

“QUELLED OR QUENCHED IN LEAVES”:
THE POPLAR EXPERIMENTS OF PATER, MONET,
AND HOPKINS

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“Theories which bring into connexion with each other modes of thought and feeling, periods of taste, forms of art and poetry,” Walter Pater promises, “have a great stimulus for the intellect, and are almost always worth understanding” (*Renaissance* 2). This essay connects the works of Pater, Claude Monet, and Gerard Manley Hopkins in order to understand how all three use the same motif, the poplar tree, to explore the unsettling realization that even the most imposing elements of life (and of the “self”) are actually vulnerable, imperiled, deciduous. From the late 1870s onwards, all three artists focus on poplars to articulate their most challenging notions of aesthetic experience, the human-nature symbiosis, and an all-too modern “impression” of life’s evanescence and fragility.

Considering the men’s chronological and physical proximities – Pater, 1839-94; Monet, 1840-1926; Hopkins, 1844-89 – prompts one to look beyond common academic categories. All three could be discussed as post-Romantics who achieved an “inspired fusion between empirical data and personal response. In this process of fusion, science and its discoveries often played an important and accepted role” (Broude 115). All three shared a post-Darwinian preoccupation with fluctuation and adaptation. Aesthetically, Hopkins was committed to a Ruskin-infused realist mode of representation, but undertook keen experiments with rhythm and wordscapes in the 1870s. Pater’s significance to the development of literary impressionism, in the late 1860s, has been as well-documented as Monet’s experiments in painterly Impressionism.¹ All three were catalyzed by working against the grain of aesthetic, cultural, and generic norms – which their poplar works demonstrate. Comparing Hopkins and Monet enables one to understand more fully the dynamics of words that are “mined with a motion” and brushstrokes that are seeking the energy within still life. Comparing both to Pater heightens the