Sacher-Masoch, Péladan and
fin-de-siècle France

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Abstract

Compared to the many enthusiastic discussions of the influence of de Sade and sadism on late nineteenth-century French literature, there has been a significant absence of critiques of the role of masochism. This lack of criticism is observable despite the fact that Sacher-Masoch, who lived in the very midst of the era and enjoyed immense popularity, had a close affinity with the literary themes of the time. This article compares Sacher-Masoch’s works to the works of his French contemporary, Joséphin Péladan, highlighting some key motifs similarly present in their fictions; the conceptualisation of conflicting relationships between men and women as a fundamental human problem, the Platonic relationship based on the fetishistic desire and fear experienced and exhibited by male characters for dominant females, the debased image of patriarchal power and hope for the rise of a superior androgynous man. A brief account of the great appeal of Sacher-Masoch’s work for fin-de-siècle France is included.

1. Imbalance between sadism and masochism

In the 1930s, Mario Praz cut his teeth by praising the immense influence of the Marquis de Sade on late nineteenth to early twentieth century literature. At the time, Adolf Hitler was rising to power in Europe, Mao Zedong’s domination of the early Chinese nation was expanding over the land, and India was still ruled from London. The world has moved on. Yet the criticism of fin-de-siècle literature seems to remain mired in the past.

This article aims to contribute to repairing the imbalance between sadism and masochism long established in the critique of late 19th century
literature, by examining masochistic aspects which can be found in the occultist works of a French artist from the epoch, Joséphin Péladan (1858-1918). It begins by recalling that Leopold von Sacher-Masoch (1836-1895) and his literary work were highly received and popular in France at the turn of the century. A particular focus of this essay is on the masochistic theme of rebirth, named by Deleuze ‘parthenogenesis’, which is then compared to Péladan’s occultist theme of rebirth, i.e., ‘palingenesis (spiritual regeneration)’.

Praz wrote, ‘with Flaubert we have entered the dominion of the Fatal Woman, and sadism appears under the passive aspect which is usually called masochism (as though the active and passive aspects were not usually both present in sadism, and a mere change of proportions really justified a change of name)’.¹ Praz’s comment in parentheses demonstrates his conviction that masochism is a secondary aspect of sadism, as well as his astonishing lack of interest in Sacher-Masoch’s distinctive literary characteristics. Praz’s prejudice was passed on to subsequent critics of Western literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (commonly known as the period of Decadence or fin-de-siècle).² A. E. Carter used the terms ‘sadism’, ‘sado-masochism’ or ‘masochism’ to indiscriminately imply any kind of cruelty or unconventional form of eroticism described either in de Sade’s texts or Decadent texts.³ Koenraad W. Swart meanwhile associated the pessimism proper to Decadence with sadism to suggest that sadism was the process of turning anguish into delight in suffering.⁴ Jean Pierrot characterised Decadent literature as a dream narrative and explained its peculiar fixation with perversion as sadistic, due particularly to its representations of cruel women, the femmes fatales: the simple reiteration of Praz’s thesis.⁵

Since Gilles Deleuze’s Présentation de Sacher-Masoch (1967) claimed the specific characteristics of Sacher-Masoch’s work to be alien to de Sade’s, there has been a gradual and positive shift in the critiques of late 19th century literature. One of the most explicit moves towards greater equality between masochism and sadism was made by Jennifer Birkett, who writes, ‘the complexity of the Sadean tradition is much reduced by the decadents, in search of vivid images of the pleasure of pain, suffering and self-denial. Sacher-Masoch, at least as much as de Sade, is the representative figure of Decadent sensibility’.⁶ The fantastic aspect of Decadent literature does not
correspond to Sade’s word of impassive rationalism so much as to Sacher-Masoch’s dream narrative, as described by Deleuze: ‘The aesthetic and dramatic suspense found in Sacher-Masoch conflicts with the mechanical and accumulating reiteration found in Sade’. Likewise, the obsessive anxiety that proliferates in Decadent literature should not be confused with the apathetic world of Sade, to which ‘emotions such as shame, remorse or the desire for punishment are quite unknown’. So Charles Bernheimer, who appreciates Deleuze’s analysis of Sacher-Masoch, discusses Decadent texts by Mirbeau, Huysmans, Lorrain and Wilde as masochistic spectacles of castrated male subjectivity. Furthermore, the Decadent *femme fatale* is not a simplistic blood-thirsty sadist, but, as Rita Felski points out, ‘an unblemished icon (a fetish)’, reflecting the feminised male artists’ fear and desire.

2. Sacher-Masoch as an honourable member of the French literary circle

Although Sacher-Masoch is largely forgotten or even by some today despised, his literary reputation was once global, particularly so in France, the cultural centre of the late 19th century. The height of Sacher-Masoch’s fame can be measured by Krafft-Ebing’s hesitation about bringing Sacher-Masoch’s name into the pathological domain. It is well known that he coined the term ‘masochism’ from the name of Sacher-Masoch. But it should be noted that, contrary to general misunderstanding, the term ‘masochism’ first appeared only in the 1890 edition of *Neue Forschungen auf dem Gebiet der Psychopathia sexualis: Eine medicinisch-psychologische Studie*, and not in the first edition of *Psychopathia Sexualis* of 1886 as is commonly thought. By the time Krafft-Ebing referred to Sacher-Masoch as the source of his coining of ‘masochism’, Sacher-Masoch’s fame had diminished, in Germany more than elsewhere, for a number of reasons: principally because of Sacher-Masoch’s criticism of Bismarck, his sympathy for the Jews and the Slavs, his Francophilia and the increasing public awareness of Sacher-Masoch’s obsession with domineering women and submissive men. In contrast, in France, his fame remained at the forefront of the literary world for exactly these reasons, and the translation into French of *Psychopathia sexualis* did not appear until the year of his death (1895). In this French translation, Krafft-
Ebing’s references to Sacher-Masoch remained discreet. The link between the term ‘masochism’ and the name Sacher-Masoch was merely suggested in a footnote: ‘So named after Sacher-Masoch, whose novels and tales are by preference concerned with this type of perversion’. And only a few other references to Sacher-Masoch’s infamous masochistic novel, *Venus in Furs*, were subsequently scattered in case-histories or footnotes.

Much later, in 1931, the second French translation was published and the French public finally became aware of Krafft-Ebing’s analysis of Sacher-Masoch’s life and work as the model case for masochism. Krafft-Ebing confessed to having had reservations about bringing up Sacher-Masoch’s name, and indicated that he had obtained information about Sacher-Masoch’s pathological sexuality long before his death: ‘When Sacher-Masoch was still alive, the full details of Sacher-Masoch’s perversion were made known to me but kept strictly confidential, and were never published’. Further, according to the English translation (1947), Krafft-Ebing still apologetically justified his action in defence of Sacher-Masoch’s honour: ‘As a man Sacher-Masoch cannot lose anything in the estimation of his cultured fellow-beings simply because he was afflicted with an anomaly of his sexual feelings’.

Sacher-Masoch was introduced to the French people as ‘one of the leading artists of the modern Realist school’. He was also described as ‘the leader of the Naturalist school in Germany’. His reputation had thus been firmly established in France since 1872, when the first French translation of his short story ‘Don Juan de Kolomyia [Don Juan of Kolomyia]’ appeared in the *Revue des deux mondes* (1 Oct 1872). By 1892, various journals, such as the *Revue des deux mondes, Revue bleue,* and *Le Gaulois,* had begun regularly to translate his texts into French. Work ranging from fiction to memoirs was immediately collated, printed, and reprinted, in book form. In 1883, he was awarded the *Légion d’honneur.* In 1886, when he travelled to Paris for the first time, the front page of *Le Figaro* (19 Dec) gave an enthusiastic welcome to ‘the virtuous poet who has always devoted his talent to the service of beauty and truth’.

The January 1883 volume of the international journal *Auf der Höhe,* edited by Sacher-Masoch, shows that an incredible number of famous French intellectuals and artists sent him personal messages or telegrams.
to celebrate his 25-year literary career. Included in these messages and
telegrams were pieces from the most celebrated Positivists, Naturalists and
Realists, such as Hippolyte Taine, Ernest Renan, Jules Simon, Alphonse
Daudet, Edmond de Goncourt, Guy de Maupassant and Emile Zola. Their
applause came from the recognition that Sacher-Masoch’s work, just like
their own, probed into the problems of contemporary society, in the name
of truth and progress. Thus Jules Simon praised Sacher-Masoch as, in his
view, his talent was ‘the blessed tool of all forms of progress’. Zola went on
to predict the lasting honour of his name: ‘If one is a genius and tells his
time the truth, immortality will reign’. Renan stressed that Sacher-Masoch’s
periodicals were important because they presented truth and goodness so
as to ‘contribute to the most important tasks of our age’. The great master
of Romanticism, Victor Hugo, plainly extolled his artistic merit: ‘My
congratulations on the jubilee, my blessings to the poet!’

It is not certain whether Péladan was one of such Sacher-Masoch’s
contemporary admirers. Yet he certainly knew Sacher-Masoch because he
invited Sacher-Masoch among other prominent literary figures from France
and other Western Europe to one of his Wagnerian theatre productions
entitled Babylone, whose premiere was given at the Théâtre de l’Ambigu-
Comique in Paris on 21 May 1894. Unfortunately, Sacher-Masoch never
made an appearance due to his deteriorating health – he died in the
following year. Moreover, it can be argued that Péladan actually referred
to Sacher-Masoch’s incomplete saga entitled, The Legacy of Cain, in the 11th
volume of his own completed saga in 21 volumes, La Décadence latine [The
Death of Empire]: he writes the name ‘Cain’ in the following line ‘le legs
de Kaïn, rut et meurtre [the legacy of Cain, lust and murder]’ with a ‘K’–
‘Kaïn’– as in German.

What is of more concern in this essay is, however, the literary affinity
between Sacher-Masoch’s works and those of a French fin-de-siècle author,
Péladan, in terms of the theme of rebirth of a superior man by means of
suffering. The term attached to this theme is different; ‘parthenogenesis’,
given by Deleuze to Sacher-Masoch’s imagination, and ‘palingenesis’, which
comes from occultist tradition and was upheld by Péladan as his doctrine.
Yet I argue that they express a similar idea regarding male identity and use
pain and suffering to achieve it. Indeed, Péladan’s favourite scenarios usually
contain domineering women who enjoy inflicting torture and humiliation on artistic and intellectual heroes. The conflicting image between aggressive women and passive men cannot be reduced to a simple master-slave diagram, nor can the domineering heroines simply be called female sadists; this is better understood in the light of Sacher-Masoch’s ‘masochistic’ texts.

3. Sacher-Masoch’s ‘de-sexualising’ love and ‘sexualising’ human history

Sacher-Masoch’s realism mainly lay in his sympathetic depictions of the oppressed minorities – the Jews or the Slavs – at the time of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which was the primary source of Sacher-Masoch’s appeal for the French intellectuals. So Henry de Rochefort praised Sacher-Masoch, ‘The primary obligation of him who strives for the freedom of others is to renounce himself for others’. The epithet ‘Turgenev of Little Russia’ was another compliment paid to Sacher-Masoch at the time. The strength of Sacher-Masoch, found in both his realistic and idealistic depictions of the Jewish people, is appreciated even today; as Adam J. Freudenheim says, ‘his Jewish figures emerge as true-to-life, if somewhat idealized, people’. Ironically, Turgenev himself disliked the critics’ comparison of his own works with those of Sacher-Masoch, not being pleased even by Sacher-Masoch’s admiration for him. He scoffed at Sacher-Masoch’s taste for imperial ladies, declaring that ‘this monster [Sacher-Masoch]... boasts about himself: “[my heroines are] [at] the very least, baronesses!” ... this is truly just too much!’ Indeed, long before the publication of the first French translation of the notorious masochistic tale, Venus in Furs, in 1902, it had been already recognised that his heroine was always ‘the same imperious and triumphant Delilah, golden-haired vampire who drains the blood from the heart and holds beneath her foot a man disarmed by the power of her kiss’.

Deleuze formulates the idea that there is a double intention at work in Sacher-Masoch’s imagination, ‘at the same time to “de-sexualise” love, and to sexualise all the history of humanity’. To ‘sexualise’ human history implies that Sacher-Masoch’s realism is a pretext for reducing history to the personal level of a series of exchanges in which the woman is dominant, while his ‘desexualised’ love relates to his negation of sex and marriage and
his appreciation of fetishised female beauty and woman’s dominance.

For instance, Sacher-Masoch’s first scholarly book as a historian deals with the figure of Charles V. Yet a critic observes that the academic argument in the work is often hindered by Sacher-Masoch’s self-indulgence in dwelling on the cruelty of Charles V’s sister, Maria of Austria.\(^{29}\) When Sacher-Masoch wrote a novel on the famous amity between the 18\(^{\text{th}}\) century scholar and Catherine II of Russia, *Diderot à Saint- Pétersbourg [Diderot at St Petersburg]*, his aim was to portray Diderot as a masochistic character.\(^{30}\) In the novel, he is depicted as a fool who, infatuated with the despotic beauty of Catherine, disguises himself as a monkey just to please her, thus risking his life under the whip and knife of his rival, a Russian scientist who attempts to kill this monkey to stuff the skin. The historical contexts of oppression, violence and tyranny are used to justify Sacher-Masoch’s masochistic glorification of suffering, sacrifice and pleasure at the behest of powerful female figures.

While ‘sexualising’ history, Sacher-Masoch ‘de-sexualises’ love. His masochism consists in the fetishistic worship of female beauty and the fear of and disgust with sexual intercourse, in marriage in particular. The Platonist hero Henryk in *l’Amour de Platon [The Love of Plato]* says, ‘A pretty girl is for me a work of art, like a painting, which one should not touch or even approach’.\(^{31}\) A countess, Nadeshda, disguises herself as an androgyne in order to embody his Platonic dream of love. But when she begins to want marriage, revealing herself as a woman, he abandons her, saying, ‘You have stolen my ideal’.\(^{32}\)

Similarly, in *Venus in Furs* the revelation of Wanda’s sexual desire creates a rupture between herself and Séverin. Séverin’s masochism is based on his worship of Wanda as an idol – *Venus in Furs* – and he therefore becomes ‘her priest and her slave’.\(^{33}\) Yet, when Wanda wants to stop being his cold idol, desiring to become just a wife, Séverin accuses her of being, ‘on the point of becoming vulgar’.\(^{34}\) Séverin’s masochistic attitude is presented as a form of love which is opposed to the banality and vulgarity of sex and marriage.

According to Deleuze, the masochist’s anxiety and revulsion over procreation and appreciation of fetishism arise from his desire to humiliate the symbolic father, who signifies the virile power of control and the
oppressive law of the real world and who is responsible for endowing the masochist with a sense of guilt for resembling the father. Contesting Freud’s idea in ‘A Child is Being Beaten’ that the father disguises himself as a cruel woman in order to punish a masochist (the child) and that this imagining causes a sense of guilt, Deleuze maintains, ‘It is not “a child”, but a father who is beaten’. He explains that the masochist adopts an effeminate and passive pose not in order to degrade himself, but rather in a secret attempt to emasculate the image of the father and humiliate his symbolic possession of male domination and aggressive humanity in society.

The humiliated image of the father is certainly one of the characteristics of Sacher-Masoch’s imagination. In his works, fathers are often neglected, but when portrayed they appear as old, powerless and humiliated characters. ‘Don Juan of Kolomea’, for example, is the short story of a man known as a playboy Don Juan, whose problem is in fact his sad status as a neglected husband and father in his family. In Les Prussiens d’aujourd’hui [Prussians of our Time], a journalistic portrait of contemporary German society filled with masochists and femmes fatales, Sacher-Masoch presents Count Riva in the image of a humiliated father, referred to as ‘an old madman’, who embodies the decaying glory of patriarchal authority. Likewise, Séverin’s father in Venus in Furs is referred to as ‘old and sick’ and is soon reported to have died.

Deleuze contends that the sadism of the father is ‘neutralised’ in this manner, but it is simultaneously assimilated into the ostensible authority of the fetishised female and her punishment of the father. Just like a symbolic phallus conferred upon a woman by a fetishist, the furs and whip adorning the dominatrix are symbols of power, abdicated by a masochist. Deleuze labels this fetish-dominatrix in masochism as ‘the oral mother, the mother of steppes, and the great childminder and bringer of death’. As a reflection of contemporary prejudice, which portrayed women as driven by animalistic desires, the masochist imagines that his female partner symbolises the maternal implacability of natural forces. At the same time, however, she symbolises the paternal law of society, which lies in her capacity as the phallic mother. In Venus in Furs, the goddess of love thus explains that her fetishised beauty is the source of her cruelty because it controls male desire: ‘I admit that I am cruel ... but have I not the right to be so? The man is the one who
desires, while the woman is the object of desire'. It is interesting that, in Sacher-Masoch’s mind, being an object of desire does not mean passivity but rather power and dominance. Then, in the story, Wanda’s claim that her prestige comes from the education and wealth inherited from her father and her elderly husband, now both dead, further implies that it is the woman who is the rightful heir to the patriarchal heritage.

Moreover, in *La Femme séparée* [The Divorced Woman] (first translated into French in 1881), Sacher-Masoch narrates a clearly masochistic and fetishist story of a married aristocrat, Anna, and an idealistic, submissive writer, Julian. Julian is another masochist, whose ideal woman is ‘a cruel woman, a woman like Catherine II of Russia’. Anna is described as ‘much more dangerous than a vampire’; however, it is Julian who gives Anna all her powers. When she encounters financial difficulties due to her divorce, Julian delights in sacrificing his life and talent to provide her with money, for it pleases him to see her behave as if she were still a capricious, wealthy and imperious woman. His fetishisation of Anna is evident in his worship of her nude form in religious raptures and his dramatisation of her as his ideal despot, ‘Wanda’, in a drama piece that he creates. When their relationship begins to fade, Anna disguises herself as a mysterious rich despot and sets up a stage to enslave and whip Julian, so that she can revive his passion for her.

Deleuze proposes that the function of the oral mother is to facilitate ‘parthenogenesis’: the purpose of rebirth as a sexless man from the mother’s asexual phallus is to give the masochist the pleasure of being reborn. Because this is its purpose, castration is not an obstacle in masochism, contrary to Freudian psychoanalysis; castration is ‘the condition which makes possible an incestuous union with the mother’. This means that the masochist needs the anxiety and sense of guilt symbolised by fear of castration, in order to ultimately attain in his fantasy the forbidden incestuous pleasure of relations with the mother. This reunion with the mother means becoming a totally self-sufficient dream creature – the fetish himself. In Sacher-Masoch’s novels, this dream is suggested by the recurrent figure of a beautiful rival, ‘the Greek’ – a perfect androgyne who is a new man ‘without sexual love’. In *Venus in Furs*, the attraction between Wanda and the Greek is described as a fatal attraction between cognate species, ‘the lioness [Wanda] looks at the lion [the Greek]’. Like identical twins,
Wanda and the Greek become allies to whip the masochist, Séverin. This whipping is represented as the moment of his rebirth as the new man and Séverin is transformed from a masochist into another ‘Greek’.

Before moving on to examine how occultist ideas and masochistic obsession with suffering are closely related in Péladan’s works, it should be added that the theme of the birth of the iconic androgynous man in Sacher-Masoch’s imagination is often expressed in close relation to religious and mystic elements. The masochist invents his own emasculation, that is, his own death as a ‘man’, in order to achieve this ultimate goal of rebirth; Deleuze comments that this is evident in Sacher-Masoch’s adaptation of the images of Cain and Christ. Sacher-Masoch symbolically uses Cain’s murder to express the painful burden of sinful humanity and uses the crucified Christ to signify the virtue of vicarious suffering and resurrection as an asexual icon: ‘The Man on the cross, without sexual love, without property, without relationships, without quarrels, without work.’

According to Deleuze, the figures of Cain and Christ appeal to Sacher-Masoch, who named his grand cycle *The Legacy of Cain*, because of their suffering and their close relationship to their mothers and variance with their fathers. As his mother’s favourite, Cain murdered his brother Abel, who was their father’s favourite. Christ’s crucifixion is shadowed by his mother, the Virgin Mary, who accompanies him through his Passion and Resurrection, her second virgin birth. Men’s suffering and their being crucified are highlights in *La Pêcheuse d’âmes* [*The Woman who Fished for Souls*]. Its domineering heroine Dragomira, who belongs to an extremely purist and violent sect, murders men on a cross to purify their souls from terrestrial suffering, under the pretext that they are penitents. The expression of homicidal desire, acts and fear in the story is excused in the name of religion. Sacher-Masoch reiterates a similar use of religion as a means of violence in *La Mère de Dieu* [*The Mother of God*], in which Deleuze finds the masochistic hero Sabadil the best example of the Cain-Christ figure. The novel traces how Sabadil suffers from being human, which in his case refers to his carnal desire for a young girl Mardona, who plays a role of the high priestess of a religious sect. He eventually consents to be crucified by her in order to atone for his sin and become asexual and spiritual. This bloody scene of death mimics the Passion of Christ. At the time of his death, Mardona tells Sabadil, ‘And now you are
Deleuze pays a special attention to this mysterious line and says that being ‘man’ here means being alone and autonomous, devoid of the genital sexuality inherited from his father.\(^5^3\)

The iconic asexual male figure appears in the aftermath of the ‘death’ of a masochistic existence. One is the image of the Greek who appears in *Venus in Furs*, as we see above, and other is the figure of the ‘Wanderer’ in the eponymous short novel, ‘L’Errant [The Wanderer]’, which more explicitly shows transformation in the form of identification with the cruel mother. Becoming like this man is a goal of masochism, since Sacher-Masoch presents the story as the prologue to his saga *The Legacy of Cain* to show what he calls ‘the completely harmonious solution to the dissonance of human life’.\(^5^4\) The story introduces the majestic man, the Wanderer, who first confesses his masochistic past and then describes the process of his rebirth. The Wanderer is honoured and worshipped by villagers as a sacred man, who condemns the whole human race as the offspring of the fratricidal Cain, but whose spiritual preaching sounds simultaneously heroic and yet masochistic: ‘renounce the legacy of Cain; search for truth, learn to abandon and despise life and love death’.\(^5^5\) His confession has strong masochistic overtones, as he details how miserable and helpless he used to be, a man who was ‘scoffed at, trampled on’ and enslaved by the woman he loved.\(^5^6\) He insists that every man is doomed to suffer just as he did, but anyone can be reborn a new man, the Wanderer, as he was, once he has defied social norms (patriarchy) and acquiesced only in the merciless and all-embracing authority of Mother Nature, who is described as ‘the solemn and taciturn goddess, who always gives us life and then takes it away’.\(^5^7\) The image of a man abandoning himself in front of a domineering woman is glorified in the form of a cult of the feminised Nature. It is also suggested that the new man is born by becoming identical to the domineering figure of woman, with the power to both nurture and devour men.

A sense of guilt and torment, a desire for suffering and expiation at the hands of an imperious woman, whose infliction of pain on her son and his second birth as an iconic sexless man all crystallise in the novels of Sacher-Masoch. His imaginary world is not a simple matter of a man being whipped by a woman to gain sexual pleasure, nor is it merely a passive expression by a victim of sadistic abuse. Rather, it is related to the concept of male
subjectivity being transformed into something superior and stronger through willingly receiving and enduring suffering. A similar struggle and hope regarding masculine identity can be found in the occultist works of Péladan.

4. Péladan’s Occult theme of Palingenesis – the Source and Role of Suffering and the birth of the Magus

The son’s lost faith in his father, his anxiety over castration and his feminisation, which results in the reactive creation of fetishistic and masochistic literature, was a common theme of *fin-de-siècle* artists. Appreciating the significant role of masochistic sensibility and sexuality in Decadent literature, Birkett says, ‘Decadence is an attempt [...] to substitute fiction for history’, and asks ‘who are the Fathers capable of their [the Decadent generation’s] destruction, figures to whom they feel they owe allegiance, and against whom they can only fantasize rebellion’. Reflecting the historical and social backgrounds, she argues that the Decadents were those who felt painfully caught in a conflict between the old heritage and the new movements. On the one hand, they blamed the Fathers for their degenerate and perverted inheritance; the Decadents’ obsession with moral and physical decay was acknowledged as a scientific fact by worried psychologists and sexologists (one instance being Krafft-Ebing’s invention of ‘masochism’). On the other, the Decadents felt threatened by the rise of socialism and feminism, ‘the “mob” and Medusa’, whose egalitarian principles appeared to them not to reinvigorate society but to increase its disorder. As disinherited sons, they dreamed of engaging in the heroic task of establishing new values, an order and hierarchy of their own. So Birkett writes, ‘Decadence is not just Herod and Salome. It is the ageing Emperor Hadrian and his favourite, Antinoës’. This feminised Antinoës, who was responsible for corruption and paid his debt by sacrificing his life, was the one with whom Decadents in their fantasies narcissistically identified themselves, refusing to belong to either the disappearing age of the Fathers or the coming age of the masses and woman’s emancipation.

Péladan was one of these guilt-ridden Decadent aesthetes and produced in his epic cycle *La Décadence latine* [*The Death of Empire*] his
private fantasies of obsessive anxiety, parades of victim mentality, desperate crusades, the cult of androgyny and the pleasure-pain inflicted by empowered women. The saga claims to depict the decadence of contemporary society, to which the Magus, ‘the superior man’, intends to restore virtue and occult Order. However, the superiority of the Magus is not the actual crux of the story. Like the Greek in Sacher-Masoch’s fantasy, Péladan’s charismatic image of a new man, an androgynous Magus, appears to be merely a hope. The true core of his text is the suffering of the would-be Magus, whose intellectual and artistic superiority is ignored by society, whose Platonic quests for the Ideal end in failure due to irrepressible female sexuality and the convention of marriage, and whose last resort is to resign himself to suffering.

Péladan produces the image of the Magus as a solution to a world with which he is deeply discontented; to his mind, it consists only of the conflicts of base desires such as ambition, money and lust. In *Comment on devient mage* [How to Become the Magus], Péladan sets up the superiority of the Magus against the dominant power in reality, i.e., militarism and democracy: ‘Soldier, you cannot be the Magus’, ‘The supreme ugliness is democracy; the supreme viciousness is militarism’. This antagonism is always accompanied by his hero’s exhibition of his sense of inferiority, humiliation and suffering. In *l’Initiation sentimentale* [A Sentimental Initiation], the third volume of his saga, the Platonist artist Nébo defines two kinds of superior man; men such as Bonaparte, on the one hand, who is admired and remembered in history for massacring people and, on the other, men such as the poet and hierophant who talks about love and spirituality in opposition to ferocious humanity, but ‘after being ridiculed, he is killed and never remembered’. Nébo identifies himself with the latter, a martyred poet whose existence turns out to be nothing to posterity.

In the preface to his brother Adrien’s book, Péladan professes a similar personal sense of resignation in accepting humiliation and death; he compares militarism to intellectualism and defends Adrien’s inadequacy as a soldier on the grounds of his poor health: ‘The intellectual man has only two perspectives regarding militarism: either degradation if he is subjected to it, or death up against a wall if he revolts’. Similarly, a series of texts (the dedication, open letters and the preface) on the first pages of *Le Panthée [All is God]*, the tenth story in the saga telling of the suffering artist-Magus
Bihn, remains symptomatic, impulsively revealing Péladan’s personal sense of a victim oppressed by society. Péladan writes in a both self-mocking and vindictive tone, ‘Is it my fault if I cannot speak in the low language used by the Medan circle?’ While boasting of his many achievements as novelist, art critic, historian, and so on, what he is grumbling about to the readers of his fictional story is a paranoid fantasy of conspiracy: that no one takes him and his works seriously, because he is better than all those who have become successful and whose power is based on deceit and corruption. The literary circle Medan was a prestigious literary group led by Zola, to which Péladan, apparently, was not invited. Consequently, he insisted that he could not have complied with their degraded form of literature in the first place. Further, almost masochistically, Péladan goes on to disclose two letters of rejection from major Parisian theatres (the Odéon Theatre and the Comédie-Française) regarding a theatrical production of his own, *Prince de Byzance* [Prince of Bysantium], and complains that they are not capable of understanding the significance of his piece.

Parading his grudge against contemporary society, in terms of its injustice and ignorance of the artist’s talent in particular, is not uncommon in Péladan; one of the most extreme examples of this sort includes the abrupt appearance of the author who intervenes in the course of the second story of the saga, *Curieuse!* [Curious!], only to whine about how his artistic production was stifled by the government. Defending his lack of physical strength against a militaristic society which sees male intellectuality as inferior, he stresses how disdainfully he was treated by officers during his imprisonment (in 1886), which resulted from his refusal to be conscripted. The tone of his voice is at once proud and vengeful: ‘they touched me and looked me up and down as if they were dealing with a pig, me, tabernacle of an immortal soul, created in the image of God, premature mediator of *Apocalypse!*’ Mérodack, named after the chief Babylonian God of creation, is both the self-authorised name of the author and the name of the fictional leading character of the Magus brotherhood, so the readers of his works are invited to see the author himself and his Magus fictional character as identical. Naturally, it is not uncommonly assumed that the miserable situations filled with failure and mortification experienced by the fictional characters echo exactly those of the author. The characters’ complaining
about their miserable life as neglected artist deeply reflects Péladan’s own problems.

It is not only society as a whole that ridicules the Magus’s intellectualism and spiritualism but women in particular who challenge and put down his spiritual superiority by making men their husbands, i.e., ordinary men. The grand despotic heroine, Princess Léonora d’Este, who appears from the first volume of the cycle, *Le Vice supreme* [*The Supreme Vice*], enjoys enacting her favourite vision of ‘the works of art where a triumphant woman subjugates a man’. It is however simplistic if she is reduced simply to a female sadist; she is better understood as ‘the oral mother’ in Deleuze’s sense, who embodies both the maternal and paternal functions of the world and offers men both the pains and the hope of rebirth. Her despotism is rooted not only in her indomitable sexuality as a woman but also in her bond with patriarchy, as is suggested by her aristocratic status and prosperity and her refusal to allow herself to be brought up by women to become a good wife. Fluent in several languages, with a knowledge of the classics and literature, she considers herself nothing like ordinary women but superior to both them and men. Disdaining both sex and marriage, she exercises her charm to enslave male desires; this is evident from the episode in which she abandons her husband Malatesta and leaves him to die in despair, immediately after their nuptial night, because in the act of procreation she finds no poetry. So she says, ‘I swear, to my pride, never to disgrace myself’.

Fetishistic and masochistic approaches are the only forms of love that she accepts because to her they appear spiritual, idealistic and most of all, ‘extraordinary’. They are the way to secure her power over men and satisfy her extreme pride. In a later volume of the saga, in the thirteenth volume of the saga, *Finis latinorum* [*The Death of Ancient Rome*], d’Este’s willingness to be a fetish becomes more evident. In this story, she gradually consents to be a spiritual inspiration for artistic men, including Mérodack’s Magus brotherhood, supporting them financially and living chastely as a partner of the self-contained androgyne named Tammuz, who is one of Mérodack’s men: ‘the eyes of Léonora d’Este shone, satisfied; a certain softness in the movement, the old stiffness disappeared and a metamorphosis which made her charming took its place’. Her transformation of asexuality, serenity and self-abnegation is presented by the author as the manifestation
of an ideal quality in a woman because, worshipped by men and magi, she comes to symbolise the nurturing image of a woman who devotes all her powers to inspiring magi so that they will accomplish their mission.

The woman is both a source of agony and artistic inspiration for Péladan’s Magus heroes. With the exception of the unusual example of the perfect androgynous Tammuz, Péladan’s stories center on magi who perceive themselves as victims of women and struggle vainly to become androgynes and make women the same.71 Their attempts are doomed to fail, due to the intransigent nature of female desire. In the fourth story of the saga, A cœur perdu [With Lost Heart], for example, a Platonist Nébo upholds the premise of ‘the negation of sex’, because an ordinary relationship between a man and a woman appears to the Magus ‘the so banal terrain of bestiality’, where a man can only be either a woman’s ‘cruel Master or demeaned slave’.

This aversion to procreation impels Nébo to attempt to initiate the princess Paule to be his androgynous idol, whose beauty he can worship only spiritually. Nonetheless, their relationship is never harmonious, but causes perpetual conflict between his idealism and Paule’s refusal; in her words, ‘No, you don’t love the real Paule that I am, but a fictional and artificial Paule, who I will never be’.73 Frustrated by Nébo’s fetishist approaches, Paule eventually humiliates his hope for a spiritual and aesthetic relationship by ‘raping’ him. In Péladan’s narrative, their consummation is compared to torture, where an eroticism of pain-pleasure is highlighted: ‘the apparatus of pleasure and its emanation are incredibly similar to those of tortures and their exhalation’.74 Then the story recovers for the last time a new element of confrontation between Nébo and Paule: Paule looks for more gratification in marriage and childbirth, while Nébo seeks to end the relationship. Just as Sacher-Masoch’s Henryk in Love of Plato abandons Nadeshda when she refuses the role of androgyne, Péladan’s story equally ends with the rupture of the couple due to a woman’s revolt.

As observed above, Péladan’s personal hatred for his contemporary French society is reflected in the view of society expressed in his fictional world, and so is his own personal experience with women, in particular a hysterical and indomitable woman named Henriette Maillat. Henriette was for a time Péladan’s mistress and patron, and their relationship can be said described as a sort of mother-son patronage, because Henriette was elder,
wealthier and socially superior. It was Henriette who made it possible for him to enter the Parisian literary circle in the first place. Yet among the Decadent artists she had a notorious ‘reputation as a hysterical nymphomaniac’. Her reputation included the alleged murder of her husband (her husband committed suicide in mysterious circumstances) and her unfaithful liaisons with other Decadent artists (Leon Bloy, Barbey d’Aurevilly, and Huysmans) while she was still with Péladan. Huysmans characterised her as the Satanist Madam Chantelouvé in Là-bas [The Damned] (1891), which he based on his secret affair with her. The relationship between Henriette and Huysmans observable from their letters was a masochistic drama of its own; Huysmans was overwhelmed and fascinated by the woman, who relentlessly exhibited hysterical pain and suffering and had sexual dreams of the Devil and death. To Huysmans, Henriette even repeatedly disclosed her sexual dissatisfaction with Péladan, because ‘he is too superior ... I am left unsatisfied.’ Péladan apparently exercised in his own life the idealist spirituality familiar to the readers of his fictions, and Henriette humiliated and ridiculed Péladan, seeing his principles as nothing but a cloak for his incompetence and impotence. Paule becomes impatient with Nébo’s Platonism in the same way.

Just like Sacher-Masoch’s ‘Greek’ and ‘Wanderer’ images, in Péladan’s imagination, the androgynous being offers a wishful solution to human suffering. One of the clearest examples of the androgyne is Tammuz, who plays the role of ‘the Greek’, a dominant seducer in Péladan’s epic cycle. Tammuz appears as a complete androgynous man who seduces others without himself being seduced or suffering from any romantic agonies from a romantic relationship. He denies all kinds of manly privileges, such as social status, economic prosperity, aggressiveness or physical superiority; he appears as a wandering pacifist without a family or job, except as a missionary for Mérodack’s occult-Catholic sect. He looks like an effeminate and elegant dandy, preferring delicate soft clothes; he lies lazily, like a courtesan, saying disdainfully, ‘Why should a man who has the function of thought cultivate his masculine system and wear heavy shoes and coarse linens’. It is proposed that, by means of this feminised man, Péladan will achieve his ambition: to set a new form of superior being in opposition to the gender identities defined by society.

Péladan insists that his androgyne is asexual. Yet the images of
androgyne in his texts generally carry strong overtones of sexual desire – fetishism in the case of Nébo and necrophilia in the case of another Magus-artist, Nergal, in the fifth volume of the saga, Istar, in which Péladan produces a sequence of masochistic pleasure and pain. Nergal, a novelist, attempts to convince a married woman, Istar, that they should repress their carnal desires for each other in order to achieve a Platonic bond between them, elevating their adulterous but chaste relationship above that of her marital relationship with her husband. Istar first consents to become a muse for Nergal’s artistic inspiration, but she increasingly struggles both with her own passion for him and a sense of guilt, in an agony which eventually leads to her death.

In this novel, fetishism goes to an extreme in necrophiliac frenzy. Nergal tries to resurrect her by conducting an occult ritual, in which, this time, his own repressed desires for Istar are unleashed in the form of his uncontrolled desire for her lifeless and unresponsive body. It is her completely cold and indifferent but also irresistibly seductive body that dominates and controls the scene in which Nergal is gripped by a delirious and terrifying desire to rape her corpse and at the same time end his own life: ‘the idea of going with her ... this body that he had so much desired appeared to quiver and the desire rose in front of him’. Nergal is not presented here as an ‘abuser’ of the female body, but rather remains terrified and tormented. Yet Istar symbolises power – the law of Nature, i.e., the power of lust and death. In a sense, she also symbolises the power of reproduction. For Nergal fetishises her in his own novel by making her his heroine, a fetish for eternity. Thus, he tells her memory: ‘you gave me your soul to make my masterpiece’.  

All the struggles, humiliation and pain, are in Péladan’s mind caused by the contemporary militaristic and capitalist authorities and the instinctual and material demands that women make of on men, but they are necessary factors in the creation, known as ‘palingenesis’ in the occult tradition, of the androgynous superior being, the Magus. Péladan shapes his fictional world to depict the process of suffering through which the superhuman status of the Magus is achieved. Like Persephone in the Eleusinian myth, the initiation of the Magus takes place through the painful experience of a descent into the Underworld (which for him is the bourgeois domestic world). Pain is central in attaining the occult illumination in Péladan’s thought. ‘Use pain’ he tells
the initiate; ‘the initiate realises one step of advancement towards perfection at each pain’. In his aspiration to become a celestial androgyne, the Magus is doomed to suffer in his dissatisfaction with earthly needs and values; hence, Péladan explains, to become the Magus is to learn how to transform this inevitable pain into pleasure: ‘the metamorphosis of pain by way of glorification. The enthusiast changes suffering into joy by means of the power of his vigour of soul’. This he depicts as the Magus’ extraordinary mental capacity, but ordinary readers may find it not unlike mastering the masochistic mechanism: the transformation of pain into rapture, which Péladan simply cloaks with a claim of the mystical experience reserved for special men.

It should be added that the obsession with pain and suffering expressed in the mystic pretext was in fact not peculiar to Péladan, but common among nineteenth-century artists, including Sacher-Masoch, who was obsessed with the image of Cain and Christ’s Passion, as shown above. Their ideas centered on ‘the concept of Christianity as a hard religion, a religion of suffering’ which appears also, according to Richard Griffiths, in the works of Huysmans, Bloy, Péguy, Claudel and Barbey d’Aurevilly. Sometimes understood as vicarious, suffering was glorified in Christianity as a noble practice, but ‘a certain sado-masochistic element’ can be found, in particular in the case of Huysmans. Joyce O. Lowrie in The Violent Mystique makes the similar point that the central concern of nineteenth century occult literature lies in the obsession with suffering. She criticises Praz for reducing the dominance of suffering into sadism or algolagnia, which makes it a simple matter of personal sexual orientation. Instead, she claims, the representation of violence and suffering holds a philosophical, theological and cultural significance: ‘While suffering appears everywhere in nineteenth century literature, the specific themes of suffering viewed as a result of retribution and atonement have a definite and symbolic place in Balzac’s system, in Barbey’s world-view, in Bloy’s cosmology, in Huysmans’ mystical theology’. It is pointed out that in their works suffering becomes a desirable experience en route to a spiritual ascent. Lowrie naturally includes Péladan’s occultism in her discussion, but, regrettably, refers to him only as a ridiculed propagandist of occultism, due to his parading in extravagant costumes in public.
Conclusion

This paper set out to demonstrate how the distinctive features of Sacher-Masoch’s imagination are shared by his French contemporary, Péladan, whose domineering heroines have been recognised but who have been viewed merely as female sadists. In his lifetime, Sacher-Masoch’s reputation rested on what contemporaries perceived to be his realistic depiction of the world. Interestingly, the forms which he chose for this depiction – such as the abhorrence of sex and marriage, the fetishisation of women as a symbol of oppressive power and the image of the advent of the new man – have striking similarities with those of Péladan, a Decadent and Symbolist, who was extremely critical of the Realist and Naturalist school. It may be argued that the mindset and sensibility of the Realists/Naturalists, not to mention their political preferences (anti-socialism, anti-feminism, a commitment to hierarchy and a sense of elitism), have far more in common with those of their idealist antagonists than is generally acknowledged. In conclusion, I would like to propose that a good way to pursue this line of investigation would be for more critics to investigate the neglected writings of Sacher-Masoch and their importance for the French fin-de-siècle.

Decadence, the limited availability of Sacher-Masoch’s texts in German or English, and my own language limitations, I have mostly used his French translations. Furthermore, to my knowledge, Peladan’s works have not yet become available in English. (Unless otherwise indicated, all translations in this article are my own).


11 Hostility towards Sacher-Masoch and masochism is vividly manifest in Philippe Sollers’s words, ‘the Marquis de Sade finds himself married, against his will, to a mediocre writer of the nineteenth century whom he would have despised, if he could have read his [Sacher-Masoch’s] work’, in *Sade contre l’Être Suprême: Précédé de Sade dans le Temps* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), p. 12. Kaja Silverman suggests that the popularity of Sade and sadism derives from the fact that among all ‘perversions’, which by their nature destabilise social and heterosexual standards, sadism is ‘the one which is most compatible with conventional heterosexuality’. Masochism, in contrast, would provoke restlessness among male intellectuals because it involves a question of their own identity as men, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 187.


*Auf der Höhe*, p. 316.


Ibid., p. 101.


Ibid., p. 232.


40 Deleuze, Présentation de Sacher-Masoch, p. 93.
41 For fetishism and nineteenth- and twentieth-century artists, see e.g. Marcia Ian,
42 Deleuze, Présentation de Sacher-Masoch, p. 49.
46 See Deleuze, Présentation de Sacher-Masoch, p. 82. For the theme of the birth of a new
masculinity as the desirable androgynous in masochism, see Nick Mansfield, Masochism:
47 Deleuze, Présentation de Sacher-Masoch, p. 87.
48 Ibid., p. 46.
49 Sacher-Masoch, Venus, p. 223.
50 Sacher-Masoch, cit. in Deleuze, op.cit.
51 See Sacher-Masoch, La Pêcheuse d’âmes.
53 See Deleuze, Présentation de Sacher-Masoch, p. 86.
54 Cit. in Michel, Sacher-Masoch, p. 182.
56 Ibid., p. ix.
57 Ibid., p. xv.
58 For decadent fetishism in relation to masochism, see Charles Bernheimer, ‘Fetishism
and Decadence: Salome’s Severed Heads’, in Fetishism as Cultural Discourse, eds. by
and also Emily Apter, Feminizing the Fetish: Psychoanalysis and Narrative Obsession in
60 Ibid., p. 11.
61 Ibid., p. 15.
62 Péladan, Amphithéâtre des sciences mortes, I: Comment on devient mage, éthique (Paris:
Chamuel, 1892), p. 23.
63 Ibid., p. 31 and p. 42.
65 ‘Introduction’ by Joséphin Péladan, in Adrien fils Péladan, Anatomic homologique: la
triple dualité du corps humain et la polarité des organes splanchniques, avec une préface de


Ibid., p. 72.


Ibid., p. 195.

Ibid., p. 301.


Henriette’s letter to Huysmans in 1884 (?), in *Les Péladan*, p. 158.


Ibid., p. 487.


Péladan, *Comment on devient mage*, p. 173.

Ibid., pp. 179.


Ibid., p. 182.
