

Anti-Apostrophe in the “Terrible Sonnets” of Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Life of One Mormon Missionary

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That is what the highest criticism really is, the record of one's
own soul.

Oscar Wilde

Therefore I will not refrain my mouth; I will speak in the anguish
of my spirit; I will complain in the bitterness of my soul.

Job 7:11

Our civilization is founded on the shambles, and every individ-
ual existence goes out in a lonely spasm of helpless agony. If you
protest, my friend, wait till you arrive there yourself!

William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience

I was given an upbringing that left me with a tendency to view many situations through the lens of religious struggle, and I have discovered that many of my more secular friends find this tendency troubling. Such theological tendencies become even more troublesome when I discuss the works of a poet also prone to theologizing—say, for instance, Gerard Manley Hopkins, who in 1866 converted from the Church of England to Catholicism while at Oxford, became a Jesuit in 1868, and, when he did so, burned all his early poetry as unworthy of his profession. In 1884, he

was appointed Professor of Greek at University College in Dublin and named Fellow in Classics of the Royal University of Ireland, where his primary responsibility was grading student papers. He was not allowed to preach: congregations found his sermons too eccentric in doctrine as well as diction. Hopkins hated Ireland (although he lived there until he died of typhoid in Dublin in 1889), and mourned the loss of the opportunity to give sermons. He fell into a depression in 1885, during which he wrote little; the few exceptions include some “Terrible Sonnets” that came to him as “inspirations unbidden.”

These half-dozen sonnets shriek in agony and moan in despair. The word “damnation” does not appear once in any of the poems. If there is any validity in Michael Riffaterre’s idea that poems “owe their unity to the one word left unspoken” (Riffaterre 1978, 3), then the *significance* or the “formal and semantic unity, which includes all the indices of indirection” (2) of these poems is *damnation* and all its attendant pain, all the self-loathing that necessarily occurs when a believer believes he has been rejected by God. Given the extent to which Hopkins’s “Terrible Sonnets” are devoutly and devotedly frightened by and worried about the nature and role of God in human lives and in nature, criticism of them should include attention to the idea of *god* in them and to the reasons why someone would write *about* him, though not *to* him.

Apology means both “a formal justification or defense” and “an acknowledgment expressing regret or asking pardon for a fault or offense” (*American Heritage Dictionary* 2000). I realize that I’m constructing a fairly apologetic apology¹ here, but if Jonathan Culler can state that apostrophe, as in “O mysterious apostrophe, teach us to understand your workings! Show us your varied talents here!” (Culler 1981, 135) is embarrassing to postmodern, post-Marxist critics, surely God is *more* embarrassing to them; otherwise, I can’t account for the long critical silence on the topic of God in poetry by such explicitly religious poets as T. S. Eliot, Emily Dickinson, and Hopkins. And a poet who sweats damnation is the most embarrassing spectacle of all.

It has been interesting, in the decades that I have studied and taught literature at public universities, to see how apologetically religious literature written after the Renaissance is discussed, as if Freud’s dismissal of religion as neurosis were absolutely true, and that people writing such stuff in such times as ours should somehow “know better.” Eliot’s devotion to Anglo-Catholicism is seldom mentioned without someone countering that he also loved whoopie cushions or bawdy songs; John Donne’s religious

poetry would appear to be interesting mainly for his description of religious experience in sexual terms;² and I've heard great pains taken to prove that Hopkins's deeply Christian descriptions of nature can be appreciated "even by atheists." Christopher Smart's religious poetry requires no such defense; he can be allowed to believe in God because he was institutionalized for insanity.

One way to avoid apologizing for poets who believe in God is to refrain from doing content-based readings in the first place. But I want to argue that even literary analysis consisting primarily of verbally-based, linguistically-informed attention to textual material should, if that textual material deals with ideas of God, deal with the seriousness and weight of those ideas, even if that analysis tends to squirm in discomfort as it does so. Because sometimes the point is not the *jouissance* of the text, but its *desespoir*.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Ur-text of religious despair is Job. The Book of Job not only questions the nature of human suffering, it also interrogates language's capacity to explain, express, and account for that suffering. Consider Job's retort to Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, when they tell him his suffering is punishment for sins:

Teach me, and I will hold my tongue: and cause me to understand wherein I have erred.

How forcible are right words! but what doth your arguing reprove?

Do ye imagine to reprove words, and the speeches of one that is desperate, which are wind? (Job 6:24–26)

What Job most wants is not even an end to his suffering, but an explanation for it, and he demands one from God. Of course God has better sense than to offer Job "right words" or to try to reprove "the speeches of one that is desperate": God merely explains how powerful and great he is, and Job retreats, asserting that language fails to function as an accurate index of human comprehension of the universe:

Who is he that hideth counsel without knowledge? therefore have I uttered that I understood not; things too wonderful for me, which I knew not. (Job 42:3)

It is not only in the Old but in the New Testament as well that language is seen as inadequate for describing human life, or for addressing God:

Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. Romans 8:26

What, then, does a believer do when the Spirit is no longer helping him utter those unutterable groans? Silence can be at least as hard to interpret as speech: it can be, among other things, “dark heaven’s baffling ban” or “hell’s spell,” but one result of supernatural silence is that it often begets human inarticulation; it can bar or thwart any word the heart breeds.

Consider, for example, the inadequacy of language in this poem by Hopkins:

To seem the stranger lies my lot, my life
 Among strangers. Father and mother dear,
 Brothers and sisters are in Christ not near
 And he my peace/my parting, sword and strife.
 England, whose honour O all my heart woos, wife
 To my creating thought, would neither hear
 Me, were I pleading, plead not do I: wear-
 y of idle a being but by where wars are rife.

I am in Ireland now; now I am at a third
 Remove. Not but in all removes I can
 Kind love both give and get. Only what word
 Wisest my heart breeds dark heaven’s baffling ban
 Bars or hell’s spell thwarts. This to hoard unheard,
 Heard unheeded, leaves me a lonely began.

The vocabulary in this poem seems to have shrunk: while the syntax is eccentric and complex, the diction is remarkably simple: there are only two words with more than two syllables, and both of those—*unheeded* and *creating*—are two-syllable verbs that gain their third syllables when conjugated out of the present tense. Several words do double duty: *stranger* in the first line is both “odder” (the Irish thought Hopkins very odd) as well as “the one who is unknown” (the meaning that dominates in the second appearance of the word); *peace*, coupled as it is with *parting*, is also “piece”; *remove* is “a leg of a journey” or “a distancing,” as well as “a disappearance.”

In the first part of her essay “Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion,” Barbara Johnson suggests that in Baudelaire’s poem “Moesta and

Errabunda,” the final question of “Can one call back (the paradise of childhood) and animate it with a silvery voice?”

is a perfect description of apostrophe itself: a trope which, by means of the silvery voice of rhetoric, calls up and animates the absent, the lost, and the dead. Apostrophe itself, then, has become not just the poem’s mode but also the poem’s theme. In other words, what the poem ends up wanting to know is not how far away childhood is, but whether its own rhetorical strategies can be effective. The final question becomes: Can this gap be bridged? Can this loss be healed, through language alone? (Johnson 1987, 187)

In several of Hopkins’s sonnets, the answer is *no*. The mode and the theme become not apostrophe so much as anti-apostrophe: a refusal to call and animate any friend or possible ally, because the gap cannot be bridged, the loss cannot be healed. *Heart hoard unheard heard unheeded* in “To Seem the Stranger” might all as well be *hard*, as close in sound as they are to it. England “would neither hear / Me, were I pleading, plead not do I”; given this situation, *hard* introduces both *hard-hearted* and *hard of hearing*. Such attributes in an auditor certainly make any apostrophizing to it, if not embarrassing, at least futile.

Culler points out that “[o]ne who successfully invokes nature is one to whom nature might, in its turn, speak” (Culler 1981, 142) but in “No Worst, There is None,” apostrophes beyond the self are quite pointless: cries to “Comforter” and “Mary” fall off every bit as unheard and/or unheeded as “To Seem the Stranger” suggests they would. It is only “self” that can be successfully addressed, and then as *Wretch*. The whirlwind calls to mind the story of Job; however, it is not the voice of God but the voice of *Fury* that addresses the human speaker:

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

This poem uses non-Latinate monosyllablism to great effect, particularly in its first and final lines. There's a clanging bell, the death knoll of someone's soul, in the first stanza of this poem: *pitch* (not just *thrown* but a musical tone) in the first line sets up a pun on *wring* in the second, with *-ting* at the end of the third line setting up *-ling*³ (as in *ting-a-ling*) at the end of the seventh; and these noises all—as the sixth line points out—*sing* along shrilly to an ugly melody, a melody that gains momentum as multi-syllabic words are introduced and as plosives (*p* and *k*) and glottal stops (*t* and *g*) are replaced with rolling consonants such as fricatives (*f* and *s*) and liquids (*l* and *r*), but the song ends abruptly with the clipped words of the stanza's final line.

The bell has stopped ringing in the second stanza; the primary rhyme, the rhyme the poem ends on, the rhyme important enough to occur three times in five syllables (“steep or deep. Here! creep,”) is *-eep*, a gentle plosive, like the sound of something soft as it hits bottom after dropping off a cliff. The cliffs in the poem are *fall*, and the repetition of that *-l* in *small* and *all* extends the fall (a drop, an overthrow or collapse, the loss of innocence and grace resulting from Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit in the garden) off the cliff, before the splat at the end of the poem.

Durance means “confinement or restriction by force; imprisonment” and comes from French “durer, to last” (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 2000). Considering this etymology, Hopkins's “small durance” that does not “long . . . deal with that steep or deep” is a bit hard to imagine, about as hard to comprehend as a poem that begins at an impasse: “No worst, there is none” seems to be an end, but it is followed by quite a bit of movement: pitching past, wringing, heaving, falling. This is an example of a poem that follows Riffaterre's maxim that “a poem says one thing and means another” (Riffaterre 1978, 1), and what this poem means is that no matter how bad it gets, it can always get worse, despite—or perhaps because of—our feeble attempts to cope with torment through language.

In “Carrion Comfort,” Despair can be successfully invoked:

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

Why? That my chaff might fly; my grain lie, sheer and clear.
 Nay in all that toil, that coil, since (seems) I kissed the rod,
 Hand rather, my heart lo! lapped strength, stole joy, would laugh, cheer.
 Cheer whom though? the hero whose heaven-handling flung me,
 foot trod
 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.

The syntax here is less slack and more difficult to untwist than those last strands of man: the sentences are constructed on internal rhymes and asyndetic buildings and/or corrections, as in: “that *toil* [as well as] that *coil*”; “that night, [no, not a night but rather] that year/Of now done darkness”; “That my chaff might *fly* [and] my grain *lie*, *sheer* and *clear*.” What also lies clear here is that the strands of the conflict played out in this poem are likewise quite twisted and not particularly slack: there is considerable confusion as well as fusion: when the speaker wonders whom his struggling over his faith would cheer, he has fused himself with Satan and Satan with God.

It's a poem that describes striving for silence and attempting, not to act, but to abide. It is the writing of a poet who is trying to hold his tongue, hold body and soul together, hold back his hand from taking his own life:

I'll not . . .
 . . . untwist—slack they may be—these last strands of man
 In me or, most weary, cry *I can no more*. I can;
 Can something, hope, wish day come, not choose not to be.

Remaining alive, the alternative to crying, “I can no more,” is only a vague *something* posited in opposition to a clear-cut negative. In the poem, that vague *something* is placed *between* “I can no more” and “not choose not to be”—and in this Christian context, suicide *means* damnation. These two sentences end with the determined negativity implied by hell, while all possible positives are slurred between them into the weakest of “positive” emotional states: hoping and wishing. *Faith* isn’t even aspired to.

The final sentence of this poem contains one of the moves in Hopkins that I find most interesting of all: the admission made here is so dreadful that the act of recording it requires—an invocation? An apostrophe? Well, at least some type of horrified *exclamation*—before it can be completed: “I wretch lay wrestling with (my God!) my God.” The more obviously announced apostrophe—“But ah, But o”—in this poem is not to God, but to *Despair*, an inadequate food composed of the fetid flesh of carrion, which, while it might sustain the body, does nothing to nourish the soul. Hopkins here is *not* discussing the type of cannibalism John the Divine has in mind when he reports that Jesus said

I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give you is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.

The Jews therefore strove among themselves, saying, How can this man give us his flesh to eat?

Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat of the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you. (John 6:51–53)

The anti-eucharist of *Despair* is not the only less-than-appetizing food described in the “Terrible Sonnets.” We also are offered, in the second stanza of “I Wake and Feel,” a kind of cursed croissant, a damned doughnut:

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.
 Selfyeast of a 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.

This poem speaks to me on a deeply personal, visceral level. At the age of twenty-one I volunteered to be a full-time proselytizing missionary for the church I'd grown up in, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, also known as the Mormons. I sent to church headquarters in Salt Lake City the necessary papers; a few weeks later I received a call to serve a year and a half in Taiwan, a place I knew nothing about, teaching religious discussions in Mandarin Chinese, a language I knew nothing about. Still, I was quite pleased to devote eighteen months of my life to "the building up of the Kingdom of God" in Asia. Nobody in the church claims missions are easy, but they are frequently referred to as "the best 18 months⁴ of your life." My mission, however, consisted of eighteen of the most painful months I have ever endured. Missionaries are told constantly that they're doing the most important work on earth, and certainly when it goes well, it's rewarding. But missionaries pay a price for the rewards they reap: they are forbidden to read anything besides eight approved books; they can't date or listen to music; they can't allow anyone to address them by their first names, as it fosters intimacy; they can't even write letters or email to family or friends except on their one day off each week; they're allowed only two phone calls home a year (Christmas and Mother's Day); they aren't even allowed to be alone: every minute of every day, except for the time required to bathe or use the toilet, must be spent in the presence of an assigned "companion," to ensure that a missionary has little opportunity to violate any of the other rules.

I dealt with the loss of privacy, but after eight months, I couldn't bear not reading. I got permission to read one novel a month. But I really wanted to write. I'd published poetry in half a dozen journals and been told I had talent. I felt guilty for wanting to write and angry that I couldn't justify that desire—writing takes so much time and energy. I had companions tell me that "unrighteous desires of my heart" such as wanting to write prevented me from being "a suitable vessel for the word of the Lord."

As painful as those experiences were, as sinful as wanting to write made me, I was capable of a more grievous sin: I occasionally admitted to myself, in a tiny, unhappy corner of my tiny, unhappy heart, that I didn't believe Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon from golden plates; I believed he wrote it himself; I believed it *wasn't* the Word of God. This monumental admission filled—consumed, ate—that tiny corner of my tiny heart. It wasn't merely an aesthetic or literary or intellectual judgment: I was half a world away from home and utterly dependent on other missionaries and ecclesiastical authorities for my physical and emotional support. For me

to say, “I think this text is *fiction*, quite made up, and subject to the idiosyncrasies of its author and the society he inhabited” was, in the context I inhabited, self-imposed damnation, and believe me, I felt it. I tasted it. I didn’t write much poetry, but I kept a journal and produced the writings of a poet who is trying to hold her tongue, hold body and soul together, hold back her hand: one of the things those texts say is that you can catch a flicker of one possible hell if you awaken every morning at 2 a.m. and have to lie all night awake with your own revolting tongue festering in your own revolting mouth. *My taste was me*. You stew in sheets that, when you got in them, were still damp with your sweat from the night before; you wait for it to be light; and you know that *[t]he lost are like this, and their scourge to be / As I am mine, their sweating selves; but worse*.

At twenty-one, ignorant, depressed, far from home, I looked at sentences that people told me were *true*, were *canonical*, were *scripture*, and that *I* told people were *true*, were *canonical*, were *scripture*, and I said, “Hmm. I don’t think so. *I want to believe this was written by God, but I can’t*.” And since I still believed in God and his judgments, if not in his authorship of the Book of Mormon, I dealt daily with the assertion that I would be damned because of my inability to read and interpret the way the people around me read and interpreted. I didn’t want to live, but I wasn’t very excited about the alternative of dying and going to hell, either. Soon I lost the ability to sleep or to swallow. I could not digest food. I hated the taste of my own saliva; I resented sharing my body with anything as disgusting and evil and worthless as myself. I wept constantly. I wrote to a friend, “I can’t even pray about it because nothing comes out but tears.” Worst of all, I knew that God felt about me the same way I felt about myself: I was an insignificant wretch to him and I wished like Job

O that I might have my request; and that God would grant me
the thing that I long for!

Even that it would please God to destroy me; that he would let
loose his hand, and cut me off! (Job 6:8, 9)

And this occurred while I, like Hopkins, was “in exile” from my native land and my family and while engaged in Christian service that should have brought me, according to the assumptions underlying such service, greater joy than I could ever experience elsewhere.

And so, reader, think for a minute, about the taste that starts at the back of my throat and then coats my tongue and then fills my mouth when I read “I am gall, I am heartburn.” What gymnastics of syntactical analysis

can compete with the synesthesia that makes me *taste* in Hopkins's poetry, makes me *taste* again all down my own throat, the wretched, foul, unnourishing food that is one's own soul? I have read enough about depression, in various sources including *The Merck Manual* (1987), a diagnostic handbook for doctors, to know that this is a discussion of what I considered one of the most abhorrent—and terrifying, as I at least couldn't imagine why it was happening—symptoms of severe depression: a foul, vile coating on the tongue that makes eating, drinking, and breathing intensely distasteful. Perhaps the acidity, the sting of this taste, relates to the anatomical origin of an unspoken apostrophe or prayer that, so to speak, sticks in the unhappy supplicant's throat. In a Christian context, that fuzzy, filthy, foul index on the tongue of the soul's wretchedness is rendered all the more horrific because an attentive reader of the New Testament knows that Christ will, with a look of distaste and revulsion on his resurrected face, spue the lukewarm out of his mouth (Revelations 3:16).

The gall and heartburn of the second stanza are preceded by an equally uncomfortable first stanza:

I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.
 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.
 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.

This stanza is discussing, obviously enough, the “insomnia, with difficulty falling asleep, multiple arousals” and “early-morning awakening” that constitute one of the major symptoms of depression (*The Merck Manual* 1987, 1517). In terms of both theology and language, what I note first is that there still is no prayer here, no apostrophe to God: the “O” in the second line might be a general exclamation, a moan, or it might be an address to “you, heart,” but it certainly is not addressed to God. What's the point of calling on God? He's not listening; cries to him are all “dead letters.” The wretch is left alone, groaning his own unutterable, unheard groans, awake all night, feeling the “fell of dark,” an experience wrapped in several strands of meanings of *fell*. One dictionary definition of *fell* as a noun is “the hide of an animal”; it could also work as a half-noun made out of the past tense

of *fall*; or it could be a half-noun made out of *to fell* as a verb, meaning, to kill; or it could be a half-noun from *fell* as an adjective, meaning “of an inhumanly cruel nature” or “capable of destroying” (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 2000). God, as well as the dark, at times certainly seems to have an inhumanly cruel nature and be capable of destroying.

Various Hopkins critics have spent considerable time trying to figure out what order the sonnets were written in; W. H. Gardner, editor of the Penguin edition of Hopkins’s collected poems, wants to see a progression towards healing. Hence he argues that “Patience, Hard Thing” and “My Own Heart” are the final two sonnets of the sequence, and that they demonstrate “more of heroic acceptance than self-pity: underneath the despair and complaint the note of willing self-surrender to the higher necessity is always implicit” (Gardner 1953, xxx).

Perhaps. But there still is no prayer in them, no address to God: only a discussion of that fact that prayer is difficult. Comfort is not being sought; merely the ability to endure, merely something to cover over signs of defeat and despair:

Patience, hard thing! the hard thing but to pray,
 But bid for, Patience is! Patience who asks
 Wants war, wants wounds; weary his times, his tasks;
 To do without, take tosses, and obey.
 Rare patience roots in these, and, these away,
 Nowhere. Natural heart’s ivy, Patience masks
 Our ruins of wrecked past purpose. There she basks
 Purple eyes and seas of liquid leaves all day.

We hear our hearts grate on themselves: it kills
 to bruise them dearer. Yet the rebellious wills
 Of us we do bid God bend to him even so.
 And where is he who more and more distills
 Delicious kindness? —He is patient. Patience fills
 His crisp combs, and that comes those ways we know.

What is the noise of a heart grating on itself? Especially of the purple, oozing, trampled-on heart one would have after enduring the contest with Despair in “Carrion Comfort” in which the enemy

wouldst. . . 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.

All I can imagine is that it is some kind of whimper. Perhaps the whimpering of a broken heart strikes “the note of willing self-surrender to the higher necessity” of God’s demands that Hopkins’s editor says “is always implicit” in all but the most despairing poems. It’s an argument with some sense to it. If the poet still hasn’t gained enough confidence in God and language to address God directly (he doesn’t do that until 1889, in “Thou Art Indeed Just, Lord,” written shortly before he died), at least he has recovered enough to cease the “countless cries.” Either that, or he is so benumbed by pain that any sobbing has ceased and all tears have simply dried up (*The Merck Manual* 1987, 1518).

The poem that occupies the final position in the sequence (according to Gardner’s ordering) seems less frantic than its companions. But I can’t quite tell if the absence of frenzy is anything other than an expression of the weariness that Patience, who “wants war, wants wounds” necessarily induces:

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.
 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 a world of wet.

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; whose smile
 ’s not wrung, see you; unforeseen times rather—as skies
 Between pie mountains—lights a lovely mile.

The extended apostrophe beginning the second stanza—as if anything but endearments will bruise the heart dearer, as if the self is now so far away

that it doesn't always come when called—thuds with fatigue. It takes effort merely to stay still and be seen by God, merely to look at the sky.

In *Inspirations Unbidden: The "Terrible Sonnets" of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, Daniel A. Harris asserts that there lies "behind the sonnets' difficulties a far more fundamental issue: the justification, or lack of it, for suffering" (Harris 1982, 14). Harris points out that religion has spent a great deal of time giving suffering a purpose, and argues that "[t]he position that such suffering is purposive cancels both the experiences and the linguistic characteristics manifested by the poems; it has been attractive because its inviolable consolation is safe, not because it is true" (Harris 1982, 14).

The medical community is a little less certain than the religious community that such suffering has either a purpose or an identifiable cause: *The Merck Manual* states that

Stressful life events (especially separations) commonly precede affective episodes, predominantly unipolar [depression without subsequent mania]. However, such events may represent the prodromal manifestations of an affective episode rather than its cause; eg, affectively ill persons often alienate their loved ones. (*The Merck Manual* 1987, 1516)

Realizing, then, that any speculation about what caused Hopkins's melancholy is, of course, nothing but speculation, I still want to offer this opinion: I think what plunged Hopkins when he was "banished" to Ireland to grade papers into the depression he always struggled with, was the idea that he had failed in the calling he'd chosen, in the calling most important on earth. If, as a servant of God, a major part of how you serve him is to preach about him, and this part of your calling is also the part that brings you the most pleasure, and if you are suddenly relieved by your superiors, who speak to you on behalf of God, of the responsibility/opportunity to preach, with the explanation that your audience dislikes your sermons and is not moved or inspired by them, I really think it would be hard not to see this change in duty as God's disapproval or "dark heaven's baffling ban." It's not that "The vacuum Hopkins intuited was created by his dread recognition that Christ had departed the mundane world" (Harris 1982, 34), as Harris suggests; it's that Hopkins feared that he himself was not in a state of grace. What good is a world full of grace if you don't *share* in that grace?

Thus I argue that Hopkins's "Terrible Sonnets" are rooted in the particulars of religious despair, and that it's important to maintain that particularity—at least it's important if one wants any insight into religious despair, into the filthy physicality of emotional suffering and the noisy gulping inarticulate pleadings that one be allowed to hear something besides silence. And I confess further that I see the sonnets not only as great literature, but as *revelations*, according to a definition suggested by William James: "a book may well be a revelation in spite of errors and passions and deliberate human composition, if only it be a true record of the inner experiences of great-souled persons wrestling with the crises of their fate" (James 1936, 24).

Hopkins's sonnets are important to me for a number of reasons. First of all, they've taught me about writing and rhetoric: I've used some of his devices and modes in my own writing. More significantly—and perhaps this sounds naïve and self-indulgent, but it matters, so I will not be hushed or consoled—they've saved my life. They have taught me how to speak about certain topics. They have given me permission *to* speak. They let me hold back my hand, and not hold my tongue. And reader, if I can't talk to God, I'll talk to *you*.

NOTES

1. A teacher once told me that the etymology of apology is *a-pology*, meaning "without speech." I checked the *Oxford English Dictionary*: actually the word comes from *apo* (as in *apo-gee*, or the point furthest away) plus *logy*: "away speech." In any event, the idea of speech that doesn't exist or reach an audience is important to my article.

2. However, that's certainly not a new development in religious parlance, and as William James points out in *Varieties of Religious Experience*, "[i]t is true that in the vast collection of religious phenomena, some are undisguisedly amatory. . . . Religious language clothes itself in such poor symbols as our life affords, and the whole organism gives overtones of comment whenever the mind is strongly stirred" (James 1936, 11).

3. This rhyme pun provides one possible answer to the question of why, since Hopkins could have rhymed on the final syllable of *lingering* as well as on the first, and since he doesn't hold himself to maintaining ten syllables per line, he hasn't simply left the hyphen out of *lingering*, and found another stressed syllable to include in the last line of the stanza. Another possible explanation is that by hyphenating the word and extending it across the boundary of a line, he is defying "fury's" injunction against lingering.

4. Until October 2012, Mormon men were *expected* to serve missions when they turned nineteen; Mormon women were *allowed* to serve missions if still single when they turned twenty-one. The slight age difference was intended to give

women more time to get married, their main purpose in life, as well as to cut down on mission romances. In 2012, the age requirement for men was lowered to eighteen; it was lowered to nineteen for women. Unchanged is a difference in the length of service: Men serve for two years; women for eighteen months.

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