Leopold von Sacher-Masoch (1836-1895)

Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s countless fictional accounts of male characters pleasurably submitting to a cruel female figure wielding whips and wearing furs became the basis for the term ‘masochism.’ Yet his literary contributions were once equally noted—and through new translations recently re-acknowledged—for their vivid descriptions of the Jewish culture of Eastern Europe. Relatedly, depictions of Galicia, an ethnically diverse province of the Austrian Empire, served as the exotic setting for much of his work.

Leopold (Ritter) von Sacher-Masoch was born in the Galician town of Lemburg, which then belonged to the Austrian empire and today is the Ukrainian city of L’viv. His mother’s family (Masoch) was native to the region and through them he was exposed at an early age to the Polish and Ruthenian languages and cultures. His maternal grandfather was a respected physician and rector at the university; with him, the young Sacher-Masoch visited patients in the city’s Jewish section. His father and paternal grandfather—of Bohemian descent—were both upper-level security officials of the Austrian empire. Through their service, the family acquired the title of Knight.

Because his father was the city’s chief of police, Sacher-Masoch was well aware of the bloody conflicts between Polish nationalists, Galician peasants, and the Austrian military surrounding Lemberg in February of 1846, and witnessed first-hand the insurrection against Austrian rule in Prague in 1848 after moving there for his father’s new post. The former events supplied the political and historical background to his first fictional work, *Eine Galizische Geschichte. 1846* (1858), and the latter for *Der Emissär* (1863), neither of which have been translated into English. This tumultuous period in the history of the Austrian empire supplies from today’s perspective an interesting link to the cultural phenomenon of masochism, which parodically reverses the schema of existing power relations. Put simply, it depends and merely plays upon unchanging hierarchical structures.

Sacher-Masoch studied history in Prague and then Graz, where he completed his doctorate in 1856, and afterwards taught as a lecturer. His acquired expertise of Austro-Hungarian history was put to use in his fiction. Although so many of his stories are set in the region of his birth, he spent much of his life in Graz.

Because of the similarities between his fiction and biography, a good deal of attention has been devoted to Sacher-Masoch’s relationships with women. Even his first affair in the early 1860s created scandal, when it resulted in his lover Anna Franziska von Kottowitz’s divorce from her older husband. The novel *Die geschiedene Frau* (1870) is based on their relationship and its decline. In 1869, he met Fanny Pistor, or Baronin von Bogdanoff, with whom he was famously photographed kneeling by her feet. This relationship likely supplied some biographical basis for Severin and Wanda’s relationship in *Venus im Pelz* (Venus in Furs) (1870), a plot that enjoys almost endless variations in subsequent fictional romances. Many readers have assumed the story was based on his relationship with first wife, Wanda, but in fact, his marriage to Angelika Aurora Rümelin (who only changed her name to Wanda in 1872) was a result of the novel’s publication, which provided the couple with a basis for contact and an erotic exemplar. The turbulent and financially-distressed marriage lasted from 1873 to 1878. After his death, his ex-wife battled his widow and second wife, Hulda Meister, and his secretary, Carl Felix von Schlichtegroll, in a series of back-and-forth biographies (see bibliographies).

Over the course of his life, Leopold Sacher-Masoch published around 120 books. Whereas many were translated into French, only a fraction have appeared in English, and most are out of print and unknown even in their native German. The majority of the romances for which he is best known were variations on the popular theme established in *Venus in Furs*, but during his lifetime he was equally known for his depictions of the eastern provinces of the Austrian Empire and of their Jewish communities. Indeed the first of Sacher-Masoch’s works to be introduced into English were those depicting Jewish life: *Der neue Hiob* (The New Job), *Der Ilau* (*Seraph: A Tale of Hungary*), and *Jewish Tales*. These stories collected in *Russische Hofsgeschichten* (*Tales of the Court of Catherine II*) and *Venus in Furs* followed within a few years. In “Wandering Rocks,” Leopold Bloom notices a volume of *Tales from the Ghetto* by Leopold Sacher-Masoch, but no volumes by Sacher-Masoch ever appeared under that precise title, which resembles instead Leopold Kompert’s *Scenes from the Ghetto*, from which Sacher-Masoch was accused of plagiarizing.

It is worth noting Sacher-Masoch’s intermittent work as a magazine editor. For nearly eight months between 1866-67 he ran the *Gartenlaube für Österreich*­ (an Austrian response to the popular German *Gartenlaube*), which was not only political in its competition with the German literary magazine, but revolutionary in its German translation of works from Austria’s provinces. In an open response to criticism, Sacher-Masoch wrote, “we will represent Austrianness as a political nationality, in which the natural nationalities, each in full enjoyment of its rights and freedoms, are united” (*Leopold Sacher-Masoch* 337). In 1880, during his brief residence in Budapest, he edited and produced most of the content of *Die Belletristische Blätter*. While living in Leipzig, he founded the literary and cultural review, *Auf der Höhe* (1881-1885), which published translations of literature by Victor Hugo, Camille Flammarion, Dostoevesky, and lesser-known authors from Eastern Europe, as well as critical essays in sociology, music theory, and art.

Sacher-Masoch’s romantic works have been considered representative of the decadence of early-Modernist or fin-de-siecle male aesthetics. Since Gilles Deleuze’s examination of *Venus in Furs*, the stylistic features of Sacher-Masoch’s writing have been associated with broader masochistic aesthetic practices and philosophical positions. On a cultural level, his treatment of female characters has been linked to modern anxieties about the rising New Woman, and to parallel hierarchical tensions between nation and empire. Of course, a massive number of psychoanalytical studies have been conducted in connection with his name, after Richard von Krafft-Ebing used it to coin the term Masochism in an 1890 article “Neue Forschungen auf dem Gebiet der *Psychopathia sexualis*” (*New Research in the Area of* Psychopathia Sexualis) before adding it to the book’s sixth edition, providing a basis for Sigmund’s Freud’s numerous investigations.

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