



# STUDIES

IN  
THE SPIRITUALITY OF JESUITS

## **The Mystery and the Majesty of It**

*Jesuit Spirituality in the Poetry  
of Gerard Manley Hopkins*

**PAUL MARIANI**

47/2 • SUMMER 2015

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ISSN 1084-0813

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## *the first word . . .*

“Fish gotta swim, birds gotta fly,” and if we could add a coda to Jerome Kerns’s iconic lyric from *Show Boat*, “artists gotta eat.” Art is great, but for the great majority of minor practitioners, however talented, it just doesn’t pay the bills. Any restaurant meal in New York or Los Angeles will most likely be served by an articulate, handsome young man or a beautiful young woman, just waiting for the big break, or if not a starring role opposite Meryl Streep, then at least a television commercial for trash bags. Year after year, aspiring novelists and poets keep writing obituaries for neighborhood weeklies or teaching English to Urdu speakers in community colleges, fully confident that sometime later this year editors at the *New Yorker* will discover their unique style and the *New York Times Book Review* will feature their work as the lead article. Sadly, in the cold, cruel universe of profit and loss, the mundane world offers few cash grants and little recognition for the gifted among us. (I’ve been waiting by the telephone for a MacArthur genius award for the past fifty years. It’s all politics. Clearly.) Survival comes to the modestly gifted by developing a second life to pay the bills at the end of the month.

I suppose this has always been the case. Imagine life in the second millennium before the Common Era. To feed his family an enterprising Akkadian slave would have to smuggle a few blank cuneiform blocks out of the scriptorium each night. At home, under the light of his flickering oil lamp, he would inscribe some racy story about the one-armed galley slave and the brick maker’s daughter to sell to rich Egyptian tourists on holiday. The next day, in a shadowy corner of the market place, he’d hawk his illegal substances with the come-on patter: “Be the life of the party with one of my spicy papyrus-back novels. But wait. That’s not all. Act now and I’ll even throw in a reed replica of the pharaoh’s barge, complete with asp bowsprit. All this for a mere two scarabs. Come straight to the manufacturer and avoid the Luxor sales tax. Offer is good only while supplies last.”

The artists’ plight doesn’t change much over the centuries. Medieval minstrels had to land a long-standing gig in the lord’s castle, and a poet had to enchant milady with romantic ballades, but not too romantic if he wanted to remain attached to his head. I wonder if Bach ever complained to his wife about having to play that wheezy organ in the cathedral every day, when his time could be better spent composing more ditties for his well-tempered cla-

vier. Our image of Mozart has been irrevocably shaped by Tom Hulce's manic performance in *Amadeus* (Milos Forman, 1984), but even if the film provides only a highly fictionalized approximation of the composer, it's easy to imagine Wolfie's preferring comic operas and dance music to the scores he had to provide for liturgical settings. Nonetheless, for both of these tunesmiths, it was bishops and emperors who offered the steady jobs. They could do fun music on their own time. The sad fact facing these composers is that they needed some means of support while they were doing what their enormous gifts impelled them to do.

The other arts were no less demanding. Shakespeare had to sell tickets at the Globe or it would be back to selling textiles in Stratford-upon-Avon. At least John Donne had a job as a cleric and did religious poetry to balance the more erotic endeavors of his youth. Architects did commercial buildings and civic monuments as they waited for the contract to design the massive palazzo or cathedral. I wonder how many painters supported themselves through flattering portraits of their wide-girthed patrons, and beautified images of their equally girthed wives and daughters. Some even had to climb rickety scaffolds every day and spend hours lying on their backs decorating ceilings in the heat of a Roman summer. Even if it was the Sistine Chapel, the job was still glorified house painting for one who longed to return to his marble and chisels. The masterpieces of choice could come later. No doubt many of the world's great artists led double lives: They served their personal gods for art, but mammon for rent.

Irreverent thoughts such as these kept distracting me during my third reading of Paul Mariani's brilliant and sensitive essay on the life and poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Yes, three readings. It took that long for me to grasp the complexity of the poet and the multiple lives he led during his tragically few years among us. Under Professor Mariani's expert guidance, three or three and a half Hopkinses emerged for me.

The first, of course, was Hopkins the poet. The literary achievement is remarkable in its quantity and variety. The poems were familiar, like faint, muffled voices calling across a vast Welsh grassland, or a busy Dublin thoroughfare. I strained to catch the almost familiar sounds, but realized the lines have changed for me. Reading Hopkins as an undergraduate might have been a truly transformative experience for a young man, but for one considerably beyond the freshman thrill of discovery, the perfect phrasing offers consolidation, or even repose. Yes, I kept repeating, that's true. He's expressed in a few words what it's taken decades for me to understand and appreciate: death and life, terror and beauty, despair and hope. With all their old man's wisdom, these are a young man's poems. He died at age forty-five. Yet in those years, he saw so much and grasped life so firmly and expressed so passionately that readers even today are left breathless.



While his wisdom surpassed his years, he had the young poet's daring originality. He turned the language upside down. Recall the other Victorian poets. Swinburne was born in 1837, Browning in 1812, Arnold in 1822, and to go back a bit, Tennyson in 1809. The young rebel Hopkins saw the light in 1844. Not to detract from the magnificent achievement of his somewhat older contemporaries, it's obvious that Hopkins was doing something new and unsettling with the language. He seems to reinvent poetry in such a way that makes the others, for all their obvious merits, seem a bit passé, as though they belonged to a different century. He seems more comfortable in the company of Yeats or Frost.

On this rereading of the poems, I think I discovered—believe it or not—a comic writer, although he and generations of critics would find such a statement a bit of a stretch, if not ludicrous. This is the half of the three and a half Hopkinses. Here's what I mean. On reading these poems once again, one can't help but be fascinated, even amused, by the absolute delight he seems to take in the sounds of words. He repeats the phonemes for the sheer joy of the noise they make rubbing against each other: "seared with trade, bleared, smeared with toil," "lush kept, plush-capped sloe," "Gush!—flush the man," and so on. Did he enjoy music as much as the music of words? He loved words as though they had their own personalities. He played with them, worked variations on the sound. Did he have a sense of humor? If so, he must have been a horrible punster. Would he have been captivated by the challenge of archaic words embedded in the crossword puzzles of the *Times* of London? Would he have liked confounding his adversaries in a cutthroat game of Scrabble? As a student, did he write bawdy limericks about his least favorite professors—and then wisely destroy them? I like to think all of these are possibilities.

The poetry leads easily into Hopkins the contemplative, and this is the second Hopkins I rediscovered in reading this essay. Professor Mariani unites the words of the poem with the faith of the poet, forged in prayer and trial, shaped by Scripture, and polished by the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius and the thought of Duns Scotus. In the best senses of the term, Hopkins was a Jesuit mystic. He reached a sense of divine presence not only in the beauties of nature—surely, he did that—but also in city streets and untimely deaths. He found God in all things, all sorts of things, in persons and objects, and in his own solitude and melancholy.

Finally, Professor Mariani introduced me to a Hopkins I had never appreciated before. If a Jesuit is a contemplative in action, and our spirituality is inextricably linked to mission, how did this external, visible side of his life, his varied missions, influence his poetry and his spirituality? Paradoxically, Hopkins the poet and mystic is best known to generations of his admirers, but these facets of his life arose from the private internal being. We study the poems and gradually grasp the interior life, now decades after this death. Yet, as is the case for most Jesuits, he led a very public life as well. Day after day, he had to walk into a classroom to face boys who may not have ap-

preciated his presence. Each evening he dozed over bundles of mind-numbing student essays and examinations, those crumpled, blotted pages, bleared, smeared with adolescent toil, rarely finding anything shining out like shook foil. He preached—not very well, it seems—administered the sacraments and consoled the suffering. One can only imagine the distress brought upon this master of language and contemplation when he realized, as he must have, how inadequate were his efforts at verbal evangelizing. For his second life, his day job as it were, he was a priest and a Jesuit teacher doing the kinds of things that Jesuits have always done, and experiencing the same moments of satisfaction and tedium.

We can be most grateful that Professor Mariani has shared the results of his years of study with us and we are doubly grateful that he chose *STUDIES* as a way to bring his work to American Jesuits and their collaborators around the world. He provides a challenging and rewarding essay for our reflection. Like most of my contemporaries in the Society, I'd read a good deal of the poetry and even memorized a few snippets in the early years of my course of studies. I wonder if younger men, who now for the most part enter after the undergraduate education in literature, have had the same privileged experience. For those of us familiar with the poetry, however fading the memory, Professor Mariani's essay will refresh the delights of days gone by. For men with no particular recollection of his work, this issue of *STUDIES* will be a revelation—or dare I use the good Joycean word?—an epiphany.

### *a few second words . . .*

Many thanks to Andrea Frank of the Boston College Fine Arts Department for her assistance in preparing the woodcut of Hopkins that appears as the frontispiece. The full-sized portrait had been hanging outside my door at St. Mary's Hall, and the thought struck me: maybe we could use it. With her digital wizardry, Andrea made it happen. It will surely add to the readers' enjoyment of the issue.

This essay was developed from a lecture Prof. Mariani delivered on September 30, 2014, to mark the close of the year-long exhibit commemorating the 125th anniversary of Hopkins's death, mounted by the Burns Library Boston College. Instrumental in planning the lecture and facilitating the original contact between the author and *STUDIES* was Prof. Robert Maryks, associate director of the Institute of Advanced Jesuit Studies at Boston College and editor of the *Journal of Jesuit Studies*. The curators at the Burns Library and Professor Maryks also deserve a note of thanks for their contribution to this issue.

*Richard A. Blake, S.J.*

Editor

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Portrait of Gerard Manley Hopkins, entitled “By the Gate of the Sacred,” a woodcut by Robert McGovern, 1987 and hung in the St. Mary’s Hall, the Jesuit Residence at Boston College.

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# The Mystery and the Majesty of It

## Jesuit Spirituality in the Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins

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*The published writings clearly open a path into the mind of Hopkins the poet, but his personal struggles with his teaching, community, preaching, and health reveal additional layers of complexity in Hopkins the Jesuit. His ongoing effort to balance these varied facets of his life presents a richer understanding of the term “contemplative in action.”*

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### I. Incomprehensible Certainty

“**T**hou mastering me/God,” Hopkins’s great ode, *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, begins. And there it is, the opening salvo, the overture, as it were, to the young (thirty-one-year-old) Jesuit scholastic’s understanding of what he has been sent forth to do. And what is that? Is it not to proclaim the fact that his Lord and Master, Christ, *Ipse*, is—with the Father and the Spirit—worthy of all praise as the Creator whose designs are so often beyond our immediate understanding, but that, when those designs are finally glimpsed and somehow understood through patience and prayer, when—at last—the larger picture reveals itself, we are left with, indeed surprised by, a sense of wonder, awe, and—yes—joy.

It is then that the one who has searched in the darkness for an answer as to why there is so much suffering in the world should be consoled beyond anything one might have hoped for, so that one feels



blessed, feels so fully realized that only some extravagant gesture—like King David dancing before the Ark of the Covenant—will do. And so the poet, who kisses his hands toward the night heavens above him, the winter snowstorm having at long last lifted, beholds the stars returning now, as if seen for the first time, and seeming to wink at him now and to call him home:

I kiss my hand  
                    To the stars, lovely-asunder  
Starlight, wafting him out of it; and  
                    Glow, glory in thunder;  
Kiss my hand to the dappled-with-damson west:  
Since, tho' he is under the world's splendour and wonder,  
                    His mystery must be instressed, stressed;  
For I greet him the days I meet him, and bless when I understand.<sup>1</sup>

It is something Hopkins has discerned through living in close community with his fellow Jesuits, through studying and—more—living the day-to-day grind and drudgery of his studies and his work among the poor and marginalized. It is also something he has gleaned from the Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises*: that beauty and wonder are not mere accidents caught in the glimmer of light and darkness, but something more, signs of God's presence, the Mystery in and with and through the great design that has always been there, but which has had to be instressed upon our minds and—more—our very hearts, the realization that there is a Creator who is also a Father and who has loved us so much that he gave us his only Son to bring us home again, so that—that reality having been instressed at last upon us, we have no other choice really than to greet him—love him, adore him in return—the way a child runs to embrace a mother, a father.

The *mystery* of it. And what did Hopkins mean by the word *mystery*? In a letter he wrote in late October 1883 to his closest friend, the poet Robert Bridges, raised in an Anglican household, but by now an agnostic, Hopkins explained what he himself meant by mystery. He knew what Bridges no doubt meant when he called the Incarnation a mystery. "You do not mean by mystery what a Catholic does," Hop-

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<sup>1</sup> *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, in *The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited by Norman H. MacKenzie (Clarendon Press Oxford, 1990), 119–28. Henceforth this collection will be cited as *Poetical Works*.

kins told him, in that bold, no-nonsense way of his when dealing with something as important as the doctrine of the Incarnation.<sup>2</sup> “You mean an interesting [religious] uncertainty,” he said, and “the uncertainty ceasing interest ceases also.” But for Catholics—and Jesuits like himself—mystery meant something far greater: “an incomprehensible certainty.” Incomprehensible to the human mind, perhaps, but nevertheless something certain, something to be believed in.

There had to be a formulation of the mystery, for without formulation there could be no interest, so that “the clearer the formulation” of the mystery “the greater the interest.” For a believer like himself and an unbeliever like Bridges, the “source of interest” was the same: “the unknown, the reserve of truth beyond what the mind reaches and still feels to be behind.” But whereas a mystery like the Incarnation or the Trinity was in the long run little more than an intellectual puzzle, a curiosity at best, so that, the “curiosity satisfied, the trick found out (to be a little profane), the answer heard,” interest in the mystery disappeared.

Not so, on the other hand, for himself. “You know,” he continued, how “there are some solutions to . . . chess problems so beautifully ingenious, some resolutions of suspensions so lovely in music that even the feeling of interest is keenest when they are known and over, and for some time survives the discovery [itself].” But what if the answer to the mystery turned out to be “the most tantalizing statement of the problem,” so that the truth one assented to remained of necessity the great difficulty?

Consider, Hopkins went on, the difference between his mentor, Cardinal John Henry Newman, and Newman’s younger brother, Francis, who could not assent to the Anglican doctrine required at the time of all Oxford dons, and so left Oxford. If the Trinity, the younger Newman explained, was something that could “be explained by grammar and by tropes, why then he could furnish explanations for himself.” And that left the problem of where the real mystery, “the incomprehensible one,” finally lay. At that point, Hopkins explained, “one should

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<sup>2</sup>Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges, October 24–25, 1883, in *The Collected Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins; vol. 2: Correspondence 1882–1889*, edited by R. K. R. Thornton and Catherine Phillips (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2013), 619–20.

point blank believe or disbelieve." And so, where the younger brother chose to disbelieve, the older brother came to believe.

That chess move having been made, though, there was something more. For him as a Catholic and a Jesuit, belief in the Trinity meant more, much more.

There are three persons, each God and each the same, the one, the only God: to some people this is a "dogma," a word they almost chew, that is an equation in theology, the dull algebra of Schoolmen; to others it is news of their dearest friend or friends, leaving them all their lives in a balancing whether they have three heavenly friends or one—not that they have any doubt on the subject, but that their knowledge leaves their minds swinging; poised, but on the quiver.

And if that was true of his understanding of the Trinity, it was likewise true of his understanding of the vast implications of the Incarnation, a mystery less incomprehensible than the former, perhaps, but for all that no less true. For an unbeliever like Bridges, the Incarnation came down to this: that if Christ was "in some sense God," it was also true that in some sense Christ was not God. And therein lay the agnostic's interest: in that puzzling uncertainty. But for Hopkins Christ was "in every sense God and in every sense man," and that was what kept him on and off balance: in the "locked and inseparable combination" of the God/man, Jesus Christ. And that, he explained, was why he as a Catholic and a Jesuit spoke of "the mystery of the Nativity" or "the mystery of the Crucifixion": that the child in the manger was God, "the culprit on the gallows God, and so on." In and of themselves, birth and death were not mysteries, but that God should be crucified for us: *that* was what fascinated him, "with the interest of awe, of pity, of shame, of every harrowing feeling."

Like many who make the Ignatian Long Retreat, Hopkins had thought and thought hard about the reality and endless ramifications of the Mystery of the Incarnation, of Christ's life in Galilee, of the end in the beginning and the beginning foretelling the end: birth to death, Nativity to the Passion, a birthing into a new life, a new life following death, that divine life growing and blossoming with time, something outside the limits of Chronos, of human time, something only the heart



cornered, like a hart pursued and cornered by baying hounds, a final yes or no that would change everything afterwards:

Warm-laid grave of a womb-life grey;  
Manger, maiden's knee;  
The dense and the driven Passion, and frightful sweat;  
Thence the discharge of it, there its swelling to be,  
Though felt before, though in high flood yet—  
What none would have known of it, only the heart, being hard at bay,  
Is out with it! Oh,  
We lash with the best or worst  
Word last!<sup>3</sup>

To what could he as a poet compare the experience both the nuns and perhaps not yet as profoundly he himself had undergone, he asked himself in that winter of 1875, meditating from the relative safety of the fortress-like theologate at St. Beuno's in North Wales when the news broke of the death of those five Franciscan nuns, exiles from their homeland Germany, all drowned off the coast of England when their ship, the *S.S. Deutschland*, trapped on a shoal, broke apart. To what compare it? To what experience available to us all? Was it not like biting into a ripe plum, he asked, when the bitterness or sweetness of the crushed fruit fills the mouth and the body to the very brim in a single irretrievable instant?

How a lush-kept plush-capped sloe  
Will, mouthed to flesh-burst,  
Gush!—flush the man, the being with it, sour or sweet,  
Brim, in a flash, full!—Hither then, last or first,  
To hero of Calvary, Christ's feet—  
Never ask if meaning it, wanting it, warned of it—men go.

## II. Pied Beauty Everywhere

“**T**hou mastering me/ God”: one of the most important things this young Jesuit in formation understood as he looked back on the spiritual journey he was on, beginning with his family—the oldest child in a large Anglican family of eight siblings, then as an

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<sup>3</sup>*Deutschland*, 121.

honors student at Oxford, where (to the dismay of his parents) his journey would lead to his becoming a Roman Catholic with the guidance of John Henry Newman, who had guided so many other young men at Oxford back to the Catholic Church. And then, after further discernment as to whether he should enter the Franciscans or Benedictines, deciding a year after his conversion and a retreat with the *Exercises* to join the Society of Jesus.

Beginning then in September 1868, at the age of twenty-four, he underwent the various stages of Jesuit formation, beginning with the novitiate at Roehampton on the southern edge of London, then the scholasticate at Stonyhurst in the north of England, where he studied philosophy, then a year teaching rhetoric to a class of Jesuits in the early stages of formation. And then it was on to St. Beuno's, where he studied the prescribed Scholastic theology in the Thomistic tradition, though he also discovered the writings of the medieval Franciscan friar, John Duns Scotus (1265–1308), while at Stonyhurst, and whose writings he read in the original Latin.

And what Scotus added to the young Jesuit's Romantic sensibility was nothing less than an understanding of and appreciation for the generic sense of things, but of the distinctive and individual mark of everything in God's ongoing creation: what Scotus, in his own years at Oxford centuries before, called the *haecceitas*—the "thisness"—of each and every thing. And if Hopkins's particular understanding of God's creation was met with misunderstanding and even suspicion by his priest professors at St. Beuno's, so was Duns Scotus in his own time and subsequently, for it was from the word Duns that the word *dunce* derives. But then, as it so often happens, Hopkins understood, Duns Scotus was one of those (not unlike himself, though he did not say so directly), who "saw too far, he knew too much, his subtlety overshot his interests" so that "a kind of feud arose between genius and talent, and the ruck of talent in the Schools [i.e., the Scholastic understanding of Thomism and subsequently] finding itself, as his age passed by, less and less able to understand him, voted that there was nothing important to understand and so first misquoted and then refuted him."<sup>4</sup>

But the young Hopkins had read Scotus, he himself says, with "delight," because the medieval philosopher, along with Hopkins's

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<sup>4</sup>Hopkins to Coventry Patmore, January 3, 1884, *Correspondence*, 2:636.



contemporary, John Ruskin, had helped him see the uniqueness and distinctiveness of everything in nature, once it was, in the Jesuit tradition of *contemplatio*, pondered over with prayerful attention. And soon Hopkins was celebrating the pied beauty he was finding everywhere around him in his walks through the Welsh countryside. "I do not think I have ever seen anything more beautiful than the bluebell I have been looking at," he wrote in his journal for May 1870. "I know the beauty of our Lord by it."<sup>5</sup> That sense of the wondrous inscape of a particular thing he caught again seven years later in his condensed sonnet, "Pied Beauty," "Glory be to God for dappled things," the poem begins thus:

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 áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spáre, stránge;  
Whatever is fickle, frecklèd (who knows how?)  
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;  
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:  
Praise him.<sup>6</sup>

*Brinded. Couple-colored. Rose-moles. Stippled. Fickle, freckled, adazzle, dim.* Look, Hopkins tells us. Behold what is there before you and look at it once more with the sense of childlike awe and wonder we too often lose as we grow older and jaded.

"Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul." Thus the underlying "Principle and Foundation" of the *Spiritual Exercises*. And, Father Ignatius added, "the other things on the face of the earth are created for man that they may help him in prosecuting the end for which he is created. From this it follows that man is to use them as much as they help him on to his end, and ought to rid himself of them so far as they hinder him as to it" (*SpEx* 23). God gives us a world of splendor and immensity, and it

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<sup>5</sup>Hopkins's journal entry for May 18, 1870, in *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited by Humphrey House and Graham Storey (Oxford University Press: London, 1959), 199.

<sup>6</sup>"Pied Beauty," *Poetical Works*, 144.

is our privilege and responsibility as conscious beings to acknowledge that bounty and to praise the Creator for all he has given us.

For Hopkins the Jesuit, God's presence was to be found in everything, difficult to discern at times, but nevertheless there: God the Grand Designer and Creator who was beyond change, but who paradoxically underwrote the kaleidoscopic flux that was (and is) the world at each and every moment. It was a world where all things interacted in imitation of the Trinitarian three in one—the Utterer, the Uttered, and the Uttering, each perpetually reaching out to the Other, who was always also the One.

Consider the ever-changing clouds glimpsed at dawn or dusk, the light changing from minute to minute, or hour by hour, or as rain clouds gather, or high winds begin to blow. Or consider those rose moles stippled brushlike on living trout in the flint-cold streams where Hopkins fished at Stonyhurst and Wales. Note too the hundred varieties of color in finches' wings, or those chestnuts which fall and break open to reveal a flame-red center not unlike those chunks of gray-black coal breaking open as they fall through the grating, gashing themselves to reveal at last the fire within.

### III. Through the Darkness

**I**s it not like Christ's heart breaking with love and sorrow on the cross, "The dense and the driven Passion, and frightful sweat," and finally "the discharge of it,"<sup>7</sup> the orgasmic bursting of God offering up everything for His rare, dear creation, man. It is something, Hopkins has come to understand, something "none would have known" had it not been instressed on our own hearts: Love itself, nailed to a tree for all to look upon, its hands outstretched and pinioned, beckoning, beseeching.

Only in prayerful meditation and something more—a hunger, a need, a cry from the wounded soul—"the heart, being hard at bay"—as when one suddenly realizes that the ship you are on is going down, or when a hart realizes finally that it has been surrounded by baying hounds and that escape is now impossible—it is then that the heart and

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<sup>7</sup> *Deutschland*, part 1, stanza 7 (p. 120).



the words fully confess and are “out with it!” In the cosmic irony of things, then, it is only in Christ’s dark descending that he proves “most . . . merciful then.” And if Hopkins understands this on one level now, how much more will he come to understand it eight years down the line, when he will compose his darkest and richest poems, those terrible and terrifying sonnets written in blood, in which Christ etched—yes, inscaped—his own passion on Hopkins as once he did on Francis of Assisi and Ignatius of Loyola and John of the Cross and Catherine of Sienna.

It is that sense of composition of place, not this time meditating on the landscapes of Judea and Jerusalem in the reign of the Emperor Tiberius, but focusing instead on what the *London Times* had just reported about a shipwreck off the coast of England, where the Thames enters the North Sea. December 6, 1875, and a German passenger ship, the S.S. *Deutschland*, steaming from Bremen, founders on a strand and—in the continual raging of the winter storm, is knocked about as if by some insane force, the steamer’s cabins flooded and the temperatures sinking far below freezing, with the loss over less than twenty-four hours of a quarter of its two hundred passengers, including five Franciscan nuns, exiled by Germany’s Second Reich anti-Catholic laws: five women destined for the new world—New York and St. Louis—to resume their duties serving others.

And what was it those five sisters experienced in the midst of that storm, Hopkins asks himself and us. What was it like to wait for help through the darkness and ice and snow when there would be no help forthcoming? What was it like to hear the desperate cries of men and women and children, like so many lost sheep, or to witness a man attempt to come to the aid of a woman, like some hero out of a Victorian novel, to save the day, only to be battered against the side of the ship, the headless body looped bizarrely in a sling of ropes, rocking back and forth like some nightmarish pendulum? And when—at last—as the papers reported, the tallest of the five nuns cried out in her agony, “O Christ, Christ, come quickly,” what did she mean? Was it a cry of despair to have the agony end? Or was it, rather, that she was calling Christ to her side in this, her final gesture, calling on the only One who could turn “her wild-worst best”?

Often, the Jesuit who writes these lines understands only too well, when we are exhausted with work—as he would often find himself



nodding off under the weight of the hundreds upon hundreds of Greek and Latin exams he meticulously graded winters and summers and in between—a man or a woman will ask for an end to “the jading and jar of the cart,” as when some great gray dray horse with its collar strapped about its neck wants nothing more than to lie down exhausted.

And doesn't the appeal of the Passion strike us more tenderly during a thirty-day retreat, say, when one is relatively safe and comfortable indoors as another winter storm comes whipping off the winter ocean? No, it was something else the woman felt then: the sense that Christ was actually with her—*here, and now*—in the midst of the storm. Christ's presence felt, there in the storm, Christ the Paraclete and Comforter: her “Master, / Ipse, the only one, *Chríst, Kíng, Héad.*” As at the conclusion of the canon at the Mass in the Tridentine form of Hopkins's time, when the priest raises the chalice and the host before the congregation of believers and calls out “*Per ipsum, et cum ipso, et in ipso, est tibi Deo Patri omnipotenti, in unitate Spiritus Sancti, omnis honor et gloria per omnia sæcula sæculorum* (Through him, and with him, and in him, O God, almighty Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all honor and glory is yours, forever and ever).

And what is the fruit of Hopkins's long meditation on this tragic shipwreck—just one of hundreds he read or talked about in a time before air travel, when ships cast off to cross the oceans almost as often as planes taxi off runways today into what only God knows awaits them. Remember, Hopkins tells us, when Christ's hand-picked disciples were out on the Sea of Galilee and one of those sudden squalls came up and the fishing boat they were on seemed in danger of sinking, taking them with it. Remember how they frantically woke Christ, exhausted with having done his Father's work. Remember how they were sure they were perishing then, and how Christ had commanded the very winds to cease and they did, and the waters suddenly calmed.

So now, here, on a December night in the year of our Lord 1875, Christ coming to fetch his beloved, to calm her and her sisters and the others—including those “last-breath penitents” awakened by the nun's cry—to gather them as he gathered those souls when he harrowed hell, leading them into an eternal safe haven, beyond reproach or despair. That was what the woman had done by witnessing to her Lord, calling out to him, as now Hopkins does likewise, calling out to those who will listen to the cry of his poem. For what was that sister if not a lioness, a

beacon of light, a prophet, comforting the others with her witness—including those who read the poem now, 140 years after the event—that we might be as startled by the Word as those on the *Deutschland* were, we too hovering in the liminal space of the imagination there in the “unshapeable shock night” of our own chaotic worlds?

For isn't it true, as this young Jesuit has come to realize, that nothing happens by pure chance? Life is not some mere rolling of blind dice, as Nietzsche or Mallarmé or Thomas Hardy would have it. As it turned out, he sees now, the nuns perished sometime in the early hours of December 7, the eve of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, “Feast of the one woman without stain,” who, thus conceived, in turn so conceived her Son without stain. And now this nun, this virgin prophetess, in her turn conceives in her mind and heart the Word, “heart-throe, birth of a brain, “that héard and képt thee and úttered thee óutríght.”

Out/right. Out and outwardly and rightly so, as Hopkins here writes it out on the page for us, inviting us to bear our witness as well. And the fruit of this cry—hers and his—is that her voice is heard, and will be heard again and again as her witness—read aright by the poet—makes clear, for she has indeed and *in deed* become a beacon in the dark, this bell—this belle—to “Startle the poor sheep back” and make of the shipwreck “a harvest” in the very heart of this tempest which tears away our chaff and leaves our sheer grain as gift for the Lord.

And something more: this is indeed Christ reenacting the harrowing of hell, “Our passion-plungèd giant risen” seeking out even “The-last-breath penitent spirits,” so that he may return to the Father in the *De Processu*, the great procession out and back, Alpha and Omega, with his arms full of saved souls. This is, I think, the reason Hopkins could justify his poem: that others would see what he had gleaned from meditating on that winter storm and so turn back to the One, the one reality that—as the Psalms tell us over and over again—contains everything that has ever finally mattered.

## IV. A Flare from Foil

**T**hat Hopkins's great ode was rejected—not by the English public, but by his fellow Jesuits who edited the Jesuit *Month* because they found it too experimental, too cryptic, and certainly

far too unsettling—only adds to the irony of one crying in the wilderness, though even that rejection Hopkins learned to live with. After all, if the poem was meant to be published and heeded, he believed, a way would be found, though it would take another four decades—thirty of them following his death—before the poem was finally published, and then by an old Oxford friend who was now England’s Poet Laureate, Robert Bridges, the unlikely salvager who had little good to say about Catholics and even less about Jesuits. The important thing, of course, was that Hopkins remained true to the Order which had done so much to shape the fire at the core of one of their own, and whose witness continues to bear the impress of the immortal diamond that the poem after all is.

It is also true that Hopkins’s Jesuit witness became clearer as the years unfolded. Consider, for instance, the sonnets of 1877, written in the months leading up to his ordination in September of that year. Here, for instance, is the opening of a poem he wrote in February, called “God’s Grandeur.” “The world,” the Jesuit poet reminds us, is indeed “charged with the grandeur of God.” There’s a cosmic energy about God’s creation, Hopkins cries out: an electrical charge, both violent and yet violet sweet, which is ready to instress itself upon us if only we will pay it a moment of the attention it deserves. Here’s the poem:

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 reckon his rod?  
Generations 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.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>*Poetical Works*, 139.



Note a couple of things here. First, the manner in which Hopkins addresses us, as if he were delivering a powerful homily in fourteen lines: that God's grandeur—*ad maiorem Dei gloriam*—is everywhere around us, not passively, but as a veritable force field, an energy, electrical, alive, ever-present, like a living river of crisp, fresh air. And it is both an energy that can strike us with its brilliance and force, the way a flash of lightning does, or the way light will instantly flare off gold or tin foil on a bright day, the way an insight strikes us all at once—as in a transformative instant whose memory remains vividly in the mind for decades to come,

Or it can touch us by increments, gathering to a greatness, the way luscious yellow-green olive oil collects in an olive press, drop by resplendent drop (as, say, in that oil press at Gethsemane, among the olive trees). So, Hopkins implies, grace struck Paul in an instant on his journey to Damascus and changed him forever. Or it can come ever so slowly, like the tide, as it did for Augustine, after years of mistrials and willful mistakes. But in either instance, it is Christ who is there in all of this, boding but abiding, whether it be the mental and spiritual suffering in the Garden of Olives, or the Eastering of the Son following the darkness of three dark days in the tomb.

Yes, Hopkins, that eco-poet, knew how generation after generation had trod, had trod, had trod, searing all of nature with its human smudge and smell and carbon footprint because we kept insisting on insulating ourselves from the living world around us with our own self-bent concerns and virtual non-realities. No wonder he loved to walk barefoot whenever he could through the dew-fresh grass and feel the earth alive under his feet as he journeyed on.

There's a fresh eco-economy too at the heart of Hopkins's poems composed in the Welsh countryside that winter, spring, and summer of 1877. For many of us, the value of the world is gauged by the price a thing will fetch, whether that be oil or coal or real estate or even the value others place on human life. But that, Hopkins believed, was not how God saw the world, nor how Christ—that model of downward mobility—likewise saw it. With Christ it was a matter of giving and then giving again, of spending himself until he had literally poured himself out. And that is how this young Jesuit understood nature: as something that could never be spent, because at the heart of the world was love and with it the dearest freshness deep down things. *Down*: meaning within,

but also as in the down of a dove, as in the figure of the Holy Ghost as a mothering bird protecting her young, caring and brooding over her brood, and then, like the morning sun eastering, rising again, phoenix-like, “with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.”

Or consider another sonnet written a week later meditating this time on the night sky: “The Starlight Night” with its Van Gogh-like glinting heavens. “Look at the stars!” the poet invites us. Just look up at the black heavens

at all the fire-folk sitting in the air!  
The bright boroughs, the circle-citadels there!  
Down in dim woods the diamond delves! the elves’ -eyes!  
The grey lawns cold where gold, where quickgold lies!  
Wind-beat whitebeam! airy abeles set on a flare!  
Flake-doves sent floating forth at a farmyard scare!<sup>9</sup>

How beautiful, how wondrous is God’s creation, and there for the bidding. But bid with what, then? If you would see the Mystery that is there, the deepest mystery of it all, you will have to open yourself to what is being offered you, Hopkins tells us. But first you will have to rinse your eyes, rub them, prepare them with “Prayer, patience, alms, vows.” And behold, there before you: March bloom and May mess in every season, summer and winter. And yet, Hopkins tells us, all of this beauty is in the long run but a barn that merely holds the true beauty and the harvest, the shocks, the wheat, the surprise for which there are no adequate words. All of this natural beauty is but a paling and the stars tiny pieces of gold, the outer gates containing a Mystery much greater, by which even this stupendous universe pales. And that is the Creator, God, our true home, containing “Christ and his mother and all his hallows.”

## V. Sword and Strife

**B**ut, of course, Hopkins—like Cormac McCarthy in our time—would also become increasingly aware of the darker realities of life, of what he understood as the crushing effects of our fallen nature on the world itself. Once, after walking along the beaches of

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid, 139–40.



the Welsh working-class resort town of Rhyl, he compared the contrapuntal sound of the ocean waves and the “wild winch whirl” of the skylark’s song to the sad carnival music men were too eager to make at a true cost hidden even from themselves. We—he wept—we who were “life’s pride and cared-for crown,” God’s dear ones, darlings, had managed with our self-bent proclivities to lose “that cheer and charm of earth’s past prime,” as we rushed onwards on our self-bent downward slope, breaking ourselves, as we continued on our way, “down/ To man’s last dust,” radically de-creating the possibilities we were heir to as we hurried unwittingly to the primal, Darwinian-laced sea from which we had evolved over millennia, draining fast—ah, too fast—“towards man’s first slime.”<sup>10</sup>

But, even through all of Hopkins’s suffering and pain—and he did after all suffer the loss of many connections to his family because of his conversion to the Roman Catholic Church, since they could not understand why their son and brother—who had shown so much promise—had given up so much to become a Catholic and (worse) a Jesuit. “To seem the stranger lies my lot, my life/ Among strangers” he confessed in a sonnet meant for no one’s ears but his own. And you can feel that distancing in the photographs we have of his parents, his seven surviving brothers and sisters, his aunts and uncles and cousins—all at least nominally Church of England—and then compare these images with those of Hopkins the Jesuit, and that small book titled *Plain Reasons Against Joining the Church of Rome*, by Richard Frederick Littledale, LL.D., D.C.L., published in London by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1880, a short treatise written for “those who have seceded, or are tempted to secession, from the Church of England to the Roman Communion: that they may see what is the *true* nature of the accountability with which they are charging themselves in following their own private judgment rather than the providential order of God.”

The Burns Library at Boston College contains a copy of this very book inscribed by Hopkins’s mother, Kate, dated April 2, 1881, and it suggests that she was still trying to understand why her poor boy had made the terrible decision he had fifteen years earlier to leave the Anglican fold while a student at Oxford. “Father and mother dear,/ Brothers and sisters are in Christ not near,” Hopkins would write in May

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<sup>10</sup>“The Sea and the Skylark,” *ibid*, 143.

1885 in a poem he never shared with anyone, much less his own family. He wrote that poem a year into his assignment as a professor and university examiner in classics in his time in Ireland, exiled at forty to the Jesuit's University College in crumbling Dublin. If coming into the Church had been something he felt he had had to do if he was to find peace within himself, that peace had also turned out to be—as his Master had warned—a parting as well: Hopkins's own "sword and strife."<sup>11</sup>

Then too there was his work as a priest ministering to the largely working-class Irish population in a huge industrial city like Liverpool in the late 1870s and early 1880s. Assigned to the large Jesuit parish of St. Francis Xavier on Salisbury Street, his pastoral duties included—among other responsibilities—saying Mass, preparing sermons, hearing confessions with the smell of whiskey on some of his penitents, visiting the sick, counseling, and performing the last rites. He did not have the rhetorical eloquence of some of his fellow Jesuits, we know from his own words, and phrases like "The Loss of God's First Kingdom" in one sermon and the word "Sweetheart" in another soon got him in trouble with his superior, who suggested that Father Hopkins write out his sermons beforehand, so that the superior could look over them before Hopkins delivered them.

On the fourth Sunday after Easter—April 25, 1880—he told his congregation of Irish draymen and dockworkers that they should heed what he had to say about John's Gospel and Christ's long last testament and not "stare or sleep over" what he was going to tell them, because it was, after all, both "contemptible and unmanly . . . for men whose minds are naturally clear, to give up at the first hearing of a hard passage in the Scripture" and "to care to know no more than children know" about the word of God. On this day he asked them to take to heart a passage in which Jesus tells his disciples that, though he must soon leave them, the Holy Ghost will come in his place. "*And when he, that is the Holy Ghost,*" he tells them from the raised lectern, "*whom our Lord in this place calls the Paraclete, has come he will convince the world of sin and of justice and of judgment.*"

And now it will be his task to explain to his congregation—and he can already see one or two beginning to nod off as one of the ushers

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<sup>11</sup> "To seem the stranger lies my lot, my life," *ibid.*, 181.

prods them awake with a cane—what exactly a Paraclete is. A Paraclete, he tells them, is someone “who comforts, who cheers, who encourages, who persuades, who exhorts, who stirs up, who urges forward, who calls on.” And he brings the idea home with an example from one of those cricket matches they have all no doubt been witness to. “You have seen at cricket how when one of the batsmen at the wicket has made a hit and wants to score a run, the other doubts, hangs back, or is ready to run in again, how eagerly the first will cry, “*Come on, come on.*” Well, he explains in his down-to-earth fashion, that is what a Paraclete does to someone: “calling him on, springing to meet him half way, crying to his ears or to his heart: This way to do God’s will, this way to save your soul, come on, come on!”

And now he has warmed to it. Christ too, he tells them, was a Paraclete, for didn’t he urge on his disciples with his own example? Did he not lead the way himself, like an officer of the line going before his troops? And when, like Peter, they all fled when the temple police and Roman soldiers ambushed them in the garden at Gethsemane, when the lanterns cast long shadows among the olive trees, did he not bear “the brunt of battle alone,” dying alone there on the field, “on Calvary hill,” and bring “the victory by his blood”? Did he not cry his men on, telling them to follow him, until, finally, they did just that? And, poignantly, “when they would not follow he let them go and took all the war upon himself. . . . For though Christ cheered them on they feared to follow, though the Captain led the way the soldiers fell back; he was not for that time a successful Paraclete,” for, when the moment of truth finally came to be counted, didn’t they to a man “forsake him and flee”?

How hard it is to do good in this world, this young priest knows. For our very “flesh is against it, the world is against it, the Devil is against it.” And yet, didn’t Christ prevail? For with his final victory over the darkness “the hellish head was crushed,” though “the earthly members were not aware of a wound.” Yes, he went on, how he wished he could hold their attention a while longer and show them “how the Holy Ghost has followed and will follow up this first beginning, convincing and converting nation after nation and age after age till the whole earth is hereafter to be covered.” Oh, how he would like to show them just a few of the ways by which “the thousand thousand tongues”



of the Holy Spirit work their wonders, then, in Jerusalem, as now, here, in Liverpool. But there is no more time.<sup>12</sup>

No time. No time. During that same Mass, he reads off the names of those in the parish who have recently died. Among them is one Felix Spencer, a blacksmith from Birchfield Street, who died of pulmonary tuberculosis on April 21, at the age of thirty-one. A week later, Hopkins composed one of the few poems he wrote during his time at Liverpool. He called his sonnet "Felix Randal," the word *randal* being derived from the Old English and meaning a shield, a strip of leather placed between a horse's hoof and the horseshoe, as a way of protecting the horse's foot. It's the perfect word for what Hopkins wants here—the sense of the holy viaticum he offered the dying farrier to help him on his final journey beyond death. "Felix Randal the farrier, O is he dead then?" the poet/priest begins, as if surprised to learn that Felix should be so soon gone. And is the priest's "duty all ended" now? Or is there one last thing he must do to honor poor Felix? Did he not watch this "mould of man," no matter his human strength as it returned—as it had to—to the mould of clay from whence it came, this man,

big-boned and hardy-handsome  
Pining, pining, till time when reason rambled in it, and some  
Fatal four disorders, fleshed there, all contended?<sup>13</sup>

And so it is with death, no matter how many of the dying—young and old—he has had to watch over and must in the future watch over, offering them the dignity of the last rites: the anointing, the confession, and the offering of Christ's own body as a shield against the Dark One's final onslaught. "Sickness broke him," the poet recalls, remembering too how Felix had cursed his fate at first, unwilling to believe that someone as strong as himself could succumb to a wasting disease that would take him, as death takes us all. But Hopkins had also seen Felix changing under his ministering, how anointing him with the oil of the sick had comforted him, and how he had offered Felix the "sweet reprieve" of confession, and tendered him the "ransom" of Holy Communion: Christ's gift of himself as payment for Felix's human failings, the legal tender of Christ himself offered most tenderly.

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<sup>12</sup>Cf. *The Sermons and Devotional Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Oxford University Press: London, 1959), 68–75.

<sup>13</sup>"Felix Randal," *Poetical Works*, 165.

And then the Lancashire blessing and farewell: "Ah well, God rest him all road ever he offended!" Hopkins adds. Life as a journey, then: that age-old metaphor—a plodding on of our quotidian lives, like workhorses in the grinding going round of work. And then the surprising, transfiguring end, as Felix's "more boisterous years" give way now to suffering, and suffering in turn not merely to death, but to a new creation as the old self itself gives way, remembering a time when *thou*, Felix, "at the random grim forge, powerful amidst peers / Didst fettle for the great grey drayhorse his bright & battering sandal!"

The reverence of that "thou," the address at the end as Felix enters the Great Mystery of returning to his Father. Just so then, that what Felix did for those great grey drayhorses drumming the cobbled streets of Liverpool, Hopkins has been privileged to do for Felix. In its closing lines, the poem circles back to Felix's prime, at the same time crossing the threshold of a mystery as blessed Felix—for that is what Felix's name means—the Latin of the first name soldered to the Old English of Randal—enters his new life armed with his bright and battering sandal, his sacramental armor, the image of the horseshoe signaling the Omega, the true end point, as Felix goes forth to meet his beloved Lord and Master.

Hopkins spent much of the six and a half years between his ordination and his being sent to Dublin to teach Latin and Greek working as select preacher in places as diverse as London, Oxford, Stonyhurst, Glasgow, Manchester, and Liverpool. In that time—hard as it was for a man who confessed that he often suffered from melancholy—or what we call depression—at least he was in England. And then came the call to leave England for Ireland, something he found particularly hard to do, as he saw it as nothing less than exile from his "rare, dear England." His dream had always been to work in England and do what he could to restore his beloved country to the faith of an earlier time—the faith of Bede and Langland and Chaucer and Duns Scotus and Thomas More—a time when England was still in communion with Rome.

Instead, at thirty-nine, he found himself in Ireland in a time when the country was in a state of profound national unrest and was increasingly demanding autonomy or at least parity with England, such as many believed Home Rule would provide. And here he was, the only English Jesuit in Dublin, teaching mostly poor Irish Catholic university students in England's former second capital, where the Catholic ma-

majority of students had been largely excluded from Dublin's Trinity College, as they had been from Oxford and Cambridge.

"I am in Ireland now," Hopkins wrote. "Now I am at a third/ Remove" (religion, family and now country separating him from the world which had given him nurture). But, being Hopkins, he refused to pity himself. "Not but in *all* removes I can/ Kind love both give and get." Still, there was this to ponder as well: that he was suffering depression and even separation, he believed, from the very one whose one "word/Wisest" had sustained him until now, and even his poems, scratched out in longhand on random sheets of paper, seemed barred from seeing the light of day as if by "dark heaven's baffling ban." Or if not heaven's ban, then—worse—"hell's spell." And it was this—to have no audience for his singular and original poems, no one—not even his closest friend, Robert Bridges, to understand what he had tried to do in his Jesuit poems. This, then, was what it meant "to hoard unheard" or if heard then to go unheeded, which left him in essence "a lonely began."<sup>14</sup>

But it is "in the deepest darkness," the Trappist Father Thomas Merton tells us, "that we most fully possess God on earth, because it is then that our minds are most truly liberated from the weak, created lights that are darkness in comparison to Him. For only then are we "filled with his infinite Light which seems pure darkness to our reason." This is what Hopkins—like St. John of the Cross before him—had to learn: that it was only in darkness that "the infinite God Himself becomes the Light of the darkened soul and possesses it entirely with His Truth." Then, and only then, "at this inexplicable moment," did the deepest night become day and faith itself turned into understanding.<sup>15</sup>

*In the beginning was the Word*, John's Gospel begins, and *the Word was with God*, and *the Word was God*. That, and against that, to be still-born, to sing into an apparent Void the message Hopkins believed he had been sent to announce and which we—the fortunate ones—have been able to listen to and learn from the witness of his terrible dark sonnets, gleaning such consolation as we can from another man's sorrow. But then, is that not one of the deep paradoxes of the Christian message itself?

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<sup>14</sup>"To seem the stranger," *Poetical Works*, 181.

<sup>15</sup>Cf. Thomas Merton, "From Faith to Wisdom," in his *New Seeds of Contemplation*, introduced by Sue Monk Kidd (New Directions: New York, 1961, 2007), 134–35.



There is so much that Hopkins has to offer us that it would take months, years, to plumb what Hopkins has to teach us in his sermons, his letters, his lecture notes, his intimate diaries, his meditations on the *Spiritual Exercises*, but especially his poems. Given that we can only focus on a relative handful of examples, such as the poem he wrote in the months leading up to his ordination, called “The Windhover.” Hopkins composed a draft of the poem on May 30, 1877, while he was still at St. Beuno’s, conceived, apparently, as he walked out with a group of fellow Jesuits to celebrate a May morning Mass in a small stone chapel situated above the Jesuit house higher up on the hill. That it was a memorial Mass for St. Joan of Arc was no mere chance—not for the priest who had written so beautifully of those five Franciscan nuns, or of St. Thecla, or of Margaret Clitheroe, or on so many occasions remembering Mary, his spiritual mother.

“I caught this morning morning’s minion,” the poem begins, as the speaker’s eye follows the pattern of a kestrel, a small hawk, hovering high in the morning sky above. But this is more than a bird; this is Christ’s self inscaped upon the poet alert to God’s presence in things. This bird is indeed nothing less than the “king/ dom of daylight’s daphin.” It is a “dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon,” drawn towards the sun, the eastering light, but also drawn—etched out—against that same light, a thing gliding effortlessly above him in the winds blowing in off the ocean, something 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!

What is it the poet—steeped in the Ignatian method of prayer, with its focus on the sacramental mystery of God’s creation, centered on the bread of the quotidian transformed into a veritable sacrament—what *is* it he sees? A bird, yes, ringing out its *quidditas*, its doing-be, its uniqueness, as it navigates without effort through the strong headland winds, perfectly attuned—this creature—to a world it and the poet both inhabit. Ah, then: the mystery and mastery of the thing!

But of course the poet sees more—much more—as he watches the falcon swing through the air in wide circles, before finally plunging to earth to seize upon what it has been searching for.

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-vermillion.<sup>16</sup>

And isn't that what he understands Christ has done with us? Singled each of us out, descending on us here, now, on this cool spring wind-gusting morning, as once Christ singled out a young French maiden who would wring victory for her king, though at a terrible cost to herself? But then, of course, isn't that what Christ Himself experienced in his kenotic emptying of himself for mankind? Beautiful as he was as a man and a teacher and a friend, and bestowing his wisdom on any who would listen, someone Hopkins confessed he would very much loved to have met in the flesh, what Christ did in giving himself up on the cross, his beautiful body buckling there on the wood, was something "a billion times told lovelier, more dangerous," Hopkins confesses now, out with it here in his poem.

But, Hopkins asks, is that really so unlike the nature of things—that clods of earth and pieces of coal should buckle, crumple, break up in order to realize another, far more striking beauty hidden within? Look at the Welsh farmers with their horses in the countryside about him, breaking up the moist clods of earth: how the light shines upon them, catching the quartz glints, in an instant turning them into diamond-like shards of light—"sheer plod" itself doing this, allowing the plough and the sillion both to shine in God's light. Or—evoking the words of another priest—this one the Anglican father/poet George Herbert—echoing his own "ah my dear" addressed to Christ, isn't that what happens when those seemingly dead coals there in the gratings of a million homes," those "blue-bleak embers," even as they fall, "gall themselves, and gash gold-vermillion," flaming out even as they die—like Christ on the cross, giving everything of himself for us, and thus

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<sup>16</sup>"The Windhover," *Poetical Works*, 144.



transforming the world itself. There it is, then, the thing that saves us in the daily going round of things: unstinting service to others in that endless supply of papers to grade and students to see through the straits of Homer and Plato and Cicero and Seneca, of Sappho and Catullus, of Ovid and Livy and Pliny, all the while having to deal with sickness and fever and depression, while bucking up and keeping one's sense of wit and humor about one.

## VI. Nature's Bonfire

**H**opkins was only forty-four when he succumbed to typhoid contacted in Dublin, only to be buried, not back in England, but somewhere in the community plot, without a headstone just like his fellow Jesuits, in Dublin's Glasnevin Cemetery. For over half a century now he has served as a model for me, both as a poet and as a man who served God as he could. Not a day goes by that I don't think of Hopkins, so much so that I often feel his presence about me. Here's a poem dedicated to the Jesuits I have been honored to know and work with over the years, including my own Jesuit son. It's called "Hopkins in Ireland," composed in Hopkins's signature form, the Petrarchan sonnet.

Above the blue-bleak priest the bright-blue fisher hovers.  
The priest notes the book upon the table, the lamp beside the book.  
A towering Babel of papers still to grade, and that faraway look  
as once more the mind begins to wander. Ah, to creep beneath the  
covers

of the belled bed beckoning across the room. He stops, recovers,  
takes another sip of bitter tea, then winces as he takes another look  
at the questions he has posed his students and the twists they took  
to cover up their benighted sense of Latin. The fisher hovers

like a lit match closer to him. The windows have all been shut  
against  
the damp black Dublin night. After all these years, his collar chokes  
him still, in spite of which he wears it like some outmoded mark  
of honor, remembering how his dear Ignatius must have sensed  
the same landlocked frustrations. Again he lifts his pen. His strokes

lash out against the dragon din of error. The fisher incandesces in the dark.<sup>17</sup>

The King fisher, Fisher of Men: the dark dove who hovers above us because God knows what we ourselves too often forget, that, as Hopkins wrote in the months leading up to his death, if he often felt like some grunt, some soldier tossed about from assignment to assignment, some “Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch” and matchwood, he was also—like us—as he affirmed with one of the strongest uses of the verb *Is* in the language (the verb and Verbum of being and becoming)—“immortal diamond,” not because of anything he had done, but because of God’s mercy and love in becoming one of us.

In the last year of his life, despite his crippling bouts of illness and depression, he seems to have found a sense of consolation that went deeper than what he had experienced earlier, no doubt because he had walked through the valley of the shadow of death himself and understood more deeply what was at stake here: what in fact would have to be left, not in his hands, but in God’s hands. Here is the poem, a caudated (or extended) sonnet, replete with tails, which had to burst the boundaries of the traditional sonnet to get said what had to be said. He called the poem “That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection,” and he composed it in late July 1888, as he walked about the streets of Dublin, trying to clear his head and rest his tired eyes after one more day of grading examinations.

In Ireland, they say, it rains between the showers. And so here, as this time a summer storm rather than the winter storm he had written about in his *Deutschland* ode a dozen years before, races across Ireland and England from west to east. Rain, snow, rain, snow, winter, spring, summer, fall, the same and yet different, again and again and again in the great Heraclitean flux of nature. As beautiful and vital and frisky as the clouds are on this Saturday afternoon in late July in the city, as the rains pass by and the summer sun begins to break through again, it strikes him with the force of a revelation that these clouds are more than mere clouds, that they are in fact a fast forwarding of life itself, and that for all of their casual roughness, like a gang of rowdies passing overhead, they—like time itself—are careless of the changes they make

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<sup>17</sup>“Hopkins in Ireland,” in *Epitaphs for the Journey* (Cascade Books, Eugene, Oregon: 2012), 195



on everything. They are, in fact, like the smoke from some great bonfire. Bonfire: not a bonny fire but rather what the word really derives from: *bone fire*—and one which will consume us all in the great conflagration of time, including the poet who witnesses the scene of apocalyptic light flaring across the whitewashed cottages and buildings with a growing terror. “Cloud-puffball,” the poem begins with a kind of hullabaloo, as if he were witnessing an Irish St. Patty’s Day parade, or a political demonstration in the streets,

torn tufts, tossed pillows | flaunt forth, then chevy on an air  
Built thoroughfare: heaven-roysterers, in gay-gangs | they throng;  
they glitter in marches.  
Down roughcast, down dazzling whitewash, | wherever an elm arches,  
Shivelights and shadowtackle ín long | lashes lace, lance, and pair.  
Delightfully the bright wind boisterous | ropes, wrestles, beats  
earth bare  
Of yestertempest’s creases; | in pool and rut peel parches  
Squandering ooze to squeezed | dough, crust, dust; stanches, starches  
Squadroned masks and manmarks | treadmire toil there  
Footfretted in it. Million-fuelèd, | nature’s bonfire burns on.<sup>18</sup>

Pools to mud to squeezed dough to crust to dust, until—in short order the wheel tracks of wagons and carriages and the boot- and footprints in the street all disappear, as the people on the streets of Dublin that afternoon long disappeared. As he will soon disappear—as Merton said to his Bangkok audience just hours before he died when he touched a faulty fan and the electric shock killed him. And then we are gone, and—in short order—the memory of who we were goes up in the bonfire, along with our life’s work often, our stories, our poems, our papyrus leavings, yes, even the things we leave in our virtual clouds today. “But quench her bonniest, dearest | to her, her clearest-selvèd spark/ Man,” this Jesuit, versed in the Exercises too well knows, then

how fast his firedint, | his mark on mind, is gone!  
Both are in an unfathomable, all is in an enormous dark  
Drowned. O pity and indig | nation! Manshape, that shone

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<sup>18</sup> “That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection,” *Poetical Works*, 197–98.

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.

And then? Then what? Right there, in the split second that makes the pause in the middle of a line of poetry, in the clarion call of Eternity breaking into our sense of time as evolution, there comes the sudden transformation, as St. Paul explained to the community at Thessalonica, and the chord of a new dimension, a new reality, is sounded. "Enough," the poet exclaims, and there it is, what the heart has always hungered for: "the Resurrection, / A heart's-clarion!" And so, from desolation to consolation, in a flash, full!

Away grief's gasping, | joyless days, dejection.  
Across my foundering deck shone  
A beacon, an eternal beam.

We are sinking, Lord, the poet remembers, recalling too Jesus in that fishing boat being awakened by his terrified followers, pleading with him that they were sinking now, that the boat was in danger of going down. And Jesus, rising up and facing the hellish waves, and quieting them with his words. Like that nun on the *Deutschland*, calling out to the only one who could save her now, save what was essential, her very self. And now it is Father Hopkins himself, calling out to the only One who can save him from time's vast womb of all, home of all night. And with Christ at his side he can afford to be jaunty once more. Let death take it all, let "Flesh fade, and mortal trash / Fall to the residuary worm" as the will and last testament are read out. And let the "world's wildfire leave but ash." No matter now, no matter. Because, in an instant, "In a flash, at a trumpet crash," as Paul had realized two mere millennia before, the faithful would be with Christ.

And why? Because the Lord of the Universe had deigned to become one of us, had emptied Himself of his Godhead to walk among us out of love. Because the great "I AM" Had mingled His Being with ours, thus raising us to the level of the Godhead and made us His children. "I am all at once what Christ is, | since he was what I am," Hopkins instresses the fact in upon us in a series of fourteen monosyllables back to back,

I am all at once what Christ is, | since he was what I am, and  
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, | patch, matchwood, immortal dia-  
mond,  
Is immortal diamond.

Something exists at the core of our being, and it will shine forth when all the nonessentials are burned away: the times we were merely one more Jack or Joe or Tom or Molly, the times when we were dismissed or dismissed ourselves as some joke, the times when we were but a mere fragment—a poor potsherd—of who we might have been—a patch, a clown (paccio), a near nonentity, a piece of matchwood to be struck, to flare up, and be extinguished, and yet, having undergone the ordeal, having carried the wood of the cross, having matched as best he could his wood with the wood of Christ, or as he would have in the best of all possible worlds (which is never really given to us) we too—because of God’s mercy—are at the heart of it “immortal diamond.”

*Diamond*, which Hopkins rhymes with “I am, and” reinforcing that with the *t* of what—*tiamand* and *diamond*: a word in the center of which shine the letters “I am.” Not merely I was once upon a time, the dates engraved on our tombstone, but I AM: the name by which God identified himself to Moses, a phrase which John the Evangelist echoes again and again as the living signature of the Son, and which the Father, in his infinite goodness, has given us to share. Let the poems, then, like the example of this poet-priest’s life, in spite of its often blue-bleak soutane exterior, bear witness to the truth of his life (and ours) which is at one and the same time, and amidst the Heraclitean flux of our contingent existences—a resounding and final affirmation—as Hopkins has come to understand—of God’s abiding love.

## VII. On the General Granite

**A**nd then it was back to ordinary time, as the journey continued and Hopkins understood, good Jesuit that he was, that it was in remaining faithful to the duties assigned him—even here in Dublin (especially here in Dublin, perhaps) that he might paradoxically grow in his union with the Triune God.

Three months later, in October, at the request of his fellow Jesuit, Father Goldie, Hopkins wrote a sonnet in honor of a Jesuit brother whose first feast day occurred that same month. This was Alphon-



sus Rodriguez, born some 350 years earlier, a “simple” Jesuit brother whose main task was to welcome guests at the gate of the Jesuit house of studies in Majorca. And though he had wanted to be a Jesuit priest, the death of his father in Segovia had left him with the responsibility of taking over the family’s business selling cloth. In time he had married a woman named Maria, and soon he was the father of three. And then inexplicable failure as Maria and then all three children died, and eventually even the business failed.

Adrift, he eventually joined the Jesuit order, hoping to become a priest, only to be told that, at thirty-five, he was too old to begin the long course of studies leading to ordination. Two years later, he was sent to Majorca, where he was assigned the duty of porter. A humble task, yes, but he took it seriously, much as Hopkins tried to fulfill the duties assigned him, saying to himself, as he went to answer the door each time, “I’m coming, Lord.” Fast forward another thirty-five years, and there was Brother Alphonsus, still answering the door, still calling on Christ. It was then that he met Peter Claver, a Jesuit in formation, and became Claver’s spiritual director. And it was Alphonsus who, with his keen spiritual insight into the interior life of Claver (as with so many others), urged the young Jesuit to offer himself to the missions in South America. In time Claver was sent to Cartagena (Colombia) to work with thousands of West African slaves who were being sent to the New World. And it was Claver who fed and tended and comforted these enslaved human beings over the years, bearing witness to their dignity and humanity, so that, in time, he would earn the title “Slave of the Slaves.” But only now, in 1888, would Alphonsus be canonized, not for his brilliant exploits, but for a life of humility served in the name of Christ. He was, really, exactly the sort of saint Father Hopkins could relate to, and the poem Hopkins wrote in Alphonsus’s honor tells us as much about Hopkins’s own kind of heroism as it tells us about the saint he set out to honor.

“Honour is flashed off exploit,” Hopkins begins, and then adds the all-important qualifier: “or so we say.” And it is fitting that

those strokes once that gashed flesh or galled shield  
Should tongue that time now, trumpet now that field,

And, on the fighter, forge his glorious day.<sup>19</sup>

So it was with Christ, who underwent the long journeys from town to town proclaiming the Word, then the betrayal and the savage torture of the pillar, the crowning with thorns, the being forced through the streets of the ancient city, only to be nailed hands and feet to a cross, like some hawk to a barn door. And so with so many martyrs, from Stephen on, who have borne witness to Christ.

But what if the war should be fought all within, as with those who suffer depression and self-loathing or what we call post-traumatic-stress syndrome, the awful sense that everything one has done has ended up a failure? What then? What then when "Earth hears no hurtle . . . from fiercest fray"? What if one is subjected to teaching students, many of whom could not care less about Latin and Greek or English? And what of those long hours of grading paper after paper after paper, of trying to right grammatical wrongs which only seem to proliferate like cancer?

That is God's work, finally, to judge, and not ours, for it is His to crown his suffering servant and wring victory out of the jaws of sullen defeat.

Yet God (that hews mountain and continent,  
Earth, all, out; who, with trickling increment,  
Veins violets and tall trees makes more and more)  
Could crowd career with conquest while there went  
Those years and years by of world without event  
That in Majorca Alfonso watched the door.

It was a powerful lesson which Hopkins could only learn, finally, by suffering through a similar world which seemed to pass him by as well without event, even as the Holy Spirit gave him the gift of composing poems of suffering and marginalization that speak as powerfully to us today as when Hopkins first penned them in his cell-like room at 8586 St. Stephen's Green.

By the spring of 1889, it was clear that something was seriously wrong with Hopkins's health. He was physically and mentally exhausted, and there was an ironic edge to his letters to Bridges, especially about Bridges's insistence on publishing his poetry only in limited

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<sup>19</sup>"In honour of St. Alphonsus Rodriguez," *Poetical Works*, 200.

editions, rather than reach out to the wider audience available in inexpensive paperbacks. Bridges wrote back, reminding Hopkins that at least he was being published, while Hopkins remained unpublished and unknown to nearly everyone besides himself, and going so far as to burn two of Hopkins's last letters to him (an act which Bridges would soon regret).

Realizing that he had managed to offend Bridges, when what he had hoped to do was to urge his friend to seek out a wider readership, Hopkins apologized. "I am ill to-day," he wrote Bridges on April 29, "but, no matter for that as my spirits are good." Then he added, "I want you to 'buck-up,' as we used to say at school, about those jokes over which you write in so dudgeonous a spirit. . . . You I treated to the same sort of irony as I do myself; but it is true it makes all the world of difference whose hand administers."<sup>20</sup> As a sort of peace offering and apology, he enclosed a new sonnet, this one addressed to Bridges himself, which he had written a week earlier.

It was a poem explaining to Bridges why it was he wrote so little these days, and why he let the things he did write "lie months and years in rough copy untransferred" to the book of poems Bridges had copied out for him years before. He began the poem with an announcement of sorts, describing the "fine delight" that came with poetic inspiration: it was a sensual image, for inspiration was rather like a phallic fire, not unlike the moment of spiritual impregnation such as Mary experienced at the Annunciation, when she gave her consent to the angel that she would do what had been asked of her, regardless of the consequences.

The fine delight that fathers thought; the strong  
Spur, live and lancing like the blowpipe flame,  
Breathes once and, quenched faster than it came,  
Leaves yet the mind a mother of immortal song.<sup>21</sup>

That moment of conception, of poetic inspiration, Hopkins went on, was all that was necessary to generate a poem, even if it took months, even years—as the poet Horace had said—for the poem to come to fruition. The seed had been planted, and the poem would come in its own good time.

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<sup>20</sup> Hopkins to Bridges, April 29, 1889, *Correspondence*, 2 (1882–89), 989–91.

<sup>21</sup> "To R. B.," *Poetical Works*, 204.



Nine months she then, nay years, nine years she long  
Within her wears, bears, cares and moulds the same:  
The widow of an insight lost she lives, with aim  
Now known and hand at work now never wrong.

That moment of inspiration, he told his friend, was what he needed now if his own muse was to be impregnated, the ecstatic and sensuous rapture of insight: the sense that the gist of the poem had been conceived, the sense too of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, speaking as in tongues of fire, that "Sweet fire the sire of muse," the "one rapture of an inspiration."

But, he explained, that was what he apparently had not been given much of lately. And then, in the rhythm of the lines which followed, he gave Bridges the very thing he said he did not now have. "O then," he wrote, "if in my lagging lines you miss / The roll, the rise, the carol, the creation," blame it on the desolation of "the winter world" he now found himself blanketed by, a world where he could scarcely breathe "that bliss / Now," so that he had to offer up, yield up, "with some sighs, our explanation."

And therein lay the answer, for it was not "my explanation," but rather "our explanation." And who was this "our"? Was it himself speaking to himself in his winter world, or was it rather himself and what Wallace Stevens called his "interior paramour," his understanding that this was where his Lord and Master had placed him now, so that even in the midst of desolation, in the midst of what the artist may feel as a prolonged dry spell, he could still create an extraordinary poem which reflected and incarnated the very fire, the very roll and rise and carol of creation, that he said he now lacked. Even in his desolation, then, Hopkins found consolation, and if his friend did not understand, well, at least he and Holy Spirit which sustained him now, his own interior paramour, understood.

If he was a physical wreck by then, suffering from migraines, eyestrain, eczema, stomach reflux, insomnia, and—worse—typhoid contacted by flea-infested rats in the sewer of the school's kitchen, but which he thought at first was some rheumatic fever which left him prostrate, no matter. "I saw a doctor yesterday," he wrote his father on May 3, in the joking spirit they had employed with each other over the

years, “who treated my complaint as a fleabite, a treatment which begets confidence but not gratitude.”

For a month, though bedridden and tended by nurses, he seemed to rally. But then, during the night of June 5, his condition took a turn for the worse, and his parents back in England were told that their son’s end was near. They were both there at his side when he died on Saturday, June 8, at half past one in the afternoon. His last words are reported to have been, “I am so happy. I am so happy.” His funeral took place three days later at the church of St. Francis Xavier’s on Upper Gardiner Street in Dublin, with seventy priests and a huge crowd in attendance, after which his body was laid to rest in an unmarked grave in Prospect Cemetery, Glasnevin, in the Jesuits’ crowded plot, his name incised, along with the names of his fellow Jesuits, on the general granite headstone you will find there today.

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