



APPLICATION OF NEW CRITICAL TOOLS IN HOPKINS'S POETRY-A CRITICAL STUDY OF CHOSEN SONNETS

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Abstract

The New Criticism is an Anglo-American version of theory and practice of Formalism and it assumed prominence from 1940s to 1960s. The New Critics agree that literary work is autonomous and they also believed in the formalistic aspects of the text. They always opposed the quasi literary approaches of literature viz. the biography of authors, social context and history of literature. Actually, the term, 'New Criticism' was popularized after the publication of the book *The New Criticism* (1941) by John Crowe Ransom and credit goes to him for associating the other critics together (viz. Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, Yvor Winters, Blackmur etc.) within a new critical approach. Ransom along with these aforementioned critics favoured some terms viz. irony, paradox, alliteration, imagery, symbols etc. for interpreting the work of art. Now, in the case of Hopkins, he was a late Victorian poet and he is always remembered for his technical innovation and stylistic experiment. The personality of Hopkins was very rich and prominent and it is reflected in his sharp sensuous appreciation of beauty and a deep religious fervor (faith). He wrote poetry under the impact of Keats and the Pre-Raphaelites. He wrote a number of praiseworthy poems viz. *Pied Beauty*, *God's Grandeur*, *Hurrahing in Harvest*, *Harry Ploughman*, *The Windhover*, *No Worst, There is None* etc. In my full-fledged article, I would like to analyze two poems *The Windhover* and *No Worst, There is None* where the poet anticipated the observations of the New Critics with respect to the functional use of alliteration, resonance, repetition, suppression of connecting words and creation of compound words and new coinages with archaic terms.

Keywords: New Criticism, Formalism, Quasi Literary, Pre-Raphaelite, Resonance, Archaic.

INTRODUCTION

It is common knowledge that in terms of chronology, G. M. Hopkins was a late Victorian poet but because of 'peculiar' circumstances, his poems appeared in print in the next century, in 1918. Thus,

he was discovered quite late and the Imagists did not get any chance to learn from his poetic experiments but F. R. Leavis, the noted Cambridge critic and early apologist of Modern poetry, declared that Hopkins was likely to prove for 'his time' and

the future, 'the only influential poet of the Victorian age' and he appeared to him 'the greatest'.¹ Very soon, the New Critics and the poets of 30s looked towards him for linguistic innovations and stylistic experiments. There were, of course, 'historical reasons'² for the restoration of a potentially talented poet for the war-weary disillusioned poetic readers and creative writers. John Donne was already discovered by Prof. Grierson and T. S. Eliot and in the case of Hopkins, there were similar reasons for his appreciation because he also disapproved of the moral crises of the Victorian period where all was 'smeared with trade'. Hopkins is generally described as a sensitive artist with deep appreciation of the natural beauty and multi-faceted creation of God's universe but apart from that, he was also an intensely dedicated man of religion who was ready to forego everything in his service to God. In his poetry, 'biography'³ plays a very important role and it explains his 'split' personality. Indeed, he had given up poetry before his conversion to Christianity but because of a 'miraculous' event, he returned to poetry, his first love.⁴ A poem in particular is often cited to express his mindset on the eve of his conversion and the poem is aptly titled *The Habit of Perfection* (1866). As the poem reveals, the choice was a very difficult one and the inner struggle was even more complex. In the poem, in question, there are clear indications of his determination to renounce his sense endowment and active interest in the world. However, the diction and the language of the poem clearly reflects an 'aesthetics of tension' and a rare gift of wordplay and manipulation of poetic language for achieving a kind of dramatic tension and eventual resolution in favour of spiritual life.⁵

Presently, within the narrow confines of space and parameters of New Criticism, I would like to discuss two of his most celebrated poems viz. *The Windhover* and *No Worst, There is None*, both sonnets. As it is well-known, Hopkins had genuine interest in poetic diction and he was very much determined in making note of his special quest in the specific 'inner form of an object' ('inscape') as well as the 'evocation of poetic intensity' ('instress').⁶ He had also studied the views of Duns Scotus, a medieval Christian theologian who spoke of the

possibility of reaching the universe of the divine through an intuitive awareness of his individuality.⁷ Moreover, his studies in the 14th century Alliterative verse and Welsh poetry made him search for a new kind of rhythm in which 'accents' were scanned in terms of actual necessity, and not in terms of the traditional method of viewing a rhythm. He used the word, 'sprung rhythm' to articulate his interest in sense-stress instead of syllable-stress. Apart from that, he anticipated the observations of the New Critics with respect to the functional use of alliteration, resonance, deliberate violation of rules of etymology, suppression of words, omissions of connectives and also creation of compound words through the use of a hyphen. What needs to be remembered is he did not do it for ornamental purposes but for expressing his individual vision of God's 'glory' and his 'pied universe'. However, in later years, when his inspiration dried up and he fell gloomy and tired because of recurrent illness, he exhibited the same kind of restlessness and intellectual curiosity. In fact, Hopkins's poetry, both ecstasy and agony are reflected, recalling the case of John Donne's Love poems and 'dramatic' holy sonnets.⁸

I would like to concentrate, first of all, on his best known and most admired sonnet *The Windhover*. It is well-known that the year, 1877 was a very fertile year and fruitful period in the poet's life. During this period, he wrote a number of nature cum religious poems and he celebrated the glory of God and the grandeur of his creation as reflected in different aspects of human life, viewed by a sensitive but devout poet. In these sonnets, nature and super nature seem to blend, exhibiting at the same time his creative originality. Poems like *Pied Beauty*, *God's Grandeur*, *Hurrahing in Harvest* and *Harry Ploughman* etc. are often referred to as examples of Hopkins's celebration of God's glory and grandeur. But even in some of the nature poems like *God's Grandeur*⁹ and *Binsey Poplars*,¹⁰ one finds a kind of veiled criticism of his contemporaries for whom the world was too much with them and who had no idea of God's veiled omnipotence and anger.

As far as the poem *The Windhover* is concerned, this is the most 'appreciated' poem of Hopkins for various reasons. First of all, the poem

seems to be a creative transformation of an actual experience recorded by the poet in his prose journal.¹¹ James Reeves, a well-known apologist of Modern poetry, has recorded how the poet caught hold of the glimpse of a falcon in the early hours of morning. In fact, in the prose version, we get a beautiful paraphrase of many of the expressions used in the poem. (Morning's darling, prince of daylight's kingdom, dapple dawn, ecstasy, pulling on the rein).¹² The poet's desire to achieve the mastery of the falcon and its animal beauty, valour and action, and also, the images of plough horse, making a gleam with a furrow, cold gray blue embers of the dying fire and a gash of red hot coal are also mentioned in the prose account. When one reads the poem after this discovery, it becomes clear that creative imagination is at once a mysterious power and it involves a painful effort. Even Hopkins called the poem, "the best thing, he even wrote" and all critics including the New Critics like Yvor Winters have concurred with the remark.¹³ The poem is obviously a Petrarchan sonnet but it has been modeled after Hopkins's own poetic method and practice. It looks like a prose poem and it has a subtitle, "To Christ our Lord". Not only this, Hopkins also uses a French term, 'chevalier' in the sestet which creates an effort of ambiguity behind a clear intention and purpose. As everyone knows, the French term, 'chevalier' is used for various purposes namely, royalty, knighthood, bravery, meekness, splendour and courage. All these senses are blended in the images of Christ, seen as a kind of ever agile and graceful Creature with superhuman qualities. As a matter of fact, the whole poem is based on the principle of juxtaposition and contrast. One can even notice a kind of sub-conscious conflict suggested by the earthly power and control of a hawk and the subtler and quiet grace of Christ. In this poem, one finds a very beautiful illustration of Hopkins's conception of genuine poetry as a blend of 'in-scape' and 'in-stress'.¹⁴ First of all, one is drawn by a sense of immediacy where the poet uses the first person pronoun 'I' in a very effective manner and exploits a number of alliterations and repetitions which would appear as absurd and meaningless iteration. Thus, the word, 'morning' is repeated twice and it is used both as a kind of special favourite or close beloved

of the morning sun. Not only this, the morning sun is further seen as a kind of promising 'heir' of the bright day light (Dauphin). The bird is similarly shown to be drawn or attracted by the morning splendour, reflected in two colours of the sun. In fact, all these repetitions and alliterations are used as attributes of the hawk, shining in reflected glory. The poet soon describes various flights of the bird, particularly its exploits in the air and here, grammatical ambiguities also add to the bird's daring exploits, rivaling the circular jump of a horse below during training. Thus, the expression like, 'rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing' and 'bow-bend' are not just meaningless, obscure, repetitions but they refer to the gliding exercises and the perfect control of the bird engaged in hazardous exercises. The highly expressive verb, 'rebuffed' is used in the sense of 'snubbing' which is normally used for a sensible or articulate human being in giving expression to his anger or irritation. Again, the alliteration, 'heart in hiding' refers to poet's excitement and thrill expressed at the wonderful control of the bird and his desire to emulate the mastery of similar kind. But, even then the poet is quite sure that the bird's success is just material and it signals the height of earthly power, pride, pedigree and splendour.

The poem takes a real turn in the sestet where like a Petrarchan sonnet, the highly expressive word, 'buckle'¹⁵ comes as a master stroke. Critic after critic has interpreted this word, 'buckle' and its connection to 'my chevalier' is brought home.¹⁶ James Reeves and other practical critics have found various meanings of the word, 'buckle' which connotes at once the discipline, control, pressure and collapse.¹⁷ W. H. Gardner, one of Hopkins's authoritative interpreters, calls the windhover, 'the analogue of Christ' but the poem really turns from nature to super nature and establishes the supremacy of Christ in a very illuminating manner.¹⁸ 'Buckle' is usually used for the sense of binding or controlling but it is used here as well as in a 'metalanguage' sense of grappling or preparing for action as well as additional sense of collapsing (To buckle under pressure). Thus, it becomes clear that Christ's glory is not mundane or immanent but it is something higher, and rarer, and the poet is

humbled. Once again, the poet uses two house-old images of ploughing land by means of horses and the dim burning of blue light. Finally, Christ's sacrifice is viewed as a very rare kind of red colour of blood which oozes not by inflicting injury on others but by wounding one's own body. Thus, the alliteration of 'gall, gash, gold-vermilion'¹⁹ is no mere verbal trick but a very functional and appropriate expression for rendering a complex phenomenon (bathe in spirit that glow). Here, the paradox of golden colour and inflicting injury are combined in a very rare example of reconciliation of image and idea through a new kind of compound word.

As regards, the other sonnet for appreciation entitled *No Worst, There is None*, it belongs to the group of sonnets which are known as 'terrible sonnets'²⁰ described by Hopkins as the outcome of 'Fits of Sadness'. From Hopkins' correspondences to Robert Bridges, it becomes obvious that this sonnet was 'written in blood'.²¹ In fact, in this group of seven or eight sonnets, Hopkins records the anguish of his soul which in mystical terms is described as 'Dark Night of the Soul'. Along with *Carrion Comfort* and *Though Art Indeed Just*, the present poem is a true revelation of the poet's lacerated self and acute sense of horror and despair. In fact, the experience described here is akin to nervous breakdown or deep spiritual depression as recoded in William James' well-known book *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902).²² The poem is also remarkable for Hopkins' brilliant use of 'sprung rhythm' and highly expressive poetic coinages and archaic expressions. In respect of theme, the poem has many parallels, say, with Moloch's speech in *Paradise Lost* to his fellow sufferers in Hell, Lear's own ejaculations on seeing the misery of Edgar in the play *King Lear* and also various sonnets of Shakespeare where similar full-blooded expression has been exploited.²³ Likewise, Yvor Winters has commented on the accentuated pattern of syllables in detail in his well-known book *The Function of Criticism* (1957).²⁴ Turning to the poem for a close analysis, one feels that it is a brilliant example of Petrarchan sonnet with certain variations. The poem begins by following a technique of 'affirmation by negation' ('no worst, there is none'). At the very beginning, the mood of

powerful desolation is expressed in a very assertive manner, then and of moves to the word-play on the word, 'pitch'²⁵ which is repeated with different meanings and intentions. The word 'pitch' is here used both as a verb and noun, suggesting at once the blackness of Hell and the dizzy height from which the sufferer is to be felled. The alliteration suggested by juxtaposing words like 'pitched' and 'past' also conveys the magnitude of suffering about which no one has any idea before. Then, the poet uses the word, 'pangs' but he views it as a prelude (forepangs) to further suffering to follow. Next, he throws a direct question to God and Blessed Virgin Mary to convey his acute frustration and he then questions the Grace of God which echoes the cries of St. Thomas and other Christian Saints.²⁶ The poet next coins a new word, 'herdstrong'²⁷ to be followed by the expressive word, 'huddle'²⁸ which is used for the straying sheep pressed together in confusion. What the poet means is that his cries are endless and know no respite even for a single moment. Hence, they are like the cattle following each other in confusion. Finally, the poet feels that his sorrow is not the suffering of an individual but it is a kind of 'universal grief'. Similarly, the poet feels that he has been treated by God like Job of the Old Testament and has been pressed on a powerful anvil.²⁹ This Biblical image acutely conveys the poet's unabated intense suffering very accurately. Hence, his soul cries out for a final deliverance in the form of a cruel death. (Fell) But the poet's request is unheeded.

In the sestet, we have a further development of the dilemma of human existence provided through the imagery of a climber to a steep mountain. The imagery calls Hamlet's predicament³⁰ and the poet feels that no other human being who has not experienced such continual suffering can have the depth of human predicament. In a highly compound expressive, 'no men fathomed' Hopkins clearly hints that those who have never gone through such suffering can have any idea of man's fate, "Hold them cheap/May who ne'er hung there".³¹ Hopkins uses two apparently contradictory words, 'steeps' and 'deep' with homonymous features only to suggest that a human being is just like a mountain climber who has to hang and creep for his survival in the mist of fluctuation of fate. The

image of 'whirlwind' further confirms that one can have rest only in death which is a kind of eternal sleep. As a matter of fact, *No Worst, There is None* is one of the most powerful creations of Hopkins as a dramatic poet and also as a great manipulator of new expressions and unusual coinages. The poem reminds one of some of the powerful sonnets of Shakespeare on the fury of Time and self dramatization of Donne's Holy sonnets.³² Here, there is a similar use of paradox, alliteration and self-interrogation.

CONCLUSION

In short, the present analysis of the two poems of Hopkins rightly suggests that Hopkins was a distinctly original voice of Victorian era and as such he was rightly ignored and kept hidden, even by his close friends. The New Critics first found in his poetry a beautiful illustration of their view of poetry as an autonomous 'product' or a 'construct' where the manner of poetic technique blends beautifully with the subject-matter of the poem.

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6. Thomas, T. C. ed. *Twentieth Century Verse-An Anglo-American Anthology*, Trinity Press, 2017. Pp. 10-11.
7. Ibid. p. 10. (A poem has also been written on him by Hopkins)
8. Hartman, Geoffrey H. ed. *Hopkins-A Collection of Critical Essays*, New Delhi: Prentice Hall of India, 1980. Pp. 22-24. (In Shakespeare's sonnet on the 'time theme', we find a similar use of interrogation and dramatic devices of piling image upon image for creating intensity (Devouring Time, blunt thou the lion's paws and Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea etc.). Similarly, in some of Donne's Holy sonnets (Batter my heart, thee-person'd God and Death be not proud, though some have called thee etc.). There is a similar intensity, created by rhetoric and repeated use of imagery.)
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