Masked Atheism
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Published by The Ohio State University Press

LaMonaca, Maria.
Masked Atheism: Catholicism and the Secular Victorian Home.
The Ohio State University Press, 2008.
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According to scholars of nineteenth-century anti-Catholicism, the Victorian preoccupation with Rome was a rather neatly contained phenomenon. E. R. Norman and D. G. Paz argue that anti-Catholic politics and sentiment declined dramatically after the 1870s due to a “waning of all religious feeling in English society” (Norman 20) and the “rise of alternative sources of entertainment” (Paz 300). In a similar vein, Susan Griffin interprets the relative scarcity of anti-Catholic themes in late-nineteenth-century fiction as a symptom of secularism, as well as a shared cultural sense that “[Catholicism’s] threat has so far weakened that that it offers neither such deep gratifications nor such decided terrors” (214). With the fade of anti-Catholic sentiment, one might be left with the impression that Catholicism itself didn’t matter anymore. This study argues that secularism, rather than emerging at the end of the century to quell Victorians’ obsession with Catholicism, functioned as a powerful ingredient in popular responses to the Church of Rome throughout the entire century. In this final chapter of Masked Atheism, I wish to emphasize, moreover, the continuing importance and relevance of Catholicism for fin de siècle writers and aesthetes. As Emma Donoghue has suggested, Catholicism continued to provide writers with a vantage point well removed from the social status quo: “Being Catholic in [early-twentieth-century] England meant becoming slightly foreign, aloof from the establishment; as a church
it was associated with the rich and the poor, but definitely not with the bourgeoisie” (124).

Ellis Hanson’s *Decadence and Catholicism* adroitly demonstrates how “Roman Catholicism is central to both the stylistic peculiarities and the thematic preoccupations of the decadents” (5), emphasizing, in particular, their exploration of “the powerful historical relationship between homoeroticism and Roman Catholicism” (24). Far less attention, however, has been given to female aesthetes and their engagements with Roman Catholicism. While this topic can (and ought to) inspire the writing of a future book, my purpose here will be to consider how the Catholicism of fin de siècle writers Michael Field (Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper) might situate them within the larger group of Victorian women writers discussed in this book.

Michael Field presents a special challenge because they seem, at first glance, so resistant to being “Victorianized.” Field critics demonstrate a curious inclination to discuss Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper as completely severed from a Victorian context and/or exclusively within the context of male decadent writers. Indeed, one might puzzle at length over any similarity between the novels of conventionally pious Lady Georgiana Fullerton—the only other Catholic convert discussed at length in this study—and the “bacchic,” pagan, homoerotically charged works of the Fields. When one turns to the Fields’ largely unpublished journal, *Works and Days*, however, two overlapping threads tie it to conventional preoccupations of earlier female authors: spirituality and the home.

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1. Although Michael Field is a good place to begin, as recent analyses of the Fields’ Catholicism by Frederick Roden and Marion Thain demonstrate. See chapter 7 of Roden’s *Same-Sex Desire in Victorian Religious Culture* (2002), and Thain’s chapter on the Fields, “’Damnable Aestheticism’ and the Turn to Rome” (in *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem* edited by Joseph Bristow [2005]). Martha Vicinus, in *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women: 1778–1928*, also discusses the Fields’ conversion, but implies that it had a deleterious effect on their poetry.

2. Michael Field, argues Angela Leighton, in *Victorian Women Poets*, “belongs altogether outside the tradition of Victorian women’s verse” (204); “It is as if [their] poems exist in an atmosphere altogether outside the moral and ideological structures of the age” (225). Julia Saville, in “The Poetic Imaging of Michael Field” (in *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem*), highlights the Fields’ “determination to engage shoulder to shoulder in debate with leading male intellectuals” (178) of their time, while Thain discusses the Fields’ conversion to Rome within the context of their friendship and correspondence with priest and former Decadent poet John Gray.

3. *Works and Days* is the handwritten, twenty-eight-volume diary chronicling the Fields’ life together from 1888 to their deaths in 1914. (This refers to volumes 2 through 29 of the thirty volumes of Field diary material, now held in the British Library. Volume 1 is authored by Bradley alone, and records her trip to Paris in 1868–69. Volume 30 contains miscellaneous material removed from earlier volumes. Following the Fields’ instructions, executor Tommy Sturge Moore opened the journals fifteen years after their deaths and published, in 1933, selected entries and letters to form “a connected biography” (qtd. in Donoghue 143). Moore’s compila-
treatment of such themes is, naturally, far from conventional. An analysis of selected portions of *Works and Days* suggests that, while the Fields were surprisingly reliant on the Victorian notion of sacred domesticity, their embrace of Catholicism helped them to preserve their sense of home as sacred space, even as they confronted loss, chaos, and meaninglessness in the death of their adored dog, Whym Chow.

A brief glance at one of the Fields’ fellow writers and Catholic contemporaries, Alice Meynell, throws into relief the variety of ways Catholicism might have related to authorial identity at the fin de siècle. Recent scholarship on both Alice Meynell and Michael Field includes considerations of

![Figure 6.1. Katherine Bradley (Michael Field) with Whym Chow. Reprinted with permission of the English Province of the Order of Preachers](image-url)
the influence of Catholicism on their poetry. For both Meynell and the Fields, however, authorial identity was as carefully crafted as anything they wrote and published. For each author, this act of creation was particularly vexed in a period when traditional ideals of the Angel in the House coexisted uneasily with the iconoclastic New Woman. Talia Schaeffer suggests that Meynell’s “most successful act of literary creation” was “her own angelic reputation” (162). In her book The Forgotten Female Aesthetes, Schaeffer discusses how Meynell, to whom Coventry Patmore entrusted his original manuscript of the “Angel in the House” (Schaeffer 169), in fact struggled to negotiate a delicate compromise between the two dominant female models of the fin-de-siècle, apparently proving to her admirers that “New Womanism and traditional femininity could merge seamlessly” (161). In an interpretation of Patmore’s poem published in 1921, Meynell, as Schaeffer argues, “revises the Angel into a strong, vengeful, prophetic male. Here we see Meynell taking charge of her own idealized role, super-intending its transformation into something more relevant for the modern world” (169).5

There appears a general consensus among critics that Meynell’s Catholic identity helped to soften her modern edge and contributed—either directly or indirectly—to her image as a living, breathing Household Angel. Schaeffer, for example, suggests that the Angel in the House “conveys Meynell’s Catholic piety” (163), whereas Vanessa Furse Jackson ties the poet’s Catholicism to her creative qualities of “restraint, intellection, and detachment,” qualities rendering her popular as “a poet who reassured and reinforced cherished, threatened values” (460). Given Catholicism’s association at midcentury with all things irreligious and antidomestic, however, the notion of Catholicism as a bolster to Meynell’s angelic image is somewhat surprising. It could be, perhaps, that Meynell’s admirers apotheosized her despite her Catholicism, just as they overlooked her chaotic housekeeping and her abstracted, unsentimental attitude toward her seven children.6 Or, perhaps Meynell’s case supports Susan Griffin’s argument

4. Many scholars, such as Angela Leighton, Talia Schaeffer, Vanessa Furse Jackson, and Ana Parejo Vadillo at least mention Catholicism as significant to Meynell’s poetry and value system; more sustained discussions of Catholicism and Meynell’s poetry include those by John S. Anson (1986) and F. Elizabeth Gray (2003). Thain’s and Roden’s reassessments of the Fields’ religious writings (as texts evincing “a dynamic as exhilarating as that found in their earlier work” [Thain 313]) include close readings of selected “postconversion” poems.

5. Schaeffer quotes Meynell’s review directly: “[I]t is possible that this early poem [Patmore’s “Angel in the House”] is contemned because the reader takes the ‘Angel’ to be the woman, and an angel obviously feminine is a kind of sentimentality. But I prefer to take the ‘Angel’ to be Love” (169).

6 Schaeffer observes that “Meynell’s abstraction from household affairs never interfered with her status as the incarnation of housewifery. Instead, admirers transmuted Meynell’s
that Catholicism, by the end of the nineteenth century, comes to signify (in fiction, at least) a “relic” of religion, or religious nostalgia, rather than a threat to religion itself. “The Church of Rome that earlier narratives warn the Protestant faithful against,” she argues, “is now recast as attraction to a limited and limiting comfort that the modern culture of disbelief cannot offer” (214). Part of the appeal of Meynell’s public persona was a shared sense that the Household Angel was itself a “relic” of bygone times, so Griffin’s observation about Catholicism in late-nineteenth-century novels might be usefully applied to Meynell’s act of self-construction as well.

Meynell’s careful cultivation of her public persona indicates how important a feminine aura was, even at the dawn of the Modern era, for the woman writer. While the creation of this palatable angelic identity was difficult for Meynell, for the Fields it was downright impossible. The Fields’ adoption of a single, male pseudonym and their strenuous attempts to conceal their true identities were, on one hand, a straightforward attempt to bracket sex as a factor in the public reception of their writings. One might also consider, however, how much more difficult it would be for the Fields, two aging spinster sisters, to play the role(s) of Household Angel. And, of course, that wasn’t all. While Bradley and Cooper’s sexual relationship may have escaped close public scrutiny at the turn of the century, the modern reader of Works and Days finds a chronicle of a domestic life that would have utterly scandalized Victorians had they been able to read it. Even in 1922, in the first biography of the Fields, author Mary Sturgeon glosses over unconventional aspects of Bradley and Cooper’s relationship, implying, finally, that their bond most closely resembled that of mother and child.\(^7\) She does not, of course, include diary passages such as the following:

\begin{quote}
As for the Love + me—we are tenfold more to each other [. . .]. We are re-united in our desire to publish, we are much more united in our walk + all airy pleasures. We are each more of a bodily sweetness together as
\end{quote}

\(^7\) “But of [Katherine’s] devotion to [Edith], its passion, its depth, its tenacity and tenderness, it is quite impossible to speak adequately. From Henry’s [Edith’s] infancy to her death—literally, from her first day to her last—Michael [Katherine] shielded, tended, and nurtured her in body and spirit. Probably there never was another such case of one mind being formed by another” (45).
we breathe a close life together. I only want always to have my beloved
beyond escape [. . .]. God keep us inseparable! (Edith on New Year’s Eve, 1904, 202)8

Frequently in the journal volumes prior to Bradley’s and Cooper’s
conversions to Roman Catholicism in 1907, the Fields describe themselves
and their lives together as “bacchic” and “pagan.” Earnest Victorians would
have agreed; ultimately, the journals document a domestic existence that
would have resembled, in the eyes of staunch Protestant Victorians, the
interior of a debauched Catholic convent. Eschewing heterosexual mar-
riage and motherhood for a committed homosexual relationship and
the vocation of professional authorship, the Fields, as Ana Parejo Vadillo
points out, occupied a space that conflated the categories of “work” and
“home” (166). When not composing poetry and plays in their study room,
Bradley and Cooper seem to have devoted large amounts of time, money,
and energy to the cultivation of aesthetic wardrobes (they were especially
fond of hats) and luxurious home décor. Strikingly absent from the jour-
nals are Victorian preoccupations with female virtue and “duty.” “On one
occasion,” writes Emma Donoghue, quoting the journals, “they were driv-
ing to Shoreditch in London to collect the perfect sofa, they passed hordes
of ’sad, mis-shaped, mis-featured work-people’; the tone was that of travel-
ers on safari” (59).

Throughout the journals, however, there are surprising echoes of Vic-
torian domestic fiction—most notably, Hannah More’s Coelebs in Search
of a Wife—in the Fields’ sustained construction of the home as a sacred
space, a material stage on which poets and lovers enacted lives permeated
with spiritual, creative, and intellectual transcendence, in defiance (or
denial) of a world that was, quite simply, going to hell in a handbasket. On
New Year’s Eve, 1906, Edith writes,

   The whole of life and government now, is for the brute mass—as if Athens
had laid out her life for the satisfaction of her Slaves. To give these brute-
masses satisfaction food must be adulterated, all objects vulgarised, books
tirely written for them, manners lost, the capital of the land squandered,
the sea-coast betrayed, motor-buses raging, smelling [. . .]. Speed is the
one God + motors are his angels. (235)

8. In most cases, the diary volumes are divided by year; each year and volume has its own
separate pagination. For future reference, the 1904 journal is volume 18 (Add Ms 46793), the
1906 journal is volume 20 (Add Ms 26795), the 1912 journal is volume 27 (Add Ms 46802), the
1913 journal is volume 28 (Add Ms 46803), and the 1914 journal is volume 29 (Add Ms 46804
A).
For Bradley and Cooper (at least prior to their conversion), the real menace to civilization is not atheism, but other consequences of modern life: processed food, bad books, noise, and traffic—and, one suspects, a reading public largely indifferent to the poetic genius of Michael Field.

One reason that the Fields turned to Catholicism after Whym Chow’s death is that their joyful paganism could not sustain them in the face of suffering and loss. Yet even before their conversion, it is clear that the Fields relied upon a Victorian religion of the home (with some significant revisions) to validate and celebrate their most unconventional domestic arrangement, a “marriage” and a working partnership between two women. This is especially evident in the Fields’ representations of Paragon, the first and only home the poets had all to themselves. Heeding a longing for “a wedded life with my Love in our own home” (Edith qtd. in Donoghue 100), the Fields moved from Durdans in Reigate, which they had initially shared with both Edith’s father, James, and sister Amy, to 1, The Paragon, a small Georgian house on the Thames, in Richmond, in 1900. In We are Michael Field, Emma Donoghue describes at length “their temple of love and beauty” (103), a domestic interior filled with artwork, masses of fresh flowers, potpourri, curios, luxurious textiles, and jewels: “Every sense was meant to be delighted” (106). The Fields shared the interior of their home with a pair of dogs and a pair of doves; outside, they enjoyed the beauties of their well-tended garden, which included an altar to Dionysus.

Home as paradise provided the Fields with a comfortable and familiar conceptual framework on which to graft their shared life together, but perhaps it also served a more public purpose as well. The Fields kept their diary private in their own lifetimes, but arranged for its eventual, partial publication fifteen years after their deaths in 1914. As Edith and Katherine penned their diary entries, surely they knew that the details of their lives together would eventually be consumed and evaluated by the public. And the Fields seemed aware that they had some explaining to do. While the Fields’ domestic piety would, on one hand, make their lives more familiar and understandable to outsiders, other aspects of it were somewhat baffling. Even the Fields’ most intimate friends failed to comprehend the dynamics of their household; this fact was made glaringly evident to the Fields upon the death of Whym Chow, when friends assumed that they

9. In Women Poets and Urban Aestheticism, Ana Parejo Vadillo discusses the Fields’ residence at Durdans in Reigate, including in her analysis a description of the home’s décor and the Fields’ “aestheticisation of the domestic [ . . . ] in which paintings, photographs, drawings and texts create a space for poetry and writings” (166).

10. According to the diaries, Whym Chow was considered Katherine’s dog, while a basset hound, Music, belonged to Edith.
had merely lost a favorite pet. Whym Chow, however, was no mere pet—he was the figurehead of the Fields’ domestic religion. This religion might seem a parody of Christianity, except that the Fields, in their journal entries, were so utterly sincere in describing it. Nearly a year after Whym Chow’s death, on the brink of her conversion to Roman Catholicism, Edith explains that “[f]or years I have worshipped the Holy Trinity, ever since I prayed, + Michael [Katherine] used to pray for the little Earthly Trinity Whym Chow + Hennie [Edith] + Michael to the ineffable Divine Trinity—that symbol all creatures must adore who attain to its fastness of life. Closer than ever was this worship when Whymmie died [. . . ]” (29 December 1906, 231). The Chow formed one person of the Fields’ domestic Trinity, a union of three lovers—two human, one canine. “Michael and I love Chow as we have loved no other human being,” writes Edith, “for central + to us is his Love—our Flame of Love” (January 1906, 26). To Edith, at least (who writes far more than Katherine in Works and Days about the significance of Chow upon his death), Chow’s devotion was somehow the model and inspiration of the perfect love that the Fields themselves strove to attain. “And my love for Whym-Chow is the very core + living of my whole heart,” Edith writes later. Even Michael in herself alone is not quite at that origin of all that is profoundest in my love—her dog just reaches it first + waits for her impatiently to come into her mightier possession than his” (July 1906, 126; emphasis in original).

The manner in which Edith and Katherine regarded their Chow, for all Edith’s attempts at explaining it, remains—perhaps appropriately, as befits all divine mysteries—something of a cipher. What is clear, however, is that within the mystical little Trinity, Chow was the Household Angel, the “golden flame” at Paragon—or, as Edith dubs their home in one entry, “The Palace of our Golden Chow” (12 May 1906, 85). This becomes especially evident in January 1906, when the entire concept of “home” perishes along with Chow. After the veterinarian puts the dog down, on 28 January, Katherine breaks the news to Edith:

When she [Katherine] enters our desolated Paragon, home no more forever—she says “my little dog is at rest—at rest—you hear it—he is at rest.” It is like the sound of icebergs that grow + laugh+ then break up. It

11. In May 1906, Edith writes to a Mrs. Turnbull that she and Katherine have spent the past four months living in “complete solitude,” since “[o]ur friends have failed to understand we are in any grief at all” (1906, 90). The Fields’ outraged comments regarding lukewarm or insensitive responses to Whym Chow’s death are scattered throughout the 1906 journal.
12. Both Roden and Thain discuss Whym’s figuration as Holy Spirit and the nature of the Fields “Trinity” at greater length.
is hideously + greatly tragic. Our grief is blind, is potent . . . we scarcely
touch food but bring back to order the rooms, now grown so hateful that
we realise we must go. “Yes,” I say to Michael, “we must let Paragon + get
a little flat in town.” (28 January 1906, 18)

Katherine and Edith prepare to flee the now odious Paragon, even as they
prepare an elaborate burial ceremony for Chow. They go to town to make
the requisite arrangements and are confronted, upon their return home,
with the great yawning void of the front hall:

And in the afternoon a cab—our manuscripts + jewels, that we only
remember had value, taken to Bank, money taken out . . . flowers, bunches
of flame-tulips and wreaths of similax with which to receive our Beauty
next day . . . the sense as we approach Paragon of the nothingness of
it—the entrance into a silent hall, where has been a whirl-storm of the
most golden welcome—a dance as if the sun had come down carrying love
instead of his light. [. . . ] Oh the bitter tears for that silent hall the symbol
of a silent World where for us there is no welcome. Whym Chow, Whym

Four months after this entry, Edith still refers to the front door of Paragon
as “an entrance into the cave of death” (12 May 1906, 84). In mourning
Whym Chow, the Fields seem to grieve not only the loss of a beloved pet,
but also the light of their home: now empty, desolate, and, as Katherine
describes it in a later entry, a “Charnel-House” (6 March 1906, 51).14 The
Fields’ depictions of home, at this point in the journal, appear oddly simi-
lar to Dickens’s representations of domestic spaces bereft of ministering
angels, such as the households of Paul Dombey and Ebeneezer Scrooge.

But Whym’s passing symbolized for the Fields even more beyond the
loss of home. Marion Thain suggests that Whym Chow, who “had repre-
sented many aspects of pagan desire for the two women [. . . ] died at a
time when that desire was being ‘defined’ by a new normative category of
sexuality” (312). It is very possible that Whym Chow’s death foreshadowed
to the poets a new direction for their “pagan desire,” what Thain describes
as “their shift away from sensual abandon to spiritual devotion” (312). But
on a more fundamental level, the Fields had, quite simply, lost their reli-

13. This long entry appears to have been started on the date of Chow’s death (28 January) and
continued into the following day.
14. “We return to Paragon—March 6th. And it is as if Romeo went down to Juliet’s Charnel-
House not meaning to die there—to be there a little while, and then pass out [. . . ]” (1906,
50).
igion and their conviction of a perfect, benevolent, and loving force active in their lives. “[I]n this bare world,” wrote Edith to her friend Marie Sturge Moore, “we went to him as our brazier of love, the flames + the incense [sic], the motion + thrill we found perfect alone in the passion Chow had for Michael—a love that has consumed his life in 8 years, when he should have lived 8 years more” (29? January 1906, 20). Accordingly, Chow receives a burial fit for deceased royalty—or deity. According to Edith’s journal entry of January 30, Katherine tenderly prepared Whym for burial, wreathing the little body with “Bacchic ivy” and tucking “wine-coloured Christmas roses” beneath his chin. Edith entrusts Chow with “the best lock of my hair from its roots,” and Katherine places a fire-opal between his paws. “We each touched a wine-cup over the little Chow, + Michael spilt the wine of the Sacrament on the tan fur of his flank—blood on his brow [from the vet’s bullet], wine on his side!—what should not grow up to us from the sacred stains!” (23).

Even before their conversion to Catholicism, the Fields’ domestic religion fused significant Christian symbols with pagan allusions. They would not, however, recover a sense of pride or love for Paragon until the balance of their beliefs shifted toward Christianity and a fascination with the Church of Rome toward the end of 1906. From February until December of 1906, the diary entries chart the evolution of a revised domestic religion for the Fields, alongside increasingly frequent mentions of their growing friendship with Father John Gray.15 But this transformation was long in coming. For months after Whym Chow’s death, the Fields spent a considerable amount of time away from Paragon, which they were determined to vacate for good. For some reason, however, they were unsuccessful in finding a new tenant for the house. “We should have to live in street poverty, if Paragon does not let,” writes Edith on 24 March (58), “+ tho for life’s sake we will do it unhesitatingly.” Confounding the Fields’ dilemma was the fact that Paragon still held a strong fascination for them. Edith, in a letter to a friend, writes:

These walls sometimes shriek like mandrakes when we threaten to remove their shelves + appurtenances. But whether we let or not we vacate in May. We go forth simply for our souls’ health: here we live only a memorial life + Michael, stomping an archangelic foot, vows he will not lead a memorial life [. . .]. (March 1906, 60; emphasis in original)

15. Interestingly, Katherine is introduced to John Gray for the first time just days before Whym’s death, in January 1906. Edith does not meet Gray in person until the Fields’ trip to Edinburgh in August of that year. For more information on Gray’s considerable influence on the Fields, see Thain’s essay.
Despite Katherine’s determination not to “lead a memorial life,” by May her diary entries reveal considerable ambivalence about leaving Paragon. She describes it as a biblical Eden, watched over by a conventional, Christian-sounding God. “And the old garden blooms new flowers: Seven years a tiny Paradise a making. And God has flourished it out of His heaven” (May 1906, 89). Two pages later, she writes, “I believe we are being kept at Paragon that we may overcome the terror of the little grave [Whym was buried in the rose garden], + wholly dissociate this from the spirit of Flame that is our sure possession of God” (91). The following month, in an entry dated “Trinity Sunday,” Katherine writes,

Little Paragon shines in great beauty. Our little house is like Paradise—the Angel at the gate sits smiling his sword across his knees—And we know not whether it is the will of the lord of the garden that we should depart— or remain to dress + tend the garden. If the angel should draw his sword,+ forbid us to depart? (97)

One might surmise that the Fields’ gradual reconciliation with life at Paragon was inevitable once their grieving for Chow had run its course. What is clear, however, is that Catholicism, in some way, helped the Fields to make sense of Chow’s death and to incorporate it into their sense of a larger, divine plan for their salvation. These moments of recognition are interspersed in the diary alongside revelations of their changing attitude toward home.

In August, the Fields made a brief stop at Paragon before a trip to Ireland and Scotland (during which they visited Father Gray in Edinburgh), and to their delight, “for the first time a return [to Paragon] has not been all pain—we have caught the sense of what our home is” (Edith, 3 August, 144). (The beginning of this entry is headed, in Katherine’s handwriting, “to our Home—the Paragon,” the word “Paragon” topped with a sketch of a royal crown.) In the entry penned immediately after their trip, Katherine notes triumphantly, “And we have just resolved to settle down merrily in Paragon—to warm + to embellish it—and to be happy within it” (23 September, 179). A page later, Edith describes her love for Chow, using a phrase from the Latin Mass. “O Salutaris Hostia—I only know worship when I hear that—Love lifted up—the same sort of love I give to Chow, lifted up to God whole as a world” (180). As the Fields embraced Catholic theology and worship, they began to describe Whym not as irretrievably lost (as they do earlier in 1906), but as eternally present. Interestingly, the dog’s metaphysical and mystic significance did not seem to diminish for the Fields. This entry, written by Edith when she was attending Mass
regularly, just months before her formal conversion in April 1907, evinces no sense of incongruity between adoration of Chow and adoration of a (presumably) more orthodox, Catholic conception of the Holy Trinity:

Oh Truth—Vera Veritas! My Love + I + Chow are together+ garner what this year 1906 has brought of marvel + immediacy of life. Though our Whym was taken at once from our mortal sight + touch+ the [dear?] habit of being in the flesh—let me say rather in his golden Fleece—at our side, we are closer to him now, more instant to the marvellous love of his heart + soul than when he lay on our couch. And ever is he living by our hearts + thoughts + conception one with us both + with each, prayed for, dwelt on adored forever + in the might of the Divine Majesty—Sancta Trinitas. (New Year’s Eve, 1906, 234)

With a newly revised understanding of Chow as living and present among them in spirit, the Fields were able to do something that would have been unthinkable in January 1906: spend Christmas at Paragon. In October, Katherine writes, “Deep in my heart I ask if we may not—mas- tering our sorrows—spend our Christmas here—we three together deliv- ered from memory—winged +serene? O little Paragon where [ . . . ] we are conquering Death—God prolong our home to us!” (192; emphasis in original).

On 25 December 1906, the Fields spend a triumphant Christmas Day, interspersed between the homey comforts of Paragon and the sublime interior of a Catholic sanctuary. They first attend Low Mass, where Kath- erine marvels over the “Bacchic” quality of the carol at the service (220). “Then,” writes Edith, “resting and refreshing ourselves at Paragon” (224), the women pass the time until Benediction decorating a Christmas tree. At Benediction, it is Edith’s turn to marvel at the “Bacchic sight” of the lights joined with song. Returning once more to Paragon, the Fields indulge in turkey and plum pudding—taking a walk afterward to overcome “the grossness of both”—then it is time for the exchange of presents. Katherine gives Edith a copy of The Garden of the Soul, and both women receive gifts of Catholic missals from Edith’s sister Amy (225).16

Juxtaposing domestic and sacred spaces, Catholic and “bacchic” wor- ship, spiritual contemplation with the decking of halls and consuming of pudding, Edith’s description of Christmas Day 1906 suggests that for the Fields, at least, religious conversion is not a radical departure from the

16. Edith’s sister Amy married a Catholic, John Ryan, in 1900. Edith, Amy, and Katherine all converted to Rome in the same period, between 19 April and 8 May of 1907.
past, but a continued dialogue with it. Perhaps the strongest evidence of this, however, is Edith’s belief that Chow spends the holiday with them, not so differently as he did the previous year:

A beautiful Christmas day of paramount blessing + responsive gratitude—always with us that darling Whym, lighter of our Torch, our greatest lover. I remember last Christmas he had a bow of rosy heliotrope suddenly got by his “Minnie”—I did not like it,—it detracted from his fur—Whym was not gay I am sure. (225–26)

Whym’s ghostly presence in 1906 also suggests how difficult it was for the Fields to dispense with the concept of a Household Angel. Rejecting for themselves such a role, the Fields displace it onto the family pet. But when the dog dies, domestic felicity does not seem possible for the Fields until they can find a way to envision Whym still alive and present in their midst. “I have always disowned the Church of my childhood,” writes Edith on 29 December 1906, “because it was destitute of the real centre of all true religion—an altar with its present Deity + because the Dead had no portion in its services” (231). In Catholicism, a religion that emphasizes both sacrifice and the sacramental presence of Deity alive and at work in the world, the Fields seem to have found a workable vocabulary, both for “resurrecting” Whym and recovering a sense of coherence and transcendence in their domestic life together.

If the Fields’ “revised” domestic piety helped them to retain the notion of home as a sacred space in spite of death, it also fortified them against other threats in later years, such as the growing urbanization of their formerly peaceful suburb of Richmond. In May of 1912, Edith, already stricken with cancer, describes a distressing afternoon, ruined by street traffic:

Motor-buses, rivalling each other in their constant + noisome traffic, had overcome our patience during the afternoon when I tried a little drive. The

17. Thain argues that “Michael Field ultimately chose to transform rather than destroy—to write over rather than ‘erase’ completely. [. . . ] [W]e discover [in the Fields’ religious poetry] the fluidity of a poetic identity that interlaces past and present, as well as self and lover, to create a personal mythology that is not only governed by its own logic but also strives for a coherent interface with the cultural concerns of the age” (332).

18. This arrangement perhaps accommodated the Fields’ sexual identity in a more traditional Christian sense as well. Roden suggests that for the Fields, “love of and devotion to an animal enabled the two women to avoid the standard heterosexual trope of bridal mysticism. [. . . ] Thus the two women could come to God not as brides of Christ but as mothers and lovers of their dog” (194).
air was heavy—the stench of the oil was all the freshness I got. We tried to
turn away—+ got a tiny space of relief in a pilgrimage to the river through
by-ways. But the sadness of this ruined world of Richmond + the personal
misery suggested that we might have to leave the beloved Paragon for the
sake of health and sanity. (57)

Tortured both by the motor buses and the loud music of a German family
living next door, the Fields, as in 1906, regard the decision to retain or quit
Paragon as a question of God’s will—but how to discern his wishes? In
August, on the Catholic feast of Our Lady of the Snow (commemorating a
miracle, by which the Virgin Mary left instructions for the location of her
chapel by a snowfall), Edith writes,

> How I pray that as [the Virgin] clearly showed where she would have her
home by the wonder of white snow in summer, she will as clearly show us
about our home + throw a whiteness over Paragon if we are to remain or a
whiteness of direction as to where we are to go if it is God’s will we should
leave our Paragon. (92)

The Fields finally decide to remain at Paragon, but not before consult-
ing their priest, Fr. Vincent McNabb, about the morality of the issue, and
making a novena (a series of prayers said over nine days). In the course of
the deliberations, both Katherine and Edith consider whether the “Paradise
Lost” (58) of Richmond and the resulting domestic inconveniences might
actually bring them closer to God. In August 1912, Edith writes: “It may
be that God is calling me to this meritorious mortification of the senses by
sending motorbuses with their horse + smell + Germans with their music
at late hours to haunt Paragon. It may be He wishes me by victory over
the senses—even the humblest—smell—it has been remarked that the Hill
of Skulls may well have mortified God’s own nostrils” (100; emphasis in
original). “[M]ortification of” and “victory over” the senses seems a stark
contradiction to the Fields’ aesthetic approach to life, in which experiences
of transcendence depended so heavily on external, mostly material, condi-
tions: solitude, tasteful decorating schemes, flowers, jewels. Catholicism’s
emphasis on mortification, however, allowed the Fields to convert external
distractions into spiritual opportunities and provided a pair of aging and
ill women a sense of power over forces beyond their control. Six years
prior, the Fields’ Catholicism helped preserve Paragon in the face of death;
now, despite encroaching noise and smells, it could help retain for them
Paragon’s sacramental significance—that is, as a sign of God’s presence in
their lives.
Despite the Fields’ belief in the spiritual value of sensory mortification, they remained devoted to their luxurious surroundings. Edith’s interpretation of the motor buses and Germans as God’s instruments does, however, betray a guilty suspicion that perhaps the sensual life of an aesthete was incompatible with that of a devoted Catholic. A month later, in September, Edith remarks that Paragon’s bedrooms, which she had expensively redecorated, are “a little provoking to the conscience” (28 September, 119). In October, she consults McNabb about her spending, “as from time to time poets spend in their fine frenzy to rebuild their world” (2 October, 131). McNabb puts her scruples to rest, saying—as he views the pricey new curtains in the bedroom Edith describes as “my gift, my gilded cage for the loved Michael” (128)—that “the Thames is worthy to be framed in silk” (131).

Perhaps one of the most surprising things about Works and Days is the marked contrast between the 1906 entries—the year of Whym Chow’s death—and the entries Katherine pens in the wake of Edith’s death in December 1913. While the dog’s death utterly prostrated the Fields, Katherine’s reaction to the loss of her life partner is, as recorded in the journals, resigned and peaceful in comparison. Whym Chow’s death sent the Fields flying from their beloved home, but Edith’s death compelled Katherine to embrace Paragon all the more. Paragon seems to have provided Katherine with enormous comfort, and her reflections on it suggest that she continued to feel Edith’s presence there. Her description of Christmas 1913—written just weeks after Edith’s death—contains some interesting parallels to the Fields’ entry from Christmas Day 1906, when Whym seemed present in spirit, if not in body. By this time, Katherine’s own cancer (which she never disclosed to Edith) is at an advanced stage. Katherine spends part of her holiday with her nurse, an Irish nun whose blue veil, as the diary records, Edith would have liked, as it is “so harmonious in the lovely rooms of Paragon” (24 December 1913, 98). Even better, the nun expresses intense admiration for the Fields’ beautiful home:

And of Christmas Day!

And then Nursie comes. I walk with afterwards in the fresh terrace-gardens. It is sweet. Then I return + read Matins. I just turn a little sick at the turkey, and wisely betake myself after dinner at once to writing letters. Asleep—the Blue Light returns—she is full of the dancing of the Novices—the White Doves—with their exquisite step-dancing. I order her tea in the Sun-Room. And then, Hennie My Beloved, she kindles to all the beauty thou has builded for us in Paragon—[ . . . ] the flowers, the soft colouring the charm. [ . . . ] our rooms—the sun-room, the river-room, the gold
room, the little gold-room. And thus, tho' she is come to dress a deadly wound I have given her delight, +, coupled with the dancing novices, she has had a gay Christmas Day. (99)

Katherine does not go so far as to say that she enjoyed Christmas day; the nun's enjoyment seems enough, especially as it is due, in part, to Edith's tasteful decorating. The nun's admiration of Paragon seems a further confirmation, for Katherine, that Edith's devotion to beauty still bears living fruit; one wonders whether the nun even remembers Katherine a little of Edith (although according to Donoghue, this nun got overly attached to Katherine and had to be discharged [139]). Throughout this period, she writes to Edith as if she were still reading her journals, and—as with Whym Chow later in 1906—implies that Edith is continually present in Paragon. A few weeks after Christmas, she writes: “I cannot tonight suffer the little Blue—my beloved and I must be alone—I will go into the sun room + read with her” (12 January 1914, 6).

One of Katherine's regrets in her final months, in summer 1914, was that she would not have the comfort of dying at Paragon. Emma Donoghue describes how Katherine, having moved to a small cottage in Staffordshire to be near Father Mc Nabb, railed about the ugliness of her surroundings: “Like Oscar Wilde, she was troubled by the décor: ‘I am suddenly asked to die in a stuffy Drawing room with a grand piano, & lusters & every form of vulgar & horrible details.’ But outside her window was an overgrown lawn, at least, so she made the best of things and named the place ‘Paragon Cottage’” (140). Donoghue also mentions how Katherine, in a theological discussion with Fr. John Gray, expressed her difficulty with the notion of Purgatory, and especially the thought that Edith might have to linger there; not knowing Edith's precise fate, she explained, was the difference between “Henry landing in Australia & enjoying the kangaroos, & Henry still tossed on unknown seas” (143). As amusing as this picture is, it seems surprising that Katherine's metaphor for heaven relies on an exotic, outdoor location rather than a comfortable domestic interior. This picture of heaven sharply contrasts with the Fields' representation of it in their many years of journaling. As *Works and Days* indicates, Paragon was their heaven on earth, a paradise presided over by Dionysus, Whym Chow, Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and finally, Edith's beauty-loving spirit.

The fact that Paragon remained sacred to two personalities who might, without exaggeration, be described as fickle and unpredictable is less a testament to the Fields' creativity in decorating or color schemes than it is to another kind of “home renovation.” The Fields' attitudes toward, and representations of, Paragon proved highly adaptable, varying in response
to the sea changes of death, religious conversion, and urbanization. On one hand, the Fields’ flexible attitude toward home highlights their aesthetic creed and their determination to live in love and beauty. But it was also meant to dignify, even sanctify, a domestic situation that many Victorians would have labeled as profane and associated much more readily with hellfire than with heavenly bliss. And in the ever-evolving construction of home, Catholicism was, for the Fields, a vital discursive tool. We have seen, throughout this book, how women writers appropriated Catholic imagery and symbolism to represent both the terrifying spectacle of godless homes and homes that stand as fortresses (like Wemmick’s castle) against the raging forces of secularism, atheism, consumerism, and Modernism. But as the Fields’ writings demonstrate particularly well, Catholicism, as the century progresses, does not speak only to those writers wishing to condemn or to deny change. Even though the Fields, in moving from a secular to a religious worldview, seem, at first glance, to reverse the trajectory of their society as a whole, this change had potentially dire implications for both their relationship and their art.19 Rather than erase their identities and pagan past, however, the Fields found in Catholicism—a religion of paradoxes and contradictions—a means for reconciling past and present, and for enabling personal change while sustaining cherished values and commitments.

19. A number of scholars (including Leighton and Vicinus) have suggested that the Fields’ religious conversion was bad for their poetry. Perhaps the Fields themselves shared this apprehension (of both creative and personal transformations) in the years leading up to their conversion. In 1904, Katherine, after reading the new biography of Christina Rossetti, writes that “[a]pparently religion was a deteriorating influence on her [. . .] + on her art. [. . .] Woe to the gods that ruined her” (3 February 1904, 26–27). In the same year, Edith presents a rather sinister sketch of her friend, Catholic convert Alice Trusted: “Her face under Catholic direction looked strained and harder—the excitement plays like ignus fatuus round the fatal and cruel conditions of soul” (154).