CHAPTERS II

HOPKINS'S POETICS
Most of the characteristics of Hopkins's verse originate from his views on poetry. He has deliberated on it carefully and has made many interesting pronouncements on its nature and technical features. His theory of poetry is based, in turn, on his philosophy of 'inscape' and 'instress'. For him, "poetry is in fact speech only employed to carry the inscape of speech for the inscape's sake and therefore the inscape must be dwelt on".¹ More than once he accepted that "inscape is what I above all aim at in poetry".² At another place he called 'inscape' 'the very soul of art'.³

It is Hopkins's spiritual outlook on this world that made 'inscape' so precious to him.

¹ House and Storey (eds.), Journals and Papers, p. 289.
² Abbott (ed.), Correspondence with Bridges, p. 66.
³ Ibid, p. 135.
The inscape of an object was to him 'word of God',
which reminded him more of the Creator than a
superficial impression could have done. He
habitually looked at objects with the fixed
determination to catch what was individually
distinctive in them, in order to arrive at some
insight into their essence as individuals. To
express this set of individuating characteristics
in a suitable term the poet coined the word
'inscape'. He had long been seeking a
metaphysical explanation for the hold on the
mind - the excitement that certain forms and
patterns in nature exert on us. This he called
'instress'.

Hopkins appreciated inscape so highly
because in perceiving it he knew the individual
well, and the better he knew the individual the
more sparks it threw off, 'sparks that rang of
God'. And the more he knew the object the more
it became worthy of personal love. Hopkins was

4 House and Storey (eds.), Journals and Papers,
aware of the fact that in spite of profound generic and specific differences, man and beast and inanimate nature were all alike, 'selves', 'supposits'. From this angle of vision there was between man and the rest of creation a difference of degree and not one of kind. In man the self was joined to a free nature, while in all other creatures and things the self was not so raised.

Hopkins writes:

A person is defined a rational (that is intellectual) supposit, the supposit of a rational natural. A supposit is a self ...

Hopkins contemplated objects separately, each with its own individuating characteristics, each independent in its existence and activity.

Through his impersonation he was ever in communication with them as with persons, each with life entirely its own. His famous poem "The Windhover", for example, presents the power, beauty, speed and ecstasy of the Kestrel's flight.

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5 House and Storey (eds.), Journals and Papers, p. 322.
isolated and magnified to more than life - like (as art must magnify). To Hopkins its flight was the distinctive essential quality of the bird - "the achieve of, the mastery of the thing". 6 This seizing of the distinctive quality and , as far as possible, its concrete, sensuous presentation was said by Hopkins to be "what I above all aim at in poetry". 7

Hopkins's concept of inscape owes a great deal to Scotus. He was attracted to Scotus's philosophy more strongly than to Aristotle's or St. Aquinas's. In the philosophy of Aristotle and Aquinas there is no separate entity which limits the universal or determines and individualizes it. In Scotus's philosophy, however, it is the very individualizing character which is the final determining factor of the Being. It is called haecceitas or 'thisness' by Scotus. The study of Scotus made him turn upon himself and consider the essence

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7 Abbott (Ed.), Correspondence with Bridges, p. 66.
of the individuating principle in himself. In one of his poems he writes:

Selves - goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,
Crying what I do is me: for that I came.8

The poet, in whatever he creates, brings individuality into play, by means of which parts of a poem or a work of art are particularised. He was critical of poets who failed to project their individuality through their poems. His judgement on an Irish poet named Aubrey de Vere is significant:

He [Aubrey de Vere] has all the gifts that make a poet excepting only that last degree of individuality which is the most essential of all.9

Hopkins's desire to individualize and inscape each part of a poem is quite compatible with his

8 "As Kingfishers Catch fire", Poems, p. 90.
9 Abbott (ed.), Correspondence with Dixon p. 112.
idea of the design or shape that a poem should have. His idea of impressing individuality on each part of a poem is certainly novel.

Hopkins had tremendous reliance on originality occurring from inspiration. He is nearer in this respect to the Romantics, who assert the supremacy of the poet's imagination and the value of novelty. Each poet, according to Hopkins, has a distinct individuality of his own and in working it out he brings in a comparison with other immortal spirits who have done the same. Emphasizing the need of originality for a poet, he wrote to Patmore:

I scarcely understand you about reflected light: every true poet, I, thought, must be original and originality a condition of poetic genius, so that each poet is like a species in nature (not *individium genericum* or *specificum*) and can never recur.10

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Hopkins, like the great Romantics, preferred to write under the stress of inspiration and, in so doing, was opposed to the neo-classicists, who viewed both the context and the expression from the point of their general validity and appeal. Hopkins was never a spokesman of the average or non-specific. He forcefully maintained:

It is the virtue of design, pattern or inscape to be distinctive and it is the vice of distinctiveness to become queer. This vice I cannot have escaped. 11

Hopkins did not approve of the neo-classical stance which insists on conformity. He was of the opinion that obscurity in poetry is sometimes to be regarded as a positive virtue, even an end in itself. Emphasising his viewpoint, he added:

Granted that it "Wreck of the Deutschland" needs study and is obscure, for indeed I was not over desirous that the meaning of all should be quite clear, at least unmistakable, you might without the effort that to make it all out would seem to have required, have nevertheless read it so that lines and stanzas should be left in the memory and superficial impressions

11 Abbott (ed.), Correspondence with Bridges, p. 66.
deepened, and have liked some without exhausting all. I am sure I have read and enjoyed pages of poetry that way. Why sometimes one enjoys and admires the very lines one cannot understand as for instance: "If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well", which is all obscure and disputed, though how fine it is everybody sees and nobody disputes. And so of many more passages in Shakespeare and others. Besides you would have got more weathered to the style and its features - not really odd.

With Hopkins style and formal features in poetry have got to be 'weathered'. This does not apply to Shakespeare's style. Obscurity in Shakespeare is occasional, but in Hopkins obscurity is persistent.

Another important feature of Hopkins's poetry is his use of rhetoric. He considered rhetoric as an essential quality for good poetry. He criticized Wordsworth's poetry for the lack of rhetoric and considered it to be the main defect in the latter's poetry. He once wrote to his friend:

12 Abbott (ed.), Correspondence with Bridges, p. 56.
... it is the universal fault of our literature, its weakness is rhetoric. The strictly poetic insight and inspiration of our poetry seems to me to be of the very finest, finer perhaps than the Greek, but its rhetoric is inadequate — seldom first rate, mostly just sufficient, sometimes even below par. By rhetoric I mean all the common and teachable elements in literature. What grammar is to speech, what thoroughbass is to music, what theatrical experience gives to playwrights. 13

Hopkins went to the extent of identifying poetry with rhetoric. A useful distinction nevertheless must be made between the purpose of a rhetorician and a poet. The purpose of a rhetorician is to persuade, but that of a poet, according to Hopkins, is to enact and demonstrate his individuality through a poem. Moreover, rhetoric as a branch of study can always be taught and learnt, for it has set rules to guide. But there are no fixed laws for writing poetry; it is but the device of imparting form, shape and individuality to one's thoughts and vision. The individuality of the poet distinguishes his work from those of others. A distinction can also exist between

13 Abbott (ed.) *Correspondence with Dixon* p. 141.
various works by the same hand. Poetry in this sense has no tricks or set rules; it is, unlike rhetoric, written, according to Hopkins, in a mood of inspiration and when that mood has passed, the poetry written thereafter is soon reduced to a trick or formula. After a period of apprenticeship, a poet is able to write a good deal of uninspired poetry because he has a set diction at his command. Such poetry is named 'Parnassian' by Hopkins. He considered the poetry of Tennyson (particularly his longer works) representative of this kind of poetry. He held that this kind of poetry stands in clear contrast with the truly inspired poetry, such as that of Shakespeare.

Hopkins's undergraduate essay "On the Origin of Beauty" deals explicitly with his theory of poetry. As a poet he modelled his verse closely on his formulated critical principles. The essay clearly brings forth the concept of the formal

organization and the structural foundations of poetry. Hopkins draws directly from his analysis of beauty the basic principles of his poetics. According to him:

The basis of our appreciation of beauty is the perception of variety in uniformity, or of the mixture of regularity and irregularity. 15

He further maintained:

The beauty we find is from the comparison we make of the things with themselves seeing their likeness and difference. 16

He feels that "Beauty is a relation and the apprehension of it a comparison." 17

Hopkins lays considerable emphasis on parallelism in poetry. There are, he says, only two kinds of comparisons in poetry - comparison for likeness' sake to which belong metaphor, simile and the things of the kind and comparison for unlikeness sake to which belongs antithesis, contrast and so on. The word which gives the common principle for both these kinds of comparisons is parallelism. 18

15 House and Storey (eds.), Journals and Papers, p. 90.
16 Ibid, p. 91.
17 Ibid, p. 95.
18 Ibid, p. 96.
Parallelism can, then, be put under the head of diatonic beauty. Under the chromatic beauty come emphasis, expression, tone, intensity, climax and so on. Thus only the first kind, i.e. the marked parallelism, is concerned with the structure of verse, especially the recurrence of a certain sequence of rhythm. The force of this recurrence begets a recurrence of parallelism, answering to it in words or thought. The more marked parallelism in structure, whether of elaboration or of emphasis, tends to beget or pass into parallelism in thought.

Hopkins has emphasized the significance of vividness, force and intensity, which distinguish poetry from an ordinary prose statement. It is significant to note that he gave this definition while refuting Wordsworth's statement that "the most interesting parts of the best poems will be found to be strictly the language of prose when prose is well written". ¹⁹

¹⁹ House and Storey (eds.), Journals and Papers, p. 270.
a patterned language in contrapuntal term. He was fully conscious of the differences between the colloquial rhythm and the controlled contrapuntal rhythm. He considered this contrapuntal relationship necessary in poetry for attaining a heightened expressiveness. He observes that "sprung rhythm is accordingly the rhythm of speech set and patterned since the structure of poetry is artificially heightened".  

Parallelism, comparison, counterpoint - these are the terms by which Hopkins variously accounts for poetic elements. The idea of novelty, originality and particularity reigns supreme in Hopkins's concept of poetry. Poetry which does not allow for the individuality of form would not for long be satisfying to Hopkins. Not only the poetic form but also the patterning of each part in a poem must have the interest of inscape by employing devices like alliteration, assonance, consonance and internal rhyme. Meter, Hopkins thought is desirable but not

20 Abbott (ed.), Correspondence with Bridges, p. 60.
essential for poetry. He defined verse as "speech wholly or partially repeating the same figure of sound". Poetry, which may or may not be written in meter, is, to him, "speech which wholly or partially repeats the same figure of grammar and this may be heard for its own sake and interest over and above its interest of meaning".

Obscurity in Hopkins proceeds from his notion of poetry as rhetoric or ornamental metaphor. He writes in one of his letters:

One of two kinds of clearness one should have - either the meaning to be felt without effort as fast as one reads, or else, if dark at first reading, when once made to explode. 24

The first kind recommended by Hopkins is, obviously, the clarity of logical statement. The second is different from the first because initially it is not clear but becomes so when it explodes as a result of the heightening or extension of the

21 House and Storey (eds.), Journals and Papers, p. 290.
22 Ibid, 289.
23 Ibid, p. 289.
24 Abbott (ed.), Correspondence with Bridges, p. 90.
reader's consciousness. According to Hopkins, explosion in poetry is necessary because of the fact that its rhetoric is inspired. Much of the poetic obscurity in Hopkins would have been explicable if only there were sufficient punctuation marks available for transcribing the poet's distinctive attitude and the rhetorical effectiveness with which it is realised in words. He once wrote:

I want 'Harry Ploughman' to be a vivid figure before the mind's eye; if he is not that the sonnet fails.
The difficulties are of syntax no doubt. Dividing a compound word by a clause sandwiched into it was a desperate deed. I feel, and I do not feel that it was an unquestionable success. But which is the line you do not understand? I do myself think, I may say that it would be an immense advance in notation (so to call it) in writing as a record of speech, to distinguish the subject, verb, object and in general to express the construction to the eye, as is done already partly in punctuation by everybody, partly in capitals by the Germans, more fully in accenuation by the Hebrews. And I dare say it will come. But it would, I think, not do for me, it seems a confession of unintelligibility. At all events there is a difference. My meaning surely ought to appear of itself, but in a language like English and in an age of it like the present, written words are really matter open and indifferent to the receiving of different and alternative verse forms.
some of which the reader cannot possibly be sure are meant unless they are marked for him. Besides metrical marks are for the performer and such marks are proper in every art. Though indeed one might say syntactical marks are for the performer too. 25

Most often the logic of grammar and syntax and even of the lexical elements has to be fully sacrificed by the poet to bring out the meaning of his poem. A completely different kind of notation would thus be needed to help readers understand Hopkins's poetry well. Justifying his innovations, he wrote to Bridges:

Either I must invent a notation applied throughout as in music or else I must only mark where the reader is likely to mistake ... 26

Only by reading Hopkins's poems in the right way can he be understood correctly. In him the essential elements of affective speech, which cannot be adequately expressed otherwise in writing, become

25 Abbott (ed.), Correspondence With Bridges, p. 265.
26 Ibid, p. 189.
functional and bear out the meaning of the line.

Hopkins suggests the readers to:

... take breath and read it with the ears, as I always wish to be read, and my verse becomes all right. 27

Sprung rhythm is the natural outcome of his theory of inscape as the aim and end of poetry.

Hopkins held that the poetical language of an age should be "the current language heightened, to any degree heightened, but not ... an obsolete one". 28 His belief was that the language of poetry should stay close to ordinary speech. Equally clear was his realization that poetry is not conversation and so it can be heightened and rhetorical, without falling into artificiality. These two principles, working together, give a poem its contrapuntal flavour. The current language is the language spoken by ordinary people in their everyday life, as the only proper medium of poetry, advocated by

27 Abbott (ed.), Correspondence with Bridges, p. 79.
28 Ibid, p. 89.
Hopkins, it is not in consonance with any kind of archaic language. It is also opposed to any artificial language because artificiality, to Hopkins, was an untruth and therefore incompatible with the expression of inscape.

The language of Victorian poetry, as we know, was not totally free from artificiality. Hopkins was very careful not to let pedantic artificialities intrude into his poetic language. In him do we find far greater individuality of language than in any other poet. The harmony of his being begotten from constant self-analysis and self-control, extended to the relation between the expressed self and the expression. With his intense reflection on everything that touched his self, he was conscious of the balance he must strike between his thoughts and feelings and the material in which he had to express them.

Hopkins was not unaware of the heterogeneous elements that in due course had found their way into the English language. He felt that this heterogeneity was, in reality, an imperfection. A pure language seemed to him a finer thing than
a mixed language. As an artist of words, he tried to contribute what the language lacked in perfection. His keen interest in English etymology and his capacity to choose the right word made him a most sensitive artist. He wanted a stronger rhetoric of verse and saw the need for getting back to the 'naked thew and sinew' of the English language.\textsuperscript{29} It may be remembered that various expressive devices were not just added ornaments that suited the tone or atmosphere of his poetry; they were part of the expression of his own inscape. This is the reason why, despite its Anglo-Saxon character, the language of Hopkins is modern and not archaic or artificial. Some of the most distinctive stylistic features of his poetic language are considered in the following chapters.

\textsuperscript{29} Abbott (ed.), \textit{Correspondence with Bridges}, p. 267.