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Hopkins and the Christian Imagination

John C. Hawley, S. J.

The context for these remarks may be suggested by a recent work from one of Ireland's most prominent living poets. The following is taken from Seamus Heaney's collection, *Seeing Things*:

The annals say: when the monks of Clonmacnoise
Were all at prayers inside the oratory
A ship appeared above them in the air.

The anchor dragged along behind so deep
It hooked itself into the altar rails
And then, as the big hull rocked to a standstill,

A crewman shinned and grappled down the rope
And struggled to release it. But in vain.
"This man can't bear our life here and will drown,"

The abbot said, "unless we help him." So
They did, the freed ship sailed, and the man climbed back
Out of the marvellous as he had known it.

The role of poets is to get their anchors caught in many such monasteries, to shimmy down the entangling ropes, and then to record the marvelous resistance that caused them to stop in the first place to notice. But those in the monastery, putting in their time, must not too quickly conclude that such accidental tourists, dropped from some ethereal realm, are likely to drown if we do not

distance them from the world we consider mundane. In both situations, that of the sailor and that of the abbot, the question of how we envision reality, of what our shaping paradigms may be, dominates our interpretation and response. Imagination shapes our engagement with reality. What remains opaque or simply insignificant to one individual nags someone else, fascinates or haunts, sometimes opens onto an experience of epiphany.

Imagination also reshapes logic and offers a new approach to a problem that facts and reason cannot sufficiently describe. Thus, Albert Einstein was once asked to explain the theory of relativity in terms that might make it a bit more accessible to the average human being. Einstein replied: "I cannot do what you request, but if you will call on me at Princeton, I will play it for you on my violin" (Fischer 15). Einstein implicitly suggested a new paradigm for the reality he had been representing until then by the mathematical paradigm that so confused his listener. This calls to mind, in light of our principal focus during these days, the particular aspect of imagination that theologian David Tracy calls analogical. Analyzing our age as one of porous boundaries between various paradigms for reality, he argues strongly in favor of an ecumenism in our religious imagination, an opening up of our systematic approach to transcendent encounters. Thus, he writes,

Because an analogical, not univocal, imagination is the need of our radically pluralistic moment, the dissimilarities are as important as the similarities-in-difference, the ordered relationships will emerge from distinct, sometimes mutually exclusive, focal responses of the different traditions and the focal questions in the situation. Each of us understands each other through analogy or not at all.

(447)

We are each, in a sense, theories of relativity for each other, intelligible less through anything close to a mathematical formula than through the playing of a violin.

So, too, with Hopkins; so, too, with Hopkins' God; so, too, with Hopkins' manic creativity or depressed dryness. Again, in the words of David Tracy,

if we are not to deny the witness of experience itself in the human search for love, then we also know that listening, argument, conflict, confrontation are internal dialectical necessities operative in the demands for self-transcendence present in every loving relationship.

(447)

What I hope to suggest in what follows is that Hopkins consistently entered into his world and his poetry from the viewpoint of a Christian. This may seem obvious and beyond question. Nonetheless, if Tracy is correct, then the internal doubts and external failures that have led some to brand his closing years as odd, unfair, even tragic are remarkable confirmations of the vitality of his Christian imagination. It is that specific world view that gave birth to the conflict; it is his obvious sincerity from start to finish that transformed him into a public failure and a private saint. If some would also call him a neurotic, one *unnecessarily* struggling against imagined forces, it might be argued that the Freudian paradigm is as much an imaginative construct as is the Christian. Both grapple with reality to shape a suitable analogy—both ultimately work more as poets than as scientists.

From the beginning, the specific aspect of the Christian view that captivates Hopkins *is* one of conflict. This should not be surprising, since he very much experienced himself as a convert, with all that meant in Victorian British society. He was casting himself outside the pale, as his father, a devout Anglican, very well

knew. In writing to his son's Anglican confessor, Manley Hopkins said "the blow is so deadly and great that we have not yet recovered from the first shock of it. . . . save him from throwing a pure life and a somewhat unusual intellect away in the cold limbo which Rome assigns to her English converts" (434-35). Father and son appear not to have spoken to each other after this for five years (Bump 60). This seems extreme, but the father's description of the conversion as a throwing away of a "pure life" suggests the sort of imagination shaping *his* understanding of Roman Catholicism, and the consequent response from his converted son.

As painful as this and later struggles clearly were for the poet, they demonstrate the level of engagement with reality as it divided itself in his imagination—not as a series of dichotomies, which, in fact, he refused to admit to his imaginings but as a world of contention and volatility. As theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar noted,

From the poems, the diaries and letters there breathes everywhere, uniquely and unmistakably, the English countryside: woods, hills, green upon green, always a strong wind, driving clouds, the closeness of the sea, the moors and highlands with quick-flowing brooks and heather, the surge of the waves, islands wild and yet with a Southern mildness. But it is no cultural landscape, not at all a romantic or mythological landscape, but, as it were, a primeval landscape. The word *wild* is everywhere and is literally meant, but it enters even into the loftiest Christian utterances: as when Mary is described as "worldmothering air, air wild [sic]," and Christ's Advent, in the great shipwreck poem, as "sealed in wild waters."

(359)

He sings of "brute beauty" with startling results and, as von Balthasar and most readers notice, in poems like "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire," it is a nature that is "noisy, stormy, joyfully romping about, pillows of clouds

tossed by the winds of the storm" (361). This "primeval" nature stays, for Hopkins, a mysterious power that seems to terrify and fascinate him, as in this journal entry from 1872, when he was 28:

This month here and all over the country many great thunderstorms. Cyril, in bed I think, at Liverpool after a simultaneous flash and crash felt a shock like one from a galvanic battery and for some time one of his arms went numbed. At Roehampton Fr. Williams was doubled up and another Father had his breviary struck out of his hand. Here a tree was struck near the boys' cricket field and a cow was ripped up (*J* 221).

Hopkins, of course, was far more than a nature poet, though, and what terrified him in the lightning is present in his theology, as well. Thus, in the poem first alluded to by von Balthasar ("The Blessed Virgin compared to the Air we Breathe"), he speaks of

Mary Immaculate
 Merely a woman, yet
 Whose presence, power is
 Great as no goddess's
 Was deemèd, dreamèd; who
 This one work has to do—
 Let all God's glory through,
 God's glory which would go
 Through her and from her flow
 Off, and no way but so.

(*P* 93-97)

Grace or Providence, if less destructive than the lightning, works in scarily analogous ways.

What was true for Mary is analogously true for each human being, in Hopkins' scheme of reality. In his notes for his retreat in August of 1880, for example, in

meditating on the notion of the creation of men and women, he turns his attention to the unifying force of instress, which patterns each one's individuality, willy-nilly:

when I ask where does all this throng and stack of being, so rich, so distinctive, so important, come from / nothing I see can answer me. And this whether I speak of human nature or of my individuality, my selfbeing. For human nature, being more highly pitched, selved, and distinctive than anything in the world, can have been developed, evolved, condensed, from the vastness of the world not anyhow or by the working of common powers but only by one of finer or higher pitch and determination than itself and certainly than any that elsewhere we see, for this power had to force forward the starting or stubborn elements to the one pitch required. And this is much more true when we consider the mind; 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, and is incommunicable by any means to another man.

(S 122-23)

In this imagination of the "one of finer or higher pitch and determination" Hopkins moves beyond Tennyson's description of Nature as "red in tooth and claw" and indifferent to the Species; in the implication of teleology he moves beyond Dylan Thomas' force that drives through the flower; he reaches, in fact, almost beyond Teilhard de Chardin's notion of evolution moving, in men and women, into the noosphere, and, in Christ, beyond that. As in the description of Mary, here, too, the *violence* surging through the individual in this manifestation of the transcendent is impressive. Hopkins himself once noted his surprise at this aspect of his writing (Balthasar 360).

The other face of the God with whom Hopkins contended, however, was very far from this one that recalls John Donne's "Three-personed God." Far from ravishing Hopkins, this other experience is one of complete abandonment. There is not the lush ooze of oil crushed; there is desiccation. Thus, in 1873, seven years before the retreat notes we have just heard, Hopkins is on vacation in the Isle of Man, and writes "being unwell I was quite downcast: nature in all her parcels and faculties gaped and fell apart, *fatiscebat*, like a clod cleaving and holding only by strings of root. But this must often be" (*J* 236). Why must this often be, we ask? Whether it is because Hopkins feels that he is uniquely plagued by especially debilitating psychological difficulties, or whether he is simply acknowledging that human life cannot always hold nicely together, in his special way of imagining the world he does here suggest that instress is not always easily up to its task. Nor, of course, as he was to make increasingly clear in his Dublin years, was he easily up to his own task.

But it is not just the task of teaching at University College that posed difficulties for Hopkins' imagination (and those, probably, principally because they did nothing for or with his imagination). It was, instead, the larger Christian problem suggested by the 1880 discussion of the incommunicable self locked in each individual, the one ultimately alone in this life, the one Hopkins' Christian imagination grappled with in a meditation on death that he preached in 1881:

1st prelude to the meditation—We shall die in these bodies.
I see you living before me, with the mind's eye, brethren, I see your corpses: those same bodies that sit there before me are rows of corpses that will be. And I that speak to you, you hear and see me, you see me breathe and move: this breathing body is my corpse and I am living in my tomb. This is one thing certain of your place of death; you are there now,

you sit within your corpses; look no farther: there where you are you will die.

(S 245)

These two sides to Hopkins, even if more pointedly expressed in him than in most, nonetheless must sit uncomfortably in everyone with a truly Christian imagination. One might respond that this tensive balance between hope and despair should be resolvable in one's trust in the Resurrection. There is some theoretical truth to this, but "resolution" for any living creature is either a sometime thing, or that creature has stopped living. Christians take ironic comfort in the vision of Jesus asking that the cup of suffering be taken from him, if possible. That recognition of the internal struggle is much the same as that guiding Hopkins in his opening verse to "The Wreck":

Thou mastering me
God! giver of breath and bread;
World's strand, sway of the sea;
Lord of living and dead;
Thou has bound bones and veins in me, fastened me flesh,
And after it almost unmade, what with dread,
Thy doing: and dost thou touch me afresh?
Over again I feel thy finger and find thee.

(P 51)

We do well to remember that Hopkins begins this poem in 1875, just two years after he complains of being downcast and nature being like a clod cleaving and holding only by strings of root. It was a pattern, and not by any means outside the typical striving life of the sincere Christian. If many of his last poems give wonderfully strong and violent expression to the experience of the Dark Night of the Soul, they also have a cleansing and calming affect on Hopkins the man. David Downes

has recently concluded that Hopkins overstressed the emphasis on human will in the writings of both Duns Scotus and Ignatius, and that this led to his increasing despair over his own ability to give himself purely and with fervor to the work of his own salvation. Significantly, therefore, in the notes to Hopkins' last retreat in the year of his death he concludes with a meditation on John the Baptist. Taking the role of the Baptist, Hopkins speaks of the Christ:

he baptises with breath and fire, as wheat is winnowed in the wind and sun, and uses no shell like this which only washes once but a fan that thoroughly and for ever parts the wheat from the chaff. For the fan is a sort of scoop, a shallow basket with a low back, sides sloping down from the back forwards, and no rim in front, like our dustpans, it is said. The grain is either scooped into this or thrown in by another, then tossed out against the wind, and this vehement action St. John compares to his own repeated "dousing" or affusion. 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; after that nothing is more combustible than the chaff, and yet the fire he calls unquenchable. It will do its work at once and yet last, as this river runs forever, but has to do its work over again. Everything about himself is weak and ineffective, he and his instruments; everything about Christ strong.

(S 267-68)

The characteristic Hopkinsesque interest in specific details and unusual words is there, mixed in with profound theology that his other writings from this period, such as the Terrible Sonnets, show us to be of pressing importance to him. If what Downes suggests is true, the meditation's closing resignation is significant. Everything about the poet, or the man himself, may seem weak and

ineffective; that, it seems implied, is finally all right, since everything about Christ is strong.

In concluding, I would like to refer to the Seamus Heaney poem with which I began. "‘This man can’t bear our life here and will drown,’ the abbot said, ‘unless we help him.’ So they did, the freed ship sailed, and the man climbed back / Out of the marvellous as he had known it." Among the individuals shaping Hopkins’ imagination, as others have noted in some detail, were certainly Keats, Ruskin, Pater, Savanarola, Bonaventure, Scotus, and Ignatius. None of them, ultimately, helped him climb back out of the marvellous, however, once they helped him get there. Thus, Hopkins stands exposed to the world as a conflicted, tormented, some would say overly-sensitive and possibly neurotic, highly gifted, sometimes severely frustrated man. But look what he saw, and look how he has, in turn, shaped so many lives (those of modern Jesuits certainly being clearly among them).

More than any other influence on Hopkins was that of the Jesus described in the New Testament, whom Hopkins caught "in his riding / Of the rolling level underneath him steady air" (*P* 69). That this did not make his life any easier would not surprise most Christians, and certainly not William Lynch, with whose words I close. Speaking of *Rashomon*, the great film by Kurosawa (and novel by Ryunosuke Akutagawa), in which a tragic story, told from five points of view, is left unclear in the protagonist’s mind, Lynch writes:

It is he—and we with him—who must struggle with faith and in faith and come out somehow with an image of it all that will mean his own interpreting survival, his own not-corrupting, noncorrupted action. It must be that he suffers. Every grown man and woman does this struggling with images every day of their lives. Faith moves into serenity and the forging of one of its images, but it must not accept the burden of starting with serenity. Faith is a

moving, and a wrestling. Look, says Ivan Karamazov, what the universe did to Christ.

(152)

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