

Hard Patience

BY MELINDA GRECH

In one of his so-called “terrible sonnets” or “sonnets of desolation,” Gerard Manley Hopkins confronts how very hard it is to ask for patience and to see the world from God’s perspective. Yet patience draws us ever closer to God and to his “delicious kindness.”

During his Long Retreat of November–December 1881–1882, Gerard Manley Hopkins copied into his spiritual writings notebook this eighth “Rule for the Discernment of Spirits” from the *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*: “Let him who is in desolation strive to remain in patience, which is the virtue contrary to the troubles which harass him; and let him think that he will shortly be consoled, making diligent effort against the desolation.”¹ Patience was to become a focus for Hopkins during the last eight years of his life, strained slowly out of the experiences of life and distilled from his attentive study of creation, other people, and spiritual writings. As Ignatius counseled, it was to be patience in the midst of desolation, and Hopkins knew a fair bit of desolation in his short forty-four years.

Growing up in a well-to-do religiously pious Anglican family, Hopkins excelled at Highgate School, London, and attended Balliol College, Oxford, receiving highest honors in both his final exams, Greats and Moderns. He converted to Catholicism during his last year at Balliol and later he entered the Jesuit order. During these early years he struggled with conflicts he perceived between his identities as priest, professor, and poet. He also lived with chronic physical pain, possibly Crohn’s disease. He enjoyed several years living and teaching in his beloved Wales in the 1870s, where some of his best known poems were written—“God’s Grandeur,” “As Kingfishers Catch Fire,” “The Windhover,” and “Pied Beauty.” Then in 1883 he was transferred to Dublin to teach at University College and the Royal University of Ireland.

In “To seem the stranger,” a poem written between 1885 and 1887,

shortly after his move to Ireland, Hopkins depicted his new position: "I am in Ireland now; now I am at a third Remove."² He was removed from his family, removed from the land he loved, and even within his Catholic faith he was ostracized because he was not "born Catholic" or Irish.

In addition to finding himself emotionally estranged, his physical surroundings were also a wreck. In a letter to John Henry Newman in 1884, he described the buildings at the University as having "fallen into a deep dilapidation. They were a sort of wreck or ruin...with dinginess and dismantlement all round."³ Writing to his mother the following year, he bemoaned the political situation in Ireland: "The grief of mind I go through over politics, over what I read and hear and see, in Ireland about Ireland and about England, is such that I can neither express it nor bear to speak of it."⁴ And he described his own physical condition in a letter to her in 1888:

I am now working at examination-papers all day and this work began last month and will outlast this one. It is great, very great drudgery. I can not of course say it is wholly useless, but I believe that most of it is and that I bear a burden which crushes me and does little to help any good end. It is impossible to say what a mess Ireland is and how everything enters into that mess.⁵

Hopkins struggled under the constant pressure of preparing students for examinations and grading papers. Facsimiles of page after page of checks and ticks, found in his Dublin notebooks and published in Volume VII of the *Collected Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, illustrate the drudgery of the vocation he was called to at University College and the Royal University of Ireland. Interestingly some of these pages are interspersed with bits of poetry and music, indicating the fecundity of his mind even in the darkness of his drudgery. On one page he wrote out the first lines of Shelly's "Ode to the West Wind," annotated with numbers indicating the musical meter of the lines and with solfège syllables (do re mi) suggesting a melody. On the next line he then returns to the grading checks and ticks.⁶

The next year, he again wrote his mother that he had contracted "some sort of typhoid."⁷ A month later, June 11, 1889, he was dead. The bad drains of his residence, 85/6 St. Stephen's Green, are usually blamed for the infection and his subsequent death.⁸



It was during these final years of his life that Hopkins wrote the so-called "terrible sonnets" or "sonnets of desolation," including "Patience, hard thing!"⁹ He described these poems as "written in blood."¹⁰ He had promised his long-time friend, Robert Bridges, in 1885:

I shall shortly have some sonnets to send you, five or more. ~~Three~~ Four of these came like inspirations unbidden and against my will.

And in the life I lead now, which is one of continually jaded and harassed mind, if in my leisure I try to do anything I make no way. — nor with my work, alas! But so it must be.¹¹

John J. Glavin proposes that “Patience, hard thing!” is the fourth sonnet that Hopkins added to the collection, upon further consideration. Glavin argues,

“Patience” is, I think, the poem that caused him to change his mind.... They [the other three terrible sonnets, “To seem the stranger,” “I wake and feel,” and “My own heart,”] know nothing of the “Delicious kindness” that concludes “Patience.” It alone inscapes [expresses] the kind of calm, the assured ease that pervades the final...tercet.¹²

Although Hopkins promised again and again to send the batch of sonnets to Bridges, his letters reveal that he never actually turned them over. He mentioned in a letter to Bridges three years later:

I tried to get some outstanding and accumulated sonnets ready for hanging on the line, that is in my book of MS, the one you wrote most of, and so for sending to you. All however are not ready yet, but they will soon be.... It is now years that I have had no inspiration of longer jet than makes a sonnet, except only in that fortnight in Wales.... Nothing comes: — I am a eunuch — but it is for the kingdom of heaven’s sake.¹³

In a letter written just over a month before his death, Hopkins sent a final poem to his friend entitled “To R. B.” and confessed

we greatly differ in feeling about copying one’s verse out: I find it repulsive, and let them lie months and years in rough copy untransferred to my book. Still I hope to send you my accumulation. This one is addressed to you.¹⁴

Hopkins died never having sent the “terrible sonnets” to Bridges, patiently holding on to them in the midst of his desolation. Bridges requested his papers from the Jesuit brothers after Hopkins’s death, and found among them the “terrible sonnets,” including “Patience, hard thing!” Bridges preserved them and eventually published them thirty years later.

Hopkins had hoped that some good use would be made of his poetry. “All therefore that I think of doing is to keep my verse together in one place — at present I have not even correct copies —, that, if anyone shd. like, they might be published after my death,” he had written to Bridges in 1879.¹⁵ Two years later, in a letter to his former teacher Richard Watson Dixon, Hopkins affirmed his belief that God valued what he had written, but he felt it wiser to trust God’s providence regarding the publication of his poems. This position of patience had been his principle and practice since becoming

a Jesuit, although he admitted that “to live by faith is harder, is very hard.”¹⁶

Hopkins commended the virtue of patience to others who suffered as well. For instance, when he wrote his sister Grace to console her on the death of her fiancé in 1883, he advised:

But you are not to think, my dear, that you are somehow to be made happy some day for being unhappy this [day]: there is no sense in that. What God means is that you shall greatly gain if you will be humble and patient. And patience means that grief shall not make you exacting or selfish or in good time unfit you for ordinary duty. It has this effect on some people; it makes wrecks of them.¹⁷

In “Patience, hard thing!” written a few years later, the poet crystallizes his understanding of the virtue.

Patience, hard thing! the hard thing but to pray,
But bid for, patience is! Patience who asks
Wants war, wants wounds; weary his times, his tasks;
To do without, take tosses, and obey.

Rare patience roots in these, and, these away,
Nowhere. Natural heart’s-ivy, Patience masks
Our ruins of wrecked past purpose. There she basks
Purple eyes and seas of liquid leaves all day.

We hear our hearts grate on themselves: it kills
To bruise them dearer. Yet the rebellious wills
Of us we do bid God bend to him even so.

And where is he who more and more distills
Delicious kindness? – He is patient. Patience fills
His crisp combs, and that comes those ways we know.

The first quatrain begins by reiterating Hopkins’s recognition that patience is a hard thing. He had expressed in the letter to Dixon the hardness of the practice of patience and the life of faith. Much earlier, in 1864, Hopkins had used that same phrase in his poem “It was a hard thing to undo this knot,” a poem that he wrote during a college retreat in Maentwrog, Wales, an area studded with remarkable waterfalls and rainbows. This poem wrestles with the problem of perspective. Do all the people standing around the waterfall see the same rainbow? Is the rainbow only an image in their mind? Does it exist in reality? Twenty-two years later, shortly after his appointment to Ireland, Hopkins went on a two-week retreat to the same area, perhaps hiking the same trails, climbing the same mountains, or viewing the same waterfalls. It occurs to him that there is now another hard thing in his life, also involving perspective. It is a hard thing to ask for patience, to see things from God’s perspective, because he knows from experience that such

asking is praying for war, wounds, weariness, deprivation, affliction, and obedience.

In the second quatrain, Hopkins depicts the virtue of patience as rare and exquisite, like a treasure. Employing a natural image, he likens patience to ivy, with its purple berries and “seas of liquid leaves” that slowly cover the imperfections in a wall, making it beautiful.

In the next tercet, the poet turns inward, expressing how hard this patience is to endure: “We hear our hearts grate on themselves. It kills / to bruise them dearer.” Similarly in “Spelt from Sibyl’s leaves,” written about this same time, Hopkins depicted “thoughts against thoughts in groans grind”¹⁸; and in a letter to Bridges in 1885, he confessed “it kills me to be time’s eunuch” as an undiscovered and unappreciated poet.¹⁹ Here he concludes that even though it would be difficult to request war, wounds, weariness, deprivation, affliction, and obedience, experiences that would produce patience, we *do* ask God to bend our rebellious wills toward him. Perhaps through this image Hopkins is playing off the concept “*homo incurvatus in se*” in Augustine, whom Hopkins called one of the most interesting writers he had ever read.²⁰ For Augustine, the rebellious human soul turns in upon itself and away from God in sin, but the poet asks God to reverse the rebellion and bend our sinful wills toward the divine patience. This echoes Augustine’s view that patience cannot be a human achievement, but must be received as a gift from God.²¹

Hopkins maintains the Augustinian influence and nature imagery in the last tercet. Attending to the blooms of the ivy produced from late summer to early fall, which were rich in nectar, an important food source for bees, Hopkins likens God’s work of patience to the distilling of honey by bees. They patiently store away the nectar of the flowers into honeycombs all summer, and it distills into honey. In the same way God converts patience with patience, a cooperation of his grace and our work, into “delicious kindness.” In a way, this offering of the bee is Eucharistic: we drink the honey and eat the honeycomb; his sacrifice becomes our sustenance and our joy. Hopkins ties the sonnet together in the last line reminding us that “that [patience] comes [a play on combs] those ways we know [through war, wounds, weariness, deprivation, afflictions, and obedience].”

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The Apostle Paul encourages believers to “glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience” (Romans 5:3, KJV). As we have seen, Hopkins experienced his share of tribulations near the end of his life, and realized, as do we, that some people are only saddened, hardened, or angered by their miseries. Yet in the midst of his suffering, Hopkins avoided despair and confirmed his Christian hope in a letter to Bridges: “I do not despair, things might change, anything might be.”²² Likewise when he earlier had faced an unsettling move from scholastic Oxford to a pastorate in industrial Bedford Leigh, he expressed hope in a beautiful poem, “Peace.” He noted that while pure peace is not compatible with wars and death, patience fills in the gaps, existing in the midst of tribulations. When we are robbed of peace, the Lord leaves us patience instead, which “plumes to Peace thereafter.”²³

How was Hopkins catechized in the virtue of patience? The key to his development of patience may have been his attentiveness. He was a careful observer of nature, and as evidenced in “Patience, a hard thing!,” creation was his teacher. He also paid attention to the people who crossed his path, and some of them became teachers of patience for him. Finally, he learned from the Bible and spiritual writings how to cultivate attentive patience in his life.

First, Hopkins was an exegete of creation. One of the old fathers at Stonyhurst, where Hopkins had trained for the priesthood fifty years before, was asked if he remembered the poet: “‘Ay, a strange young man,’ said the old brother, ‘crouching down that gate to stare at some wet sand. A fair natural ‘e seemed to us, that Mr. ‘opkins.’”²⁴ His attention to creation shows from the meticulous portrayal of clouds in “Hurrahing the harvest” to the tiny, intricate pencil drawings in his journals. His poetry and journals abound with careful observations of birds, waves, mountains, rivers, sunlight, fields, and trees. For instance, in a letter to Bridges in 1886, written about the time he composed “Patience, a hard thing!,” Hopkins comments:

I will back Tremadoc [a planned community in northwest Wales] for beauty against Fishguard [a coastal town in southwest Wales]. There are no myrtles, at least I have seen none, but right over the village... rises a cliff of massive selfhewn rock, all overrun with a riot of vegetation which the rainy climate seems to breathe here.²⁵

A travel guide from 1885 describes the road to Tremadoc passing “under... a cliff—overgrown with ivy...at its foot.”²⁶ Perhaps the ivy mentioned in “Patience, hard thing!” is the “riot of vegetation” growing on the cliffs of Tremadoc—Kenilworth ivy, which flowers with purple blooms from May to November. The plants are frequented only by bees, which are attracted to its sweet nectar. In the late fall, purple berries form on long stalks that upon

maturation bend downward and plant themselves among the ivy's roots.

Could it be that Hopkins packed all these attentive observations into the lines and lessons about patience? Did the cliff remind him of the hardness of life, the ivy illustrate the role of patience, and the bees symbolize God's redemption and distillation of his and our patience into sweet honey and a resurrected hope? It is also fitting that the plant is known in Italy as "the plant of Madonna." Hopkins admired Mary, who stored up all these things in her heart (Luke 2:19), as an example of perfect patience.²⁷

Hopkins also was schooled in patience by attending to his encounters, even passing or imagined encounters, with other people. A number of figures in his writings illustrate this attention—for example, the exiled nuns in "The Wreck of the Deutschland" patiently awaiting their death; St. Winifred, in Hopkins's unfinished play that memorializes her martyrdom; a soldier patiently performing his duty in "The Soldier," and the ultimate Jesuit "soldier for Christ," Ignatius, comforting him in his time of desolation; the people in "The Valley of the Elwy" who were "good" to him, patiently fulfilling their neighborly role.

In a notebook entry on St. Patrick's Day, 1885, Hopkins reflected on and identified with the patient example of Ireland's patron saint,

thanking God for the way he is glorified in him; his exile and sufferings, his piety and patience; his selfsacrifice and zeal; his miracles and success. Consider his hymn; it breathes an enthusiasm which as far as feeling goes I feel but my action does not answer to this. Ask his help for Ireland in all its needs and for yourself in your position.²⁸

On October 5, 1886, having just returned to University College in Dublin from holiday in North Wales, possibly about the time "Patience, hard thing!" was written, Hopkins wrote to his mother about two examples of patience he had observed.

One was his close friend and colleague, Robert Curtis: "poor Robert Curtis was dogged from the University with letters... and with telegrams.... When day after day these afflictions fell in I used to do the cursing; he bore all with the greatest meekness." Hopkins also observed the patience of the woman who housed them on their retreat: "Our landlady [Mrs. Evans] at Carnarvon a Cheshire woman, who knew Vale Royal and Tarporley and all, some distant cousins of ours if

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all were known, gave me instruction on patience: she had, poor soul had great troubles. As by her history appeared."²⁹

Finally Hopkins learned patience by attending to spiritual writings. Certainly, Ignatius's guiding words about the value of patience in time of desolation, copied into his spiritual journal, guided Hopkins's difficult years in Ireland. As a Jesuit priest, Hopkins likely prayed the hours of the Roman Breviary — the eight daily meditations composed of scripture readings, hymns, prayers, and writings of the Church fathers — and these frequently address patience. There he would read "...amid the trials of this life we must ask for *patience* rather than for glory"; "...be sober, grave, temperate, sound in faith, in charity, in *patience*"; "whatsoever things were written aforetime, were written for our learning, that we through *patience* and comfort of the Scripture might have hope"; and "In your *patience* possess ye your souls."³⁰ We can be reasonably sure that Hopkins prayerfully read such passages about patience daily, at least while he taught at John Henry Newman's Oratory, and perhaps for his whole life. It is likely that these words guided his thinking, corrected his living, and shaped his poetry.

Gerard Manley Hopkins practiced attentive patience, learning from spiritual writings, creation, other people, and from God who is Patience, and storing away little kindnesses. Patience, the "hard thing," crystallized into "crisp cones," and the "crisp cones" filled with "delicious" sweetness. Today, we can rob the hive and savor the honey of his words as a remedy for our own troubled souls.

NOTES

1 Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Sermons and Devotional Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited by Christopher Devlin (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1959), 204.

2 Gerard Manley Hopkins, "To seem the stranger lies my lot, my life," lines 9-10, *www.bartleby.com/122/44.html* (accessed November 23, 2015).

3 Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Collected Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins: Volumes I & II: Correspondence 1882-1889*, edited by Catherine Phillips and R. K. R. Thornton (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), II.660.

4 *Ibid.*, II.715.

5 *Ibid.*, II.942.

6 Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Collected Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins: Volume VII: The Dublin Notebook*, edited by Leslie Higgins and Michael F. Suarez, S. J. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 103.

7 Hopkins, *Collected Works*, II.995.

8 *Ibid.*, II.996.

9 The "terrible sonnets" or "sonnets of desolation" were probably written in the summer of 1885 or perhaps as late as the spring of 1886. Hopkins revised them until September 1887. The order of their composition cannot be determined, but the poems are commonly said to include: "To seem the stranger," "I wake and feel," "No worst," "My own heart," "Carrion Comfort," and "Patience, hard thing!"

10 Hopkins, *Collected Works*, II.736.

11 *Ibid.*, II.743.

12 John J. Glavin, "'The Exercise of Saints': Hopkins, Milton, and Patience," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language: A Journal of the Humanities*, 20:1 (Spring 1978), 139–152, here citing 147.

13 Hopkins, *Collected Works*, II.914. I propose that this "fortnight in Wales" may have provided Hopkins with his inspiration for "Patience, hard thing!"

14 *Ibid.*, II.990.

15 *Ibid.*, I.333.

16 *Ibid.*, I.502.

17 *Ibid.*, II.580.

18 Gerard Manley Hopkins, "Spelt from Sibyl's leaves," line 14, www.bartleby.com/122/32.html (accessed November 23, 2015).

19 Hopkins, *Collected Works*, II.744.

20 *Ibid.*, I.379.

21 In a short treatise on the virtue of patience, Augustine explains, "There are those who attribute it to the powers of man's will, not those which men have from Divine assistance, but from their own free will. This is an arrogant error." See Augustine, "Patience," in *Saint Augustine: Treatises on Various Subjects*, The Fathers of the Church Series, 16, translated by Mary Sarah Muldowney (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1952), 428.

22 Hopkins, *Collected Works*, II.744.

23 Gerard Manley Hopkins, "Peace," lines 8-9, www.bartleby.com/122/22.html (accessed November 23, 2015).

24 Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited by Humphry House and Graham Storey (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1959), 408.

25 Hopkins, *Collected Works*, II.803.

26 Mounftord John Byrde Baddeley, *North Wales (part 1): Chester, Rhyl, Llandudno, Bangor [etc.]* (London, UK: Dulau & Company, 1884), 163.

27 For many examples of Mary's connection to creation, see Gerard Manley Hopkins, "The May Magnificat," www.bartleby.com/122/18.html (accessed November 23, 2015).

28 Hopkins, *The Sermons and Devotional Writings*, 260.

29 Hopkins, *Collected Works*, II.806.

30 We do not have the breviary used by Hopkins and his notes in it. Yet we know the breviary used by his older friend and mentor, John Henry Newman (1801-1890). Hopkins greatly admired Newman, seeking his advice when making his conversion to Catholicism and teaching Greek and Latin at Newman's Oratory School upon graduation from Balliol. He wrote a birthday letter to Newman every year of his life beginning in 1873 and served as a Greek and Latin professor in the school in Ireland that Newman had begun thirty years earlier.

The quotations above are from John Henry Newman, "On the Roman Breviary as Embodying the Substance of the Devotional Services of the Church Catholic," *Tracts for the Times* #75 (London, UK: Rivington, 1840), 106, 138, 179, and 200; italics are added.



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