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Hovering in Hopkins's World

Gerard Manley Hopkins's sonnet "The Windhover" is a poem of special magnificence, and the "Falcon" in his poem plays a special role throughout this work. I will note here that the "Falcon" has been identified as a kestrel by others—however, for the sake of consistency with the poem, I will use the term "falcon." The falcon serves both the poem and its readers in a variety of ways. First, the falcon serves as a symbol of Jesus Christ, and as a symbol of Christ it functions to spur its writer, speaker and readers on to high adoration and worship of Christ. Next, the falcon works together with the opening line "*To Christ our Lord*" for the same purpose, that is, to draw attention to Christ; however, the opening line also serves as a "rudder" of sorts, directing the intention and tone of the poem as a whole, as well as the falcon particularly. In the last six lines especially, the falcon takes on many notable characteristics that peculiarly illustrate the falcon's symbolism and the One to whom they point—Christ.

Hopkins wrote the first draft of "The Windhover" in 1877, with a couple of revisions between 1877 and 1884 (Owens 43). The origin of the inspiration for the poem and its revisions finds its source in different areas of Hopkins's life. Initially, "The Windhover" was born out of Hopkins's religion and his love for nature. In addition to this, Hopkins was likely influenced to write his poem, with the particular focus on a falcon, because of his passion for hawks and interest in falconry (Thomas 498-499, 502-503).

In examining “The Windhover,” it is plain that Hopkins’s “Falcon” is a symbol of Christ; which is to say that, within the poem, the falcon serves simply as a stand-in for Christ, and to point the speaker and reader to Christ. This is first made clear by the fact that the word “Falcon” is capitalized in the poem, and as Babette Deutsch states, poets “[capitalize words] to emphasize the symbolism” (qtd. in Montag 110; Thomas 505). The fact that “Falcon” is capitalized is significant, but not just because it is the only word capitalized that is not the beginning of a new line or sentence. The concept of capitalizing words to draw the reader’s attention to the word—and thus consequently what it symbolizes or its underlying meaning—is not new, but is used by many other poets such as Emily Dickinson, William Wordsworth, and William Shakespeare.

What is more, not only is Hopkins’s falcon emphasized in this manner, but also the reader witnesses the whole poem pointing to the falcon: where it is, what it is doing, even to the motion of its wings and flight. There are also the terms which Hopkins uses to refer to the falcon, such as “morning’s minion” and “king- / dom of daylight’s dauphin,” terms which refer to a favorite or servant and royalty respectively (lines 1-2). George E. Montag reads “morning’s minion” as the falcon, which is Christ, being God’s favorite child (Montag 109). Of course, this then brings to mind a passage in the gospel of Matthew “and lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (King James Version Mt. 3.17). In this passage, Jesus has just been baptized and the heavens open up and the Holy Spirit descends on Him in the form of a dove—all imagery similar to that of the beginning of Hopkins’s poem—and then God the Father speaking about Christ as His “beloved Son” (Mt. 3.16-17). The passage supports Montag’s argument, and further establishes the falcon as a symbol of Christ. Moreover, it also sheds light on what is meant by “king- / dom of daylight’s dauphin,” since “dauphin” refers to a prince, and the kingdom of God is equated to a kingdom of light in the Bible (Col.

1.13). To put it succinctly, Christ as the Prince of the kingdom of God is seen in the falcon as the “king- / dom of daylight’s dauphin.”

Additionally, I submit that in lines ten and eleven of the sonnet, Hopkins is speaking about more than just the falcon, for he says, “AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion / Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier” (lines 10-11). The meaning can be difficult to discern, especially with the meaning of “buckle” appearing obscure upon first reading. However, if the reader accepts the reading of “buckle” as that of that of “[b]rute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here” breaking—in a manner of speaking—or falling, then they may see it as a symbolic action, specifically signifying the death of Christ. Then the reading of lines ten and eleven becomes clear and can be seen working in tandem with lines twelve to fourteen. In other words, the death of Christ—the buckling, falling, galling, and gashing—inevitably leads to the fire “a billion / Times told lovelier, more dangerous” and the embers showing “gold-vermillion” (lines 10-14). Why is the fire spoken of as both lovely and dangerous? That is because, in the death of Christ, both the judgment and grace of God is witnessed—judgment for sin falls upon the head of Christ, and grace toward the wicked is purchased. I think it also necessary to point out a similar illustration that Christ Himself used in the gospel of John, namely that “[e]xcept a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit” (Jn. 12.24). So too, here as the falcon “buckle[s]” and the embers “[f]all, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermillion” there is a type of fruit being borne, namely, the fire flaming forth from the falcon and embers.

There are arguments against this interpretation of course, such as those given by Helen Vendler in her article “Catching Fire: ‘The Windhover.’” Vendler argues in her article against interpreting the falcon as a symbol of Christ, and overall the poem as one of devotion or having

any theological significance. For instance, she does not believe that comparisons between other poems of Hopkins's that are more devotional in nature and "The Windhover" are possible (Vendler 113). Along this line of argumentation, Vendler points out that "The Windhover" differs from one of Hopkins's devotional poems, "Hurrahing the Harvest" in that "'The Windhover' makes no explicit equation between a natural phenomenon and God: it does not assert that 'the azurous hung hills are His world-wielding shoulder'" (Vendler 113). She asserts instead that the reader has to read "The Windhover" without reference to other poems of his that are normally used by other scholars to argue for a more "religious interpretation" (Vendler 117). Admittedly, Vendler is correct in that readers should not read the interpretations of other poems into "The Windhover"—rather, they should seek to understand the poem, first, in light of the poem itself and the context surrounding it (e.g., the historical context, author's intent, etc.). However, I disagree with Vendler in a couple points. First, with her overall claim that "The Windhover" cannot have a religious interpretation apart from reading other poems' interpretations into it, and secondly in some finer points, such as that "[Hopkins] does not exhort a listener to look at the stars or practice prayer or penance, nor does he address Christ" (Vendler 117). I believe I have already proved that a simple reading of the poem leads one to a clear understanding that Hopkins's falcon is a symbol of Christ. As to her other arguments, they too shall be addressed in the paragraphs to come.

The entire purpose of Hopkins's poem is to exalt Christ and stir himself and his readers to higher adoration of Christ. Hopkins's dedication, the first line in the poem, "*To Christ our Lord*" is the first indication of that; however, there is something to be said here of Hopkins's personal life in addition to the evidence from "The Windhover" itself. For example, "[Hopkins's] letters show that he was contemplating odes on several Jesuit martyrs" up to the time of writing the first

draft of “The Windhover” (Thomas 501). More than that is the significance of where Hopkins’s heart was, since “[t]here is not the slightest doubt where Hopkins's heart and affections lay, for he stated unequivocally that Christ was ‘the only person’ he was ‘in love with’” (Thomas 505). Finally, it is also plain that, although Hopkins was struggling spiritually later in his life—as Vendler rightly points out—it is vitally important to note that Hopkins’s revisions themselves were part of that struggle (Vendler 121-123; Owens 65-67). To put it another way, his adding “AND” and “*To Christ our Lord*” proved essential to reigniting his passion for his religion (Owens 65-67). Owens puts it well when he says, “[i]n both situations, the kestrel prompts Hopkins to interrogate his own faith; it is not a pressure that suddenly unravels it” (49).

In addition to the context of Hopkins’s personal life, there is the poem itself to prove its function as a devotional poem. As has been previously stated, it is critical to note Hopkins’s dedication at the beginning of the poem. The significance thereof cannot be overstated, not only because the author’s intent has been noted, but also because the dedicatory line cannot be simply omitted from the plain reading of the text—as Vendler seems to do, since she does not spend more than a few brief lines acknowledging it in her own article. The line is present in the poem, and it carries weight equal to the title due to its placement—as it is separated from both the title and the main body of the poem itself—the fact that it is italicized, and because it is related to the falcon’s symbolism. Moreover, the rest of the poem is overtly implied to be speaking of Christ, as I have previously proven.

The falcon as a symbol works intimately together with the dedicatory line “*To Christ our Lord*” to both produce the speaker’s desired effect—that is, supreme adoration of Christ, and to draw the reader to higher devotion to God. This conclusion is realistically drawn once the reader sees the purpose of the dedication and the aim of the falcon as the centerpiece symbol of “The

Windhover.” What is more, the titles with which Hopkins refers to the falcon, the capitalization of “Falcon,” and the imagery and symbolism of the sestet, even the physical placement of the falcon above both the speaker and the world, all aid in exalting not the falcon itself, but Christ, to whom the poem is devoted. It is important to understand Hopkins’s poem rightly, both in light of his intent, his personal life and struggles, and the plain reading of “The Windhover.” It is vital because understanding the poem rightly leads to a greater appreciation of Hopkins’s literature, as well as literature as a whole. With such significant insights into “The Windhover,” the poem—even more particularly, the Falcon, really does lead its reader to heights of wonder at such beauty and grace.

Works Cited

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