



TO SEE THE WORLD IN A GRAIN OF SAND WITH GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

A poet taught a physician how to see again.

By Raymond C. Barfield

I'm a physician. My work gives me the privilege of being invited into the lives of other people during the most important parts of their own stories, or the stories of people they love—birth, death, loss, hope, courage. How strange and sad, then, that many of us who work in medicine lose our sense of wonder and humble gratefulness as we rush to keep up with electronic medical records, insurance pre-authorizations, and changes in health-care regulations and laws. It is all too easy to become blind to the beauty that shows up every day, over and over, in the faces and stories of patients. It is all too easy to forget how to see well. I would not be surprised if this contributes to the rising burnout and depression rate among clinicians, which is over 50 percent according to recent studies.

I experienced burnout some years ago. I had lost my ability to see in the middle of institutional dysfunction and the never-ending stream of urgent tasks demanding my attention. Over time, I discovered that one way past this crisis was to recover a kind of mindful wonder at the beauty that shows up in my work and life, even when the stories are hard or tragic. I found a

friend who helped me relearn how to see the world, a friend with a mind adept at using images that mine the riches of creation's treasure house. He saw significance where others saw only shapes. He had learned to ask of the shadows that form in this strange universe what they are shadows of, and what light allows such shadows to be cast. Gerard Manley Hopkins who, in "Pied Beauty," asked what it is that allows us to see "All things counter, original, spare, strange" as an opportunity to "Praise him," gave me the gift of redeemed sight through his poems. His poetry was not easy for me, but neither were the lessons I needed to learn if I was going to reimagine my own vocation.

Hopkins had a hallowed belief that "the world is charged with the grandeur of God." In his work as a priest and a poet he drew on the spiritual exercises of Ignatius and the philosophical illumination of Duns Scotus to find a way to say what his mind and heart felt in a world created and loved by God. His aim in the world was to express its glory and radiance. But his contemporaries did not immediately understand what he was doing. So,

he developed his own poetics and coined new words to explain what he was trying to capture in his poems. So he spoke of the way the “inscape” of a thing is “instressed” upon the human faculties capable of receiving it. Through his poetry, he urgently tried to incarnate what he saw in creation, and his poems became a form of worship-language brimming with the shimmering light of all that is real.

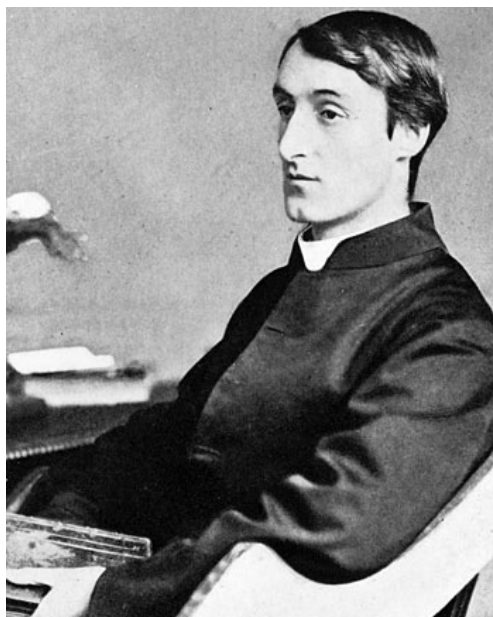
Here is my best attempt to understand what Hopkins meant by *inscape* and *instress*: when we experience the inscape of a thing, there is a change in our seeing, though what we register is always already there. To see inscape, the one seeing must be emptied of buzzing distraction, and surrender to the seeing as a mode of love, love as agape and love as the fire of eros, a desire that consumes without destroying. Instress is a repetition of experience, in which the order of a thing or situation begins to emerge from randomness, revealing its inscape, which might be too fleeting to catch with one inattentive glance. Our minds can approach a thing in an incremental way that is comprehensively descriptive without ever penetrating its *inscape*. But we can also approach a thing contemplatively, reaching not for all its discrete parts, but rather trying to see its inner unity. This unity is its *form*, and its form is what makes the *parts* of a thing the parts of a *thing*. In a created universe, every thing is a contingent burst of gifted existence. This is the source of radiance that Hopkins does not want us to miss, in even the smallest form of the smallest flower or worm. That flower or that worm might

not have been, and yet it is here. You or I might not have been, and yet here we are. In a created universe each thing is upheld and made meaningful by its dual character as a thing that is unnecessary and a thing that nonetheless *is*. In such a universe, there is a power in merely being a particular thing, because the source of all being is the Creator. *Instress* is Hopkins’s word for this power within a thing, and *inscape* is the peculiar form this power takes in any individual thing that is.

This is a radical view of reality that sees the fullness of the created world densely populated throughout by inscape. As each form is grasped by a mind that has been made to perceive form, a relationship between the form and the imagination is created. A poet is someone who craves to express this form in language, shaping a poem until the inward flame of the created thing—the flower, the face, the cloud—shines though. Instress implies more than visible radiance. It suggests a kind of force that we experience as urgent, a light not only seen but also felt in a palpable way that must be dealt with. It provokes the passion that leads to poetry, or perhaps to liturgy, as shared responsiveness to the demand of creation, as well as to our sense of being held in existence, along with everything else in this collection we call a cosmos. For Hopkins, everything is charged with God, both in the electrical sense in which it gives off sparks and ignites fires, and in the economic sense that all form, essence, and being shimmering on the surface awakens creation to its own debt to God for its very being. Creation never

comes to an end of the “account,” understood as both the availability of further gifts and the story of how we came to be what precisely we are.

The metaphor of electricity is one that can be taken as a hint or clue that was merely glimpsed by Hopkins. But there might be a deeper sense of the metaphor in light of our growing knowledge of the electrochemistry of the brain, that strange object perched among the ideas and images of the world. Who are we to say that the electricity of a created brain is not, in part, a marvelous means for making the music of metaphysics likewise show up in conversation, or on the page, or at the altar? Who are we to say that the poetry of the created cosmos, the verse of the universe, does not fittingly play on the electrical machine of the brain, as thing reaches to thing and points beyond things, that which can only be approached asymptotically with the nimble calculus of analogy? In a created world, we cannot disregard our instrument of reception, nor insulate ourselves from the vault and voltage of the physical cathedral of creation, and expect to distill a metaphysics that is true. By “metaphysics” I don’t mean some esoteric idea that is only relevant at philosophy conferences. I mean the very light in which we see the meaning and goodness of the world. I mean the answer we might try to give if someone asks us why the night sky fills us with longing. I mean the reason we believe our inward compass is reliable, giving our minds and bodies a sense of purposeful direction, so that we can think about what is worth doing in a life, and then do it. I



think this is a beautiful way to see the world. But it is not the end of the story.

Hopkins suffered from severe depression. We could also say that he suffered from ecstasy. In both cases, he knew the experience of having his mind possessed in ways that threatened his own capacity to keep his wits. So much of what we toil after, and trade our time for, is bound to our attempts to stabilize a world that is teetering on change and dissolution. But we see what we can see, and when someone can’t see the expansiveness of interplanetary space, because their mind is locked in a closet with one flickering light bulb, such a person should be loved with grace rather than judged. If the “deep down things” are insulated from us by layers of false stories, by our own painful experiences, or by misbegotten malformations, still the drive to know the truth of things can drive us toward dim lights that, once the door is flung wide, turn out to be the light of the

sun. The one we long for laughs and disappears over the next hill, not to escape, but to beckon us on to further adventures.

This atmosphere of grace redeems. We breathe an air of transformation, not only when we tumble into unexpected radiance, but also when we relax into the final meditative silence of the passage we call death. In his poem “God’s Grandeur,” Hopkins wrote about this radiance:

*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.
.

*And, for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep
down things;*
.

*Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and
with ah! bright wings.*

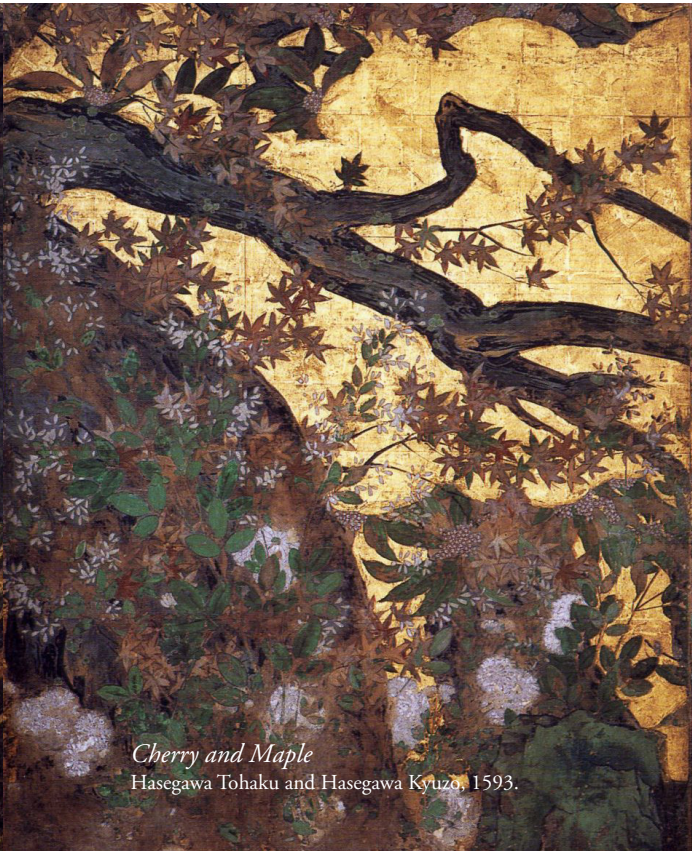
What startles in nature comes from the same source that created both sunrise and sunset. It is no puzzle worked through systematically in the way we find solutions in the laboratory. Instead, it is a fully felt discovery by a prayer-shaped imagination encountering the mystery that resides in



the deep parts of reality, demanding not the contained register of a cool and systematic mind, but rather an ecstatic breaking out of homey ignorance into the strangeness of beauty. This disorients us until we see that the landscape is closer to home than anything we have known in the grey mist of the local weather, where we tuck our heads under umbrellas and squint our eyes. We suspect that we are made for more, and that the ache in our backs and shoulders is not due to overexertion on the way, but to a constriction of wings that we become aware of through the presence of a peculiar pain.

The pain, to put it differently, is a pain of disjunction between the way we currently

act in the world and the truth of what we are meant to be and to become. The experience—the urge and urgency—of being a creature that is always, always, always becoming is a kind of ecstasy. But there is also a pathos in always being on the way, especially when the end toward which we are moving is obscured, leaving us with a vision of our own nature and situation that is partial, incomplete, and sometimes lonely. This is a kind of sadness, where sadness is a placeholder for a feeling that might be called anxiety, dread, depression, ennui, or even madness. The experiences of ecstasy and madness are not mutually exclusive, if only because they often both occur in the same soul. The ecstasy of erotic love can lead to the birth of another person, while the wave of madness



Cherry and Maple


Hasegawa Tohaku and Hasegawa Kytuzo, 1593.



can lead to someone's death. Though the erotic is enlivening, and though sadness is illuminating, both have been subjected to the cures and consolations of philosophy for millennia. But those who have known passionate love or grief know that more is needed if we are ever to be truly consoled.

In liturgy we pray for peace. If there is to be any peace on earth, it must be a peace among discordant elements, a peace of contrasts. But because the unity of God is singular and not susceptible to imitation, the inscape of anything that is created is beautiful in itself—it will be dappled, it will be couple-coloured. If we want to experience things as gifts, we must learn to see in a way that does not rush to impose a false unity by dissolving things into the manageable abstractions of generalized laws and concepts. The impulse to abstraction is understandable, with a laudable and revealing aim, and it can be motivated by an impulse toward worship. But beauty, truth, and goodness show up concretely in the world. The inscape and instress of radiant things reveals a Creator who sustains creation through unfathomably intimate presence, while being utterly and unfathomably different from creation. This beautiful, but difficult, concept of God's relationship to creation is expressed in the idea of the *analogia entis*, which was so important to Hopkins.

Nature is a language that speaks the unspeakable through its radiant forms. Hopkins answered with a language of his own in his poems, as he journeyed toward the mystery of God, a Creator who does not merely dwell beyond the things, but who lights up creation from inside. For Hopkins, there was no clear line between natural and supernatural perception of the Creator and creation. In either case, the love of God is the only answer to disorientation. Hopkins showed us how the converted imagination can relearn to see the source and sustainer of all created things *through* the things themselves, lit by an internal light. This is true for the highest celestial object, but it is also true for the face of the frightened patient I will go see soon after I finish this sentence. One measure of the value of Hopkins's insights and example is the growth of our own ability to see "the dearest freshness of deep down things," by which he most certainly means the dearest freshness in the eyes of the next patient I see. If this matters—and it does—it must matter concretely, now, as I finish this essay, sitting in the pediatric bone marrow transplant unit, on a Saturday, ready to care for sick patients through the night. Burnout is nowhere on the horizon. For this old friend of mine, and for his astonishing way of seeing creation, which I am still trying to grasp, I am deeply grateful.

Time to see my patient. 



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