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David Savran. *Taking It Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998. x + 382 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-01637-5.

Reviewed by Sara Martin (Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain)

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So Hard to be a Man: Victimized Men and the Appeal of Reflexive Sado-masochism in Contemporary America

The reader may have noticed how often contemporary American fictions placed in different cultural categories portray white men as victims. If you have wondered why this should be so, considering that white men still have more power than any other social group in America, David Savran's book *Taking It like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture* will provide suggestive answers to your query. If you have failed to notice the proliferation of victimized white male characters in recent narratives, this valuable book will give you a deep insight into the genealogy of the construction of the white man as victim not only in fiction but also in real-life America.

Savran's book is the product of five years of research on the centrality of masochism in men's self-representation. The title, *Taking It like a Man*, announces Savran's main preoccupations: why masculinity is not a function "of social or cultural mastery but the act of being subjected, abused, even tortured" (38) and why a man is to behave 'like' a man but not, simply, 'be' one. Unlike femininity, seen by men as 'natural' and effortless, masculinity (especially white men's) entails a constant effort to measure up to the demands of what being a (white) man ideally means.

Savran's arguments are supported by solid analyses of diverse types of American fictions across the high/low divide. Despite his misgivings about the dispiriting situation of American drama, Savran defends the idea that the

American theater is still highly representative of main cultural trends in the U.S.A, including the definition of masculinity. Within the wide range of texts and figures under analysis he gives, therefore, place of preeminence to The Living Theater of Judith Malina and Julian Beck, the plays by Sam Shepard – especially *Suicide in Flat-B* – and, above all, to Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. Attention is also paid to other literary figures (the Beats) and to a selection of films, including *Easy Rider*, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *The Right Stuff*, *Rambo*, *Cruising*, *Forrest Gump*, and *Twister*. The ambitious scope of Savran's book also comprehends popular figures like singer Jim Morrison and masculinist activist Robert Bly, religion (Mormonism) and action groups like Queer Nation. There is even room for a detailed exploration of a S/M short story – "Blue Light" by Steven Taylor.

Savran concedes that American white men have lost power since the end of World War II and may have reasons to feel victimized. But his main thesis is that they are misdirecting their sense of failure. Instead of turning against the oppressive patriarchal systems that white men have themselves created, men are unfairly blaming their shortcomings on the gender and race minorities struggling for empowerment. Savran's main query is why the radical promise of the 1950s white hipster has failed and resulted in the victimized white man. He uses the framework of gender and cultural studies, complemented by Freudian psychoanalysis, to reach an answer. Savran sees his own research as "an attempt to press psy-

choanalysis into service for a historical project” (10), rejecting the ahistoricism of Freudian supporters, such as cultural analyst Kaja Silverman. The use of psychoanalysis is justified by Savran on the grounds that this science – his own word – is the best tool to analyze fantasies such as gendered identifications. Therefore, the evolution of masculinity in recent decades can only be traced by considering how identificatory fantasies relate to the foundations of the male psyche according to Freud. Following Freud, Savran argues that masochism works “as a mode of cultural reproduction that simultaneously reveals and conceals (through the mechanism of disavowal) the homoeroticism that undergirds patriarchy and male homosocial relations” (32); relations which are grounded on the “undecidability of [the] pleasure and pain” (15) of being a man.

Taking It like a Man is divided into two parts, of three chapters each. The first part covers the historical evolution of the construction of the masochistic white man: “The Divided Self” deals with the 1950s with special reference to the Beats, “Revolution as Performance” with the counterculture in the 1960s and, less satisfactorily in terms of chronological and historical cohesion, “The Sadomasochist in the Closet” deals with the period from the 1970s to the 1990s. The second part - considerably shorter - deals with diverse aspects of victimized masculinity: gay ‘machismo’ (“Queer Masculinities”), American nationalism (“Man and Nation”) and spiritualized white masculinity (“The Will to Believe”).

Savran’s description and interpretation of the mechanisms that construct the white male victim work very well indeed. His central thesis of how the victimized white man is by no means a way forward into change and evolution but a retrenchment into masculinist positions may be (hopefully, will be) productively applied to the analysis of a very large number of texts and figures. But this otherwise impressive book is not without its faults. Apart from a certain tendency to insist on arguments that have been already fully exposed, the book suffers, above all, from Savran’s problematic mixture of psychoanalysis and history. He claims in the introduction that “I am, in short, to write a materialist history of the performance of white masculinities” (9), but, in fact, this is not fully accomplished. The main historical factors are delineated for each chapter, but they are not close to the book’s core, which is, rather, textual analysis. Of course, *Taking It Like a Man* is cultural studies, not history, which may explain the unbalance between texts and contexts in favor of the former.

Savran’s position is specially problematic regarding the treatment of the period 1970s-1990s as a single block. He may be right to suggest that this period corresponds to a single cycle in the representation of the victimized man as a central rather than marginal figure, but, for instance, Susan Jeffords has explicitly and convincingly distinguished between the soft bodies of the Carter era and hard Reaganite masculinity in *Hard Bodies*.^[1] Savran sees the hard and the soft body as aspects of man’s self-victimization, but, surely, the American white man of post Cold War 1999 is not *exactly* the same as the American man just returned from Vietnam. On the other hand, Savran’s historicising of changing patterns in masculinity leaves an important question unanswered: to what extent is man’s recent self-victimization a completely new departure from previous historical experience rather than a renewal of a much longer process, or its latest phase?

As regards the accomplished, pragmatic use of Freudian psychoanalysis in Savran’s exploration of masochism, the reader may miss more references to the complex issue of abuse. Sexual and physical abuse started being bandied about to denounce the excesses of patriarchal oppressors or to justify the victimization of the abused white man precisely in the late 1970s, the period that corresponds to the rise of the victimized man according to Savran. This, in itself, justifies his use of psychoanalysis, for, essentially, men are still being taught to be men the hard way by parental figures allotting discipline and punishment still very much in the way Freud described at the beginning of the century. But whereas Savran takes into account how sadism and masochism are twin constructs in the definition of patriarchy within Freudian parameters, he somehow neglects evidence of how the progressive unearthing of abuse in recent decades actually works in the making of contemporary white American masculinity either in real life or through texts.

Savran offers imaginative political action as a solution to the deadlock white man finds himself in. “Only a Marxist humanism can,” he concludes “if not exactly abolish masochistic masculinity - and femininity - at least transform the material circumstances that produced both of them in the first place” (292). Ultimately, gender (and presumably race) turn out to be a function of class: the solution passes through abolishing economic discrimination. Savran’s notion of radical perestroika (reconstruction) of class and gender roles seems to call for a revolution of the imagination leading to actual political change, but how is this to be articulated? Savran contributes

the first step - the awareness that the situation as regards men's imagination of themselves is 'corrupt' and calls for change. But if the mechanism that keeps men in power seems clear enough, the mechanisms that (would) lead white men to voluntarily relinquish part of their power *without feeling radically disempowered* are not fully understood yet. It is perhaps totally utopian, even naive, to expect a dominant group to give up a position of power and it seems only human nature that white men would try *all possible strategies* - masochistic self-victimization included - to prevent that loss. It takes much courage to acknowledge that one is wrong and it might well be necessary to appeal to man's determination to 'take it like a man' to convince the diverse victimized men that masculinity may derive its power from itself, without men needing to oppress others or themselves.

Last but not least, as is the practice in gender studies, Savran uses the adjectives 'feminised' and 'masculinised' to refer to positions that are, respectively, disempowered and empowered. He clarifies this point, noting that "gender is always an imaginary identification. It is based not on allegedly universal dimorphism but on fantasy" (p. 8). Gender, as Judith Butler has famously argued, is performative, referring back to a 'masculine' or 'feminine' imaginary construct. Savran refers thus to the

masochist as a man or woman who takes "narcissistic delight in playing the role of victim, in taking up a feminised position" (69) and explains that Jo, the heroine of the film *Twister* is "masculinised by her self-assurance, wit, and cool in the face of both killer's storms and Bill's [ultrafeminine] fiancée" (260). However, this linguistic license to 'metaphorically' use 'femininity' to signify 'weakness' and 'masculinity' to mean 'strength' only results in perpetuating a dangerous essentialism otherwise disregarded by Savran himself and many other cultural analysts. If a strong woman like Jo is 'masculinised' it can only be inferred that, by 'nature', women are weak, and there's no way the adjective 'weak' can be turned into something positive. Isn't it high time to subordinate gender to an authentic humanism that looks at how *people* stand in relation to power and powerlessness?

Note

[1]. Susan Jeffords. *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994.

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