

# “Meaning Motion”: Reclaiming the Dynamic Poetics of Hopkins

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Some years ago, a collection of essays was published under the provocative title *Why Hopkins Matters*. In something of the same spirit, we might imagine a chorus of scholars, critics, and other admirers of Hopkins venturing instead some succinct reflections on *How Hopkins Matters*. For instance, what useful intimations might emerge if we were to consider locating the signifying “essence” of the poetry as much in what it *does* as in what it *says*? If in referring to authors’ “poetics” we mean to denote not their distinctive ideas or their stylistic fingerprints but, rather, their characteristic *practices* or creativity (*poesis*: “making”), what might we conclude in the case of Hopkins?

As my paper’s title indicates, I am proposing here that the distinctiveness of the Hopkins aesthetic strategy and practice is its extraordinary dynamism. This poetry’s core business, the *meaning* of Father Gerard Hopkins’ rather surprisingly being in business at all as a poet, might be called . . . busy-ness. Action, movement, and change. His habits of mind and conduct as a poet are dramatic, not expository, rhetorical, or descriptive. The typical Hopkins poem finds its subject by observing actions, discovers and names in those actions their meaning, and then also expresses itself as an action.

It is much more customary, of course, to associate or identify Hopkins primarily with his “signature” principles of *inscape* and *instress*. Stylistics and religious thematics aside, the poetry has been most thoroughly explored and valued as perceptual and conceptual expressions of the divine principles of *abidingness* that materially shape and spiritually sustain the created world. The often complex significance of those recurrent motifs of discreet individuating form (Scotist *haecceitas*) and latent vital pressure are commonly understood to constitute the meaning discerned by Hopkins in the visible world, and

the meaning of the poems themselves as discerned in so many illuminating ways by scholars and critics. But for Hopkins, “meaning” is a verb, not a condition of being. It is something that happens. Something that explodes. Ethos is praxis. Nothing in this world of things “means” unless and until it is seen to move, to go into action, to differ, differentiate itself, almost in the Derridean sense of active *différance*, beyond merely being different. Hopkins consistently subordinates even inscape and instress to this vision of a created universe that displays and fulfils in *actions* (not in form or being) the meaning and intention (in-tension) of its Creator.

Hence it is that the poems themselves are to an extraordinary degree poems of vigorous movement, vehement language, and adventurous dramatic rhythms, enacting rather than denoting or describing their subject matter. Their life is in their own action. It means to mean what it says and does, and it means it by performing it. If there are “themes” in Hopkins, it is in the musical rather than rhetorical sense of the term: a pattern or figure of notes, often irregular, yet always a mimetic movement occurring in time, and existing only in performance. As we shall see, it is no coincidence that Hopkins does turn several times to musical analogies in naming the expressive “meaning” of distinctive behaviours, both artistic and natural, that declare, rehearse, celebrate, and interrogate the dynamism of the ever-changing, ever-fleeting universe of things. Stress is the life of it, and verbs are the sweep and the hurl of it.

This tendency or impetus in Hopkins can be traced back to his earliest school verses. And again through the anxious poems of the Oxford years. Even during his virtually silent period, the early seventies, it informs the journal entries into which he was pouring his animating imagination at that time. It is especially, of course, demonstrated in the magnificent poetry of the late seventies that will be my emphasis here. But it continues later as well, to the very end, though then so often in a grimmer vein of action thwarted or wasted or surrendered or consigned to another world and order of time.

## I

Let us begin with the phrase quoted in my title – “meaning motion,” from the notoriously dense and difficult poem “Henry Purcell.” This sonnet does virtually articulate, and perform, the

Hopkinsean poetics. Ostensibly a tribute to the distinctive musical genius of our poet's favourite composer, it ends by equating the effect of hearing the music's thrusting, thronging rehearsal to the effect of seeing the sudden wuthering open of a great bird's wings. This startling display of colossal plumage "fans fresh our wits with wonder." It is explicitly "meaning motion." Action declares or produces meaning, knowledge, recognition, or at least excites our awareness of it. Likewise for the quintessence of Purcell's music – the poet insists that its "forg'd feature" is exhibited and experienced not in theme or melody or familiar sweetness but in performance, in self-expressive action.

In this sense the Purcell poem is not primarily "about" the inscape or instress of the music or of the mind of the composer. Inscapè is a created thing's distinctive form or pattern or law of being – its "forgèd feature." Instress is the vital indwelling pressure – the "arch-especial spirit" – sustaining that self, sake, make, or form. There is in both inscapè and instress, then, something latent, static, kinetic. The Purcell poem clearly suggests that each of these conditions of natural being – forged inscapè and vital instress – assumes or displays its "meaning" only if and when it goes into action, fulfilling itself in motion, change, performance, and is seen to do so.

But the Purcell sonnet does more than this, and does more than justify in God's eyes and for God's purposes the exercise of merely natural artistic genius on merely natural subjects. By distinguishing an artist's expression of "abrupt self" from "all . . . sweet notes not his," Hopkins also accounts for his own special kind of poetry. We have here, scarcely veiled, the underlying principle both of his own poetry's idiosyncrasies (his "quaint moonmarks"), and also of his warrant for writing at all.

This whole larger question – how did Hopkins justify resuming the serious writing of poetry at all after having renounced it years earlier – need not detain us here. But there is no avoiding the stupendous text in which he broke that self-imposed restraint, "The Wreck of the Deutschland." Aside from anything else, the great ode represents as itself a meaning motion, an event, an action unexpectedly "flushed" out by other actions and events. Suddenly, even improbably, "the heart . . . / Is out with it." Here the "mother of being in me, heart" does "make words break from me here all alone."

And in fact "The Wreck of the Deutschland" is Hopkins' most

action-packed poem. It is a sustained blizzard of active *doings* and *undoings*, of *mastering, binding, fastening, touching, lashing, swooning, sweeping, hurling, treading, leaning, hurtling, whirling, fleeing, flinging, flashing, towering, kissing, wafting, greeting, springing, swinging, hushing, flushing, melting, riding, going in Galilee, discharging, swelling, lashing, mouthing to flesh-burst, gushing, going to Christ's feet, wringing, fondling, darkly descending, forging, stealing through, making mercy, storms bugling, vaulting, reeving in, sweeping, hurling, whirlwind-swivelling, spinning, widow-making, unfathering, smothering, driving, striking, beating, rolling, winding, trenching, carving, washing away, shaking, stirring, pitching, dandling to and fro, bucking, flooding, fighting, falling, crushing, drowning, romping, roaring, wailing, breasting, turning, breaking, uttering, never-eldering revel, calling, swirling, hawling, slogging, brawling, rearing, gnashing, strewing, finding, suffering, before-time taking, scoring, lettering, ruddying, drawing, seraph-arriving, sealing, bathing, breathing, glancing, catching, quailing, christening, combating, cheering, ground-hugging, hovering off, appearing, blue-beating, jading, tasking, appealing, looming, doing, dealing, lording it, despatching, reading the night, wording it, conceiving, hearing, keeping, going and bleeding, obeying, being a bell, ringing, startling, carrying, recovering, stanching, quenching, outriding, gliding, rising, being fetched in the storm of strikes, burning, being fleshed and furred, dazzling, royally reclaiming, releasing a shower, letting it flash to the shire, and ultimately, of course, brightening, dayspringing, and eastering.*

It is no coincidence that “The Wreck of the Deutschland” is also a rare occasion in which we actually see Hopkins representing himself as actively and urgently engaged in the throes of composition and in literally trying to interpret his emerging subject’s *meaning*. Indeed, the ode’s whole occasion and central theme is the finding of meaning. What, he wonders in Stanza 25, does all this “mean”? What did the tall nun “mean” by crying “Christ come quickly,” and what does the portentous shipwreck and its significant incidents *mean* in the providential order of things, within and beyond time? In this self-dramatized breaking a virtual poetic silence, Hopkins has evidently come to associate human and natural action, including his own life, and his own writing, with the carrying forward and vigorous embodying of

some divine intention. This same note is struck many years later, at the end of “Epithalamion,” a more light-hearted but equally active water poem, about swimmers jubilantly enjoying a “froliclavish” day of “downdolphinry” through earthworld, airworld, waterworld. What I “mean,” Hopkins carefully adds, by affirming all this “gambolling and echoing-of-earth,” is “sacred matter.”

If this clue or hint about theorized poetic procedure is right, we should find it developed elsewhere in Hopkins. An obvious place to turn yet again is “Pied Beauty,” a poem everyone assumes is about varieties of form. And yet, more exactly, it is a poem glorying not in dappledness but in the active *dappling* of things in a changing and changeful creation, while carefully reserving ultimate praise for a Creator “past change.” Here the delightful world of things is not merely or primarily diverse or variegated; it is also changing, changeful, even fluid. It is the beauty of rosemoles all in stipple upon trout *that swim* – an effect produced by the movement of the fish and by the diffusions of light through moving liquid. The beauty of chestnuts is that they are like “fresh firecoal *falls*” – in action, the colour seeming to glow and irradiate from within. Even the visible tokens of human life – “all trades, their gear and tackle and trim” – imply vigorous workings, doings. And a patchwork landscape is likewise the sign and effect of busy, ongoing plotting and piecing, and of productive activity involving “fold, fallow, and plough.”

Hence the world and meaning of “Pied Beauty” are not simply ones of differences, but of *différance* – active differings. Indeed, in a rather ominous word, variously “fickle.” Fickleness strikes here the typically Hopkinsean note of qualification, deployed to anticipate the poem’s concluding turn from a moving, fleeting, and varied to a constant and unitary kind of beauty. First to last, this sonnet’s own trajectory is from grateful delight in what will not endure towards a greater admiration for what will, from a creation that changes to its changeless Creator. And yet even in God’s changelessness there is activity. The divine action of continuous Creation remains a *fathering-forth*, in the present tense. And the poet’s own final action is the imperative explicitly summoning us to perform a worthy responsive *action* ourselves – “Praise Him.”

A very similar counterpoise of natural action and its meaning for human obligation is the basis of the famous “Kingfishers” sonnet, a

poem of meaningful movements and actions and reactions if ever there was one. Stones ring *if they are tumbled*. Strings tell *if they are tucked*. Bells find tongue *if they are swung*. Kingfishers *catch* fire, and dragonflies *draw* flame. All these natural doings in the Kingfishers poem are *selvings* – a verb coined to activate the static noun *self*. Actions are the *goings* of self, its distinctive *speaking* and *spelling*. Action is what *flings out*, *cries out*, *deals out*, and names identity: “What I *do* is me: for that I came.” Motion expresses the “being” that would otherwise remain unrealized, its purpose and meaning (“for that I came”) otherwise unfulfilled.

The sestet of this sonnet then directly applies that principle to the corresponding human *behaviours* that would fulfil the purpose and meaning of our existence too. And again Hopkins resorts to making an active verb – *justicing* – out of an abstract noun. Justice is not a concept or attribute. It is something to do, a deed to perform, a meaning to enact. A person who “justices” thus “Keeps grace,” and that in turn “keeps all his goings graces.” Graces are “goings,” not virtues or possessions, or conditions of being. Justicing is an “act” performed in God’s eye, and Christlikeness is a “playing” to the Father.

As has so often been pointed out, the pattern of thematic development in these and other lyrics is familiar enough in Hopkins. His habitual practice is to open with exuberant renderings of natural sights and then to re-direct by some analogy the moral or religious “lesson” of that experience for humankind. Less commonly stressed is the dynamism (not aesthetics after all) by which natural beauty impresses its implications on the rightly disposed eye and mind. The procedure is exhibited most explicitly in “To what serves Mortal Beauty?” This poem evidently enough argues that eye-catching earthly beauty is indeed “heaven’s sweet gift” and can serve God’s “better beauty, grace.” More precisely, Hopkins insists again here that it is only when natural things “fling” their form that they set our blood dancing, keep our wits warm to reality, and ultimately to “what good *means*.” As in Purcell’s music, for example, cited as an illustration once more in this later poem. God means the meaning motion to attract our attention. As when Christianity was first sent to heathen England as a result of Pope Gregory’s casual glance at the beauty *flashing off* Anglo-Saxon captives in Rome. For Hopkins it was not because of the lovely lads’ “frame and face” or “self” (inscape or instress), no more than it was “form or

feature” itself in Purcell. Form, being, feature, or self *become* meaning when “flung.” The prisoners’ sudden flashing off of self was the Providential motion actively “gleaned” by the Pope, and the affective means by which “God to a nation dealt that day’s dear chance.”

Movement informs nearly all the best-loved moments in Hopkins. In springtime, “racing” lambs “fling,” thrushes “rinse and wring” the ear like striking lightning, weeds “shoot,” trees “leave and bloom” and “brush” a sky that “descends . . . all in a rush” into blue richness. Natural innocence is thus beautiful *in action*, and is then most a “strain” of all things in the Garden of Eden. Then again on the North Wales coast, natural sounds insistently “trench” upon the ear, the tide “ramps,” the moving moon “wears and wends,” the lark “ascends” and “pours and pelts music” as off a whirling spool. These boisterous natural actions are said to shame humankind with their purity, as actions. Likewise in “God’s Grandeur,” the operation of divine energy in the world is bright and active: it is *flaming, shining, gathering, living* or *springing*, and protectively *brooding*.

In “Inversnaid” the stream is a “rollrock highroad roaring down,/ In coop and in comb. . .” It variously “Flutes . . . falls home,” “Turns and twindles” and “treads.” The meaning of this motion, of the very wildness and wetness of wilderness, is somehow redemptive or cheering for humankind. It does something: “It rounds and rounds Despair to drowning.” Action precludes inaction. Our own salvation is somehow implicated with nature’s vigour. We see this again in “Binsey Poplars,” lamenting the loss of a once active natural scene – *growing* green, fresh and *following, shadowing, dandling, swimming, sinking, wind-wandering and weed-winding*. Its meaning motion – a channel of grace – has been arrested.

We could go on endlessly like this, relishing in many other Hopkins poems the same insistence on things that “interest our eye” and serve God’s purposes by actively *moving*. It is, after all, a moving lantern out of doors that interests our eye, or with candle indoors, “the to-fro trambeams truckle at the eye.” Bright stars at night appear to come alive, like glimmering elves’-eyes, or like abeles set on a flare, or to float and scatter like feathers, and yet, as in “Pied Beauty,” ultimately reminding us of the unchanging light of heaven beyond this world. Or think of the ebullient “Hurrahing in Harvest.” There the beauty of clouds is not in their shape but precisely in their action: “lovely

behaviour”: *wilder, wilful-wavier, moulded, and melted across skies*. It prompts the heart into a responsive action, so that it *rears wings . . . and half hurls earth off* for the meaning of that motion, “for him.” Or to write a poem about it.

## II

Evidence of the same tendency and principle can also be found everywhere in Hopkins’ journals, including, or especially, in entries composed during the years when he wrote scarcely any poetry. He still notices and records the look of things that move, or sees and describes unmoving things in animating metaphors of movement, or as effects of change. As with the poems, we are rarely justified in terming Hopkins’ journals “descriptive” in the sense of disposing accurately rendered word-pictures of objects in space. Even his sketches are attempts to capture not the law of a natural thing’s being or fixed shape, but the law of its action. For Gerard Hopkins, a “still life” would be an oxymoron.

We can linger, for example, over a few representative pages of his journals. Perhaps a sampling of details in entries from the 1868 tour of Switzerland. Oddly, or possibly not, he rarely attends closely to the great mountains themselves, and on most of these occasions his imagination likens even such massive rigidities to movement or consequences of actions. They are, for example, “naped,” or “shaped and nipped like the sand in an hourglass” (J 174) and elsewhere “*rising like thorns*” (J 176). A range of peaks exhibits a “silvery and steely sweep” (J 174). Certain of the Gornergrat heights “*run like waves in the wind,*” and the Rothhorn is “a rickety crest *pitching over*” (J 180).

The journal continuously records Hopkins alertly noticing and watching anything that actually does move, or, as with the mountains, resembles or implies motion. One glacier looks like an animal skin *swung and tossed high in the air* and cast out so that it falls clasping and lapping and spraying out, ending in tongues and points, knotted or knuckled like talons, or, above, in saddle-curves with dips and swells. Other glaciers are seen “*shouldering through the gorges . . . they form waves,*” and the colour in clefts “looks deep like flesh-cuts where one sees the blood *flush and welling up*” (J 175). The glaciers below the Gornergrat “make a table or stage from which the mountains *spring*” (J 181). Yet again, the Rhone glacier has “*swells of ice rising . . . like bright-plucked water swaying in a pail*” (J 178). Snow here is “tossing

and fretting,” and elsewhere *crisped, combed*, and “hewn in curves as if by moulding-planes” (J 172), or exhibits “fine pleatings . . . *running to or from* one another” (J 174). Even a meadow is “like an *unsteady and swelling* surface of water” (J 182).

Shapes more obviously moving in the journal entries are those of water and vegetation. A hillside of fir trees is “*melodious and moving* on many focuses” (J 172). Ash trees “*give off* their sprays” (J 172) or “*rose* with eye-taking sky-clusters, the leaves making the outlines of their two sides smartly *cross and recross*” (J 177), or are “*sprayed* all one way like water-weed beds in a *running stream*” (J 182). Another tree is seen as “*rubbing and ruffling* with the water” (J 182). Alpine roses have “*sinewy- turning*” branches (J 175). Sycomores appear to be “*falling apart* like ashes” (J 175). A river is “*narrowed in*, all leaved-over and *rushing*,” descending in “*cuffs or long lips of lathers*” (J 176-7). Foam cuffs are “of the crispiest endive-spraying” (J 177). Again, “over a smooth table of rock came *slipping down* a blade of water looking like and as evenly crisped as fruitnets *let drop and falling slack*” (J 178). Elsewhere great bushes of foam water “*gave off* showers of drops strung together into little quills which *sprang out* in fans” (J 178). Waterfalls look like “discharges of rice or meal but each cluster as it descends *sharpens and tapers*” (J 177). Such clusters of water “*wave and fall*, down the cascade . . . like the wax *gutterings* on a candle . . . losing solidity, *like rockets when they dissolve*” (J 173). They seem to be “*dancing down*” (J 173) or to resemble “milk *chasing* round blocks of coal” (J 178). Vapour “*beats up*,” making “little feeder rills” . . . “*catching and running* in drops” on rocks, “*shaken and delayed and chased along* them and even cut off and *blown upwards* by the blast of the vapour *as it rises*” (J 177). Edges of broken spray “*toss* like thousands of little *dancing bones*” (J 175). In these and other evocations in his journal, Hopkins emphasizes in a welter of active verbs the dynamic appearance of nature.

But before leaving behind these particular pages of the journal, it may be useful to note that Hopkins does also deploy here his term *inscape*, though rarely as a noun. Most frequently it is the past participle *inscaped* (thus virtually as a verb), usually to indicate how moving things can appear to assume a kind of form and shape. Rushing streams may be described, he writes, as “*inscaped* ordinarily in pillows – and upturned troughs” (J 176). Sycomores are “sharply quained and

accidented . . . and often most gracefully *inscaped*” (J 176). Mountains described as “sharply *inscaped*” are the same ones mentioned above that “run like waves in the wind” (J 180). Likewise, “a cascade is *inscaped* in fretted *falling* vandykes in each of which the frets or points, just like the *startings* of a just-lit lucifer match, keep *shooting in races*” (J 177). A plant can have “strongly *inscaped* leaves” (J 174). He notices “a slender *race* of fine flue cloud *inscaped* in continuous eyebrow curves hitched on the Weisshorn peak *as it passed*” (J 181). A roiling river “shewed its *scaping* the better for being muddy” (J 175). A telling instance of Hopkins’ association of natural inscape with implied action is his perception that the surface of a glacier is “*swerved and inscaped* strictly to the *motion* of the mass” (J 178). The same double quality of shape in motion or motion in shape may apply even where inscape appears in these pages as a noun. Of the possibly insignificant water-like “wimplings” of cross-hatched ice surfaces, for example, Hopkins speculates that “perhaps they too are a real *inscape* here seen descending and vanishing” (J 175). Here, authentic inscape in the visible universe is evidently being associated with fundamental rather than superficial semblances of motion.

### III

To return on that note to the poetry, the same strong emphasis on “meaning motion” holds true even in the poems “about” human beings. Schoolchildren, bugle boys, swimming youths, soldiers, beggars, blacksmiths, ploughmen, navvies. The “Handsome Heart” is one that expresses its best self in action: like carriers let fly, it doffs darkness, fulfills its own fine function, wild and self-instressed, moving the observer to pray that such behaviour will be but a sweet forestalling strain of heaven. In “Brothers,” the poet watches as the older lad’s *actions* tell the whole tale of his love, *wrung* on a rack, *smiling*, *blushing*, *biting* his lip, *driving* clutched hands through clasped knees, *clutching*, and finally *flinging* into those hands his tear-tricked cheeks of flame. And of “The Cheery Beggar” Hopkins writes that “the *motion* of that man’s heart is fine.”

The “Harry Ploughman” sonnet is a particularly striking example. Although long regarded as, yes, one of Hopkins’ most physically active poems, mimetic of muscular bodily movement in field-world, we can see that in fact all the movement occurs in the sestet. At

first, through the octave, Harry is clearly immobile, “standing at stress,” not yet working. The appearance of the parts and shapes of his muscular body are described, assembled in ranks and ready for action, like a ship’s crew lined up at roll-call. Then, at line 9, suddenly, away goes Harry. He *leans, bends, and quails* to the *wallowing* of the plough, his cheek crimsoned with exertion, his hair *wagging . . . in a wind lifted, windlaced, hanged or hurled*, his lashed *frowning* feet *racing* beside the cragiron blade *turning* furls of earth both under and, with a fountain’s shining-shot, over. In this way the poem as a whole illustrates, even enacts, the relation Hopkins sees between, on the one hand, a waiting inscape and instress, celebrated together here in the octave, and, on the other hand, “meaning motion,” which fills the sestet, turning potential into service.

Even where such confident exuberance is absent in a Hopkins poem, it will still be predicted, for better or for worse, on signifying movements, doings, changes. Think of the constant activity in “The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo”: *vanishing, frowning, drooping, dying, tumbling, waving off, stealing grey, seeing, singeing, tingeing, tainting, everything passing* that’s fresh and *fast-flying* of us, *wimpledwater-dimpled, fleeting, going gallant, resigning, signing, sealing, sending, motioning* with breath and with sighs *soaring, soaring* sighs, *delivering* them, *waking, waxing, walking* with the wind, *this side that side hurling* a heavy-handed hundredfold. Or in “St Winefred’s Well”: *lacing, groping, drawing out, straining, riding* the air, *marching* through my mind, blood *swinging and dancing* scarlet on a sword blade, *shearing, beetling, stooping, flashing, foamfalling, beaming*, being *lifted, turning*, heaven-vault *fast purpling, mantling, quenching, dashing down, withering, flinging, hacking, treading, cramping*, brooks *fleeing* from mountains, the *uproll and downcarol* of day-and-night *delivering* water, wild rash and *reeling water, swung, and cast*. The verse drama’s one reference to changelessness is the villain Caradoc’s despair that a corpse cannot change. Yet at the end we have Beuno’s assurance that Winefred’s name shall continue working vitally in the miracle of the well water, by analogy with natural springtime’s promise that it “shall *new-dapple* next year, sure as tomorrow morning, / Amongst *come-back-again things*, things with a revival, things with a recovery.”

When in Hopkins such recovery seems least certain, it is when there is least motion. Ominously, in “Ribblesdale,” for example, a

damaged “*landscape*” is inactive and silent. For once, nature cannot act, does not ring and tell of its Creator. Sadly, the least it can now do is *be*, and passively wear a frown. The valley’s voiceless plea to thriftless mankind is futile. Unless, of course, the action of writing this poem, of breaking into utterance on behalf of the tongueless earth’s now motionless meaning, might *move* readers to take some responsive action.

There is no space, or perhaps need, to trace my theme through the later darker poetry of Hopkins in which nature’s vital activity is gradually less and less his subject or resource as he instead turns inward, to a “world within,” and to the prospects of a world hereafter. Action’s last hurrah, so to speak, is the spectacular late poem “That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire.” One last time, moving clouds are delightful “torn tufts, tossed pillows [that] flaunt forth, then chevy on an air- / Built thoroughfare.” They are “heaven-roysterers, gay-gangs, they throng; they glitter in marches.” They are *dazzling, lacing, lancing, pairing*. But now the great boisterous wind of time and change is *roping, wrestling* and *beating* the earth, *drying* it – *squandering, squeezing, stanching, starching* – indifferent to even the clearest-selved things and marks of pitiful mankind’s doings, quenched and drowned and blotted out, gone in an enormous dark. And so nature’s bonfire actively burns on, its meaning now independent of ours. This poem ends in a final Hopkinsean flash of light, from this world of flux and motion to the eternal beam, to changeless immortal diamond at last.

#### IV

Perhaps all too predictably, I conclude with “The Windhover,” a test for any theory about Hopkins. For my immediate purposes here, all that really matters regarding interpretation of this notoriously disputed poem is what Elizabeth Schneider pointed so long ago: “*Something buckles and something breaks through*” (151). To which one could facetiously add, “The rest is just detail.” The single point on which everyone can presumably agree is that the core of Hopkins’ finest poem is, above all, some evidently highly signifying *action*, something that suddenly *happens*, and “breaks” into some implied but enigmatic *meaning*. This, is above all, Hopkins doing Hopkins. But what is it “about?” What happens, exactly, and exactly what does the motion mean? Is this sonnet primarily “about” catching in action the distinctive

inscape of kestrels in flight, whether poising themselves in the air, or gliding symmetrically off on a bow bend before resuming position? These would indeed be actions, or at least species-specific behaviours, including the one that gives the kestrel its popular name: wind-hover. Alternatively, are we to understand that this movement in the octave is not the poem's, or a kestrel's, only or chief action? Does something else happen next? For example, as many readers assume, although the poem doesn't explicitly say so, does the hovering or off-swinging kestrel then strike, and does this more spectacular event – suddenly plunging and flashing downward – move the observer from admiration to discovery? In which of the *motions* is the *meaning*? And so we again find ourselves back at the critical impasse fostered by the text's ambiguity in the sestet. What is the buckling? Where is “here”? Why is “AND” capitalized in full (corrected in Hopkins' hand from “And” [LPM 123]), presumably for emphasis? When something “breaks” out (or in) like a blaze of fire, when is “then”? Why is it a billion times lovelier, than what? How does it correspond to brightness-producing *actions* in the inanimate and human worlds: to embers falling open, or a plough working in the furrow of a field? And what is “dangerous” about it?

I've been urging that for Hopkins the meaning of created things – of brute beauty – exhibits itself in motion, not in fixed inscapes or the latent energy of instress. If this is right, and in keeping with the design of other sonnets such as “Harry Ploughman,” the meaning motion of “The Windhover” may most probably be expected in the sestet, fulfilling a potential established in the octave's emphasis on inscape and instress. An action-becoming-meaning would be a “buckling” in both senses commonly suggested – a dramatic change in the phenomenal world (like a flaming out, or like the stoop of a hunting hawk), AND one eliciting in the perceiver (“here”) in that instant (“then”) a massively coalescent responsive insight beyond that of the immediate “brute” occasion. If this motion is a billion times more meaningful, some analogy with divine action does seem certain. As for the image of shine-producing ploughing as active selving and service, we have just noted it in “Harry Ploughman” too.

But why “dangerous”? The word also appears in “To what serves Mortal Beauty?” – in that case apparently acknowledging some element of distraction or moral risk in feelings aroused by merely natural delights. Here in “The Windhover,” both the context and usage are

apparently different. Any moral peril in having allowed one's "heart in hiding" to be "stirred by a bird," whether hovering or striking, into neglect of God or duty is surely too slight. My contribution to decades of guesswork will accordingly be etymological, and only partly facetious. "Dangerous" is one of the sonnet's significant cluster of Old French words – unusual in Hopkins. It functions here with words like *minion*, *dauphin*, *valour*, *plume*, *chevalier*, even *falcon*, certainly *sillion*, *vermilion* and – to stretch a point – maybe even *billion*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* records various obsolete or archaic derivations from Old French that pertinently connect *danger* in various contexts to the scope of lordship or dominion, to the reach or range of a person or missile, and even more specifically as regards falconry, to the hunting or striking range of a hawk (I 644). The better the hawk, the more . . . *dangereux*? Whatever might be a billion times lovelier and more "dangerous" in its scope for *action* than a windhover would surely be the ultimate in the scale of being and power. Its imaginative discernment would presumably signify the dramatic breaking or coalescing of this dynamic universe into ontological consciousness. And it would lend a magnificent sense to this poem's execution and implications, regardless of how differently we might each prefer to name the "fire" of such a revelation, the meaning of its motion.

#### Works Cited

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