

---

# AN EXERCISE IN PRACTICAL CRITICISM: G.M. HOPKINS' "THE WINDHOVER"

**Charles Briffa**

---

G.M. Hopkins (1844-89) was ordained priest in 1877. He composed the following sonnet in the same year, but it was published posthumously in 1918.<sup>1</sup>

## THE WINDHOVER To Christ Our Lord

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-  
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding  
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding  
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing  
In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,  
As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding  
Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding  
Stirred for a bird, – the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume here  
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion  
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plough down sillion\*  
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,  
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.

\* "sillion" = furrow

The poet's doubts react in his mind as he watches the kestrel hovering in mid-air against the wind, with quivering wings while scanning the earth below for insects and small rodents. But the poem is no mere description of the falcon's behaviour: the title itself indicates this. It is the feeling of the poet's own "brute beauty": the superiority of his spiritual experience seems to him above the kestrel's glory. Witnessing the windhover's physical freedom in the octave, he senses in it an unusual beauty which seems antithetical to his ascetic life, and his "heart in hiding" is attracted towards the bird. Yet, the austerity of his patient spiritual

---

1. This note is considered essential to the understanding of the subsequent discussion of this autobiographical poem.

renunciation is in the sestet "a billion/Times told lovelier" so that the sonnet becomes a revelation of an experience of great spiritual dimensions,<sup>2</sup> revealing at the same time a complex tension between his joy in the sensuous, natural world and the self-denial in his religious vocation.

All the conventional and innovatory technicalities in this poem are made to enlarge the meaning and project a deep psychological awareness.<sup>3</sup> Together with the falcon, the poet feels the ecstasy of physical activity: "caught" seems to imply the sudden capture of this feeling in the poet's soul. The repetition of "morning" in the same line (despite the different grammatical functions of the two words) conveys an excitable state and the intensity of the alliterative string in the second line reveals the force of the sensation.<sup>4</sup> The poem is full of sound patterns – alliteration, assonance, rhythm and rhyme all help to show the motion of the bird and the progression of the emotion.

The vigour of the initial voiced plosives /d/ in line 2 makes the line strongly dentalized contributing impressionistically to the antithesis of smoothness (as found in the falcon's gliding) and harshness (as expected from an ascetic way of life) both of which are felt by the poet simultaneously. The first two lines represent his inner conflict in a nutshell through the synaesthetic associations conveyed by phonological repetition. The soft nasals /m/, /n/, /n/ of the first line contrast sharply with the hard plosive pattern of the second line. This increase in hardness represents the tranquillity found in the kestrel's beauty and the harshness of self-discipline. At the same time, some nasals can be found also in the second line so that the interlacing of sound patterns may reflect the interweaving of his emotional experiences further emphasized by the merging of alliteration and rhyme in line 2. The unconventional division of "king-dom" in the poem may be a graphic indication of the phonological shift.

The details of the sonnet can have interpretations, but they all contribute towards the basic theme of conflict between the bird's beauty and freedom of action and the Jesuit's life of renunciation. Some statements in the poem seem to show that his world is superior to the falcon's world, yet at times he appears to be undecided. And it is this indecision, reverberating in his mind, that is the cause of the conflict.

"Minion" admits of several interpretations and this ambiguity contributes to the general feeling of doubt and inner friction. Grammatically it may be ambiguous admitting of two possible functions: as a headword (or noun) or as a modifier (or adjective) describing "king-dom".<sup>5</sup> As a headword it lends itself to lexical polysemy: does it mean this 'morning's favourite' (showing the poet's at-

- 
2. The poet is trying to project directly his own mental state in a particular moment of his life and therefore there could be some consideration of the psychological state of the poet's mind especially through the examination of archetypal patterns which may reveal the collective unconscious mind of the poet. A psychological interpretation of this kind is, however, beyond the scope of the present task of guiding the student through a practical criticism exercise.
  3. There are so many characteristics in this poem that it is not easy to talk about all of them due to the limited space available.
  4. G.M. Hopkins referred to similar experiences as "inscapes". A sensuous impression resulting from a natural thing or object brings forth to his sensitive mind an elusive particularity. This inscape is then given poetic form which vibrates with feeling.
  5. The second one may be dismissed because of the comma.

traction to the bird’s activity) or this ‘morning’s subordinate’? The second interpretation may refer to either the falcon or the priest: is the bird subordinate to the Jesuit? Or is it a reference to the servile life of the Jesuit? As an adjective it may refer to the fine appearance and movements of the falcon, typing up with the subsequent ideas of the dauphin and the “wimpling wing”. The majestic activity of the falcon, as depicted in the octave, may be said to have an underlying reference to Christ our Lord. “Daylight’s dauphin” may refer to Christ, the Light of the world, in his kingdom and the “ecstasy” may be that of divine assimilation rebuffing “the big wind” to make the poet feel a sense of achievement in his spiritual renunciation. The metonymy in “his riding/Of the rolling level” may be a contributing factor to this interpretation because of its evangelical associations (‘his riding of the rolling waves brought to level’). Its conciseness captures the urgency of superimposed images which might at first look paradoxical – “rolling” and “level”. We somehow see the smoothing of the rolling waves by feeling the wavy billows miraculously merging into calmness.

In the sestet “buckle” connoting discipline is functionally ambiguous having two aspects: as a verb in the simple present and as a verb in the imperative. There is also difficulty of interpreting “here” and “then: here” may mean ‘in the case of the priest’ or ‘in the case of the windhover’; “then” ‘when the windhover’s freedom has been achieved’. In such an ambivalent context “chevalier” may personify either Christ, the fire of love, or the falcon, the source of inspiration.<sup>6</sup>

“The achieve of, the mastery of the thing” – this is an instance of functional conversion<sup>7</sup> reinforced by syntactic parallelism for poetic vigour. The two elements intertwine in the poem but separately they may be represented thus:

		ABSTRACT TERM			
(ACCEPTABILITY) (DEVIATION)	↓	the the	MASTERY ACHIEVE	of the thing of the thing	SYNTACTIC PARALLELISM
(MOST COMMON) (POSSIBLE) (DEVIANT)	↓	the the the	ACHIEVEMENT ACHIEVING ACHIEVE	of the thing of the thing of the thing	FUNCTIONAL CONVERSION

The oddity of the deviant form encapsulates a whole concept and through parallelism an action is endowed with abstract qualities which reveal the connection between the physical and the spiritual. The purpose of the syntactic parallelism is to move expectation to a climax, so that there is progression in the variable elements: from the achievement to the mastery of an ‘experience’, a progression towards completion. This is further reinforced by the volta by means of which the poet’s world transcends that of the falcon.

The sonnet form, capable of expressing any poetic thought or feeling, is most

6. Ambiguity may be considered a reflection of the poet’s psychology at moments of doubts. Indicative of indecision, it brings into conflict material and spiritual beauty so that the poem itself becomes a psychological experience.

7. “Achieve” is used in place of the abstract noun “achievement” with the same grammatical



combination of order and freedom, thus complementing the main theme with much concentrated fervour.

---

CHARLES BRIFFA B.A., M.A., teaches English and Arabic at the Junior Lyceum for Girls, Blata-l-Bajda.