

The Sight & Sound of God

Immortal Diamond: The Spiritual Vision of Gerard Manley Hopkins (Image Publishing, 1995)

Several years ago I was helping my wife clean the attic of her parents' home. We found 50 years of accumulated past wants --- the latest fashions (from the Sixties), four broken television sets, sad-eyed dolls, and outdated furniture. Pushing the cobwebs away, brushing away dust, we attempted to bring order from chaos. We searched for something, for anything worth saving.

I opened a mildewed cardboard box. Inside was the dank smell of old books. Reaching down in the jumbled pile, I fished out a worn copy of *Modern American & British Poetry*, copyright 1955. Thumbing through it, I came upon a section devoted to Gerard Manley Hopkins. I couldn't put the book down. The attic cleaning could wait.

The next day I rushed out and bought a copy of the only Hopkins book I could find: *The Immortal Diamond: The Spiritual Vision of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. This slender volume contained a brief biography of the famous Jesuit poet and 53 of his best-known poems. I was particularly captivated by two of Hopkins' poems: "God's Grandeur" and "Pied Beauty."

The most refreshing thing that I found in these poems was their marriage of spiritual wonder and technical ability. It can be a difficult marriage because so often the Christian, in his zeal, allows the poem to become overly didactic. At worst, it can become nothing more than a prop for dogma, a propagandizing tract. While Hopkins' poems do carry moral meaning and serve a "teaching" function, he manages to give poetic voice to spiritual yearnings while respecting the nature and promise of the form. Thus, at the outset I was pleased to discover a "religious" poet who *remained* a poet.

A successful poem must transcend its particulars, whether of the poet or of the poem, and capture a universal experience with which many can identify. Hopkins largely succeeds. One can appreciate the *catholicity* of this Catholic writer's poems. Even the unconventional person of faith will find no exclusion but, rather, an accessibility in this language from "Pied Beauty:" "Glory be to God for dappled things ---/ For skies of couple-color as a brinded/ cow;/ For rose-moles all in stipple upon/ trout that swim. . . ." The language is antiquated, yet somehow fresh in its strangeness, psalm-like in its intensity. This poem and "God's Grandeur" both remind me of and were likely inspired by the celebration

of Creation contained in Psalm 148.

Hopkins' poetry is replete with inventive similes and metaphors, providing rich visual and auditory imagery that allows one to "see" and "hear" his poems. For visual imagery, sample these lines from "God's Grandeur:" "The world is charged with the grandeur of/ God./ It will flame out, *like shining from shook foil*; / It gathers to a greatness, *like the ooze of oil*/ Crushed. Feel the electricity, excitement, and anticipation in such words as "charged," "flame out," and "shining" -- strong, passionate words that ably communicate Hopkins' belief that nature revealed the awesome power, beauty, and wonder of God.

Indeed, Hopkins' word-choice, his diction, is so fresh and inventive that I can almost "see" the things he describes even when I have no idea what it is he is describing. In "Pied Beauty" he speaks of "rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim." Trout I know. Rose-moles are new to me, yet I can *almost* see them. At least Hopkins makes me want to see them. And what, after all, are "Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls. . . ?" It seems not to matter to my enjoyment of the poem.

And then there's the *sound* of his poems, as in his abundant use of alliteration. From "Pied Beauty:" "All things counter, original, spare, strange;/ Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows/ how?)/ With swift, slow; sweet, sour;/ adazzle, dim;/ He fathers-forth whose beauty is past/ change:/ Praise Him. These "chiming consonants" produce a feeling of intensity, of passion, of emotion.

In addition, Hopkins' poems have a rhyme scheme which accentuates the music of the poem without becoming predictable or sing-song. Given the unusual nature of the adjectives he uses, the rhyme scheme simply becomes a part of the whole experience. At times he uses a traditional sonnet form, as in "God's Grandeur," a fitting form for the balancing of God's immanence and transcendence because it suggests a complex unity.

He even employs the onomatopoeia with facility. From "God's Grandeur:" "Generations have trod, have trod, have trod. . . ." The words carry with it the sound of weariness, the wearing down of earth's freshness and purity beneath all that is "seared with trade; bleared,/ smeared with toil. . . ."

In sum, in these two short poems, which are merely samples of the rich work he has produced, Hopkins is able to captivate the reader by a sensual and rich, yet spiritual experience. We both hear and see the Divine. Yet it is not only his diction and form that are technically excellent, he also clearly communicates large ideas.

In "God's Grandeur" Hopkins seems to be saying that in all the ways we hide and insulate ourselves from the Divine --- in our labor, in our civilizing impulse, even in our religion --- we cannot touch or taint the "dearest freshness

deep down things,” the spiritual essence behind, amongst, or in all things. More than that, the poem contrasts and unifies both the sublime and beautiful aspect of the Divine, as evidenced in nature. The first octet of the sonnet pictures an awesome, powerful God, utilizing words such as “charged” and “flamed out” to suggest fire or, perhaps, lightening, things which can have a sometimes terrifying beauty. In contrast, the closing sestet pictures the beauty of God in the image of a sunrise. Thus, God’s “grandeur” is both awesome and beautiful. He is both over his Creation (“Because the Holy Ghost over the bent/ World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings”) and among his creation (“There lives the dearest freshness deep down things”), both transcendent and immanent.

Similarly, “Pied Beauty” is a rich celebration of the diversity of creation, its wonder, and its mystery. He contrasts the changeable nature of Creation, its mutability, with God’s unchangeable, immutable nature. And yet, again, God is separate from but still intimately connected with the Creation which he “fathers-forth.” Linked phrases like “Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls” suggest a connectedness within Creation and yet, at the same time, the individuality of each created thing (“All things counter, original, spare, strange. . . .”). It produces an almost childlike wonder at what can be taken so for granted.

Whether in diction, form, or content, Hopkins demonstrates a technical ability that is superior. When married to his honest poems of spiritual yearning or, as in the poems critiqued here, his celebrations of the divine order of nature and of the Divine, they leave us in mystery and wonder, a natural place when we consider the infinite.

It was fitting to discover Hopkins in a humble pile of discards in a dusty attic. For all his ability, Gerard Manley Hopkins was a poet of humility, full of wonder and hope at the beauty of nature and of the Divine, yet cognizant of his finite human form. “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.” Reading *Immortal Diamond*, I saw his many facets. I saw words that *shine*. And I remembered who I am before God.