

# Editorial

## Making Pleasure

IN THE *PHILEBUS* PLATO has Socrates advance a theory which defines pleasure as a sort of side-effect that comes into being when harmony is restored after a temporary disruption, or when a process of repletion fills a temporary vacancy. This definition, like many subsequent ones, relies on a strong and direct contrast between pleasure and pain. "What I claim," says Socrates to his friend Protarchus, "is that when we find the harmony in living creatures disrupted, there will at the same time be a disintegration of their nature and a rise of pain." Protarchus concedes the point and Socrates presses on: "But if the reverse happens, harmony is regained and the former nature restored, we have to say that pleasure arises, if we must pronounce only a few words on the weightiest matters in the shortest possible time" (31 d–e). In the case of someone taking a cool drink after a long period of deprivation, Socrates explains, thirst is a kind of pain associated with destruction, and the process of replenishing bodily fluids again restores harmony and is accompanied by pleasure.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud proposes that the minimum requirement for pleasure is the release of tension. The particulars of Freud's position resemble those proposed by Socrates in ways we might find surprising, perhaps even uncanny. The heightening of certain kinds of "excitation," Freud writes, is experienced as "unpleasure," and the "release" from these excitations or tensions "is felt as pleasure." Like Socrates, Freud postulates a negative state of being (disruption for Socrates, tension for Freud) which brings about the opposite of pleasure (pain, unpleasure). Again like Socrates, Freud understands pleasure as a by-product which comes about when the negative condition is repaired or alleviated.

I begin with these two highly influential examples because they suggest some of the ways in which the discourse on pleasure in western thought has not been entirely convincing. For example, we (like our intellectual masters from the past) seem reluctant to admit that pleasure is a good thing. If I had cited Christian teaching along with Plato and Freud, this reluctance would seem even more obvious and more tenacious. I think we are at last emerging from a critical climate in which theories of pleasure are likely to be dismissed or stigmatized as mere hedonism, but this rhetorical turn has been practised with great frequency and little intelligence from Plato's time to our own.

Secondly, I have put Plato and Freud next to each other because both of them insist that pleasure can be understood only in relation to an opposite experience: pain in Plato, unpleasure in Freud. The interaction between pleasure and its variously designated opposite is a subject of enquiry in several of the writings gathered here, both discursive and creative. Madeline Bassnett locates "A Frightful Pleasure" in the enigmatic Jacobean tragedy, *The Changeling*; her focus on wonder and monstrosity is a tacit admission that we often derive pleasure from the apparently (or perhaps the officially) painful. Eugenie Brinkema traces an equally unsettling pattern through the imagery of an Italian film, Cavani's *The Night Porter*, which recreates an erotic obsession out of the desecrations of the Holocaust. Mary Vincenzetti's short story, "Devilled Eggs," concludes with a scenario that conforms to Freud's requirement of a release of tension, but many readers may want to relocate the precise event described here as something other than pleasure. A. D. Nuttal, one of the scholars cited by Bassnett, is the author of a thoughtful book entitled *Why Does Tragedy Give Pleasure?* This is the question raised implicitly both by Vincenzetti's short story, and by "Love's Pleasure, Love's Pain," Eluned Summers-Bremner's adventurous account of the emotional ambiguities embedded in the fiction of Anita Brookner. There would seem to be plenty of material here to suggest that Plato and Freud were onto something: the more you think about pleasure, the more you find that you have to take its opposite into account.

But some of our authors take up the question of pleasure in ways that would not have been congenial either to Plato or to Freud. Take the question of gender. Janine Rogers in "Getting There is Half the Fun" and Deirdre Dwyer in "Love in a Foreign Country"

both draw a connection between female pleasure and mobility. I don't think Plato considered this issue at all, and even Freud, with all of his apparent interest in what women want, would not have found the gendering of pleasure offered by these female authors very much to his liking.

And what about the question that nobody asks – not Plato, not Freud, not any of the writers gathered here – namely, does pleasure have a history? In one sense I have imposed this question on the articles gathered here by arranging them in a chronological sequence. Janine Rogers provides a frame for this sequence, if you like, since she herself constructs an “historical overview” which begins with medieval women (like the Wife of Bath) and ends with contemporary lesbian erotica. Brenda Dunn-Lardeau situates her study of attitudes towards bodily pleasure during the historical shift which separates the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Madeline Bassnett focuses on a single text drawn from late Renaissance culture, and Paul J. Young gives an entertaining account of some of the ambiguities inherent in eighteenth-century erotica by commenting at length on a particular specimen. Eugenie Brinkema and Eluned Summers-Bremner bring the discussion forward to the recent past by interrogating film, fiction, and theory that emerged relatively late in the twentieth century.

But perhaps I have been arrogant in suggesting that nobody asks about the history of pleasure. In a sense, the contributions I've just described would suggest that many scholars are interested in different histories of pleasure: histories of the discourses of pleasure, of the gendering of pleasure, of the policing of pleasure, of the renunciation of pleasure, and so on. If our special issue points the way towards the writing of such histories, then it has done everything it was intended to do.

While I hope that the arguments presented here will help readers to understand pleasure in ways they hadn't foreseen, I also hope that the fiction and poetry will create special pleasures for readers who are willing to be drawn in. “The Disappearing Father” by Brooke Biaz offers an account of a painful experience when considered from the narrator's point of view. But there are hints throughout the story that disappearance (whatever that may mean in the present context) is a kind of reward for the narrator's Dad. He now takes his partner dancing until the wee hours of the morning, he sleeps late, he seems to have escaped the relentless voyeur-

ism which we happily accept, for most of our lives, as responsibility. By contrast, Elena Wolff's three poems about our relationships to plants will appeal to readers who have found pleasure in gardening. And aesthetic pleasure, a topic often alluded to by many writers in these pages, is the explicit subject of Michael Pacey's "The Final Pages of Another Novel." I like especially Pacey's nervousness about exactly what it is we take from our reading experience. In part it seems to be a sensory response: "Then a tingling begins all over, my arms become gooseflesh." Let's celebrate this whenever it happens; the pleasure which accompanies the conclusion of a great read is a precious thing, and we should relish it. And perhaps we should be grateful to the artists who have given of themselves to ensure that such pleasure would be not only the creator's but the reader's too.

With these last words I have come very close to formulating, yet again, the *raison d'être* for such a journal as *The Dalhousie Review*. But this is my last attempt of this kind. After editing this journal for six of the last seven years, I have come to a fork in the ways. Because there are other things I want to do with my life, I have decided to abandon *The Dalhousie Review*, my decision having been made much easier by the secure knowledge that the next Editor, Robert M. Martin, will offer exemplary leadership in the years ahead. My own term as Editor has been a pleasure, from beginning to end, partly because I have been able to work in partnership with a gifted Production Manager, Jennifer Lambert. I am grateful to her and to all of the people who have contributed to the journal during my watch: that includes both the relatively small circle of colleagues and friends who have done the work that such an enterprise needs, and the very large network of authors, readers, reviewers, and subscribers without whom the bare existence of the journal would be not only impossible but pointless. Thank you, everyone. And goodbye.

R.H.