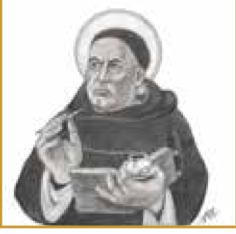

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A Jesuit Philosopher and a Jesuit Poet:

A Thomistic Reading of Hopkins' "As Kingfishers Catch Fire"

Gerard Manley Hopkins' "As Kingfishers Catch Fire" ranks among the English Jesuit's most famous poems, garnering tremendous attention among literary critics as well as the general reading public (especially Christians). I here propose a unique addition to the interpretive discussion of this poem, as I will turn to one Jesuit as a guide to reading another. The seminal work of the American Jesuit Father W. Norris Clarke SJ (1915–2008), who ranks among the twentieth century's most influential Thomists and metaphysicians, is an apt guide for illuminating the complexities of Hopkins' Christological poem, "As Kingfishers Catch Fire". There is an unusually close sympathy and convergence of thought between Father Clarke's Thomistic analysis of the act of being and personhood and Hopkins' poetic representation of these themes in his poem. What I offer here is a reading of "As Kingfishers Catch Fire" in the light of Father Clarke's dynamic Thomistic, metaphysical, and personalist insights.[1] Bringing together the British Jesuit poet and the American Jesuit philosopher bears much interpretive fruit for readers of this poem, one rich in themes of existence, personhood, and Christology.

Hopkins' sonnet is broken into two stanzas. The first, an octet, serves as a reflective and seemingly random catalog of things in the world—some living, some non-living, both natural and man-made. It is worth noting the poem begins with a subordinated clause—"*As* kingfishers catch fire". By way of anaphora[2], the "As" is repeated in the first two lines of the poem to emphasize comparison, which is further amplified by the word "like" in line three. The poem's speaker provides a list of objects and activities that seem mundane, but in fact evoke tremendous wonder at creation. He accomplishes this sense of wonder through powerfully imagistic metaphor: the "catching fire" of a kingfisher (one can imagine the bird splendidly flying away from its perch on a tree); a dragonfly "drawing flame" (one can imagine the sun sparkling off the wings of a dragonfly in flight); a rock being tossed down an old-fashioned stone well (bouncing off its sides as it descends); the ringing of bells by the pulling of a rope (one can imagine traditional bell towers in churches and town buildings). Both technically skilled and highly innovative as a poet, Hopkins makes wide use of alliteration, assonance, and his own unique metrical pattern he called "sprung rhythm" to give this brief world-catalog a powerful linguistic effect upon the reader.[3]

If the words "as" and "like" imply a comparison, a constellation of similes, to what are these seemingly random selection of objects—a bird, an insect, a rock, bells—being compared? The poem's speaker selects them as illustrative of a powerful metaphysical principle (one that will, by the poem's conclusion, turn into a deeply mystical and theological principle): being exists, and was *created* to exist, to manifest itself, to be known. Hopkins concludes his seemingly random list of objects with a metaphysical pronouncement of immense profundity: Each thing in the world "does one thing and the same". What is that "one thing" each existent object does? It "speaks" itself—each thing exists to cry out "*What I do is me: for that I came*." The figurative use of personification here is significant: in this initial octet stanza, Hopkins deliberately selects non-personal beings as his examples of creation, ending the stanza by figuratively personifying them, giving them a voice to manifest their existence by "speaking" it out to the world in a human voice.

Here we may turn to what I might call a mode of Jesuit hospitality. I will invoke one of Father Hopkins' brethren, a later (or belated) Jesuit, to shed some metaphysical and theological light upon Hopkins' majestic poem. Father Norris Clarke, SJ ranked among the English-speaking world's most eminent Thomists in the mid to late twentieth century. During his long career at Fordham University, he wrote many works on Thomistic philosophy, perhaps his most impactful being his masterful study *Person & Being.*[4]

Father Clark's project in *Person & Being* is profound. He seeks to articulate a speculative and dynamic Thomistic understanding of the act of being, and then deploy this metaphysical insight as a lens to do full justice to the Christian understanding of human nature and personhood. The core of Father Clarke's reading of the Thomistic act of existence is what he calls the "dyadic structure" of all being. Drawing from St. Thomas' *Summa contra Gentiles*, *Summa Theologiae*, and *De potentia*, Father Clarke demonstrates that the act of existence in the Angelic Doctor carries with it an inherent and "immense innate dynamism"; in fact "self-expression through action is . . . the whole point, the natural perfection or flowering of being itself, the goal of its very presence in the universe".[5] Father Clarke emphasizes this "intrinsic dynamism in every being to be *self-communicative*" is ordered so it might "share its own goodness with others", and cites the felicitous observation of Jacques Maritain who calls this ontological reality "the basic generosi-

ty of existence".[6] The tendency of all being to manifest itself to the cosmos is not just a bare fact for Father Clarke, but a revelation that all being tends toward active being in relation to others: "*To be* fully is to be *substance-in-relation*".[7] Yet for Father Clarke, this outward facing dimension of the act of being is balanced by being's opposite pole, the "'introverted,' or *in-itself* dimension, as substance".[8] Father Clarke returns to the long Aristotelian and Thomistic metaphysical doctrine of substance:

> . . . it should not be forgotten that the aspect of substantiality, already well-developed in this tradition, is indispensable, as the necessary grounding for relationality itself. . . . There must be an *in-itself* somewhere along the line [of being] to ground the betweenness [of being in relation]. This is the ontological role of substance in a being: to provide the abiding unifying center for all the being's relations and other attributes.[9]

Tying together the two poles of every act of existence—the tendency to manifest outward, toward others, to be in communicative relation; and the tendency to dwell richly "at home" in one's own being, to be a stable center of identity—this Father Clarke calls the "dyadic" structure of all existing beings. This language of the two poles, or the dyadic structure, is Father Clarke's amplification of what St. Thomas labels the "'first act' of . . . being, and the action or operation proceeding from it, which ground its relationality, its 'second act'".[10]

Father Clarke's reading of the Thomistic act of existence, of the nature of all existing beings in the cosmos, seems to have in mind just what his fellow Jesuit, Father Hopkins, rendered poetically in "As Kingfishers Catch Fire". The following quote from Father Clarke seems a perfect gloss to understand the rich metaphysical, ontological resonances of the poem's first octet stanza: "All being . . . is, by its very nature as being, *dyadic*, with an 'introverted,' or *in-itself* dimension, as substance, and an 'extraverted',' or *towards-others* dimension, as related through action."[11] Father Clarke, the metaphysician, helps us perceive Father Hopkins' *ratio* in his seemingly random catalog in the first stanza. All existing things with an identity—a bird, an insect, a bell, even a mere rock—don't merely have being; they exist to announce themselves (to "fling out broad its name"), to manifest their identity and activity to the cosmos. Hopkins renders poetically what Maritain calls the "generosity of existence":

> 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 do is me: for that I came*.

Hopkins identifies the vital urgency—what the philosopher Henri Bergson came to call the *elan vital*—of all being not simply to subsist, but to energetically manifest itself to the cosmos. Father Clarke pinpoints what St. Thomas and Hopkins both perceive: no being in this universe is without purpose, without dignity, without a role to play in the drama of God's creation. Each created thing "does one thing and the same", "dealing out" from "indoors" the mystery of its existence through act, "Crying" out to all creation both the "who" and the "what" (or purpose) of its mortal being. Both in his writing and in the classroom, Father Clarke would often emphasize that no being, no matter how seemingly insignificant, is truly irrelevant in God's eyes: each thing has a mission—to proclaim its being and act that being out, and in so doing render back to God His own glory. This great medieval notion of all creation as *exitus* and *reditus*, going forth from God and going back to him, lies deep within the existential layers of the first stanza of "As Kingfishers Catch Fire".

Yet our analysis is only halfway complete—we must turn our attention to the sonnet's astonishing and magnificent second stanza. This stanza, in its first lines, has one of the greatest instances in all of English poetry of what the poets call a "volta". A volta is a turning point in a poem, especially in a sonnet, from one idea, image, or tension, to something different. In the sonnet tradition, the volta is often the prelude to the poem attempting to resolve some problem or tension the poem raises. For instance, in several of Shakespeare's early sonnets—the so-called "fair youth" sonnets—the poems' speaker bemoans that nature will take away the great beauty of the young man, rendering him ugly and worn over the years. In several such sonnets, the volta in Shakespeare is the turn, the prelude to the "resolution" of this crisis: the speaker will render the fair youth immortal through making him the subject of his poetry (in which the youth will always be fair and beautiful). Father Hopkins' gives us what I might call a Christic volta: the whole poem, in the second stanza of "As Kingfishers Catch Fire", takes a profound Christological turn. The volta phrase signifies a profound ontological change of register, from not just beings in the world, but *persons* acting in the world, and finally the divine person of Christ Himself.

The second stanza, in its volta phrase "I say more", begins with a significant turn for the poem's speaker. What is the "more" the speaker has in mind? It presupposes a transition, a movement in the speaker's reflections that is both reflective of what has been considered thus far and desirous to radically expand the scope of his contemplation. The first stanza discusses what we might call creation as non-personal. All the beings cataloged in the previous stanza—living and non-living—are an extended synecdoche, parts standing in for the whole of the non-personal created order. While the speaker finds this universe wonderous to contemplate, being itself demands a deeper reflection, a reflection into being's highest manifestation—*the person*! Once again, Father Clarke's thought illuminates his confrere's poetry. In a brilliant move of Thomistic metaphysics, Father Clarke argues that the highest manifestation of *being* itself, in its fully dyadic tendencies (inward and extroverted) is to exist *as person*:

> For St. Thomas, the person is "that which is most perfect in all of nature" . . . when being is allowed to be fully itself as active *presence*, it *ipso fact* turns into luminous *self-presence* and *self-possession* . . . self-consciousness in the order of knowledge and self-determination in the order of action. . . . To *be* fully . . . therefore, is to be personal.[12]

The speaker's contemplation in Hopkins' poem thus *naturally* turns toward personal existence, because being as person is the highest mode of being itself.

This astonishing second stanza, a sestet, concisely emphasizes at least three distinct and profound elements of what it means to be a person. The first emphasis is upon moral action in a communal context: "the just man justices". This striking instance of denominalization (making a noun into a

verb) implies that being just is not a static moral abstraction—it must incarnate itself in real action between persons. St. Thomas himself offers a fulsome definition of justice as active virtue:

> For since every virtue is a habit that is the principle of a good act, a virtue must needs be defined by means of the good act bearing on the matter proper to that virtue. Now the proper matter of justice consists of those things that belong to our intercourse with other men. . . . Hence the act of justice in relation to its proper matter and object is indicated in the words, "Rendering to each one his right", since, as Isidore says . . . "a man is said to be just because he respects the rights [*jus*] of others."[13]

The just man, in "his intercourse with other men", gives to his fellow what is "his right", what is his due as a human person. Justice is what holds society together; it is the rendering to our fellow men and women honesty, courtesy, dignity, integrity, good will, and what is needful for human flourishing in all things affecting our communal and individual lives. Yet even justice itself is not enough, or the last word, for humanity (the word "more" as a pushing upward through layers of being and action haunts the logic of the second stanza). For in Hopkins' poem, justice naturally leads to the second emphasis of this stanza—grace. The speaker moves from the merely human level of natural virtue to the transcendent, theological realm. In its rich definition, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* emphasizes that grace is the miracle of humanity participating in the life of God, and this participation is pure, gratuitous gift.[14] The speaker, in stating the just man "Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces" using punctuation and repetition to emphasize the mystery of humanity's participation in the life of God. The line gives us a short phrase abruptly halted by a colon (a poetic device known as a caesura). The morally ordered man "keeps grace", which is to say he remains and abides in God. Participating in God's own life is his regular mode of living, which is emphasized in the phrase ending in the repetition of the word, "that keeps all his goings graces". The "more" of the stanza's first line serves as a guide to remind the reader that "more" than merely natural virtue, more than simply the justice humanity can muster on its own, is necessary to fully be as person, individually and in community. We must share in God's life to truly "justice", to "keep [our] goings graces".

We are thus led to the third and most profound emphasis of this final stanza—"Christ". The fourth line of this second stanza is another astonishing caesura "Christ". This abrupt pronouncement of the name of Our Lord is followed by a pause, a halting, of the line with the dash to compel the reader to dwell upon the Holy Name. This caesura announces the completion of the phrase in line three "Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is", which is the profound mystery that each human person bears the image of Christ in himself and reflected toward others. Once again we find an illuminating harmony between Father Clarke and Father Hopkins on the subject of our Blessed Lord. Father Clarke advances a daring philosophical and theological speculation in his Thomistic study of personhood. Working with the established metaphysical presupposition that the Holy Trinity itself is the perfection and ground of being, and thus of *personhood*, Father Clarke associates the receptive, welcoming dimension of person-in-relation to other persons as grounded in the Divine Person of Jesus Himself:

> . . . an active, welcoming, gratefully responsive attitude . . . is a positive, joy-bringing aspect of personal relations. . . the Second Person [of the Trinity] . . . [represents] pure subsistent Receptivity and Gratitude, [and] is of *absolutely equal worth* and perfection as the self-giving mode of the Father.[15]

We discover Father Clarke and Father Hopkins are literally "on the same page", for their combined message can be paraphrased thus: to be person-in-relation to others *is to encounter the hidden, veiled, but manifested Christ*. Among the most moving lines, certainly in Catholic poetry and in all of English poetry, are the final three lines: "Christ—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". The euphonous alliteration of the last two lines, repeating the "l" and "f" consonants drives home the deeply Christological resolution of the poem's tensions and contemplations. To be ethical, or moral (just); to "keep grace"; what is all this other than to "Act in God's eye what in God's eye" we are—Christ, in whose very image all of humanity exists from its inception. To encounter the other is to receive, via hidden mystery, Christ Himself, and to receive the other is to mirror Christ's own reception of the Father's love and glory. The speaker ties together the doctrine of Christ's indwelling as the *imago Dei* of each human to its necessary social consequence: not only does Christ reside in each individual, each individual *encounters* and *confronts* the person of Christ in every human relation, in each human encounter. The poem in its final line ends on the sublime note of *reditus*—the return to God. When man acts in his full dignity as person, when he encounters and receives Christ not just in himself but in all his personal and social encounters, this glorious symphony results in the mirroring back "To the Father" the Father's own glory.

In a remarkable passage from the Second Vatican Council's "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World"—*Gaudium et Spes*—the Council fathers pronounce the following: "Christ . . . by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear".[16] Hopkins' sublime poem "As Kingfishers Catch Fire" serves as a poetic rendering of this great Magisterial teaching. And in a gesture of true Jesuit hospitality, Father Norris Clarke's Thomistic analysis of being and its manifestation in personhood assists us in exploring the metaphysical and theological depths of what is arguably Hopkins' most famous poem.

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References

1. This Thomistically-oriented analysis serves as a complement to the considerable body of biographical and critical literature on Hopkins devoted to the influence of Duns Scotus upon his thought. Hopkins' interest in Scotus is well documented, and Hopkins even wrote a poem entitled "Duns Scotus's Oxford" as a sort of homage to the great Franciscan philosopher. Yet Hopkins was also interested in Thomas Aquinas, at least enough to translate one of his hymns. Hopkins produced a now widely read English translation of St. Thomas' famous Eucharistic hymn "Adoro Te Devote".

2. Anaphora is the repetition of the first

word or phrase of a poem. It is a scheme (a figurative use of language) common among poets.

3. Alliterative phrases abound in the first stanza: e.g. “kingfishers catch”, “dragonflies draw”, “rim in roundy”, “tucked string tells”. Assonance is also widely deployed, especially the “o” vowel: e.g. “over rim in roundy”, “tongue to fling out broad”, and “mortal thing does one”. Sprung rhythm is a “metrical system devised by Gerard Manley Hopkins composed of one to four-syllable feet that start with a stressed syllable. . . . According to Hopkins, its intended effect was to reflect the dynamic quality and variations of common speech, in contrast to the monotony of iambic pentameter” (“Sprung Rhythm”, “Glossary of Poetic Terms”, *Poetry Foundation*, poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/sprung-rhythm). For those interested in “scanning” poems for meter and foot, Hopkins’ innovative use of stressed and unstressed syllables makes his poems notoriously difficult to measure, but his sprung rhythm also accounts for the intoxicating linguistic and aural impact of reading and reciting his poems.

4. W. Norris Clarke, SJ *Person & Being* (Milwaukee: Marquette UP, 1993).

5. *Ibid*., p. 8.

6. *Ibid*., p. 9.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

10. *Ibid.,* p. 14.

11. *Ibid.,* pp. 15–16.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

13. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Second part of the Second Part, Q.5a, art.1. *The Summa Theologiae of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 2nd Revise Edition, trans. by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (1920). newadvent.org/summa/3058.htm#article1

14. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the official website of *The Holy See*. vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/__P6Z.HTM . Sections 1996-1999 of the *Catechism* state: “Our justification comes from the grace of God. Grace is favor, the free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God, adoptive sons, partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life. . . . Grace is a participation in the life of God. . . . The grace of Christ is the gratuitous gift that God makes to us of his own life, infused by the Holy Spirit into our soul to heal it of sin and to sanctify it.”

15. Clarke, p. 21.

16. Gaudium et Spes, the official website of The Holy See, vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html. Section 22.

New Voices—New Poetry in English

Fr. Gerard Garrigan

No Royal Road to Poetry

“It is a happy thing that there is no royal road to poetry.”
Gerard Manley Hopkins

“No royal road to poetry”
Not to reign unrestrained
The poet’s job to do
To serve and not be served
The Beautiful, the Good, the True
The servant’s road and not the king’s
Which leads not to fading things
Like earthly crown or golden ring
The road our Suffering Servant Savior trod
But why is this “a happy thing”?
For service happiness does surely bring
Unending happiness does surely bring