

Failed Unions and Successful Estrangements: Finding My Queer Pandemic Desire in Gerard

Manley Hopkins' Epithalamion

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**Abstract**

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Weaving between personal experience and close reading, this paper explores the sonic devices utilized by the voyeuristic speaker in Gerard Manley Hopkins' "Epithalamion" poem. The paper, both creative and critical in genre, builds upon previous queer re-readings of this Hopkins' text and ties it to the author's contemporary concerns of queer desire and connection during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Failed Unions and Successful Estrangements: Finding My Queer Pandemic Desire in  
Gerard Manley Hopkins' Epithalamion**

Listen, here is what it means to fall in love during a pandemic. Pay attention, hear now what I did to pretend I was ready to touch another human again. The scene is this: it is 2021 and I'm a month away from thirty years old. I'm going on an internet date with a woman who just drove the entirety of I-90 to move here from Boston, station wagon brimming with boxes, bags, jade plants. She doesn't know the city yet, so I suggest the arboretum, for it is almost April, for the falling-open-flowers have begun, for the magnolias are dropping their petalled jowls on the walking paths, for the crocuses crowd in patches, for the pale-nippled-daffodils peer up at passersby like a flock of yellow eyes.

I send her a pin for parking lot #17. Local queers know this is the cruising lot, where mostly men meet-up to make eye contact in their parked cars and then to wander near the water and meet beneath the bridge to nowhere, a confluence of abandoned highway off-ramps from a failed floating bridge, once intended to connect the 520 to I-5. Nearly ten years ago, I would walk those ramps with friends, taking moody photographs, showing off our freshly shorn skulls, our asymmetrical attempts to belong. We would watch men stride singularly through the trees, them cleaving us with their eye contact, as if attempting to repel the gaggle of giggling baby dykes that we were. We were scandalized and jealous. Why weren't we allowed to loiter here? To catch a glimpse of whatever they were searching for? We had longings too. So we looked at the lily pads. We eyed the straight couples in kayaks, as they worked Lake Union's currents with their four oars, fast arms indistinguishable from each others, splitting families of water lilies with their pointy, plastic bows.

But by now, I've forgiven the gay men and the sporty heterosexuals for their recreational wantings. There is enough room at the arboretum for all of us, enough shores to sun on, enough corners to shadow in. So, the woman and I plan to meet at Lot #17. I recognize her from across the black concrete. She's wearing the same gray and maroon crewneck from her profile picture, with "Crater Lake Oregon" cursived across her chest. My face, masked from the eyes down, finds her face, also masked around the mouth. From about twelve feet away, our eyes, nervous, narrowed, meet and I dare a nod. Recognition makes me nauseous, makes my mouth go dry, makes my hands go into my pockets, scraping at splinters, at lint, at nothing. I am suddenly thankful for the fabric barrier muzzling my stale mouth, my quivering chin. I stop at the mandated six feet away from her, and say her name aloud, like a question I know the answer to.

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"HARK, hearer, hear what I do; lend a thought now, make believe," calls out the speaker of Gerard Manley Hopkins' "Epithalamion", directly inviting the reader to be "leafwhelmed" in a secret rendezvous inside a fantastical "hood/Of some branchy bunchy bushybowered wood." Traditionally, an Epithalamion, a lyric poem praising the Greek god of marriage, is written upon the occasion of and intended to bless a wedding. However, this ode's propulsive sound play sets it apart and will ultimately drive it into a queer failure of the genre's traditional aims. The speaker announces themselves to the "hearer" and then pulls them, through sonic play, into the scene. The alliteration and assonance unroll the lush excess of the hearer's sudden surroundings, "Marbled river, boisterously beautiful, between/Roots and rocks is danced and dandled, all in froth and waterblowballs, down." The sound play is heightened by the roughly ABBA rhyme scheme established in the first stanza and bolstered by iambic pentameter (with several accented

nods to Hopkins' sprung rhythm), alerting us immediately and in multiple modes to the importance of sound. We, as readers, are placed in the literal role of "hearer" and the speaker tunes our ears for us from the beginning, demanding we do only what we are destined to do as hearers, to "hear." We are called into being a witness, or an auditory voyeur. We are prepared to "make believe" with the speaker through the excesses of sonic play, a primary tool of meaning making within the poem, because of the ways it goes on to toy with and contest the private versus the public, distance versus intimacy.

The poem charges forward with no regularized rhyme scheme, though different variations on end-rhyme continue throughout, elevated by the ongoing alliteration. Simultaneous to this accumulation of sound play, the landscape of our opening is personified in embodied ways: the hills have "loins" where the "wood" "leans." This moment of nature touching nature is intimate and flirtatious, much like the "marbled river" that is "danced and dandled." As the landscape takes on a human form, we are thrust into the present moment with the speaker, "We are there, when we hear a shout", again another moment that sound is the signifier to closeness, and this soon extends to being a conduit for yearning. It is also through the speaker's speech that this marriage ode enacts its first subtle union: the "we" asserted between speaker and hearer. If "we" read on, if "we" listen as asked, then "*we* are there" [my emphasis added] with the speaker (and whoever else soon joins them) as accomplices, partners, collaborators. Whatever happens from here on, we are a part of it, whether it is imagined or real.

The sound of the "shout" seems to touch or impact directly the environment's surrounding flora of "the hanging honeysuck, the dogeared hazels" as they make "dither... hover." Sound is prioritized as the logic for this cause and effect, as it is investigated by the

speaker, "And the riot of a rout/Of, it must be, boys from the town." The syntax here is strange, clipped by unexpected and alliteratively motivated movements forward. The effect is such that the hearer must lean in closer to the sounds the speaker uses to tell their tale, to make semantic sense of their lyrical swings and turns. This stanza closes with the completion of an earlier rhyme with "hood" and "wood": "Bathing: it is summer's sovereign good." In this satisfying end stop, the source of the incoming sounds is revealed. At this moment, the beloveds of Hopkins' attempted "Epithalamion" is revealed: "boys from the town" going for a summer swim. Hopkins' "Epithalamion" celebrates union through distance, it contends with yearning through the sensory delights of prosody and the only marriage it doesn't miscarry is the impossible one, the collective, unspoken and unconsummated one, between the boy-beloveds at the swimming hole, the speaker/watcher/writer, a soon-to-arrive stranger and us, the hearer/reader/secondary voyeur.

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After I say her name and she says mine back, we walk. Not towards the men and their failed ramps to the aborted bridge, but towards the rhododendrons. We cruise past the azaleas, which haven't quite popped yet, their buds like packs of puckered lips on the bushes, pinks only beginning to show their tongue-tips, threatening to open any minute. We stay masked, weaving the path with six feet between us, pointing to magnolias cartoonishly gutted on the pavement. "These are edible," I say, pulling a not-dead petal from the branch, lifting up my mask to feed the gingery flag to myself. She does it too and we chew in unison. I note her bite-mark on the pink flesh of the flower before she drops it to the ground. We realized that we have shared something, we laugh and look away.

We ask good questions about each other lives while peeling clementines on a bench. We share back and forth about the last year of quarantine, marveling at how few people we've hugged in the span of thirteen months and trying to imagine if we'll ever go back to shaking hands with strangers. I tell her that I dared to get a haircut the week before, and that I reveled in the alien fingers on my scalp. She laughs, half-feigning shock and jealousy. Neither of us have gone on a "social distance date" before, so we lean in towards our own absurd shynesses, touching that tenderness instead of each other's knees. Both Jews, we joke that this is how some Orthodox people date by choice, keeping distance, but also avoiding eye contact. My raised-Orthodox friend later tells me this is something they miss about the community they left behind to come out as queer. They loved the distance and what it preserved, what it forced one to feel solidly in themselves before searching for it in another.

I start to understand what my friend means, after the woman and I spend five weeks dating from six feet away. What we can't do with touch, we do with words, and I don't even mean in the obvious explicit way. I lean my body towards hers by learning about her entire family and childhood pastimes and daily rituals and friendship woes. I memorize her snorts, sighs, voice impressions. I suckle on the sounds she offers up: it is the only way she can touch me. Even though the whole point is that my body shouldn't intercept even one molecule of her moistures, I spend the weeks bending like a tulip head towards her rain, hoping to be hit. I probably am. Or at least I feel how her voice hitting the air changes the air before it reaches me. Her vibrations pass into me.

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The epithalamion's second stanza opens up with another level of union and voyeurism wherein the speaker announces the arrival of a "listless stranger: beckoned by the noise." The poem pivots here so that we, the speaker and hearer, can join this stranger in his own bout of witnessing from distance the subject that the speaker has already centered our gaze upon: "the bevy" of swimming lads. The "we" drops away to focus on the "he" of the stranger, signaling that three layers of watching and listening are now happening. This layered epithalamion allows the stranger to play "the role of groom" who "covertly cruises the bridal boys" (O'Connor par. 10). We listen to the speaker's narration, who watches the "listless stranger" watching "the boys/ With dare and with downdolphinry and bellbright bodies" move joyously about the sheltered swimming hole. The alliteration from the first stanza carries on, with the classic Hopkins use of excessive and whimsical compound words such as "downdolphinry" and "bellbright." These aggregates of descriptions simultaneously alchemize the boys into animals (dolphins) and machinery (bells). This embodied paradox is mirrored by the oppositions in the next line which declares that the boys are "earthward, airworld, waterworld" and again, the speaker's allegiance to sound is upheld, as internal rhyme and repetition completes this strange portrait, "thorough hurled, all by turn and turn about."

The joy of the young men, despite distance, solidifies into a wearable object, a "garland of their gambols." It is physically embodied enough that it can be taken into the body of the stranger, it "flashes in his breast." Once again, the alliteration here concretizes the joy, the sounds of "garland" and "gambols" seem to mimic the shaking bells of a collar or the fluttering petals of a wreath. It is through in-scene sound that the stranger can ingest the distant joy of the boys and it is through poetic sound effects that the speaker transmits this joy to the hearer/reader. This

joyfulness, once taken into the stranger's body, produces a reaction, transmuting "into such a sudden zest/Of summertime joys/That he hies to a pool neighbouring." The joy of the swimming fellows incites "zest" in the stranger and he scurries to a pool to also partake in the "summer's sovereign good." He finds a nearby pool, so as to remain both separate and connected to the beloved boys, and this pool is "sweetest, freshest, shadowiest." The ringing "est" at the end of each word in this superlative list creates a fevered kind of rhyme between a vibrant and strange combination of adjectives: sweet, fresh, shadowed. A shadow brings a connotation of danger, evil or hidden-ness, yet it is redeemed with sweetness and freshness, as if the coverage that creates the shadow has protected something truly valuable and precious. What makes this spot hidden is what makes it original, appealing, perhaps even fecund and generative for new life.

The speaker goes on to adorn the stranger's cove with fantastical excess in one of the poem's longest lines, "Fairyland; silk-beech, scrolled ash, packed sycamore, wild wychelm, hornbeam fretty overstood." Here is an important moment to remind ourselves that the speaker has been narrating the entirety of this epithalamion in present tense, giving a fresh now-ness to the beauty he is lifting up for us. This magical inlet is "overstood/By. Rafts and rafts of flake-leaves light, dealt so, painted on the air,/Hang as still as hawk or hawkmoth, as the stars or as the angel there,/Like the thing that never knew the earth, never off roots,/Rose." The speaker is praising this sacred lagoon, freezing its beauty while maintaining its freshness, because its "rafts" of light are "painted on the air" and "hang as still as hawk or hawkmoth." Like the hawk or hawkmoth, this secret inlet is both moving and still, alive and suspended in gravity and time. Literally illuminated, like many figures are in Catholic religious imagery, this location's importance continues to be elevated with lofty images of "stars" and "angels." It is "Like the

thing that never knew the earth”, so celestial and hallowed that it could not have sprung “off roots” or from the mortal earth.

It is here in this liminal space between heaven and earth, between shadow and light that the stranger “feasts” by tearing off his clothes so fast they “All lie tumbled-to; then with loop-locks/Forward falling.” These shorter lines mimic the jolting haste of his undressing “Till walk the world he can with bare his feet.” Spurred by his simultaneous union and alienation from the swimming boys, he is ready to put his body into the same body of water that he had watched them in. The water itself is also a vehicle for sound as it “warbles over into” and through the speakers insistent sonic play, its textures are described as “filleted with glassy grassy quicksilvery shivè and shoots.” The stranger, no longer listless, is prepared to be transformed by the “heavenfallen freshness” of the lake. The speaker stages a charged moment of futurity while watching the stranger preparing to jump, “Here he *will* then, here he *will* the fleet/Flinty kindcold element let break across his limbs/Long.” We are both in the present moment with the stranger and yet bracing for the immediacy of his impending dive, his imminent union with the water, the same water that touched the boys. Through the vehicle of this “kindcold element”, he can unite with the boys while maintaining his removal, the stranger-ness upon which his entire identity (in the universe of this poem) rests.

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Admittedly, I’m overeager to see the woman again. I am both greedy to shrink the space between us and tenderly protective of both our bubbles. I reach towards and inwards and she mirrors me. We rock, two passengers on opposite ends of a sailboat, back and forth towards water and towards each other. I invite her on date to what locals generously call “the beach” but

is actually a grassy park with a rocky shore along Lake Washington. It's not even May yet, so the water hasn't warmed, but I always start swimming well ahead of that. The rain is still coming in waves, the lilacs are just beginning to bud, it is definitively not early summer. Meaning it is my time to shock winter skin awake with the lake's sharp embrace shattering. I dare the woman to join me. Like any sensible mammal around, she hasn't jumped in the lake since moving here in March. It's a warm Wednesday. She declares she's up to the challenge of this Northwest christening.

We meet at the park that contains the city's old growth trees. We perch on the shore below the forest, the trees' ancient stalks guarding and filtering the April light cast down in buttery beams. We are in the good company of other masked weekday beachgoers and brave swimmers and splashers, most of them under the age of ten, so young they don't fear the cold like their parents do, who are comfortably studded along the shore. The woman and I babble and dawdle, and I get the sense that our shared magnetism makes any word we utter feel delicious and potent to each other. I want to hear every word she says and how she says it and how it's shaped when it comes out of her mouth. We dilly-dally clothed on the warm concrete, shyer than dogs to reveal our soft stomachs to each other, and perhaps even more scared to share what our faces and voices do when plunged into a cold lake. We haven't been out of control around each other yet. We have been steadily curating ourselves and our distance from each other's bodies for a few weeks now.

After some time of basting in the sun, we build up the body temperature and courage to strip down and sink our separate selves towards the stony floor of the lake. We don't count down from three, we go in our own times. I run in and dunk first, somewhat performing, or maybe just

practicing, a bravery for her that I am still trying to own by myself. I submerge, stroke, shake and shout once I can, breaking the surface shivering into the air. I do feel a little bit more new, and less ashamed, than I thought I would. I spend a moment frigid and staring out into the rest of the lake. She follows suit on her own time, and when she comes back up, I am struck by how much of her wet face there is with no mask and glasses set atop it. Her shocked smile is so wide.

After spending the past pandemic summer swimming in the lake, I had often wondered if the virus could be transmitted between swimmers through the water itself. I spent those hotter months diving off docks and occasionally wondering whose cells might somehow be slipping alongside my calves, as I kicked myself farther and further into the center of the water, often so far that the shore looked minuscule, theoretical. In this moment, I stare at the woman and wonder if some part of her, perhaps something contagious or perhaps something innocuous, was touching me now or might touch me someday. Her shoulders crumple in to preserve heat and a chill goes down my spine. Both sufficiently cold and jolted, we scurry out at the same time, leaving the lake spaced apart but together, in some true sense of that word.

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Once the stranger weds the water, the speaker steers us out of the scene, “Where we leave him, froliclavish while he looks about him, laughs, swims.” His stranger-ness is both maintained and contested by this moment of “froliclavish”, where he has been transformed from his listlessness and becomes a part of something greater. It is here in this fraught moment that the “we” of speaker and hearer returns and we are reminded of the other simultaneous sound-based union of this epithalamion. We are forced to be present with the speaker in the moment at which he tears himself away from the scene of the stranger’s solitary and queer nuptials, “Enough now;

since the sacred matter that I mean/I should be wronging longer leaving it to float/Upon this only gambolling and echoing-of-earth note.” He has to interrupt himself forcefully, “Enough now”, and consciously re-direct the ending towards what he is supposed to be praising: heterosexual and monogamous marriage. This contrived volta serves as a painful record of the speaker’s, and perhaps the author’s, unfulfilled desires and nullified queer yearnings. It does not feel like a volta that the author is in control of or intended. After the lush and gorgeous queer abundance of the ode up to this point, the speaker’s obligation has caught up to him, “I should be wronging longer leaving it to float.”

The speaker has failed to properly execute an ode to “spousal love” and he knows it. Yet, he persists and hastily turns us towards the supposedly true aims of the ode: to write a happy poem occasional for his brother’s wedding day. The turn flounders in questions and half-hearted jabs at symbolism, “What is ... the delightful dene?/Wedlock. What the water? Spousal love.” And from there, it finishes with an awkward and brief address to the poem’s intended audience of the crowd of wedding guests, “Father, mother, brothers, sisters, friends.” When the speaker invokes their presence, they crowd the poem, which clearly was not meant for their ears. They haunt and intrude in the fecund and magical universe the speaker has crafted.

This epithalamion celebrates the stranger who “enters into communion, however "chaste," with the young boys even while he remains cut off from them” (O’Connor par. 9). The poem straddles distance and intimacy, delivering this paradoxical praise through multiple layers of sonic play. In failing at his surface aims of celebrating normative marriage, the speaker has almost succeeded at crafting an ode to another kind of togetherness, one that also requires estrangement and separateness. Until the speaker aborts his own queer epithalamion with the

intrusion of the heterosexual gaze, he was actually succeeding, at honoring the agency and wisdom of queer desire.

And what invitation is he really making to the familial wedding guests in the poem's final strophe? He calls them "Into fairy trees, wild flowers, wood ferns/Ranked round the bower." Those descriptions mirror the earlier descriptions of the bevy of boy's joyful pool and stranger's sacred cove, albeit trimmed and sanitized. Could we imagine that the speaker wishes to invite these normative others into another route to belonging and communion? Could it be possible that he does hold out hope at the poem's end for emergent and queer unities to spread beyond private groves deemed shameful and abnormal? Surely, there isn't enough language given to us in the poem's strange ending to stake such a claim, but the fact that the draft ends with no period leaves the door open for some sort of longing, some sort of hope, some sort of a future.

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The woman's "pod" is being very strict about continuing social distancing until everyone within it is fully vaccinated. So, we keep dating like this: distanced, outdoors, on porches in the rain, learning more and more about each other only through sight and sound, and we watch as vaccination supply goes up and phases open up to more and more people. The countdown to touch begins as her roommates have their vaccine appointments line up. I try not to track the days in my calendar, but I fail at that, by which I mean succeed at counting the days till I will kiss the woman. We even break through enough shyness that I can admit this to her and she counts along with me, by which I mean we count together towards the date we get to be together in a new way. It will be entirely new, because I've never done it this way, and neither has she.

We remark on how much we've used touch as a form of affirmation or communication or screening in past dating experiences. There is a lack present, but it is also a spaciousness. I tell her about how I noticed within the first few months of pandemic the relief I felt at not having to greet certain people with a hug when seeing them in public. I still don't know if I would have realized that without these circumstances. This is not to say the pandemic's purpose was to give me a lesson about embodiment and my own internal sense of consent, rather just that our bodies all went through something and there must be ways of digesting this. We both shared that the mask can feel protective in public, a shield, a blankety armor around what we show to strangers on the street.

We make up different names for the day that we break the seal of distance on. Her best friend calls it Kiss Day. All of our friends track our strange courtship like a sport or a TV show. Any graze of a fingertip is an escalation in intimacy that earns fervent text message updates after the date. To put it plainly: we want each other so bad and everyone we know knows it. She jokes, "I think we're milking it at this point." I laugh, and agree. Even though the wait is excruciating and spiked with the dopamine levels of our younger-closeted-lesbian-seventh-grade-selves, it also feels hearty, sturdy, important.

Like most things of the past year, the distance is nothing I would have ever chosen. But it does something to my own sense of my body: to float and flounder in the estrangement of being a mammal yearning for touch. Around her, I listen closely to her and to me. I feel the edges of my self prickling, reminding me I'm mine, not hers. This is a belonging I need and it does not curdle the yearning for her, the other, it just ties it to the earth, to my own hands. Four days before Kiss Day, just before her second shot is fully integrated into her immune reaction, we

push the envelope. “Your antibodies are almost fully downloaded,” I joke. We discuss it beforehand, staging the entire scene. We lie in the grass, in broad daylight, in a crowded park, from four feet away. She reaches her hand out to me. We fumble and grasp fingertips, our eyes welling up, our masked mouths speechless, maybe even wide open.

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