The religious crisis in the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins.

By

R J Giles

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Supervisor: S Prozesky

Summary

Gerard Manley Hopkins produced poetry in the Victorian era which was noted for its originality of syntax and form. The essence underlying a large body of his poetry was his Catholic religion. His early religious poetry utilized nature-based metaphors to express his love of Christ and trace the immanence of God within nature. He borrowed heavily from the aesthetics of Pater and the philosophy of Duns Scotus. The dissertation explores these early influences and assesses their contribution to the formation of a unique religious interpretation of life and the formulation of an aesthetic congruent with this religion. The dissertation dissects early symptoms of religious doubt within his poetry and finally analyses his 'Terrible Sonnet' phase in detail to ascertain whether the crisis so often described as occurring during this period was religious or merely reflected a loss of creative ability.

Key Terms

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By

Roy James Giles

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Introduction

The problem in examining the religious crisis in Hopkins’s poetry lies in a correct definition of the term. A religion implies a specific system of faith and worship. In nineteenth century England the generally accepted religion was a carefully defined dogma characterized by features I shall elaborate on later in the introduction. Broadening the definition to ‘religious’ encompasses further entities such as an individual’s piety, his devotion, his sense of belonging to a specific order and particularly in Hopkins’ case the need to adhere to certain vows. A crisis carries connotations of urgency, danger and possibly represents a turning-point or re-evaluation of what had previously been accepted as the norm. Hopkins’s religious crisis covers all these entities. It remained throughout a dilemma of choice. He was acutely aware of the needs of his religion, yet he sought to compromise those needs with an innate sensuousness which was expressed in his poetry. The following passage characterizes the way religion moulded his activities:

For Lent no puddings on Sundays. No tea, except if to keep me awake and then without sugar. Meat only once a day. No verses in Passion week or on Fridays. Not to sit in armchair except can work no other way. Ash Wednesday and Good Friday bread and water. (Gardner 1963:41).

The above passage from Hopkins’s notebook is a facet of the dichotomy that crafted his life – an asceticism that continually wrestled with a recalcitrant aestheticism. His asceticism was founded in the self-discipline with which he pursued his Jesuit Rule. It encompassed an abstinence from what could be construed as the pleasures of normal life for a hoped-for spiritual benefit. Hopkins denied himself the indulgences which secular society offered. This was echoed in the rigorous Jesuit training he undertook, as well as in later years the accepting of social and psychological isolation whilst attempting to deal with his religious doubts. His aestheticism or appreciation of beauty was
grounded in his love of Nature. It was expressed in his poetry which remained throughout deeply personal. That he felt a profound sense of guilt in indulging in this pleasure was evidenced by the burning of his poetry upon entering the Society of Jesus. Hopkins’s religion was formulated both by his surrounding society and by a rationalism informed by his own aesthetic needs. In attempting to define the religious crisis in the life of Hopkins it is necessary to expand on the term ‘Religion’ in the context of late nineteenth century England: ‘Religion in all of its guises provided the underpinning of life in nineteenth century England’ (Altick 1973:203). It was intertwined in both the cultural and intellectual fabric of English life. It ordered and sustained a certain hierarchy in society and was co-opted by politicians to justify their views and actions. Its all-encompassing nature intruded upon Hopkins’s youth. The uniformity and ordered nature of English society and Church was reflected in Hopkins’s household. He was the eldest of eight children and reared in a prosperous middle-class home (Gardner 1963:xvi). His devout mother and father anticipated his pursuit of orthodox Anglicanism, but conflicting views within Anglican England thwarted this ideal.

Altick defines the Englishman’s religion:

The ordinary Victorian had been reared in a culture circumscribed by Christian teaching. In addition to a common literary and argumentative vocabulary the Bible provided the accepted cosmogony, a considerable part of ancient history as it was then known, and above all the foundation of his morality. Religion had determined his whole outlook upon life, his assessment of its nature and purpose and when what he had been taught to believe were its eternal verities were cast into question, he suffered accordingly (Altick 1973:203-204).

Anglican Religion was tightly woven into the fabric of English society. Dissent was frowned upon and poorly tolerated. As a religion it was yoked to a rigid theology, lacking the spirituality and ritual of Catholicism. There emerged, however, counter currents within the intellectual foundations of the church. The earliest stirrings of dissent were
voiced by the Oxford movement – beginning as a protest against political events and the subservience of the church to the temporal power. The Oxford Movement began as well to concentrate upon the long neglected spirituality of religion. The need to cater to the individual needs of parishioners had begun to occupy the central stage. It was at the same time a regressive step in that there was a tendency to restore the former power of Bishops and to re-assert the Church’s authority in matters of faith. Its stance can be seen as deeply paradoxical – there was an emphasis on the emotional aspects of one’s spirituality, yet at the same time a fundamentalist attitude to religion was encouraged. Within this approach one can already perceive the congruence between this attitude and the aesthetic dilemma that controlled Hopkins’s life.

Hopkins sought a purity and depth in his spirituality through a denial of extraneous pleasures, as evidenced in the passage at the beginning of the introduction. The Anglican religion had clarified its own spirituality by removing much of the ritual which had normally accompanied Catholic worship. Hopkins had been raised as an Anglican, yet moved toward a Catholic religion during his years at Oxford University. The ceremony and ritual that accompanied the Catholic mass could be described as aesthetic in a visual and emotive sense. These facets of Catholicism would have appealed to the sensuous nature within Hopkins. Fusing his spiritual and aesthetic needs in a single (Catholic) entity would be a logical choice.

The Oxford movement attempted to cater to both a certainty and an emotional spontaneity in religious life. Its appeal remained primarily to those who sought the comfort of this position, rather than a scientific validation of religion. Emerging from within the Oxford Movement was Cardinal John Henry Newman – a religious scholar, who changed the direction of Hopkins’s religious life (Ward 1990/91:105-106). Newman
set about reaffirming the central tenets of Christian belief. He provided the intellectual basis for a continuity between the original Church of Peter and the present Church of England. The emphasis in his approach was a rapprochement to Catholicism. He attempted to unyoke the Church from Governmental control – St Peter was the Church’s true inspiration. His final commitment was to convert to Roman Catholicism in October 1845 – a year after the birth of Hopkins. Newman’s life is relevant in the sense that it became a template for the young Hopkins to follow. Newman exhibits the rigorous dogmatic attachment to an accepted religion in youth, the years of doubt whilst in a transitional Oxford Movement and the final capitulation to Catholicism. All this is done within the certainty of a commitment to God. This is the foundation that anchored the emotional and social upheaval inherent in confronting the norms of Victorian Society.

Hopkins emulated Newman, yet as we shall see, the fierce commitment unravelled as his life followed a more uncompromising course. As Altick so clearly perceives, ‘The Oxford Movement’s affirmation of sacramentalism as a means of grace was akin to the Romantic exaltation of the symbol, especially as found in nature, as the nexus between the seen and the unseen. In an age of encroaching materialism it took religion into a rarer ether in the beauty of symbolic objects and act’ (Altick 1973:215).

Hopkins’s embracing of Catholicism reflects upon a wider impulse in mid-to-late Victorian England. His choice of religion, when viewed in the context of Newman and the Oxford Movement, was thoroughly in context with the intellectual climate of its day. It represented a rational appraisal of his own needs and held the promise of a spiritual balance and order required by the ascetic side of his personality. His religion at the onset of his creative life reflected a balance of his ascetic and aesthetic impulses. He had chosen to dispense with the sensual aridity of Protestantism yet his religion and world became even more centred on a duty and commitment to an immanent God. It
was the ‘Real presence’ in the sacrament of the Catholic Church that he could relate to
the intense emotion he encountered in nature. The remainder of his life echoes his
attempts to maintain this balance. The crisis is essentially always present – it is
repeatedly reflected in his poetry and actions. This is the point I wish to stress in
assessing the nature of his achievements in the ensuing years to 1889.

Hopkins’s religious crisis was reflected both in his personal life and in his poetry. It would
be appropriate to view this crisis from alternate perspectives.

Firstly, one could take the secular approach. This would be to ignore the fact that
Hopkins was a Jesuit priest and concentrate on the interplay between the aesthetic and
the ascetic sides of his personality. Both aspects had a compelling influence upon his
life, the ascetic arising from a profound sense of duty and an ethic of self-denial and
hard work (Gardner 1963:xix). His aesthetic sense was less moulded by the
contemporary environment. It represented a sense of his own uniqueness and the ability
to express in poetry the concept of beauty. His aesthetic derived its impetus from the
preceding Romantics and was attenuated by Pater and the aesthetics of the later
nineteenth century (Boyd 1989:54). The crisis existed in an inability to reconcile the two
diametrically opposed impulses within him. A complete commitment to aesthetics would
have led Hopkins into the abyss of the Lost Generation of late nineteenth century poets
such as Lionel Dowson or into the indulgences of an Oscar Wilde (Mariani 1998:239). It
was essentially an irresolvable crisis that needed religion to define its basis, and as
such, a purely secularist approach to the understanding of Hopkins's art would be too
superficial.
Another alternative would be the Ignatian approach. This encompasses an approach which sees Hopkins's dilemmas and his art in terms of his commitment to the Society of Jesus, or the Jesuits. It would clarify his personal moments of distress and particularly the ‘dark night of the soul’ he expresses in the ‘Terrible Sonnets’ (Downes 1960:115-147). It would also, bearing in mind the spiritual exercises of St Ignatius, provide a rational explanation and a way out of his moments of religious doubt (Mariani 2001:415). It would, however, be too confining in attempting to explain the aesthetic impulse which drove so much of his anguish and his art. His crisis would not have been a crisis had he been able to accept the rationality of Jesuit thought and dogma. It reflected to a far greater extent a rebellion against the very dogma of the order that he felt was restraining his art. The value of the Ignatian approach in assessing the crises Hopkins experienced would be a linking of the phases of Jesuit training and the poetry produced at each particular time by Hopkins. His poetry so often reflected the environment in which he found himself and to a large extent his environment was governed by his Jesuit duties. Unfortunately, as in the secular approach, the Ignatian approach gives too limited attention to the aesthetic needs of Hopkins. Its rationality precludes a thorough appraisal of Hopkins's need to assuage these impulses.

A further approach would be the ‘Victorian’ approach. This would represent a placing of Hopkins within the surrounding Victorian ethos. It would view him as another Matthew Arnold except that his crisis was religious rather than moral or secular. There is certainly no denying that Hopkins was influenced by the religious currents of the day. His commitment to Catholicism was heavily influenced by Cardinal Newman’s intervention. His aesthetics were loosely based on the epiphanies Pater sought in art (Earnest 1978:9-15). He cannot be said to merely have transposed these to nature and added a religious embellishment. His philosophy was a ‘borrowing’ of the work of Duns Scotus
and transposed to his personal needs. This was an inherently Victorian occupation as evidenced in the borrowing of Gothic and Classical architecture. Hopkins's poetics were also contemporary when viewed with those of Swinburne or Walt Whitman (Clausen 1977:175). All three exhibited a strong sense of the self and its uniqueness. In the context of Victorian aesthetics Hopkins's critics, particularly Yfor Winters, see Hopkins's work as ‘romantic both in its overwrought emotionalism and in its carelessness.’ (Hartman 1966:56)

The weakness of the above approach is that it fails to explain or unravel the depth of Hopkins's commitment to his chosen religion. He may have doubted God, but he never doubted his need for a religion or a belief beyond that in the self.

An alternative approach would be to view the poet within the persona of Hopkins and see the crisis as a perceived failing in his artistic abilities. His poetry, syntax and reliance on neologisms, borrowing from Anglo-Saxon and sprung rhythm were reflective of a highly experimental aesthetic. Hopkins's continual request to others to read his poems ‘out loud’ is also indicative of the emphasis he placed on the musical quality of his verse. The work of Michael Sprinker traces a crisis within Hopkins that arises from an inability to be creative. ‘What the poet resigns is his poetic career, the sign of which is his loss of the ability to create, to produce, to beget poems’ (Sprinker 1980:128). J. Hillis Miller also summarizes a similar viewpoint in his assertion. ‘There seems to be a contradiction at the heart of Hopkins’ theory and practice of poetry. How could poetry express at once the inscapes of nature, the inscapes of words and the inscape of the poet’? (J. Hillis Miller 1975: 307-308). Both authors see Hopkins's crisis in terms of the failure of his aesthetic or his art to satisfy him. This, like the preceding viewpoints, is too restrictive and fails to acknowledge the very definite influence of his formal religion.
I have continually defined Hopkins’s crisis as religious. There are critics who perceive the crisis articulated in Hopkins’s later poetry as having a different origin. Michael Sprinker sees the crisis as a crisis in his poetry ‘struggling valiantly against the ebbing of his poetic energies’ (Sprinker 1980:129). Hopkins’s subject in his later poetry was his distance from God and the physical suffering he was enduring. The crisis was spiritual rather than a mere ebbing of artistic ability. Rebecca Boggs asserts that Hopkins’s crisis lies in a continuing fight to remain sane and functional (Boggs 1977:888). She quotes from Hopkins’s letters to justify her assertion: ‘soon I shall be ground down to a state like this last spring’s and summer’s, when my spirits were so crushed that madness seemed to be making approaches’ (G.M.H. to R.B. 30 April 1884, in Letters pg. 193). Boggs manages to describe the crisis rather than explain its origins.

J. Hillis Miller provides a deeper insight into the later stages of Hopkins’s poetry when he claims that ‘in the end Hopkins finds that poetry is not trivial or neutral, but like other positive ways of affirming selfhood a means to damnation’ and that ‘artistic selving is bad because it is devilish, an imitation of Satan rather than Christ’. (J.Hillis Miller 1975:335 and 338).

The above quotations serve to underline the differing approaches to understanding and explaining the path that Hopkins’s poetry followed and its final crisis. My dissertation attempts to analyse the various stages in both Hopkins’s life and art in a chronological order to unravel the basis and form of the crisis which is expressed in his work, immediately prior to his death. I have consistently claimed throughout the dissertation that the crisis was essentially religious. I have to this end analysed relevant poems and attempted to extract from them evidence of a religious basis to the various choices, both
artistic and religious, which he pursued in rendering his life rational. The texts I studied were chosen to cover the secular, Victorian, Ignatian and textual approaches I elaborated upon earlier in the introduction. No single viewpoint or approach sufficed and what became apparent in my reading was that all interpretations contributed in varying degrees to an understanding of the crisis Hopkins experienced. What my dissertation sets out to do is confirm that religious factors dominated both the development and eventual expression of Hopkins’ crisis. This assertion coloured my choice of certain texts, particularly Altick’s *Victorian People and Ideas*. It provided the framework against which Hopkins religious choices could be gauged. J. Hillis Miller and Sprinker’s works were useful in interpreting Hopkins’s syntax and giving it a substance which the broader texts failed to do. Sprinker’s and Miller’s texts were less useful in contextualizing Hopkins within the prevailing social and religious environment of the day. Paul Mariani and David Downes’ books were particularly useful in this respect in that they analysed his poetry within the context of his religion and life.
Chapter 1

The early Hopkins: the roots of his aesthetic and religious dilemma

Hopkins entered Balliol College, Oxford in 1863. Three individuals influenced and shaped his early religious and aesthetic convictions. Benjamin Jowett was master of Balliol and Regius Professor of Greek. His character was admired by Hopkins for its ‘purity’ (Gardner 1963:xviii). He also was a Broad Church sympathizer and encouraged a more liberal approach to Anglicanism. The Broad Church encouraged a relaxed attitude to Church doctrine which enabled an easier acceptance of new discoveries which challenged conventional thought, such as Darwin’s theories of evolution and Lyell’s work on geology. Hopkins realized that blending religion with Art could sustain his belief in a higher order (Storey 1982:362).

Jowett facilitated this shift in thinking by allowing scepticism to colour a fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible. Matthew Arnold was at the time Professor of Poetry at Oxford. His influence on Hopkins was similar to that of Jowett. He chronicled the decline in the ‘Sea of Faith’ that had been sustaining England. He envisaged a replacement of religious faith with a faith in literature and art. The relevance of this attitude lay in its assumption that there was an element of the religious in artistic endeavour. Hopkins’s work prior to this stage was conventional and heavily influenced by Keats. His ‘A Vision of the Mermaids’ penned in 1862 echoes this:

Plum purple was the west; but spikes of light
Spear’d open lustrous gashes, crimson white
Where the eye fix’d, fled the encrimsoning spot
And gathering, floated where the gaze was not;
And through their parting lids there came and went
Keen glimpses of the inner firmament
Fair beds they seem’d of water lilly flakes
Clustering entrancingly in beryl lakes:
Anon, across their swimming splendour strook
A quivering pennon; then for eye to keen,
Ebb’d back beneath its snowy lids unseen.

The poem chronicles natural abundance, beauty and convention. There is an abundance of description and adjectives with no attempt to seek an order behind this natural abundance. Matthew Arnold provided the impetus to move beyond this stage. He encouraged the notion that Art could have a moral significance (Arnold 1954:241-255). Hopkins moves closer to this notion with the following poem which expresses a balance between himself, Nature and his chosen worship.

Let me be to thee as the circling bird,
Or bat with tender and air crisping Wings
That shapes in half-light his departing rings,
From both of whom a changeless note is heard.

I have found my music in a common word,
Trying each pleasurable throat that sings
And every praised sequence of sweet strings
And know infallibly which I preferred.

The authentic cadence was discovered late
Which ends those only strains that I approve
And other science all gone out of date
And minor sweetness scarce made mention of:
I have found the dominant of my range and state
Have, O my God, to call thee love and love.

The poem was written in 1865 – two years into his Oxford stay. There is a greater control and more subdued tone than in the earlier poem. The poem represents a prayer in that it addresses God intimately as ‘thee’ in the opening and closing sentences. Hopkins sees himself as part of Nature 'the circling bird' or 'bat with air crisping wings'.
In these metaphors he has moved both above (literally) and beyond the detailed descriptive prose in his earlier Keatsian phase. The creatures of Nature revolve around the centre which is occupied by a changeless God. The poem also has remnants of the sensuousness present in the earlier piece. Hopkins relies on the ‘half-light’, ‘pleasurable throat’ and ‘sweetness’ to conjure visual, auditory and gustatory associations with his subject. That he has reached a new certainty in his knowledge or awareness is encapsulated in the terms ‘changeless’, ‘infallibly’ and ‘authentic’ found in the poem. The poem also chronicles the end of an internal journey which Hopkins has undertaken at Oxford: ‘I have found the dominant of my range and state’. His life had begun to define its religious centre.

There is a commitment in the above poem which was lacking in the earlier poem and rather than a mere chronicling of nature there is an attempt to extract from nature a deeper meaning. God has been made an integral part of nature and the praise is a celebration of his creation rather than a superficial exuberance expressed in verse. Hopkins approaches the aesthetic that Arnold was attempting to articulate – that art needs a higher meaning to be relevant. Hopkins at this stage has chosen religion as that higher meaning.

A third influence on Hopkins during the early 1860s was Walter Pater who was a tutor at Oxford and in the process of establishing a new aestheticism. Both Hopkins and Pater had a debt to Ruskin who championed the concept that ‘Man’s visual sensibility enabled him to be receptive to the religious intimations available both through nature and art’ (Altick 1973:281-282). It was this close observation that lay at the root of both Pater’s and Hopkins’s aestheticism (Bruce 1989:247). Hopkins’s early journals are peppered with detailed descriptions of flowers, clouds and aspects of nature. An entry in his
journal dated July 17, 1866 is particularly relevant: ’Dull, curds and whey clouds faintly at times – It was this night I believe, but possibly the next that I saw clearly the impossibility of staying in the Church of England, but resolved to say nothing to anyone till three months was over…’ (Gardner 1963:108).

The extract yokes a description of nature to a profound religious decision. It is an augury of the crisis that continued throughout his life, which was establishing a balance between his nature based aesthetic and an equally compelling religious conviction. Hopkins’ relationship with Pater helped him primarily in shaping his aesthetic. It was from this aesthetic that all his novel insights developed. Close observation of nature informed with a religious conviction produced the concepts of ‘inscape’ and ‘instress’. He encapsulates the forming of these concepts in an early essay: ‘On the origin of Beauty : A Platonic Dialogue.’ He sees beauty as the product of variety, contrast and a juxtaposition of asymmetry and symmetry. It is this individuation of sense experience that leads him later to the work of John Duns Scotus and an anchoring of his private aesthetic in theology.

Pater followed an alternate path. He too established an aesthetic from sensory experience, but tried to limit ‘one’s’ exposure to art and to treat ‘life in the spirit of art’ (Earnest 1978:11). Pater saw idealism (especially Christian Idealism) as a diminution of the sensuous experience. Hopkins’ aesthetic is derived from sense experience, yet in a later essay he rejects Paterism. ‘The Probable Future of Metaphysics’ penned in 1867 rejects the Paterian phenomenalism as well as his subjectivism. Hopkins refers to it as ’an overpowering, a disproporttionate sense of personality ’ (Earnest 1978:13). Hopkins has by now established a nature-based aesthetic with a strong Paterian influence. He relies on a Platonic concept of an underlying higher order giving substance and meaning
to our sense impressions. It is in this sense that it differs from that formulated by Pater. Pater’s sensuousness is viewed as an end in itself. There is no need or commitment to an underlying order or deity. Hopkins found a means to convert this love of nature into an act of praise to a higher order. Hopkins began to believe in the doctrine of a sacramental nature (Mariani 1998:238). He set about investing natural phenomena with attributes of God. This was not merely the pantheism of a Wordsworth. It was a concerted attempt to structure his aesthetic with scaffolding borrowed from theology, language and sense experience. The fusion of all was an act of creation mimicking that of God – the writing of a poem (Barth 1996:176).

Hopkins’ quest is mirrored in an early poem, ‘Heaven – Haven’ with its subtitle ‘A Nun takes the Veil’.

I have decided to go  
Where springs not fail  
To fields where flies no sharp and sided hail  
And a few lilies blow  

And I have asked to be  
Where no storms come,  
Where the green swell is in the havens dumb  
And out of the swing of the sea.

The poem’s importance lies in its defining of Hopkins’s needs. He requires a centre of solace and equipoise, which he feels religion may deliver. The vagaries of nature are contrasted with this capitulation to a higher ideal. Within the poem lie the seeds of his later religious crisis – his desire for solace within religion contrasted against that which he encounters in reality. It is the paradox of unflinching commitment to God with the hope of a felt or ‘tasted’ salvation and the seeming failure of an answering voice or commitment on God’s part. Hopkins’s subjectivism or his ‘self-taste’ drives him even
further in a quest to assuage this need. His endeavours are all devolved from this need. The whole structure of his ensuing poetry and life is premissed upon this quest. He becomes trapped in an uncompromising subjectivism.

This chapter has chronicled the main influences on the development of Hopkins’ aesthetics, namely Pater, Arnold and Ruskin. That their influence was significant places Hopkins squarely in the mainstream of Victorian thought and literature. Hopkins’s uniqueness was as yet unexpressed at this stage. He had not developed the original syntax and metaphor that characterized his later poetry. What he had, however, set about establishing was a commitment in his work to a God whom he experienced in Nature and who promised him a certainty he still lacked. This is evident in the poems I chose to illustrate his religious development. What is also apparent is the increasing self-examination and subjectivism he is beginning to express in his poetry. It is this facet of his developing religious personality that colours his ensuing work and generates the doubts expressed in the poem that opens the next chapter.
Chapter 2

The defining and choice of his religion

We see the glories of the earth
But not the hand that wrought them all:
Night to a myriad worlds gives birth,
Yet like a lighted empty hall
Where stands no host at door or hearth
Vacant creation's lamps appall.

The above extract is from ‘Nondum’, a poem composed a few months prior to his conversion to Catholicism in October 1866. The poem is dark and introspective, in sharp contrast to the exuberant verse he was to write in the late 1870s. It represents, however, a foretaste of the ‘Terrible Sonnets’ of the 1880s. It is revealing in the sense that it enables an awareness of his vicissitudes of mood, particularly when contrasted against the celebratory tone of a later work such as ‘The Windhover’. The poem may also underscore his religious and artistic endeavours in the ensuing ten years. He sets about defining the nature of his religion, including its theological detail and integrating this with a satisfying aesthetic. Both these exertions may be an attempt to escape the nihilism expressed in the above poem. Hopkins joined the Society of Jesus after Easter in 1868. It was a compromise to the ascetic side of his character. It also underscored the particular, almost eccentric nature of his being and his choices. The Jesuits adhered to a strict code based upon the principles of St Ignatius, principles which Hopkins embraced and according to which he ordered his life. He burnt his earlier poetry as an act of contrition, a symbol of a new commitment to God (Storey 1982:362). This action may also be construed as an attempt to deny the sensual side of his being, a defiance of his own ‘inscape’ or uniqueness.
The ensuing seven years produced no poetry, but they represented a period of intense experimentation and introspection as regards language and nature and the validity of both in the context of his new found religious vocation (Gardner 1963:xxii). The period produced a defining of the terms which were to become synonymous with his poetry. ‘Inscape’ and ‘instress’ appear in his writing as early as 1868 during a trip to Switzerland (Gardner 1963:xx). Inscape is the distinct pattern that expresses an object’s inner form, that gives it its selfhood. It flows naturally as a concept from a man who was intensely individual and self-aware. It rides on an aesthetic that he initially wished to deny, but that later became completely enmeshed within a personal theology which he was bent on developing. He saw inscapes all around him – Nature, particularly, was invested with a myriad ‘individuations’, but these all formed part of a greater whole which was linked to God. He began an attempt to reconstruct the world, to salvage his own sense of belonging. Inscape is linked to the ‘haecceitas’ or ‘thisness’ within the theology of John Duns Scotus which Hopkins came to study in 1872.(Storey 1982:363). Scotus’s theories were entirely congruent with those formulated by Hopkins. He saw the individual as dwelling within the universal. ‘Duns Scotus believed in the ‘principle of individuation,’ that the mind could come to know the universal (the summum of all medieval philosophy) through apprehending an individual object’s ‘thisness’ (haecceitas) and that such apprehensions ultimately reveal God (Storey 1982:363). In a moment of sublime insight Hopkins could reconcile his love of nature, his art and his worship. His passion for the unique and the individual could also be transposed into a greater whole – God’s Creation. Coupled with God’s creation is the emergence of Christ as a metaphor for that which Hopkins saw in nature. Christ’s incarnation precedes that of his historical manifestation: this is evident in the procession of the Trinity. His presence is there at the moment of Creation. This underpins both Scotus’s and Hopkins’s sacramental
aesthetic. All of nature has the potential of the divine within it. Inscape ‘is the experience of the Incarnation of Christ’s spirit in matter’ (Lichtman 1991:37). This fact is the premiss upon which the remainder of Hopkins’s art is built. The poem for Hopkins is, as Lichtman so aptly puts it, ‘the Body of Christ’ (Lichtman 1991:48). It is the Eucharist in the sense of being the motionless, real presence of Christ, of acting with sacramental, transforming instress on the reader as Hopkins has himself been instressed by nature…” (Lichtman 1991:48). Hopkins’s quest is partially complete. He has adopted Catholicism, followed the path of a Jesuit with its discipline and required introspection and developed an aesthetic which relates directly to nature and includes himself. His ‘self-taste’ which he has so dutifully attempted to exclude from his life has become a vital component in his concept of the divine.

All nature shares in the enfleshment of Christ. Hopkins’ creation of poetry is another manifestation of the divine. The paradigm of the kenosis or self-emptying of Christ becomes Hopkins’s template for his own life and the making of his poetry. Hopkins has not only managed to reconcile his love of earthly beauty with his Christianity by means of Scotist theology, but has also given his work the rigour of a logical aesthetic. It is the clarifying of this aesthetic that Hopkins pursued prior to his defining poem ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’. Instress was the other quality Hopkins ascribed to nature in his aesthetic theory. It had a dual purpose – both ‘upholding’ an object’s inscape and being the force that the inscape exerted on the observer. It was an equally vital aspect of Hopkins’s religious aesthetic in the sense of communicating the extent of the impact of the divine upon man and nature. His poetry sought to communicate this depth of emotion or divinity through the use of unusual syntax, word-compounding, alliteration and above all a novelty of rhythm. It was the rhetoric of his use of language which to the greatest degree managed to define this concept of instress. Unlike inscape there was
little need to give this aspect of his aesthetic any religious or theological basis. It relied more heavily upon his own unique creative gift. Technique dominated and was borrowed from old Anglo-Saxon, the Welsh chiming or Cygnhanedd and a preoccupation with the sprung rhythm of speech spoken out loud (Gardner 1963:xxxii). All these managed to communicate the concept of instress, which Hopkins fused with an intellectual underpinning of his aesthetic.

The question may be posed, ‘What has Hopkins’s aesthetic and its formulation to do with his religious crisis?’ It has, in my view, a direct relevance. There was always within Hopkins the fear that his poetry and art were merely sensuous and that this reflected his own superficiality. By structuring his art and turning it into an act of true perception, not mere sensation, he could arrive at an authentic self. This attitude was confirmed by the earlier rejection of Paterian phenomenalism, his commitment to the Jesuit life and an ongoing exploration of the aesthetic basis for this art. He had arrived at a stage in his life where a number of these factors were in balance. He had become a Jesuit priest, his poetry was about to echo a carefully formulated aesthetic based upon an acute observation of nature, man and their linkage with God. He had achieved this, largely divorced from secular society – his life to 1875 was spent either in study or in a series of retreats and Jesuit seminaries. It was a state of spiritual, artistic and religious equipoise but it was at the same time tenuous and rather fragile. He had not been exposed to the vagaries of the life of a priest within secular society or the stresses of work. The major point I am underlining is that he had created this balance within a compliant world. It gave him intellectual and spiritual satisfaction but the question as to whether it could stand up to the stresses of a secular life were to be answered in the following years.
Chapter 3

Hopkins the priest and poetry penned under constraint

‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’ defines to a large extent the dilemmas Hopkins experienced as an artist and a person. It was penned after a seven-year absence from the writing of poetry and represents a summation of his religion, his technique, his aesthetic and, above all, a pivot about which one can begin to perceive the early religious doubts he was beginning to entertain. Hopkins had structured a religious aesthetic, which was largely benign, benevolent, and spiritually enhancing. At no stage was this aesthetic tested against ethical issues. He had led a largely sequestered life whilst studying as a priest. This had not exposed him to secular issues where ethics based on a specific religious persuasion would have been adequately tested.

The ‘Wreck of the Deutschland’ questioned the morality of the death of a group of refugee nuns. Hopkins had to come to terms with the death, in appalling circumstances, of the devout. Could this death have been willed by God? Surely it should be seen as a release into a higher realm of being. All the theology he had studied should have prepared him for this, but did it? There are passages in the poem that uncover a growing ambivalence in his relationship to God and underscore the emergence of his true muse, Jesus.

The first section of the ‘Wreck of Deutschland’ is a personal chronicle of Hopkins’ attainment of his religion. Although penned twelve years prior to his ‘Terrible Sonnets’ it foreshadowed aspects of the theme of the later works, The poem’s relevance is similarly its depiction of Hopkins’s relationship to God. There is a metaphor of struggle, mastery
and a blissful defeat in the stanza. God is approached as ‘Thou mastering me’, ‘Thy terror’ (stanza two), ‘The frown of his face’ (stanza three). Hopkins’s submission is complete: ‘I did say yes. O at lightning and lashed rod. The swoon of a heart that the sweep and the hurl of thee trod. Hard down with a horror of height.’ Hopkins is malleable in the hands of God – his religion has forged a master-servant relationship and an as yet unambivalent acceptance on Hopkins’s part of this union. The poem is a compression in ten short stanzas of his initiation into the Catholic faith. It reflects a new ordering of his life and underscores the reason for his personal struggle. It also reflects the consummation of that aspect of the dual personality that bedevilled Hopkins throughout his youth – the ascetic / aesthetic dichotomy. In this instance, the ascetic side has triumphed. Seven years of denial appear to have forged a will and belief capable of withstanding any challenge – be it secular or aesthetic.

The frown of his face
Before me, the hurtle of hell
Behind, where, where was a, where was a place?
I whirled out wings that spell
And fled with a fling of the heart to the heart of the host
My heart, but you were dove-winged, I can tell,
Carrier-witted, I am bold to boast,
To flash from the flame to the flame
Then, tower from grace to grace.

The ambivalence in the first ten stanzas is expressed at the end of stanza four. Hopkins refers to ‘Christ’s gift’ and verse five begins with ‘I kiss my hand to the stars, lovely asunder.’ The link is too obvious to be merely fortuitous. Hopkins’s complex psyche needs a release from a judging, omnipresent God. Christ is a symbol of himself – man suffering in secular society and triumphing, retaining throughout his love for God. Christ is the template by which Hopkins judges himself. He also utilizes Christ to introduce a more benign ‘aesthetic’ aspect of Nature, which was to figure so prominently in his later
Nature poems. Contrast ‘stay, lovely asunder’ with ‘lightning and lashed rod’ and
‘whirled out wings’. The latter descriptions are yoked to God and depict a Nature in
extremis. Hopkins attempts to fuse, to reconcile, his ambivalence to God and Christ in
stanza six:

Not out of his bliss
Springs the stress felt
Nor first from heaven (and few know this)
Swings the stroke dealt
Stroke and stress that stars and storms deliver.
That guilt is hushed by, hearts are flushed by and melt…

The stanza is a unique rendition of Hopkins’s relationship to God and Christ symbolized
by the ‘stars’ and the ‘storm’ in line five. Hopkins’s religion has as its roots the ‘real
presence’ of God and Christ in the world. This I stressed in establishing his reasons for
becoming a Catholic. This presence is felt in the first part and even more intimately in
the second part of the ‘Wreck’. It is the nature of that presence that Hopkins is
attempting to establish in verse six. Are we to see it as the ‘storm’ of a judgmental God
or the ‘stars’ of a suffering Christ? Hopkins wishes a benign and blissful fusion of the
two in this stanza where ‘guilt is hushed’ and ‘hearts are flushed’. Pertinent perhaps is
that guilt is merely flushed, not extinguished. The ‘flushed heart’ is also symbolic of the
power of Christ to inform and transform his relationship to the natural world which
courses through his poetry of the late 1870s and early 1880s. It is again an attempt at a
tenuous balance of the aesthetic and ascetic before he launches an ethical appraisal on
the events around the Deutschland.

The second part of ‘The Wreck’ chronicles suffering, death and resurrection. It is as
such an ethic of martyrdom. The poetry is rich in symbolism and has intimations of both
personal and national salvation. It represents a Hopkins reaching out of himself to a wider community – at first that of the threatened nuns and latterly England and attempting to fuse or integrate all into his vision of a Christian crisis and salvation. It represents a shift away from the self-consciousness of his earlier work, perhaps underlining his incipient move into the role of a priest within a threatened community.

The ‘Deutschland’ poem is also a defining of the dual nature of God. He not only offers salvation, but doles out judgment, which, if one carefully considers the fate of those on the ship, does not connect with an accepted human rationality. The struggle of the ship’s community echoes the personal struggle of Hopkins in the opening ten stanzas. The analogy is shown in the following extract where Hopkins contrasts the struggle of the passengers with that of his own:

They fought with God’s cold –
And they could not and fell to the deck
(Crushed them) and water (drowned them) and rolled.

With the sea romp over the deck.

This should be compared with:

I did say yes
O at lightning and lashed rod
Thou hearest me truer than tongue confess
Thy terror, O Christ, O God.

Hopkins placates fear with an inscape of religious fortitude. He sees the passengers on the Deutschland, other than the nuns, as outside a defined religious (Catholic) insight he shares with the nuns. A nun is cast as ‘a prophetess breasting the babble’ and ‘A prophetess towered in the tumult’. Contrast this with ‘the wild woman-kind’ and a ‘heart-broken rabble’ used to describe the remainder of the ship’s complement. This aspect of
the poem again underlines a facet of the reason for Hopkins’s crisis. He has crafted an aesthetic in which God or Christ is immanent in all of nature, yet he creates a distinct hierarchy of religious experience. He sees the nun as safe within the sanctity of devotion and religion, but it is something she has earned. The unconfessed as shown in the following quotation do not have this comfort:

Well, she has thee for the pain for the
Patience; but pity the rest of them!
Heart, go and bleed at a bitterer vein for the
Comfortless, unconfessed of them ...

There is no joy for those as yet uncommitted to a religion. Hopkins and the nuns have the solace of an afterlife, a knowing in the face of imminent death. The poet fails to extend this same grace to the remainder of humanity. The pernicious nature of the self-assertion chronicled so early in his poetry is echoed in the later ‘Terrible Sonnets’ where Hopkins sees himself as outside the sanctified, as a mere part of the ‘rabble’. In ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’ Hopkins pursues answers to dilemmas which confronted him as a priest. The opening ten stanzas are concerned with the personal, the latter section of the poem is occupied with religious and secular members of the wider community. His failure to annul personal doubts is echoed in his failure to rationalize the fate of the nuns and the passengers on board the Deutschland. The desperation in the themes lies in Hopkins’s failure ‘to recapture a world like that of Eden before the fall’ as J. Hillis Miller so aptly describes. ‘Hopkins is eventually forced to recognize that both man and Nature are fallen. His integration of all things in Christ turns out to be not a description of what is, but nostalgia for what would have been if Satan had not fallen. The devil brought death into the world ’ (J. Hillis Miller 1975:322).
The dual nature of God which Hopkins has uncovered in the Deutschland and for which he has sought rational answers is equally apparent in the Nature that Hopkins worships in his aesthetic, his poetry. Nature is capable of both growth and decay. It is this ageing, this transience that Hopkins can rationalize so effectively within his aesthetic, yet cannot come to terms with in his religion. The final stanza of the Deutschland echoes Hopkins’ need for personal salvation and underscores the means he wishes to use to achieve it. In the following stanza he links the drowning and resurrection of the nun with a renewal of religious feeling in himself and the populace of Britain:

Dame, at our door
Drowned, and among our shoals,
Remember us in the roads, the heaven haven of the
Reward:
  Our King back, oh, upon English souls!
Let him easter in us, be a dayspring to the dimness of us, be
a crimson-cresseted east,
More brightening her, rare-dear Britain, as his reign rolls,
  Pride, rose, prince, hero of us, high-priest,
Our hearts’ charity hearth’s fire, our thoughts’ chivalry’s throng’s
  Lord.

The sombreness of the nun’s resurrection is countered by the exuberance of the syntax and metaphor in the latter aspect of the stanza. The drowning is contrasted against the new dawn and light of the ‘the crimson cresseted east’. A tone of brightness and anticipation is emphasized through alliteration and word-compounding towards the end of the stanza. Hopkins has used the inscape of poetry and of Nature to inspire an awareness of the significance of what has occurred. He has rescued his faith through a rhetoric of poetry and symbol. At best this represents a tenuous foundation for his religion, at worst it is an augury of his later religious doubt.
The years following the writing of ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’ produced the most celebratory of the poems by Hopkins. They possess the aspect of religious joy fused and found in nature that Hopkins describes in the final lines of ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’. The poems are also expressive of the ambivalent nature of the relationship Hopkins had between himself and God. This is apparent in re-appraising the first part of ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’ – an ode that contains the seeds of all of Hopkins’s oeuvre.

Hopkins’s relationship to Christ is defined in Stanza four in describing ‘Christ's gift' as 'lovely asunder starlight' and 'dappled with damson west' and ‘instressed mystery’. In these lines Hopkins has capitulated to Christ in purely aesthetic terms. There is no fear, but a profound fusion of his love for Nature with his love for Christ. Hopkins shared a very different relationship with God. This dichotomy also shaped his religious crisis – which was ultimately a crisis of choice. Unlike the average Victorian psyche which was confronted with the simple option of adhering to conventional religion or not, Hopkins needed to choose between an orthodox religion inspired by the word of God and a more private mysticism and aesthetic represented by Christ. A poem defining his relationship to Christ is ‘The Windhover’ – which Hopkins described as ‘the best thing I ever wrote’ (Storey 1982:371). The poem is, arguably, his most celebratory and triumphant. It defines both his love of Nature and his love of Christ in the rich complexity of his own idiosyncratic syntax. He utilizes all that his aesthetic had taught him. Entities are ‘inscaped’ – the Windhover or kestrel is beauty inscaped in natural form. Its distinctiveness echoes the ‘thisness’ or ‘haecceitas’ in the works of Duns Scotus. He instresses the beauty of the scene by attaching it to Christ – his ‘chevalier’. The poem is concerned with the apprehension of natural beauty and intimations of the religious basis of that beauty. Hopkins remains at his most elevated and contented when alone.
with Christ and Nature. There is no mention of secular society or God in the poem and it is largely free of crisis. Contrast ‘The Windhover’ with ‘God’s Grandeur’. The latter poem echoes again this differing relationship with God as opposed to Christ that was evident in ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’. Hopkins ties God to the secular aspects of society. God’s ‘greatness’, his ‘grandeur’ is contrasted with man’s ‘smudge, his ‘smell’ and his ‘trade’ and ‘toil’. The octet lacks the celebratory tone of ‘The Windhover’ where Christ and Nature are fused in his worship. God is again seen as in judgment and Hopkins assimilates mankind’s transgressions as his own. The world is seen as lapsed and in need of redemption.

Redemption arrives in the sestet in the form of nature and a ‘brooding’ Holy Ghost. God has exited and left his creation to discover its own inscape. Hopkins continually reverts to a need to emphasize the fact that his aesthetics and epiphanies are dependant on a relationship with Christ and Nature rather than an obedience to an overwhelming God. His poetry as particularly evidenced in ‘The Wreck’ gleans its power from the tension that exists between his creative self and his acquired religious character. This may well explain fluctuations in single works between a sensual exuberance and a deep asceticism. Hopkins’s inability to fuse his chosen muse, Christ, with a stranger and more remote God underlies the theme driving the religious crisis in his later works.

The latter years of the 1870s and early 1880s Hopkins spent as a preacher or parish priest in London, Oxford, Glasgow, Liverpool and Chesterfield. Hopkins was confronted with squalor, poverty and the blight of industrialization. Secular life for Hopkins had little attraction. He was tasked with explaining and understanding human suffering in terms of his own beliefs. He had secured his own spiritual well-being in a fusion of Catholicism and a nature-based aesthetic. These were, however, acquired in an environment
conducive to personal growth and self-examination. The individuals he encountered in each parish lacked the luxury of a carefully nurtured spirituality and orderedness of the life Hopkins had as a priest. The baseness of the lives his parishioners pursued appalled Hopkins. He empathized with the poor, yet was rational enough to realize that all he could offer them was a modicum of spiritual sustenance to counter their suffering. He was never a practical, involved priest in the sense of changing his parishioners’ material well-being. His own intense self-consciousness and social isolation precluded an actual involvement in the communities he served within. All these factors may have contributed to a deepening awareness that he was not suited to a life as a priest within a community. The significance of Hopkins’s attempts at following the vocation of a priest were twofold. Firstly, his lack of success may well have compounded a sense of distance from the dogma of the Jesuit creed and led to a lessening of his belief in achieving a comprehensive salvation of man ‘in this life’. Secondly, it may have triggered an apprehension within himself regarding his own ‘salvation’. Could he justify the privilege of a personal salvation when confronted with the all-pervasive suffering of mankind? Did God dole out favours according to an adherence to specific patterns of worship or creeds? These same questions are explored in the ‘Wreck of the Deutschland’ when the fate of the nuns is contrasted with that of the remainder of the ship’s complement.

His poetic themes changed during this period. There was an increased concern with secular themes and a gradual, but perceptive toning down of the exuberance evident in ‘The Windhover’ or ‘Hurrahing in Harvest’. ‘Felix Randal’ epitomizes this shift in Hopkins’ poetry. The theme in ‘Felix Randal’ shifts to an ennobling of the daily toil and suffering of humanity by the intercession of divine grace. The poem has a conversational tone so unlike any work of Hopkins’s that precedes it. Hopkins, God and
Felix Randal are fused in: ‘Being anointed and all, though I had our sweet reprieve and ransom Tendered to him’.

Hopkins has become the intercessionary (Christ) between God and Man. Hopkins as an intercessionary becomes the vehicle for facilitating the acquisition of grace and the alleviation of suffering as echoed in the poem ‘Felix Randal’. The role assumed by Hopkins is similar to that he sees as existing between Christ and God: the son through his suffering on earth and eventual salvation offers a path for others to follow. It is a subtle change from the earlier poetry where nature possessed this role between Hopkins and God. His exposure to secular society has awakened an empathy with mankind which is less bridled with the self-consciousness of ‘The Windhover’. Hopkins’s religion has undergone a fundamental shift where there is a tacit identification within himself with humanity’s suffering. ‘This seeing the sick endears them to us, us too it endears’. The role Hopkins evinces in the poem is that of a priest, yet in the context of his poetry which both preceded and followed this poem it has deeper significance. Hopkins has become his muse, Christ. He has secularized both his thought and actions and what one is witnessing is the kenosis or ‘self-emptying’ of the grace he has acquired (Lichtman 1991:39). Hopkins has identified with the suffering of general mankind. This crucial act has consequences for both the tenor of his remaining years and the formulation and expression of his carefully nurtured aesthetic. The theme of the aesthetic has moved from a celebration of the immanence of God in Nature to a salvation or ennobling of suffering Man through divine grace. This is clearly supported when viewing the themes of subsequent poems. ‘Spring and Fall’ is an elegy to the loss of youth. ‘The Leaden Echo and Golden Echo’ is a preoccupation with mortal decay and the consolation of religion.
Does the shift in Hopkins’s aesthetic reflect a deepening or alleviation of his religious crisis? It has deepened the ensuing crisis. He has accepted a new role in his articulation of human suffering and the development of an aesthetic of divine grace. A conflict of wills occurs where the priest confronts the poet. The next chapter chronicles this stage of Hopkins’s life.
Hopkins' equilibrium unravels and the priest confronts the poet

Hopkins in his years prior to being a priest had established a certain equilibrium between the ascetic and the aesthetic aspect of his religious and poetic calling. There was an integration between the work he produced as a poet, and the insights his religion had given him. He had established a congruence between his personal aesthetic based upon the immanence of Christ in man and the Natural world and a religion that taught of the ‘real presence’ of Christ within all its sacraments. Hopkins had begun to drift away from a nature-based aesthetic as his exposure to mankind's suffering grew. He took upon himself the duty and moral obligations of a priest. His poetry began to lose its celebratory tone and became increasingly sombre and engaged in the plight of his parishioners. As 'Felix Randal' chronicled his shift to a greater emphasis upon humanity and its suffering and the promise of salvation, ‘Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves’ adds a new and more sombre note to this transition.

This sonnet marks another transition in Hopkins's brief life. ‘Felix Randal' shows an empathetic engagement with humanity. Hopkins was living his vocation of a priest in his poetry. There is a congruence between his work and the aesthetic he expresses in his art. The aesthetic has matured from an intense self-awareness to a more universal concern with the community of mankind. The tone of the poetry is certainly more subdued than his earlier work, which was penned largely in a physical isolation, but it remains balanced and retains a degree of optimism, albeit restrained. ‘Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves’ returns to, or rather introduces, a note of personal bleakness. It harks back to the poem ‘Nondum’ written in 1866 prior to his conversion to Catholicism. Hopkins
cannot escape from the indwelling, the self-taste that guided and governed his earlier, more celebratory work. The difference now is that this indwelling generates a wholly different perspective of the world than that espoused in ‘The Windhover’. There emerges in the work of Hopkins a pattern of cyclothymia which tends to mirror a personality rather than a firm linear artistic progression. The theme in ‘Nondum’ is not dissimilar to that in ‘Sibyl’s Leaves.’ The relevance in comparing the two poems lies in the eighteen years that separate them. The period occupies Hopkins's most intense engagement with religion. It covers his conversion to Catholicism, his training as a Jesuit priest and, finally, his initial years as a community-based priest. His world view in the two poems has changed little, ‘The lighted empty hall where stands no host at door or hearth’ in ‘Nondum’ prefigures ‘evening’ which is ‘time’s vast, womb-of-all, home-of-all, hearse-of-all night.’ The hopes and needs Hopkins placed in engaging in the Catholic faith have not delivered the personal salvation or equipoise he required. It is this failure of delivery which lies at the core of his religious crisis. He has followed the precepts and demands of Catholic dogma to the letter, yet remains unfulfilled. The importance Hopkins attached to realizing a personal grace or salvation can be gauged from the intensity with which he attempted to ground his aesthetic in his religion. The concepts of instress and inscape, the rhyming of his poetry with his religious precepts, the intense preoccupation with the philosophy of Duns Scotus and, above all, his continued commitment to a Jesuit ethic underline this importance. He arrives at ‘Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves’ unprepared for the religious void that the poem expresses. There is little reference to a benevolent Christ or God in the poem. He is once again alone with his own soul and the unravelling of his centre or religious being has begun. What is so clear from the poem is the stability of his art. It manages to convey in an equally powerful way the bleakness of his religious position. He utilizes the same rhetoric that earlier on celebrated his union with his first muse, Christ. Alliteration and a
compounding of adjectives provide both a depth and significance to the bleakness of his religious position:

Only the beak-leaved boughs dragonish
Damask the tool-smooth bleak light; black,
Ever so black.

Hopkins emphasizes the personal nature of his present anguish by references to a past that celebrated the variety, the individual differences or ‘haecceitas’ inherent in Nature:

Far earth her being has unbound,
Her dapple is at an end.

Contrast this with the celebratory opening lines of "Pied Beauty" penned in the mid-1870s:

Glory be to God for dappled things -
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow.

The discordance in his religious life has reshaped his nature-based aesthetic. The variety and uniqueness he previously celebrated have been replaced with references to the world and nature drained of colour or variety as shown in the following extract:

Let life waned, oh let life wind
Off her once skeined, stained veined
Variety upon, all on two spools;
part, pen, pack
Now her all in two flocks, two folds
black, white; right, wrong;
Reckon but, reck but, mind...
It is within the centre of this long sonnet that Hopkins provides a bleak summary of his psychic state: ‘Disremembering, dismembering’ encapsulates both a forgetting and a falling apart. Hopkins cannot forget his earlier joy in Christ and that, contrasted against his present depression, compounds the anguish. He provides a powerful metaphor for his own destruction or dismembering throughout this poem. He sees himself as ‘selfwrung, selfstrung and shelterless’ in a ‘hearse-of-all-night’. Evening or night is the extinguishing of all he previously celebrated - it clouds the dappled. The completeness of this change and its effect on Hopkins is evoked in the inclusiveness of the second line of the sonnet where he defines his total existence in allowing evening to shift from ‘womb’ to ‘house’ to ‘hearse’. His life has not been coloured or altered by his religious beliefs.

The crucial element in evaluating ‘Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves’ is in deciding whether it chronicles a religious or psychological crisis in Hopkins's life. Certain authors see his later confessional poetry in the context of his Ignatian or Jesuit training. The training warns of a ‘dark night of the soul’ that needs to be passed through before a more profound knowledge of God can be attained (Downes 1960:115-117). Does ‘Sibyl's Leaves’ merely echo this expected lapse in belief? Does it reflect an attempt on Hopkins’s part to cleanse himself of an aesthetic which he cannot reconcile with his life as a priest or Jesuit?

James Hanvey’s comment is apposite to the problem:

Any approach which attempts to drive a wedge between Hopkins the poet, the priest and the Jesuit simply has not understood the unity of his life and work. Such an approach tries to read him with a secular eye. His poetry challenges this as it does any aesthetic of mortal beauty. (Hanvey 1992:154)
The above passage elaborates a narrow dogmatic assessment of Hopkins's life. One needs to ask, 'What precipitates a dark night of the soul?' Surely secular factors are important; religion cannot be divorced from the society in which it is practised. Hopkins, prior to the writing of the poem, has been exposed to the very secular factors which we are encouraged to ignore. His art is a description of his state of mind. As such it chronicles the ongoing tension between his ascetic and his aesthetic. There is a continual call to renunciation within Hopkins which is driven by the ascetic side of his being. ‘Sibyl's Leaves’ reflects this. The bleakness of the description is a purging of life's variety, a purifying of a recalcitrant aesthetic. Hopkins realizes he cannot be redeemed by his own art. This was explicitly clear in his rejection of the aesthetic formulated by Pater. His redemption must come from God. As such, 'Sibyl's Leaves' and the remaining 'Terrible Sonnets' reflect a desperate dialogue with a God who refuses to answer his questions or solve his anguish. It is a profound religious crisis and not merely a necessary phase in the life of a Jesuit priest.

In this chapter I have traced the gradual re-emergence within Hopkins of spiritual doubt. It remains a doubt founded upon an absence of God in his world, which he sees echoed in the secular society around him, particularly his parishioners. This religious shift in his persona is again reflected in his poetry. The sombreness of 'Sibyl's Leaves' underlines this. I have utilized, in particular, the work of David Downes in an attempt to clarify in Ignatian terms the phase Hopkins was experiencing. He manages to uncover a subtle moving away from faith in Jesuit dogma in the following passage:

'It is safe, I think, to attribute a good many of the unhappy moments of Hopkins' to his poor health and to that 'partial frustration' of his esthetic nature, for these sacrifices, indeed, were the source of much of his difficulty. But he always had a solace for these
denials in his life dedicated to God through his vocation to the Jesuit priesthood. All these he could suffer for the greater glory and honor of God. But in the last four years of his life, a spiritual dryness set in. He no longer received the solace of his priesthood’ (Downes 1960:130).

With no dogma to rely upon Hopkins enters a final phase of apparent spiritual dissolution.
Chapter 5

His dismembering and resolution of the crisis

Hopkins’s ‘Spelt from Sibyl’s Leaves’ marks a bleak period of spiritual isolation. The poem is also a compaction of the Last Judgment. There is a weighing of moral worthiness, a division into right or wrong, black and white. Its theme is dismembering, a stark awareness on the part of Hopkins of his own mortality. Hopkins’s dismembering is a religious rather than a psychological event. Throughout the period between January 1885 to August 1885, during which the remaining six sonnets of desolation were penned, he maintains an equilibrium of purpose and insight.

The sonnets chronicle the loss of the equilibrium Hopkins had achieved between the ascetic and aesthetic impulses that had governed his life. They are both an explanation of his present distress and at the same time a quest search for reasons. There is no attempt at reconstructing edifices to support his faith or at a renewed reconciliation between his art and his religion. He has largely dispensed with the devices within his poetry that celebrated God within Nature. There is a direct addressing of God and a continual questioning. Hopkins refuses to find solace in agnosticism or atheism, as a number of contemporaries were doing. Swinburne and Hardy saw these as rational alternatives to religious doubt, yet Hopkins needed to maintain his faith. It is for this very reason that it would be appropriate to claim that his work during this period is reflective of a religious rather than a psychological crisis. The sonnets explore the very depths of the basis of faith and what it is capable of withstanding. ‘Dismembering’ becomes an apt description of the process he is going through. It is not a disintegration but rather a drawing apart of all he had previously accepted as defining his faith. The sonnets are
penned to reintegrate or reaffirm the basis of his faith. They as such represent a series of prayers reflective of the intimacy he has now found necessary to pursue in order to confront his God. The previous intercessionaries, namely Jesus, Mary and Nature have been dispensed with.

‘Carrion Comfort’ is a poem that stresses both the mortality Hopkins was confronting and the resolution he required. The theme in the first quatrain is that of a physical dismembering. ‘Carrion’ is allied to ‘feast’ and Hopkins adds the metaphor of a rope unravelling in ‘untwist,’ ‘slack’, and ‘loose strands’. The crisis is essentially an acceptance of the dualism inherent in mankind - that of a body, appended to a spirit. Hopkins is letting go of his physical being yet he clings to the notion of continuing to exist spiritually. ‘I can... not choose not to be...’

The poem stresses the paradox of Hopkins's life. He has sought a consoling God, has constructed an aesthetic of physical, nature-based joy and his compensation is a realization that the physical is merely a transitory, pain-wracked episode in a life of religious devotion. The sonnet is an early echo of this resolution. It is a confirmation within Hopkins of the need to discard the solace he sought in Nature and Physical life. The step is a radical resurgence of the ascetic aspect of his nature and a firm denial of an aesthetic grounded in physical beauty. Sprinker adopts an alternative viewpoint in which he sees the poem as elaborating the ‘creative’ crisis in Hopkins's life:

The poet wrestles with his personal god, that idealized image of himself as strong poet who wrenches the poet out of his facile stylistic regularities and compels him to write in a new idiom, which for Hopkins always meant a new rhythm...But ‘Carrion Comfort’ is written on the eve of a violent renewal of this crisis, so that the poem is both a repetition of the past and a prolepsis of what is to come. The poet’s struggle with his style is never over, not until he abandons his ambition,
which is always his fate, to be the creative, original fathering figure of distinctive verse (Sprinker 1980:132).

Sprinker chronicles a loss of creative ability as the trigger to the crisis Hopkins articulates in his poetry, yet there is no observable diminution in the quality of Hopkins’s verse in his ‘Terrible Sonnets’. What has changed is a shift in the themes explored rather than a lessening in his art. His theme has become a loss of faith and its aftermath. He explores this theme of spiritual loss and his eventual dissolution in the following lines:

…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, cheer.  
Cheer whom though? The hero whose heaven-handling flung me, foot trod  
Me? or me that fought him…

The verse is both an elegy to his work as a priest and a lament upon the waste of his art. ‘Chaff’ signifies both his attempt at giving solace to his parishioners as a Jesuit priest, and his poetry, both of which have produced no tangible results either within himself or in the world. He cannot perceive his inner sanctified being which he describes as ‘my grain … sheer and clear’. The ambiguity and desperateness of his situation are also reflected in his inability to celebrate God or himself as the ultimate victor.

Hopkins further elaborates on the transitoriness of physical life in the sonnet ‘No worst, there is none.’ He pursues the theme of physical suffering and rekindles the earlier affinity he saw himself sharing with Christ. This affinity takes on a wholly different guise in that Christ is seen as a fellow sufferer rather than the muse who encouraged his earlier celebratory poetry: ‘Comforter, where, where is your comforting?’
The implication of the above lines is a collapsing of the trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Christ is the saviour, the redeemer who is meant to redeem yet fails and becomes, like Hopkins, a victim. Hopkins no longer sees Christ as an intercessionary to God. He turns to Mary: 'Mary, mother of us, where is your relief?' What is so telling here is Hopkins's reversion to convention to help him come to terms with a crisis he has no way of solving himself. Mary becomes his surrogate mother whom he implores in all too human terms to provide succour. Faith has been replaced with a reliance upon the secular connection between a mother and her son.

What is so telling in this poem is the coupling of Hopkins' physical dismembering with the dismembering of the physical or man-made order within the hierarchy of religion. Hopkins' faith has moved beyond Christ and Mary to a direct challenging of God. He has discarded the conventional intercessionaries in his dire need for spiritual solace. He searches for analogies with his own situation and provides a profound metaphor of both anguish and hope for renewed faith in the following lines: ‘My cries heave... on an age-old anvil, wince and sing’. The extract expresses again the dichotomy between his art and his religion. He describes himself as both wincing and singing. The anvil can be seen as a wrack upon which his faith is being tested and proved wanting. The anvil can, alternatively be the cross upon which Christ was crucified. It would not be stretching the analogy too far to regard this period in Hopkins's life as the prolonged crucifixion that Christ experienced. It is, as reflected in the ‘Terrible Sonnets’, a period of physical pain and an attempt at maintaining a spiritual equipoise within extreme physical suffering.

A further religious paradox evidenced in the ‘Terrible Sonnets’ is the intimacy between Hopkins and God. He initially moved from an Anglican (Protestant) faith to Catholicism and finally committed himself to a more extreme form of Catholicism, the Society of
Jesus. One of the tenets of Protestantism is the stressing of a personal relationship between God and the worshipper. The ritual, the intercessionaries, and the sacraments of Catholicism are dispensed with in favour of this personal bond. Hopkins has returned to this relationship in an attempt to recover his faith. Not only has Hopkins come full circle in the form of his religion, he has also returned to the extreme introspection which characterized his earlier work. There is the need to experience his self-taste, which has now become ‘gall, heartburn.’ There is little contact or communication with a wider community. His ascetism is evidenced by the bleakness and stridency of the metaphors he uses to describe his condition. The primary difference now is that he no longer has the solace of hope which countered his earlier pessimism. He has experienced the life of a priest, he has explored the aesthetic side of his psyche and he has approached God from a deeply personal perspective. He has been brought to the brink of both physical and spiritual extinction and yet he manages to salvage something from his life experience. This is encapsulated in one of the lesser quoted ‘Terrible Sonnets’ which needs to be quoted in full to chronicle the transition he has undergone and to show in the last verse a revival of some hope:

My own heart let me 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  
By groping around 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  
Elsewhere; leave comfort root-room; let joy size

As God knows when to God knows what; whose smile
's not wrung, see you; unforseen times rather-as skies
Between-pie mountains- lights a lovely mile

The sonnet is written within a spiritual void in which Hopkins can turn to no-one other than himself, for relief: ‘My own heart let me more have pity on’. He has arrived eventually at a point where faith has deserted him entirely. He cannot seek succour from his Jesuit faith, Christ, Mary or God. He has become ‘comfortless’. In his earlier nature-based poetry where personal joy is expressed in terms of a compounding of adjectives, his present despair is depicted as a loss of sensations as: ‘in blind eyes in their dark’ or as a sensation not connecting with its needs: ‘thirst can find …in all a world of wet’. The poem chronicles a deep confusion and the only substitute for this loss that he knows is a corrupting self-pity: ‘soul, self: come poor Jackself’. The poem is also a confirmation of the failure of his aesthetic. There is no attempt at externalizing his despair, as he externalizes his joy in his earlier work within the concepts of ‘instress’ and ‘inscape’. He has arrived at that solipsistic centre that his early subjectivism had promised. Thoughts have become his only companion and there are intimations of psychic dissolution in the poem: ‘call off thoughts awhile Elsewhere; leave comfort root-room’. His torment is the realization that he is alone and all that is left to him is the secular comfort of humanism, the tolerance one would offer to a fellow sufferer.

Sprinker sees the poem as ‘an abandonment of Hopkins’s personal struggle to be a poet’. He says:

Poetry, as Hopkins has averred again and again in his own verse and prose, requires an act of will. The passivity of waiting for the grace of God to reveal unexpectedly moments of beauty and comfort may deliver Hopkins from his inner torment, but it will not help him to write poems. Hopkins’s severe curtailment of his stylistic individuality in this poem is the effective limitation of his own poetic will. Spiritual comfort and stylistic clarity are purchased at the expense of the poet's creative strength ’(Sprinker 1980:138).
Sprinker’s reduction of Hopkins’s crisis to a failure of ‘that quest for self-realization’ is too facile. Hopkins has not managed to gain any spiritual comfort or stylistic clarity in amending his poetry. His change in style merely reflects a change in his concept of faith, there is no diminution in the creative aspects of his art. The poetry he produces remains both original and profound.

Hopkins’s life from ‘Sibyl’s Leaves’ through the ‘Terrible Sonnets’ expresses the bleakest period of his life as a priest. He turns away from his parishioners whom he discovered in his ‘Felix Randal’ period and indulges in a period of intense and damaging introspection. The poems covered in this chapter are concerned with the losing or loss of faith and hope. They cannot merely be seen as reflecting a physical suffering, as all are largely concerned with spiritual disintegration. The writing of the poems chronicles Hopkins’s ongoing religious crisis, but in this instance it has a far greater depth than merely a choice between types of religion practised by Anglicans or Roman Catholics. Hopkins looks into the void of a life without faith and uses his poetry to express his anguish. A contemporary critic supports this assertion: ‘the notes from Hopkins’ retreat in January of 1888 depict a mental, spiritual and emotional crisis far more important than the poetic one. It is this despair that forms the poetry, not the failure to write the poetry that fuels the despair, for Hopkins considers himself a priest and a religious man first, only then a poet (Boggs 1997:840). Boggs also clarifies the emergence of a transition evidenced in the last quoted poem:

The light Hopkins had at the end of the 1888 retreat is the same light that shines forth at the end of ‘My own heart let me more have pity on’ when he does at last stop ‘groping round comfortless’ and ‘call off thoughts awhile/Elsewhere’. We cannot underestimate the importance for our reading of his work or for our mapping of his psychological state – of Hopkins’s return to the inscapes of Nature rather than his terror-stricken interior mindscape.
What is crucial in Boggs’ commentary is that a religious retreat and contemplation led to a reappraisal of Hopkins’s own position. He emerged from the crisis through a religious introspection rather than through an examination of his art. This tends to refute the initial claims of J. Hillis Miller and Sprinker in the introduction that the crisis was related to his art rather than his religion.

This chapter has covered the final core of Hopkins’s poetry. It has also served to support the contention that Hopkins’s crisis was a religious one. The following conclusion summarizes and underlines this viewpoint.
Conclusion

The ‘Terrible Sonnets’ represent a high point in Hopkins’s art and exposition of his religious crisis. Their importance lies in the removal of anything extraneous from his focus on his own personal spiritual survival. As such the sonnets represent a summing up of his religious, artistic and secular achievements. It is in this balancing that Hopkins could derive a sense of his progress as a priest and possibly as an artist. One needs to remember that throughout Hopkins remained a Jesuit priest. He never relinquished his priestly duties or his commitment to God. It was this marriage that coloured most of his later poetry. At no stage did he consider separating from his religion to ease his suffering. It is for this reason that one can continue to maintain that the dynamic underlining the greater part of his art remains a chronic unfolding religious crisis. It was the varying forms that this crisis took which served to mould his spiritual and secular life.

Hopkins’s earliest religious crisis was the choice between the Anglican and the Roman Catholic church. He chose the latter, feeling that it would sustain a deeper spirituality. His choice affected his secular life in the sense of causing a rift with members of his family. It was a flaunting of the convention that they wished him to follow. The choice also coloured his art in committing him to a Catholic aesthetic with an emphasis on ritual, symbol and the real presence of Christ in the world. Hopkins’s art became celebratory and rich in symbolism. He managed to perceive God or Christ in all of Nature and ordered his poems accordingly. There was a spontaneous joy within his work and this was a reflection of his personal life, which had established a similar, happy congruence as expressed in his letters.
Interspersed within this period was the ‘Wreck of the Deutschland.’ The poem is the first and clearest expression of religious doubt on his part. The religious crisis here is the acknowledgement that God is judgemental - there is a clear distinction in Hopkins’s poetry between those favoured by and capable of salvation and those that are not. It is an asking whether the sin justifies the sentence. There is also, within the poem, the emergence of Hopkins’s muse, Christ. He identifies with Christ on both a secular and spiritual level. Within the life of Christ, he can visualize aspects of his own. The relationship was reflected in his nature-based poetry, particularly ‘The Windhover’. It was this seeking out of Christ and using him as symbol of his religious and aesthetic impulses which perhaps precipitated a more profound and ongoing crisis within Hopkins. It encouraged a gradual separation from God and a dwelling on the gulf between his expectations and the reality surrounding him. Christ was the chosen mediator between himself and God. Hopkins found the greatest congruence between his religion and his life in his vision of a loving, benevolent Christ. He could not reconcile this with a God who remained distant from him, who affected the lives of the poor adversely and who demanded of him a relinquishing of his art. It was this unique aspect of Christianity - the Holy Trinity - that led to Hopkins’ anguish. God and Christ were opposed rather than apposed in his poetry. He failed to reconcile his awareness of their differences and this precipitated the state of mind and torment expressed in the ‘Terrible Sonnets’. This type of religious crisis differed from the earlier one where it was merely a choice between two competing dogmas - namely that of the Anglican and Catholic church. Choosing between God or Christ is a far more fundamental crisis. It resides in reassessing the very basis of one’s worship. Hopkins had crafted his religion and a large part of his art around a unique vision of Christ. When this failed to provide the solace he required he was forced to turn to a God he had coloured as judgemental and distant. His poetry became sombre and self-negating. There was a continual beseeching on his part
for relief, but this never came. His religious crisis had grounded itself on the most fundamental dilemma of all - a loss of faith in the inherent goodness of a chosen God. The loss of faith also represented a desertion of the hope an after-life promised. Hopkins was left alone with his anguish and the remnants of a religion to which he had yoked his life.

In the final chapter I attempted to show an emergence from the religious despair expressed in the terrible sonnets. This transition begins to occur in 'My own heart let me have more pity on'. It gathers strength in the re-emergence of both subjects and syntax which Hopkins uses in earlier less bleak phases of his life. He revisits secular topics such as the unemployed in ‘Tom Garland’ and in ‘Harry Ploughman’. The physical strength of common man is celebrated. ‘That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire’ carries all the exuberance of his nature-based poetry in its opening lines: ‘Cloud-puffball, torn tufts, tossed pillows flaunt forth, then chevy on an air…’. What is relevant to my argument is that a period of intense self-seeking and physical suffering has had little effect on the technique or subjects Hopkins includes in his poetry. It retains the same coherence and freshness that was evident throughout, other than the dismembering I alluded to during his ‘Terrible Sonnet’ phase. What this implies is that his art or its expression was altered by a religious crisis rather than a desire to explore new means to revitalize ebbing poetic energies. His acceptance of both his fate, his mortality and subservience to God is chronicled in:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Thou art indeed just Lord, if I contend} \\
\text{With thee; but, Sir, so what I plead is just...} \\
\text{Times eunuch, and not breed one work that wakes} \\
\text{Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain.}
\end{align*}
\]
The above poem is an acknowledgement of his own need for sustenance from God. It is a quiet assertion of the necessity for a faith and patience in life’s endeavours. It also places in context the extremes he experienced in exploring the sensuous side of his character and the resolution his life has now achieved.

My dissertation has focused on Hopkins’s poems and the comment of critics who largely support my contention that his crisis was religious rather than a collapse of his artistic abilities. I have tried to link the change in Hopkins’s spiritual status with alterations in his style and syntax, and have used these fluctuations to emphasize a deepening or partial resolution of his religious crisis. A possible further topic for research would be a detailed chronological examination of his letters, and linking these to the writing of individual poems, particularly during the ‘Terrible Sonnet’ phase. Not only would this clarify Hopkins’s state of mind prior to his death, but it would also lay to rest the assertions of Sprinker and to a lesser extent J. Hillis Miller that Hopkins’s crisis was stylistic and creative rather than religious. It would also explain that late flowering of nature-based images and metaphor in his final few poems, where there is a hint of the resolution of his religious crisis.

To conclude, the crisis Hopkins experiences and expresses in his Art is an amalgam of all the approaches alluded to in my introduction. It borrows from his surroundings, his contemporaries, his formal religion and his aesthetics, but it remains a fundamentally religious crisis - a crisis that seeks to define the limits of the validity of worship and the validity of the self. His epitaph is aptly penned in one of his last poems, an extract from ‘That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire’
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.
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