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Book review  
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## Imperial Masochism: British Fiction, Fantasy, and Social Class

**John Kucich, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007, 251 pages (incl. index), £22.50, ISBN-13: 978-0-691-12712-5, ISBN-10: 0-691-12712-3.**

Ever since Deleuze published his essay "Coldness and Cruelty" (1991) which critiqued the pairing of sadism and masochism, authors have been able to step away from the Freudian psychoanalytic interpretation of masochism and look more towards its historical, social, and political aspects. While Kraft-Ebbing and Freud viewed masochism as a perversion, Leopold Sacher-Masoch, the thinker and author whose name masochism is attributed to, was a historian whose novellas can be read as responses to the pan-Slavic movement taking place across Eastern Europe at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In his book, *Imperial Masochism: British Fiction, Fantasy, and Social Class*, John Kucich has followed along the lines of Deleuze in his endeavour to move away from masochism as a perversion and to explore it in terms of the ways in which "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." (p. 2). With the linguistic turn in the study of disciplines such as history, politics, and international relations, the turn towards using masochism as a tool of analysis has helped to link psychology with symbolism in the attempt to further understand social relationships.

One of the central observations that Kucich makes in *Imperial Masochism* is that discourses of class have not been adequately addressed in either the literatures on imperialism or the respective works that are analyzed in the book. To this effect, *Imperial Masochism* is divided into four major chapters that analyze the respective works of Robert Louis Stevenson, Olive Schreiner, Rudyard Kipling, and Joseph Conrad, in the endeavour to think through the presence of class politics within the imperial context. In addition to the class dynamic, Kucich explores the systems of religion (particularly evangelicalism) and professionalism, which intersect representations of masochism, class, and imperialism. This allows Kucich to demonstrate a number of things: the relevance of psychoanalysis to historicism; the role masochism plays in identity formation beyond the sexual approach seen in gender and queer studies; the social function of fantasy in British culture, particularly surrounding imperialism and class ideology, and; a demonstration of the relationship between the psyche and the social in the works of influential writers of colonial fiction.

While Kucich draws on the traditions of psychoanalytic thinking, his application of masochism as a psychosocial language has allowed him to effectively consider the centrality of fantasy as a medium

through which the individual and social experience get intertwined. In a sense, Kucich is able to successfully do two things in his work: on the one hand, he is able to employ a reinterpretation of Sacher-Masoch's thinking to the problem of class and imperialism; on the other hand, he is able to abstract the social and political climate found within the analysis of fiction within a particular historical setting, and develop an understanding of those abstracted elements through a masochian reading.

One of the things that readers must be aware of, however, is the difficulty of maintaining the separation of masochism and sadism in the endeavour to intersect psychoanalysis with historicism, sociology, and fiction. Although Kucich uses psychoanalytic tools that have already been developed, and employs what he calls 'the relational perspective on masochistic fantasy', he nevertheless slips into the language of sadomasochism at various points in the text. This serves to reproduce the very terms that impede the use of masochism as an instrument of cultural analysis since it not only combines very different social and political worlds (that of de Sade and Sacher-Masoch), and assumes that they are complementary, but the language also reaffirms masochism as a sexual perversion. Despite this critique, *Imperial Masochism* is nevertheless able to demonstrate new ways in which psychoanalysis can contribute to historicism. This serves to make it an important scholarly contribution, especially when one begins to consider not only the interdisciplinary aspect of the ideas Kucich develops, but also of the uses to which Kucich's approach may be applied to other social and political issues.

The theoretical strength of *Imperial Masochism* serves to place it at the center of new approaches to the well discussed issues of class, race, and identity. As Kucich reminds us,

the Freudian terms that tradition uses to define masochism, which it sees as a drama of sexualized domination and submission, obscure the more extensive political significance of fantasy structures that can mediate a great variety of social pressures (p. 247).

With this observation in mind, one can immediately see that Sacher-Masoch's thinking extends past the Freudian parameters that have dominated contemporary understandings of masochism. This makes *Imperial Masochism* an important read for scholars who are open to stepping out of the established boundaries in order to tread new paths of inquiry.

## References

Deleuze, Gilles (1991) *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*. McNeil, Jean (Trans.) New York: Zone Books