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**“BEAUTIFUL DRIPPING FRAGMENTS”:  
A WHITMANESQUE READING OF HOPKINS’S  
EPITHALAMION**

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A celibate whose Ruskinian interest in natural beauty focused upon the landscape and the innocent child or youth, Hopkins has not often been written of in sexual language or been critically analyzed for sexual themes and attitudes. Perhaps we should be glad. (Johnson 59)

In considerations prior to, but left unchanged in, his biography of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Norman White dismisses the poet’s elusive Epithalamion as “second-hand impressions pasted together,” as “landscape descriptions [which] have no force of plot behind them” (HQ 159, 157). I wish to argue in the pages to follow that such an assessment overlooks this Epithalamion as a display of Hopkins’s mastery of the painterly, the priestly, and the prurient—overlooks a masterpiece which John Ferns has argued not only reveals Hopkins in “his freest and happiest poetical vein,” but also “shows his genius” (175). Even as recently as 1990, scholars such as James Earl have suggested indelicately that the proper lesson learned from Hopkins’s Epithalamion is that “we would do well to destroy the poems we write while administering exams,” merely labeling the poem “a beautifully embarrassing sexual fantasy” (560).

Traditionally, most scholars have, like Earl and White, dismissed the poem as a spurious improvisation, ignoring the existence of earlier drafts which suggest a thoughtful process of revision. Most scholars seem to request a faircopy to legitimize a poem written by a poet who admitted only a year after writing the Epithalamion, in that fatal year which saw both his death and the purging of his uncollected manuscripts: “we greatly differ in feeling about copying one’s verses out: I find it repulsive, and let them lie months and years in rough copy untransferred to my book” (Letter to Bridges, 29 Apr. 1889, *Letters* i, 304).

Hopkins himself contributed to this dismissal of the poem as a fragment, though probably with good reason. As if to thwart Jesuitical censure of its homoerotic and pederastic content, Hopkins attached a nuptial title and two extraneous fragments to the completed poem, obvious fragments which Norman MacKenzie describes as “perhaps the weakest lines GMH ever wrote” (*Facsimiles* ii, 383, note). Always keen to exploit a poetical opportunity, Hopkins seems to have converted the occa-

sion of his brother Everard's wedding into "an audible fig leaf intended to cover the sentiments expressed earlier" in the poem (Dellamora 43), sentiments both suggestive and pederastic. If we look behind this fig leaf—the nuptial title and the attached fragments—we discover a poet inflamed with pederastic desire, a poet who guides us into a woodland abounding with bathing boys, then directs our gaze towards an advancing stranger, who, inspired by the sight of these naked striplings, undresses and bathes alone, caressed by a vacillating stream. Not a typical Catholic wedding-scene, to be certain.

Regarding the spiritual and psychological nakedness of Hopkins's *Terrible Sonnets*, Robert Bernard Martin comments as most critics would: "In this great series of poems Hopkins seems stripped before us, so that no conventions of nationality, period, or religion come between the poet and reader to obscure the sense of profound emotion they share" (387). But, of the later *Epithalamion*, White's classification of it as a pitiable fragment and Earl's suggestion that it should have seen the flames together reveal a deliberate avoidance, in the critical sphere, of the homoerotic and pederastic qualities which infuse it, an avoidance of the sexual and psychological nakedness that it presents and represents, an avoidance of what Michael Lynch has labeled "the gayness of [Hopkins's] whole aesthetic" (112). This avoidance is partly a decorous and cautious attempt not to marginalize Hopkins's deeply felt religious convictions, his devotion to celibacy, and his authentic sense of vocation. About John Robinson's description of Hopkins as "a man drawn to boys by their beauty," as a man who might have eventually found religious sanction for such love (*In Extremity* 95)—MacKenzie makes the following quip, intriguing but not exactly a disclaimer: "Robinson seems to mock the strenuous idealism with which every true priest, doctor, teacher, etc., must try to meet the temptations from one sex or the other in his profession" (*OET* 453, note). In what follows, I wish to suggest that we be decorous and cautious, not so much with our established views of the man and his roles, but with the complexity of the text and other evidence that he has left us, however fragmentary that text and evidence might be. It is particularly down the path of sexual desire, not spiritual devotion, that I will approach the rather-naked poet before us.

Although correct that "the lines suggest that when [Hopkins] let go, his verse turned spontaneously to naturalized images of the youthful male body," although aptly comparing the *Epithalamion* to Whitman's "Twenty-eight young men bathe by the shore"—even Richard Dellamora fails to recognize the complexity of the poem, describing it merely as "a free improvisation" (42). While Dellamora attempts a broad cultural critique, hoping to secure Hopkins within the "homosocial" atmosphere of a Victorian Oxford replete with Pater, Symonds, Solomon, and Wilde—I will attempt merely a close reading, hoping to offer a defense of a solitary poem mislabeled by most critics as a fragment or a folly (with principle exceptions being John Ferns and Jude Nixon).<sup>1</sup> I will argue that the *Epithalamion* is a masterpiece deserving inclusion amid the seriously studied poems of Hopkins's canon, more than agreeing with Martin that "it is like a paradigm of his whole poetic career" (*Hopkins* 391). Like Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*, I am hoping that we will receive

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1. Nixon writes in her *Gerard Manley Hopkins and His Contemporaries: Liddon, Newman, Darwin, and Pater* (New York: Garland, 1994): "Hardly an unfinished fragment as was for years alleged, the poem ends by returning to the sylvan scene of the opening, forming a ring-like shape" (193).

“an ampler vision, which should take up into itself and explain this world’s delightful shows, as the scattered fragments of a poetry, till then but half-understood, might be taken up into the text of a lost epic, recovered at last” (2. 241).<sup>2)</sup> We would do well to remember Thomas Carlyle’s comment: “*Disjecta membra* [Scattered parts] are all we find of any Poet, or of any man” (*On Heroes, Hero Worship*, lecture iii).

In essence, I wish to suggest that we rethink our overly abstract methods of engaging Hopkins’s texts and life, taking into consideration Pater’s recommendation—made in praise of the art critic Winckelmann—that we “escape from abstract theory to intuition, to the exercise of sight and touch” (*Renaissance* 147). To respond to Hopkins’s poem in a more “feeling,” more Whitmanesque way might allow us to realize it as something far different than previously supposed. But, before beginning what I hope to be a Hopkinsian “exercise of sight and touch,” I feel obliged to justify a Whitmanesque reading for Hopkins’s poem.

Although he claimed he “cannot have read more than half a dozen pieces at most” besides one review, and all mainly in the *Athenaeum* and *Academy*, Hopkins admitted nonetheless: “This, though very little, is quite enough to give a strong impression . . .” (*Letters* i, 155). And, though the above comment mostly regards the poet’s rhythms, its implication goes far deeper than the merely metrical. Just a few statements later in this October 1882 letter to Robert Bridges, Hopkins confessed: “I may as well say what I should not otherwise have said, that I always knew in my heart Walt Whitman’s mind to be more *like* my own than any other man’s living. As he is a very great scoundrel this is not a pleasant confession” (155, emphasis added). In light of Thoreau’s insistence that “Walt Whitman can communicate to us no experience, and if we are shocked, whose experience is it that we are reminded of?” (*Correspondence* 445), Hopkins’s admission is indeed confessional. Even if only in thought, never in action, Hopkins had realized that he was “like” Whitman, that homoerotic “scoundrel” who asserted poignantly that “wherever are men *like* me, are our lusty lurking masculine poems” (“Spontaneous” 11, emphasis added).<sup>3)</sup> Given Hopkins’s admission of similarity to Whitman, I will posit that something lusty and masculine does indeed lurk behind the nuptial title and fragments of his Epithalamion; something he dared not name; something erotically responsive to what Whitman christens in “Youth, Day, Old Age and Night” as “youth, large, lusty, loving” (1);

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2. Though, Hopkins may very well be responding to Pater in his Epithalamion—as he did in the fragment “Who shaped these walls has shewn,” drafted on the only extant letter between these friends, Pater’s acceptance of an invitation to dinner. Notice particularly the first lines of the controversial Conclusion to the *Renaissance*: “Let us begin with that which is without—our physical life. Fix upon it in one of its more exquisite intervals, the moment, for instance, of delicious recoil from the flood of water in summer heat. What is the whole physical life in that moment but a combination of natural elements to which science gives their names?” (186).

3. Gregory Woods describes the more common response towards Whitman by English readers like Whitman :

In the last years of Whitman’s life, the most enthusiastic readers of his poetry were not Americans but were English men. And they read it not primarily for the innovation of his poetic line but for his exuberant homoeroticism. These English gentlemen were his fans because they were the first generation of homosexuals—who still tended to call themselves Uranians—and because, all soundly educated in the classics, they saw in his poems a vigorous reflowering of Greek love in representations of modern life. (“Still” 129)

something that could be unexpurgated through a Whitmanesque reading of the poem.

Since Whitman, as well as his contemporaries Emerson and Thoreau, had successfully employed both “indirect but powerful sexual imagery often couched in matrimonial terms” and “the invocation of classical locations” to illustrate places which Byrne Fone in Masculine Landscapes: Walt Whitman and the Homoerotic Text suggests were conducive to open displays of homoeroticism (216)—it should come as no surprise that Hopkins chose to conceal his most delicate homoerotic and pederastic expression within an epithalamion, the classical “hymn of the wedding-chamber.” By concealing his most poignant homoerotic and pederastic fantasy behind several fragments and a nuptial title, Hopkins was perhaps reacting in much the same way as Whitman in “When I Read the Book,” though Whitman chose to hide between parenthetical fig-leaves, and then, ultimately, to exclude the poem before publication: “(As if any man really knew aught of my life; / As if you, O cunning Soul, did not keep your secret well!)” (4-5). There was indeed such a cunning behind Hopkins’s fig-leaves, as we shall soon hear.

With his voice resonating a Whitmanesque “what I assume you shall assume” (SM 2), Hopkins’s narrator summons us, his readers, into the text: “Hark, hearer, hear what I do.” As a direct address, “hearer” has miscreant connotations which would have been clearly evident to a Classical scholar like Hopkins, professor of Greek at the Royal University, Dublin. Such an imperative (clearly translatable into a Whitmanesque “what I hear you shall hear”) has served throughout pederastic tradition—especially among the Dorians—as an address which emphasizes the beloved’s role within a pedagogic, pederastic relationship, an affiliation between “hearer” and older “inspirer” which is described in Plato and Platonism, a collection of university lectures by Hopkins’s former academic coach and later friend, Walter Pater.<sup>3</sup> Pater, who claimed like Whitman that an artist “says to the reader,—I want you to see precisely what I see” (Appreciations 28), defines the roles of “hearer” and “inspirer” among the Dorians as follows:

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4. A clear elucidation of the relationship between eromenos and erastes (“hearer” and “inspirer”) can be found in K. J. Dover, Greek Homosexuality (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989): 91. For an analysis of this relationship as it was used by Oxonians like Pater, see Linda Dowling, Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994): particularly 83 and 102.

Dowling’s book is rich in analysis of Jowett, Symonds, and Pater, and their world of Hellenism tinted with the homosocial and homoerotic. The book is well-written and often insightful. Nevertheless, Dowling exhibits the same problem as Denis Donoghue in Walter Pater: Lover of Strange Souls (New York: Knopf, 1995). After making the pregnant suggestion that “Mostly he saw in those [Renaissance] paintings an ideal human image, the love of a man for a beautiful boy” (31), Donoghue leaves the chapter and the idea forever. Pederasty often breeds such silences. Yet, in the case of Dowling, we have evasion of another kind. Seemingly unable, or unwilling, to distinguish adult homosexuality from pederasty, she blurs the two as though they were interchangeable. This blurring seems a fashion among Gay Studies critics, since pederastic labels are politically and morally destructive to their image of Hopkins and other Decadents as “homosexual liberators.” Further, Dowling sees individuals like Pater as ever-engaged in counter-discourse (see xiii) instead of aesthetic expression, using their aesthetic expressions as an equivalent response to the documents and discourses of normal life (see 26, with its “spaces for discourse”).

The clean, youthful friendship, “passing even the love of women,” which . . . elaborated into a kind of art, became an elementary part of education. . . . The beloved and the lover, side by side through their long days of eager labour, and above all on the battlefield, became respectively, aiths, the hearer, and eispnhas, the inspirer; the elder inspiring the younger with his own strength and taste in things. (Plato 231-32)

After addressing us as his “hearers,” Hopkins’s narrator invites us to participate aesthetically in the creation of a mutual fantasy, hoping to inspire us with his own strength and taste in things poetical, hoping to demonstrate for us that “instinctive imaginative power” which Pater designates as “a sort of *visual* power . . . causing others also to see what is matter of original intuition for him” (142, emphasis added).

As early as 1862, in a letter to Ernest Hartley Coleridge, a Highgate friend and grandson of the poet, Hopkins displays his ability to blend instruction with insinuation: “And what do you do in the way of classics? Do you ever read Theocritus and Moschus? If not, you must; they are lovely: read Theocritus’ *Thalusia* and *Hylas*” (Letters iii, 6). Then, lest his friend miss the erotic pruriency behind suggesting he read idylls by a poet who is praising his “hearer” in “a landscape suffused with fecund desire” (Dellamora 48), Hopkins immediately summarizes for Coleridge a contemporary poem by Tennyson, a poem copious with “not so hideous” vices and a not-so-hidden seductiveness:

With regard to “the Vision of Sin,” I confess that [it] is very mysterious. . . . I do not profess to understand it entirely but will explain it as well as I can. . . . The palace is the abode of sin; the day of reckoning is near. The youth [who is the hero of the story], now beautiful, is led in by “a child of sin,” [till] he finds a company in the pleasures of indolent carousal, which presently give way to madder vices, not so hideous under the influence of the music and the coloured fountain as they really are. The youth partakes of them *of course* to the full. (Letters iii, 7, emphasis added)

Underlying this “of course” seems to be an assumption that, given appropriate conditions, any aroused youth will fully partake in madder vices (perhaps even the pederastic vices hymned by Theocritus). This assumption about the handling of such opportunities is consistent with Pater’s claim that “Men, children, are susceptible beings, in great measure conditioned by the mere look of their ‘medium.’ . . . They will come to match with much servility the aspects of the world about them” (Plato 272).

Although conscious that prurient arousal is inherent in sharing the voyeurism of Hopkins’s narrator, the “observer-participant framing the action” (Dellamora 45), we are, as susceptible beings, drawn into a sympathetic confidence with him, aware that any passions displayed here together must ever remain private, as Whitman stresses emphatically in his “To You”:

Let us twain walk aside from the rest;  
Now we are together privately, do you discard ceremony,  
Come! vouchsafe to me what has yet been vouchsafed to none—  
Tell me the whole story,  
Tell me what you would not tell your brother, wife, husband, or physician.  
(1-5)

We “vouchsafe” to Hopkins’s narrator when we “lend” him “a thought,” allow him control over our imaginations and share in his point of view. We are, consequently, implicated in his impending voyeurism. Like Whitman’s beloved reader who is free to “fully participate in [the text’s] homoerotic and homosexual context” (Fone 149), we are drawn into Hopkins’s text, and its context, by a narratorial stratagem similar to that which Michael Moon terms “enfoldment” in *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in Leaves of Grass*. Moon asserts that Whitman’s texts are primarily poetical enfoldments which “claim to deliver both the full physical presence of the author, which it of course cannot actually provide, and the imaginary space it does extend, in which the sympathetic reader may enter into partial or liminal contact with the author/speaker of these texts” (65). Similarly, when Hopkins’s narrator invites us to participate in his imaginative creation of a “branchy bunchy bushybowered wood,” we, by joining him, become “leafwhelmed somewhere,” overwhelmed by foliage, enfolded seductively into a masculine landscape by a technique which Whitman describes as “putting myself here and now to the ambush’d womb of the shadows” (SM 1053). As with Whitman’s woodlands, we find that Hopkins’s are not feminine wombs, for even the topographical descriptions abound with phallic imagery, swollen with the same seminal inspiration which inflames the landscape of Hopkins’s sonnet “Spring”:

What is all this juice and all this joy?  
 A strain of the earth’s sweet being in the beginning  
 In Eden garden.—Have, get, before it cloy,  
 Before it cloud, Christ, lord, and sour with sinning (9-12).

Affirming Whitman’s notion that “the cleanest [or most unsoured] expression is that which finds no sphere worthy of itself and makes one” (Preface 1855 719), Hopkins imaginatively constructs a liminal space conducive to the flow of his own homoerotic and pederastic desires, a Xanadu with vaulted pleasure-dome formed by a bushybowered wood that “leans along the loins of hills” like pubic foliage sprouting from fleshy riverbanks. As the narrator explains, these hilly loins are animated by a “candycolorred, gluegold-brown marbled river,” an adhesive *Calamus* river aflow with a palatable, shiny, streaked liquid: a semen of sorts. These are hilly loins such “as fancy painted . . . very faintly, in watered sepia” (*Letters* i, 225), such as are found in his descriptions of the river Hodder as “swollen and golden . . . like ropes and hills of melting candy” or “a fallow glassy gold at Hodder Roughs” (*Journals* 212, 200). This seminal river—Hopkins’s sacred Alph—gushes “boisterously beautiful, between roots and rocks,” forced through phallic passageways until it is “danced and dandled” in ejaculatory spurts that fall as “froth” or “water-blowballs,” squeezed forward between the rocks, like a Whitmanesque “pent-up aching river,” by the lusty urgency of gravity. As a symbolic treatment, this landscape displays the languor of unchannelled desires, the “strain of earth’s sweet being,” or the “limpid liquid within the young man, / The vex’d corrosion” that Whitman describes as “so pensive and so painful, / The torment, the irritable tide that will not be at rest” (“Spontaneous” 27-29).

Because the jerking, fondling motion of “dandled” is coupled with a word like “waterblowballs,” the river acquires even greater masturbatory connotations: the “watery” fluid is “dandled” forward by a “blow” (a rather aggressively-fisted word), till it is ejaculated as dropping “balls.” Whitman suggests that contact with such a



river, a masturbatory river aflow with the “limpid liquid within the young man,” affects the passions, asserting in “An American Primer” that “to be much on the water, or in constant sight of it, affects words, the voice, the passions” (75). This flowing “procreant urge of the world” (SM 44) also animates Hopkins’s hills and imagination, undoubtedly prompting the observation by Ferns that “the world in which Hopkins asks us to join him is a procreant, natural world” (166). “Projected masculine, full-sized and golden” (SM 647), the landscapes of Whitman’s procreant world are bountiful with the “tussled hay of head, beard, brawn,” with the “trickling sap of maple,” with the “fibre of manly wheat,” with “sweaty brooks and dews,” with “winds whose soft-tickling genitals rub against me,” with “broad muscular fields” (536-42). Such landscapes, sprouting “a forest of phallic suggestion” (Fone 147), are indistinguishable from the one into which Hopkins has led us, which is noticeable in things like Hopkins’s use of “honeysuck” instead of “honeysuckle” (providing connotations of fellatio, rather than maternal feeding).

Although such paradises are sensually suggestive in their flow and foliage, they lack the reciprocity necessary to be completely satisfying. “What you look hard at seems to look hard at you,” wrote Hopkins regarding nature in his journal (204). The important word here might well be “seems.” Like their progenitor Adam, both Hopkins and Whitman realize that even an authentic interaction with “the earth’s sweet being in the beginning / In Eden garden” is vacant without companionship: as Whitman will suggest, “Now I care not to walk the earth unless a lover, a dear friend, walk by my side” (Bowers 68). Although Whitman contemplated aesthetically that “I hear and behold God in every object” (SM 1281), and Hopkins that “the world is charged with the grandeur of God” (“Grandeur” 1), both poets recognized, as did Adam before them, that, without human intimacy, even the presence of God in his creation is lonely.

In his meditative “Hurrahing in Harvest,” Hopkins wanders such a Whitmanesque landscape during autumn, conscious that “the azurous hung hills are [the Saviour’s] world-wielding shoulder / Majestic” (9-10), conscious that he—as priest, as poet, as man—is lifting up “heart, eyes, / Down all that glory in the heavens to glean our Saviour” (5-6). Nevertheless, contact with both nature and its God leaves him, “the beholder / Wanting” (11-12), wanting another form of contact besides the spiritually and poetically contemplative. In “Ribblesdale,” Hopkins, for whom landscape had always been so essential, rhetorically questions: “What is Earth’s eye, tongue, or heart else, where / Else, but in dear and dogged man?” (9-10). “Sweet Earth, sweet landscape,” recognizes Hopkins, “[has] no *tongue* to plead, no *heart* to feel” (1-3, emphasis added). We find Hopkins searching for something that nature alone cannot provide, something perhaps analogous to Whitman’s lover-in-repose: “[he who] gently turn’d over upon me, / And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged [his] *tongue* to my bare-stript *heart*” (SM 88-89, emphasis added).

Perhaps while wandering these harvest fields, Hopkins longed, at least in desire, to meet a “child of Amansstrength” like his own “Harry Ploughman” (15); or a brazen farmhand like Hamo Thornycroft’s The Sower, a sculpture Hopkins had so enthusiastically admired at the Royal Academy exhibition in 1886; or, more aptly for harvest time, The Mower, exhibited by Thornycroft at the Academy in 1884 and bearing a quotation from Matthew Arnold’s “Thyrsis” with it in the exhibition catalogue (Read 326). In this quotation from “Thyrsis” (a poem commemorating the death of Arthur Hugh Clough, a relative of Hopkins’s beloved Digby Dolben), Arnold ponders the absence of those he longs to behold: “Where are the mowers, who, as the tiny swell / Of our boat pas-

sing heaved the river-grass, / Stood with suspended scythe to see us pass?" (127-29). This poem, as Arnold emphasized in 1866, is indebted to Theocritus, the same pedes-  
tastic poet Hopkins had praised to Coleridge: "I have been much reading [Theocritus]  
during the two years this poem has been forming itself" (Arnold, Letters i, 378).

In his article "'Churlsgrace': Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Working-Class Male Body," Joseph Bristow not only relates how impassioned Hopkins was about these rustic sculptures by Thornycroft, but also suggests that a painting by Frederick Walker, whom Hopkins parallels with Thornycroft, may have later inspired the Epithalamion:

In a letter to Richard Watson Dixon, Hopkins exclaims his delight in Thornycroft's "truly noble work" that cast his understanding of the plastic arts in "a new light": The statue "was like Frederick Walker's pictures put into stone and indeed was no part due to his influence." Hopkins had been acquainted with Walker's The Bathers since its appearance at the Royal Academy in 1867, and the youthful scene of nude and semi-clad boys it portrays would seem to prefigure the "froliclavish" bather of Hopkins's "Epithalamion." (706)<sup>5)</sup>

"And now I think I am going out by woods and waters alone," Hopkins wrote to Bridges in 1883 (Letters i, 181). That Hopkins should explore the pathways and waterways of his own Arcadian woodlands—places like Elwy, Aberdeen, Inversnaid and Holywell—looking for an affectionate lounge with a tongue and a heart and a hand for earnest grasping should come as no surprise in Hopkins as a man, though perhaps surprising in a Jesuit priest: nevertheless, this lounging figure is "the central and primary archetype of the homosexual imagination and the dominating icon of homoerotic fantasy—the anonymous image of passionate sexual desire as well as the ideal friend, the archetypal comrade. He stands for the unexpected sexual encounter that is unfettered by the artificial demands of name, custom, or social status" (Fone 173). Because this lounge is stripped of name and custom and social status, he represents the ultimate *stranger*, perhaps the very stranger whom we are taken into Hopkins's epithalamic forest to observe.

"We are there" in that bushybowered wood only a moment before the phallic forest—the "hanging honeysuck" and the "dogeared hazels"—begins to shake with cries of merriment. We "hear a shout" (in earlier H2, "the maddest merry shout"), a sound eventually recognized by our guiding narrator as "boys from the town bathing," figures engaged in the shameless madness of merriment and play.<sup>6)</sup>

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5. "I am expecting to take orders and soon, but I wish it to be a secret till it comes about. . . . You know I once wanted to be a painter. But even if I wd. not I think, now, for the fact is that the higher and more attractive parts of the art put a strain upon the passions which I shd. think it unsafe to encounter" (Letter to Baillie, 12 Feb. 1868, Letters iii, 231-2).

6. Martin explains the bathing atmosphere of the time:

Bathing was in some ways the Victorian male recreation that most clearly marked out its participants as members of the upper classes, or at least aspirants to them. Practically every school with any pretension arranged for its boys to stand in shivering rows before they launched themselves into weedy streams. It was understood that there was a vaguely Greek cachet about it that no other sport could match. Since it was exclusively male, the bathers were always nude, so that there was an undercurrent of unspoken sensuality about it, as well as the associations of the classical gymnasium that made it respectable. "Epithalamion," written near the end of his life, was Hopkins's closest equivalent to the scenes of boys bathing that was dear to Victorian painters, but it demonstrates adequately his fascination with the recreation that began for him in the secluded ponds of Ken Wood. (14)



In this landscape even the trees seem to appreciate these boys as “summer’s sovereign good,” for they “hover” over the “bevy of them” as a brooding bird covers her young with a canopy of feathers, an image which appears consistently throughout Hopkins’s canon, most notably in his sonnets “In the Valley of the Elwy” (“a hood / All over, as a bevy of eggs the mothering wing / Will,” 5-7) and “God’s Grandeur” (“The Holy Ghost over the bent / World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings,” 13-14).

As the bright wings of summer sunlight and the shady wings of swaying foliage bend over them, these naked striplings, mastered by the heat, defiantly hurl themselves into the moorland river “with dare and with downdolfinry and bellbright bodies,” their “bellbright” (a commonplace for “bronzed”) bodies penetrating the water’s “kindcold element” with the ease of dolphins; each “huddling out” of the seminal souse only to dive in again.<sup>7</sup> Disorderly, they cluster together on the riverbank like Whitman’s young “Paumanok” swimmers—“the clutch’d together! the passionate ones! / The side by side! the elder and younger brothers! the bony-limb’d” (205-6). And, ravished by a Whitmanesque zeal which, in an earlier draft, allows him to exclaim “O the lads!” (H<sup>2</sup>)—Hopkins, as well as his narrator, anticipates that we, who have accompanied him, will also enjoy a frolicsome display of “bony-limb’d” boys labeled as “summer’s sovereign good.” Hopkins, by presupposing our voyeuristic enjoyment of their nudity, reveals what Whitman discloses in a dictum: “the messages of great poets to each man and woman are, Come to us on equal terms, Only then can you understand us, We are no better than you, *What we enclose you enclose, What we enjoy you may enjoy*” (Preface 1855 719, emphasis added).

Appreciating along with Whitman that “no shutter’d room or school can commune with me, / But roughs and little children better than they” (SM 1255-56), Hopkins, while invigilating an examination at the Royal University in Dublin [One page appended, p. 51], seems to have composed his Epithalamion, allowing his thoughts to drift from a shuttered schoolroom towards communion with little roughs sanctified as “summer’s sovereign good,” youths perhaps inspired by remembrances of the bathers in Walker’s painting or in Stonyhurst’s “deep salmon pool with a funnel of white water at its head which generations of boys had used as a chute,” a water which MacDonald Hastings further describes as “very chilly; but we were of an age when we didn’t notice it” (Jesuit Child 57).

White claims—and probably correctly—that “in spite of [the Epithalamion’s] vagueness, Hopkins had in mind a particular spot when he wrote the poem, the bathing-place, locally nicknamed ‘Paradise,’ in the river Hodder, where the Stonyhurst College boys bathed” (Hopkins 427). Hopkins himself describes this place as “all between waterfalls. . . . If you stop swimming to look round you see fairyland pictures up and down the stream”; and a decade later, “the river Hodder with lovely fairyland views” (Letters iii, 117; i, 151). But, beyond speculations about an inspiring location—particularly vague since Hopkins has allowed us the options of “Southern dean or Lancashire clough or Devon cleave”—the manuscript of the Epithalamion reveals another location from which to draw: the classroom. Describing the spilling of water from the moorlands, Hopkins wrote not “heavenfallen

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7. Peter Swaab mistakenly suggests that “the metaphors—dolphins, bells—are sensuous without being sensual, and the tumble of the elements, describes a planetary blessing, not a sexual allure” (“Hopkins and the Pushed Peach.” Critical Quarterly 37.3 [1995]: 56).

freshness,” but “heavenfallen freshmen” [H<sup>3</sup>], a Freudian slip which, though discretely struck out, reveals that his poetical mind, in process, was aflow with a homoerotic and pederastic waterworld in which his students—and, given his tastes, certainly the freshmen—bathed rather than finished their exam. Hopkins seems to have been communing imaginatively with his students in another, more pastoral, place.

Selected from the lads of paintings or Stonyhurst or Dublin or elsewhere, or merely a composite of them all, Hopkins’s clustering freshmen, imagined as “wet-fresh,” populate the Epithalamion’s erotically-ornamented landscape, youths very similar to characters consistently appearing in Whitman’s early writing, as in the story “The Child’s Champion” (1841). The particular interest of this story for us is not that John Lankton rescues twelve-year-old Charles from a drunken sailor and then his own master, or that he invites the boy to share his bed at an inn, or that they engage there in what Whitman vaguely terms “communion,” or that an absurd angel comes to bless their love with a pair of kisses—what is of interest is the “wet-fresh” way that Lankton describes young Charles as one of those “young beings, strangers who seem to touch the fountains of our love, and draw forth their swelling waters” (Brasher 74).

Similarly, Hopkins seems to have favored one ten-year-old boy whose delicacy and sensitivity would equally have attracted Whitman or his Lankton: “Mannerly-hearted! more than handsome face— / Beauty’s bearing or muse of mounting vein, / All, in this case, *bathed* in high hallowing grace” (“Handsome” 9-11, emphasis added). Considered amid the coupled concepts of water and eroticism, this boy becomes more than an embodiment of “beauty’s bearing,” more than a poetic “muse.” As “the muse of mounting vein,” he seems to have inspired both Hopkins’s poetic and phallic vein to mount, quivering Hopkins, like Whitman, “to a new identity, / Flames and ether making a rush for [his] veins, / Treacherous tip of [him] reaching and crowding” (SM 619-21).

Such mortal beauty, admitted Hopkins in a sonnet by that name, typically inflamed his senses: “Mortal beauty [is] dangerous; [for it] does set danc- / Ing blood” (1-2). The lines which follow these insinuate even more about Hopkins’s voyeuristic tendency: while contemplating the mortal objects which his gaze usually sought, Hopkins alludes to “Pope Gregory the Great, whose appreciation of the beauty of Anglo-Saxon slave boys (*Non Angli sed angeli*) led him to send Augustine to convert the pagan invaders of Britain. The extensive allusion to this well-known story occupies lines seven and eight of the sonnet and is therefore spatially at its center” (Dilworth 265). “See,” directs Hopkins, “[mortal beauty, especially the beauty of ‘angli angeli’] does this: keeps warm / Men’s wits to the things that are; what good means—where a glance / Master more than gaze, gaze out of countenance” (3-5). Earlier drafts read “One *clear glance* / May gather more than staring out of countenance” (stressing the visual clarity essential for voyeurism) and “Where a glance / Gather more may than gaze *me* out of countenance” (stressing Hopkins’s own role as that voyeur). Then, lest we misunderstand this rare expression of his “perfect personal candor” (Whitman, *Preface 1855* 724) and, hence, fail to comprehend what keeps his wits warm to “what good means,” especially “summer’s sovereign good,” lest we miss that “meaning motion” which he says in “Henry Purcell” “fans fresh our wits with wonder” (14)—Hopkins clarifies for us, in the next poetical line, what kind of motion dances his blood, warms and fans his “wits”: “Those lovely lads, once, wet-fresh” (“Mortal” 6).

Enfolded voyeuristically into a vantage point amid the foliage, Hopkins's narrator now directs our gaze not only towards those "wet-fresh" lads, but also towards an advancing stranger "beckoned by [their] noise," a lusty intruder of whom Whitman would have inquired, "Who goes there? hankering, gross, mystical, nude" (SM 389). And, although, for the moment, Hopkins's epithalamic stranger remains dressed, he is indeed an intruder who "drops towards the river unseen," the liquidity of his motion reminiscent of the seminal "drops" of the "waterblowballs" and the dew of the "hanging honeysuck." As the embodiment of Hopkins's homoerotic and pederastic desires, this stranger appears in the poem for the first time, limned with a Paterian solidity:

To speak, to think, to feel about abstract ideas as if they were living persons; that, is the second stage of Plato's speculative ascent. With the lover, who had graduated, was become a master, in the school of love, . . . it was as if the faculty of physical vision, of the bodily eye, were still at work at the very centre of intellectual abstraction. Abstract ideas themselves became animated, living persons, almost corporeal, as if with hands and eyes. (Plato 170)

While Hopkins's abstracted sensuality takes on human shape and moves unseen towards the boys, their "bellbright bodies [are] huddling out of the river," repeatedly running across the rocks, leaping into the air, plunging into the water, becoming "earthworld, airworld, waterworld thorough hurled," hurled with the same masturbatory force as the "waterblowballs" coming forth from the river's phallic passageways.

We know nothing about this stranger except that he is "listless"—lacking in youthful appetite and desire and joy. "Beckoned by the noise," he watches the boys amidst their motion of diving, watches their excited faces and plunging bodies contort with the same expectation that Hopkins describes in his poem "Brothers":

[The young Henry] Beckoned me beside him:  
I came where called, and eyed him  
By meanwhiles; making my play  
Turn most on tender byplay.  
For, wrung all on love's rack.  
My lad, . . . .  
Smiled, blushed, and bit his lip;  
Or drove, with a diver's dip,  
Clutched hands through clasped knees. (13-21)

To the stranger of the Epithalamion, the nudity of boys leaping about in a watery dance—"this garland of their gambol"—is so sensually arousing that it "flashes in his breast," the sight of their shameless bodies in "a diver's dip" setting his blood dancing with "a sudden zest / Of summertime joys." With excessive discretion, Bristow observes that Hopkins's representation of these youthful male bodies "as primarily 'garlanded,' donned in flowers and, by extension, somehow prettified in this manner, not only was unorthodox in English letters, [but] also came close to sexually immoral sentiments" (704). Such would certainly have been the reading of Pater, his Decadents, and their Uranian descendants, all of whom would have

clearly understood the implication of Hopkins's "Self *flashes* off frame and face" ("Mortal Beauty" 11).<sup>8</sup>

Hopkins's description of "this garland of their gambol *flashing* in his *stranger's* breast" (my alteration) is derived from two of his most constant words, "dappled" and "pied," words which Bristow emphasizes, "find their ancient Greek analogue in the word *poikilos*. Plato's Socratic dialogues deploy this term, which also connotes energies that 'flash' and 'flame' with pederastic desire" (704). Whatever the arguments for a classical derivation—which Linda Dowling develops in her "Ruskin's Pied Beauty and the Construction of a 'Homosexual' Code" (5-6) and which Bristow encapsulates above—we can be relatively certain that this sudden overflow of "limber liquid youth" will, at least momentarily, provide relief for the stranger's inflamed pederastic desires, a relief described by Whitman in his excluded "After the Argument": "A group of little children with their ways and chatter flow in, / Like welcome, rippling water o'er my heated nerves and flesh."

This is the way, Whitman suggests, that "boys stir us" while we lie in the shadows. Aroused by the sights and sounds of beautiful boys stirring a river "*boisterously beautiful*" (emphasis added), Hopkins's listless stranger, dressed in warm "woolwoven wear," is motivated to undrape and bathe alone in a "pool neighboring," a pool hidden from the boys' view by a canopy of wychelms, beaches, ashes, sycamores, hornbeams and hazels. Although "ashamed to go naked about the world" (Whitman, "Hot-Cheeked" 6), this stranger, in typical Whitmanesque fashion, nonetheless feels compelled to "go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked" (SM 19). Hidden from all eyes but our own, he participates voyeuristically in the "riot of their rout," yet remains hidden behind a curtain of foliage, a bushybower similar to the parenthetical bower "In Paths Untrodden" where the homoerotic Whitman hides himself: "(For in this secluded spot I can respond as I would not dare elsewhere)" (10).

Even the notorious Whitman appreciated the risks inherent in an imaginative gratification of "summertime joys," recognizing that "the project of creating male-homoerotic 'atmosphere' in a text in nineteenth-century America could only be . . . accomplished in liminal terms" (Moon 65). Consequently, we find that even in his most unrestrained swimming fantasy—"Twenty-eight young men bathe by the shore"—Whitman discretely distances himself, displacing the scene's implied eroticism upon a female voyeur who lusts, more acceptably, from behind a curtain:

Where are you off to, lady? for I see you,  
You splash in the water there, yet stay stock still in your room.

Dancing and laughing along the beach came the twenty-ninth bather,  
The rest did not see her, but she saw them and loved them.

. . . . .

they do not ask who seizes fast to them,

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8. Though Swaab does not, as he makes clear: "Poet and reader, then, are watching the stranger watching the boys, a cooling intellectual symmetry" (56).

They do not know who puffs and declines with pendant and bending arch,  
They do not think whom they souse with spray. (SM 206-16)

Through the addition of a female voyeur, Whitman, as narrator, can liminally stand “apart from the pulling and hauling . . . both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it” (SM 77-79), can embrace those bathers with less societal disapproval. Rather than conceal himself behind the feminine, Hopkins chose more daringly to introduce an unimpassioned, male stranger described as “listless,” a twenty-ninth bather “whose perceptions [Hopkins] fully shares” (Ferns 168). This decision was indeed risky, as Hopkins did not even bother to situate his poem in an excusably classical moment—as John Addington Symonds did in “The Lotus Garland of Antinous.”

In his Memoirs, Symonds, who had preceded Hopkins at Balliol by two years, records a bathing scene less restrained than Hopkins’s:

Four young men are bathing in the pond by the embankment. I pass; the engine screams and hurries me away. But the engine has no power to take my soul. That stays, and is the pond in which the bathers swim, the air in which they shout, the grass on which they run and dress themselves, the hand that touches them unfelt, the lips that kiss them and they know it not. (167)

While Symonds’s Memoirs is extraordinary for its pruriency and admission of actualized passion, as a rule, “it is unrealistic [in the Victorian period] to expect documented proof of overt homosexual behavior, for if sexual activity of any kind occurred between male lovers in private the fact is unlikely to have been recorded” (Hilliard 186). James R. Kincaid proposes an alternative view of this lack of evidence which portrays the Victorians as more tolerant than David Hilliard does, more concerned with discretion or decorousness than being documentary: “Perhaps the Victorian code of action was one thing and that of speech was another: ‘Certain things were not to be talked about; that was really all that was asked’” (Child-Loving 37). Concerning Hopkins though, Martin asserts that

[he] was certainly moved deeply by his sexual feeling for other men, but there is no proof, or even responsible suggestion, that he ever had sexual relations with anyone else. It is not impossible that he did so, of course, either in school or at Oxford, but it seems most improbable because of his piety, his generally fastidious nature, and his extreme dislike of even speaking of crude subjects. (Hopkins 49-50)

Perhaps in diaries like the one “on which was written ‘*Please do not open this*’ . . . burnt, unread, by Hopkins’s two sisters” (Journals xiv), or perhaps in the private papers burned immediately after his death, Hopkins had been more candid than we know.

Nevertheless, the biographical evidence which remains does have the same current of homoerotic and pederastic desire (even if never actualized, but merely fantasized) which is always rippling through Hopkins’s poetry, revealing that he understood his own desires rather well. The concise and candid confessions of his Oxford spiritual diary recount lusts for beautiful choristers and less-refined shop boys, evening discussions with his friends about sex, etc. (see Martin 102-3). Or stories like the following, mentioned tersely in White’s biography: “Fr Conmee

is said to have been extremely fond of Hopkins, and invited him to Clongowes when his exam-marking was over, saying that there would be no one in the house but himself and one other, 'absolutely no regulations.' At this Hopkins kissed Conmee's hand" (390). Or one of Hopkins's own vague accounts:

I have just returned from an absurd adventure, which when I resigned myself to it I could not help enjoying. A hair-brained fellow took me down to Kingstown and on board his yacht and, whereas I meant to return to town by six that evening, would not let me go either that night or this morning till past midday. I was afraid it would be compromising, but it was fun while it lasted. ( Letters i, 172)

This is the Hopkins MacKenzie derides Robinson for drawing our attention to, lest we "mock the strenuous idealism with which every true priest . . . must try to meet . . . temptations" (OET 453, note). But, I am not seeking to support a claim of actualization here, only of potentiality and of desire—hoping to catch the voyeuristic Hopkins, the Hopkins who wrote to his mother that his distant cousins, the two Miss Patches, were "pretty lively girls," but in his diary mentions only that he had lustfully watched a Tiverton boy that day (Letters iii, 90).

Afraid to meet such a Tiverton temptation directly, afraid to join in a waterworld frolic, Hopkins's voyeuristic stranger responds as Whitman's narrator in "Hot-Cheek'd and Blushing": he is "ashamed to go naked about the world" (6). Nevertheless, he is overcome by a curiosity "to know where my feet stand and what this is flooding me, childhood or manhood—and the hunger that crosses the bridge between" (7). To appease this shameful, sensual hunger, Hopkins's stranger "*hies* to a pool neighboring," moving eagerly and pantingly towards a place where he can bathe alone, apart from the childhood "pulling and hauling"—but, his soul, Symonds would assert, "that stays, and is the pond in which the bathers swim . . . [for his are] the lips that kiss them and they know it not" (167).

In "The Bugler's First Communion," a more ceremonial and professional Hopkins applauds a boy who "*hies* headstrong to [his] wellbeing," who spontaneously gratifies his own spiritual hunger without concern for the reproach of others (24, emphasis added). Hopkins's epithalamic stranger similarly *hies* headstrong towards his own wellbeing, a secluded pool where he can privately satisfy his sensual hunger with a watery communion, for "it is the best there; sweetest, freshest, shadowiest; / Fairyland." Famished by "the hunger that crosses the bridge between" childhood and manhood, this stranger seeks the "sweet" epithalamic pool and "here he feasts," imbibing the sounds of the bathing gambol, the shade of the leaves "painted on the air," the smells of the riverbank. He is sensually satiated by a caressing, masculine atmosphere of which Whitman says, "I am mad for it to be in contact with me" (SM 20). But, although he begins to feast upon the voyeuristic spectacle, Kincaid suggests that such a hunger can never be appeased: "We imagine that we are searching for optical consummation, a satiating feast of the eyes; but we have no intention of devouring anything or even of locating something that could be devoured. All we want, first and last, is appetite" (310). This appetite, this maddening hunger, compels Hopkins's stranger, in Whitmanesque fashion, to "go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked" (SM 19), compels him into a voyeuristic playfulness about which Kincaid concludes: "Play, feasting



on its own <sup>in</sup>ventiveness, does not lead to anything but its own perpetuation. . . . Play eroticizes the whole world—and keeps it that way” (197).

This eroticization of the whole world into a sphere of appetite is particularly noticeable in Hopkins’s description of the “branchy bunchy bushybowered wood” which canopies his *secluded* pool. Especially when the topiary adjectives are taken as a progressive cluster do the connotations become clearly phallic and masturbatory. The delicate-yet-abrasive softness of the “silk-beech” (like the surface of the glans penis—“glans” being the botanical name for the nut of the beech mast), is immediately followed by the engorged bundles of the “scrolled” ash and the “packed” sycamore, creating an erection of bark which displays primal passions refusing to be restrained (the “wild” wychelm) and remains agitated (“hornbeam fretty overstood by”). The last tree is especially a portmanteau of phallic suggestion (“horn”/“beam”). Thrust upwards, this cluster of trees ejaculates “rafts and rafts of flake leaves light” into the air, sousing the sky with a repeated expression of what Hopkins calls “all this juice and all this joy” in his poem “Spring.”

It is beneath these ejaculated leaves that the stranger responds as he would not dare elsewhere, declaring, as if to establish a poetic volta: “No more.” When coupled with its visual illustration—“down he dings his bleached both and woolwoven wear”—this verbal response of “No more” anticipates more than a discarding of clothing. Since “costumes rise out of the sub-strata of education, equality, ignorance, caste and the like” (Whitman, “Primer” 76), Hopkins and his stranger are also discarding Jesuitical moralizing, Victorian prudery, celibate asexuality, and personal shame: they are fulfilling Whitman’s command to “Undrape! you are not guilty to me” (SM 145), a command “to reject to some degree the system of controls over [their] own bodies that [their] culture enforces” (Moon 72), a command to sound their barbaric yawps of “No more!” over the riverbanks of the world, a command to engage in the most “unmanly” of activities—childish play. A salient example of this “No more” can be found in White’s biographical account of Hopkins’s frolics with the children of his Irish friend, Dr. Francis McCabe: “Hopkins used to join the young people in the boat: ‘Once on a very hot day he took off his dog collar [his priestly collar] and threw it down in the bottom of the boat exclaiming ‘I’ll say goodbye to Rome!’” (Hopkins 411). Warmth and water and play have certain expectations in the mixing, one of which is exposure, as with the limbs: in “As Kingfishers Catch Fire,” Hopkins goes so far as to suggest that even “Christ plays in ten thousands places, / Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his” (12-13).

Hitherto in the Epithalamion, the stranger has been separated from the playful “garland of their gambol” by his own garland of “woolwoven wear,” a particularly interesting referent in light of the following whimsical passage from Pater’s Plato and Platonism: “[Unable to find a place for the inspired poet in our land,] we should tell him that there neither is, nor may be, any one like [a poet] among us, and so send him on his way to some other city, having anointed his head with myrrh and crowned him with a *garland of wool*, as something in himself half-divine” (276, emphasis added).

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9. Thoreau: “Boys bathing at Hubbard’s bend, playing with a boat (l at the willows). The color of their bodies in the sun at a distance is pleasing, the not often seen flesh-color. I hear the sound of their sport borne over the water. . . . What a singular fact that . . . men were forbidden to expose their bodies under severest penalty” (as quoted in Katz 490-1).

Pater suggests that the mature poet be sent away as a stranger, though anointed with praises and invested with a garland of wool: hence, in all ways, “to seem the stranger lies [his] lot” (1), for he does not conform to the rigidity of a proper society—whether Greek, or Victorian, or Jesuit. So, given the constraint and heat of his “garland of wool,” Hopkins’s stranger opts instead for the naked “garland of their gambol,” though seeking a bit more privacy than the boys, for reasons.

With his “treacherous tip reaching and crowding” inside of his clothes (like a “hornbeam fretty overstood by”), the stranger furiously unbuttons “his bleached both and woolwoven wear” (an earlier draft reading “his bleached shirt and all his woven wear,” H<sup>2</sup>). He allows his clothes, symbols of societal conformity and modesty, to fall about his ankles like Madeline’s dress in Keats’s “The Eve of St. Agnes,” a discarded cluster which entangles him because . . . he is still wearing his shoes. With frustration, the stranger finds himself the captive of his own impatience, suspended in all of his aroused nakedness by the very act of hurriedly undressing: “[His] forehead frowning, [his] lips crisp / Over finger-teasing task, his twiny boots / *Fast* he opens . . . till walk the world he can with [his] bare feet” (emphasis added).

After his conventions, his bothersome clothing, and especially his shoes have been duly discarded—“careless these in coloured wisp / All lie tumbled-to”—Hopkins’s voyeur discovers how surprisingly tactile the world about him had always been, discovers the Whitmanesque “press of [his] foot to the earth [which] springs a hundred affections” (SM 253), a touch hitherto overlooked, because, as Hopkins states in “God’s Grandeur,” “Nor can foot feel, being shod” (8).<sup>10</sup> Standing naked at the rim of a hidden pool, garlanded only by the “loop-locks” of his hair—“forward falling” locks elsewhere referred to as “loose locks, long locks, love-locks” (“Golden Echo” 15)—the stranger undoubtedly experiences the same liquid caress described by Whitman: “It sails me, I dab with bare feet, they are lick’d by the indolent waves” (SM 606). Recognizing the seductiveness and invitation of this touch, Whitman embraces the water as a lover, hurling himself expectantly into its sousing arms, as did Hopkins’s youthful epithalamic bathers:

You sea! I resign myself to you also—I guess what you mean,  
I behold from the beach your crooked *inviting fingers*,  
I believe you refuse to go back without feeling of me,  
We must have a turn together, I undress, hurry me out of sight of the land,  
Cushion me soft, rock me with billowy drowse,  
Dash me with amorous wet.

(SM 448-52, emphasis added)

While for Whitman this encounter with the sea, “rich in physical and sensual detail, . . . results in an absolute spiritual as well as sexual union” (Fone 166); for Hopkins, who undoubtedly recognizes that these inviting liquid fingers belong to the hand of God, the “fondler of [his] heart” (Deutschland 71), this water also bespeaks a chilly sense of danger, unfamiliarity, and forbiddance.

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10. In a letter to his father, Hopkins notes one blessing of the impoverished Irish: “Great part of the population are very pleasantly shod in their bare heels and stockinged in their bare shins. How gladly would I go so! The struggle I keep up with shoemakers, murderers by inches, I may say ever embitters my life” (as quoted in White, Hopkins 370).

Hopkins often contemplates a not-so-amorous “sway of the sea” (3), as he does in The Wreck of the Deutschland, asking God: “Dost thou touch me afresh? / Over again I feel thy *finger* and find thee” (7-8, emphasis added). Although recognizing the riverwater to be the hand of God the “fondler,” both Hopkins and his stranger are still apprehensive about the caressing “limpid liquid” at their feet, intuitively aware that even a touch of their feet could be erogenous, springing forth a hundred potentially “dangerous” affections. By the poetic repetition of “*here he will then, here he will the fleet / Flinty kindcold element let break across his limbs*” (emphasis added), Hopkins dramatizes the stranger’s hesitation, his fear of contact with the erogenous “pent-up aching river” into which the boys hurl themselves expectantly, a river flowing “boisterously beautiful” as a symbolic expression of “limber liquid youth” (“Bugler’s” 22), or, as Whitman would say, “the limpid liquid within the young man” (“Pent-up” 11). Realizing that an erotic hunger crosses this river between childhood and adulthood, “on all sides prurient provokers stiffening [his] limbs” (SM 623), Hopkins’s hesitant-yet-hungry stranger seeks satisfaction, though on the adult side of this seminal deluge, in a pool more conducive to his “manhood, balanced, florid and full” (SM 1170), a tranquil pool where the uncontrollable, procreant urges he shares with the boys and with Whitman can be mastered.

Mastery and masturbation—these two words cut to the quick of Hopkins’s frustrated sexuality and pit his Jesuitical impulses against his human. While Whitman “in his own love grip of autoerotic arousal” (Fone 147) can confidently assert, as he bathes and admires himself, that “welcome is every organ and attribute of me, and of any man hearty and clean, / Not an inch nor a particle of an inch is vile, and none shall be less familiar than the rest” (SM 57-58), Hopkins cannot make such a sensual or masturbatory assertion. By contrast, Hopkins seems to have conceived of his own masturbation as a stumbling block, a division between himself and the Divine, a tactile example of fleshly impulses mastering him in ways reminiscent of that “great scoundrel,” the irreverent Whitman: “O Christ! This is mastering me!” (1860, SM 243). As a Jesuit priest, Hopkins must have feared that these impulses, if indulged, could lead to the overt sensuality we find in Whitman’s “Not My Enemies Ever Invade Me”: “But the lovers I recklessly love—lo! how they master me!” (2).

Because of this, it should come as no surprise that Hopkins’s confessional notes emphasize that such sensual mastery is, at the very least, morally dangerous. Signifying them as “O.H.” (meaning “Old Habits”) in his journals, Hopkins registered shameful acts of masturbation, reminding one of the adolescent in Whitman’s “Spontaneous Me” who “wakes deep at night, the hot hand seeking to repress what would *master* him, / The mystic amorous night, the strange half-welcome pangs, visions, sweats, / The pulse pounding through palms and trembling encircling fingers, the young man all color’d, red, ashamed, angry” (32-34, emphasis added). Dellamora suggests that, for Hopkins, this shame originated because he “valorizes the flow of bodily fluid rather in the way that Shelley does in the discourse on Greek love . . . [devaluing] both intercourse between men and women and masturbation while reserving a place for involuntary emission on the side of religious and organic ecstasy” (54). If such is the case, then, even though his “poetry reveals how intimately his love of men and boys was connected with his love of Christ” (Woods, “Still” 132), Hopkins must have recognized that religious ecstasy, not to mention organic, was a rare experience and hard to come by.

In “The Bugler’s First Communion,” Hopkins depicts just such an uncommon moment of religious and organic ecstasy, the “overtones of strong sexual awareness in the poem” (Martin 297) cast within a ceremonial frame, as the priestly Hopkins “forth Christ from cupboard fetched” and administered the Eucharist to a bugler boy of the 52nd Light Infantry from the nearby Cowley Barracks, a bugler boy dressed in his “regimental red” (9-10). Amidst the ceremony, Hopkins becomes aware of how erotically provocative his own stance is, relative to the kneeling boy who is penitently ready to receive the Host. Hopkins avouches: “How fain I of feet / To his youngster take his treat!” (10-11). Recognizing intuitively or consciously that “if Christ is [seen as] a phallus, [then] the logical conclusion must be that the Eucharist is an act of fellatio” (Woods, *Articulate* 45), Hopkins withdraws the Eucharist, the “too huge godhead” (12), from its altar cupboard. The cupboard is depicted like the sheath of a phallus, complete with retractable wooden foreskin to allow the priestly Hopkins to “unhouse and house the Lord [as godhead]” (“Habit of Perfection” 24). While he places the wafer—“low-latched in leaf-light house!” (12)—on the boy’s tongue, Hopkins’s glance lingers about the boy’s face (“Christ’s darling”) and mouth (“Tongue true”) and throat (“Breathing bloom”) (14-16), his glance seeming to follow the wafer along. We find Hopkins’s glance lingering about what he calls in “The Habit of Perfection,” the “palate, the hutch of tasty lust” (13): the poet-priest seems to have actualized here a scene of religious fellatio.<sup>11</sup> And, would we be too surprised if those parted lips—armatured by many a rousing blast of a phallic trumpet—had inspired Hopkins with the same “flashing” passion we have already seen enveloping his epithalamic stranger, a passion clearly elucidated by Whitman in “The Mystic Trumpeter”:

I hear thee trumpeter, listening alert I catch thy notes,  
 Now pouring, whirling like a tempest round me  
 . . . . .  
 Blow trumpeter free and clear, I follow thee,  
 While at thy liquid prelude, glad, serene,  
 The fretting world, the streets, the noisy hours of day withdraw,  
 A holy calm descends like dew upon me,  
 I walk in cool refreshing night the walks of Paradise  
 . . . . .  
 O trumpeter, *methinks I am myself the instrument thou playest.*  
 (3-4; 13-17; 50, emphasis added)

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11. A similar comment is made by Fone regarding Whitman’s textual acts of fellatio: “the sacramental union has taken place, and the eucharistic semen has been shared” (183).

For Hopkins, the bugler's "freshyouth fretted" has a phallic, as well as instrumental, connection to the Epithalamion's "*hornbeam fretty overstood / By.*" At the very least—even barring the fellatio imagery that many readers may think I have pressed beyond a decent point<sup>12</sup>—this bugler encapsulates for Hopkins the pederastic ideal of a youth balanced between the ripening desires which threaten innocence ("freshyouth fretted in a bloomfall all portending / That sweet's sweeter ending") and the pleasant inexperience which must surely be lost to age ("chastity in mansex fine") (30-1; 16). Fearful that this pleasant "bloom" (represented by the bugler's face) will wither from what he and Whitman jointly call "fretting," Hopkins is apprehensive about looking away, racked by a pederastic fear that Kincaid legitimizes:

[In such literature,] the adult turns his back for an instant and wheels around to find the room empty: "Suddenly, . . . overnight like an overblown flower, it is dead." The child does not grow or even grow up; it becomes extinct. In part, these metaphors express the fact that the child becomes unattractive to the adult, becomes just another ordinary adult and no longer anything magical—disfigured by body hair and erupting skin and ungainly height. (226)

In "The Leaden Echo," Hopkins ponders "how to keep . . . back beauty, keep it, beauty, beauty, beauty, . . . from vanishing away" (1-2). As he stands ceremoniously before this bugler, recognizing his own inability "to keep" this youth "blooming," Fr. Hopkins seems to fantasize about a moment of passionate reciprocity with the boy, no longer only desiring to be fellated—to be mouthed like the youth's instrument—but also desiring to fellate, to consume the boy as though he were a piece of fruit, to feel him yield "tender as a pushed peach" (23) gushing "limber liquid youth" (22). And, like the frustrated pederast who, Kincaid suggests, might wish for the untimely "extinction" of his beloved as a means of preserving the boy's innocence and purity and beauty—"since, no, nothing can be done / To keep at bay / Age and age's evils, hoar hair" ("Leaden Echo" 9-11)—Hopkins writes to Bridges concerning this poem: "I am half inclined to hope the Hero<sup>13</sup> of it may be killed in Afghanistan [where the British troops are fighting]" (92).

Though "The Bugler's First Communion" shows how thoroughly Hopkins could sublimate his sexuality into ritual and poetry, it also demonstrates how sexually un-

12. Many readers—and many with more theological scruple than myself—will object that I have merely converted the eucharistic spectacle of Hopkins's "The Bugler's First Communion" into my own "The Bigger's First Communion." Such may be the case, though mine is not the first time an "L" has been altered either to enhance or diminish Hopkins's eucharistic suggestiveness. Notice MacKenzie at work in his "Introduction" to the QET:

Occasionally I have made an editorial decision because of the markedly better sense which flows from a change. In No. 71 ["The Half-way House"], line 10, the Eucharist may with theological propriety be described as "love's proper food" (as my text now runs), but as Christ in this poem is called "Love" (the personification of love), abstruse scruple might be roused by the traditional reading: "Love when here [i.e., Christ while he was a man], they say, / Or once or never took Love's proper food." (xlx)

13. "He invents some obscure child-molesters in the ranks of the English army which this Anglo-Irish boy will join; and then protectively imagines for him a guardian angel in the guise of a 'kind comrade'—an edifying military comrade with many of the characteristics Symonds (writing in 1873) attributes to the Dorian warriors of Greece" (Swaab 51).

fulfilled he must have been amid his own denials and scrupulosities and beliefs; amid Jesuitical and other religious restrictions; amid the concerns of Western culture (in general) and Victorian culture (in particular) to limit physical intimation of homoerotic and pederastic desires. As he regretfully admits, even his Saviour often unsympathetically “locks love [like a treasure] ever in a lad” (“Bugler’s” 35), locked by something far less malleable than humanity’s “bow or brooch or brace, lace, latch or catch or key” (“Leaden Echo” 1).

The principal reason for Hopkins’s inability to acquire this guarded treasure may be something unrelated to either restrictions from within or without, something inherent to his own voyeuristic tendency. A substantial distance is required for voyeurism, a distance illustrated in the Epithalamion by the stranger’s shift from the boisterous river and its boys, to the hidden pool neighboring, an imaginative movement elucidated by Kincaid:

Pedophilic figurations situate the child at a distance impossibly remote and in a focus impossibly blurred; but such an image really allows the adult to leap into this blur, somehow without canceling the desire—and, what is more crucial, without capturing or canceling the child who was originally there. The original child keeps its distance, that is, offering the adult the way to maneuver into a new position but, in doing so, moves to a new position itself, maintains its Otherness. (196)

And, lest we think that such a perspective could only be reached by a modern literary critic, perhaps it is best to let Hopkins explain the problem himself: “I cannot get my Elegy [‘On a Portrait of Two Beautiful Young People’] finished, but I hope in a few days to see the hero and heroine of it, which may enable me (or quite the reverse; perhaps that: it is not well to come too near things)” (*Letters* ii, 154).

So desirous is Hopkins to acquire this remote and blurred treasure that, even amid his contemplation of the drowning nuns in *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, he questions, “What by your measure is the heaven of desire, / The treasure never eyesight got?” (207-8, emphasis added). This question echoes Kincaid’s insistence that pederasty “seems almost always to be on intimate terms with such possessive looking” (227). Elsewhere, surrounded by more tranquil waters, Hopkins suggests where this treasure might be found: “Then come who pine for peace or pleasure / Away from counter, court, or school, / Spend here your measure of time and treasure / And taste the treats of Penmaen Pool” (37-40, emphasis added). The bugler’s eucharistic “treat” (11), in all of its erotic connotations, could just as easily have been acquired at a Penmaen or epithalamic pool, where even listless strangers can partake freely in a watery communion with the “Thou mastering me / God,” a God who is not only the “giver of breath and bread,” but also giver of the “World’s strand [and] sway of the sea” (*Deutschland* 1-3).

Even when purely visual, these “treats,” and the getting of them, disturbed Hopkins, whose impulses and earnestness were particularly Jesuitical, whether personal or prescribed:

I cast for comfort I can no more get  
By groping round my comfortless, than blind  
Eyes in their dark can day or thirst can find  
Thirst’s all-in-all in all a world of wet. (“My Own Heart” 5-8)



While considering The Wreck of the Deutschland, Hopkins's grandest "world of wet," Bristow accentuates how thoroughly these concepts of eucharistic and water communion are merged in Hopkins's poetry:

In stanza thirty . . . the poet prayerfully appeals to "Jesu, heart's light, / Jesu, maid's son," and asks what "feast followed the night" that the Lord "hadst glory of this nun." Here his inquiry shades into envy—for the nun has surely been "feasted" upon in a way that has given her, and not the speaker, the Lord's "crown." This glorious "feast" certainly sounds ravenous. . . . This "feast" may—even when all doctrinal considerations have been made—appear to verge on impropriety. This is an eminently sexual, rapacious, and wholly virile God. (700)

Although fearful of this Whitmanesque "souse upon me of my lover the sea," this liquid embodiment of an "eminently sexual, rapacious, and wholly virile God," Hopkins's hesitant stranger nevertheless accepts the homoerotic and pederastic treats hidden amidst this Edenic waterworld and immediately "feasts: [for] lovely all is." Compelled—or more aptly, guided—toward a gushing cleft in the landscape's side, this stranger is led by an unseen poetical hand, a hand employing the same tenderness Christ used while easing the hesitant finger of Thomas the Doubter into his own pierced side, a place of fluid epiphany described by Hopkins's beloved Digby Dolben in "Homo Factus Est":

Look upon me sweetly  
    With Thy Human Eyes,  
With Thy Human Finger  
    Point me to the skies.

Safe from earthly scandal  
    My poor spirit hid  
In the utter stillness  
    Of Thy wounded Side.

.....

By the quiet waters,  
    Sweetest Jesu, lead;  
'Mid the virgin lilies,  
    Purest Jesu, feed. (13-20, 49-52)

Quiet or otherwise, the waters descending into Hopkins's epithalamic pool become increasingly iconographic: first cast as a receptive chalice, then as a falcon, then as a cathedral. As a "heavenfallen freshness," Hopkins's own "quiet waters" spill tranquilly from the moorland into a "coffer, burly all of blocks, built of chancequarried, selfquained, hoar-huskéd rocks." Filled continually ("dark and daylight on and on") by waters that "warble over into" it, this stone chalice brims with a liquid grace like that promised by Jesus to the Woman at the Well: water from "a vein / Of the gospel proffer, a pressure, a principle, Christ's gift" (Deutschland 31-32). This image is described with the intricacy of a Leonardo sketch, a stone Grail perpetually receiving a liquid gift capable of converting even the most "listless" into the "froliclavish."

For the poet of "The Windhover," the falconry connotations behind the word "warble" are particularly significant, describing how a falcon crosses its wings over its

back after “rousing” and “mantling.” Feathered with erotic overtones, the water, like a “dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding / Of the rolling level underneath him” (“Windhover” 2-3), lands on the edge of the stone coffer’s burly arm, where it “rouses,” ruffling its agitated watery wings until it “mantles,” wrapping them like a cloak around itself as it finishes its downward flight. In liquid terms, though the descending wings of the river reveal “brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume,” eventually, the fire “breaks” from them “a billion / Times told lovelier, more dangerous” (9-11), an ejaculatory release which eventually replaces brute beauty, brute valour, and brute act with calm, the river peacefully “warbling” into the epithalamic coffer with the rhythmic trills and thrills and quavers expectant of a satisfied bird. Through a solitary term like “warble,” Hopkins, a poetic genius who loved falconry, is able to convey a completed-yet-controlled masturbatory experience, “the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!” (8).

Besides converting this providential water into the “finger of a tender of, O of a feathery delicacy” (*Deutschland* 246), this coffer also represents a natural cathedral whitened in places by the river’s sway, its very stones deposited by a less-than-delicate “finger” of God, which now descends into the coffer as feathery ribbons of water, “filleted with glassy grassy quicksilvery shivés and shoots,” giving the effect of a window of stained glass. It is what a much younger Hopkins describes as “glazed water vaulted o’er a drowsy stone” (*Journals* 67). With its diamonded panes of “glassy” water separated by “grassy” tracery, this “quicksilvery” and prised window of water falls into the coffer, variegated by vegetative “shives and shoots” which grow upwards from between the “hoar-huskéd rocks.” Of all of Hopkins’s spaces, this is indeed the most masterfully charged with the grandeur of God, abounding with spiritual relevance, creative incubation, and physical enjoyment, expressing the best of “earthworld, airworld, waterworld”—though not “thorough hurled” like the marbled river into which the boys dive. Mastery, not masturbatory hurling, is aflow in this seclusion, a thorough mastery of what Ferns calls “the restorative waters of life” (174).

Beckoned by the healing spirit of God moving upon the face of this water, Hopkins’s stranger accepts the watery embrace he has hitherto so feared: he allows “the fleet / Flinty kindcold element . . . [to] break across his limbs / Long,” allows “the souse upon [him] of [his] lover the sea, as [he lies] willing and naked”

14. The watery window of this epithalamic cathedral is reminiscent of the stained glass of St. Margaret’s Church near Binsey, Oxfordshire, Hopkins’s encounter with which is described by Martin: In the medieval glass in the church was a figure of St Margaret, to whom St Frideswide, patron saint of Oxford, prayed for the cure of Agar, who had pursued her and been struck blind for his lust. In answer to her prayers a well sprang forth, and its waters healed Agar. When Hopkins first went there, the trickle of water from the well was blocked up, but the legend was easy to imagine in that setting. It combined many things that Hopkins held dear: a deep and almost inborn love of water; his sense of the simple, literal truth of miracles, which never left him; deep devotion to chastity; an identity with distant English history; perhaps most of all his feeling of immediacy with the landscape. (64-5)

Though serendipity secured its placement immediately following MacKenzie’s facsimile of Hopkins’s Epithalamion, Hopkins’s pencil sketch “Cleaning Dr. Molloy’s windows” (329) reveals a man who is framed by a water-washed window which undoubtedly envelops him with refracted light, light perhaps not so unlike the stained glass of St. Margaret’s. If composed while Hopkins was drafting his Epithalamion, this sketch might provide a visual source for the poem’s coupling of water and window, revealing a man illumined by both. [Sketch appended, p. 52]

("Spontaneous" 35). He is covered by this window of variegated, liquid glass. Of particular interest here is Hopkins's earlier use of the word "flashes" to describe the passions stirring in the stranger's breast: beyond expressing how impassioned the stranger becomes under the influence of these boys' voluptuous accents, "flashes" is a glass-maker's term for the act of covering transparent glass with a film of color, implying here that the listless stranger is overspread by a brilliantly variegated "froliclavish," by a stained-glass window extraordinarily "lavish" (a word Hopkins uses to describe the healing waters of St. Winefred's well, *Letters* i, 40). Hence, the stranger is given the ability to behold the world in a surprisingly fresh and dappled way.

Enfolded voyeuristically with the stranger in his bushybowered pool, we and our narrator, Hopkins's voyeuristic couple, also experience this healing delight, this new "exercise of sight and touch" (Pater, *Renaissance* 147), this "froliclavish" so syntactically ambiguous: "We leave him, *froliclavish*, while he looks about him, laughs, swims" (emphasis added).<sup>15</sup> Perhaps this state of being "froliclavish" belongs to the stranger, or to ourselves, or to both. But, whichever the case, we have experienced what we came for, and should discretely follow Hopkins's advice for engaging "Mortal Beauty": "Merely meet it . . . then leave, let that alone" (12-13). Whichever the case, while attempting to leave our own poetic seclusion, we seem to be discovered by the gaze of the stranger, the voyeur whom we thought we were watching unseen. Consequently, after looking about him, the stranger, laughing perhaps at our acquired embarrassment, begins to swim about uncaringly, as if beckoning us to join him in the sensual pleasures of his pool.

The sensual pleasures of the epithalamic pool are far more ambiguous than the syntactical options of the word "froliclavish." Given the frolicsome and celebratory quality of the poem as a whole, it may seem remarkable that Hopkins's most sensual and pederastic expression should end in a tomb-like coffer amidst a continual overflow of water, a coffer attended by a stranger who beckons us seductively like one of Waterhouse's painted nymphs or Tennyson's child of sin. Hypnotically, pools might invite us to participate in frolic and abandon—but, for Victorians like Hopkins, they were not always places of lasting ecstasy or expectation, homoerotic or otherwise. Waterworlds, such as his "Inversnaid," often surge with an unspecified sense of loss and despair:

A windpuff-bonnet of fawn-froth  
Turns and twindles over the broth  
Of a pool so pitchblack, fell-frowning,  
It rounds and rounds Despair to drowning. (5-8)

Fear of the dangers intrinsic to pools has a biographical source for Hopkins. While the death of "the boy I love" was only a nightmare for Whitman in his longer poem, "Whispers of Heavenly Death"—

Of him I love day and night I dream'd I heard he was dead,

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15. While considering the voyeuristic interaction between readers and the young protagonist of Dickens's *David Copperfield*, Kincaid uses exactly the same phrasing as Hopkins: "He looks about him, he observes. He looks back at us, exactly what readers hiding in the bushes do not want" (306, emphasis added).

And I dream'd I went where they had buried him I love, but he was not  
in that place,

And I dream'd I wander'd searching among burial-places to find him,  
And I found that every place was a burial-place. ("Of Him" 1-4)

—the death of Hopkins's beloved, by drowning, was not a dream.

Although Digby Mackworth Dolben was not quite seventeen, three-and-a-half years younger than Hopkins when they met briefly at Oxford in February 1865, Hopkins found him "attractive," and as White emphasizes in his biography, "like many others, . . . succumbed to his charm" (110). This infatuation, suggests White, "probably caused him to understate the flirtatiousness and provocativeness in Dolben's religious attitudes" (110), attitudes unconventional in their figurement of Christ as a glorified, homoerotic lover. "The traditional aspects of religious poetry as love poetry seem somehow extended beyond their legitimate bounds by Dolben" (86), suggests Martin, later stressing that Hopkins was equally attuned to this suggestive undercurrent of eroticism: "there is a long Christian tradition of the association between eroticism and religion, and it was never far beneath the surface in Hopkins's poetry" (251).<sup>16</sup> In "Brevi Tempore Magnum Perfecit Opus," Dolben goes as far as to describe himself as the bride of Christ, a Christ who is a thinly veiled figurement of his own beloved Martin le Marchant Gosselin. Further, Dolben portrays death as a wedding ceremony between himself and "Marchie", the ascent to heaven as a procession towards their consummation bed: "We think the Brideroom sometimes stood beside him as he slept, / And set upon those virgin lips the signet of His love, / That any other touch but His they never should approve" (18-20). Such an embrace of death-as-bridegroom bespeaks Whitman's own anticipation of death-as-lover: "My rendezvous is appointed, it is certain, / The Lord will be there and wait till I come on perfect terms, / The great Camerado, the lover true for whom I pine" (SM 1198-1200).

Not long afterwards, Dolben and death did have their rendezvous, a familiar tale which Bridges describes in the "Memoir" which introduces Dolben's collection of rather-elegiac poetry:

He went, late in the afternoon, to bathe with Mr. Prichard's [ten-year-old] son Walter *at a spot where the stream widens into a small pool*. The boy could not swim, but had learned to float on his back. Digby was a good swimmer. They had bathed there together before: the conditions were not dangerous, and no apprehension was felt when they did not return. . . . What happened was that when they were bathing Digby took the boy on his back and swam across the pool with him. Returning in the same fashion he suddenly sank within a few yards of the bank to which he was swimming. The boy, who was the only witness, had the presence of mind to turn on his back and keep himself afloat, and shout to some reapers in the riverside meadows. (cx-xi, emphasis added)

It seems that on 28 June 1866, after finishing a lesson with his private tutor, Mr. Prichard, Dolben went bathing for the last time, accompanied by Prichard's son Walter,

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16. Poems such as "The Lily" and "A Letter" (Poems of Dolben 59, 60-63)—particularly the latter—are bountiful with suggestive links between Dolben's poetry and Hopkins's Epithalamion.

whom Dolben was teaching to swim by tying the boy to his own back by a sash. “Forty years later Prichard said simply, ‘He died trying to save me’” (Martin 160).

Believing Dolben to be the youthful embodiment, not only of intellectual bearing and creativity and religious fervor, but also of bravery—Hopkins wrote to Bridges concerning his death: “There can very seldom have happened the loss of so much beauty (in body and mind and life) and of the promise of still more as there has been in his case—seldom I mean, in the whole world” (*Letters* i, 16-7). But, lest Bridges recognize that meeting Dolben “was, quite simply, the most momentous emotional event of [his] undergraduate years, probably of his entire life” (Martin 80), Hopkins first—before providing the above evaluation of Dolben—marginalized his own sense of loss: “I looked forward to meeting Dolben and his being a Catholic more than to anything. At the same time *from never having met him but once I find it difficult to realize his death or feel as if it were anything to me*” (*Letters* i, 16; emphasis added). Even if Bridges later recognized that “Hopkins seems to have associated Dolben and poetry until they became almost indistinguishable” (Martin 105), even if he eventually saw behind Hopkins’s feeble claims that Dolben’s death had affected him little—Bridges would still have been unable to pierce “the opaque privacy that kept [Hopkins] from confiding, even to his own journal, all that he had felt about Dolben” (164).

Not surprisingly, with respect to the privacy of these long-dead friends, Bridges evades providing an answer, relating only that Hopkins “must have been a good deal with [Dolben], for Gerard conceived a high admiration for him, and always spoke of him afterwards with great affection” (“Memoir” lxxii-iii). Bridges must surely have had some hint that, after Dolben’s visit in 1865, “almost every day that summer term [Hopkins] spent some time with [Stuckey] Coles, who knew Dolben well—better than Bridges had known him—from Eton,” committing, suggests White, “the sin of ‘dangerous talking’ about Dolben,” such that, in the end, Hopkins was forbidden by his confessor, probably Canon Liddon, to have contact with Dolben except by letter (*Hopkins* 114-5). As Hopkins himself admitted: “no one can admire beauty of the body more than I do. . . . But this kind of beauty is dangerous” (*Letters* i, 95).

As with Bridges’s biographical evasions, when we seek to have contact with Dolben in the Epithalamion, we find only intriguing clues to direct our “dangerous talking.” Danger does permeate this poem, though subtly. Like an unnoticed *memento mori*, the leaves above the epithalamic pool “hang as still as hawk or hawkmoth,” the first recognizable as Hopkins’s elegant-but-deadly “Windhover” suspended above its prey, the second a more common harbinger of death—both motionless, both waiting. They are “dealt so,” like the fated tarot of Hopkins’s “Spelt from Sibyl’s Leaves”; or “painted on the air,” like the finger of God disclosing a fate for a Daniel to read. Threateningly, these overhang a pool where a coffer (a medieval cognate of “coffin”) is submerged and filled continually by a window of variegated water, “a heavenfallen freshness,” recalling the altar of Finedon Chapel which formerly gave access to Dolben’s tomb. “Some day I hope to see Finedon and the place where he was drowned too,” Hopkins wrote to Bridges amidst his grief. “Can you tell me where he was buried?—at Finedon, was it not?” (*Letters* i, 17). If this epithalamic coffer, as I would like to suggest, does indeed represent the combined drowning and burial places of Dolben, the places Hopkins hoped to see, even if only in his imagination, then White’s dismissal of such imagery as merely “landscape descriptions which have no force of plot behind them” seems more than a

grand misreading or an avoidance of the eroticism which infuses the poem: it throws into doubt more than just his and others' commentary on this single "pitiab-  
le fragment" (to borrow a phrase from Stephen Jay Gould).

To make such a claim is merely to admit that one has never been led through this wooded meta-cathedral (or perhaps any of Hopkins's other poetical structures) by the hand of a Gerard Manley Hopkins who was equally a pederastic poet and a Jesuit priest, who was himself guided by the hand of another religious poet, his beloved Digby Dolben, a youth who claimed the guidance of God's own hand to be an expression of homoerotic love in his aptly titled "A Poem Without a Name": "Then in the hush went forth the soul of life, / Drawn through the darkness by a gleaming hand" (12-3). Contemplating this "gleaming hand," this watery hand far different from the seductive hand of Tennyson's "child of sin," this heavenly hand which had led Dolben to the icy silence of the tomb—Hopkins must have recalled another poem by his friend, "Ah Love, first Love":

Ah Love, first Love, came gently through the wood,  
Under a tree he found me all alone,  
Gently, gently, he kissed me on the cheek,  
And gently took my hand within his own. (1-4, emphasis added)

A degree of delicacy is inherent to such a sensual-yet-Divine leading; and, faced by the "gleaming hand" of the moorland water, Hopkins and his listless stranger—both hesitant; both discarding the trappings of their lives and their societies; both revealing, however ashamedly, their Whitmanesque "perfect personal candor"—are touched. They are touched, not only by the violent, but also by the gentle hand of God. They are given the most supreme of gifts: "I feel thy finger and find thee" (*Deutschland* 8).

"The hand of God is the elderhand of my own" (1860 *SM* 92), wrote Whitman, the robust American poet who considered himself "the teacher of athletes," who recognized his poetic obligation to inspire his own "boys from the town" to trust the liquid, sensual embrace of God's elderhand: "Long have you timidly waded holding a plank by the shore, / Now I will you to be a bold swimmer, / To jump off in the midst of the sea, rise again, nod to me, shout, and laughingly dash with your hair" (1231-33).<sup>17)</sup> Not entirely "like" Whitman, Hopkins sought greater seclusion for demonstrating to his own "hearer" exactly "what I do" through an eroticized imagination, an imagination which seeks to inspire contact not only with the elderhand of God, but also with the delicate fingers of that hand. As a result, Hopkins's poetical endeavor is more refined than Whitman's, inspiring his hearer not only with a Whitmanesque love of "frolic," but also with a love of lavish "mastery." Hopkins's Epithalamion gains from whatever it lacks in Whitmanesque roughness, for Hopkins seeks interaction with the watery elderhand of a God who is both "fondler" and "father," who bestows a healing "froliclavish" upon any stranger willing to risk the dangers, willing to "look about him, laugh, swim."

On 6 November 1865, almost a year after meeting Dolben and still afraid of the dangers inherent to contact with beauty like his, Hopkins made a spiritual resolution "to give up all beauty until I had His leave for it" (*Journals* 71): in the Epithalamion,

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17. *OET* 161: "Thee, God, I come from, to thee go, / All day long I like fountain flow / From thy hand out, swayed about / Mote-like in thy mighty glow" (1-4).



we find a Hopkins who, after more than twenty years, has finally been given “leave.” The God he wanted to serve has finally answered his fundamental poetical and moral question—“To What Serves Mortal Beauty?” And, perhaps not surprisingly, the answer could have been found before the question was even asked, in a freshman’s comment to a friend: “I think I could save my life by swimming on the river now” (Hopkins to Baillie, 10 July 1863, *Letters* iii, 202). This 1863 comment is achieved by Hopkins—though perhaps only textually—through his 1888 Epithalamion: “I think I could save my life” (preserve my vitality through maintaining my biographical, poetical, sensual, and spiritual integrity) “by swimming on the river now” (an epithalamic river both imaginative and literary). Only by the end of his Epithalamion, and nearly at the end of his life, does Hopkins seem to have fully realized that Mortal Beauty is “heaven’s sweet gift,” a gift that we “merely meet” then “leave,” even if we “leave . . . alone” (12-13). It is a river in which we desire to swim, a river whose joys might outweigh its risks. “I began an Epithalamion on my brother’s wedding,” Hopkins wrote to Bridges, “it had some bright lines, but I could not get it done” (*Letters* i, 277). This statement disguises the fact that he had begun an Epithalamion to mark the joyous occasion of his brother Everard’s wedding to Amy Sichel in 1888; but that the resulting poem, by whatever poetical path, had led instead to a voyeuristic celebration of his own favored form of love, complete with a narrator and his hearer, naked boys bathing, and a reluctant stranger who joins in, but at a distance. The resulting poem is a joyful scene of pederastic “froliclavish.” Nevertheless, the poem is also tinged with a sadness and danger whose import and importance becomes clear only when it is considered as a loving remembrance of Digby Dolben, who had imagined death as a nuptial embrace, who now rested beneath the altar of Finedon Chapel. Here, in the Epithalamion, we indeed have an image like that which Hopkins used to describe his own expectations of the physical appearance of Bridges’s bride, Monica: “as fancy painted . . . very faintly, in watered sepia” (*Letters* i, 225). More than a rustic spot where boys from Stonyhurst College bathed, more than a pool aflow with masturbatory connotations, more than a place suitable for pederastic expression and phallic imagery—the bushybower of Hopkins’s Epithalamion is the symbolic and nostalgic “spot where the stream widens into a pool,” the place where his beloved Dolben had drowned, ending the one potential he seems to have had for meeting, and perhaps in some way actualizing, romantic love in his lifetime. But, after that . . .

Question

I to him turn with tears  
 Who to wedlock, his wonder wedlock,  
 Deals triumph and immortal years.     (“Wedding March” 10-12)

This Epithalamion is Hopkins’s fairyland watered by such tears; his “watered sepia” become “fancy painted”; his pain become beauty; his St. Winefred’s blood become a well. This is one of those “Beautiful dripping fragments” (to use Whitman’s words)<sup>18</sup>, not so much in itself, but in our understanding of it. Waiting “beautiful” and “dripping,” like one of those “boys from the town bathing,” this finished masterpiece awaits its next dive into the pool of literary criticism, its next “diver’s dip, / Clutched hands through clasped knees.” I hope that I have, at the

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18. Whitman, “Spontaneous Me” 7, *Children of Adam*.

very least, given Hopkins's poem just one more "turn and turn about"—and, as a lively swimmer, it will certainly expect many more.

### **Abbreviations:**

#### Journals

The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Ed. Humphry House, completed by Graham Storey. London: Oxford UP, 1959.

#### Letters i

The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges. Ed. C. C. Abbott. London: Oxford UP, 1955.

#### Letters ii

The Correspondence of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Richard Watson Dixon. Ed. C. C. Abbott. London: Oxford UP, 1955.

#### Letters iii

Further Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins Including his Correspondence with Coventry Patmore. Ed. C. C. Abbott. 2nd. ed. London: Oxford UP, 1956.

#### Facsimiles ii

The Later Poetic Manuscripts of Gerard Manley Hopkins in Facsimile. Ed. Norman H. MacKenzie. New York: Garland, 1991.

#### OET

The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Ed. Norman H. MacKenzie. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990. (all Hopkins poems come from this volume. Since my article is a close reading of the Epithalamion, I have expected my readers to keep the poem—provided in an appendix—ever before them. For that reason, I have not provided line numbers for this poem).

#### SM

Song of Myself. Leaves of Grass: Comprehensive Reader's Edition. Ed. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley. New York: New York UP, 1965. (all other Whitman passages, unless specified, come from this volume).

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### Epithalamion

Hark, hearer, hear what I do; lend a thought now, make believe

Unfortunately the Epithalamion does not appear in the recent translation of Hopkins's poems into Czech: Zánik Eurydiky, trans. Ivan Slavík and Rio Preisner. Prague: Torst, 1995.

We are leaf-whelmed somewhere with the hood  
Of some branchy bunchy bushybowered wood,  
Southern dean or Lancashire clough or Devon cleave,  
That leans along the loins of hills, where a candycoloured, where a  
gluegold-brown  
Marbled river, boisterously beautiful, between  
Roots and rocks is danced and dandled, all in froth and waterblowballs, down.  
We are there, when we hear a shout  
That the hanging honeysuck, the dogeared hazels in the cover  
Makes dither, makes hover  
And the riot of a rout  
Of, it must be, boys from the town  
Bathing: it is summer's sovereign good.

By there comes a listless stranger: beckoned by the noise  
He drops towards the river: unseen  
Sees the bevy of them, how the boys  
With dare and with downdolfinry and bellbright bodies huddling out,  
Are earthworld, airworld, waterworld thorough hurled, all by turn and turn about.

This garland of their gambol flashes in his breast  
Into such a sudden zest  
Of summertime joys  
That he hies to a pool neighbouring; sees it is the best  
There; sweetest, freshest, shadowiest;  
Fairyland; silk-beech, scrolled ash, packed sycamore, wild wychelm, hornbeam  
fretty overstood

By. Rafts and rafts of flake-leaves light, dealt so, painted on the air,  
Hang as still as hawk or hawkmoth, as the stars or as the angels there,  
Like the thing that never knew the earth, never off roots  
Rose. Here he feasts: lovely all is! No more: off with—down he dings  
His bleached both and woolwoven wear:  
Careless these in coloured whisp  
All lie tumbled-to; then with loop-locks  
Forward falling, forehead frowning, lips crisp  
Over fingerteasing task, his twiny boots  
Fast he opens, last he off wrings  
Till walk the world he can with bare his feet  
And come where lies a coffer, burly all of blocks  
Built of chancequarriéd, selfquainéd hoar-huskéd rocks  
And the water warbles over into, filleted with glassy grassy quicksilvery shivés  
and shoots  
And with heavenfallen freshness, down from moorland still brims,  
Dark or daylight, on and on. Here he will then, here he will the fleet  
Flinty kindcold element let break across his limbs  
Long. Where we leave him, froliclavish, while he looks about him, laughs, swims.

Enough now; since the sacred matter that I mean  
I should be wronging longer leaving it to float  
Upon this only gambolling and echoing-of-earth note

What is . . . . . the delightful dean?  
Wedlock. What the water? Spousal love

.....

to Everard, as I surmise,  
Sparkled first in Amy's eyes

.....

turns  
Father, mother, brothers, sisters, friends  
Into fairy trees, wildflowers, woodferns  
Rankéd round the bower

.....

## Resumé:

Článek je podrobným rozbořením básně *Epithalamion* viktoriánského básníka Gerharda Manley Hopkinse. Báseň je obvykle pokládána pouze za zlomek, avšak autor článku dokazuje, že whitmanovské čtení *Epithalamionu* odhaluje smyslný podtext, jež dává ucelený pohled na homosexuální orientaci básníka a zároveň na geniálnost, s níž se v básni prolíná umělecká obrazotvornost, smyslnost i kněžství tohoto jeziuty. *Epithalamion* v této perspektivě je závažným zpochybněním dosavadních značně váhavých životopisných prací o Hopkinsovi.



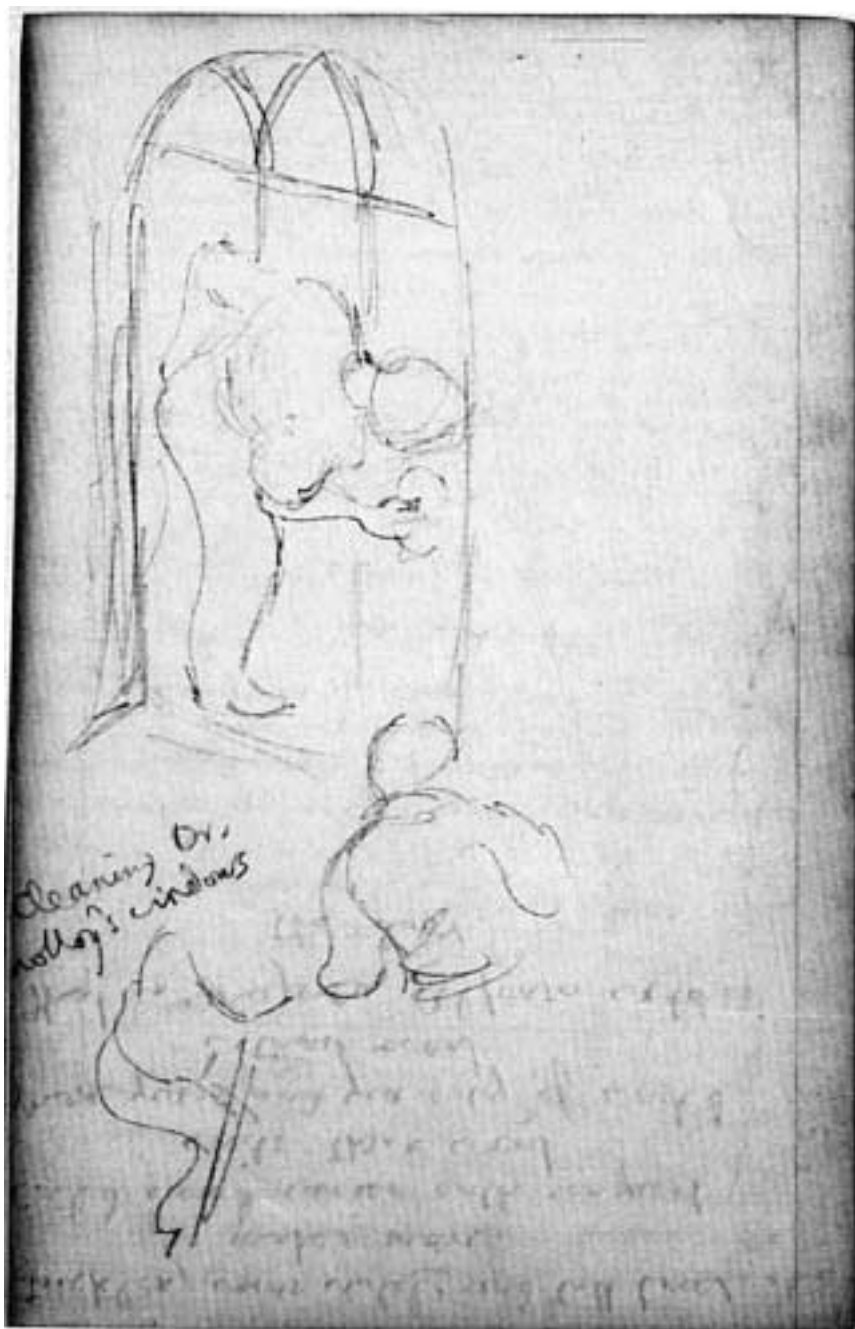


The Bathers by Frederick Walker, 1867 (Lady Lever Art Gallery, near Liverpool).



Detail.





Pencil sketch, "Cleaning Dr. Molloy's windows" (H.i.49v): Made by Hopkins on a draft of "In honor of St. Alphonsus Rodrigues" (Facsimiles ii, 329).