Lesbian Trinitarianism, Canine Catholicism: Michael Field

John Gray’s 1927 translation, *O Beata Trinitas: the Prayers of St. Gertrude and St. Mechtilde*, offers a glimpse into life in the thirteenth-century Benedictine community of Helfta in Germany. Mechtilde came to the abbey when she was seven, in 1248. In 1261, Gertrude was admitted as a child of five and placed in the care of Mechtilde. As Gray notes in the preface, ‘There was a difference of fifteen years between the two saints, whose mystical experiences and utterances cannot be distinguished without minute attention to the text’ (*Beata*, 1). The works of Gertrude and Mechtilde are considered to be Divine revelations; their subject is ‘exclusively the truths imparted by the divine persons of the Blessed Trinity’ (*Beata*, 2). Gertrude was a sickly mystic; Gray hardly teases out which prayers were written by her and which by Mechtilde. Perhaps it was not clear to the translator either.

The bulk of the two revelations was written by Gertrude. Mechtilde, some time after 1290, made known to her friend the divine favours which she had for years received; and Gertrude kept a record of these communications, at first unconfessed. From the year in which they began, 1281, Gertrude confided to Mechtilde the graces which she received from the divine Lord; and in 1289 committed her memories to writing. (*Beata*, 1–2).

Their composition – a form of poesis, by Divine muse – was something the two women shared privately. It was not mediated by male authority, because Gertrude resisted confession of her experiences to a priest. Rather, the works that bound them together in their own union of Divine revelation kept the two women united to God alone.

Gray’s translations include prayers for all occasions. However, there are particular poems on the heart of Jesus and its pulse, reminiscent of Hopkins. The two nuns also wrote a number of Marian works, praises to her heart as well as Jesus’. But the most striking of Gray’s translations concern Christ’s wounds. Some of these are short exhortations: ‘Upon the
Wound of Thy love I kiss thee' (Beata, 59). Gray comments: ‘When Gertrude had thus addressed each of the Lord’s five roseate wounds, her sadness passed away; and she was refreshed in the sweetness of devotion’ (Beata, 60). She prayed to the Sacred Heart: ‘Into this Wound of love, so wide as to enfold heaven and earth and all they contain, I return all my love to Thy divine Love, that thus it may be made perfect; and, like iron turned white in the fire, the two may become but one love’ (Beata, 70).

We have seen in Keary’s long poem the ability for women’s devotion to the wounds of Christ to contain female homoeroticism. Here the correlation is all the more direct, because Gray’s translations give voice to a medieval mystical tradition that he had effectively queered in the 1896 Spiritual Poems. More than three decades later, Canon Gray looked once again to past devotional literature for depicting a rhetoric of Christian same-sex desire. In this case, his translations served as a memorial to his two friends, Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper. The voices of these literary collaborators and Catholic converts were as indistinguishable as the thirteenth-century German nuns when they wrote under the pen name that made them famous: Michael Field. Their devotion to a trinity – of Katherine (called Michael), Edith (who went by the name Henry), and Whym Chow (their beloved dog whose death led to their Catholic conversion) – made Gray’s translation of Gertrude and Mechtilde’s prayers especially appropriate. Like Rossetti, Hopkins, Gray, and so many others, the poesis that had once composed worldly lyrics was transformed through religious conversion into a vehicle for Divine revelation. The sickly Edith, some fifteen years younger than her aunt Katherine, had been placed in her care as a young girl, like the medieval mystic, Gertrude. The bond the two women shared was one of familial friendship, literary collaboration, homosexual love, and eventually Catholic conversion.

Michael Field provides a crucial link in a homosexual history of religious women. In Katherine and Edith, the desires that were suggested devotionally by Rossetti’s theological models and tangibly in women’s friendship by Keary’s literary creations are fully manifest in the homosexual relationship of Michael Field. Chris White counters Lillian Faderman’s argument that the aunt and niece made up a ‘sentimental friendship’; rather, she affirms that they were lesbian lovers (“Poets”). The evidence we have from the two women’s lives suggests the truth of this assertion; whether or not they genitally consummated their relationship, Katherine and Edith envisioned their union as a marriage. Their journal comments on Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning: ‘Those two poets, man and wife, wrote alone; each wrote, but did not bless or quicken one another at their work; we are closer married’ (Field, Works, 16). Some critics have focused on the business side of their partnership. But this literary collaboration involved a mystical union covenanted by the Divine: ‘It is Paradise between us. When we’re together eternally, our spirits will be interpenetrated with our loves and our