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## Hopkins's confessional notes and desire: a reconsideration

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“Is a pen a metaphorical penis? Gerard Manley Hopkins seems to have thought so” (3). Thus opens Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s major study, *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Gilbert and Gubar are referring to Hopkins’s conception of creativity as an essentially masculine attribute, but the association of pens and penises is also apt in an altogether different sense. For Hopkins seems to have been both attracted and repelled by male bodies and by the act of writing in similar measures. The fear that poems “wd. interfere with my state and vocation” caused Hopkins to abstain from poetry for seven years on joining the Jesuits, and the notion that it was incompatible with his religious calling remained with him for the rest of his life, even when he was composing exultant sonnets celebrating God’s presence in the world (*Letters to Bridges* 24). Physical beauty was similarly double-edged: at once able to show forth the divine element in creation, it was also “dangerous”, as it often “does set danc-/Ing blood” (“To what serves Moral Beauty?” 1-2). The two desires – to write and for male bodies – were often linked. In 1864, for example, Hopkins drew up a list of related words in his notebook: “*Spuere, spit, spuma, spume, spoom, spawn, spittle, spatter, spot, sputter*” (*Journals* 16). David Alderson has observed that the missing word from this record of bodily and natural secretions (and perhaps the word which set off this particular line of enquiry) is “sperm” (141-142). Speculating about the derivation of words would seem a roundabout method of exploring one’s sexual desires, akin to looking up sexual terms in dictionaries, but curiosity about the provenance of words is entirely typical of Hopkins’s agonized approaches to sexual longings. Indeed Hopkins made an unhappy record of several occasions on which he experienced “Evil thoughts in dictionary” (*Manuscripts* 157). Sexual and etymological, the erotic and the act of writing, were intimately bound together in his work and in his life.

As a result, a common approach has been to interpret Hopkins’s poetry as evidencing a displacement of frustrated sexual desires. According to this view, Hopkins’s

poetic celebration of male bodies, and the highly sensual nature of his writing, provided an outlet for exploring his attraction to other men. This could only be countenanced if such writing was devotional and the admiration of men showed forth God's creation; if not, such a poetic was liable to spill over into the self-accusatory. The debt to psychoanalytic theory in such readings is evident. Indeed, the most comprehensive study of Hopkins's sexuality, Julia F. Saville's *A Queer Chivalry: The Homoerotic Asceticism of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, applies Lacanian notions of split-subjectivity to explain the combination of bold homoerotic expression and harsh self-criticism in Hopkins's writing. Saville describes split-subjectivity as enjoining a "treatment of desire as an impulse that cannot simply be resolved or eliminated but requires ongoing management" (19), so that "his often successful sublimatory activities of poetry writing and religious devotion are offset by an excess of libidinal demand that remains frustrated and manifests itself in symptoms of erotogenic nature" (25). Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* can also be seen to inform such approaches to Hopkins's work. Resisting the familiar notion of a historic repression of sexuality, Foucault instead posits the alternative of a "great process of transforming sex into discourse", a process which reaches its zenith in the nineteenth century (22). Foucault states:

From the singular imperialism that compels everyone to transform their sexuality into a perpetual discourse, to the manifold mechanisms which, in the areas of economy, pedagogy, medicine, and justice, incite, extract, distribute, and institutionalize the sexual discourse, an immense verbosity is what our civilization has required and organized. (33)

Foucault's categories – "economy, pedagogy, medicine, and justice" – exclude literature, yet critics such as Saville have not hesitated to infer that poetry could perform a similar displacement for Hopkins.

Yet while Hopkins would have held "economy, pedagogy, medicine, and justice" to be indubitably respectable discourses, he had an altogether more tortured relationship with poetry. Saville underplays the extent to which Hopkins denigrated his art, preferring to see him as a "craftsman poet" in the pattern of "a monastic artisan" (88), relatively untroubled by qualms about the worth of writing poetry. The compunctions Hopkins had about the writing of poetry itself – never mind its subject – receive little attention in her exhaustive analysis of eroticism in his work. Nor, for that matter, does she sufficiently

acknowledge the breadth of Hopkins's many scruples, which extended far beyond his sexual longings, and which are catalogued in just as much detail as the sexual indiscretions. This article attempts to recover a broader sense of how *both* the desire to write and the desire for other men were troubling for Hopkins, with reference to his early notebooks. A focus on the notebooks is justified by the integral role they have played in generating interest in Hopkins's sexuality over the last two decades. I argue that not only do they evidence sexual longings but also an eclectic assortment of what Hopkins considered to be forbidden desires, temptations that needed to be repented for and confessed. Prominent are misgivings about writing and a principal contention of this article is that the notebooks provide striking early signs of Hopkins's deepening conviction that poetic aspirations were illegitimate.

### **Earwigs and biscuits: multifarious desires in the notebooks**

The publication in facsimile of Hopkins's early notebooks in 1989, including for the first time the records of sexual indiscretions excluded from the original (and until then only) edition of the notebooks, kicked up a storm of controversy among his critics. The notebooks revealed that the "intense homosociality" (Higgins 33) of Hopkins's life in Oxford was coupled with a keen awareness of the sinfulness of desire for other men. Such a combination proved difficult to balance and necessitated confessions to the leaders of the High Church movement in Oxford, Liddon and Pusey, which the notebooks reveal Hopkins to have been meticulous in preparing for. What polarised Hopkins's critics was the catalogue of wet dreams (usually characterised as "E.S." – probably indicating "Emissio seminis"), admiration of boys and young men, and frequent returns upon what Hopkins called the "evil thought", the manuscripts revealed. Some critics downplayed the revelations; others leapt upon them as crucial evidence, notably Robert Bernard Martin, who, in his 1991 biography, placed great emphasis on Hopkins's supposed infatuation with Digby Dolben, supported by details garnered from the confessional notes. They have also been key to recent studies by Richard Dellamora and David Alderson, as well as to Saville's *A Queer Chivalry*.

Yet perhaps the most remarkable element to the notes is the lack of any real differentiation between sins. On one day in April 1865, for instance, Hopkins entered “Evil thoughts partly abt. Urquhart” and “Intemperance in food at Addis’ desert”; on the next, he chided himself for “Eating two biscuits at the Master’s” (*Manuscripts* 155-6). Overindulgence in desserts or biscuits is a regular refrain of the notes, but there are also entries that sound even more innocuous, such as this one from August 1865: “Killing earwig” (182). There is, in the notes at least, no attempt to set out which sins are more serious than others; on frequency alone, there may be more to do with overeating than with lapses in sexual propriety. And so, though it is unlikely that Hopkins considered killing an earwig and sexual fantasising to be equally serious, any attempt to draw inferences about the extent of his sexual desires from the notes must also acknowledge that they catalogue with remarkable meticulousness a whole range of what even his confessors would have considered very minor failings. That is not necessarily to cast doubt on the seriousness or depth of Hopkins’s desires for other men, as found in the notes; it is rather to underline the wider extent of his moral fastidiousness. A sense of the records of sexual sin as within a broad context of painstaking daily examinations of conscience is perhaps what is missing from studies such as those of Saville or Bernard Martin.

A notable aspect of the confessional notes is the frequency with which sinful behaviour is initiated by reading or writing. Alderson and Saville have both drawn attention to Hopkins’s admissions of sexual excitement at the crucifixion scene, and it is significant that this could be occasioned by the act of writing, as on Good Friday, 1865: “The evil thought in writing on our Lord’s passion” (157). It is impossible to say with certainty what was being written on this occasion, but Hopkins had been composing “Easter Communion” at around this time and the sonnet has been proposed by Norman MacKenzie as a likely candidate for the entry that came a day later, on Easter Saturday: “In looking over the above poem an evil thought seemed to rise from the line before” (157). Erotic language seems to shadow its devotional ‘other’ here: it should of course be Christ who “rises” from the grave at Easter and not an “evil thought”. Several lines from “Easter Communion” could have stimulated Hopkins’s imagination in a poem whose diction seems to work against its purported aim, that of the encouragement of self-denial

and penitence in the life of the believer. Its treatment of ascetic practice is anything but temperate: the alliterative sensuousness of “Lenten lips” (2) not so much contained by its partner image of being “striped in secret with breath-taking whips” (3) as inflamed by it. Even “the ever-fretting shirt of punishment” (11) is an image which “looks as if it revelled in the discipline” (Griffiths 273). No wonder that when he came to draw up a list of self-denials to be made during Lent the following year, Hopkins included “No verses in Passion Week or on Fridays” (*Journals* 53). (That the same list included “No pudding on Sundays” and “Not to sit in armchair except can work in no other way” again highlights the range and variety of his moral scruples). Yet on Easter Sunday, having the previous day entertained “evil thoughts” resulting from reading his sonnet, Hopkins regretted that there had been “No reading done” (*Manuscripts* 158). Of course this is a reference to his studies; the notebooks contain many entries repenting of days spent idling instead of working, which this instance naturally fits with. Anxieties about not keeping up with reading were common enough for Oxford undergraduates: an earlier Balliol member, Arthur Hugh Clough, had included many such reproaches in his own Oxford diaries. Reading one’s poetry and reading in preparation for the term ahead were clearly very different activities. Even so, the lack of any association between the activity of one day (when reading led to sin) and the next (when *not* reading is sin) is surprising.

A possible explanation is that the distinction between the two kinds of activities was indicated by subtle changes in expression. “Reading” and “writing” tend to be of the commendable kind and appear in the notebooks mostly as activities not undertaken: “Dangerous thought about Dolben, no reading whatsoever” (158). As with the “looking over” of “Easter Communion”, alternative (and perhaps more unexpected) verbs are used to indicate sinful behaviour: “An evil thought rose while I was making some poetry in fields” (158). Or: “Looking fully at a sentence in a newspaper with terrible associations” (191). Two entries concerned with the poem *Beyond the Cloister* (which probably survives as the fragment *A Voice from the World*) also observe this lexical rule: Hopkins notes “Dangerous scrupulosity abt. finishing a stanza” and “Repeating to myself bits of *Beyond the Cloister*” (197). Verse is “finished” or “repeated”, not written or read. However, when the fault is more to do with wasting time than indecency, the more usual terms are invoked: “Folly in writing with hanging scruple some verses ab[out] geese and

peas” (193). It should be owned that this distinction is not universally replicated throughout the notebooks and there are instances when expressions are employed opposite to the sense suggested here. Nevertheless, shifts in language offer likely indications of what Hopkins considered acceptable or unacceptable desires.

It is also worth observing that the records Hopkins kept seem to have held a purpose beyond that of preparation for confession. Robert Bernard Martin observes that:

Most of the diary is in a clear and easily legible hand of fair size, but the entries in preparation for confession are in pencil and so minute that they are at best difficult to decipher. At some later date, perhaps at his conversion, more probably immediately after confessing his sins, Hopkins drew a pencil line through these entries but without obscuring them; he seems to have wanted to be able to review them after he had been forgiven for them, and even after becoming a Roman Catholic he kept them. (100)

Why Hopkins wished to review sins of earlier years is unclear, but there is a possibility it may not only have been to gauge how far he had come in controlling his desires or as a deterrence from further indiscretions. Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality*, has laid great emphasis on confession as a “reinforcement of heterogeneous sexualities”, a particularly prevalent form of converting sex into discourse (61). In the approach Hopkins took, however, it seems plausible that confessional notes could also be an incitement to commit further sexual transgressions. And it is clear that the acts of reading and writing, or perhaps more correctly, “looking” and “making” (as the notebooks have it), continued to cause much anxiety for Hopkins beyond the end of the confessional notes in January 1866. Indeed, that he at once did and did not obscure the diary entries is remarkably like the approach he took to his poems on entering the Jesuit noviciate, burning his own copies of his verses in an event he called the “Slaughter of the innocents” (*Journals* 165), but telling Bridges, “I kept however corrected copies of some things which you have and will send them that what you have got you may have in its last edition” (*Letters to Bridges* 24). Associating the burning of his poems with the Herodic slaughter is curious: if the poems were “innocents”, there would be no need to sacrifice them. Similarly paradoxical is his relation to Walt Whitman, which Hopkins wrote of many years later, in 1882:

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. And this also makes me more desirous to read him and the more determined I will not. (*Letters to Bridges* 155)

“Confessing” his closeness to Whitman, Hopkins is also concerned to put him at a distance – by not acting on a desire to read him. But of course to know “Whitman’s mind to be more like my own than any other man living” is to have read him already. Such contradictions and evasions may be characteristic of Hopkins’s approach to male beauty, but, as the confessional notes show, they are also typical of his attitude to writing; and the two desires are often, though not always, concurrent.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, has suggested such evasions are typical of Victorian men of Hopkins’s class:

the sexual histories of English gentlemen, unlike those of men above and below them socially, are so marked by a resourceful, makeshift, *sui generis* quality, in their denials, their rationalizations, their fears and guilts, their sublimations, and their quite various genital outlets alike. (173)

This is true of Hopkins’s sexuality, but it is also pertinent to his attitude to poetry: unable to fully countenance his aspiration to write, he engaged in unconvincing “denials” (such as the burning of the poems) and “rationalizations” (permitting himself to compose his great ode, *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, because of “the chance suggestion of my superior, but that being done it is a question whether I did well to write anything else” [*Dixon Correspondence* 88]). Hopkins frequently expressed distaste for his poems in the strongest terms. To Bridges, he wrote of his work that “the oddness may make them repulsive at first”:

Indeed when, on somebody returning me the *Eurydice*, I opened and read some lines, reading, as one commonly reads whether prose or verse, with the eyes, so to say, only, it struck me aghast with a kind of raw nakedness and unmitigated violence I was unprepared for. (79)

The same expressions crop up when Hopkins describes other poems. He worried that Bridges found his method “repulsive” (137); felt his work to be akin to Whitman’s “savagery” (*Letters to Bridges* 157); also found “copying one’s verses out” to be “repulsive” (*Letters to Bridges* 304); and so on. Yet he was also, despite feigning modesty about the value of his efforts, eager to send his work around his small circle of

readers. And he could be equivocal about the possibility of being published: opposed to the efforts of friends to get his poems into print, Hopkins admitted to Bridges that he retained copies so that “if anyone shd. like, they might be published after my death” (304). Bridges followed this instruction accordingly. It has been suggested that Hopkins did not follow up his initial ambition to be an artist at least in part because he worried about “the necessity of drawing from the nude” (Phillips 82). He told his friend Baillie that “the higher and more attractive parts of the art put a strain upon the passions which I shd. think it unsafe to encounter” (*Further Letters* 231). Such an inference seems true enough judging from the number of times drawings or reproductions of paintings occasioned sinful thoughts, as recorded in the notebooks. But it seems likely that poetry also posed similarly dangerous distractions: as Hopkins told Bridges on another occasion, in terms which call to mind Sedgwick’s inference about gentlemanly evasions:

poets and men of art are, I am sorry to say, by no means necessarily or commonly gentlemen. For gentlemen do not pander to lust or other basenesses nor, as you say, give themselves airs and affectations nor do other things to be found in modern works. (176)

There is every reason to believe that Hopkins worried about such “basenesses” occurring in his own poems, as the “de-Whitmaniser” (*Letters to Bridges* 158) letter demonstrates.

It was not only the potential for “basenesses” that led to Hopkins rebuking himself for attempting to write poetry. As has already been suggested, it held associations with idleness and the squandering of valuable time. The feeling which provoked Hopkins’s admission in the confessional notes that he had committed a “Folly in writing with hanging scruple some verses ab[out] geese and peas” is mirrored by later thoughts on the illusoriness of pursuing poetic ambitions. As he told Bridges in 1879:

I cannot in conscience spend time on poetry, neither have I the inducements and inspirations that make others compose. Feeling, love in particular, is the great moving power and spring of verse and the only person that I am in love with seldom, especially now, stirs my heart sensibly and when he does I cannot always ‘make capital’ of it, it would be sacrilege to do so. Then again I have of myself made verse so laborious. (64)

The congruence between this passage and the confessional notes is striking. Both are run through with the kind of rationalisations and denials that Sedgwick describes in *Between Men*. Hopkins did not believe he had “the inducements and inspirations” for writing

poetry: the former may be true – he was discouraged, for example, by the refusal of *The Month* to publish *The Wreck of the Deutschland* – but the latter is surely disingenuous. Only two years earlier, in a sonnet dedicated “to Christ our Lord”, Hopkins had described how his “heart in hiding / Stirred for a bird” (“The Windhover” 7-8); the echo of that image here (“stirs my heart”) renders unconvincing the notion that poetic “capital” could not be made of devotional fervour. Hopkins was, in fact, only too ready to commit “sacrilege”: 1879 saw him write nine complete poems and embark on several others. What is perhaps more sincere is the feeling that the spending of “time” was what could not be justified; Hopkins was heavily overworked at the time, having taken up additional burdens as his superior recovered from an injury (White 311-312). Again, this is analogous to the anxieties first recorded in the confessional notes, where Hopkins repeatedly regretted that not enough reading had been undertaken that day, or that he had been idling hours away with poetry. Such anxieties developed into a conscientiousness about daily labour (as opposed to “laborious” verse-composition) whose corollary was the deprecation of other, less obviously useful and productive desires. Poetry was, for almost all of Hopkins’s mature years, to be regarded as “unprofessional” (*Letters to Bridges* 197).

### **“Morals and scansion”**

The previous letter Hopkins had sent Bridges (in January 1879) opened: “Morals and scansion not being in one keeping, we will treat them in separate letters and this one shall be given to the first named subject...” (62). It has been the central contention of this article that the primacy of “Morals” over poetry, and indeed their incompatibility, is as prominent in the confessional notes of 1865-1866 as the aspect which has most drawn the attention of critics: the sexual desires recorded there. The desire to write verse, Hopkins felt, was incommensurate with the pious austerity he felt called to live. But though Hopkins may have wished to keep “Morals and scansion” separate, by the end of the letter to Bridges, he is enclosing “some lines I wrote years ago” and promising to send further poems in the near future (65). Such a contradiction is emblematic of Hopkins’s attitude to poetry, for he was constantly drawn to what he had renounced, needing only

“chance suggestion[s]” (like those of his Rector [*Letters to Dixon* 88]) to begin anew on his verses. Harsh self-censure often followed, attended by the feeling that “I have never wavered in my vocation, but I have not lived up to it” (*Letters to Dixon* 88).

Hopkins’s misgivings about verse-writing are in danger of being eclipsed by the status of the poems as conduits for homoerotic expression. Richard Dellamora’s assertion that “Christ’s beauty authorized priest and poet’s continuing devotion to an embodied selfhood and to the poetic celebration of desire for other men” is something of a critical commonplace (47). Such declarations need to be moderated by an acknowledgment of the doubts Hopkins held about the value of poetry itself and what it might lead to. The reliance of critics on the confessional notes to make the case for a displacement of sexual desire on to the poems has partially obscured the very real qualms Hopkins held about his poetic aspirations themselves. Sexual feelings and guilt about writing poetry were, of course, often coupled together, and an element of Hopkins’s censuring of his poetic aspirations was to do with a fear that they might become mired in sinful imaginings. But nor is it the case that they were one and the same. The confessional notes demonstrate this very poignantly, recording with exacting meticulousness aberrations from “the curfew sent”, the self-denying practice “Which only makes you eloquent” (“The Habit of Perfection” 6; 8). What they also reveal is a more general scrupulosity about behaviour, with all kinds of transgressions repented of, many of which appear to modern eyes to be of a very minor sort, as they may have done to Hopkins’s confessors too. Scrupulosity is a term that often attaches to Hopkins and it is well to remember that while he did admit to erotically charged fantasies, he was just as prompt in reporting “Intemperance at desert” (157). Critics have, quite rightly, submitted the entries dealing with Hopkins’s sexual excitement over the crucifixion scene or while drawing a “crucified arm” to thorough analysis (167). What needs to be made clearer, however, is how the attempt to subjugate these desires was part of a wider renunciatory approach that recorded the killing of earwigs with the same care as it did homoerotic daydreams.

This is a point which has been best expressed by Hopkins’s closest friend, Robert Bridges. In May 1882, on a visit to Manresa House in Roehampton, where Hopkins was undertaking his Tertianship, they walked around the grounds together. Bridges wanted to

buy some peaches from the gardener, but Hopkins would not allow it. Half a century later, Bridges recalled the incident in his long poem, *The Testament of Beauty*:

when the young poet my companion in study  
and friend of my heart refused a peach at my hands  
he being then a housecarl in Loyola's menie,  
'twas that he fear'd the savour of it, and when he waived  
his scruple to my banter, 'twas to avoid offence. (IV, 434-438)

Bridges had observed an aspect of his friend's behaviour that was absolutely characteristic. Sixteen years after the last of the confessional notes, he still held the same "scruples", and attended to them with the same scrupulousness, as ever.

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