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Not the Same Old Masochism

Imperial Masochism: British Fiction, Fantasy, and Social Class. John Kucich. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006. 258 pp.

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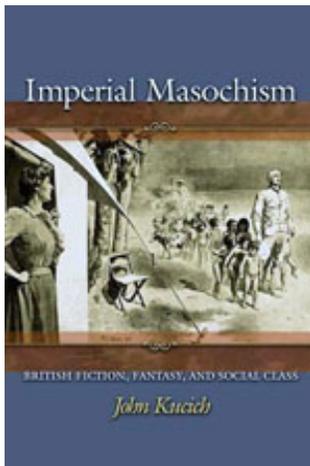
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<1>John Kucich's *Imperial Masochism* undertakes three main tasks. First, it expands the critical conception of masochism as perverse sexual praxis to a broader definition of it as a "psychosocial system," which can accommodate a variety of pain-seeking behaviors, beliefs, and fantasies, some sexualized but most not (26). Second, it uses this expansive definition of masochism to redirect critical attention to the largely overlooked importance of social class to imperial politics. And, third, by so doing it seeks to "recuperate for historicist studies both the category of social class ... and the domain of the psychological" (248). Offering provocative readings of Robert Louis Stevenson, Olive Schreiner, Rudyard Kipling, and Joseph Conrad, *Imperial Masochism* contends that a lot of what looks like discourses of race, gender, and sexuality in Victorian colonial narratives turns out to be about class conflict, worked out through masochistic fantasies of omnipotence.

<2>Kucich argues in his introduction that this broader definition of masochism depends on divesting it of the baggage of Freudian psychoanalysis with the help of contemporary object relations theory, which posits that masochism, rather than comprising a limited range of sexual behaviors and attitudes grounded in the oedipal conflict, is a preoedipal, narcissistic mode in which pain is "magically" transformed into feelings of omnipotence. Instead of attending to the psychosexual dynamics of dominance and submission outlined by Freud in "A Child is Being Beaten," object relations defines masochism as "any pursuit of physical pain, suffering, or humiliation that generates phantasmic, omnipotent compensations for narcissistic trauma" (25). (1) And this makes masochism "a widespread aspect of human experience rather than a pathology or a perversion" (26). Kucich rightly points out that one of the problems with Freudian, sexualized models of masochism is the critical impasse that has resulted from the question of whether eroticized submission represents subversive rebellion against or passive capitulation to social authority—a debate that has often split along gender lines, with subversive or "good" masochism reserved for masculine perversion and passive or "bad" masochism associated with feminine victimization. Object relations offers a way around this critical quagmire. As Kucich says, "I have been careful not to identify masochism with gendered or gay-specific sexualities—elisions that have produced feeble political idealisms as well as a great deal of dangerous stereotyping" (28). Instead, *Imperial Masochism* reveals masochistic fantasies of omnipotence as the controlling logic behind a range of imperialist and anti-imperialist narratives, in which class, rather than race, gender, or sexuality, carries the affective and ideological freight.

<3>Given the range of behaviors and beliefs covered by the umbrella of this redefined masochism, it is unsurprising that fantasies of omnipotence operate very differently for the four authors discussed in *Imperial Masochism*. Stevenson, Schreiner, Kipling, and Conrad were chosen, Kucich tells us, because they were "most instrumental in moving colonialism from the periphery of serious British culture to its center," but they nevertheless "constitute a spectrum of ideological strategies revolving around the relationships among masochistic fantasy, class, and imperial politics rather than instances of a single practice" (29). Indeed, despite his anti-Freudian methodology, Kucich points out that, for some of his authors, preoedipal and oedipal masochisms operate concomitantly. The four body chapters in *Imperial Masochism* are each layered, wide-ranging analyses of multiple texts, so I won't attempt comprehensive summaries, but instead will present them in broad strokes to give a sense of the book's range.

<4>In Chapter One Kucich argues that Stevenson "used disruptions in the psychological



economy of masochism to articulate specific kinds of social incoherence,” first in his “tragic” Scottish fiction and later, more optimistically, in his anti-imperialist South Seas writings, in which he “mobilized masochistic fantasy in service of a complex and progressive political engagement” (33). According to Kucich, the two phases of masochistic fantasy are marked by “melancholic” abjection and “magical” omnipotence, respectively. What is significant about Stevenson’s exploration of these phases is his use of the double to split them apart and place them in direct competition with one another. Kucich examines Stevenson’s Scottish historical novels to illustrate his conflicted attachments to (melancholic) middle-class, particularly evangelical, authority and (magical) bohemian rebellion. For example, in the fatal competition between the two brothers in *The Master of Ballantrae*, Kucich argues, “conflicts between bourgeois proprietorship and impoverished but stylish rebellion ... come to revolve around competing forms of self-negation” (38). What the Scottish novels present as an irresolvable opposition between competing phases of masochistic fantasy emerges in texts like *South Sea Tales* as a much more integrated and politically powerful masochism: “Turning away from a Scottish world that he saw as long since embedded in imperial Britain, [Stevenson] engaged a world in which the balance of colonial authority and resistance had not yet been settled” (47). In this new political arena Stevenson articulated an anti-imperialist politics, grounded in fantasies of evangelical self-sacrifice.

<5>Chapter Two engages directly with feminist criticism, particularly of the 1970s and 80s, which has dismissed Olive Schreiner’s self-sacrificial rhetoric as defeatist and perverse. Kucich points out that Schreiner was by no means alone in embracing this version of masochistic feminist subjectivity, the “affective vitality” of which is “still badly in need of explanation” (102). The explanation that he offers is that these masochistic fantasies were appealing to Schreiner and writers like her precisely because of the “preoedipal gratifications” they offered (102). That is to say, masochistic logic allowed women’s suffering to be recast as “glorious” martyrdom in the service of a future, utopian society. As Kucich argues, Schreiner “endowed feminism with tremendous social and psychological power by representing women’s assertive forms of self-denial as crucial to the survival, not just of women, but of the entire human race” (103). Kucich shows that Schreiner then used this same masochistic fantasy in defense of the Boers, whom she presented to her British readers as long-suffering martyrs, thus linking them ideologically to British middle-class (Puritan) values of stoic willingness to suffer, individual sacrifice to larger causes, and self-sufficient individualism.

<6>The third chapter argues convincingly that Kipling imagined British society in general, and colonial administration in particular, in terms of sadomasochistic “magical groups.” Readers familiar with departmental and administrative politics at the university will, I think, recognize the sadomasochistic magical group, which Kucich defines as a “narcissistically omnipotent bullying group that recognizes itself both as the legitimately despotic center of social order and as its permanently alienated victim” (156). Kipling’s affection for the sadomasochistic schoolboy clique culture in his *Stalky & Co.* stories is grounded in a particular middle-class, “professional” mistrust of both superiors and subordinates. This middle-class sadomasochistic professionalism, consolidated in the insular bullying of British boys’ schools, reemerges in Kipling’s laudatory representations of mid-level colonial administrators in his Indian stories. Indeed, as Kucich points out, this connection is made explicit in the two stories “Slaves of the Lamp, Part I” and “Slaves of the Lamp, Part II.” Part II recycles the bullying pranks executed by schoolboy protagonists Stalky, M’Turk and Beetle in Part I. In Part II the grownup Stalky, now a military officer in India, tricks Afghan tribes into fighting with each other instead of the outnumbered British troops, thus earning the admiration of his men, who view him as virtually omnipotent, but not, predictably, the gratitude of his bullying superiors (157–59). This version of beleaguered yet powerful professionalism, Kucich argues, appears throughout Kipling’s fiction, perpetuating “middle-class ideological principles [that] are both legitimated and camouflaged as ‘classless’ through the fluid dynamics of sadomasochism” (193).

<7>Chapter Four explores Conrad’s notoriously self-destructive heroes, arguing that their extravagant self-inflicted suffering indicates for Conrad an enlightened indictment of empire. Yet, in presenting his colonial heroes as melancholically self-conscious of the failures of imperialism, Kucich argues, Conrad in turn idealizes a particular kind of imperial professionalism. Conrad’s fiction thus both upholds and critiques imperial ideals. As Kucich says:

On the one hand, he indulged the fantasy—shared by many of his characters—that social identities could be willfully remade on colonial terrain.... On the other hand, though, Conrad portrayed radical transformations of social identity ... as illusions

that must be strenuously critiqued. He redeemed this ambivalent view of social metamorphosis, finally, only in the masochistic self-consciousness of imperial professionals. (223)

Conrad's view of the colonial professional, unlike Kipling's, was nostalgically linked to upper-class, chivalric values, which he saw as jeopardized by the incursion of "middle-class commercialism" (244). Kucich's reading of Conrad's masochistic fantasies of colonial professionalism thus usefully explores what have heretofore seemed his inconsistent attitudes toward empire.

<8>What will be clear to readers of *Imperial Masochism* is that Kucich's claim about the centrality of class to imperial discourses is spot on. His argument about the ubiquity of masochistic fantasy in both class and imperial discourses is, likewise, persuasive. What readers may have trouble with is the fluidity of Kucich's definition of masochism, which in one instance looks like evangelical self-sacrifice, in another like sadistic schoolboy pranks, in a third like megalomaniacal self-love, and nowhere looks like the erotic pleasure-in-pain of *Venus in Furs*. Kucich's gloomy prediction in his conclusion that his book will be a "bitter disappointment" to critics in masochism studies is, I think, exaggerated, although I suspect he is right that "the counterintuitive assumptions of relational theory" may suggest that his version of "'masochistic fantasy' is not what most people mean by 'masochism'" (250–51). However, I believe that most readers will find, as I did, the challenges presented by this expansive and counterintuitive conception of masochism rewarding rather than otherwise.

<9>That said, one reservation seems worth mentioning: readers for whom race, gender and sexuality remain important issues may find Kucich's insistence on class limiting. It is not, I would suggest, that his claim about the importance of class to imperial politics is wrong, but rather that in countering prevailing readings of his authors and especially in countering the

Freudian monopoly on masochism, Kucich seems sometimes to force texts to submit to his interpretations. For example, in the Stevenson chapter he notes that in the novella *The Ebb-Tide* the narrator describes the protagonist Herrick's self-loathing as "capable of producing 'orgasm'" (68); yet Kucich insists that "Herrick's immersion in masochism ... is pointedly desexualized, revolving as it does around preoedipal longings: for safety and love, for the approval of authority figures, and, in particular, for a narcissistically mirroring, rescuing figure" (69). It is, perhaps, evidence of the stranglehold that Freudian psychoanalysis exercises over masochism studies that I continued to want to read many of the instances of masochism described in the book as sexualized scenes of domination and submission. All the same, one is tempted to revise the old Freudian saw: sometimes an orgasm is just an orgasm. Yet, despite its tendency to raise issues of gender and sexuality only to dismiss them, the book offers some really nuanced readings of the complex interconnections among gender, sexuality, class and race in imperial discourses. The Schreiner chapter is one of the most sensitive readings of her work that I know of. And the Kipling chapter was more fun for me to read than Kipling's work itself. Indeed, despite my (possibly perverse) attachments to the same old masochism, I found *Imperial Masochism* thoroughly engaging. I look forward happily to the critical debates it will spark.

Endnotes

(1)Kucich cites Laplanche, Lacan, and Deleuze, as well as critics like Sander Gilman, Kaja Silverman, Suzanne Stewart, and John Noyes within this "oedipal" tradition of masochism, whereas he derives his object relations or "relational" theory of masochism from Stephen A. Mitchell, William Grossman, Jack Novick, and Kerry Kelly Novick, among others (18–20). (△)

