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The Promise of Oblivion: A Rhetorical Predicament in Sacher-Masoch, Nietzsche, and Beyond

I promise when the sun comes up
I promise I'll be true
—Waits

I can swim like the others, only I have a better memory than the others, I have not forgotten my former inability to swim. But since I have not forgotten it, my ability to swim is useless and I cannot swim after all.
—Kafka

The possibility of promising is premised on its own oblivion. This proposition might seem counterintuitive to anyone who accepts the trajectory of the promise as oriented toward the future. At first glance at least, promises appear to be events in the present whose full realization is announced for a future date. In order for a promise to be "given" as well as "kept," a certain mastery over the future ought to be professed; at the very least, the promise needs to be remembered for the time to come, its foremost imperative being that of securing and retaining: it may only be kept, that is, realized, if one understands how to keep it, avoiding its loss, its fall into oblivion. Even if one were eventually to break a promise, its very breach would serve as a marker of memory, perhaps an even deeper, more tangible one than a promise kept could ever provoke. A broken promise could still be called a promise, however undesired its perlocutionary effects may be; yet, can the same be said about a promise given to oblivion? Can a promise forgotten still truthfully be called a *promise*? Does its oblivion coincide with its breach? Can a forgotten promise anticipate future promises, beget a renewed series of speech acts from the depths of its own traceless loss?

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This seems unlikely to be the case. Nevertheless, the article at hand seeks to disclose the oblivion at the root of every promise.

That the vicissitudes of memory have everything to do with the integrity of the promise is by no means a new insight. As a matter of fact, deconstruction has been fondly invested in the illocution of promises precisely for the aporias it yields on the question of memory. Both Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida have devoted countless pages to the matter; for the moment, however, it will suffice to recall but one sentence the latter dedicated to the former, Derrida to de Man: "We cannot write what we do not wish to erase, we can only promise it in terms of what can always be erased. Otherwise, there would be neither memory nor promise" (*Memoires* 123). It would be too easy to discern in this sentence a mere threat of violence, conjuring the drive to destruction that haunts all archival inscription, all pretense at retention, and without which the desire to escape its grasp—writing, archiving, "keeping"—would not be thinkable. If we cannot write what we do not wish to erase, and if this paradoxical desire holds true especially for promises, there is a certain co-imbrication of writing and erasing at play that seems to disturb the neat separation that keeps memory apart from oblivion. If writing, and therefore language, does the work of memory precisely by risking—*always and inevitably risking*—oblivion, it's safe to say (though nothing's safe here any longer) that the promise of language is aired *from* the abyss of oblivion.

The very possibility of promising thus appears to be predicated on the obliteration of the promise. This risk is structurally inscribed in every promise, such that before a promise can ever be given and kept, uttered and broken, its own oblivion is already promised. Without the promise of oblivion, there would be, to reiterate Derrida's words, "neither memory nor promise." In what follows, I shall elucidate the structure of this promise of promises, this proto-promise and archi-announcement of all promising, the promise of oblivion, at the same time the fundamental condition of possibility and sheer obliteration of all promising. I will analyze its place in Leopold von Sacher-Masoch and the rhetoric of masochism, locate it in Friedrich Nietzsche's anthropological reflections, and rediscover it in Franz Kafka's own masochistic fantasies. The article culminates in a brief discussion of Martin Heidegger's insistence on the "oblivion of being" and the way we may have inherited it as the oblivion of language.

An Impossible Contract

Sovereign is he who decides on yielding his sovereignty. This variation on Carl Schmitt's famous definition of the state of exception could function as a preliminary maxim, an initial axiom, if you will, for understanding the project of masochism. As shall become clear in the course of this paper, the psychosexual situation of masochism that calls for this relinquishment and in which certain gestures of surrender and domination come into play is to be conceived of as a linguistic operation. By that I mean that the situation of masochism unfolds through and in language, taking on its specific form by virtue of deploying certain linguistic operations, an ensemble of rhetorical interventions. Masochism, one could tentatively hold, takes place not so much *in* or *on* the body as it *constitutes* the body, its pains and pleasures, the violence it undergoes, in terms of rhetorical gestures, especially the expression of promises. Language, we may thus provisionally and proleptically propose, does not function as a secondary medium for the mere representation of masochism, nor does it operate as a neutral instrument through which its power dynamic would be recorded, announced, made intelligible. On the contrary, the very gestures of masochism, the structure of its project, the distribution of its violence, the situation of its subjects—in short, the entire constellation of its elements—primarily manifest as functions of its language.

The project of masochism is an inherently rhetorical one. Whatever its effects, they result from certain events that come about in and through language, and only there. In order to grasp the specificity of its situation, then, one is called on to formulate the parameters of a *rhetoric of masochism* whence its sexual and, by extension, political implications could be derived. If masochism has to do with the surrender of subjective agency, as my opening axiom suggests, the critic's task would lie in designating the possibility of such surrender as linguistically conditioned. Following some key suggestions made by Gilles Deleuze, I shall argue that this linguistic condition takes the form of a certain quasi-legalistic rhetoric that makes use of speech acts to finalize covenants, formulate pacts, and make promises. The possibility of masochism is bound up with the formal structure of the promise—a rhetorical gesture we often find when constructs of nature and culture somehow collide and become reorganized, as is the case in Thomas Hobbes's theory of state formation or Jean-Jacques Rousseau's narrative invoking the initial *contrat social*. If masochism marks a specific point in the history of negotiating the redistribution of natural law into the cultural

artifact of a certain social order, that is the case because its expressive structure is that of promising, and it therefore taps into the history of all the moments when a specific type of order and distribution of power becomes erected on the unstable speech act of a given promise.

It is thus of the utmost significance that Deleuze, in 1967, starts his study of Sacher-Masoch with a chapter that introduces the problem of masochism as a rhetorical circumstance: "The Language of Sade and Masoch" ("Coldness"). Following and extending Richard von Krafft-Ebing's endeavor to introduce masochism as a lone-standing diagnosis, an independent clinical image entirely disentangled from the fraught compound of "sado-masochism," Deleuze further explicates and corroborates the critical difference between sadism and masochism.[1] In order to ascertain what distinguishes one from the other, however, an undeniable common ground must first be presented: the ground of language. Beyond the obvious and rather banal fact that both sadism and masochism, qua psychosexual situations, became announced through literary projects, one coming about around the time of the French Revolution, the other roughly a century later, the two phenomena rely on their literary registers not merely to represent or illustrate their respective situations but to *constitute* them, which is to say that everything that could become identifiable as sadistic or masochistic practice will, in the final analysis, always be discernible as the effect of certain rhetorical maneuvers, facts ordained by language, existence unfolding as linguistic reality.

The separation that Deleuze traces between sadism and masochism is thus one that distinguishes two types of utterance: while in sadism he observes a prevalence of imperatives and descriptive statements, he places on the side of masochism the lexicon of announcement, persuasion, and promise ("Coldness" 18). With some caution, one could view these two linguistic registers as corresponding to the now classic distinction between constative and performative utterances, with masochism's expressions occupying the place of speech acts, while sadism relies on propositional logic and the positivistic drive to manufacture evidence (see Austin). According to this distinction, the figure of the sadist would appear as a kind of logical empiricist, a type of modern scientist loyal to the paradigms of positivism, whereas the masochist would embody a type of rhetor, the former being committed to the elucidation of logical operations, meticulously demonstrating their implications and conclusions, while the latter relies on the exertion of a certain kind of *influence*, pedagogically leading and guiding an interlocutor who, rather than merely being subjected to the masochistic endeavor,

is persuaded into partaking through complex rhetorical and educational maneuvers. Deleuze can therefore conclude that the masochist educates while the sadist instructs ("Coldness" 19).

Formalized into a type of quasi-political infrastructure, these linguistic exercises correspond to different forms of establishing and securing a certain "social" or "inter-subjective" order: sadism becomes presentable as a kind of institutional fascism, whereas masochism sets up a context of rearing and mentorship that relies on pacts and drawn-up contracts.[2] As Deleuze puts it: "The sadist is in need of institutions, the masochist of contractual relations" ("Coldness" 20). While the article at hand is not the place to examine the soundness and cogency of this distinction, it is definitely worth pointing out, as I move on to focus on the type of contractual rhetoric we find in Sacher-Masoch and masochism, that Deleuze's separation of sadism and masochism often seems suspiciously neat—so much so that one may well wonder if we could even imagine institutions that do not, on some level, rely on contractual bonds; or if, in turn, we could possibly insist on the existence of contracts that would not in themselves imply certain kinds of institutions, indeed, if their maintenance as contractual bonds would not also require a certain form of institutionality.

In order to unfold certain problems bearing on the rhetoric of masochism, my argument will focus on the masochistic contract, namely as the privileged site for the specific demand of its language, the topos where the lexicon of masochism finds its essential articulation and whence masochism occurs as a linguistic event, a fabrication of speech. In the context of masochism's foundational text, Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs* (1870), the covenant to be expounded is sealed between the novel's protagonist, Severin, and Wanda Dunajew, his chosen mistress. Though of utmost structural importance, this contract regulating the contours of their relationship, thus anticipating the masochistic situation proper, comes into play rather late in the narrative's course. As a matter of fact, it would be a worthwhile endeavor to analyze the structures of hindrance and delay put in place to push the contractual moment to such a late point. One could argue that the masochistic project and its rhetorical maneuvers consist in large part in anticipating and imagining the contract, an extensive and intricate negotiation of conditions and clauses, various temporalities and their implications. Ultimately, however, the signed contract in itself forms a mere supplement to all sorts of preceding speech acts, what Sacher-Masoch calls *oaths*, that have already taken place, de facto preempting the contract's substance. The contract thus occupies the strange place of

a postscriptum to an oath already taken, seeking to validate a number of illocutionary acts by tracing them on paper, undersigning what has already been sworn.

The key scene leading up to introducing the covenant between the two thus has Wanda ask two questions: "Do you still love me?" followed by, "Do you remember your oath?" (219). The latter question refers to Severin's vow to cease being a citizen and de facto become Wanda's property, captive and subservient. Complementing the two questions with a statement, Wanda subsequently points out that the agreement binding the two still lacks a written covenant: "You have not signed the papers yet." As Severin reacts with confusion to this observation, the woman swiftly infers that he has "forgotten already" (219).

It is noteworthy that the introduction of the contractual moment revolves around a register of remembrance and forgetfulness—the fear of forgetting an oath already taken, of not remembering the resolution to seal a covenant. The mere fact of taking an oath, it seems, does not suffice to regulate this relationship, for a taken oath is subject to the pitfalls of remembrance and therefore to the menace of oblivion. Western philosophy from Plato through Hegel and beyond has framed this fear in terms of the conceptual difference between memory (*μνήμη*) and archivization (*ὑπόμνημα*)—or, in Hegel's words, the difference between *Erinnerung* and *Gedächtnis*.[3] Most famously unfolded in Plato's *Phaedrus*, this line and tradition of reasoning recognizes a difference between the liveliness of internalized memory, on the one hand, and the corrosive iterability of mechanical memory and archival traces, on the other. The archive appears as that which prompts forgetfulness precisely because it seduces us to rely on external prostheses, compromising our inner capacity to retain and keep alive perceptions and experiences. In the case of Sacher-Masoch's *Venus*, however, the function of memory, it seems, is already put in jeopardy before external archivization can intervene: Wanda refuses to rely on the purely internal recall of a given oath, instead insisting on its manifestation in the form of a written covenant, as though an oath can only truly be called an oath once it becomes superimposed on a drawn-up contract, thus ceasing to be an oath altogether. Ironically, what Severin seems to have "forgotten," according to their brief dialogue, is not his oath, that is, the speech act turning him into Wanda's subordinate, but his willingness to sign a contract. If he forgot something, it is the oath's doubling into a written contract, its as-of-yet-nonexistent written supplement, and it is because its nonexistence is prone to oblivion that the contract comes into being.

In order to set the stage for an in-depth analysis of its rhetoric, allow me to quote the contract at length:

> *"Agreement between Mrs. Wanda von Dunajew and Mr. Severin von Kuziemski.*
>
> *"Mr. Severin von Kuziemski ceases from this date to be the fiancé of Mrs. Wanda von Dunajew and renounces all rights pertaining to this state; in return he undertakes, on his word as a man and a gentleman, to be the slave of this lady, until such time as she sets him at liberty.*
>
> *"As the slave of Mrs. von Dunajew, he will take the name of Gregor, and will undertake to satisfy all the wishes of his mistress, to obey all her orders, to submit to her, and to regard the slightest kindness on her part as an extraordinary favor.*
>
> *"Mrs. von Dunajew may not only chastise her slave for the slightest negligence or misdemeanor as and when she wishes, but she will also have the right to maltreat him according to her humor or even simply to amuse herself; she is also entitled to kill him if she so wishes; in short, he becomes her absolute property.*
>
> *"Should Mrs. von Dunajew ever set her slave at liberty, Mr. von Kuziemski agrees to forget everything he has experienced or undergone in his capacity as slave, and will not entertain, under any pretext or in any manner, the thought of vengeance or reprisal.*
>
> *"In return, Mrs. von Dunajew promises, in her capacity as his mistress, to appear as often as possible in furs, particularly when she is being cruel toward her slave." (220)*[4]

The question of forgetting and forgetfulness that already marks the scene leading up to the contract's signing also plays a prominent role in the contract itself, yet before it is raised, a number of other rhetorical gestures is deployed, gestures with fairly odd implications. Consisting in five short paragraphs, the written-out covenant formulates several demands, distinct yet intertwined, that regard issues of signification/naming, social status, and the grievability of the life at stake. Accordingly, the covenant demands that Severin give up his status as a gentleman and citizen in order to become Wanda's possession. Furthermore, it requires him to lose, in tandem with his social persona, his name, which henceforth will be changed to Gregor.[5] Lastly, his very life is declared worthless and killable, something he must not cling to or attempt to preserve against the will of his mistress. The aims of the covenant thus

seem transparent enough; if one takes a closer look at the rhetoric underlying these contractual stipulations, however, they increasingly appear as distorted, inconsistent anacolutha, less straightforward provisions than gaping performatives, broken and twisted acts of language, impossibly wrenched.

All three of the stipulations just named ultimately amount to the annihilation of Severin as a social identity, his status as a member of society, a citizen who can account for himself. However, we can only assume that it is as such, namely, as a legal subject, that Severin is called on in this moment to *sign* the contract before him. As the contract holds, he "undertakes, on his word as a man and gentleman" to be Wanda's servant and property. Hence, it is precisely his position as man and gentleman that allows him to give the oath and undersign it; it is his social identity that guarantees the validity of the covenant, such as it is, endowing it with the force of a certain authority. Yet, to what does this oath agree? As the goal of this rhetorical gesture is precisely the annihilation of Severin's social identity, the covenant effectively seeks to undo in Severin the legal subject that would be able to sign in his own name. Signing the covenant thus expropriates him of the very right to sign the covenant. The contract annihilates the very subject it wants to hold accountable.[6]

If it is on the protagonist's "word as a man and gentleman" that the covenant's promise can be kept, who, then, will stay true to this word if the "gentleman" who gave it has ceased to exist? The covenant's dilemma is thus thrown into sharp relief: while its sole purpose lies in the annihilation of Severin's social identity, it is this very identity that provides the basis, the sheer condition of possibility, for the contractual pact. If the contract insists on its signer's de facto annihilation, it consequently insists on its own becoming void. The masochistic contract may thus be called an *impossible* one. It writes up a covenant that relies on a broken performative, yet, even the term *performative* here seems oddly out of place, as nothing comes into being; instead, everything ceases to exist, comes undone, is annihilated. Once the signer signs, he ceases to be a signer, and the contract loses its status as contract.[7] Together with his own annihilation, Severin countersigns the annihilation of the quasi-legal mechanism that would guarantee his being annihilated. Paradoxically, thus, the contract must amount to the annihilation of annihilation: instead of extinguishing Severin (as citizen and social identity), it happens to destroy itself, namely by destroying its binding force, Severin's "word as man and gentleman." For if *Severin* is a juridical subject and *Gregor* is not, how will the latter ever keep the former's promise or stay true to his given word?

The covenant's performative abyss only deepens if one closely considers the stipulation of Gregor's turning into his mistress's possession: "he becomes," the document holds, "her absolute property." The gentleman Severin is therefore transformed from a legal subject into a possessable object, a mere thing, *Sache* or *res*, whose ownership is designated by virtue of the covenant. Gregor becomes a thing to be kept, which is to say, he gives up the right to keep anything for himself, ceasing to be a holder and possessor as he surrenders to his custodian's authority. If he can only be kept but cannot keep anything for himself, it becomes, however, highly dubious whether he can be expected to keep the covenant's promise. Entirely objectified and stripped of his status as a legal subject capable of giving and keeping his word, Gregor would, in order to maintain the contract's stipulation, have to be able to keep the promise laid down in the contract as his last, inexpropriable possession. Should he turn out to be able to *keep* his word, however, he would instantly cease to be Wanda's "absolute property."[8]

Once again, we can conclude that this covenant demands the impossible. For as absolute property, Severin-turned-Gregor is by definition unable to *keep* anything; he may only be *kept*, as object or thing. Yet, he can only assume this status as property if he keeps the promise formulated in the covenant. He promises to become a thing to be kept, but in keeping the promise, he must keep something for himself, something only he and none other may keep, thus ceasing to be an absolute possession in the very instant he promises to become one. He must keep something in order to be kept, must resist becoming an absolute property in order to be one. As a result, the covenant turns its own binding force into the property of a property, that is, into something that no one can keep, for the annihilation of the keeper's ability to keep is the very objective of the pact at hand. Severin may be regarded as property, but the rhetorical force that guarantees his objectification—his word, and with it the ability to keep it—must remain in his possession.

As a general conclusion resulting from fleshing out these contradictions, we may hold that the contract is inevitably rendered void because it demands the annihilation of the very factors making it possible. In order to maintain its status as covenant, the agreement between Wanda and her future servant structurally relies on the intactness of the latter's legal subjectivity, his persona as gentleman and citizen, his ability to give and keep his word of honor. Yet, it is precisely the intactness of his subjectivity and civic being that the contract seeks to undo. The masochistic contract thus deconstructs itself.

This conclusion is corroborated by the sense that there is a certain *wildness* to this contract. To the extent that it does not rely on any pregiven forms of social order or jurisdiction—it is not witnessed by a notary or filed through a preexisting system of legality or brought before a court—it seems radically to lack the power of enforcement. Which is to say, there is no social or political force making sure the signers follow the covenant's stipulations, its environment describing a sort of legal vacuum. In a way, the covenant therefore takes on a fictitious quality, doubling the promise it requires its signers to keep. The contract's very nature qua contract itself may be regarded as nothing put a promise, *the promise of a contract*, and a precarious one at that, for it lacks the instance, the executive force, that would make sure it is heeded. The masochistic contract amounts to nothing but the promise of a promise, a treaty already breached recording a word essentially unkept. Perhaps a word unkeepable.

First Promises, and Last

Considering its essential lack of pregiven institutions of the law and its enforcement, one could argue that masochism is destined to create its *own* institutionality and that its structure is therefore related to the coming about of the first social order as narrated in state theories such as those authored by Hobbes and Rousseau. In his *Leviathan*, Hobbes explicitly foregrounds the contract's promissory nature stating that "a Promise is equivalent to a Covenant" (95). Discussing the creation of what he calls the "Commonwealth," designed to overcome the state of nature, he further qualifies this statement by insisting that covenants can only take on a social function if they can also be enforced. Emphasizing this point, Hobbes deploys a notorious pun: "Covenants, without the Sword, are but Words," adding that they are "of no strength to secure a man at all. Therefore notwithstanding the Lawes of Nature, [. . .] if there be no Power erected, or not great enough for our security; every man will, and may lawfully rely on his own strength and art, for caution against all other men" (117–18). The core of Hobbes's argument, in this context, regards the necessity of establishing a monopoly of power through which the adherence to rules and covenants could be governed and enforced. This also means, however, that promising in Hobbes has to do with a certain relinquishment: to make a promise means to surrender, giving up the very force and potential for violence needed to keep the promise. This capacity for violence becomes subsumed in the figure of the sovereign, personification of the commonwealth.

If we attempt to construe the masochistic situation against the backdrop of the Hobbesian surrender, we note that the structure of masochism at once seems to adhere to and divert from the form of the first social contract. While it digresses from the Hobbesian model in that it precisely fails to establish a power great enough to enforce the contract, it echoes Hobbes to the extent that the masochistic promise, too, implies the performance of an abdication, the stance of desistance, a radical standing down. Instead of instating and establishing a type of sovereignty, however, masochism appears to seek its annihilation. Sovereign, to reiterate the axiom with which I began, is he who decides on *relinquishing* his sovereignty.[9] Together with the subject capable of keeping its promise, the masochistic covenant also extinguishes any instance that could guard and guarantee its enforcement. It writes up a promise made of nothing, uttered by no one, spoken into nothingness. While Hobbes's model narrates the creation of society out of a kind of nothingness, a sheer void of norms and order, the masochistic covenant achieves the reverse: a relinquishing into the void, the annihilation of civility through the promise of an impossible covenant.

Both projects meet at the place of the missing relay where a juridical authority is needed that would govern the very possibility of the promise, enforcing its stipulations. While in Hobbes, when the first promise is made, there is no preexisting social order that would govern and administer its realization, Sacher-Masoch inverts this structure and deactivates, through the very act of the promise, any kind of governing infrastructure. One could argue that the masochistic contract only *seems* to empower the mistress whereas, in fact, it relinquishes sovereignty at large. There is no juridical system and no "commonwealth" Sacher-Masoch's dominatrix could appeal to or rely on to enforce her contract; on the contrary, the masochistic agreement points to a void of legality.

Discussing the logic of the covenant in *Leviathan*, Werner Hamacher calls promises that cannot rely on a preexisting order or governing convention "wild promises," and he introduces them as follows:

> *In the uncertainty of whether there even are promises and whether they could be intended and kept as such, these promises are not only those of savages, they are savage, or wild, promises: nothing could guarantee that they would not be broken, or even that they are seriously intended and understood; everything could suggest that they are threats and attacks on the pride and vanity of those to whom they are given. ("Wild" 222)*

The wild promise, too, therefore, is but the promise of a promise. A promise's mere anticipation, an utterance not explicitly recognizable as promise, simply because, by virtue of its own illocution, it has to invent and instate the very order through which it could be recognized as what it is: a promise. Wild promisers are burdened with the task not only of giving and keeping their word but of establishing the very rhetorical order together with the conventional frame of reference through which this word could be heard, received, recognized, and adjudicated as promised—and *as promise*. The wild promise, in short, has to promise that there will be a promise, promise that this promise will be recognized as a promise, kept, remembered, perhaps broken as a promise.

The creation of an order of enforcement through the enunciation of the wild promise is bound up with a gesture of surrender: "natural men," whom Hamacher here, in tune with Hobbes, calls "savages," give up their weapons so as to become citizens subject to sovereign power. Structurally, the masochistic situation describes an inversion of this form, such that it is not the wild and natural right to violence in favor of citizenship that is given up, but, inversely, citizenship is relinquished for the possibility of being violated—relentlessly and without protection. Emphasizing the structural necessity of giving up the right to use force through the promise's performance, Hamacher, in his reading of Hobbes, throws into question the performative quality of the covenant. Insofar as the bearer and utterer of the wild promise surrenders his right to violence to the figure of the sovereign, the speech act allowing for this renunciation may in fact be a misnomer. For does the sheer abdication of my entire capacity to carry out actions still deserve to be called an *act*? Does an utterance that actively aspires to a profound *incapacitation* still get to be named a *speech act*? Hamacher concludes, "Every promise not only announces but also executes an abandonment of potential acts and speech acts, and this execution [. . .] takes place as a renunciation of virtually every act and speech act, and thus as speech de-activation" ("Wild" 225). He can make this general claim based on the observation that, under the conditions of the Leviathan, "[e]very act that is unified in itself and an act with others must be oriented towards the removal of its destructive traits, and must therefore occur as an action of its deactivation." Speech has to renounce its violence in order to make itself possible and binding. Making a promise, therefore, describes less an illocutionary act that could rely on an unrestrained force of execution than a specific type of rhetorical suspension, a certain adjournment, abdication, and abandonment of and in language.

If Hobbes's narrative aims to capture the *first* of all promises, the one through which society and with it the very possibility of uttering and keeping promises are invented, Sacher-Masoch, one could say, imagines the scenario of a *last* promise: the one after which no more promising can be, annihilation of the ability to give and keep a promise, an absolute and relentless recession into the inability to keep a given word. The masochist is a debilitated promiser. The promise at stake invokes the annihilation of all further promising. It radically incapacitates one's power to promise. If Hobbes instates the "Sword" to keep the "Word," Sacher-Masoch whips his word lifeless, draining it of all binding force. To the extent, however, that the last promise inevitably echoes the first, we observe that some of the rhetorical pitfalls marking the masochistic circumstance are due to the structure of the promise rather than being genuine markers of masochism's essence. The masochistic situation relies on the form of the promise—the promise of the promise, its implied inability to act and make happen, its linguistic deactivation. And with this reliance, it inherits the impossibilities and aporias inscribed in the rhetoric of promising.

Returning to the contract featured in Sacher-Masoch's novel, the one binding Severin's fate to the will of Wanda, there is one final stipulation that bears on this current train of thought. Toward the contract's conclusion, Wanda adds the following, ultimate provision: "Should Mrs. von Dunajew ever set her slave at liberty, Mr. von Kuziemski agrees to forget everything he has experienced or undergone in his capacity" (220). This final rhetorical ploy seems rather bizarre for a number of reasons. First, it insinuates a possible reversibility of the contract in that it imagines the option of setting Gregor free whereby, one surmises, he would again become Severin, regaining his civic identity. If that is the case, however, which is to say, if the process of annihilating his subjectivity and turning him into absolute property is indeed *reversible*, it becomes questionable whether the annihilation did in fact occur in the first place. If Severin renounces his identity in order to morph into Gregor, if he relinquishes his status as citizen and legal subject in order to become "absolute property," his surrender is predicated on an indubitable finality. No right is truly given up, no thingification truly absolute if the process is readily reversible. What is more, the covenant holds that this reversibility is conditioned on a perplexing demand, namely, the agreement to forget. Should the "slave" ever regain his freedom, he *promises to forget* everything he experienced in servitude.

Applied as a precautionary measure to prevent potential retaliation, the coercion to forget adds another critical complication to the

covenant's already complex and problematic rhetoric. As discussed above, the scene leading up to the contract's signing already unfolds as a dialogue about memory and forgetfulness. "Do you remember your oath?" Wanda asks Severin before insinuating that he "has already forgotten" about his intention to put the oath into writing and sign it. As it turns out, these preliminary remarks on Wanda's part already preempt a central motif of the covenant itself: while it functions as an aid to memory, something not to be forgotten, it demands of Severin to promise the sheer oblivion of his subjection. Yet, how does one promise to forget? Isn't any attempt actively to try and forget something a foolproof way to remember it? To the degree that promises are oriented toward the future, they must be assumed to rely on a certain absence of forgetfulness; in order for them to retain the possibility of being kept, they need to be remembered. The promise to forget, then, would affect the very structural condition that makes the act of promising possible in the first place. If a promise relies on memory to continue being a promise that may, one day, be realized, the promise of oblivion seems to undo the very basis on which it can be uttered and retained as promise.

In a way, the contractually requested oblivion would, in the final analysis, amount to a kind of double oblivion. In order to enter into the relationship of servitude with Wanda, as the contract specifies, Severin has to shed—that is, to forget—his existence as Severin and become Gregor. Gregor is nothing but Severin's oblivion; he is that which remains when Severin is forgotten. If Wanda's ultimate stipulation, however, reenvisions the possibility of freedom (and thus the reversibility of servitude), this possibility has to be predicated on the oblivion of oblivion: namely, Gregor's forgetting his having forgotten Severin. In other words, Gregor, the slave, has to forget that Severin, the gentleman, was once forgotten. He has to promise to forget that he once promised to forget himself. Severin's being is thus retrieved through a double oblivion that, in a way, has to forget itself so as to create the possibility of a future that can be called "free." *Re*-membrance emerges as the forgetting of forgetfulness.

Promising Animals

The second essay of Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* famously starts with the definition of the human being as "an animal *with the right to make promises*" (56). Nietzsche expresses astonishment at the establishment of such a right, as it could only come into being by deactivating a strong force tasked with the regulation of consciousness: the force of forgetfulness.

"Forgetting," he states, is "an active and in the strictest sense positive faculty of repression, [. . .] responsible for the fact that what we experience and absorb enters our consciousness [. . .] little while we are digesting it" (57). It thus assumes the role of the gatekeeper of consciousness; avoiding that the subject's perception be so flooded with impressions that no sense could be made of the world, its eclipse of reality guarantees a space for self-preservation and allows for the maintenance of "psychic order" (58). In other words, forgetfulness yields structure. From Nietzsche's perspective, it is not just an anonymous event that would simply *befall* the subject but marks an active pursuit instead. There is a *will* behind everything forgotten. Given the sheer force and necessity of this activity, Nietzsche expresses surprise at the emergence of an opposing force, a sort of memory that allows the subject to suspend the process of forgetting for a period of time, thus establishing the right to make a promise and keep it throughout a defined future. While active forgetfulness, says Nietzsche, allows us to embrace the present, its opposing faculty, the memory of the will, begets the possibility of predicting the future, ordaining in advance what is to come.

While Nietzsche's quasi dichotomy makes it seem as though promising and forgetting would simply exclude each another, it is noteworthy that he understands forgetfulness as something that marks the result of a positive activity, the operation of actively pursued inhibition of overflowing perceptions rather than an effect of mere inertia. The right to make promises, then, stems from the abrogation of this operation, opposing the desire to rid oneself of experience with the desire for its continuity. He writes,

> *Now this animal which needs to be forgetful, in which forgetting represents a force, a form of* robust *health, has bred in itself an opposing faculty, a memory, with the aid of which forgetfulness is abrogated in certain cases—namely in those cases where promises are made. This involves no mere passive inability to rid oneself of an impression, [. . .] but an active* desire *not to rid oneself, a desire for the continuance of something desired once, a real* memory of the will. *(58)*

Read against the backdrop of my discussion of Sacher-Masoch, it might at first glance seem that Nietzsche simply excludes the possibility of a promise to forget.[10] If active forgetfulness and the memory of the will are two opposing forces, it seems safe to assume that they exclude each other so radically that a promise of oblivion is not simply paradoxical but, indeed, unthinkable. Forgetfulness could therefore only be understood to exist at

the expense of our ability to promise, and vice versa. Still, these two forces must know a point of convergence, for they are both described as "actions." While forgetfulness is no mere *vis inertiae*, as Nietzsche puts it, but, rather, the product of a subjective act, the promise, as can be derived from the passage just quoted, is also more than a "mere passive inability to rid oneself of an impression," namely, the effect of an active pursuit.

Hence, instead of viewing them as mutually exclusive, the relationship between the force of forgetfulness and the memory of the will marks an intricate dynamic of acting and deactivation. As a matter of fact, one could define the "right to promise" as the accomplished deactivation of the pursuit of oblivion, while the latter may be conceived of as active resistance to any mnemonic desire. Viewed this way, memory is not an external supplement to the process of forgetting, but a function of forgetfulness itself: remembrance is the name of oblivion's deactivation; it's the act of undoing the action of forgetfulness. In turn, "acts" of oblivion do not constitute "external" interventions that would push up against or attempt to curb, from a place beyond, the desire to retain, memorize, and keep one's word; on the contrary, they have to be understood as inscribed in the very structure of the memory of the will such that forgetfulness occurs the instant memory is deactivated. Instead of designating a process located outside of forgetfulness, oblivion's abrogation, thus the coming into being of memory, marks a process of deactivation *within* the very desire to forget. Precisely to the degree that forgetfulness, in Nietzsche, describes an act, it must be viewed as subject to a possible surrender. Surrender marks the promise inscribed in every act.

Rather than positing exclusive and opposing abilities to act, the right to make promises and the will to oblivion are structurally identical. In the final analysis, this identification may be termed *the promise of oblivion*. And its "act" or "deactivation" must be understood as detached from any conscious subjectivity. For if Nietzsche considers the subject's consciousness, its ordered mind and ability to be present, a result of actively pursued oblivion, the question arises as to how such action could be taken in the first place. In other words, if active forgetfulness is needed in order for the subject to become a subject, then "who" committed the original act of forgetting that would have formed the subject's consciousness from the tortuous chaos of myriad impressions? We find here an aporia similar to that discovered in the rhetoric of masochism: once the promise of oblivion is at stake, the structure of subjectivity disintegrates, and we are faced with the reality of an act *sans* subject, a promise without anyone to give or keep it.

Further considering the structural co-imbrication of promising and forgetting the way Nietzsche sets it up, additional complexities become transparent. If the right to promise describes a deactivation that is located *within* the desire to forget, it is possible to argue that promises occur in the very moment that forgetting becomes self-reflexive. That is, if the possibility of the promise marks the absence of forgetting, then forgetting itself, one could say, *has to be forgotten* in order for the promise to arise. Forgetting has to forget itself so as to create the foundation for a memory of the will. If it is the case, however, that only the memory of the will can deactivate the force of forgetfulness, if it is therefore true that only the desire to promise can undo the threat of oblivion, then the possibility of promising must already "exist" prior to the will's forgetting itself. This promise would be the promise that comes before all other promises; it would be the genuine promise of oblivion. Because in order to create the possibility of promising, the will to forget has to promise its own oblivion. Hence, one can argue that it is the promise of oblivion that provides the ground for all promises. The promise of oblivion serves as the condition of possibility of both the act of promising and active forgetfulness. The promise to forget forgetting yields the future of promising; promising becomes possible by virtue of the promise to forget. If the nature of promising is predicated on the will to remember, this predication is in turn structurally predicated on the promise of oblivion. For without the promise to forget forgetfulness, no memory can be. And no memory can be without oblivion's promise to swallow it whole. More fundamental than Masoch's "last" promise—yes, even prior to Hamacher's "wild" promise—the promise of oblivion "gives" the future as one in which promises may be uttered and kept. Still, both promises, the masochistic promise as well as the savage's, unconsciously partake in, indeed owe their existence to, the structure of the promise of oblivion.

Nietzsche's odd species of a "promising animal" opens the door to envisioning other kinds of narratives, especially those that carry forward the playful gaiety inherent to Nietzsche's rhetoric. One thinks of Kafka, for instance, and a story whose substance we might very well call "masochistic," for it definitely tells of education and coming of age, of violence exerted on the body and the search for masters and teachers, the desire to be dominated and, finally, to dominate oneself. An ape named Rotpeter pens a report to a certain "Academy" whose exact nature is not defined in any detail. The peculiar author relates the tale of his becoming-human, expounding the decisions and dressage involved in the process. Needless to say, the conclusion of the present article is not the place to present an exhaustive reading

of this inexhaustible piece of prose, yet its brief invocation is nonetheless pertinent because Rotpeter's journey, as it turns out, has everything to do with the rhetoric of the promise.

"Exalted Gentlemen of the Academy," Kafka's protagonist begins his report, "You have granted me the honor of summoning me to submit to the Academy a report on my previous life as an ape" (76). Rotpeter's opening explanation, however, into which this initial address transitions, is dedicated to justifying why the summoned subject sees himself unable to comply with the Academy's wishes. The problem of memory occupies a seminal place in the context of this reasoning. Even though his "apedom" lies only five years behind him, he stands incapable of giving an account of it because unbecoming the animal he had once been was conditioned on a certain kind of oblivion: his "achievement," he claims, "would have been impossible had I wanted to cling obstinately to my origin, to the memories of my youth" (77). Kafka's "Report" thus commences with the sheer *inability* to report: the story to be told in these pages cannot be told, and it is this very incapacitation, the loss of story, that makes its narration possible in the first place. Only through the forgetting of his story can Rotpeter now sit down and write about the impossibility of giving account of the process that allowed him to cease being an ape. The story with which we, as Kafka's readers, are thus confronted, is firmly premised on its own untellability.

All that Rotpeter can recall and thus report to the Academy therefore took place *after* the moment he was captured. Instead of giving account of his previous life as an ape, he consequently narrates the trauma of being shot, caught, and abducted, in a wooden box, from his then natural habitat. It was during this transport that Rotpeter formed an intention: the only way of salvaging his existence and avoiding ending up a morose and miserable exotic animal in captivity lay less in breaking out and seeking freedom than in doing everything to become *like* those who captured him, the "unmolested" ones whom he observed walking up and down in front of his cage (81). This intention and its realization are in turn conditioned on an outlandish theory of the promise that Rotpeter introduces halfway into his account: "I saw these men walk back and forth, always the same faces, the same movements [. . .]. An exalted goal dawned on me. No one promised me that if I became like them, the cage door would be raised. Promises of that kind, for seemingly impossible fulfillment, are not given. But if fulfillment is achieved, the promises also appear subsequently, just where they had earlier been sought in vain" (81). There is a certain logic of likeness at play in this passage, expressed through the fantasy that if

Rotpeter could somehow manage to become "like" the men outside his cage, his captivity would be terminated. This fantasy takes on the structure of a promise, albeit an unworkable one: promises like this are not given, the narrator holds, for they "seem" impossible. Much hinges on the term *seem* in this context because it ensures that Rotpeter stops short of declaring the sheer impossibility of keeping such a promise. Yet, who would be the one keeping it, after all? Kafka picks an odd word for this phrase, *fulfillment* (in German, *Erfüllung*), as though this promise marked less a word to be kept than a desire or wish to be realized. Who would grant this wish fulfillment and who would thus reside on the side of seeming impossibility: the ape or the ones implored to uncage him? It is unclear who gets to utter and who to keep this almost impossible promise.

The suspicion that the envisioned promise is only "seemingly impossible to fulfill" allows Rotpeter further to speculate on the conditions of such fulfillment. He comes up with an elaborate schema that focuses on the temporality of promising and the manner in which the time of promising has to be contorted and superimposed on itself should a seemingly impossible promise come to fruition. Since the promise cannot be given in any present, its trajectory has to be inverted, such that its fulfillment is pursued *before* the promise can even intelligibly be made: "[I]f fulfillment is achieved," Rotpeter argues, "the promises also *appear subsequently*, just where they had earlier been sought in vain" (my emphasis). Instead of forming the condition of its own fulfillment, the giving of a promise appears as a retroactive event of merely secondary importance. This implies, however, that promises can only be fulfilled and therefore be recognized as promises if for the time of their fulfillment's pursuit they are not remembered as such. Remembrance is granted and provoked only by the ultimate fulfillment on which the promise "also appears subsequently." Hence, in order to secure the appearance of the promise as promise, the promise has to be forgotten for the entire time of its goal's pursuit. The oblivion of its giving and keeping, of working toward its seemingly impossible goal—the oblivion of the promise *as* promise—turns out, once again, to be the very condition of the promise's appearance as promise. There can be no promise without the promise's forgetting itself, its being forgotten.

The perplexing imperative of oblivion and its sway over the rhetoric of promising is already underscored in Rotpeter's above-quoted opening sentences in which the specter of *impossibility* is invoked for the first time. His achievement "would have been *impossible* had I wanted to cling obstinately to [. . .] the memories of my youth," the reporter declares

(77; my emphasis). Now we learn that this impossibility is essentially connected to the retrospective appearance of a *seemingly impossible* promise. In seamless accordance with Nietzsche's account, the loss of memory stated in Rotpeter's opening by no means describes an event that simply befell its subject, and instead constitutes the result of an active decision: his obstinate wish to cling to the memories of his youth was actively tilted into the will to forget.[11] In other words, Kafka's promising animal had to promise to himself to forget his previous life as an ape in order eventually to make apparent the fulfillment of the seemingly impossible promise of his life as a quasi human. Rotpeter's entire narrative, and with it the sheer possibility of Kafka's "Report," thus rests on the promise of oblivion. The promise to forget opens the mnemonic horizon for the appearance of all subsequent promises, as seemingly impossible as they may be.

Coda: The Forgetting of Language

One would assume that an investigation of the problem of forgetting dictates making reference to one of its most eminent thinkers in the twentieth century, especially to the extent that the forgetting in question is not thought as something that would befall a given subject, thus eliding certain lived experiences, barring them from preservation in subjective memory. Martin Heidegger famously claimed that forgetting affects the core of ontology itself, thus his insistence on what he calls *the oblivion of being*, the very tragedy of Western thought his work sought to unveil and undo. What is worth contemplating, for Heidegger, is not the unfortunate circumstance that, in the course of our lives, we human beings tend to forget this or that, however important the consequences of such mundane forgetting might be, but that *being* itself has been forgotten—forgotten and thus withdrawn from the grasp of an ontology that would not take the verb *to be* for granted but would instead interrogate the possibility of *being* as the horizon for the appearance of all existent *beings*. Yet, it is difficult to find moments in which Heidegger, in the wake of Nietzsche, Sacher-Masoch, and Kafka, sees a convergence of oblivion with the act of promising. Perhaps one reason for this absence lies in the understanding of language he put forth in his famous dictum *die Sprache spricht* ("language speaks") that did not hear (or refused to hear) the echo of a buried truth that wants to say *die Sprache verspricht* ("language promises"), and eventually even *die Sprache verspricht (sich)* ("language misspeaks" or "language promises [itself]") (see "Language" 189). It took de Man to open up this register and unveil the promise lying at the heart of language's truth.[12]

Heidegger himself rarely considers the promise; he seldom promises anything. One instance of note, however, occurs in an essay he dedicated to the German author Ernst Jünger, dispatched as a letter to mark Jünger's sixtieth birthday. Later on, the birthday missive became known under the title "On the Question of Being," and in it we can find a remarkable moment that closely ties together an explication of the oblivion of being with the possibility of promising. Let me quote the passage at length: "Yet oblivion does not simply *befall* the essence of being, as something apparently separate from the latter. It belongs to the issue of being itself, prevails as destiny of its essence. Correctly thought, oblivion, the concealing of the as yet unrevealed essence (in the verbal sense of essential unfolding) of ~~being~~, shelters untapped treasures and is the promise of a find that awaits only the appropriate seeking" (314). Remarkably, the passage puts the term *being* under erasure, presenting it as crossed out precisely to emphasize its lack of definition—and, perhaps, the impossibility of its being defined. What is more, however, the passage insists that oblivion is no secondary process that would merely supplement or externally delay and distract the inherently intact course of being's being. To the contrary, Heidegger maintains that oblivion belongs "to the issue of being itself," thus forming part of its destinal trajectory. To think being, then, means to think oblivion. Rather than stripping the coat of forgetting from the precinct of being, the philosopher is therefore called on to enter into oblivion, engage with oblivion for the sake of its entanglement with the question of being. Heidegger defines oblivion as a way of concealing being's essence, yet this concealment is at the same time essentially inscribed in the destiny of that which it conceals.

An unprecedented and profoundly atypical move has Heidegger ultimately divulge a close proximity between what he calls *oblivion* and a specific moment of language: deploying, in a seemingly uncritical manner, the verb *to be* in the third-person singular right after putting the term *being* under the erasure of two crossbars, he writes that "oblivion [. . .] *is* the promise" (my emphasis). The promise of what? The promise of "a find that awaits [. . .] the appropriate seeking," Heidegger says. Bewildering and profoundly consequential, the formulation cannot be chalked up to its translator's discretion, for the original, too, holds that "Vergessenheit [. . .] *ist* das Versprechen" ("Zur Seinsfrage" 415; my emphasis). The implications of this phrase are far reaching and severe. Setting aside, for the moment, the question of what it would mean to go looking "appropriately" for a trove merely promised, Heidegger's outright identification of oblivion with a

promise itself *reveals*, if you will, a deep truth about the nature of promising, a truth that we have observed in Sacher-Masoch and Nietzsche as well as in Kafka. It is as though the event of oblivion can only be articulated through the rhetoric of promising, as though a promise has to be given the moment oblivion is at stake—as though from the abyssal chasm of oblivion there will always sound this promise: once oblivion reigns, only the promise lasts.

With respect to Heidegger's own endeavor, the consequences of this affinity between *Vergessenheit* and *Versprechen* are equally grave. For if it is indeed the case that the destiny of being is essentially entangled with the concealment effected by its oblivion, then to identify oblivion with a promise would entail rephrasing the entire ontology of being in terms of the rhetoric of promising. If we wish appropriately to seek the trove of being, covered by the cloak of its oblivion, we ought to become philologists of the promise—for, henceforth, questioning the essence of being implies inquiring about the possibility of promising. Being thus becomes a speech act, one that Kafka might call "seemingly impossible." To draw such a conclusion, however, would mean to accept another convergence, namely the one that recognizes the oblivion of being to overlap with the oblivion of language.[13] If oblivion marks the essence of being and if this essence is identified with a promise and if this promise undoubtedly constitutes a moment in language, then Heidegger's formulation discloses, whether willingly or not, the sheer linguistic character of *being* itself. *Die Sprache verspricht (sich)* becomes reinscribed as "being promises (itself)." It promises itself in language. Promises the language of being.

At the end of the quoted passage, Heidegger speaks of the promise's object as "a find that *awaits* only the appropriate seeking" (my emphasis). It is important that the stance of waiting, in this context, is not ascribed to the one setting out to seek, nor to the one to whom the promise's fulfillment might finally be disclosed. To the contrary, waiting here is the stance of the find itself. That which is promised is bound to wait; that is, being, its retrieval from oblivion, is bound to wait. The stance of waiting corresponds to the temporality of the promise. Hence, as long as the remembrance of being remains but a promise, waiting designates the *form* of being as such.[14] Being waits as promised; which means that the structure of language as being's mode of disclosure through promising is essentially marked by the temporality of waiting. It is therefore quite possible that Maurice Blanchot had this passage of Heidegger's in mind when he penned a text titled *L'attente l'oubli*, published in 1962, seven years after Heidegger's letter to Jünger, and translated into English as *Awaiting Oblivion*.

As often with Blanchot, the text presents its reader with two schematically sketched interlocutors, intertwined in a mixture of dialogue, aphoristic ambition, and *récit*. At some point, one of them asks an odd question: "Did I ever promise you that I would speak?" The response does not tarry: "No," the other denies, "but it is you who, saying nothing and refusing to say anything and remaining bound to that which is not said, were the promise of speech" (59). Blanchot thus discovers, as we have seen many do before him, the necessity of a promise *prior to* any promise—one that need not be uttered as it is inscribed in the very silence that envelops or accompanies the possibility of speech. This promise may not be given or said out loud as it lingers, already and interminably, at the root of every utterance and expression as well as every loss of speech a speaker may encounter. It is the promise that emanates from the unsaid and the perhaps ineffable, from everything that still remains to be said but might never cross anyone's lips or become archived through ink on paper or buried in the hypermaterial depths of digital memory. This promise emanates from a speech forgotten—yet, forgotten in such a way that there might be no one left to remember it, perhaps in such a way that it had never been remembered in the first place.[15]

"I will see you better when we have forgotten to speak," one of Blanchot's speakers claims at a later point (77). The proffered response is perplexing: "But if I did not forget, I would not speak"—as though speech, the sheer possibility of it, might be retrieved only through oblivion; as though language were lodged inside its own forgetting; as though the loss, the sheer obliteration announced by the silence of its oblivion, showed language the only path toward expression. "'[I]t is as though you speak through forgetting; speaking, forgetting to speak.'—'Speech is given to forgetting'" (77). Which is to say that speech is lost in oblivion while at the same time it is through speech that oblivion speaks: speech *given over to* oblivion, but also voice *given to* oblivion. So that what comes to language, if anything may ever come to language, is always but the trace of a forgetting: the promise of speech that may only be uttered as unmarked loss. The promise of oblivion that lets await the disclosure of its language.

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Notes

1 The initial sentence of Krafft-Ebing's definition posits a stark contrast between Sade and Sacher-Masoch: "Masochism is the opposite of sadism" (195).

2 The adjective "political" here is qualified as *quasi* and the attributes "social" and "subjective" are equipped with quotation marks because masochistic and sadistic situations emerge precisely as *negotiations* of the question of who gets to be called a subject—not as given or preestablished interactions of preformed subjectivities. For reasons that shall become clear in the course of my argument, this caveat holds true more significantly in the case of masochism.

3 On this distinction, see Paul de Man's essay "Sign and Symbol in Hegel's *Aesthetics*" as well as Derrida's 1994 lecture "Archive Fever." The complex relation between memory and the archive already interested Derrida in the 1960s as evidenced by his essays "Freud and the Scene of Writing" and "Plato's Pharmacy." (Consider Levine for a recent assessment of Derrida's understanding of archival memory.)

4 It is critical to note that, in the context of Sacher-Masoch's novel, this contract, with which Wanda presents her future slave, is accompanied by a suicide note that reads, "Having been for many years weary of existence and the disappointments it brings, I have willfully ended my useless life" (221). Severin is asked to copy in his own handwriting the note that is meant to serve as protection for Wanda in case Severin should perish under her reign. There is, however, an interesting graphological difference at play that separates the contract from the note, the former requiring Severin's *signature*, the latter having to be written in his *handwriting*, which raises questions regarding the signatory quality of one's script. Moreover, the suicide note leaves open whose death it actually anticipates: since it does not include a name, its only identifier being the author's handwriting, it is unclear whether it ought to explain the demise of Severin or Gregor or both. The entire scene, the staging of the contractual agreement and the two documents involved, displays the ways in which the masochistic situation undermines and casts doubt on the figure of the sovereign author. This doubt culminates in Wanda's leery remark that Severin signed the contract with a shaky hand, as though the tremble somehow delegitimized his signature, so she gently takes hold of his hand to steady it before he sees his name appear on the document (222). The odd layering of hand on hand during the scene of signing is suggestive of yet another ambivalence: was it in fact Wanda, guiding his hand, who signed Severin's name in his stead?

5 As I will go on to discuss Kafka further down, it is worth mentioning, at this point, that the name Gregor is no mere coincidence in German literature. As a matter of fact, Kafka's most renowned protagonist, the "Ungeziefer" (or "vermin") waking up from uneasy dreams at the beginning of *The Metamorphosis*, is named Gregor Samsa. The affinity between Kafka and Sacher-Masoch is corroborated by the fact that Samsa's room is equipped with a framed picture that "showed a lady posed sitting erect, attired in a fur hat and fur boa"—quite obviously, an allusion to *Venus in Furs* ("Metamorphosis" 29; see also Anderson 136–38).

6 One could say that the masochistic contract reverses the logic of declarations as Derrida observed it. While the declaration constitutes

the declaring subject in the very moment of its signing, the masochistic contract, inversely, annihilates its signatory subject the moment it is signed. Analyzing the phrase "We [. . .] in the Name, and by the Authority of the good People of these Colonies," as it famously appears in the United States Declaration of Independence, Derrida writes, "But this people does not exist. They do *not* exist as an entity, it does *not* exist, *before* this declaration, not *as such*" ("Declarations" 10).

7 The masochistic threat to the logic of the contract is astutely observed by Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg in her monograph on male masochism, where she argues that through its stagings, masochism subverts the bourgeois promise of a contract that "assumes a preconstituted, coherent subject equal to and capable of entering into relations with other subjects" (14). The problem of signing away one's rights appears, in a different context, in a brief section of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (first published in 1835, thirty-five years before *Venus in Furs*), dedicated to the relationship between American men and women. Contrary to Sacher-Masoch's logic, Tocqueville sees in the surrender (of women) to (male) authority a path to corroborating one's status as subject, thus to increasing one's power: "American women," he writes, "derived a sort of pride in the willing surrender of their wishes and they felt their *stature increased* by their bending to this yoke" (698; my emphasis; I would like to thank Joan Wallach Scott for bringing this context to my attention). An exhaustive comparative analysis between Sacher-Masoch and Tocqueville would of course have to take into account the latter's claim that contrary to American men, "the European often becomes a woman's slave" (698).

8 Severin introduces the idea of becoming Wanda's property earlier in the narrative, during a scene in which he states, for the first time, the wish to become her slave, seeing himself "ready to endure anything in order not to lose [her]" (193). The strange logic of property at play in this passage suggests that the only way to "keep" her would lie in becoming her kept possession. Paradoxically, then, Severin's signing away his rights and becoming an absolute property roots in the desire to *possess* and not to *lose* Wanda (as *his* property).

9 This sentence is deliberately gendered. Throughout its early history, masochism appears as a predominantly male problem, justified by the harsh irony of the fact that relinquishing one's power is the sole prerogative of the powerful. Masochism initially appears as an imposition of male desire on a woman who retroactively appears to dominate, yet only by virtue of channeling the male fantasy that invented the entire scene.

10 Another possible path leading from Sacher-Masoch to Nietzsche would lie in considering the type of *resentment* anticipated in the masochistic contract whose language solicits the promise of oblivion precisely so that Severin/Gregor "will not entertain, under any pretext or in any manner, the thought of vengeance or reprisal" (220). If, however, the contract's realization coincides with the realization of Severin's masochistic desire, one wonders where this possible resentment could come from? As a tentative response to this question, one could highlight the possibility that the anticipated resentment emerges precisely *because* freedom is regained. Since

the relinquishing of freedom is the desired goal of the masochistic agreement, a subject who would regain its subjecthood would grow resentful precisely *through* this sudden gain of strength, this sudden reinstatement of authority and agency (see the first essay in Nietzsche's *Genealogy* 24–56).

11 It is noteworthy that comparative accounts of Nietzsche and Kafka, even those explicitly discussing the Rotpeter tale, usually abstain from engaging with the rhetoric of promising and its predicaments (see Norris 1245–51; and Wagner 100–101).

12 "*Die Sprache verspricht (sich)*; to the extent that [it] is necessarily misleading, language just as necessarily conveys the promise of its own truth" (de Man, *Allegories* 277). See also Derrida's discussion of this sentence (*Memoires* 97–101).

13 Number 29 of Hamacher's "95 Theses on Philology" comes to mind: "As the forgetting of language belongs to language, so the forgetting of philology belongs to philology. Only in virtue of its self-forgetting can philology pursue language without subsuming it under the form of knowledge; only because of its self-forgetting is it disposed to assume the form of a science and, more precisely, of ontology" (xxii). A footnote in Hamacher's essay "Affirmative, Strike" discusses language's capacity to posit (a promise, for instance), and argues that this capacity is premised on a stratum of language, as yet unformed, that merely "lets": it lets things occur, lets language cohere into form, lets acts of positing become possible. Remarkably, Hamacher distinguishes these different levels of language—unformed and formed, the one that lets occur and the one that posits form—in terms of *memory*: "[A]ll positings depend on this letting," he writes; they "preserve the memory of this *letting*, and are *indebted* to it" (1140n11). If this peculiar letting is responsible for language's taking shape and its becoming active as a positing and positive language, however, it also harbors the power to undo taken positions and corrode given forms (citing Benjamin, Hamacher speaks of "Ent-setzung" or "deposing"); hence, the memory of "letting" inscribed in every "positing" is inevitably the memory of its own oblivion and obliteration. Remembering their letting, linguistic positings remember the possibility of their own undoing, thus they remember their finitude and ultimate forgottenness. In this context, see also Daniel Heller-Roazen's monograph *Echolalias: On the Forgetting of Language*.

14 That the stance of waiting is an inherently masochistic one is underscored by Deleuze: "Waiting and suspense are essential characteristics of the masochistic experience. Hence the ritual scenes of hanging, crucifixion and other forms of physical suspension in Masoch's novels. The masochist is morose: but his moroseness should be related to the experience of waiting and delay" ("Coldness" 70–71). Against the backdrop of my analysis, it is possible to argue that the masochist's stance of waiting is constitutionally related to the structure of promising and its entanglement with oblivion so prominently featured in the masochistic contract.

15 There is a strong affinity between the logic operating in Blanchot's dialogue and a sentence from Benjamin's reflections on translation: "One might," Benjamin holds, "speak of an unforgettable life or moment even if all men had forgotten it" (10). The unforgettable about a thing forgotten by everyone, we could speculatively add, is

precisely its oblivion: what cannot be forgotten about a thing forgotten is solely its forgetting itself. And it is thus this forgetting that becomes the place of a possible remembrance, the promise of a precarious future.

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