

# An Explanation of the Sonnet of Gerard Manley Hopkins . . .

*How these two shame  
this shallow and frail town!  
How ring right out  
our sordid turbid time,  
Being pure!*

IN THESE verses Hopkins states as explicitly as any poet possibly can without being stuffily moralistic the theme of his sonnet. The sea and the skylark — inanimate and animate-irrational creatures — because they are pure, retain the cheer and charm that, noon, "life's pride and cared-for crown," have lost because they are no longer pure. The adjective pure cannot be applied to the sea and the skylark in its usual moral meaning of innocent and chaste. Obviously the word is used here more in the scriptural sense of *simple*. The sea and the skylark are said to be simple in so far as they always fulfill the sole purpose of their existence — to glorify God by their necessary obedience to the laws of nature and nature's God. Man alone of all the visible creation is no longer simple because the aim of his life is simple no longer. Sin has clouded his vision of life and its purpose and made him disobedient to God. As a result he has lost "the cheer and charm of earth's past prime", both the grace of God which made man's soul a lovely paradise and the earthly paradise in which he lived and which symbolized the paradise within his soul. When grace was lost man was cursed and the earth together with him. To man when he had sinned God said: "Dust thou art and unto dust thou shalt return." In this curse even the handiwork of man must share.

*Our make and making break,  
are breaking, down  
To man's last dust, drain fast  
towards man's first slime.*

In these two lines the history not only of each individual man but of the entire human race is succinctly told.

However, the poem need not be read principally on this spiritual

plane. A clue to another interpretation is contained in these lines from a letter of Hopkins.

*My Liverpool and Glasgow  
experience laid upon  
my mind a conviction,  
a truly crushing conviction,  
of the misery of the poor,  
in general of the  
degradation even of the race,  
of the hollowness  
of this century's civilization.*

In this interpretation the poet would contrast "the cheer and charm" as exemplified in the sea and the skylark with the drabness, misery and utter joylessness of the poor in "this shallow and frail town." (Shallow, because the only concern of its inhabitants would seem to be for what is earthly and material, and frail, because like all the other works of man's hands it is fast "breaking down to man's last dust, draining fast towards man's first slime.") But Hopkins was never able, as a priest, to view any phenomenon of nature merely in terms of nature. Everything in nature was for him both a revelation and a constant reminder of deep spiritual truths. In his poetry the two are always intertwined, and that is the case here. The very structure of the sonnet emphasizes this fact.

Thought-wise the poem is divided into two major sections, each of which is subdivided again into two equal parts. Two quatrains form the first major section, and two tercets the second. In each of the quatrains the poet describes one element at the double experience that gave rise to the profound reflection contained in the two tercets. Almost perfect balance is obtained by making the first tercet correspond to the first quatrain and the second tercet to the second quatrain. And the entire sonnet is still more neatly tied together by the artistic use of two poetic technical devices. The poem begins and ends on a variation of the same idea. Thus the words of the first

line "too old to end," in one of their associated meanings, carry the mind back to the day of creation since the two noises thus described have been going on ever since "the tuneful voice was heard from high" and will continue until "Music shall untune the sky." The final line of the sonnet returns to the day of creation in the words "drain fast towards man's first slime."

The second technical device employed to bind the sonnet together into a perfect unity is the recurrence in every section of one or another variation of the sea-image. Thus in the first quatrain the sea is mentioned explicitly; in the second, the image used to describe the flight

## The SEA

and song of the lark is taken from fishing — the rod and reel of the fisherman; in the first tercet the town is said to be "shallow" and "frail" in contrast to the deep and sturdy sea; our time is called "sordid" and "turbid" while the sea is "pure;" in the final tercet the words "break" and "drain fast towards man's first slime" are connotative of the sea. The word "break" recalls "ramps" of the first quatrain, while drain . . . towards . . . slime makes all life — whether of individuals or of the race as such — streams draining towards or into some vast primordial sea of slime.

The experience that called forth the poet's deeply spiritual reflections is common enough but one that few of us could express half so exquisitely as Hopkins has done. While strolling along the sea-shore, the poet is suddenly aware that "on ear and ear two noises too old to end trench," that is, cut their way or penetrate to his inner consciousness. That he is actually strolling along the shore and not standing gazing out to sea is obvious from the fine phrase "on ear and ear," which is further explained in the lines that follow. To the right ear, principally, comes the sound of the

John Pick, *A Hopkins Reader* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. xxvii.

sea; to the left, the glad music of the lark. But both sounds cut to his inner consciousness simultaneously, as if communicated along a single trench. And only gradually do the sounds penetrate to the inner ear. They are noises that entrench themselves, dig their way into the ear. The paradox of "too old to end" is striking. One would naturally expect old things to end but the poet here is emphasizing the everabiding freshness of these familiar sounds.

Hopkins probably derived the metaphor implied in the verb "ramps" from the field of heraldry. The sea is likened to a beast rampant, rearing up on its hind-legs

and cend." The flight is so rapid that it is heard not seen. We follow the bird in its entire flight from the earth to the blue depths of the sky. The image used to describe the bird's song is, on Hopkins' own testimony, rather difficult, not because it is so vague but because it is so rich. He pictures the bird's glad song stringing out like a fisherman plays out his line on a reel. The swooping and soaring of the bird, to the accompaniment of recurrent song, is like the casting, rewinding and casting again of the line. Or the song is like a silken skein at the end of which the songster sinks and swells. In its swift flight, dipping and soaring, the bird

nounce, but also sound the knell of — our sordid turbid time. The contrast between the bright clear joyousness and charm of the sea and the skylark, and the drab, dismal squalor and cheerlessness of "this shallow and frail town" is very effective. But the squalor and the misery are of man's making. He who is the pride of life, the crown of all visible creatures — the crown God has cared for with tender and fatherly solicitude, — has lost the cheer and charm that once characterized the whole of creation and is now retained only by the lower creatures, the inanimate and the animate-irrational. And why has man lost this cheer and charm? Because he has turned his gaze away from heaven, God's home and his, to concern himself with what is earthly and material.

It seems to me that Hopkins sets "this shallow and frail town" against the depth and power of the sea. The city is man's citadel, a symbol of his strength (and of his weakness, too), but the sea, as it ramps against the shore is breaking down that city into dust. And the joyous carefree lark is opposed to the misery and cheerlessness of man. And man must be unhappy and miserable because he has left the heaven of God's grace and the ocean of His love. Until he returns to both he can never regain "the cheer and the charm of man's past prime."

Throughout the poem there is apparent Hopkins' usual successful accommodation of pitch to sound and sense. This is evident especially in such lines as "With a flood or a fall, low lull-off or all roar" which is a description almost onomatopoeic in quality of the ebb and flow of the tide; and "Left hand, off hand, I hear the lark ascend" and the lines that depict the bird's soaring into the heavens. The pitch in these lines, while generally high, rises to a climax in "till none's to spill or spend." The first tercet again has an onomatopoeic quality as it expresses the poet's deep shame and revulsion at the hollowness of civilization and the end towards which the shallowness of men will ultimately lead — "drain last towards man's first slime." The buoyancy of the octave and the disgust and revulsion of the sestet have been achieved principally by this appropriate adaptation of pitch to sense. #

# AND THE SKYLARK

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with its forelegs extended—a very apt illustration of the ebb and flow of the tide clawing away at the shore-line. The description of the tide in the third line of the first quatrain is truly picturesque. Two senses are appealed to, — the sense of sight in the words "with a flood or a fall," and the sense of hearing in the words "low lull-off or all roar," another example of Hopkins' attention to accuracy of detail. In the last line the reference to the scientific explanation of the cause of the tides — the influence of the moon — is not a vain display of knowledge on Hopkins' part. The line is functional. It prepares for the second quatrain in which the reader's attention will be directed away from the earth to the sky into which the lark ascends singing.

While the reader's attention is momentarily fixed on the moon and the sky, Hopkins quickly brings it back to earth so that the entire length of the lark's melodious flight might be followed. This is effected by the abrupt transition from the calm "while moon shall wear and wend," to the rapid, jerky "left hand, off hand, I hear the lark as-

bursts forth in song, is silent again, and again pours forth a flood of melody or, as Shelley says, "singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest." And like gentle rain the music of its song pours down and pelts the earth "until there is none to spill or spend." — Shelley's — showers a rain of melody. While Hopkins' description of the lark and its melodious flight thus recalls certain passages of Shelley's ode "To A Skylark," it seems to me Hopkins gives a better and more vivid impression of the rash, impetuous flight of the bird and its almost uncontrollable joyous song.

The transition to the sestet and its serious reflections is artistically effected by a complete change of pitch. In the final line of the second quatrain "till none's to spill and spend" we are left high in the heaven with the singing lark. Abruptly we are brought back to earth in the first line of the sestet with its low pitch and harsh sound achieved by the alliteration of the letter 's' at the beginning of the words "shame" and "shallow." These two the sea and the skylark — ring right out — boldly and openly proclaim, an-