

Hopkinetics

I am the product of a Catholic education. Between kindergarten and graduate school I attended schools run by the Passionists, Jesuits, and priests of the Holy Cross. Even though I was never the victim of molestation, at every stage of my education there was a priest active in school who was later found to be a pedophile. While that is the first thing I am compelled to note, it is not the whole story of my education.

Early on, I was taught that the telos of learning was to become a better person. I was taught that there is an intellectual tradition that bridges heaven and earth, and if that's doesn't get you there, the mystical tradition will collapse the space between the two with no thought at all.

I was taught that the Gospel's message is love, social justice, and liberation. I was given many ways to pursue those manifestations of Christ through programs the church sponsored.

There is also something about a monk's life that has called to me—a life of work, scholarship, contemplation, and prayer. Realistically though I could never be true to a vow of chastity or obedience.

What about the vow of poverty?

I won't say anything about that except that I've chosen the profession of teaching.

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“Today we’re going to look at the work of the English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889). He was a Jesuit priest and teacher. Hopkins was a very obscure poet in his lifetime whose work became influential years after his death.”

Doesn’t that happen to a lot of poets; they become famous when they die?

“First, there are legions of poets whose work never saw the light of day. Some do become influential after their death like Hopkins, Emily Dickinson, Lorine Niedecker to a lesser extent; it happens to visual artists, folk artists. Recently a guy bought a storage locker and found a treasure of photographic negatives that turned out to be amazing street scenes by a then-unknown photographer named Vivian Maier.

Maier was employed as a nanny for many years in the northern suburbs of Chicago. When she couldn’t work anymore, an ex-client set

her up in an apartment in Rodgers Park, near the Touhy Avenue Beach. In her last years she used to go to the park there with her camera. When my boys were growing up we often returned to Chicago to see family. We went to the Touhy Avenue Beach many times because it was a straight shot east from my brother's house.

"I sometimes wonder if I ever passed by her while she was sitting on a park bench there taking pictures."

What happens if there were a pic of your boys in storage?

"Unlikely, but interesting to consider. It shows that we're often just a landscape with other people's lives in the foreground. You know what else is interesting to think about?"

Hopkins?

"You know me well. Hopkins was from a Protestant family in England and was a prodigious student. At Oxford, he gravitated toward the Oxford Movement and eventually converted to Roman Catholicism.

"The Oxford Movement sought to bring the Anglican Church (the national church of England) into more of a communion with the Roman Catholic Church and orthodox churches.

"In the latter part of the Victorian Era in England, Catholics were regaining some of the rights that had lost in the 16th century when Henry VIII established the Church of England. He wanted an annulment; the pope wouldn't grant him one so he started a national Protestant church."

Do they have a pope?

"The monarch is the head of the church."

Didn't popes have kids and do all kinds of bad stuff?

"Sometimes yes. Just because they were popes doesn't mean they were good popes. When I was a kid, a local gang was named the Popes."

The holy bangers.

"Hopkins was too sensitive to be in a gang."

That segue was cheap.

"But when he segued to Catholicism it was a great shock to his family and Hopkins himself was distraught. It was made worse when he joined the Jesuits, who, as you know, were considered the archenemies of Protestantism. In fact, Jesuits were thought to be spies and agents of the pope."

*I remember they blamed Jesuits for the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre.
What about a gang called the Jesuits?*

“When I was educated by Jesuits in high school, some of those old priests were tough as nails. But back to the poetry. One of the unique things about Hopkins's work is that it shares sensibility with Romanticism in its devotion to nature. His technique is more modern, and his later psychological work is an early example of confessional poetry.”

Is that poetry you tell a priest during confession?

“I never thought of it that way, but it's an interesting way to put it. Some poets in the late 1950s and 1960s wrote poetry that worked as a cathartic emotional confession. That's where the name comes from.”

What does “cathartic” mean?

“Like an outpouring of emotion and energy. You should know that our old buddy Aristotle used the term to describe what happens when people watch tragedy, which is often violent and bloody. He figured that it provided the audience with a catharsis which meant that they wouldn't do those things in life because they experienced them in the theatre.”

Sounds like The Purge.

“Like that without all the real violence.”

You mean fictional violence. It's a movie.

“Well done. A cathartic movie about catharsis. There's something tragic about Hopkins's late poems, but the early poems are celebrations of nature. I will define two words that Hopkins used to describe being inspired by natural forms. The words are ‘inscape’ and ‘instress.’”

“Inscape is the internal design, the form found in creation. Look at the trees outside the window. What are some examples of their form?”

Their trunk and limbs and branches.

Down to their twigs.

“Computing and cognitive mapping use tree structures all the time.”

You can see form in the bark of trees.

In the various colors.

And the way leaves arrange themselves on the branches.

Inside the leaves as well, those little lines like veins.

“Great. What are some aspects of the inscape of human beings?”

Skeletal structure.

The network of veins and capillaries.

Reproductive systems.

All those bodily systems organized like networks.

What about DNA?

“Fantastic. DNA is a great example—it encodes everything in the body. I once read that if you rolled out all the DNA strands in the human body it would wrap around our solar system twice.”

That's a lot of information.

“And multiply that times all the people who have ever lived!”

Cosmic.

“One other cosmic thing about inscape. Hopkins was particularly alert to chaotic systems in nature. A system is chaotic if a very small difference in initial conditions leads to huge changes in the overall effect.”

Like the butterfly effect? The idea that if a butterfly flaps its wings in Australia it could cause a monsoon in China.

“Exactly. Tiny causes bring big effects. Weather, cloud formation, and turbulence in streams, are chaotic systems. Hopkins is attuned to chaotic systems and the effect of randomness on natural systems.

“This sensitivity to natural form, inscape, and its relation to randomness can be read in his poem ‘Pied Beauty.’”

Glory be to God for dappled things—

For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;

For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;

Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;

Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough;

And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;

Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)

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

He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:

Praise him.

“What inscape does he find in the world.”

The colors in the sky.

Patterns in the spots on cows.

He's talking about the patterns on a trout like a rainbow trout, but what is a stipple?

"It's using small dots or strokes in drawing to give an image depth. It's like these trout have been sketched with random spots. What else?"

Those crazy waves of red when you watch coals in a fire.

He says you can see inscape in the wings of birds.

And if you look at the patterns in farmland.

And in the tools used in different trades.

"What do tools have to do with inscape?"

Say you're working the land; you need tools that apply to the features of the land you're working on.

Same with mechanical things.

It's like reverse engineering: finding out about the thing worked on by looking at the tools to work on it.

"That's absolutely true."

He says he finds inscape in freckles.

He's saying what makes any thing unique to itself is inscape.

"Where does he say inscape comes from, quote the line."

"He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change." It comes from God.

"And in return for providing these things we should?"

Praise him.

"This reminds of the first poem that we have from the Anglo-Saxon.

It is spoken by an illiterate farmer named Caedmon who had a dream where he was given a poem and was told to recite the poem when he awoke. He sings of the creation of the universe according to God's 'mōdgidanc' which is Anglo-Saxon for 'mind-plans.'"

Like God's an architect who created the universe according to a blueprint.

And we can see evidence of the blueprint in all things.

"Yes; that's inscape. According to Hopkins, instress is our ability to perceive inscape which is the form of the Godhead. He says this explicitly in 'God's Grandeur':"

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil

Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
 Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
 World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

“He says the world is ‘charged’ with the grandeur of God and its energy is inexhaustible. Why?”

Because the holy spirit is like a bird watching over the nest of nature.

“Why else is nature never spent for Hopkins?”

If it comes from God; God is eternal.

“Even if that’s true, what does he say humans do to nature?”

We try to wear it out; we smear it.

“Why? Start with the line.”

He says, “the soil is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.” When we put things between ourselves and the earth, we get further from nature. We use it instead of caring for it.

But he also says that morning will come and refresh the earth.

“Great. I want to delve more deeply into this idea of instress because it connects us to inscape. As we discuss the next poem, keep this question in the background: If inscape is the divine form and instress is our ability to perceive this form, what is the inscape of instress?”

I don't get it.

“What is the divine design in instress? It sounds like pretzel logic, but after a couple of poems we'll see if you can answer the question. Remember, we can detect the divine presence in nature and this shows that we are programmed to seek God and nature helps us do so. We take in (in-stress) this design as a property of our soul.”

*So instress is like *energia* or *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*?*

“Great point—it is exactly that, an activity of the soul. The poem

“As Kingfishers Catch Fire” makes an explicit relation between inscape and instress and perhaps can help you answer the question posed.”

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
 As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
 Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
 Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
 Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
 Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
 Selves—goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
 Crying *What I dó is me: for that I came.*

I say móre: the just man justices;
 Keeps grace: thát keeps all his goings graces;
 Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is—
 Chríst—for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
 Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
 To the Father through the features of men's faces.

“How do kingfishers catch fire and dragonflies draw flames?”
Kingfishers are birds, right?

“They are. Orange-like bellies, blue wings, white around. Remember the distribution of colors is a genetic aspect that includes the random.”

I guess when they fly the sun catches their colors.

Same thing with dragonflies. Their wings are translucent. When the wings catch light you can see different colors there.

The sun shows their inscape.

“How do stones ring tumbled over into roundy wells show inscape?”

Is he talking about throwing a stone into a well and the sound they make?

“Exactly. And notice the repetition of the r-words.”

It's like a tongue-twister.

“The literary name is sprung rhythm; he's charging the line with energy by distributing stressed syllables with other sound effects.”

Is that “stress” like instress?

“Technically it's which syllables receive the accent or emphasis in speech, but you're on to something important for Hopkins. Sprung rhythm and sound effects function like the inscape of the poem—the

shape of energy in the poem. In fact, the first part of the poem is about objects as energy nodes. How are tucked strings and hung bells energy nodes?"

Like strings of a guitar. Energy through the strings makes vibrations which make music.

Same thing with bells. They say that each bell has a unique sound.

"Yes. These sounds are pleasurable, and the internal design of these objects, stones, guitar strings, bells, becomes externalized when charged with energy. In fact, what do all things say? Quote the line."

*"Myself it speaks and spells,/Crying Whát I dó is me: for that I came."
He's saying that what you do, how you act, is a way to show your inscape.*

"Yes—deals out the indoor through action. He turns a noun into a verb in naming this bringing-out of essential nature. What's that word?"

Selves.

"In being who we are we are selving. So if you're a just person?"

You'll spread justice.

"If you are filled with grace?"

You'll spread that grace.

"Here's the key: If we act with justice, with grace, then how does God see us?"

He says God will see us as Christ.

"Now expand that idea. Quote the line."

For Christ plays in ten thousand places.

"And how do we see this play?"

Through the features of men's faces.

"Again, use a word that we've discussed."

He must be saying that the divine must be part of the inscape of our faces.

"Fantastic. Why faces?"

Maybe it's like you can tell what a person is like by looking at them.

You can also see their mood by looking at their faces.

"Yes. Our essential humanity, and divinity, is visible through features of the face. Now you can answer the question. What is the inscape of instress? What is the divine design in our ability to instress, that is, detect the divine in things and each other."

He's saying that the inscape of instress is the Christ in us.

“Absolutely right and it can guide us to just and graceful acts.”
Because the soul is the God-part in us.

“Excellent. I think of this line all the time when dealing with people. There was once this dude I worked with who just didn’t like me. At first I just let it go; that didn’t change things, so then I’d bark back at him to see if he’d ever bring the moment to a crisis.”

Did it ever come to a crisis?

“We never had it out so I didn’t know what his beef was. One day I was driving to the grocery store and saw him running. It must have been a hot summer day, and as he struggled alongside the road I saw him as Christ suffering. It sounds cheesy, but all my passive aggressive bullshit left and a feeling of love passed over me.”

Whatever you do to the least of my brothers.

“Yes! He was just a dude struggling up a hill, deserving of love and respect. We’re all struggling up a hill.”

Just like Sisyphus.

“No shit, and he must have felt the disturbance in the force because the next time I saw him, and from then on, we treated each other congenially. When people get on my nerves I remember Hopkins line and feel more patient.”

We don’t get on your nerves do we?

“Perish the thought, but I do want to remind you how sensitive Hopkins’s nerves were. He was sent to Dublin to teach Greek and Latin at University College in Dublin. The guy was overworked and depressed. The poems during the last stage of his life are called ‘The Terrible Sonnets.’

“I want to teach you about the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. Ignatius Loyola was the founder of the Jesuits. He had been a knight, so Jesuits were known as Warriors for Christ. The current pope is a Jesuit. The spiritual exercises are conducted during a retreat in order to move closer to God. I’m going to give you a simplified version of the devotional technique. There are three stages: Memory, Understanding, and Will.

Always with the three.

“In the Memory stage, you focus on an image of Christ in your mind. Often that image is of Christ during his crucifixion. While you’re

focusing on that image you rid yourself of inordinate attachments. Remember what we learned about the memory?"

Imagination. You're using your imagination to focus on an image of Christ.

"Yes. Then we move to Understanding."

Just like our romantic epistemology scheme.

"You're right. We are focused on Christ, but instead of passing the image over to understanding, we let go of attempts to understand, and empty ourselves of everything."

So in the memory stage you focus on Christ, and you empty yourself of attachment, then empty yourself of reason.

"Just like that. You're empty and vulnerable but if the exercises work, what should happen to that emptiness?"

Filled with God.

"When it is filled with God, your will joins to God's will."

So you act in a way that's Godly.

"This is called colloquy, a deep conversation between two people. You achieve a closeness to God. What's the danger?"

Yeah, you empty yourself out, and nothing comes in.

You feel abandoned.

And desperate.

"This is the Dark Night of the Soul and it's obvious Hopkins felt this near the end of his life. We're going to look at one of the poems from this period called, 'No Worse There is None' as an example.

No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief,
More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring.
Comforter, where, where is your comforting?
Mary, mother of us, where is your relief?
My cries heave, herds-long; huddle in a main, a chief
Woe, wórlid-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.'

O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne'er hung there. Nor does long our small

Durance deal with that steep or deep. Here! creep,
Wretch, under a comfort serves in a whirlwind: all
Life death does end and each day dies with sleep.

“I love the sound of this poem but it’s unnerving. The speaker is under the stress of despair. What is he saying in the first couple of lines?”

It can't get any worse.

And we're beyond grief.

“What about, ‘more pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder ring?’”

What's a “forepang”?

“Let me ask you what is a ‘pang’?”

Isn't that like a sudden pain?

Like a pang of guilt.

“Yes, a sharp, sudden emotional response. Now I'll tell you that he made up the word ‘forepang.’ He taught Latin and Greek; he knew prefixes and suffixes. ‘Fore’ as a prefix means ‘before.’ What does ‘forewarned’ mean?”

To warn somehow before something happens.

“So what would a ‘forepang’ be?”

The moment right before a pang.

Or maybe a pang before another pang.

“What is he saying?”

When I'm depressed about something, I keep thinking about the thing and it gets me more and more depressed.

A negative feedback loop.

It's like when you have a bruise and keep touching it, “Yeah it still hurts.

Yeah it still hurts.”

“What's happening to the pain in this case?”

It's getting more intense.

“He's asking for help from whom?”

Isn't the comforter the Holy Spirit?

“Yes. Who else?”

Mary.

“What happens to his cries?”

There's a bunch of them, herds of them.

“And what do they do?”

They huddle together like cattle do in a storm or cold weather.

“What is he comparing his cries to in the last couple of lines in the first stanza?”

Like banging on an anvil.

What does “let me be fell force I must be brief” mean?

“I interpret it as fury or madness saying ‘let me fall; I must be brief.

“The first three lines in the second stanza compose a powerful image of giving in to despair. What is he comparing being depressed to?”

The mind has huge mountains with straight drops.

“What might others say about these drops?”

I suffer from depression. When someone says, “Why can’t you just cheer up?” I know they have never felt the way that I do when I’m depressed. It’s not a mood but, I don’t know, a condition of being.

He’s saying being depressed is like hanging by your fingertips from one of those mind cliffs and if you’ve never hung like that, you can’t know what it’s like.

“Thank you for your contributions. That’s what he’s saying.”

He’s then saying that people can’t deal long with that kind of deep pain or that steep cliff.”

“Yes, deep or steep. He transits on the rhyme with the word, ‘creep.’ ‘Creep wretch under a comfort serves in a whirlwind.’ A few things about this line before moving on. It reminds me of the Book of Job in the Old Testament. Job suffers pain and turmoil, because of a bet God made with Satan. Job asks God, ‘why all this?’ and God comes in a whirlwind and responds, ‘you don’t know my ways. Man up.’ It’s Job in his darkest hour.

“What is the only thing that brings the narrator relief at the end of the poem?”

That his life-pain will end with death.

In the same way that his day-pain will end with sleep.

Man, that’s a downer.

“I know, as rich and energetic as the poem is, the message is dark.”

Did he commit suicide?

“He was 45 when he died of typhoid, poor creature. He was a martyr to teaching. He basically graded himself to death. He had to grade

Latin and Classical Greek entrance exams, and graded them within some ridiculous fraction, like an eighth of a point. Grading those damn papers weakened his immune system.”

You want our sympathy?

Yeah, you look you're enjoying yourself. Grading our work isn't killing you.

“I’m not as sensitive as Hopkins for sure and I’m naturally tuned to happiness. Hopkins was highly strung for sure.

“One of the last poems Hopkins wrote had a sense of resignation but doesn’t howl as much as the Terrible Sonnets. It moves me as much as any poem I know. It returns to nature. It starts with a quote from the Jeremiah asking: why do immoral people prosper why good people suffer?”

Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend
 With thee; but, sir, so what I plead is just.
 Why do sinners’ ways prosper? and why must
 Disappointment all I endeavour end?

Wert thou my enemy, O thou my friend,
 How wouldst thou worse, I wonder, than thou dost
 Defeat, thwart me? Oh, the sots and thralls of lust
 Do in spare hours more thrive than I that spend,
 Sir, life upon thy cause. See, banks and brakes
 Now, leavèd how thick! lacèd they are again
 With fretty chervil, look, and fresh wind shakes
 Them; birds build – but not I build; no, but strain,
 Time’s eunuch, and not breed one work that wakes.
 Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain.

“I can barely hold it together when I read this poem. What is he asking?”

If sinners prosper, why does everything end in disappointment with me.

He’s also saying that if God were his enemy he’d treat Hopkins better than he is as his friend.

What’s the stuff about the sots and thralls of lust?

“Two ways. He’s returning to question of sinners prospering, but he may be making a confession. Why do these impure thoughts multiply in me while I am just trying to concentrate on you?”

Is there something else going on with him?

“There’s a theory about homoerotic imagery, but I don’t want you to think there’s one key to understanding his despair, like saying he was clinically depressed. Does that explain everything? The spiritual despair he feels is real to anyone who has grappled with questions of God.”

That’s where faith comes in.

“You’re right. He’s trying his best I think; faith can be difficult to grasp when you feel hopeless. There’s a term for the disappearance of God. I think it’s Greek; I read it once and have never been able to find the source. It was used to describe the moment on the cross when Christ says (quoting the Old Testament), ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’

“That’s how Hopkins must have felt—abandoned by God.

“The last five lines show he still is able to perceive beauty in nature and asks God to provide to him what he provides to living things. He sees things grow. What time of year is it?”

It’s spring; birds are building their nests.

“Compare that to how he feels about himself.”

Birds build nests but he doesn’t make anything good.

“What does he call himself?”

Time’s eunuch.

Isn’t a eunuch somebody without his....mmm...family jewels?

“Yes, why would he say that?”

He’s not procreating anything.

“What does he ask for at the end?”

He compares himself to a plant that needs rain.

He’s asking God to nourish him.

Wow, his poetry started out so positive. This is really dark.

Do you think it would make him happy that we read his poetry?

“Absolutely, ‘not breed one work that wakes’? I’m not the only one who has been awoken by his poetry. He did, indeed, suffer during his life. But what a beautiful, soul to write such poetry!”

“It’s interesting that he trusted ‘Providence’ to take care of his poetry. He accepted obscurity and believed that the divine plan, if it were so, would ensure his work would reach the light. His faith was not misplaced

“Wonderful work today.”

One more question before we let you leave.

“The tables have turned. Go ahead.”

All semester long it seems like you critique religion and now you sound religious. Are you?

“It doesn’t matter. I used to tell students to assume I was a gay animist, but then I got concerned I might have a student who was a gay animist. My point was, and still is, it shouldn’t matter to you what I profess to be. I’m qualified to teach you. I shouldn’t grade you differently if you’re cis, transgendered, gay, Muslim, Hindi, or whatever.”

Then why all that critique of creationism?

“Because I would never ask you to assume the same *belief* I have. And if you treat a belief as a provable proposition, then you haven’t learned what I want to teach you.”

That propositions are different kinds of statements than beliefs?

“Yes. Because they are falsifiable. It might be comforting to know that your teacher shares the same world-view as you do, but it has little educational value. In fact, maybe you’d learn more from me if I were a gay animist.”

But you’re not.

“I’m not saying one way or the other.”

One more thing before we let you go.

“Now I know what I sound like.”

Do you worry your poetry will never see the light?