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Milton's Influence on Hopkins' Style

Kumiko Suwa

Gerard Manley Hopkins is known as the poet who is prominent in new rhythm — sprung rhythm. Sprung rhythm, however, is not his invention, which he himself mentions in his letters, but mostly found in Anglo-Saxon poetry. This means that it is not a new rhythm at all but almost forgotten in the process of metrical devices in English poetry. Hopkins notices that sprung rhythm is the primitive form of English poetry and the natural and native rhythm of speech for English tongue. As a student of classics and etymology, he has a well-sharpened sense of language. This distinguishes him from the modern poets who like free verse as Walt Whitman, whose poetry Hopkins feels both sympathy for and antipathy against.

There are major two poets whom Hopkins admires as the masters of English poetry — William Shakespeare and John Milton. As Professor Shimane well points out, Shakespeare influenced Hopkins with his use of monosyllables and consonants.¹ While Shakespeare's style is masculine and Germanic, Milton's is feminine and Latinate because he consciously uses vowels and Latin words. Hopkins is influenced by the two poets who have contrastive characteristics. This essay focuses on Milton's influence on Hopkins' poetics. In metrics and style, Hopkins is especially influenced by Milton's use of counterpoint. Hopkins describes the choruses in *Samson Agonistes* as 'intermediate between counterpointed and sprung rhythm' (*LB*, 45). Hopkins bears some resemblance to the artists in the

baroque period—not only Milton and the Metaphysical poets in the field of poetry but also Henry Purcell and J. S. Bach in music. This is connected with his idea of counterpoint, of which, Hopkins thinks, Milton's style is the best example.

I

Hopkins wrote to Robert Bridges on the sonnet 'Andromeda' (1879):

I endeavoured in it at a more Miltonic plainness and severity than I have anywhere else. I cannot say it has turned out severe, still less plain, but it seems almost free from quaintness and in aiming at one excellence I may have hit another. (LB, 87)

Hopkins' sonnets follow Petrarchan (Italian) Sonnet form, which is divided into octave and sestet, as Milton's sonnets do. 'Andromeda' is no exception:

NOW Time's Andromeda on this rock rude,
With not her either beauty's equal or
Her injury's, looks off by both horns of shore,
Her flower, her piece of being, doomed dragon food.

Time past she has been attempted and pursued
By many blows and banes; but now hears roar
A wilder beast from West than all were, more
Rife in her wrongs, more lawless, and more lewd.

Here Perseus linger and leave her to her extremes? —
Pillowy air he treads a time and hangs
His thoughts on her, forsaken that she seems,

All while her patience, morselled into pangs,
Mounts; then to alight disarming, no one dreams,
With Gorgon's gear and barebill / thongs fangs.²

Most of the words used here are not Latinate but Germanic origin. This means that they are not poetic cliché but have natural and native sounds for the English. The theme of Greek myth is rare in Hopkins poems, which ensures that Hopkins was conscious of Milton's lofty style used in the poems with the theme of Greek myth and the Bible. Hopkins' ideal of poetic language is mentioned in the same letter to Bridges, in which he wrote about 'Andromeda':

For it seems to me that the poetical language of an age shd. be the current language heightened, to any degree heightened and unlike itself, but not ... an obsolete one. This is Shakespeare's and Milton's practice and the want of it will be fatal to Tennyson's Idylls and plays, to Swinburn, and perhaps to Morris. (LB, 89)

'The current language heightened' is Hopkins' ideal of the poetic language. Thus he did not like both Wordsworth's current but too simple language and Tennyson's heightened but obsolete poetic language.³ Hopkins' ideal in art always tends to via media of Platonic ideal, but his poems do not seem to be balanced at first sight for his use of neologism and metrics. Hopkins recognized it in saying that 'in aiming at one excellence I may have hit another', but in fact he is always conscious of metrical excellence unlike the poets of free verse. This must be Hopkins' idiosyncrasy and uniqueness.

Metrically the sonnet seems regular within each quatrain and tercet in the number of stress, but the rhythm is not ordinary iambic. It is noticeable that most of the lines have the stresses which come first. Hopkins explains this rhythm in 'Author's Preface':

... [F]or purposes of scanning it is a great convenience to follow the example of music and take the stress always first, as the accent or the chief accent always comes first

in a musical bar. If this is done there will be in common English verse only two possible feet — the so-called accentual Trochee and Dactyl, and correspondingly only two possible uniform rhythms, the so-called Trochaic and Dactylic. But they may be mixed and then what the Greeks called a Logaodic Rhythm arises. (Poems, 45)

The stress which comes first is used in the opening line, which is worthy to attract listeners to this Greek myth. Hopkins' readers may notice that this does not only relate the story of Andromeda and Perseus. The content of the sonnet is, as other Hopkins' sonnets are, divided into two parts — the octet with the explanation and problem of the present state and the sestet with the conclusion and solution of the octet. In 'Andromeda', the octet implies that Andromeda bound to 'this rock rude' is the state of the Church of England, which suffers from a 'wilder beast from West' as 'rationalism, Darwinism, industrialism, the new paganism of Swinburn and Whitman, possibly Niezche' (*Poems*, 277). In the sestet, Perseus represents Christ who saves her. Thus the theme of Greek myth turns Christian. The first two lines of the concluding tercet also have stresses which come first to make them remarkable as the climactic lines.

This kind of stress can be seen in Milton's Sonnet XVII (1673), too:

When I consider how my light is spent,
 Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
 And that one talent which is death to hide
 Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
 To serve therewith my maker, and present
 My true account, lest he, returning chide.
 'Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?'
 I fondly ask; but Patience, to prevent
 That murmur, soon replies: 'God doth not need

Either man's work or his own gifts; who best
 Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best; his state
 Is kingly — thousands at his bidding speed
 And post o'er land and ocean without rest:
 They also serve who only stand and wait.' ⁴

The octet mostly follows iambic pentameter, in which the poet's anguish on his blindness is told. The collocation of 'noun-adjective' is used in line 2, 'in this dark world and wide', and the similar use can be seen in Hopkins' expression, 'on this rock rude' ('Andromeda', l. 1). The rhythm in the octet is disturbed by the sestet's, for each opening word of lines 11 and 12 of the words of Patience has the stress which comes first. The stresses emphasise the stressed words of the solution for the problem in the octet. The fact that the sestet is not completely independent of the octet because of the run-on line makes the sestet natural but impresses us with the sounds and rhythms. The words connected to Matthew 11:29-30, 'who best / Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best', have stresses in the words 'best' and 'Bear'. The alliteration of 'b' and the repetition of 'best' impress us with the importance of the sentence. The stresses also show the important words in the last line. The role of stress and the repetition of words and sounds are significant for Hopkins, too. For example, the musical effect can be seen in the first tercet for the repetition of words and sounds and alliterations: '*Her Perseus linger and leave her to her extremes? — / Pillowy air he treads a time and hangs / His thoughts on her, forsaken that she seems*'.

The second part of 'Binsey Poplars felled 1879' may be written having in mind Milton's description on blindness in *Samson Agonistes*: '... why was the sight / To such a tender ball as the eye confined?' (ll. 93-94):

O if we but knew what we do

When we delve or hew —
 Hack and rack the growing green!
 Since country is so tender
 To touch, her being s' slender,
 That, like this sleek and seeing ball
 But a prick will make no eye at all,
 Where we, even where we mean
 To mend her we end her,
 When we hew or delve:
 After-comers cannot guess the beauty been. (II. 10-20)

Metaphysical conceit can be seen in the comparison between the destruction of nature and the suffering of eye damage. The description also suggests the relation between the macrocosm and the microcosm. Milton's blindness may have made his poetry sound more musical. Hopkins studied Milton's poetry for its musical effects, and he hoped that his poetry should be heard, as he said to Bridges: 'My verse is less to be read than heard' (*LB*, 46). The lines quoted musically sound:

O if *we* but knew what *we* do
 When *we* delve or *hew* —
Hack and *rack* the *growing green!*
 Since country is *so tender*
To touch, her being *so slender*,
That, like this sleek and *seeing ball*
But a prick will make no eye at all,
Where we even where we mean
 To *mend her we end her*,
 When *we hew* or delve:
 After-comers cannot guess the *beauty been*.

Especially lines 17 to 19 sounds impressive to make us realise that they are the important statement of the poet. As a poet, Hopkins seems more conscious about sound than Milton.

II

What Hopkins always have in mind is Counterpoint Rhythm, which is derived from baroque music. He sees the rhythm in the choruses of Milton's *Samson Agonistes*. Hopkins first exemplifies the two rhythms, 'Reversed Feet and Reversed or Counterpoint Rhythm', which 'the poets have brought in licences and departures from rule to give variety' (*Poems*, 46). He defines a reversed foot as 'the putting the stress where... the slack should be and the slack where the stress', but 'the reversal of the first foot and of some middle foot after a strong pause is a thing so natural that our poets generally done it...' (*Ibid.*). Then he goes on to explain Counterpoint Rhythm:

If however the reversal is repeated in two feet running, especially so as to include the sensitive second foot, it must be due either to great want of ear or else is a calculated effect, the superinducing or mounting of new rhythm upon the old; and since the new or *mounted* rhythm is actually heard and at the same time the mind naturally supplies the natural or standard foregoing rhythm, for we do not forget what the rhythm is that by rights we should be hearing, two rhythms are in some manner running at once and we have something answerable to counterpoint in music, which is two or more strains of tune going on together, and this is Counterpoint Rhythm. Of this kind of verse Milton is the great master and the choruses of *Samson Agonistes* are written throughout in it — but with the disadvantage that he does not let the reader clearly know what the ground-rhythm is meant to be and so they have struck most readers as merely irregular. And in fact if you counterpoint throughout, since one only of the counter rhythms is exist and what is written is one rhythm only and probably Sprung Rhythm, of which I now speak. (*Poems*, 46-47)

Hopkins distinguishes Counterpoint Rhythm from Sprung

Rhythm which, he defines, 'is measured by feet of from one to four syllables, regularly, and for particular effects any number of weak or slack syllables may be used' (*Poems*, 47). Then he goes on:

It has one stress, which falls on the only syllable, if there is only one, or, if there are more, then scanning as above, on the first, and so gives rise to four sorts of feet, a monosyllable and the so-called accentual Trochee, Dactyl, and the First Paeon. And there will be four corresponding natural rhythms; but nominally the feet are mixed and any one may follow any other. And hence Sprung Rhythm differs from Running Rhythm in having or being only one nominal rhythm, a mixed or 'logaoedic' one, instead of three, but on the other hand in having twice the flexibility of foot, so that any two stresses may either follow one another running or be divided by one, two, or three slack syllables. But strict Sprung Rhythm cannot be counterpointed. In Sprung Rhythm, as in logaoedic rhythm generally, the feet are assumed to be equally long or strong and their seeming inequality is made up by pause or stressing. (*Poems*, 47-48)

We cannot help but find the poems written in Sprung Rhythm as Hopkins' are difficult to scan when it is stressed at random and without no notes or marks. Hopkins learned metrics from Milton's poetry, and wrote two sonnets, 'God's Grandeur' and 'The Starlight Night' after his manner, on which he said in his letter to his mother:

I think I must wrote in a freak the other day...
 They are not so very queer, but have a few metrical effects,
 mostly after Milton, as in his —
 Light from above, from the fountain of light —
 or
 God hath performed for His people of old —
 or

But to vanquish by wisdom hellish wiles.
 These rhythms are not commonly understood but do what
 nothing else can in their contexts. (FL, 144)

The first and third quotations are from *Paradise Regained*, Book IV. l. 289 and I. l. 175, and the second is from *Samson Agonistes*, ll. 1532-3. The first example is written with Counterpoint Rhythm, for the first and second feet are reversed. All three examples above have irregular rhythms, to which Hopkins was attracted for its freshness to the ear. In his letter to Bridges, Hopkins remarked how he had learned from the irregularity of Milton's rhythm:

I have paid much attention to Milton's rhythm. . . .
 By the waters of life, where'er they sat —

...

Home to his mother's house private returned — etc.
 The choruses of *Samson Agonistes* are still more remarkable: I think I have mastered them and may some day write on the subject. . . . His achievements are quite beyond any other English poet's, perhaps any modern poet's. . . . I composed two sonnets with rhythmical experiments of the sort. . . . You will see that my rhythms go further than yours do in the way of irregularity. (LB, 38)

The first quotation here is from *Paradise Lost*, Book XI. l. 79, and the second is from *Paradise Regained*, Book IV. l. 639. In another note, Hopkins quotes the latter as the example of Milton's 'accentual counterpoint' (JP, 282). These two lines can be stressed as: 'By the wáters of lífe, wheré'er they sát'; and 'Hóme to his móther's hóuse prívate rétúrnéd'. From these examples, we may notice that Hopkins did not like free verse but the irregularity within standard rhythm. Hopkins thinks that Milton's verse is not licentious:

Only remark, as you say that there is no conceivable

licence I shd. not be able to justify, that with all my licences, or rather laws, I am stricter than you and I might say than anybody know. ... I may say my apparent licences are counterbalanced, and more, by my strictness. In fact all English verse, except Milton's, almost, offends me as 'licentious'. (LB, 44-45)

The statement above is on the rhythm of 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', which is written in Sprung Rhythm. The rhythm can be seen in *Samson Agonistes*, where

Milton keeps up a fiction of counterpointing the heard rhythm (which is the same as the mounted rhythm) upon a standard rhythm which is never heard but only counted and therefore really does not exist. ... Milton's mounted rhythm is a real poetical rhythm, having its own laws and recurrence, but further embarrassed by having to count. (LB, 45-46)

The choruses of *Samson Agonistes* seem to have either Sprung or Counterpoint Rhythm, and Hopkins describes the rhythm as intermediate between them. The first chorus begins: 'This, this is he; softly a while; / Let us not break in upon him. / O change beyond report, thought or belief!' (ll. 15-17). The spondee in the beginning is natural but distinguished. The other two lines also have spondees, and the use of stressed monosyllables is what Hopkins called Sprung Rhythm. Counterpoint Rhythm can be seen in such line as 'In slavish habit, ill-fitted weeds' (l. 122), which has falling rhythm with iambs and trochees.

The sonnet 'God's Grandeur' (1877) is written in '[s]tandard rhythm counterpointed' (*Poems*, 263):

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil

Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
 Generations have trod, have trod, have trod; (ll. 1-5)

The notable examples of double counterpoint, or twice-repeated inverted feet, are: 'The wórld is chárge'd *with the grándeur* of Gód'; and '*Génerátions* have tród, have tród, have tród'. The first example has the counterpointed feet in the end to show the grandeur of God with rising rhythm. The second has the counterpointed feet at first with falling rhythm showing the vainness of industrialism and destruction of nature described in the second quatrain: 'And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil; / And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil / Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod' (ll. 6-8).

'The Starlight Night' (1877) is written in '[s]tandard rhythm opened and counterpointed' (*Poems*, 264). The note on the sonnet explains that "opened" means that both the octave and the sestet are opened with a "sprung" line' (*Ibid.*), but the opening line of the octet seems to be the mixture of both Sprung and Counterpoint Rhythm: 'Lóok at *the stárs!* lóok, lóok úp at *the skíes!*' (l. 1). The italicised feet are reversed or counterpointed. The use of words is balanced, with preposition-definite article-noun combination and alliterations. Sprung Rhythm can be seen in the stressed monosyllables, with the repetition of 'look', which well expresses the excited heart of the poet. Counterpoint Rhythm can also be seen in other lines: 'The bríght *bóroughs*, the círcle-*cítadels* thére!' (l. 3); 'Fláke-doves *sent flóating* fóρθ at a fármyard scáre! — / Áh well! ít is áll a púrchase, áll is a *príze*' (ll. 7-8). In line 3, the combination of counterpointed words is definite article-adjective-noun, and the alliterations of 'b' and 'c' are also effectively used. In line 8, the words are also balanced, using 'all' and 'a' before the noun with the alliteration of 'p'.

As Hopkins says that his laws of poetry are strict, his poetics is far from free verse though it is like at first sight and hearing. The sound of Hopkins' poetry is natural, because it is based on the native rhythm in Anglo-Saxon poetry with alliterations. He uses this as Sprung Rhythm and makes it more systematic and balanced by using Counterpoint Rhythm. Hopkins saw the ideal style in Milton's poetry as he said, 'I hope in time to have a more balanced and Miltonic's style' (*LB*, 66), when he realised the oddness in his poetry. His poetry may seem odd compared with the one written in standard rhythm, but, as he said in his letter to Bridges, Sprung Rhythm is

the native and natural rhythm of speech ... combining ... opposite and ... incompatible excellences, markedness of rhythm — that is rhythm's self — and naturalness of expression. (*LB*, 46)

The statement shows Hopkins' ideal of *discordia concors*. It explains why his poems are natural but striking. What is most important in Hopkins' view of the world is selves and individualities of things, which he calls 'inscapes' of things. In his poetics, as he remarks the importance of sound in his poetry, the inscape of poetry is 'rhythm's self' though metaphors also important in his poetry, as a good poetry should excel both in rhythm and metaphor. 'Markedness of rhythm' makes poetry fresh or eternal. Hopkins also tried to combine rhythm and expression, of which he is perhaps more conscious than any other poets.

This essay has examined Milton's influence on Hopkins' style in sound and metrics. Though Hopkins learned the rhythms of Milton's poetry, he did not only imitate Milton's style but created his own more strict and systematic. Though Hopkins was

converted to Catholicism from the Anglicanism, he also admired the Protestant artists like Milton and Purcell, for he certainly believed the universality of art.⁵ They are the masters of the baroque art, and the idea of Hopkins' Counterpoint Rhythm comes from baroque music. Hopkins' poetry cannot be categorised in a certain time span, for it is at once old and new. This shows his tendency to combine 'opposite and incompatible excellences', which can be seen all through his poetics. The idea of *discordia concors* amounts to the unity between meaning and sound or the signifier and signified in his poetry, which finally proves to be the unity between man and God, as he sees it in Christ.

Abbreviations

- FL* C. C. Abbott, ed., *Further Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956).
- JP* Humphry House, ed., *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Oxford UP, 1959).
- LB* C. C. Abbott, ed., *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges* (London: Oxford UP, 1970).
- Poems* W. H. Gardner and N. H. Mackenzie, eds., *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1970).

Notes

1. Kunio Shimane, 'Shakespeare, Milton, Hopkins no Buntai' (The Style of Shakespeare, Milton and Hopkins), in Peter Milward and Toyohiko Tatsumi, eds., *Hopkins to Renaissance* (Hopkins and the Renaissance) (Tokyo: Aratake Shuppan, 1990), 61-6.
2. Hopkins' poems cited here are from *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*.
3. Hopkins comments on the sonnets of Bridges:
 ... In spite of the Miltonic rhythms and some other points your

sonnets remind one more of Shakespeare's. Milton's sonnets are not tender as Shakespeare's are. Yours are not at all like Wordsworth's, and a good thing too, for beautiful as those are they have an odious goodness and neckcloth about them which half throttles their beauty. The ones I like least are those that have a Tennysonian touch about them...not for want of admiring Tennyson to be sure but because it gives them a degree of neckcloth too. (LB, 38-39)

4. Milton's poems cited here are from John Hollander and Frank Kermode, eds., *The Literature of Renaissance England* (New York: Oxford UP, 1973).
5. Hopkins denied Milton's personality though he admired his poetry:
 ...I think he was a very bad man: those who contrary to our Lord's command both break themselves and, as St. Paul says, consent to those who break the sacred bond of marriage, like Luther and Milton, fall with eyes wide open into the terrible judgment of God. (LB, 39)