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# AESCULAPIAN ASCETICISM IN FLEUR JAEGGY'S *SWEET DAYS OF DISCIPLINE*

DURING THE PANDEMIC, Fleur Jaeggy's novella *Sweet Days of Discipline* (1991) offered peculiar consolation as a brooding romance filled with morbid preoccupations. The work is set in the 1950s at an all-girls boarding school in the Swiss canton of Appenzell and follows the unnamed narrator's infatuation with a classmate named Frédérique. But the teenage romance on offer is neither sweet nor conventional; rather, Jaeggy's characters are frostbitten by neglect, their affection is painfully anatomical, and insanity and brutality lurk just below the surface of youthful innocence. Throughout the novella, Jaeggy reveals the devastating impacts of a childhood dominated by ideology instead of parental attention and affection. While Frédérique seems to submit completely to the expectations of higher authorities and emerges as an apparently perfect student, in reality she is a disturbed nihilist who spends much of her adult life in sanatoriums. In contrast, the narrator is both an ascetic and an aesthete; she compulsively describes Frédérique's perfection, and upon its collapse takes pleasure in her own disappointment. But the narrator's masochism is ultimately a survival strategy that allows her to cope with the agonizing experience of being disconnected from sources of love and meaning. By actively repeating the trauma of parental and ideological abandonment on her own terms, the narrator, unlike Frédérique, takes control of her suffering.

At the beginning of the novella, the narrator is suspended in a state of indifference. She has been living in boarding schools for seven years and is entirely without a sense of self, explaining that she has "no past" and "no secrets." When they meet at the Bausler Institute, Frédérique ignites the narrator with purpose and a passionate desire to conquer her. Frédérique seems perfect by the school's standards: obedient, disciplined, respectful, polite, well-mannered, elegant, and a talented pianist. But the narrator is

particularly captivated by her conversations with Frédérique, which she finds profound and sophisticated. She describes Frédérique as possessing "something absolute and impregnable . . . like a distance from the world, from the living" or "the sign of someone confronting a power we know nothing of." Although she exhibits attributes praised by the institute and conducts herself with worldly maturity, the narrator describes her more forcefully as someone devoid of interest, spirit, or life. Parental neglect and institutional indoctrination have left her disconnected from reality.

In comparison to Frédérique, the narrator is directionless and uninspired but ultimately not a nihilist. At the end of the novella, when the narrator returns to the institute as an adult, she is horrified to discover that the boarding school is now a home for the blind and that no one recalls its former existence. Arguably, though, the institute is already a place of psychological blindness: the children are guided through the world by higher authorities and arbitrary systems of meaning and control, and they are never encouraged to develop their own unique perspectives or personalities. As a child, Frédérique appears to be aware of this blindness; she resigns herself to the institution's expectations and acts according to her instructors' wishes, losing herself completely to seemingly meaningless principles. In contrast, the narrator retains her innocence, testing the limits of authority with an odd affectation. Further, the narrator still labours under a certain degree of hope, articulated in fleeting acts of individualism. Both girls obey the headmistress Frau Hofstetter's orders, but the narrator actively attempts to carve out some personal identity, while Frédérique's existence reflects her superior's expectations. The narrator is also passionate and obsessive, and she has a ravenous appetite for experiences. She rises early for long walks, explaining that she is "looking for solitude, and perhaps the absolute." She likes to eat. In contrast to Frédérique, the narrator falls in love with people and ideas. She is inspired by her scenery and looks forward to her life in the world.

While the narrator may appear like a typical adolescent suffering from *Weltschmerz*, her obsessive attraction to Frédérique is a testament to her dysfunction. The narrator loves the qualities in Frédérique that she lacks herself and is chastised by her superiors for failing to demonstrate. Her attraction to Frédérique is thus always framed by her dissatisfaction or even disgust with herself. While Frédérique is composed and refined, the narrator is graceless and unsophisticated. While Frédérique eats "with her elbows

pressed against her bust," the narrator, overcome with the deliciousness of her breakfast, dunks her bread in her coffee. Furthermore, the narrator's interactions with Frédérique are often painful and exhausting, with Jaeggy describing her attempts at courting Frédérique as phases in a battle. What the narrator admires in Frédérique are the characteristics praised by the institute, such as her knowledge and experience of the outside world and her intriguing detachment from existence. She loves Frédérique for embodying everything she is not and cannot be. But loving Frédérique is intertwined with her own insecurity, shame, and even self-loathing.

Frédérique's aloofness not only aggravates the narrator's sense of self-worth but also evokes and even replicates the narrator's trauma of abandonment. This enigmatic young woman is always just out of reach, constantly eluding the narrator by both leaving the institute without her and being emotionally unavailable to her. She never seems to occupy living space or become an embodied individual. Instead, the narrator describes her through fragments of brilliant conversation, like an abstract voice, or through perfectly executed gestures. Even Frédérique's appearance seems to be detached from reality; Jaeggy writes that her "loose pullovers [hang] over her body, hiding it, just letting you glimpse an adolescent figure," keeping the narrator from even seeing her physique clearly. This relationship can be compared to the way the narrator interacts with guardians and parental figures in her life. Hofstetter may be protective, but she is not affectionate. Apart from having favourite students, she keeps the girls at a distance, inspiring fear in the narrator but never fondness. The only other adults in Appenzell are described by Jaeggy as "some ancient men, cripples," caretakers, and chauffeurs sent in the place of parents to retrieve the girls for holidays or funerals. These figures remain strangers to the girls and are always separated from them by age or status. Finally, the parents that Jaeggy describes are similarly detached: the narrator's mother is a disembodied voice calling orders from Brazil, while her father is old, sad, and placeless, spending his time in hotels and on trains. In loving Frédérique, the narrator reenacts this trauma of disconnection, alienation, and isolation from both parental love and meaning.

The parental mistreatment perforating the novella impacts its adolescents to differing degrees. After completing her education, for example, Frédérique tries to burn down her house, indifferent to the fate of her mother in the sitting room. In contrast, the narrator never acts radically but merely

persists weakly, with failure clearly on the horizon. At the age of fourteen she feels lost, unable to concentrate, and forever absent. In contrast to Frédérique's crazed volatility, she quietly retreats into a state of subtle and subdued emotional vacancy. Furthermore, while Frédérique internalizes this trauma as a child only to lash out violently as an adult, the narrator asserts control over her suffering through reenactment. By repeating this painful experience of abandonment on her own terms, the narrator, unlike Frédérique, is able to work through and overcome her trauma. This is revealed over the course of the novella, as the narrator increasingly develops a feeling of resentment towards her boarding school education and ultimately rejects these places, seeming to put them behind her. At the end of the novella, the narrator even confronts the mother superior of her final boarding school, taking a harder stance against any attempt to form her anew, making her disdain for such formation utterly clear. Frédérique, in contrast, clings to the memories of their education. When she and the narrator meet for the last time, she asks the narrator about the St. Gallen doll—a forgotten remnant from their education whose name connects it with that most ancient Catholic part of Switzerland—unable to imagine that anyone would have parted with it. The narrator's tragically contrasting amazement at Frédérique's connection to this object is a profound indication of their distance: both are troubled by their education, but one has successfully acknowledged its completion, while the other continues to be haunted by it.

In response to the demands from her distant mother, the institute's expectations of discipline, and a rules-based society grounded in civil obedience, the narrator overcomes the distressing experiences of alienation she endured as a child by reconstructing them with Frédérique. In contrast, Frédérique allows her trauma to consume her, first becoming devoid of purpose and ultimately acting violently unhinged. Crippled by competing systems of belief imposed on her from childhood and struggling with an existential "placelessness," the narrator clings desperately to the memory of authority figures like this mysterious young woman, who had such a well-defined sense of self. As she realizes by the conclusion of the novella, however, these dominant women and institutions from her childhood are themselves decaying, fragile, and hollow. At the close of *Sweet Days of Discipline*, the narrator can write like Frédérique—she has "perfected perfection itself"—but her childhood love has become a disturbed and angry adult, leaving the narrator to self-medicate once again with "the pleasure of disappointment."