

**BIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUNDS OF THE  
POETRY OF HOPKINS**

CHAPTER I  
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HOPKINS

Soon after the end of the World War II there was a rise of 'New - poetry' in England, France and in The United States. The twentieth Century poetry is embedded in various currents and cross - currents such as the Georgians, the Imagists, the Symbolists, Social poets, Surrealists and the Neo - Romantics.

The first quarter of the twentieth century produced a number of poets, who continues to write in the Romantic and Victorian ~~Manner~~. The second quarter of the twentieth century comparatively yielded a richer harvest and the poets like W.B.Yeats, T.S. Eliot, W.H.Auden, Stephen Spender and many others produced the poetry of social conflict and personal conflict. G.M.Hopkins, though a poet of Victorian are emerged as an outstanding Modern poet, in the first quarter of the

twentieth century, " I. A. Richards, William Empson, and F.R. Leavis regarded Hopkins as the classic example of the modern poet".<sup>1</sup>

The reasoning behind such as a flattering statement by the most noted critics did have something genuine to the credit of Hopkins. He had a rare power to express feelings, with his heightened language. He had a rich imagination and high aesthetic sense and technical originality although, they have shades of slight eccentricity.

Hopkins had inherited a philosophical bent of mind, and also had a deep religious strain in his character which moulded his thinking. He wrote to his father " It is God who makes the decision and not I".<sup>2</sup> This statement reveals total denial of his free will and complete submission to Gods<sup>7</sup> will. For every move in his life, the human spirit was always in conflict with the divine. His poems are the outcome of all such conflicts. Everything around him was viewed by a common man, a romantic poet and a Jesuit father all in one. Nevertheless, a responsible Jesuit father,

very much conscious of his duty superseded the poet in thoughts. That was the reason why Louis Martz in The Poetry of Meditation claimed that "Hopkins belonged to the Seventeenth Century tradition wherein meditation was made to call for a spiritual action".<sup>3</sup>

A poets creation is a vision, expressed in script. The formation of this vision is an outcome of everything physical around him, that seeds thoughts in his mind. But ultimately it is also the 'self' and its reaction that matter. " Hopkins poems may be records of his Jesuit mission and of his private joys and private burdens, but they are more than that. They are the records of the joys and burdens of Victorian England".<sup>4</sup> Thus it is necessary to consider some biographical details of his poetry.

The Hopkins were a family of comfortable wealth, cultivated and above all pious Anglicans. Gerard's father Manley Hopkins, the publisher of A Manual Of Marine Insurance, also a Consul General in London

for the independent kingdom of Hawaii was a man of letters. He also reviewed poetry for Times and wrote a novel, which remains unpublished. Gerard's mother Kate read German and had well developed literary and musical tastes. Gerard's paternal Aunt Annie, who stayed with them was an accomplished musician, painter and an amateur student of archaeology. The atmosphere on the home front was just right for an inquisitive child to be equipped with information from all sides. However, the fear of God and His love towards mankind were perhaps instilled into Gerard by his father, Manley Hopkins a conventionally religious man, a moderate High Anglican and a Sunday School<sup>5</sup> teacher. Thus the Hopkins exemplified the most attractive qualities of Victorian middle class culture, and provided an admirable environment for a boy who was to be not only a poet, <sup>but</sup> also a priest.

Hopkins attended Highgate School where " he followed a curriculum which was devoted primarily to Latin and Greek" Hopkins later in his life cast sentences and phrases in the fanciful order of Latin verse as in this poetry

as "The rolling level underneath him steady air".<sup>6</sup> Hopkins had won a gold medal for Latin verse at school. He was an academic scholar and particularly mastered classical curriculum. He won handsome prizes for his academic progress. But the most significant thing is the Prize for "Escorial" a poem written at school an extraordinary achievement of a sixteen year old boy. "Escorial" was an imitative poem and entirely influenced by Keats. The poem is significant since it enabled Hopkins to express about religion, architecture, painting and aesthetics which remained his topics of interest lifelong. Apart from Escorial Hopkins wrote another Keatsian poem, "The vision of the Mermaids" and "Winter with the Gulf Stream." The letter was published in Once a Week perhaps a weekly magazine and eventually one of the few poems to be published in his lifetime.

Hopkins is remembered to be a pale and lean boy, with an intellectual and meditative face. He was strong willed but a bit eccentric. He had once abstained from liquids for a week

just to win a bet, but secretly wanted to test human endurance.

It isn't surprising if Hopkins's poems do not revive memories of High-gate, simply because he had bitter experiences of Mr. Dyne the Principal of the School. But Highgate gained him a life long literary friend Dixon. They maintained their friendship only through correspondence.

When Hopkins had joined Oxford in 1883 there was a great religious chaos. Though the Tractarian<sup>7</sup> movement had come to a stand-still, the fight between the staunch Anglican<sup>8</sup> Edward Pusey Versus the liberal rationalist Jowett went on in full swing. The movement reached its height when Newman the founder of the Anglican Movement joined the Catholic Church.<sup>9</sup> Hopkins took interest in the struggle, more for its religious appeal, than for literary things. Though Hopkins found himself safe under the wings of Anglican Church, the ritualistic method of the Catholics attracted as he looked for some strict disciplinarian

set up. This attraction resulted in his conversion to Roman Catholicism, to the utter dismay of the members of his family, who were staunch Anglicans.

Hopkins's conversion to Catholicism<sup>10</sup> placed him in a difficult position, as in a predominantly Protestant<sup>11</sup> world Catholics were treated as outcasts. There was fear and dislike of Catholicism. Two evidences clarify the same. Hopkins's parents allowed him to come home only with a request that he wouldn't convert his brothers and sisters. Likewise, the Bridges family with whom Hopkins stayed, refused to allow a relative Digby Dolben to be tutored with their children, when Mr. Dolben started showing Catholic leanings. Oxford was still having one religion and attending Catholic services and missing Anglican ones fetched fines.

Hopkins won many friends at Oxford by his amiability and charm, Digby Dolben a relative of Bridges was one of them who shared common interests in the writing of poetry with Hopkins. During Hopkins's times it was a male dominated Victorian England and male



relationship were exceedingly close." Where art thou friend" and " Not kind to freeze me" were written explicitly with Dolben in mind, who unfortunately died in a mishap. But of all the friendships at Oxford the most important and longlasting friendships was with Robert Bridges. Hopkins's letters to Bridges reveal not only ideas about art and life but also day to day workings of remarkable intelligence. It was a friendship and more than that. When Hopkins began writing poetry in 1875 all the manuscripts were sent to Bridges who carefully transcribed them. He was a source of constant encouragement. When the Jesuit magazine The Month did not favor in publishing his poems, Bridges prerved all those poems and published his poems. Bridges preserved all those poems and published them at a ripe time. In fact the credit goes to bridges for the survival of Hopkins as a poet. After his friends death, Hopkins wrote to his wife:

He is the one figure which fills my whole memory of my Oxford life. There is hardly a reminiscence with which he is not associated. All my intellectual

growth, and a very large proportion of the happiness of those Oxford days, I owe to his companionship.<sup>12</sup>

Hopkins's mature phase of poetic career began in 1875. The themes of his then written poems are mostly religious. "Easter" Communication," " for a Picture of St. Dorothea," "Heaven-Heaven", The Habit of Perfection", " A nun takes the veil" were all written during Hopkins inquisitive state of mind. He has noted with admiration the flagellatory practices of some extreme Catholics in 'Easter Communion'.

Hopkins decided to join the Society of Jesus of Ignatius Loyola in the year 1868. But before entering the Jesuit Novitiate at Manresa House in London, he spent a month, walking in Switzerland with Edward Bond a friend from Oxford. He made a note of the minute details of the trip. The most advantageous outcome was his

discovery of the meanings and use of the terms 'inscape' and 'instress' which were otherwise known to him as he had studied Parmenides the Greek philosopher.

" Parmenides emphasized on the being or the existence of anything. According to him 'being' held nature together and makes language and knowledge possible. His view on 'inscape' and 'instress' of different things are different. To him an individual inscape in nature is a mode in which the instree is a mode in which the instress of beings appears. He Says "The same thing exists for things and for being."<sup>13</sup> these terms were carefully jotted down in his journal. His journal seems to be a work-shop of the poems to emerge from time to time.

Hopkins entered the Novitiate and was ordained as a priest on 23rd Sept.1871. He ceased writing poetry for some years. On accomplishing this new vocation he burned all his copies of poems. In 1872, Hopkins read the Oxford Commentary of Duns Scotus on the Sentences of Peter Lombard. In 1873 he taught rhetoric, at Roehampton and in 1874 he was sent

to St. Beuno to study theology, where he heard of the wreck of Deutschland in which five exiled nuns died. He had always been attached to the sea, due to his father Manley Hopkins who was a marine adjuster. This blow of disaster left him desolate and disenchanted and he expressed his nervousness and desolation in his first major poem "The wreck of Deutschland land" only to break his poetical silence. He told his mother that the wreck had made a deep impression on him, "more than any other wreck or accident"<sup>14</sup> he had ever read of. The Deutschland included five exiled nuns on the board as passengers. They ran stranded near the mouth of the Thames. The signals were not spotted due to severe storm, and the ship remained lodged, fast pounded by waves. When help arrived, the following day about a quarter of the passengers including the nuns had been drowned. Hopkins was very much touched by the event since he was himself very closely attached to the seas. This was from the human point of view. Then England was being swayed in the Apocalyptic mood. Being a priest Hopkins too wanted to warn people

about the second coming of Jesus. Hopkins wished to speak about God's judgment and mercy. So the incident of the wreck brought out of him a strong emotion and his creativity came out in its best form, in the form of this poem. He explained to Bridges that "this poem wasn't a narrative but an ode."<sup>15</sup>

"The Wreck of Deutschland" was indeed his major creation. It was also misjudged, and refused by The Month the Jesuit magazine the editor of which was father Coleridge. It was not accepted due to its eccentric technical originality.

Hopkins's "Wreck of Deutschland" was written in ambiguity. Hopkins made it appear as a personal isolated outburst, but it was also written with an apocalyptic vision, and burden for Victorian England. The message even to the present times, and thus has achieved universality. Hopkins symbolizes the water and storm as the moral degradation into which the ship Deutschland representing Victorian England was sinking in the sea of sin. The cry of the Nun to the Lord for help is an act of startling the lost sheep, those who have drifted away

from God to go back to him, who is the only Saviour of all mankind.

Soon after the Wreck of the Deutschland' Hopkins wrote some of his best loved poems, such as "Gods Grandeur", "The Starlight Night", "Spring", "The Windhover", "Pied Beauty", "Hurrahing in Harvest" and the "Lantern Out Doors". They were influenced by the Spiritual Exercises. The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola gave him a boost and his creative urge of writing poetry provided a sound aesthetic justification to express. The Spiritual Exercises state that man was created to praise. The poet seems to be witnessing God in the nature and that arouses his spirituality.

He significantly says:

"The World is charged with the grandeur of God".<sup>16</sup>

Hopkins meditated on Christ and His Glory. He was made up in such a way that he needed something concrete to give him a vision, and quench his thirst of serving the Lord in the form of poetry. As in "Windhover, To Christ

our lord". Hopkins draws out the essence of sacrifice. "hurrahing in harvest " was the outcome of Hopkins' help an hour of extreme enthusiasm as he walked one day, from fishing in the Elwy wherein the poet instresses 'god's mystery in the wonders of nature.

Hopkins being a priest, and preahining was naturally major assignment. Moreover he was a priest with a mission. As a priest he went ministering to the sick and heard confessions. The compassion for innocence threatened by corruption is the major theme of a group of poems inspired by Hopkins's experience as a priest. "The Handsome Heart", "The Bugler's First Communion", " Brothers" and "Felix Randall " are worth mentioning . "The Handsome Heart" through a poem with rational teaching, the hero of " The Handsome Heart " trusts in his priest whole heartedly; that is why he says: "Father what you buy me i like best "17

Total trust in the heavenly father has been stressed by Hopkins. "Brothers" too, deals with the topic of self forgetful Christian love.

The buglers first communion" deals with a mostholy sacred ritual of communion wherein a human being remembers that Christ was broken for him and his precious blood was shed for him, while taking wine and bread. All these poems have the mind of a priest and his duties.

"Henry Purcell" and "Dun Scotus's Oxford" owe a great deal to Scotus. Dun's Scotus believed in the "Principle of Individualization". It says that mind can come to know the universe, through quickly nothing an individual object's "thickness" which ultimately reveals God. Hopkins's poems relied on this principal. Dun Scotus's presence still haunts Oxford" ends with a moving and heartfelt acknowledgement , of what Hopkins owes to him in the following lines:

"He lived on , these weeds  
and waters these walls are what  
he haughted who of all men most  
sways my spirits to peace". 18



What Hopkins means by these lines is that Duns Scotus who was a student of Oxford once did 'haunt' all men with his principles. And above all he swayed Hopkins to peace.

" The last five years of his life (1885-1890) which Hopkins spent in Dublin as a professor of Greek and fellow of the Royal University of Ireland were the most wretched years of his life. His frustration due to his ill health superceded by his feeling of inability to recreate left him desolate. During this time he wrote the six terrible sonnets viz. " Carrion Comfort", " No Worst, there is None, " " To seem the stranger lies my lot ", " I wake and feel the fell of dark ", "Patience, hard thing! " and " My own heart let me more have pity on." All these sonnets are expressions of it. He was depressed and spiritually desolated. Hopkins wrote to Bridges: " If ever anything was written in blood one of these was", 19 Bridges guessed this to be " Carrion Comfort".

The main factor that contributed to the desolated state of Hopkins was his deteriorating health. His nervous depression increased by the strength on his eyes by almost continuous reading of examination papers. This altogether gave him the sense of being in exile. There was an inevitable conflict amongst the man, the poet and the priest. But it was the poet - priest who was always conscious of his duties. "Spelt from Sybils leaves" is the longest sonnet where in the poetic talent is seen at its best. The poem is prophetic and full of warning. The final analogy of the poem shows us the poet metamorphosing into a priest and cautious of his duties to us mankind, warning on the final judgment as per Biblical teachings. As the he priest in him gives a message of hope to all those who are fearful of death. He means to say by the Lord Jesus Christ, to have died for everyone sin mankind has been promised immortality.

Hopkins last poems "Thou art indeed just lord" and "To R.B." are distinct in their

autobiographical values. They give us the glimpses of the realization of eternal truth. When Hopkins says: "O thou lord of life, send my roots rain".<sup>20</sup> Hopkins speaks of his poor mental and physical state and ultimately cries to the Lord of life to send him 'rain' of good health, creativity and peace. Hopkins represents himself as a man who has lost hopes but he reminds himself and others that the Lord of Life is the Hope when everything is lost and gone. "To R.B." is Hopkins's last poem addressed to Robert Bridges. He was his bosom friend and Hopkins valued his friendship. Hopkins had so many other friends but it was only Bridges who could really understand and exact situation of his friend and Hopkins knew, it so well. It was Bridges who had encouraged and advised Hopkins: "I want the one rapture of an inspiration".<sup>21</sup>

Amongst all the religious poems that Hopkins wrote "The Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection" is but the poets last and most important of all messages. The priest with concern for all

mankind is with a message for man who live everlasting life. Hopkins is himself ailing and perhaps afraid of death. But he reaches the masses, that he is relying on god and His Word which promises man everlasting life.

Hopkins was seriously ill; on 5th June 1889, his parents were summoned from England. Hopkins died on 8th June at the thirty in the afternoon, calmly attentive almost to the end of prayers being said around him. His final words were:

" I am so happy, I am so happy".<sup>22</sup>

The above lines prove that even while breathing his last Hopkins experienced peace and security. Hopkins's faith on Christ is firm. He truly lived and died a life of a devout Jesuit.

Hopkins is indeed being " Each others comfort kind,"<sup>22</sup> through his poetry.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

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4. Sulloway Alison. Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Victorian Temper. Eds. Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd. ( London 1972 ) pg 7.
5. School held on sunday now only for religious instructions, and usually attached to parish or Church congregation. ( The Readers Digest Great Encyclopaedic Dictionary. Vol. 2. 1964 ) pg 84.
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7. Promoter of Tractarianism. 19th c. English High-church movement ( later called the Oxford Movement intended to revive true conception of the relation of the Church.

of England to the Catholic Church based on a series of tracts for the Times by Newman Pusey and others,  
( source:-The Readers Digest Encyclopedic Dictionary ).

9. The Church that runs on the principles of Catholicism.  
( Source :- Ibid )

10. Its principles are salvations through Church, forgiveness through mortal man and Pope's authority equivalent to God. ( Source.. Ibid )

11. Christian Churches or bodies that repudiated papal authority and were seperated from Roman Communion in the reformation ( 16th Century ) ( Source.. Ibid)

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