

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS: THE PERFORMANCE OF RESILIENCE IN THE FACE OF INNER CONFLICT¹

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Abstract: This article focuses on the “terrible sonnets” of the English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889). It shows how these poems offer an insight into a particular form of agonistics. Hopkins struggles with his understanding of self, of God, and of language, transforming experience into a fundamental clash of hegemonic visions of the world. Through resilience, there is not reconciliation but a re-visioning (therefore re-mediatising) of the possibility of human existence, which finds its home in language. Hopkins thus works between sound and sight and places a spiritual dimension into the political conversation about the task of being human. This challenge to any reductive approach is also, the article argues, an expression of resilience.

Keywords: Gerard Manley Hopkins, Chantal Mouffe, agonistics, resilience, conflict resolution

Introduction

Born in 1844, Gerard Manley Hopkins converted to Roman Catholicism in 1866, joining a Roman Catholic religious order, the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) in 1868. He was ordained to the priesthood in 1877 and after a peripatetic few years in various parishes in England, he moved in 1884 to teach Classics in Dublin. He died there in 1889, some six weeks before his forty-fifth birthday. Unpublished in his lifetime, the first edition of his poems appeared in 1918, edited by his friend, the Poet Laureate, Robert Bridges. In this article, I focus on six poems written in Dublin

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during his first year in Ireland, commonly known as the “terrible sonnets.” I will carry out this task in conversation with Chantal Mouffe, in particular the final chapter of *Agonistics*, entitled “Agonistic Politics and Artistic Practices.”² Hopkins’s struggles exist on three levels, with language, with religious experience, and with the search for resilience.

Hopkins’s poems can be read as prayers, to a God at times very close and at times seemingly distant. Prayer can be understood as performative³ – by engaging with a God who is believed to be present, a particular world and worldview are created that impact on how the person relates with the world in all its diversity. It also helps human resilience. Religious belief, whilst not a guarantee of resilience, has been shown to be a strong indicator of capacity for resilience, itself a performative, as well as an agonistic, action, a struggle with countervailing political and social forces that seek to exclude or limit.

Agonistics in Action

To talk of agonistics, as understood by Chantal Mouffe, in relation to Hopkins is not as anachronistic as might first appear. He was, after all, greatly influenced by John Milton, not only by *Paradise Lost*, but also by *Samson Agonistes*. Indeed Russell Hillier has suggested that there is an “underthought” of *Samson Agonistes* in “My own heart let me have more pity on,” to which I turn shortly.⁴ Hopkins admired how Milton pushed English syntax to or perhaps even beyond its breaking point, but as Hillier argues, the story of Samson’s struggle with God and with the meaning of his life is also an important element for Hopkins.

From Mouffe’s perspective, Hopkins’s politics may be at best mixed,⁵ though he once wrote in a letter to his long-time friend Robert Bridges that “horrible to say, in a manner I am a Communist. [...] It is a dreadful thing for the greatest and most necessary part of a very rich nation to live a hard life without dignity,

² Chantal Mouffe, “Agonistic Politics and Artistic Practices,” in Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013), 83-105.

³ See J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words. The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁴ Russell Hillier, “The Underthought of John Milton’s *Samson Agonistes* in Gerard Manley Hopkins’s “My own heart let me more have pity on,” *The Expositor* 81, no. 2 (2023): 54-59. The first line of “The Wreck of the Deutschland,” which inaugurated Hopkins’s mature return to poetry, reads “Thou mastering me / God,” already indicative of the sense of struggle that will mark his poetry.

⁵ He strongly supported continued British rule of Ireland, which did not sit easily in Dublin in the late 1880s.

knowledge, comforts, delight, or hopes in the midst of plenty, which plenty they make.”⁶ Although it has been suggested that in fact Hopkins adopts at best a patronising attitude towards the labourers he frequently encountered in his pastoral work,⁷ the attraction of communism for many writers in late nineteenth-century (to name just two, William Morris and Oscar Wilde) should not be underestimated, especially in an idyllic agrarian form.

This search for the “soul of man under socialism”⁸ is a form of agonistics. For, as Mouffe argues, the aim of the political is not consensus, but the presentation of competing claims to hegemony, the social structuring of a people gathered around a common goal. The task, then, is to insist on the possibility of choice, which is always contingent, but also always necessary. One of Mouffe’s chief contributions in this regard is reclaiming the importance of the passions, the need to acknowledge the affective in any discussion of the political. The stark choice to be made within the realm of the political (for Mouffe between some kind of socialism, or liberal late modern capitalism) is supported and reflected by art.

I would argue that Hopkins is engaged precisely in this struggle to reflect on the world in which he lives and the God whom he needs in this world to offer him consistency and self-understanding. It would be wrong to assume that this is some kind of ungrounded or purely “spiritual” world, for Hopkins is always very aware of his place in the world, of how everything has or should have meaning.⁹ This touches already on the dimension of mediatisation, in the sense that all is mediated.

For Hopkins this mediation or mediatisation is expressed in his concepts of inscape and instress. The first, drawing both on his understanding of the medieval Franciscan scholar Duns Scotus (1265-1308), especially the concept of *haecceitas*, (“thisness”), the particularity of each given thing, and the observation of the world around him, is expressed in the words of his sonnet “As kingfishers catch fire”:
“Each mortal thing does one thing and the same: / Deals out that being indoors

⁶ Letter to Robert Bridges, 2 August 1871, in Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W.H. Gardner (London: Penguin, 1986), 173.

⁷ See Jenny Holt, “The Negotiation of Power Relations in Gerard Manley Hopkins’ ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’ and Sonnets about Working-Class Men,” *Victorian Poetry* 38, no. 2 (2000): 299-318.

⁸ Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* (Auckland: The Floating Press, 2009).

⁹ In an insightful article, “‘And what does anything at all matter?’: Asceticism and the Hermeneutics of Comfort in Hopkins’s Terrible Sonnets,” *Religion and the Arts* 18 (2014): 325-48, Julia Dorothy Yost looks at Hopkins’s morality, arguing persuasively that “the hermeneutic arising from Hopkins’s black-and-white ethics is neither reductive nor crude but highly sensitive and rich. Hopkins’s ascetical outlook, in which no action is trivial, elicits unconventional discernments of the significance of action and experience” (326).

each one dwells; / Selves – goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells, / Crying *What I do is me: for that I came*" (90).¹⁰ Instress, on the other hand is what holds each particularity together. This is not a consensus, but a recognition of agonistics, a non-synthetic dialectics. The universal and the particular are not reduced one to another, but both continue and need to co-exist.

Hopkins understands his task, as priest, as poet, as human being, as one of mediating the experience he has of God in all its complexity, and especially in the struggles which go with that experience. And this is ultimately a political engagement and a performative one. It is by acting that we become who we are: "*What I do is me.*" And in acting each human being necessarily has an impact on society, and the performance is one that seeks to support or further the aims of a particular hegemonic view.

In her 2002 pamphlet, *Politics and Passions*, and drawing on Carl Schmitt, Mouffe suggests that

there is always the possibility that an 'Us'–'Them' relationship can become a friend–enemy relationship. This happens when the 'Other,' until now merely considered to be different, begins to be perceived as questioning our identity and threatening our existence. From that moment, any form of Us–Them relationship – religious, ethnic or economic – becomes the locus of an antagonism.¹¹

In what follows, I want to show how, in the "terrible sonnets," Hopkins mediates a public relationship with God, oscillating between an I–Thou and an I/Us–Them relationship, which seeks both to include and exclude, recognising closeness and distance, hope and despair.

The "Terrible Sonnets"

Hopkins's time in Dublin can be viewed in conflicting ways. His last words were, apparently, "I am so happy, so happy."¹² Certainly he had good friends in Dublin, both in his Jesuit community, and elsewhere, including families with whom he

¹⁰ All quotations from Hopkins's poems follow the text of *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W.H. Gardner and N.H. MacKenzie, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980). References to page numbers are given in parentheses in the text.

¹¹ Chantal Mouffe, *Politics and Passions: The Stakes of Democracy* (London: CSD, 2002), 7.

¹² See, for example, W.H. Gardner, "Introduction," in Hopkins, *Poems and Prose*, xxxi.

would spend time and with whom he clearly felt very much at home.¹³ However, he also suffered in Dublin, not least with his health. Perhaps weakened by either Crohn's disease or coeliac disease,¹⁴ he was almost permanently tired, his eyes ached, he was undernourished, and he did not particularly enjoy his work.

Although he spent more time in Dublin than any other place after his ordination to the priesthood, there is a sense that Hopkins never felt truly settled anywhere. The first year, living away from England and all he knew and those he loved for the first time, clearly brought even more stress. Hilary Pearson has argued that Hopkins displays all the signs of clinical depression, especially in the sonnets under discussion.¹⁵ There are also spiritual elements. Jesuits are expected to undertake an annual retreat of some eight days, based on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, the Jesuit founder.¹⁶ Hopkins's final such retreat took place at the very beginning of 1889. Reflecting on the opening of Ignatius's "Spiritual Exercises," entitled Principle and Foundation,¹⁷ he confesses his sense of worthlessness, forced into work that he finds uncongenial in a setting he finds

¹³ See, for instance, Michael McGinley, "Gerard Manley Hopkins and His Friends in Dublin," *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 106, no. 422 (2017): 193-201, and Joseph J. Feeney, "Hopkins and the MacCabe Family: Three Children Who Knew Gerard Manley Hopkins," *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 90, no. 359 (2001): 299-307. Reminiscing, admittedly almost sixty years later, one of the MacCabe children stated that "Father Hopkins was *not* unhappy as far as we knew" (304).

¹⁴ The cause of Hopkins's death is usually given as typhoid. However, medical experts, having considered his symptoms, have suggested either Crohn's disease or perhaps coeliac disease as a more likely cause. For a diagnosis of Crohn's disease, see Kenneth Flegel, "My Winter World: The Illness of Gerard Manley Hopkins," *The Lancet* 349, no. 9057 (1997): 1017-19, and in response and suggesting coeliac disease, Federico Biagi, H.J. Ellis, M.A. Morris, P.J. Ciclitira, "The Illness of Gerard Manley Hopkins," *The Lancet* 349, no. 9067 (1997): 1775-76.

¹⁵ See Hilary Pearson, "The 'Terrible' Sonnets of Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Spirituality of Depression," *The Way* 46, no. 1 (2007) 23-37.

¹⁶ The practice was enshrined in the requirements of the Society of Jesus in its General Congregation (its supreme governing body) in 1608. See George E. Ganss, SJ, "The Authentic Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: Some Facts of History and Terminology Basic to Their Functional Efficacy Today," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 1, no. 2 (1969): 18.

¹⁷ St. Ignatius of Loyola, "Spiritual Exercises," in *Personal Writings*, 4th ed., trans. Joseph Munitiz and Philip Endean (London: Penguin, 1996), 289 (23): Human beings are "created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by doing so to save" their souls. "The other things on the face of the earth are created for human beings in order to help them pursue the end for which they are created." Numbers in parentheses refer to paragraph numbers of the *Exercises*, which are constant across versions.

equally hard. He writes: "it seems to me that I could live this life well enough if I had bodily strength and cheerful spirits. However these God will not give me."¹⁸

But the struggle for Hopkins is how to live his life as a priest and perhaps also as a poet, rather than about questioning his faith. It is, in the terms of "Spiritual Exercises," an experience of desolation, described as a situation in which one feels oneself to be "without hope and without love; one finds oneself thoroughly lazy, lukewarm, sad, and as though cut off from one's Creator and Lord."¹⁹ Desolation is neither in itself blameworthy, nor is it to be denied or repressed.²⁰ The retreat notes quoted from above are an example of how Hopkins reacted within this experience, neither denying it nor desiring it. It is within such a context that he wrote the "terrible sonnets."

The Order of the Sonnets

The six "terrible sonnets" (Sonnets of Darkness or Desolation) were found posthumously, and their ordering is a matter of editorial conjecture. Robert Bridges, who first described them as "terrible posthumous sonnets," gave them the order they most frequently have to today, based on a largely neat manuscript written by Hopkins. They are untitled, but known as respectively "Carrion Comfort," "No Worst," "To Seem the Stranger," "I Wake and Feel," "Patience," and "My Own Heart." There have been dissenting voices to this order, most notably Daniel Harris in his book *Inspirations Unbidden*.²¹ The manuscript also contains a much more positive incomplete poem, "Ashboughs," that speaks of "old earth's groping towards the steep / Heaven whom she child us by" (185).²² I will thus follow the common ordering of the poems.

Given space constraints, I will offer a closer reading of two of the sonnets,²³ attending to their agonistic performance, and moving between the more 'spiritual'

¹⁸ "Retreat Notes, St Stanislaus' College, Tullabeg, 1 Jan. 1889," in Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Selected Prose*, ed. Gerald Roberts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 165.

¹⁹ St. Ignatius of Loyola, "Spiritual Exercises," 349 (317).

²⁰ Michael Ivens, SJ, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1998), 218.

²¹ Daniel A. Harris, *Inspirations Unbidden: The Terrible Sonnets of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982).

²² On "Ashboughs," see Peter Whiteford, "Hopkins' Remarks on His 'Terrible Posthumous Sonnets,'" *Renascence* 70, no. 3 (2018): 190.

²³ The two poems I have chosen can be situated within the broader trajectory of the six "terrible sonnets." In "Carrion Comfort," the first of the sequence, there is still the hope that something can be done, the refusal to give in fully to despair, and the willingness, like Jacob, to wrestle with God. I discuss the second poem, "No Worst," below. The third,

and the more 'political,' whilst avoiding any too sharp a distinction between the two. This is because there is no aspect of human life that does not have an effect on the life of society, and is thus related to the various hegemonic alternatives to structuring the polis, which is how I understand the political. For religious believers, and clearly for good or for bad, religious convictions play a part in that engagement with the structuring of the polis. Therefore, the spiritual, the way in which religious believers talk about or understand the relationship which they claim to have with the transcendent, however that is named or understood, necessarily impinges on the rest of society.

Struggles with Language and with God

To read Hopkins is to encounter an ongoing struggle both with the limits and possibilities of language and the limits and possibilities of a relationship with God. In terms of both performance and mediatisation, language here takes precedence. All language is both performance and mediatory. Like the fish and water, language is the medium in which and through which we exist. But the curse or blessing of humanity is to recognise also that language is both liberative and limiting. Wittgenstein's famous injunction to be silent about that of which we cannot speak is both important and insufficient. We often do want to talk about that of which we cannot speak, and this is at the heart of Hopkins's poetry.

A striking feature of his use of language is a firm belief in what could be termed the resilience of language. Sprung rhythm, which in his early poems Hopkins insisted on so much, is to do with the way in which normal spoken language engages with poetic metre. The basic argument is that the normal rhythm of English speech is not entirely possible to fit within the classic metres of English poetry (iambic pentameter, so loved by Shakespeare, for example). Thus the actual

"To Seem the Stranger," focuses on Hopkins' experiences in Ireland, but also in the Catholic church, feeling divided from those around from him but also through religion from his family. The thoughts of death may have gone, but still, Hopkins can only experience himself as a "lonely began." The fourth sonnet is "I Wake and Feel." Here the first glimmers of hope in the previous poem (for if he is lonely, he is at least a "began") fade again and the theme of night returns, and the darkness of his life. Here though God returns for him, even if as recipient of unanswered letters and the one who seems to demand of him this bitter life. The title (or first word – "Patience") of the fifth sonnet continues this discourse about the Transcendent Other, for patience is not only demanded of the human, but also God is seen as patient, waiting for the human. The poem is still dark, but there is some hope, for there is some other to turn to. The final sonnet is discussed in the text.

rhythm is dependent on the natural stresses, one reason why some kind of at least internal silent reading is always necessary for Hopkins's poetry.²⁴ He wanted his poetry to be heard, because in its performance it demands the rhythms of everyday speech and to that extent rediscovers the sense that is apparently lost.

"No Worst"

I begin with one of most "terrible" of the sonnets, "No Worst." It reads:

No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief,
More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring.
Comforter, where, where is your comforting?
Mary, mother of us, where is your relief?
My cries heave, herds-long; huddle in a main, a chief-
Woe, world-sorrow; on an age-old anvil wince and sing –
Then lull, then leave off. Fury had shrieked 'No ling-
ering! Let me be fell: force I must be brief'.
O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne'er hung there. Nor does long our small
Durance deal with that steep or deep. Here! creep,
Wretch, under a comfort serves in a whirlwind: all
Life death does end and each day dies with sleep.

(100)

Even to look at the printed text of the poem is to see how it seems to be falling apart, with hyphens and dashes at line ends. Moreover, in the sestet especially, most of the final words of lines are more naturally unstressed, breaking down the rhythm, unsettling the reader, not giving any rest, in keeping with the struggles in the poem. This, with the frequent alliteration, adds to a sense of alienation, of something almost familiar but not quite, of language fighting with itself to find a way to express a present absence or an absent presence, a God who is there and is not there – "Comforter [i.e., Paraclete, Holy Spirit], where, where is your comforting?"

The imagery of this poem draws heavily on nature, but this is not the freedom of the hawk in the sky ("The Windhover"), the brilliance of the diving kingfisher ("As Kingfishers Catch Fire"), the abundance of nature in "Pied Beauty." Not long

²⁴ See Summer J. Star, "'Almost Sung': The Silent Spoken Life of Hopkins's Verse," *Thinking Verse* 5 (2015): 116-48, especially 118ff.

after his arrival in Dublin in 1884, Hopkins holidayed with some friends in the west of Ireland and on a boat trip viewed the cliffs of Moher in County Clare.²⁵ It may be these cliffs that gave him the imagery for the poem, imagery that assimilates the external world into the internal – “O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall / Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed.”²⁶ And yet, it is a natural image. It may indeed be more forbidding, that of sheer cliff faces rather than vegetable or animal, but it is still part of creation. In this sense, of course, from Hopkins’s perspective it is also an address through the creation to the Creator.

The final line “all / Life death does end and each day dies with sleep” carries, alongside clear echoes of *Hamlet*, a kind of temporary resolution, of which the poem contains others (“Then lull, then leave off,” “under a comfort serves in a whirlwind”). The struggle is ongoing again, and now already we see the move from what might be termed a ‘we’ or at least a ‘you and I’ together, to what Mouffe calls an “us and them” or “me against you,” which she sees as at the heart of agonistic politics. There is a colloquy,²⁷ an address, even the kind of conversation a friend could have with another, but it is a complaint – where were you when I needed you? This is paradoxical, for only a friend can be reproved for failing to be there, and yet they are not there. It is, then, once more the present absence or absent presence. This is close to what, drawing on Jacques Lacan, Ernesto Laclau calls the “empty signifier,”²⁸ something that has no referent, though all understand it. Admittedly for Hopkins there certainly is a referent for the word “God.” And yet he struggles with the meaning of this referent, with the experience of a God who is both painfully close and painfully distant, present and absent. Is God the comforter or the whirlwind?

²⁵ See McGinley, “Gerard Manley Hopkins and His Friends in Dublin,” and Joseph Feeney SJ, *The Playfulness of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 34. It has also been reasonably suggested that the imagery refers to Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, where Edgar tries to trick Gloucester into believing he has fallen from a great height of a Dover cliff and survived (Act IV, Scene 6). See comments and references in Hillier, “Underthought,” 55.

²⁶ In a rather nice coincidence, the Cliffs of Moher are the film location for the “Cliffs of Insanity” in the film *The Princess Bride*. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZGnyI2BsTYI>.

²⁷ This technical term from the “Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius” refers to a conversation to be held with God at the end of a period of prayer, addressing him as a friend.

²⁸ See Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (1996; London: Verso, 2007), especially 36-46, and *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), 69-71. In the last-mentioned book, Laclau also refers to the Lacanian notion of “master-signifier” (217), which can be traced to Lacan’s discussion of “master-slave dialectics” in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. See *The Seminars of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses 1955-1956*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), especially 167 and 183-95.

“My Own Heart”

“My Own Heart” is usually considered the last in the sequence. It is not so much a resolution as a re-discovery, an emergence not from an agonistic clash, but to an understanding that this is what reality is like. It can be understood as a move from a hegemony of surplus presence to a hegemony of heartfelt absence. What changes is not the situation, but where Hopkins stands. Mouffe does not talk much about changing sides in agonistic clashes, but one way of understanding her work, especially her engagement with the passions and affect, is as a search for means of conversion, how to win people for the hegemonic claims she defends.

Here is the poem:

My own heart let me more have pity on; let
Me live to my sad self hereafter kind,
Charitable; not live this tormented mind
With this tormented mind tormenting yet.

I cast for comfort I can no more get
By groping round my comfortless, than blind
Eyes in their dark can day or thirst can find
Thirst's all-in-all in all a world of wet.

Soul, self; come, poor Jackself, I do advise
You, jaded, let be; call off thoughts awhile
Elsewhere; leave comfort root-room; let joy size

At God knows when to God knows what; whose smile
's not wrung, see you; unforeseen times rather – as skies
Betweenpie mountains – lights a lovely mile.

(102-103)

This is clearly a calmer sonnet, the expression of the ‘lull,’ rather than a return to the whirlwind. There is a sense of resignation, but perhaps also of acceptance. If the previous poems have seen Hopkins almost literally beating himself up (wrestling with God in a fight he can never win), here he resolves to show himself kindness. And yet, at least in the octet, he is still not out of the woods. He speaks of his “sad self,” of the tormented mind that goes on tormenting. He returns again to the theme of comfort, with its specific meaning in Hopkins:

Unlike 'comfort' in the modern idiom, which conveys a static sense of 'ease and well-being,' the Middle English and late Latin meanings imply effort toward a task for which a person is strengthened and in which he is supported. Etymologically, then, comfort is for moving forward.²⁹

In the octet Hopkins still sees no way forward, and the language of the second quatrain is as tormented as Hopkins's own mind: "I cast for comfort I can no more get / By groping round my comfortless, than blind / Eyes in their dark can day or thirst can find / Thirst's all-in-all in all a world of wet." It has been suggested that both "my comfortless" and "all a world of wet" are adjectives serving as nouns, so that "[the poet's] essence, all he is, [is] a condition, not an action; it allows him a bare existence, without energy or purpose or choice."³⁰ Hopkins is at this stage of the poem still in a situation of desolation, of despair.

This is the state of paralysis that can affect any agonistic struggle, where there seems little point in carrying on against an apparently overwhelming dominant hegemony. What complicates the matter for Hopkins is that the dryness, the blind groping, the absence of any apparent path for moving forward, is not simply an agonistic hegemony, the absence of God, the absence of human hope. It is not, for Hopkins, a contrast between a world with God and a world without God, but that, as we saw in the discussion of "No Worst," in his absence God is still present. It is precisely God's absence that he senses, God's comfort that he lacks.

Desolation, in the Ignatian tradition, is a genuine and important spiritual experience, an experience of God, even if in a negative way. It can be caused, for Ignatius, by all that is antithetical to God, but it may also be a kind of strange gift of God, in which the person is forced to reconsider and re-evaluate their understanding of God, purging it of all the accretions that can gather over the years. So, in the sestet Hopkins returns once more to self-comfort, encouraging himself to rest, "call off thoughts awhile / Elsewhere." If there is to be genuine comfort, genuine moving forward on the journey towards God, then it must come from God, not from the seeker.

The strength that Hopkins needs is not something that he can produce himself, but something that needs to be allowed to grow. Joy will come, but when and why and how only God knows. And this God is one who will smile, though even the odd division that puts the possessive "'s" at the beginning of a new line, ("whose

²⁹ Yost, "'And what does anything matter at all?'" 328.

³⁰ Virginia Ridley Ellis, *Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Language of Mystery* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1991), 277, cited in Yost, "'And what does anything matter at all?'" 331.

smile / 's not wrung"), is an indication of the fragility of this hope, a stuttering claim that is nevertheless genuine. Like the sun suddenly breaking through a gap in the mountains, the "smile" of God will, at some unexpected moment, appear, "lighting a lovely mile."

Conclusion

In conclusion, I want to suggest a few further points for reflection. Poetry as a medium is literally, a way of mediatizing. In Hopkins it is also an exercise in translation between media. Ultimately, for Hopkins, poetry is to be heard and is, thus, an aural medium. But Hopkins's poetry is more than anything else also visual. Sight is the predominant sense in all his poetry, the vision of "Christ at play in ten thousand places," as he puts it elsewhere. The question of how to verbalise and turn into sound this visual perception is one of the struggles that Hopkins faces. This is both aesthetic and political agonistics, inasmuch as the way in which experience is mediated is a political as much as an aesthetic decision. Who gets to say how we understand the world?

This translation is also a feature of mediatization, in the sense of the means which are used to communicate. Here I would say lies Hopkins's true originality, the ability to subvert hegemonic claims of how the world is by re-imagining, by using sound to induce a new vision, and sight to force us to listen in a new way. For him, as a convinced religious believer, his faith is fundamental. In the New Testament, the Letter to the Hebrews succinctly defines faith as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (Heb 11:1) Hopkins sees his task as in that sense revelatory, unveiling what is seen and hoped for.

In the "terrible sonnets," what is seen is the presence of God as an absence. This is not a denial of God, but paradoxically a moment of deepest faith. In another of the sonnets, Hopkins asks: "And where is he who more and more distills / Delicious kindness? – He is patient" (102). The non-answer is telling. The problem is not, for Hopkins, one to do with God, but with, let us say, the impatient patient. And this is where resilience comes in. The poems show how even in the most trying circumstances (illness, loneliness, tiredness, reaching almost – though perhaps never quite – to despair) the human being and human societies can resist.

Hopkins is not typically described as a political poet. And yet, every statement of human belief, every rejection of suffering, is a political act, a refusal to accept one form of hegemonic claim and standing for another, building a different people. By entering into the depths of his pain, Hopkins both refuses to reject and ignore it and at the same time refuses to accept it as the final word. However frightful the fall, there is a lull, comfort under a whirlwind, a smile. For Hopkins,

God is involved in this story, but whatever one's beliefs, it is a story of humankind rejecting claims of power where misery is inflicted and struggling, instead, to perform the story of another better world.

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