

THE SUFFERING SELF: GERARD MANLEY
HOPKINS IN THE DARK SONNETS

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Gerard Manley Hopkins produced in the years 1885-89 a series of sonnets which are the principal statements of his "dark period," that season of dry faith and sterile spirituality in which the claustrophobic Hopkins experienced desolation. Critics have variously construed these sonnets as indicative of psychological neurosis, Christian mysticism or personal despair. The terrible sonnets present such a dramatic change from the ecstatic nature poetry of earlier Hopkins that many critics have reacted too zealously to them. These last sonnets can perhaps be best understood by an approach that leads through Hopkins' conception of the "self," since in all of the dark sonnets Hopkins manifested an excruciating self-consciousness that would not permit him to rest.

Seen only at its nadir in the terrible sonnets, Hopkins' conception of the self lay behind all his poetry and came to the fore most noticeably in his

theory of "inscape."¹ Hopkins was completely taken with the distinctive beauty of a thing, those qualities which constitute its unique, individual being, and he applied the word "inscape" to the particularized arrangement of these characteristics. The task of the poet, as Hopkins saw it, is to number exactly the streaks of the tulip, if such calculations will flash forth simultaneously the tulip's self and the embracing, changeless self of the Creator. Hopkins was no natural religionist, but he believed that the created self must find the Creator, as he exclaimed in "God's Grandeur," in the imperfect "perfection" of His creation. "The world is charged with the grandeur of God./ It will flame out, like shining from

¹For a philosophical treatment of Hopkins' conception of the self as it relates to his theory of "inscape," see J. Hillis Miller, "The Creation of the Self in Gerard Manley Hopkins," ELH, 22 (1955), 293-319. The Hopkinsian self is not an intellectual perception, but rather a deeply felt sensory experience in which the individual identity asserts itself with "unspeakable stress of pitch, distinctiveness, and selving. . . . when I compare my self, my being-my-self, with anything else whatever, all things alike, all in the same degree, rebuff me with blank unlikeness; so that my knowledge of it, which is so intense, is from itself alone, they in no way help me to understand it." The Notebooks and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins, ed. Humphry House, (London, 1937), pp. 309-10. Hereafter referred to as Notebooks.

shook foil."² In "Hurrahing in Harvest" the receptive heart and the responsive senses "glean our Savior" in the beauty of summer's end.³

Hopkins believed that his life was to be a struggle for perfection; Jesus Christ had demanded no less, "Be ye perfect, even as your Heavenly Father is perfect." (Matt. 5. 48) Hopkins' commitment was complete. We have only to look at the voluntary destruction in 1868 of his early poems, the dear children of his mind, to witness his total dedication to the ideals of his Jesuit vocation. In preparation for the novitiate at Roehampton in September, 1868, Hopkins performed a penance which lasted from January to July and which "prevented [his] seeing much that year."⁴ Indeed the entirety of Hopkins' religious life was characterized, as Robert Lowell has observed, by "a fastidiousness which, had there been nothing else to Hopkins, might have brought him a sort of small

²The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins, ed. W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie (Oxford, 1967), p. 66. All references to the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins are to this edition, hereafter referred to as Poems.

³Poems, p. 70.

⁴Notebooks, p. 121.

and humorous fame as the absurd Jesuit."⁵ The desire for perfection might seem absurd to one less committed to an ideal, less certain of the existence of a just God than was Hopkins, but for him the only alternative to an attempt at perfection was a resignation to perdition. We may glimpse Hopkins' intense desire for holiness in his retreat notes for 1883, at the crucial time of his transfer to Dublin, the scene of the terrible sonnets. "During this retreat I have much and earnestly prayed that God will lift me above myself to a higher state of grace, in which I may have more union with him, be more zealous to do his will, and freer from sin. . . . In this evening's meditation on the Temptation I was with our Lord in the wilderness in spirit and again begged this, acknowledging it was a great grace even to have the desire for perfection. For indeed it is a pure one and it is long since I have had so strong and spiritual a one and so persistent."⁶

⁵"Hopkins' Sanctity," Gerard Manley Hopkins, ed., The Kenyon Critics (Norfolk, Connecticut, 1945), p. 87.

⁶The Sermons and Devotional Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins, ed. Christopher J. Devlin (London, 1959) p. 253. Hereafter referred to as Sermons.

"Dear, dogged Man" must endure the imperfections of the body while striving to perfect his soul. The spirit is in this world inseparable from the physical self, but man's corporal nature need not restrict the soul. In the early "The Caged Skylark," Hopkins found body and soul in harmony. "Man's spirit will be flesh-bound when found at best,/ But uncumbered: meadow-down is not distressed/ For a rainbow footing it nor he for his bones risen."⁷ The body can be glorified; it can achieve a translucent beauty akin to that of the God-like soul, but this will occur only after the Last Judgment. In the meantime, if one is to preserve an integrated, holy self, the body is to be merely tolerated, never allowed to dominate the soul. At the end of Hopkins' canon, in the magnificent sonnet "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection," he proclaimed that man, Nature's "Bonniest, dearest to her, her clearest-selved spark," learns death as his last lesson from her.⁸ Beyond bodily death, once the

⁷Poems, p. 71.

⁸Poems, p. 105.

"mortal trash" of the body has been put off, the soul is free to shine in resurrected glory.

In contrast to the idealized vision of "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection," was the despondency which Hopkins felt over the condition of nineteenth-century man. The tug between generalized hope and despair was a collectivization of Hopkins' own struggles as expressed in the terrible sonnets.

During the Dublin period Hopkins pondered the preoccupation of most men with physical reality. When he observed his fellow creatures, he often found collective man low and despicable; he had an almost morbid sensitivity to the potential ugliness of man. In a letter to Bridges of 1881 he wrote, "I can find myself remarking for the thousandth time with sorrow and loathing the base and bespotted figures of the Liverpool crowd."⁹ In "Tom's Garland" Hopkins seemed to admit the misery of the working class, but he expressed no desire to improve their lot. He openly loathed the despairing poor, "bred Hangdog dull"; but, even more

⁹The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges, ed. Claude C. Abbott (London, 1938), p. 127. Hereafter referred to as Letters.

painfully, he feared the rebellious workers, enraged, "Manwolf, worse."¹⁰ In "The shepherd's brow, fronting forked lightning, owns" Hopkins lamented man's humiliating servitude to the body, "Hand to mouth he lives, and voids with shame."¹¹ Man erects pitiable pretensions, but spoon mirrors reflect him a grotesque "scaffold of score brittle bones." Man, consistently refusing to reckon God's rod, will not admit the immense distance between Creator and creature. For Hopkins, however, this metaphysical separation became horrifying. W. H. Gardner remarks that "in the dark sonnets Hopkins awakens to the full horror of man's loss of innocence and faith, all the vice and ignorance in the world."¹²

God looms almost menacingly, much like the Old Testament God of retribution, in the terrible sonnets. Yet the Catholic priest could not ignore the overwhelming significance of the New Testament.

¹⁰Poems, p. 103

¹¹Poems, p. 107.

¹²Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Study of Poetic Idiosyncrasy in Relation to Poetic Tradition, 2 vols. (London, 1948), II, 338.

Hopkins wrote in his retreat notes for January 5, 1888, "And my life is determined by the Incarnation down to most of the details of the day. . . . The Incarnation was for my salvation and that of the world: the work goes on in a great system and machinery which even drags me on with the collar round my neck though I could and do neglect my duty in it."¹³ Beset by a sense of personal failure, weary in body and mind, Hopkins felt a wretched unworthiness of salvation. Still, to deny one's own ability to be saved would be to deny Christ's ability to save. If the miracle of Christ's coming could transform "This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood" into "immortal diamond," Hopkins' own horrible suffering must be seen as an intensification, a personalization of the pain that man everywhere felt, but hopefully endured for the promise of salvation.¹⁴ By putting on Christ, by accepting his grace, man can give his sinful nature a share in the life of the divine self. The lightening of the dark sonnets in "Patience, hard thing! the hard thing but to pray" and "My own heart let me more

¹³Sermons, p. 263.

¹⁴Poems, p. 106.

have pity on" marked Hopkins' realization that "poor Jackself," the frustrated perfectionist, could also be "immortal diamond."

We must remember that, while Hopkins was often repulsed by collective man, various individual men did manage to win his love and admiration, and he wrote some of his best poems about them. These poems are especially important because they reveal Hopkins' continuing faith at a time when he found his hope of salvation severely challenged. He showed such intense involvement with the subjects of these poems that at least one critic has worried that his infatuation with his rustic heroes betrays "a dangerous affinity for the selfhoods of this world."¹⁵ Yet it was priestly duty that brought the poet to Felix Randal. The poet found a deeply satisfying relationship with Felix, whom the priest had just annointed; Hopkins addressed the blacksmith, "powerful amidst peers" as "child."¹⁶ It was this unity of vocation of poet and priest that infused the portraits of

¹⁵Patricia A. Wolfe, "The Paradox of Self: A Study of Hopkins' Spiritual Conflict in the Terrible Sonnets," VP, 6 (1968), 90.

¹⁶Poems, p. 87.

Felix, the Brothers, Harry Ploughman, and the Bugler with such sympathetic warmth. Hopkins, who described Christ as "a nobler me," found in these simple people a grandeur mirroring the Savior. Thus Hopkins was able to produce the restrained exultation of "Harry Ploughman" in 1887, exactly midway through his dark period. The rare spirituality that Hopkins saw in Harry relieved somewhat the godless despondency he himself had suffered in "I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day." Hopkins, scholarly, ascetic, tortured, didn't want other men to be like himself. He wished his characters, their selves, to be "functioning not only characteristically, but intensely, violently, dangerously--on their mettle like the windhover."¹⁷ Hopkins' panegyric of rural grace and strength in "Harry Ploughman" was prompted by the brute beauty of a simple man who drove his horses and did his work. This praise of a man who does his duty, humble though it may be, is characteristic Hopkins. St. Alphonsus Rodriguez won heaven by watching the

¹⁷ Austin Warren, "Instress of Inscape," Gerard Manley Hopkins, ed. the Kenyon Critics, p. 78.

door of a monastery. Hopkins might yearn for flashing honor, for the forging of glorious days, but the spirit of the Alphonsus sonnet is a consecration of quiet achievement.¹⁸ Like Alphonsus the doorkeeper, Hopkins had waged his own martyrly struggle within a "heroic breast."¹⁹ Hopkins seems quick to recognize admirable character, even sanctity, in certain others, but yet reluctant to see anything comparable in himself.

The terrible sonnets, the exclamations of a tortured mind, have elicited various strained responses from psychological critics. His lofty aspirations and forthright emotionalism notwithstanding, Hopkins has been accused of "obtrusive admiration for masculine strength and physical beauty."²⁰ There has been idle speculation that "Harry Ploughman" is a homosexual poem. Even W. H. Gardner, our foremost Hopkins scholar, has noted a stuntedness in Hopkins' personality, "prevented by ill-health, overwork, and psychological inhibition from reaching its full stature."²¹

¹⁸It is indeed unfortunate that some psychological critics have pounced on the "gashed flesh" and "galled shield," the stuff of martyrdom in this poem, as further indication of Hopkins' perversity about pain. See below (10) for an indictment of their methods.

¹⁹Poems, p. 106.

²⁰H. C. Sherwood, The Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, (Oxford, 1969), p. 21.

²¹I, 36.

The psychological critics have probed Hopkins' psyche throughout his canon, but they have huddled in a main around the terrible sonnets, finding there the culmination of Hopkins' supposed lifelong preoccupation with pain. Michael W. Murphy is representative of these critics. "The violent imagery in Hopkins is attributable to the sado-masochistic bent in his personality, his acute sensitivity to pain and suffering, the influence upon him of other writers or his Jesuit training, and his awareness of the poetic value of such imagery."²² In the terrible sonnets Murphy finds images of "the rod, the treading foot, the 'bruised bones,' sharp pangs of grief, the grating hearts, the swords, the scourges, the blood, the sickness and the disease."²³ That Hopkins left himself open to charges of sado-masochism is regrettable, that the pursuit of suspected perversion in him might lead to a better understanding of his poetry is doubtful. Geoffrey Grigson has qualified Hopkins' sensitivity to pain somewhat. "Self-humiliation and pain in others did not obsess him, but they were always important to

²²Michael W. Murphy, "Violent Imagery in the Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins," VP, 7 (1969), 1.

²³p. 16.

him."²⁴ Mr. Grigson, operating with self-satisfied psychological acumen, limits Hopkins to "an honest half-knowledge of his own situation."²⁵ If this is the case, Hopkins somehow managed to say a great deal about his own identity with only such "half-knowledge." "My selfbeing, my consciousness, and feeling of myself, that taste of myself, of I and me above and in all things . . . is more distinctive than the smell of walnut leaf or camphor, and is incommunicable by any means to another man. . . ." ²⁶

Gerard Manley Hopkins had a perspicacious knowledge of his situation: he had calculated the ratio of his suffering, "the keener the conscience, the greater the pain." The conscience of the man striving for perfection feels guilt, and therefore pain, at the confines of any moral or physical weakness, however slight. The psychology of perfection is essentially one of endurance: and yet, paradoxically, to pray for endurance, for patience--as Hopkins did in "Patience, hard thing! the hard thing but to pray"--is to ask for more suffering. Murphy calls this masochism.

²⁴Geoffrey Grigson, "Blood or Bran," New Verse, 14 (1935), 21.

²⁵p. 22.

²⁶Notebooks, p. 309.

David A. Downes, who approaches Hopkins in sympathy with his Ignatian spirit, still finds in him "a strong intro-punitive complex aggravated by Catholicism and the priesthood."²⁷ This is mere jargon for "conscience." Religion, Downes avers, maintained "a destructive grasp on an artist-victim" until his personality, as exhibited in the dark sonnets, was "worsened by some strange, inner drive to thrust his egomania into the suicide of a strongly abnegative religion."²⁸ Downes fails to consider the tremendous impetus to poetry that religion had provided for Hopkins in such unabashedly Catholic pieces as "The Bugler's First Communion," "Felix Randal," and "The Blessed Virgin compared to the Air we Breathe." No amount of training in mere versification can account for the great poet. Religion provided for Hopkins a form, a set of moral limitations, within whose confines he worked. Far from a crass suppressor of artistic talent, the Catholic Church was a channel to Hopkins of God's grace, which made possible spiritual insights worthy of poetic transmission.

²⁷ "The Hopkins Enigma," Thought, 36 (1963), 573.

²⁸ p. 286.

Psychological hindsight has been much too severe in its judgment of Hopkins' conception of vocation. Too many critics have been too quick to find an unavoidable conflict imposed on Hopkins by the supposedly antithetical pursuits of poetry and the priesthood. Again, Gardner has commented that "the partial frustration of Hopkins' creative instincts was no doubt one of the causes of his neurosis."²⁹ Hopkins himself had admitted, "You know I once wanted to be a painter. But even if I could I wd. not I think, now, for the fact is that the higher and more attractive parts of the art put a strain upon the passions which I shd. think it unsafe to encounter."³⁰ Hopkins' understandable reluctance to confront the physical and intellectual allurements of secular art need not denote neurosis, however. Hopkins had decided in 1873 with irreversible finality that his vocation was to the priesthood. The peculiar restrictions of that way of life--the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience--necessarily

²⁹Poems, p. XX.

³⁰Further Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins, including his Correspondence with Coventry Patmore, ed. Claude Collier Abbott (2nd. ed., Oxford, 1956), 84-5. Hereafter referred to as Further Letters.

place harsh limits on the individual will. Still, like the poet's adoption of a particular form in which to work and set his meaning, Hopkins' adherence to the rules of his order was his adopted means of salvation. Hopkins' friend and spiritual advisor, John Henry Newman, had counseled him, "Don't call 'the Jesuit discipline hard,' it will bring you to heaven."³¹

Had Hopkins suppressed anything good within himself, and poetry is certainly good before God, he would have been sinful or psychotic, and certainly in opposition to Ignatius' hope that a man's talents might be used by his order to glorify God. No Jesuit was ever advised to seek pain or hardship for its own sake. However, Ignatius had predicted that "desolation" might come. The self, struggling for perfection through Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises, must be ready to face "a darkening of the soul, trouble of mind, movement to base and worldly things, restlessness . . . moving to distrust, loss of hope . . . when the soul feels thoroughly apathetic, tepid, sad and as it were separated from her Creator and

³¹Further Letters, p. 408.

Lord."³² Those who would read the terrible sonnets as blanket proof of Hopkins' personal despair must remember Ignatius' promise that willing endurance of pain would eventually prove practically effective, so that one might accomplish good works and gain happiness, fulfillment, and a sense of achievement.

Whatever satisfaction Hopkins gained from the patient endurance of his suffering, it is clear that the suffering did not prove transcendental. The temptation can be strong to regard Hopkins as a mystic, seeking fusion of the self and God. Had Hopkins been elevated to the mountain-top where the spirit is transfigured, the dark sonnets might indeed be the record of what John of the Cross has described as "the dark night of the soul."³³ This "dark night" occurs as a necessary antecedent of mystic fusion with the divine; however, more familiar, less ethereal terms--frustration, vastation, exhaustion-- might

³²Exercitia Spiritualia S. Ignatii, trans., George E. Ganss. (Madrid, 1919), p. 68.

³³"The dark night of the soul" is the totality of the sufferings which precede the mystical fusion of the soul and God. John Pick provides a full definition of the "dark night" and discusses the significant differences between the genuine "dark night" and Hopkins' experience in Gerard Manley Hopkins, Priest and Poet (Oxford, 1942), 130-34. I am indebted to Professor Pick for my ideas about Hopkins and mysticism.

just as easily describe Hopkins' symptoms. "It is surprising that many Catholic critics have drawn an analogy between the 'terrible sonnets' and the 'dark night of the soul' of St. John of the Cross. The dark night is a defined period in a long and specialized life of contemplative prayer. The experience behind these sonnets is more elementary and universal: there is nothing of the hunger which follows on the withdrawal of unique favours. Unique favours have never been granted."³⁴

Hopkins merely cast about among genuine mystics. During the retreat of 1878, he read the treatises of Marie Lataste, the French girl who reportedly had repeated visions of Christ and the Blessed Virgin.³⁵ Hopkins carefully annotated his copy of her works, making marginal amplifications of various passages. He refers seven times to her visionary accounts in the course of his devotional writings; he wrote long transcripts of her visions as appendages to his retreat notes.³⁶ Hopkins seems to have flirted with

³⁴Humphry House, "A Note on Hopkins' Religious Life," New Verse, 14 (1935), 4.

³⁵For a detailed discussion of the effect of her writings on Hopkins, see Pick, p. 135 ff.

³⁶See Sermons. Appendix I.

mysticism, to have been slightly preoccupied with it for a time, but there is simply no reason to make Hopkins a mystic.

However, Hopkins' first biographer, Father G. F. Lahey, finds "causes which have their origin in true mysticism" at the heart of the terrible sonnets: but he does not define these causes beyond a casual reference to Hopkins clinging to "the bleak heights of spiritual night with his God."³⁷ Fr. Lahey observes that "all writers on mysticism--St. Teresa, St. John of the Cross, Poulain, Maumigny, etc.--have told us that this severe trial is the greatest and most cherished gift from One Who has accepted literally His servant's oblation."³⁸ Spiritual suffering might be purgative, even therapeutic, but, without quietude, contemplation, illumination--the other marks of the soul's transcendence, it is not necessarily mystical.³⁹ This is not to discount the intensity of Hopkins' suffering, only those "hold the mind's mountains cheap

³⁷Gerard Manley Hopkins (London, 1930), p. 142-3.

³⁸p. 134.

³⁹Gardner claims that it is only the "exaltation accompanying the pain that gives the experience the quality of mysticism." (I, 153).

. . . who never hung there."⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the mainstream of Catholic thought holds that suffering is the result of sin, of guilt either personal or assumed. It seems much too arbitrary to elevate Hopkins to a facile union with the divine, when his sufferings might just as easily be seen as the predictable result of his own fallibility.

A poet who had gloried almost ecstatically in nature as a manifestation of the divine must have necessarily been distraught at the loss of outward signs of God's grace. Fr. M C. Darcy, S. J., writes in the foreward to Professor Pick's study, ". . . The sombre sonnets of Hopkins' last years obviously fall into what is well known as the season of dry and dark faith, a season during which most good people are deprived of all the old sensible delights they formerly enjoyed when thinking about God." Hopkins' besetting personal problems in the years 1885-89 prevented him for a while from exulting in the flashing forth of God's beauty; certainly those occasions when his "heart in hiding" was unexpectedly stirred by a random occurrence in nature were

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Poems, p. 100.

decidedly fewer during the Dublin period, surrounded as he was by urban squalor and wearied by tedium and overwork. In a letter to Bridges of October 28, 1886, Hopkins confided that "331 accounts of the First Punic War with trimmings, have sweated me down to nearer my lees and usual alluvial low water mudflats, groans, despair, and yearnings."⁴¹ The tiresome demands of paper-grading provide a more mundane, but more realistic, rationale for Hopkins' suffering than the "dark night." More than once his colleagues found him late at night in a swoon, sweating and breathing spasmodically over the inability to determine half-marks.

Before turning to the dark sonnets themselves, we must consider one last powerful influence on the spirit of Hopkins' last poems--his health. Gerard had been frail and anemic as a boy, and a fragile constitution plagued him all his life. Hopkins' letters are peppered with references to his frequent illnesses. A list of maladies compiled from a single volume of his letters should be sufficient to indicate his problems: chilblains, colds, exzema, indigestion,

⁴¹The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges. ed. Claude Collier Abbott (Oxford. 1935). p. 236.

insomnia, piles, rheumatic fever, toothache, typhoid. If Gerard Hopkins suffered a neurosis, it might very well have been hypochondria.⁴²

Still Hopkins looked for the praiseworthy in Creation. Where he could he praised, but, as G. W. Stonier has remarked, "The agony of his spiritual life, the striving to expel doubt is pierced forever by the knowledge that God does not respond."⁴³ This separation from the Creator, the apparent futility of prayer, the inability to communicate with "dearest him that lives alas! away" reduced Hopkins' life for a time in 1885 to a succession of empty moments. In "No worst there is none. Pithced past pitch of grief," the first of the 1885 poems in the fourth edition, Hopkins cried out from the depths of his depression. His grief had grown almost infinite. The octave of the sonnet became an exploration of fear; the sestet offered some small hope, some slight, wretched

⁴² Again the illness and the weariness Hopkins felt were projected against collective man. He wrote in his "mission" notes for October 26, 1886, "One is so fagged, so harried and gallied up and down. And the drunkards go on drinking, the filthy, as the scripture says, are filthy still: Human nature is so inveterate. Would that I had seen the last of it."

⁴³ Gog Magog and Other Critical Essays (London, 1933), p. 61.

resignation. The personal cry of anguish extends itself to embrace "world sorrow." The screams of pain that have rung on "age-old anvils" seem vicarious indeed, but Hopkins was not looking for martyrdom here; he was no scapegoat. The suffering of the Christian must hinge on Christ's suffering. Christ suffered unjustly. The disciple must not ask for more than the master. Still the intensity of unexplained, perhaps unmerited agony forced Hopkins to cry out, to seek for comfort.

The temptation to despair with which he had wrestled in "Carrion Comfort" was finally overcome by the realization that suffering leads to purification. "That my chaff might fly; my grain lie, sheer and clear."⁴⁴ There, because suffering had seemed purposive and meaningful he was able to kiss the rod. In the octave of "No worst, there is none" pangs of suffering lead not to an easy submission, much less to reconciliation, but only to more pangs that "wilder wring." The shift in tense in the sestet of "Carrion Comfort" marked a temporal distancing from "that night, that year/ Of now done

⁴⁴ Poems, p. 100.

darkness;" in "No worst, there is none" the pain is immediate.

A mocking Fury shrills through the transition from octave to sestet. The compressed language of the Fury is indicative of the emotional constriction that characterizes the entire sonnet, of the implosive grief that forces staccato lines. The repetitive onslaughts of pain in the octave slow to a gradual paralysis of the spirit in the sestet. The human will cannot long endure the confrontation with the dark self. Consequently, there is no prolonged attempt to know, much less to conquer, the evil lurking in the mind's mountains. The reluctance of the spirit to admit its frightful culpability is also in marked contrast with the determination of "Carrion Comfort," where "by taking pride in the invincible human spirit, Hopkins is coming dangerously close to denying man's essential dependence on God."⁴⁵ The abyss of God lies below the mind's mountains, the self clings to known securities. The relief offered by sleep is temporary, that offered by death is precarious. Still the rush to escape

⁴⁵Wolfe, p. 91.

ends the poem quickly in pitiable, ironic resignation.

"No worst, there is none" might represent the cry of the Christian soul which has given itself for sinners.⁴⁶ The efficacy of this vicarious suffering depends on the identification of the Christian with Christ. The soul must be purged, must be made perfect so that ultimately it can fuse with the Savior. Grief must necessarily be "no-man-fathomed," since it is bound only by each man's death. Death, "comfort in a whirlwind," beckons almost invitingly. The Christian, deprived of any sustained relief, is destined in the meantime to live out his life in pains, attached to God by a tenuous life-line that must bear the frightful weight of the tortured physical self.

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

⁴⁶This sonnet has been censured by Yvor Winters as an instance of late romantic emotional over-emphasis offered to us without the dignity of conviction. Winters would deny the possibility that Hopkins' grief might be universalized. "Since he cannot move us by telling us why he himself is moved, he must try to move us by belaboring his emotion. He says in effect: 'Share my fearful emotion, for the mind is subject to fearful emotions.'" "Gerard Manley Hopkins," in Hopkins, A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1966), p. 45.

is less fervent than "No worst, there is none." The pains here are entirely physical, nothing metaphysical. Geographical separation and doctrinal differences have alienated Hopkins from his family. Uncertainty about his political sympathies has torn Hopkins between compassion for Ireland and love for England. The peculiar circumstances of his life in Dublin conspired to diminish his reputation. His poetry had gone unheard and unheeded. Hopkins recognizes that without God's grace his creativity must fail him, his efforts must be futile. He does not want to point an accusing finger; God is not yet completely removed. "Hell's spell," rather than "heaven's baffling ban," might be the force that thwarts him. Still his attempts at poetry, at a happy reunion with his God, remain a series of arrested beginnings.⁴⁷

⁴⁷Louis Rader has found in the dark sonnets "a joy of conscious creative activity which may perhaps suggest qualifications for the mood of despair or religious doubt into which some critics have Hopkins plunge." "Hopkins' Dark Sonnets: Another New Expression." *VP*, 5 (1967), 19. Hopkins did not despair but I find little "joy of conscious creative activity" here. A letter to Bridges of September 1, 1885 is pertinent. "I shall shortly have some sonnets to send you, five or more. Four of these came like inspirations unbidden and against my will. And in the life I lead now, which is one of continually jaded and harrassed mind, if in any leisure I try to do anything I make no way--nor with my work, alas! but so it must be." Letters, p. 221.

The intensity of Hopkins' pain finally compressed day into an internalized darkness. Hopkins found himself unable to look past his own imagined depravity to find in external nature the illuminating mark of the divine, as he had in the jubilant nature sonnets of 1877. A claustrophobic sense of oppression forced his own dark self in upon Hopkins. In "I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day" Hopkins remarks that the most excruciating pain of the damned is to be "their sweating selves: but worse."⁴⁸ In the unpublished notes on the Spiritual Exercises, Hopkins wrote, "Against these acts of its own "which blotted out God and put darkness in the place of light" the lost spirit dashes itself like a caged beast and is in prison, violently instresses them and burns, stares into them and is the deepest darkened." Deprived of the sight of God, Hopkins became self-conscious. "I am gall, I am heart burn," he proclaimed. His life had become a night journey filled with disease and bitterness; earlier he had perceived the utter despicability before God of the unregenerate man,

⁴⁸ Poems, p. 101.

but now it seemed as if the Lord's faithful servant, Gerard, was being singled out for special punishment. It was the inevitability of suffering, as if God had ordered it, that most plagued Hopkins. "God's most deep decree/ Bitter would have me taste." There is some possibility that Hopkins might have seen suffering as a developmental process, reducing the strong-willed "self yeast of spirit" to a more pliable, potentially sweeter dough. However, Hopkins' concern over his long disease, his life is so rapturously complete that "perhaps he has forgotten the possible fall of desire into lust and of self into selfishness."⁴⁹

Self-consciousness, even a sublime self-consciousness, focuses exclusively on the creature, ignoring completely the Creator or, at best, relegating him to a secondary importance. Hopkins himself admitted that "It is one thing to deny oneself, it is another and often a better thing to forget oneself."⁵⁰ The renunciation of self is terribly painful; the self does not die gracefully. "Precarious as it is to

⁴⁹W. Stacy Johnson, "The Imagery of Gerard Manley Hopkins: Fire, Light, and the Incarnation," VN, 16 (1958), 79.

⁵⁰Letters, p. 193.

make the proper linkages and translations between the somatic, the psychic, and the spiritual, I should suppose all breakdowns in maturity to be ultimately spiritual, testifying to the finite self's unwillingness to acknowledge its creaturehood."⁵¹ However, Imitatio Christi demands the glorification of the Father, at any cost. The infusion of the divine will demands likeness; the creature's will must coincide with the will of the creator. As Geoffrey Hartman has observed, paradoxically "the possibility of likeness (a dangerous ideal, since it must either utterly exalt or annihilate selfhood) is the agony."⁵² Again, the cataclysmic fact of the Incarnation is absolutely essential for an understanding of Hopkins. He believed that, since Christ became man, man must become Christ-like.

In "Patience, hard thing! the hard thing but to pray" Hopkins prays for the death of his rebellious will. He has begun to master his sufferings, but he cannot forget them. "We hear our hearts grate on

⁵¹ Austin Warren, "Gerard Manley Hopkins, 1844-1889," Gerard Manley Hopkins, ed. the Kenyon Critics, p. 13.

⁵² Hartman, "Introduction," p. 11.

themselves: it kills/ to bruise them dearer. Yet the rebellious wills/ Of us we do bid God bend to him even so."⁵³ Life has become less galling, the distilled kindness of Christ is actively filling the honeycombs. Hopkins has re-established contact with God, whose "ways we know."

The artless sincerity of "My own heart let me more have pity on" is a testament of Hopkins' enduring faith. The self, having suffered through a cosmic estrangement, discovers that comfort comes passively, unexpectedly, after patience. The spontaneous inversion of word order in the first line posits the urgency that carries through the octave. The stuttered repetitions of the first quatrain, "not live this tormented mind/ With this tormented mind tormenting yet,"⁵⁴ exhibit an intensity, an exhaustion almost, that will not seek out petty alternatives. The repetition, the alliteration, and the assonance reverberating through the second quatrain intensify the circular syntactical arrangement of the words. The technique thus underscores the hard fact at the core of the

⁵³Poems, p. 102.

⁵⁴Poems, p. 102.

octave. Comfort cannot be manufactured; it must be waited for with passive resignation. The incomprehensibility of God's patterns prevents even anticipation of comfort, but as long as the soul admits the possibility of consolation, does not despair, leaves "comfort root-room," God's grace will eventually come.

For the present, God's smile still "lights a lovely mile." The calm realization here that God's smile "'s not wrung" contrasts markedly with the startling discovery of the last line of "Carrion Comfort." Hopkins has made a separate peace. He has realized that the Holy Ghost includes among his gifts peace as well as fear of the Lord. Indeed this sonnet marks a partial return to the vision of the Holy Ghost brooding "over the bent/ World . . . with warm breast and with ah! bright wings."⁵⁵ The earlier visions had come easily. There the passive self accepted other men's sins, other men's smells and for all that the Holy Ghost simply appeared. The true comfort of the Spirit is perhaps even more apparent to the poet recently racked by sorrow than

⁵⁵Poems, p. 66.

to the blithely faithful poet of the earlier poem. The vision of smile-lighted "skies [that] between pie mountains" has been earned.

These last two sonnets, "My own heart let me more have pity on" and "Patience, hard thing" indicate a general direction of Hopkins' sentiment, but he was to balk momentarily in "Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend" to ask God some direct questions. If the demands of his vocation prevented Hopkins from actively seeking a wide audience for his poetry, the need for recognition of some kind nevertheless remained. In a letter to Bridges of May 17, 1885, Hopkins confided that "there is a point with me in matters of any size when I must absolutely have encouragement as much as crops rain; afterwards I am independent."⁵⁶ In his retreat notes for 1888 he fussed about the effect of his work. "I do not feel then that outwardly I do much good, much that I care to do or can much wish to prosper; and this is a mournful life to lead."⁵⁷ Like Jeremiah,

⁵⁶Letters, pp. 218-9.

⁵⁷Sermons, p. 262.

Hopkins looked about him and saw the evil man ascendant.

In "Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend" Hopkins chides God ever so slightly. Hopkins is always deferential, but the politic "sir" of the second line shows that God might now be approached, be reasoned with, as it were.⁵⁸ No longer is God someone who "lives, alas, away," but is one who, even if he does not respond, can at least be challenged. God seems simply to have forgotten about Hopkins, who avows that he has spent his entire life upon God's cause. And yet common sinners seem to be more productive than he. Hopkins' aridity was aesthetic as well as spiritual. "It is not possible for me to do anything, unless a sonnet, and that rarely, in poetry with a fagged mind and a continual anxiety," he complained to R. W. Dixon in a letter of August 7, 1886"⁵⁹

For all his overt complaining in the poem,

⁵⁸Poems, p. 106.

⁵⁹The Correspondence of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Richard Watson Dixon, ed. Claude Collier Abbott (Oxford, 1935), p. 139.

there flows in "Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend" a subtle undercurrent of contentment. Nature has returned to him as a manifestation of divine presence. "See, banks and brakes/ Now, leaved how thick! laced they are again/ With fretty chervil, look, and fresh wind shakes/ Them." While nature, more subdued here, cannot now prompt Hopkins to the paeonic song of "The Starlit Night," it can make a contrast between internal and external states. Nature is not pathetic; it does not sympathize with the complaining poet, but neither does it suffer because of sinful worldlings, powerless to blight it. Nature's fertility contrasts with the poet's sterility; "birds build--but not I build." Where Hopkins had earlier been able to leap outside of himself, to create almost a new self by means of a vision of unity with nature, he is now restricted to his own dry self. "I am an enunch," he wrote to Bridges in January of 1888, "but it is for the kingdom of heaven's sake."⁶⁰ The ultimate failure of his asceticism to reach ecstasy, the desired fusion with either the divine or the natural, has led I. A.

⁶⁰Letters, p. 270.

Richards to call Hopkins' work "poems of defeat."⁶¹ They are at best poems of resignation. God is indeed just to smite his creatures. Yet Job's question, "What is man that Thou shouldst contend with him," antedated the coming of Christ, who brought justice tempered with mercy.

Hopkins himself resolved the problems of the suffering self; he achieved consolation. At the volta of the magnificent sonnet, "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection," written one year before his death, Hopkins suddenly cried, "Enough."⁶² Where man's life, and particularly Hopkins' own existence, had seemed only a brief painful spark, a fast firedint in the larger darkness of sin and death, Christ's Resurrection of a sudden gave promise of eternity. Man's self, Hopkins perceived, was real and immortal. Without the Resurrection, man had looked indeed Hardy-esque--simply the greater sufferer for all his sensitivity and intelligence. Gerard Hopkins preserved his faith; the dark days of the terrible

⁶¹"Gerard Hopkins," The Dial, 81 (1926), 199.

⁶²Poems, p. 105.

sonnets lay behind him. His deathbed utterance, "I am so happy" gives some clue that the immolation of self was for him the essence of perfection. Hopkins' last poems express the desolation and final consolation of a soul who learned to live in the presence of, if not in complete fusion with, divinity.

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THE SUFFERING SELF: GERARD MANLEY
HOPKINS IN THE DARK SONNETS

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

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Abstract

The terrible sonnets of Gerard Manley Hopkins are the desolate cries of a frustrated perfectionist; they have been frequently misunderstood. These sonnets are not the record of a mystical experience, nor do they indicate any significant neurosis in Hopkins. They are the products of Hopkins' lifelong struggle for sanctity, a struggle which led him to the Society of Jesus and its rigorous asceticism. Hopkins did not lose his faith. Rather, his conception of the "self" went through its final transformation in these dark poems where he experienced the pain accompanying the sacrifice of personal identity to the encompassing love of Christ.