

Theological Significance of the Poetry of GM Hopkins

Smriti Singh is a Lecturer at Darjeeling Government College, in the Department of English.

Abstract

In this short assessment of GM Hopkins attempted by Smriti based especially on his first prominent piece there is a glimpse into the 'God-driven' life of the poet ever on the search for new ways to communicate the divine presence in the world.

Keywords: Ambivalence, Christ, Faith.

A great deal of Victorian intellectual effort was spent in trying to hold together a universe which was exploding. It was an age of conflicting explanations and theories, of scientific and economic confidence and of social and spiritual pessimism. Traditional solutions, and universally acknowledged truths were generally discovered to be wanting, and the resultant philosophical and ideological tensions were evident in the literature of the period.

Religion, however, remained a powerful force in Victorian life and literature. The Church of England was the major religious institution in Victorian England but significant departures from the mainstream were manifested in various movements at the time. The divisions in the Anglican Church were, in a sense, manifestations of the interrogatory tendencies that constituted much of Victorian society. After fissures appeared within the Church of England, it functioned, at one level, as the platform for the augmentation over matters of religion and their relevance in the contemporary social life. These departures prove that the space for theological debate was very much there in Victorian England.

This brings us to a need for explaining the term 'theology', for it will lead to an examination of the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins from the theological perspective. Encyclopaedia Britannica defines theology as a discipline of various thought that is restricted to Christianity but that may be applied to other religions. The themes of theology are God, man, the world, salvation and eschatology (the study of the final events in the history of humankind).

The poetry of Hopkins is theologically significant as his writing, post 1875, was exclusively religious. Hopkins embraced Catholicism and became a Jesuit priest. Victorian despair in verse reaches its climax in the poetry of Hopkins which was largely written in the 1870s but not published until 1918. His friend Robert Bridges was instrumental in the publication of his poems. He is therefore the poet who bridges the centuries, and carries Victorian doubt to the other side of the World War II into modernism. Most of his surviving poems are distinctly God-centered. His is a God

who resolves contradictions as the fountain of all that is and as the Creator one who draws all the strands of creation back to himself. Created nature is in itself immensely precious, for the glory and the wonder of God is implicit in it.

He found a means to convert this tone of nature into an act of praise to a higher order. He set about investing natural phenomenon with attributes of God. This was not merely the pantheism of Wordsworth. It was a concerted attempt to structure his aesthetic with scaffolding borrowed from theology, language and sense experience. The fusion of all was an act of creation mimicking that of God, in the writing of a poem.

In 1875, when his long training as a Jesuit was reaching its end, he broke his self-imposed silence with 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', a great ode occasioned by the sinking of the ship in a storm of the Deutschland, which had on board five nuns, refugees from religious persecution. This poem questioned the morality of the death of a group of refugee nuns. He had to come to terms with this death in appalling circumstances. There are instances in the poem that uncover a growing ambivalence in his relationship to God and underscore the emergence of his true muse, Jesus.

The reference of this poem is its depiction of Hopkins's relationship to God. There is a metaphor of struggle, mastery and a blissful defeat in the first stanza. God is approached as 'Thou mastering me', 'Thy terror', 'The frown of his face'. The poet's submission is complete:

"I did say yes. O at lightning and rod.
The success of a heart that the sweep and the hurl
Of the trod. Hard down with a horror of light."

Hopkins is malleable in the hands of God, his religion has shaped a master- servant relationship. This poem is a compression of his initiation into the Catholic faith. Here Christ is a symbol of himself – a man suffering in secular society and triumphing-retaining throughout his love for God.

Not out of his bliss
Spring the stress felt
Nor first from heaven (and few know this)
Swings the stroke dealt
Stroke and stress that stars and storms deliver.
That guilt is hushed by, hearts are flushed and melt...

This is a unique rendition of Hopkins' relationship to God and Christ symbolized by the 'stars' and the 'storm'.

The second part of 'The Wreck...', chronicles suffering, death and resurrection. The poem is a symbolic representation and has intimations of both personal and national salvation. It represents Hopkins reaching out of himself to a wider community-at first

that of the threatened nuns and later England and attempting to fuse or integrate all into his vision of a Christian crisis and salvation. 'The Wreck' is also the defining of the dual nature of God. He not only offers salvation, but doles out judgment, which, if one carefully considers the fate of those in the ship, does not connect with an accepted human rationality.

In this poem, Hopkins pursues answers to dilemmas which confronted him as a priest. The opening ten stanzas are concerned with the personal, while the latter section of the poem is occupied with religious and secular members of the wider community. His failure to annul personal doubts is echoed in his failure to rationalize the fate of the nuns and the passengers on-board.

The years following the writing of 'The Wreck...' produced the most celebratory of the poems by Hopkins. A poem defining his relationship to Christ is *The Windhover*, which the poet described as 'the best thing I ever wrote'. It defines both his love of Nature and his love of Christ. The poem is concerned with the apprehension of natural beauty and intimations of the religious basis of beauty.

In between the period January 1885 to August of the same year, in which six of his sonnets were written, he maintains equilibrium of purpose and insight. He has largely dispensed with the devices within his poetry that celebrated God within Nature. There is a direct addressing of God and a continual questioning. The sonnets explore the very depths of the basis of faith and what it is capable of understanding. They were written to integrate or reaffirm the basis of his faith. They represent a series of prayers reflective of the intimacy he has now found necessary to pursue in order to confront his God.

The theological significance of spirituality consists in "what we do with ...the disciplines and habits we choose to live by; whether these are leading to either a greater integration or disintegration within our bodies, minds and souls, and to a greater integration or disintegration in the way we are related to God, to others and the cosmic world..."¹ It would seem right to think that everyone has to have a spirituality and the attainment of the same is indeed a process. For all kinds of reasons, we struggle with the spiritual and those with a Christian background tend to struggle particularly with the ecclesial dimension of spirituality.² Such were the struggles and tensions experienced by the Victorians of the nineteenth century amidst the upheavals brought about by modern science and the evolutionary theories that challenged the Biblical version of creation and the established faith in the orthodox teachings of Christianity.

In conclusion, we can say that the very intricacy of his verse is an attempt to express and record something of the multifariousness of the visible and the aural world. The

1 Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for A Christian Spirituality*, New York, Doubleday, 1999, p. 11.

2 Cfr. *Ibid.*, p. 12-19.

very 'difficulty' and the contortion of his poetry, its intellectual leaps and its violent 'metaphysical' yoking together of images, offer a fusion of divergent insights and impressions. Hopkins found order where other Victorians saw anarchy; he recognized purpose where many began to despair over what they presumed was an increasingly meaningless fragmentation. Even in his dark, streaming, despairing last sonnets, like 'I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day', 'Patience, hard thing!', 'My own heart let me have more pity on', there still remains a conviction that somehow is largely to comprehend a God who comprehends all things.

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