

THE “SENSUOUS SIDE” OF DECADENT STYLE: PATER AND HOPKINS

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A style or manner in art or literature can only be explained or reproduced through those special conditions of society and culture out of which it arose, and with which it forms one group of phenomena.

– Walter Pater, “Winckelmann”

In the spring of 1866 Walter Pater was, among other things, working on his “Winckelmann” essay (published January 1867 in the *Westminster Review*) and tutoring Gerard Manley Hopkins, five years his junior and then an Oxford undergraduate already preparing for the final, “Greats” examinations scheduled for June 1867. How did that particular conjunction of people, ideas, and attitudes – what Pater would term those especial, exquisite “conditions”¹ – contribute to the development of a “decadent” poetics? As this essay demonstrates, Pater was using Winckelmann, an eighteenth-century art critic and archaeology devotee, to make an argument for “the sensuous side of art” and language – a lesson that not only inspired Pater’s commitment to an opulent, mannered prose style, but also encouraged the “kind of intoxication” of word-play and prosody that Hopkins would later pursue in his poetry. Pater begins his article by positioning Winckelmann as “the teacher” of Goethe and Hegel – a “strange pregnancy” through which Winckelmann’s writings “opened a new sense for the study of art” (80). Pater and his writings provided a similar “new sense” and new appreciation of sensuousness for Hopkins. One can also use the “Winckelmann” essay to define the particular burdens of “enthusiasm” (a privileged term in Pater’s essay) that “stain[ed]” Hopkins’s “thoughts with its bloom” even as he was finalizing his decision to convert to Catholicism.² (Hopkins decided to “go over” to Rome in July 1866, and was received into the Church by John Henry Newman that October. By the time

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