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# Where Do They Go: Christian Faith and Belonging in Gay Literature

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WHERE DO THEY GO: CHRISTIAN FAITH AND BELONGING IN  
GAY LITERATURE

by

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## Abstract

This exploration of Christianity, family, homosexuality, and running away in twentieth-century literature is divided into two essays. In the first essay, G. K. Chesterton's "twitch upon a thread" provides a way of understanding the flight of Sebastian in *Brideshead Revisited* by Evelyn Waugh and Jeanette in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* by Jeanette Winterson. After they escape their mothers and home communities, Sebastian's and Jeanette's searches for a vocation eventually bring them back to where they started, in one sense or another. Sebastian finds his place within the Church, at a monastery; Jeanette travels back to her parents' house while finding her voice as a prophet outside of her church. Sexuality is shown to be an inextricable part of this process in both books but in different ways.

In the second essay, the motif of wrestling is examined within a close reading of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* by James Baldwin, shows how John Grimes, Baldwin's protagonist, experiences a conversion into the faith of his family and community while knowing that his place in both institutions is tenuous due to his attraction to other men, which is seen by his community as sinful. *Go Tell It* is situated within two literary traditions of wrestling—one homoerotic, the other holy—showing how the text itself performs the reconciliation its protagonist so desires.

## Introduction

This project began in 2013, during my first Michaelmas term abroad at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, with the Scholarship & Christianity in Oxford program (SCIO). Dr. Jonathan Thorpe, my tutor for Modern Literature, assigned me an essay answering the question, “Is *Brideshead Revisited* a dark novel?” My essay focused on the fate of Sebastian, the whimsical young Oxford man who is driven deeper and deeper into depression and alcoholism until the narrative simply passes over him. The precise source of his troubles was not obvious to me, although it did seem to involve his mother, his Roman Catholic faith, and his friendships with two other men in the novel. For my next essay, Jonathan suggested that I read *Maurice* by E. M. Forster, which I found to be a nearly perfect foil for *Brideshead Revisited* in many ways, the most pertinent of which to the present project are the fates of Sebastian’s and Maurice’s faiths and their relationships to the church and society.

Sebastian ends up in a monastery; Maurice ends up living with his young love in what I take to be early twentieth-century Britain’s equivalent of a van down by the river—a gamekeeper’s shack.

Sebastian remains an alcoholic but keeps the faith and lives a life fluctuating between community and isolation, while Maurice loses his faith, falls in love with another man, and escapes society.

The essay caused me to wonder, is there another way, and, if so, may it be found in literature? I began reading gay literature and scholarship from gay/queer studies with the hope of finding another way.

Upon my return to Oxford in 2014, I took a tutorial with Jonathan on Christianity and homosexuality in modern and contemporary British literature and began working on my culminating SCIO thesis, which sought to answer the question, “In *Brideshead Revisited* and *Oranges*

*Are Not the Only Fruit* [by Jeanette Winterson], from what are Sebastian and Jeanette trying to escape?" This thesis has been slightly modified and now constitutes the first half of my project. The second half, which I wrote back at Seattle Pacific University, adds a discussion of James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, broadening the scope of the project to include an African American narrative that deals with many of the same themes as *Brideshead* and *Oranges*, both of which are by and about white, Oxford-educated Brits, albeit of different class backgrounds.

My approach to each of the novels is one of close reading, starting with a peek at the story's end and then following the narrative more or less from beginning to end, providing perspectives from previous criticism as well as my own analysis. The two essays, for that reason, are shaped by the novels they seek to explicate. In *Brideshead Revisited* and *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, Sebastian's and Jeanette's narratives both end with a return to where each character started: Sebastian, in becoming the under-porter at a monastery, returns to Mother Church,<sup>1</sup> while Jeanette, having left her church and faith, returns to the house of her mother and father. Both are brought back by what G. K. Chesterton calls a "twitch upon the thread." Thus, I explore the question of what Sebastian and Jeanette are escaping by starting at the places to which they return. I argue that both Sebastian and Jeanette seek to escape their overbearing mothers, who would confine them to the life of their childhood, and, in running away, that both find their vocation, Sebastian within the Church and Jeanette as a prophet outside of the church. I also argue that sexuality is a key part of both characters' flight. Jeanette's love of women is the wedge between herself and her mother and church. *Brideshead's* incorporation of sexuality comes more through the Oxbridge aestheticism Waugh weaves into the book through the character of Anthony Blanche and through the name "Sebastian," which is a reference to the Christian martyr whose

Renaissance portrayals were the source of erotic inspiration for late Victorian gay writers.<sup>2</sup> Because *Oranges* deals with sexuality more explicitly than *Brideshead*, I nest my discussion of the former within that of the latter with the goal of using one to illuminate the other.

*Go Tell It on the Mountain* is different from *Brideshead* and *Oranges* in that, while working through issues of faith, sexuality, and belonging, it is the story of a boy who is initiated into his church and community. As with the other novels, I begin at its ending, at a heartbreaking scene in which the protagonist, John Grimes,<sup>3</sup> hints to Elisha, the older boy he is attracted to, that he might not be able to remain a part of that church and community forever. I then begin a walkthrough of the novel, tracing the interplay of two conflicting inevitabilities that tear at John—that of conversion and that of his exodus—as they are explored at home, in the city, and then in two wrestling scenes on the floor of John’s church. John wrestles first with Elisha, and, I argue, “the Love that dare not speak its name,” and then with God. Norman W. Jones writes that *Go Tell It* narrates “a spiritual conversion and sexual awakening as aspects of a single transformational experience” (106). The transformational experience is John’s wrestling, an act that has a rich history—two rich histories, I argue: one that is homoerotic and one stemming from Genesis 32, in which Jacob wrestles God. In a discussion of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, ancient Greek athletics, and *Women in Love* by D. H. Lawrence and in a subsequent discussion of Genesis 32, I unearth aspects of wrestling that help flesh out John’s struggle with faith and sexuality.

I have organized the following three studies of Christian faith and belonging by placing them in two main sections that are related but not perfectly unified. In the section on *Go Tell It*, I nod to *Brideshead* and *Oranges* where appropriate, but I do not fully explore the many areas in which they overlap. This would be a larger project.

## Defining Terms

“Christian faith,” “belonging,” and “gay literature” are all slippery terms that must be defined. The introduction essay to *The Cambridge History of Gay and Lesbian Literature* opens by asking, “Is there such a thing as ‘gay and lesbian literature?’” (McCallum and Tuhkanen 1). The task of defining “literature” is contentious enough without tacking “gay” or “gay and lesbian” to the front of it. With our ever-expanding knowledge of the complexity of sexuality and gender, doing justice to the “historical, geographical, and generic range of possible texts and the lability of representations of same-sex desire” becomes an infinite endeavor (10). In order to avoid trying to describe the infinite, for the purposes of this project, “gay” is an adjective that is used to describe people of both sexes who are attracted to other people of the same sex and to literature that resonates with the experiences of such people, particularly those who live within larger contexts—such as families, societies, and religions—that do not celebrate same-sex love. The three novels that will be considered below may each be defined in such a way.

“Gay” will *not* be used to refer to any single set of aesthetic preferences or to codified speech specific to a certain time and place (as the word is often used today in the United States to describe city-dwelling, white, Anglo-Saxon men who love Judy Garland, Madonna, and Lady Gaga). However, as found below, gay literature does nevertheless present certain recurring tropes, including wrestling and kissing, that are not temporally and geographically bound. These may be found in all human experience, but they have taken on special significance for people attracted to the same sex. Gay people interact with each other over time, drawing on aesthetic preferences and tropes and writing about those they see as forerunners of their own community. Each of the writers discussed below either obviously intends to do this or may be found to be doing this

regardless of whether or not their intentions are clear. Evelyn Waugh draws on the homoerotic preferences of the Oxford aesthetes; Jeanette Winterson references Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own" (202); and James Baldwin echoes many previous writers' scenes of homoerotic wrestling. When I trace such appropriations below, I often refer to them as part of a homoerotic tradition, in contrast (and complement) to a Christian tradition.

Even while including *Brideshead Revisited*, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, and *Go Tell It on the Mountain* all under the umbrella of gay literature, I acknowledge significant differences between them. They represent different geographical locations (southern England, northern England, Harlem), different levels of homoerotic content (aesthetics, sex, erotic descriptions), different racial backgrounds (white British, African American), different denominational affiliations (Roman Catholic, English Pentecostal, African-American Pentecostal). One difference I would like to emphasize between the characters discussed in this essay is that Sebastian, in my reading, is not necessarily gay. Jeanette and John are, without question. These differences are important (and are discussed more in detail below), but, far from precluding discussion, they enable broader conclusions to be drawn about gay literature, belonging, and Christian faith.

Deciding what counts as faith is also a tricky task, but most Christian churches would agree that Christian faith involves both mental and physical activity; it incorporates head, heart, hands, and feet. For the purposes of this essay, Christian faith also involves both individual and corporate behavior. Belief is therefore inextricable from identity. In short, Christian faith is assent to the creeds and participation in the practices of a Christian community, a church.

Belonging, then, is being a part of a formative community, feeling welcome in such communities, and having a purpose or role within them. All three novels explore the possibility



and impossibility of belonging to one's family, society, and faith community. Sebastian and Jeanette do not belong in their families, so they leave. Jeanette does not belong in her church, so she leaves. John does not feel like he belongs in his family, church, or immediate society, so he contemplates leaving all three. In leaving, each character searches for belonging in a new community: Sebastian among the monks, Jeanette with the non-Christians in her town and the academics at her university, and John in the city. For Sebastian and Jeanette, belonging comes with and through a sense of vocation in the new community. These characters do not have identical journeys, but together their stories suggest that it is difficult for gay persons to belong to their original families, societies, and Christian faith communities. More often than not, they will run away. The particulars of why that is the case in each novel are explored in the pages below.

**The Uses of Thread: Navigating Family, Church, and Sexuality in *Brideshead Revisited* and *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit***

“I caught him with an unseen hook and an invisible line which is long enough to let him wander to the ends of the world and still to bring him back with a twitch upon the thread.”

G. K. Chesterton, as quoted in *Brideshead Revisited* by Evelyn Waugh, page 220

“Families, real ones, are chairs and tables and the right number of cups, but I had no means of joining one, and no means of dismissing my own; [my mother] had tied a thread around my button, to tug when she pleased.”

*Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* by Jeanette Winterson, page 224

**Sebastian**

Upon learning that the team assembled by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer to turn his 1944 novel *Brideshead Revisited* into a film was apparently oblivious to the book’s deep “theological implication,” Evelyn Waugh wrote a memorandum to them, explaining its plot, characters, and themes.<sup>4</sup> In typical Waugh fashion, the memorandum is concise and fairly condescending. He writes, “The theme is theological. It is in no sense abstruse and is based on principles which have for nearly two thousand years been understood by millions of simple people, and are still so understood.” Waugh then explains the concept of grace (“the unmerited and unilateral act of love by which God continually calls souls to Himself”) and sheds light on salvation (“God has a

separate plan for each individual by which he or she may find salvation”) before describing the role of the Catholic Church<sup>5</sup> in God’s plan (*Brideshead Memorandum*; qtd. in Heath 226, 227). I quote this point in full:

The Roman Catholic Church has the unique power of keeping remote control on human souls which have once been part of her. G. K. Chesterton has compared this to the fisherman’s line, which allows the fish the illusion of free play in the water, and yet has him by the hook; in his own time the fisherman by a ‘twitch upon the thread’ draws the fish to land. This metaphor appears twice in the novel and should be retained. (*Brideshead Memorandum*; qtd. in Heath 227)

Waugh uses Chesterton’s thread to tell a story integral to Christian tradition—the sinner is saved; the lost sheep is found; the prodigal son returns. The thread, a thin but powerful connection maintained between the fisherman (God acting through the Church) and the wanderer, is what accomplishes the task of *Brideshead Revisited*, which Waugh, in his 1959 preface for Chapman and Hall’s new edition,<sup>6</sup> describes as “Its theme – the operation of divine grace on a group of diverse but closely connected characters” (9). By the end of the book the thread calls back the souls of Charles Ryder, who is the book’s agnostic narrator, and Julia and Sebastian Flyte, the two more apostate children of Lady Marchmain (a staunch Catholic) and Lord Marchmain (an apostate from the Church and his wife). Lord Marchmain is also, in the end, reconciled to the Church in a dramatic—and in some circles infamous—deathbed conversion. While Marchmain’s return to the Church happens at his death, Julia’s is marked by her refusal to marry the then-agnostic narrator Charles Ryder, whose own conversion process is gently hinted at throughout the novel, flaring in a

display of sudden religious fervor at Marchmain's death and eventually revealed, subtly but definitely, at his return to the chapel of Brideshead Manor after years spent as an artist and soldier.

Perhaps the person whose return to the Church is most difficult to comprehend is Sebastian, Charles' friend from his Oxford years. Sebastian's relationship with his mother, Lady Marchmain, is draining for him—she is overbearing and oppressive.<sup>7</sup> His inability to function under his mother's rule at home drives him to alcoholism, paranoia, and a truly tragic breakdown witnessed firsthand by Charles, Sebastian's family, and the reader. He finally flees to Tunis, where he spends his remaining years as a dipsomaniacal waif and under-porter at a monastery. Cordelia, the younger, plain but faithful sister of Sebastian and Julia, says of her brother, "I've seen others like him, and I believe they are very near and dear to God. He'll live on, half in, half out of the community, a familiar figure pottering round with his broom and his bunch of keys," until "one morning, after one of his drinking bouts, he'll be picked up at the gate dying, and show by a mere flicker of the eyelid that he is conscious when they give him the last sacraments" (308, 309). Strangely, this does not seem to strike Cordelia as a terrible thing. To the contrary, she says, "It's not such a bad way of getting through one's life" (309). Waugh intends this to be a merciful end for the young man who is initially said to be "magically beautiful, with that epicene quality which in extreme youth sings aloud for love and withers at the first cold wind" (31). In the memorandum to MGM, Waugh writes that the second half of the novel, in which Sebastian meets his fate, "shows how the Grace of God turns everything in the end to good, though not to conventional prosperity" (qtd. in Heath 228). The name of this section, the second book (third in the British edition), is "A Twitch upon the Thread"; Sebastian, like Julia, Charles, and Lord Marchmain, is pulled back into the Church. It is good to take Waugh's own thoughts into consideration, but not

to the point at which Sebastian's actions become arbitrary inevitabilities chosen by the author to fit the novel's theme. Sebastian is whimsical and withering, but he is a character of his own with experiences, beliefs, and affects that inform his actions.

Many readers of *Brideshead Revisited* have not shared Waugh's view that Sebastian's end is a good one and thus may read Sebastian's character entirely differently. An early American reader wrote to Waugh, "Your *Brideshead Revisited* is a strange way to show that Catholicism is an answer to anything. Seems more like the kiss of Death."<sup>8</sup> In his summary of the battle fought over the sexuality of Charles and Sebastian in *Waugh Newsletter and Studies*—one which lasted from 1987 to 1991—David Leon Higdon, who argues that Sebastian is gay, writes, "In Sebastian we meet Waugh's nostalgia for his lost past and the orthodoxy of his Catholicism, which required him regretfully to condemn Sebastian" (81). This claim by Higdon echoes the argument that the strange, happy ending found in E. M. Forster's *Maurice* is the author's "own refusal to fit his characters into the still-prevailing Victorian stereotype of the sexual transgressors who must ultimately receive some kind of engineered and obligatory punishment" (Durbin 4828). While *Brideshead* does not deal explicitly with the currently popular concept of sexual orientation, it is indeed written with a familiarity of the Paterian Oxbridge aestheticism that was well known to have close ties to homosexuality. For some critics (see Higdon 77-79), the question of Sebastian's sexuality turns into a battle over who can claim him with their label instead of a means by which to consider the themes of the novel afresh. Sexuality ultimately affects more than the individual—it implicates partners, families, and societies, and thus may helpfully be considered as part of a web of relationships when asking, as this portion of my essay does, "Why does Sebastian run away?"

Part of the difficulty of piecing together an answer to this question is that Sebastian disappears halfway through the book, as Lady Marchmain makes plans with Julia's fiancé Rex Mottram to send him to a doctor in Germany who specializes in helping alcoholics. Charles learns of Sebastian's flight (his surname fits him) when Rex visits him and asks, "Any sign of Sebastian?" (172). Thenceforward, Sebastian appears in the novel only when others seek him out, bringing the narrative voice with them. Charles does this: he finds Sebastian in Fez doting on a German youth in worse shape than he (211-16). Later, on a cruise ship, Charles learns from Julia that "Sebastian's disappeared completely" (258). It is through an extensive conversation with Cordelia that Charles eventually learns that Sebastian has taken up residence at a Tunisian monastery (304). After this conversation Sebastian goes unmentioned until the book's end. Because the reader only hears of Sebastian when Charles does, it is as if we too are left by Sebastian—left to wonder what went wrong. To help illuminate Sebastian's flight, it will be worth turning to a later novel that contains and deals with more explicitly many of the same elements present in *Brideshead*—such as a dysfunctional religious family, a mother who hurts others while trying to do the right thing, a child who runs away only to be threaded, and same-sex relationships (of different varieties and opacities) that yield both of joy and trouble.

### **Jeanette**

Forty years after the appearance of *Brideshead Revisited*, Chesterton's thread can be found running through Jeanette Winterson's first novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, published in 1985. Although different from *Brideshead* in numerous ways—the protagonist is a young adopted girl, Jeanette; her family are working-class, conservative evangelicals; her parents raise her to be a

missionary; she falls in love with young women—*Oranges* is also the story of someone who, raised by a matriarchal Christian family, flees faith and family only to find that she is still somehow connected to them. And in *Oranges*, the narrative focuses mainly on Jeanette and provides insight into her mind, making the question “Why does she run away?” easier to answer in her case.

Indeed, Jeanette’s motive is obvious. She falls in love with Melanie, and the two become physically intimate. When their church learns of their involvement, the pastor pronounces during church, “These children are full of demons,” to the horror of the congregation (134). Melanie recants, but Jeannette cannot, leading to her long exorcism the next day. The exorcism fails, but two days later she agrees to repent (139). Time passes, Jeanette is restored to her surprisingly powerful place in the congregation as a teacher, and she falls in love again, which is when her mother tells her to leave. “I made her ill, made the house ill, brought evil into the church” (163). The repeated rejection of her sexuality, the exorcism, and the threats of expulsion “induce the necessary stage of doubt and internal crisis that precipitates conversion,” writes Amy Benson Brown—a conversion “away from the church” (242-3).<sup>9</sup> Said differently, Jeanette begins to see the problem with her situation: “I loved God and I loved the church, but I began to see that as more and more complicated. It didn’t help that I had no intention of becoming a missionary” (165). All of her life she had had a sense of direction and purpose that comes from the Christian story. James K. A. Smith writes, “The Scriptures provide the story of which we find ourselves a part, and thus the narration and absorption of the story is crucial to give us resources for knowing what we ought to *do*” (196, emphasis original). Jeanette has absorbed the story, but removed from the church, the direction of her life would no longer be a given. Jeanette leaves the church because she is a lesbian

and her community believes she is demon-possessed and wants her out. But in leaving, she also sets out to find a new sense of purpose.

After Jeanette is rebuked publicly and exorcised by her church for her lesbianism, she runs away from home. In “Ruth,” the last chapter of the book, her flight sequence is told in the style of a children’s fable. Winnet Stonejar, the protagonist of the fable (and a near-anagram of “Jeanette Winterson”), is taken under the wing of a sorcerer who trains her in magic and gives her some power in his village (187). But when Winnet falls in love with a boy, the sorcerer forbids their relationship and tosses the boy into the darkest room in the castle (188). When she tries to free him, the sorcerer demands that she leave. Abednego, a sympathetic raven, appears and understands Winnet’s concerns without being told: “You won’t lose your power you know, you’ll use it differently, that’s all” (189). Winnet’s response, “How did you know?”, reveals her anxiety about losing the sense of purpose that comes with her community. While the raven talks to her, the sorcerer (in the form of a mouse) ties an invisible thread around her button.

Winnet leaves and discovers that she does not fit in well with people outside her home; she wants to discuss important things that the others do not understand. “If she talked about ... good and bad, they would think her mad, and then she would have no one” (196). So Winnet journeys to “a beautiful city, a long way off, with buildings that ran up to the sky. It was an ancient city, guarded by tigers. No one in her village had been there, but all of them knew about it, and most held it in awe” (196). Before this point, the novel has chronicled the educational and spiritual formation of Jeanette, and in doing so it is well within the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*. With that knowledge, the description of the ancient city, and the fact that the book is somewhat autobiographical (besides the Winnet anagram, Winterson has called it “fiction masquerading as a



memoir” and has said her own evangelical childhood “is and is not *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*”), it is safe to assume that Jeanette is off to university—probably Oxford (*Art Objects* 53,122).

Once Jeanette has escaped her mother and church—the “old world,” in which, through God, “anyone could be a new creation”—she finds her new world a little too inquisitive for comfort. Only about two pages are spent in the ancient city, and those pages are spent reflecting on her past. An unnamed questioner asks, “Don’t you ever think of going back?” Jeanette responds, “Silly question. There are threads that help you find your way back, and there are threads that intend to bring you back. Mind turns to the pull, it’s hard to pull away. I’m always thinking of going back” (204). Both in the fable about Winnet and in the framing narrative, only when she leaves home does she discover the link that, like an umbilical cord, connects her to her past.

Following some of the more fairly obvious definitions of the word, the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s entry for “thread” lists one that is particularly apropos: “A thread in various mythological or legendary tales ... is mentioned as the means of finding the way through the labyrinth or maze: hence in many figurative applications: That which guides through a maze, perplexity, difficulty, or intricate investigation.” Jeanette tells her story in part as a legendary tale, and her task of navigating the conflicting parts of her identity contains aspects of each: a “maze, perplexity, difficulty,” and “intricate investigation.” Her questioner’s last query reveals how the thread that her mother tied around her button “to tug when she pleased”—the thread that connects her to the church that exorcised her—could lead her out of the maze. The question comes:

‘What would have happened if you had stayed?’

I could have been a priest instead of a prophet. The priest has a book with the words set out. Old words, known words, words of power. Words that are always on the surface. Words for every occasion. The words work. They do what they're supposed to do; comfort and discipline. The prophet has no book. The prophet is a voice that cries in the wilderness, full of sounds that do not always set into meaning. The prophets cry out because they are troubled by demons. (205)

Prophets in the Old Testament are individuals who see that God's people have gone astray and, responding to God's prompting, call out for change. Jeanette's prophet status requires her to lose her book in exchange for, in Brown's words, "a self-made song of her own demons"—the demons being "that complex package of her identity, sexuality, and creativity," and the song being the new prophetic vocation she constructs out of that package (246). As a bookless prophet in the wilderness, Jeanette claims a role outside her church while remaining within the church's narrative. While God spoke to Moses on Mt. Sinai, Jeanette has her own mountaintop experience in the towers of her ancient city, but on her mountain, "There is no one to discuss it with." She thinks, "Wouldn't it be nice to sit on the ground again?" and sets off to spend her Christmas holiday at home (206).

Jeanette follows the pull of the thread home to spend time with her family. She finds her mother playing Christmas hymns on a new electric organ. For bedtime reading her mother gives her a copy of the *Band of Hope* review, featuring a "long piece on devilry" written by her mother (210-11). Upon her return, Jeanette is the one receiving, not distributing, the tracts because she is no longer a part of the church in which she was raised; in finding her vocation, which enables her to use her powers differently, she is a "new creation," albeit a kind that is unacceptable to the

community she has left behind. On his return to the town of his birth (Luke 4), Jesus goes to the synagogue to read aloud to the assembled Jews from the prophet Isaiah, before saying, among other things, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown” (NRSV Luke 4:24).

Winterson, like Waugh, has a bit to say about how to read her novel. In the introduction she wrote in 1991, she writes, “*Oranges* is a threatening novel. It exposes the sanctity of family life as something of a sham; it illustrates by example that what the church calls love is actually psychosis and it dares to suggest that what makes life difficult for homosexuals is not their perversity but other people’s” (xiv). Whereas Waugh tells us that the flaws of his characters are redeemed by the grace of God through their responding to the Church’s twitch of the thread, Winterson arrives at a different conclusion through the story of Jeanette: what the church considers to be a flaw may be something good and useful. Nevertheless, her thread brings her back to family and to a place where she must reckon with the God of her church. During her holiday in her hometown, she climbs her favorite hilltop and asks a question of her own:

But where was God now, with heaven full of astronauts, and the Lord overthrown?  
I miss God. I miss the company of someone utterly loyal. I still don’t think of God as my betrayer. The servants of God, yes, but servants by their very nature betray. I miss God who was my friend. I don’t even know if God exists, but I do know that if God is your emotional role model, very few human relationships will match up to it. (216)

Although there does not seem to be much left of Jeanette’s attraction to her former church and faith, what she does seem to miss is the friendship of God. It is God, if anything, that Jeanette is

drawn to and God's servants who have betrayed her; but it is God's absence that Jeanette senses and God's servants to whom she, as a prophet, must continue to speak.

Jeanette, then, flees the institutions—family and church—that have adopted her, raised her, and formed her mind, once she encounters a part of herself that they cannot explain, vanquish, or validate. She runs away from her family, church, and mother in particular because they hurt her and tell her to leave, making it clear that the relationships she desires to have with women make continued involvement with their form of Christianity (the only variety offered in the novel) impossible. Cut off from her family and church because she has discovered a new facet of her identity, Jeanette loses an old facet that she was to grow into: the role of the missionary and preacher. And so she leaves her hometown to find a new vocation. She is not well understood by those outside the institutions that raised her, but distance from them allows her the ability to reflect on her situation, leading her to the realization that she is still connected somehow to her family and that she must return. She returns to her mother no longer a member of the same church but still wondering about the same God and now bearing the task of the prophet—to cry out for change. This cry is not heard within the novel's dialogue between Jeanette and her mother or church; Jeanette's prophetic plea is her story in the hands of the reader.

### **Mother, Church, and Sexuality**

The three similarities between *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* and *Brideshead Revisited* that are most pertinent to the flight of Sebastian are the presence of a deeply religious mother who sees her child going astray and tries to wrestle them back onto the straight and narrow, the faith of the child which changes as the child figures out its place within the church and their family, and, as I will

argue, aspects of the child's actions and affects that condition its interaction with others—actions and affects which today would be considered to fall under the blanket term “homosexuality.”

When Charles first introduces Sebastian to the reader, he describes him as wearing a “dove-grey flannel, white crepe-de-chine, a Charvet tie, my tie as it happened, a pattern of postage stamps” (22). Sebastian suggests escaping Oxford, which is “pullulating with women,” to go for a drive and drink some wine (“‘It’s heaven with strawberries’”), which they do while smoking cigarettes and generally enjoying each other’s presence (23-4). Sebastian is lighthearted and childish, carrying his stuffed bear Aloysius around as a companion, getting pleasantly drunk, and introducing friends to each other—common activities for a fresher, besides the bear. But when Sebastian invites Charles home for the first time, Charles detects something beneath his friend’s winsome surface in the way he describes his relationship to the building, Brideshead. “I felt, momentarily, like a wind stirring the tapestry, an ominous chill at the words he used—not ‘That is my home,’ but ‘It’s where my family live’” (35). Sebastian has chosen a time to visit when no one but Nanny is home, because he wants to keep Charles for himself: “I’m not going to have you get mixed up with my family. They’re so madly charming. All my life they’ve been taking things away from me. If they once got hold of you with their charm, they’d make you *their* friend, not mine, and I won’t let them [emphasis original]” (37). In these quotations Sebastian associates his home with his family (“It’s where my family live”) and distances himself from his family through his usage of possessive pronouns—there is “mine” and “their” but no “our.” As they drive back to university, the “further we drove from Brideshead the more he seemed to cast off his uneasiness—the almost furtive restlessness and irritability that had possessed him” (40). Starting with this occasion, the source of Sebastian’s anxiety slowly comes to light in the shape of Lady Marchmain.

Over the course of the first book, “Et in Arcadia Ego,” Sebastian’s mother slowly infiltrates his life, at home and at Oxford. The first sign comes on the last Sunday of the year, as Lady Marchmain begins reaching out to Monsignor Bell. Sebastian tells Charles, “I haven’t been [to mass] all this term, and Monsignor Bell asked me to dinner twice last week, and I know what that means. Mummy’s been writing to him.” Sebastian sat in a prominent place at mass and “practically shouted the Hail Mary’s” to fend him off (60). The monitoring becomes more than a nuisance during their second year, when on the first Sunday of Michaelmas term Sebastian complains to Charles that he has already had four talking-tos, two of which came from Monsignor Bell and Mr. Samgrass, a don at All Souls and, as Sebastian says, “someone of Mummy’s.” They all pressure him to reform—he “made a very bad start last year” and has been “noticed” (emphasis original). In response, the two friends make an effort to “live in the shadows” (105). The first year of university had allowed Sebastian to “escape from reality,” and it is becoming clear that this will no longer be acceptable (107). Lady Marchmain visits Oxford to meet with Samgrass for business reasons. While there, she meets Charles for the first time, causing Sebastian to remark, “You and Mummy seem very thick.” This is the first sign of Sebastian’s suspicion that Mummy is going to use Charles to watch him, a suspicion that is correct (110). The eyes of his mother follow him everywhere: after a driving incident involving alcohol and hookers, Samgrass arranges housing so that he, Sebastian, and Charles, will be “gated” for the rest of the term (123). Samgrass even comes to Brideshead to watch Sebastian (124). Charles recognizes the threat to Sebastian but becomes less able to help as he becomes more associated with Lady Marchmain in Sebastian’s mind (127). As Samgrass “strengthened his hold on Sebastian.... Sebastian drank to escape.” Charles marks Easter of that year, a particularly bad drinking day for Sebastian, as “the beginning of a new epoch

in his melancholy record of deterioration, the first step in the flight from his family which brought him to ruin” (129).

In his memorandum to MGM, Waugh writes, “The first half of the story is, in essence, the failure of Lady Marchmain. First with Sebastian, whom, with the best intentions in the world, she drives out of England to a life in the underworld” (qtd. in Heath 228). In her attempt to ensure that her son makes a name for himself at university and in her later mission to keep him away from alcohol, Lady Marchmain makes Sebastian feel hunted in his own home. After Sebastian leaves Oxford prematurely to go on a tour of monasteries with Samgrass, orchestrated by his mother, the family and Charles congregate at Brideshead to hear stories from the trip and to go hunting. While the hunting party is out (Sebastian included), Lady Marchmain conveys to Charles, who has offered to take Sebastian to his London residence, her intention to detain her slippery son, who escaped Samgrass during their travels: “We must keep him happy and healthy here for a bit, hunting, and then send him abroad again with Mr. Samgrass” (163). But when the hunting party comes back from their adventures and Sebastian does not, a search for him is necessary—he is the hunted one (166-7). Lady Marchmain’s persistent attempts to control her son are largely what fuel Sebastian’s flight.

It would be artificial to consider Sebastian’s faith separately from the discussion of Lady Marchmain because her Roman Catholic influence seeps into Brideshead itself. Gregory Wolfe is right to point out that Brideshead Manor symbolizes “God and his church”—this would not be the case without Lady Marchmain (116). Historically, we learn, “Brideshead was not an old-established centre of Catholicism” (85). On the occasion of Lord Marchmain’s conversion, he is said to have told his wife, “You have brought back my family to the faith of their ancestors,” implying that

something followed Lady Marchmain into the house when they married (220). As a wedding gift to her, he had an art nouveau chapel built onto Brideshead to recognize the presence that followed her in, and, when she dies, the chapel is closed (39, 220). Roman Catholicism, Lady Marchmain, and Brideshead are difficult to disentangle.

Early on, Sebastian shows the chapel to Charles, dipping his hands in water, crossing himself, and genuflecting as he enters (38). His faith confuses Charles, in part because Charles is agnostic, in part because Sebastian remains a practicing Catholic (“Sebastian always heard his mass, which was ill-attended”) despite the wickedness it causes him to see in himself (85-6). He believes simply because “It’s a lovely idea” (87). This reason sounds childish, at least in the way it is presented. Sebastian once considers bringing Nanny to Oxford with him, “only she’d always be trying to send me to church” (37). The desire for Nanny’s presence demonstrates his childlike need to be nurtured. His decision not to bring her to Oxford could stem from a wish to let his faith be freely chosen or a wish not to be *treated* like a child, or it could be an actual aversion to church. It also could be an early hesitation to opening a door for his mother’s far-reaching grasp. The faith itself—his belief in God—could be another symptom of “his desire to remain a child rather than assume adult responsibilities, as evidenced by his teddy bear, his devotion to Nanny, and Cara’s observation that he ‘is in love with his own childhood’ (103)” (Beatty 157). Before his, as Charles calls it, “deterioration” and flight from Brideshead, Sebastian’s commitment to the Church is genuine, but—as it is for Jeanette—it is also part of his complex relationship with his mother and his childhood. Regardless of whether it is in itself something he is trying to escape (I believe it is not), distance from home will cause Sebastian to contemplate his connection to the Church and to God.



Ultimately, Sebastian's flight to the monastery—yes, driven by his desire to escape his mother and home—should be seen as the consummation of two traditions familiar to Waugh: one, the homosocial and -sexual Oxford aestheticism that was obsessed with youthful beauty, the other, that of St. Sebastian, an early Christian martyr. In 1873 Walter Pater, an Oxford classicist, published *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, glorifying the Renaissance's "care for physical beauty, its worship of the body" (13). Years earlier he wrote a paper called "Diaphaneité," which calls for a utopia of Hellenistic young men: "The beauty of the Greek statues was a sexless beauty; the statues of the gods had the least traces of sex. Here there is a moral sexlessness" (xii, 139). Pater's writings were enormously controversial and enormously influential on the following generations of Oxford men, including Oscar Wilde, whose *Picture of Dorian Gray* resonates with the 'Conclusion' of the *Studies* (Bristow xxviii). For the Oxbridge aesthetes around the turn of the century, "Hellenism provided an aesthetic and moral justification of male love" that could be found between teachers, dons, and their students (Reay 220, 221). Waugh was personally familiar with this aspect of Oxford life from his education there, which began in 1922 (Patey 10-13, Pugh 68).

A favorite subject for these men was St. Sebastian, a martyr who was shot with arrows, survived, and then was clubbed to death. He was commonly portrayed in the Renaissance tied to a tree, a sensuous sheath for the arrows that fail to kill him.<sup>10</sup> "Sebastian's beatific attitude in the midst of an arrow-inflicted anguish suggests a polymorphous eroticism, a 'perverse' stance of bodily vulnerability exploited by numerous late-Victorian writers" and transitional Modernist writers, including John Addington Symonds, Pater, Wilde, John Gray, Marcel Proust, and Rainer Maria Rilke (Kaye 113). In *Brideshead*, Anthony Blanche—the flamboyant aesthete, friend of Sebastian,

and patron of gay bars—greet Sebastian, saying, “My dear, I should like to stick you full of barbed arrows like a p-p-pin-cushion” (33).<sup>11</sup> Those words alone from the mouth of an Oxford aesthete who claims to have dined with Proust are enough to assert confidently that Waugh is intentionally evoking the homoeroticism of the Oxford aesthetes (46). This does not establish Sebastian as a homosexual, but, through association with a homoerotic tradition, it does establish him as an object of homosexual desire, reinforced by consistent descriptions of his youth and beauty that could rival those of Dorian Gray, of whom it is written, “All the candour of youth was there, as well as all youth’s passionate purity” (Wilde 17).<sup>12</sup> It also places Sebastian in a tradition that has an uncomfortable relationship with the church. Pater, an atheist, writes of the Renaissance, “In their search after pleasure ... people were impelled beyond the bounds of the primitive Christian ideal” (16). While Pater and a number of his followers did likewise, this is not the trajectory of Sebastian Flyte.

Waugh’s contribution to the inherited homoerotic tradition of St. Sebastian is a Sebastian who symbolizes both a specific strand of homoeroticism and a faith determined enough to lead to a kind of martyrdom. But Waugh’s Sebastian has a different kind of martyrdom than his historic namesake. Sebastian’s first stint in Africa is spent with Kurt, a young, maimed German soldier, prone to giggling through his toothy smile, with “long fair hair combed back without a parting and a face that was unnaturally lined for a man of his obvious youth” (211). Kurt is, in his spoiled youth, a mirror image of Sebastian. Although Sebastian is also sick, the presence of Kurt awakens in him something new—he experiences a “spiritual resuscitation,” for he is able to take care of his new friend (Beatty 157). Sebastian tells Charles, who is visiting him, “it’s rather a pleasant change when all your life you’ve had people looking after you, to have someone to look after yourself.

Only of course it has to be someone pretty hopeless to need looking after by *me*” (215, emphasis original). Away from Brideshead and Lady Marchmain, who would have him perpetually treated like a child, Sebastian begins to see how he can be helpful to others. When he first arrives at the monastery in Tunis, he asks to be made a lay brother. Denied that, he says that he “wanted to go to the bush, as far away as he could get, among the simplest people, to the cannibals.” When told that there were no cannibals around, he asks about pygmies and lepers, “lepers would do best of anything.” The Superior of the monastery replies, “You are not a young man. You do not seem strong to me,” and, after Sebastian returns drunk to the monastery many times, agreed to let Sebastian be an under-porter. “We see some queer fish,” he said (304-5). Sebastian remains childlike in his naïveté, but, without the presence of his mother and home driving him further into himself, his heart opens to serve others, and therein lies his vocation.

The vocation Sebastian finds does not rid him of his suffering. This is key to Waugh’s theology. He remains a drunk throughout the book, only “practically [giving] up drinking at one time while he and Kurt lived together. Kurt was ill and had a wound that wouldn’t heal. Sebastian saw him through that” (306). But the monastery provides a group of people who will love his quirks and tolerate his hiding bottles in the garden, Cordelia predicts (308). He will also have ready access to the sacraments, which are a source of life to believers. Sebastian’s suffering leads him to a community in which he can pursue holiness. Returning to the question of the “kiss of death” raised by Waugh’s reader, Gregory Wolfe writes, “The sufferings that [the church] seemingly inflicts, because of its laws and absolute claims, are the bitter herbs through which the disease of sin is purged” (116). Cordelia says, “No one is every holy without suffering. It’s taken that form with him” (309). In *Brideshead*, suffering and vocation come hand in hand.

Unlike Jeanette, whose thread brings her back to her mother but not to her church, Sebastian is twitched back not to his mother but to a monastery. Both threads lead to family, in one way or another. This is obvious in the case of Jeanette, but for seeing how Sebastian returns to a variety of family, we turn to Wolfe once more. About the G. K. Chesterton quote at the beginning of this portion of the essay, Wolfe writes, “This is a metaphor for the church, which is a family, not a voluntary association; one’s relationship to it has nothing to do with the will. Hence its inexorable claims (117).” Both threads lead to sacrifice and service. For Jeanette, this involves leaving the church while being a prophetic voice to it, and for Sebastian this involves finding a humble way of serving the Church. By adopting the figure of St. Sebastian, and in him marrying orthodox Catholicism to the youthful beauty loved by the Oxford aesthetes, Waugh invests this figure, from whom others had stripped any theological significance, with a specifically Christian meaning that has “for nearly two thousand years been understood by millions of simple people” (qtd. in Heath 226). In doing so, Waugh gives the thread a good yank of his own (qtd. in Heath 226).

**“To Make the Conquest Dear”: Wrestling with Flesh and Spirit in *Go Tell It on the Mountain***

“The Lord done laid him out, and turned him around and wrote his *new* name down in glory.  
Bless our God!”

And he kissed John on the forehead, a holy kiss. (225)

There are many ways to read a kiss, for a kiss can betray numerous shades of intimacy. Beyond simply loving, kisses are tender or erotic; they are used to congratulate or welcome; and they can be chaste, or, as in the final scene of James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, holy. Though it is described merely as “holy,” the kiss that is given to John, a young man who struggles to figure out what he believes and what community he belongs to, from Elisha, the teenage Sunday school teacher at John’s church, has enjoyed a wide number of interpretations, as has their relationship in general. This kiss has been read as a guidepost that helps John escape his cruel father (Crawford 80), as a confirmation of his homosexuality (Csapó 72; Giles 378), and as determinedly *not* homoerotic (Lundén 126). The scene has possible implications beyond sexuality and resolving family strife. Michael Philip Penn’s fairly recent scholarship recovering the kiss’s role in the liturgy of the early Christian church suggests, “The kiss should connect community members to each other.... but separate them from outsiders” (29). What St. Paul calls the “holy kiss” in four of his letters became associated with the church’s rites of initiation; it was “shared with the reconciled penitent, the newly baptized, and among those continuing to celebrate the Eucharist” (McGowan 55; 57). Whether or not he was aware of the kiss’s significance to the early

church, Baldwin was certainly familiar with Paul's letters. Is the kiss, then, a sign of John's acceptance into his Harlem church, Temple of the Fire Baptized? Lest we give into the temptation of haphazard simplification for the sake of classification, it must be maintained that, like any powerful symbol, the kiss can hold numerous connotations in tension. But the kiss is particularly suited to this task because it is an action in which two distinct persons, entities, or ideas come together, not to destroy but to acknowledge each other in love, even when in passing. And even then, the kiss Elisha gives John is only one small part of the narrative; it follows (and, in a way, seals) the events of John's fourteenth birthday—his wandering into New York from Harlem, his wrestling with Elisha, and his dramatic conversion, all of which work to confuse the binarisms of spiritual/physical, innocence/experience, arrival/departure, and insider/outsider.<sup>13</sup>

## Home

A Christian life is both chosen *for* an individual and chosen *by* an individual—this is part of what is introduced by the first paragraph of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (henceforth called *Go Tell It*).

Everyone had always said that John would be a preacher when he grew up, just like his father. It had been said so often that John, without ever thinking about it, had come to believe it himself. Not until the morning of his fourteenth birthday did he really begin to think about it, and by then it was too late. (3)

“Everyone,” which is the subject of the first sentence, names a Shakespearean chorus that introduces the ensuing drama. This “everyone” is only identified through the words it speaks—words that provide the protagonist with a vocation to grow into. These words (“John would be a preacher when he grew up”) say as much about everyone as they do about John; “everyone” is

within the context of a people that has an interest in raising up leaders—specifically, preachers.

“Everyone” is a community of Christians, and John, like Sebastian and Jeanette, has internalized the expectations the community has for him. But when he begins seriously to consider the implications of being a preacher just like his father, “it was too late.”

With those four short words a double inevitably enters the narrative. It appears to be inevitable that John will join the church and become a preacher like his father. Because it has not yet happened, the Temple of the Fire Baptized awaits the day of his conversion. Near his fourteenth birthday he feels “all the pressures of church and home uniting to drive him to the altar” (5). “One day, so everyone said, [the Power of God] would possess him” (8). The holy life is waiting for him; it is “imminent, coming closer day by day” (10). But amidst statements such as these are revelations of John’s various anxieties and diversions that would keep him from conversion and participation in the community. Elisha is mentioned for the first time—John admires “the timbre of Elisha’s voice, much deeper and manlier than his own,” and “the leanness, and grace, and strength, and darkness of Elisha in his Sunday suit.” Being called on by Elisha during Sunday school makes his heart pound and his palms sweat (6). The sensual descriptions of Elisha and of John’s physical response to him have been read as the inception of the novel’s homoerotic subtext, one that perhaps explains some of John’s discomfort in his church—“There had never been a time when John had not sat watching the saints rejoice with terror in his heart, and wonder” (7). A passage that comes slightly later clearly connects attraction to other boys to a sense of sinfulness, and thus, alienation from his church: “He had sinned with his hands a sin that was hard to forgive. In the school lavatory, alone, thinking of the boys, older, bigger, braver, who made bets with each other as to whose urine could arch higher, he had watched in himself a

transformation of which he would never dare to speak” (11). The final few words of this quote are an unveiled reference to “the love that dare not speak its name,” the love between men from the poem “Two Loves” by Lord Alfred Douglas—the young lover of Oscar Wilde. Meditating on his church and “the darkness of his sin” leads John to a conclusion: “he had made his decision. He would not be like his father, or his father’s fathers. He would have another life” (12). Although it is inevitable that John will be brought before the altar to become a full-fledged Christian man and member of his African-American community, so too does it appear inevitable that he will leave these things behind for “another life.”

This double inevitability is closely linked to what Baldwin describes as “double alienation” in his essay “Many Thousands Gone” (20). The context is a discussion of the dehumanization of African Americans, then commonly called Negroes. Baldwin writes, in a white first-person narration, that those Negroes who dare to intermingle their lives with those of white people “do so at the grave expense of a double alienation: from their own people, whose fabled attributes they must either deny or, worse, cheapen and bring to market; from us, for we require of them, when we accept them, that they at once cease to be Negroes and yet not fail to remember what being a Negro means” (20-21). Baldwin suggests that to be a Negro is to be a person displaced by the systems he or she is born into. In the opening “Autobiographical Notes” of *Notes of a Native Son*, the collection of essays in which “Many Thousands Gone” was also published, he again describes his sense of being trapped, this time with reference to being a writer: “Of traditional attitudes [to the Negro problem] there are only two—For or Against—and I, personally, find it difficult to say which attitude has caused me the most pain” (2). For Baldwin, personally, being an African American is to be caught between two histories—to be “a kind of bastard of the West,” an



“interloper,” to appropriate the years of white oppression and “make them mine” (4). John’s own struggle to figure out his place inside or outside of his community, prompted in part by his attraction to the same sex, is an experience of double alienation: he does not seem to belong with his family or church, and, as it is revealed when he visits the city (discussed below), he does not belong outside of them, either.

The resolution with which John determines to have another life may be great (the text goes as far as to say that, like Pharaoh, “John’s heart was hardened against the Lord”), but a conversation he has with his mother before adventuring into the city reveals that he is not so sure (14). The internal tensions in his soul cause him to weep, which is when he hears his mother’s voice calling to him (24). His mother, Elizabeth, appears to know things about John that he might not know about himself. She looks at him “as though she were looking at someone else’s child” (25); when she says, “You going to be a mighty fine man, you know that? Your mama’s counting on you,” John intuits that “in a kind of secret language she was telling him today something that he must remember and understand tomorrow” (25; 25-26); she tells him not to fret, that the Lord will reveal to him what he needs to know, and that the Lord works for the good of those he loves (26); she does all of this “because she knew he was in trouble” (26). Although John is not sure if he and his mother are thinking about the same things, out of a desire to comfort her, he says, “Yes, Mama. I’m going to try to love the Lord.” He is “astounded” at the words that come out of his own mouth, but his mother’s reaction is stranger: “there sprang into his mother’s face something startling, beautiful, unspeakably sad—as though she were looking far beyond him at a long, dark road, and seeing on that road a perpetual danger. Was it he, the traveler? or herself? or was she thinking of the cross of Jesus?” (26). These questions are left dangling for the reader to ponder.

John's tender moment with his mother begs for comparison to the relationship that he has with his father, Gabriel. Not only is John determined to "not be like his father, or his father's fathers," as is mentioned above, but there is mutual antagonism between father and son. After we learn of the hardening of John's heart against the Lord, Baldwin writes, "His father was God's minister, the ambassador of the King of Heaven, and John could not bow before the throne of grace without first kneeling to his father," which he refuses to do (14). With God so clearly aligned with his father, whatever peculiarity grows within John that seems to counter the will of Gabriel also counters the will of God (and is therefore sin), and vice versa, driving a wedge further between John and his F/fathers. This growing peculiarity seems to have something to do with his sexual awakening. The sentence that conflates Gabriel and God continues: "and John's secret heart had flourished in its wickedness until the day his sin first overtook him" (14). "[T]he day his sin first overtook him" refers back to a few pages earlier where it is written, "He had sinned," followed by the account detailed above about in which "he had sinned with his hands a sin that was hard to forgive ... thinking of the boys, older, bigger, braver" (11). Thrice in this brief paragraph, which details the "transformation of which he would never dare to speak," the word "sin" is used, cementing the connection between "sin" and John's thoughts and actions regarding the other boys. And his heart's flourishing in wickedness is related to his refusal to bow down before his father and his God. His father, in turn, "had always said that his [John's] face was the face of Satan" (20). Whereas Elizabeth, a steady example of quiet faith, sees John, senses his pain, and calls out to him, Gabriel, quick to anger, sees in John something that must be called out of him.

John talks to his mother, receives birthday money from her, and then leaves the house to spend the money before his father comes home. He sees New York's skyline and climbs the hill that separates him from the city. The sight of the city brings him "exultation and a sense of power," fueling his ascent of the hill and rousing thoughts of going to live as "the Lord's anointed" in the city that his ancestors longed for but also memories of the city's inhabitants, "whose eyes held no love for him." Most tellingly, he thinks of his parents "and all the arms stretched out to hold him back, to save him from this city where, they said, his soul would find perdition" (27). New York conjures conflicting emotions for John and his community—both desire and displacement, as well as fear of damnation. John lusts for his own "conquest of the city," to indulge his senses and "[t]o hurl away, for a moment of ease, the glories of eternity!" (28). The city, even from a distance, is at least visible. It may be entered and smelled; it houses motion pictures and women in fur coats. For John, standing on top of the hill between home, family, and church on one side and the city on the other, there is no contest. "These glories [of heaven] were unimaginable—but the city was real." He runs down the hill—"If it's wrong, I can always climb back up" (28). In so doing, John seeks the physical and immediate and breaks from his ancestors, who would not or could not approach the city.

But what John finds in the city is far from the consummate power or liberation that he expects to find there. When he sees beautiful women in fur coats, he wonders what church they attend and if they read Scripture daily, and he realizes that "their thoughts were not of God, and their way was not God's way.... Their feet laid hold on Hell" (30). Even though he has left the physical confines of his Christian community, his thoughts are still shaped by his community's values—its questions have become his questions. Despite his desire to leave, he here discovers that

he is indeed part of his community, in that he, too, cares about God and Hell and the broader story given to him by his church, a story not shared with city-dwellers. This moment is similar to the moment in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* when Jeanette, having left her church, realizes that the questions she has been raised to contemplate—questions about the meaning of life, about good and evil—are not thought about so much by others in her neighborhood. Whereas for Jeanette this realization fuels a journey to university, John's encounter with the city leads him somewhere else, for, besides being unchristian, the city is white, and he is black. He is doubly alienated.

In addition to being a Christian community, the Temple of the Fire Baptized is an African American community; therefore, the process of figuring out his place within his faith community is inseparable from the process of figuring out his place within (or outside of) the black church. John is aware of the violence and injustice committed against people who share his skin color, and he has been warned by his father, who “said that all white people were wicked, and that God was going to bring them low,” so when he visits the city, not only does he feel the tension of being a Christian in an unchristian place, he feels the alienation of being a black person in a white space (30). It is a disorienting experience for him. “Niggers did not live on these streets where John now walked; it was forbidden; and yet he walked here, and no one raised a hand against him” (30). Because he experiences no punishment for trespassing into what he observes to be white territory, he wonders if he, on this day of exploration, could enter the Fifth Avenue shops and apartments the white people enter. In response, he hears the laughter and words of his father: “*No, nor tomorrow neither!*” For him there was the back door, and the dark stairs, and the kitchen or the basement. This world was not for him....they would never let him enter” (31, emphasis original). And at that moment, John sees the inhabitants of the city differently: “In John's mind then, the

people and the avenue underwent a change and he feared them and knew that one day he could hate them if God did not change his heart” (31). The possibility of hating white people is, again, the possibility of becoming like his father, of not being an alien at home.

Following this moment of racial recognition, John goes to see a movie about an evil woman (“blonde and pasty white”) who is dying of tuberculosis. Her impending demise does not seem to be a tragedy, because the woman is immoral—she has many boyfriends, smokes, drinks, is cruel and greedy, and has “never thought of prayer. It was unimaginable that she would ever bend her knees and come crawling along a dusty floor to anybody’s altar, weeping for forgiveness” (33). John’s reaction to her is a complex one: he cannot wish for her redemption, but he also wants to be like her, “only more powerful, more thorough, more cruel; to make those around him, all who hurt him, suffer” (33). After the woman dies and the movie ends, John’s thoughts turn to hell, and he is confronted with his choice. Because John is both repulsed and drawn deeper into the city—into to this sinful, white space—he is torn between two conflicting ways of life. Seeking to defy this choice, he “struggled to find a compromise between the way that led to life everlasting and the way that ended in the pit. But there was none, for he had been raised in the truth” (34). Does he stay in the theater and choose the path that leads to hell, or rise up and choose the “narrow way”? While the readers are not given a clear answer to this question, John does return home to his family in the next paragraph, to find that his brother Roy has been stabbed.

Many things are revealed through John’s trip to the city: from the initial sighting of the cityscape, the city’s allure is palpable, as are the hands of his community that would keep him from going there; John’s walk down Fifth Avenue heightens his awareness that, by virtue of his Christian upbringing and the color of his skin, the city is not a place where he belongs; but in

going to the movie theater, he identifies with a fallen white woman, longing to share her life of bitterness and glamour. Although he longs for a middle way between the life of faith (the life of his father and community) and city life (that of the woman in the film), such a life is not available to him, so he resumes the life familiar to him; he returns home. Throughout this section and throughout the novel, John is looking for a place in which he can be himself, a place in which the unnamed transformation he has undergone is not so intimately interwoven with sin. A place in which, perhaps, he may love another man. But in the world he has been given, his desires and his body can only be experienced as a jumble of contradictions within a tight box of alienation.

### **Wrestling with Flesh**

Besides being John's birthday, it is a Saturday night, which is when the Temple of the Fire Baptized gathers for its tarry service—a time when “people are instructed to let God have God's way in them” and “taught how to yield to the Holy Spirit” (Daniels 299). A common thing for Christians to do in times of trouble is to wait upon the Lord for deliverance, so John goes to church. He arrives early to sweep, which is what he is doing when Elisha enters and greets him, saying, “Praise the Lord” (46). After they greet each other, Brother Elisha's appearance is described: he is wearing a lettered jacket from his high school, his forehead shines with sweat, and his shirt is “open at the throat” (46). John notices this, asking, “You ain't cold like that?” which triggers a page of playful dialogue, followed by a long paragraph of wrestling. The smile that Elisha wears quickly becomes a “ferocious grimace” as he attempts to subdue John, who “struggled and squirmed” (48). The narration goes: “Usually such a battle was soon over, since Elisha was so much bigger and stronger and as a wrestler so much more skilled; but tonight John was filled with

a determination not to be conquered, or at least to make the conquest dear.” John attacks with a “strength that was almost hatred,” kicking, twisting, pounding, and pushing, to the surprise of Elisha. Baldwin emphasizes the sensuality of the wrestling—the smells, sights, and sounds: “the odor of Elisha’s sweat was heavy in John’s nostrils. He saw the veins rise on Elisha’s forehead and in his neck; his breath became jagged and harsh....” When Elisha slips and loses his hold on John, they “stared at each other, half grinning,” pause to catch their breath, and return to their work of preparing the sanctuary for the service.

Even among those who find the passage to be homoerotic, there is much disagreement about its significance. Does it, as Csapó and Clarence Hardy III suggest, emphasize the clash between John’s church and his sexuality, or does it, as Amy Hungerford writes, “[bring] those religious and sexual impulses inside the circle of the black church, into the company of saints” in such a way that it may be welcome (738)? Given the passage mentioned above, in which the sin of John’s hand is paired with thoughts of older boys and his unspeakable transformation, a homoerotic reading of John’s wrestling is very reasonable. Besides what evidence can be found elsewhere in the text, the act of wrestling is not itself a neutral symbol. It, like the kiss, has a history—or histories—of its own. Two lineages that are particularly pertinent to parsing out the meaning of John wrestling Elisha are a homoerotic tradition spanning from *Gilgamesh* to ancient Greece to D. H. Lawrence’s *Women in Love*, and the story of Jacob wrestling God in Genesis 32.

Many literary portrayals of wrestling are written ambiguously, inviting the reader to wonder about the significance of the actions. The first example of this is found in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, in which Gilgamesh, a king and mighty hero of Uruk, grapples with Enkidu, a man created by the gods, with long shaggy tresses, “like those of a woman,” who will become the king’s beloved friend

(George 5). When the two first meet, Gilgamesh is about to use his royal privilege to have sex with a woman who is marrying another man. Enkidu is infuriated by this wrongdoing, so, fresh from seven days and nights of sex with a prostitute, he travels to Uruk to literally block Gilgamesh's entrance to the bride's chamber: "Enkidu blocked the door with his foot, / he did not allow Gilgamesh to enter" (George 107). Andrew George's translation of the Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet continues:

They took hold of each other, backs bent like a bull,  
 they smashed the door-jamb, the wall did shake;  
 Gilgamesh and Enkidu took hold of each other, backs bent like a bull,  
 they smashed the door-jamb, the wall did shake (107)

In her reading of this encounter between the two great men, Susan Ackerman, noting how abruptly the narrative switches from anticipating Gilgamesh's bedding of the bride to his grappling with Enkidu, writes, "the Epic's wrestling scene represents some transfer of the narrative's sexual imagery and energy and thus [it is] practically impossible not to suggest that the Epic means us to see Enkidu as replacing the young bride as the object of Gilgamesh's eroticized interest" (69).

While this is, of course, only one reading, it is one Ackerman holds in common with many others. The editors of *The Cambridge History of Gay and Lesbian Literature* write, "Ever since the Sumerian story of *Gilgamesh*, one of the first epics, the expression of same-sex desire has been narrativized, lyricized, dramatized, and chronicled—at times, moreover, bending gender to the point where the sameness of 'sex' is itself in question" (McCallum and Tuhkanen 1-2). That the story does not explicitly state, "Gilgamesh then had sex with Enkidu" or "Although they were only wrestling, the two men were clearly working out some sexual frustration," has not stopped readers from finding a



homoerotic subtext there anyway; ambiguity is often more fruitful for art, more suggestive than a clear statement of fact.<sup>14</sup>

Without falling into the pit that is contemporary debate about ancient Greco-Roman sexuality, it is worth mentioning here that there is a connection between Greek wrestling, and athletics in general, and homoeroticism. The first portrayals of nude athletics in Greece are found on Proto-Corinthian, Corinthian, and Proto-Attic vases from around 650 BCE, when it most likely became standard practice throughout the region (Fisher 245). Poets like Pindar composed praise poems to be sung in honor of great athletes, extolling their beauty; in Xenophon's *Symposium*, a wealthy man throws a party for his athletically successful young lover; contests were held to award the most beautiful young men; naked young men were sometimes, as on the Parthenon frieze, portrayed as ideal citizens (Fisher 247-9). In sexual the relationships that consummated such desire, one partner was often an older man who may have had wife (Halperin *One Hundred Years* 55).

Although modern homosexuality is distinct from the pederasty of ancient Greece, the obsession with aesthetic perfection of the body is something they share. In his consideration of (mainly white) modern gay culture, David Halperin writes, "homosexual desire routinely verges on an obsession with absolute, unearthly perfection, with flawless archetypes or Platonic essences" (*How to be Gay* 230). The pursuit of such beauty can be found both in Greek homoerotic athleticism and in the love between an older man and younger man that Oscar Wilde defended during his trial, when he was asked to define "the Love that dare not speak its name" (qtd. in Friedman 250). Wilde's speech also draws attention to another similarity between Greek pederasty and the kind of homosexuality often found at Oxford at the time, which is the age difference

between the men. In Wilde's context, this love was shared by a professor or tutor and his pupil. By defining the unnamed Love as, in part, "such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare," Wilde, whose influence on subsequent gay writers is difficult to overstate, claims the ancient Greeks (and others) in constructing a lineage of what became known as Greek love (see 22–23 above).

While Wilde and other late Victorian writers tend to draw on Greco-Roman standards of beauty and not necessarily texts that refer to wrestling, D. H. Lawrence, a couple decades later in 1920, chose "Gladiatorial" as the name for the chapter of *Women in Love* in which the book's two male protagonists, Birkin and Gerald, wrestle. Birkin offers to teach Gerald some—interestingly—Japanese wrestling, jiu-jitsu. With "a queer, smiling look," Gerald says, "Well, I'd like it very much" (278). The two men, both of whom are involved with women, strip, and they begin to struggle. The text tends to focus on the difference of the two men: Birkin is "more a presence than a visible object," while Gerald is "concrete and noticeable"; Birkin is "tall and narrow" with thin bones, while Gerald is "heavier and more plastic" (279). They pause and "discussed methods, they practised grips and throws" and grew "accustomed to each to each other's rhythm" (280). One element of this wrestling is instructional—Birkin teaches Gerald, and they both hone their technique. They also learn about each other's bodies; "they got a kind of mutual physical understanding" (280). Once calibrated, they continue to wrestle, seeming "to drive their white flesh deeper and deeper against each other, as if they would break into oneness" (280). The language of oneness and penetration is used frequently in the passage to show how the two men, different though they are, reach "through the muscles into the very depths" of each other, in an

“octopus-like knot[]” (280). This ends with Gerald panting on the carpet and Birkin, nearly unconscious on top of him (281). They hold hands (282). They discuss what just happened between them. They agree that they both feel more free and open (283). Birkin reflects on the difference between them, “as far, perhaps, apart as man from woman, yet in another direction” (284). Finally, Birkin tells Gerald of his failed proposal to Ursula, the sister of the woman Gerald is seeing. “And so you came here to wrestle with your good angel, did you?” Gerald asks.

Several themes emerge from these three sources—*Gilgamesh*, ancient Greek literature, and *Women in Love*. Firstly, women are always present somewhere in the narratives. The struggle between Gilgamesh and Enkidu is most clearly a physical struggle that occurs because one disagrees with how the other is about to treat a woman. Gilgamesh is about to have sex with someone else’s bride when Enkidu blocks his way. In ancient Greece, it is likely that at least the older participant in a pederastic relationship would also be sexually involved with a woman. Both Birkin and Gerald pursue a woman in *Women in Love*. In all of them, homoeroticism emerges only in contexts in which, for men, sex with women is the norm. Secondly, difference is important in all three accounts: human king/warrior crafted by gods; old and experienced/young and beautiful; tall and narrow, immaterial object/heavy, plastic, concrete, and noticeable, are all binarisms embodied by the various pairs. Thirdly, for the texts in which the primary erotic contact is shared between the two wrestlers (*Gilgamesh* and *Women in Love*), these differences make wrestling an opportunity to gain knowledge of the other person and of one’s self. Enkidu and Gilgamesh become close friends as a result of their encounter. Birkin and Gerald learn that they become “more whole” by being physically intimate as well as mentally and spiritually intimate (Lawrence 283). Finally, in these two texts, the act of wrestling is also a way that the bodies of two men

become one in a way acceptable to society, in a way that is not necessarily sex. Arguments may be made as to whether or not sex is implied—in *Gilgamesh*, I doubt it; in *Women in Love*, I do not doubt it—but the stories do not turn on that distinction.

While it is not clear that Baldwin is directly drawing on *Gilgamesh*, the Greeks, or Lawrence, all of the above themes are present when John wrestles Elisha. In an earlier passage, Elisha and Ella Mae, a young woman, are scolded in front of the altar by the pastor. “They had been ‘walking disorderly’; they were in danger of straying from the truth,” and thus had to be called out for sinning (9). For unspecified reasons, this has a dizzying effect on John, who does not have similar interests. This is still fresh in the mind of John when, after they wrestle, Elisha says, “You still got Adam’s mind, boy and you keep thinking about your friends, you want to do what they do... and I bet you think about girls, don’t you, Jonny? Sure you do,” he said, half smiling, finding his answer in John’s face” (49). Elisha then tells John that the Lord wipes away all traces of the old Adam when the Lord saves you. John, in return, “stared in dull paralysis at the body of Elisha,” recalling Elisha’s scene with Ella Mae. While Elisha apparently is interested in women—at least one particular young woman—John does not appear to be. When the question is subtly raised by Elisha, John’s only response is to stare at Elisha’s body. Difference also is at play. Elisha is older, and John is younger; Elisha has been saved and is accordingly a full part of their church, while John has yet to be saved. This set of binarisms, old/young and insider/outsider, allow for the possibility of John’s initiation into the church community with the help of Elisha. As he wrestles with Elisha, John is also actively wrestling with his identity, that is, he is trying to figure out whether or not he belongs in the company of believers, and he is struggling with the specific sin

that has been haunting him. In all of these ways, *Go Tell It* fits into a literary lineage of homoerotic wrestling.

Now, to return to Gerald's question about wrestling with "your good angel." The angel of which Gerald speaks is found in the Torah. In Genesis 32, Jacob wrestles with an unnamable man, and, through their struggle, Jacob is renamed and blessed. Jacob is camping out by the Jabbok River before a highly anticipated meeting with Esau, his brother. He sends his children, wives, and woman servants across the Jabbok along with everything he owns (NRSV Gen. 32:23). Then, "Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak" (Gen. 32:24). The change in narration is abrupt, and the identity of the man with whom Jacob wrestles is unknown. The word used, *'ish*, typically means "man," but it is also "a term used regularly to refer also to angels" (Zakovitch 100). In his Genesis commentary, Walter Brueggemann notes that this *'ish* has sometimes "been understood as a demon or a Canaanite numen," as well as Esau himself (266-7). But, perhaps the ambiguity of the word and figure is necessary to the story. Brueggemann writes, "In its opaque portrayal of the figure, the narrative does not want us to know too much. It is part of the power of the wrestling that we do not know the name or see the face of the antagonist. To be too certain would reduce the dread intended in the telling." But, with most Christians, Brueggemann affirms, "It is most plausible that in the present form, the hidden one is Yahweh" (267). But it is not clear that Jacob realizes this, so, for now, mystery.

During their wrestling, when the unnamed assailant sees that he is not winning, the man strikes Jacob in the intimate location of the hip socket, dislocating Jacob's hip (32:35). With the ice effectively broken, the two figures have a strange conversation. First, the man says, "Let me go, for the day is breaking," to which Jacob replies, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me"

(32:26). One might expect Jacob, who has already stolen Esau's blessing, to be satisfied, but instead, "now he seeks a more weighty blessing" (Brueggemann 268). Either changing the subject or seeking to know who it is that he is about to bless, the man asks for Jacob's name, and Jacob tells him (32:37). The stranger says, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed" (32:28). Following this puzzling statement, Jacob, seeking to complete their introduction, asks, "Please tell me your name" (32:29). But the stranger will not reveal his identity. Verse 29 continues: "But he said, 'Why is it that you ask my name?' And there he blessed him." The narrative continues, saying that Jacob then named the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved" (32:30). Jacob, now Israel, limps off into the sunrise, and the chapter ends (32:31).

So, in this story, Jacob wrestles with an unnamed opponent who renames him, blesses him, and leaves him with a limp. Each of these actions is important. A name, in the Old Testament especially, carries weight. When Jacob becomes Israel, he also is given, "by implication, a new being" (Brueggemann 268). Wrestling with the unnamed is an identity-changing act. The details of the blessing are not given. Were words spoken? Apparently not. But, through this blessing, Yahweh affirms that Israel—a man who will become an oft-exiled or outcast people—is whom God chooses. As James McKeown points out, the people who descend from and are Israel will not only constantly struggle with surrounding nations—"the most important struggle for Israel was with God" (156). It is fitting, then, that the blessing is accompanied by a limp, which, because it is inflicted by touching his thigh—or, as Brueggemann suggests, his "vital organs"—is a "mark left on his very manhood and future" (Brueggemann 270).

Reading the first part of *Go Tell It* in light of Genesis 32 reveals something about the significance of John wrestling Elisha. Jacob's wrestling an unnamed man parallels John wrestling an unnamed desire—"the Love that dare not speak its name." At the end of the passage, after John stares, paralyzed, at Elisha's body and remembers Ella Mae, he "looked into Elisha's face, full of questions he would never ask. And Elisha's face told him nothing" (50). Elisha here embodies the unnamed love, and the lack of dialogue mirrors the dialogue of the Jacob and God. Jacob asks his opponent for his name; John's silence is such that he cannot ask Elisha his questions. The exchange between the two is an exchange of silence—John cannot ask; Elisha cannot tell, and so the unnamed desire remains unnamed. And the tarry service begins.

### **Wrestling with God**

Part 2 of *Go Tell It*, "The Prayers of the Saints," provides the personal histories of Florence (John's paternal aunt), Gabriel, and Elizabeth (John's mother). Woven throughout part 2 is a description of the progression of the tarry service in the Temple of the Fire Baptized. Shortly into the service, John is "ill with doubt and searching," longing for direction and either "a power that would bind him, forever and forever, and beyond all crying to the love of God," like Jacob, or to leave the church and never come back (75). John is still torn between paths, but something deep within him turns. After a period of silence, the church begins to groan, as if in labor (110). Elisha then cries and falls back, as the church sings, "Take me through, Lord, / Take me through," and then, "A lone voice, joined by others, among them, waveringly, the voice of John" (110). Later, John tries to pray, only to be swept up by hatred for his father (143-44). The congregation eventually rises, except Elisha, who, still on the ground, begins to speak in tongues (149). After

intense eye contact with John, Gabriel tells him to kneel (150). Elisha gets up and goes to the piano, and the singing resumes (152). A commotion builds before silence suddenly falls over the church (188; 192). Elizabeth hears the cry of her son. “On the threshing-floor, in the center of the crying, singing saints, John lay astonished beneath the power of the Lord” (192). Part 2 ends with those words. Throughout the first two parts, John’s narrative bristles with the tension between seeking God and fleeing God. But while it is not clear what will happen next, being slain in the spirit is a religious experience, and it produces the expectation of conversion, of “going through.”

The title of part 3 is “The Threshing Floor,” which is where John now lies—“the dusty space before the altar which he and Elisha had cleaned” (195). John’s wrestling with Elisha prepared the way for what is about to happen, namely, John wrestling God. He “knew that above him burned the yellow light which he had himself switched on,” a minor detail that could easily go unnoticed (195). This yellow light calls to mind the yellow stain that John notices when he wakes up that morning, which, in the narrative, is found right before the sin of his hand is first disclosed (10). This stain, without explanation, transforms into a naked woman (11). The yellow light hanging above him now in the church could be a reminder of his ever-present sin. It is under this light and surrounded by the praying faithful that John wrestles with demons and the Lord.

A “malicious, ironic voice” enters John and tells him to leave, but he can do nothing but fall (196). The voice tells him to get up and leave again, but John only falls further into despair and darkness, a “wordless” darkness (197). But there he remembers the cross, and as bitterness brews in his heart and he wants to curse, “the Spirit spoke, and spoke in him” (197). The ironic voice within him wrestles the Holy Spirit, and it is the Spirit that speaks first. No sooner does this happen than his heart opens with “sudden yearning tenderness for holy Elisha; desire, sharp and



awful as a reflecting knife, to usurp the body of Elisha, and lie where Elisha lay” (197). Everything—his hatred, his desire for God, his desire for Elisha—is shown to be knotted up together. A burning look from Gabriel causes John to know “that he had been thrust out of the holy, the joyful, the blood-washed community, that his father had thrust him out” (198). The reason for this is not disclosed. Still plagued by the ironic voice, he focuses on his father, who threatens to beat the sin out of him (200). Their argument culminates in a silver and gold city where Gabriel, like Abraham preparing to sacrifice Isaac, brings a knife down on him (200–201).

A new part of John’s struggle on the threshing floor begins as he calls out “*Father! Father!*” after Gabriel stabs him (201, emphasis original). “These were the first words he uttered” (201). Gone is the ironic voice, and now he searches for something in a vast grave (202). The cloud of witnesses hovering above him “did not know what he was looking for, they could not help him search. He wanted to find Elisha, who knew, perhaps, who would help him—but Elisha was not there” (202). It is significant that John reaches the conclusion that the faithful cannot help him. This conversion, if it is one, might not be the rite of passage into his church that it is intended to be. But then a crowd of “despised and rejected, the wretched and the spat upon, the earth’s offscouring” finds him, and he sees their scars and sees that he is one of them (204). If it is not the church that John is being initiated into in this vision, it is the story of the African Americans who have come before him. John cries out to the Lord for mercy, and a voice responds, telling him, “Go through” (205).

Two scenes follow that take the two sacraments recognized by Protestants—the Eucharist and baptism—and distort them. In baptism a believer is forgiven and brought into the family of faith, and in the Eucharist, a believer receives the body and blood of Christ. John finds himself at

a communion service where Elisha is washing his father's feet (206). A number of people are there, dressed in white and without shoes. The image is that of Christ's last supper, but the blood is not only in the goblet—the feet of those present are stained with it. Try as they might, the blood does not wash off. John finds himself at the river with the others, still stained “with unholy blood” (206). Rivers are often where group baptisms take place, but in this river, people are blind, lame, wailing, and plucking at their own flesh (206). Here the body of Christ is shown to be in disarray; so John is baptized into discord—not saved from his inner turmoil, but brought into a new life soaked in it. He is becoming more fully a part of his community and, at the same time, more fully aware that he will not be delivered from his suffering.

Inexplicably, then, “John saw the Lord—for a moment only” (207). He is overcome by freedom and cries to the Lord to take him through as he rises back upwards to where the saints are. A sweetness fills John, and the choir is singing: “For his drifting soul was anchored in the love of God; in the rock that endured forever. The light and the darkness had kissed each other and were married now, forever, in the life of John's soul” (207). This is the language of conversion, but the second sentence comes as something of a surprise—the darkness is not defeated but married to the light. John has been reconciled to himself. And when Elisha, who is also the first distinct person John hears, asks him, “Are you saved, boy?” John responds with a yes (209). And his voice is “the new voice God had given him” (209). John has wrestled with the Lord; has been given, if not a new name, a new voice; and has become a member of his church community. And, as an older woman in the church points out, Elisha was instrumental in this. “Look like the Lord was using Elisha to say: ‘It's time, boy, come on home’” (212). The inevitability of John's conversion is thus confirmed. Here, for a moment, it looks like John might have found the place he belongs—

with God and God's people. Baldwin allows this to stand as a possibility, a taste of inclusion and comfort for a tired and lonely soul.

"Yet," the comfort does not last; "as he moved among them ... something began to knock in that listening, astonished, newborn, and fragile heart of his; something recalling the terrors of the night, which were not finished, his heart seemed to say; which, in this company, were not to begin" (209). The certainty of John's conversion lasts all of a couple pages, and the second inevitability is remembered. *Go Tell It* is a conversion narrative, but the conversion is not one that ends neatly; it remains possible that John will leave the church, as Baldwin himself did.<sup>15</sup> John walks home with his family and Elisha, and, as he does so, the narrator rhapsodizes, melding words from the New Testament with the narration.

He was free—*whom the Son sets free is free indeed*—he had only to stand fast in his liberty. He was in battle no longer, this unfolding Lord's day, with this avenue, these houses, the sleeping, staring, shouting people, but had entered into battle with Jacob's angel, *with the princes and the powers of the air*. (221, emphasis original)

The freedom spoken of here is ambiguous. Is John free from sin or free from the church? What is clear is that the city is no longer threatening to him. Like Jacob, he is given a new people. And it is also clear his wrestling bout on the threshing floor is only the beginning of a longer struggle with Jacob's God. Like Jacob, having grappled with the divine, he limps off into the sunrise, into the uncertain future.

Elisha and John talk on the way home. Elisha reminds John to "remember Jesus" and to be willing to "pay the price" for him—to sacrifice himself (222). They walk with Elisha's arm around John in brotherly support, and as they walked, John "wanted to stop and turn to Elisha, and tell

him . . . something for which he found no words” (223). The words he does manage to find are, “You pray for me? Please pray for me?” Even after Elisha reassures John that he has already been praying for him and will keep doing so, John continues: “For me,’ persisted John, his tears falling, ‘for me” (223). A little later, John stops again, and “struggled to tell him something more—struggled to say—all that could never be said” (224). Instead, he recites a brief testimony: “I was down in the valley,’ he dared, ‘I was by myself down there. I won’t never forget. May God forget me if I forget” (224). The language is foreign to him; he tries the words on like new clothing. The halting manner in which he speaks manifests the struggle that he is still experiencing. Despite the big moment that just occurred in his life—he “got religion”—the young man is distraught, not overjoyed. John is realizing that, even after his dramatic conversion, his mountaintop experience, the doubts and temptations he has are still there. And will remain.

Before John walks in the door, he turns to Elisha, and, trembling, says, “No matter what happens to me, where I go, what folks say about me, no matter what *anybody* says, you remember—please remember—I was saved. I was *there*” (225). John is, to the best of his ability, trying to communicate that he will not be able to bear the mantle of the community he has publicly joined, of the faith he has publicly professed. While Elisha hears him, it is not clear that Elisha hears what John wants him to hear. The older boy turns to Gabriel and says, “The Lord done laid him out, and turned him around and wrote his *new* name down in glory. Bless our God!” (225). At this point, Elisha bestows the holy kiss upon John, “like a seal ineffaceable forever” (225). Unlike the wrestling and struggling that dominates the novel, the kiss is a simple, nonviolent gesture, but its meaning is complex. This specific kiss embodies the love between men, but is it the kind that John desires? The moment is one of brotherly love, apparently not one of erotic excitement. It is also a

response to John's worry about how the faithful will see him in the future, and, as such, it is an act unconditional acceptance, love, and peace—a promise of presence.

## Afterword

To end, I would like to point out two themes that emerge from my discussion *Brideshead*, *Oranges*, and *Go Tell It*. The first is that Sebastian, Jeanette, and John are all characterized by their inability to belong in their home community, and, for Jeanette and John, that leaving the community involves a loss or drastic change of faith. This is not only a phenomenon in fiction. In the opening chapter of *Queer Theology*, Kathy Rudy, formerly a faculty member at a prominent divinity school, writes of being outed for being in a relationship with a woman and being accused of heresy for her writing on homosexuality. She was moved from the divinity school to the Women's Studies Department, and she lost her faith (37). "Before, the world felt driven by the love of God. After, the world seemed to go forward based only on sheer force of my own will." She asks, "How does one cope with a shift in which things that were once 'impossible for humans but possible for God' were now just plain impossible?" (38). Rejection from the faith community can result in the loss of faith and a profound sense of displaced identity.

The solution Rudy seeks is "a theory of subjectivity that would allow me to be two contradictory things at the same time," that would allow her to be incoherent, which, at this point of her life, would mean both believing and unbelieving (43). This is precisely the function of some of the symbols used by Waugh and Baldwin; the second theme that emerges from my project is the ability of gay literature to incorporate previously contradictory histories through the employment of meaning-rich symbols. Waugh's Sebastian and Baldwin's kiss and wrestling are examples of this. They hold erotic and holy or divine together—separate things that remain locked into each other, like a kiss or two wrestlers, for that matter—forming a new union.

But, despite the presence of such expansive symbols in gay literature, the gay characters themselves still leave the church, even in novels written since those discussed here—Sebastian is the exception. (Because Sebastian is not necessarily gay, it might seem problematic to include him such a statement, but because he himself is a melding of a gay lineage and a Christian one, it is legitimate to do so.) And even then, even with the theologizing one can do with his suffering, Sebastian still leads what looks like a pretty damn miserable life. It is possible (unlikely, but possible) that John Grimes might stay in his church, but the life he is initiated into is nevertheless one of internal strife and alienation. In this model, Elisha, the potential love object, becomes a church member who benevolently pities John. Gay characters might be haunted by the ghosts of their Christian pasts, like Jeanette or Annie Oh in Wally Lamb's *We Are Water*, but ultimately there is no God behind the apparitions, no substance beneath the reflexive ritual.

The metanarrative I sought in twentieth-century literature—that of gay characters eventually being able to retain (or even celebrate) both their sexuality and faith—does not seem to exist in the way I was hoping to find it. I believe this is because the people who would write such stories are still trying to figure out what such a life would look like. So, instead of fiction that accomplishes this task, many nonfiction accounts of queer Christians (predominately gay men as of yet) are being published. What was once the frequently thinly veiled fictional autobiography, such as *Oranges and Go Tell It* (and even parts of *Brideshead*), has become actual autobiography, typically in the tradition of the spiritual autobiography. Books like *Washed and Waiting* by Wesley Hill (2010), *Out of a Far Country* by Christopher Yuan (2011), and *Gay and Catholic* by Eve Tushnet (2014) articulate their authors' journeys toward finding places in their churches while maintaining a conservative sexual ethic and still being attracted to people of the same sex. Justin Lee in *Torn*

(2013) and Matthew Vines in *God and the Gay Christian* (2014) share their paths towards finding acceptance in their churches and coming to believe that God blesses gay unions. The books are confessional but also persuasive, aiming to build sympathy with their readers and win them over to the author's perspective. When or whether fiction will follow reality has yet to be determined. Regardless of genre, the trend does seem to be bending away from flight narratives, or perhaps it is just that a wider range of stories is being told, which is good and important, because where future generations of LGBTQ Christians find their place of belonging will be determined by the narratives this generation puts into print.



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Appendix



Figure 1: *St. Sebastian*, by Giovanni Razzi “Il Sodoma” (1525)

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<sup>1</sup> While there are Christian women and men in the novels discussed below, the novels themselves are not necessarily “Christian literature.” Susan Petit, in a debate over Michel Tournier with John M. Dunaway in *Christianity and Literature*, proposes

that a novel is Christian if, as a whole, it reflects Christian beliefs more or less explicitly and in a fashion that presents those beliefs as true. The beliefs need not be those of a particular church, but they must conform to the central doctrines of Christian churches generally or derive clearly from the Gospels and Christian tradition. (320)

With such a definition, only *Brideshead Revisited* could truly be considered Christian literature, although a case for *Go Tell It* could be made.

<sup>2</sup> This is also my justification for including *Brideshead Revisited* in a paper about gay literature, a move that is, for some, controversial.

<sup>3</sup> Baldwin likely borrows the surname “Grimes” from the opera *Peter Grimes*, by Benjamin Britten, which has been seen by some to be about homosexual oppression (see Clifford Hindley, “Homosexual Self-Affirmation and Self-Oppression in Two Britten Operas”). To my knowledge, no one has written on the possible connection between the opera and *Go Tell It*.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Davie, ed., *The Private Diaries of Evelyn Waugh*, *Observer Magazine* (April 29, 1973): 13; quoted in Heath 226.

<sup>5</sup> I will use the capitalized “Church” when referring specifically to the Roman Catholic Church, and “church” when referring to other denominations and particular local church communities.

<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise specified, as here, I will quote from the 1999 reissue of the edition published by Little, Brown and Company.

<sup>7</sup> Draining, indeed. She is once said to suck the blood of the “small gang of enslaved and emaciated prisoners [she keeps] for her exclusive enjoyment” (56).

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<sup>8</sup> Evelyn Waugh, *The Essays, Articles, and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh*, ed. Donat Gallagher. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1983: 304; qtd. in Wolfe 114.

<sup>9</sup> Brown's article on *Oranges*, "Inverted Conversions: Reading the Bible and Writing the Lesbian Subject in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*," is the best source I have found for probing the book's many religious allusions.

<sup>10</sup> See Figure 1 in the appendix for an example.

<sup>11</sup> The pin-cushion is mentioned earlier in the chapter by Lunt, who is searching for one with which to furnish the Ladies' Cloakroom (22).

<sup>12</sup> It also neither validates nor denies claims that Charles and Sebastian had a gay relationship. Building on Higdon's analysis, Tison Pugh's article aptly describes the same-sex romantic relationships at Oxford, which were not dependent on orientation. Cara, Lord Marchmain's mistress, is familiar with these relationships, and recognizes Sebastian and Charles' friendship as one of them. See Pugh 64-8 and Waugh 101-102.

<sup>13</sup> Here I rely on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*:

The analytic move [this book] makes is to demonstrate that categories presented in a culture as symmetrical binary oppositions—heterosexual/homosexual, in this case—actually subsist in a more unsettled and dynamic tacit relation according to which, first, term B is not symmetrical with but subordinated to term A; but, second, the ontologically valorized term A actually depends for its meaning on the simultaneous subsumption and exclusion of term B; hence, third, the question of priority between the supposed central and the supposed marginal category of each dyad is irresolvably unstable, an instability caused by the fact that term B is constituted as once internal and external to term A. (10)

Although I will not closely follow Sedgwick's method of deconstructing such binarisms, I believe the framework to be a helpful one. Within the context of this paper, the "valorized" terms are those prioritized by John Grimes's church, family, and community.

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<sup>14</sup> A beautiful example of *Gilgamesh* appearing in contemporary gay literature is found in a poem of the same name by Spencer Reece. The second part of the poem speaks directly of the legend:

Fragments, clay cylinders, tablets, parchment—  
to write Genesis, they say, the writers  
searched their neighborhood,  
found all kinds of things, including  
the epic about Gilgamesh, much of it damaged,  
regarding the man who saw into the deep.

Somehow, the part  
about Gilgamesh and Enkidu  
in love  
got lost. (20)

<sup>15</sup> For an account of Baldwin's own dramatic conversion experience that he never quite recanted, even as he distanced himself from Christianity, see his long essay "The Fire Next Time." I thank Prof. Brian Bantum for not only directing me to this source, but for helping me think through this portion of the essay.

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### Appendix on Faith and Learning

My father had a name for the basement of the house I grew up in, a brick house in Manchester, New Hampshire. He called it the “Cave of Wonders.” To a child, there was nothing in particular about the unfurnished, cement-floored basement that set it apart from the rest of the world in wonder, but in the mind of my father, the basement was where he spent years giving birth to his third child, his dissertation: *The Bible in Athanasius in Alexandria*. “Between the water heater and the sump pump,” he says. From this illustrious lair in the mid 1990’s he also translated the three volumes of Ceslas Spicq’s *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* from French into English, worked as an editor for a prominent Christian academic publisher, and defended the Cave when his two impish children attacked with rubber bands. My mother—then a pastor in the United Church of Christ, now in the Evangelical Covenant Church—also does scholarly work when she writes her weekly sermon, an explication of texts—sacred, theological, and/or academic—that are made accessible for parishioners to incorporate into their lives. I don’t know what most people talk about over dinner, but in my household the topic tends to lean towards patristic history. Due to my parents’ examples, I have always seen academics, faith, and life as three strands braided; one cannot easily be separated from the others. Faith and academics, you could say, are incarnated in the life of a Christian scholar—in her workplace, worship place, and home.

The denomination I was raised in, the Evangelical Covenant Church, has no single approach to academics. While many Evangelical traditions are skeptical of academia, I would say that learning is valued by the Covenant, both as a denomination and in the local churches that I have attended. It is neither reviled nor worshipped. In general, the Covenant identity is not one found in being anti-this-belief or in focusing on that belief. Where some churches have strict

doctrine, the Covenant Church's theology is summed up in six affirmations: the centrality of the word of God, the necessity of the new birth, a commitment to mission, the church as a fellowship of believers, a conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit, and the reality of freedom in Christ.

Covenanters fall down in different places on a number of issues that have split other churches. The Covenant sensibility is pietistic; the emphasis is on how faith changes the way we live, not necessarily the opinions we have.

As I transition to life as an Episcopalian, I bring the Covenant pietism I was raised with into the world as seen through Anglo-Catholic eyes. I recently attended the Enquirers' Classes at my local parish, which are classes designed to orient newcomers to the tradition, liturgy, and passions of the Anglican tradition. The sessions were alternately taught by Fr. Samuel Torvend, a professor of church history at Pacific Lutheran University and the current Priest in Charge at our parish, and Dr. Mark Taylor, professor of theology at Seattle University. That a newcomer's class attended by four students should be taught by two PhDs is emblematic of the Episcopal commitment to both learning and serving. In Fr. Samuel's class on Anglo-Catholic identity, he explained how baptism is the center of Christian life. Since the movement began in the 1800s, Anglo-Catholic parishes have traditionally sprung up in the poorest of neighborhoods. They believe that if all are truly made equal in Christ through baptism, then that has pretty radical implications for how we are to treat others. Christ is in the suffering, and so we must not only seek and serve those hurting in our world but take up the work of changing the unjust systems that oppress them. Worship inspires justice.

After attending this class, some images came to my mind—of a Jesuit priest holding high the cross as he and the Guaranis he has served are shot by the Spanish, of icon-bearing Orthodox

priests stepping between police and protesters in Ukraine, of a Catholic-raised Harvard-educated medical doctor who, refusing a readily-available life of comfort, spends his days caring for the poor of Haiti, of a church in Detroit camping out on the lawn of a drug lord until he leaves their neighborhood, of my small Episcopal parish in Lower Queen Anne, which offered proper burials for those claimed by AIDS when the endemic began to spread in their community, regardless of the family's ability to afford such a service, of Jesus, the Son of God, reaching out to touch and heal the blind, lame, and leprous. "The human body is good enough for God to dwell in," Fr. Samuel said. "What does that mean for how we live?" It means that we are not to fear when we are called to help others. It means that we are to embrace the bodies of strangers, be they hideous, beautiful, or falling apart.

And, for the scholar, it means that we are not to be afraid of investigating the good world that God creates for us. *The Sacred & Secular University* by Jon H. Roberts and James Turner describes the birth of the modern studies of history, art history, and literature in the 1800's. It surprised me to learn that these fields are relatively young, especially given the remarkable ability they have to teach us about the meaning of human existence. When I read the introduction to the second edition of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, I, along with the author herself, was surprised at how the book, within the brief decade of its published life, had been said to "constitute a provocative 'intervention' in feminist theory or be cited as one of the founding texts of queer theory" (vii). Academia has been moving quickly into areas that have yet to be explored. As I enter my own Cave of Wonders to write an honors thesis that will dive into one of those areas—faith and homosexuality in literature, an intersection intrinsic to my Christian experience and an intersection eyed with suspicion by many of my sisters and brothers around the world, the Anglo-

Catholic view of the world promises that in my seeking I will find the presence of Christ and further appreciation of the beauty and wonder of God's creation. What do I have to fear?

5/13/2015