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**John Kucich: Imperial Masochism**

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## Introduction

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### FANTASY AND IDEOLOGY

Never completely losing its grip, fantasy is always heading for the world it only appears to have left behind.

—JACQUELINE ROSE, *States of Fantasy*

MASOCHISM is often regarded as a site of social and cultural intersections. But in late-nineteenth-century British colonial fiction, it focused one particular conjunction more than any other: the relationship between imperial politics and social class. This relationship has lately been an unfashionable topic for scholarly analysis, despite the intense scrutiny being applied to nearly every other aspect of British colonialism and some noteworthy protests about the imbalance. David Cannadine, for example, recently claimed that the “British Empire has been extensively studied as a complex *racial* hierarchy (and also as a less complex *gender* hierarchy); but it has received far less attention as an equally complex *social* hierarchy or, indeed, as a social organism, or construct, of any kind.”<sup>1</sup> Ann Stoler has registered a similar complaint, while emphasizing the interdependence of these categories: “We know more than ever about the legitimating rhetoric of European civility and its gendered construals, but less about the class tensions that competing notions of ‘civility’ engendered. We are just beginning to identify how bourgeois sensibilities have been coded by race and, in turn, how finer scales measuring cultural competency and ‘suitability’ often replaced explicit racial criteria to define access to privilege in imperial ventures.”<sup>2</sup> Many cultural critics share Stoler’s assumptions about the mediated nature of colonial identities. In Anne McClintock’s much quoted formulation from *Imperial Leather* (1995): “no social category exists in privileged isolation; each comes into being in social relation to other categories, if in uneven and contradictory ways.”<sup>3</sup> But methodologically sophisticated imperial studies have persistently marginalized social

<sup>1</sup> David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 9. Italics in original.

<sup>2</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 99.

<sup>3</sup> Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 9.

class or have falsely stabilized it in relation to fluid hybridizations of gender, race, sexual orientation, and other forms of social classification. The former is evident in the subtitle of McClintock's book, for example (*Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*).

Analyzing representations of masochism can help to rectify this imbalance. Although masochism is not usually associated with social class, images of colonial masochism tended to bear with special weight on problems of status hierarchy, no matter how much they were also articulated upon other forms of social identity. These strong correlations between masochism and social class are not the explanatory key to colonial experience, nor can they be studied in "privileged isolation." But they do provide a reminder that class was a more important and a more complicated aspect of colonial life than recent scholarship has recognized. They can also demonstrate that ideologies of social class were intertwined with imperial self-consciousness in immensely variable ways.

The principal contention of this book 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. I am not arguing that masochism had an inherent class or imperial politics. Neither would I wish to claim that social or imperial identity can be understood through collective psychology, masochistic or otherwise. My argument is simply that elements of masochistic fantasy resonated powerfully with both imperial and class discourses in late-nineteenth-century Britain. This discursive resonance presented writers of fiction with an extraordinary opportunity to refashion both imperial and class subjectivities by manipulating the complex intersections between them that masochistic fantasy helped to forge. In this sense, I am arguing that masochism played a vital role in the shaping and reshaping of social identity at the imperial periphery, which had important consequences in domestic British culture as well. I am also arguing that imperial and class ideologies in nineteenth-century Britain exploited a common and very powerful form of affective organization.

Because I regard masochism as a psychosocial language (rather than a fixed set of behaviors or a personality profile), I speak of it throughout this book as a fantasy structure. My emphasis on the centrality of fantasy to masochism—a notion entertained in Sigmund Freud's early studies and sustained by subsequent relational work—has a number of important consequences. For one thing, it circumvents some of the more mechanistic tendencies of psychoanalytic approaches to culture. Critical appropriations of psychoanalytic theory have too often closed off possibilities for cultural interpretation—largely by combining crude, reductive assumptions about psychological causality with hair-splitting terminological distinctions. But psychoanalytic models need not stifle cultural analysis, nor should they

provoke unproductive debates about whether the origins of subjectivity lie in private experience, psychobiology, or culture. Important object-relational studies of fantasy, such as Melanie Klein's work on the symbolic status of the mother, de-anatomize the body and make it available for figural readings.<sup>4</sup> Poststructural analysts of fantasy, from Jean Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis to Jacqueline Rose, have also insisted on the textualized character of phantasmagoric material.<sup>5</sup> The analysis of fantasy structures has, in fact, served a variety of psychoanalytic approaches seeking to understand the relationship between psychological and social processes without privileging one or the other. Understanding masochism as a fantasy structure means viewing it as a medium in which individual and social experience is intertwined. It also means regarding it as a medium of symbolic transformation that incorporates a wider range of behaviors than is usually conjured up by the term "masochism," which often provokes thoughts only of whips and chains, sexual role reversals, and physical self-mutilation.

Viewing masochism as a fantasy structure has other important methodological consequences. As Laplanche and Pontalis have famously pointed out, fantasy crosses the boundary between conscious and unconscious experience, linking the worlds of daydream and delusion to indecipherable psychic pressures that resist direct apprehension.<sup>6</sup> These pressures can be variously understood as pre-given, socially constructed, or individually developed. For that reason, the analysis of fantasy structures enables the cultural critic to place phantasmagoric forms of conscious awareness in relationship to unconscious material of all kinds, both psychological and social. As Terry Eagleton once observed, the study of ideology means linking together its most articulate with its least articulate levels.<sup>7</sup> Viewing fantasy as a set of psychosocial symbolic structures has the potential to do just that.

By concentrating on processes of discursive mediation, I resist the evaluative urgency that has been so common in the cultural analysis of masochism. Attempts to judge masochism's complicity with or subversion of dominant social power have all too often overwhelmed more nuanced ways of recognizing its powers of symbolic transformation. Masochistic fantasy is an instrument for social action—not an action in itself that has

<sup>4</sup> See, in particular, Melanie Klein, "The Importance of Symbol-Formation in the Development of the Ego," *Contributions to Psycho-analysis, 1921–1945* (London: Hogarth Press, 1965), pp. 236–50.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 49 (1968), 1–18. Jacqueline Rose, *States of Fantasy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 3, claims that fantasy is the fundamental symbolic structure of the social.

<sup>6</sup> Laplanche and Pontalis, p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 50.

intrinsic political (or psychological) content. But neither is it an open-ended process of symbolic reversals, resistant to political interpretation. It is, rather, a symbolic language often used to achieve particular, determinate objectives. Of course, reading masochism as an ideological medium is itself a political choice as well as an ethical and aesthetic one. While its evenhandedness may alienate those with polemical views on the politics of masochism, it has the advantage of illuminating a great range of distinct ideological content in very different writers and colonial contexts.

Before venturing further into questions about what masochistic fantasy is and what it is not, I must begin with a brief sketch of the social and cultural contexts that enabled it to link late-Victorian discourses about imperialism and social class. If masochistic fantasy served as an important means for organizing what Cannadine calls the “complex social hierarchy” of British colonial experience, it did so because it was firmly embedded in British imperial and social history.

#### MASOCHISM IN CONTEXT

Although we are not used to scrutinizing instances of cherished pain in British imperial iconography very deeply, the glorification of suffering was an enormously important theme well before Victorian evangelicalism tried to Christianize every aspect of the imperial project. British imperialism may have fostered countless narratives of conquest, and it may have celebrated victorious heroes like Wellington, Clive, and Wolseley or great triumphs like Waterloo, Trafalgar, Plassey, and Red River. The arrogance of the British abroad was legendary, too, and often a source of perverse national pride. But British imperialism also generated a remarkable preoccupation with suffering, sacrifice, defeat, and melancholia. As Linda Colley has reminded us, one paradigm of British imperial narrative may well have been Crusoe. But another was Gulliver, a figure whose ordeals of enslavement and humiliation culminate in his subjection to an unquestionably superior race.<sup>8</sup> This subjection compels Gulliver to disavow the sense of legitimacy he had once vested in his nation and in himself, making melancholic abjection, in his case, a vehicle for self-transformation.

What is particularly striking about British imperial culture is how often it mythologized victimization and death as foundational events in the teleology of empire. There was, seemingly, a different crucifixion scene marking the historical gateway to each colonial theater: Captain Cook in the South Pacific, General Wolfe in Canada, General Gordon in the Sudan;

<sup>8</sup> Linda Colley, *Captives: Britain, Empire, and the World, 1600–1850* (2002; New York: Random House, 2004), pp. 1–4.

or else there was mass martyrdom (the Black Hole massacre in India) or crucifixion averted (the popular tale of Captain John Smith and Pocahontas in America). When, in 1871, W.H.G. Kingston lionized Cook for “the founding of two nations of the Anglo-Saxon race,” for example, he was echoing a long tradition of Cookiana that continued to sustain the cultural identities of Australia and New Zealand well into the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> This foundational myth, like the others mentioned above, revolved around the sanctification implicit in the imperial martyr’s suffering—a sanctification that allied imperial pain with redemption and with the beginning, rather than the end, of history. In short, sanctification transformed the pain and finality of death or defeat into pleasurable fantasies of ecstatic rebirth or resurrection. After Cook’s death in 1779, poems by Helen Maria Williams, William Cowper, and Hannah More, along with a famous elegy by Anna Seward, all compared him to Christ and stressed his having been deified by the Hawaiians who killed him (an assertion later contested by British and American missionaries). One of the first important paintings of Cook’s death, Philip James De Loutherbourg’s *Apotheosis of Captain Cook* (1785), which was used as the backdrop for an immensely successful London pantomime and later published as an engraving, shows Cook being assumed into heaven by the figures of Britannia and Fame. Other influential paintings of the death scene by John Webber, John Cleveley, and Johann Zoffany represent Cook as an icon of emotional and spiritual transcendence—the only serene figure in a scene of chaotic violence.

Wolfe was similarly sanctified in the public imagination. A painting by Benjamin West, viewed by enthusiastic crowds when first exhibited in 1771, possesses, in Simon Schama’s words, a “radiance illuminating the face of the martyr and bathing the grieving expressions of his brother officers in a reflection of impossible holiness.”<sup>10</sup> The West painting is transparently modeled on Passion scenes, with an upraised British flag standing in for the cross. The Black Hole massacre, which took place in Calcutta in 1756 (helping in some measure to motivate Clive’s successful campaign against the French at Plassey), was also transformed into a foundational myth in the second half of the nineteenth century by those who portrayed the victims as saintly martyrs. In 1902, ignoring warnings from the India Council in London against “parading our disaster,” Lord Curzon lavishly restored the Black Hole monument in Calcutta and praised the “martyr

<sup>9</sup> William H. G. Kingston, *Captain Cook, His Life, Voyages and Discoveries* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1871), p. 319.

<sup>10</sup> Simon Schama, *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), p. 21.

band” in his dedicatory speech.<sup>11</sup> He defended his actions to the India Council on the grounds that “their death was practically the foundation stone of the British Empire in India.”<sup>12</sup>

Many of these foundational scenes of martyrdom were military. The siege of Mafeking, the Mysore disaster, the catastrophic First Afghan War, Gordon’s death at Khartoum—all figured in the national imagination as spectacles of military weakness or defeat that also inspired British resurgence. Many contemporary accounts of these military episodes, such as William Thomson’s *Memoirs of the Late War in Asia* (1788) or Robert Sale’s *A Journal of the Disasters in Afghanistan* (1843), are remarkable excursions into martyrology rather than documentary accounts. But the sanctification of the imperial sufferer was not simply a rallying point for military conquest. Imperial iconography is littered with nonmilitary martyrs as well: missionaries like John Williams and David Livingstone, for example, and explorers like Sir John Franklin, Mungo Park, and, of course, Cook. India was especially rich in civilian martyrs. These included Bishop Heber, whose death in 1826 was widely mourned in both India and Britain, as well as the many young scientists whose lives and work were tragically cut short by disease: William Griffith, Alexander Moon, William Kerr, John Champion, George Gardner, John Stocks, John Cathcart (to name only a few of the botanists).<sup>13</sup> These Keatsian deaths ensured that many a scientific text emerging from India was read as an implicit memorial to its prematurely deceased author. Celebrated instances of self-sacrifice such as these helped stiffen the ethos of martyrdom that underlay even the most ordinary colonial life. In Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), St. John Rivers sees in Jane “a soul that revelled in the flame and excitement of sacrifice,” which he regards as the supreme qualification for a life—inevitably short—of unheralded colonial service.<sup>14</sup> With a more penitential spirit, Peter Jenkyns in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford* (1853) expiates his youthful sins through the ennobling suffering of colonial service.

Of course, images of imperial martyrdom, self-sacrifice, or even self-abasement cannot be conflated with masochism. The images of cherished imperial suffering I am describing served a great many purposes. In part, they simply reflected the dangerous and often disastrous side of imperial enterprise. From the perspective of the empire at its height, narratives of

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Zetland, Lawrence John Lumley Dundas, Marquis of, *The Life of Lord Curzon: Being the Authorized Biography of George Nathaniel, Marquess Curzon of Kedleston, K.G.*, 3 vols. (London: Ernest Benn, 1928), 2:158.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Zetland, 2:159.

<sup>13</sup> I. H. Burkill, *Chapters on the History of Botany in India* (Delhi: Government of India Press, 1965), makes for chilling reading on these and other untimely deaths.

<sup>14</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (New York: Norton, 2001), p. 344.















































