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DIXON**

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Christian Pre-Raphaelitism: G. M. Hopkins' Debt to Richard Watson Dixon

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IN JUNE, 1879, Hopkins wrote an older poet and former teacher, Richard Watson Dixon, to express admiration for the latter's neglected work. Tactfully the younger man tried to comfort the older:

I seemed to owe you something or a great deal, and then I knew what I should feel myself in your position—if I had written and published works the extreme beauty of which the author himself the most keenly feels and they had . . . been (you will not mind my saying it, as it is, I suppose, plainly true) almost wholly unknown.¹

He expressed hope that Dixon's poetry might be recognized: "Many beautiful works have been almost unknown and then have gained fame at last" (*Correspondence*, p. 2). At the time of this letter Hopkins was thirty-three and Dixon forty-seven. They began a correspondence which was to last through ten of the thirteen years of Hopkins' mature poetic activity, and ended the year before Hopkins' death.

Since Dixon and Hopkins were widely separated in age and location their friendship was chiefly formal and literary, and Hopkins included many of his views on the writing of poetry in the correspondence. Most are observations about Dixon's works; since the latter have found almost no twentieth-century audience, Hopkins' comments on them have attracted little attention. Nevertheless, these judgments may be as useful for understanding Hopkins' thought as his briefer comments on ultimately more famous contemporaries. His admiration of aspects of Dixon's poetry—greater than his regard for similar qualities in the work of Tennyson, Rossetti, and Morris—reflects Hopkins' divergence from Victorian literary orthodoxy, and mirrors changes of critical judgment in its responses to Dixon's style.

Hopkins' affection for Dixon's poetry lasted from his Oxford days through his final letters. At Oxford he read Dixon's *Christ's Company* and

¹ *The Correspondence of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Richard Watson Dixon*, ed. Claude Collier Abbott (Oxford Univ. Press, 1955), p. 2; hereafter cited as *Correspondence*.

Other Poems (1861), *Historical Odes and Other Poems* (1864), a prize poem, *St. John in Patmos* (1863), and even an historical essay on the tenth-century fear of the millenium.² He studied *Christ's Company* so carefully, he told Dixon, "that I made it, so far as that could be, a part of my own mind" (*Correspondence*, p. 1). Forbidden to take books with him into the novitiate, he had copied out Dixon's "St. Paul," "St. John," "Love's Consolation," and other poems; this was no trivial labor since the three poems mentioned occupy fifty-four pages of printed text. In his first letter to Dixon he compared portions of *Christ's Company* to poems of Morris, Rossetti, Keats, and Wordsworth, finding Dixon's medieval poetry less affected than Morris' or Rossetti's and his ode "To Summer" equal to Keats's odes and Wordsworth's landscapes (*Correspondence*, pp. 2, 3). Eighteen years after reading *Christ's Company*, Hopkins could still assert that one line in "St. John," "Her eyes like lilies shaken by the bees" (st. 30),³ had given him more delight "than any single line in poetry ever gave me" (*Correspondence*, p. 3). Hopkins introduced Coventry Patmore and Robert Bridges to Dixon, and described Dixon's poetry to Bridges as in important respects superior to that of Tennyson.⁴ In 1884 he wrote a critique of Dixon's work for Thomas Arnold's *Manual of English Literature*:

In his poems we find a deep thoughtfulness and earnestness, and a mind touched by a pathos of human life . . . so much that here it would be hard to name his rival. We find also the very rare gift of pure imagination, such as Coleridge had . . . His description and imagery are realised with a truth and splendour not less than Keats' own.⁵

During the years in which he was forming his own conception of poetry, Hopkins therefore considered Dixon one of the greatest writers of his day, and it is possible that Dixon's poetry may have had an effect upon Hopkins' writing. There are in fact some resemblances between Dixon's early poems and Hopkins' religious poetry.⁶

² *The Close of the Tenth Century of the Christian Era*, Arnold Prize Essay for 1858 (Oxford, 1858). In *Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Victorian Temper* (Columbia Univ. Press, 1972), pp. 164-166, Alison Sulloway argues that Dixon and Hopkins shared a calamitarian, apocalyptic approach to history.

³ References are to *Christ's Company and Other Poems* (London, 1861).

⁴ *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1955), p. 139; hereafter cited as *Letters to Bridges*.

⁵ Thomas Arnold, *A Manual of English Literature, Historical and Critical* (Dublin, 1885), pp. 470-471; hereafter cited as *Manual*.

⁶ Practical difficulties obstruct the study of Hopkins' response to Dixon's poetry. Many of the poems Hopkins painstakingly criticized remained unpublished and have been lost. Dixon himself destroyed many before his death, perhaps in a period after his 1892 depression, when he decided only his religious work was significant. The poems of Dixon's later published volumes—*Odes and Eclogues* (1884), *Lyrical Poems* (1887), *Eudocia and her Brothers* (1889), *Songs and Odes* (1896), *Last Poems* (1905), *Selected Poems* (1909)—are not arranged in chronological order. Since Dixon attended carefully to Hopkins' criticism of his manuscripts and probably revised what Hopkins disliked, it is not easy to find specific passages which

In "St. Paul," a *Christ's Company* narrative copied out by Hopkins, the deputy Gallio recounts his religious conversion which followed a vision of divine love. The poem builds to an ecstatic conclusion as he relives his great confrontation. In frame, imagery, and diction, "St. Paul" loosely suggests Hopkins' visionary ode, "The Wreck of the Deutschland," the first poem written after his conversion to Catholicism. The narrator of "The Wreck" also describes his past conversion, evokes an incarnation, and concludes with a climactic vision of redemption. "St. Paul," like "The Wreck," uses heavily charged fire imagery, images of sky, cloud, and sea, and vivid coloration (crimson, gold), in "fire-calm soul" (p. 7), "pathos which not flamed but burned" (p. 7), "Welding glow of faith" (p. 8), and "fiery wings and fire-cloud cars" (p. 10). Pulsating romantic imagery was hardly new, but its use in this religious context is rather distinctive.

Likewise, Dixon's belief in a necessary conjunction of love and suffering expressed familiar Romantic paradox in Christianized language: "in our guilt, / Failure and pain this very love inheres" (p. 11). Compare Hopkins' sharper lines on the interfusion of God's judgment and love:

Father and fondler of heart thou hast wrung. ("The Wreck," st. 9)

To bathe in his fall-gold mercies, to breathe in his all-fire glances.
("The Wreck," st. 23)⁷

Another poem which Hopkins took with him to the novitiate, "Love's Consolation," is a Chaucerian prologue intended to precede nine tales of love. Hopkins wrote Dixon that the poem had a tenderness which "no one living could surpass" (*Correspondence*, p. 2), and praised its richness of color and the beauty of specific images of quicksilver and a heart surrounded with hair (*Correspondence*, p. 77). He found the Monk's recountal of past romantic pain very dramatic, especially the couplet beginning, "Ah, Lord, thy lightnings" (p. 86), the central sentiment of "The Wreck." Hopkins' own poems make heavy use of direct emotive language and the Victorian "ah!":

and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
Fall, gall themselves. ("The Windhover")

the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings. ("God's Grandeur")

"Love's Consolation" contains specific, colorful descriptions of the Monk's walk through the woods, by beeches, bushes, berries, vines, and the ashtrees and poplars which Hopkins admired (cf. "Binsey Poplars"). The lovers appear and describe themselves in spasmodic imagery.

Hopkins condemned. The letters do document with reasonable certainty the qualities which Hopkins admired in Dixon, and the works (cited earlier) which influenced Hopkins when he was at Oxford.

⁷Citations of Hopkins' poems are from *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie, 4th ed. (Oxford Univ. Press, 1967).

including comparisons with a "wave-wallowing wreck" (p. 94) and a ringing bell, the latter a familiar Hopkins image ("The Sea and the Skylark"). Several lines are broken into short units and enjambed:

There is one way for thee; but one; inform
Thyself of it; pursue it; one way each
Soul hath by which the infinite in reach
Lieth before him. (p. 97)

"Love's Consolation" also emphasizes a romantic belief in the importance and beauty of the individual unit of creation, a basic doctrine of Hopkins' aesthetic and religious thought:

Thousand light-shadows in the rippling sand
Joy the true soul; the waves along the strand
Whiten beyond his eyes; the trees tossed back
Show him the sky; or, heaped upon his track
In a black wave, wind-heaped, point onward still
His way, one way. O joy, joy, joy, to fill
The day with leagues! Go thy way, all things say,
Thou hast thy way to go, thou hast thy day
To live; thou hast thy need of thee to make
In the hearts of others; do thy thing; yes, slake
The world's great thirst for yet another man!
And be thou sure of this; no other can
Do for thee that appointed thee of God;
Not any light shall shine upon thy road
For other eyes; and thou mayest not pursue
The track of other feet. (*Christ's Company*, pp. 97-98)

When read with rhetorical emphasis on the pronouns, the passage sounds like a manifesto of inscape, and the touchingly premonitory "do thy thing" is reminiscent of Hopkins' more artful "the just man justices" ("The Kingfisher"). Like that of "St. Paul," the imagery of "Love's Consolation" emphasizes flowers, fire, motion, and pain:

oozes gore
Less sufferably: how our eyes draw fire
From the fire fount of pain! . . .
Flake after flake . . .
grow and glow
A white intensity of chastest flame. . . .
a wave of heaven
That flowed to us. (*Christ's Company*, p. 99)

Dixon concludes with the doctrine already expressed in "St. Paul": "Love, too, blossoms out / More perfectly from agony and doubt" (p. 100). Compare Hopkins' use of "draw fire" (no. 57), and his association of flowers and flakes with the expression of love in conflict: "Storm flakes were scroll-leaved flowers" ("The Wreck," st. 21).

"St. John," the final poem known to have been copied by Hopkins, also anticipates "The Wreck of the Deutschland" in its frame: the testimony of a man, sitting peacefully on an island, who sees a highly charged vision. "St. John" contains sixty-four repetitious Spenserian stanzas, while "The Wreck" compresses similar effects in thirty-five. Like Hopkins' poem, "St. John" uses enjambment between stanzas, and emphasizes descriptions of clouds and sea:

Half mist, half water, and all ghost, upfroze,
And bared for man the nether firmament
Between the sea and sky, what time the rent

Clouds like a garment parted from it, and close
The dark fogs sauntered earthwards; now as soon
Yon clouds part upwards, downwards; and outflows
Vast amber . . .

broods love—possessed
O'er the dark world, like dove upon her nest. (sts. 1-2)

Sensations of ascent and descent (“upwards, downwards”) are manifold in Hopkins’ poetry, and Milton’s image of a dove brooding over the dark world appears in the closing of “God’s Grandeur”: “Because the Holy Ghost over the bent / World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.” Hopkins’ “bent” and “went” may echo the “rent” and “firmament” of Dixon’s poem.

“St. John” emphasizes God’s mensuration of a circle about humanity (st. 5); in “The Wreck” Hopkins alludes to God’s hooplike embrace of humankind:

Yet did the dark side of the bay of thy blessing
Not vault them, the millions of rounds of thy mercy not reeve even them in? (st. 12)

The recurb and recovery of the gulf’s sides,
The girth of it and the wharf of it and the wall. (st. 32)

Both poets compare God with surging waves and the force which binds oceans. Like “St. Paul,” “St. John” contains a paradox of pain and vision:

pear’s head of bliss. (st. 7)
that love began

In agony . . . as flowers issue from the underclod,
Man’s anguish gives angelic love its shell
Of service. . . of love and anguish God doth mix
Peace. (sts. 9-10)

There are similarities of diction: over one hundred words occur, either in identical form or grammatical variations, in both “St. John” and “The Wreck of the Deutschland.”⁸ Dixon frequently uses a literal expression, Hopkins an allusive one; for example, Dixon describes a military “banner”; Hopkins uses “-furled” to describe Christ as conquerer. Dixon mentions “drops” of blood, Hopkins, “ruddying of the rose-flake.” In

⁸These include: above, bathe, bay, bell, best, birth, blest, bliss, blood, blue, body, breast, breath, burst, Christ, cold, cross, crowds, crown, crushed, dame, dark, dazzle, deep, dim, double, divine, drew, dull, earth, eye, ever, evil, face, falling, feel, feet, fiery, fiery flakes, fire, first, flame, flakes, fleece, flowers, foam, fought, fountains, form, found, frost, full, glory, glowing, God, grace, grain, grasped, gray, hairs, hand, head, heart, heaven, height, horror, hues, hurtle, king, knee, leaves, light, lily, lion, Lord, love, measure, might, mind, motion, mystery, nails, ocean, pale, pressed, purple, red, rest, river, rod, rolled, rose, ruddy, scarlet, secret, seraph, shone, sister, sky, softly, spring, stars, stroke, sweet, sword, tears, tell, thought, throne, tides, time, tongue, tossed, virgin, violet, water, waves, wept, west, white (used frequently in both), white flower, will, wings, womb, word, world, wrack.

general Hopkins’ precise and unusual expressions replace the commonplace generic objects of Dixon’s poem.

Besides parallels in diction, there are other common features of “St. John” and “The Wreck.” Each employs rose-and-flake-imagery throughout several stanzas. Each invokes an idealized woman—“Misraim” in “St. John,” Mary in “The Wreck”—and a holy warrior—Michael and Christ respectively. In each the vision intensifies to one of God enthroned, and each poem concludes by emphasizing the narrator’s isolation on an island. Each poem shifts constantly from viewer to vision and back again. This leads in “St. John” to vagueness, but intensifies in “The Wreck” the violent, rocking rhythms which express its sense of pained paradox and shock. Perhaps the undergraduate Hopkins so absorbed “St. John” that its excited rhythms and imagery were available to him years later as prototypes for the more concise and structured poetry of “The Wreck.”

Hopkins’ interest in “St. John” reflected his general preference for Dixon’s odes, perhaps in part the result of shared interest in classical forms. He praised the “Ode to Shadow,” found the “Ode on the Death of Dickens” “fine and stirring” (*Correspondence*, p. 73), and enthusiastically called the “Ode on Advancing Age” “one of the very grandest ever written” (*Correspondence*, p. 157). He praised a Dixon ode on learning and sympathy (“Sympathy: An Ode”) and felt the “Ode to Summer” was so superlative that it could only be ranked with odes by Keats (*Correspondence*, p. 3). The “Ode on Conflicting Claims” he found the best of a sheaf of manuscripts Dixon sent him, nearly perfect in execution and excellent in thought and feeling, “to me a poem of an immortal beauty” (*Correspondence*, p. 68). In his last preserved letter to Dixon, he urged in a postscript, “Please write more odes” (p. 157). The only exceptions to Hopkins’ preference for Dixon’s odes were the latter’s historical odes, which might better be classified as verse narratives. Dixon’s otherwise monotonous and regular verse seems to have benefited from the necessity to vary rhythm and verse length in the odes, as in this passage from the “Ode on the Death of Dickens”:

Beneath the invisible scourge
Of the south to foam upleaps the wave:
The tides hasten: the blasts urge
From the depth of their grey mysterious cave,
The white precipitate clouds, that seem made
More slowly to wander the sky, like a herd
Of deep-uddered cows hotly bayed
By a fierce dog beyond their own pace: but the bird
Turns seaward a sun-smitten wing:
For the storm and the calm are there. (st. 1)

Hopkins particularly admired the cows-and-dog conceit, the most strained, “eccentric” image of the poem.

Hopkins' strongest reason for preferring Dixon's odes was probably their direct, personal elegiac emotion, analogous to Hopkins' own melancholia:

Already, see, the broad-leaved sycamore
 Drops one by one his honours to the floor:
 For his wide mouths thou canst no longer find,
 Poor mother that thou art, the needful food;
 The air doth less abound with nectar kind:
 And soon his brethren of the prosperous wood
 Shall paler grow: thou shalt be fallow-hued,
 Mother, too soon; dies too
 The aspiration thou hast sent,
 The thrilling joy, the sweet content
 That live with trees so green and heavens so blue. ("To Summer")

Hopkins also appreciated Dixon's other falling-leaf elegies, "Feathers of the Willow" and "Fall of the Leaf," and used similar motifs in his "Spring and Fall."

Many of Dixon's simpler nature lyrics delighted Hopkins. He called "Fallen Rain" a "most delicate and touching piece of imagination" (*Correspondence*, p. 20), as beautiful a "work of pure imagination" (pp. 47-48) as could be found. With fastidious physical exactitude he criticized the description in the poem of rain: "The rain could never be wooed by the rainbow which only comes into being by its falling nor could witness the wooing when made" (*Correspondence*, p. 20). Hopkins made tunes for several of these nature lyrics, including "Fallen Rain" and "Feathers of the Willow," and his sister Grace composed others at his request. The "Fall of the Leaf" was to him "this beautiful poem" (*Correspondence*, p. 73); of "The Feathers of the Willow" he stated, "I do not think anywhere two stanzas so crowded with the pathos of nature and landscape could be found (except perhaps there are some in Wordsworth)" (*Correspondence*, p. 3).

The feathers of the willow
 Are half of them grown yellow
 Above the swelling stream;
 And ragged are the bushes,
 And rusty now the rushes,
 And wild the clouded gleam.
 The thistle now is older,
 His stalk begins to moulder,
 His head is white as snow;
 The branches all are barer,
 The linnet's song is rarer,
 The robin pipeth now.

Though "Feathers of the Willow" contains motifs of seasonal and human decay, described in liquid rustling sounds which Hopkins seemed to find attractive, it is hard now to understand why he felt such pathos in this poem. Another favorite, "Sky, that rollest ever," consists of five quatrains, the last of which describes the final return of rain to the sea. Hopkins wrote

to Bridges of its "pathetic imagination" (*Letters to Bridges*, p. 250) and projection of emotion into nature.

Hopkins also made extensive comments on Dixon's narrative romances, the works for which Dixon was most noted in his lifetime. In addition to the neo-Chaucerian romances of his "Love's Consolation" series, Dixon published in 1883 his major work, *Mano: A Poetical History of the Time of the Close of the Tenth Century Concerning the Adventures of a Norman Knight*. He began several "northern epics," but seems to have destroyed them all, perhaps in reaction to Bridges' comments on their epigonism. Though he later criticized their inconsistencies of plot, Hopkins continued to admire Dixon's medieval romances. At one point Hopkins felt narrative might be Dixon's best poetic mode, writing Bridges:

I hope he will push on with the epic or romance you saw, for he will be more telling in a long than in short pieces, as is natural in one who is rich in matter and imperfect in form. I see no reason why he should not write the finest narrative poem of this age. (*Letters to Bridges*, p. 139)

Hopkins seems to have admired the romances for the natural description, visionary religion, and private melancholia which characterize Dixon's other writings. At first, he admired Dixon's medievalisms and felt them more authentic than those of Rossetti and Morris (*Correspondence*, p. 2). Since Dixon was the only poet of Pre-Raphaelite tendencies who remained an orthodox Christian, it was natural that Hopkins found his medievalisms less irritating than the secular/sexualized variants in Rossetti's art-Catholic poems or Morris' *The Defence of Guenevere* and *The Earthly Paradise*.

Hopkins' general praise of *Mano* in Arnold's *Manual of English Literature* was qualified by observation of its faults:

Mano is . . . noble but never highflown, sad without noise or straining—everything as it most reaches and comes home to man's heart. In particular he is a master of horror . . . and pathos. . . . He is faulty by a certain vagueness of form, some unpleasing rhymes, and most by an obscurity—partly of thought, partly of expression—suggesting a deeper meaning behind the text without leaving the reader any decisive clue to find it. This fault injures the general effect of *Mano*. (*Manual*, pp. 470-471)

It is incongruous to see the gentle Dixon described as a "master of horror," especially since the nettles which *Mano* sees on his way to the stake are the only example cited by Hopkins in support of his epithet. Presumably Hopkins was referring to Dixon's descriptions of pain.

Hopkins also praised *Mano*'s archaisms for their dramatic effect, but considered the general use of postfabricated antiquarian diction vicious: "I half think . . . that nothing was ever quaint in its time" (*Correspondence*, pp. 177-178, 66). In theorizing that past events should be described through "deepings"—details which simultaneously convey a sense of past and present—Hopkins followed the practices of Ruskin, Morris, Tennyson, and other Victorian medievalizers. His use of Anglo-Saxon stems attempted to carry through this practice: "Churlgrace, too, child of

Amansstrength, how it hangs or hurls" ("Harry Ploughman"). "Churlsgace" and "Amansstrength" convey more of the rooted vigor of Saxonisms than Dixon's fadedly derivative and Spenserian use of "gan," "oft," "whither," and "wont."

Raised on the poetry of Coleridge, Keats, and Wordsworth, student of Pater and admirer of Ruskin, Hopkins naturally responded to many features of contemporary Victorian romanticism, but he needed a Christian intermediary who could present new patterns in a form amenable to his conservative religious sensibility. Hopkins responded with special pleading to Dixon's attempts to fuse spasmodic language and Christian doctrine, in the hope that he might encourage a great Christian poet. The tacit critical assumption that a major poet learns little from a minor one must here be abrogated. Hopkins and Dixon were allied by significant affinities of interest and temperament: Dixon was the only contemporary who recognized Hopkins' brilliance of mind, and told him so continually and fervently, and Hopkins in turn was perhaps Dixon's most intense admirer. Both rejected the heterodoxy of Pre-Raphaelitism, but accepted Pre-Raphaelite definitions of "beauty" and "design." Both valued emblematic, bright coloration, detailed description, and paradoxical evocations of love and pain. Hopkins claimed Dixon possessed a pathos "the deepest, I think, that I have anywhere found" (*Correspondence*, p. 37); since he was not given to imprecision, and had read Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, the Romantics, and Greek and Latin classics, he clearly considered the older poet a kindred spirit whose preoccupations he understood intuitively, and whose elegiac mode and religious faith harmonized with his own sensibility. There are strong reasons to believe that Hopkins' early reading of Dixon confirmed his own tastes and influenced "The Wreck of the Deutschland," and that Hopkins' work in turn may have affected Dixon's later poetry—for example, Dixon's "To Peace," which resembles Hopkins' "Peace" (no. 51). Hopkins confessed later in life that some of the romantic poems of *Christ's Company* (and of Tennyson) failed to move him as they once had—he felt the failure was partly his—but the structural and prosodic precision against which he judged Dixon in this period were those of his best poetry. As Hopkins outgrew Dixon's influence, he became progressively more critical of the latter's prosodic and narrative deficiencies, but he never deprecated the highly passionate qualities he most admired in Dixon—pathos, tenderness, and subtlety in description of natural change—which heightened his own gift for clarity in complexity and compression.