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# “Let Joy Size at God Knows When to God Knows What”: Gerard Manley Hopkins’s Struggle for Comfort, and the Illuminating Nature of Unwarranted Suffering

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Claremont McKenna College

**“Let Joy Size at God Knows When to God Knows What”: Gerard Manley  
Hopkins’s Struggle for Comfort, and the Illuminating Nature of Unwarranted  
Suffering**

Submitted to  
Professor Robert Faggen  
And  
Dean Peter Uvin  
by  
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Gerard Manley Hopkins suffered deeply. His “Terrible Sonnets” are confessional poetry that demonstrate his struggle with his God and with himself. This work analyses the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, starting Noah and ending with Jesus’s promise of a Paraclete, to analyze how both God and Man approach earthly and heavenly comfort. The work will then turn to Hopkins’s poetry to show that Hopkins’s unshakable faith and deep understanding of the Bible is both the cause and the cure of his suffering. This essay concludes that it is only through suffering that Hopkins, like Job, Jesus, and King Lear, is able to achieve both comfort and wisdom.

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*Mom*

*Dad*

*Bruce*

*Jack*

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## Introduction

The critic John Middleton Murry wrote that “We cannot apprehend a work of literature except as a manifestation of the rhythm of the soul of the man who created it. If we stop short of that, our understanding is incomplete” (Pick, 138). The priest and poet Gerard Manley Hopkins had a beautiful, tortured soul. The rhythm of Hopkins’s soul, like the rhythm of his poetry, overflowed with stresses. He was foremost a priest, and wrote only poetry to glorify and better understand God. Hopkins felt heights and deep stresses that came from his complete devotion to God, and glory and despair followed from such devotion. On this subject Hopkins wrote that God’s “mystery must be instressed, stressed; For I greet him the days I meet him, and bless when I understand.” And he certainly did “greet God.” Hopkins dwelled intensely on the natural world, which he believed was God substantiated, and so created some of Christianity’s most stunning devotional poetry. He wrote such brilliant and bursting lines as the opening lines of “God’s Grandeur”:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil

and the closing tercet of “The Windhover”:

shéer plód makes plough down sillion

Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,

Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.

Hopkins’s belief that God’s “mystery must be instressed, stressed” also resulted in terrible anguish. Hopkins failed, as all those who attempt it do, to understand God’s

ways, and this was a source of enormous suffering for the poet. Hopkins's writing, especially his later work, is filled with utter torment. Hopkins's poetry offers a glimpse into the mind of a man whose attention to God is so great that it tears him apart. God does just that in Hopkins's Sonnet 41, "Carrion Comfort":

But ah, but O thou terrible, why wouldst thou rude on me  
 Thy wring-world right foot rock? lay a lionlimb against me?  
 scan  
 With darksome devouring eyes my bruised bones? and fan,  
 O in turns of tempest, me heaped there; me frantic to avoid  
 thee and flee?

But while Hopkins often shows his own "wrestling with God" to be a source of his misery, there is never an indication that he wavers in his faith. A large element of Hopkins's misery derives from his strong devotion to God, and his desire to be perfect for Him. As is evidenced by an entry Hopkins wrote in his notes, much of Hopkins's torture comes from his pursuit of an impossible ideal and the failure of his spirit work towards this goal:

I am ashamed of the little I have done, of my waste  
 of time, although my helplessness and weakness is such  
 that I could scarcely do otherwise. And yet the wise man  
 warns us against excusing ourselves in that fashion. I  
 cannot then be excused; but what is life without aim,  
 without spur, without help? All my undertakings miscarry:  
 I am like a straining eunuch. I wish then for death: yet if I

died now I shd. Die imperfect, no master of myself, and  
 that is the worst picture of all. O my God, look down on  
 me. (Thornton, 55).

The absence of spirit is second only to the absence of comfort in regards to Hopkins's complaints. Hopkins fixates on comfort, begs for it, demands it, tries to provide it for himself. A clue as to why comfort was so important to Hopkins is found in the spiritual exercises that Hopkins, as a member of the Jesuit Order, had to rigorously partake in. John Pick argues that it is because of these exercises, which involve intense prayer, meditation, and reflection, that Hopkins entered a period of what Pick calls "spiritual desolation." Sister Madelera, who has studied "spiritual dryness" in ascetical writers, claims that spiritual desolation is "perhaps one of the commonest of all the trials in the spiritual life and one on which almost every spiritual writer has had something to say" (Pick, 132).

Hopkins' poetry, most notably his "terrible sonnets," the seven untitled, undated works that were likely written in 1884-5, are cries from within this period of spiritual desolation. In all of them, Hopkins in some way asks or attempts to find comfort that will ease his misery. While it is understandable that Hopkins would beg for comfort during a time of great distress, his writhes and pleas run contrary to the lessons given in the Bible and the doctrines of the Society of Jesus that concern comfort. Sister Madelera's *Imitation of Christ*, a book that St. Ignatius, the founder of the Jesuits, recommended to all of his followers, included:

It is no hard matter to despise human comfort, when we  
 have that which is divine.



It is much and very much, to be able to lack both human and divine comfort; and, for God's honour, to be willing cheerfully to endure desolation of heart; and to seek oneself in nothing, nor to regard one's own merit. (Pick, 133).

Madelera's advice for those who suffered is to not struggle and strive for comfort, but to let God perform His will:

As for comforts, leave them to God; let Him do therein as shall best please him

...

"For when the grace of God cometh unto a man, then he is able for all things. And when it goeth away, then is he poor and weak, and as it were left only for affliction.

In this case thou oughtest not to be cast down, nor to despair; but to resign thyself calmly to the will of God, and whatever comes upon thee, to endure it for the glory of Jesus Christ" (Pick, 148 & 135).

A close examination of the Bible yields a similar conclusion in regards to comfort: Man should not provide comfort for themselves, comfort can only be provided by God.

This paper will take five poems in which Hopkins's personal struggles with God and his search for comfort are the most vivid, and will explore why it is that Hopkins continues to ask for a comfort that he knows Jesuits ought not request. Chapter One will

chart the progression of the way that comfort is viewed in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Chapter Two analyzes Sonnet 44 “No worse there is none,” the poem in which Hopkins expresses his distance from God the most vividly, and begs God for comfort the most explicitly. Chapter Three analyzes two poems in which Hopkins most feels the presence of God as a double-natured entity, Sonnet 41 “Carrion Comfort,” and Part One of “The Wreck of the Deutschland.” Chapter Four pairs Sonnet 42 “No worst, there is none” with Sonnet 46 “My own heart let me have more pity on” to show that Hopkins could not simply read and absorb the teachings of the Bible and of Madelera; as they taught a type of wisdom that can only be learned through suffering.

## I. Comfort in the Bible

The notion of “comfort” progresses throughout the Old Testament. In the Torah there is no sense in which God comforts humans. It is up to man to comfort one another. The earliest sense in which “comfort” is mentioned is in Genesis 5:28. Lamech names his son נֹחַ (Noah) meaning "rest, comfort." After God created man, He appeared to them only as a severe and punishing force. After Adam and Eve ate the fruit that God had forbidden, God punished the two by expelling them from the Garden and ordering to them that “cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life” (King James Version, Gen. 3:17). The next appearance of God is after the fratricide of Abel, when God punishes Cain so severely that the marked brother cries “My punishment is greater than I can bear” (Gen. 4:13). After this horrible punishment, God is silent for nine generations and approximately 1000 years.

Lamech’s naming of his son is man’s first notable attempt at comforting themselves in a world in which God is at best absent, and at worst a horrifying destructive force. Very little information is given about the post-lapsarian, antediluvian age other than God’s observation that “the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” However, God has not given any explicit commandments to man or drawn any distinction between good and evil. The men and women of this time lived in the shadow of a God who they were aware had an ethical code that was severe in its punishment, but which was otherwise unknown to them. The last contact God made with earth 1000 years before when He punished Cain for murder, an act that God had never explicitly classified as a

crime. Lamech explains that he has named his son Noah because “This same shall comfort us concerning our work and toil of our hands, because of the ground which the LORD hath cursed” (Gen. 5:28). That Lamech named his son Noah or “comfort” reflects Man’s state of constant unease and prevalence of the human desire to be comforted.

It is significant that God establishes his first covenant with Noah. Although God kills almost all life with a great flood, man gains a type of security - a comfort - when God, after such a long silence, reveals himself again. God promises Noah that there will be restrictions on the extent to which He will punish men:

And I, behold, I establish my covenant with you, and with  
your seed after you;

And with every living creature that is with you, of the  
fowl, of the cattle, and of every beast of the earth with  
you; from all that go out of the ark, to every beast of the  
earth.

And I will establish my covenant with you, neither shall  
all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of a flood;  
neither shall there any more be a flood to destroy the earth.  
(Gen. 12:9-11).

Lamech gives the name “comfort,” not God. It is a clear example not only of humans asking God for comfort, but of the attempts at comfort that humans attempt for themselves. But it is important to note that God provided the comfort of the covenant, not Man, and that He did not do so because Man asked for comfort (after all, God drowned

the man who asked for it) but for His own reasons. In the Torah, the comfort that God provides through the covenants is, at best, secondary to God's desire that His will is obeyed. Instead, the only comfort that is intentionally given in the Torah is the comfort that humans provide one another. For example, in Genesis, 24:67:

And Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and  
took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her:  
and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death. (Gen.  
24:67).

And Genesis 37:35:

And all his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him; but he  
refused to be comforted; and he said, For I will go down into the grave  
unto my son mourning. Thus his father wept for him (Gen. 37:35).

The most common type of comfort in the Torah comes from within a family unit after a death. However, there are several examples in which someone comforts someone outside of their family. This is usually a negative act and is done without true concern for comfort. King David, the masterful and slimy ruler, is a clear example of a false comforter. He comforts those around him, but these acts are often for for pain he himself has caused. In Second Samuel, King David falls in love with Bathsheba, seduces her, and then has her husband Uriah killed. David's direct involvement in Bathsheba's suffering makes the comfort that he gives her seem insincere:

And David comforted Bathsheba his wife, and went in  
unto her, and lay with her: and she bare a son, and he

called his name Solomon: and the Lord loved him. (2 Sam. 12:24).

In First Chronicles, King David is again involved with earthly comfort that results in disaster for the comforted. His neighbor King Nahash of Ammon dies, and David sends a messenger to comfort the new King, Nahash's son. However the comfort that David offers is not trusted:

And David said, I will shew kindness unto Hanun the son of Nahash, because his father shewed kindness to me. And David sent messengers to comfort him concerning his father. So the servants of David came into the land of the children of Ammon to Hanun, to comfort him.

But the princes of the children of Ammon said to Hanun, Thinkest thou that David doth honour thy father, that he hath sent comforters unto thee? are not his servants come unto thee for to search, and to overthrow, and to spy out the land? (1 Chron. 19:2-3).

The Ammonites took the comforters, shaved them, cut off their clothes, and sent them away. King David declared war, and utterly destroys the Ammonites. David's simple act of comfort ended up having horrific results for King Hanun, the very man he was trying to comfort.

*Ketuvim*

While the Torah offers a few examples, the Ketuvim thoroughly shows that Man should not provide comfort, especially spiritual comfort, to his fellow Man. The clearest biblical example the failure of human comfort is found in The Book of Job. The notion of “comfort” and “comforting” is very important to the pitiful character of Job. God took away Job’s crops, his livestock, and his children, and then covered him in terrible boils. In this story, Job seeks out comforters to justify how it is possible that he could be inflicted with such terrible suffering. His friends, the now famous “Comforters of Job,” attempt to explain what seems at best to be an absent God, and at worst a malevolent God. Eliphaz the Temanite attempts to comfort Job with the claim that there is a moral order in the world:

Even as I have seen, they that plow iniquity, and sow  
wickedness, reap the same.

By the blast of God they perish, and by the breath of his  
nostrils are they consumed. (Job 4:8-9).

That one can find comfort in the belief that the world operates on a moral order is found again Psalm 119. This psalm indicates that God’s commandments are the dearest comfort God has given. Yes, God should be feared, but only if you break his commandments:

My hands also will I lift up unto thy commandments,  
which I have loved; and I will meditate in thy statutes.

Remember the word unto thy servant, upon which thou  
hast caused me to hope.

This is my comfort in my affliction: for thy word hath quickened me.

The proud have had me greatly in derision: yet have I not declined from thy law.

I remembered thy judgments of old, O Lord; and have comforted myself.

Horror hath taken hold upon me because of the wicked that forsake thy law. (Ps. 119: 48-53).

Both Eliphaz and the speaker of Psalm 119 receive comfort not only from the knowledge that they will not be harmed by God as long as they follow his commandments, but also from the knowledge that those who do break God's commandments (like Job) are punished. Eliphaz goes even further, and argues that Job should be thankful for the "correction" that God has given him, and that suffering is a blessing:

Behold, happy is the man whom God correcteth: therefore despise not thou the chastening of the almighty (Job 5:17)

Eliphaz believes that God's power is so great that even Man's sin is a part of God's larger purpose.

Bildad the Shuhite takes a historical approach to comfort. Bildad reasons that God has helped man in the past, and that if Job is wants to see God, he must look to the past:

For inquire, I pray thee, of the former age, and prepare thyself to the search of their fathers:



(For we are buy of yesterday, and know nothing, because  
our days upon each are a shadow:)

Shall not they teach thee, and tell thee, and utter words out  
of their heart. (Job 8:8-10).

The third comforter, Zophar the Naamathite, tries to comfort Job by saying that  
God's wisdom is beyond Job's understanding, and that while Job might not think that  
he has done wrong, God knows the truth:

For thou hast said, My doctrine is pure, and I am clean in  
thine eyes.

But oh that God would speak, and open his lips against thee;  
And that he would shew thee the secrets of wisdom, that  
they are double to that which is! Know therefore that God  
exacteth of thee less than thine iniquity deserveth. (Job 11:4-  
6).

This is a sentiment that is expressed again in Psalm 77. The psalm is a  
recollection of suffering. The speaker of the psalm is not concerned with God's  
absence, but rather with how God operates on Earth.

I cried unto God with my voice, even unto God with my  
voice; and he gave ear unto me.

In the day of my trouble I sought the Lord: my sore ran in  
the night, and ceased not: my soul refused to be  
comforted.

I remembered God, and was troubled: I complained, and  
my spirit was overwhelmed. Selah (Ps. 77:1-3)

The speaker makes it clear in the first verse that God is with him, and creates an anthropomorphic image that “he gave ear unto me.” This, however, is not enough - it is God’s presence, not his absence, that troubles the speaker and causes him to reflect, “my soul refused to be comforted.” The speaker arrives at a resolution which is a mix of both Bildad and Zophar’s conclusions: God’s ways are above human understanding, but we can look to our fathers to see that God cares for his people:

Thy way is in the sea, and thy path in the great waters, and  
thy footsteps are not known.

Thou leddest thy people like a flock by the hand of Moses  
and Aaron (Ps. 77:19-20).

While these three friend’s explicit attempt is to provide comfort to their suffering friend, each of these justifications of God are more attempts of comfort for themselves. Eliphaz reasons that the reason that bad things are happening to a good person is that there is a moral order in the universe, and the reason why Job suffers and he does not is because he is more moral than Job. Bildad steps away from the individual and into the abstract. He comforts himself with the stories of the past, and tries to draw from them a narrative in which God has always been good and provided for man. And Zophar, most blind and astonishingly, claims that there is some kind of higher knowledge which God, and maybe even himself, are a part of.

The comforters give him explanations which do not hold Job accountable for his miseries, and this leads Job to lay the weight of his suffering on God. The speaker of the

poem asks his lord how it is that such a faithful servant of God could be so wretchedly tortured by him. God, in his longest continuous portion of speech in the Bible, speaks out a whirlwind and delivers one of the most astounding chastisements in literature:

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind, and  
said,

Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without  
knowledge?

Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of  
thee, and answer thou me.

Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?  
declare, if thou hast understanding.

Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest? or  
who hath stretched the line upon it?

Whereupon are the foundations thereof fastened? or who  
laid the corner stone thereof;

When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of  
God shouted for joy?

Or who shut up the sea with doors, when it brake forth, as  
if it had issued out of the womb? (Job 38:1-8).

For four full chapters God utterly strips Job down with the same sustained, furious energy. By the end, a lesson has been drilled into Job's consciousness in a way more profoundly savage than any other directions in the Bible. God's meaning is painfully clear to Job: one cannot look to Man or to God for comfort.

The bitter conclusion that Job comes to is expressed in Psalm 69. The psalm makes a plea to God for relief that matches Job in its despair and in the vivid description of suffering:

Save me, O God; for the waters are come in unto my soul.

I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing: I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me.

I am weary of my crying: my throat is dried: mine eyes fail while I wait for my God (PS. 69:1-3).

But the bitterest of his lamentations is that he is completely alone in his suffering, and that there is no one who can give him comfort:

20 “Reproach hath broken my heart; and I am full of heaviness: and I looked for some to take pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none.”

This sense of abandonment in the Ketuvim is also vividly presented in Lamentations 1:16:

For these things I weep; mine eye, mine eye runneth down with water, because the comforter that should relieve my soul is far from me: my children are desolate, because the enemy prevailed (Lam. 1:16).

A careful examination of the Ketuvim yields the conclusion that there can be no earthly comfort. Faced with the horror and blackness of the world, the comfort that other men can offer is at best absent, and at worst, incomplete and self-serving. Solomon expresses it best in Ecclesiastes 4:1:

“So I returned, and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun: and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power; but they had no comforter” (Eccles. 4:1)

### *Nevi'im*

At the end of Isaiah 39, the final chapter of First Isaiah, Isaiah prophesies to King Hezekiah of the coming Babylonian conquest of Judah and the era, known as the Babylonian Captivity, that will follow. Second Isaiah was likely written during the this captivity. Professor Herbert Marks describes the composition of Second Isaiah as:

Though clearly influenced by the prophecies of Isaiah of Jerusalem, the two sets of poetic homilies collectively known as Second Isaiah were written and compiled anonymously in the last years of the Babylonian Empire and later joined together with their postexilic sequel (chaps. 55-66), to an earlier version of chaps. 1-39. (Marks, 1193).

Second Isaiah was written during a time of considerable grief for the Jews. The Babylonians had captured their kingdom, and the Jews were imprisoned. It appeared that the covenants that God made with his people were not being kept. It was a time of

enormous turmoil and distress, which is why it is so significant, and fitting, that the Second Isaiah begins with God's first mention of comfort:

“Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.  
 Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that  
 her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned:  
 for she hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her  
 sins” (Isa. 40: 1-2).

God's message continues with two lines which at first seem negative and helpless, as if they were from Ecclesiastes:

The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All  
 flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the  
 flower of the field:  
 The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit  
 of the LORD bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass.  
 (Isa. 40 6-7)

But as the Asbury Bible Commentary notes, v. 6-7 refer to the transitory nature of human contrivances, particularly human kingdoms like that of Babylon. As with all things human, such kingdoms will fade away like the grass, while this word of comfort and hope will stand forever.” (*Asbury*)

For the first time, God speaks to his people and offers an explicit command that his people should be comforted. It is not simply a covenant which promises a

continuation of a line through future generations. Instead, God tells the tribe of Judah that they should be comforted, and trust that God will make all things right for them.

### *The New Testament*

The New Testament completely changed the theological implications of comfort. Jesus took comfort as an important aspect of his ministering. He construed comfort as a certainty. On the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus proclaimed that “Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted (Matthew, 5:4). Jesus flips the notion of a moral order in the world; not only do bad things happen to good people, but it is because they are good that they suffer. Jesus also makes it explicit that although they suffer now, there will be comfort in the future. It is significant to note that Jesus only makes the claim that “they shall be comforted” in the future. This is to say either that they will be comforted after death, or that some change will come in the future in which they will either no longer suffer, or that they will continue to suffer, but will be comforted. In John 14 Jesus explains how this last scenario is possible. Jesus promises that he will provide some new force, the Holy Ghost, which will comfort them forever :

If ye love me, keep my commandments.

And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another

Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever;

Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive,

because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye

know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you.

I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you.(John  
14:15-18).

Jesus makes it clear that up until this point, his role was to comfort mankind. But Jesus is also aware that he must die, and so promises that God will send not an earthly, mortal force, but a spiritual, eternal one. The word “Comforter” in the New Testament is translated from the Greek “Παράκλησις” or “paráklēsis.” This can also be translated to “encouragement” or “consolation” (Hammond and Busch, 375). It is not just that God will provide comfort for his suffering servants, he will also provide for them the means by which they can abide by his commandments. Jesus can give the commandments, but it is the Holy Ghost, the paráklēte, who will stay with Man and remind them of the spirit of Jesus’s message:

But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the  
Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things,  
and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I  
have said unto you. (John 14:26).

The notion of duty in relationship to comfort is further expanded upon in the opening of Second Corinthians. Paul praises God for his sacrifice, and advises the Corinthians to follow Jesus. Paul explains that just as Jesus suffered to comfort man, Man should also suffer in order to encourage his peers to find God. Jesus’s sacrifice proves that God loves man, and that he is “the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort,” but Paul goes on to explain the duties that come with this comfort. The more we suffer, the more we are like Christ, and the more we are able to comfort others and lead them to salvation:



Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God.

For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ.

And whether we be afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effectual in the enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer: or whether we be comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation.

And our hope of you is stedfast, knowing, that as ye are partakers of the sufferings, so shall ye be also of the consolation. (2 Cor. 1:4-7)

## II. One of Hopkins's "Cries Countless" for Comfort

Hopkins's sense of comfort is derived from the New Testament. His prayers for "comfort" often seem to be much more a call for a Paraclete. Hopkins wrote one of his sermons on the importance of Jesus' promise of a Paraclete. He points out that the Holy Ghost is often translated as "comforter," but as he explains in his sermon "The Paraclete," the word *comforter* does not go far enough. Hopkins goes on to give his own impression of what kind of force God has provided for man:

A Paraclete is one who comforts, who cheers, who encourages, who persuades, who exhorts, who stirs up, who urges forward, who calls on; what the spur and word of command is to a horse, what clapping of hands is to a speaker, what a trumpet is to the soldier, that a Paraclete is to the soul: *one who calls us on*, that is what it means, a Paraclete is one who calls us on to good. (Notebooks, 287).

In even simpler terms, Hopkins portrays a Paraclete as someone who provides a spirit - a will to live, and most important, a will to live for God. Hopkins portrays the Holy Spirit in a way so childish and innocent that it is almost humorous. In fact, his congregation laughed at his words. It is not difficult to see why. Hopkins tries to create a style that his congregation, which was composed mostly of navy sailors or docks men, could relate to. However, as John Pick points out, it is "easy to imagine that poor delivery might have made [the following] bathetic":

One sight is before my mind, it is homely but it comes  
 home: you have seen at cricket how when one of the  
 batsmen at the wicket has made a hit and wants to score a  
 run, the other doubts, hangs back, or is ready to run in  
 again, how eagerly the first will cry/Come on, come on! – a  
 Paraclete is just that, something that cheers the spirit of  
 man, with signals and with cries, all zealous that he should  
 do something and full of assurance that if he will he can,  
 calling him on, springing to meet him half way, crying to  
 his ears or to his heart: This way to do God's will, this way  
 to save your soul, come on, come on! (Pick, 129).

While it is humorous to imagine a man of Hopkins's stature and brilliance standing on a stage making a windmill motion with his arm whilst shouting "come on, come on," there is something tragic about what Hopkins has written. In his public sermon, Hopkins writes of how tremendous a blessing the Holy Ghost is for man, but his private poetry reflects a completely different reality.

In his sonnet "I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day," Hopkins expresses not only his depression, but also the frustration and abandonment he feels at having been promised a Paraclete, and not having one. This poem is notable in the way that Hopkins expresses tremendous suffering without giving any specific causes or symptoms of his complaint. This poem does not ask for comfort in the way that Job asks for comfort after his family is killed, his wealth is taken away, and his health is destroyed. Instead Hopkins expresses what the Germans call "weltschmerz," or pain of life. The subject-less misery

that he expresses are not related to earthly troubles, but are cries of spiritual unease. Both of these poems ask God to provide a spirit who “comforts, who cheers, who encourages, who persuades, who exhorts, who stirs up, who urges forward, who calls on;” in short, Hopkins asks God for a Paraclete.

Hopkins’s Sonnet 44 “I wake and feel the fell of dark not day” immediately conveys not only the bleakness of his situation, but also just how lost and helpless he feels. A fruitful point of comparison, and one which Hopkins likely intended, is John Milton’s Sonnet 23, which begins:

Methought I saw my late espoused saint

Brought to me, like Alcestis, from the grave,

The first thirteen lines of Milton’s sonnet are extremely positive. The blind poet Milton has not only regained his sense of sight, but he has also regained his dead wife.

However the fourteenth line collapses the joy of the previous thirteen lines, and reveals that they are all a dream: “I wak'd, she fled, and day brought back my night.”

Milton has a very definite cause for his despair in both his blindness and his dead wife. However, he is afforded some relief in his dream in which he regains both. The final line takes away both, and ends in the paradox “day brought back my night.” Here, the night is both Milton’s blindness and his metaphorical despair.

Hopkins’s sonnet seems to begin where Milton’s sonnet ends. Hopkins too wakes to darkness. But Hopkins does not see this darkness, he “feel[s]” it. The abstract notion of the dark continues as Hopkins writes that it is the “fell of dark.” Here “fell” is the past tense of intransitive verb form of “to fall.” Hopkins does not describe a broad time period, such as “I wake and feel the fallen dark, not day,” which metrically works

equally well, but instead brings a past event into the present. For Hopkins, darkness fell, and he can feel in the present tense this specific event, as if night were constantly falling. Hopkins wakes to a state of perpetual descending into dark, as if each new moment were worse than the previous.

“Fell” is the Latin for “gall,” a word which Hopkins uses at the beginning of line nine to describe himself, and which means “bitterness; ... animosity, rancor.”<sup>1</sup> Hopkins wakes to the malice of the world, not to the spirit of comfort that Jesus promises in John 14. But “gall” is also used in line nine to refer not to the world, but to himself: “I am gall, I am heartburn.” It is not only the world that is bitter, it is also Hopkins himself. Both the world and Hopkins can only be in this world of “gall” because of the absence of a Paraclete.

There is a third sense of the word “fell,” which comes from the Old Norse for mountain “*fial*,” which is “a hill, mountain. Obs. exc. in proper names of hills in the north-west of England, as Bowfell, Scawfell, etc.”<sup>2</sup> Hopkins would have surely known of this sense having lived in Stoney Hurst, North Wales, and Liverpool. Substituting this sense into the line, it would read “I wake and feel the mountains of dark, not day.” The idea of dark mountains of the mind are repeated in Hopkins sonnet “No worst, there is none” where Hopkins moans “O the mind, mind has mountains.” These “cliffs of fall” are described as being part of the physical make-up of the brain. The suffering that Hopkins feels, then, is not something inflicted upon him by God, but is part of Hopkins’s physiology. Hopkins addresses this further in his Sonnet 47, “My own heart let me have more pity on,” in which Hopkins asks his mind to accept God’s comfort

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<sup>1</sup> “fell, n.3.” *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2016. Web. 25 April 2016.

<sup>2</sup> “fell, n.2.” *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2016. Web. 25 April 2016.

and to let it shine: “as skies / Betweenpie mountains - lights a lovely mile.” In this later poem, Hopkins reasons with himself that the Paraclete is present and will comfort him, if he will only let it. However, in “I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day,” Hopkins really believes that God’s spirit has either abandoned him, or that these mountains have kept God’s light from shining onto Hopkins. This is made clearer in the next three lines, in which Hopkins directly addresses his own heart:

What hours, O what black hours we have spent  
This night! what sights you, heart, saw; ways you went  
And more must, in yet longer light's delay.

Hopkins uses the inclusive pronoun “we” to refer to himself and his heart. By doing so, Hopkins places significant emphasis on the heart as a sovereign entity, and makes it clear that his reference to it is not a metonymy. It is significant that while Hopkins uses for himself the verb “to feel” to describe something visual, the heart, which would usually feel, is now described as having vision. Hopkins’s intentions become clearer when the second quatrain is examined:

With witness I speak this. But where I say  
Hours I mean years, mean life. And my lament  
Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent  
To dearest him that lives alas! away.

Hopkins repeats the eternity of suffering that he feels. An hour of life feels like a year, like a lifetime. Hopkins is not so far off from writing “mean eternity” next. But note that it is not “But when I say,” it is “But *where* I say” (emphasis my own). This slight distinction draws attention not to the words being spoken, but to the words that have been

written down. It is a conscious evocation that the sonnet is a piece of writing. To be more precise, the “where” is an indication that the sonnet is actually a letter. “I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day” is a direct entreaty from Hopkins to God, asking Him to provide the spirit that Hopkins was promised.

This proposal is strengthened by the very short, powerful statement that begins the stanza: “With witness I speak this.” The OED cites “witness” as “applied to the inward testimony of the conscience;” and directly cites that this sense comes “after 2 Cor. i. 12.”<sup>3</sup> Second Corinthians 12 is the beginning of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. In this line, Paul expresses the “inner testimony” of his conscience, and tells his audience that what he is about to say is true:

For our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience,  
that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly  
wisdom, but by the grace of God, we have had our  
conversation in the world, and more abundantly to you-  
ward (2 Cor. 1:12).

But Unlike Paul, Hopkins is not addressing his fellow man, but rather is putting this statement of sincerity at the start of a letter that is composed directly to God.

This claim that the second stanza of Hopkins’s poem is a letter addressed to God is strengthened in the second half of the stanza. “And my lament” (notice that it is only one lament) / “Is cries countless” (here again is the infinite nature of Hopkins’s pain) “cries like dead letters sent / To dearest him that lives alas! Away.” Most commentators read “dead letters” simply as “letters that do not arrive to their sender,” which is certainly

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<sup>3</sup> “witness, n.” *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2016. Web. 25 April 2016.

true. Hopkins's epistolary pleas for comfort, this one included, have not reached "dearest him that lives alas! Away," that is, God and the Holy Ghost. However, there is a significant double meaning in the phrase "dead letters." Herman Melville picked up on this connection in his wonderful and tragic *Bartleby the Scrivener*. Bartleby does almost nothing throughout the story but be obstinate. He has no strong desires, no sense of pleasure, and no spirit. Almost nothing is told of Bartleby's life before the story begins, but at the end the narrator comes upon one clue to his past life:

The report was this: that Bartleby had been a subordinate clerk in the Dead Letter Office at Washington, from which he had been suddenly removed by a change in the administration. When I think over this rumor, I cannot adequately express the emotions which seize me. Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men? Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness, can any business seem more fitted to heighten it than that of continually handling these dead letters and assorting them for the flames? (Melville).

This scrivener who is so "prone to a pallid hopelessness" wholly lacks the spirit that Hopkins describes as "one who comforts, who cheers, who encourages, who persuades, who exhorts, who stirs up, who urges forward." Bartleby is a man further along in his spiritual misery than Hopkins is in the sonnet, but both have their misfortunes rooted in "dead letters." As the Narrator in Melville's work expresses, "Dead letters! Does it not sound like dead men?"



Both Hopkins and Melville understood that the phrase “dead letters” evokes the most famous phrase of The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians:

Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as *being* from ourselves, but our sufficiency *is* from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life (2 Cor. 3:5-6).

The full meaning of Hopkins's sonnet rests upon “dead letters,” and its evocation of Second Corinthians. The dead letters is a reference to Jesus’ overturning of the Mosaic covenant, in which the commandments that God handed down for men to follow were written upon stone tablets. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus expands the requirements of the Mosaic covenant. He states that Man must not follow the word of the law that God set out in letters on the stone tablets, but must instead follow the much looser, less clear spirit of the law. This task is considerably more difficult. Though following previously clear commandments such as “thou shalt not kill” and “thou shalt not commit adultery” was sufficient, now under Jesus’ new covenant, “whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgement,” and “whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart” (Matt. 5:22 & 28). This new covenant is considerably more exacting for Man. Captain Ishmael, another great character from Melville, also strives to live life in a world without any hint of a Paraclete. He might well have spoken in *Moby Dick*, “He tasks me; he heaps me,” in reference to Jesus’ near-impossible commandments for Man (*Moby Dick*, 138).

However, in Second Corinthians Paul agrees that men’s resources alone are not sufficient for them to follow God’s commandments. Paul states that man’s “sufficiency is from God,” who has made Man “sufficient as ministers of the new covenant.” In this

new covenant, Man shall follow “the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” Here, “letter kill” - “Dead letters.”

While the sense of “letters” as character representations is significant to both Hopkins’s sonnet and Second Corinthians 3, the sense of “letters” as epistles is equally important. Second Corinthians is itself an epistle, while Second Corinthians 3 begins with a rhetorical question that asks if man is able “commend” (praise and support) himself on his own, or if Man needs specific writings of commendation from Jesus:

Do we begin again to commend ourselves? or need we, as  
some others, epistles of commendation to you, or letters of  
commendation from you?

Paul then answers this question in the next two verses:

Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read of  
all men:

Forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle  
of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with  
the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in  
fleshy tables of the heart (2 Cor. 3:1-3).

Paul reasons that the answer to his question is a combination of both human self-sufficiency and spiritual support. Jesus has ministered an epistle, that is, a direct spiritual message, to man. However this message has not been inscribed in stone tablets as it was in the Sinai covenant of Exodus 34:1, but is instead written with the “Spirit of

the living God,” that is, the Holy Ghost, “in the fleshy tables of the heart.” What Paul describes is the “new covenant” that Jeremiah prophesies:

Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah:

Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the LORD:

But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. (Jer. 31:31-3).

In Second Corinthians 3 Paul restates Jeremiah’s prophecy and declares that it has been fulfilled by Jesus, and then goes further interprets to interpret this writing to be a literal letter of support that is made up of, to cite Hopkins once again, the Paraclete “who comforts, who cheers, who encourages, who persuades, who exhorts, who stirs up, who urges forward.”

Second Corinthians illuminates some of the curiosities of the first stanza: specifically the nature of the darkness of the opening line and why Hopkins chose to

not only address his heart directly, but also to imbue it with the capacity for sight. In Second Corinthians 3:13-17, Paul once again speaks of the days of Moses in order to contrast it with the wonderful gift Jesus' new covenant is for Man:

And not as Moses, which put a veil over his face, that the children of Israel could not steadfastly look to the end of that which is abolished:

But their minds were blinded: for until this day remaineth the same veil untaken away in the reading of the old testament; which vail is done away in Christ.

But even unto this day, when Moses is read, the veil is upon their heart.

Nevertheless when it shall turn to the Lord, the veil shall be taken away.

Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. (2 Cor. 13-17).

Paul speaks of the Jews, both in the past and present, that have not turned to Jesus. These Jews approach their Bible with a veil over their hearts, blinding both their minds and hearts. The veil shall be removed from their hearts when they "shall turn to the Lord," where the "Lord" is the Holy Ghost. Paul makes the curious claim that "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." That is, the Holy Ghost gives one "freedom from the bondage or dominating influence of sin, spiritual servitude, worldly ties, etc."

Paul describes a wonderful reality for Christians: Christ has not only allowed them to see properly, but his spirit has also allowed them to be free. Paul chides Christians to pity those that do not have this spirit. And one feels pity for Hopkins, who must endure the double suffering of being without God's spirit and being horribly aware that he has done all that was required of him to attain it. It then becomes clear that when Hopkins addresses his heart directly and writes, "O what black hours we have spent / This night! What sights you, heart, saw," the answer to this reflection is that the heart has seen very little from behind the veil.

Hopkins's second stanza is one of Hopkins's "cries countless." It is a heartbreaking plea to God to send the spirit that was promised to him, but for a reason which Hopkins does not know, this letter is like so many of his others cries, one of many "dead letters sent / To dearest him that lives alas! Away."

While the octet of the sonnet is directed at a clear audience, the sestet is remarkable in its loneliness and despair. It seems Hopkins has completely given up any attempt at finding comfort, and instead laments his own wretched state. The first stanza is concerned with his wretched physical state, while the second stanza is concerned with his spirit.

Like Milton's Satan, who spoke "Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell," Hopkins declares his physical body to be both utterly corrupt and utterly hellish:

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.

While Hopkins expresses the loathing that he feels for his physical body, there are still elements of remorse for his lack of spirit. The opening statement “I am gall” might be a continuation of the letter metaphor from the previous stanza. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “gall” as “With reference to the bitterness of gall. *to dip one's pen in gall*, to write with virulence and rancour,” a sense which is used in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* by Sir Andrew Aguecheek “Let there bee gaulle enough in thy inke” (*Twelfth Night*, III. ii. 47)<sup>4</sup>

This stanza, while explicitly related to Hopkins’s corporeal state, is also related to his spiritual state. The words “gall” and “bitter” that Hopkins uses to describe himself are the same words that Peter uses to describe Simon in Acts 8 in order to justify why Simon cannot receive the Holy Ghost:

Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is  
not right in the sight of God.

Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if  
perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee.

For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in  
the bond of iniquity (Acts 8:21-3).

But while Peter speaks figuratively about the heart and the “gall of bitterness” and does not make direct reference to physical defects, Hopkins’s language seems quite literal. The line “bones built in me, flesh filled, blood brimmed the curse” is so vivid that it seems to express a true loathing that Hopkins has for his body.

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<sup>4</sup> "gall, n.1." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2016. Web. 25 April 2016.

While the sonnet's main focus is "spirit," specifically the Holy Ghost, the word "spirit" does not appear until the final stanza:

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.

"Selfyeast of spirit a dull dough sours" is the most wonderful phrase in the poem, both in its originality ("selfyeast" is coined by Hopkins) and in the power of its complaint. Hopkins laments that the only type of spirit that he has is his own. Metaphorically Hopkins is bread, "dull dough," and he is turning sour because there is nothing but "self yeast of spirit" to raise him up. This line connects with line 10 "Bitter would have me taste: my taste was me," so that Hopkins makes the claim that he is bread, and that Hopkins, regrettably, must eat this bread. This strange image is better understood when it is compared with Deuteronomy, where God speaks of what He has provided Man:

And he humbled thee, and suffered thee to hunger, and fed  
thee with manna, which thou knewest not, neither did thy  
fathers know; that he might make thee know that man doth  
not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth  
out of the mouth of the LORD doth man live (Deut. 8:3)

Hopkins does not have the word of the Lord, he has been abandoned and has to live on bread - himself - alone. However he has not lost faith in God. Although Hopkins asks for comfort and for God to reveal Himself, he does so out of weakness, not out of

lack of faith. Hopkins can at least find comfort that, although he cannot feel God's spirit, he at least is not one of the "lost."



### III. Carrion Comfort

In 1885 Hopkins wrote in a letter to Robert Bridges that he had just completed a poem that seemed to be “written in blood” (*Poems and Prose*, 239). Scholars believe this poem to be “Carrion Comfort.” “Carrion Comfort” addresses a dualism in Hopkins’s spirit, one in which a suffering man begs for relief and the other in which the man’s strong will refuses to succumb to the temptation of comfort. The strength of the will’s voice is seen immediately. The poem begins with a statement of firm resolution which is characteristic of Hopkins:

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

The central image of the first stanza is flesh, which takes on distinct senses in the first quartet and the second. In the first line, the image of flesh is that of “carrion comfort,” a phrase which combines the abstract notion of “comfort” with the quite vivid sense of carrion as “dead putrefying flesh of man or beast; flesh unfit for food, from putrefaction or inherently.” The abstract “comfort,” which on its face carries a positive connotation, is substantiated with the concrete image of rotting flesh. But while the image is repulsive to the audience, to Hopkins the meat is a temptation. He declares that he will “not *feast* on thee” (emphasis mine), which suggests that Hopkins would eat the rotten flesh with an eagerness that borders on excess. Presumably the feast would be coming at

the end of a long fast – Hopkins has been without comfort for so long that he would consume an excess of even foul comfort. Ultimately Hopkins refuses to “Despair.”

It takes only a passing familiarity with Hopkins’s work and character to realize that his refusal to despair is not merely a refusal to be depressed or to feel bad. When Hopkins states that he refuses to despair, it is quite literally a refusal to commit suicide. The word despair might even be a pun on the word “despair,” meaning “To undo the pairing of, separate from being a pair,” which for Hopkins would mean a separation of the soul from the flesh.<sup>5</sup> The next lines reinforce this separation, as Hopkins continues the image of a self torn apart : “Not untwist — slack they may be — these last strands of man / In me.” The sense of dissolution then sinks into an affirmation of being. Hopkins rejects suicide, and says that he will not “most weary, cry *I can no more*. I can.” What can Hopkins do? He can continue to live. However, he phrases this in a convoluted way. Hopkins can “not choose not to be.” The word “not” is used six times in four lines. Hopkins’s poem is not a call to action, but rather is a refusal to do that which he has been dwelling on. Hopkins is so tortured that he needs to record in writing - as if it were a vow to himself - that he will not despair, he will not feast on “carrion comfort,” he will not “choose not to be.” Hopkins’ struggle is not to find an answer to his suffering; it is to keep himself from committing suicide. The comfort for Hopkins is death.

The next four lines make the state of his flesh extraordinarily vivid. While Hopkins refuses outright death for his flesh, it is clear that he is already close to death.

But ah, but O thou terrible, why wouldst thou rude on me

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<sup>5</sup> "† dis'pair, v.1." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2016. Web. 28 March 2016.

Comfort for him is in turning his own flesh into carrion, into dead flesh.

Thy wring-world right foot rock? lay a lionlimb against me?

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With darksome devouring eyes my bruised bones? and fan,

O in turns of tempest, me heaped there; me frantic to avoid

thee and flee?

The lines begin with two exclamations, “But ah, but O,” which are moans of pain. This creates a sense of profound pathos. However, Hopkins uses it to effectively make his suffering vivid and personal. After this beginning, Hopkins illustrates his fantastic and bizarre imagination. In the lines 5-8, Hopkins is a dying animal whom God the predator is eying. He crafts an image of a cat playing with its prey before eating it. But here, Hopkins plays out this familiar scene on a terrifying scale. In a series of mono-syllabic words that create a desperately slow pace, Hopkins asks why an omnipotent God is would afflict him in such a way: “why wouldst thou rude on me / Thy wring-world right foot rock?” Hopkins shows his dexterity of language by turning “rude” into an adverb to describe God’s rocking him with his foot. By rude, here, Hopkins connects the violence of God’s action, “Not gentle, violent, harsh; giving out unkind or severe treatment; marked by unkind or severe treatment of people or living things” with the seemingly unthinking nature of God: “of an animal, not having the power of reason.” Now chiefly *literary* in *rude beast*.” God’s foot has the ability to grasp the whole world, but he uses it like a lion to prod Hopkins to see if he will still fight. The discrepancy between God’s awesome power and the seemingly

trivial action of inflicting pain on one man is so great that in order to justify it, Hopkins entertains the notion that God is simply an unthinking carnivore.

But the God that Hopkins describes is not unthinking. The God that Hopkins describes is rather an intelligent cat, playing with its prey. God never devours Hopkins outright, but he does seem to take pleasure in the immense suffering he is causing poor Hopkins. The pain that God causes Hopkins is a sort of horrid cruelty; however, Hopkins introduces an extended metaphor which complicates his culpability. God is described as a large cat, and so can He or a cat be described as cruel? The Polish poet Czesław Miłosz addresses this question in his poem “To Mrs. Professor in Defense of My Cat's Honor and Not Only.” In this work Miłosz defends non-human creatures against charges of cruelty, and in doing so undermines the notion that God is sensitive to such charges as “cruelty”

Yes, undoubtedly, they are innocent,

Spiders, mantises, sharks, pythons.

We are the only ones who say: cruelty.

Our consciousness and our conscience

Alone in the pale anthill of galaxies

Put their hope in a humane God.

Who cannot but feel and think,

Who is kindred to us by his warmth and movement,

For we are, as he told us, similar to Him.

Yet if it is so, then He takes pity

On every mauled mouse, every wounded bird.  
 Then the universe for him is like a Crucifixion.  
 Such is the outcome of your attack on the cat:  
 A theological, Augustinian grimace,  
 Which makes difficult our walking on this earth. (Miłosz).

Despite the torture that God puts him through, Hopkins never blames God. He seems to take the same conclusion that Miłosz does; that God cannot be as sensitive to suffering and notions of cruelty as man would like to believe He is.

Hopkins rejects the notion of a cruel God, but he refuses to accept that there is no reason for his suffering. While the first four lines are filled with very short, declarative statements, “Not, I’ll not,” and “I can,” the rest of the poem is filled with unease and questions. Ten out of the following thirteen sentences end in a question mark, the most poignant of which is the single-word question that opens up the sonnet’s volta: “Why? That my chaff might fly; my grain lie, sheer and clear.”

This question, “why” is the fourth question in a row that Hopkins poses. The build up to the rest of the line makes the reader expect that Hopkins will continue to ask questions. However Hopkins finishes the line with the answer to his previous questions, as if he had written the first stanzas in the throes of great pain, and then written the second stanza the next morning, after the pain had passed and Hopkins had time to reflect. Hopkins reasons that the cause of his suffering is to make him pure: “That my chaff might fly; my grain lie, sheer and clear.”

Up to this point, Hopkins retells and personalizes Hosea 13 and the speech of chastisement that God gives to the nation of Israel. Hosea includes the “chaff” of line 9, the God-ordered winds of line 8, and the striking lion imagery of the second stanza:

Therefore they shall be as the morning cloud and as the  
early dew that passeth away, as the chaff that is driven with  
the whirlwind out of the floor, and as the smoke out of the  
chimney.

Yet I am the LORD thy God from the land of Egypt, and  
thou shalt know no god but me: for there is no saviour  
beside me.

I did know thee in the wilderness, in the land of great  
drought.

According to their pasture, so were they filled; they were  
filled, and their heart was exalted; therefore have they  
forgotten me.

Therefore I will be unto them as a lion: as a leopard by the  
way will I observe them:

I will meet them as a bear that is bereaved of her whelps,  
and will rend the caul of their heart, and there will I devour  
them like a lion: the wild beast shall tear them. (Hosea  
13:3-8).

Israel's crime is that the Lord provided for them, and in their prosperity they neglected God. But God's punishment and Israel's suffering is not out of cruelty - it is to purify them:

O Israel, thou hast destroyed thyself; but in me is thine  
help. (Hosea 13:9).

Hopkins believes this purification is the cause of his misery. He has not committed the sins that Israel has, but God is still enacting the same methods that He used upon Israel. God's personal project for Hopkins is to separate the chaff from the valuable grain. In *Hosea* the grain and the chaff represent the pure and the impure: in Hopkins's sonnet the grain is the spirit and the chaff is the physical body. Hopkins states that God acts to cause "my grain lie, sheer and clear." Both sheer and clear are related not to the physical state, but rather to the immaterial state. Sheer is "an immaterial thing: Taken or existing by itself,...alone," and also "exempt, free (from service or fealty); clear, acquitted (from guilt or crime)." "Clear," here, is "serene, cheerful; of unclouded countenance or spirit." The accounts of physical suffering in the first stanza set up this conclusion: it is not Hopkins's physical state that is important, but his spiritual state.

The next two lines continue the distinction between Hopkins's spirit and his body. He explains that while he has suffered physically, he has experienced moments of spiritual joy:

Nay in all that toil, that coil, since (seems) I kissed the rod,  
Hand rather, my heart lo! lapped strength, stole joy, would laugh, chéer.

Despite all of the pain that came after Hopkins accepted God, all of the toil and coil (“coil” as in Hamlet’s mortal coil: “What dreames may come / When we haue shuffled off this mortall coyle / Must giue vs pause.”), Hopkins heart has “lapped strength, stole joy, would laugh, chéer.”<sup>6</sup> Things have not been as bad as he described it in the first stanza.

However this consolation leads Hopkins to another series of questions. Hopkins wonders if he should “cheer” the God who has put him through such misery in order to purify his soul, or if he should praise himself for his resolve:

Cheer whom though? the hero whose heaven-handling  
flung me, fóot tród

Me? or me that fought him? O which one? is it each one?

That night, that year /Of now done darkness I wretch lay  
wrestling with (my God!) my God.

In this final stanza, Hopkins draws a parallel between himself and the long-suffering Jacob. In the book of Genesis, Jacob is exiled from his home for 21 years and is trapped into serving another man, and his true love dies in childbirth. But Jacob’s most significant act was to wrestle with an angel. The story of Jacob and the Angel is recounted in Genesis, 32: 24-28:

And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with  
him until the breaking of the day.

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<sup>6</sup> "coil, n.2." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2016. Web. 25 April 2016.



And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he  
touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's  
thigh was out of joint, as he wrestled with him.

And he said, Let me go, for the day breaketh. And he said, I  
will not let thee go, except thou bless me.

And he said unto him, What is thy name? And he said,  
Jacob.

And he said, Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but  
Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with  
men, and hast prevailed (Gen. 32: 24-28)

Jacob does not have grace handed to him; he needs to wrestle with the Angel and persevere until the angel is forced to give Jacob a blessing. After this, Jacob is given the name Israel, which means “He strives with the lord” (Gen. 32:28).

In “Carrion Comfort,” Hopkins feels akin to Jacob. Hopkins too wrestles with God, but the big source of tension comes from split loyalty. He does not know if he should cheer for a God that has abused him, or for himself, who has wrestled with God and persevered.

“My God” is repeated twice, and each instance has a distinct meaning. The first is an emphatic ejaculation that breaks up the past tense recollection of the night and year of his torment. It puts a sudden burst of emotion and presentness into the poem, and reminds

the reader that there is a human speaking, to whom the recollection of these years is so terrible that it makes him gasp. It is an incredibly human and tragic clause.

The end of “Carrion Comfort” closely parallels George Herbert’s “The Collar,” another work concerned with a man of the Church wrestling with God. The speaker of the poem raves for 34 lines about how he will leave God before the final two lines bring him back in line:

But as I raved and grew more fierce and wild  
 At every word,  
 Methought I heard one calling, *Child!*  
 And I replied *My Lord.*

Herbert’s poem is significant in that it is the first poem to feature a title which is not directly in the work. But it is clear that the collar here represents a type of bondage, as if the speaker of the poem were a dog on a leash. The speaker raves, but in the final two lines is yanked back by the throat and made to be obedient to God. During the entire poem up to these lines the poet, as he describes himself, “raved and grew more fierce and wild,” but his final two lines are as subdued and defeated as can be: a simple “My Lord.”

This is precisely what Hopkins has done in his work. The poem has a tremendous energy and charge that seems to writhe through the lines along with the speaker of poem, but the final two words are as subdued as are the final two of Herbert’s: a simple “my God.” Hopkins goes even further and is even more daring than Herbert. The close proximity of the scream of anguish (my God!) with the understated, composed “my God” answers the question that he had posed earlier: “Cheer whom though?” Hopkins admits at the end of the poem that it is God who has acted, and that even though it has been he that

has struggled triumphantly, he must not take credit for it. He begins to blame God, but realizes that humble praise is the more fitting response.

*The Wreck of the Deutschland*

Another account of Hopkins's spiritual wrestling with God is found in Part One of Hopkins's masterpiece "The Wreck of the Deutschland." While the tone of "Carrion Comfort" is one of anguish and questioning that culminates in a tepid, almost forced praise of God, the primary role of "The Wreck of the Deutschland" is to exalt God for both the grace and the destruction that He is capable of.

In 1868, upon joining the Jesuit Order, Hopkins burned all of his poems. He referred to this act in his journal as "slaughter of the innocents" (Thornton, 12). "The Wreck of the Deutschland" broke the self-imposed eight-year abstention from writing poetry. Hopkins explains the force that moved him to write again in a letter to his friend Canon R. W. Dixon:

What I had written I burnt before I became a Jesuit and  
resolved to write no more, as not belonging to my  
profession, unless it were by the wish of my superiors; so  
for seven years I wrote nothing but two or three little  
presentation pieces which occasion called for. But when in  
the winter of '75 the Deutschland was wrecked in the

mouth of the Thames and five Franciscan nuns, exiles  
 from Germany by the Falck Laws, aboard of her were  
 drowned, I was affected by the account and, happening to  
 say so to my rector, he said that he wished someone would  
 write a poem on the subject. (Cash, 3).

The “Wreck of the Deutschland” is divided into two parts, which R.K.R. Thornton describes as “images of each other, the internal and external shipwrecks” (Thornton, 27). Part Two of the ode, which is similar to Milton’s “Ode on the Morning of Christ’s Nativity” both in stanza-form style and in the narrator’s positions, places Hopkins right in the middle of the sinking ship. Most of the work is concerned with describing the horrors of the shipwreck and the courage of the dying nuns. The first part, the “internal shipwreck,” is a passionate meditation on the theological implications of such a tragedy. Hopkins does not make clear in the poem who it is that is speaking - himself or the Nun, but he does reveal in a letter to Robert Bridges that “what refers to myself in the poem is all strictly and literally true and did all occur.”

The work begins with an exclamation of both praise and awe:

Thou mastering me  
 God! giver of breath and bread;  
 World's strand, sway of the sea;  
 Lord of living and dead;  
 Thou hast bound bones & veins in me, fastened me flesh,  
 And after it almost unmade, what with dread,

Thy doing: and dost thou touch me afresh?

Over again I feel thy finger and find thee.

We see in these lines a joining of opposites. God is both “giver of breath and bread,” that is, spirit and substance, “Lord of living and dead,” and He has the capabilities to have both “bound bones and veins in” and to almost “unmade” Hopkins. In short, Hopkins echoes Job in his understanding of the dual nature of God, and in the praising of God despite this: “the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” (*JOB*, 1:21).

The opening words “Thou mastering me / God” is like an exacerbated breath. There are two senses of “Mastering”: the participle form “God is mastering,” as in “God is giving” or God is “terrifying,” and also the progressive tense, which shows that God is continuously mastering Hopkins and forcing him to submit. The final two statements of the stanza “and dost thou touch me afresh? Over again I feel thy finger and find thee” support the progressive tense reading. These lines have the same sense of God “yanking on the chain” of the speaker that is seen in both “Carrion Comfort” and in Herbert’s “The Collar.” In the two other poems God does not exert force until the final line of the poem, but in “The Wreck of the Deutschland” Hopkins is brought back to God in the first sentence of the poem: “Thou mastering me / God!”

Part of the magnificence of “The Wreck of the Deutschland” is Hopkin’s ability to distill a tragic event into a poem of praise. Hopkins understands the ways of God do not and perhaps cannot, always seem just or benevolent, but that all phenomena are from God and so should be praised. As Hopkins so beautifully puts it in “Pied Beauty,”

With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;

He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:

Praise him.

The didacticism that borders on compulsion of the final line of “Pied Beauty” fits in with the God’s hold over Man. Hopkins gives a wonderful description of what it is like for the spirit of God to enter into man, and compares it to biting into a sloe berry and having the sweet and bitter juice fill one’s mouth:

“How a lush-kept plush-capped sloe

Will, mouthed to flesh-burst,

Gush!—flush the man, the being with it, sour or sweet,

Brim, in a flash, full!—Hither then, last or first,

To hero of Calvary, Christ’s feet—

Never ask if meaning it, wanting it, warned of it—men go. “

The end of the stanza takes an unexpected turn. God’s spirit takes hold of a person in a rather coercive way. This too seems to acknowledge God as a “mastering” force - but it seems he is not always master over servants, but sometimes over slaves. This too seems to be an element of the dual nature of a God: some worship God because they love Him, some worship God because they are forced to. Hopkins fully explains the double nature of God at the end of Stanza 9:

Thou art lightning and love, I found it, a winter and warm;

Father and fondler of heart thou hast wrung:

Hast thy dark descending and most art merciful then.

Hopkins reasons that God is most merciful when He “Hast [His] dark descending,” that is, when God is the most destructive. This seems like a paradox. However, “The Wreck of the Deutschland” is a theodicy. The conclusion that Hopkins comes to is the same that he arrives at in “Carrion Comfort:” suffering is a purifying force. The metaphor that Hopkins employs in “Carrion Comfort” is that of a tempest blowing away the chaff from the grain. In “The Wreck of the Deutschland,” God is a magnificent, sublime figure. In this work Hopkins does not fear or resent the staggering force with which God afflicts man, but rather he encourages it, asking God to hammer man into whatever shape he thinks is best.:

With an anvil-ding  
And with fire in him forge thy will  
Or rather, rather then, stealing as Spring  
Through him, melt him but master him still:

It is for this reason that Hopkins finishes in introspective Part One and leads into the horrifying and tragic account of Part Two with a call for Man to love God:

Make mercy in all of us, out of us all  
Mastery, but be adored, but be adored King.

Hopkins does not hide from the horrors that God inflicts. He reasons that God must do things for a reason, and so

#### IV. Wisdom from Suffering

Hopkins's intense suffering and his cries for comfort are most vividly illustrated in his Sonnet 42: "No worst, There is None." This sonnet is notable for its intense, subjectless anguish. Hopkins writes of suffering, but does not identify a cause. The sonnet begins:

No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief,  
More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring.

The first sentence appears to be missing a subject. Many different words could be read into the first clause: "no worst state," or "no worst suffering." A reader or speaker of the poem who does not take great measures to read the poem carefully will rush past the comma that divides the sentence, and elide the "t" in worst" with the "th" in "there." Hopkins plays this trick to make his audience believe he is saying that there is "No worse" state than the one that he is in. But what Hopkins' true meaning is far more powerful, and is made clearer in the second half of line one, and in line two. "Pitched past pitch of grief," implies that his current state is beyond the "pitch of grief." "Pitch" here is used as both a verb and an adjective, and the sense could be evoking the sense of sight, as in "to fall headlong, esp. landing heavily; to strike forcibly against something as a result of being thrown." Whatever state grief is - be it a dark color, a shriek, or to be thrown outside of one's self - Hopkins's state is "pitched" even further.

The sentence continues into the next line where Hopkins makes it clear that his subject is future pangs of pain: "More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring." Future pains will be "schooled" by the pain he has already felt. It is not just that he has



already suffered, but this suffering will cause Hopkins to suffer more in the future.

Hopkins finishes the line with an almost concrete image, foretelling that the future pangs will “wilder wring” him. This conjures an image of Hopkins’s tortured flesh being squeezed tight and twisted like a washcloth between two hands. But the most significant idea of these lines is that this pain will continue to wring wilder and wilder. So to return to the first line of the poem, Hopkins means that there is no such thing as a “worst” or final pain. It is not just that he suffers now; the true tragedy of these lines is that Hopkins believes that he will continue to suffer more and more, with no clear end in sight. This echoes Edgar’s reflection in Shakespeare’s *King Lear* that one of the most horrid parts of suffering is the knowledge that the future could still be worse:

[Aside] O gods! Who is't can say 'I am at  
the worst'?

I am worse than e'er I was.

...

[Aside] And worse I may be yet: the worst is not

So long as we can say 'This is the worst.' (*King Lear*, Act 4, Scene 1).

While Hopkins’s first two lines have vivid diction and alliteration, the next two lines are written in a subdued, plain speech. The contrast between the complexity of the language he uses to describe his pain and the clearness of the next two lines underline his pitiful plea for an alleviation of his suffering:

Comforter, where, where is your comforting?

Mary, mother of us, where is your relief?

Hopkins cries for comfort are directed at the comforter that Jesus promised his disciples. In John 14:16, Jesus told his followers:

And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; (John 14:16).

And in John 14:18 Jesus promises:

I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you.

But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.(John 14:18).

The suffering that Hopkins endures does not cause him to question his faith, but it does lead him to feel lost. The first thing he asks for is not for relief, but for comfort. It is not a temporal question, but a question of where? This further adds to the sensation that there is no direct subject that causes Hopkins to suffer. Relief and comfort are intangible and locationless, yet Hopkins asks “where” they are.

In the next stanza Hopkins continues to describe his suffering, and manages to use incredibly vivid images to paint an empty picture:

My cries heave, herds-long; huddle in a main, a chief  
Woe, wórl-d-sorrow; on an áge-old anvil wince and sing —  
Then lull, then leave off. Fury had shrieked 'No ling-  
ering! Let me be fell: force I must be brief.'"

His cries “heave” as if they were waves rising up, and these rising cries are “herds-long” as if each one were a cow. It is impossible to create a concrete image of what these cries

are actually like. Hopkins's genius makes this mixing of sonic and visual images somehow simultaneously abstract and vivid. These cries are described once again in an evocative, yet vague way, as "huddled in a main" around "a chief [w]oe." This principle cause of misery is described as something enormous and disincarnate, a "world-sorrow." While Hopkins does have an enormous capacity for empathy and pity, the suffering that Hopkins is describing seems too sharp and personal to be empathy. What affects Hopkins is what the Germans refer to as "*Weltschmerz*" or "world-pain." There is nothing specific that is causing Hopkins such intense pain - it is the whole world, it is *everything* that is adding to his suffering.

But after Hopkins makes this expansive claim about his suffering, he once again follows it up with a vivid image. His cries "on an age-old anvil wince and sing — / Then lull, then leave off." This line creates an incredibly sharp image: he compares his cries to the sound that comes from a piece of hot metal being beaten again and again. In "The Wreck of the Deutschland," Hopkins used the metaphor of a hammer and anvil and asked God to continue to use force to inflict his will upon man:

"With an anvil-ding  
And with fire in him forge thy will  
Or rather, rather then, stealing as Spring  
Through him, melt him but master him still:"

But now Hopkins seems to be having second thoughts about God's use of force. The hammering that God is inflicting upon man is too much for Hopkins, and so he asks both for "comfort" and for "relief."

The simultaneous sharpness and vagueness of Hopkins's suffering closely parallels the language that he uses to describe it. This is seen most clearly in the final lines of the octet "Fury had shrieked 'No ling- /ering! Let me be fell: force I must be brief.'" The pain that he feels is pointed and sharp, forceful and brief, but at the same time is so powerful and overwhelming that it is the only thing that Hopkins can feel. The pain becomes his whole world for brief, sharp moments.

Despite all of this suffering, Hopkins does not blame God. Instead he believes that the cause of his suffering comes from some aspect of his brain: "O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall/ Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed." Here again Hopkins provides a terrifying, sublime image of his suffering, but he presents it in a way that is impossible to fully visualize. He does, however, provide an explanation for this - that only those who have truly experienced the heights and depths of his suffering can understand his image fully: "Hold them cheap / May who ne'er hung there." Those that never have suffered as he has cannot possibly give this image the importance they deserve. Luisa Camaiora explains the difficult image of the "cliffs of fall" of the mind by drawing a parallel between the sestet and the famous Dover Cliff scene of King Lear (Camaiora, 46). In this scene, Gloucester, who has been blinded and so does not know that it is his son Edgar who leads him, asks to be brought to a cliff to commit suicide:

There is a cliff, whose high and bending head  
Looks fearfully in the confined deep:  
Bring me but to the very brim of it,  
And I'll repair the misery thou dost bear  
With something rich about me: from that place

I shall no leading need. (Act IV, Scene 1)

Hopkins's description of the mountains of the mind are notoriously difficult to visualize. Camaiora explains this difficulty away with the comparison to King Lear. The mountains are not supposed to be real, nor are they to be seen. Camaiora writes: "It is certainly Hopkins's intention that the reader should recall these passages, and remember that Edgar is rendering real, for his blind father, a scene that exists only in his mind, just as Hopkins is endowing with reality the metaphorical mountains that he affirms exist in the mind (Camaiora, 47).

But just because the mountains exist only in Hopkins or Gloucester's minds do not take away from the gutting meaning they hold. Hopkins anticipates the criticism that what he describes are merely "mountains of the mind," or imagined difficulties. Hopkins warns in lines 10-12:

Hold them cheap

May who ne'er hung there. Nor does long our small

Durance deal with that steep or deep.

There is something terribly foreboding in this last line. While the octet is concerned with the infinite spiraling of time and of the ceaseless increase in pain, the line "Nor does long our small / Durance deal with that steep or deep" confesses that the pain will not last forever. The subsequent lines eliminate any notion that the reason why we don't deal with these cliffs for long is because things will get better in life:

Here! creep,

Wretch, under a comfort serves in a whirlwind: all

Life death does end and each day dies with sleep.

Hopkins divides himself into two people: the speaker of the poem, and the “Wretch” that he is now addressing. The short exclamation “Here!” that starts the sentence serves to alert both the reader and the “wretch” that the remainder of the poem will be an apostrophe to this second person. The syntax of the penultimate clause is extremely confusing: are “wretch” and “creep” verbs or nouns? Is the word “which” left out, so that the intended reading is “creep, Wretch, under a comfort [which] serves in a whirlwind”?

Camaiera continues to illuminate Hopkins’ words with parallels to King Lear. She cites the scene in which Lear offers Kent the Fool shelter from the raging storm, telling them: “Prithee go in thyself; seek thine own ease. . . . In, boy; go first. - You houseless poverty - / Nay, get thee in. I’ll pray, and then I’ll sleep.” (III, iv, 23, 26-27). Camaiera explains that: “In the sestet the whirlwind, like the storm in King Lear, becomes symbolic of the difficulties of life, and the soul of man is the poor innocent ‘Fool,’ subjected to the adverse forces and manifold calamities of nature, and addressed with self-pity and self-commiseration as ‘wretch’.”

Another possible reading is to interpret this cryptic passage as a reference to the final chapter of the book of *Job*. God appears to Job in a whirlwind and shows the suffering man how insignificant he is compared to God’s power. The King James Bible shows the purpose of the speech to be to utterly crush Job, and translates Job’s meek response as “Wherefore I abhor *myself*, and repent in dust and ashes.” However, Stephen Mitchell offers a different translation, one in which God’s purpose is to put things in perspective for Job: “therefore I will be quiet, comforted that I am dust.”

The poem hinges upon the two different translations. Do Hopkins and Job emerge from their suffering and apparent abandonment by God with grief or with comfort and wisdom? Camaiera points to multiple literary parallels to conclude that Hopkins ends the poem having acquired greater wisdom, and comments that “it has further been noted by [Howard] Fulweiler... that the archetypal symbols of unmerited suffering present in the poem - Job, Prometheus, Lear, Christ - were all illuminated by their suffering.” This is certainly a compelling analysis, but one may derive an even more substantial argument for Hopkins’ achieving wisdom by looking at Hopkins’ Sonnet 47, “My own heart let me have more pity on,” which is, in many ways, a companion piece to “No worst, there is none.”

*“My own heart let me more have pity on”*

Hopkins’s Sonnet 47 seems to be in direct conversation with Sonnet 42. The poem is a call for comfort and, like Hopkins’s calls for comfort and relief in lines 3 and 4 of Sonnet 42, is written in a plain, conversational tone. Hopkins does not ask God or Mary for comfort, but instead pleads with himself:

My own heart let me 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.

Hopkins learned the lesson that Job learned, “therefore I will be quiet, comforted that I am dust.” We see in this poem none of the exclamations, long-streams of

alliteration, or other poetic flourishes which are characteristic of Hopkins' style. Instead Hopkins has written a very subdued, earnest work. He has accepted that, no matter how elaborate of a poem he crafts, or however much he reasons or begs with God, that nothing will come of it. Hopkins then turns from focusing outward upon God, to looking inwards to himself. Rather than ask God for pity, Hopkins looks for pity within, and asks himself to not live with his "tormented mind tormenting yet." Once again Hopkins does not give a concrete target or cause to his suffering. The suffering exists only within his own head, and is not grounded in external circumstances. Hopkins admits that he is so in his own head that he cannot see that there is hope for him:

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.

Hopkins has failed to find comfort, but he is still confident that comfort exists. Despite everything, he has not lost faith in what Jesus promised in John 14: "I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you" (John, 14:8). Hopkins does not believe that God has abandoned him. God does provide comfort, Hopkins just cannot perceive it. Hopkins cannot feel this comfort, the Holy Ghost, because he is looking for it within himself. Hopkins's actions have been self-defeating; his suffering comes from his mind, and he has been trying to use his mind to ease his suffering. The more he tries to think his way towards comfort, the worse he will feel.

The comfortless cannot create comfort for themselves, just as a blind person cannot find day by using their damaged eyes, or a person can quench their thirst by



focusing on that thirst. A person who is so afflicted must not focus on their affliction.

Hopkins realizes this, and advises himself:

Soul, self; come, poor Jackself, I do advise  
 You, jaded, let be; call off thoughts awhile  
 Elsewhere;

The sympathy that Hopkins shows himself is heartbreaking. As in “No worst there is none,” Hopkins divides himself into the egos in order to teach himself a lesson. But the difference between the two is enormous. While before he snarls at himself “Here! Creep, Wretch,” now he gently speaks “Soul, self; come poor Jackself” (the poet Henri Cole explains Jackself as “simply [Hopkins’] everyday being”) (Cole).

Hopkins is not only gentler to himself; he is also gentler to God. While previously he used powerful, sublime images of God (God as a hammer and anvil, God as a whirlwind, God as a devouring lion), he now views God and comfort as small seeds growing within him. It is not that God has ravaged him, but that Hopkins, who has described himself in previous poems as sterile and barren (“bruised bones,” “cliffs of fall / frightful, sheer,” “bitter...dull...sour”), must make himself more hospitable. He must:

leave comfort root-room; let joy size  
 At God knows when to God knows what;

In short, Hopkins must have faith that God will watch over his servant. Maturing from his previous demands to know what God’s plans were, Hopkins has gained the wisdom that such control is beyond his reach. Rather than hold on tightly to his misery

(as he seems to hold on to the mountains of Sonnet 47: “May who ne’er hung there...”), Hopkins instructs himself to let go.

The sonnet ends with an anthropomorphizing image of God which paints God both as benevolent, but also amiable and sympathetic. Hopkins must trust God,

whose smile

’s not wrung, see you; unforeseen times rather—as skies

Between pie mountains—lights a lovely mile.

The terrible mountains of the mind that were described in Sonnet 42 appear again. But here Hopkins does not focus on their height or their harsh surface. Instead he focuses on the space between them, where sunlight streams through. Hopkins will not be able to escape the “cliffs of fell” that exist inside his own head, but he can choose to focus on what is between them. The advice that he gives himself is beautiful in its simplicity. The end of the sonnet provides comfort and gently loosens the tangles of anxiety, much in the same way that Sidney’s Muse does at the end of Sonnet 1 of *Astrophil and Stella*:

“Thus, great with child to speak, and helpless in my throes,

Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite--

“Fool,” said my Muse to me, “look in thy heart and write.”

The most striking aspect of this line is that here, Hopkins commands himself to see. Hopkins, who has so often described himself as blind or in darkness, now instructs “see you” to his other ego. As Henri Cole describes it, “Let comfort come through, he tells to his Jackself—comfort that is like sunlight falling thru a valley, changing those parts it touches.”

### Final Thoughts

The absoluteness of Gerard Manley Hopkins's faith is both the cause and the cure his suffering. Why does Hopkins cling so tightly to comfort? Why does he beg God for relief, and try to reason some kind of moral order out of his suffering? Hopkins knew the story of Job extraordinarily well and was told by Sister Madelera at the beginning of his spiritual exercises the proper way to approach comfort, and yet Hopkins did the opposite of this advice, and attacked both God and his pain in an effort to find some relief. The resolution of Sonnet 47, the moment Hopkins finally understands:

Soul, self; come, poor Jackself, I do advise  
 You, jaded, let be; call off thoughts awhile  
 Elsewhere; leave comfort root-room; let joy size  
 At God knows when to God knows what;

is almost identical to the advice that Sister Madara gives:

As for comforts, leave them to God; let Him do therein as  
 shall best please him

...

"For when the grace of God cometh unto a man, then he is  
 able for all things. And when it goeth away, then is he  
 poor and weak, and as it were left only for affliction.

In this case thou oughtest not to be cast down, nor to despair; but to resign thyself calmly to the will of God, and whatever comes upon thee, to endure it for the glory of Jesus Christ” (Pick, 148 & 135).

But still Hopkins sought out comfort, and almost killed himself in his pursuit. And the reason for this is because Hopkins is human, and humans seek comfort wherever they can. Man has sought comfort since the days of Lamech, and has continued to seek it long past when Job realized the dangers of it. This is why Hopkins, despite being told otherwise by both Job and Madara's, struggled and strived for comfort.

But in doing so, Hopkins finally achieves wisdom. Hopkins needed to understand every inch of the frightful mountains he clung to in order to realize that there was a gap between. It was only through intense suffering that Hopkins, like Job, is ready to speak “therefore I will be quiet, comforted that I am dust.”

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## Appendix

Submitted to Professor Robert von Hallberg on 11/6/15

Dead Letters from a Dull Man: One of Hopkins' Cries Countless

By Joel Kirk

The beginning of Hopkins' poem, "I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day" immediately places itself in a tradition of poems with the topos of waking to darkness, the most notable of which is Milton's Sonnet 23 "Methought I saw my late espoused saint." In fact, Hopkin's poem seems to be in direct discussion with this work, inverting Milton's work in several significant ways. Sonnet 23 begins with sight, and ends in blindness, finishing with the lines "I wak'd, she fled, and day brought back my night." A key difference between the two works is the clear and specific target for the despair that is found in Milton's poem (his wife is dead), and the far less clear cause of despair that is found in Hopkins'. While Milton can see in his dream, but then wakes to blindness and despair, the speaker's blindness and despair pervades both dream and reality in Hopkins' poem. But the despair comes not from a failing of the senses, but rather from a vailing of his heart which keeps him from seeing the glory of God.

Hopkins sonnet is divided, by rhyme scheme and spacing, into an octet and a sextet, both of which are halved again by the rhyme scheme. The two quatrains follow an a-b-b-a pattern, while the two tercets have a c-c-d structure. Each of these segments begin

with a very short, pointed sentence. The first begins “I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day” (L.1). Both portions of the alliterative phrase “feel the fell” are striking, odd choices in diction. That Hopkins chose the sense of feeling, rather than of sight to describe a sensation that, in its literal usage, can be experienced only through vision, immediately makes clear that the poem is not concerned with blindness of the eyes. The curiousness of this is immediately followed by the very odd use of “fell” to describe the state of the dark.

While it is common to use “fell” as the past tense of the intransitive verb “to fall” (as in “darkness fell”), it is used in this sense to indicate a very specific period of time which has passed. In the standard sense, darkness falls, and then it is dark, but Hopkins usage implies that darkness once fell, and this act of darkness falling is one of perpetual renewal. The speaker of the poem wakes to a state of the constant falling of darkness, illustrating the constant and hopeless despair that is the theme of the poem.

But more significant, Fell is the latin word for “gall” - “bitterness; hence, animosity, rancor,” a word which the speaker will claim that he is in line 9 at the start of the sextet.<sup>7</sup> And more significantly still, the Oxford English Dictionary cites the definition of “fell” as “A hill, mountain. *Obs. exc.* in proper names of hills in the north-west of England, as Bowfell, Scawfell, etc,” a detail Hopkins would surely have known, having lived in Stoney Hurst and North Wales.<sup>8</sup> Substituting this definition in, the poem reads as “I wake and feel the mountains of darkness,” a sentiment which is repeated in another one of Hopkin’s sonnets concerned with despair, Sonnet 42, “No worst, there is

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<sup>7</sup> “† fell, n.3.” *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, September 2015. Web. 6 November 2015.

<sup>8</sup> “fell, n.2.” *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, September 2015. Web. 6 November 2015.



none,” in which Hopkins writes “mind has mountains; cliffs of fall/ frightful.” With only the first line, Hopkins is able to express that he is in a state of darkness that is continuously falling, that he is a physical manifestation of this darkness, and that this darkness that he is feeling are the mountains that have so often blotted his own mind.

In line two Hopkins introduces a second object besides the speaker of the poem, with the use of “we.” This “we” is revealed in line 3 to be the speaker’s heart “what sights you, heart, saw; ways you went” (L. 3). Once again, the notion that the darkness, the “black hours” of the poem is not a visual one is stressed through Hopkins’ referring to the heart, which would typically be described as “feeling,” as something which has seen sights. Line three contains two of the three exclamation points of the poem, all three of which are in the first stanza. The significance of this reflects the overall tone of the first stanza, which is far more declarative. This is especially evident in the first quatrain, where the notion of an external audience is very clear.

The next quatrain begins with another short sentence “With witness I speak this.” The OED cites “witness” as “Applied to the inward testimony of the conscience; after 2 *Cor.* i. 12.”<sup>9</sup> This idea is critical to the understanding of the stanza, but needs to be bracketed for now. Finishing off the line five and enjambed into line six is the sentence “But where I say / Hours I mean years, mean life” (L. 5-6). “Where I say,” not “when I say.” The use of “where” turns the action of saying not into a practice, as in “when I say my home I mean England,” but instead into a very specific act which can be referenced,

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<sup>9</sup> “witness, n.” *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, September 2015. Web. 6 November 2015.

as if he is citing words that have been written, rather than words that he is speaking. This shows a clear self-consciousness from the speaker of the poem, making it clear that the “I” in the poem is the same as the writer of the poem. But not only that, the use “where” rather than “when” creates a concrete state of time in a poem whose time seems to be ceaselessly renewing. The use of the word “fell” adds to this, as does the rest of line six in which the speaker insists that the despair he is in is not located in a specific hour, or year, but in “life” itself – life not only meaning his life, but in all existence there is misery. The result of this are the “cries countless” that he sends forth.

“Cries countless” follows the theme of infiniteness and the abstract, but it is contrasted by the oddly specific rest of line seven and eight “cries like dead letters sent / to dearest him that lives alas! Away.” The idea of personal letters never arriving is tragic, so much so that it is the sorting of these letters that was given by Melville to his most blank and despairing character, Bartleby. But both authors could not so easily have put such great stress on such an odd phrase had there not been more to it.

The key to the poem, what the message that the first stanza, and the poem as a whole, is based on, is Paul’s Second Epistle to the Corinthians. This work does a great deal to illuminate many of the most curious phrases of the poem. The idea of “dead letters” conjures up the most famous passage of the letter, 2 Corinthians 3:6: “Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life” (2 Corinthians, 3:6).

As was mentioned earlier, the lines “with witness I speak this” are a direct invocation of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians, so much so that the passage is cited by the O.E.D. within its definition. This line is

For our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience,  
that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly  
wisdom, but by the grace of God, we have had our  
conversation in the world, and more abundantly to you-  
ward (2 Corinthians, 1:12)

Hopkins is attempting to have a conversation with God, but because his prayers are not working, he is forced to write to him directly. The first stanza of the poem is a letter. The letter seems to be addressed to his heart, but it is in the heart itself where the epistle is written. sending it to “dearest him that lives alas! Away,” him being Jesus (although it is unclear why “him” is not be capitalized) (L. 8). It is this letter which is killing the speaker, but because he lacks the spirit of Jesus to give him life, the letter is all he has.

By examining the Second Epistle to the Corinthians (which very significantly is also a letter), the issue of the darkness of stanza one becomes clearer. Paul writes of the veil that was over the hearts of those in the Old Testament, but which Jesus and his spirit has since removed:

And not as Moses, which put a veil over his face, that the  
children of Israel could not stedfastly look to the end of that  
which is abolished:

<sup>14</sup> But their minds were blinded: for until this day remaineth  
the same vail untaken away in the reading of the old  
testament; which vail is done away in Christ.

But even unto this day, when Moses is read, the veil is  
upon their heart.

<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless when it shall turn to the Lord, the veil shall  
be taken away.

<sup>17</sup> Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the  
Lord is, there is liberty (2 Corinthians 2, 13-17)

The speaker of the poem lacks the spirit of Jesus, and because of this the veil remains on his heart. This is a very Old Testament poem. This is clearly seen in the second stanza, which moves away from the format of a letter, into much more of a depressed meditation. The ideas in this passage reflect those of the Old Testament and original sin. There is no redemption in the line “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” (L. 9-11). Here, Hopkins recounts the book of Genesis, first focusing on the Chapters 2 and 3 by referring to the garden of Eden and the original sin that has caused all matter to be tainted with evil, and then moving back towards Genesis 1 in which God creates man.

While the whole poem is concerned with spirit, Hopkins waits until line 12, the final sentence of the final tercet, to mention it by name. In another succinct introductory sentence, Hopkins writes the best line in the poem “Selfyeast of spirit a dull dough sours” (L.12) The word “Selfyeast” is original to Hopkins and the sense of it in the poem seems to be the self’s ability to act as the agent that causes the spirit to rise. The “dull dough” mentioned in the second part of the line seems to refer to his own flesh. The

sentence has a cause and effect structure: the spirit that is raised only by the self causes a person to “sour.”

Hopkins ends the poem with the difficult to parse lines “I see /The lost are like this, and their scourge to be / As I am mine, their sweating selves; but worse” (L. 12-14). The speaker is saying that the lost are in an equal state of despair to him because they do not have Jesus. However, the speaker is able to find comfort because he himself is not lost. He does have Jesus, he just can’t feel his spirit. This is contrasted with those who are lost, who not only do not feel Jesus’ spirit, but will also go to hell when they die. This is very similar to the sentiment expressed in “The Lantern Out of Doors” where he seems to find some kind of solace in the fact that despite his current misery, not only will he be going to heaven, but others will be in a much worse state after the “life” that he speaks of in lines 6. So while there is a sense of overwhelming despair in the poem, there is the idea that there is some respite: death.

In this way, Milton and Hopkins’s sonnets are similar. In death there will be an escape. But while for Milton there is a sense that there is also some escape in dreams, Hopkins makes it very clear that there is no escape in this life. Hopkins sonnet begins as a cry for help, a letter to Jesus pleading for him to send save him, but ends as a meditation on his own helpless state. There is to be no saving him from the “black life” he lives, but the fact that this misery will only last for the time that he lives, rather than all of eternity, is the brightest consolation that he can feel.

## Works Cited

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