Queer Devotions, Noble Perversions: Denying the Lesbian Body in Christopher St John's *Hungerheart: The Story of a Soul*

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Abstract
This essay discusses the little-known 1915 novel, *Hungerheart: The Story of a Soul* by Christopher St John (*née* Christabel Marshall). It analyses the dualism between the spiritual and the material as a means of sanctifying lesbian desire, and discusses the way in which this is mediated through the modes of courtly love and Catholicism, both of which serve as symbolic vehicles for the representation of an identity which was yet to be consolidated in the public imagination. In denying the embodied dimension of same-sex love, St John suffuses her text with a repressed eroticism, an eroticism which can be read back into the text through its queer perversion of Eucharistic and ascetic imagery. By drawing on recent developments in lesbian modernism as well as theoretical approaches which have opened up a critical dialogue about the place of queer desire in religious ritual, this paper seeks to turn attention to a much-neglected writer in order to explore the queer performativity of desire.
Keywords: lesbian, Catholicism, chivalry, sublimation.

Christopher St John (*née* Christabel Marshall) was born ca. 1871 and had a varied career as a novelist, playwright, suffrage activist, biographer and music critic; but despite her turning her hand to numerous vocations, she has largely fallen into obscurity. Part of the reason for her erasure from the historical record is the fact that she lived her life surrounded by various famous figures. Her life partner was the women's suffrage dramatist and theatre director, Edith Craig, the daughter of renowned Shakespearean actress, Ellen Terry. From the year 1916, Craig and St John lived in a *ménage à trois* with the artist Clare Atwood, and the women counted amongst their social circle several figures whom have been linked to a Sapphic community in the early twentieth century, including Cicely Hamilton, Virginia Woolf, Vita Sackville-West, Ethel Smyth, Radclyffe Hall and Una

Troubridge. St John frequently adopted a masculine style of dress and was spoken about in ways that signalled her lesbianism (Cockin 1998). These factors notwithstanding, St John has only infrequently been afforded a footnote or short description in the critical texts and biographies that address her more prominent Sapphic peers. In literary terms, this neglect may be a consequence of the highly covert portrayal of same-sex desire in her only text on the subject of lesbianism, her 1915 novel, *Hungerheart: The Story of a Soul*[1]. The novel is heavily inflected by its author's Catholicism to which she converted in 1912, and disguises the lesbian adventures that govern the plot as a journey of spiritual awakening.

Hungerheart abounds in images of suffering and asceticism which are part of its narrative of Catholic conversion. Although not a great deal is known about the circumstances of her conversion, we can place her in the context of a noticeable trend of lesbian converts during the early decades of the twentieth century. As this essay hopes to demonstrate, St John and her novel may prove to be an intriguing point of critical inquiry for the lively debate in current scholarship on the intersections between both male and female queer identities and Catholicism. Joanne Glasgow, who has provided an analysis of this trend, claims that Catholicism provided St John and other lesbian converts such as Renée Vivien and Radclyffe Hall, with a "liberation from conventional sexuality" and that "*Hungerheart* details her spiritual journey and conversion to Catholicism in ways that are almost emblematic of the lesbian convert of the period" (1992: 251)[2]. The novel inscribes an erotics of negative emotion that hinges upon the performativity of Catholic shame; however, a thorough analysis of the relation between conversion and latent desire exceeds the scope of the present essay. I turn attention instead to the symbolic dichotomy between body and soul which is central, not only to Catholicism, but to other discourses of impossible or unrequited love, and which provides a means of structuring the pain of desire and denial, chiefly through the dynamics of sublimation which is at the heart of courtly love. In attending to this suppressed eroticism

[1] At present, my research into the publication history of *Hungerheart* is ongoing. It is hoped that further investigation into publishers' archives may state how many copies were printed and sold in 1915.

[2] See also Martha Vicinus (2004) on lesbian conversion.

which inheres in the dualism between body and soul, my analysis reveals the complex relationships between the subject and object of desire, and between what is concealed and what is revealed by a text in which lesbian desire is given incipient shape prior to Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928). Hall's novel bears some notable similarities to St John's earlier text, the most significant one being the plotting of lesbian development along the lines of a spiritual journey. Whereas Hall's reliance on the sexological construction of sexual 'inversion' is well documented, it is less clear whether St John was influenced by or exposed to the work of Havelock Ellis or other sexual scientists. Katharine Cockin claims that *Hungerheart's* protagonist is "the victim of 'sexological' theorising, a self-diagnosed invert" (1998: 23), and certainly there is textual evidence to suggest that St John gave credence to the equation of female masculinity with same-sex object choice in the way she presents her protagonist. This cross-gendering, however, is part of a more fluid portrayal of same-sex desire in relation to religious faith than Hall's. *Hungerheart* comprises elements of the romantic friendship model and the New Woman novel, and by imbricating both within the conversion plot, St John aligns the former with a sense of the sacred and the latter with spiritual fortitude.

In his short but astute reading of *Hungerheart*, David Trotter places St John within a genealogy of New Woman writers whose political activism and lesbian visibility are transmuted along a line of inheritance and influence (Trotter 1998). *Hungerheart* calls attention, visibly but selectively, to its own heterodoxies through a set of rhetorical devices such as the interpolation of likeminded readers and passionate language. In this way, *Hungerheart* appears to be argumentative in its purpose, but the protagonist's lack of reflection on the nature of her desire allows for the effective dissimulation of lesbianism. Indeed, her personal and social revelations seem to be displaced onto other aspects of her experience such as her writing and social conscience. John-Baptist neither represses nor avoids recognition of her desires but rather avoids the need to explicate them. Furthermore, in a text that features shame to a large extent as both aesthetic and theme it is remarkable that at no point do the reference points of shame and same-sex desire actually converge. Instead, the overemphasis on shame and difference becomes a kind of narrative decoy, a performance of confession and shame that

attracts attention away from the *real* difference, pointing towards the salience of the Catholic confessional mode for structuring a love that speaks but leaves itself unnamed. In other words, *Hungerheart* confesses lesbianism without revealing it.

The articulation of lesbianism is produced by two movements that shape it as an identity with both a political component and an erotic one. Firstly, the vocal challenge to gender and sexual orthodoxies that encourages the reader to transcend their inhibiting logic; secondly, the textual iteration of these orthodoxies in order to re-appropriate them into a new logic capable of expressing lesbian desire, *i.e.*, by performatively manipulating "the binary restrictions on sex/gender imposed by the heterosexual matrix" (Butler 1990: 97). St John invokes her own and John-Baptist's political engagement to argue passionately for the issues that concerned her as a suffragette and New Woman, in particular the culturally accepted centrality of marriage and romantic (heterosexual) love in women's lives. At the same time, the vehement political tone of her narration is charged with the language of spiritual ecstasy and suffering. Catholicism therefore provides an additional undercurrent within the text that conceivably links John-Baptist's personal quest through adversity and triumph with a broader social narrative. Counterintuitively for a novel that is forward-looking in its politics, it draws on the passive/active arrangement of gender roles in the courtly love paradigm for its expression of same-sex desire. However, John-Baptist does not simply step into the role of the male suitor; rather, St John reconstitutes the terms of the "heterosexual matrix" to expose the queer potential of desire itself and desiring subjects when they are separated from the earthly confines of the sexed and gendered body. *Hungerheart* can thus be rehabilitated into a body of writing that looks to a spiritual history for its organisation of love and desire at a time when lesbianism was "in the process of becoming constituted" (Sinfield 1994: 8).

The protagonist's perpetual hunger for fulfilment is the *raison d'être* behind her picaresque wanderings, and this desire for something that is never named is continually deferred and displaced. This deferral, or "disavowal" of lesbianism, as Clare L. Taylor has called it (2003: 59), may seem to suggest prudishness, naivety, or a need to avoid censorship and scandal. While the narrative rhythms of deferral serve to dissimulate the reactions of outraged readers,

they are also driven by the logic of unrequited love. Thus, disavowal becomes a means for St John to express the pain and negative effects of same-sex desire without directly invoking their cause. The dynamics of yearning, pursuit, and disappointment are given expression throughout the novel. It is the conflation of Catholic dualism and the sublimatory logic of unrequited love, particularly courtly love, which gives *Hungerheart* its unique shape. It may be a novel devoid of sex, but its emotional excess suffuses the text in a way that makes it erotically charged.

Hungerheart is the first-person narrative of the female protagonist, John-Baptist Montolivet, relating her maturation from her early childhood to her later life. The baptiser of Christ and the prophet whose role was to prepare the people for holiness in anticipation of Jesus's coming, "John the Baptist held a special significance for both Christopher St John and for Edith Craig" (Cockin 1998: 68), and is echoed in the name St John took for herself after her conversion. John-Baptist's childhood is unhappy in her adoptive family, and she resorts to daydreams in which she casts herself as a boyish hero. Throughout John-Baptist's childhood and adolescence she forms strong attractions towards older women which suggest a yearning for maternal as well as romantic fulfilment. She goes to study at Oxford, but her adoptive mother dies soon afterwards and discloses the identity of her biological parents. She has an affair with a married man, and when it ends she engages in various liaisons with men, aware of the danger and the thrill of playing with fire. One evening, she sees a play starring the famous actress, Louise Canning – who is a fictionalised version of Ellen Terry – with whom she has been infatuated since childhood. She is invited backstage to meet her and is introduced to Louise's daughter, Sally, the disguised Edith Craig. They begin a relationship which is never defined as overtly sexual, and set up house together. Sally briefly contemplates marriage to a man, Robin, shattering John-Baptist's happiness and leading her to overdose on liquid cocaine resulting in her near death. Sally ends her relationship with Robin and continues to live with John-Baptist, although the harmony that had existed between them is never quite recaptured. John-Baptist and Sally become involved, reluctantly at first and then passionately, in the women's suffrage movement. John-Baptist has relationships with other women that echo the pattern of romantic pursuit and unfulfilled desire that has characterised her

other attachments. Finally, during a visit to Rome, she finds spiritual fulfilment in the Catholic Church and begins her conversion when the Virgin Mary appears to her in a divine apparition.

The dualism between the spiritual and the material is foregrounded in the novel in various didactic addresses to the reader. It is also apparent from the novel's title which collapses spiritual craving with the language of embodied physicality; but it simultaneously establishes the symbolic economy of hunger and satiety that is the novel's most prominent correlative for desire. Yet this division also points towards the mystification surrounding female same-sex desire and the disavowal of this desire as having any possible expression through the body. Lesbianism's connotations of loss and backwardness have recently been explored by Heather Love. In her chapter on *The Well of Loneliness*, she recognises that for Stephen Gordon the painful effects of social disapprobation contribute to her loneliness, but this loneliness also results from "a bodily feeling of lack" (2007: 118) due to the incompatibility of the masculine soul in the female body. St John adjusts the terms of the argument, but it is played out on the same contested territory of the body and soul. *Hungerheart*'s engagement with Catholicism could be viewed as another instance of a backwards-looking queer aesthetic in its endorsement of religious asceticism. Owing to its strategic enmeshment of Catholic devotion and what I identify here as Sapphic structures of unrequited love, the novel bears comparison to other literary examples that Ruth Vanita reads as seeking Marian and Sapphic models as a joint spiritual inheritance for organising their portrayals of same-sex love (1996). In what follows, I trace a similar merging of models in *Hungerheart* that contributes to an erotic spirituality, placing it at the verge of modernist experimentation with lesbian desire and narratives of identity rendered through a religious thematic[3].

[3] A text that bears comparison to *Hungerheart* in its exploration of same-sex desire, Sapphic devotion and religious transcendence is Hope Mirrlees's *Madeleine, One of Love's Jansenists* (1919). As well as a brief summary in her 1996 book, Vanita offers a comprehensive discussion of this rare novel in her chapter on Mirrlees and Jane Harrison (2007). An analysis of *Hungerheart* and *Madeleine* is beyond the scope of the present study, but I intend to carry out further investigation in this area.

In her study of the poet Amy Lowell, Jaime Hovey traces the importance of cultural models of unrequited love for lesbian modernists in the early twentieth century:

> Sapphic modernist poets such as Amy Lowell saw in the unrequited desire that infuses both Sappho's poetry and the European courtly love literature that followed it a longing that spoke to them, a longing that seemed to offer a lesbian tradition stretching back to antiquity. This tradition combined Sapphic longing for the love of an indifferent woman with the courtly love tradition of service to an idealised and unattainable lady. (2004: 77)

As Hovey goes on to explain, early twentieth-century lesbianism's corollary of suffering and failure is written back into a tradition which dignifies it as an important facet of lesbian history and cultural expression. This sanctification of same-sex love as honourable suffering is characteristic of John-Baptist's devotion to numerous beautiful and unattainable women. Arguably, it is not only the dignity afforded by chivalry that makes it an appealing model for lesbian representation during the early twentieth century. It also presents a practical advantage in that one need not risk censorship by imagining the erotic assuagement of same-sex desire because, by its very nature, courtly love takes its pleasure from desire itself rather than its fulfilment. In the case of *Hungerheart*, the eroticism that suffuses the novel is generated by the protagonist's painful knowledge that reciprocation of her love is impossible. In order for same-sex desire to have any embodied presence at all, the body must become a repository for the pain and pleasure of a longing that is turned back upon itself. The excessive emotions that attend the spurning of the protagonist's love are registered through hyperbole and a somewhat precocious demonstration of a young soul in torment.

John-Baptist's ardent attraction towards other women begins with her youthful infatuation with the housemaid, Nennie. The idealisation of the feminine in statuesque imagery elevates lesbian desire to the realm of superlative classical beauty, underwriting its aesthetic status:

> When I first saw one of those noble Greek statues of women with waved hair parted on straight, low brows, with dreamy blank eyeballs, and necks strong as marble columns; women tall and fine, with lovely

draperies through whose transparent veil you see firm rounded breasts like pomegranates, spacious splendid waists, and long untired limbs, I thought of Nennie, and what to me meant maternity. (St John 1915: 14)[4]

The above quotation invokes several connotations of Greek statuary, some of which resurface throughout *Hungerheart*. The comparison of Nennie to a statue fixes her in the role of object/muse, while John-Baptist is positioned in the role of gazer/artist, implying a distinctly gendered model of creativity in which she is figured in the traditionally male role. The breast is nourishing in itself and is reinforced by the whiteness of the statue, but the image of the fructifying pomegranate suggests a more fruitful corporeality which verges on excess. Paradoxically, the simile of the fruit, which is suggestive of nourishment and therefore an important part of the novel's troping of hunger and being sated, withholds its power to nourish because the marble form is self-contained and inorganic. The eroticism here is explicitly maternal, but the whiteness of marble simultaneously connotes virginity and purity as well as androgyny. Taken together, these contradictory associations of virginity and maternity constitute a model of same-sex eroticism that recurs throughout the novel, and which reaches its apotheosis in the Virgin Mary's appearance before John-Baptist, precipitating her conversion at the end.

Furthermore, the translucent veil that simultaneously conceals and reveals the erotic body beneath is a visual symbol of *Hungerheart*'s recurrent narrative strategy. It is an image that initiates the novel's economy of desire which conforms to the terms of courtly love, which Julia F. Saville has described:

[4] The use of classical statuary in the work of H.D. has been thoroughly documented by Cassandra Laity (2009) and Eileen Gregory (1997). They have traced her dialogue with the Victorian Decadents and Aesthetes such as Walter Pater and Algernon Swinburne, and have discussed the ways in which her work interprets Greek sculpture in order to frame a female homoerotics. It may be the case that St John's interest in classical statuary represents a comparable attempt to explore same-sex desire and to do so by drawing on the same pre-existing tradition which inspired the Modernist poet. Thus, St John may constitute a visible link between late-Victorian neoclassicism and the emergence of a female, lesbian reappropriation of statuary; however, such a link requires substantiation through further research.

In a technique exemplified in the tradition of courtly love, that obstacle ensures the inaccessibility, and therefore the perfection, of the object, which now assumes its new status of sublimity […] the sublime object. […] The object may take a great variety of forms: the literal veil […] that both restricts and excites. […] The success of the sublimatory process depends on the capacity of the obstacle to make the object appear almost within reach and yet not quite accessible. [...] It allows the subject both to have his cake and, as it were, to savor the prospect of eating it. (Saville 2000: 26-7)

The veil that covers the sculpted body acts as the permeable object that restricts access to the erotic object, yet does not extinguish desire. On the contrary, if desire can logically only exist through *not* achieving its object, then the obstacle ensures that desire is maintained. John-Baptist is consistently figured in the role of suitor, a role that is traditionally reserved for the male hero. To occupy this role is to desire actively rather than passively, which is the prerogative of the female object of desire.

The terms of excitement and restriction that structure sublimation may seem to be simply part of the novel's religious asceticism. Yet it could be argued that the very fact that the rules of this particular type of ritualised desire necessitate the "not having" of the desired object, even as it appears to be within reach, provides a useful framework within which to structure forbidden, unimaginable or unspeakable lesbian desire. In positioning John-Baptist in the role of the courtly lover, St John creates a narrative space in which same-sex desire can be played out repeatedly without ever coming to fruition in, as it were, penetrating the veil which keeps the sublime object at a crucial distance. In other words, desire, even for other women, is allowed to exist so long as it remains unsatisfied. It is desire for the androgynous soul's fulfilment that drives the action of the novel, and it is this desire that takes precedence over the idea that actions or passions have gendered implications or referents:

There are women, however, who do not correspond to this ideal, women who are in love with love, and know how to cut their losses. […] When shall we cease to generalise about women, and to assume that sex is more powerful in determining their actions and emotions than the soul which has no sex, and differs in every human being born into the world? (St John 1915: 195)

It is the act of desiring and not the gendered referent of desire that is the mark of difference in this novel. In this way, the "heroic-erotic" (Trotter 1998: 208) desire which is exemplified by the dynamic of sublimation is a very effective means of structuring same-sex desire without overtly articulating it. John-Baptist recognises that her desires, and perhaps more importantly, the way in which she desires, are different from the majority of her sex. What is more, she *identifies* with these desires, or, rather, her identity is based on them in a significant way. By emphasising her protagonist as different from other women because of the *way* in which she desires as opposed to *whom* she desires, St John sufficiently disguises her lesbian subject matter to be able to keep it in plain sight.

Hungerheart takes advantage of established gender roles and the position that they take in the courtly love paradigm, not by critiquing them, but by simply appropriating them. In positing John-Baptist in the role of desiring subject towards another woman, St John underwrites the queerness of her main protagonist by making her fluidly capable of occupying the traditionally masculine role of active desirer. The predetermined dynamic of chivalry means that St John circumvents the need to state John-Baptist's lesbianism explicitly. The fact of her being a woman is never questioned or shown to be problematic since the terms of courtly love ensure that a safe distance is maintained between the subject and object of desire. In other words, lesbian desire is not a problem as long as it is safely contained within a paradigm which, culturally speaking, has always attenuated desire's fulfilment.

Active desire is performed repeatedly by John-Baptist towards numerous women who inspire her infatuation: "The hunger I had to find someone to love burnt me more with every inch that was added to my stature. It was *to love* I yearned more than to *be loved*" (p. 88, emphasis in the text). Intriguingly, the object of John-Baptist's desire is never fixed; rather, desire is serial, settling on numerous women throughout the course of the novel. It is the very act of loving which is desired, and indeed at one point John-Baptist claims: "I did not understand women, I thought, because they loved to attract love [...] I felt in myself a burning desire to love, to be the active one who gave, who held the world's record for giving" (pp. 184-85). It is notable that John-Baptist's desire is frequently described as "burning" inside her, a metaphor that strongly evokes the martyrdom of Joan

of Arc. The suggestion of virgin sainthood pervades the novel as a symbol of heroic resistance, clearly evoking the appropriation of the figure of spiritual militancy by the suffragettes (Tickner 1988). The emphasis on virginity also implies the impossibility of same-sex desire, as well as its innocence in Catholic terms, as Glasgow argues (1992). According to Vanita, the impossibility of same-sex love "may breed despair in a text; it may also allow claims for a special miraculous destiny, similar to the claims made for Mary and the saints" (Vanita 1996: 8). In *Hungerheart*, it does both; and the emphasis on saintly virginity serves as both a covert allusion to lesbianism, and the prerequisite for the protagonist's higher religious destiny. Paradoxically, then, experiencing the pain of desire as one who loves actively means simultaneously occupying the role of the martyr who suffers passively. In this way, desire is inextricably bound up with the novel's discourses of asceticism, suffering, and martyrdom.

After her infantile attraction to Nennie, she becomes enamoured with Lady Martha during her teenage years on whose pillow she leaves roses and poetry. During a passionate outburst on discovering that Lady Martha is to be married, John-Baptist exclaims: "'Not him!' [...] 'Oh my angel, not him!' It was the first time I had ever called her by an endearing name. As it passed my lips, I seemed to lose all consciousness that I was a raw child, a child of her own sex, and to become the master of the secrets of love" (St John 1915: 80). What emerges strongly here is the insistence upon the power of language in the context of desire. It is the utterance of devotion that has a transformative effect upon the young John-Baptist, allowing her to transcend the classificatory obstacles of age and sex. This agency can be explained by the power relations inherent in the courtly love paradigm: "the distance between his position and the Other's position assures the courtly lyricist a space of difference necessary for self-definition and representation. He thus obeys the imperative not to give up on desire and in turn retains the privilege of articulateness" (Saville 2000: 28). This position of differentiation is explicitly gendered as masculine, since it secures autonomy achieved through the distancing of the desired object (woman) as other.

In order for St John to appropriate the autonomous position of desiring subject for her main protagonist, she exploits rather

than modifies the prerequisite terms of courtly love and she cross-genders John-Baptist's desire as active and subjective. In other words, she leaves the paradigm of courtly love intact and instead places her protagonist in the traditionally masculine position. Speaking of her jealousy of men's position, John-Baptist claims: "Above all I envied them their prerogatives as lovers" (St John 1915: 245). Her affair with her friend's husband, Jerome Sales, however, compromises her autonomy as an active lover. In the moment she submits to his advances, she experiences a loss of subjectivity, figured through the loss of her soul:

> When our lips met I had no sense of being subjugated. I gave of my own will […] But soon I felt the illusion that this was love, and this was beauty, slipping from me as he held me, and at the same time the warmth slipped from my body. The chill of death crept down my back […] It seemed to me that the closer our embrace the further we receded from one another […] 'Come back, my soul!' I cried. (p. 191)

It is clear that, in submitting to a desire that is equal to her own, she feels the risk of being consumed by Jerome. Thus, she recoils because his masculine desire threatens to subsume her difference and she experiences this loss as deathly. John-Baptist's active, burning desire is reduced to a cold stasis. Jerome's desire is an "ugly, devouring beast" (p. 189), connoting a base appetite that flares up in lust rather than the nobler hunger that characterises John-Baptist's sense of her own desire.

John-Baptist's heterosexual relationship with Jerome serves to complicate the novel's patterning of same-sex infatuation and strong friendship. However, it is my suggestion that this can be explained by the courtly love paradigm, which is central to *Hungerheart*'s organisation of desire, and by the novel's insistence on the importance of friendship. First, it is significant that the section of the novel in which she meets Jerome is immediately preceded by a short section in which John-Baptist contemplates the significance of male homosocial desire:

> Just before I met Jerome Sales I had been strangely impressed by a saying of Cicero's quoted in Montaigne's Essay on Friendship: 'Love is an endeavour to contract friendship through the splendour of beauty'. […] Bearing this in mind, I was not shocked by the revelation that in these noble friendships there had been an element of sensuality. (pp. 186-87)

When she and Jerome begin to drift apart, it is "the loss of his friendship" for which she mourns, and claims that "it was as comrades we had been most happy" (p. 193). I would suggest that John-Baptist's relationship with Jerome is presented as having much in common with these ardent male friendships that are traditionally homosocial and occasionally homoerotic.

The comparison of the relationship to homoerotic friendship between men is extended in the following reference: "he told me that he had always thought Oscar Wilde's favourite description of hair as 'honey-coloured' absurd until he saw mine" (p. 194)[5]. Thus, Jerome's admiration for John-Baptist is presented as not only cross-gendered[6], but as an extension of the homoerotic trend of aesthetic and decadent writing which peaked during the 1890s. It is also notable that Jerome is attracted to certain aspects of John-Baptist which are particularly masculine, such as her "strength and activity" (p. 194). It is clear that St John's presentation of the relationship is far more queer than straightforwardly heterosexual, since it comprises aspects of cross-gendering and same-sex erotic friendship. By repeatedly invoking the terms of courtly love – which place John-Baptist in the role of the active, masculine lover – St John effectively queers the promise of heterosexual union since, in the case of Jerome Sales, it is the role and not the referent that determines the nature of desire. Ironically, the framing of heterosexual relations along queer lines serves to emphasise, by way of contrast, the virtuous and self-sacrificing qualities of lesbian love.

In *Hungerheart*, the eternal, androgynous, spiritual, and multivalent soul is repeatedly claimed to be at odds with the temporal, sexed, material, and intransigent body: "If love is terrible on earth […] it is because of our duality. A violent craving of the spirit seeking to satisfy itself through the flesh!" (p. 242). This is the lament which prevails throughout the novel, keeping the body and soul in a state of tension and tinging the narrative with a disavowed eroticism. This tension is not resolved by Catholicism; but

[5] Oscar Wilde applied the epithet "honey-coloured" to younger men. See Bobby Fong's article (1979: 13) on several Wilde poems, including "Remorse" (1889) in which the term "honey-coloured" features.

[6] See Gay Wachman (2001) on lesbian writers' use of male homoeroticism as a means of plotting lesbian desire.

Catholicism provides a narrative that makes sense of and spiritualises this dichotomy, because the same irreconcilable contradiction lies at the heart of this religion in the very form of Christ himself. The prevailing motif at the heart of Catholicism is that Christ embodies both God and man in his presence. It is in this persistent theme that the Catholic motif begins to make sense as a strangely appropriate stage upon which to act the underlying representation of lesbian desire. To John-Baptist, the soul is the marker of humanity, and is therefore fundamentally incompatible with corporeal acts of desire, but such acts are specifically heterosexual: "Men and women are not animals […] [T]heir infinite souls must wake when the effects of the drug of pleasure have passed off" (p. 191). The reference to the "drug of pleasure" implicates (hetero)sexual acts as a form of false or unwholesome nourishment for the soul. Thus, St John makes an implicit connection between bodily excesses and what is symbolically ingested into the soul, creating an impression of extreme abjection predicated on the Christian dichotomy of pure and impure. The novel's extended Eucharistic imagery transforms impure actions into a contaminating ingestible substance. Alternatively, such actions fail to provide adequate sustenance because they are spiritually (and therefore nutritionally) void.

Hunger and thirst are repeatedly invoked throughout the novel in order to metaphorise the protagonist's yearning for spiritual fulfilment. It is my suggestion that the emphasis on hunger and thirst and their eventual assuagement in Catholicism is an evocation of the distinctly Catholic ritual of the Eucharist. The repetition of this imagery creates a subtle link between the various recurrent instances of longing that structure the novel with the protagonist's eventual fulfilment in the imbibing of Christ's body and blood. The Holy Eucharist centres on the notion of transubstantiation: the belief that matter can appear outwardly to retain its physical appearance while also transcending into something else. According to Richard Dellamora: "This paradox is central as well to romantic love: the notion that what is bodily, even insistently so, can signify transcendence" (2007: 115). The belief that the insubstantial spirit of Christ can be made present in tangible form in the communion wafer promises to make possible the otherwise impossible union with Christ. It is clear that the enabling of impossible desires that this union calls up is embedded in the idea of homosexual prohibition.

Whether this desire is deemed liable to incur persecution at the hands of society or the law, or whether this desire takes the form of unrequited love for a member of the same sex, impossibility would often appear to be a precondition of homosexual love.

Later in the novel, John-Baptist compares another object of her desire, the Italian aristocrat, Giovanna Ludini, to the oranges she is eating: "How beautiful you look with those golden fruits piled near you! You are own sister to them. The same tawny sunshine ripened you" (St John 1915: 248). The description is highly visual and performs the aesthetic delectation that Saville claims is integral to the desirability of the sublime object. In this instance, the obstacle is Giovanna's cool distance which is evoked by the rigidity of the composition-like description. Her complexion not only complements the oranges circumstantially, she is akin to the oranges, doubly suggesting her edibility which is reinforced by John-Baptist's claim, "I needed this beauty to fructify my spirit" (p. 248). It is not Giovanna's love which is needed to nourish John-Baptist, but the visual quality of her beauty. The terms of sublimation are hence enacted, because it is the aesthetic promise of beauty which maintains desire, but does not promise the proximity which will assuage it.

If desire can nourish, however, it can also poison. There are several instances in the novel in which St John extends the metaphor of imbibing to encompass the suffering and abject dimension of love. When Lady Martha discloses her intention to marry, the protagonist claims: "I felt an almost physical bitterness in my mouth; her words were poison to me" (p. 81). This quotation sets up the relationship between desire as pure and desire as debased, figuring the transition as oral corruption. The poison imagery reaches its apotheosis later when John-Baptist, betrayed by Sally's engagement to Robin, overdoses on liquid cocaine. The bitterness may also, though, represent the transubstantiation of the saviour's blood as it is ingested in the sacrament of the Eucharist. While John-Baptist is denied access to Lady Martha, her proximity has the effect of a Eucharistic meal because even in the sacrament the body and blood can only represent what is lacking and can never be achieved by the mortal eater: the host will only sustain until the next meal and reinforces the eater's status as perpetually mortal. The Eucharist therefore is the ultimate analogy of desire. Instead of physical love

being the portal to the soul, the soul is symbolically ingested and becomes physical once it is inside the eater. John-Baptist may never make love to another woman bodily, but transubstantiation enables the beloved to enter her and become a physical Real Presence.

Catholicism's sacrament of the Eucharist may serve as a powerful metaphor for lesbian lovemaking in the early twentieth century, even in its apparent denial of the physical; but the suppression of the body does not necessarily preclude the possibility of same-sex union if we look, as St John did, beyond the bounds of the earthly. In *Hungerheart*'s final section the individual first-person voice dissolves with the introduction of one final friendship with an unnamed nun who is immured in a convent, a friendship that Trotter claims "reproduces her relation to all other women in her life" (1998: 208). I would argue, however, that St John does offer a reconciliation of the picaresque plot of sequential eroticism or 'friendship' but it comes at the price of the generic stability of the *Bildungsroman* itself. In the last few pages of the novel, the narration assumes an epistolary form, addressing the nun in the second-person, conveying an intimacy that makes explicit the resolution of the desire that has driven her from one 'friendship' to the next: "every endeavour that I have made to express myself in friendship has brought me nearer to the Divine Friend [...] Was He not keeping me intact, unconsumed, unspoiled, for a friendship which should have no life outside His own Heart?" (St John 1915: 313). Religion is a space, both physical and metaphorical, in which John-Baptist's desires can finally be avowed by her entry into a kind of holy trinity, recalling the structure made by the poets Michael Field and their dog Whym Chow in what scholars have named "the third term"[7]. In her recent work on the role of the lesbian muse, Sarah Parker explores the utility of the third term for the aunt-niece couple, explaining that it "helps Bradley and Cooper to avoid being stuck in the fixed dyadic relation of poet and muse" (2013: 51). Similarly, John-Baptist's struggle to express herself through love gives way to a fusion of self and other as subject and object of desire respectively, resulting in a love that resonates with Michael Field's simultaneity of poetic identity.

[7] Marion Thain (2007) and Frederick Roden (2002) have discussed this. See also Ruth Vanita (1996).

Taking place in the presence of God, John-Baptist's union with the nun surpasses the dyad that affixes a gendered logic to romantic roles, and thus it surpasses the need to be understood by the mortal world: "Who in the world could understand our moments of union? Who in the cloister either? But they are understood in heaven" (St John 1915: 316). *Hungerheart* conveys a quest for selfhood through a story of love gained and spurned, creating a lesbian aesthetic through "the courtly values of submission, devotion, and service [which] are shown in the tireless journey of the speaker in pursuit of the goddess" (Hovey 2004: 79). St John finally elevates this journey from the mortal and gendered dynamic of pursuer and pursued by looking to the pre-existing configurations of love and sensuality in Catholicism alongside those of chivalric devotion. Where other lesbian plots might end in tragedy or heterosexual marriage, *Hungerheart* does away with the need for such outworn recourses by having her protagonist find fulfilment in God. St John's religious ending coupled with her own conversion to Catholicism has earned her, perhaps deservedly, the description of being "rather pious" (Hamer 1996: 32). Nevertheless, when we see that she exploited the symbolic space of religion in order to give expression to desires outside of orthodox sexuality, her project appears potentially subversive because it hides its radicalism in plain view. St John looked to Catholicism and chivalry for their configurations of love and sensuality as instruments to dignify lesbianism. In *Hungerheart*, she could only, through elaborate metaphor, hint at the unnameable alternative to marriage that she had achieved in life. By displacing desire onto the realm of the spiritual, she draws on oral and ascetic imagery to show the erotics of lesbian suffering.

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