

## The Ecological Import of Hopkins's Sacramental Vision

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Gerard Manley Hopkins's vision and poetics give us a strong basis for a robust sacramental ecology. However, Sally McFague, an American Christian feminist theologian, in her book *Super, Natural Christians* would question this claim about Gerard Manley Hopkins, the 19<sup>th</sup> century Jesuit priest and poet. She claims that Hopkins renders invisible or transparent the horizontal array of creation to the vertical referent of Christ. In this paper, I want to contest this idea. Sally McFague in her book *Super, Natural Christians* praises Gerard Manley Hopkins for his "integrated sensibility, [his] ability to see the natural and the supernatural worlds together" (58,59), but she criticizes his vision of the natural world as understanding nature only as a symbol or instrument to move us toward knowing the divine. She believes Hopkins depicts nature as a means to an end, without its own integrity and purpose. As brilliant as McFague's book is, she fails to see Hopkins's sacramental vision as giving nature its full due. However, I want to say his poetry enacts a double-vision that recognizes, honours, and affirms both realities without compromising the value of either.

McFague draws on three models to illustrate the history of Christians' relationship with nature: the Medieval model, the Enlightenment model, and the Ecological model. Both the medieval model and the ecological model convey humans and nature as subjects, whereas the Enlightenment model depicts only humans as subjects, thus consigning nature to mere objectified resource. She praises the medieval model for its portrayal of humans as created and governed by God and interconnected to all other forms of life, but she criticizes this model for its failure to recognize intrinsic worth in nature. Nature is never significant in and for itself but rather is reduced to a symbolic or allegorical framework to benefit Christians. The Enlightenment model illustrates the deterioration of the medieval understanding of Christians connectedness with nature, viewing nature only as resource and humans are the sole subjects in the world. There has been an ontological shift; no longer is nature seen as symbolic of God's relationship to humanity; nature serves humanity. Nature is now utterly object, subjected to human desire.

In McFague's own ecological model, she rejects the Enlightenment model and retrieves aspects of the medieval model, albeit with some significant alterations. The recovery of nature as subject is essential to her ecological model; however, nature is not to serve humanity's quest for understanding aspects of the divine, as in the medieval model, but is to be respected and understood in and for itself, in what Buber calls an "I-Thou," encountering another self relationally. This ecological model stresses the interdependence of humanity and nature, and emphasizes the subjectivity of all creation, even while it celebrates and respects the differences and the individuality of all beings. She uses this ecological model as a corrective for the medieval, sacred model, that emphasizes only the unity of all things in God and stresses the vertical relationship of all being in the world to God. The ecological model stresses the horizontal, relational aspect of our being in the world towards nature, rather than the vertical, and encourages us to have a loving gaze that respects differences without the need to control or subdue nature.

Despite St. Francis of Assisi living in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, McFague sees his life as giving flesh to the bones of her ecological model. St. Francis had a sort of double-vision that was capable of seeing things in and of themselves, as well as something moving us toward the divine. For example, Francis understood the wind as the wind, a natural phenomenon, as well as the breath of the Holy Spirit (56). Drawing on Leonard Boff's work, McFague explores Francis's understanding of poverty. Boff claims that Francis of Assisi understood poverty as "a way of being by which the individual lets things be what they are; one refuses to dominate them, subjugate them, and make them objects of the will to power" (57). Boff goes on to say that "the more radical the poverty, the closer the individual comes to reality, and the easier it is to commune with all things, respecting and reverencing their differences and distinctions" (57). Each subject within the natural world should be celebrated for its own sake as well—the horizontal dimension, and as a means to praise God—the vertical dimension. By not desiring something for ourselves and our own purposes, we can glimpse the intrinsic worth of all things in the natural world. When our desire to dominate lessens, and in a stance of poverty towards the world, we begin to have a richer encounter with others and see their subjectivity.

McFague gives a brief mention of Gerard Manley Hopkins's vision of the world, but she states that Hopkins's vision falls within the medieval model; nature ultimately collapses into the divine and in some ways becomes invisible.

Unfortunately, McFague overlooks Hopkins's sacramental vision, within his journals and his poetry, as exemplifying this very same double-vision of St. Francis of Assisi. She relegates him to an instrumentalist, who sees creation, merely as a means to pivot our attention towards the divine, subsuming all things in Christ and elevating the vertical dimension of reality to the erasure of the horizontal. She criticizes Hopkins saying that "although Hopkins veers in the direction of subsuming matter to spirit, the physical to the mystical, the natural to the supernatural, he, nevertheless, continued the multidimensionality of the medieval world: things are not just themselves—they signify more. She states, however, that Hopkins "succumbs to the vertical direction" (58), not giving the horizontal its due.

Implicit within McFague's interdependent, ecological model is a moral dimension; we are not to dominate and subjugate the natural world for our own desires, but to live in a mutual relationship with it. Hopkins too believes that the way we give our attention to something, see something, will determine the degree to which we will understand its being. For Hopkins, seeing is a moral act (Ward 204). Hopkins would spend hours, sometimes days looking lovingly and attentively at something particular in the natural world, not to devour it for **his** own self, but to attend to it for **its own sake**. The attentive gaze is essential for recognizing being, recognizing another self. Hopkins says, "What you look hard at seems to look hard at you" (Hopkins, *Journals and Papers* 204,205). Hopkins's loving gaze always sees another as subject, even a self that looks back at the seer. In his loving gaze at "a thing," he states that "nothing is so pregnant and straightforward to the truth as simple yes and is" (Hopkins, *Journals and Papers* 127). He affirms the natural world, relinquishing control or domination of it. He encounters another, intersubjectively, acknowledging and respecting difference and desiring to know it for its self.

Although Hopkins's journals, letters, and sermons illustrate his desire to see the natural world for its own sake, his poetry most eloquently expresses his double-vision. Paul Mariani, a renowned scholar on Hopkins recognizes Hopkins's double-vision: "Hopkins' poems imitate the natural-supernatural structure which he believed all phenomenon revealed, without compromising the reality of either" (93).

Many of his poems move from the horizontal to the vertical dimension of reality, giving both their due, such as [As kingfishers catch fire], "God's Grandeur" and a perennial favourite "Pied Beauty." However, in "Binsey Poplars," Hopkins stays

completely within the horizontal domain, lovingly attending the poplars, perceiving them as selves, and affirming our intersubjectivity with nature, even while he is lamenting the loss of these trees.

Through Hopkins's loving gaze, he affirms his lost relationship to these poplars. In the first three lines of the poem, he addresses them as

My aspens dear, whose airy cages quelled,  
 Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun,  
 All felled, felled, are all felled. (1-3).

He refers to them as "my" and "dear" illustrating his intimate relationship with them. He also affirms their particular being, different from his own, in their ability to provide shade from the sun. But perhaps his loving gaze towards them is noticed the most through his description of their absence, in their deaths: all felled, felled, are all felled. In this one line, ten "I's" are seen. These I's even take the shape of poplars, or I might say, I's, first-person singular pronouns.

Throughout this entire poem, he remembers the fullness of their being and laments the way humans have "touched" them: O if we but knew what we do / When we delve or hew----- / Hack and rack the growing green! (9-11). He laments not only the loss of these trees, but laments humans' inability to see them in their project of being.

Here Hopkins's intimate relationship with these trees gives an alternative route into understanding the way their being connects to our being:

Since country is so tender  
 To touch, her being so slender,  
 That, like this sleek and seeing ball  
 But a prick will make no eye at all. (12-15)

In humanity's inability to see nature as subject, it fails also to see itself fully. Let us move through these lines thoughtfully, carefully. He brings touch and sight together in these four lines, profoundly different senses: sight, one can see for miles—we can see the moon for instance, but we do not have to be intimate with what we are seeing to supposedly "know" it; touch is profoundly different; we can be at the farthest distance only an arm's length away to touch something. What we do with this arm's length will influence who we will become and who and

what others will become. We will gently caress someone, or we will strangle this being. The way he desires to touch these trees is not by destroying them, not hacking or racking them, but by recognizing their tenderness, sensing their slender being. He then through simile compares what would happen to our “eye” if it were stabbed—our sight would be gone; we would be blinded. Here I think Hopkins is playing with words. Let’s take the “E-Y-E” in the 15<sup>th</sup> line and understand this eye as a homophone, the “I” as subject. If we do not see nature properly, as a subject, distinct and different from ourselves, worthy of respect and admiration, we also diminish our own subjectivity: the subject-nature of nature is slackened, as well as our own subjectivity.

However, he does not just allude to them as being selves, he actually speaks of them as selves in speaking of their deaths:

After-comers cannot guess the beauty been.

Ten or twelve, only ten or twelve

Strokes of havoc unselfe

The sweet especial scene. (12-14)

In his act of attentively gazing at these trees, he affirms what Buber would call an I-Thou relationship that sees another, whether human or non-human as a subject, worthy to be respected and revered in their differences and distinctions from himself. He speaks of their “deaths” in terms of great loss to himself and others, and presumably to themselves.

You might, as I have found, the use of “subject” in reference to non-human entities as suspect, but let me point out that this is the discourse of McFague. However, perhaps we could better understand subjects here as us giving place for the otherness to interrogate us and possibly show their difference from our ideas of them.

Through his attentive gaze upon the natural world and his poetics that gives voice to the otherwise mute subjects of creation, Hopkins gives us a basis for a robust sacramental ecology that affirms and honours both the natural and supernatural. McFague would argue that Hopkins merely conveys nature a transparent window that opens to God; however, in my conclusion, I would like to add some colour to this image. Let’s say that Hopkins in his understanding of nature gives us a window, but let’s say a stained-glass window that has an integrity and beauty in

and of itself. Christ shines through the stained-glass window, but he never renders it transparent.