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G.M. HOPKINS AND TWO DANTES

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The paper analyzes the attitude of the English Victorian poet G.M. Hopkins to his contemporary and compatriot Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Italian Early Renaissance poet Dante Alighieri and the ways Hopkins and Rossetti interpreted medieval allegorical tradition.

Keywords: *G.M. Hopkins, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Dante Alighieri, medieval allegoric and symbolic traditions*

Introduction. During the reign of Queen Victoria English culture focused on the reclaiming of the medieval past. The Gothic Revival style became the fashion of the day, represented by the Houses of Parliament rebuilt after the fire of 1834 by Charles Barry. The painters and poets of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood founded in 1848 followed the medieval outlook on art. Medieval literature was quite the fashion of the day, especially legends about chivalrous knights, charming ladies and courtly love as described by Th. Malory (1415 – 1471) in his *Morte d'Arthur*. Alfred Tennyson, the Poet Laureate and one of the leading figures in Victorian literature, adapted the subject matter of medieval Arthurian legend to the problems of the day in *Idylls of the King*. Victorian Medieval Revival brought into focus the life story and poetic legacy of Dante Alighieri, the greatest poet of European Middle Ages. The attempt to describe and analyze how two Victorian poets, G.M. Hopkins and D.G. Rossetti interpreted Dante allegorical tradition might enrich the understanding of the 19th century English poetry and of Hopkins and Rossetti poetic genius.

The paper deals with the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins which is a unique phenomenon. Never published in his lifetime, it is now considered one of the highlights of Victorian poetry. The study of his attitude to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, another major Victorian poet, and of both of them to Dante Alighieri shows the influence of medieval allegorical tradition on the 19th century English poetry.

Main part. Though Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844 – 1889) and Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828 – 1882) were contemporaries, they never met personally. Hopkins was well acquainted both with Rossetti's poems and his pictures, and had some connections with Rossetti's circle. In a letter to Baillie (July 12 – August 14, 1864) among "great things" he has to tell his friend about Hopkins writes: "I have been introduced to Miss and Miss Christina Rossetti, Holmen Hunt and some other people [1, vol. 1, p. 66]. Hopkins' letter to his mother (March 5, 1882) includes the praise of Ch. Rossetti's book of poetry [1, vol.1, p. 216].

His friend Richard Dixon was acquainted with Edward Burne-Jones since his study at Birmingham Grammar School and with William Morris since his student days at Oxford and even studied painting under Rossetti's guidance. G.M. Hopkins was well aware of his friend's connections with the Pre-Raphaelite group, in a letter to Dixon (13 – 15 June, 1878) he expresses his pleasure at the fact that both D.G. Rossetti and E. Burne-Jones are admirers of Dixon poetry [1, vol.1, p. 305].

In a number of letters Hopkins mentions Rossetti's poems, referring to him as a member of medievalist group. Thus, in a letter to Dixon (1 – 16 of December, 1881) Hopkins supposed that his friend and W. Morris belonged to the same school which he called the school of Rossetti or the school of Pre-Raphaelites, and a few lines further "this modern medieval school" [1, vol. 1, p. 504–505]. It is a well-known fact that G.M. Hopkins wrote to D.G. Rossetti praising his art. His admiration was not reciprocated. The Pre-Raphaelites did not think high of Hopkins' poetry. In 1881 Hall Caine, a good friend of the Pre-Raphaelites was editing anthology "Sonnets of Three Centuries". D.G. Rossetti wrote to him recommending sonnets by Dixon, whom he characterized as "an admirable poet" [see 9, p. 258]. Caine accepted Dixon poems but rejected Hopkins' [9, p. 250]. Coventry Patmore, who was Hopkins' correspondent for quite a while, read a handwritten copy of his poems and found them too difficult, "of a kind to appeal only to few" [9, p. 323]. There is some evidence D.G. Rossetti alongside with Patmore and Hall Caine also rejected Hopkins' poems [1, vol. 2. p. xlvi, note].

Hopkins was greatly interested in Pre-Raphaelite painting and made some special arrangement with Mr. Rae "to see his Rossettis" [1, vol.1, p. 438]. In letters he also discusses Rossetti's pictures *Damsel* and *Dante's Dream*. It is obvious that at the beginning of 1883 Hopkins was very much interested in Rossetti's posthumous exhibition (see letter to R. Bridges, 4-5 January, 1883 and also a letter to Baillie of 14, January, 1883) and in a letter to Bridges (28 – 29 January 1883) [1, vol.2, p. 560, 565] mentioned his disapproval of Noel Paton's comparison of "Dante's Dream" and Sistine Madonna.

One of the reasons to put the names of D.G. Rossetti and G.M. Hopkins in a row is their veneration of Dante Alighieri. There's no need to mention that the father of D.G. Rossetti was a great admirer of the author of

Divine Comedy and named his son after him and that D.G. Rossetti adored Dante, translated Dante, used many Dante's images and motifs in his works.

G.M. Hopkins also valued Dante Alighieri very highly throughout his life. He took Dante's portrait to Oxford to decorate his room alongside with the portraits of Raphael, Tennyson, Shelley, Keats, Shakespeare, Milton and Dürer. Hopkins considered Dante a major poet and often put his name alongside with that of Shakespeare. In his notebooks and diaries he mentions Dante's name several times admiringly and with veneration. In the diary for 1864 reflecting on Catholicism Hopkins wrote, "We live to see how Shakespeare's England weds with Dante's Italy" [2, p. 248]. In a letter of 3 – 10 January 1883 to Robert Bridges he discusses what a gentleman is. Hopkins' notion of a gentleman is highly Christian and connected with the idea of self-sacrifice. He writes that Christ was "not snatching at the truest and highest good, the good that was his right" and that He "humbled himself to death". This is "the root of all His holiness and the imitation of this the root of all moral good in other man". Only moral good makes a true gentleman and this quality puts a gentleman "if there is such a thing on the earth" in the position "to despise the poet, were he Dante or Shakespeare" [1, vol. 2, p.569].

On Easter Eve 1885 Hopkins wrote to Patmore trying "to spur" him "on" with his poem [1, vol. 2, p. 723] (meaning *Marriage of the Blessed Virgin* Patmore planned to write). One of the arguments Hopkins gives is that if Patmore wrote such a poem it would add more brilliance to his shorter pieces. To prove his point Hopkins mentions great names. "Are Virgil's *Georgics* and *Bucolics* read more or less for his having written *Aeneid*? Much more. So of Shakespeare and Dante" [1, vol. 2, p. 724]. In a letter of 11 February 1886 addressed to Bailie among the examples of "best literature" Hopkins speaks of *Divine Comedy* [1, vol. 2, p. 758].

Besides mentioned above, there's a lot of evidence that both D.G. Rossetti and G.M. Hopkins admired Dante Alighieri. Dante, one of the major European poets, was a great medieval author. His '*Divine Comedy*' and other works are sort of a summary of medieval literary tradition, Summa allegorica. He also contemplates on allegory as a theoretical phenomenon. "Dante distinguishes two forms of allegory. The first is 'the allegory of poets', and the second 'the allegory of theologians'. He says, that in the 'allegory of poets', the quarry is the truth 'hidden under a beautiful fiction' [3, p. 43], and that there is no necessary truth in the literal story being told. But the Bible is characterized by the 'allegory of theologians', where both the literal and the allegorical levels are true" [4, p. 25–26].

No doubt Dante Alighieri was very well aware of the tradition to read both secular and religious texts as allegories. He gave the best and most well-known explanations of what allegory is. In *Convivio*, written before '*Divine Comedy*' (book 4, chapter 26) Dante "offers an allegorical interpretation of the *Aeneid* books 4 to 6" [4, p. 24], describing the death of Dido and Aeneas descent to the underworld. Dante "reads Virgil's text as a charting of three ages of man" [4, p. 24]. In the famous letter to Can Grande della Scala Dante distinguishes 4 levels of interpreting religious texts – the literal, the allegorical, the moral and the anagogical – and "extends then to the interpretation of his own poem the *Commedia*" [4, p. 26].

Dante not only summed up medieval concepts of allegories, allegorical interpretations of texts, he masterfully employed allegorical tradition in his works. For many centuries by now it has been clear that every line and episode in the *Divine Comedy* has multiple meanings which can be explained rationally. In the very first chapter of the poem three beasts attacking Dante when he found himself "in a gloomy wood" signify different vices, the wood itself symbolizes human life where it is so easy to lose the path "which leads aright".

It's obvious that D.G. Rossetti, a great admirer and connoisseur of Dante, followed Dante's tradition of rational allegory. Let us take, for example, one of his most famous Dantesque pictures, *Beata Beatrix* (1864–1870) (fig. 1). It has at least two meanings, personal and allegoric. The figure in the foreground is Elizabeth Siddal, the wife of the painter who died two years before he started on the picture. It also has a strong Dantesque meaning, quite obvious as the title of the painting is a quotation from Dante's *Vita Nuova* which D.G. Rossetti had translated a few years earlier. Both layers of meanings are represented with numerous emblematic details. The bird in the foreground refers to the nickname of Elizabeth Siddal whom Rossetti called The Dove, white poppy it carries in his beak is a reference to the fact that Elizabeth died of the overdose of laudanum made of poppy.

All the details in the background point to Dante. The townscape is that of the Ponte Vecchio in Florence. The sundial shows number nine – a symbolic number crucial for understanding Dante poetry. But in this case it's a hint on the time of Beatrice's death – nine o'clock on the 9th June 1290. The figure on the right is the poet himself, the one on the left represents Amor, the personification of Love. In '*Vita Nuova*' Dante describes how he saw Amor in his vision for the very first time: "there appeared to be in my room a mist of the color of fire, within the which I discerned the figure of a lord". It was Love (Amour), he held in his arms "a person ...covered only with a blood-colored cloth". The poet recognized his lady and noticed that Amor "held also in his hand a thing that was burning in flames" [5, p. 8–9]. Later on the poet realized that this burning thing was his heart, and Love made the lady eat it. Dante explained all his allegorical visions and emblematic details in a commentary that he included in *Vita Nuova*. As a result mystical elements were deciphered quite rationally.



Figure 1. – D.G. Rossetti. Beata Beatrix

D.G. Rossetti followed Dante connecting the symbolic and the rational. He used to write poems as a sort of verbal commentaries on his pictures explaining the meaning of them. One of the most obvious examples is *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (fig. 2). D.G. Rossetti painted this picture in 1848, referred to it in one of his letters as belonging to religious class and wrote two sonnets to explain its meaning and put them on the frame below the picture.



Figure 2. – D.G. Rossetti. The Girlhood of Mary Virgin

Actually he revived the medieval tradition of allegoresis, allegorical interpretation of religious and secular texts. The viewer of the picture was to react to it intellectually and Rossetti provided him with proper decoding system, explaining the meaning of every object:

These are the symbols. On that cloth of red
 I' the centre, is the Tripoint, – perfect each
 Except the second of its points, to teach
 That Christ is not yet born. The books (whose head
 Is golden Charity, as Paul hath said)
 Those virtues are wherein the soul is rich:
 The refore on them the lily standeth, which
 Is Innocence, being interpreted.
 The seven-thorned briar and the palm seven-leaved
 Are her great sorrows and her great reward.
 Until the time be full, the Holy One
 Abides without. She soon shall have achieved
 Her perfect purity: yea, God the Lord
 Shall soon vouchsafe His Son to be her Son [6, p. 142].

In the sonnet D.G. Rossetti actually gives a clue of how to read the picture, what visual details signify. The two sonnets explaining the picture are definitely good examples of ekphrasis, a rhetorical figure D.G. Rossetti was fond of. He often wrote sonnets to explain his paintings – and other artists' paintings, sometimes it was vice versa – he painted a picture to visualize his poem (*The Blessed Damozel*).

The Girlhood of Mary Virgin (1849) was one the first pictures painted by D.G. Rossetti. The principle of explaining what is what in his works remained important to him till late in his life. His *Sonnet on the Sonnet* (fig. 3) opened sonnet sequence *House of Life* (1870). The poet himself sometimes referred to the sonnet as the “birthday sonnet” as he inscribed it on the front page of *The Treasury of English Sonnets*. He sent the book as a birthday present to his mother in 1880 and encircled the text of the sonnet with a symbolic drawing. It illustrated Rossetti's aesthetic ideas presented in the sonnet.



Figure 3. – D.G. Rossetti. Sonnet on the Sonnet.

In the letter to his mother the poet explained the meaning of the drawing. The flying feminine figure with a laurel wreath on her head and a lyre in her hand represents the poet's soul which is the source of inspiration. The hourglass she is about to put down denotes that a monument to the moment should be put up. The double-faced coin on the branches of the plant also has a symbolic meaning. The butterfly represents the soul, the serpent surrounding alpha and omega symbolizes eternity. No doubt, D.G. Rossetti had a keen feeling of interconnection between the visual and the spiritual. He tried to find material representation for ideas and explained their symbolic meaning rationally.

G.M. Hopkins shared Rossetti's interest both in poetry and painting and in allegory. He treated topics similar to Rossetti's in a different way. We have just considered Rossetti's sonnets decoding his picture *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*. Hopkins wrote two poems about Virgin Mary. The closest example to Rossetti's decoded symbolism is *Rosa Mystica* (*The Rose in a Mystery*). This is a question and answer poem devoted to Virgin Mary. Describing *Rosa Mystica* the poet asks:

How many leaves had it? Five they were then,
Five like the senses, and members of men [7, p.146]

G.M. Hopkins gives the meaning of symbolic leaves through comparison, it's a rare example of an explanation of symbolism in his poetry. Similar comparison can be found in *The Blessed Virgin compared to the air we breathe*.

Different from Rossetti Hopkins, though very good at drawing, seldom created ekphrasis proper. One of the few examples is his early pen-and-ink drawing *A Vision of the Mermaid* (1862) which was accompanied by a poem:

Plum-purple was the west; but spikes of light
Spear'd open lustrous gashes, crimson-white;
(Where the eye fix'd, fled the encrimsoning spot,
And gathering, floated where the gaze was not;)
And thro' their parting lids there came and went
Keen glimpses of the inner firmament:
Fair beds they seem'd of water-lily flakes
Clustering entrancingly in beryl lakes [8].

It is obviously an example of word painting, a detailed description of an imagined sea scene.

There are few poems about pictures in Hopkins. Let us consider two of them, *Lines for a Picture of St. Dorothea*, *Dorothea and Theophilus* and *On the Portrait of Two Beautiful Young People. A Brother and Sister*. *On the Portrait of Two Beautiful Young People* (1886) was written about a portrait Hopkins saw in Miss Cassidy's home in Monasterevin. It was a sentimental Victorian painting of her two cousins as children. The portrait caught Hopkins attention and he began a poem. But it has very little of ekphrasis in it, it's in "chastened neo-classical style of Thomas Grey's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*" [9, p. 372]. Hopkins laments the tyranny of Time and what it does to the innocence he can see in the faces of the portrayed boy and the girl. The poem has practically nothing to do with symbolism of real objects.

One can find some symbolic images in *Lines for a Picture of St. Dorothea*. It describes Hopkins feelings about the saint. Dorothea is a legendary Christian virgin, she lived in Cappadocia in 4th century A.D., was tortured and sentenced to death by the Roman prefect Sappiricius. There practically no evidence about her as a real historical person. The legend says that when she was walking to the place of her execution some pagan lawyer Theophilus by name addressed her in mockery: "Bride of Christ, send me some fruits from your bridegroom's garden". With the help of a boy Dorothea sent him her headdress full of roses and fruits which smelled heavenly. Theophilus immediately became a Christian and was executed.

It's worth doing to compare the symbolism of Christina Rossetti's *A Shadow of Dorothea* and Hopkins poem. Christina Rossetti's piece begins with the portrait of the saint:

Golden-haired, lily white,
Will you pluck me lilies?
[...]
I pluck young flowers of Paradise,
Lilies and roses red:
A sceptre for my hand,
A crown to crown my golden head.
Love makes me wise:
I sing, I stand,
I pluck palm-branches in the sheltered land. (1-2, 9-15) [10].

Commenting on these lines Miho Takashahi writes: "In this poem Rossetti uses the same emblems as the Pre-Raphaelites prefer, such as lilies, golden hair, and roses...<...> Here what is to be expected as 'an already programmed reaction' is admiration for the purity and innocence" [11, p. 119]. But the lines do not include verbal explanation of emblems. Actually lilies and roses are traditional images of medieval art, they also "belong to the artistic trend of the Pre-Raphaelites" [11, p. 120]. Probably they do not need deciphering because their meaning was absolutely clear to every believer being a part of long established Christian tradition.

Different from Ch. Rossetti's dialogue, the first 4 stanzas of Hopkins poem are Dorothea's monologue. The emblematic imagery here is quite similar to that of Ch. Rossetti's. Dorothea is carrying "a basket lined with grass" and describes flowers and fruits she has in it. All the plants have symbolic meaning, it can easily be understood but is not explained rationally. Dorothea's lilies do not "blow" in "Caesar's garden". Quinces that she has "not one / Is set in any orchard", her mallows grew "in starry, starry shire". The symbolical meaning of quince is love, beauty and fertility, mallow means "consumed by love". Christian reading of the symbols is quite clear, but like Ch. Rossetti, Hopkins does not give any explanatory commentary.

The same is true about Hopkins landscape poems. They certainly have pictorial quality. If we take *The Windhove*, for example, with its dedication "To Christ Our Lord" we immediately meet two symbolical / metaphorical phrases (morning's minion, kingdom of daylight's dauphin) describing the bird, all of them both wonderful and emotional and referring to Christ and none has rationally defined meaning or programmed significance. Hopkins does not tell us, as D.G. Rossetti probably would that, "morning's minion" means this, and "kingdom of daylight's dauphin" means that. For Hopkins the Book of Universe is full of God's signs, "the world is charged with the grandeur of God". The poet takes it in emotionally as a great mystery that cannot be easily decoded. He has "a sacramental vision of the world around us" [9, p. 5] but it is never rationalized.

Medievalism was quite the fashion of the day in the lifetime of both D.G. Rossetti and G.M. Hopkins. Medieval mental practice of reading Universe or the book of Nature considered that every letter in it has some special divine meaning and is a symbol of something supernatural and divine. As Umberto Eco put it, "The Medievals inhabited a world filled with references, reminders and overtones of Divinity, manifestations of God in things. Nature spoke to them heraldically: lions or nut-trees were more than they seemed; griffins were just as real as lions because, like them, they were signs of a higher truth" [12]. This mode of thinking was more rational than emotional; one could decipher the metaphysical meaning of what he saw around him. To quote Eco again, Nature "was a kind of polyphony of signs and references. Christ and His divinity were symbolized by a vast number and variety of creatures, each signifying His presence in a different place-in heaven, on mountain-tops, in the fields, the forests, and the seas" [12].

Medieval vision of the world was a road leading in two directions. One was to read the world as “polyphony of signs and references” thus moving from the visual reality to something metaphysical. The practice of allegories, allegorical interpretation of text was based on this word vision. The other was to create a material representation of an idea. It is manifested in numerous allegorical personifications popular in medieval poetry, especially dream-visions. Hence such allegorical figures as Lady Philosophy in Boece and Lady Nature in Alan of Lille. All details of their descriptions signify some feature of the corresponding notion. Dante’s Amor in *Vita Nuova* is the fruit of the tradition. In my opinion D.G. Rossetti with his elaborate explanations of the meanings of his verbal and visual images followed medieval allegorism.

G.M. Hopkins considered symbolism to be an essential feature of good poetry. In his letter to Robert Bridges (June, 1, 1886), we can find a paragraph of literary criticism. Hopkins expressed quite a low opinion of Richard Crawley’s poem *Venus and Psyche* and one of the faults he finds with it is that “there is not the slightest symbolism” [1, vol. 2, p. 782]. As a creative artist he was also an adept of symbolism. For him symbol was a polysemantic structure, its meaning could only be perceived emotionally, grasped through co-feeling it.

G.M. Hopkins believed the world around us to be a manifestation of the glory of God. He looked for the inscape, the inner uniqueness of everything he saw around him. And the uniqueness had only one meaning – God’s goodwill and grace. The difference between him and D.G. Rossetti lies in his deep religious feeling which helped Hopkins to see everywhere the “beauty past change” without deciphering it rationally. For him the world was God’s creation and its beauty – the glorification of God’s grandeur. As Hopkins wrote in his notes on St. Ignatius: “This world is word, expression, news of God”; “it is a book he has written.... a poem of beauty: what is it about? His praise, the reverence due to him, the way to serve him...” [13].

Conclusion. The description and analysis of how G.M. Hopkins and D.G. Rossetti perceived and used the allegorical tradition learned from Dante Alighieri shows the difference in reclaiming the medieval past by the two poets. D.G. Rossetti with his verbal explanations of painting expected from the reader some programmed reactions, G.M. Hopkins evoked emotional involvement based on deep religious feeling.

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ДЖ.М. ХОПКИНС И ДВА ДАНТЕ

М.К. ПОПОВА

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Ключевые слова: Дж.М. Хопкинс, Данте Габриэль Россетти, Данте Алигьери, аллегорическая традиция, средневековый символизм.