

MUSIC ALONE SURVIVES ? COLLAPSING FAITH IN SOME SONNETS BY G.M. HOPKINS AND GEOFFREY HILL

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Music survives, composing her own sphere,
Angel of tones, Medusa, Queen of the Air,
and when we would accost her with real cries
silver on silver thrills itself to ice
Geoffrey Hill, "Tenebrae"

Much of Hill's poetry is marked by a tearing sense of loss, a poignancy of absence made more acute by his extensive use of classical forms long associated with the expression of a harmonious, or at least eventually harmonized worldview, whatever jarring notes may be included. Most notable among these forms is the Petrarchan sonnet, this "bipartite structure" consisting of an octet and a sestet which, Fuller writes, is convenient for "observation and conclusion, or statement and counter-statement" (p.2), which is thus, through the very imbalance in the form, a particularly adequate support for a balanced assessment.

Not many twentieth-century poets still use the sonnet form to shape their explorations of the world; none I would say does it with such earnest if not desperate intensity as Hill. True, his sonnets, as almost everything he writes, are elaborately second-hand, not in the sense of second-best, but because of an intertextual apparatus which keeps the writer carefully apart from what is written; no reader here can confuse the speaking voice with the voice of the writer. Yet who could doubt that Hill is passionately, albeit sometimes antithetically, involved?

This passionate involvement in a spiritual quest is a feature he shares with the famous Jesuit poet whose verse, willy-nilly, has affected all twentieth-century poets, Gerald Manley Hopkins. I would further suggest that, whatever the convictions of the man, some lines in Hopkins's poems point to a view of faith as a collapsing, or at least wavering and collapsible, construct. Hopkins's all-fathering God may not be such a long way from Hill's abyss of pain-inflicting absence.

In this short paper I propose to focus on eight sonnets in the *Tenebrae* collection (1978), namely the "Lachrimae" sequence and the first of the two sonnets in the "Tenebrae" sequence. These pieces are particularly resonant with the sense of being cut off from the source of faith and are directly related to the Baroque period which marks both a climax in the exuberance of religious expression and in its propensity to stress suffering and the development of conditions that were to lead to the invalidation of belief.

Contrasted with Hill's consistently desperate awareness of absence, Hopkins's faith may appear as almost blissfully fulfilling. The presence of God in the whole universe, from poplar leaves to bluebells and from twinkling stars to kestrels in flight, is indeed the recurring theme of his celebrations in verse. Yet I argue that behind the dazzling accuracy of some images, beyond the undeniable daring of the language, a lack of coherence even on the most immediate level of observation affects even his most happy poems in such a way that they can be said to adumbrate the tragedy of faith as impossibility. This point I will explore in Hopkins's famous celebration of "Christ Our Lord," "The Windhover."

On first sight Hill's sonnets have more in common with Donne and the Metaphysical poets than with G.M. Hopkins. The posture and composure as well as the inspiration of most of his sonnet pieces go back directly to the Renaissance and seventeenth-century period. There is, however, one major difference. For all the contortedness in the body of the poems, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century sonnets end on resolution or at least poise, on the promise of harmony restored. Hill's sonnets by contrast end on a rending sense that completion is for ever impossible.

In Donne's time, with the assertion of the bourgeoisie's power, old structures were creaking apart, tearing on – or torn by – new economic and political forms. Those were troubled times, times of passionate uncertainties. Yet they were sustained by the underlying confidence in man's potentialities underscored by the sudden expansion of the world as known to European man. Man's understanding of the world was moving away from the mythical into the sobriety of scientific inquiry. Economic considerations were surreptitiously pervading the social and

political spheres. God may have been on its way to some attic backroom of impotent forgetfulness, but He (of course a dominant male, what else?) was still very much alive in people's minds, in the Puritan ethic of success as in the Catholic ethic of atonement. It was the end of a world, but another one was settling into place. The more enlightened minds of the time knew that contrary to received phrases still in use today the sun does not rise or set but the earth revolves around it while rotating on its axis. Yet there was no doubt that there would be another day, other decades and many centuries of expanding human history: the days ahead were as full of promises and opportunities as the unexplored white areas on the map of the world.

Present prospects are tragically different. In Conrad's phrases, the conquering West has turned most blank spaces into "place[s] of darkness" given over to the "merry dance of death and trade" (*Heart of Darkness*, p. 142 and p. 152). The Nazi extermination camps can be seen metonymically as a final stage in man's inhumanity to man:

If there is any basis at all for a universal history, it is not a tale of cumulative happiness but, as Adorno comments, the narrative that leads from the slingshot to the megaton bomb... There is indeed, as Marx recognized, a singular global story which weaves all men and women into its fabric, from the Stone Age to Star Wars; but it is a tale of scarcity and oppression, not of success – a fable, as Adorno puts it, of permanent catastrophe... For Adorno, there can be no real history after [the Nazi death camps], only the twilight or aftermath in which time still moves listlessly, vacuously on, even though humanity itself has come to a full stop (Eagleton, p.343).

We have reached a juncture where we have no choice but to live "on the horns of an impossible dilemma, conscious that the abandonment of Utopia is just as treacherous as the hope for it, that negations of the actual are as indispensable as they are ineffectual, that art is at once precious and worthless" (p.357). Hill's work is probably one of the most unbearable illustrations of this torn and tearing awareness. In it the undermining undertow of disillusioned scepticism is most clearly apparent in the recurring conceit of the oxymoron. This figure of speech is also used and abused by the Metaphysicals, but in their poems they manage to introduce some final reconciliation which is conspicuously absent from Hill's. His, underneath their neat polish, are deafening with the silent shout of absence. In Brian Moore's terms, the eucharist can no longer be the inexhaustible miracle in which bread and wine are turned into the body and blood of God; it is a mere "pious ritual" through which men further expose the formal vacuity of their pretence at faith.

As noted by Brian Oxley in his review essay "Geoffrey Hill's 'Christian year,'" the poems in the 1978 collection called *Tenebrae* fall into five parts which can be compared to five "open wounds; a formal stigmata" (Oxley, p. 287), the first four coinciding with particular moments in the development of Christian thinking and of literary forms. The short, sometimes outwardly disconnected lines in "Pentecost Castle" echo a desperate strain in the troubadour tradition of fifteenth-century Castile. The seven sonnets in "Lachrimae" are steeped in the Baroque tradition of the Counter-Reformation. With their echoes of Coleridge, Disraeli and Tennyson and their direct references to the building of the Empire, the thirteen sonnets in the next sequence – its title reproducing the one of "Augustus Pugin's theologico-architectural manifesto of 1843, 'An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England'" (Haughton, p.136) – focus on eighteenth and nineteenth-century England and the price to be paid, both at home and abroad, for the refined elegance of the Great Houses. In typical twentieth-century fashion the following "sequence" does not appear to be one ("these fragments I have shored against my ruin"); it consists of six short pieces all more or less directly haunted by Nazi Germany, and includes, within its extreme of fragmentation and, one would expect, destitution, one of the most positive notes in the whole collection. The poem on the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who opposed the regime and died in prison, ends on the following lines (with Eliotian overtones):

Against wild reasons of the state
his words are quiet but not too quiet.
We hear too late or not too late.

The final sequence, which has the same title as the collection, and which Oxley calls "a passionate final act" in this Passion Play (p. 292), is marked by a return to Baroque diction and sensibility; in some respects it can indeed be read as a continuation of "Lachrimae." There is something chilling in its unrelenting insistence on impossibilities. Both its epigraph and its final section are concerned with music. The lines quoted in the epigraph (without reference) could describe the condition of a man in an icy sort of hell, cut off from warmth and beauty. The effect is perhaps even worse once we know that the words are quoted from a biography of the composer Gustav Hoist: in his numbness and isolation the man had no access any more to the music he lived for ("scarcely able to hear a note of the songs"). Conversely, the music that survives in the last section (the four lines quoted as epigraph to this paper) is not accessible to human suffering. The lines, in Edwards' words, are "an extraordinary, pared anti-ode to St Cecilia" (162). The obverse of some benevolent madonna, music is a superb and scornful

whore ("accost"), a Gorgon figure ("Medusa") who turns human emotions into delicate sound effects and icy thrillings: a high-pitched otherworldliness doomed to evanescence. This apparent triumph is the final extinguishing of the final candle in the Holy Week ritual known as "Tenebrae." Does, as Oxley suggests, this descent into a "deeper dark" antiphonally announce the light of the resurrection, as in David Jones's dramatic monologue "The Tribune's Visitation"? The intensity of despair that pervades Hill's religious quest seems to preclude this reading.

In *Tenebrae* even more than in other collections a number of pieces are adaptations of pre-existing poems, which, being translated, are uprooted, deprived of their proper and original context. Now this sense of estrangement applies to all pieces, whether they are based on a former poem or not (which most readers can only know from reading critical literature). In all of them we feel that the words no longer belong, no longer fit into their proper frame: they are left to drift. The absence of proper anchorage exposes their inanity. The lines shrill into muffled screams, or, worse, they stifle yawns of bottomless ennui.

Haughton's discussion of Hill's titles provides accurate and enlightening comments on the "Lachrimae" sequence. "Devoted to English Counter-Reformation martyrology and the devotional literature of tears,"

it bears a Latin title with musical and devotional associations. It is the magnificently ornate title of Dowland's "Lachrimae, or Seven teares figured in seven passionate Pavans," which Hill associates in an epigraph with the title of St Robert Southwell's "Mary Magdalen's Funeral Tears" – thus associating the careers and art of the recusant poet and the composer (Haughton, p.135).

The sequence, which incorporates his masterful re-writing of seventeenth-century Spanish poems, provides evidence of Hill's "deep and passionate love of music" (Haffenden, p.91); it is Hill's own "witnessing" to those martyrs who had trained to die as witnesses to God; it testifies to his fascination with a period at which, more than at any other, the Catholic version of Christianity was haunted by the redeeming virtues of suffering and sacrifice, thus invalidating what Girard sees as Christ's breakthrough beyond the need for victims and scapegoats. The form of Christianity known to Counter-Reformation martyrs and artists is a perpetuation of violence, and as such, Girard would argue, a negation of the gospels' good news. Combined with twentieth-century scepticism, the result is devastating. The "Crucified Lord" addressed in the first lines of the first, fourth and sixth sonnets is a pathetic human fabrication. Nailed onto his Cross, there is no hope of his ever raising or redeeming anyone or anything. The speaking (un)believer is tied in complete helplessness, with the added discomfort of seeing through the pointlessness of what has become mere religious pretence yet being unable to break through and escape its empty repetitions. Though some poems may play on assonances rather than full rhymes (for instance "fade," "dread," and "blood" in "Lachrimae Antiquae Novae"), all seven sonnets are built on the four-rhyme pattern abba abba cdc dcd, with minor variations in the second tercets. This may emphasize the sense of empty formality.

How genuine are the "true tears" of the first sonnet "Lachrimae Verae" (the one that comes last in Dowland's straightforwardly ascending sequence)? Isn't there something devious in weeping for a condition one has brought about: the representation of the contorted body of Christ on the Cross is a way men have engineered to get rid of their sins: "You are the castaway of drowned remorse." "Our skill" in line 7 is the skill of the artists or craftsmen who made the crucifix, but is also the perverse human skill at exacting victims. In the deadlock of the first tercet the inability to turn comes close to a parodic echo of Eliot's "I cannot hope to turn" in "Ash-Wednesday."

I cannot turn aside from what I do;
you cannot turn away from what I am.

The last three lines point to the emptiness of formal observance, including self-denial. Whatever ritual may be followed, "You do not dwell in me nor I in you." Estrangement is the keyword of this strange meeting. Man can be "at one" only "with [an] eternal loss." Reason enough for grief and most real tears. Ben Jonson's "Masque of Blackness" stages the powers of deception. Hill's sonnet is an imitation of a poem by Quevedo on a miniature representation of his beloved ("Retrato de Lisi...", see Edwards 162). It presents man's attempt at taming God into formal splendour, here the gagging splendour of Baroque art, but implicitly any artistic representation, including Hill's poems. The oxymoronic nature of the attempt explodes in conjunctions such as "celestial worldliness" (1.5) or "slavish master" (1.9), but can be felt from the first lines in the very notions of a contained splendour, a bearable brilliance, the east light being embodied and made "fit to be caressed." Spiritual quest is turned into gold locks, and we are the "dispossessed" at Midas' feast. The delusion of "self-love" that leads to such wrong-headedness is proper to Western culture as it emerged in the Renaissance. Conquest of new worlds eventually leads to indiscriminate blackness, the weary erasing of all shaping attempts:

until he tires and all that he has made

vanishes in the chaos of the dark.

Such un-making is further elaborated in "Martyrium." Mainly because of verbs such as "walking," "swats," "glances up" and "scans," the first four lines present an unusually concrete scene, that of a traveller walking through a hot countryside. True, there are disquieting elements: the fact that the man, though not called "Jesus," is "Jesus-faced"; the presence of a "streaked gibbet with its birds that swoop". The traveller is weary and definitely not comfortable (drying sweat, the head "crowned with flies"), but conspicuously detached: he "scans his breviary" as a way of turning his attention away from unpleasant circumstances, not of concentrating on some inner revelation. Yet so far, the readers have a sense of immediate reality, which is un-done, dissolved in the first word of the second quatrain. What had been perceived in three dimensions is suddenly flattened into a tapestry badly treated by time. Paradoxically, this second quatrain also represents a climax in horror: the negative affixes in the line "a mouth unstitched into a rimless cup" conjure up a nightmarish vision of Dali-esque absence of definition. The "he" of the first tercet, who suffers "clamorous love" "for our sake," is readily associated with the repeatedly evoked "Crucified Lord," again the victim of the human need to cast off ("[love's] grief that would betray him to our fear"), but with the second part of the main clause ("or does not hear / above the hiss of shadows on the wheat") he reverts to the traveller of the first lines, displaced, unconcerned, the clamour of love covered by "the hiss of shadows," the snaky whispering of unsubstantiality. Partly because of the repeated aspirations coming before ("hear," "hiss"), partly because of the situation in the first lines, "wheat" can be heard as "heat." The first meaning of "viaticum," which led to the sense of provision for the trip we take into the other world – "Eucharist administered to the dying" (Haughton, 158) – is food one takes on a journey, thus connecting traveller and wheat turned into bread or wafer. Here the passage referred to in the de-substantiated meal of the viaticum effects another fading: the solidity of "earth's desire," dissolves into spirals of imagined imprints ("vernicles" are Veronica's handkerchiefs, with the outline of Christ's face on them) rising in "summer air." Compared with the fall suggested in the second quatrain, the upward movement in the last lines has something peaceful about it. Yet what the poem ascends into is sheer nothingness.

"Lachrimae Coactae," the sonnet on coerced tears, is passionately personal. It begins with what looks like the conventional paradox of the believer unable to turn his steps away from perdition ("knowing what ceases and what will not cease, / frightened of hell, not knowing where to turn"). But it soon founders into a predicament which is much worse still in its confusion: the apprehension that there may be no point in this religious suffering, that God is nowhere to be found, and certainly not in the body of Christ on the cross presented as some deceiving trick ("your own device"). The phrase remains: "innermost true light"; but what use is a light that cannot be perceived? In the last lines God's hold on our lives and our clinging on to his indifferent care are denied through words such as "void" and "semblance" at the same time as they are asserted: we are the willing victims of self-devised delusions.

In "Pavana Dolorosa" too the speaking "I" is massively present. The first line identifies the speaker with Southwell, while with the third line he is also the lute player and composer Dowland. The inversion of "loves" and "passions" in line 1 is remarkable: there is something suspicious because unchecked about passions, which accounts for Southwell's mere allowance of them in the original text. The suspicion passions arouse is confirmed in the double oxymoron of line 2 ("Ash-Wednesday feasts, ascetic opulence"). The real pretence of the lute's wincing music figures another kind of common contradiction echoed in the line "true-torn among this Active consonance." Some games of make-believe are deadly serious. This one is a perfect instance of hopeless reflexivity (explicit in "self-wounding" and "self-seeking") which leads to the endless (because pointless) pursuit of the *venator formarum* or artist. The knots of these contortions reach a climax in the paradoxes of the last two lines, in which the same words or sounds are repeated with a negation irretrievably separating aspiring subject and object of desire (on this see also Haughton 158):

I founder in desire for things unfound.
I stay amid the things that will not stay.

The new ancient tears of the following sonnet ("Lachrimae antiquae Novae") are an anti-celebration of Christian religious festivities, beginning with a for once unambiguous pity for the "Lord" that has been waylaid, kidnapped, to serve as their pretext and object: "consigned by proxy to the judas-kiss / of our devotion." This piece focuses more on externals: rituals are but empty repetitions, but most helpful in the domination of the world. The cross is a mighty partner of the sword in the building of empire: "Triumphalism feasts on empty dread" and "Dominion is swallowed with your blood." There is a further sinister implication in this last line: the dominant form of Christian ritual calls for missionary exportation.

The last sonnet in the sequence "Lachrimae Amantis," Hill's version of a sonnet by Lope de Vega, with remarkably little love in it, is rather different in tone from the six others in that in it the speaker is not torn by some dreadful tension. But is his drowsy acceptance of distance to be preferred to the tearing despair in other

pieces? The Spanish writer was fully within the tradition of men wondering at God's patience with their unruliness and making ready to compensate for it by a belated compliance. Not so in Hill's translation. The unnamed lord to whom the octave is addressed has turned, by the end of the poem, into a distant "him," whose very existence is doubtful (see Edwards 160-61). The "long night" and the "dark solstice" suggests Christmas time, when days start to lengthen (towards Lent?), a time of birth and promise of life. But this evanescent hope, briefly flaring into the brightness of T.S. Eliot's "frost and fire" ("Little Gidding"), collapses into the certainty of renewed death and suffering, which seem to be all that most of Hill's speakers can experience of Christian faith. Characteristically, the "half-faithful" speaker of the last tercet feels surrounded by music but cut off from the present moment: "bathed in pure tones of promise and remorse."

The two sonnets in "Tenebrae," the second and fifth pieces in a sequence that variously comments on the absence of a spiritual dimension in our Christian endeavours, are masterpieces of contorted unsaying. The forms of love which haunts their lines lead to a bottomless desolation not only, perhaps not so much, because they are tainted with "Amor Carnalis," but because they are caught in possessiveness. The "you" of the second piece can be read as a continuation of the "Lachrimae" sequence: the "Crucified Lord," but now perceived as active and deviously stifling. More interestingly still, the speaker in this sonnet could be the one of "Lachrimae Amantis," whose has eventually come while he slept. The first six lines do express rest and fulfilment, though they are bought at the cost of suppression of identity, a high price announced in the first line already, with the sibilant "soft and searching voice." The first twist does not come between octet and sestet, as in most sonnets, but in lines 7-8: such love based on dread is exclusive of trust and leads to desolation, the negation of hope. But the twist in the last lines, concluding the dubious identification between the crucified God and the dispossessed believer, contains a worse indictment. What does he ("you") "sustain," and in what sense? The object can only be the "false ecstasies" on which the speaker wounds himself. While the second "sustain" ("as you sustain each item of your cross") is likely to mean "endure," one may suspect the first of including the sense of nourishing, giving food to: not only bearing but supporting. This locks the unequal partners in a circle of dependence which can be seen as a form of hell. At a further remove than in the "Lachrimae" poems I feel nagged by the suspicion that the "you" in 2 is as insubstantial as the succubae in 5, that the whole relationship has been carefully engineered through centuries of masochistic ritual, that ultimately there is only a haunting absence on which the Medusa of pure form can draw her arabesques.

How is this absence adumbrated in Hopkins's poems? My answer goes against the grain of most Hopkins criticism. I feel the potential failure of faith in the lack of consistency between his celebration of natural phenomena and his interpretation of them as manifestations of God in the world. To me, the undermining of the faith he proclaims does not occur only in the sonnets of desolation, which John Hillis Miller focuses on when he examines Hopkins in *The Disappearance of God*. These "sonnets of desolation" do indeed betray some wavering of his trust, particularly the sleepless one "I wake and feel the fell of dark not day." Yet for all their despair, these are carefully shaped and contained outcries of pain and revolt that can fit into the Biblical tradition of thwarted prophets complaining against God's ways to them though never really questioning His all-powerful presence: using despair as a springboard for a subtle reaffirmation not only of God's supremacy but of man's willing though at times reluctant compliance. In them the writer is all the more wary as his bad health, hostile surroundings, and unrewarding professional tasks lead to doubts and despondency. Unexpectedly, I find undermining contradictions in his most positive "celebratory" sonnets such as "The Starlight Night," "Hurrahing in Harvest," or this most commented and analysed of sonnets, "The Windhover," which has been heralded over the decades since its publication as a majestic celebration of Christ.

The description of the kestrel's flight in the first eight lines contains some beautiful images. I like the gracefulness in the bird's/skater's bow, heard too in the alternation of sound in "as a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow bend." The motionless power of the bird's effortless gliding and absorbing in his steadiness all unruliness of land and air is suggested in the sheer control of breath necessary to articulate correctly lines like "in his riding / Of the rolling level underneath him steady air" and in the insistent alliterations (three "m" in line 1, no less than 6 "d" in line 2). The watcher's emotion is neatly expressed in line 8: the assonance in "stirred for a bird" renders a fluttering of the heart in keeping with the "wimpling wing" four lines above. A first, fairly obvious answer to the much vexed question of why his heart should be "in hiding" is that if he wants this easily frightened bird not to fly away out of sight (where he can no longer catch him in the net of his observation), he has to make himself as inconspicuous as possible. The "hiding" may also imply some fearful withdrawal from religious commitment, as suggested by Gallet in his full-length study of the poem in *Etudes Anglaises*, and the sight of the bird may spur his fervour, which in turn may be echoed in the fire breaking out in line 10. All this is possible, yet to me not altogether convincing. Even in the octave recording a particular experience in the past tense, I wonder about the relevance and accuracy of Latinate words such as "minion" and "dauphin," which I find hard to associate with a bird praised for his mastery even if we think of the night scene before the battle at

Agincourt in Shakespeare's *Henry V* (see Render, 177-79). This court vocabulary may be consonant with the context of falconry; but when we are invited to look up at the bird's majestic flight, we hardly think of some controlling falconer. The effeminate refinement clashes with the force of the suggested movement and the impact of the final, intentionally ambiguous and syntactically awkward exclamation: "the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!"

Matters become definitely more complex in the sestet. The capitalized "AND," the use of "then" and of comparative forms ("lovelier, more dangerous") all plead for a marked change presented as a consequence of a first sentence whose meaning is at least ambiguous. The six nouns in line 9, with the emotional "oh" as a cesura in the middle, all have the same function: they are either subjects of a verb in the indicative mode, or objects to be put on as an armour by the speaker or the speaker's heart (Gallet), or (as is more likely because of the exclamation mark and of the comma after "plume," (see Schoder, 296,) but is by no means compulsory: an additional comma may contribute to a sense of ruffled feathers) vocatives before a verb in the imperative mode. What this verb ("Buckle!") might mean is the question most debated by all critics writing on the poem. It is indeed open to half a dozen contradictory readings, from a sense of strengthening through closer joining together to a sense of giving way under stress ("to warp, crumple, bend out of its plane," SOED). Given what immediately follows and the address to "my chevalier" in line 11, one is tempted to follow the positive reading forcefully put forward by Schoder of "Buckle!" as a challenge to action *ad majorem Dei gloriam*, through which fusion and identification between the falcon and "Christ Our Lord" is effected. But "buckle" in this sense implies some battle or contest. Who is the enemy to be defeated? The wind hardly qualifies. The forces of disbelief or mere lukewarm adhesion? A further question concerns the identity of the person addressed as "thee" and "O my chevalier." The speaker's own heart, as Gallet persuasively, but not quite convincingly argues? The falcon? Christ? Or the falcon that has become Christ? If we retain this last hypothesis, what, concretely, actually, happens at this juncture which looks conspicuously like some coalgas fire explosion? And what might be the connection with the last three lines, clearly introduced as some sort of explanation ("No wonder of it")? These lines present two images, both taken from the realm of common everyday experience for Hopkins's contemporaries. Nothing could be more different from the kestrel's masterful hovering and gliding than the heavily stressed plodding of the ploughing farmer and the tumbling of embers when the fire is about to die. True, they are mentioned because of the light gleaming on the metal of the ploughshare and glowing in the collapsing log respectively; but these, in turn, surely, have little in common with the blaze of "the fire that breaks from thee"? Something else must be at stake, related to what happens in the first tercet. A ploughshare is a weapon made to cut, its sharp edge dividing the womb of the field before the sowing of new life. The wounding is explicit in the second image: the "blue-bleak embers" "fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion." This last line is in fact so clear in its connotations that few critics have failed to see that it has to refer to Christ's crucifixion. In this case, cannot the fire of line 10 break from some self-willed immolation? And aren't we justified in revising the meaning of "Buckle!?" That is, isn't there a shift in the poem at this most obscure juncture, from unimpeded mastery of the sky as a fit object for wonder to the other wonder of (self-imposed) defeat as a means to attain an even more resounding, or rather (given the visual context) dazzling victory? The reading of "buckle" as a bending, a giving way is argued by Milroy on the grounds of Hopkins's use of etymology and his relating "buck" and "buckle" to OE "bugan" (bend). The connection between "buckle" and the images of collapse in the last three lines is explored by Mariani and by Robinson, though the latter deftly recovers unity and wholeness: "the display of valour and pride and the rest is made possible only by the collapse of these separate ideal categories in the real particular, the bird" (p.44). Nevertheless, I fully agree with some of Robinson's comments on these last lines:

Christ's life in this last tercet is the paradox of the dull coal suddenly made bright in destruction; it has become an aesthetic fact as much as a moral one, and the consequences in this poem are unfortunate. Our attention is less on the crucifixion as a symbol of triumph than it is on the "gash" of sacrifice. Yet the gash is celebrated still, and, although the mourning note of "ah my dear" [a reference to Herbert's "Love"] makes the celebration contained in this last tercet a quiet one, it does not cancel the fact that the crucifixion is being seen as beautiful. This seems to me regrettable (Robinson, p.51).

It is regrettable in more than one way. Not only is suffering (yet again) glorified, but this tour de force of a poem is hopelessly dislocated. Would the onlooker of the octave bother to come out and watch a self-immolation, whatever its liturgical virtues?

As no critic fails to mention, Hopkins himself wrote that "The windhover" was the best poem he had ever written. Did he mean it? Was he being cocksure of doing the right thing, of glorifying the power of God through the beauty of nature? Or was he mischievously anticipating the reels of contradictory criticism that would result from its contradictions? The most likely explanation is that he was particularly pleased precisely by what I find

fault with, that is, the subtle sleight-of-hand through which he effects in his verse, hinging on the controverted "buckle" at its core, the reversal in which the force of Christianity was invested in his eyes.

I find similar discrepancies, and indeed inconsistencies, between lines describing nature and their religious interpretation in several other poems. In "The Starlight Night," for instance, leaving aside the questionable pertinence of the flower comparisons ("a May-mess," "March-bloom, like on mealed-with-yellow shallows!"), how can we reconcile the infinitely open space of a starlit sky with the final image of the barn: "this piece-bright paling shuts the spouse / Christ home, Christ and his mother and all his hallows"?

"A poem," Rehder writes, "converts all language into metaphor and metaphor is a way of being in two places at once" (p. 177). Hopkins' metaphors often leave me with the uncomfortable sense of ultimately not being in any place at all: there is something almost systematically constrained in his associations.

Hopkins's brilliant mind had entered all the twists and turns of theological reasoning, and something of this intellectual complexity pervades the complexity of his verse. He regenerated the English language in a much needed way; he coined extraordinarily accurate images. But except in one or two poems, they fail to hang together. The ground rock of coherence is lacking. And this in-coherence is the gash or gap into which Hill's anguish of absence comes pouring in.

One with desperate lucidity, the other unknowingly, unwillingly and long before the death camp era, both Hill and Hopkins testify to the vacuous-ness in which Adorno sees humanity becalmed once European history has lost its direction and impetus. All that remains, and it does, magnificently, remain in the works of both poets, is formal splendour, a beauty which in itself, whatever may or may not be found in it, is an affirmation of man's creative power.

But does this mean that art in our time can only express the anguish of disconnection? that a sense of holiness can only be spurious? The art of David Jones, for one, stands as an unequivocal refutation. For all his awareness of the threat of any empire and his acknowledging the horrors of all wars, his poetry is essentially a celebration of connectedness, a tribute to the divine in all things and creatures. The main difference between Hopkins and Jones is perhaps that with Jones language does not become metaphor. The world is not a sign of the divine to be provided with an appropriate interpretation; if approached with proper reverence it is, literally, holy. With him, Eagleton's dilemma on the simultaneous necessity and danger of Utopia does not lose any of its validity, but – in Jones's work if not in his life – it loses its paralyzing fangs.

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