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Another Body, Another Fantasy: Ambivalence, Drive, and the Letter in Freud's "A Child is Being Beaten"

Keywords

ambivalence, drive, fantasy, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Nassif, Oedipus complex, sexual difference

Abstract

In a 1967 article for *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, Jacques Nassif shifts the focus of Freud's "A Child is Being Beaten" from the aetiology of perversions to the question of fantasy. Nassif concludes that there is a fundamental fantasy exhibited in these cases and conducts an "archaeology" of this fundamental fantasy, locating the origin of fantasy with the origin of sexual difference: castration and the Oedipus complex. In the final lines of the article, Nassif wonders if "another fantasy," with a different verbalization that corresponds to a "another body," could be built on this structure, but admits his reading does not permit an answer to this question. I propose that a reading that shifts the focus in the text again provides both an affirmative answer to Nassif's question as well as indications of an elaboration. On my reading, without abandoning Nassif, ambivalence is the conceptual focus. Ambivalence, as Freud formulates it, is not just the reversal of feelings into their opposite, like love transformed into hate. Rather, ambivalence is the co-presence of things "different in their nature," and this co-presence modifies these things chained together. In the context of the fantasy in "A Child is Being Beaten," this shift in conceptual focus results in an alternative schema of the Oedipus complex, an analysis of drive as a linguistic representation of the ambivalent relation, and the Lacanian concept of the letter as the precipitate of this ambivalent relation circuted by the drive. The conclusion, here, is that the fantasies recorded in the text do not only express a fundamental fantasy about the origin of the sexes, as Nassif suggests, but express a fundamental fantasy about the conditions of signification *tout court*. The article ends on an open question—cued by Nassif's closing question in his essay—regarding

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the possibility of further reconciliation between queer theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis in light of this analysis of ambivalence, drive, and the letter.

Neko drugo telo, neka druga fantazma: ambivalenca, gon in črka v Freudovem »‘Otrok je tepen’«

Ključne besede

ambivalenca, gon, fantazma, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Nassif, Ojdipov kompleks, spolna razlika

Povzetek

V članku, ki ga je leta 1967 objavil v *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, Jacques Nassif v obravnavi Freudovega spisa »‘Otrok je tepen’« premakne poudarek z etiologije perverzij na vprašanje fantazije oziroma fantazme. Nassif ugotavlja, da se v obravnavanih primerih razkriva temeljna fantazma in se loti njene »arheologije«, pri čemer izvor fantazme umesti v izvor spolne razlike: kastracije in Ojdipovega kompleksa. V zadnjih vrsticah članka se Nassif vpraša, ali bi bilo na tej strukturi mogoče zgraditi »neko drugo fantazmo« z drugačnim ubesedenjem, ki bi ustrezala »nekemu drugemu« telesu, a prizna, da njegovo branje ne dopušča odgovora na to vprašanje. V prispevku zagovarjam tezo, da dodatni premik fokusa omogoči pritrđen odgovor na Nassifovo vprašanje, obenem pa nakaže možnosti nadaljnje razdelave. V mojem branju – ki se ne odvrne od Nassifa – je konceptualni fokus ambivalenca. Ta, kot formulira Freud, ni le sprevernitev čustev v njihovo nasprotje, denimo ljubezni v sovraštvo. Ambivalenca je, nasprotno, soprisotnost reči, ki so »različne po svoji naravi«, in soprisotnost modificira te med seboj spete reči. V kontekstu fantazije v spisu »‘Otrok je tepen’« ta premik konceptualnega fokusa proizvede alternativno shemo Ojdipovega kompleksa, analizo gona kot jezikovne reprezentacije ambivalentnega razmerja in lacanovski koncept črke kot usedlino tega razmerja, okrog katerega kroži gon. Odtod sledi, da fantazije, ki jih popisuje Freudovo besedilo, ne izražajo le temeljne fantazme o izvoru spolov, kot predlaga Nassif, temveč obenem temeljno fantazmo o pogojih označevanja nasploh. Prispevek sklenem z odprtim vprašanjem – na katerega napelje Nassifovo lastno sklepno vprašanje – o možnosti nadaljnega zbližanja med kvirovsko teorijo in lacanovsko psihoanalizo, ki ga odpre tovrstna analiza ambivalence, gona in črke.

Introduction: Is it Possible to Subvert Oedipus?

Toshio Matsumoto's 1969 film *Bara no Sōretsu* or *Funeral Parade of Roses*, opens on an amended quotation from Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal*: "I am the wound and the blade—the victim and the executioner." The film blends documentary interviews with gender nonconforming people of 1960s Tokyo together with a re-telling of the myth of Oedipus. This latter thread follows the life of a trans woman, Eddie, in a disjointed montage.

Though the following linear presentation is perhaps a betrayal of the film, the much-abbreviated story goes like this: As a child, Eddie was beaten by her father. When her father abandons Eddie and her mother, Eddie suggests to her mother that she still has Eddie to support her. Her mother mockingly laughs at her in response. Sometime later, Eddie finds her mother with another man, and Eddie stabs them both using a knife. Now an adult, Eddie works at The Genet, a gay bar and brothel. The Genet is managed by Gonda, with whom Leda, another trans woman and the madame of the bar, lives; the two are in a relationship. However, Leda correctly begins to suspect that Eddie and Gonda have a secret sexual relationship. To Eddie, Gonda promises to make her the new madame of the bar. Leda is later found lying in her bed, having committed suicide, draped in a veil, and surrounded by roses. On the floor are two dolls, one with a nail in its upper chest, and the other with a nail in each eye. After Leda's funeral, Eddie is promoted to madame of the Genet. While Eddie takes a shower after having sex with him, Gonda finds a book containing a photograph of Eddie with her parents. Though a hole has been burnt through the face of Eddie's father in the picture, Gonda recognizes Eddie's mother as his former wife and the young child as his. Upon this realization, Gonda kills himself with a knife. Upon seeing this, Eddie takes the knife and stabs herself in each eye before stumbling outside in front of a crowd of people.

It is obvious that this is a parody of the classical myth of Oedipus. The film itself nods to the reference material by including posters advertising performances of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* in the background of one of the scenes. However, in *Funeral Parade of Roses*, instead of the son killing the father and sleeping with the mother, it would seem a strict inversion of the myth of Oedipus has occurred: the daughter has killed the mother and slept with the father. For a Jungian, this would represent a dramatization of the Electra complex instead. Yet, the *tableau*

of the film is far more complicated than either of those understandings would have it, not least because Eddie is not a cisgender man or woman but perhaps more importantly because of the play of psychosexual resemblance, difference, and ambivalence incarnated in the androgyny and queerness of most of the cast and their interrelations. Hence, the film is more appropriately called a “subversion” rather than an “inversion” of the myth of Oedipus and the Freudian schema of the psychological complex associated with it.

The film’s subversions foreground the questions of my inquiry of certain fundamentals of psychoanalytic theory. Is the Oedipus complex invariant? If so, which schema (or schemata) of Oedipus are we bound to refer to and return to in our theory? Does any Oedipal schema necessitate conformity to a path of normal psychosexual development whereby a man or a woman lives up to the ideal of their sex? Or, can another body, another fantasy, form on the same structures that undergird Oedipus?

Jacques Nassif’s 1967 essay on Freud’s “A Child is Being Beaten” opens up this question for other heirs of the Lacanian conceptualization of the fundamental fantasy. In this essay, Nassif reads the text as if fantasy were the matter at issue rather than Freud’s explicit aim of elaborating an aetiology of the perversions.¹ In doing so, Nassif follows Freud’s argument closely, explicating the concept of fantasy in terms of the content, object, and signification of the fustigation fantasies.

To begin, I present the basic concepts and terms that arise in both Freud’s and Nassif’s respective analyses of the empirical material recorded in “A Child is Being Beaten,” namely the Oedipus complex and ambivalence. From here, I retrace Nassif’s sidetracking of Freud and the place and function of the Oedipus complex in both Freud’s and Nassif’s analyses of the clinical vignettes of fustigation fantasies. Then, I problematize the particular schema of Oedipus both theorists adopt, taking a cue from Freud himself that ambivalence in the Oedipal configuration might not be based on the child’s rivalry with the parent of the same sex, as is often unquestioningly assumed. Alongside that analysis, I contextualize this alternative schema of the Oedipus complex within the clinical

¹ Jacques Nassif, “Fantasy in ‘A Child is Being Beaten,’” trans. Holden M. Rasmussen, *Filozofski vestnik* 46, no. 3 (2025): 9–32, <https://doi.org/10.3986/fv.46.3.01>.

vignettes presented in “A Child is Being Beaten.” Subsequently, I initiate my own reading of that text, treating the text as if the core issue were neither the aetiology of the perversions (Freud’s frame of inquiry) or fantasy (Nassif’s) but ambivalence within the Oedipus complex, and I follow the same three tracks of elaboration as Freud and Nassif: the tracks of the content, object, and signification of the fustigation fantasies. When the focus is shifted to ambivalence, the object of the fustigation fantasy is not the sex of the beaten child but is instead the drive as the representation, in words, of the relation and limit between somatic, libidinal experience and symbolic, psychosexual reality. In turn, the signification does not directly correspond to the meaning of the fantasies and the meaning of the positions of the players in any version of the fustigation fantasies but is instead the letter, Lacan’s concept that names the substrate of all language and signification.

The advancement I make through Nassif’s opening suggests a path forward for better understanding “another fantasy” other than that presumed to be normal according to the simple schema of the Oedipus complex proposed by Freud and adopted by Nassif. In other words, this argument heralds a different approach to the question of transgender, queer, and otherwise sexual and gender “nonconformity” than ones hitherto taken by Freudians and Lacanians alike. This final point is merely an implication; it is an opening made in like manner to Nassif’s at the close of his 1967 article. The substance of the present article concerns the rejection of the simplest schema of the Oedipus complex and a conclusion that the fustigation fantasies do not express a fundamental fantasy about castration and sexual difference but instead seem to express a fantasy about the conditions of signification *tout court*.

Nassif’s Sidetracking of Freud: Fantasy, Oedipus, and Ambivalence

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In that 1967 article in *Cahiers pour l’Analyse*, Nassif comes to the same questions I posed in the penultimate paragraph of the Introduction. Though he poses these questions from within a very different context to ours, they nonetheless present us with an opening, a refreshing reading of Freud, and a novel approach to the production of psychoanalytic theory. This opening allows me to suggest certain innovations to Freudian and Lacanian doxa.

Nassif subjects Freud's 1919 "A Child Is Being Beaten': A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversions" to a provocative reading operation that he characterizes with the following:

There is no doubt that in [Freud's] manifest project the fantasy of fustigation is exposed and detailed only in order to provide an example of perversion, the veritable focus of interest. What we would like to do is properly decenter the subject to shift the spotlight and focus it on a precise sequence of the theoretical field that Freud works on; in short, to act as if the problem of fantasy, at the level of a latent project, were being approached for its own sake through this text.²

Nassif then tells us the intriguing result of his decision to treat the elaboration of fantasy as the manifest project of Freud's text: the fantasy crystallized in the statement "A child is being beaten" is not a fantasy belonging to an individual neurosis but is "a metaphorical representation of a fundamental fantasy. In this case [...] it is a castration fantasy whose role is to express the origin of the difference of the sexes."³ Reframed in this manner, the fustigation fantasies detailed in Freud's clinical vignettes thus become expressions of more fundamental and invariant structures. The problem of the aetiology of perversions is put aside in order to investigate the question of the nature of the unconscious, fundamental fantasy and what exactly this unconscious, fundamental fantasy exposes about the nature of subjectivity. In investigating this question, Nassif eventually proposes an "archaeology of the subject," less concerned with the case-historical genesis of a perversion expressed in fustigation fantasies and more concerned with the question of sexual difference and the acquisition and construction of sexed and gendered behaviors and dispositions.

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In other words, Nassif's "archaeology" uncovers processes of differentiation and identification as base elements of a fundamental fantasy. Such processes are *represented* by the permutations of the fustigation fantasies across time, and these permutations are expressed by the *wording* or the verbalization of the fantasy.⁴ Importantly, this wording expresses an ambivalence; beating (read:

² Nassif, 10.

³ Nassif, 11.

⁴ Sigmund Freud, "A Child Is Being Beaten': A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversions," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), 17:185.

displeasure) coexists side-by-side with loving (read: pleasure) in one form or another in each of the permutations. Regarding this, Nassif writes,

Freud does employ the concept of verbalization on several occasions (which I have found expressed in English by the term “wording”). In this context, and in support of our preceding interpretation (beating—fucking), Freud remarks [. . .] that intimacy between parents is thought of in terms of relations of another order, such as sleeping together, undressing oneself in front of the other, etc. [. . .] Verbalization here is thus a simple form of transposition that does not involve any imbrication in a process of ego-defense. It concerns nothing more than the verbal expression of signifiers already known and immediately interpretable where a kind of “secondary elaboration” comes into play at the level of the vocabulary available to or, rather, lacking in the subject.⁵

This process of “secondary elaboration” and the transposition of descriptions of one type of relation into another are subtended by a complex function that allows for the substitution of images or words: the sex act can become something else in the wording of the child. This merely describes the changes and how they occur in the verbalization, though. What is more fruitful to follow is the implication that prior to any specific event or experience, the individual child has at their disposal the means to combine, or rather “co-present” things. This suggestion leads us to venture the claim that some underlying element, function, or process depends upon the co-presence of different significations in order to “make sense,” to try to construct a cogent reality wherein one has a position that in turn grants oneself meaning.

The means to “co-present” things different in their nature is our capacity for ambivalence. “Ambivalence” does not simply describe feelings or affects that turn into their opposite, like love turning into hate or attraction turning into repulsion. Tadej Troha explains why Freud’s usage of the term “ambivalence” cannot be reserved solely for the description of this transformation or reversal feelings:

[The] frequent coexistence [of love and hate], their simultaneous focus on the same object, provides the most important examples of the ambivalence of feeling. If this were all, ambivalence would serve only as a description of a special

⁵ Nassif, “Fantasy,” 17.

case of reversal, more precisely, it would designate the consequences of one of the cases of reversal, the coexistence of opposite feelings that a subject has for the same object.⁶

As such, Troha proposes an extension of the concept of ambivalence, one in line with Freud's own usage, even if he seldom spells this out for us. For example, in "A Child is Being Beaten," Freud recognizes the fact that seemingly opposite characteristics of the drive may exist alongside one another. He writes that as time passes "an instinctual impulse, its (passive) opposite may be observed alongside of it deserves to be marked by the very apt term introduced by Bleuler—'ambivalence.'" ⁷ And, commenting on this same passage, Troha argues,

The motif for extending the use of the concept seems clear: what makes up the essence of ambivalence is not determined substantially in terms of love and hate but is a matter of a formal coexistence.⁸

[. . .]

The second member of the pair does not eliminate the first one, the substitute does not annul the original. In this sense, ambivalence is no longer a specific characteristic of a special case of the reversal into opposite, but precisely the point in which both processes that are declaratively "different in their nature" lose their fundamental distinguishing feature.⁹

This extension of the concept of ambivalence aptly captures the core of the child's ability to hold together two ideas, seemingly opposed, and develop a cogent system of reference and signification on that basis. In this process, the "primary" elaboration is usurped by what Nassif calls the "secondary elaboration," annulling the first and constructing a new meaning which permits the elements to formally coexist.

Furthermore, and perhaps most overlooked despite the rise in attempts to bridge theoretical psychoanalysis with queer theory, the determination of ambivalence as the formal coexistence or co-presence of things different in their nature clarifies the essence of what Freud names "bisexuality" to describe the co-presence

⁶ Tadej Troha, "On Ambivalence," *Problemi International* 1 (2017): 229.

⁷ Sigmund Freud, "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes," in *Standard Edition*, 14:131.

⁸ Troha, "On Ambivalence," 230.

⁹ Troha, 230; quoting Freud, "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes," 14:127.

of both masculine and feminine attributes in an individual. We are justified in calling the constitutive androgyny of the human animal an instance of ambivalence since it bears the two features described by Troha. First, there is the co-existence of things “different in their nature.” Again, we are not dealing with opposites but with things that typically receive their meaning through their differences and resemblances. In this case, both masculinity and femininity describe something about the behavior or disposition of a person and the signals of their sex, signals which can include but are not limited to their secondary sex characteristics, and which indubitably take on different if not opposing forms in different contexts. The interpretation or “reading” of these signals position the individual relative to others through their resemblances and differences. The foregoing is a simple, general description of the social assignation of a person’s position on the basis of sex and gender; psychoanalysis complicates this assignation in providing evidence that these elements coexist *and annul one another*. This is the second feature described by Troha, and in this case it is important to dispense with Freud’s use of the term “bisexuality” since we are no longer handling an elaboration of the mixture of two things but their annulment and transformation into something else. Yet, at this stage, what this something else could be is opaque, and we must not rush to the conclusion that it is a third sex or gender since this process of annulment and transformation likely affects something more fundamental than both the names for sex-assignments and gender identifications as well as the social utility of that nominalism.

This opens a new approach that branches from Nassif’s own sidetracking of Freud’s text, an approach which will clarify the opacity introduced by the extension of the concept of ambivalence. Indeed, though the conceptualization of the perversions may appear to us obsolete, the empirical subject-matter of “A Child is Being Beaten” appears still fecund over a century after its initial publication as a result of Nassif’s reading. According to Nassif, the ambivalent relation dramatized in the fantasy observably concerns sexual difference, and specifically concerns a more fundamental, underlying fantasy about the “origin of the difference of the sexes,” according to Nassif.¹⁰ This, however, depends on our understanding of the Oedipus complex since the changes in the permutations all bear, in some way or another, on the sex of the figures in the fantasy, as Nassif also observes. In lieu of a more precise formulation from Nassif’s pen, it seems

¹⁰ Nassif, “Fantasy,” 11.

that we ought to surmise that Nassif accepts Freud's famous articulation of the Oedipus complex from *The Ego and the Id*:

In its simplified form the case of a male child[’s passage through the Oedipus complex] may be described as follows. At a very early age the little boy develops an object-cathexis for his mother, which originally related to the mother’s breast and is the prototype of an object-choice [. . .]; the boy deals with his father by identifying himself with him. For a time these two relationships proceed side by side, until the boy’s sexual wishes in regard to this mother become more intense and his father is perceived as an obstacle to them; from this the Oedipus complex originates. His identification with his father then takes on a hostile coloring and changes into a wish to get rid of his father in order to take his place with his mother. Henceforward his relation to his father is ambivalent; *it seems as if the ambivalence inherent in the identification from the beginning had become manifest*.¹¹

In this simplified form, which Freud deems sufficient “for practical purposes,” the child develops a rivalry with the parent of the same sex. There are two outcomes of this inherently ambivalent identification. Freud calls one of these “more normal”: the child comes to further identify with the parent of the same sex while relinquishing their claim to the other parent as a love-object. The other outcome is an inversion: the child identifies with the parent of the opposite sex, relinquishing their claim to them as a love-object. In a young boy, the former outcome results in a more masculine disposition since he identifies with the father in a less ambivalent fashion, while the latter results in a more feminine disposition, and often in homosexuality and an even more pronounced ambivalence. The schema expresses an identical function for young girls, according to Freud, with the difference being that the mother is the rival.¹² Moreover, Freud specifies here that the relation between the child and the rival parent is always already ambivalent; ambivalence is there from the beginning, is even a condition of forming the rivalrous relation Freud is telling us characterizes every Oedipal configuration.

In the context of the fustigation fantasies Nassif and Freud analyze, given the evident importance of the sex of both the batterer and the beaten child in the

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, “The Ego and the Id,” in *Standard Edition*, 19:31–32; my emphasis.

¹² Freud, 19:32.

fantasies, the crux of the issue arguably lies in whether and how the child identifies with a feminine or a masculine position. In a configuration wherein the batterer and the beaten child are male, and wherein the beaten child is the same as the author of the fantasy, the fantasy seems to express a homosexual desire for the father. Nassif and Freud characterize one such fantasy of this kind as such, in fact.¹³ If we retain this understanding of the Oedipus complex, an understanding Freud himself calls a simplification rendered in the name of “practical purposes,” then we would be permitted in thinking, as Nassif does, that the whole of the fustigation fantasies express a more fundamental fantasy about sexual dimorphism and the child’s position within a psychosexual matrix coded by sexual difference and sexual dimorphism. The entirety of phantasmatic identification would depend on whether and how one identifies with one or the other sex as represented by the parents in a heterosexual coupling.

There may be skepticism on the part of some readers towards the heteronormativity of the theoretical portrait of development detailed just above. For my part, I contend that the view that all processes of identification and differentiation are a consequence of “the origin of the difference of the sexes” is not theoretically complete. This is partially because there is a “complicating element” in Freud’s simple schema of the Oedipus complex, but it is mostly because the characteristics of the fustigation fantasies contradict the conclusion that it is anatomical sexual dimorphism or even the more abstract concept of sexual difference that determine how one traverses fantasy. Indeed, in Nassif’s final analysis, such a proposition is a temptation to be countered since the matter can be immediately unsettled by posing a necessary question. Nassif closes the article on this discussion, writing,

if it is on the structure exposed by castration that the fantasy of being beaten is grafted, it is obviously not the difference of the sexes that by itself makes the fantasy. Or one could ask oneself, could another fantasy not form, with a different verbalization, on the ground of this same structure, based on this same archaeological foundation, but according to the individual history of a particular body?¹⁴

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¹³ Nassif, “Fantasy,” 24; Freud, “A Child Is Being Beaten,” 17:185.

¹⁴ Nassif, 31; Nassif’s emphasis.

In other words, the somatic, libidinal experiences and psychosexual, *symbolic* reality that compose the events of rivalry in the Oedipal configuration are secondary; they expose a structure rather than create one, and it is on that exposed structure that the ambivalent relation verbalized through the fustigation fantasy of “A child is being beaten” is grafted. Could another fantasy not form, with a different verbalization, on the ground of the same structure exposed by castration, based on the same archaeological foundation, but according to the history of a different body? In other words, are sexual difference, castration, and Oedipus intertwined in such a way to destine the subject for a particular formation, a normal path of psychosexual development or even sexualization?

To propel Nassif’s examination forward, I propose a sidetracking of his reading, one that foregrounds an elaboration of a theory of the drive that takes into account that “complicating element” of “bisexuality”—now in the new guise of “constitutive, psychosexual ambivalence”—as if it were the manifest project of Freud’s text. In other words, it is only due to Nassif’s adroit reading operation, where he decenters Freud’s explicit aim and takes the elaboration of fantasy as the manifest project of the text of “A Child is Being Beaten,” that we can conduct another, complementary reading operation of both his and Freud’s text together. Hence, I will retrace some of Nassif’s steps to conduct a reading that would permit responding to the question he poses at the close of his text.

The Oedipus Complex and the Fustigation Fantasy

Nassif appears to have the simplest schema of Oedipus in mind when he claims that the fustigation fantasies detailed by Freud are a representation of a more fundamental fantasy of castration in confrontation with sexual difference. However, in retracing Nassif’s reading, reasons emerge to adopt an alternative but unexplored schema hesitantly offered by Freud in *The Ego and the Id*. My own sidetracking of the reading of “A Child is Being Beaten” towards an examination of ambivalence begins from these reasons. Let us first remind ourselves of Freud’s own track through the material offered by these fustigation fantasies, though.

In “A Child is Being Beaten,” Freud posits that there are three phases of the fustigation fantasy.¹⁵ The form “A child is being beaten” is phase C, and it is what first appears in analysis as an utterance made in free association. The absence of the batterer from the verbalization—or the “wording” as Freud puts it in English—is the most obvious feature of this permutation, as is the seeming anonymity of the child being beaten. In phase A—temporally the earliest phase in the analysand’s life but coming second through in the work of analysis—the child derives pleasure from fantasizing a beating of a rival. The child being beaten “is invariably another child, most often a brother or a sister if there is any[;]” the one doing the beating is the father.¹⁶ So, the fantasy is worded as, “My father is beating the child (he only loves me).” In this phase, it is clear who is hurt and who is loved, but the loving is implied and dependent on the hateful harm inflicted on this rival child. It is only in phase B that the child producing the fantasy becomes the one being beaten by the father. According to Nassif, this “is what Freud expresses in the language of overdetermination, which is actually the language [*langage*] of co-presence in the same archaeological disposition where being beaten itself continues to signify being loved.”¹⁷ The wording in phase B is modified to: “My father is beating me (I am being beaten by my father).” In this shift, “loving” has been occulted by “beating,” and in this process loving and hating become entwined by the verb “to beat” or *battre* in French. For Nassif this phase is paramount because it attests to the fact that there is no simple disappearance or effacement of the identity of the batterer from the fantasy; between “My father is beating the child” and “A child is being beaten” there is a distinctive break and a transformation rather than a simple effacement, all evinced by the phase B verbalization.

In summary, the inventory of the phases of the fustigation fantasies as recorded in the text looks like this:

- Phase A: “My father is beating the child (he only loves me).”
- Phase B: “My father is beating me (I am being beaten by my father).”
- Phase C: “A child is being beaten.”

¹⁵ Freud, “A Child is Being Beaten,” 17:185–86.

¹⁶ Freud, 17:185.

¹⁷ Nassif, “Fantasy,” 26.

In tracing these permutations and the shifts that occur in a play of resemblance and difference, Nassif explains that his reading entails following three tracks Freud himself highlights: (1) the track of the content of the fantasy—who is being beaten and who the batterer is—(2) the track of the object of the fantasy—which here refers to the sex of the beaten child—(3) and the track of the signification of the fantasy—the interplay of love and hate through the verb “to beat.”¹⁸ My sidetracking will begin on that second track, that of the object, and I will redefine this object not as the sex of the child being beaten but as the drive. To wit, the analysis of “signification” will accordingly change on the basis of that analysis.

Now, the first track focuses on the content of the beating fantasy. The “content” refers to the description of the roles played out in the scene of the fustigation fantasy. In each of the cases, there is the latest, phase C formulation with the content of “A child is being beaten:” the batterer is undisclosed, and the author of the fantasy is “looking on.”¹⁹

In phase B the content is almost always a construction in analysis. It takes the form: “My father is beating me (I am being beaten by my father).” This construction aims at rendering clear, for the analysand, that what is at stake in the fantasy is the repression of their sexual choice for their father. Whereas the fantasy in phase A is the child’s imagined reality of a punishment for those whom they must share the father’s affection, the phase B permutation is only made possible by a repression of the pleasure associated with the object-choice for the father, transforming “to love” into a verb associated with displeasure: “to beat.” This changes the role of the author of the fantasy from onlooker to the beaten child.

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Nassif, here, highlights that in focusing on the content of the fantasy for its own sake rather than for the sake of describing the origin of the perversions, we begin to see that we are dealing with some remnant of castration, the very early encounter with the fact of the difference of the sexes and its later ossification into the Oedipus complex. This is because the transformations of the fantasy are characterized by the changes (or lack thereof) in the sex of each of the players.

At this stage, Nassif tells us that his reading only describes horizontal

¹⁸ Freud, “A Child is Being Beaten,” 17:184; Nassif, 20.

¹⁹ Freud, 17:186.

modifications and differences: little boys are like this, and little girls are like that. This type of description does not offer anything more than what colloquial expressions of the difference of the sexes already provide us, like “knowledge” that men come from Mars and women from Venus, as the playground proverb goes. This is a methodological consequence and limitation since isolation of the content of the fantasy from its other elements can result only in these dead-end descriptions. Freud’s own approach focuses primarily on the content of the fustigation fantasy with only a secondary interest in the “object” of the fantasy, i.e. the sex of the beaten child. Indeed, in this article Nassif highlights that Freud himself fails to mention that he has documented cases—that of the Rat-Man and the Wolf-Man, namely—where the beating was localized in places other than those described in these vignettes: the penis versus the buttocks, for example.²⁰ It would seem that following the track of the content fails to illuminate much more about the character, structure, and logic of fantasy. Hence, Nassif directs us along two other and more theoretically fecund tracks.

The second track—that of the “object”—advances the endeavor. By “object” Nassif is referring to the sex of the person being beaten in any of the permutations of the fantasy. The importance of this track is most clearly exhibited in phase B of the fantasy. In phase B, the child being beaten is the same as the author of the fantasy and the batterer is always the child’s father or one of his substitutes. In most of the cases recorded in “A Child is Being Beaten” phase B is a construction offered in the analysis. Freud suggests to these analysands that this fantasy must have been repressed, being a logical intermediary step towards the ultimate anonymous phase of the fantasy—“A child is being beaten”—where the child is no longer identical to the author and the batterer is notably absent from the formulation. From phase A, which is a recollection, to phase C, which is the articulated formulation, the fantasy is anonymized, and the question concerns

²⁰ Nassif interprets a particular passage from the case-history of the Rat-Man as indicating a beating on the penis, though the text is actually ambiguous as to the location of the father’s strikes on the Rat-Man’s body in the described episode. It is clear, however, that the beating is tied to masturbation and hence involves the penis in the clinical construction Freud offers to the Rat-Man here. This construction elucidates how the Rat-Man unconsciously and retroactively constructed his own fustigation as a chastisement for experiencing sexual pleasure. Sigmund Freud, “Notes upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis,” in *Standard Edition*, 10:205. However, in the case of the Wolf-Man, it is clear that the beatings are localized on the penis. Sigmund Freud, “From the History of an Infantile Neurosis,” in *Standard Edition*, 17:26.

what could warrant the redaction of the identities of the players between these two phases. Hence, Freud offers the phase B articulation “My father is beating me” which must be repressed to delimit an incestuous and potentially homosexual desire for the batterer.

Crucially, in one of the clinical vignettes of an adult, homosexual man, Freud tells us that phase B was not a construction but rather offered as the enunciated form of the fantasy in the analysis.²¹ This is where Freud draws inspiration for the construction of phase B in the other cases, and it would be tempting to suggest that the man’s retention of this form of the fantasy signals his arrested development in the Oedipus complex. Indulging this temptation, one could argue that rather than accept the superiority of his father in the rivalry for the affection of the mother, the homosexual man comes to identify as the romantic and sexual partner of the father instead. After all, the heterosexual women and the heterosexual man detailed in the same text seem to have repressed this phase, if they experienced it at all.

Given that Nassif’s underlying understanding of the Oedipus complex is precisely that simplest schema, the import of the second track, that which examines the changes in the sex of the beaten child, is clear, for it permits drawing a genetic relation between any of the phases to the child’s resolution (or lack thereof) to their rivalry with the parent of the same sex. This means that Nassif’s proposed “archaeology of the subject,” where archaeology is understood as an analytical method of uncovering origins—or more “primitive” or fundamental elements at the least—depends on the simplest schema of the Oedipus complex since it is only in this schema that the sex of the child and the sex of the parent maintain a fixed signification: boys are like this and should become men; girls are like that and should become women. The stability offered by the simplest schema of Oedipus lends itself to linking the signification of the fantasy to the difference or resemblance of the sex of the beaten child to the author of the fantasy. This construction of the processes of identification and differentiation *vis-à-vis* sex is only intelligible if the rivalry of the Oedipal configuration is taken to be a blueprint or genetic index.

²¹ Freud, “A Child is Being Beaten,” 17:199–200.

However, though the child is identical to the author of the fantasy in phase B, the beaten child in the fantasy bears distinctively androgynous traits and an androgynous signification. This complicates the differentiation Nassif makes between object and signification because the sex of the child is irrelevant to the fustigation in these clinical vignettes. What Freud reports to us and what Nassif himself focuses on are the qualities that we associate with femininity and masculinity, including passivity and activity as well as secondary sex characteristics that would lead the author of the fantasy to identify the batterer as being either “male” or “female.” In other words, the object is identified on the basis of *signals of sex*, and not just those of the beaten child but of *each of the players in the fantasy*.

This problematization can be surmounted if one follows a different, though conceptually adjacent track of the “object.” However, both the fantasy under investigation in “A Child is Being Beaten” and the more complicated schema of the Oedipus complex admitted in *The Ego and the Id* problematize Nassif’s (and Freud’s) conception of the object, signification, and, ultimately, the stakes of the fantasy. To take the object of the fantasy to be the sex of the beaten child is by no means an uncontroversial *decision* if we read the B phase of the fantasy to the letter, and the ensuing obscurity can be better resolved with reference to the more complicated form of Oedipus based on “bisexuality” and ambivalence. Continuing his discussion of the feminine and/or masculine disposition in the Oedipus complex, he writes,

It would appear, therefore, that in both sexes the relative strength of the masculine and feminine sexual dispositions is what determines whether the outcome of the Oedipus situation shall be an identification with the father or with the mother. *This is one of the ways in which bisexuality takes a hand in the subsequent vicissitudes of the Oedipus complex. The other way is even more important. For one gets an impression that the simple Oedipus complex is by no means its commonest form, but rather represents a simplification or schematization which, to be sure, is often enough justified for practical purposes.* Closer study usually discloses the more complete Oedipus complex, which is twofold, positive and negative, and is due to the bisexuality originally present in children: that is to say, a boy has not merely an ambivalent attitude towards his father and an affectionate object-choice towards his mother, but at the same time he also behaves like a girl and displays an affectionate feminine attitude to his father and a corresponding jealousy and

hostility towards his mother. It is this complicating element introduced by bisexuality that makes it so difficult to obtain a clear view of the facts in connection with the earliest object-choices and identifications, and still more difficult to describe them intelligibly.²²

Here, Freud admits the possibility that an underlying *coexistence* of masculine and feminine attributes may explain the vicissitudes of the Oedipus complex. This suggests that there is an ambivalent relation or function that precedes the relations with the rival parent and the love-object. This “complicating element” is put aside, despite being “complete,” because it less neatly characterizes the relations of the child, and hence is less “practical.” Directly following this, Freud makes a remarkable, underestimated qualification, writing, “It may even be that the ambivalence displayed in the relations to the parents should be attributed entirely to bisexuality and that it is not, as I have represented above, developed out of identification in consequence of rivalry.”²³ Adopting this schema, and modifying our tracks through the empirical subject-matter of the fustigation fantasies as a result, yields provocative theoretical conclusions.

To wit, the empirical subject-matter of the fustigation fantasies in the text offers support for accepting this alternative schema of the Oedipus complex. If there is indeed a confusion of pleasure and displeasure made possible by the confusion of beating for love-making, in this reconstruction the father is loving and hating the beaten child at the same time; the verbs’ entwinement in the verb “to beat” casts the father and the child in ambiguous roles. Due to the ambivalence of the relationship knotted around the kernel of the verb-duo “to beat/to love” or “*battre/baiser*,” isolating rivalry and identification from one another becomes difficult, if not impossible, in examining the phase B form of the fantasy. Freud’s simplified schema of Oedipus cannot account for the shift from the A phase to the B phase then, and it cannot account for the coexistence of loving and hating in any of the phases except as a perversion of a development presupposed by the simple form of the schema itself. Thus, the empirical matter of the fantasies necessitates prioritizing analysis of the ambivalent character of the child’s relations with the parents over those characteristics of rivalry. As Freud hypothesizes, the ambivalence of the child’s relations with the parents can be

²² Freud, “The Ego and the Id,” 19:33.

²³ Freud, 19:33.

attributed to “bisexuality” or the unfocused psychosexuality of the child, hence consideration of either text—“A Child is Being Beaten” or *The Ego and the Id*—leads us to the demand for an elaboration of what this attribution entails and what its implications are.

As suggested above, the term “bisexuality” relies on a strict binary but we need not imagine such a thing existing, since this term describes the expression of ambivalent, androgynous identifications and differentiations on the part of the child. It is perhaps more properly designated as “constitutive psychosexual ambivalence” and similar phrases and terms. Now, this alternative schema of the Oedipus complex differs from the simpler schema in a crucial way. Whereas the simple schema is concerned only with the relationship of rivalry between the child and the parent of the same sex, the alternative schema is concerned with the *ambivalent identification* of the child with multiple parties, primarily an identification with both feminine and masculine traits. This is a far more complicated schema in that it involves not only a single relationship between two individuals but the relation and limit of the somatic, libidinal experience of the child—how and from where the child experiences pleasure, displeasure, attraction and repulsion, or love and hate bodily—along with their psychosexual identifications and differentiations—how they attempt to represent themselves in light of their bodily and libidinal experiences. Thus, the object is no longer the biological sex of the child but the *representative* of the limit between the child’s somatic experience and psychical reality. The object of the fantasy is *the drive*.

The Drive: Recasting the Object in the Fustigation Fantasy

First, it is exigent that we carefully define this drive as a representative of the limit and relation between somatic, libidinal experience and psychosexual reality, since it possesses a precise function in the theory of psychoanalysis, and its function will bring us back to the discussion of the object and signification of the fustigation fantasies, and ultimately to the question of this archaeology of the subject.

Freud famously characterizes the drive in energetic, hydraulic, and sometimes quantitative terms: “There is nothing to prevent our subsuming the concept of ‘[drive]’ under that of ‘stimulus’ and saying that [a drive] is a stimulus applied

to the mind.”²⁴ The drive is the expression of quanta of stimulus, but even in Freud’s conceptualization “[a drive] appears to us as a concept on the frontier between the mental and the somatic, as the psychical *representative* of the stimuli origination from within the organism and reaching the mind.”²⁵ Freud, in other moments, ties the drive’s pressures, aims, objects, and sources to erogenous zones and corresponding, external phenomena according to the temporal, biological development of an organism, a tendency exaggerated by later psychoanalytic theorists.²⁶ In “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes,” however, his analogies discourage thinking of the progression of these stages as a neat advancement from one to the next. Rather, the life of the drive resembles successive eruptions of lava, waves spilling over one another, cooling unevenly atop the previous layer.²⁷

Though this analogy presents an oft-ignored contradiction of the typical picture of developmental stages, it by no means repudiates the presentation of the drive as a conceptual representative of an energetic, hydraulic force. Freud’s conceptualization hence positions the drive as the representative of the limit between a somatic, biological force and a psychosexual reality, but a limit which is itself only the line between a primal urge or instinct and the “higher” expression of a psychosexual desire or wish. For example, the drive, in its oral dimension, originates from the human infant’s biological need for nutrition through consumption and digestion, and Freud relies on the assumption that pleasure is the result of a cascade of stimuli that encourage seeking out this nutrition again; something tastes good, so the organism can “bodily” believe that it offers nutrition, and therefore will preserve its life. This is a simple narrative that describes the honing of the libido in one “stage” of development. Of course, the human infant does not exist in a “natural” state void of social, economic, and technological mediations, and the earliest experience of oral nutrition and pleasure is the breast or its technological substitutes. Thus, in adult life we may find expressions of several psychosexual fixations, aims, and so on that may be traced back to these early experiences with the breast as the object that first fulfilled this

²⁴ Freud, “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes,” 14:118.

²⁵ Freud, 14:121–22.

²⁶ Freud, 14:116–19. Even on these pages, Freud does not go so far as to suggest that the drive’s pressure, aim, object, and source are exclusively determined by time and physiological development, however.

²⁷ Freud, 14:131.

biological urge. In this conceptualization, the life of the drive is *linear* and its origin in somatic, libidinal experience determines the possible permutations of the psychosexual reality of later life. However uneven in movement the successive waves of the drive across an individual's life may be, the analogies relying on hydraulic and energetic images necessitate this *linear* presentation of the life of the drive and progressive honing of the libido as hydraulic, energetic force.

Lacan's conceptualization of the drive does not rely on these energetic, hydraulic analogies, and instead takes the *linguistic material* uttered in psychoanalysis to be the *representative* of the limit between the individual's somatic experience and psychosexual reality.²⁸ This conceptualization much better encapsulates the empirical matter of fantasies like those recorded in "A Child is Being Beaten" because the experience and reality of the fantasy is not represented by an energy or a hydraulic force; after all is said and done, these forces are never *observed* by Freud but merely *postulated* in order to begin making sense of the phenomena encountered in the psychoanalytic clinic.²⁹ The term "limit" here is an appropriate characterization of the drive because, as Lacan argues in the closing words of the second book of his *Seminar*, the drive possesses a phenomenological duality (even in Freud's formulation): it can tend towards pleasure and displeasure, and do so simultaneously, but only due to the fact that the drive necessarily exists on the threshold between the somatic and the linguistic, the libidinal and the symbolic.³⁰ As pleasure-seeking, the drive is libidinal, and is thus of the imaginary order since representing this aspect requires the use of analogy to provide an image of this pleasure-seeking action. Furthermore, this aspect of the drive is narcissistic because it operates within the structure of the ego. As death-seeking, however, the drive is linguistic and *partial*, because it exists *beyond the pleasure-seeking aspect* in a form that is incompletely recognized. Insisting that his audience reread the text of "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," Lacan claims,

The symbolic order is rejected by the libidinal order, which includes the whole of the domain of the imaginary, including the structure of the ego. And the death drive is only the mask of the symbolic order, in so far—this is what Freud

²⁸ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Peregrin, 1986), 177.

²⁹ Freud, "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes," 14:119–20.

³⁰ Jacques Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), 326.

writes—as it is dumb, that is to say in so far as it hasn’t been realized. As long as the symbolic recognition hasn’t been instituted, by definition, the symbolic order is dumb. The symbolic order is simultaneously non-being and insisting to be, that is what Freud has in mind when he talks about the death drive as being what is most fundamental: a symbolic order in travail, in the process of coming, insisting on being realized.³¹

Precisely in masking the symbolic order’s incompleteness the *death drive* is the representative of the limit between a somatic urge, or something that can be represented by analogy as a somatic, libidinal urge to seek pleasure, and symbolic, since it is articulated in a linguistic form that crystallizes or arrests the urge for pleasure. This representative is non-being precisely because it is made up of mere *wording*; yet, it is insisting to be because it represents the function of the symbolic order in modifying the somatic, libidinal, and imaginary urges. Consequently, what Freud calls the death drive turns out to be the most complete conceptualization of *the* drive rather than a special instance of *a* drive, according to Lacan. The drive represents the circuit between somatic experience (which is indifferently) and psychosexual reality (which is itself only representable through *words* like “A child is being beaten” or “My father is beating me.”). Thus, the drive, as a foundational concept, represents both *the fact that* as well as *how* language—like that *wording* of the fustigation fantasies—steps in to bridge the somatic experience with material reality, giving rise to a *psychosexual reality* whose pressures, aims, objects, and sources may have nothing to do with biological reproduction, self-preservation, or homeostasis.³²

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Given that the hard kernel, as Nassif puts it, of the fantasy is the unchanging and entwined verb duo “beating/loving,” the fantasy stages the relation and limit that the notion of the drive represents; this verb duo, present in all of the phases of the fantasy, instantiates a threshold with two “sides,” as it were: one somatic, libidinal, and imaginary, and the other linguistic, psychosexual, and symbolic. The action is definitively somatic, as corporeally violent as it is, and the ambivalent fusion of pleasure and displeasure, love and hate, designates

³¹ Lacan, 326; translation modified.

³² Nassif refers to an “imaginary reality” structured by fantasy as opposed to a “real reality” in his discussion of the fustigation fantasy. The latter certainly corresponds to what I call “material reality” and the former is perhaps close to what I call “psychosexual reality.” Cf. Nassif, “Fantasy,” 14.

the other side of the threshold portrayed in the fantasy. This verb duo thus acts as an axis around which the permutations revolve. If we take the object to be the “thing” staged and observable in the fantasy, then it is this limit, which remains unchanged and always bifurcates the *tableau* between the somatic, libidinal, and imaginary, on the one hand, and the psychosexual and symbolic on the other. And, again, the concept of the drive is a representation of this limit that sutures, relates, and bridges just as much as it constructs a threshold and a delimitation between the libidinal and the symbolic. Thus, the object of the fantasy is the drive with its circuit expressed in the wording of the fantasy.³³

So, the drive is the representation, in words, of the ambivalent relation and limit upon which the individual constructs and maintains identification that are similarly ambivalent. This points to the necessity of the alternative, more complex schema of the Oedipus complex, since we are not dealing with the single relation of rivalry with the parent of the same sex, as the simplest schema holds.

As such, the signification of the fantasy should not be interpreted solely in light of the sex of the beaten child but should be understood as the *annulment* and *transformation* of the meaning of the things that are different in their nature yet co-present in the drama of the fustigation fantasy. By “annulment” here we should not understand a simple, clean elimination of masculinity, femininity, love, hate, and so on. Rather, this annulment represents the elimination of the *first* signification of each of the attributes caught in the ambivalent structure of the fantasy, namely the somatic, imaginary, and libidinal one. The act of fantasizing—as an enactment of the construction of the relation and limit that the drive represents—annuls both sides of the coin, as it were, producing an altogether different alloy, and one that can explain the underlying nature of the drive beyond what clinical observation of ambivalence offers.

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Hence, we are not dealing here with a fantasy made solely in confrontation with the origin of the differences of the sexes but instead made in confrontation with the drive itself, wherein those signals of sex merely indicate something more

³³ At most, we could say that the sex of the beaten child is not the sole object of the fantasy; however, whether there is one, two, or several objects of the fantasy does not matter given that this reading, mimicking Nassif, follows one path of several through the subject-matter of the fustigation fantasies.

fundamental than both somatic experience and the symbolic order. The question arises of what those signals indicate and how they indicate. In a word: what do they mean? This appears to put us onto a similar track as Freud and Nassif: the track of the signification of the fustigation fantasy. However, the problem that the analysis of the drive as linguistic representative presents is not one of signification but the annulment and transformation of the signification of two terminal aspects: somatic, libidinal, imaginary experience and linguistic, symbolic, psychosexual reality.

We thus come upon the possibility of a theoretical conceptualization of the governance of the drive, its constitutive ambivalence, and its precipitate annulment and transformation of the elements it delimits and binds. The problem is not one of determining the signification of the fantasy but one of excavating the substrate that generates ambivalence (which the drive merely represents) and organizes the relationships and matrices of the elements of the fantasy. Our question now concerns what concept we can construct to adequately represent the governance of the drive and its rendering of the content of the fantasy. We are dealing with something that underlies signification, determining its transformation through processes merely dramatized in the fustigation fantasy. This is *the letter*, as articulated by Lacan.

The Letter: Recasting “Signification” in the Analysis of the Fustigation Fantasy

Lacan provides a simple definition of the letter: “By ‘letter’ I designate the material medium [support] that concrete discourse borrows from language. This simple definition assumes that language is not to be confused with the various psychological and somatic functions that serve it in the speaking subject.”³⁴ The letter is not simply the written characters that compose a written language, neither is it the phonemes of spoken language. It is a constructed concept that names the condition of all signification, passed down and maintained in any community, institution, society, or civilization: “[N]o signification can be sustained except by reference to another signification,” writes Lacan, and it is the letter that anchors this “signifying chain,” constructing signification while simultaneously

³⁴ Jacques Lacan, “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud,” in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 410.

determining the positions and indices of any word and thing.³⁵ Implied by these cursory definitions is the letter's capacity to hold together formally different or distinct elements together; it possesses a capacity to found coexistence and sustain the co-presence of things different in their nature. Now, we can be more precise about this function: it is the consequence of the annulment of "things different in their nature" through a process of what we may call "literalization" since these "things" are being annulled and transformed through their formal relation of coexistence *qua* letter. As an example, Lacan describes two doors labeled "Ladies" and "Gentlemen." Both signifiers refer to the same signified (a restroom), but their difference arises from the distinct associative chains of signifiers that history and culture attach to implied sexual differentiation.³⁶ The signifiers create meaning through the play of resemblance and difference in a context, not through their shared reference. In other words, "things" become signifiers, no longer simply being "signifieds" or references represented by a word, sign, or image; the "being" and reality of a signifier is characterized by its relation to other signifiers rather than an essence or an attribute. The letter is *representative* of the fundamental element of these relations that are chained together by various somatic, psychical, historical, and institutional links. The letter thus *hews* the possibility of all formal relationality.

Consequently, the letter is the condition of possibility for the drive. The drive is the representation of the particular ambivalent relation and limit that structures the fustigation fantasies, and so it belongs to the set of phenomena conditioned by the letter.

Turning our attention more directly to the empirical subject-matter of the fustigation fantasy and the fundamental fantasy it expresses, the question now seems not to be one of the meaning or the signification of the fantasies. The question concerns instead the underlying nature of the "text" that carries this signification as well as the drive to compose this text and which mandates its recurrence, the repetitive fantasizing of the beatings; we could call the repetitive action of this fantasizing a compulsively repeated "reading" of a "text" founded on the letter. In this way, one can consider symptoms, fantasies, dreams, verbalizations, and even clinical constructions as texts composed of signifying chains,

³⁵ Lacan, 411.

³⁶ Lacan, 411.

all founded upon the letter. Not only does the reoccurring fantasizing of the fustigations represent a recurrent reading, so too does the psychoanalytic investigation—in the clinic and in theory—represent a reading of a kind too. “Therein lies a veritable ‘drive,’” writes Paul-Laurent Assoun, “that confronts the subject with the letter of their desire and makes present an absence that is dear to them. Scientifically, ‘de-psychologized,’ the question can be articulated with its own brutality: What does the one who reads want?”³⁷ In the context of “‘A Child is Being Beaten,’” we can inquire what the one who composes and rereads the text of the fustigation fantasy recurrently wants. This inquiry requires locating the material support of the fantasy as a text and symptom: the letter. Following this, we can suggest something about the nature of not only these fundamental concepts but the relationship of our theory to what these concepts supposedly “think through” or name.

Now, Nassif suggests where one might locate the bedrock of the fantasies and subjectivity. Yet, this will inadvertently direct us to a more palpable and convincing location of the letter. He writes that “the body, although it can only be apprehended in its significant parts [*ses parties signifiantes*], is this entity that, as it develops, supports the temporalization of the subject, as is implied by repression. And one could therefore assume that the body constitutes in some way a repressive instance that bars the evanescent subject.”³⁸ Nassif’s conclusion is that the body is the medium that bears the impact of the Oedipus complex, marked by the “scars of Oedipus,” a name Freud employs to characterize the fustigation fantasies themselves.³⁹ The body “supports the temporalization of the subject” in serving as a visible, physical “chronicle” of the individual’s path through childhood and the travails of the Oedipus complex. This would potentially allow one to “assume” that it is the body that marks the limit and threshold between the unconscious and waking subject of thought, where the latter designates the traditional conceptualization of the subject as self-conscious bearer of rationality and autonomy. The body preserves these scars of Oedipus and so permits the potential instigation of the repetition of the drive-circuits that the fustigation fantasy stages.

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³⁷ Paul-Laurent Assoun, *Introduction à la métapsychologie freudienne* (Paris: Quadriges, 1993), 126; my translation.

³⁸ Nassif, “Fantasy,” 31.

³⁹ Freud, “‘A Child is Being Beaten,’” 17:193.

However, in pointing out the prominence of the body to us, Nassif inadvertently identifies an aspect more solidly grasped by the schema and analysis I have elaborated: “[The body] can only be apprehended in its significant parts,” where the French term could more awkwardly be rendered as “signifying parts.”⁴⁰ These would be what I referred to as “signals of sex” as opposed to the actual, anatomical sex of the batterer or the beaten child. The body cannot be the support of the temporalization of the subject, and it cannot be the bearer of the scars of Oedipus precisely because it is not the anatomical body that can be apprehended in the fantasy. The drive, however, is such a support and bearer; this is not simply a sleight-of-hand but a consequence of reframing the empirical subject-matter of the cases recorded in the text as dramatizations of the construction of limit and relation by the drive. Furthermore, this dramatization depicts a constitutive ambivalence that annuls both the somatic, libidinal experience and the symbolic, psychosexual reality of the subject. If the body has a part to play in “bar[ring] the evanescent subject,” it is only through its annulment and *literalization* into a text.⁴¹ So, the drive, and its specific verbalization or *wording*, indicates the location of a scar of Oedipus; it silhouettes a wound and, in the repetitive composition of the “texts” of the fustigation fantasy, the drive plays the role of the blade that makes the wound and exposes a more fundamental structure.

The scar, as an analogy, is a representation of the remainder supposed to have been left behind after the disappearance of the subject in the drive. This disappearance or loss of the subject may explain what exactly is at stake in the “‘ambivalent’ striving for the object, which may include ‘injury and annihilation.’”⁴² Alenka Zupančič glosses the Lacanian position on this stake linked to the relation between subjectivity and the drive with the following:

Even before we become ourselves, we lose something. But what follows from the Lacanian perspective is rather this: The originally lost object is the subject itself, the subject “before” the transcendental constitution. [...] To put it in a somewhat clumsy but suggestive way: What falls out of reality when it is constituted as a possible object of knowledge is the subject as an object among other objects. The

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⁴⁰ Nassif, “Fantasy,” 31.

⁴¹ Nassif, 31.

⁴² Darian Leader, *Jouisissance: Sexuality, Suffering, and Satisfaction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021), 13; quoting Freud, “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes,” 14:137–39.

subject begins as an object [. . .]. When it constitutes itself as subject, it disappears from [. . .] objective reality; but it disappears in such a way that it remains inscribed in it as the lost object.⁴³

This is what the word “scar” indicates, then: the subject is lost as an element belonging to material, objective reality. This requires its annulment as an object among other objects and its transformation into an inscription. In other words, the subject is annulled as object and literalized into an element of the symbolic order. The letter is the material support that results from this process. Across the permutations of the fantasy in “A Child is Being Beaten” this is indicated everywhere, whether it be by the necessary absence of the subject in the scene—as is the case in the form “A child is being beaten”—or the representation of the subject as an object that is simultaneously loved and hated in the form of “My father is beating me” or “My father is beating the child (he only loves me).” The letter is what bars the subject and what the drive’s circuit encircles, restaging its disappearance even to the point of injury or annihilation, even if such injury and annihilation is phantasmatic. The letter is the scar of Oedipus.

The fustigation fantasies do not, then, express a more fundamental fantasy about the origin of the sexes, and do not indicate anything about an individual’s resolution (or lack thereof) of the simplest form of the Oedipus complex. The fustigation fantasies recorded in “A Child is Being Beaten” express a more fundamental fantasy of the *literalization of the being of the subject*. It is the codification, inscription, or writing of a text composed of signifiers that do not signify a subject but another signifier. My recourse to “Lacanesque” here is not meant to purposefully ambiguate the matter. Rather, it is meant to cement my insistence that we are not dealing with one and only one type of relationship, like that of rivalry. We are dealing with the conditions and effects of establishing any and every relationship, identification, and differentiation; we are dealing with the conditions of signification and formal relationality *tout court*. Through the fustigation fantasy, somatic, libidinal experience and psychosexual reality are annulled and *literalized*, transformed into a *text* whose kernel is the verb duo “to beat/to love.”

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⁴³ Alenka Zupančič, “Lacan as Speculative Thinker?,” *Rivista di Estetica* 86 (2024): par. 45, <https://doi.org/10.4000/13876>.

Conclusion: Oedipus Subverted

In the final moments of *Funeral Parade of Roses*, right after Eddie has pierced both of her eyes with the knife Gonda, her father, has used to slit his own throat, a shot of a man suddenly appears: “It was frightening, wasn’t it?” he asks the viewer. “The cursed destiny of man! It was such a unique film with cruelty and laughter. Let’s look forward to the next film. *Sayonara, sayonara, sayonara.*” We abruptly return to the sight of Eddie stumbling onto the street, blind and bloody, just like Oedipus: the same cruel destiny, but another body, another fantasy. The film’s “subversion” of Oedipus dramatizes the same processes of annulment and literalization belonging to the drive and the letter. Just as the titular letter of Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Purloined Letter”—a text that serves Lacan in his famous illustration of the function of the letter—organizes the actions, positions, desires, and fates of the characters, so too does the photograph, with a hole bored by a burning cigarette in the face of the father in the film. We could crystallize Eddie’s final, tragic moments, as the film invites us to do with its title frames, with the following: “I am the wound and the blade—the victim and the executioner.”

The fustigation fantasies recorded in “A Child is Being Beaten” exemplarily, rather than uniquely or singularly, stage this same process, the same cruel destiny that repeats the disappearance of the subject and its impossible transcendental constitution. The fustigation depicted in the fantasy (its content) is an expression of ambivalence. This ambivalence is crystallized in the relation and limit established by the verb duo “to beat/to love,” and is represented and encapsulated in theory by the concept of the drive (the object). The drive’s repetitive action and perpetual re-inscription through continual re-fantasizing betrays the material support of signification (the letter). In all of this, the subject is necessarily lost, or rather, annulled and literalized. Wound and blade, victim and executioner: a cursed destiny.

We come again to Nassif’s questions, better equipped. I paraphrase him: If it is on the structure exposed, not by castration but the drive, that the fantasy of being beaten is grafted, it is obviously not the difference of the sexes that by itself makes the fantasy. Or one could ask oneself, could another fantasy not form, with a different verbalization, on the ground of this same structure, based on this same archaeological foundation, but according to the individual history of

a particular body?⁴⁴ The foregoing permits us to answer affirmatively to these questions since, in bridging Freud and Nassif's analyses with other developments in psychoanalytic theory, we can pinpoint the archaeological foundation of the subject in its literalization. Put differently, the "origin" of the subject is only its retroactive annulment and transformation, as dramatized and expressed in the wording of texts like the fantasy, the symptom, the dream, and so on. However, there are two caveats, or rather two new meanings each for these two terms "fantasy" and "body." Regarding "another fantasy," this designates both the possibility of another permutation of the fustigation fantasy as well as the open-ended possibility of any other fantasy that may not conform to the simplest schema of the Oedipus complex. Regarding the "particular body," another body, it is precisely its particularity which leaves open the possibility of either another imaginary body-schema that does not conform to the gender binary or any physiological configuration of anatomy, especially those that do not conform to the presumed standard of sexual dimorphism. In short, we are well beyond the colloquial playground parable about Venus, Mars, men, and women: there is room for transgender, transsexual, and intersex individuals; in a word, all gender nonconforming bodies bearing a letter that generates a fantasy. Another fantasy and another body may be conceptualized and represented in psychoanalytic theory. Another fantasy with a different verbalization can form because what underlies the fustigation fantasies is the phantasmatic exposition of the condition of all signification. The cursed destiny of the subject, to be the author of its own disappearance and perpetual literalization, is not determined by the origin of the difference of the sexes but the condition of all signification: the ambivalence of the letter.

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That exposition of the condition of all signification includes the signification made possible by the metaphorical substitution of the mother's desire for the Name-of-the-Father. This refers to a Lacanian conceptualization of the Oedipus complex, and one constructed from the simplest schema based on the rivalry between the child and the parent of the same sex. Lacan maintained that this metaphorical substitution characteristic of the Oedipus complex represented the bestowal of civilization upon the subject, deeming it necessary and ineluctable. This feature is not contradicted by my analysis and adoption of the more complex form of the Oedipus complex; indeed, it is a strong argument for

⁴⁴ See Nassif, "Fantasy," 31.

Lacan's insight since constitutive ambivalence is now directly tied to a structure that foments not just sexual difference but signification *tout court*, hence all of the "texts" of the subject's desire.

My aim in writing about *Funeral Parade of Roses* in an article about Freud, Nassif, Lacan, and the fundamentals of psychoanalytic theory was to highlight bodies and fantasies typically excluded from psychoanalytic theorization, bodies deemed abnormal according to that simplest schema of the Oedipus complex. These nonconformists, gender traitors, and queers are traditionally designated as being arrested in a "psychosexual" stage of development, stuck with a perverse fixation, or even diagnosed as psychotic. It would be a crude oversimplification to suggest that all psychoanalytic theory endorses such designations. However, in Lacanian circles it cannot be denied that the question of transitioning from one sex to another, of electing to identify as a gender distinct from one assigned at birth, and even of valorizing one's queerness as not abnormal remain controversial topics. These controversies stem from formalizations of the Oedipus complex constructed on the basis of the simplest schema. My aim has been to subvert this schema by following Nassif's adroit sidetracking of one of Freud's overlooked texts. I did not set out to put to rest the controversies in psychoanalytic and "queer theoretical" circles. This article is about certain fundamentals of psychoanalytic theory; these fundamentals happen to be at the center of said controversies, though. It is my position that a lucid elaboration of the letter of the desire of individuals who defy the simplest, overused schema of Oedipus cannot be heard by clinicians and theorists if these fundamentals are not revisited.

Catherine Millot presents one such "classical" theorization of the phenomena associated with a desire to change one's sex, presenting three "formalizations" that frame her readings of the biographies of historical figures who were transsexual or transgender as well as her interpretations of "interviews" conducted with gender nonconforming individuals in Paris in the 1980s. She deems these formalizations to be "keys to transsexuality," insisting on that term throughout.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Catherine Millot, *Horsexe: Essay on Transsexuality*, trans. Kenneth Hylton (New York: Autonomedia, 1990), 31. Millot also insists on referring to transgender women as male transsexuals and transgender men as female transsexuals. I do not adopt her terminology or quote here but offer this clarification for the reader who may consult her text.

One of these is the Oedipus complex as articulated by Freud and formalized by Lacan. She writes,

Lacan's contribution to Freudian theory of the Oedipus complex consists in showing that it can be analysed in terms of the semiotic theory of modern linguistics. The Oedipal phenomenon, when viewed in this way, can be thought of as a signifying operation involving the substitution of one signifier for another—in other words, involving metaphor. The metaphorical operation generates a new signification, one which the signifiers initially brought into play not in themselves entail. Metaphor, like metonymy, is a way of producing sense by means of signifier play. The Oedipus complex is a special example of metaphor; it consists in substituting one signifier, the Name-of-the-Father, for another, the desire of the mother.⁴⁶

Millot's conceptualization aligns with my own, up to a point. The description of the signifying operation of metaphor is compatible with my own account of Oedipus and the excavation of the letter through analysis of the fustigation fantasy. However, given that the defining feature of Oedipus is not rivalry with the parent of the same sex and is instead the possibility of ambivalence understood as the coexistence of things different in their nature, like femininity and masculinity, a reevaluation is called for. Namely, is it so certain that the effect of the paternal metaphor is a "substitution [that] at last makes sense of maternal conduct and speech"?⁴⁷ But, this "making sense" is there from the beginning of the Oedipus complex and not at its accomplishment: the ambivalent relation is more manifest at different moments in time but it is there from the beginning, according to Freud.⁴⁸ This brings into question the possibility of marking the "end" of the Oedipus complex, and therefore problematizes Millot's argument that an inability to enact the substitution of the mother's desire for the Name-of-the-Father represents an incomplete, abnormal psychosexual development.

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Millot's conclusion is that the desire to change one's sex is a psychotic symptom of that incomplete, abnormal psychosexual development. In her view, it is a desire to change something in material reality in the hopes of rectifying a symbolic confusion (though in her idiom we are often left confused as to whether

⁴⁶ Millot, 32.

⁴⁷ Millot, 34.

⁴⁸ Freud, "The Ego and the Id," 19:32.

she means a change in the Real or a change in material reality, which are not equivalent in Lacanian theory). Her argument deserves closer attention in light of the subversion of the simple schema of Oedipus I have offered here. If rivalry with the parent of the same sex is not what determines the ambivalence of identifications, then theorizations depending on this relationship require reevaluation. More to the point: Can we maintain that there is a normal path through the Oedipus complex if we cannot demonstrate that there is an end to ambivalence, desire, and fantasy?

However, this analysis merely indicates where one could start in returning to Millot as well as other Lacanian conceptualizations that are either with or against so-called queer theory (and, of course, this inquiry would benefit from clearer conceptions of “queer theory” outside of a genre or fashionable buzzword). The present analysis alone does not offer conclusive argumentation on these matters. To proceed, however, one would need to carefully elucidate not only how the alternative schema of Oedipus may or may not affect other theorists’ arguments but also detail what the epistemological status of the letter, as a concept and as the scar of Oedipus, exactly is. My analysis has clarified the connection of the letter to ambivalence, Oedipus, and the drive, but there are further questions. For instance, the relationships amongst theoretico-clinical constructions in analysis, the letter, and the matheme remain opaque. Though the drive, as a conceptual representation of the relation and limit constructed by ambivalence, exposes the letter and its effects, more must be clarified about the differences and resemblances between theoretico-clinical constructions and the daily construction of the symptom, the fantasy, and so on. In other words, what distinguishes theory’s constructions from fantasizing?

So, we are left better equipped, I hope, to investigate two persistent problems for psychoanalytic theory. First, what is the letter of the desire of so-called queers and gender nonconformists when viewed not through the simplified text of Oedipus but the complex text? Second, what differentiates the conceptualization and construction of the letter in theory from the conceptualization and construction of fantasy constitutive of subjectivity itself? These two questions are by no means small matters, and they are not disconnected from one another given that Millot’s own theoretical position is not born out of malice or sheer prejudice (one hopes, at least) but out of her understanding of Lacan’s formalizations and constructions. The fundamental fantasy expressed by the fustigation fantasy is

not merely about the origin of the difference of the sexes, it expresses a fantasy about the genesis of signification and the subject's symbolic annihilation and literalization as a condition of that genesis. Though this process is, of course, psychosexual in nature and bears on sexual difference, we must recognize that this is always only a sublimation of sexuality, hence we call it "psychosexual."

If there is an archaeology of the subject, then it is not properly conducted solely on the basis of sexual difference, but on the condition of signification that literalizes the subject. An analysis of the ambivalent relation and limit—represented by the drive—exposes that fundamental substrate underlying all fantasy and signification. The letter: it is the remainder of the annulment and literalization of the being of the subject, and the particular texts of the fustigation fantasy and *Funeral Parade of Roses* offer translucent vignettes of these processes fomented by our constitutive ambivalence.

Evidently, Nassif's exemplary approach to the "return to Freud" still holds promise for the field and function of psychoanalysis, a promise which may begin to bear fruit through these translations.

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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