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# SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION IN THE POEMS OF GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS AND ITS RESONANCE IN SU SHI, THE CHINESE POET

## 杰拉德·曼利·霍普金斯诗歌中的灵修转变及 其与中国诗人苏轼的共鸣

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### Abstract

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889) is regarded as a great Victorian poet and arguably the most famous among Jesuit poets. Scholars in general believe he was deeply influenced by the *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius* as a Jesuit priest and his poems reflect Ignatian spirit. Hence, during this Ignatian year (20 May, 2021---31 July, 2022) it is appropriate to explore certain Ignatian insights from some of his poems, focusing on the theme of spiritual transformation. The five sections of this article are: (1) Introduction: Early initiation to the pleasure of poetry in a Jesuit school; (2) Spiritual transformation from a Christian perspective; 3) Life of Gerard Manley Hopkins; (4) Excerpts of Hopkins showing his friendship with Jesus; (5) Conclusion: Resonance in Su Shi, a Chinese poet

## Introduction: My early initiation to the pleasure of poetry

In my youth while studying in Wah Yan College, a Catholic school in Hong Kong, I was fascinated by Fr. Patrick Grogan, an Irish Jesuit, reading or reciting poems in Poetry class once a week. His facial expression, tone of voice and articulation somehow captured my attention, before I understood what they were all about. What a delightful experience! I simply enjoyed listening to the beautiful sounds and rhythms of the poems as he read or recited them to the whole class. Later came his explanation, which further enhanced my understanding and appreciation. Little did I know I was initiated to beauty and truth through poetry. I still remember the poems he taught us, like "You are old, Father William" by Lewis Carroll, with fun and humor, and "I see His Blood upon the Rose" by Joseph Mary Plunket, a poem about seeing Christ in nature. He also introduced us to sonnets of Gerard Manley Hopkins like "God's Grandeur" and "Pied Beauty".

In one of his sermons, Hopkins wrote, "...The Holy Ghost makes of every Christian another Christ, an AfterChrist, lives a million lives in every age; is the courage of the martyrs, the wisdom of the doctors, the purity of the virgins; is breathed into each at baptism..."

## Spiritual transformation from a Christian perspective

Spiritual transformation is achieved mainly through God's grace. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to convert a sinner into a saint. Human effort alone is not sufficient to change a person. It takes divine grace to transform a person into Christ. In one of his sermons, Hopkins wrote, "...The Holy Ghost makes of every Christian another Christ, an AfterChrist, lives a million lives in every age; is the courage of the martyrs, the wisdom of the doctors, the purity of the virgins; is breathed into each at baptism...". (Lichtmann, M. R., 1989) Jesus Christ, Son of God, came from His Father. After dying on the cross, he was raised to life on the third day by the Father. Transformation into Christ is an ongoing process and the way back to the Father.

### Life of Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J.

Hopkins was born in Stratford, the eldest among eight children. Since childhood he loved sketching, music, poetry and classical literature. He won a scholarship in Balliol College of Oxford University, and studied ancient history, philosophy, literature, Greek and Latin. After four years he graduated with honors.

In 1866, after much prayer and reflection, especially on the Real Presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, he was received into the Catholic Church by John Henry Newman, his mentor in faith, who wrote to him, while discerning about his vocation, "Do not call the Jesuit discipline hard; it will bring you to heaven." Hopkins entered the Jesuit novitiate in 1868 and took his first vows two years later. He studied Philosophy for three years and after a year of regency and three years of Theology, he was ordained to the priesthood in 1877. After four

years of pastoral service in Oxford, Sheffield and Liverpool, Hopkins took his final vows in 1882. In 1884 he was sent to teach Classics and Greek in Dublin University until he died of typhoid fever in 1889.

Excerpts from the poems of Hopkins showing his friendship with Jesus

“I greet him the day I meet him and bless  
when I understand.”

-- *The Wreck of the Deutschland*

To meet Jesus unexpectedly for Hopkins means to result in understanding and blessing or praise.

“Man is created to praise, reverence and serve our God and Lord.”

(The Principle and Foundation in the Spiritual Exercises)

The life direction and motivation for Hopkins can be summarized in “Man is created to praise.” Hence, he begins his poem *Pied Beauty* with “Glory be to God” and ends it with “Praise him.” Similarly, he dedicated *The Windhover* “To Christ our Lord”.

Hopkins depicts the first sin committed by the angels. They lost grace and fell from heaven into the depth of hell.

“Angels fall, they are towers, from heaven-  
-a story

Of just, majestical, and giant groans.”

-- *The Shepherd’s Brow*

Adam and Eve committed the second sin, because of pride and disobedience against God, causing death to humanity.

“What is all this juice and all this joy?  
A strain of the earth’s sweet being in the  
beginning

In Eden garden--Have, get, before it cloy,  
Before it cloud, Christ, lord, and sour with  
sinning.”

-- *Spring*

“Lovely the woods, waters, meadows,  
combes, vales,  
All the air things wear that build this  
world of Wales;  
Only the inmate does not correspond...”

-- *In the Valley of Elwy*

Hopkins was aware of his own sins as a turning away from God:

“Once I turned from thee and hid,  
Bound on what thou hast forbid:  
Sow the wind I would; I sinned:  
I repent of what I did”

-- *Thee, God, I come from*

To repent is the first step towards growth and transformation. Gregory of Nyssa said sin is refusal to keep growing. Heaven rejoices when a sinner repents!

“Christ minds...”

Their ransom, their rescue, and first, fast,  
last friend.”

-- *The Lantern out of doors*

The poet describes how on seeing a lantern in the dark outside, he wonders where it is going, and shows his faith. Despite human pride, selfishness and disobedience, Christ sacrifices himself on the cross for love of us and saves us from sin and death. The Third Week of the *Spiritual Exercises* emphasizes on Christ who comes to redeem us. No wonder in *The Wreck of the Deutschland* Hopkins hailed Christ as “hero of Calvary” and adored him as “the Master, King, Head.” He addresses Christ as “Hero, holiest, loveliest, bravest” in *The Bugler’s First Communion*. He challenges us to see Christ at play in our brothers and sisters:

“---for Christ plays in ten thousand places,  
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his  
To the Father through the features of  
men’s faces.”

-- *As kingfishers catch fire*

“In a flash, at a trumpet crash,  
I am all at once what Christ is, since he

was what I am, and  
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch,  
matchwood, immortal  
diamond,

Is immortal diamond.

--*That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and  
of the Comfort of the Resurrection*

At the Last Judgement, Hopkins believes he will be like Christ, because Christ was what he is. "In his 'immortal diamond,' Hopkins has discovered an image that resonates throughout mystical literature, most notably in Teresa of Avila, who compares divinity to a very clear diamond symbolizing 'how all things are seen in God and how He contains all things within Him.'" (Lichtmann, M. R. 1989, p. 212) Hopkins found meaning and healing for all his pain and agony because Christ has conquered sin and death through His resurrection.

"Those years and years by of world  
without event  
That in Majorca Alfonso watched the  
door."

--*In honor of St. Alphonsus Rodriguez*

The example of this simple Jesuit brother who just "watched the door" and attained sanctity reminded Hopkins of a priest saying: "a great part of life to the holiest of men consists in the well performance...of ordinary duties." (Lichtmann, M. R., 2002, p.45)

Towards the last few years of his life, from 1885 to 1889, Hopkins suffered from deep depression. During this period of desolation, he wrote what were later referred to as "terrible sonnets", like *No worst there is none*, *To seem the stranger, and Thou art indeed just, Lord.*

To seem the stranger lies my lot, my life  
Among strangers. Father and mother  
dear,  
Brothers and sisters are in Christ not near

And he my peace my parting, sword and  
strife.

--*To seem the stranger*

Hopkins felt like a stranger in a strange land in Ireland. "He was never at home in Dublin, and he knew none of the Jesuits in the Irish Province." (Lichtmann, M.R., 2002, p. 47) Alienated from his family members and country, he bore the monotony of teaching, preaching, grading hundreds of examination papers...all the while, God seemed so silent and distant. Hopkins died in bed on 8 June 1889 saying, "I am so happy: I am so happy." Apparently, he passed away in consolation, after much purification and suffering in life. He was in union with Christ finally.

Conclusion: Resonance in Su Shi, a Chinese poet

Of all the Chinese poets, Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037—1101) is perhaps the most popular. He lived towards the end of the Song dynasty, a man of integrity and creativity, with charm, and multiple talents: a poet, painter, calligrapher, magistrate, wine brewer, champion of the oppressed, an essayist and engineer. Professor Lin Yutong has these words of admiration for this great poet: "... the life of a great and human mind and spirit, as they took temporary shape on this earth, Su Tungpo died and his name is a memory, but he has left behind for all of us the joys of his spirit and the pleasures of his mind, and these are imperishable." (Lin, Y, 1948, p.343)

The following are just two of his poems:  
水調歌頭

丙辰中秋，歡飲達旦，大醉，作  
此篇，兼懷子由

明月幾時有  
把酒問青天  
不知天上宮闕  
今夕是何年  
我欲乘風歸去

惟恐瓊樓玉宇  
 高處不勝寒  
 起舞弄清影  
 何似在人間  
  
 轉朱閣  
 低綺戶  
 照無眠  
 不應有恨，何事長向別時圓  
 人有悲歡離合  
 月有陰晴圓缺  
 此事古難全  
 但願人長久  
 千里共嬋娟

Towards the last few years of his life, from 1885 to 1889, Hopkins suffered from deep depression.... Hopkins died in bed on 8 June 1889 saying, 'I am so happy: I am so happy.' Apparently, he passed away in consolation, after much purification and suffering in life. He was in union with Christ finally.

She rounds the vermillion tower,  
 Stoops to silk-pad-doors,  
 Shines on those who sleepless lie.  
 Why does she, bearing us no grudge,  
 Shine upon our parting, reunion deny?  
 But rare is perfect happiness--  
 The moon does wax, the moon does wane,  
 And so men meet and say goodbye.  
 I only pray our life be long,  
 And our souls together heavenward fly!  
 (Lin Y., 1993, pp, 117-121)

The great poet was demoted and banished to various places like Hangchow, Michow, Suchow, Tengchow, Yangchow and Hainan. He bore no grudge against his oppressors, and could poke fun at them in writing the following verse:

人皆養子望聰明，  
 我被聰明誤一生，  
 惟願孩兒愚且魯，  
 無災無難到公卿。

"All people wish their children to be brilliant, But I have suffered from brilliance all my life. May you, my son, grow up dumb and stupid, And, free from calamities, end up as a premier."

(Lin Y., 1948, p. 192)



#### *Mid-Autumn Festival, to the Tune of Shiutiaoketou:*

How rare the moon, so round and clear!  
 With cup in hand, I ask of the blue sky,  
 "I do not know in the celestial sphere  
 What name this festive night goes by?"  
 I want to fly home, riding the air,  
 But fear the ethereal cold up there,  
 The jade and crystal mansions are so high!  
 Dancing to my shadow,  
 I feel no longer the mortal tie.

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