

*“The Penetration and Illumination of  
Life’s Experience” in James Joyce’s  
Ulysses and Gerard Manley  
Hopkins’ Poetry*

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*Abstract: Different as they may appear in person and as writers, Joyce and Hopkins share far more than time spent in Ireland or in exile. Michael McLaverty in discussing Hopkins points to what holds true for both writers: both penetrate and illuminate “life’s experience” as both “appeal fundamentally to [our] . . . total nature” (142). As Hopkins’ poetry penetrates life’s experience it more and more illuminates Scotus’s divine design. As Joyce’s prose penetrates life’s experience it more and more illuminates those truths discoverable in what William James called “subjective life” (I:239). While Hopkins shows a deep penetration into religious experience, Joyce demonstrates a great range of personal, subjective experience. Yet both exhibit a remarkable “coherence of . . . vision within its own range” (Peake 322).*

Hugh Kenner reports that James Joyce was only seven years old when Gerard Manley Hopkins died and that “Joyce so far as we can tell never chanced to hear of Hopkins” (144). Yet by the time Joyce wrote *Finnegans Wake* (1939) he must have known of Hopkins and his poetry since he refers to both. For instance, Joyce rearranges Hopkins’ alliteration in “dapple dawn drawn falcon” from his most famous poem, “The Windhover” to read “While the dapplegray dawn drags nearing night” (*Finnegans Wake* 585.20).<sup>1</sup> Joyce also refers approvingly to Hopkins’ technique of “sprung rhythm as “spring of Sprung Verse. The Vertex” (293). But besides overt references to Hopkins’ work, Joyce shared with Hopkins several important characteristics as well as not a few superficial ones. Joyce, for instance, educated by the Jesuits, may have been considered a likely candidate for the priesthood, but did not become one. Throughout his life he did, however, embody many of Jesuitical qualities both in his life and work. Perhaps he had “the cursed jesuit strain . . . injected the wrong way,” as Buck Mulligan contends is true of Stephen Dedalus (*Ulysses* 8). Hopkins, also educated by the Jesuits, later did become one himself submitting fully to the discipline of the order. Both Joyce and Hopkins exercised intense self-discipline in the service of a higher good. Both labored intensively at the expense of their physical health. Both spent a significant portion of their lives in exile. Joyce went into exile *from* Ireland and more particularly from Dublin. Hopkins went in exile *to* Ireland, more particularly to Dublin although he spent many happy weeks in county Kildare. Both were highly creative linguistically and both changed the major forms they worked in—Joyce in the novel and Hopkins in poetry; and both shared a

“fierce interest in particularity” (Kenner 144). Walter Ong contends rightly that “To Hopkins . . . existence . . . begins not with abstract principles at all but with full-fledged existing things, in all their totality particularized. . . first there is God, and then there is his real, particularized creation” (107). Joyce would enthusiastically agree with the first part of this assessment, as attested to by the “full-fledged existing things, in all their totality particularized” on virtually every page of *Ulysses*. But the pre-eminent quality shared by the work of both writers—in addition to their striking particularity—is, what Michael McLaverty designated as the “penetration and illumination of life’s experience” which when successful “appeals fundamentally to man’s total nature” (“Night and Day” 142).

Joyce’s fiction, especially *Ulysses*, appeals to a broad range of feeling and experience as it explores human relationships within “the modern placeless cosmopolis” (David Jones), the heroism of ordinary people in difficult circumstances, and the nature of love and loss. Hopkins’ poetry appeals equally to our total nature as it penetrates deeply and illuminates vividly the experience of nature, religious faith, the joy of living and celebrating life, the sanctity of the individual. Both writers articulate a moral vision which the late distinguished critic, Charles Peake defines as an artist’s characteristic ways of seeing and presenting life, as distinguished from any moral ideas, attitudes, beliefs, or faiths to which he may adhere and which he may seek to express in his work.

Joyce’s moral vision in *Ulysses* rests on those values which Leopold Bloom’s experience illuminates—values which turn out to be traditional and simple in the extreme. For Joyce such values were and remained those which he saw as crucial for the survival of humanity in an increasingly atomistic, amoral modern world. If Bloom, canvasser for ads and salesman, this budding adman who sells images and words appears worsted by the philandering billsticker Blazes Boylan, that will prove only temporary. As Joyce presciently saw, in the modern world billstickers—those who glued handbills to walls and hoardings, hence the nickname—were a dying breed to be replaced by salesmen selling space in newspapers—Bloom’s current occupation—or on outdoor billboards or in electronic media. In comparison with Bloom, Boylan himself is judged and found wanting by the very woman with whom he sported on that afternoon of 16 June 1904. “Poldy has more spunk in him,” says the discerning Molly in her low Dublin idiom (742). Although Bloom rarely articulates a moral vision of life, except for his halting defense of “love . . . the opposite of hatred” (333), readers will clearly discern one in his acts and thoughts. He struggles to accept the death of his son, Rudy, he acknowledges the loss of full intimate communication with his wife Molly, and he admits his failure to fulfill his given role as husband. His compassionate act of rescuing Stephen then bringing him home, as he once brought home a stray dog (compare Peake 330), eventuates in cracking Stephen’s isolation, if only momentarily. As Peake says: “Stephen’s bitterness and isolation is, temporarily at least, alleviated by Bloom’s practical good nature, so that he declines the offer of a night’s lodging with amicability and gratitude, agrees to further meetings, and shakes hands in a friendly parting” (334). This small but significant shift in Stephen occurs under Bloom’s influence as Stephen drops momentarily his habitual surly attitude and overly intellectualized responses to people and situations. It may possibly portend future unnamed possibilities.

Here, and elsewhere in *Ulysses*, Joyce presents a precisely delineated moral vision of right behavior which appears less in the framing of moral principles or tenants for action, than it does in concrete examples of right action itself. During his long day of *Ulysses*, Bloom performs all the works of corporal mercy and all the works of spiritual mercy as well as doing his work-a-day job under difficult circumstances with often uncooperative co-

workers. "There is nothing new about Bloom's moral attitudes; they seem to him, and are, commonplace," Peake maintains. "In *Ulysses*," he continues, "Joyce's enquiry is not into the validity of accepted moral positions but into the behaviour which purports to acknowledge and rest on these propositions. He penetrates into what, in the conditions of ordinary life, constitutes moral behaviour" (325). Therefore, Peake contends, the penetration will reveal itself in the discriminating and exact presentation of Bloom's nature as it is continuously expressed in his thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and into the general insight into human nature provided by that penetration (325). Joyce presents Bloom not as the Average Man—who by definition is no person—but Everyman (727) whose key virtue proves to be equanimity (733). But Bloom's equanimity should not be confused with a stoic acceptance of what is. Instead, Bloom's equanimity involves his affirmation of things as they are including his wife's infidelity and his partial responsibility for it, since that act is "as natural as any and every natural act" (733). Bloom has the wisdom to know what he cannot change. Because he abnegated his sexual role as Molly's husband, for instance, he cannot now play the outraged, betrayed husband. To go home and interrupt her pleasure, such as it might be, would appear churlish and worse, while almost certainly proving futile. Bloom thus embodies rather than articulates qualities, such as serenity, courage, and wisdom (731-734).<sup>2</sup>

While Peake's definition of an artist's moral vision holds for Joyce, it must be qualified for Hopkins, since the latter's moral vision as poet, his "characteristic ways of seeing and presenting life," cannot be distinguished easily, if at all, from his personal moral beliefs. Both rest on the bedrock of his faith in God. God, moreover, is not *Deus absconditus* as is true of Joyce, but abidingly present in His creation where He may be discerned: "The world is charged with the grandeur of God. / It will flame out, like shining from shook foil . . ." ("God's Grandeur" l. 1-2, 66). The god of Joyce's works, by contrast, has deserted his creation leaving behind only the impersonal artist in the world. Unlike Joyce, Hopkins' artistic and personal vision includes his belief that God's creation is good and to be celebrated; that human beings are fallen and to be pitied; that the essence of life is faith in the Goodness of God and in the power of Christ's Passion to redeem individuals; and that human identity derives from creaturehood.

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.*  
("As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame" ll. 5-8, 90).

Life itself, for Hopkins, images the natural sequence of birth, fruition, death—the very rhythm of creation—which pre-exists outside the poet or any human being "and sucks the light as full as Gideon's fleece" ("—I am like a slip of comet" l. 11, 147). Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in theologically explicating the doctrine of creation and fall, concisely describes Hopkins' personal moral vision found in his letters and sermons as well as his artistic moral vision reflected in his poetry. Bonhoeffer declares that "The praise of the Creator is only completed when the creature receives its own being from God and when it praises God's being by having its own being" (18).

Hopkins' poetry shares with Joyce's *Ulysses* a significant "degree of penetration into human experience," together with an impressive "range of experience into which the author has insight" and, perhaps most remarkable of all, "the coherence of the vision within

its own range" (Peake 322). A typical instance of this penetration and coherence in Hopkins' verse occurs in "The Windhover," "this mysteriously powerful sonnet" (MacKenzie 84) which Hopkins at mid-career considered his finest poem.<sup>3</sup> Seamus Heaney's observation on "Heaven-Haven," applies equally well to "The Windhover" that "the words . . . are crafted in the service of an idea that precedes the poem" (84). Preceding "The Windhover" is not only the idea, but also the personal experience of conversion and of God's call to each individual to lead a life of faith and the individual's affirmative response that for Hopkins lies at the heart of human experience.<sup>4</sup> "The Windhover" offers three images of God's call and a person's positive response in the variously interpreted sestet. First, for some, God's call is sudden and overwhelming, like Saul hearing God's voice while traveling on the road to Damascus. The resulting almost instantaneous conversion happens much like the precipitate brilliant streak formed when the hawk buckles and stoops to seize his prey:

Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion  
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!  
("The Windhover: To Christ our Lord" l. 9-10, 69)

Such dangerous, fiery life-changing events whose impact is seen and felt from afar, contrast with Hopkins' second image "No wonder of it: sheer plod makes plough down sillion / Shine . . ." According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, sillion is an obsolete form of selion: "A portion of land of indeterminate area comprising a ridge or narrow strip lying between a furrow formed in dividing an open field, a 'narrow land'" (428).<sup>5</sup> Hopkins' second image, which has been variously interpreted, emphasizes the bright streak which may result from the ploughshare's "blade [which] mirrors the brilliance of the sun" (MacKenzie 84) or from the newly turned-over soil which reflects back the sun's shining on it. The second reading may prove more satisfactory since that streak, unlike the ploughshare's mirror is not a sudden or wayward flash but one formed only over time as the plowman plods on. This image reflects those people, who may well be in the majority, who also answer God's call by laboriously tilling the soil of faith. Their lives reveal their answer to God's call only over time and only over time unlike Paul/Saul's sudden conversion. "Sheer plod" through life characterizes the depth and brilliance of their response, rather than the instantaneous streak of the stooping hawk.

The final, third equally distinctive image reflects not an individual's response to being summoned to a life of faith whether suddenly or over time, but Christ's. His answer to the call inevitably includes His whole life culminating in His sacrifice as imaged in the verbs "Fall," "gall," and "gash" which in turn leads to the broadcasting of the Good News caught in the third streak of reddish gold, the "gold-vermilion" image of the resurrection:

. . and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,  
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.  
("The Windhover: To Christ our Lord" l. 11-13, 69).

These three images range from sudden conversion through plodding faith to the perfection of the sacrificial life.

While Hopkins may not have felt like Paul on the road to Damascus, his own "conversion when it came was all in a minute" as he wrote to Urquhart (Letters quoted in White 139). He saw his conversion, its "beauty and valour and act" ("The Windhover: To Christ

our Lord" 1.9) as the central event in his life. "Hopkins' holy book was the New Testament, its commentary was the *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola*, its reality was in his own experience of conversion and vocation to the Jesuit rule" (Heaney 91). Hopkins believed that his poetry was a conduit for pre-existent truth. But, like Joyce, ". . . he does not lay claim to a perception of natural facts hidden from ordinary men [as] is evident in every line of description he wrote. As for religious experience, it is the same," rightly argues Marshall McLuhan (82). Hopkins' development of sprung rhythm, for instance, often praised as highly inventive, was, for him, not so much his creation as his discovery of a pre-existent condition evident everywhere in Creation. As Hillis Miller accurately observes "The sprung rhythm . . . as Hopkins affirms in 'Wreck of the Deutschland,' corresponds to the intrinsic rhythm of God's immanent presence in His creation: 'world's strand, sway of the sea,' 'ground of being, and granite of it.' Such a conception of rhythm is constative. It claims to reaffirm, to echo, a pattern already present outside the writing" (167). The rhythm of words, as they form themselves into poetry, derives, therefore, from the rhythm already present in God's creation which accounts not only for its ultimate meaning but also for the deep satisfaction readers derive from reading and hearing it. Robert Welch discussing "Siollabhadh" ("Syllables") by the Irish poet, Seán Ó Riordáin concludes that it is comparable to Hopkins' "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection." "For sensual pleasure in the rhythmic possibilities of words, for the frank unintellectualized delight in the existential presence of the moment, for life re-presented as blessing, this poem ["Syllables"] can stand alongside the miraculous moments of joy and celebration to be found in . . . Hopkins' "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire of the Comfort of the Resurrection" [sic] . . . (215).<sup>6</sup> Joy and celebration are thus inherent in creation for both poets.

According to Hopkins, following Duns Scotus, the Son of God's participation in creation discloses for him the true worth and identity of the individual<sup>7</sup>:

I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and  
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,  
Is immortal diamond.  
("That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection" ll. 22-24, 106).

Acting "in God's eye what in God's eye he is" ("As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame" l. 11, 90) affirms the uniqueness of the individual as does the very nature of creation itself. "Crying *What I do is me: for that I came*" ("As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame" ll. 5-8, 90).)

Desmond Egan in "The Writer and Religion" observes that ". . . the greatest weakness of Twentieth Century writing [is] its lack of a sense of value. Not on chaos alone doth man live. *In* perhaps, but not *on*" (133). If the twentieth century begins in Heraclitean flux which results in the chaos Egan describes that in turn leads to what he calls "an obsession with the abyss [and] . . . the rejection of any objective truth towards which the spirit might orient itself" (Egan 133). The century appears to be ending not in flux but in the instantaneous chaotic simultaneity of non-events "photoflashing it far too wide" (*Finnegans Wake* 583). Hopkins' contemporary, William James,<sup>8</sup> pictured people's experience of the present as a "saddle-back" of duration. James maintained that ". . . the practically cognized present is no knife-edge, but a saddle-back, with a certain breadth of its own on which we sit perched, and from which we look in two directions into time. The unit of composition of our percep-

tion of time is a *duration*, with a bow and a stern, as it were—a rearward- and a forward-looking end” (574). James’s sense of time as the present connected both to the immediate past and to the immediate future forms an important part of the moral vision of Hopkins’ poetry as it does of Joyce’s fiction. The loss of these connections which occurs in the course of the twentieth century has left us with James’s knife-edge—what he elsewhere calls the “specious present” where everything appears to dwell but where nothing really exists—the ephemeral moment of Egan’s chaos that is so opposed to Joyce’s infinitesimal brevity. Time and space have thus been contracted to “that point in time”—the ubiquitous contemporary cliché—where values, to say nothing of the notion of the so-called “eternal verities,” appear forgotten replaced by slogans, ad campaigns, painless religion, pop psychology, and the instant media analysis of instant media events.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, poems such as “The Windhover” and novels like *Ulysses* take us out of the contemporary specious present by insisting on a sense of duration, a sense of historical continuity, and an awareness of the human community stretching backward and forward from the present. Part of that sense of duration derives from Hopkins’ belief that he was articulating a revelation available to all without regard to place or time rather than merely sharing personal beliefs or the fruits of his individual imagination or vision. Seamus Heaney convincingly makes this point in comparing Hopkins with Dylan Thomas “another poet with a sacramental apprehension of the world” (90). In the “linguistic virtuosity” of “The Force that Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower” Heaney finds “considerable imaginative force” yet in contrast with Hopkins there:

is much more the “logic of imagination” than the “logic of concepts,” more the yeast burgeoning of images from a dark embryo than the delighted and precise realization or incarnation of a mystery. It is not so much the word made flesh as the flesh made word. . . . Whatever truth the poem proposes it is only co-extensive with the poem itself. (90)

When, on the other hand, Hopkins rhetorically exclaims, “what is all this juice and all this joy?” (“Spring” l. 9, 67) he is not so much announcing a personal discovery limited to this poem as he is affirming the very nature of creation itself as he attempts to penetrate to the very heart of that creation “in Eden garden.” The miracle of spring lies in its reminding us of the first spring: “Nothing is so beautiful as Spring— / . . . A strain of the earth’s sweet being in the beginning / In Eden garden” (ll. 1, 10-11, 67). Opposed to those “prurient philosophers,” so roundly satirized by e. e. cummings, who attempt to delve into the secrets of life and nature as their “doting fingers . . . pinched and poked” (“O sweet spontaneous” l. 3-6, 39), Hopkins seeks always through nature to come into the presence of God, the Creator of nature—“to behold Thee as Thou art” (“Nondum” l. 53, 34). He attempts to do so not through the intercession of human philosophers but through “Christ, lord” to whom he directs his prayer “Have, get, before it cloy / Before it cloud . . .” (“Spring” ll. 11-12, 67). Christ preserves the wonder and innocence of creation for Hopkins since He is present through all creation and, as the second person of the Trinity, was present before creation itself. This belief of Hopkins derives in part from his reading of Duns Scotus. So thoroughly did Hopkins immerse himself in Scotus and so well did he understand him that the *Catholic Dictionary of Theology* (London, 1962), uses Hopkins to explain Scotus, not the reverse. “The ideas of Scotus about the individual existents of this world have been much illuminated by their being taken up by the poet G. M. Hopkins . . .” (Mackenzie, *Guide* 113). As Walter Ong convincingly argues:

The Scotus view of the Incarnation . . . links creation and redemption more closely and makes Christ more the centre of the cosmos than do competing theories . . . Scotus thought . . . the Incarnation of the Son was God's first intent in all of his creation. Hopkins states Scotus' position and makes it his own (S 197): "The first intention . . . of God outside himself or . . . outwards, the first outstretch of God's power, was Christ." The creation of the universe and of humankind followed as a consequence of the design to have the Son take on human nature. (108)

Both Scotus and Hopkins share this overtly Christian reading of the world and human experience. Joyce, although he certainly admired and championed Scotus as one of Ireland's three "great heresiarchs" who could refute the arguments of all the "Doctors of the University of Paris" ("Ireland" 160-161), demurs.

As Hopkins' poetry penetrates life's experience it more and more illuminates Scotus's divine design. As Joyce's prose penetrates life's experience it more and more illuminates those truths discoverable in what William James called "subjective life" (I:239). While Hopkins shows a deep penetration into religious experience, Joyce demonstrates a great range of personal, subjective experience. Yet both exhibit a remarkable "coherence of . . . vision within its own range" (Peake 322). Different as they may appear in person and as writers, they share far more than time spent in Ireland or in exile. Michael McLaverty in discussing Hopkins points to what holds true for both writers: both penetrate and illuminate "life's experience" as both "appeal fundamentally to [our] . . . total nature" (142).

## Notes

A truncated version of this essay appeared in *Studies* 87.346: 164-170.

1. Desmond Egan testified, after hearing this paper at the Nineth Gerard Manley Hopkins International summer School that "in a flasch and, rasch, it shall come to pasch, as hearth by hearth leaps live" (FW 594) refers to lines 18-20 of "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire . . ." "Flesh fade, and mortal trash . . . leave but ash / In a flash, at a trumpet crash" (105-106) (Monasterevan, Ireland 5 July 1996). If so, Joyce may also have conflated these lines of Hopkins with the more familiar ones of Wordsworth "My heart leaps up when I behold / A rainbow in the sky."
2. See Morse, "Bloom Ensl'd: Isolation and Memory in *Ulysses*" and " 'The Days of Time': Overcoming Isolation in *Ulysses*."
3. "I shall shortly send you an amended copy of *The Windhover*: the amendment only touches a single line, I think, but as that is the best thing I ever wrote I should like you to have it in its best form" (letter of 22 June 1879 in *Poems* 266).
4. There are almost as many different interpretations of this poem as there are commentators. The additional reading I here propose is based upon models of religious experience culminating in the example of Christ's sacrifice. This reading has the advantage of overcoming many of the prevalent critical dilemmas, such as those outlined by Virginia Ridley Ellis in *Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Language of Mystery* (194-235, 320-323). (See especially her extended discussion of "buckle" and of the dedication, "To Christ our Lord" and, in the extensive summary of criticism to be found in her useful appendix, "Sheer Plod," [320-323]).
5. *The Times* for 19 May 1894: "The land is for the most part in open fields, cut up into numerous narrow strips or 'selions' as they are locally termed, and cultivated by small farmers" (OED 428). See: OED, *selion* 427-428.
6. McLaverty also linked Hopkins and Ó Riordáin in a letter to John McGahern of 30th January 1961: ". . . some of Ó Riordáin's poems . . . seemed to me to be in the Hopkins manner: not in the metre but in the associative depth and freshness of images chosen. They set up wide ranges in the mind; they had body and strength . . ." (199).
7. According to John O'Meara, Scotus "was the most considerable philosopher in the western world between Augustine and Thomas Aquinas and the greatest Irish philosopher (with the possible exception of Berkeley) ever" (vii).

8. Hopkins and James were born only two years apart so their dates overlap: Gerard Manley Hopkins 1844-1889, William James, 1842-1910.
9. For a discussion of this new perception and experience of time as reflected in literature of the twentieth century, see Morse "The Present Time of Things Future." "Adam's sin, calling for redemption as it did, gave the incarnation a special urgency but not its real *raison d'être*" (Ong 108). Todd Bender believes that the Scotus influence on Hopkins has been vastly over-rated. He claims that "the ideas of Hopkins are fortuitously congruent to those of Scotus rather than derived from him" (38). He also contends that "scholars have been strangely reticent to discuss Hopkins' actual references to Scotus" (39n21). Although he discusses "Duns Scotus's Oxford," he fails to take account of two important references to Scotus in Hopkins' letters. In 1875, Hopkins wrote to Robert Bridges saying he "care[d] for him [Scotus] even more than Aristotle and *pace tua* than a dozen Hegels" (20 Feb. 1875). Similarly, in a letter to Coventry Patmore he says Scotus "saw too far, he knew too much" (Both letters quoted in Ong 108). For a full discussion of Scotus's importance for Hopkins, See Ong, "Systematic Theology and the Self: The Scotus Cosmos" in *Hopkins* (106-112). For an excellent brief introduction to Scotus and his thought, see O'Meara.

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