

THE SUFFERING SELF: GERARD MANLEY  
HOPKINS IN THE DARK SONNETS

1050 7/10

by

JOHN EDWARD BROWN

B. A., Kansas University, 1970

-

---

A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

1974

Approved by:

*W. R. Brown*

---

Major Professor

LD  
266T  
R4  
1974  
B76  
C-2  
Document

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."<sup>1</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup>For 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."<sup>2</sup> In "Hurrahing in Harvest" the receptive heart and the responsive senses "glean our Savior" in the beauty of summer's end.<sup>3</sup>

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."<sup>4</sup> 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

<sup>2</sup>The 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.

<sup>3</sup>Poems, p. 70.

<sup>4</sup>Notebooks, p. 121.

and humorous fame as the absurd Jesuit."<sup>5</sup> 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."<sup>6</sup>

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

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