

‘The Divine Friend, Unknown, Most Desired’: The Problematic Uranian Poets

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Death in Venice dates from 1912, just after Thomas Mann, on holiday with his wife in Venice, had fallen in love with a boy named Wladyslaw Moes, a ten-year-old Polish aristocrat nicknamed Adzio. Mann would later claim that nothing was invented in *Death in Venice*—Tadzio, the cholera, the ballad singer... were all there. Well, also there, wandering about the city and sharing his erotic interests was another writer, though he and Mann never met, as far as we know. Frederick William Rolfe, known by the pseudonym of Baron Corvo, arrived in Venice in 1908 at the age of 48, and remained there until his death five years later. With Mann’s novel, Rolfe’s tauntingly biographical *The Desire and Pursuit of the Whole*, J. A. Symonds’s *The Key of Blue*, as well as a dozen other volumes—Venice had indeed become the pederastic stage.

While the Stephens, both Orgel and Greenblatt, have made currency of the concept of ‘Elizabethan Self-Fashioning’—the concept, though not exactly in the same sense, is also applicable to one group during the ‘Second English Renaissance,’ the period dubbed by its members as ‘Victorian’. That group was the Uranians.

Amid a world of ‘decorous behavior,’ *these* Victorians found themselves the ultimate outsiders, this collection of artists whose desires and pursuits were particularly pederastic in nature. Their voyeuristic posturing—a proximity to the object of desire without that distance being defeated, at least artistically—constitutes a distinct temperament unique in English letters. But, the illegality of their desires resulted in a form of self-fashioning no less marked than that of their Elizabethan predecessors, though taking a different stance, a stance gilded by an astonishing degree of secrecy. Rolfe’s own self-fashioning—‘history as it ought to have been and very well might have been, but wasn’t’ (Rolfe 1994 [1934]: 45)—is most clearly displayed in his 1904 novel *Hadrian the Seventh*, which concerns a convert who becomes, through serendipitous circumstances, the Pope. Rolfe was himself the convert George Rose and the papacy never within his scope, but in fantasy...

Besides the self-fashioned and flamboyant Baron Corvo, there are 36 other Uranian poets and a score of prose writers who constitute a pederastic tradition which is currently chronicled by only one book, Timothy d’Arch Smith’s *Love in Earnest: Some Notes on the Lives and Writings of English ‘Uranian’ Poets from 1889 to 1930*. The subtitle—‘Some Notes’—expresses the inherent difficulty in reconstructing the Uranian atmosphere, partly because of its own discretions, for its members often sacrificed their fellows as necessity arose.

A striking example of this is Walter Pater’s review of *Dorian Gray*. Asked by Oscar Wilde to provide a review, Pater took the occasion to distance himself from both Dorian and his corrupter, Lord Henry—both of whom were clearly modeled on Pater and the ideas he had expressed in his volume *The Renaissance*. The review, published in the periodical *Bookman* in November 1891 claimed the murdered Basil as the ultimate expression of ‘true

Epicureanism' (Pater 1891: 59), and decried the flagrant sensuality that Wilde's novel presents and represents. This review severed a fourteen-year friendship between the two, Pater choosing discretion over friendship. Wilde's cultivations in love and in literature had become too overt and scandalous for Pater, who in turn cultivated as much distance between himself and his friend, in person and in print, as courtesy would allow.

Or, another example: immediately after Simeon Solomon's arrest in 1873 for importuning a man in a public urinal, Pater and Swinburne met in Oxford to discuss how to obliterate any traces of their intimacy with the painter. Pater always chose discretion over friendship, hoping not to find himself, as Wilde soon would, a defendant in the most famous of Victorian trials.

With that in mind, it is perhaps not surprising that, in most cases, relationships among the members of this group were almost entirely textual, traceable only through bookplates, inscriptions, dedications, and acceptance letters. That they discussed pederasty and other forms of the homoerotic (whether classical or contemporary) among themselves is certain—but of these conversations we have only hearsay. Besides this, the Uranians often burned their correspondence and diaries (or their friends and families did so); or, as was the case with Pater, they covered their tracks by avoiding both. Charles Edward Sayle's diary provides an example of why such was the case, with one entry in which he dreamed that his friend Horatio Forbes Brown (a friend of Rolfe's whose parties were a feature of Venetian life) was 'in a state of complete nudity, indecisive of what to use for a fig-leaf—a page of his own poems? or mine?' (d'Arch Smith 1970: 110).

Beyond their biographical obscurity, the Uranians often privately printed their volumes and circulated them only among their fellows, which requires a biographer or literary critic dealing with the movement to be equally an archaeologist and an archivist, for unfortunately the history of the Uranians is mostly contained within the sales catalogues of auction-houses like Sotheby's and Christie's, the art going into the hands of private collectors like Seymour Stein, who acquired Solomon's *Bacchus* for a mere £28,000 in 1993 (Pacheco 1994: 79).

For their more private uses, the Uranians themselves collected nude photographs by Wilhelm von Gloeden, whose guest book is itself a catalogue of the pederastically-inclined. Like Decadent children with baseball cards, the Uranians exchanged packets of these photographs. Edmund Gosse, discretely handed one packet by Symonds, kept stealing glances at it during the funeral service for Robert Browning at Westminster Abbey. Boys will be boys, one might say [...] but there were real dangers involved in such exchanges.

'All things I love are dangerous,' Marc-André Raffalovich once remarked, this poet and friend of Pater, Gosse, and Symonds. But, in the twentieth century and today, these dangerous Uranian collectables have become most prized... and for different reasons: fine papers, exquisite bindings, general rarity. The result is that many of the Uranian works (whether those be textual or visual) have disappeared into private collections like Stein's, or have not surfaced since sales over fifty years ago.

A case in point: presently for sale at William Dailey Rare Books in Los Angeles is Raffalovich's own copy of Sayle's poem *Bertha: A Story of Love*, published in a limited edition by Kegan Paul in London in 1885. What is of interest to a book collector is its original blue cloth, lettered in gilt, blocked in gilt with a device of a sail (a pun on the author's name) designed by Burne-Jones. Its price of \$750 is slightly less than usual because it has one worn corner, light wear to its boards, several spots of foxing to the flyleaf—but is otherwise fine. Such is the view of an antiquarian. But, to a biographer of the Uranian movement like myself, the book is priceless, for it bears three bookplates of Raffalovich, to whom the book was originally presented. The book's ultimate value is not contained in its ornamental binding, but

the traces it provides of a line of descent, exchange, and Uranian intimacy, linking undeniably Sayle and Raffalovich (see d'Arch Smith 1970: 77).

Another striking example of such a text is Frederick Rolfe's *Desire and Pursuit of the Whole*, first published in 1934, in conjunction with A. J. A. Symons, *The Quest for Corvo: an experiment in biography* (a recent edition of which has an introduction by A. S. Byatt) in which Symons chronicles his difficulties unearthing the Rolfe manuscripts, as well as the details of his salacious life, details which are thinly veiled in the novel.

As far as Rolfe's novel is concerned, we can forgo the adventures of his protagonist Nicholas Crabbe in exposing the hypocrisies of the other English expatriates in Venice, or the vitriol he throws upon his former friends (both of which constitute substantial portions of the text)—what is striking is Crabbe's relationship with his gondolier, 'an innocent expert well-knit frank boy' (Rolfe 1994 [1934]: 52), with only one fault:

[Nicholas] always laid singular and particular stress upon the influence of her phenomenally perfect boyishness—not her sexlessness, not her masculinity, but her boyishness [...] She looked like a boy: she could do, and did do, boy's work, and did it well: she had been used to pass as a boy, and to act as a boy; and she preferred it: that way lay her taste and inclination: she was competent in that capacity. [...] A youth knows and asserts his uneasy virility: a girl assiduously insinuates her femininity. [Gilda] came into neither category. She was simply a splendid strapping boy—excepting for the single fact that she was not a boy, but a girl. (Rolfe 1994 [1934]: 48-49)

Here we have Uranian self-fashioning taking a rather Elizabethan twist, for the ensuing dalliance and the eventual erotic fulfillment which concludes the novel would have been untenable if Zildo the gondolier were not, in actuality, the boyish Gilda whom Nicholas had pulled from rubble after an earthquake, an act that drove Gilda to swear her perpetual servitude, in the only capacity in which Nicholas needed a servant... as his gondolier. But, after this episode has been duly explained, the writer and the reader proceed to forget that the boy is not a boy, which brings us into constant proximity—but *only* proximity—with the ultimate object of Rolfe's desires:

[Zildo's] cleansing operations [of the boat] brought him near his master's chair. He crept balancing along the gunwale with his cloth, to polish the prow. As he came crawling back, a little shy breath of night sighingly lifted and spread the splendour of the fair plume waving in noble ripples on his brow. Nicholas had a sudden impulse to blow it, just for the sensuous pleasure of seeing its beauty in movement again—it was within a hand's length of his lips.

'To land,' he instantly commanded, checking himself with a shock, sternly governing mind with will. [...] But, perhaps Zildo would not have snubbed him? 'So much the worse, o fool! Hast thou time or occasion for dalliance?' Thus, he reigned up his soul, prone to sink, prompt to soar. (Rolfe 1994 [1934]: 107-108)

Or this scene, more tauntingly tactile:

And then, all of a sudden, on this iridescent morning of opals in January, when the lips of Zildo touched the hand of Nicholas, owner of lips and owner of hand experienced a single definite shock: an electric shiver tingled through their veins: hot blood went surging and romping through their hearts: a blast, as of

rams' horns, sang in their ears and rang in their beings; and down went all sorts of separations. [...] He thrust the whole affair out of his mind. Zildo was worthy of all praise—as a servant. And—custodia oculorum—it might be as well not to look at Zildo quite so much. (Rolfe 1994 [1934]: 122-123)

The passage above displays typical Uranian posturing, a proximity to the object of desire without transgressing that voyeuristic distance, 'history as it wasn't but as it very well might have been'. For, to come too close often brought the actual into absolute contrast with the desired. Rolfe's letters from Venice—private but not destroyed—display how this desirous proximity found itself expressed in everyday life:

A Sicilian ship was lying alongside the quay and armies of lusty youths were dancing down long planks with sacks on their shoulders which they delivered in a warehouse ashore. The air was filled with a cloud of fine white floury dust from the sacks which powdered the complexions of their carriers most deliciously and the fragrance of it was simply heavenly. As I stopped to look a minute, one of the carriers attracted my notice. They were all half naked and sweating. I looked a second time as his face seemed familiar. He was running up a plank. And he also turned to look at me. Seeing my gaze he made me a sign for a cigarette. I grabbed at my pockets but hadn't got one; and shook my head. He ran on into the ship. I ran off to the nearest shop and came back with a packet of cigs and a box of matches to wait at the foot of his plank. Presently he came down the plank dancing staggeringly under a sack. I watched him. Such a lovely figure, young, muscular, splendidly strong, big black eyes, rosy face, round black head, scented like an angel. As he came out again running (they are watched by guards all the time), I threw him my little offering:

—Who are you?
—Amadeo (lovely mediaeval name).

The next time,
—What are you carrying?
—Lily-flowers for soap-making.

The next time,
—Where have I seen you?
—Assistant gondolier one day with Piero last year.

Then,
—Sir, Round Table (a homosexual fraternity).

I'm going to that ship again tomorrow morning. I want to know more.

Did Rolfe return the next day? Did it lead to more than cigarettes and banter and insinuation? I haven't a clue. I only know that Rolfe would soon lie dying in his beloved Venice, staring off toward a shoreline full of gondoliers, still waiting for his own Tadzio/Zildo, 'The Divine Friend, Unknown, Most Desired' (which was Rolfe's personal motto). These two aspects, 'the unknown' and 'the most desired', these encapsulate both the Uranian movement and its elusiveness.

If this strand of pederastic writers is ever to be properly engaged, it will probably be through Gerard Manley Hopkins, for only in the case of Hopkins do we find a poetry of grandeur blended with Uranian sentiment. Laid alongside Hopkins's 'Epithalamion', the poetry of the others seems facile, the prose equally so, such that only in Pater—and to a limited extent Henry James—does this sentiment reach high art. But, it is because of two other aspects that Hopkins lends himself to such a choice. Firstly, he detested the self-fashioning distinctly this group's. In a short unpublished treatise, Hopkins writes:

when I consider my selfbeing, my consciousness and feeling of myself, that taste of myself, of *I* and *me* above and in all things, which is more distinctive than the taste of ale or alum, more distinctive than the smell of walnutleaf or camphor, and is incommunicable by any means to another man (as when I was a child I used to ask myself: What must it be to be someone else?). Nothing else in nature comes near this unspeakable stress of pitch, distinctiveness, and selving, this selfbeing of my own. (Hopkins 1959: 123)

While his *nom de plume* allows Rolfe to be playful and scathing, its absence allows Hopkins a self-honesty equally brutal. It is this degree of honesty which makes him unique among the Uranians. Secondly, as the *Times Literary Supplement* made clear half a century ago: 'No modern poet has been critically commented on in more detail. [...] Rarely has a poet attracted such a burden of documentation and commentary' (Anon 1959: 544). His poems, letters, journals, confessional notes—all added to the 'biographically known' (such as his perpetual friendship with Pater)—these enable us to reconstruct Hopkins's Uranian desires more fully than those of the others, even Rolfe.

Hopkins is the most obvious bull's eye for scholarship, which is made clear by a fragment found among his papers after his death:

Denis,
Whose motionable, alert, most vaulting wit
Caps occasion with an intellectual fit.
Yet Arthur is a Bowman: his three-heeled timber'll hit
The bald and bold blinking gold when all's done
Right rooting in the bare butt's wincing navel in the sight of the sun.
(Hopkins 1990 [1918]: 155)

'His three-heeled timber [...] Right rooting in the bare butt's wincing navel' is an image that Victorian scholarship hopes not to see 'bald and bold' in 'the sight of the sun'. The salacious is best ignored—in terms of these Uranians.

A diary entry by Mark Pattison from May 1878 makes one wonder how Hopkins, appointed to a Jesuit curacy eight months later, could have claimed 'By the by, when I was at Oxford, Pater was one of the men I saw most of' (Hopkins 1956: 246). Pattison's diary reads:

To Pater's to tea, where Oscar Browning was more like Socrates than ever. He conversed in one corner with four feminine looking youths 'paw dandling' there in one fivesome, while the Miss Paters and I sat looking on in another corner—Presently Walter Pater, who, I had been told, was 'upstairs' appeared, attended by two more youths of similar appearance. (Quoted in Pater 1970: xxxiv)

Oscar Browning, who would be sacked from Eton the following September under suspicion of pederasty because of his involvement with the young George Curzon (later Viceroy of

India), ‘paw dandling’ with four boys in a corner (rather tactile phrasing to be certain), while Pater, said to be ‘upstairs’ (an area beyond the bounds of Victorian guests, however intimate), reappearing with two boys in tow—that was excessive to an extreme for Pattison... but for Hopkins? Well, the only extant letter between these two friends (probably saved from oblivion because Hopkins had drafted a poem on the verso) is Pater’s acceptance of an invitation to dinner... at the Jesuit presbytery. Wilde always praised ‘feasting with panthers’, and Hopkins, like Wilde, would have had no trouble recognizing ‘pater’ within that pun.

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