

THE GOSPEL IN
GERARD MANLEY
HOPKINS



Selections from His Poems, Letters,
Journals, and Spiritual Writings

Edited by Margaret R. Ellsberg • Foreword by Dana Gioia



By the Gate of the Sacred ©

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“By the Gate of the Sacred,” portrait of Gerard Manley Hopkins,
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Cover portrait detail by Robert McGovern.

Illustrations by Gerard Manley Hopkins courtesy of the Harry Ransom Center,
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In memory of Mary Frances Dunham, 1954–2015

+

Spring

(unfolding rhythm with sprung leadings: no counterpoint)

Staccato

: Nothing is so beautiful as Spring;
 when creeds, in wheels, shoot up long, lovely, and lush;
 : Thrush's eggs look little low heavens, and thrush
 through the echoing timber does so rinse and wring
 : The ear, it strikes like lightning to hear him sing;
 the glassy heart-tree leaves and blooms, they brush
 the descending blue; that blue is all in a rush
 of richness; the racing lambs too have fair their fling.

: what is all this juice and all this joy?

Rall. ~~At~~ A strain of the earth's sweet being in the beginning
In Eden Garden. - Have, get, before it drowns,

Before it cloud, Christ, Lord, and sour with sinning,

Rall. : Innocent-minded Mayday in girl and boy,
Most, O maid's child, thy choice and worthy to win-
ning.

May 1877

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Foreword

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS is a singular figure in English-language literature. No other poet has achieved such major impact with so small a body of writing. His mature work consists of only forty-nine poems – none of which he saw published in his lifetime. Even when one adds the two dozen early poems written at Oxford and various fragments found in notebooks after his death, his literary *oeuvre* is meager in size, even for a writer who died in his forties.

Yet Hopkins occupies a disproportionately large and influential place in literary history. Invisible in his own lifetime, he now stands as a major poetic innovator who, like Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, prefigured the Modernist revolution. A Victorian by chronology, Hopkins belongs by sensibility to the twentieth century – an impression strengthened by the odd fact that his poetry was not published until 1918, twenty-nine years after his death. This posthumous legacy changed the course of modern poetry by influencing some of the leading poets, including W. H. Auden, Dylan Thomas, Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Geoffrey Hill, and Seamus Heaney.

As W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie observed in the fourth edition of *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (1970), “The steady growth and consolidation of the fame of Gerard Manley Hopkins has now reached a point from which, it

would seem, there can be no permanent regression.” There is a mixture of relief and wonder in their statement. No one would have predicted the poet’s exalted position when the first edition was published, not even its editor, Robert Bridges, who spent much of his introduction apologizing for the poet’s eccentricities and obscurities. Hopkins currently ranks as one of the most frequently reprinted poets in English. According to William Harmon’s statistical survey of existing anthologies and textbooks, *The Top 500 Poems* (1992), Hopkins stood in seventh place among English-language poets – surpassed only by Shakespeare, Donne, Blake, Dickinson, Yeats, and Wordsworth (all prolific and longer-lived writers). His poetry is universally taught and has inspired a mountain of scholarly commentary. Despite the difficulty of his style, he is also popular among students.

Hopkins is one of the great Christian poets of the modern era. His verse is profoundly, indeed almost totally, religious in subject and nature. A devout and orthodox convert to Catholicism who became a Jesuit priest, he considered poetry a spiritual distraction unless it could serve the faith. This quality makes his popularity in our increasingly secular and anti-religious age seem paradoxical. Yet the devotional nature of his work may actually be responsible for his continuing readership. Hopkins’s passionate faith may provide something not easily found elsewhere on the current curriculum – serious and disciplined Christian spirituality.

The history of English poetry is inextricably linked to Christianity. As Donald Davie commented in his introduction to *The New Oxford Book of Christian Verse* (1981), “Through most of the centuries when English verse has been written, virtually all of the writers of that verse quite properly and earnestly regarded themselves as Christian.” Not all poetry was explicitly religious, but Christian beliefs and perspectives shaped its

imaginative and moral vision. The tradition of explicitly religious poetry, however, was both huge and continuous. Starting with Chaucer, Langland, and the anonymous medieval authors of *The Pearl* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, religious poetry flourishes for half a millennium. The tradition continues robustly through Donne, Herbert, Vaughan, Traherne, Cowper, Milton, Blake, Wordsworth, Tennyson, both Brownings, and Christina Rossetti – as well the hymnodists Watts, Cowper, and Wesley. Then in the middle of the Victorian era it founders. Matthew Arnold’s melancholy masterpiece of anguished Victorian agnosticism, “Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse” (1855) exemplifies the crisis of faith. Entering the ancient Alpine monastery, Arnold contrasts the millennium of faith it represents with his own unsatisfying rationalism. Arnold articulates his intellectual and existential dilemma: “Wandering between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born.”

Not coincidentally, it was during that moment of growing religious skepticism and spiritual anxiety that Hopkins appeared to transform and renew the tradition of Christian poetry. Consequently, he occupies a strangely influential position in the history of English-language Christian poetry. His audaciously original style not only swept away the soft and sentimental conventions of nineteenth-century religious verse, it also provided a vehicle strong enough to communicate the overwhelming power of his faith. His small body of work – hidden for years – provided most of the elements out of which modern Christian poetry would be born.

PEGGY ELLSBERG’S *The Gospel in Gerard Manley Hopkins* focuses on the central mystery of the author’s singularly odd career – how a talented minor Victorian poet suddenly emerged

after seven years of silence as a convulsively original master of English verse. For Ellsberg, Hopkins's conversion to Catholicism was the catalytic force, intensified by Jesuit spiritual discipline and intense theological study. Hopkins's poetic formation, she contends, was inextricable from his priestly formation. It was no coincidence that the great explosion of his literary talent occurred as he approached ordination. His conversion had initiated an intellectual and imaginative transformation – initially invisible in the secret realms of his inner life – that produced a new poet embodied in the new priest. For both the man and the writer, the transformation was sacramental.

Although Holy Orders plays a critical role in the chronology of Hopkins's transformation, the connections between his Catholicism and creativity do not end there. The author's religious and imaginative conversion, Ellsberg demonstrates, depended on his vision of all the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. "For him," Ellsberg formulates persuasively, "a consecration made from human language reversed existential randomness and estrangement." Hopkins's belief in transubstantiation and real presence saved him from the painful theological doubts and sentimental spiritual hungers of his Anglican contemporaries; their crepuscular nostalgia and vague longing were replaced by his dazzling raptures of light-filled grace. A brave new world filled his senses with the sacramental energy of creation where every bird, tree, branch, and blossom trembled with divine immanence.

From the start Hopkins's literary champions have been puzzled, skeptical, confused, or even hostile toward his conversion. Catholicism was seen, even by Robert Bridges, as an intellectual impediment that the poet's native genius somehow overcame, though not without liability. Or Hopkins's theology was a cerebral eccentricity that generated an equally eccentric literary style. Ellsberg refutes these condescending views of the

poet and the Church. She pays a great poet the respect of taking his core beliefs seriously, not in the least because they have also been both the animating ideas of European civilization and the foundational dogmas of the Roman Catholic Church, which have inspired artists for two millennia.

The Gospel in Gerard Manley Hopkins combines scholarly accuracy with critical acumen. Ellsberg's extensive commentary on Hopkins's verse and prose texts both elucidates his thought and provides illuminating context for the poems. Meanwhile she sustains her larger argument on the spiritual development of the author as a model Christian life of consecration, contemplation, sacrifice, and indeed sanctity. In restoring the focus on the centrality of Hopkins's faith, Ellsberg does not simply clarify the underlying unity of his life and work. She also restores a great poet and modern saint to us, his readers.

Dana Gioia
Poet Laureate of California

PART I



Manor Farm, Shanklin.
Finished Sept. 21, 1863.

Incompatible Excellences

AN INTRODUCTION

IN THE CATHOLIC CEMETERY called Glasnevin in Dublin, the Jesuit Father Hopkins was buried near Maud Gonne in the summer of 1889. A century later, in 1989, the gravekeeper at Glasnevin referred to the famous priest and poet as “the convert.” Although geographically he did not die far from the place of his birth, Gerard Manley Hopkins had traversed vast theological paradigms, revolutionized poetic language, and called down the thunder and lightning of God onto the written page.

Only after leaving the Anglican Church, to which his family was so bound, leaving Oxford University, where he was on track to spend his life, and entering the Jesuit order, known for its insistence on quasi-cadaver-level obedience, did Hopkins boldly take on the visceral Anglo-Saxon two-beat foot that runs through English speech, mix it prodigally with Welsh and Latin and French, mold his lines to Greek forms, and concoct stanza after stanza and sestet after octet of nerve-shocking genius. Arbitrary, stray, he innovated rhythmic power in his poetry. He cut sonnets at ten lines. He flatly rejected everyone’s attempts to correct him. His opinions and practices were stubborn to the verge of arrogance and compulsion; in other words, he was coherent. He did as he wished while cloaked in a mantle of obedience. The reader

who arrives at the on-ramp to one of Gerard Manley Hopkins's masterpiece poems, or one of his letters or sermons or journal entries, will become the larger for having entered there.

As a Jesuit novice, age twenty-four, Hopkins made a Long Retreat with the extremely important manual called *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola*, composed by the Spanish/Basque priest Ignatius of Loyola in 1522–24, while the Lutheran Reformation simmered in the background. The *Exercises* provide essential guidance for Jesuits (and for anyone interested in directed contemplation). Hopkins would use the *Exercises* for the rest of his life. Perhaps the most influential moment in the *Exercises* occurs when the retreatant is invited to employ “*compositio loci*,” composition of place. Here the text instructs the person in prayer to visualize precisely and in naturalistic detail scenes from the life of Christ. Louis L. Martz, in *The Poetry of Meditation* (1976), characterizes “the composition of place” as essential in the religious poetry of seventeenth-century England. In Hopkins, this exercise influenced his sermons profoundly, and produced potential poetry.

Six months before he died, while on retreat at St. Stanislaus College in Tullabeg, the Jesuit novice-house in Ireland, Hopkins composed his most self-revealing material in his notes on Ignatius's “First Principle.” St. Ignatius, founder of the Jesuit order, opened his manual of exercises with the line “*homo creatus est laudare*” – man is created to praise. These words had permanently affected Hopkins. They showed up in his incessant search for creative pattern that made his art form into an homage to the author of all form. Humphry House, early editor of Hopkins's notebooks, wrote:

No single sentence better explains the motives and direction of Hopkins's life than this: “Man is created to praise.” He believed

it as wholly as a man can believe anything; and when regret or sorrow over anything in [Hopkins'] life comes to a critic's mind, this must be remembered. ¹

The specific instruction of the Jesuit *Exercises* clearly influenced the rigorous forms Hopkins chose for his poetry.

Gerard Manley Hopkins employed a sort of religious Expressionism, one certain of the divine and receptive to idiosyncrasy. Yet anthologies necessarily classify him as Victorian, since his short life spanned 1844–89. The Victorian period, 1837–1901, was the great age of teapots, three-volume novels, and piano legs wearing skirts. The Victorian sun never set on the Union Jack, and one out of three inhabitants of the planet was a British subject. Conventional style was heavy – windows hung with dark drapes, parlors densely ornamented. Women wore lace cuffs and men wore stiff collars. The short, stout Queen, ruling the empire with unflinching dignity for six and a half decades, raised terrier dogs. She bore eleven children. She oversaw such events as the Crystal Palace Exhibition in 1851, the Crimean War, and the controversy over Darwin. She slept every night for twenty-five years with a copy of Tennyson's "In Memoriam" under her pillow.

Into the cream of this quirky age, Gerard Hopkins was born. Appropriately eccentric, a firstborn son, surrounded by gifted people, he was destined for success as a wealthy Anglican. His biographers have characterized him as frail, pale, anemic, short (5'2"), thin, too tired to wake up in the mornings, unpunctual, and inclined to wear little girls' slippers with ankle straps. One anti-hagiographical critic claimed that his high-pitched voice conveyed the powerful stereotype of an affluent Englishman, and that his arched eyebrows and long nose conferred on him the appearance of a cartoon snob. A fellow Jesuit described him as "effeminate, with mouse-colored hair." Saying Mass, he was

apparently slow and scrupulous, jerking nervously at the slightest noise. When he taught school, the boys described his lessons as bearing “little marketable value.” He once foolishly told a group of high school boys that he regretted that he had never seen a naked woman.

But he was also independent and willful, wiry and athletic: his brother Cyril wrote of Gerard’s boyhood activities, “He was a fearless climber of trees and would go up in the lofty elm tree standing in our garden . . . to the alarm of onlookers like myself.”² At Highgate School, he fought stubbornly with his headmaster, Mr. Dyne. Hopkins, age seventeen, wrote in a letter to Charles Luxmoore, “Dyne and I had a terrific altercation. I was driven out of patience and cheeked him wildly and he blazed into me with his riding whip.”³

As a mature but unpublished poet, he refused to revise a single line of his work, calling his verses “grubs in amber.” He possessed unshakable certainties. In brief, he actually was equipped for success – born with numerous silver spoons in his mouth, academically accomplished, artistically sensitive, stoic in the English way. So how could a man who claimed that “the holding of himself back . . . is the root of all moral good” embody such creative fertility that he set a new table for poetry forever? Because of this obscure Victorian Jesuit, the subsequent century produced an enlarged and liberated poetry, including lines like these:

Never until the mankind making
Bird beast and flower
Fathering and all humbling darkness
Tells with silence the last light breaking

*Dylan Thomas, from “A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire,
of a Child in London”*

Hopkins's conversion at age twenty-two to Roman Catholicism notoriously and quite entirely derailed any hope of secular success. He went straight from a Double First at Oxford to incompetently teaching grammar school in the industrial city of Birmingham. In 1868, he capped his apparent folly by entering the Jesuits. A fellow Jesuit wrote, "I have rarely known anyone who sacrificed so much in taking the yoke of religion."⁴ When he decided on a religious vocation, he destroyed the sentimental and anxious poems he had written before age twenty-three. The next time he acted as a serious poet, at age thirty-one, having filtered and brewed a fresh poetic, he unleashed the power of nuclear fission in "The Wreck of the Deutschland."

He had burned his early poems – he referred to this moment as his "slaughter of the innocents" – and by the time he wrote "The Wreck," he was an experienced Catholic. He had already claimed that he became a Catholic because "two plus two makes four"; but also, and the poems of the 1870s demonstrate this, he said that he had converted because of the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation. "Religion without it," he wrote, "is somber and illogical." Having recognized the power of words at the consecration of the Eucharist – words which, Catholics believe, transform ordinary bread and ordinary wine into the real body and real blood – never again could language prove merely decorative. For him, a consecration made from human language reversed existential randomness and estrangement, the experience of which shadowed many of his contemporaries. Assuming that human language possessed this power, Hopkins went on to untie the bindings and stretch the known limits of poetry. He obliged his few readers to expand their receptivity.

During the later 1870s, Hopkins's new voice would ring out in the nature sonnets: "God's Grandeur," "The Starlight Night," "Spring," "In the Valley of the Elwy," "The Sea and the Skylark,"

“The Windhover,” “Pied Beauty,” “Hurrahing in Harvest,” “The Caged Skylark,” “The Lantern out of Doors.” One could say that Hopkins practiced transubstantiation in every poem. By mysterious talent, he changed plain element into reality sublime. He encountered a jumble of weather, birds, trees, branches, waters, blooms, dewdrops, candle flames, prayers, then instressed them and, delighted, wrote in his journal, “Chance left free to act falls into an order.”

Transubstantiation also, for Hopkins, reorganized molecular disorder: instead of losing heat, as the laws of thermodynamics indicate, Creation rebooted every time divine power zapped the altar with the sacred words *hoc est corpus meum* (this is my body). The localization of power into, onto, everyday elements like bread and wine added to Hopkins’s overall sense of compression, of the felt pressure, of the stressing inward, of religious meaning. And just as the determined and talented young boy Gerard had once forced his little brothers to eat flowers so that they would really understand flowers, the adult Gerard believed that only by eating the Eucharist could he “take in” (his word was “instress”) God. The Incarnation of Christ raised the energy of everything. And when Hopkins placed his conviction of this into poetry, he tended to mention electricity, lightning, fire, flash, flame. He wrote in his late, great poem, “That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and the comfort of the Resurrection”: “In a flash, at a trumpet crash, / I am all at once what Christ is, | since he was what I am and / This jack, joke, poor potsherd, | patch matchwood, immortal diamond, / Is immortal diamond.”

His posthumously collected poems were published in 1918, the final year of the World War which left western civilization gassed and devastated. All art would undergo transformation. Ironically, almost thirty years after his death, Hopkins’s slight volume encapsulated like an unexploded bomb the energetic

proof that he had already transformed English poetry. Today, more than a century and a quarter after his death, he is universally recognized among the greatest English poets. And his greatest greatness, I think, lies in his appropriation of nature to establish religious meaning. Nature, as he idiosyncratically saw it, fastened him to God. He “instressed” an “inscape” (pattern), and this act energized him and whatever he looked upon. And though he would spend the final five years of his life plagued by “fits of sadness so severe they resemble madness,” Hopkins never abandoned the solution he had achieved through his reading of nature’s explosive titration with God.

The mid-Victorian period, with its legacy of Romantic poetry and painting, produced many amateur naturalists. Observers repeatedly described Hopkins as stooping down to study wet sand or blades of grass or little blue flowers. When he was eighteen, he drew an excellent likeness of weeds which he labeled neatly, “Dandelion, Hemlock & Ivy.” It was not unusual for nineteenth-century poets to associate nature with heightened emotional states, or even to bind it to the notion that God himself may have written nature like a book. This book could reveal the divine to those who had eyes to read. Keats had coined the phrase “egotistical sublime” to describe Wordsworth’s enhanced self-consciousness in the presence of nature. Hopkins, on the other hand, instressed the sublime to enhance his other-consciousness.

Hopkins grew up in Wordsworth’s and Keats’s poetic shadows, in a household filled with good artists, and in an era that encouraged the close study of natural phenomena. He was raised to fulfill the expectations of a milieu that privileged certain pursuits of noble leisure – drawing, poetry, piety. Hopkins was gifted at all of these pursuits. His siblings were also talented, and in their lifetimes more obviously accomplished

than he: Lionel became an internationally renowned scholar of ancient Chinese; Arthur illustrated Thomas Hardy; Millicent, an excellent musician, became an Anglican nun. His mother loved Dickens and German philosophy. She was a descendent of the painter Gainsborough. His father, an insurance executive, published religious poetry. Everything about his family made it probable that Hopkins would pursue a path marked by art and an Oxford identity. Improbable, however, was his conversion at twenty-two to Roman Catholicism, the church of the unwashed and of a few rejected Oxford patricians like John Henry Newman and the younger Thomas Arnold.

The reactions of Hopkins's parents and friends to his conversion were predictably negative. The poet's father, Manley Hopkins, wrote to Canon Liddon:

Save him from throwing a pure life and a somewhat unusual intellect away in the cold limbo which Rome assigns her English converts. The deepness of our distress, the shattering of our hopes & the foreseen estrangement which must happen, are my excuse for writing to you so freely & so pressingly; but even these motives do not weigh with us in comparison of our pity for our dear son.⁵

This sentiment persisted among Hopkins's associates for the rest of his life. A year after Hopkins died, Charles Luxmoore wrote to Arthur Hopkins: "Humanly speaking he made a grievous mistake in joining the Jesuits."

There were other Catholic converts, of course, including five undergraduates in Hopkins's class at Oxford. And there were other nature lovers, and other poets, like the Rossettis, drawn to a purer pre-Reformation past. But Hopkins eventually short-circuited all trends with his intrusive genius. You could say that he unintentionally spearheaded modernity in poetry. His closest friend, Bridges, buried Hopkins's work for thirty years, and

then presented it to a readership not quite ready; only after the second edition of the *Poems* came out in 1930, after Modernism and Imagism and free verse, did Hopkins's confounding and game-changing contribution take off. It strutted the unabashed two-beat foot of common speech ("rash smart slogging brine") and Anglo-Saxonate kennings (wanwood, betweenpie, leafmeal). His new style reached all the way back, and all the way forward.

Hopkins's legacy contains nagging contradictions: a master religious poet in the category of Donne and Herbert, he abandoned tradition by architecting wild verbal experiments. And then, he constantly protested his indifference to critical opinion and thus to poetic fame: he wrote to Robert Bridges, "You are my audience and I plan to convert you." When accused of out-writing the wits of even this audience, he refused to give an inch: "I cannot think of altering anything. Why shd. I?" It seems, though, that while perhaps indifferent to fame, he certainly intended to broadcast something he kept seeing – that constant, recurrent presence of God. What indeed could anybody say?

By the end of his life, though he did not know he would soon die of typhoid (caused by antiquated plumbing in the Jesuit residence at 86 Stephen's Green, Dublin), Hopkins complained in aggrieved sonnets, "Soul self, come poor Jackself, I do advise / You, jaded, let be" and "Birds build, but not I build; no, but strain / Time's eunuch and not breed one work that wakes." He felt far-flung, flattened, a failure. He was not destined to live long enough to reverse this feeling. If only he could have known that eventually Christians and literary critics alike would be ecstatic to claim him as their own: "Somewhat to their surprise . . . the public are being told by the best critics . . . that an English Jesuit who died over forty years ago must be regarded as one

of England's greatest poets.”⁶ Ultimately readers would find in Hopkins's words a refreshing, liberating way of receiving and holding the body of God.

IN THE NEXT SECTION of this volume, “Christ Calls,” some of Hopkins's early written material – poems, journal entries, and letters – will point the way to his later achievement. The poems express delirious idealism about religious life (“Heaven-Haven”), an early reflection on the sacramental possibilities of bread and wine (“Barnfloor and Winepress”), a sonnet written when he was twenty-one (“Myself Unholy”). His perceived unholiness also appears in scrupulously kept confessional notes, which include lists of sins such as oversleeping, talking too much, and looking at anatomical drawings in *The Lancet*. His scrupulosity was extreme, and it seems certain that Hopkins was a controlled, lifelong celibate.

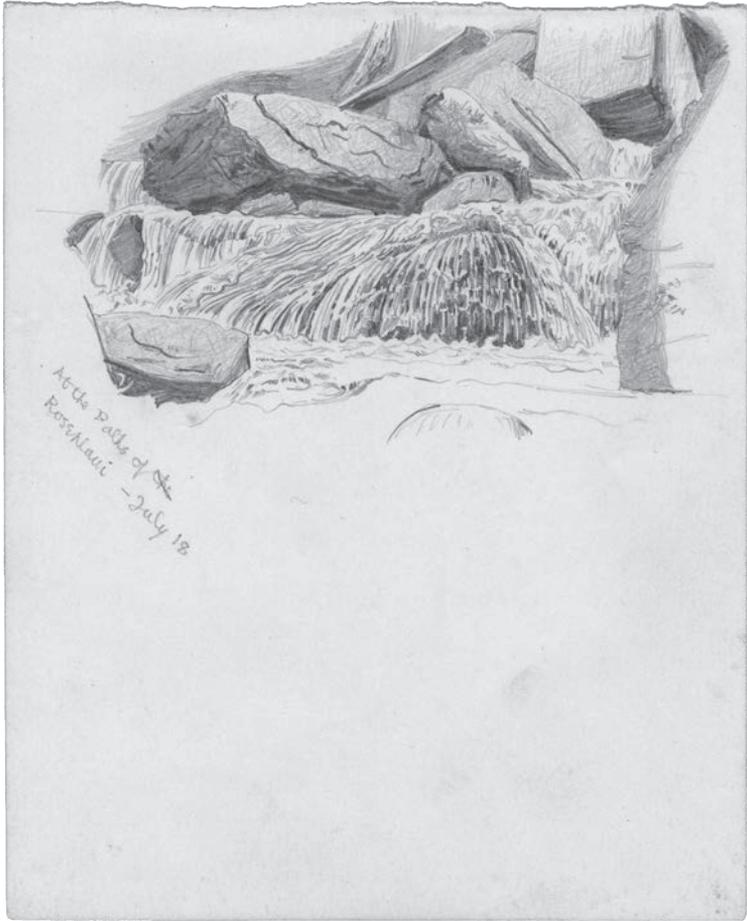
The self-restraint he exerted from the time he decided on a religious vocation (1868) meant that he wrote no poetry for seven years; that same self-restraint created an ambitious, tempestuous, dramatic, iconoclastic, debut masterpiece in “The Wreck of the Deutschland” (1875–76), which he actually wrote under obedience. We will read this poem in Part III, “Reckoning with the Wreck.”

In 1872, three years before he determined that he was permitted to write poetry, Hopkins discovered the medieval Franciscan Duns Scotus's commentary on Lombard's *Sentences* (1250). Although his appropriation of Scotus (1266–1308) alienated his Jesuit examiners in the theologate (who preferred the teachings of the “Angelic Doctor,” Thomas Aquinas), Hopkins acquired both inspiration and consolation from Scotus's special

take on the well-worn medieval dialectic concerning universals and particulars. Hopkins's sonnet "Duns Scotus' Oxford" claims that the Franciscan "of all men most sways my spirit to peace." For Scotus, individual things always resulted from a process he called "contraction," by which universals contracted down into *haecceitas*, the "thisness" of particular concrete things. So affirmed by Scotus, Hopkins will write "Each mortal thing does one thing and the same: / Selves – goes itself; myself it speaks and spells, / Crying What I do is me: for that I came." Here Hopkins reveals what I consider his most significant contribution to the arts of living morally and of writing uniquely: the concept of "selving." He cobbles it from an arcane point in Scotus's commentary, runs with it, and from it springs the real originality of Hopkins's opus. His idea of selving blends with a Victorian taste for precise detail. I believe that his discovery of Scotus enabled him to write the poems of the late 1870s, and determined how he would write them. We will read his nature poems in Part IV, "What I Do Is Me."

The final section, "Wrestling with God," will include writing from the last five years of his life (1884–89). Happiest as an undergraduate at "Cuckoo-echoing, bell-swarmèd, lark-charmèd, rook-racked" Oxford (1864–67), and then again during the theologate at St. Beuno's "on a pastoral forehead" in Wales (1874–77), Hopkins proved ill-suited to working long, humble hours as a priest and academic examiner in the industrial slums to which his vocation sent him. Liverpool, Chesterfield, London, Glasgow, finally Dublin: the absence of larks and cuckoos compounded by his own apparent lack of talent in transacting his priestly assignments drained him. For most of his clerical career, he complained of extreme exhaustion and its handmaiden, depression. He described himself as "harried" and "fagged" and "gallied up

and down.” None of us likes to do what we are not good at doing. Hopkins’s claim that his religious vocation “served” him must have been often challenged. Still, even in despondency, he never quit but rather conducted an extremely robust if solitary conversation with the universe.



Poems

(1864–1868)

Barnfloor and Winepress

*“And he said, If the Lord do not help thee, whence shall I help thee?
out of the barnfloor, or out of the winepress?”*

— 2 Kings 6:27

Thou that on sin's wages starvest,
Behold we have the joy in Harvest:
For us was gathered the first-fruits
For us was lifted from the roots,
Sheaved in cruel bands, bruised sore,
Scourged upon the threshing-floor;
Where the upper mill-stone roof'd His Head,
At morn we found the Heavenly Bread,
 And on a thousand Altars laid,
 Christ our Sacrifice is made.

Those whose dry plot for moisture gapes,
We shout with them that tread the grapes:
For us the Vine was fenced with thorn,
Five ways the precious branches torn;
Terrible fruit was on the tree
In the Acre of Gethsemane;
For us by Calvary's distress
The wine was rackèd from the press;
 Now in our Altar vessels stored
 Is the sweet Vintage of our Lord.

In Joseph's garden they threw by
The riv'n Vine, leafless, lifeless, dry:
On Easter morn the Tree was forth,
In forty days reach'd Heaven from earth,
 Soon the whole world is overspread;
 Ye weary come into the shade.

The field where He has planted us
Shall shake his boughs as Libanus,
When He hath sheaved us in His sheaf,
When He has made us bear His leaf.

We scarcely call that Banquet food,
But even our Saviour's and our blood,
We are so grafted on His Wood.

Myself unholy, from myself unholy

Myself unholy, from myself unholy
To the sweet living of my friends I look –
Eye-greeting doves bright-counter to the rook,
Fresh brooks to salt sand-teasing waters shoaly:
And they are purer, but alas not solely
The unquestion'd readings of a blotless book.
And so my trust, confused, struck, and shook
Yields to the sultry siege of melancholy.
He has a sin of mine, he its near brother,
Knowing them well I can but see the fall.
This fault in one I found, that in another:
And so, though each have one while I have all,
No *better* serves me now, save *best*; no other
Save Christ: to Christ I look, on Christ I call.

Let Me Be to Thee as the Circling Bird

Let me be to Thee as the circling bird,
Or bat with tender and air-crisping wings
That shapes in half-light his departing rings,
From both of whom a changeless note is heard.
I have found my music in a common word,
Trying each pleasurable throat that sings
And every praised sequence of sweet strings,
And know infallibly which I preferred.
The authentic cadence was discovered late

Which ends those only strains that I approve,
And other science all gone out of date
And minor sweetness scarce made mention of:
I have found the dominant of my range and state –
Love, O my God, to call thee Love and Love.

