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Queer Hagiography: John Gray and André Raffalovich

Perhaps one of the most curious stories of the 1890s concerns the great friendship between John Gray and Marc-André Raffalovich. Extending over a period of more than forty years, this spiritual friendship endured the changes of the decades. When Raffalovich was buried, (the then-Canon) Gray was quoted as telling the sacristan: “I’m the saddest man in Edinburgh. My friend has gone to heaven” (Sewell, Dorian Mode, 185). Gray died a few months later. The tale of these two men elucidates the nature of male friendships in the Roman Catholicism of the 1890s and beyond. Raffalovich was the great apologist and expicator of chaste friendship for homosexuals in his 1896 Uranisme et Unisexualité. One of the foremost scholars of Raffalovich and Gray, Fr Brocard Sewell, a Carmelite priest, also wrote extensively on Baron Corvo and the homosexual religious culture of the 1890s. Rather than dissociating these two elements of 1890s culture, Sewell acknowledged homoeroticism in the religious life.

The biographies of Gray and Raffalovich are necessary to truly understand their significance as iconic figures. The couple became a model of Catholic homosexual friendship. The Gray–Raffalovichs were the fulfilment of the monastic friendship envisioned by the Oxford Movement sixty years earlier. Their union follows Aelred’s teaching on spirituality. Like the Oxford writers, Gray and Raffalovich mapped their lives on to an earlier religious model. For them, ‘sexual desire [was] re-envisioned as Christian or Platonic agape’ (Hanson, Decadence, 323). A consideration of selected saints will help to explain the homosexual hagiography and theology of the two men. The sixteenth-century Spanish John of the Cross and Jacopone da Todi, a thirteenth-century Italian Franciscan, both depict wild love relationships with Christ in their poetry. Newman’s St Philip Neri was in fact devoted to Jacopone. Ecstatic mysticism became the spiritual equivalent of carnal passion for the homosexual Roman Catholic converts of the 1890s. Desire in the love of God attracted writers who turned to Christianity. The religious eroticism of saints who longed for Christ’s body served as a safe haven for the transformation of homosexual feelings into love of God.
Eve Sedgwick writes of Christ that ‘the embodied male figure is a distinctive thematic marker for the potent and devalued categories of kitsch and the sentimental’ (*Epistemology*, 142). The Raffalovich–Gray story is indeed ‘sentimental’, as was their use of the romance with God. Raffalovich and Gray were survivors with a past. Upon escaping the Wilde hysteria unscathed, they adopted new and different identities. Their own ‘hagiography’ – as relics of the nineties – followed them for the next forty years. Gray’s Edinburgh church was completely modernized in the 1950s and 1960s, its Decadent trappings removed, perhaps on orders from Rome. J. C. M. Nolan writes: ‘There is no doubt that Father Walter Glancy was visited in St. Peter’s by some of the “Gray Clerks” in quest of the Gay Gray – very soon to be known as “Dorian Gray”, likely model for Wilde’s creation, worthy of a Pink Plaque’ (*John Gray*, 14) Nolan attributes this to the 1962 publication of Wilde’s letters and Brocard Sewell’s work on Gray (*John Gray*, 14).

John Gray moved through a range of subcultures in the 1890s. The fascination with Gray seems Wildean in its form as well as its subject, containing an element of paradox. Gray was both priest and homosexual aesthete: at one point the one, at another moment the other. Hanson observes the way in which Gray ‘integrated his homosexuality, his decadent style, even his dandyism, into a virtually seamless performance as a priest’ (*Decadence*, 311). He embodied the open secret: that of homosexual cleric. Celibate priests were coded effeminate in the nineteenth century, as seen in the gender anxiety over Newman and his circle. To locate an actual homosexual priest – as all historical evidence suggests that Gray was – is more troubling. The body of the priest may be queered, existing in the liminal space between the genitally active and biologically procreative male and female, each with its socially effected markers of identity. When the priest is the homosexual – the queer sexual transgressor of these categories – he is pathologized perhaps more than the layman because he has publicly performed all of the expectations of the open secret, negating its privacy. If the priest is identified as a homosexual but no evidence can be found to confirm that he is genitally active – breaking his vows – and if he fulfils his vocation admirably, then his body is all the more troublesome because it does not affirm the category of the pathological or sinful homosexual. Such was the case of John Gray.

However marginalized Roman Catholicism may have been in English culture – and still is to a certain extent – it has allowed a place for identification as a homosexual. Within this space, celibacy is expected. The Roman Catholic Church has never officially prevented the ordination of celibate homosexuals. They offer the Church much in the way of service. The celibacy of the Roman Catholic clergy poses different questions of sexual orientation and identification than among the laity. While publicly all men may be assumed to be heterosexual, the lack of genital expression of desire already locates the priest in a queer space – like places earlier in history where expressions of same-sex desire were more acceptable than in the world. As Philip Healy has observed: