



Hopkins' Poetry: An Ecophilosophical Metaphysic

Dr. Kokila Sehgal Mathur

Associate Professor

Department of English

Dyal Singh College, University of Delhi

New Delhi, India

Abstract: To read Hopkins is to become aware of the spiritually awakened intellect's exquisite achievement. Hopkins' vocation as a Jesuit priest trained, tested and refined his innate religiosity and in his poems, prayer and poetry fuse in a dynamic way. In the medieval scholastic, Duns Scotus' philosophy of 'individuation', Hopkins found an echo of his own intuitive beliefs and led him to coin the term "Inscap" or particular design and pattern and "Instress" or the Divine irradiation. The world was really news of God he said in one of his sermons; the myriad unique manifestations of Nature were the countenance of God and man was created to admire the beauty of God's handiwork and to praise and adore the Maker. But the ruthless march of industrialism and materialism tramples mindlessly on Nature and leaves the poet disturbed and sad at this disconnect between man and the Divine. The wonder and splendour of this gift from God is a reflection of God's better beauty, Grace. Hopkins foreshadows the post-modern movement of Ecocriticism where the 'Wilderness' is perceived as imbued with divine breath. His compressed and sinewy verse revitalizes perceptions about the nature of human life and its engagement with the environment. In today's scenario of global warming which threatens the Apocalyptic, Hopkins' poetry acts like a beacon illuminating the darkness with its spiritual light. His song gives beauty back to God in praising the Supreme Creator. Hopkins' model of the world has a particular urgency for the thinkers, philosophers and policy makers of today. The quest for understanding the mystery of the Universe, of God and human existence cuts across boundaries of religions, cultures and socio-political conditions.

Keywords - Inscap, Instress, God's Grace, Nature, Wilderness, Ecocriticism, Industrialism, Global warming.

INTRODUCTION

Hopkins' experience as a Jesuit priest both kindled his poetic endowment and spurred it to exceptional achievement. He declared that "inscape is what I above all aim at in poetry" (L, 66). Hopkins took a technical concept of creation, strangely, not from St. Thomas Aquinas, but the Blessed Duns Scotus, "of realty the rarest- veined unraveller" (WHG,40). The Jesuits believed in St. Thomas Aquinas' division of matter and form and according to Aquinas the form of an object is in the matter. Duns Scotus, a realist philosopher and medieval Scholastic theologian, gave the opposite view or the presence of matter in the form. The emphasis is on form and this led Hopkins to coin the word "Inscap", meaning the particularity or the individuality which manifests itself in the form. Under the influence of the aesthete, Walter Pater, Hopkins wrote: "Poetry is in fact speech employed to carry the inscape of speech for the inscape's sake" (J,289). This verges on pure aestheticism or "art for art's sake". But it was Hopkins' vocation as priest that saved his poetry from collapsing into mere aestheticism of Swinburne and Oscar Wilde. Religion endowed serious artistic purpose to 'inscaping' and led to what he coined "instress". Instress is akin to what Shelly called "the One Spirit's plastic stress". Instress is "the sensation of inscape – a quasi-mystical illumination, a sudden perception of that deeper pattern, order and unity which gives meaning to external forms": and in *God's Grandeur*, Hopkins writes how "there lives the dearest freshness deep down things" and also that "the world is charged with the grandeur of God" (WHG, xxi; 27). Speaking of a bluebell he says: "I know the beauty of our Lord by it" (J, 199).

DISCUSSION

Hopkins' nature ordained his development, his choice of calling and his submission to religious rules. When he entered Oxford in 1863, the Oxford Movement was still strong and there were plenty of forces to pull him away from Newman's influence. But Hopkins' desire was to find 'the one visible Church' and in 1865 he wrote: "I have found the dominant of my range and state- / Love, O my God, to call Thee Love and Love" (WHG, 5). *Spring and Death*, an early poem is almost a parable of the experience of growing up where he shuns pure aestheticism: "a little sickness in the air/ From too much fragrance everywhere" and awakens to reality: "Sudden, Death before me stood" (Russell, 21). He is now driven to find a meaning in his experience, driven by the sense that life is short and leaves little time for self-indulgence.

Duns Scotus' "principle of Individuation" and "theory of knowledge" corroborated Hopkins' theory of Inscap and Instress. Duns Scotus explained that the knowledge of the singular or the individual made it possible for a knowledge of the universal. Hopkins wrote that "this world is then word, expression, news of God" (S, 129). The 'Middle Poems' celebrate natural inscap whereas the 'Terrible Sonnets' give human inscap and all lead to: "there's none but truth can stead you. Christ is truth" (WHG, 84). In *The Wreck of the Deutschland* prayer and poetry meet. The suffering of the nuns and of his own prior to conversion are seen as God's kindness because through suffering, God wins over man. There is the inscap of "dappled-with-damson west".

The feeling evoked by natural beauty is one of the ways through which man comes to know God and “His mystery must be instressed, stressed” (WHG, 14). Hopkins is the priest of poetry; he is also the poet of the priesthood. The sufferings of shipwreck, terrible in words, profound in feeling of the poem, are an offering, an oblation to God the Master.

In *Henry Purcell*, inscape is the ontological secret: “It is the forged feature finds me; it is the rehearsal/ Of own, of abrupt self there so thrusts on, so throngs the ear” (WHG, 41). In *Pied Beauty*, the priest permeates the poem, writes John Pick in his book. Hopkins rejoices “Glory be to God for dappled things”. The aesthete gives accurate emphatic cognition of trees, metals, plants, skies, clouds, birds, water. He gives inscape of dappled objects: “skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow”, “rose-moles in all stipple upon trout”, “landscape plotted and pieced”. He writes of “all things counter, original, spare, strange”. The priest in him celebrates God who creates all these things and “whose beauty is past change” whereas all “dappled” objects of natural beauty are “fickle” or changeable. The priest utters his adoration for God: “Praise Him” for his beautiful creation (WHG,30-31). In *The Starlight Night* the exquisite beauty of the stars “the fire-folk sitting in the air!” evokes child-like wonder and awe at this “prize” (WHG,27). Natural beauty is “of religious significance, and to perceive it properly, to possess it in any real sense..... is a matter of religion as of aesthetics” explains Russell (42). The hallmark of humanity is sensitivity to such god-given beauty, this being an essential condition for man to realize the true understanding of his own nature and capacities. In the poem *Binsey Poplars*, Hopkins laments the destruction of trees and natural habitats due to massive industrialization: “My aspens dear./All felled, felled, are all felled;.../Not spared, not one..”. To the poet it is man’s ignorance of his own value and deadened sensibility that delivers “strokes of havoc” on Nature and future generations would be deprived of this bounteous gift: “After-comers cannot guess the beauty been” (WHG, 39). The poet is horrified at the ugliness of human enterprise: “Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;/All is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;/And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil/Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod” and man has become insensitive to God’s grandeur (WHG, 27). Man’s disconnect with, and ruthless exploitation of his natural environment is perceived by Hopkins as a betrayal rather than development and refinement of his inborn nature. This is a theme with a disturbing resonance in our present times with global warming wreaking deathly blows to human civilization and fear of Apocalypse. Hopkins felt that civilization had taken a wrong turn because man had become dismissive of life giving values in his materialistic greed. A January 2021, World Economic Forum Report in collaboration with McKinsey & Company, advocates: “Natural climate solutions offer an opportunity to address both climate and nature crises and generate significant additional environmental, social and economic benefits” and delineates the efforts and investment in Nature by business giants like Amazon, Nestle, Shell to green the planet. A prime thrust is to plant millions of trees and restore forests, oceans and water bodies to save life from extinction. Another interesting study on sustainable policies in America, 2017, reveals that “belief in a mystical God described as ‘mystical, nature, energy, cosmic, or the universe’ was positively associated with sustainable consumer spending, recycling behaviors, and charitable giving of one’s time and resources to support sustainability programs and initiatives”. This perception of God and value of nature, also plays a role in predicting public attitudes and behaviors related to sustainability and government spending on environment. A path breaking book, *Lessons from Plants* (2021) by Beronda Montgomery, Professor of biochemistry and microbiology, Michigan University, states that human beings can learn from plants how to become more aware of our environment and to adapt to our world by calling on perception and awareness, the power to reframe the way we live our lives.

Hopkins questions “to what serves mortal beauty” in the poem of this name, and the answer is “God’s better beauty, grace” (WHG, 58). Man was created to praise God through an admiration of natural inscape and hence man’s duty is to “give beauty back, beauty, beauty, beauty, back to God, beauty’s self and beauty’s giver”, he states in *The Golden Echo* (WHG, 54). The aesthete recognizes ‘inscape’ and the priest recognizes ‘instress’ at the same time – the two are inseparable.

Bridges charges Hopkins with “the naked encounter of sensualism and asceticism”. In *The Windhover* Hopkins rejects neither the natural beauties of the falcon, nor the sensuous delight he finds in them. They must not be denied, they must be rather stressed. The mortal beauty of the Falcon, the energy and valour and pride, will be a “billion/Times told lovelier” when apprehended as the outward and visible sign of the creative force, God; it becomes a source of spiritual strength. The “dangerous” and active end to which this kind of inspiration draws the priest is the absolute submission to God’s will (WHG, 30). Elizabeth Jennings in *The Unity of Incarnation* writes that Hopkins “saw God’s signature written on all creation, creation upheld by the love of God” (187).

In *Spelt from Sibyl’s Leaves* Hopkins bids farewell to the “skeined stained veined variety” of earth whose “dapple is at an end” (WHG, 59). In the ‘terrible’ sonnets that follow, there is a clash between the impulses within the poet as he is caught between his desire to reach spiritual fulfilment and his reluctance to surrender human identity. In *Carrion Comfort* he is pitting himself against the Almighty. In his spiritual exercises, Hopkins had stated that man was born to praise God, yet in this sonnet he asserts his human pride in contradiction to Christ-like humility. Christ makes him suffer for his own good: “That my chaff might fly; my grain lie, sheer and clear” (WHG, 61). The motive and result of the conflict is the divine gift of grace. But the poet takes pride in the invincible human spirit and he wonders whether he should cheer himself for fighting God. The poet asserts his individuality against the priest’s selflessness. Pride in his inscape becomes an obstacle to his salvation. The theological interpretation of suffering is a slender thread to save one from despair. In *No, worst, there is none*, he cannot long face his inner conflict and rushes to escape through sleep or death. In *To seem the stranger lies*, he laments his ineffectuality as priest, artist, and man. Unable to face the sacrificial order which he must undergo in initiation of Christ, the poet reacts as Satan did. His creativity fails him: “Only what word/ Wisest my heart breeds dark heaven’s baffling ban/ Bars or hell’s spell thwarts.” He admits the futility of his inscape without the stress of God’s grace to make it productive: “This to hoard unheard, /Heard unheeded, leaves me a lonely began” (WHG, 62). Pride in human potency is no longer possible for him. He yearns for God to “send my roots rain” because “birds build—but not I build” and there is poignant utterance of his poetic sterility in *Thou art indeed just, Lord*. He is now ready for self-abnegation which, when finally completed will have prepared him for his proper place (WHG,67).

In *I wake and feel the fell of dark*, there is God’s relentless quest for human self-sacrifice. His suffering is for his own good: “God’s most deep decree/Bitter would have me taste.” He learns that “Patience, hard thing” teaches him to accept his limitations and man must struggle not against but for reconciliation with God. In *My own heart*, he addresses a self-shorn of its pride: “Soul, self, come, poor Jackself, I do advise/You, jaded, let be” (WHG, 62-63). He now awaits solace.

In the ‘terrible sonnets’ Hopkins is suggesting that man’s instressing of his own inscape is a developmental stage ordained by God. Man must be elevated by a sense of his own greatness before he can be humbled by a recognition of the vastness and

mighty selfhood of the Divinity and man needs God's grace to do this. Hopkins had been chosen by God to see the paradox of self as clearly as any mortal could see it. He comes to the conclusion that the world is charged by God's grandeur and not his own.

Hopkins' poetry explores the metaphysical dimension of human existence and calls for a spiritual attitude to Nature which he sees as the temple of God: "Nature's motherhood...How she did in her stored/Magnify the Lord" (WHG, 38). In a universe teeming with pied beauties, unique particulars, all would be dissonance, yet there is rhyme or similarity and harmonious interrelatedness and pattern because these are all refractions of the Universal spirit or God's stress, "the fire" that energizes all creation as delineated in the poem *The Windhover* (WHG, 30).

Hopkins had an intense practical concern with all that inspired and motivated him --- his religion, his insight into Nature, his poetic concerns of ethical and technical foundation of his work. He expresses "care and dear concern" for the earth in *Ribblesdale*, while in *Inversnaid* he worries "what would the world be, once bereft/Of wet and of wilderness? Let them be left, /O let them be left.../Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet"(WHG, 52, 51). Hopkins anticipates Ecocriticism, the "earth centred approach", the complex intertwining of environment and culture, the belief that "human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" (Glotfelty, xviii-xix). Ecocriticism focusses the lens on us humans, asking us to critically examine the way in which we represent, interact with, and construct our environment, both 'natural' and 'manmade'. Hopkins' vision of the wilderness of Nature as a divine text, imbues us with a sense of renewal and awareness of life's positive meaning, where Nature is an instrument to gain access to God's power and glory: "for tool, not toy meant/And hold at Christ's employment" (WHG, 45). Today the movement of Ecocriticism treats the wilderness as a touchstone to Reality. Reading Hopkins' marvellous poems leads to an enlargement of consciousness and his Inscape and Instress is "the fine delight that fathers thought" and "leaves yet the mind a mother of immortal song" (WHG, 68).

CONCLUSION

The poet's training corresponds in many ways with priest's training: the self-mastery, the ability to discard the inessential and patience during the mystical experience of the 'dark night of the senses'. Hopkins achieves steadfastness through religion and the priest who called himself "Time's eunuch" has defeated time with many a poem that both wakes and impacts (WHG, 67). Hopkins establishes that "a kind of touchstone of the highest or most living art is seriousness; not gravity but the being in earnest with your subject — reality" (Grigson, 166).

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