



## Belief in Hopkins' turns

Brian McClorry SJ

The poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins SJ, who was born on 28 July 1844, have been a source of inspiration and comfort to countless people over the years, not least because of the way in which they capture the power and dynamics of belief in God. Brian McClorry SJ looks at how Hopkins uses a poetic device to illustrate the tensions and discoveries of faith in three of his sonnets.

In a sonnet, that 'little song' of some fourteen lines, there is a 'turn' – a shift in the poem's subject, argument, movement, momentum, atmosphere, sense and feeling. In a Shakespearean sonnet the 'turn' happens in the last two lines. A Petrarchan sonnet is more expansive: the 'turn' happens after the first eight lines, the octet, and occupies the next six, the sestet. What follows is about the 'turn' in three (Petrarchan) sonnets by the Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889). The hope is that the 'turn' in these sonnets may well say something of what it might be to have faith or to believe. What kind of shifts are afoot? This question does not suppose that there will be final 'conclusions'. A poem should 'get somewhere', but where it gets to is not a complete hard and fast result but some holding together, with altered tensions and a fresh sense of discovery.

The three sonnets are 'The Windhover', 'As Kingfishers Catch Fire', both written at St Beuno's in 1877, and 'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection' written in Dublin in 1888.<sup>1</sup>



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### 'The Windhover'

Before joining the Jesuit novitiate in 1868, Hopkins burnt copies of his poems on the grounds that being a poet was incompatible with being a Jesuit. In 1875 at St Beuno's, the Jesuit theological college in North Wales, he was given a somewhat *en passant* encouragement by the rector and began to write ['The Wreck of the](#)

[Deutschland'](#). By the time he was ordained in September 1877, Hopkins had written some fourteen poems, including 'The Windhover'.

The sonnet begins with chivalric imagery ('minion', 'kingdom', 'dauphin') which culminates in seeing, really seeing, a kestrel, or windhover – indeed a 'Falcon' who is 'morning's minion' or messenger. It is a wondrous seeing, not simply a sighting. The bird rides 'the rolling level underneath him steady air' and its sweeping flight 'Rebuffed the big wind.' Then, exultantly, Hopkins finds, 'My heart in hiding / Stirred for a bird, - the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!' Then comes the sonnet's turn, where everything ('brute beauty', 'valour', 'act', 'air', 'pride' and 'plume') is told 'here' – in this experience – 'Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion / Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!'

'Buckle' can mean to buckle on, gird yourself. Buckling on a sword fits the chivalric imagery well. Hopkins had to struggle long and hard to find that being a Jesuit and a poet could genuinely come together; eventually everything buckled on – he loved Wales where he felt at home. And (AND!) he was writing poetry once more. But Hopkins also had to get through three years studying theology in a training that today seems 'almost unimaginably barren and unenlightened'.<sup>2</sup> 'Buckle' can also mean to collapse or crumple. What collapsed was perhaps a particular understanding of his vocation, which led to the burning of his poetry. Both senses of 'buckle' hover over the turn.

As for the continuing grind of nineteenth century theology: 'No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plough down sillion/ Shine'. 'Sillion' refers to a ploughed furrow which, given some clay in the earth and the right light, will shine. Indeed a whole ploughed field may shine. And 'blue-bleak embers', say in the grate of a coal or wood fire in Hopkins' small room, can go slack, shift and glow – and 'gold-vermilion' attends the space where the writing is done. What seemed to get nowhere works towards a surprised and exultant relief. There has been a huge struggle with theological training and vocational compatibility. Hopkins has indeed come through.

Christ is perhaps present in the metaphors 'Falcon' and 'chevalier'. Still, the poem's title has a precise colon which makes the late 'dedication' part of the title: 'The Windhover: to Christ our Lord'. Christ was present in the long struggles with vocational clarity and a dispiriting theological training. These have been a workroom for faith and belief, for expectancy and hope. And Hopkins – eventually – begins to write again.

To oversimplify, Hopkins' struggle looks like a wrestle with 'bad religion' in which human creativity has a precarious place, and where theology was overly propositional, relatively innocent of mystery and full of answers to preset

questions. Jesus's remark that the sabbath was for people not people for the sabbath (Mark 2:27) is not irrelevant to theology or religion. However, a Falcon flew and was truly seen!

### 'As Kingfishers Catch Fire'

This is very different from 'The Windhover'. What is heard or seen is not a single falcon but many creatures: kingfishers, dragonflies, stones falling into wells, bells. Here everything 'Selves – goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells'. There is a complete and fully expressed identity: '*What I do is me: for that I came*'. Here the italics do considered and careful duty for the flamboyant exclamation marks of 'The Windhover'. This evocation of an 'I' might fit some traditions of Romantic poetry, say Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself', the 1881 title Whitman gave to a poem first published in 1855, which begins: 'I celebrate myself and sing myself'. To be able to 'sing myself' and do what I came to do might well attract the 'heart in hiding' which, in 'The Windhover', 'stirred for a bird'. But Hopkins will have none of it.

The 'turn' of this sonnet has found a tone that is open, clear and relaxed: 'I say more: the just man justices'. The delighted encounter with dragonflies and kingfishers, wells and bells, is a delighted prelude to enlargement and discovery. There is no 'AND', certainly no 'but': the struggle and ambiguity of 'The Windhover' are gone. The exigent isolated 'I' finds a wonderful and connected action – a gift, a 'grace: that keeps all his goings graces' – the alliteration is also gracious. To justice – it is good to find justice as a verb – is to act what in God's eye we are: Christ. And here in Christ there is no isolation: 'for Christ plays in ten thousand places'.

I remember years ago quoting this part of the sonnet in a homily and, full of concern for inclusive language altered the last line (I think apologising for the impertinence) to sound: 'To the Father through the features of our faces.' I even liked the way the vowels of 'our' riffed off

nearly vowels. It is, however, difficult to be inclusive – ‘our’ can be part of a divisive ‘us’ and ‘them’. Hopkins’ intent, however, is not only stunningly universal. Christ connects us together: ‘for Christ plays in ten thousand places, / Lovely in limbs and lovely in eyes not his / To the Father through the features of men’s faces.’ Hopkins’ ‘more’ finds a vision that rules out all forms of discrimination and seeks out a new community.

After ‘I say more’ there is clearly a discovery, a finding that is new, of both Christ and humankind. The working of faith and belief leads to a depth and to a range which lies beyond any easy prediction or imagination. Discovery and surprise attend the calm beginning of the sonnet’s turn: ‘I say more’. More indeed. Faith and belief have room for ‘more’ and rejoice when a new horizon dawns.

#### [‘That Nature is as Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection’](#)

Is this a sonnet? Well, everyone says so – including Hopkins – although there are additions to the fourteen line rule. Well, ‘rules’ are to be well considered but not idolised. This sonnet that Hopkins wrote in Dublin in 1888, the year before he died, is not about a single bird as in ‘The Windhover’, or many creatures like ‘As Kingfishers...’, but ‘nature’ as a whole. Hopkins finds that his own sense of the impermanence and transience of nature is shocking. So Heraclitus (c. 535-475 BCE) for whom all is change or flux, and only change is permanent, becomes an evocative figurehead<sup>3</sup> for this vertigo.

There is much delightful language: ‘heaven roysterers’ and a ‘bright wind’. But of ‘Man’ we’re told, ‘how fast his fire-dint, | his mark on mind is gone!’ And of humankind and nature, we hear: ‘Both are in an unfathomable, all is in an enormous dark / Drowned.’ It’s a very different mood from the earlier [‘God’s Grandeur’](#), where ‘for all this, nature is never

spent; / There lives the dearest freshness deep down things’. But now, ‘vastness blurs and time / beats level.’ An extraordinary line. There is no ‘more’ that can be said.

Then comes the turn: ‘Enough! the Resurrection, / A heart’s clarion!’ This exclamation and its exclamation marks are not from nowhere. ‘Enough!’ is not running away, but rather a memory or recognition of a past mood, long-lived and not to be re-lived. Hopkins has been here before – in what are often called the ‘Sonnets of Desolation’, also written in Dublin probably two or three years before ‘That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire...’. For example, ‘No worst’ begins with: ‘No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief’ and ends: ‘Life death does end and each day dies with sleep.’ So ‘Enough!’ means Hopkins will not follow a real, debilitating and persistent mood which he had experienced and about which he had already written some six sonnets – wrestling, as in [‘Carrion Comfort’](#), ‘with (my God!) my God.’

The ‘heart’s clarion!’ is the Resurrection of Jesus and so the resurrection of both humankind and nature. ‘Flesh’ will ‘fade’ and ‘fall’, nature will leave only ‘ash’. Then, ‘at a trumpet crash, / I am all at once what Christ is, | since he was what I am’. So indeed we find ‘the just man justices’ as in ‘As Kingfishers Catch Fire’. However, ‘justices’ is what Christ does and his justicing has the transformed and transforming aspect and impetus of resurrection. Resurrection is not to be reduced to restoration, resuscitation or immortality but is a transformation, another kind of ‘glory’ (1 Corinthians 15:35-49). So this ‘Jack, joke, poor potsherd’ – Hopkins, anyone and everyone – or ‘immortal diamond’, is truly ‘immortal diamond’. The diamond, itself a product of transformation and an old image of perpetuity, ‘remains itself but the splendor its [sic] gives comes from another light that utterly fills it.’<sup>4</sup> It is pleasing to imagine Heraclitus full of light...

It is extraordinary that although resurrection was indeed a requirement in European theology, in the past that theology often did little more than try to demonstrate that the theologians' understanding of Jesus's death were correct. The salvific reality of Jesus's resurrection was minimised.<sup>5</sup> Hopkins' poetry points to a much fuller reality. Faith and belief need this wholeness of death and resurrection.

Hopkins' poetry was not published in his lifetime.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps this is one hinterland to this sonnet on Christ's 'resurrection'. Another Dublin sonnet, 'To seem the stranger' speaks of 'dark heaven's baffling ban' which is 'to hoard unheard'. What came to nothing can have an unforecasted and transformed future.

For [Seamus Heaney](#), good poetry is 'travel-worthy' in that it can cross space-time, move between cultures and enliven different circumstances.<sup>7</sup> So 'The Windhover' might relate to 'bad religion' (perhaps not 'relativism' so much as reductionism) and the ambiguity of 'plod' (change or keep going?). 'As Kingfishers...' stands as an encouragement to discovery and a seal of wonder on what may be given – an enlargement of Christ's mystery. And 'That Nature...' finds that we (nature looking at nature) and the universe are part of a scarcely recognisable 'future' which can enliven us now. For this we need to 'read' both the poetry and ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations of Hopkins' poetry are from Gerard Manley Hopkins (ed. Catherine Phillips) *Selected Poetry*, OUP, The World's Classics, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Endean SJ, 'The Two Vocations of Gerard Manley Hopkins', *Thinking Faith*, 11 July 2014: <https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/two-vocations-gerard-manley-hopkins>

<sup>3</sup> It's not surprising that Hopkins, from 1884 Professor of Greek and Latin Literature in University College, Dublin, refers to Heraclitus, a pre-Socratic philosopher and who wrote on 'nature' although only fragments of his work survive. It is also unsurprising, though interesting, that Hopkins does not pick up on writers on change who were his near contemporaries: in science, Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* came out in 1859; in theology, John Henry Newman's *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* in 1846.

<sup>4</sup> Brian D Robinette, *Grammars of Resurrection. A Christian Theology of Presence and Absence* (Herder & Herder: Crossroad, 2009), p.380. Robinette gives a 'reading' of 'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire...' on pp. 378-380.

<sup>5</sup> See Robinette's Introduction to the above.

<sup>6</sup> Other poets unpublished in their lifetimes were George Herbert (1593 – 1633) and Emily Dickinson (1830 – 1886).

<sup>7</sup> See 'The Nobel Lecture' of 1995 in Seamus Heaney, *Opened Ground: Poems 1966 – 1996* (Faber & Faber, 1998).