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British literary decadence and religion

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BRITISH LITERARY DECADENCE AND RELIGION

by

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ABSTRACT

Throughout British decadent literature, authors creatively experiment with religion. While part of this experimentation is a matter of how authors represent religious subjects or syncretized religious traditions, a much more foundational level of this experimentation seeks to redefine "the religious" altogether. Collectively, the authors in this study seek to redefine "religion" as focused around community, ritual, and aestheticism over creed or dogma. This new definition resonates with the way many twentieth-century sociologist, theologians, and psychoanalytic theorists have discussed the nature and role of religion in Western society, and I rely on these thinkers throughout my methodology.

Also central to my methodology is my suggestion that the primary lens through which critics often read British decadence is the lens of experimentation and redefinition. It has been well established that British decadents creatively experimented with their representations of gender and sexuality, their use of genre, and their incorporation of Western philosophy, yet their treatment of religion—specifically the Western religious traditions which appear in their works—has been largely unexamined. This project argues that the British decadent authors' creative treatment of religion is central to their works and to their broader experimental project.

In my first chapter, I suggest that the experimental work that Pater does with philosophy, art theory, and genre has its roots in the experimental work he does with religion. Pater espouses a syncretic approach to religion which sees Christianity as the most recent, and most evolved, link in a series of conversant religious and philosophical traditions. At the same time, he opposes the institutionalization of religion as well as any violence that might take place in its name. In my second chapter, I claim that Oscar Wilde's destabilization of language—separating words from their denotative meanings—lays the groundwork for his separation of religious ideology from the aesthetic and communal elements of religion. My third chapter argues that decadent religion, as imagined by Pater and Wilde, was not always easily integrated into religious life. I suggest that

the sadomasochistic imagery seen throughout some of Francis Thompson's works signifies a larger conflict between his attraction to decadence and his devotion to Catholicism. In the final chapter, I consider Vernon Lee, a woman writer who spent much of her life in Continental Europe. I claim that her position on the fringes of British, male, decadent society allowed her a unique vantage point, from which she repeatedly examined the decadent religious project even as she valued a secular, moral humanism over that project.

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

British decadence is known for its experimentation, recreation, and redefinitions. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century was a time when homosexuality was becoming a defined identity, when previous limitations of genre were disregarded, and when gender expectations were being questioned. This dissertation claims that British decadent authors such as Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, Francis Thompson, and Vernon Lee similarly worked to redefine what was considered "religion." Through their works, they argued that religion should be less concerned with dogma or creed and more concerned with inclusive communities built around aesthetic experiences. In my first chapter, I suggest that Walter Pater works toward this new definition by viewing Christianity as the most recent, and most evolved, link in a series of Western religious and philosophical traditions. At the same time, he opposes any violence that might take place in the name of religion. In my second chapter, I claim that the way that Oscar Wilde separates words from their denotative meaning lays the groundwork for his separation of religious ideology from the aesthetic and communal elements of religion. My third chapter argues that the sadomasochistic imagery seen in works by the Catholic decadent poet Francis Thompson signifies a larger conflict between his decadence and his Catholicism, something which challenges the feasibility of Pater and Wilde's concept of decadent religion. Finally, I suggest that Vernon Lee—a woman writer who spent much of her life outside of Britain—repeatedly calls into question the value of Pater, Wilde, and Thompson's religious ideas.

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EXPERIMENTATION AND RELIGION:

AN INTRODUCTION

> And it is the imaginative quality of Christ's own nature that makes him this palpitating center of romance. The strange figures of poetic drama and ballad are made by the imagination of others, but out of his own imagination entirely did Jesus of Nazareth create himself. [. . .] That is why he is so fascinating to artists. (Wilde *De Profundis* 929)

Despite religion's occasional place as a side note in decadent studies, in late 1800s England, to think decadently was frequently to think about religion, albeit creatively and often subversively. Whether one was him or herself religious or not, the concerns of decadence were persistently intertwined with the topic of religion. Take, for example, Oscar Wilde. On May 25, 1895, Wilde was sent to prison for acts of gross indecency after a trial that brought issues of homosexuality into a new level of public discourse for British Victorian society. He ultimately landed in Reading Gaol, where hard labor and poor conditions would deteriorate both his health and his spirit. In 1897, Wilde successfully petitioned for pen and paper. With these materials, he wrote *De Profundis*, a letter to his former lover, Alfred Douglas, whose father had begun the lawsuit that eventually caused Wilde's imprisonment. The letter is as much a theological epistle as it is a letter of love and condemnation. In it, Wilde explores the nature of belief and unbelief, the figure of Christ, and the personal peace that can be found through forgiveness of others. Shortly after his release from prison, Wilde wrote his last literary work, the poem, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol." This poem similarly emphasizes the importance of love and forgiveness and the way that Christ acts as a representative of these ideals.

What has rarely been addressed is that Wilde's last two works are very explicitly his most religious works: in them, he interacts with theology, employs religious imagery, and grapples with his own personal faith at a level seen only in few of his earlier works. And while some have read these works as the products of a weakened mind, feeble from prison, there is no reason not to read them as the culmination of Wilde's interest in religion. As a younger man, Wilde considered conversion multiple times, each time being dissuaded by the fear that his father "would [have] cut him off altogether" (qtd. in Ellman 54). Eventually, Wilde did convert to Catholicism on his deathbed, though the clarity of and his agency in that decision has sometimes been questioned.

When Wilde was sent to prison, opponents of the decadent movement of which he was a part saw it as an ideological victory. Newspapers celebrated: "The aesthetic cult, in the nasty form, is over," and claimed it as "a dash of wholesome bigotry" (qtd. in Ellman 479). And while it would be reductive and unwise to see Wilde as a singular head figure of a very disparate decadent movement, it is worth noting that at the end of his literary career, a career that largely shaped the course of British decadence, Wilde's mind turned primarily to prison reform and the nature of religion and spirituality. This dissertation suggests that Wilde was not alone in considering questions of faith, religion, and unbelief as an integral part of the decadent project, and it seeks to reclaim a religious narrative in British decadence. While not every author in this study would identify him or herself as religious, they all position religion at the center of their work, and understanding how they experiment, transform, and ultimately redefine "the religious" is essential to an understanding of the British decadent movement.

(Re)Defining Decadence

Most broadly, British decadence can be defined as a movement in the last two decades of the nineteenth century marked by significant experimentation across many artistic forms and intellectual fields. While some studies of decadence discuss the ways that experimentation destroyed Victorian modes of art and thinking, more recent trends in decadent studies focus on what was created through decadence. The editors of the recent collection, *Late Victorian Into Modern* (2016), suggest that the end of the Victorian era was not merely an end but was paradoxically both "a beginning and a *fin*" (1). The premise is that the writers of the 1880s and 1890s were not merely concerned with the death of Victorian ideas and trends but equally interested in the birth of modernism and in "making it new".[1] Stefano Evangelista develops this concept especially well by reading decadent obsessions with death and decay through the Victorian scientific lens of death as a byproduct of evolution and progression and through the Freudian lens of the death drive in which the end goal of death is an essential guide to the development of life.

I mention this work because it highlights a particular turn in decadent studies, one which is essential to my own concerns. Past discussions of decadence have often dwelt on decadence as decay. Contemporaries of the movement emphasized its diseased nature. As Dennis Denisoff summarizes, "By the 1890s, many had had enough of the mix of aesthetic idealism, taunting self-display, uncommon sexuality and degeneracy that had become packaged as [decadence and aestheticism's] defining characteristics" (31). He cites particularly George Du Maurier's description of aesthetes as "little misshapen troglodytes with foul minds and perverted passions"

[1] Ezra Pound's phrase which, at least in the rearview mirror of British high modernism, became what Michael North would call "the most durably useful of all modernist expressions of the value of novelty" (162).

and Max Nordau's chapter on "Decadence and Aesthetes" in his 1912 work, *Degeneration*, a work Denisoff summarizes as "chastising [decadence and aestheticism] for encouraging pessimism, sexual aberrancy, mysticism and poor taste in clothing" (31). The past few decades of criticism have similarly described the decadent era as one of uncommonality and aberrancy, but have argued that the destruction of social and sexual norms was a good thing. Some of the most landmark works on decadence by thinkers like Eve Sedgwick, Richard Dellamora, and Dennis Denisoff have highlighted how what were originally seen as decadent attacks on Victorian norms in fact led to new modes for thinking about gender and sexual queerness, as well as the eventual redefinition of sexual norms.[2]

The turn toward reading the decadents as positive builders of culture has of course been a gradual one; inherent in many discussions of what decadence destroys has been the suggestion of what decadence creates. Yet as a comprehensive mode of reading the movement, it is still relatively nascent. The *Late Victorian Into Modernism* collection, which comes as close as any work to making such a statement, does so tentatively—saying that their contributors "engage and, at times, argue with [the] received idea" that "the turn of the nineteenth century" should be read through themes of "nostalgia, decline, and closure" (5). It also concerns itself with a wide

[2] Eve Sedgwick, in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), finds a continuum between male homosexuality and male homosociality, which she thinks has been overlooked by the homophobia that is an intricate element of male social bonds. She suggests that men bond through a shared admiration of/desire for a woman, something she calls triangulation and something that masks any homosexual desire. The ultimate goal of her study is to show how homosocial friendship are used to reinforce patriarchal society. Richard Dellamora's 1990 *Male Desire* responds to Sedgwick by focusing on desire between "self-aware male homosexuals." Whereas Sedgwick's study focuses on the ways in which the male homosocial limits other groups, Dellamora's interest is in how the male homosexual "did not relinquish concern for other marginal groups" but rather used their subjective experience as a ground for advocating for differences and outsiders (11). Dennis Denisoff's work includes the 2001 volume *Aestheticism and Sexual Parody* in which he argues that sexual parody, even as it sometimes attacks a certain sexual minority, inadvertently propagates knowledge of and discussion of that sexuality.

representation of Victorian authors that ideologically, geographically, and historically stretch outside the confines of the British decadent movement.

The work I do in this dissertation, though, is predicated on the fact that the decadent movement indeed was as concerned with birth as with decay. It is also predicated on the fact that the British decadent movement was unique from other expressions of decadence because of its especially strong concern with intentional and productive experimentation and redefinition. By creating a definition of decadence which is specifically British, and by connecting that definition to these recent trends in decadent studies, I believe that new fields of study will emerge as essential to include in the narrative. In this dissertation, that topic is religion.

In the following pages, I make the case for defining the British decadent movement as uniquely concerned with questioning the very nature of gender, sexuality, genre, and philosophy. Inherent in this questioning is a recreation of entire categories of thinking, and among these categories is religion. The authors in this study represent the decadent interest in redefining the religious through approaches we would understand today as psychological, sociological, and theological.

Decadence in Britain

"Decadence" is a notoriously difficult term to define, all the more so defining the subcategory "British decadence." In their overview of the history of decadence criticism, Constable, Denisoff, and Potolsky lament that so much criticism of the period is descriptive, summative, and—at best—observational. Acknowledging the variety and challenge of works and ideologies encompassed by the term, they ultimately suggest defining "decadence" through "an interdisciplinary critical response" that encourages the "'perennial decay' of boundaries—the

insistence on *at once* mobilizing and undermining boundaries and differences" birthed in "the destabilizing effect of the decadent conception of mimesis" (21, 22).

In a similar move against received definitions, Potolsky, in his own volume, complains of a trend in defining decadence. One of his most significant complaints is that "[c]ritics have long argued that the key characteristic of decadent writing is a turn away from the world and the public interest to the interiority of the private self," while he argues for "[r]egarding decadence as an evolving literary stance rather than a fixed set of traits," something which encourages a definition of decadence as a community in connection with and communication with one another (5). The intertextuality at the heart of decadence, as well as the idea of decadence as "a characteristic mode of reception," suggests that while no one trait can describe all decadent writers, similar interactions with texts both antique and contemporary characterize decadence as a community (4).

Potolsky's volume is primarily concerned with the international and cosmopolitan nature of decadence. He claims that although "the history of the decadent movement has been told from the perspective of a single national tradition," the decadent movement was "fundamentally international in origin and orientation" (1). Implied in his statement is a disapproval of past readings of national expressions of decadence, but I believe that disapproval mostly exists because several readings of national decadences—French, British, American, German—do little to distinguish any one national mode of decadence from international modes of decadence. But of course there are national modes of decadence: though decadence might be an international or cosmopolitan movement, each nation experiences its own inflection of it, and volumes that wish to discuss decadence within the parameters of a certain nation must address this inflection. The decadent movement started in France, most vocally—perhaps—by Baudelaire. Ray Furness

summarizes Baudelaire's account of decadence in his writings on Poe as valuing decadence for "being morbid and bizarre [. . .] 'unnatural'" and summarizes Gautier's response to Baudelaire as "the refined, the ultra sophisticated, the *recherché,* the subtle, the neurotic, the knowledge of being somehow explorers, or manifestations, of a terminal cultural sickness" (9). The German inflection of decadence, though, would read it much more intentionally as a response to Naturalism (Brockhaus's encyclopedia calling it "a reaction against Naturalism; it is a symptom of today's nervous, senile, fragmented society which is impervious to anything which is healthy and natural" (qtd. in Furness 9)). German decadence, according to Furness, "entertained above all the insatiable desire to portray the monstrous and the boundless—it was no coincidence that they were Wagnerians" (10). American decadence, meanwhile, developed in a distinctly different social context than European modes of decadence. Puritanism and capitalism created a society in which the languor and decay of European decadence might seem foreign, yet as David Weir suggests, American decadent artists responded to the steady growth of American expansion in the nineteenth century: "when the nation's 'manifest destiny' was fulfilled, another, darker destiny loomed: once the frontier reached the Pacific, it ended; the only West left, some thought, was a long twilight of decline" (xii). [3]

It is worth noting, then, that those works which read decadence as a productive form of destruction and experimentation largely focus on British authors. The above mentioned volume that most explicitly argues that decadence was a proto-modernist concern with "making it new"

[3] For more on differences between European and American modes of decadence, as well as on European decadence as concerned with decline and destruction, see *Decadence, Degeneration, and the End: Studies in the European Fin de Siècle* edited by Harmanmaa and Nissen, *Romancing Decay: Ideas of Decadence in European Culture* edited by St. John, and Bernheimer, Kline, and Schor's *Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy and Culture of the* Fin de Siècle *in Europe.* In my project, I see the European—and especially French—expressions of decadence as discussed in these sort of studies as distinct from recent conversations of creative decadence during the end of the century in Britain.

focuses exclusively on British authors, as do many of the less ambitious works that suggest or imply the productive growth and creation that came out of decadent experimentation and destruction. Though productive experimentation is not exclusively British, the state of current criticism implies that intentional creation and redefinition through experimentation was characteristic of a uniquely British brand of decadence.

As critics begin to view productive destabilization as characteristic of British decadence, I believe stronger connections will emerge between existing conversations concerning decadent approaches to philosophy, art, genre, and gender and sexuality. In each of these categories, the idea of productive destabilization already has been implied but not always stated as expressly British or decadent. Matthew Kaiser, for example, argues that Oscar Wilde undermines the competitive nature of a British world in play by intentionally playing to lose, thus destabilizing the premise of social competition and mastering the fluctuating world by intentionally contributing to its state of flux.[4] Discussions of Walter Pater especially focus on his philosophical blend of Hegel with the Greats: on the one hand, Pater disrupts the concept of social norm and aberration by using Plato to suggest that the norm might in fact be an aberration; an aberration—like homoeroticism—might be the historical norm. On the other hand, Pater's historicism looks to the future: his Darwin-inflected Hegelianism looks to what endured in the past in order to shape the destruction of current social vestiges and the creation of a more sophisticated future.[5] Although all of Europe found itself in the throes of an unstable, rapidly

[4] *A World in Play*. Kaiser's book focuses on Victorianism as a whole, yet the trends he identifies are particularly apt to describe British decadence.

[5] Throughout this project, as I refer to "Hegelianism," I refer specifically to the decadent understanding of Hegelianism which is largely reflective of Pater's own readings of Hegel. To summarize William Shuter's account of "History as Palingenesis in Pater and Hegel," Pater was

changing world—as well as under the influence of Hegelianism and social Darwinism—the way in which England experienced both was uniquely influenced by its position as an empire increasingly at risk of decay and its more immediate connection to thinkers like Darwin and Huxley.[6]

It is not the intention of this project to divorce British decadence from all other modes of decadence. Yet, to illustrate my claim that the British decadents were moving beyond previous modes of decadence, it is worth a brief comparison of the French and the British decadents' approach to genre. The French were much more intentional about the destruction of existing categories while the English were much more intentional about syncretism and the creation of new genres and modes of expression. This does not mean that the French did not create new categories or that the English did not actively destroy them, but rather that a French manifesto might triumph symbolism in art and literature as "the enemy of plain meanings, declamation, false sentimentality and objective description," something one critic would describe as reacting against the idea "that everything in life found a rational explanation and no mysteries remained in nature" (Moreas 10). The imagery in Baudelaire's *Fleurs de Mal*, for example, focuses on images like rotting corpses and vampiric prostitutes. In one poem, the lover pursues his desire "Comme après un cadaver un choeur de vermisseaux" ("like, after a cadaver, a swarm of maggots") and in another, his lover is a vampire: "Infâme à qui je suis lié/ Comme le forçat à la

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interested in the way in which Hegel understood palingenesis through the idea of mediation, the rebirth which simultaneously annihilates, resurrects, and reconstructs history into the present.

[6] In the introduction to *Decadence, Degeneration, and the End*, Marja Härmänmaa and Christopher Nissen suggest that multiple European countries saw the development of decadence as a response to the loss of their empires, citing specifically the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian war (1870) and Spain's defeat in the Spanish-American War (1898). Britain, as the nineteenth century's largest empire, may have not experienced defeat as swiftly, but the Boer Wars, the Irish push for home rule, and even the unsuccessful Indian Rebellion of the 1850s threatened Britain's identity as the insurmountable world power.

chaîne" ("vile woman to whom I am bound / Like a slave to the chain") ("Je t'adore à l'égal de la voûtre nocturne" 7-8, "Le Vampire" 7-8, translation mine). The poetry of Mallarmé and Verlaine breaks down what is expected in the form of French poetry, Mallarmé experimenting with the visual spacing of words to connect to context and Verlaine experimenting with cadence, repetition, and metrical form. Meanwhile, the English decadence that develops out of the French movement features several examples of genre syncretism that blur the lines between the novel, art history, and philosophical treatise, and the result is less a destruction of old forms as much as the creation of new forms.

Even in the often discussed realm of gender and sexuality, there is something uniquely creative about the British decadent approach to categories of male/female, heterosexual/homoerotic. While writers like Wilde and Lee, for example, attack and blur the line between these sorts of categories, it is not merely with the aim to shock but with the intent to create new categories of thinking about the gendered and sexual. Elisa Glick, for example, finds this sort of creation in the pervasive image of the 1890s English dandy. She sees the dandy as both a Susan Sontag dandy, "seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon [and . . .] stylization" but also as a political creature: "a revolt against heterosexual norms, materialism, industriousness, and utilitarianism" (Sontag qtd. in Glick 16, Glick 17).[7] While these are two separate modes of conceiving dandyism in Glick's mind, they both point to a singular idea of the dandy as a mode of creation, both aesthetic and political creation.

This overview has been brief, but it highlights something important. British decadence was not merely something that, as a result of its destructive and subversive tendencies, happened

[7] For Susan Sontag's idea of the dandy, see "Notes on 'Camp'" in which she compares camp culture to an evolution from the dandy figure, one she identifies with detachment, overbreeding, and overdetermination.

to also be creatively generative. Rather, authors and artists intentionally sought to create a new way of thinking about gender, sexuality, genre, and philosophy through their subversive work. By adopting this mode for thinking about British decadence, we not only acknowledge an area in which English decadents are pioneers (and not merely followers of a French fad), we also open the door for discussions of areas of unique interest to English decadent authors.

Disrupting Religion, Creating Religion

What I seek to do in this dissertation, then, is to transfer these concepts of experimentation and creation from the popular topics of intellect, art, and gender/sexuality to the topic of religion. Although the act of destabilizing religion has often been mentioned in passing or in connection to other acts of experimentation, very rarely has decadent religion—or the decadent project of redefining religion—been treated as an exclusive subject. Furthermore, those works that do touch on religion merely touch on the ways in which the decadent movement subverts and deconstructs religious norms. Hardly any work at all has explored what grows out of the destabilization of late Victorian religion, especially if we exclude the creation of non-religious categories such as agnosticism and atheism.

The religious landscape of England at this time was uniquely poised for this experimental work. Anglicanism, coming out of the eighteenth century, was already divided between categories of high church and low church, broad church and evangelicalism. These divides became heightened during the nineteenth century as Darwinism, higher criticism, and other changes both within and without the church encouraged interpretive and sometimes doctrinal shifts on the one hand and reactive dogmatic rigidity on the other. Tractarianism, in the 1830s and 40s, sought to connect Anglicanism more closely with Roman Catholicism and resulted in an

increased turn to high church traditions within the Anglican church as well as many conversions to Catholicism. Meanwhile, English/Irish politics played into strengthened anti-Catholic rhetoric even as nonconformist Christian traditions sought greater political support and public position. Compared to many of its European neighbors, England's religious landscape was comparatively more varied and fragmented. Yet the central authority of the Church of England created a political difference of power which left Catholicism, nonconformists, and non-Christian traditions like Judaism at a distinct disadvantage. It should be noted that while the authors in this study were attracted to different religious positions and postures (Catholicism, paganism, humanism) at different times and in different ways, one of the things that strongly unites them is a suspicion of the Church of England as a central institution of spiritual and political authority.

I want to avoid, here, a direct debate over whether Pater, Wilde, Thompson, or Lee were themselves religious, though of course analysis may suggest that they were either religious or not. Instead, I want to consider them as theorists of religion—what religion is, how it functions, and how it should function. In doing so, the British decadents mirror many more recent thinkers on religion—and can be understood through these thinkers better; so, it is by way of certain theorists that I build my methodology. The three fields I wish to tie together are those of sociology, psychoanalysis, and postmodern theology. Although these fields have at times been disparate to the extent that some might call them antithetical, the way in which the authors in this study function, in their own way, as psychologists, sociologists, and theologians suggests some level of a shared narrative about religion across the fields.

Sociology

In discussing how religion functions in society, in discussions detached from issues of metaphysics and belief, the British decadents mirror the role of the sociologist as they not only observe the way religion *does* work in their society but continuously imagine how religion *might better* function in society. These two frames of thinking—the descriptive and the prescriptive, if you will—are best understood through the lenses of two twentieth-century French sociologists. In describing the way they see religion currently functioning at the end of the 20th century, all four of the authors in this study are concerned with how it functions as a dominating force which reinforces hierarchical structures: the constraining structures that kill Marius because they view him as a heretic, that throw Wilde in prison for homoerotic behavior, that would have viewed Thompson as an outsider because of his Catholicism and debilitating alcoholism and Lee as an outsider because of her queer gender and atheism. Pater, Wilde, Thompson, and Lee's criticisms of religion as it functions in their immediate social context can best be read through Pierre Bourdieu's own analysis of religion. Religion is a secondary concern for Bourdieu, but the way it fits within Bourdieu's patterns of thinking about larger issues of dominance and control provides a helpful model for thinking about religion sociologically. In *Masculine Dominance*, for example, Bourdieu's primary task is examining the way that discourse about the body is used to reinforce systems of masculine dominance and the way women internalize the idea that masculine dominance is natural and turn to it for reassurance, thus perpetuating the system. Yet he cannot discuss structures of masculine dominance without discussing religion as a universal concept that is often rooted in a "deep-seated anti-feminism" which historically "was the authorized reproducer of a pessimistic vision of women and womanhood" (85). Yet what he says about universal structures by way of his discussion of women in the church speaks volumes

about broader issues of domination within religion. Bourdieu here touches on the very erotic underpinnings of patriarchal religion; we might suggest in Christianity, for instance, that discourse of the body often overlaps not only with discussions of a wife's duty to submit to her husband but also with the need for a congregation to submit to a leader, the believer to God, the Son to the Father, the monk or nun to the Father or Mother Superior. And while decadent discussions of western religion are not always explicitly erotic (they sometimes are, as we will especially see in Chapter Three's discussion of Thompson's "Hound of Heaven"), they are—at least in the works addressed in this project—always concerned with reclaiming and refining a religious discourse of the body.

Another key element to Bourdieu's discussions of religion is that the church not only supports existing dominating hierarchies: rather, it is, itself, a self-preserving dominating structure. Bourdieu's problem with religion is specifically a problem with institutionalized religion, a topic raised time and time again by the British decadents. Terry Rey summarizes:

> Pierre Bourdieu's essays on religion are quite influenced by two seemingly very firm convictions: that religion in the modern world is in decline; and that religion's ultimate social function is to help people make sense of their respective positions in the social order. Consistent with the general raison d'être of his entire sociological project, Bourdieu's commentaries on religion, taken together, thus aim to demonstrate how institutional religions seek to monopolize the religious field by imposing on the laity an "orthodox" worldview and by denouncing as "heretical" any alternative worldviews that competitors seek to propagate among the same laity. (57)

The British decadent project, I argue, is insistently unorthodox and heretical by way of institutionalized religion's definitions. Through intentional acts of subversive theology, it seeks

to disrupt the stability of institutionalized religion. In doing so, it shifts the discourse away from institutions and toward more organic communities. The new way it seeks to define "the religious" thus becomes more in line with the work of another French sociologist, Danièle Hervieu-Léger. In *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, Danièle Hervieu-Léger comes to a definition of religion that differentiates it from non-religious spirituality and cultism. She suggests that religion be read as "an ideological, practical and symbolic system through which consciousness, both individual and collective, of belonging to a particular chain of belief is constituted, maintained, developed and controlled" (82). A few elements of this definition are especially important when applied to a decadent redefinition of religion. These elements derive especially from the fact that religion is not only ideological but equally practical and symbolic. When discussing the "Fragmentation of Religion in Modern Societies," Hervieu- Léger faces the fact that despite modernity's scientific worldview, religion has remained important not only outside of but also within western society (23). Two elements contribute to this "continued importance" (23). First, religion remains key to community formation in modern society. Although "social change wears down [religion's] collective ability to set up ideals," a large portion of society still relies on religion for social connection (25). This, Hervieu-Léger suggests, is because "Science in effect is powerless to take over those functions of religion which lie outside the realm of knowledge" (25). Religion, in contrast, she claims can provide a tradition to connect with a chain of past belief and practice. It does not merely create community with current practitioners, but it "is the code of meaning that establishes and expresses social continuity" (84). The second element that allows religion to remain important in the face of modernity is the sacred. Although modernity might challenge a specific ideology, religion still remains uniquely capable of orchestrating emotional experiences and connections to higher powers specific to their traditions.

The strength of the sacred, is that it "cannot be reduced to the body of doctrine and the liturgies which comprise its socially accepted expression" (52).

Hervieu-Léger might see this transformation of the religious as a twentieth-century phenomenon. All the same, her identifications of the problems that religious traditions face as well as her identification of modern solutions strongly mirror the problems the British decadents saw in the religious milieu of Victorian England as well as the solutions they proposed in their works. Walter Pater, for example, has a strong Hegelian bent that desires the connection with the past provided by the evolution of religious traditions, yet he himself is strongly attracted to a scientific humanistic system of thinking and belief. Oscar Wilde, the nonconformist, wants the community and ritualism that religion can provide if it lets go of its strong ideological dogma.

One last social thinker is important to this study, and that is Michel Foucault. To bring Foucault into a discussion of western religion is difficult but, I believe, both useful and necessary. I am indebted to other critics who have mapped out Foucault's complicated relationship with religion, from Philippe Chevalier—who has explored Foucault's understanding of Christianity as a sequence of Christianities as well as Foucault's own sequence of relationships to Christianity—to Mark Jordan—who emphasizes the importance of Christianity to Foucault as "a library of genres for speech" as well as how Christianity's language "control[s] this world and the bodies very much in it" (9).

Inherent in Foucault is an "appreciat[ion of] Christianity as a succession of forms of power" which I believe is mirrored in the work of British decadents (Jordan 9). So much of Pater, Wilde, and Lee's critiques of historical Christianity grows from its position as a regulatory institution and especially its use of institutional power to attempt to regulate sexuality as well as to create boundaries between orthodox religion and pagan expressions of beauty. Meanwhile,

Thompson eroticizes the regulatory nature of his Catholic religion. Yet in my chapter on Wilde, I specifically look at how religious language is the basis of this regulation and how religious re-naming allows Wilde to subvert institutional Christianity's power. Furthermore, a Foucaultian understanding of Christianity's relationship to the physical body illuminates an understanding of sadomasochistic religious language in Thompson and of the focus on suffering bodies throughout Lee's critique of medieval religion.

Psychoanalysis

A second major methodological underpinning of this project is the use of psychoanalytic theory to discuss not just individual social occurrences of Western religious traditions but also the broader religious impulse that might lie behind several individual traditions. Such an approach parallels well with the universalizing impulse behind not only Victorian anthropological discussions of religion but also the British decadents' syncretic, often Hegelian, approach toward religion. Four specific psychoanalytic discussions are most relevant throughout this project: 1) the way in which the Judeo-Christian tradition highlights the void of the O/other's desire through the law of the fathers, 2) Zizek's theory of "radical subjective destitution" which comes out of the figure of Christ's self-sacrifice for the sake of that O/other, 3) the idea of fetish specifically as a contrast to radical subjective destitution, and 4) the role of abjection throughout western religious traditions.[8]

In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Zizek reads God as the image of the ultimate Other, one whose demands—whose desires—adherents are spiritually, ethically, and exclusively required to fulfill. "Is not the Jewish God the purest embodiment of this '*Che vuoi?'*" he writes,

[8] I follow the tradition of using the capitalized "Other" to denote the divine other, the lower cased "other" to refer to the human other, and "O/other" to refer to both concepts together.

"of the desire of the Other in its terrifying abyss, with the formal prohibition to 'make an image of God'—to fill out the gap of the Other's desire with a positive fantasy-scenario?" (*Sublime* 115). In the Jewish religion, the Law of the Fathers serve as a cyclical attempt to fulfill the void of God's desire, whereas in the Christian religion, Christ, in what Zizek elsewhere describes as "radical subjective destitution," releases himself—in an extreme form of subjective destitution—from the desire to fulfill the Law, ultimately releasing himself from the Father's demand. Imitation of Christ becomes escape from the cycle: "The saint occupies the place of objet petit a, of pure object, of somebody going through radical subjective destitution" (*Fragile Absolute* 116). Of course, Christ's act of radical subjective destitution simultaneously amounts to the very sacrifice which fulfills the Law's demainds. So I would suggest that the saints and Christ, as supreme saint, through an act of subjective destitution, in fact fulfill the void of divine desire, both the anxiety of God as Other's desire for us and our desire for religious fulfillment which does not seek God in love but rather craves something to fill the void within ourselves. Throughout the literature in this study, then, subjective destitution ultimately becomes reread as sacrifice.

In my first and second chapters, I argue that Walter Pater began and Oscar Wilde developed an idea similar to radical subjective destitution as a response to the demands of society which were justified through a religious discourse: the law of the [social] father justified through the law of the [Christian] Father. They do this through focusing their discussions on early Christian practices—before institutionalized Christianity—and on the life of Christ. Returning to the early roots of the Christian faith, they argue that both the social and religious impulse to fulfill a set of religious demands must be replaced by a humility that emphasizes the

importance of the other in the material world and not just the importance of the self in the metaphysical/philosophical world.

Wilde and Pater view the shift of emphasis from the self to the other as a positive move which allows the individual to value oneself proportionally in the material world. Opposed to this positive model is the negative model of fetish in which the desire to fill the void of the O/other's desire—and to fill the void of one's own desire—collapses into a disproportionate obsession that highlights both the emptiness within the self and the parallel inability of the self to meet the demands of the O/other. Freud originally read sexual fetish in terms of a resistance to female reproduction and a use of the fetish object to distract away from it—to modify reality within the analysand's mind, but by way of Lacan, Zizek focuses on the issue of commodity fetish as a distraction from the emptiness within the self. An interesting link can be made between fetishism and Freud's thoughts on religion. Although Freud tended to read the sexual fetish—overtly—as a negotiation of oedipal desire, I think his seminal work on religion, *Totem and Taboo*, can be applied with much more nuance to fetishism as we see it in Victorian literature, specifically as we see it frequently in relationship to Christian imagery. In works like Francis Thompson's "Hound of Heaven," for example the sexual fetish becomes the site where religious and sexual taboo collapse into one another. Although I deal with sexual fetish images such as flagellation within my chapter on Francis Thompson, I borrow from Zizek's broader definition of fetish and apply it most specifically to Thompson's religious imagery. In his works, sadomasochistic imagery and language highlights the fetish potential within the western religious tradition. Thompson does this from a more positive—even fetishist—position, but I also note that throughout her negative critique of western religious traditions, Vernon Lee points out the patterns of religious fetishism as dangerous and unhealthy.

This project highlights the outsider—the sexual outsider, the religious outsider, the national outsider—and especially considers the way that religious discourse is used to exclude the other from regular elements of society. While a sociological consideration is helpful here, I pair it with a psychoanalytic understanding of the abject, especially in considering why certain individuals are targeted as "other." Psychoanalysis allows us to identify as threatening those elements of ourselves that we have cast off as "waste" and suggests that when we as a society see those elements in others, we view those others as abject. This is repeatedly highlighted in all of the works discussed throughout this project, but Vernon Lee especially highlights the problematic nature of this model. In my analysis of her short stories, I apply Kristeva's model of abjection—paired with the framework of similar applications of Kristeva to race and religion—to Lee's depiction of decadent religion, not as her contemporaries wish it to be, but as she sees it play out in actual British society.

Postmodern Theology

Postmodern theology gives us a tradition in which we are allowed to discuss religious and theological thought outside the logic of particular religious traditions. In his introduction to an anthology of postmodern theology, Graham Ward defines postmodern theology in terms of two kinds of cultural transformation. One, "a transformation within the logics of a certain movement" works to radically draw out "elements already apparent within an historical epoch" (xiii). Meanwhile, the other "is a radical break with the cultural logic of the past or present" (xiii). Ward, looking over the state of postmodern theological studies today, finds both forms of transformation present in a way which defies attempts to categorize the field: "the categories did not hold. There are too many shades of liberal to conservative theological thinking, too many

people working creatively between the positions" (xxiv). It is this creative work between positions that I believe is mirrored in the decadents' own approach toward western religion, and so throughout this study, I seek to draw parallels between current postmodern theological work and the work began by Pater, Wilde, and Thompson especially.

Particularly pertinent to this study is the work of John Schad and his book *Queer Fish*. Schad has identified the mid and late nineteenth century as beginning the work of decentralizing Christianity from the center of European culture and discourse and moving it toward the outskirts, a place where it becomes uncertain and uncanny. Referring to Christians as "fish" (both because of the fish symbol of Christianity and because of their place as "fish out of water"), Schad uses the term "queer" to describe their new identity, titling his work *Queer Fish*. And while his use of "queer" initially signifies an older sense of the term—as strange and out of place—it also works nicely into this present conversation about religion that reflects queer sexuality in its fluidity, resistance to definitions, and identification as "other."

One of the benefits of Schad's work is its flexible approach toward what can be considered "Christian." Schad is not concerned with those who fit within the boundaries of institutionalized western religion, but with those whose Christianity is non-conforming. Speaking of the examples in his study, he suggests, "Insofar as they are Christians they are treacherous Christians; in their case, Christian unreason is not so much the external other of secular modernity as the internal other of Christian orthodoxy" (4). And to find these sorts of others, Schad is willing to look to those who did not even identify themselves as Christians but who creatively played with Christian ideas within their work (Schad includes chapters on Marx, Derrida, Joyce, and others). This model, of focusing on people who theorized and shaped Christianity more than people who professed to be Christians, frees us from the impossible task

of deciding which figures are within the scope of religion and instead allows us to focus on the revolutionary potential of their thoughts about religion.

I also discuss Wilde and Thompson in comparison to the work that Soren Kierkegaard was doing around the same time as they were writing, though each was likely unaware of the other. Kierkegaard emphasizes, especially through works like *Works of Love* and *Fear and Trembling*, that to fulfill God's desire—in *Works of Love*, the command to love one another, and in *Fear and Trembling*, God's demand to Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac—there must be some level of renunciation of the self. In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard argues that there must be a complete leap of faith, an absolute release of any hope that God would restore Isaac to him, a complete turning over of Abraham's own desires for God's. In *Works of Love*, love must be an utter act of *kenosis*, of emptying the self, asking nothing and hoping nothing in return for the act of love toward the other. Kierkegaard's demand for self-sacrifice has the potential for sanctifying humility, but it also—taken to the extreme—risks the erasure of the self in the face of the other. This positive potential and negative risk are seen, I believe, in the way that Wilde and Thompson respectively develop similar theologies to Kierkegaard's. I also think it important to discuss Wilde and Thompson as parallel to Kierkegaard because of the way Kierkegaard is frequently read as an early postmodern theologian, thus setting a precedent to likewise read Wilde and Thompson in a similar light.

Postmodern theology allows the possibility of thinking theologically without thinking religiously, thinking religiously without thinking within a religious category, and thinking in religious categories without identifying as part of a religious tradition. This work has its roots in part, I believe, in the decadent writers whom I examine through this dissertation.

Chapter Overviews

In the following four chapters, I discuss how each author addresses religion from a social, psychological, and theological standpoint. I come to the conclusion that each uses these various approaches to argue for a broadening of a definition of "the religious" to include communal experiences of spiritual ritual and material aesthetic experience. The Christian faith remains the primary focus of their studies, but through their decadent approach to defining religion, the authors in this study all deploy some level of syncretism, either between different Christian traditions or between ancient pagan religions and Christianity. The value of this redefinition, for three of the authors in this study, is that they believe that the true religious experience, much like the true aesthetic experience, would lead to social engagement and sympathy with the other. The fourth author of this study creates characters who maintain this sort of religious ideal, but these characters invariably fall victim to societies which are invested in maintaining religion as a source of social power.

In "Walter Pater's Quest against Frozen Orthodoxy," I suggest that the experimental work that Pater does with philosophy, art theory, and genre has significant roots in the broader experimental work he does with religion. Walking through three of his major works—*The Renaissance, Marius the Epicurean*, and *Gaston de Latour*—I highlight how Pater simultaneously 1) questions nineteenth-century assumptions about early, medieval, and Renaissance Christianity, 2) suggests in these expressions of Christianity an alternative way to understand the religious experience, and 3) makes his newly defined idea of religion central to his characters' personal development. Through each of these actions, Pater undermines the stability of Christian theology and argues that those elements of Christianity which are worthwhile become lost if Christianity becomes an institutional power. The goal of Pater's work

with religion, then, is to weaken Christianity as a monolithic institution and instead encourage the creation of non-traditional religious communities around aesthetic experience and a commitment to social good.

Although Walter Pater may use individuals as case studies, his interest, grounded in Hegelian dialectic theory, tends toward the universal. In "Oscar Wilde and Religious Naming," I explore how Wilde moves in the opposite direction, from the universal to the individual, but comes to very similar conclusions about the religious experience. In Wilde's pre-prison works, I read a destabilizing of social structures in the name of individualism. The Christian religion is especially targeted for its ideological rigidity and the way it uses its power to place limits on individuals.[9] At the same time, though, Wilde repeatedly highlights the value of a subversive approach to the Christian religion: an approach that appreciates its syncretic potential, its symbolic multiplicities, and its aesthetic rituals. This nascent aesthetic experience of the Christian religion becomes embodied more fully in Wilde's prison writings. In "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" and *De Profundis*, Wilde suggests that Christianity is a worthwhile aesthetic experience insofar as individual experiences of spiritual beauty encourage collective work toward social good.

My third chapter, "Francis Thompson and Religious Fetishism," suggests that many elements of Pater and Wilde's decadent religion were incorporated in the works of both decadent converts and people like Francis Thompson who were lifelong Catholics. The challenges of incorporating Pater and Wilde's theoretical and sometimes idealistic approaches to religion in the context of late Victorian society is highlighted in the study of Francis Thompson's life and

[9] In the case of Pater and Wilde's critiques of Christianity, the specific tradition of Christianity is not clarified, but because the elements of Christianity which are most severely criticized are its power as central (read: national) religion and its strict moralizing nature, we might assume that these critiques are aimed at British Anglicanism and more Puritan-inspired nonconformists.

works. Francis Thompson's parents were converts to Catholicism in the wake of Tractarianism, and Thompson grew up desiring a career in the priesthood, but this career was denied to him when seminarians disapproved of his aesthetic interest in literature which was deemed antithetical to his theological training. Paired with other disappointments early in life, this rejection from the religious community was part of a trajectory which led to alcoholism, addiction, and subsequent isolation from religious communities. In my analysis of his two most explicitly religious works, I identify a preoccupation with the connection between the Christian religion and physical/emotional pain. I also note a strong sense of isolationism and a transference of fetishism away from addictive substances toward God himself. Though avoiding direct biographical correlation, I do suggest that Thompson's works broadly reflect issues which are encountered when a decadent individual seeks to approach religion in the experimental way put forth by Pater and Wilde.

In "Vernon Lee's Religious Ruins," I suggest that Vernon Lee similarly reflects on the integration of decadent experimentation with the reality of religious institutions, only from a non-religions—even anti-religious—position. Pater and Wilde's ideals were founded on the idea that religion might work if it were de-institutionalized and if the boundaries between religious traditions were made fluid. In the first section of this chapter, I compare the role of religion in Vernon Lee's own work on the Renaissance, *Euphorion*, to the centrality of religion in Walter Pater's iconic *Renaissance*. I suggest that the differences reflect an intentional, secular rewriting of decadence, a rewriting in which the role of religion is reconsidered if not even sometimes erased. In the second half of this chapter, I turn to two of Lee's short stories, "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady" and "A Seeker of Pagan Perfection." I argue that the central figures of each story represent the idealist decadent who seeks to synthesize aesthetic experimentation with

religious devotion. In both cases, institutionalized religion causes the death of these characters in its attempt to maintain monolithic power.

As I walk through each chapter, I begin by situating the author in the broader decadent themes of experimentation and destabilization. I then discuss how throughout their works, these authors see religious experimentation as at least as important as the other kinds of experimentation which take place. Finally, I discuss how they contribute to the sociological, psychoanalytic, and theological concept of "decadent religion."

CHAPTER ONE

WALTER PATER'S QUEST AGAINST A "FROZEN ORTHODOXY"

More than one biographer has noted how little we know about Walter Pater considering how popular his works were during his lifetime and in the years that followed.[10] As his earliest biographer noted, "Pater was always apt to be reticent about his own interior feelings, and confided them only to the more impersonal medium of his writing" (Benson 3). Henry James would call Pater "a mask without face," though Arthur Symons defends Pater by describing the mask as "worn for protection and out of courtesy, yet molded upon the inner truth of nature like a mask molded upon the features which it covers" and insists that his readers do indeed know him: "the books are the man" (qtd. in Rosenberg 188; Symons "Introduction," *Renaissance* xii).

The details we do know about Pater's life are largely the result of the reminiscences of his family and friends. Walter Horatio Pater was born to an ex-Catholic father who died when Pater was so young that he would barely remember him. He was raised mostly by female relatives both in England and abroad, and he would live with his mother and sisters even through his years as an Oxford don. As a child, supposedly, Pater wanted to enter a career in the church, his family remembering a child "fond of organising little processional pomps, in which the children were to move with decorous solemnity" (Benson 3). As an adult, though, it was in the

[10] Denis Donoghue describes the records Pater left of his life, saying, "There are weeks or even months in which he seems to have taken literally his favorite motif of evanescence and drifted away. We assume that he is still alive, but the evidence for his breathing is meager. [. . .] Normally, an essay, a lecture, or a book at last sets the life astir, resumes the narrative, and we conclude that during the vacant weeks he has been living what he regarded as his true life: [reading and art]" (*Pater* 23). Laurel Brake explains how the result is that " biographers, critics, historians, and novelists in the twentieth century [are left] to piece together the elusive traces of his life, much of which had been withheld or destroyed by his family and friends" (*Pater* ODNB).

ceremony of academic life that Pater found his calling. After passing his exams at Oxford, Pater became a don at Brasenose College. Throughout his career, he applied multiple times for more prestigious positions but was repeatedly disappointed. In many ways, Pater never entirely fit in with the university world into which he so fully invested himself. His great work, *The Renaissance*, drew strong criticism from the clergy of Oxford, and although his career saw the pass of an examinations act which was loosening Anglicanism's hold on the university, his more agnostic, aesthetic approach toward religion still separated him from Oxford's religious majority. Sexuality may have been another way in which Pater felt excluded from the mainstream. At one point in his teaching career, a young man, William Hardinger, was sent down from Brasenose for allegedly possessing love letters addressed to Pater. Speculative critics have suggested that this scandal may have stunted Pater's ability to advance through his career; others have suggested that, at worst, it caused an already reserved Pater to keep any homoerotic sexuality closely hidden.

The Aesthetes, The Decadents, and Pater

Although sometimes frustrated in his Oxford career, Pater was a tireless scholar whose work would shape a generation and be considered by many as some of the greatest prose in the English language.[11] Yet the lack of discussion concerning Walter Pater and religion is striking

[11] Yeats would write, "We looked consciously to Pater for our philosophy" and described *Marius* as a novel with a particularly legacy:

> It still seemed to me [. . .] the only great prose in modern English and yet I began to wonder if it, or the attitude of mind of which it was the noblest expression had not caused the disaster of my friends. It taught us 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. (qtd. in Christ 76)

considering that his two novels, two of his three major works, are both about young men who question their religious origins and devote their lives to the exploration of religious and philosophical traditions. The philosophical and ethical are frequently addressed, but rarely the religious or spiritual. T.S. Eliot, perhaps, inadvertently began this trend in his essay on "Arnold and Pater." Refusing to discuss Pater as an important religious thinker, Eliot casts Pater as "primarily the moralist" and insists that Pater's moralizing approach to religion is second rate: "Pater was not with [Flaubert or Henry James, [. . .]] but, rather, with Carlyle and Ruskin and Arnold, if some distance below them" (5, 7). Though contemporary criticism clearly defends Pater against the disparaging remarks of Eliot, its bent toward discussing Pater as a philosophical, artistic, and historical thinker—but not as a religious, spiritual, or theological thinker—implicitly suggests that at some level, we might agree with Eliot that Pater's thoughts on religion are not original nor significant.

It is time to reclaim Pater as an original and important religious theorist. Not only is theory about religion central to Pater's work, but Pater's thinking about religion is also seminally important in the development of creative approaches to religious thought throughout the end of the British nineteenth century. Because I claim Pater to be original, I wish to distinguish him from his contemporaries, and because I claim him to be an important influence, I also wish to situate him among his decadent followers.[12] Of course, the impulse to classify Pater with Carlyle and Arnold has passed, but the decision to classify Pater as an aesthete such as Swinburne or the

[12]This approach strikes a balance within a field which does not quite agree on how to classify Pater. Linda Dowling considers him as foreshadowing the 1890s decadent movement *(Hellenism and Homosexuality)*. Thais Morgan reads in his 1860s Aestheticism the groundwork for 1890s thinking on sexuality and gender, and writers such as Dellamora and Hanson comfortably discuss him as a contemporary both in discussions of aesthetes and in discussions of decadents. It is worth noting, though, how many critical works discuss "aestheticism and decadence" together without taking time to define or differentiate between the two. The one fairly naturally developed from the other.

Pre-Raphaelites is understandable given their common philosophy and contemporaneousness. This classification has merit, but its weakness is that it overlooks what makes Pater distinctive from his contemporaries.

Take, for example, the difference between Swinburne and Pater. While the hermaphroditism of several of Swinburne's poems may fit a queer reading of gender, the degree to which his poems escalate to violence and occasional sadomasochism suggests an ultimate intent to destroy, not bend or appropriate, the categories in which readers think of gender. And the Proserpine poems—and even more so "Anactoria"—use this imagery of sexualized violence to attack the categories in which religion and belief are conceived. Sappho's sadistic attacks on Anactoria are contrasted with God's loveless, purely cruel attacks on the human world. The violence of sadomasochistic sexuality is preferable to the violence of God against his creation. In a similar emphasis on decay, necrophilia highlights the decay of the body, and Sappho's adoration of Anactoria's corpse-like body parallels her obsession with death: "Save me and serve me, strive for me with death" (294).[13] While much less violent, I believe we can also read Pre-Raphaelite aesthetes' work as deconstructing rather than destabilizing social expectations. And, to stretch to the international influence of experimental form and genre, in France, the verse of Verlaine was originally celebrated much more for its destruction of form than, after the work of his followers evolved it into what it would become, for its destabilization of the concept of form.

Pater, on the other hand, disrupts categories of thinking yet does so in the interest of transforming them into—of following their evolution into—redefined categories. Thais Morgan has noted this difference in her comparison of Pater and Swinburne's approach to

[13] See "A Terrible Beauty: Medusa in Three Victorian Poets" (Patterson), "Swinburne's Divine Bitches: Agents of Destruction and Synthesis" (Fisch), "Swinburne and Kali: The Confessional Element in Atalanta in Calydon" (Wilson).

homoeroticism. In her words, Swinburne "explores a range of transgressive perversities" while Pater seeks to normalize: "Pater is actually more active in pushing at the border dividing respectability and homoeroticism than the vehement Swinburne" (325, 328). Though her terminology is slightly different, the key difference she sees between Pater and Swinburne is that Pater works within the existing categories (in this case, acceptable sexuality/unacceptable sexuality) which Swinburne seeks to destroy: "The transgressive perversities including homoeroticism that are depicted in Swinburne's work are not equivalent to the full-fledged legitimization of homoeroticism and homosexuality in Pater's" (330). It should be noted that "normalizing" is not merely, in this case, a matter of stating something as normal but of redefining the category "normal"—indeed disrupting ideas of normalcy—in the process.

This disruptive work does not characterize just Pater's approach to sexuality, but also his approach to genre, history, philosophy, and religion. Approaches to Pater's work across disciplines frequently mirror Morgan's "normalization" thesis. Though their language may differ, several discussions of Pater's work focus on how he moves the marginalized into the mainstream by redefining mainstream categories. I mention a few of these below. My own approach builds off of these discussions while suggesting that Pater's normalizing work is more radically disruptive than sometimes recognized. I also seek to draw together various discussions of what have been characterized, up until this point, as separate "normalizing" projects to suggest that together they form a very intentional, unified project interested in challenging mainstream philosophies and beliefs in order to make that mainstream more inclusive.

No doubt the most extensive conversation of Pater's normalization of the marginal is the conversation surrounding his approach to sexuality. In the Spring 2007 issue of *The Pater Newsletter* dedicated to queer studies of Pater, Heather Love notes, "As the field of queer literary

studies has taken root in the academy over the past couple of decades, critics have significantly broadened our view of sexuality as a topic in Pater's work" (25). Early criticism of Pater casts little attention to the homoerotic subtext of several of his works. Pater is not mentioned in Wyndam Lewis's denunciation of decadence as homoerotic, which used Wilde and Verlaine as examples of the vice of the invert, once claiming that inverts like Wilde "convert[ ] what [they] borrow[ ] from the intellect to the purposes of *sex*" and that Verlaine, like Wilde, "was advertising that particular vice" (qtd. in Higgins 81). A few critics were sensitive to the homoerotic potential in *The Renaissance,* and Donoghue notes that Pater's close friends knew of his homoerotic leanings, but it seems that only in recent decades have critics really appreciated the normalization of homoeroticism throughout Walter Pater's works.[14]

Thais Morgan discusses how Pater's normalization of homoeroticism goes hand in hand with his normalization of classical Platonism, while William Shuter—primarily concerned with preventing an obsessive "outing" of Pater—suggests that Pater's primary concern was to draw parallels between the Hellenic world and his present one. Dennis Denisoff similarly situates Pater's queerness in mid-to-late Victorian Neo-Paganism. Rachel O'Connell highlights the erotic and aesthetic pleasure of contemplative retreat, drawing a parallel between Pater as the homoerotic subject and his interest in the aesthetic, reparative nature of the academy and the monastery. Frequent mention of the role of male friendship throughout Pater criticism can be

[14] See the later section on "The Renaissance" for more on its reception.

Donoghue's remarks about Walter Pater's homoeroticism being mentioned by acquaintances includes a citation from Mark Pattison's diary about a visit to Pater in which he was told that "Walter Pater [. . .] was 'upstairs'" and later "appeared, attended by 2 more youths of [feminine] appearance" as well as a letter by Symons which claims that Pater's "view of life gives me the creeps, as old women say. I am sure it is a gastly shame; & that live by it or no as he may do, his utterance of the theory of the world has in it a wormy-hollow-voiced seductiveness of a fiend" (*Pater* 38, 40).

read as, and sometimes explicitly claims to be, highlighting Pater's normalization of the homoerotic through the homosocial.[15]

Two additional topics should be considered in terms of Pater's normalizing approach to the marginalized: his approach to science and philosophy as well as his approach to classicism. Gowan Dawson argues that *Marius the Epicurean* is contemporary with "scientific writing in the periodical press," citing the fact that Pater originally intended *Marius* to appear in the intentionally Darwinian *Macmillan's*. Because *Marius* follows the format of a traditional conversion novel, Dawson suggests, readers might overlook how Pater mediates "the debates over materialism fought out in the 1870s" which were often reduced to a debate between religion and science (42). In Morgan's language of normalization, by creating a character drawn to both Christian and Darwinian thought, we can argue that Pater uses Christianity to normalize Darwinism.[16]

And as much as critics reference classicism as part of Pater's homoerotic apologetics, the fact that classicism itself was a sometimes marginalized subject should not be overlooked. William Shuter, in his reflection on "Pater, Wilde, Douglas and the Impact of 'Greats'" overviews how the study of *Literae Humaniores* was changing in the second half of the

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[15] See specifically "The Platonic Eros of Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde: 'Love's Reflected Image' in the 1890s" (Monsman) and "Pater, Wilde, Douglas and the Impact of 'Greats'" (Shuter)

[16] My use of the term "materialism" throughout this chapter is shared with many Pater scholars, yet it is worth noting that in Victorian England, "materialism" was—as Gowan Dawson puts it—a "slippery signifier" (115). "Materialism" was used not only to refer to "scientific naturalism" which might be seen akin to "amoral secularism" but also to a kind of physicality, an emphasis on the fleshly body (Dawson 125). It appeared as often as a pejorative term as it did as a philosophically descriptive term, though Pater clearly is interested in a German materialism which emphasizes the reality of the physical world over the metaphysical, though his interest in putting an appreciation of the tangible at the forefront of his philosophy does not always preclude the supernatural.

nineteenth century; texts and subject matter were evolving alongside archeological discoveries and contemporary conversations.

One issue I take with certain discussions of Pater's treatment of marginalized topics is the way in which these discussions polarize two different positions: homoerotic and heterosexual, Greek and Christian, religion and science. I believe such polarizations undermine the fluidity Pater saw between subjective experiences. Though the importance of fluidity in Pater's thinking has sometimes been discussed, it has not been connected to the normalization thesis nor has it been applied to religion.[17] To reconcile the concept of normalization with the concept of flux and fluidity is, I believe, strongly in the nature of Pater's work. To transfer this united theory to less frequently discussed aspects of Pater's work would likewise be a natural progression, and I

[17] Two essays have avoided polarization and celebrated fluidity particularly well. In 2002, Lene Østermark-Johansen wrote on, "Serpentine Rivers and Serpentine Thought: Flux and Movement in Walter Pater's Leonardo Essay." Working off of one of the most famous phrases from the Leonardo essay, Østermark-Johansen explores the significance of the second in the pair: "the smiling of women and the movement of great waters." Connecting the movement of waters to a simultaneous interest in the presence of—and movement of—serpents, the essay argues that Pater shared in "an obsession with flux, movement, and dialectical argument" along with "the Renaissance artist and the Victorian critic" (475). Instead of connecting this obsession to a wider interest in flux or movement in either Pater or his contemporaries, Østermark-Johansen's focus remains on the artwork discussed by Pater. She argues that Pater's prose mirrors the water theme by its "flux and fluidity," that his approach to the paintings importantly highlights the landscapes of Leonardo's paintings, and that his treatment captures "a dialectic of surface versus depth" present in Leonardo's works (467).

Gabriel Robert's 2008 essay "'Analysis leaves off': The Use and Abuse of Philosophy in Walter Pater's R*enaissance*" deals with the issue of destabilization a bit more broadly. He suggests a connection between Pater's interest in philosophy and all other subjects that Pater addresses in his works, but for the most part, this universalizing connection is implied, not stated explicitly. Identifying in Pater what Angela Leighton calls a "resist[ance to] the conceptual dualism underpinning philosophical aesthetics," Roberts argues that Pater moves away from an idea of truth that can be identified through language toward a theory which "situates truth outside language" in image and experience (qtd. in Roberts 410, Roberts 412). He claims that Pater supports this move by "making language strange in order that it can be true" but also toward proposing, through his writing, a move toward artistic experiences in which the individual experiences what we might call the sublime (414)?

suggest that in transferring it to religion, multiple threads of the conversation can be joined together. In the following discussion of *The Renaissance, Marius the Epicurean,* and *Gaston de Latour*, I argue that Pater sees the destabilization of religious categories as the grounds for his subversion of other categories of thinking. This idea of religion in flux allows Pater to refocus his definition of "the religious" away from centralized religion (which is paired, in most cases, with a centralized government) toward the primitive and toward the physical. In a break away from much Pater scholarship, I maintain that Pater becomes increasingly creative in his playful approach toward this project rather than increasingly conservative.[18]

Studies in the History of the Renaissance

The essays published in 1873 as Pater's *Renaissance* were written individually before being bookended by the famous prelude and conclusion. The prelude contextualizes the work

[18] Many critics suggest that Pater's later work reacted to criticism that considered *The Renaissance* dangerous as well as to the flamboyant lives of many of his followers. As Gerald Monsman has discussed, close association with Wilde and his bolder literature might easily make Pater nervous, and not at all unfoundedly: "Pater had good reason to fear that his ideals also—not just the aesthetic antinomianism of Dorian, Lord Henry, and his decadent book—would come under attack by what the *Gazette's* editor called Jeyes's 'warfare' against 'Yellow-Bookism, Walter-Paterism, aestheticism" (27). Because of this, many critics maintain, Pater's second great work, *Marius the Epicurean*, was a refiguring of Pater's philosophy in more conservative terms. As Monsmon notes, in this novel and subsequent work, Pater "observ[es] that doctrines unintentionally can produce treacherous advice" and that "words may have indirectly fatal consequences" in what he reads as Pater "responding to Oscar Wilde's seductive (mis)construction of Paterian aesthetic theories" (28). William Shuter reads in Pater's Plato lectures and fiction an intentional desire to emphasize friendship between men over sexuality, a desire to "obscure and even to question" the issue of the "differences between friends and lovers" by means of "refusing to be even more explicit than he was" (504). And Richard Dellamora, although ostensibly combating the idea that Pater "criticized Victorian religious beliefs and social mores in his first book, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), then spent the rest of his life backing down," still acknowledges the appearance of a retreat in later editions of *The Renaissance*, a move he believes was meant to "avoid entangling [Pater] in further arguments with his critics at Oxford" (139).

among those works which attempt "to define beauty in the abstract, to express it in the most general terms, to find some universal formula for it" and within the byproduct of these attempts, "the suggestive and penetrating things said by the way" (71). Pater, of course, maintains that the subjective and variegated nature of art and beauty makes the first attempt impossible, so in his work of art criticism, he focuses instead on saying "suggestive and penetrating things" (71). The result is a striking work of art criticism and a work which more widely has been read for its philosophical approach to life, sensation, and beauty.

In my overview of individual essays from *The Renaissance*, I seek primarily to highlight the normalization of flux and change through which Pater destabilizes categories of religious—and by parallel, sexual, social, and literary—thought in each essay. From that foundation, I highlight what I believe to be the product of this experimental approach toward religion: a redefinition of religion as that which is founded in primitive sensations and an appreciation for the body. Throughout the "Pico della Mirandola" and "Michelangelo" essays, as well as in the "Conclusion," Pater places a premium on the spontaneous, visceral responses to art to which he draws a parallel with spiritual sensations when religion is divorced from strict dogma. These physical experiences are ultimately situated in the body of the individual and, often, are a response to the depiction of the body in works of visual and written art.[19]

[19] It bears consideration that Pater rarely has been included in the studies of sensation throughout the Victorian era, yet his sensational approach to art—which focuses on the body's physical reactions to a work of art or a work of literature—parallels the goals of sensation novels in creating such visceral reactions in readers. That this connection has not been thoroughly explored is likely, in part, Pater's own doing, as his preface to the third publication of *The Renaissance* strongly suggested that those who used his aesthetic approach to art criticism as an excuse for licentiousness or excess clearly misunderstood the intellectual rigor and discipline at the heart of his theory. In doing so, Pater clearly separated himself from a popular, sensational approach to visual art and literature. Yet the connection between Pater and popular sensationalism is worth exploring.

The Prelude

In the prelude, Pater lays the groundwork for his creative, redefining work. He does so primarily by challenging the philosophical assumptions that undergird traditional approaches to art criticism. Dismissing as unimportant whether there can be a right or a wrong, a good or a bad, interpretation of art or definition of beauty, Pater creates an approach to art criticism that simultaneously undermines fixed categories of meaning, philosophy, language, and religion. As Roberts has shown, Pater radically moves the focus of art criticism away from the objective to the subjective. While Pater's subjective understanding of art and beauty is commonplace, what has been less frequently observed is how his approach to art criticism becomes a universalizing principle that guides his approach to all other subjects. Pater embraces a world destabilized not just artistically but generally, and he seeks to create this world through active experimentation with traditional definitions and modes of thought.

The prelude, then, is in one respect Pater's experimental thesis, but it also is—itself—an act of experimentation put into practice. Not only does Pater turn the genre of art criticism on its head by subjecting it to his own perceptions and reactions (which in turn, of course, encourages others to respond to art with their own unique perceptions and reactions). He also blatantly turns the stability of language and definition on its head. When explaining his use of the term "Renaissance," for example—the very term about which the essays are written—Pater argues for "giving it a much wider scope than which was intended by those who originally used it" and instead defines it by those works which provide a historical model of destabilization, those which are part of an "outbreak of the human spirit" and support "the breaking down of those limits which the religious systems of the middle age impose on the heart and the imagination" (73-74).

This raises another important and often overlooked aspect of the prelude: the centrality of religion to Pater's approach to the Renaissance. Pater very essentially sees the Renaissance as responding to the problems caused by religion: limits on sexuality, artistic expression, and philosophy. And criticism has, for the most part, focused on these consequent problems. In her overview of critical approaches to Pater—many of which we know focus on *The Renaissance* more than any of Pater's other works—Becker-Leckrone highlights two trends: one which focuses on "Pater's philosophical genealogy" and the other which focuses on the "personal, social, political, sexual, institutional, or cultural forces at work" in Pater's world (286). Yet by only focusing on these things, critics see only the solutions Pater proposes to these individual areas. They fail to recognize his prescribed solution for the very source of these problems: if inflexible and institutionalized religion is the problem, the solution is a radical reconceiving of religion and its function in society.

Though our understanding of Pater as an agnostic and a secular humanist might encourage us to read into his work a dismissal of religion, the prelude suggests that this is not necessarily the case. Pater sees traditional readings of the Renaissance as pitting the artistic humanistic spirit against the Christianity of the day, and he insists that these readings are unnecessarily dualistic and reductive. He also see the solution to the problem as essentially spiritual on one hand—that "power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects"—and essentially communal on the other. Speaking of the representative Renaissance thinkers in his project, he says:

> It is the unity of this spirit which gives unity to all the various products of the Renaissance; and it is to this intimate alliance with mind, this participation in the best

> thoughts which that age produced that the art of Italy in the fifteenth century owes much of its grave dignity and influence. (75)

And while we might be tempted to read this as a spirituality not connected to religion, the context of *The Renaissance*, the religious structures the work sees itself as expressly addressing, asks that we also not read it as diametrically opposed to it. Indeed, the emphasis on unity and conversation within philosophical texts and works of art suggest that, if anything, Pater values the organization and dialectic provided by religious community, though that community might be less traditional in the case of Renaissance thinkers spread out across time and space.

Throughout "Pico della Mirandola," "The Poetry of Michelangelo," and "Winkelmann," Pater redefines religion so that it might admit a more inclusive and aesthetically inclined community. Although "Winkelmann" was originally written before the other two, its place at the end of the chronologically organized essays asks us to consider it within the context of the more maturely developed "Pico della Mirandola" and "Michelangelo." In "Pico della Mirandola" Pater argues for the ideal of syncretism, in "Michelangelo" he argues for the destabilizing nature of syncretism, and in "Winkelmann" he presents the philosophies of Pico della Mirandola and Michelangelo fully internalized in a later age.

Pico della Mirandola

The opening paragraph of "Pico della Mirandola" ends with a phrase describing the context of the age in which Pico della Mirandola worked: "it was too serious to play with religion" (93). Yet throughout the essay, playing with religion is exactly what Pater sees Pico della Mirandola doing. His syncretism, though primarily meant to reconcile two religions—the pagan and the Christian—is described by Pater in the most creative and intellectually playful of

terms. “To reconcile forms of sentiment which at first sight seem incompatible, to adjust the various products of the human mind to each other in one many-sided type of intellectual culture” is how Pater articulates Pico della Mirandola’s aim, and in speaking of his move toward a religious life, Pater maintains that Pico della Mirandola followed in the tradition of the mystics: “either not to speak of divine things at all, or to speak of them dissemblingly: hence their doctrines were called mysteries” (93, 102).

Reconciling the incompatible, adjustment, many-sidedness, dissembling: these words speak toward a sort of intellectual play which is first destabilizing before it resituates into something new, a universal culture of myth. Pater supports the symbolic approach toward religion which he sees in Pico della Mirandola’s work when comparing the Greek classics to the Christian Bible:

> Plato and Homer must be made to speak agreeably to Moses. Set side by side, the mere surfaces could never unite in any harmony of design. Therefore one must go below the surface, and bring up the supposed secondary, or still more remote meaning, that diviner signification held in reserve, in recessu divinius aliquid, latent in some stray touch of Homer, or figure of speech in the books of Moses. (95)

Here, Pater praises Pico della Mirandola for destabilizing the religious and philosophical categories which separate Greek philosophy and poetry from Judeo-Christian thought, and it is this kind of creative and experimental thinking which I believe Pater considers “play[ing] with religion.” I want to, for a moment, consider Pater’s particular use of the term “play” because I believe it reflects a broader Victorian trope: the trope of what Matthew Kaiser calls “the world in play” (1). From Engel to Dickens, Brontë to Wilde, Kaiser sees in Victorian writing a motif of play, not so much in the sense of individuals *at* play (though individuals certainly play

throughout Victorian literature) but rather in the sense of the world around them being *in* play. The difference is key: the society that is at play is outside the game, controlling it, whereas the society in play is within the game, unable to gain the perspective or equilibrium necessary to understand the game itself. Thus a world in play is "a world in flux: an inconstant and unsettled condition" (1). At the same time, though, Kaiser sees Victorians gain their footing in this dizzying world by learning to accept and even encourage flux and inconsistency.

Pater draws a parallel between his own society and the early Renaissance. As he discusses how Pico della Mirandola plays with ideas, he highlights the kind of play he and his contemporaries are doing in their own time. He admires della Mirandola for his attempts at "the reconciliation of the religion of antiquity with the religion of Christ," yet he finds that it is not until recently that a "modern scholar [. . .] might observe that all religions may be regarded as natural products; that, at least in their origin, their growth, and decay, they have common laws" (30). Yet he encourages his readers that this belief should not be the end point, but the beginning of creative thinking about religion(s): "the basis of the reconciliation of the religions of the world would thus be the inexhaustible activity and creativeness of the human mind itself" (31). The inspiration of della Mirandola's play should thus mean even more cognizant theoretical creativity in the modern age, and it is important that we read Pater's work as aiming to that end.

Another important element of Pater's destabilized religion in *The Renaissance* is shifting the focus of religion away from thought toward sensation. In the Pico della Mirandola essay, Pater discusses the history of religions saying, "that they arise spontaneously out of the human mind, as expressions of the varying phases of its sentiment concerning the unseen world." The use of the word "sentiment" as opposed to "thought" or "philosophy" or any number of more intellectual terms uniquely shifts the focus of religion away from the intellectual toward the

emotional. This shift is supported elsewhere in the essay as Pater reflects further on the idea "that nothing which has ever interested living men and women can wholly lose its vitality" (Even the term "interest" is loose enough to encompass both the intellectual and emotional aspects of interest). The vitality that Pater finds throughout the history of religion is situated specifically in aesthetic and artistic experiences; he argues that it excludes "no language [others] have spoken, nor oracle beside which they have hushed their voices, no dream which has once been entertained by actual human minds, nothing about which they have ever been passionate, or expended time and zeal" (104). In other words, religion is less a matter of what is believed and much more a matter of what is felt and experienced.

Michelangelo

In the "Michelangelo" essay, Pater further destabilizes religion by arguing that the religious experience is strongest and most sincere when experienced on the outskirts of a religious tradition. Instead of focusing on the most common approach to Michelangelo's work, that which Pater reads as appreciating as the "only characteristic" its "wonderful strength, verging, as in the things of the imagination great strength always does, on what is singular and strange," Pater argues for a multifaceted strangeness, that which is both strong and sweet: "strangeness must be sweet also—a lovely strangeness [. . .] sweetness and strength, pleasure with surprise, an energy of conception which seems at every moment about to break through hall the conditions of comely form" (119). What Pater does here is challenge a singular approach to Michelangelo's work and argues for a multifaceted reading which destabilizes tired, singular readings. In doing so, Pater also models what he sees Michelangelo doing at the level of religion. The term I use for religion in the "Michelangelo" essay is "queer religion," in part because of the

obvious way in which it highlights the homoerotics of artistic and religious sensations and because of the way that, in turn, it models a wider sense of religion that is "queer" in the sense of strange and on the outskirts.

Pater's sense of Michelangelo's religion comes primarily from his appreciation of a spiritual experience through art which equally—syncretically—works through pagan and Christian subjects. The value of both religious traditions come from the similar sensations which are awakened through Michelangelo's treatment of them, sensations which are described using homoerotic language. Language of penetration, flow, and vitality fill Pater's prose on the subject: belabored, teasing colors eventually "have passed into his painting," his work contains the "penetrative suggestion of life," and his artistic virility is celebrated in a passage declaring:

> He penetrates us with a sense of that power which we associate with all the warmth and fullness of the world, and the sense of which brings into one's thoughts a swarm of birds and flowers and insects. The brooding spirit of life itself is there; and the summer may burst out in a moment. (121)

The homoerotic nature of Pater's prose on Michelangelo is not a unique observation of mine. Laurel Brake describes his prose as brimming with sexual suggestion, yet "*just about* passable as public and polite," noting as the most suggestive passages the ones which discuss "the portals of its vast unfinished churches and its dark shrines" which contain "some of the sweetest works of early Tuscan sculptors," and—in much less of an innuendo—the description of "What a sense of wrong in those two captive youths who feel the chains like scalding water on their proud and delicate flesh" along with the assumption that Michelangelo's youth was marked by the "vehemence of its passion" (Brake, qtd. in Brake 29). Yet it is not merely important that Michelangelo's works and writings are homoerotically suggestive to Pater but rather that Pater's

discussion of religion comes to a climax simultaneously with his sexually suggestive language. The connection between the homoerotic and the religious is just beginning to take shape in essays like "Michelangelo" and "Winkelman," but it is suggested by the proximity of these sexual images with religious images. The first of Brake's quotations takes place as part of a meditation on religious spaces in Rome and the second two as part of a discussion of Michelangelo's early religious subjects. And while religious subjects, of course, do not imply the religiosity of the artist, Pater's language suggests an overlap between Michelangelo's interactions with religious subjects and his potential homoerotic relationships. At one moment, for example, he pictures Michelangelo as he "crouches below the image of the Almighty," an image which could be read simultaneously as prayerful and sexual. Read in light of "Winkelmann" and Pater's later works, such a reading is not a stretch.

The "Michelangelo" chapter also presents a queer religion in the less expectedly sexual sense, akin to the idea of queer Christianity presented by John Schad in *Queer Fish*. In "Michelangelo," I argue, Pater suggests the idea of a true religious experience as most possible apart from religious majorityship. His idea of religion is one of birth and vitality, and the power and inflexibility of fixed orthodoxy squelches religion's creative spirit. Pater compares the Catholic revival's attitude toward art as even more oppressive than the Protestant Reformation's, claiming that "in thus fixing itself in a frozen orthodoxy, the Roman Catholic Church had passed beyond [Michelangelo]," and that Michelangelo might have better connected to the religion in its earlier days "when its beliefs had been in a fluid state" (129). This is a concept that Pater returns to repeatedly in his later works: the problem of majority religion.

Winckelmann

The last essay I wish to discuss—and the last essay in *The Renaissance*—is possibly the most complicated and unwieldy of Pater's essays in the collection. David Carrier describes it as a "two part" essay: "The first part of Winckelmann describes Winckelmann, who failed to understand the modern world. The second part discusses Goethe, who learned to make art adequate to our post-antique culture" (101). Most criticism tends to focus on Pater's celebration of Winckelmann's art as the product of a mind out of its time. Pater's interest in Winckelmann grows chiefly out of some notes in Goethe which describe Winckelmann's kindred connection with antiquity: "Winckelmann, by contemplation of the ideal works of the ancients, received a sort of inspiration, through which he opened a new sense for the study of art. He is to be regarded as one of those who, in the sphere of art, have known how to initiate a new organ for the human spirit" (183).

Criticism has generally approached Pater's celebration of Winckelmann's "new spirit" as a celebration of the homoerotic in art. Thais Morgan extensively uses "Winckelmann" to support her claim that Pater normalizes homoeroticism through art criticism; she argues that by appealing to the canonical symbol of the male nude, Pater subversively yet effortlessly moves an appreciation of male beauty and the male body into the mainstream. Though Richard Dellamora mentions, in passing, that "Young Pater shared Winckelmann's religious skepticism, his intense commitment to rationality, and his absorption in the study of art," his essay on "Winckelmann" focuses less on these qualities than on the homoerotic: how Winckelmann "show[s] that an explicit homoeroticism might play a key role in cultural interpretation" and how the "Winckelmann" essay focuses on the androgynous body.

Yet if essays like "Michelangelo" argue for the value of experiencing religion—or religions—on the fringes, "Winckelmann" demonstrates both the benefits and challenges of living like Michelangelo outside of Michelangelo's favorable circumstances. And while a part of that experience might be homoerotic, the larger structure in which Pater sees it is religious. Winckelmann's philosophic struggle was between Greek religion and Christianity, yet unlike "the modern student [who] most often meets Plato on that side which seems to pass beyond Plato into a world no longer pagan," Winckelmann experienced Plato as "that which is wholly Greek, and alien from the Christian world" (186). Pater diagnoses the problem as a lack of syncretism: while Goethe might easily develop a spirit of "universality," Winckelmann was unable to synthesize antiquity with the present day (215). Antiquity "came to seem more real than the present," to the extent that Winckelmann did not have "the desire of discovering anything new" (184).

In the terms of this study, Pater reads Winckelmann as one who trades one form of fixed religion for another. On the fringes of the Christianity of his day, Winckelmann turns instead—unquestioningly—to the paganism of a past time. Although Pater mentions Goethe as praising Winckelmann for having "elasticity, wholeness, intellectual integrity," he argues that such a description better fits Goethe than "the narrow, exclusive interest of Winckelmann" (188). He reads Winckelmann's eventual interest in Roman Catholicism as transparently for art's sake: "while Rome had reconciled itself to the Renaissance, the Protestant principle in art had cut off Germany from the supreme tradition of beauty" (189). The problem of Winckelmann is that he could not view religion as something malleable and fluid, but just as Pater reads Winckelmann as laying the groundwork for Goethe's "note of revolt against the eighteenth century," so he also

reads Winckelmann as a necessary figure before the birth of a new and experimental approach to religion (212).

Conclusion To The Renaissance

If "Winckelmann" is to be read as Pater's analysis of someone unable to reconcile the religion of the past with the present day, his "Conclusion" serves as a guide to his readers for how to do differently. Here, he returns to his initial move of expanding definitions and emphasizes the essentially sensational nature of the true religious experience. In his reference to Novalis he says, "The service of philosophy, of speculative culture, toward the human spirit is to rouse, to startle it into sharp and eager observation" (219). Before encouraging his readers toward passion, he insists that it is "Philosophical theories or ideas" which "may help us to gather up what might otherwise pass unregarded by us" (219). From what comes before in *The Renaissance* and from the next work, *Marius*, we must read his philosophies at least in part as a matter of Western religions.

Unfortunately, criticism has tended to emphasize the sensational and overlook the fact that, throughout *The Renaissance*, the sensational is the spiritual, and the spiritual functions within the context of syncretic religion. When taught, *The Renaissance* is almost always read through the famous lines of the conclusion, "How may we see in [our life's pulses] all that is to be seen in them by the finest senses? How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy?" and the answer to these questions, "To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life" (219). And yet to read this outside of the context of the religious dialectic is to fall into the very same pitfall that caused Pater to remove the

"Conclusion" altogether from the second edition. Though Dellamora might indeed be correct that part of that move was for Pater to protect himself from accusations of homoeroticism, I believe that Pater's real concern was the way in which decadence had become exclusively a matter of excessive living and sexuality and not an intellectual—and religious—concern. This seems especially the case when one considers that his worry about how the conclusion "might possibly mislead some of those young men into whose hands it might fall" had been addressed "more fully in Marius the Epicurean with the thoughts suggested by it." No other work by Pater is more invested in the connection between religion, intellectualism, sensational living, ethics, and art than *Marius the Epicurean.*

Marius the Epicurean

As previously noted, *Marius* is frequently read as more conservative than *The Renaissance*, whether that be a matter of Pater backing away from more extreme views or simply being more careful of his public presentation. And although many have defended Pater as not really being more conservative but rather just putting on a more conservative show, few have claimed that *Marius* is in fact not any less progressive than *The Renaissance*, and virtually no one has considered that it might be in fact more progressive. Yet if we focus on religious experimentation as the foundation for all the other experimental things Pater does with his subject matter in *The Renaissance*, then we ought to read *Marius* not as a break from *The Renaissance's* project, and not even as a clarification of what was meant by *The Renaissance*, but rather as a bold continuation and progressive development of the theory first developed in *The Renaissance.*

Marius the Epicurean traces a young man's development across several religious and philosophical traditions. It begins at his family house outside of Rome on a day when the family is celebrating one of the feast days of the religion of Numa. Marius is drawn to the beauty of the day's rituals but disturbed by the spectacle of the sacrificed animals. As he grows older, Marius travels to a temple where he has a spiritual awakening while in conversation with a local priest. He then continues to school where he befriends a young man named Flavian. Flavian is a couple years older than him but takes him under his wing; the two bond over their discovery of epicureanism and—especially—over a book of tales that includes the myth of Cupid and Psyche. Flavian catches ill and dies. Marius continues to flourish at school and, upon finishing, begins work in the court of Marcus Aurelius. It is here that he is introduced to the philosophy of stoicism. He is at first attracted to this philosophy, but at a demonstration of gladiators at the colosseum, he discovers that stoicism lacks a materialism that necessitates compassion for the physical world. Around this time, he befriends the guard Cornelius who introduces him to his sister and a community of early Christians. Marius feels at home within this community although the narrative intentionally excludes anything as direct as a conversion. Roman soldiers, all the same, mistake him for a Christian and capture him. On his journey with his captors, Marius falls ill and dies.

The presence of religion has sometimes been taken for granted in *Marius*, and recent criticism more frequently deals with the homoerotic elements of the novel, the Hegelian principles at work, and the work's intertextuality. Such discussions often shift the focus of discourse from the religious to the philosophical, using any religious dialectic and synthesis to point toward the sexual benefit of resituating religious moralism within the framework of historic normalization, the way in which Pater's treatment of Christianity is a case study for a much

wider Darwinian approach to religion, or the ultimate aesthetic purposes of the novel. This is, of course, an improvement over previous essays which deal with religion but get lost in arguing either for or against Marius's actual conversion at the end of the novel (An argument as unhelpful as those over whether or not Walter Pater was actually gay).

Two essays in the past two decades have dealt with religion in *Marius* as a primary subject. In his 2011 *Victorian Studies* essay, Sebastian Lecourt argues that Walter Pater writes *Marius the Epicurean* against a Protestant tradition in which the act of conversion (and the popularity of the conversion novel) emphasizes belief and volition over ritual and historic tradition. Lecourt claims that Pater's interest in anthropology encouraged his interest in survival and fitness, and that for Pater, the beauty of religious survival was of value even apart from personal belief or the volition of conversion. Although he categorizes Pater's approach to religion as collectivist and traditional, Lecourt reads this approach as part of a liberal Victorian idea of many-sidedness, gathering the value offered by fragmented parts.

In a similar vein, Jude Wright argues that although *Marius* fits within the early Christianity genre and features a series of conversions, the conversions are ultimately experienced and valued through the lens of Marius's original pagan faith. "Religion," he writes, "is presented as an aesthetic endeavor, one which is concerned with widening perceptions and allowing broader (and more interesting) interpretive frameworks" (8).

These two articles offer extraordinary support for reading Pater as redefining the religious, but I wish to push the argument a few steps further. First, I want to differentiate between the ways in which Pater fits into already existent progressive approaches to religion and the ways in which his approach is uniquely groundbreaking. Secondly, I want to reconnect Pater's pioneering work on religion to his treatment of other subjects in *Marius*. Ultimately, I

believe that religion is not merely one of several areas of pioneering thought in *Marius* but that Pater presents a progressive approach to religion as the key to a progressive approach to sexuality, philosophy, and art.

Both Lecourt and Wright argue that Pater works within a pre-existing genre in order to introduce new—and current—ideas. Lecourt argues that Pater reworks the conversion novel genre to introduce values from contemporary anthropology; Wright argues that Pater uses the early Christianity narrative to explore the idea of religion as aesthetic experience. While on the one hand, each of these approaches suggests that Pater is doing something new within *Marius*, both argue that the "new" is merely new for the genre: in reality, Pater is one of several writers exploring anthropology and Darwinism in fiction, and the idea of the religious as aesthetic is not much more than a restatement of his position in *The Renaissance.*

Introducing these ideas into genres where they have not been explored is indeed progressive, especially when you consider that Pater chose such specifically religious genres in which to redefine religion. Yet we are left with the implication that it is Pater's application of an idea that is most unique, not his idea itself. Yes, the extent to which Pater clearly lays out a syncretic and aesthetic religion is important, but the use of these terms exclusively suggests that what Pater promotes is more an aesthetic and historical appreciation of religion—of the spiritual—that is only nebulously connected to religion as practice. However, if we consider what Marius finds valuable throughout his exploration of various religious and philosophical traditions, we find the development—I suggest—of a religious community built around ritual, aesthetic experience, and social action.

Ritual, tradition, and aesthetics: these are the elements which Marius, in his journey, repeatedly finds beautiful in each religious tradition. From his interactions with the ceremony of

the Religion of Numa, to his encounter with epicureanism—highlighted by the story of Psyche and the backdrop of his relationship with Flavian—to the mythical qualities of early Christianity: the aesthetics of each religious and philosophical tradition is what initially draws Marius in. Yet very markedly, Marius repeatedly turns away from these traditions because of the violence woven into their rituals. The religious holiday which opens the novel is interrupted by Marius's consideration of the sacrificed animals:

> One thing only distracted him—a certain pity at the bottom of his heart, and almost on his lips, for the sacrificial victims and their looks of terror, rising almost to disgust at the central act of the sacrifice itself, a piece of everyday butcher's work, such as we decorously hide out of sight. (vol. 1, 9)

The anthropomorphic discussion of animal sacrifice in Marius's younger years foreshadows the human sacrifice of gladiators in the colosseum which will cause Marius to lose faith in the anti-materialism of Marcus Aurelius's stoicism later in life. In the sacrifice of the religion of Numa, Marius enjoys the ritual of the day save the unfortunate element of sacrifice. Yet as he grows older, he finds it troubling to be able to enjoy ritual without feeling the pain of the sacrifice. After his experience watching the gladiators he thinks,

> Those cruel amusements were, certainly, the sin of blindness, of deadness and stupidity, in the age of Marius; and his light had not failed him regarding it. Yes! what was needed was the heart that would make it impossible to witness all this; and the future would be with the forces that could beget a heart like that. (vol. 1, 242)

Billie Inman has suggested that Pater's strong preference for forgiveness over sacrifice was developed in part during his reading of Merimee in 1874. She notes that the story of Colomba, who avenged her father's death by killing off his murderers, particularly affected

Pater. He referred to the end of the story, in which the two murderers' father asks why Colomba would show no mercy, as the "last hard page": "mere dramatic propriety itself for a moment seems to plead for the forgiveness [. . .] Such dramatic propriety, however, was by no means in Merimee's way" (qtd. in Inman 101). Inman also speculates that Pater would have read Merimee's account of watching a bullfight, after which the author admitted what to him had been a surprising preference for fights to the death.

It should not surprise us, then, that what Marius finds in the early Christian community which he cannot find elsewhere is an ethical community which works a valuing of life into the rituals of their religion. At the same time, he also finds a community on the outskirts of the mainstream culture. Just as Michelangelo was able to produce art more powerfully and freely because he came before the "frozen orthodoxy" of the ruling Catholic church, so the early Christian community is free of the potential violence that can be enacted by a majority religion. This is highlighted by two facts: first, Marius does not convert to Christianity, at least not in a traditional sense and at least not explicitly in the novel. Marius's ability to dwell within the Christian community without the pressures of a formal conversion highlights the lack of even figurative violence within this community. Secondly, the passivist nature of the Christian community is contrasted to the explicit violence of the Roman world around them, bookended by the murders of gladiators on one end and the death of Marius on the other.

Thus it is that we must read Pater's approach to religion as progressive through and through. I also believe that it is only because of Pater's progressive approach to religion that he is able to do so much progressively in every other area of this work. Consider first how treatments of the novel to date have read the work's subversion of genre as one of the work's most significant types of subversion, and specifically traditionally Christian genres: the conversion

novel, the early Christianity novel. The conversion narrative, as Eun Young Koh has summarized, typically follows a set structure: "preconversion life, a moment of divine intervention, and postconversion life" (136). Yet in *Marius the Epicurean*, Pater elides the conversion altogether. Marius's Christianity is part of a natural progression of philosophy and religion more than a sudden, divinely inspired awakening.[20] Pater's destabilization of genre is not merely another type of destabilization alongside his work on religion; it springs fully from and artfully mirrors the destabilization of religious traditions that take place within the novel. The same can be said for sexuality.

Marius features a series of interactions between the young man Marius and older men who guide his intellectual development. For example, it is an older male priest at the temple who guides Marius to his first spiritual awakening. This spiritual moment, intense but unsustainable, is followed by Marius's strong friendship with the young Flavian at school. Although the two lay in the silo together while reading Greek romances, the language is intentionally non-sexual. At the same time, though, the language is coded in such a way that suggests a homoerotic relationship to a minority reader. Flavian is, from the beginning, set apart from other boys. He remains "isolated from the others," he "take[s] a fuller hold upon thing around than is usual with boys," and the closeness he maintains with Marius is an "intimacy" marked by the way "the intellectual power of Flavian" maintains "sway" over Marius's younger mind (vol. 1, 51). As Matthew Kaiser has pointed out, the intellectual give and take of Flavian's relationship with the less mature Marius mirrors Plato's dialectics between teacher and student. But it should also be

[20] Sebastian Lecourt ("'To surrender himself, in perfect liberal inquiry': Walter Pater, Many-Sidedness, and the Conversion Novel") suggests that Pater's preference for gradual acceptance over sudden change-of-heart reflects a wider liberal tradition of "intellectuals who no longer believed in Christian doctrine, but remained sentimentally attached to the Church" and therefore wished to "gravitate toward models of religion that valorized inheritance over volition" (232).

noted that to a knowing audience, this relationship would also resonate with the pedastry outlined in Plato's *Phaedrus* and discussed in Pater's lectures on that work.

Flavian dies of a fever, and Marius, after a brief time in the court of Marcus Aurelius, falls under the influence of Cornelius, a soldier who introduces him to the beauties of Christianity. Throughout all of this, the lack of explicitly sexual language or imagery naturalizes the male-male education it depicts (see Monsman). The scene is safe insofar as Marius also befriends Cornelius's betrothed, Celia, but the older male/younger male dynamic once again provides erotic undertones, if not an erotic relationship. Although any eroticism, then, is deeply coded, by having his last scene of male education take place within the context of the early Christian church, Pater suggests that these bonds between men are not only natural in ancient Greek and Roman culture but also within Christianity. This is highlighted by the way that Marius, in the early parts of his relationship with Cornelius, is constantly comparing—not Christianity to stoicism—but the individual older male mentor, Aurelius, to the individual older male mentor, Cornelius. In these comparisons, Cornelius's acknowledgement of physical reality and its importance is contrasted with Aurelius's stoic disinterest in physical things. The result of this is that Marius's consideration of Cornelius, by way of Cornelius's philosophy, gives way to his appreciation of the male body: "the very person of Cornelius was nothing less than a sanction of that reverent delight Marius had always had in the visible body of man" (vol. 2, 53). Cornelius's Christianity is one in which the body is "the one true temple in the world," and this centrality of the body to Christian theology is mirrored by Marius's appreciation of Cornelius's body, featured first in Marius's appreciation of Cornelius's physiognomy, suggested later by how pleasantly Marius reflects on times in Cornelius's company, and finally confirmed by the fact that the narrative comments on how strange it is for Marius to with Cornelius to escape from

captivity in order to marry a woman. Although nothing explicitly sexual occurs within the text of the novel, these homoerotic bonds are explicitly important to Marius's spiritual development. To that extent, we might read Pater as suggesting that male homoerotic bonds are not merely natural within Christianity; they might be argued as necessary.

Gaston de Latour

Gaston de Latour was Pater's last fictional work, unfinished and unpublished in his lifetime. Pater began work on *Gaston* almost immediately after finishing *Marius*, but it was a work that he would develop and work on for years. After his death, it was initially published as a largely unedited fragment in 1896. The text most commonly read today is the result of a more complete version that takes into account Clara Pater's remembrances of her time assisting her brother and Pater's own manuscripts.

At first glance, the novel seems a second version of *Marius* with only the time and place changed: it tells the story of a French youth—Gaston—who initially intends to enter the priesthood. His training in Paris exposes him to both the art and ideas of the early Renaissance. The war between the Catholics and the Hugonauts causes Gaston, along with his grandfather and two companions, to travel away from their home to visit the poet Ronsard who recommends him to the philosopher Michel de Montaigne. Gaston is influenced by de Montaigne's hedonism and aestheticism while simultaneously developing a strong materialism.

What differs between Marius and Gaston includes a commitment to working within a Catholic framework throughout the second novel as well as a much more sustained dedication to materialism as an ideal. Whereas *Marius* measures the lasting value of several religious and philosophical traditions against the standard of materialism, *Gaston* much more extensively

explores the value of a certain type of Catholic/Christian tradition. The novel should be read, therefore, not just as revisiting the ideas developed in *Marius* but, equally important, as returning to the specific concerns with the Christian tradition developed in *The Renaissance*.

One of the primary concerns of *Gaston de Latour* is reconciling the spirit of Christianity with materialism. Early in the novel, Gaston feels the strong importance of material beauty to the point that it initially challenges his devotion to the church:

> Touch it where you might, you felt the resistant force of the solid matter of human experience—of human experience, in its strange mixture of beauty and evil, its sorrows, its ill-assorted fates, its pathetic acquiescence; above all, in its overpowering certainty, over against his own world of echoes and shadows, which perhaps only seemed to be so much as echoes or shadows. A nature with the capacity of worship, he was straightway challenged, as by a rival new religion claiming to supersede the religion he knew, to identify himself conclusively with this so tangible world, its suppositions, its issues, its risks. (20)

Through Gaston's exploration of the beauty of the natural world—including "the physical beauty of humanity"—he independently develops his own ethics of aestheticism. The physical sensual world becomes a link to the Platonic ideal. Poetry strengthens this link, causing Gaston to muse that "[t]hings were becoming more deeply sensuous and more ideal," transforming Gaston's impression of "such objects as wine, fruit, the plum in the cap, the ring on the finger." The transcendent power of the physical world reworks Gaston's ethical orientation away from a binary of right and wrong toward the flux of the natural world's ability to connect one to the Platonic real. Initially these are read as "two rival ideals":

> And therewith came the consciousness, no longer of mere bad-neighbourship between what was old and new in his life, but of incompatibility between two rival claimants upon him, of two ideals. Might that new religion be a religion not altogether of goodness, a profane religion, in spite of its poetic fervours? There were "flowers of evil," among the rest. It came in part, avowedly, as a kind of consecration of evil, and seemed to give it the beauty of holiness. Rather, good and evil were distinctions inapplicable in proportion as these new interests made themselves felt. (36-37)

As the novel develops, though, Gaston finds a syncretism between the materialism of what he originally reads as a "new religion" and the Christianity of his youth. This he accomplishes through a discovery of the flux already inherent in the Christian religion. During the philosopher's life, de Montaigne represents to Gaston the "new religion," the consecration of the profane. Yet after de Montaigne's life, Gaston reflects on what was not a rejection of traditional religion but rather a synthesis between a material hedonism and Christianity. He reflects on:

> [A] hundred, always quiet but not always insignificant, acts of devotion, noticeable in those old days, on passing a village church, or at a home, in the little chapel—superstitions, concessions to others, strictly appropriate recognitions rather, as it might seem, of a certain great possibility, which might lie among the conditions of so complex a world. (57-58)

This connection allows Gaston to rework his concept of both de Montaigne's and his own approach to religion. The flux that was so important in de Montaigne's teachings on other subjects transfers now to Gaston's appreciation of religion. From de Montaigne, Gaston learned the instability of things. Words, de Montaigne said, reflected the instability of the natural world:

"Words, too, language itself, and therewith the more intimate physiognomy of thought, 'slip every day through our fingers.' [. . .] In no respect was nature more stable, more consecutive, than man" (28). Similarly, de Montaigne extrapolated from children's play a larger reflection on life: "play was not play enough, but too grave and serious a diversion" charged with "discovering the real soul in [the child]" (46). The creativity in child's play, in which the truth of the soul can be found, parallels the experimentation which should constantly characterize religious and philosophical thought. Now, later in life, Gaston finds the flux inherent in the Christian religion of his youth. He finds himself drawn to "the poetic guidance of the Catholic Church in her wonderful, year-long, dramatic version of the story of redemption" with "[t]he sudden gaieties of Easter morning, the congratulations to the Divine Mother, the sharpness of the recoil from one extreme of feeling to the other" (69). The flux of the liturgical year is matched by the fluid movement of the Holy Spirit. He reflects on "the Spirit; above all, of the freedom, the indifference, of its operations; and who would give a strangely altered colour, for a long time to come, to the thoughts, to the very words, associated with the celebration of Pentecost" (71).

As has been mentioned, critics are fond of citing *Marius* as a false conversion novel, noting both the ways in which *Marius* conforms to the genre and the ways the novel undermines it. I would suggest that *Gaston* is similarly a false deconversion novel, both mirroring and undermining the genre. Just as *Marius* fails to feature a characteristic moment of divine intervention and personal change, so *Gaston* lacks a moment of loss of faith or a decisive turn away from the church.

I have focused, so far in my discussion of *Gaston*, on those sections available shortly after Pater's death, compiled and edited by Shadwell. These sections contain the majority of Pater's discussion of religious experimentation in *Gaston*, and they are also the most consistent

as a continuation of his thought in *The Renaissance* and *Marius*. It should be noted, though, that in 1995, an extended version of *Gaston* was published which included previously unpublished chapters. One chapter in particular stands out as important. The heart of my argument has been that Pater's sense of religion was built around an aversion to the violence necessary to sustain majority institutionalized religion and that religious experimentation keeps religious ideas from developing into violent modes of majority religion. Yet one previously suppressed passage of *Gaston* complicates these claims in such a way as to beg discussion.

In the "Anteros" chapter, Pater tells the story of Jasmin and Raoul. Jasmin is a young nobleman who courts the Lady Margaret; Raoul is a young man of lower rank who seeks to serve Jasmin out of love and devotion. He follows Jasmin to the city where he attempts to win Jasmin's favor by killing a nobleman who wronged Jasmin. For this murder, Raoul is put to death. Yet whereas Pater's previous passages about death and sacrifice are resistant and disapproving, the passage which describes Raoul's execution can only be called sadomasochistic.[21] The execution begins with a procession from the prison to the place where he will be beaten to death. The prose dwells on the moment in which they "strip away his scanty clothing" and then later on the fact that he awaits death with "only his loose white shirt upon him" (108, 109). Simultaneously, it emphasizes the humiliation of the moment and the submissiveness that it has created: "he is become humbler than a little child, is pressed onward, may be handled, turned this way and that, as passively as a child already dead" (108). And then, ultimately, Raoul is placed upon Saint Andrew's cross, blindfolded, and beaten.

The sadomasochism of these overlapped images and descriptive moments is undeniable and—if the work had been published in Pater's lifetime—would likely have been recognized by

[21] See "Walter Pater and the Art of Evanescence" in Rosenberg's *Elegy for an Age: The Presence of the Past in Victorian Literature*.

his more discerning readers. The question this passage presents, then, is if Pater's commitment to non-violence, indeed the cornerstone of his redefinition of religion, is upheld or rewritten in his final work. In the next few pages, I wish to present two possibilities: first, that Pater increasingly understood the attraction of fetishized pain near the end of a lifetime of opposition and disappointment and secondly, that although Pater acknowledged this attractive potential, he ultimately resisted it.

If this passage does reveal a fetishization of the pain suffered by (most likely a sexual) minority, the scene reflects a partial internalization of the figurative violence Pater felt from factions of Victorian society. Near the end of his life, Pater had worked very hard to advance very little in his career at Oxford. The reasons for this, as critics have speculated, were likely religious and sexual. Though Pater had lived to see the passing of a Test Act which largely disarmed the clergy in Oxford and worked toward a further secularization of the university, the fact that his later works spoke much more kindly of the Christian tradition than *The Renaissance* suggests maybe not a rewriting of his views, but definitely the effects of a more mature and socially-conscious thinker. And although I agree with William Shuter that Hardinger's rumors about an affair with Pater were more than likely just rumors, I don't think we can discount the effects those rumors may have had on Pater's career. To live one of the most careful lifestyles of any of the British decadents—to be, as James put it, "a mask without a face"—and yet to face such cruel censure might certainly cause feelings of sexual and religious aggression to work themselves out in a single sadomasochistic scene similar to those seen throughout so many other aesthetic and decadent writings.[22]

[22] Consider this project's previous discussions of Swinburne's "Anactoria" and Baudelaire's *Fleurs de Mal,* Thompson's "Hound of Heaven" and Wilde's "The Sphinx" and *Salome* as

At the same time, in light of the trajectory of Pater's writing, I think we might also consider this moment a moment of not only risking life and death but actively and creatively playing *with* life and death. This is, indeed, a very decadent move, and it is a move that I believe is borrowed from the French decadents, calling to mind Baudelaire's vampire and the necrophilia of his contemporaries—perhaps even the image of Salome kissing the decapitated head of John the Baptist in *Salomé*, a play Wilde originally would write in French. Of course, Pater's framework is uniquely English concerns.[23] In a society in which life and death are on the line, in which living an aesthetic life, an areligious life, and/or a homoerotic life is to risk social if not physical death, the ultimate game of the creative mind is to rise above the game and actively experiment *with* life and death. This is the game of the macabre; it is also the game of the sadomasochist, a kind of roleplay in which life and death are mastered through manipulation and simulation.

However, I also want to consider the fact that Pater's sexualization of Raoul's death, while sadomasochistic, does not wholeheartedly condone fetishized pain. Pater carefully situates this story as part of Gaston's own fascinations with "unkindly or cruel love, the worship of the body, the religion of physical beauty, with its congenital and appropriate fanaticism, a servitude based on the most potent form of that relationship of the weak to the strong, noted by Aristotle as the elementary grounds of slavery" (102). The base of such passion, the narrative suggests, is "that cruel eagerness to consume the reluctant lover, and then of that cruel weariness of a lover found too facile, which allowed, nay encouraged him to consume, to destroy himself by

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discussed in later chapters, as well as convincing sadomasochistic readings of Symon's "The Temptation of St Anthony."

[23] A full consideration of necrophilia as a distinctly French decadent concept is in Lisa Downing's *Desiring the Dead: Necrophilia and Nineteenth Century French Literature*.

sacrifice" (103). While it does not outright condemn Gaston for having these thoughts, the chapter also resists normalizing these attractions. In the conclusion of the chapter, Gaston is diagnosed as the victim of his upbringing: "Presenting itself at first as only the proper antidote to the too narrow and scrupulous conscience of a religious childhood, a restrained youth, the theory of 'indifference' had but subjected him to a sort of conscience more exclusive still, to this impassioned love of passion—call it what you will" (110). The sadomasochistic in Gaston, then, is simultaneously sympathetic and symptomatic. Perhaps Pater himself felt the attraction toward transforming his own experience of exclusion into a more pleasant form of pain. Or, what I believe is more likely, perhaps Pater perceived this impulse in his contemporaries and followers and spoke toward that trend.

Pater's Contributions to Decadent Religion

While one could argue that most decadent authors who followed would be indebted to Pater's ideas on religion—while I, in fact, would argue so much—I think it worthwhile to pause and consider how Pater individually creates a new, decadent approach to religion that functions on a sociological, psychoanalytic, and theological level. Sociologically, Pater challenges religion as institutionalized power and gravitates toward those religious traditions which favor small communities of followers rather than large politico-social organization. We see this in *The Renaissance*'s condemnation of the "frozen orthodoxy" that preceded and followed the experimental era of Renaissance art. We see it in *Marius*'s preference for persecuted Christian house churches over Roman religion. And we also see it in *Gaston*'s preference for small, local religious and philosophical communities that stand in stark contrast with the war between the Catholics and Huguenots.

This preference highlights what many twentieth-century sociologists would identify—from a secular standpoint—as the problems with religion as it functioned in society. Religions, as Rey says in his summary of Bourdieu's body of work, "seek to monopolize the religious field by imposing on the laity an 'orthodox' worldview and by denouncing as 'heretical' any alternative worldviews" (57). Although by the time he writes *History of Sexuality*, his focus is more on scientific language than religious, Foucault still suggests that the church appropriates scientific language to attempt to repress (unsuccessfully, he believes) that which threatens its institutional power. Pater imagines what Bourdieu and Foucault cannot: religion that dwells in small communities rather than in regulating institutions.

Pater also imagines something that Bourdieu, Foucault, and their predecessor Bataille did not when he seems to suggest that emphasizing community over dogma could eventually divorce religious traditions from the sacrifice of bodies which remain central to their theology. That certain tradition of French sociology to which these thinkers belong emphasizes that that which is regulated in Western religion is the body and that that which is sacrificed in Western religion is likewise the body. Pater's characters have a similar problem with the sacrifice of bodies: Marius, for example, dislikes the sacrifice of animals in Roman rituals and the sacrifice of gladiators in the Roman colosseum. The reason why Christianity appeals to Marius, I believe, is because the sacrifice of Christ can be read as mythology. Though Marius finds the sacrifice unnecessary, he reads it not as a literal sacrifice but as a figurative one. In Jungian terms, the myth of Christ's sacrifice meets the need for sacrifice at the heart of humanity's unconscious collective, and is thus preferable to the physical sacrifice of people and animals.

Theologically, Pater follows the Victorian impulse to mythologize religion common in works like Strauss's *Life of Jesus*. But more unique is his emphasis on small religious

organizations as opposed to large institutions. This concept resonates with Graham Ward's critique of western Christianity today, a Christianity he sees as competing for attention in the secular world by becoming spectacle (see *True Religion*). Instead of this spectacle, Ward suggests the importance of "neo-tribes" which simplify Christianity to a forgiveness which can reconcile the individual—on a small, local level—with the self and with others. Pater's turn away from the mythology of sacrifice toward the importance of local community highlights this sort of neo-tribalism.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have made a move away from reading religion as auxiliary to Pater's experimental and redefining work, no longer regarding it as secondary to issues of genre, gender, and sexuality. Instead, I suggest that the redefinition of the religious is central to Pater's entire decadent project. *The Renaissance* suggests that institutionalized religion stifled the creativity of Renaissance thinkers and artists, but it also celebrates not merely the artistic experimentation of the age but the theological and spiritual one as well. In *Marius* and *Gaston*, Pater's titular characters do not exchange institutionalized religion for secularism or non-organized spirituality but instead engage with organized religious communities in a way that resituates the religious experience away from authoritarian systems of belief toward the physical rituals that bind the community together.

In the following three chapters, I argue that this redefinition is central to decadent conversations about religious subjects throughout the end of the British nineteenth century. Central to Pater's concept of the religious is the idea of experimentation. The decadent authors who follow his lead inherit his definition of the religious, but they also continue in his tradition

of further experimentation and further redefinition. The early work of Oscar Wilde, for instance, is much more interested in the perverse and shocking potential of syncretic approaches to religion, and his later work is much more accepting of self-sacrifice as central to the personal religious experience. His works follows a similar pattern as Pater's—from the sensational to the more conservative—but he is also much more comfortable with violence—in the beginning, against his oppressors and in the end, against himself in the form of sacrifice. Francis Thompson, on the other hand, de-emphasizes the communal in favor the ritualistic, creating a religious experience that fetishizes religious discipline and the isolation of being a religious outsider. Throughout the development of his work, though, I believe he ultimately lands on Pater's definition of religion as community if only because of his increasing awareness of the ethical problems with isolated, fetishized religious experiences. Vernon Lee's work provides a meta-commentary on the decadent religious experience, synthesizing these various approaches and—in the process—questioning the value of a decadent religious project at all.

CHAPTER TWO

OSCAR WILDE AND RELIGIOUS NAMING

Whether to Pater's honor or to Pater's chagrin, Oscar Wilde became—in the public eye and most likely in his own—Pater's legacy. Yet two more different personalities could not exist. Whereas Pater was Shaw's "mask without a face" who would disappear for long periods of time to write and read, Wilde cultivated celebrity through his roles as lecturer, playwright, and public personality. Wilde's sometimes contradictory many-sidedness has often been appreciated in scholarship. Some of the most shared anecdotes include Wilde's admission that *Dorian Gray* "contains much of [him] in it. Basil Hallward is what [he] thinks [he] is: Lord Henry, what the world thinks of [him]: Dorian what [he] would like to be" (qtd. in Ellmann, *Wilde* 319). At another time Wilde would admit that *An Ideal Husband* contained "a great deal of the real Wilde" (qtd. in Pearce 222). Ava Leverson maintains that Wilde claimed that *Salomé* was the only one of his plays he really liked, that it was the only one that captured Wilde's real self.[24] And of course, *The Importance of Being Earnest* questions whether the singular self exists at all.

Yet underneath all of this runs a desire to find out the real Wilde, to suggest what aspects of Wilde are revealed in *An Ideal Husband* or *Salomé* or any of the three main characters of *Dorian Gray*, even if such an impulse runs against the grain of Wilde's own personality and work. The question of the real Wilde seems especially strong when it comes to the issue of religion, and it can be easy to try to claim Wilde for Catholicism, agnosticism, or secularism. Petra Dierkes-Thrun, for instance, builds much of her reading of *Salomé*'s modernity on the foundation of its anti-religious, anti-metaphysical secularism. Jerusha Hull McCormack

[24] In *Letters to the Sphinx from Oscar Wilde,* London, 1930. Huntington Library.

constructs a very similar argument on the basis of *Salomé*'s intentional Catholicism. While both believe that Wilde approaches religious subjects from a subversive, transgressive angle, they claim that such subversion necessarily comes from a particular religious or anti-religious position.

The kind of creative flux that Pater applied to the idea of religious traditions, which Wilde inherited, allows us to sidestep the question of whether Wilde was or was not Catholic or Anglican, orientalist or Greek, atheist or agnostic, secular or religious. Wilde, I suggest, is invested in a variety of religious postures and uses them all in his creative approach toward religious theory. By undermining the stability of the texts that Western religious traditions largely depend upon, Wilde draws parallels between the aesthetic rituals and spiritual sensations across traditions and argues that ritualistic religion might be more inclusive than dogmatic religion.

To appreciate this version of Wilde's approach to religion, and to acknowledge religious thinking as central to Wilde's work, one ought to reconsider Wilde's life. In the following pages, I present two biographies: one is the curated version generally taught and accepted today and the other is a parallel, religious version. Read together, they create a semblance of a Wilde neither committed to religious identity nor invested in secularism. Rather, they—paired with readings of his works—suggest a Wilde who elides categorization and instead views religion and spirituality as places for experimentation, recreation, and discovery.

Two Narratives

Wilde's public life has presented a narrative of the author which has often been accepted as authoritative. Born in Ireland to Protestant parents, Wilde attended Trinity College before

transferring to Oxford. Though reports claim that he was eager to seek out Walter Pater, it is likely that the closest he ever came to meeting his hero—during those student days—was when he attended one of Pater's lectures. He did, however, participate in Ruskin's trench project, and he did quite well scholastically. Wilde's success as a writer after his time at Oxford led to an American tour in 1882. Upon returning home, he met and married Constance Lloyd. Around this time, he also befriended several men, including Robert Ross, and began engaging in various homoerotic relationships. The most important of these friendships, though, was a friendship with a young Alfred Douglas at Oxford. Douglas and Wilde's relationship developed over many years. Douglas's longstanding frustration, and his father's detestation of Wilde, erupted when the Marquis was turned away from the opening of *Earnest*—having planned to publically shame Wilde—and instead left an insulting note at Wilde's club. Wilde, at Douglas's encouragement, sued the Marquis for libel, a case which quickly turned into a countersuit that set Wilde at the center of a trial for acts of gross indecency. Wilde was found guilty and sent to prison, eventually landing in Reading Gaol for most of his three year sentence. When released, Wilde went to France, partially so that he could escape the infamy which surrounded his person in England and partially—some have suggested—because homosexual acts were not wholly outlawed throughout France at that particular time. Wilde lived in France for three years until his death in 1900.[25]

Much of this story was carefully curated by Robert Ross in the wake of Wilde's death. Ross, the executor of Wilde's estate, most significantly released *De Profundis* in parts so as to highlight Wilde's victimhood at the hands of an indolent and self-obsessed Douglas. Douglas's counter-narrative, focusing on his young age and subsequent conversion, gained little traction. In

[25] See Berrong 181.

more recent years, Richard Ellmann's biography and the film, starring Stephen Fry and based on the biography, have cemented this narrative as authoritative and largely followed Wilde's sexual development and scandal as the primary events of Wilde's life.

As important and central as that story is, it risks putting a fairly singular face on a man who valued his many-facedness. Even Wilde's value as author, aesthete, and thinker sometimes has become subjugated to the idea of his primary identity as homosexual. Furthermore, this is a noticeably areligious version of Wilde's life. In order to appreciate Wilde's life and work, I believe we also need to understand him in light of his increasing, sincere interest in religious questions. I consider my own work in conversation with previous works on Oscar Wilde and religion, including Ellis Hanson's chapter on Wilde in *Decadence and Catholicism*, Jarleth Killeen's *The Faiths of Oscar Wilde*, and Jerusha Hall McCormack's work on Wilde and Catholicism. I also, however, suggest that this understanding of Wilde can be supported by reading the above biography as parallel with a religious biography of Wilde's life.

The fact that Oscar Wilde was born in Ireland is sometimes overshadowed by the fact that he was born to a Protestant family. Yet the Protestant family into which he was born was a family very much interested in Catholicism. Wilde's mother, Jane Wilde, who wrote as Speranza, was actively in favor of complete Irish independence and was popular for writing and publishing poems encouraging military action against England. Jarleth Killeen notes in Speranza's verse a dislike of the Protestant tradition which fueled her nationalism, a nationalism that at one point caused her to almost plead guilty to treason on behalf of another. Yet at the same time, Jane Wilde was invested enough in Protestantism that she stopped short of any consideration of conversion. On might conjecture that a certain amount of agnosticism encouraged her to fight for the romantic Irish Catholic cause without any attraction beyond the

romantic elements of Catholicism itself. Wilde's father, William Wilde, certainly did appreciate the romantic side of the Irish Catholic faith, but merely as a psychological study. In a work on Irish superstition, he concludes, as Killeen summarizes, "that most traditional Irish customs have their roots in a pre-Christian rather than a Catholic world-view" (6).

Yet one must appreciate the fact that Oscar Wilde was born into a unique family in which Catholicism was as much a point of conversation as Protestantism. Some suggest that because of his son's increasing interest in Catholicism, William Wilde was all too glad to see his son move from Trinity to Oxford. But at Oxford, Oscar's interest in Catholicism only grew, paired with a strong interest in the sincerity with which aesthetic figures—like Pater—loved the religion of the Greeks. The fact that Wilde was drawn to Catholicism and Greek mythology might not surprise modern readers who know Wilde's reputation as a non-conformist, yet as Ellmann reminds us in his essay on "Oscar at Oxford," Wilde worked diligently to fit into the English world at Oxford: changing his speech and accent, learning the customs and traditions of Oxford, and attempting to out-English the English with his famous command of fashion. Though Wilde was "conspicuous," he wanted to be conspicuously English.

It is therefore all the more noteworthy that Wilde, by his later years at Oxford, was considering conversion to Catholicism. Though this potential conversion is often contextualized within the Oxford movement, a conversion to Catholicism would highlight Wilde's Irish past in a way that he seemed to not want highlighted. When Wilde's friend David Hunter Blair came back from Rome as a convert, Wilde began very openly discussing Catholicism with his Protestant friend and reported even displaying pictures of the pope and Newman in his quarters. On a trip to Rome, he himself was close to conversion before he was persuaded away by a trip through the Greek islands with a professor. The Catholic interest of Wilde was intentionally

more than a monolithic idea of Catholicism but rather a collection of local Catholicisms, all which influenced him: the Catholicism of England, the Catholicism of Ireland, and the Catholicism of Rome. Throughout his life, Wilde retained this interest in Catholicism and also retained several Catholic friends, the closest of whom—Robert Ross—made certain that Wilde received the last rites on his deathbed.

Those who have sought to reclaim a religious biography of Wilde often reclaim an exclusively Catholic biography which oversimplifies Wilde's ambivalence toward codified religion and overlooks the variety of other religious influences in Wilde's life. Killeen helpfully proposes that Irish folklore played an important role in Wilde's approach to religion, and we might remember that as a disciple of Pater, Wilde also took Greek religion very seriously. Unlike Pater, though, who grew up practicing the Anglican liturgy with his siblings, Wilde inherited a hybrid sense of religion from his childhood, a hybridity that was only made more complex during Wilde's Oxford years. At the same time, though, Wilde's Irish background gave him a particularly keen sense of the inter-religious violence which made such hybridization both necessary—to bring peace between religious traditions and the nations that claimed them—and impossible on a large scale.

Wilde's Creative Religious Project

That Wilde is a master at experimentation, subversion, destabilization, and recreation is well documented throughout Wilde studies, but my interest in Wilde's creative approach toward religion—especially in his pre-prison works—is most related to Wilde's relationship to symbolism. Wilde's symbolism, especially in works like *Salomé*, was in the tradition of French symbolism, a movement by poets like Baudelaire and Mallarmé to represent an emotion with a

description of tangible sensations, to represent an idea through a physically experience. Of course, from the beginning was an awareness that the symbol was always incapable of truly capturing the thing it symbolized. As James Lawler says, the symbol should be "a sign and not an object complete in itself [. . .] an act and not an expression" (3). As Wilde makes clear in his preface to *Dorian Gray*, his symbolism is one that grasps at fragments of a sublime experience and one that can never be simplified into corollary representation.

Wilde's symbolism is also one which touches on complex social realities. In *Salomé*, for instance, the titular character reflects anxieties about gender and sexuality. As we will see in this chapter's discussion of *Salomé,* her role throughout much of the play as a woman with distinct desires and agency, unable to be contained by the patriarchal structures of her society, places her in conversation with the New Women of the 1890s. Her role as a hyper-sexualized woman, tempting John the Baptist, represents anti-Catholic anxieties which frequently manifested in the figure of the Whore of Babylon. In *Dorian*, symbolism likewise speaks to social anxieties. For example, the presence of Chinese imports—including decorative china and opium—throughout the novel speaks to anxieties concerning foreign influence.

Wilde's symbols are always slipping, never entirely fixed or stable. As Yeeyon Im has mentioned, *Salomé*'s conclusion—with the princess kissing the lips of a beheaded John the Baptist—is problematic to traditional readings of Salomé as representative of New Woman, gay man, Catholic, or Jewish other: "How can we reconcile her cruel passion of carnal desire with the supposed spirituality of the symbolist tradition?" she asks (163). Likewise, strictly post-colonial readings which read anti-empiricism in *Dorian Gray* is incompatible with Wilde's consumption of Eastern art. We need, as readers of Wilde, to appreciate the fragmentation of Wilde's symbols.

Just as Wilde's symbolism complicates and fragments that which it represents, so I believe Wilde's pre-prison works that address the Christian (Anglican, Catholic) religion question the stability of things Wilde presents as central to it: its singularity as a true religious narrative, the stability of the language which codifies it, and the stability of the symbolic order of which it is a part. Throughout these three elements runs a common fascination with the power that comes with speaking and naming. By deconstructing the power of language and texts, Wilde deconstructs Christianity's identity as a religion of the book.

The three pre-prison works that I am interested in are *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Salomé,* and "The Sphinx." These texts have primarily been read in terms of their interest in fluid models of sexuality, and I think these sexual concerns are closely tied with religious concerns. Foucault, of course, understood sexual naming as closely connected with religious power. Although the scientology that named sexual deviance throughout the nineteenth century was primarily a scientific, secular endeavor appropriated by the government and medical communities to regulate what it now had a name for, Foucault understands the historical role of the church as a series of power-wielding institutions and recognizes the way that the nineteenth-century church appropriates legal sexual naming and regulation. Throughout Victorian England, the ability to name sexual difference allowed the government and the church to legislate and regulate it, but it also allowed for a subversion and perversion of these central powers. Wilde's focus on destabilizing names and texts largely confirms this reading of the relationship between the nineteenth-century church and nineteenth-century religion.

In the first section of this chapter, then, I explore how these ideas play out in Wilde's pre-prison works. In the second section of this chapter, I explain how I believe Wilde uses concepts

currently discussed in terms of "kenosis" and "radical subjective destitution" to fill the void left by removing the stable, central, religious text.

The Picture of Dorian Gray

In 1890, Wilde published what would become the first of his most popular and lasting works, his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. *Dorian Gray* was originally published in *Lippincotts*, but after reviews that suggested that some of its contents "were better unwritten" and "only fit for the Criminal Investigation Department," Wilde revised the novel before publishing it in book form (181). This revised copy omitted Basil's confession to Dorian that "[s]omehow [he] had never loved a woman" but "adored [Dorian] madly, extravagantly, absurdly" (qtd. in Longmans 227-28). Yet the omission of this explicit moment only strengthens the symbolic nature of the novel's homoeroticism and allows Wilde's treatment of it to shift between all three of the main characters.

Wilde's subversion of social, sexual expectations through the novel might be the most obvious form of subversion, yet the novel also destabilizes language, art, and religion through its redefinition of language and artistic representation. Throughout the novel, both subjects shift from denotative representations to symbolic representations of fragmented emotional and physical sensations. The preface to *Dorian Gray* is one of Wilde's more intentional engagements with the French symbolic movement. In it, he expresses that "all art is at once surface and symbol." His emphasis that "[n]o artist desires to prove anything" and that "[n]o artist has ethical sympathies" works in tandem with the French symbolist's war against "plain meaning," and his warning that "those who read the symbol do so at their peril" reflects the way the French symbolist tradition valued the complexity and incomprehensibility of strong art (3-4).

Wilde's preface specifically focuses on the symbolic nature of language. It claims that "thought and language are to the artist instruments of art" (4). To Wilde, language is not a repository of meaning but rather a tool, an instrument, toward the creation of beautiful things. This concept of language is what moves the plot of the novel forward. At the beginning of the novel, in Basil's studio, Dorian contemplates the nature of words after hearing Lord Henry expound on aestheticism. Even as he contemplates the power of articulated language, though, Dorian finds himself drawn to the physical sensations he experiences because of the sound of the words rather than to the simple philosophy behind them. He stands "vibrating and throbbing to curious pulses" as he thinks:

> Music had stirred him like that. Music had troubled him many times. But music was not articulate. It was not a new world, but rather another chaos, that it created in us. Words! Mere words! How terrible they were! How clear, and vivid, and cruel! [. . .] They seemed to be able to give a plastic form to formless things, and to have a music of their own as sweet as that of viol or of lute. Mere words! Was there anything so real as words? (23)

References to words throughout the rest of the novel confirm that the realness of words is a realness beyond any denotative meaning. Rather, it is the shape and sound of words, their connotations, their aesthetic sounds, which carry power. Through the novel, the text repeatedly highlights the way words sound and the way words make characters feel. This is especially the case in the scenes concerning Dorian's love affair with Sibyl Vane. Lord Henry's speech causes a change in Dorian which leads him to fall in love with Sibyl. Henry muses, "It was through certain words of his, musical words, said with musical utterance, that Dorian Gray's soul had turned to this white girl" (61). Sibyl is also affected by the aesthetics surrounding words; when her mother speaks to her, "The waving of crooked false-jeweled fingers gave grotesqueness to

the words" (63). When Dorian loses interest in Sibyl Vane, it is because she is no longer able to produce aesthetic pleasure through the way she acts: "The few words she had to speak [. . .] were spoken in a thoroughly artificial manner" (84). As opposed to the artistic portrayal of Shakespearean heroines she had accomplished on stage, this real Sibyl is robotic on stage now that she is in love with Dorian.

Throughout the course of the novel, when words become divorced from fixed meaning and connected to powerful emotional and physical experiences, they become significantly more powerful. In the case of Dorian's relationship with Sibyl, words are ultimately murderous. Although Sibyl's death is technically a suicide, the true weapon that kills her is the language which Dorian speaks against her. When James suggests that he should kill Dorian, Sibyl feels that his words "cut the air like a dagger," yet it is later Dorian's words which cause her own death (71). Conversely, in that sequence of events, Dorian believes that language can restore just as powerfully as it can destroy. After going home from his argument with Sybil, and before he discovers her death, Dorian uses the act of letter writing not so much as a way to apologize to Sibyl but as a way to make himself feel better through the cathartic power of language. By pouring "wild words of sorrow and wilder words of pain" into his letter, he finds some temporary peace (97).

It should be noted that through this replacement of meaning with powerful sensation, language becomes increasingly unstable. It is the instability of language and meaning which enables Wilde to destabilize everything else through *Dorian Gray*. Take, for example, the way that Wilde complicates the decadent relationship to orientalism and empire in the eleventh chapter. This chapter overviews the various outlets in which Dorian seeks aesthetic and hedonistic pleasure, the emphasis being—expectedly so—on the senses. The chapter's litany of

his interests, though, highlights Dorian as a consumer of the East. As Dorian migrates from smell to sound to sight, the common thread that runs through his experiences is the part of the world from which they originally come: "And so he would now study perfumes and the secrets of their manufacture, distilling heavily scented oils and burning odorous gums from the East" and then, "At another time he devoted himself entirely to music [. . .] he used to give curious concerts in which mad gipsies tore wild music from little zithers, or grave, yellow-shawled Tunisians plucked at the strained strings of monstrous lutes" (132). Finally, Dorian turns to the visual pleasure of Eastern jewels and tapestries.

Wilde's interest in Chinese imports and other artifacts of the East is well documented, but it is more difficult to determine whether the commentary he makes on orientalism in his works is positive or negative. Qi Chen creates a kind of orientalist bibliography of Wilde, tracing him from a university student with famous blue china to a recommender of Chinese porcelain and textiles in his American lectures, to someone who returned to England with particular opinions on tea, perhaps influenced by his time in San Francisco. While Chen sees the import and reproduction of Eastern styles as something that makes contemporary style and taste accessible to the middle class—and not just to the aristocracy—there is also a sense in which orientalism has a dangerous power throughout *Dorian Gray*. As others have mentioned, the literal addictive properties of opium and the illness it causes mirrors, in Victorian literature, the addictive nature of oriental commodity collection and the national sickness that results from Eastern contagion.[26] In *Dorian Gray*, Dorian is leaving an opium den when James Vane confronts him over the death of Sybil and almost kills him. James might be English, but as a sailor, he has come into contact with the East and can similarly function as a symbol of Eastern contagion and danger. Although

[26] See Keep and Randall, "Addiction, Empire, and Narrative."

the novel uses Eastern commodities, such as perfumes and tapestries, as a sign of aesthetic taste, it also uses opium and James Vane as symbols of Eastern danger.

Similarly, Dorian's aesthetic pursuits are not unilaterally symbols of positive decadent pleasure, and this—I believe—connects to the anti-intellectual nature of his pursuits. Phyllis Weliver has noted that Dorian is mentioned as an excellent musician but that in the course of the novel, we never see him play a piece from beginning to end. In Dorian, Weliver reads the signs of a certain kind of dandy who is marked by "playfulness" and has the "major component of [. . .] the veritable deification of boredom." What she calls the "deification of boredom" might accurately be read as an anti-intellectual interest in the arts. When Dorian studies perfumes, he does it through experience rather than academic study, "distilling heavily scented oils and burning odorous gums." His interest in music is not expressed in the study and practice which must have cultivated his talent but rather in "giv[ing] curious concerts" which feature music that is not meant to be analyzed but rather is meant to be felt as "wild" and "monstrous." While Wilde clearly values the emotional over the intellectual, he does seem to resist a mindless engagement with aesthetic experiences which lack any sort of rigor. Compare Dorian to Basil Hallward, whose work as a painter is all-consuming.

This all connects back to religion. Just as for Dorian the arts are valuable for sensational rather than intellectual pleasure, so is religion. The narrative's discussion of perfumes, Eastern music, jewels, and tapestries is bookended by a discussion of Dorian's interest in the Roman Catholic Church. In the first section of discussion, the narrative mentions Dorian's enjoyment of "the cold marble pavement," "the jeweled, lantern-shaped monstrance," and "the fuming censers that the grave boys, in their lace and scarlet, tossed into the air like great gilt flowers" (131). Yet it is not merely these external elements which fascinate Dorian but also the story at the heart of

the Church: “The daily sacrifice [. . .] stirred him as much by its superb rejection of the evidence of the senses as by the primitive simplicity of its element and the eternal pathos of the human tragedy that it sought to symbolize” (131). It is the emotions of the Christian story, though, and not the intellectual belief, that captures Dorian’s interest: “he never fell into the error of arresting his intellectual development by any formal acceptance of creed or system” (131).

The final section of this passage overviews Dorian’s interests in priestly robes and church artifacts. The passage casually mentions the symbolism of the garments—the purple that adorns “the Bride of Christ” and the “orphreys [. . .] divided into panels representing scenes from the life of the Virgin”—but the theology of the church is transferred into a theology of sensation. Dorian particularly notes how purple robes represent “the pallid macerated body that is worn by the suffering that [the Church] seeks for and wounded by self-inflicted pain” (137). The orphreys were most noted for the raiment of the saints and martyrs and for how “the mystic offices to which such things were put [. . .] quickened the imagination” (137).

Dorian weakens the idea of monotheistic religion by refusing to engage with it beyond anti-intellectual, even lazy, acknowledgement of a few of its most accessible symbols. The novel *Dorian Gray*, however, does so through tying the Christian religion specifically with moralism that is codified in written language. If the novel successfully divorces words from strict meaning, it weakens those Christian texts which set a moral code for Christian followers. Matthew Kaiser identifies in Wilde an equation of moralism with competition. Looking at Wilde’s whole body of work, he argues, “[E]arnestness can be traced to the agnostic impulse, to the need to win, to prevail morally or intellectually over others. In Wilde’s eyes, earnestness is moral athleticism, the sport of Puritans” (148). By weakening Puritan moralizing impulses by implicitly weakening

the proof-texts upon which they depend, Wilde conversely elevates the aspects of spiritualism which lead to individual peace and beauty. As Lord Henry says to Dorian and Basil:

> To be good is to be in harmony with one's self [. . .] Discord is to be forced to be in harmony with others. One's own life—that is the important thing. As for the lives of one's neighbors, if one wishes to be a prig or a Puritan, one can flaunt one's moral views about them, but they are not one's concern. Besides, individualism has really the higher aim. (79-80)

Moralism, says Lord Henry, causes a false sense of forced community but ultimately is reduced to moral competition. While the crime and murder that Dorian commits likewise eventually cut him off from his community, the narrative sets it in contrast with the potential of the aesthetic community that allows individualism, that which Lord Henry, Basil, and Dorian initially share.

The Sphinx

In "The Sphinx," Wilde continues his contemplation of Christian moralism by specifically looking at how it creates Christian asceticism. Nicholas Frankel, in his work on Wilde's illustrated works, comments that "nobody reads 'The Sphinx' nowadays," and while the statement may have been a bit of an exaggeration, the dearth of criticism produced on the poem in the two decades since does support his general point. Wilde published "The Sphinx" in 1894, three years after publishing his short story, "The Sphinx without a Secret." The shift between the two works is noteworthy. "The Sphinx without a Secret" is the story of a woman who creates an air of mystery around herself to drive her lover mad; upon her death, the man discovers that she really had no secret at all and was only pretending that her meetings were clandestine and that she had secret relations. In short, it is a story in which the woman's sexuality—at its root—is

harmless, though the woman goes out of her way to torment the man who loves her. The poem "The Sphinx" begins with the scholar-speaker assuming the harmlessness of the sphinx, interrogating her about her sexual past, until through his own musings, the thought of her overpowers him. The granting of agency to the female sphinx is not the only thing which separates the poem from the story. "The Sphinx without a Secret" is a story primarily about sexuality whereas "The Sphinx" combines concerns about female sexuality with a hybridization of Egyptian and Greek mythology which ultimately threatens the scholar's Christian faith. Margaret Debelius has commented that the conflation of Egyptian and Greek myth represents "palpable anxieties about other kinds [other than sexual] of anarchy": "Even more than just fears about gender and nation, the sphinx also functions for these male writers as an expression of concerns about empire crumbling and sexual preferences shifting" (7). Within "The Sphinx," I believe, these anxieties are primarily religious.

The struggle between neo-paganism and Christianity throughout this poem represents the way that competitive religious moralism, as denounced in *Dorian Gray*, can be destructive. Throughout the poem, the speaker becomes increasingly distracted from his studies and increasingly attracted to the pagan world the Sphinx represents. Norbert Lennartz has suggested that the poem offers the image of decadence we expect by making the speaker a bold dandy who brazenly turns the table on the sphinx, asking the questions instead of being asked and boldly revealing her sexual past. Lennartz notes the way that the poem becomes more and more frenzied as the speaker thinks on neopagan imagery, and I suggest that this frenzy is a particularly sexual one, showing a link between neo-paganism and decadent sexuality. At the height of the frenzy, though, Christological imagery begins to seep into the poem, and gradually the neopagan imagery weakens as the Christological imagery grows stronger and more prominent. The frenzy

of the poem dies with the neopagan imagery, and at the end of the poem, the speaker is left in his room with the crucifix. Christianity has won against the tempting, sexual force of Hellenic paganism, though Lennartz would argue that the speaker is left with an intensified rather than eradicated sexual desire.

Lennartz chooses to read the Christianity of the poem as a Christianity which is "pathetic" and "on the brink of collapse" (428). He, therefore, does not read the so-called Christian victory at the end of the poem as the victory of one religion over another but as the victory of the guilt produced by a dying religion over the sexuality of a religion long decayed. At the same time, though, even in his analysis of the poem, Lennartz cannot help but reveal the real and very alive violence between the two religious forces throughout the poem. Furthermore, he clearly shows how the violence experienced between Greek paganism and Christianity is more than a struggle between religions; it is a struggle between sexuality and religious conviction. Lennartz might claim that Wilde's religiosity is merely the wishful—perhaps even regretful—embrace of religion, but his analysis suggests how both sexual and religious desires are very alive within Wilde as a writer.

What I wish to build is a case for reading the religious conflict in the poem as a conflict between the asceticism of Christianity and the aestheticism of neo-paganism. The main purpose of this conflict is not to read one religion as more powerful than another, or more contemporary, as I believe both that the poem offers no support for such a reading nor does such a reading support Wilde's overall interest in blended religion. Rather, I believe this poem presents one of the first instances of Wilde confronting the problem of conflict between would-be hybrid religions.

Throughout the beginning of the poem, the image of the sphinx operates as a nexus for

hybridity. This hybridity initially emphasizes the pagan: the Egyptian imagery not only of the sphinx but also of creatures such as basilisks and hippogriffs and gods such as Amenalk and Thoth. Yet in a transitionary stanza, the speaker mentions the historic cross between the Egyptian pagan and the Christian: "Sing to me of the Jewish maid who wandered with the Holy Child, / And how you led them through the wild, and how they slept beneath your shade" (834). After this point, though Egyptian pagan imagery remains dominant, Greek and Christian imagery continuously appear. Most notable is the stanza in which the speaker asks, "Or did you love the god of flies who plagued the Hebrews and was splashed / With wine unto the waist?" (836). In each of these lines, what matters most is not the overlap of the pagan and Christian traditions—not even the mere positive nature of it—but the cooperative element. In the first example, the sphinx acts as a guide to the holy family during their exile in Egypt. The second example most explicitly implies a sexual relationship between the sphinx and the Egyptian god of flies, yet it also suggests a level of cooperation between the Jewish god who orders a plague of flies and the Egyptian deity who creates it.

The sexuality of the piece, of course, is in line with this emphasis on cooperation between religious traditions; I would even argue that it is the key image of religious hybridity throughout the work. Iain Ross has suggested reading "The Sphinx" as a reworking of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," "The Sphinx" especially "dramatiz[ing] the frustrations and fantasies engendered by an attempted dialogue with a mute artefact" (462). Yet, as Lennartz has noted, it is not merely dialogue that the speaker of the poem pursues but sexual seduction. The speaker does not simply discuss a litany of potential lovers with the sphinx, but imagining such lovers—indeed, the sphinx herself— causes him "foul dreams of sensual life" (842). I argue that the speaker's initial attempt at seduction is parallel with his attempt at religious syncretism. As the poem progresses

and its energy increases, the speaker leads to the climactic conclusion, "But these, thy lovers, are not dead," continued a few lines later, "Your lovers are not dead, I know. They will rise up and hear your voice" (840). It is this realization that causes the speaker to back away from the goal of either sexual union with the sphinx or religious participation in her paganism. Though the speaker might say that he tires of the sphinx, it is in fact the realization that she retains connections with real and powerful religious deities that causes him to turn anew to a monolithic Christianity, saying "only one God has ever died" and "leave me to my crucifix" (839).

I also would argue, though, that the act of naming is instrumental in the shift. A significant portion of the poem's second half operates as a litany of pagan deities: Adon, Amenalk, Thoth, the list continues and includes almost a dozen names. Interestingly, these proper names are not the only items of the list: between them are nameless gods—"or did you love the god of the Assyrian / Whose wings, like strange transparent talc rose high above his hawk-faced head?"—and wild creatures—"And from the brick-built Lycian tomb what / horrible Chimera came / With fearful head and fearful flame to breed / new wonders from your womb?" (836, 835). Yet the ebb and flow between proper names and general descriptions eventually builds into a powerful and repeated moment of naming. When the speaker lands on the idea of the Sphinx mating with Ammon, the god is emphatically named twice—"Great Ammon was your bedfellow!," "White Ammon was your bedfellow!"—before being mentioned by name two other times in a discussion of a priestly procession through Ammon's temple (836-37).

This act of naming fuels the power of paganism and transforms it from a hybrid potential to a rival religion. Iain Ross suggests that "the speaker hits at random upon certainty," but then continues, "In *The Sphinx*, to assert a thing is to know it, and to repeat an assertion is to provide evidence for it" (462). Yet the gradual build up to this moment of repeated naming is far from

random but rather an oscillation between the creative potential of the unnamed and the unilateral power of the named. Ross is correct that the assertion creates truth, yet it is very specifically the naming nature of the assertion that creates truth in the poem.

The nature of this naming is reminiscent of Lord Henry's desire to "re-Christen everything," a suggestion that the power of language is not in the innate meaning of the words but rather in artistic creation with words (*Dorian Gray* 191). The move parallels Foucault's suggestion that language first granted truth to the thing it expressed, later became a form of power to govern, eventually became fragmented as humanity gained increasing subjectivity and the ability to challenge and create with language. Wilde, situated between language as truth and language as power, tries to push beyond them both toward language as creation.

In this poem, Wilde presents two options: the option of hybrid religion between the pagan and the Christian and the option of singular Christian religion. The danger of the first is the frenzied chaos that the sphinx spins the speaker into, a loss of stasis and the introduction of new, powerful religious narratives. Because of this, the speaker chooses the second option, singular Christianity. Yet the poem insists that the option chosen does not truly exist. Though the speaker is left alone in front of the crucifix, it is with the knowledge of overlap between his own and the pagan religion, with the experience of paganism's powerful sensuality, and with the conviction that the pagan gods are not dead.

Salomé

In 1894, Oscar Wilde wrote the last of his serious works before prison, a highly symbolist play, *Salomé*. *Salomé* is noteworthy in part because of its titular character, the nameless Biblical daughter of Herodias who had become known famously as "Salome" throughout nineteenth-

century art and literature. The play chronicles Salome's sexual longing for the prophet Jokanaan, her anger at his coldness toward her, and her ultimate decision to ask for his beheaded head, to kiss, in exchange for the dance of the seven veils.

Salomé, as I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, is frequently read as Wilde's most symbolist work, and the vast number of things that critics have seen symbolized through *Salomé* is a testament to its dense richness. Understanding this complex network of signs and signifiers is also necessary to understanding the way that *Salomé* connects to Wilde's wider approach to religion in his pre-prison works. In the next few pages, I lay out the various ways that *Salomé* has been read in order to ultimately show how each reading connects to Wilde's mission to undermine denotative language and religious meaning.

Salome's character is frequently discussed as a representative of feminine sexuality and gender, her powerful presence in the male spaces of the play highlighting women's increasing presence in the public spaces of the world Wilde lived in. *Salomé* is also a play about symbolism, performance, and the gaze. As much as it is Wilde's most symbolist work, it simultaneously questions the stability of a symbolic order. Helen Tookey explores the symbolism of the moon and blood throughout *Salomé* and discovers a slippage between these signifiers and the signified. Tookey reads blood in *Salomé* through the lens of Durkheim: "Blood is both revered and feared," she says, "because it symbolizes the power of life and death" (28). The blood throughout *Salomé* is particularly menstrual. Jokanaan's blood is spilled because of Salome's sexuality—both the sexuality of her virginal dance and the sexuality of her sexual awakening and desire for the prophet—yet the blood is representative of a non-reproductive sexuality. It represents a slippage from Salome as virginal object to Lilith-like subject. Similarly, Tookey sees a parallel between Salome's shift into menstruating monster and how references to the moon throughout the play

repeatedly shift between reading it as a virginal object of beauty and reading it as a dangerous symbol of the female gaze.

In questioning the symbols and characters in the play, *Salomé* also challenges ideas of gender in *fin de siècle* England and France. Laura Chilcoat in her discussion of Salome as New Woman challenges the comparison of Wilde's *Salomé* to depictions of Salome throughout French decadent literature, including Flaubert's and Huysmans's: "From Salome's first entrance in Wilde's play there is an agency and activity that is absent in previous visions of her. [. . .] Throughout the play, Salome exercises her agency in everything she does; all of her actions express her own desires" (3). One might go a step further and see Salome as gaining increasing agency throughout the play: after all, her agency grows from a desire to walk out onto a terrace to a desire to behead the prophet with whom she has fallen in love. If so, Salome becomes not only the active character Chilcoat reads her to be but also a dynamic character who can even better represent the rising presence of New Women in London society. All the same, we can agree with Chilcoat's suggestion that the tragedy of Salome's death is written as just that, a tragedy meant to produce our sympathy, and not a condemnation of female independence.

Ellis Hanson has read *Salomé* as a play about anti-Catholic sentiments in Victorian England, a play which capitalizes on the sensual nature of a Biblical narrative in response to English Protestant complaints that Catholicism hyper-sexualized the Christian religion. *Salomé*, he claims, mocks the anti-Catholic literature which Richard Hoftstader has remarked "was the pornography of the Puritans" ("Scarlet Woman" 123). In doing so, Wilde exploited the overlap between the sensationalism that critics despised in Catholicism and the sensationalism of anti-Catholic literature itself. This observation fits into Hanson's wider consideration of Wilde and the thrall of conversion. Hanson quotes from Wilde's letters: "Still I get so wretched and low and

troubled that in some desperate mood I will seek the shelter of a Church which simply enthralls me" and his advice to another, "*Do* be touched by it, *feel* the awful fascination of the Church, its extreme beauty and sentiment, and let every part of your nature have play and room" (qtd. in "Scarlet Woman" 126-127). Yet as much as *Salomé* might suggest a sensuous attraction toward a more physical experience of religion, Salome as a character is excluded from the religious. Jokanaan refuses to let her look at him, and her kiss is not merely taboo because it is necrophilia but also—as Tookey has noted—because it represents the menstruating woman coming in contact with a sacred space. I suggest, then, that instead of reading *Salomé* in light of Wilde's fascination with conversion, we read it as a play about the thrall of religion without the possibility of conversion: a play about a subject who is simultaneously called to and barred from the sacred experience.

Throughout these many thematic elements runs a common concern with the power of the gaze: of the dangers of watching and the dangers of being watched. Salome is the object of Herod's gaze and the object of the gaze of the male guards, and Jokanaan resists Salome's request to look at him. Tookey reads in the play a complex understanding of a gendered gaze: the men in the play suffer because they have fallen under the thrall of Salome as monstrous woman, but Salome similarly suffers for looking upon what Tookey reads as a feminized Jokanaan, something Tookey suggests runs parallel with contemporary concerns about women's increased presence in public spaces. Yet one cannot overlook the importance of *Salomé* as a viewed performance about the dangers of looking and watching. The fact that the stage directions for the dance of the seven veils are so sparse—"SALOME dances the dance of the seven veils"—leaves significant interpretive space for the objectifying moment of the play—both within the play and for directors, actors, and audiences (570). Within productions of *Salomé*, audiences experience

the shift between the thematic discussion of gender and gaze on stage and the active experience of participating in the same dangerous activities as the characters. And as Sharon Marcus has claimed, this connects to the larger issue of celebrity. Wilde originally enlisted Sarah Bernhardt, one of the most famous and sometimes scandalous female actresses of her day, to play Salome. This adds another layer of slippage, from the theater to the outside world of celebrity worship.

Inherent in each of these readings of *Salomé* is a certain religious or areligious reading of the play. Petra Dierkes-Thrun might take the most extreme reading of the play as anti-religious when she reads Nietzsche's death of God in the play's lack of divine intervention, in the murder of Christ's prophet, and in the constant shift of signifiers which negate absolute truth. Yet even the suggestion that the religious symbols in the poem ultimately symbolize celebrity in British society or the New Woman, who was increasingly visible in public spaces, agrees with Dierkes-Thrun that "Wilde gives *Salomé* an essentially secular outlook" (33). Meanwhile, Tookey's reading of blood representing female reproductive power is based in the Jewish story of Lilith and strongly suggests that Salomé's monstrous femininity is at least in part connected to her position as a Jewish princess. Ellmann, and with him, Jerusha Hall McCormack, are more heavily invested in a Catholic *Salomé*. I suggest that rather than choose one of three competing religious ideologies, we must read the poem as at times representing each and at other times representing them all. The same image can represent the danger of the sensual Jewish woman, the Whore of Babylon, and the areligious figure of the woman in the public spaces of British society. This is ultimately possible because *Salomé* is a play about visual and musical representation rather than an overdetermined text. Into this we might read that the removal of the authoritative text allows significant overlap between what were previously very different

religious traditions. This is a concept which is more articulately and maturely developed in Wilde's two post-prison literary works.

Post-Prison Wilde

The degree to which Oscar Wilde's experience in prison changed him is a bit up for debate. Robert Ross remembers a much more serious Wilde post-prison, and it is this version that survives in biographical works such as Ellmann's. Ada Leverson, alternatively, remembers that on the day Wilde was released from prison, his demeanor was lighthearted, and that his time in France was enjoyable up until his illness.

Yet Wilde himself admits that prison changed him, and in *De Profundis* he extrapolates on the way that suffering as a teacher has caused him to shift his values and his understanding of the world. Though the external Wilde may have still been lighthearted with company, and though even internally Wilde may have found peace in his final days after prison, the lens through which post-prison Wilde saw the world had shifted somewhat from the framework from which pre-prison Wilde operated. In works like *Dorian Gray*, "The Sphinx," and *Salomé*, sacrifice is both a thing which draws the narrative voice toward religious experiences—Christian and pagan alike—and the ethically problematic element of an aestheticism which is drawn to the beauty of sacrifice at someone else's account. In his post-prison works, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" and *De Profundis*, Wilde reconciles his destabilization of religion into sensational experiences with the concept of sacrifice as an aesthetic experience. He does so by resituating sacrifice away from an unwilling victim toward the subjective, willing religious individual. In the remainder of this chapter, I am going to suggest that Wilde's model of religion parallels the psychoanalytic concept of "radical subjective destitution" that Slavoj Zizek sees as an inherent product of

Lacanian psychoanalysis. By exploring the way in which radical subjective destitution operates through both "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" and *De Profundis*, I argue that Wilde sees the ultimate result of the destabilization of religion through language as the redefinition of religion as a sacrificial community built around shared ritual and aesthetic experiences. Finally, I argue that Wilde does so in a way that makes this development not merely the natural result of his own treatment of religion throughout his body of work but also the natural result of Pater's approach toward religion when paired with Wilde's prison experience.

If the problem of the decadent pursuit of aesthetic pleasure is the risk that the other becomes *objet petit a* to an individual's desire, then the solution, according to Wilde, is radical forgiveness. Yet the action which binds the individual to the other in a community not built around competitive morality but around shared aesthetic experience is not merely forgiveness of the other but rather sacrifice on behalf of the other. Slavoj Zizek describes radical subjective destitution as a sacrificial form of love that defies the compulsive desire for *jouissance* and instead sacrifices the self in a recognition of the other's personhood. Zizek uses the Christian model of Christ as an example, one who lays down his life in order to bring life to the other. Instead of using the other to fill one's own void, one sacrifices oneself for the sake of the other's fulfillment. This is the model presented in "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" and *De Profundis*.

The Ballad of Reading Gaol

Repeatedly throughout Wilde's pre-prison works, the problem that faces the decadent individual is when the pursuit of pleasure collides with the sacrifice of the other. We have seen this especially in *Dorian Gray* and "The Sphinx," but it is also suggested by the way in which consistently, throughout Wilde's comedies, the central moral problem of the play is the pursuit of

a game, a pleasure, or an ideal without full consideration of the other as collateral. Selfish aesthetic pleasure, too, is a sin, as seen in a fairy tale like "The Selfish Giant," the story of a giant who will not let children play in his beautiful garden. In works like these, it is not merely the decadent aesthete who sacrifices the other for his own gain, but equally so the "puritan" figures who sacrifice not for aesthetic but for moral pleasure. This concept becomes concrete in the refrain of "The Ballad of Reading Gaol": "Each man kills the thing he loves." The central act of murder in "Reading Gaol" has been at least somewhat contested: Karen Alkalay-Gut specifically sets herself in opposition to Ellmann's reading of the poems condemnation of "the cruelty of the doomed murderer's crime" saying,

> But the problem in the poem is more than just a shift in emphasis from the actual life-and-death consequences of the crime to its symbolic, metaphysical and emotional significance. Wilde carefully, methodically, and repeatedly elides the actual, brutal, premeditated murder of a woman which forms the basis for all action in the poem by negating the existence of the victim. (350)

Alkalay-Gut's conclusion is that although the other is depersonalized throughout the symbolic action of the poem, the call for sympathy of all others works against the poem's own depersonalization. To go a step beyond Alkalay-Gut, I suggest that the depersonalization of the victim is not accidental but indeed an essential element of the poem, and that the text itself calls for its readers to be concerned about the aesthetic way in which the murder is described and the casual way in which the victim is mentioned. The clearest precedent to this is, of course, Sybil Vane who is given far more agency but comes to the same end: an aestheticized death for which Dorian is ultimately responsible. The aestheticization of her death is more than anything what puts Dorian at fault, what mars the image in his portrait, and what causes the second death of

James Vane when he tries to avenge his sister. The question presented by *Dorian Gray*—and by "Reading Gaol"—is not whether the murdered individual is deserving of subjectivity, agency, or sympathy but rather whether there is a way to pursue aesthetic pleasure without harming the other.

Wilde's answer is seemingly paradoxical. On the one hand, the definitive, repeated statement of "each man kills the thing he loves" suggests an inevitability of heinous acts against the other, whether literal murder or jealousy or betrayal (844). Yet the poem's hope is not in the avoidance of the alienating act but rather in community despite these acts. In its fourth section, the poem turns to the example of Christ, "God's son [who] died for all" (856). If the guardsman in the first sections of the poem symbolically represents each person who seeks aesthetic pleasure, Christ stands in for each victim. The passivity of the victim, literally reduced to the word "thing" throughout the poem, is paralleled with the active nature of the Christian sacrifice. Christ "brings his will to light" through "dy[ing] for all," "[coming] down to save," and actively providing the "blessed Cross / That Christ for sinners gave" (856-57). Within this poem, Christ the victim radically chooses the vehicle of his victimhood as the basis for community with the ones who have harmed him. Furthermore, this action erases the lines between victim and criminal. Christ's identification with the victim—on the cross—is simultaneously an identification with the criminal, the "outcasts" who "always mourn" (857).

In a final empowering level, "Reading Gaol" can and ought to be read through a psychoanalytic understanding of Christ as both upper-cased Other, the God whose law represents a void of desire humanity cannot fill, and Christ as the one who subjected himself to ultimately meet that desire. In his book on *Zizek and Theology*, Adam Kotsko explains, "Christ as the self-undermining 'big Other' opens up the possibility of a collective of subjects who are directly

confronted with each other's *jouissance*—that is, a collectivity founded on the Real of the subject rather than on the symbolic fiction" (98). In application to Wilde's work, only through the model of Christ can the individual seeking aesthetic pleasure understand the other as a similar individual—with similar desires—in a way which acknowledges and does not destroy the other's personhood.

In turn, this move enables community. Within the poem, the isolation of the prisoners is emphasized above all else. The guardsman, especially, is isolated as one who "[has] got to swing," and thus "walk[s] within another ring"—apart from the other prisoners—during daily outdoor exercise (843). Yet each of the prisoners experiences literal isolation within their cells and figurative isolation in the face of the fearful shadows that haunt them the night before the guardsman's death. Through the Christian figure of Christ, though, the poem suggests community. Christ, the poem implies, does not merely identify with the outcast criminal through his criminal death on a cross, but he also envelops the outcast in his rest—"He is at peace—this wretched man— / At peace, or will soon be,"—in his future life—"And he of the swollen purple throat / And the stark and staring eyes / Waits for the holy hands that took / The Thief to Paradise"—and in his aesthetic pleasure—"God's kindly earth / Is kindlier than men know, [. . .] Out of his mouth a red, red rose! / Out of his heart a white!" (856, 855).

"The Ballad of Reading Gaol" suggests a community in which no one escapes criminality and no one escapes victimhood, but each collapses on the other through the Christian model. Kotsko explains this in psychoanalytic terms: "In contrast with sentimental forms of love that idealize the other subject, Christian love directly identifies with the finitude and weakness of the other subject, just as Christian theology identifies a despised outcast directly with God himself" (98).

It is important to note that this new community is also enabled by a destabilization of words, meaning, and ultimately prescriptive law just as in Wilde's earlier work. The fifth, and second to last, section of the poem opens,

I know not whether Laws be right,

Or whether Laws be wrong;

All that we know who lie in gaol

Is that the wall is strong [. . .] (857)

Once again, the meaning of the words of the law, as well as the power those words have to discipline and regulate, is undermined by the increased importance of the sensations caused by their correlating actions. The poem continues to focus on the anti-aesthetic experience of prison: "With bars they blur the gracious moon, / And blind the goodly sun," "Each narrow cell in which we dwell / Is foul and dark latrine," "The brackish water that we drink / Creeps with a loathsome slime" (857-58). These physical, material experiences of prison overshadow any abstract, metaphysical idea of "right" or "wrong."

Furthermore, the anti-aestheticism of the law is contrasted with the aestheticism of Christ's sacrifice and the community formed around radical subjective destitution, most clearly symbolized by the red and white rose which grow out of the forgiven criminal's body. The importance of shared aesthetic pleasure to such a community is made all the more clear in Wilde's other post-prison work, *De Profundis*.

De Profundis

De Profundis was written before "Reading Gaol" but was not published until after Wilde's death, and then in parts. The original, of course, was sent to Alfred Douglas directly,

who reported he burned it without reading it. Wilde also gave a copy to Robert Ross, who published a shortened version in 1905 and published a slightly longer text, in order to protect copyright after portions of the letter were read in court, in 1913. According to a seller advertising one of the copies in 1920, "only fifteen copies were printed," and it was "extremely improbable that the 'Suppressed Portion' [would] ever be reprinted—certainly not in the life time of this present generation" (Reynolds, Huntington Library). While the one full copy which Ross had given the British Library was not to be available until 1960, Vyvyan Holland did publish a full version, though one which contained errors, in 1946.

Though the excitement over the suppressed version of the letter was largely because of what it had to say about Lord Alfred Douglas and his family, the letter also contains Wilde's most extensive thinking on theology, religion, and spirituality. When Merlin Holland published a limited number of printings of the original facsimile, kept at the British Library, he said, in the foreword, that in this letter, readers were able to know his grandfather at his sincerest, a Wilde with no façade.[27] Indeed, throughout the letter, we read about Wilde's most humbling private moments: the unseemly details of caring for Douglas when the younger man was sick, the difficulty of caring for himself when sick, the exquisite sorrow over his mother's death, and his extreme sorrow over causing his wife and family pain both before and during his prison sentence.

This humility, of course, flows from the radical subjective destitution which Wilde espouses in his post-prison works. Wilde repeatedly turns to the issue of forgiveness throughout the letter, and it is always a turn toward the concept of *kenosis*, of love being an emptying of oneself. In the face of what society has done toward him, Wilde instead bears the burden himself:

[27] *De Profundis: a Facsimile Edition of the Original Manuscript* Ed. Merlin Holland. William Andrew Clark Library UCLA.

"nobody great or small can be ruined except by his own hand," and "Terrible as was what the world did to me, what I did to myself was far more terrible" (912). And yet far from an ascetic pose, Wilde maintains that humility is yet a pathway to a different kind of pleasure. Although he maintains, "feasts are not for me any more," he looks forward to enjoying a life of pleasure when he is ultimately released from prison: "If I made a list of all that still remains to me, I don't know where I should stop: for, indeed, God made the world just as much for me as for any one else. [. . .] With freedom, flowers, books, and the moon, who could not be perfectly happy?" (935). The radical forgiveness of the poem, the sacrifice of the self on behalf of the other, is also on behalf of the self. "When he says, 'Forgive your enemies,'" Wilde writes, "it is not for the sake of the enemy, but for one's own sake that he says so" (926). The ethical system that grows from competition ruins the self, but the ethical system that grows out of sacrificial forgiveness is otherwise: "[Christ's] morality is all sympathy, just what morality should be" (931).

The questions of morality, forgiveness, and sympathy in the poem are spiritual questions, and the letter has traditionally been read as a spiritual letter. Several critics have commented on the Catholic confessional nature, both in a traditional and in a subversive sense, of the letter. Molly Kelly Robinson, in "Reading Spirituality in *De Profundis*" notes that the spiritual influences of the letter are not merely limited to the creative portrait of Christ in its pages but also a sort of Eastern occultism in its connection of suffering, meditation, and self-realization. She concludes: "Wilde calls upon a heterogeneous set of influences, both ancient and modern, to create a highly original conceptualization of human spirituality" (225).

Yet the weight of criticism strongly lands on the side of spiritualism and not religion. This is understandable given the strong agnosticism of the letter—"I would like to found an order for those who *cannot* believe"—but is challenged by the assertion that quickly follows:

"every thing to be true must become a religion" (915). Given Wilde's earlier creative approaches to religion—approaches that destabilized the meaning that grounded morality and gave way to aesthetic experiences—I propose that we read *De Profundis* as the founding letter of Oscar Wilde's new aesthetic approach to Christianity. Even the genre of the work asks that we do so: the religious letters of Paul, sometimes written from prison, gave birth to Christianity. Could it not be supposed that Wilde imagined himself as doing a very similar thing?

In the final pages of this chapter, I turn to Hervieu-Léger's understanding of religion as "an ideological, practical and symbolic system through which consciousness, both individual and collective, of belonging to a particular chain of belief is constituted, maintained, developed and controlled" (82). Wilde's idea of spirituality, I maintain, is one that must be organized under this concept of religion. Wilde repeatedly turns to the Christian tradition, not because he perfectly believes but because he values, so highly, "belonging to a [. . .] chain of belief." And within that belonging is the desperate need for ritual (a "symbolic system") and community.

On ritual, Wilde says, "And agnosticism should have its ritual no less than faith. It has sown its martyrs, it should reap its saints, and praise God daily for having hidden Himself from man" (915). Yet Wilde's sense of ritual is far from a simple symbolism of belief but rather a system strongly rooted in the inability of the symbolic order to reflect the real. Paradoxically, ritual should create moments of representation of what cannot be represented. Although agnosticism's rituals should naturally mark that which is hidden, the very act of ritual creates truth. Where the symbolic order of words fail, actions make concrete. Although "What is said [. . .] matters little," "Whatever is realised is right" (915-16).

The isolating potential of this approach to faith and unbelief does not escape Wilde. One of the greatest conflicts of the letter is the reconciliation of the first half of the letter with the

second. In the first half of the letter, Wilde mourns his isolation in prison, his boredom, his lack of intellectual companionship, and the large degree by which his friends have deserted him. In the second half of the letter in which he realizes that the epiphany he has had—following the example of Christ yet outside of the creed of the Christian church—further isolates him from any future community. It is out of this crisis that I believe Wilde longs to form the "Confraternity of the faithless." It is for this reason, too, why I believe that Wilde finds the Christian tradition as worth maintaining, even if he regards it as something to be approached creatively and with agnostic skepticism, for within a tradition is a community with the past and present.

Ultimately, Wilde also finds value in the social potential of community. In both "Reading Gaol" and *De Profundis*, Wilde spends significant time musing on the problematic nature of society at large which led to his imprisonment. Although Wilde might ultimately look to the faults within *De Profundis*, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" focuses primarily on the murderer guardsman, and it takes the consequences of society's actions beyond two years of imprisonment to the guardsman's death. By focusing on a character outside of himself, and making the case even more extreme, Wilde finds himself able to deliver a far stronger condemnation of the results of society's religious moralism and its hypocrisy: "For each man kills the thing he loves, / Yet each man does not die." Even more harshly, Wilde connects the entire prison system to the problems of morally exclusive community:

> [E]very prison that men build
>
> Is built with bricks of shame,
>
> And bound with bars lest Christ should see
>
> How men their brothers maim. (857)

In *De Profundis*, Wilde suggests that if an exclusionary, moralizing community can commit such

wrongs, a religious community built around aesthetic ritual can work for social good. The Church should be distinct from the society that cannot recognize its own faults but should also draw all into its aesthetic rituals:

> [T]he supreme office of the Church should 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 to art, is to be found in the servitor answering the priest at Mass. (924-25)

Wilde's Contribution to Decadent Religion

As I have just demonstrated, Wilde shares Pater's interest in decadent religion as a community built around aesthetic rituals and physical/sensual pleasures rather than as a moralizing community dependent upon a single text which is denotatively literal and authoritative. His greatest departure from Pater, however, is his position on sacrifice. Whereas Pater disliked sacrifice because it was violent and relegated it to the symbolic, mythological realm, Wilde embraced an idea of sacrifice that was physical and personal. Reading Wilde through the model of Zizek, we see him embrace the idea of radical subjective destitution, a personal sacrifice of one's own identity and desires in order to fulfill the desires of another. This, of course, is only possible through Christ's ultimate sacrifice which fulfilled the void of God's desire and cured the individual's anxiety that stemmed from that void.

I would also like to suggest, though, that we read Wilde parallel to Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard died a year after Wilde was born, so the two men were separated by a generation, not to mention by language and the European continent. There is no indication that Wilde would

have been familiar with Kierkegaard's works, but the two definitely developed some similar thoughts about religion.[28] Kierkegaard, in works such as *Works of Love*, argues that the heart of the Christian religion is love, and that love is a religious duty grounded in renunciation of selfish desires for any return of love. This idea of love is reflected in the language of "kenosis," or emptying the self for the sake of the other. It parallels Kierkegaard's idea of faith, as developed in *Fear and Trembling*, as something which believes that "infinite resignation" is required for true acts of faith, a commitment to relinquish everything with no hope of its return in order to experience true love for God. What "infinite resignation" is for faith in God, "kenosis" is for love of others, and so to read the two ideas in conversation strengthens their definitions.

Wilde's post-prison works are full of infinite resignation and kenosis. A significant element of infinite resignation is the sacrifice of earthly belongings and treasures, just like Abraham intended to sacrifice Isaac. Wilde, in *De Profundis*, suggests that prison has taught him that true personal and spiritual fulfillment can only be found in separation from extra, decorative material things. This is not a total resignation from a Pater-esque materialism, but rather an appreciation of the simple physical world: "With freedom, flowers, books, and the moon, who could not be happy?" In this letter, Wilde also outlines two forms of "kenosis," the first a sort of imperfect kenosis represented in the litany of the financial, personal, and material sacrifices he made out of love for Alfred Douglas, the second a fuller kenosis found in the sacrifice Wilde experienced through his imprisonment that taught him to love humanity differently. Through his imprisonment, which he speaks of in the most bereft terms—"hideous, mean, repellent, lacking in style"—he becomes emptied, but this emptying ultimately causes him to "feel more regret for

[28] Julia Prewitt Brown deals with philosophy and art rather than religion, but she connects Wilde's aestheticism to Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* in *Cosmopolitan Criticism: Oscar Wilde's Philosophy of Art.*

the people who laughed [at him] than for [him]self" (936-37).

I draw this comparison between Kierkegaard and Wilde for two reasons. First, to suggest that the theology of Wilde is very much compatible with what has become an established and recognized mode of theological thinking. Secondly, I wish to read the decadent religious project alongside Kierkegaard, considered now to be one of the great thinkers of Western philosophy, to suggest that what the British decadents said and thought about religion was equally innovative and equally important.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have, in essence, suggested that Wilde is Pater's legacy. Wilde departs from Pater on the issue of sacrifice, and he is much more invested in symbolism and its potential to undermine the monolithic centrality of the Christian (particularly moralistic) religion in English society. At the same time, though, the destabilizing work he performs is mostly a continuance of the work begun by Pater. Pater and Wilde, I believe, create the heart of decadent religion as we see it reflected and engaged with throughout subsequent works of British decadent religion. In the next two chapters, then, I look at two versions of this engagement. In Chapter 3, we see Francis Thompson very earnestly try to reconcile his investment in a decadent idea of religion with his very devout Catholic faith. In Chapter 4, we see Vernon Lee expand on the problems of decadent religion in modern society, to the point that she questions its value in the first place.

CHAPTER THREE

FRANCIS THOMPSON AND RELIGIOUS FETISHISM

To say that Pater and Wilde were wholly optimistic about their ideas of a decadent approach to religion would be a significant overstatement. Marius is killed because of his engagement with a spiritually evolved Christian community, and Wilde himself spent his life torn between a Protestant family whom he feared would disinherit him, the Catholic community to which he was attracted, and an agnosticism which challenged adherence to strict religious traditions. Be this as it may, Pater and Wilde's positions allowed them to theorize the idea of decadent religion in their novels, letters, and poems without themselves putting theory into practice. The practice was left to the converts, both decadents like John Gray and Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper—who wrote as Michael Field—who converted to Catholicism and, I would argue, those who were born into Catholicism and "converted" to decadence.

Into this second category, I place Francis Thompson. Thompson's parents converted to Catholicism in the wake of Newman and Pusey's Oxford movement, and Thompson himself grew up in Lancashire with a passion for the church that was matched only by his passion for literature. Thompson originally desired to enter the priesthood, but his love of poetry, including—as one biographer put it—the Pre-Raphaelite passion for "rich, sensuous imagery," caused enough concern in his superiors that he eventually left his religious education for an education in medicine (Boardman). Most sources agree that Thompson found the study of medicine both gruesome and unpleasant, and after his mother's long and painful illness and death, it was clear to his disappointed family that he would never finish his professional education. Instead, Thompson moved to London where he soon began living on the streets,

occasionally using opium and most likely drinking heavily. He spent his days, though, exploring London's galleries and libraries, thus pursuing an informal study of art and literature.

After two years of homelessness, Thompson's growing depression would drive him to attempt suicide. The story has it that he was saved by a prostitute with whom he lived until he eventually accepted Wilfrid and Alice Meynell's invitation to live with them. The Meynells had taken an interest in Thompson's poetry, and Wilfrid Meynell would publish much of Thompson's works. Thompson stayed with their family for several years until his redeveloping opium habit—and, some suggest, romantic feelings toward Alice Meynell—encouraged the Meynells to send him to a Franciscan monastery in North Wales. Thompson stayed at Pantasaph from December 1882 through December 1896. This time was no doubt important in Thompson's religious development, and much of Thompson's poetry during and after these years reflects a religious bent. Thompson wrote prolifically during this time: *Poems* was published in 1893, *Sister Songs* was published in 1895, and *New Poems* was published in May 1897 shortly following his departure from Pantasaph.

Thompson's career highlights what multiple Catholic poets felt was a pull between devotion to the church and the often pagan and sexual passions of decadent poetry. If we consider some of the poets who converted to Catholicism during Thompson's lifetime, we find several whose work was significantly altered after their conversion. Marion Thain notes "an anxiety to leave behind, cover up, or transform a past" in the works of John Gray and Michael Field (314). Jerusha McCormack admits that John Gray, to some extent, never regained the same poetic voice after conversion.[29] And Ruth Vanita suggests that Michael Field's poetry moved

[29] For Jerusha McCormack's detailed examination of John Gray's life, including his relationship to his literary work after conversion, see her work, *John Gray: Poet, Dandy, and Priest.*

from the language of Greek homoeroticism to "Marian" imagery post-conversion. And, of course, Gerard Manly Hopkins famously burned his pre-conversion poetry.

What interests me is that, in contrast to these decadent converts, Thompson was not only Catholic his whole life but also continuously wrote poetry filled with decadent, pagan, and sensual images. Thompson, in the tradition of Pater and Wilde, believed that the sensuality of decadent language and literature mirrored the sensuality of Catholic ritual.[30] He also communicates, through his poetry, a flexible idea of Catholicism which can encompass pagan and other non-Catholic traditions. In this way, Thompson embodies a decadent approach to religion. However, throughout the development of Thompson's poetry, decadent religion does not maintain an exclusive or unchallenged narrative. Rather, Thompson's body of work communicates the conflict that stems from the poet's attempts to fluidly combine two communities and the loneliness that comes from not fully belonging to either.

Catholic rhetoric may have seemed a refuge for spiritual and sexual outsiders in the eyes of decadents like Pater and Wilde, as I have proposed throughout this project's first two chapters. Yet the actual institution of the Catholic church presented the devout believer with strict moral expectations and theological tenets. Meanwhile, English society teemed with anti-Catholic sentiment flowing from Anglican pulpits to popular periodicals. The result was that an individual who sought to adopt the decadent experimental stance toward art, sexuality, and theological thinking within the parameters of Catholicism found him or herself frequently caught between artistic freedom and religious expectations. At the same time, the Catholic individual was constantly at odds with Victorian society as a whole. The result of this for someone like Francis

[30] Because Roman Catholicism was highly ritualistic and concerned with iconography, anti-Catholic rhetoric often equated it with sensationalism and idolatry. For a fuller exploration of Victorian anti-Catholicism, see Paz, *Anti-Catholicism in Mid-Victorian England.*

Thompson was significant. Based on his biography and work, the struggle between decadence and Catholicism began when his love of literature barred him from the priesthood and continued throughout the rest of his life.

In this chapter, I seek first to situate Francis Thompson as a Catholic individual within the context of the anti-Catholicism of his day and as a decadent individual whose decadence is frequently at odds with his Catholicism throughout the body of his poetry. I suggest that the ongoing struggle leads to a pattern of symptom formation in which the conflicts between decadence and Catholicism become codified through sadomasochistic language and fetish images.

Catholicism and Isolation in Victorian England

Thompson was born in 1859 in the midst of several decades of strong anti-Catholic sentiment throughout England. Victorian anti-Catholicism at this time responded to claims of papal authority, the establishment of a hierarchy of Catholic bishops in England, debates over church-rate abolition, and strong agitation to repeal the Maynooth agreement.[31] D.G. Paz notes that each of these issues with Catholicism connects inversely to the issue of Anglicanism: should the Church of England remain a central and state-supported institution in nineteenth-century Britain? Those who said "yes" felt threatened by the growing institutionalization of Catholicism throughout England, the influence of Catholicism on the Anglican church via Tractarianism, and the number of individuals—including Newman—who converted to Catholicism in the wake of the Oxford movement.

[31] Throughout the mid-nineteenth century, Britain saw Catholic emancipation, the return of a Catholic hierarchy in England in which bishops were established throughout England, and the disestablishment of the Anglican church in Ireland.

The result was that a Catholic individual growing up in the middle of nineteenth-century England was surrounded not only by religious oppositions to Catholicism but also by strong political and social oppositions. An anti-Catholic text might reduce the contrast between "Protestant Christianity on the one side and Popery [. . .] on the other" to issues of spiritual "truth and falsehood," but the timely reason for these debates was tied to who would continue to have a political voice in England's future and what should be done with that voice (Beamish xi-xii). This connection implied that the religious other was the political/national other, and the popular media propagated this idea. As Eleanor McNees has demonstrated, *Punch* spent the better part of the 50s, 60s, and 70s attacking the pope and positioning itself as a "patriotic defender of the Anglican faith" (20). In one drawing, for instance, the pope is dressed up in a Guy Fawkes mask. The caption claims that he is "preparing to blow up all England!" (qtd. in McNees 25).

Such rhetoric aligned English Catholics with the church in Rome and against the Anglican community of England, but English Catholicism in fact lacked the same kind of connection to Rome that would have been experienced in France or Italy. In physical isolation from European Catholicism, and without the same level of ecclesiastical development, English Catholicism developed along its own lines: Mary Heimann has extensively discussed English Catholicism as a uniquely English experience. Devotional services such as the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament and the Public Rosary were distinctly English, and they developed apart from Rome, even as the papacy tolerated and most likely approved them. These distinctly English services grew out of what Heimann characterizes as an insularity in English Catholicism, in many ways separate from the concerns of both continental Catholicism and Irish Catholicism.

English Catholicism was already insular, but consider individuals—like Thompson's parents—who left the Church of England for Catholicism in the wake of Tractarianism. While

plenty of Anglican clergy were willing to decry Tractarianism as popery, some Catholic clergy were no more willing to trust "this Oxford crisis." As one wrote,

> But that this Oxford crisis is a real progress to Catholicism, I have all along considered a most perfect delusion. I look upon Mr. Newman, Dr. Pusey, and their associates, as wily and crafty, though unskillful [sic] guides. If they have brought upon themselves an unexpected check in their wild career, it was not because they were too eager in their advances toward Rome, but they were too anxious to mar the triumphs of Catholicism. (Rathborne 4-5)

From the perspective of the twenty-first century, we cannot over-determine how much broad rhetoric concerning Catholicism, Anglicanism, England, and Rome would affect a single Catholic community or parish, let alone an individual. It is worth noting, though, that this cultural milieu stands in contrast to certain discussions of decadence which see decadence and Catholicism as extremely complementary and easily reconciled. It is also worth noting that a more complete picture of the religious environments in which Thompson would have lived can be ascertained by considering the locations in which he lived. Lancashire, for instance, the county in which he was born and raised, was a Catholic stronghold in England. As Snell and Ell note, "The county had 114 places of Catholic worship, 20 per cent of the total in England and Wales" (177). In contrast, they identify a particular "anti-Catholic prejudice" existing in London, where Thompson would spend much of his later life (179). And although northeast Wales, where Pantasaph sat, was not one of the denser Catholic areas, it was one of the strongest non-conformist regions and thus would likely not have been as invested in anti-Catholic rhetoric as centrist Anglican regions. While the national anti-Catholicism would have been present and accessible wherever Thompson lived, it is likely that he felt it most when he was in London

while he was most likely separated from the Catholic community because of his homelessness, opium habit, cohabitation with a prostitute, and drunkenness.

While Catholicism was highly attractive to a number of individuals between the mid-nineteenth century and the fin de siècle, and while many individuals in decadent circles either found Catholicism attractive or were Catholic themselves, it is important to retain a sense of the isolating potential of English Catholicism. Not everyone, of course, would have felt such isolation personally, but I suggest that in the case of an individual coming from a recently converted family and training for the priesthood, this cultural context at least affected him on some subconscious level.

Decadence versus Catholicism

That Catholicism and decadence are often complementary has already been well established by Hanson, McCormack, Roden, and others, and that Thompson himself found his Catholicism and his decadence often in agreement cannot be denied, as I will support in the following sections of this chapter.[32] In fact, just as Oscar Wilde was a decadent who, most likely, was attracted to Catholicism as a religious haven for social and artistic outsiders, so I believe Francis Thompson was a Catholic who was attracted to decadence for similar reasons. For the most part, in decadence, Thompson found an affinity for the sensationalism that characterized his religious practice. As Maureen Moran suggests, through decadent verse, Thompson found himself able to mirror Catholic ritual because it is similarly "a way of rendering God's inexpressible Otherness real and, paradoxically, concrete" (Moran 251). Thus it should be no

[32] See Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism*; McCormack, "Wilde the 'Pervert': Oscar and Transnational (Roman Catholic) Religion"; and Roden, *Same-Sex Desire in Victorian Religious Culture.*

surprise that past criticism of Thompson—though sparse—has largely affirmed the connections between his Catholicism and his decadence.

Yet to dwell on the compatibility between Thompson's decadence and his Catholicism is to overlook the moments at which the two seem at odds in his poetry. Thompson's poetry can range from profanely and perversely sensuous and pagan to strongly judgmental of religious difference and sexual sin. It can at one moment seamlessly combine decadent experimentation and religious subject matter and in the next moment collapse under a weight of guilt and shame. In the following examples, we see Thompson attempt and sometimes succeed at integrating a decadent idea of religious flexibility and syncretism into his work. We also see that those successes are fragmented and mixed with ambivalence and guilt.

In some of Thompson's works, this ambivalence and guilt works itself out through an experimental risk followed by resignation or regret. Joseph Bristow defines decadent poetry as an impulse to "redefine the locations, the forms, and the language in which [. . .] art might make sense of modern culture at the century's end" (4-5). Thompson redefines each with a signature decadent flare for experimentation and flux, and yet following each of these decadent successes is personal, spiritual guilt. Take, for example, Thompson's poem "The Mistress of Vision" in which the speaker describes his journey through a maze-like secret garden to find a mysterious weeping woman. The description of the walk through the garden—"secret was the garden," "It was a mazeful wonder; / Thrice three times it was enwalled / With emerald"—are mildly reminiscent of Baudelaire's "L'invitation au Voyage," and the ethereal haziness of it all which causes the lady's weeping body to be nearly translucent has been compared to the "esoteric mystery" of "Coleridge's 'Kubla Kahn'" (1, 6-7; Boardman 96). But the world is also slow. The lady sings "through a dream-night's day" and by her song causes the birds to "bate their

winging" and prevents "the wall of emerald" from "float[ing] in wreathèd haze away" (17-20). The sun "solemnly sw[ings], slowly" (42). In this way the otherworldly becomes, perhaps, the afterworldly, evoking a Proserpine from Swinburne who is tired "of everything but sleep" ("Garden of Proserpine" 17). In fact, I suggest that the poem represents a creative approach to intertextuality which combines all three precedents with Thompson's own opium-induced vision.

Yet at the end of the speaker's vision, the narrative does not rest but instead is broken by the interruption of a very articulate moment of regret. Anticipating waking, the speaker moans in the last few lines,

> When she shall unwind
>
> All those wiles she wound about me,
>
> Tears shall break from out me
>
> That I cannot find
>
> Music in the holy poets to my wistful want, I doubt me! (183-87)

Brigid Boardman suggests that the "holy poets" —the romantic poets who "set out to celebrate the 'return to nature'"— are his inspiration, but then become impediments in his quest to be "the poet of the return to God" (102). Thus, Thompson's own successful hybrid of a romantic return to nature and a decadent vision of the pagan afterlife ends with his frustration at the unchristian-ness of his own work.

This happens elsewhere but is perhaps most clearly seen in the way that Thompson reworks his "Ode to the Setting Sun" by the addition of a prelude and an after-strain. At first glance, "Ode" is a highly pagan-inspired work. The poem praises the sun and imagines its reign in the sky above all the Greek deities of the past, including Hyperion, Dionysus, Artemis, and all of Olympus; ultimately, it celebrates the sun as a more primitive deity:

Yet ere Olympus thou wast, and a god!

Though we deny thy nod,

We cannot spoil thee of thy divinity.

What know we elder than thee? (58-61)

The "Ode" would seem a fully pagan celebration of the deified sun and of the Greek deities of old if not for a prelude and an epilogue, which Thompson calls an "after-strain." With the addition of each of these sections, the poem is resituated between meditations on the image of the cross as it casts its shadow at sunset. The sun is no longer the deity, but rather "the Cross-planted reigns" ("Prelude" 17). The setting of the sun is seen as transient in comparison to this cross: "For Rome too daring, and for Greece too dark, / Sweet with wild wings that pass, that pass away" ("Prelude" 31-32). What initially may have been read as an attempt at religious syncretism becomes a moment of the Christian cross overpowering the pagan sun.

Add to these examples the number of highly moralizing poems Thompson wrote, especially about sexuality. For example, a series called "A Narrow Vessel" tells the story of two young people who fall in love. The young girl gives her lover a lock of her hair but then grows tired of him and turns him away. The first two poems in the series are both titled "A Girl's Sin," part one being "In her eyes" and part two being "In his eyes." A middle poem generalizes jilting as a sin of the female sex through its title, "The Way of a Maid." After framing the narrative in such religious terms, Thompson proceeds to weave an analogy in the epilogue in which the girl no longer represents just women who hurt their male lovers but also represents the soul which wanders from its spiritual commitments:

If I have studied here in part

A tale as old as maiden's heart,

‘Tis that I do see herein

Shadow of more piteous sin.

She that but giving part, not whole,

Took even the part back, is the Soul [. . .]

Such a Soul, for saddest end

Finds Love the foe in Love the friend;

And—ah, grief incredible—

Treads the way of Heaven, to Hell. (“Epilogue” 1-6, 21-24)

Thus a young person’s mistake in love first becomes her sin and then becomes a metaphor for all who only partially commit their souls to God. While this is the most extensive example of Thompson’s moralizing treatment of romance, it typifies his constant awareness of right and wrong in much of his poetry as well as the more severe treatment women receive through his moral approach to sexuality and romance.

The goal of this section is to highlight that although Thompson’s poetry is in many ways decadent, and although his work is in many ways Catholic, the decadence and Catholicism of his work are not always in agreement. The conflict between them replaces a narrative of “decadence *and* Catholicism” with a narrative of “decadence *versus* Catholicism.” It is this ongoing struggle between decadence and Catholicism which I believe leads to more complex symptom formation as featured in two of Thompson’s major works, “The Hound of Heaven” and *Health and Holiness*.

The Hound of Heaven

Francis Thompson wrote "The Hound of Heaven" in 1888 during a period of recovery at Pantasaph. The poem has retained popularity in certain religious circles but has received little critical consideration over the last several decades. In the poem, the narrator describes his flight away from a hound who chases him. This hound relentlessly destroys anything that might bring the narrator pleasure and destroys any place where the narrator might try to find refuge. Despite the narrator's attempt to find refuge in anything other than religious faith, eventually the God-hound "knocks [him] to [his] knees," and he confesses that it is only through the pain of God's pursuit that he can reach the pleasure of God's companionship. The poem is marked with strong sexual images of dominance, submission, and punishment which I believe encourages a sadomasochistic reading of the poem's central allegory.

On the one hand, this poem fits into a tradition of British spiritual poetry in which pain draws the individual closer to God. Within the Protestant tradition, we might think of John Donne's "Batter My Heart, Three-Personed God" or the poetry of William Cowper who celebrated the martyr's choice of pain and death for the sake of nearness with God. In the Catholic tradition, written before Thompson's composition of "Hound of Heaven," though not published until 1918, is Gerard Manly Hopkins's "Wreck of the Deutchland," which questions the nature of God in the wake of the death of several nuns at sea. God, Hopkins maintains, does not hurt us for his bliss, but rather allows mankind to share in the suffering of Christ's passion in order to grow closer to Him. And beyond these are a host of Victorian poems that attribute human pain to God without assuming God's kindness: Tennyson's *In Memoriam,* Barrett Browning's "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," even something as areligious as Swinburne's "Anactoria."

On another hand, "The Hound of Heaven" deviates from these traditions in combining the ascription of sadism of Swinburne's tradition with the devotion of Hopkins's. The areligious or agnostic tradition might attribute cruelty to God for allowing human suffering, but traditionally the religious tradition—as expressed in Hopkins, for example—focuses not on his infliction of pain but on the alleged sanctification achieved by the individual through pain. In the following section, I will argue that Thompson rather uniquely combines religious affection for a sadistic God in a separate way from even the Catholic rhetoric of his day, traditional Catholic asceticism, and contemporary Catholic literature. Instead, I claim, the poem is much more in line with Victorian pornography and flagellation literature. From here, I propose reading the poem through the lens of "fetish religion."

I have mentioned Swinburne's "Anactoria" because it is the most recognizable sadomasochistic poem in the canon of Victorian literature and because it initially seems to have a lot in common with Thompson's "The Hound of Heaven." In "Anactoria," Swinburne imagines Sappho as a sadistic mistress who desires to punish Anactoria for leaving her for a man in order to win Anactoria back for herself. The sadistic desire is clear, as are certain details of cruel acts:

> I would find grievous ways to have thee slain,
> Intense device, and superflux of pain;
> Vex thee with amorous agonies, and shake
> Life at thy lips, and leave it there to ache;
> Strain out thy soul with pangs too soft to kill,
> Intolerable interludes, and infinite ill;
> Relapse and reluctation of the breath,
> Dumb tunes and shuddering semitones of death. (27-34)

"Anactoria" is important because it is at once very similar to and very different from "The Hound of Heaven." The passage quoted above certainly resonates with the images of flagellation and domination throughout "The Hound of Heaven," though "Anactoria" might be written from the point of view of an anti-religious sadist and "The Hound of Heaven" from that of a religiously devout masochist. More importantly, though, is the end toward which sadomasochism is employed in each poem. Richard Dellamora insists that the sadomasochism of "Anactoria" is secondary to the primary realities it represents. While he admits that Swinburne's fascination with flagellation is documented, to read "Anactoria" simply as an expression of its author's sadomasochistic desires, he claims, would mean missing the poem's complexity. In using the poem to express non-normative and possibly homoerotic sexual desires, Swinburne adopted the language of sadomasochism to express that "in the lover's absence pain is pleasure," to indict a society which itself "interdicts sexual difference," and "because the Victorian Sappho introjects the cruelty of the patriarchal deity" ("Poetic Perversities" 78).

This reading of Swinburne's sadomasochism is both consistent with trends in critical approaches to Swinburne and with a wider understanding of Swinburne's artistic project. The difference between it and "The Hound of Heaven" is that, in Thompson's poem, the sadomasochism remains primary. Instead of brief images of sadomasochism that lead to the anti-religious climax of "Anactoria," "The Hound of Heaven" works from general descriptions of God's dominant pursuit of the speaker and leads to the sadomasochistic details as the primary climax. Rather than the sexual representing the spiritual, the reverse could almost be said to be true: God's spiritual chase and stripping the narrator of exterior pleasures leads to the narrator's physical nakedness in that moment of climax:

Naked I wait Thy love's uplifted stroke!

My harness piece by piece Thou hast hewn from me,

And smitten me to my knee;

I am defenceless utterly.

I slept, methinks, and woke,

And, slowly gazing, find me stripped in sleep.

In the rash lustihead of my young powers,

I shook the pillaring hours [. . .] (111-18)

In eight lines preceding the speaker's ultimate submission to God, the poem references forcible stripping, exhibition, flagellation, and possibly even bondage ("pillaring"). Though these most powerful images of the poem ostentatiously precede a spiritual submission, the level of detail afforded the spiritual is comparatively weak, especially when the emphasis of that spiritual submission strongly retains parallels with sexual submission. For example, the ending of the poem approvingly dwells on the humiliating tone of God's final lines:

Wherefore should any set thee love apart?

Seeing none but I make much of naught' [. . .]

How hast thou merited—

Of all man's clotted clay the dingiest clot?

Alack, thou knowest not

How little worthy of any love thou art!

Whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee,

Save Me, save only Me? (162-70)

The difference between "Anactoria" and "The Hound of Heaven" represents a difference in attitudes toward power, particularly as it is situated in religious authority. "Anactoria" fits into Swinburne's wider attitude toward religion which can be read as primarily anti-authoritarian: he not only questions the authority of the Christian religion but uses sadomasochism as one of many approaches toward dismantling it as a power-wielding institution.

"The Hound of Heaven," alternatively, not only defends the authority of the Christian religion but takes pleasure in its exercise of power. Even without any explicit sadomasochistic images, of which the poem has many, this pleasure in subjection to power is innately masochistic. In her overview of the aestheticization of power in Foucault, Suzanne Gearhart observes the inherent sadomasochism of Foucault's understanding of pain and pleasure within powerful institutions. "Power," she says, "implies the existence of inequality, subordination, humiliation, or pain, and it is primarily the concept of sado-masochism that can account for the conversion of such an experience of displeasure [. . .] into a source of pleasure" (391). Key to her argument is Foucault's understanding of repressive systems as pleasurable to both the enforcing individual and the individual who must evade: "The pleasure that comes from exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palpates, brings to light; and on the other hand the pleasure that kindles at having to evade the power, flee from it, fool it, or travesty it" (Foucault, qtd. in Gearhart 391). Ultimately, Gearhart argues that sadomasochism, like art, contains the ability to transform the pain—that is the byproduct of power relations—into pleasure.

While such a Foucaultian approach toward the institution of the Christian religion could be used to argue that the act of religious devotion itself is in some ways sadomasochistic, I am only interested, at present, in how "The Hound of Heaven" primarily understands the Christian

religion is as a regulating, repressing institution, how the speaker finds pleasure both in the evasion of that power and in punishment under that power, and how that pleasure is paralleled by explicitly sadomasochistic references such as to flagellation and sexual humiliation. The poem opens with an evocation of the mixture of pain and pleasure found in evasion:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;

I fled Him, down the arches of the years;

I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways

Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears

I hid from Him, and under running laughter. (1-5)

This evasion continues for the majority of the poem, the first 100+ lines consisting of a litany of places where the speaker seeks to hide from the God-hound's pursuit. While these lines are not explicitly sexual—as in the second half of the poem in which God captures and beats the speaker into love and submission—the belabored attention given to decadent descriptions of nature and other resorts suggests pleasure in the flight. Although the speaker insists that he experienced no pleasure until his union with God, strong parallels exist between the pain and pleasure of flight—"in the mist of tears," "under running laughter"—and the pain and pleasure of God's discipline. And indeed, the poem even suggests that the running is part of the foreplay of being caught: "Fear wist not to evade as Love wist to pursue" (45).

The theological implication of this poem's structure, half dedicated to the chase and half to the capture, furthermore reduces Christianity to its regulating elements. Though the word "love" occurs ten times throughout the poem, each time it is associated exclusively with the imposition of God's law: "I knew his love who followed," "Love wist to pursue," (twice), "I wait Thy love's uplifted stroke!," "is Thy love indeed / A weed, albeit an amaranthine weed, /

Suffering no flowers but its own to mount?," the passage quoted above which uses the term "love" four times while pejoratively berating the speaker for fleeing, and the final line, spoken by God, "Thou dravest love from thee, who dravest Me" (19, 45, 111, 130-32, 182).

This evidence combines to suggest that the sadomasochism of flagellation or even the possible sexual violence of rape ("I slept, methinks, and woke, / And, slowly gazing, find me stripped in sleep" (115-16)) are not minor details in this poem but rather explicit moments which mirror the entire poem's structure as a sadomasochistic fantasy of flight, capture, torture, submission, and pleasure.

This is important because it reflects the poem's understanding of God and the Christian religion, something which I argue is characterized by a fetishized extraction of a part from the whole. God, for example, is not merely described as heaven's hound or a choking weed but most frequently as depersonalized feet, a hand, and a voice: "nameless" parts that are known only insofar as they cause fear and pain. For example, early in the poem, the speaker narrates, "They beat—and a Voice beat / More instant that the Feet— / 'All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.'" After the "uplifted stroke" of discipline, the hand eventually brings pleasure: "Halts by me that footfall: / Is my gloom, after all, / Shade of His hand, outstretched caressingly?" (177-79). Yet here, still, the hand and feet are isolated parts of the whole. The poem, in fact, never provides an image of God aside from those parts of him which deliver pain.

Here is the heart of fetish religion within the poem. By "fetish" I do not mean a particular sexual fetish, though the popular Victorian obsession with flagellation is definitely at work in this piece. Rather, I wish to focus on the wider concept of fetish as a part of a whole, an obsession outside of context, what the semiotician Sebeok would call a "synecdochical sign ('something other than the whole person')" (120).

The focus on the part rather than the whole presented itself frequently throughout Victorian pornographic literature, and it is worth taking a moment to see the overlap between "Hound of Heaven" and the genre. In popular works of the day, narrators focus for longer passages on the rear to be flagellated, the emasculating petticoat worn by a man, or the elaborateness of a restraining device. In such passages, personhood is generally secondary at best. The person about to be flagellated is barely mentioned, but the device used for flagellation might be discussed in great detail. A dominating woman or man might be described only by details of clothing, voice, or instruments held. The following two passages from Victorian pornographic texts show a kind of fetishization which is not at all unlike fetish-focused moments of "The Hound of Heaven":

> I had felt my virility ebbing away during the hours I had stood with the red [petticoat] enveloping my shoulders, touching my eyes and nose and mouth, conscious all the while that it was a woman's petticoat which had been worn, and that a thing so essentially feminine had, willy-nilly, been forced upon me. (*Gynecocracy*)

> [. . .] after you have secured your victim to the ladder, say, with her hands stretched high above her head, secured by the wrists high up, then her legs being also secured by the ankles to rings at the post, and the ladder being wider at the bottom than higher up [. . .] (*Experimental Lecture by Colonel Spanker*)

In the first quotation, in place of a description of the events, dialogue, or even internal thoughts that transpire over the course of hours of humiliation, the emphasis remains on the nature of the petticoat, its color, how it hangs and touches the speaker, and its inherent femininity. In the

second, instead of a sensual description of bondage or flagellation, the passage lingers on the technical elements of a device and its use.

Early psychoanalysis focused on fetish as compensation, as the result of a sense of lack. Freud, for example, reads fetishism as a substitution which protects against the threat of castration (a fear awoken by the maternal vagina) and a "token of triumph over [it]" (*Fetishism* 152*)*. For Lacan, fetishism allows for symbolic substitution for the real, a substitution which grants relief and satisfaction. This satisfaction must be found in substitution, one might surmise, because of the anxiety and trouble produced by encountering the actual, the real, the whole.

And perhaps this is why fetishes such as flagellation and cross-dressing were almost surprisingly common in Victorian society. Although Deborah Lutz, in *Pleasure Bound*, prefers to think in terms of "other" Victorians rather than a move against Victorian mainstream culture, the aspects of that mainstream culture which focused on medical discussions of sexual difference, moralizing sexuality, and sometimes strict religiosity created a culture in which sexuality as a whole was complicated and sometimes shameful. The ability to find pleasure through fixation on a part, a substitution, makes sense in light of these cultural trends.

But what does this mean for religion, specifically within "The Hound of Heaven"? First, the parallels between fetish as an element of the sexual outsider experience and fetish as an experience of a religious outsider point to the transformation of religion when ritual and creed are embraced outside of consistent community. And this transformation, I maintain, intensely alters the individual's experience. Though erotic references recur throughout Thompson's body of work, none of these compare to the visceral eroticism of "The Hound of Heaven." Several of the more moralizing poems, in fact, condemn the actual act of heterosexual sex. This suggests that the intensity of the metaphysical sadomasochistic experience, the totality of its fantasy,

overshadows any possibility for union on the physical plane. In fact, God does not save the individual *from* the erotic but rather the spiritual connection between God and individual is the culmination *of* the erotic. Compare "The Hound of Heaven" to these lines from Thompson's unpublished notebooks:

For love should be a pretty thing

A kiss, a ruffled curl,

The laugh that makes a boyish arm

A light wear for the girl. (Thompson, Notebook, MS)

Female romantic affection is reduced to convention, a matter of emotional prettiness and stability. This takes the form of a directive: "love *should* be a pretty thing." More emotion is expressed when the gender of the other is unspoken, though it is presumably male within the context of somewhat violent and largely unstable language:

What shall I find me for feasting dress?—

Your white disused childlikeness.

What hid music will laugh to my calls?—

An orgie of mad bird-bacchanals. (Thompson, Notebook, MS)

Combine the tameness of the overtly heterosexual poem with the mad energy of the queer potential in this poem on Virginity:

Through thee, Virginity, endure

The stars, most integral and pure,

And ever contemplate

Themselve inviolate [. . .]

But thou, who know'st the hidden thing

Thou hast instructed me to sing,

Teach LOVE the way to be

A new virginity.[33] (Thompson, Notebook, MS)

Past sexual experience is denounced in light of future, presumably religious, devotion. Furthermore, the phrase "thou, who know'st the hidden thing," bears a double meaning, not only referring to God as the one who knows all men's secrets but also suggesting a sexual component to "the hidden thing."

This context reaffirms a reading of passages like the following as a destabilization of the boundaries between the religious and the sexual:

My freshness spent its wavering shower i' the dust;

And now my heart is as a broken fount,

Wherein tear-dripping stagnate, spilt down ever

From the dank thoughts that shiver

Upon the sighful branches of my mind. (136-40)

The erotics of hiding from God, of being pursued by God, and of being in union with God are much stronger than any heteronormative connection in Thompson's less developed love poems to women. This spiritual/erotic connection is vulnerable and vital; it cries and sweats and breathes; the connection between the spiritual and the erotic is essential. And even this scene could be read in the context of flagellation literature. "My freshness spent its wavering shower" might represent Victorian pornographic literature's obsession with premature ejaculation, and the "sighful branches of my mind" might be read as mirroring physical birch branches.

[33] Unpublished material from the Burns Library at Boston College.

What is the implication of all this for decadent religion? Thompson's approach to religion was in several ways different from Pater and Wilde's, yet I believe it maintains a strong relationship to their project. Pater and Wilde wrote outside the concerns of orthodoxy; Pater was not interested in formal religious affiliation, and Wilde was interested in Catholicism as a site for his creative expression. Yet Pater and Wilde both placed central emphasis on the importance of community around faith's rituals and creeds. Thompson, by contrast, was baptized and confirmed into the Catholic church, and he remained a devout Catholic throughout his entire life. Yet the isolation in a poem like "The Hound of Heaven" reduces religion to simply ritual; its aesthetic experiences become disproportionate and fetishized both psychologically and sexually outside of faith community or creed.

Pater and Wilde's projects are very intentionally a matter of destabilizing religious categories. While some might read "The Hound of Heaven" as non-specifically Christian, it is difficult to find evidence that Thompson has any desire to find Christian community outside of the Catholic church (Boardman). Although he might creatively play with pagan and sensual images in his poetry, "The Hound of Heaven" actively fights against the idea that religious joy can be found outside the Christian idea of God. Yet within his own parameters, religion becomes destabilized as the regulative and punitive aspects of God become emphasized and sexualized over other elements of theology. Within the boundaries of Catholicism, Thompson does perform creative work. In the second half of this chapter, I consider Thompson's 1908 book which examines and questions the necessity of physical asceticism within the church.

Health and Holiness

In *Health and Holiness: A Study of the Relations Between Brother Ass, The Body, and His Rider, The Soul*, Francis Thompson combines his past interests in both church and medicine as he asks whether physical asceticism is a necessary component of the devout Catholic life. Considering the vast majority of saints, especially those noted for their dedication to ascetic practices, Thompson points out that they lived in pleasant climates where the land presented every type of natural pleasure and supported their strong, healthy bodies. Alternatively, the modern Catholic in England faces a different problem:

> But to our generation, uncompromising fasts and severities of conduct are found to be piteously alien; not because, as rash censors say, we are too luxurious, but because we are too nervous, intricate, devitalized. [. . .] The east wind has replaced the discipline, dyspepsia the hair-shirt. Either may inflict a more sensitive agony than a lusty anchorite suffered from lashing himself to blood. (21)

The way to address this problem, Thompson insists, is through pursuing health as a means to holiness. He mentions a late archbishop who noted that "men of sedentary habit and unshakably introspective temperament may endure spiritual torments for which a fortnight's walking-tour is more sovereign than the exercises of St. Ignatius" and maintains "the love of God is more than solely ethical sanity" (16, 80).

Yet Thompson does not dismiss asceticism entirely; rather he asks for a change of attitude toward it. Physical asceticism must be marked by a kind attitude and patience toward one's body: "The weak, dastardly, and selfish body of to-day needs an asceticism [. . .] The task before religion is to persuade and constrain the body to take up its load. It demands great tenderness and great firmness [. . .] it must feel the love behind the inflexible will; the will

always firm behind the love" (50). And asceticism must primarily become a matter of internal discipline so that the internal might energize the external: "holiness not merely energises, not merely quickens; one might almost say it prolongs life" (74).

The change in tone between "The Hound of Heaven" and *Health and Holiness* may initially seem drastic, yet I maintain the common thread of sadomasochistic religion remains intact in both. In *Health and Holiness*, Thompson—with far greater sophistication—is still addressing the reconciliation of the centrality of pain within the Catholic faith with modern medicine. Sadomasochism attempts to assert a sense of sexual pain as positive against a modern world which operates around the avoidance of pain. Thompson's work in *Health and Holiness* attempts to do the very same.

The language Thompson uses throughout *Health and Holiness*, far from revising his earlier sadomasochistic approach toward religion, in fact reinforces and develops it from the fetish elements of "The Hound of Heaven" toward something increasingly sophisticated and inclusive. In the same way that sadomasochism reworks physical pain into something sexually pleasurable, so Thompson's approach to asceticism allows him to regulate the amount of physical pain involved in asceticism while maintaining—in his esteem, even increasing—the spiritual pleasure. This regulation of pain and pleasure returns to what Gearhart described as the sadomasochism of Foucault's approach to authority and discipline.

When the *Journal of Homosexuality* published a two volume series on sadomasochism in 2006, the authors began with the assertion that sadomasochism, by their scholarly definition, "does not entail violence and it is not nonconsensual" (Moser and Kleinplatz 3). Almost immediately following, one of the coauthors remembers a particularly severe scene he watched at the first party he attended for research, so severe that he almost called the police until he

witnessed the female submissive reach sexual climax and express interest in repeating the scene later that evening. The implied conclusion is that consent and pleasure negate violence. While I do not wish to delve into a debate about the definition or nature of violence, per se, I do think it is important to note the way that regulation, care, and consent have become integral elements to practices of sadomasochism over the hundred plus years since Thompson wrote as well as its appearance Victorian flagellation literature.

Contemporary psychological and social criticism is largely divided over the nature, role, and healthiness of sadomasochism, but the most sadomasochism-positive approaches operate through the idea of performance: the individuals re-enact a system of violence that in turn allows them to escape and/or gain control over it. This is especially true of performance approaches to masochism which maintain that through physical pain to the body, the individual breaks free of the body's limitations. Lynda Hart, one of the most noted theorists in the field of sadomasochism studies, insists that masochism begins with the masochist's willingness and desire to become "dehumanized, erase (her)self" (149-50). What is at the root of all sadomasochism-positive arguments is the fact that sadomasochism primarily meets the needs of the masochistic individual and that the sadist is the secondary individual in the scene, the one who assists in meeting those primary needs.

At a less sophisticated level, late-nineteenth-century pornographic literature argues much the same. Even non-consensual depictions of flagellation are marked by significantly extended moments in which the initiating man or woman tries to comfort the woman being beaten, explain to her the pleasure she will derive from it, and care for her afterwards. In this literature, the vast majority of women are presented as eventually agreeing; many become flagellators themselves in

order to initiate more women into the pleasures of flagellation, and those who do not conform are seen as entirely out of touch with their sexual natures.

It is this sort of a relationship that presents itself in *Health and Holiness*. Thompson insists that his concern is that the soul be both kind and firm in pushing the body toward what will ultimately bring it happiness, like a rider who presses a horse forward with insistence and with care. He does not suggest the abandonment of asceticism altogether but instead suggests that there is a way that asceticism can achieve its purposes within limits, without excessive force. At the same time, though, the psychology behind asceticism remains: the dominant nature of the wiser soul over the ignorant body, the humiliating discourse around the weaker body, and the maintenance of pain as a means of guidance toward holiness, though that pain may take a different form. In the same way that sadomasochistic discourse defends itself as non-violent by emphasizing care, necessity, and performance, so Thompson defends his new asceticism against what his secular contemporaries and others might view as self-abuse in the name of religion.

The Lack of Community in "The Hound of Heaven" and *Health and Holiness*

When discussing "The Hound of Heaven," I noted the exclusion of any sense of community within its idea of religion. *Health and Holiness*'s relation to community is similarly solitary. The pursuit of holiness is exclusively an individual matter; in the previous quotation from an archbishop recommending a walking tour rather than spiritual discipline, it is noteworthy that the walking tour itself is not an explicitly communal activity. And although Thompson references and quotes several archbishops throughout his work, those are appeals to authority. Combined with his other works, one might extrapolate that Thompson's interest in the church is more as a hierarchical institution of power than as a locus of religious fraternity. It

certainly is far from the intimate community at Celia's house or the camaraderie that Wilde imagines within his agnostic order.

I suggest that this is in fact the result of Thompson's fetish approach to religion. In "The Hound of Heaven," Thompson disproportionately reduces God to his punitive aspects, and in both "The Hound of Heaven" and *Health and Holiness*, Thompson emphasizes union with God at the expense of union with the wider church. These are consistent with a fetishized obsession with God's dominance to the point, again, of becoming sadomasochistic. Pierre Bourdieu argues that female masochism is a bodily internalization of male dominant discourse, and he finds in Christian religious traditions a carryover of this gendered discourse, calling the church "the authorized reproducer of a pessimistic vision of women and womanhood" (85). Thompson strongly argues against the feminine nature of religious submission—insisting that "the old man" should not be transformed into "the old woman"—yet his argument innately implies the asexuality of women as he insists that holiness imparts a manly virility to those who submit to it. Yet what we see here is a transfer of sadomasochism from heterosexual sexuality to homoerotic Christianity. Just as submission under a sadist ought to give a woman sexual pleasure, so submission to a dominant God—or dominant church governance—ought to create spiritual pleasure in the religious individual. Thompson's sense of religious pleasure is every bit as much an internalization of dominant religious discourse.

My understanding of sadomasochism throughout this chapter relies on a few important texts on the subject including Lynda Hart's 1998 landmark work *Between the Body and the Flesh* and Staci Newmahr's 2011 ethnography of the "public, pansexual SM scene" in *Playing on the Edge* (4). It is worth noting that both Hart and Newmahr read sadomasochism as negotiating liminal spaces. For Hart, that liminal space is the space between the symbols that sadomasochism

attempts to recreate in overly determined roles and the impossibility of perfect representation in reality (outside of a sexual scene). For Newmahr, sadomasochism negotiates the space between risk and intimacy, chaos and order. In Thompson's work, too, this negotiation occurs between idealized decadent sexuality and the reality of the Catholic church. Yet the negotiation eludes him as it spills outside the contained scenes which Hart and Newmahr describe as safe and outside contained spaces into an overreaching figurative mode that affects entire religious and social structures.

The result of Thompson's concept of submission is the erasure of the self and union with God. In "The Hound of Heaven," the self is despised as "ignoble" and "worthless," while God is the one who deigns to show it notice or give it worth. The benefit of submission to God is less that God gives the self worth than that association with God seems to free the individual from association with its self. In *Health and Holiness*, Thompson speaks much more kindly of the self. And yet the same goal—at least, the partial erasure of the self—remains. Although Thompson opposes any idea of extreme asceticism, the physical destruction of the body is replaced with the figurative, spiritual loss of the self through holiness:

> But with all tender and wise allowance (and in these pages I have not been slack of allowance), it remains as it was said: "He that loseth his life for Me shall find it." The remedy for modern lassitude of the body, for modern weakness of will, is Holiness. There alone is the energizing principle from which the modern world persists in divorcing itself. (77-78)

Note that I am not arguing that religion, the Catholic Church, or Christianity are universally sadomasochistic. But what presents itself in these two works by Thompson is a fetishization of God and of religion that asserts the necessary and productive nature of emotional

pain in a way that both underplays the importance of spiritual community and parallels the discourse of sadomasochism. Pater and Wilde compensated for their inability to belong in specific communities—Pater's desire for stronger academic community in Oxford, Wilde's inability to belong to a faith community—and their wider rejection from society as a whole by creatively reworking religion throughout their writing. Thompson, alternatively, internalizes a discourse of dominance which is re-enacted through the isolation of religious fantasy.

The way in which "The Hound of Heaven" has endured as a valued religious poem in evangelical communities today also speaks to the relevance of identifying Thompson's Christianity as fantasy. The most extensive attention the poem has received in recent years has not been from a scholarly or theological direction but rather from the world of evangelical film-making. That these two 2014 films try to maintain the religious storyline of a punitive, regulating God while excising any homoeroticism is telling: the first, available online, turns God into a giant, fluffy, but slightly intimidating black dog slowly stalking a young girl (as opposed to the male narrator) through a modern city while she recites a few tamer parts of the poem and summarizes the rest in a prose monologue. The excision of the God-hound's physical violence as well as the transformation of the homoerotic passion into the platonic affection between a large puppy and a female speaker retains the religious sentiment that agrees with the makers of the film while removing that which is uncomfortable and unacceptable for a modern evangelical audience. The second notable adaptation has not been made available outside of the festival for which it was made. Though the trailer suggests acceptance of the darker, more uncomfortable

tone of the poem—the film is highly surrealist—it does not reveal anything beyond a kind of unorthodox sensuality in the life the speaker wants to pursue.[34]

The actual text of "The Hound of Heaven," though, refuses to be made safe, and embodies a common sadomasochistic religious fantasy that arises from creative religious destabilization, not only in the poem but also in the more sanitized text of *Health and Holiness.*

Francis Thompson's Contributions to Decadent Religion

Thompson's work, specifically texts such as "The Hound of Heaven" and *Health and Holiness*, shows the dangers of idealized decadent religion—a religion that is flexible, syncretic, and creative—when faced with the powerful institutions of religious organizations such as the Catholic church. Though Thompson's works grow out of his unique situation in a specific Christian tradition in a specific moment in history, it is worth seeing the way that sociologists have broadly seen the overlap between erotic violence and the violence—sometimes figurative and sometimes physical—enacted in the name of religion. I first consider Bataille's work on erotic violence in *Tears of Eros* (1989) and then consider the more recent work of Talal Asad (2003).

Bataille's overall thesis depends upon the link between eroticism and death. Sex, he claims, epitomizes the enjoyment of life and connects to the production of life; when humanity and its sexuality become aware of the death which threatens its enjoyment of life, sex becomes at once and inseparably erotic and tragic. Using this inherently tragic definition of eroticism,

[34] The first adaptation to which I refer is *The Hound of Heaven: A Modern Adaptation* written by Brian and Sally Oxley, Sonja Oxley Peterson with Devin Brown and illustrated by Tim Ladwig. It is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RXlgz4aBKt8. The second is *The Hound of Heaven* by N.D. Wilson, Christian author and professor at Saint Andrews College, trailer available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D2MUtNXJYhM.

Bataille then proceeds to demonstrate "how an unbounded eroticism [has] passed smoothly into conscious eroticism" throughout history, beginning with a discussion of prehistoric art and continuing to the present (162). In doing so, he finds that eroticism and religion are linked in two fundamental ways. First, if eroticism signifies the awareness of death which permeates sexuality, then religion crucially supplements eroticism with the promise of a life after death.

Religion thus emphasizes what is to come at the expense of present pleasures. Bataille believes that religion is essentially concerned with prohibition. At the same time, though, this prohibition bestows value on the prohibited thing. This value can be seen within the feasts (of paganism and Christianity alike) which mark religion: "what was ordinarily excluded [is] allowed and even required" (71). In this way, "Religion is doubtlessly, even in its essence, subversive: it turns away from the observance of laws" (72). Opposed to a Pauline theology which claims that the law creates the desire to transgress, Bataille suggests that transgression, in some ways, is built into the laws of religion through feasts and other means which provide exceptions to the law.

More importantly, though, is the way Bataille links the violence of eroticism with the violence of religion. Both, he claims, are concerned with horror, presumably the horror of death. Furthermore, both find relief in ecstatic pleasure. It is through this connection that Bataille elevates eroticism to the level of the sacred: "What I suddenly saw," he explains in a description of his own observations of sacrifice and religious horror, "and what imprisoned me in anguish--but which at the same time delivered me from it--was the identity of these perfect contraries, divine ecstasy, and its opposite, extreme horror. [. . .] where the religious horror disclosed in sacrifice becomes linked to the abyss of eroticism, to the last shuddering tears that eroticism alone can illuminate" (207). Horror, sacrifice, the abyss: these are, for Bataille, simultaneously

the realm of violence and sexuality. Religious sacrifice fights against the violence of the abyss, the horror of death—indeed, religion ecstasy fights against the abysmal horror of death—even as erotic ecstasy brings the horror of death into the sexual act.

According to Bataille, then, sexuality and religion share in a violent struggle to find pleasure in the face of death. This is more than just a matter of each participating in a similar violence. Both are part of the same struggle and fight, using the same brand of ecstasy which brazenly revels in pleasure in the face of imminent death. At the same time, though, we must raise the objection: neither religion nor sexuality is ever purely about pleasure. As Bataille himself noted, religion is concerned with prohibitions, prohibitions which threaten to prevent our pleasure. And sexuality itself frequently combines pleasure with pain. (We are reminded, again, of Swinburne's "Anactoria" and sadomasochism.) How, then, do we reconcile the similar ecstasies of religion and sexuality with their similar experiences of pain?

In *Formations of the Secular*, Talal Asad describes the troubled position of Christianity at the time when secularism, through the Enlightenment, began changing views of pain. The Enlightenment, he claimed, was marked by a growing interest in efficiency. Torture, many noted, was neither an efficient nor reliable way of producing a confession. Along similar lines, humanity seemed to be increasingly defined by an ability to eliminate pain. Torture and cruelty were identified as barbaric and inhumane. At times they were still allowed to exist, even as we see them continuing to exist at times in our current societies, but even then it was determined that pain was only deemed necessary if "the human destruction inflicted [did] not outweigh the strategic advantage gained" (117).

The result of this modern concept of pain was that suffering became seen as purely negative and undesirable. This proved particularly difficult for a Christian narrative which "was

traditionally rooted in the doctrine of Christ's *passion"* (106). The secular, modern concept of pain required that Christianity focused on action since the suffering, torture, and death of Christ seemed gratuitous and unproductive—a suffering marked by excessive pain, something rejected by modern standards. At the same time, though, the passion of Christ and the suffering of his saints remained at the heart of the Christian religious tradition. Within this tradition, such pain was not negative but both positive and necessary. Modernity thus asked Christianity to make a radical break from its tradition in order to conform to modern, secular ideas of pain.

Asad identifies another area in modern culture in which pain retains its positive charge: sadomasochism. "Sadomasochism is disturbing to many people," he claims, "because here they are confronted with suffering that is no longer simply painful," and because sadomasochism's "object is *excess*" (118). Like the monks who subject themselves to flagellation, the masochist has "learnt to experience [pain] *positively*" (121). Both sadomasochism and religious pain trouble the modern subject because both challenge modernism's definition of what it means to be human (being able to avoid excessive pain) by connecting to the positive experience of pain.

I do not think that Thompson represents a universal impulse to cope with the non-physical pain of religious censorship and exclusion by fetishizing a higher power as a sadist whose spiritual pleasure comes at the cost of physical pain. However this kind of religious fetishization remains one particular symptomatic expression of what sociologists have recognized as a larger issue within Western religious traditions. The fact that sadomasochistic imagery appears throughout other decadent works on religion suggests that we should not overlook it as an element of decadent religion.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have suggested that what Pater and Wilde only theorized about—the idea of a creative, flexible religion which interacts with multiple traditions and is based on ritual over creed—Francis Thompson attempted to live. Although many critics, especially those writing about Oscar Wilde, suggest that Catholicism and decadence are complementary, the life and work of Francis Thompson complicate that idea. While Thompson's life highlights an interest in decadent literature and his work features decadent images and language, both his life and work also show a conflict between religious expectation and artistic ambition which, at its most severe, leads to a symptomatic presence of sadomasochism in some of his major works.

In the final chapter of this project, I turn to Vernon Lee, a non-religious outsider who would have been familiar with the stories of Catholics like Thompson, Gray, Dowson, and Field, and who reflected on the problematic nature of integrating decadent religion into late Victorian society.

CHAPTER FOUR

VERNON LEE'S RELIGIOUS RUINS

If Francis Thompson internalized a decadent idea of religion more than any other figure in this dissertation, Vernon Lee was the least invested and the most detached. Despite this detachment, though, Lee continuously responded to the idea of decadent religion throughout her works, so her perspective is essential to take into consideration. In many ways, Lee presents a unique study. In her literary biography of the author, Vineta Colby summarizes Vernon Lee: "She was too late to be a Victorian, too early to be a Modernist. She was a nonmilitant feminist, a sexually repressed lesbian, an aesthete, a cautious socialist, a secular humanist" (xii). This sketch, though containing some extremely subjective interpretations, captures what has recently drawn scholars to Vernon Lee as well as what continues to complicate any attempt to categorize who Lee was.

Vernon Lee was born Violet Paget to Henry Ferguson and Matilda Paget. Her mother, the daughter of a businessman who had made his money in Caribbean trade and other business investments, had originally hired her father as a tutor for her son from her first marriage. They later married and gave birth to Violet, who inherited her father's love of scholarship. Although the benefactress of an uneven education—she never went to boarding school and was inconsistently tutored by governesses—Violet grew into the role of independent scholar with early interest in the cultures of France, Switzerland, and Italy where her family lived during her early days. She began publishing at the age of fourteen under the name she would use both professionally, and often personally: Vernon Lee.

Lee traveled to England for the first time in 1881 where she met Walter Pater, who took an unusually keen interest in her work. Pater, who in fact separated himself from those who considered themselves disciples of his in the wake of *The Renaissance*'s first appearance, both supported Lee in her writing and asked for her input on his. Even when Lee was away from England, she and Pater often would maintain correspondence. It has been remarked that Lee modeled her work off of Walter Pater's, though I in fact believe that she responds to it on a much deeper and critical level. The friendship between the two authors should not surprise us. Both were deeply intellectual people whose homoeroticism was rarely if ever consummated in a physical relationship; their energies were put into a few close platonic relationships and, even more so, their work. Lee, for example, formed close but asexual relationships with two women in particular who helped her in her research, writing, and publication. The first, Mary Robinson, would enter into a heterosexual marriage, a decision which both confused and deeply grieved Vernon Lee. The other, Kit Anstruther-Thomson, eventually left Lee after their joint research took too much of a toll on her mind and body.

Lee's position toward female homoeroticism received a good deal of debate when critical interest in her literary work was rekindled in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Some went so far as to consider Lee a "failed lesbian," while others defended Lee as an authentically asexual romantic (Newman 59).[35] More recent discussions of Lee have turned from her relationships with women to her relationship with British decadence. I think that Lee's relationship to sexuality and her relationship to British decadence as a movement should, in fact, be considered together. When unified, they present a model of Lee's ability to work creatively around

[35] For a full consideration of Lee's sexuality and the various positions critics have taken toward it, see Sally Newman's "The Archival Traces of Desire: Vernon Lee's Failed Sexuality and Interpretation of Letters in Lesbian History."

predetermined categories in the pursuit of something new, a model into which I believe Lee's approach toward decadent religion also fits as she attempts to replace experimental approaches toward religion with more radical experimental attitudes toward sexuality.

Sexuality, Decadence, and Vernon Lee

Vernon Lee managed to forge an asexual, homoerotic romantic life at a time when female homosexuality was just beginning to become codified as a sexual identity. In both of her relationships, she replaced sexual activity with intellectually rigorous interactions. Mary Robinson was in part a sounding board for Vernon Lee's ideas. Martha Vicinus recounts how Lee "took Robinson's poetry seriously, and Robinson was an attentive student of her friend's aesthetic theories and historical studies" ("Legion of Ghosts" 605). Robinson's friendship with Lee was important not only because of the interchange of ideas, though, but also because of the supportive, traditionally female, role she offered Lee. On one occasion, the two retreated to a cottage to allow Lee some time to write, Lee mentioning to her mother that Robinson "is a most excellent housekeeper and she is so sweet and cheerful when she has nothing but me and a few books and the country to amuse her" (qtd. in Colby 116). Anstruther-Thomson was even more integral to Lee's studies. The two women set off to explore the relationship between "aesthetic response" and the "certain bodily reaction that produced the emotions through which artwork could be deemed beautiful or ugly" (Bristow, "Vernon Lee" 199). For long hours, Lee would observe and record Anstruther-Thomson's physical reactions as she viewed art in the galleries. Her later work, written even after she and Anstruther-Thomson worked together, largely relied on the notes Anstruther-Thomson took during their periods of research in the art galleries. With Robinson, intellectual intercourse replaced sexual, and with Anstruther-Thomson, an intellectual

and academic interest in physiognomy replaced a sexual interest in the sensual body. In forging romantic relationships that focused on the intellectual rather than the physical, Lee creatively managed to challenge the assumption—as noted by Sally Newman—"that the sexual component of the relationship is the critical factor" (59).[36]

Lee also transgressed gendered expectations as she forged a queer gender identity. Although Lee largely identified with feminine emotions, she also identified with the rigorous intellectualness of a masculine, academic mind. In *Miss Brown*, Lee writes of women who "kindle from their pure passion a fire of enthusiasm as passionate, but purer than it is given to men to kindle," who "are not intended to be . . . either wives or mothers" (qtd. in Vicinus, "Legion of Ghosts" 602). Vicinus interprets this to mean that although Lee "did [not] see herself as a male soul trapped in a female body," she did see within herself both the masculine and the feminine (602). I believe that this queer sense of gender is supported by the fact that in both her professional and personal life, Lee frequently went by the name of "Vernon," though she also sometimes went by the name of "Violet" in her personal friendships. (Mary Robinson would call her "Vernie.") Yet her correspondences are filled with not only references to her as "Vernon" but also sometimes references to her refusal to meet the expectations of female behavior. In a letter, a friend once complained that when she met Lee in the streets in America, Lee's language was "very lurid, so [she] cut the conversation short" (Russell MS Huntington). Add to this Lee's insistence on associating with the male decadents of England and featuring, primarily, men (and frequently male homoeroticism) in her work, and I believe that we should read Lee as not only non-conforming in terms of sexual identity but also in terms of gender identity.

[36] Vernon Lee wrote a single novel, *Miss Brown*, which focused on an asexual female romance and praised its celibacy. Her novel was poorly received, and Lee returned to writing nonfiction and short stories.

Lee's sexual and gender identity allowed her not only to walk in male decadent circles but also to understand and identify with them. Maxwell and Pullham note that Lee had the same outsider status as sexual dissidents in Victorian society: "this outsiderism, and male same-sex desire in particular, at once pushed them to the margins of Victorian mainstream society, made them a significant deviant minority, and provided them with an immediate if covert subject matter" (8). The way in which decadence used its outsiderism as subject matter and as a codified ideal turned a minority position into a central element of the literary movement. In an age when male homosexuality as an identity position was just beginning to form and lesbianism would not become a fixed identity for several decades, one might suppose that Lee found the decadent language of male homoeroticism to be the most familiar language through which to explore diverse forms of sexual dissidence. But, one also might suggest that her fluid sense of gender and sexuality was an identification with the platonic ideals she read in the classics and with the "otherness" with which male critics viewed female subjects in art and music (an otherness, I will argue, which sometimes shows up in Lee's own literary representation of women).

At the same time, Lee differed from the British decadents significantly. Although she was British by nationality, she spent most of her time abroad. Her writing was highly influenced by her travels, and the fact that she was fluent in several European languages meant that she was widely read in continental literature and philosophy. As many have written, Lee was much more concerned with the physical and psychological aspects of aestheticism than many of her male decadent contemporaries. After Anstruther-Thomson's breakdown, for instance, Lee concluded that the source of aesthetic responses to art must be psychological, partially because she believed that the breakdown was due to the psychological strain on her health.[37] Much of her later work,

[37] See Bristow, "Vernon Lee" 131-135.

including the volume *Beauty and Ugliness* (1913), was concerned with resituating aestheticism away from spiritual-like emotions and into scientifically minded psychology. Parallel to this emphasis is an emphasis on empathy. As has been demonstrated by many critics, Vernon Lee's discussions of empathy implicitly criticizes decadent aestheticism for being too focused on a selfish consumption of art: the Paterian viewer looks at art and is only concerned with the pleasure he can personally derive from it. Lee puts much more emphasis on enjoying art with an appreciation for its distinct subjectivity, specifically as understood in its historic context, a mode of art criticism she views as empathetic.[38]

The similarities and differences between Lee and the British decadents suggests that Lee communicates a more objective position from which she weighs the strengths and weaknesses of the British decadent project. In this chapter, I explore the fact that Lee felt that a particular weakness was the centrality of religion to British decadent thinking. In the following pages, I focus on two works which have received relatively little critical attention in Lee studies, *Euphorion* and an essay/short story from its sequel, *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*, "A Seeker of Pagan Perfection." I then turn to one of Lee's more popular stories, "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady," which—despite its popularity—has only sometimes been considered for its commentary on religion. Undergirding these explorations is the belief that Vernon Lee's position at the end of decadence gave her a unique perspective on the decadent religious project. Lee's career was still in its early stage when Oscar Wilde was sentenced to prison, something that he attributed to the fact that the Victorian age was more concerned with religious moralism than with the aesthetic beauty and connection that should be the heart of the religious experience. Vernon Lee, of course, would not have read *De Profundis*, if at all, until after Ross published it

[38] See Bristow, "Vernon Lee"; Mahoney, "Haunted Collection"; and Townley, "Rewriting Paterian Sympathy."

in 1905, after she had already written the three works in this study. That she observed the same religious intolerance that led to the social conditions of Wilde's imprisonment, however, is not at all unreasonable to assume.

Vernon Lee also may have been aware of the damages of internalized religious expectations, the kinds that affected Michael Field and John Gray post-conversion and which led to the fetishism observed in some of Francis Thompson's works. At the very least, she would have been familiar with these authors' works and observed the influence of religion on the trajectory of these authors' careers. Having spent most of her life in Italy and France, Lee likely did not see the romantic draw of Catholicism in the same way that English authors, who understood it in terms of its foreign otherness, would have. Add to this the fact that Lee found in psychology an alternative to religion and spirituality as a basis for ethics, and we find that Lee had very little reason to be invested in British decadent attempts to redefine "religion" and change what it meant to partake in a religious community. Quite to the contrary, in works like *Euphorion*, "A Seeker of Pagan Perfection," and "Prince Alberic," Lee revisits decadent interests in Renaissance art, pagan subjects, and homoeroticism in order to decentralize decadent religion and replace it with secular ideals.

Euphorion

Shortly after her first trip to England, Vernon Lee began a two-volume treatise on the Renaissance, the first and most noteworthy of which was *Euphorion. Euphorion* follows Lee's first major critical work, an overview of eighteenth-century Italian opera, in its particular focus on Italy. Although Lee was of French birth and English parentage, she considered Italy home, living there for much of her life and always focusing on Italy more than England or the rest of

the continent in her work.[39] In *Euphorion*, Lee consciously reflects and, at many points, rewrites Walter Pater's version of Renaissance philosophy and art history. Lee dedicates the book "To Walter Pater, In appreciation of that which, in expounding the beautiful things of the past, he has added to the beautiful things of the present" (front page). Critics have sometimes suggested that the preface signals an intention to model *Euphorion* off of *The Renaissance* and have sometimes suggested that it signals an intention to right the wrongs of *The Renaissance*.[40] The most likely answer is, of course, that it does both.

The work begins by suggesting that what made the Renaissance possible in Italy more than anywhere else was the relative democracy and secularism of the Italian states as opposed to the dominance of large monarchies across the rest of Europe. The individualism that resulted from this democracy and secularism led to the self-cognition necessary for the Renaissance to begin, but it also came at the cost of social morality. As Lee writes, "The men of the Renaissance had to pay a heavy price for this intellectual freedom and self-cognizance which they not only enjoyed themselves, but transmitted to the rest of the world; the price was the loss of all moral standards, of all fixed public feeling" (47).

It is in fact this lack of moral standards, though, which Lee believes allowed the Italian Renaissance to spark so much life in the drama of Elizabethan England. In the next section of the work, Lee suggests that the scandal and sensationalism of Italy was so foreign to Elizabethan

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[39] In the opening of the first chapter of her biography, Colby quotes Lee, later in life, who questioned, "Had I ever really cared for any country except Italy?" Colby likes to distinguish between "two Italys in Vernon Lee's life: the country in which she lived for more than half a century and the country she created in her imagination and re-created in her work" (1).

[40] As examples of two of the more extremely disagreeing positions on the subject: Colby claims that *Euphorion* reflects Pater's influence more than "any other major Victorian writer on the subject" while also discussing Lee and Pater's correspondence concerning her plans to write it (66). Sondeep Kandola believes that although the "prefatory salutation of Pater" suggests that "*The Renaissance* [is] the ur-text upon which Lee implicitly modelled her own work," Lee writes *Euphorion* against Paterian homoeroticism and individualism (474).

audiences that it translated into a keen sense of beauty and horror in the works of poets like Shakespeare. In fact, Lee points out that it is because of the Elizabethans' "purer moral atmosphere" that they were able to translate Italian stories into such powerful dramas (87).

In the final chapter of *Euphorion*, Lee addresses what she calls "mediaeval love," or rather, the dichotomy between the courtly and physical romance of a knight with his queen and the idealized but unphysical relationship between a king and his queen. Lee is insistent that these are two different kinds of affection and that although the second kind is in fact adultery, faithfulness within that relationship is paramount for both the knight and the lady. Yet Lee remains disturbed by the idealization of adultery in courtly romance, and she suggests a third form of medieval love: the love of the poet that cannot have what he desires and yet sustains his platonic ideals through the value of restraint. Thus, a poet like Petrarch could, according to Lee, "reduc[e] this mediaeval love to a mere intellectual passion, seeking in women merely a self-made embodiment of cravings after perfection" and "cleans[e] away that deep stain of adultery" (430).

I choose to focus on these three sections of *Euphorion* because they highlight the ways in which *Euphorion* is an intentional response to Walter Pater's *Renaissance*. Lee follows the structure of *Renaissance* in a way which positions herself as an insider, an expert on Italian culture and history, elevating her to at least Pater's level of notability. She also intentionally responds to criticisms of aestheticism that were voiced against Pater's work, and—finally—she rewrites the history of the Renaissance in such a way that religion becomes peripheral at best.

Lee structures *Euphorion* similarly to how Pater structures *Renaissance*. Both of their introductions consider the circumstances out of which the Renaissance came to be, and both introductions lay out what the author believes to be the goal of art criticism and, by way of doing

so, introduce the key elements of aesthetic theory. Pater, in his "Prelude" had acknowledged that the Renaissance's "outbreak of the human spirit" was due to "the breaking down of those limits which the religious systems of the middle age imposed" and suggested that a certain "unity of [. . .] spirit" gave birth to an "intimate alliance with mind" and to "the best thoughts which the age produced" (73-75). Lee, however, chooses to frame the Renaissance not in terms of its immediate Christian predecessor (she waits to explore that topic until the first chapter), but rather in terms of the pagan ideals out of which it grew. The introduction explains that "Euphorion is the name given by Goethe to the marvelous child born of the mystic marriage of Faust and Helena," and continues to see in Euphorion's parents, the two parents of the Renaissance:

> Who Faust is, and who Helena, we all know. Faust, of whom no man can remember the youth or childhood, seems to have come into the world by some evil spell [. . .] Faustus, who has labored so much and succeeded in so little, feeling himself at the end, when he has summed up all his studies, as foolish as before—which of us has not learned to recognize the impersonated Middle Ages? And Helena, we know her also, she is the spirit of Antiquity. [. . .] she is a ghost raised by the spells of Faustus, a simulacrum of a thing long dead; yet with such continuing semblance of life, nay, with all life's real powers, that she seems the real, vital, living one. (3-5)

Although both Lee and Pater mention the relationship of the middle ages to the Renaissance, and although both would view the Renaissance as a breaking away from the limits of middle age religion and philosophy, Lee oversteps these religious boundaries in order to see the middle ages not simple as a unilaterally limiting time period but also as an era with a dark and struggling side that, when paired with the inspiration of antiquity, gave birth to "the

harmonies and anomalies" that became the Renaissance (7). This mention of antiquity also brings the pagan mythologies of Greece and Rome to the forefront of the Renaissance's creation.

Lee's introduction also suggests her familiarity with the Italy of which she writes. Pater had seen some of the works he discusses in *Renaissance* when he toured Italy in the 1860s, but his work focuses largely on the works themselves rather than the geographic or cultural context in which they were created. Lee, however, even in brief asides, suggests a strong familiarity with Italian geography, culture, and language. She might say that "a kind of encyclopaedic atlas of [the Renaissance]" is "a work completely beyond [her] facilities," yet her command of Italian landscape, history, and politics is much more in depth than Pater's or most other decadents who spoke of Italy as a collection of artistic impressions without specific mentions to its particulars. Similarly, in his consideration of some of Lee's other works, Stefano Evangelista notes how often Lee speaks to the things she has regularly seen during her life in Italy: "Lee places great emphasis on the fact that her insights are contingent on the time she has spent in the presence of the art works she discusses" (34). The result, he believes, is that "her familiarity with the collection of antiquities in Italy and Germany is presented as a type of authenticity, validated by her cosmopolitan credentials" (34).

Pater's work is organized by artist, beginning with a key philosopher (Pico della Mirandola), continuing to discuss great artists such as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, and finally ending with his essay on Wincklemann, a thinker with great but somewhat unfulfilled potential who nevertheless set the stage for Goethe's more perfect work. Lee by contrast organizes her essays by focusing more on ideas than individuals. In "Sacrifice," she discusses the key philosophical and political distinctions that allowed Italy to be the birthplace of the Renaissance; in the second essay, she considers how Italy enabled the works of dramatists like

Shakespeare; and in the final essay, she moves into the imperfect concept of "Medieaval Love" which gave birth to such artists as Petrarch. By largely following the structure of *Renaissance*, Lee is clearly acknowledging the importance of her mentor. But in speaking of broader topics, tied specifically to the Italy she knows so well, Lee represents herself as an expert.

While the framework of the introduction and last chapters of *The Renaissance* and *Euphorion* are especially similar, focusing on the origins of the Renaissance and then the way in which imperfect ideals gave way to more perfect art, the differences in their organization are also important. Sondeep Kandola has noted that "[u]nlike the majority of Pater's essays in *The Renaissance*, Lee's essays did not bear the names of (male) artists, but of schools: "The School of Boiardo," "The Outdoor Poetry," "Portrait Art" (475). Kandola connects this difference to what she believes is Lee's aversion to the individuality and narcissism of male, decadent homoeroticism. While I will develop later in this chapter my belief that Lee strongly identifies with male, decadent homoeroticism, I do think that her focus on schools over individuals is important. By focusing not just on a few well known individuals but on the wide and interconnected schools and movements that created the Italian Renaissance, Lee demonstrates a mastery of her subject matter that establishes her as a credible authority.

It is from this position of authority that Lee is able to simultaneously decentralize religion from an Paterian approach to art while also defending Pater against his strongest critics. In the first two chapters of the work, "Sacrifice" and "The Italy of Elizabethan Dramatists," Lee establishes that the Renaissance essentially grew out of secularism. Lee believes that at the heart of the Renaissance was the destabilization of Christianity as the central lens through which all thought and innovation had to pass. The discovery of Antiquity, she believes, freed Renaissance thinkers from a worldview in which everything had to grow from Christianity's presumptions. In

"Sacrifice," she writes, "The men of the Renaissance [. . .] had thrown away all accepted rules and criteria, they had cast away all faith in traditional institutions" (47). Although morally, Lee realizes that "they had destroyed [the ethical standard], and could not yet rebuild," she suggests that the loss of Christianity's tightest constrictions resulted in "the habit of equality before the law, of civic organization, of industry and commerce [. . .] science, literature, and art" (46).

Lee is therefore highly invested in a vision of the Renaissance as a total break from Christian theology and ethics. She acknowledges that this rupture from the past causes a lack of morality, but even then, she is eager to illustrate that even the most negative results of secularism led to positive results. In "The Italy of Elizabethan Dramatists," for instance, Lee argues that it is this precise loss of a moral center that created the dark Italian histories which would intertwine with Elizabethan moral sensibilities to create some of the greatest art in English history. These "stories of hideous wickedness, of the murders and rapes and poisonings committed by the dukes and duchesses, the nobles and senators," Lee insists, "fascinated with the attraction of tragic grandeur, of psychological strangeness, of moral monstrosity" and created the inspiration for English drama (69). And in these dramas, dark as they may be, lie the potential for English secularism itself: "there are no Gods [sic] revengeful but just: there is nothing but this blood-stained and corpse-strewn earth" (78). Though the unhealthy moral attitudes of the Italian Renaissance might have created its dark moments, Lee contends that they were importantly, culturally productive.

By first asserting herself as an authority on her subject matter and then deeply engaging with issues of morality and Renaissance art, Lee positions herself so that she can identify as Pater's disciple while defending her—and his—philosophy against the censure it received in the decades after its first publication. The very title of the chapter "Sacrifice" is meant to appease an

audience who decries the amorality of not only the Renaissance but also of Pater's approach to artistic appreciation. One could surmise that the individualism that Lee defends in the Renaissance Italian city state, that individualism which could be used for good or bad, parallels Pater's own individualistic approach toward the art of that time period. Furthermore, Lee goes to great lengths to admit the moral faults of her subject matter. She is quick to acknowledge that the English's pure and unified moral feeling contained a sense of right and wrong, healthy and unhealthy, which was not present in Italy's public consciousness during this time.

Lee's last and longest chapter is dedicated entirely to the idea that courtly love is inherently adulterous love and therefore problematic. The formula by which she believes Petrarch is able to cleanse courtly love of adultery amounts to a poet wanting an ideal that he knows he cannot achieve. While some might see this struggle with sexual morality as a growth from Lee's asexual aversion to physical sexuality, I think we should also see it as doing two other more important things. First, insofar as Lee's work continues the aesthetic project of Pater and the decadents, she must defend the movement against the accusations of libertinism which it had drawn after Pater's *Renaissance* was first published. Secondly, Pater's solution to religious restriction was to separate religion from dogma, to allow a kind of Hegelian play between potentially contradictory ideas in order to create stronger communities and stronger philosophies. Lee, on the other hand, wants nothing to do with religion. In her conclusion, Lee calls religion "Wastefulness":

> Why this vagueness, this imperfection in all mediaeval representations of life? Because even as men's eyes were withdrawn, by the temporal institutions of those days, from the sight of the fields and meadows which were left to the blind and dumb thing called serf; so also the thoughts of mankind, its sympathy and intentions, were withdrawn from the

> mere earthly souls, the mere earthly wrongs and woes of men by the great self-organized institution of medieval religion. (447)

Lee does not want to change religion, but to eliminate it altogether. She sees in the Renaissance a time when "man's energies of thought and feeling were withdrawn from the unknowable to the knowable, from Heaven to Earth" (448). But to suggest the demolition of all religion requires substituting something in its place, and Lee thus has the work set out before her to defend the morality of the human spirit as manifested in secular humanism. This is something that she attempts, at times more successfully than others, in *Euphorion*, but it is also a work that she continues in her better known short stories.

A Seeker of Pagan Perfection

Euphorion challenges Pater's assertion that the Renaissance resulted from a creative approach to religious traditions which allowed syncretism and individuality, an approach to religion which, I have argued, undergirds the entire British decadent approach to religion. A specific kind of religious syncretism that we see recurring throughout British decadence is the syncretism of pagan and Christian imagery. In works like "The Sphinx" or "Ode to the Setting Sun," a struggle exists between paganism and Christianity, yet in them—and the wider representation of pagan mythology in late Victorian literature—paganism implicitly stands parallel to Christianity, and any victory Christianity has over the pagan characters is temporal, figurative, and unstable. It is against this tradition that I believe Lee writes "A Seeker of Pagan Perfection," a story in which Christianity enacts physical violence against pagan practitioners, a story which calls into question the potential for syncretic religion.

"A Seeker of Pagan Perfection" was published as part of *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* in 1895. The story has received almost no critical attention, and Vineta Colby's quick gloss of it in her biography of Lee dismisses it as a "gruesome and rather pointless story" (143). To the contrary, I believe that this story is essential to understanding how Lee engages with decadent ideas of religion. In this story, Lee imagines the story of Domenico Neroni, a figure she claims to have found in an entry from a medievalist historian who stated that Domenico and two others had been found desecrating a church and were therefore displayed and humiliated in a cage before being executed in public. Lee's story, therefore, is an attempt to imagine the circumstances that led to Domenico's desecration of the church and his subsequent demise. In a tale that takes the form of an authoritative history, Lee claims that Domenico was a painter who desperately desired to be able to paint the perfect bodily form. Living in the middle ages, though, Domenico did not have access to naked human bodies to study, his only access being to a few decaying corpses. When Domenico discovers the art of antiquity, though, he discovers a kind of perfect anatomy which he desires to duplicate. He struggles to do this, though, and comes to the conclusion that ancient artists must have been given the secret to perfect bodily representation through communication with the pagan gods. Since the medieval church claims that the pagan gods are demons, Domenico pursues witchcraft and pagan rituals in a desire to bring one forth. When one of these rituals takes place in an old church, he is discovered and executed.

One impulse is to read Vernon Lee, and this story, within a tradition of Victorian women writers who used Hellenistic subjects for distinctly feminist purposes. That female writers of the *fin de siècle* viewed and addressed Hellenistic subjects differently than their male counterparts is discussed in T.D. Olverson's recent work, *Women Writers and the Dark Side of Late-Victorian Hellenism*. Olverson suggests that women writers of the late nineteenth century

found affinity with the subversive roles of the female tragic heroines of Greek drama and used these figures for subversive purposes. That explanation works well for poems like Augusta Webster's "Medea in Athens," a dramatic monologue which features Medea after she had killed her own children and lends a voice to a woman who is subversive in her roles as both wife and mother. It even works, to some extent, for those of Lee's works which feature female characters or subjects. However, a theory which focuses the difference between male and female writers on issues of subversive forms of femininity proves difficult when applied to a story with no female characters and no prominent female subjects. Indeed, even the gods which Domenico desires to summon are men, and the statue which most catches Domenico's attention is of Dionysus.

I suggest that the very male nature of this story requires us to read it in light of the conversation Vernon Lee's male contemporaries were having about Greek culture and religion. The syncretism that was believed possible between Greek philosophy and Christian religion, especially by Pater, has been well explored throughout this project, and that the quite literal violence of the Christian officials in this story against a man who sought the pagan gods clearly demonstrates Lee's skepticism of this syncretism. What I think is more important to ask is precisely why Lee calls the decadent idea of experimental, syncretic religion into question. This is, I believe, because Lee sees a violent impulse at the heart of any dominant religious tradition, because she sees Hellenism as essentially homoerotic and Christianity as essentially homophobic, and because she questions whether religious experimentation can truly result in anything productive or useful.

"A Seeker of Pagan Perfection" features many moments of religious violence. The most memorable of these moments might be the humiliation and executions that take place at the end of the stories, but the first moment is a pagan sacrifice of a lamb in a ceremony meant to

summon a pagan god. The fact that both religious traditions in this narrative feature physical violence that leads to death is, I believe, one way in which Lee suggests that a common thread of violence runs through all Western religious traditions. Yet it is worth noting that she specifically focuses on the violent potential of dominant, institutionalized religion. The violence of the Catholic church is far more extreme than the violence of the sacrifice. The Catholic priests humiliate Domenico and the others by hanging them in a cage for days and parading them through town. They mutilate the men's bodies by cutting off their right hands. They then hang one of the men and burn the other two.

The story not only condemns medieval Catholicism for being so gruesomely violent, but also suggests that this institutionalized version of Christianity goes out of its way—outside of the very teachings of its texts—in order to be so. The pagan sacrifice serves both as a commentary on the violent potential of pagan religion and as a commentary on how utterly unnecessary the violence at the end of the story will be. The narrative describes the lamb about to be killed:

> It was a miserable little lamb, newly born, its long, soft legs tied together, its almost sightless, pale eyes half-started from its sockets. As the humanist took it, it bleated with sudden shrill strength, and Domenico could not help thinking of certain images he had seen on monastery walls of the Good Shepherd carrying the lame lamb on his shoulders. This was very different. (219-220)

In this scene, Lee juxtaposes the violence of the pagan ritual with the gentleness of Christ as a healing shepherd-savior, but the larger narrative of this story juxtaposes the violence of the men's execution at the hands of the Christian church with the simple and non-violent goal of Domenico's quest: to see a perfect body and reduplicate its beauty in art. Both of these juxtapositions not only suggest that Christian violence is unnecessary, distasteful, and extreme.

They also suggest the extremes that the Christian religion has gone to—against the very nature of its source—in order to reintegrate violence against those who seek beauty. And yet they also reinforce the idea that even the least violent of religions will deteriorate into what the medieval church has become once it becomes the dominant, regulating institution of its society.

Lee also challenges religious syncretism in this story by suggesting that Hellenism is inherently homoerotic while Christianity is inherently homophobic. In the Christian culture of the story, the naked body is seen as something dangerous. The only naked bodies Domenico has access to are diseased corpses which pose a danger to his own health. These symbolically suggest the danger of the naked body since, as Kristeva notes, "Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without" (*Powers of Horror* 71). This may very well link, too, with the dangers of sexuality: to evoke Kristeva again, such abjection as these diseased bodies carry "strays on the territories of *animal*" and connotes such things as "sex and murder" (12-13). We might say that the destructive force of the diseased body, by its very abjection, carries sexual potential in its foreign threat. In contrast to an idea of nudity as threat, the story notes how Greek culture was comfortable with naked boys exercising and with loose clothing which rendered the wearer "half-naked." In this image, there is no sense of danger, disease, filth or otherness to the naked body—in short, no abjection. Indeed, we could view these references as asexual, though the connotations of sexuality bodies carry in medieval culture prevent such a view.

Another thing which prevents an asexual reading of these naked bodies is the important role of the gaze throughout the story. When the narrative explains the ancient Greeks' access to naked forms, it focuses not on *seeing* but on *watching*: "Those ancient painters and sculptors . . . for generations had *watched* naked lads exercising in the school or racecourse" (189, emphasis

mine). A parallel moment to this watching occurs when Domenico is shown the sculpting of Dionysus and he, his friend, and another guest stand admiring the form of the body. Sedgwick's idea of triangulation is typically limited to male viewers admiring a female object, and the sculpture is clearly of a man. Yet, because of its status as a work of art, I believe that it occupies a liminal sexual space and, indeed, the story itself admits that the male body of Dionysus "[gives] an impression almost womanly" (199). Thus, the sculpture can allude to homosociality between the men. Because it is a work of art and not an actual man, it is socially acceptable for three men, even within medieval Christian culture, to stand and admire it together. However, because the sculpture is of a man—however womanly he is—Domenico's admiring gaze, noting "the compressed strength of the long light thighs," "depressions and swellings of the muscles," also suggests some level of homosexual desire on the part of the artist (200).

The Christian attitude to the naked body as opposed to the homosociality of Greek art, and the homoeroticism of the pagan rituals, pits Christian homophobia against Greek homoeroticism. The fact that the entire conflict of the novel is caused by the Christian aversion to nakedness and the painter's desire to understand the naked, male body, draws strong and essential parallels between its commentary on Christianity as a regulating, violent institution and Christianity as a homophobic institution. Ultimately, too, the attempt to syncretize these two religious traditions is fruitless. Although Christianity cannot provide Domenico with the inspiration he requires, his failed pagan rituals cannot either.

In place of religious experimentation, then, I believe that Vernon Lee proposes gendered and sexual experimentation as the key to creative liberty. This is best supported by the fact that Lee strongly identifies with the male, frequently homoerotic, figures in her stories and studies. There are a few possible explanations for and implications from Vernon Lee's identification with

male homoeroticism. The first explanation is that the male voice and point of view that Lee assumed allowed her to position herself in a strong literary tradition that would also afford her more literary recognition than female homoeroticism. As Emily Hamer notes, "Gay men have always had easier access to the formation of social identity than lesbians have had, because they have always had the privileges that go with being a man" (6). Though Vernon Lee lived to see lesbian identity increasingly codified through the early decades of the twentieth century, her association with the masculine homoeroticism of English decadence allowed her, in her early life, to connect not only to a destabilizing movement in which to work theoretically but also to identify herself sexually in an era where queer women largely had to create their own sense of sexual identity.

At the same time, though, the creativity and transgression of Lee's identification should not be overlooked. Elsewhere, Lee writes extensively on female friendship, and she maintained connections to many of those whom we consider the New Women of her day. Yet it is not primarily with that movement but with the male dominated decadent movement with which she chooses to identify herself. Richard Dellamora summarizes the importance of this move in a review of Zorn's *Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, History, and the Victorian Female Intellectual*. He writes:

> I believe that the case needs to be made for [Lee's] importance as a Victorian modern. This claim eclipses observations that can be made about her status as a New Woman writer. As the latter, Lee is one among many [. . .]. Within Aestheticism and the Decadence, Lee's feminist perspective enabled her to be the best critic we have of male sexual hysteria. Not only an analyst of gender relations and the structure of the male psyche, Lee works powerfully to show how her fascination with boy-girls and her

> experience as a crossgendered, i.e. as a masculine woman, enable her both to specify new modes of psychological interiority and to show how such modes structure both innovation and cultural history. ("Vernon Lee's Moment" 8)

Dellamora suggests that Vernon Lee's sexual positioning is a matter of her "uncanny ability to inhabit unanticipated subjectivities," that the male perspective in several of her stories and essays is an intentional critical standpoint from which she makes valuable observations. Simultaneously, though, he refers to Lee as "crossgendered" and specifically values her "experience," not as one who performs masculinity as a sort of commentary but as one who identifies as "a masculine woman." It is this unique combination of objective commentary with subjective experience that at once allows Lee to speak from the point of view of masculine homoeroticism but also to undermine any sense of stable identity it might be forming throughout the English decadent movement.

Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady

In "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady," Vernon Lee continues to develop an idea of Christianity that sees it primarily as intellectually and creatively stunting, violent in its role as dominant religion, and opposed to gender and sexual fluidity. The story focuses on a young prince, Alberic, who grows up under the guardianship of his uncle, the Christian Duke Balthasar. Alberic is entranced by a tapestry in his room, and when the furniture is moved one day, the tapestry is found to depict the snake lady Oriana. Alberic is fascinated by the snake lady, but the Duke replaces it with an allegedly more Christian image: a picture of Susanna and the Elders. Alberic cuts this second tapestry to shreds. Because of his insolence, Alberic is sent away to a remote garden estate. There he is befriended by a snake who, at night, transforms into a woman.

The snake lady refers to herself as Alberic's godmother and provides Alberic with friendship, books, and all other material things that he needs. The Duke, discovering this friendship, sends three of his advisors, and these advisors eventually kill the snake lady. Alberic, in protest, starves himself to death.

Criticism of "Prince Alberic" tends to focus on the role of the feminine within the text. Mary Patricia Kane provides a poststructuralist, feminist reading of the text when she examines the plot through the lens of Lacanian development. When Alberic first encounters the tapestry, it acts as a mirror which allows him "to imagine a world in response to visual stimuli" as he passes through the mirror stage. As the Duke teaches Alberic the language and rituals of his position, Alberic is dragged through a symbolic stage of development. The majority of the story, though, according to Kane's reading, is built around the conflict created when Alberic refuses to identify with the father figure of the Duke and instead subverts the patriarchy through identification with the snake lady. Martha Vicinus, with a similar interest in the story's shifting subjectivity, suggests that the story can and should be read instead as about female homoeroticism: "The oedipal implications of a boy fixated on an erotic mother are irrelevant, for Lee is constructing an ideal lesbian romance," one in which family is formed outside of procreation and two individuals bond through "reciprocal need" ("Adolescent Boy" 109). Meanwhile, Peter Christensen's historical reading of the story's setting does not explicitly speak to the feminine, but it implicitly supports it. Christensen notes that in 1700, France and Austria began to hold increasingly strong influence over the northern part of Italy. He argues that the disorientation that the prince experiences at the end of the short story more importantly signifies the disorientation of a culture in which reason overtakes imagination and creativity. The value of imagination over

reason could very well be read in gendered terms, especially parallel to Lee's own readings of masculine objectification as opposed to feminine empathy in art criticism.

Yet, as I have demonstrated, Lee not only identified with female homoeroticism but also frequently identified with a Pater-and-Wilde-esque male homoeroticism throughout her writing. And as Dellamora has argued, to read Lee as exclusively "new woman" is to overlook the way in which she is heavily invested in a masculine, decadent dialogue. In the next several pages, then, I provide a reading of "Prince Alberic" which places it within the religious dialogue of masculine British decadence. To do so, I read it as continuing the polemic Lee began against both Christianity and experimental decadent religion in *Euphorion* and "A Painter of Pagan Perfection."

Throughout the story, the presence of a snake lady, first in the tapestry of Orsina and later as the godmother snake lady, represents intellectual and creative freedom and growth. Even before Alberic discovers that the lady on his tapestry is half snake, the tapestry provides "an inexhaustible charm" because through it, Alberic learns about the natural world. Along its borders, the tapestry is covered with depictions of dozens of plants and animals. Alberic learns their names from his nurse and uses them as inspiration for his own exploration of plants throughout the palace garden and his own research into different kinds of animals which is conducted by interviewing the palace's staff. The depiction of mountains, the sea, rivers, and roads encourage Alberic's interest in geography.

After the snake lady is discovered on the tapestry, and the tapestry's successor is destroyed, Alberic is sent to the country. Here, he has even more access to the natural world which fascinated him in his tapestry. The vineyards, orange and lemon orchards, and carnation covered buildings cause Alberic to wonder, "had the tapestry been removed to this spot, and

become a reality in which he himself was running about?" (300). When the snake woman becomes Alberic's godmother, this location further becomes a place not of lonely exile but of personal and intellectual stimulation. When the Duke's advisors come to bribe Alberic with gifts in case he ever ascends to his uncle's position, they find that he is thriving thanks to a vast library, plenty of clothes, and horses which his godmother has magically provided for him. Thanks to these gifts, the Duke's advisors behold Alberic as a "precocious young scholar," a "brilliant cavalier[ ]," and a marvelously dressed gentleman (308, 309).

Thus the presence of the snake lady is twice associated with Alberic's development both as a refined individual and as an intellectual scholar. Twice too is the snake lady removed from Alberic's life because she stands opposed to the Duke's Christian ideology. Alberic might initially strike readers as a similar character to Marius or Gaston. The story starts with his intellectual development as a youth and somewhat traces it into early adulthood. Alberic, like Marius, is disturbed by the dead animals he encounters as a child. Like Gaston, his Christianity meets with and is willing to harmonize with what he learns through exploration of the natural world. Yet unlike Marius or Gaston, Alberic's creative and intellectual growth is twice stunted by his uncle's Christian ideology. First, the tapestry which inspires him is taken away, and even before then, a crucifix hides the part of the tapestry which features the snake-like bottom portion of the lady. When Alberic has recovered from this first barrier to his growth and found inspiration in a real snake woman, this woman who provides companionship and intellectually stimulating material is killed by the Jesuit.

The Christianity of the story is in this way not merely stunting to Alberic's personal development but also inherently violent. It is no mistake that the Jesuit is the one who ultimately kills the snake lady. Nor is it a mistake that the first tapestry is covered by a crucifix, then

replaced with a tapestry of Susannah and the Elders which is specifically mentioned to be a gift from the "Most Christian Majesty King Lewis XIV" (289). And the tale that is depicted in the original tapestry is said to have entered Western knowledge only through "the chronicles of the Crusaders" (290). Repeatedly throughout the story, Christianity does not merely stand symbolically against the demonic, pagan-like image of the snake lady. It is a physically violent, crusading religion, institutionalized through its alliance with monarchs, and its representative—the Jesuit—commits the plot's greatest act of murder.

Of course, the Duke's inflexible Christianity does damage Alberic in plenty of non-physical ways. I previously mentioned Vicinus's female homoerotic reading of the story, but I would like to suggest that the story can better be read as a commentary on male homoeroticism. The obvious phallic imagery of the snake should allow at least the possibility of reading the snake lady as an effeminate male. Furthermore, the way in which the snake lady is integral to Alberic's intellectual and creative development largely mirrors the kind of homoerotically charged mentor relationships featured in Pater's novels or even Wilde's own relationship with Douglas. Consider alongside this the kind of gifts that the snake lady presents to Alberic. The clothes especially seem to turn the young man into a decadent dandy:

> Alberic was sixteen, but far taller and stronger than his age would warrant. His figure was at once manly and delicate, and full of grace and vigour of movement. His long hair, the colour of floss silk, fell in wavy curls, which seemed to imply almost a woman's care and coquetry, His hands also, though powerful, were, as the Dwarf took note, of princely form and whiteness. As to his garments, the open doors of his wardrobe displayed every variety that a young prince could need; and, while the Dwarf was watching, he was exchanging a russet and purple hunting dress, cut after the Hungarian fashion with cape

and hood, and accompanied by a cap crowned with peacock's feathers, for a habit of white and silver, trimmed with Venetian lace. (307-308)

Two levels of signification could be read within this passage. First, considering that this story was published a year into Wilde's imprisonment, one could read into some of the descriptions of the prince a description of Wilde himself. The comments on the prince's height balanced with his delicacy parallel descriptions and pictures of Wilde, and the peacock feathers were especially associated with Wilde's particular aesthetic. Beyond reading this description as similar to one person, though, we should read it generally as describing a kind of gender fluidity associated with the dandy: womanly, delicate, and white yet retaining a masculine strength. The institutionalized Christianity that literally kills the snake lady figuratively kills Alberic's dandy-like beauty as the prince starves himself to death and is "hastily buried under a slab, which remained without any name or date" (343).

Finally, I believe male homoeroticism is suggested through the depiction of the feminine side of the snake lady as foreign and other. Though the perspective of the heterosexual male author in the Victorian era is equally objectifying of women, throughout male written decadent literature, women are removed yet another step by being not only the sexual other but an other that is not even connected to the author's masculinity by sexual desire. The result is the glib comments of Oscar Wilde's characters about women or Francis Thompson's thoroughly sterile discussions of heterosexual love. Insofar as Alberic shares intimacies with the snake lady—she is after all his sole companion and confidant during his time in the country—she represents the effeminate male homoerotic companion. But as a female character, she is distanced from Alberic the male insofar as her womanly form—her female genitalia, in fact—is replaced by an animal's bottom half.

Vernon Lee does destabilize Christianity along with her fellow British decadents, yet whereas they would experimentally revise Christian theology or blend it with pagan religious traditions, Lee seeks to decentralize it to the extreme of removing it from any place of importance at all. Lee's version of Christianity, as described in *Euphorion*, "A Painter of Pagan Perfection," and "Prince Alberic," is entirely harmful and irredeemable.

Christianity and Abject Homoeroticism

Unlike Pater, Thompson, and Wilde, who each in their own ways see something redeemable and worth saving among the Christian traditions, Lee primarily criticizes monolithic Christianity because by doing so, she can further destabilize sexuality and gender as seemingly fixed identities. Though each of the previous three decadent authors pursues it in his own way, they all desire a religious experience which reconciles the good of the Christian religion(s) with the beauty of other traditions and with their social and sexual differences. Lee, however, opposes the idea of Christianity as an authoritative institution. I believe her unorthodox approach to genre allows for the decentralization of religion throughout her accounts of history. "A Seeker of Pagan Perfection" mimics the genre of biography, and the object of its study is a fictional Renaissance artist. This approach prompts the question of what is fictional (the story of Domenico), what is non-fictional (art history), what is factual, and what is not. Christianity is cast into this instability as an ancient object of cultural study rather than as a current institution of faith. Similarly, the folklore nature of "Prince Alberic" undercuts Christianity by relegating it to a land of pretend.

This move is important because of the critical distance it creates between Christianity and Lee's treatment of it. Having created this distance, Lee moves to the familiar. Just as her

identification with decadent male sexuality allows her to comment on it uniquely, so her familiarity with the English decadent project allows her to borrow its destabilizing approach to Christianity and then subversively comment on the ways in which others have performed this destabilization.

I believe that through stories like "A Seeker of Pagan Perfection" and "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady," Lee suggests that the syncretism of Wilde and the fetishism of Thompson both stem from a similarly abject position. The idea of the religious abject is probably best understood through a relationship of Christianity to Judaism. Leena Shröder best describes the connection between the self and the experience of religious abjection, though her work focuses on Lee's later contemporaries Leonard and Virginia Woolf. Shröder, both summarizing and building off of a tradition of Kristevan/Lacanian psychoanalysis, describes a system in which Judaism, as the source of Christianity, becomes a threatening and abject other not only to Anglicanism, but also to England as a whole. Judaism, although Christianity's source, is also that part which Christianity wishes to cast off from itself. And even as modern England seeks to move increasingly toward secularity, the site of England and the trope of the wandering Jew will always mean an abjectifying relationship between Christianity and Judaism. Just as Derrida proposes in "Faith and Knowledge" that racial tensions always connect back to religion through the history of location—"difficult to say 'Europe' without connoting: Athens— Jerusalem— Rome—Byzantium"—so England as a historically Christian country is tied to that religion just as much as a Jew is tied to his religious, Jewish heritage (43). In her study, Shröder points to the anti-Semitism characters perceive and then internalize as self-abjection as caused specifically by religion.

Yet I believe that something very similar to what Shröder describes as the relationship between Judaism and Christianity occurs between the heterosexually oriented institution of the Christian church and male homoeroticism. By the turn of the century, the Anglican church—as well as much of evangelicalism and facets of Catholicism—had fully embraced an image of muscular Christianity, a version of Christianity firmly rooted in a heterosexual binary. Biblical passages about gender paralleled Victorian heteronormative discourse of both Darwinism and sexology. Yet Christianity had its homoerotic roots—the male friendships of Christ, the monasticism of the medieval church, even the homoerotic elements of spiritual bliss found in union with a masculine God. Any rejection of homoeroticism on religious grounds could be read as a move by Christianity to cast off its homoerotic origins as abject waste.

In "A Seeker of Pagan Perfection" and "Prince Alberic," Lee presents two characters who attempt both the syncretic community of Wilde and the fetishism of Thompson. Domenico attempts to combine paganism and Christianity in pursuit of art, and he fetishizes the naked body. Alberic similarly seeks to enjoy the pagan image of the snake lady within the space of his uncle's Christian domain, and his fixation on the snake lady is akin to fetish. Domenico and Alberic are not merely rejected from their communities because of their attempts. Rather, the narrative goes to extremes as Domenico and Alberic's communities eviscerate them through physical violence and emotional humiliation. They both become quite literally abject as they waste away in anticipation of their deaths and their corpses then are disposed of. The message, if there is one, is that the homoerotic will always be abject within a Christian faith community; there can be no attempt to build community despite it or to retreat into fantasy away from it.

If Lee assesses the position of the decadent religious figure in a way similar to Kristeva's description of the abject, it might not surprise us that her overall assessment of religion is very

similar to Kristeva's first book on the Christian religion, *In the Beginning was Love*. Kristeva's *In the Beginning was Love* is a response to an invitation to consider psychoanalysis and faith; in the course of her consideration, she not only touches on the links between psychoanalysis and faith, but also the links between religion and sexuality within the realm of psychoanalysis. What sends the analysand into analysis, Kristeva claims, is love. "[I]t is a want of love," she says, "that sends the subject into analysis" (3). Kristeva identifies a similar desire at the heart of religion or, primarily, Christianity. Christianity provides the subject with a love which does not depend upon the subject's actions: "God was the first to love you, God is love" (25). Furthermore, Christianity, she claims, sympathizes with common desires and provides an illusion in which these desires can be met. The virgin birth, for example, creates an illusion in which the mother can be pure and virginal and exist apart from the threat of the father's sexual attractions. The theology of God the Father collapses the maternal and paternal into one so that connection with the father (through language) does not depend on the rejection of the mother (who, before language, meets all one's needs). This concept offers the illusion of unity through the Trinity; in the Trinity, the Son can identify with the Father, being of the same substance: "Consubstantiality with the father and symbolic identification with his name? Patients aspire to nothing else" (40).

Kristeva argues that psychoanalysis needs to allow for the productive purpose of illusion and that the goal of psychoanalysis is not simply to destroy illusion but to allow illusion to practice "its full therapeutic and epistemological value" (21). At the same time, though, she does not believe that this means allowing religion to continue its function as illusion. Instead, she believes that the analyst must "shift[ ] attention from the 'macrofantasy' to the 'microfantasy'" and thus discover the sexuality which hides beneath the desires which religion attempts to meet. For early Kristeva, then, the object of desire is always sexual; religion merely covers over that

desire without satisfying it.

Even more remarkably, Kristeva revisits her position on religion several years after *In the Beginning was Love* and expands on it in *This Incredible Need to Believe*. Although I believe that the attitude that Lee articulates toward religion is closer to Kristeva's view in *In the Beginning was Love*, it is worth noting that in her second work, Kristeva agrees that religion, specifically Christianity, is a necessary step toward the realization of a humanist society. "Unlike Freud," she writes, "I do not claim that religion is just an illusion. [. . .] [T]he history of Christianity prepared the world for humanism" ("From Jesus to Mozart (Christianity's Difference)"). Lee clearly believes that secular humanist ethics have replaced Christian moralism at the end of the nineteenth century. Throughout *Euphorion,* she explains that Renaissance Italy had lost Christian moralism without having yet developed secular humanism, but the statement implies that she believes that her current age has a strong enough grasp of humanism that Christianity has become a vestigial element of culture, like the ruins of antiquity that she discusses in her works.

Although I believe Lee would substitute a non-physical understanding of aestheticism in the place of sexuality (as the ultimate object of desire), she similarly views religion as "microfantasy." Domenico's broad interest in the aestheticism of bodies is contrasted with his community's very limited fixation with religious propriety. Alberic's aesthetic interest in art, literature, and pagan mythology is contrasted with the demands and limitations of his uncle's religious dogma. For Lee, religion is always, to some extent, a fetish. At its very best, it might lay claim to some brief moments of aesthetic beauty, but in doing so, it fixates on a small part rather than the whole.

Vernon Lee's Reflections

Some might wonder at the inclusion of Vernon Lee, an individual so opposed to religion, at the end of a project promoting the idea of a decadent religious movement. I have two main reasons for doing so. First, British decadence—as well as international expressions of decadence, in fact—centered around the idea of fragmentation, and it would be disingenuous to suggest that on the topic of religion, the most visible figures of decadence were somehow strangely unified. I do not want to suggest that all British decadents were of one mind, aiming toward the similar goal of experimental and syncretic religion. Rather, I wish to explain the importance of a concept of decadent religion as something that decadent authors cared about and discussed from multiple positions.

My second reason for ending this project with a discussion of Vernon Lee is because of her chronological position at the end of the transition from decadence to modernism. Vernon Lee was uniquely positioned at the end of the decadent movement. She lived—and continued to write—into the 1930s. Although the works discussed in this chapter were published in the 1880s and 90s, it is worth noting Lee's unique ability to look back on the decadent movement of which she was a part.

Lee saw, of course, the fates of the individuals in this study. Her close friendship to Walter Pater likely made her aware of the sense of exclusion he felt from the Oxford community that still largely retained the exterior elements of an Anglican university. She witnessed Wilde's imprisonment, but more notably, she also witnessed how the man largely responsible for that imprisonment, Lord Alfred Douglas, rapidly changed course shortly after Wilde's trial and became an extremely moralizing figure who professed devout Christian faith and vehemently

denied any homoerotic inclinations. She also would have seen a number of decadent men convert to Catholicism and frequently renounce lifestyles associated with homosexual practices.

Even before some of these events occurred, I believe Vernon Lee's outsider perspective on English society likely helped her see all the more clearly the trajectory in which things were moving. Having grown up in France, Switzerland, and Italy—the last of which she most likely continued to consider uniquely secular—the religious landscape of England, and especially its anti-Catholicism, probably seemed somewhat strange to her. Even as she invested in the development of an English decadent project of destabilization, she retained an ounce of skepticism about what that destabilization might achieve with or for religion. Indeed, her religious project was much more in line with the modernist aim to relegate religion to cultural artifact than with the goal to create a new definition of religion, but she worked within the English decadent project of destabilization to achieve that relegation.

CONCLUSION

The foundation of this project lies in the claim that critics most often read British decadence through the lens of experimentation and redefinition, and the motivation of this project has been to see religion considered alongside the other subjects which were recreated throughout British decadent experimentation. To that end, this project has explored how Walter Pater viewed religious redefinition and syncretism as his primary method for challenging assumptions about genre, sexuality, and history. It has looked at how Oscar Wilde's separation of words from their denotative meanings laid the groundwork for his separation of religious ideology from the aesthetic and communal elements of religion. It has also viewed the writings of Catholic author, Francis Thompson, as symptomatic expressions of some of the difficulties one faced when trying to apply a decadent idea of "the religious" to specific religious traditions like Catholicism. Vernon Lee, from her position on the fringes of male decadent circles in Britain, suggests that these precise kinds of difficulties negate the worth of a decadent religious project altogether.

This narrative begins rather optimistically. Walter Pater believes that the evolution of religious traditions has contributed positively to Western historical development, and he believes that if one takes a creative and syncretic approach to religion, it can continue to play a formative role in British culture. Oscar Wilde adopts this approach in his personal philosophy, and in his post-prison works, he in fact longs for the kind of community which could be united around the aesthetic beauty of religious ritual and the social priority of acceptance and care for one another. Yet in Francis Thompson, we find an individual who significantly struggles as he tries to combine a decadent emphasis on pagan/Christian syncretism and sensual pleasure with his own

Catholic devotion. And in Vernon Lee, that kind of personal struggle becomes represented through the actual death of characters who attempt a decadent approach to Christianity. The optimistic story ends, it seems, rather darkly.

Was the decadent redefinition of religion a failed project, after all? That, of course, depends upon what would be considered "success." Pater and Wilde, especially, never desired a revolutionary change within the institutions of religion. They rather desired to see the power of religious dogma decreased while the beauty of religious ceremony, and the power of religious traditions to bring people together, was preserved. By its very nature, this was a goal that would never be fulfilled on a very visible, grand scale. It was one which would be evidenced in the struggles of individuals and small groups of individuals as they resituated what constituted the soul of their religious practice and where that religious practice would take place.

To weigh the so-called success of the decadent movement's attitude toward religion, then, I think it is necessary not only to look at the *fin de siècle* but also to look at the century that followed. Attitudes toward Western, ancient, and world religions in the early twentieth century sometimes strongly affirmed decadent approaches to religion and sometimes strongly reacted against them. I also think it is helpful to consider how elements of decadent religious thought can be seen in contemporary worship and contemporary theology. Whether or not British decadence is—or was—a conscious influence in each of these cases matters less, I believe, than whether the British decadent authors in this study had worthwhile ideas that would endure.

British Decadent Religion and the Early Twentieth Century

At what point does one literary period end and another begin? What we call "Victorian literature" is conveniently bookmarked by the beginning and end of Queen Victoria's reign, but

"decadence" is a movement that crosses national boundaries and, in England, crossed into the twentieth century (Vernon Lee wrote into the 1930s). It is a movement which several recent critics have considered as marking not the end of Victorian literature but the beginning of British modernism. While it is not the work of this dissertation to suggest or defend any singular definition of modernism, I do wish to invoke those studies which connect British decadence to British modernism and to explore the presence of decadent ideas about religion in the works of a few authors typically classified as part of British high modernism.

Throughout the last few decades, there has been a significant move toward reading certain late Victorian authors, the decadents included, as more in line with the ideology and literary patterns of the first half of the twentieth century. David Weir's *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (1995) suggests that decadence "provides a conceptual focus that helps to unify the cultural transition from romanticism to modernism" (xvi). Vincent Sherry's *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (2015) agrees that decadence was an important force in shaping certain aspects of twentieth-century British literature, but it was one that was intentionally suppressed under a veneer of critical disapproval of 1890s literature before it was recreated and represented as modern: "The 'decadence' of the Nineties joins the modernism of the Teens, that is, but in cipher. This decadence is not just a contested predecessor [. . .] it is obviously proscribed. Just so, it is re-inscribed into a set of alternative counters" (3). And the *Late Victorian into Modern* (2016) collection of essays, as previously mentioned, finds similar interests in material culture, technology, psychology, gender, and the avant-garde throughout the literature of the late nineteenth century.

Interestingly, in these volumes and the many individual articles that join their conversations, religion is rarely mentioned. This might be for a few different reasons. First,

studies of religion in both decadence and twentieth-century British literature are far less frequent than studies of other topics. Secondly, the religious lives and the literary oeuvre of many of those whom we recognize as "religious" in the beginning of the twentieth century look very different from the lives and literature of Pater, Wilde, Thompson, and Lee. GK Chesterton's *Orthodoxy*, for example, seems a treatise against the very fluid, experimental, anti-dogmatic nature of decadent religion. T.S. Eliot's *The Idea of a Christian Society*, far from the decadent desire to deinstitutionalize Christianity, suggests that a society should be unified in its construction around Christian principles. And the conversion of several individuals to Catholicism during this time period suggests an attraction to the constancy of the past rather than to the creative potential of the future, as indicated in Evelyn Waugh's own explanation of why he converted to Catholicism. "Christianity exists in its most complete and vital form in the Roman Catholic church," he wrote. "It seems to me a necessary sign of the completeness and vitality in a religious body that its teaching shall be coherent and consistent. If its own mind is not made up, it can hardly hope to withstand disorder from outside" (qtd. in Coffey 64).

Despite these glaring differences, I believe we can find many similar impulses and desires within the religious theories of Pater, Wilde, Thompson, and Lee and those of T.S. Eliot, Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, Ford Madox Ford, and their contemporaries. I want to avoid over-determining causation when I see similarities between the British decadents and the British modernists, but I want to suggest a few instances of what might be decadent ideas re-inscribed in modernist texts. For example, I believe that the way that religion was connected to cultural memory in several twentieth-century works is not unlike the decadents' syncretic impulse to connect different Western religious traditions in their various narratives. Laura Coffey has demonstrated the correlation between the English country home and Catholicism in Waugh's

works, specifically *Brideshead Revisited.* In *Brideshead Revisited*, Coffey argues that the aristocratic Catholic family maintains English cultural values, and that those values as situated in Catholicism are symbolically represented by the country estate. The nostalgia for English values is met through Charles Rider's turn to Catholicism, even as country estates are quickly disappearing. The turn to Catholicism, then, is a turn to English national culture and memory. This is a more conservative, and more nationalistic, version of what English decadent authors do. Pater, for instance, values Christianity because it is the latest and most enlightened of a chain of Western religious traditions. We can see similar impulses in Thompson's works when the attraction of paganism is overcome by the permanence of Christianity. For Pater and Thompson, Christianity is part of a larger continuum of Western culture. For Waugh and like-minded modernists (one thinks especially of Eliot's emphasis on tradition), syncretism between Western religious narratives becomes replaced by a singular, English narrative.

One might also consider the relationship of certain Christian authors with their respective churches in the twentieth century. Although Eliot, a convert to Anglicanism, would advocate *The Idea of a Christian Society*, and although Catholics like Waugh, Ford, and Greene were attracted to Catholicism because of the singularity of the church, it has been noted that none of these authors were particularly invested in conforming to the institution of the church. As Timothy Sutton has noted, "the modernist Catholics showed a relative disregard for their relationship with the English church hierarchy or for Vatican-sponsored criticisms of their work" (25). He cites, "faithfully practicing converts like Hopkins and Waugh (and Eliot in the Anglican community) expressed only mild concern with their standing among church officials, while the more doctrinally liberal Ford and Greene quite openly ignored official Catholic social or moral teachings and scoffed at clerical criticisms of their novels" (25). Though an increasingly secular

English culture might contribute toward this indifferent attitude, these authors' insistence that they could be wholly Catholic without being wholly in line with church morals and beliefs should be read in connection to the decadent move away from morality and doctrine toward community and practice.

Finally, I think Wilde and Thompson's versions of decadent religion, with their emphasis on self-sacrifice, can be seen as parallel to the version of Christianity which was highlighted in light of World War I. Paul Fussell notes the recurrent images of the cross and crucifixion in popular literature and poetry during and after the war. He suggests, "Reminded of the Crucifixion all the time by the ubiquitous foreign calvaries [sic] and by the spectacle of uniformed miscreants immobilized and shamed with their arms extended, the troops readily embraced the image as quintessentially symbolic of their own sacrifice" (128). Even without the Christian imagery, the image of the soldier, sacrificing self for nation, continued into post-war literature, marking a very similar kind of radical subjective destitution as Wilde would see not only in Christ but also in his own post-prison role in society.

Again, none of this is meant to argue a strict cause-and-effect relationship between decadence and early twentieth-century culture. It should, however, suggest that British decadent attempts to redefine what constituted religion did not entirely fail and that throughout the early parts of the next century, several of their ideas reappeared, though sometimes altered. I also want to suggest, though, that we should consider the ways in which decadent ideas about religion have reappeared in our contemporary approaches to religion.

Throughout this project, I have read Pater, Wilde, Thompson, and Lee in light of psychoanalysis, social theory, and postmodern theology to show that in many ways, these authors anticipate major twentieth-century thinkers' approaches toward religion. They intuitively

redirect religion away from institutionalized dogma toward small communities based around what Hervieu-Léger calls *Religion as a Chain of Memory*. And in many ways, the changes they wished to see in the religious traditions of their day can be seen in some of the religious traditions of today. To consider those traditions most relevant to this study, the Anglican church's ordination of women and the Episcopalian church's ordination of LGBTQIA+ individuals, for instance, stem from a desire to become a more inclusive community and from a willingness to place community over historically held dogma. The increasing presence of, and tolerance of, progressivism in the Catholic church indicates a possible desire to likewise become more inclusive. The Unitarian Universalists organization around principles rather than creed, and their incorporation of several religious traditions, is probably the closest thing to the decadent idea of a religious community built around practice rather than creed.

Every semester, I teach several works which stem from several religious traditions and spiritual positions. For the past two semesters, I have included "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" and *De Profundis* in my syllabus. I am struck by the way in which my students discuss these various texts. When I teach Naomi Shihab Nye's "Different Ways to Pray," my students discuss how the poem celebrates the various ways individuals practice their Muslim faith around the world. When I teach Anne Sexton's "With Mercy for the Greedy," my students admire her ability to take an important principle of Christianity and rework it into her agnostic spirituality. When I teach Wilde's post-prison works, though, my students read Wilde's discussions of Christ, of his inability to believe, as bleak and hopeless. Though they can read *De Profundis* as a somewhat optimistic text, and they especially enjoy the parts where he imagines life after prison, they struggle with the fact that Wilde feels so alone because he lacks a religious or spiritual community. I believe that the difference between their responses to the universalism and

agnosticism of Nye and Sexton and the mixture of universalism and agnosticism they encounter in Wilde is due to their understanding of context: they identify that in the twenty-first century, they have access to spiritual communities, even religious communities and churches, regardless of questioning or belief. I believe there is some connection, albeit sometimes a loose one, between Wilde, the decadents, and the early twentieth century, between the early twentieth century and theorists like Zizek, Foucault, Hervieu-Léger, and Ward, and between all of these individuals and the religious landscape of today. I believe that it is, in some small part, because of Pater, Wilde, Thompson, and Lee that we have been and continue on a trajectory toward a more inclusive, always beautiful, idea of "religion."

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