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# The Victorian Sonnet, from George Meredith to Gerard Manley Hopkins

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A glance at the few scattered sonnets that appear in the collected poems of Alfred Tennyson and Robert Browning might be cause for thinking that the Victorian sonnet is an enfeebled, outmoded form, possessing neither the strong, impassioned rhetoric nor the bold thematic diversity that Romantic poets were able to bring to 'the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground'.<sup>1</sup> Wordsworth's prolific output as a writer of sonnets after 1802 did not always have a salutary influence on his successors and there are dozens of execrable imitations of his best-known efforts in the genre. In addition to the many contrived and uninspiring sonnets about the sonnet in the later nineteenth century, there are numerous anthologies of sonnets, introductions to the sonnet, and scholarly essays on the history of the sonnet.<sup>2</sup> Much of this material is laboured and prescriptive, conveying a general impression that the sonnet, while undoubtedly popular, has ceased to have a vital, dynamic connection with contemporary culture.

Modern criticism has done little to alter the prevailing view of the Victorian sonnet as antiquated and derivative. Although there have been extensive studies of the well-known sonnet sequences by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Christina Rossetti, these have tended to concentrate on the traditional features of the amatory sequence from the Renaissance onwards, often neglecting what is most innovative and original in nineteenth-century examples of the genre. There are promising signs, however, of a revival of interest in the Victorian sonnet. Jennifer Ann Wagner, for instance, argues that later nineteenth-century poets were empowered rather than overwhelmed by Wordsworth's immense and authoritative control of the form, and that they considerably extended the intellectual and aesthetic preoccupations of the Romantic sonnet. In *A Moment's Monument: Revisionary Poetics and the Nineteenth-Century English Sonnet*, she traces what she sees as 'the second life' of a form that had enjoyed its original heyday three centuries earlier. She argues persuasively that 'the history of the sonnet in the nineteenth century is more than a decorative strand in this century's textual history', and she shows how the sonnet becomes the exemplary form for poets who are deeply preoccupied with ideas of subjectivity and temporality. Even so, she claims that there is a diminution of the political force of the Romantic sonnet, and that 'the sonnet is not as primary an arena for politics in the late nineteenth century as it had been previously'.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> William Wordsworth, ed. by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 286.

<sup>2</sup> See Alison Chapman, 'Sonnet and Sonnet Sequences', in *A Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. by Richard Cronin, Alison Chapman, and Antony H. Harrison (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 99–114.

<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Ann Wagner, *A Moment's Monument: Revisionary Poetics and the Nineteenth-Century English Sonnet* (London: Associated University Presses, 1996), pp. 12, 128.

We need, perhaps, to broaden our conception of politics if we are to appreciate the full extent to which Victorian poets modified the sonnet form in response to their own most urgent social and cultural needs. What proves to be most interesting is the way in which the dialectical structure of the sonnet suggests to writers a way of confronting and exploring the controversial issues of the time, including problems of democracy and social class. The ideas that were to coalesce in Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* also found an outlet in a remarkable series of sonnets that Arnold composed at moments of personal and social crisis in the 1840s and 1860s. These are profoundly political poems, even if their politics are essentially reformist rather than revolutionary. George Meredith's *Modern Love* was condemned with such virulence when it first appeared in 1862 that it came to be seen as a threat to the moral well-being of the nation.<sup>4</sup> There is no simple distinction to be made in Meredith's case between sexual politics and politics proper. His sonnet sequence is one of the most candid and provocative accounts of marital failure in nineteenth-century literature and a daring disavowal of all that the love sonnet had previously celebrated and enshrined. There are complex and intriguing political affiliations in the sonnets of Gerard Manley Hopkins, including those written in Dublin during a time of burgeoning Irish nationalism. If 'Felix Randal' ennoble the life of a Liverpool labourer, 'Tom's Garland' recoils in fear from the spectacle of working-class discontent and mass unemployment. It is part of the special appeal of Hopkins as a sonnet-writer that he can be at once the most anarchic and the most conservative of poets.

Nevertheless, there is some truth in the claim that what seems to pervade the Victorian sonnet is a self-reflexive concern with subjectivity and moments of heightened consciousness. This is certainly borne out by the sonnets for which Tennyson and Browning are remembered. Tennyson's enchanting lyric 'Now sleeps the crimson petal' is occasionally extracted from *The Princess* and included in sonnet anthologies, though the poem is essentially an unrhymed fourteen-line composition that gathers momentum through sustained anaphoric and epistrophic effects rather than through the more usual observation and modification of the sonnet's structural dynamics:

Now sleeps the crimson petal, now the white;  
Nor waves the cypress in the palace walk;  
Nor winks the gold fin in the porphyry font:  
The fire-fly wakens: waken thou with me.

Now droops the milkwhite peacock like a ghost,  
And like a ghost she glimmers on to me.

Now lies the Earth all Danaë to the stars,  
And all thy heart lies open unto me.

Now slides the silent meteor on, and leaves  
A shining furrow, as thy thoughts in me.

Now folds the lily all her sweetness up,  
And slips into the bosom of the lake:

<sup>4</sup> See the early reviews of *Modern Love* reprinted in *Meredith: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Ioan Williams (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), pp. 92–107.

So fold thyself, my dearest, thou, and slip  
 Into my bosom and be lost in me.<sup>5</sup>

As a fantasy of female submissiveness, the poem might be said to conform very well (thematically, at least) with a long tradition of love sonnets from the Renaissance onwards. Structurally, however, it raises some pertinent questions about what constitutes a sonnet, other than the basic requirement of fourteen lines in iambic pentameter. Tennyson's lyric certainly possesses a strong sense of design, but the typographical layout is in keeping with its repeated insistence on the present moment of fulfilment rather than with any perception of finely poised oppositions or logically constructed arguments. The deployment of lines (4+2+2+2+4, rather than 8+6 or 4+4+4+2) suggests that Tennyson's lyric is weighted rather differently from the traditional Renaissance or Romantic love sonnet. The unwavering present-tense observations of a drowsy world, the simple but strategic conjunctions, and the incantatory repetition of line openings and line endings all work to enhance the poem's seductive close.

Browning's 'Now' (from *Asolando*, 1889) has the intensity and inwardness of Tennyson's lyric, though it achieves this through an intricate modification of the Petrarchan sonnet form, bringing the third rhyme word unexpectedly forward (the rhyme scheme is *abbcadedefggf*). Where Tennyson repeatedly uses line endings to emphasize the first-person pronoun, Browning effectively conveys the turning from 'you' to 'me' at the very centre of the poem. Lines 8 and 10 end with 'me', while line 9 (the structural 'turn' of the sonnet) also begins with 'me':

Out of your whole life give but a moment!  
 All of your life that has gone before,  
 All to come after it,—so you ignore  
 So you make perfect the present,—condense,  
 In a rapture of rage, for perfection's endowment,  
 Thought and feeling and soul and sense—  
 Merged in a moment which gives me at last  
 You around me for once, you beneath me, above me—  
 Me—sure that despite of time future, time past,—  
 This tick of our life-time's one moment you love me!  
 How long such suspension may linger? Ah, sweet—  
 The moment eternal—just that and no more—  
 When ecstasy's utmost we clutch at the core  
 While cheeks burn, arms open, eyes shut and lips meet.<sup>6</sup>

Browning's sonnet is remarkable for the way in which it creates a moment's monument, both acutely registering the impulse to preserve the experience of 'ecstasy' and simultaneously acknowledging the need to let it go. In a breathlessly elliptical and densely parenthetical style, the sonnet opens up long perspectives on a 'whole life' and fastens vividly and erotically on the passing moment. The love sonnets of Tennyson and Browning neatly encapsulate those stylistic features for which the two poets are renowned: one tending towards mellifluousness and ornamentation, the other striving for the impact and immediacy of actual speech. Both poets are drawn to the concentrated form of the

<sup>5</sup> *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. by Christopher Ricks, 3 vols (London: Longman, 1987), II, 284–85.

<sup>6</sup> *Robert Browning: Selected Poems*, ed. by Daniel Karlin (London: Penguin, 1989), p. 294.

sonnet, but within the space of a single short poem their pronouncements on love are likely to appear insubstantial or merely whimsical. A more discursive, expository treatment of love requires the expansiveness of a sonnet sequence: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, Christina Rossetti's *Monna Innominata*, Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The House of Life*, and, most importantly, George Meredith's *Modern Love*.

Browning, as an admirer of Shelley, was clearly aware of how the sonnet might be prised away from its aristocratic, courtly origins and put to the service of radical political causes. His own modest attempt at writing a political sonnet is cautiously egalitarian rather than revolutionary. The uncollected poem 'Why I am a Liberal' (1885) deftly balances the vagaries of fortune against a more principled ideal of liberty.<sup>7</sup> The turn from octave to sestet marks the sonnet's acknowledgement of the limitations of a laissez-faire politics and asserts the importance of inalienable rights: 'But little do or can the best of us: | That little is achieved through Liberty.' As the title of the sonnet suggests, the rhetorical impulse is towards declaration and explanation rather than incitement. The poem dutifully answers itself with a flatly assertive 'That is why'. 'Why I am a Liberal' lacks both the rhetorical command and the powerful political vision that Shelley was able to summon in his sonnets, but it nevertheless provides an indication that the sonnet continues to provide a space, not just for thoughts of love, but for meditations on the problems of democracy.

It is Matthew Arnold, however, who proves most responsive to the political sonnets of his Romantic predecessors. Just as 'The Scholar-Gipsy' and 'Thyrsis' reverberate with the Keatsian sensuousness that Arnold elsewhere admonished, so too do the sonnets appear to exceed themselves in their affirmative echoes of those Romantic authors for whom Arnold, in his critical essays, was at pains to distance himself. This is not to suggest that Arnold is avowedly in support of the more revolutionary tendencies in Romantic poetry. The political relationship with Wordsworth, especially, is complex, and it often manifests itself in terms of a chastened, circumspect view of human liberty. Among Arnold's 1849 sonnets are several conventional pieces dedicated to Shakespeare, to Emerson, and to the Duke of Wellington, but there is also a small group of sonnets clearly inspired by the political events of 1848—by revolution in France and by the powerful surge of the Chartist movement in Britain.

Arnold's 'Quiet Work' (simply titled 'Sonnet' in *The Strayed Reveller, and Other Poems*, 1849) responds to the 'fitful uproar' of 1848 with a call for patience and repose that draws extensively on Romantic ideals of harmonious integration with Nature.<sup>8</sup> The opening is strongly Wordsworthian—'One lesson, Nature, let me learn of thee'—but so, too, is the modified Petrarchan form of the sonnet, with its introduction of a third rhyme in the octave (*abbaaccadefdef*). The repeated emphasis on 'toil', 'labour', and 'work' keeps the class conflicts of the 1840s in view, but the labourers that the sonnet most admires are Nature's 'sleepless ministers', the stars. Here, the sonnet effectively consolidates a range of well-established Romantic motifs, all of which reinforce the ideal of quiet

<sup>7</sup> *Robert Browning*, ed. by Adam Roberts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 572.

<sup>8</sup> *Arnold: The Complete Poems*, ed. by Kenneth Allott (1965), 2nd edn by Miriam Allott (London: Longman, 1979), p. 112. All other quotations from Arnold's poems are from this edition.

work: 'the secret ministry of frost' in Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight', the 'silent tasks' in Wordsworth's 'Gypsies', and the 'patient, sleepless eremite' in Keats's 'Bright star' sonnet.

If Arnold draws on Romantic precursors to underwrite the quietistic politics of this early sonnet, he can also at times be prompted into more radical political gestures that suggest the influence of Shelley rather than Wordsworth. His sonnet 'To A Republican Friend, 1848' has its origins in his extensive correspondence with Arthur Hugh Clough, but the specific date (added to the title when the poem was reprinted in 1853) also establishes that great year of revolution and political upheaval as a crucial context for understanding the poem. The prevailing conditional tense appears to echo Clough's remark in March 1848, 'If it were not for all these blessed revolutions, I should sink into hopeless lethargy',<sup>9</sup> but just as surely it echoes Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind':

God knows it, I am with you. If to prize  
Those virtues, prized and practised by too few,  
But prized, but loved, but eminent in you,  
Man's fundamental life; if to despise  
The barren optimistic sophistries  
Of comfortable moles, whom what they do  
Teaches the limit of the just and true  
(And for such doing they require not eyes);  
If sadness at the long heart-wasting show  
Wherein earth's great ones are disquieted;  
If thoughts, not idle, while before me flow  
The armies of the homeless and unfed—  
If these are yours, if this is what you are,  
Then am I yours, and what you feel, I share.

The rhyme scheme here suggests a hybrid Petrarchan–Shakespearian form, both retaining the formal elegance of the envelope rhymes in the octave and making resourceful use of the emphatic closing couplet: *abbaabbacdcdee*. Arnold creates a powerful and imposing tension in the sonnet by running repeated conditional phrases ('If to prize [. . .] if to despise [. . .] If sadness [. . .] If thoughts [. . .] If these [. . .] if this') against the confident certainty of the opening and closing lines, with their positive declaration of solidarity. 'I am with you' is intensified in the candid, epistolary signing off, 'Then am I yours'. In a style that recalls Shelley's 'England in 1819', the sonnet rebukes the comfortable and complacent upholders of the establishment and mourns the neglect of truth and justice. The parenthetical insertion at the end of the octave is especially reminiscent of Shelley. Although democracy was often negatively portrayed in the mid-nineteenth century as a flood and a deluge, as well as a militant force, Arnold's perception of a starving, vagrant underclass is both stark and sympathetic.

Arnold's correspondence with Clough clearly shapes the strong sense of dialogue within and between the sonnets of the 1840s and lends them a conversational ease. The second sonnet to his republican friend, simply titled 'Continued', has an air of cautious reassessment, if not recantation:

<sup>9</sup> Arnold: *The Complete Poems*, p. 107.

Yet, when I muse on what life is, I seem  
 Rather to patience prompted, than that proud  
 Prospect of hope which France proclaims so loud  
 [. . .]

This time, the voice is at a distance from the republican politics espoused by Clough. The second sonnet responds pessimistically to the idea of an imminent revolutionary change, seeming to postpone equality until we are 'left standing face to face with God'. The turn from octave to sestet reinforces this conviction: 'Nor will that day dawn at a human nod'. Even so, the idea of humanity 'bursting' through its mundane concerns with 'plot and plan' to achieve eventual liberty is strongly Shelleyan. In the light of these two sonnets and their dialogue with both Clough and Shelley, it would seem unwise to make any definitive pronouncement on the politics of Arnold's poetry in the late 1840s. What the sonnets reveal is the profound instability and disquiet that flows through Arnold's thoughts about the place of poetry in modern culture and about its social and moral responsibilities at this unnerving time.

Arnold's conviction that the sonnet had a strong civic and political relevance is evident as late as 1863, when he came to write a pair of sonnets titled 'East London' and 'West London', both of which were published in *New Poems* (1867) and then in successive editions of Arnold's poems in 1868 and 1869. These, of course, are the years in which Arnold's meditations on culture and anarchy are at their most intense, and we need to read these sonnets in the context of the growing campaign for political reform if we are to appreciate them fully. 'West London' is remarkably candid in its depiction of class conflict, subtly utilizing the resources of the sonnet to draw attention, not just to obvious disparities between rich and poor, but to the utter destitution of 'the homeless and unfed' in the most fashionable part of the city:

Crouched on the pavement, close by Belgrave Square,  
 A tramp I saw, ill, moody, and tongue-tied.  
 A babe was in her arms, and at her side  
 A girl; their clothes were rags, their feet were bare.  
 Some labouring men, whose work lay somewhere there,  
 Passed opposite; she touched her girl, who hied  
 Across, and begged, and came back satisfied.  
 The rich she had let pass with frozen stare.  
 Thought I: 'Above her state this spirit towers;  
 She will not ask of aliens, but of friends,  
 Of sharers in a common human fate.  
 She turns from that cold succour, which attends  
 The unknown little from the unknowing great,  
 And points us to a better time than ours.'

The conventions of the Petrarchan sonnet are very deftly employed here, with the octave–sestet and quatrain–tercet divisions being used for maximum political effect. Each verse section of the poem contains a particular observation or perception. The sonnet turns effectively from the speaker's casual observation to his concentrated thought, at the same time demonstrating the difference between the destitute woman's 'tongue-tied' condition and his own refined and

elegant speech. Even more impressively, the sonnet slips from the narrative past to the imposing present, before closing with a strikingly prophetic awareness of social change. There is evidence here that the sonnet form, carrying with it the inspiring rhetoric of Milton and Shelley, functions in a way that enables a more radical and emancipatory politics than we are accustomed to finding in Arnold's writings of the 1860s.

It is worth noting that while Arnold perpetuates and reworks the tradition of the political sonnet, he does not employ the sonnet form for the more private, introspective musings of the Marguerite poems, even though these have an epistolary mode of address not unlike the sonnets addressed to Clough ('To Marguerite—Continued' is indicative of this tendency). It is difficult to conceive of Arnold venturing into the confessional, revelatory discourse associated with the sonnet sequences of Elizabeth Barrett Browning or Dante Gabriel Rossetti, or, indeed, of George Meredith. There are moments in Meredith's *Modern Love* when his disenchanted protagonists seem to show the 'palsied hearts' symptomatic of 'this strange disease of modern life', but in other respects his sonnet sequence is far too iconoclastic (and far too French) for Arnold's liking. The title of Meredith's sonnet sequence is deeply ironic, for the lovers in question, however enlightened they may appear to be, are still bound by convention and hypocritically conceal their broken marriage: 'Each sucked a secret, and each wore a mask.'<sup>10</sup> Here, the isolation that Arnold writes of in his Marguerite poems has become a chronically destructive condition.

Meredith's sixteen-line sonnet is a highly flexible and versatile form that clearly suits the skills of a writer habitually attuned to the technical resources and demands of realist fiction. The enlargement of the form allows for narrative expansion of the episodic action within the individual sonnets and it opens up space for the play of dialogue. At the same time, Meredith does observe the familiar conventions of sonnet-writing, judiciously exploiting the tension between rhythmical structure and syntactical structure, and also making strategic use of the characteristic turn or *volta*. The rhyme scheme is *abbacddceffeghhg*. The greater variety of rhymes than we usually find in the sonnet, either in its English or Italian variants, considerably eases the requirements of narrative progression. This arrangement also conveniently avoids the epigrammatic neatness associated with the Shakespearian closing couplet.

The fictional qualities of *Modern Love* are evident not just in the sustained narrative framework of the sequence and its highly developed dialogue, but also in the diction and syntax of individual sonnets. One of the most innovative features of the sequence is its accommodation of long syntactical units, more readily associated with the realist novel than with lyric poetry. Complex sentences are run across the four constituent quatrains of each sixteen-line sonnet, creating a strong sense of propulsion and also dislocation. Sonnet I provides an excellent example of the characteristic interplay of syntactical and rhythmical structures in the sonnet sequence as a whole:

<sup>10</sup> Sonnet II. All quotations from Meredith's poems are from *The Poems of George Meredith*, ed. by Phyllis Bartlett, 2 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978).



By this he knew she wept with waking eyes:  
 That, at his hand's light quiver by her head,  
 The strange low sobs that shook their common bed,  
 Were called into her with a sharp surprise,  
 And strangled mute, like little gaping snakes,  
 Dreadfully venomous to him. She lay  
 Stone-still, and the long darkness flowed away  
 With muffled pulses. Then, as midnight makes  
 Her giant heart of Memory and Tears  
 Drink the pale drug of silence, and so beat  
 Sleep's heavy measure, they from head to feet  
 Were moveless, looking through their dead black years,  
 By vain regret scrawled over the blank wall.  
 Like sculptured effigies they might be seen  
 Upon their marriage-tomb, the sword between;  
 Each wishing for the sword that severs all.

Even though the rhyme scheme suggests that the individual sonnets are structured around a series of quatrains, the syntax in this opening sonnet moves headlong across the first six lines. It also ends in the middle of a line, creating a strong caesura and setting up the steady enjambment of lines 6–12. These opening six lines owe more to the realist novel than the traditional love sonnet. Characteristic of Meredith's language is the strongly dissonant resumptive conjunction 'that' at the beginning of line two, upsetting any expectations of lyric melody and establishing a more vernacular idiom. The most enigmatic aspect of the sequence's narrative structure is its use of both third-person and first-person voices, sometimes within the same sonnet. In Sonnet III, for instance, the omniscient mode is suddenly transposed into an insistent first-person presence: 'See that I am drawn to her even now'. Sonnet IV then returns, rather puzzlingly, to the more detached third-person viewpoint. This alternation of perspectives initially suggests a framing device, with a dramatic monologue or monodrama being enclosed by a more objective testimony. However, the opening and closing shifts of perspective can be readily understood in terms of a single, protean consciousness in a profound state of distraction, desperately confronting the circumstances of an appalling personal tragedy. This, too, is part of the poem's indubitable modernity.

As it progresses, *Modern Love* moves through a bewildering variety of literary modes—dramatic, pictorial, allegorical, and elegiac—and these are often strangely at odds with the realist elements that predominate. The opening sonnet's capitalized 'Memory' and 'Tears', for instance, seem luridly allegorical, and there are also touches of melodrama in this and other sonnets. The poem is both lyrical and anti-lyrical, sometimes shifting abruptly from metrical smoothness and regularity to highly convoluted syntax and elliptical phrasing. It repeatedly draws attention to its own discordant tendencies and linguistic peculiarities, with the husband sarcastically declaring at the end of Sonnet XXXIII: 'Strange love talk, is it not?' The curiously hybrid language of the sequence is in keeping with the powerful clash of ideas and values that Meredith's lovers struggle to resolve. If the lovers are 'modern' in their determination to base their conduct on new ideas of human physiology and psychology, they are

also inveterate traditionalists, instinctively reverting to older models of human progress and development in times of crisis. Sonnet xxx amply demonstrates the extent to which the lovers are caught between a progressive, evolutionary discourse and an older, biblical wisdom:

What are we first? First, animals; and next  
Intelligences at a leap; on whom  
Pale lies the distant shadow of the tomb,  
And all that draweth on the tomb for text.  
Into which state comes Love, the crowning sun:  
Beneath whose light the shadow loses form.  
We are the lords of life, and life is warm.  
Intelligence and instinct now are one.  
But Nature says: 'My children most they seem  
When they least know me: therefore I decree  
That they shall suffer'. Swift doth young Love flee  
And we stand wakened, shivering from our dream.  
Then if we study Nature we are wise.  
Thus do the few who live but with the day:  
The scientific animals are they.—  
Lady, this is my sonnet to your eyes.

The self-conscious incongruity of the closing line is a measure of the distance between inherited poetic tradition and the prevailing evolutionary discourse of the 1850s and 1860s. The linguistic devices of the sonnet that have persisted all the way from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century as a standard of what love poetry should be are now seen to be drastically, even comically, anachronistic. The unusual collocation that comes from infusing the traditional language of love poetry with empirical scientific discourse is brilliantly captured elsewhere in the husband's disillusioned homage to his 'gold-haired lady's eyeballs pure' (xiv). A relentless displacement of conventional poeticizing is one of the hallmarks of Meredith's radical appropriation of the love sonnet. Repeatedly and obsessively, *Modern Love* draws upon a poetic idiom that is patently derivative and self-consciously 'literary', only to debunk it as grotesquely archaic and inadequate to the times.

The poem's modernity is seen, as well, in its exploration and authentication of sexual jealousy and anger, and in the provocative association it establishes between sexual repression and neurotic behaviour. Initially, the husband's agitation is seen to emerge from the friction between his continuing sexual desire for his wife and his moral revulsion at her suspected infidelity, but an additional source of frustration is his struggle against conventional outrage, to the point where he theatrically invokes and then censors his own role as the injured and vengeful partner: 'Behold me striking the world's coward stroke' (vi). A painful sense of self-division accompanies this fitful role-playing. The husband is by turns sarcastic and pitiful, tender and indignant, bitterly hostile and warmly generous, striving to 'ape the magnanimity of love' (ii). The strongly interrogative nature of the husband's address suggests a radical crisis of identity and a desperate need for reassurance over the disruption of his marriage: 'But where began the change; and what's my crime?' (x). There are numerous dramatic asides that reinforce this impression of personal instability, as the husband

pauses to address himself, his wife, or an imaginary audience: 'Am I failing?' (xxix); 'What's my drift?' (xxxI).

That the wife's adultery is one of the causes of marital breakdown is implied as early as Sonnet II—'This was the woman; what now of the man?'—but much of the dramatic power of *Modern Love* stems from the husband's reversion to the most blatant stereotypes, as he struggles to achieve a more equable and emancipated view of women. Accordingly, the wife in the poem is viewed as both divine and malignant, both queen of heaven and sinful transgressor: 'A star with lurid beams, she seemed to crown | The pit of infamy' (II); 'Poor twisting worm, so queenly beautiful' (VIII); 'Devilish malignant witch! And oh, young beam | Of heaven's circle-glory' (IX). The complexity of the poem, however, is such that the husband is acutely and ironically aware of his own idealizing and debasing tendencies. There are moments when the husband reveals an acutely ironic sense of the mundane world of household matters:

She issues radiant from her dressing room,  
Like one prepared to scale an upper sphere:  
—By stirring up a lower, much I fear!  
(VII)

The comic rhyme here suggests an instinct for bathos remarkably similar to that of T. S. Eliot in his dramatic monologues 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' and 'Portrait of a Lady'.<sup>11</sup>

The wife in *Modern Love* is more reminiscent of the psychologically complex New Woman of the later decades of the nineteenth century than of any obvious female stereotype. Unlike many of her predecessors in sonnet sequences, she has the capacity for speech, a sarcastic sense of humour, and a lively intelligence. Meredith's flair for social comedy is once again apparent:

Once: 'Have you no fear?'  
He said: 'twas dusk, she in his grasp; none near,  
She laughed: 'No surely; am I not with you?'  
(IX)

Even so, the response of the wife to her husband's affair suggests that she, too, is far from emancipated in her state of modern love. Meredith referred to *Modern Love* as 'a dissection of the sentimental passion of these days', perhaps tactfully playing down its autobiographical elements, but also emphasizing its broad cultural relevance.<sup>12</sup> The husband's sentimentality, frequently the target of the poem's biting satire, is evident in his continuing idealization of 'Love's inmost sacredness' and his inability to accept the loss of the heavenly splendour it once bestowed upon his life:

Is my soul beggared? Something more than earth  
I cry for still: I cannot be at peace

<sup>11</sup> Isobel Armstrong argues persuasively that, in a complicated way, *Modern Love* is a comic poem and she reads it in the light of Meredith's 'Essay on the Idea of Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit' (1877). See *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 440–59.

<sup>12</sup> *The Letters of George Meredith*, ed. by C. L. Cline, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), I, 160.

In having love upon a mortal lease.  
I cannot take the woman at her worth!

(xxix)

While wishing to respond intelligently and sensitively to the pressures of marital breakdown and estrangement, the husband cannot entirely abandon the idea of love as sacred and immortal. In a powerfully compelling way, the poem associates the husband's crisis of belief with a more general intellectual crisis in the wake of evolutionary theory. 'Out in the yellow meadows' of spring, the husband recalls a time when love seemed to confirm his place in a purposeful and benevolent world:

What's this when Nature swears there is no change  
To challenge eyesight? Now, as then, the grace  
Of heaven seems holding earth in its embrace.

(xi)

The 'spiritual splendour' and 'the consecration of the Past' have been displaced, but the latent religious vocabulary here suggests both a former happiness in love and a former belief in a divinely ordained universe. In its rueful and ironic echoes of Wordsworthian sublimity, the poem reveals its own tormented post-Romantic sensibility:

The 'What has been' a moment seemed his own:  
The splendours, mysteries, dearer because known,  
Nor less divine.

(v)

The deep sexual disillusionment in *Modern Love* coincides with a widespread epistemological crisis and a critical turning from a confident apprehension of 'Nature's holy plan' to an appalled awareness of 'Nature red in tooth and claw'. The poem nevertheless suggests the possibility of a close alignment and integration between human needs and desires and a newly emerging conception of the natural environment. This tentative rapport finds its most serene expression in Sonnet XLVII, which Swinburne thought was the finest sonnet in the sequence ('a more perfect piece of writing no man alive has ever turned out'<sup>13</sup>):

We saw the swallows gathering in the sky,  
And in the osier-isle we heard them noise.  
We had not to look back on summer joys,  
Or forward to a summer of bright dye:  
But in the largeness of the evening earth  
Our spirits grew as we went side by side.  
The hour became her husband and my bride.  
Love that had robbed us so, thus blessed our dearth!  
The pilgrims of the year waxed very loud  
In multitudinous chatterings, as the flood  
Full brown came from the West, and like pale blood  
Expanded to the upper crimson cloud.  
Love that had robbed us of immortal things,  
This little moment mercifully gave,

<sup>13</sup> *Spectator*, 7 June 1862.

Where I have seen across the twilight wave  
The swan sail with her young beneath her wings.

Here, at a late stage in the sequence, husband and wife find an unexpected moment of harmony, gratefully sharing the present moment rather than dwelling obsessively on the past. The scene of contemplation conveys the quiet inevitability of change in its delicate, transient images of light and water, and in the subtle suggestiveness of swallows and swans in flight. In this brief interlude, the poem extols the idea of blood kinship with the earth, but the blood-stained crimson clouds also have an ominous significance. The recovery of emotional stability is only partial, and the tranquil scene is all the more poignant in that it precedes, and perhaps even precipitates, the desperate suicide of the wife.

Throughout *Modern Love* there is an insistent parallel between the breakdown in communication between husband and wife and the seeming refusal of Nature to render any coherent meaning to human perception. The poem's final magnificent image gives tragic recognition to the waves of destiny, whose consequences are powerfully felt but only dimly comprehended:

In tragic hints here see what evermore  
Moves dark as yonder midnight ocean's force,  
Thundering like ramping hosts of warrior horse,  
To throw that faint thin line upon the shore!  
(L)

*Modern Love* lays bare the troubled sexual ethics of its time with a boldness and adventurousness unmatched in Victorian poetry. In doing so, it decisively transforms the poetic diction habitually associated with the sonnet, exposing and displacing the most stultifying and artificial aspects of convention, but also ambitiously enlarging the narrative possibilities of the sonnet sequence. It is not just the disturbing frankness with which the poem dissects 'the sentimental passion' of its day that distinguishes it from other sonnet sequences such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *House of Life* or Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*; it is also its imaginative capacity to look beyond the ideological constraints of its own time towards a future in which men and women will live with a greater sense of confidence, equality, and freedom.

Meredith continued to write sonnets in the usual fourteen-line form, sometimes sending them to national newspapers such as the *Daily Chronicle* as a way of intervening in public debates. 'The Warning' and 'Outside the Crowd', both written in 1896, take a strong stand against British colonial aggression, the former intent on exposing 'This little Isle's insatiable greed | For Continents'. By the time Meredith came to write these late political sonnets, his experiments with sixteen-line and fourteen-line compositions had already been overtaken and surpassed by those of another prolific and prodigious writer of sonnets, one whose work was to remain in relative obscurity until 1918. Among Victorian poets, Gerard Manley Hopkins stands alone as the most technically proficient and most radically innovative in his use of the sonnet form. It is part of his interest and appeal as a writer of sonnets that Hopkins is also the most stringent and most exacting of poets in terms of observing and respecting the mathematical proportions of the form. If Meredith is essentially concerned with

expansion, and with the narrative, dialogic potential of the sonnet form, Hopkins is preoccupied with intensification, and with the discipline and dynamism of the sonnet's constituent parts. Where Meredith dramatically transforms the love sonnet, fusing it with realist fiction to give a bold and unillusioned view of sexual ethics, Hopkins produces the most powerful and compelling religious or devotional sonnets since those of John Donne and George Herbert. In very different ways, Meredith and Hopkins decisively alter the standard of poetic diction customarily associated with the sonnet, though both writers appear to be drawing on the rhythms and cadences of actual speech in their striking experiments with the form.

Hopkins's undergraduate essay 'On the Origin of Beauty: A Platonic Dialogue', purportedly written for Walter Pater in 1865, considers the idea that beauty derives from a complex relationship between regularity and irregularity, likeness and difference. In a passage of the discussion that bears on the proportions of the sonnet, Hopkins proposes through the presiding Professor of Aesthetics (probably based on John Ruskin) that 'there is a relation between the parts of the thing to each other and again of the parts to the whole, which must be duly kept'. The sonnet illustrates this formal principle, in that 'It must be made up of fourteen lines: if you were to take a line out, that would be an important loss to the structural unity.' Similarly, in contemplating the 'emphasis of pathos' to be found in the rhyming couplet of a Shakespearian sonnet, the essay considers the relation of the parts to each other and of the parts to the whole: 'On the one hand the sonnet would lose if you put two other lines instead of that couplet at the end, on the other the couplet would lose if quoted apart, so as to be without the emphasis which has been gathering through the sonnet.'<sup>14</sup>

Some fifteen or sixteen years later, Hopkins was to offer similar pronouncements on the sonnet form in a letter to Richard Watson Dixon, carefully distinguishing between the Shakespearian sonnet and the Italian sonnet, 'which is the sonnet proper'. He considers the Shakespearian sonnet 'a very beautiful and effective species of composition in the kind' and adds that, 'though simpler, it is as strict, regular and specific as the sonnet proper'. Crucially, the Shakespearian sonnet has 'the division into the two parts 8+6, at all events 4+4+4+2', and this division is seen by Hopkins as 'the real characteristic of the sonnet'. Mathematically, the form might be regarded as an unsymmetrical equation 'in the shape  $x+y=a$ , where  $x$  and  $y$  are unequal in some simple ratio'. Musically, it might be regarded in terms of major and minor scales. Paradoxically, it is largely owing to his self-confessed 'dogmatic' views about the exact proportions of the sonnet that Hopkins is compelled to produce such powerful and energetic versions of his own.<sup>15</sup>

There are three main phases of sonnet-writing in Hopkins's poetic career. The earliest is confined to a single year, 1865, when Hopkins is preparing to enter the Catholic Church. It includes some soul-searching devotional sonnets, such as 'Myself unholy', 'Let me be to Thee', and 'See how Spring opens'. The

<sup>14</sup> *The Note-Books and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. by Humphry House (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), pp. 68–72.

<sup>15</sup> *The Correspondence of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Richard Watson Dixon*, ed. by Claude Collier Abbott, 2nd edn (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), pp. 71–72.

second phase, 1877 to 1879, coincides with Hopkins's final year at St Beuno's in Wales (1877 was the year he was ordained) and his brief return to Oxford as curate at the church of St Aloysius. This middle phase includes some of his most innovative and exuberant sonnets, including 'God's Grandeur', 'The Starlight Night', 'The Sea and the Skylark', 'The Windhover', and 'Hurrahing in Harvest'. It is also the phase during which Hopkins composes his remarkable curtal-sonnets, 'Pied Beauty' and 'Peace'.<sup>16</sup> The third and final phase is that of the late 1880s, when Hopkins is living in Dublin. It includes the so-called 'sonnets of desolation' or 'terrible sonnets', probably composed in 1885, as well as some 'extended' sonnets, such as 'Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves', 'Tom's Garland', and 'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire'.<sup>17</sup>

Despite his high regard for the Shakespearian sonnet, it is the Petrarchan or Italian sonnet, 'the sonnet proper', that most appeals to Hopkins when he first begins to try his hand at the form. 'See how Spring opens', written on 26 June 1865, when he was on the verge of conversion to Catholicism, shows an impressive control of the form, though the poem is much more conventional and stable than the sonnets Hopkins would write in the year of his ordination as a priest:

See how Spring opens with disabling cold,  
 And hunting winds and the long-lying snow.  
 Is it a wonder if the buds are slow?  
 Or where is strength to make the leaf unfold?  
 Chilling remembrance of my days of old  
 Afflicts no less, what yet I hope may blow,  
 That seed which the good sower once did sow,  
 So loading with obstruction that threshold  
 Which should ere now have led my feet to the field.  
 It is the waste done in unreticent youth  
 Which makes so small the promise of that yield  
 That I may win with late-learnt skill uncouth  
 From furrows of the poor and stinting weald.  
 Therefore how bitter, and learnt how late, the truth!

The rhyme scheme here is one of the simplest Petrarchan types—*abbaabbacdcd cd*—and the octave and sestet offer a clear conceptual development, from the imperative opening, through rhetorical questions and expressions of regret, towards a painful realization and acceptance of the truth. If Hopkins adopts 'the sonnet proper', however, he does so with a strong awareness of how Milton had employed the Italian form. The opening line recalls the 'late spring' of Milton's sonnet on his twenty-third birthday ('How soon hath Time') and there are echoes of other Milton sonnets in the use of Scripture (the parable of the good sower appears in Luke 8, the Gospel reading for 25 June in the *Book of Common Prayer*). The compression and inversion of 'late-learnt skill uncouth' are also reminiscent of Milton, as are the numerous clauses that swell the ponderous syntax. Most impressively, however, Hopkins follows Milton in allowing the

<sup>16</sup> J. R. Watson, one of the most thoughtful and discerning critics of Hopkins's sonnets, offers an illuminating reading of the curtal sonnets in *The Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Penguin, 1989), pp. 57, 89.

<sup>17</sup> All references are to *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 4th edn, ed. by W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie (London: Oxford University Press, 1967).

syntax to surge across the octave–sestet division, powerfully and mimetically crossing the threshold that has, for so long, been loaded with obstruction. Even at this early stage, Hopkins both observes the structural relationship of octave and sestet and shows a freedom of invention. As a meditation on his delayed conversion to the Catholic faith, the sonnet carries hope and promise, however muted. At the same time, as Norman White has pointed out in his biography of Hopkins, the ‘self-denigration’ in this and an earlier sonnet, ‘Myself unholy’, anticipates the terrible crisis in the sonnets written twenty years later.<sup>18</sup>

The most fertile time for Hopkins’s experimentation with the sonnet was undoubtedly the year of his ordination, 1877, when his contemplation of his dual vocation as priest and poet was at its most intense. In the eight months between February and September of that year Hopkins produced some of the most astonishingly innovative sonnets ever written, including ‘God’s Grandeur’, ‘The Starlight Night’, ‘As Kingfishers catch fire’, ‘The Sea and the Skylark’, ‘The Windhover’, ‘Pied Beauty’, ‘The Caged Skylark’, ‘Hurrahing in Harvest’, and ‘The Lantern out of Doors’. Throughout these sonnets, there is an insistent acknowledgement of God’s presence in the world and of the spectator’s instinct to praise God for the mysteriousness and multifariousness of his creation. Hopkins told Robert Bridges that ‘The Windhover’ was the best thing he had written, and much of its power derives from the tremendous compression that Hopkins is able to bring to the sonnet form without it collapsing completely under the turbulent force of its own idiosyncratic diction and rhythm:

I caught this morning morning’s minion, king-  
 dom of daylight’s dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding  
 Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding  
 High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing  
 In his ecstasy! Then off, off forth on swing,  
 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.

Despite the extensive critical commentary that ‘The Windhover’ has received, very little of it has been concerned with the poem as a sonnet. In some respects, it observes the familiar Petrarchan form of fourteen lines rhyming *abbaabbacd ccde*, except that the sestet is visibly displayed as two tercets. The rhymes in the octave are alternating male and female rhymes, though of course it might be argued that the same ‘ing’ rhyme word is simply maintained throughout. The repeated participles have an accelerating effect on the poem’s momentum. Where Hopkins makes a radical departure from convention is in greatly lengthening the number of syllables per line, while tending to retain the usual five stresses associated with iambic pentameter. The resulting large number of

<sup>18</sup> Norman White, *Hopkins: A Literary Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 117.



unstressed syllables creates a highly energetic and syncopated sprung rhythm, so powerfully driven that it splits the word 'kingdom' across the ending of the first line and sets up a forceful enjambment throughout the rest of the sonnet.

As Norman White observes, 'The excitement and high-pitched intensity of the octave is effected by a madrigal medley of sound devices: nearly every line has its characteristic one, two, or three consonants', and in the first two lines, in particular, these take the form of alliterative 'adjectival clusters'.<sup>19</sup> The self that catches sight of the kestrel in the opening line of the octave reappears in the closing line, confessing a secret admiration for the bird: 'My heart in hiding | Stirred for a bird'. It would be too simple to see this notion of 'hiding' in terms of the conflict between the poet's perception of sensuous, physical beauty and the priest's apprehension of the spiritual beauty of God's creation, but there is undoubtedly a tension between the 'Brute beauty' of the bird and what Hopkins later terms 'God's better beauty, grace'. The poem observes the turn from octave to sestet characteristic of the sonnet proper, but also energetically sustains it, so that the capitalized conjunction in the second line of the sestet seems to carry the force of the traditional *volta*. All of the majestic qualities of the bird are seen to coalesce or 'buckle' in the sestet as the bird falls to earth (with 'buckle' semantically anticipating 'collapse'). At the same time as recognizing the bird as Christ's chivalric messenger, the poem is drawn towards a humble recognition of vocational hardship. Just as the sheer plod of the ploughman makes the ploughshare shine as it cuts through the earth, so the priest's daily toil will be dedicated to the greater glory of God. The sestet slows into a more meditative mood, with the punctuation in the closing line allowing for the brilliant climactic image of the crucifixion in 'gásh góld-vermílion'. The affectionate address 'ah my dear', so reminiscent of George Herbert's devotional poems, suggests that 'The Windhover' is, above all, a love sonnet dedicated 'to Christ our Lord'.

In the elegiac sonnet 'Felix Randal' Hopkins once again takes the measure of his own vocation in relation to a traditional craft involving hard, physical labour. The poem falls slightly outside the three main phases of sonnet-writing outlined above and was occasioned by the death of a young blacksmith, Felix Spencer, one of Hopkins's parishioners in the Liverpool slums where he was working in 1880. Although the sonnet is noticeably more subdued than 'The Windhover', it uses the same technique of extending the sonnet line and introducing a sprung rhythm. Here, the alexandrine measure gives a more stately movement to the line (Hopkins marks six stresses rather than five), while the carefully observed divisions both within and between octave and sestet also contribute to the dignified, elegiac mood:

Felix Randal the farrier, O is he dead then? My duty all ended,  
Who have watched his mould of man, big-boned and hardy-handsome  
Pining, pining, till time when reason rambled in it and some  
Fatal four disorders, fleshed there, all contended?

Sickness broke him. Impatient, he cursed at first, but mended  
Being anointed and all; though a heavenlier heart began some  
Months earlier, since I had our sweet reprieve and ransom  
Tendered to him. Ah well, God rest him all road ever he offended!

<sup>19</sup> Hopkins: *A Literary Biography*, p. 282.

This seeing the sick endears them to us, us too it endears.  
 My tongue had taught thee comfort, touch had quenched thy tears,  
 Thy tears that touched my heart, child, Felix, poor Felix Randal;  
 How far from then forethought of, all thy more boisterous years,  
 When thou at the random grim forge, powerful amidst peers,  
 Didst fettle for the great grey drayhorse his bright and battering sandal!

The 'O' in the opening line effectively combines a conventional, literary expression of grief with the muted surprise that often enters casual conversation. In the same way, the sonnet repeatedly crosses a highly stylized poetic diction with a local speech derived from Lancashire dialect. 'Mended' is exactly right as a way of describing the blacksmith's change of heart, just as 'fettle' (still in use in the north of England) is a putting right and a restoring to a good state. 'Ah well, God rest him all road ever he offended' effectively catches the rhythm and stress of local speech. As Tom Paulin suggests, 'Anyone who enjoys the extremes of impulsive affection and vitality in regional speech is bound to notice that Hopkins's inner ear is awash with an infinite and exquisite sense of unique vocal patterns.'<sup>20</sup> Much of the poem's verbal energy, however, issues from particular kinds of phonetic heightening, including internal rhyme ('cursed at first') and repeated consonantal and assonantal chiming. Some of the most vigorous linguistic effects derive from neologisms such as 'hardy-handsome' or from a revitalized archaic diction. James Milroy points out that 'sandal', as a surprising substitute for 'shoe', is an example of Old English or Old Norse kenning.<sup>21</sup> Paulin's claim is that Hopkins's privileging of demotic speech is in keeping with the enlarged democratic sympathies that came from his immersion in working-class culture in Liverpool, Glasgow, and Dublin. At the same time, simply by dedicating the sonnet to a Liverpool labourer, Hopkins makes a vital contribution to the transformation of a poetic form that for centuries had been the preserve of an aristocratic elite. The structure of the sonnet, and not just its diction, carries the force of that transformation, placing the speaker's perception of common humanity at the critical turn from octave to sestet. The sonnet moves from the sudden death of Felix Randal to his recent illness and his dwindling strength, but the final tercet recovers from the more distant past a bright sustaining memory, heroic and mythological in its proportions, and magnificently rolls it out in that long closing line, with its powerful alliteration and internal rhyme.

Hopkins's conversion to Catholicism undoubtedly had complicating political consequences. Paulin believes that Hopkins's vocation brought him into closer contact with human suffering and broadened his political awareness: 'By refusing the self-defining solitudes of Protestant individualism, he came to sympathize with the deprivations of powerless working people' (p. 91). 'Felix Randal', however, harks back to a disappearing agrarian economy, while the later sonnet 'Tom's Garland' fearfully contemplates the militant 'packs' of unemployed labourers who 'infest the age'. Ironically, in Dublin at a time when home rule for Ireland is being vigorously debated, the English Hopkins reverts to 'self-defining solitude' and the sonnet now becomes the appropriate form for registering private torment and frustration. That exile in Ireland intensified

<sup>20</sup> *Minotaur: Poetry and the Nation State* (London: Faber, 1992), p. 90.

<sup>21</sup> *The Language of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Deutsch), p. 140.

the spiritual anguish that Hopkins experienced in the 1880s is evident in the sonnet that opens 'To seem the stranger lies my lot, my life | Among strangers'. The poem echoes John Clare's lyric 'I am', most emphatically at the turn from octave to sestet: 'I am in Ireland now; now I am at a third | Remove'. The chiasmus in the line reinforces the strong sense of alienation and self-division in the sonnet, while the 'third | Remove' suggests successive stages of isolation and difference: from family and then from the wider Anglican community by virtue of conversion to Catholicism, and then from the Irish by virtue of being English.

'I wake and feel the fell of dark' is very likely the sonnet that Hopkins claimed, in a letter to Robert Bridges, he had 'written in blood'.<sup>22</sup> It, too, echoes Clare's strange lyric at its turn, but this time the realization of self is bitter and burning: 'I am gall, I am heartburn'. These Dublin sonnets of desolation are markedly different in style and vision from either 'The Windhover' or 'Felix Randal'. As Daniel Harris argues, Hopkins's late sonnets 'did not manifest [. . .] that inescapable of Christ in nature which had formerly been his joy; nor did they serve a communal function by implicitly ministering to an imagined congregation'. Instead, they show 'a sudden and darkly brilliant heightening in Hopkins's scope and linguistic incisiveness', tending towards nightmare and breakdown.<sup>23</sup> Although Hopkins was to carry on experimenting with the sonnet, creating in 'Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves' what he called 'the longest sonnet ever made', the impulse of his final efforts carries the sonnet towards modernist fragmentation and towards a dark psychological intensity that has rarely been equalled.<sup>24</sup>

In entreating the frowning critic to give the sonnet its proper due, Wordsworth was both helping to restore the reputation of the form and writing himself into a tradition that had seemed to founder after Milton. It seemed to founder again after Wordsworth and the writing of amatory sonnet sequences became one way of keeping the form in currency. The sonnet, however, was always most vital and imposing when it functioned not just as a private mode of secular and religious devotion, but as a vehicle of social and political critique. If we see the later nineteenth-century sonnet only as a space for the exploration of intense personal emotion and heightened states of subjectivity, then we are apt to overlook what might prove to be the most durable aspect of its legacy. What Meredith and Hopkins reveal is the sonnet's continuing capacity for expansion and intensification, in ways that make it more alert and responsive to changing attitudes and values and beliefs. Hopkins, especially, renews and revitalizes the sonnet, relentlessly enlarging its scope and possibility. In one of the late sonnets of desolation, he finds himself in Ireland, 'a lonely began'. The phrase suggests a terrible sense of unfulfilment, but as far as the sonnet form was concerned, it was as if it had only just begun.

<sup>22</sup> *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*, ed. by Claude Collier Abbott, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 219.

<sup>23</sup> *Inspirations Unbidden: The 'Terrible Sonnets' of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp. xiii–xiv.

<sup>24</sup> *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*, p. 245.