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"We Were Framed to Fail and Die": The Ethics and Poetics of Mortality in the Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

“WE WERE FRAMED TO FAIL AND DIE”:
THE ETHICS AND POETICS OF MORTALITY
IN THE WORKS OF GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN ENGLISH

BY
BRETT C. BEASLEY

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For my wife, Anne.

... there is another form of death, which is the most positive and creative of all the moments of life, a communication of self to self to the last drop.

—William F. Lynch, SJ

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- CW I *The Collected Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Vol. I: Correspondence 1852-1881*. Ed. R. K. R. Thornton and Catherine Phillips. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013. Print.
- CW II *The Collected Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Vol. II: Correspondence 1882-1889*. Ed. R. K. R. Thornton and Catherine Phillips. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013. Print.
- CW III *The Collected Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Vol. III: Diaries, Journals, and Notebooks*. Ed. Lesley Higgins. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015. Print.
- D-R Douay-Rheims Bible
- KJV King James Bible
- PW *The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. Ed. Norman MacKenzie. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990. Print.
- SDW *The Sermons and Devotional Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. Ed. Christopher Devlin, SJ. London: Oxford UP, 1959. Print.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation is the first comprehensive analysis of the subject of mortality in Gerard Manley Hopkins's writings. Hopkins's writings on this subject are broad and varied: while still a student at Oxford, Hopkins became fascinated by martyrs; later, as a priest he would go on to write movingly about the deaths of parishioners in his care and would extol the virtues of soldiers, or "daredeaths" as he refers to them in one poem; finally, toward the end of his life, Hopkins became preoccupied with the role our own mortality plays in shaping our life, perspective, and choices. While previous scholars have tended to dismiss Hopkins's interest in death as "morbid" and have commonly rejected the notion that there is a unified perspective on death in his writings, I argue that his treatment of death exhibits both a fundamental unity and an ethical perspective. In a synthesis of formal criticism and moral philosophy, I show that Hopkins's poems are not so much emotional expressions as spiritual exercises; they are both shaped by and imitative of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola as well as the broader tradition of spiritual exercises in Christian and classical thought. As such, they provide methods for responding to death ethically by using our experiences and awareness of death to redirect and transform our will and desires.

INTRODUCTION

HOPKINS'S MORBID-MINDEDNESS

In his 1877 sonnet “The Lantern Out of Doors” Gerard Manley Hopkins presents what at first seems like a simple image: a lantern passing in the nighttime. The first four lines of the octave read:

Sometimes a lantern moves along the night
That interests our eyes. And who goes there?
I think; where from and bound, I wonder, where,
With, all down darkness wide, his wading light? (PW 140)

Endearing as it may seem to imagine goodwill and solicitude going out from the mind and heart of the speaker of this poem to the intentions and concerns of a stranger, the rest of the octave amplifies this sense of concern only to turn toward a darker suggestion:

Men go by me whom either beauty bright
In mould or mind or what not else makes rare:
They rain against our much-thick and marsh air
Rich beams, till death or distance buys them quite. (PW 140)

What began as a charming image becomes an image of the futility of our concern—and not just for one particular stranger but for “men” in general. The loveliness of their spirits and personalities are like the lantern; they may draw our eyes and elicit our concern momentarily, but that concern will prove futile as they pass eventually to where that care, concern, and interest cannot follow them. The first three lines of the sestet emphasize this point, opening with the reiteration of “death or distance”:

Death or distance soon consumes them: wind
What most I may eye after, be in at the end
I cannot, and out of sight is out of mind. (PW 140)

The speaker draws a distinction here between two kinds of interest: the concern that “interests our eyes” on the one hand (as the second line of the poem states) and the concern that lodges in and is sustained by the *mind* on the other. The unfortunate limitation of humans is that the latter depends upon the former. The lantern elicits my concern, as does the loveliness of another human person, but once that interest is no longer stimulated, I cannot maintain my concern. What is the solution to this problem? For the speaker, it is Christ. The poem concludes:

Christ minds: Christ’s interest, what to avow or amend
 There, eyes them, heart wants, care haunts, foot follows kind,
 Their ransom, their rescue, and first, fast, last friend. (PW 140)

In these final three lines the clauses shorten to create a kind of hopeful crescendo that stands in direct contrast to the longer, slower clauses and meandering, almost languid syntax of the octave. Although we cannot go with others when they pass away from us in life (or “pass on” to death), we can take comfort in the conviction that Christ goes with them, to the point of his care actually “haunt[ing]” them.

This poem contains many of the elements for which Hopkins is most often celebrated. It is replete with rich language and surprising images. (Consider the perfectly executed yet surprising turns of the sonnet form, the lyricism of phrases like “first, fast, last friend” and “all down darkness wide.”) It shows a keen faculty of observation with great attention to minute specificities. (Who else but Hopkins would not only notice this lantern but think so deeply and intensely about it?) Perhaps most importantly, it showcases Hopkins’s unique and powerful religious imagination in its sense of Christ as both a haunting presence and a friend. But all of these features should not distract us from the central preoccupation of the poem: death. While it does so with rich language, careful observation, and deep religious conviction, the poem asks us

to consider our inability to sustain our and others' lives, to come to terms with the limits of our and others' consciousnesses, and to reckon with the limits of our affections for others and their affections for us. In other words, the poem revolves around an existential problem: the ultimate meaning and value of life; as well as an ethical problem: how we ought to relate to others given their limitations and ours. These are the issues we need to investigate in order to determine whether the poem's religious solution, along with its keen observations and rich language, is ultimately effective or not. So, while no good reading of the poem would ignore the poem's religious components, it would be a mistake to see the religious solution offered in the poem as one that simply dissolves or renders the ethical and existential problems void.

In this dissertation, I suggest that Hopkins can and should be read not just as a religious poet or a nature poet or an innovator in poetic form and diction, but also and in particular as a poet of death. I apply a mode of reading that focuses on the ethical and existential problems raised by death to a wide range of Hopkins's works and to his poetic project in general. I argue that the dominant approaches to reading Hopkins have tended to downplay or ignore the subject of death in his poetry. Thus, they have not simply failed to recognize or analyze references to death in particular poems; they have also misunderstood Hopkins's project as a whole.

Most critics have tended to locate Hopkins's main achievement in his startling and fresh poetic diction and syntax. Many others have seen Hopkins's central significance in the way his work changed our views of religion and the natural world. While incorporating these views, I want to focus in this dissertation on the existential level of Hopkins's project. I want to examine how he understood what it meant to exist as an individual person, having both consciousness and conscious awareness of death, who also makes a life among other people in the same condition, and how these concerns shaped his poetry and vice-versa. My purpose is not to reject the

dominant trends in Hopkins criticism but to qualify and inform them to help them proceed more productively. The primary debate that has shaped Hopkins's reception and the critical works on his poetry is the debate between those who see his work as drawing its primary significance from its religious content and those who do not. The main question has thus been, how do we understand the fact that Hopkins was a priest *and* a poet? Views have varied widely on this issue. Some have seen Hopkins as a great poet *in spite of* his religious concerns. Others have seen him as a great poet *because of* these same concerns. My hope is that my analysis will help readers gain distance from the longstanding priest vs. poet debate in Hopkins criticism in order to identify important questions and insights that this debate has tended to render invisible and to reorient this debate on less abstract issues: not on Hopkins's theology, strictly speaking, but on his religious experience, not on the ideas his poems express but on the practices they embody. About this distinction, we will have more to say both at the end of this introduction and in the conclusion to this dissertation.

First, I will explain and defend my project in more detail by demonstrating just how central death is to Hopkins's work. This fact has not achieved broad recognition or discussion over the last 100 years that Hopkins's works have been available in print. In suggesting that Hopkins can and should be read as a poet of death, I am driven not just by a need to correct longstanding trends in Hopkins criticism; I am also responding to the central place of death in Hopkins's poetry. By "central," I mean three things. First, I mean that death serves as an *inspiration*; it is the drive or impetus behind much of Hopkins's creative work. Second, I mean that death is *pervasive*; it shows up, albeit in varied ways, throughout Hopkins's oeuvre. Third, I mean that death forms a *unified theme*. It is not just a preoccupation that surfaces with great regularity in Hopkins's poems; rather it offers a way of understanding Hopkins's creative project

in general because it helps us understand his development and evolution both existentially and poetically. Of these three forms of centrality, the third will require the most explanation. For now, let us focus on the ways death both inspires and pervades Hopkins's work.

Given Hopkins's relatively small oeuvre and irregular poetic output, it is of obvious value to identify which subjects and events could be counted on to inspire Hopkins to write poetry. Death in its various forms seems to have been one such event. The factors that kept Hopkins from writing were legion: his lack of an audience beyond his close friends (CW II 681, 964); his personal and poetic eccentricities (CW I 334, 437; CW II 546); his constitutionally ill health (CW I 221, 400; CW II 563, 671, 716); the demands of his work and duties as a priest (CW II 780, 798, 914); his frame of mind, which tended toward depression and nervousness (CW II 673, 676, 731, 925, 950); the uninspiring conditions and scenery that often surrounded him (CW I 445; CW II 945); and his own sense that his poetic avocation conflicted with his religious vocation (CW I 317; CW II 514, 681). With these factors at play, it is a wonder Hopkins produced any poetry at all. Nevertheless, death seems to have been the one thing that could move his muse quite reliably. It was the deaths of five Franciscan nuns that roused him back to poetic creation in 1875 after a period of seven years of inactivity and resulted in what is by far his single longest poetic work. Again in 1878 it was another deadly shipwreck that resulted in another major long poem, "The Loss of the Eurydice." But it was not just cataclysms that inspired Hopkins. These poems participate in Hopkins's general interest in violent deaths, particularly those of martyrs like St. Lawrence (in "The Escorial"), St. Dorothea, St. Thecla, Margaret Clitheroe, Edmund Campion, St. Winifred, and others (see further discussion in chapter 1). He was also moved to write by another more familiar type of death, death among everyday people. Take, for example, the death of a parishioner, the local farrier, in "Felix Randal" or the

portended death of the “bugler boy” in “The Bugler’s First Communion,” and he writes about death, or the threat of death in the context of childhood and youth, in “Spring and Death,” “Spring and Fall,” and “On the Portrait of Two Beautiful Young People.” Additionally, Hopkins writes frequently of his own mortality in his “inspirations unbidden,” the so-called terrible sonnets he wrote during his Dublin years, and other poems from that period, including “Carrion Comfort,” “No worst, there is none,” “To His Watch,” and others. A number of Hopkins’s most celebrated works contend directly with the problem of mortality and attempt to understand the meaning and significance of human life, given the fact of our inevitable deaths (e.g. “The shepherd’s brow” and “That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection”).

Death clearly plays a role in inspiring a wide range of poems, but what about its pervasiveness? Here we should note that death enters and informs Hopkins’s poetry in a wide variety of ways. It is not just in “inspirations unbidden.” It also arises in scenes and situations that are less pressing and urgent, some of which are even wholly imaginary without the concreteness of an actual or immediate event behind them. Take, for example, the imagined conversation with a “young child” about her mortality as seen through the lens of nature in “Spring and Fall.” Or as another example, “Henry Purcell,” while serving as an elegy, is a poem memorializing a figure who died 150 years before Hopkins was born. There is an apocalyptic strain in Hopkins as well that surfaces in poems like “Spelt from Sibyl’s Leaves” and “That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection.” The presence of death is felt even in the signally joyful poems of 1877, including widely anthologized works such as “The Windhover,” “God’s Grandeur,” “Pied Beauty,” and others that Hopkins wrote at St. Beuno’s in Wales. While never undoing the positive emotions of the poems, death lingers on the fringes. It

is suggested in the violent diving of the kestrel, in the souring of the springtime, in the coming of the harvest. Likewise, it shows itself in the longing for a beauty that is “past change” and for “man’s...bones [to be] risen.”

It is clear, then, that death is not just a type of event that occasions some poems. It is an underlying concern or preoccupation that pervades Hopkins’s poetry. Sometimes it is explicit, other times less so depending on the period of Hopkins’s life and the poetic forms or conventions he happens to be working within.

Despite death’s pervasiveness and centrality in Hopkins’s work, no study, to my knowledge, has attempted to comprehensively analyze this subject in Hopkins’s work. This is not to say that critics have ignored death in Hopkins’s work altogether. Rather, when they have made mention of death in Hopkins’s work, they have tended to treat Hopkins’s preoccupation with death as a kind of pathology. This has allowed critics to, by and large, assume that this preoccupation is not as central to Hopkins’s work as I have claimed. Rather than seeing death as a crucial source of inspiration, many have seen it as a “morbid interest” that surfaces now and again; rather than a pervasive concern, many have seen it as a preoccupation that arises in isolated moments only. Denying the two forms of centrality I have attributed to death in Hopkins’s work, neither have these critics seen in the theme of death an underlying unity or development.

It could be argued, of course, that it was not inspiration that death afforded so much as permission. Given Hopkins’s ambivalence about spending his time writing poetry, death provided an opportunity. It was an event serious enough to merit the consideration and attention poetry requires. At the same time, the prospect of providing a memorial or drawing a meaning from a death provided a much-needed rationale for producing a poem. This is an issue we will

pursue further in the chapters that follow. But for now, it is worth mentioning that we need not understand inspiration in an overly Romantic sense. I do not mean to imply that Hopkins could not have written about other subjects. But even if we imagine that death simply offered a serious enough topic to provide a pretext for doing something Hopkins otherwise felt he could not do, it is worth considering why he felt this way. As we will see, the reasons are not altogether obvious.

In what follows, I will examine the general reception of Hopkins's interest in death. I will specifically focus on the claim, common at every stage of his reception, that some aspect of Hopkins's work, interests, or tendencies is "morbid." After analyzing the ways Hopkins's so-called "morbidness" has been read by critics, I will propose an alternative way of reading. I argue that the "morbidness" critics see in Hopkins's work is not a passing concern or aberration; it is the norm—a structural concern that is endemic, we might say, to Hopkins's poetic project. Hopkins is not morbid in isolated instances; rather he is what William James called "morbid-minded." Following James, I argue that a "morbid-minded" approach has its own value and insights. Instead of dismissing it as pathological, we need to understand it as having a validity and deep moral awareness that can sometimes be lost in more "healthy-minded" approaches to death.

Is Hopkins Morbid?

In his 1935 essay on Hopkins's poetry, "Blood or Bran," the poet Geoffrey Grigson begins by citing Sigmund Freud on "psychic individuality" and the "distortion" it causes in perception. One of the peculiarities of Hopkins and his "psychic individuality," according to Grigson, is his interest in bloodshed and pain—not fake bloodshed, or "a leakage of bran" as Hopkins put it in one letter to Bridges, but rather "the gash, the bloody flow, the bloody hour of the martyrs" (21). Grigson concludes that due to these elements, Hopkins's poems were "damaged by morbid

exuberance.” “Hopkins would have been a more excellent poet,” Grigson writes, “had he known himself better,” which is to say, had he balanced out the “psychic individuality” that led him to the “morbid exuberance” Grigson finds distasteful. Grigson’s essay represents an early and especially forceful form of a suggestion that appears in the work of many critics who would follow, namely, that Hopkins’s concerns about death are unhealthy, either morally or imaginatively (or both), and are for this reason to be regretted. Other critics have not often been as harsh in their diagnosis as Grigson (few are bold enough to claim they know what would have made Hopkins a “more excellent poet,” for example), but many have shared his general aim of identifying a morbid element in Hopkins and separating it out from what is healthy, even if they see morbidity and health in different ways or trace the manifestations of these qualities in different poems.

Several critics have followed the basic thrust of Grigson’s argument in understanding Hopkins’s morbidity as primarily arising from his own “psychic individuality.” These critics have pointed out that Hopkins was, at least at times, self-accusatory or self-disgusted, and exhibited a tendency to dwell on thoughts of his own “undo[ing].” Angus Easson writes of Hopkins’s “morbid self-scrutiny” (7) and argues that Hopkins shows “a certain morbid fascination in how a man may crucify himself” (49).

Other critics have focused more on the role Hopkins’s religion played in his “morbidness.” Although religion was not the central focus of his essay per se, Grigson had also suggested that the minute, specific, and descriptive passages in Hopkins’s writings dealing with violent death—such as the “cracked flesh” that lies “hissing in the grate” in his prize poem “The Escorial”—were motivated in part by his “professional interest [i.e. as a priest] in pain.” Grigson was joined in his view that religion played a crucial role in Hopkins’s “morbidness” by another

early critic of Hopkins, Elsie Elizabeth Phare. Phare located in Hopkins “a morbid detestation of human limitation ... [of which] his religion makes him more than usually aware” (142).

Similarly, Daniel Harris would later write of “the ‘higher cross’ [Hopkins] so morbidly and sincerely desired.” And despite his sympathies with Hopkins’s religious perspective as a fellow Jesuit, Christopher Devlin, SJ, concurs that there is something “narrow and morbid” in Hopkins’s religious attitude. A common approach to critics who write from this perspective is to compartmentalize Hopkins’s morbidity as merely a product of his religious perspective or, as is the case for Devlin’s reading, an unfortunate error within that religious perspective.

There is another aspect to what Angus Easson calls Hopkins’s “dwelling on details of physical suffering” that has drawn accusations of morbidity, and that is Hopkins’s curious lack of sympathy when writing about the deaths of those with whom he was familiar (49). Jill Muller echoes the sentiments of many others in describing Hopkins’s account on September 7, 1888, of a local man who gouged his own eyes out as “morbidly detailed.” The story she refers to is as follows:

This reminds me of a shocking thing that just happened to a young man well known to some in our community. He put his eyes out. He was a medical student and probably understood how to proceed, which was nevertheless barbarously done with a stick and some wire. The eyes were found among the nettles in a field. After the deed he made his way to a cottage and said “I am blind: please let me rest for an hour. . .” I mention the case because it is extraordinary: suicide is common. (CW II 950)

This frankness about death and suffering, seemingly untinged with affection, is seen as well in Hopkins’s letter to Robert Bridges upon the death of Bridges’s sister. It surfaces in poems like “The Bugler’s First Communion” as well as in Hopkins’s admission of being “half inclined to hope” that the hero of the poem “may be killed in Afghanistan” (CW I 368). For critics who take

this perspective, Hopkins's "morbidness" is a symptom of his general isolation, lack of sociability, or failure to develop authentic intimate relationships.

A distinct but related approach is found in the work of those critics who see Hopkins's "morbidness" as stemming from his own repressed sexual attractions and troubled sexual identity. Tom Paulin writes of Hopkins's "brutal eroticism," citing the 28th stanza of "The Wreck of the Deutschland." Calling it "the orgasmic stanza," he suggests that "Hopkins makes the tall nun's death resemble a combination of sexual intercourse and a cavalry charge" (96). John Robinson agrees, arguing that "No amount of explanation can entirely take away the morbidity of the stanza" (121).

Hopkins has not been without his defenders against the charge of "morbidness." W. H. Gardner in his monumental early study of Hopkins's poetry expresses some discomfort at the "symptom of morbid interest" he finds in Hopkins (*A Study*, Vol. I 321), but is careful to point out that it is not technically morbidness or "sado-masochism" for Hopkins to be "half inclined to hope" that the hero of his poem "The Bugler's First Communion" "may be killed in Afghanistan." This is because, Gardner writes, Hopkins's only disease is "Hamlet's disease of extreme sensitivity—that revulsion and deep despair at the wickedness of the world" (*A Study*, Vol. II 296). In his essay "Are the Modern Poets Morbid?" Tad Guzie makes a still stronger, more categorical claim. Guzie contends that Hopkins, unlike the modern poets who succeeded him, is not morbid. For Guzie it is precisely Hopkins's Catholic faith that guarantees this fact. This is the case for two different reasons. First, Hopkins's ultimate focus is not death but life. Second, Hopkins insists that life is connected to a supernatural source. These two features allow Hopkins to avoid the "prosaic shatteredness that is a mark of the confusion in the minds of [modern poetry's] creators." As he puts it at the beginning of the article in a loose quotation of

the conservative Catholic anti-modernist Welford Inge, “the long-suffering literary public has at last begun to perceive modern poetry’s fear of singing of life and its materialistic preoccupation with death and the disintegration of death” (27). Guzie claims that other modern poets give us the beauty of nature “downstream,” but Hopkins connects beauty to its “source.” Through Catholicism Hopkins comes to both a conscious and subconscious acquisition of “the enduring facts of human nature and the universe,” Guzie says, borrowing a phrase from Welsh writer Arthur Machen.

Guzie’s essay appeared in *The Catholic World* in 1957, and much of his audience would most likely have been convinced that a Catholic poet could not be a morbid poet. Therefore, as far as his rhetorical purposes were concerned, Guzie did not need to offer proof beyond the steadfastness of Hopkins’s faith. Guzie’s approach is unfortunate, though, for two reasons. First, it fails to recognize and assign any importance to the fact that Hopkins is deeply preoccupied with death. And second, it misrepresents the way that Hopkins’s religious imagination actually surfaces in his poetry. Although Hopkins’s poems do often turn away from the more seemingly “morbid” elements they contain, they do not do so by simply rendering in poetry “the enduring facts of human nature and the universe.” And the fact that Hopkins was not a materialist does not mean that his poems turn away from the material world. Death is regularly accompanied by suffering, longing, and despair in Hopkins’s writings. Heaven, however, appears only very rarely and obliquely. When Hopkins is at his most theological, he takes pains to also be at his most concrete.

Although I have reservations about the claim that Hopkins is “morbid,” my purpose is not, like Guzie and Gardner, to defend Hopkins against this claim. Instead, I have assembled these claims primarily because I want to examine their common concerns and underlying

assumptions. First, I would like to suggest that the objections to Hopkins's "morbidness" should be taken seriously as objections of a moral character. When critics call Hopkins "morbid" they are simply expressing individual taste or mere subjective opinion. The common concern for most of these critics has to do with a lack of care and concern they observe on the part of Hopkins when he writes about death. This lack of care and concern appears in a number of different ways. First, he appears to lack concern when he glorifies and fixates on the extreme and disastrous suffering of others. Second, he fails to show requisite care when those around him die or when relatives of those around him die. Third, he does harm to himself in submitting himself to excessive and uncalled-for self-scrutiny. These are the actions that critics have reacted to when they have called Hopkins morbid. By identifying these morbid features, critics are able to advance their own moral agenda by blaming (misguided forms of) religion, sexual repression, or excessive individuality and by praising the elements of Hopkins work not tainted by these features.

Contrary to both those who see morbid elements in Hopkins's poetry and those who have defended Hopkins against such claims, I argue that Hopkins is not just morbid in isolated instances. He is what William James called "morbid-minded." Morbidness is a mode of religious experience for James, one that has its own validity and its own set of deep moral concerns. Writing at the outset of the twentieth century, James identified an opposition between "healthy-minded" and "morbid-minded" religion. While he saw value in both "temperaments," he expressed concern that "healthy-mindedness" had supplanted and attempted to invalidate the insights and contributions of "morbid-mindedness." He wrote of "healthy-mindedness":

This religion directs him to settle his scores with the more evil aspects of the universe by systematically declining to lay them to heart or make much of them, by ignoring them in his reflective calculations, or even, on occasion, by denying outright that they exist. Evil

is a disease; and worry over disease is itself an additional form of disease which only adds to the original complaint (121).

On the other hand, “morbid-mindedness” is “based on the persuasion that the evil aspects of our life are of its very essence, and that the world’s meaning most comes home to us when we lay them most to heart” (124). By “evil” James means all forms of suffering and hardship, but it is primarily death, “the worm at the core” of our experience, that is the signal manifestation of these other “evil[s].”

The morbid-minded person is simply one who recognizes that death and other evils are intrinsic to human experience and thus seeks to make these elements constitutive of a meaningful life. James writes that for the morbid-minded person

evil is no mere relation of the subject to particular outer things, but something more radical and general, a wrongness or vice in his essential nature, which no alteration of the environment, or any superficial rearrangement of the inner self, can cure, and which requires a supernatural remedy. (127)

Since the “evil” that we experience most familiarly and most viscerally is often death—either facing our own mortality or experiencing the death of a loved one—James sees the genius of morbid-minded religion in its ability to recast death as constitutive (rather than destructive). He writes:

If you ask how religion thus falls on the thorns and faces death, and in the very act annuls annihilation, I cannot explain the matter, for it is religion’s secret, and to understand it you must yourself have been a religious man of the extremer type [. . .] There are saints who have literally fed on the negative principle, on humiliation and privation, and the thought of suffering and death, —their souls growing in happiness just in proportion as their outward state grew more intolerable. No other emotion than religious emotion can bring a man to this peculiar pass. (52)

While James insists “I am not yet pretending finally to judge any of these attitudes. I am only describing their variety,” he nevertheless admits that “healthy-mindedness” has many limitations that “morbid-mindedness” does not (135). “Systematic healthy-mindedness,” he writes, “failing

as it does to accord to sorrow, pain, and death any positive and active attention whatever, is formally less complete than systems that try at least to include these elements in their scope” (154). The relative formal completeness of “morbid-mindedness” means that it is more durable; it provides a meaningful place to suffering, death, and failure and is not invalidated by them. James is a valuable voice in the question of the value of morbidness because he presents a strong defense of morbidness even as disposition or temperament, one that is a basic psychological feature or a persistent element of one’s worldview. For James, the “morbid-minded” soul may simply prove more sensitive than most, or at least more determined to find significance to suffering, pain, and death. Thus, it may represent a powerful or even heroic unwillingness to accept easy answers.

Although James does not primarily employ historical forms of explanation, he does give some indication that the nineteenth century was a key moment in the development and ascendancy of healthy-minded religion. He writes:

The advance of liberalism, so-called, in Christianity, during the past fifty years, may fairly be called a victory of healthy-mindedness within the church over the morbidness with which the old hellfire theology was more harmoniously related. We have now whole congregations whose preachers, far from magnifying our consciousness of sin, seem devoted rather to making little of it. They ignore, or even deny, eternal punishment, and insist on the dignity rather than on the depravity of man. They look at the continual preoccupation of the old-fashioned Christian with the salvation of his soul as something sickly and reprehensible rather than admirable; and a sanguine and “muscular” attitude, which to our forefathers would have seemed purely heathen, has become in their eyes an ideal element of Christian character. (88)

It is easy to see that “healthy-minded” religion could only have arisen in a world in which a life relatively free from pain and suffering was a reasonable expectation. Only for the past few hundred years, and even now only in select parts of the developed world under ideal conditions, has it been possible to expect that pain and suffering will be the exception, not the rule, in life.

Thus it is only relatively recent religious movements such as Christian Science and Scientology that have imagined perfect health and wellness to be attainable in this life. As C. S. Lewis puts it in *The Problem of Pain*, “all the great religions were first preached, and long practiced in a world without chloroform” (5). Clearly, in his move toward more ancient religious practices—including not just his conversion from Anglicanism to Catholicism, but also his specific interests in the medieval theology of John Duns Scotus and his embrace as a Jesuit of Ignatian spirituality (itself rooted in older Stoic and early Christian practices)—I argue that Hopkins was rejecting the trend toward healthy-mindedness that James identifies.

James’s functionalist view of religion provides a general sketch of morbid-mindedness. That outline will be useful insofar as it helps us illuminate Hopkins’s work. And, as we will see, it is useful precisely because it asks us to look at Hopkins’s work in all its concreteness, not examining the content of what Hopkins believed in the abstract but looking instead at Hopkins’s specific practices and experiences as a concrete individual. So, informed by James’s account of morbid-mindedness, it remains for us to focus on what makes Hopkins unique: his status as both priest and poet. We will examine the concrete dynamics of his religious practices and their manifestations in his poetry. In particular, I will highlight one major distinction Hopkins makes that is especially important for understanding his poetry and its relationship to death: the distinction between wishing (or what Hopkins sometimes calls the “affective will”) and choosing (or what Hopkins sometimes calls the “elective will”).

The Tension Between Desiring and Choosing

So how does Hopkins’s poetry work, particularly with regard to encountering death? The answers to that question will occupy us for the length of this study, with each chapter representing a different type of occasion and a different set of strategies for encountering and

dealing with death. Below I offer an outline of those occasions. But even if distinct situations call for distinct strategies, there are goals, concerns, and a basic set of tools that are common to all of them. The general point I will try to make is that Hopkins's poems should not be understood as expressions but exercises. An individual expression asserts the self; it communicates an inner reality outwardly. But Hopkins has a different vision of the Christian life and of poetry. Rather than expressing desires, passions, affections, etc., he uses poetry, in the manner of a spiritual exercise, to shape them.

In the "Principle and Foundation" at the opening of the first week of the Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises* we find an idea that greatly preoccupied Hopkins. I will quote the "Principle and Foundation" in its entirety as Hopkins copied it in his notes:

Man was created to praise, reverence and serve God Our Lord, and by so doing to save his soul. And the other things on the face of the earth were created for man's sake and to help him in the carrying out of the end for which he was created. Hence it follows that man should make use of creatures so far as they help him to attain his end and withdraw from them so far as they hinder him from so doing. For that, it is necessary to make ourselves *indifferent* in regard to all created things in so far as it is left to the choice of our free will and there is no prohibition; in such sort that we do not on our part seek for health rather than sickness, for riches rather than poverty, for honour rather than dishonour, for a long life rather than a short one; and so in all other things, *desiring and choosing* only those which may better lead us to the end for which we were created. (122, emphasis mine)

What preoccupied Hopkins greatly in this passage was the wide difference he perceived in what may seem to us like a very fine distinction. Ignatius here writes "desiring and choosing only what is most conducive for us to the end for which we are created." While at first blush "desire" and "choose" may seem to be nearly synonymous words, we all understand that the two do not automatically go hand-in-hand; we are all familiar with choosing what we do not wish, and vice-versa.

Hopkins for the most part saw these two functions as separate faculties of the will: the

“affective will” and the “elective will.” The fact that the will is (potentially) bivariate opens us up continually to the danger that we may wish and choose different things. Hopkins explains:

By the will is meant that which decides action in us, *arbitrium*, [i.e. “choosing” or the “elective will”], or the faculty which is affected well or ill towards things, *voluntas* [i.e. “desiring” or the “affective will”]. If these are both one and the same faculty, then the first is the faculty at pitch, the other not, or it is the faculty at splay. (142)

Within the will, the desired state is one of wholeness in which the various faculties of the will are aligned and the person in question desires and chooses the same thing, but for Hopkins this was a state that was difficult to achieve and even harder to maintain. It is the goal of the spiritual life to continually exert effort and deploy strategies to attempt to develop and sustain the connection of desire and choice and to direct them toward the correct end. It is this instability and constant state of threat that Devlin in his edition of Hopkins’s spiritual writings identifies as a source of trouble for Hopkins. Devlin suggests that the distinction Hopkins makes is alien to Christian thought, or at least to orthodox Catholic doctrine, suggesting that the conflict between will and choice is ultimately more Victorian than Christian in origin. He also speculates that the distinction may be due to Hopkins’s having been raised an Anglican or that it could result from the influence of Jansenism in Victorian Catholicism. In short, it is clear to Devlin that Hopkins’s perspective on the will is foreign to historic, officially sanctioned Roman Catholic doctrine. For Devlin, Hopkins’s view of the will is a kind of tragic flaw at the heart of his poetic project; he argues in particular that the tension in Hopkins’s life between his poetic and religious callings is “bound up with his exaggerated distinction between the affective and the elective will” (119). And ultimately, “[Hopkins’s] psychological error about the *arbitrium* [i.e. the will] may be looked on both as a cause and an effect of his deprecation of his poetic genius” (120).

Here again we see the attempt, as we discussed above with regard to morbidity, to identify an unhealthy element or error within Hopkins's work and suggest a hypothetical solution, allowing the critic to correct, almost, Hopkins's views *ex post facto*. But I would like to suggest that there is actually nothing unorthodox in Hopkins's view of the will, even if his formulation and terminology bears the marks of his own individuality. And I would also like to suggest that this distinction is not so much a cause and an effect of his deprecation of his poetic genius; it is a cause and effect of his poetic genius itself.

As Thomas Dixon has shown, traditional Christian understandings of the passions tended to be founded on a fundamental ambivalence or duality due to the desire "to say both—against the Stoics—that some human feeling or affection is proper and necessary to this life, but also that God, the angels and perfected humans are free from the turmoil and perturbations of sin and the passions" (61). According to Dixon, four basic ideas unite the majority of traditional Christian affective psychology:

First, the passions were described frequently by [Augustine and Aquinas] as unruly forces. In this context the need for order and for the exercise of control by reason, will and virtue was emphasised. Secondly, there was a discussion as to which were the proper passions, or more often affects or affections, for a Christian to experience and to aspire to. In general a clear distinction was made by both Augustine and Aquinas between inappropriate passions of the lower appetite directed towards worldly objects and appropriate affections, or movements of the will, directed towards goodness, truth and, ultimately God. Thirdly, passions were seen as symptoms of the fall. They were a sign both of the rebellion of the body against the mind and of the sickness of the fallen soul, a punishment for Adam and Eve's original disobedience to God. Finally, there was the question of the affective life to be expected in the world to come. It was in the world to come that a unified, ordered self, experiencing no passions but only the pure affections of love and joy, could be hoped for. (29)

The fact that these four basic ideas—the unruliness of the passions, the need to promote some and discourage others, their origin in sin, and their ultimate unification and purification—were

common to the most prominent Christian thinkers in Western history is justification for seeing them as simply part and parcel of traditional Christian soul-based understandings of the self.

The central aim of Hopkins's morality, and the reason for his concerns about the passions and their influence on the will, is *perfection*. Here again, Hopkins's view, as odd as it may sound, is thoroughly traditional. As Gary Gutting points out, "Christianity is nothing if not an ethic of perfection. For such an ethic, what matters is not what is good but what is best" (126). Hopkins's own process of rejecting a lesser good in the attempt to gain what is best or most perfect explains why he rejects all sorts of passions, affections, appetites, and sentiments—not because they are bad in and of themselves but because his rejection of them helps him strive for perfection. As John Robinson has put it, Hopkins pursued "an idea of moral perfection characterized by rigour and subjugation of the will" (18). But this is only to say that he had a fairly traditional understanding of the role of the will in ethical and religious life. What remains is to show precise ways in which this attitude manifests itself in his poetic works.

In order to understand the role of Hopkins's poetry in the subjugation of his will in the service of perfection we need to understand Hopkins's poems not as expressions but as *exercises*. Here, of course, we can think of the Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises* in particular, but also what Pierre Hadot has called "spiritual exercises" more generally. Hadot defines spiritual exercises as "a concrete attitude and determinate lifestyle, which engages the whole of existence" (83). The philosophical act these exercises embody "is not merely situated on the cognitive level, but on that of the self and being. It is a progress which causes us to be [i.e. to exist] more fully, and makes us better. It is a conversion." It is not "thought," strictly speaking, but rather "a therapeutic of the passions," for which reason Hadot claims "ethical exercises" could also be a fitting term, though perhaps it would be too limiting (83). He explains:

These exercises have as their goal the transformation of our vision of the world, and the metamorphosis of our being. They therefore have not merely a moral, but also an existential value. We are not just dealing here with a code of good moral conduct, but with a way of being, in the strongest sense of the term. In the last analysis, then, the term “spiritual exercises” is the best one, because it leaves no doubt that we are dealing with exercises which engage the totality of the spirit. (127)

For Hadot, Ignatius’s *Spiritual Exercises* are “nothing but a Christian version of a Greco-Roman tradition” (82). While Christian spiritual exercises are based on the Greek Christian notion of *askesis*, Hadot argues that our equation of them with common notions of asceticism is often misguided; they are not simple self-denial or renunciation. Spiritual exercises help us pay attention to ourselves, particularly to the way our passions are directed, and they help us “establish a relationship of the self to the self” in order to gain perspective and achieve transformation (90). If the two main strategies—which manifest themselves in a wide variety of forms—are the development of attention and the establishment of a dialectics of the self, the spiritual exercises have for their ultimate aim and focus the “training for death.” Hadot writes that “training for death is training to die to one’s individuality and passions, in order to look at things from the perspective of universality and objectivity.”

William Lynch, SJ, has drawn his own parallels between spiritual exercises and Christian art. From the Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises* Lynch draws the insight that in order to encounter God, the human person has to accept time and definite realities; he or she must look for the divine in and through them rather than by denying them. This acceptance manifests itself in the *Spiritual Exercises* in the fact that the exercisant proceeds through the drama of the life of Christ in all its concrete actuality, and along the way one advances through the definite composition of place in detail. The “Ignatian plea,” according to Lynch, is “that we direct our search for God through time, reality, and the self.” All along, Lynch is guided by the motto associated with

Ignatius, *non coerceri maximo, contineri minimo, divinum est*: “it is a divine thing not to be hemmed in by the largest limitation and yet to be contained in the smallest” (24) Thus, the true Christian writer for Lynch proceeds to every insight along a path of the finite; insights about the divine proceed by way of a descent into the definite.

So, in brief, a general outline for seeing Hopkins’s works as exercises for shaping the will—including not just choices but also desires, passions, affections, and appetites—would appear as follows: it would examine the ways in which Hopkins’s poems deploy techniques for paying attention to oneself; it would identify the way Hopkins’s poems establish a relationship of the self to the self in order to will and choose only what is best, i.e. the end for which the person was created; it would take note of how Hopkins’s works arrive at spiritual insights by embracing time and concreteness rather than abstraction; and it would recognize the ways each of these strategies is deployed as “training for death.” Despite the differences in context between Hopkins, Lynch, and Hadot, each prizes what John Henry Newman called “real assent” as opposed to what “Newman might have called the purely notional mind” (Lynch 76; Hadot 277). This distinction provides the best explanation for why, if we look to Hopkins’s work as the *expressions* of a religious believer, we may often be puzzled by the strange war of passions, the doubt, the seemingly excessive self-accusation, etc. But if instead we see Hopkins’s works as exercises aimed at bringing desire and choice together and redirecting them toward what is best, then suddenly the poetry, and in particular its relationship to death, begins to make much more sense.

In speaking about Hopkins’s poems as exercises rather than expressions, I would like to mention one last tendency common among readers of Hopkins that I hope to avoid in this study, and that is the tendency to read Hopkins as lyric poet. Perhaps this sounds like a strange claim

given that Hopkins was a great innovator in writing short, dense, finely-wrought, non-narrative poetry. And it is true that Hopkins most certainly can be profitably read as a lyric poet. But when we read Hopkins as a lyric poet we can ignore both a number of possible functions for his poetry and a number of possible stances the reader might have toward it. The functions of poetry I want to highlight in this study are of this variety, so this is an argument I will flesh out to some degree in each chapter that follows. For now, let me simply outline the major distinction I am making and shift I am calling for.

We have seen that Hopkins's main aim is to discipline and control his emotions, not to let them out or express them. Thus, when we read in John Stuart Mill's famous definition of lyric poetry that it is "feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude," we can begin to see a number of ways Hopkins may not fit this description. For Hopkins, the emotions are as much tools to be utilized as they are something to be "let out" and shared. This is not to say that Hopkins saw the emotions as evil or sought to eliminate them—nor, for that matter, does Ignatius. In fact, for Hopkins and for Ignatius, an emotion is something momentous; it is a movement of the soul rather than a simple mental state. Because the stakes are so high (they involve our very souls), we must not simply express; we need to contain, discipline, and redirect. Thus, while it is easy to imagine that rational religious Hopkins (the priest and ascetic) was occasionally overthrown by emotional Hopkins (the poet, the writer, the aesthete), we can recognize that this distinction depends too much on the idea that poetry must confess feeling, that it must be "overheard," as Mill says, rather than heard in the manner of rhetoric. But I would suggest that Hopkins is not indifferent to all listeners in the way Mill suggests that true lyric poetry ought to be. If Hopkins's poetry has a reader—and even when its only reader is the poet

himself—the poetry is not feeling confessing itself so much as feeling warring with itself and undergoing a process of redirection.

When we resist the temptation to read a poem as a lyric, we focus on a humbler and more immediate understanding of what the poem is actually for. For lyric theorist Allen Grossman the value of lyric poetry lies in the fact that it imparts a kind of “immortality” by allowing one’s voice, one’s self—or one’s “face” as Grossman often terms it—to live on in the future after one’s death. Thus, the ethical imperative is to recognize the face in the verse and respond authentically and wholly, to recognize one’s responsibility to the “face” as seen in the poem. For Grossman, “Poems pitch persons toward one another full of news about being, about personal life. The poem is an occasion, across vast reaches of space and time, for the performance of the ceremony of hospitality in which the stranger is greeted and the contracts of sociability are covenanted” (284). Grossman’s aim, of course, is to provide an ethics of reading and interpretation. His program is an attractive one in that it offers a clear theory of poetry and attributes a clear ethical value not just to the poem but also—and especially—to the act of reading, as a form of “hospitality.” By reading in the manner Grossman suggests I recognize an ethical obligation to the “face” of the other despite the fact that time and distance may separate us. My act of reading saves the speaker from oblivion and resituates him or her in a community of listeners.

However, if it is true, as I have suggested, that we should not read Hopkins’s poetry as the overheard confession of feelings (i.e. as lyric poetry), how should we read it? In this project, the main ethical consideration I want to highlight is not the ethics of reading so much as the ethical aims of the poems themselves on a more immediate level for the poet and the reader in helping both to encounter and redirect their passions and desires. Hopkins’s poems are not expressions meant to be ethically [over]heard, but rather exercises to engage in. This means that

the important ethical obligation is to ourselves as we read, not to the poem as a vehicle of the author's voice. This distinction helps us understand why Hopkins was (or at least attempted to be) indifferent about whether his poetry garnered him any fame. It was not because his poetry was a guilty pleasure that fell outside his general decision to bring all of his passions, affections, and efforts under direction to a single, common aim. It was precisely *because* his poems served this practical, existential purpose. Hopkins's poems were not attempts to gain immortality. They were instead a "training for death."

The Structure of the Present Study

In this introduction, I have advanced three main arguments about death in Hopkins's poetry. I have suggested that death is central to his project—as an inspiration, pervasive element, and point of development—and I have suggested that this fact has been obscured by the primary approaches to reading Hopkins. Second, I have suggested that rather than thinking about Hopkins as lapsing into moments or spells of morbidness or having a morbid tendency, we ought rather to think of Hopkins as "morbid-minded" in the sense meant by William James, namely as having a religious perspective that draws its energy from focusing on death (and the pain, suffering, loss, and desolation that can attend it) rather than drawing its energy from denying death or attempting to simply mitigate loss and suffering. I have argued that Hopkins was not so much immoral in this perspective as differently moral: he embraces a morality based on the perfection of the soul, not a morality based on the reduction of harm and the promotion of fairness. Finally, I have suggested that Hopkins should not be thought of as a lyric poet whose utterances fit the description of "feeling expressing itself to itself in moments of solitude." I have suggested instead that his poems are more like spiritual exercises or ascetic practices than they are lyric expressions.

These three arguments each represent shifts that ultimately make an enormous difference for our interpretation of Hopkins's works, and they help us avoid the error of either paying little attention to Hopkins's approach to death or otherwise dismissing it as morbid. In particular, my third argument, that Hopkins's poetry is more exercise than expression, will be crucial for understanding why Hopkins's poetry operates the way it does, often praising what we initially might like to blame, controlling emotions we might like to express, searching for difficult comforts where easy comforts may be available or when we might be more attracted to despair. In the three chapters of this dissertation, I will pursue at length three different types of practices embodied in Hopkins's poetry, each of which corresponds to a certain type of relationship or moral issue related to death.

In the first chapter, I will examine Hopkins's heroic poems, particularly those about martyrs. I begin by situating Hopkins's writing about martyrs within a larger social context for writing and thinking about heroes. In particular, I trace the sense in the nineteenth century that hero systems were increasingly fragile due to the levelling effects of democracy, psychology, and bourgeois culture. The main moral issue I will explore in this chapter is whether Hopkins's focus on pain and suffering is justified. I will also focus on the phenomenon of moral amplification, or the process whereby threats can make us see a world of saints and demons. I argue that Hopkins primarily exhibits a moral awe for the suffering of martyrs and that he manages not to demonize those who inflicted suffering upon martyrs.

In the second chapter, I examine Hopkins's poetry about the loss of familiar rather than heroic individuals. I explore Hopkins's lack of sentimentality in what was otherwise a highly sentimental age, particularly when it came to the deaths of those with whom one shared a bond of intimacy. I explain and defend Hopkins's relative lack of sentiment over these individuals,

arguing that Hopkins has ethical reasons for attempting to avoid or limit grief and mourning, and that he instead substitutes the emotion or sentiment of longing in their place. I also explore Hopkins's apparent grief over the loss of non-human objects and over nature in general, attempting to explain why and in what sense Hopkins expresses more feeling over the loss of the non-human than the human.

In the third chapter, I examine Hopkins's poems about his own morality. In particular, I look at his process of attempting to achieve comfort. In support of this aim, I explore Hopkins's understanding of the self and the process of "selving." I trace the current of self-disgust in Hopkins's work, raising again the question of whether we should think of this element in Hopkins as morbid. Ultimately, I argue that Hopkins achieves comfort in the face of death in an ethical manner by searching for authentic comfort rather than comfort by more abstract or theoretical means. I contend that his innovations in the sonnet form in particular help with this aim.

In the conclusion to this dissertation, I review the arguments in each of these chapters, and I ask a final broad question about my project's overall significance and about its implications for understanding Hopkins's writings on death. That question is, "What is the relationship between death and happiness for Hopkins?" Using Hopkins's last reported words ("I am so happy! I am so happy!") as my starting point, I argue that death is ultimately necessary for being truly happy because happiness consists not in the reduction of pain or acquisition of pleasure but in virtue itself. I show that whether he was admiring the suffering and achievement of the martyrs, longing for a lost loved one, or searching for comfort in the face of existential despair, Hopkins understood death as something that could help him live more fully *coram deo* ("in the presence of God"). As he writes in one meditation, "the true position of things between man and

God appears by an immediate light at death, when man's self is set face to face with God" (SDW 140).

Let me conclude with a few words about how chronology figures into the argument and overall structure of this dissertation. As I have said, my aim here is to offer a comprehensive account of Hopkins's writings on the subject of death. Because I observe an underlying unity and process of development in Hopkins's writings on this subject, with few exceptions I treat Hopkins's works chronologically. While the dating of Hopkins's poems is not always certain, what is certain is that Hopkins underwent periods of intense creativity, which were driven by the circumstances discussed above. This means that the development I mean to demonstrate is not strictly linear. Nevertheless, Hopkins's concerns do evolve from period to period. The main periods I consider crucial are Hopkins's undergraduate years, his novitiate, his period as a curate and teacher of rhetoric, and, finally, his Dublin years. While each chapter is not discrete from the others, each chapter does have a unique focus: chapter one on the beginning of Hopkins's poetic and priestly career, chapter two on what we might call the "middle" period, and chapter three on his final years.

Chapter one's discussion of martyrdom is largely focused on relatively early works by Hopkins (his juvenilia to his novitiate in Wales, a period stretching from 1860 to 1877), though the two periods of most intense activity are 1864-1865, when Hopkins most likely wrote his hagiographical poems about St. Dorothea and St. Thecla. The further discussion in chapter one of Hopkins's poems on soldiers focuses again on two intense periods of productivity. The first is during Hopkins's tenure as a curate at Bedford Leigh in 1879. The second is Hopkins's Dublin years, particularly 1886 to 1889, when he most likely wrote the three poems about soldiers discussed at the chapter's end.

Chapter two focuses more intensely on the period of Hopkins's curacy and tertianship (1878-1883). Its discussion of phatic phrases in Hopkins's poetry focuses on "Felix Randal" and "The Bugler's First Communion," both written in the period from 1879-1880. The discussion of the deaths of children focuses largely on "Spring and Fall" (also 1880) but makes reference to poems both much earlier and much later to illustrate Hopkins's engagement with the Ignatian concept of indifference. The chapter concludes by returning to the same period but with a different theme in mind: the death of nature. The poem central to this section is "Binsey Poplars" (written in 1879). This chapter supplements the general picture of Hopkins's development presented in chapter one by focusing in greater detail on the deaths of individuals Hopkins knew personally and also situates Hopkins's attitudes about grief, which were informed by Ignatian indifference, within the general Victorian cultural fascination with highly sentimental forms of grief.

Chapter three also focuses on a relatively circumscribed period while making reference, on a few occasions, to poems of other periods. The main concern of the chapter is the death of the self, so naturally the poems of Hopkins's Dublin years (1884-1889) in which he felt increasingly isolated and experienced great spiritual anguish, are the primary focus. The major exception is the discussion of "Spring and Death," an undergraduate poem. This discussion is included to provide context for Hopkins's development away from the "seer" or "dream vision" genre of poetry for writing about his own death, which entailed not only a movement away from his own works but also a rejection of the model provided by John Henry Newman in *The Dream of Gerontius*. The chapter concludes with an extended discussion of "That Nature is a Heraclitean fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection" (1889).

In short, it is necessary to proceed both thematically as well as chronologically in order to treat the theme of death in Hopkins's poetry comprehensively. I have opted to prioritize themes over chronology. But I have introduced each theme in a manner such that this dissertation moves from Hopkins's first poem to his (reported) last words, providing an analysis of main concerns as well as an account of the way these concerns develop and build upon one another.

CHAPTER ONE

HOPKINS'S MARTYRS AND "DAREDEATHS"

*"It is said that all martyrdoms seemed mean to the looker on.
The nineteenth century is no exception to the rule.*

—Oscar Wilde¹

The earliest surviving poem written by Gerard Manley Hopkins is "The Escorial," a composition that won the annual poetry prize competition at Sir Roger Cholmeley's School at Highgate when Hopkins was just fifteen years old (see note in PW 215). It would be inaccurate to describe the poem as an *ars poetica* for the brilliant poetic output of Hopkins's later years. Transformative experiences such as his time at Oxford, his conversion to Catholicism, his early training in Jesuit spirituality, and his self-imposed abstention from writing poetry (1868 to 1875) render the Hopkins of "The Escorial" almost invisible in later, mature works. Nevertheless, in one aspect of "The Escorial" we do see Hopkins's later concerns prefigured: in the poem's preoccupation with heroes and the way we respond to them.

The poem, the subject of which was chosen for the competition, explains that the Spanish fortress, palace, and convent known as El Escorial² was constructed in response to two victories—one martial and the other spiritual. The most immediate victory was that of Philip II of Spain at the Battle of St. Quentin (August 10, 1557). Philip promised "while glory or defeat / Hung in the swaying of the fierce *melée*" to dedicate a great gift to St. Lawrence ("Laurence," Hopkins spells it) if he proved victorious. Philip's promise was no doubt inspired by the fact that the battle took place on the saint's feast day, as Hopkins indicates ("amidst the heat / Of battle

once upon St. Lawrence' day"), and it is Lawrence's own much earlier spiritual victory in his martyrdom to which Philip's commemoration ultimately makes reference.

Hopkins describes St. Lawrence's martyrdom, in which the saint is "roasted to death on a gridiron," as follows:

For that staunch saint still prais'd his Master's name
While his crack'd flesh lay hissing on the grate;
Then fail'd the tongue; the poor collapsing frame,
Hung like a wreck that flames not billows beat— (PW 1)

Then the poem explains that saint's faith and the "fiery constancy" depicted in these lines serves as the main inspiration for Philip in the construction of El Escorial. Hopkins writes:

So, grown fantastic in his piety,
Philip, supposing that the gift most meet,
The sculptur'd image of such faith would be,
Uprais'd an emblem of that fiery constancy. (PW 1)

Philip's promise and his plan for keeping it result in the fact that the structure of El Escorial mirrors that of an instrument of death. Hopkins writes in an explanatory note, "The Escorial was built upon the form of a gridiron,—the rectangular convent was the grate, the cloisters the bars, the towers the legs inverted, the palace the handle" (PW 2). Thus, the overarching quality of El Escorial presented in the poem is extreme severity. The structure lacks both the "grace" of Gothic architecture (PW 2) and the serene, classical "Doric mood" (PW 3). It stands in "solemn mockery" to Spain's ornate Moorish structures such as the Alhambra (PW 3). It captures instead "the pride of faith" and "sternest piety" (PW 3).

We are meant to see Philip's act of devotion as a strange one. The phrase "grown fantastic in his piety" indicates disapproval of something deeply misguided. And indeed, the poem provides examples of the irrationality and the extravagance of Philip's promise, showing something unsound in his judgment that a gridiron-like the building would be a "meet" gift for

St. Lawrence. The first stanza of the poem suggests this perspective even before we learn of Philip's plan. We are told that although El Escorial is a "pious work," it is also "a massy pile." Its cloister is "the proudest home / Of those who strove God's gospel to confound / With barren rigor and a frigid gloom." The building's inhabitants—the inhabitants of the cloister in particular—do fully work against the truth of the Gospel ("confound" in this statement may mean "mix" or "combine" rather than "thwart" or "destroy"). Nevertheless, it is clear that the speaker strongly disagrees with the character and approach of the building and the Catholic monks who inhabit it, with their "*barren rigor and frigid gloom*" (PW 1, emphasis mine), even if he can recognize a certain power in their work and an authentic (if distant) kinship with them in their cause. Their *object* of belief and adoration is correct enough. But the *manner* in which they propound the gospel is seriously flawed, that is at least in the estimation of the youthful Anglican Hopkins.

The irony, of course, is that Hopkins will soon himself grow "fantastic in his piety" as he moves increasingly away from Anglicanism during his undergraduate years, eventually converting to Catholicism and entering the Jesuit order. A new relationship to heroic deaths begins to emerge in his works. In some ways he will stand in the place of Philip II as presented in "The Escorial," creating his own extravagant tribute to martyrs in "The Wreck of the Deutschland," and this tribute will, in turn, strike those around him as quite odd. He will write of other martyrs as well, among them St. Dorothea, St. Thecla, St. Winifred, Margaret Clitherow, and Edmund Campion. Additionally, Hopkins's works will be tinged all over with more subtle hints of and admiration for hero figures who kill or are killed. Consider, for example, his "heart" as it is "Stirred for a bird" in "The Windhover." The admiration Hopkins feels for the kestrel is presented in terms like those of a subject for a knight: the bird is noble, a "chevalier" and a

“dauphin” (PW 144). This admiration is inseparable from the violence of the bird’s action. The kestrel swoops in (“Buckle!”) not for any mere show of “mastery” but to capture its prey, to kill in a “dangerous” act in which “fire breaks from [it]” (PW 144). Similar language spills over into Hopkins’s admiration for especially lovely inanimate objects as well. Also in “The Windhover,” we see “blue-bleak embers” that “Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion” at the poem’s conclusion. As with the bird, the embers are described in anthropomorphic terms that specifically suggest a grand and even violent act of destruction (i.e. “fall,” “gall,” and “gash,” PW 144). Later in Hopkins’s works, there will be an interest in soldiers—“daredeaths,” Hopkins calls them—and their heroic willingness to die for a cause in poems like “The Loss of the Eurydice,” “The Soldier,” and “What Shall I do for the Land That Bred Me?” In each case, Hopkins is drawn to the heroic power of self-sacrificial acts.

How do we explain the intense attraction Hopkins feels for those who die heroically—or are willing to? In the introduction to this dissertation, I claimed that Hopkins’s approach to death was rooted in a coherent moral vision. I suggested that this moral vision may initially seem foreign or even “morbid” to us because, in contrast to most contemporary approaches to ethics, Hopkins is not intent primarily on reducing harm and promoting fairness. Instead he adopts what I called an “ethics of perfection” in which unruly passions and desires are (re)directed toward God. It is this moral vision that supplies Hopkins’s writings on death their fundamental unity, and it explains their diversity. Hopkins’s ethical response to death manifests itself in a wide range of practices. Hopkins may refuse to mourn a loss on one occasion while on another he may write about a death with great gravity and emotion. In either case, it is important to recognize that Hopkins’s poems are more *exercises* than they are *expressions*. They are not primarily

designed to confess emotions that are overheard by the reader as they are exercises designed to help the writer and reader both will and choose the good.

Following the general approach I laid out in the introduction, this chapter will present the argument that Hopkins's poems on heroic death *also* exhibit a fundamental unity that takes part in Hopkins's underlying moral vision and contributes to his overall project. But unity does not mean stagnation or sameness. I trace a line of evolution in Hopkins's views on heroes, suggesting that the differences between Hopkins's poems about martyrs and soldiers are not opposed to one another but rather represent two different perspectives or points of development. Ultimately, I claim that the approach to identifying and responding to heroes Hopkins develops in his works is valuable from an ethical perspective. Hopkins neither glorifies suffering as such nor utilizes heroic death triumphally. I even suggest that Hopkins's poetry about soldiers is not actually about war, strictly speaking, but rather "the war within," or one's own inward spiritual struggle to direct one's will and desires toward God. By introducing the difficulty of recognizing a hero into his poetry, Hopkins invites his reader to a change of heart—a peaceful process of conversion as opposed to a coercive one. By way of further introduction, I will establish a few general issues related to heroic death and its uses.

Scholars have long understood that, broadly speaking, "heroism" names a type of system for identifying and sustaining meaning. Heroism helps us fulfill our basic individual existential need to *matter* as well as our need to establish a moral order in social life. At the same time, it creates a host of (potential) moral problems. William James captured well both levels—the personal and social—in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. James claims that "mankind's common instinct for reality...has always held the world to be essentially a *theatre* for heroism" (364, emphasis mine). He explains:

In heroism, we feel, life's supreme mystery is hidden. We tolerate no one who has no capacity whatever for it in any direction. On the other hand, no matter what a man's frailties otherwise may be, if he be willing to risk death, and still more if he suffer it heroically, in the service he has chosen, the fact consecrates him forever. Inferior to ourselves in this or that way, if yet we cling to life, and he is able "to fling it away like a flower" as caring nothing for it, we account him in the deepest way our born superior. Each of us in his own person feels that a high-hearted indifference to life would expiate all his shortcomings. (364)

We each face the basic existential problem due to the fact that we are aware of our own mortality. Thus, we live with an (at times unconscious) anxiety. Heroes help allay this anxiety by showing us, or at least allowing us to feel, that certain values transcend our individual lives and are worth dying for. In *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker expanded James's insights to offer a fuller account of the ways we create heroes and hero systems in order to preserve meaning. Becker describes humanity's basic existential predicament as follows, "This is the terror: to have emerged from nothing, to have a name, consciousness of self, deep inner feelings, an excruciating inner yearning for life and self-expression—and with all this yet to die" (87). This fundamental predicament creates a terror of insignificance we must ward off by attaching ourselves to heroes and hero systems. Becker calls this "man's tragic destiny: he must desperately justify himself as an object of primary value in the universe; he must stand out, be a hero, make the biggest possible contribution to world life, show that he *counts* more than anything or anyone else" (4).

Each person's quest to be an "object of primary value" necessarily involves other people. Thus, James's "theater" image is apt; heroes need audiences and audiences need heroes. The hero needs a community in order to be a hero and to have the heroic effect often desired or aimed for in heroic self-sacrifice, and yet the community also needs heroes to the point of even manufacturing them, if necessary. According to social psychologists Jonathan Haidt and Sarah Algoe, heroism occupies and helps organize the "third dimension of social space." For them,

social life can be seen not just as having a “horizontal” dimension of solidarity, including those we are intimate with or connected to, and a “vertical” dimension, including those over whom we have authority and those who have authority over us in a hierarchy, but another dimension as well, which they call “divinity.” Thus, we organize our worlds not just in terms of hierarchy and solidarity but in terms of saints and demons, honor and disgrace, glory and shame.

One ethical pitfall that arises with regard to the third dimension of social space is the phenomenon of “moral amplification,” or “the motivated separation and exaggeration of good and evil in the explanation of behavior” (Haidt and Algora 323). Despite the fact that “good and bad behaviors do not spring entirely or primarily, from the goodness or badness of individuals” (322), the process of moral amplification answers to a “hunger for purity: the perfect separation of good and evil” (323). In its most extreme form, moral amplification develops into what Roy Baumeister calls the “myth of pure evil.” Baumeister writes:

The myth of pure evil depicts innocent victims fighting against gratuitously wicked, sadistic enemies. The myth encourages people to believe that they are good and will remain good no matter what, even if they perpetrate severe harm on their opponents. Thus, the myth of pure evil confers a kind of moral immunity on people who believe in it. [. . .] belief in the myth is itself one recipe for evil, because it allows people to justify violent and oppressive actions. It allows evil to masquerade as good. Often, it is in the wake of an evil act that we are most liable to lapse into the myth of pure evil; victims identify themselves or their heroes as completely righteous, and thus they are able to portray the opponent’s side as purely evil. (95-96)

Because we invest so much in our hero systems, we are at times attempted to maintain them in unethical ways. If they are attacked, we will defend them as if our lives have been threatened.

In sum, hero systems answer to our basic existential need to attach ourselves to meanings that will outlive us. And yet, they can also support and enable great injustice and wrongdoing. When we encounter rhetoric that utilizes heroes and hero systems, we would do well to ask, “How empirically true is the vision we are being presented with—is truth or obfuscation its

aim?"; "Is it life denying or life affirming?"; and "Whom does it harm or blame in order to achieve or maintain its universality?" As I trace out the development of Hopkins's views on heroic death, I will make reference to these issues and compare and contrast Hopkins with other contemporaries, theorists, and writers.

Martyrs as Heroes

After "The Escorial" the theme of martyrdom would not again become a major concern for Hopkins until the period in which he was considering converting to Roman Catholicism. It is not hard to see why this might be the case. Hopkins stood to lose much by converting. As a Catholic, he would lose many friends and would have weaker connections with Anglican family members. He would be voluntarily accepting the position of a second-class citizen in many ways, losing, for example, the opportunity for a government or academic career. So it is no surprise that poems featuring those who were persecuted appealed to him at this time. But to say that Hopkins was interested in martyrs because he saw his interests mirrored in them would be too one-dimensional. Hopkins is interested *in his interest* in martyrs as well as in renunciation more generally. He focuses on the seductive attractiveness of the perfection gained through asceticism and renunciation. Several poems from this period, including "Heaven-Haven" (PW 29-30) and "The Habit of Perfection" (PW 89-90), attempt to render in poetic form the positive desire for what is heavenly over and against what is worldly. They often operate by evoking sensations only to negate them as a pale imitation of something higher: "I have asked to be / Where no storms come, / Where the green swell is in the haven dumb, / And out of the swing of the sea" (PW 30) or "Palate, the hutch of tasty lust, / Desire not to be rinsed with wine: / The can must be so sweet, the crust / So fresh that come in fasts divine!" (PW 90). In these poems, the only thing more beautiful than a lovely sound is silence, and better than the choicest food is fasting.

Similarly, the martyr poems of this period are explorations of the attractive power, the aesthetic qualities of otherworldliness. We see one version of this otherworldliness in the poems Hopkins wrote about the St. Dorothea, of which four separate versions survive. The titles given to three versions—“For a Picture of Saint Dorothea,” “St. Dorothea (Lines for a picture),” and “Lines for a picture of St. Dorothea”—suggest that it imitates Pre-Raphaelite poems written to accompany paintings. Indeed, the poem evokes much of the melancholy wistfulness and the dreamy longing for another world that characterizes Pre-Raphaelite images. Historical records indicate that St. Dorothea was martyred during the Great Persecution of Diocletian (303-313 CE). Accounts of her martyrdom focus on the fact that she was ready to embrace death, since it would send her to paradise, “where the trees among the glades are adorned with fruit all the year round, lilies ever blossom white, roses are flowering, the fields and mountains are perennially green, and the hills clothed with verdure” (Latin text in *Acta Sant.* 774a, quoted in PW 256). Dorothea was then challenged by Theophilus, who oversaw her execution, to bring back fruits and flowers from this paradise. These arrived, carried by an angel, shortly after Dorothea’s death. The poem embraces and depends upon miracles more overtly than much of Hopkins’s poetry, while the sordid reality of the killing itself happens offstage, so to speak. The rhetoric or persuasion that brings about the conversion of Theophilus derives largely from the supernatural events that surround St. Dorothea’s conversion—as opposed to, for example, her bearing under duress. The poem opens with the placidly spoken words of an angel:

I bear a basket lined with grass.
 I am so light and fair
 Men are amazed to watch me pass
 With the basket I bear,
 Which in newly drawn green litter
 Carries treats of sweet for bitter. (PW 58)

The angel presents these “sweet” otherworldly spoils to Theophilus in exchange for the “bitter” spoils he had dealt to St. Dorothea, suggesting their heavenly origin as follows:

See my lilies: lilies none,
 None in Caesar’s garden blow.
 Quinces look, when not one
 Is set in any orchard; no,
 Not because their buds not spring;
 Spring not for world is wintering. (PW 59)

The repeated comparison of earthly flora and produce with heavenly counterparts serves to emphasize how superior they truly are, how matchless, how ultimately unlike the earthly things. As with many of Hopkins’s other poems about renunciation, these lines evoke earthly images only to negate them; each line quoted above includes a negation of one form or another: “lilies *none*,” “*None* in Caesar’s garden,” “*not* one,” “*no*,” “*Not* because,” “Spring *not*” (PW 59, emphasis mine).

The main drama of the poem comes from Theophilus’s encounter with the angel and his failed attempt to explain away the miracle. He declares:

But they came from the South
 Where winter-while is all forgot.— (PW 59)

The angel responds:

The dewbell in the mallow’s mouth
 Is it quenched or not?
 In starry, starry shire it grew;
 Which is it, star or dew?— (PW 59)

Ultimately, Theophilus accepts that he has witnessed something divine. Awed by this heavenly proof, he enlists himself to join St. Dorothea in martyrdom. He declares:

Ah dip in blood the palmtree pen
 And wordy warrants are flawed through.
 More will wear this want and then
 The warped world we shall undo.
 Proconsul!—Is Sapricius near?—

I find another Christian here. (PW 59)

This last line is Theophilus's profession of faith (the "Christian" he finds is himself) in the form of a death warrant. This final stanza as a whole is filled with images of persuasion. The "palmtree pen" is meant to signify the palm, a symbol of victorious martyrdom. The bodily act of martyrdom is presented as undoing or rendering un-persuasive the "wordy warrants" issued by those who persecute Christians. In this stanza, the "blood" is the ink that enables a martyr to send a compelling and convincing message. Yet in the poem more generally, it is not the martyrdom itself but the miracle that succeeded it that is responsible for Theophilus's conversion; apart from this mention of "blood" the embodiment of the martyr's message in the very act of suffering and dying is tidily hidden from view in favor of a more direct access to the divine through the angel and his miraculous cargo.

In another slightly later martyr poem from this period, "St. Thecla," we find a further, more direct exploration of renunciation and its attractiveness. The poem's speaker opens with a lament that renunciation seems to have lost the attractive power that was once so obvious, and St. Thecla serves as the emblem of that mode of attraction:

Who thinks of Thecla? Yet her name was known,
Time was, next whitest after Mary's own.
To that first golden age of Gospel times
And bright Iconium eastwards reach my rhymes. (PW 69)

The poem makes use of the sensuous (and sensual) aspects of Thecla and the wedded future held out to her in order to evoke seduction and attraction:

Twice lovely, tinted eastern, turned Greek —
Crisp lips, straight nose, and tender-slanted cheek.
Her weeds all mark her maiden, though to wed,
And bridegroom waits and ready are bower and bed. (PW 70)

Nevertheless, the poem veers away from these immediate sensory pleasures in order to praise “the lovely lot of continence” instead.

As with “St. Dorothea,” “St. Thecla” is a skillful and attentive adaptation of its source text. Its main source is the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, a work of early Christian non-canonical literature. The text, written in the second century CE, was tremendously popular, but also controversial for its essentially anti-sex, anti-household message. Modelled on the romances of the period, the text presents a drama very much like a courtship between the Apostle Paul and Thecla; however, this romance breaks with convention by upending the ancient household system and the bonds of matrimony supported by most romances of the period. Thecla, a beautiful young woman, is seduced *away* from her impending marriage by the attractiveness of Paul—but not so much his physical charms as the beauty and power of his teaching or message. The “Paul” of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* teaches, in contrast to the Paul of the canonical New Testament epistles, not just that celibacy is *superior* to marriage, but that sexual intimacy of any kind is *fundamentally incompatible* with the Christian life.

In an alternate form of the beatitudes “Paul” presents his message “about abstinence and the resurrection.” He proclaims:

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God; blessed are those who have kept the flesh chaste, for they shall become a temple of God; blessed are the continent, for God shall speak with them; blessed are those who have kept aloof from this world, for they shall be pleasing to God; blessed are those who have wives as not having them, for they shall experience God; blessed are those who have fear of God, for they shall become angels of God. [. . .] blessed are the bodies of virgins, for they shall be well pleasing to God and shall not lose the reward of their chastity (178).

While a few of these pronouncements are reproduced verbatim from the canonical gospels (“Blessed are the pure in heart” appears in Matthew 5:8, for example), by and large the message is clearly a more radical asceticism than that endorsed by canonical New Testament texts. Some

New Testament texts suggest that celibacy is a greater good or more perfect state than marriage, but no canonical New Testament text makes the suggestion presented here: that purity in heart and salvation itself are the products of keeping “aloof from this world,” suggesting in other words that the dividing line between good and evil is synonymous with that between the spirit and the flesh, or the world and heaven and separation from the world is the index of moral goodness. Such a radical dualism is more in keeping with Manichean or Gnostic teachings than with orthodox Christianity.

Nevertheless, such are the views that attracted Hopkins during this period. Or at least he was interested in *becoming* attracted to them (“If you cannot desire, then desire to desire,” Hopkins would later recommend in his spiritual writings). It appears at moments that physical and sensory attractions are not as fully sublimated as Hopkins may intend. When, for example, he speaks of Thecla’s desire as the “Firm accents strike her fine and scrollèd ear,” the attempt to redirect our attraction to “the lovely lot of continence” can fall flat. And when Hopkins writes “All over, some such words as these, though dark / *The world was saved by virgins*, made the mark” precisely what it was, in concrete terms, that moved Thecla remains no doubt a mystery for most readers (PW 70, emphasis in the original).

Whereas the actual moment of martyrdom preceded the events described in “St. Dorothea,” Thecla’s martyrdom is only vaguely foreshadowed in the last three lines of “St. Thecla”:

The earnest-hearted maiden sat and heard,
And called to come at mealtime she would not:
They rose at last and forced her from the spot. (PW 70)

In most accounts, Thecla has many adventures before eventually facing martyrdom.

Nevertheless, the fact that, as in “St. Dorothea,” the martyrdom itself is *not* the main interest is,

paradoxical as it may sound, one of the most interesting things about the poem. In the poem, the attractions and interests that derive from embodiment and physicality bear but a shadowy resemblance to divine realities. We see her attraction to divine perfection such as comes from having “kept aloof from this world”; her suffering and death are thus beside the point. Death is nothing but an opportunity to trade in this world for a better one, and suffering is a fleeting moment on the way to the infinite bliss that awaits in paradise. Ultimately, these poems suggest that heroism does not come by way of accepting suffering and death; rather it comes by way of adopting a perspective according to which death does not matter.

As we will see, Hopkins’s views will change. He gradually moves away from this perspective and finds ways to present martyrdom as an embrace of finitude, concreteness, and particularity.

We will now turn our attention to “The Wreck of the Deutschland,” its achievement, and its significance within Hopkins’s project. Hopkins approached martyrdom in “The Wreck” as more mature thinker after his self-imposed abstention from writing poetry, which lasted for seven years. So, although in “The Wreck” Hopkins returns to his earlier preoccupation, the poem also departs in many ways from Hopkins’s earlier martyr poems. For one, it no longer draws from or functions as hagiography. The five nuns who perish in the poem are presented as martyrs, but the process of recognizing and comprehending the achievement of the hero (the tall nun) is complex and protracted, and it clearly depends not upon indisputable supernatural signs but on experiencing something akin to what she experienced. For this reason, we do not even encounter the central heroine until we have been introduced to a crisis that will help us in recognizing her as a hero, after which the poem dramatizes an extended process of successive interpretations of her words and actions.

The poem's difficulty is notorious, and has caused many readers, including both Robert Bridges and Coventry Patmore, to refuse to read it a second time. Robert Bridges expressed some reservations about including it in the first volume of Hopkins's poetry he edited, writing:

The labour spent on this great metrical experiment must have served to establish the poet's prosody and perhaps his diction: therefore the poem stands logically as well as chronologically in the front of his book, like a great dragon folded in the gate to forbid all entrance, and confident in his strength from past success. This editor advises the reader to circumvent him and attack him late in the rear; for he was himself shamefully worsted in a brave frontal assault, the more easily perhaps because both subject and treatment were distasteful to him. A good method of approach is to read stanza 16 aloud to a chance company. (83)

Bridges's image here of "The Wreck" as a forbidding dragon to be approached strategically is apt, although perhaps not for the reason Bridges has in mind. The difficulty of "The Wreck" is constitutive of its meaning. Hopkins suggests as much himself when he acknowledges that the poem "needs study and is obscure, for indeed I was not over-desirous that the meaning of all should be quite clear, at least unmistakable" (CW I 295). Thus, to understand "The Wreck," like slaying a dragon, is an achievement. This is precisely because the poem itself dramatizes the difficult process of finding truth, meaning, and the divine, in a situation that seems senseless or even malign.

The poem makes it clear that traditional shows of heroism through sheer strength and power are not what it means to extol. Especially important in this regard is stanza sixteen, mentioned by Bridges as the key to "A good method of approach." The stanza reads:

One stirred from the rigging to save
 The wild woman-kind below,
 With a rope's end round the man, handy and brave—
 He was pitched to his death at a blow,
 For all his dreadnought breast and braids of thew:
 They could tell him for hours, dandled the to and fro
 Through the cobbled foam-fleece, what could he do
 With the burl of the fountains of air, buck and the flood of the wave? (PW 123)

This stanza is remarkable for the dramatic reversal it describes. In one moment a man, “handy and brave” and seeming fully able to master his environment, descends from his high perch on the rigging to save the women he sees suffering below him. But “at a blow” the situation reverses. Rather than making the situation subject to his will, he becomes subject to it. The rope he confidently tied around himself becomes an instrument of mockery and humiliation: the women he descended to save now stare upon his lifeless body as it is batted around almost playfully (“dandled the to and fro”). Clearly, might is not key to heroism in “The Wreck.” But what is? What does a hero truly look like, and who can best recognize him or her?

The autobiographical element of the poem thus becomes very important. This element has caused a number of interpretive difficulties. It may seem inappropriate in a poem dedicated “to the happy memory of five Franciscan nuns” to encounter first and at length the speaker’s own amorphous and vague spiritual struggle (when he “did say yes / O at lightning and lashed rod”), which seems to have only a very tenuous relationship to what happened on board the *Deutschland* when it foundered on the Kentish Knock. Indeed, Hopkins himself acknowledges the wide difference between his position and that of the nuns:

Away in the loveable west,
On a pastoral forehead of Wales,
I was under a roof here, I was at rest,
And they the prey of the gales. (PW 125)

And yet the entirety of the poem’s first part is dedicated to the poet’s own drama of discovering God. However compelling it may be in and of itself, this narrative may seem to rob pride of place from the poem’s own declared subject and its purported occasion for existing in the first place, a fact which led J. Hillis Miller to conclude that the poem was “only nominally about the dead whom it memorializes” (254, quoted in Wheeler 342), and earlier it had led Claude Colleer Abbott to claim that the autobiographical first part is a separate and more important poem than

the second part, which is the part that contains the narrative of the wreck (xxvi, quoted in Wheeler 342).

Nevertheless, the poem contains many links between the two stories. Both tell of spiritual crises. Although the speaker did not share in any life-threatening danger, there is most certainly an agony to his spiritual crisis, presented, whether literal or not, in physical terms: “midriff astrain with leaning of, laced with fire of stress.” *Stress*, here as elsewhere in Hopkins’s work, is a key word. It is Hopkins’s name both for the experience and true awareness of God. Thus, a true interpretation of God’s work often takes the form of *stress* or *stressing* of some kind, and *stress* is also the necessary condition for seeing the divine reality rightly. Hopkins writes:

I kiss my hand
 To the stars, lovely-asunder
 Starlight, wafting him out of it; and
 Glow, glory in thunder;
 Kiss my hand to the dappled-with-damson west:
 Since, tho’ he is under the world’s splendour and wonder,
 His mystery must be *instressed, stressed*;
 For I greet him the days I meet him, and bless when I understand.

Not out of his bliss
 Springs the *stress* felt
 Nor first from heaven (and few know this)
 Swings the stroke dealt—
 Stroke and a *stress* that stars and storms deliver,
 That guilt is hushed by, hearts are flushed by and melt—
 But it rides time like riding a river
 (And here the faithful waver, the faithless fable and miss). (*PW* 120, emphasis mine)

Here the poet’s status as one who has “felt” God’s “stress” (a word that appears four times in the two stanzas quoted above) is what enables him, unlike both the “faithful” and the “faithless,” to speak the truth and judge rightly. It is the “stress that stars and storms deliver” that allows him to see God “under the world’s splendour and wonder.”

The poet's qualifications, however, are not simply that of a fellow sufferer, but one who suffers in the same cause and serves the same master. Ultimately, it is the process of serving this master, which is also explained as developing mastery, that allows for a correct interpretation of the nun's achievement. This focus in part explains not just the autobiographical element but also the rather unique and surprising genre of the poem. It is, after all, not a sad poem, not elegiac or mournful as we might expect. Rather, the poem is an ode, or more specifically an epinicion or ode "upon (*epi-*) victory (*nike*)," like those written by Pindar and others to celebrate triumphs in the Hellenic games. Thus, the poem is focused on the excellence of a particular event or "performance," we might call it.³

But what is the nun's "performance" exactly? The poem's rejection of the heroism of sheer might (as we saw in stanza 16) notwithstanding, the nun's victory is nothing if not intensely physical. In keeping with the poem's focus on interpretation, the nun's cry is both the sign and seal of her victory. We are told that her cry is evidence of her correct interpretation of God's activity in the events around her:

Ah! there was a heart right
 There was single eye!
 Read the unshapeable shock night
 And knew the who and the why;
 Wording it how but by him that present and past,
 Heaven and earth are word of, worded by?—
 The Simon Peter of a soul! to the blast
 Tarpeian-fast, but a blown beacon of light. (*PW* 126)

What this correct interpretation consists of, we shall discuss shortly. For now it is necessary to follow a series of successive, competing, and difficult interpretations of the nun's cry. "The Wreck" is nothing if not a noisy poem. In fact, it is a poem that threatens at some points to rend or resist the dutiful slotting of syntax and to collapse into a stormy sea of noise, and in this sense it both mirrors the situation it describes and also performs something of the interpretive act it

identifies: we struggle to pull meaning from the poem, just as the tall nun struggles to pull God's voice from the "electrical horror" of the lightning and thunder.

It would be difficult enough if the nun's voice was the only voice hidden in the noise, but there are other voices as well to add to the confusion in Hopkins's presentation of the scene, most notably the voice of death personified as beating on a "drum":

Some find me a sword; some
 The flange and the rail; flame,
 Fang, or flood" goes Death on drum,
 And storms bugle his fame.
 But we dream we are rooted in earth—Dust!
 Flesh falls within sight of us, we, though our flower the same,
 Wave with the meadow, forget that there must
 The sour scythe cringe, and the blear share come. (*PW* 121-122)

Interestingly, the speaker presents the voice of death here as something to be listened to, not something to ignore or turn away from. The question is not whether these words spoken by death are correct, the question is whether this utterance is the "final word" so to speak. Hopkins does not, like John Donne, address death in order to assert the death of death ("Death, thou shalt die"). Rather, he lets death speak and even identifies the voice of death as something we must listen to in order to live authentically, without "forget[ting]" the fate that awaits us. In the midst of this noise, the poem constantly affirms that the message of God is present—but where? The poem cycles through many different prepositions in an attempt to locate the touch of God's "finger." God is "throned *behind* death" and "*under* the world's splendor and wonder." God is "*past* all grasp," and at other times, God is wafted out of the sky in the "dappled with damson West."

The situation in which Hopkins first learned about and became fascinated with the story of the wreck itself set Hopkins a special challenge. The fact that he read the newspaper accounts of the wreck and received their interpretations of the nuns' deaths meant Hopkins was both aware of the other interpretations available for her cry and also burdened with the need to correct

these accounts. In some ways, his poem simply rewrites to gainsay the newspaper accounts, such as this one from *The Daily News*:

There were five nuns on board who, by their terror-stricken conduct, seem to have added greatly to the weirdness of the scene. They were deaf to all entreaties to leave the saloon, and when, almost by main force, the stewardess (whose conduct was plucky in the extreme) managed to get them on to the companion ladder, they sank down on the steps and stubbornly refused to go another step. They seemed to have returned to the saloon again shortly, for somewhere in the dead of night, when the greater part of the crew and passengers were in the rigging, one was seen with her body half through the skylight, crying aloud in a voice heard above the storm “O my God, make it quick! Make it quick!” (quoted in Street 76)

The main animating emotion here is fear. The nun calls upon God to escape from, rather than embrace, suffering, making a chaotic and disastrous situation worse for the “plucky” stewardess ready to use “force” in juxtaposition to the nun’s useless cries.

The view that this account reflected an anti-Catholic sentiment was expressed by the German liberal newspaper *Weser Zeitung*. It claimed that “There was certainly hour-long lamentation from the women in the saloon, but it is ridiculous to speak of a particular wailing from the sisters, as it much more likely that they remained the calmest of all” (quoted in Street 79). The *Weser Zeitung* made full account of the anti-Catholic bias in several other newspaper articles, insisting that the eyewitnesses they spoke with “heard no specific cry of lamentation from [the nuns]” (quoted in Street 78). While there is no doubt that an anti-Catholic sentiment pervades many newspaper accounts, the suggestion made by the *Weser Zeitung*, that the cry may have come from someone else, but not from the nuns, is doubtful, and it is not, of course, the interpretation Hopkins arrives at in his telling of the story. It is crucial to remember that any English account of the nun’s cry is already a translation; the cry was spoken not in English, but in German, as several eyewitnesses made clear in their statements. Adolf Hermann remembered the cry to be “*Ach Gott! mach es nur kurz, wenn wir schon sterben müssen!*” (Oh God! Just make

it short when we have to die!), while W. Leick, a passenger from Cleveland, Ohio, who was aboard the *Deutschland* remembered the cry as simply “*Mein Gott! mach es schnell mit uns!*” (My God! Make it quick with us!). However, the account that initially inspired Hopkins was the account published on the eleventh of December, which was written by the Harwich correspondent of *The Times*. This account reported “Five German nuns, whose bodies are now in the dead-house here, clasped hands and were drowned together, the chief sister, a gaunt woman, six feet high, calling out loudly and often, ‘O Christ, come quickly!’ until the end came” (quoted in Street 75).

This latter version, which Hopkins adapts in his poem as “O Christ, Christ, come quickly” replaces fear with faith as the dominant emotion. But it also adds to the discipline and devoutness of the response by suggesting that the response could well have been a quotation from scripture or at least a repetition of a sentiment mentioned often in scripture in various forms. One version is found in the biblical book of Revelation (22:20). The verse reads, “He that giveth testimony of these things, saith, Surely I come quickly: Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” (D-R); “He which testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus” (KJV). Whether he is correct or not, Hopkins refuses to see the nun’s cry of agony as an inarticulate reflex the way Elaine Scarry does when she writes that physical pain “does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned” (4). There is no doubt an amount of frisson aimed for in the newspaper articles about the wreck, as we see nuns completely undone by fear and pain. Hopkins means to suggest the opposite, that in choosing a quotation, the nun is engaging in an act of trust—saying “Yes,” or “Amen,” as in the quotation from the book of Revelation. Her cry is thus an act of recognition of God’s work.

By quoting a divinely inspired text, she is “Wording it how but by him that present and past, / Heaven and earth are word of, worded by?—” For this reason the cry is not best described as “primal” as it has been by Paul Mariani (“Lexical Plenitude” 36). “Primal” is too Romantic and expressivist. No doubt it involves strain, but in it there is also remarkable control and mastery in the same way that the cry of pain uttered in an athletic performance might say something about the achievement of the performance but is not itself the achievement. Nor is the cry, despite its intertextual connection with the Biblical apocalypse, an apocalyptic one, as Alison Sulloway has claimed. She writes that the nun welcomes the “escape from temporal horror into the bliss of eternal life.” However, it seems clear that what the nun, like the poet, says “Yes” to is the process of the development of mastery through suffering, not an escape from that suffering. Sulloway’s claim could perhaps apply to Hopkins’s earlier poems about martyrdom, in which the fact of death simply did not matter; it was merely a moment to pass through on the way to an eternal reward in heaven. But it is clear that in “The Wreck” Hopkins has a different form of heroism in mind, one in which both the threat and experience of death can both perfect and reveal one’s true self. Far from being a plea to escape life, the nun’s cry is itself an assertion of self-mastery and of complete trust in God.

This is to suggest that, perhaps most surprisingly, the nun’s heroism does not arise from her cry’s efficacy or its actual communicative function. The importance of the nun’s cry is what it says *about her*, rather than what it says *to others*. As we saw, the newspaper accounts focused on the apparent inefficacy of the cry; they pictured her and the other nuns sitting in futility rather than taking effective action. One stanza near the end of “The Wreck” could be taken to counter that suggestion with the view that the tall nun is heroic because her cry directs those on the ship back to God:

Well, she has thee for the pain, for the
 Patience; but pity of the rest of them!
 Heart go and bleed at a bitterer vein for the
 Comfortless unconfessed of them—
 No not uncomforted: lovely-felicitous Providence
 Finger of a tender of, O of a feathery delicacy, the breast of the
 Maiden could obey so, be a bell to, ring of it, and
 Startle the poor sheep back! is the shipwreck then a harvest,
 Does tempest carry the grain for thee? (PW 127)

In the space of this single stanza the speaker turns from pronouncing doom for “the rest of them” only to end the stanza with the opposite suggestion, that the shipwreck is “a harvest,” representing a reaping rather than a loss of souls. But it is worth asking what it is about the nun’s cry that has the power to “startle the poor sheep back.” It is likely not the actual verbal content of her message. Rather it is the way that message exhibits her mastery. The fact that she continues to cry out to God in death inspires a kind of admiration or moral awe, and it is this that, at least for some observers, may hold out an attraction and kindle a new affection for the divine “Martyr-Master” she serves.

In contrast to Hopkins’s earlier martyr poems, there is no guarantee that the heroism described will be recognized. Rather the martyr’s message entrusts itself to the concrete and the finite. There is no miracle to guarantee that onlookers (and by extension, readers) will be converted at a flash, like Theophilus. But there is the hope that a change of heart occurs such that we are drawn to God and God’s message in Christ. The change begins within. As Hopkins writes in one stanza:

Ah, touched in your bower of bone
 Are you! turned for an exquisite smart,
 Have you! make words break from me here all alone,
 Do you!—mother of being in me, heart. (PW 123)

In total, there are nineteen mentions of heart(s) in the poem, and at each step of the interpretive process the speaker is assessing the state-of-heart, so to speak, of those who interact with the tall

nun, as they go from “heart-break” and “heart-throe” to “heart’s cheering.” Thus, it is not an instantaneous conversion from without that the poem aims for, but a radical, if slow, change from within: “Let him easter in us, be a dayspring to the dimness of us, be a crimson-cressed east.” Once this change has occurred, we will admire Christ as our “Pride, rose, prince, hero of us, high-priest, / Our heart’s charity’s hearth’s fire, our thoughts’ chivalry’s / throng’s Lord” (*PW* 128).

Given the size, scope, and achievement of “The Wreck of the Deutschland,” discussions of Hopkins’s poems on martyrdom can end with this poem as a kind of culmination. And yet to do so is to overlook a powerful and fascinating experiment in writing about martyrs: “Margaret Clitheroe.” The poem was most likely begun at the end of 1876, the same year Hopkins finished writing “The Wreck,” or perhaps early the following year (see *PW* 358). We have seen how Hopkins placed an unlikely hero in an epinicion, or victory ode, in “The Wreck.” By presenting a martyr outside the hagiographical context and as a living, breathing, suffering, and dying character, Hopkins was able to embrace a heroism that did not reject but rather utilized and worked through human finite. In “Margaret Clitheroe” Hopkins goes a step further by presenting Margaret’s heroism in the context of a gallows ballad. (Note the relevant fact that although Margaret is a martyr, she was not canonized as a saint until well after Hopkins’s time—by Paul VI in 1970).

The form of the gallows ballad is typically associated with broadsheets (one use of the genre for more literary purposes would occur before the end of the century in Oscar Wilde’s “Ballad of Reading Gaol”). In addition to being overshadowed by “The Wreck” as well as unfinished, the poem’s “low” style no doubt can give the false impression that the poem is aesthetically uncomplicated and therefore uninteresting or unworthy of critical comment.

However, the apparent simplicity of the gallows ballad genre allows Hopkins to make a remarkable experiment, making the (mis)recognition of a hero constitutive of a martyr poem in a more fundamental way.

In addition to exhibiting rhymes, meter, stanzas, and refrains reminiscent of ballads, the poem frames and focalizes its narrative through the recognition and punishment of crime in a manner very much in keeping with the gallows ballads that were well-known in the Victorian era. The poem opens when the sentence is handed down.

God's counsel columnar-severe
 But chaptered in the chief of bliss
 Had always doomed her down to this –
Pressed to death. He plants the year;
 The weighty weeks without hands grow,
 Heaved drum on drum; but hands also
 Must deal with Margaret Clitheroe. (*PW* 136-137)

Although we are aware that the sentence is actually, on a more fundamental level, God's, we recognize that others are seeing and judging Margaret as guilty. As a martyr of the post-Reformation era, Margaret is unique in sharing Hopkins's situation as a Catholic among Anglicans.

We see Margaret as she awaits her execution and then as she faces not the scaffold but rather a uniquely grisly public spectacle: being slowly pressed to death. This was due to the fact that Margaret remained silent before the court. She wanted to spare her servants and children from the burden of having to testify against her (which could have involved torture, commonly used at the time to elicit information). The penalty she faced is known as *peine forte et dure*. It was explained as follows by one writer of the period:

[. . .] he [that] is judged mute, that is dumme by contumacie [. . .] his condemnation is to be pressed to death, which is one of the cruellest deathes that may be: he is layd upon a table, and an other uppon him, and so much weight of stones or lead laide uppon that table, while as his bodie be crushed, and his life by that violence taken from him. This

death some strong and stout hearted man doth choose, for being not condemned of felonie, his bloud is not corrupted, his lands nor goods confiscate to the Prince [. . .] (Sir Thomas Smith, *De Republica Anglorum*, quoted in McKenzie 279)

As Andrea McKenzie notes, Margaret Clitherow was “probably the only woman in the early modern period subjected to the *peine forte et dure*” (286). This punishment, which was seen as particularly courageous and “masculine” contributed to Margaret Clitherow’s fame and no doubt to Hopkins’s attraction to her story as well.

The silence that led to the bizarre sentence Margaret received functions in a similar way to the tall nun’s cry in “The Wreck.” The meaning is not in the words so much as the act of speaking (or choosing not to). Like the tall nun’s cry, Margaret’s silence creates the primary stress and strain we observe as well as the opportunity for victory. Her silence provides, then, the opportunity for us to recognize her acts and her virtue. We move around the spectacle on the scaffold (which is not actually a scaffold in Margaret Clitherow’s case, but a door) to consider the perspectives of those in attendance:

Fawning fawning crocodiles
 Days and days came round about
 With tears to put her candle out;
 They wound their winch of wicked smiles
 To take her; while their tongues would go
 God lighten your dark heart – but no,
 Christ lived in Margaret Clitheroe. (PW 137)

The reader, however, is allowed to witness or join in the communion of the saints victorious:

Great Thecla, the plumed passionflower,
 Next Mary mother of maid and nun
 – – – – –
 And every saint of bloody hour
 And breath immortal thronged that show;
 Heaven turned its starlight eyes below
 To the murder of Margaret Clitheroe. (PW 138)

Rather than standing condemned before all onlookers, in a manner akin to “Sam Hall” or other traditional gallows ballads, the poem allows these saints to look on and recognize Margaret in kinship, providing an alternative community, one that sees her as virtuous rather than as a criminal.

“Margaret Clitheroe” is notable as well for the directness and even uncouthness with which it describes the physicality of Margaret and her martyrdom. As we have seen, Margaret’s opponents are “crocodiles” who shed crocodile “tears.” The Trinity is described playfully as “The Utterer, Utterèd, Uttering.” Hopkins even jokes, “Small matter of that,” in explaining that when Margaret is killed, she is pregnant (“Within her womb the child was quick.”) He plays as well with moral “uprightness” in contrast to Margaret’s manner of execution: “She was a woman, upright, outright; / Her will was bent at God. / For that / Word went she should be crushed out flat” (*PW* 137). Like Thecla and Dorothea, Margaret is physically attractive, though her charms are pictured more bluntly: “The Christ-ed beauty of her mind / Her mould of features mated well. / She was admired.” The “spirit of hell” is “to her virtue clinching-blind,” which, as Joseph Feeney has noted, is a play upon “Clinch,” the name of the judge who orders her execution (89). Nor does the poem shrink from the grisly scene of her martyrdom. But, at the same time, it does not exploit the scene for added pathos. It states frankly and definitely:

When she felt the kill-weights crush
 She told His name times-over three;
 I suffer this she said for Thee.
 After that in perfect hush
 For a quarter of an hour or so
 She was with the choke of woe. –
 It is over, Margaret Clitheroe. (*PW* 138)

With this final line, Hopkins likely meant to conclude what we might call “The Ballad of Margaret Clitheroe” (Hopkins did not title the poem himself). Hopkins has indicated that the

saints victorious look down upon the “show” of Margaret’s “murder,” but he here allows the martyrdom to rest in all its “mean[ness]” without any supernatural aid to supervene upon the definite and concrete world in which Margaret is slowly (“For a quarter of an hour or so”) pressed to death. The scene remains humble, in low, direct, even darkly comic style, trusting that redemption can work in and through (rather than in opposition to) finite realities.

“Margaret Clitheroe” represents an important moment in Hopkins’s movement away from the “otherworldly” martyr poetry that he began to write as his interest in Catholicism deepened. But its specific approach was not to be repeated. The intentionally low style of writing would not again form the basis for a poem about martyrs or heroes of any kind, though we perhaps see some small glimpses of it in the more plainspoken lines of “The Loss of the Eurydice.” Before reaching that poem, however, it is necessary to say more about Hopkins’s project more generally as it relates to heroes and theories of the heroic in his historical context. Toward this aim, in what follows we will situate Hopkins’s sermons on heroes alongside another current of thought on heroes, especially as represented by G. W. F. Hegel and Thomas Carlyle. Doing so will allow us to better understand Hopkins’s concerns and to make sense of the shift in Hopkins’s works away from the deaths of martyrs specifically to a focus on those who are merely willing to die—soldiers, or “daredeaths” as Hopkins would later call them.

Hopkins’s Sermons on Heroes and their Historical Context

We can situate Hopkins’s interest in heroic death in its historical context. Doing so helps us understand Hopkins’s project by comparing and contrasting it with that of his contemporaries. In a general sense, we can see that Hopkins was part of a movement identified by Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age*. This movement flourished in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when it provided a critique of the “levelling” effects of Deism and humanism. This movement rejected

the view that “Everybody is to be equal, and the old virtues of aristocracy are no longer valued: the virtues of heroism, for instance, the warrior virtues” (319). Taylor explains this “objection” as follows:

In this objection, the tilt in modern humanism and “civilization” toward equality is taken together with the valuing of peace over war, with the affirmation of the “bourgeois” virtues of production, and the relief of suffering; this is put in the context of the rejection of “extravagance” and “excess”: and the whole is condemned for the levelling, for pusillanimity, for a negation of any high, demanding ideal, for the negation of all heroism. (319)

Hopkins’s project is certainly to resist the “levelling” effects of modernity, but how does his version of this “objection” to levelling compare with other members of this movement, particularly his Victorian contemporaries? This movement is broad and diverse; it admits of no orthodoxy. Taylor writes:

We can see this in reactionary thinkers, like de Maistre, but also in Tocqueville; in Baudelaire, but also in Nietzsche; in Maurras, and also in Sorel. It can not only place itself on Left and Right (although perhaps it has been more evident in the twentieth century on the Right); but it also can take pious forms (where are the great vocations of asceticism and self-giving?), as well as fiercely anti-Christian forms (Nietzsche, who sees all this modern liberal egalitarianism as Christianity continued by other means). (319)

Hopkins belongs clearly to one of the more religiously devout versions of the movement. Indeed, his conversion to Catholicism and commitment to the Jesuit order can be understood both as causes and consequences of Hopkins’s rejection of the “levelling” effects of modernity. But Hopkins’s particular version remains unique. In this section, I will situate the understanding of heroes in Hopkins’s sermons alongside the works of Hopkins’s contemporaries, in particular Hopkins’s older contemporary, Thomas Carlyle, in order to help us understand some of Hopkins’s concerns and, ultimately, what makes his way of responding to these concerns important, not just for his own development as a thinker and poet, but as a figure in Western intellectual and religious history.

“No man is a hero to his *valet de chambre*” writes G.W.F. Hegel, citing “a well known proverb.” He continues:

I have added—and Goethe repeated it two years later—“not because the former is not a hero, but because the latter is a valet.” The valet takes off the hero's boots, helps him into bed, knows that he prefers champagne, etc. The hero as such does not exist for the valet, but for the world, for reality, and for history. Historical personages who are waited upon in the history books by such psychological valets certainly come off badly enough; they are reduced to the same level of morality as these fine connoisseurs of humanity, or rather to a level several degrees below theirs. (87-88)

Hegel here gives voice to one of the greatest challenges that will shape the Romantic and Post-Romantic movement to recover heroic values: the difficulty of reconciling a demand for “high” heroic values with the everyday, mundane realities of life. In an age of much change, where old regimes could topple and “the people” exerted greater political power while the bourgeoisie gained greater economic power, these thinkers were often hard-pressed to show that heroic individuals rather than collectives or abstract social and economic forces were in control of the direction of human civilization and culture. For Hegel and his followers, in order for us to participate properly in the progress of history, we need to recognize heroes and their achievement, but that achievement is by no means obvious or straightforward. This meant that Hegel and the thinkers who followed in his footsteps were forced to develop new theories about how to recognize a hero when we see one.

For Hegel, the answer lies in the mandate to avoid “psychologism,” by which he means an excessive emphasis on the individual’s particularities, morals, and intentions. Hegel explains that a hero’s greatness can easily arouse envy, jealousy, or dislike; it is an occupational hazard, we might say: “A mighty figure must trample many an innocent flower underfoot, and destroy much that lies in its path” (89). So we must resist the tendency to moralize. The hero is not heroic by dint of his (Hegel’s heroes are all male) goodness. Hegel’s heroes are great despite not

being good. One doesn't become a hero by an extraordinary effort and magnanimity; often it is even through the actions of a megalomaniac (Napoleon is the prime example for Hegel) that the history of the world moves forward.

The hero does not even perform his heroic acts—or submit to heroic death—intentionally. Hegel writes that he has “no consciousness of the Idea as such.” He is simply a practical person “with insight into what is needed and timely” for his particular situation. Caesar, for example, acted without knowledge that he was helping Rome reach its destiny when he took the throne.

They know how to obtain satisfaction and to accomplish their end, which is the universal end. With so great an end before them, they boldly resolved to challenge all the beliefs of their fellows. Thus it was not happiness that they chose, but exertion, conflict, and labour in the service of their end. And even when they reached their goal, peaceful enjoyment and happiness were not their lot. Their actions are their entire being, and their whole nature and character are determined by their ruling passion. When their end is attained, they fall aside like empty husks. They may have undergone great difficulties in order to accomplish their purpose, but as soon as they have done so, they die early like Alexander, are murdered like Caesar, or deported like Napoleon. (85)

The hero is unhappy in life and unhappy at its end. The magnitude of the hero's wreck against the ideals of his age is itself an indication that he was working all along in favor of a transcendent order. Here again the question of recognition is paramount for Hegel. He repeats his admonition not to use this aspect of heroism to besmirch the hero:

The fearful consolation that the great men of history did not enjoy what is called happiness—which is possible only in private life, albeit under all kinds of different external circumstances—this consolation can be found in history by those who are in need of it. It is needed by the envious, who resent all that is great and outstanding and who accordingly try to belittle it and find fault with it. (85)

The ammunition Hegel imagines the “ordinary” individual may use against the hero is the hero's private life—or lack thereof. Our envy is so great in the shadow of a hero that we need to be constantly on guard against the tendency to bring the hero “down to earth.”

Hegel's ideas were introduced to an English-speaking audience in a modified form by Thomas Carlyle. Carlyle's 1843 book *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* is at times a tribute to Hegel's work and at other times something more like an adulteration of it. Nevertheless, Carlyle adds enough of his characteristic verve and over-the-top prose to give the work a feel and character that is completely independent and original. In many places, Carlyle expresses Hegelian notions with a peerless turn of phrase that makes the ideas seem like his own witty sayings. Some passages read like paraphrases of Hegel's work, but always with added rhetorical flare and intensity of meaning. For example, Carlyle writes:

We will also take the liberty to deny altogether that [statement] of the witty Frenchman, that no man is a Hero to his valet-de-chambre. Or if so, it is not the Hero's blame, but the Valet's: that his soul, namely, is a mean valet-soul!...The Valet does not know a Hero when he sees him! Alas, no: it requires a kind of Hero to do that;—and one for the world's wants, in this as in other senses, is for most part want of such. (*Heroes* 216)

In Carlyle's appropriation, envy becomes meanness, and, furthermore, an accusation against the skeptic's soul. Carlyle's intensity develops into a full mandate: recognize the hero; to do so is a kind of heroism, to fail to do so is a kind of treachery. Along with this mandate, Carlyle erases Hegel's qualification that we cannot recognize heroism in our contemporaries—for Carlyle we can, nay we must, recognize the heroes among us; political and cultural life depend upon it.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, Carlyle's views had become more extreme. He began to make the mandate to recognize heroes even more intense. He turned fully against democracy, which he claimed instituted a "Valet-World" that "has to be governed by the Sham-Hero, by the King merely dressed up in King-gear" (*Latterday Pamphlets* 7). In democracy Carlyle saw the machinery of heroism taken over by the valets; the valets themselves were now selecting their own fake "heroes" and running the show without any authentic ability to recognize true heroism. The process was further exacerbated by the rulers themselves who

acquiesced to the populace's lack of belief in them. Heroes lost faith in their own heroism.

Carlyle writes:

What was peculiar and heard of in this year for the first time, the Kings all made to go, as if exclaiming, "We are poor histrios, we sure enough—did you want heroes? Don't kill us; we couldn't help it!"—Not one of them turned round, and stood upon his Kingship, as upon a right he could afford to die for, or to risk his skin upon.... That, I repeat, is the alarming peculiarity at present. Democracy, on this new occasion, finds all Kings conscious that they are but Playactors. (*Latterday Pamphlets* 7)

So intense and urgent has the mandate become that the heroes themselves as well as the people around them have become culpable in the event that a hero is unjustly overlooked or not heeded.

In sum, Carlyle put intense pressure on Hegel's thought by attempting to increase the hero's direct importance and recognizability in everyday life. He maintained Hegel's sense that heroes are necessary for society to function as it should and to move history in the proper direction. But in doing so he fashioned an even more radical version of some of Hegel's key points, that a hero is necessarily distant from us, of necessity immoral (or amoral), and ultimately unhappy.

Returning to Hopkins, we can see several of Carlyle's concerns mirrored in Hopkins's work, and yet his approach to heroes is in other ways diametrically opposed to Carlyle's. Whereas Carlyle (following Hegel) had seen the hero as essentially amoral, Hopkins will insist that moral goodness must remain part of heroism. Unlike Carlyle and Hegel, Hopkins maintains that cheerfulness is an essential quality of the hero as well. And lastly, he increasingly holds up Christ as the true form of a hero—but not in the sense of a distant force moving history forward, but as one whom we can admire in part because he is a hero who admires *us*.

In the period of Hopkins's life following the composition of "The Wreck of the Deutschland," and simultaneous with the composition of "Margaret Clitheroe," Hopkins was for the first time not just taking on parish work, but also preaching. Hopkins's "career" as a preacher

began in 1878 with a three-sermon series at London's Farm Street Church followed by six sermons during the following year at the parish church of St. Aloysius in Oxford. But it was not until what Christopher Devlin calls Hopkins's "idyllic interlude" in Bedford Leigh in the fall of 1879 just before he was moved to Liverpool that he truly came into his own as a preacher.

Devlin writes:

To Bridges and Baillie, who believed (probably rightly) that Oxford was just the place for him and who were evidently distressed by his move, [Hopkins] wrote the most unexpected letters of joy and self-congratulation at the exchange. In this smoke-sodden little town he came up against people who needed him desperately, and their need was what he needed. A man must fall in love with his parish or cure of souls if he is to do well by it. Hopkins fell in love with Leigh as he had never quite been able to do [. . .] with Oxford. (SDW 5)

In Bedford Leigh, the "Lancashire people of low degree or not of high degree" were those who most praised and most inspired Hopkins, and a unique charm of the sermons Hopkins preached there appears in the way he conveys cosmic themes in common, everyday speech using plain, even homely images.

Arguably the masterpiece of this new style and perspective is the sermon Hopkins preached on November 23, 1879, which focuses at length on the concept of Christ as a hero. The language and thought were not new to Hopkins. He had spoken of the "hero of Calvary, Christ" in "The Wreck of the Deutschland," where he also included "hero of us" in the long heroic epithet that closes the poem: "Pride, rose, prince, *hero of us*, high-priest, / Our hearts' charity's hearth's fire, our thoughts' chivalry's throng's Lord" (PW 128, emphasis mine). But in this sermon Christ's heroism is of a more intimate variety. He writes:

Our Lord Jesus Christ, my bretheren, is our hero, a hero all the world wants. You know how books of tales are written, that put one man before the reader and shew him off handsome for the most part and brave and call him My Hero or Our Hero. Often mothers make a hero of a son; girls of a sweetheart and good wives of a husband. Soldiers make a hero of a great general, a party of its leader, a nation of any great man that brings it glory,

whether king, warrior, statesman, thinker, poet, or whatever it shall be. But Christ, he is the hero. He too is the hero of a book or books, of the divine Gospels. (SDW 34)

While “hero” often implies distance, someone we “look up to” and thus are not intimate with, the aspect Hopkins has in mind here is the personal affection, the subjective appropriation of a hero. The fact that his use of the word “sweetheart” in this passage would later receive censure from his superiors in Liverpool shows the degree to which Hopkins attempts here to express divine love in plain, intentionally indecorous ways (SDW 277-278, note 34).

Carlyle had presented heroes as divinities, prophets, reformers, poets, and intellectuals. Hopkins, in almost a direct answer, replaces each of these heroes with Christ or rather places Christ as the hero in each of these domains. Christ is a “conqueror,” a “king,” a “statesman,” a “thinker,” and “an orator and poet” (35). Still, despite Christ’s affinity with these “high” heroic functions, it is not his ability to “command men” so much as his ability to move individual hearts that shows his greatness. Hopkins writes:

He is all the world’s hero, the desire of nations. But besides he is the hero of single souls; his mother’s hero, not out of motherly foolish fondness but because he was, as the angel told her, great and the son of the Most High and all that he did and said and was done and said about him she laid up in her Heart. He is the true love and bridegroom of men’s souls: the virgins follow him withersoever he goes; the martyrs follow him through a sea of blood, through great tribulation; all his servants take up their cross and follow him. And those even that do not follow him, yet they look wistfully after him, own him a hero, and wish they dared answer to his call. Children as soon as they can understand ought to be told about him, that they may make him the hero of their young hearts. (SDW 35)

Hopkins is not interested here in Christ as a shaper of an abstraction like “history,” “mind,” or “spirit” (*Geist*), as was the case for Carlyle and for Hegel. Rather he is interested in Christ as the shaper of personal histories, particular minds, and individual spirits.

Hopkins’s characterization of the intimate affection for Christ as a “hero” develops even greater intensity and concreteness in an extended meditation on Christ’s body. He describes Christ’s physical form in minute detail as

moderately tall, well built and tender in frame, his features straight and beautiful, his hair inclining to auburn, parted in the midst, curling and clustering about the ears and neck as the leaves of a filbert, so they speak, upon the nut. He wore also a forked beard and this as well as the locks upon his head were never touched by razor or shears. (SDW 35)

The important thing is not this description's fidelity to the historical truth in every detail ("we do not indeed for certain know [it] to be correct," Hopkins writes) but rather its truth to the concreteness or definiteness of Christ's incarnation, that Christ "lived and breathed and moved in a true and not a phantom human body and in that laboured, suffered, was crucified, died, and was buried" (SDW 37).

Having established Christ as a hero and as both approachable and incarnate, the sermon culminates in the stirring call to "make him your hero now," which asks the hearer to glorify Christ incarnate with a series of striking, definite, concrete images. Hopkins writes:

Take some time to think of him; praise him in your hearts. You can over your work or on your road praise him, saying over and over again / Glory be to Christ's body; Glory be to the body of the Word made flesh; Glory to the body suckled at the Blessed Virgin's breasts; Glory to Christ's body in its beauty; Glory to Christ's body in its weariness; Glory to Christ's body in its Passion, death and burial; Glory to Christ's body risen; [. . .] Glory to its every heartbeat, to its joys and sorrows, wishes, fears; Glory in all things to Jesus Christ God and man. (SDW 38)

In closing his sermon, Hopkins adds a final twist: "If you try this when you can you will find your heart kindle and while you praise him he will praise you" (SDW 38). To this most simple effort ("try this when you can") Christ responds with his own "praise" of us. Notice as well in this statement that it is again the "heart" and the change in it as it "kindle[s]" that is of the utmost importance. The admiration that Hopkins imagines us having for a hero goes far beyond mere allegiance to a superior spirit; it is decidedly warm and affectionate.

Thus, one form of evidence of this change of heart is, surprising as it may sound, cheerfulness. In his Bedford Leigh sermons Hopkins presents cheerfulness as both a cause and a consequence of heroism. Especially telling in this regard is Hopkins's sermon for the third

Sunday in Advent, 1879, preached on the text “Rejoice in the Lord always” (Philippians 4:4 KJV, D-R). Hopkins begins by asking how it is possible to rejoice in the Lord *always*. He mounts a list of obstacles that would make it seem difficult indeed to be joyful at all times: we are threatened by mortal sin (and thus with “with hell, everlasting fire”) and many have had earthly comforts taken from them. Nevertheless, Hopkins writes, “Cheerfulness has ever been a mark of saints and good people.” Even “the martyrs were cheerful.” Here he returns to the martyrdom of Margaret Clitherow to provide an example:

as she went through the York streets, to be pressed to death on Ouse Bridge, all along the road as best she could with her pinioned hands dealing out alms to the poor, looked, it is said, so marvellously [sic] cheerful and happy that her murderers, like those Pharisees who of Christ her master said that he cast out devils by Beelzebub, had nothing for it but to pretend she was possessed by a “merry devil.” Goodness then, my brethren, is cheerful and no wonder, and if there are, as to be sure there are, some good people whose looks are commonly downcast and sad, that is a fault in them and they are not to be copied in it” (SDW 48).

We can rejoice in our sufferings because to love God is to experience joy, to receive comfort. Thus, the signs of the martyrs—what distinguishes them from “common convicts”—are the “joyous looks” on their faces (SDW 48).

Lest this call seems too difficult, Hopkins assures his hearers that “when we love God he first loved us, first loved us as a ruler his subjects before we loved him as subjects their ruler” (48). And in closing this, the final sermon he would preach for his Bedford Leigh congregation, he again returns to the reversal by which Christ is revealed to call out to and admire us in very personal terms:

We call to him for comfort, but long ago he said: Come unto me. Long before John or Edward, Margaret or Elisabeth ever said / I love our Lord Jesus Christ / he said / I love John, I love Edward, I love Margaret, I love Elisabeth. His servants rejoice in him, at least St. Paul says they should, but much more does Christ rejoice in them. Are they handsome, healthy, strong, ableminded, witty, successful, brave, truthful, pure, just? He admires them more than they can, more than they *justly* can, themselves, for he made all

these things, beauty, health, strength, and the rest. But we admire ourselves and pride ourselves: we should leave that to him, he is proud enough of us. (SDW 49)

There are several new suggestions in this more extended account. It is not just our praise of Christ that leads Christ to praise us. Rather, Christ praises us for the qualities he created in us, for the uniqueness that makes us who we are. And in the final passage of his sermon, Hopkins extends the scope of what Christ praises to include not just our qualities, but our acts:

If we do well he smiles, he claps his hands over us; he is interested in our undertakings, he does not always grant them success, but he is more interested in them than we are. The wife wants her master a good husband, Christ wants it more; the child wishes him a good father, Christ etc; the employer wants him a faithful workman, he is satisfied with moderately good work, Christ is not, he looks at it with a keener artist's eye; and so on. We must then take an interest in Christ, because he first took an interest in us; rejoice in him because he has first rejoiced in us. (SDW 49)

The logic of Hopkins's sermon seems to have much to do with a double entendre implied here but made more explicit in a later sermon, preached in Liverpool, in which he compares the Holy Spirit, or Paraclete, to a cricket player calling "Come on, come on!" to a teammate (SDW 70). The double entendre is on the word *cheer*: on the one hand, it can mean to lift one's spirits and on the other it can mean to cry out to or call on, as in an athletic contest. But for Hopkins these are intimately linked ideas. Christ "cheers" in the sense of comforting by "cheering" us on as we undertake any effort whatsoever, urging us on to the peak of perfection. Christ is the hero we admire who first admired our own heroic actions.

Soldiers as Heroes

With this new emphasis on heroic effort in any undertaking we can begin to understand a new preoccupation that emerges in Hopkins's writing in the late 1870s and will continue on for the rest of his life. As we have seen, Hopkins was increasingly interested in linking "high" heroism with the everyday concerns of individuals. The new manifestation of that concern appears in the idea that soldiers are heroes, perhaps even archetypal heroes. Hints of this theme have occurred

to Hopkins early on (as we saw, he links soldiers and martyrs even in “The Escorial”), and his interest in the military character of spiritual life no doubt increased after he joined (“enlisted,” as he put it) in the Jesuit order, an order founded by a former soldier and maintaining some aspects of military character and discipline. In the end, though, it was not his own internal prompting but another shipwreck that served as the occasion for Hopkins’s first lengthy exploration of the heroism of soldiers in “The Loss of the Eurydice.” As he explained to Bridges, “My muse turned utterly sullen in the Sheffield smoke-ridden air and I had not written a line till the foundering of the Eurydice the other day and that worked on me and I am making a poem” (CW I 291). The ship sank on March 24, 1878, and by April 2 Hopkins had produced three stanzas to show to Bridges.

Apart from a few lines, Hopkins believed his “Eurydice” to show “more mastery in art” than “The Wreck of the Deutschland” (CW I 424), though it has undoubtedly gained less critical discussion. At 120 lines (in comparison with 280 in “The Wreck of the Deutschland”), the poem is both shorter and simpler and, as Hopkins also points out, includes “more wreck [narrative] and less discourse” (CW I 292). Quatrains rhymed in a simple AABB pattern replace the byzantine, meandering stanza form of “The Wreck of the Deutschland,” and the diction and syntax of the “Eurydice” are similarly simplified, though a few long compound words (e.g. “water-in-a-wallow” and “brown-as-dawning-skinned”) appear. But even these along with the poem’s many neologisms (e.g. “deathgush,” “heavengravel,” “wolfsnow,” and “daredeaths”) read with the rough simplicity of Anglo-Saxon kennings.

The poem’s simplicity extends to the question of heroes as well. Partly, this arises from the basic facts of the tragedy itself: only two crew members survived, and the voyage was not fraught with the same drama as that of the *Deutschland* either in terms of the the religious

persecution that preceded the voyage or in the protracted agony of its foundering. Instead, the startling thing about the *Eurydice*'s wreck was its instantaneity. The ship was struck unprepared by a squall that had been hidden from view behind Boniface Down on the Isle of Wight. The ship canted over, took on water, and sunk to eleven fathoms in just eight minutes (PW 391). The difficulty, then, for the poem is to display this freak accident as heroic, and to show in what sense it could possibly serve a higher purpose.

Hopkins focuses intently on the preparation of the soldiers that the wreck renders, literally frozen and metaphorically frozen in time:

They say who saw one sea-corpse cold
 He was all of lovely manly mould,
 Every inch a tar,
 Of the best we boast our sailors are.

Look, foot to forelock, how all things suit! he
 Is strung by duty, is strained to beauty,
 And brown-as-dawning-skinned
 With brine and shine and whirling wind.

O his nimble finger, his gnarled grip!
 Leagues, leagues of seamanship
 Slumber in these forsaken
 Bones, this sinew, and will not waken. (PW 151)

With their discipline, which has seemingly attended to every detail, the soldiers bear the mark of excellence and virtue. But something has gone amiss; the spiritual lives of these men do not bear out the same virtue that their bearing would suggest. They, like their ship, are “foundering”:

He was but one like thousands more,
 Day and night I deplore
 My people and born own nation,
 Fast foundering own generation. (PW 151)

What are these men guilty of? They have left unattended the piety and worship of past generations:

I might let bygones be—our curse
 Of ruinous shrine no hand or, worse,
 Robbery's hand is busy to
 Dress, hoar-hallowèd shrines unvisited; (PW 152)

Here, unlike the men, the “shrines” are unattended, ignored, “hoar[y],” not “Dress[ed]” or even looted. If the mark of the soldier is attending to every detail such that “all things suit,” then that is precisely the discipline that has been lacking in spiritual matters, and the result is the “ruin,” not of the “shrines,” but of the “breathing temple[s],” the men themselves:

Only the breathing temple and fleet
 Life, this wildworth blown so sweet,
 These daredeaths, ay this crew, in
 Unchrist, all rolled in ruin— (PW 152)

Thus, the main analogy in the poem is not between the wreck of a *ship* and the spiritual life, but between the wreck of *seamanship*—or of martial discipline more generally—and the spiritual life.

The answer to this failure lies not in mourning (though mourning is appropriate), but rather in looking to the true hero, Christ:

O well wept, mother have lost son;
 Wept, wife; wept, sweetheart would be one:
 Though grief yield them no good
 Yet shed what tears sad truelove should.

But to Christ lord of thunder
 Crouch; lay knee by earth low under:
 ‘Holiest, loveliest, bravest,
 Save my hero, O Hero savest.’ (PW 152)

As in Hopkins's sermons at Bedford Leigh discussed above, affection for Christ as “my hero” is the crucial spiritual discipline. Hopkins remains hopeful, but also maintains that “grace was wanted” the day when the *Eurydice* sank (PW 152). Thus, the note of protest with which the poem begins (“The Eurydice, it concerned thee, O Lord”) appears again at the poem's end.

Hopkins suggests that there may be hope for the souls lost in the wreck. He writes, “till doomfire burn all, / Prayer shall fetch pity eternal” (*PW* 152). As he was keen to emphasize in his spiritual writings, “there is a special providence over death” (*SDW* 252). He holds out the possibility that current prayer will work retroactively, supplying grace so that the souls that are “sunk” can be rescued even if the sunk ship cannot.

Along with “The Bugler’s First Communion” (a poem discussed at greater length in the next chapter), “The Loss of the Eurydice” announces Hopkins’s growing interest in the special heroism of soldiers. At the same time, we have seen a growing interest in the humanity of Christ and a form of heroism that is reconcilable with that humanity in all its concreteness. In later poems Hopkins begins to connect these two interests more closely with one another. We see perhaps the fullest expression of this idea in Hopkins’s sonnet “The Soldier.”

“Yes. Why do we all, seeing of a soldier, bless him?” The first two words of this opening line of the sonnet introduce a peculiar attitude. On the one hand, we have a decisive affirmation: “Yes.” But the affirmation is softened by the question that succeeds it. The speaker is adamant and at the same time unsure—adamant, that is, that we *do* bless (i.e. praise) a soldier when we see him, but unsure about why. The question, as subsequent lines elaborate it, turns on the distinction between inner versus outer and appearance versus reality. We bless “Our redcoats, our tars” despite the fact that they are “the greater part, / But frail clay, nay but foul clay.” They appear praiseworthy, but in reality they are nothing more than human with the same vulnerability to harm and vice as other human beings. The attitude of assurance that we *do* bless a soldier returns with a direct, if not exactly simple, answer:

[. . .] Here it is: the heart,
 Since, proud, it calls the calling manly, gives a guess
 That, hopes that, makesbelieve, the men must be no less;
 It fancies, feigns, deems, dears the artist after his art;

And fain will find as sterling all as all is smart,
And scarlet wear the spirit of war there express. (PW 184)

A gloss for this syntactically tangled sentence might read as follows: the answer to why we praise a soldier is that when we see a soldier we recognize that his calling is praiseworthy; thus, we imagine and earnestly desire that the individual soldier must be praiseworthy as well.

The sonnet's sestet changes the focus of the poem first by turning the reader's gaze toward Christ:

Mark Christ our King. He knows war, served this soldiering through;
He of all can reeve a rope best. (PW 184)

But ultimately the redirection to Christ is not to recognize Christ as a soldier but to see Christ recognizing the soldier as a true Christ-like soldier and his deeds as "Christ-done":

[. . .] There he bides in bliss
Now, and seeing somewhere some man do all that man can do,
For love he leans forth, needs his neck must fall on, kiss,
And cry 'O Christ-done deed! So God-made-flesh does too:
Were I come o'er again' cries Christ 'it should be this'. (PW 184)

The poem began with the affirmation that we praise soldiers coupled (perhaps awkwardly) with questions about their praiseworthiness. The sestet concludes the poem by intensifying the problem at hand. "We" are now out of the picture; Christ discerns and judges, not us. And yet Christ does so with even greater gusto, appearing to admire the soldier (or at least a soldier-like person by implication, one who "do[es] all that man can do") to the degree of desiring to follow and imitate him, and not just the reverse.

The close connection between the soldier and Christ is surprising. But it is not without biblical precedent. For example, II Timothy 2:3 (D-R) reads, "Labour as a good soldier of Christ Jesus" ("Thou therefore endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ," KJV); Christ claims in Matthew 10:34 (D-R), "I came not to send peace, but the sword" ("I came not to send peace,

but a sword” KJV); and the book of Revelation pictures Christ at the head of a heavenly army.⁴ Still, one cannot help but agree with John Robinson’s accusation that Hopkins exhibits an “extreme instability of judgment” in this poem (97). The speaker seems unable to specify the precise reason for his praise of the soldier, though he redoubles his commitment to do so. The textual history of the poem also lends credibility to Robinson’s claim. There is evidence that Hopkins labored a great deal over the poem, especially over the decision of what verb to use to indicate the work judging the qualities of the soldier. He oscillated between the suggestion that the soldier’s virtue is discovered on the one and that it is imagined on the other. In one revision Hopkins uses “fancies, feigns, deems, dears,” and also uses “fain to find” in one version and “fain will find” in another. Hopkins appears to have been particularly interested in the homophones “feign” and “fain,” which is telling given that “feign” would suggest invention while “fain” would suggest an attempt at true discovery (PW 184).

Still, many may balk at the “Prince of Peace” connected with a figure of military force and domination. But it is not, upon close inspection, sheer force and domination that make a soldier in Hopkins’s formulation. In *Discipline and Punish* Michel Foucault identifies a shift, beginning in the seventeenth century, in which soldiers were increasingly treated as “docile bodies,” or agents of an external power. Foucault points out that these techniques

were different from asceticism and from “disciplines” of a monastic type, whose function was to obtain renunciations rather than increases of utility and which, although they involved obedience to others, had as their principal aim an increase of the mastery of each individual over his own body. (137)

“Obedience” is the key word here. The one undergoing “disciplines” of the monastic type could count on increasing in self-possession, but the one undergoing the martial disciplines Foucault analyzes in *Discipline and Punish* becomes increasingly an instrument of an external power. This distinction is helpful because it allows us to see that even when Hopkins is speaking about the

soldiers he actually interacted with in his lifetime, he has a pre-modern conception of soldiers in mind. Like Aristotle and other classical thinkers Hopkins imagines the ideal soldier as one who possesses virtues, in the sense of habits and activities developed to their peak point of excellence.

This is not to say that nationalism and imperialism did not have a strong pull on Hopkins—but they are no means the sole reason for his interest in soldiers. His moments of nationalism arise especially during his later years in Ireland as he writes in disgust and anger over major British defeats like that at Majuba Hill in the First Boer War.⁵ We see it most clearly, perhaps, in his patriotic song “What Shall I Do for the Land that Bred Me?” in which the speaker declares himself ready to “live,” “fight,” march,” and even “fall” (i.e. die) “for her [England’s] honour” (PW 198-199). But even in “What Shall I Do for the Land that Bred Me?,” Hopkins insists that it was “a task of great delicacy and hazard to write a patriotic song that shall breathe true feeling without spoon or brag,” declaring, “How I hate both!” (PW 497, note 2). In comparison with Hopkins’s more complex, less sentimental treatments of heroism, “What Shall I Do for the Land that Bred Me?” may be a lapse but it also provides evidence that Hopkins actively worked to resist letting imperialism and nationalism become the central focus of his poems about heroes. Relevant also are the remarks Hopkins made to his friend and fellow Catholic convert, Coventry Patmore: “great end of Empires before God” he wrote, is “to be Catholic and draw nations into their Catholicism” (CW II 785). But it should be observed that Hopkins took the idea expressed by “draw” here very seriously. The truth and beauty of the faith should attract peacefully, not be imposed through coercion. This is why Hopkins suggests that it is artists, not military might, that contribute the “marked and striking excellence” that makes the empire, and its Christianity, attractive (CW II 785).

Conversion and “The War Within”

Thus far, I have argued that Hopkins participated in a recovery of heroic values, but like many who participated in this movement, Hopkins had to face the difficulty of integrating heroes and admiration for them into everyday life. For Hopkins, admiration for heroes became increasingly an admiration of human activity and the humanity of Christ, and the soldier became a special emblem later in Hopkins’s career of the kind of human mastery and self-discipline that Christ especially admires. Now, by way of conclusion, I would like to discuss one final, later poem in which Hopkins revisited the theme of heroism and crystallized several of the insights he had earned about heroism throughout his lifetime. The poem is Hopkins’s sonnet in honor of St. Alphonsus Rodriguez. Rodriguez, a Spanish Jesuit lay brother who lived from 1533 to 1617, was canonized in 1888. Following the canonization, Jesuit provinces were invited to contribute tributes for the saint’s first feast day. The request provided Hopkins with a valuable opportunity to reconsider the nature of heroism and to crystalize some ideas that had been developing for his entire adult life. At the request of a superior, Hopkins’s sonnet was “written to order” and dispatched to Majorca. Alphonsus was an unlikely saint for many reasons: as a lay brother (rather than an ordained priest) he had a relatively humble status. He was initially considered too frail, after the deaths of his wife and children, to enter the order, and for forty years his main work was as a door keeper. But Alphonsus’s struggle, like Hopkins’s, was an inward one: he was, as Hopkins put it in a letter to Bridges, “much favored by God with heavenly lights and much persecuted by evil spirits” (CW I 964).

The poem begins by suggesting that there may be a problem with our typical ways of thinking about heroism:

Honour is flashed off exploit, so we say
And those strokes once that gashed flesh or galled shield

Should tongue that time now, trumpet now that field,
And, on the fighter, forge his glorious day. (PW 200)

Note that the claim Hopkins is making here is not just about the heroism of those with the courage to gash flesh and gall shields, it is about what “we say” about the way these acts should be remembered. We believe they ought to be recorded, as though each blow makes its own indelible mark or record, like a scar (a word Hopkins used in an earlier draft in place of “gashed”), but with a more positive, glorious set of associations.

Although “so we say” suggests that “we” are wrong about “glory,” the speaker does not give up on heroic acts, admitting, “On Christ they do and on the martyr may.” But the gash of the sword leaves a literal mark, and Christ and the martyrs have likewise left a mark on the world in the influence they have exerted and the changes they have effected. The same is not true of an internal spiritual struggle:

But be the war within, the brand we wield
Unseen, the heroic breast not outward-steeled,
Earth hears no hurtle then from fiercest fray. (PW 200)

Here again we see Hopkins returning to the idea that heroism is possible for each individual because it is a matter not of “exploit,” which requires at least the opportunity, but rather, it is a matter of the heart which lies inside “the heroic breast” that wears no “outward[ly]” visible armor.

Hopkins took great pains over the sestet of the sonnet. It begins in the three distinct extant versions of the poem with either “Yet” or “But” marking the *volta*, and in each version it attempts to redirect our attention away from the “exploit[s]” of heroes and instead to the masterful and creative work of God. In the earliest completed draft of the poem, it is clear that Hopkins had aimed to describe God as a meticulous artisan who fashions his wares slowly. God “masons mountains” and “carves” continents, working with “exquisite increment.” In the final

version some of these more quaint touches are gone, but what the poem loses in vocabulary, it gains grammatically and tonally by placing the phrase in a long parenthetical that adds to the sense of slowness it describes. It reads:

Yet God (that hews mountain and continent,
Earth, all, out; who, with trickling increment,
Veins violets and tall trees makes more and more) (PW 200)

Here the basic idea remains that God acts with “trickling increment,” creating the “Veins” in “violets” and acting creatively over time to make the “tall trees” continue to grow (PW 201). In the same way, God can slowly and almost imperceptibly “crowd career with conquest” (i.e. grant a heroic degree or amount of achievement). Hopkins here has in mind the success of many of the Jesuits leaving from Majorca, while Alfonso, the hall porter, simply “watched the door” (PW 201). He did not outwardly perform the great missionary feats. But he waged “the war within” so well that his own humble life was itself a victory. Although he lived in a “world without event” his canonization is a result of his “heroic virtue.” The AABCCB rhyme scheme of the sestet helps it conclude very softly and decidedly unheroically, both in the sense of it having no grand action and in sounding very different from the “heroic” couplet that concludes many English (in particular Shakespearean) sonnets: “That in Majorca Alfonso watched the door” (PW 201). In addition to the unheroic action of simply “watch[ing] the door,” the final line introduces the poem’s subject for the first time in the body of the poem and thus inverts the typical order we would expect to find in an honorific, commemorative poem. Additionally, apart from “Christ” and “God,” “Majorca” and “Alfonso” introduced in the last line are the only proper nouns in the poem. A poem that began by invoking “honour” and presenting images of “gashed flesh” and “galled shield” concludes in a manner that leaves the lingering in a moment of incredible

stillness and specificity; we see not just anyone anywhere, but Alfonso in Majorca doing the one very particular, finite, and seemingly insignificant vocation that is for him and him alone.

As we have seen, Hopkins was from a very early time interested not just in heroic outward actions, but also the “heart” behind the actions as well as, ultimately, the change of heart heroic actions could cause in the observer. In “St. Alphonsus Rodriguez” Hopkins goes yet a step further to suggest that heroic achievements may take place with very little perceptible outward transformation. As we discussed at the outset, one of the most dangerous temptations of any hero system is its claim to universality, especially when it maintains its sense of universality at the expense of others, and when it does so through violence or forced conversion. Indeed, *conversion* is a key word here.⁶ In his early poems on martyrs, Hopkins had pictured the martyr as one in love with otherworldly perfection. Those who converted also developed this love, often through miraculous means. But here in “St. Alphonsus Rodriguez” conversion is the slow, painstaking process of an artisan (God) fashioning a person in minutest detail, ever approaching perfection. To be a hero is to have undergone this process of conversion, and to admire a hero is to see this inner process even when outward signs do not reveal it. Whereas the former kind of conversion happens at an instant, and indeed amounts mostly to an escape from the finite realities of time and matter, the latter embraces them; just as God’s power works in and through time and matter to make the trees grow, the continents move, and, like a miniaturist painter, creates the “veins” in every violet, so God works on us as well. This latter kind of conversion can be pictured in these naturalistic terms precisely because it does not rely on the supernatural to the exclusion of the natural.

The distinction between these two types of conversion is crucial because how we imagine conversion ultimately decides much about how we use martyrs, soldiers, and other heroes. Pierre

Hadot argues that it was not until the Christian era that conversion developed any strong sense of interiority. Conversion existed as a concept in pre-Christian antiquity, but it was largely an outwardly moral and mostly political affair. Only a small subset of the population in classical times—mainly those engaged in the practice of philosophy—believed a greater degree of inwardness was necessary in philosophical “conversion” such as we find in Plato’s *Republic*, in which “the key to education consists in turning [one’s] gaze in the right direction.” After Plato, according to Hadot, philosophy increasingly became a process of conversion, and philosophical instruction became almost a form of preaching. It used rhetoric and logic to appeal to a person to either recover his original nature (*epistrophe*) or reorient his whole being (*metanoia*). It is only in Judaism and Christianity that “the interior experience of conversion attained its highest intensity.” Hadot writes that religious conversion “reveals in these religions a radical and totalizing aspect which resembles philosophical conversion. However, it takes the form of an absolute and exclusive faith in the word and the salvific will of God.” Hadot sees a new form of “conversion” emerging in the Hebrew Bible. But primarily in the Greek New Testament there is an emphasis on turning toward God while there’s still time—a kind of apocalyptic version of conversion—and there is also “the eruption of divine power which manifests itself by miracles and fulfillment of prophecies.” Hadot writes that these signs were “the first apologetic arguments, the first causes of conversion.”

The problem is that interiority and universality often go hand-in-hand, at times with unfortunate consequences. This Christian form of conversion is in some sense the greatest development of the notion of conversion, and yet it also contains at times dangerous impulses. Hadot writes, “assured of its righteousness and its truth, it can let itself be taken in by the temptation to impose itself violently.” Thus, the increasing demand for universality can negate

the freedom of the individual, and the history of forced conversions to Christianity attests to this unfortunate development. But a forced conversion attempts to achieve universality at the expense of interiority, and this is precisely what the view of conversion suggested in Hopkins's works ultimately disallows. For Hopkins, a hero has a beauty that draws us, but the hero's manner of drawing us is aesthetic and peaceful, not coercive. As David Bentley Hart has written in a series of perceptive comments on martyrdom, "Christian thought learns that its rhetoric must never be a practice of coercion precisely because, in following the form of Christ (the Father's supreme rhetoric), it is always already placed on the side of the excluded, and must occupy this place as the place of triumph" (441). This is true for Hopkins's mature view of martyrs, of Christ as a hero, and even of Hopkins's soldiers much of the time. The persuasive power of those who undergo heroic death lies in their effort in "the war within" as they struggle to wish for and to choose the ultimate end for which they were created.

Notes

1. See *De Profundis* (Wilde 87). “Mean” here means, roughly, “ugly.” The martyrdom Wilde has in mind is his own. In his work, this statement about the “mean” appearance of martyrdom serves as an explanation for the moral and artistic import of his own suffering and hardships, despite the fact that they appear “hideous, mean, repellent, lacking in style.”
2. Here I use “El Escorial” to refer to the architectural structure and “The Escorial” to refer to Hopkins’s poem.
3. It should be noted that, though his interpretation remains controversial, Peter Sloterdijk has argued at great length that martyrs should be seen as “death athletes” who provide “peak performances” in the arena (204). Martyrs provide a model Sloterdijk uses to present western history as “the description of catapults” (190). By “catapults” Sloterdijk means those means by which we set ourselves apart from the communities, habits, and rote ways of thinking that belong to our societies and cultural milieux. Central to the development of these “catapults” in human history is a transformation by which the “[d]ifference within humans is now primed as the difference between humans.” What results is a “non-political division of classes.” There are on the one hand “those who hear the imperative that catapults them out of their old life,” and on the other hand those “who are quick to admire, and thus make it clear that higher efforts can exclusively be a matter for the admired, but certainly not the admirers” (191). The result is “a humanity at two speeds” (193). Sloterdijk acknowledges that one of the main issues for the hero systems he identifies is the challenge of death. It is a site at which many energies are directed. He writes, “Whoever challenges death, then, in order to integrate it into the domain of ability, will—if successful—have proved that it is within the realm of the humanly possible to surmount the insurmountable—or become one with the terrible” (200). The role of the heroic individual for Sloterdijk is to picture death as something before which we need to remain wholly submissive. We must face it not as an obligation but rather as “an ability.” Sloterdijk sees this “ability” in the crucifixion of Christ. The “compulsion” of others is absorbed “into the protagonist’s own will” (202). He calls Christ’s death a “scriptural-messianic-athletic statement of achievement” and claims that “Jesus’ last words should be reproduced more in the manner of ‘Made it!’ or even ‘Mission accomplished!’, even though such a turn of phrase would go against the conventional Christian view of the passion” (203). With the beginning of the Christian era, martyrs emerge as central “role models” who continue the “athleticization of the Christian death struggle.” Sloterdijk also points out that Tertullian compares the deaths of early third-century martyrs to both athletes and soldiers.
4. The question of which English-language bible translation to use in Hopkins scholarship is a difficult one. For a full exposition, see Martin Dubois “Styles of Translation: Hopkins’ Bibles.” Dubois writes, “Broadly speaking, when he quotes from lesser-known passages of Scripture in his sermons, and, one senses, has cause to refer to the text itself, Hopkins follows the Roman Catholic versions—presumably translating from the Latin Vulgate, and thus staying close to the English Douay-Rheims Bible. When the passage in question

is well-known, however, and, it seems likely, is quoted from memory, the resonances with the King James Version are unmistakable” (280-281). Thus, to give a sense both of the way Hopkins may have remembered a familiar verse as well as how he may have understood its meaning if using the Latin Vulgate, I include the Douay-Rheims (D-R) reading followed by the King James (KJV) reading of each biblical text.

5. Hopkins writes of the battle: “500 British troops after 8 hours’ firing, on the Dutch reaching the top, ran without offering hand to hand resistance before, it is said, 80 men. Such a thing was never heard in history. The disgrace in itself is unspeakable.” The “disgrace” of this single English defeat in the First Boer War returns several times in his writings like a recurring nightmare—even seven years after the fact, as in the quotation above. This “disgrace” caused Hopkins deep worries about the state of Britain, its people, and its empire. He worried that soon “all our population will become a town population and a puny unhealthy and cowardly one. Yes, cowardly.” In a passage from a different letter Hopkins is led into another mention of Majuba Hill by way of a consideration of contrasting images. After witnessing the Mayday procession in Liverpool of 1881, Hopkins writes, “While I admired the handsome horses I remarked for the thousandth time with sorrow and loathing the base and bessotted [sic] figures and features of the Liverpool crowd. When I see the fine and manly Norwegians that flock hither to embark for America walk our streets and look about them it fills me with shame and wretchedness. I am told Sheffield is worse though. We have been shamefully beaten by the Boers (at Majuba it was simply that our troops funked and ran), but this is not the worst that is to be.” This passage makes even more clear the contrast of admiration and shame that animates much of Hopkins’s writing. It is not unreasonable to read an element of sexual attraction in Hopkins’s comments about the “fine and manly Norwegians.” But the attraction is not exclusively sexual. It is more an attraction to and desire for the public spectacle of something fine and noble than it is a desire for any private gratification. It is the admiration of something that has reached a level of perfection, the utmost peak of excellence for that being, and it is the shame of being seen in a state less than excellent by one who possesses excellence; it is the thought of the Norwegians “look[ing] about them” that fills him with shame. In his distress over the defeat at Majuba Hill, Hopkins was not alone. A decade after Hopkins’s death, the cry “Don’t forget Majuba” inspired determination on the part of British troops in the Second Boer War.

6. Pierre Hadot has argued that the concept of “conversion” that entered modern languages from the Latin *conversio* is best understood as an amalgamation of two concepts that can be traced back to ancient Greek thought. The first is *epistrophe*. The second is *metanoia*. Epistrophe, Hadot writes, “signifies change of orientation and implies the idea of a return.” *Metanoia*, on the other hand, “signifies change of mind, repentance, and implies the idea of a mutation and a rebirth.” These two concepts are in some sense opposed to one another. But they nevertheless exist together in an “internal opposition” in many understandings of “conversion.” Thus, in the idea of conversion there is both the freedom of a human being to transform and reinterpret herself and the necessity of “an invasion of forces exterior to the ‘me’ that is more about divine grace or some psychosocial constraint” (“Conversion”).

CHAPTER TWO

HOPKINS'S GRIEF, INDIFFERENCE, AND LONGING

*"I am not going to give in to any nonsense about Little Nell
[. . .] I cannot stand Dickens's pathos; or rather I can stand it,
keep a thoroughly dry eye and unwavering waistcoat) [. . .]"*

—Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges

Gerard Manley Hopkins was often preoccupied with death, but during the years 1878 to 1884 that preoccupation took on a unique form. The parish work that consumed his days for most of this period and which he found “very wearying to mind and body” involved visiting the sick, performing last rites for the dying, and ministering to soldiers who were bound for the dangers of battle (CW I 394). So perhaps it should come as no surprise that Hopkins’s writings from this period evince a preoccupation with “the death of the other”—with the loss of children, acquaintances, friends, and loved ones. Hopkins’s writings from this period also express strong convictions about the emotional responses that should accompany such deaths when they occur. We see an important glimpse of these convictions in a letter dated February 5, 1881, in which Hopkins writes to his friend and fellow poet Robert Bridges to discuss Bridges’s poem “On a Dead Child.” In an earlier letter, Bridges had claimed “On a Dead Child” was the finest poem he had written. But Hopkins disagrees. He objects, he says, to phrases like “firm, pale hands” and “wise, sad head,” on the grounds that they are not “exquisite.” They belong instead, he says, to a “familiar commonplace about ‘Reader, have you never hung over the pillow of..pallid cheek, clammy brow...long, long night-watches...surely, Sir Josiah Bickerstaff, there is some hope! O say not all is over. It cannot be’—You know” (CW I 426-427, ellipses in the original). This

miniature parody of a Victorian deathbed scene makes one aspect of Hopkins's attitude toward grief evident: its lack of sentimentalism. Nor was this lack of sentimentalism about death limited to one period in Hopkins's life. While still an undergraduate at Oxford, he wrote a parodic epitaph for "Jane Green" in the manner of a country churchyard tombstone:

Her prime of life—cut down too soon
By death—as th' morning flower at noon:
Her loving husband lives to deplore:
Yet hopes she'll flourish ever more. (CW III 217)

While it is difficult to precisely discern his aims for this poem given the paucity of information we have about it, it is clear that at just twenty years old Hopkins was already bristling at the "familiar commonplace[s]" about grief that arise in poetry. When he encountered actual deaths in his life, Hopkins as revealed in his letters is strikingly blunt. "Suicide is common," he declares to Bridges in a letter that describes a grisly scene in which a young medical student gouged his own eyes out with a piece of wire (CW II 950). And when Bridges's own sister, Harriet Louisa Plow, died a year after her husband and child were murdered, Hopkins wrote to Bridges:

I cannot help thinking that perhaps for her own sake she could not have much wished to live longer with such dreadful grief upon her memory. [. . .] But sufferings falling on such a person as your sister was are to be looked on as the marks of God's particular love and this is truer the more exceptional they are. (CW I 191-192).

This comment is doubly suggestive: rather than offering his friend much sympathy, Hopkins focuses on the way sufferings "are [i.e. ought] to be looked on," and at the same time he suggests that the grief Harriet Louisa Plow lived with during the last year of her life was an unfortunate situation that was not productive of any meaning in and of itself. It would not add any meaning to her life, had she lived longer: as he wrote to his mother about the event, "I think, poor thing, it happier for her to die than live" (CW I 192-193).

Hopkins's relatively unsentimental approach to grief may come as a surprise given what we know of Hopkins, both as a poet and a priest. Where is his interest in human uniqueness and individuality, his value for the "beauty bright / in mould or mind or what not else" that makes humans "rare" (i.e. precious) as he puts it in "The Lantern Out of Doors"? If he could mourn the loss of the distinctive beauty and being of a group of trees he calls "my aspens dear" ("Binsey Poplars"), why does he not mention the uniqueness lost with the lives of individual people? Despite the lack of these elements, at times Hopkins's works have served others in their grief. In his penetrating memoir, *Lament for a Son*, the philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff actually employs Hopkins's term "inscape" to describe the function and experience of grief. Wolterstorff writes that his son, Eric, who died in a climbing accident, "put his stamp on things" (11). He explains, "I think of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins's notion of *inscape*: a thing had *inscape* for Hopkins when it had some definite character [. . .] Eric put *inscape* on things: the way he dressed, the way he cooked, the way he shook hands, the way he answered the phone" (11, emphasis mine). Similarly, Wolterstorff is wracked by regret over "all the times I did not prize the *inscape* of that image of God in our midst which was he; and over all the other times I did but did not tell him so" (64, emphasis mine). For Wolterstorff, grief is a direct response to God-given particularity or "inscape" and the more intense the inscape the greater the sense of grief. And for this reason, it is not just an individual but also the experience of grief that has an inscape. He writes, "As each death has its own character, so too each grief over a death has its own character—its own inscape" (56). In the end, Wolterstorff finds spiritual meaning in the process of grieving. It helps him establish his faith on firmer footing than before his loss. Why, we might wonder, does Hopkins not share this aim? Why does he not seek this experience or

recognize it in others?

Throughout this dissertation, I am providing a comprehensive analysis of the topic of death in Hopkins's poetry. In this chapter, I focus on Hopkins and grief. I situate Hopkins's rejection of highly sentimental forms of grief alongside dominant Victorian modes of grief and mourning, and I examine Hopkins's alternative strategies for dealing with loss as we find them embodied in his poetry. I will pursue my argument along three main lines. First, I will explain key ways in which Hopkins fits with and deviates from the understandings and representations of his contemporaries. Second, I will explore a formal feature, phatic phrases or "small talk," in Hopkins's poems about death. Finally, I will consider the intertwined themes of nature and children in Hopkins's poetry about death. I will show that Hopkins's work in each of these areas is distinctive, both in the way it aligns with as well as in the way it diverges from cultural norms. I will also explain and defend the claim that Hopkins's poetry occupies a well-considered ethical viewpoint on grief and mourning despite the ways it upsets expectations about how one ought to write about the death of the other.

Hopkins in the "Age of Elegy"

In his 1847 book *Works of Love*, the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard wrote that the love a living person maintains for a deceased person is "the most unselfish, the freest, the most faithful love" (358). Across the North Sea, most of Kierkegaard's Victorian contemporaries were living in wholehearted agreement with this sentiment. With their value for domesticity and their investment in intimate relationships, the Victorians tended to become preoccupied with determining what effect death has on the meanings we create with those we love most dearly. The answer they gave to this question shaped Victorian responses to a related problem: how

should we *feel* when a loved one dies? Should we be grateful for the life the person lived and joyful for their repose, or should we be grieved? Should we try to break our emotional ties to the deceased to get on with our lives? Or should we maintain these ties all the more strongly in protest of the loss of our loved one?

The dominant and defining answer to these questions in the Victorian period arose from a new sense that the death of the intimate other was *unacceptable*. This led many Victorians to the view that the affections one feels for the person in life can and should be maintained and preserved after the person dies. Thus many Victorian thinkers and writers responded to death by celebrating loves that were, in one way or another, “stronger than death.” The precise nature of a stronger-than-death love varies, but prominent fictional examples would include the obsessive love of Catherine and Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* and Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s serene “Blessed Damosel,” while real-world examples would include prolonged bereavements like that of Alfred, Lord Tennyson for Arthur Henry Hallam (the subject of *In Memoriam*) and that of Queen Victoria for Prince Albert. New religious movements such as spiritualism offered the bereaved the hope in life of making actual contact with deceased loved ones.

Nor was the impulse to imagine a love stronger than death limited to religious believers. The fact that George Eliot was skeptical about the existence of God and the afterlife, for example, did not stop her from imagining Tom and Maggie Tulliver entwined in death in a loving embrace “never to be parted” (*The Mill on the Floss* 521) or from portraying the “human love” of the Reverend Edgar Tryan reaching out from the grave and waiting “for its eternal repose until it had seen [Janet Dempster] endure to the end” (*Scenes of Clerical Life* 301). The era was, to put it simply, what John D. Rosenberg calls “the age of elegy,” an age in which an

elegiac attitude pervaded a great culture otherwise divided along so many lines of religion, political ideology, and class (*Elegy for An Age* 1).¹

Victorian sentimentality surrounding death was supported by a very specific vision of what a “Good” or ideal death might look like. For an image of such a death, we can look to the Reverend William Hett’s *Miscellanies on Various Subjects* (published in 1823), which provides a “Device for an Engraving” of an ideal deathbed scene. Hett’s “device” describes the scene as follows:

The good man’s sick chamber. – He is sitting in the middle of the bed, his back supported, – His wife hanging over the bed side, his left hand grasped in her two hands, her eyes fixed upon his face in a silent agony of distress. – The children near the mother all in tears: the two little ones clinging to her, and attentive to her only: the larger ones dividing their grief between each parent. The servants, male and female, standing in a group, at a small distance from the bottom of the bed, in a mute and serious attention to the last good words of their dying master, which he is in the act of uttering. In the features of his countenance, the inward sentiments of hope and joy rising, as far as is possible, superior to the appearance of languor and debility. – His medical friend, at a small distance from the wife, in an attentive posture, his face full of thought indicating this sentiment, “How nobly a Christian can die!” – In the window an hourglass nearly run out. – Upon a small round table, near the bed, on the right hand of the sick man, a Bible open at this passage of Job, which is legible, “I know that my Redeemer liveth.” A prayer-book open at the Burial Service, with these words legible, “I am the resurrection and the life.” (21-22)

The domestic setting along with all of the trappings of domestic life and domestic affections are the distinctive features of the scene. These are standard parts of the particular approach to ideal deaths that developed in Victorian Britain. Patricia Jalland, who has conducted the most extensive study to date of the Victorian “good death,” argues that, according to the Victorians, a death is considered “good” when the dying person 1.) dies at home, 2.) makes farewells to members of his or her family, 3.) has time to complete his or her “temporal and spiritual business,” 4.) is “conscious and lucid until the end” in order to be able to receive forgiveness for

his or her sins, and 5.) bears pain and suffering “with fortitude” (26). Jalland writes that while there was some debate about the relative importance of the various elements of a “good death,” there was widespread agreement about one element in particular: “the human need for family support” (26). Indeed, Jalland shows that the “primary consolation” for the Victorian family facing the death of one of its members was the prospect of a heavenly reunion, a re-creation so to speak of the affections of the family in the afterlife (271). So no matter which aspect of death we focus on—whether it is the process of dying, the moment of death, the funeral, or grief, mourning, and consolation—the nuclear family was the all-important site in which Victorians located and preserved the meanings and significances that mattered to them. The effect of establishing the family as an absolute context for the meanings of life and death, as we will see, allowed for a concomitant intensification and apotheosis of family affections. In other words, grief became unrestrainedly sentimental when the family became sacred and beyond reproach.

In his monumental study of Western attitudes toward death from the Middle Ages to late twentieth century, *The Hour of Our Death*, the historian Philippe Ariès presents one of the most comprehensive frameworks available for understanding cultural shifts in attitudes toward death. Ariès’s approach considers four themes: the awareness of the individual, the defense of society against untamed nature, belief in an afterlife, and belief in the existence of evil (603). The primary theme that guides Ariès’s study is the first theme, the awareness of the individual. This theme leads Ariès to distinguish the Romantic and post-Romantic approach to death from “the death of the self,” which preceded it, and “the invisible death,” which follows it. Ariès calls this approach “the death of the other,” or, literally, “your death” (*la mort de toi*). Ariès’s employment of the second person pronoun is intentional; whereas the concern with the loss of selfhood in

death (what Ariès calls la *mort de soi*, or “the death of the self”) became dominant during the Renaissance and focuses primarily on the fate of the individual soul at death, he sees a rapid shift in death culture away from a focus on eternal judgment in the wake of Romanticism. According to Ariès this era, which begins around the beginning of the nineteenth century, witnessed “a revolution in feeling” in which “all four...themes were transformed” (609). Ariès explains the important shifts as follows. First, affectivity migrated away from the individual and the community and focused more exclusively and more intensely on intimate relationships and thus on the deaths of “a few rare beings whose disappearance could no longer be tolerated” and whose deaths “caused a dramatic crisis”—specifically, the nuclear family, which became the site of “absolute affectivity” (609). Second, death becomes beautiful, a “compromise” between nature and culture (610). Third, hell is replaced by a scene of reunion with the departed, a “recreation of the affections of earth,” as we observed in our discussion of Jalland’s work (611). Finally, death is no longer evil in and of itself, but natural; the badness of death lies primarily in the fact that it parts loved ones (610). This perspective made it possible in Romantic and post-Romantic art and literature to refuse to detach one’s affections from a loved one, and in fact to maintain them as part of a higher, and more beautiful obligation. As Mario Praz puts it in his classic work on the Romantic tradition, *The Romantic Agony*, “to such an extent were Beauty and Death looked upon as sisters by the Romantics that they became fused into a sort of two-faced herm, filled with corruption and melancholy and fatal in its beauty—a beauty of which, the more bitter the taste, the more abundant the enjoyment” (31).

There are, of course, national differences in Romanticism as well as in the way Romanticism and art responding to “the death of the other” manifest themselves. For this reason,

Jalland has argued that Ariès overgeneralizes the experience of Catholic France in his account and suggests that rather than the “beautiful death,” the “good death” occupied the consciousness of English Protestants. She shows how the English middle class bore the influence of Evangelicalism and revitalized the tradition of the *ars moriendi*, or “art of holy dying.” Thus Jalland emphasizes not just the beauty of the “good death,” but also “piety and fortitude in the face of suffering,” as well as the role of the larger familial love in addition to romantic love. But the fact that English mourners in the nineteenth century eschewed some of the more extravagant erotic manifestations of grief engendered by Romanticism in countries like France is not to suggest that in Victorian Britain there was any less emphasis on sentiment and sentimentality. It is simply to point out that grief and mourning could sometimes exist in a tense relationship in nineteenth-century Britain, where there was a higher value for emotional *authenticity*. While grief and mourning tend to correlate, they sometimes correlate positively and sometimes negatively. In order to show authentic grief, a person may engage in elaborate, long, and expensive mourning rituals, or one may opt for the simplest funeral arrangements available to show that their inward grief is so authentically felt it does not require outward displays. The key to Victorian sentimentality is not extravagance, but privacy and inwardness. As Jalland shows, a shift occurred around 1870 toward more simple funeral arrangements due to an increasing perception of falseness in elaborate funerals. This emphasis maintained the importance of the inner emotional state of grief in the mourner despite the fact that the outward signs of mourning could be prolonged (as an expression of the mourner’s inner state) or attenuated (to avoid allowing the outward manifestations of grief to take the place of the inner emotional state).

It remains for us to demonstrate how the “ethics of authenticity” broke with traditional

Christian ideas about the ethics of grief and mourning, the ideas that influenced Hopkins and set him apart from his contemporaries. It is important to note that the demand for emotional authenticity in grief and mourning could be combined with Christianity, but its conceptual grammar does not belong to traditional Christian ethics about grief and loss. The scenes of heavenly reunion, that earthly affections were the very stuff of heaven—these elements of discourse about death barely existed before the Romantic era. In fact, the New Testament scriptures portray Christ as being somewhat perturbed with a group of Sadducees who seek to determine whose wife a woman will be in “the resurrection” if she has been married to more than one man. Jesus responds to their question in Matthew 22:30 (D-R) by saying, “For in the resurrection they shall neither marry nor be married; but shall be as the angels of God in heaven” (KJV: “For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven”). In keeping with this verse, much of traditional Christian eschatology has represented heaven as a place where no exclusive, overriding bonds of affection exist between individuals. According to most traditional Christian theologians, in the afterlife there is a higher or more exalted love rather than a re-creation of love to the exact specifications and dimensions of earthly relationships.

One of the most memorable dramatizations of romantic love (or a lack thereof) in the afterlife is found in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. While it is the love of Beatrice that brings Dante to Paradise, as soon as the pair reach the empyrean, the pinnacle of paradise, they part. Each has to go to his or her own place, turning not toward one another in a loving gaze or embrace, but to the spectacle of divine glory that the empyrean encloses like a stadium. Dante sees Beatrice at a distance where she turns and smiles but then, Dante reports, “*poi si tornò all’ eterna fontana*”

(“she turned toward the eternal fountain,” *Paradiso XXXI*). Their love takes its proper place as a vehicle toward divine love but it stops short of challenging divine love and allows itself to be superseded by a love it only participated in to a lesser degree.

Not only are Dante’s imaginings instructive, Victorian reactions to Dante’s depictions of affections in the *Divine Comedy* are revealing as well. It is telling that during the nineteenth century the story of Francesca da Rimini and her lover Paolo, both of whom Dante places in the second circle of hell with the lustful in *Inferno V*, was widely celebrated, inspiring several prominent poets (e.g. Edmund Gosse, Lord Byron, and A. C. Swinburne) and serving as the source material for numerous play adaptations and musical scores, as well as many works of visual art (including several paintings and drawings by Victorian visual artists such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Frederic Leighton, and Edward Burne-Jones). The lovers had carried on an extramarital affair for many years and were discovered and killed by Francesca’s husband during a tryst. Dante imagines the couple condemned to spin together forever in a kind of whirlwind symbolic of the passions that swept them away in their lifetimes. Yet, as Allison Millbank writes in *Dante and the Victorians*, “Francesca was often viewed as the tragic hero *par excellence*” throughout the nineteenth century (151). Even if Francesca’s specific actions could not be seen as exemplary for many Victorians, her desire to have love at any cost and her state of everlasting emotional rapture with her lover in the afterlife held something poetic and admirable for many Victorians despite the fact that for Dante the fate was quite literally hellish and the desire it represented immoral.

Due to the fact that his emotional life was largely shaped by traditional Christian and classical views of the role of the passions, Hopkins is more interested in disciplining the

emotions, in bringing them under the direction of the will, than he is in simply expressing them.

In the rest of this chapter we will observe the strategies Hopkins deploys to represent and react to the “death of the other.”

Hopkins is a poet who is more likely to be described as “stoic” than “sentimental.” Over the years, critics have highlighted a number of different aspects of Hopkins’s anti-sentimentality. In *The Fine Delight: Centenary Essays on Gerard Manley Hopkins*, Francis Fennell highlights the temporal dimension of Hopkins’s anti-sentimentalism, which he characterizes as Hopkins’s “*immediacy*, his absorption in the *now*” (174). Fennell writes:

Other writers more characteristically live in the then (of the past) or the when (of the future)... In his poetry Hopkins is almost never nostalgic. We find in him no sentimentality about past eras like Rossetti’s medieval world or Swinburne’s pre-Christian Hellenistic age. Nor does he offer any equally sentimental idealization à la Macaulay of what “progress” will accomplish. (174)

This is a crucial point, and there is much that could be said about sentimentalism and attention (or lack thereof) to the present moment. It is most important for our purposes to note that Hopkins’s spiritual exercises helped him practice living in immediacy and detach his will from all else. As Pierre Hadot writes, “Attention to the present moment is, in a sense, the key to spiritual exercises. It frees us from the passions, which are always caused by the past or the future—two areas which do *not* depend on us” (85). (The immediate reference point for what Hadot calls “spiritual exercises” is ancient philosophy in general and Stoicism in particular, but the spiritual exercises Hopkins practiced share many similarities with these practices and share their view of attention and the will.)

In “‘Why, Tears! Is it? Tears’: Gerard Manley Hopkins and Victorian Sentimentality” Howard Fulweiler offers a slightly different explanation of Hopkins’s anti-sentimental attitude.

For Fulweiler, sentimentality tends to attach to institutions, especially nationhood, religion, nature, and the family, and he agrees with the view already expressed that “The greatest opportunity for sentimentality [in Victorian literature] arose in the general nineteenth century anxiety about women and children, and the perceived collapse of family relationships” (489). As Fulweiler points out, Hopkins simply rejected many of the underlying relational contexts upon which Victorian sentimentalism depended:

He finally came to renounce not only the familiar Church of England, but also the holiest icons of nineteenth-century sentimentality—family, hearth, home, the love of a woman—to enlist under the discipline of St. Ignatius of Loyola [. . .] In his innovative singularity as a poet, in his commitment to an alien religious creed, and in his apparent rejection of Victorian middle-class domestic values, Hopkins has seemed a man profoundly out of touch with his age, especially the sentimentality that characterized its popular literature. (Fulweiler 486)

For Fulweiler sentimentality was produced by desperation in “an unauthentic [sic] attempt to re-enchanted or re-animate a world now reduced to a meaningless mechanism, an attempt once more to belong, even at the possible cost of rationality” (488). Thus for Fulweiler sentimentality is by definition inauthentic, based on anxiety over a loss of “participation” or connection to the divine.

These two views of Hopkins’s anti-sentimentality can be helpfully brought together as parts of a single historical shift in our ways of perceiving and interacting with the world: the shift from “passions” (which were understood to be movements of the soul) to “emotions” (seen as psychological states). As Thomas Dixon, Jr. writes:

The category of ‘emotions’ was alien to traditional Christian thought and was part of a newer and more secular network of words and ideas. No one (to my knowledge) ever wrote books called *The Psychology of the Passions* or *The Emotions of the Soul*; ‘emotions,’ unlike ‘affections,’ ‘passions,’ ‘desires,’ and ‘lusts’ did not appear in any English translation of the Bible (5).

So Hopkins does not just reject sentimentality as something overwrought. He rejects the

discourse in which it is embedded, and he does so through practices that help him reorient himself to the present moment and reject passions that would lead his soul astray. In order to understand Hopkins's works, we need to recognize the wide difference between the detachment and disengagement. The former is achieved; it is the result of self-discipline. But "disengagement" describes a mind that is separated (or "buffered" to use Charles Taylor's term), imagined to be separate from the world.

Phatic Phrases in "Felix Randal" and "The Bugler's First Communion"

In this section I explore two poems, "Felix Randal" and "The Bugler's First Communion," both of which abound with light phrases that enter in and diffuse an attitude of grief and mourning that otherwise pervades the poems. Both poems revolve around the deaths (an actual death in the case of "Felix Randal" and a portended death in "The Bugler's First Communion") of young men to whom Hopkins ministered as a priest. I provide an account of the shifting reception of these poems, showing how "light" phrases and critics' reactions to them have played a central role in shaping the critical conversation. Then I suggest a new direction for interpreting these phrases based on the argument that they are *phatic* phrases (what we colloquially call "small talk"). I offer an explanation of how these phrases fit into a larger anti-sentimental impulse in Hopkins's work, and I assess whether and in what sense Hopkins's refusal to grieve in these poems is ethical.

In the very first line of "Felix Randal," written in April of 1880, a few months after Hopkins's arrival to perform parish duties in Liverpool, we begin to see some of the features that have perplexed Hopkins's readers and critics over the century that has passed since his poems first appeared in print. The opening four lines read:

Felix Randal the farrier, O is he dead then? my duty all ended
 Who have watched his mould of man, big-boned and hardy-handsome
 Pining, pining, till time when reason rambled in it, and some
 Fatal four disorders, fleshed there, all contended? (PW 165)

These first lines signal that the poem will respond to the death of another person. Thus, we expect an elegy, a poem of mourning and commemoration. An elegiac work would typically proceed by emphasizing the *singularity* of the deceased person. William Watkin defines *singularity* as “the irreducible aspect of our being, that which exists but cannot be named, that is singular to us but which we share with all others, that is who we are but that cannot be known, that relates us to strangers because it is the strangeness within ourselves” (15). The elegiac poet often attempts to depict the singularity of the deceased person by showing the loss incurred by a particular community when that community is deprived unfairly, or so it seems, of the unique gifts and contributions of the deceased person. Thus, John Milton writes in his pastoral elegy, “Lycidas”: “For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime, / Young Lycidas, and hath not left his peer.” Alternatively, elegiac poets—often Romantic poets in particular—tend to emphasize the private (i.e. personal and intimate) dimensions of loss, which often derive additional power and intensity precisely because they are private. Thus, Wordsworth writes in “She dwelt among the untrodden ways,” “She lived unknown, and few could know / When Lucy ceased to be; / But she is in her grave, and, oh, / The difference *to me!*” (emphasis mine).

The poem continues in an emotionally restrained retelling of the facts of Felix’s illness and a final return to an image of Felix going about his vocation:

Sickness broke him. Impatient, he cursed at first, but mended
 Being anointed and all; though a heavenlier heart began some
 Months earlier, since I had our sweet reprieve and ransom
 Tendered to him. Ah well, God rest him all road ever he offended!
 This seeing the sick endears them to us, us too it endears.

My tongue had taught thee comfort, touch had quenched thy tears,
 Thy tears that touched my heart, child, Felix, poor Felix Randal;
 How far from then forethought of, all thy more boisterous years,
 When thou at the random grim forge, powerful amidst peers,
 Didst fettle for the great grey drayhorse his bright and battering sandal!

Clearly, several aspects of Hopkins's diction in "Felix Randal" seem irreconcilable with the aims of mourning because they threaten to downplay the impact of the loss of the deceased person's singularity. Consider the following examples. First, instead of announcing Felix's death as final (as in "Lycidas is dead" or "she is in her grave") and turning toward the difficult work of mourning, the speaker responds with what sounds like a casual question ("O is he dead then?"). Second, the speaker identifies the deceased person not in terms of his singularity, but with a common secular vocation (farrier). This vocation seems too humble to represent an irreparable loss to the community—and indeed the speaker is not suggesting Felix was so excellent a farrier that he "hath not left his peer." The horseshoe we see Felix "fettle" in the "random" (i.e. chaotic) "grim forge" at the close of the poem is described not in terms of its excellence or importance to the community but rather playfully as a "bright and battering sandal" (PW 165). While the speaker does say in the ninth line of the poem "seeing the sick endears them to us," the terms are not specific or intimate enough to suggest that the speaker himself is incurring the tragic loss of an irreplaceable loved one, as Wordsworth certainly means to indicate in the lines quoted above from "She dwelt among the untrodden ways." In fact, the loss is not first and foremost personal, but vocational. The speaker considers the loss in terms of his "duty," which is now "all ended" as a result of the death. (Later in the poem the Eucharist is also administered dutifully; it is "tendered" as though it too were as much a product of mundane labor as the "bright and battering sandal" Felix "fettle[s]"). When Hopkins refers to the change in Felix's disposition after his

anointing, he mentions that he “cursed at first, but mended / Being anointed and all.” Similar to “then” in “is he dead then?” here the phrase “and all” serves to set a light, conversational tone rather than the solemn tone that might seem more appropriate for a poem about a man’s change of heart as he confronts his death. Similarly, the phrase “Ah well, God rest him all road ever he offended!” which closes the second stanza suggests spoken conversation with “Ah well,” and is also a colloquial and thus more humble form of a priest’s absolution (PW 165). Additionally, a general light mood is set by the poem’s sprawling Alexandrine lines that chime playfully with alliteration, rhyme, assonance, and *cynghanedd*. Finally, and perhaps most strikingly, there is no indication that the farrier’s death was “too soon,” that he is “dead ere his prime,” despite the fact that Felix Spencer, the blacksmith whom critics generally accept as the inspiration for “Felix Randal,” was only thirty-one years old at the time of his death (Mariani, *A Life* 246). His death remains a loss, but an *acceptable* one, something to be expected, not something to resist through the maintenance of the same affections one had for the deceased person during his life.

The light-sounding phrases in “Felix Randal” are sparse in comparison with the profusion of such phrases in “The Bugler’s First Communion,” a poem Hopkins wrote two years earlier, during his first assignment as a parish priest in Oxford. As Hopkins’s letters indicate, the poem is based on an actual event that occurred during one of his routine visits to minister to soldiers in the British Army at the nearby Cowley Barracks. As in “Felix Randal” these phrases correlate with otherwise serious concepts, particularly death and the sacraments. The first two stanzas of “The Bugler’s First Communion” read:

A bugler boy from barrack (it is over the hill
There)—boy bugler, born, he tells me, of Irish
Mother to an English sire (he
Shares their best gifts surely, fall how things will)

This very very day came down to us after a boon he on
 My late being there begged of me, overflowing
 Boon in my bestowing,
 Came, I say, this day to it—to a First Communion. (PW 161)

As Elsie Elizabeth Phare, the author of the first book-length study of Hopkins's poetry (1933) pointed out, these lines seem “minutely and unnecessarily circumstantial,” and they dwell on a “not very significant piece of information” (48). Despite a periphrastic description, what do we really learn about the boy's origins and heritage? The phrase “he / Shares their best gifts surely, fall how things will” does not specify anything like the “irreducible aspect of his being.” It seems instead a polite way of making conversation. Similarly, what does it add to the reader's experience to know that the barrack[s] is “over the hill / There”—as though “There” has any meaning for the *reader*? These lines indicate spoken conversation and they tell us about the attitude of the speaker, but they do not advance the aim of registering singularity. The main event of the poem, the communion, is reached by a wandering route and presented almost offhandedly:

Here he knelt then in regimental red.
 Forth Christ from cupboard fetched, how fain I of feet
 To his youngster take his treat!
 Low-latched in leaf-light housel his too huge godhead.

There! and your sweetest sendings, ah divine,
 By it, heavens, befall him! as a heart Christ's darling, dauntless;
 Tongue true, vaunt- and tauntless;
 Breathing bloom of a chastity in mansex fine. (PW 162)

In describing the moment of serving communion to the soldier, the speaker describes both the boy and the Eucharist in playful and avuncular terms: the boy is a “youngster” and the Eucharist is his “treat.” The speaker goes so far as to dwell on the oddities of the materiality of the host. It is “Christ [in a] cupboard,” a “too huge godhead,” that is “Low-latched in leaf-light housel” (PW 165). The playfulness of this retelling is doubly odd given that the danger of death looms in the

background of the poem; the boy ostensibly begs for the “boon” of receiving the Eucharist because he is worried as he prepares to head into a potentially deadly battle, a fact that becomes increasingly clear when we learn that his fate seems to be sealed already by “a divine doom,” and his “Breathing bloom of a chastity” is quickly transforming into a “bloomfall” or wilting. (PW 162).²

We could summarize the oddities and incongruities I have been identifying using the words of Austin Warren. Warren claimed that in Hopkins’s work there is often “a discrepancy between texture and structure” (87). In the case of “Felix Randal” and “The Bugler’s First Communion” that “texture” includes light, colloquial, conversational phrases that seem incongruous with a the “structure” we expect given that these poems are about young men preparing for death. Before offering my own solution for the “discrepancy between texture and structure” in these poems, let us first consider their reception history as a way of determining what is at stake in a solution and what remains to be explained.

Early readers of Hopkins often resorted to a relatively simple explanation for the “discrepancy between texture and structure” we have identified. That explanation was, to quote Robert Lowell, that “[Hopkins] knew nature but he did not know too much about people.” With this criticism, Lowell clearly targets poems like “The Bugler’s First Communion” and “Felix Randal”; he notes that Hopkins “met [people] sacramentally and at their occupations,” but due to a paucity of intimate relationships “he shows little knowledge of their individuality and character” (91). One main early exponent of this view was Elsie Elizabeth Phare, whose criticisms of “The Bugler’s First Communion” are quoted above. Despite having written the first book-length work of Hopkins criticism, Phare is not often cited by Hopkins scholars today due to

the fact that, as she openly acknowledges, her work primarily seeks to register her own subjective reactions to Hopkins's poetry. And yet Phare's analysis of "Felix Randal" and "The Bugler's First Communion" is interesting despite what she calls the "rather peevish fault-finding" of her approach (53). Phare recognized that these poems were short autobiographical narratives that revolve around the life, vocation, and death of ordinary people (rather than, say, heroes, political figures, or historically significant individuals). She thus made the understandable assumption that Hopkins's aim in writing them is similar to Wordsworth's aim in the *Lyrical Ballads*, namely "to enter sympathetically into the hearts of other human beings" (47). Having assigned to the poems this aim, she indicates the various ways in which the poems "fail." "Felix Randal," she says, is inauthentic in its attempt at sympathy. She explains the poem's refusal to mourn by arguing that "by force of will [Hopkins] is working himself up to a pitch of grief for Felix Randal which normally he would not reach...he is trying by repeating the man's name, by rehearsing the circumstances of his illness to work himself up to a frenzy of compassion" (53). In "The Bugler's First Communion" it is "Hopkins's attempt at simplicity and directness" that fails, according to Phare (50). Phare identifies words like "youngster" and "treat" as particularly indicative of false simplicity, along with Hopkins's description of the communion bread as a "leaf-light housel" containing Christ's "too huge god-head," a phrase she finds "odd and to me disagreeable" (48-49).

Whatever the deficiencies of her approach, many of Phare's conclusions were shared by critics of her age. In his contribution to the early volume of essays on Hopkins by the Kenyon Critics, F. R. Leavis found manifestations of "the simplicity of the single-minded and pure in heart" to be "disconcerting" when they appeared in "The Bugler's First Communion." In the

poem, Leavis sees Hopkins attempting a kind of naïveté that makes the poem simple-minded. Leavis mentions that the “innocent unconsciousness” we see in this stanza makes it clear why Hopkins “put intolerable strains on the gravity of his congregation,” alluding to Hopkins’s notoriously ill-received sermons (124). Austin Warren writing in the same volume not only notes the “discrepancy between texture and structure” in the poems, as we have seen, but points out that in “The Bugler’s First Communion” the discrepancy creates a “gap between the psychological naïveté and the purely literary richness” of the poem (88).

The Kenyon Critics’ volume appeared in 1944, hardly a time for a critic to be found praising simplicity or naïveté. Against the backdrop of the Second World War there doubtless seemed little defense or utility for a retreat into simplicity. Critical tastes favored densely intellectual, fragmented, and allusive texts like T. S. Eliot’s *The Four Quartets*, which had appeared just one year prior. If there were Hopkins poems that were likely to resonate with this audience they were Hopkins’s sonnets of desolation, which receive much praise in the Kenyon Critics’ volume.

In addition to the social and political context that drove these early critics, there was also a basic lack of understanding of Hopkins’s biography and intellectual debts. By tracing out his connections to Jesuit practices and to poetic traditions, a number of scholars qualified earlier claims that Hopkins was a loner, completely isolated from and independent of others. One dimension of this trend showed itself in John Pick’s 1942 study, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poet and Priest*. Pick’s subtitle, “poet *and* priest,” announces his argument: Hopkins’s poetic and religious imagination are one; Hopkins is not a great poet *in spite of* being alienated in the priesthood but *because* of the conceptual and imaginative grammar of the Jesuits. The byproduct

of Pick's approach, however, is that he fails to acknowledge the oddities and incongruities of many of Hopkins's poems. Instead he takes the works at face value. "Felix Randal," he says, shows "the tenderness and concern of the priest," and provides evidence of "the deep satisfaction drawn from the priesthood" (88). Similarly, "The Bugler's First Communion" shows Hopkins's "tender affection for his charges and the consolations of the priest" (88). Books like Pick's were a necessary corrective for the highly unsympathetic view of Hopkins's Catholicism in general and his religious vocation in particular that motivated some early critics.³ But the reaction against this negative view can entail its own blindness to the ways in which a "discrepancy between texture and structure" persists in many of Hopkins's works even when we approach Hopkins's religious attitudes sympathetically.

The same fault appears in W. H. Gardner's two-volume work, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Study in Poetic Idiosyncrasy in Relation to Poetic Tradition* (1948-1949). Without a doubt the most impressive early work of Hopkins criticism, Gardner's study was able to give a position like that represented in Pick's study authoritative status; what Pick did in a cursory way for Hopkins's Jesuit vocation Gardner did in a robust way for Hopkins's religious and poetic imagination more generally. Gardner's basic thesis was that Hopkins's status as an innovator depended upon (and cannot be understood apart from) his debt to the traditions he innovated within. While he was not a typical Jesuit or a typical poet, his adherence to what he saw as the crucial elements of traditions enabled him to innovate. After Gardner, it became far less easy to pronounce one of Hopkins's poems a failure caused by his alienation. This approach was particularly successful with "Felix Randal." Although this poem was often seen even before Gardner's work as one of Hopkins's better attempts to understand people—a better failure, so to

speak—Gardner was successful in elevating the poem in many critics’ estimation, and seems even to have played a role in convincing George Orwell it was “the best short poem in the language” (Vol. II 306). But this is crucial: Gardner read the poem *as a sonnet*, first in a discussion of sonnet morphology (Vol. I 71-108) and again in a discussion of the Italian sonnet tradition (Vol. II 306-308). By presenting it as a participant in the sonnet tradition rather than as a piece of commemorative or mourning verse, Gardner was able to give the poem an identity and its innovations a purpose apart from the discrepancy of texture and structure we have been discussing. But despite the fact that “Felix Randal” is a poem of fourteen lines that can be divided into octave and sestet, it is a narrative poem, not a lyric poem, as we would expect a sonnet to be. And unlike Hopkins’s late sonnets, it focuses on the death of the other, not the death and anguish of the self. So in the end, books like Pick’s and Gardner’s did not offer explanations for the “discrepancy between texture and structure” in “Felix Randal” and “The Bugler’s First Communion” so much as they sidestepped those discrepancies, suggesting that they could disappear if seen from the proper sympathetic perspective.

Scholarship in the second half of the twentieth century did little to fundamentally alter this debate. Major commentaries such as those by Peter Milward (1969), Paul Mariani (1970), and Norman MacKenzie (1981) remark upon Hopkins’s use of dialect in these poems, as do books on Hopkins’s use of language more generally (e.g. Plotkin). Often implicit in these remarks is the assumption that in using the dialect of either Felix, the bugler, or the community in which either lived and worked, Hopkins is making an important gesture toward the singularity of the individual in the poem. There is little doubt that Hopkins’s diction is influenced in these poems by dialect. And yet, this does little to account for the discrepancies between texture and

structure. For one, it does not account for all of the seemingly odd phrases or the light mood they create. The argument that these phrases gesture toward the singularity of an individual is unconvincing. For example, Norman Mackenzie attempts to give this basic idea greater purchase, suggesting that Hopkins's account of the bugler is intensely personal and contrasts with "the impersonal life of the army, [where] the bugler...was only a cipher among hundreds of lads and men living in Cowley Barracks, which in turn was only one among several hundred barracks scattered across Britain" (123). But this argument owes more to the general expectation that Hopkins is a poet of particularity than it does to the actual words and phrases he writes about the bugler. As we have seen, a number of phrases in the poem are remarkable precisely because of how little information they give us. We do not know the boy's name, for example, nor do we see any of those who will miss him after his death. We learn only that he has "an Irish mother" and "an English sire" and that "he shares their best gifts surely," but we are never told precisely what those gifts or their significance might be, nor is the quality of those gifts the meaning the poem rests upon. The poem's periphrastic locutions and needless repetitions that delay the narrative of the poem ultimately suggest more about the attitude with which the priest/poet regards the bugler than they tell us about that distinctive quality that which makes the bugler unique and irreplaceable. MacKenzie's argument rests on the assumption that the scene in actuality would almost certainly have taken place in the presence of others who are left out of Hopkins's retelling, suggesting that the poem's aim is to help us focus on the bugler to the exclusion of others. But even this contention is called into question by the statement that the priest/speaker is approached "on my late being there" i.e. at an unexpected time when others may not have been present and when the Eucharist had to be "fetched" by him from the "cupboard."

More recently, Joseph Feeney's 2008 study, *The Playfulness of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, has reinvigorated the sense that many early readers had that these phrases should be read as very light. Feeney's focus on the playful elements and attitudes in Hopkins's verse allows him to make a robust account of the lightness of these poems where others have tended to downplay or ignore them. Feeney describes "The Bugler's First Communion" as a poem of "verbal effervescence" (116). It is light or "even whimsical, though it deals with religion and morals" (110). He notes that the "wheat-host is described in boylike terms, as a 'treat,' and in soldierly terms, as 'Christ's royal ration.' And like a family's loaf of bread, the host comes not from a sacred tabernacle but 'from cupboard'" (110). Similarly, in his discussion of "Felix Randal," Feeney makes note of the casual and conversational opening, the use of dialect, and the playfully complex syntax, and even puns on the words "Felix" (meaning "happy"), "battering," and "sandal" (112). Feeney's study is successful in many ways. It admirably connects Hopkins's work with a general theory of playfulness and corrects the view that Hopkins's anguish was the driving force in his creativity. It also manages to reconcile Hopkins's playfulness in general with his religious vocation and imagination. But these connections do not satisfy the aim we have been pursuing. They offer a broad framework, but more work needs to be done to address the discrepancy between light texture and a structure that responds to death.

"Felix Randal" and "The Bugler's First Communion" have often been mentioned in connection with the larger theme of homosexual desire in Hopkins's works. Both poems celebrate male beauty. Felix is "big boned and hardy handsome" and "powerful amidst peers." Similarly, the bugler is a "Breathing bloom of a chastity in mansex fine," a phrase Phare objected to for its "apparently unconscious sensuousness...[which] jars in a poem which contains praises

of chastity” (50). Most readers have agreed more or less with the view that these poems do express homosexual desire—but also that they subordinate this desire to a religious impulse. Robert Bernard Martin, for example, argues that “There are overtones of strong sexual awareness in the poem, but they are subservient to the theme of the transience of purity” (297). One thread of this line of criticism is interesting for our purposes because it incorporates the “light” phrases in the poems to discuss the role of homosexual desire. This way of reading was first introduced by W. H. Auden. Auden briefly suggested that “The Bugler’s First Communion” is marred by an “unacknowledged” conflict in Hopkins “between homosexual feelings and a moral sense of guilt” (500). Auden does not seek to condemn the expression of homosexual desire but rather to champion poems in which guilt is “transformed” in artistic ways (500). Later readings by Wendell Stacy Johnson, Julia F. Saville, and others have followed Auden’s lead, reading these poems, and “The Bugler’s First Communion” in particular, as manifestations of Hopkins’s uneasiness about his homosexual desire. For this mode of reading the light phrases function to “generate...distance and so forestall the possibility of an erotic charge to his descriptions” (Saville 160).

Now let us pursue the argument I suggested at the outset, that the phrases we have been tracing throughout the reception history of “Felix Randal” and “The Bugler’s First Communion” are best and most profitably thought of as phatic phrases. This identification will help us reconcile and combine the divergent insights that arose in the reception history. As I have mentioned, phatic phrases are identifiable with what we colloquially call “small talk.” We know that small talk functions as a kind of social lubricant. But this is only one dimension of these phrases, as we will see. The term was coined by Bronislaw Malinowski in a supplementary essay

included in C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards's groundbreaking 1923 work, *The Meaning of Meaning*. Malinowski's account in turn inspired Roman Jakobson to include the Phatic Function in his model of the six functions of language. Malinowski and Jakobson have since engendered a wide field of inquiry in sociolinguistics, though despite its close relationship with literary studies in its origins, this field only rarely converges with the work of literary critics today. A phatic phrase is not defined by specific words or any particular grammatical structure. Instead, it is defined by its unique communicative function. This function differs from most of what we expect communication to consist of, particularly that subset of communication we call literature. Phatic phrases can be distinguished from the other functions of language, but they are not completely separable in practice. According to Malinowski, Jakobson, and many of their followers, one defining feature of phatic phrases is their *primitiveness*. Malinowski, a cultural anthropologist, introduced the term as a way of categorizing several prominent features of primitive languages that are less obvious in more developed languages and cultures. And Jakobson also maintains Malinowski's sense that these phrases are primitive and primarily spoken. He writes, "The endeavor to start and sustain communication is typical of talking birds; thus, the phatic function of language is the only one they share with human beings. It is also the first verbal function acquired by infants: they are prone to communicate before being able to send or receive informative communication" (356). A second prominent feature is that phatic phrases are primarily *spoken*. In fact, Malinowski derives the term phatic from the Greek word *phatós*, which means "spoken." The content of the words is not as important as the very fact that they break the hostile mood of silence to show a predisposition to cooperate. Words, Malinowski writes, "are needed to get over the strange and unpleasant tension which men feel when facing

each other in silence,” hence the lightness and colloquial qualities of many phatic phrases (314). Importantly, despite their primitiveness and their lightness, phatic phrases do perform important social functions. They build connections, and thus are “in use as much among savage tribes as in a European drawing-room” (313). They allow us to create “ties of union...by a mere exchange of words” (315). They “serve to establish a common sentiment, an atmosphere of sociability” (313). Phatic phrases are not used as “an instrument of reflection but as a mode of action” (315). They are both the sign and seal of a relationship, not expression of emotion or ideas about a relationship. Malinowski writes, “Inquiries about health, comments on weather, affirmations of some supremely obvious state of things—all such are exchanged, not in order to inform, not in this case to connect people in action, certainly not in order to express any thought” (313). Building upon Malinowski’s and Jakobson’s theories John Laver defined the ultimate goal of phatic communication as not just establishing a relationship, but also achieving a *transition* within a relationship; phatic phrases were not used only in greeting routines but in parting routines as well. Due to the fact that phatic phrases are not primarily understood as producing emotion or aesthetic effects, it is understandably rare to find a defense of phatic phrases on stylistic grounds, but one major exception is Brooks Landon. Landon is primarily a prose stylist, not a poet or critic of poetry. Nevertheless, his claims about the effects of phatic phrases on syntax can apply to poetry as well as to prose. For Landon, a phatic phrase is a “syntactic speed bump” (178). Whereas a cumulative sentence propels us forward, the syntactic “speed bump” of the phatic phrase causes us to stop as if to check that the connection is working and our lines of communication are open.

By identifying the “light” phrases in “Felix Randal” and “The Bugler’s First

Communion” as phatic phrases, we have one concept that can encompass all of the seemingly difficult-to-reconcile features of the phrases we have noted throughout: the emphasis on spoken language, the colloquialisms, the paucity of specific information, the lack of reflection, and the dearth of emotion, are all accounted for by this linguistic structure. And with Laver’s contribution to the theory of phatic phrases—that they are used for achieving transitions and for partings—we begin to see the implications of the phatic phrase in a poem about death. One of the benefits of understanding these phrases as phatic phrases is that we can understand them as a stylistic and emotional—and ultimately a social—*strategy*, a way of engaging with reality and shaping our response to reality. For Hopkins there is little value in merely expressing emotions that are not subject to the will. Thus, what we should expect to see in “Felix Randal” and “The Bugler’s First Communion” is not so much an effusion of “authentic” feeling so much as the record of self-discipline—not emotion expressed, but rather emotion mastered. The simple, spoken quality of the phatic phrase draws us back into the present. It helps us exist in the moment without focusing on the sadness of what we cannot change in the past or what we cannot control in the future.

In his reaction against the sentimental and linear aspects of traditional mourning, Hopkins, surprising as it may sound, shares much with contemporary theorists of ethical mourning in poetry. Theorists like Jahan Ramazani, William Watkin, and Clifton Spargo have pointed out that models of mourning based on a slow, often emotional process of overcoming grief have major flaws. These theorists tend to reject the notion that mourning is a process at all, that it is something that the mourner must proceed through linearly toward the goal of wellness. This model of mourning was given important formulation in Sigmund Freud’s “Mourning and

Melancholia” as well as in Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s well-known five stages of grief. The basic idea both for Freud and for Kübler-Ross is that grief is a normal process so long as it continues to proceed toward the goal of wellness. When it does not do so, it becomes pathological, what Freud called “melancholia.” Contemporary theorists of ethical mourning have taken issue with what they see as self-centeredness in this approach. They point out the danger that lies in detaching the ego’s libidinal impulses from the deceased person (Freud’s model) or moving from denial to anger to bargaining to depression and finally to acceptance (Kübler-Ross’s model): I can make the process of grieving all about myself. Thus, contemporary theorists of ethical mourning emphasize the importance of maintaining responsibility toward the deceased person. In order to be truly ethical in our mourning, we must maintain what C. S. Lewis, in his memoir of mourning, *A Grief Observed*, calls “The rough, sharp, cleansing tang of [the other’s] otherness” (20). It was for this reason that Lewis suggested that it might be best to consider the burial plot of the deceased person the primary link with the deceased rather than “preserving and caressing an image in one’s own memory” (21). The image in one’s memory has a “fatal obedience,” an “insipid dependence” on the mourner. But the burial plot is “an obstinate, resistant, often intractable bit of reality” (22). Like Lewis and contemporary theorists of ethical mourning, he eschews sentimentality because of its tendency toward self-centeredness. A certain emotional decathexis is necessary precisely in order to regard a deceased person ethically. Otherwise we cherish the *memory* of the person rather than the person, and in doing so, we cherish not really the other but a part of ourselves. Excessive grief can also obscure our true responsibilities to the other, most of which take place during the person’s lifetime. For Hopkins these responsibilities are rigorously and scrupulously localized in the sacraments, which participate in the eternal

without abandoning finitude, which affect eternity without leaving the present. So in a sense, it is fair to say that Hopkins believes that his responsibility to the other lies through the narrow way of the finite. By the time death comes, Hopkins's duty to "Felix Randal" is "all ended," the Eucharist is "tendered," the "boon" is bestowed. If Hopkins has performed his duties as a priest, there is no reason to feel guilt or remorse over unfulfilled responsibilities and no necessary "work of mourning" that would answer to that responsibility. By allowing the other person to have his or her own narrative and own orbit around the divine rather than selfishly capturing the other into our embrace and by denying the responsibility of keeping the other person alive simply through his memory, which would be tantamount to loving a part of himself, Hopkins respects alterity in a powerful way.

Grief over the Loss of Children and Nature

Let us return now to a question raised at the beginning of this chapter: the deaths of children. In "Felix Randal" and "The Bugler's First Communion" we have seen examples of the deaths of the relatively young—certainly those dead "ere [their] prime," especially in the case of the bugler. But Hopkins clearly sees these men as adults. In Hopkins's decidedly unsentimental remarks to Bridges about the poem "On a Dead Child," it seems that the target was not just sentimentality about death in general but about children in particular. This raises an important question: does Hopkins share the Victorian era's special sentimentality with regard to children, and if not, why not? We will pursue this question through an analysis of Hopkins's poetry about children and death, and in particular his poem, "Spring and Fall." A further complication of this question arises, however, when we consider the strong link between childhood and nature—often Hopkins metaphorically structures life in terms of natural cycles such as natural growth and seasons, as is

evident in the title “Spring and Fall.” If Hopkins can respond to the deaths of the young without sentimentality, then why does the “death” or destruction of nature and natural objects seem to occasion a very different emotional charge, as we see, for example, in “Binsey Poplars”? We will parse out these two categories, identify the differences involved, and offer an explanation that accounts for the difference.

It is worth noting that Hopkins at times seems to have had quite tender thoughts about children. Take, for example, his short narrative poems like “Brothers” or “The Handsome Heart,” which date from the same period we have been discussing. These poems celebrate the moral purity of children, albeit in fleeting moments: in “Brothers” we see a glimpse of the care and support one brother has for another, and in “The Handsome Heart” we see the “gracious answer” of a child who was pure in heart and selfless. But when death is a topic of discussion, Hopkins holds back, and seems to resist any effusion of emotion.

One form Hopkins’s resistance to grief takes with regard to children is a kind of meta-consolation. The best example of meta-consolation is “Spring and Fall,” a poem that does not explore the actual death of a child but instead focuses on the awareness of death in the “young child” the poem is addressed to. Hopkins seems to have been very pleased with “Spring and Fall.” In fact, he announces to Bridges in 1881 that he is composing his own plainchant version of the poem. The solemnity of plainchant can be taken as an indication of the mood Hopkins had in mind for the poem, and may also suggest that the poem is an example of the “exquisite” poetic quality Hopkins told Bridges a poem about the death of a child ought to aim for.

In the opening of the poem we see an image of grief. But instead of grief over a dead child, we see an image of a child grieving. The simple question with which the poem begins sets

the agenda for the poem, as it attempts to determine and evaluate the true object of the child's grief:

Márgarét, áre you grieving
Over Goldengrove unleaving? (PW 166)

Although at first we may expect that Margaret's grief is only figurative—a sort of childhood fancy about the loss of the trees' beauty or a concern over their pain—the poem slowly begins to affirm the idea that this grief is very real. At this point in the poem, though, it may still seem as though the speaker may attempt to disagree to set Margaret's perceptions right and do away with her childish fancies:

Leaves like the things of man, you
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you? (PW 166)

But when this voice of experience enters with its statement of greater wisdom, it is not to admonish or correct, but to join in the lament:

Ah! as the heart grows older
It will come to such sights colder
By and by, nor spare a sigh
Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie; (PW 167)

Even when this speaker delivers the central insight of the poem, the speaker emphasizes that Margaret is *correct* to grieve—even more correct than she realizes:

And yet you will weep and know why.
Now no matter, child, the name:
Sorrow's springs are the same.
Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
What heart heard of, ghost guessed: (PW 167)

And in the final couplet of the poem, the “grief” that was announced in the first two lines is revealed as having Margaret herself as its object:

It is the blight man was born for,

It is Margaret you mourn for. (PW 167)

Words like “grieving,” “mourn,” “sigh,” and “sorrow” make it clear that the poem is taking on and inhabiting the language of mourning. But the way they are deployed subverts the Victorian consolation literature about the deaths of the young. Instead of elevating Margaret as a special object of grief, one whose loss is and remains unacceptable, Hopkins makes Margaret herself the mourner of her own death no less, and what is more, her mourning is natural, unavoidable, fitting, and acceptable.

In order to fully understand the way “Spring and Fall” subverts the conventions of Victorian literature on the deaths of children, we need to understand why the deaths of the young were such tender, emotionally charged experiences for the Victorians. On the one hand, children came to represent innate goodness in a new way during the Romantic era. The intellectual pioneer of this movement is often understood to be Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau’s *Emile, or On Education* provided an inspiration for many for a model of child-rearing and instruction that would not seek to inculcate an awareness of and an expiation for innate sinfulness, but would instead attempt to preserve, celebrate, and give free reign to innate goodness. For Rousseau, individual persons apart from society are not corrupt. It is only society and collectivity that breeds corruption. He writes, “Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man.” Rousseau’s vision was transmitted into British households directly via the work of Rousseau’s admirer Thomas Day and in particular through his tremendously popular *History of Sandford and Merton* (1783–89). A sense of the moral purity of children (and thus a correlative pity for their hardships) animates a wide range of Victorian works of literature from social and political poems like Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “The Cry

of the Children” to novels like *Jane Eyre* and *Oliver Twist*. Often, as in the case of both of the two novels just mentioned, we feel an added sense of pity because we witness the death of a child who is pure in heart and full of good will. The Victorians often imagined children as being so morally incorruptible that they were actually angelic, a fact that is highlighted in the famous death of Little Nell in Dickens’s *The Old Curiosity Shop* in which Nell is pictured being taken up in the clouds among the angels.

If children were increasingly seen as morally incorruptible on the one hand, on the other hand their lives were highly threatened by the overwhelming social forces unleashed by the Industrial Revolution. In Victorian Britain, infant mortality was between 30 and 40 times more common than it is today, largely due to poor nutrition, overcrowding in cities, and poor sanitation.⁴ For a family of 10 children such as Charles Dickens’s own family, there was a high probability that at least one or more of the children would not live to see adolescence, as was the case with Dickens’s daughter Dora, who died at eight months old. So the Victorian celebration of childhood is on some level a defensive or compensatory action; the emotions surrounding childhood were so highly elevated because it was so widely and pervasively threatened. Despite the fact that these threats and experiences were well-known to Victorian parents, as Patricia Jalland argues in *Death in the Victorian Family*, Victorians were not less attached to their children or less mournful over the loss of a child than contemporary parents. Even in very large families the death of a child was a major blow, and often required a long period of grief.

In response to these forces, consolations over the death of a child often took a very specific form. As we have seen, the most common Victorian consolations for the deaths of children include the idea that the child was saved from the hardships and temptations of life and

that the family would be reunited in heaven in what Philippe Aries calls a “re-creation of the affections of earth” (611). Quite often, and especially in England, works of consolation drew a great deal of comfort from what researchers today call children’s “death concept.” According to a review of the literature on death concepts in children by Mark W. Speece and Sandor B. Brent, we can distinguish a child’s death concept from a “mature” death concept on the basis of three distinct awarenesses that it lacks and only tends to develop when a child is between five and seven years of age. When the full “mature” death concept is achieved, the individual sees death as an *irreversible* and *universal* state of *non-functionality*. These characteristics may sound abstract or vague—they are not terms we learn in themselves—but they are easily understood when we compare them with an immature death concept. Prior to the development of this mature death concept children may see death as not final, something someone recovers from, that a deceased relative may come back to life as though the person had fallen asleep or gone on a trip (1673). Speece and Brent also explain that before the development of a mature death concept a child may also believe that the deceased person experiences sensations, breathes, knows, feels, or even eats and speaks (1676). And perhaps most notably, many children imagine that at least some people can avoid death altogether, and especially that either they themselves or other children cannot die (1676).

Wordsworth is perhaps the best example of a writer who actually seized upon these qualities in children’s death concept and deployed them as consolations. To put it simply, for Wordsworth, life is, as he says, “a sleep and a forgetting”; his picture of a child is not of immaturity slowly gaining knowledge of the real but that of a child *having* knowledge of immortality already through a sort of Platonic anamnesis that (tragically) wanes due to the

distractions of habit, civilization, and the rapid pace of modern life. Consider, for example, the poem “We are Seven” from the *Lyrical Ballads*. The poem begins:

———A simple Child,
That lightly draws its breath,
And feels its life in every limb,
What should it know of death? (67)

The speaker is a gentleman who visits the child and asks about the number of children in the family. The child, an eight-year-old “cottage Girl,” returns the answer “we are seven,” despite the fact, as we learn progressively as the child fills in details of her story, two siblings “in the church-yard lie.” The poem, then becomes something of a debate, with the gentleman insisting that there are five children and the child maintaining that there are—not just *were* but *are*—seven children. Clearly, although the speaker’s attitude is some blend of exasperation and amazement, the overall effect of the poem is to commend the child’s tender and affectionate solicitude for the dead as though they were living. The poem emphasizes the physical proximity of the girl to her deceased siblings—they lie “Twelve steps or more from my mother’s door,” and the girl often knits and even eats her supper at the graves (68-69). And not only does she interact through companionship with her two deceased siblings, it is as though they commune with one another. She makes a point to mention that “they are side by side,” as though this would prove that they matter and can and should be counted, despite the fact that they are deceased. Thus the poem celebrates the child’s *connection* to the dead, which seems to be enabled precisely because she as a child lacks the “mature” concept of death as a permanent, irreversible state of non-functionality. The child’s death concept is the sign and seal of the consolation; she still has the awareness, not a mistaken one but one with special insight, of our connection with those we love that is stronger than death. Wordsworth makes further use of the idea of the death concept

of a child in many poems, famously in his “Intimations” ode in which the “recollections” of early childhood prove the existence and immortality of the soul, and in “My Heart Leaps Up” the ambition to connect with “the child [that] is the father to the man,” in other words, our own childhood selves, is memorably expressed and held up as an ideal because our childhood selves were connected to the joys of the world in a way that our adult selves often are not .

Returning to “Spring and Fall,” we can see that Hopkins is presenting a different view of childhood and a different kind of consolation about the death or the awareness of death in children. Hopkins does not imply that children are any more suited to die than adults because they are more innocent or more aware of a connection to the divine or to nature. While the child in “Spring and Fall” does seem to be connected intimately to nature, given that her “fresh thoughts” can “care” for the trees losing their leaves in a way that the “colder” thoughts of an adult cannot, this is no special gift. In fact, all she has through this special awareness is not an intimation of immortality so much as an intimation of mortality. The child and her death concept are given no special status and in fact the poem actually resists any sentimental elevation of her status. For her death is just as much a state of universal, permanent non-functionality as it is for any adult. Thus, she faces not a tragic decline from an ideal state so much as the same struggle with life and death each person faces. The poem does not counsel any special attachment to the past or any idealized vision of her future. Instead it counsels serene meditation leading to a full awareness of the finite and mortal state we all share. In the end, the trajectory of “Spring and Fall” is roughly the reverse of “We are Seven”; the mind of a child does not console us and alleviate our thoughts of and anxieties about death, but rather the intimations the child experiences cause us to focus all the more on death and its universality.

There is another word we could use to describe the resistance to sentimentality and the self-discipline in the face of grief that we have been describing: indifference. While this term may suggest callousness or unfeeling, the term actually has a very specific meaning within Ignatian thought. In the “Principle and Foundation” of the *Spiritual Exercises* Saint Ignatius writes of the difference between created things and the creator. Human beings are meant to “praise, reverence, and serve” their creator, but created things are “to help [human beings] in the pursuit of the end for which they were created” (32). Created things can be a help, but they can also be a hindrance. Thus, Ignatius writes, “...it is necessary to make ourselves indifferent to all created things, in regard to everything which is left to our free will and is not forbidden” (32). George Ganss explains that “indifferent” does not mean “unconcerned or unimportant,” rather “It implies interior freedom from disordered inclinations” (151). Some of Ignatius’s language in this passage echoes the Stoic emphasis on *apatheia*, which was important for the ante-Nicene Fathers, and some also borrows from a key distinction first introduced into Christian discourse by Augustine of Hippo and used by many thinkers after, and that is the distinction between use (*uti*) and enjoyment (*frui*). While we may *use* created things insofar as they help us achieve the ends we were created for, only God is to be *enjoyed*. As Paul Scherz explains in a perceptive recent article on Stoic and Christian attitudes toward grief, there are ethical reasons Christians have traditionally sought this kind of indifference, in particular the belief that passions like grief and fear could cause them to fail in the quest to care for those who need them by drawing them away from the present toward a nostalgia for the past or a pining for a future heavenly reunion (23).

Perhaps the clearest expression of this Ignatian doctrine of indifference in Hopkins’s

poetry is “Morning, Midday, and Evening Sacrifice.” As in “Spring and Fall” it uses the process of a natural cycle to structure human life, but in this poem the passing of a day serves rather than the passing of the seasons. Following the structure suggested by its title, the poem is divided into three stanzas, each of which explores a moment in life—morning (youth), midday (adulthood), and evening (old age). Each stanza has seven lines and an ABABCCC rhyming pattern. In the first stanza, there is a description of beauty followed by an exhortation:

The dappled die-away
 Cheek and wimpled lip,
 The gold-wisp, the airy-grey
 Eye, all in fellowship—
 This, all this beauty blooming,
 This, all this freshness fuming,
 Give God while worth consuming. (PW 163)

The basic structure suggested by this first stanza repeats in the subsequent two stanzas; a description of the moment of life in question gives way to an exhortation about how that time of life ought to be approached. The second stanza reads as follows:

Both thought and thew now bolder
 And told by Nature: Tower;
 Head, heart, hand, heel, and shoulder
 That beat and breathe in power—
 This pride of prime’s enjoyment
 Take as for tool, not toy meant
 And hold at Christ’s employment. (PW 163)

It is quite clear that Hopkins is drawing from the Christian tradition of using (as a “tool”) created things while avoiding enjoying them. The poem concludes:

The vault and scope and schooling
 And mastery in the mind,
 In silk-ash kept from cooling,
 And ripest under rind—
 What life half lifts the latch of,
 What hell stalks towards the snatch of,

Your offering, with despatch, of! (PW 163-164)

In the end, what Hopkins expresses is not so much enjoyment or a kind of mournfulness over the loss of enjoyment, but rather he mourns the misuse of nature and of beauty and also mourns the loss of the possible *use* of beauty. The main aim of the poem is to show the trajectory of life not just as a progression from birth to death but one toward or away from divine ends. Each stage of life is fraught with temptations, whether the freshness of youth, the pride of adulthood, or the wisdom of older age. We are tempted to will these for their own sake or for the pleasure we can derive from them. We use them as “toy[s]” rather than as “tool[s]” (PW 163). Hopkins’s answer to this temptation is to make them a “sacrifice” or to give these goods “back to God” as he writes in “The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo,” which is to say that we should use them toward the end for which we were created and in that sense when we appreciate them, we do so insofar as they can lead us to God, which is, when we take the long view, the only secure way to value any created thing.

Now let us turn briefly to one final poem that explores the beauty of childhood and also aims at indifference, a poem Hopkins calls an “elegy in Gray’s meter”: “On the Portrait of Two Beautiful Young People” (PW 476). The opening of the poem seems to evoke highly sentimental forms of grief and nostalgia:

O I admire and sorrow! The heart’s eye grieves
 Discovering you, dark trampers, tyrant years.
 A juice rides rich through bluebells, in vine leaves,
 And beauty’s dearest veriest vein is tears. (PW 191)

But as the poem’s second stanza begins, the speaker at first continues elaborating nostalgically on the scene (“Happy the father, mother of these!”), but then corrects himself (“Too fast”). In the third stanza, the speaker shifts the focus to the present, asking “And are they thus?,” in other

words, “Are the brother and sister as good as they were as children?” These thoughts occasion thoughts about the future that was waiting for the children:

She leans on him with such contentment fond
As well the sister sits, would well the wife;
His looks, the soul’s own letters, see beyond,
Gaze on, and fall directly forth on life. (PW 192)

Ultimately, the important question is how the children use what they are given in life, whether they use it toward the end for which they were created or not. It is a question of divine judgment, whether they will be “found wanting” when life is “Fast furled and all foredrawn to No or Yes.” But neither does the speaker linger on the future. He draws his thoughts back again to the present in the last stanza (though the poem remains unfinished):

Enough: corruption was the world’s first woe.
What need I strain my heart beyond my ken?
O but I bear my burning witness though
Against the wild and wanton work of men. (PW 192)

We cannot be sure how the poem might have ended if Hopkins had finished it, but it is clear that the emotional self-discipline the speaker evinces in the poem entails drawing oneself away from nostalgia about the past and idealism (or fear) about the future and focusing on the responsibilities of the present, a task that is perhaps difficult when it comes to children but one that is, for that very reason, all the more crucial.

As we have seen, Hopkins’s anti-sentimental approach to children and death often connects the deaths of children to the decay of the natural world. In “Spring and Fall” the two were explicitly identified with one another: the child’s grief was not just for the falling leaves but for the “blight that man was born for” and thus for herself. Similarly, in “Morning, Midday, and Evening Sacrifice” as well as many other poems by Hopkins human life is compared with natural

cycles, with youth as a period of beautiful blooming that should nevertheless not lead us to ignore the inevitability of the harvest or wilting that remains for us at the end of life. Part of what makes death in these poems something not suitable for extended, sentimental grief is precisely the fact that death is, in several senses of the word, “natural.”

A complication of this view arises, however, when we consider some of Hopkins’s responses to the destruction of nature. Several of these responses do seem to elicit actual grief, often grief of a much more highly sentimental kind than we have observed in Hopkins’s writings about the deaths of other humans. Take, for example, the following journal entry from April 8, 1873:

The ashtree growing in the corner of the garden was felled. It was lopped first: I heard the sound and looking out and seeing it maimed there came at that moment a great pang and I wished to die and not to see the inscapes of the world destroyed any more. (CW III 236)

It is difficult to imagine Hopkins writing this way about the death of another person. Even the deaths of the nuns in “The Wreck of the Deutschland” do not excite this kind of emotional charge, full of woundedness and perhaps even despair. To write of this “death” seems excruciating to Hopkins, and with the word “maimed” he personifies the tree, making its felling into something resembling a gruesome murder.

Grief over the destruction of nature seems to reach a height during the very same years we have been discussing, the early years of Hopkins’s work as a parish priest. In fact, his poem “Binsey Poplars,” one of his most direct and intense encounters with destruction of the natural world, was written shortly before “The Bugler’s First Communion.” The former poem, however, presents a strikingly different kind of emotional charge from the latter. Hopkins introduces the poem with the subtitle “felled 1879,” as though the trees had a potentially historical existence

like a human being, suggesting that their “death” date is something worth remembering, an event with lasting significance. The poem begins in a manner more typical of an elegy than perhaps any of Hopkins’s poems, addressing the subject and announcing the loss:

My aspens dear, whose airy cages quelled,
 Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun,
 All felled, felled, are all felled; (PW 156)

With “dear” the speaker of the poem suggests a close relationship with the trees. By repeating “felled” the speaker invites us to linger in the idea of what has been lost and in a sense to refuse to move on or to get over the loss. He continually returns to the qualities of the trees and reiterates the fact of their loss like one revisiting a trauma:

Of a fresh and following folded rank
 Not spared, not one
 That dandled a sandalled
 Shadow that swam or sank
 On meadow & river & wind-wandering weed-winding bank. (PW 156)

The poem goes on to protest the action, showing “what we do / When we delve or hew — / Hack and rack the growing green!” One aspect of this destruction has to do with what we have called “singularity,” something that seemed absent in important ways from Hopkins’s writings about the deaths of people. He mentions the unique way the trees looked and the fact that they block the sun in an irreplaceable way, casting a lovely shadow and creating a special, beautiful “rural scene.” He compares the unique singularity of a tree, its “being,” to the faculty of sight, which is fragile and easily destroyed:

Since country is so tender
 To touch, her being so slender,
 That, like this sleek and seeing ball
 But a prick will make no eye at all,
 Where we, even where we mean
 To mend her we end her,

When we hew or delve:
 After-comers cannot guess the beauty been. (PW 156-157)

As if to reiterate the trauma of the loss, the speaker ends by returning again to the loss:

Ten or twelve, only ten or twelve
 Strokes of havoc unselfe
 The sweet especial scene,
 Rural scene, a rural scene,
 Sweet especial rural scene. (PW 157)

Here again the repetition serves to focus us on the horror of the moment of the loss and to resist the urge to move on and get over it.

Previously, we have defended Hopkins against the claim that he simply “did not know too much about people,” by suggesting that his poetry ought not to be seen as expression so much as self-discipline in the face of death. But do Hopkins’s reactions to the destruction of nature call this defense into question? Does Hopkins’s effusive grief over nature show his relative indifference over the deaths of people in a less ethical light? And if not, what accounts for the difference? To put the question simply, why is it that in “the age of elegy” Hopkins was more an elegist of nature than of people?

The answer lies in the manner of destruction that is inflicted upon nature in these poems. Hopkins does not grieve over what we might call the “natural” destruction of the natural world. Grief is not the proper response to changes in seasons, to trees losing their leaves, to the harvest, or to changes in weather. But the destruction Hopkins pictures in “Binsey Poplars” is, at least to him, the unnatural and untimely destruction of beauty that could have been used (*uti*) by “aftercomers” to gain a sense of, and ultimately to enjoy (*frui*), the divine. For Hopkins, by destroying nature we do not just destroy an object, we destroy the very means by which we are meant to achieve the end for which we were created. In short, nature is not, in the end, an

exception to the rule of emotional self-discipline we have observed in many of Hopkins's poems. When it comes to nature it is not the case that Hopkins's distress is so great that he breaks with his usual forms of self-discipline. Ultimately, the target of his grief is one that is wholly appropriate from the perspective of the *Spiritual Exercises*: "the wild and wanton work of men" as he puts it in "On the Portrait of Two Beautiful Young People." When he grieves he is not grieving for nature in and of itself or for its own sake, rather he is grieving humans' destruction of nature that thwarts the proper use of nature.

Reading Hopkins After "The Age of Elegy"

What does it mean to encounter Hopkins's anti-sentimental perspective on grief in an age that is not characterized by an intense interest in and preoccupation with death, grief, and mourning, but rather by what Ernest Becker famously termed "the *denial* of death"? Whereas the Victorians tended to be overt with their grief, many British and American mourners feel awkward or embarrassed about their grief, especially when it extends beyond the first few weeks or months after the death in question. As the English Anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer observed in his 1955 article "The Pornography of Death," "The natural processes of corruption and decay have become disgusting, as disgusting as the natural processes of birth and copulation were a century ago" (51). Several writers have noted that, in various ways, the medical system and its "medicalization" of death has contributed to this change. Walter Benjamin, for example, wrote, "Today people live in rooms that have never been touched by death, dry dwellers of eternity, and when their end approaches they are stowed away in sanatoria or hospitals by their heirs" (94). Phillippe Ariès concurs. He writes, "Death has ceased to be accepted as a natural, necessary phenomenon. Death is a failure, a 'business lost.' This is the attitude of the doctor, who claims

the control of death as his mission in life” (586). But medicalization has not been a direct cause so much as an enabling factor. As we have seen, there was already a growing sense of desperation in the Victorian period. Victorian sentimentality is a manifestation of this desperation and is thus one step on the way to our current attitudes toward grief, not their diametrical opposite. In important ways, we are still heirs to the “revolution in feeling” that Aries describes. Charles Taylor suggests that we resemble the Victorians most in the fact that “the greatest crisis around death comes from the death of someone we love.” Taylor argues that for us these relationships “are so significant, they seem to demand eternity” (720). Janet McCracken suggests that our lingering “Romantic Attitude” manifests itself in our “reluctance to demystify grief” (139). We “tend to think of grief as an especially personal experience, a psychological state whose depth we ought not to plumb, because it is somehow larger, more beautiful, more ‘true’ than either the person who feels it or the one who studies it” (140). Our continued idealization of grief means that we rarely attempt to analyze grief and even more rarely attempt to make grief subject to our will, to act upon it and change it the way Hopkins does. Hopkins’s work can serve as a reminder that there are conditions under which, as Paul Scherz puts it, “grief undermines duties to others [...] As social creatures we must allow others to console us. Grief can alienate one from the present, causing the neglect of essential duties and relationships” (13). At the same time, our grief can blind us to the fact that others are not our possessions, and that “the presence of a loved one is a gift from God and must be experienced in its vulnerability” (15).

Nevertheless, Hopkins does allow himself certain feelings about deceased loved ones. We have—if only in subtle hints and whispers—evidence of them. As he wrote to his mother, he

often prayed for and sometimes at length felt he received “some token from heaven in connection with the death of people in whom I am interested” (CW I 284), such as the “great mercy” he received regarding the salvation of his friend Digby Dolben (CW III 558). These statements suggest that Hopkins ultimately transformed grief into what Scherz calls “Christian longing,” a unique form of affection that was not found in classical thought. Christian longing recognizes, in the words of Cyprian, that the dead “are not lost but sent before . . . that as travellers, as voyagers are wont to be, they should be longed for, not lamented” (quoted in Scherz 19). In longing for the people in whom he was “interested,” Hopkins ultimately assimilates his longing for the person into the longing for Christ. As the poem “The Lantern Out of Doors” suggests, it is ultimately only Christ who can show the ultimate concern for the individuality of another person; while for us “out of sight is out of mind,” for Christ the situation is different:

Christ minds: Christ’s interest, what to avow or amend
 There, eyes them, heart wants, care haunts, foot follows kind,
 Their ransom, their rescue, and first, fast, last friend. (PW 140)

Notes

1. This is not to say that a “good death” was actually available to everyone in Victorian society. Rather, it had clear class connotations and there were clear social disgraces it was “pushing back against,” so to speak. For example, Ruth Richardson has argued that the Victorian preoccupation with the “good death” cannot be understood apart from Victorian fear of the shame associated with particular kinds bad deaths that one could become vulnerable to. She shows that a kind of “symbiosis” was at work between those who profited from the sale of corpses, i.e. bodysnatchers or “resurrection men,” and undertakers who sold tombstones and grave goods. She writes, “During roughly the same era in which the human corpse became an article of commerce, so also did the ‘respectable’ funeral” (112). The Anatomy Act of 1832 effectively made the bodies of the destitute available for dissection to anatomy schools, adding an extra element of horror and vulnerability to death “on the parish.” We can even see in the writings of Charles Dickens an increasing awareness of the “symbiosis” Richardson speaks of, as he represents in his later novels not idealized deaths like those of Little Nell but increasingly the “bad” deaths or fears of such deaths among the poor and vulnerable members of society like Jo in *Bleak House* and Betty Higden in *Our Mutual Friend*.
2. The expectation of death is made more explicit in the context of the letter Hopkins sent to Bridges enclosing the poem. On the text of the poem Hopkins writes, “ordered to Mooltan in the Punjaub; was to sail Sept. 30” (by that time, Hopkins had left Oxford for Liverpool). And in his letter Hopkins introduces the poem by writing, “I enclose a poem, the Bugler. I am half inclined to hope the Hero of it may be killed in Afghanistan” (CW I 368).
3. Phare makes note of this sentiment, which she shares in some ways, when she mentions, “I sometimes suspect that we are many of us so certain that becoming a Jesuit must involve some unnatural and undesirable deformation or repression that we are prepared to see oddities in a Jesuit poet where there are none” (141).
4. Infant mortality fluctuated little throughout the Victorian period despite major improvements in sanitary conditions and medical practices that improved life at other stages. In 1880, the infant mortality rate in England and Wales was 153 deaths per 1,000 live births (Jalland 120). For comparison, in 2014 the infant mortality rate in England and Wales was 3.6 deaths per 1,000 live births (“Childhood Mortality in England and Wales”).

CHAPTER THREE

EXISTENTIAL HOPKINS

Hopkins's career was filled with many projects begun only to be abandoned. He was an aspiring musician and visual artist as well as a poet, and his letters contain mentions of numerous grand works he aspired to compose or write. Many of these works, however, survive only in fragmentary form, and others were never written or have not survived. In his vocation as a priest Hopkins also had the prospect of a brilliant career, either as a scholar or as a preacher, and he received opportunities for success in these domains, but these endeavors largely ended in failure as well. During the final years of his life he was neither a scholar nor a preacher, nor did he have much time for creative avocations; rather he lived among the Irish Jesuits in Dublin, where he was assigned to review hundreds of exam papers from all across Ireland, an occupation about which he wrote, "I often think I am employed to do what is of little or no use" (SDW, 261). Nevertheless, Hopkins differentiated between the "outward" and "inward" way he advanced the "side I serve on" (SDW 261). Although his work had little impact "outwardly," "The other part, the more important, remains, my inward service" (SDW 262). He thought often of St. Joseph, "the patron of the hidden life; of those, I should think, suffering in mind as I do." (SDW 260).

A crucial part of Hopkins's "inward service" was the basic existential problem we all face: his ongoing confrontation with his own mortality. The prospect of his death issued a challenge to a key aspect of his aesthetic and religious philosophy. He had maintained and cultivated a strong sense of his own individuality or "inscape" throughout his life. This sense of his own "selfbeing" was moreover the main site where he observed the creative work of God.

During these final years of his life, Hopkins was often forced to consider whether and to what degree death “blots black out” or destroys the unique individuality of a person.

Up to this point, we have considered Hopkins’s poems about the deaths of heroes (chapter one) as well as “the death of the other,” i.e. of acquaintances and friends (chapter two). In both cases, we observed that Hopkins espouses an ethics of perfection; his writings function to help him achieve a unity of will and desire so that he may wish for *and* choose the highest end for which he was created, in accordance with his interpretation of the “First Principle and Foundation” of the Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises* (see Introduction). Heroes, as we saw in chapter one (both soldiers and martyrs), were exemplars of a perfectionist ethic, primarily by virtue of their self-mastery in the face of death. Hopkins’s poems about the “death of the other” followed a different pattern and trajectory of development while espousing the same ethic. In these poems, the main concern was to establish the right relationship to the deceased person. Unlike typical Victorian literature about the death of the other, they aimed to accept death, not to resist it. Ultimately, they depended upon an affection I called “longing”—an emotion very different from sentimental grief—in which the deceased person is loved and longed for “in Christ.”

We will now consider not the death of a hero or of “the other” but of the self. Here we will treat Hopkins not as commemorative writer or a writer focused on models of a good death but rather as a writer concerned with existential questions or with death in the “first person,” so to speak. I will argue that Hopkins’s approach to his own mortality takes part in the same moral vision as his other poems about death, and, for this reason, it exhibits a fundamental unity. As with the other writings we have discussed, we will treat Hopkins’s writings on this subject as exercises rather than expressions. Sometimes they stir up despair, and at other times they seek comfort. But despite the apparent variety of these writings, they have the same goal: a right

relationship to one's own death. I argue that Hopkins clarifies his approach to the death of the self throughout the final years of his life and that his innovations, particularly in sonnet form and syntax, support the spiritual meanings he works toward.

The Dialectics of Comfort and Despair

Whether they looked to mourning rituals, to doctrine, or to literature, the Victorians were zealous—even desperate—for comfort in the face of mortality. As we have seen, Hopkins was a typical Victorian in that death was a major preoccupation for him. What makes Hopkins distinctive is his refusal of most of the comforts in the face of mortality that his contemporaries held dear. For example, he refused to find comfort in the idea that heaven is merely a re-creation of the affections of earthly—and particularly middle-class domestic—life, as we saw in the previous chapter. In this chapter, we will see that Hopkins refuses to consider death in the abstract. He uses concrete images to represent death and the shadow it places over every human life. Thus, Hopkins rarely represents the afterlife in his poetry.¹ Nor does he represent the disembodied soul or judgment before God. (Absences like these are especially remarkable when we consider their relative surfeit in the works of other Victorian Catholic poets like John Henry Newman, as we explore at length below.)

So as much as Hopkins desires comfort, he also stirs up feelings of despair. We see Hopkins attempting to balance comfort and despair, certainty and uncertainty in “The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo” (written 1881-1882). The two halves of the poem move us between two poles. In the first, beauty's transiency leads to despair:

How to keep—is there any any, is there none such, nowhere known some, bow or brooch
or braid or brace, lace, latch or catch or key to keep
Back beauty, keep it, beauty, beauty, beauty, . . . from vanishing away?
[.]
Be beginning; since, no, nothing can be done

To keep at bay
 Age and age's evils, hoar hair,
 Ruck and wrinkle, drooping, dying, death's worst, winding sheets, tombs and worms and
 tumbling to decay;
 So be beginning, be beginning to despair.
 O there 's none; no no no there 's none:
 Be beginning to despair, to despair,
 Despair, despair, despair, despair. (PW 169-170)

In the second, hope points us “yonder”:

Spare!
 There is one, yes I have one (Hush there!);
 Only not within seeing of the sun,
 Not within the singeing of the strong sun,
 Tall sun's tingeing, or treacherous the tainting of the earth's air,
 Somewhere elsewhere there is ah well where! one,
 One. Yes I can tell such a key, I do know such a place,
 Where whatever's prized and passes of us, everything that's fresh and fast flying of us,
 seems to us sweet of us and swiftly away with, done away with, undone,
 [.]
 See; not a hair is, not an eyelash, not the least lash lost; every hair
 Is, hair of the head, numbered.
 Nay, what we had lighthanded left in surly the mere mould
 Will have waked and have waxed and have walked with the wind what while we slept,
 This side, that side hurling a heavyheaded hundredfold
 What while we, while we slumbered.
 O then, weary then why
 When the thing we freely forfeit is kept with fonder a care,
 Fonder a care kept than we could have kept it, kept
 Far with fonder a care (and we, we should have lost it) finer, fonder
 A care kept.—Where kept? Do but tell us where kept, where.—
 Yonder.—What high as that! We follow, now we follow.—Yonder, yes yonder, yonder,
 Yonder. (PW 170-171)

The poem is a significant lyrical achievement in which words glide through several rapid series of permutations, as in “bow or brooch or braid or brace, lace, latch or catch or key.” As a kind of counterpoint, however, other words chime through simple repetition: first “beauty, beauty, beauty,” then “despair, despair, despair,” and, finally, “yonder, yonder, yonder.” While the poem's main source of comfort is religious, it is not abstract. The claim that “every hair is, hair

of the head, numbered,” draws upon Christ’s words from the gospel of Matthew, which state that each person’s hairs are numbered by God (Matt. 10:30). This means, in Hopkins’s own terminology, that Christ is the best at attending to each person’s “inscape”; indeed, Christ is more mindful of our uniqueness and particularity than we are or could ever hope to be. It is ultimately the conviction that Christ knows and cares for us in every detail that offers comfort in the poem. Beyond that, we only have the repetition of “yonder”; we glimpse nothing more concrete or well defined about the afterlife.

As in his meditation on death (discussed in the next section), Hopkins meditates on the fact that death is both certain and uncertain. On the one hand, we know that we will die—that much is certain, but we don’t know when or where we will die. This tension is constitutive of our experience of death. If we undo the tension, we denature it. Therefore, we cannot seek complete certainty about death, whether through theology, philosophy, or even through visionary traditions of poetry that attempt to represent the afterlife (discussed below as well). At the same time, we should not overemphasize the uncertainty of death. Even that can be too comforting, allowing us to merely avoid rather than confront death. Hopkins’s aim is to maintain a productive tension, to keep death constantly “before us,” allowing it to shape our life, our will, and our desires.

Hopkins’s method for keeping death constantly before him can be understood as a “spiritual exercise,” but one that differs in important ways—particularly in its emphasis on embodiment—from most other spiritual exercises concerned with death. “In conformity with the philosophy of Christ, let us make our life a training for death,” writes Maximus Confessor (quoted in Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* 138). Maximus’s statement is typical of the method of meditation on death in spiritual exercises coming from the ancient world and entering into Christianity. One common feature of this type of practice is meditation on the *separation* of

body and soul. Indeed, following Plato and Socrates as well as the Stoics, the very act of philosophical contemplation was understood as a method of practicing in advance the separation of body and soul that occurs in death, making philosophy itself a kind of spiritual exercise, a feature Michel de Montaigne would later consider in “That to Philosophize is to Learn to Die.” As Pierre Hadot has shown, Christian thinkers were able to import this type of meditation on death from the ancient world more or less directly into Christianity without major changes largely because they found precedents for these practices in Christ’s life, death, and resurrection as well in the Pauline Epistles: e.g. 1 Corinthians 15:31: “I die every day.” Thus, Gregory Nazianzen felt justified in following the advice of Plato as a way of following Christ: “Make of this life, as Plato said, a training for death, while—to speak in his terms—separating the soul from the body as far as possible” (quoted in Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* 138).

Unlike these previous Christian thinkers and the ancient philosophers they draw upon, Hopkins does not counsel meditation on the *separation* of the soul and body. In fact, one of the most distinctive features of his spiritual exercises is his insistence on considering death from the perspective of *embodiment*. The importance of embodiment is presented in striking ways in Hopkins’s meditation on death, written around 1882. He explains the aim of the meditation: “What we want is so deep a sense of the certainty and uncertainty of death, to have death so before us, that we may dread to sin now and when we die die well” (SDW 245). What Hopkins aims at is a sort of complementarity between comfort and despair similar to what we observed in “The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo.” The first half of the meditation focuses on the certainties of death, many of which have to do with sensory pleasures and their loss in the death of the body:

Do you love sunshine, starlight, fresh air, flowers, fieldsports?—Despair then: you will

see them no more; they will be above ground, you below; you will lose them all. Do you love townlife, homelife, the cheerful hearth, the sparkling fire, company, the social glass, laughter, frolic among friends?—Despair then: you will have no more of them for ever, the churchyards are full of such men as you are now, that feasted once and now worms feast on. (SDW 245)

Throughout the meditation, the epistrophe “Despair then . . . Despair then” closes in on all sides and leaves the listener no hope and no possibility of escape.

Hopkins’s meditation on death is proof that even at his most explicitly religious, Hopkins maintains his rejection of abstract comforts in the face of death. We could easily expect a Christian sermon to downplay the event of death and focus instead on judgment and the afterlife, which Christian doctrine instructs us about and prepares us for. However, Hopkins directs his hearers first to themselves—and specifically to their bodies. “We will die in these bodies. . . This is one thing certain of your place of death,” he writes, “you are there now, you sit within your corpses; look no farther: there where you are you will die” (S 245). Once he moves in the second half of this discourse to speak of the “comforts of death,” he speaks primarily of the sacraments. The sacraments are part of Christian—specifically Catholic—doctrine, it is true. But Hopkins emphasizes above all the physicality of the sacraments and their comforting power that exists on this side of the “veil” of mortality. The sacraments have metaphysical implications, but they are also expedient and practical. Hopkins warns his hearers of the physical conditions and maladies that can hinder the administration of the last sacraments: vomiting in the case of Holy Communion or a loss of consciousness in the case of Penance.

Hopkins had long been interested in the *resurrection* of the body. Earlier, he had resisted the temptation to think of the body as the cage of the soul, despite certain precedents for this view in Christian tradition. He concludes in his 1877 poem “The Caged Skylark,” for example:

Man’s spirit will be flesh-bound, when found at best,

But uncumbered: meadow-down is not distressed
 For a rainbow footing it nor he for his bones risen. (PW 148)

Here he insists that embodiment is part of what is “best” or perfected in a resurrected body. In Hopkins’s late writings, however, there is also an emphasis not just on the *resurrected* body but also on the acceptance of the *mortal* body, in all its humility. It is part of the self, or the “poor Jackself.”

In the late poem “The Shepherd’s Brow” we see a treatment of embodiment in the face of death that is so humble as to be even comical at times. The poem begins with grand images: a “shepherd” (presumably Moses, who is identified as “That Shepherd who first taught the chosen Seed” in the first sentence of *Paradise Lost*) faces forking lightning bolts and, Hopkins says, “owns / The horror and the havoc and the glory / Of it”; and the angels in their act of falling from heaven face their fate and find their place in a grand story, “a story / Of just, majestic, and giant groans.” But in contrast to the angels (“they are towers”), “we” (i.e. humans) are a “scaffold of score brittle bones.” In place of grand action, of “lightning” and “majestic...groans,” we have only the act of breathing—until we eventually stop: “Who breathe, from groundlong babyhood to hoary / Age gasp; whose breath is our *memento mori*—.” Since breathing marks the beginning of our life and ceasing to breathe marks the end, each breath is a reminder of our eventual end, and in that sense we can conceivably face the humility (and humiliation) of mortality in each moment.

Our mortality means we are neither Moses who, according to Deuteronomy 34:7 (D-R), “was a hundred and twenty years old when he died: his eye was not dim, neither were his teeth moved.” (KJV: “And Moses was an hundred and twenty years old when he died: his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated”) nor fallen angels. Thus, the speaker wonders, “What bass is

our viol for tragic tones?,” in other words, how should we tell our more humble story, and what sense can we make of it? In the sestet, which begins after and in response to this question, the speaker elaborates on this shameful and sordid condition that humanity occupies.

He! Hand to mouth he lives, and voids with shame;
 And, blazoned in however bold the name,
 Man Jack the man is, just; his mate a hussy. (PW 201-204)

These first three lines of the sestet establish humanity’s general situation. Then the final three lines shift the pronoun from the third person (“He!”) to the first person (“And I”):

And I that die these deaths, that feed this flame,
 That . . . in smooth spoons spy life’s masque mirrored: tame
 My tempests there, my fire and fever fussy. (PW 204)

The appearance of “I” provides a culmination as the poem’s concerns move inward, becoming more intimate. But this culmination hardly provides an answer to the questions the poem raises. It is unclear at first where “there” in the final line refers to: what is the place where the fire and fever is tamed? On close inspection, the only credible option seems to be “Man Jack” from the previous sentence, the opening image of the sestet. Thus, the suggestion is that the course of one’s life is necessarily humble because it is embodied. Embodiment is, so to speak, the genre of our life stories. The only answer the speaker offers to the question posed in the octave is that he clings to the body and accepts it. It may not be capable of grand action, but grand action is not required. Human frailty is an embarrassment—but also a relief. The only solution is to choose the self in all particulars and not to fly from the “poor Jackself,” which includes the body.

Hopkins’s emphasis on concreteness and embodiment extends, surprisingly enough, to his writings on the afterlife. In his meditation on hell, Hopkins asserts that “The great evil of hell is the loss of God” and not the pain felt there, nevertheless it is “the pain of fire and others, that we understand” (SDW 241). In other words, it is necessary to meditate on concrete, physical

realities in order to avoid the spiritual state of hell. This means that embodiment is a spiritual leverage point for us now (before the afterlife, that is), even if we technically understand that hell itself is not an embodied reality but a place of spiritual torment. Thus, Hopkins takes us through a process by which we successively see, hear, smell, taste, and touch the pains of hell in the manner of Ignatian “composition of place” or “application of the senses.”

Hopkins’s thoughts on hell reveal that hell is more a state of the self than it is an actual location. Hell is ultimately resultant from the decision to choose the self in exclusion to God: the damned “appeared before Christ at death, their mind's eye was opened, they saw themselves from that sight to bury themselves anywhere, even in hell; as a frightened or shamed child buries its head in the pillow they bury theirs in the pit” (SDW 242). Or, as he writes later, “it is we who carry out the threat; we walk over hell's brink” (SDW 243). This is an important point because it shows that hell for Hopkins is not a place of arbitrary punishment for rules broken; it is a place where pain is *intrinsically* related to our choices and reactions. In fact, it shows us the truth or reality of our choices and actions. Thus, the point of meditating on hell for Hopkins is not to arrive at the correct beliefs in order to avoid the pains threatened there, but rather to develop and train one’s inner self. This can occur, if necessary, through terror: “*If you are terrified* (I wish you, brethren, for once this much evil, I wish you to feel terror)” (SDW 244). But there is a difference between terror of punishment and terror of the state of one’s own soul, self, or being. To be “lost” or “damned” for Hopkins is refuse to take part in the process of “selving.” For the faithful, “their correspondence with grace and seconding of God’s designs is like a taking part in their own creation, the creation of their best selves. And again the wicked and the lost are like halfcreations and have but a halfbeing” (SDW 197).

Later, in his poem “Spelt from Sibyl’s Leaves” Hopkins will again approach the subject

of hell. In this poem, which Hopkins called “the longest sonnet ever made,” a judgment is warned of, which sorts all of life onto “two spools” and divides all of nature into “two flocks, two folds.” The speaker admonishes us to “reckon” “mind” and “[be]ware” of the “rack / Where, selfwring, selfstrung, sheathe- and shelterless, thoughts / against thoughts in groans grind” (PW 191). Here again, although the image is deeply unsettling—Hopkins no doubt wishes us, as in his meditation on hell, “to feel terror”—the basic truth is that those tortured on the “rack” are hung or strung there by their own selves, their own state of being that rejects God.

What of heaven—does it offer any comfort in the face of death? When Hopkins finds comfort from “heaven” it is not through an escape from material reality but rather in and through something within the material world that “points” to heaven while remaining itself. As he writes in “Ashboughs”:

Not of all my eyes see, wandering on the world,
Is anything a milk to the mind so, so sighs deep
Poetry to it, as a tree whose boughs break in the sky.
Say it is ashboughs: whether on a December day and furled
Fast or they in clammyish lashtender combs creep
Apart wide and new-nestle at heaven most high.
They touch heaven, tabour on it; how their talons sweep
The smouldering enormous winter welkin! May
Mells blue and snowwhite through them, a fringe and fray
Of greenery: it is old earth’s groping towards the steep
Heaven whom she child us by. (PW 170)

Although this poem concludes by mentioning “Heaven,” the poem’s gaze never leaves the “ashboughs” of its title. The trees nestle heaven, and they grope towards it. They are a sign, a sacrament, even. But for this very reason they do not lose any of their density, finitude, or concreteness. They point “yonder” while also pointing to themselves. Thus, it truly is the ashboughs and not heaven as an abstract or disembodied spiritual state that serve as a comfort, a “milk to the mind.”

We also have evidence from poems of this period that Hopkins was occasionally drawn to the comfort of death itself, simply because the anguish of living while “suffering in mind” was so great. Two fragments in particular, contain this impulse: “The times are nightfall” and “To His Watch.” The former begins with what may appear to be the expression of a depressed mind according to which all of the world looks hopeless:

The times are nightfall, look, their light grows less;
 The times are winter, watch, a world undone:
 They waste, they wither worse; they as they run
 Or bring more or more blazon man’s distress. (PW 176)

Despite the opening lament’s focus on “the times,” it is not the sad state of the world the poem seeks to encounter or explore. It is rather the state and fate of the *self*. In the context in which “the times are nightfall [and] their light grows less” (an earlier draft reads, “light of heaven grows less”), the tragedy is the self’s own inability to seize the opportunity to do something about it, to have a role that matters and makes an impact in righting what is wrong. The octave of this sonnet (assuming a sonnet is what it would have become, if finished) shows that we are no longer looking at the times’ light growing less, we are looking at the self unable to help:

And I not help. Nor word now of success:
 All is from wreck, here, there, to rescue one—
 Work which to see scarce so much as begun
 Makes welcome death, does dear forgetfulness. (PW 176)

“Dear” and “welcome” show that death is being approached now with an attitude of affection.

But the poet finds this affection disturbing, and is earnestly looking for peace of mind. Here, the turn inward is offered as the solution, similar to the “inward service” we observed in the opening:

Or what is else? There is your world within.
 There rid the dragons, root out there the sin.
 Your will is law in that small commonweal... (PW 176)

“Your” in this poem is ambiguous: it could refer to the poem or to God, though in Hopkins’s understanding of “inward service” it could easily refer to both; the aim of the inner life is to conform one’s own will and desire to God, becoming both more fully oneself and more fully God’s at the same time. During the same retreat in Ireland in which Hopkins turned to his “inward service” he writes, “All my undertakings miscarry: I am like a straining eunuch. I wish then for death: yet if I died now I should die imperfect, no master of myself, and that is the worst failure of all” (262). It is noteworthy that the word “perfect” comes into English from the Latin *perfectus*, meaning “completed,” which in turn comes from the verb *perficere* (*per-* “completely” + *facere* “do”). The imperfection (in the sense of “incomplete,” not just “flawed”) of Hopkins’s outward endeavors makes death seem desirable, but the mere fact of his continued existence means that God has more days appointed for him to go on living, more “inward service” for him to do. The goal is not to achieve perfection in terms of complete sinlessness, as if such a state were possible, but rather to do fully and thoroughly the work one has been given. Thus, it is reasonable to wish for less work, to wish, for example, that our lives might be shorter, which would mean arriving at perfection sooner.

In another slightly later fragment, “To His Watch,” Hopkins expresses the idea that death could come as a comfort in a similar way. He writes:

Mortal my mate, bearing my rock-a-heart
 Warm beat with cold beat company, shall I
 Earlier or you fail at our force, and lie
 The ruins of, rifled, once a world of art?
 The telling time our task is; time’s some part,
 Not all, but we were framed to fail and die—
 One spell and well that one. There, ah thereby
 Is comfort’s carol of all or woe’s worst smart. (PW 186)

The comparison between the self and a watch is not uncommon in English, particularly Early

Modern, verse (Cf. Robert Herrick's "The Watch," and see Gardner, I, 172-173 for other parallels). Hopkins's innovation is to suggest that it may actually be a comfort to be "framed [i.e. created] to fail and die." The finitude of our lives, the frailty that defines us, means we do not have the task of living indefinitely we only live for "some part, not all" of time. Hopkins, as MacKenzie notes (PW 464), seems to have Psalm 103 in mind: "For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust" (verse 14, Authorized Version). Indeed, this is the only way that the speaker experiences God in the poem: God is the one who made us in all our intricacies "a world of art" and also "framed [us] to fail and die." Our appointed task is only to live a set number of days, otherwise there would be no perfection (in the sense of "completeness") available to us. Note that this is an inward perfection that may not be outwardly visible or empirically verifiable. It is not merely a consequence, a reward for our actions after we die. Rather our actions are *constitutive* of it. We will pursue this point in greater detail in the conclusion.

Sonnet Form and Existential Knowledge

It is important to understand how the genre of Hopkins's late sonnets relates to the type of knowledge they ultimately convey. In order to understand these poems, it is helpful to compare them with another type of poem about death that they engage with and appropriate: the "seer" or visionary tradition of poetry. A "seer" poem may seem like the best or even the only available option for exploring one's own mortality. Unlike dirges or elegies, "seer" poems are primarily aimed at confronting the mortality of the protagonist rather than that of another person. In other words, they are *existential* poems rather than *commemorative* poems: they are concerned with first-person questions, with "my death" rather than "your death" (what we explored in chapter two) or the death of an important figure (what we explored in chapter 1). This tradition was also

often used by classical poets like Virgil as well as by Christian poets like Dante to suggest ways in which an encounter with one's death or knowledge of one's future state might shape the life of the protagonist in the interim. Aeneas receives a vision from the underworld about his future as the founder of Rome, for example. Likewise, although Dante cannot stay in Paradise, his vision leaves his will and intellect "turning by the love that moves the sun and all the other stars" (*Paradiso XXXIII*, 143-5: "*ma già volgeva il mio disìo e il velle, / sì come rota ch'igualmente è mossa, / l'Amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle*"). But despite the fact that the seer tradition focuses on the life and death of a protagonist and not that of a remembered loved one, the protagonist's life and death remain largely allegorical. Aeneas, of course, is not an historical individual who actually lived and died, but a founding myth. And although in some sense Dante the pilgrim is inseparable from Dante Alighieri the historical individual, his journey is allegorical. It is, importantly, "midway through the journey of *our life*" ("*nostra vita*," emphasis mine) that the poem begins. Dante's vision is meant to be useful insofar as it is general enough for us to imagine ourselves in his place, to make his lessons our own.

While I want to focus primarily on the ways Hopkins's late sonnets veer away from the "seer" tradition, it is worth considering one early "seer" poem Hopkins wrote: "Spring and Death." We will see that even during his undergraduate years, Hopkins was able to appropriate the "seer" form and then shirk the form's typical outcome. The poem begins straightforwardly: "I had a dream. A wondrous thing: / It seem'd an evening in the Spring." The first and last nouns of the two quoted lines announce the poem's form. The poem is a "dream," i.e. in a tradition that dates back to *Piers Ploughman* and before. And in the dream, the setting is "Spring," with the capitalization suggesting an allegorical rather than a literal springtime. Immediately, we sense a problem. Although it is Spring, there is a "little sickness in the air / From too much fragrance

everywhere.” Indeed, Death personified—again an allegorical figure—walks there. The speaker then addresses Death directly:

“Death,” said I, “what do you here
At this Spring season of the year?”

Death replies:

“I mark the flowers ere the prime
Which I may tell at Autumn-time.” (PW 17)

With this reply, Death completes the allegory with the suggestion of a moral or a lesson. The lesson, the reader might assume, is that death is always present, or perhaps that death takes some lives too early. But that is not how the rest of the poem unfolds. We discover that Death’s statement does not line up with lived experience:

But the Spring-tide pass’d the same;
Summer was as full of flame;
Autumn-time no earlier came.
And the flowers that he had tied,
As I mark’d, not always died
Sooner than their mates [. . .] (PW 18)

The poem aims to tell us something different from what it has led us to expect:

[. . .] and yet
Their fall was fuller of regret:
It seem’d so hard and dismal thing,
Death, to mark them in the Spring.

In the end Death’s intended action, to mark a flower to cut in autumn is largely irrelevant. What matters instead is the living thing’s posture toward its own mortality. As one of the few critics sensitive to the existential qualities of Hopkins’s works, Dennis Sobolev, has rightly pointed out:

No metaphysical explanation of the presence of death (this “so hard and dismal thing”) or the human condition in general is either mentioned or clearly implied by the poem. The whole description, however allegorical, remains within the strict limits of the existential. (133)²

The allegorical scene the poem stages, with its peek “beyond the veil,” provides no relevant moral and no reliable knowledge about when and where death comes. Instead, it highlights the fact that death “seem’d” different to certain flowers. Some had a different orientation to it, although their situation was no different considered as a bare fact.

So much for Hopkins’s own writing in the “seer” or dream tradition. The tradition was ineffective for the sort of project he developed, so perhaps it is not surprising that he did not write more extensively in it. What he did do, however, is reject the influence of one of the most celebrated “seer” poems about death of the Victorian era—a rejection rendered all the more important because the poem was written by Hopkins’s own spiritual mentor, John Henry Newman. I allude, of course, to *The Dream of Gerontius*, a poem that was printed in *The Month* by its founder, Margaret Taylor, in 1865, in the May and June issues, just before the journal passed into the hands of the Jesuits and the editorship of Father H. J. Coleridge, S.J. (Roughly a decade later, Fr. Coleridge would pause and ponder Hopkins’s “The Wreck of the Deutschland,” which he had in his hands, and then decide not to print it.) Newman’s poem offers an extended look at the moments before and after death. The central character is, fittingly for the “seer” tradition, allegorical. His name, Gerontius, is derived from the Greek *geron*, literally meaning “old man.” The poem tells of Gerontius’s death and his soul’s journey to purgatory. The poem weaves together Catholic theology and the language of the last rites into a single poetic drama. The poem represents the most crucial and anxiety-filled moments associated with death. It begins with the moment of death itself and ends after the soul’s accusation and judgment before God.

We might expect that Hopkins would have appreciated this poem. The poem is often regarded as Newman’s finest, and it certainly is his most ambitious poetic work. Also, generally speaking, Hopkins was very appreciative of and deeply influenced by Newman’s writings. Many

critics have analyzed the influence of Newman on Hopkins's works. Hopkins's undergraduate friend Martin Geldart actually referred to Hopkins as "Gerontius Manley," noting Hopkins's affinity with Newman (Mariani, *A Life* 344). Jill Muller has demonstrated the connections between Hopkins's poems and Newman's *Apologia pro Vita Sua* and his novel *Loss and Gain*. Bernadette Waterman Ward has shown the influence of Newman's *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* on Hopkins's works. Jude Nixon has adeptly demonstrated the influence of Newman's sermons on Hopkins's spring- and Mary-themed poems as well as the influence of Newman's historical novel, *Callista*, on Hopkins.

These connections are undeniable, but it is easy to overstate their importance. I cannot agree, for example, with the suggestion that Newman was both Hopkins's spiritual and literary mentor.³ The fact that Hopkins was such a careful reader and personal admirer of Newman makes his departures from Newman all the more worthy of careful consideration. Those departures have largely to do with poetic form and technique. We know from his own testimony that Hopkins did not care for Newman's poetic taste. He found it embarrassing, for example, that Newman could compare a poet like Southey to Milton (CWI 316). And although Hopkins evidently valued Newman's hymn "The Pillar of the Cloud," better known as "Lead, Kindly Light," which he once transcribed in his notebook, he had a fairly low estimation of Newman's place in the history of poetry. In a letter to R. W. Dixon it becomes clear that he considered Newman's work, along with that of other Tractarian poets, a sort of dying gasp of the "Lake School" of poetry (CWI 506).

Hopkins's relationship to *Gerontius* is an especially valuable case because it is one of the few instances in which Hopkins directly responds to Newman's verse in his own. The dominant attitude of Newman's poem is one of surrender to death. As he feels life ebb away, Gerontius

says:

I can no more; for now it comes again,
That sense of ruin, which is worse than pain,
That masterful negation and collapse
Of all that makes me man; as though I bent
Over the dizzy brink
Of some sheer infinite descent; (28)

Scholars have detected several echoes of these lines in Hopkins's works.⁴ The first line quoted above appears, for example, in the third line of "(Carrion Comfort)", which I will quote here with surrounding lines for context:

Not, I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee;
Not untwist—slack they may be—these last strands of man
In me or, most weary, cry I can no more. I can;
Can something, hope, wish day come, not choose not to be. (PW 168)

Hopkins's emphasis on "I can no more" highlights the appropriated status of the statement. But the line reverses the sentiment of Newman's *Gerontius*. Whereas *Gerontius* is unable to resist his undoing ("Not untwist [. . .] these last strands of man / In me"), the speaker of "(Carrion Comfort)" refuses to be undone, and although his hope has no positive content, he clings to his ability to resist acquiescing. But the speaker does not "rage against the dying of the light" (i.e. death) in the manner of Dylan Thomas's celebrated villanelle, "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night." Rather, it is despair, a loss of hope and especially an end to the process of "selving" that the speaker rages against.

A similar pattern plays out in another echo of Newman's poem in "No worst." The poem's "cliffs of fall / Frightful" that are "sheer" and "no-man-fathomed" recall *Gerontius*'s vision of the "dizzy brink / Of some sheer infinite descent," but with a significant difference: whereas for *Gerontius* the experience is little more than landscape on his journey toward the afterlife, "No worst" lingers and keeps its reader on the cliffs. Although the speaker longs for an

end to his anguish, the comforts he finds are no comfort at all: “all / Life death does end and each day dies with sleep.” These aren’t the stable, assured thoughts of Gerontius, but the desperate thoughts of a “wretch” in a “whirlwind.” They end the poem not with a hope of escape, but rather by drawing us back into agony, since the only comforts we can grasp at are so partial and unsatisfying.

In “(Carrion Comfort)” and “No worst,” the only authority invoked is the speaker’s own. Both poems open by demonstrating the sufferer speaks of his own suffering. Both poems question God’s apparent indifference—“why wouldst thou . . .” and “Comforter, where, where is your comforting”—from this standpoint. If it is pain that establishes the authority of the speaker, then the epistemological mode is that of personal, experiential knowledge: “Hold them cheap,” says the speaker of “No worst,” “May who ne’er hung there.” Only by enduring the pain can the speaker give expression to the poem. The authority of Newman’s speaker is derived from his special, privileged vision “behind the veil.”

Importantly, the poem includes more voices than just that of Gerontius. A whole host of characters—friends, angels, a priest, demons—populate Gerontius’s journey to the afterlife, each voice having its own particular verse form. The authority, then, is the authority of the church; its theology, sacraments, and liturgy permeate the poem and provide its characters. Gerontius relies on them to ensure his salvation in his *mortis in discrimine* (crucial moment of death). As Michael Wheeler writes, “in order to receive salvation, Gerontius must throw himself utterly upon the mercy of Christ and the ministrations of the church.” Prayers form much of the fabric of the poem. Gerontius cries “*Miserere, Judex meus, / Parce mihi, Domine*” (“Have mercy, my Judge, spare me, O Lord”). It also mentions the *subvenite* said by the priest at Gerontius’s bedside. The poem includes many elements of the mass, including the Credo, which affirms that Gerontius is

prepared for death (and judgment), having certified his right thinking and orthodox beliefs. In fact, we might even say that the poem exists in sacred rather than chronological time; the poem concludes only as the priest at Gerontius's bedside finishes his prayer, enveloping the poem in a sacred environment that exists wholly apart from the physical world. *Gerontius* is also a poem about a specific theological concept: purgatory. Geoffrey Rowell argues that, for Newman, the very idea and doctrine of purgatory itself was comforting:

Insofar as it removed eschatology from mechanical interpretations into the realm of the personal relationship between man and God it spoke powerfully to the needs of the nineteenth century, and enabled many Protestants troubled about eschatology to consider the possibility of purgatory. (192)

Although the fires of purgatory have not always presented themselves as a consolation for believers, in Newman's case and the case of many of his contemporaries, they were a welcome prospect to relieve intense anxieties about one's salvation. They offer relief when the prospect of confronting God is too much to ask, given one's knowledge of one's own sinfulness by making the chasm between heaven and hell less absolute.

In contrast to the works of Hopkins we have been considering, Gerontius finds "freedom" and a truer self as his soul leaves his body and former life behind. He says:

I went to sleep; and now I am refreshed,
A strange refreshment: for I feel in me
An inexpressive lightness, and a sense
Of freedom, as I were at length myself,
And ne'er had been before. (31-32)

In keeping with the "seer" tradition, Gerontius's dream offers esoteric knowledge. Because upon his death Gerontius loses all perception dependent upon embodiment, when he encounters the song of his guardian angel he admits, "I cannot . . . say / Whether I hear, or touch, or taste the tones" (34). The loss of the bodily senses, however, provides him a more certain source of

knowledge: “had I part with earth, / I never could have drunk those accents in” (38). The guardian angel explains Gerontius’s dreamlike mode of perception as follows:

Thou livest in a world of signs and types,
The presentations of most holy truths,
Living and strong, which now encompass thee.
...thou art wrapped and swathed around in dreams,
Dreams that are true, yet enigmatical. (50)

Because he cannot depend on himself or his own faculties for knowledge, he must receive most of what he learns as a direct report from the angel. As with “Spring and Death” there are uncertainties entailed, and the mode of dream entails their “enigmatical” quality. As in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, characters arise to give their direct reports to Gerontius. These reports from “beyond the veil” retain power and applicability for the life of any reader precisely because Gerontius is an allegorical figure. Again, we can see how markedly this mode differs from Hopkins’s line “Hold them cheap / May who ne’er hung there,” which indicates just how tied to experience the message of one of Hopkins’s poems is. Let us then compare results. Whereas Gerontius experiences distress and fear just before his death, he quickly crosses the threshold that Hopkins refuses to imagine crossing. The level of interaction that Gerontius imagines with God is also minimal; it is also a threshold on the way to purgatory that does not require active participation. Gerontius’s soul is passively drawn to God. But God’s glory causes the soul to be “scorched” and “shriveled” before it can reach Him. The angel tells us:

now it lies
Passive and still before the awful Throne.
O happy, suffering soul! for it is safe,
Consumed, yet quickened, by the glance of God. (66-67)

Gerontius accepts his position gladly, declaring himself “motionless and happy in my pain.” This is the climax of Gerontius’s “prepar[ation] to meet [his] God.” It is not a meeting at all, but a

near-meeting, a mere flash that emphasizes the radical alterity of God, rather than the intimate and active (if sometimes unwelcome) participation we witness in Hopkins's poems.

Whereas Gerontius escapes from himself and his own sinfulness, Hopkins confronts himself and simultaneously confronts God. Hopkins's poems, above all, emphasize extended rather than momentary actions. The poems shore up the speaker's strength and attempt to locate the necessary will and support to go on suffering. The poems consistently highlight the enormous amount of active attention required to persist without submitting to the temptation of despair. The speaker of "(Carrion Comfort)" cheers both himself and God, his opponent, as they continue in the struggle. This more mutual form of struggle replaces the passive endurance of being under God's heel as he rocks his foot, as we see in the octave. The two principal images of "No worst," the "steep or deep" of the cliffs and the anvil on which the speaker cries, both specifically emphasize the "durance" or "lingering" that makes the experience particularly harrowing.

In his 1881 meditations on the *Spiritual Exercises*, Hopkins explores the idea that the self, each person's own existence, is *the most* unique and developed thing that person has sensory access to. He writes, "I find myself...as myself something most determined and distinctive, at pitch, more distinctive and higher pitched than anything else I see" (SDW 122). Hopkins's language is highly sensory and experiential almost as though he were writing tasting notes to convey to another person his own experience of what it is like to experience existence as himself.

He writes:

when I consider my selfbeing, my consciousness and feeling of myself, that taste of myself, and 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 walnutleaf or camphor, and is incommunicable by any means to another man. (SDW 123)

He continues:

that inmost self of mine which has been said to be and to be felt to be, to taste, more distinctive than the taste of clove or alum, the smell of walnutleaf, or hart'shorn, more distinctive, more selved, than all things else in needing in proportion a more exquisite determining, selfmaking, power. (SDW 125)

Hopkins has here inverted the normal process of aesthetic judgment. He has turned it “outside in,” so to speak. Whereas aesthetic judgment—or “taste”—typically depends on one’s own subjective experience of sensory phenomena outside oneself, Hopkins describes his sensory experience of his own inner being or existence. He makes his sense of his own existence concrete and specific, something that he can develop an awareness of. Importantly, Hopkins also suggests that the “taste” of himself is not wholly subjective. He may be the only person who has access to this experience of himself, but he is “tasting” something that does not depend on his experience of it for its existence, it is something God created. Hopkins discovers it; he does not invent it.

This point is important because Hopkins’s sense of himself is not at his own disposal, nor is it always welcome. Note that there is distinctiveness and intensity in the flavors and aromas Hopkins speaks of in the passages quoted above, but not always pleasantness. Like any very distinctive and intense flavor, aroma, or sensation, they could attract or possibly repel. Indeed, Hopkins extends the metaphor of the “taste” of his own being in this direction. He emphasizes the “bitterness,” the potentially oppressive or even disgusting qualities, of his own being. This idea is implicit in his 1881 notes on the *Spiritual Exercises*, and it becomes explicit in the so-called “sonnets of desolation” that date from Hopkins’s Dublin years, particularly 1885 and 1886. Take, for example, the sonnet, “I wake and feel” in which he writes:

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

The lost are like this, and their scourge to be
As I am mine, their sweating selves; but worse. (PW 181)

Suddenly the uniqueness of selfhood becomes a dubious or even dangerous gift. Our self is *self compounded upon self*, as though the powerful flavor of hartshorn, clove, or alum were in his mouth but could not be removed because it is permanent, simply the taste of tasting itself. In this scenario the self becomes excruciating and disgusting, not something we delight in experiencing, only something we can hope eventually to escape from. Dysgeusia (literally “bad taste,” an acrid or foul taste experienced in the mouth for long durations) may well have been a condition Hopkins experienced during his frequent illnesses. But whether or not he understood its etiology, the idea of a lingering, oppressive part of oneself is something Hopkins casts as an existential state, and many poems of this period are engaged in discerning the condition and battling against it.

One of the most remarkable features of Hopkins’s poetry from this period is the way he layers phrases and stalls syntax to create compounding effects that perform the content of his poems, often with taste images. For example, solipsism leads not to a development but to a dissolution or “dismember[ment]” as Hopkins puts it in the poem “Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves.”

He writes:

[. . .] For earth her being has unbound, her dapple is at an end [. . .]
self in self steeped and pashed—quite
Disremembering, dismembering, all now [. . .] (PW 191)

Or in “My own heart”:

My own heart let me have 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. (PW 186)

Although in this second poem Hopkins is ostensibly easing up on himself, allowing himself space or distance from his own reproaches, the syntax cannot quite let the feeling of the oppressiveness of selfhood go, as we see with the repetitions “tormented ... tormented ... tormenting ... ,” “comfort ... comfortless ... ,” and “all-in-all in all.” Hopkins is announcing his intention to “live to my sad self hereafter kind, / Charitable,” but the poem captures more of his *striving* towards this goal than his *arriving* at it.

Still, to strive is to undergo the process of change and to move toward perfection, or at least to have the *hope* of moving toward perfection. It is important to note that for Hopkins, flavors were fundamentally unstable and the line between improvement and ruin, preservation and decay, was a blurry one. “Yeast” provides an excellent example of this fact. The “yeast” Hopkins has in mind here is not granulated active dry yeast, which was not invented until the twentieth century. Most Victorian bread was to some degree what we would call “sourdough,” in which the “yeast” utilized is that which is already naturally present within flour. The only way to keep this yeast from going “off” or getting too sour is to keep “feeding” it using flour and water. The same process that allows it to grow is the same process of going bad by getting too “dull” or too “sour.” When this type of dough is not fed regularly the surface of the sourdough develops a pungent greyish alcohol. In other words, it sweats. This is what Hopkins has in mind when he says the lost are “their sweating selves.” They are no different from himself (“As I am mine”) in that they have an inherently unstable inner spiritual life, but as their lives have no hope of further “becoming” or “selving” they are simply left in their “Selfyeast[ed]” situation.

So this is the difficult situation Hopkins has created for himself with a metaphor that does

many things and is entangled in its own entailments in a way that mirrors the dense, allusive qualities of his poems. The presence of the divine is all that can save him from the oppressiveness of his selfhood, and yet it is primarily within that selfhood he perceives the divine presence he needs. This is a paradox, but there is a coherence to the metaphor as well. It allows Hopkins to imagine, to naturalize, the development of the self as a process of development within decay, or a kind of “extropy” within the process of entropy that affects us all, from our process of aging to every aspect of the material world around us. Hopkins was able to imagine and attempt to embody in his poems not an escape from that process, but a way of inhabiting it fully, creatively, and imaginatively, to look at the process of rotting and locate within it a kind of ripeness. The idea here is to wait on God within the self. Somehow in and through the self God will be most active. This is the difficulty, but also the hope and the promise of Hopkins’s existential dysgeusia. Like the “self” that is “in self steeped and / pashed” in “Spelt from Sybil’s Leaves” whose “thoughts against thoughts in groans grind,” the self remains in torment, but a torment that longs for God instead of one that has turned away from God.

Through his various experiments with the sonnet form, Hopkins refined his approach to writing about mortality. The octaves of these sonnets push the reader to a point of extreme anxiety or vexation for which the sestet of the poem offers a degree of comfort. The existential authenticity of the poem, its success as a spiritual exercise, rests completely on its ability to offer comfort for death, decay, and loss without explaining them away or escaping from them. As we have noted, Hopkins’s valuation of the sonnet consisted in the form’s ability to balance and channel the sentiments of comfort and despair. As Paul Mariani has written, “In the final analysis, [Hopkins] did not really care what English poets in an earlier age had done with the form . . . it was the form itself rather than the work of earlier sonneteers that most interested him”

(*Commentary* 321). When we speak of “the form itself” what we are principally talking about in Hopkins’s case is a ratio. He considered it perfectly acceptable to write both caudated sonnets as well as curtal sonnets so long as they maintained the traditional Italian ratio of 4:3 on either side of the volta or “turn” that typically separates the octave and sestet. But without this ratio, the sonnet is “crippled for life,” as Hopkins once wrote to R. W. Dixon. (This meant that, for Hopkins, many English sonnets were sonnets in name only, not in form, strictly speaking.) Unlike “The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo,” which features a complete break and a longer second section which allows the despair of the first section to completely evaporate into the “yonder” of the second section, the sonnet maintains a balance, but always one that is essentially asymmetrical.

Hopkins was so finely attuned to the feel of the sonnet that he expressed to Dixon his view that English sonnets could benefit from being slightly longer in their line length. This was an experiment that preoccupied him in some of his later poems, the finest example of which is “That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection.” The poem belongs to the small set of mature sonnets, written only during the last decade of Hopkins’s life, that employ Alexandrine lines. The title of the poem mentions explicitly the problem, “that nature is a Heraclitean fire,” as well as the solution, “the resurrection,” that the poem will arrive at on the other side of the volta. The effect is that we anticipate the solution and begin to prepare for it as we read. The poem’s sheer size, which nevertheless retains the sonnet ratio, allows the problem to emerge and to intensify and carries great force by the time it fully emerges.

The entire first two lines of the poem are devoted to identifying and naming the unique shapes and actions of a cloudscape. The speaker sees them as “puffball[s], torn tufts,” and “tossed pillows” that “flaunt forth,” “chevy,” “throng,” and “glitter in marches.” The clouds are

merely invested with this high level of lyrical personality and then left for a moment as the speaker's eye moves to the even less substantial images of light and shade cast by trees. Momentary and shifting as the shadows may be, the speaker still inscapes them with great, almost extravagant, acuity as "shivelights and shadowtackle." Next we move to nature's most paradigmatically insubstantial element: the wind. Only here do we begin to have some intimation of the pernicious results of the kinesis of nature as we see that the wind pictured violently "ropes, wrestles, beats earth bare." Yet the intimation is largely masked by the fact that the wind is characterized as the "bright wind boisterous," rather than a more sinister force. The word "boisterous" itself encapsulates this tension; it is introduced by the adverb "delightfully," which along with the modifier "bright" causes us to interpret it as meaning "good natured," as in "A rich, boisterous, foxhunting baronet," rather than in the sense normally associated with weather, that of "rough" or "violent," as in "A boystrous Wind hath blown away the Leaves." (OED Online)

Finally, as if suggested by the beating of the wind on the ground, the focus of the poem moves to the earth's surface itself. Although we might expect the ground to be more solid than the light or the vapor of the clouds, it takes part in the same flux as the rest of nature. The "masks and manmarks" that are pressed into it are erased as the soil dries from "ooze," to "dough," to "crust," to "dust." Again, the specificity of the description and the keenness of the observation impart a value to the scene that is incommensurate with its radical impermanence. The next line sums up the problems presented hitherto: "Million-fuelèd, nature's bonfire burns on." If up to this point we have read the sonnet's descriptions of nature positively, following the cues of words like "glitter" and "delightfully," we face a dilemma. The mention of "nature's bonfire" suggests the etymological meaning, "bone fire," or funeral pyre. How can we continue to

celebrate nature's dazzling kinetic display if it reaches its apogee only in its own destruction?

Continuing both the pattern of images and word associations, we learn that humans are part of that bonfire—in fact, they are the “bonniest,” the “clearest-selvèd spark” of it. But even if man is the clearest and most individual part of nature, there is no part of him so particular (so “stark”) that time cannot “level” it. By this point in the poem, the speaker has gradually reached a point of near complete despair (“O pity and indignation!”) as change slowly revealed itself in death to be a leveller that “blots black out,” extinguishing all of the variety and multiplicity it seemed to promote. What follows is perhaps the clearest and most dramatic volta in any of Hopkins's sonnets: “Enough! the Resurrection, / A heart's clarion!” Because the volta announces itself so forcefully, it is easy to see why many critics have interpreted the second part of the sonnet as a sort of theological evasion of the problem presented in the first part of the poem. Even a critic as perspicacious and sensitive to religious themes as J. Hillis Miller has suggested that Hopkins is casting all of his hopes on “the miracle of transubstantiation” to “change him from one allotropic form of himself to another” with no essential continuity with his current self (358). But Paul Mariani writes, “although the conclusion rests on Christian doctrine, it has an integrated and esemplastic harmony with the rest of the poem” (*Commentary* 289).

I have, of course, been suggesting that a theological approach can become inauthentic, but this only occurs when theology is used to explain away the dread of mortality. But although this sonnet so clearly employs theological concepts, it does so without precluding an existential approach. It seems a curious blunder that Miller's and other critics' objection to the solution offered in “Heraclitean Fire” rests on an interpretation of the poem's final lines as being abstract, distant, and theological, when in fact the images themselves are very concrete and, in addition, in the present tense:

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. (PW 174)

The only past-tense verb in the concluding portion of the sonnet is the “was” that refers to the incarnation of Christ. But the solution is not, as Miller has suggested, to simply wait in holy hope for the afterlife; rather, the material world and embodiment are redeemed in the present. This means that although the speaker says in the preceding lines that the “world’s wildfire” can “leave but ash,” he is not devaluing the material present in favor a spiritual future. Although it might be easy enough to imagine that the “diamond” refers to a spiritual and immaterial soul, that assumption is not warranted by the specificity of the image Hopkins chooses. The image of the diamond signals the redemptive power of processes, heat, and pressure. But in the case of the diamond, the process is not entropic, but rather productive; it increases the value of the substance as well as its longevity. He avoids moving us from an earthly process to a heavenly product or from change to stasis. The self is achieved at every step of the process of decay, through existential angst, and through agony like that experienced on the “cliffs.” The diamond has all of the qualities most valued in Hopkins’s aesthetic project, with all of its hardness, unique rarity, and particularity. When Hopkins pushed the problem of mortality to its apogee, he was able to find the appropriate concrete image he needed to suggest a high degree of comfort without abstraction.

Notes

1. See O’Gorman.
2. On Hopkins as an existential thinker: Sobolev mentions but does not develop the connections between Kierkegaard and Hopkins. He analyzes the existential themes in “Spring and Death” and “Spring and Fall” along with “Spelt from Sibyl’s Leaves.” He privileges poems without any recognizable Christian content, and while Sobolev’s analyses are quite excellent, my argument is that even Hopkins’s poems with explicitly religious themes do not depart from an existential perspective. Constantini points out the similarities between Martin Heidegger and Hopkins and offers an excellent reading of the existential themes in “To His Watch.” Other important studies on this topic include those by Willems and David Miller, although it should be noted that these latter two works focus on issues separate from the problem of mortality.
3. For example, see Nixon. The connection Nixon sees between Hopkins and Newman is an important one, “their joint advocacy of intellectual pain” (79). Nevertheless, this similarity of content does not account for the differences in form that I am attempting to analyze here.
4. Although many subsequent scholars have remarked upon the connection (see especially Costantini, Muller, and Nixon), the first to make note of it in print appears to have been Brian Vickers. In a short letter that appeared in the March 3, 1966 issue of the *Times Literary Supplement* Vickers writes, “By this allusion Hopkins seems to be repudiating Newman’s presentation of the passive nature of the soul’s collapse and urging a more intense heroic state, where the soul likes ‘wrestling with (my God!) my God.’” (178)

CONCLUSION

HOPKINS'S LAST WORDS

When his own untimely death came on June 8, 1889, Hopkins's final words were, "I am so happy, I am so happy," according to his first biographer, Fr. G. F. Lahey, SJ, who was presumably repeating the report of Fr. Wheeler, a fellow priest who ministered to Hopkins over the course of the sickness that would claim his life (Lahey 147). Several of Hopkins's later, more assiduous biographers, in particular Bernard Bergonzi and Alison Sulloway, have pointed out that these words conform to typical Victorian deathbed conventions. For that reason, they argue, Lahey's account needs to be regarded with suspicion (Bergonzi 154; Sulloway, "Hopkinsian Biography" 87). Nevertheless, many of Hopkins's other contemporary biographers have accepted Lahey's account as a reliable reporting of Hopkins's final days. I suspect that Hopkins's biographers' decision to choose to report "I am so happy, I am so happy" as Hopkins's last words has more to do with the truth of story structure and genre than it has to do with strict adherence to reliable fact. As Hayden White has pointed out, all histories must conform to a genre because they must have a shape of some kind. As histories of a particular person, biographies are no exception to the rule. And who would consider Hopkins's life a complete tragedy? His life and sufferings, as it turned out, were not in vain, but have had a tremendous effect of many lives, on the development of English poetry, and on our understandings of Christian theology and the spiritual life in general. Festivals and conferences celebrate his works. Scholars and academic journals devote scrutiny to them. In that regard, Hopkins is today vastly more successful than his friends such as Coventry Patmore and Robert

Bridges, who showed in their lifetimes many more outward markers of success and more outward manifestations we tend to associate with “happiness.”

The question I want to pursue here, however, is not, strictly speaking, whether we have good evidence to say with certainty that “I am so happy, I am so happy,” really were Hopkins’s final words. Nor do I want to judge whether the story of Hopkins’s life can be told as a happy one, given his posthumous fame. In other words, I do not want to consider whether Hopkins’s struggles were “worth it” in the end. Rather, I want to ask a more fundamental question: does it make sense to think of the activities of Hopkins’s life—in particular the disciplines, exercises, and poetic writings, we have considered in this study—as constitutive of a happy life? This question is not a speculative one; it is perhaps *the* most important practical question for judging and understanding the character of Hopkins’s moral life and especially how death could possibly fit meaningfully into that life.

First, let us admit outright that looking purely at the most immediate facts, the thought that Hopkins could possibly have been “happy” at his death from typhoid at the age of 44 may seem an absurdity. Indeed, in the year before he died he reflected on his happiness as follows:

This morning I made the meditation on the Three Sins, with nothing to enter but loathing of my life and a barren submission to God’s will. The body cannot rest when it is in pain nor the mind be at peace as long as something bitter distills in it and it aches. This may be at any time and is at many: how then can it be pretended there is for those who feel this anything worth calling happiness in their world? There is a happiness, hope, the anticipation of happiness hereafter: it is better than happiness, but it is not happiness now. It is as if one were dazzled by a spark or star in the dark, seeing it but not seeing by it: we want a light shed on our way and a happiness spread over our life. (*SDW* 262)

Nevertheless, despite this gloom, only four days later Hopkins writes in quite a different tone about happiness and its relationship to his religious faith and calling. In a moving passage on the Incarnation of Christ, he writes:

[. . .] my life is determined by the Incarnation down to most of the details of the day. Now things being so that I cannot even stop it, why should I not make the cause that determines my life, both as a whole and in much detail, determine in greater detail still and to the greater efficiency of what I in any case should do, and to my *greater happiness* in doing it? (SDW 263, emphasis mine)

Christopher Devlin suggests that this passage is tantamount to an admission that Hopkins's earlier unhappiness was "partly wilful" [sic] (SDW 320). In other words, Hopkins intentionally lowered himself to a point of spiritual desolation and then proceeded to apply new thoughts, meditations, and contemplations to raise himself up again to a point of spiritual consolation, similar to the dynamic we observed in the "Dialectics of Comfort and Despair" in the previous chapter. Indeed, because both of the passages quoted above are part of Hopkins's private retreat notes, we should not take his statement about unhappiness as a form of confession or soliloquy, a mere baring of the soul. Instead, it is, as we have often observed, an *exercise* more than an *expression*. It is not aimed at authenticity; rather, it is aimed at training and self-mastery.

Throughout this study, I have claimed that Hopkins practiced a morality of perfection. But here it is worth pointing out that, at least in a certain sense, a morality of perfection *is* morality of happiness. As Servais Pinckaers, OP, and others have pointed out, both classical (especially Aristotelian) and medieval visions of morality saw happiness as the central aim of the moral life; the good life was the truly happy life. However:

From the fourteenth century onward the perspective changes radically. The question of happiness is quickly set aside, and moral analysis increasingly focuses on the obligations imposed by law as the expression of divine will. The manuals of moral theology no longer contain a treatise on happiness, as St. Thomas had, although he remains their great authority. Consequently, in their view one can construct an ethics and live a moral life without ever considering the question of happiness. Kant, for his part, critiques what he calls "eudaimonism" (from the Greek term *eudaimonia*: happiness), critiquing any system that introduces into moral intention a consideration of happiness viewed as an end. (Pinckaers 66)

This is a crucial point because Hopkins's Victorian contemporaries lived and operated within a

moral universe very much shaped either by Kantian (or other deontological) thinkers who prioritized duty or by utilitarians like John Stuart Mill and others. These visions of morality (which Pinckaers terms “moralities of obligation”) either disregard the question of happiness or they delay it, making it a result or consequence of ethical behavior. As a Jesuit priest who was grounded not just in Ignatian spiritual exercises but also classical and medieval moral thought, Hopkins was well positioned to issue a challenge to the various moralities of obligation that characterized his age.

Unfortunately, however, Hopkins is often read as a morality-of-obligation thinker *par excellence*. As we have seen, Christopher Devlin (a fellow Jesuit) makes this mistake (see “The Tension Between Desiring and Choosing,” in the Introduction, pp. 17-25). When we see Hopkins as driven by a morality of obligation we misunderstand his poetry and its relation to his vision of having a good life (both in the sense of morally good life and in the sense of a happy life). But I have suggested here that Hopkins’s poetry was not inevitably a distraction from the ethics of perfection (though in principle, anything could be a distraction if used improperly). Rather, Hopkins used poetry as a spiritual exercise to direct his will and desires toward what he understood to be a right relationship with God and people. In this sense both his moral life and his poetry were constitutive of happiness.

This is not to say that Hopkins always felt happy when pursuing it. As Herbert McCabe, OP, has pointed out in *The Good Life: Ethics and the Pursuit of Happiness*:

[. . .] for the Utilitarian happiness is an empirically identifiable state, one which is simply recognized by being experienced and one which, as the most desirable state, it is rational to seek by various means to maximize. Happiness for him is first of all an experience. For the Aristotelian, on the other hand, happiness is fundamentally an activity; it is the state of the person who is living without hindrance the life that becomes that human being, the “satisfactory” life (the life “sufficiently made”). Happiness is not like, say, pain, the name of an experience any more than, say, friendship is. We learn how to use words like

“happiness” and “friendship” in much more complex ways than we learn how to use “pain.” It would be at least peculiar for a man to be mistaken about whether he was in pain a few minutes ago, whereas the Aristotelian thinks a person may easily think she is happy or living in friendship when she is not. (6-7)

If, following McCabe’s lead, we consider what *activities* Hopkins engaged in in order to pursue happiness rather than whether he experienced happiness as a *state*, we can see Hopkins’s moral and spiritual life as much less dreary that it may appear at first. After all, few writers have been more preoccupied than Hopkins with the fundamental activities that make a being what that being is. As Hopkins writes in “As Kingfishers Catch Fire”

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves — goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.* (PW 141)

We can see that the emphasis on “selving” that informs much of Hopkins’s poetry is not only an *aesthetic* but also a *moral* concern. No true happiness and no true abundant life can exist apart from becoming that self who we truly are.

How does all of this apply to the question of death? From a morality of obligation perspective, in which happiness is an experience that is either irrelevant to moral questions or is simply the outcome of moral action but not constituted by moral action, it is difficult to conceive of any sense in which death could actually be part of a good life. In fact, it is almost inevitably either negative or neutral. It means the end of happiness as an experience. When we speak of a death wish from this perspective, we are speaking of, as William Lynch, SJ, puts it, “a desert and a wish for it” (260). When this wish appears in poetry it is an attempt to “reduce it to silence, the night, a false virginity” (here Lynch has in mind the Romantic beautiful deaths described by Mario Praz in *The Romantic Agony*). “But,” Lynch writes, “there is another form of death, which is the most positive and creative of all the moments of life, a communication of self to self to the

last drop” (260). This wish is central to Hopkins’s poetic project. Ultimately, the martyrs and soldiers we observed in chapter one were models of this wish. In chapter two, we observed how Hopkins substitutes Christian longing for the highly sentimental grief that characterized the approach to death shared by many of his Victorian contemporaries. In the third chapter, we observed more closely the ways in which Hopkins uses poetic form, in particular his innovative sonnet form, to channel and maintain both comfort and despair in the face of death, ultimately resulting in existential knowledge. Each of these approaches manifested in a different way an attempt to communicate one’s being to the last drop.

Charles Taylor has observed in a series of perceptive comments occasioned by Hopkins’s poetry, “Being really ourselves requires an abandonment, a letting go, a sacrifice. So that the moment at which Christ enters most fully our lives is (if we allow it) the moment of our death” (763). Given that this was Hopkins’s perspective, it makes a great deal of sense to think of him as “happy” even in death. Death in this sense is the completion of conversion. As we saw first in our discussion of conversion in chapter one, the concept of “conversion” can be traced back to two concepts in ancient Greek thought. First is *epistrophe*, a “change of orientation [that] implies the idea of a return” (Hadot, “Conversion”) Second is *metanoia*, a “change of mind, repentance, [that] implies the idea of a mutation and a rebirth” (Hadot, “Conversion”). By allowing us to both abandon ourselves by turning away from the self to God (*metanoia*) and return to the truth of our inscape (*epistrophe*) our death offers the ultimate opportunity for conversion. We can therefore be happy in death—not out of sentimentality, an escape to the afterlife, or a rejection of the material world, but rather because it is the end, the completion and perfection of each individual’s process of “selving.”

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