

Reading Hopkins after Hubble: The Durability of Ignatian Creation Spirituality

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The Victorian poet Gerard Manley Hopkins already demonstrated a special sensitivity to nature as a young Anglican. But his conversion to Catholicism, followed by his formation as a Jesuit, nurtured a creation spirituality that moved him from the rather cold view of the cosmos typical of his Victorian era to a vibrant sense of God intimately revealed in nature. This new sense of being a creature involved in an intimate personal relationship with the Creator comes from Hopkins' appropriation of the creation spirituality of Ignatius of Loyola. After reviewing the evolution of worldviews from the medieval synthesis melded with the Newtonian mechanical model (the Victorian picture) to our contemporary cosmic "story," this article then samples poems that illustrate the creation spirituality that Hopkins absorbed from Ignatius' vision. This vision is remarkably in tune with the new sense of the place of the human creature in the cosmic story that the sciences now tell regarding the emergence of matter, life, and persons.

Keywords: Gerard Manley Hopkins, Ignatian spirituality, creation spirituality, science and theology, nature and poetry

THE "Hubble" of the title is not the telescope-bearing satellite with corrective lenses that we launched some years ago. The Hubble I mean is the man after whom that piece of hardware was named, Edwin Hubble, who in 1928 organized the data that made it clear for the first time that we live in an expanding universe. In this sense, "Hubble" provides a convenient marker to help us focus on the worldview that opened up for us during the last two-thirds of the twentieth century. The world picture that the natural sciences is giving us presents a bracing challenge, to say the

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least, to religious sensibilities that have been nurtured by the late medieval synthesis that wedded biblical faith with the classical cosmology built on Plato, Aristotle, and Ptolemy—the very synthesis that was still informing the faith of Catholics born before 1950.¹

Now why, in this context, bring up the Jesuit Victorian Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–89)? I have discovered that one of my favorite poets makes curiously good sense the more I learn the story of the cosmos as told by our contemporary natural sciences. Reflecting on this new pertinence of a familiar voice has led me to some new convictions about the relationships among religion, cosmology, imagination, and creation spirituality.

I will explore these convictions in four movements. First, I will sketch our contemporary worldview as I see it emerging. Second, I will invite you to listen to some poetry of Hopkins within this new worldview (yes, please read the poetry *aloud*). Third, I will explain why the imagery of a Victorian poet makes so much sense against the background of our worldview, which is so very different from that of his own age. Fourth, I will suggest what I think are some implications for us Christians in an emergent universe.

I. Our Current Worldview: The Universe Story

If we quickly summarize some of the obvious developments that have led to our contemporary view of the cosmos, it is clear that we have experienced a progressive series of displacements—and recently, I will argue, a surprising restoration.² The universe that the Western world inherited from our

¹ For a helpful discussion of this synthesis, see N. Max Wildiers, *The Theologian and His Universe: Theology and Cosmology from the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. Paul Dunphy (New York: Seabury Press, 1982). Another classic and accessible treatment of this synthesis is C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964). The point of Lewis' subtitle is that one needs to be introduced to the late medieval world picture to understand medieval and Renaissance literature.

² My portrayal of the contemporary worldview derives from a wide variety of sources. For a recent comprehensive survey of the full sweep of theologizing regarding creation, from the biblical traditions into the early twenty-first century, see Anne M. Clifford, "Creation," in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, ed. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 201–53. For a thoroughgoing treatment of the interface between Darwin's argument in *On the Origin of Species* and the Nicene Creed, see Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014). A top climatologist, James Hansen, has written an account of climate change that is both powerfully personal and accessibly technical: *Storms of My Grandchildren* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009). For concrete examples of the extinction of species occurring in our own day, see Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth*

pre-Christian Greek ancestors was *geocentric*. The Ptolemaic model placed the earth at the center, circled by the moon, the sun, planets, and the heavenly sphere of the stars. Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543) overturned this with his hypothesis that the sun is at the center, with the earth as one of the planets (the third, after Mercury and Venus), moving around the sun. Our magnificent moon is no planet at all but merely an earth-centered satellite, one of some sixty-one moons (and counting) in our solar system.

Isaac Newton (1642–1727) proposed a model of the world that explained all we see around us as matter governed by mechanics and gravity. This model seemed able to explain all motion and change, microscopic and macroscopic, as a matter of mass and force reducible to mathematical formulae. We could think of ourselves as smaller machines within the big machine—the most sophisticated machines, but explainable mechanically nonetheless. God was still in the picture, but now distantly. With the machine model, Western culture was moving toward the Deist way of imagining God as an uninvolved watchmaker. There was still room for the human spirit, but thanks to a way of thinking that René Descartes (1596–1650) had taught us prior to Newton, it seemed more like a ghost in a machine.³

From Charles Darwin (1809–82) came a theory that claimed that we evolved from less complicated forms of life through a process of random mutation and natural selection of the fittest. Thus by Hopkins' time in the mid-nineteenth century, Copernicus had decentered us, Newton had mechanized us, Darwin had dethroned us—and Freud would soon suggest that we were not even the sovereign rulers of our personal conscious life.

Later we learned that not only are we not the center of our solar system but that our centerpiece, the sun, is a rather ordinary middle-aged star (five billion years old with about five billion years left to go), part of an arm of a

Extinction: An Unnatural History (New York: Henry Holt, 2014). Some earlier works that I have found especially helpful are Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (New York: Bantam, 1988); Timothy Ferris, *Coming of Age in the Milky Way* (New York: Doubleday, 1988); John Boslough, *Masters of Time: Cosmology at the End of Innocence* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1992); Ian Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science*, The Gifford Lectures 1989–91, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Harper & Doubleday, 1992); Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993). For a charming reflection on how faith can relate to the cosmic story in the mind of a contemporary Jesuit astronomer, see George Coyne, SJ, "The Fertile Universe: Science and Religion," *Origins* 35/36, February 23, 2006, 601–6.

³ On the relationship between Newtonian cosmology and Christian faith, see Michael J. Buckley, SJ, "The Newtonian Settlement and the Origin of Atheism," in *Physics, Philosophy, and Theology: A Common Quest for Understanding*, ed. Robert J. Russell, William R. Stoeger, and George V. Coyne (Vatican City: Vatican Observatory, 1988), 81–102.

spiral galaxy composed of some 100 billion other stars. And even our magnificent Milky Way galaxy is not the center of anything but just one of as many galaxies as there are stars in our galaxy. As we became acquainted with the Andromeda galaxy, some two million light-years away, we came to learn that this unimaginably distant entity is one of a couple dozen galaxies that, distant as they are, are close enough to the Milky Way and far enough from most other galaxies that astronomers call them the Local Group!

When Edwin Hubble's discovery in 1929 of the redshift of distant galaxies led us to understand that those galaxies are moving apart from one another at rates approaching the speed of light, our sense of cosmic displacement intensified even further.⁴ This data led to the Big Bang hypothesis, which holds that when one reads the expansion of the universe backward, one comes to a point some 13.7 billion years ago when all of space and time began to emerge from what Stephen Hawking has called a "singularity."⁵

And now, just when these unimaginable dimensions of time and space threatened to maximize our sense of human smallness, lateness, and insignificance, new insights have begun to articulate a cosmic story that promises to restore our sense of dignity.

If the size and age of the universe had begun to daunt us, astrophysicists are now telling us that the cosmos *had* to be as old and as big as it is to prepare for us. It had to be several billion years old because it took several generations of billion-year-old stars to cook up the elements, especially carbon, needed to produce the kind of life we are. All the atoms in our body were constructed in now burnt-out stars; and it took this long to come up with those elements. That accounts for the age.

As for the size, the emergent cosmos had to expand at precisely the rate it did. If it had expanded just a bit more *slowly*, it would have collapsed on itself, without sufficient time for the evolution of human life. If it had expanded just a bit *faster*, it would have become completely dissipated, yielding no galaxies, no stars, no planets, and consequently, no carbon-based life. And so, given the necessary rate of expansion and the necessary age to mature the elements and structures of life, the cosmos does indeed have to be as big and as old as it is to accommodate us. Astronomers call this the cosmological anthropic

⁴ "Redshift" is the apparent increase in the wavelength of radiation emitted by a receding celestial body as a consequence of the Doppler effect. It shows up on a spectroscope as a shifting toward the red end of the spectrum.

⁵ The precise number—13.7 billion years—comes from a newspaper account of a report of readings from the Wilkinson Microwave Anisotropy Probe, a robotic instrument with two telescopes that sweep the sky every six months in an orbit one million miles from Earth (a *Baltimore Sun* article carried in the *Omaha World-Herald*, March 17, 2006).

principle, the interpretation of the cosmos as having been “fine-tuned” to produce human life.⁶

Small as we are, late as we are, marginal as we seem to be in time and space, we are nonetheless one of the glories of the cosmos and intimately related to all of it. Now we understand that the machine model based on Newton’s physics, for all the genuine and usable truth it contained, turns out to be only a partial account of the way things are. Darwin’s theory of the origin of species is partial as well in its account of the development of life. Today we are beginning to understand that, long before the emergence of life, *nonliving* matter went through a long and elaborate development, that the stars have life cycles, that the entire cosmos has been evolving since the beginning and, indeed, is still emergent.

We are learning to see ourselves as the universe, at long last, becoming conscious of itself. We are intimately related to the life systems around us. The paradox is that the stranger the universe becomes, the more we discover it to be our home.

That, briefly, is my amateur attempt to summarize some aspects of our current world picture. Now listen to how strangely pertinent our Victorian poet sounds against this current background. Although Hopkins lived in a world still stunned by the decenterings of Copernicus and Darwin, and the mechanizing of Newton, he saw reality through quite different glasses—especially after his Roman Catholic conversion. And the lenses were not simply Christian, but precisely Ignatian lenses. Listening to a string of complete poems makes this clear.

II. Some Poems From Hopkins

In an early poem, “Nondum,” written at Oxford when Hopkins was only twenty-two, just a few months before his conversion to Roman Catholicism, the poet expresses directly the worldview of the dominant culture around him. Against that picture he places his own, slightly more hopeful view of the cosmos. This comes through in his modulation from the world as “we” (the age) experience it to the world that “I” experience. While there is scarcely a hint of the experimental boldness in imagery and rhythm that we meet in his mature work, the youthful poet already wields conventional rhymed iambic tetrameter as well as most of his Victorian peers.

⁶ For an excellent discussion of the cosmological anthropic principle and theology, see Christopher F. Mooney, SJ, “The Anthropic Principle in Cosmology and Theology,” *Horizons* 21, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 105–29.

Nondum

Verily Thou art a God that hidest Thyself. Isa. 45:15

God, though to Thee our psalm we raise
No answering voice comes from the skies;
To Thee the trembling sinner prays
But no forgiving voice replies;
Our prayer seems lost in desert ways,
Our hymn in the vast silence dies.

We see the glories of the earth
But not the hand that wrought them all;
Night to a myriad worlds gives birth,
Yet like a lighted empty hall
Where stands no host at door or hearth
Vacant creation's lamps appall.
We guess; we clothe Thee, unseen King,
With attributes we deem are meet;
Each in his own imagining
Sets up a shadow in Thy seat;
Yet know not how our gifts to bring,
Where seek Thee with unsandalled feet.

And still th'unbroken silence broods
While ages and while aeons run,
As erst upon chaotic floods
The Spirit hovered ere the sun
Had called the seasons' changeful moods
And life's first germs from death had won.

And still th'abysses infinite
Surround the peak from which we gaze.
Deep calls to deep, and blackest night
Giddies the soul with blinding daze
That dares to cast its searching sight
On being's dread and vacant maze.

And Thou art silent, whilst Thy world
Contentends about its many creeds
And Hosts confront with flags unfurled

And zeal is flushed and pity bleeds
 And truth is heard, with tears impearled,
 A moaning voice among the reeds.

My hand upon my lips I lay;
 The breast's desponding sob I quell;
 I move along life's tomb-decked way
 And listen to the passing bell
 Summoning men from speechless day
 To death's more silent, darker spell.

Oh! till Thou givest that sense beyond,
 To shew Thee that Thou art, and near,
 Let patience with her chastening wand
 Dispel the doubt and dry the tear;
 And lead me child-like by the hand
 If still in darkness not in fear.

Speak! whisper to my watching heart
 One word—as when a mother speaks
 Soft, when she sees her infant start,
 Till dimpled joy steals o'er its cheeks.
 Then, to behold Thee as Thou art,
 I'll wait till morn eternal breaks.⁷

The night sky works as an image in two ways: *literally*, as the most vivid way a human being can experience the larger cosmos in its vastness, and *metaphorically* for a worldview that pervades the culture around him. The speaker is himself immersed in that worldview, yet somehow, in a faith not yet maturely Christian, he finds strength to hope beyond the cosmic coldness.⁸ There is,

⁷ Norman H. MacKenzie, ed., *The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 91–93. Unless stated otherwise, the poems of Hopkins quoted in this article are taken from this definitive edition of his poetry. For the most part, when I supply notes on Hopkins' diction, the information is taken from the notes that appear in MacKenzie's commentary on the particular poem (the latter half of MacKenzie's edition of Hopkins' poetry consists of such commentary). I am aware of the more recent edition of Hopkins' works by Catherine Phillips (rev. ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). However, I have chosen to stay with the MacKenzie edition, as representing the version of Hopkins' work familiar to most readers.

⁸ Joseph J. Feeney, SJ ("The Collapse of Hopkins' Jesuit Worldview: A Conflict between Moralism and Incarnationalism," in *Gerard Manley Hopkins Annual*, ed. Michael Sundermeier [Omaha, NE: Creighton University, 1992], 105–26) alludes briefly to the

perhaps, no better expression of the *Zeitgeist* to which he refers than the work of another Oxford alumnus, Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach," written fifteen years before. It is instructive to hear it in its entirety.

Dover Beach

The sea is calm to-night.
 The tide is full, the moon lies fair
 Upon the straits;—on the French coast the light
 Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,
 Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.
 Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!
 Only, from the long line of spray

Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,
 Listen! you hear the grating roar
 Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
 At their return, up the high strand,
 Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
 With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
 The eternal note of sadness in.

Sophocles long ago
 Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought
 Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
 Of human misery; we
 Find also in the sound a thought,
 Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The Sea of Faith
 Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
 Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.
 But now I only hear
 Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
 Retreating, to the breath
 Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
 And naked shingles of the world.

worldview of this poem (109), but to make a different point, namely, Hopkins' moralistic preoccupation with self before his Catholic conversion.

Ah, love, let us be true
 To one another! for the world, which seems
 To lie before us like a land of dreams,
 So various, so beautiful, so new,
 Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
 Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
 And we are here as on a darkling plain
 Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
 Where ignorant armies clash by night.⁹

Now hear this from Hopkins, some twenty-six years after Arnold's "Dover Beach," and some eleven years after his own "Nondum." Like Arnold's poem, it involves a seashore, a consideration of tides and moon, and meditation on the human condition. The poet is across England from Dover, on the north shore of Wales, walking westward toward the resort town of Rhyl, where industrial revolutionaries came to play.¹⁰

The Sea and the Skylark

On ear and ear two noises too old to end
 Trench—right, the tide that ramps against the shore;
 With a flood or a fall, low lull-off or all roar,
 Frequenting there while moon shall wear and wend.
 Left hand, off land, I hear the lark ascend,
 His rash-fresh re-winded new-skeinèd score
 In crisps of curl off wild winch whirl, and pour
 And pelt music, till none's to spill nor spend.

How these two shame this shallow and frail town!
 How wring right out our sordid turbid time,
 Being pure! We, life's pride and cared-for crown,

Have lost that cheer and charm of earth's past prime:
 Our make and making break, are breaking, down
 To man's last dust, drain fast towards man's first slime.

⁹ Miriam Allott and Robert H. Super, eds., *Matthew Arnold*, The Oxford Authors (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 135–36.

¹⁰ Norman H. MacKenzie, *A Reader's Guide to Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 73–74.

In both works, the response of the poet—or the persona of the poem—is prompted by a seaside scene involving moon and tide. Both poets dwell on the sound of the ebbing tide and on its primal antiquity. Both even use the word “roar”—Arnold as referring to the ebb, Hopkins apparently to the flow. And both lament a failing of faith. But with what a difference! In Arnold, the outgoing tide represents the recession of the Sea of Faith as a historical fait accompli. In Hopkins, the tide—in its *rise* as well as its fall—is emblematic of inanimate nature’s obedient response to the Creator’s design. Whereas Arnold laments in a kind of fatalistic way what he perceives as the inevitable ebb of faith, Hopkins expresses his faith that human beings have a vocation as “life’s pride and cared-for crown” to respond to creation and Creator with the purity of the sea and the skylark. Being one’s creaturely self is what it is all about, but in the case of the human species it is a much more complicated, and (typically) much less successful, matter. Arnold is sad about what he considers an inevitable ebbing. Hopkins is sad about what he considers the human abuse of freedom (“Our make and making break, are breaking, down / To man’s last dust, drain fast towards man’s first slime”).

Now listen to “Starlight Night,” also written in that same eleventh year after the writing of “Nondum.” Here Hopkins can contemplate the nighttime cosmos with a response that literally turns some of that earlier poem’s imagery on its head. Now the night sky invites him to a play of mind that is able to see the stars in terms of a series of robust and positive metaphors. (To hear this sonnet, it helps to know Hopkins’ more unusual diction: “delves” is a dialect term for quarries, or mines; “whitebeam” and “abele” [pronounced like *able*] are kinds of trees whose leaves have bright undersides that can flash in the wind; “shocks” are piles of grain sheaves.)¹¹ To follow the imagery, it helps to think of it as a series of thirteen different ways of looking at a starscape.

Starlight Night

Look at the stars! look, look up at the skies!
 O look at all the fire-folk sitting in the air!
 The bright boroughs, the circle-citadels there!
 Down in dim woods the diamond delves! Elves’-eyes!
 The grey lawns cold where gold where quickgold lies!
 Wind-beat whitebeam! airy abeles set on flare!
 Flake-doves sent floating forth at a farmyard scare!—
 Ah well! it is all a purchase, all is a prize.

¹¹ These notes come mainly from MacKenzie, *Poetical Works*, 365.

Buy then! bid then!—What?—Prayer, patience, alms, vows.
 Look, look: a May-mess, like on orchard boughs!
 Look! March-bloom, like on mealed-with-yellow sallows!
 These are indeed the barn; withindoors house
 The shocks. This piece-bright paling shuts the spouse
 Christ home, Christ and his mother and all his hallows.

Where in “Nondum” the night sky appalls, in “Starlight Night” the scene invites a play of fantasy. In the former, the heavens were “like a lighted empty hall / Where stands no host at door or hearth”; here, the stars become peepholes in a barn revealing the light of a joyful feast unfolding within.

Here is another sonnet from that remarkable 1877 vintage (in this selection, “reck” is the obsolete short form of “reckon,” and “rod” means “scepter”).

God’s Grandeur

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
 It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
 It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
 Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
 Generations 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.

And, for all this, nature is never spent.
 There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
 And though the last light off the black West went
 Oh, morning at the brown brink eastward, springs—
 Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
 World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

The speaker is at once at home and not at home in the world. He can use the modern image of electricity and the ancient one of olive oil production to speak of the manifestation of God immanent in creation, in this case in the experience of a lightning storm. The second quatrain sketches what Hopkins saw, the nineteenth-century industrial, exploitative disregard of that manifestation. Folks have fouled the nest. Then the sestet celebrates

nature's capacity to regenerate itself, thanks to the nurturing, strikingly feminine, divine presence.

A darker variation on this theme comes in another sonnet, "Ribblesdale." It helps to know that, in the brief decade since Hopkins' studies at Stonyhurst, the lower courses of the river Ribble "had fallen victims to the industrial prosperity of Lancashire,"¹² and the rich salmon spawning in its waters had virtually ceased. (Strange words: "throng" is used as an adjective, and "louched" is a dialect word for "slouch" or "slouching.")

Ribblesdale

Earth, sweet Earth, sweet landscape, with leaves throng
 And louched low grass, heaven that dost appeal
 To with no tongue to plead, no heart to feel;
 That canst but only be, but dost that long—

Thou canst but be, but that thou well dost; strong
 Thy plea with him who dealt, nay does now deal,
 Thy lovely dale down thus and thus bids reel
 Thy river, and o'er gives all to rack or wrong.

And what is Earth's eye, tongue, or heart else, where
 Else, but in dear and dogged man? Ah, the heir
 To his own selfbent so bound, so tied to his turn,

To thriftless reave both our rich round world bare
 And none reck of world after, this bids wear
 Earth brows of such care, care and dear concern.

Theodore Roszak found the line about people being "Earth's eye, tongue, or heart" so pertinent that he used it as an epigraph for his book *The Voice of the Earth: An Exploration of Ecopsychology* (Simon & Schuster, 1992). Like the Romantics, the poet apostrophizes impersonal nature. But like the Metaphysical poets, he can self-consciously confront the poetic convention with philosophical thoughts about impersonal being literally communicating with the speaker's reflexive self-awareness, only to lament the moral abdication of this conscious part of creation. The contemporary maxim of evolutionary sensibility, "I am the earth," already finds expression in this Victorian sonnet.

¹² MacKenzie, *Poetical Works*, 432.

Sometimes the human creature cooperates. Hopkins reflects on that possibility in his sonnet celebrating the life of a Spanish Jesuit brother, who died in 1617 after having spent some forty years at the college of Montesion, Majorca, serving as doorkeeper or receptionist. (“Brand” is an archaic word meaning “sword.”)

In honour of St. Alphonsus Rodriguez

Honour is flashed off exploit, so we say;
 And those strokes once that gashed flesh or galled shield
 Should tongue that time now, trumpet now that field,
 And, on the fighter, forge his glorious day.
 On Christ they do and on the martyr may;
 But be the war within, the brand we wield
 Unseen, the heroic breast not outward steeled,
 Earth hears no hurtle then from fiercest fray.

Yet God (that hews mountain and continent,
 Earth, all, out; who, with trickling increment,
 Veins violets and tall trees makes more and more)
 Could crowd career with conquest while there went
 Those years and years by of world without event
 That in Majorca Alfonso watched the door.

Here the vision of human continuity with nature is so complete that the poet can see the humble task of door watching as a human collaboration with the same divine energy that works the microcosmic growing processes of violets and marshals the movement of continents (the heaving of tectonic plates, we might say today).

We have followed the emergence of Hopkins’ worldview—from his experience of a nearly vacant universe as a twenty-two-year-old, followed by a visit to Arnold’s “Dover Beach,” then on through five sonnets displaying the mature man’s robust sense of a universe charged with the grandeur of God, with humanity as “life’s pride and cared-for crown,” but mostly misbehaving. Where did that worldview come from?¹³

¹³ At this point, I realize that what I mean by “worldview” is something other than what Feeney means in “The Collapse of Hopkins’ Jesuit Worldview.” By “worldview” I mean the poet’s *understanding* of God’s presence in creation and creatures, whereas Feeney seems to mean the poet’s *experience* of God’s presence in creation and creatures. In the latter sense Hopkins’ Jesuit worldview does indeed collapse during the Dublin years, but I would argue that the poet’s *understanding* of how God relates to the

III. The Sources of Hopkins' Worldview

Now we come to the interesting question. How does it happen that Hopkins, who as a person was never fully at home anywhere he lived, in England or in Ireland, nevertheless always had a strong sense of his identity as a creature in the cosmos?¹⁴ In the face of the cold worldview of his Victorian age (reflected in Arnold's "Dover Beach" and in his own "Nondum"), how did he manage to nurture a faith in a God who loved him through everything around him, even through what he had earlier perceived as a cold universe? The short answer is that his faith was tied not to cosmology but to a worldview that was indeed rooted in the late medieval synthesis and yet mediated by the fresh synthesis of the Renaissance mystic Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the religious community Hopkins joined in 1868.¹⁵ A brief look at the text of the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius will substantiate that assertion.

As a manual to be used by a director working one-on-one with a retreatant, this text presumes a vision of the relationship between God, humanity, and the world that comes out of a worldview shared among educated Catholic Europeans of the early sixteenth century. When, therefore, we look for Ignatius' view of creation in this text, we find it simplified, not spelled out. In the *Exercises* the writer is not *teaching* about Creator and creation; he is working with that shared doctrine in a project that intends to help a retreatant make important decisions within the context of that shared faith vision. In other words, the implied reader of the *Exercises*, the director, knows the Thomistic synthesis regarding creation, to which Ignatius can allude without needing to spell it out.

Ignatius expresses his world picture chiefly in two passages that virtually bookend the *Exercises*: a half-page reflection called "Principle and Foundation," standing at the head of the First Week, and at the very end of the Fourth Week, a two-page exercise called "Contemplation to Attain Love." "Principle and Foundation" follows.

world endures even in the desolation of the Dublin years, as demonstrated powerfully in the sonnet celebrating the Creator's presence in the world and in the life of Alphonsus Rodriguez, written a year before Hopkins' death.

¹⁴ My reflection on this question owes much to the stimulating study of Walter J. Ong, SJ, *Hopkins, the Self, and God* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986).

¹⁵ As Hopkins himself made clear in his own correspondence and notes, another powerful influence on his vision was the work of twelfth-century Franciscan theologian John Duns Scotus (on this see, for example, Ong, *Hopkins, the Self, and God*, 106–12). In the larger picture, I am convinced, this was for him a nuancing of the contemplative vision already established in his life through the *Exercises* of Ignatius.

Human beings are created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by means of doing this to save their souls.

The other things on the face of the earth are created for the human beings, to help them in the pursuit of the end for which they are created.

From this it follows that we ought to use these things to the extent that they help us toward our end, and free ourselves from them to the extent that they hinder us from it.

To attain this it is necessary to make ourselves indifferent to all created things, in regard to everything which is left to our free will and is not forbidden. Consequently, on our own part we ought not to seek health rather than sickness, wealth rather than poverty, honor rather than dishonor, a long life rather than a short one, and so on in all other matters.

Rather, we ought to desire and choose only that which is more conducive to the end for which we are created.¹⁶

On the face of it, and to ears sensitized by current ecological discussions, this text appears stunningly anthropocentric and remarkably devoid of Christian reference. In fact, its thrust is better labeled *theocentric*. For the author's point is to highlight the presupposition that human reality is primarily a matter of relationships, with the relationship to Creator being the most important one for human creatures to consider as they exercise their privileged gift of freedom. As for the absence of explicitly Christian reference, that can be explained by the context. The whole thrust of the *Exercises* is explicitly Christian, its purpose being to facilitate the retreatant's appropriation of, and personal response to, God's self-revelation in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Ignatius' point here is not to *instruct* in some complete way; it is to *remind* director and retreatant, in a very abstract and suggestive way, of the presumed set of relationships that constitutes the framework for any Christian reflection and decision making.¹⁷

All of this becomes clear in "Contemplation to Attain Love" (*SpEx* 230–37), the last of the *Exercises*. The love to be attained here is, of course, not *God's* love for *us* (which is given, not attained) but human love of God (which always needs coaching). It begins with preliminary observations that love ought to manifest itself more by deeds than by words and that love consists in mutual sharing between the persons involved. Ignatius invites the retreatant to "ask for what I desire," namely, "the interior knowledge of all the great

¹⁶ George E. Ganss, SJ, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius: A Translation and Commentary* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992), sec. 23. I will cite this English language edition henceforth, and citations will be included parenthetically in the body of my text in an abbreviated form by section number (e.g., *SpEx* 23).

¹⁷ For a full commentary on this passage, see Joseph A. Tetlow, SJ, "The Fundamentum: Creation in the Principle and Foundation," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 21, no. 4 (September 1989): 1–53.

good I have received, in order that, stirred to profound gratitude, I may become able to love and serve the Divine Majesty in all things." In other words, if one wants to grow in the love of God, one must pay attention to God's gifts.

To provide a vehicle for expanding on that prayer, Ignatius then presents four points. The first point goes like this:

I will call back into my memory the gifts I have received—my creation, redemption, and other gifts particular to myself. I will ponder with deep affection how much God our Lord has done for me, and how much he has given me of what he possesses, and consequently how he, the same Lord, desires to give me even his very self, in accordance with his divine design.

Then I will reflect on myself, and consider what I on my part ought in all reason and justice to offer and give to the Divine Majesty, namely, all my possessions, and myself along with them. I will speak as one making an offering with deep affection, and say:

"Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and all my will—all that I have and possess. You, Lord, have given all that to me. I now give it back to you, O Lord. All of it is yours. Dispose of it according to your will. Give me love of yourself along with your grace, for that is enough for me." (*SpEx* 234)

As in "Principle and Foundation," the language is generic, the framework abstract, but the format is designed to be filled with the concreteness of the retreatant's own personalized version of the Jesus story and the remembered experiences of the retreatant's own life story.

The retreatant is invited to interpret his or her whole personal experience as a gift of God, calling for personal donation in response, as expressed in that familiar *Suscipe* prayer quoted above ("Take, Lord, and receive . . .").

But that is only the beginning. Ignatius refuses to restrict this reflection to the area of personal history. In the second point, he contextualizes the personal within the cosmic:

I will consider how God dwells in creatures; in the elements, giving them existence; in the plants, giving them life; in the animals, giving them sensation; in human beings, giving them intelligence; and finally, how in this way he dwells also in myself, giving me existence, life, sensation, and intelligence; and even further, making me his temple, since I am created as a likeness and image of the Divine Majesty. Then once again I will reflect on myself, in the manner described in the first point, or in any other way I feel to be better. (*SpEx* 235)

Clearly here we glimpse a vision that places the human creature within the whole community of creatures, sharing materiality, life, and sensation with

other creatures, and gifted with a special kind of consciousness that gives the human a special role—"Earth's eye, tongue, . . . heart," as Hopkins puts it in "Ribblesdale."

Then, to ensure that the retreatant does not simply wallow in the wonder of cosmic metaphysics and that these considerations remain rooted in the larger vision of divine love inviting human response, Ignatius suggests a third point:

I will consider how God labors and works for me in all the creatures on the face of the earth; that is, he acts in the manner of one who is laboring. For example, he is working in the heavens, elements, plants, fruits, cattle, and all the rest—giving them their existence, conserving them, concurring with their vegetative and sensitive activities, and so forth. Then I will reflect on myself [i.e., as in the first point]. (*SpEx* 236)

Finally, Ignatius invites the retreatant to take yet another "run" at all of the above, this time from the perspective of God as the source of whatever goodness one experiences in life:

The Fourth Point. I will consider how all good things and gifts descend from above; for example, my limited power from the supreme and Infinite Power above and so of justice, goodness, piety, mercy, and so forth—just as the rays come down from the sun, or the rains from their source. Then I will finish by reflecting on myself, as has been explained. I will conclude with a colloquy and an Our Father. (*SpEx* 237)

This vision of a loving Creator intimately present to creatures, especially the human creature, shows itself elsewhere in the *Exercises*, in places that might surprise the first-time reader (i.e., in the preliminary Annotations and in the meditation on personal sin). We will look at three examples.

First, in the fifteenth prenote to the person directing the retreatant, Ignatius advises the director to get out of the way and let the Creator work directly with the creature (the person making the retreat):

During these Spiritual Exercises when a person is seeking God's will, it is more appropriate and far better that the Creator and Lord himself should communicate himself to the devout soul, embracing it in love and praise, and disposing it for the way which will enable the soul to serve him better in the future. Accordingly, the one giving the Exercises ought not to lean or incline in either direction but rather, while standing by like the pointer of a scale in equilibrium, to allow the Creator to deal immediately with the creature and the creature with its Creator and Lord. (*SpEx* 15.3-6)

The connection with the vision of “Contemplation to Attain Love” should be obvious.

In a second example, the meditation on the history of sin ends with the recommendation of a direct conversation with Jesus expressed in this language:

Imagine Christ our Lord suspended on the cross before you, and converse with him in colloquy: How is it that he, although he is the Creator, has come to make himself a human being? How is it that he has passed from eternal life to death here in time, and to die in this way for Christ?

In a similar way, reflect on yourself and ask: What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What ought I to do for Christ? (*SpEx* 53.1–2)

Here we find that understanding of the divinity communicating with the creature in the self-giving of Jesus, which Ignatius, like Paul and John, found at the heart of his Christian understanding of the human creature in the cosmos.

In the third and final example, one of the strongest images of the human connection with the rest of creation occurs in what seems at first an unlikely place, the meditation on personal sinfulness. Here, after a reflection on one’s own story of sinfulness and on the dignity of the One sinned against (e.g., comparing “God’s justice with my iniquity, God’s goodness with my malice”), Ignatius presents a final point to the retreatant:

The Fifth Point. This is an exclamation of wonder and surging emotion, uttered as I reflect on all creatures and wonder how they have allowed me to live and have preserved me in life. The angels: How is it that, although they are the swords of God’s justice, they have borne with me, protected me, and prayed for me? The saints: How is it that they have interceded and prayed for me? Likewise the heavens, the sun, the moon, the stars, and the elements; the fruits, birds, fishes, and animals. And the earth: How is it that it has not opened up and swallowed me, creating new hells for me to suffer forever? (*SpEx* 60)

Here, when Ignatius attempts to help the retreatant taste the chaos of sin, as alienation from God springing from the abuse of freedom, he does it in terms of the relationship with the community of nature that sin violates. The retreatant is called to a cry of wonder that, even as sinner, a person knows the divine presence and support mediated by the rest of the cosmos.

Students of Hopkins know, of course, that for our Victorian poet this sense of God present and communicating through every creature was heightened by his zest for the theology of the twelfth-century writer John Duns Scotus. But there can be no doubt that the primary source of Hopkins’ creation spirituality is the gospel vision as mediated by the *Exercises* of Saint Ignatius.

This summary presents by no means all of the ways that the *Exercises* of Ignatius express the creation spirituality that informed Hopkins' sense of the cosmos.¹⁸ It should be sufficient, though, to illustrate the points of resonance with his poetry: (1) the sense that humanity is part of nature, (2) the sense that all creatures mediate the presence and love of God, (3) the conviction that humankind is equipped through self-consciousness and freedom to be the most responsive of creatures, (4) the awareness that people, nonetheless, regularly abuse that privilege, especially by inattention to the gifts, which in turn leads to ingratitude and selfish behavior violating the network of relationships with God and other creatures, and (5) the awareness that renewed conversion to one's creaturehood is always available through response to the love of God revealed in Jesus.

IV. Some Afterthoughts

The poetry of Hopkins is an important reminder that Christian faith is not first of all about cosmology; it is about an experience of the revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth as that has been passed on and celebrated in community. Given that experience and its attendant highly personal worldview, the believer can find a home in the world. Then science and cosmology become further illuminations of an already meaningful universe. Even Saint Thomas' famous five ways (*Summa Theologiae* I, q. 2, a. 3), after all, were not proofs for the existence of God, but arguments meant to show that Christian talk about a God who can reveal is not unreasonable.¹⁹

The Christian image of self in the cosmos is profoundly personal. Our Western culture is divided in its approach to cosmological questions. One can interpret the world from the atomistic point of view, which yields a reductionist picture of the cosmos. Or one can approach it from a holistic point of view, discovering the sense of direction described by the anthropic principle. The Christian sense of creation encourages the latter. We need to restate that worldview within the common creation story now emerging from the sciences.

¹⁸ For example, Ignatius' discussion of "swearing by a creature" in his section on the General Examen (*SpEx* 39): "To swear by a creature is more permissible for persons spiritually far advanced than for those less advanced. The perfect, through constant contemplation and enlightenment of their understanding, more readily consider, meditate, and contemplate God our Lord as being present in every creature by his essence, presence, and power. Thus when they swear by a creature, they are more able and better disposed than the imperfect to render respect and reverence to their Creator and Lord."

¹⁹ On this point, see Lubor Velecky, Aquinas' Five Arguments in the "Summa Theologiae" 1a2, 3 Studies in Philosophical Theology 9 (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1994), esp. 34–67; 113–34.

It is time that we recognize that the worldview generated by contemporary natural science is not simply an extension of the worldview of the Enlightenment. Einstein, Hubble, and the rest have moved us from a stable, mechanical cosmos to a developing, organically related worldview that presents not a cosmos, really, but a *cosmogensis*. Simply put, we have moved from a world picture to a universe story.²⁰ And that move creates a whole new context for the dialogue between religion and science. Inasmuch as both astrophysics (on the macro level) and quantum mechanics (on the micro level) contribute to a story that suggests a sense of matter as fields of energy involving some kind of form-creating dynamics, the emerging scientific world picture is much more open to the spiritual. Moreover, both scientists and theologians have become humbler in the breadth of their truth claims. Both are becoming aware that they approach reality with different tools and diverse methods.²¹

The personalized view of the universe that Hopkins inherited from his stream of the Christian tradition is not model specific; that is, his view is not tied to, say, the Ptolemaic model that still reigned in the early sixteenth-century Europe of Ignatius. Like his mentor, John Henry Newman, Hopkins was able to welcome new discoveries and speculations coming from the science of his day regarding the cosmos. These were no threat, but rather further lore and news about a strange and marvelous world in which his faith had already found a home.²² That should be an encouragement to us who are Christians today, who live among natural scientists who tell us that mind is not only at home in matter but that matter seems to require mind.²³

Hopkins' "take" on the place of humanity within the community of creatures remains suggestive for us, who live at a time when some thinkers, in the name of deep ecology, accuse Christians of unduly privileging the human among the species. In the face of that charge, we probably ought to admit that our biblical faith does indeed commit us to the vision of humanity as "life's pride and cared-for crown." At the same time, we also recognize that that very status derives from our being "Earth's eye, tongue, . . . heart" and

²⁰ The best help I have found for getting this sense of the universe story as cosmogenesis is Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era—A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992).

²¹ On this see Christopher F. Mooney, SJ, "Theology and Science: A New Commitment to Dialogue," *Theological Studies* 52 (1991): 289–328.

²² On Hopkins' (and Newman's) interaction with the sciences of the mid-1880s, see Tom Zaniello, *Hopkins in the Age of Darwin* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1988).

²³ See Anne M. Clifford, "Postmodern Scientific Cosmology and the Christian God of Creation," *Horizons* 21, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 62–84.

carries with it the role of collaborating with the rest of the life community in a “use of creatures” that is reverential and sustainable.

In our day, historian Lynn T. White Jr. has laid Western society’s disregard of the natural world at the feet of biblical faith: Christianity, he claims, has found in Genesis 1:28 (“fill the earth and subdue it”) a mandate to intervene in nature with total disregard for the integrity and future of the natural world.²⁴ Some understandably defensive responses by biblical scholars have ignored an important truth here. Although Genesis, properly understood, does not espouse the abuse of nature, some Christian *interpretations* of Genesis 1:28 have allowed for, and even encouraged, ecological abuse. In Hopkins’ poetry, however, we encounter an instinctive, and tutored, intuition that humanity is part of nature—a part that, because of its level of self-consciousness and freedom, has a special responsibility regarding the rest of creation. In our day, the worldview being unfolded by our natural sciences is elaborating that insight with a complex beauty that Hopkins himself might not have imagined but surely would have appreciated.

In this article, I have tried not so much to argue a point as to provide an experience. First, we sampled aspects of the history and shape of the post-Hubble worldview in which we live our lives as believers. Second, we listened to the products of a particular religious imagination from another age, the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, and I hope that we came to appreciate the insight that, although immersed in a Victorian worldview, which was rather inhospitable to a healthy sense of the self in the world, Hopkins could express a vision of humankind in nature that nurtures faith and that makes even more sense today. Third, we found the roots of this vision not in Hopkins’ cosmology but in the Christian worldview mediated by the creation spirituality of Ignatius of Loyola. Finally, I made some applications to our situation as Christians in an emergent universe.

A final thought: whether our spirituality is mediated by Benedict, Francis, Bonaventure, Aquinas, Julian of Norwich, Loyola, Theresa, Luther, Calvin, Menno, Wesley—to name just a few Christian go-betweens—we who claim to follow Jesus are heirs of a tradition that is at heart world-affirming. At this moment, when people of all nations and cultures are becoming aware of our shared universe story—along with our self-induced ecological crisis—we shall have much to contribute if we appropriate and act on the biblical sense of life as primarily a gift to be shared rather than a possession to be defended.

²⁴ This thought is developed in White’s much reprinted chapter, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” in *Machina ex Deo: Essays in the Dynamism of Western Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968), 75–94.