



Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium

Volume 14 | Issue 1

Article 7

3-18-1988

Inscaping the Spirit in "As Kingfishers Catch Fire"

P. Karen Todd

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Todd, P. Karen (1988) "Inscaping the Spirit in "As Kingfishers Catch Fire"," *Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls/vol14/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

INSCAPING THE SPIRIT IN "AS KINGFISHERS CATCH FIRE"

P. Karen Todd
Brigham Young University

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same; 5
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.

I say more: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces; 10
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is--
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.
(Poems 90)

Hopkins critics as respected as Gardner and MacKenzie have seen in the fiery imagery of "As Kingfishers Catch Fire" a reaching toward philosophical profundities. Gardner asserts that the "live and glancing blowpipe flame typifies the first conception of 'immortal song' in the poet's mind; and the fire is the visible sign of vital activity when . . . 'kingfishers catch fire' and 'dragonflies draw flame'" (1: 155). MacKenzie notes that "the kingfisher's azure back and wings (and sometimes its red breast) scintillate fire as the sun's rays catch it. . . . The dragonfly jets flame like a blow-pipe, unmistakably itself" (149). He also suggests a parallel with Psalm 148, a psalm of praise for creation. Without focusing specifically on sacramentalism, MacKenzie has noticed it: this sonnet glorifies God like the devotions of the faithful in prayers or anthems. But in that tendency to praise lie deeper implications.

Hopkins's kingfishers shine far beyond literal significance, beyond philosophical constructs such as "immortal song" and "vital activity," beyond representing God's creations as in Psalm 148. Closer examination sheds light on another aspect of the images in this sonnet as emblems of the indwelling spirit of Christ present in all His creations. In his study of Hopkins's "Ignatian spirit," Downes asserts that Hopkins was more than a sensuous recorder of detail in nature:

One must ask what individuated Hopkins' artistic nature. . . . He perceived God behind it all. . . . Has any poet sacramentalized the world of being as he did? . . . There is always present in his sensibility a supremacy of the beauty of the spiritual over material reality, as beautiful as the material one

is. So basic was this in his sensitive soul that he talked of mortal and immortal beauty.

For me as for Hopkins, "This is the very core of the matter. . . . The mortal beauty of the transient world of natural being serves to proclaim the immortal beauty of the intransient world of supernatural being" (76). In this one sonnet alone, "As Kingfishers Catch Fire," several concrete images take on a sacramental dimension and "flame out" from the "world of supernatural being."

The Victorians revived the popularity of the emblem. But no Victorian poet illuminated the capacity of the emblem for poetic incarnation more vividly than Hopkins did out of the richly allusive texture of his newfound Catholic perspective. With a subtle effectiveness few other poets have achieved, Hopkins the poet serves a priestly office by invoking grace and evoking spiritual responses in his readers. His emblematic images sanctify the natural world to remind us of the "whole scheme of redemptive history" as his intensifying sonnet structure leads us through a sacramental experience.

Much of the beauty of Hopkins's art is that he does not give us merely literal nor exclusively symbolic kingfishers--they are at once the real birds and the evidence of Christ in the world. Even as the sun glints off their brilliant wings, the kingfishers, infused with Christ's spirit as part of His handiwork, ignite with tongues of flame like those seen on the day of Pentecost. In the same way, the dragonflies "draw flame"--they reflect not only the sunlight but also the fire of the Holy Ghost, which in Hopkins's view indwells all nature.

The light in this sonnet also attains to a traditionally symbolic aspect for all Christians through familiar biblical metaphors. The apostle John links the creation with this light: "All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men" (John 1.3, 4). All of Christ's creations, then, contain His light; this light sacramentalizes nature, makes divine emblems of the kingfishers as they "catch fire."

When from that fiery image Hopkins moves to a cooler one, the new image is no less emblematic: the wells, reminiscent of Christ's "well of water springing up to everlasting life" (John 4.14). This emblem has a long tradition even before Christ refers it to Himself; He may draw upon Isaiah, who also uses the well as a symbol of God's life-giving power: "with joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation" (12.3). Like these "wells of salvation," the wells in Hopkins's sonnet contain holy water, water sanctified by the glory of God. Thus in the first two lines of this sonnet Hopkins has alluded to two of the believer's most central and richly allusive symbols of deity: the light of the world and the water of life.

The water and the fire recur as frequently in Hopkins's sonnets as in the Bible. And again as in the Bible, they often occur together, as they do here. Particularly when they are linked, they may represent an "underthought" of the "baptism by water and by fire" that Christ told Nicodemus was necessary to salvation: "Verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 2.5). Hopkins felt that "the world is charged with the grandeur of God" and that seeing God in nature could bring man to God with almost the same salvific efficacy that the sacraments could. With the Psalmist, Hopkins seems to be saying, "The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof" (Ps. 24.1)--the earth as well as the "heavens declare the glory of God" (Ps. 19.1). The kingfishers and the dragonflies reflect His light; the well rings with rippling echoes of Christ's living water; together they whisper of baptism by fire and by water.

Perhaps the kingfisher can even be seen as a symbol of Christ. But it might be more clearly viewed as christological not so much because of a noncanonical link with the Christian fish symbol one critic has noted (Beyette 712) as because of a biblical link with Christ. Christ was often called a king in the Bible; in Matthew the King is shown as Savior: "Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matt. 25.34).

And Christ is also identified in this salvific aspect with fishers, as when He called His apostles Peter and Andrew. "And Jesus, walking by the sea of Galilee, saw two brethren, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea: for they were fishers. And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matt. 4.18, 19). The image of the fishers, then, has come to be a symbol of one who "catches" men, who brings them to God's shore in the net of Christ, that master fisher of men. Hopkins was fond of puns; considering these two images linked with Christ, the "king" and the "fisher" of men, perhaps the "kingfisher" is a Hopkinsian pun: Christ as the king of the fishers of men.

The bell in line four also resounds with emblematic evidence of Christ. That bell tolls us to the central theme of this sonnet, that all things in proclaiming their own individual inscape also tell of Christ. "Each hung bell's / Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name" (3, 4). Given Hopkins's penchant for punning, the bell's bow can be read also as the verb "to bow." As it is coupled with the word "tongue," one can almost hear the bell ringing out that "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2.10, 11). Thus the bell not only flings out its own name but also rings out His name, the name of Christ, Who has made everything and given everything its particular qualities of self. From this reading the next line follows neatly: "Each mortal thing does one thing and the same": each mortal creation of Christ also does as the bell does, "Deals out that being [Being] indoors each one dwells"--gives out the essence of the indwelling Christ along with its own inscape; "Selves--goes itself; myself it speaks and spells."

Christ is thus both visible and audible in the emblematic imagery of this poem from the kingfisher in line one to the final line of the first stanza. "What I do is me" paraphrases the words of Jehovah himself, as the Old Testament God telling Moses His name, "I am that I am" (Ex. 3.14). The latter half of the line, "for that I came," clearly refers to the New Testament as Christ approaches His great sacrifice. Beyette calls this a "Biblical underthought, . . . a subtle but deliberate echo of Christ's reply to Pilate" (711): "For this came I into the world; that I should give testimony to the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice" (John 18.37)--a voice that rings out in all nature, a voice as clear as a bell.

In the sestet Hopkins illuminates his belief concerning the immanence of Christ in God's highest creation, people. Here Hopkins seems to be fulfilling not simply the expectation set up by his octave but also answering the question put by the Psalmist, "What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him? For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honor" (Ps. 8.5, 6). Hopkins says that in God's eye man is Christ. Made clearer by Hopkins's magnified vision of it, this is a rather hazy doctrine familiar to all Christians from the Bible: "He shall abide with you and shall be in you. . . . In that day you shall know that I am in my Father: and you in me, and I in you" (John 14.17, 20). Hopkins meditates in the last three lines of the sonnet on important aspects of man's

relationship to Christ implicit in this indwelling of 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." As Christ is the soul of the church, the members of the church are His "limbs" and "eyes"; it is a symbiotic relationship. Although Christ is certainly the more powerful part of the partnership, we are through God's grace part of His body: "For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also in Christ" (1 Cor. 12.5).

Thus the images in the penultimate line of the limbs and eyes are reminiscent of the literal body of Christ, which He sacrificed that we might live. Those images embody our relationship to Christ as members of His church, the figurative body of Christ. And we partake of Christ's nature in the sacrament of the Lords' Supper; as we eat the bread and drink the wine (or water) that represent the body and blood of Christ, we are sanctified and become new creatures in Him. Cotter points out that "Christ's members become whole and complete through him: 'God has made all things subject under his feet and appointed him head over all the Church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills the universe in every part' (Eph. 1:22-23; adapted)" (41).

Hopkins uses another aspect of this bodily imagery to show the power of Christ to make us whole and truly alive--subliminal allusions to two of Christ's major healings in the New Testament. As Christ made the lame to walk and the blind to see, so He is now "Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his"; through His presence He transforms us all from the spiritually halt and blind to those who walk and talk with God, who see Him face to face: "To the Father through the features of men's faces." For as Paul explains, "Now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face; now I know in part; but then shall I be known as also I am known" (1 Cor. 13.12). In Hopkins's christological terms we are known as what we truly are in God's eye, as He sees Christ in our own faces when we are spiritually healed and made new creatures in Christ. "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (2 Cor. 5.17).

In this pervasive bodily imagery Hopkins sounds the stops upon several metaphors in the Bible. These metaphors echo and ring (like the wells and the bells in the poem) with emblematic significance, evoking "the whole scheme of redemptive history" for the reader and thus greatly enriching the poem. The images, like the Christ they incarnate, are simultaneously immanent and transcendent. As Beyette asserts, "the specific imagery of the sonnet's underlying structure is Biblical or exegetical. . . . Although the specific images of kingfisher, dragonfly, and stone are 'natural,' they seem ultimately to function as spiritual symbols, suggesting, as Hopkins once observed, 'the sensible thing so naturally and gracefully uttering the spiritual reason of its being'" (711). Every concrete image in the poem is at once itself in the physical world and a reminder of Christ as He indwells and is revealed by every aspect of His creations, from the fire of the Holy Ghost to the well of living water, from the tongues that confess Christ to the limbs, eyes, and faces of people made whole in unity with Christ.

"As Kingfishers Catch Fire" is thoroughly informed by a series of theologically rich emblems and incarnating natural images. But the sacramental aspect of the poem runs deeper, into the very bones of the poetic structure. The movement of the poem may lead the reader through a process like receiving a sacrament. The sacraments typically take the communicant through a series of spiritually intensifying actions that lead from the mundane world to the sacred. For example, that most universal of sacraments, the Lord's Supper, begins with the mundane bread and wine and leads to grace through symbolically partaking of Christ's sacrifice. Poetry that achieves something similar has

a characteristic that Robert Alter describes in The Art of Biblical Poetry as "structures of intensification":

The two basic operations of specification and heightening . . . lead to an incipiently narrative structure of minute concatenations, on the one hand, and to a climactic structure of thematic intensifications, on the other hand. . . . What is primary is a predicament, an image, or a thematic idea that is amplified. . . . Poetic form acts in these cases as a kind of magnifying glass, concentrating the rays of meaning to a white-hot point. (63)

Alter posits that the sonnet is usually antithetical to this process of intensification; but later he admits, "Having cited the sonnet at the outset of this discussion as a counterexample . . . , I should add that one can certainly find sonnets--in English, some of those of Gerard Manley Hopkins come to mind--that evince something like a structure of intensification" (84). One of Hopkins's sonnets that comes to my mind as evincing structures of intensification is "As Kingfishers Catch Fire." The sound structures intensify throughout the poem, a result of Hopkinsian "heightening" of language and of his sensitive ear for the inscapes of words.

Often, of course, Hopkins foregrounded the language for its own sake; but more often he foregrounded it for a poetic purpose similar to onomatopoeia. Hopkins believed in an onomatopoeic etymology, as attested by many of his journal entries. More than that, he believed that words had an inscape of their own, an inscape essential to the sacramental quality of his poetry: "oftening, over-and-overing, aftering of the inscape must take place in order to detach it to the mind and in this light poetry is speech which afters and oftens its inscape, speech couched in a repeating figure" (JP 289). In this journal entry Hopkins explains a kind of structure of intensification that results from repetition. He also wrote that he thought "poetical language" should be "the current language heightened" (LB 89).

Exactly that sort of intensification or heightening results from the structure of the poem we've been examining. As James Milroy has shown in his book The Language of Gerard Manley Hopkins, the sound patterning is much more complex than alliteration; it involves such Hopkinsian practices as "vowelling off" (48), "gradience" (148) and "skothending" (144). Since Milroy has examined these techniques so thoroughly, I will not; but I will illustrate with a few examples how they "inscape the Spirit." Throughout "Kingfishers" Hopkins uses repetition and concatenations that intensify. Note, for example, the alliteration of the /ŋ/ sound in the following lines:

Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells; (3-6)

And these ringing sounds echo the /ŋ/ in kingfishers--as if the kingfisher itself were ringing out its own particular inscape and the name of its Creator.

As in many of Hopkins's mature poems, initial alliteration also plays an important role in the sound patterning. For Hopkins this sound-play was not merely arbitrary; he believed that "within particular languages, certain phonetic structures may carry sense associations" (Milroy 157) and "that many words 'rhyme' with the texture, shape and sense-impressions of the things they stand for" (158). Here Hopkins has chosen to repeat "strong" velar stops (/k/ and /g/) in "kingfishers catch" and in "grace" and "God's," adding them together in "Keeps grace that keeps all his goings graces; / Acts

in God's eye what in God's eye he is-- / Christ." This phonetic connection points to a semantic connection between the kingfisher and Christ. But it also shows that this is what the poem, beginning with the kingfisher, leads up to: all creation--from the kingfishers upward to the highest creation, humankind--tells of Christ, "speaks and spells" His name. Stop consonants, in fact (including /d/ and /t/), tie the poem together and accumulate until that climactic line, "Christ--for Christ plays in ten thousand places." And then the sound of the poem takes a sharp turn with the "softer" liquids (/l/ and /r/) and fricatives (/f/ and /z/) that cluster in the stressed words of the final two lines, "Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his / To the Father through the features of men's faces." Aurally the effect is like that of a rise to a climax followed by a denouement. Spiritually it is much like the transformation to a "new creature" in Christ of which Paul wrote (2 Cor. 5:17). The semantic content is enhanced and intensified by the music of the poem.

Hopkins was alert not only to the sound inscapes of words but also to what he believed were essential etymological inscapes. In his journals he often recorded series of words that he thought were linked by sound and therefore by a similar origin. He studied philology and ascribed to the then-prevalent notion that sound--particularly in the common and current language of the people--indeed echoed sense. Thus he chose his diction with attention not only to the sounds but also to the subtle significances of words, even of connotations connected with etymologies long buried. He also ascribed to certain words senses peculiar to his own philosophies. "Catch," for example, meant in his Journal "to observe, to understand and succeed in describing something accurately, to 'catch' an inscape" (Milroy 234). Thus the "kingfishers catch fire" not only in the ways we have already discussed but also by "catching" an inscape. The word "bell" was also "charged" for him; this is "especially relevant to No. 57, in which the 'name' of the bell is its sound" (233).

And as the bell catches the inscape of its individuality, other words whisper of Christ. "Features" and "faces," for example, in their echoing finality, may speak of the the all-pervasive creation: the OED gives their etymology from the Latin "facere," to make. This verifies by subconscious linguistic suggestion what Hopkins has just said, that we are God's creatures made in the image of Christ, that we proclaim Him even in the individuality of the features of our faces.

In moving from the kingfishers and the dragonflies to the wells and bells and finally to human beings--all of them infused with Christ's spiritual fire--Hopkins has presented in this sonnet "a climactic structure of thematic intensifications, . . . an image, or a thematic idea that is amplified." Creating his own "structure of intensification," "Hopkins has conducted us from the kingfisher's reflected sunlight to the Father of lights himself" (MacKenzie 151). With the sacraments as guide, Hopkins has taken us in this sonnet on an increasingly intensifying journey from the beauty of the natural world to God.

WORKS CITED

- Alter, Robert. The Art of Biblical Poetry. New York: Basic Books, 1985.
- Beyette, Kent. "Grace and Time as Latent Structures in the Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins." Texas Studies in Literature and Language 16 (1975): 705-721.
- Cotter, James Finn. Inscapc: The Christology and Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1972.
- Downes, David A. Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Study of His Ignatian Spirit. New York: Bookman, 1959.
- Gardner, W. H. Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889): A Study of Poetic Idiosyncrasy in Relation to Poetic Tradition. 2 vols. London: Oxford UP, 1944.
- The Holy Bible: Authorized King James Version. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979.
- Hopkins, Gerard Manley. The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Ed. Humphrey House. London: Oxford UP, 1959.
- . The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Ed. W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie. 4th ed. London: Oxford UP, 1967.
- . The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges. Ed. Claude Colleer Abbott. London: Oxford UP, 1935.
- MacKenzie, Norman H. A Reader's Guide to Gerard Manley Hopkins. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981.
- Milroy, James. The Language of Gerard Manley Hopkins. London: Andre Deutsch, 1977.