"Enough of the World is Mine": Decadence, Homosexuality and Catholicism in the Life of John Gray

Lewis Whitaker
“ENOUGH OF THE WORLD IS MINE”:

DECADENCE, HOMOSEXUALITY AND CATHOLICISM

IN THE LIFE OF JOHN GRAY

by

LEWIS H. WHITAKER

Under the Direction of LeeAnne Richardson, PhD

ABSTRACT

This project follows the life of the late-Victorian poet John Gray, who was born into lower-middle class poverty in London. Gray educated himself, rising from clerical positions with the Post Office and the Foreign Office, before meeting Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon, who published his early work, and designed the seminal book of fin de siècle verse Silverpoints, for which Gray earned the epithet le plus decadent des decadents. This project considers the ways in which Gray’s associations with Ricketts and Shannon, along with Oscar Wilde, André Raffalovich and the aunt and niece couple writing as Michael Field impacted his life, from the
publication of his early decadent poetry, to his renunciation of the London demimonde, to eventual ordination in the Roman Catholic Church. It demonstrates the ways in which Gray’s aesthetic merely changed focus, and how his life was ruled by aesthetics, homoeroticism and Catholicism.

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DEDICATION

“Over our heads will float the Blue Bird singing of beautiful and impossible things, of things that are lovely and that never happen, of things that are not and that should be”

– Oscar Wilde The Decay of Lying

For Patty.
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1 INTRODUCTION

A Pontifical Requiem for the Dead was celebrated in St. Peter’s Church, Edinburgh, on the morning of 19 June 1934 for the church’s founder and rector, Fr. John Gray. Gray had died five days earlier at age 68, exactly four months after his beloved friend, companion, and St. Peter’s greatest benefactor, André Raffalovich. Archbishop Andrew McDonald presided with Archbishop Donald Mackintosh from Glasgow in attendance. The entire chapter from St. Mary’s Cathedral, where Gray had been made canon in 1930, joined almost 100 other priests, as well as representatives from religious orders across Scotland and England including “Dominicans, Benedictines, Franciscans, Passionists & Jesuits”; numerous friends; and parishioners (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 258). The Prior Provincial of the Dominican Order in Oxford, Fr. Bernard Delany, gave the eulogy, remembering Gray as “a priest, and a great priest . . . whose love of his Master overflowed in priestly charity” (Delany 176). Delaney extolled his gifts with the poor and needy, the sick, and the suffering, by singling out his kindness, sympathy, humor, and humility.

The funeral of a priest always seems like the beginning of a cause for canonization, and Delany’s remarks may have struck some of the listeners as strange. The common perception was that Fr. Gray was aloof, that he was mysterious, and that he was cold. Gray did nothing to change these perceptions. Parishioners meeting him on the street often hid from him. Catholic patients sometimes left the floor when he made sick calls at the local hospital. He had an outward show of severity to the members of his flock, but those who got to know him found a core of pastoral gentleness. An early parishioner at St. Patrick’s recalled “everybody said he was real proud, but he was real kind in the confessional” (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 194).
Friends, similarly, expressed bewilderment at his reserve. Fr. Edwin Essex, a frequent guest and preacher at St. Peter’s alternately described Gray as being rigid, detached, impersonal, “schooled,” “restrained,” “never effusive,” and possessing an “obvious air of religious detachment” before noting that these behaviors were all part of Gray’s careful attempt at self-restraint (154). Fr. Brocard Sewell notes, “those who met him only on social occasions were seldom able to penetrate his reserve. People whose acquaintance with him was limited to his appearances in Edinburgh drawing-rooms could not know him as did the clergy of the diocese, and yet to most of them he was an enigma” (Sewell Footnote 55). Peter Anson, a guest at both St. Peter’s clergy house as well as Raffalovich’s home on Whitehorse Terrace, who has left a vibrant description of Gray’s living quarters, the church, and Raffalovich’s hospitality, finally asks in desperation:

Did anybody ever understand John Gray? When conversing with him one had the feeling that he was wearing a mask. At moments the mask was raised slightly; but I can honestly say that never once in the fifteen years that I continued to meet him [after 1914] was the mask removed. He remained inscrutable, enigmatic, shrouded in mystery, and it was largely because of this polished reserve that he was so fascinating.

(135-36)

Anson then compares Gray’s face to Leonardo da Vinci’s Mona Lisa, and adapts Pater’s famous description of the painting, claiming that “[Gray’s] is the head upon which ‘all the ends of the world are come,’ . . . He is older than the rocks among which he sits; like the vampire, he has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave” (136). From 1963, with Gray long since dead, Anson delicately recreates links to the decadent past.
Gray’s reserve, and his recreation of himself as a priest, owes much to this decadent past that he tried to eradicate. He had so successfully completed the eradication, perhaps at the expense of human relationships, that it was the priest and not the decadent poet that was remembered at his death. Neither The Times’ obituary nor Fr. Delaney’s sermon at Gray’s requiem mention any connection to the 1890s. While Delaney referred to him as a “priest-poet,” he pays far greater attention to “the songs and poems he did not sing” (175). Because of this vigorous scrubbing of the past, the name John Gray is largely unknown outside of close studies of the Victorian fin de siècle. His poetry, which was once considered the most decadent of the movement is no longer considered the best example of poetry from this highly idiosyncratic period. Lionel Johnson, Ernest Dowson, and Oscar Wilde were better poets and are certainly better remembered. Gray, however, sank into near-obscurity and remained largely forgotten until the 1960s.

John Gray, however, bears the unique distinction of living the period of the decadence, surviving it, and emerging on the other side as a new and transformed creation. He is a symbol of regeneration or resurrection after the decline, decay and death that the period celebrates. Unlike so many poets of the age who died young (neither Johnson nor Dowson lived to age 35), Gray lived to age sixty-eight and died of natural causes, exactly four months to the day after his beloved friend André Raffalovich. The early deaths of so many leading figures, along with Wilde’s trial, incarceration, disgrace, and exile signaled the decisive end of the Victorian era. Wilde’s conviction for gross indecency in 1895 effectively ended the decadent and aesthetic period of the late-Victorian era and closed the fin de siècle five years before the calendar marked the beginning of the century. Similarly, the conviction of Wilde also drove the nascent
homosexual consciousness back underground. While the Catholic Church was resurgent in the latter half of the nineteenth century and continued to expand in the early 1900s, it was still viewed with some suspicion, and critics saw it as a repository for both decadence and homosexuality. Gray’s life is a living and vibrant document that weaves together all of these provocative threads of the closing years of the 1890s: aestheticism and decadence, homosexuality, and Roman Catholicism. Gray’s life, and not his verse, represents his best work of poetry. Instead of his written work, Gray’s life is his monument.

The late Carmelite Priest Fr. Brocard Sewell was among the first to rescue Gray from literary oblivion in the 1960s. His Two Friends: John Gray & André Raffalovich, published in 1963, began to reclaim Gray from almost 30 years of silence and neglect. This was followed by A Footnote to the Nineties: A Memoir of John Gray and André Raffalovich in 1968, and a substantive biography, In the Dorian Mode: A Life of John Gray 1866-1934 in 1983. Fr. Sewell, an eclectic and fearless researcher who ran afoul of the Vatican for his opposition to Pope Paul VI’s encyclical on artificial birth control, Humanae Vitae, is almost wholly responsible for rescuing Gray, as well as Olive Custance, Montague Summers, Frederick Rolfe, Arthur Machen, and other minor characters of the late nineteenth and early centuries from obscurity.

Sewell’s work on Gray was bolstered by the papers of the late Dr. Helen Trudgian, whom the English Dominican Order commissioned in the mid 1930s to write an official biography. The Dominicans wanted of a biography of Canon John Gray, the formidable Roman Catholic priest and Canon of Edinburgh, and not the elegant, decadent poet of the 1890s. As with most “official” biographies, Trudgian’s work was intended to be not biography but hagiography. Dr. Trudgian, due to ill health and advanced age did not complete her work, and her papers passed
to Fr. Sewell, laying the framework for the three volumes he published. Fr. Sewell refused to whitewash Gray, but his work contains hints of the Catholic Church protecting one of its own. In significant areas, notably sexuality, Sewell refuses to ask difficult questions of his subject. Nonetheless, his work in rescuing Gray from obscurity cannot be overestimated and represents the first serious engagement with Gray and his work.

Jerusha Hull McCormack’s 1973 doctoral dissertation *The Person in Question: John Gray, A Critical and Biographical Study* formed the basis of her 1991 monograph *John Gray: Poet, Dandy and Priest*. Dr. McCormack’s work represents a much fuller, more objective look at Gray, and does not shy away from the issues that Sewell mentioned but did not develop, namely Gray’s possible homosexuality and his possible intimate association with Oscar Wilde. Her work, however, is not without its own prejudices and biases. Her thesis is suggested by the title of her dissertation and refers to Gray’s short story “The Person in Question,” which he did not publish in his lifetime. For McCormack, this fascinating tale, featuring a common *fin de siècle* theme of the *doppelganger*, becomes an autobiographical template for understanding Gray’s life. The ghostly encounter that the narrator makes in “The Person in Question” serves as a metaphor for Gray’s divided life – the sacred priest and the profane decadent poet. For McCormack, Gray is poet, dandy and priest, but never a fully integrated character.

The work of these two scholars is foundational, but neither goes far enough. For a proper understanding of Gray, we need neither hagiography nor psychoanalysis, but rather a clear and objective view of his life. We must consider the aesthetic and religious climate in which he was formed, and where he lived and moved and found his being, as well as the homoerotic circles he timidly explored. John Gray’s life was driven by aesthetics, religion, and
homoeroticism. His career as poet and later priest represents not so much a divided life, but an integrated one. This trajectory represents not two lives – one sacred and one profane – nor a single life with a Dorian Gray or Dr. Jekyll double, but rather a singular, deliberate one, filled with abandoned pursuits and dead ends, but with a singular purpose for educational and aesthetic improvement and heightened social status.

Nevertheless, we are left with only the most meagre facts of John Gray’s early life. The facts present little more than hastily drawn sketches. To understand him and the decadent period of late-Victorian literature, we must examine the empty spaces of his biography, formation, and influence. We must examine what is left unseen and unsaid and examine the ways that Gray attempted to fill these spaces. We must examine the relationships that he formed, and the very calculating process he undertook of becoming an aesthete: knowing the right people, making the right connections, appearing in the right places, and striking the right poses.

After determining that his earlier life as poet and aesthete in London was not built upon solid footing, Gray abandoned it for one as confessor and priest, leaving London behind forever and striking out for seminary training in Rome and the life of a parish priest in Scotland. Here, two structures, the salon in his friend André Raffalovich’s home on Whitehorse Terrace and the sanctuary of St. Peter’s Church on Falcon Avenue in Edinburgh form the two axes around which his later life revolved. Both structures were as carefully constructed as John Gray’s own life, element upon element, brick upon brick, and story upon story.

To understand this life, particularly the radical shift in emphasis, we must gather the threads: poet, aesthete, priest, decadent, playwright, disciple, companion, confessor, guide,
mentor and friend, and hope that they will form a tapestry with a clear design, rather than a tangled and frayed selvage. We can trace in Ellis Hanson’s vivid phrase, the “violet thread[s] of homoeroticism,” suggested, hinted at, playfully engaged then swiftly withdrawn, but never proven; the scarlet threads of the Roman Catholic priesthood, a calling that has always welcomed sinners as well as saints, publicans as well as Pharisees, and prodigals above all; and the heliotrope threads of aestheticism and decadence, which outline performance and decorum, beauty and decay, exaltation and degradation (318).

Alternately, we can look at how Gray constructed his life, almost as if he were a carpenter, drawing upon the unpleasant lessons learned in childhood. Though, like many who did not survive, he discovered that this foundation, laid in the decadence of the 1890s, was not a solid one, but one built on quicksand. With this realization we find greater meaning in his decision to abandon the life of poet and aesthete for that of confessor and priest. In this way, he builds the edifice of his life upon petrus, Peter, the rock upon which Christ as well as John Gray built his church.

This project considers the arc of John Gray’s life, from relative obscurity in working class neighborhoods of London, to his final triumph as priest in Edinburgh, Scotland. It focuses on the unique confluence of late-Victorian aestheticism and decadence, Roman Catholicism and homoeroticism, and demonstrates the way in which Gray’s life is not a collection of fragments shored up against ruins, but rather a rare demonstration of the ways in which these three areas can co-exist and also enrich one another.

Chapter 1 begins in the void, in the empty spaces that Gray either left unfilled, or which he actively sought to obfuscate. Because Gray grew increasingly reticent about his past, his
early biography is difficult to construct. It examines the few details that can be teased out from his drab lower-middle class beginning and determines a pattern of elements from which Gray drew artistic inspiration but which he desperately tried to hide or disguise.

Chapter 2 discusses the aesthetic background of the final decades of late-Victorian England and France. In particular, it centers on John Ruskin and Walter Pater, the two monumental figures of aestheticism, and discusses the shifting definitions of aestheticism and decadence, both of which figured into Gray’s life and aspirations.

Chapter 3 explores the influence of Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon, Gray’s earliest mentors and the publishers of his first written work. It positions English decadence and aestheticism against the French forms that Ricketts and Shannon introduced to the Victorian public and outlines Gray’s first publication in the pages of *The Dial*. These two men became Gray’s earliest mentors, providing Gray with a thorough aesthetic grounding, and modeling a deep, abiding, homoerotic relationship that became a constant refrain in Gray’s life.

Chapter 4 begins with Gray’s first meeting with Oscar Wilde, the putative “High Priest of Decadence” and the most visible public figure of the Victorian fin de siècle. It demonstrates the ways in which Wilde epitomized the differing threads of aestheticism and decadence making him a ready target for Gray’s attention. Additionally, it shows the ways in which Wilde became Gray’s mentor and “master,” teaching him aestheticism, decadence and homosexuality, but adding the crucial element Roman Catholicism.

Chapter 5 details the most crucial figure in Gray’s life, and the most lasting, André Raffalovich. It demonstrates the ways in which Raffalovich became patron, mentor, benefactor and friend, combining and transforming homoeroticism, Catholicism, and aesthetics. It
examines the ways in which both men were influenced by decadence, which became a
dangerous and shifting world that invited increased public scrutiny. This chapter also describes
the crucial decision Gray made to return to Catholicism after a period of apostasy, and the ways
in which his vocation as priest was shared with Raffalovich.

Chapter 6 explores Gray’s fraught relationship with Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper,
the aunt and niece couple who wrote collectively as Michael Field. Under Gray’s tutelage the
two women became Roman Catholics, and Gray achieved with them a type of spiritual
mentorship that mirrors the relationships he sought for himself in earlier years. Mentoring the
two women allowed him to transition from pupil to teacher, becoming for them, and only
them, “Father Silverpoints.” They, in turn, allowed Gray to return to writing, as the priest slowly
re-engaged with a changed literary world.

The conclusion examines the physical artifact of St. Peter’s Church in Edinburgh, proving
the ways that it represents, more than any piece of published verse, John Gray’s “best piece of
poetry.” This living monument, dedicated strictly to the celebration of the Mass and to personal
and corporate prayer, represents all of John Gray’s aspirations and hopes. It is a tribute in stone
to Gray’s aestheticism, Catholicism, and even his homoeroticism.

2 BEGINNINGS

_The first forty odd years of this life are pure preliminary, obscurely and fatally composed, to the_
_passage which marches nobly and passionately to an ecstatic end._

John Gray. _Light._
In the beginning of John Gray’s life, as in any creation myth, there is impenetrable darkness and void. Few facts are known. Few things can be verified. All of this was by design. Gray so carefully hid or obstructed the details of his early life that reconstructing his childhood is nearly impossible. In later years, contemporaries noted Gray’s refusal to speak of his childhood, leaving the period before his appearance with other figures like Oscar Wilde nearly impossible to reconstruct. There is a birth certificate, along with government records stating his employment for the Civil Service, but overall the biographer is left with mystery and shadows. However, even Gray’s reticence about his youth is helpful, for it shows the lengths to which he ran to construct, in relief, a new and more colorful identity, freed from the burden of history.

The sense of mystery and uncertainty begins with the actual date of his birth. According to official records, he was born on 10 March 1866 in the working-class suburb of Bethnal Green, London. In actuality, he was born one day earlier. Gray’s parents, twenty-one and twenty-three at the time of his birth, being “weak in astronomy and novices in their character,” incorrectly recorded the date with the Registry Office (qtd. in McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 11). The imprecision of Gray’s birth and the playful way that he refers to it becomes a metaphor, forming part of the mythology that he created of a double life, one that could be divided neatly down the middle into two halves: the profane, and then the sacred. This sense of a double life, used for comic effect by Oscar Wilde in the titular character of The Importance of Being Earnest, becomes, for Gray, a type of veil or covering that the older, inscrutable Gray carefully drew over his entire life. While this veil could be draw or withdrawn at will, it always prevented a complete view.
While not exactly Dickensian, his beginnings were modest, poor, and hard. The Grays were on the upper end of the lower-class, close, but never exactly in the Victorian middle-class. The future poet had neither social class, formal education, nor even religious identity. In a society as stratified as nineteenth century London, to be something other than middle or upper class was to be forever marked as “other.” After gaining prominence as a poet, Gray deliberately obscured the facts of his early life, refusing to speak of them except in unguarded moments when his determination slipped. “If ever a man was inscrutable,” Brocard Sewell finally exclaims, seemingly with exasperation, “he was” (Sewell Footnote 55). Even relatives such as his sister Beatrice, and his grand-niece Heather Coltman were at odds to supply more than the most superficial of comments about Gray’s early life.¹

Gray’s father was a journeyman carpenter and later a wheelwright. His skill was within “the arena wherein stubborn stuff / With man locks strength,” as Gray recalled in his poem “The Forge” (51-52). While this skill set him out from the lower classes “as an artisan, one of the aristocracy of labor” the sheer physicality of Gray Sr.’s work marked him as upper-lower-class but not quite middle-class (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 12). While an artisan, he was still an artisan of labor. While he may have been an aristocrat, he was still an aristocrat of labor. Their homes, all rentals in neighborhoods such as Bethnal Green and Plumstead, were distinctly working-class. There was little room for social mobility, and the Grays never rose far above their humble origins. John, however, had larger plans.

Unpublished works by Gray suggest that the home was fraught with tension. “The primary conflict was between mother and father” in a scene “which might have come from early D.H. Lawrence: one in which the ‘intellectual’ mother with middle-class aspirations for her
son is at odds with a father battling to keep him among his own” people and social class (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 13-14). This struggle between seemingly intractable opposites, middle-class desires and intellectual curiosity vs. lower-class poverty and struggle, is characteristic of the dichotomies that repeated over and over in Gray’s life.

If the conflict between the two parents was the primary one, as McCormack argues, Gray’s mother Hannah may have been the stronger partner. Heather Coltman describes Mrs. Gray as a “tough cookie,” yet a mother who “adored and spoilt her sons, particularly John,” who, “in her eyes . . . could do nothing wrong or foolish” (qtd. in McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 13). Mrs. Gray was “seemingly the parent with the intellectual abilities,” and she taught her children at home, at least for the first few years (qtd. in McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 15). Recognizing, perhaps, her own desires at self-improvement, Mrs. Gray encouraged her eldest son in his studies as he attempted to “bridge the great divide ... between those who worked with their hands and those who did not” (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 16). Mrs. Gray’s aspirations for middle-class respectability and “something more,” so emblematic of the aspirations of thousands of late-Victorian Londoners, instilled in the young John Gray the desire to escape his humble beginnings.

Gray had demonstrable talent as a child and was the only one among a family of nine children to have any formal education. Although Hannah Gray preferred to educate her children at home, she recognized something in her eldest son that persuaded her to send him to Mr. Nichols’s Wesleyan Day School in Plumstead. In 1878, when he was twelve, he won a scholarship to the Roan School in Blackheath. Here, Gray won a prize sponsored by the Royal Humane Society for an essay on animal cruelty (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 15). He
exhibited early talent at both schools, social class hampered him. Gray recognized that formal education, along the lines of Oxford or Cambridge, brought not only knowledge but also class and social prestige. He was also painfully aware that it was inaccessible.

However, even these meager attempts at education ended when Gray turned thirteen. His father, John Gray Sr. removed his son from school and apprenticed him as a metal turner at the Woolwich Arsenal. The reasons for this decision are unclear. The father may have felt that his son was “getting a bit above himself” and that manual work “among his own kind” might ground him (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 16). A cancelled section of an unpublished poem written soon after his father’s death suggests that Gray’s father wanted him to “learn to use his hands” in the father’s trade (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 16). Gray never forgave him for this harsh lesson. In the only direct reference to his father that has survived, Gray wrote to Pierre Louÿs in 1892 “I have lost my father. I am well pleased with the loss” (qtd. in McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 16). The iciness of these two sentences – emotionally detached and unnaturally calm – hints at the breach that existed between father and son. It also represents the titanic struggle Gray faced to overcome the accidents of family and birth, as he re-forged himself as a new creation. His father’s death was one of many deaths that Gray used to punctuate important periods in his life. The passing of his earthly father made possible a closer connection with a heavenly father, but also for John Gray’s own eventual assumption of the role of father and priest in the Roman Catholic Church.

Religion played no part in Gray’s early life, to the extent that, later in life, his younger sister Beatrice could not remember the denomination to which they belonged. Gray never spoke of it. Several factors suggest Methodism, with hints at the fiery “Primitive” strain that
favored revivalism and spirited preaching, which was popular amongst the working class, but these clues are largely circumstantial. Two stories, “Niggard Truth” and “Light,” feature deeply religious, dissenting characters. Both have autobiographical elements and suggest that Gray had a thorough knowledge of the sect in particular. Furthermore, if the family had been Methodist, Gray could have received preferential treatment for admission to the Wesleyan Day School he attended. Gray frequently mentioned in letters and prose writings his admiration for the hymns of Charles and Samuel Wesley, nephew and brother, respectively, of Methodism’s founder John Wesley, which later informed his work in the creation of *Saint Peter’s Hymns*, a working hymnal for his parish in Edinburgh (Sewell *Dorian Mode* 2). Gray elaborated many of these techniques in a separate essay on the craft of hymn composition, *On Hymn Writing* published in 1925.

This religious trajectory completely sidesteps the Anglican Church. There is nothing in Gray’s early life that hints at familiarity, much less curiosity, with the Established Church, which formed the core of national identity and conferred a sense of belonging. Unlike so many prominent figures of the Victorian period who were committed Anglicans before converting to Catholicism, including John Henry Newman and Gerard Manley Hopkins, Gray did not, and never mentions it as a possibility. There is a brief mention of Roman Catholicism, but the story is likely embroidery. Fr. Bernard Delaney, prior provincial of the Dominican Order English Province, told Gray’s sister, who became a Benedictine nun later in life, that as a child, Gray “used to go about with Father Pius Cavanagh, OP” (qtd. in Sewell *Dorian Mode* 3). Sewell notes the difficulty in reconciling this story with Cavanagh’s tenure at St. Dominic’s Priory in London. While theoretically possible, Bethnal Green is some six miles from St. Dominic’s in Hampstead;
It seems more likely that Delaney was, like Gray himself, projecting a particular narrative onto Gray’s life that is more characteristic of hagiography than biography. Cavanaugh was the priest who received both Gray and Raffalovich as Third Order Dominicans, so a connection earlier in Gray’s life would lend a certain symmetry to the myth of a prodigal son, running away from his early encounter with the Catholic Church, only to find it in later life.

The detour in Gray’s life, prompted by the apprenticeship at the Woolwich Arsenal, provided subject material for poetry later in life. His only recourse was a focused emphasis on self-education. His early successes placed him on a footing to eventually seek a university education. However, class and economics ensured that it would not be an Oxford or Cambridge degree. Only a lower-level university education would have been attainable with adequate preparation. In 1884 he registered as a private student at the University of London and began a rigorous course of self-study at nights. The requirements for the matriculation exam were demanding, including “Latin, and either Greek, French, German, Sanskrit or Arabic; English language and history; mathematics; mechanics; and one science subject, either chemistry, heat and light, or magnetism and electricity” (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 20). As if to offset the technical requirements, he taught himself drawing, the violin, and experimented with poetry, including “a Keatsian daze embellished with Pre-Raphaelite detail” at age sixteen (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 19). Gray achieved in only six years the equivalent of a middle-class education.

Gray accomplished his education while working full-time. He proved himself a skilled metal-turner and wheelwright and was promoted to the drawing room at the Woolworth Arsenal. Continued study allowed him to qualify, by taking competitive exams and at the young
age of sixteen, for positions with the London General Post Office, working his way up to Clerk, Lower Division, of the Post Office Savings. At age twenty-two, he transferred to a respectable position with the Foreign Office Library.

The new position gave him a modest income, but Gray’s true desires for poetry, fame, and the aesthetic currents of the day caused him to spend most of his money on entertainment, clothing, and trivialities. He sought out Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon, who gave him a thorough education in art and aesthetics, beginning in 1888. The following year he met Oscar Wilde, with whom he formed a deep and affectionate bond before an estrangement two years before Wilde’s trials.

Ricketts and Shannon; along with Wilde; André Raffalovich, Gray’s lifelong companion; and Edith Cooper and Katherine Bradley, the aunt and niece couple who wrote collectively as Michael Field; were instrumental in Gray’s artistic development and his success as a poet and a priest. Gray’s efforts at self-improvement are staggering, even by today’s standards, but he still lacked money, access and social class. His attempts to engage with the aesthetic world of the *fin de siècle* – entering into dialogue with the major voices of the age – could not have been accomplished without the assistance of mentors, friends, and partners. His success as a poet and a public aesthete came about only through the careful cultivation of intimate friendships and artistic alliances and demonstrates the ways in which Gray’s tenacity and force of will opened doors that initially seemed closed to him.
3 THE AESTHETIC BACKGROUND:

JOHN RUSKIN AND WALTER PATER

The ideal of asceticism represents moral effort as essentially a sacrifice, the sacrifice of one part of human nature to another, that it may live the more completely in what survives of it; while the ideal of culture represents it as a harmonious development of all the parts of human nature, in just proportion to each other.

Walter Pater. Marius the Epicurean.

Gray was twenty years old in the spring of 1888 and in “‘the zenith’ of his youth (Symons Memoirs 136). His tutelage and self-improvement were taking place at an epochal period in English cultural history, a transitional time that marked the end of the Victorian era and the beginning of the twentieth century. Critics often refer to the period from 1880-1920 as “English Literature in Transition.” The dates are rounded for symmetry, as most periods are, but they demonstrate the ways in which the cultural and literary movements of the Late-Victorian period were markedly different from the decades that followed and preceded them. The aesthetic and decadent movements of the fin de siècle highlight the twenty years before the turn of the century. Attempts at deflating the torpor of Victorian life, when cracks began to form in the façade of a global empire, manifested in literary experiments in decay and languor. Similarly, the first two decades of the twentieth century were marked by openly repudiating Victorian values and literary traditions. Modernism, although it was foreshadowed before the Great War, did not fully manifest until writers and artists had fully absorbed the horrors of global conflict and death on a scale unknown in living memory.
As if to punctuate the decline of the century, many of the major figures of the era died or retired from public life, as their influence faded into shadow. Matthew Arnold, the herald of “sweetness and light” who argued forcefully for retaining an established church for the transmission of the cultural, if not spiritual, values of the nation died suddenly at the age of sixty-six in April of 1888, as his own faith was in eclipse (Culture and Anarchy 5). The High Victorian tradition of cultural criticism, tied so closely to the Horatian didactic ideal that art should delight and instruct, died with him; no living figure achieved the depth or insight of Arnold’s calls for morality, tradition, and decorum. As the century progressed, his voice seemed tied to a tradition that was no longer relevant. Tennyson published his funereal “Crossing the Bar” – which he requested be placed last in any collection of his works – one year later. The sentiments expressed by the poem, as well as his stated desire that it be placed last among any collection of his works give it an air of ending and finality, and following its publication, he largely retired from public life. Robert Browning followed Arnold in death in December of 1889. The deaths of Browning and Arnold along with Tennyson’s retirement clearly signaled, that the old age was fading away.

The two years of 1888-89, then, symbolically mark the Götterdämmerung of the old Victorian lions of conservatism, establishment, tradition, and duty and the tenets that they espoused. Traditional, hidebound values were quickly becoming passé, but the Victoria Regina still held the throne. The never-ending summer of Edward VII’s short reign, which saw the relaxation of these impossible responsibilities was still a long decade in the future. Similarly, the age’s greatest poets and critics were in decline, but the newer, more controversial voices had not yet begun to speak. This transitional period, shaded with uncertainty and introspection, is
best evoked in Arnold’s despairing description of

Wandering between two worlds, one dead,

The other powerless to be born

(Arnold "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse" lines 85-86)

that evokes the societal anxieties at work in the final years of the mid-Victorian period. The Empire upon which the sun never set had reached its greatest expansion around the globe. As had been true for every global empire, expansion and growth were immediately followed by decline, decadence, and decay. The autumnal years of 1888-89 immediately precede the fin de siècle.

The greatest aesthete of the mid-Victorian era, John Ruskin, had similarly retreated into semi-retirement in the 1880s after decades at the center of public life, struck dumb like the prophet Zechariah, and suffering from nearly complete mental and physical exhaustion. Ruskin’s retreat made way for the rise of Walter Pater, who, in turn, made way for Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon, as well as Oscar Wilde. While Ruskin was largely silent, his eighty-year life, stretching from 1819-1900, predating and encompassing the entire Victorian era, ensured that his work and influence as the greatest aesthetic theorist of the nineteenth century were forces to be reckoned with, even in 1888.

John Gray’s drive and determination to raise himself up from his working-class background aligned him with many of Ruskin’s social pronouncements. And while there is no documentary evidence to prove that Gray read Ruskin, the similarities between Ruskin’s writings and Gray’s drive demonstrate that the latter absorbed some of the former’s theories. In 1888, one could not breathe the Victorian air and not assimilate some Ruskin. Yet as early as
the 1870s, he was increasingly marked as part the old order; his characteristically conservative Victorian call to morality and rigor was becoming unfashionable. Ruskin reveled in the old and archaic, especially in his celebration of Gothic art and architecture, which he considered the high-water mark of aestheticism and a bulwark against corruption and decadence. Beyond the Gothic, lay dangerous, uncharted territory and moral anarchy, which Ruskin linked with the close of the Renaissance, the very period that Walter Pater celebrated in his most significant work. “The more the Renaissance bloomed,” Ruskin argued, “the more it decayed” (qtd. in Ellmann 48). While he celebrated the art and architecture of the period, Ruskin feared the ways in which culture had drifted from its moralistic underpinning.

No one aestheteician commanded more of an audience than Ruskin, and his views highlighted the duty, moralism, work, and virtue of the age. Every critic who engaged in a serious dialogue with aesthetics had to acknowledge Ruskin’s role; his breadth of knowledge was never surpassed. However, Ruskin’s emphasis on work and morality demonstrate the ways in which art, and indeed the entire Victorian age, was encrusted with layer upon layer of societal expectations. For Ruskin, art’s didactic component was the moral bedrock that the age was chained to. It provided a firm foundation, but some found its strictures confining.

Gray’s drive for self-improvement has its ante-type in the trajectory of a socially ambitious and self-educated cork-cutter from Sunderland who became famous by representing to Ruskin the “highest type of working man” (Cook and Wedderburn XVII: lxxviii). Ruskin recognized in Thomas Dixon a true disciple, and eagerly sent him “everything [he had] yet published on political economy,” after the two began corresponding in 1867 (Ruskin The Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin XVII: 815). This correspondence, collected and published as
Time and Tide, by Weare and Tyne that same year, became the catalyst for Fors Clavigera, Ruskin's seminal 1871 treatise on labor, work, and social reform. Ruskin singled out Dixon because of his hard work and his philanthropy. He was a manual laborer and craftsman who specialized in fashioning corks for lifebuoys and bottles: a very modest trade, but through his determination and skill Dixon provided a comfortable income for himself and his family and made philanthropic benefactions for the future generations (Hilton 116). In endowing libraries and mentoring young men who visited his shop in Sunderland, Dixon cultivated “something higher than either mere amusement or sordid money making,” topics which Ruskin forcefully denounced in 1865’s Sesame and Lilies (Cook and Wedderburn XVII: lxxix). Dixon personified the strong social and moral component that Ruskin insisted upon for all forms of art. In singling him out, Ruskin acknowledged and encouraged an active interest in the arts and culture while demonstrating to his follower the connection between education, labor, and artistic pursuit.

Unknowingly, Gray walked the same path as Thomas Dixon.

Similarly, the process of self-improvement that both Gray and Dixon undertook anticipates, and offers a more optimistic version of, E.M. Forster’s fictional depiction of Leonard Bast in Howards End, published in 1910, demonstrating the extent to which Ruskin was a cultural touchstone for generations of upwardly mobile young men even into the twentieth century. Both Gray and Bast come from lower middle-class beginnings, and both set out on deliberate plans of self-improvement. Both are initially employed as bank clerks. Bast reads John Ruskin, somewhat passively: “He felt that he was being done good to, and that if he kept on with Ruskin, and the Queen’s Hall Concerts and some pictures by Watts, he would one day push his head out of the grey waters and see the universe” (Forster 52). For Bast, Ruskin
represents a type of talisman or prescription. By absorbing Ruskin, as if by osmosis, Bast would be armed with the tools necessary to make the same nearly impossible leap from lower to middle class that Gray did.

Gray’s approached things differently. While Bast “was being done . . . to,” Gray was always active, calculating, and deliberate (Forster 52). He sought out art and aesthetics that were representative of the new aestheticism, he looked forward, while Bast looked backward. Both Gray and Bast would have been denied an Oxford education, leaving them both to seek either a less-storied university, or else a course of self-education. They differ from Oscar Wilde, then, who worked directly with Ruskin at Oxford and initially shared many of his central tenets. Ruskin becomes a figurehead not only for Victorian education but also aestheticism.

Gray’s biography fits, perhaps unknowingly, with Ruskin’s philosophy. Gray’s forced manual labor at a young age allowed him to engage the aesthetic currents of the age. For Ruskin, work always included a moral as well as an aesthetic component. It instructed as much as it delighted. The human elements inherent in carpentry, wheel making, and metal turning preserve a central Ruskinian tenet that the imperfections inherent in any human work are not only unavoidable but also desirable; they demonstrate man’s shared work with God in the act of creation. Ruskin claims as “universal law, that neither architecture nor any other noble work of man can be good unless it be imperfect” ("The Nature of Gothic" 91). This imperfection, far from a deficiency, is in fact a stamp of humanity, which makes the product both unique and dignified. It is also incarnational in its focus, joining something supernatural with something human: perfect with imperfect, nature with humanity.
Ruskin’s 1858 lecture “The Work of Iron,” furthermore, argues for a spiritual view of the material world. The rust that stains the water at Tunbridge Wells, where Ruskin delivered his lecture, gave him the metaphor he employed to emphasize the connection between inspiration and physical strength, between artistry and skill. He noted that common and ordinary rust is what forms and gives color to “the ground we feed from and nearly all the substances first needful to our existence” (Ruskin "The Work of Iron" 116). Rather than signifying death and decay, it is the product of “metals with breath put into them,” the visible sign of life in metal ore (Ruskin "The Work of Iron" 116). The connection between breath and spirit, here, is deliberate. The oxidation of iron – a process that can only be unnaturally arrested by preventing contact between the iron and air – is what gives color to the natural world, and provides the variegation found in nature. Just as iron and air combine to make color, so too do physical strength and inspiration join to make art: hands join heart in the same way that body unites with spirit. The two must not and cannot be separated. They must form an integrated whole to produce art. The worker who casts and polishes iron forms this combination of human body and soul “united, one guiding the other,” towards true craftsmanship (Ruskin "The Work of Iron" 122). “Without mingling of heart-passion with hand-power,” Ruskin states emphatically, no art is possible. The highest art unites both in their most intense degrees: the action of the hand at its finest, with that of the heart at its fullest” (“The Work of Iron” 122). While iron forms the ground from which man draws sustenance, it can also be made into necessary tools such as scissors, ploughs, needles, and razors but only with the help of the human craftsman. It is only through cooperation with body and spirit as well as between element and craftsman that mankind can create products that are beneficial.
This is not just a practical argument but a theological one as well. Spirit or breath, which is of supernatural or divine origin, joins with that which is common, mankind, and iron, in an act of craftsmanship. The cooperation of the two creates something that is incarnational in its scope. Art and craftsmanship are the meeting places between God and man, and it is here that the two join in the act of creation. Craftsmanship is the earthly space in which God allows man to be a partaker, if on a smaller scale, with the divine act of creation.

Gray takes up Ruskin’s aestheticism and his theology in two early poems, “The Forge” and “The Wheel”; both look back to a childhood that Gray actively sought to escape. Both are insightful, keen, and unsentimental, as well as effective methods for Gray to work through the pain of youth and unfulfilled desires for social class and education. As if addressing Ruskin directly, the techniques described are medieval, the projects are durable and useful, and the craftsmen are ennobled by their participation. Gray turns the functional into the artistic by poetically recalling two separate incidents from his youth.

“The Forge,” published in The Savoy in April 1896, recalls “The blast shut off for breakfast” in an ironworks (Gray "Forge" line 5). As the men gather for a communal morning meal of “boiling water, stained / With tea and sugar” along with “hearty chunks of bread/ Protecting ivory bacon, purple veined (Gray "Forge" lines 13, 19-20). The tea stains and the ivory and purple of the bacon evoke the rust of Tunbridge Wells. The wight cooks the bacon on an “anvil polished bright” as he “passes over it / A piece of red-hot iron till ‘tis brown” (Gray "Forge" lines 18, 22-23). While this poem is largely concerned with the vivid details of a morning break at the forge, Gray also celebrates the workers, who appear as “Flame-flesh-shapes, sweat-stamped clinging cotton swathed” ("Forge" line 43). Gray’s wordplay, particularly
the use of alliteration, suggests Gerard Manley Hopkins’s hidden works from a generation earlier. More importantly, though, Gray notes how the

Smitten steel complains, all bruised and scathed,

From thud to bark, from bark to metal scream;

Through ordeal of the fire and scaling trough,

To wake it from its long-embowelled dream,

To uses brought, flame-licked and torture-bathed. ("Forge" lines 46-50)

He celebrates Ruskin’s concept of the imperfect made perfect by the actions of men, a central tenet to The Stones of Venice. The forge, where “unlovely night / Grown Chinese hell” recalls Ruskin’s celebration of the Gothic; the men perform tasks unaided by the passage of time (Gray "Forge" line 44). The workmen are medieval figures, performing backbreaking labor under primitive conditions in an environment untouched by nineteenth-century progress. The smith is “Maimed in his poor hands, wry, with crooked back, / Great-armed, bow-legged, and narrow in the chest”; his body is bent and wracked, like the Greek god of the forge Hephaestus, by hours of torturous work, yet he masters not only fire but also metal (Gray "Forge" 33-34). This is no lament for the unfortunate blacksmith, nor is he meant to be pitied. In the arena of the forge he “locks strength” with the elements of iron, fire and water, achieving “mastery” over them in the creation something useful (Gray "Wheel" 52-53). The blacksmith, while bent and stooped by human frailty, is godlike as he shares in the act of creation. He is not demoralized by backbreaking labor, but rather ennobled. He is not reduced to lowly servitude as an unknown, lower-class worker. Instead, he is elevated in sharing, like a god, the moment of conception.
Similarly, “The Wheel,” which was not published during Gray’s lifetime, recalls his father’s stint as a wheelwright. In the precision and intricacy of its detail, the poem “could almost be used as an instruction manual [for the] making of a wheel” (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest line 17). Presented in six sections, each with an increasingly complicated rhyme scheme, the poem details each step in the process, starting from the selection of the materials (“Oak, elm and ash; these / Are the three greatest trees”) to the final attachment of the iron tire (Gray "Wheel" lines 1-2). The poem ends with a lyrical coda evoking Ezekiel’s biblical vision of wheels of fire. Gray notes that the “spirit of the living creature was within the wheels,” again evoking Ruskin as it is the humanizing power of work that animates the wheel (Gray "Wheel" 178-79). Here the man makes the wheel, but the wheel, also makes the man (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 17). Man participates in another God-like creation as the final couplet exhorts “Your power is power of power till reckoning reels; / Yours is the spirit of the creature, wheels!” (Gray "Wheel" 188-89).

Ruskin’s work inspired the creation of the Guild of St. George, an association of craftsmen and artists dedicated to reviving handcrafts and ancient techniques, which emphasized the human element in craftsmanship. Its organizational statement claims that it is a “charity for arts, crafts and the rural economy,” but in Ruskin’s day the Guild was controlled by an almost missionary zeal with an underlying Christian message (Eagles). Members were expected to work with their hands in the physical act of creation, but with the understanding that craftsmanship would stimulate the inner, spiritual life. Work, and the production of art, cultivated closeness to God, thus giving work and craft a moral underpinning, and aligning artistic endeavor with an outward demonstration of Christianity. Although Ruskin famously
underwent an “un-conversion” when he lost faith in orthodox Christianity, he never fully abandoned his core belief in an amorphous sense of Christian obligation and “duty,” he simply resigned himself to not knowing the answers to religious questions he had asked in his younger days. Significantly, though, he never embraced full agnosticism nor atheism and required at least a minimal acceptance of Christianity from members of the Guild. Despite his own lack of belief, he expelled Katherine Bradley, one half of “Michael Field,” an important figure from Gray’s later years, when she claimed she had lost faith in God.

Ruskin’s did not speak alone, however. His voice was not the only one in the aesthetic debate. Walter Pater, a generation younger than Ruskin took the opposite point of view. For Pater, the classics professor at Brasenose College, Oxford, the Renaissance was not only an historical period that began, flourished, and ended in the past, but also an evolutionary movement that continued into the present day (Ellmann 48). Artists of the present moment, the ones who lived by “art for its own sake” and who sought “not the fruit of experience but experience itself” heralded a new aestheticism; they drew from the past but looked to the future (Pater The Renaissance 188, 190). Pater’s new philosophy was not tied to the moral underpinnings that guided Ruskin, a course that placed him on a collision course with the administration of Oxford.

Pater formed neither Guild nor association like Ruskin, but nonetheless spoke with an almost apostolic zeal, and he attracted a sizeable following of Oxford undergraduate disciples. He published his seminal work The Renaissance in 1873, revising and re-editing it throughout the 1880s, before issuing a final draft in 1893. Pater, thus, was a very contentious and visible figure during the 1880s, the period in which Gray first appeared in the public eye in the
company of Pater’s most famous disciple, Oscar Wilde. Pater’s was the face of a philosophy that was frequently associated in the public mind with hedonism and sexual inversion. The faculty of Oxford, all in Holy Orders in the Anglican Church, viewed Pater’s essay as a manifesto for a new religion, a dangerous cult of “art for art’s sake,” divorced from the school’s Christian ethos. The Renaissance urged eager and impressionable readers to get “as many pulsations as possible into the given time” and to seek “not the fruit of experience but experience itself” (Pater The Renaissance 190). Pater offered a passionate and vibrant vision, freed from conventional morality, urging readers “to burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain [the] ecstasy” of sensation (The Renaissance 189). Pater’s sensuous call for ecstasy sounded perilously close to Paganism. He stood in marked contrast to Ruskin who stressed an essential moral, Christian, component to art.

Pater was also among the first writers to publicly embrace the term “decadence” “He used the term and was interested in many of its associated ideas, and he was the one figure who claimed the respect of the new generation of the nineties as a whole. In 1873 he claimed that the art of the Renaissance exhibited “to the full that subtle and delicate sweetness which belong to a fine and comely decadence” (Pater The Renaissance xxiii). His Studies in the History of the Renaissance initially praised as “the manifesto of the so-called ‘aesthetic’ school” was eventually claimed as the most representative pronouncement on decadence. This acknowledgement of the beauty of decadence recognizes that “decadent style is only such in relation to a classic style. It is simply a further development of a classic style, a further specialization, the homogeneous. The [classic] is beautiful because the parts are subordinated to the whole; the [decadent] is beautiful because the whole is subordinated to the parts” (Ellis
xiv). But Pater spoke generally, describing the most expansive sense of decadence. He remained the distinguished Classics Professor at Brasenose College, Oxford and always remained aloof from the movement’s more sordid associations. His work was philosophical and largely confined to the classroom and the page. Yet his prose work is often ranked as among the most stylistic in the English language; each sentence, paragraph and “page is perfectly finished, with a conscious art of perfection. In its minute elaboration it can be compared only with goldsmith’s work” (Symons "Decadent Movement" 867). Pater takes language, philosophy and criticism and fashions them into a work of art.

Pater’s writings were hypnotic and sensuous. He advocated the study of Greek art and religion, freed from what he perceived as a cheerless Christian religious tradition. It carried the “intoxicating command to end the crucifixion of the senses and begin the renaissance of joy” (Dowling 118). The focus on sensation, pleasure, and intensity, combined with his celebration not only of the artistic representation of youth but of youth itself, drew many impressionable and homoerotically inclined young men. The whiff of homoeroticism, clinging to Pater like incense smoke, made him irresistible to figures such as Oscar Wilde and André Raffalovich, both of whom were aware that their sexual attractions were somehow different from their peers. Both made a point of knowing Pater: Wilde studying with him, and Raffalovich meeting him at Oxford. Both figures brought Pater’s views to Gray in differing ways. Both would have been aware that, ultimately, all of the essays in Pater’s The Renaissance “glorify the same thing, male friendship” (Ellmann 51). However, Pater never resorted to an “outright statement or even suggestion” of homoeroticism; his method of “constantly beckoning and receding suggestiveness” with “homoerotic themes — most often Platonic ones — [that] are constantly
either raised to visibility or veiled in their explicitness with the richly various materials of Pater’s prose” intimates without explicitly making a claim (Dowling 94). Pater’s method was no less queer because it was on the level of hints and obfuscation. In fact, it is just the opposite. Unspoken suggestions, hints, and whispers are often more seductive than direct address.

Pater’s tutorials at Oxford were on the front lines of a cultural battle that was quietly playing out in the halls of England’s premier institution of higher learning, a battle for a more visible recognition of sexual inversion, or what we might anachronistically call “homosexuality,” enjoined beneath the veneer of aestheticism. Linda Dowling deftly describes this battle, taking place behind the restructuring of the Oxford curriculum, in her Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford. The open discussion of Greek culture and literature, in a spirit of “spiritual procreancy” fostered by an all-male, Socratic forum, made possible the discussion of homosexuality, although this was initially inconceivable (Dowling xiii). The tutorial system, part of the Oxford ethos almost since its founding, was revived by John Henry Newman and William Hurrell Froude after 1825 “as a vehicle for the intensifying reciprocal bonds of masculine interest, affection, and obligation to which modern cultural theory has given the name ‘male homosociality’” (Dowling 35). Because Newman and Froude were both Anglican priests, as well as visible proponents of the ritualistically minded Oxford Movement, the tutorial system took on a deeply spiritual charge. The tutorial became a method in which instruction took place in the form of private or semi-private conversations between undergraduates and Dons “in which intellectual growth was to merge with religious awakening, and instruction would verge on intimacy” (Dowling 35). The exchange between student and teacher was confessional, spiritual, emotional, and intimate. The teacher was both professor and priest. This holistic approach,
focused on spiritual development as well as educational competency, was intended to form the full man, the *Oxford* man.

After Newman’s exile from Oxford in 1846, soon after his conversion to Roman Catholicism, Benjamin Jowett and the reformers who followed him continued the tutorial system changing only its focus. Rather than emphasizing a strictly Christian curriculum, Jowett stressed “mental illumination,” employing the study of Greek literature and culture (Dowling 35). The shift in emphasis moved the discussion from the preparation of good Christian men, most bound for ordination amongst the Anglican clergy, to the formation of good citizens, who were readied for service to Queen and empire. The move represented a seismic shift in education, moving away from Oxford’s Christian ethos to a more expansive one that looked outward toward the farther reaches of Britain’s territories. Jowett’s look back to ancient Greece was an attempt to reconstruct England as a new Athens, one in which “England’s future life as a nation . . . would be . . . determined by the quality of its *ideas* rather than by the mere quantity of its railways or factories or people” (Dowling xiv). It would produce men who thought, rather than relying strictly on brawn. Engaging in the free play of ideas, through a discussion of ideas themselves and through a modern engagement with Continental criticism, would be a means for “channeling modern progressive thought into the Victorian civic elite (Dowling 64). Although Gray was self-educating, his thinking was very much in line with the Oxford curricula, although his ideals were less idealistic. He desperately sought to eschew the dirty hands of the wheelwright for the clean ones of poet.

Ruskin and Pater represent differing views of aestheticism and differing views of the individual’s response to it. Ruskin’s aestheticism, for example, is, quite literally concrete: it is
focused on physical objects, whether foot bridges, masonry arches or carved stone, and their actual, literal construction using firm foundations and centuries-old techniques. Pater’s philosophy is more conceptual and ethereal, more erotic, and more treacherous. Ruskin was safe; Pater was dangerous, exhilarating, and terrifying. Ruskin offered sure footing and stability; Pater gave the thrilling sensation of being unmoored, suspended between heaven and earth, with the ever-present possibility of a shattering fall. Ruskin adamantly demanded morality, while Pater offered only art for art’s sake, and a synesthesia of pulsation and desire.

While Ruskin and Pater were the two most visible figures in the debate over what aestheticism meant, they were not the only voices. Their philosophies were in large part academic, confined to the classrooms of Oxford and Cambridge. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was on the front line of the debate and helped put into action the ways in which aestheticism changed from a mere appreciation of beauty, to something that was gathering sensual and more sinister associations. The Brotherhood, formed in 1848 around Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Holman Hunt, and John Everett Millais, initially sought a return to simpler techniques and natural subjects. Their manifesto was deceptively simple: “deeper devotion to Nature’s teaching was the real point at which we were aiming,” claimed William Holman Hunt; “The first principle of Pre-Raphaelitism was to eschew all that was conventional in contemporary art” (Hunt I:134). The carefully chosen words “conventional” and “contemporary” were aimed at William Turner, the most celebrated painter of the nineteenth Century, as well as Joshua Reynolds, Walter Sickert, George Frederic Watts, and other members of the Royal Academy. In the minds of the Brotherhood, the Royal Academy represented hide-bound tradition, which had continued from after the time of Raphael through, first, the
Renaissance and then movements such as Mannerism and Classicism. Thus, the group were “Pre-Raphaelites” in that they looked back to standards in place before the rise of Raphael. While “conventional” and “contemporary” members of the Royal Academy experimented in impressionism and symbolism, their efforts, while popular with the British public, represented to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood a degradation of English art. Mounting an attack against these venerable artists was a bold and calculating stroke that brought attention to Hunt and Rossetti’s new school.

In eschewing convention as well as contemporary trends and espousing a return to “nature,” Hunt sought a return to realism, which, for Victorian artists was disingenuously cloaked under a “respect for decorum,” and was employed using classical or mannered poses (Spinozzi and Bizzotto 30). The Pre-Raphaelites took this quite literally painting in nature or en plein air, “in order to obtain intense effects of light, and showing a clear preference for bygone ages [such as] the English countryside, ancient mythology, medieval Italian painting and literature, Shakespeare’s plays, and Romantic poetry” (Spinozzi and Bizzotto 25). Both the technique of en plein air and the archaic subject matter had been rejected by the Royal Academy. The artists of the Academy favored impressionistic interpretations of recent subjects, often painted in comfortable heated studios, far removed from the subjects they depicted.

In seeking a return to nature and to more natural artistic techniques, The Pre-Raphaelite movement’s aims initially seem conservative. Their emphasis on light, rather than the gloomy London streetscapes, as well as their celebration of ancient subjects earned the praise of Ruskin, who offered a lively defense of the Brotherhood’s works in the face of establishment criticism in The Times of London. In a pamphlet published to expand his views, Ruskin claimed
the group had “carried out to the very letter” the advice he had given all artists in the first volume of *Modern Painters*, to "go to nature in all singleness of heart, and walk with her laboriously and trustingly, having no other thought but how best to penetrate her meaning; rejecting nothing, selecting nothing, and scorning nothing" (Ruskin *Pre-Raphaelitism* 5). The intricate, almost photographic technique the artist demonstrated was, to Ruskin, as sign that they had seriously observed and conveyed the “meaning” found in nature. In looking back to the artists and techniques existing before Raphael, the Brotherhood rejoined the earlier tradition of “the faithful representation of all objects of historical interest, or of natural beauty existent at the period” which Ruskin defines as the artist’s “true duty” (Ruskin *Pre-Raphaelitism* 15). The Pre-Raphaelites were successful artists because they knew their duty and they performed it, drawing and learning from nature, rather than depicting an impressionistic view of it. Their work, even the depiction of “fleshly” subjects, was successful because it was true.

But this depiction of the physical bodies of female subjects in flowing gowns freed from Victorian bustles and corsets, emphasized the corporeal form and was viewed with suspicions of sexual excess. The prevailing trend in Victorian painting was for muted tones and impressionistic depictions of landscapes. Human subjects were presented without calling “undue” attention to the body. Pre-Raphaelite paintings such as *The Lady of Shalott*, *Lady Lilith*, *Proserpine*, and *The Blessed Damozel*, on the other hand, emphasized the physical body of the female model, simply by depicting it as close to nature as possible. The Brotherhood’s return to nature and to realism was, ironically, a move that conservative critics considered scorned.

The vibrant use of color that characterized Pre-Raphaelite painting was transferred over into verse. A.G. Swinburne, an associate and supporter of the Brotherhood, praised Rossetti’s
use of “golden affluence,” “jewel-coloured words,” “chastity of form,” “harmonious
nakedness,” and “consummate fleshly sculpture,” (qtd. in Buchanan 337). Swinburne's words
set the stage for a withering denunciation in the pages of The Contemporary Review.

Critic Robert Buchanan swiftly accused Rossetti in particular and the entire Pre-
Raphaelites Brotherhood in general of radically shifting away from the moral component of art.
When viewed against Ruskin’s very clear and simple definition of art as that which returns to
nature, learns from her, and depicts her truthfully, Buchanan’s frenetic claims are excessive.
Buchanan claimed that the Brotherhood’s poetry inferred “that the body is greater than the
soul”; he argued “that the poet, [in order to properly] . . . develop his poetic faculty, must be an
intellectual hermaphrodite, to whom the very facts of day and night are lost in a whirl of
aesthetic terminology” (Buchanan 335). Similarly, Buchanan charged that followers of this new
aestheticism held a “morbid deviation from healthy forms of life,” and a “sense of weary,
wasting, yet exquisite sensuality;” their work contained “nothing virile, nothing tender, nothing
completely sane; a superfluity of extreme sensibility, of delight in beautiful forms, hues, and
tints, and a deep-seated indifference to all agitating forces and agencies” (Buchanan 337). In
focusing on “virility” and “hermaphroditism,’ Buchanan makes a not-so subtle jab at
effeminacy, echoing the fears that were current at Oxford. The Brotherhood, with their focus
on the female form were not charged with homosexuality, but rather with a lack of manliness
and an excess of “softness.” These “fleshly gentlemen” as Buchannan dubbed them “have
bound themselves by solemn league and covenant to extol fleshliness as the distinct and
supreme end of poetic and pictorial art;” by doing so they have put “on record for other full-
grown men to read, the most secret mysteries of sexual connection, and that with so sickening
a desire to reproduce the sensual mood, so careful a choice of epithet to convey mere animal sensations, that we merely shudder at the shameless nakedness” (Buchanan 338). Buchanan’s deliberate use of the words “flesh,” “sexual,” “sensual,” marked Rossetti’s work as pornographic. “Morbid,” “wasting,” “deviation,” “sickening,” and “nothing virile” point to their decadence. Buchanan’s emphasis on the flesh, the lack of virility, and particularly on the Brotherhood’s deviation from accepted norms demonstrates the ways in which art that he claimed as deviant and an open expression of homoeroticism were soon to intersect, as the lines between effeminacy and homosexuality converged. The morbidity and deviation that Buchanan views in Pre-Raphaelite poetry is suggestive of the discourse surrounding homosexuality, and his Buchanan’s claims are more suggestive of cultural anxieties than the “fleshly school.” Faced with a withering response from Rossetti, Buchanan recanted, eventually dedicating his 1881 novel God and Man to him.

John Gray made his first steps into the aesthetic and decadent fray against this furious background, when the nature and purpose of art were fiercely debated at the universities as well as in the public square. The discussion of art and aesthetics reached Gray in his quiet position in Civil Service in London. His efforts at self-education, and his tentative experimentation with poetry, would soon be met with public acceptance. Prior to meeting Ricketts and Shannon, Gray’s most private feelings were of rootlessness and dislocation, coupled with a “profound sense of alienation [and of being] an outcast,” (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 14). His desire to leave behind the dirty world of the Woolwich Arsenal and his unhappy childhood for something more refined would be realized. And it is possible that he was beginning to recognize that his sexuality differed from what was socially expected, and that
they could never be expressed in Bethnal Green. However, fellow artists, free-thinkers, and Bohemians, in neighborhoods such as Chelsea would understand and accept him. There, perhaps, he could find support and encouragement for all parts of his life, poetry and aestheticism, sexuality, and even his restless spirituality, which bound them all together. The student was ready. The masters would appear.

4 THE FIRST MENTORS:
CHARLES RICKETTS AND CHARLES SHANNON

We are out of date in our belief that the artist’s conscientiousness cannot be controlled by the paying public...

Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon. The Dial, Issue #1

In the spring of 1888 John Gray made his first steps toward leaving the past behind by seeking out and meeting Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon. He was only twenty-two years old, and by accounts “obviously homeless, spiritually as well as artistically” as well as “painfully young, poor and eager” when he met the first of many powerful influences who would change his life forever (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 22). Despite his disadvantages, Gray discovered and sought out the two without any apparent outside influence.5 His intuition and keen eye for the London art world led him, as if by instinct, to the crumbling home that Ricketts and Shannon rented off of King’s Road in Chelsea. Known evocatively as “The Vale,” this modest home became the epicenter of a new and exotic artistic philosophy that bridged the divide not between Ruskin and Pater, which Wilde attempted, but between England and France. The Vale was part salon, studio, and meeting place where well-established artists across all disciplines
like William Butler Yeats, George Bernard Shaw, Aubrey Beardsley, Walter Sickert, James Whistler, Vaslav Nijinsky, Sergei Diaghilev and Roger Fry mixed freely with less well-known figures, such as the aunt and niece team of Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper, known collectively as “Michael Field,” who figured prominently in Gray’s later years. Alphonse Legros, a friend of both the Pre-Raphaelites and Baudelaire was a frequent guest, as were Max Beerbohm, Reginald Savage, and William Rothenstein. All aesthetic roads in 1880s London intersected or converged at the Vale.

Ricketts and Shannon’s role in the decadent and aesthetic movements is rarely given the attention that the two men deserve. The fact that they operated in so many different media, including book design, painting, sculpture, stage and costume design, jewelry, poetry and criticism tends to dilute the vital role they played in late-Victorian aesthetics. They were catholic in that they were comprehensive; art was studied, criticized, designed and then produced. They were not merely poets, book designers, or printers, they were all three. When they made designs for the theater, they designed all aspects from costumes, to set and production design. Their works were always total works of art that were complete and unified. Similarly, they were avant-garde in the most generous sense, by attempting things previously unknown in English art. They “sought by means of the avant-garde to realign the tradition of English art, both visual and literary” (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 26). They were not experimental and daring for the sake of being shocking, but rather for purpose of reawakening the arts. Their realignment represents nothing short of a dramatic call to arms.

By seeking out Ricketts and Shannon, as he later sought out Wilde, Gray demonstrates his desire to devote his life not only to art and a vibrant and new understanding of art, but also
the pursuit of fame and public adoration. Ricketts and Shannon take up the philosophy of “art for art’s sake” championed by Pater, but they approach things more forcefully by actively engaging Pater’s claims without needing to navigate the political climate of Oxford. Similarly, theirs is not simply a philosophy; they actively put art into action across disciplines, publishing, painting, sculpture, theatrical design, verse, and prose. Their new outlook is unfettered by the earlier tradition of Ruskin and Arnold, which insisted on a dogmatic moral component of art as an instructive medium for the dissemination of culture and societal values. Ricketts and Shannon were concerned with cultivating “exquisite taste, refined manners and obscure interests [as] an end in themselves” (Calloway 8). Art was valued for its own sake, not for its success at instruction. It could delight, if it wished, but it did not have to instruct. Art had only to be.

Ricketts and Shannon lived together at the edge of London’s “Bohemian” quarter in an intimate relationship that closely resembled a marriage. The two men shared rented rooms of questionable quality across London before settling at The Vale in 1888 where the rent was cheap, and the area was filled with fellow artists, poets, painters, and political radicals. The two could fit in without outside intrusions. While the exact nature of their union is unknown, the two were central to each other’s lives. Max Beerbohm allegedly referred to them as “the Sisters of the Vale,” his campy language suggesting then, as it does now, that the two were homosexual, while subtly suggesting the complete reverse, as Sisters of the Vale, punning on “veil,” would be nuns (qtd. in Janes 219). Wilde dubbed Ricketts “Orchid” and Shannon “Marigold” the former suggesting an otherworldly exoticism and the latter comfortable and complementary domesticity. Similarly, Michael Field, with whom they shared a particular
intimacy referred to them as “The Apple and the Pear” as a way of celebrating the “complementary roles they all played” in a world that did not allow either the Fields’ or the Charleses’ marriage; “Instead of husband and wife, they could be apple and pear” (Donoghue 87). Field also used frequently used “the fairyman” or “Fay.” Each of these nicknames, employed by different friends and at different times, seems to winkingly acknowledge an intimate connection between the two, but they fail to acknowledge the different contours same-sex relationships can take. Just as Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper refused any association with an emerging lesbian consciousness, Ricketts and Shannon never defined their relationship. And, as with Gray and Raffalovich there is no definitive record that adequately describes their bond.

Ricketts and Shannon demonstrated this shared connection by creating a “collector’s mark”: two intertwined letter Cs, representing the two Charleses, an outward but not overt sign of their private lives together (Delaney 19). It was, for the two men, a simple reminder of what they shared, which, because of its subtlety, did not invoke outside comments. Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper followed suit, commissioning an emblem from Selwyn Image that joined two wedding rings with a thyrsus as a symbol of their shared lives; they used it for the remainder of their lives. Unlike Bradley and Cooper, though, Ricketts and Shannon were extremely circumspect and rarely spoke of their shared lives; they have left “no acknowledgement in diary, letter or reported conversation” to prove definitively they were lovers (Delaney 25). John Addington Symonds, desperately seeking some form of community as he wrestled with his own homosexuality, visited the two, asking “increasingly impertinent questions,” before pleading “But you are, aren’t you? You do, don’t you?” just before being
shown the door (Delaney 25). While this exchange says more about Symonds, it indicates the ways in which Ricketts and Shannon were viewed, as McCormack reports, as “so obviously and fortuitously ‘married,’” albeit in a somewhat unconventional manner (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 41). Before Gray was drawn into Wilde’s circle, with its stormy and tempestuous relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas and his reckless collusions with telegraph boys and stablemen, Ricketts and Shannon modeled a stable and dutiful relationship acutely focused on the production of art and beauty. Gray’s future relationship with André Raffalovich could well have been modeled by Ricketts and Shannon.

The homoerotic frisson that existed at the Vale – or even the novelty of two men sharing a life together, may have been what drew Gray, as it later drew Oscar Wilde and the Michael Fields. McCormack notes that “homosexuality among artists at the time was a kind of vogue, in part it attested to the illicit nature of the ‘new art’ and its status as an underground cult” (Poet, Dandy, Priest 43). Artists were, broadly speaking, more accepting of homosexuals and those on the edges of society. The Vale’s location in Chelsea attracted those with artistic and homosexual temperaments. Gray, then, could have been drawn to Ricketts and Shannon for a number of reasons. McCormack states, “for Gray, as a self-consciously avant-garde poet and critic, it may have been difficult to escape the pressure of the homosexual clique” (Poet, Dandy, Priest 43). This does not, of course, “prove” Gray’s homosexuality, but merely notes the ways in which he was comfortable circulating within circles that were thought to be “queer.” Gray’s desire for self-improvement and aesthetics prompted him to seek spaces in which he could call greater attention to himself and to his work.
Despite their radically different backgrounds, Ricketts had some commonality with Gray. Both shared eclectic educations that were the byproducts of will and determination. Although Gray had lived exclusively in London, Ricketts who was only six months younger, spent a peripatetic childhood in Switzerland, France, and England, rarely staying in one area long enough to form lasting friendships. Ricketts’ father, a retired Royal Marine and a painter who eventually exhibited at the Royal Academy and the Royal Society of British Artists in London, bequeathed to his son an appreciation of visual arts. While the two shared a love of art, Ricketts noted that he and his father “liked totally different things in the National Gallery”; Ricketts Sr. derided his son’s lack of a muscular athleticism by calling him “Mademoiselle” (Delaney 12). Ricketts’ disapproving father resembles Gray’s, who strongly disapproved of his son’s education, viewing it as something that took his son above the proper station in life. Ricketts differed, however, in having a father who encouraged an appreciation of art.

As a result of his father’s disapproval, Ricketts grew extremely close to his mother, Hélène, who had been born in France of French, Italian and Spanish ancestry. If Ricketts’s appreciation of visual aesthetics came from his father, his mother, an accomplished pianist and vocalist whom Gioachino Rossini praised, gave her son an appreciation of music. He gravitated toward opera, the combination of visual and musical expression, and by the age of nine had seen a production of Don Giovanni that remained vividly imprinted on his senses, as well as the British premiere of the Verdi Requiem, conducted by the composer and a chorus of 1200 at the Royal Albert Hall. From an early age, Charles “became his mother’s confidant, and shared with her not only a passion for music but also that animation and quickness of mind that seem peculiarly French” (Delaney 12). Their home was filled with Italian arias and the piano Etudes
and Nocturnes of Chopin, who would be Ricketts’s favorite throughout his life. Her death, two months after Ricketts’s fourteenth birthday left him pessimistic and withdrawn, with occasional bouts of nervous anxiety.

After Hélène Ricketts’s death, Charles was considered “too delicate for school” and his father withdrew any type of formal education (Delaney 14). While this was done with Ricketts’s best interests in mind, it occurs at almost the exact same time that Gray’s father removed him from the Roan School in Blackheath, and Gray undertook his course of self-education. Both young men began a course of self-education but for completely different reasons. Gray was actively seeking to escape the working classes, while Ricketts’s was to cultivate his interests in art, already the major focus in his life, as deeply and as broadly as possible. Gray’s classroom was the Woolwich Arsenal and Civil Service, while Ricketts’ was the art museums of London and Paris. Ricketts’s mother, before her death, had introduced her young son to the artistic world, and was friend, companion and tutor. Gray’s mother, as her niece Heather Coltman recalled, “seemingly the parent with the intellectual abilities,” recognized these qualities in her son, and “seems to have actively encouraged him in his endeavours at self-improvement” (qtd. in McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 15). The critical difference, however, was that Ricketts’ mother died when both she and her son were young, preserving and idealizing their relationship. Gray’s mother lived a full life, outliving her husband by many years. In her later years she was often an irritant to her son, who found her strong will frustrating.

Ricketts was left largely unsupervised after his mother’s death, and his education was framed by visits to museums by day and voracious reading of French and English novels and poetry by night. When he turned twenty-two, in 1888, he had been thoroughly immersed in the
living, vibrant, works of painters and poets who had not yet been discovered by patrons in England. Ricketts knew the work of “Gauguin, Van Gogh, Cézanne, Rimbaud and Mallarmé before those who wrote them up [in England] had heard of them” (Lewis 16). Ricketts’s continental childhood, and his frequent trips across the English Channel assured that he felt “equally at home in Paris and in Chelsea” (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 22). He was positioned on the cutting edge of modern art, criticism, and aesthetics, and along with Shannon, was better positioned than any other figures of the period to introduce French aesthetics to an English audience. They would be the heralds of French art and culture to fin de siècle England, and the eager, young, John Gray who had appeared on their doorstep would be their disciple.

Gray’s later private claim that he was “an invention of Ricketts,” is a powerful admission that not only evokes the sense of artifice and artificiality of the decadent movement, but also the tremendous debt that Gray owed to this, his first, important, artistic alliance (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 32). The Vale, which Gray referred to as the “palace of enchantment,” made him; without it he would likely have remained a lowly civil service clerk. Ricketts gave Gray, and others who sought him out, a rigorous course in art history, but one which never advocated complete dependence on the Old Masters, the emerging French Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, or, in fact, on any one particular school. Rather, Ricketts stressed that “every work must be judged on its own merit” emphasizing independence of thought, careful observation and insight; a prejudiced critical faculty, based on conventional opinions, “imply that he who makes them ‘sees through his ears because his eyes are no use’” (Lewis 15). 9 The true gift for the artist is discernment and analysis. The roles of critic and artist, for Ricketts,
were not separate; they argued that both should remain united to create the complete artist. Wilde argued this position more forcefully in *The Critic as Artist*, published in 1891.

Additionally, Ricketts exposed Gray to the artists who passed through the Vale, including those on the periphery of Oscar Wilde’s extended circle, as well as other poets, artists and thinkers, including William Butler Yeats and the members of the Rhymers’ Club.10 The exposure was not limited to Britain, though. Ricketts and Shannon provided credentials and access – a passport of sorts – to the aesthetic leaders of France, including Félix Fénéon, Paul Verlaine, and Stephané Mallarmé. Gray began corresponding with these vibrant new figures, entering into the Continental dialogue.

This combination of education, exposure and access that the two provided their young protégée was a means by which he could become both artist and critic in his own right. While they were both accomplished artists, Ricketts and Shannon, “are best defined as connoisseurs: [they] knew about art” and “both were relentless and energetic in asserting” their “exact (and exacting) taste” (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 21). Because Gray came to the Vale with no formal education and thus nothing that needed to be corrected, Ricketts could give him the means “to see, to discriminate [and] to explore” (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 26). It was an emphasis on the individual, and his own response to art. “Nobody,” T. Sturge Moore said of Ricketts, “was more loyal to experience . . . what he saw and felt now was of supreme importance” (Lewis 16). Ricketts demonstrates his debt to Pater by focusing on the individual and his personal response to a work of art. Matthew Arnold’s call “to see the object as in itself it really is,” which emphasized the nature of the object or work of art separate from the individual’s views had been the prevailing aim of criticism. Pater asks, however,
What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book to me? What affect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure? and if so what sort or degree of pleasure? How is my nature modified by its presence, and under its influence? (Pater *The Renaissance* xx).

Ricketts’ method centered on teaching Gray to develop his own, personal response to art, and to perfect it using his own perception and insight. It was both practical and hands-on, as he evaluated works of art to discern their implications for his own aesthetic sense. It differed from the Oxonian seal, with its accompanying social status, but offered a greater engagement with both craft and craftsmen.

When Gray arrived at the Vale in 1888 Ricketts and Shannon were gathering material for the first volume of *The Dial*, their “occasional publication,” that ran from 1889 and 1897. While Ricketts and Shannon only produced five issues, *The Dial* was revolutionary in its approach. Earlier publications like *The Germ*, which the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood first published in 1850, sought unity between the “mystical and the erotic” and looked back to a period of “purity” in the arts, prior to the ascendancy of Raphael (Beckson 237, 236). Ricketts acknowledged *The Germ* as *The Dial*’s artistic precursor, but his outlook went further. Later, the *Century Guild Hobby Horse*, first published in 1884 by architect Arthur Mackmurdo, artist Selwyn Image, and editor Herbert Horne, attempted to bridge the Pre-Raphaelites and the 1890s and “illustrate and encourage the unity of the arts” (Beckson 237; Jepson 219). However, both of these earlier literary magazines focused on English and Italian models, and completely ignored the importance of France. *The Dial* differed from previous periodicals in that it was unabashedly and unapologetically French in its outlook and modern in its vision. Rather than a
dimly remembered French Renaissance of the past, *The Dial* sought the France of now. While Ruskin and Pater sought an antiquated and idealized past, centered on Northern and Southern Europe, Ricketts and Shannon looked to contemporary France.

The publishers modeled for Gray a direct and self-confident approach without timidity that he demonstrated in his first publication. They spelled out their goals and prejudices in a bracingly direct “Apology” that appeared in the back of the first issue of *The Dial*:

> The sole aim of this magazine is to gain sympathy with its views. Intelligent ostracism meets one at every door for any view whatsoever, from choice of subject to choice of frame. If our entrance is not through an orthodox channel, it is not, therefore, entirely our fault; we are out of date in our belief that the artist’s conscientiousness cannot be controlled by the paying public, and just as far as this notion is prevalent we hope we shall be pardoned in our seeming aggressiveness. (qtd. in Brooker and Thacker 102)

Aggressiveness indeed. Ricketts and Shannon affirmed and expanded the “Apology” in the second issue of *The Dial*, in a statement entitled “The Unwritten Book,” which clarified and furthered the aims of the magazine. The second document, while not as strident or aggressive, nonetheless clearly called for “an effort towards renaissance”; the two statements form a single “manifesto for the Aesthetic ideal” (Calloway 13-14). Ricketts and Shannon stated “let admiration be one of the reasons for *The Dial* to exist; admiration . . . is ‘the essence of all art’ – it is that which makes us wish in childhood, when power is not yet, and before experience has shut the gates for larger flowers … Art has been, Art is, so the present touches wings with the past” (Calloway 14). The ringing endorsement of art existing for pleasure and admiration – delight — without any sense of didacticism or morality clearly marked Ricketts and Shannon’s
avant garde support for the new trends in art and in art criticism. These bold statements echo Pater, as the emphasis is clearly placed upon experience itself and not its fruit, as well as on the absolute insistence on the sovereignty of art itself. *The Dial*’s outlook was the credo of art for art’s sake writ large.

Ricketts and Shannon’s exacting standards in matters of content, as well as in book design, typography, layout, and illustration, mark *The Dial* as one of the most significant literary journals of the 1880s. Hand printed at the Vale Press, *The Dial* demonstrated Ricketts’ desire to create books and magazines that were beautiful objects in themselves, not “trade commodities, but things made to abide their proper season with us, and to show what value we moderns set upon our accumulated inheritance of poetry and prose” (Peters Corbett 103). The design included “asymmetrical use of type and ornament and the use of unusual materials, such as coarse brown paper wrappers” (Calloway 13). The design of the journal was physically and visually as unusual as the subject materials contained within.

Gray dutifully took up the “super-refined aestheticist version of the arts” that his mentors held and carried it over into his own emerging views of art and beauty (Brooker and Thacker 102). In formulating his vision and outlook, Gray looked not to England, but to France. Because his experience with aesthetics was not tied to Ruskin or Pater, as Wilde’s was, Gray’s vision at this stage in his life looked outward, beyond the narrow-mindedness and provincialism of England. While this would not have been possible without Ricketts and Shannon, Gray’s own Promethean desire to recreate himself is powerful and clear. His background lacked the culture and formal education that would help him create a public persona, but Gray was, in a sense, freer to recreate himself. He had no familial expectations to meet; there was no fortune from
which he could be disinherited. The aspiring young aesthete, coming of age in 1888, was free to follow the direction of Ricketts and Shannon. The artistic future that they helped him realize lay in abroad, in a literary culture that took greater liberty and freedom by allowing the artist room to expand and grow in ways that were not possible in provincial England. Similarly, as Gray later realized, his spiritual future lay not in the bourgeois piety of the Anglican Church, but in Rome.

Gray’s first published work on Jules and Edmond Goncourt, appearing in The Dial’s debut issue in the summer of 1889 when he was only twenty-three, celebrates the triumph of aesthetic style over substance. His essay singles out the Goncourt brothers’ creation of themselves as artists and their own peculiar stylistic curiosities as independent works of art. In this way, specifically in the celebration of style over substance, Gray’s essay is a veritable manifesto for decadence. It represents Gray’s clear desire to align himself with the French aesthetic tradition as well as the emerging English decadent consciousness. Similarly, it marks Gray as a public figure and critic, who contributes to the creation of art as well as to the interpretation of the decadent artist. Significantly, Gray makes the vital connection between French authors and the English decadent tradition three years before Arthur Symons’ seminal The Decadent Movement in Literature. By embracing the Goncourts, Gray places himself as “literary mediator between France and England” and as professional artist and critic (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 23). He prophetically declares that the moribund artistic movement in England, which had begun under the Pre-Raphaelites but had grown stale, “[would return] through France” (Gray 5). It is a bold move. Gray, young and unknown but also aspiring and ambitious, argued that he could both understand and celebrate that which had so “alienated [the Goncourts’s] public,” and situated himself amongst the aesthetes of both
England and France (McCormack Prose 1). The importance of this essay in the history of English Decadence should not be overlooked. Gray’s early, but no less vital, association with Ricketts and Shannon in the initial stages of his career gave him the confidence to make his argument so boldly and to forge a new name and identity.

Despite The Dial’s insistence on current French thought, Gray’s article reaches back almost three decades to focus on the brothers who wrote collaboratively during the Second Empire. In their novels Charles Demaillé, Manette Salomon and Soeur Philomène, which are historically significant if not financially successful, the Goncourts invented the roman documentaire – the “documentary novel” – which was the precursor to Émile Zola’s Naturalism in the late 1860s. The choice of the Goncourts is unusual; the two brothers had been out of the public eye and out of fashion for almost two decades. Jules had been dead for almost twenty years and Edmond was no longer publishing when Gray’s article was printed. Time, though, had not rehabilitated their public image. While they were considered “supreme aesthetes . . . with refined tastes and a mania for collecting objets d’art,” the public viewed them as “highly neurotic [and] utterly misogynist” (France 352). However, the Goncourt Journals, the brothers’ memoirs, were published beginning in March of 1887, placing them back into literary discussions, at least in aesthetic circles. The third volume was published only months before Gray’s article appeared in print. Because of their vivid, impressionistic documentation of life during the Siege of Paris and the Second Empire, and the first-hand, expository nature, freed from the strictures of a fictional narrative, the Journals, and not any one of their novels, are considered by many to be their finest work, and “may well be [what] saved Edmond de Goncourt” from obscurity (Becker 4; Galantière ix). Gray’s first published work contributed to
the work of reviving interest in the Goncourts and he used them to help define the decadent artist.

The collaborative nature of the Goncourts’ work predates Ricketts and Shannon, with whom Delaney draws a clear parallel, but also foreshadows the collaborative work that Gray undertook with Raffalovich (26). More clearly, though the *Journals*, in particular, anticipate Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper’s joint diary *Works and Days* and stands as a similar document to their legacy. The language the brothers used to describe their work could have just as easily have been penned by the Michael Fields. The Goncourts describe the journal as our nightly confession, the confession of two lives never parted in pleasure, in work or in toil, the confession of two twin spirits, two minds engaged in receiving, from contact with men and things, impressions so like, so identic, so homogeneous, that this confession may be deemed the elaboration of a single ego, of a single *I*.

(Goncourt and Goncourt xi)

Cooper and Bradley echoed this exact sentiment in an 1884 letter to Robert Browning stating, “Spinoza . . . says ‘if two individuals of exactly the same nature joined together, they make up a single individual, double stronger than each alone,’ i.e. Edith and I make veritable Michael” (qtd. in Thain 97). These partnered relationships: Ricketts and Shannon; Wilde and Gray, and later Douglas; Gray and Raffalovich; Bradley and Cooper, mirror the collaboration of God with Man in the Incarnation, a subject that would dominate the latter years of John Gray’s career.

However, relationships, whether human or divine, are not Gray’s focus in his essay, nor even are the literary or historical contents of the Goncourts’ novels or journals. Instead, he focuses on their unique and idiosyncratic style. Gray makes a cursory nod to the novels’
“admirable studies of heroic women” in the final paragraph, but completely ignores the almost
thorough “critical vilification (‘sculptured slime,’ ‘literature of putrescence’)” which met their
initial publication (Galantiére viii; Gray 9). Critics had dismissed the novels as:

dismal, airless, written only for the sake of the ‘scientific, clinical observation,’ with
which the authors fancied they were scrutinizing human beings who were to them so
many monstrosities; shapeless, lopsided, filled with whole chunks of décor minutely
described and scenes recounted in detail, all of no significance to the march of their
story or the personality of their characters; written partly in a gibberish of which the
poor dears were actually proud . . . Their novels are something of a trial.

(Galantiére viii).

Gray does not mention the substance of the novels nor their subject matter, but instead
focuses strictly on style. The novels, he argues, represent the triumph of a careful cultivation of
personality and a conscious construction of artificiality over any sort of insight into their subject
matter. None of the characters rise above caricatures; they are not fully formed by the writers.
As Wilde would argue just a year later, art represents not mimesis, but rather stands as man’s
“spirited protest,” his “gallant attempt to teach nature her proper place” (Wilde "The Decay of
Lying" 74). The artificiality and ennui that the Goncourts demonstrate, along with the “morbid
inquisitiveness” and “fascinat[ion with] the repellent” mark them as early decadent artists
(Galantiére viii). When viewed holistically from the perspective of the twentieth century – after
which the decadent movement had formed, thrived, and then decayed itself – it is clear that
the Goncourts are the forebears of the movement.
For Gray the Goncourts’ greatness is directly attributable not only to their neuroses, but to “nerves” in general. Thus, he uses what becomes in the nineteenth century a type of shorthand for describing decadent style and the decadent artist. The brothers are “extravagantly neurasthenic, constantly subject to megrims thrown into frenzies of incapacity and self-pity by noises, insomnia, indigestion” (Galantière v). Their mannerisms, their eccentricities, nerves and neuroses, as well as their “tortured syntax and countless neologisms,” are reason for celebration and not condemnation (McCormack Prose 1). They are signs of refinement and distinction and mark each brother as a true artist, who is “always an abnormal creature, a being with an overdeveloped brain, or diseased nerves” (Gray 4).

Because he recognized and celebrated the Goncourts’ artistic distinction, Gray declares himself as more discerning and more sensitive than the average reader. It is a calculated move that Gray employs to set himself above the general public; he boldly lays claim to a cultural understanding and keen insight that rise far above his own upbringing and training. At this point in his nascent career, with Bethnal Green a mere four years in his past, the future poet is actively severing connections with his past and embracing a decadent future. The fact that the common, working-class public did not understand them is part of their appeal. “Never,” Gray writes, “was great work more destitute of charm for the vulgar than that of MM. Edmond and Jules de Goncourt. To the few, to artists in fact, their studies, aphorisms, epithets, are exquisite beyond praise . . . for the multitude they are far too mature” (Gray 3). “Writings all of nerve” he continues, “are not for readers made all of gristle” (Gray 5). The emphasis on the Brothers’ exclusivity – the claim that the writers’ works could only be understood by a select, hyper-refined public – anticipates Arthur Symons’s analysis of another French decadent, Stephané
Mallarmé, who “wished neither to be read nor understood by the bourgeois intelligence, and it is with some deliberateness of intention that he has made both issues impossible” (Symons "Decadent Movement" 862). Nerves, neuroses, and a certain Kabbalistic esotericism demonstrated for Gray and Symons the individuality and overall quality of a writer’s work.

The Goncourts, in turn, directly influenced Émile Zola, who took from them his clinical approach to his observation of the lower classes and continued the development of decadent sensibilities that Gray inherited and explored. Zola’s combined detailed, scientific examination with an unsettling and unemotional detachment. While the Goncourts celebrate their nervous excitement, Zola firmly subjugates his, holding them back with an almost sociopathic reserve. Zola’s intent was “to study not characters, but temperaments” (22). His protagonists cease to become real, a point he emphasizes in the Preface to the Second Edition of Thérèse Raquin:

I chose to portray individuals existing under the sovereign dominion of their nerves and their blood, devoid of free will and drawn into every act of their lives by the inescapable promptings of their flesh. Thérèse and Laurent are human animals nothing more. In these animals I set out to trace, step by step, the urges of instinct, and the derangements of the brain which follow on from a nervous crisis ... There is a total absence of soul, as I will readily admit, for such was my intention. (Zola 22)

Zola makes no attempt at understanding his characters; he simply turns the cold light of clinical observation on them, “applying to two living bodies the analytical method that surgeons apply to corpses” and “making horrors ordinary” (Arthur Edmonds, qtd in McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 264n30; Zola 23). Nothing could be more foreign, or more repellant, to a Victorian reading public that thrived on sentimentality and to their personal attachments to popular
characters. Dickens’ Little Nell from *The Old Curiosity Shop* is a representative example of a character that was both fully formed *and* deeply loved by the reading public.\(^{15}\) The decadent shift from characters that the reading public loved and sympathized with to ones that were merely soulless “human animals” consisting of “nerves and blood” was shocking and uncomfortable, but, at least in the beginning, it remained safely across the English Channel.

The Goncourt’s work, together with that of Zola and Balzac, made possible the most decadent and influential French novelist of the *fin de siècle*, Joris-Karl Huysmans. Huysmans is essential for understanding French decadence, particularly in his application of Catholicism to the decadent experience. Huysmans’s anti-hero Jean des Esseintes in the 1884 novel *À Rebours* is indebted to the Goncourt’s focus on nerves and sensitivity. Self-exiled in his expansive villa, des Esseintes actively attempts to engage as many nerves and senses as possible by surrounding himself with works of art and engaging in experiments with perfumes, colors, liquors and musical instruments. In the novel’s most celebrated and *de trop* example, des Esseintes gilds his pet tortoise’s shell and encrusts it with jewels so that he can better appreciate the play of light against his Oriental carpet. This emphasis on the senses and experience is, in turn, a response to Walter Pater’s calls for filling one’s life with “as many pulsations as possible.” Experiencing these pulsations, the product “not [of] the fruit of experience, but experience itself and “to burn always with this hard, gemlike flame,” Pater notes, “is success in life”(Pater *The Renaissance* 189).

Gray never practiced the Satanism of Durtal, the auto-biographical hero in Huysmans’ quartet of novels *Là Bas*, *En Route*, *La Cathédrale*, and *L’Oblat*, nonetheless he viewed his early life and his rejection of the church with great regret, spending the remainder of his life after
breaking with Oscar Wilde in a perpetual state of penance for his unnamed sins. His essay “The Redemption of Durtal,” published in the fourth edition of *The Dial*, praises Huysmans focus on “the subject of repentance, rarest of all perhaps in pure literature” (Gray "The Redemption of Durtal" 74). The review is brief but displays many of Gray’s stylistic characteristics. The tone is aloof and reserved. Gray is clearly writing as a Catholic, despite not yet fully living a Catholic life, creating a tone that reads as condescending. Furthermore, his comments are not particularly incisive. Nonetheless, the essay does signal the role that repentance, demonstrated in the constant dialogue between sin and grace, would play in his life.

Gray’s pseudo-scientific emphasis on the Goncourts’ nerves, specifically on the medical and psychological nature of them is characteristic of the ways in which decadent literature shares some of its vocabulary with scientific discoveries in the late nineteenth century.¹⁶ Joseph Moreau in France, along with Cesare Lombroso in Italy, argued that artistic talent was the daughter of neurosis, and that neuroses, or at least neurotic traits, were hereditary (Stableford 62). Artistic talent was part of one’s genetic makeup – artists were born, not made – and talent was always accompanied by nervous disorders, sickness, or disease. Gray’s praise of the Goncourts’ nerves, then, demonstrates an acknowledgement and affirmation of their artistry, and nods toward current psychological thought. Max Nordau, though no longer considered a medical authority, violently attacked all of the elements of neuroses, sickness and disease in his *Degeneration*, later in the century. Similarly, André Raffalovich, (although not trained as a doctor) took up a similar pseudo-psychology, albeit with a much more understanding aim, in defense of homosexuality in his *magnum opus* Uranisme et Unisexualité, completed during his long friendship with Gray.
Thus, Gray’s essay on the Goncourts becomes not only an essential document for the exploration of decadence and the ways in which decadence entered England by way of France, but also for the way in which it firmly established Gray as a decadent artist and critic in his own right at a young age. Similarly, it marks the ways in which his attention is centered on the cultivation of a public personality, focused on the production of art. It does not anticipate, however, the ways in which Gray’s life would ultimately become the greater work of art than his poetry. In his focus on the self, Gray’s future association with Wilde becomes inevitable. Wilde proclaimed as central tenet of his own aesthetic “life itself was the first, the greatest, of the arts, and for it all the other arts seemed to be but a preparation” (Wilde Uncensored PDG 160). Gray may well have been following Wilde’s slow climb to fame from a distance. Despite their great differences, the two were moving along very similar trajectories.

These facts of Gray’s life prior to his first meeting with Wilde are not representative of his life as a whole, and they only tentatively engage the cultural forces at play. They demonstrate the divide between the public and private selves, between form and substance, between past and present. In later years Gray would have labeled them as sacred and profane. Until the last period of his life he would have been unable to fully integrate the two. The crucial year of 1888-1889 demonstrates his artistic infancy, the period before he moved from the shadows into the bright light of public life. This year coincides directly with the seminal cultural and artistic movements of the late Victorian period and with the figures who rose to prominence. They demonstrate his artistic formation, when he composed his first work put before the general public.
Ricketts and Shannon trained John Gray to be a critic, an aesthete, and introduced him to the decadence, but owing to their own tendency toward reclusiveness, they could not make him a public figure, something the working-class young man from Bethnal Green desperately wanted. They gave him a place to put his name before the public, and they taught him the value of criticism, particularly in learning to value of his own aesthetic eye. They offered him access to the new directions art from France was taking and introduced him to the leading voices of the new movement. Additionally, they modeled homoeroticism and the constancy of a long and stable same-sex partnership. The only area where they could not help the young artist was in the area of religion; both were predisposed toward atheism. Their sole spirituality was art, and art alone. Oscar Wilde, however, educated in the hothouse of Oxford, where art, aesthetics, homoeroticism and religion converged, combined all of these elements as he created a distinct public persona. And, as he was for so many others, he was a person that John Gray had to meet.

5 THE MASTER: OSCAR WILDE

*Behind every exquisite thing that existed, there was something tragic.*


After his “creation” by Ricketts and Shannon, an action that obscured but did not fully erase the working-class boy from Bethnal Green, John Gray’s first major triumph as an aspiring poet and aesthete came in the late summer of 1889. Although a published writer with a promising Civil Service career ahead of him, Gray still lived with his parents in another rental house in Plumstead. Frank Liebich records Gray’s “high society” appearance with Oscar Wilde at
an unnamed Soho restaurant, rented for a private supper party. The familiarity between Gray and Wilde, along with the casualness with which he is introduced on par with established poets John Barlas and John Davidson argues for an earlier first meeting — in order for him to be as well-known as this document suggests, Gray must have met Wilde at some point earlier — yet this is the only surviving document that definitively places the two in each other’s company by this date. Gray had written about the public figure in the pages of *The Dial* before this date, but he had not yet become one himself. This night marked the first public appearance of the aspiring aesthete.

In 1889, Wilde was thirty-five and still at work creating his own persona. He had not yet produced any of the major dramatic works for which he became famous, but he had successfully toured America with a calling card marked “‘Professor of Aesthetics,’ a title for which he had no authentic certification” (Friedman 15). The young nation was captivated by his unusual dress, including lavender pants, ruffled shirts, and often rouged cheeks; his manner; and his extravagant style. They didn’t quite know what to do with him, but they knew they wanted to see him. Wilde’s lectures were unique. Other writers, including Charles Dickens and Matthew Arnold, had toured America in previous decades, but their initial aims were to observe life in the former colony, observing and recording their thoughts in the first century after independence. Wilde toured so that Americans could see him. Following his year abroad, Wilde lectured on a smaller scale in Britain, produced a volume of poetry that sold admirably, and edited and wrote for *Women’s World* magazine. While he had not yet become a household name, he had become a public figure who was gathering more and more press, not all of it favorable. Wilde’s theatrical behavior and his active cultivation of celebrity attracted as much
scorn as it did praise, but at this point he recognized, as Lord Henry Wotton did, that the “one thing in the world worse than being talked about, [was] not being talked about” (Uncensored PDG 58). Liebich’s document, which both notices and critiques him, demonstrates the tension inherent in Wilde’s creation of a public self.

To perfect the art of living life deliberately and with minute attention to detail, Wilde drew from two distinct streams of aestheticism to create himself as the quintessential “dandy,” and cultivated friendships beyond Britain, expanding his circle of influence and connection by corresponding with leading French aesthetes, including Paul Verlaine, Stéphane Mallarmé and Edmond de Goncourt, harbingers of a new, decadent aesthetic. Gray followed these actions almost to the letter. To outwardly demonstrate his pursuit of the new aestheticism, Wilde curled his hair “in imitation of a bust of Nero in the Louvre” and declared himself a new creation; “the Oscar of the first period,” he said, “is dead” (Holland and Hart-Davis 195-96).18 The period of learning was over; the period of influencing others was about to begin. Wilde enthusiastically embraced the literary limelight, and his very visible position as a professional aesthete made him the perfect object for Gray’s youthful attentions. Similarly, Gray’s own eagerness, which he demonstrated with Ricketts and Shannon, made him an enthusiastic disciple to Wilde’s cult of personality.

Liebich was unimpressed by Wilde. The manuscript documents his private impressions of Wilde the celebrity, and not Wilde the spokesperson for a new aesthetic philosophy; it records Liebich’s highly personal and private observations and is not an analysis of Wilde’s work or career but merely his appearance and deportment at an otherwise undistinguished evening. His assessment of Wilde is uniformly crude and unflattering, proclaiming him “too stout for an
aesthete” by not conforming to the stereotypes of professional artists (Liebich 1). Wilde failed to confirm Liebich’s perception of a professional artist, and he seems determined to deflate the public image of Wilde, remarking not only upon his weight and appearance, but also on his prodigious appetite. As the son of a German composer, Liebich’s anger may have been fueled by what he described as Wilde’s “Germanophobia” (2). Wilde reportedly encouraged the young pianist to claim a more exotic sounding Silesian lineage (“you know ... Holy Roman Empire and all that”) instead of his more pedestrian and ordinary, “merely” German, ancestry (Liebich 2). Liebich failed to get the joke.

Despite Liebich’s clear dislike of Wilde, and against protestations of his own heterosexuality, he finds himself “rather more curious” to meet John Gray, whom he describes as an “extraordinarily good-looking youth” (Liebich 2). Many had noted Gray’s physical beauty, including Florence Gribbell, who became an important figure in his later life in Edinburgh. Patricio Gannon records a night in which a companion, likely André Raffalovich, pointed out Gray in the box opposite hers. She viewed him through opera glasses and remarked “what a fascinating man. I never knew that anybody could be so beautiful” (106). John Barlas “hinted, rather vaguely, of the (alleged) intimacy [with] Wilde,” confirming the public perception that Wilde and Gray were lovers despite a lack of corroborating information (Liebich 1).

Nonetheless, this easily forgotten, and still unpublished, document confirms that some erotic tension was evident between Wilde and Gray from their earliest dated meeting, and demonstrates the ways in which the two were subjects of rumor and innuendo by a public audience that was paying increasing attention to both of them. While Wilde was the one on display this night, John Gray attracted significant notice in his own right. Art and homosexuality
are fused, demonstrating the ways in which the aesthetic and decadent artistic netherworld was increasingly coded as a queer space.

With the possible exception of Wilde’s comment on the Holy Roman Empire, Liebich makes no mention of religion, the final element that links Gray and Wilde. Aestheticism, homosexuality and Catholicism informed all of Wilde’s work, and ruled all of Gray’s adult relationships. That Gray would seek out Wilde, then, becomes not only inevitable, but also unavoidable. In 1889, no other figure combined Gray’s major interests, or more closely represented the life Gray wished to live than Wilde. With Gray’s desire for literary and aesthetic recognition, which had been present from his youth, foremost in mind, an association with Wilde becomes useful for Gray’s aspirations, and forms part of a carefully calculated plan. Although Gray’s friendship with Wilde lasted only four years, understanding this relationship is vital for grasping the forces that shaped Gray’s literary and aesthetic ambitions.

Before examining Gray’s construction of his own public image, however, it is critical to trace Wilde’s own influences that Gray enthusiastically sought to emulate. While Wilde acquired “his dandical dress, his Hellenic bias, his ambiguous sexuality, his contempt for conventional morality” and first encountered Algernon Charles Swinburne and the Pre-Raphaelites at Trinity College, Dublin, his greatest successes in constructing his public persona and forming his aesthetic creed came from Oxford (Ellmann 34). Oxford stamped him with the seal of a formal, upper-class education — the mark of breeding and belonging that Gray desired but could never achieve.

Going up to Magdalen College in 1874, Wilde expressed his desire to meet only two people, John Ruskin and Walter Pater, the leading voices of aestheticism. Although Wilde
seemingly departed from him, Ruskin remained a primary influence throughout his life. As late as 1888 Wilde still sought his approval, sending a copy of The Happy Prince, and declaring him to have something “of prophet, of priest, of poet,” and possessing an “eloquence such as [the gods] have given to none other” (Complete Letters 349). Wilde embraced Ruskin’s Gothic asceticism, working with his mind in the classroom, and with his hands in Ruskin’s road-building project outside of Ferry Hinksey in the autumn of 1874. This project, which was intended to allow the villagers to pass between Upper and Lower Hinksey via a direct route, was on one level strictly utilitarian. Heavy rains often forced villagers to take a circular route amounting to a several-mile diversion. Draining and paving the road was the most utilitarian and cost-effective solution, yet Ruskin used the opportunity to teach his students the medieval techniques espoused in The Stones of Venice. Specifically, the students were taught manual and ennobling labor, working with their hands to create a monument that was both durable and aesthetically pleasing. The work was both physical and demanding. Wilde learned “to lay levels, to break stones and to wheel barrows across a plank,” performing hard, grueling, manual work that foreshadows the forced labor at Reading Gaol in 1895 (Essays and Lectures 193). Ruskin called for the road to be decorated with banks of flowers, elevating it from the purely servile to the beautiful. Despite grumbling about rising at dawn, this project “fostered Wilde’s conviction that art had a role to play in the improvement of society” (Ellmann 50). The project demonstrated, in an outward and visible way, the moral aspect of art. It declared in concrete terms that public works should illustrate art as well as celebrate human craftsmanship. It was not only utilitarian, but also beautiful, physical, ethical, and principled.
Ruskin, then represents one part of Wilde’s opinions about the function of art. Wilde later rejected the conventional mid-Victorian morality that Ruskin came to represent, with its strong emphasis on duty, devotion to hypocritical conceptions of right and wrong, and rigid adherence to middle-class values, but he never abandoned the inherent morality in art. He simply expanded his definition of morality. His provocative comment in the introduction to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* “an ethical sympathy in an artist is an impossible mannerism of style” instead calls attention to this type of morality, equating conventional views of goodness or propriety with an affected pose, and calls attention to the inherent hypocrisy contained in such views (Wilde Uncensored PDG 239). Wilde never fully abandoned Ruskin’s views, but he moved from their dogmatism to embrace Walter Pater’s dreamlike sensuousness and his focus on “pulsations” and sensations. As if to demonstrate the change occurring in aesthetic thought, neither Wilde nor Ruskin finished the bridge-building project. Like so many of the Gothic cathedrals of Europe that Ruskin admired, and to which he quickly returned soon after the project’s inception, the road between Upper and Lower Hinksey remained unfinished and abandoned in the middle of the swamp it was intended to traverse.

The bridge is an apt metaphor for Wilde’s sense of aestheticism. As Ruskin’s importance waned, Pater’s influence waxed. Ruskin, who symbolized for Wilde “earnestness and purity,” slowly gave way to Walter Pater’s “self-realization and beauty” (Ellmann 75). Or, phrased another way, “Ruskin appealed to conscience, Pater to imagination. Ruskin invoked disciplined restraint; Pater allowed for a pleasant drift. What Ruskin reviled as vice, Pater caressed as wantonness” (Ellmann 49). Pater’s seductive language contrasts with Ruskin’s neo-Calvinism and demonstrates the stark differences between the two. Similarly, the differences between
the two men and their philosophies discloses a growing dichotomy between art that is moral and useful and art that is beautiful but “quite useless” (Wilde Uncensored PDG 239). At Oxford, Wilde was present for the critical moment when art became unmoored from a resolute emphasis on moral certainty.

While it is tempting to label Ruskin as sacred and Pater as profane in the life of Oscar Wilde, a dichotomy which John Gray, especially after he embraced Catholicism, comfortably applied to the arc of his own life, this argument is ultimately reductive for both Wilde and Gray. One may easily envision Ruskin and Pater sparring for Wilde’s soul in the classrooms of Oxford. A more useful view, however, envisions the two as “heralds,” one on each side of Ruskin’s bridge, “beckoning [Wilde] in opposite directions” (Ellmann 51). Each represents differing views of aestheticism and differing views of the individual’s response to it. Ruskin’s aestheticism, for example, is, quite literally concrete: in the case of Ferry Hinksey, it calls for a literal bridge to be constructed, a solid, sturdy, structure crafted of hand-cut stones and firm foundations built using centuries-old techniques. Pater was more ethereal, otherworldly, and sensuous. He “taught [his followers] to walk upon a rope tightly stretched through serene air, and we were left to keep our feet upon a swaying rope in a storm” (Yeats 201). While the public connected Ruskin with duty, Christian piety and belief and Pater with sensuality and paganism, the two do not fit so easily into discreet categories.20

Despite their clear differences, both Ruskin and Pater are essential to Wilde’s development and to the aestheticism that Wilde modeled for Gray. Wilde fully incorporated both into the construction of his personality and passed them on to Gray. Rather than taking one for his model and discarding the other, Wilde blended the two. Ruskin stirred his
conscience, while Pater invigorated his senses (Ellmann 98). Ruskin gave a sense of exigence and duty to Wilde’s art, and Pater gave it spirit and flesh. Yet the student eventually outgrew both masters as Wilde developed a growing sense of his own identity as a professional aesthete – a public figure who was neither professor nor philosopher. The way in which Wilde integrated the two into his sense of self, by drawing what he needed or wanted from each and adding his own sense of particular genius to an already oversized personality, made him a particularly attractive candidate for Gray, who similarly sought to create a persona distinct from his background, and to integrate his own sensuousness with his nascent Catholicism.

Although Gray was unable to engage directly with the currents of Greek culture, philosophy and homoeroticism that circulated in the all-male, almost monastic environment of Oxford, he received the benefit of Wilde’s training secondhand, observing the ways in which Wilde embraced both. Drawn from the thought of Matthew Arnold and John Stuart Mill, Literae Humaniores, the study of classical Greek and Roman texts, formed the basis of the Oxford curriculum and was the metaphorical fountain from which all Oxford education was drawn. During Wilde’s tenure at Oxford, the program sought to use ancient texts to serve Victorian liberalism in the fight against an increasingly stagnant, mechanized, England. The emphasis on Greek texts consciously attempted to move mid-Victorian England into contact with broader, more open-minded thought. Opening young minds to philosophical texts prompted vigorous intellectual engagement and allowed them to formulate new and innovative ideas. By articulating new ideas, Oxford men engaged the nation, at the height of her colonial expansion, bringing it into line with the rest of post-revolutionary, liberalized Europe.
However, once a dialogue with Classical Greece was opened, students were free to read fully into all that Greek culture encompassed. Without the strict Christian religious underpinning that characterized Newman’s time as a tutor, students like Oscar Wilde, sensing their own homoerotic desires, found a means of giving voice to their erotic longings for the first time. As A.C. Benson noted in his diary, “If we give boys Greek books to read + hold up the Greek spirit + the Greek life as a marvel, it is very difficult to slice out a perfectly normal part of Greek life, and to say that it is abominable” (qtd. in Brake 45). Pater hinted at the connection between Hellenism and homosexuality but left a wide lacuna for students to fill in on their own.

John Addington Symonds, however, made the connection quite clear. His *A Problem in Greek Ethics* was written but not yet published in 1873, the year before Wilde’s arrival at Magdalen. Symonds corresponded with Wilde in a series of now lost (or destroyed) letters, during the period in which he was writing his sexually charged pamphlet; Wilde was only 19. Symonds explicitly linked Hellenism with aestheticism by claiming that Greek morality was “aesthetic and not theocratic, [and] nonetheless, on that account humane and real . . . Guided by no supernatural revelation, with no Mosaic law for conduct, [the Greeks] trusted their *aesthesis*, delicately trained and preserved in a condition of the utmost purity” (*Studies of the Greek Poets* 383). This shift away from theology and towards aesthetics moved his thought away from a judgmental, angry, and remote Christianity, toward a gentler, human-centered creed that emphasized beauty and individuality. Furthermore, rather than an inward focus that centered on who was within the Church and who was without, Symonds’s new creed was egalitarian and democratic, and expanded morality from its constrictive Christian framework. For someone as gifted as Wilde, Symonds’ advocacy of Greek culture, specifically in the
reification of aesthetic expression and the deliberate move away from punitive Old Testament legalism resonated deeply. Symonds sent him his homoerotic publications such as the *Sonnets of Michael Angelo Buonarroti and Thommaso Campanella* and it is likely, owing to Symonds’ own desperate attempts to find others with whom he could identify, that the two discussed homoerotic desire in the lost letters.

Through Wilde, Gray also accessed the spirited debates over religion and society that later informed his decision to seek the Catholic Church. At Oxford, Wilde had the freedom to engage in spirited, academic debates about Anglicanism and Catholicism, which Gray’s rough, working-class background did not allow. As the Church of England engaged with German “Higher Criticism” and attempted to address the problems of the nineteenth century, many, notably John Henry Newman and Gerard Manley Hopkins, found the liberal drift unsettling. Conservatives argued that the church, shifting its focus from things heavenly to things earthly and loosening its dependence on dogmatism and scholastic interpretation of scripture, risked unmooring itself from its own tradition and watering down the truth, resulting in a tepid moral relativism. Those who left argued that the Roman Catholic Church alone, by holding onto an unbroken tradition that stretched back to the Apostles, held the truth. Additionally, the central locus of power in Rome with a pope and an administration strictly focused on preserving tradition and truth, safeguarded the faith, keeping it free from cultural or critical trends.

Wilde formed his view of the Catholic Church in the generation immediately following the end Oxford Movement in 1845.22 Thus, it is critical to explore the Movement’s impact and its influence on the nation and on Wilde before exploring Gray’s own Catholicism. Seeking to integrate aspects of Catholic tradition and ceremonial into the Church of England – making the
Anglican Church more Catholic — this movement, centered around John Henry Newman, sent shock waves through the colleges at Oxford that still reverberated when Wilde arrived in 1874. While the movement continued in an altered form, the major players were no longer part of public discourse. Newman was central not only to the Movement but to the very fabric of Oxford itself. Observers, following his “perversion” to the Catholic Church, envisioned secretive priests colluding in mysterious and arcane rituals just beneath Oxford’s carefully maintained veneer of respectability. Once discovered, it was impossible to determine the reach of the Catholic Church. If Newman could swim the Tiber, who else might be secretly planning to follow him? The scandal of Catholic conversions called the University’s tradition of personal tutorials into question. These intimate, individual, and pastoral, relationships formed between tutor and student were increasingly viewed as an ominous move to lure impressionable students away from the Established Church and from England itself. The years following Newman’s defection to Rome in 1845 were marked by “virtual hysteria over the power of the Roman Church,” a fear compounded by the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy in 1850 (Dowling 45). Because the Catholic Church was dependent on Rome and insisted on priestly celibacy, Anglican critics charged Catholics and their sympathizers with being “Unenglish and Unmanly” (Hilliard 187). In 1875, the Catholic Church encroached upon the gates of Oxford itself. Cardinal Manning, a former Anglican priest and fellow at Merton College, preached at the consecration of the Church of St. Aloysius of Gonzaga with Oscar Wilde in attendance. It was the first Catholic foundation in Oxford since the Reformation.

As Gray’s model for “dandyism,” Wilde drew from two different traditions, both of which are related to the Oxford Movement and to Catholicism, in the creation of his public
persona. Understanding the differences in the two is crucial for understanding how Gray developed his own sense of style and his conception of aesthetics. Wilde’s public persona as a “dandy” begins at Oxford, and the English dandy is a direct descendent of the Oxford Movement. By the end of the century the dandy and the aesthete were conflated in the public mind, however, Hanson makes clear that the distinctions between the stylistic postures of the English followers of the Oxford Movement and the artistic endeavors of the French decadents are quite pronounced. The two movements coalesce in the figure of Oscar Wilde, who joined them together to become the most visible public figure of the new aesthetic movement and England’s most visible dandy.

The English school’s roots lie in the ritualism and fastidiousness of the Anglo-Catholic faction of the Church of England, which, while always a minority part of the Anglican tradition, became more prominent in the years of the Oxford Movement. The Movement’s emphasis on outward displays of ceremonial, such as elaborate vestments in liturgical colors, chanted music, and candles on the altar, along with a focus on auricular confession, clerical celibacy and an elevated, “professional” view of the priesthood was at odds with The Anglican Church’s low or broad liturgical expression, and moved at least part of the Church toward Roman Catholic practices.

Because of the tendency to look outside of Britain for inspiration, either to Rome or to other Continental Catholic cultures, followers of the movement were viewed with suspicion for repudiating traditional Victorian piety. Although the Oxford reformers claimed that their liturgical practices were part of the common heritage of the English Church, critics found their practices not only foreign and strange, but inconsistent with British culture and values.

Oscar Wilde, at least at first, was most directly influenced by followers of English school,
who were either actively engaged with the Anglo-Catholic faction or the Roman Catholic Church or were drawn to their outward trappings. Gray’s spiritual poverty, which he demonstrated with Ricketts and Shannon, found the exoticism beguiling, and Wilde’s ease in conversing with the currents of this movement captivating. Most followers were sincere about their religious convictions, despite the difficulties the mainstream church presented. The popular press took notice of the growing trend toward ritualism and charged followers with softness and effeminacy. “Clergymen of ‘extreme High Church proclivities,’ Punch proclaimed, ‘are very fond of dressing like ladies’” (Hilliard 189). Charles Kingsley, who was unnaturally focused on Newman’s celibacy, charged that his refusal to marry was unmanly and ultimately un-Christian, as it ran contrary to the Adamic command to be fruitful and multiply. The public viewed Anglo-Catholics as play actors obsessively focused on symbols and mysticism rather than faith and works. It is easy to see how this baroque exoticism proved attractive not only to a figure like Oscar Wilde, but to Oxford students, many away from home for the first time, engaged in free and open discussions of philosophy, and “freed from the respectability and the puritanism of the churches in which they had grown up” (Hilliard 184). Pater encouraged young men to engage the sensual eroticism of the mind and body, to gather as many pulsations as possible. The new expansion of Anglo-Catholicism, offering candles, incense, vestments and chanted litanies, while still ostensibly within the Protestant tradition they knew, was alluring, seductive, and for many, irresistible.

Gray’s spiritual poverty drew him to the English school, but his economic poverty made the outward displays of the French school equally attractive. Additionally, his early work on the Goncourts and other French decadents as well as his tutelage from Ricketts drew him toward
France. Paul Verlaine, Charles Baudelaire, Barbey D’Aurevilly and Joris-Karl Huysmans are the most representative examples who “revised [earlier] English models from Beau Brummell, to [William Makepeace] Thackeray and [Benjamin] Disraeli” updating the 18th century dandy to contemporary France (Hanson 244). The dandy’s outward display of clothing, manners, and deportment, his fastidiousness and his leisure, was coded as effeminate, and this transferred over easily to the followers of ritualism. Thus, both the dandy and the ritualist were marked as effeminate – as being womanlike – rather than homosexual. While both the English and the French schools have their origins in English culture they draw from different points. Some French writers developed a “Catholic strain,” but most are more often associated with “mysticism and diabolism,” particularly if that diabolism leads to a penitent conversion à la Huysmans’ alter-ego Durtal (Hanson 244). Unlike the English, the Catholicism of the French School viewed the Church from the outside, an inverted view filled with suspicion and scorn rather than piety. Instead of the Mass, the decadents were drawn to an artistic, if not literal Black Mass – a furtive communion with Satan, not with Christ. This trope was not new; French decadents followed Milton in holding out the figure of Satan as a bold and courageous artist, increasingly estranged from a world who did not understand him.

Contemporary artists projected their fears and anxieties onto a mythological figure who was similarly marginalized by respectable society. Communing with Satan in the Black Mass becomes an act of transgression and bravery as well as aestheticism. In this view Satan, like a decadent artist, experiences rejection as well as scorn and shame. The Goncourt brothers, whom Gray’s advocated in his first essay, and Stéphane Mallarmé were misunderstood by the average reader and actively scorned by the reading public.
Both movements, ultimately, have Catholicism as their end points and both movements are clear influences on Wilde and on Gray. English decadents sought the mysticism and baroque exoticism of Rome, far removed from the joyless Protestantism of the Church of England, while French decadents mounted a counter-offense against their own deeply ingrained cultural Catholicism. The English sought a richer, multi-textured expression of piety, while the French travelled the road of prodigality and exile, before returning to the place where they began. The French attacked the Catholic Church, but many antagonists ultimately returned to the place where they started. Satanism, as expressed by the French Diabolists, is only possible if one has belief, even if it is the dimmest point of belief. Eliot argued, with regard to Baudelaire, that “Satanism itself, so far as not merely an affectation, was an attempt to get into Christianity by the back door. Genuine blasphemy, genuine in spirit and not purely verbal, is the product of partial belief, and is as impossible to the complete atheist as to the perfect Christian” (373). Only those who held at least a mustard seed of faith could rebel against faith. Some faith and belief had to exist in order for those who were dissenting to mount any form of coherent rebellion.

John Gray, as the disciple of Ricketts and Shannon, was responsible for helping define the new decadence in the pages of *The Dial*, but he had not yet met someone who so fully embodied the two strains of dandyism and decadence. However, only weeks before he published his essay on the Goncourts, he met London’s deliberate celebrity, Oscar Wilde. Thus, Gray’s assumption of the role as the literary mediator for the movement and his introduction and public association with the movement’s most visible figure makes him a critical figure in the fusion of French and English models. Wilde commanded more public attention, but Gray has
the distinction of constructing one of the first critical analyses of the movement, leaving the curious possibility that Wilde may have wanted to meet Gray as much as Gray wanted to meet Wilde. The meeting that Frank Liebich records is the first known meeting of the two, but an earlier date is possible. In the years before Gray published “the quintessentially decadent volume Silverpoints,” Wilde, who had access to higher society, was his frequent companion (Hanson 311). Wilde’s public performance of aestheticism joined with the increased public attention that Gray received as the attractive, new, young, and previously unknown spokesperson; they complemented each other well.

Appropriately, in this critical summer of 1889 when he proclaimed himself mediator between England and France and met Wilde, Gray converted to Catholicism. Wilde, again, may have been a model, as he had courted the “Scarlet Woman” while at Oxford. This flirtation, equal parts schoolboy rebellion against family and expectations, curiosity about the unknown, and attraction to the exotic, was an integral part of the post-Oxford Movement experience. Wilde engaged fully with all aspects of the church, except, perhaps, with the most critical element: faith. Hanson argues that Wilde’s “singular synthesis of Roman Catholicism, aestheticism, and eroticism” informed all areas of his public self and his work, suffusing “every book that he ever published” ; more than any one part of his life Catholicism explains his role as artist and critic (Hanson 229). But whether Wilde believed that the Catholic Church was the bulwark of truth and the only earthly expression of the one true faith remains a source of much debate. Wilde used the Catholic Church and its external trappings as part of his creation of a public persona, performing an act of conversion and even repentance filled with seduction,
flirtation, promises and refusals, but he did not convert until his deathbed, while possibly unconscious, and at the insistence of Robbie Ross.

Gray’s conversion happened in a different way. He did not have the academic space in which he could have free and open dialogue about the truth or Catholicism, or a public space where he could model and construct a persona; it happened on a deeply personal level. In the year of Gray’s first published article, and within months of Leibitz’s dinner party, Gray met Marmaduke Langdale, the charming, Byronic, dissolute scion of a recusant Catholic family from Brittany, and, much to his family’s dismay, a frequent actor in Sir Frank Benson’s company. How the two met is unknown, but they ran in overlapping social and literary circles. Langdale was friends with Ernest Dowson, and was, himself, an “ardent Swinburnian [who] wrote verse in that manner” (Jepson 222). Invoking Swinburne would have been enough to mark Langdale as having decadent sympathies. Through Dowson, Langdale met other members of the Rhymers’ Club, where Gray was something of a “permanent guest,” as was Oscar Wilde. Both visited frequently, often reciting poetry, but neither actually joined or published with the group (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 60). Unlike the effete Wilde, however, who was already flirting with London’s homosexual underworld along with the Church, Langdale was decidedly heterosexual. He had the reputation as a “lady-killer,” known for his “recurring fiancées” (Jepson 254; McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 37). Gray was situated somewhere between these two powerful influences: Wilde, interested in the Church but equally drawn to a dangerous life of sex and criminality, and Langdale, Catholic by familial tradition, if not by actual practice.

Marmaduke invited Gray to visit the Langdale family at their home in St. Quay, Brittany during the summer of 1889, a mere few weeks after Gray’s appearance with Wilde. The
experience of the Langdales’ true, living faith, as well as their three-hundred-year pedigree was something that filled a deep and lasting spiritual need.²⁴ Theirs was not the *bourgeois* faith of the Anglican middle classes, nor the nominal dissenting faith of Gray’s own family. Instead, it was a generational faith, and one that had been tested through the generations.

By the time Gray met Langdale’s nineteenth century namesake, the family had experienced financial collapse, but the possession of an ancient peerage gave them both class and distinction. Langdale’s father died eighteen months prior, leaving Mrs. Langdale and five children, several of whom were in poor health, in penury. Yet she “persisted in an unquestioning faith which made an indelible impression on the young Gray” (McCormack *Poet, Dandy, Priest* 37). The Catholic faith, which was inward, yet completely integral to the family’s self-identity, represented something new to the young aesthete. It was a faith that permeated all facets of the family’s life, even if certain members, like Marmaduke, became less observant in later years. Marmaduke could leave the practice of the Church, but he always remained a Catholic. If his faith and discipline lagged, it was the Roman Catholic Church that he failed to believe or practice. For the Langdales, the Church represented grounding, culture, and a sense of familial obligation and identity, all of these were absent in Gray’s life, and he was actively seeking them as a way of forming his own identity. The Langdales demonstrated for Gray the ways in which faith was the bedrock of their being rather than a societal obligation. However important and influential it was to them, though, it could only take Gray so far. Ricketts and Shannon had taught Gray to see, to feel, and to experience art as well as life. Resultingly, his Catholicism could not be academic. Gray had to experience it first-hand.
The moment of Gray’s conversion occurred during this same visit to Brittany while on a solitary morning walk. The moment was dramatic and life-changing and yet remarkably void of the baroque expressions of Catholicism that would feature into Gray’s later life. He reported the tale of his conversion, apparently only once, to Fr. Edwin Essex, who referred to the moment as the point:

when the faith finally came to him. Early one morning he found himself at Mass in a small, wayside chapel, with half-a-dozen peasant women. It was an untidy, neglected place, and the priest, an unshaven figure at the altar, slovenly, and in a hurry. Vividly and slowly, as if savouring afresh each tiny detail, Canon Gray reconstructed the scene, without a hint of criticism, leaning forward in his chair, hands on knees, and, in his grave eyes, a look of brooding wonder even after so many years. “Yes, Father,” he said, with a slow turn of his head in my direction, “it was then that it came to me. I said to myself, ‘John Gray, here is the real thing.’” (Essex 72)

Gray marks this moment, an almost mystical uncovering of truth, as the one revelatory flash which changed his entire life, yet he does not relate the details until forty years after the fact, a period of time in which the moment likely accrued multiple layers of meaning. Fr. Essex notes that Gray “reconstructed” the scene, suggesting the craft of a poet or artist and the action of self-fashioning. Despite the austerity of the story, including the untidiness of the church and the priest and the remoteness of the location, Gray pays attention to even the most minute detail. The ascetism is not the same as what he experienced in Rome, or what he created in his future Edinburgh church, but the attention to tiny details and the way Gray reproduces each one afresh reveals the aesthete’s craft. As Pater suggested in the Conclusion to *The Renaissance*
Gray carefully records each pulsation in the “variegated, dramatic life” playing out in the Breton church; while pressing “swiftly from point to point,” he is “present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy” *(The Renaissance* 188). And for Gray, that purest energy could only be found in the Catholic Church.

In reconstructing the scene, Gray carefully fashions the narrative as a work of art and an aesthetic object, each element is arranged for maximum power. But this story, like Gray himself, asks more questions than it answers. Did Gray embellish the shabbiness of the priest and church for dramatic effect? Did he place more emphasis on this one moment than the moment deserved? Whatever the moment meant to Gray, and this point is similarly Paterian, he never wavered from the singular view that this one glimpse at the ineffable changed his entire life. Recalling the moment in 1929, forty years later, he wrote to Fanny Langdale, Marmaduke’s sister, telling her “whatever I do at this present moment goes back in an unbroken chain of events to the weeks I spent with you at St. Quay. The reality of religion there seen was the invisible seed of God’s mercy from which all grew” (qtd. in McCormack *Poet, Dandy, Priest* 38). After returning to England, Gray received conditional baptism at Saints Anslem’s and Cecelia’s Roman Catholic Church in Lincoln’s Inn Fields, and was confirmed at St. Mary’s, Cadogan Gardens.  

Rather than using the date of his baptism to mark the beginning of his new life, Gray observed the anniversary as one of “oblation and resolute resignation to the will of God” (Vernon 175). Writing to Raffalovich on the ninth year, as he prepared for ordination, Gray notes, “I suppose the longer I live the more tragic each anniversary of this day will become. I went through instruction as blindly and indifferently as ever anyone did and immediately I
began a course of sin compared with which my previous life was innocence” (Vernon 175).

Gray’s exaggerated rhetoric, as before, invites questions rather than gives answers. He never reveals the exact nature of this “course of sin,” but his associations then and for the rest of his life have led many to assume homosexuality without any definitive proof. Gray carefully curated his life; what evidence survives from the period between his baptism and the letter to Raffalovich has been carefully sifted and edited to preserve the image of his later life. In *Works and Days* Edith Cooper relates a 1908 conversation between Gray and Katherine Bradley where Gray refers to “the old days” of “reckless destruction of health by exotic habits . . . low company . . . idle hours at the Foreign Office [and] long nights of vain pleasure” (qtd. in McCormack *Poet, Dandy, Priest* 40). Michael Field “gathers” that Gray meant “in the haunts of the world & the devil not in sin – a conversing with sin not so much sinning” implying a tenuous guilt by association, rather than any type of direct action (qtd. in McCormack *Poet, Dandy, Priest* 40).

Field seems anxious to absolve then Fr. Gray from any sin. However, the complexity of this passage (Cooper, recalling a conversation Bradley had with Gray, which Michael Field then interprets) makes it nearly impossible to parse, and speaks to Gray’s own complicated method of communication. Field later expressed frustration at Gray’s letters claiming they were “like leaves of the Pythoness.”(McCormack *Poet, Dandy, Priest* 213). His artificial style and laconic syntax added to the myth of Fr. Gray.

Hanson argues that “[Gray’s] sins no less than his conversion had a singularly artificial and premeditated perfection about them that recalls the well-wrought sins and shames of Wilde” (Hanson 312). This demonstrates the ways in Gray’s conversion narrative and the part his sins played in his conversion, were created or “reconstructed,” objects. Both were works of
art, and thereby aesthetic, and the artificiality, premeditation, and attention to certain, specific, details encode them as decadent. By observing the date of his baptism as a day of penitence rather than a day of celebration, Gray subtly deflects attention from the sacramental grace of baptism, instead foregrounding the “course of sin” that followed it. The demurral contained in the phrase “course of sin,” like the description of Gray’s initial conversion in Breton, similarly raises questions: What were his unnamed sins? How did he sin? Michael Field participates in the obfuscation by insisting that Gray was “conversing with sin not so much sinning,” which isn’t really sinning at all. One need not spend a life in penitence, as Gray did, for merely “conversing” with sin.

Gray’s careful construction of his conversion narrative, particularly with the deliberate emphasis on penitence, was an integral part of the 1890s decadent engagement with homosexuality and Catholicism that Hanson calls the “peculiar dialectic of shame and grace,” best demonstrated by Baudelaire, Huysmans, Verlaine, and Wilde (86). Lord Alfred Douglas, Wilde’s lover and destroyer, characterized, particularly in “In Praise of Shame” and “Two Loves” the ways in which, for many decadents of the 1890s, “the word shame had become virtually a synonym with for sexual acts between men” (Hanson 86). Hanson identifies his dialectic as the ways in which homosexual decadents and aesthetes from the 1890s used shame and repentance as spaces in which they could not only enact their sins, speaking them aloud in the sacrament of confession and thus recalling each intricate detail, but also share in Christ’s sufferings. “For many decadents, from Baudelaire to Wilde, the Church was indispensable as the only institution that really appreciated the beauty and artistry of shame” (Hanson 37). For the homosexual, the Church offered a space for the performance and recreation of the
transgression, as well as a space for the assurance of pardon and absolution. For poets and artists who were drawn to Catholicism, it offered an additional area for self-definition and the construction of a distinctive persona.

While Gray’s sexuality has never been identified beyond the “violet threads of homoeroticism, by turns suggestive and coy, that coils through his work from beginning to end,” yet it is clear that up until the time Gray published *Silverpoints* his primary influences were homosexual (Hanson 318). Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon were assumed to be homosexual, although they refused to answer pointed questions from John Addington Symonds. Many of the artists and writers who frequented the Vale were open-minded and unmarried, and perhaps considered homosexual by virtue of remaining single, especially as panic increased as the century waned. Brian Reade argues that “homosexuality of various kinds [was] a vogue within certain small but widening circles” in the latter half of the nineteenth century, particularly the worlds of art and aesthetics as well as Catholicism (Reade 54). The Vale was the acknowledged center of the new aestheticism, and it attracted many known homosexuals. Gray sought out the Vale and received his artistic instruction and published his first work here. Similarly, Wilde’s circles were notoriously, and dangerously homosexual. If Gray was guilty by association, his guilt lies in seeking out the circles that would garner the greatest attention. It is equally possible that as a young man from Bethnal Green, he sought out understanding and companionship with like-minded people. The record does not answer the questions.

If homosexuality was in vogue at the *fin de siècle*, conversions to Roman Catholicism were likewise considered critical to the aesthetic experience. Wilde led the way performing the
rituals of conversion repeatedly. After a month of sickness that left him bedridden, Wilde confessed to Fr. Sebastian Bowden, then London’s most cosmopolitan priest who “was known for his conversions among the well to do” (Ellmann 93). However, when he was due to appear for his formal reception into the church the following week, Wilde sent, instead, a box of lilies. After his exile following his imprisonment, he received the blessing of Pope Leo XIII at least seven times enacting over and over his penitence and showing his need for grace (Hanson 99).

Others followed, but for different reasons. Lionel Johnson published “homoerotic Catholic poetry that was pitiless in its self-laceration,” enacting his own struggles with faith, doubt, sexual repression and alcoholism, before turning to the Church as a stronghold for truth and certainty (Hanson 86). Ernest Dowson, despondent after a rejection from a prepubescent waitress, turned to alcohol, and sought the Church “as an escape from desire, however unlikely the prospect” (Hanson 13). Beardsley converted shortly before his death, writing furiously to his publisher Leonard Smithers in an attempt to destroy the illustrations that defined the decadent movement. And in the best example of using “conversion as a flight from decadence,” Lord Alfred Douglas, Wilde’s flagrant lover, converted in 1911, married Olive Cusance, and spent the remainder of his life repudiating Wilde and repenting the sins of his youth (Hanson 13). What is notable about these examples is that each case represents a flight from something (sin, desire, homosexuality) rather than a movement toward the Church.

John Gray’s seminal contribution to the decadent movement, Silverpoints, was published in March of 1893 a time which, when viewed from retrospect, marks the pinnacle of the brief life of Decadence. McCormack argues convincingly that if the volume had been issued a few years earlier, it would have largely gone unnoticed, eclipsed by the work of other,
arguably more accomplished poets. Similarly, if it had been issued two years later, it would have been swept up in the “hysteria of the Oscar Wilde trial” and immediately discarded (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 107). However, several crucial moments in culture, art, science and religion converged in 1893, to create a “perfect storm” for the production of the most representative volume of the decadent nineties. Because it circulated in the moment it did, *Silverpoints* preserves, as if in amber, all of the things that the word decadence represented, and ensured that Gray, in the “zenith of his youth,” lived forever (Symons Memoirs 136). Yet in pointing out this moment, one also notes the fragility of the entire decadent experiment; *Silverpoints* balances precariously on a knife’s edge. When Gray attempted to distance himself from his most famous work, buying up and destroying copies that survived, he succeeded only in adding to the volume’s allure. Few things pique public interest more than a limited edition, small press publication that its author is actively seeking to destroy. Arthur Symons wrote, “it is a book which will certainly be remembered as marking a certain hour of the day. Every line is packed; and in most books there is so amazingly little ore, when one looks into them” (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 144). Following its publication, Gray’s book became inextricably linked with the movement, and the word was suddenly on everyone’s lips. The reading public, however, had only the faintest idea what “decadence” meant, much less the direction it would take them.

Elkin Matthews and John Lane published *Silverpoints* in March of 1893, in a limited run designed by Charles Ricketts. The title of *Silverpoints* “suggests the interrelationship between poetry and the visual arts (the artistic technique employs a silver pointed stylus that leaves an indelible trace of silver-grey on paper coated with opaque white)” (Beckson 56). The silver-grey
mark that the artist leaves on the paper, subtlety plays on Gray’s last name and suggests his desire to make a permanent mark on late-Victorian culture. Sewell suggests that the title was chosen as a nod to Théophile Gautier’s 1852 collection *Emmaux et Camées* (Enamels and Cameos). Gautier, the first to use the phrase “L’art pour l’art” as early 1835, had experimented with the silverpoint technique before he became a writer. While the Silverpoint technique was largely characteristic of the Renaissance (Albrecht Dürer, Leonardo da Vinci, and Raphael all used the technique), Alphonse Legros along with members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood revived it in the nineteenth century. Thus, the name carried both aesthetic and poetic connotations. Similarly, Ricketts had experimented with the technique. Ricketts had shepherded Gray’s development in his earliest years a poet an artist at the Vale, and personally oversaw all elements of the work’s production; it is likely that he suggested the title for its evocative sound, as well as the way in which it evokes an archaic artistic technique that recalled a previous age of artistic ardor. Ricketts extensive knowledge of art, technique and design, combined with his cross-disciplinarity contributed in making Gray’s first volume of poetry the “epitome of decadent book-production” (Thornton 50). The success of the work is often tied as much to Ricketts’ design as to Gray’s verse; if Wilde had trouble living up to his blue china, Gray sometimes had trouble living up to his book’s binding.

For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, critics focused more on Ricketts’ unique design at the expense of Gray’s verse. The physical form, the book-as-object, drew more attention than the poems contained inside, a move which risked breaking the two into unequal halves, a type of bibliographic Manicheanism. Ricketts had conceived *Silverpoints* “as a work of total art,” a melding of form and content, typography and poetry (McCormack *Poet, Dandy,*
Gray applied this type of dichotomy to much of his life: the poet of the 1890’s yielding to the priest, the body existing separate from soul, and flesh distinct from spirit. Yet in each instance the two parts are conceived as separate and distinct envisioning halves ignores the ways in which can only function as a unitary whole. As Gray would discover late in his life, it was only by marrying poetry and prose (or poetry and design, in the case of *Silverpoints*) and flesh with spirit that any wholeness could be achieved.

*Silverpoints* also bears many marks of Wilde’s influence, and Wilde had guaranteed production of the print run before the publishers assumed responsibility. As Wilde had done in his early work, Gray ingratiated himself to popular figures of the day. The first poem is dedicated to Alice, the American born Princess of Monaco, and the second to Paul Verlaine, who also inspired the epigraph. 28 French writers Félix Fénéon, Pierre Louÿs are noted, but Gray also notes English figures such as Ernest Dowson, Frank Harris, Robert Sherrard, Ellen Terry and Charles Shannon. By dedicating many of the poems in *Silverpoints* to famous artists and figures of the day, Gray made public his relationships with famous persons. He then ingratiated himself to them by presenting copies of his work, often with effusive inscriptions.

Gray begins the volume with a fragment of Verlaine, “... en Composant des Acrostiches Indolents” as an epigraph for *Silverpoints*. The ellipses, hiding more than they disclose, naturally cause the reader to seek the first part of the cryptic line. The complete first stanza of Verlaine’s May 1893 poem “Langueur” proclaims:

\[Je suis l’Empire à la fin de la décadence,\]

\[Qui regarde passer les grands Barbares blancs\]

\[En composant des acrostiches indolents\]
D’un style d’or où la languer du soleil danse.

(I am the Empire at the end of the decadence,

Who watches the great white Barbarians pass by

composing indolent acrostics

Of a golden style where the languor of the sun dances).\textsuperscript{29}

The larger passage employs several typically decadent tropes (languor, indolence, Barbarians, a “golden style”) that Gray evoked in Silverpoints, demonstrating clearly his assertion of his own authority as a fin de siècle poet, and aligning himself with the French poets who defined the movement. By invoking Verlaine, who remained an important influence on the aspiring poet long after he abandoned the movement, Gray boldly assumes the mantle of the “Empire at the end of the Decadence” suggested by the unquoted line.

Gray’s choice of epigraph is initially both delicate and subtle, but ultimately discloses a calculated strategy. Verlaine’s poetic voice speaks as a personified Roman Empire (“Je suis l’Empire”) at the end of its decline (“à la fin de la décadence”). As such, it draws a clear line from the Romans and the Greeks, both of which epitomized culture, freedom, and philosophy, progress, industry and expansion “[who] stood firmly behind any Victorian’s understanding of his own society” through the French, to the British Empire (Thornton 2). The French Empire, expanding and contracting repeatedly over the nineteenth century, had a more visible period of decadence by 1893, which Verlaine and other Symbolist and Impressionist poets demonstrated, but Britain’s sun was beginning to set.

Both French and English expressions of decadence demonstrate many of the anxieties that the public felt at the approach of the twentieth century. Eschatological fears that both
nations experienced as the Empire declined and the century ended manifested as fin de siècle/fin du globe. A superstitious anxiety that as the age ended the entire world hurtled towards descent and eventual destruction. Rather than arresting this decline, decadent artists sought to embrace it where they found it, celebrating its strange and beautiful colors. Already marked by his sensitivity and neuroses, the decadent artist made art from decay, celebrating ugliness and corruption where he found it. Gray’s tacit acceptance of “Empire,” then, clearly aligns him with the decadent movement in France, but also demonstrates his assumption of the role laid out for him by Ricketts and Shannon as the literary mediator between France and England. In a simple epigraph at the beginning of Silverpoints, just four years after his first assumption of the mantle of forerunner of English decadence, Gray proclaims himself the movement’s leader.

The mark of Ricketts can be found in every part of Silverpoints, which “from its first utterance . . . proclaims itself an agent of the new movement, and every aspect of the book’s production elaborates this gesture” (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 110). Gray’s friend and mentor personally designed and oversaw every part of the book’s design, including the binding, typeface, ornate initial letters and colophon. The binding, tall and slim, resembles a checkbook stood upon the short end; the width exactly one-half the height. The covers feature gold stamped stylized flames or leaves laid over thin, wavy lines against apple green cloth wrappers. The verses are printed on handmade Van Gelder paper. Ricketts ordered Caslon Old Face italic for the typography, an obscure script inspired by the work of fifteenth century Venetian printer Aldus Manutius. Many critics describe the font as “unreadable” or “virtually indecipherable” which is not only inaccurate, but which calls undue attention to the part the
typography plays in the conception of the book as a whole. It is dramatic and unique but is not “indecipherable.” Each page is given wide margins, with the text oriented to the top left corner, a design choice that “became one of the marks of the Private Press movement of the 1890s” (Fletcher *The Poems of John Gray* 9). Vast expanses of blank space swallowed up shorter poems, while longer poems co-existed naturally on the page. 31 Nonetheless, tension exists between text and design, between design and content, characteristics that would become further define the books of the period.

What then, is to be made of the poems contained within Ricketts’ exquisite binding? Frank Harris and Richard Le Gallienne acerbically wrote that the poems “did not come up to their binding” (McCormack *Poet, Dandy, Priest* 110). Other critics noted the French affectation of the verses, perhaps unaware of the absolute necessity of French poses at this point in the history of Decadence. The French influence is most apparent in the choice of translations: seven are taken from Verlaine, three from Baudelaire, two from Rimbaud, and one from Mallarmé. Gray carefully labels these “imitations,” a choice that emphasizes artifice and mimicry rather than literalism in translation. Fletcher uses a modifier to describe some of the imitations as “free,” “loose,” “close” or “paraphrase” while others are merely marked as translations, demonstrating the fidelity, or lack thereof, that Gray maintained with the source material (Fletcher *The Poems of John Gray* 298-303). Similarly, the poets that Gray imitates are the ones closely tied to the French decadent school, and the volume becomes as much an homage as an original collection of poetry.

Of the twenty-nine poems contained in *Silverpoints*, the sixteen that are original can best be used to determine Gray’s artistic talent. Fletcher claims that “many of the poems
exhale an air of Beardsleyesque decadence,” which is most apparent in “The Barber” (Fletcher *The Poems of John Gray* 13). Beardsley attempted his own “Ballad of the Barber” in 1896, perhaps as a homage to Gray, although drawn from the stock figure of a “Demon Barber,” a staple of mid-Victorian “penny dreadfuls” that predates both poets by nearly a half century, with “Sweeney Todd” being the most notable example. Gray’s barber appears to the poet in a dream, detailing the methods of applying “many a mask” to “pleasant girls.” The barber notes:

It was my task,

To gild their hair, carefully, strand by strand;

To paint their eyebrows with a timid hand;

To draw a bodkin, from a vase of kohl,

Through the closed lashes; pencils from a bowl

Of sepia to paint them underneath; (4-9)

The obvious emphasis here is on the use of cosmetics not only to create a mask, but to create a work of art. While the girl is “pleasant,” the barber gilds, paints and draws, using kohl, pencils and sepia, as if to improve upon her beauty. She becomes secondary to his work, a mere canvas upon which he can create. Nelson argues that Gray was indebted to Baudelaire’s essay "Eloge de Maquillage," and that the poem equally anticipates Max Beerbohm’s “A Defense of Cosmetics,” published in the *Yellow Book* in 1894 (Nelson 231n5). All three are part of the decadent emphasis on the superiority of art to nature and emphasize artificiality over inherent beauty. This theme is carried into the second stanza when the barber

moulded with my hands

The mobile breasts, the valley; and the waist
I touched; and pigments reverently placed
Upon their thighs in sapient spots and stains
Beryls and crysolites and diaphanes,
And gems whose hot harsh names are never said.
I was a masseur; and my fingers bled
With wonder as I touched their awful limbs (12-19).

The verse becomes decidedly more erotic as the barber touches thighs, breasts, waist and valley, each with increasingly sexual implications, adorning them with pigments and with jewels. In describing himself as a masseuse, he begins to move from barber to sculptor, changing and molding the girl to fit his own conceptions of beauty. The poem ends with the poet/barber experiencing a type of hallucination as he is returned to wakefulness, his blood cold as he apprehends the girl no longer adorned with the cosmetics he so carefully applied. Finding her no longer no longer the product of his own work, the barber is “maddened” until, in the last line he “laughed and wept” (line 32). The poem’s focus on artificiality is enough to mark it as decadent, but the focus on the girl’s physical body, on her breasts and “valley” as well as on her limbs, throat and hair mark it as decadent and perverse.

“A Crucifix,” which Gray dedicated to Ernest Dowson, focuses on a religious subject, yet similarly evokes both decadence and perversity. As he did in his earlier poems “The Wheel” and “The Forge,” Gray describes the crucifix in minute detail. He specifically locates it in “a gothic church,” “against an aisle,” and “against a wall” (Gray "A Crucifix" lines 1,2,3). Light filters into the church through “painted windows, orange, blue, and gold” (Gray "A Crucifix" line 3). “The statue is of wood,” he notes, “of natural size” (Gray "A Crucifix" line 9). He then notes one can
behold “the Christ’s unutterable charm,” and that the perceptive viewer can see “the last convulsion of the lingering breath” from the “robust and frail” corpus (Gray "A Crucifix" lines 11,12,13). “Beneath / That breast indeed might throb the Sacred Heart,” he muses, as he observes Christ’s brow “under the torture of the thorny crown” (Gray "A Crucifix" lines 12-13,17). Gray’s use of evocative detail here, particularly on the physical sufferings of Christ, and on the bleeding feet, the torn side, and the hands, is consistent with Catholic piety, and the crucifix he describes is certainly not unorthodox or even untraditional, yet his extreme focus on the sensual details, evoking color, texture, sound and breath, are consistent with decadent conceptions of religious art. Gray’s aesthetic eye for detail would follow him not only to his ordination, but to the eventual construction of St. Peter’s Church in Edinburgh.

Despite Gray’s early and very ardent association with Oscar Wilde, by 1892 Gray was rethinking his association. The two had been “assumed to be lovers” but there is nothing that definitively links them as such (Ellmann 308). Additionally, Gray dutifully played along with the ruse that he was the model for Dorian Gray, including signing a letter to Wilde as “Dorian” (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 49). However, Gray’s actions more likely suggest a young, aspiring poet using the cultural moment to draw attention to himself. He was in Wilde’s orbit between 1889 and 1892, and while there may have been some connection between John Gray and Wilde’s choice of Gray as Dorian surname, the existing record does not make the case.

Similarly, Wilde was moving away from Gray, entranced by the aristocratic and better educated Lord Alfred Douglas. With Douglas, Wilde became more profligate in flouting social mores. Leaving Constance at home with the two children, the two frequented many of London’s homosexual brothels, sex clubs, and other more sordid sites for arranging encounters
between strangers, a practice Wilde called “feasting with panthers.” This vivid phrase demonstrates not only the danger of such encounters, but the thrill caused by taunting the public coupled with the very real possibility of blackmail and ruin. In Gray’s mind, this may well have created a sense of discord or revulsion between Wilde’s “beautiful manners and his underworld company” (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 102). Wilde’s appearance had similarly changed. While he was always prone to being overweight, by 1892 at the age of thirty-eight, Wilde’s youth had left him. He had grown fatter and unattractive. Unlike the fictional Dorian Gray, the signs of his indiscretions and appetites were written on his own body, and not on a hidden portrait. Gray, still in his youth and with the bulk of his life ahead of him, sensed the danger that pursuing the course of dandy held, as the different forces of Decadence, including moral degeneracy, sickness, and homosexuality swirled around him. Recalling the moment in Breton when he found “the real thing,” Gray recognized that his life had a higher purpose. It was his own public performance of the dialectic of shame and grace. Acknowledging the shame of his unnamed sins, Gray repented by returning to the Catholic Church and beginning again. As he withdrew from Wilde, Gray drew nearer to the Church that had shown him, in a dramatic moment of illumination, his life and calling.

Gray’s fears were realized when Wilde was tried and convicted in May of 1895. The trials represented, even for those even peripherally connected with Wilde, not only a condemnation of Wilde’s criminal acts of homosexual behavior, but also his work and the work of the entire decadent experiment in English literature (Fletcher "John Henry Gray: His Life, His Poetry" 10). Wilde’s conviction ensured that homosexual behavior would be definitively and permanently linked with Decadence for generations. Gray envisioned that all parts of his life
would be under close scrutiny. Even though he had broken with Wilde a few years earlier, the threat of association filled him with dread. William Muir, one of Gray’s Edinburgh converts to Catholicism, reports that Gray was given the news of Wilde’s conviction on Coventry St. near Leicester Square in London. He made his way to the Church of *Notre Dame de France*, where he knelt quietly in silent prayer. After what seemed only a short interval, a woman tapped Gray on the shoulder, telling him that the church was closing. He had spent the entire day kneeling in the darkened church (Sewell "Biographical Outline" 27). His mind was so rapt in contemplation of God, Wilde, and the future, that he had lost touch with time.

This incident marks Gray’s “second conversion,” and, like the first, there are more questions unanswered than answered. Muir claims that Gray connected the announcement of the verdict and his church vigil. At other times he did not. Similarly, the length of the “entire day” is left unqualified. Did eight hours pass, or two? Gray’s careful narrative of his initial conversion in Breton was “carefully constructed,” as Gray savored each detail of the neglected wayside church where he first encountered the Mass. Then, he recounted the events almost 40 years after they occurred, allowing a sense of mythology to creep into his story. Similarly, in detailing this moment of fear and spiritual reawakening – the moment that mirrors his first conversion – Gray permits enough questions to enter that one cannot be sure what constitutes literal fact and what is the cryptic arc of John Gray’s life. As in his first conversion, the events are recollected many years after they occurred, allowing the same, deliberate, composition of memoir to help in the backward creation of a moment of crisis. As a true disciple of Wilde, he had learned the value of myth in the creation of the self.
Gray has left no evidence to prove or disprove whether his association with Wilde was foremost in his mind, nor can we know if he was remembering the “course of sin” that he described after his baptism in 1889. Nonetheless, it is clear that he feared his name might be raised during Wilde’s trial, risking incrimination by association, and engaged barrister Frank Matthew to hold a watching brief 32 on his behalf and scrupulously avoided any contact with Wilde or his circle. The message he received at the news of the verdict unmistakably indicated to him that he must change his life. Following immediately upon the heels of Wilde’s conviction his life makes a sudden and dramatic shift. Within the span of two and a half years, Gray re-entered the Roman Catholic Church (the incident at Notre Dame de France marking the date of his renewed commitment), sought ordination as a priest, and left behind the life of the decadent poet that he had so carefully cultivated.

Gray and Raffalovich had both known Wilde well, and the shock waves of Wilde’s his conviction drew the two closer together. Artists, writers, and young men who had only a peripheral relationship to him feared the worst. Because newspapers mentioned Wilde carrying a yellow book during his trials, circulation for the journal known as the Yellow Book plummeted. Aubrey Beardsley, the journal’s art director who had also contributed illustrations to Wilde’s banned play Salomé, suddenly found himself unemployed at the age of twenty-three. The public inextricably linked Beardsley to Wilde. Despite publisher John Lane of the Bodley Head giving him a few commissions for his Keynotes series of novels, Beardsley career as an artist was largely finished after Wilde’s conviction (Colvin 70). As Roger Fry’s “satanic” epithet suggests, Beardsley’s particular form of art carried about it the scent of sulfur.
In April of 1895, one month before Wilde’s conviction, Beardsley was struck with a reoccurrence of Tuberculosis, a malady that had plagued him for most of his life, and which would kill him in March of 1898. Recognizing the precariousness of Beardsley’s situation early on, Raffalovich offered help. Sick, unlikely to recover, and unemployed, Beardsley offered the two a perfect symbol for burying the past and scripting the future. But first, Raffalovich enjoyed the notoriety that friendship with Beardsley brought. He recalled in later years “wherever we went, we were gazed at. They sang about him at the Gaiety; Max [Beerbohm] caricatured him; strangers credited him with unfathomed perversity; acquaintances all recognized his simple boyishness” (qtd. in McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 174). Furthermore, “Beardsley allowed Raffalovich to eat his cake and have it too: to enjoy the pleasures of notoriety and indulge his keen interest in the demimonde without paying the price in terms of respectability” (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 174). He could, it would seem, luxuriate in the suggestion of sin without dirtying his hands. It was a course of sin, not so much sinning, as Gray would later recount of the period following his first conversion. Raffalovich balanced this, however, with token commissions, allowing Beardsley a modicum of dignity so that he did not feel as if he were living on charity. When the young artist started coughing up blood and appearing pale and wan, both must have known that these commissions would never reach completion.

Raffalovich, who had only been baptized in February 1986, found Beardsley a logical candidate for conversion, a convenient move that would give Gray and Raffalovich a sense of purpose and confirmation of their own interests in the Church. Beardsley would be receptive; like many figures from the fin de siècle, Beardsley’s biographer claims that the artist “had always been fascinated by the spiritual life, and . . . found in the texture of Catholic ritual and
belief a sense of protective stability” (Weintraub 206). Beardsley’s biographer Stanley Wientraub has suggested that Raffalovich and Gray’s motives were less than sincere: instead of an ardent desire to save the soul of the decadent movement’s most visible artist – to snatch this Fra Angelico from the grasp of Satan – they sought a “trophy.” By converting this most conspicuous figure, this argument suggests, the two could handily repudiate and expiate the decadent past and claim the spiritual future for the Catholic Church.33

Wilde and Beardsley, then, bookend Gray’s decadence. John Gray had broken with Oscar Wilde in 1893, but the decadent period of his life ends not with Wilde’s conviction and imprisonment in 1895, but rather, in the year following Wilde’s release, with the death of Aubrey Beardsley at the young age of twenty-five. For Gray, the passing of Beardsley symbolized the death of decadence, and marks a sharp division of the early, profane half of his life with the latter sacred portion. Beardsley’s submission to the Church and his early death were visible reminders to Gray that earthly fame was ephemeral and even deadly. His departure allowed Gray to gracefully, and silently, retreat from the public stage and draw inward. Yet, perhaps because Gray knew Beardsley’s profane, pre-conversion reputation, he remains an aloof figure, with an “emotional reserve [that] seems almost bleak” (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 173). Gray was present, yet hovers at the margins of the story. Of the two events, Fr. Dominic Hart suggests that it was the death of Aubrey Beardsley that influenced John Gray towards the ecclesiastical state” (80). Gray quietly absolved Beardsley’s youthful blasphemy and focused solely on his faith. The actions and behavior of the young Beardsley, bravely facing the Angel of Death reminded Gray of the simplicity and power of the faith that he had first encountered with the Langdales in Brittany.
In many ways, Beardsley’s conversion was Raffalovich’s affair, carried out with the zeal that belongs only to a new convert to the faith. Beardsley allowed Raffalovich to enjoy a brief moment in the decadent sun, appearing in public as the artist’s companion and mentor. But Raffalovich too, acknowledged that the aesthetic tides were turning, and that a life focused on God would join him together with Gray. As Beardsley’s life deteriorated, Raffalovich stood by as spiritual guide and patron. At his death, Raffalovich similarly turned his back on the decadence and faced the future.

Just nine months after Beardsley’s conversion – the length of a pregnancy – Gray made his own decision to enter the priesthood. In December of 1897 Gray made a religious retreat with the Jesuit fathers at Manresa House, Roehampton, where Hopkins had spent his novitiate, and in the silence of the cloister dedicated his life to the Roman Catholic priesthood. Thus, the conversion of Beardsley represents a spiritual child of sorts, birthed by the chaste union of Gray and Raffalovich. Beardsley’s conversion yields as a spiritual rebirth, a third conversion of sorts, to give Gray’s religious life a type of spiritual, Trinitarian symmetry.

In presenting Beardsley to Gray, Raffalovich offered him as a sacrifice: a lamb, albeit a decadent one, to be offered in expiation of the visible life that the two friends had shared in the 1890s. Beardsley’s conversion and death “was to become for Gray and Raffalovich a sign, both of the death of the old order of the ‘decadent’ nineties and a foretelling of the new dispensation of grace” (McCormack Prose xxi). As such, it is the ultimate religious and aesthetic symbol, not only of sacrifice, but of self-sacrifice. When Beardsley was buried, on a cloudless day in March of 1898 on a quiet hill above the village of Menton on the French Riviera, Gray
and Raffalovich buried the decadence of their own lives, leaving it behind to make the long pilgrimage to Rome.

6  **THE FRIEND: ANDRÉ RAFFALOVICH**

“Oh mon frère, if I could pour myself out for you like water, I would”

André Raffalovich, letter to John Gray.

In February 1896, roughly halfway between Wilde’s conviction and Beardsley’s death, André Raffalovich, who had been born in Paris, the youngest child of Russian Jewish emigres, was baptized at the Church of the Immaculate Conception in Mayfair. He took the name Sebastian, a third century Roman martyr whose name and *cultus* carries a particular resonance for homosexuals. To outsiders, the move was sudden and unexpected. John Gray, however, knew the heroic measures his closest friend had made to support Aubrey Beardsley and bring him into the fold of the Catholic Church. Gray knew the deep bond of love he and Raffalovich held for one another. Raffalovich’s baptism into the faith Gray had been practicing with renewed commitment since his silent vigil at the Church of Notre Dame de France one year prior would draw the two closer together and strengthen their intense bond. Raffalovich alone had been the one constant throughout this turbulent period that closed the decade of the 1890s for both of them.

The mental anguish of the Wilde trial and Beardsley’s imminent death had been arduous for both of them. When Gray made his retreat with the Jesuits in December of 1897, three months before Beardsley’s death, he vowed to serve God as a priest. André Raffalovich had considered a religious vocation of his own but decided against it, suggesting to Gray that his
priesthood was *their* vocation. His wealth and generosity made it possible for Gray to enter seminary and pursue ordination less than one year after his retreat.

Raffalovich was Gray’s patron, just as he had been patron to Beardsley. During the middle period of Gray’s life Raffalovich becomes the central human focus, both friend and benefactor, allowing Gray to concentrate on a seminary career and the establishment of ministry in Edinburgh. Gray’s childhood of poverty was a source of constant fear for him, but Raffalovich’s wealth and generosity would allow him the space and the security to shift his focus from literary dandy to priest without fears of poverty or loss of social status. While his association with Wilde aided Gray’s early success, his success during this middle period owes itself directly to Raffalovich, the one lasting friend and companion. From their first meeting in 1892 the interests of the two become mutually intertwined.

Raffalovich’s own artistic temperament, as well as the gifts and talents he brought to their forty-year relationship, play a significant role in Gray’s life. Raffalovich is, at various times, patron, mentor, brother, father, and friend. He becomes Gray’s *anam cara* (“soul friend”), a bond that is far more intimate than “friend,” and which approaches mystical marriage of St. John of the Cross’s *Spiritual Canticle*, a text which was critical to Gray. A proper understanding of Raffalovich’s upbringing and experience becomes vital for a proper understanding of Gray. One must consider Raffalovich’s contributions to the relationship, and how they, in turn, nurture Gray’s vocation. Despite their radically different upbringings, the two would-be aesthetes had travelled parallel paths, which ultimately intertwine once the two meet in 1892. Raffalovich’s own interests in homosexuality, aesthetics, and finally Catholicism mirror Gray’s own. The influence of Raffalovich allows Gray to combine the three central elements of his
philosophy: aesthetics, homosexuality and Catholicism in a way that he could never have managed without the love and support of his closest friend.

The backgrounds of the two men are so radically different that their close association initially seems unlikely. Although Gray was born distinctly lower-middle-class, by the time the two met he had achieved a level of recognition that is striking. Raffalovich’s was born into great wealth, and never worried about poverty or hunger. Instead, what drew them together was the creed of aestheticism. Both were fueled by an overpowering desire for betterment and self-improvement, as well as love of aesthetics and culture. They both moved within similar artistic circles in late-century London and had mutual friends. Their shared experiences made their meeting certain in 1892; literary London was an insular society, and the inevitability of Raffalovich’s meeting with Gray and it mirrors Gray’s encounter with Wilde several years earlier.

Both men shared the strong influence of a mother prompting her son towards aestheticism. Gray’s mother “rather spoiled her eldest child” and had “middle-class aspirations” for him (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 14; Sewell Dorian Mode 1). Similarly, Raffalovich’s imposing mother Marie guided the young Marc-André through the gilded salons of 1880s Paris. Exiled from her native Odessa along with her husband during one of Russia’s anti-Jewish purges, Marie and Hermann Raffalovich immigrated to Paris, where Raffalovich Sr. established himself as a banker of international stature and great wealth. Mme. Raffalovich established herself as patron of the arts, critic, and host of a noted salon, roles that Andre would take up later in life.
Madame Raffalovich’s great learning and cultural influence were prodigious for her time, and her influence on her third and final child Marc-André was powerful. Following his birth, she declared that she would henceforth live for herself. After taking up the study of languages — she reportedly knew eight — she regularly contributed reviews of art exhibitions in Paris to the *Journal de Saint-Pétersbourg* (McCormack *Poet, Dandy, Priest* 44). This more public role helped her transform her home on the Avenue Hoche into a well-known *salon* frequented by leading artists, writers, scientists and politicians of the day, among them physiologist Claude Bernard, Gustave Moreau, J.K. Huysmans, Henri Bergson, Colette and Sarah Bernhardt. Marc-André was exposed from an early age to the most significant artists and thinkers of the French *Belle Époque*. With his mother’s aid, he cultivated friendships across the Atlantic, reviewing books, articles or exhibitions of English artists, dutifully sending his press clippings, opening dialogue that he hoped would bear fruit when he arrived in London.

Both Gray and Raffalovich experienced some type of breach in their relationships with their mothers. Despite the strong influence of Mme. Raffalovich early in his life, a rift developed following Raffalovich’s departure from Paris, which he never fully explained, and her absence was a source of great sensitivity and pain to him. Similarly, Gray’s mother virtually disappears from his biography once he reaches adulthood, appearing only as an irritant concerning the education of Gray’s siblings and as another family member that Gray converted to Catholicism. She remained, until her death, “one of the few people who caused him to lose his temper” (McCormack *Poet, Dandy, Priest* 15). Both women and their maternal relationships simply vanish from their sons’ lives.
Raffalovich hung his mother’s portrait prominently in his dining room in Edinburgh, but an unspoken but clearly understood rule prohibited guests from acknowledging or mentioning it (McCormack *Poet, Dandy, Priest* 45). Her great beauty, often noted by her guests in Paris, was surely depicted in the portrait, and the prominent placement, in a place of honor, rather than hiding the pain, made it palpable for all in the room to see and ensured that this enigmatic rule was a difficult one to observe. Capturing her youth preserved as if in amber, the portrait sharply contrasts with Oscar Wilde’s better-known picture, slowly decomposing in Dorian Gray’s fictional attic. The prohibition added yet another element to the curious conventions of dining in the Raffalovich home.34

The very visible secret that the portrait represented and the questions that it raises marks another point of contact between both Raffalovich and Gray. Raffalovich hid his mother and the pain of his breach with her in plain sight. The prohibition against acknowledging the portrait, the focal point of the dining room, is really a prohibition against the questions it would raise. Mme. Raffalovich had reputedly commented on her son’s “ugliness,” giving him over to Miss Gribbell for care when he left for England, but pictures of him in his youth do not bear this out, suggesting that this story might have been apocryphal. The “ugliness” she reportedly found in her son may represent something deeper. Did she, perhaps, know that her son was homosexual, and did this prompt his desire to leave Paris? London was hardly safer than Paris, but Raffalovich’s visible secret may have been entangled with his own difficult recognition of his sexuality. Gray, likewise, hid his own mother, whom he associated with their poverty and the drab former life that Gray tried to outrun. Since John was Mrs. Gray’s favorite, there is a possibility that she, similarly, intuited his sexuality. With both men, however, the past was
carefully scrubbed or else not noted at all, and both mothers, symbols of the past, simply vanish.

André Raffalovich, like John Gray, was also “obviously homeless, spiritually as well as artistically” as a young man, and both had literary aspirations. After meeting figures from French literary society, Raffalovich set out for Oxford, the primary center for disseminating English cultural values, planning to study for a degree. Having met the leading artists and public figures of France, his journey to Oxford represents his desire to meet the literary figures from England who were interpreting the new movement. Sewell notes that he took Responsions and had an interview with Walter Pater but decided against Balliol because of poor health (Sewell Footnote 25). Raffalovich had the luxury of declining an academic career, while Gray was prevented by circumstance from even attempting one.

Instead of seeking a degree, Raffalovich made careful and deliberate literary connections. He met Pater, whom he intended to meet before leaving Paris. Raffalovich’s chatty remembrances from his time at Oxford, “Giles and Miles and Isabeau,” published pseudonymously as Alexander Michaelson, notes that “he had been warned by Professor Keats to avoid the acquaintance of [Walter]Pater and [John Addington] Symonds” (Michaelson "Giles and Miles and Isabeau" 25). By including Pater with Symonds, Professor Keats’s warning carries a deep suggestion of homosexuality, and points to the controversy surrounding Pater and the attraction homoerotically inclined young men felt for him. Raffalovich notes, “I, of course, made a point of knowing Pater” (Michaelson "Giles and Miles and Isabeau" 25).

Raffalovich “reveled” in the “spiritual growth” Pater demonstrated in his semi-autobiographical novel Marius the Epicurean (Michaelson "Giles and Miles and Isabeau" 25).
The beginning and end points of Pater’s growth are undefined, and Raffalovich wrote almost fifty years after this initial meeting. Raffalovich found in the novel a reflection of his own approach to Catholicism and the extended period before he embraced it fully, a move that Pater was unable to make. Tracing the development of the title character from an early life of study and philosophy, through a long period of Epicureanism, before ending at the house-church of the early Christian martyr Cecelia of Rome, the novel is the ultimate affirmation of “art for art’s sake.” Marius never fully renounces his earlier, pagan, philosophy. Instead he finds unique “pulsations” in the new religion and fits them into his own system of belief. It is a growth in aestheticism that approaches Christianity but never enters. If Marius is Pater’s fictional alter ego, he dies appreciating the aestheticism and asceticism of the Christian Church, but from the outside. Marius’s view of the Christian rites from outside Cecelia’s house are among the novel’s most enduring images, yet Marius dies at the end of novel on the figurative, if not the literal, threshold of the church, incapable or unwilling to go further. Raffalovich seems unconcerned with Pater’s tepid acceptance of Christianity, seeing, perhaps in a fictional guise, the same journey that he and John Gray had taken, from the figurative darkness of a pagan past to the light of a Christian future. Pater had flirted with Catholicism, like Marius, but could not fully embrace the church.

Raffalovich has particularly harsh comments about John Addington Symonds, whom he was similarly warned against meeting. He claims he “did not admire, and was not curious about” Symonds, and found himself “too inexperienced to be excited by so clinical a case” (Michaelson 25). In 1882 Symonds was not yet an apologist for homosexuality. His major polemical works, *A Problem in Greek Ethics* and *A Problem in Modern Ethics*, had not been
published. However, his translations of Michelangelo’s sonnets to Tommaso Campanella, unexpurgated and including male pronouns for the first time, were issued four years earlier in 1878. Symonds did not use the sonnets to push for an acceptance of homoerotic desire. He quickly notes that the celebrated painter and poet “worshipped Beauty in the Platonic spirit, passing beyond its personal and specific manifestations to the universal and impersonal” (Symonds "The Sonnets of Michael Angelo Buonarroti and Tomasso Campanella" 188). Symonds transforms Michelangelo’s homoerotic love into a chaste appreciation of “eternal and immutable beauty” ("The Sonnets of Michael Angelo Buonarroti and Tomasso Campanella" 188). Symonds initial response to homosexuality, immediately affirming the superiority of Platonic love and arguing for “superior inverts,” would have accorded well with Raffalovich’s later research on the subject. Symonds had not yet proclaimed his homosexuality, but his own research resembled Raffalovich’s own. Symonds’s attempt to make sense of a life filled with “profound personal suffering” at his own “inversion” (Grosskurth 14) should have garnered him a gentler appraisal from Raffalovich, who was, no doubt aware that he was somehow “different.” This sharp dismissal of Symonds, especially in light of Raffalovich’s own Uranian poetry and his major work on sexual inverts, suggests that Raffalovich was reading too much back into his brief time at Oxford, with the prejudices gained by the passage of nearly fifty years. He recreates a scene from his youth and engages in mythologizing as Gray had done earlier. Perhaps Raffalovich found Symonds’s wrenching honesty about his sexuality later in life difficult to square with a higher, purer inversion.

Brian Reade suggests that Raffalovich never truly sought a degree, reducing his cultivation of deliberate friendships to a strictly calculated move to improve his social standing
and to move him further into artistic circles, a deliberate move simply to announce his arrival in England. Reade notes, “the young Raffalovich decided that friendship with [Pater] would bring him into contact with other disciples. And there, very probably, he was not much mistaken; even if those disciples were not perhaps so rich, nor so *arriviste*, as Raffalovich, that they could lay siege to Pater with dinner parties” (32). This suggests that Raffalovich, because of his wealth, could not only decline an Oxford degree, but could buy up friendships with those who would be most beneficial to him.

Leaving Oxford, Raffalovich arrived in London in 1884, the same year that Oscar Wilde spent abroad lecturing in the United States. Raffalovich’s wealth insured that he could easily make his entrance into fashionable society. A vigorous pursuit of the major literary figures of the day turned him into a “professional guest of such celebrities as Browning, Whistler, Swinburne, Burne-Jones and Pater” (McCormack *Poet, Dandy, Priest* 46). This list is impressive, designating due attention not only to poets, such as Robert Browning and Algernon Charles Swinburne, but also artists James McNeill Whistler and Edward Burne-Jones, along with a continued association with aesthetes like Pater, and, for a time, Wilde. Similarly (and strategically) this guest list demonstrates the way in which Raffalovich deftly balanced the old masters with a younger, brasher group of radicals. Raffalovich could trace many of these friendships back to the press clippings and reviews he dutifully sent to these figures long before his arrival in London. Yet this collection of friends leans markedly towards the newer aesthetic leaders of the day, including figures associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and the rising “decadent” school, with which Raffalovich would himself become associated.
These guests allowed Raffalovich to form his own salon, not unlike his Mother’s, where he gathered many of these same aesthetic figures: the professional guest gave way to the professional host. Raffalovich’s homes in London and later Edinburgh, where he relocated after Gray’s ordination to the priesthood, were known for the warmth of their host, and the diversity of the company. Furthermore, Raffalovich’s salon became John Gray’s salon, allowing him to maintain access to the leading figures of the literary world, long after he severed ties to “decadent” London.

Raffalovich determined to first enter artistic society as a poet. While his work was never a commercial success in strictly economic terms, his literary output over the course of eleven years is nonetheless impressive. He published his first volume of poems, Cyril and Lionel, and Other Poems: A Volume of Sentimental Studies in 1884. Tuberose and Meadowsweet followed in 1885, In Fancy Dress in 1886 and It Is Thyself in 1889. (All of these predate Gray’s published works.) A final collection of poems, The Thread and the Path was issued in 1895. His one novel of manners, A Willing Exile, was published in 1890. While composing these verses, Raffalovich was also contributing what might best be described as “gossip” to at least three “now forgotten magazines,” including The Hawk, Modern Society, and The Gridiron (Sewell "Biographical Outline" 15). However, none of his poetic works have been reprinted, and many are difficult to find beyond the occasional excerpt. Many of the verses celebrate “love and sensuality between men,” yet this is done, like most nineteenth century writings on same-sex love, without the gender of the speaker or the subject explicitly named, leaving them deliberately ambiguous (White 260). And while the poems now seem sentimental, saccharine, and overwritten, they are among the first poems of the fin de siècle to address homoeroticism.
There seems little doubt that Raffalovich was homosexual, although the extent to which he was “actively” homosexual cannot be determined. Critics who have written on Raffalovich, usually in his relation to Gray, claim emphatically that his affections were homosexual, and that his initial attraction was sexual in nature. It seems unlikely, however, from the surviving evidence that the relationship was ever consummated. As for Gray, most of the “proof” of his homosexuality lies in his relationship with Wilde and the homosexual community that gathered around him.

_Tuberose and Meadowsweet_, published some four years before Gray’s essay on the Goncourts, is arguably the most important of Raffalovich’s works, but this owes more to the attention Oscar Wilde paid to it than to its success as poetry. Wilde simultaneously praised, mocked, and dismissed Raffalovich’s work by focusing on the scansion of “tuberose” insisting on it with two syllables, in an anonymous review published in the _Pall Mall Gazette_ in March of 1885. Raffalovich responded three days later, quoting Shelley in his defense, hoping to end the feud carried out in the pages of the _Gazette_ (Sewell "Biographical Outline" 27). Never to be upstaged, though, Wilde countered with a disyllable pronunciation, also from Shelley (Ellmann 263). Aside from this spat, Wilde’s criticism is instructive. The mockery draws the most attention, but Wilde’s review claims “To say of these poems that they are unhealthy and bring with them the heavy odors of the hothouse is to point out neither their defect nor their merit, but their quality, merely” (qtd. in McCormack _Poet, Dandy, Priest_ 47). This is a backhanded compliment, yet the keywords “unhealthy,” “odours” and “hothouse” acknowledge Raffalovich’s association with the decadent school. Raffalovich is rarely aligned with this movement, (or if so, only tangentially, as a friend to Gray) so this rather ambiguous claim,
praising the work’s decadence, is a unique and oft misunderstood criticism on the very eve of the decadent movement’s brief life. It also demonstrates, somewhat surprisingly, that Raffalovich arrived at decadence before Gray.

Raffalovich was particularly drawn to men and boys younger than himself. His affective and amatory poetry is aligned, aesthetically with the “Uranian” school that emphasized relations based on the Greek model of an older, wiser “lover” and a younger “beloved.” Raffalovich demonstrated this by supporting young men, especially artists. Sewell notes that Raffalovich “got on well with young people and was pleased when they returned his interest,” but there has been no credible suggestion that his interests were more than Platonic (Sewell Footnote 63). Just as he had done with Pater some years earlier, Raffalovich “laid siege” to his favorite young protégées as a generous patron. Raffalovich’s only request, as a return on such a lavish investment, was that the recipient, in turn, should help another deserving young man at an undefined point in the future. As he wrote to an unnamed young man, “if ever you can in years to come be of use to a younger man, be, and remember that you will be paying me back” (Sewell Footnote 68). Because he had configured these relationships as Platonic, Raffalovich easily fuses his “sexual inversion” with a Christian vision of charity and help for those less fortunate. He easily translated his Platonic Greek worldview Christian, neo-Platonic framework after his conversion in 1896.

Gray had formally converted to Catholicism in 1890, but when he met Raffalovich in November of 1892 he was involved in the “course of sin” that he frequently referred to. Nearly four years had passed after Gray’s tutelage at the Vale by Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon, and it was three years after Gray’s meeting with Oscar Wilde. Gray was actively preparing
Silverpoints, its printing delayed, for press. Raffalovich’s literary career had largely run its course before Gray’s began. He did occasionally contribute short essays to periodicals, attacking Oscar Wilde’s prose style in one, and he was similarly critical of Gray’s, which likely bore some resemblance to Wilde. Gray, in turn, published a “vitriolic reply in another forgotten periodical” (Sewell Dorian Mode 31). Thus, the two first encountered one another in the pages of the London press, with Oscar Wilde operating as the third side of a triangular relationship.

Arthur Symons, Gray’s neighbor in The Temple, saw that the two men had more in common than what divided them, and suggested that they meet in person. Gray had moved to the Temple, which was quickly becoming less of an enclave of London barristers and more of an outpost of Bohemia in the late century. This was a calculated move to bring him in touch with more artists and writers. Along the cramped streets and alleyways, leaders of the Aesthetic and decadent movements lived and worked. Symons’s rooms at Fountain Court were a busy gathering place for those who made art, and those who talked about it. W.B. Yeats and George Moore and the translator Alexander Teixeira de Mattos, with whom Gray later collaborated, were among those living at the Temple at the time of Gray and Raffalovich’s meeting. Ernest Dowson was a frequent guest, and Wilde visited occasionally. Symons used his connections with these figures to establish himself as one of the foremost authorities on the burgeoning Aesthetic movement. His essay The Decadent Movement in Literature was published in 1893, one year after Gray and Raffalovich met. Six years later he published his more expansive study The Symbolist Movement in Literature, almost bookending the period and demonstrating the difficulty in defining not only “aesthetic” but also “decadent” and “symbolist” terms which many used interchangeably. The meeting between Gray and Raffalovich was a success.
Raffalovich proved himself genial and kind, unlike the writer that had criticized Gray in the press. The two became immediate friends and Raffalovich invited Gray to supper the following week. From this point forward, the lives of Gray and Raffalovich, which had been moving along separate tracks but in the same direction, become inseparable, broken only by death.

Raffalovich can, in fact, be credited with saving Gray’s life, by rescuing him from financial collapse and severing his connection with Wilde. The move cemented their relationship, insured its longevity, and fused their two lives and aesthetics together. Oscar Wilde’s importance to Gray was already in decline. Just ahead of Gray’s apotheosis as *Le plus decadent des decadents* at the publication of *Silverpoints* in 1892, Gray’s aesthetic and spiritual worlds were on the verge of collapse. The pressures of working as a civil servant by day and an aesthete and dandy by night were proving too much to bear. The cost of maintaining a public lifestyle were placing Gray increasingly in debt, and the mental stress of living a double life was unmanageable. By late November of 1892, Gray wrote to Pierre Louÿs in Paris that he feared “death, folly and calumny” were his only companions (qtd in McCormack *Poet, Dandy, Priest* 96). The tone of this letter, panicked, disjointed and fragmented, demonstrates “as he himself realized, [that he was] close to madness” (McCormack *Poet, Dandy, Priest* 97).

Gray’s association with Wilde exacerbated this pressure. Similarly, the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* attracted the attentions of Wilde’s other disciples as well as the press. Despite the fact that Gray at one time courted this attention, including signing at least one letter to Wilde as “Dorian,” he successfully sued the *Star* for libel when the newspaper directly identified him as the inspiration for Wilde’s novel. Gray could sense the gathering storm. Wilde’s behavior became more and more reckless, consorting in greater frequency with rent-
boys and male prostitutes in the Victorian sexual underworld. Like Gray Wilde saw his life as a double one. He was balancing on one hand “deliberate self-abandonment [with] disinterestedness and self-possession,” namely his dalliances with rent-boys and Lord Alfred Douglas, and on the other his more spiritual connections that produced art, and his vowed, domestic life with Constance and the children (Ellmann 390). He did not acknowledge the difference in the two lives until after his time in Reading Gaol, when he wrote to Douglas, “when I compare my friendship with you to my friendship with such still younger men as John Gray and Pierre Louÿs I feel ashamed. My real life, my higher life was with them and such as they” (Wilde De Profundis 686). Gray, sensing Wilde’s ultimate disgrace and recognizing his own desire for a higher life, sought to distance himself.

Edith Cooper, one half of “Michael Field,” recorded in her diary John Gray’s “reckless destruction of health by exotic habits” and notes how “a good doctor, seeing death sure in two years if such life were continued, broke the spell & got the fair young wreck to eat meat at each meal & take sleep in nature’s way. The beginning of redemption was made! The Doctor was preparatory master for the seminary & priesthood” (qtd in McCormack The Man Who Was Dorian Gray 115). There seems little doubt that the “doctor” in question is Raffalovich, who providentially arrived on the scene just as Gray’s “madness” seemed sure to overwhelm him. His only requirement was that Gray conclusively break his connection with Wilde.

This flirtation with madness, which should not be seen as discounting the very real symptoms that Gray endured, is another decadent trope. Gray initially considers his illness to be the result of “nerves and other vices,” while later, enigmatically, hinting at convulsions or seizures. All of these symptoms reflect the characteristics Gray praised in the works of the
Goncourt brothers. Aside from the real psychic danger he was in, Gray would have normally used these symptoms as evidence of his artistic refinement. Similarly, des Esseintes, the hero of J.K. Huysmans’s “Breviary of Decadence” À Rebours suffers from “overfatigued senses [which] seemed satisfied that they had tasted every imaginable experience” (23). It is only a short step from Huysmans to Pater.

Gray may have exorcized this particular demon by writing through it. His short story “The Person in Question” bears many autobiographical elements and was written in 1892, when Gray was twenty-six, and just after his meeting with Raffalovich. The fact that it remained unpublished, despite its successful treatment of the doppelganger theme, suggests that it may have been too personal to reveal to the general public, particularly at this point in Gray’s life and career. It is certainly plausible that “The Person in Question” was “Dr.” Raffalovich’s prescription for the ailing John Gray: a means not only for corralling Gray’s nervous energy, but also for thoroughly examining what the future might hold for his continued association with Oscar Wilde.

The hero of the story is reduced to “hysteria [and an] unappeased craving for what had once been so unpleasant” searching in vain for “the person in question” (Gray 28).

In working through the trauma of recognizing what he might become in twenty-five years’ time – the “person in question” is “at least twenty five years older” than the narrator – Gray was slowly forced to encounter the very real possibility not only of his own future, but of his present. For the “person in question” does not appear ruined or disgraced. He is “bearded stragglingly,” but otherwise appears “scrupulously clad” (Gray 20,22). He frequently dines alone, but at times is surrounded by a “strange assortment” of friends (Gray 25). It is not so much the future that frightens the narrator, but the present. It his desire to follow and pursue
“the person in question,” to know his movements and his actions, the narrator arrives at the "tragedy of his life now" which is to find this person “at whatever cost" (Gray 28). “The person in question” is not shunned by society, but in seeking him, the narrator, in the present, removes himself from society, overcome by a “mania” to find the person “for completeness” (Gray 28). His nights are spent restlessly, repeating over and over “‘What shall I do? What shall I do?’” (Gray 28). In this “Paterian Nightmare,” the future has destroyed the narrator’s present, and he is reduced, like an addict, to the pursuit of continued pulsations of following and knowing “the person in question.” Gray must have recognized in writing “The Person in Question” his own life, spent seeking the adoration and approval of Wilde. The twenty-five-year span from present to future could only represent a constant struggle, with greater intensity, for Wilde’s attentions.

Raffalovich, ever the gentle and loving friend, nonetheless made an unambiguous demand, which was to become incumbent on all of his friendships: “You cannot be Oscar’s friend and mine” (Michaelson "Oscar Wilde" 701). Although Gray would not formally break with Wilde until 1893, he began slowly severing his to the world that Wilde represented.

Raffalovich’s life’s work, Uranisme et Unisexualité, published in France in 1896, is an attempt to fuse aesthetic Platonism and sexual inversion. It was the product of Raffalovich’s own struggle at reconciling homoerotic desire with Roman Catholicism and marks an important historical contribution in the understanding of homosexuality. However, unlike Symonds or Walt Whitman, whom Symonds idolized, Uranisme et Unisexualité calls for a higher form of male relationships, circumscribed of any type of genital expression. His homoeroticism is thoroughly Platonic, operating on the level of philosophical idealism and divorced from the experiences of sexually active inverts.
During this critical time, a period of intense psychic and spiritual turmoil, Gray began writing religious poetry, concurrent with the publications of *Silverpoints*, although he did not publish them until his 1896 volume *Spiritual Poems*. Thus, he was writing his “decadent” verse alongside the more pious spiritual poems that would form the volume of the same name. Some have interpreted this as proof of Gray’s “divided mind,” the dichotomy of sacred and profane that he wanted so much to preserve. However, it is a mistake to view things so narrowly. There is a definite shift in emphasis between *Silverpoints* and *Spiritual Poems*, the two major volumes of his pre-conversion youth, but there is also enough to connect the two, and to demonstrate convincingly that they come from the same pen. Just as it is impossible to divide the randy “Jack Donne’s” early erotic poems from the stern “Dean John Donne’s” powerful religious poetry in the seventeenth century, categorizing John Gray’s verse isn’t as simple as marking *Silverpoints* as belonging to John “Dorian” Gray, and *Spiritual Poems* as looking forward to Fr. John Gray a decade later. There are simply too many decadent tropes and turns of phrase to be ignored. In fact, there is more homoerotic verse in the latter volume than in the former.

An example is the complicated “They Say in Other Days,” which ends with a rapturous account of the Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross’s entrance into heaven. St. John of the Cross was Gray’s patron saint, about whom he wrote to Michael Field “[St. John] made a hole in the covering which I had woven about myself to hide me from God . . . I love him very much with a firm persuasion that I should be in hell but for him” (Gray Letter to Michael Field). Gray makes St. John’s meeting with Christ decisively erotic, in keeping with St. John’s own account in his *Spiritual Canticle*. In Gray’s poem, St. John is folded in the hands of Christ.
He lay upon their wounds, and wept the whole
Of longing that was in his holy soul (Gray "They Say in Other Days" lines 41-43).

Later, in the poem’s most erotic image, St. John is
locked within the riven Side
The Wound said: ‘Sleep, beloved, and be calm;
I, in thy flesh, made wounds upon thee balm.

(Gray "They Say in Other Days" lines 55-57)

Finally, St. John is subsumed and “cradled in the Sacred Heart” of Jesus.” (Gray "They Say in Other Days" line 64). There is nothing un-orthodox about these images; they follow St. John of the Cross’s particularly lush poetry quite well, but the reader cannot avoid the homoerotic reading of St. John “filling the gap made by the sword” (itself a phallic image) to ultimately penetrate the side of Christ and to be “taken in by Him” and made one flesh with the Sacred Heart (Roden Same Sex Desire 176). Gray simply substitutes Christ himself for a human lover, marking this among the fin de siècle’s most decadent works.

Gray continues the imagery of entering the wounds of Christ in the poem “Saint Bernard: To the Stabbed Side of Jesus.” Here the poet cries:

Lord Jesus, see, I cling to thee,
Vouchsafe me thy salvation;
Save in thy wounded Side, for me
There rests no consolation.
O precious Wound, be thou adored,
Thou open door of grace.

(Gray "Saint Bernard: To the Stabbed Side of Christ" lines 10-15)

This is one of several poems in Spiritual Poems and that are translations from St. Bernard of Clarivaux, the twelfth century abbot who wrote extensively on the biblical Song of Solomon. Roden notes that by employing St. Bernard, Gray can “make explicitly homoerotic an already carnal template: one that contained same-sex desire that had never been clearly recognized” (Roden "Queer Hagiography: John Gray and Andre Raffalovich" 166). Gray makes no explicit claim of homoeroticism, but rather adapts St. Bernard’s language for his own uses. St. Bernard, as male poet, was already operating within a homoerotic discourse that could itself hide beneath religious expression. Gray simply continues what St. Bernard had begun.

As Gray was composing his Spiritual Poems, he and Raffalovich turned to the world of theater in an attempt to further present themselves to the leading aesthetes of London. Their first joint works were compositions for the theater. Over a period of two years, 1894 and 1895, the two wrote and produced Sour Grapes: A Masque, Written Entirely in Rhymed Couplets by John Gray; Black Sheep: A Pantomime Pastoral, With Spoken Prologue and Epilogue, written by Raffalovich; and two duologues, A Northern Aspect; and The Ambush of Young Days, written jointly. The titles of the first two of plays are pregnant with homosexual interpretations. “Sour grapes” hints at unhappiness with one’s situation in life or resentment. Similarly, “black sheep” suggests societal or familial outcasts; both Gray and Raffalovich were essentially estranged from their families at this point. Neither script for Sour Grapes nor Black Sheep has survived. By virtue of their genres, masque and pantomime respectively, they were likely intended to be
experienced, not read. They may have been merely Paterian “pulsations”– an evening’s entertainment, and no more. A *Northern Aspect* and *The Ambush of Young Days* have been described as “brittle, pretentiously clever, [and] addressed to the sort of audience that delighted in Wilde’s plays” (Temple 50). However, they lack the wit and energy of Wilde’s plays, and pale in comparison. None of these plays even approach Wilde’s brilliance, and their very existence is largely forgotten.

Gray and Raffalovich’s full-length joint production *The Blackmailers* received only one matinee performance in a rented theatre on 7 June 1894. The playwrights claimed that the “mangled and mutilated” version that was produced and published had been cut down from five acts to four, leaving the audience confused. The reviews were unanimously negative. *The Times* proclaimed it “sordid and repulsive,” noting that the work was “without precedent and may very well hope to remain without imitators” (qtd. in Senelick 56). *The Theatre* pointed out the repetitions in the plot, claiming “Blackmail is levied right and left; there is nothing but that in the play” (qtd. in McCormack *Poet, Dandy, Priest* 154). The focus on blackmail and its repetition would surely have resonated with a homosexual viewer. By the time of the Wilde trial “blackmail” was easily understood as code for homosexual orientation or practice, and the “in crowd at the Prince of Wales Theatre, used to reading between the lines, could easily break the code” (Senelick 20). Only five years earlier Lord Arthur Somerset was forced into voluntary exile from England following the discovery of a male brothel in the Cleveland Street Scandal of 1889. When Claud Price, the play’s villain, proclaims his young protégé *sotto voce* “a blackmailer,” the play’s “coterie audience would readily have had ‘sodomy’ on their lips” (Senelick 21). The two characters’ names, Hal Dangar and Claud Price, similarly, are suggestive
of blackmail: there is a “price” to be paid for blackmail; engaging in such behavior brings “danger.” However, the drama reverses the usual outcome of the “blackmail” scheme by having the possibly homosexual characters act as the blackmailers, and not as blackmail’s victims. The usual victim is instead put forth as the perpetrator, creating an unsympathetic and self-loathing view of the homosexual character.

If audience members could not discern the homosexual subtext by the coded use of blackmail, Price and Dangar often touch each other, exchange “knowing glances” and engage in dialogue that suggests a deeper relationship. Recalling an earlier fishing trip, the two exclaim:

PRICE: I think that you were the only fish I caught that day. (This with intensity) You don’t like dogs, I remember.

HAL: Ah, but I have a lovely poodle now. (Gray and Raffalovich 29)

Price’s “catch” suggests an earlier, more intimate relationship. And while the poodle was not necessarily encoded as homosexual in the nineteenth century, the dialogue and its intensity suggest the difference between a rugged, working dog for hunting or fishing, coded as masculine, and a domesticated and feminized pet.

The play also functions as a means for both Raffalovich and Gray to deal with their own lingering family issues. A number of characters (most notably Lady Felbert and Admiral Felbert Danger) are introduced for the first time in the fourth act as foils whose only dramatic function is to allow Hal to painfully unburden himself of his hatred for both his late father and his mother. Concerning his father, Hal claims:

[Mother] you never disguised from us your dislike of our father. You drew out our attention to his bullying, vulgar voice, his heavy tread, his untidy moustache, his physical
delinquencies, his moral deficiencies. You sapped his power, and our love at the same

time, and when we were older, and you needed his authority as a weapon against us,
you called us unnatural because we despised him! How can you disobey your father?
You taught us first to know how contemptible a man he was. Then you went over to his
side, and encouraged his tyranny over me” (Gray and Raffalovich 50).

These pointed jabs at Hal’s absent (dead) father also present the mother as the Freudian
ciastrating and devouring female. Despite the point of Hal’s fury being the moral and physical
“deficiencies” of the father, he is clear that the mother is the active agent who exposes these
deficiencies and demolishes the image of the father who literally cannot defend himself.

Turning to his mother, Hal “impetuously” eviscerates her as well:

You never understood me, mother. You fostered all my vices, all my vanities – you
treated me as if the world belonged to me. ‘My boy is not like other boys’ you used to
say . . . You hated my modesty, you destroyed my unselfishness. You were ambitious for
your son, for yourself. You did not want me happy and young, but prosperous and
approved of. “Succeed, succeed,’ you said, and you scorned me when I failed.

(Gray and Raffalovich 50)

The force of these lines, delivered at the climax of the play in long, angry declamations has “the
trenchancy of actual experience”; they seem almost too personal to hear (McCormack Poet,
Dandy, Priest 13). They stand out from the remainder of the play and throw the fourth act into
relief with the earlier acts and unbalance the entire structure. The ineffective and castrated
father along with the strong mother certainly have analogues in the lives of Gray and
Raffalovich. Both fathers were absent in the lives of Gray and Raffalovich, and both mothers
were overbearing, making this section more closely resemble an exorcism of personal demons than a domestic melodrama.

The final act also reverts to several common homosexual tropes. Despite playing against these tropes earlier with the reversal of blackmailer and recipient, *The Blackmailers* in the end ultimately reifies many common homosexual stereotypes. Hal is the product of an overbearing and domineering mother, and an absent and castrated father. While Hal may not have been the typical victim of blackmail, his participation in it leaves him (until the drama’s dénouement) “out of options” and, himself, facing blackmail from his relatives in the form of exile to New Zealand. The thought of burying himself alive by working in New Zealand, throwing away his youth and his happiness, reduces Hal to a fit of near-hysterical sobbing. He considers suicide, as many ruined homosexuals did, mixing poison with his wine, only to pull it away at the last moment, “creep[ing out of the room] on tiptoe” for a self-imposed exile (and presumed life of crime) with Claud in Paris (Gray and Raffalovich 53).

The resounding failure of *The Blackmailers* in 1894 marks a watershed moment in Raffalovich and Gray’s shared lives, as “from this date on can be traced their retreat from a public audience and public themes and eventually, perhaps, from the artistic life itself” (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 156). Gray may have felt himself running “out of options” during the period between his meeting Raffalovich in 1892 and the Wilde trials of 1895. The storm clouds around Wilde were starting to gather, and the very public role of the aesthete and dandy, which was coded as homosexual, was becoming dangerous. As Wilde’s behavior became more and more reckless, he seemed poised for a spectacular fall.
Wilde’s conviction in 1895 drew the two friends even closer together. But from the few surviving letters one can only guess at the nature of their attraction to one another. Both were dedicated aesthetes, but it cannot be said with any certainty that the aestheticism extended into a sexual attraction. Gray destroyed all documents that would have linked him decisively to Wilde, leaving most of the information about the early days of the Raffalovich/Gray friendship to be gleaned from Raffalovich’s writings. In this vacuum, any number of suppositions, none of them grounded in verifiable fact, can be made. Despite Raffalovich’s statement that “You cannot be Oscar’s friend and mine,” which he apparently applied to all of his friendships (Raffalovich, himself, broke off all contact with Wilde in 1892) it does not prove that Raffalovich was “determined to win him from Wilde” in any sort of romantic sense (Croft-Cooke 215). Yet this rumor persists. Ellmann notes “Wilde and Gray were assumed to be lovers, and there seems no reason to doubt it,” despite the fact that public assumption does not, in fact, prove the initial point (Ellmann 308). McCormack claims that it “appears that Raffalovich was in fact attracted to Gray and wished for a [sexual] relationship” but this remains conjecture (Poet, Dandy, Priest 148; emphasis added). If anything, the hostile climate of the years between 1892 and 1895 would have insured that the two would have been extremely circumspect, in order to avoid being tarred with Wilde’s brush.

If some type of sexual attraction existed between Gray and Raffalovich, they immediately and firmly redefined their relationship. That it was erotic in the strictest Greek sense there can be no doubt. Raffalovich once wrote “Oh mon frère, if I could pour myself out for you like water, I would,” using deliberately biblical language that suggests (even if it did not attain) not only eros, but agape. The deep and intense love that they shared with one another
was gradually transformed into one neatly defined by familial, brotherly, bonds. Most of
Raffalovich’s letters to Gray are addressed “my brother” or, more frequently the tender and
diminutive, mon petit frère. Raffalovich was only two years older than Gray, but the use of
brother not only emphasizes the religious aspect of the friendship, but the Platonic nature of it
as well. In defining Gray as “brother” Raffalovich, thus, deftly side-steps the possibility of sexual
attraction and conceives of their union as “one of those rare relationships between two people
of the same sex: one [which is] chaste, ennobling and dedicated to spiritual ends” (McCormack
Poet, Dandy, Priest 151).

This brotherly relationship gave Gray the space to escape the stress of not only his own
mental breakdown, but also the fear wrought by the Wilde trial when those with even a whiff
of homoeroticism feared arrest and prosecution. It assured him also of a steady income, for
Raffalovich was generous in his benefactions. This freed Gray somewhat from poverty and fear:
the wolf-at-the-door which may have caused his breakdown in 1892. Raffalovich also offered
Gray something that he had not likely experienced in the whole of his life, a steady and loving
family, headed by Raffalovich’s surrogate mother Florence Gribbell. This gave Gray room and
peace from which he could contemplate the future, which was increasingly turning towards the
Catholicism he had embraced in 1890 and then allowed to lapse. From the increased attention
to his religious faith, which may have been triggered by Wilde’s conviction, Gray produced the
poems that would become Spiritual Poems, and began laying the groundwork for his eventual
decision to enter the Roman Catholic priesthood.

When Raffalovich followed Gray into the Catholic Church in February of 1896, Gray does
not attempt to explain or understand his friend’s decision, stating only that it “was a conversion
coup de foudre” and that “no one can disclose how this came about” (qtd. in McCormack Poet, 
Dandy, Priest 166). Raffalovich approached his newfound faith with a “thoroughness which 
knew no exceptions [and he] was soon conversant with Catholic devotions, Catholic ways” (qtd. 
in McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 166). This language allows Gray to emphasize the sincerity of 
Raffalovich’s conversion while preserving the mystery of it, suggesting that it was of an even 
more lasting permanence than his own because it was complete, and suffused with mystery. 
Mystery here, is understood in the language of St. John of the Cross. Conversion was not a 
puzzle that cannot be solved, but rather, a spiritual and ineffable action that could not be 
described in limited, human speech. It was not the dramatic conversion that Gray, himself, 
underwent twice, nor was it the myth of “glorious nonsense” William Butler Yeats recounted: 
Gray and Raffalovich had gone cruising in the Mediterranean in a yacht which they had 
painted black and christened Iniquity. They put in at a small Italian port where some 
religious festival was in full swing; and it was there that their change of heart took place 
quite suddenly (qtd in McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 165).

While not literally true, the tale is instructive as myth and allegory. The ship, an ancient 
Christian symbol of the Church, which had been named for sin, instead guides the two to the 
safe harbor of true religious faith. While the decadent imagery works well with late-century 
descriptions of religious conversions, it is in the simple, sincere, outward expressions of piety 
that a change of heart can take place. In this way, the myth recalls Gray’s first conversion, 
which occurred in the French countryside, in an unconventionally aesthetic setting.

Raffalovich’s baptism further fused the lives of Gray and Raffalovich together, and 
served, in a sense, as a “mystical marriage,” not unlike St. John of the Cross’s marriage of the
lover and the beloved in the *Spiritual Canticle* that was a principal text for Gray. As such it combined homoeroticism with poetry and aesthetics. Although the two men were inseparable before André’s conversion, the sense of a shared faith, which would become a shared vocation and priesthood, deepened the bond of brotherhood that they already felt. “They saw their friendship as something religious,” a brotherhood to be sure, but more; “their relationship was consecrated by religion” (Sewell *Footnote* 97). From a loosely interpreted and somewhat generic sense of fraternity, the two reinterpreted the bond as a brotherhood in *Christ*, a deeper, more intimate union.

Gray was always restrained in his affections, unlike Raffalovich, who was always exceptionally effusive. When Gray left for the Scots College in Rome to begin his seminary training, Raffalovich became virtually obsessed with Gray’s physical and mental health that grew more intimate as the two friends grew older. Along with Miss Gribbell, who had been Raffalovich’s maid, housekeeper, companion, and friend since his childhood, the three formed their own family, a domestic representation of the Holy Trinity that so appealed to Michael Field. Gribbell and Raffalovich cared for Gray as a family at numerous points when Gray reached mental and physical exhaustion. Raffalovich’s care was persistent and maternal, and frequently hypochondriacally obsessive. While Gray was in Rome and later at St. Patrick’s, Raffalovich wrote almost daily, frequently enclosing gifts of cash, chocolates and wine. He admonishes Gray to “indulge yourself, as much as possible in sleep, warmth, food,” imploring “we do hope you are well, and not tired, and eating” and pleading “We were so afraid, pauv’ p’tit that you are not well?” (qtd. in Roden "Romantic Friendship" 65, 64) Raffalovich refers to Gray intimately as “mon fils et mon frère,” “Petit frère” and “dear child,” which Gray later echoes as
“mon cher enfant,” closing most letters as “Jacopone,” an intimate reference that Gray used only with Raffalovich. Gray’s use of Jacopone recalls the thirteenth century Franciscan friar and fool-for-Christ Jacopone di Todi, whose “bridal mysticism” poetry anticipated St. John of the Cross, Gray’s patron (Roden Same Sex Desire 168). The lush, homoerotic writings of both saints profoundly influenced and inspired the spirituality of both men and allowed them the language with which to express their spirituality and their love.

As the most significant figure in Gray’s life, Raffalovich replaces all those who came before or after, including Ricketts and Shannon, Wilde, and Michael Field. He allows Gray to remove himself from London society and the influence of the fin de siècle underworld, and to recreate himself as a priest. Significantly, though, as Gray redefines himself, Raffalovich becomes figure who holds the secrets to his former life. With Raffalovich’s money, Gray escapes the threat of penury forever, and has the freedom to seek ordination. As Gray departs for Rome, Raffalovich and Miss Gribbell care and support him, as family, as Gray wrestles with the ascetic rigors of seminary life. Their letters insulate him from isolation, as Gray was in his mid 30s, older than most of his classmates who had taken the traditional path to the priesthood via the minor seminary. The lectures, in Latin, were difficult for him to follow, and the curriculum was challenging. He found no time nor inclination for the poetry that he dominated with his decadent past. Intending at this critical point in his life to make art completely subservient to religion, “Gray resolved the question of the value of [poetry] – by rejection. Shortly before taking his final leave from London to study for the priesthood at Scots College, Rome, Gray announce to Pierre Louïs that he would never write again” (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 181).
7 THE DISCIPLE: MICHAEL FIELD

The rest

Of our life must be a palimpsest—

The old writing written there the best.

Michael Field. “A Palimpsest”

In January of 1906, Katherine Bradley, who used the collective pen name “Michael Field” with her niece Edith Cooper, wrote to John Gray in great distress over the death of her beloved dog Whym Chow. She had met Gray just four days earlier at the home of Ricketts and Shannon, finding him “rosy . . . inscrutable & kindly” (qtd. in Thain 280). The sudden death of Whym Chow thrust the two women into intense grief and an overwhelming spiritual crisis and Gray into a long-distance, pastoral relationship. As Oscar Wilde had done in the previous decade, the two sought solace and meaning de profundis — out of the depths of despair. Because these letters are so viscerally personal, and because the subject of their grief is a dog, the reader approaches them with some embarrassment, peering over the shoulder at a profound and deeply passionate confession of anguish and despair provoked by the death of a pet. The letters are a remarkable account of a soul in pain, a cry of the heart and the spirit.

Bradley graphically detailed her bungled attempts at comforting the dog, who had suffered some type of seizure brought on by meningitis:

Chow was already in a frenzy – (stricken of some awful brain disease). I nursed the little creature day & night — ready at once to part with him ... Vets, said I ought to give him a chance — till on the Sunday — for the bright eyes were growing blind & the little feet
wandering in circles — that no gentle caress wd stop — I resolved to kill him ... It was in sacrifice — & indeed much for the sake of Love itself — & then through blunderings . . . I was nearly 5 hours seeking to quench that too sturdy life . . . And no prayer was listened to — And I heard the cries of my little Whym — when after chloroform — he was being driven to the vet — for the final puncture — I hoped unconscious.

(qtd in McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 207)

Bradley imagined Whym as a type of romantic hero and wished to dispatch him with a single bullet that the proud Bacchic cub would face without fear, only to be frustrated by regulations that forbade firearms within the town of Richmond. In the end she resorted to the help of a veterinarian. The experience left her frantic, spiritually orphaned, and bereft of the God she ostensibly pretended not to worship. She continues, “I . . . took down the candles from the altar of the Trinity — & was left — oh — a very brief while — without God” (qtd. in McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 207). This harrowing event plunged Bradley into a profound and existential crisis. Although she was a self-proclaimed pagan with a somewhat fluid devotion to Dionysus, Bradley only tenuously resolved her grief by accepting Whym’s death as a sacrifice, an offering up of her beloved pet to a higher power, which eventually led her to reception into the Roman Catholic Church under Gray’s careful propting and guidance.

Although their friendship was new, Gray may well have been the only one who would listen to the two women’s cries. Even their closest friends “sometimes found [them] unbearable” (Donoghue 10). The death of Whym Chow amplified the heightened sense of the dramatic and the tragic that both Bradley and Cooper demonstrated in their published work, as well as in their overly expressive lives. Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon, who had
figured so prominently in the lives of Gray, Raffalovich and Wilde and who were Bradley and Cooper’s “male-doubles,” complained of their “stilted and lachrymose,” letters following the dog’s death and their “excessive and dolorous lamentations”; as the women’s grief continued, Ricketts declared emphatically that he would hear no more about the loss of Whym Chow (qtd. in Ricketts *Letters* 19; Thain and Vadillo 265). Fr. John Gray, alone, it seems, listened to the genuine and authentic cries of fear and loneliness that the loss of their beloved pet provoked. Gray alone recognized that the death of Whym Chow represented something much more than it seemed. While different in its immediate cause, their genuine spiritual crisis was quite similar to his. Their crisis shook the two women to their innermost cores, just as Gray’s silent vigil in the church of Notre Dame de France only a decade prior radically altered the course of his life.

By interacting with Bradley, who had a much closer relationship to Gray than Cooper, Gray reopened a dialogue on poetry and aesthetics, sending copies of verse that he promised he would never write. Gray remained a companion, critic, and guide for the remainder of the two women’s lives and shared an intimacy with them that he shared with none other, including André Raffalovich, his closest friend and life partner. As Gray’s friendship with Raffalovich developed into a highly mannered and formal Edwardian association, receding by degrees from the sexually charged atmosphere of 1880s London, Katherine Bradley became the spiritual daughter and friend with whom Gray shared a frankness that only one who had a similar, intimate friendship could understand (Roden "Romantic Friendship" 61).

As a priest, John Gray could never be the familiar “John,” much less the intimate “Dorian” that Wilde used. For the Michael Fields he was always Father Gray, or Canon Gray.
Yet because of a shared history, as artists, aesthetes, (likely) homosexuals, and survivors of the fin de siècle, Gray permitted an intimacy that broke with his famously studied reserve. Bradley, and no one else, not even Raffalovich, playfully referred to Gray as “Father Silverpoints,” recreating links to the 1880’s and 90’s that Gray was tenaciously trying to destroy. Ironically, Bradley’s term of endearment occurs at the very point when Gray was actively buying up and destroying copies of his most famous work in a futile attempt at eradicating the past. As a nickname or title, “Father Silverpoints” straddles and combines both the dim past of the 1890s with the present; it links the decadent poet with the pious priest, the profane with the sacred. Gray allowed Bradley to re-join what he had put asunder, and she came to represent for him what Beardsley had a decade earlier: an aesthete from the decadent 1890s whom he could bring into the Church; an offering to expiate the sins of the past. Although Bradley and Cooper lived only eight years after meeting Gray, understanding the relationship between Bradley and Gray is crucial for properly understanding Gray’s later career. Gray outlived both women by 20 years, but in many ways his relationship with the Michael Fields informed the aesthetic of his last years and made possible the publication of his final works. It allowed the resurgence of an aesthetic sensibility that contained echoes of the fin de siècle, but which was changed and transformed by the author’s submission to the Church.

Before Gray met Bradley and Cooper, he was serving his first position after ordination as curate of St. Patrick’s Church, Edinburgh, learning the form and grammar of the cure of souls. The two women, settling into their new home at The Paragon and installing a statue of Dionysus in the back yard, were joyously pagan, and had no interest in Catholicism or Gray. The dandy that they had heard of in literary London was transforming from poet and bon
vivant into a dutiful and pious priest. As he had promised, he had given up poetry, focusing all
of his efforts instead on the impoverished members of his flock. At the time, St. Patrick’s was a
parish of about 10,000 Irish immigrants, the “most desperately poor of Edinburgh,” riddled
with crime, disease and violence where “even in daylight, the police would go in pairs”
(McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 190, 195; Turnbull 5). Despite his legendary detachment, a
quality that only increased as he got older, the former dandy embraced his new vocation with
zeal, eagerly seeking out those under his care. Writing to Raffalovich, then vacationing in
Europe, the new priest exclaimed: “It is beautiful work. I don’t want to exchange it for no
matter what. It is all so simple: there are the open arms of God, and one has just to push
people into them” (qtd. in McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 191). What seemed to have
changed for Gray was an inner orientation – a realization that he was doing the work that he
was called to do. Life no longer consisted of an outward pursuit of vanity and pleasure. He
writes, intimately, to Raffalovich:

   My own conversion in my mind nearly exactly coincides with the action of passing from
   a world of dreams to a world of things [.]. Then my world was the inexact (au fonds) (sic)
   now it is the exact. I deliberately wanted desired things not as they were but as I wanted
   them. Now I want them as as they are. (Vernon 215)

What was real and true for Gray, increasingly, was not poetry and fame, but the certainty of
the experiences of the members of his parish and the clarity of his religious vocation.

   His parishioners related stories of his kindness and humility, as he offered spiritual
counsel and sacramental guidance along with assistance with that went beyond his charge: he
scrubbed floors, changed fuses or offered household help, particularly to women, many of
whom had been abandoned by alcoholic husbands. Perhaps recalling some abuse or neglect from his own childhood, he was, at least, conversant with the effects of poverty. Enthusiasm for his vocation was evident, and Gray’s demonstrated his genuine care for his flock in letters to Raffalovich where he relates the conditions in the parish with a strong measure of clarity that is devoid of irony. He never flinched from the cold reality of the crushing brutality of poverty and abuse, but his letters always respect the worth and dignity of those whom he encountered. However, even in these accounts, he is prone to slight artistic embellishment – the poet is never truly eradicated. The world of dreams is never ultimately banished, but it is changed. His focus is not on the poetry or on the elaboration of the scene, but he uses his artistic gifts to attempt greater clarity. His behavior, very much at odds with his younger persona, indicated a radical shift in emphasis.

In a letter describing a pastoral visit to a woman who, in a reversal of the usual narrative “had drink in her” and had savagely attacked her husband with an oven door, Gray notes “Balzac could hardly have done [the scene] better … Life is like a dome of many-coloured glass – with most of the panes smashed” (qtd. in McCormack *Poet, Dandy, Priest* 192). The image artistically reminds Raffalovich and himself of the brokenness, yet ultimate innate worth, of each human life, as he tries to find beauty even in the depths of human suffering and despair. His world is far beyond literary London, although the subjects he deals with are ones that resonated with his childhood. It would be a foreign world to Raffalovich as well as Bradley and Cooper, but his metaphoric embroidery work and use of poetic language bridges the world of the past with the world of now.
By employing this metaphor and tying the scene to Balzac, Gray recalls subject matter that French novelists of the nineteenth century, including the Zola, Flaubert, and the Goncourt brothers, the subject of the new priest’s first published essay twelve years prior, could have described. This brief letter demonstrates in a very minor way how Gray’s aesthetic was never fully eradicated – he aestheticizes a moment in an otherwise unattractive scene, raising squalor to the level of art. It is, on a less profound level, similar to the way he described his moment of conversion. Gray also speaks in poetic terms, the simile comparing life to “a dome of many-coloured glass – with most of the panes smashed out” is purely an artistic embellishment. Importantly, though he demonstrates that he has moved beyond his youthful enthusiasm for “nerves” that he championed in the Goncourt brothers, and now embraces a much more wholistic appreciation of the members of his parish as fully realized humans with bodies and with souls. They are no longer “specimens” but rather souls under his care. They are spiritual brethren, perhaps even children, with whom he shared a very personal identification. In a letter to his niece he identified himself quite directly and intimately with the Catholic minority Scotland, writing “there are ten thousand of us Catholics here ... and not a few of us drink; but on the other hand our faith is unbounded and we have moments of sorrow for our misdoings which a saint might envy” (qtd. in McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 190 emphasis added). He draws, here, a close connection not only between himself and his parish, but also with the increasing Catholic population in Presbyterian Scotland, newly resurgent after the re-establishment of the hierarchy in 1878.

By comparing life to a multi-coloured dome, Gray marks the clear separation that he maintained between himself and his flock. His humility seems genuine, but Gray’s detachment
and reserve followed him throughout his life. Pre-conciliar priests, especially those in areas where the church expanded in the nineteenth century, more carefully preserved this separation than in later years, making the priesthood an almost perfect vocation for someone as aloof as Gray, and makes the intimacy that he achieves with the members of his flock all the more surprising. After his ordination, he was always mindful of the barrier existing between himself and his parishioners, referring to it as “the great wall of China” (qtd. in McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 192). Even though Gray’s working-class background gave him a measure of commonality with his flock, he never felt fully accepted, particularly by the men of Edinburgh, and never felt as united with them as his earlier letter suggests. He always kept them, and himself at arm’s length. In a letter to Raffalovich he noted, “from my desire to see [what they do] I become a little nervous, with a small temptation to diffidence. The ‘men of the parish’ are so vague, silent, mysterious, and yet they are very concrete all the same” (qtd. in McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 194). Despite the shyness – and his use of “nervous” and “diffidence” are particularly intimate indications of how uncomfortable he felt – he clearly demonstrates his respect. By holding the men in respect, they came to respect him, “because he came with work to do, and he did it” (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 194). The working-class youth who had so desperately run from the grit and grime of his childhood has returned as an adult to serve the same people from his youth. Aware of his self-consciousness and the way he thought he was viewed, he noted in early 1898, “I had prayed for new year’s gifts of humility” (Vernon 160). The working men of Edinburgh were stark reminders of his childhood and lessons in hubris.
Gray largely kept his promise to write no poetry. He published nothing commercially after *Spiritual Poems* in 1896, a volume that was intended to demonstrate his shift away from the decadence of *Silverpoints* but failed to do so. However, he privately circulated a series of small almanacks, the *Blue Calendars*, as Christmas presents for friends starting in 1894, and extending until 1898. These tiny booklets, in a way that *Spiritual Poems* did not, signaled quite dramatically his radical shift in focus from dandy to priest. In 1903 he sent a booklet, similar in content and format to the *Blue Calendars*, entitled *Fourteen Scenes in the Life of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, to selected friends.

Sands and Company republished the booklet as *Ad Matrem* in 1904, and it would be this work that brought him into contact with Michael Field. As a commercial publication, *Ad Matrem* did not bear the aesthetic marks of Ricketts and Shannon, however, the apple-green wrappers, with the title and the author’s name stamped in gold, and a familiar, distinctive, italic typeface quietly recalled *Silverpoints*. However, this is the only aesthetic statement the volume makes. These poems have a different mission. Meant to accompany a series of *tableaux vivants* – pantomimes – performed by the children of St. Patrick’s, Gray argues in a brief author’s note that the lines “had to satisfy two conditions: to describe the succession of the scenes, and to be easily understood by the boys and girls who spoke them” (*Ad Matrem* i). Gray deliberately diffuses any artistic endeavor, placing his poetry beneath the priest’s stole. As a result, these verses are not strong examples of his poetic talent. *Ad Matrem*, marks “Gray’s subjugation of his gift to pastoral uses; no sign of personal accent or the vanity of authorship remains” (Fletcher “John Henry Gray: His Life, His Poetry” 16). Their intent was to instruct, and the verses contain little that delights. The didacticism often becomes
embarrassingly clunky, as in the twelfth scene, where Gray notes the young Christ’s work in his foster father’s workshop:

Joseph has taught Him how to use the plumb
And spirit-level; bradawls, bits and brace;
He does not let Him use the axe, in case
He might chop off a finger or a thumb. (Gray "XII" lines 9-12)

The simplistic style and meter (iambic pentameter and an ABBA rhyme scheme) combined with a touch of childlike humor, ensured that they could be memorized, and their lessons retained by the children in his parish.

Two poems, one from Silverpoints and one from Ad Matrem demonstrate the extent to which Gray’s aesthetic underwent a radical change. In “Heart’s Demesne” from Silverpoints, for example, Gray employs typical decadent tropes of flowers, ivory, and gardens which remind the poet of the physical flesh of a female lover:

My garden’s face is oh! So maidly fair,
With limbs all tapering and with hues all fresh;
Thine are the beauties all that flourish there.
Amaranth, fadeless, tells me of thy flesh.
Briarrose knows thy cheek, the Pink thy pout
Bunched kisses dangle from the Woodbine mesh. (Gray "Heart’s Demesne" lines 7-12)

The garden and flowers in Ad Matrem return, but they are quietly chastened. The Virgin Mary, to whom the poems are addressed, becomes:

God’s Lily; God’s sweet Rose; His house of Gold;
His tower of ivory long ago foretold;

The Garden of the Lord; the fountain sealed. (Gray "II" lines 26-28)

The sexual imagery the flowers evoke in the first poem is reordered and sanctified in the second. The subject is changed from a carnal lover to the remote, untouchable, and virginal mother of God. Additionally, Ad Matrem draws heavily from the Litany of Loreto, perhaps the most popular document of Marian piety next to the Rosary, and part of Gray's communal prayer life at the Scots College in Rome (Sewell Dorian Mode 87). His usage here, without any irony, summarizes the ways in which Gray has shifted his aesthetic emphasis, reordering his gifts to serve a religious end.

Bradley and Cooper received a copy of Ad Matrem through Ricketts and Shannon. That a volume otherwise undistinguished in form or content, served as the catalyst for introducing Michael Field to John Gray is an accident of history. The two women had acquired a copy of Gray's 1894 Blue Calendar, and admired his deftness at comparing Christ to Dionysus, noting "The man works in religion as a worker in ivory – treats the things as lovely myths; but with a note of conviction a real classical student has, when he speaks of Apollo & the muses" (qtd. in McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 161). Ironically, the dedicated pagans noticed in the dedicated Catholic a mark of conviction regarding Dionysus and began a journey that would lead them both to the Catholic Church.

Before their introduction to Gray, Bradley and Cooper had lived together amongst extended family for most of their lives, on wealth inherited from Bradley's father, a successful tobacco merchant in Birmingham. They had a comfortable and steady, upper-middle-class income and moved amongst comfortable upper-middle-class families, which allowed Bradley
and Cooper access to a type of bourgeois respectability that Gray, as a youth, could only
dream of. They recognized nothing of the poverty that Gray had known all his life. While the
two often aspired to a certain respectability that bespoke a higher class (“they preferred not to
remember that their exquisite reveries were funded by cigars”), they were also keenly aware
that financial security never forced to them into an unwelcome marriage (Donoghue 13). The
pressures to conform to heteronormativity were societal, but not pecuniary.

Additionally, Bradley, unlike Gray, had access to upper-class education, studying at
Newnham College, Cambridge, in 1875, and engaging with Jane Ellen Harrison, among others,
who led the resurgent interest in Greek drama and paganism, and who later formed the group
known as the Cambridge Ritualists. Here, Bradley encountered a sexually segregated, all
female environment, heady with the allure of Classical Greece. The segregated, almost
claustro environment at Newnham, with its emphasis on classical texts and the free exchange
of ideas mirrors the education that Wilde and others received at Oxford. The homoeroticism
that was present in an all-female environment, as well as the emphasis on ideas and “spiritual
procreancy” had the same effect on Katherine Bradley and some of her classmates as it did on
generations of young men at Oxford. In its short history the College had developed a highly
choreographed set of behaviors and traditions. At evening dances one girl would lead each
couple, which the young women referred to as “doing gentleman;” girls “propped” one
another by proposing that they refer to one another by first names, “a delicious mark of
intimacy” (Donoghue 23). Katherine, in turn, educated Edith, to such a degree that both
women enrolled at University College, Bristol, in 1878, where they studied classics and
philosophy.
The two women refashioned themselves as Greek maenads, following, perhaps more literally than Cambridge undergraduates, Pater’s reclamation of the importance of Greek Hellenism. Here the two embraced the figure of Dionysus as a sign of rebellion and self-identity, and a ringing rejection of their staid upbringings. They found “in the figure of the Greek maenad, . . . an imaginary alternative to the Victorian Spinster,” allowing them to deflect the focus away from their singleness, and also away from their increasing devotion to one another (Prins 46). For in this environment of Greek studies and feminine companionship, the two women — Bradley, then thirty-two and Cooper, sixteen — began behaving as a couple, “[swearing] Against the world, to be/ Poets and lovers evermore,” a bond that they later configured more specifically as a sacred marriage (qtd. in Thain and Vadillo 251). Emma Donoghue argues that from around 1878 the two “started socializing as a pair, sleeping together at night and calling each other ‘my Love’ and ‘my Beloved’” (Donoghue 29). As early as 1882 Bradley was signing letters to Cooper as “Your own spouse-friend” (Bickle 63). To signify their shift in focus, they began wearing “aesthetic dress ... [rejecting] corsets and crinolines in favour of daringly clingy dresses in arty colours of peach, gold and green” that members of the Pre-Raphaelite circle had taken up a generation earlier, and which connected them more closely with Pater and Wilde (Donoghue 33). Theirs would be an unconventional relationship, completely devoted to art and beauty.

The exact nature of what it meant to Bradley and Cooper to be “lovers” and the question of whether the two celebrated their love for one another physically has been the subject of much critical debate. Early biographer Mary Sturgeon admits that their relationship was “clearly on the grand scale and in the romantic nature,” while consistently referencing the
“psychology” of the relationship, which she admits falls outside the scope of her knowledge (Sturgeon 23, 61). This suggests knowledge of a deeper relationship that Sturgeon, from the vantage point of 1922, was unwilling to broach, and stops short of describing the relationship in anything other than the most general and sweeping terms. Thomas and D.C. Sturge Moore, who published excerpts from Cooper and Bradley’s massive 30 volume collected diary Works and Days in 1933, edited very selectively – only one 338-page volume of excerpts was published — but they do not omit entries that are particularly effusive in their narration of desire. The editors introduce the entries with an extremely brief eight-page foreword, then recede into the background, allowing the two women’s voices to speak.

Pioneering lesbian historian Lillian Faderman considers the relationship between the two women to be one of “romantic friendship” and not physicality. She writes, “they would have been shocked to think they were shocking,” in a distressingly uncritical assessment of the two (210). “If they saw something unorthodox about their relationship,” she argues from ignorance, “they would have been more reticent in their poems to each other” (Faderman 210). Chris White directly challenges Faderman’s thesis in her essay "'Poets and Lovers Evermore': Interpreting Female Love in the Poetry and Journals of Michael Field," arguing that their relationship was physical. Most critics from the 1990s onward, including Emma Donoghue, Virginia Blain, Martha Vicinus, and Sharon Bickle have claimed the two as lesbian lovers (Bickle xxxiii).46

If no sexual component existed in their relationship, then Bradley’s reference to giving Christ “a vow of chastity” as her first gift upon entering the Church and Cooper’s insistence that “since I entered the Holy Catholic Church I have never fallen into fleshly sin,” are
unnecessary (Treby 180, 179). The two could, perhaps, be scrupulously insisting on the purity of their sacred marriage, within which there would be no fleshliness, no trespass against chastity, and no sin, but this seems improbable. Natasha Distiller’s claim that, “to assert for most of the writers at the turn of the twentieth century a straightforwardly modern gay or lesbian identity is thus to leave out of the equation much murky detail” is instructive (136). As tempting as it may be to read the erotically charged diary entries and letters between Bradley and Cooper as evidence of their lesbianism, there is danger in a claim that is ultimately so reductive. We can acknowledge homoeroticism; we can acknowledge passionate intensity, but we cannot go much further with the evidence at hand. The two women felt little need to excuse or explain any of their behavior, much less to define it. They were Michael Field.

As Michael Field, the two women were, at the same time, two and one. After reading The Foundations of the Moral Life, Bradley noted, “Spinoza, with his fine grasp of unity, says: ‘if two individuals of exactly the same nature are joined together, they make up a single individual, doubly stronger than each alone,’ i.e. Edith and I make a veritable Michael’ (qtd. in Vanita 121). “The emphasis here,” as Vanita notes, “falls on the strength of sameness,” as well as the devotion to unity, to wholeness, and to singularity of purpose (Vanita 121). Vanita notes that the two also “fruitfully develop[ed] ideas of difference in union,” particularly “that of the older lover and the younger beloved,” imagery drawn from Plato and adapted into a female context (Vanita 121). However, they were egalitarian in their application of such terms. Each referred to the other as “lover,” demonstrating the ways in which each philosophical or erotic framework was left open to their own particular interpretation of it. Katherine could choose to
be the lover, or Edith could. Their conceptions of relationship models were pliable enough to allow a fluid exchange of roles and identities.\textsuperscript{47}

This sense of a shared union, two women coming together with singularity of focus to create \textit{veritable} Michael evokes their usage of the collective singular for Ricketts and Shannon. While all four interacted jointly and singularly, Bradley and Cooper often referred to the two men as one unit: “The Artists.” Gray and Raffalovich never assume a joint identity like Ricketts and Shannon or Michael Field, largely because Gray’s ordination as a priest set him apart from the world and dictated that Raffalovich was no longer his equal. While the two conceived of their vocation as a shared one, it is unclear how much of this the two women could have intimated from their interactions. While Gray allows a degree of intimacy into his relationship with the two women, he was always consciously aware of the “great wall” between himself and everyone else.

In seeking teachers, mentors and guides, the relationships that Bradley and Cooper looked to were almost exclusively male, “almost always sympathetic but sexually unavailable father-figures, older writers, homosexual men, [or] Roman catholic priests” including Robert Browning, Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon, and certainly John Gray (Vanita 100). All of these men were safe; none presented a threat to the sacred union of the two women. Women, potentially, did. They found no commonality with the few recognizably “lesbian” couples of the era, and never identified as such. While they often used male pronouns with each other and were known to close friends as “Michael” and “Henry,” there is a sense of playfulness and even irony at work.\textsuperscript{48} The male persona was balanced by an almost
ostentatious femininity. The aesthetic dress from Bristol gave way to annual trips to a milliner for an extensive purchase of a new season’s hats.

The use of “Henry” and “Michael” notwithstanding, “neither had any interest in the polarized roles played with by lesbian couples such as Alice B. Toklas and Gertrude Stein” (Donoghue 31). When meeting Vernon Lee and her partner Clementia (Kit) Anstruther-Thompson in 1895, the two immediately disliked them. Despite the fact that Lee and Anstruther-Thompson described their relationship as “lovers, friends, and co-authors,” language that is identical to the Michael Fields, Bradley found Lee’s “mannish .... tailored suits” and their lack of “feminine delicacy” appalling (Donoghue 88; Thain 47). Their private diaries were even more direct: “Bradley describes [the two women] succinctly ‘Anstruther tall — & big-jointed, Veronia an untidy mess of oddity perversion’” (Thain 47). Their language and its sharpness calls attention solely to the two women’s outward appearances and male behavior and does not mention their work.

While both women envisioned their bond as sacred, permanent, and marital, they also considered it superior to other “conventional” marriages. After an 1886 meeting Browning, an early champion of their work and a willing accomplice, at least at first, to keeping the gender of the shared Michael Field identity secret, the two noted in Works and Days “those two poets, man and wife, wrote alone; each wrote, but did not bless or quicken one another at their work; we are closer married” (Field Works and Days 16). Because their work was the joint product of their shared labor, their marriage superior, even to the two most famous lovers of Victorian England. It demonstrates the ways in which art, for Bradley and Cooper, rather than children, was the fruit of their union. The sexually charged verbs “bless” and “quicken”
demonstrate the extent to which the two saw their “sacred union” as ultimately more fertile than the Brownings’ and their spiritual bond as one surpassing the elder poets. Madden notes, quoting their journals, that “women must become mothers ‘by body or brain,’ producing either ‘the child or the poem’” (Madden *Tiresian Poetics* 77). In this manner, the two employ the Oxford language of “spiritual procreancy” by developing language to explain their bond and their work. Because the two are equals, they are doubly stronger and doubly creative. Because they are freed from the domestic expectation of motherhood, they are freer to create art and poetry.

The two women recognized in the partnership of Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon, their early mentors and friends, a relationship that mirrored their own: homoerotic, and singularly devoted to the acquisition of, appreciation of, and production of art and beauty. They find, in the two, the same blessing and quickening that they shared, and which the Brownings did not: “These 2 men live & work together & find rest & joy in each other’s love just as we do.” (qtd. in Donoghue 84). Later, the two note, “We bid our guests goodnight with a sense that we have walked into friendship as deep as moving grass” (qtd. in Donoghue 84). This striking image draws its power from natural imagery, which the Fields emphasized in much of their work, and focuses on the loving and nurturing nature of the relationship itself – particularly its friendship and equality – as well as on the art that the two produced. Michael Field’s diaries and private letters refer to the Ricketts and Shannon as “brothers-in-art,” as well as “the sacred ones,” “The Artists,” or “The Brothers,” further emphasizing the bonds of spiritual connection the men shared, their “higher calling,” and their devotion to art and
beauty (Donoghue 87). By centering the discourse on brotherhood and shared vocation, Bradley and Cooper forefront the similarity of the two partners that they had found in Spinoza. While the relationship between Gray and Raffalovich ostensibly drew its power as Michel Field’s did from the sexual similarity between the two, Gray’s role as a priest subdued the suggestion of equality and egalitarianism that Bradley and Cooper valued. Ricketts and Shannon remained friends until death, but their importance to the two women gave way in importance to the consecrated friendship of Gray and Raffalovich. Because their circles intersected in 1880s and 90s London, Bradley and Cooper would have known about the relationship between Gray and Raffalovich, even if they did not know how to define it or viewed it as somehow less creatively productive than Ricketts and Shannon.

Gray was foregrounded because of his role in Bradley’s conversion, but Bradley and Cooper are somewhat muted about Raffalovich. Vernon notes, in passing, that the two found “Raffalovich and Miss Gribbell tedious and affected” (53). Raffalovich wrote to Michael Field in 1884 when he was twenty, praising their closet dramas Callirrhoë and Borgia. When he discovered that Michael Field was, in fact, two women, Raffalovich wrote back, dejectedly, “I thought I was writing to a boy, to a young man of my age whose world I appreciated” (qtd. in Thain 5). One can hear in his somewhat petulant reply, the excitement of connection, which Browning’s accidental disclosure of their joint female identity shattered. Cooper briefly recalls this exchange in Works and Days during a visit to Edinburgh, “at Low Mass the Celebrant, the author of Silverpoints: in one row Michael, Field & Raffalowich (sic) who thought he was writing a boy of his own age when he wrote to the author of Callirrhoe” (qtd. in Thain and Vadillo 282) The relative silence in the record of their meeting may speak to Raffalovich’s
shyness at his vulnerability, and the upper hand the two women wielded by the male identity of Michael Field.

The two did not acknowledge in Gray and Raffalovich a shared, productive partnership along the lines of Ricketts and Shannon. There seems to be no mention of their plays, despite a common connection with J.T. Grein and the Independent Theater. Gray had given his 1892 lecture on “The Modern Actor” at the Independent, which subsequently gave Michael Field’s A Question of Memory one performance the following year. Grein, however, did not produce Gray and Raffalovich’s The Blackmailers, which was also given one failed performance in a rented theater. The failure of The Blackmailers and their other shared theatrical work marks the two men’s retreat from the public eye in the 1890s, but the disappointing matinee did not deter Michael Field, who continued to write drama, but saw nothing reach the stage. Instead of drama, Gray and Raffalovich shared in the production of St. Peter’s Church, discussed later, which Raffalovich funded and Gray designed. However, Raffalovich’s foundational contributions were kept silent. If Cooper and Bradley knew about it, based on their eventual intimacy with Gray, they do not note it.

In addition to a strong homoerotic element to their shared lives, along with a singular devotion to aesthetics, Katherine Bradley shared with John Gray a dour religious upbringing that eventually yielded to the Roman Catholic Church. Both had a childhood of religious dissent and non-conformity, which placed them outside of the religious and cultural mainstream. While Gray’s non-conformity was marked by apathy and ignorance, Bradley and Cooper’s family home was “darkened by religious observance of a sombre kind” that followed one of the many radical political and religious movements of the late eighteenth and early
nineteenth centuries (Ricketts *Michael Field 4*). Katherine’s mother Emma remained staunchly non-conformist, although her brother-in-law, James, Edith’s father, was Anglican. And while Emma occasionally worshipped with the family in the Church of England, religion for Bradley and Cooper was always in a state of perpetual flux, wavering between a somewhat dutiful, if uncommitted attention to the Established Church, and a gloomy, pessimistic dissent. In this sense, Bradley and Cooper never fully belonged to any one tradition or confession, and their religious observation was left largely to either the individual or to charismatic personalities. It lacked a sense of orthodoxy, or belonging, and paid no attention to sacraments, ritual or ceremony. Any sense of the numinous was lacking if not completely absent, demonstrating the collective spiritual desire on the part of the three for a means to satisfy their spiritual longing. Moving away from their childhoods permitted them to rewrite the past and allowed for an influx of color and beauty.

Cooper and Harris’s rebelled against their background by assuming a “paganism” that is not so much a literal adoption of the worship of Dionysus as much as it is a wholesale rejection of bourgeois culture and respectability. Their paganism functions in their lives like the “course of sin” that followed Gray’s initial conversion, a prodigal rejection that ultimately leads all back to ultimate truth. Their study and close identification with Greek and Roman culture aligned them with the Hellenism that Walter Pater and allowed engagement on some level with the currents from Oxford. However, their paganism invited a closer connection to nature and art for art’s sake; they celebrate nature herself, rather than art’s superiority. While Pater and others looked to pre-Christian models without naming Dionysus, Michael Field built him an altar and celebrated good reviews by “dancing madly [before it] like Bacchic satyrs” (Thain and
Vadillo 28]. Yet despite the fact that Bradley and Cooper’s paganism was, on some level, a very conscious aesthetic and social choice and a type of behavior designed to garner attention for them and for their art, it is clear that Michael Field belongs to Dionysus and not to Christ. Field’s profane birth made it difficult to baptize him into the Catholic Church some years later. His role as “the Faun” in Dionysus’s retinue “was born out of [Bradley and Cooper’s] pagan mode of experience” (Thain and Vadillo 28). Paganism offered them the freedom of the maenad and adding themselves to Dionysus’s devotees fostered a sense of equality. While the two never fully abandoned Christianity, creating before their conversions a blend of paganism and Christianity, the church at this point in their lives was too constraining.

This syncretism is most apparent in the way Bradley and Cooper adapt the idea of the trinity to their own particular beliefs. The trinity is not the sole property of the Christian Church; it appears in numerous forms in almost every pagan mythology. Bradley, in particular was particularly drawn to it. The two often used trinities as symbols of their poesis and part of their shared, creative life. Because they employed them at various times and to different ends, and they were able to readily adapt it to Christianity. In October of 1906 Bradley noted, well before her conversion, that “the Trinity is ever breaking forth into fresh combinations” (Vicinus 102). In 1897, they recorded in Works and Days a rapturous Spring day when “[God] calls us in the Spring to Himself. He is our Lover: — Let it be our happiness to be with him, to be of him, to create. To create is to have intercourse with God. It would be too lonely for God in the Spring without poets” (qtd. in Treby 136). God, poet and poem create an artistic trinity, and the poem emphasizes the absolute interdependence between the three. Although this was a product of their apparent paganism, their theology is orthodox. The poet joins with God in an
act of creation, which is always be a shared act. God needs the poet (without them, God would be “lonely”), and the poet needs the inspiration from God. The two were more Christian than their outward paganism suggests. Similarly, Nature forms a trinity with the two women in “Cowslip Gathering,” joining what man could not. The poet notes “there must be / In all true marriage perfect trinity” (qtd. in Thain and Vadillo 124-25) and Nature herself steps in to join the two in marriage. Vanita notes that here “Nature [functions] as a presiding goddess, and the ‘true trinity is thus all-female” (Vanita 120). This instance is rare in Field’s poetry, as their conception of trinity always included a male figure, although it was a male that functioned on their own terms.

Whym, the flame colored and untamed Chow dog that the two received in January of 1898 was the male figure that they began configuring into their domestic trinity. Bradley ensured that their beloved “Bacchic cub” was always pagan. They recorded in their diary “He is infinitely beautiful, with every beauty, except the beauty of holiness ... I will never make him a Christian dog ... I will civilize the seven devils ... He is Michael’s own little brimstone soul” (qtd. in Treby 140). Whym was a force of nature, and they celebrated his primal brutality after he attacked and killed Rudyard Kipling’s pet rabbit, reducing him to a white lump . . . I am sorry death came so leisurely ... But the Chow! The incident has made a man of him. I shall never forget the air with which he dashed in and drank water, like a young hero who flings aside his casque and refreshes himself.

(Field Works and Days 240)

Whym was filled with “a musky passion . . . & the power of inward frenzy. – velvet manners & the savagery of eastern armies behind,” the language is decidedly “Bacchic” (qtd. in Treby
While he was loving to and beloved of Bradley and Cooper, it was his fiery and masculine savagery that the two extolled. For the two he represented their own pagan spirit which was kept in check by Victorian propriety. Whym could truly celebrate the Bacchic rites, as he does with Kipling’s rabbit, engaging in the *sparagmos* and *omophagia* of the bacchante. While the two women could aestheticize their paganism, envisioning themselves as contemporary maenads, Whym alone could act out the maenad’s violence and brutality, unfettered by conventional propriety.

Whym Chow allowed the two to develop the idea of trinity in human, corporeal terms. He also allowed for unique, trinitarian configurations. Roden argues that "the energy in that triangulated relationship came from the love between the two women" (*Same Sex Desire* 196). Whym’s strength, his power and his body could be touched and handled, and if needed, restrained. Because Bradley and Cooper focused their union and their individual selves on the singular male figure of Whym, the energies were not co-equal, ensuring that it did not accurately illustrate the Divine Trinity of Christianity. The addition of Whym into their home allowed the two to focus their love on a created and male being, in the same way that they had channeled their energies into creating and maintaining the fictional Michael Field.

Significantly, Whym had what Field did not: Whym had a body that could be felt and experienced. This domestic, human (and canine) trinity, allowed them to transform their home and their relationship: their lives were made complete by the dog who allowed “perfect union” (qtd. in Treby 153). However, Whym’s death in 1906 severed their earthly trinity, forcing the two women to find ways to recreate the domestic unity that the dog provided and to seek a greater understanding of the great symbol of the Divine Trinity that the two had long
romanticized. Although trinities are not solely the property of Christianity, in the Catholic Church the two later found language that confirmed their strongly held beliefs, “a thoroughly Christian way of thinking about love and the interrelatedness of living beings (human and non-human)” (Knight and Mason 197). Embracing the Holy Trinity allowed them to confirm the holiness of their earthly trinities.

The death of the aggressively masculine Whym Chow left both women grief-stricken, and their domestic trinity shattered. While the two experienced the loss differently, their focus and concern eventually arrived at the same end point. For Cooper, the loss was catastrophic. She wrote, “Today I have had the worst loss of my life—yes, worse than that of beloved mother or the tragic father—my Whym Chow, my Chow Chow, my Flame of Love is dead + had died—O Cruel God—by our will.” (Field The Diaries of Michael Field Vol. 14, 14v) In part because the two had euthanized the dog, Cooper experienced the loss as sacrifice. This sacrifice, she later understood, only made sense within the context of the Catholic Church, which also required belief in the Holy Trinity. Bradley however, experienced the dog’s death as a severing of the earthly, domestic Trinity that she and Cooper had consciously created with him. He completed and made perfect the union of the two, creating a type of family. Bradley discovered “in the bosom of the Trinity – sacrifice . . . blood on the wings of the Dove – the Gift of the Father – the offering of the Son” (Thain and Vadillo 341-42). Cooper’s sacrificialism became Trinitarian, and Bradley’s Trinitarianism became sacrificial. Both would arrive at a point where they recognized the interconnectedness of the two concepts, an understanding that dwarfs that of most practicing Christians, but their approaches to grief and conversion provoked a type of rupture in their own relationship. While Chow’s death dissolved their
earthly conception of Edith, Katherine and Whym, it allowed the two women to connect with the greater Trinity, which they only understood in types and shadows.

The Mass is central to understanding both sacrifice and the Trinity, yet, because Bradley and Cooper were joyfully pagan at the time of Whym’s death, neither fully understood its power. Gray would be central in helping them comprehend that both sacrifice and the Trinity were most clearly realized in the Mass. While they were culturally familiar with Catholicism, they viewed it through their own pagan lens. In her summation of the catastrophic year 1906, Cooper wrote that she had enjoyed the “Bacchic joy of Benediction at the Oratory – though rarely going to it,” stating that she had “always loved its flame-lit gratitude,” and this devotion may have planted a seed that led to her conversion (Field Works and Days 272). Cooper acknowledged in the extra-liturgical service of Benediction a clear parallel to her celebration of Dionysus. Because it is held outside of Mass, usually on the evening after the Eucharistic celebration in the morning, Benediction requires no faith, no belief in Transubstantiation, no outward acknowledgement; there is no sacrifice to assent to or confess. The one thing needed is an aesthetic appreciation of symbols and actions. Cooper sees, in the multiplication of candles on the altar and the twilight character of the service, the torchlit processions of Dionysus. Bradley echoed this in a letter to Gray, musing that her love for “all that is pagan in the Church” might be because she once “was a torch-bearer on the hills” (Thain and Vadillo 338). The two did need not be Catholic to enjoy the aesthetics of Benediction, but faith and surrender were essential for the Mass.

Gray explained to the women the importance of sacrifice to understanding the Mass, as well as the centrality of the Eucharist to both the life of the Church and himself, claiming very
directly “Benediction . . . was nothing beside the Mass . . . [The Mass] was the centre of reality” (Field Works and Days 272). As he recounted the story of his conversion in Breton the two women understood it to be a confession of Gray’s willingness to die for his faith. His willingness to sacrifice his own life for his faith appealed particularly to Cooper, exacerbated by the conscious decision she had made with Bradley to euthanize Whym. The two resolved to study “the unknown Mass” (Field Works and Days 272). Accordingly, she made the discovery first; “after reading the Missal in Latin” Cooper suddenly exclaimed: “This is sacrifice: from this moment I am Catholic”’ (Sturgeon 53). Sturgeon argues that sacrifice “was not by any means a new idea to them; on the contrary, it will be seen that it was their earliest ideal. And the reason for its triumphant force at this stage lay precisely in the fact that what had been an instinct then, an intuitive hardly conscious, but integral element of character, now became a passionate conviction” (Sturgeon 54). Summing up the critical year 1906, Cooper recalls Whym’s death as a “great mystery,” and that “in the midst . . . loomed for me an altar, as the symbol of sacrifice, of Love unto Death and beyond it forever” (Field Works and Days 273). Sacrifice allowed her to comprehend Whym’s death, and by identifying the centrality of sacrifice to the Mass she understood “his death brought me to worship fully – because he brought me to realize the need of an Act of Sacrifice in making the heart a Spirit, the will a creative sufficiency” (Field Works and Days 272). A possible reunion with Chow and the preservation of her union with Bradley after death could only be accomplished within the only in the Catholic Church.

Cooper’s conversion came rapidly in early 1907 and is marked by her persistence, her speed, her insistence upon emotion rather than dogmatism or logic. While Gray is present in
their lives after Whym’s death, he does not take an active part in Cooper’s conversion. After reading the Priest’s Missal in December of 1906, which acknowledged and confirmed her sacrifice, she accepted the Church immediately. Her confessor, Fr. Gerald FitzGibbon of St. Elizabeth of Portugal Church in Richmond was “dazzled and startled [by her] world of Art and lay philosophy”; her “experience . . . dread of confession . . . ease of exposition & simplicity of manner made him at once distrustful in his estimate & yet [he was] intimately convinced of [her] call to the Church by Intuition” (qtd. in Treby 176). She refused to read any theology, and her decision to convert was largely on an emotional level. When Fr. FitzGibbon found her “already full & entire Catholic on the central doctrine of the Blessèd Sacrament” he did not pry any further into points of dogma or Church discipline (qtd. in Thain and Vadillo 338). She was received at St. Elizabeth’s on April nineteenth 1907.

Charles Ricketts, an intimate of both women, reported that Cooper’s “conversion was worked out in secrecy, without the knowledge of [Bradley], who hopelessly exclaimed when told ‘But this is terrible! I too shall have to become a Catholic!’” (qtd. in Moore and Moore 271) This marks one of the rare instances of duplicity between the two; they had always insisted that their work was a joint effort, channeled through Michael Field, as was the careful construction of their lives. For Bradley it signaled the loss of her sacred union with Cooper, and her fears were both existential and primal. She confided to Gray, “It cost much for us who are one poet, thus to break in twain” pleading with him, “I must wait, till you know whether you can open the door”(qtd. in Thain and Vadillo 338). Bradley’s letters to Gray after Cooper’s conversion are filled with her apprehension and reticence, acknowledging her “deeply heretic blood” and fears that she would be “too wild for the fold” (qtd. in Thain and Vadillo 338). She
insisted that Gray would be the one who would convert her, and she waited cautiously for his response.

Until her own conversion three weeks later, Bradley existed in a liminal space, near, but not yet within the Church. She hesitated and did not enter, much like Marius on the threshold of Christianity at St. Cecelia’s home church. She refused to go through the motions at St. Elizabeth’s, a five-minute walk from their home, but Bradley resisted, insisting she was not yet ready for reception into the Church, and resolving only do so under Gray’s direction. Bradley expressed a clear dislike for Fr. FitzGibbon but tolerated him for the sake of Cooper. Similarly, Cooper disliked Gray, but tolerated him for the sake of Bradley. She could have made a swift, conversion, as Gray did; she could have joined Cooper when she converted, but fought against it, needing to approach the Church on her own terms. In the interim, though, she reacted emotionally, experiencing the terrible fear that God had put asunder what woman had joined.

Bradley opened up her fears and her concerns regarding conversion to Gray, carefully relating Cooper’s experience and response to the death of Whym Chow. She writes plainly and succinctly in a postscript to Gray, “This is not how it happened with me” (Thain and Vadillo 341). For Cooper, sacrifice came first, and then the Trinity. For Bradley, it was the reverse: the Holy Trinity came first and sacrifice, second, and only through the Trinity. In the same letter, immediately after she notes the differences in their experience with death, Bradley relates how she drew Cooper to the Trinity, “More than seven years ago I built a little altar to the Blessed Trinity; & waxing strong in this worship – drew my Fellow in with me along – this is my worship, & my adoration – my joy has been to discover, in the bosom of the Trinity – the sacrifice” (qtd. in Thain and Vadillo 341). Bradley demonstrates the way in which the Trinity
was the foremost image in her mind and suggests the ways in which her primary emphasis was on their domestic unity: the trinity she had created with Cooper and Whym. She only found sacrifice *through* the Trinity. Then, combining the two, she states emphatically to “I do not apprehend [underlining this three times for emphasis] any of the great doctrines of the Catholic Church – save this of the Sacrifice – blood on the wings of the Dove – the Gift of the Father – the offering of the Son” (Thain and Vadillo 341) (Spring 1907) Even this statement, ostensibly about acceptance of sacrifice, is clearly expressed in the language of the Trinity: Holy Spirit, Father, Son.

Michael Field’s Catholicism seemed to come suddenly, but in fact, it followed a similarly languorous path as John Gray and noting the similarities is important for understanding both Field and Gray. Marion Thain argues “It is essential to see the story of their Catholic faith within the context of John Gray’s conversion, and thus to reveal the crucial links between their little discussed spiritual crisis and his emblematic one” (Thain 171). This is particularly true for Bradley, who lacked Cooper’s focused conviction and sought out Gray for guidance. The two recognized in each other many of the struggles and frustrations. Both were driven by aestheticism and homoeroticism, both were products of the *fin de siècle*, and both eventually sought out the Church as a refuge from their earlier lives. Gray, perhaps alone among priests of the time could communicate with Bradley because he knew her struggle. He was more candid with her than any other correspondent.

An early letter to Bradley displays Gray’s openness and demonstrates the ways in which participating in Bradley’s conversion allowed him to revisit his own. Gray refers to a now-lost
letter where he outlined the details of his conversion, which the two referred to at the end of 1906. He writes Bradley:

You cause me a start when you allude to my conversion; you make me remember the ecstasy (sic) of those days when I wrestled with the Father of the angels, how unity and concord invading the present unified even the past, made sure the future and He came to me not to destroy but to fulfil. As I unrolled the book of my life, I saw the days when eyes had been peeping through the lattice unknown to me. I remember fits of shyness when the time came to pray. (Letter to Michael Field [25 January 1907])

Peter Anson and others have noted Gray’s use of metaphorical masks and how he rarely let them slip (Anson 135-36). This demonstrates one of those rare instances and may well be the most intimate letter Gray ever wrote, particularly following his ordination. His reference to the ecstasy of conversion resonated with Bradley’s previous study of the Greek religious frenzy and the out-of-body experience that Dionysius’s bacchantes shared. By sharing his own very personal experience, which he equates to wrestling with God, Gray validates her fears, and allows a space in which she can more fully express her uncertainty.

Bradley’s faith was much more logical and academic than Cooper’s, and she wrote to him at least once a week starting after Whym Chow’s death. After this he was never again as candid or intimate, replacing the mask that he uncharacteristically lowered. The two often frustrated one another. Vernon notes that “Gray frequently referred to their correspondence as a duel which he did not want to get involved with, but which he was drawn into because of his punctilious nature” (12). Bradley complained that Gray was deliberately obscure: “Not one of the simple sentences gives a simple meaning the meaning is scattered as the leaves of the
There is no doubt the priest was overwhelmed by her insistence upon minutiae and finer points of dogma; McCormack says Bradley “threw herself on Father Gray with a child’s trust and impetuousness” (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 212). However, Gray indulged her, suggesting Missals and companion books for understanding the Mass as well as spiritual reading, and advice on choosing a London confessor.

In Bradley, Gray found in a way to reengage many of the aesthetic and religious debates of the 1880s without fully returning to the world he had once known. The same was true in the opposite direction. Bradley’s drab religious background made her seek not only the truth of Catholicism, but its beauty. While on one level “Bradley and Cooper were quite typical of a certain type of Roman convert at the end of the century, being educated, articulate, fairly wealthy and well connected,” they were not typical for Scotland. (Thain 7). Bradley offered him a chance to exercise his priestly ministry with someone who had known Pater and Wilde, and who appreciated the way in which Catholicism engaged all of the senses. He could speak to her “poet to poet,” and could engage in both the theological and aesthetic debates that he was unable to with the poor Irish congregation of St. Patrick’s. Cunningham suggests that it was a shift of focus that allowed Gray as well as Bradley to “[switch] from one kind of erotics to another, from bodily sensuality in verse to a kind of rococo religiosity. But then, pagan sensuousness was not all that far from the lush Roman practice such converts seemed to crave” (889). Because of their shared background, Gray’s pastoral advice for Bradley is sensitive, caring, and marked by its common sense.
Gray met Bradley where he found her, and he refrains from dogmatism or rules in his counsel. Nowhere does he tell her she must believe or perform in a certain way in order to be received. Instead, he reminds her of Augustine’s commentary on the First Epistle of John as a type of first principle: “Submit to [the Church] & then do what you want. The Church is democratic” (qtd. in Treby 177). At other times he counsels her concerning her frustration with saying the Rosary: “If you do not like it, let it be...the Rosary need not be said with gnashing of teeth. (Letter to Michael Field [21 October 1907]). When she pushes back against other devotions he advises “Do not let any ‘devotion’ [serve?] you more than enough...If a ‘devotion’ or the expression of a devotion scalds one, it is a refuge to protest: I love God” (Letter to Michael Field [3 June 1907]). When Bradley expresses her apparent concerns as she prepared for confession, he points out:

the discretion of the priest who reconciles to the Church is far less restricted here than in your diocese. It will be a happy thing to write a few very simple letters as a search light to see if any important parts have missed your attention. This life is of course the unimportant thing: but it would be conscious & painful if there were any uncertainties left in the mind (Letter to Michael Field [11 April 1907]).

Bradley appears to have later sought advice on suicide, a question that would have recreated links for both of them to the figures from the fin de siècle who either died by their own hands or by alcoholism or reckless behavior. Gray responds with remarkable broadmindedness:

Following the [unintelligible] life we venture to pray for the souls of those who die by their own hand, as I pray for a friend once adored; how much the more for the true & patient [areas?] of goodwill. Think of the love of God sine termino [;] metaphysical
phantasies do not exaggerate it . . . when some die, the wonder I am sure consists in the throes of perplexity subsiding into everlasting peace. No one can know what takes place between God & the soul. I do not think it can be told.

(Letter to Michael Field [20 June 1907])

The subject was apparently important to Bradley. When she later asks mentioning a specific name, Gray suggests “we exceed our faculties in presuming on the subject of his eternal soul” (Letter to Michael Field [21 October 1907]). While the Catechism of the Catholic Church explicitly condemned suicide, forbidding a Christian burial, Gray’s pastoral counsel here is noteworthy for the way in which it allows both of them expansiveness of thought by focuses on the mystery of God and the limitlessness of God’s love. One can easily imagine Bradley scrupulously pressing him on each particular Church law, which Gray prudently redirects.

Gray does not seem to address the two items that are most specific for Katherine Bradley, namely her relationship with Cooper, and the place of Whym Chow in their understanding of the Holy Trinity. Cooper almost called off her baptism when she feared “there is nothing this young seminarist might not misconceive ... even our Sacred Relation” (Donoghue 126). Relenting and making her confession she “made a ‘vow of chastity’ as a gift to God, and [Fr. Fitzgibbon] did not probe” (Donoghue 127). Just days before her baptism Cooper excerpts a letter from Gray in which he emphasizes that “The soul’s life . . . is between the Soul & its Lover. He wd. Make Michael feel this – Henry must not be mixed in the matter. ‘There is no communication in this between Michael & Henry,’” she adds, angrily, “I begin to fear he will tamper with our bond” (Treby 177). Given Gray’s very practical pastoral advice to Bradley, Cooper appears to be misreading his intentions. It seems likely that he is pointing out
that the two need not worry over the details of their individual conversions – the soul’s life is between the Soul & its Lover (i.e. God) – and that the Church will join rather than separate Michael and Henry. Gray demonstrates their union in Christ, an idea that he and Raffalovich applied to their own lives. He is, in fact, confirming their relationship with the Trinity: Cooper, Bradley, and Christ are now united in a new Trinity of Love.

Gray never cautions Bradley against what some might see as a blasphemous reconfiguration of the Holy Trinity that was present from the first stirrings of conversion and remained until Cooper’s death. In the same early 1907 letter in which Bradley related Whym’s death, she tells Gray:

Before Whymmie was brought home to be buried at the foot of the altar of Dionysus in the garden – we were able to pray & to ask God to accept that sacrifice – and presently – a month or two after – at Rottingdean – I was quietly told of Heaven; that we three Henry, Whymmie, & Michael were accepted – to reflect as in a dark pond – the Holy Trinity. It is our mystery – it is our secret [underlined three times for emphasis]. In return for our blasphemy, Whymmie returned to us to be our guardian angel, (jube haec perferri per manus sancti angeli tui in sublime altare tuum)56 & little living Flame of Love. He is my little Fellow, as Henry is my Fellow. (qtd. in Thain and Vadillo 340)

Significantly, Bradley does not ask Gray for advice as she reconfigures the Holy Trinity; she tells him what has occurred. She describes their sacrificial offering of Whym to God by using the same words that the priest recites after consecrating the elements in the Mass. Gray never reacts to this, nor does he tell the women that their understanding of sacrifice and Trinity must be amended. The two might, perhaps, be forgiven a grief-stricken moment of sacrilege in their
anguish, but Gray seems never to have corrected her. The sacrifice of Whym Chow and his position as guardian angel who reconnects the trinity that death had severed, forms an integral part of the rest of Michael Field’s life, and they spent the remainder of their earthly lives pondering the mystery of his death and apotheosis. Whym’s death and transfiguration allows a closer connection between the two women as their relationship adapted to their new Catholic life and reconfigures their relationship to be as part of the Trinity. Bradley emphasizes secrecy and mystery, words that have both pagan and Christian resonance, and which describe something that cannot be explained in human speech because it passes human understanding. As the mystic saints before her, Bradly would employ poetry, using the language of paradox and metaphor, to understand that which could not be explained.

Bradley and Cooper expressed Whym Chow’s place in their trinity soon after his death, in *Wilde Honey From Various Thyme*, published in 1908. In the poem simply named “Whym Chow,” they introduce the idea of Whym functioning in the role of the Holy Spirit by drawing attention to other animals that had helped the saints:

Nay, thou art my eternal attribute:
Not as Saint Agnes in loose arms her lamb, –
The very essence of the thing I am:
And, as the lion, at Saint Jerome’s suit,
Stood ever at his right hand, scanning mute
The hollows of the fountainous earth, whence swam,
Emergent from the welter, sire and dam:
While Jerome with no knowledge of the brute
Beside him, wrote of later times, of curse,
Bloodsheed, and bitter exile, verse on verse
Murmuring above this manuscript [in awe
The lion watched his lord, the Vulgate grew],\textsuperscript{57}
So it was wont to be betwixt us two –

How still thou lay’st deep-nosing on thy paw! (Field "Whym Chow")

Whym is the women’s “eternal attribute” and the “very essence of the thing I am,” thus providing an extension of their life and work. He provides companionship and comfort, attributes of the Holy Spirit after Christ’s Ascension, by laying “deep-nosing” on his paw “betwixt us two.” The dog acts as St. Agnes’s lamb or St. Jerome’s lion, a third, non-human conduit of the divine.\textsuperscript{58}

The clearest equation of Whym with the Holy Spirit is made in the poem “V: Trinity” in the volume dedicated to him, Whym Chow: Flame of Love. This exquisite limited edition of 25 copies, complete with a russet suede cover that evoked the dog’s coat, was not designed for the public but only for a few select friends. It functions as a “luxurious mass for the dog,” a requiem for the death of their most beloved companion (Thain 188).

I did not love him for myself alone:
I loved him that he loved my dearest love.
O God, no blasphemy
It is to feel we loved in trinity,
To tell Thee that I loved him as Thy Dove
Is loved, and is Thy own,
That comforted the moan
Of Thy Beloved, when earth could give no balm
And in Thy Presence makes His tenderest calm.
So I possess this creature of Love's flame,
So loving what I love he lives from me;
Not white, a thing of fire,
Of seraph plumed limbs and one desire,
That is my heart's own, and shall ever be:
An animal — with aim
Thy Dove avers the same. . . .
O symbol of our perfect union, strange

Unconscious Bearer of Love's interchange. (Field "V: Trinity")

The clear comparison of Whym with the Holy Spirit, occurs in line five when the poet notes she
“Loved him as Thy Dove / Is loved, and is Thy own.” For the two women, Whym becomes the
third element of their trinity, completing their bond and sanctifying it. Although the poems
were initially drafted just after Whym’s death, Bradley published the volume in 1914, soon
after Cooper’s death and just before her own. Thain suggests that most of the poems were
written by Cooper, but the authorial “I” here is complicated, as Bradley edited and published
the volume some eight years after their composition. Thus, either woman could be speaking
and insisting“I did not love him for myself alone: / I loved him that he loved my dearest love.”
When taken together, these two poems demonstrate how Bradley and Cooper conceived
Whym’s role as mediator and comforter. It is Whym, perhaps more than God, who knit the
two women together. The poet does not excuse this potentially blasphemous conception of their domestic union, stating “O God, no blasphemy / It is to feel we loved in trinity.” As Bradley had done earlier in her letter to Gray when she discussed Whym returning as guardian angel, the poet does not ask, she states, and she states clearly. Similarly, she uses a clearly implied, if not stated logic, “does the devout Christian not adore the dove, the material symbol of the Holy Trinity? So why not a chow dog?” (Roden "Michael Field" 201)

While Michael Field shared theology and poetry with John Gray, he does not seem to have commented on their particular understanding of the Trinity. His counsel on the doctrine of the Trinity was apophatic, insisting that it ultimately cannot be understood, only believed. Soon after her Confirmation, he wrote to Bradley, “It is the mystery of the Blessed Trinity before which we gasp. Where the intelligence cannot receive an impression, those who possess it present the imagination – in vain . . . God is in all ways eternal [strange?] in the abyss of intolerable light” (Gray Letter to Michael Field) 28 July 1908. He does not state that those who possess intelligence, impression, or even imagination should not contemplate or even hypothesize about the nature of the Trinity, only that God always remain ineffable.

These conversations of poetry and theology, though, at once bold, fresh, and unexpected, reengaged Gray’s poetic sense, allowing him to cautiously begin writing again. He was in a poetic desert from 1900 to 1920, partly because of his profession, his construction of St. Peter’s, and his estrangement from literary London (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 225). He expressed his frustration to Bradley, : “I am about once more, not good for much even in comparison with the week before last: back to my going & coming and the scraps with which my soul is nourished. I am expiating: When I should have chosen things I cared for nothing but
words: Now things grind my face and I pine for words” (Letter to Michael Field [17 December 1907]). The following year he enclosed a poem, entitled “The Emperor and the Bird” with the cryptic note “It shows well how the remnants of my talents are limited – by the queer“ (Letter to Michael Field [29 December 1908]).

Too sore upon a human frame: too great
This heavy priesthood, royalty, immense
Fatigue, the office of the exalted Bonze:
Lonely, endeavourless, terrific state,
From inattentive eyes too closely screened,
In sombre courts of adamant and bronze,
Time polished and from age to age patined,
And quaking service all his recompense.

His sparrow, in the broad air, where he plays,
Delighted, in much light, with many a shrill
Contention, summoned, drops, a parachute:
By gardens and by devious covered ways
Sweeps silent, to the sacred hall addressed,
A satin flesh mailed mamelukes salute,
Wheels steadily to the Presence, preens his breast,
Waits gaily, back and forth, the sovereign will. (Gray "The Emperor and the Bird")
Gray’s inspiration came from his reading of the late emperor and empress mother of China, and the ways in which the emperor functioned as both priest as well as ruler (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 192). There is a clear re-engagement with some decadent tropes: the sense of weight figurative and literal that the emperor carries, the fatigue, the screened eyes, the detail of adamant and bronze, the gardens, the devious covered ways, as well as the satin flesh. The emperor, an archaic, crushed figure who wields great power yet is not free, contrasts with the sparrow, who holds no earthly power, but yet has perfect freedom.

Additionally, the poem has a sense of ennui, of boredom or drowsiness that recalls not only the fin de siècle, but Gray’s earlier personality as the most beautiful young man in London. Frank Liebich, who recorded Gray’s first appearance with Oscar Wilde, noted that Gray’s mood affected him that night, before claiming “I found nothing in his speech nor his manner, which seemed tinged with condescension” (Liebich 1). Gray had written over his previous life, expunging the young poet who was concerned with the world, but it was not eradicated. His former was still visible, a palimpsest that those who knew him could read.

For Bradley and Cooper, as well as John Gray, all was eventually palimpsest, from life, to poetry to Catholicism. In their poem “A Palimpsest” Bradley and Cooper wrote:

... The rest

Of our life must be a palimpsest

The old writing there the best.

................................................

Let us write it over,

O my lover,
For the far Time to discover (Field "A Palimpsest" lines 1-3, 8-9).

For the two former pagan women, Catholicism was a chance to write their story over, to go back and revise the errors of their past writing their life anew. But as this poem acknowledges, any attempt to erase their paganism by scraping the parchment and writing it over, often results in ghostly images returning from the past, for “the old writing there the best.” The choice of palimpsest is deliberate, for women as conscious of their histories as Michael Field. It is not an attempt at blotting out the past, but rather of letting it inform their present lives.

Vicinaus claims that “Bradley and Cooper were never wholly doctrinal in their Catholic worship” as their reconfiguration of their domestic trinity and the transfiguration of Whym Chow demonstrates (Vicinaus 101). Cooper once described herself as “Greek, Roman, Barbarian [and] Catholic”; even after conversion, elements of these various cultures remained. (Field Works and Days 54). They never fully eradicated their paganism, and after Cooper’s death in 1911, Bradley reused it for poetic inspiration. She railed against the heavens, “how we loved one another then – in 1906! – the year before we entered the Catholic Church . . . the Church severed us” (qtd. in Treby 202) even as she prepared to move to Hawkesyard Priory, in order to die near her confessor.

Similarly, Gray’s priesthood was assembled from parts of his former life. If Cooper was Greek, Roman, Barbarian and Catholic, Gray was equally Bethnal Green, the Temple, and Edinburgh as well as decadent poet, likely homosexual, and Catholic priest. Michael Field allowed him to gradually re-engage with the life he had lived before, writing it over, in palimpsest. With the deaths of Edith Cooper in 1911, and Katherine Bradley in 1914, Gray buried “Father Silverpoints” and became the stern rector of St. Peter’s Church. No one
reminded the decadent poet from 1890s London, but the traces remained. From the safe vantage point of Edinburgh, Gray reengages the world, as he began writing poetry, and his one inscrutable novel, Park. He was no longer the poet who became a priest, he was the priest who wrote poetry.

8 ST. PETER’S CHURCH: CONCLUSIONS

The procession formed. Park, with his restless, distracted habit, had begun by noticing the types, the linen, the vestments, the processional cross, the candlestick he himself carried; until, moved with contrition, he said to himself:

There is nothing more beautiful nor more terrible than the mass;

John Gray. Park: A Fantastic Story

The Most Reverend James Smith, Archbishop of St. Andrews and Edinburgh, joined a procession of fifty priests and seven canons from across Scotland, ceremonially opening and dedicating for public worship The Church of St. Peter. The morning of the Feast of St. Mark, 25 April 1907, marked the completion of a process that began two years earlier for financing and constructing a new Catholic church in Edinburgh, fully aligned with Gray’s vision, aesthetics, and aspirations as a priest. Gray meticulously planned and designed the church complex to his exacting specifications, an edifice that was simultaneously ascetic and baroque, restrained and exuberant, imposing and welcoming. Entering the church from the southwest corner, Archbishop James Smith viewed the length of the unfinished nave, arranged in modest basilican style. It gave quiet homage to the church Fr. Gray had glimpsed from his sickbed in Rome, years earlier, when André Raffalovich gently nursed him back to health (McCormack Poet, Dandy,
Priest 290n.42). The walls, chastely lined with whitewashed brick, were pierced by muted glass windows that allowed a soft, diffused light to filter in. Tall piers rose to meet a deeply coffered ceiling of Oregon pine forty-eight feet above the top of the Archbishop’s miter.

Archbishop Smith’s eye was drawn immediately to the sanctuary in the east end. A half octagonal apse surrounded the high altar, fashioned from a massive block of green and white marble and forming the central focus and the sole reason for the building’s erection. The morning light glinted against gilded candlesticks of carved wood and a throne for the solemn exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. Paraments dressed the altar in red recalling the blood shed by the apostle and martyr Mark, whose feast was commemorated that day, a day chosen, Gray said, “partly because . . . the best vestments I have chance to be of that colour” (qtd. in Vernon 29). It also silently acknowledged that the first name of the church’s greatest André Raffalovich was Marc.-60 Each exquisite furnishing richly adorning the church seemed foreign, perhaps even pagan, in Protestant Scotland, yet all was completely in line with a building that would soon be set apart as the dwelling place of God.

The Archbishop could not yet make out the finer details: small fish of red and green Egyptian and Sienese stone and brass, swam against a rippling sea of Cioppolino marble that recalled the lake of Galilee; the iron communion rail fashioned in the form of the fisherman’s net; the rood, gently curved at the bottom to form an anchor, an ancient Christian symbol of hope and another nod to the church’s patron saint. The casual observer could easily miss these tiny details and those that would be added in future years as the church was completed, but they all worked together in “harmony of proportion and materials” to create the “total liturgical environment of St. Peter’s” (Glancy 1) (Nolan 11). Each decoration and feature, each small echo
of a long ago time or place formed part of a larger organic whole that was aesthetic and theological, as well as beautiful and reverent, wordlessly conveying Gray’s conscious effort to create a space wholly set apart for the worship of God and the celebration of the Mass.

The construction of St. Peter’s Church marked the final phase in John Gray’s transformation from a *bon vivant* poet in London to the respected but mysterious priest in Edinburgh. Gray had so successfully turned his back on his former life of *le plus decadent des decadents* that few, save Katherine Bradley, knew of, much less mentioned, the poetry, plays, or his erstwhile association with Oscar Wilde. His literary aspirations would return, but in an almost unrecognizable form, as he tenuously approached a form of literary Modernism, despite the dangerous name that it shared with the theological movement the pope condemned as the “synthesis of all heresies.” (Pius X). Even as Gray begins publishing again, his life in the period after 1907 becomes more inward focused. It is marked by an increasing measure of introspection and reserve. While the members of his parish loved him, none pretended to understand him. Some told tales of his kindnesses and his gentleness in the confessional, but the zealous young curate who scrubbed the floors of poor women in the Edinburgh slum gave way to the mature and reflective Rector of St. Peter’s.

Because St. Peter’s Church was the focus of the last twenty-seven years of Gray’s life, it functions as symbol for the ways in which he transformed himself completely into a priest, but a particularly aesthetic priest. It is the artist’s greatest piece of poetry, and the deliberate choice and placement of each ornament and furnishing can be read as the lines of a poem. Each item can be read and analyzed within the context of Gray’s life, as ways in which he both expressed and concealed his personality, his life, and his work. The church is the stage upon
which Gray performed his priesthood, and the sanctuary from which he withdrew from the world. It is the space where he drew inspiration for reengaging his poetic gifts. As such, it is the culmination of all the forces that drove Gray’s life. It is a monument to his aestheticism, even his decadence, as well as his homoeroticism and his particular interpretation of Catholic spirituality. It combines all of the elements of his life and represents the vanishing point at which all of the pathways of his life converge. St. Peter’s, much more than any poem, is the lasting monument to Gray’s artistic sense and his consecrated friendship with Raffalovich, but just as those areas of his life were “inscrutable,” an encrypted memorial in stone, iron and glass, a gesamtkunstwerk of the fin de siècle, by one of the few artists from that period who survived into the twentieth century.

Gray chose a portion of a vacant twenty-eight-acre estate formerly known as Falcon Hall for the site of St. Peter’s, a site which was resonant with deeper symbolism. On the surface, it was a logical and strategic site, designed to serve Scotland’s growing Catholic population, just a few decades after the restoration of the hierarchy. Morningside was affluent, unlike the Cowgate, and a mission parish would minister to native Scots Catholics as well as converts. Raffalovich’s sister Sophie related the story of the land acquisition:

Miss Gribbel told me the story of the church. The ground had been, years before, the property of a rich and intolerant Scotchman. He had a profound hatred of the Catholic Church. One of his daughters became a Catholic and he banished her from her home without pity. The girl, before going into exile, buried in her father’s rose garden a little statue of Our Lady. She prayed that the ground might one day be used for a church. Years passed. A church was required for a suburb of Edinburgh. Ground was bought. St.
Peter’s was built on the very spot where the convert had put her little statue. She was old and poor. She came to the consecration. Father Gray, who knew her story, put at her disposal a little house opposite the church. She lived there, and to her death the congregation looked on her with tender respect, and Miss Gribbell showed her every attention. (O’Brien 702)

Thus, as Gray said at the groundbreaking on 16 January 1906, “St. Peter got a foothold in Edinburgh” and the mythology began (Sewell *Dorian Mode* 702). While almost certainly a tale of “glorious nonsense,” much like Yeats’s conversion story of Raffalovich and Gray sailing on a black yacht dubbed *Iniquity*. O’Brien’s tale is an allegory of the resurgence of the Catholic Church over its Protestant enemies, personified here by the “rich and intolerant Scotchman.” Divine Providence combines with the simple piety of a young girl in an act of creation, establishing the divine origins of the new parish. The walls of St. Peter’s rose not only because of the works of men, but because God willed them to. While Gray did not relate this tale himself, and O’Brien’s version is apparently the only time it was recorded, it is a tale that demonstrates fiction improving upon the bare facts. Art shows nature her proper place. Oscar Wilde would have approved.61

While St. Peter’s is inextricably connected to John Gray, who served the majority of his 33 years as a priest – the length of Christ’s earthly life – within its walls, the building owes its greatest literal and figurative debt to Gray’s relationship with André Raffalovich and the love the two men shared over forty years. In his funeral sermon for Gray, Fr. Bernard Delaney called the church “the standing symbol of their friendship – a perfect friendship which united them
both to the Friend of friends, Jesus Christ our Lord” (174). Their relationship, as Michael Field’s had, united two friends on earth with Christ in heaven.

Gray designed the church in close consultation with architect Sir Robert Lorimer, then considered “the best architect in Scotland” (Glancy 1). His specifications were exacting; the design and execution were a product of Gray’s vision “fashioned to articulate an ordered liturgical whole” (Nolan 12). Writing to Raffalovich, Gray noted, “I am sure the result will also be exceedingly beautiful; things really for once being remoulded nearer to the heart’s desire” (qtd. in McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 205). St. Peter’s would be Gray’s artistic and liturgical statement.

In such meticulous design, Gray focused not only on beauty but on the unity of art and of vision, as well as the direct connection between form and function. He recalls, by such precision, the aesthetic education he received from Ricketts and Shannon decades earlier. Just as each part of Silverpoints – from binding, design, paper selection, typography, to text – functioned together to create one singular work, St. Peter’s was designed to evoke unity of purpose; and represented one singular artistic creation. Similarly, it also recalls the careful precision with which Bradley and Cooper, with the assistance of Ricketts and Shannon, designed and furnished “The Paragon,” the “home for [their] marriage . . . their temple of love and beauty” (Donoghue 103). Gray designed each element of the church, such as furnishings, paraments, and artwork, in a way that made each “subservient to the holy Sacrifice of the Mass” (Gray St. Peter’s, Edinburgh: A Brief Description of the Church and Its Contents 6). His creation would be artistic, aesthetic, and theological.
Gray’s artistic vision, by this point in his life was the product of the friends who had helped create him. Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon taught him vision, training his keen eye for art and its greater meaning. Oscar Wilde demonstrated how to construct a public persona and how to perform before the public with style. Similarly, Wilde showed Gray the differing forms of aestheticism and decadence, the “spiritual procreancy” of Oxford, and the allure of Catholicism. Michael Field showed him new ways to conceive of God, and a new way to approach poetry. And his eternal friend André Raffalovich showed a Christlike, kenotic love, and stayed with him until death.

The lives of Gray and Raffalovich began growing more closely together in the twilight of the fin de siècle, particularly after Wilde’s conviction, when any connection to the period of the 1890s was suspect. In 1898 and 1899 the two sealed their friendship, taking vows in the Third Order of St. Dominic and uniting themselves as brothers in Christ. These vows to God and to each other as members of the Dominican Order created a public, spiritual bond that acknowledged and celebrated their friendship and made it even more visible. Anticipating Michael Field’s assumption of an earthly reflection of the Holy Trinity, Gray and Raffalovich joined with Christ in configuring their shared relationship, as well as their priesthood, ministry, and calling. As in a marriage, Christ becomes the third figure in their relationship, the force that bound all three together. Their love for one another was made possible by, and as a result of, each one’s love for God in a shared, reciprocal exchange of love. This bond defined the two so completely that as Peter Anson noted, “it was difficult, if not impossible, to think of the one without the other” (141). St. Peter’s became and outward and visible sign of this bond.
Raffalovich’s love and concern for Gray was complete. He worried over Gray’s health when Gray studied in Rome, and after he exhausted himself at St. Patrick’s. Seeing the strain that ministry among Edinburgh’s poorest placed on Gray, Raffalovich made possible the construction of St. Peter’s. Wishing to offer something substantive to the Archdiocese, Raffalovich clearly stated his desire to provide a “means of giving suitable employment to Father Gray” (qtd. In Turnbull 6). In a brief letter to the Archbishop, Raffalovich thoroughly outlined a proposal that offered up to £3000 towards construction and maintenance of the new church, to be built in two stages, allowing Gray time to establish a congregation that could financially support the mission parish, allowing them to have ownership in the Church’s construction. Speaking boldly for himself and for Gray, Raffalovich stated that his plan had “evolved because of my deep & lasting interest in Fr. Gray,” and noted “to our deep regret Fr. Gray cannot again face the hard work of St. Patric’k & in seeking to find him congenial employment I am happy to do what all I hope consider a service to religion in Scotland” (qtd. in Turnbull 11). Gray had resigned from St. Patrick’s in December, but Raffalovich makes this argument to the Archbishop for both of them, speaks for them both. He acknowledges the relationship between them by submitting the proposal that would build St. Peter’s, but which would provide employment and vocation for his friend, as well as a statement of their friendship and shared vocation.

The two considered Gray’s priestly vocation one that they shared. Raffalovich considered a call to the priesthood soon after his conversion, but abandoned it because of his health, prompting the two to re-envision Gray’s vocation as a joint one. Gray acknowledged that the two were serving God together in a letter from 1898, the year in which Raffalovich
took his Dominican vows: “You know we have often said it is your vocation we are struggling to get on foot. We are waiting to know what god (sic) will do with his Lamentable subject – and you are just as likely to hear as soon as I – or do you leave me to find out for myself?” (qtd. in Roden "Romantic Friendship" 62). His acknowledgment here, that God would communicate His desires for Gray, the “Lamentable subject,” through Raffalovich is a rare moment of intimacy on Gray’s part. Raffalovich acknowledged the future that he envisioned for both of them in an undated letter: “What matters most to me is our relation towards God, that you and I should do his will here, and be with Him for an eternity. That is the prize, the aim of all and everything, and our history, yours and mine, does point to such a scheme, to such a condescension on God’s part” (qtd. in McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 202). Their shared calling was visible to others. Raffalovich’s sister Sophie, who converted to Catholicism in 1890, around the same time as Gray, referred to “the two friends [who] worked in a rare union of heart and mind in God’s service,” placing special emphasis on the shared life of her brother and John Gray (O’Brien 702). Raffalovich’s focus on the afterlife, and his desire that they would be together with Christ, is similar to Katherine Bradley’s fear that death would eternally separate her from Edith Cooper and from Whym Chow, making Bradley’s conversion to Cooper’s new faith vital for the afterlife.

Rather than encoding their friendship, as so many homoerotically inclined couples did in the years following the Wilde trial, Gray and Raffalovich placed theirs in the “glass closet,” which Hanson argues is a space “by which sexual desire is paradoxically hidden in plain sight” (323). Fr. Edwin Essex notes the “affectionate reverence each lavished on the other,” indicating the way in which their declared love was plainly visible (155). Raffalovich’s homosexuality was clear; his life-long study of sexuality and inversion was never hidden from the public, and
Uranisme et Unisexualite had been published in 1896. Gray, however, carefully destroyed any evidence of his, leaving only the “violet threads of homoeroticism” that were evident throughout his life to demonstrate his contact with the world Raffalovich studied with such intensity (Hanson 318). However, his association with Wilde, if anyone could remember it, whispered the love that dare not speak its name. By the time of Gray’s ordination any sexual attraction between the two was sublimated into an extremely formal relationship. Like the portrait of Raffalovich’s mother in his dining room, visible yet unacknowledged, the relationship that existed between the two was quietly hidden in plain sight, leaving those who viewed the two often at odds to understand or describe it.

Gray carefully encoded the church with elements that spoke to all of his experience as an aesthete, including his relationship with Raffalovich, but the centrality of the altar was always principal. Photographs from St. Peter’s Jubilee brochure demonstrate this sense of the ineffable that the altar and its centrality. The altar, raised high in the east end and backed by a green and white reredos, draws the eye forward and then up, along a horizontal axis of the earthly life, and then upward, via the vertical to the things of heaven. Before it Gray had spread the “first Persian rugs which reached Edinburgh” (Shewring 150). Massive candlesticks surrounding the eucharistic throne continue the upward thrust and illuminate Sir Frank Brangwyn’s massive painting The Confession of St. Peter, depicting “the moment when the Prince of the Apostles uttered the words: ‘Thou art Christ, the Son of the Living God’” a scene Gray felt “ha[d] not hitherto been presented” (Letter to Michael Field [2 February 1907]). The sacred, present in the mysteries of the altar, co-exists with the handiworks of man. The perfection of the Sacrament is only made possible by the imperfection of human artists, a
concept that is Ruskinian in its outlook. The construction and design of St. Peter’s demonstrated in stone and iron this shared work of God and Man and continues many of the aesthetic theories expressed by Ruskin, Wilde, and finally Gray.

Edith Cooper heard echoes of Ricketts noting, “The altar at Benediction a picture of beauty; almost like a Ricketts effect” (qtd. in Vernon 31). A photograph of the altar set for Benediction on the Feast of the Sacred Heart in 1940 displays a forest of candles (too numerous to count) illuminating and highlighting the altar. The careful arrangement and design evokes a theatrical set in the conscious way in which it draws all attention to the monstrance enthroned above the altar. This does not take away from the centrality of the Sacrament but instead magnifies it, demonstrating, as the influential English Anglo-Catholic priest and contemporary of Gray Percy Dearmer claimed, "art is the expression of spiritual values in terms of beauty" (4). The two cannot and must not be separated, for "the higher religion is and the better art is, the more they become intermingled; religion expresses itself in terms of poetry, architecture, music, and other arts,” (Dearmer 10). That the altar in a Catholic Church should appear dramatic and susceptible to artistic interpretation, then, is perfectly natural.

In representing the drama of the Passion, the Mass is inherently dramatic, as Oscar Wilde noted in De Profundis:

when one contemplates [Christ’s Passion] from the point of view of Art alone, one cannot but be grateful that the supreme office of the Church should always be the playing of the tragedy without the shedding of blood, the mystical presentation by means of dialogue and costume and gesture even of the Passion of her Lord, and it is always a source of pleasure and awe to me to remember that the ultimate survival of
the Greek chorus, lost elsewhere in art, is to be found in the servitor answering the priest at Mass. (Wilde *De Profundis* 743)

In a sense all pre-Conciliar Catholic liturgy retained a formal theatricality that would have spoken to Gray’s aesthetic sense; the Mass was celebrated in a sacred tongue used only among the separate, priestly caste, in elaborate and symbolic vestments, and on a central altar on which Christ was both sacrificed and resurrected daily.

Gray’s original design for the church was not completed until 1928, at which point the fabric of the structure as a vehicle for his liturgical vision was largely complete. The completed nave was roughly twice the size of the one Archbishop Smith blessed in 1907. In the intervening years the building was gradually furnished with elements that continued Gray’s theme of unity and contained clues to his life and friendships. Gray carefully curated additional donations of artwork and financial contributions from friends and parishioners, now numbering approximately 300, allowing him to select items that conformed to his view for the church. For example, a bronze statue of St. Peter, a replica of the one in the Vatican, was added as a visual reminder that “both St. Peter and John Gray – in his unregenerate days – had denied their Lord” (Hart 82). A copy of Guido Reni’s painting of the Flight into Egypt was installed opposite the pulpit. The inscription from Matthew 2:13, *Surge et accipe puerum et matrem eius et fuge in Aegyptum* (“Arise and take the boy and his mother and escape into Egypt”) silently suggests Gray’s own escape from the decadence of London. John Duncan, an Edinburgh based symbolist painter, whose work shows a clear Pre-Raphaelite influence, supplied the Stations of the Cross. In the south transept, Malcolm Drummond painted a ghostly image for the Sacred Heart altar. The massive piece, worked in tempera, depicts Christ vested for Mass, “clad in alb, girdle and
stole in allusion to His eternal priesthood,” with a crown of thorns, pierced hands, and “His heart . . . outlined in gold” (Glancy 16). The identification of Christ as a priest at Mass, a theological but not a literal statement, demonstrates the centrality of the Eucharist in Gray’s. The Pentland Hills, a favorite walking spot for Gray which were visible from St. Peter’s, are depicted in the background. Morris Meredith Williams executed a mural for the Chapel of St. Andrew, dedicated to St. Peter’s brother and the patron of Scotland. Red-haired angels that look conspicuously like Scots children are featured in the back of the painting. These two works in particular place Christ and the saints in a Scottish setting, ground Gray in the country where his new vocation lay, and are visual, inclusive for his parishioners. A painting of St. Michael dominates the west wall, depicting the Archangel immediately after the defeat of Satan, with the inscription “O most glorious prince, Michael the Angel be mindful of us” (Nolan 11). Although added well after their deaths, the painting and its placement remember Gray’s friends Michael Field and suggest their intercessions in the communion of saints. The lush details of the artwork, against the stark whitewashed walls are striking and evocative.

A small stained-glass window, high in the western wall of the church, depicts the keys of St. Peter, the usual artistic element of the Prince of the Apostles, which is repeated throughout the church. However, there is an unusual difference in the image in the window. Rather than the more traditional two crossed key found in the bronze statue and in the ironwork at the entrance to the courtyard, these are uncrossed, side by side, with chains loosely linking them together. This depiction is not unorthodox, but in the context of the church’s design and construction they suggest the friendship of Gray and Raffalovich. Crossed keys, as in the papal arms and in most iconographic depictions, are one unit. They are one pair of keys. However, the
keys in the window remain separate but joined. It wordlessly echoes the joint relationships of
the figures from his past as well Gray’s relationship with Raffalovich. As the congregation faced
the altar, in the east wall, the window in the west would be behind them, visible throughout
the Mass only to Gray. As he preached or addressed the congregation, with Raffalovich and
Miss Gribbell usually seated beneath the pulpit, both they and the window would be in his field
of vision, an important reminder of the family with whom he made his life. This small element,
which most likely went unremarked by visitors to the church, is an aesthetic way of reminding
him, and those who noticed of the most significant figure of his life.

In this highly aestheticized setting, Gray’s performance of the Mass further
demonstrates that aestheticism, even decadence was never fully eradicated. The red vestments
for St. Mark’s day evoke Wilde’s fastidiousness in dress and manner and the use of disguise.
Early records from St. Peter’s Church record large expenditures for lavish vestments. Beneath
ornate robes of silk and brocade, “he wore breeches so as not to spoil the crease in his
trousers, of which he had seven pairs, worn in turn day by day” (Hart 85). He said Mass
punctually each morning at 7:30 AM, with Raffalovich in his accustomed pew beneath the
 pulpit. “Father Gray was dignity itself,” Sewell notes, “his genuflexion at the words ‘Et
Incarnatus est,’ in the Creed was a lesson in reverence” (Sewell Dorian Mode 125). Geddes
MacGregor, who often served as acolyte for Gray recalled that Gray’s “intoning of the Deus, in
adjutorium meum intende seemed to convey the impression that if you did not hear the comma
– slurred over or omitted by the majority of celebrants – you were in danger of relegation to
the poena damni.(Sewell Dorian Mode 101). Fr. Essex noted his “dignity and decorum, and said
that he “was once reverently described as a ‘procession of one’”(159). Edith Cooper, despite
her dislike for Gray, Raffalovich, Miss Gribbell and St. Peter’s itself noted the “conscious aesthetic way” that Gray celebrated the Mass (qtd. in Vernon 31). These actions, from Gray’s careful dress as a young poet in London, to the familiar, but likely apocryphal, story that Gray had chosen the Scots College in Rome solely for its distinctive habit, to the carefully constructed and vested persona of a priest at St. Peter’s, demonstrate Gray’s early dandiacal aestheticism existing well after he converted to Catholicism.

Whereas the design of St. Peter’s Church was, at the same time, austere and baroque, the clergy house clearly evokes the decadence of the 1890s. Friend and frequent guest Peter Anson recalled the furnishings of the guestroom:

The windows were very small leaded casements, filled with semi-opaque glass, through which the pale winter sunshine of Edinburgh hardly penetrated. The whole house was in a dim, mysterious, and elusive twilight. It was a world of half-tones. In fact it only needed an invisible gramaphone playing Debussy or Maeterlinck to make it quite perfect. To think of Pelléas et Mélisande or Le Cathédrale englouti is to capture the impression of St. Peter’s presbytery – and its creator. (135)

Gray’s bedroom, Anson notes, was “austerely furnished . . . the sheets on the bed were of black linen” (135). The dim shadows, twilight, and half-tones of Gray’s rectory recall the most aesthetic home in decadent literature, that of des Esseintes in À Rebours where the sensitive young aesthete engages all of his senses in an insatiable search for new experiences. Gray’s office was furnished with “works in Icelandic, much poetry and mystical theology, besides costly illustrated volumes on sculpture, painting and architecture” (Anson 135). Additionally, despite destroying as many copies of Silverpoints as he could, Gray’s kept numerous books from the
1890s in his office but “[they] were not allowed to show their faces on his shelves. Like so many naughty children they stood there – with their faces to the wall” (Essex 155). If a visitor pulled one of the books from the shelves, “it would without comment be gently lifted from his hand and replaced” (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 219). The quality of details in both St. Peter’s and the clergy house and Gray’s “love of visible things would have scandalized Manichaeans” in their sumptuousness, while Gray’s outward comportment demonstrated extreme reserve (Shewring 163).

The peculiarities of Gray’s church and home were balanced by the Edwardian excess at Raffalovich’s home on Whitehorse Terrace. The existence of the two structures shows the ways in which both men “[split] their domiciles between God’s house and man’s” sharing the two structures in the same manner that they shared their lives (Roden "Romantic Friendship" 67). Raffalovich’s home became his salon, at last, recreating the atmosphere that his mother had created during his childhood in Paris. He welcomed every important figure who passed through Edinburgh, including Walter Sickert, Max Beerbohm, and Henry James, as well as “artists, writers, professors, some famous, some forgotten,” or anyone whom Raffalovich found interesting, including “a highly cultured Copt, a characteristic smiling Japanese, [and] a Chinaman showing his interested audience the correct way of making tea” (Sackville 142).

Visitors often visited St. Peter’s for High Mass on Sunday, then retired to Whitehorse Terrace for an afternoon luncheon, hosted by Raffalovich, moving between the two with the same ease that Gray and Raffalovich did. The two homes gave Gray access to the aestheticism of his past, but in a space that was separate enough from the asceticism of church discipline to preserve proper decorum. If Beardsley allowed Raffalovich “to eat his cake and have it too: to enjoy the
pleasures of notoriety and indulge his keen interest in the demimonde without paying the price in terms of respectability” the two homes allowed much the same. Gray could remain the aloof priest, while enjoying the pleasures of the artistic world, while Raffalovich could have his salon yet be the pious communicant at Gray’s Mass (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 174). If Gray was the inward, introspective one, Raffalovich was the exact opposite, and his complement.

In reconstructing their relationship as public figures in the Church and at Whitehorse Terrace, and likely because they were aware of their public profiles, both men “learned to master that slight and subtle shift of the lens by which sexual desire is re-envisioned as Christian or Platonic agape (Hanson 323). They turned their relationship into an object itself, something cultured, refined, and of great value, which could be viewed and studied, but rarely understood. Peter Anson recalls that Gray called on Raffalovich every Sunday evening for a late evening conversation and drink. “Had a complete stranger been present,” he argues, “his impression would have been that these two men were hardly more than acquaintances” (Anson 140). Fr. Essex concurs, “their approach was so schooled, there was an element of sweet restraint about it that one found it hard to realize they had been friends for so many years” (156). Formalizing their bond this way, the two aestheticized it, turning it into a relic of the 1890s. Both were aware of the length of their friendship and of the different periods their shared life had endured. Their bond was foundation and bedrock of their lives, and of St. Peter’s Church itself.

Their friendship remained a constant, but Gray’s aloofness continued as he grew older, retreating further and further into himself. He became more “inscrutable, enigmatic, [and] shrouded in mystery,” until his face, shielded behind several masks, resembled “Leonardo da
Vinci’s *Mona Lisa,*” before noting “it would not be irrelevant to adapt Walter Pater’s description of it to Gray” (Anson 136). Anson makes an unambiguous reference, and clearly connects Gray with the grandfather of decadence and the dangerous conclusion to *The Renaissance.* It is an appropriate image, though, Gray, like the *Mona Lisa,* remained unknowable. Gray was aware of his reserve and noted the way others reacted to it. “I know what some folk think of me,” he said to Fr. Edwin Essex; “I have to do it in self-defense. If I were to relax for a single moment, only God knows what might happen to me” (Essex 160). Gray’s comments are as enigmatic as he was. This tight reserve, the emphasis on self-defense and his refusal to relax are all unqualified. Only he and God know what he could have meant by relaxing, much less on the apparent destructive forces that would have been unleashed if he had. The cryptic comment continues the development of Gray’s mythology from his hidden childhood throughout the entire course of his priesthood.

When Gray turned sixty and observed the twenty-fifth anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood in 1926, he marked the occasion with a short poem, to which he appended a short note: “I see more beauty in the world as I grow older. I hope to write less and better with time.” He recalls some of the beauty he first found as a young priest when he saw the beauty of humanity in the poverty of the Cowgate, equating it to the dome of multi-coloured glass. His poem is brief:

> Enough of the world is mine;
> more than the envious know
> I have dug in a deeper mine
> than depths where rubies glow;
I have sailed in a fairer ship
the rim of a vaster sea
than sleep or companionship
ever were sweet to me. (Gray "Enough of the World Is Mine")

This is not among his best poetic work, but it does indicate a shift in Gray’s outlook and orientation. While Gray began reengaging his poetic gifts when catechizing Katherine Bradley, and in the process recalling figures from the 1890s, he finds in his sixtieth year that he has no real desire to return to it. What he has, after twenty-five years in the priesthood, all of them spent far away from literary London, is enough of the world. In this latter part of his life he found that in being a priest he could only, must only return to the world, and to writing. Having renounced writing altogether when he entered the seminary, Gray finds that he has not renounced it entirely. He has retained “enough of the world” and now finds contentment in his choice. As a priest, he has renounced the vanity of the world, taking on the black cassock as a symbol of his renunciation of the flesh and his death to the world in exchange for a higher, nobler calling. Significantly, though he has not renounced the world completely; he has merely has enough.

At the end of his life Gray reengages his aesthetic and literary sense, returning to poetry, essay, and his only novel. Katherine Bradley had been dead for seventeen years when John Gray published his final work in installments in the Dominican Order’s monthly review Blackfriars in 1931, but his gradual re-engagement with poetry and essay writing began during her catechesis. In many ways, his spiritual and literary connection with her made possible the re-awakening of his literary voice. If the aunt and niece lesbian couple writing under a male
pseudonym frequently leaves critics and readers baffled, Gray’s only novel does likewise. It is part science-fiction, part utopian fantasy, and part satire on the current Roman Catholic political climate in the Edinburgh diocese, something which would have only been relevant to a highly select group of people in a very specific time, and which grows increasingly anachronistic and maddening with the passage of time. Gray’s prose can be both hypnotic and maddening, sometimes at the same time, a mannerism that at times calls too much attention to itself and the reader can see the “aesthete fastidiously seeking le mot juste” (Healy 127) The fabric of the story is decorated with any number of seemingly private jokes or obscure references, some of which are available to the reader, and some of which are so hopelessly obscure, that the reader is “constantly fidgeted by the feeling that some esoteric joke is being played on him, the sense of which just escapes him” (Zaina 97) Jerusha McCormack reads the story as “an attempt by the author in the last years of his life to achieve a coherent identity, an attempt with singularly fails” (Prose 177). The frustratingly dense style suggests that Gray has retreated so far into himself and has become even more inscrutable than he had been before, as he encodes the novel with so much mystery, secrecy, and coded language that the it risks collapse beneath its own weight. Much like the exalted Bonze in “The Emperor and the Bird,” the poem that he sent to Katherine Bradley which restarted his writing, Gray seems weighed down by the trappings of his office, crushed, tired, and on some level weary of the price he has paid for removing himself from the world. This baroque meditation on calling and identity is at turns groundbreaking, and obtuse.

The nucleus for Park lies in the same letter to Michael Field written on December 29, 1908, where he enclosed “The Emperor and the Bird.” Gray describes for her the simple beauty
of the liturgical service: “There was great peace and sweetness here at the mass of Christmas: Not a breath of sound but the mass in a filled church” (Vernon 289). Gray’s words are simple yet filled with awe and wonder and a deep sense of religious profundity at the power of the Incarnation. Writing to Michael Field after the first Christmas spent in St. Peter’s, Gray’s mind returns to the simplicity he encountered in Breton. He mentions nothing aesthetic about the setting but only the peace and silence of the people and the Mass.

This is mirrored in Park’s most striking passage, when the veil of fiction seems to be drawn back, and the time between 1908 and 1934 are compressed. In an achingly beautiful passage, he describes the Midnight Mass of Christmas held in the subterranean church of the Ugandan Martyrs in the surreal landscape of Park’s setting. Gray’s prose is at the same time stark and lyrically beautiful, not unlike the physical building of St. Peter’s itself. Because the titular character Fr. Mungo Park is without a celebrant, he is forbidden from saying Mass. He can only serve as an acolyte:

The procession formed. Park, with his restless, distracted habit, had begun by noticing the types, the linen, the vestments, the processional cross, the candlestick he himself carried; until, moved with contrition, he said to himself:
There is nothing more beautiful nor more terrible than the mass; and with downcast eyes he went about his business as an acolyte.

On the way to the altar the antiphon pealed; Ecce sacerdos magnus!

The bishop, he reflected; and that was all

He recalled his days as a student in Rome, when he had assisted at great functions; and felt happy. (Gray "Park" 274)
Despite pages of Gray’s frustrating prose, the narrative suddenly changes at this point. It blossoms at the clear and vivid description of the Midnight Mass and the reader feels, as Anson did, that the mask has been lifted or the veil drawn aside. The reader experiences “the real thing” as Gray had at his first Mass in Brittany. The frustration that Park has experienced throughout the novel because of his inability to say Mass suddenly melts away as he views the sacrifice from a different angle. No longer standing at the center of the altar, in persona Christi, Park kneels on the lower step, and finds grace in the humility of serving. He seems returned to the simplicity and humility of his first parish in the Cowgate, and he finds himself now, as then, in a position of happiness and peace. The description may be the closest and most personal lines Gray ever wrote.

Park elegantly bookends Gray’s literary life, and stands in sharp contrast to his earlier, unpublished short story “The Person in Question.” The latter features an unnamed narrator wandering around London following the ghost of his former self. It is a meditation on the divided life, the narrative that Gray preferred during his earlier life. In Park, however, Fr. Park has escaped the horror of the doppelgänger and has found his freedom in the clerical state. Fr. John Gray did much the same. He finds, at the end of his life, that the collar of the priesthood has freed him from slander and persecution. Unlike the young John Gray who outran his own decadent past as poet and dandy by abandoning London and swearing off literary society forever, the older Gray has integrated the two, moving seamlessly between the world of St. Peter’s and Whitehorse Terrace. At the end of the novel Gray’s alter ego Fr. Mungo Park returns from the upside-down world depicted in the novel, where he was assumed to be dead. In the world of Park, as a dead man, the law protected him from any public criticism or slander. Gray
has found that by dying to his previous life he has, in fact, risen to a new and spotless life. He has returned to poetry and prose but has transformed them both with his priesthood. The curious law of not speaking of the dead has given him new confidence to re-engage his gifts without fear. As if fulfilling the injunction from Matthew 16:25, Fr. Mungo Park, and John Gray has lost his life for the sake of Christ but has found it.

In this way, Gray, at the end of his life, has transformed himself, his vocation, and his writing career. Hanson notes, “What I find extraordinary about Gray is the way in which he integrated his homosexuality, his decadent style, even his dandyism, into a seamless performance as priest,” and it is precisely this that marks Gray for distinction among the many aesthetes, homosexuals, Catholics, and aesthetic, homosexual Catholic poets of the fin de siècle (311). Gray distinguished himself by becoming a priest, even “the ideal priest” as he was remembered at his funeral, in full view, and on his own terms (Delany 175). He did not assume a pagan sumptuousness as a Catholic priest, he simply reveled in the sensuousness, even a type of paganism that was already present (Hanson 18). And he did this without any repudiation of the Church’s truth. Indeed, the lack of pagan elements would only be possible if the Church had burst forth ex nihilo, and not from the Roman Empire. Instead, the Catholic Church, particularly the pre-conciliar Church of the late-nineteenth century engaged all senses, from the smell of incense smoke and candle wax; to the taste of bread and wine made Body and Blood of Christ; to the sonorous sounds of Gregorian Chant; the sight of baroque vestments, statues and icons; and the touch of finger to holy water, ashes, or linen. It was, from a purely aesthetic standpoint, worlds away from the austerity of a Wesleyan Methodist chapel, or even a low-church Anglican parish. For someone who had genuine spiritual desires, the allure of the
Roman Church, as it had been for Oscar Wilde as well as Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper, was irresistible.

As a man drawn erotically to someone of the same sex, the Roman Catholic Church offered a unique space that provided “public trust and respect, freedom from the social pressure to marry, opportunities for intimacy with boys [and men], passionate friendship and cohabitation with likeminded men and a discipline for coping with sexual shame and guilt” (Hanson 297). Since physical intimacy would be strictly forbidden between members of the same sex, a third male, Christ, becomes the conduit by which the two could be intimate. It is for this reason that the designation “brothers in Christ” takes on a much more important meaning for Gray and Raffalovich. It allowed Gray to live his passionate attraction with Raffalovich in plain sight, a relationship so intensely close that Fr. Delaney could acknowledge it publicly, referring to Raffalovich as Gray’s “life-long friend,” whom God would not allow those two friends to be separated for long. Death divided them, but death has now united them” (174). This intimacy of two friends pales, however, in comparison to the summit of the Gray’s vocation, and arguably the most homoerotic thing conceivable, the celebration of the Mass. Here Gray, as priest, shares in a supernatural union with the very Body and Blood of Christ, making them present by transubstantiating them in his own hands before taking that same flesh into his own body.

This “religious and consecrated” friendship of John Gray and André Raffalovich outlived the mental and physical stresses of the 1890s and survived for over forty years. Together and separately they composed a significant corpus of work. Yet ultimately their lives, filled with the pursuit of beauty, personal companionship, and God are of greater interest. The ways in which
they managed to combine the shared love of aesthetics, religion and homoeroticism has no other parallel in the Victorian *fin de siècle* and the years before the Great War. Yet to find the greatest monument to Gray and Raffalovich, one must look not to poetry, drama, nor even biography. For these two friends, the monument stands on Falcon Avenue in the Morningside district of Edinburgh and a short walk away at the salon on Whitehorse Terrace, the two spaces that were sanctified by their love and shared vocation, and the two spaces in which they lived and moved and shared their love with others.

At the end of Gray’s short story “The Person in Question,” the main character spends his days endlessly wandering the streets of London, searching for the other half of his divided self, asking in near hysteria “what shall I do?” It is the existential nightmare, and points to many of the anxieties of the twentieth century. The ghost of the person in question seems incapable of leaving the Café Royal, where the young John Gray spent many of his unregenerate days. The story has been told by parishioners at St. Peter’s that Fr. Gray’s ghost haunts the church he built. He is often seen sitting in the baroque confessional, as Gray did, reading his breviary or waiting for a penitent. After a period of time, he gets up and walks into the clergy house. The ghost is not frightening or malevolent, it’s Fr. Gray, still about the work he had done while the priest of St. Peter’s. If the former haunting signifies Gray’s divided self, the latter displays his integrated self. He says his prayers, he waits in the confessional, and then he goes back into the half-lit shadows of the clergy house where he lived. There have been no reports of Raffalovich at Whitehorse Terrace, but it seems only appropriate that he be there, or rather, that both should occupy both spaces in the afterlife as they did in their former lives. Two friends in death,
as they were in life, defining in word and deed the ways in which aestheticism and decadence, homosexuality, and Catholicism can live together in unity.
NOTES

1 Brocard Sewell traces the lives of Gray’s siblings as far as possible in Footnote to the Nineties. At least three have questionable birth dates, and significant facts are included only for Beatrice, who became Sr. Mary Raphael OSB; Sara, who married a Rear-Admiral Arthur Tinklar, an officer from the Royal Navy; and Alexander, who studied for the priesthood but did not take orders. It seems that few of Gray’s immediate family distinguished themselves enough for Gray to mention them, and he was remained notoriously circumspect about his family. (Sewell
Footnote 2)

2 “Crossing the Bar” is not Tennyson’s last poem. His (verse) play The Foresters, with incidental music by Arthur Sullivan, was produced in New York in 1892. A London production, mounted after Tennyson’s death, was met with nearly unanimous condemnation.

3 Elaine Showalter notes a similar “twilight” in the English novel, situating it after the death of George Eliot. The backlash she argues, was largely against the brief dominance of female writers. “After George Eliot’s death in 1880,” she writes, “male professional jealousies erupted in critical abuse of women’s emasculating effect on the English novel,” (Showalter 17). After her death, Showalter argues, the form (the triple-decker) and content (beginning, middle, and end; courtship followed by marriage) of the Victorian novel changed forever.

4 “The Wheel” appears in Ian Fletcher’s edition of The Poems of John Gray for the first time.

5 Just how Gray met Ricketts and Shannon is unknown, but Wilde did not make the initial introduction. Wilde and Gray’s first documented meeting occurs in the early summer of 1889, although an earlier acquaintance is certainly possible. Wilde did not call on Ricketts and
Shannon until the two sent him a gift copy of the first edition of *The Dial* in August of 1889.

Gray did not meet Raffalovich until 1892.

6 Shannon, for example, had numerous affairs with female models. Labeling him simply “homosexual” or even “bisexual” imposes modern terms that were unknown to them.

7 Delaney notes that Ricketts’ mother’s may have been descended from French nobility, and that her absence from official documents following her father’s death suggests that she may have been illegitimate. He hypothesizes that her background holds a clue to Ricketts’ own “secretive side” as well as his “insecurity and defensiveness” (6).

8 Interestingly, Ricketts often spent Sundays at the home of “an eccentric spinster with untidy hair” near Plumstead, where the Gray’s relocated after Bethnal Green (Delaney 15). Gray and Ricketts could well have encountered each other on the street without knowing.

9 Moore’s reminiscences about Ricketts are taken from a larger, unpublished collection of Ricketts’ letters, and are used as a narrative that connects different periods in Ricketts’ life in Lewis’s *Self Portrait*.

10 What the Rhymers’ Club lacked in terms of an “ideological center and boundaries” and “distinct organizational structure” it made up for in diversity (Cohen 154). No formal membership list ever existed, and members were only loosely defined by publication in the two anthologies published in 1892 and 1894. William Butler Yeats is generally considered the “founder” of the club, which met at various locations before settling on the Olde Cheshire Cheese pub in Fleet Street. However, despite Yeats’s association with various Irish Nationalist parties, The Rhymers’ Club included members and guests from aesthetic and decadent circles,
as well as members of the Irish Literary Renaissance and Irish Nationalist parties, Scots nationalists, English, publishers, and artists.

11 Beckson notes that the subtitle of The Dial was telling: “[The magazine] was occasional indeed, for only five issues, with two hundred copies of each, appeared between 1889 and 1897.” Ricketts and Shannon published a new issue when one was ready for publication, rather than according to a strict schedule.

12 Symons essay includes comments on Verlaine and Mallarmé, all of whom Gray translated in Silverpoints. Cevasco notes that Gray was among the first to translate these now canonical French poets into English (105). Symons expanded The Decadent Movement in Literature into a more fulsome essay, The Symbolist Movement in Literature in 1899, revising it in 1919.

13 Here, Symons refers to Mallarmé’s refusal to make his poems available in an affordable edition. Before the publication of a selection of verse and prose, just prior to Symons’s essay, “it was only possible to get [Mallarmé’s] poems in a limited and expensive edition, lithographed in facsimile of his own clear and elegant handwriting. An aristocrat of letters, Mallarmé has always looked with disdain on the indiscriminate accident of universal suffrage” (Symons "Decadent Movement" 862). Whereas the Goncourts’ subject matter and exacting style made their works inaccessible for the average reader, Mallarmé, only made his poetry available for a select few who could both understand (and this point is arguable), and afford to purchase them.

14 Zola published Thérèse Raquin serially from August to October of 1867, and in book form that same autumn. The second edition, with the preface, was issued in the spring of 1868.
American fans of The Old Curiosity Shop reportedly stormed the docks in New York as a ship approached from Britain bearing the latest serialized chapter, crying out to the sailors aboard “Is Little Nell alive?” This apocryphal bit of lore, however, was debunked in 2014 (Glatt).

.... Oscar Wilde, of course, is an outlier to the popular response to Little Nell’s death. He reportedly said, "One must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing."

Thornton notes in a parenthetical comment regarding Arthur Symons: “there is an intriguing possibility of close links between medical and scientific discoveries and the vocabulary of Decadence,” but he does not expand on it. (50). See also Ferguson’s, “Decadence as Scientific Fulfillment” in PMLA

Frank, or Franz, Liebich (1860-1922), a popular concert pianist of the 1880s, would have been 29 at the time of Gray and Wilde’s meeting. It is unclear, however, when he recorded his reminiscences. From the internal evidence of the letter, Liebich was a guest of John Davidson and John Barlas at a party “to meet Oscar Wilde” (1). Liebich has left little by which to remember him. The significance of this document, for these purposes, is that it records the first meeting of Gray and Wilde. The record is a typescript of a manuscript originally held by Christopher Millard, Wilde’s first biographer, and is now at the William Andrews Clark Library of the University of California, Los Angeles.

The choice of Nero is quite deliberate. Beckson notes that mid-nineteenth century historians “seized upon him as characteristic of Roman decadence,” singling out his brutal persecution of the early Christian Church (43). “By the end of the century, the Aesthetes and Decadents, rejecting the moral judgments of the historians, perceived Nero as a cultural hero, an Aesthete
(or, some might say, a Decadent) who had brought a new, curious sensibility to a declining world” (Beckson 43). By copying the bust of Nero from the Louvre, Wilde pays tribute to both Roman and French Decadence and nods in Pater’s direction: “The youthful prince [Commodus] had lately assumed the dress of manhood, on the return of the emperor, for a brief visit from the North; putting up his hair, in imitation of Nero” (Pater *Marius the Epicurean* 212).

19 Barlas’s mental state was fragile, (Ellmann pronounces him “half-demented) and his obfuscation, which he bases on hints, vagueness, and allegations, make his words questionable (308). According to Holland and Hart-Davis, Barlas was arrested for discharging a weapon outside of the Houses of Parliament in December of 1891 declaring, “I am an anarchist. What I have done is to show my contempt for the House of Commons.” (Holland 511 note 2) Wilde secured his bail following this incident. Barlas had earlier been arrested for involvement in the “Bloody Sunday” riots in Trafalgar Square, for which he was severely beaten. His history of anarchism and extreme emotions, combined with his head injury and impaired reasoning insured his commitment to an asylum, where he died in 1914 (Holland 511 note 2)

20 Ruskin underwent a shattering “de-conversion” from orthodox Christianity in later years, but maintained a secular devotion to the high-Victorian ideals of duty and morality, which were equated with religious faith.

21 Phyllis Grosskurth details the tortured journey of Symonds papers, particularly his *Autobiography* in her edition of the work, which only reproduces a fraction of what Symonds left behind. H.F. Brown, Symonds’ friend and biographer, censored his 1895 work, and Edmond Gosse, apparently censored it further. Brown and Gosse are complicit in destroying many of Symonds’ letters. See also Sarah Heidt’s article from *Victorian Studies*
John Henry Newman and Edward Bouverie Pusey are usually marked as the leaders of the Tractarian movement, and their choices reflect the two possible ways forward after the movement ended. Newman and Henry Edward Manning, resigned their Anglican orders and entered the Catholic Church, later becoming Cardinals and leading figures in the English Catholic Church. Frederick Faber and Gerard Manley Hopkins, both at Oxford during Newman’s time joined him. Pusey and John Keble, who argued loudly in the Tracts for the Times, silently made their peace with the Anglican Church. A remnant of the Movement remained with Pusey, but lacked clearly defined objectives.

Hilliard’s article “UnEnglish and Unmanly: Anglo-Catholicism and Homosexuality” is critical for understanding the Ritualist movement within the Anglican Church. He argues that public fears of Catholic practices and “popery” creeping into the Anglican Church culminated in the 1889 ecclesiastical trial of Edward King, Bishop of Lincoln whom Norman claims “embodied all the Tractarian characteristics which Protestants held in special abhorrence” (qtd. in Hilliard 189). King was charged with using lighted candles on the altar, celebrating the Holy Communion in an eastward position and pronouncing the absolution with the sign of the cross, and other actions that are now seen as normative in the Anglican Church, but which were novel in the nineteenth century. Chapter four of Ellis Hanson’s Decadence and Catholicism points out King’s likely homosexuality and “the spirit of romantic love he engendered among his male disciples” (which existed along a continuum from Newman) along with the “uncanny” similarities between “King’s defense of ritualism and Wilde’s defense of aestheticism (Hanson 256-57). Newton’s article in Ecclesiastical Law Journal details the specific charges brought against King, and the ramifications of the ecclesiastical trial.
Though outside the scope of this project, the pedigree of Marmaduke Langdale is worth mentioning, as it combines many themes that were important to Gray and his search for status and identity. Gray’s friend Marmaduke was descended from the first Baron Langdale, his namesake, who was knighted by Charles I in 1628, and who distinguished himself in battle during the English Civil Wars, particularly in campaigns in Ormskirk and Malpas as the leader of the “Northern Horse” brigade (Hopper). Exiled to the continent for his Royalist sympathies during the Interregnum, Langdale converted to Roman Catholicism at some point between 1649 and 1653 in an apparent attempt at reclaiming his family’s ancient heritage. His grandfather, Anthony, had been a “staunch Catholic,” fleeing Tudor England for Rome rather than submitting to the Anglican Church in the 1570s (Sunderland 23). Langdale had been baptized an Anglican in 1598, at the height of anti-Catholic persecutions, though this initially seems more a matter of expediency and safety than piety. Despite the fact that the Stuart court and the Anglican Church were, at the time, largely High-Church and tolerant of ritualism, Langdale was not merely “conforming Protestant” but “possibly Puritan,” until he experienced a profound religious epiphany in Rome in the early 1650s (Newman Old Service 220). This conversion was a radical about face, “excit[ing …] resentment [from English expatriates] at his religious fierceness” (Newman Royalist Officers 223). However, his refusal to associate with other members of the Catholic nobility in the exiled court of Charles I’s widow Queen Henrietta Maria in France, demonstrates that his conversion was not strictly motivated by political ambition, but was the result of deep spirituality. Despite his royal favor, Baron Langdale experienced the ups and downs of fortune. While raised to the peerage by Charles II after the restoration, Langdale pled poverty and ill health and did not attend the king’s coronation in
1661. He died the following August, without the ministrations or absolution from a priest. The pattern of hereditary honor, ancestral Catholicism and temporal poverty would be repeated 200 years later. Sewell includes an appendix on Langdale in Footnote to the Nineties.

25 Originally the Sardinian embassy chapel, the Church of St. Anselm and St. Cecelia is dedicated to the eleventh-century Archbishop of Canterbury and the second or third-century virgin martyr and patroness of music. The later figures prominently in the conclusion to Pater’s Marius the Epicurean. Catholic Churches were few in number during the nineteenth century, and opted for the one closest to The Temple, where he lived at the time. Nonetheless, the parish has a coincidental aesthetic connection.

26 Ellman points out that André Raffalovich pseudonymously recalled this florid twist, very much consistent with decadent tropes, in his bitter essay remembering Wilde. Published in Blackfriars in 1927, the editorial preface to Raffalovich’s article notes that for “the bulk of our readers … the name of Wilde is only a faint memory,” a somber reminder that in one generation Wilde’s name had faded from public consciousness (Michaelson "Oscar Wilde" 694).

27 McCormack notes that while the connection to Silverpoints is (her) conjecture, internal evidence places the undated letter around 1893 or 1894. Significantly, Silverpoints is the only work Gray tried to distance himself from (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 282n.89).

28 Her Serene Highness, Alice, Princess of Monaco was the guest of honor at a celebrated dinner party given by Frank Harris at Claridge’s hotel in 1891 (Gray uses French for her title, rendering it SAS: “Son Altesse Sereine”). Oscar Wilde and George Moore were guests, and Gray recited his “strong, weird, fascinated verses” (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 69) He sent her one of the
“deluxe” vellum-bound copies of *Silverpoints*, along with a framed photograph, which she acknowledged in an effusive note.

29 Norman Shapiro translates this poem more lushly

> I am the Empire as the decadence
>
> Draws to a close: midst Vandals’ conquest, I
>
> Compose my fey rhymes, my acrostics wry,
>
> A-dance with languid, sun-gilt indolence (Shapiro 134).

One is reminded of Lawrence Venuti’s claim (après Roland Barthes) that every act of translation is an act of violence.

30 Desmond Flower relates that Gray told him “Ricketts’ design on *Silverpoints* cover is of lime seeds over a stream. The ‘flame’ is the leaf with a twig at the bottom and seeds round it – these last are falling into the stream – the wavy lines” (Flower 4). Ricketts’ design was always very exacting.

31 Ada Leverson, in a well-known exchange with Oscar Wilde, acknowledged Gray as “then considered the incomparable poet of the age,” before suggesting that the volume contained “the tiniest rivulet of the text, meandering through the very largest meadow of margin” (qtd. in Sewell *Dorian Mode* 40). Leverson suggested that Wilde “publish a book *all* margin, full of beautiful unwritten thoughts; each volume must be a collector’s piece, a numbered one of a limited ‘first’ (and last) edition: ‘very rare’ (qtd. in Sewell *Dorian Mode* 40). While this passage is characteristic of Wilde’s wit and sarcasm, as well as that of his frequent correspondent and sparring partner whom he called “The Sphinx,” it points out the ways in which most of the critical attention was paid to *Silverpoints*’ unusual design.
A “Watching Brief” is a peculiarity of the British (and Commonwealth) legal system. A subject who is not directly mentioned in court proceedings, but who has reason to believe that his name might be mentioned in connection with the trial, submits a Watching Brief to a solicitor. It is used as a stopgap measure to prevent defamation from occurring while the subject is not present in court.

In his biography of Beardsley, Stanley Weintraub refers to the “subtle pressure” exerted by Raffalovich and Gray, and notes that Beardsley “seldom had kind words for Rome, […] except to Raffalovich” (Weintraub 206). He argues further that the conversion was “on the level of feeling rather than intellect” (Weintraub 212). Beardsley’s poverty just before his death made him, perhaps, more susceptible to Raffalovich’s promise of a steady income, but it would be impossible (and somewhat reckless) to judge Beardsley’s reasons for conversion on the evidence that remains.

Brocard Sewell reproduces a portrait of Marie Raffalovich in Footnote to the Nineties, and notes that it was at Hawkesyard Priory, at least in 1968. The Dominicans left Hawkesyard in 1988, and the buildings were sold to a private individual, before becoming the provincial cathedral of the Old Catholic Church in the United Kingdom. Raffalovich gave richly to the Priory, but it is unclear if this is the portrait that once hung in his dining room. Mme Raffalovich appears regal, formidable, and somewhat aloof; her style and demeanor seem more in line with a Roman matron than the mother of someone as “stereotypically Jewish” as Raffalovich.

Wilde mocked Raffalovich’s deliberate hospitality, clucking his tongue at “poor André,” claiming, “he came to London with the intention of opening a salon, and he has succeeded in opening a saloon.” Wilde apparently loved this bon mot so much that he recycled it into his
novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Arguably, this comment says more about its author (who was constitutionally incapable of refraining from a well-placed quip) than its subject.

36 Raffalovich is rarely mentioned except in relation to Gray. The critical edition of *Uranism and Unisexuality*, hopefully, will remedy his position in sexology, but, at least with regards to his poetry, Brian Reade notes that Raffalovich “[has not been given] the recognition he deserves . . . [as] an experimental craftsman: internal and feminine rhymes, bad rhymes, no rhymes, odd rhymes – he tried all such devices, with results that were occasionally marred by weakness of syntax” (Reade 33). Reade wrote in 1971, and little was done to reclaim Raffalovich after this date. Ed Madden, however, in his essay “Say it With Flowers: The Poetry of Marc-André Raffalovich,” is one of the few contemporary critics who attempts to “recover Raffalovich as a writer […] reexamine his work’s literary value [and] its place in a particular cultural context” (12).

37 Brocard Sewell’s biography of Gray, *In the Dorian Mode* is the source for much of the information in this paragraph. The periodical in which Raffalovich published his critique of Wilde and Gray has not been located. Sewell’s source was the late Dr. Helen Trudgian, who was first tasked by Fr. Bernard Delaney, prior provincial of the English Dominican Order with writing an “official” biography of Gray (Sewell *Dorian Mode* viii). Trudgian never finished her biography, and Fr. Sewell obtained her papers in the early 1970s. He cites a note in Trudgian’s papers about Raffalovich’s criticism of Gray (Sewell *Dorian Mode* 200 n. 33)

38 Richard Ellmann argues that “the nineties began in 1889 and ended in 1895” (Ellmann 305). He uses the publication of Wilde’s “Decay of Lying” and Wilde’s imprisonment as the
“bookends” for the period. As usual, there is some argument about when the 1890s, “the Decadence” or “The Aesthetic Movement” began, and exactly what each of these terms meant.

39 This point, again, is taken from Dr. Trudgian’s papers, specifically her notes taken during an interview with Sophie Raffalovich O’Brien, Andre’s sister (Sewell *Dorian Mode* 200 n. 34).

40 McCormack suggests that the term “scientific” was “elastic enough to include [Raffalovich’s] treatises on homosexual behaviour in various journals of psychology” (McCormack *Poet, Dandy, Priest* 105). Thus, while Raffalovich was not a doctor in the strict sense he was often thought of as having some sort of professional status. Also, his care of Gray at this crucial juncture also suggests both doctoring and nursing.

41 In *The Man Who Was Dorian Gray*, McCormack hypothesizes that Gray wrote “The Person in Question” under Raffalovich’s orders, and that this is what “broke the spell.” There is no concrete evidence to prove this, but the dates are consistent, and it seems a plausible thesis.

42 McCormack notes that the fifth act is among the Gray papers at the National Library of Scotland, but the Library’s inventory of the Gray and Raffalovich papers does not list it.

However, Laurence Senelick, who published *The Blackmailers* for the first time in his *Lovesick: Modernist Plays of Same-Sex Love, 1894-1925* claims that the “Keeper of Manuscripts ... has assured [him] that no such thing exists” (Senelick 22n.10).

43 I am grateful to Dr. Laurence Senelick for helping to make this distinction in an email exchange.

44 Roden’s chapter includes excerpts from Gray and Raffalovich’s correspondence during the period when the two were separated, before Raffalovich moved to Edinburgh permanently. In addition to pointing out the intimacy expressed by the two, he notes the ways in which the
letters were tender and familial, before moving into greater formality after Gray’s ordination.

Vernon excerpts only a few of Gray’s letters, calling the correspondence between the two “some of the most affected letters ever written” (70)

45 Bradley, Cooper and Gray had circulated in the same circles, many of them intersecting with Ricketts and Shannon in the late 1880s and 90s but had not met. Michael Field was well-enough known for Gray to send a copy of Silverpoints, which Field acknowledged in 1893 (McCormack Poet, Dandy, Priest 207).

46 Ivor Treby, who has done more than any one figure to promote Michael Field and their legacy, goes to great lengths to counter the lesbian claims made Blain, Donoghue, Vanita, and others. See the introduction to his Binary Star: Leaves from the Journal and Letters of Michael Field 1846-1914.

47 Virginia Blain’s article "'Michael Field, the Two-Headed Nightingale': Lesbian Text as Palimpsest" discusses the ways in which both Bradley and Cooper negotiate identities, trading off the “butch” role in their relationship. She notes that Bradley teased Cooper “about the coveted male role” in a congratulatory letter and suggests “their intellectual dialogue seems to have maintained its energy through constant shifts in its power base” (Blain 249, 252).

48 Cooper’s nickname “Henry” was often shorted to “Hennie,” a name that is at least androgynous if not feminine. Critics have attempted to discern a “butch/femme” dichotomy with the two, assuming that Cooper, delicate and frail, was the “femme” and Bradley, fiery and extroverted, the “butch,” but the two exchanged roles often. This is, again, an attempt at reading contemporary conceptions of gender and its performance onto an earlier time.
Ivory Treby cites this as “mowing” grass instead of “moving” grass. Michael Field’s handwriting is notoriously difficult to decipher (Treby 130).

Vernon also notes Katherine Bradley’s entry in her diary from July 5th 1908: “Yes - there was Miss Gribbell, tall and dressed abroad like an old Lombardy poplar with its countriness and apart from her Andrée (sic) expressing devotion in heraldic twists” (275)

Katherine’s family had followed John “Zion” Ward and Prophetess Joanna Southcott for at least a generation before the birth of her parents. While Southcott opened up an expansive view of the role of women in a religious context, their message was filled with a rigid and gloomy interpretation of Christianity. Katherine’s parents Charles Bradley and Emma Harris identified so closely with Ward and Southcott’s vision, and with a rejection of the Church of England, that refused to be wed in the Anglican Church, instead marrying themselves by public declaration of vows “untrammeled by law,” and unblessed by the state, a move that made Katherine’s birth technically illegitimate (Donoghue 13). Jackie Latham’s “The Bradleys of Birmingham: The Unorthodox Family of Michael Field,” traces the relationship between the Harrises and Bradleys and the religious radicalism of the two families. Julie Melnyk’s article emphasizes the way in which certain dissenting factions “promoted women’s transgression of the boundary between acceptably feminine utterance and testimony and the masculine preserve of the sermon,” suggesting ways in which Wesleyan Methodism (likely Gray’s denomination) “emphasized intuition and emotion as reliable sources of spiritual enlightenment, giving women a special claim to certain kinds of spiritual knowledge, apart from and transcending that offered by masculine rationality and education” (Latham; Melnyk). One wonders what would have happened if Bradley had not become Catholic. Cooper mused in a
letter to Gray “What an exhilarating Rev. Mother she w[oul]d make!” (qtd. in Roden "Romantic Friendship" 61).

52 The idea of just what the two, particularly Bradley, meant by the trinity is not easily answered. Bradley calls attention to the trinity at numerous points during her writing, and it is this idea that helped her navigate conversion to Christianity. But this is complicated by the fact that their penmanship and idiosyncratic style (almost always) works against them. Ivor Treby, whose work on Michael Field is invaluable, addresses “the baffling cacography of Katherine Bradley,” specifically noting that “her upper case T nearly every time emerges as a lower case t,” and that both women have “an apparent tendency to insert random and inappropriate capital letters” where they will” (Treby 24-5). This is particularly difficult when examining the T/trinity. I use trinity in the Latin senses trinus/”threefold” and trinitas/”triad” and reserve the capital Trinity for the Christian construction of God in three persons: Father, Son, Holy Spirit.

53 Benediction is properly seen as the outward expression of the “True Presence” of Christ in the Eucharist, and is designed to show this forth, but worshipers need not make any formal means of assent. As Cooper notes, it is a service of “gratitude,” which anyone can simply enjoy.

54 Six candles are required for a Solemn High Mass, but Benediction requires at least twelve, and potentially more, making this a very “theatrical” form of worship, something Cooper noted at St. Peter’s, Edinburgh (Fortescue 240).

55 Cooper’s temper flared when Gray’s sent a book of popular devotions, finding the gesture condescending: “The action is unfortunate... We don’t want prayers and private devotion, we who are of the universal ritual of wheat & grape. – & if anything, articulate. It is difficult even for Father Gray to understand we have been trained in Latin, & had the widest and most
exact ing discipline in the philosophic thought of the age” (Treby 175). She also expressed frustration when she seemed to overwhelm her confessor who “puts his head into his hand ponderously” when she asks questions (Treby 177).

56 “Order our offerings to be borne by the hands of your holy angel to your high altar” – Roman Catholic Canon of the Mass.

57 The brackets occur in the original publication

58 This important point is often lost. *Whym Chow*, because of its unusual content, is often treated by critics with some scorn. Thain and Vadillo note in their Broadview edition “many of the poems not included here were left out because of their ludicrous sentimentality,” while arguing that the “question of the book’s ‘campness’ must be addressed if we are to consider Michael Field’s work seriously. It seems more likely that *Whym Chow* is exactly what it claims to be: a private exposition of grief, intended for a select group of friends. If Michael Field refused to fit into pre-determined categories or roles, this volume can be read as another example of that. They were Michael Field; This is *Whym Chow*.

59 Fletcher notes that “The Emperor and the Bird” was found among a bundle of Gray’s letters to Michael Field. It remained unpublished until 1950. Terrence Ian Fitton-Armstrong, who used the shorter pen name “John Gawsworth” describes the poem’s discovery in his chapter in Sewell’s *Two Friends*. (Fletcher *The Poems of John Gray* 312)

60 Marc-André Raffalovich usually dropped the Marc from his name and was known to most as André. After baptism, he took the name Sebastian, and used it exclusively, becoming André Sebastian Raffalovich. Among the Dominicans he was known by the florid title Br. Sebastian of the Coronation.
Turnbull records a story by Miss Lillian Young, written in 1908 that preserves a much more plausible, if less poetic, story. Miss Young, a convert, observed the piety of Catholics who walked long distances to Mass. Wishing to find a place for them to worship, she buried a statue of the Virgin on the vacant Falcon Hall land, “thus putting her in possession” of the property (Turnbull 8). When the estate was sold, St. Peter’s purchased the land upon which Young had buried the statue.

The Jubilee brochure, published by the church to mark the building’s 50th anniversary preserves the church, for the most part, as Gray intended. J.C.M. Nolan’s article “John Gray and a Church in Edinburgh” outlines the changes made in the 1960s “in the spirit of Vatican II” that have altered the fabric of the building so much so that it often fails to resemble Gray’s designs. In a shocking example, the well-designed baptistry, complete with wrought iron gates from Thomas Hadden that subtly evoked Psalm 42 (“As the hart panteth after fountains of water; so my soul panteth after thee, O God”), is now the site of the toilet. Fr. Kevin Douglas, the incumbent at St. Peter’s has made slight changes to reverse some of the damages from the 1960s, but Gray’s original vision has largely been obscured.

Cooper was not fond of St. Peter’s, arguing that “the creative passion has stopped at the making of the church—. . . it lacks a universal basis of beauty & passion—the air of it does not suggest Christian Charity or Christian humility; it is naked of love & adoration” (Vernon 31). Hers was certainly a minority opinion, and she softened it in later life. While her lines are committed to their joint diary, Cooper was aware of the relationship between Bradley and Gray, and tread lightly.
A celebret is a testimonial letter, issued by the priest’s bishop, allowing him to celebrate mass outside of his own diocese.

Eric Gill in printed Park for Gray in Joanna Italic, without the use of quotation marks. The reader is thrust into a “fantastic” (and sometimes precious) environment that is, often impossibly difficult to read and comprehend. McCormack’s edition of Gray’s selected prose reproduces Gill’s design as closely as possible.

McCormack ends John Gray: Poet, Dandy, and Priest, with the report of Gray’s ghost in St. Peter’s. I hope I can be forgiven from borrowing it here and adding my own interpretation, offering it as an homage to her work and friendship.
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