

4. Gerard Manley Hopkins, “That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection”

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889) is best remembered for his celebration of nature’s beauties in poems such as “Pied Beauty,” “God’s Grandeur,” and “The Windover.” Yet less than a year before his death, Hopkins drew on Heraclitean ideas to express a darker view of nature:

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.¹

Notes: “Cloud-puffball...pillows”: clouds in various shapes; “chevy”: chase, run; “roysterers”: merry-makers; “roughcast”: a substance used to coat walls; “Shivelights and shadowtackle”: splinters of light and rope-like shadows; “rut peel parches”: the top layer of mud dries out; “Squadroned masks and manmarks”: different patterns of human footprints; “treadmire”: walk in

¹ From Phillips 1986, 180-1; hereafter cited as “That Nature.” Mariani 2008, 394 dates the creation of the poem to July 26, 1888.

mud; “Footfretted”: marked off by footprints; “manmarks”: traces of human activity; “firedint”: dent or mark left by fire; “mark on mind”: impression left in human memory; “Manshape... a star”: an individual’s distinctive achievements; “clarion”: trumpet call; “foundering deck”: a sinking ship; “Flesh fade”: human life passes away; “the residuary worm”: forces of dissolution; “Jack”: an ordinary individual; “potsherd”: piece of broken clay; “matchwood”: kindling.²

Hopkins’ use of the adjective “Heraclitean” in his title gives rise to three questions: (1) At what points do Heraclitean ideas or images figure in “That Nature”? (2) What would count as a distinctly “Heraclitean” fire and how might it relate to “the comfort of the Resurrection”? and (3) Does “That Nature” express a genuinely Heraclitean doctrine or did Hopkins draw on these materials to fashion a point of view all his own?

As a student and later a professor of classical languages, Hopkins was familiar with the Greek texts published in the (then) standard edition of the teachings of the Presocratic philosophers, H. Ritter and L. Preller, *Historia Philosophiae Graecae*.³ It is clear from comments in his notebooks and letters to friends⁴ that Hopkins was familiar with the teachings of the Presocratic thinkers Xenophanes, Heraclitus, and Parmenides. In 1866, while still an undergraduate at Oxford, Hopkins converted to Roman Catholicism. In 1868 he entered into the priesthood (joining the Society of Jesus) and taught at Catholic secondary schools and universities for the remaining two decades of his life. Both the philosophical and religious strands in Hopkins’ life figure in this extended reflection on coming to be and passing away.

² These glosses are taken largely from Phillips 1986, Walliser 1977, and Mariani 2008.

³ Gotha: Perthes, 1838; second edition—the one Hopkins knew—1857, with ten subsequent editions; hereafter cited as RP. Hopkins’ classical education and its importance for his poetry are discussed in Arkins 1996/1997, 458-72 and West 2006/2007, 21-32.

⁴ Higgins 2006, 204-11, 235-55, and 308-22.

“That Nature” begins from a view of nature and human existence marked by dissolution and decay, and concludes with an affirmation of the Christian promise of eternal life. The exclamation “Enough!” in line 16 marks the transition from the first, joyless perspective to the second, triumphant one. The most relevant text here comes not from Heraclitus but from *First Corinthians* 15: 22:

In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

Heraclitean images and ideas, however, appear throughout the poem.⁵

Lines 1 through 9 depict a natural realm marked by movement, conflict, and dissolution: clouds in various shapes gather, separate, and march about the sky while light and shadows crisscross and impale (“lance”) one another. The wind takes up where the sunlight leaves off, “delightfully” flattening out ruts and gullies caused by earlier rains. Mankind makes its first appearance as a maker of indentations equally subject to obliteration. Nature, characterized as a “Million-fuelèd...bonfire” (9) and “world’s wildfire” (20) roars on. The obvious connection here is to Heraclitus’ B 30:

This world order, <the same for all, > no god or man made, but it always was, is, and will be, an ever living fire, kindled in measures and extinguished in measures. (RP, 21)

Students of Hopkins’ poetry⁶ have routinely glossed these references to “nature’s bonfire” and “world’s wildfire” as an affirmation of the doctrine of flux or universal change attributed to

⁵ As Walliser 1977 and others have noted, it is difficult to detect references to the teachings of any other Presocratic philosophers. In general, ancient Greek cosmologies posited cycles of birth, death, and re-birth, rather than the linear descent to oblivion depicted in “That Nature.” W. Foltz 1980, 23-34 claims that Hopkins’ choice of diamond, the most durable form of carbon, was intended to evoke Parmenides’ view of “what-is” (*to eon*) as eternal, indivisible, un-moving, and fully developed, thereby endorsing a combined Christian-Parmenidean metaphysics. But, unlike *to eon*, diamonds are not eternal, indivisible, un-moving, or completely realized at every moment. Nor is it clear why Hopkins would have wanted to blend the Christian message of salvation with Parmenides’ metaphysics.

Heraclitus first by Plato (*Cratylus* 402a, RP 19)⁷ and subsequently by many others. Yet neither the simile of an ever-changing river nor the doctrine of flux figures in Hopkins' story here.

Rather, like Heraclitus, Hopkins conceives of nature as a realm in which forms of the four basic elements— fire (bonfire, spark, star, wildfire, beacon, beam), air (clouds, “air-Built thoroughfare”, wind), earth (mire, ooze, dust, ash), and water (pool, tempests)—contend against and annihilate one another. As Heraclitus sums it up (B 8, RP 21):

All things come about through strife.

We learn some of the details in B 76 (RP 22):

Fire lives the death of earth and air lives the death of fire; water lives the death of air, earth that of water. Fire's death is birth for air, and air's death is birth for water.

Similarly B 126 (RP 23) describes how natural bodies acquire and then lose opposing qualities over time:

Cold things become warm, a warm thing becomes cold; a moist thing becomes dry, a parched thing becomes moist.

We learn also from B 31 (RP 22) and B 90 (RP 21) that fire takes on different substantial forms at different times, presumably in accordance with the governing principle or ratio—the

Heraclitean *logos* or “account”:

The turnings of fire: first sea, and of sea half is earth and half lightning storm...sea is poured forth <from earth> and is measured according to the same ratio (*logos*) as existed before it became earth. (B 31)

All things are an equal exchange for fire, and fire for all things, just as goods are for gold and gold for goods. (B 90)

⁶ See M. Johnson 1972, 237; Walliser 1977, 92-97, 104-105, and 121; Phillips 1986, 385; Cotter 1986, 265; Salmon 1990, 31-2; Arkins 1996/1997, 472; Cervo 1998, 135; and Moulin 2000; among others.

⁷ See the discussion in the first chapter. Hopkins was, however, familiar with the flux interpretation of Heraclitus and, at least at some point in his life, subscribed to it (see Higgins 2006, 206).

Thus, the reality denoted by the phrase “Heraclitean fire” is not that of universal change, but rather the way in which natural substances and qualities consume and are consumed by fire in accordance with fixed measures. So far, at least, Hopkins and Heraclitus share similar points of view. But while “That Nature” depicts a realm of entities headed down toward annihilation (compare the sequence “down,” “down,” “quench,” “gone,” “drowned,” and “death”)⁸, Heraclitean nature sustains itself through a reciprocal exchange among its component elements. It is a cosmos or “elegant arrangement” that “was, is, and will be”—not an irreversible decline.⁹ For Heraclitus, but not for Hopkins, “the way down and the way up are one and the same” (B 60, RP 21-22).¹⁰

At line 10 “man” (humankind) appears as the “bonniest” of nature’s creatures¹¹, yet the products of his intelligence disappear from view like footprints made in mud.¹² Like boisterous clouds on parade, we human beings present a passing show, we “strut and fret our hour upon the stage”, and then are no more. Human intelligence is identified as a kind of fire (“his firedint”) much as Heraclitus states in B 118 (RP 26) “a flash of light is a dry soul, wisest and best.” The reference to a star in line 14 echoes reports in Plutarch and other ancient writers (RP 25) that Heraclitus linked individual souls with the fire in the heavens. But here too Hopkins goes only

⁸ In this respect “That Nature” traces out the same scenario envisaged in “Spelt from Sibyl’s Leaves” (1886): “Our evening is over us, our night | whelms, whelms, and will end us.”

⁹ Hopkins may have known of the interpretation of this fragment, developed by the Stoics and others (and presented in RP 29-30), according to which the cosmos undergoes total destruction in fire (*ekpyrosis*). In any case, however, the “turnings” of fire are cyclical.

¹⁰ A. Czerniawski 2003, 40-41 observes that the degree of continuity implied in “kindling in measures and dying out in measures” sits uneasily with Hopkins’s vision of nature headed toward destruction.

¹¹ There is no reason to regard this as an ironic characterization. Hopkins elsewhere speaks of man as God’s finest creation (see McNamee 1979, 235-36).

¹² According to Walliser (1977, 97), “Hopkins treats nature and man separately in the poem. This would have been inconceivable for Heraclitus or any other Presocratic philosopher because for them man is an integral part of nature.” But while Hopkins depicts nature before turning to humankind, it is clear that both humankind and nature are mired in conflict and dissolution.

part way with Heraclitus. In “That Nature” individual achievement is inevitably blotted out by the vastness of the universe and the passage of time: “nor mark/ Is any of him at all so stark/ But vastness blurs and time | beats level.” By contrast, according to Heraclitus B 63 (RP 28), some individuals “arise to become wakeful guardians of living men and corpses.”¹³

The doubly chiasmic structure of B 62 (RP 28) points toward the larger reality:

athanatoi thnêtoi thnêtoi athanatoi zôntes ton ekeinôn thanaton ton de ekeinôn bion tethneôtes
Immortals mortals: mortals immortals: living their death and dying their life.

Mortals and immortals, i.e. human beings and gods, depend upon and live in alternation with one another. They “live each other’s deaths and die each other’s lives” in the same way in which the elements feed off each other, i.e. some gods become human beings while at least some human beings achieve divine status. As B 88 (RP 28) states:

And as one and the same thing, there is present [in us] living and dead, waking and sleeping, young and old. For these having changed round are those and those having changed round are these.

Similarly, according to Aëtius (a 2nd-century compiler of earlier views):

Heraclitus said that the soul is indestructible. For when it departs [the body] and goes back to the soul of the universe, it returns to that to which it is identical in kind. (A 17)

For Heraclitus, then, the soul has both its origin and its ultimate destination in the heavens, although this story may apply primarily to those who can in some manner keep their souls

“dry.”¹⁴ Hopkins adopts one aspect of Heraclitus’ way of thinking—his view of human intelligence as a kind of fire—but embeds it within the framework of a darker vision. In

Hopkins’ somber view, “man’s firedint, his mark on mind” is “in an enormous dark drowned.”

¹³ Hippolytus (in *Refutation of All Heresies* IX, 10.6) quotes the remark to establish that Heraclitus shared the Christian belief in bodily resurrection, although it is not clear why being “a wakeful guardian” would require having a body.

¹⁴ B 24 and 25 speak of those who die in battle as having “better destinies.” But in light of common ancient belief that “like knows like”, Heraclitus probably associated wisdom with aligning one’s soul with the fiery (and drying) power that rules the cosmos.

In the poem's three last lines we arrive at "the comfort of the Resurrection" through the identification of the ordinary individual ("Jack") with "what Christ is...immortal diamond."¹⁵ Although the mention of "a trumpet crash" and "all at once" call to mind the end time at which the bodies of the faithful will be raised, the focus here is on the promise of eternal life made to mankind through the death and resurrection of Christ.¹⁶ The gospel is the "beacon, an eternal beam" that shines out even when the world's bonfire has reduced nature and humankind to ash. Human nature is depicted as a composite of natural substances, but the sequence "poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond" is probably best understood (following Walliser 1977, 119) as a progression from "things that are not whole and no longer in their original condition" to a reality that is both whole and permanent.

In "That Nature" Hopkins made extensive use of Heraclitean materials to fashion a somber vision of nature, only to reject that vision in favor of the Christian promise of eternal life.¹⁷ In the process he converted Heraclitus' conception of nature as a self-sustaining system into a bleak depiction of a one-way descent to oblivion. He also set Heraclitus' positive characterization of human intelligence as a kind of fire within a far more pessimistic context. In an oft-quoted letter¹⁸ to his friend and fellow poet Robert Bridges, Hopkins stated that his use of Greek philosophical materials had led him to a distinctly non-Greek conclusion:

...and lately I sent you a sonnet, on the Heraclitean fire, in which a great deal of early

¹⁵ Cf. Hopkins' "Heaven Haven" ('Rest') and "He hath abolished the old drouth'" (both 1864).

¹⁶ Cf. *First Peter* 1:3: "According to His great mercy, He has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (cf. *Second Corinthians* 5:17-21).

¹⁷ In the light of what he regarded as analogies between aspects of Heraclitus' teachings and elements of "That Nature," M. Johnson 1972, 241 states that Hopkins sought to achieve "a fusion of Heraclitean philosophy and Christian theology." More plausibly, T. Steele 1997, 34: "Where nature has only a bonfire, a bone-fire to offer us, the supernatural and miraculous dimension of Christianity assures us that our resurrected life will recapitulate and eternally perpetuate all our earthly reality."

¹⁸ Abbott 1955, 291.

Greek philosophical thought was distilled; but the liquor of the distillation did not taste very Greek did it?

In the next, less often quoted sentence Hopkins confirms that he was prepared to make creative use of the materials he had inherited from earlier thinkers: “The effect of studying masterpieces is to make me admire and do otherwise.”