

MASTURBATION AS A WAY OF LIFE¹

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Submitted to Central European University
Department of Gender Studies

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Gender Studies

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Budapest, Hungary

2013

¹ A debt to “Friendship as a Way of Life” (1997), an interview with Michel Foucault.

Abstract

This thesis explores how the concept of masturbation—both as a sexual act and as a pejorative speech act—is mobilized by Western anxieties about economic exchange, social order, subjectivity and self-reflection. I will trace a genealogy of masturbation over a range of Western discourses beginning from its origins as a master trope of the European Enlightenment. Combining the sexual histories of Thomas Laqueur, Michel Foucault, and others with the anthropological history of debt offered by David Graeber, I will show how the masturbation panic that swept European societies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was fueled by contemporaneous philosophical and political worries about the nature of currency, credit, and the rule of law. In particular, masturbation would take on a symbolic relationship with the failure to pay one's debts, the result of which would be social lostness and a fall into slavery. I will then show how these anxieties bear out in the political and philosophical theories of Rousseau and Hegel, demonstrating how, in each case, pleasure in the self is rendered as a dyadic self-enslavement that demands the intervention of a *third term* that will bring the subject into the sight of the law. For Rousseau, the third term will be the social contract; for Hegel, “The Priest” as a proxy for Absolute Spirit. I will thread Judith Butler’s critique of Hegel’s “slave subjectivity” and the subjective failure before the Law into structuralist psychoanalysis, showing how the psyche is figured by Freud and Lacan as a libidinal economy of exchange and endless debt which is formulated by a fundamentally anti-narcissistic imperative to reflect the law. Finally I will turn to the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, moving through her concept of “queer performativity” and her work with shame affect in order to reorient anti-masturbatory speech acts as a demand *to be seen*. This reorientation will follow the line between dyadic and structuralist forms of exchange, redrawing life and masturbation onto the same side of subjectivity.

Debts

To Eszter Timár for shattering my self. To Zsazsa Barát for the flawless insertion of the xenolith “fucking” between two obnoxious terms. To the faculty and staff of the Department of Gender Studies for ad(sub)mitting me. To my fellow/femme class members for supplementing me. To the notorious Mx. Chris Xteena Xteen Zivalich for generally being a fierce queen, but mostly for being a not-so-great personal shopper. To Erman, to whom my thoughts escape, Taksim. To CEU and Ms. Soros with love. To my friends not in Hungary who have read me in my absence. To those who literally gave me cash to incinerate in this writing. To david colin onze for self-sucking. To Britney for self-touching. And to Madonna for self-referencing. To my sister, her family, and our (m)other. To the Dunbracks, who have loved me. And to Mark, who returns.

For me,

Mark,

and the always other...



Photograph by david colin onze (2010), courtesy of the artist.

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Introductions, Questions

“The passivity and irrelevance of European intellectuals and American universities over the past three decades is largely due to the wrong turn they have taken into masturbatory post-modernism.”

—Johann Hari, “Why I Won’t Be Mourning Derrida,” October 13, 2004

In or around 1991, a forthcoming article by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick was singled out for censure in a book that was likely printed “before the offending paper was so much as written” (Sedgwick, 1991, 818). The article, “Jane Austin and the Masturbating Girl,” came under attack as an example of “mental masturbation” in American academia. Beating-off was antithetical to intellectual utility, and Sedgwick’s title was, it seems, forged into an object-lesson of sorts. Because of the wrinkle in timing, the article that eventually came to bear the notorious title recursively folds the narrative of this autogenesis into a rumination on masturbation, its punitive history and the importance of the figure of the masturbator in Western sexuality. In a way, the writing of the article is written over traces of both what it was supposed to have been and what it was becoming. The article is a literary forgetting.

The pejorative charge of mental masturbation, or masturbation (on its own, even), has not gone away.² As the epigraph above evinces, the accusation of masturbation rears its head now and again to put academic passivity and irrelevance to bed, which—now and again, one assumes—inspires a trouble-maker of sorts to defend masturbatory ways of thinking and doing (see Esplin, 2004).³ But what is the relation, I am curious, between the act and the epithet? How is it that the act seems to have achieved (?) some amount of sociability, some quantum of normalcy, but the embodiment of masturbation—as an identity—remains firmly excluded from contemporary

² Nor is it new. Masturbation as an aesthetic criticism dates at least back to the early 1800s. (See Laqueur, 2003, 61-62).

³ That often the epithet seems to stick to certain theoretical, philosophical and literary projects that I take pleasure in inspires in me an affinity. Call me sentimental: I understand the charge, and I know it has very much to do with my interests.

social currencies? What would lead someone to call an article, or a book, or an entire way of thinking “masturbatory”? What is at stake when one person intercedes into another’s reflections? And how might that single intercession be but a mere instance, a sour morsel of a more totalizing ethical imperative? In the thesis that follows, I hope to begin a kind of answering to this call—the call to masturbation as a subjectivity.

I will begin by tracing the genealogy of masturbation as an adjectival pejorative to the European Enlightenment which bore its sexual referent—specifically: masturbation as a transgressive, private sexual act with and upon oneself. Relying on historical research, I will show how the concept of “masturbation” emerged as a master trope of the Enlightenment that through a discourse of exchange, debt, and death; social and physical. At the dawn of the eighteenth century, “solitary sex,” as Thomas Laqueur (2003) names it, became a medical and ethical problem stoked by anxieties surrounding the core values of modern subjectivity: autonomy in the form of morality, mastery in the form of self-governance, solitude in the form of thought, privacy in the form of property, fantasy in the form of wealth, and pleasure in the form of commodities (Cook, 2009; Foucault, 1978 [1990]; Laqueur, 2003). Insofar as solitary sexual pleasure became a locus for the articulation of modernity’s anxieties about selfhood, the economy, citizenship, and a crucial division between public and private space, masturbation was, in short, “the sexuality of the modern self” (Laqueur, 2003, 210).

Thomas Laqueur dates the origin of “modern masturbation” at the publishing of *Onania*, an anti-masturbation tract that came out of England’s Grub Street publishing industry, situating it squarely in the economic and political debates that were waged across Europe by intellectuals and moralists at the turn of the eighteenth century. Masturbation would come to embody a sort of ultimate limit to the radical forms of self-governance and burgeoning economic structures that

were being put forth as models for the secular, capitalist, liberal nation-states that were struggling to take shape. Laqueur's central thesis is that new forms of credit and paper money that emerged in north-western Europe around the time that masturbation became exigent as both a sexual act. The link with economy and exchange would bring masturbation into a homology with sodomy, both of them considered "counterfeit" forms of proper sexual exchange that would exacerbate bourgeois anxieties about a world unhinged from, and therefore lost to, "reality" (Laqueur, 2003; Fisher, 1999).

I will also turn to David Graeber (2011), whose anthropological history, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, examines the interrelation of debt and political and social order. Graeber explores the various ways in which debt has historically functioned both to sustain human relationships and to threaten the very bonds that various forms of institutional indebtedness create. Additionally, Graeber offers a narrative of Western selfhood read against the backdrop of human slavery that has enabled and fueled major political and economic shifts in the history of Western civilization. Enslavement to one's debts was a reality across Europe during the time in which masturbation became a vice and came to symbolize social death. Slavery was the limit of debt. The end of return. The masturbator, as a sort of defaulter on the economy of social debt, fell out of sight of society, both tyrant and slave to his self.

In Chapters 2 and 3, I will explore how the tyrant/slave dyad will come to mobilize the political and philosophical thought of two of the most influential thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries respectively: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.⁴ The tyrant-slave relationship will be one of the subjective figurations Rousseau uses to inveigh

⁴ I use "tyrant/slave" here for two reasons. First, those will be the words Rousseau will use to develop his political and pedagogical theories. Second, while "master/slave" might commonly sound as the trope of slavery, the use of "master" here confuses a distinction between the Enlightenment concept of "self-mastery"—an exercise of individual maturity and self-control; i.e. to be a master of oneself—and "tyranny," a state of enslavement without reason or regulation.

against masturbation. In his iconic pedagogical work, *Émile, or On Education* ([1762] 1995), Rousseau will warn against the enslavement of the self to the self. In contrast, Rousseau will advocate for an ownership of the self, a self-mastery that will come to surpass a primary, infantile selfishness for an adult subjectivity that can participate in social, sexual and economic exchange with others. Masturbation will stand as a self-enslavement; a habit, uncontrollable, based on fantasy, and carrying the subject outside the sight of the law. Émile must push the addictive pleasure of reflexive self-interest into a bright future of delayed pleasures—property, sociability and marriage. To fall into vicious self-enslavement will be a violation of the social contract; a counterfeit exchange; a turning on one’s debt to society. The failure to achieve true exchange with others, for Rousseau, will be synonymous with vanity, the incessant exchange of mirrors, or what he will call *l’amour propre* (Marshall, 1988).

At the close of the eighteenth century, enslavement would be taken up by Hegel to theorize consciousness *qua* Christian subjectivity in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. In order to break a declension of dyadic subjective formations, Hegel will finally add a third term—“The Priest”—as a governmental figure and representative of the law who will mediate and break the structurally recursive deadlock of self-enslavement, a relation Hegel would term *Unhappy Consciousness*. I will read Hegel through Judith Butler’s exegesis on subjectivity in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997). Butler is concerned primarily with theorizing the subjection (*assujettissement*, via Foucault) of subjectivity. To what extent is subjectivity—a person’s ability to speak as a discursive subject, and thus, to be seen—predicated on one’s subordination to a social order that one did not choose? And to what extent, then, is subjectivity rendered as a form of indefinite indebtedness? For Butler, Hegel’s addition of the priest is a sleight of hand that will skirt the implications of his own concept of consciousness as a self-negating folding back on the self. The Priest, however, for Hegel, will ground self-enslaved consciousness by exposing it the transcendental order of

Absolute Spirit. This grounding through exposure will be attended by an eschatological reterritorialization of self-pleasure into the realm of the Absolute.

In the twilight of the nineteenth century, Sigmund Freud would recast Enlightenment anti-masturbatory narratives as a psychoanalytic system that would place masturbation and its clinical, pathological counterpart—*narcissism*—at the crux of socialization. In Chapter 3, I will show how Freud theorized psychic development in structuralist terms consistent with the Enlightenment project of rendering masturbatory subjectivity as immature, inassimilable into society, and thus, in need of mediation from a third term that could produce a stable psychic economy. For Freud, the third term will be a notion of civilization informed by a biological teleology. Drawing from his interrelated work in *On Narcissism* (1921 [1959]) and *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1914 [1986]), I will show how Freud’s double use of self-pleasure—as “auto-erotism” and as a pre-social libidinal cathexis of the ego, or, “primary narcissism”—constructs self-pleasure as an inwardly directed phenomenon that will ultimately need to be sacrificed in order to properly direct the libidinal instincts toward the external world. Here, I will turn to Judith Butler’s work in *Gender Trouble* (1990) to argue that, in addition to the incest taboo, and (Butler’s intervention) a prior taboo on homosexuality, Freud also sets up a primary masturbation taboo. In other words, at the heart of Freud’s libido theory, and the Oedipal complex, which aims to direct a polyvalent libido properly toward heterosexuality, lays a primary taboo on masturbation *and* unmediated self-satisfaction. Cathexis of the ego, a dangerous yet necessary phase of sexual development, a closed-circuit of self-pleasure, must be surrendered—first and forever—as a kind of psychic and somatic debt tribute to the civilization that is kept delicately in place by a complex of sublimations, exchanges and substitutes. I will conclude this chapter by turning to Freud’s work on group psychology to situate the anti-narcissistic debt-economy of the individual psyche within the debt-exchange economy of group identity.

Jacques Lacan would build on Freud's psychoanalytic system, making even more explicit the structuralist underpinnings of modern subjectivity. In Chapter 5, I will turn to Elizabeth Grosz (1990) and Alphonso Lingis (2003) to show how Lacan articulates in Freud's Oedipal phase a "mirror stage," wherein a child's primary social attachment with the phallic mother is figured as a "protosocial" subjective formation that will need to be broken by a third, mediating term. Lacan will ominously call this the *Name-of-the-Father*, and it will introduce the Symbolic order. Here, I will turn again to Butler, deploying her critique of Lacanian structuralism as a "slave morality" in order to demonstrate that both Freudian and Lacanian thought on the psyche, like Rousseau and Hegel's social philosophies, are, at base, structured by an anti-narcissistic, anti-masturbatory imperative that can never fully be accomplished, and will only ever lead to an exchange economy of endless debt to a law that demands reflection.

In the final chapter, I will circle back to Sedgwick, drawing on her work on shame and "queer performativity" to reorient anti-masturbatory speech acts as a demand *to be seen*. I will use Sedgwick's reading of Silvan Tompkins and "shame affect" to draw lines through reading and writing as productive forms of reflective exchange. I will also bring Sedgwick's earlier ruminations on "the masturbating girl" into view of her later work on Henry James in order to suggest a reading of James as a productive, masturbatory, queer performer of shame; a subjectivity we might also read in Rousseau. In conclusion, I hope to draw reflective and structuralist modes of exchange into closer proximity to offer a view of masturbatory subjectivity a concept of emancipation without the imperative to be normal.

Chapter 1

The Enlightenment, or, Self-Interest in the Age of Mastury

*I'm a slave for you. I cannot hold it, I cannot control it.
I'm a slave for you. I won't deny it, I'm not trying to hide it.
—Britney Spears, "I'm a Slave 4 U"*

1.1 The Economy of *Onania*

If the Renaissance had been the “rebirth” of European culture, perhaps the Enlightenment was its stringent upbringing. The pangs of desire experienced by the cultural coming-of-age of Early Modern Europe seem to have been the subject of a strict and lasting scolding in the eighteenth century. Kant’s assertion that “enlightenment is man’s emergence from self-imposed immaturity” (Laqueur, 2003, 267) illuminates the vital role the self will play in the Enlightenment as a discourse of adulthood; a discourse that will bifurcate wealth, pleasure, privacy, autonomy, and sovereignty into virtue and vice and, in the process, render masturbation as a sacrificial lamb. As historian Thomas Laqueur phrases it, the “Enlightenment project of liberation—the coming into adulthood of humanity—made the most secret, private, seemingly harmless, and most difficult to detect of sexual acts the centerpiece of a program for policing the imagination, desire, and the self that modernity itself had unleashed” (ibid., 19). Masturbation would be invented in order to be surrendered. Its somatic power was pathogenic; its psychic influence lasting.

While today, “masturbation” conjures a wide variety of meanings and images, as a master trope of the Enlightenment, masturbation was generally figured as the act of one person sexually stimulating themselves, usually manually, and almost always in private. While there are certain

ways we understand masturbation outside the literal and figurative walls of privacy (i.e. “mutual masturbation” or acts that would be outlawed as “lewd” such as masturbating in public, or simply the spectral presence of others via the imagination of the user), the adjectival force of masturbation connotes both isolation from a social context—or, *solitude*—while in the pursuit of self-interest in the form of self-gratification—or, *pleasure*—both of which have the ability to convey a negative valence in their respective usages. Even if, in certain contemporary Western milieu, masturbation as a sexual act can be regarded as “healthy,” “natural,” or at the very least, “normal,” it still has not entirely shaken the legacy of its historically shameful origins. I argue that the force of censure and shame is retained in the pejorative use of the “masturbation” today, and that this force is directly descended from its eighteenth century coinage in Western Europe, where anxieties about the rule of law, the nature of currency, and the usefulness of pleasure converged as a way to articulate and regulate a conservative figure of the modern self who would be wholly indebted to society and utterly exposed to its gaze.

It is widely understood that the advent and invention of masturbation, imagined as a solitary sexual vice, sent Western culture into a medical and moral panic for two centuries (Foucault ([1978] 1990; Laqueur, 2003; Rubin, 1984). Thomas Laqueur (2003) locates the epicenter of the European masturbation panic on or around 1712 in the hot stew of England’s raucous commercial print industry known as “Grub Street,” which was run by a consortium of capitalists bound together by the pursuit of profit through publishing both “high-minded religious and pedagogical works and scurrilous semipornography” (ibid., 25-32). It was here, according to Laqueur’s sleuthing, that John Martens, a medical “quack” who in 1708 was convicted by a British court of publishing obscene literature, would anonymously publish *Onania*, the anti-masturbation tract that would magically bind a biblical story about *coitus interruptus* with a seemingly unrelated sexual act that, while perhaps widespread, had not necessarily been a subject of public discourse. Virtually an instant hit throughout London’s media-fueled coffee house

culture, *Onania* would live to see numerous published editions as it fanned out across The Channel to France, then Europe and eventually the New World (Laqueur, 2003).

Laqueur's history brings to light several important analyses about the sexual act which that bore the negative adjective that intermittently pricks our critical discourse today. First, no other sexual act has quite a traceable beginning as masturbation. It seems that most of the anti-masturbation literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries can be connected to the publication of Marten's *Onania*. Second, that a vice *qua* illness could literally be invented almost out of nowhere by a dubious sensationalist in London's back alleys and, within just a few decades, become established as the source of authoritative knowledge by the medical and philosophical elite of Europe seems, by Laqueur's account at least, to have been a remarkable achievement (Laqueur, 2003).⁵

Thirdly, and what lies at the heart of Laqueur's thesis, masturbation came to be articulated as a life-threatening vice when economies in north western Europe were embracing new forms of credit and paper money that destabilized the desire to ground currency, credit and emerging markets in a teleology that would constrain their excesses. There seemed to be terrible anxieties about the proliferation of exchange and the expansion of credit, both core imperatives of capitalism, that were projected onto the body as they came to define the problems with solitary sex. Masturbation, credit, and paper money all stoked ethical concerns around pleasure and desire that threatened long-held notions of reality itself as determined, and thus regulated, by a relation to "nature." The desire for the endless expansion of capital that had no correlate in gold or silver coin was analogous to the desire for sexual "commerce" with oneself that could

⁵ Laqueur, however, admits that even if *Onania* had not been published, Europeans would still have been troubled by masturbation. It seems that the body, and its relationship to political and economic power, was poised, at the close of the seventeenth century, to become the locus of reflection on the modern self (Laqueur, 2003).

conceivably go on forever without satiety (Laqueur, 2003; Graber, 2011). These were imminent, phantasmatic desires

born not from some adamantine, foundational need or from original sin but from the imagination and fiction. Desire of this sort was Janus-faced: the driving force of both commerce and credit—the engine of progress—*and* of the solitary sin of self-pollution, their doppelganger in the wilderness beyond culture and society.

At stake was a new morality of the marketplace (Laqueur, 2003, 279).

Indeed, morality and the marketplace were coterminous in *Onania*. The publication thrived in the bustling coffee houses of London, and was published by an expanding commercial print industry. And quite true to capitalist form, the publication, along with introducing masturbation as a “newly exposed corruption” (Laqueur’s words, 33), also introduced its “cure”—or several of them—in the form of expensive medicines that were available for order at the same bookstores or publishing houses that sold *Onania*.⁶ From the beginning, then, awareness of the newly minted vice of masturbation—like paper money and commercial credit—was limited to those who were likely to have had access to it: namely, the middle classes (Laqueur, 2003; Graeber, 2011; Foucault ([1978] 1990)).

The language of *Onania* drew deeply from the terminology of the marketplace, or, the language of exchange. The identification of masturbation as “counterfeit” situates masturbation within the semantic field of currency. Counterfeiting has troubled systems of money as long as they have existed (Graeber, 2011). A counterfeit currency strikes at the heart of state power and authority and threatens to undermine teleological claims to rule (Fisher, 1999). As a social-sexual pejorative, “counterfeit” had been circulating in England since at least the 17th century (if not

⁶ In Laqueur’s analysis, the cost was “more than two weeks worth of wages for a footman” (Laqueur, 2003, 26)

before then), where it was frequently associated with sodomy. According to Will Fisher, “counterfeit” was used by political players to discredit enemies by associating them with sodomy, which, in the Early Modern period, connoted “subversive social relations” between men; often friendships between men of different classes that were becoming more frequent with the growth of industrial cities and towns. Fisher’s analysis evinces how notions of sexual status in Renaissance England were central to the maintenance of class boundaries, and thus, political power. Regardless of whether the accusation of “counterfeiting” was a canard or a legitimate anxiety, either way, an imbalance of power produced a relationship where neither party could be counted on, in effect, to act according to their social status. A master/servant relationship wasn’t sociable, and a relationship to the state that was constructed on terms of absolute power wasn’t socializable. In some critical sense, these “counterfeit” models of intersubjectivity moved in shadow beyond the forces of regulation—beyond economy.

In tandem with the worry about maintaining class boundaries that expressed itself in the Early Modern pejorative “counterfeit” and its equation with sodomy was the notion that sodomy was an excess, a luxury, and—like one of its addictive counterparts, smoking tobacco (an association that will apply to masturbation a century later (Laqueur, 2003, 55) —a kind of spending that did not produce anything that could be exchanged or recirculated into a system of social and economic currency. These vices took a unit of currency—tobacco, or the body itself—and incinerated it. The economic dead-endedness of masturbation and sodomy as (im)pure pleasures would keep both vices in close association with death. The figure of the effeminate, the sallow, the frail and the withered would be attached to both masturbation and sodomy for centuries (Fisher, 1999; Foucault ([1978] 1990; Gilman, 1985; Laqueur, 2003; Mosse, 1985; Rubin, 1984).

As Foucault evocatively phrases it, “death is power’s limit, the moment that escapes it; death becomes the most secret aspect of existence, the most private” (Foucault, 138). We could substitute “sodomy” and “masturbation,” here, for “death” in order to crystallize the relation that both had to social death and power, and to Western anxieties about vices that were imagined to exist beyond the sight of the law. Insofar as they were viewed as vices of secrecy and solitude, sodomy and masturbation became stand-ins for death. They were the limit of life, healthiness, divine and social laws, and the laws of economic exchange.

As an “expenditure without return” (Fisher, 1999) sodomy vexed the relationship between exchange, pleasure and debt. If the sexual exchange between male and female bodies resulted in a profit of pleasure, the pleasure (long seen as dangerous by Christian morality) was at the very least regulated by its usefulness in adding a new member to the community. To enjoy the pleasure of sex without “paying the marriage debt” (or “flesh debts” (Graeber, 2011, 330)), was to cheat an economy of sex that had been organized and ordained by God; an economy that mitigated what was dangerous about pleasure by obliging it to be useful. To experience sexual pleasure was, in a very real sense, to rack up a debt to Creation. And the only way to pay down this erotico-spiritual indebtedness was in the currency of Creation; procreation; or life—literally the currency of babies.

This is the same heteronormative, reproductive, currency-exchange morality that was used to carve out modern masturbation. *Onania* would state this rather explicitly: the problem with masturbation was that a person was gaining access to a sexual pleasure “which God has ordered to attend the Carnal Commerce of the two sexes for the continuance of our Species” (from *Onania*, in Laqueur, 2003, 14). Masturbation, “the filthy commerce with oneself” (ibid., 27), was not actually a commerce at all because it did not have the capacity to produce offspring. Like sodomy, it could not pay—in babies—the debt to God or society that sexual pleasure was

believed to have owed to both or either.⁷ Put another way, masturbation could not bring pleasure into a proper relation to the debt-law of procreation. The masturbator (like the sodomite) turned his back on a social and divine debt, closed himself in the privacy of his room, conjured an alchemy of pleasure that was not only false, as in counterfeit, but wasteful and mortifying. Masturbation partook in the ultimate transgressive exchange: it exchanged life for death. As self-mortification, the pleasure of masturbation was pure, unadulterated self-interest.

1.2 Pleasure, Principle, Interest

An interesting point made by David Graeber (2011) in his history of debt in Western civilization, is that the idiom of “self-interest” became popularized in the century prior to the publication of *Onania*. It was both a key to and the notion underlying what he calls the “new philosophy” of European capitalism in the seventeenth century and derived from *interesse*, the early Roman legal term for interest payments, or a penalty for not paying one’s debt on-time (Graeber, 2011, 331). Adapted from St. Augustine’s negative concept of “self-love” (opposite to man’s love for God), “self-interest” came to define the very nature of mankind, its investment in itself in the endless pursuit of the generation of pleasure (ibid., 332). *Usury*, the generation of money through interest-bearing loans, had been opposed by the Christian church of the Middle Ages, mainly because of the threat that the profit-motive posed to religious devotion (ibid., 319). According to Graeber, profiting from interest was seen as making money with money, a practice with a long history of moral and political objection. It was unnatural in that, as we have already seen with sodomy and masturbation, it was not assimilable into a normative economic model of exchange. In the Middle Ages, usury would again achieve this status. Interest would become synonymous with unnatural self-interest just when certain educated circles were beginning to

⁷ This most likely explains the neologistic coinage John Martens appropriated as a euphemism for masturbation—“onanism”—which is derived from the Biblical character Onan, whose story has more to do with *coitus interruptus* (“pulling out” in penis-in-vagina intercourse) than private self-pleasure.

figure out how the law of exchange could accommodate the burgeoning world of material pleasure (Graeber, 2011).

The “new philosophy,” according to Graeber, was the one put forward (in part) by English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes’s political theory, scandalous at the time and eventually labeled “political hedonism,” presupposed a selfish, pain-avoiding, pleasure-seeking human at the heart of a political state that would be set up in order to militate against the grave repercussions of collective avarice (Graeber, 2011, 331; Vaughn in Cook, 2009, 455). It was the beginning of social contract theory, whereby naturally born-free man was encouraged to willingly surrender the drive for unlimited pleasure in deference to social order.

Importantly, Hobbes, and others who shared his views (Bernard Mandeville, in particular (Cook, 2009; Laqueur, 2003)), believed mankind’s insatiable desire for pleasure could be useful. Instead of just saying “no” to material pleasure, states should work with it and consider “the means by which the pursuit of individual interests might be made consonant with social order and collective prosperity.” These ideas developed into what Alexander Cook calls a “general theory of interest management” that would be widely held among European thinkers by the eighteenth century (Cook, 455-56).

All of these histories—Laqueur’s, Graeber’s, Fisher’s and Cook’s—elaborate, more or less, the schema for the deployment of sexuality laid out by Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* ([1978] 1990). In the first volume of his influential work on Western sexuality, Foucault aired out what he called the “repressive hypothesis,” a commonly held attitude that an originally free sexuality had come to be dominated and suppressed during the Victorian era, and that only in the twentieth century did sexuality begin to emerge from the clutches of repression; this hypothesis would become the axiom of both psychoanalysis and

much common wisdom. Quite to the contrary, however, Foucault contended that modern forms of power that emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe *invented* sexuality as a technique of state control that could organize and manage populations by turning them into sexual subjects—into subjects *with sexuality*. The “deployment of sexuality” involved an incitement to confession and an intensification of the relationship between oneself and the apparatus of the state, an investment in life and a desire to seek the “truth” of life by seeking that truth in sex ([1978] 1990).

Foucault would identify the sexualization of children and the trope of “the masturbating child” as one of the four strategy-effects produced by the deployment of sexuality. Along with the hysterical woman, the homosexual, and the Malthusian couple, the child masturbator was articulated as a psychosexual personality by the merger and dissemination of power and pleasure in the form of bourgeois sexuality ([1978] 1990).

Foucault’s analysis of masturbation does miss, it would seem importantly, the way in which masturbation was not only seen as a problem for children, but also as a threat to adult men and particularly to women, as Laqueur’s history makes abundantly clear. From the outset, the “heinous sin” of masturbation was available to “both SEXES.” Indeed, the focus on masturbation and women was explicit. Not only were women subjects of masturbation—portrayed as overly sexual, depraved and insatiable; a characterization that will crystallize later in the “hysterical woman” of the nineteenth century—but they had also played a pedagogical role as servants, nannies and caregivers who were often thought to initiate children into the practice (Foucault [1978] 1990; Laqueur, 2003; Mosse, 1985). The point, here, is that the masturbator, inaugurated by *Onania*, was a kind of sexual identity that was available to anyone, and thus, to everyone, or at least everyone of a certain class.

One of Foucault's more nuanced arguments is that sexuality, to begin with, was an invention by and for the bourgeois classes. The deployment of sexuality, he writes, "was not established as a principle of limitation of the pleasures of others by what have traditionally been called 'the ruling classes.' Rather it appears to me that they first tried it on themselves" (Foucault ([1978] 1990, 122). In other words, the preoccupation with pleasure and its usefulness, and the "intensification of the body" that attended it, was a preoccupation of the commercial classes. The "onanistic" child was not "the child of the people," but "rather that of the schoolboy, the child surrounded by domestic servants, tutors, and governesses, who was in danger of compromising...the obligation to preserve a healthy line of descent for his family and his social class" (ibid., 121). Expanding this observation to include adult men, it was, then, the doctor, the lawyer, the merchant, the educator, and the publisher (to name a few) who invested in their bodies *and* the bodies of their wives and children; who took up the project of forging the health and future prosperity of the patrilineal middle class by intensifying a relation to the body that focused on the proper use of pleasure.

The deployment of sexuality would allow the bourgeois classes first to distinguish themselves from the ruling nobility's backward-looking claims to authority that centered on "blood," historical lineage, and, from the point of view of the bourgeoisie, resulted in a state of luxury, vanity, and excess (Foucault, ([1978] 1990; Laqueur, 2003; Mosse, 1985). The emergent bourgeoisie would take the opposite course. They would look to the future, and the future rested in *healthy* offspring produced by a regime of *healthy* sexuality via an emphasis on the *healthy* body which, according to Foucault, "should undoubtedly be linked to the process of growth and establishment of bourgeois hegemony" (Foucault, ([1978] 1990, 125).

Foucault claimed that the deployment of sexuality to the common classes would happen only after conflicts with the proletariat in the nineteenth century, whereby the bourgeoisie, as a

compromise for admitting that the working classes should have access to livable housing and working conditions, would grant the proletariat a body and a sexuality in order to surveil and control them (ibid., 126).

While Foucault situates the deployment of sexuality in the nineteenth century, already in the eighteenth century, middle-class values were beginning to spread to common classes, in part, at least, because the bourgeoisie seemed to like imagining that others could share their view of a world built on statehood, financial speculation and hygienic morality. This is the argument Graeber makes repeatedly. In debunking “the myth of barter,” an imaginary world-before-money that economists since Adam Smith have used to illustrate human nature as fundamentally oriented toward impersonal exchange fueled by personal self-interest, Graeber emphasizes how this view of humanity made sense for a certain class of English people who hoped that the paper currency and opening credit lines, effectively accessible only by the “moneyed” classes, would eventually become available to all. According to Graeber, this early form of trickle-down economics—we might call it *the deployment of cash*—did actually happen (2011, 341), and, in the process, supplanted local neighborhood economies that relied often on local forms of currency, and largely on informal systems of credit extended by good-will from shopkeepers to members of their own communities (ibid., 327). Money, Graeber contends throughout *Debt*, had always been associated with impersonal social relationships. Something you need to use because the personal intimacy that would create a sense of person-to-person trust simply wasn’t there. Graeber laments the conversion of what he calls “human economies”—where money only operates “as a social currency, to create, maintain, or sever relations between people rather than to purchase things” (ibid., 158)—into economies of exchange, where everybody uses money to

conduct impersonal transactions that previously would have been done by a simple record of credit and a handshake (ibid., 328).⁸

The tendency for the bourgeoisie to imagine all forms of social interaction as exchange also led to the development and proliferation of etiquette (Graeber, 2011; Foucault, [1978] 1990). “Please” and “Thank you” (both with origins relating to debt and servitude) became common niceties even between people who knew each other intimately. Graeber takes particular umbrage at this inheritance because it marks so well the success of the dissemination of the social, political, and economic program of the bourgeoisie in the West: Every relation between people of equal status is designed for exchange and predicated on debt. Proper sociability, or put another way, proper *subjectivity* was modeled on a program of indebtedness that held that *the price for equality in status was mutual servitude*. Everyone of a given class was both lord and servant to every other member of that class.

In the *double* double deployment of bourgeois values—cash money and sexuality—the commercial exchange and social indebtedness went hand in hand. To trade in the currency was, in an important way, to also have to pay tribute to the power that issued it. To do otherwise would be to turn one’s back on one’s class; to deface the currency; or, to counterfeit. Thus, in addition to anxieties about the imagination and excess in paper and credit markets, masturbation (and sodomy) figured into this logic of social and political hegemony as the failure to pay a debt. A social debt, or, a debt to society that was viewed as analogous to the promise of a return of interest on a bond—the promise to mature.

⁸ A criticism I have of Graeber, however, is that he provides little to no account for individual psychology, identity, or subjectivity in his otherwise rich anthropological interpretation of economy and personhood.

1.3 Human Bondage...And not the fun kind.

All of this occurred during what Graeber calls “the proletarianization of Europe” (2011, 351). For most of the Middle Ages, young men and women were expected to become servants in other households. One would receive room and board, learn a skill as an apprentice, and labor until one had the suitable means to marry. Life as a servant was seen as a necessary, obligatory but temporary stage of personal development. An individual’s subordination to others was okay, so long as it had an end date. The prolongation of this stage would be seen as a failure to become a proper adult. But, Graeber points out, the “price revolution” whereby, over the course of two centuries, a 500% inflation and a lack of bullion currency, combined with political efforts to insist that gold and silver were the only currency (taxes were to be paid in coin) reduced much of the European population to wage-laborers and disrupted the economy of obligatory but limited servitude (ibid., 308-14). The situation became such that moving out of servitude became less and less tenable, until “millions of young men and women across Europe found themselves effectively stuck in a permanent adolescence” (ibid., 351).

This did not sit well with the “emancipation project of Enlightenment,” which viewed the maturity of a male individual, from servant to master, as a synecdoche for the progressive trajectory of civilization. Maturity was explicitly associated with the move out of servitude and into self-mastery, and the mastery over others, namely, one’s wife, one’s children, and one’s own servants. The failure to move out of economic dependence on others was to remain in an enslaved state. Slavery, it would seem, haunted European thought and stood out as the unfortunate fate *par excellence*, the antithesis of Enlightened man (Graeber, 2011).

It is not within the limits of this thesis to fully account for how much of the preoccupation with slavery that came to dominate European thought was directly tied to

reflection on and opposition to the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and how much was residual from the common knowledge that the history of Western civilization was (and is still) largely a history of enslavement.⁹ However, according to Graeber, slavery as a concept was widely looked down upon across Europe prior to the establishment of the Atlantic slave trade; the church opposed it; and by the time Portuguese and Dutch merchants found the opportunity to kick-start a modern human slave trade on the western coast of the continent of Africa, slavery proper had otherwise vanished from European culture, save the persistence of wage labor and indentured servitude, often indistinguishable from more explicit forms of slavery (Graeber, 250, 346). There was also opposition to the enslavement of Africans, resulting in the prohibition of slavery within certain European national borders.¹⁰ But we can at least see that anxieties about the enslavement of the modern self were grounded in material realities. If one could not pay one's debts, one could be rounded up and shipped off to the New World in indentured servitude (Graeber, 2011). An enslaved man was a man who was "dead to world." Lost to society.

Combined, the slave and his mirror opposite, the tyrant, were a subjective proposition that threatened European values of citizenship, in much the same way as citizenship in ancient Greece had demarcated a distinction between a free citizens and slaves (not to mention the other effeminized, statutory minors: women, young boys, and prostitutes).¹¹ Enslavement was not an egalitarian relation, and thus, neither the citizen nor the slave could properly participate in exchange.

Nor, conceptually at least, was enslavement a relationship that fostered autonomy. Both the tyrant and the slave were purely dependent on each other, and thus, were effectively—not

⁹ Karen Offen's work sheds light on how the "trope of slavery" as a metaphor for the oppression of women in European institutions of marriage was extant in proto-feminist French literature prior to the exigency of anti-slavery discourse in relation to the Atlantic slave trade (Offen, 2000).

¹⁰ Graeber, importantly, points out that this did not prevent the trade outside of borders, or from those within profiting financially from it (Graeber, 2011).

¹¹ See Halperin (1990).

equal—but mirror opposites. Enslavement was a relation that formed a closed-circuit that could not guarantee the hallmark of self-mastery—restraint—either in the use of unlimited force or the practice of unlimited submission. It was a relation comprised of absolute power. The relationship between the tyrant and the slave produced nothing outside of itself; nothing that could be recirculated into a social economy. Above all, however, the tyrant/slave dyad had the potential to fall entirely outside of the reach of a mediating law—a *third term*—that would condition and regulate its excesses. The tyrant and the slave “were as close to perfectly isolated, alienated beings as one can possibly come” (Graeber, 2011, 209). The structure of civilization—a combination of society and statehood—was thus bifurcated into two camps: on one side, citizenship, social exchange and visibility; on the other, invisibility, solitude, and slavery.

In tracing the history of masturbation and the panic that swept Europe and other parts of the world within virtually one hundred years of its initial spark in the publication of *Onania*, the partnership between the histories of sexuality and debt-based exchange economies emerge as indelibly intertwined. The emancipation of the “man” of the Enlightenment was attended by his consignment to a social contract that would bring him to light and allow him to enter into capital and social debts. He who could not manage his debts failed at the Enlightenment imperative of self-mastery, falling victim to a self that was both tyrant and slave.

In the following chapter, I will show how the model of the tyrant and the slave came to be articulated as an impossible, if not entirely avoidable, subjectivity of the Enlightenment in the political and social theory of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The tyrant and the slave will be deployed by Rousseau to warn against the perils of masturbation in *Émile*, a pedagogical work designed to bring the subject into life by bringing him into the sight of the law—the social contract.

Chapter 2

Rousseau's *Émile*: A Debt Subjectivity

*Hey, hey, they say I better get a chaperone
Because I can't stop messin' with the danger zone...*
—Cyndi Lauper, “She Bop”

2.1 The Dangerous Supplement

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was born in 1712 in the democratic republic of Geneva.¹² Rousseau's coming-of-age, then, would seem to coincide with the coming-of-age of modern masturbation. It is difficult to tell exactly how Rousseau, one of the most influential philosophers of his era to speak out against masturbation (Emmanuel Kant would be the other (Laqueur, 2003)),¹³ came to understand masturbation in terms that would make it antithetical to the social and moral values of the Enlightenment. There doesn't seem to be evidence that Rousseau ever got his hand on a copy of *Onania*. Samuel-August Tissot's *L'Onanisme*, the French-language counterpart to *Onania*, came out in 1760, just two years prior to Rousseau's *Émile* (Laqueur, 2003). The two met in 1762, shortly after the publication of *Émile*, when Tissot sent Rousseau a copy of his work, assuming they shared a sympathy for the horrors of the subject (Laqueur, 43-44; Stengers and Van Neck, 2001, 58-59). While Rousseau corroborated Tissot's inkling about their shared disavowal of masturbation, it would seem unwarranted to hold that Rousseau shared anything like the obsessive anti-masturbation verve that Tissot would build his own career upon. When Rousseau writes about the act of masturbation—in *Émile* and, later, *The Confessions*—he

¹² This is the year that Thomas Laqueur cheekily settles on for the original publication of *Onania*. There seems to have been record of a no-longer extant edition in 1710 (Laqueur, 2003).

¹³ Gregory Therel Esplin recounts a “legend” that Kant would wrap himself in a sheet when retiring so as to prevent himself from masturbating (Esplin, 2004).

does so fleetingly and within much broader contexts, and in the service of more pressing interests than sexual repression. Rousseau, simply put, had bigger fish to fry.

In the following, I will read *Émile* as a primary text, supplementing now and then with Rousseau's *Confessions*. I will return to David Graeber in order to analyze Rousseau's pedagogy in relation to social contract theory and the structure of debt. Then I will draw on the work of David Marshall in order to expand on the concept of *l'amour propre*, and Rousseau's general attitude toward the role of the state in ordering society.

The importance of *Émile* in the history of masturbation is the book's success. This is the point Thomas Laqueur (2003) makes. By the end of the eighteenth century, almost 200,000 copies of *Émile* had been printed in French; there were also translations (ibid., 43). It is likely, then, that Rousseau's allusion to masturbation in *Émile* aided in the intensification of anti-masturbation discourse in the eighteenth century by giving it intellectual and philosophical heft.

But Rousseau's treatment of masturbation *qua* masturbation in *Émile* is symptomatic, not axiomatic. The passage in which Rousseau digresses to warn of the "dangerous supplement" takes up barely a single page in a pedagogy that lasts nearly five hundred, and spans approximately twenty years of *Émile*'s life and upbringing ([1762] 1911, 357).^{14 15} It comes in the latter part of Book IV, which otherwise deals with a rather august exegesis on the nature of the passions and a quasi-secular defense of faith. What makes Rousseau's attack on masturbation resonant is that it is issued within the terms of a theme that Rousseau had been hammering out from the very first page of Book I: That man, free of relation to any law, will abuse everything

¹⁴ Note about language: For *Émile*, I will quote in English from the Everyman translation by Barbara Foxley (1911). Additionally, I will include footnotes of the original French text that is published online by Columbia University's Institute for Learning Technologies. To cite the online text, I will include the book and paragraph number in which the cited text appears; i.e. a citation from Book I, paragraph 10 will appear as (I, 10). Due to the time limitations of this thesis, for all other citations of Rousseau will be in English.

¹⁵ "...ce dangereux supplement..." (III, 1165)

around him, including his self. Or put another way, man, left alone, will be a tyrant, and slave to his own tyranny.

The summoning and vanquishing of the tyrant/slave dyad is the strict beat to which *Émile* marches. It is first deployed to characterize, in sum, the state of modern infancy. The infant, whose “earliest ideas are those of empire [in the sense of domination] or servitude” (ibid., 17), who is simultaneously “slave and tyrant” (ibid., 18), is a proto-human, without law and without reason.¹⁶ The infant is the uncoordinated, unreasonable monarch, enslaved to his own private, avaricious craving, which *Émile* must outgrow and master on his way to becoming a public social subject. The tyrant/slave dyad will emerge in *Émile* wherever there is a threat of unrestrained and unrestrainable power; in other words, wherever there is a potential for absolute power.

It is notable that *The Social Contract (Du Contract Social)*, published in the same year as *Émile*, opens with the iconic declaration, “Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains” (Rousseau, [1762] 2010). This certainly gives evidence to the idea that Rousseau’s literary preoccupations around this time were more broadly political than discretely sexual.¹⁷ Absolute, unmediated power was antithetical to Rousseau’s imagined Republic, where naturally free and equal men entered into a civil contract with each other, thus creating a state that would not only restrain individual human avarice but, importantly, the tyranny of the state itself. If men did not have access to the exercise of state power, they were not subjects, properly speaking—they were slaves. Rousseau’s distinction between subjects (or citizens) and slaves is analogous to his distinction between the master (or state) and the tyrant, and the critical, defining difference

¹⁶ “...ses premières idées sont celles d’empire et de servitude...” (I, 69)—Note: I have translated this literally in order not to mask the original connotations; “...esclave et tyran...” (I, 70)

¹⁷ I have not come across an author who has made this claim outright. However, Rousseau’s tie to the history of masturbation seems somewhat notorious and, I think, overshadows—what I will argue here—that Rousseau’s criticism of masturbation made sense more in terms of his theory of power, and less as a strictly sexual morality.

between each pair is the rule of law. For Rousseau, the tyrant and the slave were beyond the reach of the law, just as the infant with his insatiable wants, was beyond the reach of reason.¹⁸ Absent any mediating, equalizing third term between them—either God, or the law in the form of a contract—the tyrant and the slave collapse into a mirror image sustained only by a state of absolute, unlimited, insatiable, imaginary and thus illegitimate power exercised in the form of total domination and total submission. The tyrant and the slave, in a critical sense one and the same, cleave as they come into agreement with the restraint of a governing law. They cease to be mirror images of each other as the instatement of the law moves them from reflexivity to complementarity; from mutual enslavement to contractual agreement. It is, it would seem, the signature move of the Enlightenment: The formulation of the move out of unfettered immaturity and into the adulthood of self-restraint.

For Rousseau then, the role of civilization as a whole, and pedagogy in particular, will be to free mankind of his preternatural disposition toward self-enslavement through the institution of the law and an apparatus capable of distributing and maintaining the rule law. Even if Rousseau believed that civilization fundamentally corrupted humanity, at the very least, its mechanisms could be harnessed to keep itself from falling into unfettered chaos. For Rousseau, the perverting forces of social construction could be re-appropriated for the purposes of normalization in accordance with natural law.¹⁹

This is the theme through which Rousseau introduces his condemnation of masturbation in *Émile*. Since Émile's worst enemy is himself (*c'est lui-même*), he requires a master (*maître*) "to protect him from himself" (*c'est à vous de le garantir de lui*) until he can do the job on his own, a

¹⁸ Rousseau goes out of his way to criticize Locke's advice to reason with children (Rousseau, E., 60-61). For Rousseau, "reason" is expressly what children do not have, and won't have for some time, if ever.

¹⁹ Rousseau's opinion on social construction was fairly straight-forward. Even if contemporary ethics and roles (particularly regarding those different for men and women) were constructed socially, it was our job as humans to use social construction to conform civil law to the laws of nature, which were transcendental and perfect. To do otherwise would be to participate in *l'amour propre* (Rousseau, in *Émile* and *Letter to D'Alembert*).

capacity that will be synonymous with “reason” and that can only be cultivated through the pedagogy that Rousseau prescribes. The pedagogue, or master, is encouraged to set up and execute a technology of control and surveillance that will ensure that *Émile* will remain free from the dangers of modern life. *Émile* should not be left alone. The master should sleep in the same room with him, if possible. *Émile* is to be thoroughly exhausted before going to bed, and as soon as he wakes he should get up and be active. For Rousseau, imagining *Émile* alone pricks a particular anxiety about privacy’s ability to carry a subject out of sight of the law, and into vice and habit. To be seen is to be social. To be social is to be regulated. Rousseau articulates this precisely in his warning about masturbation. Indeed, the entire gesture of *Émile* reads as a blueprint for surveillance. Rousseau is relentless in the gaze which it directs upon his subject. And yet it is precisely this intensity of gaze—and its superpositional externality—which Rousseau recommends as the solution to *Émile*’s inability to regulate himself. To fail to guide *Émile* to reason, to give him the tools of self-restraint—to make him master of himself—would be to allow him to remain in an infantile state of self-servitude, doomed to suffer the delusions of his own imagination; “lost” to the social world ([1762] 1911, 357).

And it is indeed the social world to which Rousseau directs *Émile*. The world of reason lies outside of one’s self. But this would not simply be a case of exchanging one set of chains for another. That would not, properly speaking, be an exchange. Society, for all of its faults, did have things to give *Émile* in return for the sacrifice of his infantile, selfish pleasure-seeking: Social currency, the ability to earn and living, and eventually, a *Sofy*. It will be through the terms of property that *Émile* will earn his way into a proper relation to society. In fact, *Émile* will discover that society and exchange are one and the same.

Fundamental to this movement from internalization to externalization will be Rousseau’s notion of a primary selfishness. Rousseau, and not without scandal, held that “there is no original

sin in the human heart, the how and why of every vice can be traced. The only natural passion is self-love or selfishness in a wider sense” (ibid., 66).²⁰ Natural self-love (*l’amour de soi-même*; or sometimes *l’amour de soi*) is akin to a survival instinct. It is a preservative impulse, one that allows us to harness a distinct value for ourselves so that we might develop an interest in preserving ourselves. It is through *l’amour de soi-même* that the child will learn a kind of self-distinction above and before others, a relation to the self in which Émile will learn that he has an interest in preserving his self, and thus, caring for his self by way of demanding what he needs. But, if this condition is not properly socialized, it falls into *l’amour-propre*, selfishness or vanity; a false estimation of the self that preserves (or regresses back to) the mirroring dyad of the tyrant and the slave which initiates the child’s life. And it is precisely the job of the master (the tutor) to guide this force within Émile, by “watching” and “listening” to Émile, by constantly surveiling him, to make sure this sense of self is preserved until reason—much later—is installed as a substitute *maitre* (a substitute Rousseau?).

It is the concept of the infant/child as naturally self-centered that presses Rousseau to insist, then, that

Our first duty is to ourselves; our first feelings are centered on self; all our instincts are at first directed to our own preservation and our own welfare. Thus the first notion of justice springs not from what we owe to others, but from what is due to us...If you talk to children of their duties, and not of their rights, you are beginning at the wrong end, and telling them what they cannot understand, and what cannot be of any interest to them (ibid., 73).²¹

²⁰“...il n’y a point de perversité originelle dans le cœur humain; il ne s’y trouve pas un seul vice dont on ne puisse dire comment et par où il y est entré. La seule passion naturelle à l’homme est l’amour de soi-même, ou l’amour-propre pris dans un sens étendu.” (II, 267)

²¹ “Nos premiers devoirs sont envers nous; nos sentiments primitifs se concentrent en nous-mêmes; tous nos mouvements naturels se rapportent d’abord à notre conservation et à notre bien-être. Ainsi le premier sentiment de la justice ne nous vient pas de celle que nous devons, mais de celle qui nous est due...parlant d’abord aux enfants de leurs devoirs, jamais de leurs droits, on commence par leur dire le contraire de ce qu’il faut, ce qu’ils ne sauraient entendre, et ce qui ne peut les intéresser.” (II, 287)

In this single paragraph, the self, duty (or debt), justice, and rights come together critically. The self, for Rousseau, is already a condition of indebtedness. The self owes the self, and is attached to itself in terms of service to a debt. Justice, “springing” from this self-indebtedness, is the rule by which the ability of a man (or child) to fulfill his debt-obligation to his self is measured. And rights are the tools by which Émile can make his claims to self-satisfaction. It is precisely upon this debt-based subjectivity that Rousseau will draw his first lesson-plan for Émile: The lesson of property.

2.2 L’Amour Property

“We must therefore go back to the origin of property,” Rousseau announces before laying out a scene by which he intends to teach Émile the socially meaningful use of his primary interest in the property of himself. In this lesson-plan (scheme, really), Rousseau instructs young Émile to plant bean seeds into a plot of soil in the corner of a garden. Rousseau teaches Émile to value the planting of the beans as a kind of “taking possession” of the land, whereby through his labor and his care, Émile invests part of his self in the earth (in raw matter) in a way that is inextricable and undeniable. Émile can claim the essence of his labor within the soil against all other claims, “as he could withdraw his arm from a man who wanted to keep it against his will” ([1762] 1911, 74).²² This is part one of the lesson: the transubstantiating power of labor to convert matter into property.

The second part of the lesson comes when, one day, Émile returns to the garden to find his bean sprouts torn out of the ground. Through Émile’s tears and cries, Robert-the-gardener is summoned to inform young Émile that he had planted his beans on land that belonged to the

²² “...comme il pourrait retirer son bras de la main d’un autre homme qui voudrait le retenir malgré lui...” (II, 291)

gardener who had already sown the soil with a rare variety of melon. In other words, Émile had sown his own seeds in soil that had already been sown by another man. The example is meant to teach Émile “how the notion of property goes back naturally to the right of the first occupier to the results of his work” (ibid., 75).²³ It is primary occupancy plus individual labor, then, that underpins the primitive origins of natural property.

I would be remiss not to comment on the phallogocentric patina of this entire scene: men fighting over sowing their seeds in maternal soil (at one point Rousseau compares it to Balboa planting the flag of the King of Spain in South America). It is telling that, in order to demonstrate to Émile the nature of property, Rousseau uses the metaphor of agriculture over, say, the example of a toy or a blanket. These latter, presumably, are not things Émile had earned with his labor; the value of labor in them, one might say, is effaced by giftedness. They were given him and, thus, lack the necessary activation of labor that converts raw matter into property in the first place. It is also fairly easy to deconstruct the transubstantiating (phal)logic of Rousseau’s claim here: In order for man to plant his seed in some portion of earth (or women) so that his labor in doing so might transform the earth (or women) into his natural property, he must presuppose that the earth (or women) is already, in some sense, his property and, thus, belongs to him to seed in the first place.

Yet Émile still has one more lesson to learn here. Upon the discovery that Robert-the-gardener was the “first occupier” of the garden, and thus, its rightful owner (according to Rousseau’s formulation), Rousseau demonstrates to Émile the script of economic exchange by entering into a negotiation with Robert-the-gardener. Rousseau asks if he and Émile might keep a corner of Robert’s garden for the planting of bean seeds *in exchange* for half of the beans cultivated. Oddly, although it is no doubt supposed to be an example of reasonable human

²³ “...comment l’idée de la propriété remonte naturellement au droit du premier occupant par le travail...” (II, 295)

kindness, Robert-the-gardener allows Émile (and Rousseau) to keep their corner of the garden without giving up any of the fruits of their labor, so long as Émile (and Rousseau) leave his crops untouched: “I shall dig up your beans if you touch my melons” (ibid., 76)²⁴ What to make of this stuff of beans and melons? At best, Rousseau’s lesson-plan on property seems to want first, to demonstrate a law of property that Émile inherently senses but does not explicitly understand, and second, to teach to social value of property in terms of exchange.

This scene ends up offering a complicated proposition regarding how Émile comes to be his own property, or the property of his self, in its primary sense of *l’amour de soi-même*. If property derives its nature from the double stroke of first occupancy *plus* labor, how does this bear on Émile’s self-ownership? Does Rousseau intend for us to imagine that Rousseau’s ownership of his self stems from a primary occupancy? Is it possible to imagine that Émile’s self could have been occupied, primarily or otherwise, by anyone *other than himself*? It is clear that Émile will be required to put labor into his self in the form of self-mastery, but how can this labor figure in the cultivation of ownership after the fact of primary ownership? If Émile does not put labor into his self, does he in some sense forfeit his claim to self-ownership because, although he was the primary occupier of his self, he didn’t really do anything with it? In short, what are the stakes of Émile’s ability to master himself properly?

It is certainly within the realm of Rousseau’s philosophy to conceive of the self as always at-risk of being displaced by an *other* (*autre*). His criticism of the professions of acting in the *Letter to D’Alembert on the Theatre* will follow this track. Also, in his *Confessions*, Rousseau, more than anyone else it seems, often felt that he was other than himself.²⁵ It seemed a continual struggle for Rousseau to live up to the unique, self-same individuality that nature had supposedly given him to begin with, and that it was his responsibility to master, and by doing so, *to be*. The self by

²⁴ “*Mais souvenez-vous que j’irai labourer vos fèves, si vous touchez à mes melons.*” (II, 294)

²⁵ In *Confessions* ([1789?] 2000), generally and specifically pp.114 and 125. Also, see Marshall (1988).

analogy, in this very configuration, is rendered as the already feminine material upon which self-mastery is applied, thus transforming a primarily feminine self, “slave and tyrant,” into a properly masculine self-sameness.

An analysis here in terms of performativity will prove fruitful. The self, as the self-same, seems to be at once presupposed and yet also and only the result of a secondary practice of self-mastery that must be taught from the outside. Émile will need to cultivate his true, natural self through a performative practice of self-mastery in order to achieve, ironically, self-sameness over and against a primary *l'amour de soi-même/l'amour propre*, which is infantile in its tyrannical self-enslavement.

Additionally, Émile's primary self is feminine insofar as it is the raw material of self-mastery, which will transform the self into the property of the self. In a critical sense, this primary, feminine self is a counterfeit, a fake self that can only be “the man of our fantasy” ([1762] 1911, 18)²⁶, and must be repeatedly displaced by the action of self-mastery, the transformative power of which will carry Émile from a state of reflexive, infantile, feminine, self-enslaved tyranny to one of external, mature, masculine, mastered self-sameness; a self which, paradoxically, Émile was already—naturally—supposed to have been. Put another way, the self becomes the property of the self that it *always was* yet *never was*, or *was-but-was-not-yet*: the transformation of the self into the self.

Setting aside for a moment the irresolvable chronology at work in Rousseau's concept of the development of the self *qua* property, it is at least clear that Rousseau proposes that through a strict pedagogy, Émile will learn to exchange a primary, unmediated selfishness for a socially coherent self-mastery aligned with the laws of society, thereby establishing a social currency that

²⁶ “...c'est là l'homme de nos fantaisies...” (I, 70); I don't think it would be a stretch to read this, in both senses of fantasy, as simply “woman.”

is entirely dependent on this process. By entering society, by agreeing to give up *l'amour de soi-même*, Émile's name will bear the stamp of the society into which he enters. What follows, then, is that rather than belonging to himself—which self-mastery is supposed to underwrite—Émile, having, or rather, *being* currency, now belongs to society. In fact, once the pedagogical transformation is complete, Émile will be indebted to society for his very existence. He will be obliged to return to society—again and again—and the currency he will use to pay this debt is his self.

2.3 Coining the Self

For Rousseau, every man must work in order to pay off the debt that his very presence in society produces. The debt is as much due to physical demands the individual will require (food and shelter) as it is to the psychological and social mechanisms that allow the individual to be socially legible (manners, mores, etc). It is important, however, that this debt cannot be paid in mere cash. If that were possible, children of wealthy people could use their wealth to shirk their social responsibilities. According to Rousseau, “The man or the citizen, whoever he may be, has no property to invest in society but himself...” ([1762] 1911, 189). The self, by this formulation, is the capital of society.

Ironically, it is the status of men as equals under contractual society that, ultimately, produces a mutual, communal indebtedness. In fact, according to Rousseau's description (which he admits he has over-simplified for the sake of his young student), society seems to be at base a condition of debt that enforces equality through a system of normalizing exchange-value:

There can be no society without exchange, no exchange without a common standard of measurement, no common standard of measurement without

equality. Hence the first law of every society is some conventional equality either in men or things” (182).²⁷

In other words, society is synonymous with exchange, and equality as a common standard is necessary in order for exchange-society to function, and, it seems, a precondition of debt. Thus, the “conventional equality” between men in society does not free men from bondage. Rather, it binds them to each other negatively in terms of collective indebtedness to the society that sets itself up as the condition of possibility for equality in the first place. We have here a conundrum that echoes the problem of the self as property. Are men in society indebted to each other because of their equality? Or are they equals because of a mutual debt to each other? Furthermore, are they, in fact, indebted to each other individually, or to the whole of “the greater good” which bore their equality? And when might there be a slippage between these two directions of indebtedness?

It will be helpful here to take into consideration the structure of debt itself. David Graeber’s analysis would suggest that it is debt that presupposes equality (2011, 86). Men of unequal social status cannot enter into a debt relationship. Rousseau would seem to agree here. And yet, Graeber adds a level of nuance by arguing that indebtedness occurs when two people already of equal status agree to become temporarily unequal, thereby establishing a debt in which one party has an obligation of return (either money, or simply just his physical person) to the other. Upon the return of what is owed, the debt cancels and equality is again established between the parties. Two problems arise.

First, the contract is, in a way, threatened by the promise of return that constitutes a debt. Graeber notes that indebtedness is a situation “when two parties cannot yet walk away

²⁷ “Nulle société ne peut exister sans échange, nul échange sans mesure commune, et nulle mesure commune sans égalité. Ainsi, toute société a pour première loi quelque égalité conventionnelle, soit dans les hommes, soit dans les choses.” (III, 664)

from each other, because they are not yet equal. But [the debt] is carried out in the shadow of eventual equality” (Graeber, 2011, 122). Logically, then, a repayment of debt would cancel out “the very reason for having a relationship” (ibid.). Thus, as a force that intensifies societal bonds, debt also presupposes the potential unraveling of society. Secondly, debt, properly speaking, can only be understood in the strict temporality of potential return *within the time of one’s life*. Debt that has no reasonable expectation of being repaid by the debtor within his lifetime is tantamount to indefinite servitude. Endless debt is enslavement (Graeber, 2011).

The social contract, then, as the centerpiece of Rousseau’s political philosophy, produces a state of artificially intensified relations that must be sustained in order for the state to remain intact. If, by entering into a social contract, citizens accrue a debt to the state that is also constitutive of the state, then a full repayment of that debt would dissolve the state itself, or would at least relax the bonds that were necessary to produce the state of the state. By this reasoning, the state would seem to have a vested interest in perpetuating social debt. Thus, the debt to society comes to be the very means by which the social contract is appropriated and held together. Furthermore, if the assumption of citizenship and personhood lead a subject to the service of a “social debt,” it would seem difficult to imagine the possibility of every paying off that debt, so long as to pay that debt will always be to affirm one’s status as a subject, and thus, to continually and endlessly accrue a debt to society.

Nevertheless, Rousseau imagines that Émile’s social debt—payable only by Émile, and only in the currency of his person—is remunerable. And because Rousseau imagined the social contract to be the one thing that would prevent people from remaining avaricious slaves to the tyranny of their own *l’amour propre*, then it was imperative for all men, including Émile, to enter into the contract and begin servicing what appears to be an endless debt to the state of civilization.

In a rather emphatic footnote following the scene with Robert-the-gardener, Rousseau writes, “Take away the primitive law of contract and the obligation imposed by contract and there is nothing left of human society but vanity and empty show” ([1762] 1911, 76).²⁸ For Rousseau, unmediated self-interest, *l’amour propre*, will be the definition of subjectivity without service to debt. Like masturbation, vanity is a play of mirrors producing nothing but infinite recursion. Ungrounded, and unreal. Outside the rule of law. A mere image of true connection between people; a counterfeit exchange that threatens the constitution of society itself.

2.4 Rousseau’s State of Reflection

In “Rousseau and the State of Theater,” David Marshall (1998) explores in great detail the implications of Rousseau’s binary distinction between *l’amour propre* and *sympathy*. Part of civilization’s etiolative effect on men is, simply put, that it makes them more concerned with appearances than with substance. The parade of people in society—particularly in cities and especially at the theater—discourages real connection between people. On the contrary, society encourages a kind of self-consciousness whereby when we interact with others, rather than really seeing them, we see only ourselves because we are caught up in a game of reflection by measuring our own esteem against what we interpret the esteem of others to be. In society, no one (or very few) escape this all-encompassing theater of mirrors. In its most extreme, society is little more than a carnival of narcissists continually mistaking each other for mere reflections of themselves.

Marshall points out, however, that the opposite of *l’amour propre*, true sympathy, puts Rousseau at

²⁸ The online French text I am using for *Emile* does not include Rousseau’s footnotes that appear in the English translation. Therefore, I am not able to reproduce the original French of this passage.

risk of contradiction, in that sympathy requires projecting oneself into the position of another person so that one might truly understand them. As Marshall makes clear, the distinction between the evacuation of the self that is the result of *l'amour propre* and that which takes place in the act of sympathy is difficult to parse, if possible at all. The actor, for Rousseau, represents a person who is too good at sympathy, and the audience, too bad at it. The theater, like society, fostered a state of reflections that, for Rousseau, necessitated contractual logic. Without law, there would be only sheer vanity and limitless misidentification (Marshall, 1988).

Rousseau's answer to this problem was to turn theater over to the state. This move is not meant merely to make a powerful state. As I have argued, Rousseau opposed absolute power, at least in theory. Yet his willingness to hand over the power of imaginary reflection *qua* theater to the state is in-line with his belief that it is in society's best interest for the state to regulate its citizens since they cannot be trusted to regulate themselves. In this way, Rousseau seems to have developed a habit of opposing the things he disapproved of most about civilization by projecting them into the sphere of the sovereign, or the law, thereby making them worse because absolute and inaccessible. If citizens are helpless to stop themselves from being self-reflective narcissists, then the state must be granted the power over reflection so that it might manipulate its citizens for the cause of a greater good. The citizens, then, will reflect not each other, but the state.

This is exactly the case Rousseau makes throughout *Émile*, and in particular, in the passage where he condemns masturbation. If *Émile* is his own worst enemy, if he cannot be trusted on his own not to indulge in vicious habits, then society must step in and operate as an apparatus of surveillance, control and absolute power. *Émile* must reflect the law. It would seem, then, that masturbation became available for Rousseau to inveigh against because it matched up so nicely with his political and moral views, and not the other way around.

I characterize Rousseau's pedagogy as "absolute power" primarily because Émile's entire course of instruction is enacted without Émile's knowledge or agreement. There are moments when Rousseau's "lessons" read as cruel,²⁹ and at others, light-hearted trickery, and there is no other who can intercede on Émile's behalf. Émile has no father because Rousseau *is* his father ([1762] 1911, 442). Rousseau, in the guise of the tutor, becomes the only form of power by becoming all forms of power.

Furthermore, it is Émile's presupposed lack of reason that permits Rousseau to deny him any say in the education into which he is effectively coerced. The thing that seems to be lacking here is, in fact, *a contract*, the possibility of which, for Émile, is entirely foreclosed by Rousseau-the-tutor, who is given the task of subjecting Émile to a state of absolute control. The following advice effectively reads as a summary of Foucault's theory of modern power:

There is no subjection [*assujettissement*] so complete as that which preserves the forms of freedom; it is thus that the will itself is taken captive. Is not this poor child, without knowledge, strength, or wisdom, entirely at your mercy?...Can you not make of him what you please? His work and his play, his pleasure and his pain, are they not, unknown to him, under your control? No doubt he ought only to do what he wants, but he ought to want to do nothing but what you want him to do. He should never take a step you have not foreseen, nor utter a word you could not foretell (100).³⁰

²⁹ I'm thinking here of a passage where, to prove a point about love, Rousseau-the-tutor falsely informs Émile that his Sophie is dead.

³⁰ "Il n'y a point d'assujettissement si parfait que celui qui garde l'apparence de la liberté; on captive ainsi la volonté même. Le pauvre enfant qui ne sait rien, qui ne peut rien, qui ne connaît rien, n'est-il pas à votre merci?...N'êtes-vous pas le maître de l'affecter comme il vous plaît? Ses travaux, ses jeux, ses plaisirs, ses peines, tout n'est-il pas dans vos mains sans qu'il le sache? Sans doute il ne doit faire que ce qu'il veut; mais il ne doit vouloir que ce que vous voulez qu'il fasse; il ne doit pas faire un pas que vous ne l'ayez prévu; il ne doit pas ouvrir la bouche que vous ne sachiez ce qu'il va dire." (II, 387)

Rousseau's tutor must let Émile "always think he is master while you are really master"³¹ until Émile has matured, which is none other than a process of a double subjection—first of his self to the rule of his self; second of his self to the rule of the law. And yet it is difficult always to tell the difference between the two. Is the substitute master Émile is expected to install over his primary *l'amour de soi-meme*, merely a doubling of his self over his self? Or is it, rather, an incorporation of a governing law modeled on the form of his tutor, the substitute Rousseau? Or is it a copy of *the law itself*? And how do we account for the transference of the law itself from its sovereign domain of the absolute, through the tutor/Rousseau, and into young Émile?

Rousseau never explains the mechanism by which the law becomes incarnate in Émile. He seems to think that pedagogical subjection alone will ensure Émile's internalization of the law, with its debt, its control, and its surveillance; a subjection that will be performed through an exercise of absolute power. Émile, in this configuration, seems rather without agency. And what also seems missing is the third part of the lesson on property with Robert-the-gardener—negotiation and contract.

The absence of a pedagogical contract notwithstanding, we might then ask of Rousseau's pedagogy: What would make Émile *want* to incorporate the rule of law over his primary *l'amour de soi-meme*? Why would he want to hand over absolute power, in the form of a primary tyrant/slave subjectivity without debt and with unlimited, if imaginary, pleasure, to both his tutor and to the absolute rule of law? What would motivate him to exchange immediate gratification for the delayed pleasure in adulthood? Bluntly: Why would Émile give up masturbation? And if and when he does give it up, where does it go? Does it simply vanish into the ether? Or is it somehow preserved in the economy of exchange?

³¹ "...qu'il croie toujours être le maître, et que ce soit toujours vous qui le soyez..." (ibid.)

In the concluding book of *Émile*, Rousseau ruminates on the phenomenology of a reflexive, absolute law beyond the reach of human manipulation:

For all mankind, there is a law anterior to that of public opinion. All other laws should bend before the inflexible control of this law; it is the judge of public opinion, and only in so far as the esteem of men is in accordance with this law has it any claim on our obedience. / This law is our individual conscience (413).³²

While “individual conscience” is not altogether inaccurate, it is important to note that the literal translation of *le sentiment intérieur* is “interior sentiment.” It is the law to which all other laws must bend. The law outside of human rule, paradoxically, lies within. The law beyond human intervention and the gaze inward, in the final instance, are one and the same.

Masturbation played a fleeting role in *Émile*’s pedagogy, but it was symptomatic of Rousseau’s configuration of society as held together by the moral and financial economy of the social contract. And the rule of law, so central to maintaining social order and preventing mankind from falling into unlimited vanity and vice, would have to be reflected in each and every citizen.

In the following chapter, I will retrace these anxieties about absolute, dyadic power—what I am calling masturbation subjectivity, or subjectivity without debt—and their relation to law in Hegel’s attempt to formulate a stable subject in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Turning to Judith Butler’s work on Hegel’s *Unhappy Consciousness*, I will show how, in Hegel, the fear of death

³² “Il existe pour toute l’espèce humaine une règle antérieure à l’opinion. C’est à l’inflexible direction de cette règle que se doivent rapporter toutes les autres: elle juge le préjugé même: et ce n’est qu’autant que l’estime des hommes s’accorde avec elle, que cette estime doit faire autorité pour nous. [1339] Cette règle est le sentiment intérieur.” (V, 1338)

leads to a consciousness inevitably enslaved to itself and the irrepressible pleasure of bodily negation, until, that is, a third term arrives to save the day.

Chapter 3

A Lord, A Bondsman, and A Priest Walk Into a Bar: Judith Butler and The Unhappy Enlightenment of Hegel's Consciousness

Happiness lies in your own hand

It took me much too long to understand how it could be

Until you shared your secret with me...

—Madonna, “Secret”

3.1 Finishing *Émile*

So why would *Émile* want to give up masturbation? And what mechanism would even allow him to do so? What would be the process by which *Émile*'s primary *l'amour de soi-meme* would be converted into an autonomous, regulated self-sameness in flush agreement with a social contract? If for lack of doing so, *Émile* is to fear being “lost” (*perdu*) to society, what, exactly does this fear entail, and how is this fear introduced so that *Émile* will know to fear social lostness? There is scant evidence in *Émile* that the young student puts up much of a fight against the pedagogy to which he is subjected. Nor does he ever seem to be directly punished; something Rousseau warns against. Rousseau paints *Émile*'s education as a sort of fluid passage from infancy to adulthood guided by the disembodied hand of a friendly master.

Indeed, Rousseau's account of subjectivation (*assujettissement*) excludes any agency for the subject-in-the-making to either accept or reject the terms of his subjectivization. And all the “dangers” that lie beyond socialization are self-evident yet complete mysteries, which in their very fear-inducing quality are imagined to initiate a reflexive retreat from selfishness and social

lostness to sympathy and social personhood—to social indebtedness. And in no way does Rousseau explore how socialization and its regulatory, reflexive effect is attended by punitive norms that in there very punitivity might play a coercive role in the formation of the subject.

3.2 Turning On the Self

This is the critical jumping-off point for Judith Butler in *The Psychic Life of Power*, where Butler interrogates Western accounts of subjectivity that seem to be based on a double bind of self-punishment and failure before the law. Hegel, Freud and Althusser will be the case-studies to which Butler will introduce a Foucauldian analysis of power. For the purposes of the chapter at hand, Hegel will identify the stakes of subjectivity through a theory that indirectly resonates with Enlightenment narratives of self-enslavement, emancipation and the rule of law. (Note: Due to the research limitations of the 1 year MA thesis, I was not able to use the primary text of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. In what follows, I will read Hegel through Butler, sowing my own analysis along the way.)

The inaugurating question of Butler’s inquest is “What is the psychic form power takes?” (1997, 2). Butler marvels at how, in various structural accounts of subjectivity, the formation of the subject as the movement of external power toward internalization “is relentlessly marked by a figure of turning, a turning back upon oneself or even a turning *on* the self” (ibid., 3). This figuration leaves open the incommensurability of the moment of the subject’s formation and the notion that the becoming of the subject happens through an action of the subject upon itself. “The paradox of subjection,” Butler notes, “implies a paradox of referentiality: namely, that we must refer to that which does not yet exist” (ibid., 4).

Underwriting Butler's exploration of this paradox, however, is an explicit concern regarding another paradox that marks the terms of this subjectivization—that we become subjects within systems that we have not consciously chosen. In a sense, subjection “consists precisely in this fundamental dependency on a discourse we never chose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency” (ibid., 2). In other words, as subjects, we are at once the condition of agency and an effect of subordination to a system of subjectivization that was not of our choosing; not initially at least. This leads to a kind of subjective debt that will be impossible to account for. Butler, elsewhere, will call this a “slave morality” (1990, 72).

Butler's exegesis on Hegel follows the transition in *Phenomenology of Spirit* from the section on “Lordship and Bondage” to the subsequent section, “The Freedom of Self-Consciousness: Stoicism, Skepticism and The Unhappy Consciousness” (1997, 31). Butler suggests that the reason this transition is “one of Hegel's least interrogated philosophical movements” is because its general message—that man's enslavement to another man cannot be sustained—“secured a liberationist narrative for various progressive political visions,” creating a disinterest in anything that would say otherwise (ibid., 31). In other words, when Hegel begins the process of displacing freedom from bondage to others with bondage to the self, he starts to lose a certain segment of his audience.

Before continuing further, it might help to understand that, for Hegel, the activating force in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is the fear of death, or, “absolute fear” (ibid., 39). This fear operates as an organizing principle for the stages of human consciousness. Butler turns to Hegel, in part, because it underscores her observation that “the conditions of existence” and one's success within them so often seem to elide with a “risk of death” (ibid., 28). For Butler, the relation of the subject to death is vital to understanding the effectivity of subjectivization's normalizing tendency. This would seem to cut through Rousseau's conflictless *assujettissement* of

Émile, where Émile is imagined to accept the terms of his subjection without coercion or fear of punishment.

For Hegel, man's fear of death is central to the formation of consciousness and will be the very spark that catalyzes ethics. In other words, ethics, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, will spring forth from the subject himself in response to external threat in death. This absolute fear of death originates first as a fear of others, that is, an awareness that death will be brought from the outside by another individual. Life and death are analogized as their negating embodiments—the murdered and the murderer. To control this unstable dyad, man invents the strategy of domination, whereby he submits himself to the domination of other men so that he may live without the fear of death. Thus, man willingly submits himself as the Bondsman of a dominating Lord (Butler, 1997).

In the section on the Lord and the Bondsman, Hegel reiterates the Enlightenment theme of enslavement as an impossible subjectivity based on mirroring, misidentification and loss of control. Although in this particular instance, he is, at least in theory, taking up a case of intersubjectivity rather than intrasubjectivity. However, we might just as well read this as metaphor. The Lord dominates the Bondsman by forcing the slave to labor at the production of objects. The Lord expropriates the labor of the Bondsman, thus becoming a “disembodied reflection” (ibid., 37) of the Bondsman who, by his labor, is meant to substitute the body of the Lord. But the Lord must disavow this substitution. The Bondsman, in turn, allows the objects he labors in making to be expropriated by the Lord. The Bondsman must disavow his labor in the object so that it can belong to the Lord and bear his signature. The Lord, then, is a spectral object of limitless consumption, who is mirrored by the equally hollow figure of the Bondsman who compulsorily gives up the fruit of his labor. Much like Rousseau's tyrant and slave, the Lord and the Bondsman exist in mutual enslavement.

For Hegel, this mimetic situation can only exist through ruses and trickery. On its own, it cannot be grounded. Both the Lord and the Bondsman must enact a set of “consequential erasures” (ibid., 39). First they erase themselves. Then they erase the erasure of themselves. But, according to Hegel, this double disavowal (“I am not myself. You be me but do not let me know that you are me.”) the excess that marks the object that is passed between them. The object, invested with the labor of the Bondsman, inevitably reflects back the Bondsman to himself. He sees himself, not only in the counterfeit image of the Lord, but the object which indelibly bears the mark of his effort. The Bondsman, then, unable ever to completely disavow his own labor in the object, must transcend his enslavement to the Lord so that the objects he makes can be sustained in order to fulfill this “theological promise.” Ultimately, it is the irrepressible fact of the Bondsman’s labor in the object that prevents the ruse of mutual enslavement from taking hold (Butler, 1997).

This move on the part of the Bondsman, however, presents a crisis for him. The sustained object that now reflects him in its sheer materiality is seen as both “determinate” and “transient.” Whence the Bondsman’s own determinacy and transience is exposed (ibid., 41). This revelation, however, *occurring precisely at the threshold of freedom*, triggers a great anxiety. It “reintroduces” the fear of death that had initiated the Bondsman’s introduction into voluntary enslavement. But now, instead of believing that death will only arrive artificially at the hands of another person, the Bondsman realizes that death is “the fate of any being whose consciousness is determined and embodied” (ibid., 41). It is his own materiality—his own determinacy and transience—that bring about death.

From here, the Bondsman panics, retreating in a reflexive flight away from death, or what Butler aptly refers to as Hegel’s uncelebrated “resolution of freedom into self-enslavement”

(ibid., 31). In a marvelous foreclosure, man, approaching a state of freedom, confronted with his own determinacy and transience, beholds absolute fear in the form of mortality. In the face of this impossible vision, he recoils, incorporating the rule of the bondsman over himself. The bondsman submits himself to self-enslavement and to a regime of increasingly intensifying ethical imperatives of bodily negation in order to beat back the fear of death that absolute freedom represented (ibid., 43).

Is it possible to read Hegel's flight from absolute fear and the subsequent instatement of the law as a reiteration of Enlightenment anxieties about the rule of law? To go back to masturbation, so much of the early anxiety about masturbation stemmed from the fear that it could not be controlled. Masturbation and its criminal relationship with the imagination was thought to be a kind of access to absolute pleasure, and because of this, it had to be brought into a relationship with a law that could mediate its excess.

The same would seem to hold for the fear of unlimited credit and paper money that Laqueur credits for fueling anti-masturbation mania. The invention of the law seems to follow the revelation of imminent absolute freedom, which, rather than being welcome, comes to stand for that which cannot be admitted; that which cannot be. For the Bondsman, this fear "is allayed by legislating an ethical norm" (Butler, 1997, 43). So too, it would seem, with speculative finance, government, and sexuality.

Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, written in the first part of the nineteenth century, does seem consonant with (and perhaps indebted to?) Enlightenment narratives of emancipation, which, as we have seen in Rousseau, are frequently attended by a reflexive compulsion to establish a normalizing rule of law that is greater than any individual, and that binds individuals together in a collective indebtedness. At least Hegel's Christian morality, more than Rousseau's

secular(ish) ethics, attempts to locate a *reason* for the incorporation of the law into individual consciousness—fear of death—the result of which is, effectively, a terrorizing self-consciousness. Nevertheless, Hegel’s foreclosure of absolute freedom with absolute law will only culminate in the form of a dyadic self-enslavement that—once again—must be broken in order to stabilize dyadic self-inslavement and to solve the persistent trouble of pleasure.

3.3 Stoicism, Skepticism and The Unhappy Consciousness, or, Three Impossible Enslavements

The problem with the flight from fear of death is that it can only reproduce another impossible subjectivity, what Hegel will call The Unhappy Consciousness. In the chapter called “Freedom of Self-Consciousness,” Hegel traces the three stages of self-consciousness from stubbornness, to self-righteousness, to freedom (Butler, 1997). Again, sensing immanence-of-death-in-absolute-freedom, man’s consciousness recoils in a folding back on itself that seeks to negate the material aspect of being. To achieve this, consciousness attaches to thought, or to itself, because thought is closest to the permanence of spirit; to that which is *for itself*, and thus, eternal (ibid.). This first stage of self-consciousness is regarded by Hegel as *stoicism*, a self-conscious renunciation of the body in favor of spirit; an attempted “withdrawal from existence per se, including its own” (ibid. 34). The stoic exhibits a stubbornness (*eigensinnigkeit*) which is responsible for instituting the legislation of ethical imperatives (ibid., 1997, 33-34).

A problem arises, however, when one realizes that the act of renouncing the body, paradoxically, only affirms the body even more. Therefore, the defeat of each attempt to negate the body produces another, more intense imperative of bodily negation. The skeptic emerges here in a dialectic relationship with the stoic in order to make this point—and to make fun. The skeptic is characterized by a secondary form of stubbornness: childishness. He seeks pleasure in

pointing out the contradictory position of the stoic. His work is a double negation that is indiscriminate in its aim. The skeptic relishes being able to undermine the position of any determination, thus creating chaos, or “contradiction for its own sake” (1997, 44).

But the stubbornness of the skeptic soon confronts his own problem when faced with another skeptic. He begins to see that his position, too, is untenable in its inability to locate a point of determination. Reflecting on this, and recognizing the futility of remaining a skeptic, he moves from stubbornness to self-righteousness, or devotion (*Andacht*) through a doubling down on bodily negations (ibid., 47). This, *The Unhappy Consciousness*, takes the form of an attempt to forge a body that will match up with thought, or unchangeable spirit, through a punishing self-righteousness. “Predictably,” Butler points out, “this effort to deploy the body in the service of thinking the unchangeable proves impossible...

Devotion turns out to be pure self-feeling, what Hegel disparagingly refers to as “the chaotic jingling of bells, or a mist of warm incense, a musical thinking” ...Indeed, self-feeling refers only and endlessly to itself (a transcendentalized form of *eigensinnigkeit*), and so is unable to furnish knowledge of anything other than itself (ibid., 47).

Thus, through a potentially endless repetition of corporeal self-sacrifice, or really, *unlimited self-feeling*, *The Unhappy Consciousness* inevitably becomes caught in an endless cycle of bodily investment and pleasure. Indeed, Butler’s description of *The Unhappy Consciousness* as a self-enslaved state reads virtually as a diagnosis of masturbation as repetitious “self-abuse” and “self-pollution”:

This intermingling of pleasure and pain results from a renunciation of the self which can never quite accomplish that renunciation, which, as an incessant accomplishing, carries with it the pleasurable assertion of the self. The self-absorption of consciousness...appears as negative narcissism, and engaged preoccupation with what is most debased and defiled about itself (48).

The “incessant accomplishing” of self-righteous devotion ultimately fails in its attempt to align itself with the unchangeable. The Unhappy Consciousness falls into an inward spiral of sensuality that only a mediating third term can intercede. What began as consciousness’s self-preserving flight from death culminates in its opposite; the affirmation of death through the pain and pleasure of endless self-feeling.

3.4 Enter the Priest

The Priest, or “mediator,” arrives on a scene of absolute debasement of consciousness; consciousness mired in the filth of the pleasure and pain of the self (Butler, 1997). The self-inflicted penance of The Unhappy Consciousness, with its inadvertently autoerotic “chaotic jingling of bells,” its “mist of warm incense,” and its tireless repetition, had gone on quite beyond the control of any external regulating norm. The ethical imperatives of The Unhappy Consciousness had been autogenic. As the internalization of the terms of intersubjective bondage, these regulatory norms were doomed to fail because they were modeled on a dyadic, mirroring structure of enslavement. The Priest, then, provides a crucial intercession to this false state of self-enslaved, self-feeling, self-mortifying, self-pleasuring self-consciousness. There are two critical transformations the Priest introduces.

First, the Priest displaces pleasure from the equation of bodily negation. Through a system of bodily mortifications and fasting, the opportunity for pleasure in penance is reduced. Yet, not fully convinced that the denial of the body can ever truly escape the possibility of the body's affirmation in pleasure, the priest conceptually jettisons pleasure from the earthly realm, reterritorializing it within the realm of Absolute Spirit. This conceptual reterritorialization of pleasure (an act of faith?) within the realm of Absolute Spirit ensures that penitence will be all about the pain and misery of bodily existence, thus effecting "the transition from self-consciousness to reason" (1997, 53).

Second, the Priest stabilizes the narcissistic dyad of self-consciousness by drawing it into a relation with the third term of Absolute Spirit. He does this, in part, by instituting a displacement of wills. First, the Priest disavows his will as his own, claiming, rather, that his is the will of Absolute Spirit for which the Priest himself is merely a proxy. Secondly, the Priest counsels that the will of the penitent—through his authorization—is also the will of Absolute Spirit. This proposition alleviates both the Priest and the penitent of the contradictoriness that the self-relation of their embodiments guarantees and is impossible to escape.

Additionally, and importantly, by displacing the penitent's will as the will of Absolute Spirit via the proxy of the priest, self-consciousness is also brought into a relation with "a community of wills"—the congregation, and the first suggestion of an apparatus of social regulation—the recognition of which "effects the transition from self-consciousness to Spirit" (1997, 52-53).

For the first time, then, Hegel's consciousness *qua* self-consciousness is situated socially via a community of fellow Christians who share Christ's debt of suffering through the denial of the body. It is a communal debt, one Christians share toward each other, as well as toward Spirit.

And it is the promise of a delayed eschatological pleasure—as “repayment” (ibid., 52)—that underwrites this collective subjectivization that is mediated and conditioned by the third term of Absolute Spirit. Ultimately, the will of Absolute Spirit, in Hegel’s scenario, is the only possible will *for itself*. That this proposition goes hand-in-hand with a reterritorialization of pleasure is telling. It would appear, then, that narcissistic reflection (in the sense of a being *for itself*) and absolute pleasure are projected into the realm of the Law and denied to individual subjectivity.

3.5 A Phenomenology of Structuralism?

In the two sections explored by Butler, Hegel moves consciousness through a series dialectic formulations: from murderous anarchy, through human bondage, and into self-enslavement. This succession of impossible dyads is finally broken with the intervention of a priest-figure who aligns self-consciousness with Absolute Spirit and brings it into relation with a spiritual congregation that is characterized by collective subjectivization of the body, mutual indebtedness, and the delay of earthly pleasure which will be repaid in the afterlife.

Butler is not convinced by Hegel’s move to break this deadlock of masturbatory self-referentiality with the intervention of the Priest. For Butler, this “religious solution in Spirit” seems to contradict what had appeared to be “a trenchant critique of ethical imperatives and ideals” (1997, 53). Hegel’s *priest-ex-machina* seems not only to be an easy out, but, perhaps, an impossibility in itself, particularly in its purported ability to remove pleasure entirely from the equation of self-negation. In other words, just because we say there’s no pleasure in penance doesn’t mean there won’t be. But the fact that “freedom” of consciousness can only be reached, by Hegel’s account, when a divine third term intervenes, signals, for Butler, a structural move that keeps the subject mired in a repetition of self-denial because the subject can only fail at this task. As a state, Hegel’s model of free consciousness represents “a kind of dialectical reversal which

centers on the impossibility of a full or final reflexive suppression of what we might loosely call ‘the body’ within the confines of life” (57). The subject of Absolute law is only ever a slave to it insofar as the task of subjectivity is the servicing of an endless debt.

I have been developing the theme of a dyadic, narcissistic, primary selfishness or self-interest that is broken, and thereby conditioned, by the intervention of a third term of the law. While this foray into Hegel, despite its sexual undertones, has been somewhat tangential to the subject of literal “masturbation,” which in Rousseau was to some degree more physical than figurative, the interdicting structure that is systemic in Hegel, with its displacement of pleasure and interruption of dyadic self-enslavement with the third term of the law, outlines a similar structure by which masturbation in the Enlightenment was figured, and which, I will argue, will be reiterated in later structuralist theories of subjectivity. Namely, psychoanalysis.

In the following chapter, I will take up the psychoanalytic work of Sigmund Freud in order to demonstrate how structural thought is underpinned by an anti-masturbatory imperative. Freud will bring together sexual and psychic masturbation—autoeroticism and narcissism, respectively—into close proximity, and he will incorporate them both into a structuralist framework that both necessitates and prohibits them. Keeping Judith Butler’s work close at hand, I will apply her analysis of “the heterosexual matrix” and Foucault’s “repressive hypothesis” to Freud’s anti-narcissistic theory. At the conclusion of the chapter, I will turn to Freud’s related work on group psychology to offer a social account of subjectivity as it relates to the imperative of sublimated narcissism, as well as to offer a theory of panic that might inform a thinking about anti-narcissistic discourses as constructed upon anxieties about the collapse of social cohesion.

Chapter 4

Freud's Libido: A Debt Economy

*I'm not ashamed of the things that I dream
I find myself flirting with the verge of obscene
Into the unknown, I will be bold
I'm going to places I can be out of control*
—Britney Spears, “The Touch of My Hand”

4.1 Following Butler

Judith Butler's interest in Freud in *The Psychic Life of Power* follows two tracks that Butler had previously laid out in the second chapter of *Gender Trouble*, “Prohibition, Psychoanalysis, and the Production of the Heterosexual Matrix” (1990). In the first track, Butler isolates Freud's positing of primary sexual “dispositions” with which boys and girls enter into the Oedipal conflict. The point of this work was to show how, in order for young boys and girls to be “disposed” to the heterosexual incestuous attachments that bring about the crisis whereby they learn to deflect their object-cathexis to their opposite-sex parents—thus the incest taboo is instated—there must first be a prior taboo on homosexuality that “disposes” children to attach to their opposite-sex parent in the first place. Butler supports this argument by pointing out that Freud's positing of an original bisexuality in children is conceived *not* as two contradictory heterosexual and homosexual attachments by a single gendered subject, but, rather, as a subject possessing two instances of heterosexual desire—a masculine attachment to the mother, and a feminine attachment to the father. Butler argues that Freud's contradictory logic regarding sexual development was underwritten by a “heterosexual matrix,” a culturally (if unconsciously) enforced imperative whereby homosexuality is always already foreclosed as a possibility for identification. Through the heterosexual matrix, homosexuality is rendered as secondary to and

derivative of heterosexuality, which is understood as natural, even though, according to Freud's own theory, it must be shaped by the forces of civilization (Butler, 1990; 1997).

The second track is more fundamental to Butler's thesis in *The Psychic Life of Power*, which is the reiterated figuration of consciousness *qua* subjectivity as a turning back on oneself; an attachment of the self to the self that paradoxically initiates the subjective self through an investment in painful self-negation. (Recall Hegel's recoil from fear.) Butler turns to Freud's theory of melancholy to show how Freud posits that the incorporation of a lost object into the ego shapes the ego in the form of the object and sets up a super ego that serves as an internalized voice of self-beratement that aims the subject's ambivalence toward the lost object at its own ego. The self-beratement effaces the both the love and the loss of the object, producing a consciousness that is incapable of avowing either the loss, or the love. In other words, the subject is unable to mourn (Butler 1990, 1997).

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler is more intent on applying this analysis to the formation of heterosexuality, whereby the subject is exposed to a prohibition against incest and the prior prohibition against homosexuality. The homosexual taboo is understood as more psychically entrenched because of the double disavowal of both the homosexual object and the homosexual aim. The double prohibition is set up within the ego, shapes the ego, and becomes an identification, the source of which is unthinkable and unspeakable: Thus, "I never lost that person and I never loved that person, indeed never felt that kind of love at all" (1990, 88). Butler, then, is arguing that adult heterosexuality is the effect of a melancholic psychic state produced through the double prohibition against homosexuality and incest, which is then set up inside the ego as an imperative identification the effaces the history of this loss-based identity through psychic foreclosure; a foreclosure that regulates the field of speech and the psychic surface of the body (Butler, 1990; 1997).

At the end of this chapter, Butler begins work she explores more thoroughly in *The Psychic Life of Power*. In addition to applying Foucault's theory of power and the "repressive hypothesis" to Freud's concept of the melancholic formation of the subject, Butler also uses Foucault to challenge Lacan's insistence that the initiation of the subject into the symbolic order enacts an effacement of an original *jouissance* that is prior to the law, and the lack of which interpellates a speaking subject into an impossible desire to recover that state. Thus, the Symbolic is given the dual role of prohibiting this prior *jouissance* and permanently displacing the subject from having any agency to change the law. These two structuralist claims—the there is a subject prior to the law, and that the law is permanent—will be contested by Butler via a Foucauldian analysis of power that will emphasize the generativity of the law, and the impossibility of a subject prior to the law (Butler, 1990; 1997).

In the following, I hope to engage Judith Butler's ideas subjectivity with themes I've been laying out in this thesis: masturbation, impossible dyadic subjects, endless debt, and the reterritorialization of pleasure within the third term of the law. I will begin by exploring Freud's ideas about the act of masturbation, and will continue with his work on narcissism to explore the ways in which a taboo on masturbation can be seen as primary to heterosexual development. Here, I am reading Freud's original texts, supplementing them with Thomas Laqueur (for historical reference) and Elizabeth Grosz (for theory).

4.2 Freud and the Specter of Masturbation

Sigmund Freud came of age in a Europe that was under the thrall of the second wave of masturbation panic.³³ From a medical point of view, anxiety about sex with oneself had

³³ This "second wave," as I'm calling it, was characterized largely by what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick called a "bifurcation" in masturbation discourse which lead to "disparate regulatory categories and techniques" for men and women (1991, 825). See also Laqueur (2003), Foucault ([1978] 1990), and Mosse (1985).

outgrown the flimsy moralism that had announced its birth in *Onania* and was now firmly institutionalized in medical practice as a disease whose somatic pathologies were as real its threat to social organization. However, hegemony is not necessarily uniform, and in the nineteenth century masturbation was marshaled as both a cause and a cure for illness. At the same time some doctors were performing clitorectomies and other acts of violence upon women's genitalia (Sedgwick, 1991; Rubin, 1975; Laqueur, 2003), others, particularly practitioners of the new field of psychology, were engaged in the practice of masturbation as therapy; mostly for women and the treatment of "hysteria." But the cultural ambivalence toward masturbation that certain Europeans (and some Americans) expressed does not eclipse the overall picture of a regulation at work in the discursive production of masturbation as a sexual act and as a form of prohibited, solitary sexuality.

Like Rousseau and Hegel, Freud was no less a child of the era of modern European sexuality, and he would emerge as a crucial figure in the discourse on masturbation. It would indeed seem nearly impossible to tease apart Freud's views on masturbation from his biographical situation in a culture compulsively enthralled by masturbation's somatic potency. Like "masturbation," however, there is no *one* Freud. Freud's thought developed over the course of his life. Yet, according to Thomas Laqueur (2003), Freud expressed, maybe more than any of his contemporaries, a sustained ambivalence toward masturbation.³⁴ This ambivalence was translated into his developmental theories of human sexuality which normalized masturbation by making it both primary and natural, yet useful in the sense that it would need to lead to other things; namely, heterosexuality. First, masturbation in the form of infantile "auto-erotism" centered on life-sustaining events like food and excretion. Secondly, genitalized masturbation would take the form of phallic masturbation (the penis for boys; for girls, the clitoris).

³⁴ Laqueur's account of Freud's thoughts on masturbation span a range of Freud's career, from as early as 1905 until as late as 1932. I will cite Laqueur's citations where pertinent.

Prohibition would mark these organs as erotogenic zones oriented toward *future* use.³⁵ One more step along the fraught road to eventual heterosexuality.

Overall, Freud's normalization of masturbation into a system of heterosexual development had the effect of producing masturbation only in order to prohibit it. This makes masturbation both sacrificial and essential. As Laqueur points out, Freud's narrative of sexuality centralizes masturbation as "something to go through and something to build upon" (Laqueur, 2003). In order to serve a use, masturbation must be discarded and exchanged for the assumption of adult heterosexuality. In Freud's developmental model, masturbation practiced beyond the necessary stages, would lead to "*the first great deviation* from the course of development laid down by civilized man" (Freud in Laqueur, 2003, 393) (emphasis mine).³⁶ Masturbation, and its ontogenic pleasures, could not be—in and of itself—for itself.

My emphasis is intended to showcase the priority Freud gave to masturbation in the order of sexual deviations, or *disorders*. In 1908, Freud called it "the absolutely essential first step in the sublimation of infantile autoeroticism, the prototypical sublimation" (Laqueur, 2003, 390)³⁷ The prohibition of masturbation was part of the instantiating move from infantile homeostasis and self-satisfaction to a relationship with pleasure critically dependent on external objects, a dependency that, once initiated, would never end; and if it did, it would be called a regressive disorder, or perversion. This movement of the location of pleasure, from the self to the other, is critically presupposed by Freud who then retroactively explains object cathexis as a necessary, natural displacement of primary self-satisfaction.

³⁵Freud in "Three Essays on Sexuality," 1905. That the genitals were "destined to do great things in the future" (Laqueur, 392; and 493, note 39).

³⁶ Freud in "New Introductory Lectures," 1932 (Laqueur, 493, note 40).

³⁷ Freud in "'Civilized' Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness," 1908 (Laqueur, 493, note 37).

It would seem possible, here, to employ Butler's concept of the "heterosexual matrix" to explain Freud's systematization of masturbation. If masturbation is observed as the taking of one's own body as a libidinally invest object, then, in a sense, that object of attachment and the source of the libido will be perceived as having the same sex, and thus, will be homosexual. In *On Narcissism*, Freud makes quixotic reference to "homosexual libido," and it seems possible to interpret this as libido that has been redirected from an external, always already opposite-sex object onto the same-sexed body of the subject; Butler makes this connection, but does read into its potentially masturbatory significance (Freud, 1914; Butler, 1997). This qualification of libido, a qualification that seems dependent on the performativity of the libido in question (it is homosexual because it is participating in a homosexual action), does seem to suggest that unqualified libido is, by default, heterosexual. But this would contradict Freud's view that libido exists prior to external cathexis. If libido is as libido does, then what is libido prior to the formation of the subject? How can libido be heterosexual if the point of libido is to lead the ego into heterosexual subjectivity through a course of attachments to opposite-sex objects?

By Laqueur's account, masturbation was crucial for Freud, even if his ideas about most things changed over time. Masturbation lay at the heart of Freud's move from "seduction theory" of sexuality, where sexually indifferent (innocent?) children were thought to be coaxed into sexuality through external trauma, to "libido theory," where the genesis of sexuality was finally thought to originate in the body of the child (Laqueur, 2003; Grosz, 1990).³⁸ With this shift came a restructuring of the role society played in both the formation of sexuality and the development of the psyche that governs it. Instead of being a coercive imposition of the social upon the individual, psychic sexuality emerges as the collision of endogenic libidinal instincts and the external world toward which they are naturally predisposed. The positing of the libido as a force-within, which, through its work on external objects, initiates and forms sexuality and, with

³⁸ The case was "Dora," and the issue—among others—was masturbation (Laqueur, 2003).

it, the order of the psyche, also prepared for the development of Freud's seminal work on a psychic pathology characterized by "a turning away from the external world"—narcissism (Freud, 1914, 18).

4.3 On *On Narcissism*

On Narcissism, written in 1914 on the heels of *Totem and Taboo* (1913) and three years prior to his essay "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), provides both an exposition on libido theory as well as a bridge between individual and social psychology, work which Freud would later return to in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921). It is a vibrant, oftentimes confusing and self-contradictory article on the interrelationship of libido, the ego, the ego ideal and their quarrelsome roles in sexual and social development.

While masturbation is only tenuously alluded to in this essay, and never is it mentioned by that name—it usually appears as an infantile "auto-erotism"—Freud introduces the concept of narcissism, and the essay itself, by crediting its coinage to Paul Näcke who in 1899 used it to describe both an "attitude" and a self-sexual practice. Näcke's narcissist was "a person who treats his own body in the same way in which the body of a sexual object is treated—who looks at it, that is to say, strokes it and fondles it till he obtains complete satisfaction through these activities" ([1914] 1986, 17). Already underlying the notion of narcissism is the problematic presupposition that a sexual object is *other*, and that thus, to treat oneself as a sexual object is pathologically derivative and developmentally regressive.

The sexual connotation that accompanies "narcissism," in addition to being one of self-pleasure, is also decidedly homosexual. The Western appropriation of the Greek myth of Narcissus as a metaphor for homosexuality (or sodomy) has a long history. Early sexologists,

such as Näcke and Havelock Ellis (who also shares credit in the coining of “narcissism”) must have been aware of this.³⁹ Even Rousseau, in the mid-eighteenth century, had written *Narcissus, or the Lover of Himself* ([1752] 1767) which lampoons confused masculine identity and was inspired, according to Rousseau, by a man he had known who demonstrated homosexual proclivities.⁴⁰ Indeed, it is in the myth of Narcissus and the metaphor of the mirror that masturbation and homosexuality often come face to face.⁴¹

Freud’s essay on narcissism is carried in with reference to the “disorder” of homosexuality, and he returns to homosexuality when he zeros in on clinical, or *secondary* narcissism, as a libidinal cathexis of the ego; or the ego attaching to itself. Clinical narcissists “are plainly seeking *themselves* as a love-object, and are exhibiting a type of object-choice that must be termed ‘narcissistic’” ([1914] 1986, 30) (emphasis in the original). Thus, Freud establishes the distinction between two kinds of sexual object-choice; *anaclitic*, or that which is taken after the “model” of the mother (or for girls, the father); and *narcissistic*, that which is taken on the model of the ego from which the libidinal cathexis had issued. Homosexuals are said to develop the latter kind. This explanation literalizes the trope of homosexuals as seeking only themselves in their sexual partners. But Freud almost immediately qualifies this diagnosis by generalizing it:

We have, however, not concluded that human beings are divided into two sharply differentiated groups, according as their object-choice conforms to the anaclitic or to the narcissistic type; we assume rather that both kinds of object-choice are

³⁹ On Havelock Ellis, see Morrison’s footnote in Freud (1986, 17).

⁴⁰ The play concerns one young Valentine who took to the fashion of painting his face, and, when confronted with an image of himself that had been doctored to look like a woman, he could not detect the ruse and thus fell instantly in love with himself. It is worth noting that in his *Confessions* Rousseau admits that the model for this character was taken from one M. Corvesi whom Rousseau characterized as possessing “ultramontane proclivities,” a reference to Italy which lay “beyond the mountains”—aka, where all the homosexuals were (Rousseau, [1789?] 2000, 117 and 653, in note).

⁴¹ See also Aaron Betsky’s (1997) problematic work on queer space. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) provides a refutation to the disparaging correlation of same-sex attraction to mirror identifications. Betsky, citing Sedgwick, ignores her argument. Also, see Elizabeth Grosz (1998) “Refiguring Lesbian Desire.”

open to each individual, though he may show a preference for one of the other. We say that a human being has originally two sexual objects—himself and the woman who nurses him—and in doing so we are postulating a primary narcissism in everyone, which may in some cases manifest itself in a dominating fashion in his object-choice (ibid., 30-31).

In short: Everyone is a narcissist. Yet everyone will also be required to get over it in order to become healthy human beings, fully invested in social experience.

Secondary narcissism, then, will occur when libido that had been successfully attached to an external object is “withdrawn from the external world” and “directed to the ego” (ibid., 19). Thus, the withdrawn libido re-cathects, not to a new external (presumably opposite-sex) object, but to the (same-sex?) ego itself. Freud figures this secondary narcissistic cathexis as a superimposition upon primary narcissism, which is obscured (ibid., 19). The narcissistic ego becomes a palimpsest of its endogenic desire to cathect with itself.

4.4 The Narcissistic Ego

Freud’s concept of primary narcissism is thought through his “narcissistic model” of the ego (Grosz, 1990). While it is not within the parameters of this thesis to give an in-depth analysis of Freud’s account of libido and ego in *On Narcissism*, I will attempt to give some basic information about how Freud conceived the relationship between the ego and libido, and how Freud used these views to conceptualize both primary and secondary narcissism within the confines of a libidinal economy structured on investment and return.

In the narcissistic model, the ego emerges as “a storehouse of libido, a kind of psychic repository or dam where libido can be stored from its various sources throughout the body in the anticipation of finding appropriate objects in which it could be invested” (Grosz, 1990, 29). The libido, then, is a cathecting force whose action and experience gives size and shape to the ego. Freud had originally posited two types of libido: object-libido, which is directed outward toward sexual gratification in the service of the sexual instincts; and ego-libido, which is directed inward toward self preservation in the service of the ego-instincts. Through his analysis of clinical narcissism, Freud came to “infer” a primary narcissism, *prior to ego formation*, where ego-libido and object-libido exist together virtually “indistinguishable” from each other. This state is described by Freud as a “narcissistic perfection of [the subject’s] childhood” (Freud, [1914] 1986, 36), a state of “symbiotic bliss” (Morrison, 1986, 13) in which the instincts for survival and pleasure coexist through a finite reservoir of basically undifferentiated libidinal energy.

It is important to note, however, that “primary narcissism” is figured by Freud as a sort of mid-way point between “auto-erotism” and the first object-cathexis with the mother. Yet there are certain places in *On Narcissism* where Freud seems to conflate these states. Nevertheless, Freud *is* clear in this account that the ego begins to form with the beginning of object-cathexis, thus effecting the surrender of primary narcissism. The surrendering, however, destabilizes the ego by draining it of libido, leaving it open to threat. Because of the hydraulic mechanics of libido, by loving someone else, we begin to love ourselves less. This destabilization initiates a “vigorous,” life-long quest “to recover that state” ([1914] 1986, 42). But this desire is untenable; impossible. Once they are exchanged for ego formation and a relationship with the external world, autoeroticism and primary narcissism, forever disturbed, are irretrievable. Lost states.

It would not be difficult to read Freud’s libidinal economy in terms of Graeber’s theory of debt. In cathecting to an object, the ego’s “investment” presupposes a return to libidinal

equilibrium. If the investment is not returned, the ego goes into a sort of shock and attempts to recuperate its primary homeostasis—a sort of psychic run on the banks. In a “normal” heterosexual adult psyche, the quest to stabilize the primary libidinal market, so to speak, is satisfied by a precarious trifecta of operations. First, a trace of primary narcissism is said to persist in everyone, providing some influx of libido. Second, the instatement of the ego coincides with the formation of an *ego ideal*, what Freud will later call “the heir to the original narcissism” ([1921] 1959, 52). The ego ideal appears to be the effect of the internalization of external “cultural and ethical ideals” that institute prohibitions which result in libidinal sublimation, or, the deflection of sexual aims from libidinal cathexes ([1914] 1986, 35). The ego ideal, also referred to as the “narcissistic ego ideal,” allows for a “displacement” of libido onto the ego ideal in such a way that the ego can substitute ego-libido through the satisfaction of societal imperatives which are held in place by the ego ideal’s voice and “watchman”: *conscience* (ibid., 35, 37-38). The ego, prohibited from directing libido toward itself—a prohibition for which Freud will not yet provide an account—finds satisfaction in directing libido toward its ideal as a sort of supplemental sustenance.

Thirdly, object-cathexes can replenish the ego with libido in the form of returned cathexis, or requited love. Or, in the case of unrequited love, the object-cathexis can be withdrawn in order to replenish ego-libido. This “return of object-libido to the ego and its transformation into narcissism represents, as it were, a happy love once more...[which] corresponds to the primal condition in which object-libido and ego-libido cannot be distinguished” (ibid., 41). Yet, while fulfillment in love may correspond to the primitive economies of autoeroticism and/or primary narcissism, it is a mere *representation*, forever entangled with the displaced satisfaction of the ego ideal and whatever “residue of infantile narcissism” remains within the ego (ibid., 42). Thus, libido that is directed toward the ego is

primary in its proto-subjective form, secondary in its normal, recuperative form, and tertiary in its perverted, pathological form.

In this way, Freud's primary narcissism would appear to exhibit some homology with his postulation of "primary bisexuality." Instead of primary bisexuality being a coincidence of two heterosexual aims stretched between the mother and father, Freud seems to suggest that primary narcissism is just opposite: two instances of sexual aim—one heterosexual, one homosexual—toward the mother and the self, respectively. And like primary bisexuality, primary narcissism, by the fact of its *primariness*, appears to serve as both an obstacle to and yet also a necessary springboard for normal heterosexuality. But at this point, it is still unclear as to whether the prohibition against primary narcissism is instated against narcissism as a foundational premise of psychic development, or because narcissism takes the form of a kind of homosexuality.

We can observe how the taboo against narcissism, like the taboo against homosexuality, would appear as necessary, and thus, *prior* to the incest taboo. One must first learn to give up an attachment to oneself so that attachment to others, conceived as natural and normal, can commence. By this same logic, it would appear that the taboo against narcissism would even precede the taboo against homosexuality in the sense that sexuality *per se*, whether hetero or homosexual, is always already social, or intersubjective. Yet the taboo against narcissism and the taboo against homosexuality can also be seen as simultaneous effects of the heterosexual matrix with its underlying yet effaced prohibition against homosexuality. Thus, instead of relating directly to each other, self-cathexis and homosexuality would relate individually to normative heterosexuality, and would thus be, in some sense, different instances of the same prohibition.

It is further illuminating to consider how Freud's recuperative narcissistic drive—aka, normative heterosexuality—taking the form of a lifelong attempt to recover the state of primary

narcissism, echoes the course of repetitive self-negating failings of Hegel's *Unhappy Consciousness* prior to the arrival of the Priest. Both cases end up being rendered as radical forms of self-feeling; the *Unhappy Consciousness* as a brutal renunciation of the body that inevitably affirms the body; heterosexuality as a compulsive attachment to difference and externality that effaces a narcissistic drive through external object-cathexis and the displacement of libido onto the ego ideal. Also, in both Hegel and Freud, the incitement to structural stabilization is figured as a recuperative project—in Hegel, existence prior to the fear of death; in Freud, libidinal satisfaction prior to object-cathexis.

The driving force of natural heterosexuality, according to Freud, is, paradoxically, a desire for individuals “to be their own ideal once more, in regard to sexual no less than other trends, as they were in childhood—this is what people strive to attain as their happiness” ([1914] 1986, 42). It is a regressive goal pursued via supposedly progressive means. In this sense, complete abandonment of primary narcissism is undermined by every attempt to achieve it. It is an unreachable yet ideal mandate of the social; the impossible debt accrued by the assumption of social personhood.

4.5 But Wherefore Give Up Narcissism?

While Freud suggests that primary narcissism is both an egoistic and objective attachment to, basically, a dyadic proto-ego that is both subject and object, Freud undermines this claim on two fronts. First, by calling into question the ego's viability as an object; if the ego takes on the shape of the sex of the subject, which Freud will argue elsewhere, then an ego-cathexis will indeed be homosexual, and therefore, a perversion from natural heterosexual development. Second, Freud continues to express ambivalence about how the onset of external object-cathexis and the abandonment of primary narcissism comes about in the first place. This

begs the question, as we asked of young Emile: Why would a child give up masturbation? Or, in this case, *narcissism*, or unlimited “self-sufficiency.”

In *On Narcissism*, Freud offers two ideas. The first suggestion, based on Freud’s characterization of the behavior of libido, is that a build-up of libidinal “cathexis of the ego...exceeds a certain amount” ([1914] 1986, 28). Freud does not speculate on the quantity of that amount. He will say, however, that the excessive buildup is the result of the ego’s attempt to protect itself from “falling ill,” but that, “in the last resort,” we must admit that we need the help of others to maintain our health (*ibid.*, 28). The desire for initial object-cathexis by this model would seem to be located in the ego’s ability to rationalize its own survival.

Freud’s second suggestion focuses more on an external model of causation. After deferring to future generations the work of excavating the “disturbances” that would interrupt a child’s primary narcissism, Freud posits that the “castration complex,” which accompanies the Oedipal crisis, might serve as one example where primary, harmonious ego and object libido are differentiated as an “effect of early deterrence from sexual activity” (*ibid.*, 34). Both of these explanations meet on the level of self-preservation. And the second example is followed by Freud’s exposition on the ego ideal as the attachment to and incorporation of regulatory imperatives issued from the external world upon which the ego models itself.

In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* ([1921] 1959), a work that, theoretically, picks up from where *On Narcissism* left off, Freud offers two accounts of the sublimation of narcissistic libido that are more directly intersubjective in their postulation. The first is optimistic, to say the least. The second, negative and policing. It is the second type that concerns this thesis.

Freud offers the example of a group of siblings, the eldest of whom, when faced with the realization that she will have to give up some of her narcissistic demands, accepts her demotion to the status of “equal” among siblings *so long as* her siblings are also denied the same narcissistic wants that she denies herself. She reasons, according to Freud, “If one cannot be the favourite oneself, at all events nobody else shall be the favourite” (ibid., 66). This “replacement of jealousy by group feeling” is emblematic of a group identity that is predicated on self-sacrifice. In other words, “group feeling” is a tenuous product whose fate is predicated on the instatement and sustaining of an anti-narcissistic economy. Freud calls this the very definition of “social justice.” Giving up narcissistic individuality for group belonging “means that we deny ourselves many things so that others may have to do without them as well, or, what is the same thing, *may not be able to ask for them*. This demand for equality is the root of social conscience and the sense of duty” (67) (emphasis mine).

My emphasis on Freud’s rather sober view of social justice is intended to showcase both the suppression of speech that a negative anti-narcissism enacts as well as the operative role individual members of a given group or community play in the enforcement of regulatory self-sacrifice. If group cohesion is, at base, determined by a sublimation of narcissistic demand that limits speech, there is already a contradiction in that enforcement of such a law will (naturally?) take the form of a speech act of some kind. Freud does offer the idea of “suggestion” by which group members regulate one another’s behavior. We might guess, then, that the intra-enforcement of anti-narcissism by one individual member upon another, just a “suggestion,” might go something along the lines of, “I have given up my narcissistic interest to be equal with you. Your lapse of narcissism threatens this equality. You must sublimate your narcissism so we can be equal again.”

The resonance with Graeber’s theory of debt is notable. The group, by Freud’s model, through a collective sublimation of narcissistic self-interest (I’ll just call it socialization), now constitutes a contractual equality. In this state of equality-in-surrender, any individual who perverts from the group imperative—specifically an anti-narcissistic imperative—automatically withdraws a presupposed investment in group cohesion which, once withdrawn, now figures as a debt. The infractor is obligated to repay this debt—keep in mind, this was originally conceived as his own libidinal property—with his obedience in deed, body, and spirit. So long as the group exists as a political entity, and insofar as to be a member of a group is to become the subject of an anti-narcissistic imperative that creates an “equality” between group members, then every member of the group is bound by a debt-potentiating economy of exchange. Equality and endless indebtedness are at this point inseparable.

If this theory holds, and a group is constituted by a bank-like incorporation of mass quantities of sublimated libido, then the unauthorized withdrawal of libido would seem to present a sort of crisis of confidence within the group that echoes the original crisis experience by the ego at the moment of its constitutive destabilization.

Freud explains *panic* as the presupposition of “a relaxation in the libidinal structure of the group” ([1921] 1959, 36). That is, group hysteria can’t set in until there is a kind of critical mass of epistemological anxiety that the ties that bind the group have relaxed, which unleashes a panic that group disintegration is imminent. The performative re-enforcement of the anti-narcissistic law that founds the group and sustains its political cohesion would logically be the result of such a libidinal relaxation. But the enforcement of the law by one individual upon another can only paradoxically break the law, in that, to speak for the law, one must temporarily identify with the law *as* the law, as opposed to identifying with the law as “having” or reflecting the law, which is

the basis of group identification. And since the law itself is narcissistic in its absolute demand to be reflected, the individual who speaks for the law inevitably speaks from a narcissistic position.

The concept of group panic—and the way Freud is using it—tends, however, to evoke images of crowds of people running through the streets every which way. But panics can be slow; panics can diffuse over time; they can be diffuse in their manifestation. If we apply Freud’s notion of “panic” to the masturbation panic that reigned for two centuries across Europe with truly punishing consequences—a panic into which Freud was born—we might regard it as fundamentally the result of an anxiety about the disintegration of society, and the response was to demand that subjects, in certain ways, be visible to the law. In this regard, masturbation panic was a crisis of vision, and thus, a crisis of attention. It concerned those who were thought to be turning their backs on society—on their parents and the state alike. Earning interest (as self-interest) on a debt they were not repaying. Like Hegel’s *Unhappy Consciousness* and Rousseau’s *Émile*, the psychic subject, in order to be a subject, must turn his vision away from his self, deflecting it toward others and to the law that binds them each to one another.

In the following chapter, I will turn to Lacan, who will build on Freud, and, more explicitly than any other subject of this thesis, will articulate the exchange imperative underlying structuralist concepts of psychic subjectivity. I will then return to Butler, deploying her critique of Lacanian structuralism as a “slave morality” in order to demonstrate how the anti-narcissistic imperative underpinning psychoanalytic structuralism can never fully be accomplished, and will only ever lead to an exchange economy of endless debt to a law that demands its own reflection.

Chapter 5

I'll Be Your Mirror Phase, or, The Imaginary Order

5.1 From Freud to Lack

If the insistence that mirroring dyadic formations must be interrupted by a third term in order to bring them into a system of social exchange was subliminal in Rousseau, cryptic in Hegel, and teleological in Freud, in the work of Jacques Lacan, it will be literal. Lacan based his psychoanalytic theory upon Freud, reorganizing Freud's theories by "structuralizing" them, or interpreting them largely through Saussurian linguistic analysis (Johnston, 2013; Grosz, 1990, 67). In this chapter, I hope to show how the move from self-pleasure and mirroring to externality, difference, exchange and delayed gratification is articulated in Lacan's work as the developmental structure of psychic subjectivity and endless debt. To do this, I will offer an extended exegesis on Lacanian psychoanalytic structure in order to demonstrate how Lacanian theory reiterates the anti-narcissistic structures I have been tracing in this thesis, and makes visible a crucial element within this structure: the eclipse of the subject's experience of immediate pleasure, but the disavowal of the subject's prerogative to interpret the nature of that pleasure lost. I will read Lacan mainly through Elizabeth Grosz and Alphonso Lingis, and combine this reading with Butler's analysis of Lacan in *Gender Trouble*. I will then add my own analysis concerning equality, debt, and the sacrifice of immediate pleasure in the form of reflection as an effect of a Western, structuralist imperative.

As I have previously shown, Freud posited a primary narcissism that is displaced by heterosexual identification/cathexis; a model-identification with the father and a sexual-cathexis with the mother. These "two psychologically distinct ties" come into conflict in the Oedipal

crisis as a “consequence of the irresistible advance toward unification of mental life” (Freud [1921] 1959, 46). Within the Oedipal crisis, the male child fears castration from the father who now represents a threat to his cathexis with the mother. Out of fear of castration, the boy exchanges his immediately gratifying cathexis with the mother for a delayed, exogamous gratification with another female at some point in the future (Freud [1921] 1959; Grosz, 1990; Schneider, 2005; Rubin, 1975; Butler, 1990). That is, if all goes according to plan. Lacan will build upon this Freudian framework, but he will adjust this series of events to his postulation of the three orders of existence: the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic (Grosz, 1990, 59).

Lacan first posits the Real, a primal *jouissance* (pleasure)⁴² prior to language, a kind of ontogenic unity that will come to be indefinitely displaced and obscured by language. Lacan characterizes *jouissance* as a “pure plentitude,” also figured as “the lack of lack” (ibid., 34). An absolute pleasure, in and of itself. The order of the Real is attended by the expression of “need”, or that state which is “close to natural, base survival” (ibid., 59). It is a state when need and satisfaction are synchronistically linked. The utterance of “need” is the “inarticulate cry” of the newborn whose needs are at first satisfied by the excitement of surface contact and fluids pleasure (ibid., 60; also Lingis, 1989, 157).

Is this *jouissance* the self-satisfied pleasure of the primary narcissism Freud postulates in *On Narcissism*? It would seem so in that *jouissance*, in Lacan’s model, precedes libidinal object cathexis as did Freud’s first accounts of primary narcissism. Yet, as we shall see, Lacan does not account for a primary libido-cathexis of the ego in his concept of *jouissance*. Perhaps Freud in later writings cleared up this distinction. Or perhaps Lacan is here performing a clean-up on Freud’s logic. Either way, for Lacan, *jouissance*, as a “lack of lack” prior to ego formation, is in some sense absolute experience, surface and fluids (Lingis, 1989, 157).

⁴² For the use of “pleasure” as an appropriate translation of “*jouissance*,” see Johnston (2013).

This *jouissance* is interrupted by the beginning of the introduction of language in what Lacan coined as *the mirror phase*. The mirror phase is modeled on the object-cathexis of the mother, or, the “pre-oedipal phallic mother” (Grosz, 1990, 63). Lacan teases this maternal object-tie from the matrix of the Oedipal crisis and grants it a transitional function between undifferentiated *jouissance* and individuated subjectivity. And, like Freud’s formulation of the first object-cathexis, the mirror phase coincides with the formation of the ego. For these reasons, we might begin to read the mirror phase as Lacan’s reworking of Freud’s primary narcissism.

The mirror phase is a largely visual event. Initiates the Imaginary, or “the order of identification with images” (ibid., 43), which is attended by the expression of *demand*. Demand is produced through the impingement of absence upon the Real, and will be “the pivotal moment around which the mirror stage revolves” (ibid., 34). The presence of lack, or the loss of *the lack of lack*, initiates a psychic grasp of the child toward language. The child develops the proto-language of demand—“I want...,” or, “Give me...” —in part by developing an awareness of the metonymy between the absent primary object-of-need and the secondary object-of-resource (ibid., 61). Something like milk and toys will come “to function as excuses for the second object, the (m)other” (ibid., 61-62). Thus, the demand of the Imaginary order is understood as insatiable in its character precisely because it is not based on real need, or, rather, the corollary of the need is no longer the object that will fill it. In other words, the move toward linguistic socialization begins with the initiation of a state of imaginary insatiability.

The mirror phase, importantly, is also the event through which a child first develops a visual sense of self. This is accomplished by the projection of the ego onto external surfaces. Or, perhaps, the ego might be said to develop as an effect of the internalization of the visual image

(ibid., 43; Johnston, 2013). Either way, the mirroring surface will be both a literal mirror, and figuratively, the gaze of the mother.

The sense of correlative embodiment that this crucial visual recognition provides, however, coincides with a radical visual disembodiment the moment that a sense of self and other is established. The child “recognizes itself at the moment it loses itself in/as the other” (Grosz, 1990, 41). It is an affirmation of self and other predicated on negation; a death or “a suicide”; a “losing of oneself in the stagnant element of the image” (Lingis, 1989, 160).

The “self” that is produced in the mirror phase is, properly speaking, not a subject. It is a proto-subject because it is merely a mirror image of the other. A reflection. A “Me” that insatiably demands of the other who is my opposite. The self of the mirror phase is self-enslaved to its own imaginary identifications. Even though the mirror phase initiates the process by which the child begins to learn to identify with the signifier of his name, the self of the mirror phase is not yet social (Lingis, 1989, 160). As Grosz puts it, the mirror phase “initiates the child into the categories and terms of discourse, but it does not position the subject in a *stable* enunciative position as a speaker of a discursive ‘I’” (Grosz, 1990, 66) (emphasis mine). The mirror stage brings the infant from the self-sufficiency of *jouissance* into a radical dependence on the unstable world of mirror images in a sort of enslavement to mimesis (ibid., 32).

Yet Lacan’s account of the mirror phase does not rest responsibility for its mirroring enslavements on the child alone. The mother also participates in mirroring, and thus, the mistaking of the self for the other. For Lacan, the relationship between mother and child forms a reflexive dyad in which both subjects are “trapped” in imaginary relations; reflection; both misrecognizing the other for the self (ibid., 46-47). As a mirror opposite of this dyad, each

strives to have the other, [and] ultimately, to *be* the other in a vertiginous spiral from one term [of] identity to the other...Therein lies the limit of imaginary identifications. There is no way out of the vacillation between two positions and the identification of each with the other ('s desire). Each strives to fill the impossible lack in/of the other (ibid., 46-47) (emphasis mine).⁴³

Lacan locates the “phallic (m)other” opposite the child in an unstable, infinite game of mirroring. For Lacan, the relation between the mother and child is “bound up with the narcissistic structure of mutual identifications” (Grosz, 1990, 67). Because each of them provides the other with its identity in a “closed circuit,” the relation between mother and child

“does not provide the conditions for social, linguistic, or economic exchange relations, although it provides some of their pre-conditions. The imaginary is the order of demand and appropriation: *exchange is not possible between two individuals for whom there is no third term*. In order for the dyadic structure to give way to the plurality constituting the symbolic order, *the narcissistic couple must be submitted to symbolic regulation* (ibid., 67).

It is a *folie a deux*; a mutual madness of imaginary appropriation that echoes the state of Hegel's Lord and Bondsman: mutual appropriation of identity is the equivalent of mutual demand and surrender; is the equivalent of mutual enslavement. Both of these are models of *dis*order that fall out of a heteronormative imperative, and—it would appear—a normative imperative of exchange. The dyad is not, properly speaking, a system or a structure on its own. It is a proto-structure that produces only the “proto-social,” the proto-economy and the proto-symbolic. The

⁴³ Lacan may have taken this notion from Freud, who in *On Narcissism* formulated a particular brand of parental love as “a revival and reproduction of their own narcissism, which they have long since abandoned” (1914a] 1986, 33).

Imaginary order, with its demand and its mirrors, will “require” a third term to break the “vertiginous spiral” of the proto-structural dyad. This will “need” to happen so that the Imaginary order can become the Symbolic order; so that demand can become desire; and so that the self and the (m)other will be able to exchange something more than images.

5.2 Enter the Name-of-the-Father

The final part of Freud’s Oedipal phase comes when the boy-child recognizes the authority of the father in the form of castration anxiety. It is the site at which the boy’s identification with his father and his object-cathexis with his mother (showed by Lacan to be a stage on its own) “irresistibly” come into conflict. The boy comes to recognize that his mother is castrated (phallic castration), and that it was the father who castrated her. Fearing his own castration, the boy renounces his mother as a sexual object in exchange for his own penis which takes on a metonymy with the “woman” of his future. The male “has” the phallus, then, and the female “is” the phallus that is preserved by the resolution of the Oedipal crisis. Thus, the boy has exchanged immediate (incestuous and heterosexual) gratification for a phallic “token” he can exchange in the future for a wife (Rubin, 1975); a *Sofy*.⁴⁴

Lacan is responsible for the shift from the “penis” to the “phallus” as the primary reference of psychoanalytic sexual development. Indeed, he is credited more generally with the transition from literal, biologicistic accounts of psycho-sexual formation to a symbolic, structuralist reworking of psychoanalysis as a discrete system of exchange (Rubin, 1975; Johnston, 2013). Thus, Lacan also initiated the push away from the emphasis on the role of the actual father in the castration-Oedipal complex. Instead, Lacan gives the father a functional role as the introduction

⁴⁴ It telling that Rubin characterizes the Freudian/Lacanian account of the Oedipal crisis as “the original social contract,” a conceptualization of patriarchal arrangements that is also interrogated by Carol Pateman (1988).

of the law of exchange, the paternal third term that breaks the reflexivity that has made slaves of the mother and son. He calls this the Name-of-the-Father (Grosz, 1990; Lingis, 1989; Butler, 1990).

The Name-of-the-Father initiates the order of the Symbolic, which is attended by the expression of “desire” (Grosz, 1990, 59). It is the third term that liberates—but at the same time preserves, reorients and stabilizes—the *folie a deux* of the mother-and-child of the mirror phase. With the entrance of the third term, the Symbolic displaces the Imaginary. But this displacement is not necessarily, or ever, permanent. For Lacan, the imaginary will continue to re-emerge throughout an individual’s life, both in pathology and in normal psychological existence (Grosz, 47). Freud seems more apt to label the recurrence of narcissism, or the recurrence of any developmental stage, as disorder or deviation. It seems that for Lacan, more so than Freud, the displacement of primary narcissism by the Symbolic order will in some way anticipate the Symbolic order’s failure to secure an absolute erasure of narcissistic identification.

Nonetheless, it remains the imperative of Lacan’s psychoanalytic structure to intercede between the son-(m)other dyad that apparently “needs” to be broken. To backtrack a step, the move from undifferentiated bliss to false dyadic subjectivity—prefigured in Hegel by the onset of the fear of death—is conceptually important in the way it positions the proto-self of the mirror phase as the unauthorized arbiter of pleasure. The loss of *jouissance* is followed by the mirror phase, which is followed by the Symbolic. Again, the Symbolic never fully eclipses the Imaginary dyad. What the Symbolic law does (or is said to do) is bring that dyad into a stability; a stability that is nonetheless a state of dissymmetry, *not*—at least in theory—slavery. One might equate this with the transition in Rousseau from “tyrant and slave” to “master and subject.” The point of the Symbolic order, then, seems to preserve the mirroring dyad, but, by displacing them

and at the same time holding them in place, breaks the closed circuit and allows the entry of the third term, the Law itself, and thus, symbolization and exchange to take place.

The point I hope I'm making is that Lacan's paternal law does not only foreclose undifferentiated *jouissance*. It also creates and displaces a dyadic, self-reflexive and self-determined recuperation of immediate pleasure. If Lacan's origin narrative of *jouissance* describes a state of pure, absolute pleasure in fullness, then the mirror stage must be read as the individual's self-determined effort to recuperate that pleasure; a pleasure which can only be identified by absolute, unmediated self-reflection. Thus, structural psychoanalysis is both embedded with a heteronormative imperative toward externality and difference, as well as a fundamental normative ideal that prohibits the singular and immediate self-determination of pleasure by characterizing this action as imaginary and impervious to exchange. Thus, the key effect of the Symbolic order is the way it produces, through the intervention of the Name-of-the-Father, a sense of governing self-consciousness that interrupts the immediate pleasure of reflection on pleasure. The Symbolic order casts the self-other dyad under the *flagellum dei* of the Other through a triangulation that commands the self to measure its experience of reality beyond the imaginary limits of dyadic reflection (Grosz, 1990, 80).

Furthermore, the regulatory triangulation of the Name-of-the-Father that moves the subject from immediate, imaginary satisfaction of his demands, to delayed satisfaction in a desire that is purported to be "always the desire of the Other" (Grosz, 80). Thus, if the pleasure-in-demand of primary narcissism is replaced by a delayed, symbolic "desire" that is "always the desire of the Other," we might recognize this as the same reterritorialization of pleasure and reflection that attended the intervention of Hegel's Priest. Recall that there, the Priest instituted a displacement of wills, so that the Unhappy Consciousness (and all other Unhappy Consciousnesses under Christendom) could disavow his own will as the will of Absolute Spirit

and thus find relief from the inevitable self-pleasure of repeated self-debasement. This displacement and disavowal promises eschatological pleasure in the afterlife, producing a condition of debt that cannot be repaid on this earth. The endless repayment of debt will take the form of repetitious attempts to satisfy the desire of the Absolute to be reflected.

With Lacan's account of symbolic desire, we see similarly that the subject's proto-subjective imaginary "demand" is replaced with the desire of the Other, or the desire of the Law. Whatever pleasure one might have found in narcissistic mirroring is now permanently delayed by his subjection to language and the symbolic order, which then places *jouissance* and a self-determined hermeneutics of pleasure forever out of reach. The fully formed subject is consigned to permanent failure before the Law; a failure that is the ironic effect of the Law *qua* desire. This is Lacan's retelling of Freud's theory of recuperative heterosexuality; a recuperation that takes the form of a relentless, performative retracing of the loss of primary narcissism.⁴⁵ But in this sense, because the Law has displaced pleasure as its own, the subject then seeks to satisfy the pleasure of the law, which is never his. The failure at this unending task is, however, partially remunerated by the subject's capacity to speak as a desiring subject.

5.3 Finishing the Law

One might begin to sense a point of criticism that Judith Butler had applied to Hegel's *Unhappy Consciousness*. The repetitive tracing over one's loss of primary narcissism not only reiterates the aesthetic structure of masturbation, but is also logically bound to reinforce self-pleasure although now under the guise of a disavowal of will: "The pleasure I trace is not my own, but the Law's. In tracing and retracing the Law's pleasure, I reflect the Law, not myself."

⁴⁵ For an account of heterosexual intercourse in the "missionary position" as two simultaneous instances of psychic masturbation, see Žižek (2006).

Through a post-structuralist framework, Butler, rightly, sees through the ruse of the Law, in both Hegel and Lacan.⁴⁶ “The construction of the law that guarantees failure,” Butler argues in *Gender Trouble*, “is symptomatic of a slave morality that disavows the very generative powers it uses to construct the ‘Law’ as a permanent impossibility” (1990, 73). It is the disavowal that makes the system problematic. In both Hegel and Lacan, the subject engages in a disavowal of the very generativity of self-denial. The structuralist third term is, in a way, a psychic trick designed to mask the subject’s performative role in producing the law by placing the law forever out of reach. For Butler, this structuralist disavowal ultimately effaces conservative ideologies that might have a tendentious interest in safeguarding the law from change (1990).⁴⁷

Structuralist accounts of subjectivity that are, at heart, anti-narcissistic—an intervention in reflection and the self’s relation to immediate pleasure—perform this inaccessibility by rendering the Law as *that which is reflected*, and subjects as those whom exchange the law between themselves by disavowing their own narcissistic need of self-reflection. It would follow then, that the anti-narcissism that creates social currency and collective indebtedness is only ever, by structural accounts, a reorientation of narcissism. The temporality of the Law is immediate. The law *demand*s to be followed. The Law demands synchronistic recognition. The Law is the discursive manifestation of the demanding need for immediate gratification that subjects deny themselves in order to become social persons. And, as the Law’s reflection, subjects are only in the position to reflect back the Law to itself. It follows, then, that subjects of structuralist Law enter into a narcissistic reorientation to the Law, which is imaginary. The imaginarieness of the Law is disavowed, and social order reigns. A Law that “reflects the will of the people”—a Law of

⁴⁶ It is curious that nowhere does Butler seem to take stock of the mirror phase or its implications in Lacan’s psychoanalytic structuralism. Her treatment of “psychic mimesis” in *Gender Trouble* and elsewhere takes only Freud’s melancholia as a negative model for mimesis. Likewise, in her analysis of Freud, she focuses on melancholia, but not its positive opposite, secondary narcissism.

⁴⁷ Butler specifically singles out the religious overtones of Lacan’s account of Symbolic law.

the “greater good”—can only be imagined through a radical surrender and disavowal of individual reflection.

In the end, the Law fails to eradicate narcissism. First, because the law *is* narcissism by being absolute narcissism. Second, because, as we saw in the previous chapter on Freud, and as we have seen in Hegel, the suppression of the self in the form of anti-narcissism will only ever fail to sublimate narcissistic tendencies, and the enforcement of anti-narcissism by individuals upon each other can only occur through an identification with the narcissistic law *as* the law, an identification that undermines the individual’s enforcement of law itself by placing them in a narcissistic position in relation to the “community of wills” that is united in sublimated equality. Thus, the economy of exchange that structuralist law purports to secure is, from a certain view, an economy of endless debt, which is not a debt at all, but an institutionalization of the very dyadic structure of enslavement that these laws purport to eradicate. Ultimately, the individual’s failure before the law becomes the rule of law, uniting a community of subjects through an unserviceable debt to one another, whom the law passes through. A community under this kind of law appears to be a collective enslavement of wills, circling into the very self-feeling they aim to bypass while effacing their performative role in the foreclosure of dyadic exchange.

Reflections, (In)conclusions

I do it for the joy it brings,

Cuz I'm a joyful girl

Because the world owes me nothing,

We owe each other the world

—Ani DiFranco

6.1 Reflections on the Written

The European panic against masturbation caused unquantifiable amounts of pain. As a master trope of the Enlightenment, the figure of the masturbator—the person turning away from society—was deployed cruelly and widely to incite social order through a psychic and somatic intervention between the self and self-reflection; between the self and the bodily self. The doubly deployed economies of exchange—sex and cash—in the end, served fundamentally conservative and punitive political agendas.

Genealogically speaking, the relationship between masturbation and homosexuality, and the dissymmetrical application of masturbation anxiety toward women, evince the origins of masturbation anxiety as a discursive production of Western phallogocentrism and heteronormativity. Modern masturbation's origin as *onanism* reads—visually and aurally—more as a node, an orificial sexual lacuna, than the largely phallic status it would take on in the twentieth century. Furthermore, even as the originary European panic has, more or less, subsided, we are still left with masturbation's pejorative sign; an epithet that, when slung, appears as an enactment of the law of attention, the imperative of which is to turn one's vision to the external world; to a “greater good.” If there are pain and pleasure, both must be shared and socialized through the institution of sanctions and prohibitions secured by a third term. The anti-narcissism discourse that articulates an excess of pleasure as a reflexive turning away of the individual from externality

and the system of useful exchange is meant, it would seem, to impose a kind of collective utility, a painful usefulness, an exchange-system where everyone is bound, indebted, by a renunciation of selfish pleasure, regardless of whether or not that renunciation can ever fully be achieved. As a law of the renunciation of selfish pleasure, the charge of masturbation is also a law of failure.

It does seem important that the social and psychic accounts of Western subjectivity I have been working with, in Rousseau, Hegel, Freud and Lacan, each revolves so centrally around pleasure. Each seems also to articulate what could be described as an anti-masturbation or anti-narcissistic discourse. These discourses all portray masturbatory subjectivity as a subjectivity that isn't one; as a subjectivity without indebtedness to others; ironically and invariably, as a state of slavery. The price of self-enslavement through masturbation, the pleasure of bodily renunciation or narcissism is figured, in all cases, as social death. Rousseau's *Émile* risked being "lost" to the world due to the irresistibility of his own hand. Hegel's consciousness remained "unhappy" insofar as the renunciation of the body only enslaved the body to an eternity of self-feeling. In Freud, masturbation, in its manual form as well as its metaphoric and clinical pathology—narcissism—was the "limit of love," or libido, the sexual force that was thought to draw all living bodies into collectivity and civilization, however discontent. And for Lacan, the mirror phase, with its immediate "demand" risked "trapping" the subject in a kind of madhouse of mirrors; imaginary and mistaken identities that were not thought to be assimilable into the Symbolic order of the speaking "I."

All of these narratives posit this state of masturbatory reflectivity as primary, necessary, but, ultimately, sacrificial. As self-enslaved dyads, each of them requires the arrival of a third term—a Law—in order to produce *social* order, a triangulated structure *qua* a system of exchange. The law mediates the reflective subject so that it might open up his reflections and condition them, thus, socializing his pleasure. Once displaced from his reflection, the subject can now

enter a system of exchange which places him among a community of “equals” whose reflections have also been displaced and exchanged for difference, for heterosexuality and a position from which to speak—in short: for social currency. This equalized “community of wills,”—or *society*—is bound together in two directions: to each other in their identification with the Law as ideality; and to the Law itself which has reterritorialized the prerogative of pleasure in immediate gratification—the prerogative of demand. This double-bound society fails forward, unable ever to repay its debts, but needing to sustain debt as a presupposition of equality and political hegemony. A debt that guarantees return in the mint of social currency that subjectivity forges. The entire structural apparatus that is mobilized upon and around the interdiction of reflection and synchronistic pleasure only comes to reproduce it, displace it and institutionalize it as the Law-out-of-reach. In the end, there is no escape from the immediacy of the self from which the imperative of exchange promises to free us.

6.2 Reflections on Pleasure

Reflection and the immediacy of pleasure appear to be coterminous in the problem of masturbatory subjectivity. Reflection occurs at light-speed. There is no delay; no gap in which judgment can be inserted. This makes masturbation appear, like paper money and fictional credit, impervious to regulation. The pleasure in masturbation seems limitless in its absoluteness of presence and its supposedly closed circuit. All the more, the accounts of subjectivity I have been tracing and retracing each convey a high valuation of the pleasure reflection presents for the individual who is enslaved by it. Even if masturbation and narcissism are a kind of self-enslavement that is cut off from the external world (and by extension, *dead to it*), Rousseau, Hegel, Freud and Lacan all seem to support the notion that reflection provides something that feels good; maybe *seems* good, but is, in the end, too good to be true.

But what is this unbearable pleasure of seeing ourselves reflected in an image? Is it, in fact, unbearable? And furthermore, can the proposition of unmediated reflection not, in fact, be considered useful? The subjectivities I have here taken into account do, indeed, make use of masturbation subjectivity if only to install it as a necessary, constitutive exclusion, foreclosing masturbation's autopoietic potential. Can masturbation, figured as the taking of pleasure in oneself at risk of loss of contact with the external world—or a falling out of the economy of exchange—be thought productive prior to its sacrifice? And why would masturbation and exchange necessarily be mutually exclusive?

In *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (2003), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick theorizes a performativity of shame, a rumination which inevitably draws her attention to reading and writing. The prose in which Sedgwick writes her subject is so rich that the descriptive adjectives that immediately come to mind—"thoughtful," "meditative," "introspective"—produce a chain of tautological references. The work, here, is the work a mirror does. The work reflects. That the subject of "shame" should occupy the attention of a writer so deeply "in love" with reading and writing already brings her work into a relationship with masturbation (Hu, 2013). Indeed, the sense of "shame" was a hinge upon which the hammer of masturbation anxiety repeatedly swung. In *Touching Feeling*, Sedgwick performs a reparative recasting of shame as not only *not* necessarily shameful, but as a productive, performative exchange with the outside world.

Sedgwick situates shame in the field of psychology, turning to the work of Silvan Tompkins whose theory of affect Sedgwick develops and rethinks (rewrites?). It turns out, rather propitiously, that psychologists who theorize shame affect locate the development of shame within the timeframe of the mirror phase (2003, 36). If Sedgwick is correct, and shame, figured as the physical gesture of "eyes down, head averted," is induced in the child by an epistemic break in the "circuit of mirroring expressions" that are exchanged between him and his mother,

then it would appear that the shame that attends the epistemic break in mirroring finds analogy with masturbation anxiety; although now inverted. If we apply the figuration of shame in affect theory to the shame of masturbation, it would be necessary to say that, instead of arising from the shame of *being seen*, masturbation anxiety would have to be figured as an affective response to *not being seen*. I'll repeat myself—masturbation anxiety, and the cry it produces in the form of the anti-masturbatory demand “Stop looking at yourself!”, effaces the demand at its core—“Look at me!”

Two things resonate here. First, that the anxiety that shame embodies is quite literally a fear of visibility—a fear of being lost to the vision of the world. This would explain the prospect of “social death” that abides masturbation panic. Secondly, if the interruption of reflection manifests shame, then structuralist subjectivity is unavoidably a subjectivity of shame; a subjectivity that demands reflection, but that, through an anxious shame, disavows this need by transforming it into a demand that others not be seen as well. Sedgwick paraphrases Tomkins:

...shame effaces itself; shame points and projects; shame turns itself skin side out; shame and pride, shame and dignity, shame and self-display, shame and exhibitionism are different interlinings of the same glove. Shame, it might finally be said, transformational shame, *is performance*...Shame is the affect that mantles the threshold between introversion and extroversion, between absorption and theatricality, between performativity and—performativity (ibid., 38).

Lacan's “need” of the mirror phase to be broken might be read, now, as a performative demand that the other not be seen which effaces the need to be seen at the heart of anti-narcissism and masturbation panic.

Perhaps the accusation of masturbation is only the negative, paranoid resolution of shame. But shame need not be productive only in a negative sense. Indeed, this is the argument underlying Sedgwick's work on performative shame, or "queer performativity," which Sedgwick defines as "a strategy for the production of meaning and being, in relation to the affect shame and to the later and related affect of stigma" (ibid., 61). In the first chapter of *Touching Feeling*, Sedgwick takes Henry James as her case example. She writes on Henry James's late writing on his early writings in the form of a series of prefaces to a reprint of his collected works. Sedgwick characterizes James's autocriticism—lustly reflections of an older James on a much younger version of himself—as "pederastic" and "pedagogical," or "pederastic/pedagogical" (ibid., 44). But we might just as well imagine this dual relation as masturbatory; an engaged feeling of the self, a reflection, tactile and self-knowing that turns out (writing) as it turns in (reflection). The very productivity of autobiography in general would, in this analysis, be a performance that communicates in the very moment of its shame; an introversion that is extraordinarily extroverted. A narcissism free to course over any one of the figurations Freud schematizes as secondary narcissistic attachment of the subject to "(a) what he himself is (i.e. himself), (b) what he himself was, (c) what he himself would like to be, (d) someone who was once part of himself" ([1914] 1986, 33). A reflection open to exchange.

While Sedgwick renders James's self-relation via the intersubjective or socially sexual model of "pederasty," in "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl" (1991), written prior to the publication of *Touching Feeling*, Sedgwick theorizes how modernity's "masturbator" might have served as a model for the novelistic sexuality in Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. Noting that the "lesbian" would not have been an identity available to Austen as a template of sexual characterization, Sedgwick reflects on the masturbation hysteria that was gripping the Austen's England. Sedgwick tentatively "suggests" that as "one of the very earliest embodiments of 'sexual identity' in the period of the progressive epistemological overloading of sexuality," the

figure of the masturbator might indeed be the very template for normalizing hetero and homo-sexualities (1991, 862).⁴⁸ It is interesting that Sedgwick does not follow up on this prescient idea in her treatment of Henry James. After all, James did come of age during the second century of masturbation panic which, from its conception had been fanned by the flames of the printed word.

I would like to taxonomize Rousseau, here, as a queer performer insofar as his work can be read as *a strategy for the production of meaning and being, in relation to the affect shame and to the later and related affect of stigma*.⁴⁹ As a writer, the autodidactic Rousseau is exemplary for his dual stroke of self-referentiality and self-effacing shame (See, again, Marshall). The breadth of voice, the sheer voluminosity (read: excess) of writing and, particularly in *Confessions*, the constant taking of his own pleasure attended by gracious bows and apologies from the author, not to mention his anxiety about vanity, marks out Rousseau's oeuvre as the product of a masturbatory practice. As the subject of the confession, Rousseau is caught in the eye of the reader, "continually present in his gaze" ([1789?] 2000, 58), as he *repeats himself* (ibid., 111); as he recounts the pleasure he took in reading Plutarch, "reading and re-reading him" (ibid., 8); as he recounts the process of writing as "writing and re-writing" (ibid., 111), the making of palimpsests; or when he accounts for his shame of spending money, confessing, "I spend in secret" (ibid., 37). If Rousseau's love for absorbing books led him to "become the person whose life I was reading" (ibid., 9), perhaps in confession Rousseau's self-becoming through writing himself, over and over, is equally an act of love. A love that comes from being seen being.

⁴⁹ Note: This is a restatement of the previously cited quotation of Sedgwick.

Sedgwick brings the act of reading into purview with a chapter subtitled “Reading Silvan Tompkins” (Sedgwick, 2003), where she situates Tompkins’s work alongside that of Freud. Near the close of this chapter, Sedgwick lets the trail of her ideas wander along the familiar figure of shame. She suggests that if “the lowering of the eyelids, the lowering of the eyes, the hanging of the head is the attitude of shame, it may also be that of reading” (2003, 114). Sedgwick argues for a performative reading of reading, of being lost to the world in being lost in one’s self, and she turns to Freud’s slight quip in *On Narcissism* that seeing children caught up in their own imagination (a sign of primary narcissism) is, in fact, pleasant to watch (2003, 115). As performance, the self-encurled posture of reading, then, reads “as extroversion at least as much as introversion” (ibid.). And it might bring pleasure, after all, to witness another’s performative self-pleasuring.

Sedgwick’s cautious, slightly awry and consciously self-indulgent approach to writing about reading (and to writing about writing, and also to writing about reading about writing, *ad infinitum*) elaborates the recursion imminent in the folding and unfolding of text. And nowhere does she make the claim that either reading or writing need be interrupted by a third term in order to participate in exchange. For Sedgwick, writing and reading are acts of irrefutable exchange. Each is productive, and, insofar as they register a strategy of meaning-making in which shame and stigma inhere, reading and writing are performatively queer.

In working with Sedgwick to achieve a productive reading of masturbation and self-reflection, I do not, however, mean to argue that structural exchange, with its intervening if imaginary law, is therefore *not ever* productive. The law simply seems to make a certain kind of exchange possible, and it would seem easy to imagine the possible merits of the input of a

conditioning third party. One thinks immediately of “peer review” as a structural intervention between the publisher and the writer.

Likewise, I am not always opposed to the accusation of “masturbation.” I have used it, I think, appropriately, on occasion (on other occasions, maybe less appropriately). There are moments, for instance, when an other on whom one’s life is, for a significant moment, irreducibly dependent, where lack of being seen *as other* by the other might indeed take the form of a threat to survival. Other times might be far more trivial but ethically poignant—for instance, I was at a music concert not too long ago when the lead singer of the band turned his back to the audience and faced his band and remained this way for a good portion of the evening. The only word I could muster to express my annoyance was “masturbation.” Even though I hadn’t paid to get in, I still felt entitled to recognition.

To return to the concerns that issued in this thesis, the charge of “masturbation” becomes critically important to interrogate when it comes to recurrently inhabit our approach to a specific thought, reflection, aesthetic or political project, or even entire ways of thinking about the word. Of particular scrutiny should be anywhere this charge seems to accumulate or pattern.

To wit, there would seem to be a bright future for an analysis of the prevalence with which certain New Materialist thinkers discharge accusatory masturbation or its significant relatives to critique the linguistic hard-line of a certain brand of post-structuralist thought. Karen Barad (2003), summarizes this tendency rather succinctly. After announcing that “Language has been granted too much power.”, a bell gong if there ever was one, Barad throws her cards on the table:

...social constructivist approaches [to the subject of matter] get caught up in the geometrical optics of reflection where, much like the infinite play of images between two facing mirrors, the epistemological gets bounced back and forth, but nothing more is seen (2003, 802-803).

Barad's evocation of narcissistic entrapment in language is supplemented by other New Materialists who pepper their critiques of post-structuralism with phrases like "strange" (Kirby, 2008) "smug self-enclosure" (Latour, 1999 in Kirby, 2008) and, not to miss an opportunity to evoke the maturity imperative of the Enlightenment that unleashed the panic of masturbation, "bedtime stories" (Shaviro, 1997 in Barad, 200).

These attitudes would not be as meaningful, nor probably carry as much force, if they were not also accompanied by a deferential appeal to the Universe as a sort of all-encompassing absolute sum total of materiality. The Universe, or the material that makes up the universe in New Materialist accounts of matter, is often evoked as a sort of "greater good," a third term that will mediate self-referential, post-structuralist navel-gazing. The religious overtones are not even always subtle (see the last page of Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*, 2010), nor am I saying they necessarily should be. But in a perhaps justifiable effort to take human anthropocentrism down a peg, these discourses evince a pattern of reconstructing a structuralist reterritorialization of reflection as the prerogative of a universe, or of a "nature" that "reads, writes," and "articulates *itself*" (Kirby, 2008) (emphasis in the original). A universe that reads and writes itself is a universe that reflects itself, an absolute universe. This is hardly different than Hegel's (or many others') representation of the divine Absolute, or God, as the soul reflector, *and* the sole reflector. There is nothing wrong with making a claim like this, but the concomitant pattern of critiquing post-structuralists for doing the same thing—reflecting—falls into the anxiety camp of masturbation panic. Maybe this is a temper that can be consoled. The fascinating work by New Materialist

theorists on the *nature of nature*—work that seems quite often commensurate with post-structural and queer theories⁵⁰—would benefit from acknowledging its embeddedness in anti-narcissistic discourses that appeal to a supernatural third term as that which possesses the prerogative of reflection, thus rendering us, we human individuals, as mere tokens of exchange through which the power of that Law moves.

6.3 Reflections Upon Reflections

I have nothing against the Law. Or maybe I do. Maybe I have an interest *in* the Law; an interest that might be described as *self*-interest. Indeed, there lies productivity in a third term. As a witness, a referee, someone to break a tie. Dyads can be enriched by intervention; and perhaps we can imagine intervention without imagining a break in dyadic structure. As readers and writers of ourselves, we learn by being simultaneously reflective but open to hacking, incorporation and updating.⁵¹ The third term is useful. But it need not be “The” third term. It need not, and more likely isn’t, singular, absolute or permanent. Whatever it is, it will be performative. The social world might even be imagined as an infinite interplay of triangulations. Any two points can be triangulated by a third point, a rule between them; but then that rule is also in relation to two points that each, on their own, might act as a law between the other two. Every point is a mirror and a law. In fact, maybe all there are are infinite superimpositions of dyads and triangles. And even then, maybe there is no difference.

⁵⁰ See Timothy Morton (2010), “Queer Ecology.”

⁵¹ Regarding “hacking,” a debt is issued to Eszter Timár for introducing, to me, the biological use of this term.

A final question might be: Are we ever are *not* masturbating? If that is the case, then we need not talk of giving up masturbation, anymore than we need talk about giving up narcissism. To translate Derrida's words on narcissism to its embodiment in self-touching: *There are little masturbations, there are big masturbations, and there is death in the end, which is the limit.* Although Derrida reminds us that, "Even in the experience—if there is one—of death, narcissism," or masturbation, "does not absolutely abdicate its power" (1986). If structural subjectivity draws a line on which one side exists *life and love*, and on the other, *death and narcissism*, perhaps by retracing the movement of law—in that sense, being the law⁵²—we can draw narcissism and death onto the same side as love. We can draw masturbation onto the same side as life.⁵³

⁵² See Derrida (2005): "Deconstruction is the law."

⁵³ A debt to Zach Rivers for this phrasing. See Rivers, "Subjectivity Without Return: Reparatively Weaving Self(s) and Other(s) on the Same Side" (2012).

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