John Henry Gray was born on 2 March 1866 at No. 2. Vivian Road, Bethnal Green, a working-class area in the East End of London, "Mean streets of semi-detached houses of dull uniformity." Most of the inhabitants, so it seems, were industrious, provident, house-proud, typical altogether of the superior artisan class. The poet's father, John Gray, a Scot, was journeyman, wheelwright and carpenter employed at the Royal Naval Dockyard at Woolwich, south of the River Thames. Later he was to be appointed Inspector of Stores at Woolwich Arsenal, a position of some authority and probably in the light of the times and John Gray senior's social position, reasonably paid. It was probably also a consequence that the family, increasing rapidly in the Victorian manner, removed to 96 Eglinton Road, Plumstead, which in today's modish language might fairly be termed "upward mobility." To his mother, a woman of strong character, he was close, though his relationship with his father was sour. At the age of twelve, John Henry won a scholarship to the Roan, a grammar school at Maze Hill, a middle-class suburb not too distant from Woolwich. We are told that his parents were required to pay £10 a month. Gray's father, however, insisted on John leaving school after a year to augment the family income which now had to provide for six children. Already he had shown himself studious and independent. He was fond of wandering about alone and exploring districts in and on the verges of London. Fr. Brocard Sewell suggests that he would sometimes join up with gypsies on these rambles. One of his grandmothers, Sarah Harris, had been a Romany. John was aware of his ancestry and once told his youngest sister Beatrice that his totem was a brock or a badger. During his holidays, he would often rise very early, take some food from the larder and leave a note for his mother on the kitchen table saying that he would be out for the day. His mother, we are told, would never worry about him.

Before leaving school in 1879, he had, doubtless at his father's insistence, passed an examination which ensured his admission into Woolwich Arsenal as a trade lad. He soon became adept at metal turning and we may gather something of the context of his working life from two of the poems that he wrote in the 1890s: "The Forge" and "The Wheel." Already at school he had become a close student and he was to master several languages over the next few years. His auto-didacticism extended to music, drawing and painting. Duly approving of such a signal example of Victorian "self-help," his employers arranged for him to take a trade test and he was promoted to the drawing office. Still, his wages were low and the greater part of them had to be passed on to aid the family purse. Another poem, written probably in 1893
or 1894, unfinished, untitled and previously unpublished, bears on this period in his life and contains some lines that were critical of his father, crossed through in the course of revision. Two stanzas may be cited for their autobiographical resonance:

Then and still being young
Ill liking it I went among
Whose art it was to make a useful thing[.]
There many a long year I learnt
To make a thing where living is well earned,
Where men set up the engines of their suffering.

The fragment ends with an oddly severe spasm of self-rebuke. Fr. Brocard Sewell comments pertinently that he was right to feel that his gifts of mind demanded more than a life of industrious labour yet there was a strain of vanity in the young Gray and this was to play its part in his successful efforts at self-improvement:

A certain time expired;
I dared confess that I was tired
Of whirling lathe and rank machine-oil’s smell[.]
I lied; I loved them one and both;
Truth being vanity in me was loath
That wit like mine should cut no harder stuff than steel.

In 1882 Gray passed by competitive examination into the Civil Service as a Boy Clerk in the Savings Bank Department of the General Post Office. He was appointed on 5 October 1883 to the Post Office Confidential Enquiry Branch, where his main activity was attempting to track down lost letters. In June 1887 he passed the London University’s matriculation examination and in the following year he was transferred to the Foreign Office. He was now altogether of the middle class. It had been a remarkable effort for a young man, of working class origin, whose formal education had been brief and narrow and who had attended neither public school nor university. His by now no doubt muted cockney accent was to a degree offset by his talents, his industry, his engaging manners and his bold good looks.

He had already developed ambitions to become part of what may be termed the avant garde, to develop his gifts as writer and, perhaps embracing both, to sustain a style of life he had begun to glimpse, dandiacally cosmopolitan. His emotional orientation appears to have been bisexual since he was only mildly attracted to women (though they were certainly attracted to him) but his name was never romantically connected with a woman. His passionate
friendships were probably with male friends though this does not necessarily imply acute familiarities. At the same time, he himself admitted to a life of sin which certainly lasted till the middle of the 1890s. Converts, however, are notorious for their delicate sense of having offended against God. It would certainly be quite wrong to cast Gray, for example, as one of Oscar Wilde's "slum chums." Unlike poor Edward Shelley, let alone Charlie Parker, he was neither unbalanced nor mercenary, and he had a real talent. Wilde, Dowson, Lionel Johnson and Beardsley were all to admire his odd literary gift which struck them as "decadent" in a very individual manner, a little bizarre, a little baroque, equivocal hymns to art, a sophisticated naiveté.

The second recorded event in Gray's biography is a visit paid to St. Quay, Portrieux, Brittany, at the invitation of a friend, Marmaduke Langdale, a mildly talented amateur actor, translator, and member of an old recusant family that had been on the right side in the English civil wars. The Langdale family's Latin Catholicism was to have distant but far-reaching effects on his life. In the summer of 1889, Gray was still living at the family home, a home in which there may well have been alcoholism and there was certainly little privacy. The contrast, however, was not merely with the Bohemian world, the high and somewhat flashy Bohemian ambience of Wilde, but with a family which was united by affection and a shared faith. And a family that had never changed its faith. Their culture was Catholic and this contrasted with the unicoloured nonconformist ménage at Eglinton Road, Woolwich. A coldly objective prose fragment describes the relations, including the sexual relations, between Gray's father and mother, and although the stress there falls on male appetite, it barely requires Dr. Freud to suggest that Gray's own responses were ambivalent. His adverse attitude to his father may have stemmed also from a continuing resentment at having been deprived of education. Fr. Sewell suggests that a further cause of Gray's depression at this time were the difficulties of adapting to the middle and upper-middle-class young men who were his colleagues in the Foreign Office and the persistent money difficulties that rendered arduous his life as dandy and man of letters.

Gray recorded in a letter to one of Langdale's sisters that his Breton experiences were as "stars in the sky of my memory." With the elder of the Langdale daughters, indeed, Gray maintained a continuous correspondence and in a letter written as late as 1929 he traces the irresistible Grace that led to his conversion:

I like to repeat what I am sure you like to read that whatever I do at this present day goes back in an unbroken chain of events to the weeks I spent with you at St. Quay. The reality of
religion thus seen was the inevitable seed of God's mercy from which all grew. I guess what must have been your part, either independently or under your mother's influence. She was quite mother enough by vocation to find out (quite correctly) who needed prayers in those days: and this survivor needs them still.

Living in a Catholic countryside, among the quiet piety of a Catholic family, he was to undergo one more crystallizing experience. He was always a great walker and early one morning in the deep countryside found himself passing a small wayside chapel. It was neglected and, led by curiosity, he found at the altar an unshaven priest intoning "the blessed mutter of the Mass," hastily and in a slovenly manner. Years later Gray was to observe, "it was then that it came to me. I said to myself, John Gray, here is the real thing."

The following year Gray was received into the Latin Church, but it had at first little effect on his personal conduct. As Fr. Sewell puts it: "he then entered immediately on a course of sin compared with which his previous life had been innocent." In that same year Gray at last left the family home at Woolwich and took chambers at No. 1. The Cloister in the Temple, one of the Inns of Court, a nest of lawyers mostly, though (till the second world war) affording inexpensive lodgings for young literary bachelors. The Temple was full of old buildings, lawns, trees and narrow passages sloping down from the newspaper street, Fleet Street, to the Thames Embankment. After a year, Gray moved once more, but in 1892 returned to 3 Plowden Buildings in the Temple, living on the same floor as Arthur Symons and the translator of Maeterlinck, Alexander Texeira de Mattos, while George Moore and later W. B. Yeats inhabited the same building.

His move not only brought the Foreign Office within walking distance, but brought him into still closer contact with the younger men of letters. He had already met Wilde, not perhaps as has been suggested as a casual "pick up" in a bar but in more formal circumstances. Frank Leibech mentions the presence of Wilde and Gray at a dinner party early in 1889 and it must have been at about this time that Arthur Symons recalls his first meeting with Gray: "Once at a Private View in the New Gallery, as I came downstairs, I came on Wilde in the midst of his admirers. . . . Seeing me he made a gesture, and as I went up he introduced me to John Gray, then in what is called 'the zenith' of his youth."

From 1890 on Gray also began to frequent the Playgoers' Club, the Rhymers' Club and other literary gatherings. He was also to be found at that centre of High Bohemian life, the Café Royal in Regent Street. And through the
Rhymers' Club, though he was a guest rather than a member, he extended his acquaintance with the fin de siècle writers and artists. Even before his move to the Temple, he was probably in touch with Charles Ricketts, painter, typographer, connoisseur and Charles Shannon, painter and lithographer. Gray was to contribute frequently to their magazine The Dial and to edit poetry for Ricketts's Vale press. While living at 62 Chancery Lane between 1891 and 1892, Fr. Sewell has pointed out, Gray was only a few doors away from Charles Kains Jackson, lawyer, antiquarian, editor and publisher of the "Uranian" periodical The Artist and Journal of Home Culture. Friend of Corvo, the very Ombudsman one might say of the homintern world, Kains Jackson published homosexual authors in The Artist such as Corvo, John Addington Symonds, Lord Henry Somerset and John Gambril Nicholson. Indeed, aside from some of Wilde's pronouncements, it can be said that notions of fin de siècle, "decadence" and the New Hedonism found their earliest expression in its pages. In August 1890 Gray had contributed a somewhat feeble translation of a Verlaine sonnet. Two mannered pieces had by then appeared in the Athenaeum and a poem, a long way after Austin Dobson, accompanying an illustration by Shannon, in Black and White (1891).

Wilde and Gray were close in the years from January 1891 to early 1893 and in 1892 Gray, whom Bernard Shaw described as one of Wilde's "more abject disciples," inscribed a copy of his translation of some of Paul Bourget's stories "to my beloved master and my friend." If not the actual original, Gray with his extreme physical beauty, itself a kind of genius, and his talents, must have appeared the incarnation of Dorian Gray, while Wilde must have been aware that like Dorian, John Gray was leading a double life. And as Jerusha McCormack has suggestively argued, the fictional persona may well have exercised a strange power over the immediately subsequent course of John Gray's life. It was probably at about this time that Gray wrote a short story "The Person in Question" which was to remain unpublished for more than seventy years. Its theme is closely aligned to that of The Picture of Dorian Gray but while Dorian evades his older self with his sins all too legible on his face, Gray's younger self confronts his older self in a way that is quieter but more eerie that the hero of Wilde's novel. It is the banality, the hollowness and moral fixity of what the narrator comes to recognise as his older self.

Gray's first contributions to The Dial go as far back as 1889: an article on the Goncourt brothers and a fable, a version somewhat grotesque of Wilde in his Happy Prince or House of Pomegranetes vein. Besides editing some Elizabethan and Jacobean poets, Gray wrote also a number of prospectuses for the Vale. His avant garde sympathies are clearly evident in the prospectus for Jules Laforgue's Les Moralités Légendaires, though he perhaps faintly
understresses Laforgue's icy frivolities. Early in 1892 Gray came rather more prominently before the public or rather the public prints. His lecture on the "Modern Actor" was given at the Playgoers' Club on 8 February, to be published later in that same year in *The Albemarle* edited by the young realist short story writer Hubert Crackanthorpe. Broadly speaking, Gray's attitude to the modern actor, like that of W. B. Yeats, was that he was "agin 'im." Like Symons, Theodore Wratislaw, Lionel Johnson and other young poets, Gray praised the vulgar and despised art of the music hall, juxtaposing its robust and vivid performers with the "army of beautiful and talented mercenaries" of the "dead" commercial theatre; its "star system"; its elaborate machines, an end in themselves, and its florid costumes and stage settings. A fragment survives of a brilliant description of Albert Chevalier, the Coster King. Unfortunately, Gray's own contributions to the theatre, whether singly or in tandem with his dear friend André Raffalovich, barely fulfill his own admirable prescriptions. In his poetry of this phase he was unwilling to compromise; but he tended to seek for a more immediate success in his dramatic efforts, which are varied in form, but, with the tepid exception of his version of Theodore de Banville's *The Kiss*, minimal in achievement. A report of "The Modern Actor" in *The Daily Telegraph* alluded to Gray as protegé of Oscar Wilde; but in a letter to the paper, Wilde forcibly denied the suggestion and declared that his young friend had perfected already his own mode in verse and prose.

The young artists and poets of the 1890s were caught in what has been termed "a double-bind." Wilde in his letter to the *Telegraph* had pointed out that in this "vulgar age," the artist had to subsist beyond the protection (and financial assistance) of the great patron, Prince, Pope or aristocrat. Up to the middle of the nineteenth century, the artistocracy or landed gentry continued to assist the deserving poor scholar or peasant poet, but that was on the understanding the gratitude should be shown and that the finished product should be "comfortable." By the 1890s, to secure not a patron but an audience, the poet or artist had to acquire publicity. But this had largely to be achieved through the press, itself now vulgarised by the new audience of the faintly literate, forced into being by the Education Acts of 1870 and 1874. Whistler, and after him Wilde, had been enabled to write their insolent letters to the press and to submit to the interviews that were the idiom of publicity. Their mastery of a tone of witty contempt infuriated both journalists and the middle-class audience; and bad publicity—at least up to 1891—was distinctly better than no publicity at all. But publicity good or bad would naturally involve trivialization: personalities, not principles; "news" not issues. It is in this context that we should place Gray's "too-too" introduction of 1892 to a prose piece *The Garden of Citrons* by an imaginary author Emilio Montarnaro (otherwise J. T.
Grein) a deliberately shrill parody of *fin de siècle* style with its effervescent synaesthesia and shrugging inconsequence. It was naturally reviewed as an example of the humourless eccentricities of the latest school and it follows on the one hand the *Les Deliquescences* of Adoré Floupette, published at "Byzance" in 1885 and some of Beardsley's mischievous spoofs, as when he published in the same issue of *The Savoy* that contained his own work two drawings, one in traditional idiom, both of which were highly praised at the expense of Beardsley's acknowledged designs.

Certainly 1892 was a busy and ambitious year for Gray. It witnessed his translation of Banville's *Le Baiser* on a Platonized Pierrot motif and its production as the curtain raiser at the Royalty Theatre. The typescript was discovered over eighty years later among the papers of the Lord Chamberlain. *The Kiss* had been produced by J. T. Grein at his private Independent Theatre, a club rather than a commercial theatre, and so technically free of the Examiner who censored plays for the Lord Chamberlain's office. It was, however, tactically sensible to submit the more harmless offerings to the Examiner, perhaps on the Whale and the Tub principle.

In 1892 also Gray met through Wilde the young litterateur Pierre Louys and through Louys some of the French *symboliste* poets he was to translate in *Silverpoints*. His correspondence with Louys was conducted partly in French, even extending to punning middle-French, and from these letters we learn of Gray's melancholy, his ill-health, his financial worries, his proletarian origins and the death of his father accompanied as is usual at such times by a sense of guilt at having rejected John Gray senior. There is some passing gossip about Wilde and his circle and a reference to an affair with a woman, unique, according to Fr. Brocard Sewell, in Gray's letters. There are also gaps in Gray's side of the correspondence, particularly about the time of the Wilde scandal.

By November 1892 we gather that his health is improving. He was receding from Wilde's circle and had met the man who was to be his protector, friend and collaborator, Marc André Raffalovich. There seems to have been a moment in that year when Gray felt that he should withdraw from publication his first collection of poems, *Silverpoints*. The cost was to be underwritten by Wilde. It was to be Raffalovich, though, who underwrote the costs of the book and in the end John Lane the publisher agreed to assume financial responsibility.

Marc André was the younger son and the third child of Herman Raffalovich, a Russian born Jewish banker. His mother was a highly intelligent woman of various interests, who held a salon in Paris. In 1882 at the age of 18 Marc
André was sent off to London with Miss Gribell, his mother's friend and companion, to keep house for him. In London he attempted himself in a rather florid mode to found a salon. Raffalovich was a somewhat ugly man, with a persistent guttural accent, novelist and poet of the third class (his last volume *It is Thyself* is his best work). Yet he was warm-hearted, generous, doing much good mostly by stealth, and Gray, as one Dominican has recently suggested, may well have "seen Christ in him." Wilde was rather uncharacteristically malicious about "Raffy." Arriving at Raffalovich's house at 72 Audley Street at the same time as five other guests, he remarked to the butler "a table for six, please." From Wilde's point of view, Raffy was somewhat devoid of talent, not conspicuously witty, certainly not handsome and his sexual inclination not sufficiently marked. Wilde took something of the same line with Beardsley's equivocal sexuality. When their friendship had been established, Wilde made various gibes about Beardsley's refusal to "come out," such as "don't sit on the same chair as Aubrey. It is not compromising."

As to Gray and Raffalovich, they soon attempted singly and in concert to conquer the stage, though their attempts were uniformly unsuccessful. Prose was not neglected. In 1889, and to later issues of *The Dial*, Gray contributed criticism and short stories; his analysis of Huysmans' *La Bas* is of pungent interest for his own spiritual development. Later, his work appeared in an annual, *The Pageant* of 1896 and 1897 in which Ricketts's influence was paramount. The short story "Light" has clear autobiographical resonances, while other stories in a periodical of more popular cast, *The Butterfly* indicate both talent and versatility. "Old Gough," for example, has a contemporary proletarian setting; "The Lovers of the Age of Stone" reflects a decadent primitivism. Indeed, the short stories of this decade are as achieved as his poetry.

*Silverpoints* was published in March 1893 and furnishes what is probably the most extreme example of the limited edition of a minor poet, the point where the esoteric becomes the profitable through calculating the point at which reader's tolerance would falter, the whole being embellished with a design by a contemporary artist. *Silverpoints* is indeed one of the most startling examples of the book-as-object in a decade prolific in fine printing. Bracketing off for the present its content, it has a green saddle-book design, floriated initial letters and Caslon old face italic type in the style of the early Venetian printer Aldus Minutius, much admired in the Vale and Century Guild groups, with Roman capitals at the beginning of each line of verse. Ricketts designed the binding, lay out, initial letters, and designer's emblem on the colophon page. The margins deriving perhaps from Whistler's *Gentle Art of Making Enemies* and *The Century Guild Hobby Horse* are of unusual width and depth and this indeed became one of the marks of
Gray: His Life, His Poetry

the Private Press movement of the 1890s. The binding is in apple-green with gold fleur-de-lys between wavering gold lines. Ada Leverson, witty friend of Wilde, commented on "the tiniest rivulet of the text meandering through the very largest meadow of margin. I suggested to Oscar Wilde that he should go a step further than these minor poets; that he should publish a book all margin; full of unwritten thoughts." We are reminded by contrast of Mallarmé's horror of the vacant white page or the technopaegnia of "Un Coup de Dés." It would, nonetheless, be unfair to suggest that Gray's achievement was dependent more on the refinement of his printers than on the piquancy of his verse. The title alludes to the technique of drawing with a silver stylus on specially prepared paper and to any drawing using that technique. It indicates also that style, the medium is crucial. Art with Nature and Grace is a major theme of the volume. The versions of Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Verlaine, Rimbaud and Laforgue remind us that Gray played a significant part in the transmission of contemporary French poetry.

His next volume of verse Spiritual Poems of 1896 was also designed by Ricketts with a special type face and published by Ricketts's private Vale Press. From manuscripts now in the National Library of Scotland, we may gather that the earlier poems in this volume are synoptic with the latest in Silverpoints and that in the same oblique manner as the translations in the earlier volume they indicate an advance in the spiritual life. In August 1894 Gray had written to John Lane: "I also wish Ricketts to build the book as I did before & there has been some talk of his doing an 'emblem' for a frontispiece," using that word in the loose sense of the later nineteenth century, "but I think this may possibly not come to much." It came to nothing, indeed; Spiritual Poems was to have no title page, for these were an aberration in Ricketts's eyes of the Renaissance.

Before the close of 1893 Gray had removed from the Temple to rooms at 43 Park Lane, a more prestigious address, and conveniently near to Raffalovich at South Audley Street. Contemporary accounts of him at this time refer to his being "incurably given over to social things." He was now a permanent guest at the house Raffalovich rented during these summers at Weybridge just South West of London on the Thames, and convenient for the archery and punting that Gray practiced at this time. Raffalovich's sister, later Mrs. William O'Brien, was not over enchanted with her brother's friend, though she changed her view of him later: "greedy at table, taking Raffalovich's generosity and kindness very much for granted." Yet as the translations in Spiritual Poems and the religious verses in The Blue Calendars, appearing in very limited editions between 1895 and 1898, suggest, a change was working within him. The Calendars contain a devotional poem for each month of the year. This marked, as Fr. Sewell observed, the poet's return to the practice of his religion and the beginning of a life of devotion." Such
an impression is reinforced by the article on Durtal, the hero of Huysmans’s autobiographical fictions whose theme is transcendence of the aesthetic appeal of Catholicism, repentance and the distance to be travelled when "a new heat" had begun. Similarly "Light" contributed to the Pageant of 1897 seems also to have an autobiographical slant. A middle-aged blacksmith’s wife, living in one of the outer suburbs of London, experiences a spiritual awakening while at a Sunday evening service in a Dissenting chapel. This is confirmed by her discovery of a translation of one of Jacopone da Todi’s religious lyrics, paralleling Gray’s own discovery of those. The blacksmith’s wife dies in a state of rapture and despite the opinion of her friends that she is demented, her husband remains convinced that she is sane. The piece has strong if oblique autobiographical reference.

From this year till the artist’s death in March 1898, Gray, like Raffalovich, was close to Beardsley, though they seldom met. Raffalovich assisted Beardsley financially and, like Gray, spiritually. The two friends have been rather unfairly accused of playing on a dying man’s physical shrinking from the mortal facts.

About another episode connected also with faith, one may be less assured. The Oscar Wilde trials of April 1895 were not only trials of Wilde’s criminal acts, they were trials also of Wilde’s works and of the whole decadent phase of English culture. The high-toned Uranian belief held by Raffalovich could all too readily be confused with the descent down the ladder of love so elegantly put by Percy L. Osborn in the pages of Lord Alfred Douglas’s Spiritual Lamp:

Le premier pas de ton échelle,
Aphrodite unisexuelle....

The first step is sight; the second touch, and the third, taste:

Puis, le troisième est quand sa bouche
Ses lèvres purpurine touche,
Ainsi qu’un rayon de soleil
Baise une fleur au tient vermeil.

Le pas prochain, c’est la caresse,
Quand ton bras amoureux la presse,
Pendant que presse sans dessein
Tu frottes doucement son sein!
Gray: His Life, His Poetry

The last step down the ladder is "union complète" and the poem concludes:

Et je ne sais quelles langueurs.

Even worse than the inverted Platonism was the decadent self-mockery.

Raffalovich would have hardly been human had not some resentment of his treatment by Wilde lingered on. At all events in his pamphlet L'Affaire Oscar Wilde, which appeared late in 1895, Wilde was condemned as the betrayer of the Uranian cause. The analysis was acute, and L'Affaire is a pioneering work, indeed in its way a classic text. A later pamphlet and an essay contributed in 1928 to the Dominican periodical Blackfriars have a distinctly less acrid note. As to Gray, he was sufficiently concerned at the time of the trials to engage counsel to hold a watching brief for him. His job in the Foreign Office might well have been at stake, but his name went unmentioned. Gray himself seems to have shown no bitterness about Wilde. If the lurid name was mentioned in later years, and it was a breach of manners to mention it, the most he would permit himself was a murmured "Ah! poor Oscar!"

The transition from John Gray, the exquisite, the ambitious young man of letters to the priest was imminent. In December 1897 he made a retreat with the Jesuits at Manresa House, Roehampton, and as Fr. Sewell puts it: "he decided to give his life the most total re-orientation possible by offering himself as a candidate for the priesthood." His resignation from the Foreign Office followed towards the close of 1898. It seems possible that the divine lightning had twice struck in the same person. His choice of the Scots College in Rome for his studies may well have owed something to his Scots extraction, but may also have formed part of a determination to break decisively not merely with his old life and haunts. At one point we are told that he made enquiries of the Oratorians at Brompton, but his application was refused; it could have been on the ground of age as much as notoriety. He was ordained priest on 21 December 1901, and late the following year appointed to a curacy at St. Patrick's, Edinburgh. The parish was a strange one for the late, golden boy of Park Lane and the Café Royale, situated in the Cowgate, then one of the more desperate slums, populated largely by the rough Irish. Here he became known as a priest who would go anywhere, would do anything for his flock. His deftness of hand and mechanical aptness, relics of earlier metal-turning days at the Royal Arsenal, astonished and delighted. But he remained a man of paradoxes: even as a student for the priesthood, he sustained his dandyism. Fr. Sewell tells us that "when travelling on the Continent. . . . he always wore a cassock,
beaver hat and buckled shoes," and he was often taken by innkeepers and railway porters for some kind of prelate.

Writing proved virtually impossible in those years from 1898, but besides occasional poems (some written earlier) in the pages of the periodicals, he produced the last of his Blue Calendar series, the *Fourteen Scenes in the Life of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, given to a wider audience the following year and securing a third printing in 1906. Privately printed also was the *Verses for Tableaux Vivants* of 1905 designed for performance by the children of St. Margaret's School under the direction of the nuns.

In 1904 Gray had edited in abridged form the last letters of Aubrey Beardsley (Beardsley's ribald letters to Leonard Smithers were not available and had they been would not have been used). Some of these last letters were addressed to himself, most to André Raffalovich. The editor's purpose was to present the artist as "decadent" saint on the model of Huysmans, to redeem him from any charge of "aesthetic" insincerity. Gray became an assiduous and formidable priest. From 1905 his energies were much involved with the acquisition of land and the building of a new church to serve the prosperous suburb of Morningside on the southern verges of Edinburgh. Raffalovich appears to have offered a subvention of five thousand pounds towards the new church which was blessed on 25 April 1907. St. Peter's Morningside was built to the designs of Sir Robert Lorimer and in a pamphlet published in 1925 Gray alludes to its Italian allegiances: the entrance court with its high gate, its trees and the arcading to left and right; the inside lofty, white, still, emphasizes the impression, the "whole effect of a smaller primitive church in Rome." Of the rectory, there is a vivid description:

The guest room had characteristic furniture. . . . Hanging on its walls were a few framed lithographs by Shannon and Ricketts. A heavy velvet-like fitted carpet added to the comfort. The windows were very small leaded casements, filled with semi-opaque glass, through which the pale winter sunshine of Edinburgh hardly penetrated. The whole house was a dim mysterious and elusive twilight. It was a world of halftones. . . . The large booklined study held a few comfortable green leather armchairs, and a business-like desk. Fr. Gray's personality was revealed by his room and his wide interests by his books—works in Icelandic, much poetry and mystical theology, besides costly illustrated volumes on sculpture, painting, and architecture. His austerely furnished bedroom was perhaps even more characteristic: the sheets on the narrow bed were of black linen.
There are disconcerting reminiscences of Des Esseintes' refuge at Fontenay.

Gray's friend, the inevitable Raffalovich, had moved to Edinburgh, finding it suited his health and he was able to preside over gatherings of persons; like Gray he believed that "society" was the medium "in which Christianity circulates." It is said that Raffalovich's drawing room curtains (from South Audley Street presumably) provided the altar cloth for St. Peter's. The church's fittings were removed in the flush of the iconoclasm that succeeded the second Vatican Council, as ruthless in its effects as those of the notorious Puritan Dowsing or the Tudor tyrant of a century before.

Gray's health had begun to be a problem towards the close of his study for the priesthood. The "slim gilt" youth of the 1890s was tending to overweight and he may well have suffered from high blood pressure. Strenuous hill walks and sparer, if still choice diet improved his condition; but he had to keep a constant watch on himself. While at St. Patrick's he had taken a lively interest in local social and economic problems, in the living conditions and wages of his parishioners; but once installed in more middle-class Morningside, these interests altogether lapsed. His interests nonetheless remained wide; wider than literature, they embraced wild flowers, minerals (the shadow of Ruskin) while he also collected toys and weapons. Wider issues of politics and economics he ignored, though he had earlier written an eloquent and informed article on the crofters of the Hebridean island of Eriskay.

His duties as priest continued to inhibit much production of verse and it was not until 1922 that he privately published Vivis, a slender budget of quatrains which ushers in his later, laconic manner, though what criticism has come to suggest is his finest poem "The Flying Fish" had been first published in the fourth issue of The Dial, thirty years before its slightly revised reappearance in The Long Road (1926). That volume embodies also most of the quatrains, the title poem, and a small number of other new items. From 1921 he began contributing to the Dominican periodical Blackfriars. Like Raffalovich, he had become a Dominican lay brother back in the 1890s. In 1925 Gray brought out three more works: a description of Saint Peter's; a brief essay on hymn writing and Saint Peter's Hymns, some being translations from the Roman breviary. Another translation, which ran to three printings, The True Prayers of Saint Gertrude and Saint Mechtilde, German medieval mystics, may also be mentioned.

In 1930, Gray was appointed a canon of the Cathedral Chapter of the diocese of St. Andrews and Edinburgh. His last two volumes are Poems (1931), issued in a limited edition, though from a somewhat crass commercial publisher with sectarian interests, and Park: A Fantastic Story (1932) which has been twice
Gray: His Life, His Poetry

edited and promises to be the most accessible of his writings. This too was
issued by Sheed and Ward, whose opinion of Gray’s work or of its possible
appeal was minimal.

On 14 February 1934, André Raffalovich died suddenly in his sleep. Gray was
severely affected: "I am," he told the sacristan at St. Peter’s, "the sad-
dest man in Edinburgh. My friend has gone to Heaven." The two-fold cord
of forty years had been broken. At the funeral in Mount Vernon Cemetery,
just outside Edinburgh, on a bitterly cold day, Canon Gray officiated. He
wore only his vestments and it has been plausibly suggested that it was then
that he "contracted the seeds of the illness from which he died four months
later." His own death took place from congestion of the lungs and pleur-
isy, with the complication of an abscess on the left lung which necessitated
an operation. The operation succeeded, but his heart gave out.

II

The lyrical verse of the 1890s poets is often confessional: "to drift with
every passion till my soul/ Is a stringed lute on which all winds may play";
"Go from me, I am one of those that fall"; "I have been faithful to thee
. . . in my fashion." Our first impressions, though, of the earlier phase
of Gray’s verse is detachment. The deeper truths of his interior life are
obliquely tendered through the choice in Silverpoints—we can hardly gener-
alise about the uncollected and unpublished works—of texts for translation,
such as Baudelaire’s "A Une Madone," "Femmes Damnées" and "Voyage à Cythère"
or through fable in "Mishka" or "The Barber." To be sure, "Did we not,
Darling, you and I," eulogizes a homosexual passion, echoing the garden scene
of the temptation in The Picture of Dorian Gray: "The fluffy bee knows us
and fills/ His hive with sweet to think upon"; but an exact reading is
uncertain. The last stanzas suggest that even in death the lovers will
still remain alienated by the strangeness of their passion. Detachment is
part of the role of the exquisite that Gray so consistently choreographed.

Silverpoints is loosely fused through counterpoint and resolution of the
Sauve" suggests a fallen and trivial garden scene assisted in traditional
mode by art: "crutched up branches." Nature imitates art while Ysabeau’s
"bursting lips" and the tangle by which Nature "snares" is reflected in the
irregularly spaced rhymes. "Heart’s Demesne" reasserts the imagery:
"Bunched kisses dangle from the Woodbine mesh," and the poem concludes
Gray: His Life, His Poetry

with a rococo version of the Unutterability *topos* of the Decadence. "Song of the Seedling" is a memorable example of a Blake-like empathy with the natural world that in one form or another remains typical of Gray's work at all phases. "Wings in the Dark" belongs to a class of utterance like the sonnets "St. Ives" and "On the South Coast of Cornwall" that celebrates the alien world of shore and sea and the lives of fishermen, an index of Gray's admiration for those with dangerous skills. The boat itself in "Wings in the Dark," a product of art, is projected as a natural object and here as elsewhere fish, animals and birds change places, a theatre of staccato motion. "The Barber" exalts once more an Art that improves on Nature but the menacing quality of life, unexpected, grotesque, is what is lastly accented. The third stanza echoes imagery culled from the jewel structure of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, whose source itself lies in Huysmans' *À Rebours*.

The translated texts are clustered towards the close of *Silverpoints*. Most have ennui, blasphemy and repentance as topics. The Baudelaire translations are the finest, giving voice richly and darkly as they do to the economy of Sin, Damnation and Grace. One instance of Gray's response to an original may be cited. The use of "vault" as *rime riche* in the "Voyage à Cythère" is specially witty: "soar and vault" is followed by "empty vault": so that the rhymes are both associated and polarized, acting as microcosm of the voyage itself.

The earlier unpublished and uncollected poems are, as we might expect, variable. There is a number of experimental pieces that end up in failure. "Travellers' Tales," which is not experimental, leaves the impression of being written on commission for *The Boy's Own Paper*. It has good lines but a number of flaccid epithets: stories are "strange"; trees "gigantic"; monuments are naturally "mighty" and sea-captains inevitably "tanned." The poet aims at a phantasmagoric vagueness but quite misses the boat. The final effect is merely cosy and its bland rhetoric is altogether different from the sinewy colloquialism of "in spare details" in the "Voyage à Cythère."

A similar technique of distancing appears in *Spiritual Poems*, though Gray slots in a few original poems that more or less bear directly on his own (and on André Raffalovich's) state of soul. Certain of these original and translated poems were written at the same time as the later poems in *Silverpoints*, but some date from 1894-1895 and would seem to suggest that the turn in Gray's inner life took place earlier and more gradually than has been supposed, but in spite of an original poem like "They say in other days"—which has deep feeling and a religious dread, a smell of nightmare—the process had only moderate effect on his conduct. The poet's translations
range widely from the middle ages to the nineteenth century and cover the quietism of a Madame Guyon and the sweet stammerings of a Verlaine. The book is a thesaurus of devotion; the austere liturgical poetry, void of individuality and eccentricity, that speaks therefore communally and has sustained the communal life of the Church for centuries; the spiralling energy of the Baroque; the quiet pieties of the North, the fiery structures of Southern mysticism.

Spiritual Poems were keyed to an effect of devotional struggle, prayer and illumination; but Ernest Dowson’s reaction to the first Blue Calendar was explicable. He was unsure as to the degree of sincerity involved in the archness, the self-conscious virtuosity of such pastiche of the old carols. The doubtful included Gray himself, at least so far as the opening poem went. We should perhaps remember that these poems were intended for friends; that they are gifts and deliberately intended to remind his readers of the tradition of celebration rather than exploration of the moral order. Like Verlaine, the speaker of the poems attempts a child-like response to the opening of Heaven’s Kingdom. Still, along with the later Calendars and the utilitarian volumes that followed, the heretical or reverently agnostic reader is liable to bracket such verses off from critical attention. The first two Calendars are not without charm; the two translations from Angelus Silesius and Friedrich Spee respectively are accomplished while "The True Vine" has real vivacity of concept and metre.

The three later Calendars are more sober; the personal voice, prominent at least in pure style, is not totally muted. The sonnets for saints, in spite of a few spirited lines, are drab and the Fourteen Scenes in the Life of the Blessed Virgin Mary frankly homiletic. In effect, the second Blue Calendar is the last volume that relates to Gray’s earlier phase. The Tableaux Vivants and St. Peter’s Hymns also witness to Gray’s subjugation of his gift to pastoral uses; no sign of personal accent or the vanity of authorship remains. The Hymns are not without distinction. In a number of cases modelled on Breviary Hymns they attempt to make dogma if not appealing at least memorable. What Gray considered the hymn writer should aim for may be gathered from the suppressed Preface to St. Peter’s Hymns: "A visible work of religious art can only be produced by theologian and artist in collaboration." The theologian directs the artist to short passages from the Psalms, antiphons, introits. The hymns Gray holds up as models are Catholic, but he also records his admiration for the "Evangelical and Methodistical fecundity"; for Charles Wesley reaching "The white heat of sacred passion": "The altar streams with sacred Blood,/ And all the temple flames with God." The good hymns of the Enthusiasts, Gray tells us, all possess a notion "cast into some measure just then tickling the inward ear and the complete work
Gray: His Life, His Poetry

rushes into being without labour or delay" (we may compare T. S. Eliot's remark about a tune preceding language where composition is concerned).

The second, dandiacal quality found in Gray's early poems is virtuosity. He seems to have tried every type of brief poetry: lyric, translation, dramatic curtain raiser, dramatic monologue, iconic verse (Ophelia and Saint Sebastian). It is regrettable that he did not attempt enigmatic narrative verse for which on the evidence of "The Flying Fish" he had a distinct gift. The virtuosity is mainly manifest in technical devices: Gray frequently uses rime riche, slant and consonantal rhymes, for example, "heart" and "spikenard" (Le Voyage à Cythère); muted internal rhyming and, on occasion, synaesthesia. Sometimes, with a sense of collusive audience he mocks at his own avant garde devices by using the same word in place of rhyme where the audience might expect rime riche as in the repetition of the word "snake" in the same sense in "The Vines." And in that same piece Gray uses a catalectic In Memoriam metre but occasionally shifts the accent in the first foot to u u -/.

Some of the symptoms we might expect to appear in a poet of the fin de siècle, the conscious archaisms; the occasional deliberate anachronism; the Alexandrines with wavering caesuras, used by Gray in a translation of a Verlaine sonnet about the time when Johnson and Dowson were experimenting along these lines; the prevalent parody including self-parody and self-mockery. "How very pale your pallor is" might well be an item culled directly from The Stuffed Owl, but must instead be viewed as a cardinal example of the decadent poet's habit of self-mockery through exaggeration. Similarly a construction such as "Nor never see their fit goal" recalls the syntax of Max Beerbohm's Enoch Soames, "Nor not strange forms and epicene" instead of "and," but perhaps Beerbohm had Silverpoints in mind. Beerbohm was himself, after all, a hanger-on of the Wilde circle. In his cruel exposition of "The Catholic Diabolist," from Blackburn or Rochdale or whatever unlikely place it was (though Francis Thompson was brought up in those industrialised parts), he has the "sorry-faced" Enoch (an antitype of the biblical Enoch translated downward into the infernal regions) mediate in a subfusc monotone his own dim verses.

What Linda Dowling has termed the Unutterability topos, the keeping secret of words that describe an event of such acute power, of a word that would undo, "uncreate" like Pope's opiate Madonna, fin du globe, the world, is miniaturized in Silverpoints: "And many whisper things I dare not tell." Beardsley's sinister nuntius in the giardino segreto does tell. The world that Gray evokes in some of the poems of Silverpoints is one that must be kept hidden. The poet moves through this world like a Cardinal in a society
Gray: His Life, His Poetry

where religious authority is perpetually under threat, so that his vocation and his secrets must be kept, as it were, in pectore.

Cockney rhymes, the twang sounded between clenched teeth, can be heard from time to time particularly in "The Lovers’ Manual"—"Amor" and "glamour," for example. This may be naughty, or may suggest the music hall or may reflect Gray’s own lower-class London tones. These are difficult judgments to make and Professor Higgins is not altogether helpful. Lord Curzon, as grand a grandee as ever spurned the earth, recently installed as Viceroy of India, on entering his palatial office is reported to have glared at the ink wells provided for him. "Take these away! They’re all bräss and gläss." Nothing less than gold and silver would do. Curzon, like many an aristocrat with estates in the country, retained in those flat a’s something of the local dialect in his speech.

The second phase of Gray’s work is marked by economy and a tautness of expression. His most distinguished volume, The Long Road, appeared in 1926 and contains what has come to be recognised as his "long, hard, sharp, strange, difficult masterpiece . . . one of the fine 'modern' poems of our century." "The Flying Fish" was, of course, written in the 1890s but one need not quarrel with the verdict or the Hopkinsish prose. "Enough of the World is Mine" speaks directly of his condition but "The Long-Road," a prattling poem, though intensely personal, is often obscure and, unlike "The Flying Fish," which if anything is more opaque, tends to exclude the reader. A number of the items in Poems (1931) are "modernistic" rather than "modernist," a touch perhaps of the ersatz glitter of the 1930s though the sensitive disgust of "Odiham" is bracing and the hymns are, like most of the poems of this phase, skilful. Perhaps the most authentic note is Gray’s humble, uncomplicated stance towards the natural scene. Gray’s eye, like that of Hopkins in his Notebooks, is alert to the delicate states of moving water, to the pure contours of upland country; he hears water-speech and presents the sense of nature as a plenum, a continuum, organic, never quite repeating the same moment, though lending context and stability to our life here. In Poems (1931) we encounter the same determination to write for a privileged few: "France, you remember Dominic" leads instantly on to a false Albigensian trail. The technique is assured, but the content of the poems seems faintly weightless. But after his early works and his homiletic exercises Gray never wrote badly or boringly. Phrases, stanzas, insights, oddities, persist to the end.

Twinges of virtuosity, experimentation, variety and an unintermitted energy of the imagination and its expression are not perhaps adequate to muted objections from those for whom Gray’s talents were minimal. We must try, in Paterian mode, to analyse and isolate the unique "virtue" of his poetry,
Gray: His Life, His Poetry

bitter, unexpected as it is, its aroma. In Lionel Johnson's "Dark Angel," if the poet makes good use of the public symbolism, his attitude remains subjective; his despair is florid, his pain referred through echoes, mirrors, dissolved in rhetorical figure, apt alliteration, narcotic cadence:

Less change, a dread to drifting dust
Than thine eternity of cares.

But the despair in Gray's poetry is of another order:

Then Pluto judged; that is to say, his face was bare;
Whereof I may not tell if it were harsh or fair;

But this I may: a man might howl a space
Of many years who once had seen his face.

The speaker looks at his situation in a dry light; the presence of the tormentor is established in sinister undertone: this is how things are, they can be no otherwise; the pain is now and always. Only in John Davidson among other poets at the end of the century smoulders a quality that is analogous to this, and Davidson, like Johnson, or the Henley of "Invictus," dramatizes, presents himself as the agonist of his own drama:

My head erect beneath the tragic years.

But Gray speaks of himself as the dull average sinner in a Hell that is also average and terrible. Just this directness and honesty is found also in the "Verses from Santeuil." The matter of factness, that dry light, like some accident of geology, preserves the better poems and even when opened up to critical inspection they cohere.