

4

Queering the Eucharist

Gerard Manley Hopkins's "The Blessed Virgin"

Katherine Inskip

Devout and doubtful, sensual and spiritual, Gerard Manley Hopkins's writings reveal the complexities and contradictions of being a practicing Christian and possible homosexual in the latter half of nineteenth-century Britain. Through his letters, journals, prose, and poetry, he explores the contours of his religious beliefs, but never more provocatively than in his verse. With his experimental poetics, sensual language, and evolving theological thought, his poetry serves as a nexus through which he engages with specific Anglo-Catholic and Roman Catholic doctrines as well as homosocial and homoerotic desires that attract and elude him. Such is the case with Hopkins's "The Blessed Virgin Compared to the Air We Breathe," a poem that expresses a non-normative desire for Real Presence as he suffuses his religious images and themes with a unique sensuousness and intimacy. In "The Blessed Virgin," Hopkins contemplates Mary's complex role as Mediatrix and how he can unite with Christ through her. More than an exercise in triangulated desire, Hopkins voices a yearning to commune with the maternal Other of God, which he achieves by sacramentalizing the "Air We Breathe." Through this poem, Hopkins forwards his desire for a physical and spiritual union with a woman by queering the Eucharist.

For Hopkins, the doctrine of Incarnation was not a casual concern. Indeed, no aspect of his religious devotion could ever be deemed casual. The Incarnation refers to the "mystery and the dogma of the Word made Flesh" (Drum 1910). Christologically, the "Word of God" is Jesus Christ who was made flesh when he was born of the Virgin Mary. Centuries of theological inquiry into the precise nature and meaning of the Incarnation shaped doctrines that would evolve into the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar, the Eucharist. From the antique Church through the Scholastics, Church leaders renewed their definition of the Eucharist (Ellsberg 1987, 50). Extrapolated from Christ's seemingly simple words uttered at the Lord's Supper, "This is my body" and "This is my blood," came the "doctrine of the real presence of the body and blood of

Christ in the Sacrament,” which was articulated as the doctrine of transubstantiation by the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 and was reaffirmed in 1551 by the Council of Trent (Pelikan 1996, 10). These “doctrinal decisions” provide the foundation for the contemporary understanding of the Eucharist in which “the Body and Blood of the God-man are truly, really, and substantially present for the nourishment of our souls, by reason of the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ” (Pohle 1910). Transubstantiation refers to the transformation that the Eucharist undergoes after consecration whereby the bread and wine literally become the body and blood of Christ. An “extension of the Incarnation,” this doctrine holds that by partaking of the Host “the communicant swallows the divine Word translated into human flesh,” thus allowing the person “momentarily to participate in the process of the Incarnation” (McNees 1992, 20). The ancillary doctrine of concomitance arose, which stated the “inviolable unity of Christ’s body as eucharist,” meaning that the “body and blood of Christ were present in each element,” so that each host in every church was simultaneously the same body (Beckwith 1993, 3). Thus, “as God had entered the word as human flesh at the Incarnation, so he left himself to the world at the Last Supper” (Ellsberg 1987, 50). These doctrines are foundational to Hopkins’s religious conversion and poetic themes.

Raised and baptized Anglican, Hopkins likely would have lived and died one had it not been for the Tractarian movement to establish the “Authority and Catholicity of the English Church and to infuse into it something of the medieval spirit of intellectual and practical piety” (Gardner 1985, xviii) sweeping through Oxford from the 1830s through the 1860s. These High Church teachings appealed to Hopkins and paved the way for his eventual conversion to Roman Catholicism. Hopkins acknowledges this in a letter to his father, citing “an increasing knowledge of the Catholic system (at first under the form of Tractarianism, later in its genuine place),” fourth on his list of reasons why he could not remain Anglican (Hopkins 1985, 166). In fact, his admiration for Pusey and fellow Tractarian H. P. Liddon delayed his conversion. Hopkins concedes that Pusey and Liddon “were the only two men in the world who cd. avail to detain me: the fact that they were Anglicans kept me one,” until “that influence gave way” (1985, 166–67). This admiration could not withstand the weight of his intellectual and spiritual dissatisfaction with Anglicanism. He notes in the July 17, 1866, entry in his journal “the impossibility of staying in the Church of England” (1985, 108) and on August 28 of the same year writes to Newman of “the necessity of becoming a Catholic,” a decision he “had long foreseen” (1985, 161). Much to the heartbreak of his family, incredulity of his friends, and disappointment of his Oxford professors, Hopkins followed the example of former Tractarian John Henry Newman¹ and became a Catholic in 1866. This life-changing decision was followed by another one in May 1868 when he “resolved to be a religious” but was “doubtful betw. St. Benedict and St. Ignatius” (1985, 110). Opting for St. Ignatius, Hopkins entered the rigorous and self-effacing Society of Jesus in September of 1868 and dedicated himself to the order until his death in 1889.

Of critical importance to Hopkins in his decision to leave the Church of England was the incarnational doctrine of Real Presence. He concedes that both Anglicans and Catholics share a belief in the literality of the Eucharist:

I shall hold as a Catholic what I have long held as an Anglican, that literal truth of our Lord's words by which I learn that the least fragment of the consecrated elements in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar is the whole Body of Christ born of the Blessed Virgin, before which the whole host of saints and angels as it lies on the Altar trembles with adoration. This belief once got is the life of the soul and when I doubted it I should become an atheist the next day. (Hopkins 1985, 165)

But for Hopkins this similarity of belief in itself is insufficient as the Anglican priests lack the authority to consecrate the host and ensure that Christ is really present in the Eucharist. As Hopkins further explains to his father:

But, as Monsignor Eyre says, it is a gross superstition unless guaranteed by infallibility. I cannot hold this doctrine confessedly except as a Tractarian or a Catholic: the Tractarian ground I have seen broken to pieces under my feet. What end then can be served by a delay in wh. I shd. go on believing this doctrine as long as I believed in God and shd. be by the fact of my belief drawn by a lasting strain towards the Catholic Church? (Hopkins 1985, 165)

Anglicans and Roman Catholics both uphold the doctrine of Real Presence, accepting the process as “mystical, mysterious, and actual” and not “metaphorical” as do strict Protestant theologies (McNees 1992, 20). However, their understanding of the change the bread and wine undergo as they are filled with the Real Presence of Christ is different. Anglicans view this change enacted by the Prayer of Consecration as “figural or typological” whereas Catholics see this change as “transubstantial” (1992, 20). For Hopkins, this difference between the typological and the transubstantial is crucial. Without Real Presence in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar, Hopkins claimed in a letter to his friend E. H. Coleridge dated July 1864, that religion was “somber, dangerous, and illogical” (qtd. in Ellsberg 1987, 51). By his estimation, the Church of England cannot achieve the fullness of the Real Presence in the Eucharist because it lacks the power to activate the words of the Prayer of Consecration.

Not only were incarnational doctrines essential to his conversion, they retained their significance throughout Hopkins's life. In a letter to Robert Bridges, he extolls the magnificence of celebrating Corpus Christi, “the feast of the Real Presence” (qtd. in McNees 1992, 73). He enthuses that:

it is the most purely joyful of solemnities. Naturally the Blessed Sacrament is carried in procession at it. . . . But the procession has more meaning and mystery than this! It represents the process of the Incarnation and the world's redemption. As Christ went forth from the bosom of the Father as the Lamb of God and eucharistic victim to die upon the altar of the Cross for the world's ransom; then rising returned leading the procession of the flock redeemed / so in this ceremony his body *in statu victimali* is carried to the

Altar of Repose . . . and back to the tabernacle at the high altar, which will represent the bosom of the godhead. (Qtd. McNees 1992, 73–74)

His breathless description of the Corpus Christi ceremony conveys his fascination with the “meaning and mystery” of the celebration. The rituals and pageantry are not what captures Hopkins’s zeal; it is the way they dramatize the doctrines of Incarnation and redemption. His affinity for these doctrines would, in fact, find frequent and powerful expression in his poetry and sermons (Pick 1966, 83). Hopkins’s abiding contemplation of the Incarnation indicates the personal significance of this doctrine as well as his desire to experience Real Presence through the established Catholic sacraments and also by viewing the world sacramentally.

The Catholic understanding of the role of sacerdotal intercession and sacramental language in the mysterious process of transubstantiation and concomitance resonated strongly with Hopkins. The gradual institutionalization of these doctrines situated medieval Christians in an original context, placing them “within a symbolic system operating within a history of salvation, and it was lived as a drama re-enacted at every altar during every mass” (Rubin 1991, 144). By affiliating the Incarnation of Christ with his Passion, the Church effectively “domesticated” and “located” a heretofore ineffable God, and “apportioned and routinized” his omnipotence (1991, 144). Access to this system, and the more accessible God it promised, required sacerdotal intervention—priests to consecrate and administer the host. Through language, the metaphysical and physical dimensions of Christ converge in the Eucharist. The performative speech acts spoken by Christ at the Last Supper and reiterated by the priests during mass transmute bread into flesh, wine to blood. It is through words that the Word of God is made Flesh. By virtue of this, the “act of human speech furthermore becomes an analogue of the incarnation” (Quilligan 1979, 160). This conceptualization of language as “the closest one can come to comprehending the idea of incarnation” (1979, 161), initially expounded by Augustine, leads to a distinctively “Roman Catholic use of language” (1979, 167). Through his conversion to Catholicism, Hopkins was able to access the fullness of sacramental language in his religious and poetic life.²

The development of his incarnational poetics took some time to bear fruit. In the same month that he decided to become a “religious,” he also stopped writing poetry. Hence, the infamous journal entry where he alludes to the “slaughter of the innocents” (Hopkins 1985, 110). With the blessing of his superiors, Hopkins ended his seven-year self-imposed poetic silence. His subsequent poetry is deeply influenced by Ignatian teachings and methods since the intensive years of meditation, prayer, and study required of novitiates into the Society of Jesus affected all aspects of Hopkins’s life as a priest and poet. Considering Hopkins’s twenty-one years dedicated to the Society of Jesus, John Pick makes a compelling argument about the absolute significance of the Spiritual Exercises to Hopkins and how “they gave direction to all he experienced, thought, and wrote” (1966, 25). David A. Downes suggests that Hopkins’s poetry can largely be viewed as “poetic approximations of some of the

dispositions and methods of Ignatian prayer" (1959, 172). In his efforts to craft verse that can "address, reveal, and praise God," Hopkins uses language sacramentally (Ellsberg 1987, 47). That is, like the Eucharistic prayer that transubstantiates bread and wine into Christ's flesh and blood, the poet's "words themselves must become the elements of communion" (McNees 1992, 24).

That Hopkins's resulting sacramental poetry is also highly sensual may seem contradictory. How can he use words as "outward signs of grace" (McNees 1992, 21) while using them to create a sensual onslaught of vivid images of nature captured in a rush of words and sprung rhythm? Critics who make a study of his work in close relation to his religious life find no great disparity between the spirituality and sensuality of his verse. Eleanor J. McNees sees "the sensuous quality" of his language as a necessary part of achieving sacramental poetry because it compels "the reader to participate in language as experience" in a way that closes the space "between words and the world to which they refer" (1992, 29). This sensual/sacramental poetry brings the reader—and the poet—closer to experiencing Real Presence. Downes also asserts the spiritual basis of Hopkins's "sensuous imagery," maintaining that "to portray creation as anything else but good and beautiful would be to say that God's manifestation of Himself was defective, low, and ugly" (1959, 169–70). Hopkins experiences nature both sensually and sacramentally, but not sexually. He is not aroused by nature; he is transformed by it. Through instress and inscape, Hopkins can access the divinity within the natural world and within his own nature. The result is a union with Christ akin to what a communicant experiences when partaking of the Eucharist.

The pronounced desire to achieve a union with Christ—which is the overarching goal of St. Ignatius's Spiritual Exercises³—is understood by a growing number of critics as an indication of suppressed homosexuality. Queer readings of Hopkins's works, not unlike nonqueer readings, tend to read his poetry autobiographically. They scrutinize his life at Oxford and in the Society of Jesus for evidence of same-sex attraction.⁴ His friendships and associations, especially his tutelage under Walter Pater,⁵ have provided critics with sufficient fodder for these valid speculations. While Hopkins—in keeping with the mores of his age—never discusses his sexuality overtly, his letters and journals suggest that he may have felt more than friendly admiration for his fellow man. Much is made of his "observation of and fondness for some males and the infrequency of his expression of equal fondness for females" (Boyle 1990, 109). The intensity of his attachment to Bridge's cousin Digby Mackworth Dolben gives critics particular pause. Although their friendship was brief—Hopkins only met him once and corresponded a few times until Dolben's death by drowning—this attachment has fueled a lot of speculation about Hopkins's sexuality.⁶

Speculations on Hopkins's sexuality follow not only his life as a young Oxonian but also through his conversion and Jesuit life. Although Robert S. Boyle, SJ, makes a strong point about the relevance of determining the sexual orientation of a man who deliberately dedicated himself to a celibate life (1990, 109), that very act of self-renunciation is viewed by some critics as an indication of suppressed same-sex

attraction. Hopkins certainly would not be the first nineteenth-century man to enter the priesthood as a way to live homosocially without defying social norms or violating his religious ideals. Frederick S. Roden persuasively establishes the English monastery of the nineteenth century as a “queer space” (2000, 85)—queer, not “as a homosexual, or even homoerotic,” but by virtue of “its sense of difference” (2000, 97). The queer possibilities of monastic life were not lost on those who opposed the Tractarian movement and maintained a deep-seated suspicion of Roman Catholicism. The “contemporary hostility” toward Tractarians, as explicated by James Eli Adams, can be interpreted as “an expression of homophobia, aroused by a social formation in which intense homosocial relations were not occluded by the exchange of women that typically facilitates bonds between men” (1995, 16–17). This homophobia can be found in similar criticisms of the Catholic monastic orders, especially the Jesuits, whose Society of Jesus resembled a secret society. Even with the caveat that not all secrets closeted in the monastery bespeak homoerotic desires (1995, 106), the space itself cannot be free of such associations. In Victorian England, life in the Catholic priesthood was an alternative lifestyle.⁷

Monastic life under Roman Catholicism held a strong doctrinal appeal for nineteenth-century Englishmen who may have experienced same-sex attraction, as well. As a doctrine that “glorifies the male flesh of the Divine,” transubstantiation invites the devout to focus their attentions upon a male body (Roden 2000, 86). For the “single-sex community” of monastic life, this meant marking their “hours by the repeated consecration and evocation of . . . the hidden God in the Eucharist, which is consumed into one’s own flesh” (2000, 86). Roden proposes that the stress placed upon the Eucharist in both Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism emphasizes the physicality of the individual worshipper and as part of a collective body (2000, 86). This emphasis upon the physical bodies of Christ and his male communicants can be viewed sacramentally but sexually, too, when it is placed alongside the spousal imagery of Catholicism that holds Christ as the bridegroom and the Church as his bride. In the early Church through the Middle Ages, this metaphor yielded few if any gender conflicts, likely in part because the patristic tradition used it to justify sexual renunciation for all clergy and chastity for women.

The same cannot be said for mid to late nineteenth-century Britain where non-normative sexual desires and practices were labeled, medicalized, and criminalized.⁸ Thus, whereas “the sexual ambiguity” of the spousal relationship was not problematic in earlier centuries, it became distinctly more difficult to navigate for the sexually anxious Victorians (Healy 2000, 104). For them, the spousal imagery was a site of “sexual ambivalence” for those in the priesthood (2000, 102). Depending upon the “circumstances and personal predisposition” of the priest, this ambiguity could “encourage a certain type of homosexual orientation” (2000, 102). That is, the spousal imagery welcomed those whose own sexual orientation was either confused or counter to established norms; the Church became “a refuge and a bastion” for a man who chose to suppress his homosexuality, a “protection” for a man uncertain of his sexual leanings, and “no doubt . . . a screen for their sexual practices” for other men (2000,

104). Although determining whether Hopkins falls into any of these categories is impossible, it is generally presumed that his entrance into the priesthood was related to his awareness of his sexuality and not solely as an expression of his spirituality.

Presuming Hopkins to be a homosexual in priest's clothing, critics have plumbed his writings for confirmation of same-sex attraction.⁹ Renée V. Overholser makes a strong case for reading his poetry as a method of redirecting homosexual desire,¹⁰ as does Richard Dellamora in his analysis of the spousal relationship he sees Hopkins desiring to establish and possibly consummate with Christ.¹¹ These readings recognize the medieval influences on his religious and poetic development, and firmly and rightly situate Hopkins in the nineteenth century. Most importantly, they do not fall into the trap identified by Alison Sullo way of making "simplistic judgments" about Hopkins's life and poetry, such as "the willful assumption that Hopkins's poetry was *merely* the fruit of buried or frustrated homosexual impulses" (1990b, 3). The danger in reading Hopkins's sexuality into his poetry is in presuming that the sacramental is only a screen for the sexual. It is one thing to view his poetry as sublimating a socially unacceptable desire. It is quite another to make the leap that Hopkins "shows forth his homosexuality in his gay adjectives," a point that Boyle takes objection to in his criticism of "whoever wrote the Hopkins material in *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature* in 1973" (1990, 109). Hopkins's distinctive theological thought and poetic expression defy attempts to reduce his life and works into neat categories and easy explanations. Reductive readings of his poetry are not fair to Hopkins as a poet, as a priest, and as a man who likely experienced same-sex attraction.

The specter of Hopkins's sexuality looms most suggestively and problematically over critical readings of his incarnational poetry. On one hand, readings that situate his verse in a broader tradition of erotic and homoerotic poetry can reveal additional layers to Hopkins's multilayered poems. However, problems ensue when readings intent on exploring the poet's queerness ignore the spiritual dimensions of his work, or worse, distort his spiritual desires. For example, Gregory Woods's contention that "a great body of devotional poetry, most of it written by men . . . is identical in its conventions to secular love poetry, and differs only in the name of the beloved: Jesus Christ" (1987, 42) has the potential to lead to an elucidative reading of the vital connection between the sexual and spiritual in sacramental poetry. His observation that in both poetic forms "the desired goal is bed" (1987, 43) is not out of bounds as it delves into the parallels between the two genres. Understood in relation to medieval love lyrics, devotional poetry offers the sexually repressed poet a safe avenue of expression because it operates allegorically. As such, desiring communion with the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist is permissible, even respectable, because of its metaphysical implications. At the same time, the metaphysics of divine love can also mask the desire for physical union. In this sense, the figure of Christ as the beloved serves as a safe site to express a form of love that cannot be named or consummated.

If Hopkins's poetry were to be read primarily as a redirection of same-sex attraction away from his peers and toward Christ, then this practice would exclude or misread some of his most explicitly incarnational poems: his Marian verse. Although

Eucharistic images abound in the majority of his devotional works (a category that includes practically all of his works), the poet most directly contemplates Christ's physicality in his meditations on Mary and her integral role in both the Incarnation and redemption. Sharing his order's admiration for Mary, Hopkins "frequently paid homage" to her not only in his poetry but also in his sermons (Pick 1966, 83). She is, like Christ and the Holy Spirit, a recurrent theme in his writing, one rooted in the Spiritual Exercises and coursing "through his Jesuit life from 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' onwards" (1966, 103). Unfortunately, with the notable exception of *The Wreck*, his intricate and beautiful Marian poems are frequently overlooked in critical discussions of Hopkins's work. That these poems comprise the entirety of the few poems Hopkins wrote postconversion for immediate publication has not proved sufficiently compelling to attract scholarly attention. This neglect may lie in part because they are occasional poems commissioned by his superiors¹² and, therefore, seem to stand apart from works that stem from the poet's own thought and inspiration. Even Pick, a critic who pays some passing attention to the Marian verse, suspects that Hopkins's wish "to appeal to popular tastes" makes these poems somewhat "unsatisfactory" (1966, 103). Although the public nature of these poems may have intimidated Hopkins, these poems reflect the signature originality, complexity, and craftsmanship of his non-Marian verse. More importantly, they reflect a very real attachment to the Blessed Virgin.

Considering his pronounced personal interest in the Incarnation and his Jesuit training, it would be strange for Hopkins to avoid contemplating the role of Mary in that process and explore it in his verse. It is not by accident, coincidence, or appeasement to his superiors that the "Virgin appears over and over again in Hopkins' poetry" (Downes 1959, 164); she appears throughout his life's work because of her theological importance to him. Hopkins's conversion to Catholicism not only gave him access to Real Presence through the sacraments, it also gave him Mary. Considered to be "one of the most controversial figures in Victorian England," Mary was "a powerful presence" whose figure personified the "errors" of Catholicism (Engelhardt 2000, 44). These so-called false doctrines included "pagan idolatry, superstition and willful ignorance of the Bible, all of which were summed up in a single word: Mariolatry" (2000, 44). For this reason, the Tractarians were careful to reject the elevation of Mary alongside papal authority and sacerdotal intercession. Hopkins's conversion to Catholicism restored Mary to her intercessory role between humanity and divinity. Joining the Society of Jesus further solidified the importance of Mary since the order consistently held reverence for Mary as a "special concern" from the Counter Reformation to the present (Downes 1959, 164). His study of Duns Scotus also reinforced his attachment to Mary;¹³ a great admirer of the theological scholar's theories, Hopkins deeply "prized" his "early defence of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception" (Pick 1966, 83). These Catholic influences gave Hopkins something he could never find in Anglicanism: a worthy female object of sacramental desire.

In Catholic theology, Mary holds a unique position in the Christological world that is inextricably linked with the Incarnation. As Jaroslav Pelikan explains, "the

primary importance of the annunciation was believed to lie in the miracle of the incarnation" (1996, 82). Free from sin (Original or otherwise), Mary's virgin body was able to usher the human aspect of god, Christ, into the mortal world. Through her physical body, the Word of God was made Flesh. The importance of this bond between Mary's body and Christ's to early and medieval Christians is manifested in artistic representations of these personages. Brown's study of Roman Catholicism uncovers the "heavy stress" these Christians placed on the physical connection between "the flesh of Christ and that of his virgin mother" (1988, 444) in sixth-century icons that frequently feature Christ lying on his mother's lap, "as if indissolubly tied to



"The Virgin Adoring the Host, 1852". Ingres' painting was criticized for presenting a virgin whose appearance was more mortal and sensual than divine and beautiful. This image is also unique in Marian art – no other painting depicts Mary with her transubstantiated son. Like Hopkins' poem, Ingres' painting is radical in its representation of these subjects.

Oil painting by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres

humankind by the bond of her womb" (1988, 445). These ties were also recognized and revered in the Middle Ages. It was not a coincidence that the emergence of the Cult of Mary was concurrent with the Church's adoption of the doctrines of transubstantiation and concomitance. Synergistically, Eucharistic lore conjoined with Mariolatry, creating a "strong bond" between the "eucharistic body reborn at the mass and the original body born in the virgin womb, to produce the powerful image linked both to crucifixion and to nativity in the Virgin Mary" (Rubin 1991, 142). In the process, Mary herself became "augmented in the eucharistic context . . . a mediator, celebrant, the person who had intimately constituted the sacred" (1991, 142). Mary is not only the mother of God, she is also the mediator between God and man.

In her role as Mediatrix, Mary unites God and humanity through Christ on multiple levels. This union happens on a physical level with her "active role in the incarnation" (Pelikan 1996, 131). The incarnation would not have occurred if she withheld her "assent to the word and will of God" (1996, 131). Her consent to carry and raise the Son of God brought Christ into the world; through her participation she "made the incarnation and therefore the redemption possible" (1996, 131). Mary's place in uniting humanity and divinity did not end with giving birth to Christ but extended to her intercessory position between the two. On a metaphysical level, Mary helped sinners receive God's grace through Christ. Pelikan explains that Mary "was addressed as the one who could bring cleansing and healing to the sinner and as the one who would give succor against the temptations of the devil; but she did this by mediating between Christ and humanity" (1996, 133). To the mortal world, her intercession with Christ brings "healing," "fertility," "consolation," and above all "mercy" for "the fallen" (Warner 1976, 315–316). She is "the advocate who pleads humanity's cause before the judgment seat of God" (1976, 316). Although she cannot grant mercy directly to sinners, she can intercede on their behalf through her prayers because of her direct access to Christ. All hail Mary, the Mediatrix of Grace.

To contemporary readers accustomed to interpreting gender anxiety in nineteenth-century British literature through a queer lens, Mary, as the Mediatrix, could easily be seen as the necessary shared female who makes male same-sex desire possible in a society that disavows homosexuality. She brings together a sinner and his savior as well as a priest (the bride) and Christ (the bridegroom). Mary is the perfect woman to mediate homoerotic desire since her body is maternal, not sexual. The miracle of the virgin birth to Roman Catholics is that Mary was able to experience "every human physiological process" necessary to conceive, bear, and nurse a child without having to endure "the hot act of male procreation and the wrenching-open of the womb at childbirth" (Brown 1988, 444). Spared these "two violent and indispensable links of a normal human process" (1988, 444), Mary was "disconnected, in the believer's mind, from the black shadow of the sexual act that lay at the root of normal, physical society" (1988, 445–46). This state of physical perfection was imagined to ennoble all similar "intensely physical relationships" that involve the shared qualities of "nurture, intimacy, [and] the continuity of one's own flesh and

blood" (1988, 444). Holding a perpetual virgin as the ideal of womanhood served to bolster the Church's evolving position on celibacy. It also, likely unintentionally, makes Mary the perfect woman for a gay or questioning priest to desire. Already practicing sexual renunciation, the priest could form a nonsexual bond with the woman who is physically linked to the man he desires above all.

The potential for male homosocial/homoerotic desire to be negotiated through the body of Mary can be seen in Hopkins's poem "The Blessed Virgin Compared to the Air We Breathe." As is the norm with his Marian verse, "The Blessed Virgin" is "little discussed" (Loomis 1988, 169) in general and almost universally disregarded in queer criticism of Hopkins. Seldom appreciated for its own merits or in relation to Hopkins's other works, "The Blessed Virgin" is easily dismissed as "innocuous piety" by "the average critic" who may be too hasty in deeming this poem "unimportant to the semantics of many late Hopkins' lyrics" (Loomis 1988, 169). Its lackluster critical reception is summed up in Virginia Ridley Ellis's lukewarm praise of the poem, considering it one of the poet's "minor achievements" (1991, xv). This view is not helped by Hopkins's own disappointment with the poem, which he expressed in a letter to Bridges, writing that "it is too true that the highest subjects are not those on which it is easy to reach one's highest" (qtd. in Ellis 1991, xv). Yet this poem has appealed to some readers who have recognized its poetic and theological virtues. Pick determines that of all his Marian poems, this one "is the most characteristic of Hopkins itself" (1966, 103). "Something more than devotional," Downes sees Hopkins attaining "a kind of meditation" in its "poetic management" of the theme of Mary's intercessory role in human salvation (1959, 165). Justus George Lawler is the most supportive reader of "The Blessed Virgin," commending it as "Hopkins's most extraordinarily Metaphysical poem" (1998, 92). I concur that "The Blessed Virgin" is remarkable in its metaphysics, poetics, and Hopkinsian characteristics. But far from "innocuous piety," "The Blessed Virgin" is an intriguing experiment in incarnational poetics. Although Hopkins's theme of "communion with Christ through Mary" may be a "typical theological and meditative subject" (Downes 1959, 165), the resulting poem lends itself to a queer reading of Mary's position betwixt and between Christ and man. More than this, Hopkins's meditation on Mary forwards an unorthodox view of her mediating presence, one that elevates her beyond typical Mariolatry as he queers the Eucharist by transubstantiating the "Air We Breathe" into the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Since the Blessed Virgin is linked physically and spiritually to Christ, a person can connect to Christ through forging similar bonds with her. According to the doctrine he expatiates in the poem, Mary's role in the Incarnation constitutes an immediate physical connection with Christ that can be shared with others seeking Real Presence. "Mary Immaculate" (l. 24) can experience the Real Presence of Christ in a way that no other human can—directly. Her sinless state and untouched body, along with her spiritual receptiveness, denote a sacramental readiness that elevates her above mere women and goddesses (ll. 25–28). She, alone, is worthy to receive

the whole body of Christ into her body and this comprises the “one work [she] has to do” (l. 29). Her body is the gateway that could:

Let all God's glory through,
 God's glory which would go
 Through her and from her flow
 Off, and no way but so. (ll. 30–33)

As he explicates further in the poem, Mary makes God knowable by making him incarnate. She serves as “the softening, humanizing medium of God's glory, justice, and grace” (Gardner 1985, 283, n. 60). Prior to entering the world, “god of old” (l. 103) was “A blear and blinding ball / With blackness bound” (ll. 97–98) located in a “grimy vasty vault” (102) until “A mother came to mould / Those limbs like ours” (ll. 103–4). Mary's essential role in the Incarnation made God visible:

Through her we may see him
 Made sweeter, not made dim.
 And her hand leaves his light
 Sifter to suit out sight. (ll. 110–13)

With her immaculate soul and pure body, the Blessed Virgin can make the Word of God flesh without diminishing or despoiling him. Through sharing her flesh and blood with Christ, Mary makes the Incarnation possible that allows people to see and know God.

Hopkins's emphasis on the shared flesh between Mary and Christ predicates the mystical on the physical. Though the process remains a mystery, the Incarnation is all about the corporeality of Christ as he transitions from an intangible god into a mortal man through the body of a woman. He reinforces this bodily connection, reminding readers that:

Of her flesh he took flesh:
 He does take fresh and fresh,
 Though much the mystery how (ll. 55–57)

By this logic, if a person wants to establish a physical connection with Christ, then he must go through Mary; like Christ, “of her flesh” he must also take “flesh.” Sharing flesh with Mary involves some ingenuity on the part of the poet. A sexual union is not an option since she is a perpetual virgin and he is celibate and likely homosexual. Any carnal knowledge between them would be a violation, not a sacrament. To resolve this dilemma, Hopkins establishes a chaste, physical bond with Mary that is maternal, not sexual. In this, he mirrors Christ's relationship with the Blessed Virgin by becoming her flesh-and-blood son.

Since Hopkins cannot physically take residence in Mary's womb, he metaphorically transforms the air enveloping the world into Mary. Through a metaphysical conceit gleaned from a moment of instress, Hopkins can imagine himself inside

the body of Mary and also take Mary into his body, experiencing Incarnation and redemption through her. Reflecting on the “wild air, world-mothering air” (l. 1) with its “nestling” (l. 2) and “nursing element” (l. 10) that sustains his life “more than meat and drink” (l. 11), Hopkins correlates the act of respiration with gestational incubation. This metaphysical air “minds” (l. 16) the poet of Mary:

. . . who not only
 Gave God’s infinity
 Dwindled to infancy
 Welcome in womb and breast,
 Birth, milk, and all the rest
 But mothers each new grace
 That does now reach our race— (ll. 17–23)

By metaphorically connecting the substance and function of the atmosphere with the body and office of the Virgin, Hopkins recognizes the expansive soul-saving power of the divine mother while emphasizing her physical body. Though she “mothers each new grace,” this mystical process is predicated upon her maternal capacity to “welcome” Christ physically in her “womb” and at her “breast.”

By replicating this mother–son relationship, the poet becomes less like a man and more like god. Mary’s “inexhaustible fecundity” (Pick 1966, 103) has the power to transform an individual physically and spiritually:

Not flesh but spirit now
 And makes, O marvellous!
 New Nazareths in us.
 Where she shall yet conceive
 Him, morning, noon, and eve:
 New Bethlems, and he born
 There, evening, noon, and morn—
 Bethlem or Nazareth. (ll. 58–65)

As the Mediatrix, Mary unites Christ and man through “the divine sacrament’s impregnation in the human soul” as she “create[s] birth-places for human Christliness” within each person (Loomis 1988, 136). That is, we can experience “the birth of Christ within man, a re-incarnation of the Incarnation” (Pick 1966, 103). Mary’s capacity to bring Christ into the world is not restricted to a physical act or a historical time; she can birth him spiritually into the souls of all those who would receive him. Varghese Mathai summarizes the perpetuity of this phenomenon, explaining: “Just as the Word chose to annunciate its own conception in Mary’s womb, so does the Word after its historical incarnation repeat the act experientially” (1996, 136). By “draw[ing] like breath” (l. 66), men become “more Christ” (l. 67), a “new” and “nobler” self (l. 69) who is “Both God and Mary’s Son” (l. 72). Man can achieve this state through breathing in Mary’s grace, which prepares his soul to receive the Real

Presence of Christ in full. More specifically, the poet can become one with Christ through communing with Mary.

Through the metaphysical conceit of the air, Hopkins enfolds Mary's physical participation in the process of Incarnation and intercessory presence in the redemption into one maternal identity. "As the mother of grace," Mary sustains "our supernatural life" just as the oxygenated "Air we Breathe" sustains "our natural life" (Pick 1966, 103). Because of this Marian air, "we"—her children—"are wound / with mercy round and round" since she, "wild web, wondrous robe. / Mantles the guilty globe" (ll. 34–39). As Christ's earthly mother and humanity's spiritual one, her spiritual influence has a physical impact. Through "high motherhood" (l. 47), she cares for the welfare ("ghostly good," l. 48) of humanity by "play[ing] in grace her part / About man's beating heart" (ll. 49–50). Her multidimensional maternity allows her to nurture her children spiritually in a way that touches them physically. They may not be nursing at her breast as Christ did, but they breathe in the air that is charged with her presence and receive spiritual sustenance from it. Investing the material air with spiritual mothering is not just symbolic; it is transubstantial. Hopkins's comparison of the "Blessed Virgin" and "the Air we Breathe" is more than contemplative; it is consecrative. As he catalogues the similarities between the atmosphere and Mary, Hopkins progressively sublimates the two images into one common entity.

Hopkins's sacramental use of poetic language consecrates the "wild air, world-mothering air;" it becomes the Blessed Virgin Mary in the same way that the bread and wine becomes the flesh and blood of Christ, the Blessed Sacrament of the altar, through the prayer of consecration. Rather than ingesting Christic bread/flesh and wine/blood to attain salvation, the poet inhales Marian air to receive her light and grace. "This blue heaven" (l. 86) contains Real Presence, not of Christ, but of the Blessed Virgin. With the air as a Eucharist, breathing becomes a means of communion. In establishing a new Eucharist of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Hopkins moves beyond traditional Roman Catholic dogma. Theologically, Mary is limited to her intercessory role; she "never works on her own, but only through Christ" to redeem humanity (Warner 1976, 323). This distinction, however, has been lost "in practice" as evidenced by the body of vernacular stories that endow the Virgin Mary with powers and gifts until she "undeniably usurps the unique privileges of Christ" (1976, 323). In the lives of believers, Mary can perform miracles and extend grace by virtue of her own status as the queen of heaven. Hopkins suggests this mystical vision of Mary when he writes:

Nay, more than almoner.
The sweet alms' is her
And men are meant to share
Her life as life does air. (ll. 42–45)

She is not merely a petitioner, requesting mercy for sinners at the hour of their death; she is mercy incarnate. Sharing "her life as life does air," Mary makes salvation pos-

sible for all without Christ. Hopkins has effectively transferred Christ's power to redeem to Mary who offers grace in this life and in life eternal. By locating saving grace in the Marian air he breathes, Hopkins queers the Eucharist.

While much has been made of Hopkins's sexual orientation and how his incarnational poetry represents the sublimation of suppressed homosexual desire, this sacramental poem is less about desiring the Real Presence of Christ than about communing with Mary. Her role as Mediatrix can be read as the ultimate in triangulated desire, but this reading does not tell the entire story in this poem. The goal is not to become one with Christ so much as to become like Christ—to be Mary's son in the womb and at her breast. Ultimately, the poem voices a yearning to unite with the female Other of God, Mary, not exclusively as a means of communing with Christ. His desire to experience the Real Presence of the Blessed Virgin finds full voice in his entreaty to his "dear Mother" to be "my atmosphere / My happier world" free from sin (ll. 114–117). Though the language is sensual ("Above me, round me lie" [l. 118]; "Stir in my ears, speak there" [l. 121]), the intent is not sexual but sacramental. Hopkins wants her redeeming influence to correct his "forward eye" (l. 120) and to fill his ears with words "Of God's love . . . / Of patience, penance, prayer" (ll. 122–23). Far from an empty indulgence in Mariolatry, "The Blessed Virgin" expresses a sincere desire to feel the loving embrace of a mother:

World-mothering air, air wild.
Wound with thee, in thee isled.
Fold home, fast fold thy child. (ll. 124–26)

With this concluding prayer, Hopkins articulates his need to be joined inextricably with Mary and feel her nurturing and saving presence in his life. She is more than a woman exchanged between two men; she is a divine mother who can freely reciprocate his love and guide him to heaven.

WORKS CITED

- Adams, James Eli. 1995. *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Beckwith, Sarah. 1993. *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings*. London: Routledge.
- Boyle, Robert. 1990. "Man Jack the Man Is': *The Wreck* from the Perspective of 'The Shepherd's Brow.'" In *Critical Essays on Gerard Manley Hopkins*. Ed. Alison G. Sullo way, 103–16. Boston: G. K. Hall.
- Bradstock, Andrew, Sean Gill, Anne Hogan, and Sue Morgan, eds. 2000. *Masculinity and Spirituality in Victorian Culture*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Brown, Peter. 1988. *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Downes, David A. 1959. *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Study of His Ignatian Spirit*. New York: Bookman.

- Drum, Walter. 1910. "The Incarnation." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 7. New York: Robert Appleton.
- Ellis, Virginia Ridley. 1991. *Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Language of Mystery*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press.
- Ellsberg, Margaret R. 1987. *Created to Praise: The Language of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Engelhardt, Carol Marie. 2000. "Victorian Masculinity and the Virgin Mary." In *Masculinity and Spirituality in Victorian Culture*. Ed. Andrew Bradstock, Sean Gill, Anne Hogan, and Sue Morgan, 44–57. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Gardner, W. H. 1985. Introduction. In *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. Rev. ed. Ed. W. H. Gardner, xiii–xxxvi. New York: Penguin.
- Healy, Philip. 2000. "Priesthood and Sexuality." In *Masculinity and Spirituality in Victorian Culture*. Ed. Andrew Bradstock, Sean Gill, Anne Hogan, and Sue Morgan, 100–115. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Hopkins, Gerard Manley. 1970. *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. 4th ed. Ed. W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 1985. *Poems and Prose*. Rev. ed. Ed. W. H. Gardner. New York: Penguin.
- Lawler, Justus George. 1998. *Hopkins Re-Constructed: Life, Poetry, and the Tradition*. New York: Continuum.
- Loomis, Jeffrey B. 1988. *Dayspring in Darkness: Sacrament in Hopkins*. Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press.
- Mathai, Varghese. 1996. "Breath, Utterance, and the Word: Three Elements of the 'Arch and Original' Sound in Hopkins." *Rereading Hopkins: Selected New Essays*. Ed. Francis L. Fennell, 127–42. Victoria, B.C.: University of Victoria Press.
- Maynard, John. 1993. *Victorian Discourses on Sexuality and Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McNees, Eleanor J. 1992. *Eucharistic Poetry: The Search for Presence in the Writings of John Donne, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Dylan Thomas, and Geoffrey Hill*. Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press.
- Pelikan, Jaroslav. 1996. *Mary through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture*. New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press.
- Pick, John. 1966. *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Priest and Poet*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pohle, Joseph. 1910. "Eucharist." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 7. New York: Robert Appleton. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05572c.htm>.
- Quilligan, Maureen. 1979. *The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Roden, Frederick S. 2000. "Aelred of Rievaulx, Same-Sex Desire and the Victorian Monastery." In *Masculinity and Spirituality in Victorian Culture*. Ed. Andrew Bradstock, Sean Gill, Anne Hogan, and Sue Morgan, 85–99. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Rubin, Miri. 1991. *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sullo-way, Alison G., ed. 1990a. *Critical Essays on Gerard Manley Hopkins*. Boston: G. K. Hall.
- . 1990b. "Introduction." *Critical Essays on Gerard Manley Hopkins*. Ed. Alison G. Sullo-way, 1–7. Boston: G. K. Hall.
- Warner, Marina. 1976. *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*. New York: Knopf.

Woods, Gregory. 1987. *Articulate Flesh: Male Homo-Eroticism and Modern Poetry*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.

NOTES

1. Ian Ker's lecture "John Henry Newman and Gerard Manley Hopkins," delivered at the 2007 Hopkins Festival and archived on the festival's website, offers a sound introduction to the influence Newman had on Hopkins.

2. Notably, Ellsberg observes that Hopkins began using the words "inscape" and "instress" to express his incarnational view of nature and poetry the same year he converted to Catholicism (1987, 10–11).

3. According to Pick's study, the marked asceticism of Ignatius's order is designed "to set man free for the exercise of love, to clear away the path to his one great goal, union with God through love" (1966, 29–30). For more on Ignatian thought and practices, see *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, translated by Anthony Mottola.

4. Norman White enumerates the difficulties in making conclusive statements about Hopkins's sexuality based on such limited resources as his notebooks and journals in the article "Hopkins: Problems in the Biography," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 21, no. 1 (1988).

5. For insight on Pater's sexuality and his influence, see Linda Dowling's *Hellenism and Homosexuality*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984; Richard Dellamora's *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism*, Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990; Patricia Clements's *Baudelaire and the English Tradition*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985; James Eli Adams's *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995; Thais E. Morgan's "Reimagining Masculinity in Victorian Criticism: Swinburne and Pater," *Victorian Studies* 36, no. 3 (1993); and William F. Shuter's "The Outing of 'Walter Pater,'" *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 48, no. 4 (1994). For insight into Hopkins's relationship with Pater, see Gerald Monsen's "Pater, Hopkins and the Self," *Victorian Notes* (1974) and Michael Matthew Kaylor's *Secreted Desires: The Major Uranians, Hopkins, Pater and Wilde* (2006).

6. Hopkins's attachment to Dolben is touched upon in Robert Bernard Martin's *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Very Private Life*, New York: Putnam, 1991. See also Norman White's *Hopkins: A Literary Biography*, Oxford, England: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

7. David Hilliard explores the connection between male homosexuality and the Anglo-Catholic tradition in his essay "Unenglish and Unmanly: Anglo-Catholicism and Homosexuality," *Victorian Studies* 25, no. 2 (1982). Also see Frederick Roden's *Same-Sex Desire in Victorian Religious Culture*, New York: Palgrave, 2002 and Patrick O'Malley's "Epistemology of the Cloister," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian & Gay Studies* 15, no. 4 (2009).

8. For discussions of homosexuality in the Victorian age, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1985 and *The Epistemology of the Closet*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990; Jeffrey Weeks's *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain, from the Nineteenth Century to the Present*, London: Quartet Books, 1979 and "'Sins and Diseases': Some Notes on Homosexuality in the Nineteenth Century," *History Workshop* 1 (1976): 211–19; Brian Reade's *Sexual Heretics: Male Homosexuality in English Literature from 1850 to 1900: An Anthology*, London:

Routledge, 1970; and H. Montgomery Hyde's *The Other Love: An Historical and Contemporary Survey of Homosexuality in Britain*, London: Heinemann, 1970.

9. A sampling of such criticisms includes Peter Swaab's "Hopkins and the Pushed Peach," *Critical Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (1995); Michael Lynch's "Recovering Hopkins, Recovering Ourselves," *Hopkins Quarterly* 6 (1979); and Joseph Bristow's "'Churlsgace': Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Working-Class Male Body," *English Literary History* 59 (1992).

10. See Renée V. Overholser's essay "'Looking with Terrible Temptation': Gerard Manley Hopkins and Beautiful Bodies," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 19, edited by John Maynard and Adrienne Auslander Munich (1991).

11. See chapter 2, "'Spousal Love' in the Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins," in Dellamora's *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism*.

12. In accordance with Stonyhurst tradition to honor Mary each May, Hopkins would write a poem to be inscribed on a plaque and placed before the Lady Statue.

13. For a detailed examination of Scotus's support of Mary, see Roberto Zavolloni and Elidoro Mariani's *La dottrina mariologica di Giovanni Duns Scoto*, Rome: Antonianum, 1987. For a brief discussion on Scotus's argument for Mary's sinless state, see Marina Warner's *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, New York: Knopf, 1976.