Blue of the Sky as 'Swarming and Blushing': Celebration of Nature in G. M. Hopkins

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"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".

G. M. Hopkins' poem 'God's Grandeur' opens with a very powerful metaphor expressing the electrifying presence of God in the world. For the poet, Nature was the visible sign through which he encountered God, the Creator. He found nature a means of sanctification and it enabled him to render worship to God. While reading "God's Grandeur", one can almost feel the explosion that is going to take place soon. This poem can be read along with another of Hopkins's poems, namely, 'The Starlight Night' which expresses the poet's ecstasy and wonder at the beauty of nature: "Look at the stars! Look, look up at the skies! / Look at all the fire-folk sitting in the air!" Hopkins's spiritual Father and the Founder of the Jesuit Order, Ignatius of Loyola, was an avid star-gazer. Lying on his back in the open terrace of a building, Ignatius was fond of looking at the stars and praising the Maker of them all. Hopkins seems to have been following in the footsteps of his Founder in this respect, giving himself over, for a while, to the sheer beauty and glory of the stars which appear to him as "the fire-folk sitting in the air!"

Hopkins showed his minute observation of nature and his love of beauty in the visible world already as a child. He grew up developing a passionate love for the beauty in nature and

this naturally got reflected in his writings. Lahey comments, "he led a sort of charmed life, dreaming and reading, and chewing the cud of his gleanings from the world – harvest of poetry . . . he was a fearless climber of trees, and would go up very high in the lofty elm tree, standing in our garden at Oak Hill, Hampstead, to the alarm of on-lookers like myself" (8). His senses were sharp and active and he took great pleasure in observing objects which looked apparently silly or insignificant to people with ordinary senses. He could spend any amount of time just observing things and each time he observed a thing it appeared fresh and new to him. This ability to observe and enjoy the beauty and individuality of things grew up in him so naturally and spontaneously that often he was found himself lost in those sublime moments. And there was an inner urge within him to identify himself with the things he observed.

Hopkins' model and spiritual father, Ignatius, had several mystical experiences which gave him great consolation in life. The most important of all such experiences was the one Ignatius had at the river Cardoner, which he failed to express in words. Hopkins had similar mystical experiences of Nature even before joining the Jesuit Order. While Ignatius attributes such experiences to direct divine intervention, Hopkins does not; instead he considers them as part of his love affair with Nature. Hopkins speaks of one such rare experience which he had on August 30, 1867:

> Fair; in afternoon fine; the clouds had a good deal of crisping and mottling.--A round by Plumley.--Stands of ash in a copse: they consisted of two or three rods most gracefully leaved, for each wing or comb finally curled inwards, that is upwards.-- Putting my hand up against the sky whilst we lay on the grass I saw more richness and beauty in the blue than I had known of before, not brilliance but glow and colour. It was not transparent and sapphire-like but turquoise-like, swarming and blushing around the edge of the hand and in

> the pieces clipped in by the fingers, the flesh being sometimes sunlit, sometimes glassy with reflected light, sometimes lightly shadowed in that violet one makes with cobalt and Indian red (House, 154).

This is a brilliant picturesque expression of a rare moment in the artist's life: an experiment with light and colour that one can actually do oneself on any day, if it's bright and sunny, where one lives. Hopkins' portraying of the blue of the sky as "swarming and blushing" around his hand makes one think of Van Gogh.

Hopkins had profound love for Nature. He was a great walker too. His long walks are recorded in his journals as deep visual and spiritual experiences. His keen observation of Nature and his intuition into what he observed are well expressed in his journal. On 14 August 1867 he turned 23, just graduated from Oxford and was staying with a friend's family in London. He noted that day in his journal: "Hot; fine, with haze; at six in the evening a wonderful rack of what I hear they call 'flock-of-sheep' clouds, a dapple of plump rounds half parted, half branching from one another like madrepores" (ibid. 150). 'Dapple' is a favourate word for Hopkins and it appears in several of his poems and in each poem he has a different meaning for the word. One is reminded of "Glory be to God for dappled things" in 'Pied Beauty,' in which he glorifies God for the rich variety and diversity he finds in Nature. He gets an intuition into what he observes in Nature, and through his skillful use of language he communicates to his readers how the apparent opposites exist in harmony to praise God. In 'The Windhover' he uses the expression, "dapple-dawn-drawn-Falcon," and in 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' he says, "I kiss my hand to the dappled-with-damson west". The colour of the sky at dawn in the former poem and the colour of the western sky at sunset in the latter, as the poet sees them, are so variegated and beyond the expression in language that he coins compound epithets to describe them. Hopkins developed a

large idiosyncratic vocabulary in the early journals--words that begin as aesthetic terms, then take on theological meanings for him during his Jesuit years.

A few days after, on 22 August Hopkins went to a park to draw, and afterwards he described the scene in his journal:

> From the spot where I sketched--under an oak, beyond a brook, and reached by the above green lane between a park-ground and a pretty field--there was a charming view, the field, lying then on the right of the lane, being a close-shaven smoothly-rounded shield of bright green ended near the high road by a row of viol-headed or flask-shaped elms--not rounded merely but squared--of much beauty--dense leafing, rich dark colour, ribs and spandrils of timber garlanded with leaf between tree and tree (ibid. 152).

Hopkins does not merely delight in the panoply of natural objects that catches his eye. He goes further into it, and through his imaginative language he translates his visual experience into linear prose which he himself calls a ‘treasury of explored beauty’ (Abbott, 202). He says,

> But what most struck me was a pair of ashes in going up the lane again. The further one was the finer--a globeish just-sided head with one launching-out member on the right; the nearer one was more naked and horny. By taking a few steps one could pass the further behind the nearer or make the stems close, either coincidingly, so far as disagreeing outlines will coincide, or allowing a slit on either side, or again on either side making a broader stem than either would make alone. It was this which was so beautiful--making a noble shaft and base to the double tree, which was crested by the horns of the nearer ash and shaped on the right by the bosom of the hinder one with its springing bough. The outline of the double stem was beautiful to whichever of the two sides you slid the hinder

> tree--in one (not, I think, in both) shaft-like and narrowing at the ground. Besides I saw how great the richness and subtlety is of the curves in the clusters, both in the forward bow mentioned before and in some most graceful hangers on the other side: it combines somewhat-slanted outward strokes with rounding (House, 152).

Here the description is very picturesque, like a painting, but one that is three-dimensional and one can walk through. At one point Hopkins has us moving our heads back and forth to examine the delicate changes in their perception of two trees.

The beauty found in the variety of God's creation reminds Hopkins of its Maker. He was attuned to find God's presence in birds, trees, sunsets, stars, etc. He felt that God was enveloping the whole of creation. He found the myriad forms of God in the variety of his creation. "His whole raison d'etre was to go through the world to Christ as Christ had come from the heavens to man" (Pick, 51). The mystery of Incarnation helps Hopkins to form a new vision of the world and of humans, in which the physical world becomes God's word, expression and news. Hopkins, to some extent, went beyond Ignatian spirituality and admired the Franciscan spirituality of love of the world, especially love of Nature. He knew well that his founder Ignatius himself was inspired by Francis of Assisi, whose spirituality had a more universal appeal than the limited Jesuit vision of the world. It is also from Francis of Assisi, the great Nature-saint, that Hopkins learnt to praise God through the creation. Thus, in Hopkins one finds the beautiful blend of the spirituality of St. Ignatius of Loyola and St. Francis of Assisi. "The joy in the variegated and transient inscape of the world is Franciscan in its eagerness in "Pied Beauty" (ibid. 53). St. Francis invited the whole creation – animals, plants, Brother Sun and Sister Moon – to praise and honour God, their maker and master:

> Praised be You, my Lord, with all your creatures, especially Sir Brother Sun, who is the day and through whom You give us light. And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendour; and bears a likeness of You, Most High One. Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars, in heaven You formed them clear and precious and beautiful. Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind, and through the air, cloudy and serene and every kind of weather through which You give sustenance to your creatures (qtd in Franciscan Sister, 31).

St. Francis echoed the psalmist who invited the rest of creation to join the human race in singing the praises of God (Ps 148: 96). Ignatian spirituality helped Hopkins establish a similar sort of fraternity with all the good and beautiful things created by God. Among the many poems written by Hopkins under the inspiration of the Ignatian meditation called *Contemplatio ad Amorem*, 'God's Grandeur' perhaps best illustrates the ever vibrant presence of God in the world. The Jesuit poet found his consolation in life being imbued with the spirituality of "Contemplation to Obtain the Love of God" (*Contemplatio ad Amorem*), which helped him to see God in all things and all things in God.

In this context we must ask how Hopkins accommodated his sensuous love of nature within the framework of Christian spirituality, more specifically Jesuit spirituality. Although as a student at Oxford, Hopkins, like St. John of the Cross, held a negative attitude to his love of the world, including his love of nature, later on he realized that such an approach was not necessary for a sound Christian spirituality. He struggled hard to strike a balance between his sensuous love of the world and asceticism. Hopkins was by nature a highly scrupulous person and having joined a strict religious order like the Society of Jesus this tendency in him got stimulated all the more. It took many years for him to come to the belief that the 'inscapes' in nature were

manifestations of God's presence in the world; in 1867 as a student at Oxford he was struggling with the opposite possibility, that the beauty of the world is a temptation that must be renounced for God.

The Ignatian Exercises played the most important role in transforming and remoulding Hopkins' idea of beauty, sense experience and aesthetics. They became pivotal in his movement from an adolescent love of sensuous beauty for its own sake to a mature and sacramental love of beauty. They taught Hopkins to see creatures as the gifts of God, tokens of His love given to help humankind in their efforts to reach Him in thought, desire and the fulfilment of desire. With a renewed vision of beauty Hopkins was, once again attracted by trees, leaves and grass and all the beauties of the world and considered them as the earth's supplicants and messengers to God. In 'Pied Beauty' the poet feels that all distinctions and varieties are singing God's glory. God embodies the principle of similarity in dissimilarity, of identity in difference. In the opening lines Hopkins pays homage to God for having created multi-coloured and spotted things: "Glory be to God for dappled things- / For skies of couple-colour as a brinded 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". The poet takes delight in the pied beauty of nature – its dappled and varied appearance. He admires the skies, river, reddish brown chestnuts, birds in the branches and the works of human beings, and he praises God for all of them. In the poem, Hopkins admires the co-existence of contrary things; he admires their uniqueness and originality, their oddness, which differentiates each from the others. Then by asking the metaphysical question, "who knows how?", he means to say that nobody can explain why these things are 'freckled'. All these things have their origin in God. All things issue forth from God. God's beauty is not subject to change. God's beauty is eternal when compared with the transient beauty

of Nature. For Hopkins, God was not a notional or imaginary idea; God was a living person, throbbing with life, in fact, Life itself; God was not merely in heaven; He was very much here and now. Since God was enveloping the whole universe, Hopkins considered the world of Nature constantly and faithfully singing the praises of God.

Human beings, the crown of creation, seemed to have forgotten their vocation; instead of being a provident master of creation, man has defaced and deformed the world by denuding the forests; the earth has become bare and barren, because of the recklessness and avarice of the man. One can almost feel the anger, anguish and disgust of Hopkins over human greed and wanton destruction and desecration of Nature in the following lines: "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" ('God's Grandeur'). Deforestation, environmental pollution and anti-environment developments in the modern world have resulted in environmental pollution, global warming, and a total ecological crisis. In the light of the present ecological crisis, study of Hopkins becomes more enlightening and rewarding.

In fact Hopkins saw in creatures more than the gifts of God: "Give beauty back, beauty, beauty, beauty, back to God, / Beauty's self and beauty's giver" ('The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo'). Hopkins saw creatures as a likeness of God, who is the exemplary cause of natural beauty. The doctrine of the creature's semblance to its creator belongs rather to faith and philosophy. 'Nondum' is about the frustration of a man practicing a belief without seeing God: "We see the glories of the earth / But not the hand that wrought them all". *Contemplatio ad Amorem* is the final goal and acme of the entire Ignatian Exercises, in which all is transmuted by the fire of Love. This Exercise created a deep impact on Hopkins' sense perception and poetic

thought. As a result created beauty became for him a call to Divine Beauty. Aesthetic and religious experience became one in the sacramental apprehension of beauty.

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