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"An Interest in Higher Things": A Comparative Analysis of Two Juvenile Poems by John Keats and Gerard Manley Hopkins

There is a general critical consensus that Hopkins absorbed Keats in his youth only to abandon him almost completely in his maturity. Such an assumption, ideological issues aside, overlooks the powerful influence Keats continued to exert on Hopkins from both a linguistic and semantic point of view. In the first case, Hopkins inherited a sensitivity towards language from Keats which was to become one of the hallmarks of his poetic experimentation, and in the second, the shift from aesthetic appreciation in his early verse to religious worship in his mature works may be seen as reflecting a concern to transcend otherwise irresolvable paradoxes similar to those that haunted Keats' poetic vision.

In her essay on the influences on Hopkins' language, Josephine Miles lists examples of the kind of diction Hopkins derived from Keats, including his re-vision of many of his epithets and compounds — and concludes that the effects achieved point to "an emphasis on the special perceivable nature of things [...]"[1]. Graham Storey similarly remarks that Hopkins continued throughout his mature poetry to pursue "the essential form of a thing, and the exact words to express it"[2]. This striving for exactness is a feature common to both poets, though from Hopkins' perspective, the concept of exactness is synonymous of a deeper religious understanding that transcends Keats' aestheticism. Indeed, on the surface, the question of religion is one upon which the two poets surely seem to be utterly divided.

[1] Josephine Miles, "The Sweet and Lovely Language" in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Critical Symposium*, New York, The Kenton Critics New Directions, 1944. p. 65.
[2] Graham Storey, *A Preface to Hopkins*, London, Longman, 1981, p. 21.

Keats could even be cynically dismissive of religion, as can be seen, for example, in his sonnet "Written in Disgust of Vulgar Superstition", in which he denounces conventional religion as a life-negating force:

> The church bells toll a melancholy round,
> Calling the people to some other prayers,
> Some other gloominess, more dreadful cares,
> More hearkening to the sermon's horrid sound[3].

However, there is a sense in which Keats' anti-religious stance smacks of youthful exhibitionism, for his criticisms are in reality aimed at the self-assertive manner in which religion was practised by certain people. Also, his letters not only reveal an otherwise admiring view of Jesus[4], but a profound knowledge of the Bible and an anxiousness to believe in a life after death. Furthermore, many of his discussions on his poetic activity are significantly couched in religious symbolism and terminology which reflect an earnestness that undermines any intentions to parody poetry as a mere surrogate for religion. Keats' anti-religious views should really be seen as those of a young man trying to find his way in the world. That Hopkins himself was aware of a spiritual concern behind Keats' aestheticism is evidenced in one of his letters:

> I feel and see in him [...] an interest in higher things and of powerful and active thought [...] Nor do I mean that he would have turned to a life of virtue — Only God can know that — but that his genius wd. (sic) have taken to an austerer utterance in art [...][5].

The note of confident sympathy and understanding expressed in this assertion is significant. Hopkins was a ruthless critic, of

3 *The Poetical Works of John Keats*, London, Oxford University Press, 1954, p. 268.

4 *Letters of John Keats*, selected by Frederick Page, London, Oxford University Press, 1954, p. 249: "It is to be lamented that the history of (Jesus) was written and revised by men interested in the pious frauds of Religion".

5 *Further Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Claude Coleer Abbot, London, Oxford University Press, 1956, p. 386.

himself above all, and was not inclined to lavish praise gratuitously. Yet, time again in his letters one sees him adamantly defending Keats against adverse opinion. In another letter, while seeking to justify elements of weakness in Keats' verse, he concludes: "For Keats died very young and we have only the work of his youth"[6]. John Pick goes as far as to suggest that Hopkins' later criticisms of Keats show him "drawing his own portrait and evaluating his own youthful work"[7]. This implies a romantic self-identification that seems inappropriate to the rigorous Jesuit priest, though, on a sub-conscious level, such an identification would explain the perceptiveness of Hopkins' insights of Keats' poetry as well as justify what he pinpointed to be his essential faults:

> You classed Keats with the feminine geniuses among men and you would have it that he was not the likest but rather the unlikest of our poets to Shakespeare. His poems, I know, are very sensuous, and indeed they are sensual. This sensuality is their fault, but I do not see that it makes them feminine. But at any rate [...] in this fault he resembles, not differs from Shakespeare[8].

In this association between Keats and Shakespeare, Hopkins makes a significant distinction between 'sensuous' and 'sensual'; the former implies a general pleasure of the senses whilst the latter has a more explicitly sexual connotation. Nevertheless, the criticism fails to conceal the fact that similar preoccupations also run through his own poetry.

In view of Keats' early influence on Hopkins, this article will limit discussion to a comparative analysis of two juvenile poems; Keats' "I Stood Tiptoe Upon a Little Hill"[9], written in 1817, and Hopkins' "A Vision of the Mermaids"[10], written during the

6 *Ibid.*, p. 381.

7 John Pick, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Priest and Poet*, London, Oxford University Press, 1966, p. 3.

8 *Further Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, cit., p. 381.

9 *The Poetical Works of John Keats*, cit., p. 2. Henceforth line numbers will be given in the text.

10 *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie,

Christmas of 1862, three months before he entered Oxford University. Both poems deal with a fantasy vision perceived by a poetic subject which eventually vanishes from sight and both share similar structural and poetical procedures. Although one critic has seen in Hopkins' early work, particularly "A Vision of the Mermaids", an eagerness "to surpass 'Endymion' in sumptuous richness"[11], the poem in question seems to have much more in common both in terms of style and subject matter with "I Stood Tiptoe Upon a Little Hill" and although it pre-dates Hopkins' comments on Keats, it is interesting that it should draw so much on his poem, using escapist elements Keats himself was to put into question in his later work, particularly in the odes. Indeed, W. J. Turner notes that "A Vision of the Mermaids" reveals "a sensuousness and sensibility of language comparable to that of the early Keats" and that Hopkins "who died in 1889 at the age of forty-five (sic), remained to the end more sensuously enmeshed than Keats was in the later years of his short life"[12]. However, in spite of their striking analogies, there are differences between the two poems which, as shall be seen, point to essentially contrasting poetical approaches.

First, from a metrical point of view, both poems are in iambic pentameters with a high ratio of end-stopped lines, occasionally broken by metrical deviations. The nature of these deviations, however, is significantly different. Several of Keats' lines range from eleven to as few as six syllables:

_ / _ / / _ _ _ / _ / _
A bush of May flowers with the bees about them;
/ / _ / _ / _ / _ / _
Ah, sure no tasteful nook could be without them! (29-30)

[...]
/ _ _ / _ / _ / _ /
Open afresh your round of starry folds,

Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1970 (1967), p. 8. Henceforth line numbers will be given in the text.

[11] Cedric Watts, *A Preface to Keats*, London, Longman, 1985, p. 68.

[12] W. J. Turner, "Some Modern Poetry: Nineteenth Century and After" in *The Critical Heritage*, ed. Gerald Roberts, London, Routledge, 1987, p. 199.

/ / _ / _ /
Ye ardent marigolds!

[...]
/ / _ / _ _ _ / _ /
Dry up the moisture from your golden lids
_ _ / _ / _ /
For the great Apollo bids (49-50).

The awkwardness of Keats' extra syllables is clearly felt and in the first two examples the effect is almost colloquial. Nevertheless, the kind of looseness he aims for is not altogether unrelated to his own impulsive and spontaneous approach to composition[13]. The metrical deviations of Hopkins' poem (of which there are 24), on the other hand, exploit the principle of ellision:

Where the eye fix'd fled the encrimsoning spot
And gathering, floated where the gaze was not; (9-10)
[...]
Clustering entrancingly in beryl lakes (14).

In line nine — whose three successive stresses in "eye fix'd fled" are already an anticipation of Hopkins' sprung rhythm —, ellision occurs in the vowel falling between "the" and "encrimsoning" (thus to be pronounced "th'encrimsoning"), whilst in the following line it is already present in "gathering" since the word itself can be pronounced as two syllables, as is the case with "clustering" in line 14. Ellision is perhaps more typical of Italian verse than English (and Hopkins' use of it here recalls his later preoccupations with the sonnet form) and in recuperating the pentameter scansion allows for a certain tightness. In the following example, there is either an artificial stress on "Pompeii" intended, whose extra vowel constitutes a syllable for a line which would otherwise have only nine, or else a non ellision on "medallion'd":

[13] See Jack Stillinger, *Romantic Revisions*, ed. Robert Brinkley and Keith Hanley, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1992, who remarks that Keats rarely revised or struggled with his poems and that "Manuscript after manuscript shows him getting most of the words right first time".

_ / _ /(_)/ _ / _ /
At red Pompeii on Medallion'd walls (51).

Hopkins' second type of metrical deviation is seen in his occasional switch to alexandrines, all of which are end-stopped and function to conclude a sequence as well as interrupt the monotony of the basic pentameter beat:

With garnet wreaths and blooms of rosy bedded fire (26)

Like shiver's rubies dance or sheen of sapphire hail (73)

Whence oft I watch but see those Mermaids now no more (143).

Although both poems are in rhyming couplets, Keats' poem has a decidedly higher ratio of feminine rhymes which seem more consonant to the evocation of a dreamy vision, their final weak syllable allowing the line to trail off rather than be abruptly end-stopped. Hopkins' poem, on the other hand, has a prominence of masculine rhymes which contribute, together with his metrical tightness, to establish a more assertive tone.

From a structural point of view, the first line of each poem establishes the speaker's spatial co-ordinates:

I stood tiptoe upon a little hill (Keats)

Rowing, I reached a rock — the sea was low — (Hopkins)

Furthermore, each poem concludes with the vanishing of the poetic vision:

But now no more
My wand'ring spirit must no further soar (241-2, Keats)

Whence oft I watch but see those mermaids now no more (143, Hopkins).

(Note the same negative determiner used in each case). Also, the descriptive sequences of each poem concern the revelation of a

fantasy vision, which is at the same time dependent upon the actual external surroundings of the speaker. In Hopkins' poem the speaker is collocated in the same external scene — the sea — as his vision and in Keats the poetic fantasy is dependent on the natural setting around the speaker:

> There was wide wandering for the greediest eye
> To peer about upon variety [...]
> To picture out the quaint and curious bending
> Of a fresh woodland alley never-ending (15-18, Keats)
>
> Then looking on the waters, I was ware
> Of something drifting through the air [...] (27-8, Hopkins).

In each case the speaker is represented in the double role of passive onlooker on the one hand, and imaginative participant on the other. Interestingly, in both poems the speaker is also characterised by a sense of carefreeness: in Keats he is "light and free" (23) and in Hopkins "unhindered" (34). Although the interdependence in the two poems between external/internal, reality/fantasy is a typically Keatsian trait, Hopkins also structures his poem upon these binary oppositions and was to later exploit their dramatic potential in his religious poetry.

There are also significant differences between the two poems in terms of their spatial and temporal dimensions. The main difference lies in the fact that in Keats' poem there is a continual shifting along the syntagmatic axis reflecting the speaker's changing temporal and spatial point of view. Thus, the lexemes "wander" and "wandering", for example, are interconnected along the syntagmatic axis of the poem, shifting from natural object (natural scene) to human object (the symbolic poet) to subject (the speaker of the poem: "There was wide wandering for the greediest eye [...] The wanderer by moonlight" (185)..." My wandering spirit" (242). For Keats, the concept of wandering is an important poetic principle, and here it is played against the lack of movement represented by the poem's referential aspects: "I stood tiptoe [...] So while the poet stood" (177) [...] "He was a poet [...] /who stood on Latmus' top" (193-4) which establishes a counter-progression around the dichotomy MOBILITY/IMMOBILITY

from the Speaker-Poet to the Symbolic-Poet, creating an alternation between the erratic and the ecstatic, or what one critic has called "inspired randomness"[14] and which is a characteristic of Keat's verse in general. Likewise, here the imagination jumps from one image to another and from one poetic locus to another to produce a cumulative effect of multiplicity — it is no accident that one sequence deliberately begins with an interrogative "what next?" (107). How different to Hopkins whose poem is characterised by a concentration of the spatial and the temporal reduced to the here and now of the actual poetic vision which "thicken'd on my sight" (37), can be seen by considering the following example in which the speaker sets about describing the mermaids as they appear before him:

> [...] one translucent crest
> Of tremulous film, more subtle than the vest
> Of dewy gorse blurr'd with the gossamer fine,
> From crown to tail-fin floating, fringed the spine,
> Drooped o'er the brows like Hector's casque and swayed
> In silken undulation, spurr'd and ray'd
> With spikéd quills all of intensest hue;
> And was as tho' some sapphire molten-blue
> Were vein'd and streak'd with dusk-deep lazuli,
> Of tender pinks with bloody Tyrian dye (38-47).

Apart from the predominance of liquids, here evocative of the lapping sound of water, this extract is representative of the sort of sustained 'analytical' descriptions that abound in the poem[15]. Attention to minute detail is coupled with similes that are parenthetical embellishments to the description rather than actual

[14] John Kerrigan, "Keats, Hopkins and the History of Chance" in *Keats and History*, ed. Nicholas Roe, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 229: "His own sense of tracing [...] 'shadows with the magic hand of chance' shows how he was hospitable to the random". Kerrigan contrasts this quality in Keats with Hopkins' "mathematical self-consciousness".

[15] See N. H. MacKenzie, *A Reader's Guide to Gerard Manley Hopkins*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1981, p. 21 for a consideration of the influence of Hopkins' scientific studies on the poem.

digressions from it, creating a series of cohesive ties in which each segment qualifies the preceding one, so that "translucent crest" is comparatively linked with "the vest/Of dewy gorse" which is, in turn, "blurr'd with gossamer fine", and this crest, in turn "Drooped o'er the brows like Hector's casque" etc. Similes and metaphors in Hopkins' poem, therefore, serve to provide semantic density to the poetic vision since they inevitably point back to its signifieds (the mermaids). This intensity, which is achieved by "accumulating variations around an initial concept"[16], is also a typical feature of Hopkins' poetic procedure in his later verse. In Keats, on the other hand, the cumulative detail of signifiers along the syntagmatic chain, particularly his mythological references, assume an autonomy of their own. Signification in Keats moves outwards and whereas an ideological attitude conditions most of the paradigmatic choices in both poems, in Keats this attitude is made more explicit through the use of attitudinal terms which are almost completely absent in Hopkins' poem. Indeed, in Hopkins' poem, the poetic voice stresses his essential isolation from the vision ("I gazed unhinder'd [...] Careless of me", 103) and the only attitudinal term used is the noun "sadness" in "I know the sadness but the cause know not" (125). Whereas Keats' poem is characterised by an ecstatic tone in which the speaker loses himself in the rapture of his wandering thoughts, in Hopkins the rapture is reflected in the poet's intense concentration of aesthetic response, but it is never referred to as a quality inherent in the speaker as such.

In his poem, Keats temporally digresses into virtually all the tense forms, whereas Hopkins collocates his description in the past definite tense to which all the other tenses (present perfect, past perfect, subjunctive, past progressive and present tense) are sequentially and syntagmatically related. Whereas Keats' poem is therefore both spatially and temporally indeterminate (and this indeterminacy is the hallmark of his Romantic vision), Hopkins' poem is temporally unambiguous, presenting only a spatial

[16] John Stephens and Ruth Waterhouse, *Literature, Language and Change. From Chaucer to the Present*, London, Routledge, 1990, p. 163.

dichotomy between what pertains to reality (eg. the rock, the sea etc.) and fantasy (the mermaids).

Keats also continually draws attention to the act of poetic creation, ("And many pleasures to my vision started" (26) [...] "O maker of sweet poets, dear delight" (116) [...] "For what has made the sage or poet write/But the fair paradise of Nature's light?" (125-6). On the other hand, Hopkins self-consciously draws attention to the language which, in terms of its dense concentration of sound patterning alone ("Rowing I reached a rock — the sea was low" in itself functions as an incipit anticipating this quality in the poem) rivals Keats in sumptuousness. Indeed, his closely packed and cumulative images show an attempt to, in the words of Bernard Bergonzi, "load every rift with oar"[17]. The following is representative of the sensuousness of Hopkins' diction in the poem:

> *Pl*um-pur*ple* *w*as the *west*; but *sp*ikes of *light*
> *Sp*eared o*p*en *l*ust*r*ous gashes, crimson *w*hite;
> (*W*here the *eye* *f*ix'd, *f*led the encrimsoning spot,
> and *g*athering, *fl*oated *w*here the *g*aze was not;) (7-10, my italics).

As can be seen, this contains a tight network of alliteration and assonance, especially plosives, which give a sense of a heavy weight to the twilight setting and gradually give way to a blend of voiceless fricatives and voiced stops to suggest the melting of light. The diction is most Keatsian: "plum" (a particularly tactile and visual word) and "crimson white" are both reminiscent of Keats' sensitivity to colour, whilst "lustrous gashes" is aurally sensuous as well as semantically paradoxical (introducing an element of violence in the poem which will be discussed later on). Elsewhere, certain compounds and epithets used by Hopkins either derive directly from Keats or are imitations: words which simultaneously evoke either two or more of the sense impressions of sight, touch, taste and hearing and have a physical 'roundness' such as "rosy-lipp'd", 'rosy-budded", "planets bud", "cluster'd", flesh-flowers, "crystalline", "satin-purfled", "crimson-golden",

[17] Bernard Bergonzi, *Gerard Manley Hopkins*, New York, Collier, 1977, p. 7.

"bubbles bugle-eyed" (which recalls Keats' "beaded bubbles winking at the brim in "Ode to a Nightingale"), "shiver'd rubies", "sun-flushed", "solid green", and "cold fishes"; colour compounds strongly reminiscent of Keats: "plum-purple", "crimson-white", "blood-light", "molten-blue', "pansy-dark", "rosy-pale", "vermeil-rain", "onyx coronals" and "blood-vivid"; synaesthetic and kinetic words such as the following compounds and onomatopoeic expressions: "dainty-delicate", "crushes and tears", "plashes", "sun-flushed", "gurgled", "lush long tresses" and "quenched"; and archaic terms: "o'er", "anon", "betwix't", "ware", "where'er", "mazéd", "spikéd", "cleped", "gan", "withouten", "plaintively", "antique chaunt" and "oft". The later Hopkins would abandon some of these words, especially truncated participles, but compounding and synaesthesia were to remain constant practices in his poetic experimentation.

From another angle, "A Vision of the Mermaids" recalls something of Keats' obsession with mutability. As mentioned earlier, at a certain point both poems contain a description of nature being ravaged:

> [...] it may haply mourn
> that such fair clusters should be rudely torn
> from their fresh beds, and scattered thoughtlessly
> by infant hands, left on the path to die (43-6, Keats)

> Soon — as when Summer of his sister Spring
> Crushes and tears the rare enjewelling,
> And boasting 'I have fairer things than these'
> Plashes amidst the billowy apple-trees
> His lusty hands, in gusts of scented wind
> Swirling out bloom till all the air is blind
> With rosy foam and pelting blossom and mists
> Of driving vermeil-rain; and, as he lists,
> The dainty onyx-coronals deflowers,
> A glorious wanton; (84-93, Hopkins).

Surprisingly, the difference between the two passages lies in the higher degree of sensuality in Hopkins' poem. Keats' description, which begins with the paradoxical "haply mourn", is referentially

collocated in a conceivably realistic world in which young children, in their innocent cruelty, do indeed tear up flowers. Against this primitive violence of the child, Hopkins' metaphorical description is characterised by a sexual violence in which spring (personified as female) is raped by an aggressive and authoritarian male summer. The language is blatantly and self-consciously sexual: ("his lusty hands [...] deflowers") incestuous ("his sister Spring") and violent: "crushes and tears [...] gusts [...] pelting [...]". Such a disruptive image also contrasts with the atmosphere of reverie that characterises the rest of the poem and shows how Hopkins could exceed Keats in terms of sensuality in his early verse.

Both poems dramatise a dissociation between poetic voice and poetic vision and each concludes with the final vanishing of the poetic vision itself. Keats' evocation subsumes the dichotomy NATURE/POETRY through a constant interrelation throughout the poem between the referential world of nature and the fantasy world of mythology. On the one hand, Nature is seen as the sole inspiration of artistic and cultural expression ("For what has made the sage or poet write/But the fair paradise of Nature's light?") and in so being charms the poet away towards fanciful things such as myth; "So felt he, who first told, how Psyche went" (141). On the other, there is the sense that Nature is ultimately desolate without man's vision which transforms it by praising its beauty. Both Nature and myth, however, are seen as ultimately non graspable and the following description of fresh-water fish effectively evokes this illusive quality:

> [...] How they ever wrestle
> With their own sweet delight, and ever nestle
> Their silver bellies on the pebbly sand.
> If you but scantily hold out the hand,
> That very instant not one will remain;
> But turn your eye, and they are there again (75-80).

Similarly, the goldfinches fly off at once "in a wanton freak" (90) as soon as they are perceived. Nature is self-sufficient and deceives the poet at the same time as it inspires him. As regards the illusive nature of myth, at the very end of the poem the speaker reaches a point beyond which he can no longer continue. He literally dries up:

> Cynthia! I cannot tell the greater blisses
> That follow'd thine, and thy dear shepherd's kisses:
> Was there a poet born? — But now no more,
> My wand'ring spirit must no further soar (239-242).

The use of the modal 'must' is ambiguous. On the one hand, it may refer to the awareness of the speaker's limitations, but on the other of the risk, or rather the uselessness of continuing with his poem. For the sense is also that in re-evoking mythology in this way, he is merely narrating second hand. In his later poetry, particularly the odes, mythological elements are accommodated in terms of a dialectic tension with the real world. Here the sense is of a lush cataloguing of random items void of dramatic potential. The anacolouthon with which the poem ends, in a sense, anticipates Keats' underlying scepticism of myth making as a form of consolation'[18]. The fading of the vision in Hopkins' poem is more complex. As in Keats, the impasse of the speaker's fanciful apparitions partly alludes to the traditional belief of mermaids representing cruel deception — that of which "poets sing" (121). Similarly, the speaker is seduced into illusion by the vision of the mermaids, but once the vision disappears he also loses his ability to recreate it. On another level, while the mermaids are initially characterised by their apparent indifference to the speaker, this barrier is finally resolved by the underlying sense of sadness which links poetic voice and poetic vision: "And a sweet sadness dwelt on everyone" (117) which is followed by a significant shift to the present tense as if to indicate the extent of its effect on the speaker: "I know the sadness, but the cause know not" (125). What exactly generates this sadness is paradoxically the mermaids' essential isolation from man and the knowledge that they can have no part in his world.

Therefore, the problem of linking fantasy and reality remains

[18] See Paul A. Cantor, *Creature and Creator: Myth Making and English Romanticism*, London, Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 156: "Keats seems more interested in humanising mythology than in mythologising humanity [...] he does not view man's fate in light of the stark alternatives of salvation and damnation". This comment appropriately exposes a contrast with the religious vision of Hopkins' mature poetry.

unresolved and it is a problem that concerns the reconciliation of contrasting elements evoked explicitly or implicitly in both poems. In Keats' mature poetry the problem is expressed in terms of a powerful dialectic tension whilst in Hopkins it becomes resolvable in terms of the "profound sense of pattern, of difference-in-unity, of contrast-in-likeness"[19] which was to become such an essential characteristic of his mature works.

* *This paper was given at the "Gerard Manley Hopkins Summer School" in Monasterevin, County Kildare, in July 2000.*

[19] Bergonzi, *op. cit.*, p. 177.