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**Religious, philosophical and existential dimension
of Gerard Manley Hopkins' poetry**

*All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.*

(Gerard Manley Hopkins: "Pied Beauty")

Throughout the centuries faith, religion and spirituality have become crucial subjects in various scientific and artistic works, being the inspiration for theologians, philosophers, artists, writers, playwrights and poets. Irrespective of time, place, social-political conditions and cultural differences and boundaries artists have invariably endeavoured to explore the nature of God and to improve their knowledge on the mystery of the universe and the existence of man. In Christian literary tradition, especially in Catholic writings God, man and man's relationship with God constitute dominant themes which are frequently expressed by unique, innovative language.

There is no escaping the fact that in Western literary and artistic world, particularly in the era of religious decline, progressive secularization and a debasement of moral and ethical values Christian writers greatly contribute to the promulgation of faith and ecclesiastical spirit amid their reading public. In Anglo-Saxon literary tradition it is undoubtedly Catholic writers, particularly 18th and 19th century poets, such as Alexander Pope and Gerard Manley Hopkins who, constituting the minority in Anglican society and non-Catholic circles, excelled at expressing their religious ardour and spiritualism. Both the former and the latter, albeit their flair and aptitude, were regarded as controversial, too zealous and, as a result, became overshadowed by their contemporaries.

Due to the linguistic and stylistic complexity of the poems as well as the mysterious arcanae of the personal life, Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889) deserves a special attention, both as an artist and priest. When referring to the poet's life and literary output one may describe them as a streak of agony, religious zeal, spiritual disharmony and opposition. Various critics describe him anti-democrat, being both revolutionary and reactionary, highly individual and eccentric in his poetry and life

(Armstrong, 1993). Born and brought up in the tradition of the High Anglican Church in mid-Victorian period, Hopkins converted to Catholicism, having questioned the authenticity of the English Church during his studying at Oxford University, the period which followed the publication of Newman's *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (1864) (MacKenzie, 1993). Hopkins, who was torn between his Anglican roots, especially the ritualistic fringe of the High Anglican Church he and his family represented and his future vocation as a Jesuit priest, created poetry full of fierce Catholic piety but simultaneously sensual violence. The English poet viewed faith as a source of inspiration and artistic fulfillment yet mingled with fear and internal labyrinth. Thus, it comes as no surprise that he was regarded as the most controversial figure among Victorian poets who received unfavourable reviews from literary critics and dispiriting responses from the audience.

In his works Hopkins underlined the uniqueness of experience and exceptionality of the transitory aspect of everyday experience. His religious beliefs were modeled on the philosophy of Duns Scotus (1265/66 -1308), a mediaeval Franciscan, the author of the doctrine of *Scotticism*, whom he deeply admired, from whom he borrowed the concept of *hacceitas* or "thisness" and the formula of individualism and introspective attitude, and to whom he dedicated his poem "Duns Scotus's Oxford" (1972). Scotus contributed to Hopkins' shaping and developing both the religious and artistic facet of his output as well as he made the English poet look profoundly for the moment of vision, of interior perception into an object's being, as contrary to the perfunctory, confused knowledge with which the majority of people are satisfied (MacKenzie, 1993). Moreover, the English author took inspiration from 17th century metaphysical poets, in particular George Herbert. Similarly to Herbert, Hopkins displayed the intense struggles of a deeply-religious man who had doubts, hesitations and felt himself abandoned by God, endeavouring to release himself from bonds and yet realizing that he is incapable of renouncing God's protection (Sikorska, 2007).

Gerard Manley Hopkins' oeuvre which comprises such prominent poems as "The Wreck of the *Deutschland*" subtitled "to the memory of five Franciscan nuns exiled by the Falk Laws drowned between midnight and morning of Dec.7th, 1875), "God's Grandeur", "The Starlight Night", "Pied Beauty", "Duns Scotus's Oxford" and "Spring and Fall", to name but a few, remain complex, demanding and highly problematic, therefore appealing more to contemporary readers than to the 19th century public accustomed predominantly to didactic, more direct and unambiguous literature. As was mentioned previously, Hopkins, being a profoundly religious poet, remained under the great influence of Metaphysical poetry which was filled with spirituality, mannerism, philosophy and which had elements of sensual violence and intensity of feelings. Using all these features and constituents the artist paid homage to God and strived to comprehend his magnitude and to explore the mystery of creation, nature and its relation with man.

Dualism and contradiction constitute the essence of his poetry and they are reflected in every subject-matter and linguistic pattern. God, a central figure of his

almost every poem, is depicted, on the one hand, as a creator, life-giver and feeder, but, on the other hand, as a severe final judge who reprimands, punishes and takes human life. The above quotations illustrate these oppositions:

*Thou mastering me
 God! Giver of breath and bread;
 World's strand, sway of the sea;
 Lord of living and dead;
 Thou hast bound bones and veins in me, fastened me flesh,
 And after it almost unmade, what with dread,
 Thy doing: and dost thou touch me afresh?
 Over again I feel thy finger and find thee.*
 (quoted in Barańczak, 1981, p. 24)

*Be adorned among men,
 God, three-numbered form;
 Wring thy rebel, dogged in den,
 Man's malice, with wrecking and storm.
 Beyond saying sweet, past telling of tongue,
 Thou art lightning and love, I found it, a winter and warm;
 Father and fondler of heart thou hast wrung;
 Hast thy dark descending and most art merciful then.*
 (ibid, p. 30)

In the first fragment of the poem one can see two facets of the Lord – a peaceful, life-giving versus fiery, severe and life-taking, yet they cannot be classified as merely positive and negative. In Hopkins' writing God is always referred to as the omnipotent, superb spiritual phenomenon and even though he sometimes severely punishes people, he is still the one to be admired and praised, which becomes visible in the second excerpt of the poem.

What unites these two fragments of "The Wreck of the *Deutschland*" as well as other works of the English poet is the dualism and opposition in presenting a central theme as well as linguistic and stylistic complexity. On the one hand, the author depicts God as well as the nature and man, created in his own image, and their relationship, in a highly emotional ecstatic, all the more violent way in order to manifest not only his religious zeal and unshakable faith but also to demonstrate how difficult, painful and even distressing the act of faith and the process of searching for God can be. Hopkins intensifies such a complex perception of religion and attitude to life via his knotty language and style, especially through his intricate metrical system called sprung rhythm which relies on a tangled use of accentuated feet and non-accentuated syllables.

Only thanks to such discordant, irregular rhythm, being his own invention, the artist could thoroughly display the internal chaos of a Christian. This pessimistic and gloomy vision of life and Christian agony is visible in his "Dark Sonnets" written between 1885 and 1886, the most glaring example of which is the afore-mentioned "The Wreck of the *Deutschland*". These works, written at the end of the author's life, perhaps best illustrate a human soul who is desperately searching for Christ and for the religious grace that appears to have vanished from the world (Stephen, 1986). On the other hand, one may notice a harmonious, composed and rational accent in his poems which testifies to the artist's quietening down and his acceptance of the state of affairs:

*Patience, hard thing! the hard thing to pray,
But kid for, patience is! Patience who asks
Wants war, wants wounds; weary his times, his tasks;
To do without, take tosses, and obey.*

.....

*And where is he who more and more distills
Delicious kindness? – he is patient. Patience fills
His crisp combs, and that comes those ways we know.
(ibid, p. 108)*

As was pointed out before, Gerard Manley Hopkins used nature as one of his central themes and he always described it with reference to God. The English poet puts forward the belief that nature, created in Lord's image, is the language God speaks. According to him every creature which is part of the earth has the unique quality or essential "whatness" that he calls inscape. The inscape is the individual 'distinctive' form, the 'oneness' of a natural object which is put into action thanks to instress, the divine energy that both upholds the inscape of all things, determines it and makes it alive to the senses of the observer. In his poetry instress, which is a mystifying illumination or insight into the underlying order and unity of creation (Cuddon 91) is epitomized by God. In Hopkins' most popular works exemplifying his devotional poetry, such as "Pied Beauty", "God's Grandeur" or "The Windhover: to Christ our Lord" the author pays homage to God's act of creation and describes nature in terms of Christ-like qualities:

*I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon,
in his riding
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
Inn his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,
As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl
a gliding*

*Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
 Stirred for a bird – to achieve of, the mastery of the thing!
 Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
 Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
 Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!*
 (ibid, p. 66)

Similarly to “Pied Beauty” and “God’s Grandeur”, this poem, which the author himself considered to be his best work, reflects a harmonious, serene, highly spiritual and sensual side of Hopkins’ output. “The Windhover” (1877) in which the artist created an image of admiration of the strong and ravishing falcon, constitutes the meditation of a poet on miscellaneous elements of the uniqueness and unity of God. Nevertheless, Hopkins often presented two contradictory facets of nature. When set beside the aforementioned tranquil, peaceful and graceful features of God’s creative act, nature is also the source of destruction and agony. Unlike in “The Windhover” or in “Hurray in harvest” (written between 1876-1889) where the landscape seems to speak the voice of God and where its mysticism becomes almost Eucharistic (in the author’s words), in “The Caged Skylark” (written between 1876-1889) Hopkins presented the image of a bird that should be set free but is bound in prison and, in a figurative sense, he compares the eponymous caged skylark to the imprisoned human soul. A destructive and degenerative aspect of nature and humankind are probably most vividly depicted in “I Wake and Feel the Fell of Dark, not Day” (1885) or “No worst”, which are Hopkins’ crisis sonnets full of feelings of bitterness, apprehension and disgust with his physical nature. All the same, the two sides of nature and the existence of a human being, a peaceful and agreeable on the one hand, and a violent, distressing on the other hand, are merged. For instance, in “The Caged Skylark” the image of a bird in captivity which embodies the imprisoned human soul, implicitly carries the conviction that man’s spirit, albeit “flesh-bound”, finally frees itself (Sikorska 2007). In similar vein “That nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection” contains both the elements of dread, bedlam and ferocity on the one hand and consolation and solace on the other hand. As the title implies, Resurrection of Jesus Christ puts an end to the earthly suffering and brings comfort to human souls: “Enough! the Resurrection, a heart’s-clarion! Away grief’s gasping, joyless days, dejection” (quoted in Barańczak, 1981, p. 114).

All things considered, the religious, philosophical and existential dimension of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poetry remains an invaluable contribution to the shape and development of the Christian thought both for theologians and academic critics. These difficult, highly ambitious and ambiguous works, filled with spiritual anxiety, dualism and struggle between reason and sensuality, harmony and violence, happiness and suffering were mostly rejected by the Victorian audience and critics. Hopkins’ “model of the world” (Barańczak 1981), his depiction of the tragism of human existence and the

presentation of two contradictory facets of God seemingly meet more the expectations of contemporary readers and are more appreciated by today's thinkers, philosophers and men of letters.

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