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**WE ARE
MICHAEL FIELD**

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First published in 1998 by Absolute Press

This edition published 2014 by Bello
an imprint of Pan Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited
Pan Macmillan, 20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world

www.panmacmillan.co.uk/bello

ISBN 978-1-4472-7957-0 EPUB

ISBN 978-1-4472-7955-6 HB

ISBN 978-1-4472-7956-3 PB

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Introduction

From the day Katherine Bradley picked up her newly-born niece,
Edith Cooper, to the day half a century later when Edith died in
her arms, the two women lived together in a partnership that was
extraordinary both personally and artistically. Though they began
as aunt and niece, as soon as Edith grew up they became (in their
own words) 'poets and lovers'. They wrote both separately and
together under various names, but mostly the pseudonym of 'Michael
Field'; they published thirty plays and eleven books of poetry, and
kept publishing even when the praise of the critics had turned to
sneers and silence.

I first heard of the Michael Fields (as their friends called them)
when I came across some of their poetry, and was staggered by its
lyricism and erotic power. I could hardly believe that such good
poets, taken so seriously by their peers in the 1880s and 90s, could
be completely forgotten a hundred years later. Today a reader is
most likely to come across a glancing reference to the Michael
Fields in a biography of one of their famous male friends, among
them John Ruskin, Robert Browning, George Moore, Oscar Wilde
or George Meredith. Generally they are characterized as pathetic
literary hangers-on; and the prejudices against women writers
(especially collaborators, spinsters and lesbians) that dogged their
career still linger on.

To satisfy my curiosity about the Michael Fields, I turned to their
only biography: a 1922 study by Mary Sturgeon, who took pains

to reassure suspicious readers (in the age of Freud) that Miss Bradley and Miss Cooper had not been 'abnormal'. But lesbian historians were among the first to begin rescuing the reputation of the Michael Fields from complete obscurity. As early as 1956 Jeannette H. Foster was paying attention to their shared life; Lillian Faderman followed in the late 1970s. Chris White was the first to begin to tease out the sexual implications of their love as evoked in *Works and Days* (1933), a single volume of excerpts from the milder parts of their diary.

When I realized that approximately thirty volumes of unpublished journals and letters lay in the British Library, I was daunted, but could hardly stay away. These papers turned out to hold the key to most of the mysteries about Michael Field.

The most common misconceptions about them are factual; for example, that they had to publish all their work at their own expense and that they never had a literary reputation of any note. Critics who have read only a tiny sample of their work have pronounced that the rest is no good. But a reading of the Michaels' complete works offers many surprises, especially among their plays, a handful of which are riveting. As writers, they took risks and were never afraid of making fools of themselves, which they sometimes did, but at other times they achieved greatness.

Even today, some critics assume the Michaels were far too innocent to have sex. But though most of their contemporaries took for granted what their friend Logan Pearsall Smith mockingly called their 'unsullied chastity', it is clear from their diaries that Katherine and Edith were lovers in a highly sexual sense for several decades. Other more hostile misinterpretations continue to flourish: that Edith was a timid femme follower; that Katherine was a talentless butch parasite; that the aunt loved more than the niece, and ruined the niece's life by preventing her from marrying a man. But a reading of their entire diaries brings to light how independent and opinionated Edith was, and how much she needed and desired

Katherine. On the other hand, feminist scholars have occasionally bought into the Michael Fields' own myth that their union as lovers was perfect, with no tensions, no rivalries, no pain. One story-line in the diaries which I had not expected described Edith's tormented passion for their art critic friend, Bernhard Berenson. The Michaels' sexual identities were complicated by the fact that, apart from each other, they much preferred men to women. (And further complicated by their erotic and religious passion for a chow dog.)

The more I found out about Edith and Katherine from their diaries, the more superbly contradictory they became. They were Anglicans, then atheists, then practising Pagans, then Roman Catholics: As fussy Tory spinsters and free-thinking suffragist Aesthetes, they wept for the deaths of both Queen Victoria and Oscar Wilde. Hardworking, witty, generous in love and friendship, they were also bitchy, snobbish and monstrously egotistical. They saw life as a work of art, and faced brutal death as an adventure.

From the middle of the 1970s, a number of literary historians (most notably Henri Locard, Kenneth Ireland, David Moriarty, Jan McDonald, Holly Laird, Yopie Prins and Angela Leighton) have begun to pay the Michaels' poetry and journals the tribute of close reading and intelligent criticism. J. G. Paul Delaney's decades of research on the artist couple who became the Michaels' best friends, Charles Rickerts and Charles Shannon, has added a great deal to our knowledge of Edith and Katherine. What the Michaels deserve and need is a long and thorough critical biography, based on the great treasure trove of unpublished papers, as well as on the full range of their works. However, in the meantime, until someone decides to embark on that Amazonian task, I offer this short and personal study of the intertwined lives of a couple who – both as people and as writers – have come to haunt me.

Many of the Michaels' concerns – how to make history come to life on the page, how to love a woman without marrying her, how to write about sexual passion, how to talk to and about God –

were already mine before I began this book. While I was immersed in their diaries, Katherine and Edith came to seem as real to me as my loved ones. I picked up their vocabulary; I quoted them in every conversation (for which I now apologize to the same loved ones). I experienced a slightly shameful vicarious pleasure from visiting their Aesthetic life: plumed hats, boxes of fresh violets, tours of the Continent, and servants to do all the dirty work. But I learnt a lot from them too: about language, and collaboration, and playing with gender, and courage in times of disaster, and using stamina and imagination to keep love alive. And though Katherine and Edith disliked the Irish, and ended their lives as the most pious Catholics, I suspect they would approve of any book with their name on the cover, even one by a lapsed Catholic Irishwoman.

They were demanding Muses, and some days they drove me mad. (Even their devoted friends sometimes found the Michaels unbearable.) The millions of words Edith and Katherine produced, the excess of their emotions, the energy they poured into every opinion, every encounter, every detail of everyday life -- all this can be exhausting. Yet it is that same energy that lights up their work, that makes parts of their diaries sound as if they were written yesterday, that gives this particular pair of ghosts their lasting power to haunt.

A girl

A girl,
Her soul a deep-wave pearl,
Dim, lucent of all lovely mysteries;
A face flowered for heart's ease,
A brow's grace soft as seas
Seen through faint forest trees:
A mouth, the lips apart,
Like aspen-leaflets trembling in the breeze
From her tempestuous heart.
Such: and our souls so knit,
I leave a page half-writ --
The work begun
Will be to heaven's conception done,
If she come to it.

Underneath the Bough (1893)

demanding some measure of self-government for Ireland, which made Katherine dislike Amy's husband even more. 'Alas, they are a hateful little nest of Catholic pro-Boer Irish mice . . . as we have not the same God or the same Country all deep kinship is severed.'

Katherine was suffering from 'nerve-collapse' these days. They were both sick on and off all spring, and after a holiday in the New Forest Edith came down with rheumatic fever and nearly died of a heart attack. 'For days we are severed. She is away in wander-land,' wrote Katherine. She had to lift Edith's limbs to relieve the pain of the swelling, and give her water from a baby's bottle. Amy came to help with the night shifts. In her delirium Edith raved about 'the cocoa-queen' and 'the incorporated bulldogs'.

They enjoyed the convalescence; Edith always felt a great 'spaciousness' after a bad fever. 'My bride, my feast', Katherine called her in a poem. The doctor advised Edith not to attempt the strain of writing for a full year, but poems were flowing from her pen by July. In this mood, even John Ryan's visits were welcome. The Michaels were gradually getting used to his habit of praying during meals, and his appalling puns. He was 'loving & pleased at nonsense', they concluded at last, and 'Amy is happy with him'. At a dinner with the Painters to celebrate the first birthday of the new century, at which they all had two helpings of everything, Edith played a trick on Ricketts by means of an airtube under the cloth, making his plate wobble from side to side. But Ricketts said nothing, assuming it was all due to the champagne.

The mood changed in January 1901 with the news of the death of Queen Victoria and the fall of another cap stone at Stonehenge. They went into mourning: 'Henry is looking like a fresh, black iris.' Dutifully they gunned a picture of the new king Edward VII into their journal, but they were not optimistic about his reign. With such dangerous social tendencies as trade unions, godless science, the extension of the vote and the education of the poor, the twentieth century seemed like a new world of 'lice and scorpions,

all things of creeping filth and slime'. About the only modern inventions they welcomed were the electric drill, which reduced Edith's regular agonies in the dentist's chair, and the telephone. Edith was to write in 1905,

We have again talked through the telephone – oh, we need nothing but the voice to be to each other. All my Loved is in her generous laugh.

In 1901 the ten-year nation Census came around, and Edith was amused to find that the form did not accommodate same-sex couples.

Like Shannon, I write myself as head of a house, & like him entertain as guest or lodger the choicest of my sex – the Beloved One, Single & E – even as I am.

Ricketts, who frequently used Edith's face in his woodcuts, was now working on a miniature portrait of her which he intended to put in a pendant called Pegasus and give to Katherine; he got great vicarious pleasure out of their devotion, which seemed more absolute than Shannon's for him.

While the Painters were away in June 1901, a young poet who was 'house-dogging' for them, Thomas Sturge Moore, came to dinner. Tommy or the Albatross, as they nicknamed him, soon came to be one of their dearest friends. 'Tommy is awkward in body as a sturgeon,' commented Edith, 'but he has caviar inside him.' Edith was usually too shy to read her own poems aloud but on one of his six-hour visits Tommy managed to persuade her, and they encouraged him to read his own verse, dramas to them, at least until Whym Chow found the sound disturbing.

Shannon and Ricketts's Vale Press now brought out the second play of the Fields' Roman trilogy, *The Race of Leaves*, on gorgeously thick paper with Ricketts' dramatic woodcut decorations, a tide page featuring Janus the two-faced god, black and red lettering,

and a green cover with a motif of leaves. The play, mostly by Edith, set at the end of the second century, dramatizes the downfall of the grim Emperor Commodus, whose paranoia begins to seem justified when his sister tries to kill him. His mistress, Marcia, a murderer but also a troubled Christian, is one of the most interesting characters in this play full of bewilderingly complex alliances and rivalries.

In the spring of 1902 there were rats in Paragon. Was nothing sacred? The Michaels escaped to Rottingdean in Sussex for most of April. The worst of it was that the Painters were planning to move away from Richmond; they could not resist a rich patron's offer of spacious penthouse studios in Holland Park. The new place – which the Michaels coldly nicknamed 'The Palace' – was highly aesthetic, even down to its pingpong table, and was crammed with art and antiquities. Ricketts mollified the Poets by telling them that the lift would be strewn with roses whenever they – and Whym Chow – came to dinner.

He also came up with an irresistible subject for a new play: the rise and fall of Sabbatai, the seventeenth-century 'Turkish Messiah'. 'Unless we take the subject quickly,' the Michaels recorded, 'Fay "will give it to [Tommy Sturjel Moore", his usual threat.' They immediately started sketching out a tragedy about spiritual pride to be called *A Messiah*. Unusually for them, it is only three acts long, and written in a mixture of prose, blank verse and free verse, with choruses who speak in short, bare lines that anticipate the verse dramas of T. S. Eliot. It opens with a chorus of Rabbis watching the man who may be the messiah dip himself in the sea:

THE SEA IS COLD.

THE SEA IS VERY COLD.

THE SEA IS STARRY.

LIKE WOUNDS UPON THE SEA ARE THE LARGE STARS.

Sabbatai is one of their most playful, sensuous heroes; he delights

in grapes, coffee, biscuits, and feeds Turkish Delight to children. When captured, his nerve fails and he is forced to convert to Islam. *A Messiah* was a brave stylistic experiment, if not a consistently successful play; the Michaels left it unpublished.

Later in June 1902 Tommy brought along a dinner guest, the Irish poet and playwright William Butler Yeats. Yeats admitted to Edith and Katherine somewhat shyly and in great detail how much he had always admired their plays since his student days. For dinner they all wore wreaths of simlax (climbing asparagus). Edith thought Yeats rather too preachy, however, to be a kindred spirit. She recorded with some amusement how his nervous hands flopped about like flowerheads and his hair 'dribbled' on his forehead; she described how she itched to cut it with the grape-scissors. (They were far from charmed the following year when Yeats asked to see their tragedy *Deirdre* for possible staging by the Abbey; then turned it down, only to produce his own play of the same name in 1907.)

The year before, they had started seeing BB again after a gap of six years. He visited the haven of Paragon quite often these days, but they both found him disappointingly dull as a married man. 'Oh for the days when we discussed sex, & life, & love, & adultery,' sighed Katherine, 'when all things seemed possible – abolition of parents & husbands, duties & ties.'

They spent the summer of 1902 in the New Forest, where Cousin Francis turned up, ever his usual amenable self, even when they tied Whym's leash round his neck and dragged him 'round & round our great mahogany art-table, whisking the whip'. Then they spent October in Rottingdean, where Chow attacked a pet rabbit that belonged to the writer Rudyard Kipling, who lived nearby. They were only slightly sheepish when the rabbit died, and they called Chow 'a young hero'.

The Michaels were spurring themselves on to finish a play about

the old Cornish legend of Tristan and Iseult, called *The Tragedy of Pardon*. The heroine's kinswoman Brangaena substitutes herself for her beloved Iseult on the wedding night and submits to Mark's embraces. She even offers to take Iseult's place in a trial by ordeal that involves a branding iron. The Michaels give her an extraordinary speech about the egalitarian and sacred qualities of passion between women.

I CANNOT LET YOU GO. THERE IS LOVE
OF WOMAN UNTO WOMAN, IN ITS FIBRE
STRONGER THAN KNITS A MOTHER TO HER CHILD.
THERE IS NO LACK IN IT, AND NO DEFECT;
IT LOOKS NOR UP NOR DOWN;
BUT LOVES FROM PLENTITUDE TO PLENTITUDE,
WITH LEVEL EYES, AS IN THE TRINITY
GOD LOOKS ACROSS AND WORSHIPS.

As soon as it was finished they began working on a totally different play about the same story, *Tristan de Léonois*. Yseult (a different spelling to mark the new play) is married to Mark of Cornwall and has already been deserted by her lover Tristan when the tragedy begins. Disguised as a fool, Tristan visits the court; they die by drinking poison together. This play has less suspense and excitement than the first, but what it proves is the richness of the Michaels' imagination; they could create several different visions from the same story.

There was another tragic triangle up the road. On 22 January 1903, Shannon threatened to leave Ricketts and marry his latest model and lover, Herry Deacon, known as 'Smudge'. Still careful even in his misery, Ricketts recorded the conversation in discreet Italian in his diary and said nothing to the Michaels. He used every possible argument to persuade Shannon to stay: how, for instance, could they possibly divide up their art collection?

Ricketts worked harder than ever; he did yet another editing job

on the Michaels' next play, *Julia Donna*, cutting out some of the 'art words' they were so addicted to, before his Vale Press published it in April 1903. Mostly written by Edith, this Oedipal sequel to *The World at Auction* is one of their most powerful and frightening plays. The clarity of its story and theme – two fatherless sons fighting for their mother's love – allows for an exploration of the bonds of blood that goes deeper than cliché. Not only can the widowed Empress Julia not prevent disaster between her sons Caracalla and Geta, but she brings it on, by persuading them to stay with her rather than move apart to a safe distance.

HOW WILL YOU DIVIDE
YOUR MOTHER, HOW WILL SHE BE TORN ASUNDER
AND SHARED BETWEEN YOU?

Caracalla ends up stabbing Geta to death in her arms. But the worst thing for Julia is the realization that she cannot have Caracalla even now; maternal love is not something holy, but 'a foul canker' in her heart. 'We have no past', Caracalla tells her, with the frightening confidence of a baby; 'Mother and only son as on the day / You gave me birth.'

This riveting play got no critical attention – at this point, critics were simply ignoring anything with 'Michael Field' on the cover – but the beauty of the edition delighted Katherine and Edith. The Vale Press, however, had never recovered from its losses in a big fire two years before; Ricketts had finally to wind it up in June 1903. At least his other misery seemed to be over. Shannon was to keep up a sporadic affair with Herry Deacon for another four years, but there was no more talk of marriage. That summer Ricketts sent the Michaels some wonderfully camp postcards from the Continent: 'Have no wide notepaper on which to write bluff and manly letter.'

After a visit to Avebury – where Edith was very tempted to burn the village to the ground so that nothing would obscure the standing

stones – they went back to Surrey, where the Berensons had established a sort of literary colony at Mary's parents' house in Haslemere. Mary borrowed some pictures from her brother Logan, without asking, to make a nearby cottage beautiful enough for the Michaels to stay there. They walked in the fields talking philosophy with the Harvard professor George Santayana. Berenson teased them by revealing that literary London nicknamed them Gog and Magog (the two legendary giants) and the Scarlet Women. (This last phrase, with its overtones of sexual scandal, probably referred to their plays rather than their love-life, which few would have guessed about.) One day BB finally made Edith a halfhearted apology for his past behaviour: 'I did not suppose you owed me any rancour for the little fracas that happened years ago?' But 'he left me cold,' she wrote, 'I really must do something to hurt Bernhard,' Katherine noted later in the year.

The Michaels had grown to love one of the borrowed pictures in their cottage, a painting on silk. They assumed that Logan had discarded it, and so they took it home with them, as Logan wrote later with tongue-in-cheek tolerance, 'in pious obedience to that law of possession, which, inscribed in Heaven, if not on earth, decrees that objects of beauty belong to those who love them best'. At the time he was less philosophical, and insisted that Mary get it back for him, which caused a breach; the Michaels took years to forgive him for this 'meanness'. They were retreating further and further into eccentricity, a society of two.

In July they had made their wills. Ricketts told them gloomily that to get your papers into the British Library, 'You must be a mummy or George Eliot.' (He would have been very amused to learn that fifty years later, scholars would travel to the British Library's Manuscript Room to pore over the collected Ricketts, Shannon and Michael Field papers.) The Michaels had decided to honour Tommy Sturge Moore by making him their executor, but they were as horrified as Ricketts to hear that Tommy was secretly engaged to his cousin Marie Appia. 'It breaks up that little celebrate [sic]

company,' Edith wrote, 'and we lose a friend for no man who is married can be a friend.'

But they all rose to the occasion. Ricketts made Marie a stunning jewelled pendant of Psyche descending into Hades, which can be seen as his sly comment on marriage. In 1904, with his usual extraordinary generosity, he designed for Katherine a magnificent mosque-shaped 'Sabbatai ring', inspired by the jewel supposed to have been given to the hero of their play *A Messiah*, to convert him to Islam. These days Ricketts was reading Baudelaire; the Michaels found the 'Femmes Damnées' poems (about passion between women) impressive, though rather over the top. The Painters and Poets discussed how high breasts should be held in a corset.

At Easter, instead of eggs, the Michaels gave each other fine cigarettes and perfume. Early summer saw them in Rotingdean again, walking with Whyhm and restoring their health with 'good milk puddings'. But what was on their mind was something much spicier. Diane de Poitiers was twenty years older than her lover, Henri II of France; the Michaels represented her as a sexy, white-haired widow, one of their best heroines. Though Diane: *Queen of Earth and Heaven and Hell* centres on the contrast between her and the young, embittered, unloved Queen Catherine de Medici, it is not a cat fight; Diane does try to be a friend to Catherine, though in the best tradition of tragedy it all goes horribly, and mysteriously, wrong.

In a series of letters, Ricketts sent a scenario for a drag tragedy called *Giuliano*, or, *Neuer, Neuer Let Us Part*, suggesting they might act it in masks in the Sun Room at Paragon, with Ricketts as Diane (in a mask of silver lace), Katherine as the old King François (pink satin), Edith as Catherine de Medici (black velvet), and Shannon as 'the shut door'. They should exclude all 'inferior married people' from the cast – and, come to think of it, exclude the audience too, since 'art is selfsufficient'.

On a more serious note, though, the Michaels needed a publisher, now the Vale Press had closed. 'God will provide a publisher as he provided a ram for Isaac,' Katherine wrote with grim faith. She asked George Meredith to use his influence in the cause of their five plays which 'must be published', but he could do nothing for her.

In January 1905, Ricketts bullied the politically inert Michaels into getting involved in a protest over the arrest of the Russian writer Maxim Gorky, who was threatened with execution. But Katherine and Edith were more engrossed in another contemporary story of execution. Ras Byzance was an Ethiopian leader who killed his wife and her servants because he suspected her of adultery. The newspaper clipping that alerted the Michaels to the story called it 'A Modern Othello', and indeed, *Ras Byzance*, the stage play Edith wrote in ten days (and it shows), is so feebly reminiscent of *Othello* that a reader would never guess that either the story or writing belonged to the twentieth century.

The Painters wrote from Rome, where Ricketts was giggly with relief; by accident (or perhaps as an unconscious punishment for the 'Smudge' affair?) he had given Shannon eight times the prescribed dose of 'strickneen' for his fever, but Shannon had somehow recovered. In another rather ludicrous health crisis, all the Michaels' doves died of leprosy. Ricketts was very sympathetic, and bought them some more for Easter. But he and Shannon had less patience with those spoilt, barking dogs. Ricketts made frequent jokes about slaughtering them; accepting an invitation to dinner in May, he hinted that 'my lips would relish above all things a Chow ragout in pagoda sauce'.

Back in 1899 he had urged the Michaels to write a play about the Italian Renaissance, with all those 'characters with rich honey & wicked old wine in them'. Once, chatting about the Borgias, Ricketts acted out his fantasy of Pope Alexander as an aesthete, fondling a chestful of pearls. This bit of nonsense became a key image in

the Michaels' next play, *Borgia*. This steamy, tangled play has a huge cast list of forty-two speaking parts as well as extras, and suffers from a fracturing of the reader's attention and sympathies.

Ricketts was disappointed by this play, but Katherine had learned a crucial lesson from her soured friendship with the Berensons.

I don't care a straw what you think of Borgia or any other damned play – in comparison with the good of our being 'very pleasant to each other' – like David & Jonathan.

(What a perfectly homoerotic image for this friendship between a male 'Fairymán' and a female 'Michael'!) Supportive despite his reservations about the play, Ricketts now came up with a great idea. The Michaels should shed their awful reputation by self-publishing *Borgia* anonymously. Ricketts provided the artwork, and sent Tommy Sturge Moore as the intermediary to ask a new publisher – A. H. Bullen – to set his name to it. This simple trick on the critics worked brilliantly. It is ironic that *Borgia*, though one of their worst plays, was the first for many years to get reviews, and a few good ones among them.

After Tommy Sturge Moore, Francis Brooks now had the temerity to get engaged. Though in theory the Michaels could only approve (as they believed 'the unmarried are shelterless & deserted'), they could not help feeling that Katherine had lost her only beau and Edith her best listener. They enjoyed John and Amy's company this summer – he was called 'brother' now, who had once been such an enemy – but the Ryans moved to Dublin in July. The Michaels felt too isolated in September's foul weather to keep a diary.

The Painters were much better at keeping their chins up. When Ricketts's goldfish, Big Ben and Little Billie, both died in October, he sent the Michaels a flippancy letter containing a Chinese ode on each fish, with a cartoon of the Dark Angel bearing the two away on a plate. The Poets replied with a Monty-Pythonesque fantasy

of 'St Ricketts' restoring the dead to life: 'the fish is not dead, but swooneth'.

Against Ricketts' advice, the Michaels were writing two plays of a planned trilogy about Herod of Israel (persecutor of the Baby Jesus). In their plays he is a moody, schizoid tyrant who puts away his first wife, an Arabian with the unlikely name of Doris, to take a second, Mariamme, whose grandfather he promptly murders. Herod's libido is as nomadic as his conscience, and *Queen Mariamme* is marked by a strong, homoerotic strain in his feelings for his wife's beautiful young brother Aristobulus, whom he watches swimming:

CARESS ME, O MY DEAR . . .

O PLUNGED SWAN . . .

DIVE DOWN IN THE WATER!

YOU DAZZLE ME TOO MUCH.

Whereupon, of course, he has the boy drowned. In the second play, *The Accuser*, he has Mariamme put to death, and takes back the powerful white-haired Doris, together with her son Antipater – whose name should surely give his father some hint of danger.

In January 1906 Whyhm Chow seemed sluggish, which the vet blamed on constipation; 'Whack him, Michael,' advised Ricketts.

This month Katherine met someone who was to prove a crucial new friend: John Gray. His career had paralleled the Michaels', but somehow they had never met. In the 1880s and 90s he had been a dandy and Decadent poet in the Ricketts circle, and a friend and probably lover of Wilde, who took him as the model for the hero of his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) and paid for the printing of Gray's first collection, *Silverpoints* (1893) – praised by one sardonic critic for the beauty of its margins. Just two years later Gray began to change his life by buying up copies of *Silverpoints* and destroying them. He formed a lifelong partnership with the

Michaels' old acquaintance Marc-André Raffalovich, who had argued in *Uranisme et Unisexualité* (1896) that homosexuals were born, not made, but should sublimate their feelings into friendship. In 1898 Gray became a priest, which Ricketts told all round town as a runny story. Ricketts finally introduced Katherine to the 'rosy', golf-playing Canon Gray at the Palace on 26 January 1906.

She went home that night and found Whyhm Chow walking into walls. Eight years old, he was suddenly blind and in great pain, evidently 'stricken of some awful brain disease'. She and Edith nursed him round the clock, and wrote to Ricketts of their terror. Two days later, they decided to have Whyhm put down. Katherine wanted it to be done with one clean bullet, but guns were forbidden in Richmond; after six hours of bungled efforts with sleeping draughts, he died. By terrible luck, it was just then that they received Ricketts' answer to their last letter; he told them he was sick of their 'morbid preoccupation' with the petty illnesses of their spoiled pet. 'Well may he be jealous,' Edith raged; 'Michael & I love Chow as we have loved no human being.'

On 1 February they buried Whyhm Chow under the altar of Dionysus in the garden, with an eclectic service that included one of John Gray's Catholic poems; Katherine wore a black hat with horse plumes. They went to Rottingdean for a break, but every walk, retraced in floods of tears, reminded them of the dog. Parodic odes were all very well for Ricketts' goldfish, but for Whyhm Chow they began writing an entire book of poems, published years later in a terracotta suede limited edition under the unabashed title, *Whyhm Chow: Flame of Love*. Any reader expecting sentimental Victorian pet poems will be unnerved by this collection, in which Whyhm features as sex symbol and god made flesh, the masculine principle joined with their womanhood in a mystic trinity. Just as they had reinterpreted James Cooper as soon as they lost him, so the Michaels rewrote the death of this 'doomed little wanderer' as a Christ-like sacrifice. They claimed that the intensity of his love had caused his

five to be 'consumed' after only eight years, and that he was now their 'guardian angel' or spirit guide.

Condolence letters poured in. Logan Pearsall Smith recalled thirty years later how his sister Mary Berenson sat up till four in the morning trying to write an adequately sad letter, but her brisk advice on good places abroad where they might cheer up seemed 'barbaric' to Edith. She and Katherine were having a sort of joint breakdown. Months later Ricketts complained that the Michaels' letters were still 'stilled & lacrymose'. He was going through a dreadful time himself, because Shannon was in love with a model again – the twenty-six-year-old free-spirited sculptor Kathleen Bruce, who was looking for the ideal man to father the son she longed for. 'What should I do if Shannon got married?' Ricketts wrote in his diary later that year. The Michaels had no idea about this anxiety which preyed on his nerves. His letter to them of 9 April is a strange mixture of the irritated ('I won't listen to any more laments') and the whimsical ('slay the fatted muffin in anticipation of my return'). They responded with rage to what Edith called his 'sulphurous & vile jeering', and for two months it looked like this friendship, central to all their lives, might fall apart. Then at the end of June, Katherine and Edith paid a visit to Shannon and Ricketts, all being very careful with each other.

In August they made the first of their trips to see the Ryans in Dublin. They came home via Scotland, so Edith could be introduced to John Gray and Marc-André Raffalovich in Edinburgh. Canon Gray, whose past had overlapped with the Michaels', could understand their hunger for something more, now Whym Chow was dead, some consolation no human friend could give. With his discreetly homoerotic side, he was the perfect bridge between two pagan lesbians and an institution they had been raised to loathe: the Roman Catholic Church.

In retrospect, their conversion seems inevitable. As Katherine and Edith saw it, Whym Chow's divine sacrifice of his life had made

them understand that of Jesus, and won them salvation. To put it another way, it could be said that the Michaels were so lonely and isolated after their dog's death that they needed a new kind of ready-made family. But why should such free spirits have picked one of the most authoritarian and repressive churches around?

Dionysiac ritual was not enough for them; it had no real structure, offered no company, and could not tell them how to live their lives. Though Katherine had attended the Anglican Church sporadically over the years, it had always seemed to both of them rather wishy-washy and hollow, an altar with nothing on it. Whereas the Roman Catholic Church appealed to their sense of drama and sacred ritual, as well as offering a clear, disciplined and sociable path to heaven. It was ancient and regal; its décor, all gold and incense, could have come straight out of one of their plays. It promised a God they could literally bow down to and take into their mouths, as well as real communion with the dead; it demanded absolute surrender in return.

Such a conversion was also highly fashionable. Victorian women writers and 'inverts' of both sexes, in particular, were turning Catholic in their droves. Literary lesbians who made the crossing in the early twentieth century included Radclyffe Hall and Una Troubridge, René Vivien and Violet Shilero, 'Tony' Arwood and 'Christopher' St John, and Alice B. Toklas. Being Catholic in England meant becoming slightly foreign, aloof from the establishment; as a church it was associated with the rich and the poor, but definitely not the bourgeoisie. And although Catholic women were meant to be subordinate to men, they could also devote themselves to the barely veiled goddess-cult of the Virgin Mary. 'O virgin life, O vowed and deep secluded / O angel-sung!' wrote the Michaels a few years later. Suddenly being spinsters was something holy.

Their journals, from the winter of 1906 on, are a sort of spiritual travel diary. Edith decided to move her birthday from 12 January to 29 October (Whym Chow's birthday), to mark the dog's role

as 'God's Minister' in her life. By December 1906 they were going to Mass regularly, reading a Latin Missal (early nineteenth-century Venetian, of course) and recording their amazement that the year of their 'worst loss' was also the time of their greatest 'marvel'.

Although converting to Catholicism was yet another way for the Michaels to remain united, each needed to make the journey on her own. Katherine's confessor (a priest who would advise her as well as hearing her Confession) was Father Vincent McNabb, an Irish Dominican. Edith hated him on sight for his 'supercilious hardness', but within a month he had become 'the great Vincent', a dear figure in his big black cloak. McNabb was an easygoing man who used to annoy them by giggling in church; he assured Katherine that 'the Church welcomes poets' and supported the Michaels as a couple, writing after their deaths of their unique 'fellowship in life and love'. Edith's confessor at the local Vineyard Church in Richmond was a young curate from Amiens in Northern France, Father Gossannon, which she soon shortened to 'Goss' or 'Gossie'. A skinny, ~~lively~~ moody man with beautiful mangle-hands, whose vestments were always too short, he 'broke me in and trained me'; she reported. Had they met 'in the world', she admitted years later, there would have been 'attraction' between them. The confession box provided a safe setting for the kind of intense, flirtatious friendship both the Michaels liked to have with men; the Church had solved the problem of friendship between the sexes, Edith wrote playfully, because 'the Priest is Man on Woman's terms'. There was 'no love lost' between McNabb and Goss, which the Michaels found quite amusing. And for extra advice and consolation they both had John Gray, whom Katherine nicknamed 'Father Silverpoints' so he would never forget their shared past. John Ryan was an influence not only on them but on his wife: Amy, in Dublin, made the decision to convert at exactly the same time, Easter 1907.

But the Michaels still had last-minute worries. They knew they would have to surrender many things, in particular the freedom to decide on the rightness of things for themselves. As usual, Edith

was the only one who dared write down anything about their sex life. She referred to 'my secret sins' obliquely on 9 April: how could she speak to Father Goss of the anguish of the 3rd, 4th & 5th Verses of *Femmes Damnées*? Baudelaire's two 1857 poems of that name were banned in France till 1947. In the verses in question in the longer of the poems, the nervous younger woman, Hippolyte, is described as weeping, whereas her seducer, Delphine, is shown '*étendue à ses pieds, calme et pleine de joie*' ('stretched at her feet, calm and satisfied'). By the time we reach verse thirteen, Hippolyte has mustered enough strength to ask whether they have committed '*une action étrange*' ('a peculiar act'), but Delphine soothes her conscience, and the women end the poem in an eternal, though damned, embrace.

This might seem like a strange allusion for Edith, whose sense of her bond with Katherine had always seemed so joyful, but now she was entering a Church which said that all sex outside marriage was sinful. The problem was whether Goss was educated enough to pick up the reference to Baudelaire, or would she have to spell it out? 'And I know he thinks I have to confess forbidden relations to men,' she wrote in exasperation, 'with whom the relations of my lifetime have been abstract & blameless.'

On 12 April Edith panicked and sent Katherine running off to tell Goss to cancel the baptism scheduled for the 19th. 'There is nothing this young seminarist might not misconceive ... even our Sacred Relation to each other!' Confused, but kind, Goss persuaded her to calm down. Before her first Confession, Edith prayed 'that the Christ so exquisite to women may inform my young Confessor'. In fact it was a very soothing, general Confession. Edith made a 'vow of chastity' as a gift to God at this time, and Goss did not probe. Katherine made her own first Confession and, as Edith recorded with a little defiance,

comes straight down the Church to me, bearing a kiss ready
on her lips . . . while the Priest prays she presses the kiss home
with a brave sound . . . The Priest heard.

In those days, priests seem to have had no objection to such loving
converts, or such audible kisses.

Edith was baptized by Goss at the Vineyard Church in Richmond
on 19 April 1907. Amy, in Dublin, followed suit on 1 May. Katherine
waited till Gray could receive her on 8 May (the feast of St Michael)
at his new church in Edinburgh. Only then did she write to Ricketts.

*Being a serpent & so wise I trust this news will not startle
you; for you must have seen how 'the ruddy Mass Book' has
been with us all the winter . . . I invoke your Catholic mother
of the many lovely names to plead with you to be glad.*

Ricketts was shocked, but sent gallant congratulations; he would
only resent their conversion, he wrote, if he found his seat in
Paragon usurped by the '*chers pères*' ('dear fathers', i.e. priests).
Despite being an atheist, he threw himself into helping his friends
accessorize; he gave them his mother's coral rosary, portable
candlesticks, a crucifix and a small Spanish reliquary with fragments
of the True Cross. On one of his later visits Edith absently called
him 'Father', which he found hilarious. Ricketts was feeling
very relieved in 1907, as Kathleen Bruce had decided against
marrying Shannon, having met a much more impressive father for
her unborn children: Captain Robert Scott. (She had the son she
always wanted, and shared her husband's adventurous life for a
couple of years before he died in a tent near the South Pole in
March 1912.)

In one sense, the Michaels' conversion can be seen as a disaster.
Instead of spending their days thinking about art and love, they
now fretted over the finer points of Catholic theology, such as
whether Edith might be allowed to bend the rules of fasting because

of her difficulty digesting fish. But on the other hand, 'Sancta' or
'Holy Mother Church' was like a new lover to Katherine and Edith:
'our whole lives are filled with happiness because of her', they
insisted. Just after her baptism, Katherine wrote Edith this short
poem.

BELOVED, NOW I LOVE GOD FIRST
THERE IS FOR THEE SUCH SUMMER BURST
WHERE IT WAS STIRRING SPRING BEFORE,
LO, FOR THY FEET A BLOSSOM-FLOOR!

PATIENCE! A LITTLE WHILE TO WAIT
TILL I POSSESS MY NEW ESTATE,
THEN TO ASSUME THY GLORIOUS PART
IN MY ENRICHED AND FEASTING HEART.

It took patience, and flexibility, but their love did weather this great
change. Like many long-term couples who do not have sex anymore,
the Michaels remained extraordinarily intimate. They still had
breakfasts in bed 'for revel', and romantic holidays. On 7 December
1907 in Confession, Edith had to admit to 'shameless dallings
with most perilous temptation, all the more base & ungrateful as,
since I entered the Holy Catholic Church, I have never fallen into
fleshly sin'. Goss took this calmly and advised her to focus on the
purity of the Virgin Mary.

Another likeable thing about their conversion was that they did
not write off their past as one long sojourn in the wilderness. There
was some breast-beating over their Decadent days, but mostly they
saw their pagan worship as having been a helpful preparation for
the real thing. They kept on writing, though literature was no
longer quite at the centre of their lives. Edith claimed that it helped
her poetry to have a meaningful focus, rather like being in love.
Their 1908 collection, *Wild Honey from Various Thyms*, mixed
poems from the 1890s (on nature, classical themes and love) with
new religious ones. Despite his protestation that he could not draw

bees, Ricketts designed them a honeycomb cover for this book which contains some of their best work, especially Katherine's sequence of sonnets on James's death in the forest. Another very moving poem begins:

LORD LOVE. TO THY GREAT ALTAR I RETIRE;
TIME DOTH PURSUE ME, AGE IS ON MY BROW,
AND THERE ARE CRILES AND SHADOWS OF THE NIGHT.
TRANSFORM ME, FOR I CANNOT QUIT THEE NOW.

In many ways life went on as normal after the Michaels' conversion. They were more cheerful – except when they wept during Confession – and less isolated. They went to Dublin yearly, and in 1908 they visited the Berensons in Italy, where Mary made them a portfolio of Italian religious paintings – 'In this way even a heathen may be helpful', she commented ruefully. Their old acquaintance Will Rothenstein came back into their lives in 1906, and the Michaels grew very close to 'Billy' and his wife and child.

They went on many retreats to convents – despite their dislike of nuns – and Katherine visited workhouses, where she caused one deathbed conversion which gave Edith a pang of 'spiritual envy'. But they also still enjoyed choosing hats, and good food. Even when in 1910 they became Dominican tertiaries (like lay nuns), they got a special dispensation to keep going to the theatre. They also remained interested in current affairs, such as the dreadful 1906 scheme to build a 'Channel Tunnel' between Britain and France. (They need not have worried so prematurely, as the 'Chunnel' did not open till 1994.)

In January 1909 they received a feverish scrawl from Amy – still 'our Little One' in her mid-forties. Pneumonia, in those days, had no treatment but aspirin and morphine. Katherine and Edith made the gruelling journey to Dublin by train and boat; as the Ryans' house was full, they stayed at a hotel, where they were bewildered by the strangeness of electric light in their bedroom. 'The nurse-fiend'

insisted that the shock of their arrival would harm Amy, so for several days they had to creep about the house, rearranging the withered flowers, whispering to 'Johnnie'. When they finally insisted on going in, Amy was overjoyed to see them, but her breath sounded 'like flight on flight of warlike arrows', wrote Edith, making an Amazon of her dying sister. Again, the nurse tried to make them leave husband and wife alone together, but John had already arranged the deathbed: Katherine was to hold Amy's hand, and Edith was to sit directly in her line of vision to the last.

His generosity lasted past Amy's death. 'John wants to bring her back to us,' wrote Edith. Crowds of the poor Amy had helped fled in to pay their respects, and then 'the new trio' set off for the boat to England with Amy's body shrouded in a nun's habit. They buried her in Mortlake cemetery in Richmond. Edith was briefly racked with guilt for neglecting her sister all her life, and distressing her with her 'modernism'; she cried so much that she went blind for a while in February. But even when Musico the Bassethound died later in the spring, their losses did not shatter the Michaels as they would have in the pre-conversion days. The Church provided a structure both for grief and the hope of meeting again, and Katherine had an unorthodox faith that 'of course there are dogs in our Father's House – & pleasant baying sounds'.

These days they had enough spirit and humour to weather health crises and the financial horrors caused by Edith's income being tied up in probate with her sister's (and also John wanting to break Amy's will in order to give more to charity). They sent a self-mocking invitation to the Rothensteins:

*'We are gradually gathering together the teeth, glasses, wigs,
and complexions that may enable us again to greet our friends.'*

Just as they held onto their non-Catholic friends, so they were still proud of their pre-Catholic writings. They were sometimes a little embarrassed by them, but made no attempt at self-censorship;

in fact, with McNabb's encouragement they got around to publishing several more plays from the bottom drawer. As he assured them, 'it is by truthful expression of the whole of our lives that the value of our conversion is assured'; theirs was a story with a holy ending. Using the persona of 'the author of *Borgia*', a nameless, reclusive male, they published *Queen Marianne* in 1908, and arranged to bring out five more (*The Tragedy of Pardon*, *Diane*, *The Accuser*, *Tristan de Léonois* and *A Messiah*) in 1911. A clever preface claimed that 'the author of *Borgia*' had died in Rome after years of illness and was buried in an unmarked grave, but hinted that further 'hidden manuscripts' of his might yet 'be found, like a squirrel's hoard'. Probably they planned to publish their four remaining pre-Catholic plays, but then to turn to the great work of writing plays for God. Now, as they saw it, their new career could begin.

Mortal, if thou art beloved'

Mortal, if thou art beloved
Life's offences are removed:
All the fateful things that checked thee
Hearten, hallow and protect thee.
Grow'st thou mellow? What is age?
Tinct on life's illumined page,
Where the purple letters glow
Deeper, painted long ago.
What is sorrow? Comfort's prime,
Love's choice Indian summer-clime.
Sickness? Thou wilt pray it worse
For so blessed, balmy nurse.
And for death? When thou art dying
Twill be love beside thee lying.
Death is lonesome? Oh, how brave
Shows the foot-frequented grave!
Heaven itself is but the casket
For love's treasure, ere he ask it,
Ere with burning heart he follow,
Piercing through corruption's hollow.
If thou art beloved, oh then
Fear no grief of mortal men!

Underneath the Bough (1893)