



Gerard and God's Grandeur by Tim McIntosh

The Jesuit priest Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-

1889) was one of the most original poets to write in modern English. His brief life can be understood as an attempt to reconcile two disparate callings—those of a deeply committed Christian and a passionate poet.

Hopkins, the oldest of nine children, was born to a devout mother and a cultured father (who himself published a book of poems). A fearless climber of trees in his youth, the young Hopkins clambered through the same elm groves where John Keats wrote "Ode to a Nightingale" in 1819.

Although Keats lived a generation earlier, he shaped Hopkins's early poetic ideals. Hopkins identified with the Keatsian notion that a poet ought live in a "world of private visions" where life "might be freely altered to fit personal desire." Though inspired by this manifesto in youth, Hopkins later construed it as a blockade against his desire for God.

Hopkins's talent with paint and pencil prepared him to see nature as a theological revelation. As a young man, he spent long periods outdoors, concentrating his vision on fish in river eddies, cattle grazing in glens, flowers fanning against the wind. The results might be seen in these brush-stroked lines of "Pied Beauty":

*For skies of couple-colour as a brinded
cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout
that swim.*

Or these from "That Nature is a Heraclitian Fire":

*Cloud-puffball, torn tufts, tossed pillows'
flaunt forth, then chevy on an air-
built thoroughfare: heaven-roysterers, in
gay-gangs ' they throng; they glitter
in marches.*

This concentrated sight remained with him throughout life; he often returned to nature for material and inspiration.

Two collegiate pursuits also helped shape Hopkins's verse. While enrolled at Balliol College, Oxford (to study classics, of course), he took a philology class. In vogue was the "onomatopoetic theory" of language origins. Oxford philologists at the time believed that words like *moo*, *achoo*, *buzz*, and *quack* not only imitated sounds, but were examples of how all primitive words functioned. Meanings were later affixed to these sounds and evolved into modern words. Philologists later abandoned the theory, but it stoked Hopkins's imagination. Read aloud part of Hopkins's "Binsey Poplars" and hear how attentive Hopkins was to word-sounds.

*My aspens dear, whose airy cages
quelled,
Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping
sun,
All felled, felled, are all felled;
Of a fresh and following folded rank
Not spared, not one
That dandled a sandaled
Shadow that swam or sank
On meadow and river and wind-
wandering weed-winding bank.*

The result is a peculiar lyricism, a tongue-spoken music that gratifies as it illuminates.



**March 10
Student Art Show
& Performance
7:00 PM**

"Melody is what strikes me most of all," Hopkins later wrote, "in music and design in painting...and is what I above all aim at in poetry."

While Hopkins shaped his craft through painting and philology, the Oxford Movement shaped his theology. The movement was one of several worldviews vying for the minds of young Oxford Victorians. Others included mainline Anglicans, moderate Anglicans, liberal Anglicans, romantics, Matthew Arnold humanists, scientific materialists, and philosophical rationalists.

The Oxford Movement started eighteen years before Hopkins enrolled. A small stream of Anglicans led by John Henry Newman, England's most prominent Anglican, migrated back into the Catholic Church. When other prominent clergymen followed him, Anglicans were irate. How could Newman and friends join the Papists?

The Oxford Movement hoped to reestablish the authority and unity of the Catholic Church in England. Its second goal was to infuse Oxford's creeping rationalism with Christian piety. Newman feared that theologians like William Paley were leading believers to mistake philosophy for faith. Newman believed Paley's famous Clockmaker Argument demonstrated God's power, skill, and



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craftsmanship, but it failed to portray God's holiness, mercy, and future judgment—and these, said Newman, were the essence of Christianity.¹

This emphasis on the passionate nature of faith surely resonated with Hopkins who was wrestling privately with intense emotions. During his second year at Oxford, he wrote of “battling with God,” and his diary entries revealed a strong sexual attraction to male friends. Nothing suggests Hopkins's desires were physically consummated, and it seems he remained celibate throughout his life. “I am a eunuch,” he later wrote his friend Robert Bridges, “but for the kingdom of God's sake.”

Hopkins's lifelong melancholy also emerged during this time. He sought to cure his “terrible pathos” (as one friend called it) through ardent religious devotion. It is no surprise, then, that his Catholic conversion seems more like a hasty elopement than a methodical marriage. This is not to suggest his conversion was effortless. He disputed Catholic claims about the sacraments and papal infallibility. But despite these disputes, he felt defenseless before God's grace. He later wrote,

*I did say yes
O at lightning and lashed rod;
...And fled with a fling of the heart to the
heart of the Host.*

His conversion angered friends, parents, and teachers, but he defended himself in a letter to his father, saying that he had “no power...to stir a finger: It is God Who makes the decision and not I.” He feared his father would never allow him in their home again. He was allowed, but only under condition that he not try to convert his brothers and sisters.

Relations with his father remained chilled throughout his life, but Hopkins had expected it and was willing to endure it. He believed his Catholic conversion as necessary to pursue Christ.² “I have found the dominant of my range and state,” he wrote. “Love, O my God, to call Thee Love and Love.”

A week after becoming Catholic (Newman himself had confirmed him), Hopkins gathered all his Keats-inspired poems and,

determined to quit anything that barred him from God, burned them in a bonfire. (He later nicknamed the event the “Slaughter of the Innocents.”) He then entered the Jesuits at age twenty-four and, for seven years, abandoned poetry.

His preparation for ordination began with the stringent life of a Jesuit novice. For thirty days he meditated upon God's forgiveness of sins and then upon the life, Passion, and resurrection of Christ. The purpose of these exercises, according to Ignatius of Loyola (founder of the Jesuits) was to remove from the soul “all disordered activity...and find the divine will in the disposition of one's life.” For a time, Hopkins would also practice poverty and serve as a preacher, missionary, and parish priest. By all reports, he was devout, conscientious, and well-liked.

But he wrote no poetry. He yearned for a time when his poetry and ministry would merge. “Surely,” he wrote later, “one vocation cannot cancel out another.” Yet he resolved not to write “unless it were by the wish of my superiors.”

An opportunity surfaced three years before his ordination. He mentioned to his rector being stirred by a newspaper story about the *Deutschland*, a ship that capsized in the North Sea. Five nuns aboard had drowned. With a wink, his rector suggested someone should write a poem about it. That was the sanction Hopkins needed. After seven years without writing a poem, he broke his silence.

“The Wreck of the *Deutschland*” began Hopkins's attempt to merge poetry and theology. The poem advocates for God's justice and pleads against His disappearance among the Victorians. The poem contains three groups of stanzas. The first is autobiographical, revealing how God had touched Hopkins:

*Thou mastering me
God! giver of breath and bread;
World's strand, sway of the sea;
Lord of living and dead;
Thou hast bound bones and veins in
me, fastened me flesh...*

Another stanza wonders why this same God showed no mercy to the *Deutschland's* passengers:

*O Father, not under thy feathers
nor ever as guessing
The goal was a shoal, of a fourth the
doom to be drowned;
Yet did the dark side of the bay
of Thy blessing
Not vault them, the millions of rounds
of thy mercy not reeve even them in?*

But ultimately he takes comfort in a Love in the next world that surpasses this world's suffering:

*With a mercy that outrides
The all of water, an ark
For the listener; for the lingerer with a
love glides
Lower than death and the dark...*

By the time Hopkins was ordained, the major elements of his mature poetry had blossomed. He developed a new technique based on the Welsh, Irish, and Anglo-Saxon dialects in his parish that he called “sprung rhythm.” Sprung rhythm cadences guide the timing of his poetry through stressed and unstressed syllables. Read aloud the following (“Pied Beauty,” inspired by Psalm 148); your mouth will naturally fall into a pleasing cadence:

*Glory be to God for dappled things—
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled
cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout
that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches'
wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced—fold,
fallow, and plough;
And áll trádes, their gear and tackle
and trim.*

*All things counter, original, spare,
strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows
how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle,
dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past
change:
Praise him.*

Despite exuberant praise to God for dappled things, melancholy weighed on Hopkins and emerged in his later poetry.

In "No Worst, There is None," he expresses the deep world-sorrow that plagued him throughout his life:

*No worst, there is none. Pitched past
pitch of grief,
More pangs will, schooled at forepangs,
wilder wring.
Comforter, where, where is your com-
forting?*

In 1884, Hopkins received a post at the University of Dublin. This allowed more time to write, but his teaching duties often overwhelmed him. And despite laborious hours of composition, his poetry was not recognized. His superiors knew almost nothing about it, and his friends failed to understand it. The Jesuit journal *The Month* rejected his only two submissions.

He knew recognition was fickle, and he called fame "a thing which lies in the award of a random, reckless, incompetent, and unjust judge—the public, the multitude." He took comfort in his belief that "the only just judge...is Christ, who prizes, is proud of, and admires, more than any other man, more than the receiver himself can, the gifts of his own making." He knew these things, but surely his aloneness was a heavy weight to bear.

Admirers of Hopkins's poetry adore his sprung rhythms and God-infused imagery; we might be tempted to envision him as a candlelit mystic, piously dashing off modern masterpieces. But his life was a struggle to write next week's sermon, visit dreary parishioners, and shuffle to another school. In other words, most of his life was tediously ordinary. Yet, despite lifelong depression, Hopkins's last words were, "I am so happy, I am so happy. I loved my life." Perhaps the most suitable poem for the end of his life was "Heaven-Haven (A nun takes the veil)":

*I HAVE desired to go
Where springs not fail,
To fields where flies no sharp and sided
hail
And a few lilies blow.*

*And I have asked to be
Where no storms come,
Where the green swell is in the havens
dumb,
And out of the swing of the sea.*

Thirty years after his death, Hopkins was "discovered" when Robert Bridges published his poems. Modernist literary critics heard a new voice in poetry, inventive and alive. The faithful heard something deeper: songs written by a man stretched between passions of poetry and faith.

Notes:

¹ Newman's ideal was the Apostle Peter who acted first in faith and only later philosophized. Newman cites Acts 10 where Peter, after his vision of the clean and unclean animals, immediately journeys to the Gentile Cornelius's house to tell him about Christ. Only later did Peter philosophically reflect

about the dream's meaning: God had given the Gentiles the same gift as He gave to Jews who believed in Jesus (Acts 11:17). Peter's example was, for Newman, indicative of the nature of faith: action first, philosophy later. See Newman's University Sermons.

² Kitchen, Paddy. *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Life* (1978), p. 96.

Tim McIntosh is a tutor at Gutenberg College. In addition to teaching writing to Gutenberg freshmen and sophomores, he is a playwright, screenwriter, and actor. He earned his M.A. in theology from Reformed Theological Seminary.

Student Art Show & Performance

March 10 at 7:00 PM

The annual art show highlights the art of students from Gutenberg College, the University of Oregon, and other local colleges. Performance begins at 7:00 p.m. Limited seating is first come, first served. A gallery reception follows. A donation of \$3.00 for admission is requested but not required. All donations help support the arts at Gutenberg College.



Gutenberg juniors honored in November at the **2011 Junior Tea** for having successfully completed their two-year exams: (l to r) Becca Manley, Juliet Peterson, Bryn Maclennan, Amanda Kramer, Samuel Weisse, and Madelaine Wheeler. Each student received a Greek New Testament.

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