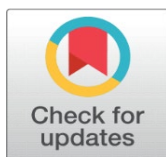
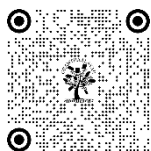


THE MORAL AND AESTHETIC DILEMMAS OF URBAN NATURE IN GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS' SELECT WORKS

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ABSTRACT

Gerard Manley Hopkins emerges as a pivotal Victorian poet whose innovative poetics anticipate modernist aesthetics while articulating a profound ecological consciousness. His work critically interrogates the industrial transformation of 19th-century urban landscapes, synthesizing theological reflection with environmental critique. Employing experimental linguistic strategies and fragmented imagery, Hopkins develops a unique hermeneutic for interpreting industrial environments. His poetry dialectically negotiates the tension between spiritual transcendence and material degradation, challenging prevailing aesthetic and philosophical paradigms of his era.

Through a close analysis of poems like *"The Sea and the Skylark"* and *"Duns Scotus's Oxford,"* this study examines Hopkins' nuanced engagement with urban ecological discourse. His poetic framework reveals a complex interplay between industrial transformation, environmental disruption, and human phenomenological experience. Hopkins' critical perspective is characterized by a dual hermeneutic: lamentation for urban ecological decline and a redemptive vision of potential ecological-spiritual reconciliation. Drawing inspiration from the philosophical insights of Duns Scotus, he reimagines urban spaces as sites of potential spiritual and ecological regeneration. Situated within contemporary ecocritical discourse, Hopkins' work provides a prescient critique of industrial progress. By interrogating the aesthetic and moral dimensions of urbanization, he offers a sophisticated philosophical-poetic response to environmental degradation that resonates with current ecological challenges. The analysis demonstrates Hopkins' significance as not merely a Victorian poet, but a critical ecological thinker whose work anticipates late 20th and early 21st-century environmental humanities scholarship.

Keywords: Gerard Manley Hopkins, Urban Nature, Industrialization, Ecocriticism, Environmental Ethics

1. INTRODUCTION

Gerard Manley Hopkins, a Catholic priest and poet of the Victorian era, stands as a visionary figure whose poetic oeuvre offers profound insights into the environmental and socio-cultural upheavals of his time. His works resonate with a deep awareness of the ecological and aesthetic transformations brought about by industrialization, making his perspectives increasingly relevant in the contemporary era of environmental crisis (Phillips, 2012). Hopkins' ecological vision, intricately tied to his religious convictions, is articulated through a rich tapestry of imagery and symbolism rooted in his faith and philosophical outlook (Gardner, 1978). His poetry not only critiques the degradation of nature but also explores the human and spiritual dimensions of these changes, highlighting the intersection of beauty, morality, and environmental stewardship (White, 1990).

The industrial revolution ushered in an era of unprecedented urban growth and economic transformation, altering the fabric of British society. Once predominantly agrarian, the nation transitioned into a commercial and industrial powerhouse, with urban centers mushrooming around production units (Engels, 1845). These cities, however, often lacked adequate infrastructure, sanitation, and basic amenities, leading to squalid living conditions for the working class (Briggs, 1963). The stark juxtaposition of industrial progress and human suffering presented a moral and aesthetic challenge for Victorian poets, compelling them to grapple with the presence or absence of beauty amidst urban chaos (Landow, 1980).

Hopkins' poetic engagement with urban nature reflects this tension, offering a nuanced perspective on the interplay between industrial growth and environmental decline (Abrams, 1971). While his poetry celebrates the inherent beauty of creation, it also critiques the disfigurement of the natural and urban landscapes caused by industrial expansion. His ability to perceive and articulate beauty within traditionally unpoetical surroundings reveals his innovative approach to both aesthetics and social critique (Guimond, 2000).

This paper explores Hopkins' depiction of urban nature, focusing on how he grapples with the industrial changes of his time and redefines the perception of beauty in the midst of urban disarray. Hopkins' poetry powerfully captures this transformation, as evident in his observation that "generations have trod, have trod, have trod" (Hopkins, 1918/1967, "God's Grandeur"), reflecting the repetitive and destructive nature of industrial progress.

By examining his works within the framework of ecocriticism and Victorian socio-cultural dynamics, this study highlights the relevance of Hopkins' ecological aesthetics in understanding the complex relationship between industrial progress, environmental disintegration, and the human spirit. As Roberts (1994) notes, Hopkins "saw nature not as a passive backdrop, but as a dynamic, spiritually charged landscape" (p. 67), which becomes particularly significant in his urban poetry.

Through close analysis, the paper reveals Hopkins' unique ability to perceive beauty in seemingly unpoetic environments. In "Binsey Poplars," he laments the destruction of nature with the poignant lines, "O if we but knew what we are doing, / When we delve or hew" (Hopkins, 1918/1967), critiquing the thoughtless environmental degradation of his time. White (1990) argues that such verses represent "a profound ecological consciousness that predates modern environmental discourse" (p.42).

The study seeks to situate Hopkins' poetry as a vital resource for engaging with contemporary discussions on urbanization, environmental ethics, and the role of art in fostering ecological awareness. Phillips (2012) suggests that Hopkins' work offers "a radical reimagining of human-nature relationships" (p. 89), making his poetry remarkably prescient in addressing current environmental challenges.

Hopkins, as part of his assignments in industrial urban centers, had to be directly in touch with some of these pressing problems. He bemoans the ugliness, squalor, and the unpleasant noise that make the city life aesthetically unappreciable. For instance, he reacts to conditions of existence in Liverpool as: "It is indeed a most unhappy and miserable spot" (Abbott, 1955, p. 42). Later, when he moved to Glasgow, he found only slight improvement in the condition of surroundings: "Things are pleasanter here than at Liverpool. Wretched place too Glasgow is, like all our great towns; still I get on better here, though bad is the best of my getting on" (Abbott, 1955, p. 135).

Complementing Hopkins' observations, Timothy Morton's ecocritical perspective in *Ecology Without Nature* (2007) argues that "industrial landscapes produce a radical disjunction between human perception and environmental reality" (p. 54). Greg Garrard's *Ecocriticism* (2004) further contextualizes this experience, noting that "Victorian urban landscapes represented a profound rupture in humanity's relationship with the natural world" (p. 72).

It was not just the environmental conditions that affected him but more than that the pitiable condition of the poor people who were victims of urban life. His words on the ground reality echo his deep concern for the misery of people and their humanness:

"My Liverpool and Glasgow experience laid upon my mind a conviction, a truly crushing conviction, of the misery of town life to the poor and more than to the poor, of the misery of the poor in general, of the degradation even of our race, of the hollowness of this century's civilisation: it made even life a burden to me to have daily thrust upon me the things I saw." (Abbott, 1955, p. 97)

Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble* (2016) resonates with this perspective, arguing that "industrial landscapes are sites of profound ecological and social violence" (p. 103). Similarly, Rob Nixon's concept of "slow

violence” in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) illuminates the systemic suffering embedded in urban industrial transformations.

The loss of rural serenity that the recently migrated masses experienced, along with a feeling of alienation from nature resulting from changes in life and mode of production, were crucial issues in Hopkins’ time. Two of Hopkins’ poems, “The Sea and the Skylark” and “Duns Scotus’s Oxford,” express his concerns and perspectives on urban living, embodying what Lawrence Buell in *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005) describes as “the poetic articulation of ecological consciousness” (p. 89).

2. INDUSTRIAL CHAOS AND NATURAL HARMONY IN “THE SEA AND THE SKYLARK”

During his studies of theology at St Bueno’s college, Wales, Hopkins was sent on a forced vacation to the Coastal resort town of Rhyl to recuperate his health. Rhyl, that time, was a sleepy coastal town slowly on the course of becoming an attractive tourist location beckoning people from many industrialized cities of England for a well-deserved vacation. “The Sea and the Skylark”, Petrarchan sonnet, written while he was at Rhyl in 1877 was originally titled “Walking by the Sea.”

In the octave, Hopkins compares two ancient sounds: those of the sea and the songbird, the skylark: “On ear and ear two noises too old to end” (1). In the first quatrain of the octave Hopkins deals with the sea, describing its might and terrible beauty through the onomatopoeic representation of the sound it makes. Hopkins is walking westwards along the shore near the North Wales town of Rhyl with the sea on his right hand: “With a flood or a fall, low lull-off or all roar, / Frequenting there while moon shall wear and wend” (3-4). He skilfully portrays the contrasting sounds of the high and the low tide and merging and contrasting it well with the song of the skylark which he was able to hear at the same time while he was on the move.

The second quatrain centres on the skylark, giving a detailed imagery of it. On his left hand lie the sand dunes, a favourite haunt of the skylark, over which the lark is soaring, making its singing louder with its rise: “His rash-fresh re-winded new-skeined score / In crisps of curl off wild winch whirl, and pour” (6-7). The powerful and impetuous quality of the sound from the skylark is emphasized by its being classed with the noise of the sea: both „trench“ his hearing.

The sestet describes the apathy and indignation that the poet feels towards the man-made progress in the city. The „two noises too old to end,“ the sea and the skylark, creations of God, according to the poet, are shaming the man-made town which lies behind him: “How these two shame this shallow and frail town!” (9). The poet feels disillusioned at the crowded, noisy, and dirty town filled with tourists from industrial cities bearing the marks of their ordeal, and agony at the merciless practices of industrial life. Here, Hopkins looks town-wards, condemning human intrusion on the tranquillity of nature with a number of heavy hitting adjectives like “shallow,” “frail,” “sordid,” “turbid;” and evoking a miniature industrial revolution in the hard, angry, reductive rhymes of “Our make and making break, are breaking down.” Like a prophet, he reminds that the sea and the skylark embody nature’s and God’s moral challenge. And they emphatically “ring right out” the diminished, man- made present like a corrective cleansing sound.

The town is presented in the poem as everything that is opposed to the culture and value of natural life. The contrast is made between the sea and the skylark on the one hand and the man-made city on the other. The prophetic vision of Hopkins enables him to see “how these two shame this shallow and frail town! / How ring right out our sordid turbid time” (9-10). The poet is affirming the life giving purity of nature against the sordidness of the civilization that man is creating. In the overall presentation of the poem the city gets a new meaning: Hopkins treats Rhyl as a symbol of Victorian progress, uniformity and rootlessness. Like the semi-fashionable suburbs being flung up all over Britain, it had no history and little character or inscape ((Mackenzie, 1981, p. 73). Hopkins believed that these man-made centers of human public interaction fundamentally lacked integration into nature. The plight and agony of the town-folk always affected Hopkins particularly the miserable life of the working class in the industrial cities. The essential humanness is vitiated in cities as they are artificial structures built up without heeding the vitality of nature. Therefore he observed that people in the industrialized city too lack this essential vitality.

Hopkins attributes a higher role for the humans in nature. In virtue of the incarnational principle all beings share the essence of Christ but considering the fact that humans share the essence with Christ more than other beings force Hopkins take a more humanistic stand. Like Darwin, Hopkins too believed—true to his Christian calling—that humankind is the highest form of development in the world. It is not a position of privilege but one of taking

responsibility for the rest of creation. The Psalmist's glorification of humans appears to be the immediate inspiration for Hopkins to seriously think about their role and status in nature:

What is man that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him? For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels and hast crowned him with glory and honour. Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet. (8:4-6)

Resonating with the wisdom of the psalmist, Hopkins places man at a higher pedestal wondering whether, "Being pure! We, life's pride and cared-for crown, / Have lost that cheer and charm of earth's past prime" (11-12). Arguing that man is created chiefly to pay glory and reverence to God, Hopkins claims that created "a little lower than angels" man gives God glory "even by his being, beyond all visible creatures" (Devlin, 1959, p. 239). Man is distinctive in the sense he is able to give

God conscious glory as a being "more highly pitched, selved and distinctive than anything in the world" (Devlin, 1959, p. 122). However, by failing to live up to the individual distinctiveness, man has failed in his ontological purpose: "To man's last dust, drain fast towards man's first slime" (14). Therefore, to Hopkins, humanity's so-called progress is „towards man's first slime": in its superficiality, it is reversing down any so-called chain of evolution. In tune with his often repeated theme, appears also in his "Spring," Hopkins believes humankind's paradise has been lost, and people have fallen away from the way God intended them to be. The imagery of dust and slime in the last line of the poem represent spiritual degeneration; but at the same time, they were also the visible by-products of industrialization.

3. THE INTERPLAY OF URBAN AESTHETICS AND ENVIRONMENTAL INTEGRITY IN HOPKINS' "DUNS SCOTUS'S OXFORD"

Hopkins composed the poem "Duns Scotus's Oxford" in March 1879 as a tribute to his thirteenth century mentor Duns Scotus. The poem happened on his return to Oxford, his alma mater, after eleven years of gap as a Jesuit priest to serve in a parish nearby. A sonnet in form, the poem demonstrates Hopkins' attitude to city. His appreciation for the city of Oxford proves his attraction for cities characterized by an intermingling of natural and built components.

The first quatrain of the octave of the sonnet presents Oxford at its best as a well-constructed and neatly maintained city, a fine dwelling place apt for stay and study, "Towery city and branchy between towers" (1). Remarkably blending the natural with the urban, the poet makes the poem a perfect meeting ground of town and country. Tall buildings branching out in different directions evoke the sense of a tall tree with branches in all directions creating a large space of shade and comfort. The university as a centre of higher learning, provides shelter and shade like a large tree, is a haven for the knowledge seekers. The poet attempts a metamorphosis of the university into a comforting tree by placing it very much in the middle of natural beauty: "Cuckoo-echoing, bell swarmed, lark-charmed, rook-racked, river rounded" (2). The city was „river rounded" with the Cherwell and the Thames flowing around the east, south and the west. On all four sides, the university campus is finely decorated with meadows where flocks or herds grazed or where corn and hay were harvested. These depictions of natural beauty cast the Oxford amidst a landscape of exquisite beauty, marked by balanced harmony of elements in nature. Therefore, the poet continues, "that country and town did / Once encounter in, here coped and poised powers" (3-4), implicitly creating a sense of balance and harmony. Mackenzie corroborates this when he says, "from any vantage point Oxford offers a silhouette of towers and trees-man and nature in superb conjunction" (111).

Hopkins was deeply convinced of the fact that everyone had an equal claim to the fruits of the nature like the air, water and the soil. His life as a pastor in different town parishes of London metropolis helped him have a firsthand experience of the drudgery of city life. He noted how the disharmony of the three vital elements of the nature like air, water and soil makes the lives of the townsfolk miserable. In a letter to his mother in 1870, Hopkins wrote: "No one is ever so poor that he is not (without prejudice to all the rest of the world) owner of the skies and stars and everything wild that is to be found on the earth" (Abbott, 1956, p. 111). Hopkins believed that before the industrial revolution, the respective powers of "country and town," nature and man, met each other coped within the city walls and poised in even balance with each other. He regrets that such a balance and harmony was fast diminishing as a result of unscientific town planning and shallow architectural practices.

Portraying Oxford as a city architecturally well-conceived and noting its recent diversions denigrating the original beauty, Hopkins points out the nature of humanity's impact on the environment.

In the second quatrain, the poet focuses his attention on the “base and brackish” outskirts of the town. With the expansion of the city, there came a new set of buildings not in tune with the existing architecture but terrace houses in red or yellow brick marring the beauty of the city. These new structures not only crowded the city in the pretext of providing cheap accommodation for the burgeoning population but also caused environmental hazards with improper sanitation and unhygienic surroundings. Therefore, he complains that “Thou hast a base and brackish skirt there, sours / That neighbour nature they grey beauty is grounded” (5-6). The “graceless growth” sour and spoil the natural beauty and shocked by the apathy, he laments that humans have failed in their duty to keep the integrity of nature and rural tradition. As Parhan rightly observes: “Hopkins was criticizing not urban development per se but, specifically, the aesthetically “graceless” quality of modern growth that had destroyed the hitherto mutually interrelated environment” (2010, p. 212). Therefore, the poet laments: “Rural rural keeping-folk, flocks, and flowers” (8), implying that no sustainable progress can be made unless a ceaseless care is provided for the upkeep of folk, flocks of sheep and its lovely wild flowers.

Hopkins’ insatiable search for a lasting solution to the degradation of nature finds resonance in Duns Scotus’ philosophical framework. As Timothy Morton (2007) argues in *Ecology Without Nature*, this approach represents “a radical reconceptualization of individuality beyond anthropocentric limitations” (p. 42). Hopkins celebrates Scotus’ philosophical insight: “Of reality the rarest-veined unraveller; a not / Rivalled insight, be rival Italy or Greece” (12-13). Scotus’ theory on the importance of the particular aligns with contemporary ecocritical perspectives. Lawrence Buell (2005) notes that such an approach represents “a fundamental reimagining of ecological interconnectedness” (p. 67). When one recognizes the inherent worth of each being, it promotes a more holistic environmental understanding.

Greg Garrard’s *Ecocriticism* (2004) further contextualizes this perspective, suggesting that such philosophical frameworks offer “a transformative approach to understanding human-nature relationships” (p. 89). Donna Haraway’s *Staying with the Trouble* (2016) extends this idea, arguing that recognizing the “unique materiality of each being” is crucial for developing sustainable ecological consciousness (p. 103).

Rob Nixon’s concept of “slow violence” in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) provides additional depth to Hopkins’ ecological vision, highlighting the importance of recognizing the intrinsic value of individual entities within complex ecological systems (p. 54). Scotus’ theory on the importance of the particular as a true source of knowledge has been a key for Hopkins to apprehend the integrity and interrelatedness of the universe. When one is able to recognize the inherent worth of each being and honour its value, it can promote a sustainable, more holistic, and integrated approach to life in nature.

4. CONCLUSION

An analysis of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poems, “The Sea and the Skylark” and “Duns Scotus’s Oxford,” through an Ecocritical lens, unravels his nuanced portrayal of urban nature and its entanglement with the industrial transformations of his time. Hopkins critiques the profound alterations industrialization imposed on both natural and urban landscapes, revealing their physical and spiritual disfigurement. He identifies how industrial progress not only reshaped environments but also fundamentally distorted human perceptions of nature and its inherent value. His poetry lays bare the aesthetic and moral costs of the Victorian society’s emphasis on utilitarianism, consumerism, and profit-driven practices, which prioritized economic gains over ecological and human well-being.

At the heart of Hopkins’ critique is his prophetic insight into the interconnectedness of nature, humanity, and spirituality. In “The Sea and the Skylark,” the juxtaposition of the eternal sounds of the sea and the skylark with the sordidness of urban life underscores the loss of harmony and vitality in the human-built environment. Similarly, in “Duns Scotus’s Oxford,” Hopkins laments the decline of architectural and ecological integration, illustrating how unchecked urban expansion disrupted the balance between rural and urban spaces. Yet, he also finds hope in the enduring beauty of Oxford’s past and the insights of Duns Scotus, whose philosophy inspires a vision of nature’s integrity and the unique value of all beings.

Hopkins’ ecological aesthetics challenge readers to reconsider the prevailing ideologies of his time and their enduring legacy. His works call for a renewed reverence for nature and a commitment to sustainable practices that honour both the material and spiritual dimensions of existence. Through his poetic engagement with urban nature, Hopkins not only critiques the Victorian industrial order but also offers a timeless meditation on humanity’s role as

stewards of creation. His vision remains profoundly relevant in addressing the ecological crises of the contemporary world.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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