
John Kucich. *Imperial Masochism: British Fiction, Fantasy, and Social Class*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. 258p.

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In *Imperial Masochism: British Fiction, Fantasy, and Social Class*, John Kucich reappraises late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century conquest and class through an analysis of literary works by Robert Louis Stevenson, Olive Schreiner, Rudyard Kipling, and Joseph Conrad. This recent release is in many ways a continuation of Kucich's earlier work on *Repression in Victorian Fiction*—or, as he writes, “a rethinking of the relationship between self-negating practices and Victorian subjectivity” (30). But whereas Kucich's 1987 analysis of repression ultimately idealizes social collectivity, 2007's *Imperial Masochism* is more ambivalent about the role of ideology on late-Victorian subjectivity.

This analysis of imperialism and social class focuses on four novelists because, Kucich writes, Victorian novels were extremely influential conduits for both ideology and ideology critique, and contributed to the creation of Victorian subjectivity. Kucich has elsewhere established himself as a nineteenth-century scholar, writing extensively on canonical Victorian writers such as George Eliot, Charlotte Brontë, and Charles Dickens. Instead of analyzing imperial masochism in the works of these mid-century writers, Kucich here focuses on fin-de-siècle literature because, as he notes, imperialism and interclass competition are both particularly heightened at this time. Analyzing late nineteenth-century new imperialism, then, Kucich selects four writers whose works drew popular British attention to the issue of colonialism: whereas Stevenson and Schreiner use masochistic fantasies differently to support their middle-class and anti-imperialist positions, Kipling and Conrad variously redraw class alliances in ways that support imperialism.

The first chapter, titled “Melancholy Magic: Robert Louis Stevenson's Evangelical Anti-Imperialism,” reads Stevenson as an anti-imperial writer who “mobilized masochistic fantasy in service of a complex and progressive political engagement” (33). At once melancholic (cherishing suffering) and magic (with fantasies of omnipotence), Stevenson's masochism was neoevangelical, middle-class, and anti-imperial. In “Olive Schreiner's Preoedipal Dreams: Feminism, Class, and the South African War,” Kucich confronts feminist readings of Schreiner that focus on her masochism in sexual terms alone. By interpreting the South African/British writer through a nonsexualized version of masochism and by attending to the category of social class, Kucich attempts to make Schreiner's feminism and anti-imperialism intelligible as an active revision of middle-class subjectivity. While more critical of imperialism than the writers analyzed in the second half of *Imperial Masochism*, Kucich is careful

to note that Stevenson's and Schreiner's anti-imperial masochisms are not wholly liberated from the class and race politics of the imperial project.

Turning towards Kipling and Conrad in chapters three and four, Kucich illustrates two different connections between imperialist and class ideologies. "Sadomasochism and the Magical Group: Kipling's Middle-Class Imperialism" is *Imperial Masochism's* most sustained treatment of sadomasochism—masochistic fantasy which engages "sexual desires or when omnipotent rage itself becomes sadistic" (28)—and here Kucich describes the way Kipling's sadomasochistic groups "underwrote a remarkably unilateral class politics" and ultimately supported an imperialism dependent on class hierarchies (138). A writer, Kucich notes, who was ostensibly more critical of imperialism, Conrad emerges from "The Masochism of the Craft: Conrad's Imperial Professionalism" as a supporter of a very specific, gentrified professional class imperialism, even while he discredited a more middle-class, commercial imperialism. Earlier versions of the first three chapters of this book have already appeared in print between 2001 and 2003, making the Conrad chapter the newest contribution to this project.

To this reader, the title *Imperial Masochism* evokes Anne McClintock's oft-cited 1995 *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. Indeed, Kucich uses McClintock and others as a point of departure: missing from or marginalized in these sophisticated analyses, Kucich writes, is the "unfashionable" topic of social class (1). The primary contention of this present book, then, is that "figurations of masochism in British colonial fiction constituted a psychosocial language, in which problems of social class were addressed through the politics of imperialism and vice versa" (2). By placing imperialism, class, and masochism in conversation with one another, Kucich ambitiously redefines imperialism in terms of class and masochism in terms of narcissistic omnipotence. The book employs both cultural politics and psychoanalysis, and thus contributes to analyses of British imperialism while it illustrates a methodological synthesis of these two theoretical perspectives.

"This is not primarily a psychoanalytic study," Kucich warns, for it omits much psychoanalytic discourse and it uses—rather than contributes to—psychoanalytic theory (17). Nevertheless, the book is a notable intervention into the field beyond its valuable pairing of this discourse with an historical cultural politics. Rather than adopting the popular, Freudian or post-Freudian view of masochism as a product of the drives located in oedipal sexuality, Kucich uses relational psychoanalysis and reads masochism in terms of preoedipal narcissism and omnipotent fantasy. This appears to be a paradox: how is self-inflicted pain equated with fantasies of omnipotence and power? Kucich responds to this anticipated critique by arguing that compensatory fantasies require pain—a kind of exalted suffering—in order to

exist. Kucich focuses on this lesser-known theorization about masochism because, as he concludes about the Freudian and post-Freudian model, “The sexualization of masochism tempts some theorists to read it as a set of infinitely ambiguous tropes for political domination and submission” (20). The relational psychoanalytic approach facilitates an ideological reading of masochism, which in turn allows one to consider masochism as widespread and cultural rather than pathological or perverse.

What makes *Imperial Masochism* noteworthy beyond its substantial contribution to both its subjects and theoretical approaches is its style: the book is at once theoretically rigorous and engagingly readable. Kucich is able to match technical terminology with lucid explanations and examples, and to integrate literary close readings with contextual information and sustained theoretical argument. Although this reader would like to have seen more attention given to sadomasochism and its imperial manifestations throughout the book, Kucich’s nuanced focus on masochism is an appreciated departure from frequent formulations that position imperialism as a strictly sadistic enterprise. This book is extremely useful as a model for scholars seeking to bring cultural studies and psychoanalysis together, while its focus on class makes *Imperial Masochism* invaluable for those interested in late-Victorian imperialism. ✱