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RELIGION AND CONCENTRICITY IN THE WOKS OF GERALD MANLEY HOPKINS

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ABSTRACT

This paper tries to analyse the religious tension and concentricity in the poetry of the priest poet Gerald Manley Hopkins. Hopkins used poetry to express his religious devotion, drawing his images from the natural world. He found nature inspiring and developed his theories of inscape and in stress to explore the manifestation of God in every living thing. According to these theories, the recognition of an object's unique identity, which was bestowed upon that object by God, brings us closer to Christ. Similarly, the beauty of the natural world—and our appreciation of that beauty—help us worship God. The problem of concentricity is another concern of his poetry. Hopkins view of the canon is a decentred one in which the work and aesthetic style of each original artist radiates from and so coheres around – its own centre, its own distinctive character and convictions.

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INTRODUCTION

The problem in examining the religious crisis in Hopkins's poetry lies in a correct definition of the term. A religion implies a specific system of faith and worship. In nineteenth century England the generally accepted religion was a carefully defined dogma characterized by many features. Broadening the definition to 'religious' encompasses further entities such as an individual's piety, his devotion, his sense of belonging to a specific order and particularly in Hopkins' case the need to adhere to certain vows. A crisis carries connotations of urgency, danger and possibly represents a turning-point or re-evaluation of what had previously been accepted as the norm. Hopkins's religious crisis covers all these entities. It remained throughout a dilemma of choice. He was acutely aware of the needs of his religion, yet he sought to compromise those needs with an innate sensuousness which was expressed in his poetry.

Religious poetry under constraint

Many poems, including "Hurrahing in Harvest" and "The Windhover," begin with the speaker praising an aspect of nature, which then leads the speaker into a consideration of an aspect of God or Christ. For instance, in "The Starlight Night," the speaker urges readers to notice the marvels of the night sky and compares the sky to a structure, which houses Christ, his mother, and the saints. The stars' link to Christianity makes them more beautiful.

Hopkins's early poetry praises nature, particularly nature's unique ability to regenerate and rejuvenate. Throughout his travels in England and Ireland, Hopkins witnessed the detrimental effects of industrialization on the environment, including pollution, urbanization, and diminished rural landscapes. While

he lamented these effects, he also believed in nature's power of regeneration, which comes from God. In "God's Grandeur," the speaker notes the wellspring that runs through nature and through humans. While Hopkins never doubted the presence of God in nature, he became increasingly depressed by late nineteenth-century life and began to doubt nature's ability to withstand human destruction. His later poems, the so-called terrible sonnets, focus on images of death, including the harvest and vultures picking at prey. Rather than depict the glory of nature's rebirth, these poems depict the deaths that must occur in order for the cycle of nature to continue. "Thou Art Indeed Just, Lord" (1889) uses parched roots as a metaphor for despair: the speaker begs Christ to help him because Christ's love will rejuvenate him, just as water helps rejuvenate dying foliage.

Many of Hopkins's poems feature an ecstatic outcry, a moment at which the speaker expresses his transcendence of the real world into the spiritual world. The words ah, o, and oh usually signal the point at which the poem moves from a description of nature's beauty to an overt expression of religious sentiment. "Binsey Poplars" (1879), a poem about the destruction of a forest, begins with a description of the downed trees but switches dramatically to a lamentation about the human role in the devastation; Hopkins signals the switch by not only beginning a new stanza but also by beginning the line with "O" (9). Hopkins also uses exclamation points and appositives to articulate ecstasy: in "Carrion Comfort," the speaker concludes with two cries to Christ, one enclosed in parentheses and punctuated with an exclamation point and the other punctuated with a period. The words and the punctuation alert the reader to the instant at which the poem shifts from secular concerns to religious feeling.

Much of Hopkins' poetry can be described as following the model of a "Hymn to Creation", which we see in Psalms such as Psalm 148. Poems that clearly fit into this mould are "God's Grandeur", "Pied Beauty", "Easter" and "Hurrahing in Harvest." In all of these poems, man and nature are linked by love in one joyous hymn of creation, although often nature is depicted as being the more faithful worshiper. Consider these lines from "Easter":

Gather gladness from the skies;
Take a lesson from the ground;
Flowers do ope their heavenward eyes
And a Spring-time joy have found;
Earth throws Winter's robes away,
Decks herself for Easter Day.

Nature's example, then, is meant to be an impetus to spur mankind on to faithful worship of our creator God.

Concentricity

In an unfinished and untitled poem from early January 1866, selfhood is described as the inevitable centre from which the experiences the world:

I am the midst of every zone
And justify the East and West

It is not eccentricity but rather concentricity that defines the poet's sense of himself here, for this vision of the world arranges itself about his 'all-accepting fixed eye'. The poem, however, ends with a wish to escape from his fixed centralized selfhood:

O lovely ease in change of place
I have desired to pass

In his commentary on this poem J. Hillismiller observes that the poet's wish 'to pass beyond the situation of being always the centre of the world' is the key to desire expressed in a poem written a few months earlier, in late October 1865, to be assimilated into another model of concentricity.

Let me be to Thee as the circling bird,
Or bat with tender and air- crisping wings
That shapes in half-light his departing rings,
From both of whom a changeless note is heard.

Hopkins figures his life and art in this poem as a pattern of concentric circles around the newly ‘

Found

Dominant of my range and state-

Love, O my God, to call Thee Love and Love.

The ‘dominant’ is not only a ruler or commanding authority, but a musical term for the fifth note of the scale of a key, which is especially important in defining harmonies. In other words this ‘dominant’, God for ‘Love’, draws the poet’s being into harmony. The conceit around which ‘Let me to Thee’ is organised derives from Pythagoreanism, a school of classical Greek philosophy that regards number as the eternal principle of determines the relations of musical harmony and regular movements of the planets. It explains the latter with doctrine of harmony of the spheres, which theorises the universe as a series of concentric spheres, each of which is studded with astronomical bodies and moves around their common centre at numerically fixed intervals. The sounds that these concentric movements make are understood to harmonise with one another and so produce a celestial music.

The imagery of Hopkin’s poem draws upon both the geometrical and musical arrangement of the spheres and the harmony they generate. God is the geometrical centre that radiates, and the ‘dominant’ note that reverberates, outwards in the universe of the poem, just as the utterances and actions of ‘the circling bird’ and the bat move outwards from their ‘changeless note’ in the form of both resonant sound waves and their circling flight, which are punningly referred to herein the bat’s ‘departing rings’. Hopkins extends Pythagoreanism, which originally described planetary and other astronomical relations, to the organic nature. The bird’s and the bat’s patterns of sound and flight enact a microcosmic version of the harmony of the spheres.

As Hopkins’ poems demonstrates, Pythagoreanism lends itself to such efforts to describe the universe as theocentric, God centred. The Pythagorean ideas of number and harmony are amongst the earliest principles of philosophical idealism, which argues against the common sense view that identifies appearances(that which we see, hear, and otherwise perceive through the senses) with reality by asserting that, on the contrary, eternal thoughts or ideas are the ground of the world, the ultimate reality.

By conceiving of the universe in terms of such unchanging ideas, the Pythagorean philosophy allows them to be identified with the mind of God. Pythagoreanism draws out the theological implications of idealism, for, if ideas do order the objective world, they would seem to require a source, an original thinker- namely, a creator God, the Logos or Reason. The Logos or Word that Hopkins nominate here as ‘Love’ is ‘The authentic cadence’. A cadence is a point of rest or repose at the close of a musical phrase, a relaxation and a resolution of musical movement or tension. It furnishes a metaphor for the resolution of his recent anguish over his religious belief and conversion, the rest of peace that closes this period. The authentic cadence is a chord progression from the dominant to the tonic, which most clearly defines its key. The authentic cadence that the poet has taken to heart reciprocally reverberates outwards to draw his life and experience of the world into harmony: “I have found my music in a common word”. Written a year before his formal conversion to Roman Catholicism, the poem strongly suggests that some version of this religion has superseded his Anglican Faith.

The authentic cadence was discovered late

Which ends those only strains that I approve,

And other science all gone out of date

And minor sweetness scarce made mention of:

I have found the dominant of my range and state-

Love, O my God, to call Thee Love and Love.

The concentrically arranged cosmology that resonates from the ‘changeless note’ is identified with ‘the authentic cadence’, the true church that accordingly renders other versions of Christianity redundant.

Hopkins’ poem suggests that its Christian reworking of Pythagoreanism, in superseding ‘other science’ , is itself a new science , a term that refers here to a logically systematic body of knowledge, which may be

philosophical or theological, or indeed scientific in the conventional modern sense. In an 1866 letter to his father Hopkins explains that his new belief is based on logical criteria.

Conclusion

The 'Terrible Sonnets' represent a high point in Hopkins's art and exposition of his religious crisis. Their importance lies in the removal of anything extraneous from his focus on his own personal spiritual survival. As such the sonnets represent a summing up of his religious, artistic and secular achievements. It is in this balancing that Hopkins could derive a sense of his progress as a priest and possibly as an artist. One needs to remember that throughout Hopkins remained a Jesuit priest. He never relinquished his priestly duties or his commitment to God. It was this marriage that coloured most of his later poetry. At no stage did he consider separating from his religion to ease his suffering. It is for this reason that one can continue to maintain that the dynamic underlining the greater part of his art remains a chronic unfolding religious crisis. It was the varying forms that this crisis took which served to mould his spiritual and secular life.

The crisis Hopkins experiences and expresses in his Art is an amalgam of all the approaches alluded to in my introduction. It borrows from his surroundings, his contemporaries, his formal religion and his aesthetics, but it remains a fundamentally religious crisis - a crisis that seeks to define the limits of the validity of worship and the validity of the self. His epitaph is aptly penned in one of his last poems, an extract from 'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire.'

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