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1

Queer Converts: Peculiar Pleasures and Subtle Antinomianism

Thomas Lawrence Long

It was rumoured of him once that he was about to join the Roman Catholic communion; and certainly the Roman ritual had always a great attraction for him. The daily sacrifice, more awful really than all the sacrifices of the antique world, stirred him as much by its superb rejection of the evidence of the senses as by the primitive simplicity of its elements and the eternal pathos of the human tragedy that it sought to symbolize. . . . But he never fell into the error of arresting his intellectual development by any formal acceptance of creed or system, or of mistaking, for a house in which to live, an inn that is but suitable for the sojourn of a night, or for a few hours of a night in which there are no stars and the moon is in travail. Mysticism, with its marvellous power of making common things strange to us, and the subtle antinomianism that always seems to accompany it, moved him for a season . . .¹

This catechumen *manqué* is, of course, Dorian Gray. Midway through his Gothic novel, Wilde anatomized in Augustinian fashion his young seeker's degradation: not by a luridly minute inventory of sexual exploits (as Huysmans had done a few years previously in the character of Des Esseintes), but by a more mundane though not less material accumulation: Dorian's collections of perfumes, exotic musical instruments, jewels, embroideries, and finally, ecclesiastical vestments. While it would likely have repulsed and horrified Victorian readers' evangelical sensibilities, Dorian's exploration of forms of "high church" Catholicism is a spiritual journey into a kind of transcendental hedonism: "For these treasures, and everything that he collected in his lovely house, were to be to him means of forgetfulness, modes by which he could

escape for a season, from the fear that seemed to him at times to be almost too great to be borne" (Wilde 140).

Perhaps because I grew up in a post-immigrant Catholic culture that sought exemplars of cultural Catholicism – "famous Catholics" like Sinatra or the Kennedys – I still seek out analogous celebrity Catholics to solidify my queer identity. In particular, I am fascinated by the rolls of Queer Catechumens, the sexually outlandish who converted to Catholicism in its various forms, including Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism, and other purveyors of high church pleasures. William Beckford, Gerard Manley Hopkins, John Henry Newman, Joris Karl Huysmans, Frederick Rolfe, Charles Warren Stoddard, Renée Vivien, Ronald Firbank, Radclyffe Hall, W. H. Auden, Daryl Hine, and, of course, Dorian Gray, are among the icons in my imaginary chapel. The sheer numbers seem striking to me – or do I just see selectively? Ellis Hanson suggests that "By the 1920s, the notion of Anglo and Roman Catholicism as a magnet for homosexuals had passed from a running joke to a simple fact."² In any case, I have wondered what drew queer people to a religiosity often associated with a detailed and laborious scrutiny of sexual desires and practices, as in the discipline of the confessional, along with a systematic doctrinal repudiation of non-marital and non-reproductive sexualities.

In this essay I will outline biographical research into queer conversion and speculate on the peculiar pleasures that forms of Catholicism might hold for the sexually queer, and I will follow two hunches. First, in Anglo-Protestant North America and England, membership in the Roman Catholic communion was always already perceived as anti-social and deviant and thus served as a "subtle antinomianism" for the sexual dissident. Similarly, in post-revolutionary and modernist continental Europe, Catholicism was intellectually suspect. Thus conversion to Catholicism provided an emblem or objective correlative of secret perversion. Second, Catholic theology and sacramental practices enabled a paradoxical maintenance of the contradictions in sexual dissidence and in a perverse way fostered sexual promiscuity. The anonymous confessional offered absolution for sexual sins, provided that one was not "living in sin" (and thus failing to demonstrate contrition). To follow these two hunches, I will situate these conversions along a continuum, at one end the flight from the material into a transcendental signifier, and, at the other end, transcendence by immersion in material signification. In particular, I will suggest that the materiality of Catholic sacramental practice after the Counter-Reformation Council of Trent (1545–63) and the Church's valorizing of non-married exemplars – the

martyrs and saints and priests and nuns who declared an everlasting “Nay” to heterosexual relations – merged with an emergent queerly decadent Aestheticism, as has been recently discussed by Ellis Hanson in *Decadence and Catholicism*. At the same time, Catholic moral manuals and penitential practice obliquely encouraged promiscuous sexual liaisons.

Hanson recalls the commonplace “that gay people turn to the Church to hide from their desire,” but he counters instead “that they are searching for a suitable stage on which to perform it” (24). Between the late sixteenth century, after the Counter-Reformation Council of Trent, and the mid-twentieth, before the Second Vatican Council, Roman Catholic liturgical practices offered an external forum for the enactment of *faux médiéval* pageantry, a performance of spiritual devotions that subordinated the internal forum, the realm of Protestantism’s “born again” conversion, to the liturgical external forum. If Protestant moralism required a strict and abiding congruence of word and deed, Catholicism admitted incongruities. In distinguishing itself from the interiority of Reformation fideism, Counter-Reformation Catholicism lavished exteriority with even greater significance. As Paul Giles points out in a chapter on the Catholic aesthetic of queer artists Andy Warhol and Robert Mapplethorpe, “That romantic freedom and individual autonomy cherished by Protestant culture is trumped by a ‘Catholic’ system where ‘inner light’ is less significant than one’s assigned place within an overall structure of meaning.”³ While most nineteenth- and twentieth-century converts maintained a medievalist romance about the Church, the Church’s articulation of seven sacraments and its precisely measurable codification of religious practices, particularly the penitential, permitted those with an ambiguous interiority to compensate with carefully regulated material practices. The church that tolerated carnival excesses prior to Lenten austerities and offered daily sacramental confession after libertine nights could be understood as a psychic counterweight for some people.

Moreover, Catholicism’s official clerical and regular social structures of celibate and sexually segregated priests, brothers, and nuns, and its exemplary narratives of unmarried saints and martyrs provided sanctioned roles for those disinclined towards heterosexual marriage. Christ’s own non-married state provided the prototype for countless “eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom.” Thus evading pressures for social conformity, queer people could claim a venerable pedigree of unmarried, same-sex sociality. Indeed, as a cursory review of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Catholic catechisms reveals, the Church pre-

sented celibate clerical and religious life as a “higher” or better calling than marriage, whose primary charism was the reproduction of new Catholics. Moreover, Protestant polemics and sensationalist tracts viewed Catholic celibacy as not only aberrant in itself but tending towards a variety of (usually sexual) vices.

Fear and loathing: the Euro-American anti-Catholic impulse

Intellectuals’ and artists’ anti-Catholic sentiments were culturally configured in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the cultural contexts of anti-Catholicism determined its meaning. In Anglo-American Protestant countries (chiefly England, Scotland, and the United States), Catholicism was equated with sexual perversion, authoritarian violence, and superstition. Examining nineteenth-century American attitudes toward Catholics, Masons, and Mormons, David Brion Davis describes the rhetoric used against these three groups by dominant Protestant nativists:

While nativists affirmed their faith in Protestant monogamy, they obviously took pleasure in imagining the variety of sexual experience supposedly available to their enemies. By picturing themselves exposed to similar temptations, they assumed they could know how priests and Mormons actually sinned. . . . We should recall that this literature was written in a period of increasing anxiety and uncertainty over sexual values and the proper role of woman. As ministers and journalists pointed with alarm at the spread of prostitution, the incidence of divorce, and the lax and hypocritical morality of the growing cities, a discussion of licentious subversives offered a convenient means for the projection of guilt as well as desire. The sins of individuals, or of the nation as a whole, could be pushed off upon the shoulders of the enemy and there punished in righteous anger.⁴

The sexual segregation of Catholic clergy and religious, the requirement of celibacy for those in religious life, the sacramental practice of private auricular confession, and the Latin liturgy all contributed to this menacing mystique. In addition, the fact that most Catholics in America were immigrants added class and ethnic hatred to the dogmatic mix. The situation in England, where Catholicism had been a disempowered minority since the sixteenth century, was not much different. As Patrick Allitt notes in a study of English and American converts:

Quite apart from the religious wrench of conversion, becoming a Catholic in Britain or the United States often prompted accusations of disloyalty to the nation, its Protestant heritage, even its sense of common decency. When Thomas Arnold (Matthew Arnold's brother) converted, his wife wrote a furious letter to Newman, accusing him of persuading her husband "to ignore every social duty and become a pervert." She added, "From the bottom of my heart I curse you for it."⁵

In his study of Victorian Protestant fiction, Michael Schiefelbein observes that, "These novels strikingly dramatize the many evils ascribed to Rome in nonfictional discourse: superstition, idolatry, deceit, sexual impotence or license, corruption, oppression, debauchery, and treason."⁶ In continental Europe, intellectuals and artists associated the dominant Church with clerical authoritarianism and political oppression. The doctrines and rituals of the Church were less obnoxious than the intimacy between Church and state, the Church's restraint of intellectual freedom through its Holy Office, the Index of Forbidden Books, and the power of excommunication, and the dissemination of this power down to the level of a local parish priest. It might be said that, whereas intellectuals of Protestant countries were anti-Catholic, intellectuals of Catholic countries were anti-clerical.

True confessions: Catholicism, sexual morality, and sacramental practice

Firmly embedded in the popular imagination of Anglo-American non-Catholics even today are several images of Catholic life: clerical celibacy, prohibitions against contraception (and concomitant large families) as constitutive of marital chastity, and the confessional. Celibacy, contraception, chastity, and confession compose a set of *topoi* that continue to be employed in the popular culture media of television, movies, and jokes. However, like most cartoons, these clichés fail to convey the intellectual subtleties or the pastoral implications of Catholic moral theology, particularly its sexual ethics.

Roman Catholic moral theology stands on three pillars: the Bible, Church tradition, and the assimilation of Classical philosophy (chiefly Platonic and Aristotelian) into a Natural Law theology. Like most Christian traditions, Catholicism views the Old Testament and the New Testament as the authoritative divine word. Unlike Protestantism with its injunction *sola scriptura*, Catholicism also refers to the record of early

Christian Greek and Latin writers (the so-called “Church Fathers” or Patristic writers), Church councils, and authorized theologians. Moreover, it also employs Classical philosophy in order to arrive at explanations of biblical and traditional texts, as seen in Augustine’s Neo-Platonism and Aquinas’ Aristotelianism. The result has been the formulation of a Natural Law theology, intended particularly to supplement the gaps in biblical texts. These traditions were later complemented in a synthesis of Catholic moral theology developed by Alphonsus Liguori in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Thus the Church is able to arrive at conclusions about modern ethical issues for which there is no clear biblical or even patristic, conciliar, or theological precedent.⁷

Natural Law theology is teleological, asking what are the natural purposes or ends of acts. In the Church’s sexual ethics, before its reform in the second half of the twentieth century, the sole end of sexual intercourse was procreation, and the end of procreation was engendering a family. Thus any sexual activities that fell outside of marital procreation were equally forbidden, or in the language of moral theology, a mortal sin. Adultery, fornication, masturbation, contraception, in addition to sodomy, all failed to adhere to the natural *telos* of sex. For example, the 1917 edition of *The Catholic Encyclopedia*⁸ asserted that “all sexual intercourse outside of married life is regarded equivalent to adultery in justifying complete separation, even the unnatural sins of sodomy and bestiality” (“Divorce [in Moral Theology]”) and reproduced Alphonsus Liguori’s conclusion that sodomy between husband and wife is an adultery (“Adultery”).

Between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries, Catholic moral teaching achieved an astonishing uniformity and dissemination through the reproduction of manuals of moral theology, concise handbooks that were used in the training of parish priests and that priests then employed in local application, chiefly in the sacrament of confession. Since the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), Catholics had been obliged to make confession to a priest and to receive Holy Communion at least once each year, a practice confirmed by the Counter-Reformation Council of Trent, which added the provision that confession had to consist of a meticulous examination of conscience entailing an account of the species and number of the sins. In order to assist the penitent in confession in making a full confession (a tally of the precise species of the sins and the number of times each was committed), priests needed careful seminary training and a useful handbook for pastoral practice. Rooted in medieval penitentials (books listing sins and their

appropriate penances), the manuals of moral theology provided uniformity across the national boundaries of Catholic countries, since they were written in the Church's universal language, Latin. To us they seem legalistic and casuistic, attempting to account for nice distinctions without differences. In their time, however, manuals "prevented the priests of the day from arbitrarily imposing unreasonable demands on their people and instead protected a certain gentle and patient spirit in moral theology."⁹ In addition, their acts-centered ethics maintained sodomy as a juridical object rather than creating the sodomite as a species. The confessor was only interested in what you had done, with whom, and how often. (Particularly with lust, "entertaining impure thoughts," a willful fantasizing that produced a *delectatio morosa*, also counted as acts.) Acts of sodomy required the penitent's contrition and confession and the priest's penance and absolution, as did any sexual sin, or any other mortal sin for that matter. In one sense, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Catholic moral manuals and penitential practice resisted modernism in a way that Foucault would have appreciated.

In the early twentieth century one manualist achieved nearly canonical status: Adolphe Tanquerey (1854–1932), a French priest whose Sulpician order was dedicated to seminary instruction of French, English, Irish, and American clergy. His *Theologia moralis fundamentalis: De virtutibus et praeceptis* and *Synopsis theologiae moralis et pastoralis* became the vade-mecum of Catholic confessional practice.¹⁰ Their precepts were also contained in his more pastoral handbook of Christian sanctity, *The Spiritual Life: a Treatise on Ascetical and Mystical Theology*. Tanquerey situated sins that proceed from sensuality within the context of the concupiscence of the flesh (including gluttony and sloth, in addition to lust). Typical of the medico-moral discourses of the late nineteenth century, he attributed a variety of psychological and biological consequences of lust, including:

[T]he mind becomes dull and weak because the vital forces are used up by the senses: taste for serious studies is lost; the imagination gravitates towards lower things; the heart gradually withers, hardens, and is attracted only by degrading pleasures. . . . In some cases the physical frame itself is deeply affected: the nervous system, over-excited by such abuses, becomes irritated, weakened, and "incapable of fulfilling its mission of regulation and defence;" . . . the various bodily organs function but imperfectly; nutrition is improperly accomplished, strength is undermined and the danger of consumption threatens.¹¹

The discourses of degeneracy are evident here, although these symptoms might also be attributed to any neurasthenic Decadent artist. Despite what seems to us the extremity of that rhetoric, in representing lust in those terms Tanqueray acknowledged it as arising from the human condition: "This pleasure is permissible to married people, provided they use it for the purpose for which marriage was instituted; outside of this it is strictly forbidden. In spite of this prohibition, there is in us an unfortunate tendency, more or less violent, especially from the age of puberty or adolescence, to indulge in this pleasure even out of lawful wedlock" (415, para. 873). Thus sexual concupiscence was universalized, not simply the mark of the pervert. In guiding the priest who would in turn guide the penitent struggling with lust, Tanqueray recommended avoidance of the occasions of sin, maintenance of custody of the eyes and touch, and engagement in vigorous physical activity; but his strongest recommendation was that the penitent resort to frequent confession and reception of communion (419, para. 882). He universalized the struggle with lust, situated it in the human condition, and encouraged the penitent:

The Council of Trent tells us that God does not command the impossible, but that He requires us to do what in our power lies and to pray in order to obtain the grace of accomplishing that which, of ourselves, we are incapable of performing. This injunction holds particularly in matters of chastity, with regard to which most persons, even those in the holy state of marriage, encounter special difficulties. (419, para. 882)

Catholic converts, regardless of their sexualities, could find in the doctrines and practices of the Church antidotes to some of the dilemmas posed by Protestant Christianity. As Schiefelbein points out in his study of English Victorian fiction:

. . . unlike nonfictional discourse of the day, these novels also explore the imaginatively rich possibilities of Catholic culture. . . . An attraction to Catholicism's incarnational theology . . . was also shared by . . . novelists who longed to proclaim the sacredness of humanity in all its lusty materiality. In all these cases, the novelists exploit Catholicism for its ability to integrate what many expressions of Protestantism tended to polarize: sacred and secular, spirit and flesh, revelation and historicity.¹²

At the same time, conversion to Catholicism could satisfy one's desire for cultural resistance: "[Arnold] Lunn attributed Chesterton's conversion to a sort of wilful perversity, a determination not to fall in with the conventional wisdom of his day."¹³ This "wilful perversity" against social norms reflected the subtle antinomianism of some converts.

Peculiar pleasures and subtle antinomianism

What do queers want? When I read the nineteenth- and twentieth-century discourses of queer consciousness, I interpret a significant condensation around two poles: normalizing discourses of assimilation ("We're just like everybody else in every way but one") and antinomian discourses of transgression ("We are your parents' worst nightmare"). A galaxy of attitudes, desires, and styles clusters around those two poles. If today's queer can choose between, on the one hand, a Rainbow MasterCard or, on the other, a shaved head, tattoos, and body piercings, were there analogous options for sexual dissidents at the turn of the previous century? My contention here is that conversion to Roman Catholicism or Anglo-Catholicism, more than a simple camping Arch Faggotry (the "smells and bells" of Catholic ritualism), was for some people a way to externalize their repudiation of mainstream erotic sensibilities. In other words, an English or North American queer's converting to Roman Catholicism or a continental intellectual queer's embracing the Catholic Church were socially beyond the pale, and thus served as a sacramental analogue or objective correlative of perversion. Every antinomianism is the suspension of one set of rules on the way towards the imposition of another, and Catholic doctrine and discipline were already widely regarded as perverse.

For some Anglo-American queer converts, like the American writer Charles Warren Stoddard and the English Frederick Rolfe, Roman Catholicism's celibate (if not always chaste) male priesthood provided an attractive homosocial environment. Reared as a Presbyterian, Stoddard was attracted to Catholicism in childhood. John Crowley suggests that:

In Stoddard's far sunnier Catholicism, which Rolfe would have considered self-deceiving, the spiritual and the carnal were happily wedded . . . No clear boundary existed between "homosociality" and "homosexuality" except within the ideology of Christian brotherhood, which Stoddard radically revised to suit his temperament.

When he agreed to take a position at Notre Dame, in fact, he cited his devotion to young men as one of his strongest credentials.¹⁴

His “temperament” in fact was precisely the reason for his conversion that Stoddard gave in a letter to the American writer James Whitcomb Riley:

I couldn't help it, you see; it was born in me and was the only thing that appealed to my temperament, I believe a man's religion is necessarily [*sic*] a matter of temperament. I couldn't be anything else than a Catholic – except – *except* a downright *savage*, and I wish to God I were that!¹⁵

In place of his childhood Calvinism's erotophobia, Stoddard may have found in sacramental Catholicism a *détente*, however unstable, between body and spirit, for as Austen points out, “the consolation of Catholic confession was especially important to Stoddard, who knew very well from childhood what the Calvinists had to say about Sodom and Gomorrah. What the Presbyterians had seemed to damn in self-righteous fury the Catholics seemed to have the grace to forgive.”¹⁶

Homosocial Catholicism seems also to have attracted the English writer Frederick Rolfe. Born into an Anglican family, what we can know of his conversion (indeed what we can know of anything of his life is a problematic muddle of fact and the extensive fiction he made of it) indicates that it was a desire for priesthood that impelled Rolfe's conversion. Cecil Woolf and Brocard Sewell suggested that “Rolfe loved Catholicism and everything about it – except the Catholics.”¹⁷ Convinced that the only legitimate priesthood resided in the apostolic succession in the line of St. Peter, Rolfe converted to Catholicism but spent the rest of his life thwarted in the aspiration for ordination, writing the fantastic novel *Hadrian VII*, the story of a sinned-against Englishman who is suddenly and mysteriously elected pope, ordained and crowned, surrounding himself with attractive young men. Symons attributed homosexual aestheticism as the motivation for Rolfe's conversion:

The attraction of the Catholic Faith for the artistic temperament is a phenomenon which has been the subject of many novels, and is one of the facts of psychology . . . [Y]et it is not surprising that one in whom nature had not implanted a love for women should embrace a celibate career.¹⁸

Rolfe's modern biographer, Miriam J. Benkovitz, proposes that his fusion of romantic and erotic infatuation with older boys and young men, represented by his literary fascination with boy martyrs and priest martyrs, might be understood as a motive for conversion.¹⁹ Of course he might have had the company of young men, clerical ordination, and sacraments by remaining in high church Anglicanism, and the fact that he remained a Catholic long after his hopes of ordination had been definitively frustrated suggests that Rolfe was motivated by more than opportunistic pedophilia. Like Stoddard, Rolfe seems to have been drawn to the romance of Catholic homosociality and its social perverseness. Conversion to stigmatized Catholicism in Protestant cultures was one way of embracing an objective correlative of interior perversion.

For continental queers like Joris Karl Huysmans and Julien Green, however, the motives for joining the Church would have to overcome anti-clericalism. In a preface to his novel *A Rebours (Against the Grain)*, written twenty years after the book's publication, Joris Karl Huysmans described the origins of the book and of his Catholic conversion. Of the first: "I pictured to myself a Monsieur Folantin, more cultured, more refined, more wealthy and who has discovered in artificiality a relief from the disgust inspired by the worries of life and the American habits of his time."²⁰ Huysmans' project required extensive research that resulted in his "condensing into a 'meat essence' of precious stones, of perfumes, of flowers, of literature religious and lay, of profane music and plain song" (57), the prototype of Dorian Gray's immersion in a transcendental hedonism. Interestingly, Huysmans revealed his medievalism, remarking "I was led by the very nature of my task to study the Church under many aspects. It was in fact impossible to go back to the only really characteristic eras humanity has ever known, the Middle Ages that is, without realizing that She embraced everything, that art existed only in Her and by Her" (57). "She," of course, is the only woman with whom Huysmans could find himself infatuated: Ecclesia, Holy Mother Church, and Bride of Christ. He noted blandly: "'Against the Grain' appeared in 1884, and I set off to be converted at a Trappist House in 1892; nearly eight years had elapsed before the seeds of the book had germinated" (69). While claiming to be mystified by "grace" and conversion, he did acknowledge that:

The Church offices, mysticism, art were the vehicle and the means; it occurred mostly in churches, at Saint Séverin in particular, where I used to go out of curiosity, for lack of other things to do. I experienced as I watched the services only an inward tremor, the

little shiver one feels on seeing, hearing or reading a fine work of art. (71)

Or, I would add, on falling into love or lust. In an English introduction to the novel, Havelock Ellis, serving as both art critic and sexologist, associated the novel's "decadent style" with Byzantine architecture, St. Mark's Cathedral in Venice, and later Gothic, paragons of Catholic ritualism (23), while characterizing Huysmans as

... at once the ultra-modern child of a refined civilization and the victim of nostalgia for an ascetic mediaevalism; his originality lies in the fact that in him these two tendencies are not opposed but harmonious, although the second has only of late reached full development. (33-4)

I suspect, rather, that Huysmans was less original in this regard and more akin to other queers who had found or would find their same way through the world. Ellis also cited Huysman's *Là-bas* (*Down There*) in which the book's central character, Durtal, proposes a "spiritualistic naturalism" that combines a connoisseur's attention to the material world with the ascetic's disposition to rapture. Ellis suggested that Grunewald's famous Crucifixion painting provides a suitable analogue of this spiritual naturalism: "the Christ who was at once a putrid and unaureoled corpse and yet a manifest god bathed in invisible light, the union of outrageous realism and outrageous idealism" (37). This figurative *discordia concors* is a defining feature of Catholicism's sacramental negotiation of the natural and supernatural, the capacity for ambiguity and contradiction.

Writing forty years after Huysmans, French-American convert to Catholicism, Julian (or Julien) Green, would note in his diary entry of December 30, 1940:

Does our body never weary of desiring the same things? For it always yearns after the same feast while our spirit continually demands something new. There are only two types of humanity that I have ever really understood: the mystic and the profligate, because both fly to extremes, searching, each in his own way, for the absolute; but of the two, the profligate is to my mind the most mysterious, for he never tires of the only dish served up to him by his appetite and on which he banquets each time as though he had never tasted it before.²¹

These two extremes were thematic of both Green's fiction and his self-reflection; later in 1947 he recorded:

The carnal man lives with the spiritual man. One tries to slit the other's throat. To give up pleasure means throwing the carnal man into jail, but none the less, he goes on living, tied up, and gagged as tightly as you please; yet he is there, and what is strange, he changes, follows a completely personal evolution. (182)

Yet for all his apparent dualism, Green frequently salvaged sexuality, more successfully in his diaries than in his fictional characters. An entry from 1943 remarked, "I have always dreamed of a life where sensuality would be absent, not by reason of ascetic discipline, but from the very nature of this ideal existence. However, doesn't this mean dreaming over the happiness of childhood?" Nonetheless, five years later he would annotate this entry: "Yet who would wish for such questionable happiness? . . . [Sexuality] is also an element of essential activity that is to be found everywhere, in my opinion, as much in the field of intellect, in literary creation, as in spiritual life itself. . . . For the devout, enemy number one is the sexual instinct; the only thing he forgets is that this instinct comes from God" (131–2). What permitted Green to balance these oppositions – mystic and profligate, spiritual man and carnal man, spirituality and sexuality – was precisely the external Catholic observances that ordered his ambiguous interiority. In a diary entry from 1940, written in America after he had fled from the German occupation of France, Green asserted that, "True order is founded on prayer, all the rest is more or less disguised disorder. The Middle Ages were a huge edifice whose foundations were the Pater [the Our Father or Lord's Prayer], the Ave [the Hail Mary], the Credo, and the Confiteor. All that is built on anything else can only collapse sooner or later into blood and mire" (101). Indeed, the typical Catholic devotional life in the first half of the twentieth century would have included a variety of rituals to organize one's life, including daily mass, weekly confession, the Marian Angelus devotion three times daily, a daily examination of conscience, and prescribed prayers for morning, night and meals, not to mention feast days, holy days of obligation, and novenas. Derived from Catholic medieval practices, these rituals provided an attractive alternative to failed modernity, particularly, for Europeans, in light of the catastrophic Great War and the flawed peace that followed. As a result, by the middle of the twentieth century, important Anglo-American

intellectuals, such as Thomas Merton and Richard Gilman, had converted to Catholicism. As Allitt observes:

Catholicism was attracting some converts in the same way that communism attracted others. Both offered a complete philosophical system and a rich intellectual tradition. Each claimed to have an answer for every human dilemma and each stood in judgment over a world in crisis. Each possessed a set of venerated texts that, taken in the right spirit at the right time, had a transforming effect on readers, so that Gilson's *Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* could act on Merton and Gilman in the way that the works of Marx and Lenin had acted on a generation of young Communists. . . . No wonder Catholic conversion narratives from these middle years of the twentieth century are sometimes reminiscent of Communist conversion narratives.²²

Public conversion narratives are not simply an acknowledgement of intellectual assent but a ritual of self-identification. By the late twentieth century, this narrative for queer people would transform itself into the "coming out" narrative of homosexual identity.

In figures like Anglo-Americans Stoddard and Rolfe and continentals Huysmans and Green we see how compelling religious symbols are, how effective in reconciling oppositions, and even how suavely they efface the tendentious particulars of Christianity's doctrinal animus towards homosexuality. In many ways conversion to Catholicism could also be viewed as anti-social and thus an objective correlative signifying hidden perversion. Here, indeed, is the traditional catechism definition of a sacrament: a visible sign of an invisible reality. What makes forms of Catholicism particularly appealing to queer converts is that Catholic sacramentalism promises salvation through matter, the *mater* of us all.

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