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The Economic Problem of Masochism in Education

Ansgar Allen and Emile Bojesen[1]

It is no secret that there is much to learn from masochism.[2] But its lessons have yet to include the thought that educational relations might themselves be structured by a masochistic economy. Given that our claim for the existence of this economy is made from within the academy, care must be taken, unless the educational researchers who comment on it be considered exempt. Educational researchers are not above nor insulated from what they critique. Educational researchers actively participate in masochistic games of love and hate, pleasure and discomfort that define educational relationships. They participate directly as lovers and sufferers of education themselves, or indirectly by providing long, wearing critiques of education that function as so many reasons for disappointment. Everyday educators and educational researchers alike are tied, bound together, with the latter serving to reinforce this economy of pain by furnishing educators with a scholarly framework, an optional supplement, a pile of books, papers and reports within which they can somewhat pleasurably locate their suffering. But this is not all they achieve. In addition to providing lengthy disquisitions explaining what all educators already feel,

[1] The order of authors' names is alphabetical and does not indicate priority.

[2] Some of the most important studies since Freud include, Deleuze 1999; Bersani 1986 and Laplanche 1976.

and have long felt more acutely – namely, transposing into writing a sense of the 'shitness' of things – educational research helps sustain what it bemoans. It gives succour to that love of education, the educator's love of what they do, that finds pleasure still in the discomfort and displeasure that education must necessarily produce. Educational research dignifies education with moral purpose and helps sustain our love for it by endlessly implying education must be worthy of morally informed critique and attention. We urge the reader to keep these discomforting ideas in mind, throughout the essay that follows.

Approaching Freud

In this essay, we treat Freud's thought on masochism – and his accompanying discussion of the death drive – as symptomatic of his historical moment. We position Freud within, and view his work as being expressive of, an important moment in the history of subjectivity. For that reason, we deliberately sidestep the basic ontological claims one might associate with psychoanalytic readings of the human condition. Here we have the work of Michel Foucault in mind, in particular his claim that [with Freud] sexuality was only 'constituted as an area of investigation' because 'relations of power had established it as a possible object'.[3] Freud could only discuss sexuality, as he did, because relations of power had already constituted it as a historically contingent, noteworthy phenomenon. As Leo Bersani put it: 'Foucault reminds us how little Freud innovated'.[4] Freud gave scientific form (and new institutional impetus) to a longstanding disciplinary injunction to know yourself and to declare what you are. Nonetheless, and despite our attempt to locate Freud in history, his work was not purely reactive or symptomatic of his time. According to Bersani, it had the potential to revolutionise the historical phenomena of which it was an expression. There is a destructive radicalism – or what Bersani calls a 'self-destroying

[3] Foucault, 1998, p. 98.
[4] Bersani, 1986, p. 30.

intelligence'[5] – operating in Freud's work. In other words, his work may still undermine what it anatomises, although in doing so it must also undermine and evacuate its own authority as an objective science. In Bersani's reading, Freud is not simply an agent of disciplinary power, though this is often his function. Freudianism may well have become 'the most pervasive, and the most prestigious modern form of a discursive technology of self-knowledge and self-creation', but Freud's work also bore the potential to destroy 'the technology he brilliantly exemplifies by his very attempt to make its assumptions explicit'.[6] It is with this argument in mind that we make the following claim:

When Freud discusses masochism, he extends the psychoanalytic gaze to a set of relations – relations by which we are formed through practices of self-discipline and self-mortification – that have been developing and extending their hold on Western subjectivity since the Christian pastoral. In so doing, he also allows us to ponder how those relations might be undermined, or recast. In this paper we are primarily interested in these relations insofar as they are also *educational* relations.[7] We have discussed

[5] Bersani, 1986, p. 12.
[6] Bersani, 1986, p. 30.
[7] A note on our use of the term 'education' is perhaps necessary: It is common in educational critique to argue that 'education' refers to something greater than 'schooling'. This argument is made against those who are said to confuse the latter reality with the former idea and who find themselves unable, as a result, to imagine that education might be different, that it might be better than what it is in its institutional manifestation. Departing from this point of view, and its accompanying insistence that we define what we mean by education (against all that would debase it), we do not seek to dignify or overly clarify the term. Rather, we allow deliberate conceptual slippage between the meaning of education in the more specific, institutional sense (involving salaried teachers, institutionalised children, classrooms, assemblies, auditors, administrators, inspectors, and so on), and education in the broadest sense of the word, understood as the set of inherited techniques and cultural practices that structure and produce the social relations and

the Christian pastoral and its connection to education at length elsewhere.[8] Very briefly, and for the purposes of this paper, by 'Christian pastoral' we refer to the modes of introspection and self-mortification developed by the church and its medieval pastorate. As Ian Hunter argued, although these modes of introspection and subject formation were developed by the Church, they were not confined to its institutions, and eventually managed to 'slip their doctrinal moorings', providing amongst other things the 'core moral technology of the school'.[9] These pastoral relations and techniques still operate in such a way that 'binds the educator to his pupils by committing the educator to a project of mutual redemption'.[10] Pastoral power ensures that the educator still inherits something of the connection, and self-understanding, that once tied a pastor to his congregation, where the plight of the educator is 'fettered to the plight of those to be educated', ensuring that teachers 'carry the success of education, and the educational encounter on their conscience'.[11]

Though we have not yet put it in these terms, there is something decidedly masochistic operating here at the core of our commitment to education, where educators, and students, endure considerable discomfort for the 'love' of education. This love is driven by an enduring perception of the inherent significance, intrinsic nobility and foundational importance of what they do. Here we must be specific. We are using masochism in the strong, exacting sense, developed by Freud. To adapt Laplanche's reading of (Freud's reading of) masochism to our current purposes: we argue that 'the [educational] subject is masochistic'

subjectivities that define Western modernity. We argue that this approach better reflects the complexity and systematic evasiveness if not functional duplicity of an idea that has risen to such prominence in the modern era.

[8] Allen, 2017; 2014; Bojesen, 2017; 2016.

[9] Hunter, 1994, p. xxi.

[10] Allen, 2017, p. 64.

[11] Allen, 2017, p. 61.

properly speaking, 'only insofar as he [or she] derives enjoyment *precisely where* he [or she] suffers, and not insofar as he [or she] suffers in one place in order to derive enjoyment in another'. Or, to put it slightly differently, 'the subject suffers *in order to* derive enjoyment and not only *in order to be able to* derive enjoyment (or to pay the "tax" for enjoyment)'.[12] This distinction is crucial, as many would agree that education involves the acquisition of some ability or other to defer gratification. From this more easily accepted, socially acceptable, point of view, educational discomfort may be necessary in order to deliver us to the fulfillment that education promises. To exemplify this position (which is not our own), the educator might say: 'You may not, for instance, enjoy the homework we set, but if you stick with it, it will bear fruit in terms of a better understanding of your subject matter.' You must, in effect, pay an educational tax, for the fulfillment that education promises to deliver you to. But this is the extent of the role of suffering in education, according to this point of view. Our understanding of masochism is clearly different. We aim to develop and substantiate the far more radical claim that masochism in education involves a more intimate, immediate link between suffering and enjoyment. We propose, then, to extend our previous work by investigating the possible link between our collective, inbuilt commitment to education, and what Freud offers by way of a theory of masochism. In line with the position set out above, and to avoid misunderstanding, it is worth pointing out that our argument is limited to a form of diagnosis that attempts to identify the historically contingent, masochistic workings of education, without thereby claiming that all education is, or that education must always be, essentially masochistic.

[12] Laplanche, 1976, p. 104.

The Economic Problem of Masochism

In 'The Economic Problem of Masochism', a brief essay by Freud originally published in 1924, we encounter its three principle forms (according to Freud): feminine, erotogenic and moral (or mental[13]) masochism.[14] Once we get beyond the initial shock invited by the suggestion that the experience of Western education is basically masochistic, or at least has strong masochistic tendencies (and we should not underestimate the difficulty of reaching this position, our point of departure); it is perhaps easiest to link *moral* masochism with the kinds of mental torture education is often associated with. We can see the imprint of something like moral masochism in the kinds of self-regulating, disciplinary, confessional practices education has us enact. When faced with the three forms of masochism, we will most likely find ourselves able to make this associative link for moral, rather than feminine or erotogenic masochism (the latter two involve physical and sexual torture), not least because, according to Freud, moral masochism is 'chiefly remarkable for having loosened its connection with what we recognize as sexuality'.[15] Although this does not mean that the libido is absent from the practices of moral masochism, it is at least sublimated. We are, in other words, able to preserve our understanding of educational practices as non-erotic, and for that reason respectable, whilst entertaining the idea that education could be, in some sense, masochistic.

[13] Though 'moral masochism' is Freud's chosen term in this essay, as the editor's footnote points out, Freud had earlier proposed the term 'mental masochism' to refer to those 'who find their pleasure, not in having *physical* pain inflicted on them, but in humiliation and mental torture' (Freud cited in editor's footnote: 2001a, p. 165).

[14] Freud, 2001a. These are all 'secondary' forms of masochism, not to be confused with 'primary' masochism, which, for Freud, is the death drive itself in its unmediated form.

[15] Freud, 2001a, p.165.

Though we will discuss moral masochism at length below, we nonetheless suggest that Freud's brief analysis of erotogenic masochism is most telling, since it foregrounds the relation between the self-annihilating 'death drive'[16] and the operations of the libido. This connects with and extends our understanding of educational violence – or 'benign violence'[17] – in that it helps us to see how the annihilating tendency of education, which is oriented towards failure and diminishment, is combined with the avowedly nurturing, enabling ethos characteristic of all well-meaning educators. We suggest that, through an engagement with Freud, we might achieve greater understanding of how a positive educational ethos exists alongside and manages to survive the persistent shortcomings, and systemic failings of institutionalised education. Indeed, as we argue below, masochism could be essential to the survival of Western education in its current form. To substantiate this claim we must carefully work through Freud's theory of masochism, and explore how it might help us to understand what we view as the neurotic dimension of all educational relationships.

Framing masochism

Freud begins his discussion of masochism with a conundrum: 'if mental processes are governed by the pleasure principle [an enduring hypothesis in Freud's work]…masochism is incomprehensible'. [18] Unlike its counterpart, sadism, where pleasure is derived from inflicting pain on others, masochism ties pleasure to processes that endanger the organism experiencing it. This strange association between pain and pleasure is

[16] The death instinct, as many commentators have noted, is not an instinct at all. See Laplanche and Pontalis, 1988, pp. 214-217. As such, even though we otherwise cite the translation from the Standard Edition verbatim, we amend 'instinct' to 'drive' and 'instinctual' to 'drive-induced'.
[17] Allen, 2014.
[18] Freud, 2001a, p. 159.

subsequently explained by Freud as being due to the interaction of 'two classes of drives' – 'the death drives and the erotic (libidinal) life drives'.[19] Freud goes on to explain what he means by this, though not before a brief diversion, considering an alternative account of pleasure before he embarks on his discussion of masochism. This alternative vision is altogether more disturbing[20], and Freud retreats from it, declaring quite simply: 'But such a view cannot be correct'.[21] We draw attention to the existence of this aborted argument in Freud's essay to make the point that Freud's subsequent account of how masochism functions is less objectionable in terms of its consequences than it might have been. Indeed, as we explain below, Freud's account might invite ambivalence in relation to the problem of masochism, even acceptance. It strikes us that, as we extend Freud's account of masochism to education we might invite similar ambivalence, where to identify education as masochistic is to open a problematic space of reflection, rather than embark upon a rejection of, or at least polemic against education.

[19] Freud, 2001a, p. 159.

[20] In this rival account Freud speculates that every unpleasure might be understood as coinciding 'with a heightening, and every pleasure with a lowering, of mental tension due to stimulus' (159-60). Pleasure is associated with the calming of the mental apparatus, with 'the purpose of reducing to nothing, or at least of keeping as low as possible, the sums of excitation which flow in upon it' (159). Such an account of pleasure, as a kind of serene state, nonetheless places pleasure 'in the service of the death drives, whose aim is to conduct the restlessness of life into the stability of the inorganic state'. Pleasure would hence be redefined as opposed to the 'demands of the life drives – the libido', and be as such a kind of death drive seeking the annihilation of the organism that experiences it. This might well explain masochism and its association of pleasure and pain, but Freud abruptly ends this line of argument (according to Bersani (59), this was the hypothesis that Freud had been simultaneously recognising and repressing since *Beyond the Pleasure Principle)*. Freud instead opts for an apparently more nuanced, and one might observe, more palatable hypothesis (which occupies him for the remainder of the essay), where pleasure is partly redeemed.

[21] Freud, 2001a, p. 160.

Of the three forms of masochism, Freud identifies erotogenic masochism (involving sexual excitation) as the basis of the other two. He begins by alerting the reader to the fact that his analysis will remain 'incomprehensible unless one decides to make certain assumptions about matters that are extremely obscure'.[22] The reader must, we are told, accept the abstractions Freud is about to introduce, most notably:

> In (multicellular) organisms the libido meets the drive of death, or destruction, which is dominant in them and which seeks to disintegrate the cellular organism and to conduct each separate unicellular organism [composing it] into a state of inorganic stability'.[23]

Faced with such a destructive impulse, the libido 'has the task of making the destroying drive innocuous'. To an extent it fulfils this task, Freud argues, by diverting the so-called death drive outwards, in acts of aggression directed towards objects in the external world. Mediated by the libido, this drive, which can be called 'the destructive drive, the drive for mastery, or the will to power', becomes what Freud calls 'sadism proper'.[24] Sadism is, then, the death drive directed outwards by the erotic (libidinal) life drives. But this is not the end of the matter. The outward projection of the death drive does not exhaust it. Another portion of the destructive drive 'remains inside the organism and, with the help of the accompanying sexual excitation described above, becomes libidinally bound there'.[25] This is what Freud calls erotogenic masochism.

As we extend the analysis of masochism to educational relations (both those directed outwards and those directed inwards), it is important to note the complexity, mutual relationality, and

[22] Freud, 2001a, p. 161.
[23] Freud, 2001a, p.163.
[24] Freud, 2001a, p. 163.
[25] Freud, 2001a, pp. 163-4.

fluidity of these associations between drives (as Freud might put it), or in our terms; the complexity, relationality, and fluidity of these historically acquired habits. Though Freud admits he is without the means to understand how, exactly, the taming of the death drive by the libido is effected, he does point out that there must be 'a very extensive fusion and amalgamation, in varying proportions, of the two classes of drives'. We never encounter 'pure life drives or pure death drives' but 'only mixtures of them in different amounts'.[26] By analogy, it is this strange mixture of the annihilating and enabling tendencies of education that forces us, as critics, into engaging with education with a certain amount of ambivalence, or at least cause for hesitation. Though education may involve considerable symbolic violence, systematic disadvantage, exclusion and diminishment, and at the other extreme may involve moments of (for contemporary morality) unacceptable erotic interest (on the part of the teacher or student), it largely achieves the 'diffusion'[27] of these two rival tendencies. This so-called diffusion results in situations that are as insidious as they are hard to detect.

Typically, education treads a middle ground, less erotically charged or outright violent than it has the potential to be.[28] Nonetheless, these allusions to erotic and destructive impulses,

[26] Freud, 2001a, p. 164.
[27] Freud, 2001a, p. 164.
[28] This should not be taken to imply that education in its moderate, moderating form is the least of all evils. Its tendency to reconcile or at least bring into peaceful connection rival tendencies is not, necessarily, to be admired. Just as, for Freud, 'heterosexual genitality' represents the 'hierarchical stabilization of sexuality's component instincts' (Bersani, 1986, p. 32) – a deeply problematic assumption on Freud's behalf that normalises and excludes – the principles of measure and the attempted ordering of life by education as it combines and enfolds its libidinal and destructive investments is not necessarily desirable. Education achieves a hierarchical stabilisation of forces that also *enforces* a vision of the world akin in scope and coercive self-righteousness to its heteronormative cousin.

which, we claim, are built into the architecture of Western educational relations, may, even in their diffuse form still strike most readers as too scandalous and over-drawn to warrant serious consideration. And so (as suggested above) we might move swiftly to a discussion of moral masochism, which is 'chiefly remarkable for having loosened its connection with what we recognise as sexuality'.[29] As we do so, however, we must remember that for Freud (at least in this particular essay of his) erotogenic masochism is still the root form, and as such, cannot be absolutely disconnected from its sublimated heir. Similarly, though moral masochism may at first sight appear more palatable, as we explore below, it could have equally disturbing implications.

It is also worth noting in passing that the deliberate association, and intermingling between rival drives and tendencies in Freud's work, extends also to the distinction between sadism and masochism introduced above. These two opposing channels by which the death drive is modulated and expressed cannot be entirely separated, since Freud suggests a degree of fluidity, or potential for movement, between them, where the 'drive for destruction, which has been directed outwards' can 'be once more introjected, turned inwards'.[30] Presumably, introjected impulses might also be redirected outwards. Indeed, this informs our understanding of education, where there is, we claim, a complex relationship between its learned masochistic and sadistic impulses. As we seek to exemplify below in our analysis of film, the educator's learned masochisms justify his or her sadisms, and the sadism of the educator becomes a prompt for ever more introverted masochisms – all of which would be unbearable if it were not for the binding of pleasurable satisfaction into forms of educational discomfort.

[29] Freud, 2001a, p. 165.
[30] Freud, 2001a, p. 164.

As we approach our discussion of moral masochism, which, for Freud, is just as 'unmistakably pathological',[31] we should also point out where we depart from Freud's analysis, or perhaps more accurately, where we deepen and further extend Freud's pathological diagnosis. Freud identifies the strength of moral masochism (the tendency for those receiving it to 'react inversely' to 'praise or appreciation', leading to a further decline in their condition[32]), and its hold upon at least some of us, as 'one of the most serious resistances and the greatest danger to the success of our medical or educational aims'[33] – we will explain why it is so resistant in what follows. We, by contrast, argue that the reach of this neurosis extends into education itself. The strength of moral masochism today is its near ubiquity. Unlike Freud's, ours is a decidedly unredemptive reading, which offers no hope of salvation through existing educational means, since these means are infected by the neurosis they might hope to combat.

Freud links his discussion of moral masochism to his earlier work on the conscience, because at first sight it seems as though moral masochism is an example of an 'especially sensitive conscience', as it reacts inversely to praise or appreciation.[34] Recapping his earlier work, Freud explains that the conscience is the residual effect of parental authority, which becomes internalised in the super-ego. As a function that inflicts discomfort on the self, the conscience could be easily confused with moral masochism: 'We may be forgiven for having confused the two to begin with'[35], presumably since both involve the introjection of a destructive impulse. The key dimension of the conscience, however, is that it entails 'consciousness of guilt as an expression of a tension between the ego and the super-ego'. [36] Moral masochism is different, in that it is largely undetectable by the person afflicted

[31] Freud, 2001a, p. 166.
[32] Freud, 2001b, p. 49.
[33] Freud, 2001a, p. 166.
[34] Freud, 2001a, pp. 168-9.
[35] Freud, 2001a, p. 169.
[36] Freud, 2001a, pp. 166-7.

– and this, precisely, is why it is so resistant to therapy. Though our ethical sense, which is produced by the conscience, employs the sadism of the super-ego to inflict its violence on the guilty subject, moral masochism operates directly through the ego. This is why 'the masochistic trend of the ego remains as a rule concealed from the subject and has to be inferred from his [or her] behaviour'. For Freud, this is by stark contrast to the 'sadism of the super-ego' that becomes for the most part 'glaringly conscious'.[37]

This may seem a little abstract, and overly dependent on an acceptance of Freud's prior theory of the ego, the super-ego, and their interaction. Nonetheless, we would argue that a distinction appears here, in Freud's work, that could help explain why some educators might struggle to identify with the claims made towards the beginning of this paper; namely, the suggestion that the educator is bound to his or her pupils, so that the difficulties of the latter bear heavily on the conscience of the former, forcing teachers to carry the success of education, and the educational encounter on their conscience as a component of Freud's notion of moral masochism. Even fewer educators would identify with the further claim, that this mutual bind, which involves considerable discomfort for all involved, is also enjoyed, where the educator derives satisfaction from being made at least partly responsible for the success of his or her pupils. Educators are both fettered to and libidinally invested in their students. As they tie themselves in knots regarding responsibilities they can never fulfill, hopes they can never satisfy, educators experience a quickening of the pulse, a quota of pleasure. But perhaps educators should not be expected to identify with these claims. We, indeed, as authors, struggle to identify with them. We find our affective commitments to education difficult to escape, as we struggle to understand why we and other educators remain within this masochistic bind which fetters the educator to an educational project that must, as a rule, involve considerable failure as well as success. It is surely odd that educators continue

[37] Freud, 2001a, p. 169.

to feel bad about outcomes that are inevitable, when failure must be produced by a hierarchizing and stratifying system that needs failure in order to conceptualize success. It is strange that the educator's guilt leads to redoubled effort, and that the educator can derive some kind of satisfaction from that effort. It is odd, not simply that we remain at work but that we retain our fond attachment to the idea that educators are, at core, well intended; that education provides a suitable context for these good intentions to be expressed. These problems seem intractable, though the language by which we frame this conundrum may well be part of the problem. We proceed as though we might render educational commitments intelligible, however perverse they may turn out to be. It could be that the fettering of the educator to education is largely automated (as an acquired habit), and beyond interrogation. It could be that this self-destructive, uncomfortable, but strangely gratifying bind that Freud describes, and that we will go on to explore in the context of education, is barely available to inspection. Perhaps the economy of educational masochism can only be inferred from the behavior of educators, rather than confirmed through some kind of confession or confessional analysis.

If these intuitions are correct – intuitions that associate educational discomfort with Freud's conception of moral masochism – it should also be observed that if the ego of the educator is already tied to its own destruction, it has no need of a super-ego (recall, that for Freud, the ego of the moral masochist is already bent on its own destruction in such a way that this impulse evades detection). Or to frame this slightly differently, the self-destructive operations of the educator may be less dependent on a super-ego, with its links to governmental authority, than is generally assumed. This argument is worth attending to, since most commentators still blame the latter for submitting education to its reductive, 'anti-educational'

demands. [38] We may instead have reached a stage where educators diminish themselves to a great extent automatically and unconsciously. The demands made by an increasingly elaborate regime of audit and inspection – of efforts to embed performative regimes such as performance related pay – would, from this point of view, be mere embellishment to educational subjectivities that are already committed to their own subjugation. The imperium of an overweening governmental authority finds itself knocking on an open door.

This distinction between the educational conscience (as something we can become conscious of) and the largely unconscious, drive-induced masochistic tendency of the educator, also helps to explain how morality (as an explicit set of commitments and ideals) can be largely evacuated from educational discourse and practice, without reducing the commitment of educators to their practice. It explains how much of the educator's work can now involve a commitment to practices and procedures that stretch our definition of education as a values-based endeavor, without breaking education as an institutional, economic activity. It explains how the masochistic educator can diligently operate within a system that they conceive of as destroying or undermining a more 'authentic' education, approached as a morally informed activity, whilst retaining his or her commitments to the performance of being an educator. This educator will 'do what is inexpedient' from the perspective of a morally informed educational practice, without threatening his or her status or self-understanding as an educator. The masochistic educator, or the masochist within the educator has escaped morality in this sense, and become available to cynicism, whilst retaining the sense that the profession is still worthy of regard. As will be upheld in our concluding reading of *Dead*

[38] This position is so dominant in educational critique that it would be unfair to single out authors and reductive to offer a string of exemplary references. It is the framework that structures understanding, rather than a position that individual researchers choose to occupy.

Poet's Society, this educator will dutifully 'act against his [or her] own interests', will 'ruin the prospects which open out to him [or her]', and will perhaps even 'destroy his [or her] own existence',[39] whilst retaining a commitment to education and the dignity of the educator that is to all intents and purposes being undermined by the same individual.

To follow the argument of Freud's essay to its last remarks, we might also add the disturbing claim that the educator is only in this self-destructive position due to the *'cultural suppression of the drives'* which education has achieved. In teaching us to hold back our destructive impulses, to live within the ordered violence of institutional education, it has held back, in Freud's terms, 'a large part of the subject's destructive impulses from being exercised in life'.[40] Due to its careful ordering of violence, education generates a situation where violence turns inwards, where masochism is intensified so that it constitutes the ego of the educator and educated person. To the extent that educated people are still able to reflect on their own inevitable destruction, we would claim that they are oddly consoled by that prospect, as if their martyrdom to education would be the finest expression of their commitment to it. Indeed, given the role of the libido in constituting this perverse connection of pleasure to pain inherent in masochism, we should notice how the '[educated] subject's destruction of him [or her]self cannot take place without libidinal satisfaction'.[41] Education is destroying itself, and we love it.

Educational symptoms of the masochistic economy

Freud's analysis of masochism allows us to better understand how education is underpinned and maintained by the libidinal investment of the educator – a term we use to refer to those who are (and this includes almost all of us) ideologically wedded to the success of education. This commitment to the success of

[39] Freud, 2001a, pp. 169-170.
[40] Freud, 2001a, p. 170.
[41] Freud, 2001a, p. 170.

education is connected in modernity to the idea that education will, at its best, aim to secure success, progress, and betterment for all at the level of morality, rather than simply improve education along instrumental lines, according to a reduced, reductive, and technical understanding of the world. Another way of describing this predicament is to say that the educator has a libidinal attachment to the idea that education is inherently redemptive, not simply on an individual basis, but socially, politically, even economically. That is to say, it does not merely provide contextually specific and pragmatic accommodations to the world as it is, but a deeper, 'moral' value. The commitment to the inherent beneficence of education informs, enframes and justifies the educator's love of the student, the educator's love of education, and ultimately, the educator's love of him or herself as an educated person. What is peculiar about this commitment is that it not only helps obscure the underpinning violence of educational relations (by adding a layer of good feeling to them), it also *establishes the necessary conditions for that violence*. Here again Freud is instructive, since masochism involves an intimate, and enduring relation between the libido and the death-drive. This might explain how the educator's love of education exists alongside the accompanying drive – also intrinsic to all educational experience – to discipline, diminish, fail when necessary, and even destroy those involved in the educational relationship. Freud's conception of erotogenic masochism also draws attention – again crucially for us – to the opposite of erotogenic masochism, namely, sadism, which is built into the Western educational tradition and its drive to mastery.[42]

The figure of the educator, who has attained some form of educational success, is marked by an implicit self-assurance of the benefits of education. This assurance manifests itself in the certainty with which many educators, and those who consider themselves educated, celebrate and perpetuate education as the primary means to social and self-betterment. The learned

[42] Allen, 2016.

masochism which underpins their own experience of education comes to guide the structure and process of their own pedagogic practices. A stark example of where this masochistic process reaches its limit is in the experience of teaching students who, for whatever reason, do not submit themselves to learn in a particular context. These students refuse or simply do not experience the inbuilt, automated guilt associated with 'not learning' that educators wield as their primary weapon. The educator, by contrast, has had this guilt, concomitant with moral masochism, grafted on to their psychic and social sense of being and will not hesitate in projecting its destructive impulse outwards. They have subjected themselves to education so thoroughly that the slippage between their internal sense of guilt and the projection of that guilt onto the external educational subject become an extension of the same movement. What intransigent pupils nonetheless produce is a situation where the educator cannot 'appeal' to the will to learn of the student. The educator and the student do not appear to share a common masochistic economy, and so there is no connection between them along these lines, at least, not in that instance. This forces the apparently well-meaning educator to switch techniques, opting for more overt disciplinary interventions. The educator must adopt the harsh, judgemental tones of the super-ego.

For Freud, this educator is forced to resort to 'ethical' means, to the enactments of a moralising self. In his terms, the 'ethical sense' is created by drive-induced renunciation, which then 'expresses itself in conscience and demands a further renunciation of drive'.[43] As an individual who has been successfully introduced into, and has come to manifest the key subjective frameworks of the prevailing moral order, the educator has had their own drives co-opted, and now they seek to do the same to their students. To the extent that education still operates through the conscience, educators enforce that conscience either through direct appeal to educational systems of value ('do this because it is important for

[43] Freud, 2001a, p. 170.

x reason'), or through indirect appeal to those systems of value ('do this because I tell you to [for reasons that must remain obscure to you, but which nonetheless inform my practice, and will become apparent after you submit to them]'). As we have argued, this operates alongside a region of guilt established by educational masochism, which we might describe as 'guilt without conscience', a form of automated guilt, unavailable to reflection.[44] It has no need of a super-ego (internally manifested, or externally reinforced) for its enforcement. For this reason, no conflict appears between a super-ego and a recalcitrant ego that would make the enforcement of that guilt apparent.

To recap, Freud claims that masochism – and we would say education – comes from 'the death drive and corresponds to the part of that drive which has escaped being turned outwards as a drive of destruction.'[45] We would claim that, through the educational relation, this drive can be redirected outwards, and conditions the educator's near-instinctual repulsion when faced with situations of 'not learning'. The educated masochist becomes a sadistic educator through the outward projection of the educator's 'guilt without conscience'. And here it is worth pausing to reflect on that external projection when Freud writes that, since this manifestation of the death drive 'has the significance of an erotic component even the subject's destruction of himself cannot take place without libidinal satisfaction.'[46] Freud is only suggesting that this erotic component is manifested through self-destruction, but if, as we claim, the educational

[44] It remains unclear to us whether this guilt might be a residual effect of a departed conscience (where the framework of value that animated that conscience has fallen away) and hence would be a 'guilt without conscience' in the literal sense; or whether this guilt might be a misdiagnosis of the experience of educational masochism (i.e. it only feels like guilt, because that is how we are consciously accustomed to understanding and interpreting the experience of educational bad feeling).
[45] Freud, 2001a, p. 170.
[46] Freud, 2001a, p. 170.

relation is an outward projection of internal guilt experienced in 'not learning', libidinal satisfaction can, in fact, be produced through the destructive co-option of the students' drives by the educator in the name of education.

To support this interpretation, we can turn to Jacques Lacan's own reading of part of Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* (which expands on many of the themes we have introduced above, including the pastoral), from his seventh seminar on *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, which itself purports its primary aim as 'deepening our understanding of the economic problem of masochism'.[47] In Lacan's interpretation of Freud, the paradox of 'moral conscience'

> shows itself to be more demanding the more refined it becomes, crueller and crueller even as we offend it less and less, more and more fastidious as we force it, by abstaining from acts, to go and seek us out at the most intimate levels of our impulses or desires. In short, the insatiable character of this moral conscience, its paradoxical cruelty, transforms it within the individual into a parasite that is fed by the satisfactions accorded to it. Ethics punishes the individual relatively much less for his faults than for his misfortunes.[48]

This paradoxical formula, which reflects the connection that Freud draws between libidinal satisfaction and moral masochism at the end of 'The Economic Problem of Masochism', takes on an even darker hue when applied to the context of education. Of course, most contemporary Western educators rightly see themselves as far removed from something like the harsh disciplinarian of the Victorian schoolroom, but what Lacan and, for him, Freud, open a way towards thinking, is the cruelty of a refined moral conscience. For Lacan, as for Freud, this moral

[47] Lacan, 2008, p. 18.
[48] Lacan, 2008, p. 110.

conscience is only explored as far as its manifestation inward, however, the most commonplace classroom settings make clear that this refined cruelty has an outward facing dimension as well. We might also dwell further on the sentence, 'Ethics punishes the individual relatively much less for his faults than for his misfortunes', by reflecting on the practices of educators in contexts where student cohorts are primarily made up of socially marginal and/or underprivileged groups. Education is presented as the cure to social ills in the absence of sufficient material support – alongside which, any professed lack of desire to engage with this 'educational solution' is so alien to educational thought, so unavailable to inspection, understanding and sympathy, that it can only be described as deviant. The cruel paradox of this 'guilt without conscience' is projected outward by educators in our schoolrooms, with the expectation that it be internalized in the psyche of their students. It is insatiable, completely without sympathy, and the source of an ideology that declares 'all can achieve success', though few will, or can.

Representing the Masochistic Economy in Education: Dead Poets Society

A prominent representation of educational experiences, which has arguably risen to the heights of cultural phenomenon, is the 1989 film *Dead Poets Society*. We do not suggest that it is directly representative of educational experience in schooling, but rather that it is representative of a cultural desire for what schooling *should* be like, thereby being productive of the masochistic economy it also represents. Our reading will suggest that the film exhibits the most destructive – which is also to say, most 'enjoyable' – components of the masochistic economy in education, both on the screen and in the experiences of its audiences. The film shows how pleasure and guilt conjoin in education, as well as enhancing both the pleasure and guilt the audience might feel in relation to education. This represented guilt operates on two levels, first in terms of the explicit structure of the institution the boys attend, Welton Academy, and its

prioritisation of a responsibility towards academic success and professional careers. We would suggest that this operation of guilt is not only too consciously, overtly enforced via the rhetoric of the teachers and in the minds of the boys, but is also not pleasurable enough to successfully engender anything approaching erotogenic or moral masochism in the Freudian sense. By contrast the second operation of guilt, exhibited primarily through the lessons of Mr Keating (played by Robin Williams) and their effects, combines nuanced forms of both moral masochism and erotogenic masochism (and thus constitutes what we have called 'guilt without conscience'). [49]

We position our own reading directly in opposition and in ironic relation to an article by Éamonn Dunne, which tells us that the film is 'a powerfully emotive treatise on radical pedagogical practice, an allegorical representation of the power of perversity to make us fall in love with the aberrant, the rebellious, the transgressive'. [50] We argue instead that Mr Keating does not escape the conservative, conformist intentions and morally disciplinary traditions of education. Nor does he escape the masochistic economy which underpins and exceeds them; he exemplifies and intensifies those economies. The forms of pedagogy Keating engages in are, then, not to be seen in opposition to other more obviously traditional forms but rather as their necessary complement. Keating himself is the successful

[49] Clarke (2018) also draws attention to the stifling effects of Keating's injunction to enjoy. In this analysis, Clarke contrasts the traditional authority of the school to Keating's equally constraining transgressive approach via a distinction between the prohibitive 'Oedipal' father, and the obscene 'anal' father, or 'Master of Enjoyment' (see Žižek 2005, p. 206). Though the violence of the latter is harder to identify, it is probably still easier to identify than masochism, since it is located in the educational superego, rather than residing more fundamentally in the ego.

[50] Dunne, 2013, p. 633.

product of the system (and we would say, masochistic economy) that critics such as Dunne suggest he rebels against.[51]

We might here return to the contrast between the work of conscience and the work of masochism in education. As outlined above, the key dimension of conscience is 'consciousness of guilt as an expression of a tension between the ego and the super-ego'.[52] This is clearly in play in the duty the schoolboys feel towards their parents in completing their studies successfully. One of the introductory scenes of the film shows two of the boys criticising Neil Perry for obeying his father, while eventually admitting that they do the same with their parents. While these pupils may gain some pleasure from satisfying their parents desires for them, and they certainly suffer the pains of boredom and lost free time along the way, this is not an example of moral masochism but rather conscience. Moral masochism, as we have said, is different, in that it is largely undetectable by the person afflicted – the boys whom Keating lumbers with guilt via his injunction to 'seize the day', that is to say for the absence of what could be called their own self-realization, are not aware that they

[51] It is worth pointing out that our argument also differs from the analysis offered by McLaren and Leonardo (1998) who claim (unlike Dunne) that Keating's inspirational, norm-breaking pedagogy, fails to meet the aims of revolutionary pedagogy. To do so, it must transcend 'idiosyncratic acts of bourgeois transgression' and the 'performative moments of apostasy' that we witness in the film (p. 139). This may be true, but McLaren and Leonardo's analysis only perpetuates (in a way that is characteristic for critical pedagogy) a problematic vision of the redemptive pedagogue, whose very attachment to education, from our point of view, might be their most pernicious (because untroubled) inheritance. So, whilst we agree that the students 'lack the ability to articulate a political project' that allows them to transform the social conditions within which they are confined (p. 141), we do not assume that a more critically configured education, in the guise of a better Keating, is what they need. Rather, it might be necessary to interrogate the masochistic economy that Keating (either in his existing, or in an improved form) both represents and deepens.

[52] Freud, 2001a, 166-7.

are being made to feel guilt. They do not realise that they punish themselves with the whispered motto *Carpe Diem*, precisely because they also take pleasure in their ridiculously optimistic attempts to act it out. The ethical sense, which is primarily produced by the effects of the school and the parents on the conscience of the boys, employs the sadism of the super-ego to inflict its violence on the guilty subject, while the moral masochism of Mr Keating operates directly through the ego (in Freud's terms). This is why when watching *Dead Poets Society*, we must remember that 'the masochistic trend of the ego remains as a rule concealed from the subject and has to be inferred from his behaviour'. This is especially the case as the 'sadism of the super-ego', represented primarily by Headmaster Nolan, and the authoritarian father Mr Perry is, in Freud's words, again, 'glaringly conscious'.[53]

A key point of clarification to be made before proceeding with our reading of the film is that Keating is not only presented as a masochistic educator, but also a sadistic educator, who encourages masochistic psychologies in his students. By contrast, we would argue that the other educators (and Mr Perry) are, in fact, at once too educationally pragmatic (in the conventional sense) to exhibit any substantial sado-masochistic tendencies. Even the 'harsh' actions of the headmaster (when he paddles Charlie Dalton) or Mr Perry (when he threatens to withdrawn Neil from Welton) are pragmatic rather than sadistic actions. The harsh pragmatism of the school is tied to the notion that severe discipline is what maintains their position as 'the best preparatory boys school in the United States' (as it is described in the film) – where the quality of the school is defined by the quota it sends to the 'Ivy League'. This reduction of education to instrumental ends is what the film overtly invites us to question. In doing so, it appears to critique the inherent violence of some educational relations, but this critique fails to identify and challenge their sado-masochistic component. The irony here is

[53] Freud, 2001a, pp. 166-7.

that the non-sadistic and non-masochistic aspects of education are those which are under attack in the film. The film tries to teach us that this severe, pragmatic approach to education is hollow and superficial and that what we really need is an impassioned education which helps us reveal our true selves to ourselves, whatever the cost. In fact, the 'cost' is precisely what makes this more authentic education so visibly 'valuable'. This is the masochistic economy operating in education as the co-option of the drive.

The lesson of the film, then, is that we should not accept a form of schooling which neglects the inherent value of education in favour of its instrumentally driven 'double'. We should strive for 'authenticity' in education, even in a structural context (at least superficially) opposed to its existence or practice. The lingering question might then be: if this authentic education is supposedly so rare, why has the representation of it resonated with so many viewers? We argue that this is because the rhetoric of authenticity and inherent value is, in fact, not at all absent from the majority of educational discourse and practice, such as suggested by *Dead Poets Society*, and is, on the contrary, utterly ubiquitous.[54] In this sense, the film is at once a nightmare and a fantasy of education, polarizing two of its key principles and co-implicated economies: pragmatism and masochism. The only point in the film where these two polarities clearly meet and show mutual support for one another (in a manner which we suggest is far more representative of actual pedagogical dispositions) is in the scene after Charlie Dalton pretends to receive a phone call from God in school assembly, requesting that girls should be allowed into the school. This prank is significantly engendered by the production of Dalton's masochistic psychology through Keating's sadistic pedagogy, where the boys are taught to experience guilt for, amongst other things, not 'walking their own walk'. Keating, enhancing the sadism of his pedagogy, takes no responsibility for Dalton's behaviour and explains (with a

[54] For a sustained engagement with this topic see, Ladkin, McKay & Bojesen, 2016.

reference to the mantra of the Dead Poets Society, whose Emersonian goal it is to 'suck all the marrow out of life') that 'Sucking all the marrow out of life doesn't mean choking on the bone' and that 'you being expelled from school is not daring to me, it's stupid', not least because, as he tells Dalton with a wry smile, being expelled from the school would mean he wouldn't be able to attend Keating's classes. He effectively explains to the boys that they should be both pragmatic and passionate, indicating (again contrary to Dunne's reading) that the supposed 'rebellion' he advocates, only has sustainable value within the strictures of the pragmatic aspects of education. Thus, masochism acts as the support for pragmatism in education, or at least finds itself (and its inherent violence) articulated to the violently reductive demands of an accompanying pragmatic logic.

Though *Dead Poets Society* allows us to meditate on the mundane presence of masochism in educational environments, it does also explore the potential of that same masochism (with its shifting and necessarily unstable configuration of death and life-oriented drives), to exceed that mundane economy: a child commits suicide; a child is expelled; a teacher is sacked. And yet, this does not place the underpinning masochism of the film, and Keating's pedagogy, in question. The audience is put in the position of experiencing a vicarious masochism through the educationally inspired self-destruction of Dalton, Perry, and Keating. As we have argued in our reading of Freud, the '[educated] subject's destruction of himself cannot take place without libidinal satisfaction'.[55] And the audience loves it. This is nowhere better figured than in the final, now extremely famous, scene, where Keating's exit is met with some of the boys taking to stand on the tables and proclaiming, 'Captain, my captain', in the middle of a suitably uninspiring lesson taken by the headmaster. The tragedy of Perry's suicide appears overshadowed by the sacking of Keating. This apparently stirring scene, even now, remains in public consciousness. Its sustained

[55] Freud, 2001a, p. 170.

resonance was exemplified in the wake of Robin Williams's 2014 suicide, where fans from across the world performed this scene in tribute to him. Why does this scene remain so affective? Our claim, which is really the major claim this paper seeks to make, is that, through co-opting the death drive (or the basic destructiveness and malice that is built into the Western educational tradition), education teaches us to take pleasure in pain, first and foremost within the workings of its own economies.

Coda

We might emphasise, in concluding, that this reading of masochism in education is not a simple extension of Freudian theory to education. It reads Freud against himself insofar as Freud assigns education, together with other authorities (religion, government, etc.), the role of further developing the chastising, norm enforcing super-ego, which was set up following the dissolution of the Oedipus complex.[56] According to our reading, education is not simply a vehicle for enforcing the super-ego, serving its function in society as a 'cultural super-ego', as Freud later put it in *Civilization and its Discontents*.[57] Here too, we distance ourselves from a tendency amongst educational critics to constantly point out that education is an enforcer of cultural

[56] See for example, Freud's account in *The Ego and the Id:* 'As a child grows up, the role of the father is carried on by teachers and others in authority; their injunctions and prohibitions remain powerful in the ego ideal [which is related to what Freud later calls the super-ego] and continue, in the form of conscience, to exercise moral censorship' (Freud, 2001b, p. 37). This point is repeated in 'The Economic Problem of Masochism'*:* 'The course of childhood development leads to an ever-increasing detachment from parents, and their personal significance for the super-ego recedes into the background. To the imagos they leave behind there are then linked the influences of teachers and authorities, self-chosen models and publicly recognized heroes' (Freud, 2001a, p. 168).

[57] Freud, 2001c, p. 142.

norms. These norms, so the argument goes, are often left hidden within its operations, and by implication demand the intervention of the educational critic to reveal them. Freud would probably help complicate this. Though modern education conceptualised here as a super-ego enforcer, does inherit the precept: 'You *ought to be* like this (like your father)', that injunction is accompanied by the prohibition: 'You *may not be* like this (like your father)'. [58] In other words, education consistently denies our achievement of the norms it compels us to pursue and, as such, reveals itself as a somewhat shady operator in its adoptive role as norm enforcer. But, in our reading, this is not its only function. Education helps constitute, and serves to support the mortification of the educational ego. Not simply operating from above as a disciplinarian overlord, education roots its oppressions within that ego. It does so to such great effect because it maintains a love of education that will not be diminished however uncomfortable the experience of education may become.

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[58] Freud, 2001b, p. 34.

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