A Close, Eco-Theological Reading of Gerard Manley Hopkins' "God's Grandeur"

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Introduction:

It is well known that Gerard Manley Hopkins was enamored with nature. One must look no further than his sonnets on the topic to find proof of this. Moreover, biographical research proposes that Hopkins struggled to find a balance between his devotion to nature and to God. It is suggested that this is why, in 1868, he burned all but a few drafts of his early poetry. Hopkins began writing again in 1875 while at St. Bueno's Seminary, where he received his ordination in 1877 (Ferns 134). Thus, some of Hopkins' earliest mature works are dubbed the 'St. Bueno sonnets' and include "The Starlight Night," "God's Grandeur," "Hurrahing in Harvest," "The Windhover," "Pied Beauty," and "The Caged Skylark" (Murphy 173, 176). These sonnets arguably divide in two sections: "those that describe the illness or define the cure" (Murphy 176). This paper will explore Hopkins' conception of "the ilness" by examining his well-known work, "God's Grandeur." This exercise seeks to deepen the reader's understanding of the poem and how it relates to the larger collection of St. Bueno sonnets and Hopkins' biography.

Humanity + Nature: (whole text)

"And because His goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, He produced many and diverse creatures, that what was wanting to one in the representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another. For goodness, which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures in manifold and divided; and hence the whole universe together participates in the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better than any single creature whatever."

Saint Thomas Aquina, Summa Theological

We know that Hopkins was particularly interested in St. Thomas Aquinas, since a copy of "Adoro Te Devote," written by Aquinas and translated by Hopkins, was published in The Irish Monthly in 1903 (Early Poetic Manuscripts 258-69). In the passage above, Aquinas posits that the "whole universe together" exemplifies God's goodness. Because God is perfect, in Him, goodness is "simple and uniform." However, because the Earth is 'fallen' and imperfect, this "divine goodness" was divided among all creatures. It is not a far leap to conclude, then, that because the entire universe participates in the divine goodness, the entire universe must also participate in the process of redemption. Hopkins once wrote, "God gave things a forward and perpetual motion; the Devil...brought in the law of decay and consumption in inanimate nature, death in the vegetable and animal world, moral death and original sin in the world of man" (Devlin 199). For Hopkins, redeeming the world from the power of the "Devil" is not solely based on overcoming the original sin in the world of man. This is just one third of the redemption for which Christians are called to strive. The "decay" of "inanimate nature" and the "death in the vegetable and animal world" are also pieces of creation that have been affected by the "Devil," and to attain ultimate Paradise these facets must also be redeemed.

Humanity + Nature:

At least one apt interpretation of the word, I argue, is the definition of the verb "charge" which reads, "To fill (any substance) with other matter, diffused or distributed throughout it" (OED). This meaning seems in line with Aquinas' concept that the "goodness" of God is distributed throughout the "whole universe."

Humanity + Nature:

In the book of Genesis in the Christian Bible, the relationship between nature and humanity is broken when Adam and Eve first sin and are consequently expelled from the Garden of Eden. The couple is told, thereupon, that because of their actions the ground will be cursed, their toil will be painful, and only through difficult, manual labor will they be able to produce food. It is common belief that the curse brought about by the 'original sin' endures to this day and has, consequently, created a disordered universe. If the rift between humanity and nature was brought about by the first sin, as it is believed by Hopkins and many others, then ultimate redemption can only come after this relationship has been

Humanity + Nature:

In so few words, Hopkins manages to describe the complex relationship humanity has with nature; it is both symbiotic and antagonistic. "Man" relies on the earth for sustenance, while the earth relies on humankind for stewardship. However, "man" has harmed the earth by working in discord with it, and he has separated himself from the land off of which he lives.

Moreover, the use of shoes is a representation of the relationship between humans and the earth. Not only does humanity damage the earth, but shoes must be worn because nature can also hurt humans. An additional measure in the curse of the expulsion of Adam and Eve comes when God creates animosity between humanity and the serpent. The book of Genesis 3:18 reads, "thorns and thistles it [the ground] shall bring forth for you" (3). The brokenness of this relationship, which can be expanded to encompass all of nature, moves in both directions, and yet, the redemption and restoration of the earth requires a close communion.

Humanity + Nature:

Hopkins likens the disparity between humanity and nature to the setting of the sun: although it is time when the hope of communion is fading and growing darker, one can still believe that redemption will ultimately and inevitably be achieved, just as the sun will always inevitably rise after it has set.

Humanity + Nature:

In one sense, it suggests that both the natural world and humanity are hurting. Hopkins does not delineate here between the world of nature and its inhabitants.

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.

Divinity:

Hopkins provides contradictory images, the first expansive and the second reductive. In an essay on the subject of these two lines, Elizabeth Villeponteaux writes, "The twin images contain elements that any Catholic and many other Christians should recognize as being symbolically important and inextricably linked: flames and oil" (202). She goes on to explain, "The Acts of the Apostles tells us that when the Holy Spirit descended upon Christ's twelve apostles at the Pentecost, he appeared in the form of flames. As for the oil, the majority of the sacraments, including Baptism, Confirmation, Anointing of the Sick, and Holy Orders (ordination), involve anointing with holy oil as a sign of the coming Spirit" (203). This argument, that the lines refer to the Holy Spirit, is certainly not the only interpretation. However, it does seem supported by the last lines of the poem, which refer again to the "Holy Ghost."

Hopkins asks why, after seeing all the grandeur of God in the natural world, do men not fear Him more? Michael Lackey addresses this question in Hopkins' work when he writes, "the argument of the sonnet is to persuade the reader to believe, not to behave morally" (85). He additionally posits, "Hopkins' narrator holds people in his time accountable, for since God has made Himself manifest through the visible world, the narrator can only ask: 'Why do men then now not reck his rod?'" (83). Both of Lackey's statements, along with Hopkins' original question, infer what Hopkins sees as the moral relationship between humanity and the world: the visible world should lead one to a belief in, and fear of, God.

In this second half of the octave, the tone becomes noticeably bleaker. This quatrain describes the broken relationship between humanity and nature. This is foreshadowed by the enjambment of the third and fourth lines that highlight the word "crushed." Within the sentence, the word "crushed" refers to the oil. Without the line break, the phrase would read, "It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil crushed." In this sense, the meaning is fairly straight forward and innocuous. However, because of the enjambment, the word also intimates a shift in tone. It is both autonomous, "Crushed," and paralleled with the question that follows.

Humans have placed a barrier between themselves and nature. Because of the barrier between humanity and the earth, one can no longer feel or realize the damage that is

These lines of the poem describe God's relationship with nature as well as the natural world's intrinsic moral value.

There is the burden that humanity places on the earth by living off of it and treating it improperly. The natural world is "bent" because mankind has "seared [it] with trade," among other things.

Humanity: (whole text)

"The earth dries up and withers,

the world languishes and withers;

the heavens languish together with the earth.

The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants;

for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant.

Therefore a curse devours the earth,

and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt;"

Isaiah 24:4-6

According to this scripture, humanity is responsible for the destruction and "languishing" of the earth. This is not meant solely in the sense that people have taken advantage of the earth, but also that humanity's sin is directly correlated with the decay of the world.

Like the excerpt above from the book of Isaiah, in these lines Hopkins recognizes the harm that man has done to the earth. He writes that the world is "seared with trade" and "bleared with toil." These are both human deeds that have been acted out against the natural world. In these lines of the poem, instead of working together for thousands of generations, humanity has worked in discord with the earth., and that the soil is therefore "bare."

According to the curse in Genesis, God said that humanity would eat off the land through painful "toil" (Gen. 4:17). Hopkins' use of this same word earlier in the poem underscores the image of intense work, of men and women "bent" and laboring in a field. Ultimately, it describes a post-lapsarian humanity.

"Though Hopkins does not provide an easy solution to the 'illness' he has here described, the final sestet of the poem provides, at least, some hope. It begins with the lines, "And for all this, nature is never spent; / There lives the dearest freshness deep down things" (499). Here Hopkins still recognizes that the world is seemingly spent; however, there still lives a freshness of things "deep down." Hopkins seems to believe that, despite the damage humanity has done to the earth, because the world is charged with God's 'grandeur,' it can never completely be destroyed by humanity. Somewhere, deep down, there is still a hope for communion and redemption. The following two lines are a metaphor for the situation in which humanity has found itself.

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