

## Poetry and Revelation: Hopkins, Counter-Experience and *Reductio* \*

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**Abstract:** What is “religious poetry”? A brief study of three major critics - Samuel Johnson, T. S. Eliot and Harold Bloom -- reveals the guiding assumptions behind the notion. These assumptions are then brought under scrutiny. A close reading of G. M. Hopkins’ poem “God’s Grandeur” reveals another way of considering religious poetry.

WE ARE DRIVEN TO USE THE EXPRESSION “RELIGIOUS POETRY” and even “Christian poetry”, though usually with reservations and regrets. For they come with a concession, now more or less traditional, that this is a minor poetry at best. Strangely enough, the verse that mostly invites the qualification “religious” is written after the middle ages: the adjective bespeaks intense modernisation. We remember Bishop Sprat’s address to Abraham Cowley, “You first the Muses to the Christians brought”, and are more surprised by the claim than his audience would have been, and not only because we do not read Cowley, let alone relish his prosody.<sup>1</sup> Exceptions in English to the judgement that religious poetry is minor occur only rarely. If Milton’s “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity” is a case in point, Spenser’s “An Hymne of Heavenly Love” probably is not. *Paradise Lost* also excuses itself from the general rule, yet even here people are more at ease in talking of religion in the epic rather than it being religious poetry. In terms of the blank verse tradition, it is in Milton’s impress on later poets such as Samuel Catherall and Elizabeth Rowe that we find clearer examples of “religious poetry”, and we tend not to be overjoyed when we discover

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1. Thomas Sprat, “Upon the Poems of the English Ovid, Anacreon, Pindar, and Virgil, Abraham Cowley, In Imitation of his own Pindarick Odes”, *The Works of the English Poets from Chaucer to Cowper*, ed. Alexander Chalmers, 21 vols (London: C. Wittingham, 1810) IX. Sprat’s lines read, “You first the Muses to the Christians brought, / And you then first the holy language taught: / In you good poetry and divinity meet, / You are the first bird of Paradise with feet.”

them. Of course, Blake's lyrics are exceptions as are, in quite another way, his prophetic books. Yet to say that Blake is exceptional is only to say that Blake is Blake.

Closer to our own times, *Four Quartets* presents another exception, yet the chances are that the category of religious poetry will not be the only one brought into play when discussing the poem.<sup>2</sup> If it is introduced, it will be treated with care, not least of all because Eliot agreed "up to a point" with those who taught that religious poetry tends to be minor poetry.<sup>3</sup> Whether that stricture applies to *Ash Wednesday* or whether that poem's taut energy makes us doubt the conclusions of Eliot's essay would be a question worth considering. Eliot did not relegate *Ash Wednesday* to the section of his *Collected Poems* called "Minor Poems", but perhaps he was thinking only in the context of his own work. Certainly the Eliot of "What is Minor Poetry?" is of little help to us, since he only circles around the word "minor".<sup>4</sup> What makes George Herbert for Eliot a minor poet in "Religion and Literature" (1935) and then a major poet in "What is Minor Poetry?" (1944) is never satisfactorily explained.<sup>5</sup> We leave Eliot's criticism unconvinced that the word "minor" can be used descriptively but not evaluatively. Let us

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2. It has been argued that *Four Quartets* transcends Christianity. See the discussion of this case by Kristian Smidt, *Poetry and Belief in the Work of T. S. Eliot* (New York: The Humanities Press, 1961) 213-14.

3. T. S. Eliot, "Religion and Literature", *Selected Essays*, 3rd edn. (London: Faber and Faber, 1951) 390.

4. See Eliot, "What is Minor Poetry?", *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957). Also see Christopher Ricks, "Notes away from the Definition of Minor Poetry", *Ploughshares* 4: 3 (1978) 115-21. The sense of "minor" proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari falls into another camp entirely, and might well be appropriate for the study of contemporary religious poetry. See their *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan, foreword Réda Bensmaïa (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) ch. 3. In general, it is hard to rehabilitate the judgement that literature is minor without making reference to the hierarchy of genres or another hierarchy that might be taken to have replaced it.

5. See Eliot, "Religion and Literature", 391, and "What is Minor Poetry?", 45-46. Is it that Eliot found that Herbert showed an awareness of more human passions than he first thought when reading *The Temple*? Or that he came to believe that Herbert was more sincere in his poetry than he surmised? Or is it that, over time, he found Herbert's poems to treat the whole of life from a religious angle, and to do so without prejudice? In any case, Eliot's claim – "Christian poetry...has been limited in England almost exclusively to minor poetry" ("Religion and Literature", 391) – remains perplexing so long as we do not identify the modernity motivating the expression "Christian poetry". Are we to think that *Piers Plowman* is either unchristian or minor? Neither seems possible. Eliot maintained his view in *George Herbert* (London: Longman Green, 1962). Eliot observed, the year before "Religion and Literature" appeared, "Why, I would ask, is most religious verse so bad; and why does so little religious verse reach the highest levels of poetry? Largely, I think, because of a pious insincerity.... People who write devotional verse are usually writing as they want to feel, rather than as they do feel", *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934) 28-29. Note the slide from "religious verse" to "devotional verse".

therefore consider another perspective. There are ways of reversing the general judgement that religious verse is minor. For example, you can argue, as bards sometimes do, that all poetry is, in one way or another, religious. Or you can agree with Erich Auerbach that the gospels changed the nature of representation in the West and that all literature composed since patristic times is Christian in an important sense.<sup>6</sup>

Auerbach's conclusion might give you pause. You do not have to subscribe to everything that Kierkegaard said about Christianity and Christendom in order to feel the force of the distinction between the two.<sup>7</sup> And, in deciding not to be worried by or for the adjective "Christian" because it shelters in the noun "literature", you have to be all the more careful in deploying the adjective "religious". For now the word takes on a confessional resonance it might not have in other contexts. If all western poetry is Christian, at least culturally, only some of it – very little, perhaps – will be religious. Poets such as William Cowper and Christopher Smart come to mind, but so does the John Keble of *The Christian Year* (1827). Almost certainly the adjective "religious" will be accused once again of not qualifying "poetry" as much as limiting it. Why a poetry that is written *coram deo* is regarded as necessarily narrower than a poetry written *coram hominibus* is scarcely self-evident, and it is worthwhile to examine the assumptions that have led us to think that it is.

Like many other people, when I find myself using the expression "religious poetry" I hear Samuel Johnson ringing warning bells in my ears. He says in his "Life of Waller" (1799), "Contemplative piety, or the intercourse between God and the human soul, cannot be poetical. Man admitted to implore the mercy of his Creator, and plead the merits of his Redeemer, is already in a higher state than poetry can confer."<sup>8</sup> His reasons are solid ones:

The essence of poetry is invention; such invention as, by producing something unexpected, surprises and delights. The topics of devotion are few, and being few are universally known; but few as they are, they can be made no more; they can receive no grace from novelty of sentiment, and very little from novelty of expression.<sup>9</sup>

6. See Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953) ch. 2.

7. See Søren Kierkegaard, *Attack Upon "Christendom"*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1944).

8. Samuel Johnson, "Waller", *Lives of the English Poets*, 3 vols, ed. George Birkbeck Hill (1905; rpt. New York: Octagon Books, 1967) I, 291. Johnson excludes the tradition of didactic Christian verse that, we can see if we look past the *Lives of the Poets*, began with St Gregory Nazianzus's *poemata dogmatica* and that found contemporary expression in Richard Blackmore's "Creation".

9. Johnson, *Lives of the English Poets*, I, 291-92.

Another critic who offers counsel when I talk of “religious poetry” is Harold Bloom who is in some respects Johnson’s heir in our times, although, to be sure, his project is very much his own. In his Charles Eliot Norton lectures for 1987-88, he offers us a choice, “If you wish, you can insist that all high literature is secular, or, should you desire it so, then all strong poetry is sacred. What I find incoherent is the judgement that some authentic literary art is more sacred or more secular than some other.”<sup>10</sup> His conclusion is an unnerving one: “Poetry and belief, as I understand them, are antithetical modes of knowledge, but they share the peculiarity of taking place *between* truth and meaning, while being somewhat alienated both from truth and meaning.”<sup>11</sup>

Before going any further, it is evident that talk of religious poetry is bedeviled by three adjectives that are used rather loosely. Eliot is not the only critic to slide from “religious poetry” to “Christian poetry” to “devotional verse”. Johnson writes with more care, yet his strictures on “contemplative piety” are commonly folded into the more general topic of “religious verse”.<sup>12</sup> For my part, I will attend solely to Christian poetry, devotional or not, and will offer my reasons for adopting another vocabulary, but not before I return to Johnson. At first, it seems easy enough to launch a counter-attack against him. You can point out that he is chiefly concerned with devotional poetry, lyrics addressing the deity, which is only a part of religious poetry. And you can argue that his insistence on the inappropriateness of poetry as a vehicle of prayer presumes too sharp a dividing line between secular and sacred writing. That the psalms are both prayers and poems was apparent before Robert Lowth satisfactorily explained their meter in his *De Sacra Poesi Hebraeorum* (1753; trans. 1787).<sup>13</sup> Johnson bypasses Lowth’s description of Job as dramatic poetry, Jeremiah as elegiac poetry, and the Song of Songs as lyric poetry; and, resisting a powerful movement of his times, he denies that the sublime can subsume the religious: prayer puts you in a “higher state” than poetry ever can.<sup>14</sup> To see Scripture in terms of the

10. Harold Bloom, *Ruin the Sacred Truths: Poetry and Belief from the Bible to the Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989) 4.

11. Bloom, *Ruin the Sacred Truths*, 12.

12. See for example David R. Anderson, “Johnson and the Problem of Religious Verse”, *The Age of Johnson* 4 (1991) 41-57.

13. See for instance John Tutchin’s comment that “Part of the Sacred Writings were delivered in verse” in the preface to his *Poems on Several Occasions with a Pastoral* (London: Printed by J. L. for Jonathan Greenwood, 1685). Richard Blackmore made the same point in the introduction to his *A Paraphrase on the Book of Job* (1700) and Edward Young showed himself to be in agreement in his *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759).

14. Johnson’s views on devotional poetry were criticized shortly after the appearance of the life of Waller. See Daniel Turner, *Devotional Poetry Vindicated, in Some Occasional Remarks on the Late Dr Samuel Johnson’s Animadversions upon that Subject in his Life of Waller* (1785).

categories of secular literature is to devalue it, he would think, while to write sacred poetry is either to overestimate what poetry can do or to underestimate the need for originality.

Johnson's emphasis on imploring and pleading suggests that prayer is understood as petition, and not in the more general sense of speaking to God (as St Gregory of Nyssa taught) or raising the mind to God (as St John of Damascus maintained). Johnson might be thinking of the many devotional poets of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, including some of the best of them: Crashaw, Herrick, Southwell, Traherne and Vaughan. Nowadays even the least religious among us would be reluctant to add Herbert and Donne to that list. Fine poems such as "Sin's Round" and "Batter my heart, three person'd God" seem to be conducted at a pitch of fervour that is entirely appropriate to prayer. Turning to the claim that devotion is incompatible with invention, we must concede Johnson's theological point at the outset: "Omnipotence cannot be exalted; Infinity cannot be amplified; Perfection cannot be improved."<sup>15</sup> The argument might lead some to silent adoration and others to ignore God altogether. That said, the best religious verse is seldom concerned with the deity's ineffable qualities – St Bernard's prayer in the last canto of the *Paradiso* is an exception – and is mostly taken up with a relation with Him, even if it is, strictly speaking, an infinite relation.<sup>16</sup> Each of us stands before God generally and specifically, and as the relation intensifies or slackens so opportunities for poetry present themselves.

You can mount a case against Bloom by contesting his grounding assumption. It is by no means clear that literature and Scripture are subtended by the notion of "authentic literary art" in the same way, especially when a Romantic sense of "literary" is at issue. A Christian will hold the Bible to be sacred on account of it being the living Word of God, a claim that no believer will make of *Paradise Lost*, even if Milton's characters have become essential reference points in his or her imaginative life. When Johnson asserts that devotional poetry is impeded by its inability to invent, he has already accepted a strict distinction between sacred and secular, as well as a robust doctrine of biblical inspiration. This is not incoherent; it is reasonable. Bloom's view makes perfectly good sense to him as a Jewish Gnostic because no text, however sacred it has been deemed by Church or Temple, bears upon his salvation. He looks to gnosis, not faith. As soon as one speaks

15. Johnson, *Lives of the Poets*, I, 292. Also see Johnson's life of Yalden, *Lives of the Poets*, II, 303.

16. For the notion of the "infinite relation" or the "relation without relation", see Maurice Blanchot, "The Relation of the Third Kind (man without horizon)", *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

of revelation, however, the situation changes utterly: a distinction between the natural and the supernatural intrudes and brings with it the duality of secular and sacred. You can also reply to Bloom that it is doubtful that poetry and belief are antithetical modes of *knowledge*. From St Augustine to St Anselm and beyond, we have thought of faith leading to understanding. Only mystical states yield "knowledge" of God, but it is unsayable. Meanwhile, we are used to saying that literature leads us to a deeper understanding of the world. Chaucer, Dante and Shakespeare expand our sense of being human, partly because of their witness to a wide variety of life and partly because they create fresh exemplars of moral action. Poets who do that are very rare. Most do not give us anything resembling knowledge in the usual sense of the word, and perhaps only Bloom himself identifies a strong reading of strong poetry with gnosis.

It is an index of great critics like Johnson, Eliot and Bloom that their remarks have force even if they have been refuted to the best of one's ability. Their words return to haunt us when we feel most secure, and they influence how we shape our thoughts and read the poems that matter most to us. So when I take my bearings from the word "revelation" I know I am indebted to them even if none of them actually uses the word.<sup>17</sup> I choose it over "dogma", "faith", "mysticism", "orthodoxy", "religion", "sacred" and "spiritual" for it enables me to identify those writers for whom poetry is a response to God's voice not to the silence of the sacred, to consider something more elusive than doctrine, and to begin with God rather than human beings. Following Johnson's lead, I exclude from consideration didactic poems, concerned as they are with "the motives to piety" and "the works of God",<sup>18</sup> rather than God or a relationship with Him. Versified paraphrases of Scripture are also of no interest here. I take as my focus the modern Christian lyric and note at the outset that the lyric is the poetic mode most closely associated, rightly or wrongly, with first-hand experience.<sup>19</sup>

One point on which Johnson, Eliot and Bloom firmly agree is that religious poetry cannot draw on the experience appropriate for the writing of major poetry. Revelation has been communicated, if at all, only to others long since dead, they say, and no one can write first-class poetry on the basis of allegiance only. The negative evaluation of religious poetry partly turns on the concept "experience", both in

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17. I exclude, for the purposes of this essay, Blanchot's argument that the true revelation of Judaism is the possibility of dialogue with an infinite Other. I discuss this in *The Dark Gaze: Maurice Blanchot and the Sacred* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) chaps. 6 and 7.

18. Johnson, *Lives of the Poets*, I, 291.

19. See my essay, "The Experience of Poetry", *Box-kite 2* (1998) 285-304.

figuring poetry and in understanding revelation. I wish to identify the assumption more narrowly and then dislodge it or at least weaken it.

II

The assumption about experience cannot be unearthed without also bringing to light other assumptions that surround it and to some extent cling to it. First of all, it is commonly supposed, especially in the Protestant churches, that religious art must negotiate a profound gulf between revelation and aesthetics and that the effort is of dubious value. A poetic conception of religion, which diminishes its truth claims, is a danger on one side, while a religious conception of poetry, which, for the believer, overvalues its revelatory authority, is a constant threat on the other. Milton strides between the two, justifying the ways of God to man, yet not all believers have been at ease with his attempt to hold together pagan form and Christian content. Hans Urs von Balthasar has examined the consequences of the assumption that revelation and aesthetics are separate spheres, pointing out that even in modern Catholicism being and truth have been prized over beauty, despite the acknowledgment by the schoolmen that the three transcendentals are convertible, and that this bias has impoverished the tradition. His argument is that revelation has an irreducible aesthetic dimension, *Gestalt* or form, and that aesthetics has an equally resistant theological strain.<sup>20</sup> In another context I would develop his case while expressing reserve about his readings of the poets, but today I wish to put pressure elsewhere and my allusions to von Balthasar will be muted.

Closely related to the first, the second assumption is that revelation imposes a severe limitation of the poet's imaginative freedom, that there is insufficient room to move if one must at all times respond to *locutio Dei ad homines*. It is at this point that we need to recognise that "revelation" means several things and that this assumption answers to a particular historical understanding of the word. I call on Avery Dulles whose theology of revelation can help us move quickly through difficult terrain. He distinguishes five models of revelation: as doctrine, as history, as inner experience, as dialectical presence, and as new awareness.<sup>21</sup> It is only the first model that is at issue here. It gains power among conservative Evangelicals in the mid-nineteenth century and among Catholic neo-scholastics a little later, two groups that set themselves firmly against Romanticism and that remain intensely

20. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Revelation and the Beautiful", *Explorations in Theology*, 4 vols, I: *The Word Made Flesh*, trans. A. V. Littledale with Alexander Dru (1964; rpt. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989).

21. See Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1983) Part I.

suspicious of its overarching doctrine of the imagination. Without endorsing a high Romantic theory of the creative imagination, it is nonetheless possible to speak of revelation and imagination in terms of the other models of revelation. Neither Dante's *Commedia* nor Herbert's "The Collar" makes one think that the author is writing under unduly tight external constraints, and the very idea would be ridiculous when reading *The Four Zoas*. On the contrary, the awareness made possible by revelation seems to open a wider world to the various poets than they would have otherwise.

The third assumption is that there is something called "religious experience", of which "religious poetry" would be a manifestation. Both expressions come to us from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – the age of experience, if ever there were one.<sup>22</sup> From adherence to the Inner Light to the rise of Evangelicalism, Christianity oriented itself to individual experience, often enough with little or no theological depth. The appeal to experience did not always pass through revelation; it frequently sidestepped the historicity of the faith in the search for a more fundamental dimension that supposedly unified the world religions and that was regarded, from one viewpoint, as a natural revelation and, from another, as a *philosophia perennis*. When reflection on this search occurred it did so in the context of a theological anthropology in which conditions for revelation are granted methodological priority over revelation. Religion becomes a matter of "feeling" (Schleiermacher), "prayer" (Sabatier), "the sacred" (Durkheim), "existential decision" (Bultmann), "ultimate concern" (Tillich), "the holy" (Otto), "faith" (Ebeling) or "transcendental experience" (Rahner). The attempt to ground religion in experience goes by way of locating grounding experiences. Because they are found only in extraordinary attunements, these primal intuitions of the divine are easily reset as regional, as "peak experiences", rather than held to be generally available; and, in consequence, religion becomes restricted to a particular range of activity: charismatic, liturgical, or intensely private.

When these experiences fail to offer access to primal intuitions of the divine, religion is deemed not to work or the work is regarded as best done outside church, at home or in nature. Neo-orthodoxy sought to counter the misplaced emphasis on experience in religion, as did post-liberal theology, while others have pointed to the irreducible diversity of revelations.<sup>23</sup> None of these reactions has had any effect on how religious poetry is conceived. It remains a matter of "experience". For

22. As indices of this "age", see William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) and Wilhelm Dilthey, *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung* (1905).

23. See Max Charlesworth, *Religious Inventions: Four Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) ch. 1.

those who sought encounters with the divine outside church, there is a wealth of nature poetry to call on for help, a good deal of it written by Wordsworth or indebted to him. I think of the bard in his older years, almost echoing Johnson, when he confesses to the Rev R. P. Graves that the truths of Christianity are "a subject too high for him", and that his task has been "to elevate the mind to sacred things".<sup>24</sup>

The poetry that Wordsworth made possible is also Wordsworthian, to the extent that it has any interest in religion, in being cautiously aligned with revealability rather than revelation. Hölderlin had no such caution, and it is to him rather than to Wordsworth that we look when contemplating Heidegger's claim that poets open a space in which a new revelation of the holy might take place.<sup>25</sup> Karl Rahner was less bold but broadly of the same view when he commended that we read poetry in order to be responsive to revelation.<sup>26</sup> Eliot would be in general agreement.<sup>27</sup> It has become common for many of our best poets to confine themselves to elevating the mind to sacred things without actually affirming them. At the end of his oratorio "For the Time Being" (1941-42), W. H. Auden has his narrator outline the modern attitude to revealability:

Once again  
As in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed  
To do more than entertain it as an agreeable  
Possibility....<sup>28</sup>

By and large, the generation of poets after World War Two concurred with Auden's narrator. No one followed the young Robert Lowell in his passionate early religious verse, not even the older Lowell. A. R. Ammons is more characteristic of contemporary poets when, in his beautiful "Hymn", he begins by saying, "I know if I find you I will have to leave the earth."<sup>29</sup> The conditional "if I find you", repeated twice, indicates that the poem is more concerned with the possibility of finding God than with a response to a God who has revealed Himself. In their

24. Christopher Wordsworth, *Memoirs of William Wordsworth*, ed. Henry Reed, 2 vols (Boston: Ticknor, Reed and Fields, 1851) II, 370, 359.

25. See Martin Heidegger, "What are Poets For?", *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Colophon, 1975).

26. See Karl Rahner, "Poetry and the Christian", *Theological Investigations*, vol. IV, trans. Kevin Smyth (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1974) 357-67.

27. See Eliot, "The Social Function of Poetry", *On Poetry and Poets*, 24-25. Also see his reported remarks on the subject, made in 1948, in Smidt, *Poetry and Belief in the Work of T. S. Eliot*, 57.

28. W. H. Auden, "For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio", *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Random House, 1976) 307.

29. A. R. Ammons, "Hymn", *Collected Poems 1951-1971* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972) 39.

own ways, Geoffrey Hill and Charles Wright are also oriented to revealability rather than revelation, Hill being more anguished about it than Wright.<sup>30</sup>

There is another way of looking at this situation. The notion of religious poetry we have inherited in the twentieth century partly derives from a broad sense of religious experience, while doubts over "experience" in the twentieth century call the notion of religious poetry into question. It could be argued that since the First World War we have been faced with a world that limits experience, that prepackages it or consigns it to the non-experience of images, and to which its major thinkers respond by talking of *Entleben* (Heidegger) or the impossibility of *Erfahrung* (Adorno). And it could also be argued that poetry itself has rejected "experience" as bequeathed by the nineteenth century, and from the association of "Erlebnis" and "Dichtung" in particular, in order to value experiment, especially the attempt to see how automatic writing, mechanical devices or voices disconnected from persons can generate experience that no one has actually lived through. Flaubert's *style indirect libre* is one starting point, Eliot's *The Waste Land* is an important station along the way, while OULIPO and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry are contemporary examples of the adventure.

At any rate, before we can talk sensibly of religious poetry we will need to rethink both "religion" and "poetry" with respect to experience. I suspect that the rethinking would end with us putting aside "religious experience" and turning to an expression that is not less fraught but fraught in ways that are worth taking on board. I mean the phrase "experience of God". Part of the sharpness that is gained in this formulation repulses it from us, for we must ask, "Does God offer Himself to experience?" It would seem not: *Finitum non capax infiniti*. Yet if that is strictly true, at the penumbra as well as in the centre of consciousness, many biblical narratives – those of Samuel and Isaiah, for instance – as well as testimonies of the mystics, lose their apparent truth value, and we have to put aside the theology of deification running from St Athanasius to Origen to St Maximus the Confessor and beyond.<sup>31</sup> The old theological tag concerns comprehending God, not encountering divine love, and it may well be that a life spent *coram deo* does not have a single moment of "religious experience". I do not propose to delve more deeply into the issue, since that would call for technical

30. See my essay, "La Poésa e la scala a dio: Reading Charles Wright", *Religion and the Arts*, forthcoming.

31. See St Maximus the Confessor, *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ*, trans. Paul M. Blowers and Robert Louis Wilkin (Crestwood, NJ: St Vladimir's Seminar Press, 2003) 34, 104, 126.

discussions in philosophy and theology, but I will indicate how the question must be reset for it to make sense and I will offer some guidelines for thinking about it with respect to poetry.

To do so I will have to lapse into my native tongue, the language of phenomenology. Let me start then by identifying the fourth assumption. Even when revelation is understood with some sophistication, as a re-veiling as well as a revealing of God, critics have tended to emphasise the phenomenality of the supernatural order – its status as positive fact – and to figure revelation as *veritates e coelo delapsae*.<sup>32</sup> I am not thinking of seventeenth-century poets whose devotions are informed by a *theologia supernaturalis*, which must be taken into account when reading them. My concern is with modern critics who appeal to revelation in order to frame “religious poetry”. Revelation is still widely regarded by critics as supernatural in a naïve sense of the word, as though the supernatural order were a distinct, static region of being that functions for believers who appeal to it as an abstract explanation of reality. In literary criticism, this leads some readers, like Johnson, to regard a religious poem as merely representing received truths.<sup>33</sup> It entices others to sheer away revelation altogether and focus exclusively on the poetry, trusting that it will carry the belief.<sup>34</sup> Still others attend solely to the poem’s language, with the result that paradoxes inherent in the faith itself are interpreted as working solely in the economy of the poem.<sup>35</sup> And it brings others to appeal to metaphor or symbol as a means of bridging the gulf between two worlds.<sup>36</sup> To rethink revelation so that it is immanent, able to be derived from consciousness, as some theological modernists sought to do last century, does not fundamentally change this assumption, render it less one-sided, make it more answerable to the divine mystery, or place us on firmer ground as readers of religious verse. Revelation still functions as an abstract mode of explanation,

32. See, for example, Helen Gardner, *Religion and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971) 134.

33. A. S. P. Woodhouse counters Eliot by arguing that “The poem is not a mere record of an experience; it is the realization of the experience”, *The Poet and his Faith: Religion and Poetry in England from Spenser to Eliot and Auden* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965) 7. His point applies to theologians as much as to critics, as can be seen when Ross A. Shecterle takes “Religious literature” to be “writings that are seen to be ‘codifications’ of ‘divine revelation’”, *The Theology of Revelation of Avery Dulles 1980-1994* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996) 54.

34. See Eliot, “Dante”, *Selected Essays*, 258.

35. See, for example, William Empson’s reading of George Herbert’s “The Sacrifice” in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961) 262-70. Empson’s reading of “The Sacrifice” was contested by Rosemond Tuve in the first part of her *A Reading of George Herbert* (London: Faber and Faber, 1952).

36. See Malcolm Mackenzie Ross, *Poetry and Dogma: The Transfiguration of Eucharistic Symbols in Seventeenth Century English Poetry* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1954) viii.

although one that is now more likely to fall victim to psychologism than superstition. Needless to say, all this is a long way from a strict theological understanding of the supernatural order as that which exceeds *ens creatum*. What is needed is a sense of God as the mystery of the world, a phrase I deliberately take from two distant realms in the modern Christian world: Erich Przywara's *Gottgeheimnis der Welt* (given as lectures in 1924), and Eberhard Jüngel's *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt* (1977).

If we shift our perspective so that we pass from the phenomenality of revelation to its phenomenological concreteness we can begin to rethink religious poetry. Of course, no conversion of the gaze can turn weak religious poems into strong ones. The verse of Giles Fletcher, Christopher Lever and William Strode will remain just as bad as it has always been. However, the change of perspective can discharge or modify an assumption that renders memorable religious poems – lyrics by George Herbert and Gerard Manley Hopkins, say – minor by definition. Another preliminary point needs to be made. To bracket the phenomenality of revelation is not to deny the absolute reality of the supernatural order. Not at all: it is to switch off uncritical understandings of it as an explanation of the world, whether it be revelation as doctrine, history, inner experience, dialectical presence or new awareness, and to pass from fact to meaning. Phenomenology has taught us to suspend the “natural attitude”, our habitual reliance on common sense to determine the being and mode of phenomena. It should also teach us to abstain from what I call the “supernatural attitude”, the believer’s uncritical use of revelation as a thesis about the nature of reality. Pious or impious, the poet writes “without authority” in Kierkegaard’s sense of the expression.<sup>37</sup>

I will organise my thoughts around a poem that is very well known indeed, “God’s Grandeur”, written by Gerard Manley Hopkins in 1877. I choose it because it appears to be a poem of awe, one of the standard “topicks of devotion” that Johnson suggests cannot be poetical, because it seems to be a test case for judging whether poetry and belief are indeed antithetical, as Bloom would have it, and because it has the air of being somewhat programmatic. We are to talk about a poem that declares that it is a “religious poem”, that insists on its verticality even while it looks about the world. Before going any further, though, here is the poem:

The world is charged with the grándeur of God.

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37. See Kierkegaard, “The Difference between a Genius and an Apostle”, *Without Authority*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, *Kierkegaard’s Writings*, vol. XVIII (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) 93-108.

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 reck his rod?  
 Générations 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.

Ánd for all this, náture 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 óver the bent  
 World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

## III

The first thing to be said about this sonnet is that it does not attempt to write or rewrite any revealed truths. Doctrine, as Hopkins the Jesuit understands it, is a series of “sufficient propositions” (Suárez) about the world that are binding upon the believer. He is hardly less strict in his sermons.<sup>38</sup> Yet this poem does not adopt a thetic approach to God: it is not concerned with His greatness, *magnitudo*, about which one can frame theological theses, and it sidesteps even talk of glory, *kabod*, in order to evoke God's grandeur, a word deriving from the French that introduces a strangeness into the poem from the very beginning, that points us to the sublime, and that bespeaks a relationship of lordship between the divine and the human. At the risk of stating the obvious, the poem is not concerned with what Johnson calls “the grandeur of nature”<sup>39</sup> (but with the grandeur of God. It takes its cue from Psalm 71: 19, “And blessed be the name of his majesty for ever: and the whole earth shall be filled with his majesty” (Douay-Rheims), which it emphasises in an Ignatian manner. Nor does it seek to place God in an abstract relation with the world, as happens when one calls the deity *causa sui*, ground of being, or being of being, in order to explain why there is something and not nothing. Only in the lyric's closing two lines is an explanation of anything seemingly offered, but it explains little in the manner of scholastic logic, as we shall see.

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38. In one of his Bedford Leigh Sermons, Hopkins observes that faith is “to believe without doubting all that God reveals, hear him whenever he speaks to you. But is it not enough to be ready to believe anything God may reveal, who will not do that? we do not have faith unless we believe that he has spoken and can say what (in some however general way) and believe that.” *The Sermons and Devotional Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Christopher Devlin (London: Oxford University Press, 1959) 28.

39. Johnson, *Lives of the Poets*, I, 191.

That God exists, is triune, created the heavens and the earth, expects the obedience of all men and women, and cares for them and for all creation: all these creedal propositions are suspended, put out of play *as theses*, while offered to us *as acts* (of perception and judgment) that can still disturb the security of our lives. It needs to be stressed at the outset that these acts are made in and through language. Hitherto unnoticed horizons of consciousness are rendered apparent in metaphors and similes, which embody the meaning of those items to which consciousness is intentionally related and, as we know, add further meanings, perhaps not “lived through” by author or reader, that nonetheless orchestrate the very movement of the poem from its first words. The poem does not tell us “The presence of God fills the heart with awe”, nor does it illustrate any revealed truths. It synthesises and singularises diverse regions of experience in sense, not quality (as would happen in a thesis about an object), when responding to what is given as “divine grandeur”. Nor does the poem simply represent an experience. Because it is a poem, working with concentrated and concatenated language, it keeps open the possibility of further unfolding the meanings of what has been offered to consciousness and already rendered significant by it.

The poem begins by declaring something about “the world”. It is “charged with the grandeur of God”, and, since the third and fourth feet of the opening line are reversed iambs, the phrase must read, “charged | wíth the | gránður | of Gód.”<sup>40</sup> Only with the second line and its references to “flame”, “shining” and “foil” do we take the verb to link the divine and electricity. Here the natural and the supernatural are perceived as one, not in order to downplay the transcendence of God but to emphasise God’s invisible power and the danger to which you are exposed when standing before Him (or, for that matter, when avoiding Him). Notice that it is not “the earth” that is charged with divine grandeur, and it is too early in the poem for it to be “nature”. It is “the world”, the planet on which we live, and also the cosmos: the ordered totality of things, as Plato and Aristotle thought, and the sum of created being, as the New Testament teaches – the world as the theatre in which God’s mission is performed with no spectators, only participants. The world is “charged”, full of divine majesty, and also, more darkly, accused on account of our not heeding that power.

It is remarkable that a poem that begins in a sublime context, at once biblical and natural, concludes its introductory image by inviting us to fuse the ancient and the modern: “shook foil” refers to gold foil, perhaps

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40. On this line see *The Sermons and Devotional Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 195.

in an electroscope (invented in 1824), or held in someone's hands.<sup>41</sup> The majesty of God "will flame out" (my emphasis) not only in the Last Judgment but also by dint of the divine nature, which cannot be limited. To evoke the "grandeur of God" by way of sheet and fork lightning is traditional, and to do so by way of electricity would have been sufficiently modern to satisfy and disturb a Victorian reader. Yet the image is not one of grandeur in any usual sense. We are directed not to a city paved with gold but to gold foil that consists of thousands of tiny creases, and the greatness of God is registered in the small as well as the immense. No one image, not even one that holds together the sublime and the beautiful, could possibly evoke divine transcendence, and Hopkins quickly switches to an entirely different register: "It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil / Crushed." The enjambment is violent, not only in its abuse of the line but also in the exclusion of all mention of olives: it is as though the very oil, made by crushing, is itself crushed again to be refined further. From lightning we pass to an olive press, and from the Father to the Son – indeed, to the Son at Gethsemani (Heb *Gat* = press + *semen* = oil), at the base of the Mount of Olives, who is soon to be crushed. It would be fitting to remember St Bernard of Clairvaux's fifteenth homily on the Song of Songs in which he meditates on the name of Jesus as oil that is poured out.<sup>42</sup> Yet Hopkins is closer to St Bonaventure who, in his sixth of the *sermones dominicales*, imagines Christ on the cross as a bunch of grapes in the winepress. The teaching and deeds of Jesus finally "gather to a greatness" in His passion and, indeed, in His Ascension, and the oil indicates not only the Son's kingship but also the sacramental value of His suffering and death. Later, we hear of the Spirit brooding over the planet Earth, and so find another kind of grandeur, one that Simone Weil was to identify, "Mais, il n'y a, à mes yeux, de grandeur que dans la douceur."<sup>43</sup>

I pause to underline that to speak of the deity, for Hopkins in this poem, is not to appeal to an abstract explanation of reality; it is to evoke the dread of being placed in the hands of the living God (Heb 10: 31).<sup>44</sup>

41. In his letter to Robert Bridges of 4 January 1883 Hopkins notes, "I mean foil in its sense of leaf or tinsel, and no other word whatever will give the effect I want. Shaken goldfoil gives off broad glares like sheet lightning and also, and this is true of nothing else, owing to its zigzag dints and creasings and network of small many cornered facets, a sort of fork lightning too." Claude Colleer Abbott (ed.), *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1955) 169.

42. See St Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs*, trans. Kilian Walsh, intro. M. Corneille Halfants (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, Inc., 1971) 4 vols, I, sermon 15. St Bernard returns to the theme in later sermons, especially sermon 16.

43. Quoted by Maurice Blanchot, *L'Écriture du désastre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980) 16.

44. In later poems, such as "I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day" (1885?), experience refers to an exposure to God's distance, not His presence.

It is because revelation is not merely abstract doctrine or simply exterior to life but is registered as meaningful in experience that Hopkins can ask, with urgent concern, "Why do men then *now* not reck his rod?" (my emphasis). The question asks why people do not acknowledge divine authority (and the possibility of retribution) now, and we can hear there the isolation of a Catholic convert in the Victorian era. Yet since it is posed immediately after the allusion to Gethsemani it is not unreasonable to let "rod" make us think of "rood", which is just the kind of etymological association that Hopkins likes to make. Also, it is hardly stretching the sense of the poem to suggest that the cross is the lightning rod that conducts the terrible anger of the Father. In Hopkins' day, the crosses on church steeples were still the most common conductors of lightning.<sup>45</sup> The christological controversies of the fourth century, as well as Tridentine notions of atonement, are, as I have said, suspended as creedal formulations and doctrines. Yet Hopkins' rapport with the Father is embedded in a horizon established by the relations of the Father and the Son, and which can be summarised in the dark phrase "penal substitution".

## IV

That Hopkins is awestruck when confronted by the divine is plain, and that he responds in Trinitarian terms, is also evident to believers before we reach the sonnet's closing lines: the Holy Spirit is present through the gift of speaking in faith and with wisdom. We might say that we are given "an experience" – the observation of a tremendous storm, say – yet that remark remains banal. The poem is a site where many intuitions, not all of them sensible, are gathered, each of them being an *intus legere*, a reading inside things, a discernment of original form and pattern not apparent before our gaze is converted from a concern with the positive and superficial.<sup>46</sup> The "in" of "inscape" does not indicate an immanence that has abolished all transcendence; it suggests that immanence is the way given to discern the meaning of transcendence. "God's Grandeur" reads revelation from deep inside the things of the world. It regards revelation not as a comet that has flicked the world but more as a wave that has finally broken and soaked deeply into things.

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45. The Vatican dropped its opposition to the use of lightning rods in 1769. Before then it had been thought that such things impeded divine intervention in the world.

46. On *intus legere* as the origin of *intellegere*, see St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II. ii. q. 8. Edith Stein proposes that Husserl's "intuition" and Aquinas's "*intus legere*" are the same. See her "Husserl and Aquinas: A Comparison", *Knowledge and Faith*, trans. Walter Redmond, *The Collected Works of Edith Stein*, VIII (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2000) 45.

When we examine it with care, we see that the sonnet is not so much about “an experience” as “experience itself”. It is an exposure to a peril from which Hopkins has emerged, doubtless shaken or wounded, so that he can bear witness to it.<sup>47</sup> “God’s Grandeur” is not a poem of *Erlebnis*, lived experience, along the lines that Dilthey drew in *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung* (1905), in which an event is encompassed, internalised and processed as knowledge. The fecundity and variety of the metaphors suggest that not everything presented in the poem can be lived through and rendered meaningful in the one movement or even in several movements. It is a work of *Erfahrung*, a passage that never quite reaches an end, partly because the experiencing “I” impinges on a “me” that in turn changes the “I”, and partly because there is always more meaning to be found in the consideration of multiple interactions: trope and trope, idiom and trope, form and idiom, structure and theme, and so on.

We read a little better, I think, if we say that “God’s Grandeur” bespeaks what Eberhard Jüngel calls “*eine Erfahrung mit der Erfahrung*”, an experience with experience, an event that is used to judge other events, and that calls for a re-evaluation of one’s past and future.<sup>48</sup> Experience, here, is not a cipher for revealability; it is a sign of revelation as interruption. What has been “experience” in the past can no longer be counted as such, and from now on we will measure future events against what has been revealed to us. Jüngel’s formula points us in the right direction in interpreting Hopkins’ poem and also in thinking about religious poetry. A religious poem is not one that is restricted in advance to a narrow range of experience, and second-hand experience at that. It is an exposure to the otherness of God, which characterises experience at its most radical, which might be marked in a structural fashion but will involve making that mark legible as a theme. One aspect of that otherness is that God impinges on us in contrary ways at the same time: His grandeur is given in Trinitarian terms as lightning, oil and wings. And an aspect of the radical nature of the encounter is that we may well find ourselves talking of an experience of non-experience. How can this be?

The opening stanza of “God’s Grandeur” is as good an instance as any of what Jean-Luc Marion, in a remarkable rethinking of Husserl’s “principle of principles”, calls a saturated phenomenon, that is, a phenomenon in which the concept is exceeded by intuitions, whether

47. On the phenomenological sense of “experience”, see Claude Romano, *L’Événement et le monde* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998) III, A.

48. Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism*, trans. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1983) 32.

sensible or not. Here, the phenomenon that gives itself, the holiness and lordship of God, cannot be fulfilled by a concept. The image of a storm is joined by another metaphor, the slow gathering of oil from an olive press, and together they suggest a wide range of intuitions: a sudden, infrequent discharge of energy that has been building invisibly, and a gradual collection of a nourishing and healing oil. At no time does God appear as an object, not even when the Spirit is figured as "bright wings". And here I have an opportunity to modify what I have been saying about experience. God cannot be experienced in anything like the strict sense of the word because He does not offer Himself as an object or submit to an objectifying gaze. Yet since His grandeur appears in the poem, without being foreseen or aimed at by a subject, we can talk of what Marion calls "counter-experience", that which contradicts the conditions of possibility for experiencing an object.<sup>49</sup> The subject's intentional gaze is rebuked by the intuitions to which it is exposed, not necessarily because he or she is bedazzled but perhaps because of being disappointed by unfulfilled or displaced expectations, and in any case by the sheer resistance of the phenomenon to objectification.<sup>50</sup>

To live *coram deo* might be to have counter-experience of God, to find oneself unexpectedly turned around, to have the desires of the will changed, even in a life already consecrated to religion. The cross shatters every image of God that comes from within, and there is no life of faith that does not pass beneath the cross. To recognise that God imposes Himself suddenly, violently and at large, and also that He allows Himself to be recognised as coming gradually, in oozes that have the capacity to heal and anoint, and in wings that enfold, is to admit that He discloses His grandeur as phenomenon but does not appear as object or fall under a well-defined concept. Hopkins does not encounter God as such, but even so we cannot speak of him having an "experience of non-experience" without a significant qualification. He suffers a sense of awe, recoil and insignificance before God, as well as responding to the hope for a care and a healing that will come without any perceptible agent. He is cast as witness rather than subject, not rendered passive but required to respond, doubtless inadequately, without comprehension, and without the ability to persuade others that an event has taken place. Such is "God's Grandeur". Approaching the same issue from the side, as it were, we can say that Hopkins is exposed to a

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49. Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002) 215-16.

50. See Marion, "The Banality of Saturation", trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky, *Counter-Experiences: Reading Jean-Luc Marion*, ed. Kevin Hart (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2006) §6.

peril that cannot be seen, let alone lived with or contained, as well as to that which establishes and succours.

How the two quatrains of the octave hang together is not at all clear on a first reading or perhaps even on a second or a third. The evocation of generations treading, treading, treading provides justification for Hopkins asking why his contemporaries ignore God's authority. After all, the production of oil has been traditional: "thou shalt tread the olives" we hear in Micah 6: 15. Yet Christ's sacrificial offering, suggested in the crushing of olives, has sacramental efficacy only if His authority is acknowledged. The earth has been subdued but has not been replenished; dominion has been exercised without stewardship, and man has become alienated from the earth (Ruskin) and from his labour (Marx). Nothing in the second stanza speaks explicitly of divine greatness, however. The poem is about God's grandeur insofar as it rethinks "grandeur" in a threefold manner – power, sacrifice, care – but, equally important, it is about the lack of recognition of His sovereignty and the consequences that follow from it. The earth has been "seared" not by a bolt of lightning from the heavens but by the human labour that is a direct consequence of original sin ("man's smudge") and, more particularly, by the actual sin of greed. The ploughed earth looks as though it has been scorched; it is "bare" in that trees have been felled and it has been over cultivated. Our feet are "shod": we recognise no holiness at all in nature. Performed without grace, and solely with finite ends in mind, human labour does not lead to order and clarity but to their opposites. It is for this reason that God's grandeur "will flame out", that there will be an eschatological sign of Judgment.

With the sestet we pass from "the world" to "nature", and we do so not in the spirit of contrast but in a surprising continuity with the octave. Hopkins says, and stresses it, "And for all this, nature is never spent", not "But for all this, nature is never spent." To know why this is so, we need to know the "all this" that is at issue. Is it the sinfulness of man, his poor stewardship of the earth? Yes indeed. Yet the broken relation between God and man is also relevant. Although God is all-powerful and all just, and although we have been thoroughly disobedient, He does not destroy the planet or let us do so. We are not allowed to "spend" nature as though it were realised as so much money, even though that is precisely what the poem suggests we try to do. Its "dearness" does not give itself as commodity but as intimacy with creation. Revelation is given on the inside, as it were, and it is the poet's task to read things from within – *intus legere* – and so to encounter the divine by way of inscape.

Always, it seems, there is more to encounter; and that is because the divine grandeur does not reveal itself simply as anger and power but also discloses itself as self-sacrifice and healing. It is here that the poem against which "God's Grandeur" defines itself, Wordsworth's "The world is too much with us" (pub. 1807), comes into focus. In the earlier sonnet the poet laments being out of tune with nature. He exclaims, "Great God! I'd rather be / A pagan suckled in a creed outworn" and conditionally wishes to see Proteus or Triton. Such a sight would be preferable to living with revealed truth in a world in which we are alienated from nature. Hopkins' response in his sonnet is precisely that intimacy with nature need not make one revert to paganism in order to regain religious vitality; on the contrary, it will disclose the grandeur of God not in experience but in counter-experience.

In general, this reading finds support in the final line of the lyric, the Miltonic image of the Holy Spirit "brooding" over the earth.<sup>51</sup> It will be seen that we have passed from "nature" back to "world" in order to find a cosmic perspective on the scene and accordingly to stress that God's holiness is given in maternal solicitude as well as in dynamic power and self-sacrifice. The West is "black" – we think of night and the industrial revolution – and the world is "bent" not only because its curve is seen in a cosmic perspective but also because of the crushing weight of sin and its consequence, work. Or is it because the world itself, if not its human population, is bent in adoration of the Holy Spirit, offering us a model of how to respond properly to God? Certainly Hopkins does not identify the Holy Spirit with the dawn. The metaphor is of the moment before the rising of the sun, before it becomes visible, when distinct rays of light can be made out against the dark. It is the time that Hölderlin valued in "Wie wenn am Feiertage....", the moment when nature, which precedes the gods, reveals herself. Hölderlin says, "das Heilige sei mein Wort", the holy be my word, meaning not that he will represent what is holy but rather that his words will *be* sacred speech and thus open to a new revelation.<sup>52</sup> Orthodox in his Trinitarian faith, Hopkins would never affirm nature in quite that way. Rather, he tells us that morning does not come merely as part of a mechanical diurnal round but that it springs into being because of the many opportunities for a life nurtured by the Spirit. The "because" does not have a strongthetic role in the poem; it indicates a leap from the natural to the divine rather than a logical relation of *consequentia* or *inferentia*. That morning "springs" to life recalls that specific acts are the fruit of the Spirit, and it stands in

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51. See Milton, *Paradise Lost*, I, 19-22.

52. Friedrich Hölderlin, *Poems and Fragments*, trans. Michael Hamburger, 3rd ed. (London: Anvil Press, 1994) 395.

sharp contrast to the earlier talk of being crushed. The sestet has more active verbs ("spent", "lives", "went", "springs", "broods") than the octave ("is charged", "is seared", "bleared", "smeared"); it is as though nature asserts its epiphanic power in response to the Holy Spirit. That the poet grasps the *Gestalt* of divine grandeur is itself a gift of the Spirit. Yet in saying these things it is the critic who is doing theology, not the poet.

Those who demur about the possibility of religious poetry will point to the final line, in which the Spirit is seen as a dove, as a biblical symbol (Matt 3: 16) that betrays, right at the end of the lyric, the impossibility of escaping from umpteenth-hand experience when talking of God. That the dove is a dead metaphor for the Spirit is entirely true, and we need to remember it was just as dead for Milton when he wrote *Paradise Lost*. Yet Milton did what strong poets always do with a dead metaphor: he revived it. Which is what Hopkins has done, partly by having rays of light before dawn becoming wings and partly by the signature exclamation "ah!" that interrupts the poem with an immediate affective response to the Spirit, a final moment of adoration and relief. The experience of language in "God's Grandeur" is strongly felt here, for, as Robert Bridges recognised, one peril to which Hopkins exposes himself is that the dead metaphor cannot be revived without undue force.<sup>53</sup> That would mean there would be no poetic invention, no change to the field of literary possibility by something unforeseen, something that "comes in" from nowhere and is a revelation of originality. Without this doubling of religious and poetic revelation there would be no religious poetry worth reading.

#### V

The argument against religious poetry turns partly on the narrow range of experience available to the poet and to its derivative quality. Yet it seems that a poetry written *coram deo* can engage with experience in a far more radical manner than most poetry can ever do. This claim can be clarified a little more, and so I will conclude by reflecting on one or two aspects of the style of criticism I have been practising.

All poetry involves a bracketing of the natural attitude; it marks the possibility of the multiple logics, the repeated foldings and unfoldings of metaphors and motifs, which are the very life of poetry.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, religious poetry requires a suspension of the supernatural attitude. All

53. Robert Bridges objects that the final image is one of Hopkins' "efforts to force emotion into theological or sectarian channels", "Preface to Notes", *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Gerald Roberts (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987) 78.

54. See Derek Attridge, "'This Strange Institution Called Literature': An Interview with Jacques Derrida", in Derrida, *Acts of Literature* (London: Routledge, 1992) 44-45.

poets, religious or not, perform, to some extent, the phenomenological reduction: they are led back to a consciousness whose intentional rapport with the world renders meaningful those events that might otherwise be dismissed or overlooked. Yet, at the same time, poetry frustrates the phenomenological reduction. The act of writing introduces differences and deferrals that prevent consciousness from closing on itself.<sup>55</sup> A partial or frustrated reduction admits traces of transcendence: we pass from sign to meaning. In the case of religious poetry, where we are concerned with the transcendence of God, there will be effects of counter-experience but little or no appeal to the supernatural attitude construed as a thesis.

The failure of the phenomenological reduction in religious poetry brings to mind other species of reduction. I recall the *reductio* that St Bonaventure details in his *De Reductione Artium ad Theologiam*.<sup>56</sup> This is a theological, not a philosophical, reduction; it does not lead us to the absence of presuppositions, as Husserl wanted, but to the non-ground, given only by Grace, that *ens creatum* is exceeded by *creatio activa*. It can be debated whether St Bonaventure properly suspends the supernatural attitude, and perhaps this is one of the things that Przywara was contemplating when he coined the expression *reductio in mysterium*, meaning by that the movement of being led back to a living relationship with the divine mystery.<sup>57</sup> Przywara thinks that, properly considered, theology is this *reductio*, and I do not think he would object if I included the finest religious poems in that category, especially in the case of a poem such as "God's Grandeur" that affirms the triune God. Perhaps also Jüngel would not oppose me when I say that, for Hopkins too, "God is...grasped as the mystery of the world as he *comes* to the world" while exceeding the world's possibilities.<sup>58</sup> To live in that mystery, to be *coram deo*, is not to "have" positive experience of the invisible and unknowable God but to be marked at every level of one's being by counter-experience. There, *intus legere* becomes a species of *lectio divina*. It is the place where Hopkins takes us time and again.

55. See Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973) esp. ch. 7.

56. See St Bonaventure, *On the Reduction of the Arts to Theology*, trans. and intro. Zachary Hayes, Works of St Bonaventure (St Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 1996).

57. Erich Przywara, "Katholizismus", in *Ringel der Gegenwart* (Ausburch: Filser, 1929), 2 vols, II, 667. Rahner folds the notion into his work when he says, "A theological statement is a statement which leads into the *mysterium*", "What is a Dogmatic Statement?", *Theological Investigations V*, trans. Karl-H. Kruger (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1966) 58.

58. Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World*, 378. The notion also permeates von Balthasar's theology.