## Christ Being Hopkins and Hopkins Being Christ

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Gerard Manly Hopkins often struggled to creatively question and inspire as a Victorian poet while simultaneously maintaining a humble servitude to God as a Jesuit priest. He quantifies this paradoxical relationship between the self and God by dichotomizing "Christ being man and man being Christ" (Heuser 71). The Petrarchan sonnet "As Kingfishers Catch Fire, Dragonflies Draw Flame" (1881) explores the first part of the relationship, Christ being man, in a positive light. In the poem, the speaker observes the inscape, or unique essence, contained within both animate and inanimate entities in nature and concludes that human inscape is the echo of the internal self through external actions. Hopkins' conjunction of natural and mortal inscape, and allusions to the poem itself as an act of inscape, repeatedly assert that identity and action are inevitably fused. Therefore, direct references to Christ imply there is no difference between men who act like Christ and Christ himself. The "terrible" sonnet "Carrion Comfort" (1885-1887) explores the second part of the relationship Hopkins preached, man being Christ, and negatively concludes that this isn't possible because the self is flawed. The speaker reflects on past persecution and ponders over the question of whether he should accredit God the oppressor or his own identity for emerging strengthened out of despair. Although this poem certainly depicts a man who is spiritually lost, it implicitly reveals that the reason for his anguish isn't a struggle with God, but rather Christ. Hopkins juxtaposes active and passive will, alludes ambiguously to Christ as a tormenter, and muddles traditional Ignatian meditation to demonstrate the failure that will occur when a man attempts to sustain self while simultaneously upholding to Christ's perfect example. Since both poems explore opposite ends of the paradoxical

relationship between man and Christ, the spiritual derailment that ostensibly occurs from the natural sonnet to the "terrible" sonnet, should be reevaluated and considered harmonious spiritual reinforcement because thematically they are in accordance with Hopkins' own meditation and understanding.

The definitive theme that Hopkins establishes in the opening octave of "As Kingfishers Catch Fire, Dragonflies Draw Flame" is that the unique quality, or inscape, which each entity of nature has manifests through an inevitable unification between an inherited self and willed action. The initial line describes the varying orange coloration of two juxtaposed creatures, a bird and a dragonfly, as they fly through the air. Although each creature can willingly fly, their inscape is the combination of flight with the inherited unique visual they reflect as light flashes over them. Hopkins asserts that their defining essence extends from an inherited image which God, the creator, bestowed on them. The pattern of inscape is expanded in the second line when Hopkins juxtaposes the sound of a stone tumbling "over rim in roundy wells" with the musical pitch emitted by a string and bell. This auditory inscape reveals that consciousness isn't necessary to establish a unique identity because action for inanimate entities is interaction with animate entities. An inherited state of being can be defined through action regardless of free will. Hopkins completes the analogy by addressing the inscape of mankind when he states that "each mortal thing does one thing and the same" (Line 5). The inscape of each human follows the same pattern as every other entity within nature. For Hopkins, actions don't forge an identity, bur rather result from identity. The speaker of the poem illustrates this union of action and self by exclaiming "what I do is me: for that I came" (Line 8).

This declaration reveals that to the speaker, identity is predetermined by God so that each action fulfills the purpose for which he created us.

Hopkins reinforces action and self as inseparable through various poetic techniques as well, including alliteration and grammatical arrangement. In the first line, the consonant at the beginning of the noun "kingfishers" matches the initial consonant in the verb "catch". This consonant pattern which links noun and verb is repeated in phrases such as "dragonflies draw" and "tucked string tells." Hopkins is relentless in his message that action and self are the same. His reinforcing technique subtly creates a didactic tone which implores readers to accept this relationship rather than deny it. In line seven, he creates the word "selves" which transforms the noun "self" into a verb. This fusion of noun and verb marks the clearest moment in which Hopkins illustrates that action and self are inseparable, even for humans with free choice.

Hopkins also portrays the poem itself as a manifestation of inscape by alluding to the parallel between language and sound, thus acknowledging the fact that he has accepted living as a reflection of an inherited self. When the poem describes the sound of a bell, it states that each "bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name" (Line 4). The use of the word "tongue" links a bell's involuntary ringing to the action of speaking. Speech is a unique quality that serves as another method of inevitably reflecting identity, just as the pitch of a bell does. Later in the octave, the speaker of the poem reveals his defining actions: "myself it speaks and spells" (Line 7). This passage connects Hopkins to the persona of the poem as a writer who "spells" and alludes to the fact that poetry is inscape because it emits a unique pitch through written language. Since Hopkins recognizes writing poetry as inscape, and yet writes anyway, he illustrates that he has

embraced the inevitable fusion of self and action. When the second stanza of the poem begins, the poet starts by uttering the phrase "I say more" (Line 9). This line seems to be a direct vindication from Hopkins that he understands what he says is who he is. The critic, Marylou Motto, in her book, *Mined with a Motion*, is in agreement, claiming that Hopkins inserts the words "to remind us that there is a real speaker here, one who is actively doing something in the poem" (Motto 79). She also adds that this phrase "insists that the speaker is conscious of his speech" and "that he means what he says" (Motto 79). She fails to realize that Hopkins insistence on the acceptance of human inscape as reality, illustrates a message to the reader to follow in his footsteps and cease placing importance on finding identity.

The final sestet of the poem expands the analogy of the fusion of action and self by speaking of those who live without placing emphasis on the self, as Christ did. Men, such as those who feel blessed by God, or "keep grace," keep all their "goings graces" (Line 10). Gracious action doesn't forge gracious man, it echoes a gracious man. A good man acts good, in the same way Hopkins claims a "just man justices" (Line 7). "Good" is an internal state of being that God instills in an individual at birth. Just as Christ was sent by God, so were men that act like him: "Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is—

Christ" (Lines 11-12). This line which uses the word "is" instead of is like, exemplifies what Hopkins constituted as Christ being man. The critic, Alan Heuser, in his book, *The Shaping Vision of Gerard Manly Hopkins*, concludes that the message of this poem is that "true selving follows God's will which is completed in the Humanity of Christ, for Christ sums up all the individual degrees of nature" (Heuser 70). However, he fails to see that "selving" doesn't follow God's will, but rather is God's will. Some individuals simply

won't reflect Christ, but they still act in accordance with God's will as the creator. Another critic named John Robinson suggests in his book, *In Extremity: A Study of Gerard Manly Hopkins*, that since men with "the Christ-potential within him, may yet put the nails in the cross," the beauty of the poem's message is diminished (Robinson 93). However, it is how a man acts that reflects the self, not how a man "potentially" acts. Robinson also ignores the positive tone of the last few lines which state that "Christ plays in ten thousand places," through the "features of men's faces" (Lines 12/14). There is beauty in the fact that many men are inherently capable of being Christ through action and spreading love. There is also beauty in the idea that just as dragonflies can only partially emit the flame that glorified kingfishers can, men can only partially live the perfectly selfless life Christ led. This positive, harmonious tone dramatically shifts when Hopkins writes the "terrible" sonnets.

In "Carrion Comfort," the speaker is in anguish because he is being tormented, not by God, but by Christ, who demands submission to God's will. Although the speaker initially presents the tormenter as ambiguous by calling it "O thou terrible," which suggests an intangible being like God, he then uses several other descriptions with specific, corporeal imagery. The first is the description of the tormenter as a "wring-earth right foot rock" (Line 6). The phrase "right foot rock" could be a reference to one of the five wounds Jesus received when nailed to the cross. The line is structured to sound heavy with the repetition of the consonant "r" which reflects that the tormenter has weight like Christ did in the flesh. The other description alludes to the image of a lion with "devouring eyes" (Lines 5-7). The critic Alan M. Rose in his article, "Hopkins' "Carrion Comfort": The Artful Disorder of Prayer," reveals that "most commentators

have identified a Biblical source for this terrible lion who would purify" and have concluded that the ambiguous tormenter "must refer to Christ" (Rose 214). However, Rose suggests that the tormenter is the devil because the imagery of "devouring" parallels to a comment Hopkins made claiming the devil to be the "principle of decay and consumption" (Rose 214). This seems unlikely though because the speaker goes on to say that the devouring eventually strengthened him after "all that toil" once he "kissed the rod, hand rather" (Lines 10-11). It is difficult to imagine the devil would persecute someone in order to strengthen them. The symbol of the rod is also a symbol associated with God's divine judgment and when he corrects himself to say hand this indicates that the submission is to Christ, God's will transposed into flesh. With surmounting evidence that Christ is the terrible entity the speaker is "frantic to avoid and flee," the poem indicates that even after the speaker submits to Christ he asks whether he should "cheer" his old self for fighting him (Lines 8/11). Hopkins depicts a man who is unwilling to part with the prideful self which yearns to receive credit for his renewed identity. Rose poetically states that the "final terror is not, then, that God tormented Hopkins for a purpose, but that the poet fought God" (Rose 212). The idea of fighting God becomes his comfort that he desperately wants to avoid.

Hopkins also portrays the speaker as swaying between passive and aggressive will power to emphasize the pathetic, unstable state of the self which fights against God's will. In the opening line the speaker refuses to be comforted with despair and cries out in anguish he will "not feast on thee; not untwist—slack they may be—these last strands of man" (Line 1-2). Clearly the repetition of "not" establishes a passive voice that depicts a withered will and tattered soul. However, as the defiance of despair continues, the

speaker aggressively exclaims "I can" (Line 3). Suddenly, the will appears sincere and resolved to fight so the self can regain happiness. However, the speaker immediately regresses to a passive voice again as he searches for ways that he can assert control over his life to help combat melancholy, concluding that he can "not choose not to be" (Line 4). The fact that the only way he is able to extract hope is by electing to refrain from suicide, illustrates how desperate his desire for power as an individual is. The critic Patricia A. Wolfe points out in her article, entitled *The Paradox of Self: A Study of* Hopkins' Spiritual Conflict in the "Terrible" Sonnets, that "not choosing not to be is an ungodly answer" and that "it is rooted in human pride rather than Christ-like humility" (Wolfe 92). This assessment is related to the fact that suicide is blasphemy in the Christian faith, so extracting hope out of refraining from blasphemy is not "Christ-like." Her input acknowledges the sad fact that to the speaker, God's will doesn't matter, only the vindicated power of his own will, however minute that power is. These opening lines illustrate the problem of man being Christ because a man, due to the prideful self, can be tempted to question God's power.

On a structural level, Hopkins also reflects the inverted priorities and contorted soul of the speaker by muddling chronology and inverting the Ignatian meditation tradition of spiritual poetry. Usually the sonnets of Ignatian meditation end with the speaker coming to some definitive resolution of will. However, in this poem the speaker is left in a perpetual, horrific struggle: "I wretch lay wrestling with (my God!) my God" (Line 14). The speaker is left perpetually fighting to attain his personal idea of God which balances his freedom while simultaneously reflecting Christ. The critic Rachel Salmon suggests in her article, "From Prayers of Praise and Prayers of Petition: Simultaneity in

the Sonnet World of Gerard Manly Hopkins," that there is spiritual benefit to this struggle because the "existing self and the potential Christ self must be torn asunder before they can be more closely reunited" (Salmon 399). In the middle of the sonnet, the linear movement of plot is disrupted with the use of the phrase "why wouldst" which can be past or present tense (Line 10). This ambiguity exemplifies the fact that his soul is contorted and thus unable to meditate properly. It also creates the image of a man who has perpetually cycled with God for possibly a year which indicates he can never reunite with Christ more closely, like Salmon suggests, because the free self will always be there to disrupt the unity. Even though there is certainly a negative tone throughout this poem, it still undoubtedly recognizes the difficulty of the second part of Hopkins paradoxical relationship, "man being Christ," because men are selfish.

Although there is a large shift between the natural sonnet and "terrible" sonnet with regard to tone, that doesn't mean that "Carrion Comfort" should simply be regarded as spiritually disconnected from Hopkins early sonnets. When these two works are viewed through the lens of the paradoxical relationship between Christ and man, which Hopkins was undoubtedly aware of before writing the "terrible" sonnets, they work as perfect compliments of one another. Together they form a single, harmonious and joyful message that God is with us and works through all of us. Hopkins melancholic state at the time the "terrible" sonnets were published didn't affect his ability to artistically reflect this powerful, unifying message. As Alfred Tennyson once noted, more faith can grow often grow out of doubt.

## Annotated Bibliography

Heuser, Alan. The Shaping Vision of Gerard Manly Hopkins. Oxford UP, 1968. Print.

Alan Heuser attempts to clarify Hopkins' distinctive vision of creation by exploring the influence various philosophies, including Pre-Raphaelitism, Platonism, and Scotism, had on his poetry. He concludes that Hopkins exposure to science and religion allowed him to combine wild naturalism and religious idealism into a single theory of art. This theory or vision, according to Heuser, rests on three key terms: inscape, instress, and pitch. His analysis of pitch, expression of the whole self through acts of will, in "As Kingfishers Catch Fire, Dragonflies Draw Flame" is referenced and amended in this paper.

Motto, Marylou. "Mined with a Motion" The Poetry of Gerard Manly Hopkins. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1984. Print.

Marylou Motto asserts that Hopkins' poetry contains linguistic patterns which she refers to as assent and recurrence that express religious affirmation. She concludes that neither motion is absolute, but certainly Hopkins' unique poetic diction allows the reader to feel the struggle against the subjective self. In contrast this book doesn't approach Hopkins from a theological perspective, but simply assumes a constant struggle between priest and poet. Her analysis of technique reaffirms my assessment of syntactical subtleties that reflect theme in "As Kingfishers Catch Fire, Dragonflies Draw Flame."

Robinson, John. *In Extremity: A Study of Gerard Manly Hopkins*. Cambridge UP, 1978. Print.

John Robinson, a Cambridge professor, fairly explores two opposing theories concerning Hopkins: that his religious training as a Jesuit drove his dense, energized poetry; or that the religious influence subverted his individuality and degraded his creative output. He polarizes Hopkins' poetry by addressing both his early sonnets, which seek moral perfection and reflection of God, as well as his final poems, which are extremely intimate and ambivalent. He concludes that the idea only a conflicted priest could write with this originality is misplaced because his poems aren't inspired idiosyncratically, but instead derived from the external. His analysis, which often points out inharmonious, ugly thematic messages are referenced and debunked in this paper.

Rose, Alan M. "Hopkins' "Carrion Comfort": The Artful Disorder of Prayer." *Victorian Poetry* 15.3 (1977): 207-17. *JSTOR*. Web. 8 Mar. 2010. <a href="http://www.jstor.org/stable/40002114">http://www.jstor.org/stable/40002114</a>>.

Alan Rose suggests that Hopkins, in his poem "Carrion Comfort," fails to maintain artistic control as a priest, and at times commits blasphemy which reflects his desolation and conflict with God. He concludes "Carrion Comfort" artfully disorders Hopkins' original forms of Ignatian prayer to express his confusion of faith and coil of terrible emotions in the summer of 1885 when he lived in Dublin. His analysis of the

ambiguous tormenter in "Carrion Comfort" as the devil contrasts with my analysis of the tormenter as Christ.

Salmon, Rachel. "Prayers of Praise and Prayers of Petition: Simultaneity in the Sonnet World of Gerard Manly Hopkins." *Victorian Poetry* 22.4 (1984): 383-406. *JSTOR*. Web. 8 Mar. 2010. <a href="http://www.jstor.org/stable/40003014">http://www.jstor.org/stable/40003014</a>>.

Rachel Salmon finds fault with critically interpreting and dichotomizing Hopkins' "natural" sonnets of 1877 and "terrible" sonnets of 1885 based on biographic knowledge of his experiences. She examines each sonnet structure synchronically rather than chronologically and asserts that there is no need to assert that consolation and desolation follow each other in any kind of order. She concludes, through a synchronic frame of reference, that the nature sonnets and terrible sonnets work together because the affective and elective will perpetually participate in the paradoxical relationship between man and God without progress. Her message that the act of struggling will is a positive spiritual process in "Carrion Comfort" reaffirms my assessment.

Wolfe, Patricia A. "The Paradox of Self: A Study of Hopkins' Spiritual Conflict in the "Terrible" Sonnets." *Victorian Poetry* 6.2 (1968): 85-103. *JSTOR*. Web. 8 Mar. 2010. <a href="http://www.jstor.org/stable/40001430">http://www.jstor.org/stable/40001430</a>.

Patricia Wolfe analyzes each "terrible" sonnet and finds that Hopkins' persona progresses towards resolution through successive stages. She concludes that in the final stage, Hopkins becomes redeemed because he is able to reestablish a relationship with God and surrender his selfhood as he understands his relationship to God. Her account of "Carrion Comfort" reaffirms my assessment that the speaker is primarily selfish rather than selfless.