Gerard Manley Hopkins

by Peter Cash



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Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889)

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SCOPE OF TOPIC

In 1876, Gerard Manley Hopkins, a Catholic priest, completed one of the great poems in the English language: *The Wreck of the Deustschland*. Because this poem consists of 35 stanzas, it does not fall within the scope of this Bookmark, but belongs to the series of Bookmarks which the English Association has dedicated to Long Poems.

In this Bookmark, my aim will be to examine the sonnets that Hopkins wrote subsequently. I shall confine myself to exegeses of ten individual sonnets, eight in which Hopkins finds a religious meaning in the natural world and two in which he proceeds to express his religious doubt (his 'dark' or 'terrible' sonnets of 'desolation'). One unique difficulty which attends the exegesis of a Hopkins sonnet involves his peculiar concept of 'inscape': without explaining what 'inscape' is, it is not possible fully to explain his poetry. For this reason, I shall begin with the three poems (*As kingfishers catch fire*, *The Windhover*, *Binsey Poplars*) which rely conspicuously and prominently upon 'inscapes' for their inspirations; my commentaries on these three poems, each one not so much repeating as reinforcing points made in the other two, are designed to prepare the way for a reading his other sonnets - to which an understanding of 'inscape' is almost equally indispensable.

BOOKS TO READ

ed. W. H. Gardner, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poems and Prose*, Penguin 1953.
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ed. Peter Feeney, *G. M. Hopkins: Selected Poems*, Oxford 2006.

F. R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry*, 1932.
ed. G. H. Hartman, *Hopkins, C20 Views*, Prentice-Hall 1966.
R. K. R. Thornton, *Hopkins: The Poems*, Studies in EL 53, Edward Arnold 1973.
Gerald Roberts, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Literary Life*, Palgrave Macmillan 1994/2006.
Sean Sheehan, *Gerard Manley Hopkins*, Greenwich Exchange 2005.

'AS KINGFISHERS CATCH FIRE ….' (May 1877)

From May 1866 to February 1875, Hopkins kept a journal [= a diary]. Numerous among the entries in Hopkins' journal are his precise observations of the natural world.

From 1870 onwards, he has regularly been using an unusual term:

> This is the time to study inscape in the spraying of trees, for the swelling buds carry them to a pitch which the eye could not else gather …. in these sprays at all events there is a new world of inscape.
>
> Journal, 31st March 1871.

But it is not until 1872 that Hopkins finds himself reading the philosophy of Duns Scotus (1270-1308) and discovers by coincidence that this mediaeval philosopher has put forward a theory of *haecceitas*, not unlike his own theory of inscape. Scotus argues that every thing/every natural phenomenon contains within itself individual properties which differentiate it from every other thing; he argues that each thing possesses intrinsic qualities which make

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it 'this thing' [= *haecceitas*] rather than 'that thing'. Unsurprisingly, Hopkins finds in Scotus' theory of knowledge confirmation of his own theory of inscape; it seems to Hopkins that the Scotist 'principle of individuation' endorses his own vision of the natural world.

What is more, it would seem that St Ignatius Loyola (1491-1566) has derived from Duns Scotus the very principle upon which he founded the Society of Jesus: 'Man was created to praise, revere and serve God'. As a Jesuit, Hopkins realises to his delight that he is theologically entitled to his perception of the natural world in which each thing, including man, has a specific purpose that reflects its glorious Creator.

In his own words, W. H. Gardner (1953) endeavours to explain what Hopkins means by 'inscape':

> He is mainly interested in all those aspects of a thing which make it distinctive and individual .... He was always looking for the law or principle which gave to any object or grouping of objects its delicate and surprising uniqueness.

As an editor, Gardner finds himself engaged in such exegesis for the simple reason that he cannot turn to Hopkins' own prose writings; nowhere in his diaries nor in his letters does Hopkins himself attempt a definition of the term which he uses so freely. For such a definition, it is necessary to turn to a poem.

> ['As kingfishers catch fire ....' is] one of Hopkins' most triumphant pieces of parallelism, the octave of the sonnet being simply eleven statements of the way in which individual things express their own inner nature.
>
> R. K. R. Thornton (1973)

It is not in prose, but in an untitled sonnet that Hopkins sets out his theory of 'inscape'. Accordingly, Gerald Roberts (1994) writes that this sonnet is a 'joyful exposition of Scotist selfhood, the individuality of things'. The balanced construction of the first line exemplifies in itself the Scotist perception of 'individual things' which Hopkins is concerned to demonstrate:

> As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame ....

To make explicit sense of this line, it is necessary to open out the grammar of the sentence: '**Just as** kingfishers catch fire, **so** dragonflies draw flame'. Albeit at the expense of the iambic pentameter, this revision reveals that the balance (which the comma enacts) is not between a subordinate clause of time and a main clause; rather, it is between two co-ordinate clauses ('Just as ...., so ....') in which two creatures are depicted as playing equivalent parts in God's Creation. The function of the grammar is to insist upon the equivalence between ornithological and entomological phenomena; though different from each other, the kingfisher and the dragonfly are both endowed with their own unique ability to make a vivid impact upon the eye. Moreover, Hopkins underpins this equivalence by means of the symmetry which he builds into the pattern of alliteration:

> As **k**ing**f**ishers **c**atch **f**ire, **dr**agon**fl**ies **dr**aw **fl**ame ....

In the first co-ordinate clause, the alliteration is between the 'k' of 'king-' and the 'c' of 'catch'/ between the 'f' of '-fishers' and the 'f' of 'fire'; in the second co-ordinate clause, the alliteration is between the 'dr' of 'dragon-' and the 'dr' of 'draw'/between the 'fl' of '-flies' and the 'fl' of 'flame'. The correspondences between the consonants are identical, thereby emphasising that both kingfisher and dragonfly have their own inscapes, equalling each other in intensity and intricacy.

In the first quatrain of this sonnet, Hopkins' aim is to demonstrate his theory of inscape beyond doubt. To the two visual images with which the quatrain opens, he adds three auditory images:

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> As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
> Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
> Bow swung finds its tongue to fling out broad its name.

It is significant that the syntax of the second line runs parallel to the syntax of the first; it begins with the subordinate conjunction 'as' in order to indicate that sounds, as well as sights, can boast their own unique characteristics/'express their own inner nature'. Hopkins organises his language to echo the point that, just as stones tossed into wells make one sound, so the plucked strings of a harp make another and the rung bells of a church make yet another. By his means of vocabulary, Hopkins seeks to stress that each sound has an identity of its very own; to coin a phrase, that each tucked string tells its own story. Forensic interrogation of the verse-texture reveals a complex network of vowel-sounds, none more expressive than the variation between 'hung', 'swung', 'tongue' and 'fling' which, by means of assonance, create an onomatopoeic/ campanological effect. Such a distinctive sound provides evidence for Hopkins' theory that 'each mortal thing does one thing and the same': that is, it proclaims loudly its own individuality and thereby implies God's grandeur.

Hopkins theorises that each thing (his favourite noun) 'selves – goes its self'; in coining the intransitive verb 'to selve', he is responding to St Ignatius' teaching that God has designed each thing for a specific purpose which glorifies Him. As a consequence, Hopkins is insisting that each thing is important not for 'itself' (a reflexive pronoun) but for 'its self' (a combination of possessive adjective and common noun which highlights its 'especial' nature). It is in keeping with this usage that the wood-cutters at Binsey in 1879 'unselve' the landscape when they chop down the poplars; in doing so, they desecrate a 'sweet especial scene'. In this context, Hopkins' italicised statement – *What I do is me: for that I came* – is a triumphant justification of his existence, supplying (as it does) the specific reason why he has been put on earth: namely, to worship God.

Catherine Phillips (1995) confirms that 'perceiving the essence or "inscape" of a thing was to perceive some part of God'. It is entirely in Hopkins' poetic character that he should then moralise on this evidence. In his theology, 'the just man justices'; the tautological correspondence between the adjective 'just' and the coined verb 'justices' takes for granted a logical relationship between natural order and moral/social order.

In the sestet, Hopkins' argument is neither original nor profound: if each man 'in God's eye … is Christ', if the Father sees Christ 'through the features of men's faces', then he is doing little more than confirm that God made man in his own image. Tautological though its argument may be, this sonnet is one of Hopkins' most comforting poems in that it grounds his religious belief firmly upon his epistemology.

THE WINDHOVER (30th May 1877)

In 1863, Hopkins (aged 19) went up to Balliol College, Oxford: although he went to read Classics, he was tutored there by Walter Pater (1839-1894) and befriended by Robert Bridges (1844-1930) who both stimulated his interest in Aesthetics. It is Hopkins' own theory of Aesthetics that informs both his appreciation of the natural world and his poetry. On 18th May 1870, he writes:

> I do not think that I have ever seen anything more beautiful than the bluebell I have been looking at. I know the beauty of the Lord by it. Its inscape is mixed of strength and grace, like an ash tree.

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Hopkins has developed the theory that an 'inscape' [= a miniature landscape] is an impression of God's presence in the world. He has come to believe that an inscape is a mark of God's handiwork; to coin a phrase, he knows the beauty of the Lord by it. In 1872, Hopkins travelled to the Isle of Man where he became acquainted with the philosophy of John Duns Scotus (1270-1308) whose writings corroborated his theory. Scotism argues that every physical thing contains within itself a reason why it is *this* thing [= *haecceitas*] rather than *that* thing; inherent in each individual thing are properties by which God has differentiated it from every other thing. In the twentieth century, Scotus (who knows?) might have found himself simply pointing out that each thing has its own DNA.

In *The Windhover*, Hopkins' aim is to record an inscape; nowhere in his poetry is there a more accomplished description by which he can claim to 'know the beauty of the Lord'. For this precise reason, few critics disagree with Hopkins' own assessment of the poem: 'the best thing I ever wrote'. The structure of this sonnet is classical: an octave (in which Hopkins sets out his thesis that the kestrel is a thing of physical beauty) and a sestet (in which he puts forward the antithesis that this thing of physical beauty can be a spiritual joy for ever). Assisting Hopkins' description of the kestrel (another inscape 'mixed of strength and grace') is an original rhythm:

> I had long had haunting my ear the echo of a new rhythm which now I realised on paper. To speak shortly, it consists in scanning by accents or stresses alone, without any account of the number of syllables ….
>
> Letter to Canon R W Dixon, 5th October 1878.

The Windhover is written 'in sprung rhythm, as I call it'. Its opening lines –

> I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
> -dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
> Of the rolling level …."

– rely upon the alliterative patterns of Old English: after the iambic emphasis upon the verb 'caught', the movement of the verse is determined by the accents upon the three consecutive m-words, then the six d-words and then the two r-words. Dennis Ward (1965) comments on the effectiveness of this technique: 'The swift immediacy of the verb conveys exactly that first, swift shock of delight.' With such practical criticism, Ward looks forward to Geoffrey Hill who in 1972 turns for his 'shock' away from the solitary verb to the combined effect of Hopkins' nouns and his compound-adjective. Hill writes:

> If language is more than a vehicle for the transmission of axioms and concepts, rhythm is correspondingly more than a physiological motor or a paradigm of dainty devices. It is capable of registering mimetically deep shocks of recognition.

Throughout the octave, Hopkins is able to monitor the flight of the kestrel across the Welsh Downs by means of his rhythm; this rhythm – in which the accents, rather than being predictable, are 'sprung' upon a reader – is functional in his depiction of the falcon's undulating progress. Not for nothing does Hopkins' sixty-five-word sentence expand over seven lines; its rhythmical fluctuations enact the fluctuations of the bird's flight, mime its career across the sky. Because his ear is haunted by 'the echo of a new rhythm', it could be argued that Hopkins' choice of words is made for him by an inner compulsion to alliterate. The cadences of this sentence –

> 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 ….

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– show that his use of alliteration is by no means arbitrary. Its pattern of consonants, its abandonment of r-words for w-words, illustrates precisely how the kestrel changed direction with the wind: how it went 'off, off forth on swing'. To adapt Hill's words further, these variations 'shock' a reader into a 'recognition' of the bird's erratic flight-path as it 'rebuffed the big wind'; they are instrumental in making a living 'thing' of it.

It is significant that *The Windhover* is a lyric: that is, its central figure is neither Christ ('To Christ our Lord') nor the kestrel which embodies him, but the poet who addresses him. The poem begins with the first-person pronoun in order to signify that its inner drama is entirely that of an 'I'-figure whose sense of Christian mission has been flagging. At the end of the octave, Hopkins' declarative statement –

My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird – the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!

– involves a Catholic confession that this brilliant glimpse of an uplifted bird has uplifted his own heart: that its resilient example has re-animated him and revived his sense of mission; in this connection, it is worth remembering that a 'minion' was an agent/a knight errant for a 'dauphin' and was commonly sent to do such work. The purpose of the sestet –

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!

– is to finish capturing the chivalric nature of the windhover. Seeing that it is in its element ('in his ecstasy') in its battle with the wind, the Christian poet is reminded that he too should be in his element when he is battling against the forces of adversity; observing the falcon, he admires its 'valour' and seeks to emulate it. For the 'valour' is not only that of a kestrel in its perpetual struggle against the elements; it can also be that of a Christian knight [= le 'chevalier'] in his eternal struggle with the forces of evil. The apostrophe 'O my chevalier' confirms that Hopkins is thinking of the kestrel in its chivalric role: if not as a knight errant 'riding' upon a charger, then as an emissary which, by its 'lovelier' example, has brought back to him word of God's glory.

It is important to bear in mind that Hopkins, in recording his perception of this kestrel, is presenting us with a beatific vision: that is, a vision so physically beautiful that it takes on a spiritual dimension. This being so, W. H. Gardner (1953) considers that the verb 'buckle' represents 'the crux of the poem'. Despite the exclamation-mark, the verb is not an imperative; rather, it is in the indicative mood and indicates the moment of ecstatic revelation when the various attributes of this air-borne bird fuse together to form an image of religious significance. By the exclamation-mark, Hopkins celebrates the moment when he knew the beauty of the Lord by it.

The kestrel (hence, the title of the poem) is the only bird of prey which can hover.
Hopkins, then, has in mind that moment when the kestrel spread its wings in the air and resembled a crucified figure; at that moment of epiphany, it became – not only in the poet's imagination, but also in actuality – the crucified Christ whose wounds run with a 'gold-vermilion' blood. The capitalised 'AND' marks the moment of transformation; at this moment, the falcon comes to life with such vividness that 'the fire that breaks from thee then' becomes a manifestation of God's presence. In short, the cruciform windhover becomes luminous with the Holy Spirit.

More than an ash tree, the windhover is an inscape 'mixed of strength and grace'. By its stirring example, Hopkins is inspired to re-dedicate himself to Christ. Seeing the ploughed land over which the bird hovers, he is finally reminded of the 'sheer plod' that is necessary before the 'sillion' (an archaic word for the out-turned face of a furrow) can 'shine'. He

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reaches this conclusion: only by submitting himself to such trials of 'strength' can the Christian re-affirm his faith and attain 'grace'.

BINSEY POPLARS (1879)

> I do not think that I have ever seen anything more beautiful than the bluebell I have been looking at. I know the beauty of our Lord by it. Its inscape is mixed of strength and grace, like an ash-tree.
>
> Journal, 18th May 1870.

> The ash-tree growing in the corner of the garden was felled. It was lopped first: I heard the sound and looking out and seeing it maimed there came at that moment a great pang and I wished to die and not to see the inscapes of the world destroyed any more.
>
> Journal, 8th April 1873.

Binsey Poplars is informed by Hopkins' religious belief that each natural phenomenon [eg. bluebell, ash-tree, poplar, kestrel] is endowed with a set of unique characteristics/properties; this being so, each has its own mini-landscape or 'inscape' [his own term for a thing's unique sense of self]. Devout Catholic that he was, Hopkins believed that it was possible to discern God's presence in each inscape; consequently, he regards the chopping-down of an ash-tree (in 1873) and a poplar (in 1879) as acts of sacrilege. On seeing each tree 'maimed', he suffers 'a great pang' of grief.

In Hopkins' terminology, an 'inscape' is a physical flash of insight into the divine nature of a living thing; it is a moment of epiphany in which 'God's grandeur' is revealed. In this case, Hopkins has been inspired by the 'airy cages' of the ash-boughs: that is, by the dappling effect of the criss-crossing branches upon 'the leaping sun'. In the third line, his repetition of the verb 'felled' is designed to express his incredulity that anyone could be so literally blind and so spiritually insensitive to God's grandeur as to fell 'all' ('all felled') of these beautiful trees. The entire poem is an emotional struggle to come to terms with the facts that his 'aspens dear' have been felled and an inscape on the 'wind-wandering weed-winding bank' of the River Isis has been obliterated forever. To emphasise his dismay, Hopkins places the same accents of incredulity upon 'Not spared, not one'; because he himself is entirely sensitive to the beauty of the view, he cannot credit such an act of environmental vandalism.

Of course, the axemen's act of vandalism is also spiritual; more seriously, it is a sin against Nature (in which God is immanent). For this reason, the second verse reflects at length upon the sacrilegious nature of the act. Accordingly, Hopkins' exclamation –

> O if we but knew what we do
> When we delve or hew –
> Hack and rack the growing green!

– consciously echoes Christ's words on the Cross: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" [Luke, Chapter 23, Verse 24]. In hewing down the trees, the axe-men know not what they do; hard-handed men of Oxford, they have no conception of the greater significance of 'the growing green'; they do not understand that 'country is so tender' and cannot appreciate what damage they are doing. By means of the internal rhyme between the verbs, Hopkins ('hack and rack') seeks to convey the violence of this iconoclastic exercise.

Finally, Hopkins laments that the scene has not been preserved for posterity: 'After-comers cannot guess the beauty been.' How can 'after-comers' have an inkling of the 'beauty' which was inherent in that particular aspect of the Oxford landscape? Once again, he uses a simple form of repetition to stress his point: it took only 'ten or twelve, only ten or twelve' strokes of

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an axe to alter that view irrevocably: that is, to 'unselve' it. To describe this 'havoc', Hopkins' coinage of the verb 'unselve' is of supreme importance; it relates directly to his concept of inscape, to the idea that there existed at Binsey a scene remarkable for its unique sense of 'self', a scene peculiar to that place which can never be witnessed again. In a final form of repetition, Hopkins –

> The sweet especial scene,
> Rural scene, a rural scene,
> Sweet especial rural scene

– rotates three adjectives in an ardent effort to convey the precious selfhood of that 'scene'. By this method, he hopes to suggest the precise extent of the loss which he mourns: namely, that 'an inscape of the world' has been 'destroyed'.

SPRING (May 1877)

> Here lies the great conflict of Hopkins' heart: the great attraction of beauty on the one hand, the call to subordinate it to spiritual and moral values on the other.
>
> But these pictures recall the innocence of a world that was, not the one that is, for Hopkins is rarely content to accept beauty unalloyed by moral values.
>
> Gerald Roberts (1994)

In this sonnet, Hopkins has two aims which 'conflict' with each other: first, to write an octave in which he composes a description of the 'great attraction' of Spring; second, to write a sestet in which he composes a 'spiritual and moral' reflection upon the 'beauty' of this season. Frequently, it seems that Hopkins cannot set out his sensuous appreciation of Nature without reference to God's part in its creation.

In the octave, Hopkins' aim is to give a pictorial impression of Spring. He opens the octave with a declarative statement – 'Nothing is so beautiful as Spring' – which he then seeks to justify in the following seven lines. He isolates those natural phenomena by which Spring can be readily identified and crafts them into a composite picture of the season. According to J. Hillis Miller, 'the fundamental method of Hopkins' poetry is to carry as far as it will go the principle of rhyme'; in the octave of *Spring*, Hopkins' method is to rhyme four –ush sounds [to convey the lusciousness of the vernal growth] and four –ing sounds [to suggest the resonance of birdsong throughout the woodland]. To describe Spring, he selects those sights and those sounds (those 'inscapes') which characterise it; by these onomatopoeic means, he mirrors or echoes them.

Hopkins' verse is remarkable for its texture: its rhymes and its alliterative rhythms. In addition to the two rhyme-sounds, Hopkins sets up ten networks of alliteration. The function of the resulting rhythm is to convey the dynamic onset of Spring 1877 and further to imply its luxuriance: first, the weeds, which grow through the wooden spokes of cart**w**heels, 'shoot **l**ong and **l**ovely and **l**ush'; then, there is the **th**rush song '**th**rough the echoing timber'; beneath a blue sky, 'all in a **r**ush with **r**ichness', come '**r**acing lambs'. The simile for the cathartic sound of the thrush's song ('**it** strikes like lightning**s**') is a synaesthetic image; it suggests that Spring bombards the senses to the point at which they, together with singulars and plurals, become confused. The adjective for the pear-tree ('the glassy pear-tree leaves and blooms') pays attention to the lacquered texture of its leaves and anticipates another form of lushness.

As Roberts points out, Hopkins as a Catholic priest has an ulterior motive for writing about the natural plenitude of Spring; he is describing it only in order to moralise upon it. In the

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sestet, it becomes clear that Spring appeals to Hopkins ultimately because it is a season in which God's grandeur is manifest; in the sestet, he subordinates his physical description to a spiritual reflection/justifies it in terms of Catholic doctrine. The question with which the sestet opens –

What is all this juice and all this joy?

– is by no means rhetorical because it receives an immediate answer: explicitly, it [Spring] is 'a strain of the earth's sweet being in the beginning in Eden garden'. In Hopkins' imagination, England on Mayday 1877 is a pastoral paradise only in so far as it manages approximately to reproduce conditions in the Garden of Eden. This being so, Hopkins' imperatives – 'Have, get before it cloy, before it cloud' – urge 'girl and boy' to make the most of this 'beautiful' and 'innocent' world before it disappears. He draws a parallel between an English Spring and the pre-lapsarian climate of Eden/between the season's beauty before it fades and man's 'sweet being' before it grew 'sour with sinning'.

PIED BEAUTY (1877)

I …. kiss my hand to the dappled-with-damson west
The Wreck, Stanza 5

…. daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon
The Windhover

Difficult though his language often is, Hopkins tends to begin his sonnets with a declarative statement of some simplicity: 'Glory be to God for dappled things.' In this opening sentence, he is recording a characteristic perception: namely, that God manifests himself most vividly in 'dappled' or 'pied' colour-combinations. Whether it is the sunset in *The Wreck* or the sunrise in *The Windhover*, Hopkins is fascinated by the religious luminosity of 'couple-colour'. Considered in this light, *Pied Beauty* can look at first as if it is an apology for 'dappled things'; in fact, it is a celebration of them, an unapologetic attempt to justify a lack of natural purity.

It is instructive to note that, in this curtal sonnet, Hopkins is concerned to glorify the minutiae of the natural world: the 'brinded' hide of a Friesian cow, the speckled scales of 'trout that swim' or the variegated feather-patterns of 'finches' wings'. As usual, he devotes his octave to descriptive writing, compiling here a register of six natural phenomena on which he has observed arrangements of 'couple-colour'. In this poem, Hopkins becomes a protagonist for such variegation, for a 'multi-coloured, symphonic variety' (Sean Sheehan, 2005); he is effectively insisting that 'pied' effects [= impure colour-formations in Nature] point to 'a moral realisation of unity' (R. K. R. Thornton, 1973). Whatever is 'fickle, freckled' is to be justified because it is an equal part of God's glorious design.

It is essential to recall that, in *The Wreck*, God to Hopkins was both 'father and fondler' (Stanza 9) and 'martyr-master' (Stanza 21). This being so, it makes both moral and poetic sense to him to argue the case for 'all things counter': presumably, 'all things' that run contrary [= 'counter'] to a pure and simple colour-scheme. He is seeking to reassure himself that in God's universe 'things' can happily be both 'sweet, sour; adazzle, dim'. Such 'beauty', so he maintains, is 'past change': that is, integral to the colour-scheme that God has built into his world. For this 'pied beauty', God – in Hopkins' view – should be eulogised: 'Praise him.' As ever, Hopkins' aim is to insist upon the praiseworthiness of God.

What starts out as an apology for an apparent absence of purity in God's design becomes instead a panegyric of the streaks in this design. The poem is a hymn of praise to God whose colour-schemes embrace both the pure simplicity of an April sky ('descending blue')

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and the rich complexity of a 'landscape plotted and pieced'. Both have their rightful places 'in Eden garden'.

HURRAHING IN HARVEST (September 1877)

> Hopkins' exultant descriptions of the countryside are combined with a profound sense of God's presence in Nature.
>
> Gerald Roberts (1994)

For the title of this sonnet, Hopkins makes use of a noun which the OED defines as 'an expression of exultation or approbation'; he presses this noun into activity as a verb, relying in the process upon its even more common usage as an exclamation (cf. "Hooray!") which expresses joyful satisfaction 'or approbation'. If Hopkins is 'hurrahing in harvest', then – so his present participle suggests – he must be celebrating an achievement, rejoicing at a discovery of some kind.

In this sonnet, Hopkins divides the octave into two quatrains, each of which gives an 'exultant description' of an 'inscape'. The function of the first quatrain –

> Summer ends now; now, barbarous in beauty, the stooks rise
> Around

– is to give a simple description of an autumn landscape in the Vale of Clwyd; the chiasmic movement of the line ('ends now; now ….') enacts the transition from one season to the next. In the course of this description, Hopkins compares the pattern of 'barbarous' stooks in a field to the 'lovely' pattern of 'silk-sack clouds' in the 'skies'. It is a pastoral scene that invites superlatives: 'has wilder, wilful-wavier meal-drift' ever before 'melted across skies'? Dense with verbal effects, Hopkins' rhetorical question asks us to consider whether cirrus cloud-formations ('meal-drift') have ever been 'wilder, wilful-wavier', thereby giving such cause for celebration and exultation ('hurrahing').

Famously, this sonnet was said by Hopkins to have been "the outcome of half an hour of extreme enthusiasm as I walked home alone one day from fishing in the Elwy" [16th July 1878]. Such a comment confirms that Hopkins' poems grow directly out of his own experiences and observations. The function of the second quatrain is to explain his 'extreme enthusiasm' for this walk back from the River Elwy to St Beuno's College. It becomes clear that his enthusiasm is not so much for the literal harvest-time (when 'all is safely gathered in') as for a metaphorical harvest. In the second quatrain, he asks rhetorically 'what lips yet gave you a' more 'rapturous' answer to the question: what can we 'glean' of 'our Saviour' from this 'sweet especial scene'? To this question, 'all that glory in the heavens' (to which he has just opened his 'eyes') gives affirmative 'replies'. Here, the conceit is not dissimilar to the conclusion of *The Wreck*, Stanza 31: 'is the shipwrack then a harvest, does the tempest carry grain for thee?' Indeed, his very rhyme-scheme ('behaviour'/ 'wilful-wavier'/ 'our Saviour'/ 'gave you a') has been designed to accommodate this idea. Were it not for the position of 'our Saviour', the compound-adjective 'wilful-wavier' would not exist and the three words 'gave you a' would never find themselves ending a line of English poetry. Such is Hopkins' technical daring.

In the sestet, Hopkins supplies us with a confirmation of his belief that 'our Saviour' is manifestly present in the countryside. The ninth line of the sonnet states explicitly that 'the azurous hung hills **are** his world-wielding shoulder': that is, that Christ is an integral part of the Welsh landscape. Here, Hopkins' perception is not that Christ is an Atlas-figure holding up the hills on his shoulder nor that the geological shape of the hills resembles Christ's shoulder; rather, he states that the contour of the hills **is** Christ's shoulder. For this reason,

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J. Hillis Miller (1963) concludes that '*Hurrahing In Harvest* is the most ecstatic expression of Hopkins' vision of the ubiquity of Christ in Nature'.

In the sestet, Hopkins rejoices ('hurrahs') at this moment of epiphany. He explains that 'these things, these things were here' all along, but that 'the beholder' [himself] had been found 'wanting': until 1st September 1877, he had not lifted up his eyes and seen the 'glory' of the coming of the Lord in quite this form; till then, 'instress' had not come. Hopkins repeats 'these things' in order to convey his incredulity that he could have been so imperceptive/so unreceptive. It had not previously occurred to him that Christ was physically implicit in the landscape. To finish the poem, he marks the moment when the 'two' perceptions [the geological form of the hills and Jesus' physique] 'meet' or (as in *The Windhover*) 'buckle':

> The heart rears wings bold and bolder
> And hurls for him, O half hurls earth for him off under his feet.

Hopkins describes his feeling of elation: upon recognising 'God's presence in Nature', the fusion between God and 'earth', his heart takes flight. He does away with a regular tempo, inserting that 'O' in order to suggest the sensation of being swept off his feet. 'Hopkins often marks by an exclamation the very moment in the poem when he reaches the height of wonder (R. K. R. Thornton, 1973). Both in *God's Grandeur* ('with ah! bright wings') and in this last line, he expresses his sense of wonder/joy by an apt, but unexpected interjection.

THE STARLIGHT NIGHT (March 1877)

> Hopkins is rarely content to accept beauty unalloyed by moral values.
> Gerald Roberts (1994)

In this sonnet, Hopkins' aim is to illustrate his fundamental idea that every aspect of the natural world 'is charged with the grandeur of God'. In the octave, Hopkins seems solely intent on finding as many metonyms as he can for the single phenomenon of a star-lit night. The octave begins with an imperative – 'Look at the stars!' – which conveys Hopkins' feeling of excitement at the prospect of a starry night; throughout the octave, he uses exclamation-marks – eleven in total – to communicate his sense of awe at this natural wonder. Among the nine metonyms which he uses to describe the various constellations are 'fire-folk sitting in the air', 'circle-citadels', 'elves' eyes' and 'airy abeles set on a flare'; his perception of 'the starlight night' (an 'inscape') literally fires his imagination. He studies the night sky, finding for this inscape no fewer than nine word-formulations which help him to apprehend it more exactly.

In the sestet, Hopkins imagines that 'the starlight night' is a manifestation of God's presence. Here, he repeats the imperative 'Look!' in order to suggest that the starry, starry night replicates the natural profusion of Spring. The sky is

> a May-mess, like on orchard boughs!
> Look! March-bloom, like on mealed-with-yellow sallows!

These two comparisons – for which Hopkins coins his own compound-nouns – suggest that there exists in God's creation a Romantic unity: that is, a spirit that rolls through all things, both celestial and terrestrial. Finally, Hopkins makes the imaginative connection between this particular night and the night of Christ's nativity when both magi and shepherds followed a single star to 'the barn' in which 'Christ and his mother' were surrounded by cattle, goats and sheep, 'all' paying homage to the Messiah. About this connection, there is something inevitable; it is as if Hopkins cannot appreciate a thing of beauty without finding a moral or religious reason for doing so. In the last three lines, 'the imagery strains awkwardly to assert

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a customary piety rather than display a felt experience,' writes Sean Sheehan (2005); the poet-priest is 'content' to admire the 'bright' sky only because he has a theological excuse for indulging himself.

FELIX RANDAL (28th April 1880)

> Another death with a strong human interest moved Hopkins to write *Felix Randal*, said to be based on a parishioner who died of tuberculosis at the age of 31.
>
> Gerald Roberts (1994)

Whilst he was Select Preacher at St Francis Xavier's Church in Liverpool in 1879, Hopkins undertook the pastoral work which brought him into contact with a blacksmith/a 'farrier' (by the actual name of Felix Spencer) who was dying not from 'four disorders', but from tuberculosis. The occasion for this sonnet is the pastoral visit to Spencer's house at which Hopkins learns to his surprise that Felix Spencer has died ('Oh is he dead then?') and that his duty to this parishioner is 'all ended'.

Richard Dellamora (1990) argues that *Felix Randal* is 'an expression of sublimated homo-eroticism'. In fact, the sonnet is not a homo-erotic eulogy of Spencer/Randal's masculine physique nor is it an endorsement of muscular Christianity, fashionable at the time. Unlike *Harry Ploughman*, *Felix Randal* is neither a homo-erotic appreciation of a manual labourer's physique nor (as it easily could have been) an admiration of a craftsman in whom the Christian work-ethic is literally embodied; rather, it is an elegy for 'Amansstrength' in which Hopkins' description of Spencer ('mould of man, big-boned and hardy-handsome') is simply designed to indicate the poignant way of all flesh.

In this sonnet, Hopkins' precise aim is to meditate upon the purpose of 'mortal beauty': what purpose, Hopkins asks himself, does 'mortal beauty' serve if its fate is finally to be that of the bed-ridden Felix Spencer/Randal? In this context, the function of the three epithets ('mould of man, big-boned and hardy-handsome') is to illustrate the peak of physical condition from which Felix is terminally declining ('pining, pining'). In this poem, Hopkins' interest is in a fine figure of a man who is as such a perfect exemplification of the theological concept that man is a fallen creature and that his physical perfection ('mortal beauty') serves no purpose. That Felix exemplifies this concept prematurely (aged 31) means that Hopkins' elegy for him acquires an added poignancy.

Felix, then, is not so much a specimen of muscular Christianity [= the Victorian idea that manliness is next to godliness] as a *memento mori*; informing this poem is the Catholic doctrine that all physical prowess, even Felix's in his prime, is transient. He becomes Hopkins' eponymous hero because he responds to the Church's teaching on this matter: after 'sickness broke him', he was 'impatient ... but mended being anointed and all'. Felix is 'mended' [= on the mend] not in any physical sense, but in the spiritual sense that he is a communicant of the Catholic Church ('anointed and all') and has received the Last Rites ('sweet reprieve and ransom'). To express his respect for his faithful parishioner, Hopkins voices these ideas in the Lancastrian dialect ('mended', 'anointed and all', 'all road ever') which Felix himself used.

As a Catholic priest, Hopkins is interested not in Felix's body, but in his soul. For this reason, Felix 'endears' himself to his parish priest because he listens to his spiritual advice and takes 'comfort' from it. Consequently, 'poor Felix Randal' ceases to shed 'tears' of self-pity and prepares to greet the salvation that awaits him. Finally, he is to be imagined as exhibiting a Christian humility and putting out of mind his 'more boisterous years' when he

> at the random grim forge, powerful amidst peers,
> Didst fettle for the great grey drayhorse his bright and battering sandal!

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It no longer matters that Felix ('powerful amidst peers') was once the strongest man in the village and that he shod 'the great grey drayhorse': that is, the horse which pulled the brewer's cart. It is Hopkins' intention that Felix's physical robustness (implied by association with the resplendent carthorse) should pale into insignificance beside the spiritual glory that awaits him. Peter Feeney (2006) explains that 'sandal', 'rather than a convenient rhyme for Randal', is an 'archaic term for a type of horse-shoe': in other words, Hopkins chose for Spencer a pseudonym which would complete his rhyme-scheme. That the horse-shoe was 'bright and battering' is just a further measure of the spiritual might to which – in Hopkins' Catholic theology – all forms of worldly strength are inferior.

I WAKE AND FEEL (May 1885)

In 1884, Hopkins became Professor of Greek and Latin at the University of Dublin. By 1885, it was a post with which he had become deeply frustrated and disillusioned. Subsequently, he descends into a slough of despondency:

> I have after long silence written two sonnets, which I am touching: if ever anything was written in blood one of these was …."
>
> Letter to Robert Bridges, May 1885.

Although Hopkins' letter does not identify this sonnet, W. H. Gardner believes that *Carrion Comfort* [Bridges' eventual title for the poem] nevertheless analyses the effects of the identity-crisis through which Hopkins went as a result of his posting to Dublin: 'this may be the sonnet "written in blood" about which G.M.H. wrote to R.B. in that year.' During his 'dark sonnets', Hopkins' first tendency is to express a painful bewilderment at the demoralising circumstances in which God has placed him; according to R. K. R. Thornton, he 'sees himself as a failure and fails to see God's purpose in him'. His second tendency is to fear the consequences of this wavering faith in his calling and to seek a solution.

In these 'terrible sonnets', Hopkins' contorted syntax is expressive of his contorted thought-patterns; it is functional in conveying the sheer difficulty which he experiences in coming to terms with his religious doubt. More vividly than the other 'sonnets of desolation', this sonnet describes the symptoms of Hopkins' crisis. It appears to begin where *Carrion Comfort* and *No Worst, There Is None* end: i.e. 'I wretch lay wrestling ....' In this sonnet, Hopkins seems to have awoken from the sleep with which 'each day dies' and in which his spiritual agonies were anaesthetised. As usual, the setting for a 'dark sonnet' is the cold bedroom in which Hopkins awakens to find that his painful doubts are waiting for him. This sensation –

> I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day

– creates an ironic situation in that he wakes not to a 'dapple-dawn', but to a metaphorical experience of 'dark, not day' which makes a physical impact upon him: ironically, day-break feels like night-fall. Even though it is actually day-time, to Hopkins, in his tormented state of consciousness, it still feels dark. To suggest the nature of this experience, he puns upon the word 'fell': its first usage relates his spiritual desolation to a 'fell' [= a bleak moorland]; its second usage simultaneously suggests the 'fell' nature [cruel, dreadful, rude] of this awakening. To comfort himself in his predicament, Hopkins addresses his own 'heart':

> What hours, O what black hours we have spent
> This night! what sights you, heart, saw; ways you went!

Within this couplet of iambic pentameter, his punctuation constructs each individual phrase so that its cadences convey the movements of a mind in the act of thinking. So thoughtful is the rhythmic organisation of Line 2 that the plural noun 'hours' is to be imagined as having one syllable in 'What hours' and two syllables in 'O what black hours'; when it is repeated, it has

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gained a syllable in order to emphasise the length of the black night. In the second quatrain, Hopkins compares the hours which he has spent at a distance from God to 'years'. To illustrate his sense of privation, he compares himself to a man writing frantic letters to a loved one from whom he has been forcibly separated:

> And my lament
> Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent
> To dearest him that lives alas! away.

Both the simile ('cries like dead letters') and the mid-line exclamation ('alas!') are designed to express his feeling of remoteness from Christian salvation. The positioning of the interjection 'alas!' is typically skilful; it punctuates the pentameter so that a reader cannot help but place a solemn accent upon the final iamb 'away'; the punctuation-mark keeps it waiting to rhyme mournfully with 'I say' (of Line 5).

In the sestet, Hopkins compares the physical effect of this separation from God to a form of acid indigestion, burning his oesophagus and keeping him awake at night: 'I am gall, I am heartburn'. Clearly, Hopkins' literal 'heartburn' [= his reflux oesophagitis] is a metaphor for the pain with which his heart burns upon being distant from God; in a very obvious sense, this sonnet is about the burning ache of this separation. Finally, Hopkins finds for his state of spiritual despondency another metaphor which he extends in a declarative statement:

> Selfyeast of spirit a dull dough sours.

Quite! In this case, he compares his 'spirit' to the 'yeast' which should enable a flaccid lump of dough ('dull dough') to rise in an oven and turn into a sweet loaf of bread; extending the metaphor of heartburn, he regrets that his own spirit is no longer able to lift itself. In this condition, Hopkins identifies readily with 'the lost' to whose 'sweating selves' he compares himself; the difference between Hopkins and 'the lost' [presumably, those 'sweating' it out in Purgatory] is that he – for some self-punishing reason – is 'worse'. Consequently, the mood of this sonnet is an unrelieved agony.

THOU ART INDEED JUST, LORD (17th March 1889)

> Man was created to praise, revere and serve God.
> St Ignatius Loyola (1491-1566)
> *Spiritual Exercises*

In '*As kingfishers catch fire ….*', the italicised statement which concludes the octave – '*What I do is me: for that I came*' – is a triumphant assertion of Hopkins' self-worth, responding (as it does) to St Ignatius Loyola's explanation for each man's existence on earth: namely, to worship God. Writing twelve years later, Hopkins can find no such reason for his existence; in this late sonnet, he is able to express only a profound sense of personal inadequacy. It is a very solemn poem: on 20th March, he writes to Robert Bridges that 'it must be read *adagio molto* and with great stress.'

During January 1888, Hopkins retreated from Dublin (where he had been working for five years) to St Stanislaus College Tullabeg in the Irish countryside; in the course of this retreat, he put himself through a rigorous self-examination. This sonnet is a result of the 'conscientious self-questioning' (Gerald Roberts) which he undertook there. It concerns itself partly with the pointlessness of his academic work at University College, Dublin:

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> What is my wretched life? Five wasted years have passed almost in Ireland. I am ashamed of the little I have done. All my undertakings miscarry; I am like a straining eunuch.
>
> Devotional Writings, 1st January 1889.

In Dublin, he then composes a sonnet in which he tries to come to terms with the self-loathing which he, as a diligent Jesuit, had not been expecting to experience. The octave is a theodicy: that is, a stanza in which he sets out to justify to himself the ways of God whom he (as required) 'praises, reveres and serves'. At once, there is a tension between Hopkins' assertion that God is 'indeed just' and his subsequent taking to task of God for being unjust; in this sonnet, Hopkins' strategy is to juxtapose his familiar conviction that God is just with a series of rhetorical questions which imply that he is not. The result is an ironic conflict, not unlike the tense conflict between 'father and fondler'/'martyr-master' in *The Wreck of the Deutschland* (1875).

Hopkins finds himself speaking in the voice of the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah (Chapter 12, Verse 1); this act of ventriloquism is entirely appropriate to his situation in that Hopkins, though he never doubts God's existence, begins seriously to wonder what kind of God he is dealing with. First, he echoes Jeremiah in conceding that God has always dealt with him in a just way, but then – in a rhetorical outburst of *lese majeste* – begs to point out that he deserves just treatment: 'but, sir, so what I plead is just.' Such justice is only to be expected on account of his reasonable pleas for it. Why, he wonders, have his pastoral endeavours not been rewarded with more success? Drunkenness and prostitution still thrive in the back streets of Liverpool and Dublin. Consequently, Hopkins asks three rhetorical questions in which it is impossible not to hear a tone of reproach:

> Why do sinners' ways prosper? and why must
> Disappointment all I endeavour end?
>
> Wert thou my enemy, O thou my friend,
> How wouldst thou worse, I wonder, than thou dost
> Defeat, thwart me?

The drunks who visit the brothels ('the sots and thralls of lust') seem to be having a much better time of it than their priest is; although theirs is a sinful way of life, it is not one on which he, in spite of his calling, has had any reforming impact. 'Comforter, where, where is your comforting?' he seems to be asking again. For once, Hopkins' language is direct. With an ironic indignation, he tells God: "Although you are 'my friend', you could not have treated me 'worse'/thwarted me more often if you had been 'my enemy'". Although Hopkins ('I that spend, sir, life upon thy cause') has devoted his life to the Lord's work, he has nothing to show for it. In the end, he sounds as if he is admonishing his Lord for lacking a sense of fair play, rebuking him for having unfairly inflicted upon his servant a sense of 'defeat'.

Gerald Roberts (1994) states that 'the entire sonnet is a complaint about the poet's personal plight'. In the sestet, Hopkins suddenly turns his attention to the natural re-growth of the 'banks and brakes' in Spring: 'laced they are again with fretty chervil'. He draws a sardonic contrast between the annual re-awakening in the natural world and his annual failure to achieve anything in the human world:

> birds build – but not I build; no, but strain,
> Time's eunuch ….

By this epithet, Hopkins is indicating that the 'strain' of five years of unproductive work has emasculated him: impotent or sterile, he is unlike even the plants and the birds that 'build' around him. Peter Feeney (2006) is aware of the frequency with which Hopkins has recourse to this humiliating image from St Matthew's Gospel (Chapter 19, Verse 12) and he writes that it 'conveys a sense of futility, even maybe of self-contempt'. It is no accident that the

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fourteen rhyme-words of this sonnet are all arid monosyllables. Hopkins (Letter to Robert Bridges, 18th January 1889) writes: 'Nothing comes: I am a eunuch, but it is for the kingdom of heaven's sake ….' For this reason, he ends his sonnet with an extension of the seasonal metaphor:

Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain.

To the end, he is refusing to despair and imploring his just Lord to reciprocate the faith which he has kept in Him through the black hours.

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