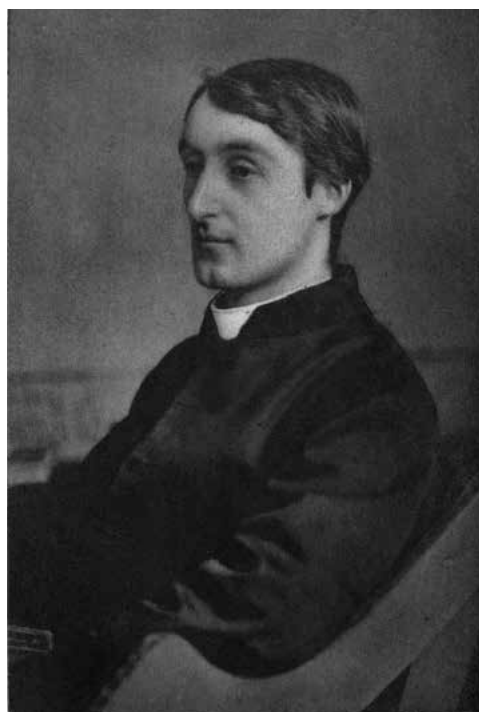


As Kingfishers Catch Fire



As Kingfishers Catch Fire: Selected and Annotated Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins

Edited with an Introduction and
Notes by Holly Ordway

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Contents

Introduction	xi
Spring	3
God's Grandeur	5
The May Magnificat	7
As kingfishers catch fire	13
Thou art indeed just, Lord	15
The Starlight Night	17
The Windhover	19
Spring and Fall	21
Nondum	23
Carrion Comfort	29
No worst, there is none	31
I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day	33
To seem the stranger lies my lot	35
Patience	37
My own heart let me have more pity on	39
Peace	41
Easter	43
Pied Beauty	47
Hurrahing in Harvest	49
The Sea and the Skylark	51
Inversnaid	53

The Lantern out of Doors	55
Barnfloor and Winepress	57
Duns Scotus's Oxford	63
Binsey Poplars	65
The Blessed Virgin compared to the Air we Breathe	67
The Wreck of the Deutschland	77
Morning Midday and Evening Sacrifice	103
Heaven-Haven	105
The Habit of Perfection	107
In honour of St. Alphonsus Rodriguez, Laybrother of the Society of Jesus	111
The Bugler's First Communion	113
At the Wedding March	119
Felix Randal	121
That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection	123
Adoro Te Devote	127
Oratio Patris Condren: O Jesu vivens in Maria	131
Index of Titles and First Lines	133

Introduction

“I am so happy . . . I am so happy. I loved my life.”

These were the last words of the priest-poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889), and from a first glance at his biography, they might seem unlikely indeed. The eldest son of a comfortably middle-class family, he excelled in his studies at Oxford; his conversion to Catholicism meant the abandonment of the promising academic career and comfortable professional life that would have been within his grasp as an Anglican with a first-class Oxford degree. As a Jesuit priest, he worked hard but had no special success as a pastor, preacher, or teacher. Throughout his life he suffered from fatigue, physical illness, mental strain, and bouts of serious depression. When he died at age forty-four, none of his mature poetry had been published. By the world’s standards, at that moment he was a nobody. Yet like St. Thérèse of Lisieux (1873–1897), his contemporary, Hopkins’ hidden creative life would in time bear much fruit.

Conversion and Priestly Vocation

Hopkins was born in 1844, the eldest of nine children in a well-educated, middle-class, middle-of-the-road Anglican family who encouraged his artistic and literary pursuits. He went up to Oxford in 1863, where he read Classics at Balliol College, Oxford, eventually earning a first in Classical Moderations and taking a first-class degree in Greats. Benjamin Jowett, later to be Master of the college, called Hopkins the “star of Balliol.” There, also, Hopkins came under the influence of Tractarianism and began seriously to consider the claims of the Church. Three years later, he realized that he was convinced of the Catholic claim.

Writing to his father, Hopkins explained that his conversion was due to various reasons, which he lists, noting that they are in no particular order:

(i) simple and strictly drawn arguments partly my own, partly others’, (ii) common sense, (iii) reading the Bible, especially the Holy Gospels, where texts like ‘Thou art Peter’ (the evasions proposed for this alone are enough to make one a Catholic) and the manifest position of St Peter among the Apostles so pursued me that at one time I thought it best to stop thinking of them, (iv) an increasing knowledge of the Catholic system . . . its consolations, its marvellous ideal of holiness, the faith and devotion of its children, its multiplicity, its array of saints and martyrs, its consistency and unity, its glowing prayers, the daring majesty of its claims, etc etc.¹

On October 21, 1866, Hopkins was received into full communion with the Catholic Church by St. John Henry Newman.

Although the Catholic Relief Act of 1829 had removed the last remaining legal penalties for being a Catholic, so that Hopkins was able to remain at Oxford and take his degree a year later,

1. *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works*, ed. Catherine Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 224.

reconciliation with the Catholic Church was nevertheless a major social and cultural break with mainstream English life. As late as 1854, students at Oxford were required to assent to the Anglican declaration of faith, the Thirty-Nine Articles. Hopkins was able to continue his Oxford studies and take his degree in 1867, but despite his stellar academic results, he would not have been allowed to take up a fellowship at an Oxford college (for teaching or further study); it was only in 1871 that the Universities Tests Act removed all restrictions from Catholics, nonconformists, and non-Christians for Oxford degrees and teaching positions. To become a Catholic meant a fall in social esteem, at the very least. His parents bitterly opposed his conversion, and although he was restored to good terms with them fairly soon after, he had no way of knowing at the time whether this temporary estrangement would be permanent.

Hopkins entered the Jesuit order in 1868. Fiercely determined to place his religious vocation above his literary ambitions, he burned his early poetry and, as he later recounted in a letter, “resolved to write no more, as not belonging to my profession, unless it were by the wish of my superiors.” That permission was not long in coming. While he was studying in his novitiate at St. Beuno’s in Wales, he read a newspaper account of the wreck of the *Deutschland* at the mouth of the river Thames; five Franciscan nuns, exiled from Germany by anti-Catholic laws, were among those drowned. As he wrote to his friend Richard Dixon: “I was affected by the account and happening to say so to my rector he said that he wished someone would write a poem on the subject. On this hint I went to work and, though my hand was out at first, produced one. I had long had haunting my ear the echo of a new rhythm which now I realised on paper.”² This long poem, thirty-five stanzas of passionate and difficult verse, was not well received by its first readers.

2. Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Correspondence of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Richard Watson Dixon*, ed. Claude Collier Abbott (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), 14.

He submitted it to the Jesuit magazine *The Month*, but the editors dithered, first accepting it and then withdrawing their acceptance. The crucial point, however, was that Hopkins felt that “after writing this I held myself free to compose” – although he put his responsibilities as a Jesuit first, adding that he “cannot find it in my conscience to find time upon it; so I have done little and shall do less.”³ We can see this attitude in the fact that, in later years, he would send poems in manuscript to his friends and very often not keep fair copies for himself.

In 1877, he was ordained a priest. Both his acceptance of celibacy and his determination to prioritize his religious vocation above his literary one challenge the twenty-first century secular attitude toward self-realization. After short stretches of work in parishes in Oxford, Sheffield, and London, he served as a parish priest in the slums of the industrial cities Manchester, Liverpool, and Glasgow – work that he found rewarding, although it was tiring and reduced the amount of time he had available to write poetry. Until recently, relatively little was known of his pastoral work. As Jude Nixon and Noel Barber observe, “It has been commonly assumed that Hopkins was largely relegated to the sidelines of parish ministry, or was ill suited to perform the work assigned to him”; however, the evidence of his collected spiritual writings and sermons paints a very different picture: he was “part of a team actively digging in and doing the work of Jesuit parish ministry” and doing so “conscientiously and competently.”⁴

Hopkins then taught Latin and Greek in London before being appointed, in 1884, as Professor of Greek and Latin at University College Dublin. Although it would have seemed a perfect fit for his talents, he found the placement difficult and suffered a great deal, both physically and emotionally. His health had never been strong, and the Irish weather was

3. Hopkins, *Correspondence of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Richard Watson Dixon*, 15.

4. Jude V. Nixon and Noel Barber, introduction to *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Sermons and Spiritual Writings*, ed. Nixon and Barber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 49.

uncongenial to him; furthermore, the college buildings were in poor condition, with inadequate heating and plumbing. He was discouraged by the low level of student work, overwhelmed with the hundreds of examination papers that he had to grade, and doubtful that the struggling, underfunded university would be a success.⁵ Although he was often seriously depressed at this time, he maintained his correspondence with his family and friends, especially Robert Bridges and the poets Richard Dixon and Coventry Patmore. Catherine Phillips observes that he “had good Irish friends and as many holidays as the College could afford and the examining timetable allow.”⁶ But he was overtaxed and weary, and all these various strains took a toll on his health. He died of typhoid fever on June 8, 1889.

Poetic Vocation

Although many commentators suggest a conflict between his priestly and poetic callings, it is more accurate to say that his work shows a contrast between the different elements of his life and personality – and by and large it is a fruitful one. Gardner and MacKenzie observe a tension “between the free creative *personality* of the artist and the acquired, dedicated *character* of the Jesuit priest” and comment that it is “by no means unfortunate.”⁷ The sense of tautness or strain in his writing also comes, to a certain extent, from his own highly strung personality, and from his tendency toward scrupulosity and perfectionism. His sonnet “My own heart let me have more pity on” is very much a note to self in this regard: “let / Me live to my sad self hereafter kind, / Charitable . . . leave comfort root-room; let joy size / At God knows when to God knows what.” Good advice! We must also bear in mind that the “terrible sonnets” of desolation and near-despair are, as we will discuss below, related to his

5. If Hopkins is ever canonized, he would be an apt patron saint for college professors.

6. Catherine Phillips, introduction to *The Major Works*, ed. Catherine Phillips, xxxv.

7. W.H. Gardner and N.H. MacKenzie, introduction to *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 4th ed., Gardner and MacKenzie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), xxxv.

engagement with the Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises*: although they certainly draw on his own experiences – and he was often very anxious and depressed – they are nevertheless imaginative exercises and not purely personal expression.

Hopkins' own attitude is one of trust in God, even (perhaps especially) when he was experiencing desolation in his spiritual life. But while "Thou art indeed just, Lord" is a lament, it is not the whole picture. We find a glimpse of his own vision of vocation in a poem about St. Alphonsus Rodriguez, the sixteenth-century lay brother who served as doorkeeper at the Jesuit college in Majorca for more than forty years. "Honour is flashed off exploit, so we say," Hopkins notes; the one who had outward achievements gains praise much more readily. Meanwhile, those who fight the "the war within" often have their efforts go unnoticed. But St. Alphonsus' decades of wrestling in prayer were not in vain, for God "Could crowd career with conquest while there went / Those years and years by of world without event / That in Majorca Alfonso watched the door." As a Jesuit, Hopkins did retreats and meditations with the *Spiritual Exercises*, and a note that he made in 1883 sums up his attitude to his writing:

I earnestly asked our Lord to watch over my compositions, not to preserve them from being lost or coming to nothing, for that I am very willing they should be, but that they might not do me harm through the enmity or imprudence of any man or my own; that he should have them as his own and employ or not employ them as he would see fit. And this I believe is heard.⁸

None of Hopkins' major poetry was published in his lifetime, though as we saw, he came close to doing so in the Jesuit

8. *The Major Works*, ed. Catherine Phillips, 301.

magazine *The Month* and in a proposed anthology, edited by Robert Bridges, to which he would have contributed along with four other poets. The latter project fell through because it was a newly established press and the publisher was uncertain of being able to complete the project.⁹ That his lack of a public readership was a source of frustration for Hopkins at some level can be glimpsed in his lament, “Thou art indeed just, Lord.” He closes the poem by observing a green hedgerow, with birds building nests: “but not I build; no, but strain, / Time’s eunuch, and not breed one work that wakes. / Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain.” Hopkins certainly could have done more than he did (which is to say, almost nothing) in terms of attempting to publish his work. In part this was due to his own hesitations about whether he should publish; in this regard, though, we should be mindful that Hopkins died in early middle age, still writing new poems. Had he lived longer, it is not unlikely that he would eventually have sought publication himself.

Hopkins’ great friend Robert Bridges, the future Poet Laureate, turned out to be a dedicated literary executor. Although Bridges was not himself a Catholic, it is both notable and commendable that his initial selection of Hopkins’ poetry included a number of poems on distinctly Catholic themes. Recognizing that Hopkins’ dynamic and unconventional style was a challenge to contemporary poetic sensibilities, Bridges began by publishing a few of the poems in anthologies, leading up to the 1918 publication of the *Poems*, which slowly but steadily established Hopkins as one of the premier poets of the Victorian era. Certainly Hopkins’ willingness to face suffering and darkness in his poetry made his voice more significant to the generation that had endured the First World War.

Having considered, in brief, the life of Gerard Manley Hopkins, we turn now to a consideration of his work.

9. Note on the text of *The Major Works*, xxxix.

Poetic Technique

Hopkins' style can sometimes be a bit intimidating to a reader unfamiliar with his work, so it is well worth easing into his poetry with a consideration of his style. The first thing to realize is that he is not experimental or unconventional for its own sake. Insofar as he stretches language to its breaking point, he does so because the meaning he wishes to convey is so big, so rich, so complex that it resists being captured in mere words; it bursts out, as it were, in unexpected ways. However challenging the language may be, Hopkins' poems are never purely subjective or arbitrary; rather, they are always outwardly oriented in the sense that they invite the reader to partake of their meaning and provide the means by which to do so.

One of the features of his poetry that has attracted the most literary-critical attention is his sophisticated use of metrical technique, particularly that of 'sprung rhythm,' which allowed him to achieve a more flexible and natural sound in his poems while still working within the framework of meter. Bridges, in his introduction to the *Poems*, observed that this meter, despite having a long literary history, had "in fact ceased to be used since the Elizabethan age." Hopkins' poetic innovation, then, draws on a deep and mostly forgotten literary history – fitting enough for an English Catholic poet. Fortunately, it is not necessary for the reader to understand these metrical technicalities to appreciate the poems; it is merely helpful to recognize that Hopkins used accent marks in some of his poems to guide the reader as to where to put the emphasis in a given line. It is also a reminder that reading the poems aloud is an aid to both understanding and appreciation. For details on Hopkins' meter and poetic technique, see the editions noted in the Suggested Further Reading section.

Hopkins wrote in a variety of forms, including narrative or quasi-narrative poems (such as "The Wreck of the Deutschland") and lyric poetry in various forms, such as rhyming stanzas (such

as “Inversnaid”). He also composed and translated poems in (and from) Latin, Greek, and Welsh, such as St. Thomas Aquinas’ *Corpus Christi* hymn, “Adoro Te Devote.”

Many of his most striking and powerful poems are sonnets: either full sonnets or the variant form called a “curtal sonnet”: a poem with the same proportions as a regular sonnet, but reduced in scale to ten lines. A sonnet is a classic verse form of fourteen lines, usually written in the meter of iambic pentameter (five stressed syllables per line, with the pattern of unstressed-stressed, as in Hopkins’ line “I *wake* and *feel* the *fell* of *dark* not *day*” [emphasis added]).

There are two classic types of sonnets, the Shakespearean or English form, and the Petrarchan or Italian form; Hopkins favored the latter. The Petrarchan sonnet is arranged as an octave (eight lines) rhymed ABBA ABBA, followed by a sestet (six lines) often (but not always) rhymed CDC DCD. The sonnet form is particularly well suited to exploring intensely focused scenes or ideas, and is often structured around the ‘turn,’ which in a Petrarchan sonnet occurs at line 9. The turn is a shift in the poem, some sort of conclusion, or a move from one idea to the next, or a change in tone, or a question and response. It often provides a key for understanding the poem as a whole, so it is well worth keeping an eye out for that ninth line in the sonnets.

Poetic Language

One of the most notable features of Hopkins’ poetic technique is his handling of language: vivid images, distinctive word choices, stretched syntax, and invented words all provide ways for him to convey meaning in a rich, textured, often highly compressed way. We find this, for instance, in the brilliant last lines of “That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection,” when he considers

Christ's Incarnation and its implications for his own eventual resurrection:

In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
 I am all at once what Christ is, | since he was what I am, and
 This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, | patch, matchwood, immortal
 diamond,
 Is immortal diamond.

One of his best-known lyric poems, "Spring and Fall," provides a useful introduction to Hopkins' style. Subtitled "To a young child," the poem opens, "Margaret, are you grieving / Over Goldengrove unleaving?" *Unleaving*: here in a single vivid, invented word we have a fresh perspective on autumn: leaf-fall as an undoing, a reversal of the trees' springtime life – indeed, as an image of death. Through familiarity, such scenes become less meaningful for us. As Hopkins observes, "as the heart grows older / It will come to such sights colder"; as adults, we will no longer be troubled even when "worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie." *Wanwood leafmeal*: the two invented compound words give us a striking picture of pale, faded leaves trodden underfoot, with the additional associations of sadness (*wan*) and fragmentation (*meal*, as in *piecemeal*). Hopkins then suggests that, despite the different reactions of a child and an adult, "Sorrow's springs are the same." All our grief, whether for ephemeral leaves or the woes of the world, comes from our experience of being in a fallen world. All this is tied together in the closing couplet: "It is the blight man was born for, / It is Margaret you mourn for." What began as a glimpse of childish sadness at falling leaves has become a meditation on the fallen human condition of loss and death – and his unexpected words (*unleaving*, *wanwood*) help us to see the picture more vividly.

Having had a taste of his approach to language, we can now go more deeply into his style and consider his use of both structure and imagery to develop a theme. We will consider one of his most theologically rich poems, “The Windhover.”

“The Windhover” is a sonnet, but at first glance it doesn’t look like one: readers might be excused for thinking it is even free verse! Here, however, we have an example of the way that Hopkins has an underlying, coherent structure even when he seems to be very unstructured. This is, in fact, a tightly constructed Petrarchan sonnet; the key is to recognize that the first line ends with “king-”, which then rhymes with “wing” in line 4 (yes, Hopkins is making a rhyme by splitting a word in half!). With apologies to Hopkins for the liberty, if we were to regularize it and remove his use of extra spaces, we find it as follows:

- 1 I caught this morning morning’s minion, king-
- 2 dom of daylight’s dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
- 3 Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
- 4 High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
- 5 In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,
- 6 As a skate’s heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding
- 7 Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
- 8 Stirred for a bird, – the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!
- 9 Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
- 10 Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
- 11 Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!
- 12 No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plough down sillion
- 13 Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
- 14 Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.

Hopkins arranged his lines as he did for a reason. He is meditating on Christ via the image of a kestrel, a type of small falcon that hunts by hovering in the air and then making a steep dive to its prey. This apparently free-flowing (but fundamentally ordered) structure is congruent with both the theme and tone of the poem.

What, then, is this poem, subtitled “To Christ our Lord,” about? We are so used to the image of Christ as the Lamb of God that we can very easily begin to think of him as domesticated, undemanding, unthreatening. Hopkins will have none of that. As he observes the windhover overhead, he is moved by the beauty and grace of the bird: “My heart in hiding / Stirred for a bird, – the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!” Language even begins to break down as he tries to express what has so moved him: “Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume” – and he bursts out into direct address to Christ: “AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion / Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!” Earlier he had called the kestrel a prince, the “kingdom of daylight’s dauphin,” using the French word for the heir to the throne; now he continues the imagery with “chevalier,” a knight – and in keeping with this martial imagery, the fire he sends (of the Holy Spirit) is indeed “a billion / Times told lovelier, more dangerous” than anything we can imagine.

Because it is a sonnet, we can expect the sestet to reflect on, and respond to, the images in the octave. At the turn he moves from considering the bird-as-bird to reflecting on Christ’s nature, as evoked by the image of the bird. Then, within the sestet comes another shift. All through the poem, we have been looking up; now we are looking down, to the earth: “sheer plod makes plough down sillion / Shine.” As the plough’s blade turns over the earth in the furrow (the “sillion”), the grinding of the soil polishes the buried blade, removing any rust, so that when it is pulled from the earth at the end of the row, it is bright and shining. Then we have a different image: “blue-bleak embers, ah my dear, / Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.” Here is a hearth with the

fire burning low; when the ash-blue embers fall out of the grate and break, their glowing insides are revealed as “gold-vermillion,” the color of blood and royalty. Both of these are resurrection images: the rusty blade and the dull ember may seem to be useless for their purposes, fit only to be thrown away, but the scraping of soil and the breaking-open in the fire make them new again. Christ has gone before us, from the heights to the depths, and as we follow him, Hopkins suggests, we too will (with suffering) be made new.

Do we see all this on a first (or second, or fifth) reading of the poem? Almost certainly not. However, this does not mark a problem for the reader, but rather points to the suitability of Hopkins’ poems for reflection and especially for devotional reading. It is not possible to do a quick read and “get it.” He does not permit us to have a consumeristic, utilitarian approach to poetry (or to prayer). We must slow down; we must try, as much as possible, to give ourselves time to reflect, to make connections, to meditate on the images and phrases of the poem, to see how they challenge us – how they make us stretch, as Hopkins stretches the syntax of the poem and the limits of language.

Joy: “Pied Beauty”

One of the great strengths of Hopkins’ poetry is that, taken as a whole, it engages with the full range of emotional and spiritual experience, from joy, delight, and praise to loss, depression, and desolation. As a result, the joy that we encounter in the poems is believable, and the desolation has a note of hope, however faint. We begin our consideration of these two themes in Hopkins’ poetry, which we might call “doxology and desolation,” with one of his poems of praise.

In the curial sonnet “Pied Beauty,” the opening words of this poem alert us that this is a doxology. “Glory be to God,” Hopkins says, “for dappled things.” What things might these be?

He launches into a remarkable list, beginning with “skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow.” The multicolored sky of a sunset or a stormy day is an obvious thing of beauty, but the comparison to a multicolored cow may take us aback. However, this too is beautiful, if we are willing to see it properly. Then he calls us to pay attention to “rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim.” The reference to stippling, a technique of painting with small dots or flecks of color, links a human art form with the living trout, reminding us that the latter is decorated by the divine Artist.

Then, in the remainder of the first part of the poem (the scaled-down octave of the curtal sonnet), Hopkins shifts to human endeavor. “Landscape plotted and pieced” is farmland, with his phrasing suggestive of a patchwork quilt, a work of human artistry on a domestic scale. The seemingly mundane is also included in his catalogue of beauty: “all trades” with their “gear and tackle and trim.” *All* honest trades have beauty in God’s eyes: the farmer’s spade and plow, the carpenter’s saw, the machinist’s gears.

At the turn, Hopkins directs our view outward: “All things counter, original, spare, strange.” Here we have a wide, dynamic view of beauty: “Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?) / With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim.” With “Landscape plotted and pieced” the poem already had an aerial perspective, and now it gives a dizzying glimpse of a God’s-eye view of the world.

While we are still slightly stunned and wondering at this vision, he closes the poem as it began, with doxology: “He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change: / Praise him.” The activity of the Creator is in the present tense; this is not the distant Watchmaker of deism, nor the impersonal nature-force of pantheism, nor yet the random chance at work of naturalism, but the Father, who is active in the world here and now.

Pain: the Sonnets of Desolation

Six of Hopkins' poems have come to be known as the "terrible sonnets" or (more accurately) the "sonnets of desolation." These poems all address different aspects of spiritual and emotional darkness. They comprise "Carrion Comfort," "To seem the stranger lies my lot," "Patience," "I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day," "My own heart let me have more pity on," and "No worst, there is none."

In these sonnets, Hopkins is undoubtedly exploring his inner landscape; with his melancholic and nervous temperament and his suffering with depression, he was certainly offering up his own struggles to God. However, that is not all he is doing. His poetry is fundamentally outward looking: insofar as a poem is introspective, the reader is being invited into that inner experience in order to engage with it. As W.H. Gardner and N.H. MacKenzie point out, Hopkins is working within the framework of St. Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*: the "desolations" expressed in the poems resemble "those accounted for, and carefully prescribed for, in the *Spiritual Exercises* – the temporary loss of joy and hope which marks the recoil from a rigorous discipline: at worst, the feeling of total separation from God."¹⁰

Considering the poems in light of his engagement with the *Spiritual Exercises* helps to account for the exceptional value of the "terrible sonnets" as devotional reading. As we have seen, Hopkins' style in general requires the reader to slow down and to be reflective about the poem as a whole and also about individual words and phrases. This approach is especially well suited for those poems in which he tackles the most painful and difficult aspects of our emotional and spiritual lives: the depths

¹⁰ Gardner and MacKenzie, introduction to *Poems*, xxv.

and dark corners that we would, under ordinary circumstances, prefer to avoid – but that we must open up, if we are to let in the light of Christ.

The “terrible sonnets” are full of wrenching lines, such as the turn in “No worst, there is none” in which Hopkins vividly describes depression: “O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall / Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap / May who ne’er hung there.” But although these poems do not hold anything back, these are not poems of despair. Even when he does not *feel* the presence of God, by the very voicing of his pain, Hopkins acknowledges that there is One who knows it and who suffered for him.

This dual voice of pain and prayer is expressed beautifully in “Carrion Comfort.” The sonnet opens with Hopkins speaking directly to Despair: “Not, I’ll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee; / Not untwist – slack they may be – these last strands of man / In me or, most weary, cry *I can no more*.” Here we can perhaps recognize Hopkins’ pastoral awareness, as he deftly identifies the temptations that come with spiritual darkness: self-pity (to “feast” on it); going along with the counsels of despair (to “untwist” the rope-strands of body, mind, soul); or simply giving up (“I can [do] no more”).

Instead, Hopkins speaks out with the strongest affirmation that he is capable of in his weakened condition: “I can; / Can something, hope, wish day come, not choose not to be.” To “not choose not to be” is an apt phrase for the refusal to commit suicide: at one’s lowest ebb, to actively embrace life may be too much, but one can at least *not* choose to *reject* life. Here, again, we see his pastoral touch: the suffering and weary soul must be led forward gently, not expected to make great leaps.

Although the first half of the octave suggests a turning from despair, the next four lines seem to bring the poet-narrator back into agonizing conflict. But this time the conflict is with God, who is addressed as “O thou terrible” with “darksome devouring eyes”

(echoing Heb. 12:29, “our God is a consuming fire”), a “lionlimb” (reminding us of the Lion of Judah), one who can “wring” out the whole world like a cloth (see Heb. 1:10–13), a tempest (see Ps. 50:3). Hopkins presents himself with “bruised bones” (see Isa. 53:5 and Matt. 12:20, and also Ps. 22), barely holding together, “me heaped there,” as if he were mere chaff on the threshing floor (see Jer. 13:24; Luke 3:17).

As we can see, these are deeply scriptural images, but not the usual ones for a consideration of one’s relationship with God—which is precisely the value of Hopkins’ searing spiritual honesty. Most of us will, at some time or other, feel this way about God and about ourselves: but will it provoke a rejection of God, or a move toward him?

Hopkins is quite straightforward about what he is feeling: he tells God that he is “frantic to avoid thee and flee.” But then, tellingly, at the turn of the sonnet he asks “Why?”, in direct address to God, giving the reader a voice to ask the most searching of questions. And as the sonnet moves through the sestet, we find that (unlike in some of the other “terrible sonnets”) there is an answer. “That my chaff might fly; my grain lie, sheer and clear.” Hopkins now likens himself to grains of wheat on the threshing floor, whose hard, inedible husk must be beaten off in order for the nourishing, good grain to be used. That this is an image of the process of sanctification is underscored by a passage in his retreat notes from 1889. Reflecting on the baptism of Christ, he writes that Christ “baptises with breath and fire, as wheat is winnowed in the wind and sun. . . . The separation it makes is very visible too: the grain lies heaped on one side, the chaff blows away the other, between them the winnower stands. . . . Everything about himself is weak and ineffective, he and his instruments; everything about Christ strong.”¹¹

11. *The Major Works*, ed. Catherine Phillips, 305.

Although this process of winnowing is for the soul's good, it is certainly painful, and Hopkins suggests that a certain degree of resistance is not just natural, but with God's grace, even fruitful. In the image that completes the sonnet, Hopkins implicitly likens his struggle with God to Jacob wrestling with the angel. As he gains strength and would "laugh, cheer" for joy, he asks: "Cheer whom though? the hero whose heaven-handling flung me, foot trod / Me? or me that fought him?" Perhaps both, he suggests. Then he concludes with a line that brings home the poet-narrator's moment of recognition: "That night, that year / Of now done darkness I wretch lay wrestling with (my God!) my God." We should note the power of Hopkins' phrasing here: that "night" is matter-of-factly described as that *year* of "now done darkness" – now that the dark night of the soul has passed, he can calmly observe that it can endure a long time in calendar days. The parenthetical exclamation captures his sense of astonishment and gratitude: all through the darkness of pain, depression, anger, anxiety, and fear, God had been present and active, even though the poet-narrator only recognizes it after the fact.

Absence and Presence:

"Nondum" and "The Starlight Night"

Along with joy and sorrow, another powerful paired theme that Hopkins addresses in his poetry is that of absence and presence – specifically, our perception (or lack thereof) of God's existence.

"Nondum" considers the question of an apparently absent God; we speak in prayer, but "No answering voice" replies. The poet-narrator lingers on the scene, drawing out the full bleakness of a world without God, in which the outward gaze sees only "vacant creation" in the night sky, and inward reflection sees the self as a "dread and vacant maze." "Nondum" is more coolly philosophical in tone than the agonized sonnets of desolation, but no less unsettling for that.

Yet the poem itself offers its own way forward. First, Hopkins has titled it “Nondum,” the Latin word for “not yet.” The poet-narrator speaks as one who has not yet heard the reassuring word of God’s presence and who is forthright about how difficult this is to endure, but also as one who waits for it, and in waiting, prays for patience. Hopkins has underscored this theme with the epigraph, which is Isaiah 45:15, “Verily Thou art a God that hidest Thyself.” Taken alone, it underscores the theme of the silent God. However, in context, we find that this line is shortly followed by God’s declaration of himself as creator of the heavens and earth:

I am the Lord, and there is no other.
I did not speak in secret,
 in a land of darkness;
I did not say to the offspring of Jacob,
 “Seek me in chaos.”
I the Lord speak the truth,
 I declare what is right. (Isa. 45:18–19)

The poet-narrator may not yet be able to have that “sense beyond” of God’s presence, but he trusts that there is a deeper and more enduring reality beyond his senses. The thread of hope in “Nondum” is woven not only from his closing plea to God to “Speak!” but also from the context of the Isaiah epigraph. God’s silence is followed, in due time, by his word.

“Adoro Te Devote” gives an explicitly Eucharistic perspective on the same question of an apparently absent God, the “Godhead here in hiding whom I do adore.” It is in Hopkins’ sonnet “The Starlight Night,” however, that we find the most direct and potent response to the bleak vision of “Nondum.”

“Nondum” gives us a very modern vision of the cosmos. Looking up into the night sky, we see darkness, scattered points of light, and the vast empty spaces between the stars. We are

looking out, from a tiny little ball of earth and water and air, out into a void. It is a sight that can indeed “appall.”

However, C.S. Lewis, in his book *The Discarded Image*, reminds us that this is but one “image” of the universe, and a modern one. In medieval times, people knew the earth is exceedingly small compared to the rest of the cosmos, but instead of looking up and seeing vacant and frightening space, they saw the heavens, full of beauty and meaning. Are we nothing but clever mammals scrabbling for existence on a cosmically insignificant bit of mud and rock circling in the void? Or are we part of a richly meaningful cosmic order, with a Creator?

In “Nondum,” Hopkins articulated the effect of the modern view; in “The Starlight Night,” he offers a corrective, an alternate vision. Here he calls our attention upward: “Look at the stars! look, look up at the skies!” Ecstatic, he calls the stars “fire-folk” and “circle-citadels,” compares them to windblown white flowers, “Flake-doves sent floating forth at a farmyard scare!”

And, having connected those bright points of light far above to the here-and-now of trees in a farmyard, to a “May-mess, like on orchard boughs,” he takes one more imaginative leap: these stars are a barn: “withindoors house / The shocks.” And this barn, with its “piece-bright paling” of stars, houses Christ himself, the firstfruits of the Resurrection.

It is a lovely image, but it might seem still to be a distant one: Christ far above us in the heavens, separate from us here on the earth. However, we must notice where we are in this sonnet. We are the saints, the souls made holy or ‘hallowed,’ to use the old term; and in a swooping change of perspective, Hopkins shows us, delightedly, that the stars are not walls shutting us out into the darkness, excluding us, but rather walls that surround us, making the whole cosmos into our own home:

... This piece-bright paling shuts the spouse
Christ home, Christ and his mother and all his hallows.

Here is a dizzying change of perspective: we are at the center,
because Christ is at the center, and we are in him.

Christ: "As kingfishers catch fire"

We have already touched on Hopkins' Christocentric approach in "The Windhover" and "The Starlight Night"; now let us turn to one of his most famous poems, "As kingfishers catch fire." Here we have a vivid picture of what it means to have one's identity in Christ.

"Kingfishers" is a deeply experiential poem. The octave and the sestet flow from beginning to end with pauses but no full stops; like water flowing downhill, we fall from one image to the next in sequence, ending up pausing at the opening phrase of the sestet: "I say more." Reading the poem aloud (go ahead, do it!) brings out its music. Hopkins uses alliteration extensively, so that it carries us onward from one phrase to the next, and emphasizes certain words to bring the images into sharper focus. Look at even just the first three lines:

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells . . .

He also uses end rhyme, a fascinating drawing-together of two strands of English poetry, for unrhymed alliterative verse is the Old English tradition, and end-rhyme is a French-influenced Middle English innovation. Hopkins has crafted what is in effect a musical composition in English words.

Not only does the poem sound beautiful, but this music is paired with images of beauty. Kingfishers: brightly colored, fast-moving birds; dragonflies: elegant jewel-toned insects whose name itself echoes fantastic creatures of medieval myth. The created world, made by God through Christ, is faithful in being what it was made to be.

Then the poem moves on to the human interaction with God's creation: wells, evoking fresh water, but also mystery and magic (think of tossing coins down a wishing well), and a child's playfulness in tossing a stone into a well just for the pleasure of hearing the ring of the falling stone. The swinging bell flings out the note in joyful exuberance, and here, with the image of the bell calling out its name, Hopkins subtly evokes the sacrament of Baptism.

These lines draw us into an experience of pure, unmediated joy – and then Hopkins tells us what that joy is, starting with the hint given by the bell calling out its name. “Each mortal thing does one thing and the same . . . myself it speaks and spells; / Crying What I do is me.” All things naturally express their own identity – and the poem's first lines have helped us feel, deep in our bones, that this identity is a joyous one. Hopkins goes a step further: following “what I do is me” we have “for that I came”: he takes us in one beat from identity to purpose.

Having introduced the idea of purpose at the pivot-point of the poem, Hopkins says “I say more,” declaring that he will unfold the meaning behind all of this.

However, he does not immediately name Christ; rather, he turns first to the human experience, “the just man justices”; by making a verb out of the noun justice, Hopkins makes the connection of identity and action concrete. This just man “Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces” – a play on words that emphasizes that God's gift of grace is what allows the man to have all that he does unfold in grace. The word “grace” helps the reader make the connection between joyful identity and Christ before Christ is named, so that the evocation of Our Lord

will be heard not as an evangelizing add-on, but as the piece that makes all the rest fit together perfectly.

For Hopkins points to Christ at the heart of everything. The just man “Acts in God’s eye what in God’s eye he is – / Christ.” Here we have a poetic restatement of St. Paul’s words: “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). Hopkins closes the poem with words that express the joy of living out that identity: “for Christ plays in ten thousand places, / Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his / To the father through the features of men’s faces.”

The fact that “Kingfishers” is beautiful purely as a poem draws us deeply into the heart of this experience: as poet, Hopkins takes us through a lived moment of pure, joyful Christian identity. We feel the joy of the kingfisher, dragonfly, stone, bell, and man each being exactly what they are meant to be: rooted, grounded, graced in Christ.

The Christian Life: “Patience”

Hopkins lived at a time of cultural and religious turmoil, not just in terms of Catholics dealing with a generally hostile Anglican establishment, but also in terms of intra-Church tumult and disagreement. A particularly divisive topic was Vatican I and the proposed definition of papal infallibility, about which there were sharply divided camps within the Catholic Church. Although there was no electronic social media, discussions in newspapers, pamphlets, and lectures provided ample opportunity for extremely heated rhetoric amongst Catholics – a scene which was often rather disedifying and discouraging both for Catholics and for those considering entering into full communion with the Church. This situation probably sounds all too familiar.

Hopkins’ poem “Patience” is fruitful for reflection in this regard. It is a poem that can be read both as inward-focused (as we struggle for patience with our own spiritual growth, or lack thereof) and as an engagement with the noisy, distracting,

anxiety-inducing world around us. In this dual focus, it serves as a reflection on the ways that we deal inwardly with exterior pressures and distractions.

Hopkins begins by recognizing that waiting is difficult. “Patience who asks / Wants war, wants wounds; weary his times, his tasks; / To do without, take tosses, and obey.” We are called to bear our cross, whatever it may be – even though sometimes what we are called to bear is neither exciting nor dramatic.

When we are called to be patient, we may instead wish that we had war and wounds to deal with: conflicts and struggles that demand clear, direct action. Instead, our task may be to graciously “do without, take tosses, and obey.” Those are hard words for modern people, who are bombarded with messages about doing things our own way, having personal freedom, making our own choices. Hopkins suggests that it’s in the acceptance of what is given to us that true patience puts down its roots.

Ivy can grow so vigorously that it creates a living carpet of green, glossy leaves; during his time in Oxford, Hopkins would have seen many college buildings covered in this way. When ivy grows over a crumbling wall or a ruined building, it smooths out the rough edges, hides the broken corners, and makes the whole thing into something new and organic. Not only that, it becomes a source of new life, as birds make their nests in the ivy’s tendrils and feed on its berries during the winter.

In this way, Hopkins envisions cultivating patience as a form of “heart’s ivy” that grows over our “ruins of wrecked past purpose.” God may frustrate our plans, “wreck” our purposes, if they are not according to his will for us; patience allows the broken pieces to be covered over and become something beautiful and life-giving in a new way.

As we survey the ruins of our self-centered plans, we may grow penitent as we recognize our own rebellion. The giving up of self-will can be agonizing: “We hear our hearts grate on themselves: it kills / To bruise them dearer.” Isn’t it enough to

recognize that we were wrong? Do we really have to change how we live? Can't we still have it our own way, at least sometimes? No?

Yet Hopkins suggests that this is what grace is: for God to do the transforming work that we cannot do for ourselves, when we ask for his help: "Yet the rebellious wills / Of us we do bid God bend to him even so." We can choose to ask God to bend our still-rebellious wills to him; we may be deeply frustrated by the self-denial asked of us, we may not feel or even want to be obedient, but we can choose to accept the self-denial and be obedient, even so.

"Patience, hard thing!" Yes, hard thing, indeed, when we have so many temptations to be resentful and angry, and when it's so easy to share and magnify those frustrations!

But what is the result of patience? "And where is he who more and more distils / Delicious kindness? – He is patient. Patience fills / His crisp combs, and that comes those ways we know." We know how bees make honey. The bees patiently visit flower after flower, bringing back nectar to the hive. Drop by drop, ever so slowly, the honey forms and, hidden within the hive, the crisp combs fill with its delicious sweetness.

Hopkins knew firsthand the pain of patience – and his poem is itself the fruit of his own willingness to accept this difficult grace.

Poetry as Prayer

We have already seen that his poems can lead us to praise, as with "Pied Beauty." Hopkins helps us to see God's glory reflected in the created order, and encourages us to lift our eyes upward to the Creator. Likewise, the "terrible sonnets" teach us to lament with true honesty, offering all our suffering to God. Other poems bridge the gap between lament and praise, as with his striking yet little-known "Nondum," which presents an unsparing and honest, yet ultimately deeply hopeful, exploration of the act of faith in the face of the world's suffering and God's apparent silence. Hopkins' Christocentric poems, such as "The Windhover," "That Nature is

a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection,” and “As kingfishers catch fire,” encourage us to see Christ with new clarity and insight. Poems such as “Patience” help us to see the inherent beauty and drama of day-to-day Christian life. But these subjects do not exhaust the richness of his themes.

Eucharistic themes appear in many of his poems, such as “Easter,” “Barnfloor and Winepress,” and “The Bugler’s First Communion.” Other poems explore the sacraments of Marriage (“At the Wedding March”), Holy Orders or a call to the religious life (“The Habit of Perfection” and “Heaven-Haven”), and even the Anointing of the Sick (“Felix Randal”). His awareness of both beauty and fallen human nature comes through in poems such as “God’s Grandeur” and “Binsey Poplars.” Many of his poems touch on the experience of prayer itself and its fruits, as with “Morning Midday and Evening Sacrifice,” “Peace,” and “Patience.” In “Oratio Patris Condren” and “Adoro Te Devote” we have poetry that is prayer – or prayer rendered poetically. His Marian piety is reflected in “The May Magnificat” and “The Blessed Virgin compared to the Air we Breathe.” The more we explore Hopkins’ poetry, the more we will find rich material for reflecting on our life in Christ – which for Hopkins means every aspect of our entire life.

Hopkins is so clearly a Catholic poet, in both the subject matter of his poems and his entire approach to his vocation, that we might expect his work to be marginalized in our current, highly secular culture, but this is in fact not the case at all. Dana Gioia, in pointing out the seeming paradox of his popularity, observes that, in presenting his faith as he does, Hopkins “provides something not easily found elsewhere on the current curriculum – serious and disciplined Christian spirituality.” Gioia goes on to note that his “audaciously original style not only swept away the soft and sentimental conventions of nineteenth-century religious verse, it also provided a vehicle strong enough to communicate the overwhelming power of

his faith.”¹² In Hopkins’ religious poetry, we encounter the real thing, not pious platitudes – the reality of a man living out his life in Christ, day by day – and we read it in poetry of tremendous power and beauty, because he attended so intensely and carefully to the craft and art of his poetry.

Gerard Manley Hopkins is one of the greatest poets in the English language, and it is fitting that he has a memorial in Poets’ Corner of Westminster Abbey, alongside Shakespeare and Chaucer. He is also a great Catholic poet, precisely because he was both devoutly Catholic and a great poet – committed to his writing as a craft, and committing all his writing to Christ. Hopkins did nothing by halves. He followed his crucified Lord with all his heart, mind, soul, and strength; he used the literary and imaginative talents given him to the full. In so doing, Hopkins created an astonishing body of work that is a gift for all readers, who can learn much about prayer in his school of poetry.

12. Dana Gioia, introduction to *God’s Grandeur: The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Washington, DC: The Trinity Forum, 2016), 4–5.

Suggested further reading

Hopkins' writings:

The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins, 4th ed.,
ed. W.H. Gardner and N.H. MacKenzie
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works,
Oxford World Classics, ed. Catherine Phillips
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

*The Gospel in Gerard Manley Hopkins: Selections
from His Poems, Letters, Journals, and Spiritual
Writings*, ed. Margaret R. Ellsberg
(Walden, NY: Plough Publishing, 2017).

*Gerard Manley Hopkins: Sermons and Spiritual
Writings*, ed. Jude V. Nixon and Noel Barber
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Biographies:

Paul Mariani, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Life*
(New York: Viking, 2008).

Norman White, *Hopkins: A Literary Biography*
(Oxford: Clarendon, 1995).

About this edition and how to use it

Most of the poems in this volume come from the first edition (1918) of Hopkins' poems, edited by Robert Bridges. "Adoro Te Devote," "Barnfloor and Winepress," "Easter," "Nondum," and "Oratio Patris Condren" are from the Appendix of Additional Poems edited by Charles Williams in the second edition (1930).

The introductory essay and the annotations of these poems are designed to assist readers and students in understanding and appreciating Hopkins' poetry. For reasons of simplicity, space, and focus, I have therefore chosen not to address the complex topic of his metrical technique, though the poems are printed with the accent marks for stresses that Hopkins included. Likewise, I have not made any mention of textual variants. For details on both these points, see *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works*, edited by Catherine Phillips.

A few general points about Hopkins' style may help readers who are new to his poetry. He often omits relative pronouns (such as *that* and *which*); alters the usual sequence of subject-predicate-object; and omits forms of the word 'to be,' leaving the verb to be inferred. As a result of this poetic compression, the meaning of a given line or of a whole poem may not be immediately apparent, but it is there – not as a projection by the reader of his or her subjective impressions or reactions, but as Hopkins' poetic vision, the meaning he wishes to convey, which we can discover and enter into if we take the time to do so. Some of his poems are, as it were, leisurely walks through open countryside; others invite us to climb what look like impossibly sheer cliff walls. But with the latter, Hopkins always gives us a path upward, if we look attentively, and the view is well worth the effort of clambering to the top.

Hopkins' language can also be challenging. For one thing, he has such a richly varied vocabulary that most modern readers are sure to come across at least a few words that are unfamiliar.

He also uses names for flora, fauna, and landscape that were no doubt familiar to him and those around him, but may be strange to readers from other places in the world. Lastly, he also occasionally invents words, which is delightful but a little bit discomfiting until one gets used to it!

The best way to read these poems is to do so slowly; reading aloud and re-reading are likewise valuable practices for getting the most out of his poems. Doing so will also help you develop your attention span and strengthen your ability to focus on what you are reading, which are skills that tend to be weakened by our distraction-filled, screen-focused environment.

In this edition, the poems themselves do not have markings to indicate which words are glossed, as these can be a distraction to full engagement with the text. Rather, all the glosses are on the left-hand page, indicated by the relevant word or phrase in **bold** with the definition or explanation following. If a poem runs across more than one page, the facing-page glosses likewise follow the text of the poem. If you are new to reading Hopkins' poetry, I suggest the following method: first read the poem through at a steady pace without looking at the glosses. Then read through the glosses. After that, re-read the poem slowly, glancing over at the glosses as needed to clarify your understanding of the poem. Reading the poem aloud is very helpful as well.

Ample white space is provided in the margins of the poems and on the annotation pages, and I encourage you to use it! Write your own paraphrases or notes; underline, annotate, respond.

The complexity of Hopkins' language and phrasing, as well as the richness of his imagery, invites and encourages a slow and thoughtful engagement with the poems. This meditative approach also allows the Catholic reader to engage with the spiritual dimension of his writing more fully, and indeed to approach his poetry as spiritual reading.

As Kingfishers Catch Fire:
Selected and Annotated Poems
of Gerard Manley Hopkins

wheels: weeds with flat, wheel-shaped flowers, such as ground elder, cow parsley, or Queen Anne's lace.

thrush's eggs look little low heavens: thrush's eggs (a vivid blue in color) look like little skies, here down below the heavens.

glassy peartree: the pear has glossy leaves and bright white flowers in spring. Given the reference later to **sinning**, the pear tree is probably also an allusion to St. Augustine's *Confessions*, in which his boyish theft of pears is an illustration of the nature of sin.

a strain: a thread.

In Eden garden: see Gen. 2:8–17.

before it cloy: before it becomes distasteful by overloading with sweetness.

Mayday: the first of May, May Day marks the beginning of the growing season (in the northern hemisphere); it is traditionally celebrated with village festivities such as dancing around the May Pole. The month of May is also dedicated to Mary, the Mother of God, and May 1 often features the 'May Crowning' of a statue of Mary with a wreath of flowers.

O maid's child: Christ, the son of a virgin (**maid**).

Spring

Nothing is so beautiful as spring –

When weeds, in wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush;

Thrush's eggs look little low heavens, and thrush

Through the echoing timber does so rinse and wring

The ear, it strikes like lightnings to hear him sing;

5

The glassy peartree leaves and blooms, they brush

The descending blue; that blue is all in a rush

With richness; the racing lambs too have fair their fling.

What is all this juice and all this joy?

A strain of the earth's sweet being in the beginning

10

In Eden garden. Have, get, before it cloy,

Before it cloud, Christ, lord, and sour with sinning,

Innocent mind and Mayday in girl and boy,

Most, O maid's child, thy choice and worthy the winning.

charged with: full of (as in an electrical charge); also, given or entrusted with something.

shook foil: a shaken sheet of metallic foil.

oil / Crushed: oil (from crushed olives), which concentrates into a valuable substance.

reck: take heed of, obey.

his rod: a symbol of authority or care, as in a shepherd's rod and staff (see Ps. 23:4); also possibly an image of the cross.

trod: walked on.

seared: burned.

shod: wearing shoes.

for: despite.

spent: exhausted, used up.

though the last lights off the black West went / . . . morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs: an image of Crucifixion and Resurrection. It may also have a historical resonance, alluding to the brutal suppression of Catholicism in England (**the black West**) during the Elizabethan era, and its survival and renewal in later centuries. During the Penal Times and afterward, priests were trained on the continent (**eastward**) and sent to England as missionaries, either covertly (as with the Jesuit martyr St. Edmund Campion) or openly (as with Bl. Dominic Barberi, the Italian missionary who received St. John Henry Newman into the Church).

bent: twisted, distorted.

broods: sits on, to protect and nurture, as a hen sits on eggs to hatch them. See "Peace."

God's Grandeur

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil

Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

5

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;

10

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.

Magnificat: a reference to Mary's song of praise (Luke 1:46–55). The name comes from the opening words in Latin, "Magnificat anima mea Dominum."

Candlemas: February 2; also known as the Presentation of the Lord. Forty days after Christmas, it celebrates the occasion when Mary, as a new mother, came to the temple for her purification and to 'redeem' her firstborn son according to the Law of Moses (see Luke 2:22–38). Traditionally, candles are blessed during the Candlemas liturgy, for both personal use and use in the church in the coming year.

Lady Day: March 25, the Annunciation, which marks Mary conceiving Jesus in her womb by the power of the Holy Spirit; it is so called for the announcement to Mary by the Archangel Gabriel that this will occur. See Luke 1:26–38.

strawberry-breasted / Thrustle: the song thrush (*Turdus philomelos*); it has a cream-colored breast flecked with brown spots that are strawberry shaped. Its eggs are bright blue. **Thrustle** is the older form of the name, dating back to Old English.

The May Magnificat

May is Mary's month, and I
Muse at that and wonder why:
Her feasts follow reason,
Dated due to season –

Candlemas, Lady Day;
But the Lady Month, May,
Why fasten that upon her,
With a feasting in her honour?

Is it only its being brighter
Than the most are must delight her?
Is it opportunist
And flowers finds soonest?

Ask of her, the mighty mother:
Her reply puts this other
Question: What is Spring? –
Growth in every thing –

Flesh and fleece, fur and feather,
Grass and green world all together;
Star-eyed strawberry-breasted
Throstle above her nested

sod: grassy turf.

sizing: growing.

thorp: small village or farm.

silver-surfèd: covered over in silver (i.e., cherry trees covered in white blossoms).

Cluster of bugle blue eggs thin
Forms and warms the life within;
And bird and blossom swell
In sod or sheath or shell.

All things rising, all things sizing 25
Mary sees, sympathising
With that world of good,
Nature's motherhood.

Their magnifying of each its kind
With delight calls to mind 30
How she did in her stored
Magnify the Lord.

Well but there was more than this:
Spring's universal bliss
Much, had much to say 35
To offering Mary May.

When drop-of-blood-and-foam-dapple
Bloom lights the orchard-apple
And thicket and thorp are merry
With silver-surfed cherry 40

azuring-over greybell: bluebells (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*),
a small perennial flower that in England particularly favors
woodlands, where it can form carpets of flowers in the spring.

brakes: thickets.

And azuring-over greybell makes
Wood banks and brakes wash wet like lakes
And magic cuckoocall
Caps, clears, and clinches all –

This ecstasy all through mothering earth 45
Tells Mary her mirth till Christ's birth
To remember and exultation
In God who was her salvation.

kingfishers: the kingfisher found in Britain (*Alcedo atthis*) is a small bird with brightly colored blue and rust-red plumage; it lives by rivers and hunts by flying above the water and then diving steeply down into the water to catch fish.

roundy wells: round stone wells; as pebbles rolled over the rim of the well fall inside, they would make a resonant, echoing plunk as they hit the water at the bottom.

tucked string: plucked string of a musical instrument.

hung bell's / Bow: a church bell is hung or placed in a frame, and then swung to make it ring; the part of the bell where the clapper strikes to make a noise is called the 'sound ring' or the 'sound bow.'

finds tongue: finds voice (i.e., rings out its peal).

to fling out broad its name: to make its distinctive sound. There is a sacramental association with this image. The Catholic tradition, since medieval times, is that church bells are given individual names. The blessing and naming of new bells (which includes holy water, chrism, and prayers of exorcism) is called the 'baptism' of the bells.

Deals out that being indoors each one dwells: gives out what dwells inside each one.

Selves: is its unique self. (See "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection" for a description of man as the **clearest-selvèd spark**).

justices: acts justly.

limbs: arms and legs (i.e., bodies).

As kingfishers catch fire

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies dráw fláme;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same: 5
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves – goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *Whát I do is me: for that I came.*

Í say móre: the just man justices;
Kéeps grace: thát keeps all his goings graces; 10
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is –
Chríst – for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

Justus quidem . . .: a quotation from Jeremiah 12:1. The first three lines of this sonnet are a fairly direct translation of this line of Scripture; the rest of the poem is a meditation on it.

Thou art: you are.

contend: strive with, dispute with.

Wert thou my enemy: if you were my enemy.

How wouldst thou worse . . . than thou dost: how would you (**defeat** and **thwart**) me worse than you do now?

sots and thralls: drunkards and slaves.

banks and brakes: riverbanks and hedges.

fretty chervil: chervil is a wild flowering plant (*Anthriscus sylvestris*) with denticulate leaves; it produces clusters of small, delicate white flowers. The overall effect of leaves and flowers is akin to the intricate, interlaced wood-carving design called 'fretwork.'

eunuch: castrated man. Although here this is an image of frustration about apparent lack of fruitfulness in his ministry and writing, such that he cannot **breed** (produce) **one work that wakes** (comes alive), Hopkins may also have been alluding to Matt. 19:12.