BETSY WINAKUR TONTIPLAPHOL

POETICS OF LUXURY IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY: KEATS, TENNYSON AND HOPKINS

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Reviewed by Jerome Bump

> "What becomes of sensual gratification in a culture whose intellectual leaders prize abstraction, whose literary artists, like Wordsworth, cherish 'the simplest elements of nature and of the human mind, the mere abstract conditions inseparable from our being, and [try] to compound a new system of poetry from them?'"
>
> (William Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age* qtd. 1).

The three poets named in the title above oppose this love of abstraction. Though Professor Tontiplaphol doesn't refer to the New Historicism, one of her goals seems to be to put its "touch of the real" on their poetry by relating it to "the luxury good – the real-world, marketplace embodiment of conceptual luxury" that "was an increasingly visible commodity in the early years of the nineteenth century" (29).

She is not the first to do so, of course. Diego Saglia's account of Romantic "luxury" ("Interior Luxury," *Keats-Shelley Journal* 52 [2003]), for example, starts with eighteenth-century "debates on commerce, progress, luxury and the figure of the consumer" (Saglia 131). Instead of "luxury," however, Tontiplaphol prefers the adjective "*luscious*, a word whose etymological links" are "to *lush, plush, delicious, lascivious*, and of course, *luxurious*," because it is "uniquely suited to an aesthetic defined, paradoxically, by great wealth in little space"; hence "the term 'luxury' in her title refers to "the experience of a packed luxury (that is, circumscribed sensory excess)" in a poem (7).

Tontiplaphol begins with Keats's "material sublime" and his preference for a "a Life of Sensations rather than Thoughts" and then adds the sense of space articulated by, among others, Rachel Crawford (*Poetry, Enclosure, and the Vernacular Landscape, 1700-1300* [2002]). "To

Crawford's list of prominently petite Romantic-era places," Tontiplaphol adds "the city shop and the bourgeois residence" (18). She traces "affinities among Keats's luscious settings, the goods-packed shop interiors that introduced British consumers to exotic new worlds, and the middle-class notion that a richly appointed home, however small, not only signified but engendered both psychological and financial security" (18). Like Saglia she focuses on Keats's sonnets, *Lamia*, *Isabella*, and the *Eve of St. Agnes,* but she begins with "Imitation of Spenser" and uses *Endymion*, *Hyperion*, and the great odes as well to show how Keats used the "textual enclosure" to "forge an alternative reality, a new place to live" (9,8).

Keats's primary image, though, is not the "forge" but the spider web of the soul, the "tapestry empyrean" richly woven with symbols, softness, space, and "Luxury" (letter to Reynolds Feb. 19, 1818, qtd. 47). Inspired by the way Kathryn Kruger connects the words *weave* and *text* (*Weaving the Word* 2001), Tontiplaphol then carefully demonstrates how the auditory effects of Keats, Tennyson, and Hopkins are woven together like the luxurious textiles produced in the century.

As "the English textile industry exploded," she argues, Tennyson created "textual spaces as linguistic textiles" in "The Lady of Shalott" and other poems (94-95). Though Tennyson claimed that he did not write the lyrics of *In Memoriam* "with any view of *weaving* them into a whole," Tontiplaphol shows us many strands between them, and between the discrete parts of *Maud* and *Idylls of the King*, all three being "loosely woven poetic spaces, alternative landscapes that formally resemble real-life Victorian sanctuaries" (138). However, Tennyson's context is now the new material culture of the Victorians in which individual storefronts give way to "the earliest department stores" (86) with "alluring street-side windows" (88). Like "the Great Exhibition" and "mid-century commercial architecture," Tennyson's rich interiors become "oddly permeable" (20).

Though Hopkins's poetry does not speak so readily to Victorian commerce, Tontiplaphol finds some links between them. She compares "The Starlight Night" to "a description of goods, an exhortation to purchase, a guarantee of quality [that] mimics the typical composition of print advertisements, a genre that Hopkins would invoke more explicitly six years later in a triolet

entitled ‘Cockle’s Antibilious Pills’” (146). More importantly, Tontiplaphol links the “weaving” of Hopkins’s poetry to the art of William Morris.

Unsurprisingly, linking Hopkins to Keats proves more difficult. In *Keats and the Victorians* (1944), George Ford gave just one paragraph to Hopkins. Of the thirty articles published on Keats and Victorian poetry since 1963, only three link Keats to Hopkins, and only one –- my own “Hopkins and Keats” (*Victorian Poetry* 12:1 [Spring 1974]) -- solely examines those two poets. So it is good to see them connected here.

Readers expecting Tontiplaphol to begin with the Keatsian luxury of Hopkins’s early poems, however, will be surprised. “Since Hopkins destroyed much of his own juvenilia,” she claims, “we lack in his case the kind of early touchstone afforded by Keats’s ‘Imitation of Spenser’ and Tennyson’s ‘Timbuctoo’ ” (139), poems which reveal a “shared text-as-space philosophy at the heart of both” (80). But Hopkins saved copies of the poems he burned, and since 1930 readers have been finding Keats evoked by his early poems. For Gerald F. Lahey, the “rich luxuriousness” of Hopkins’s “A Vision of the Mermaids” made it an early touchstone (to use Tontiplaphol’s term) that for Lahey sometimes “breathes of Spenser, other times of Keats” (*Gerard Manley Hopkins* [1930], 11). In Ford’s opinion, “The Escorial” (a poem cited by Tontiplaphol, 156) illustrated “the most obvious borrowing from *The Eve of St. Agnes*” (175). In my own study, I argued that Hopkins’s early poetry, especially “A Vision of the Mermaids,” “Spring and Death” and “Il Mystico,” is “more indebted to Keats than that of almost any other Victorian poet” (“Hopkins and Keats” 34). Much more recently, in a whole book chapter on Hopkins and Keats, James Najarian has shown that the first stanza of Hopkins’s early “Habit of Perfection” is based on a significant reading of Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (*Victorian Keats* [2002], 117-118).

Yet those who find a Keatsian strain in Hopkins’s early poetry do not usually see it sustained in the later poems. Najarian, for example, argues that in “Spring” and “God’s Grandeur” the “Keatsian geography of the desire-filled bower is built and then denied or emptied out” (124). Tontiplaphol disagrees. In doing so, she aligns herself with critics such as Josephine Miles, who contended that “Hopkins never did get over Keats” (“The Sweet and Lovely Language” *Kenyon Review* 6, [1944], 355). Miles’s opinion was ultimately shared by F. R. Leavis, even though – as

Miles herself noted – he argued the opposite in *New Bearings in English Poetry* ([1932], 367). Recanting that argument in a lecture to The Hopkins Society, Leavis declared that Hopkins was "more like Keats than any other of the Victorian age – or any other that I know of" ("Gerard Manley Hopkins: Reflections After Fifty Years" *The Second Annual Hopkins Lecture,* London [1971], 9).

But *how* is Hopkins's later poetry like Keats's? Tontiplaphol answers the question, first of all, by focusing on what Walford Davies called Hopkins's extreme "concern with the thinginess of language" (*Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poetry and Prose* [1998], liii, qtd. 153). Attempting to add a New Historicist touch of the real to Hopkins's later poetry, Tontiplaphol not only shows how much the word "thing" meant to Hopkins, but also associates it with luxury goods. She even argues that the "conception" of a word "is actually no less physical than ink on paper" and that texts are "enterable objects" (142), another variation—apparently-- on the New Historicist chiastic equation of "the textuality of the material" with "the materialism of text." To me that equation seems rather facile and the words "thing" and "conception" remain very abstract. Nevertheless, Tontiplaphol argues convincingly that sprung rhythm is "the century's densest incarnation of luscious form, in which a Keatsian-Tennysonian interchange between the aggregative (the accumulation of accents) and the woven (intertwining lettered threads and counterpointed meters) appears condensed in every line. . . . [W]hereas Keats's and Tennyson's textual spaces resemble sites of luxury consumption, Hopkins's painstakingly wrought verse evokes the luxury commodity itself, redefined, counterintuitively, as a place in its own right" (21). Less counterintuitive is her grounding of Hopkins's "thinginess" in Scoctus's "*haecceitas*, or *thisness*" and in Hopkins's own concept of *inscape* (161-2), leading to a theological interpretation of the mature poems he wrote before 1884. Here, she writes, "Hopkins finds his place in textual things, in work whose knitted subjects and woven formality generate a Christ-infused paradise" (167).

She reads the poetry written after 1884, however, in the light of "The Blessed Virgin Compared to the Air We Breathe" (1883). Though she does not seem to be aware of Najarian's book, she successfully refutes his assertion that "the desire-filled bower" is "turned inside-out" in

that poem (Najarian, 124). On the contrary, Tontiplaphol argues that here "Mary is less person than place, less angel than sanctuary" (175). In Mary's "wild web, wondrous robe," Hopkins, writes, we "are wound" with her mercy "as if with air." Inspired by Kruger's "sustained feminist analysis of textile metaphors" (48), Tontiplaphol stresses that Mary's presence "is weave-like in its capacity to filter light," and in Mary's "tapestry of strands both earthly and divine" she finds a "crosswise pattern of flesh and beam" that gives her blessedness "textilic form" (174-75). In "No worst, there is none," for example, the speaker cries, "Mary, mother of us, where is your relief?" But, writes Tontiplaphol, "the sonnet itself compensates for the Virgin's absence by evoking, formally, her textilic presence" (175). By detailed analysis of its visual and aural crisscross patterns, she shows how "the poem generates, in other words, its own woven intercession" (175). Reminding us that Keats thought of poems as "palliatives, real medicines that heal the wounds inflicted by life's slings and arrows" (37), she finds a "palliative formalist energy" in the terrible sonnets of Hopkins (176), which she also links to the "rich catalogues" of Tennyson's poems that "offer connective, not isolating, enclosure" (100).

In short, even in the more challenging Hopkins section, Tontiplaphol defines a poetics of luxury that makes a significant contribution to our understanding of Victorian poetry.

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at Austin and author of *Gerard Manley Hopkins* (1982) and many essays on Hopkins and Victorian poetry.