"Terrible Sonnets" and Performative Bodies: Approaching the Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins

Adam A. Ferguson

C-00562780

Thesis Supervisor: Karla Alwes, Ph.D.
Secondary Reader: Emmanuel S. Nelson, Ph.D.
Submission Date: 12 March, 2012

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts (MA) Degree in English at the State University of New York, College at Cortland.
I did say yes
O at lightning and lashed ród;
Thou hearest me, truer than tongue, confess
Thy terror, O Christ, O God;
Thou knowest the walls, altar, and hour and night:
The swoon of a heart that the sweep and the hurl of thee trod
Hard down with a horror of height:
And the midriff astrain with leaning of, laced with fire of stress.
--"The Wreck of the Deutschland," Stanza 2 (1875)

1.0 Introduction: Biographical and Historical Perspectives

The works of Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844 – 1889) serve as one of the clear bridges between "Victorian" poetry, which was perfectly rhymed and metered, and Modernist poetry, which sought to break down the restrictive traditions established in years prior. In fact, his use of "sprung rhythm," cited in the extract above, is one of the most salient ruptures from the past. This thesis explores how Hopkins' use of metaphor and imagery can be used to deploy a specifically queer theoretical reading—particularly given Hopkins' own sexuality, together with his repression of the same.

There are two prevailing schools of Hopkins criticism: the religious school, which examines the poetry from the perspective of the sacramental and the Ignatian; and the secular school, which approaches his poetry from the viewpoint of the homoerotic, if not overtly homosexual. Three distinctions will be drawn in order to disambiguate same-sex attraction: "homosocial," which alludes to an environment wherein women are not present, or are at least marginalized, e.g., the military, a men's prison, or a male monastic order, in the case of Hopkins; "homoerotic," which alludes to the treatment of the (usually) male body as an object of sexual attraction, but without any implications of such being consummated; and "homosexual," which

---

1 "Victorian" is placed in quotes to disambiguate the specific style of writing from the epoch in which it appeared.
2 "Ignatian" refers to the ascetic lifestyle and worldview of the Jesuits (founded by St. Ignatius of Loyola), the order to which Hopkins belonged, and which maintains control over his manuscripts.
makes explicit any sexual relationship between two men. Classifying Hopkins as specifically "homosexual" is problematic, since there is a lack of any substantive evidence that he ever acted on his attractions—the requirement of celibacy may have played a major factor in his call to the Roman Catholic priesthood.

Moreover, the middle to late nineteenth century saw, as Michel Foucault called it, "around and apropos of sex…a veritable discursive explosion" (17); with this growing discourse came the development of identity connected with one's sexuality—the idea of "sexual orientation" is a distinctly Victorian one, with its insistence on classification (and implicit stratification). Prior to the ascent of the "sexologists," e.g., Havelock Ellis, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, and later Sigmund Freud, the issue of sexuality was not bound up with the issue of identity; there was not the confessional mandate (History of Sexuality 34-35) that can be read in such texts as Psychopathia Sexualis. Thus, the discourse of the medical supplants that of the religious as the arbiter of truth, albeit in a more empirical, "testable" manner. Elizabeth Ammons succinctly summarizes this shift with the claim (regarding gender) that, "As organized religion gradually lost its power to dictate and enforce belief, science took over. The new dogma-maker, it pronounced the sexes innately and radically different" (267). As it pertains to homosexuality, Krafft-Ebing offers this analysis:

Gradually, in contact with persons of the same sex, sexual excitation by them is induced. Related ideas are colored with lustful feelings, and awaken corresponding desires. This decidedly degenerate reaction is the beginning of a process of physical and

---

3 Foucault more broadly defined his intellectual project to include history from the Enlightenment and forward; such reached a climax in the nineteenth century, hence his nomenclature of "We Other Victorians."
mental transformation...which is one of the most interesting psychological phenomena that have been observed (250).

What follows is a series of patient narratives, the vast majority of which take on a decidedly confessional tone—not only is the patient the victim of a grave psychological illness, he must also account to the psychiatrist how he is personally responsible for his present condition. The clinician/psychiatrist has become "...the new priest, the new male authority, of the new scientific era" (Ammons 261). To this paradigmatic wit, "Young laborers dressed in trousers of Manchester cloth or English leather, particularly masons, especially excited me. Persons in my own position had hardly any effect on me; but at the sight of one of those strapping fellows of the lower class, I experienced marked sexual excitement" (Krafft-Ebing 251).

The Victorian anxiety with sexuality was inextricably linked with an equally ubiquitous discourse surrounding class—morality was the sole province of the middle class, the bourgeoisie. The aristocracy functioned as a law unto themselves; the very poor were unable to afford the privilege of the social niceties that were de rigueur for those above them. Fascinatingly, the crux of the Oscar Wilde trials (1898) was not so much that he committed the "gross indecency" of which he stood accused, but rather that his purported victims were who would be called "trade" in contemporary parlance. Wilde's greater sin appears to have been the transgression of class lines, not his same-sex encounters. Furthermore, this anxiety surrounding (homo)sexuality seems to have been restricted to males—when Queen Victoria authorized the "Criminal Law Amendment Act" (1885), she is alleged to have remarked that women were incapable of being lesbian, notably because they were not viewed as sexual beings.4 Writing in the wake of Krafft-

---

4 This comment is both apocryphal and ironic, considering that Her Majesty had an intensely intimate marriage with Prince Albert.
Ebing was Magnus Hirschfeld, long-regarded as one of the few sexologists to portray homosexuality in a more clinical and less confessional light: “At all events, it is certain that men and women possessing great intellectual powers and a strong will have failed to change the direction of their sexual impulse. The nature of homosexuality is such that it is most intimately merged with the personality as a whole” (Hirschfeld 232).

These discourses and anxieties were beginning to permeate English culture when Hopkins was born (28 July 1844) in Stratford, which in this case is the suburb of London, not the village in Warwickshire of more dramatic fame. The eldest of several children born to Manley and Kate (Smith) Hopkins, Gerard Manley Hopkins was creative from an early age; his juvenile interests included Gothic architecture and mimicry. While he also had an affinity for drawing and sketching, these were talents that he did not specifically develop; the “artist” in the family was his younger brother, Arthur. Hopkins was, however, conversant with John Ruskin’s text *The Elements of Drawing*. This juvenile interest in imitation may have served as the genesis for both his early poetry and his relationship to the authority figures at the Highgate School (notably the Headmaster, Dr. Dyne). In a letter to a German instructor, Hopkins imitates the elder’s tone and style: “Under the hope that you will not resent this liberty, which arises from a sincere wish to comprehend the great ideas of [Goethe], permit me to conclude, Sir, and to subscribe myself” (White 32).

After a decidedly rocky tenure at Highgate, Hopkins was accepted as an Exhibitioner at Balliol College, Oxford.

It was during his time at Balliol that Hopkins began to solidify his views on religion, poetry, and his relationships with other men. The Victorian Oxford was a decidedly homosocial affair:

---

5 The biographer then quotes Hopkins as saying later, “I do remember that I was a very conceited boy” (32).
The society in which Hopkins was to move during the next four years was almost entirely male and unmarried; the only women to been seen regularly during term were the bed-makers and those in the Balliol kitchen. Oxford tutors [faculty], apart from heads of colleges, were celibate; nearly all were in orders….They lived within their college walls on the same staircases as their students, dined in the college hall, and had few outside ties and interests (White 48).

While at Oxford, Hopkins’ tutors included Walter Pater (who would become a life-long friend), a prominent critic of the era, and friend to several members and defenders of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, including John Ruskin and Algernon Swinburne. Hopkins’ own relationship to Swinburne was, at best, awareness; at worst, it was outright derision. In an 1889 letter to Robert Bridges, he writes that, “I am afraid I am going too far with the poor fellow. Enough now, but his babies make a Herodian of me” (HR 293). When reading Hopkins’ criticism of his contemporaries, one has the sense that he felt himself quite alone in his world, both artistically and intellectually. When his early spiritual mentor Cardinal Newman made a disparaging comparison of Milton’s *Samson Agonistes* with Southey’s *Thalaba*, Hopkins responded with “It is as if you were to compare the Pananthenaic frieze and a teaboard and decide in the teaboard’s favor” (HR 29). He was plagued with bouts of what would now be considered clinical depression and deeply internalized homophobia; but his response was instead to run headlong into the arms of the Church of Rome, initially, and then to the highly restrictive and regimented

---

6 The story also goes that Jowett, one of Hopkins’ tutors at Balliol (and constant foe of the Tractarian powers that be) responded to one of Swinburne’s “poetic” gestures at suicide with “Not on this carpet, Algernon” (White 102).
life of the Society of Jesus. His experiences in community with the Jesuits provided an environment similar to that of Balliol:

Men were expected to live without normal emotional sustenance: ‘love’ was permitted only in the large sense, and there was a morbid fear of ‘special friendships’. A Jesuit seminary was an institutional asylum, sharing characteristics with army barracks and prison [q.v.]. Such a community provided a self-justifying and well-defined corporate structure, but the cost was paid in impersonal routines, habits, and disciplines (White 187).

Hopkins’ life was punctuated by intensely close friendships with men, the first being with Marcus Clarke at the Highgate School (White 29ff.). Such “friendships” were not entirely uncommon during that period; one of the more notable examples is that of Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Arthur Henry Hallam, who is thought to be the muse behind “O Darling Room,” and to whose memory he wrote his lengthy elegiac “In Memoriam A.H.H.”7 As he came closer to his conversion to the Roman Church, Hopkins wrote in his diaries of experiencing attraction to the male body and deeming such worthy of confession (White 113-114); these attractions came to a head when he made the acquaintance of Digby Mackworth Dolben. While Dolben played a rather minor role in Hopkins’ life chronologically (they were acquainted at Oxford for less than six months), Dolben’s influence was to mark the rest of his life and his work. Canon Liddon (as Hopkins’ Anglican confessor) strongly urged the young Classicist to only communicate with

7 There has been some critical work done on the nature of such friendships, most notably and recently by Ellis Hanson at Cornell University.
Dolben via letter, and understanding the potential for his student to fall into a sin of the flesh, likewise urged him not to speak of “dangerous things” (White 115).

Shortly after their correspondence began, and while Hopkins was planning a surreptitious visit at the home of a mutual friend, Dolben mysteriously drowned: “Digby was a good swimmer…. Returning in the same fashion he suddenly sank within a few yards of the bank to which he was swimming” (quoted in White 145). At this point, Hopkins had already converted to Catholicism, but had not yet completed his novitiate or theologate at St. Beuno’s in Wales (where he undertook to learn the Welsh language, which is believed to have had an influence on his approach to prosody in his later poetry). Sadly, Hopkins failed his first theological exam, which prohibited his further advancement in the order beyond that of priest. His parish and teaching record was somewhat erratic after his departure from St. Beuno’s until he was appointed in 1884 (at the behest of Fr. Delany, a disciple of Cardinal Newman) as a Fellow in the Classics at University College, Dublin. This appointment had deep political ramifications (White 357-363), given the relationship between England as a colonial power and the colonized Ireland’s attempts to assert its identity, and a Catholic one at that. Hopkins would hold the post until his death (8 June 1889), the longest tenure he would have in any one particular position.

While at University College, Hopkins descended into yet another deep depression; one letter from 1886 to Canon Dixon states, “Some hindrance happened and the madrigal was not sung. If it had been I could not have heard it, for I was helping to save and damn the studious youth of Ireland” (HR 286). In that same letter to Dixon, Hopkins establishes a view on the nature of women’s writing that could only have come from a completely homosocial environment:
Now this is the artist’s most essential quality, masterly execution: it is a kind of male gift and especially marks off men from women, the begetting one’s thought on paper, on verse, on whatever the matter is; the life must be conveyed into the work and be displayed there, not suggested as having been in the artist’s mind: otherwise the product is one of those hen’s-eggs that are good to eat and look just like live ones but never hatch…” (Correspondences 133).

What is fascinating here is that Hopkins imbues the creative process with the specific language of pro/creation, “the begetting” from which women are somehow excluded by their presumed biological imperative. Another letter to Robert Bridges (later Poet Laureate and the assembler of Hopkins’ first volume of poetry) has Hopkins recovering from “a deep fit of nervous prostration” (HR 322, 1884). This latter was written shortly following his controversial appointment to the faculty, which he described in a letter to Bridges as “an Irish Row” (HR 321); White uses that phrase as a chapter title in his biography of Hopkins.

Robert Bridges is a rather complex figure in the publication history of the poems; he understood immediately that the works needed to be published shortly after the poet’s death in 1889, but it was not until 1918 (some thirty years later) that he edited and published the first authoritative collection. Prior to then, he had urged the family not to cooperate with one Fr. Keating, who would have published the poems, but only on the account of aggrandizing the position of the Catholic Church; the intellectual project was subsumed by the evangelical project. The two men were correspondents throughout Hopkins’ life (Hopkins’ final poem “To R.B.” is addressed as a kind of letter in verse), and Bridges came to see a clearer picture of what would
now be understood as depression and mental illness. This, coupled with the odd rhythms and some of the more psychosexual aspects of Hopkins’ poetry, made for Bridges (who was also Dolben’s cousin) no mean feat in the Edwardian climate which eventually saw the publication of the collection that he would call (perhaps ironically) to A.E. Housman “…one of the queerest in the world, but…full of genius and poetic beauty” (White 465). Until that point, Hopkins was virtually forgotten outside of Jesuit circles; even students at University College, Dublin knew him as “a Jesuit who wrote some verse” (White 459). Acknowledging his own reservations, Bridges included a poem of his own to close the volume:

Our generation already is overpast,
And thy lov’d legacy, Gerard, hath lain
Coy in my home; as once thy heart was fain
Of shelter, when God’s terror held thee fast
In life’s wild wood at Beauty and Sorrow aghast;
Thy sainted sense trammel’d in ghostly pain,
Thy rare ill-broker’d talent in disdain;
Yet love of Christ will win man’s love at last.

Hell wars without; but, dear, the while my hands
Gather’d thy book, I heard, this wintry day,
Thy spirit thank me, in his young delight
Stepping again upon the yellow sands.

Go forth; amidst our chaffinch flock display
Thy plumage of far wonder and heavenward flight! (White 466)

The lines pertaining to the “legacy…coy in my home” and the “sainted sense trammel’d in ghostly pain” are poignantly indicative in their personification of Hopkins’ feelings, and Bridges’ response to them. Hopkins, during his lifetime, was deeply ambivalent about the publication of his poetry as he perceived a conflict between the Jesuit ideal of all things going “ad maiorem Dei gloriam” (to the greater glory of God), and the human desire for recognition (or as Bridges calls it, “man’s love”). Bridges, on the other hand, appears to chastise Hopkins beyond the grave, charging him with holding “Thy rare…talent in disdain.”

2.0 Literature Review: A State of Hopkins Criticism

As indicated in the Introduction, there are two schools of thought that prevail when discussing the poetry and world of Gerard Manley Hopkins: that of the Roman Catholic, and that of “queer theory.” Prior to the ascent of queer theory in the mid to late 1970s (cf. Section 3), the Catholic/Ignatian view was the only lens through which to view the stark and startling images found within the poems and their constructions, i.e., rhythm and versification. It is indeed telling that the vast majority of active Hopkins scholarship is occurring at Jesuit and other Roman Catholic institutions; a recent (if inexhaustive) search of the Ivy League institutions found one specialist at Princeton University. The hallmark of the Ignatian school, then, is the willingness to gloss over or downplay Hopkins’ sexuality in favor of drawing out the teleological and religious metaphors, as in this example by Jeffrey Loomis: “They are thus limited reflections of the divine, as limited as the ‘minor sweetness’ [“Let me be to Thee as the circling bird”] (12) of human romance, which may have inspired Hopkins’s poem sequence ‘The Beginning of the End,’ written the previous May” (57, italics mine). What Loomis chooses not to draw out in this
passage is that “The Beginning of the End” was indeed inspired by human love—the poet’s unconsummated love for Digby Mackworth Dolben. If Hopkins had lived long enough to see the publication of his collected works, he almost certainly would have objected to the poem’s inclusion, it being one of the “dangerous things” against which he was cautioned by Canon Liddon at Balliol (White 115).

Furthermore, even as Loomis draws a connection between the Pre-Raphaelite John Ruskin and Hopkins through the latter’s sketches (based in part on themes laid out in *The Elements of Drawing*), he makes no mention of how Hopkins felt strangely attracted to his own vision of the crucified Christ (White 114) from the same time period; Loomis instead turns to the theological imagery:

The very images of Christ provided by some of these nature scenes do of course at least hint at his sacramental, oblationary presence in “nails of blood” nature, and Hopkins would later be able to utter a more fully positive sacramental response to nature through the 1870s influence of Duns Scotus. Yet there is also evidence that Ruskin, Augustine, Ignatius, and even Scotus gave Hopkins a sense of dualism within his natural theology and that his own sermonic expressions of dualism during the 1880s are not, therefore, sudden returns of a completely extinguished attitude (Loomis 95).

He does, however, make one concession; that, “In the early chapters of her Hopkins biography, Paddy Kitchen exposed material from Hopkins’ papers suggesting that the Oxford student, in his
personal confessional notes, seemed ‘excited by pain and suffering’” (Loomis 59). That
concession falls flat in his exegesis of “Where art thou friend?,” calling it, “the sad uncertainty
resulting from the lack of an immediate blessed vision” (47). In truth, the “sad uncertainty” was
more likely to have found its genesis in the recent (1865) departure of one Digby Dolben, whose
absence may have proved as fruitful a muse as the presence of Shakespeare’s “Fair Youth.” In
reading the Loomis text, one gains the impression that the author is striving against the obvious;
that in the midst of the interpretive shift of the 1980s and 1990s, his intellectual project was to
find a way to continue the cultural erasure of Hopkins’ sexuality—while the index contains
references to figures with whom Hopkins had correspondence, e.g., Bridges and Coventry
Patmore (of “The Angel in the House” fame), and more contemporary critics such as Jacques
Derrida, there is not a single reference in the index (and by extension, in the text) to Digby
Dolben by name. If Dolben’s influence on Hopkins’ poetry was to be seen as encompassing as
the “Spiritual Exercises” (which it was), then such an omission can only be seen as deeply
problematic. Yet, when addressing the question of the ambivalence toward publication, and
occasionally the composition of verse itself, Loomis writes, “Indeed, I do not believe that he ever
at heart suppressed his poetry at all (although he did consider it, along with his specific priestly
activities, less vital than sainthood). The poems of his last years are such intricate artifacts that
they could not result from enforced suppression of energy” (22).

Maria Lichtmann continues this trend of erasure in her analysis of the “contemplative”
nature of the poems; likewise, Dolben gets no mention whatsoever amidst a broad range of
influences. There is a lack of internal awareness in the passage on Poem 67 as she writes:

Also serving the intensity of religious feeling in these poems is the
condensed style of asyndeton. The asyndetic quality of much of
this verse, its lack of connectives, makes it “more austere and pathetic,” as Hopkins told Bridges it would. Image follows image in breathless, spasmodic succession, creating an anvil-like battering and the thumping of an accelerated heartbeat. The almost total lack of connectives only increases the verse’s sense of mystery and leaves the poet defenseless in the face of a seemingly demonic God (Lichtmann 199, italics mine).

While Loomis made half-hearted attempts to allude to the question of Hopkins’ sexuality, Lichtmann’s virtual elision seems curious in the wake of using interpretive language that, when placed in a more (post)modern context, is a complete double entendre. The “breathless, spasmodic succession” and the “anvil-like battering” are sexual metaphors that any theorist would be delighted to adopt. Similarly, the “thumping of an accelerated heartbeat” also unwittingly plays into the imagery of the (male) body that even Hopkins himself was experimenting with, albeit from the perspective of the tortured outsider. What is even more striking is that Lichtmann’s deployment of the term “critical theory” only refers to the elements of poetry, e.g., parallelism (63), asyndeton [“a rhetorical figure which omits the conjunction”: OED] (199), and chiasmus (198). While the umbrella of “critical theory” can be extended to historically include “New” Criticism, the date of publication (1989) should have allowed for a broader understanding of theory as it was being posited at the time. Her reading of the poetry almost seems to carry a willful disregard for what was becoming obvious to Hopkins scholars: that God was not the only “demonic” presence in Hopkins’ psyche.\(^8\)

\(^8\) This is not to imply that homosexuality carries the implication of the “demonic” \textit{prima facie}, but rather that Hopkins would have perceived it as such.
Where this kind of interpretation ultimately fails on a number of levels is precisely in its denial of anything beyond the spiritual in Hopkins’ poetry—to a great extent, it furthers the spiritual and evangelical project undertaken by the poet himself; one which Fr. Keating would have attempted to exploit, had not Robert Bridges intervened with the family. Lichtmann posits a far-too positive outcome of such imagery with her comment that “By entering into Christ’s despair [in “Carrion Comfort”], he moves beyond that Despair rejected at the poem’s beginning as only ‘carrion comfort’ into a more healing and self-affirming one that, like Luther’s and Kierkegaard’s, is a gateway to grace” (203). It is only through a strictly Roman Catholic, or perhaps nineteenth-century/Victorian, lens that the kind of self-denial and self-abasement that Hopkins practiced as a matter of course would be considered a “gateway to grace.” The poet’s struggles with his sexuality, and indeed, sexuality in general led him to resort solely to Latin terms in his confessional journals (White 113). This trait was common for the time; Krafft-Ebing would deploy a similar method in Psychopathia Sexualis. As such, Lichtmann’s bifurcated vision of human versus divine mirrors Hopkins’ ultimately destructive (psychologically) approach to his sexuality.

David Anthony Downes contests a number of the subjective readings of Hopkins’ poetry, notably that of Daniel Harris’ Inspirations Unbidden, which will be discussed in the following paragraphs. A 1990 revision of his 1959 text, Downes yet again recasts his subject with the conspicuous absence of any reference to sexuality, or to the existence of Dolben.9 Specifically,

---

9 As a recurrent theme (or lack thereof) throughout Ignatian criticism of Hopkins’ poetry, one is reminded of the old joke about the Rorschach Test: “Why do you keep seeing sex in my inkblots?” “You tell me, you’re the one with all the dirty pictures!”
he reads “Carrion Comfort” and the other “Terrible Sonnets”\(^\text{10}\) as a dialogue between the poet and his “teachers” St. Ignatius and Thomas à Kempis (Downes 114-120). To wit:

This dialogue shows that the so-called “terrible sonnets” which Hopkins wrote during the last years of his life are fully meaningful in the light of Christian asceticism. The sonnets, when juxtaposed with *The Spiritual Exercises* and *The Imitation of Christ* are not just Freudian manifestations of frustration, if indeed they are that at all, but they are the revelations of a spiritual plight the result of which God alone knows…. This is not to say that Hopkins was a mystic or that these are mystical poems. It is to say that they are the poems of a very devout man who suffered periods of intense spiritual desolation similar to those experienced by the saints (Downes 120).

Evident in Downes’ analysis of the “Terrible Sonnets” is the willingness to flirt with the psychosexual implications within the poems, but he moves very swiftly to qualify those implications with the comment “if indeed they are that at all.” He also makes no attempt to explain what may have caused Hopkins’ feelings of “spiritual desolation,” though they were many: estrangement from his family over his Catholic conversion; feelings of abandonment within the confines of colonial Dublin; his struggles over whether to continue writing and/or publishing poetry (*q.v.*); and certainly not least his homosexuality, which Downes coyly terms the “Freudian manifestations of frustration.” In contradistinction to both Hopkins and Downes,

\(^{10}\) For purposes of definition, “Terrible” refers not to the quality of the poetry itself, but rather to the poet’s state of mind and spirit during their composition.
Jacques Derrida writes in *Of Spirit*, “That the soul is a ‘stranger’ does not signify that one must take it to be imprisoned, exiled, tumbled into the terrestrial here below, fallen into a body doomed to the corruption [Verwesen] of what is lacking in Being and truth is not” (87). The “Terrible Sonnets” reflect the overwhelming feeling of imprisonment, exile, and even torture by the Divine in its immanent presence and absence.

*Inspirations Unbidden* (1982) marks the beginning of the transition from a strictly Ignatio-Catholic perspective to more of the semiotic\(^{11}\) and “critical theory” interpretations that have followed to the present time.\(^{12}\) Daniel Harris posits that, “It is not simply because critics have disregarded the manuscript evidence that they have been able to see the mask Hopkins wanted Bridges to see—a triumphant exhibition of God’s grace—rather than the abyss Hopkins saw. Catholic and non-Catholic commentators alike have persistently hesitated to acknowledge the phenomenon of an impeccably devout Jesuit priest who gives witness to God’s brutality…and insinuates through ambiguous syntax that his own disaster is ‘worse’ than that of ‘the lost’…” (11-12). It is at this point of acknowledgement that a more truly (post)modern reading of the poems can commence—that the previous (and in some cases, successive) commentators have intentionally overlooked the idea that *something* beyond Rudolf Otto’s *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*\(^{13}\) could be at play within Hopkins’ choice of words and prosody. While interpreting “Carrion Comfort” specifically, Harris collapses both Hopkins’ sense of “the mask” and his sense of time:

---

\(^{11}\) Sobolev’s (2011, CUA Press) essay offers a fascinating and in-depth reading of Hopkins and his poetry from a semiotic/phenomenological point of view.

\(^{12}\) “Critical theory” is now used in the broad sense lent to it by cultural studies and post-Saussurean methods of hermeneutics, not the narrowly defined territory employed in Lichtmann’s analysis of the poems.

\(^{13}\) “Mystery, at once terrifying and fascinating” (*Das Heilige*). Usually this phrase is applied to the concept of the immanent (numinous) Divine Presence.
The introduction of this present questioning into the reflective and partly remembered analysis of the teleology of suffering, together with the recapitulation of past experience, turns the octave into a metaphor of the speaker’s present condition: the speaker defines his present agony in terms of his revised memory of past grace. By extension, his present is only his past; the hints of future beneficence…have been cancelled” (103).

Herein is the genesis for a more Modern reading of Hopkins’ poetry; as time and subjectivity collapse into one another, the poet/speaker are in the position of grace denied—connected with a necessary suffering and spiritual pain. Evoking a kind of “Victorian Gothic,” Hopkins casts his speaker-self as a Byronic hero, brooding on his spiritual condition and the presumably sexual sin that separates him from the divine presence. Yet this serves as a genesis only, as it does not completely take up the issues of sexuality (once again with the textual absence of Dolben) that will necessarily mark later commentators (both Catholic and non-Catholic). What becomes clear for a reader of the earlier critics, then, is that a “Catholic” reading precludes any kind of “catholic” (universal) reading where a deviation from the exegetical norm is perceived.

Lesley Higgins, in her essay on Hopkins and the body, explores the implications of the “physicality” in Hopkins’ poems, particularly the “Terrible Sonnets” (28). Her argument hinges on “the specifically somatic registers of the Hopkins canon, surveying the complex, gender-encoded ways in which human and divine bodies are incessantly represented and explored, often

---

14 One notable exception to this is John Robinson’s *In Extremity* (1978) which, while it does not make any reference to Dolben, does draw some connection to the psychosexual, most graphically at the end: “…the surge of inspiration at one with the rush of semen; but this vital energy is quickly lost, and the gestation which follows is so protracted that it challenges for pre-eminence the poem’s chief lament, that the bliss of inspiration is rare now” (158). In a deconstructive manner, this “bliss of inspiration” can be understood as *jouissance* (Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*).
in extremis” (11). By locating the poems in such an embodied space, the turn toward Modernism, and perhaps also (Post)modernism becomes further obviated. Within the poetic images of a kind of Pre-Raphaelite preoccupation with Nature can be found a deeper obsession rooted in a stunted sexuality and the repression of what was coming to be understood as homosexuality, despite the juridical, religious, and medical discursive strictures that were taking root in the understanding of the (fe)male body and of gendered sexuality. The “demonic” presence which Lichtmann can only insinuate finds the beginnings of fruition in the gender-criticism of Higgins and her intellectual heirs in Hopkins study. As Higgins argues in the introduction to the essay, “To borrow Hopkins’s metaphor, we can think of the literary body as a historically-specific scaffold upon which diverse social, economic, religious, political, and aesthetic imperatives have been constructed and materially represented” (14). To undertake a Victorian reading in Hopkins’ understanding of God requires precisely this understanding of “the body” both literarily and literally, combined with the idea of the divine as more than guiding presence. Encapsulating this weltanschauung is William James, in The Varieties of Religious Experience:

Such is the human ontological imagination, and such is the convincingness of what it brings to birth. Unpicturable beings are realized, and realized with an intensity almost like that of an hallucination…. A lover has notoriously this sense of the continuous being of his idol, even when his attention is addressed to other matters and he no longer represents her features. He cannot forget her; she uninterruptedly affects him through and through (66).
This mimetic signification of the divine through the body is echoed in Higgins’ essay as she makes the connection through gender criticism: “Body-focused and articulate, Hopkins’ poems participate in—that is, reproduce, reinforce, and reiterate—various Victorian discourses of gender and morality, revealing the ways in which masculine and feminine bodies are themselves social ‘scripts,’ interpreted and allowed to act according to narrow and prescriptive narratives” (15-16). Just as Hopkins himself equated his poetic art with the act of “begetting” (Correspondences 133), Higgins makes reference to the reproductive-mimetic act of discourse within the construction and signification of the moral(ly) gendered body. As an illustration of the broader project, she concludes by positing:

Read individually, several of the “terrible” sonnets offer no “root room” for comfort, physical or spiritual; the reader, like the speaker, can become lost within their “pangs.” Only if we read the Dublin poems as a suite, with “Their Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection” as their apotheosis, can we recover, or re-write, as did their creator, an affirmative relationship between body and spirit. In doing so, we encounter the horrors and wonders of the eschatological [pertaining to “the end-times,” or the end of time] body (28).

What is left for further interpretation, then, is the question of “the eschatological body.” If, indeed, the end of time is represented as physically manifest, how and what does “the body” as such signify?
Julia Saville opens up such space in her text *A Queer Chivalry* (2000), by connecting the concepts of the eschatological body, the homoerotic body, and the body as site of physical and spiritual pain. By locating the Divine presence in the space of “the rod-wielding God the Father” and “the more overtly homoerotic God the Son…the punitive hero of ‘Carrion Comfort’” (154-155), she also places Hopkins’ speaker in an autobiographical, if autoerotic, space. If Kitchen’s biography is to be taken at face value (quoted in Loomis 59), then a particularly queer(ed) reading of the poems (and their creator) is in order. Hopkins’ homosocial and homoerotic manifestation of the male body and male sexuality must inform the (post)modern attempt to re-read, or “recover” (Higgins 28) his poetry through the voice of his speaker. To wit:

In response to “Carrion Comfort,” one might, on the one hand, admire the sleight of hand by which the speaker turns his ascetic abjection into a demonstration of self-mastering transcendence. This seems an admirable transformation of subjugation into enablement. One might, on the other hand, regret Hopkins’ readiness to punish himself at all and wish for a return to the celebrations of rural beauty he performed in the Welsh period [at St. Beuno’s]. In fact, that capacity for joy does persist in the last decade of his life, although in a somewhat troubled form. It is sustained in his eulogies to manly beauty… (Saville 157).

In order to disambiguate the eschatological body from the punished body of the “Terrible Sonnets,” it will be critical to establish the theoretical basis which informs such a reading.

---

15 Hopkins’ correspondence with Coventry Patmore is illuminative with regard to the former’s conservative sexual ideology where women were concerned (cf. Fulweiler’s article in the Fennell volume).
16 One of the chief points of interpretive confusion may arise from the binary of the ascetic (that of self-denial *ad extremis*) and the aesthetic (that of the idea of pure art, embodied ironically by Oscar Wilde).
3.0 Background and Foreground: Elements of Queer Theory

Epistemologically speaking, “Queer” theory has its historical roots in feminist theory; the two were difficult, if not impossible, to disambiguate until the late 1980’s – early 1990’s with the publication of several “anchor texts”: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s Epistemology of the Closet (1990); Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble (1990); Diana Fuss’ Inside/Out (1992); and Michael Warner’s edited volume Fear of a Queer Planet (1993). Even with the 1978 English translation of Michel Foucault’s History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge, Queer theory has been unjustly categorized as “the ugly cousin of feminism.” As critical work in the field has progressed, the notion of “queer theory” has been subsumed under the broad(er) umbrella of “gender criticism,” which encodes with its very nature an intellectual double-edged sword. Such a move allows for greater inclusion of the “T” in LGBT, which in turn permits the reader to deconstruct the concept of essentialized binary gender as a necessary part of the hegemonic and heteronormative culture. Conversely, however, there is a pall cast over specifically queer criticism—issues of gender appear to take precedence over issues of sexuality.

The privileging of binary gender and/or sexuality has ultimately created a hierarchical paradigm within the queer community—individuals who identify as either lesbian or gay are granted a greater amount of discursive validity than those who identify as bisexual or transgendered, in part due to the fact that the latter two violate (in differing ways) the constructed

---

17 While La Volonté de Savoir (“The Will to Knowledge”) was Foucault’s own title for the Gallimard edition, the initial English translation used the title “An Introduction,” which is the title cited in the Bibliography.
18 Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender/Transexual.
19 The culturally enforced idea that the heterosexual paradigm is the standard by which sexual identity should be judged. To wit, Dorothy Parker observed that “Heterosexuality isn’t normal, it’s just common” (Cf. Ferguson’s article on applications of queer theory in the classroom).
gender or sexual norms that pervade contemporary culture.\textsuperscript{20} This hierarchy could easily be denoted as “LG/BT,” with each side representing either the “acceptable” (LG), or “the outlaw” (BT). While the questions may be similar, e.g., “What meanings are inscribed in the gendered body-as-text,” or “How is the gendered body deployed as a discursive entity,” the answers provided by queer theory in contradistinction to “gender criticism” can vary widely. Michael Warner claims in the Introduction to his volume, “Following Marx’s definition of critical theory as ‘the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age,’ we might think of queer theory as the project of elaborating, in ways that cannot be predicted in advance, this question: What do queers want?” (vii). Donald Morton contests this claim in his opening essay for The Material Queer by arguing that, “In other words, today’s queer theory is finally only part of that idealist, bourgeois history currently being written through VR goggles and ‘white glasses’” (30). Riki Anne Wilchins poses Warner’s question more directly in terms of the (trans) body:

\begin{quote}
The subjective experience of gender, as well as being read or experienced by another as gendered, is not a being, but a doing. It is performed anew each time…. Culture’s greatest magic trick is convincing us that reading a body as gendered requires something inside which that body is or has, and which expresses itself through gendered acts. The reading of gender onto bodies is, in itself, a gendered act. The imaginary bodies created by such readings are not the origins of gender but their result (154).
\end{quote}

It is in this discomfiting space between being and doing that a body-centered reading of Hopkins’ poetry begins to emerge. Through the lens of “the gendered body,” the trajectory of Hopkins’ life and career take on a particular poignancy. That he would, over the course of his life, move from traditional Protestant Anglicanism circa the 1850s, to Oxford High Church Tractarianism, to the Roman Catholic Church, and eventually to the ultra-regimented and panoptic\textsuperscript{21} life of the Jesuit community clearly indicates that he had a sense of being an outsider in his own body, gender, and sexuality; moreover, that the appropriate course of action was to mortify such inclinations with over-control and punishment. Looked at another way, Hopkins appears to ally himself subconsciously more with the discourse of the prison than with that of the church:

Similarly, the hold on the body did not entirely disappear in the mid-nineteenth century. Punishment had no doubt ceased to be centred on torture as a technique of pain; it assumed as its principal object loss of wealth or rights. But a punishment like forced labour or even imprisonment—mere loss of liberty—has never functioned without a certain additional element of punishment that certainly concerns the body itself: rationing of food, sexual deprivation, corporal punishment, solitary confinement (\textit{Discipline \\ & Punish} 15-16).

This idea of the gendered/eschatological body can be seen in the “Terrible Sonnets” and in his sermon \textit{Christ our Hero}; Judith Butler’s claim of “intelligible genders” (17) provides a

\textsuperscript{21} From the “panopticon” of Jeremy Bentham, cited in \textit{Discipline \\ &Punish} (195-228); a prison design wherein all cells are centered around a single tower made entirely of windows so that all prisoners could be watched at all times, but no prisoner could be certain if he was being watched at any given moment in time (\textit{q.v.} Section 1; White 187).
generative basis for this reading: “In other words, the spectres of discontinuity and incoherence, themselves thinkable only in relation to existing norms of continuity and coherence, are constantly prohibited and produced by the very laws that seek to establish causal or expressive lines of connection among biological sex, or culturally constituted genders, and the ‘expression’ or ‘effect’ of both in the manifestation of sexual desire through sexual practice” (Butler 17). Hopkins’ description of the body of Christ, perhaps juxtaposed with the metaphorical Eucharistic “Body of Christ,” in Christ Our Hero, borders on that of the blazon despite its historical inaccuracy—if indeed accuracy as such would have been desirable within an active European and colonial intellectual project. By casting the figure of Christ as a “general,” a “conqueror,” and a “statesman” (HR 364), Hopkins situates the goals of evangelism within the boundaries of colonialism. Yet, it is in the description of the body that a clearer image of Hopkins’ own “incoherence” emerges:

There met in Jesus Christ all things that can make man lovely and loveable. In his body he was most beautiful. This is known first by the tradition in the Church…. They tell us that he was moderately tall, well built and slender in frame, his features straight and beautiful, his hair inclining to auburn, parted in the midst, curling and clustering about the ears and neck as the leaves of a filbert [hazelnut], so they speak, upon the nut. He wore also a forked beard and this as well as the locks upon his head were never touched by a razor or shears; neither, his health being perfect, could a hair ever fall to the ground (HR 365, italics mine).
While in the next sentence, Hopkins avers a direct citation for his source, “it is from memory, for I cannot now lay my hand upon it…” (*HR* 365), it is worth mentioning that his description bears a striking resemblance to a photograph of himself taken by George Giberne, presumably when he was at Balliol (Hopkins was not yet attired with the cassock and Roman collar required of the priesthood, but rather, “white tie”). Even when contextualizing his description within Church tradition, Hopkins uses the phrase “In his body he was most beautiful,” connected with the statement that (again), “his features [were] straight and beautiful.” Christ as divine figure of salvation and redemption is thus conflated with Christ in form of the human male body, the locus of Hopkins’ sexual desire—using Butler’s analogy, the “spectres” of his incoherence are reproduced mimetically through the supposed evangelical project of the sermon; the pulpit as a kind of sexual practice manifesting the expression of his sexual desire.

In order to better illustrate the specific connection between *Christ our Hero* and Catholic, particularly Ignatian, mysticism, William James locates the conflict between the classic notion of the intellect and the desire for an immanent (numinous) presence:

The deliciousness of some of these states seems to be beyond anything known in ordinary consciousness. It evidently involves organic sensibilities, for it is spoken of as something too extreme to be borne, and as verging on bodily pain. But it is too subtle and piercing a delight for ordinary words to denote. God’s touches, the wounds of his spear, references to ebriety and to nuptial union have to figure in the phraseology by which it is shadowed forth. Intellect and senses both swoon away in these highest states of ecstasy (327).
For Hopkins, though, the “nuptial union” of which James speaks is one with far darker implications; his relationship with the divine more closely mirrors that of a sado-masochistic one than the common associations attached to marriage on its face. What Hopkins experiences, through his speakers in the poems, is the “something too extreme to be borne…verging on bodily pain” (327), the doing which engenders the “Terrible Sonnets,” or as Norman Mackenzie calls them, “the Sonnets of Desolation” (PW 443).

4.0 Exegesis of the Sonnets and Selected Poems

Poem 57: “Where art thou friend, whom I shall never see” (PW 73, 1865)

Where art thou friend, whom I shall never see,
Conceiving whom I must conceive amiss?
Or sunder’d from my sight in the age that is
Or far-off promise of a time to be;
Thou who canst best accept the certainty
That thou hadst borne proportion in my bliss,
That likest in me either that or this, –
Oh! even for the weakness of the plea
That I have taken to plead with, – if the sound
Of God’s dear pleadings have as yet not moved thee, –
And for those virtues I in thee have found,
Who say that had I known I had approved thee, –
For these, make all the virtues to abound, –
No, but for Christ who foreknew and foreloved thee.

This was the first of two poems (the other being “The Beginning of the End”) that Hopkins did not wish to see published, but Bridges included in the 1918 volume of The Poems. John Pick’s A Hopkins Reader omits both poems for reasons that can easily be conjectured. The speaker opens the poem with the question, “Where art thou friend, whom I shall never see/Conceiving whom I must conceive amiss?” The implication is that the speaker must
“conceive amiss,” or remember his subject incorrectly, given that they can never see each other again (if the reading is inclined toward Digby Dolben); or that the subject is someone whom the speaker has never met, and thus must assume (conceive) any details about the person he “shall never see.” Tangentially, it is fascinating that Hopkins would choose the term “conceive” with regard to his subject and drawing upon the idea of (pro)creation to describe the nameless subject.

The Dolben reading gains a great measure of credibility in lines 3 and following: “Or sunder’d from my sight in the age that is/Or far-off promise of a time to be….” Canon Liddon’s dictum to Hopkins that he never again communicate with his friend would qualify as being “sunder’d” in the sense that the two young men were torn asunder after a brief, but intense period together at Oxford, as when the speaker states, “Thou who canst best accept the certainty/That thou hadst borne proportion in my bliss” (5-6). Whether the bliss in question was more than intellectual is left to the reader’s imagination, but for the speaker (and Hopkins) the emphasis is on the certainty of the subject’s role therein. Lines 7-13 carry in their intended enunciation (with the dash breaks) a kind of adolescent/collegiate breathlessness that would accompany the speaker’s being tongue-tied with the object of his (at least transitory) affections; this comes through in line 7: “That likest in me either that or this…,” or “Who say that had I known I had approved thee…” (12).

The lines that follow have the same pattern of half-thought punctuated by secondary half-thought until the final couplet, which contains the curious deletion in line 16. Such deletion could either imply a lack of knowledge of his subject/object (if it is the “unknown” reading), or a deliberate attempt on Hopkins’ part to obscure the identity of his subject (again, assuming that it is indeed Dolben).
Poem 59 “The Beginning of the End” (PW 74-5, 1865, excerpted)

(a)
My love is lessened and must soon be past.
I never promised such persistency
In its condition. No, the tropic tree
Has not a charter that its sap shall last
Into all seasons, though no Winter cast
The happy leafing. It is so with me:
My love is less, my love is less for thee.
I cease the mourning and the abject fast,
And rise and go about my works again
And, save by darting accidents, forget.
But, ah! if you could understand how then
That less is heavens higher even yet
Than treble-fervent more of other men,
Even your unpassion’d eyelids might be wet.

(c)
You see that I have come to passion’s end;
This means you need not fear the storms, the cries,
That gave you vantage when you would despise:
My bankrupt heart has no more tears to spend.
Else I am well assured I should offend
With fiercer weepings of these desperate eyes
For poor love’s failure than his hopeless rise.
But now I am so tired I soon shall send
Barely a sigh to thought of hopes forgone.
Is this made plain? What have I come across
That here will serve me for comparison?
The sceptic disappointment and the loss
A boy feels when the poet he pores upon
Grows less and less sweet to him, and knows no cause.
These two fragments comprise the bulk of the poem, which may have been intended as a sonnet sequence comparable to *Modern Love* (*PW* 272). While the general subtitle “a neglected lover’s address to his mistress” (*PW* 74) may seem slightly misleading, Mackenzie’s gloss on the MS alludes to the fact that Hopkins would have been reading Meredith’s cycle at the time he was conceptualizing “The Beginning of the End” (272). What is curious about this cycle, however, is its inversion of Meredith—it is the speaker/lover who is wronged by the beloved, not vice-versa as in *Modern Love*. By taking the role of the one who is “mourning” the passing of the relationship (8), Hopkins’ speaker subverts the paradigm of the so-called traditional marriage that was the subject of Meredith’s satire, casting it almost into the realm of dominance and submission.

Sonnet (a) is rife with both sexual imagery and puns, most notably the references to “the tropic tree” (3) and “its sap” (4), with a very clear sense that the speaker’s phallus (“tree”) will not necessarily retain that which renders it fruitful (“its sap”), whether the sap in question is the speaker’s ability, an ejaculatory trope (which also appears in “Carrion Comfort”), or the speaker himself—the term “sap,” meaning “a fool,” entered the language in 1815 (*OED*). There is also a pun on the speaker’s leaving the beloved, “The happy leafing” (6); the following line plays with the idea of whether the beloved has fallen short (“My love is less”), or if it is simply that the speaker’s affections have diminished (“My love is less for thee,” italics mine). Lines 11-14 extend the metaphor in line 7, with the speaker twisting the narrative knife—that his “less is heavens higher even yet” (12) than the “treble-fervent” (triple) “more of other men” (13).

Sonnet (c) contains a great deal less clarity with regard to the beloved; the liminal space “between the lines” opens enough to allow for a reading that implicates Dolben as the absent
muse. “My bankrupt heart” (3) implies either the speaker’s loss of love for the beloved, or that his desire for another man has left his heart (as a metaphor for the psyche) morally bankrupt. The second stanza continues this psychic ambivalence, in that the speaker is “assured I should offend/With fiercer weepings of these desperate eyes” (5-6), together with a bizarre pronoun shift in line 7: “For poor love’s failure than his hopeless rise” (italics mine). Whether “his hopeless rise” is a reference to a failed passion for Dolben on Hopkins’ part is not only left unclear by the speaker, but is further complicated in the third stanza with the final three lines: “The sceptic disappointment and the loss/A boy feels when the poet he pores upon/Grows less and less sweet to him, and knows no cause” (12-14). After Dolben’s departure from Oxford, Hopkins sent him many letters but received very few in response prior to the former’s death in 1867; the poet who “grows less and less sweet” could very easily be the younger man who so thoroughly captured Hopkins’ attention.

_The “Terrible Sonnets” (Selected, precise dating unclear)_

155 “I wake and feel” (PW 181)

I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.
What hours, O what black hours we have spent
This night! what sights you, heart, saw, ways you went!
And more must, in yet longer light’s delay.
With witness I speak this. But where I say
Hours I mean years, mean life. And my lament
Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent
To dearest him that lives alas! away.
I am gall, I am heartburn. God’s most deep decree
Bitter would have me taste: my taste was me;
Bones built in me, flesh filled, blood brimmed the curse.
Selfyeast of spirit (a dull dough) my selfstuff sours. I see
The lost are like this, and their (scourge) loss to be
As I am mine, their sweating selves;
Their sweating selves as I am mine, but worse.

Given that there is no specific “canon” of the Sonnets, Mackenzie proposes that Poem 155 serve as the framework for the rest of the set (PW 443); almost all of the themes represented in the cycle as a whole can be found in this poem as an exemplar. The speaker of the poem, who can be safely presumed to be Hopkins, awakens in line 1 to a sense of pervading psychic darkness; his depression has left him unable to distinguish between night and day. By lines 5-6, the “black hours” (2) have become “years…life,” and in the speaker’s “lament” is encoded an oblique reference to Dolben: “…cries like dead letters sent/To dearest him that lives alas! away” (7-8), referring back to the mandate at Oxford that the two men only communicate by letter.

Perhaps in a more Catholic vein, the line could be read in the sense of unanswered prayers, the “dearest him” being the manifestation of Jesus Christ. The “gall” (9) and “bitter…taste” (10) are clear references to the Passion narrative—the gall that was given to Christ on the cross (St. Matthew 27:34), and the “bitter cup” monologue in the Garden of Gethsemane (St. Matthew 26:39), wherein Jesus prays for the cup to “be taken away,” but ultimately surrenders to “God’s most deep decree” (9). Hopkins continues the Passion and Eucharistic metaphors with “blood” (11) and the “scourge” (13) alluding to the Last Supper and the tortures that Christ endured prior to the Crucifixion; the “dull dough” (12) is most likely the speaker’s acknowledgement that, unlike Christ, he is not capable of undertaking “God’s most deep decree.”
Poem 157 “No worst” (PW 182)

No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief,
More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring.
Comforter, where, where is your comforting?
Mary, mother of us, where is your relief?
My cries heave, herds-long; huddle in a main, a chief-
Woe, world-sorrow; on an âge-old ánvil wince and sing-
Then lull, then leave off. Fury had shrieked ‘No ling-
Ering! Let me be fell: force I must be brief’.
O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne’er hung there. Nor does long our small
Durance deal with that steep or deep. Here! creep,
Wretch, under a comfort serves in a whirlwind: all
Life death does end and each day dies with sleep.

This poem, with its clear allusions to suicide (“Let me be fell: force I must be brief”),
bears a different emotional and typological weight when compared to “I wake and feel.” The
speaker is “pitched past pitch of relief” (1), and his desolation results in the cry “Comforter,
where, where is your comforting?/Mary, mother of us, where is your relief?” (3-4); in a clear
repudiation of the Biblical taunts: “O Death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?”
(I Corinthians 15:55). For Hopkins’ speaker, contemplations of suicide—“the mind…has
mountains; cliffs of fall/Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed” (8-9)—while necessary, ultimately
amount to nothing substantive; and he decides to continue living in the dark hope that the next
day will be better (assuming that it cannot be any worse): “Life death does end and each day dies
with sleep” (14).
Poem 154 “To seem the stranger” (PW 181)

To seem the stranger lies my lot, my life
Among strangers. Father and mother dear,
Brothers and sisters are in Christ not near
And he my peace/my parting, sword, and strife.
England, whose honour O all my heart woos, wife
To my creating thought, would neither hear
Me, were I pleading, plead nor do I: I wēar-
Y of idle a being but by where wars are rife.
I am in Ireland now; now I am at a thïrd
Remove. Not but in all removes I can
Kind love both give and get. Only what word
Wisest my heart breeds dark heaven’s baffling ban
Bars or hell’s spell thwarts. This to hoard unheard,
Heard unhéeded, leaves me a lonely began.

In “To seem the stranger,” Hopkins addresses, on a primary level, the alienations he has experienced in his life thus far as a life “among strangers” (2). Following his conversion to Catholicism, his family became estranged from him; his only “brothers and sisters are in Christ…” (3). Lines 5-8 pertain to the English culture of Protestant to the point of anti-Catholicism, the speaker thinks of his mother country as the “…wife/To my creating thought” (5), in another example of the language of poetry being linked to the language of procreation, birth, and ultimately a feminine foil to his masculine art. The Roman church’s inability to gain a true foothold in England has left the speaker “wēar/Y of idle a being but by where wars are rife” (7-8); the “wars” were not necessarily fought on the battlefield, but rather in the halls of Parliament, the Church of England, and, as he had personally seen, at Balliol College, Oxford.
“I am in Ireland now; now I am at a third/Remove” (9-10) signals both Hopkins’ and the speaker’s further alienation from what he has known and with which he has been close. The quasi-Shakespearean pun on “kin/kind” in lines 11-12 is another reference to his post-conversion disownment: “Not but in all removes I can/Kind love both give and get.” Ultimately, the speaker can only resign himself to attempt to understand “dark heaven’s baffling ban” (or, “baffling heaven’s dark ban”; Mackenzie included both) in silence and solitude.

Poem 159 “Carrion Comfort” (PW 183)

Not, I’ll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee;
Not untwist—slack they may be—these last strands of man
In me ór, most weary, cry I can no more. I can;
Can something, hope, wish day come, not choose not to be.
But ah, but O thou terrible, why wouldst thou rude on me
Thy wring-world right foot rock? lay a lionlimb against me? scan
With darksome devouring eyes my bruised bones? and fan,
O turns of tempest, me heaped there; me frantic to avoid thee and flee?
Why? That my chaff might fly; my grain lie, sheer and clear.
Nay in all that toil, that coil, since (seems) I kissed the rod,
Hand rather, my heart lo! lapped strength, stole joy, would laugh, cheer.
Cheer whom though? The héro whose héaven-handling flung me, fóot tród
Me? or mé that fóught him? O which one? is it éach one? That night, that yéar
Of now done darkness I wretch lay wrestling with (my God!) my God.

“Carrion comfort” stands as a clear denouement of “the sonnets,” through its defiance of the emotional darkness and the intentional willingness to fight and “lay wrestling” with the
divine as both punisher and unrequited lover. The speaker’s defiance is clearly delineated from the first line, he will not “feast on” the carrion comfort of despair, compared to the pangs and loneliness expressed in the previous poems. “Not untwist...these last strands of man” (2) constitutes a clear refusal of suicidal thoughts; he will continue living “slack they may be.” This rejection continues with line 4, “Can something, hope, wish day come, not choose not to be.” Through the speaker, Hopkins questions divine logic, however, by asking God (“O thou terrible”) why he would punish his “wring-world right foot rock” (6), which can be assumed to mean a faithful servant (right foot rock, after Christ’s renaming of Peter/Petrus—“on this rock I shall build my church,” from St. Matthew 16:18) in the world that God has created (wrought), by laying “a lionlimb” against him (in reference to the Book of Daniel), and then eventually abandoning him in Ireland, “frantic to avoid thee and flee” (8).

Lines 9-12 present an otherwise anomalous set of images—Hopkins’ references to chaff and grain have, in point of fact, nothing to do with wheat; the grain that lies “sheer and clear” signifies ejaculation. To further illustrate the point, the speaker alludes to having “kissed the rod/Hand, rather...” (10-11), which can either be interpreted in terms of the phallus and masturbation (in keeping with Hopkins’ confessional journals at Balliol), or in terms of a rod that would be used to beat someone in a sado-masochistic sexual encounter. However, the “lapped strength” (12) would more incline his imagery to the former reading.

The final tercet of the sonnet provides the reader with a fascinating juxtaposition—“The héro whose héaven-handling flúng me” (13)—connects with the idea of “Christ our hero” that Hopkins employs in his 1879 sermon, some five years prior to his arrival in Ireland. Since he was “flung” by Christ in the form of the Jesuit order into exile, the speaker (who can be assumed to be Hopkins) has battled with his feelings of alienation from both the divine presence and “the
hero” whom he found so beautiful in Bedford Leigh. As a final note of hope, he calls the darkness “now done” (15); he is, at least temporarily, finished wrestling with the God he now calls by name, and not “O thou terrible” (5).

5.0 Conclusions

By locating both Gerard Manley Hopkins and his poetry within the constraints of the Victorian epoch, the era of the sexologists, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Society of Jesus, this thesis has clearly demonstrated how his imagery, metaphor, and prosody can open both intertextual and subtextual spaces to expose a deeply conflicted psychosexual subjectivity. The trajectory of poetry from “Where art thou friend” to “Carrion comfort” indicates that his flight into the bosom of Rome in order to hide from the “dangerous things” that captivated his imagination ultimately left him desolate and bereft of both human and (perceived) divine companionship, as one of “We Other Victorians”; the divine “rod” which he kissed only served to reify his subconscious need (if Kitchen is to be taken at her word) for suffering and punishment.
Works Cited


