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Love in Darkness: The Optimistic Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins

The poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins offers a view of the human experience that resonates with the soul not only at the high times of our lives but also at the worst. In uniting beauty and suffering, Hopkins invites us to experience God in all the various facets of creation. Moving beyond mere superficial understanding, Hopkins's writing desires for us to *meet* God in all that we encounter; from the beautiful "is-ness" of man as Christ's image we see described in "As Kingfishers Catch Fire" to the stark desolation of human grief and sorrow we witness in "The Caged Skylark", Hopkins's poetry challenges us not to allow apparent darkness to mar our view of God's wondrous creation. Even in the grim despondence of Hopkins's "Terrible Sonnets", those well-known for their melancholy and frustrated tone and subject matter, his characteristic sense of hope in God's presence, if only a faint glimmer, is never altogether lost. The often paradoxical, gravely hopeful, exasperatedly reverential, bitterly loving nature of Hopkins's poetry, particularly when considering the challenges of his own life as a motivator, call us to recognize that despite the immense weight of human suffering and the unavoidable imminence of death, we ought nevertheless to find hope for salvation, joy and eternal life in the extraordinary beauty of God.

When discussing Hopkins' paradoxical view of beauty in his writing, an awareness of his personal and religious background proves helpful; the broader context of Hopkins' lifelong fight against depression and inner turmoil provides a lens through which the messages within his

poetry become much more apparent. In Hopkins's poems as well as in the letters he writes to acquaintances, we see a man torn between joy and sorrow, appreciation and frustration, hope and despair. On one hand, Hopkins joyfully eulogizes God's gift of eternal life in "At the Wedding March," writing, "I to him turn with tears / Who to wedlock, his wonder wedlock / Déals triumph and immortal years" (Hopkins 10-12). In comparing God's relationship with man to something as glorious and eternal as marriage, the speaker's words evoke a sense of passionate closeness between humanity and its savior; Hopkins could not provide us with a much more optimistic view of the ultimate fate of mankind. To long to be locked in matrimony with God allows both the speaker and Hopkins to express man's relationship with the Father as the apex and goal of human experience. Yet, firmly to the contrary, Hopkins writes in one of his later "Terrible Sonnets", "And my lament / Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent / To dearest him that lives alas! away" (Hopkins 6-8). In linking the speaker's cries of sorrow with ill-fated letters to a very distant friend, Hopkins depicts man's relationship with God as marred, severed, seemingly without hope of repair. Here we are presented with two views of religion that apparently could not be in firmer contrast; the war that rages within Hopkins' heart makes itself clear in poems that seem to debate one another on the fate of mankind, a timeless debate between salvation at the hands of an infinitely loving God and doom resulting from our own sinful nature; such a war suggests, we may conclude, a sort of bipolar depression within Hopkins, who himself wrote, "You are certainly wrong about Hyde being overdrawn... my Hyde is worse" (Hopkins 238), in response to Robert Bridges's criticism of Stevenson's famous novel. Even Hopkins himself could not deny the importance and severity of this violent conflict between joy and despondency within himself; the struggle to find closeness with God despite life's challenges defines Hopkins's

poetic voice, resulting in a range of themes so wide one might question whether they were all written by the same man.

Yet it is within this hellish turmoil one finds the most hopeful message of all in Hopkins's poetry; despite the ferocity of Hopkins's constant struggle between good and evil, even his darkest, most despondent poems are never left without at least a sliver of hope in God's plan for mankind's salvation. While it may seem plausible that, "creative activity may... intensify [Hopkins's] self-denigration by making him more attentive to inner states" (136), as George M. Johnson argues in his "Psychobiographical Portrait of... Hopkins", Johnson's argument fails to account for the prevailing theme of hope that unfailingly marks the conclusions of Hopkins's poems. Take, for instance, "The Caged Skylark", one of the aforementioned "Terrible Sonnets". In the poem, Hopkins compares the human soul to a song-bird trapped in a cage, doomed to suffer without reaching its full potential. At first, such an image appears cruel, morbid and hopeless; however, Hopkins leaves us with a strong, sudden depiction of hope at the poem's conclusion: "But uncumberèd: meadow-down is not distressed / For a rainbow footing it nor he for his bones risen" (Hopkins 13-14). Such a drastic shift from the feeling of despair conveyed in the image of a trapped bird suffering in a cage to the natural, open magnificence of a rainbow-laden field seems to proclaim the steadfastness of God's loving plan for salvation. We will be free at last, such an image serves to remind us, from the burdensome tribulations natural to our fallen state in the beauty and eternity of the Resurrection. **Few have likely endured internal turmoil and suffering to the same degree as Hopkins, who concluded that his characteristic "fits of sadness... resemble madness" (134).** For such a man to nonetheless maintain hope in the goodness of God's plan leads us necessarily to recognize that naught in our lives should allow us to concede our search for a life with God, despite whatever difficulty we may face.

When we dive further into Hopkins' poetry on a more minute scale, we find that the attention and care he grants to each object in his poems bears witness to Hopkins' great appreciation for the finer details of creation; in granting life and individuality to each subject in his poems, Hopkins reveals the beauty and opportunity that God imbues within all created things, living and nonliving. In considering how Hopkins communicates this idea of strict distinctiveness among that which God has created, it is helpful to understand how Hopkins' Jesuit theology served to guide his view; as J. Hillis Miller argues in his "Creation of the Self in Gerard Manley Hopkins", "The self for Hopkins, in the very first moment in which it recognizes itself, recognizes itself... as a plenitude. It does not need to seek anything outside of itself as a source of its life, because that life has already been given" (294). And indeed, we may look to Hopkins' poetry for confirmation of such a contention; in Hopkins's "Spring", we watch as "The glassy peartree leaves and blooms, they brush / The descending blue" (6-7). Hopkins writes not in the abstract; rather, he imbues one particular peartree with life by allowing it to take direct action, choosing to omit the passive voice. Here, Miller's argument rings particularly true—in singling out one specific peartree—the glassy peartree—and granting it autonomy, Hopkins denotes the object as unique by its very nature, not as a result of some external force. Such an idea was not common to the time of Hopkins' writing—indeed, scholar James Wood views Hopkins as a "literary pioneer" of the concept of individuality: "'thisness'... was adapted [into poetry] by Gerard Manley Hopkins... by thisness, I mean... any detail that centers our attention with its concretion" (67). (Returning to the glass pear tree) By introducing the theology of creation to poetry in such an innovative fashion, Hopkins offers a true testament to the beauty and goodness of created things. As Hopkins treats the subjects of his poems with precision, care, and respect, he seeks to mirror the infinitely loving care with which God treats every facet of creation.

Hopkins's poetic style seems oriented towards achieving this end; from the overarching themes of goodness and purpose in his poems to the energy and life he imbues into each line by way of consonance and internal rhyme, every detail of Hopkins's poems, both literary and descriptive, speaks to the hopeful idea that God provides all created things with their own purpose. This idea presents itself no more vividly than in Hopkins's "As Kingfishers Catch Fire", perhaps his most optimistic poem of all. We see the speaker grant life even to lifeless objects such as bells: "each hung bell's / Bow swung finds tongue to swing out broad its name / Each mortal thing does one thing and the same" (3-4). In attributing human qualities to the bell by granting it a name and allowing it to speak for itself, Hopkins offers the bell a sense of dignity, respect and autonomy; granting the bell a timeless purpose allows it a share in God's greater plan. Hopkins animates even the words he writes, filling them with energy through the use of smooth internal rhyme ("swung", "tongue") and brisk, lively consonance ("bell's, bow, broad" and "swung, swing"). Reading these lines, we see, through the eyes of the speaker, the beautiful, life-giving order of God's plan. By partaking in the action for which it was created, the bell flourishes, filled with vitality; so too do we, as Hopkins argues at the poem's conclusion: "the just man... Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is— / Christ... lovely in eyes not his / To the Father through the features of men's faces" (9-14). Hopkins indirectly compares man to the bell; as the bell finds purpose in the action of ringing, man finds purpose in living in the image of Jesus Christ. These lines exude the same vitality and energy as those prior, spurred by firm consonance and a spirited rhythm, but we notice one significant difference in the speaker's fixation on beauty. We are, Hopkins tells us, beautiful to God by our very nature as images of Christ. There may be no message more hopeful than this. If a bell is made to ring, man is made to love, and in doing so is the image of love itself, argues the poem; Hopkins views closeness

with God as life's essential purpose, and finds meaning and joy in striving toward this purpose. From the grand metaphors granting man a concrete purpose to the life-giving structure of every line of the poem, Hopkins's style shines forth, especially in "As Kingfishers Catch Fire", as a testament to the eternal, vitalizing goodness of God's plan and, as a result, the inherent goodness of mankind itself.

Despite the immense darkness, suffering and depression Hopkins faces throughout his life and that often pervades his poetry, he constantly holds out hope that staying true to God's plan will lead him to joy and flourishing; this hope shines through in the pervasive optimism, lovingly intricate detail, and strong, undying desire for a relationship with God that define Hopkins's writing. Both Hopkins's poetry and his life as a whole testify to the abounding love and compassion with which God views each of us as individuals; as bells are made to ring out their own distinct sound, as man is freed from distress by his "bones risen" in the Resurrection ("The Caged Skylark" 14), as Hopkins continues to strive towards God despite the sorrow that plagues his life, so too ought we to find joy by seeking to live in God's image. We, too, will certainly face darkness in our lives, as Hopkins's Terrible Sonnets seek not to hide. But despite the suffering we will no doubt be subjected to, despite our tendency to separate ourselves from God, despite our tendency to cry out in helplessness, as a miserable skylark trapped in a cage, we are, by our very nature, able to return to a life of joy, goodness and compassion once again. We are, Hopkins ultimately reminds us, made in the image of love, and it is up to us to fulfill our purpose and to flourish by sharing that love with others.

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