HOPKINS, NATURE AND *LAUDATO SI'*

Nancy Enright

WHEN GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS was writing his poetry in the nineteenth century, he might have been surprised and, perhaps, gratified to learn that, in the twenty-first century, a Jesuit Pope—a possibility that in itself would have seemed extremely unlikely at the time—would write an encyclical, a definitive papal statement, on the topic of the natural world. Hopkins saw himself first as a priest, then as a poet, and his poetry was always deeply linked to religious experience, including his appreciation of nature, as well as to his concern about the environmental destruction that he witnessed resulting from the industrial revolution.

Hopkins wrote about nature as a vehicle of God's grace and an expression of God's love: 'all things are … charged with love, are charged with God and if we know how to touch them give off sparks and take fire, yield drops and flow, ring and tell of Him'.[1] He saw humanity's assaults on nature as a kind of sin, but retained a deep hope that, despite the destruction unleashed by humans, God and the redemptive power of God's love at work in nature could and would change things. Pope Francis's *Laudato Si'* echoes these four themes, and an exploration of some of Hopkins's most famous nature poems in connection with the Pope's text shows just how closely linked the concerns of the two Jesuits are regarding the natural world, and how important these different texts are as a call to awareness today.

One of Hopkins's most famous poems, 'The Windhover', celebrates a particular type of bird—the windhover or kestrel—and the beauty of its appearance in flight. The poem expresses the ability that nature has to stir

[1] *The Note-Books and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited by Humphrey House (Oxford: OUP, 1937), 342. This quotation was given to me by Dr Jude Nixon.

The Windhover

To Christ our Lord

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,
As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding
Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird,—the achieve of; the mastery of the thing!

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plough down sillion
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermillion.

the heart: 'My heart in hiding / Stirred for a bird'. Nature as embodied in the windhover is something sacred, reflecting a transcendental beauty. Hopkins associates the windhover with kingship ('daylight's dauphin') and knighthood ('O my chevalier!'), in a vision of 'brute beauty and valour'. His intense evocation of this creature reflects, without explicit mention, the hand of the creator; though the poem's dedication, 'To Christ our Lord', makes clear that it is written in gratitude to Christ for the bird's existence.[2] Its flight, up and down, shaken by the wind, echoes the rhythms of the ploughed landscape beneath it, the ebb and flow of the natural world, dying and rising, reflecting also the death and resurrection of Christ.

Pope Francis likewise celebrates nature in *Laudato Si'*. Its title draws on the praise to God offered by his name patron, St Francis of Assisi, in his 'Canticle of the Creatures', which repeats the mediaeval Italian phrase *Laudato si'*—'Praised be you'.[3] Pope Francis explains the link

[2] Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'The Windhover', in *The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited by Norman H. MacKenzie (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 120.

[3] St Francis, 'Canticle of the Creatures', in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, volume 1, *The Saint*, edited by Regis J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellmann and William J. Short, translated by Regis J. Armstrong and Paul Barrett (New York: New City, 1999), 113.

between his own encyclical and the attitude of St Francis, who, 'faithful to Scripture invites us to see nature as a magnificent book in which God speaks to us and grants us a glimpse of his infinite beauty and goodness'.[4] Quoting from the Book of Wisdom (13:5), Francis points out how, 'Through the greatness and the beauty of creatures one comes to know by analogy their maker'. He contrasts this reverential and celebratory view of nature as God's gift with the misguided one held by many people, who misinterpret the early chapters of Genesis as suggesting that human 'dominion' over nature is an excuse to use and to abuse other creatures as if they had no value in their own right. On the contrary, Francis argues, human beings have a responsibility to nurture and care for the earth (nn.48–49). Francis, like Hopkins, sees the beauty of creation as intimately linked to the love of God: 'Creation is the order of love. God's love is the moving force in all created things.' (n.55) Hopkins would affirm the validity of his fellow Jesuit's words.

Jesuits are taught to approach life and their own consciences through the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius, their founder. Ignatius encouraged his followers to use their imaginations to grow closer to God, and to make an honest examination of conscience, of which the *Examen* is a crucial part. The Examen involves reflecting and praying at the end of each day about what has taken place. Pope Francis encourages all readers of his encyclical, whatever their beliefs (he addresses all people of good will), to examine their own response to nature in light of social justice and faith. Hopkins's poetry also implicitly calls readers to use their imaginations to enhance their spiritual experience, as well as to examine what is right and wrong in their lives. Two more well-known poems exemplify these qualities of conversion through imagination and examination of conscience: 'Pied Beauty' for the former and 'God's Grandeur' the latter, though the second poem involves both.

Unlike 'The Windhover', 'Pied Beauty' celebrates not a single creature but a particular quality seen everywhere in the natural world—that of having more than one colour. Hopkins displays the incredible diversity of nature through examples ranging from cows to landscapes, all of them 'dappled' with variations of colour. The 'brinded' (streaked or striped) cow and the trout with 'rose moles' both testify to an almost playful enjoyment of beauty in the creator that is reflected in creation. The poem seems to dance, lavishly using alliteration to make the reader or hearer

[4] *Laudato Si'*, n.12 (subsequent references in the text).

Pied Beauty

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;
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.

play close attention to its language: 'Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings', 'Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough' and 'Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?) / With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim'.[5]

The uniqueness of each created thing, mysteriously coloured and patterned ('Who knows how?'), is clearly something to be appreciated, even reverenced. For, as Hopkins affirms near the end of the poem, the source of such loveliness is God: 'He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change'. The variety and changeableness of nature contrast with the eternal, unchanging character of its creator but, nonetheless, the colourful and varied qualities of natural creatures have their source in the unity of the creator God. The last words of the poem, 'Praise him', bring us back to the theme and title of the Pope's encyclical, *Laudato Si'*.

Like Hopkins, Pope Francis delves into the precious quality of each individual creature as a unique representation of the creator God's plan and purpose, to be appreciated and guarded, not selfishly exploited and damaged. Francis speaks of the richness of the natural world in terms that recall Hopkins's poem:

> The universe as a whole, in all its manifold relationships, shows forth the inexhaustible riches of God. Saint Thomas Aquinas wisely noted that multiplicity and variety 'come from the first agent' who willed 'that what was wanting to one in the representation of the divine goodness

[5] Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'Pied Beauty', in *Poetical Works*, 121.

> might be supplied by another', inasmuch as God's goodness 'could not be represented fully by any one creature'. (n.86)[6]

Because of the importance of each creature, the extinction of any one of them is an irreparable loss, far more so than is commonly imagined. Francis warns, 'Because of us, thousands of species will no longer give glory to God by their very existence, nor convey their message to us. We have no such right.' (n.33)

Hopkins powerfully addresses the evil implicit in the destruction of nature through human sin in his poem 'God's Grandeur', which both celebrates the beauty of creation as the handiwork of God and laments its destruction. The first quatrain glorifies creation as a sign of 'the grandeur of God'. However, the very similes expressing this grandeur foreshadow the subject of the second quatrain—the damage done to the created world through industry—since they use images not of nature but of machinery and the work of the factory ('shook foil', 'ooze of oil'). The last line of the first quatrain—'Why do men now not reck his rod?'—leads easily into the subject of the second, which gives the answer to the question just asked.

The source of the sin is human greed, expressed through economic activity: 'And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil'.

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.

[6] See Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.47, a.2.

Humanity has developed, but has lost sight of the beauty of creation, upon which humans 'have trod, have trod, have trod'. 'Man's smudge' and 'man's smell' suggest not only physical dirt but also inner corruption, combined with alienation from nature: '… the soil / Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod'. The situation seems almost hopeless, but the octave provides a characteristic 'turning'—the *volta* that is part of the tradition of the sonnet.[7]

Hopkins shifts into a tone of hope. True, enormous damage has been done (even then!) but, despite that, 'Nature is never spent'. For Hopkins, faith in nature is founded upon faith in God. There exists 'the dearest freshness deep down things'; there is something deep within the created world, put there by its Creator, which continually regenerates it, even in the face of human destructiveness. Hopkins roots the poem in Genesis. Though evening and morning ('black west' and 'brown brink eastward') are tainted, still, echoing Genesis 1:3, 'the Holy Ghost over the bent / World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings'. The ultimate message is one of hope.

Laudato Si' also offers a message of hope, albeit mixed with a much sterner warning than that given by the poet—a natural result of the increased destruction that has occurred since the Pope's fellow Jesuit wrote of nature. If Hopkins, in the mid-nineteenth century, already lamented ecological destruction, what might he have said today? Pope Francis strongly encourages us to have a renewed appreciation of the natural world: 'An integral ecology includes taking time to recover a serene harmony with creation, reflecting on our lifestyle and our ideals, and contemplating the Creator who lives among us and surrounds us' (n. 226). Francis encourages believers to act in accordance with what they profess: 'Believers themselves must constantly feel challenged to live in a way consonant with their faith and not to contradict it by their actions' (n. 200). Quoting Pope John Paul II, he says, 'When we contemplate with wonder the universe in all its grandeur and beauty, we must praise the whole Trinity' (n. 238).[8] The 'grandeur of God', as Hopkins calls it, should today lead to an appreciation that results in action to prevent further damage to creation.

Pope Francis, again like Hopkins, links ecological sin with economic activity. Hopkins alludes to 'trade' and 'toil' leading to destruction and

[7] Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'God's Grandeur', in *Poetical Works*, 111.
[8] John Paul II, general audience, 2 August 2000, n. 4.

Gerard Manley Hopkins in 1866

pollution. And Pope Francis spells out the ecological 'debt' that the richer countries owe to those in the developing world. Cautioning against an economics of exclusion, Francis argues that, while the richer countries have, by far, done the greatest environmental damage, it is the poor countries that bear the consequences of that damage. Francis notes 'the pollution produced by companies which operate in less developed countries in ways they could never do at home, in the countries in which they raise their capital' (n.51). He exposes the faulty ethics of business people, in particular, and the rich countries where they enjoy their profits, often through production done elsewhere with no thought for the harm caused: 'Their behaviour shows that for them maximizing profits is enough' (n.109).

The Pope quotes from a statement made by the New Zealand Catholic Bishops' Conference, asking what the commandment not to kill means in light of the fact that 'twenty percent of the world's population consumes resources at a rate that robs the poor nations and future generations of what they need to survive' (n.95).[9] Like Hopkins, Francis challenges

[9] See New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference, *Statement on Environmental Issues* (1 September 2006), available at https://www.catholic.org.nz/about-us/bishops-statements/statement-on-environmental-issues/.

humanity's economic and ecological failings in terms of overall moral corruption:

> We have had enough of immorality and the mockery of ethics, goodness, faith, and honesty …. When the foundations of social life are corroded, what ensues are battles over conflicting interests, new forms of violence and brutality, and obstacles to the growth of a genuine culture of care for the environment. (n. 229)

In response, he calls for conversion: 'Many things have to change course, but it is we human beings above all who need to change' (n. 202).

However, despite his strong words (and I have quoted only a few selections from them), Francis, like Hopkins, speaks from a place of hope. He is writing his encyclical to all persons of good will, on the assumption that it is not too late to turn things around. In words that echo the last section of 'God's Grandeur', Pope Francis says:

> God … offers us the light and strength to continue on our way. In the heart of this world, the Lord of life, who loves us so much, is always present. He does not abandon us … for he has united himself definitively to our earth, and his love constantly impels us to find new ways forward. *Praise be to him!* (n. 245)

Gerard Manley Hopkins, Jesuit priest and poet of nature, would agree.

Nancy Enright holds a PhD from Drew University in the USA. She is an associate professor of English at Seton Hall University and the director of the University Core. She is the author of two books, an anthology, *Community: A Reader for Writers* (2015), and *Catholic Literature and Film* (2016), and articles on a variety of subjects, including the works of Dante, Augustine, J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis.