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Rhyming with an Absent God: Gerard Manley Hopkins' Sonnets of Desolation

J.T. Jackson

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Abstract:

This essay considers how Gerard Manley Hopkins' views on aesthetics apply to his six "Terrible Sonnets" or "Sonnets of Desolation" (written in 1885). For Hopkins, beauty is always a relation between two distinct entities (or two distinct parts of the same entity) which are similar to one another. He believed their similarities and differences harmonise to create beauty, which he describes metaphorically as rhyme. However, Hopkins also saw beauty as dependent on God: God's infinite complexity gives every finite creation an individual distinctness while connecting them all as his personal handiwork, fulfilling the conditions for beauty. So integral is God to beauty that to Hopkins all artistic endeavour becomes an attempt to harmonise with him; the artist remains an individual yet seeks to attune themselves to God. This essay examines how God's apparent silence and distance during Hopkins' time in Dublin obstructed this artistic and personal need to harmonise with him. By losing his sense of God's immediateness, Hopkins lost the foundation which allowed him to appreciate beauty and produce art, causing the feeling of helpless desolation which the Terrible Sonnets express. Nevertheless, a close reading of such sonnets as "Carrion Comfort" and "Patience" reveals that Hopkins found ways of overcoming this problem by harmonising with those divine qualities demonstrated by God's apparent absence. As "Carrion Comfort" devolves into a tormented cry, that cry echoes Christ's similar experience of separation from God, introducing the strategy of using God's distance itself as a means of harmonising with him. "Patience" then develops this, focusing on a temporal virtue analogous to the specific divine quality which is evidenced by God's silence. Overall, any resolution in the Terrible Sonnets comes from accepting God's distance, rather than rediscovering the sense of his immanence. Crucially, this acceptance involves attuning oneself to God's silence in the same way one would attune oneself to his overt presence. Hopkins eventually applies his conception of beauty to the situation in which God has placed him, rhyming with God's absence instead of resisting it.

In 1865 Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote “On the Origin of Beauty”, a Platonic dialogue arguing that all beauty is a relation of similarity and difference between two things; metaphorically, it is rhyme. While it is unreasonable to hold Hopkins to his undergraduate self’s poetics, this dialogue usefully illuminates his later poetry. Indeed, its central principle of combining similarity and difference is often said to underly his work, whether it be termed “parallelism” (Raiger 66), “differentiation” (Page 25) or “rhyme” (Miller 281). For Hopkins the priest, this rhyming beauty is dependent on God, whose transcendence forms a basis of similarity for creation and whose infiniteness generates its diversity. Appreciating or creating finite beauty becomes for Hopkins a means of reflecting the divine, of rhyming with God by attuning oneself to his transcendent complexity while remaining an individual. After discussing God’s place in Hopkins’ aesthetics (using “Spelt from Sibyl’s Leaves” as illustration), I will consider how he applied his principle of rhyme to the six “Terrible Sonnets”, or “Sonnets of Desolation”, written when God felt too distant to be used as an aesthetic touchstone. Focusing on three sonnets, I will argue that any sense of resolution depends on Hopkins finding ways of rhyming with God’s remoteness. “I wake and feel” demonstrates that God’s distance has reached an unrhymable level; “Carrion Comfort” can only mitigate this distance by evoking the dying Christ, the only time God also experienced God’s absence; “Patience, hard thing!” finally expresses acceptance, as the poet matches the quality of stillness which God’s absence embodies. Rather than insisting that God’s immediateness is necessary for their harmony, Hopkins learns to attune himself to an absent God’s qualities.

“On the Origin of Beauty” presents the undergraduate Hopkins’ theory of aesthetics. It argues that beauty depends on combining regularity and irregularity, using examples such as a chestnut fan, which is more beautiful with seven leaves than six, as “less markedly symmetrical” (“Oxford Essays” 138), but conversely becomes less beautiful when “the symmetry is destroyed” completely (140). Symmetry, Hopkins argues, is regularity, the continuation of a quality at stable intervals (139). Regularity itself denotes similarity of either two individually irregular things or two parts of one thing (141). Therefore, since beauty “is a mixture of regularity and irregularity” (140), it is the existence of similarity and difference together. Hopkins’ tidy formulation is that “beauty may by a metaphor be called rhyme” (153)—a metaphor I will also use—combining tonal similarity with essential difference.

Beauty is therefore "a relation" (145), not an inherent or fixed quality, and depends on comparison.

Hopkins' late sonnet "Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves" then shows that any such comparison cannot create beauty without God. This poem's portrayal of a transcendent evening connects it to God. Like him, the evening is overwhelmingly vast—"vaulty, voluminous, . . . stupendous" (1)—and simultaneously unified and complex, seeming "equal" (1) and capable of homogeneity, as Paul Mariani notes (200), but also "Fíre-féaturing" ("Spelt" 5)[1]. Despite the sonnet's "clear hellish overtones" (Sobolev 67), the evening's characterisation is inconsistent with hellishness, being "[e]arnest" ("Spelt" 1) and a "bleak light" against which earthly things are "black" (9). Though it "whélms, whélms, ánd will end" the speaker (8) this seems only a consequence of its vastness, a quality of God as much as Hell. Evening is then contrasted with the speckled earth, whose "dapple is at an end" (5) under its influence. At the volta, the "heterogeneity of the world" (Sobolev 154) intrudes on the evening's transcendence when the speaker notices "beak-leaved boughs" which "damask" the sky (9). Analysing this heterogeneity, the speaker claims life's "skéined stained véined varíety" (11) can be divided into its constituent parts of "right [and] wrong" (12). Catherine Phillips argues this shows "dappled beauty as a misleading veil over the reality of moral absolutes" (x); more accurately, these dapples are the tangled absolutes themselves. Consequently, "Sibyl's Leaves" portrays a world of contrasts blocking the speaker's view of Godly vastness.

This binary then becomes dangerous by rhyming without God. Variety is normally a sign of beauty for Hopkins—"Glory be to God for dappled things" ("Pied Beauty" 1)—but here this variety is dangerous. The monstrously "dragonish" branches (9) are "black / Ever so black" (9-10) adulterations of the sky. They trap the speaker in a world one must be "wáre" of because, without God, only right and wrong matter (13). Those balancing elements, "black, white; | right, wrong" (12), could rhyme, being similar (as extremities) and different (as opposites). However, their relationship only creates a "rack" where "thóughts agaínst thoughts ín groans grínd" (14), in contrast to the "attuneable" evening (1) with its harmony (Hampsey 226). Jill Muller claims this represents the "moralist" defeating the "aesthete" in Hopkins (85) but being torn between good and evil is hardly moralism. Though the binary cannot represent Hell where evil prevails, as Dennis Sobolev argues (150), it equally cannot

[1] Poetry quotations are from the Penguin Classics edition, *Poems and Prose*. Line numbers are specified.

contain God or good would predominate. Thus, aesthetic harmony is lost because God is obscured. As Sobolev puts it, the "moral opposites are unable to redirect the mind from them to God […] they point only to each other" (155). "Sibyl's Leaves" demonstrates that rhyming, generally the crux of beauty, becomes a discordant clash when God is not involved.

Therefore, for Hopkins the comparisons that create beauty only work with reference to God. "On the Origin of Beauty" states that "any two things, however unlike, have something in common, if only we take a wide enough basis of comparison" (157). A Supreme Being naturally provides this basis by uniting everything into the category of his creation. God becomes the background against which Hopkins views created things, so beauty can proceed from noticing differences between them. This is why David Urban states, "[f]or Hopkins, the ordering of nature's various discordant elements is dependent on God alone" (49). God connects all created things but crucially he also keeps them individualised enough to meaningfully harmonise. Despite being "past change" (Hopkins "Pied Beauty" 10), Hopkins considers God the origin of all finite diversity because he is vast enough to encompass it without compromising his unity. As J. Hillis Miller identifies, Hopkins believed God's "pattern is infinitely complex" (272), allowing his finite creations to contrast with one another. Essentially, if God's unity were such that his essence were one quality repeated ad infinitum, then he could be defined from one instance of that quality. One creation could be a copy of his uniformity, making him reducible to finiteness and therefore less than God. Each finite creature, manifesting a sliver of the divine potentiality, must contrast with other finite creatures because (paradoxically) no two parts of the consistent, unified creator are alike. Therefore, God's vastness necessarily provides the differences (as well as the similarities) required for Hopkins' conception of beauty. As "beauty's self and beauty's giver" (Hopkins, "The Golden Echo" 19), God is integral to all facets of beauty. Beauty must be defined and described with reference to him.

Consequently, God becomes a participant in the rhyme of finite beauty. His complexity generates finite variety, explaining Philip Ballinger's claim that "the self-expressiveness of a thing" is also "where the Divine may be met" (5) because each particular represents a fragment of God's capacity. Juxtaposing particulars then goes some way towards revealing God's complexity, because diversity is the finite quality nearest to infiniteness. In "On the Origin of Beauty", Hopkins wrote that "two terms of parallelism make a whole of beauty, but these wholes again may be the terms of a higher whole" (167), suggesting the

highest whole of all, the infinitely complex God, would see creation as an aggregate of related particulars. Therefore, perceiving the comparisons which create beauty is perceiving things as the transcendent God sees them. As Bernadette Ward claims, for Hopkins art's main purpose is opening a relationship with God (449), which explains this focus on conforming to God's perspective. Apprehending beauty establishes a similarity with God, who encompasses both art and artistry.

Corresponding to this similarity, Hopkins focuses on individuality to establish a difference with God, allowing them to rhyme. Extreme divergence from God would be sinful but merely not being the same entity as him is enough for harmony. It is the same principle "On the Origin of Beauty" applies to poetic rhythm: two feet have "the same sequence of accentuation" but are different simply through being "different word[s]" (153). This differentiation then gives Hopkins a loving harmonisation with Christ, whereby their caress brings "union" but "requires the two [participants] to remain two" (Dau 11). Correspondingly, Hopkins believed God becoming flesh endorsed this individualised human existence. If Hopkins' poetry "embodies the period's turn to lived experience" (Viragh 519), it only does so because Hopkins knew he had "lived experience" in common with Jesus. Hence, Hopkins writes that at death, "I am all at once what Christ is | since he was what I am" ("That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire" 22). Essentially, because Christ established the similarity of having particularised, human existence, humans can gain eternal spiritual similarity with him. To Hopkins, instead of assimilating humans God found a way of rhyming with them, leaving humans the task of rhyming with him in return.

However, to adjust oneself to reflect God requires his visibility, so any absence raises problems. Such a situation sparked Hopkins' Terrible Sonnets, which express his overwhelming sense of spiritual separation from God (Muller 86). This perceived internal separation left Hopkins no basis to perceive external beauty. As Maria Lichtmann notes, he believed "God [cannot] be found mediately in the things of this world if He could not first be found immediately in [Hopkins'] own heart" (430). Essentially, if the poet cannot attune himself to God then he has no foundation upon which to create or appreciate beauty. The sonnets veer from desolate anguish ("Carrion Comfort", "No worst", "I wake and feel") to uneasy acceptance ("To seem the stranger", "Patience", "My own heart"), but the issue of Hopkins' isolation never truly disappears, leaving all harmony disrupted by the absence of a God to rhyme with.

That God's distance leaves Hopkins unable to find a basis of similarity is illustrated by "I wake and feel". As its speaker wallows in "the fell of dark" (1), his separation from God's illuminating presence is ascribed to his physicality: he cries, "I am gall, I am heartburn" (9). The body is the self's most obviously finite part; "this breathing body is my corpse" already, as Hopkins preached (Sermons 245). This finiteness makes it the aspect of the speaker most clearly different from God, the furthest element from his unchanging perfection. Since "the lost" are "their sweating selves" (13-14), physicality is even associated with damnability because it takes a body to sweat. However, the damned are still "worse" than the speaker (14), highlighting the Terrible Sonnets' recurring belief that regaining harmony with God might be possible. Accordingly, Mariaconcetta Costantini argues Hopkins "seems to configure a struggle between I and not-I" in this sonnet and "expresses rejection of the not-I" despite being "trapped" in its mortality (277-278). Thus, Hopkins is aware of his state and his need to overcome it, though disabled by his terrible sense of God's distance. It is how to rhyme with God under these circumstances that the Terrible Sonnets grapple with.

Like the "dead letters" (7) of "I wake and feel", "Carrion Comfort" becomes another failed attempt to call to God. Its speaker struggles to address him, speaking first to "Despair" (1) and then ambiguously to "thou terrible" (5). Critics such as Sobolev (192-193), Mariani (231) and Ann Louise Hentz (344) claim "thou terrible" is God, but when it appears there is no indication it is anything other than "thee" (1), or despair. Despair is already tormenting the speaker, so there is nothing surprising about it now "rock[ing]" him "rude[ly]" (5-6), and Hopkins is unlikely to be "frantic to avoid thee and flee" (8) if "thee" is God. Though "surely not Despair but God would be seeking to purify the poet" (Rose 213), a distant God could use despair as a tool to purify the speaker, leaving God himself unaddressed. Hopkins even draws attention to this distinction between tool and wielder by correcting himself from "rod" to "Hand" (10-11). This leaves all unequivocal references to God in the third person, as "the hero" (12), until the final line's sudden, passionate "(my God!)". This ambiguous phrase, "daringly multiple in implication" (Dubois 77), has been variously interpreted as "a gasp of recognition" (Raiger 79) of "the real nature of the two contenders" (Mariani 233) or as showing "the horror of the speaker in the recognition of what he is doing" (Hentz 347), although the speaker should have immediately recognised the "heaven-handling" "hero" (12) and is evidently not too horrified to finish his sentence. Instead of depending on subjective intuitions about what exclamation marks denote, it seems best to treat the ambiguity as deliberate. The speaker passionately cries out to God; that is all we can say. Thus, the

sonnet's only direct address to God is a final, formless call, drawing attention to God's overall absence and reframing the poem as an abortive cry for attention. If the poem's language indicates "a proximity to prayer" as Martin Dubois argues (77), then the desperation of "(my God!)" as the sonnet shuts off the speaker's voice demonstrates this praying's failure. God's absence manifests as silence, so all the speaker can do is inarticulately protest that he seems not to be listening.

This silence is reflected in the sonnet's lack of clear resolution. The one thing critics agree on is that "Carrion Comfort" is full of vague uncertainties: "apparent inconsistencies and puzzling ambiguities which are hard to ignore" (Rose 208). Individual words, particularly "seems" (10), are ambiguous while commas around sub-clauses like "that coil" (10) and "Hand rather" (11) obscure pre-existing punctuation, making sentences harder to parse. Even the sonnet's conclusion is a source of debate: Mariani claims Hopkins is "finally bending to God's will" (233), Alan Rose claims he is "unable to accept God's right to discipline him" (212) while Sobolev claims he is undecided about submission (194-195). Similarly, the sonnet form is perverted to deny any resolution. A point/counterpoint structure naturally fits the Petrarchan form, but here both octave and sestet are split in two to contain a positive resolution followed by anguished questioning. The first quatrain's certainty is challenged by a miniature volta: "But ah" (5). As one would expect, this challenge is answered in the sestet's first line: "That my chaff might fly" (9). A surge of internal rhyming—"Why", "my", "might fly", "lie"; "sheer and clear"; "toil", "coil" (9-10)—then promises the harmony a sonnet's ending should provide. However, soon "(seems)" (10) and a hasty correction from "rod" to "Hand" (10-11) are diminishing this confidence as the speaker becomes suspicious of his "stole[n] joy" (11). The first tercet's final word, "chéer" (11), then sparks explicit doubts and questions. These are ultimately caused by the volta's answer, which claims the speaker's torment was for his benefit and thereby problematises any resistance. Thus, the sonnet grows less resolved as it progresses. It knows that a volta should usher in resolution but its volta can only briefly resist the tide of uncertainty. As Sobolev argues, line nine fails to console the speaker because his torment continues into the following lines (193). The form's powerlessness matches the speaker's, whose inability to tell whom his heart cheers (12-13) demonstrates a frustratingly conscious lack of self-knowledge. Philip Page claims this inability "implies that God and self were intermingled" (27-28), "exactly the state [the speaker] has been desiring" (28), but the possibility that he only cheered himself remains valid. The speaker's final question, asking if his heart cheered both him and God, goes

unanswered, denying the affirmation Page asserts. Even the final sentence can only specify the scene and circumstances of his torment. Critics sometimes claim this final line proves "the sonnet is spoken from a position of recovery" (Dubois 77) since it refers to "now done darkness" ("Carrion Comfort" 14). However, if the speaker cheered "me that fought" God (13) then the "chaff" (9) of rebelliousness remains in him. It may be "a gloomy memory" now (Costantini 279) but if chaff persists then the torment was meaningless; the issue is not solved by its being past. With the final line becoming a resigned statement of context, the sonnet's lack of definite answers reflects God's silence.

However, a hint of resolution comes from rhyming with Christ's similar experience of Godless torment. Glenn Hughes claims "Hopkins interpreted his desolation and depression as a mode of sharing in Christ's suffering" in the Terrible Sonnets (57). Accordingly, Hopkins' closing cry, "(my God!) my God" (14), parallels Christ's "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" from the cross (Matt. 27:46). Miller claims this reveals whom the speaker's heart cheered as "both God and man are cheered by the sinner's transformation into Christ" (347). However, this overstates their equivalence; while Christ's "My God, my God" is balanced, Hopkins deliberately contrasts his two cries with different functions and punctuation. Crucially, Hopkins' cry rhymes with Christ's, being similar but with noticeable differences. Moreover, Hopkins and the dying Christ share more than just "human suffering" (Raiger 83). Jesus (God the Son) crying "why have you forsaken me" signifies the one moment when God experienced the absence of God. Hopkins harmonises with the only time when God apparently matched his current isolation. Hence, any resolution at the end of "Carrion Comfort" comes from Hopkins finding a way to rhyme with God without overcoming his sense of separation. Trapped without God's illumination, the speaker's cry devolves into formless desperation, but that very cry suggests a solution to the Terrible Sonnets' problem. Rather than first seeking to overcome their distance, Hopkins can look for a means of rhyming with God in a way that employs his apparent absence.

This receives its fullest realisation in "Patience, hard thing!". In that sonnet, the speaker asks for patience as a divine quality which harmonises with God. The imagery of jagged, earthly "beak-leaved boughs" intruding on the smooth sky in "Sibyl's Leaves" (9) is inverted by patience, which is "[n]atural heart's ivy" ("Patience" 6), smoothing over the self's jagged landscape (6-7). Patience thus brings the speaker in closer harmony with the divine and helps subdue the imperfect self. He "who asks" for patience (2), "[w]ants war,

wants wounds" (3) since "patience roots in" such trials and nowhere else (4-5). Therefore, asking for patience effectively becomes asking for opportunities to test patience. In a sense, the speaker is asking for more of the things he finds hard to bear. At the very least, he is not asking for his tribulations to be removed (which he presumably wants on some level). Andrew Hodgson claims "Hopkins's phrasing […] expounds an uncynical trust in the immediacy of God's benevolence" (109) but the speaker knows this benevolence is not a blank cheque. Accordingly, he does not quite ask for what his self wants but submits to his providential situation.

The resulting association between patience and godliness extends to characterising Christ as the one who is patient. The sonnet asks, "where is he who more and more distils / Delicious kindness?" (12-13), distinguishing the speaker who implicitly needs patience from this man, who "is patient" (13). The speaker only ever uses the first-person plural; as Melissa Tuckman notes, this is the only Terrible Sonnet without the word "I" (378). Consequently, Hopkins speaks on behalf of people generally, making this one individual exceptional. Patience "comes those ways we know" to the man (14), suggesting it is knowledge the speaker should act on and further distinguishing this man by making him an example for Hopkins' group. Thus, this exemplary individual with ever-growing kindness begins to look like Christ. He is not named but neither is "dearest him" in "I wake and feel" (8), who is generally considered Jesus. Most conclusively, the speaker asks "where" this man is ("Patience" 12). There would be no need to know where a hypothetical patient Christian was; so long as one knew how they were patient they could model patience in absentia. Conversely, divine "immanence" was "a keynote of all [Hopkins'] poetry" (Lichtmann 430), so Christ's location—present or absent—is more significant. Since the Terrible Sonnets express the painful sense of Christ's absence, asking "where" an unnamed individual is immediately brings him to mind.

Crucially, this question also reveals that Christ's absence is a sign of the patience Christians should emulate. Asking where Jesus is indicates his separation from the speaker and the simple answer, "He is patient" (13), suggests that he is patiently somewhere else, where he will stay. Christ will not approach unnecessarily, meaning patience denotes a lack of frantic haste, especially in this poem where, as Tuckman argues, "'Patience' becomes, bizarrely, a synonym for aesthetic distraction, an idleness indulgently prolonged 'all day'" (379). Yet because human patience responds to unavoidable obstacles, meekly "obey[ing]"

("Patience" 4), Christ's (God's) patience must be different. As Tuckman also notes, since "there are no hardships in heaven" God cannot really be "long-suffering" or patient (375). Given his ability to remove frustrations at will, calling God patient here suggests his patience is chosen stillness, or apparent absence, which humans can harmonise with by being temporally patient. Hence, when "Patience fills / [Christ's] crisp combs" (13-14), it is there for metaphorical beekeepers to collect but must also have come from metaphorical flowers. The metaphor suggests that as God is "beauty's giver" to whom we must "[g]ive beauty back" ("The Golden Echo" 19), so does he practise patience, bestow it on those who ask for it and then graciously collect it again. As Miller says of Hopkins' poetry, "All things flow from God and flow back to God" (303). Divine stillness should inspire an analogous human patience.

This establishes a way of rhyming with God's absence, relating to him and emulating his virtues even when he is obscured. In another sonnet, the speaker protests, "Comforter, where, where is your comforting?" ("No worst" 3). However, when God chooses to be still he cannot be questioned into motion, only attuned to with human patience. The later speaker's calm "He is patient" ("Patience" 13) implies a patient acceptance of Christ's patient distance. Thus, the speaker pursues a virtue similar to a currently prominent quality in God but slightly different due to God's infiniteness, combining similarity and difference to harmonise with God. This is why Jane Wright claims these "sonnets can appear to demonstrate that sometimes, if one's search is rigorous, to seek without resolution is resolution enough" (196-197). God's absence is unresolved but it is no longer cause for anguish. The speaker knows he must strive for patience, so he can wait like God, and knows "those ways" it "comes" (14); his course is plain. "Patience" helps resolve the six Terrible Sonnets by demonstrating how to harmoniously, virtuously rhyme with God's absence.

The sense of isolation which sparked Gerard Manley Hopkins' Terrible Sonnets, "at a thírd / Remove" from family and culture ("To seem the stranger" 9), was most debilitatingly felt in relation to God, who seemed distant and silent. Hopkins' sense of the relationship between God and self was inextricably tied to his sense of beauty, and his sense of beauty depended on appreciating the interplay between similarities and differences, both of which depended on the transcendent, complex God. Without God as this recurring touchstone, Hopkins felt not only unable to attune himself to God but to appreciate beauty generally. Accepting God's remoteness helps diminish it by conforming one's will to God's, leading

Hopkins to acknowledge that God's presence will only be felt at "unforeseen times" ("My own heart" 12). This is why sonnets like "Carrion Comfort" and "Patience" use God's absence as a rhyming touchstone. If the Terrible Sonnets are an artist's attempt to find a way to harmonise with God when he feels absent, then their solution is to harmonise with those qualities of God which are currently causing his absence.

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* Though also cited in the essay itself, Miller's chapter on Hopkins is worth singling out as a brilliant and oft-cited examination of how Hopkins' faith and aesthetics interrelate.