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The unspeakable stress of pitch

by [Denis Donoghue](#)

On *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Life*, by Paul Mariani and the necessity of critical distance.

“It is possible to put readers of Hopkins too much at their ease,” F. R. Leavis warned in *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932). He held that the difficulty of Hopkins’s poems was a quality inseparable from the issues involved, not a problem to be dismissed or a perversity to be regretted. But his warning also applies to biographers: they, too, want to put readers too much at their ease, making them feel that the narrated life encompasses the particular writings and resolves their opacities. Paul Mariani goes further. Among the several biographers of Hopkins, he is the most pious. He evidently thinks that an ideal biography would consist of judiciously selected quotations from the poet’s letters, poems, journals, sermons, and spiritual exercises.^[1] There would be no critical distance between poet and biographer. The “historic ...

Denis Donoghue's latest book is *On Eloquence* (Yale University Press).

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