

A Close Reading of Seven Poems by Gerard Manley Hopkins: Part I

Peter Cash

I. 'AS KINGFISHERS CATCH FIRE' (May 1877)

From May 1866 to February 1875, Hopkins kept a journal [=a diary]. Numerous among the entries in Hopkins' journal are his precise observations of the natural world. From 1870 onwards, he has regularly been using an unusual term:

This is the time to study inscape in the spraying of trees, for the swelling buds carry them to a pitch which the eye could not else gather In these sprays at all events there is a new world of inscape.

Journal 31st March 1871.

But it is not until 1872 that Hopkins finds himself reading the philosophy of Duns Scotus (1270-1308) and discovers by coincidence that this mediaeval philosopher has put forward a theory of *haecceitas*, not unlike his own theory of inscape. Scotus argues that every thing/every natural phenomenon contains within itself individual properties which differentiate it from every other thing; he argues that each thing possesses intrinsic qualities which make it 'this thing' [= *haecceitas*] rather than 'that thing'. Unsurprisingly, Hopkins finds in Scotus' theory of knowledge confirmation of his own theory of inscape; it seems to Hopkins that the Scotist 'principle of individuation' endorses his own vision of the natural world.

What is more, it becomes clear that St Ignatius Loyola (1491-1566) has himself derived from Duns Scotus the very principle upon which he founded the Society of Jesus: 'Man was created to praise, revere and serve God.' As a Jesuit, Hopkins realises to his delight that he is theologically entitled to his perception of the natural world in which each thing, including man, has a specific purpose that reflects its glorious Creator.

In his own words, W. H. Gardner (1953) endeavours to explain what Hopkins means by 'inscape':

He is mainly interested in all those aspects of a thing which make it distinctive and individual He was always looking for the law or principle which gave to any object or grouping of objects its delicate and surprising uniqueness.

As an editor, Gardner finds himself engaged in such exegesis for the simple reason that he cannot turn to Hopkins' own prose writings; nowhere in his diaries nor in his letters does Hopkins himself attempt a definition of the term which he uses so freely. For such a definition, it is necessary to turn to a poem.

['As kingfishers catch fire' is] one of Hopkins' most triumphant pieces of parallelism, the octave of the sonnet being simply eleven statements of the way in which individual things express their own inner nature.

R.K.R. Thornton (1973)

It is not in prose, but in an untitled sonnet that Hopkins sets out his theory of 'inscape'. Accordingly, Gerald Roberts (1994) writes that this sonnet is a 'joyful exposition of Scotist selfhood, the individuality of things'. The balanced construction of the first line exemplifies in itself the Scotist perception of 'individual things' which Hopkins is concerned to demonstrate:

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame ...

To make explicit sense of this line, it is necessary to open out the grammar of the sentence: 'Just as kingfishers catch fire, so dragonflies draw flame'. Albeit at the expense of the iambic pentameter, this revision reveals that the balance (which the comma enacts) is not between a subordinate clause of time and a main clause; rather, it is between two co-ordinate clauses ('Just as ., so .') in which two creatures are depicted as playing equivalent parts in God's Creation. The function of the grammar is to insist upon the equivalence between ornithological and entomological phenomena; though different from each other, the kingfisher and the dragonfly are both endowed with their own unique ability to make a vivid impact upon the eye. Moreover, Hopkins underpins this equivalence by means of the symmetry that he builds into the pattern of alliteration:

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame

In the first co-ordinate clause, the alliteration is between the 'k' of 'king-' and the 'c' of 'catch' / between the 'f' of '-fishers' and the 'f' of 'fire'; in the second co-ordinate clause, the alliteration is between the 'dr' of 'dragon-' and the 'dr' of 'draw' / between the 'fl' of '-flies' and the 'fl' of 'flame'. The correspondences between the consonants are identical, thereby emphasising that both kingfisher and dragonfly have their own inscapes, equalling each other in intensity and intricacy.

In the first quatrain of this sonnet, Hopkins' aim is to demonstrate his theory of inscape beyond doubt. To the two visual images with which the quatrain opens, he adds three auditory images:

As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
 Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
 Bow swung finds its tongue to fling out broad its name.

It is significant that the syntax of the second line runs parallel to the syntax of the first; it begins with the subordinate conjunction 'as' in order to indicate that sounds, as well as sights, can boast their own unique characteristics / 'express their own inner nature'. Hopkins organises his language to echo the point that, just as stones tossed into wells make one sound, so the plucked strings of a harp make another and the rung bells of a church make yet another. By means of his vocabulary, Hopkins seeks to stress that each sound has an identity of its very own; to coin a phrase, that each tucked string tells its own story. Forensic interrogation of the verse-texture reveals a complex network of vowel-sounds, none more expressive than the variation between 'hung', 'swung', 'tongue' and 'fling' which, by means of assonance, creates an onomatopoeic / campanological effect. Such a distinctive sound provides evidence for Hopkins' theory that 'each mortal thing does one thing and the same': that is, it proclaims loudly its own individuality and thereby implies God's grandeur.

Hopkins theorises that each thing (his favourite noun) 'selves – goes its self; in coining the intransitive verb 'to selve', he is responding to St Ignatius' teaching that God has designed each thing for a specific purpose which glorifies Him. As a consequence, Hopkins is insisting that each thing is important not for 'itself' (a reflexive pronoun) but for 'its self' (a combination of possessive adjective and common noun which highlights its 'especial' nature). It is in keeping with this usage that the wood-cutters at Binsey in 1879 'unselve' the landscape when they chop down the poplars; in doing so, they desecrate a 'sweet especial scene'. In this

context, Hopkins' italicised statement – "*What I do is me: for that I came*" – is a triumphant justification of his existence, supplying (as it does) the specific reason why he has been put on earth: namely, to worship God.

Catherine Phillips (1995) confirms that 'perceiving the essence or "inscape" of a thing was to perceive some part of God'. It is entirely in Hopkins' poetic character that he should then moralise on this evidence. In his theology, 'the just man justices'; the tautological correspondence between the adjective 'just' and the coined verb 'justices' takes for granted a logical relationship between natural order and moral/social order.

In the sestet, Hopkins' argument is neither original nor profound: if each man 'in God's eye ... is Christ', if the Father sees Christ 'through the features of men's faces', then he is doing little more than confirm that God made man in his own image. Tautological though its argument may be, this sonnet is one of Hopkins' most comforting poems in that it grounds his religious belief firmly upon his epistemology.

2. THE WINDHOVER (30th May 1877)

In 1863, Hopkins (aged 19) went up to Balliol College, Oxford: although he went to read Classics, he was tutored there by Walter Pater (1839-1894) and befriended by Robert Bridges (1844-1930) who both stimulated his interest in Aesthetics. It is Hopkins' own theory of Aesthetics that informs both his appreciation of the natural world and his poetry. On 18th May 1870, he writes:

I do not think that I have ever seen anything more beautiful
than the bluebell I have been looking at. I know the beauty
of the Lord by it. Its inscape is mixed of strength and grace,
like an ash tree.

Hopkins has developed the theory that an 'inscape' [= a miniature landscape] is an impression of God's presence in the world. He has come to believe that an inscape is a mark of God's handiwork; to coin a phrase, he knows the beauty of the Lord by it.

In 1872, Hopkins travelled to the Isle of Man where he became acquainted with the philosophy of John Duns Scotus (1270-1308) whose writings corroborated his theory. Scotism argues that every physical thing contains within itself a reason why it is *this* thing [=haecceitas] rather than *that* thing; inherent in each individual thing are properties by which God

has differentiated it from every other thing. In the twentieth century, Scotus (who knows?) might have found himself simply pointing out that each thing has its own DNA.

In *The Windhover*, Hopkins' aim is to record an inscape; nowhere in his poetry is there a more accomplished description by which he can claim to 'know the beauty of the Lord'. For this precise reason, few critics disagree with Hopkins' own assessment of the poem: 'the best thing I ever wrote'. The structure of this sonnet is classical: an octave (in which Hopkins sets out his thesis that the kestrel is a thing of physical beauty) and a sestet (in which he puts forward the antithesis that this thing of physical beauty can be a spiritual joy for ever). Assisting Hopkins' description of the kestrel (another inscape 'mixed of strength and grace') is an original rhythm:

I had long had haunting my ear the echo of a new rhythm
which now I realised on paper. To speak shortly, it consists
in scanning by accents or stresses alone, without any account
of the number of syllables

Letter to Canon R W Dixon, 5th October 1878.

The Windhover is written 'in sprung rhythm, as I call it'. Its opening lines –

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
-dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in
his riding

– rely upon the alliterative patterns of Old English: after the iambic emphasis upon the verb 'caught', the movement of the verse is determined by the accents upon the three consecutive m-words, then the six d-words and then the two r-words. Dennis Ward (1965) comments on the effectiveness of this technique: 'The swift immediacy of the verb conveys exactly that first, swift shock of delight.' With such practical criticism, Ward looks forward to Geoffrey Hill who in 1972 turns for his 'shock' away from the solitary verb to the combined effect of Hopkins' nouns and his compound-adjective. Hill writes:

If language is more than a vehicle for the transmission of
axioms and concepts, rhythm is correspondingly more than a
physiological motor or a paradigm of dainty devices. It is
capable of registering *mimetically* deep shocks of recognition.

Throughout the octave, Hopkins is able to monitor the flight of the kestrel across the Welsh Downs by means of his rhythm; this rhythm – in which

the accents, rather than being predictable, are ‘sprung’ upon a reader – is functional in his depiction of the falcon’s undulating progress. Not for nothing does Hopkins’ sixty-five-word sentence expand over seven lines; its rhythmical fluctuations enact the fluctuations of the bird’s flight, *mime* its career across the sky. Because his ear is haunted by ‘the echo of a new rhythm’, it could be argued that Hopkins’ choice of words is made for him by an inner compulsion to alliterate. The cadences of this sentence –

how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing
As a skate’s heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend

– show that his use of alliteration is by no means arbitrary. Its pattern of consonants, its abandonment of r-words for w-words, illustrates precisely how the kestrel changed direction with the wind: how it went ‘off, off forth on swing’. To adapt Hill’s words further, these variations ‘shock’ a reader into a ‘recognition’ of the bird’s erratic flight-path as it ‘rebuffed the big wind’; they are instrumental in making a living ‘thing’ of it.

It is significant that *The Windhover* is a lyric: that is, its central figure is neither Christ (“To Christ our Lord”) nor the kestrel which embodies him, but the poet who addresses him. The poem begins with the first-person pronoun in order to signify that its inner drama is entirely that of an ‘I’-figure whose sense of Christian mission has been flagging. At the end of the octave, Hopkins’ declarative statement –

My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird – the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!

– involves a Catholic confession that this brilliant glimpse of an uplifted bird has uplifted his own heart: that its resilient example has re-animated him and revived his sense of mission; in this connection, it is worth remembering that a ‘minion’ was an agent/a knight errant for a ‘dauphin’ and was commonly sent to do such work. The purpose of the sestet –

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

– is to finish capturing the chivalric nature of the windhover. Seeing that it is in its element (‘in his ecstasy’) in its battle with the wind, the Christian poet is reminded that he too should be in his element when he is battling against the forces of adversity; observing the falcon, he admires its ‘valour’ and seeks to emulate it. For the ‘valour’ is not only that of a kestrel in its

perpetual struggle against the elements; it can also be that of a Christian knight [= le 'chevalier'] in his eternal struggle with the forces of evil. The apostrophe 'O my chevalier' confirms that Hopkins is thinking of the kestrel in its chivalric role: if not as a knight errant 'riding' upon a charger, then as an emissary which, by its 'lovelier' example, has brought back to him word of God's glory.

It is important to bear in mind that Hopkins, in recording his perception of this kestrel, is presenting us with a beatific vision: that is, a vision so physically beautiful that it takes on a spiritual dimension. This being so, W. H. Gardner (1953) considers that the verb 'buckle' represents 'the crux of the poem'. Despite the exclamation-mark, the verb is not an imperative; rather, it is in the indicative mood and indicates the moment of ecstatic revelation when the various attributes of this air-borne bird fuse together to form an image of religious significance. By the exclamation-mark, Hopkins celebrates the moment when he knew the beauty of the Lord by it.

The kestrel (hence, the title of the poem) is the only bird of prey which can hover. Hopkins, then, has in mind that moment when the kestrel spread its wings in the air and resembled a crucified figure; at that moment of epiphany, it became – not only in the poet's imagination, but also in actuality – the crucified Christ whose wounds run with a 'gold-vermilion' blood. The capitalised 'AND' marks the moment of transformation; at this moment, the falcon comes to life with such vividness that 'the fire that breaks from thee then' becomes a manifestation of God's presence. In short, the cruciform windhover becomes luminous with the Holy Spirit.

More than an ash tree, the windhover is an inscape 'mixed of strength and grace'. By its stirring example, Hopkins is inspired to re-dedicate himself to Christ. Seeing the ploughed land over which the bird hovers, he is finally reminded of the 'sheer plod' that is necessary before the 'sillion' (an archaic word for the out-turned face of a furrow) can 'shine'. He reaches this conclusion: only by submitting himself to such trials of 'strength' can the Christian re-affirm his faith and attain 'grace'.

3. BINSEY POPLARS (1879)

I do not think that I have ever seen anything more beautiful than the bluebell I have been looking at. I know the beauty of our Lord by it. Its inscape is mixed of strength and grace,

like an ash-tree.

Journal 18th May 1870

The ash-tree growing in the corner of the garden was felled. It was lopped first: I heard the sound and looking out and seeing it maimed there came at that moment a great pang and I wished to die and not to see the inscapes of the world destroyed any more.

Journal 8th April 1873

Binsey Poplars is informed by Hopkins' religious belief that each natural phenomenon [eg. bluebell, ash-tree, poplar, kestrel] is endowed with a set of unique characteristics/properties; this being so, each has its own mini-landscape or 'inscape' [his own term for a thing's unique sense of self]. Devout Catholic that he was, Hopkins believed that it was possible to discern God's presence in each inscape; consequently, he regards the chopping-down of an ash-tree (in 1873) and a poplar (in 1879) as acts of sacrilege. On seeing each tree 'maimed', he suffers 'a great pang' of grief.

In Hopkins' terminology, an 'inscape' is a physical flash of insight into the divine nature of a living thing; it is a moment of epiphany in which 'God's grandeur' is revealed. In this case, Hopkins has been inspired by the 'airy cages' of the poplar-boughs: that is, by the dappling effect of the criss-crossing branches upon 'the leaping sun'. In the third line, his repetition of the verb 'felled' is designed to express his incredulity that anyone could be so literally blind and so spiritually insensitive to God's grandeur as to fell 'all' ('all felled') of these beautiful trees. The entire poem is an emotional struggle to come to terms with the facts that his 'aspens dear' have been felled and an inscape on the 'wind-wandering weed-winding bank' of the River Isis has been obliterated forever. To emphasise his dismay, Hopkins places the same accents of incredulity upon 'Not spared, not one'; because he himself is entirely sensitive to the beauty of the view, he cannot credit such an act of environmental vandalism.

Of course, the axemen's act of vandalism is also spiritual; more seriously, it is a sin against Nature (in which God is immanent). For this reason, the second verse reflects at length upon the sacrilegious nature of the act. Accordingly, Hopkins' exclamation –

O if we but knew what we do
 When we delve or hew –
 Hack and rack the growing green!

– consciously echoes Christ’s words on the Cross: ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do’ [Luke Ch 23, V 24]. In hewing down the trees, the axemen know not what they do; hard-handed men of Oxford, they have no conception of the greater significance of ‘the growing green’; they do not understand that ‘country is so tender’ and cannot appreciate what damage they are doing. By means of the internal rhyme between the verbs, Hopkins (‘hack and rack’) seeks to convey the violence of this iconoclastic exercise.

Finally, Hopkins laments that the scene has not been preserved for posterity: ‘After-comers cannot guess the beauty been.’ How can ‘after-comers’ have an inkling of the ‘beauty’ which was inherent in that particular aspect of the Oxford landscape? Once again, he uses a simple form of repetition to stress his point: it took only ‘ten or twelve, only ten or twelve’ strokes of an axe to alter that view irrevocably: that is, to ‘unselve’ it. To describe this ‘havoc’, Hopkins’ coinage of the verb ‘unselve’ is of supreme importance; it relates directly to his concept of inscape, to the idea that there existed at Binsey a scene remarkable for its unique sense of ‘self’, a scene peculiar to that place which can never be witnessed again. In a final form of repetition, Hopkins –

The sweet especial scene
Rural scene, a rural scene,
Sweet especial rural scene

– rotates three adjectives in an ardent effort to convey the precious selfhood of that ‘scene’. By this method, he hopes to suggest the precise extent of the loss which he mourns: namely, that ‘an inscape of the world’ has been ‘destroyed’.

