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## Looking for Unity: Contrast and Unity in Hopkins's Sonnets

Kumiko Suwa

In Hopkins's sonnets, alien natures or opposite elements are combined together at various levels. Hopkins himself was a poet-priest, and he endeavored to unite ultimately two selves in him in his poetry. Here, we will see how Hopkins's ideal of the unity of opposite elements, or contrasts are expressed in his sonnets, especially in Bright Sonnets and Dark Sonnets.

Bright Sonnets were written in 1877, and they are: *God's Grandeur*, *The Starlight Night*, *Spring*, *The Lantern out of Doors*, *The Sea and the Skylark*, *In the Valley of the Elwy*, *The Caged Skylark*, *The Windhover*, *Pied Beauty*, and *Hurrahing in Harvest*. Dark Sonnets were written in 1885. They are (*Carrion Comfort*), 'No worst', 'To seem the stranger', 'I wake and feel', 'Patience, hard thing!', 'My own heart', *Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves*, and 'Thou art indeed just'.

Firstly, I would like to analyze some extracts from Bright Sonnets and see Hopkins's techniques with words. Let us see *God's Grandeur*:

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?

Generation have trod, have trod, have trod;

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.

And, for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright  
wings.

In his choice of words, some devices are used to express contrast and unity. In line 7, a device of Welsh poetry, “*cynghanedd sain*” is used, and it is the combination of alliteration and internal rhyme. The alliteration of “sm” combines different senses “smudge” and “smell” because “smudge” expresses the sense of sight and “smell” does the sense of smell.

In imagery, “the grandeur of God” has two figures compared like this: “It will flame out, like shining from shook foil; / It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil / Crushed.” (ll. 2-4) The former figure is an imagery of light and the latter is an imagery of oil, and they are combined by the end rhyme “foil” and “oil”.

The tone of the first quatrain is luminous and expresses the praise for God, whose grandeur shows the unity of two different figures, but the tone changes from the fourth line, “Why do men then now not reckon his rod?”. From this line to the last line of the octet, the tone is dark and here the poet criticizes the activity of man after the Industrial Revolution. In the octet, the world charged with the grandeur of God and the world deteriorated by men show the contrasts.

The sestet is the conclusion of the octet. Nature and “the dearest freshness” which are the manifestation of God’s grandeur is never spent and that is proved in line 11 and 12. Finally, the Holy Ghost broods over the world bent by man’s desire, and here we see the unity between man and God.

One of the traits of Hopkins's sonnets is the religious conclusion in sestet over which critics have often argued, and for Hopkins, the unity between God and man should be shown in his poetry, and concerning his sonnets, it should be done in sestet. This trait is well expressed in Bright Sonnets, which clearly show praise for God.

Another trait of Hopkins's poetry is his frequent use of interjections. In *God's Grandeur*, in sestet we see interjections "Oh" and "ah!" break in the sentence and disturb what W. A. M. Peters calls "the logical language".<sup>1)</sup> These kind of interjections found in sestet of Bright Sonnets, it seems to me, are the expression of the poet's craving for unity with God. They give the effective use of "the affective language" in Hopkins's sonnets, and show sensuality in his way of understanding God.<sup>1)</sup> That kind of expression shows the example of the mixture of sensualism and asceticism in Hopkins's poetry.

Besides, the Holy Ghost is described by the metaphor of a bird in "broods" and "bright wings", which shows the attribute of the bird in Holy Ghost as "inscape"<sup>2)</sup>, and also recalls the association of an angel. Metaphors or figures of the bird are often seen in Hopkins's sonnets, for example, in *Spring*, *The Starlight Night*, *In the Valley of the Elwy*, *The Sea and the Skylark*, *The Windhover*, *Pied Beauty*, *Hurrahing in Harvest*, *The Caged Skylark*, *Duns Scotus's Oxford*, *Henry Purcell*, *The Handsome Hearts*, *Peace*, "As kingfishers catch fire", *Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves*, "Thou art indeed just, Lord". These examples suggest that the poet's interest in the imagery of the bird. Strange to say, the figure of the bird is not seen in Dark Sonnets except *Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves*, and "Thou art indeed just, Lord", though the examples are not thematic but supplementary (Italics are added):



As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the  
 hurl and gliding  
 Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding  
 Stirred for a bird, — the achieve of, the mastery of the  
 thing!

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume,  
 here  
 Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a  
 billion  
 Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plough down sillion  
 Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,  
 Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.

The poet who has found Falcon in the dawn is inspired by the attitude of the bird. From line 1 to 5, Falcon's "riding of the rolling level underneath him steady air" catches the heart of the poet, and the action of Falcon is simultaneous with the action of the poet in his mind because he writes poetry with his free imagination inspired by Falcon which is in this case the symbol of the poet's creativity, imagination and freedom in mind, and the delight as a poet culminates in lines 4 and 5, "how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing / In his ecstasy!". As Empson touches the relevance between the Windhover and Pegasus,<sup>4)</sup> there is an association with Pegasus in these lines because "the rein" connotes the horse, and "a wimpling wing" connotes "Pegasean wing" as Milton uses in *Paradise Lost* where also "wing" is adopted, not "wings". The following lines from *Paradise Lost* is worth considering:

Descend from heaven Urania, by that name  
 If rightly thou art called, whose voice divine  
 Following, above the Olympian hill I soar,  
 Above the flight of Pegasean wing. (VII. ll. 1-4)

Here we see the invocation of Milton as a poet. He soars above the flight of Pegasean wing following the voice of Urania who is one of the Muses. "I" as a poet also appears in the first line of *The Windhover*. As the poet in *Paradise Lost* soars in his imagination, "I" as the poet and observer assimilates himself to Falcon in his imagination and soars in the sky. In addition, as the quotation from *Paradise Lost* connotes that the poet wishes to culminate in poetic imagination, which is assured in the words "Urania", "the Olympian hill" and "Pegasean wing", that have the connotation of poetry, the figure of Falcon in *The Windhover* also connotes poetic imagination as the Pegasean image shows because Pegasus is "said allusively to bear poets in the 'flights' of poetic genius". (O.E.D. 3rd ed.) From this point of view, *The Windhover* is "a poem about writing a poem". Besides, the alliterations of "m" and "d" (ll. 1-2) express the motion of Falcon rhythmically, which shows the correspondence between the content and the form.

Falcon also is a Christian image. It is described as "kingdom of daylight's dauphin", and if we regard "kingdom of daylight" as heaven, the dauphin must be Christ, and that is endorsed by the title, *The Windhover: To Christ our Lord*, in which we see the relation between the bird and Christ connected by the colon. Moreover, it contains another image of a knight on a horse which is expressed in lines 4 and 5. This image is stressed in line 11, "O my chevalier!", which reminds me of medievalism in the association of chivalry and another of a crusade. Both of them are based on the ideal of Christianity, and also the imagery of a soldier is due to the ideal of the Society of Jesus which regards Christ as the captain and members of the Society of Jesus as soldiers to fight for the kingdom of God. This idea is more clearly shown in (*The Soldier*).

Falcon as the poet's free imagination, however, confronts a head wind, which is suggested in lines 6 and 7. This scene, according to the generalized view of critics, symbolizes the attitude as a priest which controls the self as a poet. The colon in the line 6 connects the two images. The ecstasy as a poet assimilates in the bird's ecstasy in flight, and it is a manifestation of sensualism as the word "ecstasy" suggests. Here the poet has got the "rapture of an inspiration" (*To R. B.* l. 10) and goes on to widen his imagination (ll. 5-6). The sounds of "sweeps" and "smooth" express the smooth and free flight of Falcon, and even if the meaning of line 7 expresses the control of emotion as a poet, the sound "Rebuffed" gives the life and vigor more to the free imagination of the poet.

The observer reassures his existence in lines 7 and 8. "My heart in hiding" suggests the attitude as an observer and also as a priest. Here the poet is awakened by the sight which shows the powerful and muscular movement of the bird described in the words "the hurl", "gliding" and "Rebuffed". These expressions well describe the physical beauty of the bird and the beauty is created by meeting the pressure of "the big wind". Here Falcon symbolizes at once stoical and physical beauty, in which the observer finds significance of being the poet-priest in his mind, but in this stage his poetic enthusiasm for the physical beauty of the bird overwhelms the mind. This is endorsed by the word "achive" which is Hopkins's neologism from "achievement" because its form as a verb adds kinetic and physical nuance. Moreover, the bird is expressed as "the thing" which is just physical.

The observer's enthusiasm culminates in the first three lines of the sestet. In "Buckle!", Falcon's imagery of Christ and of the poet-priest should be united. This is a logical



conclusion. But how about the observer's enthusiasm? The fire is "a billion times told lovelier" because the beauty of the Windhover culminates in "Buckle!" where three elements, that is, Christ, the priest and the poet are united by inscaping the bird. But the beauty is "more dangerous" because the logic can not hold back the insane enthusiasm of the poet.

Being aware of his office as a priest, he goes on to calm his enthusiasm. The "blue-bleak embers" indicates self-sacrifice in contrast to the fire breaking from the Windhover which is poetic enthusiasm. This poem is barely harmonized by the sestet, but the fire from the Windhover draws the reader's attention more than the blue-bleak embers.

*The Windhover* expresses the process of writing poetry metaphorically, and by this means Hopkins succeeds in expressing inscape in poetry. The concept of inscape aims at uniting different objects, and the various techniques especially metaphor which Hopkins shows in his sonnets, follow this purpose. Uniting various meanings in word or imagery is connected to uniting various individuals by inscape.

From this point of view, the concept of "dapple" is worth considering. It is already pointed out by the predecessors in Hopkins's study to which I refer greatly,<sup>5)</sup> and I would like to reconsider it adding my interpretation of Hopkins's sonnets and being aware of comparatively recent criticism of J. Hillis Miller.<sup>6)</sup>

In *The Windhover*, Falcon is described as "dapple-dawn-drawn". This compound also suggests the concept of inscape because three different words are united by the alliteration of "d" and hyphen. Dapple symbolizes various individuals in the world which are created by God, and in Hopkins view all created things are by virtue of inscape united with

God, who is the symbol of dapple because of his attribute as "many". In this context, Falcon is drawn by the dappled dawn, and Falcon itself symbolizes dapple because various imagery are united in it.

The dapple is clearly expressed in *Pied Beauty* which is included in Bright Sonnets and manifests the ideal world for Hopkins:

GLORY be to God for dappled thing —  
 For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;  
 For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;  
 Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings  
 Landscape plotted and pieced — fold, fallow, and  
 plough;  
 And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;  
 Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)  
 with swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;  
 He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:  
 Praise him.

*Pied Beauty*, as the first and final lines suggest, expresses praise for God, which can be seen in Bright Sonnets. The sestet shows the beauty of dappled things, and the inscape manifested in nature is expressed by some techniques. Such compounds as "couple-colour", "rose-moles", "fresh-firecoal", and "chestnut-falls" show the union between different elements in restrictive relation, and the alliteration "p" in line 5 unites counter meanings, "plotted" and "pieced".

The quatrain unites the dappled things described in the sestet. Though "all things counter, original, spare and strange", they are united by the originator of dapple, God. This interpretation of the poem is pervasive and I also agree

with it. The idea of dapple is assured by the word "freckled", and the nature of dapple is identified as "fickle" which is united by the alliteration "f" and the internal rhyme "ckle". The contrasts described in the line 9 are united by sound technique, that is, by "s" in the first two contrasts and "d" in the last which are laid in stressed syllable each. The fickleness of dapple can be immutable by God "whose beauty is past change". The poem is concluded in the phrase, "Praise him." which well expresses the self as a priest.

Though the poem has unity in itself, it deviates from most of his sonnets in form and it is written in the form of curtal sonnet which consists of sestet and quatrain, while his normal sonnet form consists of octet and sestet.

Other examples of this kind in Hopkins's sonnets are *Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves* and *That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire*. Both of them show the fickleness of dappled things, and they also deviate from the normal sonnet form of Hopkins; the former is Octameter Sonnet and the latter is Alexandrine Caudated Sonnet.

W. H. Gardner states that the dappled things for Hopkins have no principles and flourish anti-Christian banners:

For Hopkins there was no beauty in change and diversity unless the mind held a clear concept of permanence and unity. As he says in *The Starlight Night* and elsewhere, it is by means of morality that we apprehend permanence, that we see through the life of things into the life of God. Morality, the Christian ethic, is the umbilical cord connecting the soul to its Source; if that cord is severed man can still live — but only with detached, finite and foredoomed existence.<sup>7)</sup>

Thus the moral conclusion was necessary for Hopkins, but is it really possible to moralize poetry? The calmness of morality is contrary to the poetic enthusiasm as we saw in

*The Windhover. Pied Beauty* is a typical example in Bright Sonnets which expresses the dappled world united by God. On the contrary, the dappled world without the grace of God is described in Dark Sonnets. *Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves* is the most typical example of that situation:

EARNEST, earthless, equal, attuneable, | vaulty,  
voluminous, . . . stupendous  
Evening strains to be time's vâst, | womb-of-all,  
home-of-all, hearse-of-all night. (ll. 1-2)

While the image of *Pied Beauty* is bright and sunny, the scene in *Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves* is set in the twilight almost turning to night. The "attuneable" dusk shows dapple, and such epithets as "vaulty, voluminous, . . . stupendous" express pressure and infinity of space, and then the evening "strains to be time's vast, womb-of-all, home-of-all, hearse-of-all night" which shows darkness covering all from birth to death. In this case, dappled things are not united by God, but by darkness which has negative connotations as suggested in "hearse-of-all".

Darkness is a trait of Dark Sonnets, and in darkness the self is detached from inscape which is the means to unite dappled things in nature. "I wake and feel" well expresses the situation:

I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.  
What hours, O what black hours we have spent  
This night! what sights you, heart, saw; ways you went!  
And more must, in yet longer lights delay.  
With witness I speak this. But where I say  
Hours I mean years, mean life. (ll. 1-6)

The darkness blurs our sense of sight and consciousness of time, and by losing them we cannot help but deepen our awareness of ourselves separated from nature. The situation indicates that the self has no relation with outside world



and other elements connected by inscape, and that is the characteristic of Bright Sonnets. On the other hand, there is no inscape in darkness of Dark Sonnets, and self expresses haecceitas instead of inscape because the characteristic of haecceitas is unique and not a sharing in other being,<sup>8)</sup> unlike inscape which has much in common with others.

The content of *Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves* indicates the self separated from inscape and no unity with dappled things, but how about the form? In this poem, many compounds as metaphors show inscape of things; night is expressed in restrictive compound adjectives, "womb-of-all, home-of-all, hearse-of-all"; "hornlight" is the example of the unity of different natures. There are more examples and they are the description of inscape of things in nature manifested in techniques. These techniques to show inscape can be seen in Dark Sonnets, even though the content is contrary. The form of Bright Sonnets also shows inscape, and the content corresponds with it. So that the similarity between Bright Sonnets and Dark Sonnets lies in the form and the difference lies in the content.

The concept of inscape and dapple is the means for the union between man's self and God, or Christ who is the symbol of the unity between man and God. In the content of *Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves*, Hopkins thought that "her dapple is at end", but later in 1888, he wrote *That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection* which concludes in the union between man and Christ.

In *Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves*, a fluid and contrastive world is described, and *Heraclitean Fire* also expresses it. In the first two lines, the movement of the air is indicated in the movement of cloud described in splendid metaphors which give life to the expression and shows inscape:

CLOUD-PUFFBALL, torn tufts, tossed pillows | flaunt  
 forth, then chevy on an air-built thoroughfare: heaven-  
 roysterers, in gay-gangs | they throng; they glitter  
 in marches. (ll. 1-2)

Contrast and unity are mentioned in the verbs in line 4: "Shivelights and shadowtackle in long lashes lace, lance, and pair". In this poem, the thought of Heraclitus can be seen in the description of air, earth, water and fire.

Delightfully the bright wind boisterous | ropes, wrestles,  
 beats earth bare  
 Of yestertempest's creases; | in pool and rutpeel parches  
 Squandering ooze to squeezed | dough, crust, dust;  
 stanches, starches  
 Squandroned masks and manmarks | treadmire toil  
 there  
 Footfretted in it. (ll. 5-9)

In this expression we see the fusion of air and earth by violent movement of the wind, and then we also see the wind attacking the water. Man's footprints or "manmarks" are also dried out by the wind and transformed to dust that reminds me of the words from the Old testament: "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return". (*Gen.* 3: 19)

The imagery of fire appears almost abruptly: "Million-fuelèd, nature's bonfire burns on." (l. 9) Fire is the most important element in Heraclitus because he thought that it is the agent of transmutation and that all things are created from fire and finally return to it. The "bonfire" symbolizes not only fertility, but also death and resurrection, which are the theme of this poem. As the "manmarks" return to dust, the fire as man's self is gone:

But quench her bonniest, dearest | to her, her clearest-  
 selvèd spark  
 Man, how fast his firedint, | his mark on mind, is

gone!

(ll. 10-11)

Then the tone becomes darker like Dark Sonnets:

Both are in unfathomable, all is in an enormous dark  
Drowned. O pity and indignation! Manshape, that shone  
Sheer off, disseveral, a star, | death blots black out;  
nor mark

Is any of him at all so stark  
But vastness blurs and time | beats level. (ll. 12-16)

As in Dark Sonnets, the infinity of time and space in darkness is described here, which means the death of man's self without inscape or grace from God, and death concludes the agony of the self in Dark Sonnets.

The Resurrection soon follows death as the bonfire suggested beforehand: "Enough! the Resurrection, /A heart's-clarion!" (ll. 16-17) This awakens the self of the poet and also of reader of the poem. Then the poet sweeps away the desolation of Dark Sonnets: "Away grief's gasping, joyless days, dejection". (l. 17) The darkness is broken by "A beacon, an eternal beam". (l. 19) Even if "flesh fade, and mortal trash /fall to the residuary worm" (ll. 19-20), the soul of the poet is forever with Christ:

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. (ll. 21-24)

As the heart is united with a clarion in the compound word, "heart's-clarion", the momentariness expressed in "In a flash, at a trumpet crash" must be felt in the soul of the poet as he receives inspiration. Now he realizes that his soul and self become eternal by union with Christ, and by this, his



poetry proves its merits both artistically and religiously. The self of the poet itself is "Jack" and "joke". The words "potsherd" and "patch" are associated with dapple because they are rubbish in themselves but by being connected they become one which makes the whole. The "matchwood" reminds me of man's self compared to spark, and by the union with Christ, the matchwood becomes "immortal diamond".

Thus Hopkins's conclusion is the unity between man and Christ and in his poetry the self becomes immortal, and the poem shows the unity between Bright Sonnets which express the praise for God and Dark Sonnets which express the inquiry of the self. But, as I mentioned before, *Heraclitean Fire*, as well as *Pied Beauty* and *Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves*, is out of unity among the fourteen-line sonnets. It is interesting that these poems well express the concept of dapple but are out of unity of normal sonnet form. This shows diversity of Hopkins's sonnets as part of dapple.

Is the dapple united? — I am not sure. The various metaphors for God to which Hopkins adhered may show, as Miller says, an initial bifurcation of the Word.<sup>9)</sup> These metaphors undermine the substantiality of God as one, and at the same time, they make us realize the nature of word which deconstructive theory points out. I doubt if Hopkins's sonnets are firmly united, but as we see in *The Windhover*, their balance is unstable between contrast and unity, by which we are attracted.

### Notes

- 1) Peters uses the words "logical language" and "affective language" in Chapter 3 of *Gerard Manley Hopkins* (1st ed. Oxford University Press, 1948. 2nd ed. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970). He defines

Hopkins's "affective language" as the heightened form of "logical language" as mere information:

The more composed a writer is, the more concerned to present his experience in his adaptation of expression to fixed syntactical and grammatical rules. But in the case of an inspired poet, even where he employs logical language, he will adapt his expression to the system precisely in so far as it is compatible with his emotional attitude towards the experience to be expressed. (p. 78)

- 2) The term "inscape" is Hopkins's coinage, and from some interpretations of the term by critics, I regard it as an attribute of a thing which Hopkins expressed with metaphor. For Hopkins, inscape is the means to connect one thing and the other which often seem different and even opposite. By this means, he tried to express God in his words.
- 3) Toma Ogata and Peter Milward, eds., *Hopkins no Sekai* (The World of Hopkins) (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1990), pp. 93-94.
- 4) "William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*", in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Gerard Roberts (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), p. 169.
- 5) See Toma Ogata, *Hopkins no Kanashimi* (The Sorrow of Hopkins) (Kyoto: Yamaguchishoten, 1988)
- 6) See J. Hillis Miller, *The Linguistic Moment* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985), pp. 229-66.
- 7) W. H. Gardner, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Study of Poetic Idiosyncrasy in Relation to Poetic Tradition*, vol.1 (1949. London: Oxford UP, 1961), p. 250.
- 8) James Finn Cotter explains the concept of "haecceitas" distinguishing from inscape in *Inscape* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972), p. 126:

Scotist concept of *haecceitas* defines the thisness that constitutes an existent, that makes this being be. Here Hopkins associates it not with inscape, as has been often done by critics, but with pitch. For Scotus, as for Parmenides, being is univocal, unique, not a sharing in other being or an analogous reflection, but its self, one in the One, word of the Word.

- 9) Miller. *op. cit.*, p. 265.