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Matthew Williams
mwill124@lion.lmu.edu

Alexandra Neel
Loyola Marymount University, alexandra.neel@lmu.edu

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Saint Sebastian at the Bacchanalia:

Two Figurations of Homoerotic Desire in the Gay and Bisexual Men's Literary Tradition

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the University Honors Program
of Loyola Marymount University

by

Matthew Williams

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In André Aciman's 2007 novel *Call Me by Your Name*, the following scene occurs after the protagonist Elio masturbates into a peach:

I lunged out to grab the fruit from his hand, but with his other hand he caught hold of my wrist and squeezed it hard, as they do in movies, when one man forces another to let go of a knife.

“You’re hurting me.”

“Then let go.”

I watched him put the peach in his mouth and slowly begin to eat it, staring at me so intensely that I thought even lovemaking didn’t go so far. (Aciman 149).

A graphic mixture of sex and violence, the physical interaction between Elio and his lover Oliver in not only compared to a fight between two men, but it is also staged as a sex as Oliver explicitly ingests Elio’s semen through the vehicle of the peach. However, the 2017 film adaption of the novel does not depict this consumption of semen and peach, stopping short of displaying this transgressive sex act. The scene is censored, erased from the visual medium and the sight of a mainstream audience. In short, this translation from text to film points to the issue of censorship in the discussions and representations of gay and bisexual men’s literature.

Despite the progress allowing for discourse to emerge in the gay and bisexual men’s literary tradition—outlined by Gregory Woods in his book *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition*—many of the more “unsavory” qualities of the tradition—such as the violence in this scene from Aciman’s novel—remain under-examined. However, throughout the 20th and 21st century, a violence rooted in Dionysian fantasy¹ manifests throughout gay and bisexual men’s

¹ Elements of this tradition include intense expressions of sexuality, orgiastic violence, and consumption and destruction of flesh.

literature. This violence is often focalized through the iconography of the Saint Sebastian figure², which is rarely discussed in context to Dionysian symbolism, despite the two literary tropes representing two major schools of writing homoerotic desire. The dichotomy between these two figures is highly representative of the gay male experience in literature—while both figures appear within traditions that are both violent and highly aesthetic, the figure of Dionysus and his cult represents an active, unbridled expression of desire while the icon of Saint Sebastian symbolizes one which is passive and languid. Through the examination of violence shaped by these figures, one can witness the subversive nature of the gay male literary tradition and what has been censored from mainstream discussions and reproductions.

While allusions to Greek and Roman mythology appear throughout gay literature both before and after Oscar Wilde's trial for acts of gross indecency 1895—a pivotal turning point for gay and bisexual men's literature along with the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*—Dionysian violence bursts into the tradition with the 1912 publication of Thomas Mann's novella *Death in Venice*. Throughout the story, the protagonist Gustav Aschenbach cannot speak to the object of his desire—a young boy named Tadzio—and this silent longing eventually erupts into an incredibly violent and licentious dream:

The dream began with anxiety, anxiety and pleasure and a terrible curiosity about what would ensue...the noise, the howling, multiplied by the echoing of the mountainside, grew, took control, escalated into overpowering madness...anger seized him, delusion, numbing lust; and his soul desired to join in the dance of the [foreign] god...Foam on their lips, they raged, stimulated one another with lascivious gestures and groping hands, laughing and moaning; they poked the goads into one another's flesh and licked the blood

² In particular, the image of a physically attractive male body passively submitting to violence, especially in the form of arrows or other sharp objects penetrating the skin.

from their limbs...they were his own self as they flung themselves upon the animals, tearing and killing, swallowing scraps of flesh that were still smoking, while an unbridled coupling began on the trampled, mossy ground, as an offering to the god. And his soul tasted the lewdness and frenzy of extinction. (Mann 55-56)

Gary Astrachan writes in his article “Dionysos in Thomas Mann’s Novella, ‘Death in Venice,’” that Aschenbach’s dream depicts “the savage ritual of the stranger god, Dionysos” (Astrachan 61). Though Aschenbach is initially nervous about the impending outpouring of ecstasy associated with Dionysian ritual, he is completely consumed by “anger, delusion, [and a] numbing lust” by the time his dream concludes. He cannot resist the seductive call of “overpowering madness” and participates in the “lascivious gestures” performed by those ensnared within the bacchanalian fantasy. Additionally, he demonstrates an incredible interest in the violence of the situation, “tearing and killing, swallowing scraps of flesh” all while embracing the morbidly described “frenzy of extinction.” Here, the issue of repressed sexuality emerges, and the Dionysian appears as a literary tool for liberating that sexuality. Though the Bacchantes in Euripides’ play *The Bacchae* are primarily female, the historical cult of Bacchus was claimed by Livy in his *History of Rome* to also consist of men who were initiated into the group by having sex with other men. Though the validity of Livy’s account is called into question by several scholars, it still serves to demonstrate how the usage of the Dionysia invokes a classical conduit for homosexuality (Livy 39.13)

Here, one must also note the historical context out of which this dream within Mann’s novel is emerging. While Michel Foucault notes in his book *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction* that a society existed within the 19th century “of blatant and fragmented perversion” (Foucault 47) in which sex was a topic frequently discussed, the previous century

had also witnessed a rise in the “policing of sex: that is, not the rigor of a taboo, but the necessity of regulating sex through useful and public discourses” (Foucault 25). Because homosexuality was considered an abnormality, the discourse surrounding it was limited, framed primarily in negative terms which made authors such as Aschenbach hesitant to use explicit terminology to define homosexuality within their novels. Thus, the outburst of Dionysian violence within Mann’s novel and following publications by other authors within the gay and bisexual men’s literary canon can be interpreted as both a result of and a coded response to the discourse on sexuality in the 18th and 19th centuries. While the proliferation of sexual discourse allows for such works to be written, their explicit nature suggests a frustration with the regulations placed upon discussing homosexual identity—a theme which is explored in works throughout the tradition.

However, a brief gap occurs in the tradition between Mann’s novel and the next noteworthy publication, Gore Vidal’s 1948 novel *The City and the Pillar*.³ Unlike Mann’s Aschenbach, Vidal’s protagonist, Jim, is openly homosexual and acts upon his desires to have sex with men. While the story begins with Jim discovering his homosexuality in a pastoral sex scene with his best friend Bob, the two have a far more violent experience of intercourse towards the end of the novel:

Suddenly, overwhelmed equally by rage and desire, Jim threw himself at Bob...Grunting and grasping, they twisted and turned, struck out with arms, legs, but Bob was no match for Jim and, at the end, he lay facedown on the bed, arm bent behind him, sweating and groaning. Jim looked down at the helpless body, wanting to do murder. Deliberately he

³ While some literature was published during this intervening period—such as André Gide’s 1926 novel *The Counterfeiters* and Foreman Brown’s 1933 novel *Better Angel*—these works do not rely heavily upon the imagery of Dionysus and Saint Sebastian.

twisted the arm he held. Bob cried out. Jim was excited at the other's pain...Drink made concentration difficult. He looked at the heaving body beneath him, the broad back, ripped shorts, long muscled legs. One final humiliation: with his free hand, Jim pulled down the shorts, revealing white, hard, hairless buttocks. "Jesus," Bob whispered.

"Don't. Don't." (Vidal 203)

Driven by madness, desire, and drunkenness, Jim brutally rapes Bob. As Friedrich Ulfers writes in his introduction to *The Dionysian Vision of the World*, Jim's "intoxication is 'ecstasy' taking place under the aegis of Dionysus as *ho lysios*—the 'liberator'—who undoes boundaries" (Ulfers 6). Jim delights in the physical pain he causes Bob, with whom he desperately longs to reunite throughout the novel. This sudden flip in Jim's desire from wishing to return to the idyllic scene of intercourse to a craving for violent release suggests Jim has been denying himself sexual expression, which is not surprising considering the lack of interest Jim demonstrates in the multitude of short-lived relationships he develops throughout the novel. Though this passage does not celebrate rape, it encapsulates the extremes of sexual violence within both the Dionysian and St. Sebastian traditions, pointing to how the gay male literary tradition subverts acceptable norms of sexual discourse in its attempt to bring attention to the repression of homoerotic desire.

In addition to recalling the violence of the Bacchae, Jim's rape of Bob also alludes to the sensuality that occurs within the orgiastic ritual. His aesthetic appreciation of Bob's physicality—his "heaving body, broad back, long-muscled legs" (Vidal 203)—speaks to the imagery of the Dionysian rites. Yet, this sensuality occurs within the context of anal rape. Considering this phenomenon in regard to the post-war tragic fiction in which *The City of the Pillar* is situated, Woods writes, "Anal rape is a conclusive exertion of power, physical and

mental; but it must also be symbolic of the fragility of masculinity: for every man has an anus. It is the seat of his manly anxieties” (Woods 275). Though Bob does not desire to be raped, the scene symbolizes the internalized homophobia that prevents him from acting upon his own homosexual desires to be penetrated by another man. Unlike the first time he and Jim had sex, Bob is unwilling to play the passive role because he has been conditioned to believe that “guys aren’t supposed to do that with each other. It’s not natural” (Vidal 30). While Jim has embraced his sexuality and the various sexual acts that are attached to it, Bob remains repressed by his fear that anal penetration will revoke his claim to masculinity. In part, this fear of Bob’s also appears to emerge out of an unwillingness to subscribe to the more permanent identity of “homosexual” which had emerged in the 19th century—while “the sodomite [of previous centuries] had been a temporary aberration[,] the homosexual was now a species” (Foucault 43).

Published shortly after *The City and The Pillar* in 1949, Yukio Mishima’s novel *Confessions of a Mask* also centers around a protagonist—Kochan—who is explicitly homosexual like Jim but also represses his desire like Bob. However, while Kochan never acts upon his homoerotic feelings, his fantasies are incredibly Dionysian in their devotion to violent imagery. One particularly vivid scene occurs after a doctor tells Kochan his anemia might be the result of masturbation:

There, in my murder theater, young Roman gladiators offered up their lives for my amusement; and all the deaths that took place there not only had to overflow with blood but also had to be performed with all due ceremony...I was one of those savage marauders who, not knowing how to express their love, mistakenly kills the persons they love. I would kiss the lips of those who had fallen to the ground and were still moving spasmodically...I thrust the fork upright into the heart [of a boy prepared for a meal]. A

fountain of blood struck me full in the face. Holding the knife in my right hand, I began carving the flesh of the breast, gently, thinly at first... (Mishima 92-97)

In this passage, Kochan moves from envisioning a slaughter fest to a cannibalistic feast. This response to repression—Kochan being shamed for embracing a sexual practice considered unhealthy by the medical discourse within the novel—is incredibly Dionysian in its absolute rejection of self-control. Kochan finds a sexual pleasure in the deaths that “overflow with blood,” calling himself “savage” and murderous.

Furthermore, this passage from *Confessions of a Mask* invokes the consumption of flesh which also occurs within the dream sequence in Mann’s *Death in Venice*, with Mishima’s text venturing even further to the extreme of cannibalism. This portion of Kochan’s fantasy liberally employs erotic imagery—the “thrust[ing of] the fork” and “fountain of blood” standing in for penile penetration and ejaculation respectively. Though this scene certainly falls within the debauchery of the Dionysian rights, *Homos* author Leo Bersani would also argue that the scene does not necessarily represent “a question of lifting the barriers to seething repressed drives, but of consciously, deliberately playing on the surfaces of our bodies with forms or intensities of pleasure not covered, so to speak, by the disciplinary classifications that have until now taught us what sex is” (Bersani 81). That is, Kochan’s fantasy represents a challenge to the repression of acting upon homosexual desire rather than the suppression of a homosexual identity itself. Though the idea of the homosexual had been cemented into the discourse by the codification of sexuality in the 19th century, this identification presented the homosexual as a one-dimensional figure rather than acknowledging the multi-faceted sexual experiences of gay and bisexual men, leaving out of its categorization individuals like Kochan with non-tradition expressions of desire.

However, though Kochan's Dionysian imagination leads him to construct scenes of incredible violence and deviant sexuality, it also directs him to latch onto the imagery of Saint Sebastian as a main object of his sexual devotion. The figure of Saint Sebastian appears both in Mann's *Death in Venice* as the "intellectual and youthful masculinity that grits its teeth in proud modesty and stands by calmly while its body is pierced by swords and spears" (Mann 8) and in Vidal's *The City in the Pillar* as the smooth-skinned, deified, and later violated Bob. Yet, Mishima's novel contains the first truly vivid Saint Sebastian iconography. Kochan's first description of Saint Sebastian—a reproduction of Guido Reni's 1615 painting *Saint Sebastian*⁴—occurs shortly before he first discovers masturbation:

A remarkably handsome youth was bound naked to the trunk of the tree...the only covering for the youth's nakedness was a coarse white cloth knotted loosely about his loins...It is not pain that hovers about his straining chest, his tense abdomen, his slightly contorted hips, but some flicker of melancholy pleasure like music. Were it not for the arrows with their shafts deeply sunk into his left armpit and right side, he would seem more a Roman athlete resting from fatigue, leaning against a dusky tree in a garden.

(Mishima 38-39)

This image of Saint Sebastian—a young and attractive man bound to a tree and sensually pierced by arrows—is reconstructed throughout Mishima's text and the gay male tradition. Not only does this image suggest that suffering from physical harm is to be borne as if one is simply "resting from fatigue," but it also points to an association of violence and pain with pleasure, which continues to reinforce the Dionysian sentiment of unimpeded sexual debauchery expressed

⁴ Reni produced a few different versions of St. Sebastian paintings, but this version features St. Sebastian with two arrows piercing his flesh—one in his left armpit, the other into the right side of his ribcage—his hands bound above his head to a tree, and a low-slung white piece of fabric wrapped around his waist.

throughout the text. As Kochan explains, the figure of Saint Sebastian brings “with it a blinding intoxication” (Mishima 40) which will lead him to frame his desires in the violent narrative of the figure.

The manifestation of the Dionysia persists into John Rechy’s 1963 novel *City of Night*. Though he only gradually comes to accept his homosexuality as the novel progresses, Rechy’s protagonist repeatedly has sex with men in his role as a prostitute. Throughout his work, Rechy’s protagonist participates in several scenes of Bacchanalian revelry; however, one of his more violent interactions occurs with a masochistic client:

He had played with all my hungry needs (magnified by the hint of the withdrawing of attention), had twisted them in order to use them for his purposes, by unfettering the submerged cravings, carried to that inevitable extreme...that at this moment I could prove irrevocably to the hatefully initiating world that I could join its rot, its cruelty—I saw my foot rise over him, then grind violently down as if of its own kinetic volition into that now pleading, most vulnerable part of that man’s body... (Rechy 323-324)

Much like how Aschenbach felt compelled to join the howling that “escalated into overpowering madness,” (Mann 55) Rechy’s protagonist succumbs to chaotic violence because of the “unfettering” of his “submerged cravings.” Hiding his true emotions behind masks throughout the novel, Rechy’s protagonist briefly reveals those desires, responding with malevolence in response to the cruelty which the world has enacted upon him. In this moment, the curtain of silence surrounding homosexual desire is violently drawn aside, demonstrating an unwillingness to conform to the 19th century norms of sexual discourse which relegated sex to the realm of the clinical.

Following Rechy's *City of Night*, several publications occur which continue the tradition's foray into the absolute extremes of the violence and eroticism of the Dionysian rites. Two novels published in 1978 are noteworthy for their overall content: Larry Kramer's novel *Faggots* and Andrew Holleran's *Dancer from the Dance*. While *Faggots* is far more explicit, both these novels center around a cast of homosexual characters searching for love in a debauched and hypersexualized landscape. Not only do these novels—as wholes—represent an extended celebration of the Dionysia, but they contain several characters who take on the role of Saint Sebastian; thus, they continue to point to a coexistence of these two literary tropes within the gay and bisexual men's tradition.

Following after Kramer and Holleran, the 1989 novel *Closer* by Dennis Cooper further expands upon the uptake in violence that occurs within the tradition in the time period of his publication. One of the most visceral scenes in the book occurs when the novel's protagonist, George, barely escapes being murdered by a man named Tom:

He'd begun to hallucinate slightly...He heard a clinking noise, and felt a tiny sharp pain in his ass. "It's just some Novocaine," Tom muttered, "so I can take you apart, sans your pointless emotions." "That's considerate," George thought. Just then his ass grew so numb he felt sliced in half...George was about to cry. He was right on the edge...When Tom indicated the floor, George went flat. He heard a series of sounds. The only thing the remotely resembled was somebody chopping a tree down...He realized he was being chopped down. He sort of wished he could know how it felt, but Tom was right. He'd be crying his eyes out and miss the good parts. It was enough to see his blood covering the floor like a magic rug. (Cooper 99)

Intoxicated by different substances throughout the novel, George's hallucinations in this scene are indicative of his Dionysian lifestyle, a common trait shared by many characters within Cooper's novel. He allows himself to be further numbed to his emotions and pain, enabling him to further throw himself into the debauchery of the sexual violence in which he is about to participate. Much like Pentheus—a character gruesomely murdered for falsely presenting himself as female and infiltrating a Dionysian celebration (Euripides 1124-1137)—George is quite literally savagely torn to pieces by Tom. While Tom is standing in for the incensed Bacchants in this scene, George represents the Saint Sebastian figure, a passive recipient of the violence being inflicted upon him. While the conflation of these two traditions represents the dichotomy between top and bottom—that is, penetrator and penetrated—it also points to an interesting indictment of the punishment of Pentheus. Unlike Pentheus, George escapes from his torture alive, suggesting a shift in the acceptance of the feminized male figure constantly presenting a challenge to gender stereotypes.

This visualization of sexual deviancy reoccurs throughout *Closer*, particularly through Cooper's use of the Saint Sebastian figure within the Dionysian fantasies he constructs in his text. In a moment devoid of all inhibition, an individual referred to as "the punk" asks one of the protagonists of Cooper's novel, John, to harm him physically:

When John withdrew he saw some holes in the shape of an Xmas tree ornament. "That's it," he said. "I've got an idea. Get ready." The punk balled his fists. John bobbed his way down the back leaving bites in a regular pattern, four across, every few inches. Reaching the ass-slope he paused, massaged his sore jaw. The wounds were really a crass pink except the ones farther up, which had turned kind of violet. A few even leaked blood in long, thin strands that reminded him vaguely of tinsel. (Cooper 11)

Though John performs an act of physical violence upon the punk, the scene reads as erotic in its devotion to causing pain to a willing recipient, recalling the languidness with which the St. Sebastian figure from *Confessions of a Mask* accepts an approaching death. Furthermore, this scene subverts the perception of violence as ugly, while pointing to “the way in which the desire for an observable, physical beauty might become so analytically obsessive as to require the literal reduction of a boy to his constituent parts” (Woods 335). Though the wounds “leaked blood,” they do little to disturb John’s composition, dulling the brutality of the scene to allow for a more sensual perception of violence containing a modicum of beauty rather than simply being defined by its grotesqueness. The punk becomes an aesthetic piece to be appreciated rather than a human body suffering from violence, which meshes well with the holiday context of Christmas and its focus on ornamentation. Sexuality is impressed onto the body of the punk much like it is imposed onto the body of Saint Sebastian in the imagery which depicts his martyrdom. They are the passive recipients of an aesthetic tradition which invokes homoerotic desire through the penetration and bleeding of the male body.

While the level of violence present within *Closer* is perhaps the most explicit example of violence within the gay male literary tradition, Aciman’s *Call Me by Your Name* would continue to foster the inclusion of a Dionysian worldview within gay and bisexual’s men literature. After Elio, the protagonist, and Oliver, his love interest, have sex, Elio masturbates with a peach as he waits for Oliver to return home:

I got up and reached for one of the peaches, opened it halfway with my thumbs, pushed the pit out on my desk, and gently brought the fuzzy, blush-colored peach to my groin, and then began to press into it till the parted fruit slid down my cock...the peach was soft and firm, and when I finally succeeded in tearing it apart with my cock, I saw that its

reddened core reminded me not just of an anus but of a vagina...I scanned my mind for images of Ovid...with one more stroke, I could come, which I finally did, carefully aiming the spurt into the reddened core of the open peach as if in a ritual of insemination...the bruised and damaged peach, like a rape victim, lay on its side on my desk...I had probably looked no different on his bed last night after he'd come inside me the first time. (Aciman 146-147)

In his “rape” of the peach, Elio is incredibly methodical, describing each step of the process as he masturbates with the fruit. His desire is uninhibited, bringing a blush to the skin of the anthropomorphized peach. By associating food with an object of sexual desire, Elio is working within the Dionysian tradition, his sexual molestation of an object for consumption inversely reflecting the cannibalistic performances tied to the world of the Dionysia. He also alludes to the Ovidian figure of the hermaphrodite, which, as Sarah Carter writes in her book *Ovidian Myth and Sexual Deviance in Early Modern English Literature*, “disrupts the binary opposition of male/female and masculine/feminine, potentially enabling multifarious interpretation and engagement with ideals of gendered behavior” (Carter 115) and thus falls into the Dionysian desire for “a troubled unity, a unity that does not synthesize without remainder” (Ulfers 7). After finishing his act of sexual violence, Elio leaves the peach lying used in an allusion to his own state of sexual exhaustion after having sex with Oliver.

Despite Elio playing the role of penetrated partner during intercourse, Oliver becomes the Saint Sebastian figure throughout the course of the novel. After falling from his bike, Oliver is left with a “huge scrape and bruise on his left hip [which Elio] would have touched, caressed, [and] worshipped” (Aciman 7). Elio, like Kochan from *Confessions of a Mask* and John from *Closer*, fantasizes about the brutalized flesh of Oliver, the object of his longing. Though the gash

upon Oliver's hip is appalling, it does not diminish the elegance of his corporeal body and almost seems to increase that attractiveness. Violence to the physical is displayed within an aesthetic context, pointing to earlier works in the tradition such as Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Mishima's *Confessions of a Mask* where this sexualization of corporeal trauma serves as an outward manifestation of repressed sexuality.

Though this collection of literature by no means encapsulates the entirety of the 20th and 21st century gay male tradition, it provides an insightful look into how violence and desire have manifested through Dionysian fantasy and the iconography of Saint Sebastian. From the first challenges to the repression of homosexual individuals by Wilde and Mann to the more recent freedom found in Aciman, the tradition has been shaped by the desire of its authors to be subversive and challenge the oppressive discourse surrounding gay and bisexual male identities. However, much work remains in bringing exposure to this tradition, particularly to the more traditionally censored material. Though a conversation about homoerotic desire certainly exists within academia, the areas "if not of utter silence, [then] of tact and discretion" (Foucault 18) must also be razed from existence. As of the writing of this paper, the academic discourse surrounding the gritty bits of homosexuality—the sex, violence, and perversion—is severely lacking in quantity and diversity. Furthermore, the distillation of this tradition into other media must be done free of censorship, and it cannot fall into the trap of being flattened into narratives—such as the omnipresent "coming out" tale—that are purely constructed within a dominating heteronormative framework. If the gay male literary tradition is to flourish, then it must be told with all its complexities remaining fully constructed and in relation to the myriad of texts which constitute it. Academic discourse cannot blush at the opportunity to explore such a fascinating canon of literature.

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