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### The Dearest Freshness: Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844 – 1889)



Even as a child, Gerard Manley Hopkins felt a need to master his body in order to gain a deeper spiritual insight. He once stopped drinking water for a week until his tongue became black and he collapsed. On another occasion, he excluded salt from his diet. As a student at Oxford, he embraced the practice of self-flagellation during Lent and wore an iron girdle. When he was a novice at the Jesuit seminary, he would often wear a pointed chain around his thigh which made him limp in agony. He would have agreed with St. Francis of Assisi who wrote: *I have no greater enemy than my body*. Although he began writing poetry early, he gave up writing it at the age of twenty-seven and burnt those poems he had already written. In his journal, he described the destruction of his poems as the *slaughter of the innocents*. This was also an act of self-denial as he felt that however much he loved it, poetry was a mere distraction from his religious vocation.

Hopkins was a man of small stature, 5ft 2ins and of very slight build and was described as being rather effeminate in manner. At Oxford, he met and fell passionately in love with Digby Dolben who was the male cousin of the poet, Robert Bridges who was to eventually effect the publication of Hopkins' poems some

thirty years after his death. Digby also indulged in the practice of self-flagellation and Hopkins liked to imagine the effects of this on his beloved's body. In his journal, he wrote that Digby *striped in secret with breath-taking whips*. Far from suppressing his sexual desires, the practice of self-flagellation was inflaming his lust. However, he did no more than admire Digby from afar and his loved one died by drowning at the age of just nineteen. When Hopkins returned to writing poetry again after a seven year absence, Digby shone brightly in his memory.

At the age of twenty-two, Hopkins decided to convert to Roman Catholicism, much to the disgust of his family who were devoted Anglicans. A year later, he went a step further and decided to train as a Jesuit priest and took the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience: vows he never was to break. The life of a Jesuit priest was so harsh that it is said their average life expectancy was seventeen years less than that of the general population. Inexplicably, Hopkins failed his final theology exam and although he was still ordained, it meant that he could never advance in the Jesuit order.

In 1875, he was requested by a religious superior to write a poem about a maritime disaster which involved the sinking of a ship with the loss of over one hundred and fifty people, including five Franciscan nuns. The result was *The Wreck Of The Deutschland* and although a masterpiece, it was not published in the Jesuit publication for which it was intended. Its originality and the

sheer strangeness of its diction was too much for contemporary readers to absorb. Hopkins was himself only too aware of this when he wrote to Robert Bridges stating that *no doubt my poetry errs in oddness* but he was never willing to compromise in order to fit in with the tastes of his time. Despite this rejection, the writing of this poem led him to return to the writing of poetry and in 1877, he wrote some of his best-known sonnets, including the wonderful *God's Grandeur* in which every aspect of creation is quite literally *charged* by an invisible power, it is this which keeps everything which exists from falling apart.

Rather like Picasso or Stravinsky in the twentieth century, Hopkins returned to the distant past in order to create something startlingly new. His diction was influenced by the poetry of the Anglo-Saxons and early Welsh poetry. He dismissed the conventional metrical verse of his time of his age as *tame* and *same* and claimed to invent what he termed *sprung verse* although his definition of this term had a tendency to vary, he strove to give the language of his poetry the vigour and variations of ordinary speech which was eventually to lead to the free verse of the twentieth century. Although his verse may seem difficult at first sight, many of the difficulties dissolve simply by reading his poems aloud as Hopkins himself strongly advised. Whatever his metrical theories, in his finest poems he succeeds in creating an extraordinary verbal music.

Hopkins' thought about the nature of poetry was influenced by his reading of the medieval Scottish philosopher, Dun Scotus and from this reading he

### God's Grandeur

*The world is charged with the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?  
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.*

*And for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.*

devised his theories of *inscape* and *instress*. He came to believe that attending to the uniqueness of every aspect of creation and the energy which holds everything together was itself a deeply religious activity. Therefore, there need not be a conflict between his religious vocation and the writing of poetry. This awareness made him desire to preserve the beauty of creation and not stand idly by and see it destroyed by the increasing industrialization of the nineteenth century. During his time as a priest in Fort William in the west Highlands, he visited Inversnaid on the shores of Loch Lomand and this inspired one of the earliest, openly conservationist poems in English Literature.



Hopkins grew up in an affluent household in Stratford which was once a peaceful village in Essex until the coming of the railway line. As a Jesuit, he was moved around the country and spent periods in Liverpool, Manchester and Glasgow and he was appalled at the level of

poverty, squalor and degradation which he encountered. He was prone to periods of deep depression and his duties served to increase his despair. In 1884, he was sent to teach at University College in Dublin but his feelings of isolation increased still further. He found the role of teaching onerous and unremitting and it was in Dublin that he wrote what has come to be known as his *terrible sonnets* because of the deep anxiety which they convey. They are perhaps the darkest, most powerful and yet strangely beautiful sonnets in English Literature. In the following sonnet, he not only feels abandoned by his fellow man but by the God he has sacrificed almost everything to serve.

Hopkins had suffered many years of ill health and he died of typhoid fever at the age of forty-five. He is buried in Glasnevin cemetery in Dublin, the city in which he had felt himself to be a total stranger. Despite his physical, mental and spiritual sufferings, few people have ever more fully grasped and expressed the astonishing beauty and mystery of the natural world and it this acute awareness which perhaps lies behind the last words which he gasped on his death bed: *I am so happy, I am so happy. I loved my life.*

### from Inversnaid

*A windpuff-bonnet of fawn-froth  
Turns and twindles over the broth  
Of a pool so pitchblack, fell  
frowning,  
It rounds and rounds Despair to  
drowning.*

*Degged with dew, dappled with  
dew,  
Are the groins of the braes that the  
brook treads through,  
Wiry heathpacks, fitches of fern,  
And the beadbony ash that sits  
over the burn.*

*What would the world be, once  
bereft  
Of wet and wildness? Let them be  
left,  
O let them be left, wildness and  
wet;  
Long live the weeds and the  
wilderness yet.*

### I Wake and Feel The Fell of Dark

*I wake and feel the fell of dark, not  
day.  
What hours, O what black hours  
we have spent  
This night! what sights you, heart,  
saw; ways you went!  
And more must, in yet longer  
light's delay.  
With witness I speak this. But  
where I say  
Hours I mean years, mean life.  
And my lament  
Is cries countless, cries like dead  
letters sent  
To dearest him that lives alas!  
away.*

*I am gall, I am heartburn. God's  
most deep decree  
Bitter would have me taste: my  
taste was me;  
Bones built in me, flesh filled,  
blood brimmed the curse.  
Selfyeast of spirit a dull dough  
sours. I see  
The lost are like this, and their  
scourge to be  
As I am mine, their sweating  
selves; but worse.*