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An approach to the 'terrible sonnets'

of

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in English at Massey  
University.

John L. McKenzie

1973

- TO MY PARENTS -

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ABSTRACT: HOPKINS' "TERRIBLE SONNETS"

In contrast to those critics who examine Hopkins primarily in terms of the Exercise of St. Ignatius Loyola, this thesis proposes that Hopkins can usefully be examined in terms of certain Greek and Victorian contexts. The drive for unity, fruitfulness and wholeness which seems to characterize much of Hopkins' poetry may be represented as a Victorian phenomenon as well as Greek.

Hopkins' early poetry seems to capture the unique experience whereby multitudinousness (the tendency to fragmentation) is "held fast" in the instressing of God in Nature. It is the world of "Pied Beauty", where dappled complexity is united in the One whose "beauty is past change". The perception of this Being is the act of instress. This concept of reality, it is proposed, derives from Parmenidean epistemology. Unity for Parmenides is indivisible, timeless, motionless and complete, fixed in the present world. The "hurrahing" side of Hopkins' poetry derives from this notion.

However, in the "terrible sonnets" one can observe the horror of disintegration, both personal and universal. The most complete statement of this fear is the sonnet "The Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection" where change, as opposed to permanence, is inscaped for us. Through imaginary of fire, drowning and death, Hopkins expresses the anguished realization that God is outside nature, beyond the present. This reorientation is appropriately expressed in terms of Heraclitean epistemology. Hence it is useful to examine the development of Hopkins' poetry as a movement from a Parmenidean to a Heraclitean view of reality (mindful of certain qualifications.)

Appropriately, in terms of the Greek analogy, the pathway in this transition is the pathway of self-examination. At this point we are confronted by the Victorian parallel as concern about a meaningful, coherent universe is projected into an uncertainty about the value of the self. In the "terrible sonnets" there is recorded the self-examination of the poet Hopkins, the despair of "inscaping" the self: "I am gall, I am heartburn". Indeed, the sonnets can be seen to trace the classic descent/ascent pattern. The whole development of Hopkins' poetry in these terms is structurally reflected in the Heraclitean sonnet, such that the vision of the poem may indeed be Hopkins' final stance.

Hope for permanence and unity can only be found in the future: the Resurrection is not a comfort for the present. The final dilemma for Hopkins then is the problem of Time and the significance of Man. The "significant moment" for Hopkins was the Resurrection; the now was a world of impermanence, night, flux and conflict, both personal and universal.

## PREFACE

This thesis is a study of the relationship between certain classical and contemporary perspectives in the sonnets of desolation (1885) of Gerard Manley Hopkins.

In examining the philosophies of Parmenides and Heraclitus, two early Greek philosophers who provide fitting contexts for the poetry of Hopkins, I have taken the liberty of relying on the works of W.K.C. Guthrie (A History of Greek Philosophy Vols 1-11 Cambridge, 1962) rather than attempting to assess the state of contemporary nineteenth century scholarship. I felt that such a task was beyond the confines of this thesis.

Furthermore, in examining the poems themselves, I have relied on the third edition (enlarged and edited with Notes and a Biographical Introduction by W.H. Gardner; Oxford, 1956 impression).

References to primary sources have been made in the text, and for the reader's convenience, the following abbreviations have been used:

- Poems : Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Third Edition.  
Edited and enlarged by W.H. Gardner, Oxford, 1956.
- R/B : The Letters of G.M.H. to Robert Bridges.  
Edited with notes and Introduction by C.C. Abbott,  
Oxford, 1955.
- J/P : The Journals and Papers of G.M.H.  
Edited by Humphrey House/Graham Storey, Oxford,  
1959.
- F/L : Further Letters of G.M.H. including his  
correspondence with Coventry Patmore Edited by  
C.C. Abbott, Oxford, 1956.
- S/D : The Sermons and Devotional writings of G.M.H.  
Edited by C. Delvin, Oxford, 1959.
- L/D : The Correspondence of G.M.H. and Richard Watson  
Dixon. Edited by C.C. Abbott, Oxford, 1955.

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J.L. McKenzie.

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"For there is a certain grief in things as they are, in man as he is come to be, as he certainly is, over and above those griefs of circumstance which are in a measure removable - some inexplicable shortcoming, or misadventure, on the part of nature itself...."

(Walter Pater Marius the Epicurean ch.25.)

CHAPTER ONE : INTRODUCTION

"Whoever would understand Hopkins," says W.H. Gardner, "must go not to Freudian psychology but rather to the 'Spiritual Exercises' of St. Ignatius Loyola." <sup>1</sup> Generally, the "terrible sonnets" have been considered according to this view, that the path to spiritual integration and wholeness has its analogy and counterpoint in Loyola's schema of pilgrim's progress. Hence D. Downes asserts that the "final shape of Hopkins' vision was Ignatian."

"Hopkins expressed to an imposing extent both the spirit and ideals of St. Ignatius. Since he chose to live his life according to the spirit and disciplines of St. Ignatius' Company, and since...so much of his poetry can be so fully and fruitfully read in the light of the Spiritual Exercises, there is no question of the makeup of Hopkins' mind nor the ground of his poetic art. Both must be specified as Ignatian." <sup>2</sup>

It is my contention that Hopkins' poetry, and these sonnets in particular, arise from certain epistemological and moral presuppositions that are not particularly "Ignatian" in spirit; that there exist other fruitful contexts in which Hopkins' poetry can and ought to be considered. This is not to deny the importance of St. Ignatius to Hopkins, but I consider that for a comprehensive understanding of the total development of his poetry (and of particular images and themes) other contexts are available and ought to be considered. More particularly, this thesis will attempt to examine, mindful of certain inadequacies, aspects of the classical and contemporary Victorian backgrounds

to the "terrible sonnets."

With regard to the classical background, little critical material is available. However, T.K. Bender has noted the classical background to the development of Hopkins' critical approach to poetry, his peculiar syntax and style.<sup>3</sup> Bender concluded that Hopkins learnt, through his study of Greek texts, to approach a text in a certain way. He noted, for example, a similarity between the following undergraduate explication of a Greek text, the philological entries in the Journal and the "characteristic verbal intoxication" of such a poem as "Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves."

- (i) " *διψιοί* as an epithet of *σραγόες* is a difficult word. It is one of those poetic touches which cannot be reduced to exact explanation but convey a fine image nevertheless. It may mean eager, or else perhaps thirsty is put for thirstily-drunk as the first large drops of a thunder shower would be. I would try salt in something of the same sense: because salt excites thirst. The Editors of course proceed to arrive at the sense by the method Aristophanes describes as used by Dionusos in Hades, weighing tragedy by ounce and scruple, and measuring it with squares, yard-measures, etc." <sup>4</sup>
- (ii) "Flick means to touch or strike lightly as with the end of a whip, a finger etc. To fleck is the next tone above flick, still meaning to touch or strike lightly...It would seem that fillip generally pronounced flip is a variation of flick which however seems connected with fly, flee, flit, meaning to fly off...." <sup>5</sup>

- (iii) "Earnest, earthless, equal, attuneable vaulty,  
voluminous... stupendous  
Evening strains to be time's vast, womb-of-all  
home-of-all, hearse-of-all night."

It is my contention that classical studies contributed not only to Hopkins' sense of the intricacies of language and syntax, but also contributed to his aesthetic theories and certain epistemological and moral issues that arise from those aesthetic theories.

More however, has been written with regard to the Victorian context of Hopkins' poetry. A. Mizner stoutly maintains that Hopkins was less eccentric than is commonly thought and that he possesses an essentially Victorian sensibility.<sup>6</sup> Austin Warren, too, maintains that Hopkins learned much from Keats, the pre-Raphaelites, Pater, Ruskin, Newman, and the Victorian linguistic studies of Furnivall, Barnes, and others who sought to restore Teutonic English.<sup>7</sup> N.H. MacKenzie has explored the relationship of Hopkins' theories of inscape and instress with Ruskin's idea of inner form and observed the similarity.<sup>8</sup> W. Collins has noted the similarity of Hopkins and Tennyson in their concern with Victorian issues: the insistence on duty, work, sacrifice, heroism, idealism, search for cosmic unity and respect for the individual.<sup>9</sup> Finally, W.S. Johnson has examined the poetry of Hopkins in the light of two Victorian themes: firstly, the feeling of self-consciousness in nineteenth century literature and secondly, the ambivalence of Victorian attitudes to the

natural and temporal world.<sup>10</sup> I am indebted to these articles, particularly the last, in reconstructing my definition of the central epistemological and moral problems of the Victorian period, and I trust the reader will recognize the integration of Victorian and classical backgrounds, which this thesis will propose.

Late nineteenth century literature is replete with an overpowering pessimism, anguish and despair. The sense of coherence, and unified vision, seemed to be dissipated in a world of flux, relativity and uncertainty. The causes of this phenomenon are generally considered in the context of the transition from optimism and faith associated with a Christian cosmology to the sense of futility and hopelessness associated with a Darwinian cosmology. In the words of Tennyson:

"...Some, descending from the sacred peak  
Of hoar high-templed Faith, have leagued again  
Their lot with ours to rave The world about;  
And some are wilder comrades, sworn to seek  
If any golden harbour be for men  
In seas of Death and sunless gulfs of Doubt." (ii)

This disintegration of faith not only revolved around one's understanding of the total cosmos but also focused on the microcosm of the self, the personality. In Hopkins' words, the late nineteenth century was confronted with an "atomism of personality," a "disproportioned sense of personality" deriving from the dominant philosophy of time (associated with Hegel) which seemed to give no significance to the individual now. (12) To me,

it is this sense of atomism in both the act of knowing (epistemology) and the act of doing (morality) that is the central "Victorian" concern in Hopkins' poetry, and it has explicit classical analogues. Briefly put, this thesis proposes that in contrast to the early poetry where multitudinous forms unite in the harmonious unity of God, and where exultation arises from an immersion into this state of "echoing being" (the metaphysical background to "inscape" and "instress"), in the later poetry this optimism in the present universe is no longer present. Instead we are confronted by a world of conflict and flux in which individual forms are at variance with one another. Exultation in the later poetry arises from a separation from this world and a belief in the transcendental reality of the next. Hence triumph arises out of conflict: it is a denial of present "being" and an assertion of "becoming." The pathway in this fundamental reorientation was an examination of the "clearest-selfed spark" man: namely self-being. In the process of self knowledge, Hopkins discovered an essential dualism in his "being" that denied complete unity with God in the present. Hence he was led to posit a belief in the essential dualism of the universe: a world of flux and instability separated from a world of timeless permanence and unity, fixed in futurity. The bridge between the two was the hope of the Resurrection.