‘The Windhover: to Christ our Lord’: a meditation for Easter

David Lonsdale

‘Hopkins invites us to see that, while the great mystery of God’s redemptive work in Christ finds an image in the marvellous spectacle of a falcon’s flight, such wonders can also be found elsewhere in the world, if we know how and where to look.’ David Lonsdale reads Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem, ‘The Windhover’, with Easter eyes.

I caught this morning morning’s minion, king-
dom of daylight’s dauphin dapple-dáwn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
Of the rólling level undernéath him steady áir, and striding
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,
As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding
Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird, – the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plóugh down síllion
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
Fáll, gáll themsélves, and gásh góld vermílion.

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In this article, I offer a reading of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem ‘The Windhover’ as a celebratory meditation on the mystery of the incarnation, passion, death and resurrection of ‘Christ our Lord’, to whom the poem is dedicated. In particular, I focus on the poem’s rhythms, language and images, and explore some of their wider resonances and associations.

Lines 1 to 11 describe the windhover in its early -morning flight and the poet’s response to it, the stirring of wonder and admiration in his ‘heart in hiding’. The remaining lines of the poem develop the idea of the kestrel as an image of Christ. The movement of the poem as a whole, the way in which it develops, recalls the hymn in chapter 2 of the letter to the Philippians:

> …Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should

> bow….and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:5-11).

Rhythm and sound

Hopkins believed that poetry, and his own in particular, should be read aloud. Only by being heard could a poem's power and beauty, and the poet's intentions, be appreciated to the full. To help his readers, in some poems he marked the syllables that he wanted stressed, to enable the rhythms and precise meaning of the lines to be heard and felt. In the first part of this poem, the beat of the lines and the sounds of the words mirror the movement of the bird in flight (the stress marks are the poet's own):

> I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
> dom of daylight's dauphin dapple-
> dáwn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
> Of the rólling level undernéath him steady áir, and striding
> High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing in his ecstasy.

The rhythm catches the slow, powerful, almost lazy beat of the wings and the way in which, seemingly without much effort, the bird rides the currents of warm air rising from the earth. The alliteration of stressed syllables with 'd' and 'r' reinforces the beat of both the poem's rhythm and the bird's wings. Then, in the description of the kestrel's characteristic sideways flight, the rhythm changes: 'off, off forth on a swing'. In the line: 'As the skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend', the long vowels and 's' consonants mimic the movement of the bird through the air and the sound of skates on ice. The rhythms and sounds of these lines, then, capture and reinforce the beauty of the falcon in flight, and the poet's response to the spectacle.

Images of royalty

In the first eleven lines of the poem, Hopkins uses royal titles to convey a sense of the majesty of the bird in flight, and to begin to suggest that there is some connection in his mind between the falcon and 'Christ our Lord'. The titles are associated with monarchy and orders of knighthood, with echoes, too, of the world of medieval romance and chivalry. Hopkins imagines the windhover as 'morning's minion', both a servant of the morning and a 'royal favourite'; as a royal prince and heir to the throne – 'kingdom of daylight's dauphin'; and as 'my chevalier', a knight in the service of a king. As prince and heir to the kingdom of daylight, the windhover is at the same time an image of Jesus, son of God and heir to the kingdom of heaven (see also: Heb. 1:1-4; Gal. 3:26-4:7; Rom. 8:17). In addition to its 'royal' status, what also impresses the poet about the bird in flight is 'the achieve of, the mastery of the thing', an ambiguous phrase suggesting not only the bird as an achievement or masterpiece of the creator and of nature, but also its sense of power, its 'mastery' over the world it surveys. (I am reminded here of the very different admiration of the power of a bird of prey expressed in 'Hawk Roosting' by Ted Hughes).

The royal titles in Hopkins' poem also reflect the language of the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola, which played an important part throughout Hopkins' life as a Jesuit. In his writings Ignatius regularly refers to the Trinity of Father, Son and Spirit as 'God our Lord' or 'the Divine Majesty', and imagines God as surrounded by a heavenly court of angels and saints. 'Christ our Lord' is one of Ignatius's favoured titles for Jesus.

'Buckle!'

The further development of the depiction of the windhover as an image of Christ in lines 1–11 combines two movements. The first is the falcon's downward plunge at high speed, in which it seems in danger of crashing to its death before it makes a sudden, last-second change of direction ('Buckle!') and rises again to resume its flight. This is in parallel with the

('downward') movement of the incarnation, passion and death of Jesus, and the ('upward') movement of the resurrection:

> Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
> Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
> Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

This movement of descending and rising is reflected in the hymn in Philippians 2 already quoted. Both the falcon and Christ, heirs to their respective kingdoms, are majestic and beautiful before the 'descent' but, after the rising again, 'a billion/ Times told lovelier'. In both there is a transition from (apparent or real) catastrophe and death to renewed life, and even greater nobility and beauty.

'Sheer plod' and 'blue-bleak embers'

In the last three lines of the poem, there is a shift: the poet seems to change his mind, contradict himself. After spending eleven lines celebrating the heart-stirring flight of the falcon as an image of the even more wonderful mystery of the incarnation, passion, death and resurrection of Christ, he begins line 12 with the words 'No wonder of it'.

> No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plóugh down síllion
> Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
> Fáll, gáll themsélves, and gásh góld vermílion.

How to explain this change? In the section of the Spiritual Exercises entitled 'Contemplation for Attaining Love' [§§230-237], Ignatius invites those making the Exercises to seek and find God in all circumstances of life and in creatures at all levels of existence, from the 'highest' to the 'lowest', from the greatest to the seemingly simple and insignificant:

> To bring to memory the benefits received – creation, redemption and particular gifts – pondering with great affection how much God our Lord has done for me and how much he has given me of what he has. (§234)

But also:

> See how God dwells in creatures – in the elements giving being, in the plants causing growth, in the animals, producing sensation and in humankind granting … understanding. (§235)

And later:

> To consider how God labours and works on my behalf in all created things on the face of the earth; that is, he behaves in the same way as a person at work, as in the heavens, elements, plants, fruits, cattle etc. He gives being, conserves life, grants growth and feeling etc. Then to reflect within myself.

Ignatius sees all this 'activity' of God as an expression of God's love for the world and an invitation to humans to seek and love God in return (§233).

Returning to 'The Windhover', in the last three lines Hopkins invites us to see that, while the great mystery of God's redemptive work in Christ finds an image in the marvellous spectacle of a falcon's flight, such wonders can also be found elsewhere in the world, if we know how and where to look.

> No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plóugh down síllion
> Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
> Fáll, gáll themsélves, and gásh góld vermílion.

The revelation of God's redemption of the world in Christ can be seen mirrored not only in 'the kingdom of daylight's dauphin' but also in monotonous, humdrum activities and mundane natural events. Here the transition is not from one form of grace and beauty to an enhanced one, but from hardship and toil in the dark

earth to a moment of sunlight, and from bleak, dark cold to fire, light and warmth. It is difficult to think of a more apt pithy evocation of the monotony and stress of ploughing on foot behind shire horses than the poem's 'sheer plod'. Hopkins suggests that the bright sheen on the earth thrown up by the farmer's plough, and the way in which seemingly dead embers become living coals as they fall and rub against one another, can be seen as images of the transformation from darkness to light, from death to life, from sin to grace brought about through the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ. As he writes elsewhere, as a result of the incarnation:

> …. 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
>
> ('As Kingfishers catch fire')

And:

> 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.
>
> ('That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire')

'Gash gold-vermilion'

Hopkins weaves a thread of light and colour through these three images in the poem: the 'fire that breaks' from the kestrel's plumage as it catches the morning sun; the sheen on the earth ('sillion') turned up by the plough; and the 'gold-vermilion' of the embers as, falling, they rub against one another and split ('gáll themselves, and gásh').

In the Scriptures – in the burning bush, in the journey of the people of Israel through the desert, in Elijah's chariot, in Jesus's promise to bring fire on earth (Luke 12:49), at Pentecost and in the Book of Revelation – fire is associated with divine presence and power, experienced sometimes as terrifying and destructive, sometimes as consoling and creative. In the final stanza of Hopkins' long poem, 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', written about the same time as 'The Windhover', fire is associated with Christ as an image of charity, *agape*, self-giving love. With a series of titles for Christ not unlike those found in 'The Windhover', Hopkins suggests to the people of Britain in response to the shipwreck:

> Let him easter in us, be a dayspring to the
> dimness of us, be a crimson-cresseted east.
> Pride, rose, prince, hero of us, high priest,
> Our heart's charity's hearth's fire, our
> thoughts' chivalry's throng's Lord.
>
> (ll. 275-80)

If the fire in the 'The Windhover' is also the fire of love, then the fall of the 'blue-bleak embers' becomes an image of Christ's self-offering 'even unto death' for the salvation of the world. Both gold and vermillion, as traditional royal colours, recall the earlier imagery of 'The Windhover': the 'fire that breaks' from the plumage of the 'kingdom of daylight's dauphin'. In the Gospel of John, it is the death of Christ which is the hour of glory, the hour of the greatest love (see John 15:13). Perhaps the 'gold-vermilion' of the embers may also be read as an image, an oblique reference to the blood shed by Christ through the 'galling' of the crown of thorns, the nails, the flogging and the 'gash' made by the centurion's lance:

> '…the fire that breaks from thee
> then, a billion
> Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my
> chevalier!

So I suggest that, through an imaginative exploration of three images taken from every-day experience and their resonances, Hopkins reveals in this poetic celebration of the mystery of the passion, death and resurrection of Christ, a world 'charged with the grandeur of God'.

David Lonsdale taught Christian spirituality at Heythrop College and is the author of Eyes to See, Ears to Hear: An Introduction to Ignatian Spirituality *and* Dance to the Music of the Spirit: The Art of Discernment. *Since 2010 he has also been a co-ordinator and editor in the Power of the Word Project, an international academic network dedicated to fostering conversations between literature and philosophy, theology, ethics, spirituality and religious faith and practice.*