

Hopkins and the Impressionists

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In 1874 the first exhibition of Impressionism was held in the studios of the photographer Nadar. Monet, Renoir, Pissarro, Cezanne, Sisley, Guillaumin, Degas and others participated in it. The critical reception of this exhibition was unfavourable, and one critic called them the Impressionists as a term of reproach taking it from the title of Monet's picture (*Impression, Sunrise*).¹⁾ After this the painters themselves used this nickname as their own banner. From the time of this first exhibition till 1882, the Impressionists painted pictures using common techniques. This period 1874—1882 coincided with the latter half of the life of Hopkins. He was born in 1844 and died in 1889. Actually he was four years younger than Monet who was born in 1840 and died in 1926. Monet continued the Impressionistic technique till his death. So Hopkins and many of the Impressionists are contemporary. In this essay I would like to compare Hopkins's *Journals* with the works of the Impressionists. By examining the general themes and techniques of the Impressionists, I would like to compare them with those used by Hopkins in his descriptions of Nature as found in his *Journals*.

Light was what the Impressionists discovered in Nature, and they tried to fix on their canvasses their sensations caused by observing light and shadow. They tried to capture the effect of light and shadow on natural things by their novel use of colour. So here I would like to concen-

trate on how light and shadow affect colour.

On August 24th, 1867, Hopkins wrote as follows:

Bright, —In the middle of, I think, this day Lionel had a piece of sky-blue gauze for butterfly-nets lying on the grass in the garden.

It was a graceful mixture of square folds and winding tubefolds.

But the point was the colour as seen by sunlight in a transparent material. The folds, which of course doubled the stuff, were on the

sun's side bright light blue and on the other deep blue—not *shadow-modified*, but real blue, as in tapestries and some paintings. Then

the shadowed sides had cobweb-streaks of paler colour across, and in other parts became transparent and shewed the grass below,

which was lit by the sun through the gauze. (*The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins* second edition, ed. Humphry

House, Oxford University Press, 1966, pp.152—153).

Here Hopkins vividly describes the folds in a piece of gauze like a painter,

catches subtle differences of colour caused by the sun and fixes the

scene in words. In actual paintings, Marie Bracquemond painted these

kinds of folds in a dress of white and soft material in *On the Terrace*

(*Faintin-Latour and two young women at Sévres*) (1880)². The same

delicate folds in a dress are also seen in Frédéric Bazille's *The Fortune Teller (Using Cards)* (1869)³.

Another example of light and shadow from Hopkins is found in his journal on Jan. 4th, 1896. There he writes as follows:

—Today—another clear afternoon with tender clouding after rain

—one notices the crisp flat darkness of the woods against the sun

and the smoky bloom they have opposite it. (*Journals*, p.190).

Here the contrast of the clear dark wood in the sun and the hazy wood

behind it is again vividly described. Paul Cézanne's *Bridge over the Marne* ⁴⁾ may show a little of this effect of the woods in Hopkins's description. Another example from Hopkins is based on his experience of visiting the Rhone glacier.

July 20, 1868. We went into the grotto and also the vault from which the Rhone flows. It looked like a blue tent and as you went further it changed to lilac. As you come out the daylight glazes the groins with gleaming rosecolour. The ice inside has a branchy wire texture. (*Journals*, pp.178—179).

Hopkins beautifully describes the change of colour in the ice which is caused by the sun as he changes his viewing position. This ice theme reminds me of Monet's *View of Vetheuil, Breaking Up of Drift Ice* (1881) ⁵⁾ where floating ice covers the surface of the Seine.

The effect of light, shadow and colour is noticed in Hopkins's description of waves.

July 17, 1867... I went home by Dieppe and Newhaven. Rough passage, great waves. Got soaked with spray and cheeks frosted with brine, but I saw the waves well. In the sunlight they were green-blue, flinty sharp, and rucked in straight lines by the wind; under their forelocks the most beautiful bottle-green beam, as bright as any gems; when the wave had passed this same part—upon the turned-over plait of the crest—neighbouring by and sometimes broken by foam, looked like chrysoprase. (*Journals*, p.148).

Here the degree of green is subtly different and it is caused by the sunlight: "green-blue", "bottle-green" and "chrysoprase", that is emerald green. The last word chrysoprase appears in the Bible (*Rev. xxi. 20*). It is difficult to find the exact corresponding picture

with Hopkins's description. Monet's *The Rough Sea at Fécamp* (1881)⁶, Winslow Homer's *Maine Coast* (1890)⁷, or Paul Gauguin's *The Beach at Dieppe* (1885)⁸ may suggest to us Hopkins's description of waves. This shows that the Impressionists were fascinated by the waves which move continually, and represent momentary beauty.

Clouds in the sky have also many of the characteristics I have already mentioned. Boudin, one of the precursors of the Impressionists, painted a picture named *Clouds* and he is said to be a painter who really knew how to depict the sky. One of the attractive things of Hopkins's *Journals* is that we are able to find in it the descriptions of clouds which appear more often than of any other natural phenomena. Mostly clouds are metaphorically described but sometimes the effect of light and shadow on the clouds is described. Here, first, I would like to show the reflection of clouds in water.

May 9, 1866. Fair with clouds. Walking down towards Sandford with Coventry Patmore in hand. Blue and white delightfully overlapping each other in water. (*Journals*, p.135).

This is the mirror image of the blue sky and white clouds on it in the water. This reminds me of Monet's *Waterlilies* (about 1919)⁹ where clouds are painted on the water as well as the leaves of waterlilies and water weed. According to the Japan Broadcasting Corporation's series of programmes on Impressionism, Monet painted things which continually move and he wanted to paint the impossible. He also thought that a pool is a mirror which reflects the world.

To Hopkins too, the reflection of the sky or of other natural things was interesting, because he himself painted a reflection of himself in a lake which is shown on the cover of the Oxford paperback edition of

The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Another description of the reflection is done while he was travelling from Dieppe to Newhaven. The same course was taken on July 17th, 1867, which I have shown before as an example.

August 1, 1868. Day bright. Sea calm, with little walking wavelets edged with fine eyebrow crispings, and later nothing but a netting or chain-work on the surface, and even that went, so that the smoothness was marbly and perfect and between the just-corded near sides of the waves rising like fishes' backs and breaking with darker blue the pale blue of the general field, in the very sleek hollows came out *golden crumbs of reflections from the chalk cliffs.* (*Journals*, p.184; italics mine).

Here the sun illuminates the chalk cliff and the cliff sends back reflected light onto the sea. This scene reminds me a little of Delacroix's *The Sea from the Heights of Dieppe* (about 1852)¹⁰ where the golden light of the sky is fully reflected on the sea. Both of them show the calm sea at sunset. To remember Friedrich's *White Cliffs of Rügen* (1818)¹¹ may also be helpful where white rock and the sea are reflecting each other very delicately.

Returning to the description of clouds, I would like to note the following description.

May 3, 1866. Towards sunset the sky partly swept, as often, with moist white cloud, tailing off across which are morsels of grey-black woolly clouds. Sun seemed to make a bright liquid hole in this, its texture had an upward northerley sweep or drift from the W, marked softly in grey. (*Journals*, p.134).

Here the sun is obscured by the thin vaporous white cloud and shines

as if through water. The white cloud has soft grey marks on it and is crossed by tapering grey-black woolly cloubs. This Turner-like atmosphere of the sun reflects fleeting poetic beauty. This kind of sun reminds me of Monet's *Impression, Sunrise* (1872) where the sun is rising through the morning fog of Le Havre, Monet's *The Parliament of London, the Effect of the Sun in the Fog* (1904)¹², and the sun in Turner's *Snow-storm: Hannibal and His Army Crossing the Alps* (1812)¹³. A similar example of this effect is found in Hopkins's journal on July 29, 1868.

Later in the plain of the Rhone approaching the lake whiterose clouds formed the ground of the sky, near the sundown taking straight ranks and gilded by the light ; in front heavy dark masses with their edges soaked red and fragments of bright thread. (*Journals*, p.184).

This is the description of the clouds at sunset. The sunlight dyes the clouds near the sun bright rosy and golden colours and they clearly contrast with the dark clouds in the foreground, though their bottoms are also reddened by the sunlight. Constable's *Branch Hill Pond, Hampstead* (1821—22)¹⁴ may suggest this type of clouding.

Lastly, one other example of light and shadow is as follows :

May 21, 1866... Meadows yellow all over with buttercups. Strong dark shadows of trees through grass and buttercup stems chequering the effect. (*Journals*, p.137).

This chequering effect is made by sunlight and the shadows of trees. This is also a momentary, unforgettable scene, and the colour contrast of dark yellow and light green is very vivid. The shadows of trees in Camille Pissarro's *Woman in Orchard* (1887)¹⁵ may correspond with this chequering effect, but the gleaming light or dappled sunlight through

the tree on a woman's dress or on the ground under it was also appreciated by the Impressionists very much. It is found in Renoir's *Dancing at the Moulin de la Galette* (1876)¹⁶ and Max Liebermann's *The "Oude Vinck" Restaurant in Leyden* (1905)¹⁷. Their interest in this dappled sunlight suggests Hopkins's liking for pied beauty.

Thus Hopkins seemed to find beauty in everything in Nature. He seemed to have thought much like Constable who said that he had never seen anything ugly in his life and that in fact the forms of things are always beautified by light, shadow and the sense of perspective. Constable also said, "The world is vast. The same day doesn't come twice nor does the same time. Since the creation of the world, there has never been the same leaf on one tree". For Hopkins too, Nature showed boundless interest and beauty in light and shadow each time he saw Nature. So his natural gift as a poet combined with his skill as a draughtsman resulted in his becoming a great verbal painter as well as an excellent graphic artist as we can see from his sketches. It is certain that he saw the paintings of Turner and Constable which might have influenced him unconsciously and which clearly influenced the French Impressionists. He also owed his description of Nature to the English climate itself and its special atmosphere and light. By fixing his impressions in words he had chances to find words for use in his poems and to have a deeper insight of things which led him to his discovery of inscape and instress. To him verbal paintings were ways of praising God who lives among clouds of pied beauty which are themselves the reflection of heaven.

Notes:

1. Pierre Courthion, *Impressionism* (New York: Harry N. Abrams), p.113.

2. The Catalogue of *Le Centenaire de l'impressionnisme* (Tokyo : Yomiuri Shimbun Sha, 1974), plate 5.
3. *Ibid.* plate 1.
4. Clive Bell, *The French Impressionists* (London & New York : Phaidon), plate 30.
5. *The Catalogue of the Exposition of Claude Monet* (Tokyo : Yomiuri Shimbun Sha, 1973), plate 28.
6. *Ibid.* p.173.
7. Pierre Courthion, *Impressionism* (New York : Harry N.Abrams), p.110.
8. *Ibid.* p.173.
9. *The Catalogue of the Exposition of Claude Monet* (Tokyo : Yomiuri Shimbun Sha, 1973), Catalogue No,62.
10. Pierre Courthion, *Impressionism* (New York : Harry N.Abrams), 87.
11. *Turner et le paysage romantique* (Tokyo : Chuokoron Sha), plate 16.
12. *The Catalogue of the Exposition of Claude Monet* (Tokyo : Yomiuri Shimbun Sha, 1973), Catalogue No.56.
13. *Turner et le paysage romantique* (Tokyo : Chuokoron Sha), plate 3.
14. *The Catalogue of the Exposition of English Landscape Painting* (Tokyo : The Nihon Keizai Shimbun, 1970), Catalogue No.9.
15. Clive Bell, *The French Impressionists* (London & New York : Phaidon 1969), plate 30.
16. Pierre Courthion, *Impressionism* (New York : Harry N.Abrams), p.149.
17. *Ibid.* p.171.