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English Symposium

21 March 2017

Gerard Manly Hopkins: A Jesuit Questioning Jesus?

“Glory be to God for dappled things,” this is how the 19th century English poet and Jesuit, Gerard Manly Hopkins, begins his poem “Pied Beauty” (Milward 29). The very first thing that one will notice about Hopkins is that he was a deeply religious man, and his poetry is permeated with veneration and admiration for God. The following is Hopkins’ sonnet “God’s Grandeur:”

THE WORLD is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil

Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil

Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;

And though the last lights off the black West went

Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent

World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings. (Milward 2).

Yet despite the copious examples of veneration in his poetry, there is some debate over whether or not Hopkins made the correct decision joining the Catholic faith and becoming ordained to the priesthood as a member of the Society of Jesus. This criticism is not baseless as Hopkins' choice to become a Jesuit led to the alienation of his family, the loss of an esteemed professorship, the destruction of many of his early poems, his hesitance to write poetry, virtually no readership while he was alive, bouts of depression, and his early death (Ayers). Despite these criticisms, I argue that Hopkins never regretted his choice, nor would we have the Hopkins we love and read today if he had been spared those trials. His challenges in life led him to write some of the greatest religious poetry of all time, and in fact by doing so Hopkins joined a long tradition of religious men who went through agonizing tests only to emerge with their faith intact and astounding literary feats for the rest of us to enjoy.

Hopkins was blessed with an elevated gift to see God's hand in all things. Along with this, two other things also define his poetry: inscape, and sprung rhythm. Sprung rhythm, coined by Hopkins himself, is easier heard than explained in my opinion, but it is the idea that a sonnet's rhythm is based on the stressed syllables with no regard to the other unstressed syllables in the line (Harmon 484). Inscape is the idea, simply put, that everything has a unique God given form, or as Hopkins put it; "the 'individually distinctive' inner structure of a thing" (Harmon 265). This form is what gives beauty to things; from the iridescence of dragonflies' wings and birds' feathers in "As Kingfishers Catch Fire," to the growth of weeds and pear blossoms in "Spring," and of course in the

majestic sight of a kestrel's morning flight in perhaps Hopkins' most famous poem "The Windhover," there is scarcely a sonnet in Hopkins' repertoire that does not draw attention to some unique facet of life. However, despite this description, I would not call him a steadfast Romantic praising the environmental world above all else, because he consistently draws his observations back to God, as evidenced in the poems I just listed and in "Pied Beauty," "God's Grandeur," and "The Soldier" to name a few more.

Now that we know a little more about the poet's style, we can discuss the controversy. All the poems I listed above are more or less "bright:" positive meanings, reflections of the natural world, and examples of God's bestowal of inscape to earthly things. Yet, there is a darker side to Hopkins that cannot be ignored. Towards the end of his life in 1885, he wrote his darkest Christian poems; a total of six titled "The Terrible Sonnets" (Poetry Foundation 1). This name has little to do with the quality or skill used in the poems, and they are not bad in the sense that they were sloppy; rather this moniker has everything to do with the content, as they are sometimes called: "The Sonnets of Desolation," or the "Dark Sonnets" (MacKenzie 169). In these poems, a devout Jesuit priest, laments his life, questions God, contemplates death, and struggles with the nature of evil. The following poem, "Carrion Comfort," is one of the six "Terrible Sonnets," and is far removed from the tone of his other poems, yet you will notice that he has taken sprung rhythm to an almost new level:

NOT, I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee;
 Not untwist—slack they may be—these last strands of man
 In me ór, most weary, cry I can no more. I can;
 Can something, hope, wish day come, not choose not to be.

But ah, but O thou terrible, why wouldst thou rude on me
 Thy wring-world right foot rock? lay a lionlimb against me? scan
 With darksome devouring eyes my bruised bones? and fan,
 O in turns of tempest, me heaped there; me frantic to avoid thee and flee?

 Why? That my chaff might fly; my grain lie, sheer and clear.
 Nay in all that toil, that coil, since (seems) I kissed the rod,
 Hand rather, my heart lo! lapped strength, stole joy, would laugh, chéer.
 Cheer whom though? the hero whose heaven-handling flung me, fóot tród
 Me? or me that fought him? O which one? is it each one? That night, that year
 Of now done darkness I wretch lay wrestling with (my God!) my God. (Milward
 104)

As you can tell, it is a rather dense poem that is laborious to read aloud let alone unpack and understand. However, of particular note is Hopkins' comparison of Christ, in the poem referenced by the lion, to a predator. "O thou terrible, why wouldst thou rude on me... lay lionlimb against me? Scan with darksome devouring eyes my bruised bones?" (Milward 104). Here the peaceful scriptural image of the lion lying down with a lamb is challenged, instead the poet feels like he is being hunted down by a terrifying God who was supposed to heaven-guard him but instead has heaven flung him (Milward 106). Hopkins also uses a biblical image that compares himself to Jacob wrestling with God. So what changed? Where did his bright imagery and lyrical praise go? To understand this question we must also understand where Hopkins was at in this later portion of his life.

I believe that Christians, specifically converts, will easily empathize with Hopkins' life and experiences as many of his struggles are relatable to all who have faced religious prosecution. While an undergraduate at Oxford he converted to Catholicism, which was condemned in a heavily Anglican society (MacKenzie 14). How prevalent was Anglicanism? Well, with his conversion he essentially left behind any dreams of becoming a prominent writer, politician, or academic, and instead pursued a religious calling. He also alienated his family who were devout Anglicans themselves, and quoting from the Poetry Foundations biography of Hopkins: "when Hopkins converted to Catholicism he felt he had actually forfeited his rightful place in the family home; he did not even know if his father would let him in the house again" (Poetry Foundation 1). After becoming a Catholic, he joined the Society of Jesus in 1868, and swore himself to a life of poverty, chastity, and obedience (White 5). And here is where the tragedies start (depending on the point of view one takes). He also gave up writing poetry for fear of competing interests, and burned his early works (MacKenzie 14). He then failed his theological examination at the end of his seminary training and because of that he was left with only minor assignments in the church clergy and never rose to prominence in or out of the Catholic religion (Ayers). He began writing poetry again, but none of it was ever published (in fact his poem "Wretch of the Duchland" was rejected by the only Jesuit magazine). During his lifetime only a handful of people even knew he was a poet; he counted maybe eleven people who had read his poetry (Ayers). He also loved the Welsh language and people, but his calling instead took Hopkins to Dublin in 1885 away from his family, home, country, and friends (White xvii). The Irish and English were at odds with each other and he was disliked by the very people he was supposed to serve

(White 11). His position at University College in Dublin was more slavish than glamorous and the University's reputation was somewhat of a joke (White 10). Hopkins became very ill while in Dublin (he later died of typhoid), and was over-worked in his job, instead of teaching he was appointed to grade examinations of which there were thousands (White 13).

With this background we can understand the mood of the poet as he composed "To Seem the Stranger," another one of the Terrible Sonnets:

TO seem the stranger lies my lot, my life
 Among strangers. Father and mother dear,
 Brothers and sisters are in Christ not near
 And he my peace my parting, sword and strife.
 England, whose honour O all my heart woos, wife
 To my creating thought, would neither hear
 Me, were I pleading, plead nor do I: I wear-
 of idle a being but by where wars are rife.

I am in Ireland now; now I am at a thír
 Remove. Not but in all removes I can
 Kind love both give and get. Only what word
 Wisest my heart breeds dark heaven's baffling ban
 Bars or hell's spell thwarts. This to hoard unheard,
 Heard unheeded, leaves me a lonely began. (Milward 114).

Hopkins classifies himself as not only a stranger in the poem, but an outcast. The phrase “third removed” is most likely a reference to being a Catholic, being a priest, and living away from his family while in Ireland (Milward 116). The last two lines: “Wisest my heart breeds dark heaven’s baffling ban Bars or hell’s spell thwarts. This to hoard unheard, heard unheeded, leaves me a lonely began” seems to mirror a verse from Latter-day Saint Scripture found in Doctrine and Covenant Section 121: “O God, where art thou? And where is the pavilion that covereth thy hiding place? How long shall thy hand be stayed, and thine eye, yea thy pure eye, behold from the eternal heavens the wrongs of thy people and of thy servants, and thine ear be penetrated with their cries?” (Doctrine and Covenants: 121). Unfortunately for Hopkins, verse seven does not seem to come.

The following he wrote to his friend and fellow poet Robert Bridges in the dreary year of 1885:

NO worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief,
 More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring.
 Comforter, where, where is your comforting?
 Mary, mother of us, where is your relief?
 My cries heave, herds-long; huddle in a main, a chief
 Woe, wórd-sorrow; on an áge-old anvil wince and sing —
 Then lull, then leave off. Fury had shrieked 'No ling-
 ering! Let me be fell: force I must be brief.'"

O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
 Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap

May who ne'er hung there. Nor does long our small
 Durance deal with that steep or deep. Here! creep,
 Wretch, under a comfort serves in a whirlwind: all
 Life death does end and each day dies with sleep. (Milward 109).

Notice how Hopkins concluded the sonnet; “No Worst, There is None” with: “Here! creep, Wretch, under a comfort serves in a whirlwind: all Life death does end and each day dies with sleep” (Milward 109). In this poem Hopkins laments his life, questioning, this time, both the Comforter, or Holy Spirit, and the Virgin Mary. For a Catholic priest this seems borderline heretical. However, from a religious poetry perspective, this borderline plea for death is not unheard of. From Robert Alter’s translation, Job’s death wish poem in chapter three begins like this:

Afterward, Job opened his mouth and cursed his day. And Job Spoke up and he said: Annul the day that I was born and the night that said, “A man is conceived.” That day, let it be darkness. Let God above not seek it out, nor brightness shine upon it. Let darkness, death’s shadow, foul it, let a cloud-mass rest upon it, let day-gloom dismay it. (Alter 18).

Note how both Job’s poem and Hopkins’ reference the darkness around them; Job by a shadow, Hopkins by sleep. In fact, this darkness seems to be a common theme in Biblical lamentations, as David uses the same imagery in Psalms 23: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,” although David takes a more positive turn than do Hopkins or Job (The Bible, Psalms: 23).

But despite the bleak nature of the terrible sonnets, Hopkins was a devout Catholic to the day he died. I do not believe that these sonnets reflect a theological

turning away from God, anymore than I believe that Joseph Smith or Job turned away from God. Rather the poems seem to chronicle the trials a pleading servant of the Lord. Even with the hard times he faced, his last words spoken to his mother and father were: “I am so happy, I am so happy. I loved my life” (Ayers). From the perspective of a Latter-day Saint, Hopkins has left a shining legacy of faith in adversity, perseverance in pain, and self-sacrifice for Christ. Hopkins is a poet for all Christians, and indeed all those who might feel waylaid by the difficulty of life. Every time I read a poem by Hopkins, my own faith is increased, not diminished. I will end with the lines of Hopkins himself from one of his sonnets; “That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection.” Written in 1888 three years after “No Worst There is None,” the Poetry foundation has this to say about it: “[this] is apparently a direct reply to “No worst, there is none”: the question in the earlier poem, “Comforter, where, where is your comforting?” is answered in the title of the later poem. *Acedia* [mental sloth] has been conquered: “Enough! the Resurrection, /A heart’s clarion! Away grief’s gasping, joyless days, dejection” (Poetry Foundation 1). Here is the last of the poem:

But vastness blurs and time | beats level. Enough! the Resurrection,
A heart's-clarion! Away grief's gasping, | joyless days, dejection.

Across my foundering deck shone

A beacon, an eternal beam. | Flesh fade, and mortal trash

Fall to the residuary worm; | world's wildfire, leave but ash:

In a flash, at a trumpet crash,

I am all at once what Christ is, | since he was what I am, and

This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, | patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,

Is immortal diamond. (Poetry Foundation).

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