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**Diatribes with Despair: Gerard Manley Hopkins' Proto-Modernist Conflict with God  
Expressed Through His Mastery of Language.**

As a repercussion to the swift changes in the pace of life in the Modern era, Western man has begun to feel the terror of being alone in a godless world and turns within to seek consolation. Few men felt this isolation as deeply as the Jesuit Priest Gerard Manley Hopkins, classics chair at University College of Dublin, an Englishman who had removed himself from the Protestant faith and dedicated his life to one of the most influential Catholic sects. Ironically, this extreme Catholicism was of a sort that did not afford him a comfortable welcome in Dublin despite Ireland's dedication to Rome, perhaps because of the independent nature and power of the Jesuits. Instead, Hopkins' assignment to Ireland became a lonely test of faith and placed him in a spiritual crucible that produced the collection of poems known as the 'Terrible Sonnets'. As clearly stated in the poem "To seem the stranger lies my lot, my life", "I am in Ireland now; now I am at a third/ Remove.... This to hoard unheard/Heard unheeded, leaves me a lonely began" (Hopkins/Phillips 166), Hopkins is desolate in his position in Dublin, and he longs for some kind of validation and feedback, be it from God or man. Hopkins straddles the present with one foot in the past and one foot in the future, and creates deeply thought out, multi-layered puzzles of techniques which reflect the convoluted transitional period between Victorian and Modern literature and find resolution in an individual stoicism and focus on the now. Scholar Jiong Liu writes in his article, "Catholic Predilections in the Poetics of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Seamus Heaney":

In fact, what his “irregular” poetics tries to capture is the temporality that marks his understanding of the world as ever-occurring Incarnation, a constant communication between the time-bound and the timeless (Liu 2).

These sonnets confine Hopkins’ thoroughly subjective, Modernist questioning of the purpose and intentions of both God and man and contrast the restrictiveness of the form with the untrammelled flow of human thought processes and emotions he is suffering. Ultimately, the sonnets serve to illustrate his belief that although isolation is an inescapable fact of individual existence, all beings and every moment can be sufficient unto themselves. By performing a close reading of one of the sonnets, ‘Carrion Comfort’, we can see that many techniques that Hopkins employs are firmly rooted in poetic antiquity due to his scholarly background; it would be difficult to find a more learned and adept linguist. Therefore, his cutting-edge concepts of inscape, selving, and instress are uniquely suited to imparting a completely idiosyncratic moment in time via poetry:

Everything in the universe was characterized by what he called inscape, the distinctive design that constitutes individual identity. This identity is not static but dynamic. Each being in the universe “selves”, that is, enacts its identity...the human being...recognizes the inscape of other beings in an act that Hopkins calls instress (Norton 1547).

To begin by tracing the parallels between modernism and instress, modernism can be defined as the attempt to recreate literary expression in an innovative way to keep pace of the shifting concerns of a rapidly industrializing civilization. As Lawrence Gamache postulates in his article “Defining Modernism: A Religious and Literary Correlation,”

It would seem both by virtue of analogy and etymology that a preoccupation with “just now” rather than with the past or the future, is fundamental to what modern suggests, in particular when it is modifying statements of attitudes or states of mind (Gamache 4).

The term inscape, as defined by Hopkins, similarly attempts to refashion the entrenched assumptions of the past in favor of fresh examination of the complex characteristics that make each experience and individual unique. The communication of the inscape is how instress is achieved in poetry. The notion of selving, or identity actualization, is clearly expressed in his poem “As Kingfishers Catch Fire”:

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:  
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;  
Selves — goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,  
Crying *Whát I dó is me: for that I came* (Hopkins 1549).

The inner drive to self-actualize relates directly to the individual and societal questioning of humanity’s relationship with God in the modern age. Is it God that makes for success or suffering, or is it individual effort and worthiness? Can success be ultimately defined by the ability to selve? This focus on instress is explored by Hopkins in many of his works, and is comparable to Wordsworth’s “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (Wordsworth 295) in that both poets strive to capture a transitory experience in poetic form to recreate it for others as well as to serve as a memory for their own future benefit. Hopkins is using poetry as a vehicle to express not only what he sees, but more importantly what he feels and senses both as and from a distinct entity, and this duality is used to great effect in the visceral ‘Terrible Sonnets’ to emphasize his sense of isolation from God during his time in Ireland.

Gerard Manley Hopkins uses the sonnet form as a framework to contain a series of dialogues with Despair in which he asserts his determination to “selve” per the proto-modernist concept of inscape. Hopkins’ glorifying theory of inscape is a natural precursor to Joyce’s often more secular epiphanies:

Its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance. The soul of the commonest object, the structure of which is so adjusted, seems to us radiant.

The object achieves its epiphany (Joyce 190).

However, Hopkins’ interpretation of these effervescent moments differs due to his religious perspective, inward focus, and chronic self-skepticism in comparison to Joyce’s more worldly approach. Hopkins suffered from his displacement and alienation in Ireland, and the poet was left struggling in solitude during the spiritual disorientation of the late Victorian era

Gerard Manley Hopkins is well known for the tortured expression of his faith and doubt, which is reflected in the complexity of his symbolic and linguistic acrobatics. The ‘Terrible Sonnets,’ of which Carrion Comfort is possibly the most widely recognized, certainly are some of the most spiritually painful and convoluted poetry ever written, as is described by Jacob Hovind in his paper "Modernism's Two Versions Of Selfhood":

Hopkins consistently compresses two versions of one poetic image into a seemingly unresolved tension, creating a dense texture of doublings back and indecisions that ultimately result in a version of poetic identity as self-compression. Hopkins's poems do not so much convey the immensity of the interior life as compress selfhood into an almost terrifying density and isolation (Hovind 258).

As an example, in the poem “Carrion Comfort,” Hopkins uses the constricting sonnet form to contain his powerful overflow of feeling and to give his uncontrollable questioning a comprehensive structure. As a side note, this is perhaps reflective of his decision to become a Jesuit, the most restrictive of the Catholic Orders. Hopkins actually stopped writing poetry for almost ten years after his conversion to the Society of Jesus, believing that the personal ambition inherent in the desire to write was unbecoming to a Jesuit priest. The contrast between Hopkins’ ascetic bent and the uninhibited manner in which he plays with phonetics within the sonnet structure illustrate some of the reasons for his inner conflict between impulse and suitability. In the case of “Carrion Comfort,” Hopkins utilizes the Petrarchan, or Italian, sonnet structure to frame his dialogue with Despair as a question in the octave and an answer in the sestet, though the poem, like the poet, is filled with questions throughout. The incessant interrogative interplay imparts an immediacy to the poem that expresses the distress of Hopkins’ dynamic mental processes, comparable to writings from Joyce illustrating the stream-of-consciousness.

Hopkins composes the octave in a standard ABBA scheme and uses internal rhyme in each line to increase the cumulative phonetic impact. The poet begins to externalize his solitary debate with a powerfully repetitive statement of his intent to resist the demise of his hope:

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 (Hopkins 1554).

The reiterations of “can”, “not”, and “I” in these first lines indicate his almost frantic resolution to resist hopelessness and to remain aware of the inscape that he previously sensed within and around him. Hopkins also uses the pun of a knot in a rope, which he can “not untwist,” to reflect

this circular interlocution with himself, and the fraying of his former certitude in his beliefs as his “last strands” are now “slack.” By addressing the apostrophic Despair as “carriion comfort” he associates despondency with a paradoxical release from the soul’s torment through a total loss of faith, and with a false sustenance that is lacking in nourishment. However, Hopkins still believes that inscape can free him from his pain and bring him closer to God, or perhaps to himself, so the poet rejects this loss of faith utterly despite his “most weary” exhaustion. Hopkins seems to have been so dejected as to have contemplated suicidal thoughts, as there is a significant difference between choosing to be, as opposed to “not choose not to be,” which implies an effort to continue to exist reminiscent of Hamlet’s famed soliloquy. Again, Hopkins rejects the path of least resistance and instead delves deeper for courage and attempts to convey his very self as part of his affirmation.

Though the octet begins by defying Despair, Hopkins continues in the second quartet by questioning his ruthless diety:

But ah, but O thou terrible, why wouldst thou rude on me      5  
 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  
 (Hopkins 1554)?

The images resound with a dreadful power that has now been directed against the poet rather than being a source of succor as it had been in the past. Hopkins perceives that the inscape of God can be more terrifying than comforting and evokes this with the use of “terrible” as a descriptive appellation. This spiritual disorientation and loss of the familiar solace of established religion, and the descent into the mystic abyss of a solitary humanity, is echoed by Yeats in his

pivotal Modernist poem, “Easter 1916”: All changed, changed utterly/A terrible beauty is born (Yeats 2094). The Christian faith had been the foundation of Western culture for centuries, regardless of the variety of protestant factions that had been advocated at one time or another, but by the end of the nineteenth century that societal cornerstone was splintering and sundering from the pressures of a faster-paced and industrialized existence. This sense of devotional vertigo is articulated by Hopkins with the use of “ah” and repetition of “O,” as the poet exclaims with the force of his fear and desolation as he endures his personal “tempest.” Hopkins attempts to establish something personally relevant from the ruins by achieving in stress with his poetry, and perhaps hoped to lead his way back to faith by doing so.

The entire central passage of the sonnet is rife with Christian imagery being turned on itself. The alliterations used in “wring-world right foot rock,” “lay a lionlimb,” “darksome devouring,” and “bruised bones” turn these words into hammers, resounding with fierce authority and emphasizing the brutality of Hopkins’ lonely test of faith. For example, the “rock” could refer to the stone that gave forth water for Moses in the wilderness, or refer to St. Peter, the “rock” upon which the church was built. By using the descriptive “wring-world right foot,” with its connotations of twisting, overpowering, and punitive mastery, the positive subtexts of strength and reliability of stone have been turned about and likened to a threshing tool for humanity. In addition, the “lionlimb” could be interpreted to refer to either Christ or Satan, with “darksome devouring eyes” that instill a sense of mortal or perhaps immortal terror, with a piercing gaze that does not stop at the surface, but goes to the marrow of the soul and results in “bruised bones.” The same phrase, lion-limb, is an allusion to the book of Job (4.10), the prophet who symbolizes the eternal question of God’s true intent towards the righteous, whom Hopkins certainly identifies and empathizes with in this poem. Hopkins’ determination to continue doing

and being all he is able or “selving”, which he declared in the first four lines, is strengthened by this heartfelt illustration of what he fears, the total annihilation of his identity: “me frantic to avoid thee and flee?” Unable to escape from his God, he seeks a reason for his very personal anguish, and as no justification presents itself from above, he ultimately turns within himself for the answers.

The compound words used by Hopkins to illustrate his fearsome foe more fully, such as “wring-world,” “lionlimb,” and “darksome,” though they may seem odd to English readers, are a reflection of the binary epithet commonly used in ancient Greek poetry, which Hopkins taught at the University College of Dublin. An epithet is a word used to express specific, prominent qualities of a person or thing. By compounding an epithet into a binary with an additional, descriptive word, a more evocative and ideally “truer” image is produced for the reader. Previous poets such as Keats had used the technique in a more limited and purely descriptive fashion, for example, Keats’ use of “rainbow-large” to evoke immensity in his poem “Endymion: A Poetic Romance” (Keats). Hopkins’ use relates more directly to his attempt to convey the inscape of his visions and achieve poetic instress. In his article, “The Culture of the Ancient Epithet: Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Translation of Imagination,” Jack Mitchell states:

Hopkins’ epithets are comparable to Timotheus’ for their innovativeness; unlike Timotheus, however, Hopkins was innovating in a tradition of atraditionality, in which vividness and specificity are meant to provoke reactions on the part of the reader (Mitchell).

Although the effect is striking and unusual when compared to more mainstream poetic techniques, it is a case of ancient method being recreated to serve a modern purpose. Plainer words simply will not fit Hopkins’ need to express the inscape he envisions with utmost clarity.



It would have been an intuitive leap for the poet, as an accomplished Greek scholar, to apply his linguistic erudition by combining concepts with the same approach that had been used so effectively in ancient times in his effort to achieve in stress and communicate clearly. The lack of restraint evident here, juxtaposed within the specific procedures required of the sonnet format, mirrors the poet's emotional processes, and is seen again later in the poem used to more joyful effect.

The sonnet's turn, or *volta*, begins at the beginning of line 9 in the sestet, which is in standard CDCD rhyme scheme. Hopkins internalizes his probing thoughts with the rhetorical question:

Why? That my chaff might fly; my grain lie, sheer and clear (Hopkins 1554).

The assonance of the "I" sound repeats no less than six times in this first line, resounding with Hopkins' defiance of inner weakness and assertion of self-worth. This reaffirms the poet's declarative use of "I" in the first quatrain. This line also conjures the image of a harrowing harvesting of the soul, with purification and nourishment being the implicit outcome due to the skillful incorporation of the wheat symbol, analogous to the bread of life in Christian mythos. The chaff may stand for the poet's unordered thoughts, which when blown away will leave him "sheer and clear", no longer questing for answers but whole and purified.

Nay in all that toil, that coil, since (seems) I kissed the rod, 10

Hand rather, my heart lo! lapped strength, stole joy, would laugh, chéer.

Hopkins both reminisces upon and anticipates that spiritual grace will be the end result of his suffering. Certainly, the use of "toil" and "coil", gives the impression of fruitless, and again circular, labor. Hopkins is questioning why it should or would be hard to tell if God is good, whether what is offered to man is a "rod" or a "Hand." The subjugation of the will that is implied

by “I kissed the rod” begs the question for the need of God to punish at all, and adds to the atmosphere of bemusement due to the logical quandary thus presented. As Michael Raiger postulates in his article, “Poised, but on the Quiver: The Paradox of Free Will and Grace in Hopkins’ ‘Spring’ and ‘Carrion Comfort’:

This act of the elective will in colloquy to God fully acknowledges what the poet ...only seemed to “kiss” – the corrective rod of God’s grace, now recognized as a mercy which cheers the soul (80).

Throughout his suffering, the mercy granted to Hopkins’ is that his own “my heart, lo!” is able to directly and joyfully experience the “cheer” around him, even if inhibited by his isolation. The use of “lapped” implies strength that cannot be accumulated quickly, but rather is limited to a mouthful of increase at a time, or a hard-won slaking of his soul’s thirst. The choice of “stole” indicates that joy is not something that the lonely priest feels he has an intrinsic right to possess. However, with the phrase “would laugh, cheer,” he recognizes that joy is part of his daily life in small moments. Hopkins’ then reaffirms the contradictory nature of the poem by moving away from what is known in order to move towards resolution in the unknown in the final lines.

Hopkins boldly restates his central self-questioning with the final tercet:

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.

The poet is now speaking only to himself because he has left off hoping for an answer from above. He has still retained faith though he is not sure what it is directed at. As Hopkins wrote to his friend Robert Bridges, in a letter from October 1883, “But a Catholic by mystery means an incomprehensible certainty”(Raiger 84). By this definition, faith virtually requires that there also

be justifiable reason for Hopkins' tremendous doubts. If it was easy or comfortable to understand God, then faith wouldn't be difficult to achieve. Hopkins again plays with a tangle of juxtaposition incorporated with alliteration to illustrate the multiplicity of his deity, who is a "hero" yet indulges in an overpowering "heaven-handling," and has "flung" and "foot-trod" Hopkins' spirit. Yet, the poet is now unsure who is truly causing punishment here: is he subject to a cruel God or only to his own thoughts? Hopkins articulates the expansion of time, which crawls when one is locked in battle with despondent thought, with the line "That night, that year." The metaphor of wrestling with both God and with himself is reminiscent of Jacob in the Old Testament who wrestled with the Lord throughout a long night, and supports the irony that God could not overcome his creation. No matter how long the night seems, it does hold within its "now done darkness" an implicit promise of the coming dawn. Despite his subjective disorientation, Hopkins identifies with the suffering and stoicism of Christ with his final words, which echo the last words of the despairing savior: "(my God!), my God." In Raiger's analysis:

Christ's words speak for all those who experience the absence of God; the poet's aspiration in recognition of Christ's suffering then is also a prayer of petition for God's mercy – in acceptance of the mercy of corrective grace from which the poet previously fled (19).

Hopkins goes bravely forward, resolving to continue to "selve," accepts his purification and suffering whether due to or despite God, and declares his individual commitment to stand alone with both courage and questions intact.

Never a strong public presence, the additional pressure brought to bear on Hopkins by his almost total isolation in Ireland acted as a crucible for his poetic drive. This poem, in conjunction with the rest of the 'Terrible Sonnets' could represent the Hopkins' struggle to reject the sense of

impending doom that he was experiencing as his human identity in relation to God was reformulated in the Modern world. In his solitary despondency in Ireland, it was natural for him to ask: what if God was no longer in his Heaven, all was not right with the world, and individuals now had to come to terms with the uncertainty of human existence on their own terms, in a more personal fashion than ever before? As Gamache writes:

The subjectivity and relativity of truth became for religious and literary persons alike a source of deep disquiet, of disillusionment with the heritage they received that was supposed to provide the roots for their understanding and experience of self, society, and the universe (11).

In “Carrion Comfort”, Hopkins does not have resolution as to who or what God may be or want, but he has managed to discover who he is himself. He has “selved”, at least for the duration of this work. Unlike authors writing from a purely literary perspective, Hopkins’ background as a Jesuit priest informed his writing pervasively with religious undertones. His well-developed academic expertise with language, his level of personal isolation in Dublin, his fear of sharing his radical poetry with others, and his intrinsic strength are all reflective of his religious avocation. However, the driving force behind his writing was the same as modern authors such as Joyce and Eliot:

Both kinds of writers shared a sense of crisis as humans trying to discover or, rather, to realize some qualitative meaning in the fact of being, their own and the world’s as they experienced it, not as they were told to understand it (Gamache 2).

As Lawrence Gamache points out, Hopkins’ utterly personal struggles, pinned upon the framework of these sonnets, speak clearly across the years and typify Modern subjectivity and longing for knowledge of the unknowable, and ultimately reflect the conclusion that what can be

known is sufficient unto itself. Language served as his medium and lifeline, and he communicates an isolation that is ironically echoed in the spirits of his audience.

*Carrion Comfort*

Gerard Manley Hopkins

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     5  
 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,     10  
 Hand rather, my heart lo! lapped strength, stole joy, would laugh, chéer.  
 Cheer whom though? the hero whose heaven-handling flung me, fíot 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.

## The 'Terrible Sonnets'

Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote six sonnets between the years of 1885-1887 that can be grouped together as the 'Terrible Sonnets', also referred to as the 'Sonnets of Desolation': 'To Seem the Stranger', 'I Wake and Feel', 'Patience', 'My Own Heart', 'Carrion Comfort', and 'No Worst, There Is None'.

'To seem the stranger lies my lot, my life'

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      5

To my creating thought, would neither hear

Me, were I pleading, plead nor do I: I wear-

y 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      10

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.

'I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day'

I WAKE and feel the fell of dark, not day.

What hours, O what black hours we have spent

This night! what sights you, heart, saw; ways you went!

And more must, in yet longer light's delay.

With witness I speak this. But where I say 5

Hours I mean years, mean life. And my lament

Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent

To dearest him that lives alas! away.

I am gall, I am heartburn. God's most deep decree

Bitter would have me taste: my taste was me; 10

Bones built in me, flesh filled, blood brimmed the curse.

Selfyeast of spirit a dull dough sours. I see

The lost are like this, and their scourge to be

As I am mine, their sweating selves; but worse.

'Patience, hard thing! the hard thing but to pray'

PATIENCE, hard thing! the hard thing but to pray,

But bid for, Patience is! Patience who asks

Wants war, wants wounds; weary his times, his tasks;

To do without, take tosses, and obey.



Rare patience roots in these, and, these away,                   5  
 Nowhere. Natural heart's ivy, Patience masks  
 Our ruins of wrecked past purpose. There she basks  
 Purple eyes and seas of liquid leaves all day.

We hear our hearts grate on themselves: it kills  
 To bruise them dearer. Yet the rebellious wills                   10  
 Of us we do bid God bend to him even so.  
 And where is he who more and more distils  
 Delicious kindness?—He is patient. Patience fills  
 His crisp combs, and that comes those ways we know.

'My own heart let me have more have pity on; let'  
 MY own heart let me have more have pity on; let  
 Me live to my sad self hereafter kind,  
 Charitable; not live this tormented mind  
 With this tormented mind tormenting yet.

I cast for comfort I can no more get                   5  
 By groping round my comfortless, than blind  
 Eyes in their dark can day or thirst can find  
 Thirst 's all-in-all in all a world of wet.

Soul, self; come, poor Jackself, I do advise

You, jaded, let be; call off thoughts awhile 10

Elsewhere; leave comfort root-room; let joy size

At God knows when to God knows what; whose smile

's not wrung, see you; unforeseen times rather—as skies

Betweenpie mountains—lights a lovely mile.

'No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief'

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 5

Woe, world-sorrow; on an age-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 10

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.

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