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GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS AND THE POETRY OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE



By **Martin Dubois**
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Reviewed by **Summer J. Star** on 2018-03-19.

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Diverse, Generous, Flexible, Contingent. After reading this book, I believe these words best express both the version of Hopkins it offers and the nature of its author's unique critical approach. For decades, Dubois contends, Hopkins scholars have been over-burdened by the desire to find a "key" to, and in, his writings as a whole, and Dubois concedes the force of this desire. The synthetic, schematizing, grand-system-and-uniform-vision-finding approach, he notes, can feel genuinely motivated by readings of Hopkins's diverse and largely posthumously published writings. Not only is there a natural critical tendency to find order in the disordered manuscripts, which, as Dubois often and helpfully reminds us, Hopkins left at the time of his death. There is also the theoretical bent of the poet himself. As Dubois writes in his introduction, "Hopkins's inclination for theorizing in his prose writings (of which the twin concepts of 'inscape' and 'instress' are the most famous product) has in particular led a number of critics to evoke a direct and exact relation between the epistemology pursued in certain of his undergraduate essays and early journals and aspects of belief that enter into poems written across a far longer period"(8).

For many readers of Hopkins's work, especially in the early phase of acquaintanceship, such "relation" finding will sound familiar. It's often what gets people excited about Hopkins, finding his highly wrought concepts of inscape, instress, selving, pitch, and so on, conversing so intimately with his poems. For readers of Hopkins criticism, the tendency that Dubois diagnoses will also feel familiar, though he seldom singles out particular authors and arguments as exemplary or problematic. His running quarrel with the quest for synthetic and Key-to-all-Hopkinsiana-readings is that they have left important works, and important aspects of Hopkins's thinking, by the wayside.

This book too leaves some notable poems by the wayside. There are no discussions of "As Kingfishers Catch Fire," "The Sea and the Skylark," "Spring and Fall: To A Young Child," "Binsey Poplars," "God's Grandeur," nor (except by reference) "Pied Beauty." Yet Dubois is not classically recuperative, aiming to rouse new interest in under-read works. He seeks instead to recuperate a sense of Hopkins's thought as itself diverse: changing throughout his life, contingent on the conditions and phases of his reading, work, health, and personal realizations. For Dubois, the most fascinating thing about Hopkins is not his systematic cohesion, but his variability. As compared with previous studies, then, this book demonstrates how much more demanding, helpful, and exciting such a diachronic approach can be.

In a sense, Dubois's recuperation of Hopkins's diversity could have been applied to any aspect of his life and art, to both of which he opens new inroads for future scholarship. But he applies the principle of diversity to one specific subject that intimately fits it: religious experience. Dubois defines this term carefully. It is not the "religious experience" of William James -- a spiritual experience de-contextualized from dogma and institutions. Rather, and in keeping with Hopkins's training in Ignatian prayer, the religious experience treated in this book is something "more than private" (9). "For Hopkins," Dubois writes, "there can be no dichotomy of formal truth and individual awareness" (9). Religious experience necessarily grows within forms of religious life and given tenets of belief. Other studies of Hopkins and Catholicism such as David Walhout's *Send My Roots Rain* (1981) or Jill Muller's *Gerard Manley Hopkins and Victorian Catholicism* (2003), also explore the poet's subjective experience of faith and its expression in his works. Unlike those scholars, however, Dubois declines to read the whole of Hopkins's corpus by way of any one phase or character of his religious belief, such as the teachings of Ignatius or Scotus, or one devotional inclination, such as the incarnational celebratory or the ascetic. Dubois aims simply to show "how Hopkins's poetry conceives of encounters with the divine in the context of specific practices of faith and in relation to particular Catholic traditions and doctrines"(11). These encounters and their contexts form the structure of the book, which is admirably and interestingly organized.

Part 1, "Forms of Devotion," includes two chapters, "Bibles" and "Prayer." Here Dubois feels most in dialogue with other scholars of Victorian poetry who have sought to show how religious forms, integrated with lived experience, work themselves into art. Like Kirstie Blair in *Form and Faith: Victorian Poetry and Religion* (2012), for example, Dubois studies how verse form reflects patterns, procedures, and structures of life in the church. In discussing "Wreck of the Deutschland" and "No Worst There Is None," Dubois opens up a valuable new reading of their idiosyncratic rhetorical shifts by showing how they instantiate prayer as a literary mode. "As in the poems of occasion," Dubois writes, "Hopkins in 'The Wreck' turns to prayer conscious of the need to make allowance for others to adopt the poem's sentiment. The closing stanzas of each of its two parts are rendered in such a way that their speech might have reality in lives beyond Hopkins's own"(65). Likewise reaching beyond Hopkins's individual devotions is the chapter "Bibles," which traces Hopkins's biblical vocabulary to his

experience of different translations and their significance in the religious culture of the time. Finding traces of biblical language and idioms that might be faint at best to many readers, Dubois not only reveals his deep knowledge of the Bible but also explains the depth of Hopkins's interest in the history of biblical language. "His poems," Dubois argues, "have a large stake in what accrues to Biblical texts over time, as they become involved in the conventions of human living"(41). By melding various vocabularies in a single work (such as "Felix Randal" or "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire,"), including biblical idioms from various sources, legal language, and everyday colloquialism, Hopkins conveys his experience of "accrued meaning" or the "varnish of biblical words"(39). He thus conjoins the divine with the everyday personal, but also achieves moments of dissonance, as Dubois's excitingly contingent readings show.

Part 2, "Models of Faith," also includes two chapters, "The Soldier" and "The Martyr." "The Soldier" opens with an interesting account of Robert Bridges's inclusion of Hopkins's poems in his anthology, *The Spirit of Man* (1916), a volume that circulated broadly among World War One soldiers. Dubois reminds us that it was the interest in those selections expressed by wartime readers that encouraged Bridges to publish the first collection of Hopkins's verse in 1918. Though scholars seldom consider the martial elements of Hopkins's verse, Dubois highlights the figure of the soldier for the way it shows Hopkins in a state of conflict: a "tussle," as he nicely phrases it, "between ascetical and sacramental impulses" (85). The theme of spiritual struggle is further explored in "The Martyr," a chapter based on an essay Dubois published in *Essays in Criticism* (2013). After wryly reflecting on the fascination with martyrdom displayed in Hopkins's letters, Dubois closely reads the martyr poems of the poet's early phase as well as "The Wreck of the Deutschland," where religious experience merges significantly with politics. Dubois interestingly explains why the poem does not individualize the "tall nun," the martyr at the heart of the poem's drama. "The nuns," Dubois writes, "were far from alone at the time in suffering the anti-Roman Catholic feeling concentrated by the new European democratic nation-states"(119). By omitting any "individual history" for the tall nun specifically, Dubois contends, the poem "more freely engage[s] in contemporary controversy"(118).

Turning from the well-known "Wreck" to the lesser-read "Margaret Clitheroe," Dubois patiently glosses its "caprice," "incongruity," and "artless rhymes" that can make the poem so easily avoidable. He thus shows once again what his anti-synthetic way of reading can yield, for the awkwardness of the poem's style exemplifies the freedom of Hopkins's range. Treating the martyr as not only transcendent but also "contingent" and human, Dubois says, Hopkins moves "between personal confidences, experiential circumstance, and large martyrological significance with rare and surprising freedom" (129).

In "Last Things," the third and final part of the book, Dubois treats Hopkins's representations of "Death and Judgment" and "Heaven and Hell." Given Dubois's stress on dissonance over harmony up to this point, his argument reaches a kind of culmination when he claims that death terrified Hopkins, that for him its "rupture" signified not so much a joyful reunion with the Creator as "the disharmony that exists between humankind and God" (134). Though this claim may strike some readers as unlikely, Dubois substantiates it well through careful close-readings of Hopkins's mostly later poems, letters, and prose. In his particularly fine explication of the difficult "Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves," Dubois walks us through the deep "agitation" created by its intricate linguistic patterning; "such restiveness," he writes, "is the signal feature of this imagining of the world's end" (142). Focused on death itself, this poem as well as "The Wreck" and "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire" (both analyzed at length in this chapter) does "not attempt to understand what heaven is like, but only the transformation that it requires" (153). These works register the harrowing experience of realizing that requirement.

Likewise harrowing are the "Terrible Sonnets" examined in the final chapter. Dubois approaches them by way of the retreat sermon on hell delivered by a Jesuit priest in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. While Joyce's Father Arnall follows classic Ignatian teaching by describing separate punishments for soul and body, Dubois argues that Hopkins joins the two. Consciously swerving from convention, he represents spiritual torment as intensely embodied. As Dubois demonstrates from evidence furnished in other parts of the book as well, Hopkins chafed not only at the "abstract and syllogistic" elements of his theological education (156), but also at its slighting of what he called an "intellectual imagination" (156) in its account of religious experience. The "Terrible Sonnets" thus step forward as evidence of Hopkins's faith in the importance of that capacity to his religious life. For Dubois, the imaginings of hell in these poems are a test of how close the spiritual and material can be brought to express each other.

Interestingly, the sonnets' way of imagining heaven is scarcely more comforting, as Dubois reveals through his reading of "To Seem the Stranger." Hopkins represents God as a being whose inscrutability rouses a feeling of intense alienation. Above all, Dubois contests the tendency--widespread in discussions of Hopkins's beliefs and art--to see these final poems as a kind of "lapse" from the incarnationalism of his earlier work. When critics contrapose the "Terrible Sonnets" to the earlier nature poetry in particular, Dubois writes, they fail to recognize that Hopkins's conception of religious experience was consistently "mixed"(169).

Throughout this book, Dubois persuasively makes the case for getting acquainted with the unevenness of Hopkins, comfortable with his discomforts, and attentive to his diversity of thought -- even within distinct phases of his career, within individual poems, or within single lines. Dubois's book is concentrated, but his vigorous prose and straightforward style make it eminently readable. Along with his excellent argumentation and thorough grounding in biographical research and religious history, Dubois displays an intimate knowledge of the poems and a fine ear for their idiosyncrasies. Rather than following any one theory of interpretation, Dubois claims, this book springs from his attention to the details and diversity of the poems themselves. The quality of his close readings, both tender and precise, is perhaps the strongest verification of this claim.

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