



STUDIES *in*
THEOLOGY
and the ARTS

THE ART OF NEW CREATION

TRAJECTORIES
IN THEOLOGY
AND THE ARTS

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In God's Good Time

Poetry and the Rhythms of New Creation

Devon Abts

See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, Redeeming the time, because the days are evil.

EPHESIANS 5:15-16 KJV

The biblical proclamation of a “new creation” is, among other things, an assertion that the created order exists in a liminal temporal space between the event of the resurrection and the as-yet-unrealized promise of eschatological fulfillment. According to the New Testament authors, past, present, and future are united in the risen Body of Christ (Eph 1); those who are “in Christ” already belong to the new creation (2 Cor 5:17) and are therefore able to “walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:4). At the same time, Jesus’ followers remain embedded in finitude, joining the rest of creation in “eager longing” for the day when God will deliver the whole created order from “bondage to decay” (Rom 8:19, 21). In other words, the Christian life exists in a “dialectical tension” between the reality of entropic finitude, on the one hand, and the hope of life in eternity, on the other.¹ In light of all this, the injunction to “redeem the time” in Ephesians 5 might be seen as a summons to participate in an ongoing process of transformation by learning how to inhabit the vital rhythms of new creation.

¹Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), 21. See also Ben Quash, “Making the Most of the Time: Liturgy, Ethics and Time,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 15, no. 1 (2002): 97-114.

The outbreak of Covid-19 precipitated a seismic disruption to our lived experience of time. Deprived of the usual temporal markers—from daily commutes to family holidays—many of us found ourselves rethinking how we understand and relate to time, both individually and collectively. The shock of this rupture in our temporal perception has been compounded by the degree to which our familiar rhythms had already become “in bondage to decay.” As Charles Taylor observes, human beings in the modern West are generally accustomed to operating in a “thick environment of measured time,” which is “both the condition and the consequence” of our pathological obsession with market production, a perceived need “to make the best of time, to use it well, not to waste it.”² Our lives are tightly regulated around clocks and calendars: a full schedule is a moral achievement, and productivity the measure of success. Yet in this scheme, a subject has no real agency; she is driven by the coercive pressures of time into a state of inertia.

Thus, it is unsurprising that this dramatic rupture in time has exposed a range of menacing fault lines deep within the strata of our common life. The divisions are not new; rather, the exigencies of the moment have merely exacerbated longstanding structural inequalities: racial, economic, and gender hierarchies, to name a few examples. These disparities are borne of a diseased social imagination that serves existing systems of power rather than the needs of God’s beloved creation. In light of present circumstances, Christians are called upon to consider what it might look like to embody the rhythms of the new creation as a mode of protest against such moral and spiritual inertia. How might we “redeem the time” in the midst of such myriad convergent crises?

This essay draws on the writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins in order to consider how the notion of poetic rhythm might provide an apposite grammar for theological discourse about what it means to live into the promise of a new creation *here and now*. Importantly, my arguments are predicated on an understanding that human language is inextricably bound up with the circumstantial pressures and contingencies that shape our lives, and that scrutinizing our verbal habits can therefore help us understand and navigate the broader matrices of created experience. Hopkins is an exemplary test case for this

²Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 542.

argument, for his most profound and original theological insights are inseparable from the means by which they are communicated: they are registered “in the density of the medium.”³

In order to appreciate the theological achievement of Hopkins's rhythmic innovations, we must first consider how his lyrical genius nourishes, and is reciprocally nourished by, a highly original theology of language. In what follows, I begin by tracing the broad contours of this underappreciated aspect of his thought, focusing especially on the way that the Victorian poet invites us to conceive of the verbal medium as concretely constituted by the interplay of sin and grace in ordinary circumstances. Having laid this theoretical foundation, I then proceed to shine a light on how the poet negotiates the spiritual exigencies of language in his great ode, “The Wreck of the Deutschland.” Ultimately, I contend that Hopkins strives to incarnate the rhythms of the new creation in the dense medium of his art through a vitalizing ethic of stress.

RHYTHMS OF SIN AND GRACE: HOPKINS'S THEOLOGY OF LANGUAGE

Hopkins's entire theological worldview is predicated on an understanding that everything in creation is generated and sustained by the a priori gift of divine grace. Therefore, we may begin our investigation of his theology of language by examining how he translates this theological conviction into a linguistic principle through his enigmatic theories of *inscape* and *instress*. First, however, it is important to remember that Hopkins never defined either term; in fact, his references to both are generally unsystematic. He employs them variously, sometimes as nouns, sometimes as verbs, and each coinage holds together myriad ontological, linguistic, and spiritual inflections. While I cannot fully excavate the manifold layers of Hopkins's terminology here, I do hope to elucidate a fresh understanding of their significance for his theology of language. By resisting the urge to impose a precise definition on either concept, we will be able to see more clearly how the poet's terminology loosely articulates a compelling vision of grace as the inexhaustible divine gift that sustains and vitalizes word and world alike.

³Henry Rago, “The Vocation of Poetry,” *Poetry Magazine* 110, no. 5 (1967): 331.

According to Hopkins, each created form is inwardly marked by its *inscape*, an “individually-distinctive beauty”⁴ that distinguishes “each mortal thing” (“As kingfishers catch fire,” line 5) or pattern in creation from all others.⁵ Importantly, Hopkins stresses that its beauty is more than material: it springs from the vital depths of Being itself.⁶ Thus, to perceive an inscape is to glimpse some aspect of reality that is normally “buried away” from sight: “Unless you refresh the mind from time to time,” the poet writes, “you cannot remember or believe how deep the inscape in things is.”⁷ Yet he also declares, “the world is full of inscape,” and if we had eyes to see “it could be called out everywhere.”⁸ Thus, while most critics stress distinctiveness as inscape’s primary characteristic, my more modest proposal is that this term captures Hopkins’s astonishment at the beauty of finite things *encountered in their irreducible otherness*. Correspondingly, it also captures the poet’s sense of wonder at belonging to a universe that is filled to bursting with endlessly differentiated forms, each one in touch with the vital depths of Being. It is therefore highly significant that he names inscape as “the very soul of art”⁹ and “the essential and only lasting thing in poetry.”¹⁰ By placing this conceptual term at the center of his poetic

⁴Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Collected Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, vols. 1–2, *Correspondence*, ed. Catherine Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 835. Part of the difficulty of this term lies in the fact that Hopkins’s writings on inscape are so highly idiosyncratic; in his journals he records encounters with the “sonnet-like inscape” of an ash tree (Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Collected Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, vol. 3, *Diaries, Journals, and Notebooks*, ed. Lesley Higgins [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015], 603), the “strong and noble inscape” of a Gothic arch (611), and the “bold, jutting, somewhat oak-like” inscapes of chestnuts (441). It is impossible to say for certain what the poet means by such descriptors, though in each of these passages the term *inscape* does seem to refer to some mode of particularity. Elsewhere, however, he describes inscape as “species, design, or pattern” (Hopkins, *Correspondence*, 334), and further examples from his diaries would seem to support this latter inflection. For example, in one entry written during his time at Stonyhurst, Hopkins describes the view from a gallery window at night; he notes how the light stretches from a “brindled heaven” down to the garden below, and then concludes: “I read a broad and careless inscape flowing throughout” (Hopkins, *Diaries, Journals, and Notebooks*, 526). As all of this demonstrates, Hopkins’s references to inscape are so completely varied that precise definitions inevitably become unsustainable.

⁵All poetic citations are taken from Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works*, ed. Catherine Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁶For example, the poet writes that through instress, “Being draws-home to being.” Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Collected Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, vol. 4, *Oxford Essays and Notes 1863–1868*, ed. Lesley Higgins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 315.

⁷Hopkins, *Diaries, Journals, and Notebooks*, 504.

⁸Hopkins, *Diaries, Journals, and Notebooks*, 530.

⁹Hopkins, *Correspondence*, 793.

¹⁰Hopkins, *Correspondence*, 835.

theory, Hopkins ascribes the same sense of excess and inexhaustibility to language itself. In sum, I would suggest that inscape expresses the poet's supreme delight in the infinite, inexhaustible otherness that indwells each finite form and each verbal expression in their depth and density.

Inscap is upheld by *instress*, a vital pulse that surges within and between things, inwardly sustaining inscapes and outwardly generating relations between them. In other words, instress acts upon the world in two interrelated ways: on the one hand, it “unmistakably distinguishes and individualizes” things, and on the other it binds them together.¹¹ Importantly, I would suggest that Hopkins derives his concept of instress partly from his understanding of poetic stress, which he describes in a letter to Coventry Patmore as “the making a thing more, or marking it markedly, what it already is; it is the bringing out of its nature.”¹² Instress has this same effect on an inscape: it “marks it markedly,” deepening and drawing out or disclosing the “nature” of things without collapsing or reducing their essential otherness. Hopkins therefore frequently characterizes instress as an unsolicited, gracious bestowal—an ontological *gift* that opens the depths of an inscape to a perceiving subject, who in turn “instresses” the beheld inscape into her own self, thereby deepening the unity of subject and object.¹³ Yet the perceiver's capacity to receive this gift is by no means given; it takes an attentive and aspirational imagination to “catch” instress, which only discloses fleeting glimpses of the ontological mysteries that are ordinarily “buried away.”¹⁴ Therefore, instress may be described as that which expresses the beauty-in-otherness of inscape as an intelligible reality to be beheld and known—but never wholly exhausted—within the depths of another.

¹¹Hopkins, *Diaries, Journals, and Notebooks*, 504.

¹²Hopkins, *Correspondence*, 629.

¹³Examples are found throughout the journals; for instance, reflecting on the beauty of primroses, Hopkins writes, “the instress . . . so simple a flower gives is remarkable” (Hopkins, *Diaries, Journals, and Notebooks*, 504). Elsewhere he describes “all things hitting the senses with a double but direct instress” (489) and remarks with fondness how bluebells on a mountainside “float their deeper instress in upon the mind” (550). In these latter two citations especially, it is evident that Hopkins feels he has no ability to stem the communicative flow of instress as it penetrates the senses and the mind with an intelligible abundance.

¹⁴This sheds some light on a passing comment in the poet's journal that seems to indicate that distractions hinder a perceiving subject's ability to receive the instress of things in nature: “with a companion the eye and the ear are for the most part shut and the instress cannot come.” Hopkins, *Diaries, Journals, and Notebooks*, 544.

Balancing the inexhaustible otherness of inscape with the communicating power of instress, Hopkins grounds his poetic theory on a principle of unity-in-multiplicity: while inscape preserves the irreducibility of each finite form, instress affirms that all such forms are bound together at an ontological level. Yet I would suggest that what makes inscape and instress so innovative from a theological perspective is the way that Hopkins fuses this evolving onto-poetic vision with an understanding of divine presence in order to approximate a distinctively pneumatological theology of grace. For the Jesuit Hopkins, self-being is perfected when we fuse our inscape to Christ,¹⁵ who makes “New Nazareths in us” (“The Blessed Virgin Compared to the Air We Breathe,” line 60) by the gift of grace. In his retreat notes, Hopkins writes that grace

is any action, activity, on God’s part by which, in creating or after creating, he carries the creature to or towards the end of its being, which is its self-sacrifice to God. . . . It is divine stress, holy spirit, and, as all is done through Christ, Christ’s spirit . . . Christ in his member on one side, his member in Christ on the other.¹⁶

Hopkins thus echoes traditional accounts of the Spirit’s role in sanctification: it is “divine stress, holy spirit” that facilitates our transformation—quite literally, in this passage—into Christ. This notion of grace corresponds to instress and is pneumatologically charged: as Hopkins writes in a sermon, “The Holy Ghost passes like a restless breath from heart to heart,” inscribing Christ within his followers.¹⁷ In the same way, instress surges both through the world and within ourselves, sustaining each inscape and forging connections between things at their deepest level of being. And, for Hopkins, the deepest level of being is always the Being of God.¹⁸

¹⁵See especially Hopkins’s “Notes on the Examination of Conscience,” in *The Collected Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, vol. 5, *Sermons and Spiritual Writings*, ed. Jude V. Nixon and Noel Barber, SJ (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 383-92.

¹⁶Hopkins, *Sermons and Spiritual Writings*, 386.

¹⁷Hopkins, *Sermons and Spiritual Writings*, 329. Consider this in light of Saint Paul’s words to the Romans (Rom 8:9-11): “But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.”

¹⁸See “Notes on the Examination of Conscience,” in Hopkins, *Sermons and Spiritual Writings*, 383-92.

In other words, *instress* analogically relates each *inscape* through Christ—which, for Hopkins, means that God is viscerally present in and to the things of this world. This notion of divine intelligibility is one of the most pervasive themes in his poetry: “Christ plays in ten thousand places | Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his” (“As kingfishers catch fire,” lines 12-13). The poet glimpses his savior in the elegant kestrel of “The Windhover”; celebrates divine creative handiwork in “all things counter, original, spare, strange” (“Pied Beauty,” line 1); and praises “lovely-asunder | Starlight” for “wafting” the Godhead into the universe (“The Wreck,” lines 34-35). One of the more memorable poetic meditations on this theme is found in the opening quatrain of “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 reckon his rod?

At first glance, the speaker’s assured pronouncement in line 1 suggests that divine presence radiates throughout the material world and gives itself to be known and shared by creatures. Yet on further consideration, the poet’s proclamation appears more modest: the world is charged, not with God, but with God’s *grandeur*. And this *grandeur* communicates itself through something like *instress*—that pneumatological pulse that analogically relates each thing to Christ. Thus, Hopkins identifies the “charge” of God’s *grandeur* with two vitalizing activities—“flaming out” and “gathering”—and underscores its association with the Spirit by invoking images of fire and oil.¹⁹ This resonates with a note from his spiritual meditations, in which the Jesuit writer reflects on the grace of the Spirit: “All things are therefore charged with love, 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.”²⁰ Note once again the choice of descriptive terms: “charged,” “sparks,” “take fire,” “flow,” “ring.” Through the Spirit’s grace, God is perpetually restoring the things of this world, infusing all finite forms with the life and energy of new creation.

¹⁹The precise meaning of Hopkins’s twin similes in the first quatrain has generated much debate among scholars; given the constraints of space and time, I cannot begin to exposit their complexity in this short paper. Since I am most interested in the connection between the Spirit’s grace and the renewal of creation, I have limited my comments here to this subject.

²⁰Hopkins, *Sermons and Spiritual Writings*, 475.

To sum up this discussion so far, I would suggest that the poet's theories of inscape and instress offer a compelling metaphorical idiom for the way that grace opens a space *in this world* for divine encounter. Moreover, by making these principles the cornerstone of his poetic theory, Hopkins implicitly grounds his theology of language on an understanding that the verbal medium is always already graced by the indwelling presence of divine Being: "God's utterance of himself in himself is God the Word," he writes, "outside himself is this world. This world then is word, expression, news of God."²¹ All that exists owes its being to the *verbal* act of a Creator who indwells all created inscapes—including the inscapes of each verbal utterance—through the vitalizing instress of the Spirit's grace.

At the same time, the final line in the opening quatrain of "God's Grandeur" signals that things are not entirely right in God's good creation: "Why do men then now not reckon his rod?" Readers may begin to discern an answer to this question in the poem's second quatrain:

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.

To borrow a line from another Hopkins poem, what has happened to "all that juice and all that joy" ("Spring," line 9) expressed in the first four lines of the poem? Here the beauty and vitality of God's grandeur is contrasted with the spiritual inertia of day-to-day "trade" and "toil." These lines are weary: the heaviness of "have trod, have trod, have trod" captures the monotony of humanity's plodding, laborious steps. Our vision is so "bleared" and "seared" with the "smudge" and "smell" of human labor in time that we no longer sense God's grandeur. Perception is wholly diminished to mechanical functionality and self-interest; and in such a state of spiritual darkness and imperception, humanity becomes blind to the needs of creation as well, stripping the soil bare in its endless quest for consumption. Thus, as the octet draws to a close, the reader is confronted with a disturbing paradox: the world may be "charged" with the grandeur of God, but all is so "smudged," "smeared," and "bleared" with the weight of human labor that we no longer sense the divine intelligibility that lies deep within things, waiting "to be called out everywhere."

²¹Hopkins, *Sermons and Spiritual Writings*, 348.

As these lines suggest, Hopkins is no theological sentimentalist; he is a dogmatic convert to Rome who completely assents to the church's teaching on sin. Thus, while his theology of language is predicated on an understanding that all created things—including the verbal medium—are always and already graced, he simultaneously holds that word and world alike are subject to the corrosive pressures of sin. Hopkins is perhaps especially aware of the perils of poetic narcissism—the menacing threat of self-loving pride in his own genius, which is antithetical to the Jesuit life of prayer and self-abnegation. Thus, when explaining to a friend why he refuses to publish his poems, Hopkins remarks that fame is “hard to enter the kingdom of heaven with,” adding “the only just Judge, the only just literary critic, is Christ.”²² On one level, this indicates that Hopkins's poetry is written for, dedicated to, Christ alone; but the poet also intimates a fear that he might be subject to “a severe judgment from God” for indulging in poetry at all when, as a priest, he ought to have attended “to more sacred or more binding duties.”²³ As we consider his anxiety about poetic narcissism, then, it seems the poet is haunted by a more sinister preoccupation with the perilousness of language itself: just as we have the power to distort words, words have the power to distort us.

To better understand the implications of this for Hopkins's theology of language, let us briefly turn to one of his most astute modern interpreters: the late poet and critic Geoffrey Hill. In an insightful essay on nineteenth-century speech rhythms, aptly titled “Redeeming the Time,” Hill asserts that “language gravitates and exerts a gravitational pull” and that speech is susceptible to an “inertial drag.”²⁴ Driven by a desire to be understood, human beings allow their utterances to “drift” into the “familiar rhythms” of social custom; and since these rhythms conform not to the vital will of a speaker, but to the coercive pressures of “general taste,” Hill describes them as inert. Inert speech aims not at integrity but at convenience and accessibility: it accommodates prejudices, refuses to question itself, and in its “rhythmic gerrymandering”²⁵ it engenders the antithesis of what the critic describes elsewhere as “diligence.”²⁶ In other words, rhythmic inertia is what happens when a speaker surrenders

²²Hopkins, *Correspondence*, 306.

²³Hopkins, *Correspondence*, 493.

²⁴Geoffrey Hill, *Collected Critical Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 91.

²⁵Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, 94.

²⁶Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, 280-96.

her utterances to mindless demagoguery and self-serving indolence. Hill therefore suggests that the “inertial drag” of language is ultimately inseparable from the moral inertia of its users. And significantly, he elsewhere contends that this “coercive force of language” is inseparable from the coercive pressure of human sin in ordinary circumstances. Again, just as language “gravitates” toward error and infraction, so also the fallen human will gravitates toward sin.²⁷

It is perhaps unsurprising that Hill lauds Hopkins as the nineteenth century’s greatest rhythmic innovator, for, as I have been suggesting here, the poet is acutely aware of this “inertial drag” of sin and its corrosive effects on self and language. “Our make and making break, are breaking down,” he writes in “The Sea and the Skylark” (line 13); and through the despairing voice of the Leaden Echo, the poet laments that all is “tumbling to decay” (“The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo,” line 12). In his spiritual writings, Hopkins names this movement toward decay as *tepidity*—a term he borrows from the emerging field of thermodynamics. “Spiritual tepidity,” he writes, “is not the being between hot and cold, for in that state every soul must be . . . but it is the passage down from hotter to colder . . . to be cooling or to have cooled.”²⁸ As this citation reveals, tepidity is something more sinister than the soul’s ordinary vacillations: it is a “passage down” only, a “drifting” movement that overtakes us when we cease to be animated by God and gravitate toward solipsistic self-interest. In other words, to succumb to tepidity is to move from energy to entropy and, ultimately, to atrophy and death. “Selfyeast of spirit a dull dough sours,” the poet writes in “I wake and feel” (line 12); the soul cannot be its own sustenance. For Hopkins, then, sin is self-devouring that ends in self-destruction.

Throughout this section, I have endeavored to show how Hopkins conceives of the verbal medium as concretely constituted by the interplay of sin and grace in ordinary circumstances. While language is at all times vitalized and sustained by the stress of divine grace, speech is rendered inert by the moral and spiritual inertia of its users. In this view, the distorting pressures of sin extend into “the density of the medium,” infecting not only the content, but also the rhythms, styles, and structures of language.

²⁷Hill most fully explores the correlation between sin and language in his early essay “Poetry as ‘Menace’ and ‘Atonement’” (Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, 3, 20), but the theme also appears in multiple additional essays, interviews, and even poems.

²⁸Hopkins, *Sermons and Spiritual Writings*, 520.

Yet for Hopkins—and this is key—the prior reality of grace cannot be extinguished by any human activity. However much we collude with the corrosive energy of sin, however much we permit the gravitational pull of inertia to destroy the vitality of our speech, nothing we do can ever destroy the utterly gratuitous gift of divine grace that vitalizes word and world in all circumstances. Thus, in the sestet of “God’s Grandeur,” we return to the promise of new creation:

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.

Though existence seems barren to mortal eyes, at all times God is at work “deep down,” renewing all things from within and directing each created being toward its eschatological fulfillment. To live fully into the creaturely life that God intends for us, we must turn from “the black West” of spiritual inertia toward the “spring” of resurrection in the Spirit. In the same way, if speech is rendered inert by vices such as inattention, laziness, and self-interest, it follows that exercising vigilance, diligence, and selflessness will enable us to resist the gravitational pull toward verbal inertia and realign our utterances with the promise of new creation. In the next section of this essay, we will consider how Hopkins conceives such an act of resistance in and through a vitalizing ethic of stress.

TOWARD A THEOLOGICAL ETHIC OF STRESS

In Hopkins’s writings, the word *stress* refracts in multiple distinct but related directions. It is first and foremost a mechanical element of poetry that has its roots in the organic speech rhythms of the English language. As the Victorian poet knew from his philological studies, stress forms the basis for the natural rhythms of the English language, in which all spoken utterances have an underlying rhythmic pulse formed by the alternations of stressed and unstressed syllables. Importantly, this does not mean that stress is merely *ornamental*; rather, it is a vital mechanism through which we, as speakers, participate in

shared practices of meaning-making.²⁹ And so, when we speak about poetic rhythm as the arrangement of stressed and unstressed syllables into more-or-less regular patterns, what we are describing is the poet's deliberate and resourceful act of harnessing something that is a natural element of living speech. More than any other poet in his era, Hopkins grasps these organic roots of English verse rhythms; yet as we have seen, in his own reflections on poetic stress, he adds his own distinctive gloss: "[stress] is the making a thing more, or making it markedly, what it already is; it is the bringing out of its nature."³⁰ Once again, in this passage Hopkins suggests that there is an ontological dimension to poetic stress: something in the "nature" of a word (or even a syllable) that is beyond our subjectivity, irreducible in its "otherness"—a gratuity of vital presence. Thus, when Hopkins writes to a friend that the stress of his own "sprung rhythm" is "more of a stress,"³¹ we might surmise that the poet means to suggest that stress "wings" life out of words.

This brings us to the distinctively theological dimensions of Hopkins's notion of stress: already we have seen that he describes the Spirit's grace as "divine stress," which is closely associated with the action of instress. Yet throughout Hopkins's writings, "stress" signifies all manner of divine action toward the renewal of creation. In his essay on "Personality, Grace, and Free Will," he describes how God can, through grace, elevate the self "to a higher, that is | better, pitch of itself; that is, to a pitch or determination of itself on the side of the good."³² Elsewhere, Hopkins names this as the "elevating grace" of pneumatological stress, to which "man can respond by no play whatever, by bare acknowledgement only, the counter stress which God alone can feel, . . . the aspiration in answer to his inspiration."³³ And in his spiritual notes, he describes how God casts Lucifer out of heaven with a "stress" of divine power so strong that the rebel angels are dragged down with him; all plunge downward, "straining, in one direction," toward hell.³⁴ The stress of divine activity can be felt as judgment as well as mercy; yet in either case, "stress is

²⁹Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Humphry House (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 270.

³⁰Hopkins, *Correspondence*, 629.

³¹Hopkins, *Correspondence*, 412.

³²Hopkins, *Sermons and Spiritual Writings*, 382.

³³Hopkins, *Sermons and Spiritual Writings*, 391.

³⁴Hopkins, *Sermons and Spiritual Writings*, 367.

the life of it”—a revelation of God’s vital power in the dense textures of created life and language. Through stress, God is constantly transforming the world into a new creation.

In his editorial introduction to the 1918 *Poems*, Hopkins’s friend and posthumous editor Robert Bridges famously criticized his idiosyncrasies as “faults of style” guaranteed to alienate “those who love a continuous literary decorum.”³⁵ However, I would suggest that Hopkins’s effort to compress as much stress as possible into the textures of his verse ultimately permits him to resist inert conventions of “decorum” and to align the rhythms of his verse with the always-present stress of grace. In order to explicate this vitalizing ethic of stress more fully, let us turn to Hopkins’s greatest masterpiece—“Wreck of the Deutschland”—which is his most original contribution to English poetry and a monument to his theological genius. “The Wreck” is by far Hopkins’s longest poem, and a rich treatment of its dense layers would be a monograph in itself. Since my theme is the rhythms of the new creation, I shall focus my commentary here on the first stanza, where Hopkins recalls the dramatic narrative of his own conversion in his encounter with divine stress.

“The Wreck” is composed in thirty-five stanzas totaling two hundred and eighty lines, with each stanza employing the same rhyme scheme: ABABCBCA. The entire sequence is written in sprung rhythm, and, like its rhyme patterns, the number of stresses per line is consistent throughout the poem,³⁶ as marked here in stanza 9:

Stresses per line

- 2 Be adóred among mén,
 3 Gód, three-númbered fórm;
 4 Wríng thy rébel, dógged in dén,
 3 Man’s málice, with wrécking and stórm.
 5 Beyónd sáying swéet, past télling of tóngue,
 5 Thou art líghtning and lóve, I fóund it, a wínter and wárm;
 4 Fáther and fónidler of héart thou hast wrúng:
 6 Hást thy dárk descéding, and móst art mérciful thén.

³⁵Robert Bridges, “Editor’s Preface,” in *Poems, by Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: H. Milford, 1918), 97.

³⁶It should be noted that the first line of each stanza in “Part the Second” has an additional stress.

What is most striking about “The Wreck” is the abrupt character of its music, which is mimetically suited to express the poet’s self-abruption under the abrupting stress of divine encounter. To borrow a phrase from one of Hopkins’s sermons, the God of this poem “brings together things thought opposite and incompatible, strict justice and mere mercy, free grace and binding duty.”³⁷ Here the poet is brought under the stress of a God who is revelation and mystery, grace and duty, beauty and terror, speech and silence, mastery and mercy—“lightning and love,” “a winter and warm.” Through his vitalizing ethic of stress, Hopkins resists the inert conventions of “literary decorum” and renders his rhythms “in earnest” with the stress of grace.

Turning then to the stanza that broke seven years of poetic silence, we find that Hopkins opens his great ode with an awestruck address of the heart to God:

THÓU mastering mé
 Gód! giver of bréath and bréad;
 Wórl’d’s stránd, swáy of the séa;
 Lórd of living and déad;
 Thou hast bóund bónes and véins in me, fástened me flésh,
 And áfter it álmóst únmade, whát with dréad,
 Thy dóing: and dóst thou tóuch me afrésh?
 Óver agáin I féel thy finger and fínd thée.

Hopkins’s poem about a wreck opens with a deeply personal reckoning: the terror and wonder of his encounter with God. Over the first two lines, we meet this God, who is both the “mastering” Divine Judge and the merciful “giver of breath and bread.” Terror of divine judgment is juxtaposed against the promise of providence right from the very beginning. As the “world’s strand” and “sway of the sea,” divine stress is the rhythmic pulse surging throughout creation, holding all things together under its creative agency; it is God, not the poet, who is the master of rhythm (in stanza 33, Hopkins will underscore this point through his invocation of God as “Master of the tides”). In line 4 we hear the echoes of Romans 14:9 (KJV)—“For to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that he might be Lord both of the dead and living”—as the poet continues to unfold the paradoxical nature of his divine addressee. And then, in lines 5-7 we come to the gravitational center of this opening

³⁷Hopkins, *Sermons and Spiritual Writings*, 266.

stanza: here, God is Creator and Destroyer, the one who binds bones and fastens flesh, who yet wields the power to unmake that which he has made. The poet feels, acutely and simultaneously, the stress of grace and the stress of judgment, an urgent pressure from God to make a vital act.

We have only just scratched the surface of these lines, and already it will be evident that in order to understand what Hopkins is doing, we must go beyond the content of his utterances. Each carefully weighed stress registers the self-under-stress, the utter awe felt in the depths of his soul in this encounter with the stress of divine power. By employing the dense stresses of sprung rhythm, the poet sets his utterances in earnest with the stress of grace, thereby incarnating the rhythms of the new creation in and through his art.

INHABITING THE RHYTHMS OF NEW CREATION

What does it mean to inhabit the vital rhythms of the new creation, not as a distant promise, but as an ever-present reality—a *gift* waiting to be received? I would suggest that Hopkins's vitalizing ethic of stress offers a concrete idiom through which we can begin to grasp this theological principle. Throughout this essay, I have demonstrated how he understands and navigates an interplay of sin and grace through his verbal negotiations. Though the poet is at all times alert to the presence of divine stress surging through word and world, he simultaneously remains vigilant against the gravitational pull toward moral, spiritual, and verbal inertia. Resisting these coercive forces, Hopkins writes to open what Rowan Williams describes as "a context of 'grace'"—a space within the verbal medium where the self is continually remade by "growing in alignment" with the promise of new creation.³⁸ Perhaps by attending to Hopkins's vitalizing ethic of stress, we, too, might learn how we can cultivate verbal practices that "grow in alignment" with the stress of grace. Indeed, perhaps this is part of what it means to "redeem the time."

³⁸Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 91.

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