

Institute for Christian Teaching  
Education Department of Seventh-day Adventists

**THE SEARCH FOR INTEGRATION:  
A STUDY OF THE FAITH JOURNEY IN THE POETRY  
OF GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS**

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**Introduction:**

Like nesting Russian dolls, my paper will move from the larger to the smaller, from broad context to specific case study. First I will talk about how we at Newbold College attempt to integrate faith and learning within the context of one specific degree programme: that is, the humanities degree. Then I will discuss briefly how that same integration works within the context of one specific class which I teach within that degree programme – a class called Faith and Doubt in Victorian Literature. Finally I will look closely at one specific poet within that class to examine how the search for integration is reflected in his own poetry and how the study of that poetry might relate to the experience of the students.

**The Newbold College Humanities Degree:**

At Newbold, we offer two distinct types of degree programme: one is accredited by Adventist bodies in the USA (Andrews University and CUC), and one by secular bodies in the UK (the Open University and the University of Wales). The humanities department submitted a degree programme for validation to the Open University in 1995. We call it a BA (Hons) in Combined Humanities and it does indeed combine literature, history and theology. Students study all three disciplines in their first year and concentrate on two for their remaining two years. What is particularly significant for the purpose of this paper is that from the very beginning of the department's relationship with the OU we have always been given positive encouragement by this secular body to emphasise what they call the distinctive elements of our programme, the spiritual elements which they would not expect to be included in the curricula of humanities courses in other higher education institutions. In other words, we have been encouraged to integrate faith and learning from a rather unexpected source and it is very gratifying! So in our degree documentation – both for the OU and in our student handbook - we confidently advertise the fact that we are a Christian college, that we are the only Seventh-day Adventist college in Europe where students can study a humanities degree and that the degree has unique and distinctive elements.

The first element we emphasise is that each course is intended to encourage an awareness of the spiritual nature of humanity and a commitment to personal faith. This is a vital aspect of the underpinning course rationale and is an attempt to

highlight the value of exploring belief as part of the learning process. We state that it is the department's intention to produce graduates who not only have a body of knowledge and skills but who have also given thought to personal beliefs and values and are sensitive and committed to the broader community of which they will become a part.

Second, we commit to including in all three disciplines specific content which reflects on the role of religion in human experience. This would be expected in theology classes perhaps but we have also ensured that not only do all the literature and history classes foster an environment where spiritual themes can be comfortably discussed but also where specific courses, such as Religion and Violence in Early Modern Europe, Church and People in Nineteenth-Century England or Milton's *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes*, have been developed in order to allow major debate on issues surrounding religious events, texts and experience.

**The course *Faith and Doubt in Victorian Literature*:**

It is one of these classes in the literature strand of the degree, called Faith and Doubt in Victorian Literature, that I have been teaching from the degree's inception. This is a class which I have structured in a number of ways and with a number of texts over the years but the approach is always the same: basically I look at some of the possible choices made by a selection of nineteenth-century writers to the challenge of faith in what was a radically changing and challenging society. I include writers who continue to maintain their faith throughout their lives such as John Henry Newman and Christina Rossetti, writers who make some kind of accommodation between faith and doubt, such as the deism of Thomas Carlyle or the religious humanism of George Eliot; and writers who completely lose their faith, as in the case of Algernon Swinburne and Thomas Hardy.

I always preface my first lecture by advising the students that some of the texts and ideas we will be exploring may well cause them to ask serious questions about their own faith, questions they may not have asked before. I suggest the students will be surprised how the personal journeys of faith made by those Victorian man and women writers can connect with roads travelled by 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians. Their texts may influence the students' faith negatively or positively but as Holmes argues, 'the

educated Christian must be at home in the world of ideas and people.’<sup>1</sup> Our aim is to create educated Christians with self-knowledge and with reasons for belief. We have a responsibility to influence our students to become critical thinkers, and that sometimes means taking risks. The quality of discussions in that class would certainly indicate that serious reflection has taken place.

### **Gerard Manley Hopkins - the context:**

There is one writer whose poetry never ceases to elicit a positive response from the students even though few of them will have read his poetry before. Gerard Manley Hopkins, the poet in question, will be the main focus of my paper. I have always included his poetry because in it he explores a unique and compelling journey from faith through deep despair and doubt back to faith again.<sup>2</sup> Hopkins was a man of his time. As a Victorian, he expressed the spirit of his age, which involved an unusually strong sense of self-consciousness. Note Matthew Arnold in his preface to his poems of 1853 where he ‘informed his readers that “the dialogue of the mind with itself has commenced” ’.<sup>3</sup> For many Victorians, like John Stuart Mill, Thomas Hardy and Charles Darwin, along with that internal dialogue had come “doubts” [and] “discouragement” ’ and the loss of their Christian faith.<sup>4</sup> But Hopkins chose to remain a Christian despite an acute awareness of the reasons for disbelief so haunting his contemporaries. His final faith position does however seem to have been a more tentative, somewhat modified version of his earlier youthful faith, which was so full of exuberance and celebration. I feel that very honesty about the possibility of change and development in faith makes him a helpful model for students to study.

Because I look at Hopkins close to the beginning of the semester, and then usually conclude with texts by authors of a more sceptical bent, I spend a final session reminding the class of Hopkins’s courageous faith journey, contrasting him for instance with Thomas Hardy, a near contemporary, who was perhaps more typical of

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1975), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> I am aware that it is problematic to make a direct connection between the author and the speaker of a poem but I will be doing so during this paper because of what I see as the intensely autobiographical nature of Hopkins’s poetry.

<sup>3</sup> Alison Sullo way, *Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Victorian Temper* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), p.3.

<sup>4</sup> Sullo way, p. 2.

his time. He wrote a poem called 'God's Funeral', an end-of-century lament over what many saw as a defunct deity. In that same concluding class, I also look briefly at another twentieth-century Christian poet who scrutinised and preserved his own faith in a similar way to Hopkins, the Welsh poet R.S Thomas.<sup>5</sup> It is important to remind students that faith is always an option despite the challenges of rationalism and scepticism, and to show them that that option is still being chosen by artists and intellectuals, by those who think and create, who shape and influence.

### **Gerard Manley Hopkins - the poetry:**

Hopkins is famous for his extraordinary and intensely passionate love for language. He is one of the most innovative poets in the English tradition and his poems are dynamic and original, sometimes to the extent of obscurity. Hopkins was a committed Catholic Christian. He converted from Anglicanism to Catholicism while he was a student at Oxford University in 1863, influenced to no small degree by John Henry Newman. Not only did he convert but he later joined the Jesuit order and worked as a Jesuit priest all his life. His vocation of poet as well as priest did offer him some cause for self-scrutiny and he clearly struggled with the former since the Jesuit order tended to encourage service as its primary objective rather than creative work, self-denial and self-abnegation rather than self-expression. Despite an initial rejection of poetry-writing, however, he does return to it with a sense that it is a gift he can use, though secondary to his vocation as priest.<sup>6</sup>

Our Society values, as you say, and has contributed to literature, to culture; but only as a means to an end. Its history and its experience shew that literature proper, as poetry, has seldom been found to be to that end a very serviceable means.<sup>7</sup>

Hopkins was a great scholar, but his passion for language was not purely academic. Language is more than just words for Hopkins; it is about the Word. Language is an indication of relationship, of the possibility of proving the existence of the Word

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<sup>5</sup> Poems such as 'Threshold', 'Petition', 'The Other', 'The Absence' and 'The Coming' are examples of poems I use by Thomas.

<sup>6</sup> For a stimulating discussion of the particular tension between poet and priest in Hopkins's life, see Philip Endean, SJ, 'The Spirituality of Gerard Manley Hopkins' in *Hopkins Quarterly*, vol. 8 (Fall 1981), pp.107-129.

<sup>7</sup> *Letters*, vol 2, p. 88 in Ellsberg , p. 37.

through such exact and specific use of language that it captures as closely as possible the thing it describes. He talks about the inscape of things. '*Inscap*e was the absolute selfhood of something in harmony with other things; the more inscape something had, the more *being* it had.'<sup>8</sup> His poetry exhibits an unusually precise and specific use of language in order to come as closely as possible to what Isobel Armstrong in her book on Victorian poetry calls 'the primordial relationship between word and thing.' This is the situation in his early poetry. What happens in his later work is that he comes perilously close to quite a different position: because his language becomes increasingly distinctive and obscure, what it does is, in Armstrong's words again, 'to assert the independence of the sign and the chasm of irredeemable difference between language and things'.<sup>9</sup> This pattern reflects what was a major theological/philosophical battle for Hopkins: the desire to believe in connection, in relationship, in a universe which centres around the presence of a personal God, and a tendency, which grows stronger and stronger in his later poems, to feel the isolation of being, the pressure to separateness and individuation, the loss of certainties and the terrible movement towards an almost solipsistic reality. In his last few poems, however, it is possible to discern him reclaiming that connection, that relationship, and that personal God, once again.

My subsequent analysis of this faith journey indicates a suggested approach to the discussion of Hopkins's poetry in the classroom. My methodology would involve an initial lecture giving contextual and biographical information as well as some introduction to the formal techniques of his poetry. This would be followed by two seminar periods which may, according to the size and ability of the class, include the use of small group discussion with guided questions or a presentation by a student on a prepared topic. The small group discussion works well if the questions are circulated ahead of time and the students are asked to read specific poems with those questions in mind. This results in a more focussed discussion than if the students are given the questions in the class. If a presentation is being given, the students would also be given required reading and they would be expected to engage in a period of discussion and response with the presenter afterwards. I always spend the first seminar on the

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<sup>8</sup> Margaret R. Ellsberg, *Created to Praise: The Language of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Oxford: OUP, 1987), p.11.

<sup>9</sup> Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 430.

early nature sonnets, moving in the second to the dark sonnets and the concluding sonnets of resolution. The final seminar would also include a plenary session in which I would introduce the parallels between Hopkins and the Psalms, and the implications for the students' own faith journey.

For the purposes of this paper, I will look at five poems from distinct periods in his life. I would encourage the reader to read each poem aloud since Hopkins was most insistent that his poetry was an oral medium: 'My verse is less to be read than heard, as I have told you before; it is oratorical'.<sup>10</sup>

### **'Pied Beauty':**

The first poem is 'Pied Beauty'. Hopkins wrote it in a period in his life when he was very happy, having spent three years studying theology in the beautiful countryside of north Wales, in the 1870s. Hopkins usually wrote in sonnet form and this is a curtail or curtailed sonnet, just three-quarters of the usual length. He had a poet's sharp eye for the intricate details in nature and this is a poem rooted in the landscape he knew so well. It is full of references to particular types of British flora and fauna and so is sometimes a little difficult for those familiar with other landscapes to relate to. I have often brought actual objects from the poem into the classroom, such as the spiky green-cased seeds of horse-chestnuts, and opened them up in class to reveal the shiny brown conker inside, to help students appreciate the precision and specificity of Hopkins's natural description – 'fresh fire-coal chestnut falls'. Pictures of these objects could work as well to give students a visual image of what might be unfamiliar. But the essence of the poem is simple: it is about giving glory to God. Indeed it was strongly influenced by Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*, the first sentence of which is: *Homo creatus est laudare* or man is created to praise.

No single sentence better explains the motives and directions of Hopkins' 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 his life comes to a critic's mind, this must be remembered.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*, ed. by C.C. Abbott, vol.1 (Oxford, 1935), p. 46 in Ellsberg, p.25.

<sup>11</sup> Humphry House ed., *Notebooks and Papers* (Oxford, 1937), p. 416n. in Ellsberg, p.30.

Glory be to God for dappled things -  
 For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;  
     For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;  
 Fresh fire-coal chestnut falls, finches' wings;  
     Landscape plotted and pieced - fold, fallow and plough;  
     And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;  
     Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)  
     With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;  
 He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:  
     Praise Him.<sup>12</sup>

The wide selection of natural objects he includes in the condensed octave are all characterised by variety, contrast, difference: whether it be the couple-colour of clouds or the variegated colours of birds' wings, all nature reflects God's glory. 'What all things share with all others is the fact of their differences, their individuality. More importantly they all share one Creator, who fashioned them and infused into them His being.'<sup>13</sup> In the condensed sestet he meditates on a range of contrasting adjectives – 'swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim' – which more abstractly describe the diversity of creation. And finally that diversity is shown to emanate from God the Father who never changes. As Alison Sulloway notes,

'Pied Beauty' quite naturally begins and ends with a salute to God, the changeless origin of beauty in all its flux and its variety. The first line ... and the last line of the poem with its coda ... places the apotheosis of flux within a framework of stability ... The sonnet begins in exhilaration and ends in solemnity'.<sup>14</sup>

There are several other poems of this period which emphasise Hopkins's praise of God and his celebration of God in nature. 'Hopkins is no pantheist; but he does see all nature in a sacramental light. Nature is not simply a footstool, or the special language of God.'<sup>15</sup> In 'God's Grandeur', Hopkins expresses a 'profound sense of God's

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<sup>12</sup> *The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. by Norman H. Mackenzie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 144.

<sup>13</sup> Robert H. Goldsmith, 'The Selfless Self: Hopkins's Late Sonnets' in *Hopkins Quarterly*, vol 3 (1975), pp. 67-75, p. 68.

<sup>14</sup> Sulloway, p. 107.

<sup>15</sup> Goldsmith, p. 68.



presence in nature, but ... is equally conscious of a society which does not share this vision and is content with its materialism.’<sup>16</sup>

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 reckon 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 eastwards, springs –  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.<sup>17</sup>

Hopkins uses two rich metaphors to communicate the power and intensity of God's energy which 'flame[s] out, like shining from shook foil' and is as concentrated as the first pressing of oil. The run-on line leading into the verb 'Crushed' places increased emphasis on that concentrated power. However, he laments that man has done what he can to separate himself from God by ignoring God's law and corrupting nature. He uses the monotonous repetition – 'Generations have trod, have trod, have trod' - to emphasise what Roger Slakey has called the 'depersonalizing and dehumanizing of life'.<sup>18</sup> According to Cotter, the sonnet is not a diatribe against industrialisation, as some critics have argued, but 'the object of the poet's indignation is man himself, abusing others, refusing them the "plenty" that the Father lavishes on all[ ... ] never probing the inner knowledge of the Word who made and redeemed the universe. The light shines but man fails to master it; the soil blossoms but hearts will never read the Easter message.'<sup>19</sup>

Yet for all this, there still, in Hopkins's inimitable alliterative style, 'lives the dearest freshness deep down things' and God's spirit continues to watch over the world

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<sup>16</sup> Roberts, p. 65.

<sup>17</sup> MacKenzie, p. 139.

<sup>18</sup> Roger L. Slakey, "'God's Grandeur" and Divine Impersoning', *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 34 (1996), pp. 73-85, p. 79.

<sup>19</sup> James Finn Cotter, *The Christology and Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (US: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972), p. 171.

despite man's lack of perception. The concluding image of the Holy Ghost as dove, maternal, nurturing, and life-giving, warmly protecting the earth through her constant presence, is full of trust and faith and Hopkins's characteristic use of the emotional 'ah!' heightens the affective quality of his faith response.

For Hopkins, it is vital that each part of Nature must 'selve', must be true to its self, must reveal its inscape, in order to most fully reflect its Creator. In [As Kingfishers catch fire] he captures the distinctive inscapes of the bird, the dragonfly, the stone, the bell, ordinary objects of nature, all of which speak their selfness, remain true to the character and place the creator gave them in creation. 'Each mortal being indoors each one dwells;/Selves –goes its self; *myself* it speaks and spells.' For Hopkins, it is vital too that humans also 'selve' and if man is to be true to his own being, and 'Act in God's eye what in God's eye he is' – then he will imitate Christ, 'for Christ plays in ten thousand places,/Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his/To the Father through the features of men's faces.'<sup>20</sup>

### **The Dark Sonnets:**

The sonnets just explored which acknowledge God's general revelation in nature reveal Hopkins, as a young priest and teacher, totally committed to his God and able to celebrate his faith exuberantly and unconditionally. But in the next decade, the 1880s, he goes through what appears to have been a period of depression and questioning. There is no doubt that Hopkins was an innately melancholic personality. He said in a letter to his friend:

The melancholy I have all my life been subject to has become of late years not indeed more intense in its fits but rather more distributed, constant and crippling....I see no ground for thinking I shall ever get over it....<sup>21</sup>

It is also true that he was at that period an exhausted teacher, something we may have some sympathy with! In 1883 he writes to his friend Alexander Baillie:

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<sup>20</sup> [As kingfishers catch fire, so dragonflies draw flame] in Mackenzie, p. 141, lines 7, 11-14.

<sup>21</sup> *Letters*, vol 3, p.256 in Ellsberg, p.33.

I like my pupils and do not wholly dislike the work, but I fall into or continue in a heavy weary state of body and mind ... I make no way with what I read, and seem but half a man. It is a sad thing to say. I try, and am even meant to try. ... to write some books; but I find myself so tired and so harassed I fear they will never be written.<sup>22</sup>

One biographer comments that while Hopkins was teaching classics at University College, Dublin, from 1884, his depression was exacerbated by the exhaustion brought on by his enormous work-load: 'setting and marking six examinations a year, which on one occasion produced 557 scripts from one examination alone!'<sup>23</sup>

It was in this state that he found himself writing a series of six sonnets, which have come to be known as the sonnets of desolation or the dark sonnets. He said of them that they came to him 'unbidden and against my will', that they were 'written in blood'. They are perhaps some of the most intimate, compelling and honest poems ever written, revealing a deep loneliness of mind and spirit.<sup>24</sup>

There is some division amongst Hopkins scholars on the nature of the experience Hopkins is undergoing in these sonnets. Some see it as part of the asceticism inevitably involved in the priestly vocation, where identification with the isolation experienced by Christ during his passion is what Christians strive to emulate. In other words, there is no real sense of despair; on the contrary, as Walter Ong puts it, 'the depth of suffering revealed in his 'dark sonnets' ... signalled unwavering faith'. They simply allow an 'opportunity to know more deeply what faith entail[s] and to embrace faith's consequences with a degree of explicit awareness unattainable before'.<sup>25</sup>

Other critics do not see the experiences recorded in the sonnets in quite so positive a light; for them, the dark sonnets express a real loss of faith rather than a predictable spiritual rite of passage. Even if one bears in mind the 'dark night of the soul', a state described originally by the mystic St John of the Cross and later referred to by

<sup>22</sup> *Further Letters of Hopkins*, ed. by C. Abbott, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London, 1970), p.215-2 in Gerald Roberts, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Literary Life* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994), p. 117.

<sup>23</sup> Roberts, p. 126.

<sup>24</sup> Ellsberg, p. 38.

<sup>25</sup> Walter J. Ong, *SJ, Hopkins, the Self, and God* (Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press, 1993), p. 152.

Ignatius Loyola as one of the fundamental experiences of the seeker after religious truth, the experience still seems to be one in which Hopkins is lost and alone. It may be that Hopkins struggled with the central paradox of the immanent and the transcendent God. He seems comfortable in his earlier nature poems to celebrate the transcendent omnipotence of the Creator God but when it comes to allowing that God to be one with him, to 'imitate Christ and empty himself of self,'<sup>26</sup> then it becomes more problematic. Hopkins had a highly attuned sense of self:

And this is much more true when we consider the mind; when I consider my selfbeing, my consciousness and feeling of myself, that taste of myself, of *I* and *me* above and in all things, which is more distinctive than the taste of ale or alum, more distinctive than the smell of walnut-leaf or camphor, and is incommunicable by any means to another man.<sup>27</sup>

It seems that one of the issues he is struggling with in these sonnets of desolation is that his sense of self is stronger than his sense of God. But, as Robert Goldsmith comments, to 'purg[e] the soul of self-love or self-hate' is a necessary step to spiritual growth.<sup>28</sup>

**'I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day':**

The dark sonnet I have chosen to address is one of the bleakest, emphasising as it does the speaker's acute sense of isolation from God.

I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.  
 What hours, O what black hoûrs we have spent  
 This night! What sights you, heart, saw, what ways you went!  
 And more must, in yet longer light's delay.  
 With witness I speak this. But where I say  
 Hours I mean years, mean life. And my lament  
 Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent  
 To dearest him that lives alas! away.  
 I am gall, I am heartburn. God's most deep decree  
 Bitter would have me taste: my taste was me;  
 Bones built in me, flesh filled, blood brimmed the curse.  
 Selfyeast of spirit a dull dough sours. I see

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<sup>26</sup> Goldsmith, p. 70.

<sup>27</sup> *Sermons*

<sup>28</sup> Goldsmith, p. 72.

The lost are like this and their scourge to be  
As I am mine, their sweating selves, but worse.<sup>29</sup>

The strong sense of self, of selving, that Hopkins had celebrated in his earlier nature sonnets has here become a negative quality rather than a positive. 'After 1884, the process by which Hopkins came to grasp the world – and himself in it – as sacramentally, inextricably infused with divine presence, forced nature into the background and his own humanity to the foreground'.<sup>30</sup> In this sonnet, he seems too intensely, even unhealthily, aware of his own humanity, his own self: not only does he address himself rather than God but he can only sense himself - 'my taste was me'. He has lost his connection with God, the presence of God's self. The sleeplessness of depression – lasting from night into 'longer light's delay' - only leaves him feeling more painfully God's absence, his lack of response (the image of dead letters is very powerful here.) Hopkins's loneliness is made worse by his own self-disgust. He expresses, through the images of gall and heartburn, sensations of acidic bitterness, giving an overwhelming impression that he despises his own existence. In another version of the poem, line 12 is written as 'Selfyeast of spirit *my selfstuff* sours', possibly a clearer way of expressing the unnaturally heightened self-consciousness he is experiencing. The final couplet could hold some hope to alleviate the anguish, obscure though it is. It might be read as meaning that his state is not as desperate as the lost, who have no hope of salvation, but the grammatical structure of the final line is awkward and ambiguous and, far from hopeful, the reader is left feeling hollow and bereft. This is a radical change from the clear affirmations of his earlier sonnets, and it 'announces the poet's *de profundis*. Waking from nightmarish sleep to dark hours of lying awake in conscious self-loathing, Hopkins experiences the night within, the edge of breakdown and the absence of any awareness of God's presence.'<sup>31</sup> God simply 'lives alas! away'.

The other sonnets of desolation are equally dark. In [No worst, there is none], the very first line, including as it does the superlative rather than the comparative, indicates that he is looking at an experience beyond which there is nothing more extreme. There is nowhere he can go for consolation.

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<sup>29</sup> MacKenzie, p. 181.

<sup>30</sup> Ellsberg, p. 41.

<sup>31</sup> Cotter, p. 227.

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, the 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.<sup>32</sup>

He has clearly lost all hope of support from divine sources. The intense sensitivity of his own mind is unable to deal with this unspecified grief – possibly ‘world-sorrow’ or grief for the pain and suffering of mankind in general – and loses itself in depths of despairing thought. His only ‘comfort’ is that sleep and ultimately death, will silence his inner pain. He is nothing more than a ‘wretch’ who, like the animals he has implicitly been comparing himself to throughout, can only hide from the elements in hollow shelter. Cotter reads the word ‘comfort’ as an echo of the previous ‘Comforter’ and so sees this final line as marking ‘the beginning of wisdom; it returns us to the prosaic cycle of everyday life... the trivial too is charged with Christ’s presence.’<sup>33</sup> However, it could equally well be read as an ironic reference back to that other Comforter who has seemingly betrayed him, and so leaves the sonnet in muted despair rather than wisdom.

In another sonnet [Carrion comfort], again the idea of false or dead comfort appears as he wrestles with the idea of suicide, and challenges himself to ‘not choose not to be’.<sup>34</sup> This sonnet is full of ambivalence and obscurity. Who is the ‘terrible’? Who is he wrestling with? The ending may open out the possibility of God’s reality as He apparently wrestles with His creature but the reality of Hopkins’ self still seems stronger than God’s.

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<sup>32</sup> Mackenzie, p. 182.

<sup>33</sup> Cotter, p. 224.

<sup>34</sup> [Carrion Comfort] in Mackenzie, p. 183, line 4.

Ultimately, these intense sonnets show a speaker experiencing deep psychological suffering, struggling with an almost solipsistic view of reality. They reveal a raw honesty, an awareness of deep need, and in a sense they become desperate prayers though without apparent hope of reply.

**‘Thou art indeed just, Lord’:**

In his last years however, (Hopkins died at the early age of 45) he wrote a few sonnets which signal a return to faith, though of a somewhat different order from his first. The poem I will close with was written on March 17 1889. Hopkins died in Dublin on June 8 1889, just three months later.

*Justus quidem tu es, Domine, si disputem tecum; verumtamen justa loquar ad te: quare via impiorum prosperatur? Etc. (Jer. 12:1)*

Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend  
 With thee; but, sir, so what I plead is just.  
 Why do sinners' ways prosper? And why must  
 Disappointment all I endeavour end?  
 Wert thou my enemy, O thou my friend,  
 How wouldst thou worse, I wonder, than thou dost  
 Defeat, thwart me? Oh, the sots and thralls of lust  
 Do in spare hours more thrive than I that spend,  
 Sir, life upon thy cause. See, banks and brakes  
 Now, leaved how thick! Laced they are again  
 With fretty chervil, look and fresh wind shakes  
 Them; birds build – but not I build; no, but strain,  
 Time's eunuch, and not breed one work that wakes.  
 Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain.<sup>35</sup>

The image of the eunuch, which conjures associations of impotence and infertility, is one he had used in a journal entry from a retreat the year before:

What is my wretched life? Five wasted years almost have passed in Ireland. I am ashamed of the little I have done, of my waste of time, although my helplessness and weakness is such that I could scarcely do otherwise ... All my undertakings miscarry: I am like a straining eunuch. I wish then for death; yet

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<sup>35</sup> Mackenzie, p. 201.

if I died now I should die imperfect, no master of myself, and that is the worst failure of all. O my God, look down on me.<sup>36</sup>

But despite the depressive state of mind revealed in this journal entry, the sonnet itself is a statement of faith rather than doubt. It is about faith because the speaker is willing to talk to God, get angry with Him, express to Him his confusion and frustration over those words of Jeremiah 12, at the paradox of sinners prospering and the just suffering: why should this be? In the very fact that here we have one side of a dialogue, a *conversation* with God, not the desperate monologue of the previous poems, we can see that he seems to have progressed from his previous state of hopelessness into some sort of rekindling of relationship with his God. Ellsberg expresses it in terms of his idea of selving. He appears 'to have synthesized his relationship with God and his own need to selve'.<sup>37</sup> She goes on to express the optimistic tone of the sonnet perfectly:

This is not a poem of despair. It is not wretched, writhing, restless, or anxious, as was the tone of the previous dark sonnets. Emphasis falls on the word "Mine", implying Hopkins' possessive intimacy with the "Lord of life." And since *life* – vitality, growth, inspiration, and movement – is what he is requesting in "send my roots rain," and not the sleep of death of the [dark sonnets] this is surely a statement of hope. Previous intimations of hope and consolation invariably fluctuated and proved insufficient. But here, at last, at the very end of his career, his poetry becomes the mark of a great talent coming into alignment with a great will. Poetry is the sacrament of flesh, word, and spirit charged by their interpenetration with each other. When his resistance broke, Hopkins' highest gift was released.<sup>38</sup>

So the poem ends with a 'moving request for some kind of fertility of spirit... Christ, the maker of the universe, is asked to bring [him] renewal'.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. by Humphry House and Graham Storey (Oxford, 1959), p.196.

<sup>37</sup> Ellsberg, p. 42.

<sup>38</sup> Ellsberg, p. 44-45.

<sup>39</sup> Cotter, p. 237.



### **Hopkins and the Psalms:**

This expression of a man approaching the edge of the abyss and finally returning with hope to the reality of himself and his relationship with God has valuable parallels with other literature including the biblical. There is a fruitful correspondence between Hopkins's experiences and those expressed in the Psalms.<sup>40</sup> Walter Brueggemann, in his book *Spirituality of the Psalms*, talks of them in terms of psalms of orientation, disorientation and new orientation. The psalms of orientation (for instance, Psalms 8, 16, 33 and 104) are 'expressions of creation faith'.<sup>41</sup> They express gratitude to the Creator God, singing new songs of praise to the one who 'spread out the heavens like a tent' and 'made the moon to measure the year.'<sup>42</sup> Such poetic description bears comparison with the effusive nature sonnets of Hopkins, which praise God unequivocally for his majesty and creative power.

The psalms of disorientation (for instance, Psalms 13, 35 and 88) express 'terror, raggedness and hurt'.<sup>43</sup> In Psalm 13, the initial verses express the same intense feelings of loneliness and separation from God that can be found in Hopkins's dark sonnets: 'How long, O Lord, wilt thou forget me?/ How long wilt thou hide thy face from me?'<sup>44</sup> This anguish is echoed in Hopkins's 'Comforter, where, where is your comforting?'. The emotions in both reflect the acute desolation of loss. Brueggemann makes the point that such psalms have not always featured strongly in church liturgy because 'we have believed that faith does not mean to acknowledge and embrace negativity. We have thought that acknowledgement of negativity was somehow an act of unfaith, as though the very speech about it conceded too much about God's "loss of control"'. He feels strongly however that 'all such experiences of disorder are a proper subject for discourse with God.'<sup>45</sup>

Finally there are the psalms of new orientation which 'bear witness to the surprising gift of new life when none had been expected. That new orientation [for instance, 30, 34, 40 and 138] is not a return to the old stable orientation, for there is no such going

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<sup>40</sup> I acknowledge the work of a previous student, Jon Larssen, who wrote extensively on this topic for an extended essay while taking the humanities degree at Newbold.

<sup>41</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), p. 17.

<sup>42</sup> Psalm 106: 2, 19 (The New English Bible).

<sup>43</sup> Brueggemann, p. 29-30.

<sup>44</sup> Psalm 13: 1.

<sup>45</sup> Brueggemann, p. 26-27.

back.<sup>46</sup> The tone of Psalm 30 reflects the fact that the writer has survived the experience of desolation. Even though he can now sing a psalm to the Lord, he can never be carefree again because 'Lord, it was thy will to shake my mountain refuge;/ Thou didst hide thy face and I was struck with dismay'.<sup>47</sup> Hopkins's final sonnets also cannot recapture the purity and simplicity of the faith he once embraced. But at a point when he had lost hope, he was able to believe that new life was emerging and that his Lord would 'send [his] roots rain'. This spiritual movement, more accurately a spiral than a circle, from orientation through disorientation to new orientation, is very appropriate for Hopkins's own journey. The key for him, as for the psalmist, is that 'everything must be brought to *speech*, and everything brought to speech must be *addressed to God*, who is the final reference for all of life'.<sup>48</sup> In that renewed conversation with God, he has managed to accept 'God's grace [that] gives man the power to transcend himself, to rise to a higher pitch of self'. Hopkins describes this perfectly in the paradox he uses in his poem 'On the Portrait of Two Beautiful Young People': 'The selfless self of self, most strange, most still'.<sup>49</sup>

### Conclusion:

Literature is an ideal discipline for the integration of faith and learning because its subject matter so frequently involves spiritual or religious topics, and is, despite the challenges of some postmodern literary theory, directly concerned with the exploration of truth claims, of values, of personal faith journeys.<sup>50</sup> The power of Hopkins's final relationship with his God is made more real and more valuable because the reader has been able to follow the painful convolutions of his spiritual journey. That journey is an immensely beneficial one to share with students because it opens up at several points the opportunity for mutual sharing of spiritual experience in a classroom in which trust and honesty have been fostered. For some students, this may be the first time they have experienced such a raw and honest exposure of spiritual doubt. Traditionally there has been tendency to deny such questions because that is the way they are best silenced. There is little chance for healthy spirituality in such an atmosphere. To see how Hopkins emerges from his doubt into a new faith is

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<sup>46</sup> Brueggemann, p. 47.

<sup>47</sup> Psalm 30: 7.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>49</sup> Goldsmith, p. 72.

<sup>50</sup> For a valuable discussion from a spiritual perspective of the limitations of some postmodern literary theory, see George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

equally significant since it offers reassurance to those who feel they may have to deny their early faith because it no longer answers all their questions. Faith changes, develops, and in line with Fowler's *Stages of Faith*, may be able to hold more questions in tension in its later stages than in its earlier 'first naïveté'.<sup>51</sup> Hopkins's penultimate poem – with the marvellously grand title, 'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection' – closes with words which reveal the new orientation he has attained. They reveal a man who can still speak words of glorious and powerful faith:

Enough! The Resurrection,  
 A heart's clarion! Away grief's gasping, joyless days, dejection.  
     Across my foundering deck shone  
 A beacon, an eternal beam. Flesh fade, and mortal trash  
 Fall to the residuary worm; world's wildfire leave but ash;  
     In a flash, in 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.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> James Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (USA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), p. 187.

<sup>52</sup> In Mackenzie, p. 197-8, lines 16-23.

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