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The male wound in fin de siècle poetry

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Few religious figures evoke as many decadent and homoerotic connotations as Saint Sebastian, the beautiful male martyr shot full of arrows by Roman soldiers for confessing his Christian faith. Depicted in countless Renaissance paintings – most notably by Guido Reni who painted the subject seven times – he is generally portrayed as a swooning yet defiant youth, his lithe and muscular body pierced by arrows. Sebastian continues to have significance as a contemporary gay icon. From Derek Jarman's film *Sebastiane* (1976) to male model Sebastien Moura on the cover of gay lifestyle magazine *reFRESH* (June/July 2007), Sebastian endures as the go-to saint for the homoerotic imaginary: 'Refusing to take his place with the obsolete icons of earlier epochs, he has enhanced his position as the single most successfully deployed image of modern male gay identity'.¹ To a lesser extent, Jesus Christ himself is also recognised as a 'gay icon'. Gregory Woods notes that there is a 'great body of devotional poetry, most of it written by men, which is identical in its conventions to secular love poetry, and differs from it only in the name of the beloved: Jesus Christ'.² Ruth Vanita associates Christ with 'perpetual virginity' and 'same-sex community', arguing that this made him an inspiring 'imaginary ancestor' for homoerotically-inclined Victorians of both sexes.³

Admiration for both of these figures grew in intensity during the latter half of the nineteenth century as a significant body of writers drew on Biblical imagery in their decadent poems. Saint Sebastian and Christ appear frequently in the work of 'Uranian' writers such as Lord Alfred Douglas, Oscar Wilde, John Gray, André Raffalovich, and Baron Corvo (Frederick Rolfe).⁴ In this chapter, I aim to examine why these figures appealed to late-

nineteenth century writers by focusing on the male body and the symbolism of the wound. The wound – whether Jesus’ stigmata or Sebastian’s punctured flesh – becomes the locus for a number of oscillating desires expressed in *fin-de-siècle* writing, including male and female homoerotic desire and identification with the figure of the martyr. In *fin-de-siècle* poetry in particular, the wound is fetishized, symbolising an orifice into which the poet inserts their own desires. Before embarking on these readings, however, it is necessary to outline *fin-de-siècle* anxieties surrounding the male body – anxieties which were epitomised in the iconography of the male wound.

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, the male body became ripe for display, dissection and penetration by medical science. Max Nordau claimed degeneracy was located in man’s very flesh and could be detected by ‘stigmata’ such as harelips, webbed fingers and certain physiognomic traits.⁵ In addition to the ‘stigmata’ of the degenerate, the marks of syphilis haunted the late-nineteenth century imagination. As Elaine Showalter notes, the Victorian ‘iconography’ of syphilis relied on shocking images of the male body ‘inscribed’ with hideous skin disorders: ‘macules, papules, tubercles, pustules, blebs, tumors, [...] fissures, and scars’.⁶ The figure of Saint Sebastian is covertly linked to such anxieties. Before becoming better known as a homosexual icon, Sebastian was considered the patron saint of plague victims due to ‘the identification of puncturing arrows with the plague, which often did appear first as spots on the body’.⁷ Sebastian was associated with victims of ‘leprosy and syphilis [...] because of his bleeding wounds’ and sufferers also identified with ‘the pocked sores of Christ’s dead body’.⁸ Ironically, syphilis was even linked to religious devotion itself: Victorians were warned that ‘kissing the crucifix in church held dangers’ as the disease could be passed on via oral contact.⁹ Syphilis was also connected to male homosexuality via tell-tale marks upon the body: ‘Lesions on mouth or anus were taken as evidence of “unnatural acts”’.¹⁰

In 1885, the Labouchère Amendment criminalised acts of ‘gross indecency’ between men without proof of sodomy. Meanwhile, sexological theories sought to classify the male invert or ‘Uranist’.¹¹ Such studies often entailed the display and analysis of the body – for example, Magnus Hirschfeld’s photographs of naked members of the ‘intermediate’ sex were published in the Yearbook of the Scientific Humanitarian Committee.¹² Saint Sebastian is therefore an appropriate icon for the literally and metaphorically penetrable male body in the late nineteenth century: ‘Like the nineteenth-century representation of the hystericized female, who provided a dramatically visualized conception of medical illness for physicians such as Jean-Martin Charcot, the body of St. Sebastian furnished a series of imagistically dynamic associations for the scientific conceptualization of the male homosexual’.¹³

Such religious icons also of course provided inspiration for homoerotically-inclined Victorians themselves. Though, as Frederick Roden observes, the ‘general critical tendency [has been] to separate religious studies from sexuality’, in recent scholarship, nineteenth-century religious discourses have been reassessed as facilitating the expression of desire for both men and women.¹⁴ Roman Catholicism in particular provided an enabling discourse for homoerotically-inclined individuals at the end of the nineteenth century. The figures of Jesus Christ, John the Baptist, and David and Jonathan became icons of male homoerotic desire, proving that the ‘argument that secular, classical historiography somehow supplanted Christianity in the articulation of homosexuality is a partial truth’.¹⁵ But the significant relationship between religion and homosexuality at the *fin-de-siècle* is most frequently embodied by Saint Sebastian: the quintessential symbol of decadence *and* homoeroticism, the ultimate religious muse. Along with Ancient Greek ‘boy lovers’ such as Antinous and Hyacinthus, Sebastian represents yet another manifestation of the adolescent boy, the figure whom Martha Vicinus designates the ‘*fin-de-siècle* femme fatale’: ‘this handsome liminal creature could absorb and reflect a variety of sexual desires and emotional needs [...] his

presence in *fin-de-siècle* literature signified the coming of age of the modern gay and lesbian sensibility: his protean nature displayed a double desire – to love a boy and to be a boy'.¹⁶

Saint Sebastian's frequent appearance in *fin-de-siècle* literature suggests he was a particularly appealing figure for a nascent homosexual identity. Walter Pater named one of his *Imaginary Portraits* (1886) 'Sebastian van Stork' after the saint. The writer and aspiring priest Frederick Rolfe (Baron Corvo) celebrated Sebastian in two sonnets inspired by Guido Reni's paintings (published in *The Artist*, June 1891), and also made reference to him in *The Desire and Pursuit of the Whole* (written 1909, published 1934). John Addington Symonds praised 'the adolescent beauty of Sebastian'.¹⁷ Marc-André Raffalovich wrote of the Uranian's devotion to his 'young God, naked and bleeding [...] wounding and wounded'.¹⁸ In Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1911), the writer Gustav Aschenbach's favours heroes who exhibit an 'ephebe-like masculinity that stands silent in proud shame, clenching its teeth while it is pierced with swords and spears [...] the figure of St. Sebastian is its best symbol'.¹⁹

For such late-nineteenth century writers, looking at Sebastian was a multi-layered act: of desire for his beautiful, aesthetically perfect male body, and of identification with his sufferings, his outsider status, and his religious conflict. Sebastian's story combines a number of connotations that appealed to nascent homosexual identity during the late-nineteenth century. He was said to been a favourite of the Emperor Diocletian, placing this relationship within the tradition of Platonic devotion between man and boy. Sebastian's confession of his Christian faith also anticipates 'modern sexual self-revelation'.²⁰ Finally, the contradictory relationship between the pleasure of looking at Sebastian's body and the evidence of pain, suffering and martyrdom it evokes also connects the saint to constructions of homoerotic desire in the late-nineteenth century – the 'love that dare not speak its name' was at this time experienced as a painful suffering, and, if discovered, was ruthlessly punished.

For evidence of this punishment, we need only turn to Oscar Wilde. Wilde was a vocal admirer of Sebastian and identified with his martyrdom. In 1877, he holidayed in Greece and Italy and viewed Reni's paintings of Sebastian in the Palazzo Rosso in Genoa. Shortly after, he visited John Keats's grave in Rome. This visit later inspired a sonnet which began: 'The youngest of the martyrs here is Iain, / Fair as Sebastian, and as early slain'.²¹ In a note accompanying this poem, Wilde explained that:

As I stood beside the mean grave of this divine boy, I thought of him as a Priest of Beauty slain before his time; and the vision of Guido's Saint Sebastian came before my eyes as I saw him at Genoa, a lovely brown boy, with crisp, clustering hair and red lips, bound by his evil enemies to a tree and, though pierced by arrows, raising his eyes with divine, impassioned gaze towards the Eternal Beauty of the opening heavens.²²

Wilde, of course, was later to undergo his own martyrdom. In 1895, he was famously imprisoned on charges of gross indecency as a result of his love affair with Lord Alfred Douglas. In 1897, on being released from prison where he had undertaken two years hard labour, Wilde adopted the name 'Sebastian Melmoth' – an amalgamation of his favourite saint with the protagonist of the gothic novel *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820).²³ Through his sufferings, Wilde also came to identify with Jesus Christ, writing in *De Profundis* that 'Christ's place indeed is with the poets'.²⁴

Wilde's appreciation had its precursor in an earlier poet and priest: Gerard Manley Hopkins. Throughout his life, Hopkins struggled to resolve his homoerotic desires and poetic vocation with his ascetic religious beliefs. In 1868, he entered the Jesuit order and burnt his poems. He gave up poetry for seven years, before being moved to write *The Wreck of the Deutschland* (1875). But whilst Hopkins's conversion may be interpreted as an attempt to

suppress his homoerotic desires, Richard Dellamora argues his religious vocation in fact ‘valorize[d] masculine desire by focusing it on Christ whilst folding Hopkins into a range of “safe”, male homosocial relations’.²⁵ However, focussing on Christ did not subdue Hopkins’s physical desires. Writing of Hopkins’s ‘little bk. for sins’ kept between 1863-1865, Maureen Moran notes that: ‘the devout Hopkins associates perverse desire with the contemplation of bodies tortured for a religious cause: “Evil thought slightly in drawing made worse by drawing a crucified arm on same page,” or, even more directly blasphemous, “The evil thought in writing on our Lord’s passion”’.²⁶ Hopkins’s religious convictions, embodied in the crucified Christ, did not offer an escape from his desires, but instead brought him closer to the tempting male body: ‘Christ’s crucifixion [...] represented the most affective reproof to his sinful condition but simultaneously provoked in him the sin which he most insistently attempted to subdue’.²⁷

The Decadent poet John Gray underwent a strikingly similar transformation to Hopkins. Born in a working-class family, Gray worked as a librarian in the Foreign Office. He formed an influential circle of friends who were members of the Decadent movement, including the poet Ernest Dowson, the artist Aubrey Beardsley, and, most famously, Wilde. Wilde and Gray enjoyed a brief, passionate relationship, and Wilde was rumoured to have based the character of ‘Dorian Gray’ on this extraordinarily beautiful young man. Gray rose to become one of the most celebrated and notorious poets of his generation due to the publication of his first volume, *Silverpoints* (1893). This tall, thin volume – an iconic example of the *fin-de-siècle* ‘beautiful book’ – contained thirteen translations from French Symbolist poets including Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud and Charles Baudelaire, and fifteen original lyrics. As Joseph Bristow observes: ‘hardly any other collection of poetry from the *fin de siècle* rivals the preciousness of *Silverpoints*’.²⁸

However, the second, markedly different phase of Gray's life was already beginning. Around the time of Wilde's trial in 1895, Gray experienced a spiritual crisis which led to his re-entering the Catholic Church (he had been baptised in 1890, but had subsequently lapsed). In 1901, he was ordained and served as a priest in Edinburgh for the rest of his life. His religious convictions were expressed in his second volume, *Spiritual Poems, chiefly done out of several languages* (1896). But despite his new-found religious beliefs and denunciation of his Decadent past, the content of these new poems did not alter significantly – in fact, if anything, the celebration of the erotic male body became even more prominent in this volume. Though *Spiritual Poems* contains a poem entitled 'Saint Sebastian. On A Picture', for Gray's most visceral and homoerotic poems, we must instead turn to his religious dedications to Christ's five Holy Wounds (the pierced hands and feet and the wound in Jesus' side). The poem beginning 'My patron came to Heaven; he touched the door' dramatises an encounter between Saint John of the Cross and the Holy Wounds:

Saint John was folded in the hands of Christ.
He lay upon their wounds, and wept the whole
Of longing that was in his holy soul. [...]
"Pass on; his Passion cannot be denied."
And John was locked within the riven Side.
The Wound said: "Sleep, beloved, and be calm;
"I, in thy flesh, made wounds upon thee balm.
"My torrent poured for thee; thou art my son;
"I ached for this dear hour, my darling one.
"Thou wert a proper vessel for the Wine
"I gave thee to dispense, thou son of mine.

“Now would my love for ever close upon
“Thee; but thy house is greater; pass thou on.”
And John was cradled in the Sacred Heart,
Than which no mansion is more glorious.
O friar of sweet counsel, where thou art,
John of the Cross, my patron, pray for us.²⁹

Gray particularly identified with Saint John of the Cross, considering him his personal patron saint, writing to his friend and fellow poet Katharine Bradley that the ‘invincible love of S: John of the Cross [...] made a hole in the covering which I had woven about myself to hide me from God’.³⁰ As Ellis Hanson observes, this ‘image of the hole in Gray’s covering, rendering him vulnerable to God, is especially suggestive’.³¹ This suggestiveness is borne out in ‘My patron came to Heaven’ in which the meeting between Saint John of the Cross and the Holy Wounds is depicted as a passionate lovers’ tryst. The wound addresses Saint John directly with the endearments of a lover (‘beloved’, ‘my darling one’), and is represented through images of fecundity (‘torrent’), refuge (‘mansion’) and healing (‘balm’) for the weary speaker, who longs to stay ‘locked within the riven Side’ forever. Thus, we can read this encounter with the wound as a kind of return to the womb – the original home where one can seek succour, refreshment and (if only temporarily) unity with God. This maternal aspect is emphasised by the milk-like nourishment pouring from the wound, and the reference to Saint John being ‘cradled’ within the Sacred Heart.

However, while reading this as a feminine image of maternity, we can also read the encounter as one of homoerotic desire, culminating in a highly suggestive penetration of the wound. Saint John approaches the wounds with ‘Passion’ and weeps with ‘longing’. When locked within the wound, he experiences an ecstasy which comes close to erotic fulfilment. A

similar representation of the wound is found in Gray's translation of 'Saint Bernard to the Stabbed Side of Jesus'. This poem, originally in Latin, was translated by the seventeenth-century German hymn writer Paul Gerhardt, before being translated into English by Gray. Hanson points out that Gray's art is 'in the selection' – in other words, his translated poems reveal his preoccupations just as much as his original verses.³² 'Saint Bernard to the Stabbed Side of Jesus' is another 'unflinching fetishization of the wound'.³³ Saint Bernard addresses the wound like a devoted lover:

Open thy gates, thou darling Wound,
And let my heart, too bold,
Be swept away, and wholly drowned,
As in a flood which breaks its bound:
So shall I be consoled.³⁴

As in 'My patron came to Heaven', the blood gushing from Jesus' wound is represented as a fertile force; a cleansing 'flood' which will wash away the worshipper's sins. However, the emotions conveyed in this poem moves beyond desire for spiritual absolution; the speaker also expresses extreme thirst for the fecund wound:

Craving to touch the sacred flood,
My mouth looks up with yearning;
Through marrow, sinew, bone and blood,
Ah, sweet and sweeter art thou yet,
Lord Jesus, to my heart³⁵

The graphic imagery here describes a penetration by both the eye (looking into and through the wound in Jesus' side) and the mouth (the desired consumption of the wound's 'sacred flood'). This double hunger results in a strangely mixed metaphor: 'My mouth looks up with yearning'. The speaker imagines the nourishment that the wound can offer him: 'My heart refreshed is like to burst, / Filled from thy savourous flagon'.³⁶ This desperate thirst can be also be read as lust; Saint Bernard addresses the wound as if it were a mistress he wishes to seduce, chastising his 'heart, too bold' for its impatience.

The poem concludes with Saint Bernard's wish to be closeted within the wound, away from the dangers of the world:

Conceal me, Wound; within thy cave
Locked fast, no thing shall harm me;
There let me nestle close and safe,
There sooth my soul and warm me.³⁷

Once again, the wound represents cleansing, refreshment and womb-like protection, as well as covert erotic desire. The poem's perverse eroticism is multi-layered: Saint Bernard expresses a desire for visual penetration (looking *through* the wound), a vampiric oral eroticism (a wish to drink the blood from the wound) and finally a wish to penetrate the wound's 'cave'. Thus, the wound in Gray's poems comes to represent a polymorphously perverse orifice, combining characteristics associated with both sexes: it is open mouth to be filled, a breast offering sustenance, a womb for protection, and an anus and/or vagina inviting penetration. Aleister Crowley makes this latter connection explicitly in his poem 'La Juive', imagining his lover's body transforming into that of the crucified Christ: 'Her lips, his dripping hands and feet!' and culminating in penetration of the wound:

Such frightful fancies dim my eyes –
I can remember how his side
Lay open for a lover's prize –
I violate the Crucified!³⁸

The polymorphous quality of the wound means that it can function to symbolise a variety of desires and identifications beyond male homoeroticism. I now turn to women poets' responses to the male wound, which feminise the body of Christ and use the wound to express female homoerotic desire.

Whilst the work of male nineteenth-century poets has attracted scholarly attention with regard to religious homoeroticism, *women* poets have been comparatively neglected. However, *fin-de-siècle* women poets often shared their inspirational materials with their male counterparts, making it possible to trace a shared homoerotic tradition. The poets Michael Field (the collaborative pseudonym of aunt and niece Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper) were intimately connected with male homoerotic literary circles. Bradley and Cooper were close friends with John Gray, with Gray acting as Bradley's personal priest following the pair's conversion to Catholicism in 1907. The poets had also met Wilde and formed an intimate friendship with the artists Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon, themselves a homosexual couple. Bradley and Cooper were therefore conversant with the homoerotic religious symbolism used by their male associates, and adapted this imagery to express their own desires and identifications. As Thain argues, their 'female erotic religious discourse needs to be situated, at least partly, within – as well as growing out of – a more established and more visible male homosexual theological language'.³⁹

Female identification with the figure of Christ was common in the nineteenth century. According to Julie Melnyk: 'One of the dominant images of Christ [...] that permeated Victorian Christianity, was distinctly feminized, emphasizing virtues and roles allotted to women according to "separate spheres" gender ideology and often focussing on his passivity and suffering'.⁴⁰ Christ's wounds in particular can be read as 'the mark of femininity, and a specifically female suffering'.⁴¹ These links between femininity and martyrdom are further enforced by the Victorian ideal of the self-sacrificing 'angel in the house', as enshrined in Coventry Patmore's poem:

Man must be pleased; but him to please
Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf
Of his condoled necessities
She casts her best, she flings herself.⁴²

The associations of femininity with wounding and victimhood is also found in psychoanalytic theory, where women are considered inherently 'wounded' by their lack of a penis. Thus, the damaged bodies of Saint Sebastian and Christ may be considered an apt symbol for the female body as defined by nineteenth-century ideology, and later by Freudian psychoanalysis. Finally, as we have seen, the wound can also represent the spaces and openings of the female body – the vagina and the womb – meaning that the penetrable male bodies of Christ and Sebastian can be readily feminised and eroticised as specifically *female* objects of desire.

These associations are borne out in Michael Field's Catholic poetry, published in two volumes, *Poems of Adoration* (1912) and *Mystic Trees* (1913). In these poems, Christ's body becomes a feminised object of sensual contemplation. For example, in 'A Crucifix', Christ is

compared to delicate and fertile natural imagery including ‘a welcoming open fruit’, ‘a precious coral wreath’ and flowers: ‘Thee such loveliness adorns / On Thy Cross, O my Desire – / As a lily Thou art among thorns, / As a rose lies back against his briar’.⁴³ This last image derives from the ‘Song of Songs’ in which the male speaker describes his female beloved as a lily among thorns. Another poem from *Mystic Trees*, ‘They took Jesus’, combines floral symbolism from ‘Song of Songs’ - the female beloved describes herself as a ‘Rose of Sharon’ - with Pagan imagery of Venus, Roman goddess of love: ‘A Rose of Sharon He, / Uplifted from the tree. / Oh, fair of Spirit He! As Venus from the Sea’ – bringing to mind Botticelli’s *The Birth of Venus*.⁴⁴ In this poem, Christ is therefore doubly feminised, drawing on past literary and artistic traditions of the beautiful female muse. The feminisation is made explicit in ‘The Witness of John’. Christ’s beloved disciple describes his messiah as ‘Flushed as a rose, / [...] How maiden in humility his brow!’.⁴⁵ Elsewhere, in a poem describing Jesus’ stigmata, Christ’s hands are feminised:

O Venerable Hands, O our delight!
 We need them both. O lovely in our sight,
 O Amor meus, to be crucified!
 O Hands, clear as a woman’s in their light!⁴⁶

Several of Michael Field’s poems focus intensely upon the wounds. For example, in ‘The Captain Jewel’, Bradley and Cooper are joint-worshippers of Christ’s precious wounds, depicting them as jewels, stars and pouting lips:

We love Thy ruddy Wounds,
 We love them pout by pout

It is when the stars come out
One after one –
We are
As watchers for the Morning Star.

The jewels of Thy Feet
The jewels of Thy Hands!...
Lo, a Centurion stands,
Openeth thy Side: Water and blood there beat
In fountain sweet:
Our Master-jewel now we dote upon!⁴⁷

The ‘pouting’ image is perhaps the most sensuous, suggesting the temptation to kiss the bloody wounds. The desire to feed on the wounds is made explicit in the poem ‘Imple Superna Gratia’ (‘Fill up with divine grace’). In this poem, the speaker expresses a wish to penetrate and feed on Christ’s wounds as the bee pollinates a rose:

We may enter far into a rose,
Parting it, but the bee deeper still:
With our eyes we may even penetrate
To a ruby and our vision fill; [...]
Give me finer potency of gift!
For Thy Holy Wounds I would attain,
As a bee the feeding loveliness
Of the sanguine roses. I would lift

Flashes of such faith that I may drain
From each Gem the wells of Blood that press!⁴⁸

As Thain notes, the strikingly vampiric imagery of this poem transforms transubstantiation into 'a sexualised feeding on Christ'.⁴⁹ I propose this 'sexualised feeding' encodes a specifically *female* homoeroticism. The speaker imagines gently 'parting' the leaves of the whorled rose to reach its deepest centre, bringing to mind the labia of the vulva. As Paula Bennett notes, images of flowers, gems, jewels and even bees – all of which found in this poem – can function as clitoral symbols in nineteenth-century women's poetry.⁵⁰ Oral eroticism permeates the poem; the speaker wishes to drink and 'drain' the flower of its 'ruby' nectar, evoking menstrual imagery. Therefore, the adoration of the wound in this poem is, I would argue, quite distinct from the desire to enter physically the wound expressed in Gray's poems – the 'penetration' in this poem is primarily a visual and oral act.

Thus, in an inversion of the process by which poets such as Algernon Charles Swinburne, Charles Baudelaire and others constructed 'male lesbian bodies' (to use Thaïs E. Morgan's term) in order to express male homoerotic desire, Bradley and Cooper use male homoerotic iconography in their Catholic poetry in order to represent and express *female* homoerotic desire.⁵¹ Through the work of Wilde, Hopkins, Gray and Michael Field, Saint Sebastian and Christ's bodies thus come to represent male homoerotic bodies *and* lesbianised bodies, via their bleeding wounds, their sexualised penetration, and their status as beautiful objects of the gaze, bringing about a radical disruption of gender binaries. The image of the wound is crucial to this construction: the polymorphous nature of this orifice and its multiply gendered symbolism makes it a metaphor flexible enough to express and embody a variety of desires and gendered positionings at the *fin de siècle*.

Saint Sebastian continues as a potent icon in twentieth-century, undergoing further symbolic transformations. In 1914, the symbolism of the male wound became devastatingly literal, reflecting the physical and psychological fracturing of the male body brought about by the Great War. The young martyr became ‘an increasingly fitting visual metaphor for the many willing martyrdoms [...] sought by the thousands of young men headed for trench combat’.⁵² Later in the twentieth-century, Sebastian’s significance was revised yet again. The AIDS crisis returned him to his original role as a plague saint, and yet his image also carried the connotations of homosexual identity formed during the nineteenth century. Late-twentieth century performance artists use Sebastian to reflect on pain, suffering, and homoerotic sadomasochism. Ron Athey, the HIV-positive performance artist and Pentecostal minister, has repeatedly used his own body to represent the martyr in *Martyrs and Saints* (1992), *Sebastian Suspended* (2000) and *St/Sebastian/50* (2011).⁵³ For Athey, Saint Sebastian represents both the plague-victim and the death-in-life experience of the survivor.

In *The Swimming Pool Library* (1988), Alan Hollinghurst rather uncannily anticipates Athey’s performances when the fictional photographer Ronald Staines launches his *Martyrs* exhibition, which features sadomasochistic and semi-pornographic images of young men posed as saints, including Saint Sebastian and John the Baptist. Through Staines (who may also be a fictional version of the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, famed for his male nudes), Hollinghurst subtly pokes fun at the now clichéd status of Sebastian as a homoerotic icon. When asked why his Saint Sebastian is not struck with arrows, Staines replies: ‘Oh, no arrows dear; it’s before the martyrdom. He’s quite unpiereced. But he looks ready for it, somehow, the way I’ve done it’.⁵⁴ Here, Hollinghurst knowingly mocks Sebastian’s ubiquity as an icon of homoerotic desire – according to Staines, he no longer needs his arrows, symbols of his martyrdom, as long as he looks ripe for penetration of a different kind.

However, *The Swimming Pool Library* also demonstrates Hollinghurst's awareness of the rich *fin-de-siècle* tradition underlying Sebastian's popularity as a homoerotic icon. As the protagonist Will moves downstairs at the *Martyrs* exhibition, he comes across: 'a set of plates made to illustrate a limited edition of John Gray's *Tombeau d'Oscar Wilde* along with Stephen Devlin's setting of the poem for tenor, string quartet and oboe d'a-more – a martyrdom with a whole teeming afterlife'.⁵⁵ Though the poem by Gray is actually a fabrication and the composer is fictional, the final phrase in this sentence is indeed an appropriate one. The 'teeming afterlife' of Saint Sebastian and Christ's martyrdom is most clearly expressed in *fin-de-siècle* poetry – in the devotion to the male wound running through the work of several homoerotically-inclined poets writing in the late-nineteenth century.

NOTES

¹ Richard A. Kaye, 'Losing his religion: Saint Sebastian as contemporary gay martyr', *Outlooks: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities and Visual Cultures*, eds. Peter Horne and Reina Lewis (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 86–108 (p. 87).

² Gregory Woods, *Articulate Flesh: Male Homoeroticism and Modern Poetry* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 43.

³ Ruth Vanita, *Sappho and the Virgin Mary: Same-Sex Love and the English Literary Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p.7.

⁴ 'Uranian' was one term of many scientific terms used for male 'sexual inversion' (homosexuality) in the late-nineteenth century. It was adapted from the word 'urning' used by the sexologist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs. For more information, see the 'Science' section of Chris White's *Nineteenth-Century Writings on Homosexuality: A Sourcebook* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), particularly John Addington Symonds's *A Problem in Modern Ethics* (pp. 71–90 in White) which explains Ulrichs's terms.

⁵ Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (London: William Heinemann, 1898), pp. 16–17.

⁶ Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Virago, 1992), p. 193. See also Andrew Smith's chapter on syphilis in *Victorian Demons: Medicine, masculinity, and the Gothic at the fin-de-siècle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp.95-117.

⁷ Richard A. Kaye, "'A Splendid Readiness for Death": T. S. Eliot, the Homosexual Cult of St. Sebastian, and World War I', *Modernism/Modernity*, 6.2 (1999): 07–134, n.31.

⁸ Robert G. Calkins, *Monuments of Medieval Art* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 181.

⁹ Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, p. 193.

¹⁰ Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, p. 195. Examinations for sodomy also centred on the anus or mouth. For example, when, in 1870, Ernest Boulton and Frederick Park, the cross-dressing

theatre performers known as ‘Stella’ and ‘Fanny’, were arrested on suspicion of sodomy, they were subjected to an anal examination. The police surgeon found that ‘their anuses were dilated to a considerable degree: “I have never seen anything like it before”, the shocked police surgeon, Mr James Paul, told the court’ (Neil McKenna, *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde* [London: Arrow Books, 2004], p. 107).

¹¹ Such as Richard Freiherr von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), Marc-André Raffalovich, *Uranisme et unisexualité* (1896), Havelock Ellis, *Sexual Inversion* (1897). For more on sexology, see Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (eds.), *Sexology in Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desires* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

¹² For more on Hirschfeld’s photographs, see White, *Nineteenth-Century Writings*, p. 4.

¹³ Richard A. Kaye, “‘Determined Raptures’: St. Sebastian and the Victorian Discourse of Decadence”, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 27.1 (1999): 269–303 (273).

¹⁴ Frederick Roden, *Same-Sex Desire in Victorian Religious Culture* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 7. See, for example, Thaïs E. Morgan (ed.), *Victorian Sages and Cultural Discourse: Renegotiating Gender and Power* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1990); Andrew Bradstock and Anne Hogan (eds.), *Women of Faith in Victorian Culture: Reassessing the Angel in the House* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998); Lowell Gallagher, Frederick S. Roden, and Patricia Juliana Smith (eds.), *Catholic Figures, Queer Narratives* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), and John Maynard, *Victorian Discourses of Sexuality and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹⁵ Roden, *Same-Sex Desire*, p. 3.

¹⁶ Martha Vicinus, ‘The Adolescent Boy: Fin-de-Siècle Femme Fatale?’, *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, ed. Richard Dellamora (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 83–108 (pp.83–84).

¹⁷ John Addington Symonds, *Sketches and Studies in Italy and Greece* (London: John Murray, 1914), p. 154.

¹⁸ Andre Raffalovich, *Uranisme etc Unisexualite* (1896), qtd. in Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 323.

¹⁹ Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice and Other Stories* (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 205.

²⁰ Kaye, “‘A Splendid Readiness for Death’”, p. 114.

²¹ Oscar Wilde, ‘The Grave of Keats’ (1881), *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde: Volume One: Poems and Poems in Prose*, eds. Bobby Fong and Karl Beckson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 36.

²² Wilde, ‘Commentary on “The Grave of Keats”’, *Complete Works: Volume One*, p. 236.

²³ The author, Charles Maturin was, incidentally, Wilde’s great-uncle by marriage.

²⁴ Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde: Volume Two: De Profundis and ‘Epistola: In Carcere et Vinculis’*, ed. Ian Small (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 174.

²⁵ Richard Dellamora, *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), p. 47.

²⁶ Maureen Moran, ‘The Art of Looking Dangerously: Victorian Images of Martyrdom’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 32.1 (2004): 475–93 (475).

²⁷ David Alderson, *Mansex Fine: Religion, Manliness and Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century British Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 145.

²⁸ Joseph Bristow, ‘Introduction’, *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem: English Literary Culture and the 1890s*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2005), pp. 1–46 (p. 19).

²⁹ John Gray, ‘My patron came to Heaven’, *Spiritual Poems, chiefly done out of several languages* (1896), reprinted with *Silverpoints* (1893) (Oxford and New York: Woodstock Books, 1994), pp. xxiii–xxiv.

- ³⁰ Quoted in Marion Thain, “‘Damnable Aestheticism’ and the Turn to Rome: John Gray, Michael Field and a Poetics of Conversion”, Bristow, *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem*, pp. 311–36 (p. 327). Saint John of the Cross was a sixteenth-century Spanish mystic who had a vision of the crucified Christ whilst praying in the Monastery of the Incarnation in Ávila.
- ³¹ Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism*, p. 325.
- ³² Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism*, p. 314.
- ³³ Thain, “‘Damnable Aestheticism’”, p. 322.
- ³⁴ Gray, ‘Saint Bernard. To the Stabbed Side of Jesus’, *Spiritual Poems*, pp. xl–xli (p. xli).
- ³⁵ Gray, ‘Saint Bernard’, *Spiritual Poems*, p. xli.
- ³⁶ Gray, ‘Saint Bernard’, *Spiritual Poems*, p. xl.
- ³⁷ Gray, ‘Saint Bernard’, *Spiritual Poems*, p. xli.
- ³⁸ Aleister Crowley, ‘La Juive’, *White Stains* (Amsterdam: Leonard Smithers, 1898), no page number. Crowley’s poem eroticises a Jewish woman and, in the process, utilises the anti-Semitic ideology which portrays the Jewish people as ‘Christ-killers’.
- ³⁹ Thain, “‘Damnable Aestheticism’”, p. 316.
- ⁴⁰ Julie Melnyk, “‘Mighty Victims’: Women Writers and the Feminization of Christ”, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 31.1 (2003): 131–57 (131).
- ⁴¹ Thain, “‘Damnable Aestheticism’”, p. 322.
- ⁴² Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House: Part I* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1863), p. 109.
- ⁴³ Field, ‘A Crucifix’, *Mystic Trees* (London: Everleigh Nash, 1913), p.35.
- ⁴⁴ Field, ‘They took Jesus’, *Mystic Trees*, p. 25. Bradley and Cooper published an ekphrastic poem inspired by Botticelli’s painting in *Sight and Song* (1892).
- ⁴⁵ Field, ‘The Witness of John’, *Mystic Trees*, pp. 20–21 (p. 21).
- ⁴⁶ Field, ‘The Five Sacred Wounds’, *Mystic Trees*, pp. 33–34 (p. 33).
- ⁴⁷ Field, ‘The Captain Jewel’, *Mystic Trees*, p. 27.
- ⁴⁸ Field, ‘Imple Superna Gratia’, *Poems of Adoration* (London: Sands and Co, 1912), p. 92.
- ⁴⁹ Marion Thain, *Michael Field: Poetry, Aestheticism and the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 177.
- ⁵⁰ Paula Bennett, ‘Critical Clitoridectomy: Female Sexual Imagery and Feminist Psychoanalytic Theory’, *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 18.2 (1993): 235–59 (236).
- ⁵¹ See Thaïs E. Morgan, ‘Male Lesbian Bodies: The Construction of Alternative Masculinities in Courbet, Baudelaire, and Swinburne’, *Genders*, 15 (Winter 1992): 37–57.
- ⁵² Kaye “‘A Splendid Readiness for Death’”, p. 110.
- ⁵³ See Matilda Battersby, ‘Ron Athey: The masochist who puts writers under his spell’, *The Independent*, April 4 2012.
- ⁵⁴ Alan Hollinghurst, *The Swimming Pool Library* (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 43.
- ⁵⁵ Alan Hollinghurst, *The Swimming Pool Library*, p. 231.