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## Renzo D'Agnillo

### Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Knowledge of Death

If there was one thing Hopkins shared with the psychology of the Victorian age, it was undoubtedly an obsession with death. Both his journals, which contain numerous descriptions of the passing away of friends, acquaintances and fellow seminarians, and his letters, which see him often begging for accounts of the deaths he was unable to witness, bear a poignant testimony to this fascination. In the following description of a dying ram, his attention to detail produces aesthetic qualities which annul any sense of moral restraint<sup>1</sup>:

Under a stone hedge was a dying ram: there ran slowly  
from his nostril a thick flesh-coloured ooze, scarlet  
in places, coiling and roping its way down, so thick  
that it looked like fat<sup>2</sup>.

Such an example is symptomatic of the way Hopkins never flinches from the absolute reality of death. This decidedly unsentimental approach, which sets him apart from the mainstream of Victorian sensibility, can be witnessed time and again in his poetry, where in vain will one seek melodramatic evocations of death as typified by the Romantic poets, particularly the one closest to him, John Keats:

I have been half in love with easeful death  
Called him many a name in mused rhyme:  
[...]

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed account see Norman White, *Hopkins, A Literary Biography*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992, pp. 208-210.

<sup>2</sup> Humphry House and Graham Story (eds.), *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, London, Oxford University Press, pp. 249-250.

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Now seems it ever rich to die  
to cease upon the midnight with no pain<sup>3</sup>.

From one angle, Hopkins' obsession with death can be explained as a consequence of the poor health that was to plague him throughout his life. But his tough-minded acceptance can only be fully understood in the light of his religious vision and vocation. From a Christian point of view, mortality is the direct consequence of original sin. But when Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden they did not so much condemn human beings to death, as to the *knowledge* of death or the consciousness of the fact of their own deaths. To recall Yeats' words in his poem "Death": "Nor dread nor hope attend/A dying animal;/A man awaits his end/Dreading and hoping all [...] It is, only man who "knows death to the bone" for "man has invented death"<sup>4</sup>. The scene of the fall, the primary cause of all man's anguish, is evoked with the full consciousness of its implications of death by Hopkins in one of his sermons:

Now, brethren, fancy, as you may, that rich tree all laden  
with its shining fragrant fruit and swaying down from one  
of its boughs, as the pythons and great snakes of the East  
do now, waiting for their prey to pass and then to crush it,  
swaying like a long spray of vine or the bine of a great creeper,  
not terrible but beauteous, lissome, marked with quaint streaks  
of grey and eyes or flushed with rainbow colours, the Old serpent<sup>5</sup>.

It is fascinating to see how the skill of the poet comes to the aid of the priest here, supplying the text with rhetorical features to highlight the qualities of drama and sensuous recreation which were considered such important features by St. Ignatius, who exerted such a strong influence on Hopkins<sup>6</sup>, and which, one feels,

<sup>3</sup> John Keats, *The Poems of Keats*, ed. Miriam Allot, London, Longman, 1970, p. 529.

<sup>4</sup> W. B. Yeats, *The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright, London, J. M. Dent and Sons, 1991, p. 284.

<sup>5</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poetry and Prose*, ed. Walford Davies, London, J. M. Dent, 1998, pp. 168-169.

<sup>6</sup> For accounts of the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius see N. White, *op. cit.*, pp. 178-181; Graham Storey, *A Preface to Hopkins*, London, Longman, 1981, pp. 32-35.

the ear of the lyric poet must have revelled in creating: the initial emphatic pauses in the first embedded clause addressed to the congregation (*Now, brethren, fancy, as you may*), to capture attention, followed by the 18-word-long syntagm which appropriately anticipates the snake's arrival with its alliteration of liquids, nasals, dentals and, especially, sibilants; the way in which the image of the tree is merged with that of the snake in the simile *as the pythons and the great snakes of the East do now* with the foreshadowing element of danger in the expression (*to crush it*); and how this merging imagery is sustained in the clause *swaying like a long spray* [...] which leads to the paradoxical *not terrible but beauteous* and concludes with the climactic revelation of *the Old serpent*. All this after an anticipatory clause seething with sibilants (*lissome* [...] (close in sound to listen) *streaks* [...] *eyes* [...] *flushed* [...] *colours* [...] *serpent*). Hopkins employs a language of seduction that is insidiously imitative of the old serpent itself! Indeed, it may not be stretching things too far to suggest that he himself seems to have succumbed to the mimetic features of his own rhetoric in an attempt to locate his account of the fall in terms of a specific, immediate experience in order to impart his lesson to his congregation: that in eating of the fruit of the forbidden tree man died to ignorance and woke to wisdom.

Although the bible equates death with knowledge, paradoxically it is only through knowledge that human beings have the freedom to choose between good and evil. Thus, in choosing good death becomes the necessary transition point to the after life if the soul is to be saved. In choosing evil the soul is condemned to eternal perdition. "What we want" says Hopkins "is so deep a sense of the certainty and uncertainty of death, to have death so before us, that we may dread to sin now and when we die die well".

Thus, for Hopkins, death necessarily points to the binary alternatives of ANNIHILATION or SALVATION and though he never wavers in his belief in God, in his poetry his feelings towards

<sup>7</sup> *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, cit., p. 178.

death oscillate between the joy of his celebratory lyrics (especially the sonnets composed in Wales) to the dark anguish reflected in the terrible sonnets he composed in Ireland towards the end of his life. There is a recurrent sense, therefore, that man has the choice either to save himself by dying virtuously or, to remain in a condition of sin and perish into nothingness. Death acquires a value only if one lives, or dies, virtuously. It is significant, for example that *The Wreck of the Deutschland* is dedicated to the happy memory of five exiled nuns — no mention of all the other poor souls who drowned! — If the death experience is to be recounted at all it has to have a significance and that significance, for Hopkins, could only come from the nun who in her final hour cries out to her saviour in her hour of need: "O Christ, Christ come quickly!"<sup>8</sup>.

On the other hand, if one is merely attached to worldly things, death can only lead to perdition. In the following extract, Hopkins meditates on the terrifying prospect of the finality of death, momentarily poised before the possibilities of annihilation or salvation:

Do you love sunshine, starlight, fresh air, flowers,  
fieldsports?— Despair then: you will see them no more;  
they will be above ground, you below; you will lose  
them all. Do you love townlife, homelife, the cheerful  
hearth, the sparkling fire, company, the social glass,  
laughter, frolic among friends? Despair then: you will  
have no more of them for ever, the churchyards are full  
of such men as you are now, that feasted once and that  
now worms feast on; the dark day is coming; then rotten-  
ness and dust and utterly to be forgotten<sup>9</sup>.

There is a ruthlessness in the rhetoric here that is a far cry from T. S. Eliot's assertion that human kind cannot bear too much reality!<sup>10</sup> Hopkins allows for no such complacency in his evocation of the

<sup>8</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie (eds.), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 59.

<sup>9</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poetry and Prose*, cit., p. 178.

<sup>10</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot*, London, Faber and Faber, 1969, p. 172.



objective fact of death. But the self-reflexive nature of the text — it is, we must remember, a meditation — suggests that the imperative and iterative tone is due not so much to a pleasure on Hopkins' part to chill the spines of his prospective parishioners, than to face (and even challenge) his own terror at the idea of annihilation<sup>11</sup>.

Indeed, given the aesthetically and physically intense appreciation of the natural world and acute sense of the individuality of living beings that reverberate throughout his poetry and his prose descriptions, who more than Hopkins would have had cause to despair for the passing away of such things? The emphatic repetitions in this passage are like a series of self-inflicted blows to ram home the petrifying thought to himself: that his struggle is ultimately a struggle against the despair of losing life. As a priest, of course, Hopkins' faith was present as an ever-ready solace, and that faith he candidly announces at the beginning of the passage: *Man was created to praise, reverence and serve God Our Lord, and by so doing to save his soul*. This principle of subordination to a higher power is the motivating element in his poetry, particularly in the celebratory sonnets such as *God's Grandeur*, for instance, or *Spring* or *Pied Beauty*. In these works there is a conscious attempt to overcome the knowledge of death as finality through the redeeming power of the resurrection via poetic celebration:

Flesh fade, and mortal trash  
Fall to the residuary worm; world's wildfire, leave but ash:  
In a flash, at a trumpet crash,  
I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am [...] <sup>12</sup>.

His religious praise in these poems is "charged" (Hopkins' word) with a sensuousness of diction and rhetoric that aims to convey a ripeness and wholeness of vision:

<sup>11</sup> It may be suggested that this terror lies behind all of his poetical works, even those purporting to celebrate the beauty of God's universe and in spite of the fact that Hopkins is so demonstratively a life affirming poet.

<sup>12</sup> *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, cit., pp. 105-106.

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What is all this juice and all this joy?  
A strain of the earth's sweet being in the beginning  
In Eden Garden. — Have, get, before it cloy<sup>13</sup>.

Indeed, ripeness already suggests eventual decay and death:

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed<sup>14</sup>.

It is a time-bound factor — the original beauty (God's beauty) lies outside time; it is *past change* — and the recurrent annual death of the natural world is a symbolic reminder to us all of our own mortality. Interestingly, Hopkins wrote an unfinished poem in which he compares his own mortality with that of his watch. The phrase *We were framed to fail and die*<sup>15</sup> contains his belief that time is also finite, and its end will coincide with God's second coming or with the end of the world.

Therefore, there is precious little left to do but *praise him* if one intends to participate in God's heavenly universe. And yet, one wonders, if praise of God is in the same proportion to an intense appreciation and enjoyment of life, is it not paradoxical that this is the only way Hopkins can nullify the fear of death? In other words, are we back to the traditional ART Versus MORTALITY syndrome?

For though in his celebration of the beauty of the universe Hopkins, on the surface level, is celebrating its maker — seeking to become at one with him: on a deeper, subconscious level, he may be seen as manifesting, through his poetic discourse, a latent, repressed desire to possess beauty. To acknowledge the religious notion means accepting Hopkins' sense that human language is a re-enactment of the word of God. For the world is God's word made incarnate. Thus, against the secular notion that the more intense one's participation in life is the more the reality of death

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 67.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 66.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 193.

diminishes, can be placed the parallel religious one in which the more one is ready to subordinate one's own self to a higher authority, the more the idea of death becomes a detached, objective fact — like the deaths of so many people Hopkins recorded in his journals.

Another problematic feature appears to be Hopkins' acute sense of the self. He writes in his notes: "myselfbeing, my consciousness and feeling of myself, that taste of myself, of I and me above and in all things"<sup>16</sup> to the point of revealing that when he was a child he used to torment himself with the question "what must it be to be someone else?"<sup>17</sup> This intense awareness of self is so indicative of a clinging to life as to clash dismally with his fearlessness of death. In a sense, Hopkins' ideas on *inscape* (the pattern expressing a thing's individual form) and *instress*, (the energy which gives the object its being as well as the force which the inscape exerts on the feelings of the receiver) may be seen as a means to bridge the painful gap of this dilemma. Through instress attention is caught by the physical being and later penetrated to the individual essence of that being. Inscape and instress are, therefore, Hopkins' means of confronting the idea of death philosophically whilst asserting the value of the individual since both are expressions of the power of God's mystery. As he says in "As Kingfishers Catch Fire Dragonflies Draw Flame": *Christ plays in ten thousand places*<sup>18</sup>.

Death makes an early appearance in Hopkins' poems in *Spring and Death*<sup>19</sup>, in which it is depicted as a *dismal dirty stamp* marking certain flowers that are to die in the autumn. The point of the poem is not the inevitability of death as such, but the fact that it actually has the audacity to leave its mark before its time — and only on certain individual flowers. The tragedy resides in the premature knowledge of death. The speaker feels all the more regret precisely for those flowers that have already been marked by death in the spring and which, interestingly, do not necessarily die before *their mates*. But the artificial tone of the poem, with its regular

<sup>16</sup> *Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, cit., p. 123.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 123.

<sup>18</sup> *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, cit., p. 90.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 13.

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stilted metre and rhyming couplets, together with the fact that it represents a dream, make it twice removed from life. Most critics usually turn in quick relief to the much finer *Spring and Fall* as its mature counterpart, in which a detached poetic voice 'explains' the reality of man's mortality to a little child grieving over an autumn scene. Yet, in spite of its obvious thematic and descriptive analogies, with *Spring and Death* there is another poem which seems to be a more natural counterpart to it than *Spring and Fall*.

That poem is *Binsey Poplars*. As in *Spring and Death*, the poetic voice also bewails the death of individual elements of the natural world — here not flowers but trees, only this time mortality is inflicted not by some abstract, artificial personae, but by man himself.

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 sandled  
    Shadow that swam or sank  
On meadow and river and wind-wandering  
    Weed-winding bank.

O if we but knew what we do  
    When we delve or hew-  
    Hack and rack the growing green!  
    Since country is so tender  
    To touch, her being só slender,  
    That, like this sleek and seeing ball  
    But a prick will make no eye at all,  
    Where we, even where we mean  
        To mend her we end her,  
    When we hew or delve:  
After-comers cannot guess the beauty been.  
    Ten or twelve, only ten or twelve  
    Strokes of havoc únselve  
        The sweet especial scene,  
    Rural scene, a rural scene,  
    Sweet especial rural scene<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 78-79.

The transition from the initial *My* at the beginning of the first stanza to *we* at the beginning of the second underlines the poet's sense of shared guilt at the felling of the trees, opening up the question of responsibility to everyman: *Oh, if we but knew what we do*. Against the mortal marking of the trees in *Spring and Death* physical contact between man and nature in *Binsey Poplars* is open to two alternatives comprised either of the brutal and senseless violence of *delve or hew-/Hack and rack* or the gentle recognition of *so tender/To touch*. Here Hopkins' dynamic response to the natural world as a body makes him something of a "literalist of the imagination" (as Yeats said of Blake)<sup>21</sup>. Not only, but the possessive adjective *her* recasts the first three lines of the stanza in terms of a brutal rape, in contrast with the delicacy evoked in the following couplet. TO HACK AND RACK — TO TOUCH — or, as he puts it another way in the poem, to *mend* or to *end*. Just as all the difference in significance resides in a mere phoneme, so does the difference between salvation and perdition reside in the apparently insignificant action of *only ten or twelve /Strokes*. When Hopkins evokes one of the most tender parts of the human anatomy (also connotative of the spiritual dimension of the human being), the eye, which a mere prick of a needle is sufficient to render totally blind (physically and spiritually) he does not do so merely to underline the violence (though there is a sense that the pain the poet feels of their death is the same as having one's eyes pricked by a pin). This blindness becomes simultaneously synonymous of the disappearance of the *sweet especial rural scene* hypnotically evoked at the end of the poem as well as of man's blindness when he sins. Two key words here are *fell* and *unselve*. The felling of the trees is the ultimate sin because it is the destruction of God's world. The deliberate repetition of the word *fell* (recurrent in Hopkins<sup>22</sup>) is not only a rhetorical device, but acquires the added association with the fall. It is also no accident that Hopkins speaks of the trees as being *unselved* — a word coined

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Denis Donoghue, *The Ordinary Universe*, London, Faber and Faber, 1968, p. 84.

<sup>22</sup> Particularly in the sonnets of desolation. See, for example, "No Worst there is none" and "I wake and feel the fell of dark".

to denote the destruction of the self. For the fact of the matter is that their unrepeatable individual 'selves' have been irremediably destroyed.

In *Binsey Poplars* the death of the trees leaves a void which culminates in the ultimate tragedy that *after-comers cannot guess the beauty been*. What has been obliterated was a testimony of God's beauty, and therein lies the sinful act. From both a verbal and prosodical point of view, the first stanza evokes the presence of the trees, simultaneously articulating the poet's utter desolation, anger and despair in those long rambling unpunctuated and heavily stressed lines (which to read aloud without pausing and gasping for breath is a real challenge!), whilst the end of the third stanza can only ironically repeat an empty incantation (with the deliberate archaism *especial*) whose banal metrical regularity clashes with the complex metrical and verbal nature of the rest of the poem<sup>23</sup>. Through such a dramatic interaction of the poem's rhetorical and prosodical levels, Hopkins seems to be ultimately suggesting that any damage done to God's natural universe necessarily diminishes, if it does not threaten to annihilate even, the poetic discourse upon which it depends for its celebration.

<sup>23</sup> It may be interesting to observe that the last two lines of the second stanza that form the incantation, contain precisely half the number of syllables (14) compared with the long unpunctuated phrase that concludes the first (28).