



Nature's million-fuelèd bonfire: Thoughts on honest poetic contemplation

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My work as a theologian and poet over the last fifteen years has been much concerned with the effort to contemplate honestly the natural world, first in relation to creaturely suffering in evolution, and more recently in relation to manifestations of divine glory.¹

Honest contemplation – that's the key. Because so much Christian attention to the natural world, in poetry, in worship, in theology, has celebrated the beauties of creation without taking into account the struggle, the violence, the often ugliness of nature. Honest contemplatives need recourse to the insights of the sciences, in particular to the alarming insight that competition and struggle are factors that drive the evolution of what we tend to consider values in nature: beauty, intricacy, complexity, precision of adaptation. God seems to have used the struggle of Darwinian nature as a means to God's creative ends.²

It is important and salutary to listen to the naturalist and theologian Holmes Rolston describing the natural world as: 'random, contingent, blind, disastrous, wasteful, indifferent, selfish, cruel, clumsy, ugly, full of suffering, and, ultimately, death', but also: 'orderly, prolific, efficient, selecting for adaptive fit, exuberant, complex, diverse, regenerating life generation after generation.'³ The *same processes* give rise to both perceptions. As Diogenes Allen says, 'We are not to take the pleasantness of nature as evidence of [God's] care and ignore the fact that the very same laws of nature also bring us storms, earthquakes and drought.'⁴

These are important reflections if we are to conduct our forays into nature contemplation with honesty and clear-sightedness. I want to consider here what some Christian poets of nature can offer us as aids to honest contemplation. I begin with Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–89), the genius who, in the poem "God's Grandeur", saw that

‘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.’⁵ The ultimate manifesto of the Christian nature poet.

Another great Hopkins poem of nature is the curial sonnet “Pied Beauty”:⁶

Glory be to God for dappled things –
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches’ wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow, and plough;
And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.

With extraordinary density of thought, this poem roams across Hopkins’ landscape of praise, his response to contrast, his facility and originality of connection – a sky, bizarrely but so accurately, like the hide of a cow. But it is the very allusive line ‘All things counter, original, spare, strange’ that intrigues me. Hopkins draws near to the thought I am pursuing here, that it is not necessarily the obviously beautiful in nature that evokes our praise of the Creator. Rather the unexpected in nature (the ‘counter’ and ‘strange’), those life-strategies that are not seen in any other form (the ‘original’), and those that express their nature – or ‘inscape’ as Hopkins would have put it⁷ – in a particularly direct and uncluttered way (the ‘spare’), these draw the nature-contemplative particularly to praise. Even to tease out that line is to reduce the force of what it seeks to convey. In a sense, the poem is its own ‘counter, original, spare, strange’ song of praise, and no exegesis can enhance it. But I draw strength from the line all the same, and its underlying sense that glory is to be looked for, and responded to, in surprising places.

The poem has a fascinating sequel in Louise MacNeice’s endlessly enigmatic poem “Snow”.⁸ In this poem MacNeice sets up a somewhat surreal natural scene, and then breaks the frame by intruding brief but very telling observations of reality. ‘World is suddener than we fancy it’ is perhaps the twentieth-century sequel to Hopkins’ measured connections between observation and theology. MacNeice goes on, ‘World is crazier and more of it than we think, / Incorrigibly plural’, with more than a hint of things ‘counter, original, spare, strange’. And “Snow” moves on to ‘world / Is more spiteful and gay than one supposes’ – precisely the emphasis I have been trying to convey – ‘world’ is more, yes, always, more, yet more spite-filled than a naïve reading provides. Norman MacCaig has a fine pair of lines tending in the same direction: ‘The vinegar of existence with a wild rose growing in it, / Hear the ravishing harmony dunted with a drum thud.’⁹ Such ambiguity and counterpoint is, arguably, what modern poetry does best, and one can hear, embryonically, the technique of sudden shift and surprising juxtaposition in Hopkins’ ‘counter, original, spare, strange’.

A determined Darwinian contemplative can perhaps elicit some encouragement from that ‘counter’ line. But the only real encouragement I get that Hopkins was thinking evolution-informed thoughts is in his late irregular sonnet “That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection”,¹⁰ from which the title of this article is drawn.

Cloud-puffball, torn tufts, tossed pillows | flaunt forth, then
 chevy on an air-
 Built thoroughfare: heaven-roysterers, in gay-gangs | they
 throng; they glitter in marches.
 Down roughcast, down dazzling whitewash, | wherever an elm
 arches,
 Shivelights and shadowtackle in long | lashes lace, lance, and
 pair.
 Delightfully the bright wind boisterous | ropes, wrestles, beats
 earth bare
 Of yestertempest’s creases; | in pool and rut peel parches

Squandering ooze to squeezed | dough, crust, dust; stanches,
 starches
 Squadroned masks and manmarks | treadmire toil there
 Footfretted in it. Million-fuelèd, | nature's bonfire burns on.
 But quench her bonniest, dearest | to her, her clearest-selvèd
 spark
 Man, how fast his firedint, | his mark on mind, is gone!
 Both are in an unfathomable, all is in an enormous dark
 Drowned. O pity and indig | nation! Manshape, that shone
 Sheer off, disseveral, a star, | death blots black out; nor mark
 Is any of him at all so stark
 But vastness blurs and time | beats level. Enough! the
 Resurrection,
 A heart's-clarion! Away grief's gasping, | joyless days,
 dejection.
 Across my foundering deck shone
 A beacon, an eternal beam. | Flesh fade, and mortal trash
 Fall to the residuary worm; | world's wildfire, leave but ash:
 In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
 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.

The opening seems to tune to the concerns that a Darwinian contemplative might have, and that drives Hopkins not to insist on creation's beauty but to an admission of its bleakness, and then to a complete break, and a coda on the Resurrection, glory of a very different sort. If we combine the octet of "God's Grandeur" and the eleven lines of "Pied Beauty", and the opening of "Heraclitean Fire", then we have the beginnings of a handbook for the honest nature contemplative.

A modern theology-of-nature poet who brings the kind of honesty I am after is R. S. Thomas (1913–2000). In his fine study, *R. S. Thomas: Serial Obsessive*, M. Wynn Thomas says that in his early collection *The Stones of the Field*, Thomas 'pictured the world not as reliably ordained and managed by a humanity-orientated God, but

as provocatively neutral – glorious and harsh in equal measure, and expressing something of divinity in both its aspects.¹¹ Many elements of the created world are not in any sense beautiful, and yet they are God’s creation and in their own way eloquent of the work of God. He reflects that ‘life has to die in the cause of life. If there is any other way on this earth, God has not seen fit to follow it. [...] As far as this world is concerned, Isaiah’s vision of the wolf dwelling with the lamb, and the leopard lying down with the kid, is a myth. The economy doesn’t work like that’.¹² Easier, then, to accept the ‘groaning’ state of creation, and to insist that it ‘can be simultaneously, reflective of divine fullness and glory’.¹³ In the poem “Rough”, the system is accepted as ‘perfect, a self-regulating machine / of blood and faeces’.¹⁴ Insofar as the ‘economy’ testifies to the system God has ‘seen fit’ to create, the ‘talons and beaks’ testify thereby to the divine nature.

Thomas makes no effort to resolve this paradox into a theological system. Rather he is at work ‘preserving and balancing its tensions and, ultimately, moving toward a deeper acceptance of what he seems to view as the fundamentally paradoxical nature of existence itself’.¹⁵ Christopher Morgan shows how the sometimes shocking dystopic poems of creation in the collection *H’m* (1972) allow Thomas to test the most disturbing thoughts we might have about the creator of this ambiguous world, in a ‘mythic’ mode.¹⁶ Again this is not an attempt at a philosophical schema, but a consideration of the sort of rhetorical space poetry can open up. The poems emphasise a gap between creator and creatures, in counterpoint to Thomas’s other explorations of divine immanence, stripped of anthropomorphism, and of the search for God within, a ‘subterranean [...] ubiquitous, mystical divinity’.¹⁷

So Thomas helps us in our search for a mode of nature contemplation that is fearlessly honest about the way nature really is, and which is willing to resist neat tidying into a theological system. I propose that contemplation of the natural world needs to seek honestly for signs of the divine reality behind that world. As such it is a search for divine glory.¹⁸

I want to suggest that this contemplation of divine glory requires ‘three-lensed seeing’. Such a multiple contemplative lens opens up a view of glory in which what we see of the struggles in the natural world

– profoundly rich and important though the picture is – can be seen in counterpoint with the sense of God’s depth of engagement with all suffering. Our first lens, *gloria mundi*, what the not-yet-completely-redeemed world discloses of its creator, must be appropriated and understood in the context of a second lens, *gloria crucis*, in the context of the gift – made possible by the character of the creation – of the Incarnate Christ and his self-surrender on the Cross. But these two views in counterpoint must be combined in an overlapping triptych with an eschatological perspective, the creation as it will be in its transformed state. *Gloria mundi* must be understood in the context of *gloria crucis*, but this in turn is informed by what one might term *gloria in excelsis*, the eschatological song of the new creation, in which creaturely flourishing will be attained without creaturely struggle. As Michael Ramsey puts it, ‘There [is] no escaping from the facts of this world. Rather [does] membership in the world-to-come enable [Christians] to see the facts of this world with the Cross and resurrection upon them’¹⁹ – just as Hopkins does in the coda to “Heraclitean Fire”.

The Pauline literature seems to identify our place in the story as being firmly in the eschatological phase, though how ‘realised’ that transition to the eschaton differs between the two key texts in which Paul treats of the whole of the cosmos – Romans 8:19–23 and Colossians 1:15–20.²⁰ Somehow or other the liberty of the creation depends on humans coming into the liberty of their glory (Rom 8:21). The creation still manifests the protological glory with which it is ‘charged’, a glory full of ‘groaning’, a glory which Christians confess to be only the beginning of the story.

Gloria mundi, *gloria crucis*, *gloria in excelsis*. Perhaps looking deep into the natural world may enable us to discern something of the richness and ambiguity of this story. We have been looking at creation with scientific and poetic eyes, but the structure I am outlining here, a story in three acts, as it were, stretches our discernment of divine reality still further. It brings to every entity and event in the drama of creation the perspective that God became incarnate and suffered for the transformation of the world, and that there will ultimately be a totally transformed state of that world in which those creatures that appear victims in the first story know flourishing in the third.²¹ This

is a move to be made only with the utmost caution. It is disastrous, in my view, to suggest that simply viewing an event of suffering within creation within this larger perspective of redemption and eschatological consummation somehow dissolves out the suffering of the creature, or prevents that suffering from troubling us. Apart from anything else, that would seem to me to make light of the depth of the travail of the Cross. There are no easy fixes or short-circuits in Christian theodicy.

Two of these lenses of seeing glory are powerfully caught in Hopkins' famous sonnet "The Windhover".²² The first stanza is an exquisite description of a sign of God's ingenuity in creation, *gloria mundi*, in the masterful flight of a raptor seen against the dawn sky. The poet's 'heart in hiding / Stirred for a bird, – the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!' As Thomas Gardner points out in his recent study of the Gospel of John in relation to poetry, 'The poem works so powerfully on the reader because, like the Gospel, it first fills us with a conventional notion of glory and then shatters it, slinging us forward into something that our eyes can barely take in. It trains us to see.'²³ The second stanza 'slings' us into following the kestrel as its wings flash into the stoop, as mastery 'buckles'. The Christic reference is only in the epitaph 'To Christ our Lord', but the 'lovelier, more dangerous' image of the 'buckled' flight speaks, as Gardner recognizes, of the 'redefined' glory, *gloria crucis*, that John sees in Christ's self-sacrifice.

The intensely disciplined contemplation we find in Hopkins offers helpful ways forward, fragmentary and sometimes opaque as his writing is. Hopkins used the science of the day to aid his seeing, and brought religiously-informed poetic observation of the natural world to a pitch that, arguably, has never since been equalled. One of his most remarkable observations in his prose writing – itself an outstanding training ground for any poet of nature – goes as follows: 'I do not think I have ever seen anything more beautiful than the bluebell I have been looking at. I know the beauty of our Lord by it. It[s inscape] is [mixed of] strength and grace, like an ash [tree].'²⁴

This makes clear just how far beyond ordinary seeing this 'foolish' contemplation, at its most intense, can take us. It took Hopkins to *knowledge* of the beauty of God – it might therefore be

said to be natural theology at its purest and most direct. The bluebell functioned, to use a term from C. S. Peirce's taxonomy of signs, as a qualisign: it connoted the beauty of God by dint of its sheer quality of being.²⁵ But note what lay behind this apprehension of Hopkins' – a deep schooling in Christian philosophical theology, an intense appreciation of the developments of the science of the time, and an extraordinary openness to the natural world. The same intensity of holy contemplation is advocated by Bonaventure when he writes of 'the second way of seeing' that:

The supreme power, wisdom and goodness of the Creator shine forth in created things in so far as the bodily senses inform the interior senses. [...] In the first way of seeing, the observer considers things in themselves [...] the observer can rise, as from a vestige, to the knowledge of the immense power, wisdom and goodness of the Creator. In the second way of seeing, the way of faith, [...] we understand that the world was fashioned by the Word of God.²⁶

Celia Deane-Drummond quotes a further passage from Bonaventure in her book *Wonder and Wisdom*, where he indicates that to be able to develop this way of seeing the contemplative must

bring the natural powers of the soul under the influence of grace, which reforms them, and this he does through prayer; he must submit them to the purifying influence of justice, and this, in his daily acts; he must subject them to the influence of enlightening knowledge, and this, in meditation; and finally he must hand them over to the influence of the perfecting power of wisdom, and this in contemplation. For just as no one arrives at wisdom except through grace, justice and knowledge, so it is that no one arrives at contemplation except through penetrating meditation, holy living and devout prayer.²⁷

At moments, as von Balthasar acknowledges, an experience may seem to be a direct revelation of God's glory needing 'no justification but

itself'.²⁸ But more typically such discernment takes much discipline and purification of motive and understanding.

The sort of contemplation I am advocating seeks to receive the 'thisness' of the object investigated – the particular bluebell or the particular kestrel, in the particular moment. Beyond that, it rests on discerning how God loves the creature concerned, knowing the long history by which it has come to be, knowing how it and its ancestors have striven for selfhood, delighting in its flourishing, entering into the passion play of its frustrations and suffering.

There is however another dimension to how poets contemplate the natural world, which is not so much about receiving the total effect of a wild creature, be it bluebell or barracuda, as about the change in the poet's psyche wrought by indwelling a particular landscape. I devote the remainder of this article to that strategy. When Wordsworth writes above Tintern Abbey that

[...] I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
The still sad music of humanity,
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.²⁹

– the landscape is not so much object analysed as backdrop and catalyst of the poet's inner realisations. That is my own strategy in this next poem, about one of the local hills out on my corner of Dartmoor.

Destination³⁰

I use the moor today, ashamedly,
as an antidote
to blind family anger.

I start the long slope of Hameldown
(the far ridge like a line
of scripture, forbidding self-love).

Wind against. A white film dusting
the kists. Deer-sprites
seem to haunt the valley-floors.

The sky is empty, wash-blue, as though
some controlled explosion
had cleared away its debris

leaving only light, and three thorn
trees, absolute
as to sharpness. Suffering.

The snow's striations are intricate,
seem hand-turned;
melt-pools dissolve my eyes.

I find rest in hard ascent, my chaos
left printed in the white,
false summits disregarded.

As I stump down off the hill the snow
drifts after me, erasing
my working. I walk away empty –

begin again today, apparently,
but feel somehow foreknown,
like that new-etched scimitar of moon.

I conclude with two further poems of my own. In the next, the glaciated shapes of Scottish mountains set up resonances in the poet's mind with particularly challenging music, itself one of the most profound human responses to the glory of God.

West Highland Sonnet³¹

There is a sort of sadness, always, to these
glaciated landscapes. The hills lie scoured.
Recent ice, slow-dragged across corries
and cols, dumping debris thus devoured
on drab moraines, leaves a scarred sense,
weaves a slow traumatised song
much attacked by dissonance, dense
like late Beethoven, bleak, deaf-sung.

The Black Cuillins are the *Grosse Fuge* of the set –
strange, spiky, insistent to the edge of sanity
as to what must be – structure, at its limit,
shatters, leaving movement the only unity –
the theme, jagged, leaping, which redeems
a scoured sadness driven to extremes.

This last poem I wrote on retreat at Hawthornden Castle, at a stressful and spiritually disillusioned time. Contemplation here becomes prayer. The poem is set in the valley of the River Esk, which runs through the valley below the castle.

Leaning on the Spring³²

Leaning out along a beech-branch
High above a quick-flowing river
I watch the buds mottle and fatten
Towards leaf-point
And spread my weight out
For what seems like the first time in years,
Spread out my weight onto the gathering spring.

For years now hope
Has been quickly followed by disaster
And I have learned to furl it close.

Uncurl it, Lord, this Eastertide –
I know the water's transience
And yet the sunlight makes on it
A standing jigsaw
Bright as filigreed silver.
I know the hurt of many memories
And yet when swimming collies
Shatter the bright pattern of the Esk
My doubting will gladdens,
My knotted heart stretches towards healing.

Unfurl, I pray, my trust again.

Notes

- ¹ Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution, and the Problem of Evil* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008); idem, "Divine Glory in a Darwinian World", *Zygon* 49 (2014):784–807.
- ² Southgate, *Groaning*, Chapter 1.
- ³ Holmes Rolston, III, "Does Nature Need to be Redeemed?", *Zygon* 29 (1994):205–29 [at 213].
- ⁴ Diogenes Allen, *Temptation* (Princeton, N.J.: Caroline Press, 1986), 49.
- ⁵ "God's Grandeur", in *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins: Selected and Edited by W. H. Gardner* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953), 27.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.
- ⁷ For an introduction to Hopkins' terminology of 'inscape' and 'instress' see Southgate, *Groaning*, Chapter 6.

- ⁸ Available at www.thepoetryexchange.co.uk/uncategorized/snow-by-louis-macneice-2/
- ⁹ “University Staff Club”, in *The Poems of Norman MacCaig* (ed. Ewen McCaig; Edinburgh: Polygon, 2005), 316.
- ¹⁰ Hopkins, *Poems and Prose*, 65.
- ¹¹ M. Wynn Thomas, *R. S. Thomas: Serial Obsessive* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), 32.
- ¹² R. S. Thomas, *Autobiographies* (trans. J. Walford Davies; London: Orion Books, 1998), 95f.
- ¹³ Christopher Morgan, *R. S. Thomas: Identity, Environment, and Deity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 72.
- ¹⁴ R. S. Thomas, *Collected Poems 1945–1990* (London: Dent, 1993), 286.
- ¹⁵ Morgan, *R. S. Thomas*, 73.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 154–69.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 172.
- ¹⁸ See Southgate, “Divine Glory”.
- ¹⁹ Michael Ramsey, *The Resurrection of Christ: A Study of the Event and its Meaning for the Christian Faith* (London: Collins, 1961), 33.
- ²⁰ See David G. Horrell, Cheryl Hunt and Christopher Southgate, *Greening Paul: Re-reading the Apostle in the Light of Ecological Crisis* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2010).
- ²¹ Southgate, *Groaning*, Chapter 5, and references therein.
- ²² Hopkins, *Poems and Prose*, 120.
- ²³ Thomas Gardner, *John in the Company of Poets: The Gospel in Literary Imagination* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2014), 119.
- ²⁴ Hopkins, *Poems and Prose*, 122.
- ²⁵ For an accessible account of Peircean semiotics and their relation to theology see Andrew Robinson, *Traces of the Trinity: Signs, Sacraments and Sharing God’s Life* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2014).
- ²⁶ Quoted in Celia Deane-Drummond, *Wonder and Wisdom: Conversations in Science, Spirituality and Theology* (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 2006), 57. Cf. von Balthasar: ‘a

natural form – a flower for instance – can be seen for what it is only when it is perceived and “received” as the appearance of a certain depth of life’. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, vol. 1, Seeing the Form* (trans. E. Leivà-Merikakis; ed. J. Riches; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), 153. The gift of seeing form is itself a working of the grace of God: ‘If the spirit is to see and understand the facts as indicators of revelation, then it must receive as well the faculty to see what the signs are intended to express’ (175); the light of grace ‘bestows vision and makes the eye proportionate to what is being shown’ (176).

²⁷ Deane-Drummond, *Wonder and Wisdom*, 57.

²⁸ von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord, vol. 1*, 140.

²⁹ William Wordsworth, “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey”, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/45527

³⁰ Christopher Southgate, *Beyond the Bitter Wind: Poems 1982–2000* (Nottingham: Shoestring Press, 2000), 3.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

³² *Ibid.*, 101.