Gerard Manley Hopkins's Poetics of Anxiety and Transience

Gerard Manley Hopkins's Poetics of Anxiety and Transience

By

Mirko Starčević

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

Gerard Manley Hopkins's Poetics of Anxiety and Transience

By Mirko Starčević

This book first published 2023

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-5137-7
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-5137-4

To my father

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Gerard Manley Hopkins lived a curious poetic existence, notwithstanding the fact that his imaginative ideas and meditations, his work, poetic and theological, along with his illuminating epistolary correspondence, lingered in obscurity and were imperceptible to the eyes of his contemporaries. It was a literary life brimming with an enduring imaginative exhilaration which an ordinary or scholarly reader has had the privilege of finding out for himself or herself ever since the first edition of Hopkins's work was shared with the public world in 1918, twenty-nine years after the poet's death. Those whose interest has been piqued by Hopkins and his enigmatically singular work, will, before long, notice that there is hardly an aspect of his life, be it literary or extra-literary, that has not been the subject of a serious scholarly undertaking. One of the knots which has proved to be most persistent and impervious to the demands of a stringent analysis has been the dichotomous nature of Hopkins's poetic and clerical vocations. Even those readings of his work which start off with a premise that the two vocations might after all not be serviceably compatible, oftentimes, end up securely subordinating his poetic output and ambition to his overarching religious impulse and asceticism.

My argument is that Hopkins's aesthetic instincts are, first and foremost, and, therefore, crucially, governed by his preternatural reactiveness to the laws of transience and anxiety. It is important to emphasize that neither anxiety nor transience is continually present in Hopkins's poetical work. Indeed, the language of anxiety which addresses and uncovers the deeper nuances of transience becomes fully developed only in his mature poetic works. This, however, does not signify that, predating his mature period, anxiety and transience figure not in his thought. They do so sporadically in his early verse and theoretically, as a result of his being coached by Walter Pater, during his Oxford days when his poetry is preoccupied with expressing the devotionally and metaphysically charged poetic conceits. On this point, it is likewise essential to stress that while this work foregrounds the *presence* of anxiety and transience in Hopkins's work, I by no means wish to posit that Hopkins's entire opus is marked by ontological deliberations. Rather, my analysis of the poetics of anxiety and transience in Hopkins's work implies both the actual presence of these ontological phenomena in his later poetical work and, contrastively and implicitly, its

absence or intermittent presence in his earlier poetical and theoretical works.

In order to make traceable and visible those instances in Hopkins's poetical work which reflect the fully-developed ontological emanations of transience and anxiety, I shall utilize Martin Heidegger's phenomenologically analytic method of thinking transience and anxiety. In other words, my intention is to use Heidegger's thought not so much to trace the genesis of Hopkins's ontology but to highlight those most refined aspects of it that, as it turns out, come into being within the realm of his mature poetical work, which, incidentally, explains why I shall introduce Heidegger's thought into the work no sooner than in the second part of the book. Heidegger's analytic of Being will, first, be present throughout the larger part of my analysis of Hopkins's post-silence period, and, second, will render visible not merely the presence of Hopkins's fully-developed ontological thought in his poetry but also the manner in which these insights helped him individualize, together with his language of anxiety, his experience of transience and inscapes, and, at the same time, overturn his belated poetic presence.

Since the inextricably interwoven ontological laws of anxiety and transience are immune to the metaphysical desires of the mortals, they inevitably override the seeds of wishful and devotional thinking. Those scholarly works which consider the presence of the flux in Hopkins's work– for instance, Maria Lichtmann's *The Contemplative Work of Gerard Manley Hopkins*–are wont to downgrade the transient facet of Being as a deracinating and, thus, harmful, entity to the underlying foundations and proclivities of Hopkins's thought. My contention, on the other hand, is that Hopkins, while recognizing the undeniable, all-encompassing, and inherent presence of the flux in the substructure of all phenomena, learned to think the transience of Being in a manner beneficial to his visionary rootedness in Being-(t)here. In other words, I argue that the perceptible and less perceptible ripples of transience and anxiety had a positive effect on his poetic development. My goal is also to demonstrate that Hopkins's preoccupations with the shifting form of life and the fashion in which these preoccupations were correlated with the growth of his poetical *daemon*, the thinking of poetic belatedness, and, the stream of religious thought. To meet my objectives, no less than a consideration of all the periods of Hopkins's life during which he composed poetry will be required. Thus, I will commence with the discussion of the pre-Oxford poetry, proceed with his time at Oxford, and, then, turn my attention to the last two remaining decades of his life.

I shall preface my discussion with a broader and very necessary historical overview of the time preceding Hopkins's life, the delineation of

which will show that the poet was born into a very particular nomenclature of literary, religious, and aesthetic circumstances. While Hopkins was no doubt a highly religious individual, one whose conscious allegiances reposed with the Roman Catholic strands of thought, his literary and imaginative ambition, awash with anomaly and tropical ambiguity tussling and tasseling with God, drifted, as he was growing older, towards the sphere of thought that had more in common with Romanticism and the displaced forms of Protestantism. Understanding the historical background will, hence, serve to underscore the complexity of his own visionary dialectics.

To set me on the path, I shall, in the first chapter, analyze Hopkins's very early encounter with the fluxing mutability of existence. The two most elaborate poems of that period, "Il Mystico" and, in particular, "A Vision of the Mermaids," will constitute the marrow of the opening chapter. The purpose of analyzing these two poems will be to pinpoint the poet's still rather naïve, unsophisticated, and, nevertheless, presciently present, attunement to the transient nature of everything that is. It was a time when the unsettling whispers of anxiety were still fairly unappreciable to Hopkins.

In the second chapter, I shall discuss Hopkins's arrival at Oxford, where he met with the miasmic and glowing ideational presence of John Henry Newman. My aim will be to demonstrate that while Newman influenced greatly the devotional facets of his life, there was no such harmony of thought to be found as regards their literary perceptions. In fact, with the passage of time, their differences would only become more and more cognizable. The unsmooth pathways of their relationship contributed to Hopkins's charging forth with an intricate theory of the tenets of the language of inspiration, whose demands he was not yet able to meet as will be confirmed by the reading of the Oxford poems in the ensuing chapter.

I will, in the third chapter, centre the focus of attention on the verse Hopkins produced during his time at Oxford. In contrast with the work he composed during the pre- and post-Oxford period, the Oxford poems are permeated with the sleights of devotional sacramentalism ("Barnfloor and Winepress," "New Readings," "He hath abolished the old drouth," and "The Half-way House") and ascetic forbearance ("The Habit of Perfection," "Heaven-Haven," "My prayers must meet a brazen heaven," "The earth and heaven," and "Nondum"). The Oxford period represents, from a poetic standpoint, a time during which Hopkins was, in comparison with his early and later days, far less in communion with his ruminations on transience. However, as the fourth chapter will establish, he was not completely torn from these ruminations. While at Oxford, Hopkins came across Walter Pater, a controversial, Epicurean, and Romantically-predisposed figure, whose ideas can, retrospectively, be adjudged to have been highly deserving

of Hopkins's re-acquaintance with the strange nature of transience. One of the more telling signs that Hopkins could not easily rid himself of thinking about the prevalent flux is that he was able to overcome his initial somewhat hostile disposition towards Pater. It was also because Hopkins and Pater shared a common thread of interest in John Ruskin's theory of art which made it possible for the former to bridge the gap separating him from the latter.

Hopkins spent more than half a dozen years, following his undergraduate days at Oxford, in poetic and tremoring silence. Furbished by the insights which his having been mentored by Walter Pater afforded him, Hopkins's mind vibrated with excitement for all things that are. In 1872, in the midmost throes of his poetic silence, Hopkins came across the works of Duns Scotus, whose concept of *haecceity* overwhelmed him, ascertaining him in his meditations on the notions of *inscape* and *instress* that he had been pondering for years past. Even though several more years would have to pass before Hopkins's return to writing poetry, the hiatus in his unbridled musings on the basic tenor of transience was, finally, discontinued. The regained excitement, owing to his discovery of Duns Scotus, will be the subject of the fifth chapter. Herein I shall examine Hopkins's misreading of Scotus's *univocatio entis* and *haecceity*, in particular the manner in which they impacted his outlook on the nature of Being. Inasmuch as the Scotian perspective embellished the lineaments of his aesthetic theory, Hopkins, more so than Scotus, underlined the essential finiteness of the worldly phenomena–that is to say, their vulnerability, finitude–and one's individual experience of the individualizing temporal limitedness. To better the understanding of Hopkins's non-linear and pre-categorical reading of Scotus's *haecceity* and *univocatio entis*, I shall, at this stage, introduce the thought of Martin Heidegger, who studied Scotus's work in his younger days, and whose reading of the Subtle Doctor can illuminate the nuanced study of Scotus performed by Hopkins.

In his opus, primarily in *Being and Time*, Heidegger develops a mosaic of thought dealing with and delving into the ontological categories of Being, such as anxiety, death, and guilt, all of which, slowly but surely, found their way into Hopkins's post-silence verse. Doubtlessly, as a result of the renewed excitement and attunement to the vicissitudes of life enhanced by the Paterian and Scotian insights, anxiety, especially, as the previously hinted at yet unexplored possibility to *instress* the individual self, started to figure heavily in the poetic landscapes imagined by Hopkins. His awareness and willingness to confront these basic ontological facts of Being-(t)here in the God-forsaken world distanced his verse ever further away from the metaphysical strain of meditations, a pathway which the introduction of

Heidegger's perspective will help make more apparent. Another reason as to why I have chosen to read Hopkins's later verse in conjunction with, not reduction to, Heidegger's perspective is due to the fact the language of poetry is very rarely answerable to the non-poetic prosaicness of register. In other words, the phenomenological and highly poetical language of Martin Heidegger will alleviate the task of thinking Hopkins's mature poetry in the context of a non-poetic discourse without departing too far from the stringent demands of the former.

In the sixth chapter, I will undertake an examination of the sonnets ("God's Grandeur," "The Starlight Night," "Spring," "The Sea and the Skylark," "The Lantern out of Doors") which Hopkins wrote during his study of theology at St. Beuno College. As Hopkins became more stringently attuned to the feeling of having been forsaken by God, he, in his sonnets, intensified his exploration of anxiety, and its attributive outcroppings like homesickness, solitude, death, and *in-betweenness*. Although Hopkins had lost the metaphysical assurance of the Oxford period and some of the naïve self-assurance which dwells in his early poems, he gained a new kind, a poetic self-assurance, whose existence will be uncovered in the study of his courage to be anxious and, moreover, in his formed and re-formed experience of the transience of Being-(t)here.

In the seventh chapter, I will correlate the ideas of beauty and death. My goal is, first, to demarcate an authentic disposition from an inauthentic disposition towards death and Dasein's temporal finitude, and, second, to investigate a dialectical interdependence of death and beauty which Hopkins most tenuously anatomized in the poem "The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo." In the last part of the chapter, I will enlarge on Hopkins's understanding of death by incorporating into the discussion the notions of *kenosis* and the *parousia* which, in a singular way, enabled him to instress his poetically antithetical relationship with Christ, and, furthermore, to reach the desacralizing depths of the poetic self.

In the eighth and final chapter, I shall look at the poems Hopkins composed in Dublin and introduce Heidegger's concept of guilt in order to shed some light on the idea of poetic belatedness, which Hopkins, with the expanding sense of having been by God forsaken, found growing in relevance. As is the case with death and solitude, guilt cannot be properly considered without taking into account its boundedness to anxiety and temporal finitude. Desolation is what Hopkins's time in Dublin is normally associated with. I, on the other hand, wish to posit that while Hopkins may have seen the happiness of Being-(t)here crumbling down, his poetry asserts itself forcefully against the metaphysical conceits of his heart. Notwithstanding the prevalently darksome landscapes of the Desolation

Sonnets, therein also abides a fearless impulse to confront the elemental uncertainties which are constitutive of Being-in-the-world. That Hopkins's inspiration grew in proportion to his feeling more desolate and alone bespeaks the realty of his having found the true haven of joy in his poetry. The poem "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection," in which Hopkins submits his poetic reticence to the purifying fangs of a Heraclitean fire, operates as the bridge between the Desolation Sonnets and the poems, like "Epithalamion," "The shepherd's brow," and "To R. B.," wherein he–imaginatively reinforced by the rising spectres of ontological uncertainty without surrendering to its ontic manifestations, be it melancholy or depression–gleans, beyond the Parnassian language, the opulent light of the language of inspiration.

Beyond these formal delineations of the book, the discussion will uncover the, hitherto, immodestly under-researched ontological features of Hopkins's poetry and theories–together with the indebtedness of his work to Romanticism, particularly its over-prioritization of strangeness over estrangement and its creative adoption of those elements of Romantic, and even Protestant, poetics which correspond to the underlying themes of poetic belatedness and transience, such as the vanquishment of imaginative secondariness, the self's agonistic inter-relationship with the Other, along with the instantiation of his poetic will. These imaginative iterations, inhering predominantly in Hopkins's late work, will become more cognizable with the unveiling of the ontological principles, which I shall, in the second part of the book, analyze along the lines of Heidegger's phenomenological method. Underlying the reason as to why these principles inundated the landscape of Hopkins's thought lies with his idiosyncratic relationship with God, whose absence he transformed into an agency for acquiring poetical priority. In lieu of succumbing to the moralizing and self-flagellating instincts impelling him to make the poems an explicit object of the worship of Christ, Hopkins became, with the passage of time, more intransigent in his willingness and aesthetic self-possession to savour anxiety and transience, and not the comforts of metaphysics, poetically as the main enlargements of life.

List of Abbreviations

CWIII	2015. *The Collected Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins: Diaries, Journals, & Notebooks*. Edited by Lesley Higgins, Oxford University Press. 8 vols.
CWIV	2006. *The Collected Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins: Oxford Essays and Notes*. Edited by Lesley Higgins, Oxford University Press. 8 vols.
LI	1955b. *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*. Edited by Claude Colleer Abbott, Oxford University Press.
LII	1955a. *The Correspondence of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Richard Watson Dixon*. Edited by Claude Colleer Abbott, Oxford University Press.
LIII	1956. *Further Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins: Including his Correspondence with Coventry Patmore*. Edited by Claude Colleer Abbott, Oxford University Press.
J	1959a. *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. Edited by Humphry House and Graham Storey, Oxford University Press.
S	1959b. *The Sermons and Devotional Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. Edited by Christopher Devlin, Oxford University Press.

CHAPTER 1

HOPKINS'S EARLY REFLECTIONS UPON THE NATURE OF MUTABILITY

Inevitability was the primary regulating principle of the universal laws of existence as Gerard Manley Hopkins perceived them, presiding over the more personal and broader artifacts of natural life. The condition of being appears immovable yet it always follows the patterns of reduction or evolvement into and out of its presently perceived form. The irregular and less regular lines of a tree branch, the crenulated or lobed contours of a leaf, the crepuscular or forenoon delineation of a cloud, in unison succumb to the governing laws of disintegration and renewal. In human beings, the heirs of free will, inevitability is not predestined; rather it is the result of affective and elective modulations of one's choice. Hopkins envisioned, as a devout Christian, the cobweb of choice to be at all times in the service of the overriding goal to attain and preserve, as far as that was possible, the heart of goodness. The events marking Hopkins's life, whose poignant testimonies one continually finds painted in his word, provided many a cataclysmic challenge that a mind less stoic or morally fervent than Hopkins's would with no second thought aim to sidestep. One of the early trials disclosed itself when his heart could no longer resist the calls beckoning him towards the Roman Catholic Church. The process leading up to conversion may have brought up unrest frequently engendered by the pangs of personal doubt in the righteousness of the path he chose to pursue. The ripples of fluster were at first the cause of much pain and with time of numbness, engulfing him in the temporary twinges of premonitory dread which would gradually diminish in the face of the grander and otherworldly purpose to which Hopkins's mind was fixed on. It goes without saying that Hopkins was aware that the otherworldly bliss was preconditioned by the proper service to goodness in this world. But how can he be a deserving servant to God if constantly pulled back by the temporal forces undermining his faith. The world he knew and the figures inhabiting that world would irrevocably shift, which was demonstrated by the oftentimes derisive and threatening supplications from his parents, peers, and professors, not to undertake what

in their mind amounted to an act of impetuous and traitorous obstinacy. His resolve remained lofty, never wavering, for it stood on the long-forming pillars of faith, obviating the need to subject his decision to undergo the endless journey of justification. Conscious that the act of conversion with the promise of fruits eternal would be swift, Hopkins felt its inevitability swarming and pulsating for a long time and presently could not, merely to grant others the quietude of mind, contradict that which infused life with meaning.

His epistolary correspondence reveals, in immaculate colours, the firm backbone of his earnestness. To John Henry Newman–whose conversion to Roman-Catholicism in 1845 impelled a bevy of students not less than two decades after he had left Oxford to emulate the great scholar–Hopkins, who regarded this eminent figure with pious awe, unabashedly confessed that his parents' response to his intent to convert had been so "terrible" that he "cannot read them twice,"[1] asking Newman "whether [he] shall at all costs be received at once" (1956, 29). Hopkins was afforded the privilege of enjoying the sweetness of companionship during the formal stages of the journey, for his Balliol friends William Garret and William Addis, along with a Trinity student Alexander Wood, had converted and been received into the Roman Catholic Church briefly before his own reception into it. That his was not a completely solitary spiritual passage may have placated what could easily have proven even more tasking a journey. In contrast to the consoling aftereffects of his intentions, the entreaties for Hopkins to reconsider his decision were twice as piercing in vehemence. Henry Parry Liddon, Hopkins's first confessor and a ritualist descendant of the Oxford Movement, called upon Hopkins not to take "the final" and, more gravely, the "fatal leap," imploring him to rethink "the moral bearings of the line [he] has taken" (1956, 402). Hopkins hastily dispelled the notion of irrationality and impetuosity abiding within his judgement by affirming that the conversion may appear "sudden, though the conviction … was not sudden but old and always present" (1956, 31-32).

[1] Gerard's father Manley Hopkins published, in 1887, *The Cardinal Numbers*, a book in which Gerard's co-authoring contributions are far from sparse. Thus, in the prefatory section of the book one comes across, among other comments, Manley Hopkins's expression of gratitude to his "near relative the Rev. G. M. Hopkins, of University College, Dublin" (qtd. in White, 1992, 6). As time has the preternatural ability to belie the intensity of pain, the ice-stricken months and years following the conversion had steadily warmed Hopkins's relationship with his family. Still, the phrase *near relative* that Manley Hopkins employs in reference to his son continues to reverberate resoundingly with the incurable distance that Hopkins's actions had, evidently, provoked.

Shortly after his graduation in June 1867, Hopkins took up a post as a teacher at the Oratory School in Birmingham and before long found the life of a schoolmaster intellectually torpid and burdensome. The prospect of having to tame the flamboyant dispositions of the schoolboys was frightening. Hopkins's time at Oxford was impregnated with stability, which was now close to keeling over and urgently needed to be restored as he found time and space associated with the fruits of private meditation to be fast shrinking. The ever more seductive magnetism of *askesis*, free from the circumstances interfering with his devotional hopefulness, slowly made Hopkins notice that the sole way forward for him was to take holy orders. A man of uncompromising character that he was, he quickly arrived at the realization that an ascetic approach to life would have far-reaching consequences. One of the most soul-shattering decisions he was forced to come to terms with was that his relationship with poetry would have to be recast significantly. As a priest, he would not be permitted to "write so freely as [he] shd. have liked" (1956, 231). This self-immolating realization was so overpowering that any hopes of being able to maintain the current mode of writing stood overshadowed by the spiritual engagements yet awaiting him. The only course of action he deemed appropriate at that time was to destroy whatever he had so far committed to paper. The gelid forbearance of one's conviction to immure thoughts feverishly sought after and words conveying the thoughts sweetly woven on tusk-coloured paper as an offering to the binding fangs of fire can never be underestimated. On 11 May 1868, Hopkins scribbles a terse note in his *Journal*: "The Slaughter of the Innocents" (1959a, 165). Submitting what so clearly animated his spirit to the morgue of history must have sheared any desire, dwelling within him, to lend the event itself the privilege of protracted elaboration. He was gravitating towards joining the Jesuit order, one he deemed endowed with unabating discipline and noble solemnity; and a Jesuit, insofar as he then saw it, must beware of the traps of poetry, for poetry, as he states months later in a letter to Robert Bridges, would "interfere with [his] state and vocation" (1955b, 24). As fortune would have it, not all but most of the poems incinerated survived as he had previously shared them with his friends in correspondence, but the friable lashing of the burning paper his senses had been exposed to at that moment, along with his mind emptying out the remnants of ambition to pursue the path of verse, must have no doubt been dispiriting. A little more than a week prior to the destruction of the poems, on 2 May, Hopkins notes that "this day, I think, I resolved" (164). It is generally agreed upon that this earlier note thematically precedes the one penned on 11 May. He resolved that should he finally opt to enrobe himself in priestly garb, the poems must burn. If the surmise about the

interconnection of the two journal notes is correct, and the biographical context makes it safe to assume so, then the latent tone symptomatic of a loitering mind aside, the burning will that drove Hopkins to ultimately become a Jesuit priest overrode whatever hesitancy overwhelmed him at the doorway of no egress.

In numerous studies on Hopkins's life and work, the conversion and the subsequent resolution to join the Jesuits are regarded, and rightfully so, as one of the pivotal moments of his intellectual maturing, prefiguring the events of his later years which may, in comparison, seem less momentous in their outward appearance, while in fact they were equally clamorous and inwardly tumultuous. The hardships oftentimes tempted Hopkins to bend his knee, nay, plummet to his knees and clumber under the immensity of unvaried answerabilities that constantly kept sending tremors of despair against the wall of the vows he had previously taken and which, at all times, regardless of the inclement conditions of life, he remained devotedly intent on upholding. The conversion and its broader background do indeed play an invaluable role in understanding a mind teeming with dogmatic excitement and, beyond that, life which, instinct with charm and affliction alike, winds up, against the rising streams of devotional reticence, spilling endlessly over into the fount of literary ideas. The inevitability of religious conversion was met with an equally commanding yet religiously less exigent force of poetic inevitability that would up-set the meticulous order of his writing. It is my immediate task to unearth the framework of both these forces, to uncover whence the overflowing of varying impulses came to be, and finally to underscore that in meditating upon Hopkins's commitment both to the magnetism of poetic discipline and to the mystery of Christ's life and will, I do not seek to establish only an immutable point of separation between the two vocations, but rather to gauge due to their entwined nature the degree to which Hopkins's rigorous devotional beliefs might have enhanced or hampered the propulsions of the aesthetic pronouncements of his poetry.

Budding discursive innovations concocted by Hopkins were bold, ample, and vigorous, so much so that the self-willed escape from poetry summoned the winds of ontological emptiness that would gradually descend upon him. Whereas the pre-silence and post-silence poetry demonstrate the profound reversals and re-construals in the poet, the vaulting leap from his early poetry to the later and more tangibly anxious and self-instantiating poetics is oftentimes left unnoticed. For the proper understanding of the leap and the progression between the individual periods of his life, it is crucial that I begin by examining the manner in which Hopkins, prior to his undergraduate days, groomed the creative compulsions that made him at

first susceptible to the lovable and objectionable incantatory ideas of John Henry Newman and the Romantic and aesthetic ideas of Walter Pater he encountered at Oxford and capable of wrestling with them poetically and *agonistically* thereafter.

***

The poems which Hopkins composed in the pre-Oxford or the very early Oxford days accommodate an occasionally homespun phrase or metaphor. The youthful naïveté at times seems to be floating just beneath the surface, for seldomly–perhaps within the very minute spots of time–can an unfledged artistic apprentice, notwithstanding his or her precociousness, fully appreciate the finer nuances of life. In the early Hopkins such naïveté seems to be intimated, never willingly enunciated, for he swiftly forfeits the overly serene aspect of Nature which lifts away from its non-linear form of presentation, whose encountered projection is singly self-contained. In fact, if anything, it may be firmly believed that naïveté where its presence is felt is utilized by Hopkins consciously in order to serve and introduce irony which produces a scene where otherwise the intuitive and felt slants of meaning coincide but rarely. In "Il Mystico," a poem modelled upon Milton's "Il Penseroso," the narrator roams the foundering cape of the world, creating the impression of falling under the brief spell of artlessly imparting to us a finite foresight of temporal reality:

> Hence sensual gross desires,
> Right offspring of your grimy mother Earth
> My Spirit hath a birth
> Alien from yours as heaven from Nadir fires. (1-4)[2]

The direful image of the land where grace is merely an echo from the far-gone time, nay where grace is unattainable, is counterbalanced by the intoning voice plaintively bemoaning the ruined bliss. Comparably to Ariel, whom Shelley labels the "slave to music" (2) sending "his silent token / Of more than ever can be spoken" ("With a Guitar. To Jane" 11-12), the voice in this poem, despite cropping up as an entity unwedded to that temporal dejection, issues forth in the fashion of having once belonged to this

[2] All of Hopkins's poems which are cited in the work are taken from *Gerard Manley Hopkins, The Major Works: Including all the poems and selected prose*, edited by Catherine Phillips, and reissued in 2009.
In-text citation of all poetry, including Hopkins's poems, will include a poem's title and the line numbers. Additional details can be found in the bibliographical section.

crumbling sphere, once when the rim of this world's horizon was shined upon with warmer hues. Whatever hope is implied by the narrator resides in the interplay of the chimerical colours that "glide aloof / under the cloud-festoonèd room" ("Il Mystico" 65-66). The aloofness is physical, not spiritual. The angelic lark embraces the shared reality, for the heart wholly indifferent would be devoid of capacity to mourn and in that state to express the wish to "drink that ecstasy / Which to pure souls alone may be" (141-142). That ecstasy, incarnated in the voice, is brought to the sinking world as a sacrament, a token of triumph over irremediable loss, a hint of a poet's triumph over his own belatedness. The visible form of a sacrament dances upon the earth to the tune of "the sheep-bells," which like the Sun's streaking embers graze upon the cloudless sky. The bells announce "the deepening intensity / Of the air-blended diadem," (114-115) as the eye descries the "shiny tears and sunlit mirth / mix o'er the not unmovèd earth" (129-130).

The worldly un-worldliness briefly suggested at the beginning of the poem is thus quickly exhumed by the chimeric tones of deep and complex, dark yet multi-coloured and comforting tangles of melancholy and solitude engendered by the human condition of having been forsaken and consigned to isolation. The narrator refrains from spotting life through the lens of solipsistic hues by warding off self-righteousness and struggling to free the notion of strangeness from that of estrangement. The two not inseparable notions the narrator intuits as being tantamount to the intrinsic quality of the mortal's self-taste. The universality of this vision is neither self-serving nor cyclical because the ear is not unmoved. Besides acknowledging the weight of melancholy and solitude, it also intimates a savour of their promise, which hinges on identifying them as the omnipresent flavours of Being-(t)here. This penetrating vision is rapidly fortified in the ensuing poems, for instance, in "A Vision of the Mermaids" or "Spring and Death," wherein Hopkins further elaborates that both strangeness, as a meaning-enhancing attribute of Being-(t)here, and estrangement of the human condition–the taste of which remains singular but can be co-experienced metaphorically–are intrinsic to the human life *per se*. His voice is less an inimical abnegation of the condition and more a bold awareness *in potentia* that the cross of self-taste can be shared, yet only incidentally and never absolutely, an insight which chillingly foreshadows the frozen yet consoling ambience that Hopkins conjures in his mature years. Unlike Byron's Childe Harold–who imbibes the enclosing solitude which he finds mixed with the grounding remorse of the receding past and the strange joy of the yet unvanquished future–Hopkins's pensive wanderer does not yet know intimately how to think the ubiquitous nature of solitude with the foreknowledge that melancholy, in

spite of its pangs, offers, when bolstered by anxiety, the moments of benevolent silence and, then, vision.

Contrary to the popular belief of many critics, Hopkins, early on, approaches those themes continuously knocking at the door of his heart with a fairly in-spired knowledge that language alone can tame itself. To regard his nascent poetic efforts only as a cog in the wheel of his more mature poems is not only fallacious in terms of insouciantly disqualifying the range of his poetic prowess attempting to understand the anatomy of transience, but even more so in failing to perceive the kindred nature of ruminations prior and after an almost seven-year long poetic silence. Paul Mariani, in *A Commentary on the Complete Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, for instance, unabashedly proclaims that Hopkins's reputation as a great poet does not "rest on these [poems]," and that he, as many others, would "without much haggling, trade several pages of his carefully edited apprentice work for one more finished sonnet, say from the Liverpool or Dublin period" (1970, 1). In like manner, critics are wont to adjudge Hopkins's delineative principle of creation in this context to be marginal, sumptuously vacuous, and overshadowed by his indubitable mastery of stanzaic patterns and multifarious metrical forms displayed in the later verse. The form of sentiment in these poems, however, is not in disrepair and does not lag abysmally behind the dexterity he exhibits in following and recreating the more formal patterns of verse. This is demonstrated in "Il Mystico," which encapsulates the vivid resurgence of possibilities for life to present itself.

During the Christmas of 1862, approximately three months after he had composed "Il Mystico," Hopkins wrote a "A Vision of the Mermaids," a poem whose hallucinatory kaleidoscope of colours is grown from the seeds sown in "Il Mystico." The concupiscent and lavishly-enamelled epithets in "A Vision of the Mermaids" plentifully mirror the softly inflamed language Keats was able to summon in "The Eve of St. Agnes" and "Endymion,"[3] both of which Hopkins read and thought very highly of. The fantastically luminous hues shamelessly swoop upon the poet's naked eye, insinuating, at the same time, the impermanent nature of their flare. Underlying the

[3] Hopkins never concealed his admiration for the too-soon-departed poet. His fondness for him, who so steadily displayed the mantle of his poetic genius, was unquestionable. In a letter to Bridges, in which he analyzes the poetry of R. W. Dixon, he praises Dixon's ability to recall Keats-inspired richness: "The imagery, colouring especially, is rich in the extreme, as like Keats as anyone that has been since has succeeded in being," adding also that the real pathos of his imagery is a concoction of "curious weirdness" (1955b, 74), a distinctive trait of the Romantic tradition.

mesmeric display of colours upon the firmament is the flux of Being as the ever-orbiting nature of existence. At the centre of the moving universe, near "a rock– [where] the sea was low– / Which the tides cover in their overflow" (1-2), a solemn onlooker is rowing, his eyes at once revealing and obfuscating to him the limits of the presentable reality. The hazy realness is corroborated by the shuffling punctuation and frequent caesurae which–by mimicking the onlooker's disoriented yet pungent portrayal of the sun's daily trajectory–manipulate the sensory perception of time. The words, while fragrant with the multifarious meanings, are evanescent at best. Caesura here functions as a trope providing a mere moment's respite in the drifting and plunging of the words over their meaning's edge. The brief hiatus generously grants time to reflect, only for that pause to be broken anew by the gravitating pull of the neighbouring signifier. Such is the poem's centrifugal force that neither the narrator nor the reader of the poem can gather force tenuous enough to instill a more focused if not prosaic appraisal of any single event upon the colourful anatomy of the poem.[4] The signified unity of this gnomic mirage lingers dispersed and intangibly amidst the sea-full of the overflowing signifiers. There is a moment–one of the moments which singles itself out–within a poem that seems to rouse the gazer from his actively engaging stupor; it is the entrance of the mermaids upon the scene of his dream–or is it?

> Then, looking on the waters, I was ware
> Of something drifting thro' delighted air,
> –An isle of roses,–and another near;–
> And more, on each hand, thicken, and appear
> In shoals of bloom; as in unpeopled skies,
> Save by two stars, more crowding lights arise,
> And planets bud where'er we turn our mazèd eyes.
> I gazed unhinder'd: Mermaids six or seven. (27-33)

Their entrance is preceded by the consistent change in colour adorning the western sky. The language momently becomes strikingly imposing as the poet musters ravaging imagery to depict the sky "spear'd" and torn asunder by the "spikes of light." The apertures arrayed across the giant vault of atmosphere resemble "open lustrous gashes, crimson-white" (7-8). The wounded day yet refuses to relinquish its radiant glow. The ensanguined skyline casts aside its glowing shade and through its "parting lids" affords

[4] Cf. The pen-and-ink heading (1959a, Plate no. 3) of the mermaids standing knee-deep in water as the gathering clouds, indistinguishable from the coming night, are threateningly soaring across the sky.

the gazer "keen glimpses of the inner firmament" (12). The pendulous rhythm marking the finite span of day grows louder while the flickering light hails "the cliffs and every fret and spire / With garnet wreaths and blooms of rosy-budded fire" (25-26). Evincing terrifying might, the heavenly landscape may seem capricious in denying longer periods of equilibrium, yet the gazer knows that abnegation breeds greater yearning. Light, after all, will reappear, for the source of bliss cannot be properly crowned unless celebrated in communion.

When the gazer's eye is thus transfixed upon the sky-reflecting sea, it is bestirred from the gentle perusing of the spectacle, gazing "unhinder'd" (34) the apparition of six or seven figures from below the surface. The inexact number of the mermaids the eye is able to establish reveals its impotence in trying to fathom the freshly-fabricated wonder. It is a mountainous task, trying to capture the meaning enchained in the minute particulars of the mermaids' embroideries and apparels. The freshly begotten abundance of the colours rebukes the eye's propensity to rely upon an ever-belated mind–while seemingly disregarding its intuitive agency–to decipher the essence of an entity observed. As the eye finally settles, it can begin to appreciate the fine lacery of the mermaids' parti-coloured garb. One carries a "sea-fan," (58) another is garlanded with a "lace of rosy weed," (59) the third wears "a turquoise-gemm'd / Circlet of astral flowerets," (60-61) while others are diademed "with that daintly-delicate fretted fringe of fingers" of Glaucus, a predatory nudibranch, and with the "braids encluster'd / of glassy-clear Aeolis" (69-70).[5]

The moments spent in wonderment that the mermaids stirred into being are dissolved upon the entry of "a Nereid company" (75). Nereids, the gentle-hearted sea-nymphs and daughters of Nereus, are sprightly cavorting all around and about, their water-bedewed wings "flickering with sunny spokes" (77). Plunging "orb'd in rainbow arcs" (78), their appearance inspires lust for more life. The water plashed on every side exuberantly

[5] A description of nudibranchs very closely matching the one Hopkins conjures up in the poem can be found in J. G. Wood's "The Common Objects of the Sea-shore," published in 1856: "The Nudibranchs, although most lovely creatures, are very unsafe inhabitants of an aquarium, in spite of their delicate dainty look" (1858, 26). Several lines above is made reference to *Aeolis* (commonly spelled as *Eolis*), a suborder of Naudibranchia, known for its glassy-clear transparency and to "subside into shapless gelatinous knobs as soon as the waves leave them" (26). Their transparency made them favourite objects of study under the microscope, but as their blood was colourless (a fact which GMH's 'crimson streams' may overlook) dyes were injected to enable the observers to follow the circulating blood-corpuscles.

starts to foam, and born of foam was Aphrodite, as Hesiod in *Theogony* tells us. As much as Nereids recreate the symbols of nativity and enhancement of life, they are withal the augurs of the dying of the light, for as soon as their play is ended, they "thro' crimson-golden floods pass swallow'd into fire" (83). They vanish into the sun's volcanic luster and the scene turns forebodingly boisterous. The mermaids, stricken with the pang of desolation at seeing the Nereids taking off, apprehensively crowd, like "the wrecks in showers" (93), around and on the rock on which rests the gazing man. The mermaids, those stranded keepers of the sea, resigned to their fate "in a half-circle" cast their thoughts towards "the sun; / And a sweet sadness [dwells] over everyone" (117). The solitary man, himself a partaker of that sweet sadness, scans their yearning gaze and finds that "sadness dwells / On Mermaids" (118) always. Home is where they must return, but submerging themselves back to that vast trove of the untold stories they resent. With the light yielding its resplendence, the longings at long last dry and finally drowned, having to meet anew the warden of the "seamen whelm'd in chasms of the mid-main" (120) or to roam, in lightless loneliness, "the dusk depths of the ponderous sea" (122) is a prospect no longer avoidable. The stillness of the air gives way to the mermaids' doleful chants, and "when the sun [has] lapsed to ocean" (136), the wind permeates the atmosphere, lifts the waves which charge at the remaining fragments of light, and the latter having being extinguished, darkness is now complete and the gazer can "see those Mermaids now no more" (144).

The poem has received a wealth of scrutiny, with most of the critical train of thought declaring it to be the poet's ill-fated valediction to or exorcism of the *selving* Muse inhabiting the space of his scene of poetic instruction. For instance, in *Disappearance of God*, J. Hillis Miller suggests that Hopkins, in his early poems, strides to great lengths, and without success in so doing, to "transcend subjectivism" and, moreover, "to escape the prison of Paterian phenomenalism." In contrast, not more than a few lines above, Miller with a greater level of exactitude propounds that it is highly unlikely that Hopkins "learned to see the world in this way exclusively from Pater" (1963, 275). This latter premise then stands in apparent contradiction to the former proposition that Walter Pater, since 1864 a Fellow of Brasenose, exerted authority over Hopkins's mind as early as 1862, a year the poem was composed. It was only two years later, in 1864, when Hopkins first marginally acquainted himself with the contours of Pater's aesthetic worldview and it had taken two additional years for the young poet to meet the renowned Oxonian himself. Miller's claim that discernible solipsism, akin to the one espoused and promulgated by Pater, exists in the poem might not be incorrect only insofar as Pater's influence

on Hopkins is gauged in a revisionary fashion. Accordingly, such an approach would have to take into account and specify the initial and inherently pre-Paterian proclivity of Hopkins to the aesthetic subjectivism *per se*, which thence made the poet and the climate of his creative temperament receptive to and compatible with the tenor of Pater's ideas.

Kumiko Tanabe, in concordance with Miller's contention, proposes that "A Vision of the Mermaids" reveals that Hopkins "could not *evade* Romantic impressionism" (2015, 17). In both these hypotheses is expressed the common theme of Hopkins's supposed inability to *evade* the intrepid *daimon* of the Romantic ethos. At this point, the question arises as to what compels the view that the poem serves as an instrument–an ineffective one–of evading Romanticism. Tanabe buttresses the argument by claiming that the beholder is "still isolated in the end because he cannot recognize the language of the mermaids" (78). Notwithstanding the logical inference of the reasoning here employed, there is no clear indication of the narrator's desire to unravel the mermaid's language that is given utterance mostly in the dyed riddles of the reflecting *chiaroscuros*. If anything at all, denying the primacy of understanding, insofar as understanding denotes the infallibly final conscription of the perceived phenomena, lingers as an underlying theme of Hopkins's enduring poetical opus. Even in his most explicitly devotional poetry, where the flux of Being is willingly forestalled, Hopkins seeks not to understand God's will, but to sense the pitch and see the inscape of the divine mien. His is an ever-fortified adamancy not to subvert the threshold of the disinterested veneration, not to unbalance and pillage the uniqueness of the admired inscape. The pre-condition for the numbingly intense perception of the mermaid's fluctuating tendencies to be evoked is accomplished in isolation. Not being newly-arisen, it is brought more prominently to the fore as a result of the chasm existing between the two entities, for the "cleave of being" (1959b, 158) is ever there, the unmoving force in the ever-moving course of time. The cleave of Being, spiraling upwards, is an asset, not a crippling element, of a creature eager to receive the divine grace, whose attainment is unmistakably predicated on the distinctive and secluded experience of *selfbeing*:

> That taste of myself, of I and me above and in all things, which is more distinctive than the taste of ale or alum, more distinctive than the smell of walnutleaf or camphor, and is incommunicable by any means to another man (as when I was a child I used to ask myself: What it must be to be someone else). Nothing else in nature comes near this unspeakable stress of pitch, distinctiveness, and selving, this selfbeing of my own … [S]earching nature I taste *self* but at one tankard, that of my own being. (1959b, 123)

This passage, found among the notes on St. Ignatius Loyola's *Principium Sive Fundamentum* (First Principle and Foundation), Hopkins wrote on 20 August 1880 during the retreat. It chronologically corresponds to a period in Hopkins's life, by which time his vernal Romantic reveries should have long ago, in line with expectations, been relinquished. The voice here resoundingly, in the high Romantic terms, confirms the poet's refusal to sacrifice the core self, demonstrating the constancy of Hopkins's speculation on the insurmountable isolation of any one *selfhood*. Neither willed nor rebelled against, isolation is countenanced and, in Shelley's terms, seized as "the winged words" ("Epipsychidion" 588) shining across the interstices of Being and lending it meaning. Tanabe's comment, which posits the possibility of an overturned outcome had the gazer not regarded himself as the centre of that dream-like occurrence, overlooks the limited perspective of the narrator, the perspective at all times lurking gingerly at the foreground of the narrative. This primacy of garnering the threads of the all-encompassing vision is allocated to the sun. As the darkness is slowly encroaching upon the scene, the narrator feels his communality with the mermaids expanding, but the final composition of it remains fragmented. His moderately cheerful dejection, he assumes, echoes their monody to the memory of the departing day, without the need to impose his sadness upon them.

Isolation *is*, and whether it constitutes the bane of a poet's life or not is a matter for further thought. What remains certain is that its vitality transcends a matter of personal choice and any attempt to evade it is inevitably otiose. The task of a poet, as Hopkins saw it, is to make sense of the realm of isolation, to not let the song sang in isolation become secondary to the singer singing that song. He was surpassingly deliberate in keeping his distance from the treacherous pitfalls embodied in the plentiful enchantments of the prodigal Self. His goal, adamantine and fundamental, was from the very beginning oriented on shunning the lilt of prideful sloth present in and innate to all the shapes of self-indulgence. To enact the ascetic promotion of self-effacement, he guarded against the transgressive passions by unceasingly prompting back into memory the one principal purpose of any imaginative act, to celebrate Christ, the Word made flesh. Be that as it may, Hopkins knew that not all modes of expressions are commensurate, that some are bound to be found lacking in their poetic vitality to praise the otherwise inimitable divinity. The task of capturing the incipient stimulus of creation may literally be indifferent to the province of the achievable, but the poet is never absolved from tracing the scattered and freckled vestiges, "the quaint moonmarks" (Hopkins, "Henry Purcell" 10), of the fading light. If the entity itself is not mimicable (*mimesis*), it must perforce be created anew or re-forged (*poiesis*), this being its lone patron of permanence, which is a lesson

as old as Plato's *Symposium* and was revisited famously in Sir Philip Sidney's *An Apology for Poetry*. So powerful must the stream of re-imagining that native stimulus of the imaginative cosmos be that the consciousness, working to contain the augmenting hyperbole of Creation, can easily derail a poet bent on serving the creative purpose.

The gloom of the depicted situation, highly volatile and vulnerable to attracting chaos, hovered ponderously over Hopkins's intuitive sensibilities. Seeking the path of uncovering the governable principles of poetry, he took upon himself the task of cleaving his way through the intricately woven webs of poetical theory. Foraging those spheres where ideas are demolished, scrapped into the eternity of oblivion, where ruins are resurrected, where everything is either less than ephemeral or emits the promise of world without end, supplied him with a plenitude of material on which he in earnest expounds upon in his essays and epistolary correspondence with close friends. While the figurations of the formal theory are still opaque in 1862, the groundwork for its more elaborate delineations are already enlarged upon bountifully in the few poems written during that period. The two poems I studied are essential owing to their foreshadowing of what would become the wheelworks of his larger theoretical and imaginative project.

As the subject of Hopkins's poetical theory will be discussed later on, let it for the time being suffice to state that in both poems he labours to accommodate the Romantic theory of Imagination with his own view on the subject, which swerves slightly away from the Romantic approach,[6] but nevertheless retains some principles of that theory. It is, for instance, in "Poetic Diction" (1959a), an essay written in 1868, where he most significantly broaches the subject of Imagination. In the essay, Hopkins swims, with a lot of tact, against the tide of the Romantic concept of Imagination by enthroning Fancy, which the Romantics regarded as evanished Imagination, on the stool of admiration fixed above Imagination. It can on that account be argued that Hopkins viewed Imagination rather than Fancy as being an

[6] The syntagma "the Romantic approach to Imagination" should at all times be used with great care due to the wide-variety of definitions pertaining to the concept of Imagination the Romantics used. Some poets, like Wordsworth or Shelley, were less vehement in the opposition of Imagination and Fancy, allowing for considerable overlapping of the two. But it is Coleridge's analysis of the phenomenon that proves to be the most elaborate and hence most representative of the period and is for this very same reason usually used as the yardstick in the discussions on the phenomena of Romantic Imagination and Fancy. There are undeniable similarities between the way the Romantics and Hopkins approached the subject, yet one must not ignore the differences because they are as telling as are the similarities.

impoverished or complementary relative in regard to its loftier counterpart. Coleridge, on the other hand, regards Fancy as a composite of the unconnected dots which have "no connection natural or moral" and are brought together by "the poet by means of some accidental coincidence" (1835, 167), while Imagination, which he favours, "modifies images, and gives unity to variety" and is hence the "prime Agent of all human Perception, and a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM" (2008, 313).

Although the Coleridgean conception of Imagination covets unity, it is the evidently random constitution and the haphazardly ideated sinews of the Romantic unity which make Hopkins distrustful of it. That is to say, Coleridge quite confidently attaches the all-empowering attribute of creation to the *infinite I AM*, and this Hopkins cannot condone, for it means that the unity arrived at proves the result of a randomly agreed upon law of inception, utterly independent of any extramundane stimuli which might make its rank not only less questionable but desirable. The runaway unity, enmeshed in the unremittingly revisionary processes, presages nothing but the perpetual supremacy of the subject. Hopkins's creative misprision towards the idea of Imagination as the central transmogrifying force integrates imaginative outpouring within the environs conducive to the more sedating attributes of Fancy. Visualizing a balancing ratio, Hopkins finally locates it in Fancy, whose function is, as Sobolev maintains, to mediate between his own intensely subjectifying Imagination and the Mystery of Christ (2011, 317). Engendered by the Oedipal strife, the ephebe drifting from the enclosures of the primal Father figure could end up being consumed by the darkened self should his imaginative prowess fail to match his ambition, by darkness which can be countered only with the most vital of poetic visions, yet even that Hopkins would be very reticent to admit. A poet, Hopkins contends, has to devise a channel of egress to be able to reach out to that distancing Primal Scene. As the curtain of dusk descends, all the acts of creation face the peril of infringing on the all too generous, if temporary, rendering of brilliance. Poets cannot gaze beyond the Sun, and whenever they answer the temptation to do so, they get blinded by the devouring relish of their own spirit.

As both "Il Mystico" and "A Vision of the Mermaids" demonstrate, for Hopkins the abounding principle lies in his vision of parallelisms, which keep the brittle structure of the universe *in rhyme*. Coleridge rather disparagingly writes that the universe moulded by the laws of Fancy would end up in the forceful "fixities and definites" (2008, 313), mirrored in the act of bringing together the widely disparate particulars. The non-poetic bias in Hopkins resented the idea of the law of impermanence governing life, as