

HOPKINS AND SWINBURNE:  
“FLESH AND FLOWERS  
AND DEMOCRACY AND DAMNATION”

Lesley Higgins

In the middle of the nineteenth century, two young men “go up” to Oxford only a few years apart. Both have been raised in large, affluent High Anglican families, with fathers associated with maritime interests and culturally refined mothers. (Both have auburn-tinged hair, and are comparatively short, but those details are irrelevant.) Both were deemed fearless by their peers while growing up. Both attend Balliol College, where Benjamin Jowett is their principal tutor (but only one will take his degree).<sup>1</sup> Both admire the Arthurian murals in the Oxford Union created by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones, William Morris, and several others.<sup>2</sup> Both are intrigued by the works of Edgar Allan Poe.<sup>3</sup> Both become friendly with Walter Pater and discuss aesthetics and philosophy with him. Both are interested in the arts, especially poetry, and can compose adeptly in English, Latin, and Greek. Both will produce poems that are verbally dexterous, metrically innovative, and, in relation to the middle-class Protestant values inculcated by home, public school, and university, thematically shocking. Both will write texts invoking Christ, but one will disparage him as the “pale Galilean” and the other will embrace him fervently as “our Lord.” Only one, furthermore, will prepare extravagant fantasies of lesbian love, necrophilia, revolutionary politics, and blasphemous neo-paganism, and use the works of William Blake, Théophile Gautier, and Charles Baudelaire to defend and promote art for art’s sake.

Gerard Manley Hopkins bristled whenever considering A.C. Swinburne’s poems, some of which he knew quite well, and resented when comparisons were made about their texts. Nonetheless, to the excellent comparative work that has been done by Elisabeth Schneider and Isobel Armstrong, I would like to add a brief consideration of how their interpretations of a natural scene differ.<sup>4</sup>

Fleshy concerns, rather than Ruskinian rhapsodies about nature, were on display in 1866 when Swinburne’s *Poems and Ballads* created a major critical