

George Herbert and Gerard Manly Hopkins: A Comparative Reading of their Religious Experience

Sultana Jahan¹

Abstract

In spite of belonging to different milieu, Gerard Manly Hopkins and George Herbert, two distinguished religious poets, shared an astonishing amount of similarities. They performed the duty of a priest throughout their lives as well. At some point in their priestly life they explored their poetic talent to praise God. Their religious viewpoint was conspicuous upon their poetic life. Their sole purpose was to preach Christianity that was not very successful. Subsequently, they fell into spiritual crisis during their preaching. This article aims at making a parallel between their religious experience shedding light into their spiritual crisis and its nature.

Key Words: *Spiritual Crisis, the Service of God, Sterility*

It is easier to make out the affinity between Hopkins and George Herbert as each performed the duty of a priest and each suffered spiritual crisis. Elaborately speaking, some similar autobiographical elements accelerate this affinity forceful. It is substantiated by the fact that with a view to sacrificing their lives to the service of God, they chose hardship of priestly life and threw out all worldly endeavours. They would write only to appreciate God and express devotion to Christ. Sense of frustration and disillusionment were common in both of them. Their aim of exploring poetic talent was to represent religion rather to seek fame. Throughout their lives they suffered spiritual agony. And the great similarity is that they always managed to resume their faith after awful agony. However, difference lies in the dual aspect of religious experience of Hopkins: on the one hand he felt the presence of divine force in every aspect of nature as he looked outside, on the other he suffers from spiritual agony whereas Herbert in, no way could be called a nature poet

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of English, Northern University Bangladesh, sultanajahan83@yahoo.com

Herbert was the poet of seventeenth century whereas Hopkins belonged to the Victorian England. They had broadly different family background and backdrop. George Herbert was born in 1593. He was ordained an Anglican priest in 1630. Hopkins was born in 1844. Hopkins, an Anglican, converted to Roman Catholicism in 1866. Two years later he entered the Jesuit Order and was ordained in 1877. In spite of their belonging to different era their poetry showed that the point of contact could be established between the two different minds regardless of the barriers of time and place and how they could pulsate with the same force and swing in the same direction. Herbert and Hopkins were distinguished religious poets; each lived in a climate of intellectual fermentation and religious controversy; each suffered a crisis in his life. Similarly, both of them entrusted their work to a friend to be published or destroyed as he choose. They died of a young age and suffered from sickness. Hopkins was influenced by the earlier poet and we find echoes of Herbert's themes in his poems. É

The major theme of Herbert's poetry is love of God in spite of all his resentment and suffering. The poet always looked upon God as the father and addressed him with the most endearing terms. This gave Herbert's poetry a great human appeal. Hopkins was more concerned with God as his maker, mentor, and master. He was aware of the presence of God either as a source of mystical joy or torment. His relationship with God was at a level to which familiar human emotion did not have an easy access.

When feelings of failure and frustration are compounded by a sense of God's absence, a deeper desolation is created, and the soul finds itself listless, apathetic, and melancholy, like one cut off from its Creator and Lord. The reflection of such a condition was recurrent in Herbert's and Hopkins' poetry. Herbert impatiently searched for God; the tone was very intimate as he uttered "my God":

Where is my God? What hidden place
 Conceals thee still?
 What covert dare eclipse thy face?
 Is it thy will?
 O let not that of any thing;
 Let rather brass,
 Or steel, or mountains be thy ring,
 And I will passé. ('The Search')

With God away, the self disintegrated, as he wrote in 'Denial':

When my devotions could not pierce
 Thy silent eares;

Then was my heart broken, as was my verse . . .
My bent thoughts, like a brittle bow,
Did flie asunder . . .
O that thou shouldst give dust a tongue
To erie to thee,
And then not hear it crying! all day long
My heart was in my knee,
But no hearing.

This sense of God's absence was present in both Herbert and Hopkins. A sense of God's absence was one of the first deep notes struck by Hopkins. In December 1865 he wrote in 'Nondum':

We see the glories of the earth
But not the hand that wrought them all:
Night to myriad worlds gives birth,
Yet like a lighted empty hall
Where stands no host at door or hearth
Vacant creation's lamps appeal.
(‘Nondum’)

At this time Hopkins seemed deeply troubled. His trouble was caused by a sense of nihilism: the universal host was absent and there was no hope for comfort and consolation. Hopkins' perception was different from Herbert who considered God his love. He grieved as he lost Him. Hopkins's sense of desolation was multidimensional. Sometimes, he was almost destroyed, not by a sense of God's absence as a friend, but of his terrible and overwhelming presence as absolute being, unapproachable but all demanding. In this mode God was apprehended as transcendent, over-against his creature, with which his relations were those of violent domination. Similar ideas were expressed in the following lines of 'The Wreck of the Deutschland':

The frown of his face
Before me, the hurtle of hell
Behind, where, where was a, where was a place?

This sense of desolation and feeling of apprehension instigated them to justify the ways of God. Hopkins directly questioned God and suffered more acutely this spiritual disconnection. In Hopkins this crisis was so tormenting that it represented poet's cruel revenge on the priest. The crisis turned to an utter barrenness in the soul, and a gruesome doubt and bewilderment at God's response to a man's total and unconditional devotion. Herbert also experienced spiritual conflict in the course of his priestly life. In some of his poems he unfolded his dissatisfaction and distress. This dissatisfaction often led him to questioning the ways of God. Hopkins's 'No Worst, There Is None' and Herbert's 'Collar' expressed almost similar view.

The poem 'Collar' contained Herbert's spiritual conflict caused by his impatience with the restraint of priestly life. He could no longer tolerate the process of self-denial. The poet's resentment and craving for freedom were reflected in the following lines:

I struck the board and cried: No more
I will abroad
What? Shall I ever sigh and pine (111)

Here he did no longer continue to be under the state of subordination. At this point his life seemed to have been blasted and wasted. Feeling of discomfort and discontent caused by self-denial instigated him to rebel against God. Like Herbert, Hopkins being dissatisfied with Catholic preaching directly questioned God regarding his discontent:

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 age-old anvil wince and sing-
(No Worst, There Is None)

Hopkins here seemed to fall into existentialist crisis as he contemplated on the meaninglessness of his all endeavor as a priest and his existence in the world. In case of Herbert problems were stated uncomplicated. He was in dilemma whether he continued his priesthood or he became self-indulgent. Whereas Herbert was too much obsessed with his dilemma and despair, Hopkins was contemplating upon the meaningless condition of the humanity in general. The "chief woe" in which his cries "huddle" was "world-sorrow." And in his deep compassion for others Hopkins suffered a frustrating inability to understand God's ways. Herbert, like Hopkins did not go to the extent of questioning the ways of God, he expressed his discontent regarding sacrifice of worldly indulgence:

All wasted?
Not so, my heart: but there is fruit,
And thou hast hands ('Collar')

At this point self-renunciation seemed to him fruitless that wasted his life. However, throwing away all restraints, he resolved to be pleasure-seeking in worldly affairs. When his self-indulgence reached the peak, he returned to an appealing surrender as he heard the calling of God from innermost recess of his heart: 'Me thought I heard one calling, Child! (Collar, 111)

To Hopkins, spiritual dilemma was much more complicated. It was no doubt that self-denial and dissatisfaction regarding vocation caused conflict. When lack of justification was added to his crisis, conflict became all-encompassing. The poet was meditating upon the landscape of mind full of impenetrable mystery and was coming to the conclusion that no man could tolerate such condition for an infinite time. But the poem ended with some understanding. The poet was visited with pain in order that his impurities may have been purged away. Thus this poem gave a heart rending voice that exerts agony unrelieved by any comforting thought. Instead of sweet submission at the end of the poem, he was offered a comfort of unconsciousness.

Hopkins and Herbert renounced worldly affairs for the sake of religion. However, they acutely suffered from spiritual sterility that is really unfathomable to both of them that a poet who dedicated his talent to God was not even able to produce anything. Herbert thought him worse than a tree or plant or an insect whereas Hopkins considered himself to be a eunuch. The theme of sterility was articulated in Hopkins' 'Thou art Indeed Just, Lord' and Herbert's 'Affliction':

I reade, and wish I were a tree
For sure then I should grow
To fruit on shade; at least some bird would trust
Her household to me, and I should be just.
('Affliction', 105-107)

Here he felt like becoming a tree to be purposeful to the humanity as he was disillusioned with priesthood. The poet then was suffering from non-communication and pointlessness, for he did not know what God intended to do. As a priest, he often became rebellious and felt like giving up his priestly life that seemed to him purposeless and sterile. This feeling of sterility was intensified when other misfortune befell him. He wrote in the middle part of the poem:

My flesh began unto my soul in pain,
Sickness cleave my bones;
Consuming argues dwell in ev'ry vein,
And tune my breath to grones.
('Affliction', 105-107)

At this point he was afflicted with disease and tremendously felt the lacking of vitality. He is overwhelmed with physical weakness, death of his friends and well-wishers. He lost all zest

for life. He felt that he had become useless than a blunted knife: “My mirth and edge was lost; a blunted knife\ was of more use than I” (‘Affliction’ 105-107).

Hopkins’ complaint of barrenness, and longs for inspiration appeared with ironical statement and interrupted with disturbing question mark. The question that Hopkins posed was really thought-provoking. It was mysterious to Hopkins why God deprived him of success while sinners were progressing.

Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend
 With thee; but, sir, so what I plead is just.
 Why do sinners’ ways prosper? And why must
 Disappointment all I endeavour end?
 (‘Thou Art Indeed Just, Lord’, 1553)

At the end of the poem the poet took up the image of root and dried-up plants to compare his sense of failure and sterility. The next question is even longer and more complex:

Wert thou mine enemy, O thou my friend,
 How wouldst thou worse, I wonder, than thou dost
 Defeat, thwart me?
 (‘Thou Art Indeed Just, Lord’, É1553)

After questioning he got some realization that God’s way remained always mysterious to the human being whose function was to surrender his soul to the will of God. Then he turned the comparison away from other people to nature. He found nature in all its abundance. The bird built their nest, but the poet could do nothing. He felt utterly sterile and considered him to be spiritual eunuch. He ended the poem with humble prayer to send rain because he was a dried up plant. Similarly, Herbert ended his poem with positive recognition of love for God:

Ah my deare God! Though I am clean forgot,
 Let me not love thee, if I love thee not.
 (‘Affliction’, 105-107)

Obviously, this sense of sterility and pointlessness were caused by their questioning selves that are really obstacles in the unconditional faith to God. It is explicit in the sestet of 'No worst there is none':

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.

The profound and moving reflection regarding the struggle between the self and God found expression in both Hopkins's and Herbert's poem that was at the heart of their spiritual life. Though the terms 'self' and 'God', remained necessarily mysterious, the struggle was known to us all by experience, and it went to the core of individuality.

Thus Edouard Pousset, commenting on the *Spiritual Exercises*, said that good and evil struggling within man are not two tendencies or principles or forces but two *I's*. In the context of this struggle we can compare Herbert's 'Collar' and Hopkins' 'Carrion Comfort'..According to Pousset 'two *I's*, are the 'I' which seeks to serve itself and the 'I' which is Jesus calling were always in conflict' (Pousset,1969). This theory was given perfect voice in Herbert's poem of revolt, 'The Collar' in which his yearning for worldly indulgence reached at its highest point. At this point he felt that he wasted his time in doing wearisome and meaningless work of the priesthood:

All wasted?
 Not so, my heart: but there is fruit,
 And thou hast hands.
 Recover all thy sigh-blown age
 On double pleasures: leave thy cold dispute
 Of what is fit, and not. Forsake thy cage,
 Thy rope of sands,
 Which petty thoughts have made, and made to thee
 Good cable, to enforce and draw;
 And be thy law;
 While thou didst wink and wouldst not see.
 Away; take heed:
 I will abroad.
 Call in thy deaths head there: tie up thy fears.
 He that forbears
 To suit and serve his need,
 Deserves his load.

But as I rav'd and grew more fierce and wilde
 At every word,
 Methoughts I heard one calling, *Child!*
 And I reply'd, *My Lord.*
 ('The Collar', 111-112)

Herbert developed in the poem the images of restraints, such as collars, cages, cable, rope that substantiated a complaint voiced by a soul chafing against the religious constraint. Being discontented with priestly life, he impatiently resolved to be free. "My lines and life are free, free as the road, / Loose as the wind, as large as store". However, we are struck by his dramatic pronouncement, "I struck the board cried, 'No more!'" obviously, his problem was not with the profession of a priest, rather with his self. The metaphors like 'cage' or 'rope of sands' implies double meanings. Apparently, Herbert said that it was his 'pettie thoughts' that made the 'cage' or 'rope of sands' functions as a 'good cable' which drew him towards God. However, at the end all his boastful and bombastic proved nothing but 'pettie thoughts'.

The second part of Pousset's statement was that 'The discord within a person's consciousness ultimately has significance as vast as the duel of the rebellious angel . . . with the Word made flesh' (Pousset 1969). It pointed to some of those internal perspectives which found expression in Hopkins's dark sonnet, "Carrion Comfort":

Not, I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee; Not untwist--slack they may
 be--these last strands of man In me or, most weary, cry I can no more. I cannot 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 in 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 hero whose heaven-handling
 flung me, foot trod

The poet here struggled intensely with the temptations of despair. He was completely desperate as he must accept that there is no God who could help him overcome his agonies, and thus he entirely lost faith. Hopkins here ceased in his laborious efforts to find God and helplessly resisted his sinking into oblivion.

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.
 [“Carrion Comfort” 1-5]

Furthermore, he said that he would not "feast" on his desperation, and the linking of feast and carrion created the disgusting yet forceful illusion: to accept "Despair" — a figure almost personified by the capitalization of the word and the manner of addressing it directly — was to consume death. Yet even as the speaker linked death and despair and recognized despair as a sort of end to all things good in life, he still struggled and contradicted himself, modifying his ideas as he spoke. He argued against an inclination to submit to a state of despair, juxtaposing the opposites "I can no more" and "I can." He then expressed optimism and explicitly rejected negativity with the doubly powerful double negative, "not choose not to be."

Subsequently, he addressed to God, questioned why He was forcing Hopkins into such despair. Hopkins felt 'frantic to avoid thee', as God seemed to be giving him such a difficult time. He felt powerless against a God whose right foot could rock the 'wring-world', a strong phrase suggesting a world emptied or wrung out.

The first answer proposed is that 'my chaff might fly', an image suggesting that Hopkins' suffering had been for the purpose of purifying him. The image is that of winnowing cereals such as wheat, throwing it up in the air so that the lighter chaff was blown away and the heavier grains remained. For Hopkins, this had been an ongoing process, to which he has submitted as part of his discipline as a Jesuit priest. Hopkins could not quite reconcile himself to the process or see himself as submitted to it as he should be. He felt almost like two people: there was the person who worships his beloved Christ as 'the hero', there was another person in himself who struggled against God. The feeling at the end was that this second person was still struggling, even though Hopkins declared it to be 'now done darkness'.

At this point Hopkins' statement is striking. Despite the apostrophe, Hopkins was talking to himself; but Herbert was answered by God who, with a single sufficient word, turned soliloquy to dialogue. Herbert's case was simple: it was the complaint of the man who had renounced the world and got nothing in exchange but suffering and a sense of constriction. Hopkins was in paradoxical mood and he was wrestling with God or we can say that his two selves were terrifically in conflict to each other. On the one hand, he was allured to be

tempted to fall into despair; on the other hand, his self was suffering the pain of the inability to surrender to the will of God. The main difference between them is that whereas Herbert was able to come out all of his discontent hearing the voice of God calling 'Child' and to which he responds- 'My Lord', Hopkins could not pull through the non-communication with God.

Next, in Herbert's poem after undergoing emotional anxiety of the rebellious spirit, the sufferer turned to sweet surrender. However, Hopkins' sonnet did not receive such peaceful ending. Hopkins' spiritual suffering was more multifaceted and acute than Herbert in whom the sense of oppressive gloom was not so strong. In Hopkins the intensity of the feeling was so strong that resolution at the end would be unconvincing. Although his faith did endure, it was not evident that Hopkins ever found complete peace. Rather it would probably be more accurate to say that he learnt to accept the world as it was and to live by simple faith. He came to the resolution that God's way is always impenetrable.

It is obvious that Herbert and Hopkins are almost analogous in expressing their ethical/religious thought and spiritual struggle. Yet, Hopkins intellectualized his spiritual crisis that was more complicated than Herbert who only went to the extent of expressing the spiritual conflict. In the case of Hopkins, God's intolerable fearful appearance instilled into him a sense of emptiness that ended in unconsciousness whereas Herbert successfully made an affectionate attachment with God after spiritual agony. However, both of them knew that they had God-given abilities and their intentions were good and they wanted to do-- had tried to do--God's will and ultimately declared their faith. They knew that unfathomable mystery was hovering through the universe and to the mortals eye God's way was unintelligible. Yet they could not help perceiving that God's blessing would come—just as the intermittent light of the sun in a stippled sky appeared between two mountains.

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