

**Heroic Masochism:  
Masculine Privilege and the Uses of Pain**

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Late in life, afflicted and intent on provocation, Friedrich Nietzsche parenthetically scribbled a phrase in his notebook. Versions of it turned up in *Twilight of the Idols* (2003a [1889]: 33) and *Ecce Homo* (2007 [1909]: 9 and 99), the last two books he wrote before being incapacitated by syphilitic insanity. The phrase, of course, is “What does not kill us makes us stronger” (Nietzsche 2003b: 187). Familiar to every gym rat, self-help aficionado, and talk show fanatic, the phrase has been quoted, paraphrased, and satirized to the point of saturation. While actor/director Mel Gibson does not actually quote the phrase in his paean-to-pain films *Braveheart* (1995), *Mad Max* (1979), or *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), he paraphrases it in an interview describing how he felt about his arrest for drunk driving and subsequent anti-Semitic rant: “It changes you and makes you one tough mother-f---er. What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger. It’s really that simple” (Hiscock 2010, elision in original; see also

Gardiner 2014). Use of the phrase is not limited to tough guys, for example *American Idol* winner Kelly Clarkson uses it in her (2011) pop album, *Stronger*.

Nietzsche's familiar dictum is part of the philosopher's larger project of systematically reflecting on suffering and the will, imagining an aristocracy of endurance. In *Toward a Genealogy of Morals*, for example, he writes, "Man, as the animal that is most courageous, most accustomed to suffering, does not negate suffering as such: he wants it, even seeks it out, provided one shows him some meaning in it, some wherefore of suffering" (Nietzsche 1954 [1887]: 453).

Now Nietzsche was a complex thinker, prone to irony and a tendency toward half-mocking, half-serious pronouncements that turn absurd when pushed in any one direction. American popular culture uses of Nietzsche, however, usually affect no such tension. The bulk of references are over-reaching indexes of longed-for profundity, the remainder are unabashed mockery—e.g. the Joker's (Heath Ledger) version in *The Dark Knight* (2008): "I believe whatever doesn't kill you simply makes you stranger." My concern herein, however, is neither a critique of Nietzsche nor a complaint against his "misuse"—surely a fatuous project in any case. I am interested in the very taken-for-grantedness of Nietzschean reflections on pain. That is, whatever Nietzsche may have been getting at with his dictum, the popular usage reflects a desperate hope that suffering has, or certainly *ought to* have, a purpose.

The connection of suffering to some larger sense of purpose is negatively evoked in the use of the phrase "*unnecessary suffering*," for example in palliative care, the purpose of which is to prevent it. Such a usage presupposes that there is such a thing as *necessary* suffering. It is difficult to deny that there are some pains best endured sooner

rather than later—the treatment of a diseased tooth for instance—it hardly makes sense to say that the suffering is necessary, as opposed to the treatment. It is also easy to construct “just so” narratives regarding the plausibility, even the obviousness, of the necessity for suffering in any particular case—particularly, to paraphrase Mark Twain, when that suffering is someone else’s.<sup>1</sup>

The anaesthetizing properties of ether, to cite an example, were long known and even proposed as a way to eliminate pain in surgery by chemist Humphry Davy in the 1790s, but it was not until a self-promoting American surgeon, Crawford Long, amputated a limb in front of an audience using anesthesia in 1846 that the idea of pain-free surgery started to be accepted (Snow 2005: 36). The long gap between non-anaesthetic uses of ether and its use in surgery seems largely to have been due to the resistance of the surgeons. As historian Richard Holmes summarizes their attitude, “Pain itself was a natural and intrinsic part of the surgical procedure, and a surgeon’s ability to handle a patient’s pain—through his imposed psychological authority, his dexterity, and above all his sheer speed of amputation and extraction—was an essential part of his profession” (Holmes 2008: 284).

Nor are slow-changing attitudes toward the uses and utility of pain unique to medicine. In the late Middle Ages, pain became a central component in the production of judicial truth. In the context of denouncing Epicurianism, penitance rituals became common in Western Christendom (Greenblatt 2011). During the same period judicial torture replaced trial by ordeal in criminal justice. As argued by Talal Asad, “Violence done to the body was held to be a condition facilitating the emergence and capture of the truth” (1993: 94). Truth became, in effect, an epiphenomenon of embodied pain—which

has been considered by judicial scholars as a kind of “half-way house” between superstitious pre-modern ordeals and modern forms of judicial inquiry foregrounding forensic investigation and verification (Asad 1993: 89). Our attitudes toward pain continue to change.

While pain, to mangle a Buddhist teaching, may be an inevitable concomitant of life, suffering—by which I mean the *uses* and *meanings* of pain—is culturally constructed. In offering this formulation I specifically do not mean to psychologize suffering. The *experience* of pain is among the most intensely personal—notoriously difficult to share, mute in its essence (Scarry 1985: 3–4)—but the *uses* of pain are public and social. They are a technique, *the* technique we might even say, for the production of persons and social control (Asad 1983: 97). And while it would be delusional to accept an absolute distinction between the two—private experience and public use—what interests me herein are on the one hand the mechanisms by which techniques of pain are adopted as a wisdom so conventional they become difficult to question, and on the other hand, the consequences this unquestioning acceptance has for our embodied selves and our social bodies.

### **Contradictions of Military Masculinity**

The impetus for the current exploration of the uses of pain was my ethnographic work with soldiers and veterans of the *Bundeswehr*, the German military, at the turn of the millenium. From my own experience in the United States Army (1982 – 1986), I began my interviews and interactions with my German subjects expecting to find certain narratives. Specifically, I expected that German soldiers, like their American

counterparts, would report being subjected to a regime of physical and psychological toughening accomplished through a combination of training—physical exercise, systematic exposure to the elements, and disciplinary shaming for any show of weakness—and hazing, or peer-based punishments and humiliations. Further, I expected that such rituals of toughening, official or otherwise, would be systematically tied to a gendered regime in which militarily desirable characteristics were coded masculine, and all others feminine (Belkin 2012; Gardiner 2004; Goldstein 2001).

Not surprisingly, I did find such a pattern, but one thing struck me. While my German subjects certainly had many stories to tell about toughening, hazing, and normative manhood shaming, my reaction to their stories was blasé, dismissive. And this was in spite of both my anthropological training that emphasized a responsibility toward one's informants, and my easy identification with my informants at the personal level.

What I came to realize is that the process of hardening I had been through in my own military training—along with my pre-military induction into normative American manhood—had left me nearly incapable of an empathic reaction to their stories. The bulk of them seemed *relatively* mild compared to those I had experienced, which I like most soldiers in turn had been taught to think of as trivial in comparison to *real* suffering (Lomsky-Feder 2004: 91).

The dispositions—the habits of mind and body—that both produce and celebrate the sort of empathic resistance I experienced with my German subjects, I refer to as *heroic masochism*. Heroic masochism constructs a subject position that inculcates an entitlement grounded in resentment as the price of both gendered identity and group belonging. I have suffered to become who I am, runs the immanent logic, therefore

suffering is justified, and you too should suffer (Adorno 1998; Sanday 2007: 57). Once justified, suffering becomes as Nietzsche said, something we seek, “provided one shows him some meaning in it” (1954 [1887]: 453). That is, pain as technique, discipline for the body and mind of the initiate (the training soldier, the fraternity pledge, the child learning correct gender performance), becomes *desirable*.

The form of this seemingly paradoxical desire, and the process by which it is inculcated, is the focus of that which follows. I call the desires connected to heroic masochism paradoxical because, like Freud, I see the desire for pain as a puzzle since it seems to violate the basic “economy” of consciousness, which is oriented in Freudian terms “...at gaining pleasure and removing unpleasure” (Freud 1960 [1901]: Vol. 6, 270). If we accept this utilitarian assumption, that our most basic drive is toward pleasure and away from pain (Bentham 1988: 1), then like Freud we will be forced to seek out some subterranean form of pleasure to be derived from the sorts of experiences I will focus on herein.

I will presently return to the Freudian account of masochism as a point of departure, with the proviso that I intend to depart from the two-drive (pleasure and death) and three-structure (ego, id, superego) schema assumed in the later Freud—taking his model as a *model for* talking about the psyche in a particular way, rather than a valid *model of* consciousness. First, however, I want to tell a story for the reader to keep in mind as I present my reworking of psychoanalytic models of masochism and its relationship to military masculinity.

For many Americans the scene will be familiar enough, a standardized fragment of popular culture: the induction of young men into the military. Variants abound, from

the over-the-top slapstick of *Stripes* (1981) to the stylized man-making in *An Officer and a Gentleman* (1982), but the opening act paradigmatically involves clueless recruits filled with a heady mixture of bravado and anxiety exiting a bus and lining up military style.

The scene is over-determined, grounded in the collective experience of millions of veterans, many of whom learned about what to expect from military life from the movies in the first place. The celluloid focus is on confrontation—the conflict between the drill sergeants charged with whipping their young charges into shape and the recruits who will inevitably resist and attempt to hold onto their civilian ways.

“Move, move, move! On the line, private!” The drill sergeant shouts. The recruits stand to attention, eyes forward, back straight, heels together, toes apart at a forty-five degree angle. “Don’t lock your knees.”

The minutes drag on, standing in the hot sun. Most of us are not used to standing without locking our knees and it is tiring. Someone, inevitably, locks his knees. Sometime thereafter, his eyes roll back in his head and he falls, planting his face in the pavement. Sometimes he loses a tooth or two, and sometimes not. I witnessed this on my own first day of basic training at Fort Sill, Oklahoma in 1982. A veteran informant from the Korean War era told me a nearly identical story from Biloxi, Mississippi and I collected similar stories from Vietnam War era veterans. Life imitates popular culture imitates life, round and round in a narrative circle that never quite closes.

What, then, is the meaning of such a scene? I submit that one meaning is entailed by the *production of exemplary victims*. Line up a random group of four hundred young men and insist they stand at attention and the results are predictable: someone will fall unconscious. No one who participates in such an event can fail to take the point:

everyone is vulnerable, and anyone could tire and collapse. Inculcating this sense of vulnerability and uncertainty is the trainer's task. He punches a hole through the layers of psychic defenses—e.g. norms of conduct, decency and humane values, or alternatively rebellious or aggressive tendencies—with which the recruit defends his sense of self.

This process has never been better captured than in Stanley Kubrick's Vietnam War film *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). Basic training is in all cases infused with theater, and Marine Corps boot camp is perhaps the most fulsomely dramatic in the American tradition. Lee Ermey's character, Senior Drill Instructor Hartman—a paradigm of drill sergeants—makes explicit in a single speech what real world recruits become aware of only over time, often unconsciously. The verisimilitude of his speech, however, will be attested to by virtually any Marine Corps or US Army veteran.

Sergeant Hartman:

If you ladies leave my island, if you survive recruit training... you will be a weapon, you will be a minister of death, praying for war. But until that day you are pukes! You're the lowest form of life on Earth. You are not even human-fucking-beings! You are nothing but unorganized grabastic pieces of amphibian shit! Because I am hard, you will not like me. But the more you hate me, the more you will learn: I am hard, but I am fair! There is no racial bigotry here! I do not look down on niggers, kikes, wops, or greasers; here you are all equally worthless! And my orders are to weed out all non-hackers who do not pack the gear to serve in my beloved Corps! Do you maggots understand that?<sup>2</sup>



The mission, in Hartman's words "to weed-out all non-hackers," is one of classification, to produce in the embodied experience of the recruits visible signs of non-belonging, of being what Mary Douglas called "matter out of place" (Douglass 1966: 50). The "non-hackers" have to be identified, so that the drill sergeant can rip them out by the roots and throw them away. That is, recruits are interpolated as if they are *abject*—that which must be expelled from the body, or the social body: excrement, garbage, pus, rot—the dead (Kristeva 1982).

The health of the body requires a border, a skin. Beyond that border are all the gathered powers of the abyss: the alien, the other, the unknown and contaminating. As medieval cartographers carefully scribed on the edges of their creations: Here Be Dragons. In the social drama of basic training, all are threatened with abjection, even if the majority will spend only a brief season in its (liminal) borderlands. The efficacy of the ritual, however, is grounded in the social reality of abjection. There are those who are marked by physical absence and nominal inscription as permanently abject—"ladies"—are preemptively expelled from the body of the Corps. The recruits remain in this status only until such time as Sergeant Hartman has weeded out the non-hackers and in the process discovered those who do, in fact, "pack the gear" to serve in the Corps.

The language is infused with slippage: feminine gender equals amphibian shit equals maggots, suggesting above all else uncertainty of classification, compounded by the "sly negative" of disavowing racial bigotry while callously re-inscribing it: all are equally worthless as feminized excrement—but those who survive the training are transformed. Their previous identities are stripped away such that they become, at the end of training, Marines—with an earned claim on a particular form of military masculinity—

rather than “ladies” or “niggers, kikes, wops, or greasers.” This opening to a transformative process that at once denies and embraces racism while equating feminine gender with amphibian shit paradoxically hints at the possibility that while military masculinity requires *some* outside against which to define itself, it is potentially available to anyone who can “hack it”—who can survive the training—including, in recent years, female recruits (Belkin 2012: 4–6).

Having once been abjected—or better made aware of their abjection—the experience is unlikely to leave the recruit. Military training makes one’s own vulnerability viscerally apparent by design. It points up what ought to have been obvious, except that our socialization tends to obscure such realities—particularly in young men—in favor of what is called a healthy ego. In basic training every soldier learns (or is intended to learn) not just that he has physical limits, but that it is a trivial thing to approach them, to violate them, and to run roughshod over them.

“I will run you until you puke!” the drill sergeant declares. After seeing multiple fellow trainees retching into a ditch, one no longer doubts it. “I will P. T. [physical training] you until *I* am tired.” It does not take electric wires or red-hot poker to push people past their limits: all it requires is their compliance, their refusal to refuse, and the “voluntary” acceptance of suffering which invests the victim in the process of militarization.

The training soldier also learns that he is radically, terminally dependent on both fellow soldiers and on the institution in which he is immersed. And this like the fact of personal physical limits could be obvious to all persons always, but it is another trembling reality from which we tend to insulate ourselves. Indeed, most would frown

upon a parent who baldly reminded a child that he is vulnerable and dependent on the parent for his very survival, though it is a familiar enough motif in Disney movies directed at children (Snow White, Cinderella, Beauty and the Beast, Sleeping Beauty, etc.). And is not just the parent that provides for children, but the much larger groups of mostly anonymous people and the institutions they are a part of. As every first year student of anthropology learns, the social world in which we live really is bigger than any of us. Not only did we not make it, but no one person, no matter how gifted, could have made it. And we are utterly dependent on this social world for our lives.

It is a cliché that soldiers in combat learn of their dependence on their fellows, most immediately, for covering fire, for sharing watches, for battlefield first aid, and for the will to continue under trying conditions. Likewise they learn the extent to which they depend on the military institution to provide ammunition, food, medical supplies, transportation, and water—often as they attempt to cope with chronic deprivation. More ambivalently, the institution also supplies orders, a sense of mission, body bags to carry out the dead—and replacements. But the lessons of combat have to be pre-learned in training, lest soldiers in the field be overwhelmed with fear, suffering or resentment, and refuse to serve.

Training soldiers first learn to depend upon their fellows through collective punishments, wherein all are punished for the mistakes of one—thereby incentivizing the many to provide an “attitude adjustment” to the one in the form of off-the-books “extra training” (e.g. beatings). They also learn through collective accomplishments such as timing a platoon through an obstacle course, often in competition with another platoon: the losers get no weekend pass and spend the time repolishing the barracks floors.

Soldiers also learn to depend on each other in headsier ways, in first aid drills, the construction of fox holes, interlocking fields of fire, squad weapons (carried only by some, but necessary to the survival of all). Finally, the military simulates field conditions. Soldiers practice being miserable, and thereby learn to cope with the heightened emotions and flaring tempers brought on by chronic fatigue, unpredictable meals, bad weather, and the apparent inefficiency of logistical support.

Finally soldiers learn, or are meant to learn, about their own mortality. Here is the most ambivalent lesson, the reality and finality of death—and it is precisely this which is the center of what it means to “be a (military) man.” That is, death—in which “I” instead of being the one who expels becomes that which is expelled, leaving behind not myself, but a rotting corpse (Kristeva 1982: 3–4; Douglas 1966)—is introjected, along with all the non-hacking “ladies,” “amphibian shit,” and “niggers, kikes, wops, or greasers.” Around this is built a fiction of plenitude, of hard bodies and hard wills, meant to act as insulation from the vulnerability, limitation and fragility both outside of the military masculine self, and at its core (Belkin 2012: 3; Brintnall 2011: 99).

It is a fiction captured perfectly in popular cinema, in the intertextual space between the blithe pronouncement of the villainous Mr. Han (Shih Kien) in the martial arts fantasy film *Enter the Dragon* (1973)—“We forge our bodies in the iron of our will”—and Sarah Conner’s (Linda Hamilton’s) lament regarding the difficulty of finding a real man in *Terminator II: Judgement Day* (1991). Watching her son, John Connor (Edward Furlong) interacting with the reprogrammed “good” version of the terminator robot (Arnold Schwarzenegger), the mother declaims: “It [the terminator] would never leave him, and it would never hurt him, never shout at him, or get drunk and hit him, or

say it was too busy to spend time with him. It would always be there. And it would die to protect him. Of all the would be fathers who came and went over the years, this thing, this machine, was the only one who measured up. In an insane world, it was the sanest choice.”

So this masculine ideal, then, is not even a man at all but a machine who looks like an Austrian body builder. And while the first half of Connor’s monologue might seem to run contrary to the hard, cold, fast essence of military masculinity, this is a limit case—the terminator is not a man and presumably not subject to the vulnerabilities that afflict real human subjects. What is more, the narrative is also profoundly ambivalent given that the “good terminator” is visually identical to the “bad terminator” who hounded Hamilton relentlessly through the previous film, which is in fact the default form of this masculine robot. The distance between the two robots is some reprogramming done by John Connor in the future before sending the Arnold unit back to help him survive. This narrative bit points to another problem for military masculinity about which I will say more later, that people are not easily programmed or reprogrammed.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike terminators, flesh and blood men cannot escape the weakness around which military masculinity is elaborated and against which it is defined. In his recent book on military masculinity, Aaron Belkin points out the ways in which it is a mistake to see military forms of masculinity *against* the unmasculine, feminine, queer or other. Constructed not of simple rejections of the unmasculine, military masculinity in the United States takes its shape from the simultaneous ejection/introjection of abjected states and emotions. So, for example, Belkin notes that “...military differentiations of the

masculine from the feminine have often been represented in terms of sealed-up versus leaky bodies: men's warrior bodies are supposed to be leak-proof, like impenetrable armor, while women's bodies have been coded as leaky and soft" (Belkin 2012: 36).

To abject leaky, weak, penetrable and soft bodies, institutions perform comprehensive surveillance of soldiers. They create and demand high stakes performances, monitor and test fitness, urine, blood and feces, measure body fat percentages. All of these cultivate the internalization of a phobic response. The very despised properties that shape military masculinity must become a permanent part of the soldierly self. He (or she) must never forget what must be rejected and this must be paired with the special understanding that every soldier, no matter how hard, always risks slipping into abjection and thus expulsion from the social/institutional body of the military.

Military masculinity, in other words, is shaped by a twin structure of ejection and introjection. The non-hackers are excommunicated. Every soldier is monitored and expected to self monitor constantly for signs of weakness, weakness that must be purged. Such weakness, of course, always already exists in each of us by virtue of the actual fragility of our bodies and our lives in the face of punishing climates, deadly weapons, and opportunistic infections. While military training insists on an elaborated façade (uniform) of invulnerability, it *simultaneously* and with at least equal vigor insists on revealing just how dependent the individual is on his squad, his platoon, his institution—the entire social and productive world he did not make and over which he has but the slightest control. As Julia Kristeva puts it, the ultimate cause of abjection is not a threat to health or hygiene “but what disturbs identity, system, order” (Kristeva 1982: 4)— which

paradoxically *requires* the internalization of the abjected other in order that the recruit, the member of good standing in the group, has that other *always* to mind.

### **Freud, Masochism, and Consciousness**

Like much in Freud's work, his treatment of masochism stretches over several essays and he sometimes rejected earlier positions in the later works. At base, all of Freud's work is guided by a fairly simple proposition, namely that *H. sapiens* are ultimately and on balance governed by a utilitarian drive toward pleasure and away from pain (Benevuto 2003). Only toward the end of his career, when Freud introduces the "death drive" as a counter-veiling instinct to the pleasure principle, is this basic picture complicated. And it is at least partially to accommodate the range of observed masochistic behaviors that Freud develops the dual drive framework, which makes it of interest and use here.

Thus within Freud's basic system of thought, it is clear enough why he devotes such considerable attention to masochism: it seemingly constitutes a problem for the system itself in that "it contradicts the psyche's pleasure economy—unpleasure is its aim" (Young-Bruehl 1990: 283). He first takes up the issue at length in the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (Freud 1953 [1905]: Vol. 7, 157–159), in which he sees sadism and masochism as a single linked phenomena, both of which are fueled by a link to sexual stimulation. The underlying premise is that *any* form of bodily arousal can, under the right conditions, be associated with sexual arousal, creating a perduring link between the two in what is commonly termed a fetish. As Freud explains it in 'Instincts and Their Viscissitudes' a decade after penning the account in *Three Essays*, "We have

every reason to believe that sensations of pain, like other unpleasurable sensations, trench upon sexual excitation and produce a pleasurable condition, for the sake of which the subject will even willingly experience the unpleasure of pain” (Freud 1957 [1915]: Vol. 14, 128).

In the original account in *Three Essays*, Freud tends to see sadism as the primary condition, masochism a kind of sadism turned back on the self, and both powered by a more-or-less fungible drive to libidization. In ‘Instincts’ he reverses the ordering, seeing masochism as being more directly linked to arousal and sadism as partaking of such masochistic pleasure, vicariously, by means of identification with the masochist (Freud 1957 [1915]: Vol. 14, 129).

Freud remained, it would seem, unsatisfied by his own accounts. He continued to elaborate and adjust his account of masochism, particularly in his final two essays on the topic, “A Child is Being Beaten” and “The Economic Problem of Masochism.” In both he again shifted his positions, arguing that sadism and masochism both cover over or stand in for other forms of desire and sadism/masochism, often re-coded as being *really* about active and passive forms of arousal, mean very different things for men and for women. In the former essay, his primary conclusion is that masochistic fantasies in men—which in their final stages take on the conscious form of “I am being beaten by a woman”—are a psychic defense transformation of “I am being beaten by my father,” which is itself a transform of prior homoerotic longing for the father. In Freud’s words, “*The beating-phantasy has its origin in an incestuous attachment to the father*” (Freud 1961 [1924]: Vol. 198, 198, emphasis in original).



Well, it is easy enough to critique. I still think it worthwhile to dwell for a moment on the full shape of masochistic fantasy as developed by Freud. It involves no less than three displacements: Moving from an original desire to be loved (sexually) by the father, or “take the mother’s part,” it is transformed as follows in Freud’s account:

1) The father is no longer having sex with the son [in the fantasy], he is beating him, thus defending the psyche from homosexuality;

2) It is no longer the father who is beating the son, but the mother, further obscuring the homoerotic nature of the son’s desire, transferring object-status from father to mother, but preserving the passive role;

3) It is no longer the mother, but “a woman”—in Freud’s terms an appropriate heterosexual object—who is beating the man, thus defending him from incest.

Here we might say that in Freud’s terms, the masochist gets stuck, unable to convert the libidinous energy of being passively beaten, into “ordinary” masculine sexual aggressiveness. But the trajectory of the set of transformations proposed is itself revealing: receptive homosexual incestuous fantasy is posited as the most primal state, becoming receptive homoerotic incestuous violence, becoming receptive exogamous heteroerotic violence. If we continue the sequence, knowing what Freud considers normative, we would find that stage four would be active exogamous heteroerotic violence (sadism), and the presumed end state would then be active exogamous heterosexuality.

Now, the striking thing is that none of this elaborate apparatus of transformations and displacements is necessary if we accept Freud’s first insight—that any form of arousal is liable to be attached to sexual arousal—as a baseline explanation for

masochistic desires. The impetus for further explanation is not really to explain masochism (seeking pleasure in pain) as such, but an attempt to explain why any male child would desire to place himself in “the female position,” which Freud read from the start as the focal point of male masochism, whether in fantasy or practice.

Thus we turn to Freud’s final account of the topic in the essay *The Economic Problem of Masochism*. Here he seeks to untangle the problem of sadism and masochism by posing three different forms—erotic, feminine and moral—within his fully developed system of two drives (pleasure and death) and three-fold psychic structuring (ego, id, superego). Freud introduces a complication that would seem to be contradictory: on the one hand, he posits that all forms of manifest (or as he calls it, secondary) masochism, even moral masochism which on the surface seems far removed from any sexualized content, are erotogenic. He also poses a “primary” form of masochism which is linked to the death drive and which precedes (developmentally) the secondary forms.

In Freud’s fully developed model of the psyche and the primary drives, the death drive in its raw form is the instinctive manifestation of the inherent tendency of all things to fall apart: death, decay, dissolution. It is a kind of instinctivization of the second law of thermodynamics that flows “naturally” (read biologically) from the fact of mortality (“the way of all flesh”). Most of this primal death drive is “tamed” by the libido and redirected outward, as the will to power or mastery—it becomes, in other words, the impetus for “ordinary” aggression, which is always already eroticized, but the actual pursuit of which is risky. It is risky to the psyche, because physical and psychological prowess are often unequal to obtaining desired objects, particularly in the immature subject. Moreover, as we shall see in a moment, human societies tame this primary aggressive instinct, insisting

that it be acted on only under carefully circumscribed conditions—e.g. heterosexual, exogamous, institutionally sanctioned. The harnessing of the death drive by libido and its turning outward is also the primary basis for sadism.

Freud actually has little to say about secondary erotogenic masochism in its pure form, devoting most of the *Economic Problem* essay to what he calls feminine masochism and particularly to moral masochism. While both of these have an erotic basis, they are also more complicated. Ironically *feminine* masochism applies iconically to male subjects who desire to be “gagged, bound, painfully beaten, whipped, in some way maltreated, forced into unconditional obedience, dirtied and debased,” fantasies that signify, per Freud, “being castrated, or copulated with, or giving birth to a baby” (Freud 1961 [1924]: Vol. 19, 162).

Such desires, for Freud, are regressive, tapping into and activating the primary masochism that ought to have been turned outward as the will to power. This introjected masochism is always there, so to speak, but becomes activated in the male subject to the extent that he fails to develop the gender-appropriate will to mastery. His “desire for pain” is a triple evasion, in the first place an escape from the primary masochism of the death drive, leading down to absolute self-destruction, in the second place, from homoerotic love for the father, and in the third place from incestuous love for the mother.

Finally, and to round out the current account of the Freudian view, I turn to moral masochism, the form that has on the surface the loosest connection to an erotic basis. The moral masochist differs in that he, or she, seems to seek out punishment for its own sake, not as a path to pleasure. Moreover, and this point provides a kind of clue, the moral masochist does not require that his or her sufferings be perpetrated or ordered by

someone loved or admired. “This restriction has been dropped in moral masochism. The suffering itself is what matters; whether it is decreed by someone who is loved or by someone who is indifferent is of no importance. It may even be caused by impersonal powers or by circumstances...” (Freud 1961: Vol. 19, 165).

Unlike all other masochists, the moral masochist is apparently doing something other than following a somewhat unconventional—though per Freud perfectly explicable—route to pleasure. He is not, in the mode of a medieval Christian saint, mortifying the flesh in order to draw closer to the divine and achieve *perfetta letizia* (“perfect joy”), but is intentionally—if perhaps unconsciously—chasing after unhappiness (Benevuto 2003). Why would he do such a thing?

Freud’s answer, writ short, is guilt. More specifically, an “unconscious” sense of guilt, or “need for punishment.” So strong is this need that the moral masochist who seeks psychoanalytic treatment for neurotic disorders will fail to recover, since holding on to the neurosis is a form of self-punishment. Further, Freud argues, that the separation from erotogenesis is only apparent. In the process of taming the death drive, human beings develop what is called a conscience, or in Freudian terms, a superego. This entity is formed, in the “normal” case via the de-erotized introjection of the father (or the parents) and his rules and laws, which has considerable capacity to produce guilty anxiety in the ego. The moral masochist, however, is not so much the victim of a sadistic superego—a common enough condition, but people who are “tortured by conscience” are usually aware of such torture—but possessed of a punishment-seeking ego in relation to its own superego. Perhaps from the over-representation of the death drive in the subject, the moral masochist is not ultimately able to de-erotize the introjected father. So the

ego seeks punishment as a form of anxious arousal, which itself indicates a need for further punishment, which causes further arousal, and so on, where the arousal in question seeks unhappiness as a kind of permanent anxiety.

Those familiar with Freud will note that I have skipped over the “Oedipus complex” as basis for the formation of the superego. I take the Freudian model of consciousness as a device for explanation, and the explanatory pieces I want to recycle do not rely on Oedipus. To this end, I start from the following premises, partially derived from Freud, but modified and adapted without apology:

First, the point from the *Three Essays*, that “... nothing of considerable importance can occur in the organism without contributing some component to the excitation of the sexual instinct” (Freud 1953 [1905]: Vol. 7, 204–205). I would state the matter more generically as follows: various sorts of bodily arousal—fear, anger, sexual desire, hunger, pain—are closely related to each other and liable to become associated through a complex mapping together of sensations and interpretation, biochemical reactions, memory and anticipation. The exact mixture of hormones, neurochemicals, emotions, thoughts and anatomical reactions need not be identical from person to person, nor do we have to propose—contrary to all evidence—that all forms and intensities of the various possible states of arousal are equally fungible.

More simply put: people are capable of being aroused by a lot of things, including persons, situations, and conditions considered (by someone) inappropriate. In fact a large part of teaching people to be people is teaching them to control and direct their arousal states, sexual ones certainly, but also states of fear, anger, love, sadness and so on.

Second, most people do seem to be equipped with something like a Freudian superego, or at a lower word count, a conscience. And while I do not doubt that early childhood experiences have a profound influence on how individual consciences are formed, I see no need to imagine one universal mechanism for accomplishing this. The rather obvious fact is that adults, and by no means just parents, spend a great deal of effort attempting to shape the conscience of infants, toddlers, adolescents and young adults. The primary available mechanisms for accomplishing this are manipulations of the various arousal states discussed above, linked to explanations regarding the ways in which ostensible behavior is likely to be linked back to such arousal states. That is, again, to simplify—punishment, reward, and clarification.

If what I have posited above is basically correct, that these states are in fact rather fungible and liable to complicated associations and combinations, it should come as no surprise that developing a clear and consistent “moral compass” in human children, or for that matter manipulating the conscience of an adult, is nowhere near as straightforward a project as conditioning pigeons in a Skinner box. Our primary tools for forming and impacting conscience, in other words, are only partially effective, because people are perverse—and *many of our tools for forming and manipulating conscience tend to make them more so.*

Third, in considering heroic masochism, a mechanism akin to, but substantively different from, Freud’s death drive seems to be in play. It is clear enough that at some point in our development we become aware of our own mortality, and the exact components of this awareness and the order in which they are developed are probably not universal. It likely depends on certain qualities of individual imagination, shaped by

available experiences such as seeing or encountering corpses—human or animal—including those in various states of decay, depictions of such, and learning that a certain person is gone and will not be coming back. It may also include more visceral experiences, such as choking, near-drowning, or traumatic injury that results in unconsciousness. By analogy, suggested by others, or arrived at independently, we may also think of sleep.

It is the imagined possibility of the cessation of negative bodily arousal which serves, perhaps, in a mode not unlike how Freud imagined the death drive. Not as an instinctive residue of the tendency of things to fall apart, but a more or less conscious, or at least consciously available awareness, that death is ambivalent. While death forecloses on the positive arousal states that *might* be experienced in the future, it *certainly* ends negative arousal states—pain, fear, anxiety, loneliness, guilt and shame—experienced in the now. Suicide is thinkable, and its allure or repugnance depends in part on the quality of present and anticipated arousal states, and past experience.

So, to summarize, I borrow in modified form three points related to masochism from Freud: the fungibility of arousal states, the formation of something like a superego (conscience) via the manipulation of arousal states, and something like a death drive, which I will understand as the capacity of consciousness to contemplate an end to states presently or potentially experienced suffering.

With these premises as my starting point, I want to replace Freud's three-fold schema of masochism—erotogenic, feminine, and moral—with a two-fold typology, dividing what I am going to call *abject* forms of masochism from what I will call *heroic* forms. And while it might be possible to map this two-fold division onto Freud's three-

fold one, I see no reason to do so, since I am not taking a realist position regarding his model. While the premises outlined above are useful, they need not constitute a complete model of human consciousness. Rather, they are a starting point for thinking about what might be called the sociology of arousal, pain and the way pain is linked to power and privilege.

### **Abjection, Heroism, and Power**

In the discussion of the formation of conscience above, I asserted that our primary tool for this was the manipulation of arousal states in concert with explanation. The pairing of the two, we who teach hope, allows the learner to clearly imagine the future consequences of current choices, and to choose that which will lead to a state of arousal (present, absent, or moderated) that we approve of for the learner. In its clearest formulation the teacher says, if you do *X*, I will do *Y*, and you will not like it; if you do *A*, I will do *B*, and you will like it. And, it will be best for you if you learn to generalize this lesson, making every attempt to sort out the behaviors that lead to reactions that you will and will not like.

But conscience, it should probably be objected, is *not* simply the introjection of lessons about punishment and reward. It is guided, when most effective, by empathy. Which is to say, by a capacity to imagine how ones' actions and non-actions are likely to affect the arousal states of others, as well as the habitually activated capacity to care. This is surely correct, complicating the number and type of arousal states in play. It does not however change the basic formula, except to add further ways in which the subject-learner can learn, i.e. via attempting to replicate the apparently empathic reactions of



others, and the ways in which the teacher can impact the learner, i.e. by “modeling” empathy and engaging the empathy of the learner. The middle-school teacher, for example, does not just give a bad grade for marginal work, he or she may also indicate disappointment, a negative arousal state. The student may feel both shame at having earned a bad grade and empathic guilt for having made the teacher to feel disappointment—double jeopardy, so to speak, but either the shame or the guilt may suffice to encourage further effort from the student.

For purposes herein the critical point is that the principal tools for impacting individual conscience, whether in its formative phase or as an active mechanism, overlap strongly with tools available for the exercise of power. This may seem like an extraordinary statement, but upon reflection it is clear enough that the *active* exercise of power is also dependent on a capacity, or perceived capacity, to impact states of arousal. There is also, of course, the use of what is sometimes called “negative power” which is manifest as a capacity to limit available choices and thus channel decision making (Bachrach and Baratz 1970), such as when voters are given a choice between approving a ballot measure to support higher property taxes to pay for local schools or decline to do so, but other alternatives are not on offer. But even in such a case, the negative (or invisible) exercise of power is dependent on the prior exercise of active power in the election of pliable or “right thinking” candidates, the writing of laws, the passing of regulations, and the long-term process of shaping ideology. Which is to say negative power also depends on manipulating states of arousal, even if the most important manipulations occurred sometime in the past.

Power itself is a fraught topic, prone to endless circumlocution and euphemism. Most of this difficulty arises because of efforts to extract and distill it to some pure form. Typically these efforts have taken either what might be called the Maoist-form—“power flows from the barrel of a gun”—or the Benthamite-form—“power is grounded in self-interest.” Both are possessed of a portion of the truth, but lead to fallacious simplifications.

The Maoist definition of power tends to confuse power—a capacity to have an affect on willed behavior—with force. Force is a capacity to affect bodily comportment. If by whatever means—including threat grounded in force, but extending also to promise of reward—I can convince someone to do a thing she or he would not otherwise do, I am exercising power. If in spite of all efforts, a person refuses to comply with my expressed orders but I send thugs to drag him/her away, that is force. Indeed if the only tool I have to hand is a gun, and the purpose of the person I am confronting is suicide by delegation, what power that exists in the situation is with him or her.

The Benthamite definition of power confuses power with so-called self-interest. The problem here is twofold. In the first place, the idea of “interest” is derived, as David Graeber (2011) has so acerbically pointed out, from the language of finance. In the notion that “self-interest” is the primary mover in life is embedded the assumption that we are attempting somehow to multiply or at least incrementally increase and compound—ourselves. As usage it is decidedly modern, explicitly replacing the idea of “self-love” in Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophy, which had rather too close an association with several of what the medieval world thought of as the Seven Deadly Sins—greed, vanity, and pride to name obvious candidates. In jettisoning this theological

baggage, the liberal philosophical tradition meant to free up the subject, commending him or her to act rationally. Reason motivated by self-interest is presumed to demand a desire to accumulate limitless quantities of, well, something. Money becomes the most obvious candidate only because it is conceived of as pure value, exchangeable for anything else.

Both understandings of power—Maoist and Benthamite—fail to understand that power is always *relational*, existing only as it is exercised in the context of relationships and is fundamentally communicative. It is grounded in a *capacity* to influence states of arousal in others, but other people's states of arousal can be complex, even contradictory, as they are able to feel more than one thing at a time. Moreover, we have no direct access to other people's arousal states. Not only must we rely on tools of communication to impact them, we cannot be completely sure what these states are. Indeed, even for the person feeling the arousal state, its nature may be unclear.

This complexity means that power partakes of both Maoist and Benthamite premises—violence and “interest”—but only in a context of relationship. As noted above pure violence is not power, but force; however, the *threat* of violence—or of the escalation of violence—can potentially be an effective way to impact arousal states and thereby change behavior. As can promises of reward, or threat of their withdrawal. However, the complexity of arousal states mean that while threats and rewards may lead to compliance, they will all but inevitably lead to other colorations of affect—from fear-motivated compliance to resentment, anger and hatred; from object-desire for a reward to anxiety to fear to resentment if the capacity to offer rewards is too one-sided. The carrot and stick are power-devices, then, best suited to relationships of minimal importance. Indeed, when relying on tools so likely to produce so many affective/arousal conflicts, it

is probably best to consider the relationships in question as disposable—and that is, not incidentally, exactly the kinds of relationship encouraged by the contemporary capital-dominated marketplace.

Yet paradoxically the very contradictions of arousal brought about by techniques of punishment and reward can be, and often have been, turned around to produce exclusive communities of affect that then gain the capacity to act as communities of interest. Here we return to the concept of masochism and a consideration of how it might be implicated in the formation of such communities.

Masochism, as I conceive it, can be understood as a complexly constituted desire for pain found primarily in two analytically distinct but deeply entangled forms which I name *abject* and *heroic*. The abject form of masochism corresponds perhaps more closely with what Freud theorized as erotogenic and feminine masochisms, characterized by a desire for either physical pain of various sorts, or the experience of humiliation, disgust or violation. It is found in both men and women and while the percentage of persons who make masochistic practice a regular part of their life might be relatively small and those who identify erotically as masochists even smaller, the fungibility of arousal states all but insures that most people will have experienced, under just the right circumstances and proportions, that potential of abjection in one form or another, vicariously if nothing else. Reality TV shows, spectatorship of sports and competitions rely on this commonplace.

Abject masochism can take many forms. Besides the unremarkable (because widely distributed) capacity to find “pleasure in pain” under *very specific* conditions, it can be linked to the death drive as I have redefined it, meaning a will to die in more-or-less instrumental response to an arousal economy—whether because of extremity or

deprivation—experienced as intolerable. It can take the form of anorexic refusal for example—of food, of sex, of medical treatment, of emotional attachments—that generate (usually) degenerative states that nonetheless remain connected to an arousal economy. And it can be linked to a creative desire for self-transformation through suppression of the ego, the death of self, even if partial and temporary, as grasping, willing, and lost in struggle.

Abject masochism is by no means sex/gender specific insofar as it is practiced, experienced, or has influence upon individual human subjects. It is, however, associated with “the feminine position” within the familiar mode of binary gendered categories. That is, abject masochism is seen, categorized and understood as female/feminine not because it applies only to women, but because abjected experiences, indeed even feminine being, is widely construed as abjected. In psychoanalytic terms we might say that while *all* selves are per force incomplete, construed around a primal hollowness that obscures the radical inadequacy of signification—as Lacan might put it (Lacan 1991: 115–127)—this constitutive incompleteness is systematically categorized as feminine as a way of comparatively constituting a supposed masculine completeness (Brentnall 2011: 62 – 63). More accurately, we might say the narcissistic blind spot most of us tend to nurture in our immaturity is nothing less than a fudging of the data regarding our own limited, mortal nature of which abjection of any kind is an embarrassing or frightening reminder.

Power comes into play, and it always does, in the social uses of narcissism, particularly in the manufacture of myths and rites supporting institutions dividing people by *awarded gender*—which is gender that does not flow from biology, but must be

earned and institutionally sanctioned. And while the dominant European and American traditions have imagined a strictly binary system, this system has always operated as an affect-laded pretense that actually sorts people with an exquisite precision into innumerable, every-shifting, ever-contested gendered boxes. It is in this context of ruthless sorting and competition that the the myth of masculine plenitude is generated (Brintnall 2011: 8), a myth which amounts to the displacement of a shared human legacy of inevitable abjection, not only onto women, but onto relatively feminine, feminized, or feminizable subjects. It is also the context in which gender-authorizing institutions—men’s clubs, fraternities, religious organizations, schools, colleges and professions—have thrived. These institutions certify certain forms of masculinity and its privileges, often marking such belonging with rites that paradoxically involve reminders and experiences of abjection, including “...whipping, flailing, beating, and other forms of terrorization” (Gilmore 1990:14).

That is to say, the very rites so often used both to solemnize institutional awards of gender and to train the bodies and minds of initiates—what Bourdieu calls “rites of institution” (1992: 80)—almost invariably subject applicants to the very forms of abjection that masculine status supposedly will allow them to elide. The operative word is *allow*. Rites of institution that support the myth of masculine plenitude, do so not for all anatomically male persons, but only for those who measure up—and to measure up involves in every case receiving the imprimatur of the institution. Indeed, while anatomy has historically been a useful way to do an initial rough sort of populations into those who *might be* allowed masculine privilege and those who *will not be* under any circumstances, there is nothing in the system itself that prevents anatomically female

persons from being awarded masculine status and privilege (Belkin 2012: 3). Indeed, arguably the inclusion of at least a smattering of anatomical females—as well as other previously feminized (i.e. abjected) categories of persons—into at least the potential lists of masculine awardees can easily lead to a strengthening of institutional power vis-à-vis the exclusivity claims of any particular individual—pointing up the provisional, non-biological basis of the award considered important in nominally democratic societies.

The *mechanism of inclusion* or award is crucial, typically involving the use of pain and the inculcation of heroic masochism. What makes it heroic—other than association with by now countless narratives of heroism that showcase *necessary suffering* as a stage in the development of heroes or their apotheosis—from the Labors of Heracles to the Passion of the Christ—is the repression or displacement of the erotic potential of abjection. That is not to say that desire as such is eliminated. Rather, it is discursively attached not to the experience of abjection but to the socially authorized purpose—group belonging, thwarting the enemy, preserving comrades, obedience to the institution, the redemption of the world—glossed in the phrase *the greater good*. This requires the pretense that no person would conceive of making “such sacrifices” without such a displacement, without the repression of the horrifically fascinating and perverse attraction of the abject.

Heroic masochism, then, is the socially useful suppression of abject masochism. It valorizes sacrifice and has a tendency to find meaning and purpose in suffering. Yet at the level of the ever fungible states of arousal, its distance from abject masochism is never more than the flip of a switch, a confusion of rhetorics, an historical re-evaluation. The selfish and the selfless tend to merge in the uses of pain. Which, of course, is not to

say that there is no distinction between perpetrator and victim, between martyr and libertine, between a bubble of plenitude and a state of suicidal longing for obliteration or even ego-freeing enlightenment. All such distinctions are possible, but they accord with power-enabled actions, choices, relationships.

Moreover, and this point is critical, the undoubted fact that there exist easily achieved levels of suffering so extreme that fungible states of arousal and the whole mechanism of abject masochism becomes meaningless for the victim does not make the *infliction* or *spectation* of such suffering useless for those commanding its infliction nor meaningless to those who witness it.

Heroic masochism, in fact, can be said to achieve its most socially potent forms precisely in those cases where pain is multiplied to infinity—in burning, in dismemberment, in crucifixion—and few can imagine the victim to harbour secret and equally infinite pleasures. And yet the construction of such experiences as somehow sublime, transcendent, depends precisely on the incongruous capacity to imagine the unimaginable, that annihilation through suffering can *somehow* be linked, perhaps by a grotesque analogy to ordinary experiences of abject masochism, with something desirable—union with the infinite, perfect communion with the divine, or obtaining impossible and permanent victory in the name of group or nation.

Abject and heroic masochism, then, are irremediably imbricated, woven together so tightly that they are nearly impossible to unravel even analytically, at least without applying the boxing-up power of binary gender categories. Heroic masochism, in this sense, is defended from its own embrace of the abject—of infinities of abjection—by its social use as a tool for institutional man-making.



### **The Techniques of Pain**

Pain, then, is a technique used in the production of social control via states of arousal. The pain in question is paradigmatically physical pain, but per Freud's first insight regarding the capacity of any significant event to be eroticized or in other ways associated with structures of desire in some form, psychological pain (paradigmatically humiliation, but also isolation, restraint, and objectification) also serves.

As one American veteran told Aaron Belkin, recalling his participation in the Navy's traditional "crossing the line" rituals inflicted on sailors and marines passing the equator for the first time: "Endure the humiliation of the ritual your mates would be reassured you that you were one of them.... Yes, the ritual was very abusive... It was a matter of showing our mates that we were real males" (2012: 92).

I am going to call such showings—demonstrations of manliness, of the ability to submit to and endure ordeals of suffering—*warrants*, which reflect the successful performance of heroic masochism. The warranted initiate emerges from the rite of passage with changed status, a cemented membership in the group and/or his adult masculinity (Adorno 1998: 197; Turner 1967: 94–95), but also a permission, indeed often a requirement, that he will be called to inflict similar punishments and humiliations on others. The self-same warrants of heroic masochism function as a bar for group membership, as an attestation of masculinity, and as a kind of open-ended guarantor of privilege, the actual functioning of which fluctuates dynamically.

Examples of such rites and rituals can be multiplied almost indefinitely (Adorno 1998; Elias 1996; Frevert 1991; Gardiner 2004, 2014; Gilmore 1990; Goldstein 2001;

Theweleit 1987), referenced and recirculated in an endless parade of popular culture references beyond the ones cited above (see, e.g., Barker 2005; Boose 1993; Brintnall 2011; Clawson 1989; Feasey 2008; Kimmel 2008; Faludi 1999; Savran 1998). Herein I will confine myself to only a few examples from my work with veterans and soldiers, designed to illustrate how even relatively mild uses of the techniques of pain and its kindred simultaneously undergird group belonging, masculinity, and in my final point, privilege.

The first case involves a training practice experienced by a former member of the Army of the Republic of Ireland. A half dozen soldiers were ordered to the bottom of a swimming pool. The trainer joined them there with a single tank of oxygen, passing the breathing apparatus from person to person, around the circle. The lesson was clear enough: they were all in the situation together, and they were to learn the practical skill of sharing and conserving stored oxygen.

Then, however, the trainer complicated things. He assigned each trainee a number, and he would hold up a finger to indicate to whom the apparatus should next be passed. He began by going once around the circle, then mixed the order, even numbers, odd numbers, and finally outright skipping individuals. The training situation was radically changed, leaving all to wonder just how long the skipped individual would be tasked to hold his breath, and who might be skipped next.

Anyone who has ever been deprived of air for any length of time will understand how immediate and urgent the issue becomes. This is one of the reasons why “waterboarding”—also called “simulated drowning”—is so compelling as a mode of coercive interrogation, i.e. torture: it is designed to induce a sense of “suffocation and

incipient panic” (Human Rights Watch 2011: 54). The pass-the-aqualung exercise noted above did not actually reach that level of intensity, even for the skipped soldiers. But the prospect was there as soldiers waited for their ration of air, caught between an existential crisis and public humiliation, the water’s surface tantalizingly close.

In many ways the exercise was like the initiatory “stand until someone falls” rite previously discussed, pointing up the fragility of the body in a visceral way. Yet there is also an important contrast: at least among the accounts I collected, the oxygen deprivation was not taken to forced failure. The trainee skipped on a particular round was made physically uncomfortable, and uncomfortably aware of his vulnerability, his dependency on the cooperation of his fellow trainees, and his hierarchical subordination to the trainer—but no one began to drown, passed out from lack of oxygen, or as is more likely, panicked and broke for the surface. Unlike the basic training “stand until someone falls” rite, the “pass the aqualung” exercise was used with relatively seasoned soldiers—the non-hackers had already been removed. It is unlikely that any of those selected for the training would have much considered breaking for the surface, though panic can overcome anyone.

The second instance involves two United States Army veterans, both of whom went through basic training together in the late 1990s before being deployed to Iraq. Over the course of repeated interviews they related stories familiar to me about their military training, from vomiting phlegm after they stumbled out of the gas chamber, to the obligatory blisters from road marching. They also told the story of a particularly sadistic and feared drill sergeant whose favorite form of corrective punishment was the low crawl.

Low crawling involves dragging yourself along with your body pressed as closely to the ground as possible, on your belly, keeping your head down: a useful technique if you are taking fire with little cover. It is, however, extremely uncomfortable and creates a lot of friction. Uniforms and body armor in the field minimize the bruising and scraping. The drill sergeant in question liked to assign his soldier to low crawl in the barracks, along the smooth linoleum floor, in their underwear. The result was copious self-inflicted friction burns, like rug burns, on the knees, toes, elbows and at times faces and ears as the sergeant stomped along behind those being punished, demanding they go faster and stay down.

Such non-standard physical punishment is frowned upon in the US Army but is nonetheless common. In my interviews and my own experience I have encountered dozens of soldiers and veterans who were personally subjected to unauthorized, technically illegal training techniques. Not every soldier will be under the direct authority of a sadistic drill sergeant who makes it a point to go beyond the prescribed training techniques, but virtually every US soldier will have witnessed or at least heard of such excesses. The excesses become part of the training milieu, and while soldiers with less “hardcore” trainers often feel sorry for those subjected to such punishments, the soldiers in those platoons often take a perverse pride in what they endure, and develop an awestruck respect for the drill sergeant in question.

The third instance involves a widely-circulated training video from the German army (BBC 2007). Situated in a camouflaged machine gun nest, the soldiers are learning to fire aggressively on imagined targets. The trainer yells at them, among other things:

“You’re in the Bronx, a black van pulls up in front of you and three African-Americans get out and start really insulting your mother... act!”

Though widely condemned for racism, the transgressive nature of the training scenario was far from incidental. The trainer also demanded that the gunner shout obscenities, and it was he who decided when the targets had been killed. In each case, the demand was that the soldier demonstrate his capacity to step outside the boundaries of ordinary, civil, well-socialized behavior. Had the trainer not specifically mentioned African Americans—or any group by specific ethnicity, if he had stuck to speaking generically of “terrorists” or “the enemy”—the video might not have gone viral and attracted so much attention. But the underlying purpose is to ask soldiers to demonstrate that they still have the warrant, that their masculinity, always incomplete, is functioning adequately to soldierly performance.

In each of the three instances described—Irish military aqualung sharing, US Army informal punishment of soldiers, and German training in transgressive aggression—military masculinity is negotiated across a broad range of possibilities. Gender performance is complex, and competencies are dynamic. As disparate as these examples are, each is constructed around heroic masochism. This is obvious in the “low crawl” punishment used by the sadistic drill sergeant, but it is also true in the potential humiliation of the Irish trainees, and in the racialized aggressiveness demanded of the Germans. Each is a moment in the training regimen when the warrant is given—belonging and masculinity proved—and called due in a demand for violence, inflicted or endured.

### **Privilege and Pain**

How, then, does training of the three somewhat different types described above serve to produce and maintain masculine privilege? It is, in some ways, a strange question. The pain visited on usually male bodies and psyches in the construction of military masculinity is the price of privilege. It is strange because the privileges associated with military masculinity are unevenly distributed by class, by military rank, by race, and by sexual orientation, and the form and degree of privilege actually experienced by most of those in this hierarchy of distribution would make it seem hardly worth the pains it costs. But Nancy Dowd puts it well, “that privilege would be embraced with such a price exposes the strength and attraction of male privilege. The price paid becomes justification and entitlement” (2010: 59).

Yet if we simply see a kind of economic relationship, a trade of pain for privilege, we misunderstand the way in which heroic masochism is deployed to reinforce power and the privilege that goes with it. The attraction of military masculinity—or its hardened, toughened, warranted iterations on the shop floor, the police academy, the gang, the sports team or the prison—is not simply in imagined pay-offs, but a self-reinforcing affective loop. Shared suffering heightens the experience of belonging for the warranted, forces them to internalize the ways in which they are always already abjected and thus compromised, and demands that they hide this reality at all costs to avoid expulsion from the social body.

Yet the privileges that go with masculinity, and particularly military masculinity, are significant—even if elusive at times and unevenly distributed. At the political level, full citizenship has been historically linked to military service, which in turn has been

predicated on masculine performance. And while risking injury or death in war might not seem exactly like a privilege, it has been repeatedly constructed as such, as an opportunity to bond with the sacred nation. The benefit to those who become casualties might be considered as, at best, evanescent—but the privileges accrue collectively, not just to soldiers, but to men as a class.

An important element of masculine privilege is constructed through the subsequent utility of bonds generated in the hothouse environment of the initiated homosocial order, or what John Remy has referred to as the “men’s house,” which is “the place where those males who have earned the right to call themselves men, or are in the process of attaining this emblem of privilege, gather” (1990: 46). Broadly speaking, any point of enduring homosocial gathering, from locker rooms to barracks, are men’s houses in this sense. The initiatory rites and other forms of training that secure admission tend to heighten commitment to the group by generating difficult to assimilate arousal states and by generating a sense of being selected through the exclusion (or at least threatened exclusion) of non-hackers, and of course those who will not even be considered for membership (Bourdieu 1992).

The utility of the bonds generated in the men’s house is widely recognized, and those sharing such experiences tend to give preference to others of their most particular kind in decisions such as hiring, promotion, passing along of crucial information and the like. It is, in effect, a way to extend the boundaries of benefit usually associated with kinship, which becomes all the more important in societies where kinship circles are contracted. A key component of this, often overlooked, is the benefit of mentoring, in which men seen as fully in possession of masculinity in its preferential forms self-select

or are selected to bring along younger men seen as likely candidates, often because they have the appropriate fraternal background, or are seen as possessed of qualities akin to those found in the group (Kimmel and Traveler 2005).

Military masculinity is also associated with a number of powerful narratives that revolve around the ways in which heroic masochism is inculcated. These narratives reinforce the notion that the toughening and hardening presumably required to endure the rigors of the battlefield construct not just gendered bodies, but gendered spaces, archetypically “the front”—a space from which women are supposed to be absent, whatever the realities (Name Witheld 2010). This paradigmatic separation underwrites masculine and feminine spaces as fundamentally different, creating a social warrant for the de facto zoning practices that make pediatrician’s offices and elementary school classrooms into feminine spaces, while football stadiums and engineering colleges are masculine (Dowd 2010: 64).

Not only do militarized narratives generate a warrant for gendered social zoning, they celebrate bodily sacrifice as an ideal. They create a kind of aura around masculine accomplishment, as if all things masculine are seen through the lens of heroic masochism. The normative breadwinner role, which has done so much at the practical level to maintain male economic privilege, is constructed in a “work first” narrative field that draws on the trope of heroic masochism: whatever the man does, he does for the greater good of his family, and is therefore not only authorized, but sanctified. Failure to work sufficiently, or evidence even of a desire not to put work first, is conversely constructed as emasculating, indicative of an incapacity to hack it.



The specific soldiers who underwent the humiliations, pains, and transgressions described above might not feel, of course, that they have any of these privileges. In the first place, the exercise of privilege—gendered, racial, class-based—often goes unnoticed. It is simply what is normal for the subject. In the second place, the privileges that go specifically with military masculinity are always subject to revocation. In the gendered regime produced through the techniques of pain and heroic masochism, abjection is immanent, always almost shamefully visible. It is the male-male competition of daily life that may well dominate the consciousness of any man in particular, rather than the categorical privileges that accrue to men as such, or that he might unthinkingly exercise in his relations with women or less fully warranted men.

Finally, with respect to masculine privilege and the heroic masochism that warrants it, it must be said again that a responsibility for policing the gender line, for participating in the casual sadism of exclusion as well as the institutional violence of initiation, are part of the package. As argued by Theodore Allen in his discussion of the invention of whiteness in the United States, white racial privilege is the counterpoint to a cross-class alliance of rich and poor whites in which the poor are included in the dominant social order in exchange for a responsibility to police the color line, if necessary with violence (1994).

Masculine privilege, of the sort that accrues to those initiated in its military forms, oozes out to encompass men as a class even while further abjecting those considered “non-hackers”—feminine men, gay men, men of color, men of the wrong religion, men with bodies not conforming to militarized standards, depending on the time and place. It is also deeply compelling to those who inhabit it because of the price they have paid and

continue to pay for the belonging. The privilege is taken as a minor compensatory justice, and the sunk cost of their past pain makes refusal to go along with more of the same, or in its infliction, difficult. Their participation as victim or perpetrator enmeshes them in a system that is only reinforced by the most popular and well known narratives our culture has produced. Who doesn't want to be a hero?

### **Conclusion**

It is more than a rhetorical question. The warrants for masculine privilege have their roots in the notion that suffering is, or ought to be, good for the soul. Pain and its psycho-emotional kindred—humiliation, shame, anxiety—are at base forms of arousal that can be, and often are, invested with erotic energy. The investment, because perverse, and doubly perverse in the context of masculine homosocial environments, is to an extent unspeakable, unknowable. It is a powerful font of affect that attaches men to groups via the narrative of the greater good: suffering, then, has a purpose—service to the group, the family, the nation. The perversely alluring dread and ambivalence associated with initiation in the group, with acts of heroism and sacrifice, and with death are tamed.

This structure underwrites masculine privilege by bonding men together, both concretely and in the general sense of overvaluing the values associated with a capacity to suffer willingly: toughness, self-discipline, emotional control, discounting consequences to self or to others. To intervene in this particular warrant for masculine privilege means to cultivate new attitudes toward the body, attitudes that do not champion submission and hardness and endurance as the preeminent values. It means to refuse to perpetuate the “take one for the team” self-sacrificial attitudes so prevalent in sport. It

means to undermine narrative structures that tap into the elation that seems to go along with stories about pain, endurance, sacrifice.

The techniques of pain are techniques of emotional manipulation, grounded in our human reactions to arousal and our need to belong. Indeed, the benefits of belonging to some in-group that has organized social space for decades, or centuries, to the benefit of group members and those most easily assimilable to group norms, are at the heart of privilege. The musculature of privilege is the warrant for sadism and violence (including social bullying and intimidation) turned both against initiates and in the service of policing both gendered and group boundaries. If we are serious about changing the ways in which gendered privilege functions, then we have to think seriously about ways to mitigate against the use of pain in the production of people.

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<sup>1</sup> Twain's original version, from chapter 39 of *Following the Equator* (1897) goes: "By trying we can easily learn to endure adversity. Another man's, I mean."

<sup>2</sup> The speech occurs very early in the film, when the new recruits are lined up inside the barracks.

<sup>3</sup> Popular culture examples of narrative use of heroic masochism could be multiplied beyond the endurance of even the most intent reader, evidenced by David Savran's *Taking It Like a Man* (1998). Interestingly there is also a history of critical popular cultural treatments of the process of production that leads to a militarized masculinity and its close cousin mechanized masculinity, for example in *The Bourne Identity* (2002) and related franchise. The classic cautionary treatment is Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* (1818).