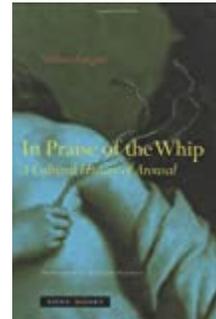




Niklaus Largier. *In Praise of the Whip: A Cultural History of Arousal.* Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2007. 526 pp. \$37.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-890951-65-8.



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Flogging as Ritual Theater in History

A now famous image, photographed by Jules Bonnet in 1882, shows Lou Andreas Salomé with a whip in her hand, as Friedrich Nietzsche and Paul Rée pull a cart. Although the relational triad this *tableau vivant* stages has long been a matter of intense controversy, its theatricality is so evident as to often have escaped commentary. Niklaus Largier's virtuoso study now sheds light on the long history of "voluntary flagellation" (p. 3) between the Middle Ages and modern times as the history of performing a complex drama within the dual horizons of Christian religion and erotic libertinage. Whether one whips one's breast in order to commemorate Jesus' passion or rather to serve erotic ends, so the author claims, these scripts of flagellation have much in common. Both are performed in rituals of arousal whose emphatic physicality tests the limits of representation. The paradox at the heart of this study is that flagellation "signifies ... a making present that breaks through symbolic similarity and historical relations and seeks to produce ... an immediacy made possible through suffering, but also shattered by it" (p. 57).

Through a focus on the performativity of whipping,

Largier drives an analytic wedge between the history of flagellation and the history of sexuality. Nineteenth-century sexologists were so successful in branding flogging as a form of sexual perversion that for most modern observers it can only mask an underlying erotic desire. To have excavated an avenue of approaching flagellation that resuscitates a plenitude of ritualistic performances and to have woven a subtle, historically changing nexus between the religious, the erotic, and the literary is this study's extraordinarily seductive achievement. The book presents the history of flagellation as a history of ritual theater performed for the eyes of others, whether God, a voyeur/reader, or a community. As the author acknowledges, such a history of heightened emotional states and of the imagination can only be conceived in form of fragments. Largier has brought together a riveting collection of texts and images, chronologically organized, reaching from the eleventh to the twentieth centuries and organized into three contrapuntal parts: Asceticism, erotics, and therapeutics.

As this study makes clear above all, whipping has an under-appreciated history. Practiced by early Chris-

tian ascetics in ancient times, flagellation found one of its first advocates in Peter Damian, the ardent church reformer and author of mellifluous Latin. From the eleventh century onward, physical imitation of Christ's suffering spread beyond the walls of monastic institutions to be enacted by lay believers, especially lay confraternities that performed public spectacles of humiliation and penance. The skin as a writingsurface permeable for New Testament scripts was of particular appeal to cloistered nuns, who sometimes chose to express their desire for a *unio mystica* with God in a bodily theology. In its focus on unmediated, embodied experience, the practice risked subverting the role of the clergy as mediators of the divine word. It unleashed ecclesiastical attempts to censure and control wherever it arose. The sixteenth-century reformations of images and rituals made such practices a matter for suspicion as well as inter-confessional debate about the status of words, acts, images, and selfhood. Early modern antiquarians also took an interest in the history of flagellation—writings that became a locus for transforming our understanding of the praxis. Medical commentators of this period collected anecdotes that increasingly veered toward the erotic in order to pique the reader's interest.

At this point in the account, Largier's study transforms itself, along with the practice it portrays, to re-focus on a history of literary representation. The Marquis de Sade's writings stripped flagellation of its religious connotations while preserving the confessional as a setting where truth about the human character was put on display. As a non-procreative form of eroticism, flagellation rose to a central position in this self-reflexive universe. De Sade paralleled the physical immediacy of whipping with that of writing, blurring the line between what is real and what is represented in scenarios of sheer excess—a resonance authors such as Algernon Charles Swinburne, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, and others exploited as well. Yet, the history of the whip in action is also the story of sexual science's success in imparting its interpretive twist on a long history of ambivalence between the flesh and the spirit, and this is what the final section of the book addresses.

These are only selected aspects of a richly textured, eye-opening, eloquently written cultural history that will be of the greatest interest to this listserv's readers. The volume first appeared in German in 2001. Graham Harman has produced a consistently engrossing translation. I particularly enjoyed immersing myself in the long quotations—a luxury increasingly rare in the current publishing climate. Its rich associations nonethe-

less call forth some questions. To be sure, whipping as a form of punishment is different from the acts captured in *In Praise of the Whip*. Even so, I would have liked to read a sustained discussion here of voluntarism. Voluntary whipping never escapes an uncanny resemblance with spectacles of public punishment, since this resonance is also characteristic of flagellation's master script, the *passio Christi*—a realization expounded in some beautiful passages of Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975; 1977). As a formula, voluntarism is so powerfully tied in with notions of what constitutes modernity that it would have warranted a deeper exploration in Largier's history, which so imaginatively relates the pre-modern and the modern. Also, the dramatic scenarios of whipped arousal are blatantly gendered, and this persistent gendering could have enriched further what under this author's competent hands already is a scintillating investigation. Though gendering certainly is acknowledged, it is almost as if some of the quotations dwell on gender more than the author does himself. At times, however, the analytic focus performance risks drowning out the historical particulars—a tendency that the category of gender could have helped counterbalance. The gendering may be nowhere more evident than in the book's many illustrations. Some of them would have lent themselves to an analytic potential unrealized here. The following example, like the famous photograph of 1882 mentioned above, however, is not taken from the book. In Urs Graf's brilliant drawing, "The Flagellation of Christ" (1520), the dynamic whips of Christ's flagellants are reflected in the letter "U" of the artist's monogram, as if to provide a visual commentary on the artist's violent involvement in the drama of the passion, namely as a perpetrator.[1]

To return to the image with which this review set out, it is no wonder that the Lucerne players in the triangulated drama seem to exude a certain fatigue. The trio varied a well-rehearsed scenario in the long history of whipping and being whipped. As Adrian del Caro has shown, the photograph cites and complicates a familiar iconography concerning the wiles of women; as Aristotle's lover, Phyllis was a "woman on top," brandishing a whip on the subservient philosopher and thus inverting the hierarchy of the sexes.[2] Paraphrasing one of Nietzsche's most infamous quotes from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1885; 1891), we can now say that there are excellent reasons not to forget the whip and its place in the intricately intertwined histories of ritual, embodiment, and representation.

Notes

[1]. Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe, ed., *Gränewald und seine Zeit* (Munich: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2007), 271-272. [2]. Adrian del Caro, "Nietzsche, Sacher-Masoch, and the Whip," *German Studies Review* 21 (1998): 241-261.

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