



ISSN: 1500-0713

Article Title: Immaculate Confession

Author(s): Michael Alvarez

Source: *Japanese Studies Review*, Vol. XI (2007), pp. 157-165

Stable URL: <https://asian.fiu.edu/projects-and-grants/japan-studies-review/journal-archive/volume-xi-2007/alvarez.pdf>

FIU | **Asian Studies
Program**

IMMACULATE CONFESSION

Michael Alvarez
Ecole Pratique des Haute Etudes

Could you hurt me, sweet lips, though I hurt you?
Men touch them, and change in a trice
The lilies and languors of virtue
For the raptures and roses of vice;
Those lie where thy foot on the floor is,
These crown and caress thee and chain,
O splendid and sterile Dolores,
Our Lady of Pain.¹

In the aforementioned lines from Algernon Swinburne's "Dolores," the poet establishes a form of erotic "divine cruelty."² It is this very form of "divine cruelty" that forges the tortured *kokoro* of the protagonist, Kochan in Yukio Mishima's *Confessions of a Mask*. The depth of the tortuous self-analysis by Kochan is seemingly unfathomable, and perpetually reaffirms the conflict inchoate within the narrative – that of an internal conflict that is desperately endured by a young man in an increasingly Westernized and war-torn Japan.

It is a culture that he tries to at once embrace (by unsuccessfully pushing his burgeoning homosexual desires to the periphery of his personality) yet repel (by continuing to feed the flame of his carnal desires by contorting his perceptions to fit a pristine sanctuary of carnal desire). Yet despite the incessant psychological self-analysis, the protagonist is somehow unable to put the pieces of his past together and thereby discover the origin of the conflict. While the conflict is apparent, and clearly expressed within this lack of societal continuity, the important piece of the analytical puzzle that completes the picture lies instead within the very essence of Sadism, which stems from the unconscious desire for control.

¹ Charles Algernon Swinburne, *Selected Poems* (Austin, TX: Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, 1987).

² Andrew Parle, "A Day Among the Creationists," University of Sydney, 06/02/1994 (http://home.austarnet.com.au/stear/a_day_among_the_creationists_parle.htm, accessed 03/24/2005).

The paraphilic focus of Sexual Sadism involves acts in which the individual derives sexual excitement from the psychological or physical suffering (including humiliation) of the victim. Sadistic fantasies usually involve having complete control over the victim, who is terrified by anticipation of the impending sadistic act.³

This desire eventually renders the protagonist Kochan incapable of acting on his emotional needs, making him curiously impotent, for his impeccable intellect conflicts with his desires, creating a unique psychological double-bind from which he cannot escape.⁴

In his love for the older, more mature middle-school student Omi, in two episodes, “foot prints” and “white gloves”, we recognize the Kochan cannot act on his impulses, or even perhaps more elaborately, his love for another young man because of his inability to express his desires within the realm of an interpersonal relationship. While we can discern the reason for his urges for Omi within the two episodes, it is the analysis of two other distinct moments from Kochan’s childhood that creates for us a lens of meaning to fully understand why Kochan acts the way he does in regard to Omi.

While never able to accurately assess his unconscious desire for control that manifests subconsciously in his sadistic thoughts (which in turn creates a conscious conflict within his homophobic environment), the protagonist in Mishima’s *Confessions of a Mask* presents enough historical background of Kochan’s fomenting personality that we can discern that two crucial catalytic events create the unconscious fertile state to feed his sadistic desires, and limit his ability for interpersonal intimacy.

The first event occurs when the protagonist is liberated from his mother as an infant – “my grandmother snatched me from my mother’s arms on my forty-ninth day”⁵ – and the second is the end of the protagonist’s stay with his grandmother, when he is plucked from her geriatric “parentage” at the age of twelve by his father, ending Kochan’s sublime fantasy existence: “rather than this I preferred by far to be by

³ *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th ed. (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

⁴ G. Bateson, D.D. Jackson, J. Haley, & J. Weakland, “Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia,” *Behavioral Science* 1 (1956): 251-264.

⁵ Yukio Mishima, *Confessions of a Mask* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1958), p. 3; hereafter CM.

myself reading a book, playing with my building blocks, indulging in my willful fantasies, or drawing pictures.”⁶

These events shape Kochan, as his formative years become an artificial construct of fantasies and childhood tyranny – “One day I would bully a maid to tears...I ended many such meals by jumping up from the table and staring hard at the maid, as though to say ‘So there!’”⁷ Clearly, Kochan at this stage is the young king in a fantasy world of knights, dragons, spells, curses, and more. Naturally, as he is not physically mature at this stage, there is no carnal pathology evident, yet the loss of control as an infant that he has manifested into his tyrannical pose as a child and the foreshadowed potency of his ultimate dilemma of fitting his visions of perfection within a far from perfect real world is evident.

As he is eventually removed from the perfection of his grandmother’s home, he is in a very different stage of development, that of puberty:

a child provided with a curious toy. I was twelve. This toy increased in volume at every opportunity and hinted that, rightly used, it would be quite a delightful thing. But directions for its use were nowhere written, and so when the toy took the initiative in wanting to play with me, my bewilderment was inevitable. Occasionally my humiliation and impatience became so aggravated that I even thought I wanted to destroy the toy.⁸

The natural awareness of sexual potency has expressed itself into entirely sadistic subconscious manifestations. And when his father is transferred to Osaka, he again lacks a male role model, furthering his identification with the female gender, which had been established in early childhood, “I was forbidden to play with other boys”⁹ and now, his guilt-ridden mask is gradually becoming formed.

By the time Kochan is beginning to feel the eventual pangs of physical desire for another person, he directs his emotions toward the perfect yet unattainable Omi. Kochan psychologically idealizes the object of his desires to the realm of the unattainable: “I fashioned a perfect, flawless

⁶ CM, p. 5.

⁷ CM, p. 24.

⁸ CM, p. 34.

⁹ CM, p. 24.

illusion of him (Omi). Hence it is that I cannot discover a single flaw in the image that remains imprinted in my memory.”¹⁰ Knowing that he cannot violate his mask, yet still feeling the subconscious lustful urges creates a leitmotif that perpetually permeates the scope of Kochan’s internal and external realities. As Kochan recognizes his love for Omi, it is the tension created by the desire of Kochan for Omi, bound by the protagonist’s unconscious sadistic urges and the inability to betray his mask that renders Kochan incapable of action: “But as usual, my sluggish motor nerves protected me from my sudden whim.”¹¹

In the “foot prints” episode, Kochan idealizes the moment to perfection, building the purity of the setting and rendering it both gothic and mystical:

The snow scene was in a way like a fresh castle ruin: its legerdemain was being bathed in the same boundless light and splendor which exists solely in the ruins of ancient castles.¹²

The moment is experienced in an idealized fashion, enabling Kochan to fit his base desires within the divine realm, supporting his long active fantasies of classical perfection that are marred only by lustful desires, which he manifests as carnal yet imaginary lust. As in the Saint Sebastian description, “The arrows have eaten into the tense, fragrant, youthful flesh and are about to consume his body from within with flames of supreme agony and ecstasy,”¹³ Kochan idolizes and idealizes Omi in the same fashion during “foot prints”: “As I ran, a most undreamed of sound came reverberating toward me – a friendly shout from him, filled with his power: ‘Hey, don’t step on the letters.’”¹⁴

Significantly, the first physical contact with Omi is rendered magical by expression, and yet tinged with dark sadomasochistic tones: “‘Poor thing. I bet you don’t even know how leather gloves feel – Here.’ Abruptly, he thrust his snow-drenched leather gloves against my cheek.”¹⁵

¹⁰ CM, p. 63.

¹¹ CM, p. 56.

¹² CM, p. 58.

¹³ CM, p. 39.

¹⁴ CM, p. 59.

¹⁵ CM, p. 61.

Clearly, Kochan constructs the divine out of his base desires, which then creates the psychological double-bind that imprisons Kochan in his carnal urges. "A raw carnal feeling blazed up within me, blazing in my cheeks...From this time on, I was in love with Omi."¹⁶ Yet because of the strictures of society, he cannot find a suitable expression for his desires, and Kochan is compelled to continue the construction of his mask.

During the "white gloves" episode, the rampant imaginative idealization of Kochan's love for Omi, "a precise definition of the perfection of life and manhood,"¹⁷ heretofore physically dormant, achieves a physical manifestation, albeit in the manner of boys at play at a game. Yet it serves to escalate the physical tension within the narrative in its heightened form of lyrical expression. "The palms of our white-gloved hands met many times in stinging slaps."¹⁸ As Kochan succeeds in grasping the glove of Omi, and they fall from their apex, Kochan feels an elusive moment that enables him to share his love for Omi:

I knew intuitively and certainly that Omi had seen the way I looked at him in that instant, had felt the pulsating force that flowed like lightning between our fingertips and had guessed my secret – that I was in love with him, with no one else in the world but him.¹⁹

Kochan finally experiences the revelation of his love, and the subsequent physical embodiment of that emotion when Omi places his arm around Kochan's shoulders. As they walk back to class, the intensity of the moment to Kochan, and the benign nature of the same moment to Omi is apparent: "it was a supreme delight I felt as I walked leaning on his arm."²⁰

As time passes, the active yet bound imagination of Kochan renders the moment into the proper paradigm to fit within his sadistic primacy: "it was a debasement more evil than that of any normal love."²¹ Kochan at once feels lust, yet guilt over his lust, and then an unconscious violent desire to control that lust that then manifests itself into dire (if imaginative) circumstances.

¹⁶ CM, p. 61.

¹⁷ CM, p. 64.

¹⁸ CM, p. 69.

¹⁹ CM, p. 70.

²⁰ CM, p. 71.

²¹ CM, p. 72.

In the provisional desire for the successor to Omi, “a skilled swimmer with a notably good physique,”²² Kochan begins to daydream of a sort of “murder theatre”²³ that demonstrates that the sadistic impulses, once germinal, are now flowering into a Baudelairean evil, which approaches dire (if only imaginary) proportions:

“This is probably a good spot to begin on.” I thrust the fork upright into the heart. 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, thinly at first.²⁴

And now, the deep unconscious desires begin to crawl their way to the surface of consciousness. First, innocently enough with the sadistically tinged Omi episodes, but now fully drawn within the imaginary world of Kochan.

Rather than recognize the apparent dichotomy within his soul, Kochan instead twists and turns within societal expectations to manage a facade-like existence. His deep well of intelligence seems at odds with the illogical nature of his subconscious desires. On the one hand, he is intellectually sophisticated enough to be able to appreciate the sad hubris of Helioglobus (or Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antonius), who satiated his primal urges at the expense of his esteem in the eyes of his kingdom. It is a subtle reminder of Elagabalus’ transsexual proclivity, which is recounted in an anecdote from Cassius Dio (LXXIX.15-16):

When Hierocles, a charioteer in the arena, was thrown in front of the emperor’s box, his blond hair spilling out from under his helmet, Elagabalus immediately had the youth escorted to the palace, where he was found to be even more captivating. Calling him “husband” and contriving to be caught in adulterous trysts, Elagabalus proudly displayed the black eyes he insisted on receiving. But there was to be a rival. Frequenting the wharves and

²² CM, p. 94.

²³ CM, p. 92.

²⁴ CM, p. 97.

public baths, agents sought out others who might please the emperor, especially those who were well-endowed.²⁵

Yet Kochan is unable to escape his own dark desires, instead almost embracing the darkness within his romanticized vision. The dichotomy is apparent in that Kochan is at once intelligent enough to be aware of the reasons and the manifestations of his sadistic desires, yet he is powerless to make any headway against them. Rather, Kochan retreats into his womb-like idyllic childhood, embracing it and lavishing himself within it: "I had a sworn unconditional loyalty to the stage manager of the play called adolescence."²⁶

Kochan is incapable of reconciling his desires with the expectations of a male in early twentieth century Japan, and therefore creates the mask that he must wear to function within society.

My knowledge that I am masquerading as a normal person has corroded whatever of normality I originally possessed, ending by making me tell myself over and over again that it too was nothing but a pretense at normality.²⁷

Kochan realizes that his imaginary world is, in truth, *more* real than his real world, and that his current existence is nothing but a masquerade. Ironically, the inner reality of episodes within his imagination, such as the "foot prints" or "white gloves" episode, (rendered perfect within the confines of his broad imagination), are much more accurate barometers of the inner character of Kochan than is his actual existence.

Kochan realizes he cannot love Omi within the physical realm, but his true desire is not to actually consummate a physical relationship. Quite the contrary, he longs for it to remain in the magical realm of his idealized imagination, unsullied by reality:

And yet from the outset, a logical impossibility was involved for me in these rude tastes, making my desires forever unattainable...

²⁵ *Scriptores Historiae Augustae, Lives of the Later Caesars: The First Part of the Augustan History: With Newly Compiled Lives of Nerva and Trajan*, trans. Anthony Birley (London: Penguin Classics, 1976), p. 108.

²⁶ CM, p. 122.

²⁷ CM, p. 153.

There was nothing for me to do but be forever watching them from afar with impassioned indifference being careful to never exchange words with them.²⁸

It is evident that Kochan is cognizant of his machinations, and even rejoices in it, as it provides him with an inner pain that in some fashion is experienced as a method of continuing to feed his sense of pleasure.

As expressed fantastically throughout the narrative, the ideas and actions of Kochan find a retrospective balance due to the gravity of consistent reference. While we perceive that Kochan is incapable of embracing his true self, we also feel that the lyrical magical realism of narrative is in fact the sanctuary that envelops Kochan in a kind of twisted comfort within his own soul. It is as if the constructs of his imagination, brought to life upon the page, form the framework for an existent that is eminently more livable than actual reality. No greater dichotomy of the dynamism inherent within Kochan's soul can be found than in the following lines:

As I did so, I recalled a line from Whitman: "The young men float on their backs – their white bellies bulge to the sun...But now again I said not a word." I was ashamed of my own thin chest, of my bony pallid arms...²⁹

Because his unconscious urges are inalienable, he can never escape his inner truth, and no mask, no matter how elaborate, will allow Kochan to exist within his own soul.

As the protagonist in Yukio Mishima's *Confessions of a Mask*, Kochan does not wish for his submerged carnal longings to express themselves within the physical realm, because by doing so, they would lose their immaculate perfection, thus ending his pristine sanctuary of imaginative lustful longings. He would then become just a simple man, facing a simple reality.

Dost thou dream of what was and no more is,
The old kingdoms of earth and the kings?
Dost thou hunger for these things, Dolores,

²⁸ CM, p. 64.

²⁹ CM, p. 126.

For these, in a new world of things?
But thy bosom no fasts could emaciate,
No hunger compel to complain
Those lips that no bloodshed could satiate,
Our Lady of Pain.³⁰

³⁰ Swinburne, *Selected Poems*.

