2. Gerard Manley Hopkins

POETRY

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889) was, like John Henry Newman, both a graduate of Oxford University and an adult convert to Catholicism. At the age of twenty-four he entered the Jesuit order, and he later became a professor of Greek at the Royal University in Dublin. His now famous poetry was almost completely unknown during his short lifetime, not appearing in a complete edition until 1918. Sometimes his poems deal with explicitly religious subjects; for example, in “The Habit of Perfection,” Hopkins meditates on his own priestly vocation. Usually, though, the tension between sensuous wonder and ascetic withdrawal for which his poems are most celebrated is more implicit, provoking a great intensity of feeling while limiting or excluding overtly Christian references. This paradoxical tension between the world and the soul, between freedom and sacrifice, was at the core of Hopkins’ Catholic vision. It also guided his inspired use of invented compound words (“lovely-dumb”) as well as of images (silence singing). The freeflowing yet harmonious result has earned Hopkins countless admirers from all kinds of religious backgrounds.

a. “THE HABIT OF PERFECTION” (1866)

Nostrils, your careless breath that spend
Upon the stir and keep of pride,
What relish shall the censers send
Elected Silence, sing to me
Along the sanctuary side!

And beat upon my whorled ear,
Pipe me to pastures still and be
The music that I care to hear.

Shape nothing, lips; be lovely-dumb:
It is the shut, the curfew sent
From there where all surrenders come
Which only makes you eloquent.

Be shelléd, eyes, with double dark
And find the uncreated light:
This ruck and reel which you remark
Coils, keeps, and teases simple sight.

Palate, the hutch of cassy lust,
Desire not to be rinsed with wine:
The can must be so sweet, the crust
So fresh that come in fasts divine!

Elect, upon my myorbléd ear,
And beat upon my whorled ear,
Pipe me to pastures still and be
The music that I care to hear.

b. “GOD’S GRANDEUR” (1877)

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—

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; blearèd,
Smearèd 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—

A reference to the lilies of the field, “who spin not neither do they toil” [Mt 6:28; Lk 12:27].
c. "THE CAGED SKYLARK" (1877)

As a dare-gale skylark scanted in a dull cage
Man's mounting spirit in his bone-house,
mean house, dwells—
That bird beyond the remembering his free fells;
This in drudgery, day-laboring-out life's age.
Though aloft on turf or perch or poor low stage,
Both sing sometimes the sweetest, sweetest spells,
Yet both droop deadly sometimes in their cells
Or wring their barriers in bursts of fear or rage.

Not that the sweet-fowl, song-fowl, needs no rest—
Why, hear him, hear him babble and drop down to his nest,
But his own nest, wild nest, no prison.
Man's spirit will be flesh-bound when found at best,
But uncumbered: meadow-down is not distressed
For a rainbow footing it nor he for his bones risen.