

THE QUALITY OF DEVOTION IN *THE WINDHOVER* BY GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

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Abstract

The break with the Victorian tradition of writing poetry came, not with the work of T. S. Eliot but with that of a little-known late-Victorian, Gerard Manley Hopkins. He freed both metre and language from the bonds of convention and paved way for the emergence of modern poetry. Hopkins is regarded as one of the greatest 19th-century poets of religion, of nature, and of inner anguish. Hopkins was a very devout Jesuit priest. So devout, in fact, that he stopped writing poetry for a long time (even burning his early poems) because he thought that priests shouldn't write poetry. Later, he decided that writing poetry was a way of bringing himself closer to God. Hopkins used poetry to express his religious devotion, drawing his images from the natural world. In this paper an attempt is made to examine the devotional quality in his poem, "The Windhover". It is the most remarkable and the most eloquent devotional poem. Hopkins wrote "The Windhover" only a few months before his ordination as a Jesuit priest, the ultimate commitment to sacrifice his worldly ambitions. He found nature inspiring and developed his theories of *inscape* and *instress* to explore the manifestation of God in every living thing.

Key words: *Windhover, Jesuit, Christ, inscape, instress, Sprung rhythm, splendor.*

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889) is regarded as the greatest poet of religion, of nature and melancholy of the Victorian era. He was a Victorian poet influenced by the Romantic poet John Keats in his first poems; the Pre-Raphaelites and Oxford's Movement both of them influenced strongly in him. Hopkins has been seen as a precursor of the modernist poetry and the bridge between Romanticism and Victorian Era, due to his description of love of nature in his poems. He was profoundly influenced by Christina Rossetti and was interested in medievalism, the Pre-Raphaelites, and developments in Victorian religious poetry. Rossetti and Hopkins fuse the impulses of late Victorian Aestheticism and Christian orthodoxy into a renewal and revision of lyric subjectivity, expressed in short forms such as the song and the sonnet. A poet of the Victorian era, who was virtually unknown in his lifetime, the works of Hopkins were not published until 1918.

Heuser in his valuable article on ‘The Shaping Vision of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ brings out, “The intensity of Hopkins thought and feeling, his passion for order, his striking ability to see images of the divine in the material shapes, his almost obsessive concern with words and numbers---- these are peculiar to his nature and distinguish him from his fellow Victorians”. (172). His poetry now serves as a distinctive expression of poetic faith in the Victorian era.

Hopkins was born on July 28, 1844 in Stratford near London. He belonged to a middle– class cultured family of moderate High Church Anglicanism. In 1863 he was admitted to Balliol College, Oxford where his interactions with a group of Anglo–catholic intellectuals showed his ascetic tendencies. In 1868 Hopkins joined the Jesuit Order to begin nine years of training for the priesthood. On entering the Jesuit order Hopkins had burnt all the verses resolving to write no more till he should, by ecclesiastical authority, be specifically asked to do so.

In a letter to a friend (Canon Dixon) he told how he came to write his first mature poem:

“When in the winter of 75 the Deutschland was wrecked in the mouth of the Thames and five Franciscan nuns, exiles from Germany by the Falk Laws aboard of her were drowned. I was affected by the account and happening to say so to my rector he said that he wished someone would write a poem on the subject. On this hint I set to work and, though my hand was out at first, produced one”. (Gorman,662)

When he was 31, the sinking of a German ship in which five nuns died inspired him to write "The Wreck of the Deutschland." (1875), Hopkins’s greatest devotional poems. Here the object is not to mourn the wreck or the loss of human lives or even to present a narrative of events. The object is to give us a picture of his own spiritual vicissitudes and to interpret the shipwreck as a revelation of God. The poem is a celebration of the glory of human and divine life of both spiritual and physical world. Although conventional in theme, Hopkins poem "The Wreck of the Deutschland" introduced what Hopkins called "sprung rhythm". The very same internal rhythm is also found in his other great shorter poems, such as "The Wind hover" and "Pied Beauty.

In 1884, he became a professor of Greek at the Royal University College in Dublin. In 1889, Hopkins died of typhoid fever in Dublin without seeing his poetry (except a few early pieces) in print. Although his poems were never published during his lifetime, his friend poet Robert Bridges edited a volume of Hopkins' Poems that first appeared in 1918. Hopkins was a 19th-century poet who wrote the most innovative Christian poetry since John Milton of Paradise Lost fame. Much of Hopkins' strange, abrupt verse is about God's relationship to humanity. Many of his poems bemoan man’s indifference to the destruction of sacred natural and religious order.

Hopkins developed theories of natural essence and expressiveness, and of meter, and coined the terms inscape, instress and sprung rhythm. The two terms Inscap and Instress were coined by Hopkins at Oxford as an undergraduate. They are the keys to Hopkins’s critical doctrine. Inscap to Hopkins meant design or pattern, whereas Instress is the undercurrent of creative energy that supports and binds together the whole of the created world giving things shape, form , and meaning to the eye of the beholder. According to these theories, the recognition of an object’s unique identity, which was bestowed upon that object by God, brings us closer to Christ.

Hopkins by nature was a deeply religious man; He was an ardent believer in God and in the divinity of Christ; he had a very powerful ascetic strain in his temperament: and he led an

austere and morally elevated life. His faith in God was so deep that in every object of nature he saw God. Everywhere in his poetry there is an expression of his fervent belief in God and in Christ, and in invoking the Deity whom he was determined to serve.

The Windhover is, the most remarkable and the most eloquent devotional poem. Hopkins wrote “The Windhover” only a few months before his ordination as a Jesuit priest, the ultimate commitment to sacrifice his worldly ambitions. “The Windhover” To Christ our Lord, is a sonnet by Gerard Manley Hopkins and is regarded as a masterpiece. It was written on May 30, 1877, but not published until 1918, when it was included as part of the collection Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins.

“The Windhover To Christ our Lord” is the greatest of Hopkins’ poems of this period, in the implications of its subject, and in its metrical accomplishment. Hopkins himself referred to it as “the best thing I ever wrote”. It is indeed “the achieve of mastery of the thing”. (Pick, 70)

He dedicated the poem to Christ, our Lord. The sub-title “To Christ Our Lord” emphasizes religious significance. The falcon in the poem is a symbol of Christ. The speaker watches a falcon flying through the sky and finds traces of Christ in its flight path. The beauty of the bird causes the speaker to reflect on the beauty of Christ because the speaker sees a divine imprint on all living things. When the poet sees a kestrel (or a falcon) in flight; the bird becomes for the poet a symbol of natural beauty which by a sudden and drastic transition, is compared with the spiritual beauty of Christ’s sacrifice.

“Hopkins’s finds Christ in early morning experience of watching a bird of prey. The force of experience described in ‘The Windhover’ (a local name for a kestrel) is that of a man who senses God through the masterly behavior of a wild creature”(Gorman,538)

The Windhover by Gerard Manley Hopkins is a semi-romantic, religious poem dedicated to Christ. It is a usual Hopkins style of sonnet that begins with description of nature and ends in meditation about God and Christ and his beauty, greatness and grace. This poem follows the pattern of so many of Hopkins’s sonnets, in that a sensuous experience or description leads to a set of moral reflections. Hopkins shows a distinct preference for the Italian structure of the sonnet form over the Shakespearean or English structure. The Italian structure has two divisions –the octave consisting of eight lines and the sestet consisting of six lines. The octave describes the bird, and the sestet begins by recognizing what the bird signifies. The poet’s main idea in the poem is that the brute beauty of the falcon is only a faint flash of the glory and splendor of Christ.

The beauty of the poem lies in the way Hopkins integrates his masterful description of a bird’s physical feat with an account of his own heart’s response at the end of the first stanza. The subject of this sonnet is the skill with which wind hover or falcon controls its flight through the air and the majesty and grandeur of the bird. It is possible to interpret the poem as attribute to the Savior, the falcon in that case being regarded as a symbol of Christ and the attributes of the falcon being equally valid when applied to Christ. The sonnet is a masterpiece in its originality in the use of words and its striking imagery.

One of the most gifted Englishmen of his generation, Gerard Manley Hopkins’s whose most recognized contribution to the literary world was his approach to rhythmic structure as he stands as the founder and developer “sprung rhythm. It is a poetic rhythm designed to imitate the rhythm of natural speech. It is constructed from feet in which the first syllable is stressed and may be followed by a variable number of unstressed syllables. It is a meter in which the number

of accents in a line are counted but the number of syllables does not matter. In sprung rhythm, the poet counts the number of accented syllables in the line, but places no limit on the total number of syllables. As opposed to syllabic meters (such as the iambic), which count both stresses and syllables, this form allows for greater freedom in the position and proportion of stresses. This gives Hopkins great control over the speed of his lines and their dramatic effects.

This technique allows Hopkins in the poem to vary the speed of his lines so as to capture the bird's pausing and racing. The hovering rhythm of "the rolling level underneath him steady air," and the arched brightness of "and striding high there." The poem slows abruptly at the end, pausing in awe to reflect on Christ. He also uses internal rhyme, The words dawn and drawn rhyme, but since they appear within the same line, that's called an internal rhyme helping the flow of the poem and once again giving greater strength to certain words and lines. "Dawn-drawn" "Stirred for a bird" "Fall gall". His sonnet 'The Windhover' the bird can be viewed as a metaphor for Christ or of divine epiphany. It demonstrates the correlation of nature with religion, as the poet uses a Kestrel to symbolize Christ, to whom the poem is dedicated.

The Windhover refers to an exquisitely beautiful bird of prey which Gerald Manley Hopkins has obviously caught in his sights in the glory of the early morning and encapsulated in poetry.

"When Hopkins early one spring morning, in a subdued frame of mind, went out from St Beuno's College and caught the flight of the windhover, the sonnet which sprang from his blend of excitement and sober musings about the future was destined to become, out of all lyrics since the middle of the nineteenth century, the one that has probably attracted the most thought and commentary". (MacKenzie,76) I caught this morning morning's minion, king- dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon,(Gorman,538)

The poem begins with a description of a falcon, or "Windhover" which is beautiful and graceful, "striding" and "riding" through the air. He uses the metaphors of "minion" and "dauphin" to express his view that beautiful and powerful as the kestrel is, it still belongs to creation and to God. So Hopkins is thanking God for sharing the majesty of creation with him, and praising him for his skill in designing it.

Suddenly the narrator notices the bird taking a sudden splendid change of flight, he makes use of a simile to describe it.

"As a skate's heel sweeps smooth-the achieve of; the mastery of the thing!" (538)

The narrator then appears in awe of the falcon's flight, and uses some stirring action words to quicken the pace of the poem and to better express the daring and perfect aerial acrobatics of the bird of prey. The language "skate" and "sweeps" or "hurl" and "gliding" add impetus and drive to the poem, as well as describing with great observational detail, the daring grace of the falcon. In the second section, the narrator describes the extent of his love towards God. The kestrel is often seen as a metaphor for Christ who sacrificed himself to die for the sins of Christians "hurling" himself downwards like the wind or the kestrel in the poem. Though the bird is majestic and graceful, it hardly compares to the wonders of God, and the moment the narrator makes contact with him. "A billion times told lovelier". The narrator then begins to show the contrast between inner and outer beauty.

The mere plodding of a ploughman as he pushes the plough down the "sillion", instead of wearing it down, actually polishes it—causing it to sparkle and shine. It appears that the poet too wishes to be able to make those kinds of sacrifices and efforts in the service of his master - to be a plough in the work of cultivating the spirituality of mankind. The suggestion is that there is a

glittering, luminous core to every individual, which a concerted religious life can expose. The subsequent image is of embers breaking open to reveal a smoldering interior. Hopkins words this image so as to relate the concept back to the Crucifixion: The verb “gash” suggests the wounding of Christ’s body and the shedding of his “gold-vermilion” blood. The poet through suffering and mortification for the sake of Christ would experience a spiritual glory.

‘The Windhover’ is but one demonstration of Hopkins’ use of poetry as the most articulate way of unifying his experience of the world and God. J. Hillis Miller provides a useful expansion on this thought:

beginning with a sense of his own isolation and idiosyncrasy, Hopkins turns outside himself to nature, to poetry, and to God. Gradually he integrates all things into one chorus of many voices all singing, in their different ways, the name of Christ. Poetry is the imitation and echo of this chorus (323).

Hopkins found that the most fitting way of expressing his devotion to Christ was through the inscape of words, in his poetry. The poem is remarkable for conveying the writer’s “inscape” and “instress”. In none of his sonnets does Hopkins succeed in capturing the instress of a particular event in nature so skillfully, or in applying it to his own peculiar position so aptly as in this one. The manner in which the falcon, its majesty, its skill, its triumphant flight, its feeling of ecstasy are imaged in this sonnet is the supreme illustration of Hopkins’s poetic theory, with its characteristic emphasis on the “inscape” of Nature, and the “instress” of things in the Windhover. The falcon in the poem is a symbol of Christ. The epithets used for the falcon are such as could be applied to Christ too; The pride, the plume, the valor refer to the bird’s struggle against the elements, a struggle which is symbolic of the struggle of Christ himself against the forces of evil. In the bird the poet thus sees the image of Christian endeavor, the struggle and the achievement in face of all difficulties, thus the bird has become the instrument of God. He links fire and Christ in “The Windhover,” as the speaker sees a flame burst at the exact moment in which he realizes that the falcon contains Christ. The poem is actually not to the bird at all; it is ‘*To Christ our Lord*’, i.e. a religious poem. Clearly, the poet is going to dedicate the pure joy both he and the kestrel experience in the majesty of creation to his God.

There are two main themes that become apparent in this poem, the division between the physical abilities of the falcon compared to that of the earthbound narrator. The other theme is the contrast between the man’s outer appearance, and his inner burning love for God. The tone of the poem is distinctly religious and regal. The regal tone first comes apparent when the poets uses the word “dauphin”, or heir to the throne, as well as words such as “kingdom”, “valour” and “chevalier”. The religious tone of the poem is developed through the use of language such as “morning’s minion” and through the images of the dawn. “And the fire that breaks up...” as well as the through the subtitle “To Christ our Lord”. This poem is evidently directed towards Christ. Hopkins is one of the greatest Nature-poets in English. He is fascinated by nature not only because of its beauty, splendor, grandeur but also because it mirrors God and reveals Him to us in all its manifestations. In the poem the falcon serves as a direct symbol of Christ. The perfect self-control and the poised daring of the falcon brings home to the poet the spiritual riches of Christ. In the last three lines of his sonnet Hopkins suggest that even the humblest objects, events and actions can give off the radiance of the obviously beautiful falcon. In the last three lines Christ’s humility and suffering, rather than his princely glory have been indicated.

Hopkins has combined his fascination for Nature with his religious fervor in the poem. He expresses his sense of gratitude to God for giving us a beautiful nature. The beauty of nature

is here seen in the wonderful bird (kestrel) flying in the air. Hopkins would use poetry to describe the individual, unique characteristics of different objects (like the windhover) that made them absolutely one-of-a-kind. When the poet sees the beautiful bird, he is reminded of Christ and becomes thankful and appreciative of him. The poem's theme is therefore related to the poet's praise of Christ rather than being about the bird. – To conclude, this poem is regarded as one of Hopkins's masterpiece and certainly deserves to be so regarded as it is overflowing with style, diction and imagery. The close of the poem shows that the contemplation of higher flights of spiritual and worldly endeavor by Christ has given purpose to the humble struggle of Hopkins, the priest. The poem is thus a declaration of Christian purpose and a triumphant confirmation of the writer's personal faith- the faith that was his very existence. Overall, though this poem is relatively short, it conveys a significant message with two meaningful themes about man's love for God and one's inner beauty. The poem is therefore a poem of thanksgiving to Christ. It is a hymn that is romantic in form but religious in theme.

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