

15. HOPKINS AND THE RELIGION OF THE DIAMOND BODY

Isn't 'fall' and 'redemption' quite a late and new departure in religion and in myth: about Homer's time? Aren't the great heavens of the true pagans - I call these orphicising 'redemption' mysteries half-christian - aren't they clean of the 'Salvation' idea, though they have the re-birth idea? and aren't they clean of the 'fall', though they have the descent of the soul? The two things are quite different. In my opinion the great pagan religions of the Aegean, and Egypt and Babylon, must have conceived the 'descent' as a great triumph, and each Easter of the clothing in flesh as a supreme glory, and the Mother Moon who gives us our body as the supreme giver of the great gift, hence the very ancient Magna Mater in the East. This 'fall' into Matter ... this 'entombment' in the 'envelope of flesh' is a new and pernicious idea arising about 500 B.C. into distinct cult-consciousness - and destined to kill the grandeur of the heavens altogether at last. [D.H. Lawrence]

I entreat you, my brothers, *remain true to the earth*, and do not believe those who speak to you of superterrestrial hopes! They are poisoners, whether they know it or not. They are despisers of life, atrophying and self-poisoned men, of whom the earth is weary: so let them be gone! Once blasphemy against God was the greatest blasphemy, but God died, and thereupon these blasphemers died too. To blaspheme the earth is now the most dreadful offence, and to esteem the bowels of the Inscrutable more highly than the meaning of the earth. [Nietzsche]

Hopkins' fascination with what he began in 1868 to call the 'inscapes' of the natural world is evident from the earliest diaries and journals, but in the eighteen-sixties it seems to have been a combination of aesthetics, draughtsmanship and natural history, having no connection with his religious concerns. Suddenly, in 1870, his inscapes acquire a new dimension and meaning: 'I do not think I have ever seen anything more beautiful than the bluebell I have been looking at. I know the beauty of our Lord by it' [Journals 199]. Later that year there follows a description of the Northern Lights, which ends:

This busy working of nature wholly independent of the earth and seeming to go on in a strain of time not reckoned by our reckoning of days and years but simpler and as if correcting the preoccupation of the world by being preoccupied with and appealing to and dated by the day of judgement was like a new witness to God and filled me with delightful fear. [200]

This fusing of aesthetic and religious experience, both grounded in natural inscapes, has been attributed to the influence of Duns Scotus; but Hopkins did not read Duns Scotus until 1872. If it is attributable to an outside influence at all, then that influence is St. Ignatius. Hopkins' commentaries on the *Spiritual Exercises* date from the same period (1877-81) as his most joyful and spontaneous poems and are very close to them in spirit:

CREATION THE MAKING OUT OF NOTHING, bringing from nothing into being: once there was nothing, then lo, this huge world was there. How great a work of power! ...
It is a book he has written, of the riches of his knowledge, teaching endless truths, full lessons of wisdom, a poem of beauty ...
'The heavens declare the glory of God!' The birds sing to him, the thunder speaks of his terror, the lion is like his strength, the honey like his sweetness; they are something like him, they make him known, they tell of him, they give him glory.
[Sermons 238-9]

God dwells in creatures ... God works and labours for me in all created things on the face of the earth ... All things therefore are charged with love, are charged with God and if we know how to touch them give off sparks and take fire, yield drops and flow, ring and tell of him. [193-5]

But there was within Catholic teaching another tradition entirely, a tradition in the ascendant in Victorian England and much more in accord with the general morality and spirituality of the time, a tradition which regarded nature with fear and hostility, which defined nature and grace as mutually exclusive opposites, and aligned the natural world, the flesh and the devil (and woman) against God:

Hence the soul cannot be possessed of the divine union, until it has divested itself of the love of created beings. [St. John of the Cross]

Though for several years Hopkins managed to avoid this dualism, it became at last the cross on which he was crucified. Nature, which was for him in 1877 the divine creative fire of God playing through the physical, temporal world, 'the dearest freshness deep down things', 'a strain of the earth's sweet being in the beginning / In Eden garden', a standard purity against which the corruption of the human world was to be judged, became by 1888 'nature's bonfire', 'world's wildfire', a heap of trash and matchwood reducing itself to ashes, a joke, and good riddance, since it was a dangerous distraction from what really matters, the only thing of true value, the immortal diamond of the redeemed soul, redeemed from world, flesh and devil. I want to try to understand the apparently unavoidable process (for a great poet who was also a Jesuit priest at that time) by which this total inversion of values took place.

* * *

When Hopkins entered the Jesuit order he welcomed the discipline he felt he needed to restrain his independent spirit and restrict his manifold interests. This meant burning most of his poems, curbing his passion for music, and giving up learning Welsh (since he could hardly pretend that his sole motive had been the conversion of Wales). It did not mean giving up his interest in the natural world and its inscapes, since it was but a short step to reinterpret these as precisely those phenomena which testified most strongly to the presence of God or Christ in creation, and therefore the most likely to help him to praise God. His moments of aesthetic insight could now be glorified as epiphanies, perceptions of the sacred, encounters with Christ. Scotus confirmed him in this, and extended his range by pointing out that it was in their characteristic action even more than in appearance and design that created things revealed their innermost being and divine purpose.

It was not long before Hopkins took the next short step, to the realization that the value of such experiences need not be private, but carried an obligation to bear witness, and that the only adequate way of testifying, for him, would be the writing of poems, for only the language of poetry could match the pattern of inscape and the charge of instress. And for this purpose it would have to be a very special and original kind of poetry which Hopkins knew he had in him, but which he knew to be beyond any of his contemporaries (with the possible and grudging exception of Whitman).

Out of this perfect matching of his religious vocation with his poetic gifts and love of nature came the great celebratory poems of the years 1877 to 1881. His effort now was not just to register physical and temporal externals, phenomena, but to interpret them as expression of the innermost, as laws of being. If this can be achieved, the object, formerly a mere eye-chaos, or, if perceived as beautiful, mere 'brute beauty' or geometry, is transfigured, becomes radiant with a meaning which is far from merely metaphorical because a tangible example of the spirit of God, the body of Christ, in this world, affording, for those of us who are not saints, our only direct experience of him in this life.

There are several Hopkins poems which seem to embody a sacramental Christianity perfectly in accord with deep ecology - 'God's Grandeur', 'Spring', 'The Sea and the Skylark', 'Pied Beauty', 'Binsey Poplars', 'Inversnaid', 'Ribblesdale'.
Let us look closely at '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.

The fourth word is charged with meanings, and plunges us deep into Hopkins' distinctive poetic and religious world. The primary meaning is, of course, electrical. It suggests that God flows through the world as an energizing current, that everything in creation is therefore connected to everything else, part of the same circuit, and also to God, the source. It also suggests that the world is a huge battery in which creative energy lies latent, in which is stored an infinite potential for renewal. All processes, natural and human, are dependent on this energy, which can be manifested in very different ways. At one extreme as light, like the sudden lightning which flashes from a sheet of multifaceted silver-foil when it is shaken; at the other as steady pressure which, with such slowness that it is barely detectable, crushes the seed to release its innermost oil. It need not surprise us that Hopkins should choose examples from the world of human industry rather than the natural world, since his main theme in this poem is man's misuse of what God provided specifically for his use, such as 'coal and rockoil for artificial light and heat' [*Sermons* 90].

Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

This strange juxtaposition of 'then' and 'now', closely followed by the word 'generations', reminds us of the first time men disobeyed God. No sooner had God charged the world with life than he put men in charge of it, and charged them not to eat of the tree of knowledge. The subsequent history of the race has been a compounding of that first recklessness. Only man has the freedom to disconnect himself from the divine circuit, and this he has systematically done, especially since the industrial revolution. The sacred flame was entrusted to man, and he has seared the world with it. Oil has been extracted not only from plants, but from the earth itself, and smeared over everything. The shod foot treading earth bare is a potent image of alienation, of man in self-imposed exile from his home 'in Eden garden' ['Spring']. Hughes expresses Adam Kadmon's glad acceptance of the earth as his proper home in the image of 'the sole of a foot/ Pressed to world-rock', to which he says 'I was made/ For you'.

The sestet testifies to that in nature which seemed to Hopkins inextinguishable:

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward springs -
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

At the very moment when nature seems utterly spent, the first token of renewal appears. The world bent with toil, or under the burden of man's works and sins, is transformed into the image of an egg the hatching of which, under the warm breast of the dove, will release the 'dearest freshness' of innocence, joy, love, creativity, which still lives under the hard shell of greed, complacency and materialism. The Holy Ghost as dove broods over the world in both senses, pondering the crime, but also renewing victimized nature. In the 'May Magnificat' Hopkins calls Mary the 'mighty mother' and

compares her to a throstle on its eggs, which 'Forms and warms the life within; / And bird and blossom swell / In sod or sheath or shell'.

'Spring' wonderfully evokes the rush and richness of new life, the intercourse of heaven and earth, as shooting weeds, birdsong and peartree leaves all 'brush the descending blue'. The vision of 'Pied Beauty' is even more ecstatically holistic, triumphantly unifying all the dualistic opposites of high and low, large and small, swift and slow, light and dark, human and non-human, change and permanence. The vision of 'Hurrahing in Harvest' is the same, until the last two lines, where aspiration towards God expresses itself as a hurling off of earth. It is not clear whether the heart only half hurls earth off because it has not quite achieved the boldness which would be needed to kick the cumbering earth off completely, or whether the poet wishes to have the best of both worlds, like Lawrence's St. Matthew:

I have mounted up on the wings of the morning, and I have dredged
down to the zenith's reversal.
Which is my way, being man.
God's may stay in mid-heaven, the Son of Man has climbed to the
Whitsun zenith,
But I, Matthew, being a man
Am a traveller back and forth.
So be it.

The ambiguity is, as we shall see, a more serious matter in 'The Windhover'.

In 'God's Grandeur' Hopkins seems to doubt man's capacity, try as he may, to do any permanent damage to the earth. In 'Binsey Poplars' and 'Ribblesdale' he becomes progressively less confident. As joy and confidence tend to produce in Hopkins verbal exuberance, sadness produces a moving simplicity. His dear aspens are 'All felled, felled, are all felled ... Not spared, not one'. 'Ten or twelve, only ten or twelve / Strokes of havoc' have unsolved the scene. Hopkins stresses the vulnerability of the natural world, how easily we can threaten its complex and delicate functions:

Since country is so tender
To touch, her being so slender,
That, like this sleek and seeing ball
But a prick will make no eye at all.

We must beware, however, of imputing too much ecological consciousness to Hopkins. What we do when we 'delve or hew - Hack and rack the growing green!' may be to wreck an ecosystem and alter the world's climate, but this is of course not what Hopkins means. He means simply that the beauty of that 'sweet especial scene' is now lost for ever, so that 'After-comers cannot guess the beauty been'.

In 'Ribblesdale', 'selfbent' man, 'so tied to his turn', so thriftless, reaves 'our rich round world bare / And none reck of world after'. There is no doubting Hopkins' 'care and dear concern'. But Hopkins does not show much awareness of connections between one part of nature and another, of interdependence, only of the independent connection of each creature to God and to the individual who knows how to touch it. Perhaps we read into 'God's Grandeur' the idea of a circuit. The created world does not present itself to Hopkins as a system, rather an aggregation of single and separate miracles, each conceived and charged by God for a specific and very precise purpose (could we but see it). And this purpose is not in relation to the rest of creation, but only in relation to the augmenting of God's glory by praise and the saving of souls.

This will become clearer if we look at two more of Hopkins' most famous poems, 'The Windhover' and 'As Kingfishers Catch Fire'.

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
High there, how he rung upon a wimpling wing
In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,
As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding
Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird, - the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!

'Caught' does not mean simply 'caught sight of'. The diction, rhythm, imagery, will not allow for so mundane a meaning. It means that Hopkins caught, perhaps for the first time, the spiritual significance of the falcon, brought it home to his heart, thereby transforming it to Falcon, the type of Christ our Lord, prince of heaven. The wonderful mimetic recreation of the characteristic hovering of the kestrel (also known as a standgale), which rides the wind with the steadiness of a skilled horseman who moves with his mount, always level in relation to it, however it may roll and threaten to hurl him, or of a skater whose skill performing figures of eight enables him to

triumph over those forces which seek to bring him down, is not there merely in order to give us a vivid description of a kestrel, as in a nature poem. It is there, along with all the medieval chivalric splendour, to fuse Falcon and Christ in one composite image of mastery, mastery of all dangers, temptations, everything which conspires to overthrow the heroic spirit, everything, that is, the poet's heart is in hiding from. We hear in the apparently throw-away phrase 'my heart in hiding' an echo of 'The swoon of a heart that the sweep and the hurl of thee trod / Hard down with a horror of height' ['The Wreck of the Deutschland'], and a hint of the heart to which he will later say 'Here! creep, / Wretch, under a comfort serves in a whirlwind'. At the time of writing 'The Windhover' Hopkins both feared the height and the danger of exposure to the big wind and longed for the whirl of wings, the fling of the heart and the towering grace. The danger is that the higher the aspiration the greater the temptation to pride, and therefore the deeper the hurtle of hell. The heart hides in true humility before the spiritual achievements of Christ and his saints, but also, perhaps, in envy of the outward trappings of valorous action, its pride and plume, which might precede a fall, as it did for Arthur's chevaliers. He does not know whether his life of obscurity and renunciation, in clerical black, is a manifestation of courage or cowardice. His heart stirs for the very thing it is in hiding from (as Eliot's heart stirred for and cowered from 'the awful daring of a moment's surrender').

At the beginning of the sestet this stirring articulates itself as a prayer for the resplendent qualities of the bird. Since the Falcon is also the Prince summoned by the King of daylight to perform his chivalric deeds in high heaven, Hopkins is praying to become something much more than a cavorting kestrel, he is praying for God to buckle on him the shining armour which will transform the drab priest into the most favoured hero and man-of-action whose exploits are emblazoned upon him and flash upon the world: 'Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here / Buckle!'. That the strong verb 'Buckle!' should be carried over and given the extra stress of beginning a line, that it should seem, therefore, to have the exclamation mark to itself, and that it should be followed by the uniquely capitalized 'AND', makes it the crux of the poem. It seems that in the very process of carrying the word over it has acquired a second and rapidly overriding meaning. As the last word of the first line of the sestet, its primary meaning seems to be 'fasten'; as the first word of the second line - 'Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then' - it has become 'cave in'. The breaking of fire from something which has broken open is a favourite

Hopkins image. It reappears in the very next poem as 'Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls', freshly fallen chestnuts, that is, as bright as the fire which breaks from a fallen firecoal, which before it fell might have seemed as dead as a chestnut's husk. More important, it is taken up in the closing lines of this poem, in the 'blue-bleak embers' which 'Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion'. To 'buckle' means then, primarily, to crumple, to cave in and break open. Christ does combine within himself all the admirable attributes of the falcon, but adds to them a quite different attribute which infinitely outshines them, his spiritual beauty, which shone brightest not in chivalric performance or any acts in which pride might plume itself, but in self-sacrifice, in the galling and gashes of the crucifixion. The fire that breaks from Christ then is the vermilion of blood which is simultaneously the gold of Grace.

Hopkins defines instress as 'a moulding force which succeeds in asserting itself over the resistance of cumbersome and restraining matter'. Thus the instress of the falcon is that which gives it the name of windhover or standgale, the force which gives it mastery over the big wind. The instress of Christ (self-sacrificial Love) is his triumph over the evil inherent in unredeemed matter ('mortal trash'). What instress did Hopkins desire for himself? Poetic inspiration ('the roll, the rise, the carol, the creation'), or the conquest of all such aspirations? The ostentatious skill of the windhover is also perhaps an image of Hopkins' pride in his own flamboyant poetic mastery, his triumph over the resistance of cumbersome language. Was his pride in that entirely for the greater glory of God?

The phrase 'O my chevalier!' implies a choice of the second meaning of 'buckle' and reverses the prayer of two lines earlier. The poet now prays not to ride in public and in pride, but to be ridden in humble obscurity. Christ is now Hopkins' chevalier because the poet's overweening heart is now the horse, that which must be broken ('rung upon the rein') and mastered ('Thou mastering me God'). What must be subdued is precisely that in him which rebelled against the humiliation of a life spent in obscurity ('in hiding') and 'stirred for a bird'. ('I am no wing/ To tread emptiness' says Hughes' Adam.) He can console himself that as 'sheer plod' burnishes the plough-share, so the self-renunciation of his own plodding life might burnish his soul. Not for him that honour which is 'flashed off exploit' ['St. Alphonsus Rodriguez']; rather the 'mastery in the mind' of 'Morning, Midday and Evening Sacrifice'. There are the resplendent crusading knights; there are the saints and martyrs whose wounds testify to their struggles; and there are those who have, outwardly, nothing to show for a life of dedication

and renunciation and inner strife. St. Alphonsus Rodriguez was 'a laybrother of our Order, who for 40 years acted as hall porter to the College of Palma in Majorca; he was, it is believed, much favoured by God with heavenly light and much persecuted by evil spirits' [*Poems* 252]. It was Hopkins' hope that his own inconspicuous 'war within' during years and years 'of world without event' might be similarly favoured.

The word 'buckle' is thus perhaps the turning point in Hopkins' work at which breaks into the celebratory mood a recognition of the need to renounce the very things he found most attractive in nature, the mortal beauty which made his blood dance. Whatever is not so sacrificed becomes hostage to 'surly the mere mould'.

'The Windhover' could only have been written by someone who had closely watched and admired the behaviour of kestrels. But that is not the main subject of the poem. As the subtitle 'To Christ our Lord' warns us, it is about Christian martyrdom. There is, of course, no reason why Hopkins should not draw upon the natural world in this way. But when we look at the use he habitually makes of nature, we may become aware of some strain between, on the one hand, the claims he makes for nature as being charged with God, and the expectation this gives rise to (which is satisfied in Whitman) that what he is doing when he looks at nature is attempting to 'see into the life of things' that he might thereby know God, and on the other the extent to which what he sees in nature is determined by relatively external correspondences to preconceptions about God, Christ and Creation which have been arrived at without reference to the natural world as anyone would see it without such preconceptions.

'As kingfishers catch fire' is perhaps the poem in which Hopkins most triumphantly marries his own vision to that of St. Ignatius and Duns Scotus. The poem speaks and spells itself very clearly, and in high spirits, racing from one half-line inscape to the next. It moves effortlessly from nature to music to man to Christ to God.

We can make allowances, in 'The Windhover' for the fact that it is not primarily a poem about a kestrel, that other aspects of the behaviour of the kestrel might have been relevant for other purposes, and that Hopkins has every right to select whatever aspect of the bird he likes for this particular poem. But the more poems we read, the more we become aware that the principle of selection is always the same, and 'As kingfishers catch fire' makes clear that it is not really a matter of selection at all:

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves - goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells;
Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*

In ringing and telling of itself, the creature rings and tells of God, who, according to St. Ignatius, made the creature for the purpose of helping men to praise him. Knowing how to touch things means, therefore, identifying and taking into one's heart whatever distinctive quality of the creature most matches a quality of Christ or God. Only this could explain Hopkins' inordinate enthusiasm for 'St. Patrick's Breastplate', a translation of a fifth-century poem ascribed to St. Patrick, which Hopkins described in May 1870 as 'one of the most remarkable compositions of man':

I bind unto myself to-day
The virtues of the star-lit heaven,
The glorious sun's life-giving ray,
The whiteness of the moon at even,
The flashing of the lightning free,
The whirling wind's tempestuous shocks,
The stable earth, the deep salt sea,
Around the old eternal rocks.

What Hopkins touches and seeks to bind unto himself is usually a distinctive form of beauty, (with a particular preference for effects of light, as in the first half of the St. Patrick quotation), or of power (as in the second). He is not, it seems to me, saying that everything a kingfisher characteristically does gives God glory, or even that everything it does is a revelation of its innermost being, and therefore of God's purpose in creating kingfishers. Rather, he is attempting to isolate one characteristic, and that a visual effect upon an implied watcher, as the sole purpose of the existence of kingfishers (or dragonflies, or kestrels, or any other creatures). 'And the world is full of things and events, phenomena of all sorts, that go unwitnessed [*Correspondence* 7]'. Hopkins regrets this 'want of witness'. Nothing has meaning for him without it. Just as it needs the human participant to tumble a stone over the rim of a roundy well or tuck a string, so it needs him to register the kingfisher catching fire or the dragonfly drawing flame. Kingfishers and dragonflies are particularly appropriate because their distinctive colouring is not pigment but structural colour,

depending on the reflection of light (from the sun symbolizing God) striking the creature at a certain angle, into the eyes of the beholder. As it is the sole purpose of a man to keep grace, so it is the sole purpose of the kingfisher to help him to do so by flashing through beams of sunlight when he happens to be watching, or of a kestrel to hover on a big wind when he happens to be watching. This, to the non-Catholic at least, is somewhat absurd - absurdly anthropocentric. Kingfishers do not flash through sunbeams in case someone might be watching, but as part of the process of catching fish. Hawks and kingfishers speak and spell themselves in their efficiency as killers. This need not, as Hughes has shown, compromise their sacredness. Hughes' kingfisher catches both fish and fire:

Through him, God
Marries a pit
Of fishy mire.

And look! He's
- gone again.

Spark, sapphire, refracted
From beyond water
Shivering the spine of the river.

['The Kingfisher']

Hopkins discounts the whole of the rest of the life of the kingfisher, including that characteristic action after which it is named, and of which the flashing between trees is an incidental part, and even the catching fire goes for nothing if the beholder is wanting. He discounts all the creatures which are never seen at all, because they live too remote from human beings, or are too small to be noticed. Descartes had clearly stated the problem:

It is not at all probable that all things have been created for us in such a manner that God has no other end in creating them. ... We cannot doubt that an infinitude of things exist, or did exist, though they may have ceased to do so, which have never been beheld or comprehended by man, and have never been of any use to him.

[quoted by Lovejoy, 188]

Gray had made the point in the famous lines:

Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear;

Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

But what was for Gray merely an unquestioning anthropocentrism was for Hopkins a theological tenet, that all non-human creatures had been created solely as revelations to man of aspects of the beauty and glory of God. Yet Hopkins seems to have been oblivious of the wastefulness of creation, if indeed it had been created purely for men to witness. In the year Hopkins entered the Jesuit order, Alfred Russell Wallace was writing his account of the birds of paradise he had seen in the Malay Archipelago:

I thought of the long ages of the past, during which the successive generations of this little creature had run their course - year by year being born, and living and dying amid these dark and gloomy woods, with no intelligent eye to gaze upon their loveliness; to all appearance such a wanton waste of beauty. It seems sad, that on the one hand such exquisite creatures should live out their lives and exhibit their charms only in these wild inhospitable regions; while on the other hand, should civilized man ever reach these distant lands, and bring moral, intellectual and physical light into the recesses of these virgin forests, we may be sure that he will so disturb the nicely-balanced relations of organic nature as to cause the disappearance, and finally the extinction, of these very beings whose wonderful structure and beauty he alone is fitted to appreciate and enjoy. This consideration must surely tell us that all living things were *not* made for man. Many of them have no relation to him. The cycle of their existence has gone on independently of his, and is disturbed or broken by every advance in man's intellectual development; and their happiness and enjoyments, their loves and hates, their struggles for existence, their vigorous life and early death, would seem to be immediately related to their own well-being and perpetuation alone.

[*The Malay Archipelago and the Birds of Paradise*, 223-4]

Hopkins also discounts everything which is not counted beautiful or in some other way impressive to human sensibility (or current fashions of sensibility). But if the world is charged with God's grandeur, how can one creature be counted more beautiful than another? Sir Thomas Browne wrote:

I hold there is a general beauty in the works of God, and there is no deformity in any kind or species of creature whatsoever. I know not by what logic we call a Toad or a Bear or an Elephant ugly; they being created in those outward shapes and figures which best express the action of their inward forms. [*Religio Medici*]

One might have expected this position to appeal strongly to Hopkins, but he is locked into an aestheticism which deduces, rather, the inward beauty (or otherwise) from the outward.

The principle that 'outward beauty is the proof of inward beauty' seems to Hopkins to sanction his obsession with youthful good-looks, his loathing of the poor on account of their ugliness, and his admiration for soldiers on account of their scarlet uniforms, as if the *raison d'être* of soldiers were to look 'manly' on parade, rather than to kill and be killed. In glorifying 'the spirit of war' he sets up Christ as example:

Mark Christ our King. He knows war, served this soldiering through;
He of all can reeve a rope best. ['The Soldier']

Why not 'thrust a bayonet best'? Hopkins has to admit that in assuming that all redcoats are manly 'the heart ... makes believe ... feigns', for even 'our redcoats, our tars' are 'but foul clay' ['The Soldier']. A bugler boy 'breathing bloom of a chastity in mansex fine' kneels 'in regimental red' for his First Communion. Hopkins prays for his safety with pleas which 'Would brandle adamantine heaven with ride and jar, did / Prayer go disregarded' ['The Bugler's First Communion']. But Hopkins calls his own sincerity in question when he writes to Bridges: 'I am half inclined to hope the Hero of it may be killed in Afghanistan' [92].

But when Hopkins turns his attention to the unfallen world of non-human creatures, such feigning is no longer necessary. He can proclaim with absolute conviction that the apparel proclaims the beast.

In his commentary on the *Spiritual Exercises* Hopkins claims that although other creatures are able to give God less glory than man, since they do it unknowingly, 'nevertheless what they can *they always do*' [*Sermons* 239]. It follows that the kestrel gives God glory in all its actions. Can we allow Hopkins, in retrospect, to divorce the hovering of the kestrel so totally from the predatory purpose of that hovering? In 1872 Hopkins had recorded that 'a big hawk flew down chasing a little shrieking bird close beside us'

[*Journals* 221]. What did that tell him about God? What God made the tiger? What of the God who demands of Job

Doth the hawk fly by thy wisdom, and stretch her wings toward the south?

Doth the eagle mount up at thy command, and make her nest on high? She dwelleth and abideth on the rock, and the strong place.

From thence she seeketh the prey, and her eyes behold afar off.

Her young ones also suck up blood: and where the slain are, there is she. [39:26-30]

The God who answers Job out of the whirlwind ridicules his hubristic claim to understanding, and his anthropocentric view of the natural world. God's purposes stretch far beyond the human world 'to cause it to rain on the earth, where no man is; on the wilderness, wherein there is no man'. He asks Job, and through him mankind:

Wilt thou hunt the prey for the lion? or fill the appetite of the young lions.

When they couch in their dens, and abide in the covert to lie in wait?

Who provideth for the raven his food? when his young ones cry unto God, they wander for lack of meat. [38:39-41]

Hopkins cannot cope with such a God, the chief of whose works is Behemoth. He faces the problem of mortality and the problem of suffering, but he turns away from the problem of predation. Even Tennyson, (Alfred Lawn Tennyson as Whitman called him), a frippery poet for the most part, his 'thoughts commonplace and wanting in nobility', had in that 'divine work' *In Memoriam* registered with compelling power and honesty that Nature 'red in tooth and claw' shrieks against a creed such as Hopkins', a creed of love, beauty, and purposes centred exclusively on individual human beings.

The nearest Hopkins comes to the problem is in a curiously and uncharacteristically evasive passage in one of his Liverpool sermons [25 October 1880]. Here his attempt to demonstrate his anthropocentric view of creation collapses with a whimper:

Therefore all the things we see are made and provided for us, the sun, moon, and other heavenly bodies to light us, warm us, and be measures

to us of time; coal and rockoil for artificial light and heat; animals and vegetables for our food and clothing; rain, wind, and snow again to make these bear and yield their tribute to us; water and the juices of plants for our drink; air for our breathing; stone and timber for our lodging; metals for our tools and traffic; the songs of birds, flowers and their smells and colours, fruits and their taste for our enjoyment. And so on: search the whole world and you will find it a million-million fold contrivance of providence planned for our use and patterned for our admiration.

But yet this providence is imperfect, plainly imperfect. The sun shines too long and withers the harvest, the rain is too heavy and rots it or in floods spreading washes it away; the air and water carry in their currents the poison of disease; there are poison plants, venomous snakes and scorpions; the beasts our subjects rebel, not only the bloodthirsty tiger that slaughters yearly its thousands, but even the bull will gore and the stallion bite or strike; at night the moon sometimes has no light to give, at others the clouds darken her; she measures time most strangely and gives us reckonings most difficult to make and never exact enough; the coalpits and oilwells are full of explosions, fires, and outbreaks of sudden death, the sea of storms and wrecks, the snow has avalanches, the earth landslips; we contend with cold, want, weakness, hunger, disease, death, and often we fight a losing battle, never a triumphant one; everything is full of fault, flaw, imperfection, shortcoming; as many marks as there are of God's wisdom in providing for us so many marks there may be set against them of more being needed still, of something having made of this very providence a shattered frame and a broken web.

Let us not now enquire, brethren, why this should be; we most sadly feel and know that so it is. [Sermons 90]

Hopkins had no answer to the passage in David Hume's *Dialogues of Natural Religion* (1779), where Hume demonstrates that the existence of God cannot be proved by the argument that design in Nature implies a designer:

One would imagine, that this grand production had not received the last hand of the maker; so little finished is every part, and so coarse are the strokes, with which it is executed. Thus, the winds are requisite to convey the vapours along the surface of the globe, and to assist men in

navigation: But how oft, rising up to tempests and hurricanes, do they become pernicious? Rains are necessary to nourish all the plants and animals of the earth: But how often are they defective? how often excessive? Heat is requisite to all life and vegetation; but is not always found in the due proportion. On the mixture and secretion of the humours and juices of the body depend the health and prosperity of the animal: But the parts perform not regularly their proper function. What more useful than all the passions of the mind, ambition, vanity, love, anger? But how oft do they break their bounds, and cause the greatest convulsions in society? There is nothing so advantageous in the universe, but what frequently becomes pernicious, by its excess or defect; nor has nature guarded, with the requisite accuracy, against all disorder or confusion. The irregularity is never, perhaps, so great as to destroy any species; but is often sufficient to involve the individuals in ruin and misery.

Hopkins badly needs a Trickster figure to account for what went wrong without having to blame God. But the rigid dualism of good and evil prevents Satan from playing this role in Christianity. Hopkins has to choose between a totally good creation by God or a totally evil one by Satan. At the outset he chooses the former, but remains deeply troubled by inescapable discrepancies until, in his final despair, he swings perilously close to the latter, a belief that Nature is a Heraclitean fire deserving no better than to be reduced to ashes, and redeemable, somewhere elsewhere, only by the Resurrection.

* * *

Hopkins is a master of rhythm. I do not mean of the theory of rhythm, but the instinctive matching of rhythm and sense which could not be fabricated in terms of any theory. So expressive is his rhythm that there are places where one feels one could get the essential meaning from the rhythm alone. A particularly striking example is the ending of 'Felix Randall'. In 'child, Felix, poor Felix Randall' the rhythm loses all impetus, is drowned in grief. Then comes the steady accumulation of rhythmic power to the triumphant and inevitable conclusion:

How far from then forethought of, all thy more boisterous years,
When thou at the random grim forge, powerful amidst peers,

Didst fettle for the great grey drayhorse his bright and battering
sandal!

But perhaps his most expressive rhythms are to be found in the poem in which he departed furthest from any kind of rhythmic regularity and the stringencies of the sonnet form - 'The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo', of which he said 'I never did anything more musical'. Under the text he wrote: 'I have marked the stronger stresses, but with the degree of the stress so perpetually varying no marking is satisfactory. Do you think all had best be left to the reader?'

It was this poem which prompted Bridges to comment on the similarity between Hopkins and Whitman, which provoked Hopkins' 'De-Whitmanizer':

I always knew in my heart Walt Whitman's mind to be more like my own than any other man's living. As he is a very great scoundrel this is not a pleasant confession. And this also makes me the more desirous to read him and the more determined that I will not.

[*Letters to Bridges*, 155]

It is no coincidence that most of Hopkins' favourite poets were 'scoundrels'. Tennyson, he claims, 'has not that sort of ascendancy Goethe had or even Burns, scoundrel as the first was, not to say the second; but then they spoke out the real human rakishness of their hearts and everybody recognised the really beating, though rascal vein' [*The Correspondence of G.M. Hopkins and R.W. Dixon*, 25]. But how could this ascetic dedicated priest, this lonely, disciplined writer of highly-wrought poems, recognize such kinship with a pagan sensualist, a loafer on the open road sending his barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world? The very qualities Whitman accepted in himself, fostered, inflated, Hopkins tried to sacrifice. Yet Hopkins knew that these differences were but superficial, that in their response to nature, in the seriousness of their commitment to writing from the heart, in religious sensibility even, they were akin.

There are plenty of parallels in the poetry, but it is in their informal prose, when stylistic differences are at a minimum, that Hopkins and Whitman come closest. Hopkins did not know Whitman's diaries which record inscapes almost interchangeable with his own:

July 14, 1878. My two kingfishers still haunt the pond. For nearly an hour I indolently look and join them while they dart and turn and take their airy gambols, sometimes far up the creek disappearing for a few moments, and then surely returning again, and performing most of their flight within sight of me, as if they knew I appreciated and absorb'd their vitality, spirituality, faithfulness, and the rapid, vanishing, delicate lines of moving yet quiet electricity they draw for me across the spread of the grass, the trees, and the blue sky. [Whitman 743]

July 22 1878. Now, indeed, if never before, the heavens declared the glory of God. It was to the full sky of the Bible, of Arabia, of the prophets, and of the oldest poems. There, in abstraction and stillness, (I had gone off by myself to absorb the scene, to have the spell unbroken,) the copiousness, the removedness, vitality, loose-clear-crowdedness, of that stellar concave spreading overhead, softly absorb'd into me, rising so free, interminably high, stretching east, west, north, south - and I, though but a point in the centre below, embodying all. As if for the first time, indeed, creation noiselessly sank into and through me its placid and untellable lesson, beyond - O, so infinitely beyond! - anything from art, books, sermons, or from science, old or new. The spirit's hour, religion's hour - the visible suggestion of God in space and time - now once definitely indicated, if never again. The untold pointed at - the heavens all paved with it. The Milky Way, as if some superhuman symphony, some ode of universal vagueness, disdaining syllable and sound - a flashing glance of Deity, address'd to the soul. [748-9]

Hopkins' diary entry for 23 January 1866 reads like missing lines from 'Spontaneous Me' or 'I Sing the Body Electric':

Lobes of the trees. Cups of the eyes. Gathering back the lightly hinged eyelids. Bows of the eyelids. Pencil of eyelashes. Juices of the eyeball. ... Juices of the sunrise. Joins and veins of the same. [Journals 72]

Hopkins did not know 'Song of Myself', where he would have found: 'Seas of bright juice suffuse heaven' and

To me the converging objects of the universe perpetually flow,
All are written to me, and I must get what the writing means.

any human end. It does not need that external point. It is in some sense ... an end in itself. [359]

The question of rhythm is also crucial:

Extremes meet, and (I must for truth's sake say what sounds pride) this savagery of his art, this rhythm in its last ruggedness and decomposition into common prose, comes near the last elaboration of mine. [*Letters to Bridges*, 157]

There is nothing in any of the passages Hopkins knew which comes particularly near to the elaboration (if such it is) of 'The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo'. But if Bridges was more familiar with Whitman, there are certainly echoes he might have heard:

Come then, your ways and airs and looks, locks, maiden gear,
gallantry and gaiety and grace,
Winning ways, airs innocent, maiden manners, sweet looks, loose
locks, long locks, lovelocks, gaygear, going gallant, girlgrace -

Such lines might well have reminded Bridges of lines of Whitman, for example:

Love-thoughts, love-juice, love-odor, love-yielding, love-climbers,
and the climbing sap,
Arms and hands of love, lips of love, phallic thumb of love, breasts of
love, bellies press'd and glued together with love,
Earth of chaste love, life that is only life after love...
['Spontaneous Me']

Usually the similarity of minds between Hopkins and Whitman is masked by their opposite ideologies, as their similarity in metre is masked by their opposite and extreme theories of metre, each of which was something of a pose. Whitman's style was no more a 'barbaric yawp' than Hopkins' was calculated artifice. But Hopkins' inspiration was not always 'buckled within the belt of rule', crammed and cramped into sonnets. It was twice allowed to find its own free form. The other example, 'Epithalamium', brings us even closer to Whitman.

The poem is little known. Hopkins imagines himself

where a candycoloured, where a gluegold-brown
Marbled river, boisterously beautiful, between
Roots and rocks is danced and dandled, all in froth and water-
blowballs, down.

He hears a shout

And the riot of a rout
Of, it must be, boys from the town
Bathing: it is summer's sovereign good.
By there comes a listless stranger: beckoned by the noise
He drops towards the river, unseen
Sees the bevy of them, how the boys
With dare and with dowlphinry and bellbright bodies huddling out,
Are earthworld, airworld, waterworld thorough hurled, all by turn and
turn about.

He hies to a neighbouring secluded pool ('the best there'), throws off his
clothes, 'offwings' his boots 'Till walk the world he can with bare his feet',
and enters the water:

Here he will then, here he will the fleet
Flinty kindcold element let break across his limbs
Long. Where we leave him, froliclavish, while he looks about him,
laughs, swims.

This comes very close to section 11 of 'Song of Myself', where a listless
woman in hiding observes twenty-eight young men bathing, and in
imagination joins them:

Dancing and laughing along the beach came the twenty-ninth bather,
The rest did not see her, but she saw them and loved them. ...
The young men float on their backs, their white bellies bulge to the sun,
they do not ask who seizes fast to them,
They do not know who puffs and declines with pendant and bending arch,
They do not think whom they souse with spray.

'Epithalamium' (1888) is by far the most relaxed and high-spirited of the late poems. The 'listless stranger' is clearly Hopkins himself ('to seem the stranger lies my lot'). Though he cannot join the 'dare' and 'downdolphinry' of the boys, he can at least cast off his cares with his clothes:

No more: off with - down he dings
His bleached both and woolwoven wear:
Careless these in coloured wisp
All lie tumbled-to

It is a frolicsome poem, clearly releasing Hopkins' repressed desire to enter the world of joy-in-life, to acknowledge the healing power of nature in itself, the earth and its elements as man's natural home. But of course 'our Law' does not allow it, overrules imagination. He takes it all back, retreats into hiding, with the disingenuous excuse that it is all an allegory:

Enough now; since the sacred matter that I mean
I should be wronging longer leaving it to float
Upon this only gambolling and echoing-of-earth note -
What is ... the delightful dene?
Wedlock. What is water? Spousal love.

It is not. Nothing Hopkins can say now can denature the delightful dene, or turn the 'fleet, flinty kindcold element' into anything but water. Both are far too real, too 'there', too concrete and sensory, too specific, to be reducible to allegory. This is Hopkins painfully renouncing what the poet in him found sacred but the priest could not. This is the crime against nature and his own nature he was virtually to accuse himself of a few months later in 'Thou art indeed just, Lord'.

* * *

Not only was the teaching of St. Ignatius and Duns Scotus wholly anthropocentric; it also encouraged in Hopkins a heightened sense of unique selfhood. If it is possible to touch God in other creatures, how much more so can we know him in other men:

Our law says: Love what are love's worthiest, were all known;
World's loveliest - men's selves. Self flashes off frame and face.
[To what serves Mortal Beauty']

and how much more fully and directly in ourselves. Hopkins' intense sense of self borders at times on the narcissistic and solipsistic:

When I consider my selfbeing, my consciousness and feeling of myself, that taste of myself, of *I* and *me* above and in all things, which is more distinctive than the taste of ale or alum, more distinctive than the smell of walnutleaf or camphor. ... Nothing else in nature comes near this unspeakable stress of pitch, distinctiveness, and selving, this selfbeing of my own.... Searching nature I taste *self* but at one tankard, that of my own being. [Sermons 123]

Again the closeness to Whitman, Whitman taking the self to be the world in little, is astonishing:

I dote on myself, there is that lot of me and all so luscious
['Song of Myself' 24]

But Whitman's exaltation of self is always qualified by his comedy -

The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer

- and balanced by an equally exaggerated humility:

I project my hat, sit shame-faced, and beg. [37]

The conclusion of Hopkins' commentary is 'that I am due to an extrinsic power' [128]; but once the conviction of the identity of self and Christ is lost, the strands of selfhood are untwisted, and the way is opened for the terrible recriminations of the years in Ireland:

I am gall, I am heartburn. God's most deep decree
Bitter would have me taste: my taste was me;
Bones built in me, flesh filled, blood brimmed the curse.
Selfyeast of spirit a dull dough sours. I see
The lost are like this, and their scourge to be
As I am mine, their sweating selves; but worse.
['I wake and feel the fell of dark']

Hopkins accuses himself of the sin of Adam, 'rebelling against God his lawgiver and judge' [*Sermons* 67]. What form could this 'selfyeast of spirit' have taken but that, believing himself to be praising God in his creation, he had in fact been praising himself:

Cheer whom though? the hero whose heaven-handling flung me, foot
trod
Me? or me that fought him? O which one? ['Carrion Comfort']

In the last poems, the conviction that to be oneself is to be Christ can no longer be sustained. The 'unspeakable stress of pitch' becomes 'pitched past pitch of grief', where to the musical meaning is added the sense of shipwreck and of being thrown away as of no worth - a 'Jack, joke, poor potsherd'. The temptation is to 'choose not to be'.

In 'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection', the charge which had sanctified the world in 'God's Grandeur' becomes 'world's wildfire' reducing it to ash. Man, nature's 'clearest-selvèd spark', goes into the bonfire with the rest. The poor Jackself is now mere matchwood. Yet none of this really matters, within this poem, for Hopkins has the master card, the last trump, up his sleeve - the resurrection which will transform his 'mortal trash' into 'immortal diamond'. It is no longer good enough as it was in 'The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo' that the body should be recovered in its youthful beauty ('not the least lash lost') at the resurrection. The desperate need to defeat time, decay and death results, as it always does in poetry ('Ode to a Grecian Urn', 'Sailing to Byzantium') in an exchange of the living body for something cold, hard, and as incapable of living as dying. Freud described this wish for a self-contained and immortal body as both infantile and narcissistic.

'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire' is the last poem with Hopkins' characteristic bravura - inventive diction, sweeping rhythms, clinching rhymes, triumphant coda. The result is a fine but, in comparison with the poems around it, a closed poem. It ends with not the hope but the certainty of the resurrection, leaving no room for other possibilities or for creative interpretation by the reader in terms of his or her nature and experience. It is clear from the surrounding poems that it is not true to Hopkins' real state, in which the only comfort which served was that 'all Life death does end, and each day dies with sleep' ['No worst, there is none']. The well-wrought poem, in its closed circularity, is itself a life-belt for the drowning self, as the externally-validated doctrine of the resurrection is its beacon. The whole

human being, whose last strands are being untwisted, is excluded from the conclusion of the poem in favour of the confident believer.

What Hopkins is undergoing in these last years is the experience Simone Weil calls 'affliction':

Affliction is essentially a destruction of personality, a lapse into anonymity ... it is a pulverisation of the soul by the mechanical brutality of circumstances. ... Unless constrained by experience, it is impossible to believe that everything in the soul - all its thoughts and feelings, its every attitude towards ideas, people and the universe, and, above all, the most intimate attitude of the being towards itself - that all this is entirely at the mercy of circumstances. ... When thought finds itself, through force of circumstance, brought face to face with affliction, it takes immediate refuge in lies, like an animal dashing for cover.
[*'On Science, Necessity and the Love of God'*]

It can also take refuge in the comforts of faith, which, whether true or false in the absolute, is always poetically false unless poetically substantiated. Poetry has nothing to do with 'truths' handed down from above, only with those less comforting truths the imagination dredges up from below. In this poem Hopkins commits one of the original sins of Hughes' Adam:

Wrapped in peach-skin and bruise
He dreamed the religion of the diamond body. [Adam']

The loss of the sense of self as something unique, eternal, and of infinite worth, was devastating to Hopkins, who needed a personal and special providence not to be shared with mere sparrows. Again there is a strong contrast with Whitman who would happily grant everything he claimed for himself to a blade of grass, and who viewed his inevitable dissolution with equanimity.

* * *

I am, I suppose, moving towards the suggestion that Whitman's open style is morally superior to Hopkins' style of the middle period in that Hopkins', like most highly wrought styles, is an attempt to impose an aesthetic or rhetorical order on material which might otherwise threaten the control and security of the ego. Hopkins' Ignatian theology, his

anthropocentrism, narcissism, aestheticism, his inscapes, his elaborate over-complex style, are all symptoms of the same syndrome, of the kind of hubristic or ego-defensive imagination which, according to Janos Pilinszky 'places the stylistic certainty of appearances before the self-forgetful incarnation of the world' ['Creative Imagination in Our Time']·

The unique Hopkins style is 'counter, original, spare, strange'. It enables us to share the thoughts and feelings of a refined sensibility. No-one would wish to be without the famous poems which exemplify it. But they are not Hopkins' finest. The greatest poetry in the language is the simplest. Not the simplicity of innocence, but a strong, naked, irreducible simplicity on the far side of experience, usually of breakdown, which dispenses with verbal richness or complexities ('the poetry does not matter'). No longer, at this level, do words strain and slide away from meanings. The language is capable, we know, of perfect expression, 'a condition of complete simplicity' ['Little Gidding']:

I am a very foolish fond old man,
Fourscore and upward, not an hour more or less;
And, to deal plainly,
I fear I am not in my perfect mind.
Methinks I should know you and know this man;
Yet I am doubtful: for I am mainly ignorant
What place this is, and all the skill I have
Remembers not these garments; nor I know not
Where I did lodge last night. Do not laugh at me;
For, as I am a man, I think this lady
To be my child Cordelia. [*King Lear* IV vii 60-9]

The greatest lines are utterly purged of style:

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow.

Never, never, never, never, never.

Only the greatest poets have touched this level of self-abnegation. It is touched again and again in the last sonnets, where Hopkins speaks directly, unselfconsciously, out of the spiritual nakedness and sterility of his 'winter world'. They came, he says, 'like inspirations unbidden and against my will'. Ostensibly, he is praying and pleading that his work might become

more rewarding and his poetic inspiration return, but the insistent imagery of fertility in both the human and the natural worlds tells another story. His last cries are addressed not to the God of 'yonder', but of here and now, to the 'lord of life', who has cut him off from all that sustains life, from the common life-need of water, and from the communion of natural life to which even the birds and plants belong.

Hopkins' inability to find 'Thirst's all-in-all in all a world of wet' reveals, consciously or unconsciously, in its echo of 'Water, water, every where, / Nor any drop to drink', his sense of spiritual kinship with the Ancient Mariner. Hopkins knew the spectre of Life-in-Death, the loneliness of a soul in agony, the curse of spiritual drought. Does he also share the mariner's guilt, the deep knowledge of a crime against nature and his own nature, like a dead bird hanging about his neck? It was a full acceptance and spontaneous blessing of all the creatures he had formerly despised, of their lordly autonomy, which released the Ancient Mariner from his curse, and allowed nature to resume her fertile processes:

To Mary Queen the praise be given!
She sent the gentle sleep from Heaven,
That slid into my soul.

...

And when I awoke, it rained.

Mary Queen provides for Coleridge here a continuity with the great pagan Queen of Heaven, who was, according to Hughes 'the goddess of Catholicism, who was the goddess of Medieval and Pre-Christian England, who was the divinity of the throne, who was the goddess of natural law and of love, who was the goddess of all sensation and organic life' [WP 110]. This is very much the goddess Hopkins had celebrated in 'The May Magnificat', where he comes close to saying that May is Mary's month because she is no other than the great Mother Goddess of earth's renewal. When he asks the 'mighty mother' why May is her month she answers with her own question: 'What is Spring?', to which she answers 'Growth in every thing -'

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

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
Mary sees, sympathizing
 With that world of good,
 Nature's motherhood.

Hopkins continues to celebrate 'Spring's universal bliss' until, almost as an afterthought, he awkwardly drags himself back from the pagan world:

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

The atonement of body and spirit, nature and God, pagan and Christian, which Hopkins had almost achieved at that time is finally abandoned in 'Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves'. Here everything his sacramental vision had unified is unwound, dismembered, back to a stark dualism which is death to poetry, except the terrible poetry of the death of poetry:

Let life, waned, ah let life wind
Off her once skeined stained veined variety upon, all upon two
 spools; part, pen, pack
Now her all in two flocks, two folds - black, white; right, wrong;
 reckon but, reck but, mind
But these two; ware of a world where but these two tell, each off the
 other; of a rack
Where, selfwring, sheathe-and-shelterless, thoughts against thoughts
 in groans grind.

The great mother has now turned dragonish:

In her death-throes, nature has defensively manifested herself to him
her unacceptable, demonic aspect, embodying the primeval fear of the

monstrous, devouring female. Hopkins can no longer integrate and reconcile the energies of his inner dragon, his unfallen self, and is consigning her to the darkness, separating the female from the male, 'black' from 'white', 'wrong' from 'right'.

[from an unpublished essay by Ann Mackay]

Hopkins, like Wordsworth, now finds himself excluded from Nature's festival, but does not for that reason end in repudiation of her. His faith in her proves at the last more resilient than his faith in a God outside nature. At the same time that he is crying out for a diamond body, he is pleading for impregnation and conception, for the creative life of the living body. These are, of course, metaphors for grace and for poetic inspiration. But it is surely highly significant that in searching for appropriate metaphors for those things which constituted for him the very meaning and justification of life, he should turn so often, so insistently and powerfully, to sexual metaphors and the closely related metaphors drawn from nature's capacity for self-renewal, nature's never-lost in-built grace.

Hopkins would have agreed with Wordsworth that the making of metaphors is 'the great spring of the activity of our minds, and their chief feeder' ['Preface' to the *Lyrical Ballads*]. Wordsworth adds, astonishingly: 'From this principle the direction of the sexual appetite and all the passions connected with it, take their origin'. It is ironic that the poet of all poets whose metaphors most vindicate this claim should have been a celibate priest whose sexual appetite was doomed to lead only to secret and sterile sin.

The last two sonnets are driven by sexual imagery. 'To R.B.' is a cry from Hopkins' widowed anima, his muse, his soul, a cry for impregnation ('live and lancing like the blowpipe flame'), for sunshine and spring rain. But in 'Thou art indeed just, Lord' he is himself the lacking father, castrated and impotent:

See, banks and brakes
Now, leaved how thick! laced they are again
With fretty chervil, look, and fresh wind shakes
Them; birds build - 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.

['Thou are indeed just, Lord']

These by no means lagging lines, stripped of all consolations from above, and of all the ego-protection of an imposed style, speak out of the real desolation of the heart. They echo hollowly the joyful shout at Eleusis: "The people, looking up to heaven, cry "Rain!", and, looking down to earth, cry "Conceive!": *hye, kye'* [Baring 381], and the opening of the Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, which testifies to a spiritual life in men which is not cut off from the fertile processes of the natural world, but continuous with them:

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breath
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne,
And smale foweles maken melodye,
That slepen al the nyght with open ye
(So priketh hem nature in hir corages);
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages ...

Nature pricked Hopkins' heart that spring, but in so doing only taunted him and brought home to him the horror of the chasm which had now opened up for him between nature and God.

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