Divining the Inscaped-Landscape: Hopkins, Merton and the Ascent to True Self

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Gerard Manley Hopkins was infused into the spiritual bones of Thomas Merton. From the moment when a young Merton declared that his reading was becoming "more Catholic" and the first books he took up were Hopkins' poetry, notebooks, and a borrowed "life of Hopkins,"[1] through his life-long love affair with nature and his keen awareness of how its inscaped landscapes shaped his spiritual landscape,[2] to every time, like a kingfisher, he caught fire, drew flame, and flung out the truth of his name,[3] the Hopkinsian spirit was an on-going force awakening him to his deepest Self. And because Merton was such a prolific writer we can easily find the enduring proof of this influence through the wealth of his written words. Merton literally wrote out the process by which his deepest identity, his interior, sacred landscape, was discovered via the relationship to the many exterior landscapes through which he walked. These exterior formations formed the interior man and became fertile ground for a true grounding in his own being, in *human* being, and in the Ground of All Being. So whether it was Dante's *Divine* Mountain by which he scaled his life, or Mt. Kanchenjunga, which haunted him near his death, influenced by Hopkins, Merton engaged the spiritual ascent through the alienated self to the True Self, exploring his messy but marvelous existence as both divinely human and humanly divine.

It is this ascent through vast and varied landscapes, without and within, and how these encounters between landscapes sparked recognition of the Divine Presence, that is not only the product of Merton's writing but the very fire that led him to put words to the page. So it is in his writing, especially within his May 1968 journal, *Woods, Shore, Desert*, that we can trace a path of spiritual growth that could be adequately described in the classic terms of Purgative, Illuminative, and Unitive, but even more richly described through the terminology of Hopkins' own poetic process of Inscape, Instress, and Selving. This poetic process, tied to these more classical terms, provides a "spiritual hiker's guide" to find-

ing the way home, to the True Self, along the path moving from familiar to unfamiliar, from known to unknown while it also highlights the profound influence the Jesuit poet had on the Cistercian monk. The landscaped journeys of faith always move us out of an all too well-known country, the movement of Illuminative-Inscape, via a different country, a land called Purgative-Instress, to the unknown country of Unitive-Selving. The final movement is discovery of place as ultimately no place at all.

Merton came to know this landscape and, in a way uniquely his own, wrote about it all the way from *The Seven Storey Mountain* to *The Other Side of the Mountain*—a journey from a well-know life story, told, to the completely untellable, unknown and unseen, other side of the mountain. And Hopkins, who tread the path before him and along-side him, was always a beckoning spirit calling Merton to become in God's eye what in God's eye he was through seeing "Christ playing in ten thousand places." It was then in the recovery of these places as "no places" where Merton learned, and still teaches us today, "how to selve, to go ourselves, and our [truest] selves speak and spell."[4]

Hopkins' profound influence on Merton can be found most readily in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. It is in this autobiography, published in 1948, that Merton characterizes his conversion to Catholicism as a conversation between himself and the long-dead poet as he writes:

> I took up the book about Gerard Manley Hopkins. The chapter told of Hopkins at Balliol, at Oxford. He was thinking of becoming a Catholic. He was writing letters to Cardinal Newman (not yet a cardinal) about becoming a Catholic.
>
> All of a sudden, something began to stir within me, something began to push me, to prompt me. It was a movement that spoke like a voice.
>
> "What are you waiting for?" it said. "Why are you sitting here? Why do you still hesitate? You know what you ought to do? Why don't you do it?"...
>
> Hopkins was writing to Newman, at Birmingham, about his indecision.
>
> "What are you waiting for?" said the voice within me again. "Why are you sitting there? It is useless to hesitate any longer. Why don't you get up and go?" ...
>
> Hopkins had written to Newman, and Newman had replied to him, telling him to come and see him at Birmingham.

> Suddenly, I could bear it no longer. I put down the book, and got into my raincoat, and started down the stairs. ...And then everything inside me began to sing–to sing with peace, to sing with strength and to sing with conviction.[5]

Time, and much more writing, would prove that Merton never changed this decidedly Hopkinsian tune. What started as a shared experience of faith conversion, across the years, over the boundary of life and death, developed into a shared vision of the natural world which was pivotal for the spiritual maturation of both men. It was a shared vision that allowed their spiritual landscapes to be awakened by the sacred landscapes that surrounded them. This is a spiritual vision best described as a poetic process, which Hopkins developed from experience and Merton lived.

Hopkins' unique terminology of Inscape, Instress, and Selving, like Purgation, Illumination, and Union, are almost interchangeable sets of concepts for describing the same dynamic process. The first two classical terms interpenetrate to the point that it becomes difficult to tell whether the fire of purgation is the illumination or is the moment of illumination which sets the fires of purgation alight? The same could be said of the relationship between the poetic terms Inscape and Instress. Hopkins highlights their interpenetrating relationship when he writes in his 1881 Notebook:

> [The] energy of being by which all things are upheld [is] the natural instress which defines an inscape and keeps it in being–it is also the sensation of inscape–a quasi-mystical illumination, a sudden perception of the deeper pattern, order and unity which gives meaning to external forms.[6]

The Inscape itself is defined by the poet when he writes: "All things therefore are charged with love, are charged with God and if we know how to touch them, they give off sparks and take fire, yield drops and flow, ring and tell of him."[7]

It is this "touching," this illuminative Instress that reveals Inscape in landscapes "charged with love, charged with God," that then set off sparks which grow to a purgative fire. Instress, then, is the act of touching Inscape and illuminating it as it also maintains intensity. The moment of touching Inscape can be likened to a flash fire that casts a sudden and brilliant light on the relationship between the divine alive in nature and the divine alive in human nature. Instress is then the energy that both maintains and reveals the Inscape. It is the energy that illuminates the relation-

ship between internal and external landscapes as it sets the purgative fire that unites them. This then leads to the Unitive stage which resonates with Hopkins' term Selving, which he simply defined as the act by which "the essential self is displayed."[8]

Merton himself gave voice to this dynamic process and the union which results, while reflecting on nature in *New Seeds of Contemplation*. In the chapter entitled, "Things in Their Identity," he comments that for animals, "Their inscape is their sanctity. It is the imprint of [God's] wisdom and of [God's] reality in them."[9] And he fleshes this out further in one of his journal entries written on Holy Saturday, April 5, 1958, just after a wren had landed on his shoulder:

> I want not only to observe but to *know* living things, and this implies a dimension of primordial familiarity which is simple and primitive and religious and poor.
> This is the reality I need, the vestige of God in His creatures. And the Light of God in my own soul.[10]

It is this relationship between the "vestige of God" in nature and "the Light of God" in the soul of the attentive viewer that sets off the spark of a true knowing that catches fire and burns. Purgative-Instress ignites and maintains the Illuminated-Inscape preparing the ground for the deeper union of Selving.

This then is the journey on which Merton, guided by Hopkins, embarked. And the trail map of his written words can lead spiritual seekers today along that same path through Illuminated-Inscapes, by Purgative-Instress to the Unitive-Selving and toward the recognition of True Self, which is also union with God. This is the spiritual ascent that leads to the "other side of the mountain." And since, in the spiritual topography of Thomas Merton, the mountain seems to be central, it will more than serve for a guiding image through this exploration of his own sacred landscapes.

In the *Woods, Shore, Desert* journal, Merton relates his reactions to a book given him entitled, *Mount Analogue* by René Daumal.[11] And in a wonderfully telling passage that he quotes from this text, he succinctly captures the heart of the journey described in the book, as well as, the heart of his own spiritual journey. While marveling at the canyons of New Mexico, Merton writes:

> From *Mount Analogue*: "How it is proved that a hirtherto unknown continent really existed with mountains much higher

> than the Himalayas... how it happened that no one detected it before... how we reached it, what creatures we met there–how another expedition pursuing quite different goals barely missed destruction."[12]

And he follows this with a brief commentary:

> The curvature of space around Mount Analogue makes it possible for people to live as though Mount Analogue did not exist. Hence, everyone comes from an unknown country and almost everyone from a too well known country.[13]

Often the curvature of the landscapes of our lives can lead us to live as if the spiritual mountain we ascend does not exist. It is often the too well-known country, the landscape of illusion, that we mistake for our deepest reality. But the spiritual quest always moves us from the too well-known country to the unknown country. And such a journey is sparked by attentiveness to the inscaped-landscapes of our lives. It is this attentiveness to the different countries we encounter, which awakens us to entire continents that we never knew existed even though our feet have always stood firmly upon them. Merton especially witnessed to this life of the examined-ascent, when he left the too well-known country of Kentucky and headed west.

It is on the first leg of his western journey, in the opening pages of *Woods, Shore, Desert*, that Merton, flying high above the vast landscape, catches fire somewhat like a kingfisher, and sets the tone for the spiritual awakening ahead, as he writes:

> Snow-covered mountains. Thirty-nine thousand feet over Idaho. Frozen lakes. Not a house, not a road. Gulfs. No announcement. Hidden again. We are all secrets. But now, where there are suggested gaps, one can divine rocks and snow. "Be a mountain diviner!" Whorled dark profile of a river in snow. A cliff in the fog. And now a dark road straight through a long fresh snow field. Snaggy reaches of snow pattern. Claws of mountain and valley. Light shadow or breaking cloud on snow. Swing and reach of long, gaunt, black, white forks. The new consciousness. Reading the calligraphy of snow and rock from the air. A sign of snow on a mountainside as if my own ancestors were hailing me. We bump. We burst into secrets.[14]

Here we are given an ecstatic sounding poetic description of the landscape Merton encounters from the airplane window. He sees

the play of rock and snow, white and black, shadow and light, darkness and illumination—all obvious opposites being held in tension, pushing toward some resolution. Merton immediately seems to draw flame as he touches the inscaped Idaho topography and divines a landscape charged with love, charged with God.

As is usually the case, such a spiritual journey begins with an absence of clear direction, until "no way" gives way to "a dark road straight through a long fresh snow field." It is the dark path of faith that is at one and the same time the blinding light of God. The spiritual air begins to thin with the recognition of secrets, things hidden, a call from within, contradictions held in tension, something familiar amid an unfamiliar landscape, "as if my own ancestors were hailing me." Then occurs the inevitable bump and the burst into illumination and the revelation of the ever deeper secrets of self in God.

W.H. Gardner, in describing Hopkins' poetic process, offers an apt explanation for the experience of Merton, that resulted in such a poetic outburst at "thirty-nine thousand feet over Idaho," when he writes: "poetic creation occurred when the poet's own nature (his own inscape) had been instressed by some complementary inscape discovered in external nature. ...all the world is full of inscape and chance left free to act falls into an order as well as a purpose."[15]

The inscaped-landscape, when attended to, provokes the illumination of Self-secrets, moves one out of a false light to the darkness that is God's light, from absence of direction to the revelation of a straight, dark, road cast upon a bright field. And like this dark road, the spiritual ascent begins to become visible, opening a way to union through the tensions of the seemingly impossible contradictions within and around us.

Merton's own inscape, then, is instressed by the complementary inscaped-landscape he sees and a secret is revealed as the inscape is "left free to act." And as "dragonflies draw flame / As tumbled over rim in roundy wells / Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each / Hung bell's/Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its / Name..."[16] the vastly varied landscapes, the jumble of dark and light without become a metaphor to a revealed state within. The Illuminated-Inscape is triggered by, as it also triggers, the on-going Purgative-Instress.

Perhaps a helpful guide to understanding this more purgative leg of the ascent is one that Merton himself turned to during his

western journey. It is a Hindu text entitled *Astavakra Gita*. The connections he makes, via this text, open the door for the reader into the deeper, interior process underway in the writer. Merton quotes the "Gita," which says: "When the mind is stirred and perceives things before it as objects of thought, it will find in itself something lacking."[17] Any illumination of secrets, on the spiritual quest, leads to a revelation of an ever deeper sense of lack, of internal alienation. We often discover our inner divisiveness, contradictions, dichotomies and utter lack, in the face of landscapes which mirror back to us our own poverty. Just as the landscape revealed high over Idaho touched Merton's own inscape, so too does another landscape awaken him to his own deeper poverty. Again in-flight, now with the Redwoods of California coming into view, Merton writes: "you can see where the hillsides have been slashed into, ravaged, sacked, stripped, eroded with no hope of re-growth of these marvelous trees."[18]

With this touching of the inscape the instressed illuminative spark feeds the purgative fires whose light and heat can be excruciating and Merton voices this as well. The "ravaged, sacked, stripped, eroded" landscape seems to reveal to him his own poverty and homelessness. He allows the instressed-inscape the freedom to act on him and by it he catches a glimpse of a personal reality which is universally true for all humankind: "I am the utter poverty of God. I am His emptiness, littleness, nothingness, lostness. When this is understood, my life in His freedom, the self-emptying of God in me is the fullness of grace."[19]

In this context then Merton again quotes the "Gita" which says: "The wise man [knows] the truth of the self."[20] And he also includes here the *Bhagavad-Gita*, in which it is written: "He [God] knows me, knows what in truth I am and who I am. Then having known me in truth, He enters into me."[21] This seems to hearken back to Merton's desire to "not only to observe but to *know* living things, [which] implies a dimension of primordial familiarity which is simple and primitive and religious and poor."[22] This represents knowledge achieved by first being known by the God who enters in and reveals the utter poverty at the heart of the human being. To enter this frightening and unfamiliar landscape is to know the truth of Self and no longer solely to observe life but to become Life itself. This is the place along the spiritual climb where the familiar becomes radically unfamiliar—what you thought you found becomes lost as the self-emptying of God within transforms into

the fullness of grace. If the spiritual trekker can withstand the utter terror that this revelation incites, then he or she discovers home in homelessness and is freed from the too well-known country that fails to satisfy. The climbers awaken to find their feet firmly planted on "a hitherto unknown continent" that has always existed with "mountains higher than the Himalayas." As Merton himself would write later in the same journal: "The country which is nowhere is the real home."[23]

So the revelation of utter poverty is also the revelation of unutterable riches. Merton's Purgative-Instressed moment of truth is the realization of how our emptiness partakes in the self-emptying of God, in Christ, which then opens in us the space for the fullness of grace: God's promised union in the midst of impoverished human contradiction. Once the inscaped-landscape is left free to act of its own upon us, and we stand fast and endure the burning and illuminating fire of instress, we come to know the truth of Self as God enters in. Or, maybe better said, God's already existent presence within us is more fully actualized at the deepest center of our being.

This actualization of God's presence in us, this entering of God within us, is what I term here, Unitive-Selving. Hopkins himself captures this moment in the poem "As kingfishers catch fire" when he writes: "Each mortal thing does one thing and the same / Deals out that being indoors each one dwells / Selves–goes itself; myself it speaks and spells..."[24] Again for Merton the physical landscape of his travels in the Western U. S. provides a powerful and provocative manifestation of this divine union come to light. After his return to Gethsemani, Merton received the photos he took of his trip, and in a brilliant moment of revelation, he makes a profound connection between the exterior landscapes captured in a photo and his own interior human geography as he writes:

> John Griffin sent one of my pictures of Needle Rock, which he developed and enlarged. I also have the contact. The Afga film brought out the great *Yang-Yin* of sea rock mist, diffused light and half hidden mountain–an interior landscape, yet there. In other words, what is written within me is there, "Thou art that."[25]

Now we come full circle from those first impressions of the play of dark and light, snow and rock, absence and presence, poverty and riches, through the great "*Yang-Yin* of sea rock mist, diffused

light and half-hidden mountain," all drawn into a unity revealing the consummation of humanity with divinity. After reading the "calligraphy of snow and rock" Merton comes into his own as a "mountain diviner," and amid *The Seven Storey Mountain,* Mount Analogue, and Mt. Kanchenjunga, he comes around to the other side of the mountain, the "half-hidden mountain" as his truest Self rises like a secret out of the clouds and is revealed: "Thou art that." Merton initially intuited how that Idaho mountain, viewed from the air, seemed to recognize him although his "own ancestors were hailing me." And now in this "half-hidden mountain" the secret is fully revealed as the hidden mountain within is made known.

Toward the end of *Woods, Shore, Desert,* Merton expresses what this climb through Purgative-Instress, Illuminated-Inscapes and Unitive-Selving has meant for him as he realizes:

> But I do have a past to break with, an accumulation of inertia, waste, wrong, foolishness, rot, junk, and a great need of clarification of mindfulness, or rather of no mind–a return to genuine practice, right effort, need to push on to the great doubt. Need for the Spirit. Hang on to the clear light![26]

As with any advance made along the spiritual ascent, the seeker realizes ever more deeply the on-going transformation to which he or she must surrender. Merton makes clear in this passage that the on-going transformation now takes place in a different light and one must continue the journey hanging on to this "clear light." I think we can get a richer sense of what Merton is expressing here by attending to this light.

In the 1982 edition of this journal, there is an especially intriguing and informative footnote concerning "the clear light" that Merton had found and so desired to hang on to. It is a quotation from Mircea Eliade who wrote:

> Death is a process of cosmic reabsorption, not in the sense that the flesh returns to the earth, but in the sense that the cosmic elements progressively dissolve into one another... When the process of cosmic reabsorption is complete, the dying man perceives a light like that of the Moon, then like that of the Sun, then sinks deep into the darkness. He is suddenly awakened by a dazzling light: this is his meeting with his real Self, which, according to the doctrine of all India, is at the same time the ultimate reality, Being.[27]

When anyone begins the spiritual ascent in earnest there is one piece of advice which needs to be followed and that is to "hang on to the clear light." This does not mean clinging to illuminations we might receive but instead allowing the light to move from moonlight to sunlight unto no light, purgation leading to death, with a trust that resurrects one into the dazzling light. It is this final light that is "the meeting with [our] real self" which is at the same time our meeting with Ultimate Reality. As Merton himself would put it:

> The secret of my identity is hidden in the love and mercy of God. But whatever is in God is really identical with Him, for His infinite simplicity admits no division and no distinction. Therefore I cannot hope to find myself anywhere except in Him.
>
> Ultimately the only way that I can be myself is to become identified with Him in Whom is hidden the reason and fulfillment of my existence.[28]

Merton demonstrates for us how this "secret" is revealed through attention to the relationship between our own particular inscape and the inscaped-landscapes of our world. Such a relationship, if left free to act, can then instress us into an ever deepening meeting with our True Self which is also the meeting with the Divine.

Both Gerard Manley Hopkins and Thomas Merton knew that this "dazzling light" of Selving was not the revelation of an outer glitter alone but that of an inaccessible inner glow. Merton himself once expressed intrigue about a Sufi notion he read about in the writings of Louis Massignon, "le point vierge" which is "the center of our nothingness where, in apparent despair, one meets God–and is found completely in His mercy."[29] He then goes on to write further on this same point stating:

> Again, that expression, *le point vierge*.... At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God is us. It is so to speak His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we

> would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely.... I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.[30]

All human beings are inscaped by God, "his name is written in us" as pure diamond, just as Merton found written in himself an interior reality instressed by an exterior landscape that gave way to the light expressed in "Thou art that." To suffer, as it were, the instresses of life is to be led up the spiritual ascent to that nothingness which first appears as utter loss, "our poverty, our indigence," and then reveals itself as "the face and blaze of a sun" that is the fullness of God's grace.

When any diviner of the spiritual mountain encounters their own absolute poverty it is a glimpse of this point of nothingness that is also the "pure glory of God." Merton knew that journey and he touched that point, as did Gerard Manley Hopkins who expressed it in the poem, "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection":

> Flesh fade, and mortal trash
> Fall to the residuary worm; world's wildfire, leave but ash;
> In a flash, at a trumpet clash,
> I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am,
> And this Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch matchwood,
> immortal diamond
> Is immortal diamond.[31]

The journey form "mortal trash" to "immortal diamond" is the heart of the climb up the spiritual mountain. It is an ascent already begun simply by the desire of the spiritual seeker for True Self and Divine Union. And, in conclusion, it is important to remember Thomas Merton's own words, that no matter how far we advance on this journey, "the climb has only begun."[32]

Appendix

> As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
> As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
> Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
> Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves– goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*

I say more: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;

Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is–

Christ– for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

–Gerard Manley Hopkins

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1948), pp. 211, 215.

2. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1962), p. 30. In the chapter titled "Things in Their Identity," Merton employs Hopkins' term "inscape" while describing how the things of nature share in the Divine identity.

3. W.H. Gardner (ed.), *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poems and Prose* (New York: Penguin Books, 1953), p. 51. See end of this article for the complete text of the sonnet, "As kingfishers catch fire."

4. *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poems and Prose*, p. 51.

5. Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 215-216.

6. Gardner, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poems and Prose*, p. xxi.

7. Richard Ellman and Robert O'Clair (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1973), p.68.

8. Ellman and O'Clair, *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, p. 68.

9. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 30.

10. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude* (Journals 3; ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham; San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1995), p. 190.

11. René Daumal, *Mount Analogue* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1968).

12. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, ed., Patrick Hart (Journals 7; New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), p. 107.

13. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 107.

14. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 94.

15. Gardner, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poems and Prose*, p. xxiv.

16. Gardner, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poems and Prose*, p. 51.
17. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 104.
18. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 96.
19. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 102.
20. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 91.
21. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 103.
22. Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, p. 190.
23. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 110.
24. Gardner, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poems and Prose*, p. 51.
25. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 110.
26. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 113.
27. Thomas Merton, *Woods, Shore, Desert: A Notebook 1968*, ed., Joel Wieshaus (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1982), p. 58; from Mircea Eliade, "Light and the Bardo," *The Two and The One* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), pp. 37-38.
28. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, pp. 35-36.
29. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Publishers, 1966), p. 136.
30. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 142.
31. Gardner, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poems and Prose*, p. 66.
32. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 107.