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# Conflict between Faith and Aesthetic Beauty in Gerard Manley Hopkins

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**ABSTRACT:** The basic question in a discussion of the Victorian poet G. M. Hopkins' inner conflicts is, how he accommodated his sensuous love of beauty within the framework of his priestly vocation. In this context this study discusses the influence of Keats and Rosetti on Gerard Manley Hopkins. In his appreciation for the beauty of the world, Hopkins, through a process of Ignatian *agere contra*, passes from Keatsian sensuousness to Christina Rossettian asceticism to the Ignatian vision of finding God in all things. In this personalization process of seeing God in everything, Hopkins beautifully blends the thoughts of many other intellectuals of his time, particularly of his friend, Duns Scotus. In the light of Hopkins' private diary notes, the article will also discuss his feeling of guilt and how he overcame his temptation to sin through the practice of Ignatian *agere contra*. The Ignatian principle of *Agere Contra* is a spiritual tool to develop one's spiritual life against the attractions and blandishments of the world, by acting the contrary way. Ignatius of Loyola believed that certain kinds of temptations from the enemy can be so powerful that one may not be able to overcome them merely by guarding against them. In such cases one could act exactly opposite to the designs and desires of the tempter and thus root out from oneself the very tendency to fall a prey to such temptations. In this spiritual sense *agere contra* is an invitation to be a contrarian in the world.

**Key words:** Sensuousness, Agere Contra, Ignatian worldview, the ascetic and the aesthetic, inscape

## I. Introduction

The name Gerard Manley Hopkins is almost identified with oddity whether within the Jesuit circle or without. Innocent eccentricities marked the very life and works of this Jesuit poet – hovering over a frozen pond to absorb the pattern of trapped bubbles, putting his face down to a cup of hot chocolate to observe the grey and grained look of the film on its surface, sprinting out of a building after a shower to stoop down and study the glitter of crushed quartz before the water could evaporate (Martin 202). Hopkins' love of beauty can be traced back to his early childhood days or even to his very family background. His father was a poet, though not by profession. His paternal and maternal uncles were painters. Arthur and Everard, his brothers, became artists. Already as a child Hopkins got training in drawing from one of his aunts. Naturally from his early childhood he developed an eye most sensitive to enjoy and appreciate beauty. No wonder once when both Hopkins and his younger brother Cyril were in the nursery, the former on seeing the deformed look of his smaller brother was overcome by deep sorrow and sobbed, "Cyril has become so ugly!" (Lahey 3).

Hopkins showed his minute observation of nature and his love of beauty in the visible world already as a child. He grew up developing a passionate love for the beauty in nature and this naturally got reflected in his writings. Lahey says quite appropriately, "he led a sort of charmed life, dreaming and reading, and chewing the cud of his gleanings from the world – harvest of poetry . . . he was a fearless climber of trees, and would go up very high in the lofty elm tree, standing in our garden at Oak Hill, Hampstead, to the alarm of on-lookers like myself" (Lahey 8). His senses were sharp and active and he took great pleasure in observing things or objects which looked apparently silly or insignificant to people with ordinary senses. He could spend any amount of time just observing things and each time he observed a thing, it appeared fresh and new to him. This ability to observe and enjoy the beauty and individuality of things grew up in him so naturally and spontaneously that often he was found himself lost in those sublime moments. Geoffrey Grigson's remark is quite apt,

To know this poet one does not need dictionaries alone, or a fine recognition of ambiguities alone, or only a knowledge of the Ignatian Exercises or of Duns Scotus, 'Of realty the rarest-veined unraveller': one must also have or must also cultivate some equivalence of pure

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sensation, some of Hopkins's own accurate empathic cognition of the plants, trees, fruit, metals, skies, clouds, sunsets, birds, waters, surfaces, grains, activities, perfumes, of all the phenomena at which he stared or to which he opened his senses (Grigson 8-9).

And there was an inner urge within him to identify himself with the things he observed.

In this context one must ask how Hopkins accommodated his sensuous love of nature within the framework of Christian spirituality, more specifically Jesuit spirituality. Although as a student at Oxford, Hopkins, like St. John of the Cross, held a negative attitude to his sensuousness, later on he realised that such an approach was not necessary for a sound Christian spirituality. The Ignatian Spiritual Exercises allow their followers to use any honest means that would promote greater glory of God (A. M. D. G. -*Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam*), and poetry could very well be one of these. However, it took some time for Hopkins to realise that even his sensuous love of nature could be used in singing the praises of God through his poetic art. Hopkins was by nature a highly scrupulous person and having joined a strict religious order like the Society of Jesus this tendency in him got stimulated all the more. Thus acceptance of the Ignatian worldview was not all smooth sailing for Hopkins; it took many years for him to come to the belief that the 'inscapes' in nature were manifestations of God's presence in the world; in 1867 as a student at Oxford he was struggling with the opposite possibility, that the beauty of the world is a temptation that must be renounced for God.

## II. The Ascetic and the aesthetic strains

When one goes through the writings of Hopkins one cannot but notice two powerful strains – the ascetic and the aesthetic – in them. In 1866, at about the time of his conversion, he wrote 'The Habit of Perfection' which indicated his desire to become a priest, but which is most remarkable in the context of the conflict in his nature. In this poem, Hopkins rejects the pleasures of the senses in favour of an ascetic way of life, and yet the poem itself is richly sensuous. He passionately applies the senses to an immaterial idea and it is dramatic in form: "Elected silence, sing to me . . . / Shape nothing, lips, be lovely-dumb . . . / Be shelled, eyes, . . . / Plate, the hutch of tasty lust . . . / Nostrils, your careless breath that spend . . . / O feel-of-primrose hands, O feet . . . " ('The Habit of Perfection'). The speaker addresses in turn personified silence, lips, eyes, palate, nostrils, hands and feet; hence it is in the form of a dramatic monologue or colloquy and it proceeds through a number of paradoxes: silence sings, shut lips are eloquent, closed eyes find light, the crust of the fast tastes delicious, and so on. According to Terence Heywood, Hopkins' intellect was immediately at the tips of the senses, and he built up their meaning by a deliberately sensuous use of words (Heywood 19). He reveals in a very striking manner the schism in his personality, the conflict between his poetic sensibility and his religious commitment.

The very essence of the man Hopkins, his inscape, was his poetic genius. This was his special likeness to the Divine Essence. A quite appropriate and convincing comment is made by Christopher Devlin in this context, that Hopkins was preoccupied in thought and action by the stern Victorian preference for duty at the expense of his inclination. Yet Hopkins the Jesuit behaved towards his poetic gift as a Victorian husband might toward a wife of whom he had cause to be ashamed. He says, "His muse was a high-born lady, a chaste matron, dedicated to God, but he treated her in public as a slut; and her children as an unwanted and vaguely sinful burden . . ." (SDW 119). Devlin, being a Jesuit, could perhaps understand another Jesuit, Hopkins, at a deeper level than many other Hopkins scholars. Thus he says that Hopkins' actual problem was bound up with his exaggerated distinction between the affective (nature, desire) and the elective (arbitrium, choice) will (SDW 116). The fact is that Hopkins loved the children of his muse; and if he tended to treat them in public as he honestly thought a good Jesuit should treat them, as sinful burden, the reason should be sought also in the traditional attitude of the Jesuit Order towards poetry since the days of Jacobus Pontanus of 16th century up to the present day, according to which art can never be an end in itself but only a means to achieve the Jesuit Order's goal.

## III. Influence of Keats

Hopkins' poems, especially his pre-Jesuit poems, show a sensitivity to the physical world and a capacity for distinguishing sensations, mainly due to the literary influence of Keats. W.H. Gardner, commenting on Hopkins' another early poem 'Escorial', points out that the influence of Keats is more immediate than that of Spenser. As in 'The Eve of St. Agnes', there is in 'The Escorial' colourful sensuousness, a tendency to linger on the highlights. See the lines in stanza 5 of 'The Escorial': " . . . this should be / A fortress of true faith, and central stand / Whence with the scourge of ready piety / Legates might rush, zeal-rampant, fiery / Upon the stubborn Fleming". And stanza 7 of the

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same poem says, "This was no classic temple order'd / With massy pillars of the Doric mood / Broad-fluted, nor with shafts acanthus-crown'd". In these two stanzas Keats is again indicated in the rich compounds: 'zeal-rampant', 'acanthus-crown'd'; even so early, the surprisingly apt epithet appears in stanza 4 of this poem: 'laver'd founts', 'pastured storm' (Gardener, A Study of Poetic Idiosyncrasy 53). The most remarkable of Hopkins' School Poems, 'A Vision of the Mermaids' (1862), a poem of one hundred and forty three lines, is the most characteristic of his early works. Rich in sensuous beauty, the poem is headed by a Blake-like illustration. It is a string of sensuous images collected together and evidently suggests the influence of Keats as well as Spenser on young Hopkins. Every line is loaded with rich imagery and sharp sense-perception. In his appeal to the eye as in: "Plum-purple was the west; but spikes of light / Spear'd open lustrous gashes, crimson-white." Or to the senses of taste, touch and smell as in: "Soon - as when Summer of his sister Spring / Crushes and tears the rare enjewelling." ('A Vision of the Mermaids').

Hopkins' recording of sense-impressions is in fact rarer and more precise than that of Keats; at many points he goes far beyond Keats in imagery of disconcerting extremity; but Keats' original guidance is always evident. For example, see Hopkins' use of imagery in the following lines: "How a lush-kept plush-capped sloe / Will, mouthed to flesh-burst, / Gush! – flush the man, the being with it, sour or sweet" ('The Wreck' 8). Here the luxurious comparison – ('lush' and 'plush') – is exactly Keatsian; and as for the assonance, although in Hopkins it is unusually forceful, yet Keats himself is repeatedly conscious of the sound of his words, as for instance in 'Ode to a Nightingale': "With beaded bubbles winking at the brim / . . / . . and mid-May's eldest child, / The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine, / The murmurous haunt of flies on summer even." The rose imagery of 'A Vision of the Mermaids' in which the sun is transformed into an orbed rose of ten thousand petals blown apart by hot pantings, culminates in the simile about how summer, that "glorious wanton" "plashes amidst the billowy apple-trees / His lusty hands" and "The dainty onyx-coronals deflowers". Here the imagery of ravishment recalls Keatsian sensuality tending to become sexuality. W. H. Gardner thinks the boy Hopkins equals the twenty-two-year old Keats in the luscious quality of his Romantic imagery (Gardener, A Study of Poetic Idiosyncrasy 55).

The influence of 'Endymion' is noticeable especially in the lush imagery; it marks a great advance in form, metre, diction and imagery in the following lines: "Plum-purple was the west; but spice of light / Spear'd open lustrous gashes, crimson—white; / . . . And thro' their parting lids there came and went / Keen glimpses of the inner firmament; / Fair beds they seem'd of water-lily flakes / Clustering entrancingly in beryl lakes . . . ('A Vision of the Mermaids'). In fact as in several other cases, here too, what is most evident from the copious images found in the poem is Hopkins' own strong sensuous nature. Gardner aptly comments: ". . . in a poem of one hundred and forty-three lines, we find pearly, ruby, sapphire, garnet, beryl, turquoise, onyx, jacinth, coral, and lapis lazuli; and there is a similar profusion of Keatsian classical allusions . . . The extreme of emotional sensitiveness is betrayed in the recurrent pathetic fallacy of a blushing, sighing, trembling, languishing, throbbing, and shivering Nature" (Gardner, A Study of Poetic Idiosyncrasy 55). The fact is that the artist in Hopkins could not but be sensuous while describing beauty. His susceptibility to Keatsian sensuousness must be one reason why asceticism became so important to Hopkins during his conversion crisis at Oxford and often in his religious career afterwards. He considered his attraction to sensuous beauty as a temptation, and therefore throughout the rest of his life he was always in danger of becoming an eccentric.

## IV. Influence of Christina Rossetti

Hopkins was much disturbed within himself concerning his sensuous love for the beauty of the world. In his desire to free himself from the Keatsian sensuous love, Hopkins turned to Christina Rossetti who helped him to move beyond the Keatsian art-for-art's-sake-poetics with the help of a more spiritual literary master, Dante whose influence pervades her poetry. Christina Rossetti's asceticism forced her to go beyond the representation of nature, finally to entertain only metaphorical meanings. According to Bump, Christina Rossetti was the woman who was to inspire some of Hopkins' art in the 1860s' though he met her only once, in 1864. Christina Rossetti in Hopkins' poetry somewhat resembles Beatrice in Dante's; in fact, she published articles on Dante and many aspects of her person and character suited her to play the role of Beatrice in the imagination of Hopkins. The example of Christina Rossetti seemed to have interrupted Hopkins' more worldly poetic endeavours and called upon him to pursue higher ideals (Bump, GMH 48). Her quest for peace of soul prompted her to withdraw more and more from the external world in order to turn inward to prepare for

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the world to come. Hopkins' asceticism helped him to search for unity in the external world, experiencing the tension between idealism and realism in the representation of nature, and in this related dialectic between the inner and outer he found his path to holiness.

The basic approach to life exemplified by Christina Rossetti in 'The Convent Threshold' eventually became Hopkins', and the pattern of his career followed hers. They shared a commitment to holiness; she discovered that her genre was the song of heaven rather than the picture of earth. She provided Hopkins with examples of simple unified songs which helped free him from some of the excesses of his early word-painting; she showed him how to trade the prolix word-painting of 'Il Mystico' and 'A Vision of the Mermaids' for instance, for the unity and concentration of 'Pied Beauty' and 'Spring'. Hopkins read 'The Convent Threshold' at a crucial moment in his career; and his 'Answer to Miss Rossetti' in 'A Voice from the world' identifies his persona as the one whose eyes look earthward; he reveals his spiritual inferiority and his admiration for Rossetti's heroine to join the convent. He himself was considering seriously going for 'a life beyond the cloistered' threshold; so he translated her poem into Latin elegiac. 'A Voice from the world' subtitled 'An Answer to Miss Rossetti's Convent Threshold is an example of this stance. His famous 'The Windhover' is a variation of one of the dream-visions of the ultimate Pre-Raphaelite, Dante, the obvious source of the inspiration of the Rossettis. In the first dream vision of the Purgatorio, an eagle sweeps down at dawn from the heavens and bears Dante to the sphere of heaven's fire, where both he and the bird burn; it is, according to Bump, an invitation to comparison with regard to the genetics of Hopkins' poem 'The Windhover' (Bump, Pre-Raphaelitism 2). Humphry House, therefore could assert that "it is no accident that Hopkins was devoted to the poems of Christina Rossetti in his youth; for it was he, not the Aesthetes who truly developed Pre-Raphaelite aims" (House, All in Due Time 156).

Hopkins met Christina Rossetti and her brother in 1864. Later Hopkins wrote to his mother that he was very appreciative of Christina Rossetti's poetry, ranking her even higher than her brother in pure pathos and pure beauty of art: "From the little I have seen and gathered of it I daresay he has more range, force, and interest, and then there is the difference between a man and a woman, but for pathos and pure beauty of art I do not think he is her equal, in fact the simple beauty of her work cannot be matched" (FLH 119). The fact that Coventry Patmore, the life-long correspondent of Hopkins, and Christina Rossetti had once been close friends shows that Hopkins was concerned with the same intellectual milieu to which she belonged.

Christina Rossetti had to make a choice between her human love and divine love; she twice refused proposals of marriage, first from James Collinson, who also became a follower of the Pre-Raphaelites and a convert to Catholicism and for a while a Jesuit, and then from Charles Cayley. The tension of asceticism and aestheticism appeared in her. Rejecting all human love, she found in Christ the satisfying object of her love. In the poem 'The Heart knowth its own Bitterness' she says: "Here means the separating sex, /Here harvests fail, here breake the heart; / There God shall join and no man part, / I full of Christ and Christ of me". She speaks of what she longed for in the same poem: "I long for one to stir any deep – / I have had-enough of help and gift- / I long for one to search and sift / Myself, to take myself and keep." For years she had hovered on the edge of the cloister and though she was never in life to cross it, in fancy she had done so many times. In her poem 'The Convent Threshold', her heroine, who is her other self, imagines she has turned from earthly love to assume the veil and from her nun's cell cries out in warning to the lover she has abandoned: "You sinned with me a pleasant sin; / Repent with me, for I repent." In Christina, Hopkins observed a transformation of eros into pure love.

Hopkins' meeting with Christina in 1864 apparently interrupted his more worldly poetic endeavours and inspired him to pursue higher ideals. Christina Rossetti became in Hopkins's poetry the lady who is spiritually more advanced, clearly superior in holiness. She was an ardent and devout spinster who had affected Hopkins at a crucial moment in his career when he was actually considering 'a life beyond the cloister'. Hopkins devoted much of his poetic creativity of 1864 to his own response to 'Convent Threshold' and he called his own poem 'Beyond the Cloister', though it was titled at first 'A Voice from the World'. The voice is that of the forsaken lover who, having pursued his self-nourished agony at length turns his thoughts to that strait way his mistress went: "Steel may be melted and rock rent. / Penance shall clothe me to the bone. / Teach me the way: I will repent" ('A Voice from the World'). Drafts of his poem extend from June 1864 through January 1865. Their interest lies in their insistent theme of repentance, expiation, the putting down of the natural self, the purifying of the spiritual self through humiliation and pain: "How shall I search, who never sought /

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How turn my passion-pastured thought / To gentle manna and simple bread?" ('A Voice from the World'). Hopkins developed the same theme with stronger intensity and technical discipline in a portrait of Pontius Pilate as a penitent. As Bump says, "'The Half-way house' has the characteristic ring of, and is indeed every bit as good as, most of, the religious sonnets of Christina. Christina's "Three Stages" and "Three Nuns" show the regular stages in the conversion pattern towards the way of silence and solitude, which are also reflected in Hopkins's 'The Habit of Perfection' because the external world is an unstable flux – a Heraclitean "stream of alteration" a Cyrenaic "string of sensations" "leading to Plato's despair at the multiplicity of phenomena"(qtd. in Bump, GMH 51).

Christina Rossetti's subordination of art to religion quickly became a key feature of Hopkins' aesthetic. In an undergraduate essay, 'on the true idea and excellence of sculpture' Hopkins argued that "art is made vigorous and more efficient by being, not its own mistress, but helpmate of religion" (JPH 4). Traditionally nature poetry is regarded as the helpmate of religion and a synchronic reading of the Bible and the Book of Nature is known as the hymn of creation. Like Christina's 'All thy works praise thee O Lord', Hopkins' Pied Beauty' shows how heavens, fish, birds, and men reveal God's glory and inspire worship of Him. Hopkins' ending, "He fathers forth whose beauty is past change / Praise him", is a concise expression of her song of 'Winter and Summer' in which she addressed God "Before whose changelessness we alternate" and concludes "Praise God, Praise God, Praise God".

## V. Conclusion

In Anglican piety we see two movements, religious and artistic, playing important roles in the shaping of Hopkins. Anglo-Catholicism, combining an ascetic religion with the glowing fire of the Romantic Revival, is one of the important factors that governed the life of this poet. The asceticism of the Oxford Movement and the aestheticism of Pre-Raphaelitism also determined his life and poetry. The highly scrupulous nature of Hopkins' personality coupled with Victorian Puritanism led him to the belief that beauty of the world is a temptation humans have to overcome through ascetic practices. According to Hopkins it is dangerous to derive beauty out of mortal beauty. In a letter to Bridges dated Oct. 22, 1879, Hopkins points out: "I think no one can admire beauty of the body more than I do, and it is of course a comfort to find beauty in a friend or a friend in beauty. But this kind of beauty is dangerous" (CH 95). The beauty of this world is seen as dangerous in his poems 'To what serves Mortal Beauty' and 'The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo'. Naturally Hopkins is torn between the two – his natural desire to enjoy the beauty of this world and his extreme kind of asceticism to deny the pleasures of the world. Hopkins' ascetic practices – his abstinence of drinking nothing for a week, and his resolution to give up verse-writing on entering the Jesuit Order, even his ceremonial burning of his poems which he called 'slaughtering the innocents', are all external expressions of the strains of asceticism and aestheticism warring within him. The co-existence of asceticism with aestheticism is seen in his bright sonnets such as 'The Starlight Night', 'Spring' and 'The Windhover'. In the octets of these sonnets Hopkins describes the visible beauty of this world with extreme delight, but in the sestet, he refers to the beauty of God that "fills the world with His Grandeur" and transcends the created beauty of the earth. And his denial of the world and art is based on a solid philosophy. Plato has no use for poets, because art is essentially a lie about the world; but Keats reverses this attitude by claiming "beauty is truth, truth beauty." Keats is actually rephrasing Plato, who says that the Good, the True and the Beautiful are one and the same. That is also a Neoplatonic idea, and even Augustine adopts it to a degree. If one compares Hopkins' 'A Vision of the Mermaids' with 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', his first mature poem, one can understand that Hopkins tried hard to find a way to correct himself of a Keatsian sensuous response to nature.

The Ignatian Exercises played the most important role in transforming and remoulding Hopkins' idea of beauty, sense experience and aesthetics. It took some time for him to free himself of his Victorian prudishness and Anglican rigidity and realise that a sound Christian spirituality like the one propounded by his spiritual father Ignatius of Loyola did consider that even his sensuous love of nature could well be used in singing the praises of God through his poetic art. Yet it still remains debatable if Hopkins could fully reconcile his sensuousness with his ascetic nature till the end, for it had been a struggle for him all through his life. And it is this struggle which marks the very character of Hopkins and which caused him to produce some of his best poems.

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