As many people have noticed, masochism had a peculiar prominence in Victorian culture, especially after mid-century: Christopher Herbert, for example, speaks of “an essentially masochistic cultural and political unconscious” in Victorian England. The “unconscious” and therefore unstable nature of Victorian masochism is worth stressing, since Victorian culture both pathologized and normalized masochistic display. On the one hand, masochism fueled the excesses of pre-Raphaelite painting and poetry, fin-de-siècle decadence, and New Woman writing. The drawings of Aubrey Beardsley, to cite the most vivid instance, scandalously eroticize pain—as do a wide range of late-century novels, from H. Rider Haggard’s She (1887) through Oscar Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891) and Sarah Grand’s The Heavenly Twins (1893). On the other hand, masochism was central to the mainstream bourgeois novel, where, earlier in the century, celebrated works like Wuthering Heights (1847) and Great Expectations (1861) had defined the masochistic male as the moral center.
of middle-class culture (in the figure of Pip, for instance), as
well as its deadliest enemy (in the figure of Heathcliff).

While there can be no unilateral explanation for the cul-
tural prominence of masochism in the mid to late nineteenth
century, a great deal of it derived from masochism's ability to
link emergent models of subjectivity with the reorganization of
middle-class ideology during this period. Class is rarely men-
tioned in current cultural theory concerned with masochism.
But if we suspend the deeply ingrained tendencies in our own
culture—including tendencies in cultural theory—to equate
masochism with sexuality, then the relevance of class to Victo-
rian masochism emerges strikingly. The linking of masochism
to sexuality was consolidated in late-nineteenth-century sex-
ology, particularly with the work of Richard von Krafft-Ebing
(who first coined the term "masochism"), and, in various post-
Freudian configurations, it has continued to compartmentalize
the role of masochism in cultural theory up to the present day.
But this conventional equation of masochism with sexuality
severely limits cultural and political interpretation (as well as
overlooking the work of twentieth-century clinicians, who find
sexual masochism to be the rarest kind of masochistic symp-
tomology they see).

In this essay I use late-twentieth-century psychoanalytic
models of masochism—which emphasize its preoedipal fea-
tures, and which do not privilege the relationship between
masochism and sexuality—to bring to light the central role
that masochism played in shaping the ideological structures of
Victorian middle-class culture. By exploring the breakdown of
these structures in the writings of Robert Louis Stevenson, I
hope to show how late-century writers exploited the instabili-
ties of Victorian masochism in order to rewrite it as a class-
coded discourse. Late-century writers like Stevenson, alert to
the growth and increasing diversity of the middle classes after
mid-century, reworked the ideological structures associated
with preoedipal, nonsexualized masochism to create alternative
middle-class subjectivities. Tracing this process of breakdown
and revision in Stevenson can help clarify both the function of
masochism in mid-Victorian culture and masochism's unprece-
dented appeal to late-century writers as a psychic trope that
enabled ideological renovations. In the course of making this argument, I hope to demonstrate how contemporary psychoanalytic models of masochism can contribute to the growing efforts of cultural theorists to synthesize psychological and social analysis. I also hope to show how closely theorists need to read self-martyring display in order to chart the political strategies that it enables.

Making large ideological claims for masochism requires first defining what it is, and recent cultural theory has had a difficult time doing that. The contradictions arise at a number of levels, including ambiguities about what acts qualify as masochistic, what kinds of symbolic opposition masochism undoes, and what the consequences of such undoing might be. Defining masochism as the destabilization of gender roles, for example, has recently produced disagreement among feminist critics about whether that destabilization serves feminism or patriarchy—prolonging a debate central to the "sex wars" of the 1980s. Kaja Silverman defends the male masochist as a rebel against patriarchal norms that, in conformity with the oedipal dynamics of the Western family romance, equate masochism with feminine submission:

Until our dominant fiction undergoes a radical metamorphosis, . . . subjectivity will always carry the imprint of the family. . . . We can not, then, start from zero with subjectivity; we can only hope to negotiate a different psychic relation to the Laws of Language and Kinship Structure than that dictated by the dominant fiction. Male masochism represents one way of doing so.2

Silverman's affirmative reading of male masochism is echoed by critics such as Carol Siegel and Laura Frost, who argue that masochism releases men from patriarchal gender roles, and by critics such as Marianne Noble and Eileen Gillooly, who claim

that masochism’s metamorphic powers have been exploited by women writers as well.3 Suzanne R. Stewart, however, argues against Silverman that, over a period of roughly seventy years (from 1870 to 1940), masochism constituted a ruse by which men proclaimed their own sexual marginality in order to secure hegemonic authority in increasingly devious terms.4 Other critics warn that masochism’s persistent association with feminine submission makes it a dangerous weapon for women to wield against normative gender roles.5

Similarly, theorists of queer sexuality are split about whether the masochist is a rebel or a collaborator. A long celebratory tradition—particularly evident in critical writing about lesbian sadomasochism—sees the queer masochist as a figure who parodies the forms and techniques of political authority in order to release erotic energy through ungrounded role-playing.6 As Barbara Rose, in a well-known anthology on lesbian sadomasochism, puts it: “I can be her slave, her servant, her teacher, her mother—I can be anything, anyone. . . . I am my body, nothing more.”7 But skeptics, such as Nick Mansfield, respond that such role-playing can be a feeble capitulation to the forms of political authority, an attempt to make subjection seem palatable by infusing it with erotic pleasure. The result is yet “another cultural gesture aimed at a power that not only remains unaffected by threatening representations but that


5 This is a central argument, for example, in Jessica Benjamin, The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination (New York: Pantheon, 1988).


represents itself in the same way." Similar disagreements characterize the work of theorists who are concerned with masochism as the mimicry of political technologies of control, such as John K. Noyes and D. A. Miller.

One explanation for these sharp disagreements about which battle the masochist is fighting, and which side he or she is on, is that cultural theory has had difficulty breaking either with Freudian models of masochism or with post-structuralist revisions of those models—both of which tend to produce totalizing perspectives on the relation between masochism and power. I want to suggest, however unfashionably, that cultural theory’s utter disregard of contemporary psychoanalytic work on masochism helps preserve the political cul-de-sacs to which it keeps returning. The Freudian model always understands masochism in relation to drives: at one stage, Freud saw it as the inversion of aggressive drives; at a later stage, he enshrined it as a primary drive in its own right. In Jean Laplanche’s fa-

8 Nick Mansfield, *Masochism: The Art of Power* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1997), p. 102. While male queer theorists tend to see homosexual masochism as a dissident practice, many have finally suspended judgment about its political valence—either because, like David M. Halperin, they see such judgments as identitarian, or because, like Leo Bersani, they find them to lack gay specificity. See Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality, and Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 2: “The moment has come to suspend our projects of identification (or disavowal, as the case may be),” in order “to examine more closely . . . sexual practices . . . [that] do not merely confirm current cherished assumptions about ‘us’ or legitimate some of ‘our’ favorite practices.” In “The Gay Daddy,” in his *Homes* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1995), pp. 77-112, Bersani critiques the idealization of sadomasochism, particularly in Foucault, as an insidious replication of heterosexual power.


mous post-structuralist rereading, masochism becomes a fantasy about drives. But understanding masochism as a problem of the drives, even if those drives are reunderstood as symbolic processes, tends to elide masochism with sexuality—and particularly with oedipal sexuality. For Freud all masochism originates in so-called “erotogenic” masochism; for Laplanche masochism is, quite simply, at the core of sexuality; and both of them locate the oedipal stage as the moment when masochism is articulated erotically through conflicts with paternal authority. Largely because of this legacy, an array of oedipal themes—mastery and submission, rivalry with the father, excesses of the superego, interplay between libidinal and aggressive drives, and psycho-social normalization—has dominated (so to speak) the cultural analytics of masochism from Gilles Deleuze through Lynda Hart. Deleuze’s influential Coldness and Cruelty (1971) set the terms for many literary critics by assigning sadism and masochism complementary oedipal identifications. In his reading of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s novella Venus in Furs (1870), Deleuze argues that sadism eroticizes the patriarchal law of the father, whereas masochism has the opposite sexual logic: deriving from erotic attachments to the mother, masochism is an unequivocal rejection of patriarchal authority. For Deleuze masochistic self-punishment always means that a father is being beaten, while at the same time a new, maternally identified male sexuality is being produced:


12 Freud consistently identified erotogenic masochism as the foundation of the other types of masochism. In “The Economic Problem of Masochism” he claims that even what he calls “moral masochism,” once it is abstracted from its libidinal origins, inevitably becomes resexualized.

13 Laplanche proclaims “the privileged character of masochism in human sexuality” (p. 102).

“The masochist feels guilty, he asks to be beaten, he expiates, but why and for what crime? Is it not precisely the father-image in him that is thus miniaturized, beaten, ridiculed and humiliated? . . . The masochist thus liberates himself in preparation for a rebirth in which the father will have no part” (pp. 60, 66). Recent performative models, like Hart’s, often invoke oedipal battle-lines as well, if only by endlessly negating them through performativity.¹⁵ Hart, perhaps the most sophisticated heir to the celebratory tradition of lesbian feminist theory, claims that masochism generates new theatrical identities that destabilize the oedipal roles of dominance and submission assumed in masochistic play.

This conception of masochism within frameworks of eroticized mastery and submission (whether derived directly from Freud or not) ultimately limits its political legibility, both by narrowing masochistic experience to real or simulated scenes of overt sexual domination (hence nearly all of the critics I have mentioned take S/M as the standard model) and by polarizing the masochist’s relationship—however reversible it may be—to political power. Sexual masochism tempts theorists to read eroticized mastery and submission as infinitely reversible tropes for political power and subjection. In *The Mastery of Submission* (1997), for example, John Noyes vacillates freely between affirming and denying the masochist’s political power, in an otherwise impressive discussion of the relationship between S/M and nineteenth-century political technologies of control. Noyes asks: “once the technologies of control become the object of erotic attachment, who is to say whether control is subverted by eroticism, or whether eroticism is reintegrated into control?” (p. 14).

Contemporary psychoanalytic theory, however, can help generate a new metaphorics for masochism—one less constrained by erotic oppositions of dominance and submission, and more determinate in its decoding of masochism’s political significance. Though the psychoanalytic literature on masochism is vast, a consensus has emerged recently on a number of principles that, I believe, can lead to more precise cultural

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¹⁵ For an excellent overview, see Hart, esp. pp. 68–79.
and political approaches. For a variety of reasons, for example, most contemporary clinicians now believe masochism to be a universal phenomenon. They also tend to agree that masochism does not have a structural essence or a privileged behavioral form; instead, theorists believe that masochism encompasses many different behaviors and that it always serves multiple psychic functions—including instinctual gratification, appeasement of the superego, and deployment of the ego’s repertoire of defense mechanisms and strategic adaptations. They agree as well that sexual masochism and “characterological” or “psychic” masochism are inconsistently related to one another. Some theorists have proposed different diagnostic groups within the masochistic field, although such schema have remained controversial. Otto F. Kernberg, for instance, places “normal” masochism alongside a range of psychological profiles, to which he gives such terms as depressive-masochistic, sadomasochistic, sexual-masochistic, and primitive self-destructive. A more common approach has followed Margaret Brenman’s call, as long ago as 1952, for a “polyphonic theory” of masochism. Theorists also tend to agree that


masochism never appears as an isolated psychic formation, but is always intricately entangled in narcissistic, depressive, or obsessive-compulsive complexes.21 In general, contemporary theorists tend to regard masochism as a useful but highly provisional concept, noting that—like any other psychic formation in psychoanalytic discourse—it always blurs at the extremes and always interacts with other psychic complexes. It is in the context of this fluid approach to masochism’s definitional boundaries, and of the growing conviction among clinicians that there can be no single, all-inclusive definition of masochism, that any productive discussion of masochistic complexities must unfold. Rather than privileging reductive or totalizing explanations for masochistic behavior, analysts today stress the importance of contextual analysis—a lesson that cultural theory could profitably absorb.

Despite the provisionality of masochism’s conceptual boundaries, a great deal of innovative work (from perspectives as varied as ego psychology, object relations, developmental psychology, and self-psychology) has shifted away from oedipal dynamics toward a more systematic study of development in which the focal point is preoedipal experience—particularly those features of preoedipal experience not directly expressed through sexuality.22 Jack Novick and Kerry Kelly Novick, who have written the most comprehensive current study, argue that the sexual conflicts of the oedipal crisis characterize only one developmental phase within masochism, and not necessarily the pivotal one.23 Attention to the preoedipal roots of masochism, and to the role of the caregiver (completely neglected by Freud), has preoccupied recent theorists with issues of individuation, separation, self-esteem regulation, and early object relations. But perhaps the most important recent convergence has

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21 Brenner makes this observation, p. 207. The relationship between masochism and narcissism, in particular, has been explored extensively: see Arnold Rothstein, “Sadomasochism in the Neuroses Conceived of as a Pathological Compromise Formation,” Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association, 39 (1991), 363–75.

22 For an excellent survey of this trend, see Glick and Meyers, “Introduction,” pp. 1–25.

23 See Novick and Novick, p. 47.
been an interest in the role of infantile megalomania, along with traumatic frustrations to it—an approach that turns out to be peculiarly appropriate to studying Victorian class relations.

Edmund Bergler initiated this approach in 1949, when, in *The Basic Neurosis*, he argued that one of masochism’s functions is to preserve fantasies of omnipotence.24 The first conflicts that the newborn must negotiate, Bergler argues, involve threats to infantile megalomania—that benign sensation of centrality and control first theorized by Freud and Sándor Ferenczi.25 Fantasies of omnipotence—which originate in megalomania—may include the wish to dominate, especially if frustrated megalomania turns to rage. But they may also be confined to magical thinking of various kinds: delusions of unqualified autonomy, the attribution of all achievements to natural entitlement rather than to real labor, self-referential mania, or delusions of unassailable security or even immortality. Summarizing the views of contemporary theorists, Novick and Novick declare: “there is more to a masochistic fantasy than omnipotence but the delusion of omnipotence is a necessary part of it” (p. 61).

Bergler claims that frustrations to infantile megalomania invariably result in masochistic solutions. In preoedipal masochism, pain and suffering may be symptoms of frustrated megalomania, but they can also help reconstruct fantasies of omnipotence—sometimes through the complementary illusion that if suffering could only be made permanent and limitless, then omnipotence would be sustained. In cases involving negligent caregivers who cause pain through abandonment, for example, the infant’s internalization of pain can seem like a magical power of reattachment to a parental object that has itself become identified with pain. From another perspective, omnipo-

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tent fantasy can delude the masochist into imagining that he or she has the power to annihilate the caregiver, which generates guilt and self-punishment that can appear to be intrinsic to control. Provoking punishment is another way for the infant to re-create fantasies of omnipotence. Heinz Kohut, for example, has argued that besides overtly controlling the caregiver’s behavior, provocations of punishment allow the masochist to reimage the caregiver as an omnipotent authority figure, thus repairing damage to the parental image caused by the masochist’s own frustrated rage, and allowing fusion with parental omnipotence through suffering. Moreover, fantasies of omnipotence thrive on what one analyst calls “the murder of reality” by eradicating the lines of conceptual difference that defeat omnipotent control—differences of gender, age, temporality, the line between wishes and satisfactions, and, of course, the difference between pain and pleasure.

Though the means may be complex and variable, the ability to use suffering to preserve fantasies of omnipotence has been theorized as a universal, necessary part of human development. What clinicians now label “pathological” masochism

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30 Arnold M. Cooper, applying models of narcissism derived from Kohut, has demonstrated the non-libidinal gratifications of masochistic delusions of omnipotence: self-definition, the maintenance of boundaries, a sense of achievement and control, and successful separation and individuation. According to Cooper, the mastery, not the avoidance of pain, is a major accomplishment of self-definition. See Cooper, “The
Robert Louis Stevenson is often simply an excess of either the omnipotent delusion or the suffering required to bring it about. A number of theorists have argued that masochism appears pathological only when the delicate balance that it maintains between omnipotence and suffering breaks down, leading to a loss of psychic integration. The existence of a masochistic economy, in which infantile megalomania is both produced by and productive of suffering, suggests that “sadistic” and “masochistic” fantasies are structurally inseparable (pace Deleuze). It also inclines theorists to locate the source of masochistic disorders within this phantasmatic economy itself, rather than in determinate trauma or isolated forms of behavior. Novick and Novick, for example, write that “this fantasy structure is the ‘essence of masochism’” (p. 47)—parodying a formulation of Freud’s that referred to the oedipal contents of the beating fantasy. Schematizing the masochistic fantasy structure may be a futile endeavor: Peter Blos, Jr., describes it as “a multilayered, interdigitated, overdetermined constellation.” Nevertheless, one can abstract provisional and partial components of such a structure—which is, in fact, how contemporary psychoanalytic theory most often proceeds.

The structural feature I have been foregrounding in this essay is the complex economy of megalomania and suffering—or, as I shall sometimes call them, the “magical” and the “melancholic” phases of preoedipal masochistic fantasy. One could analyze other features of masochistic fantasy as well, such as loss and mourning, projection, or poststructural transformations.


31 Novick and Novick, for instance, tend to attribute pathology to a confusion of pain with magical thinking so extreme that the subject comes to believe that he or she can use pain to control the actions and feelings of others, and to deny and avoid the constraints of reality—even the passage of time and the inevitability of death (see Fearful Symmetry, p. 68).

32 See, for example, Novick and Novick’s discussion of adolescent suicide as a regressive sequence, in which the balance between suffering and omnipotence progressively unravels (pp. 173–202); or their comments on the masochist’s production of omnipotent fantasy as a defense against “alexithymia,” an absolute withdrawal from interpersonal relations (p. 69).


But rather than aspire to a fully elaborated model, I will confine myself to exploring how cultural theory might use the phantasmatic, preoedipal economy of the magical and the melancholic to better understand the political dynamics of late-Victorian masochism. Through this counterintuitive approach, which departs from the conventional view of masochism as eroticized submission, I hope to broaden the ways that masochism is understood to operate within Victorian culture. In particular, I hope to show how preoedipal masochism frames a better optic through which to view nineteenth-century class relations. I also hope to distance myself from the magical/melancholic logic directly inscribed into much recent cultural theory about masochism itself. That is to say, cultural theorists often imagine the masochist either as a wizard of symbolic manipulations, annihilating social order through the sleights-of-hand of sexual pleasure and conceptual inversion, or as an abject martyr whose limitless disempowerment reconfirms the omnipotence of those same social systems—or, magically, as both at once. Cultural theorists, it seems to me, are thinking masochistically about masochism. Though I cannot pursue the question in this essay, it is worth asking to what extent cultural theory’s attitudes toward masochism share the all-and-nothing masochistic logic that I have been describing—in which omnipotence and pain confirm rather than oppose one another—and whether these attitudes thereby extend analytical paradigms deeply embedded in Victorian culture.

I now turn to Robert Louis Stevenson and the ideological deployment of the magical and melancholic phases of masochism in his work, in order to explore in more precise terms how late-Victorian masochism engages with political languages. Specifically I want to address how Stevenson, in the construction of a particular kind of anti-imperialism, marks these masochistic phases through class and race. Stevenson is a useful figure for the ideological analysis of masochism because of the frequent appearance of self-destructive themes, not only throughout his work—from early stories like “The Suicide
Club” (1878) through The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1886) and the Scottish historical romances—but also in his own life as well. By looking at Stevenson, I also want to demonstrate how the class-coding of masochism was radically revised at the fin de siècle and used as leverage to formulate new political identities, which were legitimated through a complex rewriting of masochism’s class politics.

What is most striking in Stevenson’s work, in light of the pre-oedipal model I have outlined, is how often it splits apart the magical/melancholic fantasy structure. The use of the double as a recurring device in his writings allows Stevenson to distribute each phase of masochistic fantasy separately to characters who mirror each other in fatal rivalry—a literary strategy that dramatizes the disrupted psychic economy that theorists have described as masochistic “pathology.” Jekyll and Hyde represents one of the more familiar examples of this doubling, but its fabular structure also makes it one of the more complex and confusing ones, since magical and melancholic phases crisscross each of the two central characters in unstable oppositions. Throughout much of the story, for example, Jekyll concocts magical potions that give him fantastic powers over good and evil, whereas Hyde signals the darker motivations behind omnipotent fantasy: frustrated rage and guilt. At the end, however, Jekyll’s potions produce not control but suicide, while Hyde’s deformed figure presents a series of pitiful images of human helplessness, suffering, and self-pity that follow on the failure of magical control. Thus Stevenson blurs the magical and melancholic polarities between the two characters, fracturing the relationship between these polarities across narrative time. The story’s class allegory also seems confused, if insistent: while some critics view Hyde as a type of the lower orders threatening middle-class social authority, others see him as the dark side of antibourgeois bohemianism, reading his apparently unmotivated assaults on children and Members of Parliament as projections of Stevenson’s anxiety about his own bohemian rebellion against bourgeois norms.35

A much more clarified (if less familiar) example of masochistic splitting is *The Master of Ballantrae*—arguably Stevenson's best novel, which he wrote in 1888-89 during a long voyage to Samoa (his residence for the last five years of his life). Four years after writing *Jekyll and Hyde*, as he looked back on European culture from the perspective of his time in the Pacific, Stevenson was able to clarify the ideological roots of masochistic splitting as he had never done before.

In *The Master of Ballantrae* the two sons of the ancient House of Durisdeer, James and Henry Durie, destroy themselves and each other fighting over the inheritance of the Durisdeer title and estate, as well as over the love of their kinswoman Alison—all of which the elder son, James, gloriously forfeits at the start of the novel by impetuously joining the doomed cause of Bonnie Prince Charlie. Despite their collaborative self-destruction, the two characters could not represent magical and melancholic polarities more plainly. James is a charismatic Machiavel, a brilliant performer and manipulator. Usually called simply “the Master,” he reinvents himself inexhaustibly—at various times he is an English spy, a Scottish war hero, a pirate, a forger, an Indian “Sahib,” and, always, “a consummate actor.”36 His magical powers of self-invention are not limited by inner necessity (one character calls him “a man of pasteboard” [p. 163]); or by language (he conceives language as a set of empty referents, a bag of tricks: “Oh! there are double words for everything,” he says; “the word that swells, the word that belittles; you cannot fight me with a word!” [p. 175]); or even by death itself (he fakes his own death twice, and improbably survives a duel in which Henry runs him through the chest with a sword). James’s motives are diffuse, though they seem to proceed largely from a kind of self-destructive megalomania: “... I must have all or none,” he declares; “I have a kingly nature: there is my loss!” (p. 167). The self-destructive side of James’s megalomania binds him so fatally to Henry that both die, mysteriously, at exactly the same moment—after taking turns pursuing each

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other halfway around the world. This self-destructiveness also places James’s magical, self-inventive capacities squarely within the fantasy structure of preoedipal masochism.

Henry, in contrast, is self-martyring and melancholic. An exalted sense of duty and honor compels him to suffer stoically as James’s misrepresentations convince the Durie family and the local village that Henry is a miser and expropriator. Henry is, in fact, bleeding the Durisdeer estate dry—but only to support his brother in luxurious exile (this support being a self-imposed, perverse duty that Henry keeps piously secret). Henry’s only friend, the estate manager MacKellor, observes: “[Henry] was injuring himself . . . by a silence, of which I scarce know whether to say it was the child of generosity or pride” (p. 63). By the time that his self-sacrifices are revealed and Henry is exonerated, his martyrdom has become too grotesque to be exchanged for either love or power. A remorseful Alison accepts him as her husband, but she confesses: “I bring you no love, Henry; but God knows, all the pity in the world” (p. 11). Even his unsought victories over James, including the duel to which James had provoked him, only increase Henry’s guilt as the usurping son. But while Henry considers himself an innocent and hopeless victim, his father suggests a more self-destructive logic: “there are dangerous virtues,” he says; “virtues that tempt the encroacher” (p. 103).

The split in masochism’s phantasmatic economy, which the two brothers so plainly embody, also signals an unmistakable crisis in middle-class identity. Henry’s moral masochism clearly projects mid-Victorian middle-class codes of honesty and self-sacrifice back in time, onto the noblesse oblige of a Scottish lord. In contrast, James’s flamboyant recklessness resonates doubly, both with the romance and gallantry of eighteenth-century Scottish aristocracy and with the glamorous aestheticism of that excrescence of late-Victorian bourgeois culture, the bohemian. The Master of Ballantrae thus expresses a rupture between two genealogies of class legitimacy, both of which place self-destructive energies at the heart of intra-class competition for cultural authority.

Stevenson’s allegories of class—which saturate his work—are always complex and volatile. But he consistently marks his
doubles both with conflictual middle-class identifications and with the unraveling magical and melancholic economy of masochism. That is to say, he suspends class-coded subjectivities from a disarticulated masochistic structure. Though the opposition of magical and melancholic self-destroyers is rarely as clear-cut as in *The Master of Ballantrae*, other late-Victorian novelists such as Wilkie Collins, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, and Haggard also use such oppositions as a common strategy to probe fractures in middle-class identity. Critics have often noted Stevenson’s own proto-bohemian ambivalence about middle-class identity in everything from his love/hate relationship with his father to his uneasiness about having a mainstream readership. Like the similar pursuits of many of his contemporaries—like, indeed, those of Dr. Jekyll—Stevenson’s pursuit of a marginalized intellectual respectability signifies, among other things, his conflicted relationship to his own class position. But Stevenson’s splitting of masochistic fantasy, along with his marking of this rupture as a class crisis, are also the signs of a powerful nostalgia for the (supposed) lost coherence of middle-class ideology—a nostalgia that Stevenson will learn to appease only after he leaves Europe for the South Seas.

That a nostalgia for lost ideological coherence should express itself through masochistic splitting is not as strange an idea as it may at first sound. Critics have always seen mid-Victorian middle-class morality as synonymous with voluntary self-denial and suffering, but they have less commonly understood such “moral masochism” to harbor megalomania—except perhaps in clichés about Victorian hypocrisy. In *Culture and Anomie*, however, Herbert shows that the evangelical thought that was such an important touchstone during the nineteenth century for various segments of middle-class culture fostered a belief in the existence of unlimited states of human desire, which seemed to require and justify continual self-punishment. Herbert argues that John Wesley’s definition of “original sin” as naturally unlimited human desire was the source for Wesley’s doctrine of “constant and universal self-denial.”

cupation with states of unlimited desire was not, as Herbert
claims, simply the moral pretext for evangelical self-denial: fan-
tasies about such desire are actually produced by masochistic
self-denial (for psychoanalytic reasons that we have seen). The
megalomaniacal force of self-justifying middle-class authority,
I would argue, depends on a preoedipal masochistic fantasy
structure that is deeply grounded in evangelical thought.

Wesley’s emphasis on self-denial, for example, and on the
necessity of pain to spiritual rebirth, is always balanced in his
writings by promises of “eternal pleasure,” “unmerited love”
from God, and eternal life. More important, Wesley’s chief
addition to the Erasmian tradition of Christian humanism was
a kind of mystical piety, sustained by his lifelong emphasis on
human “participation” in the divine. That is to say, Wesley’s
sermons are suffused with the notion that the reward for self-
sacrifice is “that we may evermore dwell in [God], and he in
us.” In such a state of fusion with the Almighty, believers “are
endued with power from on high” and “every thought which
arises in their heart is holiness unto the Lord.” We may ques-
tion how many of Wesley’s disciples actually followed him in
doctrinal matters such as these theories of divine “participa-
tion,” but all varieties of evangelicalism maintained the central-
ity of the conversion experience, which depends on masochis-
tic economies in similar ways. Evangelical rebirth produced the
rapturous conviction that one had been instantaneously for-
given and saved, an experience of “justification” that could be
regularly revisited through self-denial. Belief in rebirth and
justification magically combined certainty in God’s punitive
severity with certainty about salvation, in a self-exalting yet self-

38 See Wesley, “Self-Denial,” and “The Righteousness of Faith,” in Sermons, II, 242,
245; I, 208. Wesley’s ideas about constant and universal self-denial are most fully elabo-
40 The Book of Common Prayer as Revised and Settled at the Savoy Conference, Anno 1662.
14 Charles II. Reprinted from the Sealed Book in the Tower of London (London: William Pick-
ering, 1844), sec. 359. Outler suggests Wesley’s “lifelong interest” in this formulation
(see “Introduction,” in Sermons, I, 56n). In The Evangelist of Desire: John Wesley and the
Methodists (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1990), pp. 79–80, Henry Abelove notes
that nothing quite like Perfectionism had been preached before, and that Perfection-
ism promised a complete freedom from inborn sin.
42 See Abelove, pp. 2, 36.
negating euphoria that Henry Abelove terms “the internalization of apocalypse” (p. 95n).

The cultural ramifications of this logic, which ties godly endorsement and power to self-denial—and which constituted one of Wesley’s chief breaks with Calvinists and Lutherans, who condemned Wesley’s doctrine of “perfection in this life”—have yet to be fully explored.43 Not every segment of Victorian middle-class culture was equally suffused with evangelical masochism, and, as Dror Wahrman argues, the integration of evangelicalism into the ideological coherence of “middle-classness” was not achieved until the 1830s. Evangelicalism had a complex role to play in a variety of British class positions from the late eighteenth century through the late nineteenth century, but it became intimately bound up with the articulation of “middle classness” from about the 1830s on. Wahrman claims that the political languages of “middle classness” converged with evangelical forms of domestic ideology at the time of the first Reform Bill, and that “their fusion was . . . a significant turn of events” that defined, for the first time, a coherent set of moral and political values that “celebrat[ed] middle-class’ life—private and public—in ever-strengthening terms.”44 As a result, a great variety of nineteenth-century middle-class identities depended on a response to—or an appropriation of—evangelical psychological dynamics, as well as the moral and emotional authority that they had conferred in the early decades of the Victorian period. This was the case even for self-professed anti-bourgeois writers, including those who—like Stevenson—struggled to overcome their own evangelical upbringings.

The dynamics of evangelical masochism unmistakably underlie, for example, James Hogg’s *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), a Scottish novel that was very influential for Stevenson (an influence especially evident in *The Master of Ballantrae*). In Hogg’s novel the ultra-Calvinist and antinomian Robert Colwan is persuaded by Satan that his “elec-

43 In his introduction Outler discusses Wesley’s doctrine of “sinless perfection” as a scandal to Calvinists and Lutherans (see p. 65); for a discussion of “perfection in this life,” see also pp. 83–84.

tion” justifies any act, including murder, and Colwan’s numerous crimes produce a dizzying spiral of self-destruction and omnipotent religious exultation, ending in suicide. It is telling, however, that Stevenson’s work reverses Hogg’s trajectory of social transformation: in Hogg’s cautionary novel the evangelical outsider, Robert, is sufficiently empowered by his self-punishing masochism to murder his older, virtuous brother and thus inherit the estate of the late Lord of Dalcastle. In The Master of Ballantrae, however, the younger, evangelical brother, Henry, lacks the will either to overcome his brother or to reign on his father’s estate. More important, Henry is twinned in a common, mutually refractive degeneration with his lordly brother.

By the 1870s and 1880s, for a variety of familiar reasons, the evangelical bedrock of middle-class ideology had begun to erode. These reasons included the gradual decay of religious authority over the course of the nineteenth century, the redefinition of middle-class moral authority in secular terms (whether derived from emergent professional codes of conduct, from the philosophy of science, or from the secular humanism celebrated by George Eliot and other novelists), and the emergence of a recognizable “lower middle class” that blurred traditional boundaries between middle and working classes. After mid-century the role of evangelicalism in marking bourgeois identity became highly confused, and novelists such as Charles Dickens and George Eliot simultaneously affirmed evangelical values and presented biting satires of pretentious evangelical figures (such as Chadband in Bleak House [1853] and Bulstrode in Middlemarch [1872]). Stevenson’s masochistic splitting can be read, in part, as symptomatic of the ideological crisis resulting from this confusion over the place of evangelical values—and the masochistic economies they guaranteed—within “respectable” class identities.

In 1888, when Stevenson traveled to the margins of Empire for his health, he suddenly stopped writing about magical and melancholic doubles. Instead, he was able to imagine adult protagonists who rediscover an integrated mas-
chochistic economy—one that links the magical and the mel-
ancholic together again, just as evangelicalism had done—
through their successful prosecution of the tasks of Empire. In
effect, Stevenson was observing a process that Ann Laura Stoler
describes as the constant making and remaking of bourgeois
identity at those colonial sites where it seemed most destabi-
lized.45 The aspect of this process that most intrigued Steven-
son was the reintegration of middle-class masochistic fantasy
within colonial enterprise, which led to the recovery of a psy-
chological economy central to evangelical thinking. The prob-
lem for Stevenson, however, was that, at the margins of Empire,
the wrong people seemed to be profiting from this return to
the springs of middle-class ideological power.46

In Stevenson’s short story “The Beach of Falesá” (1892),
for example, the vulgar, working-class trader Wiltshire—whose
colonial ambition is to make enough money to buy a pub back
in England—undergoes a moral conversion that preposterously
reworks the masochistic conventions of middle-class romance.
Tricking a native woman, Uma, into becoming his concubine,
Wiltshire shocks himself first by falling in love with her, and
then by marrying her before the evangelical missionary whom
he had initially scorned. Uma’s beauty and naivété endow her
in Wiltshire’s eyes with the moral and social promise of the do-
mestic angel: “it came over me she was a kind of countess really,
dressed to hear great singers at a concert, and no even mate for
a poor trader like myself.”47 Wiltshire pours out all his gin and
begins blissfully cooking inedible dinners with Uma around the
open fire. His reward is that she learns to wash dishes and as-
sumes the domestic angel’s prerogative to proclaim, in pidgin,
“I think you good man” (p. 12).

45 See Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s “History of Sexuality” and the Colonial

46 While in the next few paragraphs I concentrate on two of Stevenson’s short works,
his one novel set in the South Seas, The Wrecker (1892), also dispenses with doubles. It is
preoccupied instead with partnerships formed between magically competent and per-
versely self-destructive men—partnerships that seem to underlie the commercial suc-
cess of colonial entrepreneurialism. The fundamental moral irony of the novel is that
these partnerships allow greedy and immoral people of all social classes to succeed.

47 Robert Louis Stevenson, “The Beach of Falesá: Being the Narrative of a South Sea
Trader,” in Island Night’s Entertainments; and The Misadventures of John Nicholson, vol. 13
of Works, p. 11.
Wiltshire's conversion quickly incorporates both magical and melancholic features. He discovers that he has been duped himself by a decadent social superior—a well-educated but cynical trading competitor, Case—who had set him up with Uma knowing that she was tabooed, and thus that the union would lose Wiltshire all of his business with the native villagers. When Wiltshire learns the truth, he resolves not to spurn Uma, which would have been the customary thing to do; instead, he martyrs himself for her love: "I would rather have you than all the copra in the South Seas," he says, adding, "the strangest thing was that I meant it" (p. 29). Wiltshire resolutely endures the ridicule of the islanders, and, with Crusoe-like but downwardly mobile self-sufficiency, he labors to make his own copra ("like a negro slave," in Case's sneering interpretation [p. 59]). But, all the while, Wiltshire plots a vicious revenge with the aid, significantly, of the missionary who had married him, an alliance that underscores Stevenson's perception that the practices of missionaries and traders—so often at odds—converged fortuitously through the logic of masochism. Morally and psychologically empowered through his self-righteous martyrdom, Wiltshire kills Case, against improbable odds, after being ambushed in the jungle—thus carrying out the one-against-all omnipotent fantasy intrinsic to adventure fiction. The brutality of the killing, which is far more graphic and disturbing than anything from Stevenson's early adventure novels, draws a problematic connection between Wiltshire's domestic self-sacrifice and his megalomaniacal mastery—a connection that is reflected elsewhere in his airs of superiority toward whites and in his racist condescension to natives. The villainous Case, who had himself murdered several previous competitors, turns out to have acted honorably toward exactly one person, his native wife—which further cements Stevenson's critique. Wiltshire, in fact, fulfills Case's murderous dreams of uncontested power, since by killing Case, Wiltshire becomes the only trader left on the island: "So there was I," he gloats, "left alone in my glory" (p. 74).48

48 Most interpretations of the story, in trying to reconcile Wiltshire with the more honorific conventions of the conversion narrative, ignore this persistent association of Wiltshire's conquest through trade with Case. See, for example, Katherine Bailey Linehan, "Taking Up with Kanakas: Stevenson's Complex Social Criticism in 'The Beach of Falesá,'" *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920*, 33 (1990), 417.
Despite Stevenson’s evident affection for him, Wiltshire is a grotesque parody of the integrated masochistic economy of evangelical thought. In defining the fraudulence of Wiltshire’s claims to moral righteousness, Stevenson is aided by the conventional distinction between true and false converts that was widespread in South Seas missionary writing. As in most tales of false conversion, Wiltshire comically mangles moral codes—putting great stock in his word of honor, for instance, but professing his right to cheat if he has not explicitly promised to be fair. Moreover, the story invokes three fictional genres deeply grounded in middle-class ideology—the conversion narrative, the domestic romance, and adventure fiction—only to demonstrate their participation in masochistic fantasies of omnipotence. Stevenson uses this dynamic to show how even the husks of evangelical belief appropriated by figures like Wiltshire could legitimate capitalist exchange. But the intersections of class and racial otherness that help stigmatize Wiltshire also support a moral critique that has the potential to purify bourgeois identity—a familiar process in colonial discourse. It is important to understand, however, that Stevenson’s critique is not directed at the sensual or social excesses that are the usual threats to bourgeois purity in the colonies; rather, it is directed at the re-integrated moral logic of bourgeois masochism itself—at least as that logic has been appropriated by interlopers.

In his novella *The Ebb-Tide* (1894) Stevenson turns to the other end of the social scale, conceiving a “copper-bottomed aristocrat,” Attwater, who fuses moral zeal with ruthlessness, commanding his own private island like a god. Attwater embodies the manliness, power, and wealth of idealized imperial mastery, but only because his commercial greed and lust for power blend fluidly with his extraordinary missionary zeal. A tyrannical shepherd of his flock of slave-laborers, Attwater also espouses a deeply held fatalism, spouts biblical passages about martyrdom, and assumes grotesque, Christ-like postures in his attempt to seduce a hopelessly self-destructive bourgeois man-

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50 Robert Louis Stevenson [and Lloyd Osbourne], *The Ebb-Tide: A Trio and Quartette*, vol. 14 of *Works*, p. 82.
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qué, the ironically named Robert Herrick. While Herrick had misplayed the relationship between ascesis and moral authority ("Don't think . . . that you'll go on doing the evangelical," his ship's captain—and social inferior—taunts him [p. 29]), Attwater, a religious convert, adopts the mask of evangelical authority with spectacular perfection.51

Together these upper- and lower-class figures confirm Ann Stoler's argument that, in colonial discourse, the deviant European is often far more dangerous than the non-European—since imperialism was never a secure bourgeois project, but instead required the constant remaking of ideology through the internal struggles of white elites.52 As Stoler declares:

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. (p. 99)

Gradations of masochistic fantasy may well have been one of those "finer scales"—particularly in the late stages of British imperialism, when self/other oppositions became harder to maintain, given the growing ideological exhaustion of the imperial project. In Stevenson's work, variations within masochistic fantasy structures appear to constitute a grammar of bourgeois legitimacy, reinforcing or in some cases replacing those of biology, cultural status, or sexual discipline.

A central development in Stevenson's writing in Samoa, which complements the problematic reintegration of masochism that he sees within white elites, is his relegation of masochistic splitting—of the kind we have seen in The Master of Ballantrae—entirely to the realm of racial otherness. In A Footnote to History (1892), his exhaustive account of the Samoan uprising of 1887–89, Stevenson maps the masochistic polarities of James

52 See Stoler, p. 47.
and Henry Durie onto warring Germans and Samoans. Though Stevenson's account is an acute interpretation of events—one that is still cited by historians—it portrays several German consuls, and German policy in general, as delusionally arrogant, tyrannical, and overreaching in ways that, in Stevenson's view, caused German authority over the natives to self-destruct. Twentieth-century American and Samoan historians generally agree that Germany underestimated the complexities of Samoan politics, that its crackdown of 1888–89 was a miscalculation, and that German consuls overplayed their hand in trying to install a Samoan king friendly to their own interests—the act that precipitated the rebellion. But historians also agree that Germany was forced to react to U.S. and British provocations, which included an abortive American attempt to “confederate” Samoa and Hawaii as well as joint U.S.-British support for a native government that was plainly obstructing German interests, despite the fact that Britain had effectively ceded Samoa to the German sphere of influence through negotiations in the mid-1880s. Stevenson downplays all of these circumstances in order to caricature the Germans as self-destructive bullies. He describes German diplomacy as “the organisation of failure in the midst of hate,” and the German settlers as whip-cracking slave-owners who “are naturally incensed by criticisms.” And of one German consul’s omnipotent delusions, Stevenson writes: “he continued, on the scene of his defeat and in the midst of his weakness, to bluster and menace like a conqueror.” Even an editorial in the *Times* complained that Stevenson’s account was overly full of tyrants. Such caricatures of monomaniacal ham-handedness square with British racial stereotypes of Germans—Britain’s chief late-century imperial rivals—but they also clearly project fantasies of omnipotence as the cause of German self-destruction. As the German annexation of Samoa in


55 See the *London Times*, 4 June 1892, p. 13.
1900 proved, however, Stevenson greatly exaggerated any damage that Germany might actually have done to itself.

As for the Samoans, although the rebellion achieved some notable successes, including the removal of the imposed king, throughout *A Footnote to History* Stevenson laments what he sees as excessive Samoan self-sacrifice. He faults the rebels for refusing to press their battlefield successes into resounding victory; for their deference to the Germans’ declared “neutral zone,” which was supposedly exploited by Germany itself; and, above all, for the mutually self-sacrificing reticence of the two leading Samoan chiefs, who after their victory refused to confederate their opposing factions into a centralized government under a single king. “The two entered into a competition of generosity,” Stevenson writes, “for which I can recall no parallel in history, each waiving the throne for himself, each pressing it upon his rival; and they embraced at last a compromise the terms of which seem to have been always obscure” (p. 214). Stevenson’s description of gratuitous kingly self-abnegation disregards what other historians describe as the political savvy of the Samoan factions, who recognized that the native government would be stronger if it resisted centralization. Indeed, Samoa was colonized much later than Tahiti, Hawaii, or Tonga partly because its factionalized internal politics were impervious to white control and inimical to the growth of commerce.56 What Stevenson saw as a form of melancholic masochism was, in fact, resistance to the imposition of the kind of manageable secular hierarchies that Ashis Nandy describes as a crucial weapon of imperial domination.57

Yet Stevenson’s interpretation of the behavior of the two chiefs conforms to his general attribution of melancholia to Polynesians. In *In the South Seas* (1896) he writes: “The Polynesian falls easily into despondency: bereavement, disappointment—

56 Gilson claims that the two chiefs reached an agreement that effectively compromised with the terms of the Berlin Treaty, while also preserving—as much as possible under the circumstances—harmony between Samoan factions (see p. 418). On Samoan resistance to colonization, see Gilson, p. 189.

ment, . . . the decay or proscription of ancient pleasures, easily incline him to be sad; and sadness detaches him from life."58 Stevenson believed that Polynesians had a "proneness to suicide" (In the South Seas, p. 29), and though he recognized that colonial exploitation was partly responsible for whatever demoralization he observed, he dismissed such proposed causes as the dissemination of disease, alcohol, or firearms, along with the destruction of native traditions, as merely partial explanations, arguing instead that the real problem was a Polynesian "disease . . . of the will" (In the South Seas, p. 28). Because life is so easy in the South Seas and desire so easily gratified, depression is a constant threat, Stevenson reasoned: "It is otherwise with us, where life presents us with a daily problem, and there is a serious interest, and some of the heat of conflict, in the mere continuing to be" (In the South Seas, p. 36).59

This familiar belief that free-ranging desire leads to anomie is an evangelical myth that Herbert traces from Wesley to Emile Durkheim—a myth that plays yet again on the proximity of fantasies of omnipotence to melancholia. Such proximity is an important corrective to critical accounts that narrowly attribute Stevenson's perception of Polynesian melancholy to his own projections of European cultural decay or to his deteriorating physical health.60 While Stevenson's ethnographic perceptions may be complexly motivated, his splitting of magical and melancholic polarities between Germans and Samoans—set over against the struggle of his English characters for legitimacy through a reintegrated masochism—confirms arguments (like Stoler's) that racial difference in the colonies was defined more through oppositions of the normative and the deviant than through a strictly black/white axis of difference.61 In this

58 Robert Louis Stevenson, In the South Seas, vol. 20 of Works, p. 36.
60 See, for example, Rod Edmond, Representing the South Pacific: Colonial Discourse from Cook to Gauguin (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997), pp. 160–68.
case, normativity took the form of an ideological reintegration of melancholia with omnipotence. And while it is true that the discourse of colonizers is never unmediated by the cultures with which they come into contact, it is also clear that Stevenson used the clash of European and non-European cultures in Samoa to represent a disrupted masochistic economy transposed directly from the concerns of his earlier work—a disrupted masochistic economy that formed an imposing backdrop to the colonial reinvention of evangelical masochistic integrity, whether in disavowed class transgressors (like Wiltshire or Attwater) or in social and ideological terms that Stevenson might actually endorse.\textsuperscript{62}

Stevenson himself found the colonies a place to experiment with integrated magical/melancholic projects and, perhaps, to reclaim their moral authority from the antibourgeois Wiltshires and Attwaters, who both fascinated and troubled him. While his fiction, as well as much of his documentary writing about Samoa, managed only to critique masochistic experiments and the class politics that motivated them, Stevenson created other works—some imaginary or unfinished, others dispersed across the enormous range of his South Seas writings (history, ethnography, fables, romances, lectures, prayers, correspondence, ballads, and so forth)—that displaced the conventions of Victorian fiction by rewriting bourgeois masochism in politically dissident terms. The enormous range of his South Seas writings alone suggests that Stevenson was attempting to fabricate a new authorial self. As Vanessa Smith writes: “for Stevenson, being in a novel environment was always primarily about constituting himself as an authorial subject” (p. 107). A feature of this authorial self-construction that was new to Stevenson’s South Seas writings was his emergent po-

\textsuperscript{62} Critics have recently begun exploring the cross-cultural hybridity of Stevenson’s South Seas writing—though not yet in terms that illuminate Stevenson’s representations of masochism, and, more generally, not yet in terms that are adequately grounded in Polynesian culture. See Smith; and Edmond, especially his reflections on the absences in contemporary work on Polynesian culture (pp. 20–21).
political legitimation of melancholy magic as the basis for a particular kind of anti-imperialism.

Throughout his life Stevenson had been something of a moralist without a cause. In the South Pacific, for the first time, he began to find vocations that he could embrace without irony. Only a few months out of San Francisco, for example, he was seized with an ethnographic passion, and in a December 1889 letter he tells Sidney Colvin that he yearned to write the definitive, encyclopedic account of the South Seas: “not many people have seen more of them than I; perhaps no one: certainly no one capable of using the material” (Letters, VI, 335). In this letter Stevenson projects a study of history, languages, geography, customs, and climate: “if I can execute what is designed, there are few better books now extant on this globe; bar the epics, and the big tragedies, and histories, and the choice lyric poetics, and a novel or so—none.” Stevenson’s ignorance of the existing ethnographic work on Polynesia—which was quite extensive at the time—shows the magical thinking behind this project. Yet, as Herbert has shown brilliantly, nineteenth-century ethnographers always conceived of their studies as, in part, a moral mission that required the extermination of the observer’s ego. Herbert documents the pervasiveness, at least since the time of Harriet Martineau’s How to Observe: Morals and Manners (1838), of the moral and epistemological angst among Victorian ethnographers, as well as ethnography’s affinity with salvation narratives and their stress on long, painful battles to annihilate the self’s desires and biases. Stevenson’s wife, Fanny, was horrified by the financial and professional disaster that his project represented, and she recognized the deep moral impulses at work. On 21 May 1889 she wrote to Stevenson’s editor for help in dissuading him:

Louis has the most enchanting material that any one ever had in the whole world . . . and I am afraid he is going to spoil it all. He

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63 Stevenson first mentions George Turner’s work in 1893, but he does not refer to Thomas Williams, John Williams, William Ellis, or other Polynesian ethnographers, either in his letters or in his published writings.

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has taken into his Scotch Stevenson head, that a stern duty lies before him, and that his book must be a sort of scientific and historical impersonal thing. . . . Louis says it is a stern sense of duty that is at the bottom of it, which is more alarming than anything else. (Letters, VI, 303–4)

Stevenson eventually scaled back this project, publishing only a series of journalistic sketches collected posthumously in *In the South Seas*. But there were other experiments with masochistic economies. Although he had always been passionately antireligious, for example, Stevenson developed an odd affinity for South Seas missionaries: he once declared that “the missionaries are the best and the most useful whites in the Pacific” (*In the South Seas*, p. 78). He formed close friendships with several missionaries, and he even played missionary himself: having composed a series of prayers that espoused particular moral values, Stevenson conducted services for his Samoan servants on Sundays—the only white settler in Samoa to do so. More dramatically, he once took up the cudgels in defense of a missionary martyr—a Belgian Catholic, Father Damien, who was the steward of a leper colony on the island of Molokai and had recently succumbed to leprosy himself. Stevenson risked libel by publishing a venomous attack on a Protestant cleric (named, in an odd elision, Dr. Hyde) who had cast aspersions on Damien’s morals. Stevenson visited the leper colony himself for twelve days in 1889, and he transparently identified with the lepers. He imagined the colony to be suffused with a moral haze emanating from its collective acceptance of death, as he writes to Colvin in June 1889: “a horror of moral beauty broods over the place: that’s like bad Victor Hugo, but it is the only way I can express the sense that lived with me all these days” (*Letters*, VI, 311). His vitriolic attack on Hyde was so brutal and personal that Stevenson felt certain he would be sued. After holding a family council and asking his dependents for

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65 For good discussions of Stevenson’s relationship to South Seas missionaries, and to evangelical display in general, see Smith, pp. 127–29, 141–42.

permission to brave the risk of publication, on March 1890 he wrote to Charles Baxter: “it is... probable I should be ruined... how little I care” *(Letters, VI, 377)*. Symptomatically, Stevenson’s thirst for martyrdom in defense of one missionary coincided with a raging desire to annihilate another—one of his biographers calls Stevenson’s response to Hyde a “model of deliberate insult as personal as a love letter.” *67* Suffering considerable remorse for this indulgence of what might be described as omnipotent delusion, Stevenson himself later called his attack on Hyde “brutal and cruel,” “abominable,” and “barbarously harsh.” *68*

But Stevenson’s most successful and sustained renovation of middle-class identity—to the extent that middle-class identity was grounded in masochistic economies during the mid-Victorian period—took the strange form of an anti-imperialist crusade that pervaded his life and work in the 1890s. This anti-imperialist fervor was remarkable given Stevenson’s lifelong aloofness from politics; even more remarkable, though, the political positions that did surface in his work before 1890 are not usually conducive to anti-imperialist stands. Critics often trace Stevenson’s politics to his Edinburgh Tory roots—particularly to his staunch Unionist views, which he expressed as late as January 1888 in “Confessions of a Unionist.” *69* In 1887 Stevenson had conceived an absurd scheme—only prevented by his father’s death—of moving his entire family to Ireland to take the place of a boycotted English family besieged on their Tipperary farm by Parnellites. “A writer being murdered would... throw a bull’s-eye light upon this cowardly business,” he wrote to Anne Jenkin in April 1887 *(Letters, V, 390)*. Critics also sometimes read Stevenson’s fiction as a series of conservative allegories of class conflict: Christopher Harvie, for example, sees *Treasure Island* (1883) as a transparent fable of middle-class anxiety, with its squire, doctor, and their retainers attacked by a

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*68* See, respectively, Stevenson, letter to Henry James, 19 August 1890; letter to Sidney Colvin, August 1890; and letter to Elizabeth Fairchild, 1 September 1890; in *Letters, VI, 402, 404, 420*.

*69* Originally written for *Scribner’s*, it was not published until 1921. See *Letters, VI, 102n*. 
degenerate rabble and its demagogue, John Silver; and he reads Edward Hyde’s gratuitous murder of an aged M. P. against the lower-class mobs rioting in the West End in the fall of 1885, when Stevenson was writing *Jekyll and Hyde*. Moreover, Stevenson’s earlier relationship to travel itself would not predict political engagements, conservative or otherwise, in the South Seas. His European travel writings—such as *An Inland Voyage* (1878) and *Travels with a Donkey* (1879)—had all aestheticized travel, making it a vehicle for the autonomy of the observer. His deliberately superficial, ironic contact with people and places signified the elitism of the antibourgeois traveler of the period, who, as James Buzard demonstrates, sought to make travel a performance of personal style rather than an exercise in learning or engagement.

Stevenson’s ethnographic aspirations in the South Seas were already a retreat from aestheticized bohemian travel and a return to middle-class earnestness. But his political defense of Samoan independence proved a considerably more substantial project—one that, I suspect, has contributed to the difficulty that critics of imperialism have had in classifying Stevenson’s politics, which seem far more complex than those of Haggard or Rudyard Kipling and far more activist than those of Joseph Conrad. Stevenson’s nine lengthy, devastatingly detailed open letters to the *Times* about the exploitation of Samoans, as well as his fraternization with the rebel Samoan army, were seen as dangerous enough to provoke sedition regulations from the High Commissioner of the Western Pacific, regulations that were targeted directly at Stevenson and that nearly led to his deportation.


71 In “‘Out of My Country and Myself I Go’: Identity and Writing in Stevenson’s Early Travel Books,” *Nineteenth-Century Prose*, 23 (1996), 54–73, Alex Clunas brilliantly describes the aesthetics of Stevenson’s travel writing.


73 Stevenson departed from decadently aestheticized travel narratives once before, in his first trip to the New World when, in *The Silverado Squatters* (1883), he identified imaginatively with both Native Americans and Chinese immigrants to California.

Stevenson's activism, of course, had a variety of conflicting motivations: to protect the economic interests of white settlers, to preserve peace at all costs, and to correct administrative bungling and inefficiency. But these motivations revolved as well around a deeply held conviction—which he loudly championed in a 23 April 1894 letter to the *Times*, and which, if implemented, would have cost him dearly—that the Great Powers should withdraw from Samoa and leave the native government autonomous. True to form, Stevenson was willing to back his beliefs at considerable personal risk: during the uprising of 1893, for example, he gave considerable aid and comfort to the rebels, and he declared in the *Times* that he was a partisan of the rebel chief. One of the less immediate risks he took involved his literary reputation, which suffered because he was seen both as having gone native and as having lapsed into an infelicitous realistic style as a result. Oscar Wilde spoke for many when he remarked: "I see that romantic surroundings are the worst surroundings possible for a romantic writer. In Gower Street Stevenson could have written a new *Trois Mousquetaires*. In Samoa he wrote letters to *The Times* about Germans."

Through looking at magical and melancholic fantasy structures, we can see how deeply Stevenson's anti-imperialism drew on the regenerated middle-class masochism that colonial spaces seemed to make available; we can also see how deeply that masochism, in turn, shaped his political perceptions. The megalomaniacal phase of Stevenson's activism is perhaps easiest to spot. His political self-aggrandizement caused him to end *A Footnote to History* with a direct appeal to Bismarck; he also reported being disappointed by Bismarck's ensuing silence, as

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76 See Stevenson, letter to the *Times*, 23 April 1894, in *Letters*, VIII, 268.

well as by the failure of German officials in Samoa to admire
the book, even after he had hand-delivered copies to each of
them it had insulted. More naively still, Stevenson hinted to his
highly connected London friends that he would accept the
British Consulship of Samoa were it offered to him. He also
led a delegation of white settlers that absurdly petitioned the
Foreign Office to make alterations to the Berlin Treaty of 1889.
It is even more disturbing, perhaps, that Stevenson took ad-
vantage of native gratitude in order to consolidate his own so-
cial power: in exchange for Stevenson's interventions on behalf
of political prisoners, for example, a Samoan chief had his sub-
jects build a road to Stevenson's estate, which was itself an
Abbotsford-like monument to his nostalgia for unbounded pa-
triararchal authority. And despite his occasional successes, the
giddy vanity of Stevenson's activism often lent it a puckish qual-
ity that gives one historian "the impression of ability and en-
ergy being frittered away in petty controversy" (Gilson, p. 403).

Stevenson's anti-imperial megalomania, I would argue, is
inextricably related to his deeply felt affinity for martyrdom—
both his own and that of the Samoans with whom he identified.
His advocacy of Samoan independence, for example, begins
paradoxically in the conviction that such independence is al-
ready a lost cause. Early in A Footnote to History—written before
he declared for independence in the Times—Stevenson bluntly
asserts that Samoan autonomy "is now no longer possible"
(p. 81). Misperceiving the plot to confederate Hawaii and Sa-
moa as one of the "visionary schemes for the protection and de-
velopment of the Polynesian race," Stevenson also observes that
its "most obvious fault . . . was that it came too late" (p. 101).
And at the same time that he was agitating publicly for indepen-
dence, Stevenson confessed to friends that Samoa was destined
to become a Protectorate. The belated quixotism of Steven-
son's activism was not lost on the Times, which reproved him in
an editorial: "It would doubtless be pleasant to wander . . . amid
the verdure and the flowers of Upolu with minds so free from

78 See Stevenson, letters to Sidney Colvin of September 1891, June 1892, and Oc-
tober 1892, in Letters, VII, 153, 310, 386.
79 See Stevenson, letter to Sidney Colvin, June-July 1893, in Letters, VIII, 125.
the carking cares of civilization as to find keen enjoyment in championing the lost causes of Samoan clans.”

A crucial feature of Stevenson’s anti-imperialism, grounded as it is in dynamic circuits of magical and melancholic masochism, is its political fluidity. An anti-imperialist politics that thrives on the psychic resonance of martyrdom is always in danger of sliding back into jingoism, or into any other set of political representations that employs the logic of masochism. The abrupt transition that Stevenson makes from Unionist to defender of Samoan independence illustrates this slippage quite clearly. He also explained the origins of his political engagements in a rather extraordinary way, by linking his megalomaniacal fantasy of himself as rescuer of Samoa to the death of that icon of imperial heroism, General Gordon—the so-called Martyr of Khartoum. Stevenson’s friend and official biographer, Thomas Graham Balfour, recalled:

RLS said that he had never ceased to reproach himself that “I did not say then in the papers what I might have said before it was too late. I might not have been able to save Gordon, but at least I should feel I had done something. It was this thought that finally induced me to write my first letter to The Times about Samoa. I thought, I have lost one opportunity, I will not lose another.”

The diametrically opposed positions of Stevenson and such writers as Kipling or Haggard on British expansionism always threaten to merge through the logic of preoedipal masochism, which is easily drawn to ideologically mobile conjunctions of the magical in the melancholic, or the melancholic in the magical.

There are other features of Stevenson’s anti-imperialism that spring from magical/melancholic conjunctions. One is its deep roots in intra-class competition, and its reproduction—in strange new forms—of an evangelical psychology that had gone underground in the late nineteenth century as a touchstone for a variety of middle-class identities. Another feature is the

80 The Times, 2 June 1894, p. 13. Stevenson drafted a reply but never sent it (see Letters, VIII, 334–36).
complex grammar of identifications and disavowals that constructs a regenerated masochistic subjectivity through distinctions of class and race. Masochistic structures blur the black-and-white political lines that cultural theorists sometimes use to decide which Victorian writers took the most enlightened stand on questions of Empire. This blurring should encourage us to see progressive political stands of any kind as, on some occasions, the product of complex class energies that are rooted in masochism or in masochistic identifications.

Late-Victorian masochism is both tremendously important to political analysis and very difficult to read, because it exploits a disarticulated middle-class ideology that is available for drastic rewritings. While current psychoanalytic theory can open up late-century masochism in ways that cultural theory's conventional emphasis on eroticized submission cannot, I have done little more in this essay than sketch some of those possible rewritings. It remains unclear how this approach might address the relationship between masochism and heteronormativity, homoeroticism, gender difference, or the politics of sexual pleasure. These issues must form the agenda for future studies of masochism's ideological grammar.

Nevertheless, the case of Stevenson demonstrates that we can learn a great deal about theory—both psychoanalytic theory and cultural theory concerned with the politics of masochism—through the attentive reading of literary (and non-literate) works. Rather than simply manifesting a fixed psychic structure—as writers were once thought, by an older version of psychoanalytic criticism, to do—Stevenson uses the complex structures of preoedipal masochistic fantasy to rewrite his relationship to middle-class culture in precise and innovative new terms. He was able to channel the moral and psychological authority previously identified with mainstream middle-class culture into an anti-imperialist crusade that both broke with the apolitical bohemianism of his earlier writing and enabled a dissident yet "respectable" politics. Critics have often either lionized Stevenson for his antibourgeois bohemianism, or they
have generalized vaguely about his ambivalence toward middle-class culture. His manipulation of the elements of preoedipal masochistic fantasy, however, demonstrates a much more aggressive and coherent intervention in the class politics of subjectivity. Equally important, perhaps, is what such rewritings of class-coded masochism can tell us about contemporary theoretical discussions of masochism. Political theories that try to define masochism as a form of melancholy magic—in which submission or mastery seem to be either absolute extremes or undecidably reversible—animate psychic structures that have a long social history. The political fungibility of those structures has been deeply conditioned within late-Victorian rearticulations of middle-class identity and remains haunted by the relationship between martyrdom, omnipotence, and social class deeply embedded in those rearticulations.

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