

Lyric Theodicy: Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Problem of Existential Hiddenness

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“The world is charged with the grándeur of God.”¹ This line from one of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ most well-known poems captures his deep conviction that all things course with the electrifying energy of God, not only the beautiful flash of iridescence of feather and wing, but also the horrifying crash of lightning. In his recent biography of Hopkins, Paul Mariani suggests Hopkins spent his life formulating “a theodicy and poetics which would articulate and sing what his whole self—head and heart—felt.”² But what sort of theodicy is it exactly that Hopkins offers in his poems? And, how could poems answer what Hopkins calls “the unshapeable shock night” anyway?³ Many of his darkest poems complain of God’s absence and attest to Hopkins’ constant struggle to shape the night of his experience. “[M]y lament,” he writes in one of his so-called sonnets of desolation, “Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent / To dearest him that lives alas! away.”⁴ As these lines suggest, the problem Hopkins’ poems express is not precisely the one philosophers have generally set themselves to addressing, namely, whether God’s apparent hiddenness from nonresistant nonbelievers is conceptually compatible with God’s existence. Hopkins’ problem is more nearly what Yujin Nagasawa terms the ‘problem of divine absence,’ a problem encountered by devout believers who experience God’s hiddenness.⁵ Hopkins’ intense personal experience of divine abandonment in tandem with his deep devotion to God renders his problem irreducibly existential.

And, this is a problem that philosophers widely acknowledge to be untouched by even the most sophisticated conceptual explanations of evil and hiddenness. So, to ask whether Hopkins' poems offer an answer to what philosophers call the problem of evil and the problem of hiddenness—a theodicy—seems like the wrong question, because it assumes Hopkins' problem is intellectual, not existential. But, even understanding his problem as existential, we may still wonder how the articulation of the pain of abandonment we find in his poems could be any kind of answer to it, much less a theodicy.

In this essay, I argue that Hopkins' poems themselves constitute a substantive response to the experience of existential suffering and hiddenness, and that his lyric theodicy fills the gap left by conceptual approaches to these problems precisely by giving voice to the existential crisis faced by those who feel the searing pain of the lightning and the numbing, leaden echo of silence. Hopkins' poems of existential suffering do not simply describe instances of intense suffering and stunning emptiness, they disclose it by bringing the reader into the experience that is their focus. While some of his poems might be understood as offering or assuming a theodicy of the traditional sort, I argue that the consolation they offer doesn't stem from these theological and philosophical constructions. Their consolation is the warm hand of a fellow sufferer reaching through the words. The darkest poems don't resolve, they know better, they shout in dereliction, thereby proving the faith they struggle to hold. The reader entering into these experiences, lifting up these laments, finds not only strength in the solidarity, but possibly hope in the darkness. The main aim of this essay, then, is to consider more precisely the way these Hopkins' poems do this work, and how the approach they embody might contribute to the philosophical conversation about evil and hiddenness. The first section locates Hopkins' problem within the larger discussion of the problem of suffering and hiddenness. The second section argues that Hopkins' use of lyric enables his poems to speak into existential suffering in ways unavailable to traditional theodicies, ways akin to the lamentations of

Job, Jeremiah and Jesus. The final section contends that, when understood within Hopkins' view of the incarnation and passion, his poems of existential suffering make it possible to identify with Christ in the experience of hiddenness, thereby bringing God's presence into the experience of absence.

I. Locating Hopkins' Problem:

From the very start, people working on the problem of suffering and hiddenness in the analytic tradition have recognized that there are aspects of suffering—the personal and existential—that this discourse does not address and for which it is signally unsuited to answer.⁶ This existential problem is raised for those for whom the experience of suffering and hiddenness, whether in the lives of others or their own, has made the problem undeniably concrete. My interest in this essay is specifically with the experience of suffering that is related to the existential problem of divine hiddenness, or, what Nagasawa calls 'the problem of divine absence.' This existential problem is raised for committed believers when they suffer and keenly feel the chill of God's absence. For such people suffering and seeing no sign of God poses a threat to the positive value of their lives, because in their suffering what they most long for is God's redemptive presence. Eleonore Stump argues that a person suffers in the sense relevant to this discussion when her experience "undermines (partly or entirely) flourishing, or deprives her (in part or in whole) of the desires of her heart, or both."⁷ Accordingly, those who experience divine absence feel their flourishing destroyed and hopes dashed, because they have identified their flourishing with God's presence and hoped that God would alleviate their suffering, or, at least, accompany them in it. Their question is not how suffering is conceptually compatible with a God of love, rather it is more in line with the cries of the psalmist, "Why hast thou forsaken me?" (Ps 22:1) or "Why standest thou afar off, O Lord? why hidest thou thyself in times of trouble?" (Ps 10:1). For those suffering in this way, no merely

theoretical explanation will suffice. As Howard-Snyder and Moser note, answers to this existential problem of hiddenness “often seem lame, if not contrived,” leading in some cases to “further frustration, and eventually to bitterness and despair.”⁸ Conceptual answers in such a situation are sand to the thirsty and stone to those who hunger for bread. Hopkins’ darkest poems trace his striving in the face of divine absence, despite his possession of conceptual answers, and, I argue, show the need for and the way to an existential response.

It is perfectly possible to believe firmly that God exists and is loving and even that you will one day understand your suffering and God’s silence, and nevertheless confront the existential problem I’ve described. Gerard Manley Hopkins seems to have experienced the existential problem in just this way.⁹ On January 1st, 1889, just months before his death, Hopkins began his annual retreat, re-enacting Ignatius’s *Spiritual Exercises*. His notes for the first day record his assessment of his life up to that point. He expresses certainty about his vocation and his faith, and, at the same time, the deep conviction that his life has become loathsome to him. Here is how he concludes his notes for that day:

I was continuing this train of thought this evening when I began to enter on that course of loathing and hopelessness which I have often felt before, which made me fear madness and led me to give up the practice of meditation except, as now, in retreat and here it is again. I could therefore do no more than repeat *Justus es, Domine, et rectum judicium tuum* . . . What is this wretched life? Five wasted years almost have passed in Ireland. I am ashamed of the little I have done, of my waste of time. . . [W]hat is life without aim, without spur, without help? All my undertakings miscarry: I am like a straining eunuch. I wish then for death: yet if I died now I should die imperfect, no master of myself, and that is the worst failure of all. O my God, look down on me.¹⁰

Notice the way faith and suffering coexist for Hopkins. Repeating the prayer drawn from Psalm 119, “Thou art just, O Lord, and thy judgment is right,” which continues, “deal with thy servant according to thy mercy: and teach me thy justifications,” we can see Hopkins not only confessing but also calling out to God. Though he clearly believes—or wants to believe—God exists and is just, as his repetition of the prayer attests, he nevertheless feels as if his suffering is unseen and his cries unheard; God’s silence and hiddenness serve only to make his suffering worse. The sonnet, “I wake and feel,” penned at the beginning of his tenure in Ireland, highlights the role hiddenness plays in Hopkins suffering:

I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.
 What hours, O what black hours we have spent
 This night! what sights you, heart, saw, ways you went!
 And more must, in yet longer light’s delay.

With witness I speak this. But where I say
 Hours I mean years, mean life. And my lament
 Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent
 To dearest him that lives alas! away. (ll 1-8)

What these passages makes clear is that a certain double-mindedness is at the center of Hopkins’ struggle. This clash between his beliefs regarding God and his experience of suffering and absence is the core of his problem. As long as he is true to both, as long as he holds tightly to each, he experiences his suffering as a pressing problem. If he were to let go of belief in God’s goodness, he would still suffer but he would not experience the *problem* of suffering; if he let go of his belief that God must not remain hidden, again he might suffer crushing loneliness, but not divine hiddenness.

Denis Sobolev contends that this tension between his theological and philosophical commitments and his existential experience runs through all of Hopkins' poetry. Hopkins' poems reflect his struggle to hold his faith and experience together. The result, in Sobolev's view, is that Hopkins often

refused to mediate the gap between the two, and no reconciliation between what he held to be true and what he experienced as a human being—in all the concreteness and historicity of his existence—was possible for him. Oscillating between the ecstasies of spiritual contemplation and the depth of unredeemed pain, his poetry thus dramatizes a split mode of perception, in which neither the life of the spirit nor the world of actual existence is denied, nor is one subordinated to the other.¹¹

Whether we can conclude that no resolution was possible for him is unclear, but Sobolev is surely right that the poems themselves derive much of their power from their vivid expression of Hopkins' personal desolation and their resolute refusal to relieve the pressure that this put upon his faith. Hopkins' choice to speak from within the welter of existential suffering and not from some divine point of view marks a refusal to claim that perspective or authority. As Sobolev remarks, "The person who speaks about his hopes, his ruptures, and his pain is Gerard Manley Hopkins, in all the unauthoritative unreliability of his humanity."¹² His poems, accordingly, bring the reader into the heart of his confusion and despair. By eschewing dogmatic authority, focusing instead on the raw existential tension of the speaker's situation, these poems gain human authority even if they give no explanation.

In this way, Hopkins' poetry raises theodicean questions, but, offering no clear, discursive answer to them, implies that theodicy, if available at all, may well leave us stumbling in the night. This feature of his poetry reflects what Hopkins had said in an early sermon of October 25, 1880, namely, that "God's providence is dark and we cannot hope to know the why and the wherefore of

all that is allowed to befall us.”¹³ As he comments in the 1889 retreat notes mentioned earlier, “It is as if one were dazzled by a spark or star in the dark, seeing it but not seeing by it: We want a light shed on our way and a happiness spread over our life.”¹⁴ Instead we stand in the darkness, seeing some hopeful star too small and distant to provide such light. For Hopkins, neither God nor his own flourishing can be seen from his existential location. The refusal of existential suffering to clear like some morning mist under the ray of theological truth and metaphysical commitment is Hopkins’ *real* problem.

Hopkins’ existential problem, then, is generated and sustained by his faith. In this sense, his version of the problem is uniquely Christian. With this we have located Hopkins’ problem and seen that his response is not in any straightforward sense a theodicy.¹⁵ If anything, Hopkins consistently represents theodicy as either unattainable or impotent in the face of the suffering he experiences. In view of this contention, we may wonder whether there is any helpful way to respond to this problem.

Hopkins’ poems themselves, the ones that most vividly express the existential problem, show us the way. Hopkins’ contribution is that his poetry communicates faithful struggle and discloses a kind of knowledge that goes beyond the rational justification found in theodicy. As a consequence, unlike theodicy, his poetry has the potential to offer the consolation to others experiencing existential suffering that even if they are in the dark they are not alone.

II. *Lyric, Lamentation and the Problem of Existential Suffering*

Why think Hopkins’ darkest poems do anything more than express the problem of existential suffering—an achievement in its own right—why suppose they could be part of a helpful response to it? Poetry, particularly, lyric of the sort Hopkins writes, creates solidarity by inviting the reader to enter the poetic space not only as a spectator or listener but also as the speaker. This intimate

identification places the poet's words on our own tongues. If the words and the space are only nihilistic despair, dread, and deadly loneliness, however, they may do little to relieve our burdens, even if they help us see we are not alone. To be a robust response to existential suffering, these poems would have to be more than mere cries of despair, they would also need to be cries of faith and hope. Accordingly, we need some reason to think that entering into these words and taking up these lamentations might lift us from despair. In this section, I explore the nature of lyric—Hopkins' in particular—in the mode of biblical lamentation and argue that read along these lines Hopkins' poems do more than offer company in the darkness, they shed light by articulating a space to confront an absent God.

Lyric of Intimate Knowledge: Weep with them that weep

Quoting the critic R. P. Blackmur, John Berryman's poem "Olympus" captures an essential feature of poetic discourse:

‘The art of poetry
is amply distinguished from the manufacture of verse
by the animating presence in the poetry
of a fresh idiom: language

so twisted & posed in a form
that it not only expresses the matter at hand
but adds to the available stock of reality.’

I was never altogether the same after *that*. (ll 5-12)¹⁶

As a poet, Berryman is changed by the notion that his vocation might be the provision of language adequate to reality. Language that gives readers access to the world—whether the one right before

her eyes or nearer still the world within her own mind —is, at least in Blackmur's view, what poets give and what both they and their readers at some level need. The poet Denise Levertov construes this vocation as a sort of bearing witness to one's life; poems are "testimonies of lived life."¹⁷ When this testimony finds an audience, it has tapped into a need; it has provided a language that answers a longing in the reader, a longing not only for a way to word reality but also for companionship in it. The moment of recognition is a moment of solidarity. If Blackmur and Levertov are right, poems can function to put words to reality and thereby make it more bearable for writer and reader alike.

Lyric is "the most intimate of genres", according to Helen Vendler.¹⁸ To read the lines of a lyric is to be invited "to own the words, to become for the moment the one speaking."¹⁹ What lyric offers is nothing short of self-transformation by means of identification with the poem's speaker. In a letter to his brother, Hopkins wrote "the true nature of poetry" is as "the darling child of speech, of lips and *spoken* utterance: it must be *spoken*."²⁰ Hopkins insists that his poems be spoken, not simply read on the page, because they have their full force only when they are incarnated in the reader's own voice. The intimate identification of lyric helps to explain how poetry expands "the available stock of reality" and why the knowledge it confers is impossible to explain without remainder from a third-person, propositional perspective. By collapsing the distance between reader and speaker, lyric induces the experience of the speaker; it brings us inside. If it is the epiphanic experience Hopkins has when he sees the kestrel hunting one morning in the Welsh countryside, as in "The Windhover", the reader crouches in hiding too, spying the majestic flight and buckling fall of the bird. This is a first-person experience, "*I* caught this morning morning's minion" (l. 1 my emphasis). There is all the difference in the world between noting the fact that there was a kestrel about this morning, and actually seeing it, feeling the intensity of the sun break upon you, as the bird dives. When the reader identifies with the speaker in this way, she too turns with the speaker to regard this kestrel as at once Christ, on the hunt, buckling to capture her crouching, hiding self.²¹

What the reader understands from this position cannot be fully explained from the third-person perspective.²²

In addition to this knowledge gained inside the poem—when we are the speaker, we also learn something when we stand outside the poetic space. When we reflect upon the speaker, taking up the position of a bystander, we understand the person of the speaker as other. From this position, the speaker's words become *testimony*. This is testimony of a special sort; since we have been privy to the experience that generated it, it can be *our* testimony.

What Vendler's comments on lyric help us to see is that poetry like Hopkins' communicates an intimate knowledge that no mere description can. When he asks "not to live this tormented mind / with this tormented mind tormenting yet" (l 3-4), we are brought inside this mind and learn from experience what it is to be in that dark place.²³ When this is a place we've been or are, the words expand the reality that is available and by articulating it enable us to share it. Stepping back, we can hear the "tormented mind" as a witness to the experience, and, because we have shared the experience, we can hear the testimony with sympathy. But, why suppose that sharing this experience is any sort of answer to the existential problem?

Lyric of Lamentation: Blessed are they that mourn

Sharing this experience by taking up the speaker's words might only have the effect of making the existential problem *more* real to us. And, the dismal testimony that we're not alone in our suffering might only sink us lower. As I suggested earlier, for lyric's intimate knowledge to lift us, it cannot be a song of despair alone, it must be one of faith as well. For the lyric of suffering to be a productive means of responding to the existential problem, we need some reason to think its expression of desolation doesn't merely make us desolate. We need a reason to think that it somehow alters the experience of the one who needed to express pain this way. Turning to

scriptural forms of lamentation suggests a way that a lyric of existential suffering might not only express painful despair but also anguished hope.

The psalms are replete with complaint over existential suffering. Job and Jeremiah both face terror and create poetry that struggles to understand where God could be in it, and like the psalmist, they plead, protest, complain, question, demand, lament, all in the hope that their cries will be heard. The inclusion of these poems and their liturgical use over the centuries suggests not only their power to express grief but also their power to relieve it. Given Hopkins' own familiarity with and liturgical use of scripture, these poets of existential suffering stand as relevant exemplars of the way lyric might address and transform such pain.²⁴ They give us reason to think the lyric of suffering may enable us to bear it.

In a series of meditations on suffering that grew out of his own battle with bone cancer, the poet Christian Wiman asks “[w]hat ... the difference [is] between the cry of pain that is also a cry of praise, and a cry of pain that is pure despair?” His own unsteady response is: “Faith? The cry of faith, even if it is a cry against God, moves toward God, has its meaning in God, as in the cries of Job.”²⁵ The cry of suffering, then, is not simply sorrow over suffering, but a *complaint* directed toward or, at least, before God, a complaint that makes sense only in the presence of God.²⁶ Complaint is active and directed outward. Like Jacob, those who cry out to or even against God, pull God close, unwilling to let go, intent on receiving a blessing.

Paul Ricoeur highlights the significance of this mode of response, arguing that theoretical answers to the problem of suffering—theodicies and defenses—never completely overcome the suffering itself, because they require complainants—those experiencing existential suffering—to stand silent. The successful defense renders the charges illegitimate and further complaint inappropriate.²⁷ What is called for in his view is not a *solution* to the problem of suffering, but a response that renders it productive, a response that is a catharsis of the felt pain. To allow lament to

“develop into a complaint against God”, he suggests, is an expression of “the impatience of hope ... [that] has its origin in the cry of the Psalmist, “How long O Lord?””²⁸ This is a hope that can sound like hopelessness:

How long wilt thou forget me, O Lord? for ever? How long wilt thou hide thy face from me? How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart daily? (Psalm 13:1-2)

It is a faith that can sound like despair:

My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? (Psalm 22)

In such cries, there is the hope of being heard alongside the unmistakable sorrow, anger and incomprehension at being abandoned. This response to suffering rests upon the conviction that God, as the source of all goodness, must affirm the justice of the complaint. In Ricoeur’s view, crying out in this way plays a role in the “catharsis of lament” and enables those experiencing existential suffering to “believe in God *in spite of evil*”, that is, without an explanation.²⁹

Ricoeur is not perfectly plain about what he means by ‘catharsis of lament’, or how complaint accomplishes it, but he is clearly right to see that when personal suffering shifts from a wallowing self-enclosed lament to complaint that is open before the just and loving God of one’s convictions, this suffering is imbued with a different light. The original insight Aristotle captured in his notion of catharsis is instructive here. Aristotle saw that in the rousing of pity and fear tragedy alters not only the emotions but also the beliefs that underwrite them. As Martha Nussbaum puts it, “pity and fear will be sources of illumination or clarification, as the agent, responding and attending to his or her responses, develops a richer self-understanding concerning the attachments and values that support the responses.”³⁰ Perhaps the catharsis that Ricoeur has in mind consists of this sort of illumination. When the Psalmist cries out, “My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me?”, the cry reveals to the psalmist not only the felt dread of godforsakenness, but also the beliefs that prompt

her to complain of it: her belief that God must not forsake her, her belief that God will hear her cry. It is true that the cry of complaint stems from doubt of these beliefs in the face of existential suffering and divine silence. But this doubt and its accusatory questioning reveal a stubborn love for God that is unwilling to cut off the relationship and to cease demanding God's presence and response.³¹ Commenting on the pain of this doubt (he calls it 'devotional doubt') Wiman notes that it

is active rather than passive, purifying rather than stultifying. Far beneath it, no matter how severe the drought, how thoroughly your skepticism seems to have salted the ground of your soul, faith, durable faith, is steadily taking root.³²

I would argue that voicing pain in lyric form is a purifying act that may well denote life in even the driest roots and accomplish a 'catharsis of lament' in the sense that it illuminates the unwillingness to let go of God even when God is nowhere to be seen, or, worse, is seen as the source of the suffering.

'Catharsis of lament' in this sense, then, is not simply a salve for wounded feelings. As theologian and biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann insists, biblical laments are "real prayers and not merely psychological acts of catharsis whereby the speaker "feels better" by expressing need out loud."³³ Those who lament do not simply seek religious succor; they expect divine redress. As such these poetic utterances are "acts of hope" that hold God responsible and anticipate transformation. The inclusion of this form of prayer as a necessary expression of faith signals not only the legitimacy but also the obligation to raise theodic questions.³⁴ The lyrical articulation of suffering along the lines of these biblical models suggests the way lament, as practice, aims to effect change by confronting God with the intolerable breaches of justice encountered individually and collectively. The one who laments is thereby bearing suffering; to cry out to God is to hope for relief.³⁵

Jesus's cry of dereliction exemplifies the sort of use of lyric I have in mind. When he feels the dread of abandonment on the cross, he chooses to voice his desolation in the lyric of Psalm 22. When he recites the opening lines, he becomes the speaker of the lyric, and finds in it language adequate to the reality he is facing. In that moment, he not only finds solidarity with the psalmist but with all those others who have entered these words, and in this solidarity the solace that he is not alone. Jesus reaches for these words, then, not just to express despair but somehow to have the strength to bear it.

Hopkins' late poem, "Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend," which takes this first line from Jeremiah 12.1, operates in a similar manner. When he translates the opening lines of Jeremiah's lament, Hopkins is reaching for that poet's words to articulate his own struggle with God's justice and grounding his own speech in that tradition. Like Jeremiah, Hopkins simultaneously affirms and disputes God's justice; he cries injustice in the hope for justice. Whereas Jeremiah's primary focus is the unjust flourishing of the wicked, Hopkins' is his own comparative languishing. "Why," he demands, "must/ Disappointment all I endeavor end?" (ll 3-4). Not only the prospering sinners, but also the fecund world all about him serve to painfully reveal his own sterility. This is the heart of his complaint. For years he has despaired over his inability to produce scholarly and poetic work. As early as 1883, he complains to Bridges "it kills me to be time's eunuch and never to beget."³⁶ In another letter to Bridges, he says "All impulse fails me: I can give myself no sufficient reason for going on. Nothing comes: I am a eunuch..."³⁷ And, just months before this poem was written, he despondently writes that "All my undertakings miscarry: I am like a eunuch. I wish then for death."³⁸ The poem's sestet captures this despair, forming it into a robust complaint against this God who claims justice and friendship. The speaker insists on action reflective of these claims.

... See, banks and brakes

Now leavèd how thick! lacèd they are again
 With fretty chervil, look, and fresh wind shakes
 Them; birds build—but not I build; no, but strain,
 Time's eunuch, and not breed one work that wakes.
 Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain. (ll 9-14)

As the last line indicates, the speaker owns this inscrutable God in the very act of insisting on just and loving treatment. The final plea signifies that the speaker stands finally in anguished hope, not despair. We can imagine that for Hopkins, who persistently and painfully felt the sting of failure in the work he believed he was meant to do, this lament represents his commitment to hold on to God and his refusal to settle quietly in resigned acceptance of what seems a betrayal of friendship and justice. Mariani suggests this is Hopkins' "own version of Holy Saturday, with Jesus still in the tomb, helpless, waiting upon the Father, his one hope, to fill him with His own life."³⁹ Like Jesus' own use of lament, Hopkins' poem expresses the sense of betrayal and raises the theodic question, not in the hope of an explanation, but in the hope of redemptive action. It is a hope that the poem itself proves to be realized; indeed, this is a work that wakes.

In view of what I have argued above, this active voicing of feelings of godforsakenness and betrayal may be understood as cathartic in the substantive not merely psychological sense. In calling God to account, the speaker reveals a stubborn love that will not let go of God or silently accept suffering. This active, rather than passive, response to feelings of abandonment and despair alters them and makes them 'productive', as Ricoeur would say. It transforms them into acts of hope and faith that the work of mourning, complaining, even despairing can bring God close. Ultimately, those who voice their woe express faith that those who mourn will find blessing and comfort. Earlier I suggested that for lyric to speak into existential suffering in a positive way, it cannot simply be a hopeless expression of pain. In this section, I have argued that the expression of doubt,

desolation, and the like can be expressions of faith and as such ‘productive’ responses to existential suffering. Though these poems do not remove uncertainty or provide theodicy, they do articulate a space for those who suffer to meet God, even if it is only to contend. And yet, it isn’t obvious that this contentious space, where one’s sense of God’s fidelity and love is blotted out by the darkness of one’s existential experience, is, in any substantive sense, redemptive. Seemingly, God remains absent and divine action still only a far off hope. To understand why Hopkins’ poems might add substance to this hope and be, in fact, redemptive, it is necessary to consider the role the incarnation plays in his poetry.

III. *The Incarnate Word: Touching God in the darkness, touching God in suffering*

Hopkins’ poems of existential suffering are rooted, like the rest of his poems, in the incarnation—the great ‘outstress’ of God into the world.⁴⁰ The world, he says, is none other than “God’s utterance of himself...outside himself” and “its end, its purpose, its purport, its meaning, is God and its life or work to name and praise him.”⁴¹ For Hopkins, incarnation is *the* context for all things striving to realize their nature. Hopkins’ notion of the incarnation is complex, embracing far more than the historical incarnation of God in the person of Jesus, and treating it in detail is beyond the scope of this essay.⁴² Focus on the human incarnation of God in Jesus is will suffice to shed light on the way Hopkins’ poems of existential suffering make it possible to find solidarity with God even in the darkness of God’s absence. By tapping into the struggle, pain and turmoil involved in the human experience that incarnating Christ entails, these poems allow suffers to touch the hidden God in the one who emptied himself of God to be with them. To appreciate this aspect of Hopkins’ poems, then, we need to consider what he took the incarnation to mean for Christ and how he understood Christ’s incarnation to connect to his own spiritual journey.

For Hopkins, incarnation and kenosis go hand in hand. Entering matter and taking human form requires an unimaginable emptying on God's part. As he put it in one poem "God's infinity/dwindled to infancy."⁴³ When Hopkins asks why the son of God goes forth from the Father, the answer he gives is this: "To give God glory and that by sacrifice, sacrifice offered in the barren wilderness outside of God..."⁴⁴ To become incarnate requires the son to somehow go outside of God into the wilderness; this is what is meant by kenosis: God empty of God; God outside of God; God hidden from God. Hopkins relates his understanding of what Christ's self-emptying involves and means for his followers in a letter to his friend, the poet Robert Bridges:

[Christ] finding, as in the first instant of his incarnation he did, his human nature informed by the godhead . . . thought it nevertheless no snatching matter . . . to be equal with God, but annihilated himself, taking on the form of a servant; . . . he emptied and exhausted himself so far as that was possible, of godhead and behaved only as God's slave, as his creature, as man, which also he was, and then being in the guise of man humbled himself to death, the death of the cross. It is this holding of himself back, and not snatching at the truest and highest good, the good that was his right, . . . his own being and self, which seems to me the root of all his holiness and the imitation of this the root of all moral good in other men.⁴⁵

As the last line indicates, this giving up is the paradigm of all human goodness, and its imitation the goal for all would-be followers of Christ. That Hopkins took this goal to heart is evident throughout his writings. He understands God's grace as the action by which God "carries a creature to the end of its being, which is its self-sacrifice and salvation."⁴⁶ In his own case, he recognized his desire for grace amounted to a desire "to be lifted on a higher cross."⁴⁷ He saw his desire for union with God through the lens of the passion and the crucifixion. Paradoxically, he found the greatest union with God in the incarnational moment of the greatest emptiness and suffering. To be one

with God, he implies, requires that one follow Christ to the cross and there enter into the suffering of divine absence.⁴⁸

As a Jesuit, Hopkins annually re-enacted Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*. This afforded him the opportunity to contemplate key moments of Christ's journey to the cross. Entering into these moments enabled him to see that in this God empty of God, he could find solidarity and strength. For instance, when he considers the hidden life of Jesus—those years from twelve to thirty about which we hear nothing in the gospels—he writes: “the hidden life at Nazareth is the great help to faith for us who must live more or less an obscure, constrained, and unsuccessful life.... And sacrificing all to obedience his very obedience was unknown. But the pleasingness of Christ's life there in God's eyes is recorded in the words spoken when he had just left it: ‘this is my beloved Son’ etc.”⁴⁹ His letters and journal entries suggest that he felt himself to be living an ‘obscure, constrained, unsuccessful life’ in Dublin. His energy wasted on setting and grading examinations for all Irishmen seeking a degree in classics; his own projects scattered, unfinished, and those finished, rejected or misunderstood. As the comment suggests, he could see that Christ had stood precisely where he was standing and that his submission to such a life could be pleasing to God. In a letter to his friend Richard Dixon dated July 3, 1886, he makes a similar observation, but this time taking note of the psychological toll this self-emptying must have taken on Christ:

Above all Christ our Lord: his career was cut short, and whereas he would have wished to succeed by success—for it is insane to lay yourself out for failure...nevertheless he was doomed to succeed by failure; his plans were baffled, his hopes dashed, and his work was done by being broken off undone. However much he understood all this he found it an intolerable grief to submit to it. He left the example: it is very strengthening, but except in that sense it is not consoling.⁵⁰

Though the comments are aimed at consoling Dixon for not being elected to Oxford's Chair of Poetry, it's hard not to hear the dark sonnets' "baffling ban", "ruins of wrecked past purposes," and "lonely began" behind these lines, which were written just a year later.⁵¹ Hopkins' comments to Dixon show how he might have found strength to endure those difficult years when consolation and comfort eluded his grasp and his cries felt unheard. Hopkins sees that strength can be drawn from solidarity with Christ, specifically, in his experience of grief. His understanding of kenosis also implies that though Christ must have at some level understood why he suffered—i.e., he possessed a theodicy—God was so hidden to him that he nevertheless found it an intolerable grief to submit to this suffering. This is the grief felt in Gethsemane and expressed from the cross. It is precisely this grief of Jesus that grounds his solidarity with human beings and legitimates complaint, instead of docile, detached, submission. For Hopkins, Jesus's experience of this human grief connects him to those who feel divine neglect in the face of the jarring blows of failure and injustice that threaten the positive value of their lives. He points to this aspect of the incarnation, then, because it is *the* meeting place for all who experience the bewildering anguish of God's absence in circumstances of suffering.

Hopkins' reflections on the sorrows of Christ, again using Ignatius's *Exercises*, further indicate the depth and the significance of Christ's kenosis for those experiencing suffering. In one exercise, Ignatius asks the exercitant to consider the sufferings of Christ at the time of the Passion not simply as a bystander but as Christ himself felt them. As David Flemming's commentary on this meditation makes explicit, the exercitant should "pay special attention to how the divinity hides itself so that Jesus seems so utterly human and helpless [and] should make every effort to get inside the Passion, not just staying with external sufferings, but entering the loneliness, the interior pain of rejection and feeling hated, the anguish within Jesus."⁵² This exercise prompts reflection on what Christ's kenosis and sacrifice entailed, in particular, what it felt like for Jesus to experience the

hiddenness of God at the moment of his greatest suffering. Hopkins describes this “withdrawal and hiding of the Godhead” as a “deep severance between it and the [Jesus] manhood.”⁵³ While neither Hopkins nor Ignatius aim to question the hypostatic union, they do want to emphasize that in this great sacrifice Jesus genuinely felt forsaken. As Hopkins notes elsewhere, “Christ our Lord . . . feels and understands what pain and fear and desolation are—all . . . that you can ever feel on earth.”⁵⁴ This observation is offered to those who, having worked through Ignatius’s meditation on hell, find themselves terror stricken. “Turn,” he says in his most pastoral tone, “Turn to Christ our Lord,” because he has known pain, fear and desolation.

What this sampling of Hopkins’ thoughts on the incarnation suggests is that when he considers the reality of Christ’s kenosis, he recognizes that Christ didn’t walk impervious through the wilderness, but experienced sorrow and grief and desolation like all human beings. What this implies is that in his poems of existential suffering we might touch more than suffering—we might touch God’s suffering. This incarnational context combined with the intense subjectivity of these poems’ speaker and the immediacy of the experiences related enable them to reach into the lives of those who suffer, not with an explanation, but with the possibility of God’s companionship.

“Carrion Comfort” offers an example of the way Hopkins’ poems, understood along these lines, might offer this strength to the suffering.⁵⁵ This poem points to the way that entering into the kenotic space Jesus occupied raises the theodic question in a form that radically reorients the speaker’s relation both to God and suffering. This poem, especially the second quatrain, is a prayer, more specifically, a prayer in the tradition of biblical laments. Hopkins’ insistent questions:

But ah, but O thou terrible, why wouldst thou rude on me

Thy wring-world right foot rock? lay a lionlimb against me? scan

With darksome devouring eyes my bruised bones? and fan

O in turns of tempest, me heaped there; me frantic to avoid thee and flee? (ll 5-8)

brings to mind Job's complaint:

I am full of confusion; therefore see thou mine affliction; for it increaseth. Thou huntest me
as a fierce lion: and again thou shewest thyself marvellous upon me. (Job 10:15)⁵⁶

Like Job, the speaker of this poem feels hunted and confused, battered and bruised, and yet, like Job, he does not simply feed on his despair; instead, he confronts this 'terrible' one, piling question on question. Robert Alter says, "Job will not let the terror of God confound him or silence him. He still wishes to voice his protest, not succumbing to fear."⁵⁷ So, too, the speaker in Hopkins' poem, though he is "frantic to avoid and flee", will not be silenced by his fearsome adversary.

The *volta* begins by reiterating the question at the heart of the existential problem, and at the heart of the tumbled and tossed questions of the second quatrain, "Why?" The question isn't blandly, why does God allow suffering?, but accusingly, why do you, God, inflict suffering on me? The theodic answer, "That my chaff might fly, my grain might lie, sheer and clear" is answered "Nay", not because it is untrue, but because the answer is both more complex and more personal. The speaker is coming to see in an almost giddy realization that the rod that wrecked him is also the hand that holds his heart, the rod that seemed to beat him down is the one the shepherd holds that protects and comforts. Feeling joy such as would cheer and make his heart laugh, he wonders:

Cheer whom though? the hero whose heaven-handling flung me, f'oot trod
Me? or me that fought him? O which one? is it each one? That night, that year
Of now done darkness I wretch lay wrestling with (my God!) my God. (ll 12-14)

These last lines reference Jacob's wrestling with God at Peniel.⁵⁸ Jacob, who would not let the stranger go until he was blessed, is said to have contended with God and prevailed; he found victory in holding on. Jacob, of course, had already received a promise, already met God and survived, but in both of his encounters with God, Jacob is shocked—"Surely the Lord is in this place, and I knew it not" (Gen. 28:16)—and confused—"Tell me . . . thy name" (Gen. 32:27). Only in retrospect does

he realize, “I have seen God face to face and my life is preserved” (Gen. 32:30). In Hopkins’ poem, this Jacobean struggle culminates with the speaker voicing the words of Psalm 22, joining both the Psalmist and Christ on the cross in their confused cry of abandonment, and at the same time infusing it with a new light. Unlike Jacob who is staggered to find as the day breaks that he grapples with God, the speaker, who knew this at some level, is staggered to find he is not alone in this struggle. Christ too suffered before God, felt shame and abandonment, and cried out. The insight here is not that God uses suffering to purify us—the theodic answer immediately given—the insight is something both more intimate and apocalyptic.⁵⁹ The speaker finds that even in that “now done darkness” he was not alone, Christ was with him, more joltingly, *was* him. As he says in “That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire”, “I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am” (l 22). Christ occupied his position when he cried out from the cross. What Hopkins’ speaker sees is that God is where he least expected: God is *in* his suffering. Not only does his cry in the poem register the positive action of lamentation, it suggests that the lamentation is not simply spoken to God, it is spoken by God. In this way, Hopkins’ poem indicates that we can touch God in our suffering. And, yet, to touch God in this way does not explain our suffering or God’s justice; instead it legitimizes lamentation as an authentic moment in the struggle to love God by showing it to be a moment in God’s own life.

This essay began with the observation that theodicy of the standard philosophical sort has little to say to those experiencing existential suffering and hiddenness. As Mariani observes, Hopkins spent his life developing a theodicy and poetics that would be true not only to his mind but also his heart. I have argued that this ‘theodicy’, if that is the right title for it, is not the sort philosophers have commonly sought to articulate, and as a consequence might prove to be a more productive response to the existential problem. Hopkins’ is a practical theodicy lyrically expressed. One that speaks out

of and therefore into the intensity of existential suffering without attempting to explain it away. Like the prophets and poets of the scripture, he renders the problem in the form of lamentation. I have argued that Hopkins' poems of existential suffering, such as "Thou art indeed just" and "Carrion Comfort", effect identification with the speaker that has the potential to yield solidarity and strength by bringing readers into the suffering speaker's position to cry out against God. When Jesus's own experience of existential suffering is considered, the cry against God may be understood to be uttered by God, effecting a union in such suffering that is potentially redemptive.⁶⁰ The poems redeem, I think, in the same way Christ is said to redeem, by entering into and acknowledging the horror and confusion that are perhaps ineradicable elements of the human condition.⁶¹ To enter and acknowledge this condition, however, is not to explain it away or to justify it. Lyric, specifically, lyric of Hopkins' sort, informed by the biblical tradition of lament and incarnation, then, offers a means of encountering the inscrutable face of God even in the darkness of God's appalling absence.⁶²

¹ "God's Grandeur," l. 1. All Hopkins poems are cited from the text in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works*, ed. Catherine Philips (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

² Paul Mariani, *Hopkins: A Life* (New York: Viking, 2008) 3. Mariani's poetic, meditative biography of Hopkins has been a constant companion in the construction of this essay, providing insight into Hopkins life and spiritual journey.

³ Hopkins, "The Wreck of the Deutschland," l 237.

⁴ Hopkins, "I wake and feel," ll 6-8.

⁵ See Nagasawa's essay "Silence, Evil and Shusaku Endo" in this volume. For Nagasawa the experiential 'problem of divine absence' is raised when devout, as opposed to ordinary believers or simple nonbelievers, experience divine hiddenness when they suffer horrendous evil. Hopkins' suffering certainly creates serious self-loathing, but it probably doesn't rise to the level of horror as it is typically used in the discussion of the problem of evil. Otherwise, Hopkins' case fits Nagasawa's definition, since he is a devout believer and his experience of divine hiddenness from his existential suffering deepens that problem considerably.

⁶ For example, Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974); Marilyn Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1999), 181 ff.; Peter van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) 5-12.

⁷ *Wandering in Darkness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) 11.

⁸ Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser, eds., *Divine Hiddenness*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 3.

⁹ I use the phrase ‘existential suffering’ to cover both the experience of suffering and the experience of hiddenness. In Hopkins’ case, hiddenness is a significant source of suffering, because he desires God’s presence. God’s being hidden undermines his flourishing, giving him *prima facie* reason to despair. In general, the experience of hiddenness is a source of suffering for one who believes and desires the loving presence of God. *Existential* hiddenness, then, is a distinctly religious problem and inevitably involves existential suffering.

¹⁰ Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Sermons and Devotional Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Christopher Devlin, S.J. (London: Oxford University Press, 1959) 262.

¹¹ Sobolev, *The Split World of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 2011) 12.

¹² *Ibid.*, 287.

¹³ Hopkins, *Sermons*, 62.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 262.

¹⁵ I am not claiming that one couldn’t extract a theodicy from Hopkins’ prose and poetry (in fact, I think there is one and that Hopkins at some level trusted in it). Instead, I am arguing that whatever theodicy he may have articulated or accepted, his poems do not represent it as being existentially effective.

¹⁶ John Berryman, *John Berryman: Collected Poems 1937-1971*, ed. Charles Thornbury (New York: Farrar Strauss and Giroux, 1989) 179.

¹⁷ *New and Selected Essays*. (New York: New Directions, 1992) 21.

¹⁸ *Poems, Poets, Poetry: An Introduction and Anthology*. 3rd ed. (Boston: St. Martins, 2010) xl.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* xli.

²⁰ *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Selected Prose*, ed. Gerald Roberts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980) 137.

²¹ For a fascinating article on the hawk imagery see Gary Bouchard, “The Curious Case of Robert Southwell, Gerard Hopkins and a Princely Spanish Hawk” *Renascence* 51/3 (1999).

²² In her *Wandering in Darkness*, Eleonore Stump explores the way narrative discloses knowledge that is distinct from the third-person variety that is often the focus of philosophy in general and theodicy in particular. Her focus is on the way narrative communicates knowledge of persons—what she terms second-person knowledge. Her account complements what I am arguing here regarding lyric insofar as the experience of inhabiting the speaker’s place inevitably discloses knowledge of that person.

²³ Hopkins, “My own heart let me more have pity on.”

²⁴ I am not claiming here that Hopkins consciously emulated these biblical laments (except where it is explicit as in “Thou art indeed just”), only that they gave him practice for dealing with suffering that works its way into his poetry.

²⁵ *My Bright Abyss*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 53.

²⁶ There is a significant literature dedicated to the form and rhetorical function of lament in biblical sources. I will not be using the term technically in what follows, though I will be making reference to some of this scholarship to highlight important features of biblical paradigms.

²⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 260.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 260.

³⁰ *The Fragility of Goodness* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1986) 388.

³¹ I owe this image of stubborn love to C. Mandolfo's excellent treatment of lamentation in "Psalm 88 and the Holocaust: Lament in Search of a Divine Response" *Biblical Interpretation* 15 (2007) 163.

³² Wiman, 76.

³³ *Theological Reverberations of Faith*. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2002) 119).

³⁴ Walter Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament" in *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*. P. D. Miller ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) 104, 107.

³⁵ See Walter Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament" in *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, ed. P. D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995). Brueggemann's discussion of Job 21 [see "Theodicy in a Social Dimension" in *A Social Reading of the Old Testament*, ed. P. D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994) 174-196.] points out that that complaint is not directed to god overtly. To rail against injustice, is to appeal to justice and to God for redress (Cf. Brueggemann, *Theological Reverberations*, 118 f.

³⁶ *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*. ed. C. C. Abbott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955) 222.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 270.

³⁸ *Sermons*, 262.

³⁹ *Hopkins: A Life*, 415.

⁴⁰ *Sermons*, 197.

⁴¹ *Sermons*, 129.

⁴² Maria Lichtmann's article ["The Incarnational Aesthetic of Gerard Manley Hopkins" *Religion & Literature*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Spring, 1991) 37-50] admirably lays out some of the details.

⁴³ Hopkins, "The Blessed Virgin compared to the Air we Breathe," line 19.

⁴⁴ *Sermons*, 197.

⁴⁵ *Letters*, 175.

⁴⁶ *Sermons*, 154.

⁴⁷ *Sermons*, 254.

⁴⁸ E.g., *Sermons* 255. Hopkins directs himself to "see Christ's body nailed, consider the attachment of his will to God's will. Wish to be as bound to God's will in all things, in the attachment of your mind and attention to prayer and the duty in hand; the attachment of your affections to Christ our Lord and his wounds instead of any earthly objects."

⁴⁹ *Sermons*, 176. Here, he is recalling Father Whitty's remarks on this moment in the *Spiritual Exercises*.

⁵⁰ *The Correspondence of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Richard Watson Dixon*, ed. C. C. Abbott rev. ed. (Oxford: OUP, 1955)136-138

⁵¹ The lines are from "To seem a stranger seems my lot, my life" and "Patience" respectively.

⁵² *Draw Me into Your Friendship* (Saint Louis: The Institute for Jesuit Sources, 1996), 149-151.

⁵³ *Sermons*, 191, from notes for a planned commentary on *The Exercises*.

⁵⁴ *Sermons*, 244.

⁵⁵ I am not arguing that Hopkins explicitly sought to express these moments in Christ's experience in his poems of existential suffering or that he explicitly structured them on Ignatian meditation, only that given this background Hopkins seems to recognize that these places of darkness are not utterly empty of God.

⁵⁶ See also, Lamentations 3:10: "He was unto me as a bear lying in wait, and as a lion in secret places."

⁵⁷ Robert Alter, *The Wisdom Books*. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010) 46 note on Job 9:35.

⁵⁸ Cf. Sobolev, 191-196. My approach owes much to Sobolev's spectacular exposition of this poem, but where he sees the function of the last line as disclosing to Hopkins that he wrestles with God and that this God is his God, I suggest that the echo of Jesus's lament places him in much more intimate relation to God.

⁵⁹ Goss, Erin M. “‘Almost unmade’: Hopkins and the Body Apocalyptic,” 49/1 (Spring 2011) 83-103. Goss’s larger argument is that the body itself is what enables us to persist through this displacement.

⁶⁰ Sobolev rejects the possibility of a redemptive reading of Hopkins’ dark sonnets, arguing instead that they contain an irreducible tension between orthodox and heterodox elements (cf., 263-276). As I suggest, the very tension Sobolev rightly identifies is what gives these poems redemptive potential. Acknowledging the vertiginous position of one who experiences suffering, the poems make space for this experience within the struggle to find and follow God.

⁶¹ Marilyn McCord Adams’s notion of horror captures this aspect of the human condition and its implications for Christology and the problem of evil, see *Christ of Horrors*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁶² I am grateful for encouraging feedback from the audience at “The Hopkins Conference” at Regis College in 2014; Jennie-Rebecca Falcetta who read and commented on the paper; and especially Joaquín Kuhn, whose comments and correspondence about earlier instantiations of this essay helped me avoid a number of errors. Finally, Margie DeWeese-Boyd for her support throughout the process.

