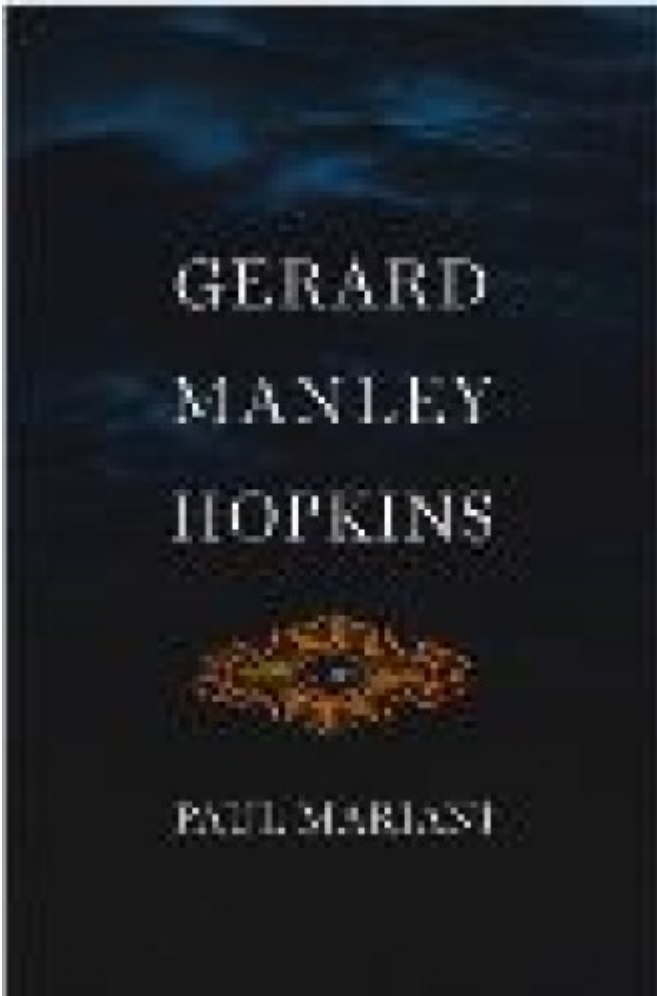


Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Life

reviewed by [Marilyn McEntyre](#) in the [February 24, 2009](#) issue

## In Review



### **Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Life**

Paul Mariani

Viking

In his sonnet "On His Blindness" Milton laments the loss that impedes "that one talent which is death to hide," now "lodged with me, useless, though my soul more bent to serve therewith my Maker." God gave him, Milton reasons, not only a talent

for words, but an urge to use them that seemed to him as essential as a heartbeat. And yet that same God had allowed blindness to stay his writing hand and make him haplessly dependent on the half-willing help of slow and uncertain daughters. The bitter note of lament that begins the poem gives way, however, to a doctrine, if not a feeling, of acceptance that has served many since as a call to deeper humility and patience: “God doth not need either man’s work or his own gifts,” he asserts, resorting to a theological truth that turns his meditation abruptly away from self and toward a truth so large that his own loss is diminished in its light. The final line of the sonnet offers a hard-won comfort accessible only to those whose desire to serve is greater than their desire to achieve: “They also serve who only stand and wait.”

Some 220 years later, one of Milton’s more remarkable successors engaged in a similar struggle, came to a similar conclusion and, despite frustrating impediments, left his own rich legacy of poetry, pressed through a fine mesh of circumstance that both diminished his output and intensified the spiritual energy concentrated in lines that continue to shock readers into gratitude and praise. Paul Mariani brings us the life of Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1888), Catholic heir to Milton’s towering Protestant legacy of faith informed by imagination, one of those rare souls for whom service mattered more than achievement or recognition.

For long periods in the course of his mobile life as a Jesuit priest, still in close touch with Anglican and agnostic friends who regretted his conversion and the “waste” of his gifts and time, Hopkins voluntarily gave up writing the poetry that seemed as native to him as speech itself. Some of those periods of literary abstinence were self-imposed, as in the course of his conversion in 1868, when, while on retreat, he resolved to give up writing poetry if he became a priest and to burn what he had already written. (We may be grateful that he didn’t entirely fulfill that intention—though a number of poems, then and later, fed his chamber fire.)

Other fallow times were imposed by the strenuous and often thankless duties of parish ministry. In a letter to his lifelong friend and critic Robert Bridges, he confided that as long as he remained in Liverpool bound to a grueling round of parish duties, he could write nothing: “Every impulse and spring of art seems to have died in me,” he lamented. In other letters, written from Dublin, where he taught Greek and Latin and spent long nights marking papers with compulsive scrupulosity, he noted that his energies were so expended on quotidian duties he could not even think of writing the poems that seemed always to have been hovering at the edges of awareness, waiting for a form.

Despite these complaints, Hopkins embraced duty the way the psalmist embraced the law. His journals and letters give ample evidence of a sturdy determination to follow Christ's example of self-emptying love even when it led him into the depths of recurrent frustration, depression, chronic fatigue and a sense that his gifts were wasted. The portrait of the poet that emerges in Mariani's detailed chronicle traces strong lines of tension between dedicated priest and equally dedicated poet in a man whose life of prayer was fueled by a love of language—its musicality, its etymological nuances, its evocative power. Hopkins's poetry rarely departed far from the act of prayer, including prayer that emerged from a darkened mind and disappointed hopes.

Readers who come to this biography already acquainted with Hopkins's distinguishing and peculiar poetic ideas—"sprung rhythm," "instress," "inscape"—will appreciate the way Mariani recognizes in those notions an echo of the deep longings that gave shape to the poet's life. Converting to Catholicism in his last year at Anglican Oxford under the influence of the already towering John Henry Newman, Hopkins took deeply to heart the theological controversies of his day. His *apologia*, though, was not like Newman's but lay in a transformed vision of the created order, its beauty and its horrors, charged with God's grandeur and swathed in a veil of mystery penetrable only by unbiddable divine light. His enduringly favorite poem, "The Wreck of the Deutschland," commemorates the sinking of a German ship in which five nuns drowned, one crying at the last, "Christ, come quickly!" This and other disasters—public catastrophes, friends' suicides, early deaths—and his own bouts of crushing desolation seemed (as Auden once put it, commenting on Yeats) to "hurt him into poetry." Words were the material, and lines, carefully stressed and torqued, were the scaffolding to which he clung when his overburdened imagination and spirit imploded and all he could manage was, as he wrote in one of his better-known sonnets, to "not choose not to be."

Over the course of Hopkins's lifelong correspondence with his disenchanted and skeptical friend and fellow poet Bridges, he developed a vigorous critical discourse that pulled no punches in addressing theological or aesthetic differences, but he also lavished praise so unstinting where it was due that there could be no doubt of how devotedly and generously he read and tried to foster others' creative work. That discourse was often surprisingly playful: his love of puns and other wordplay shows up not only in letters to family and friends, but in sermons and even his most serious poems (one includes a pun on the Magnificat). His invented usages and line-long

hyphenations make up for quirkiness with stunning emotional or sensual precision; for example, he recalls a moment “When drop-of-blood-and-foam-dapple / Bloom lights the orchard-apple.” Such playfulness seems a hallmark of poetic genius in him, just as in Shakespeare words consistently exceed their assigned tasks and take to dancing. A simple comment on the temporary nature of Jesuit work assignments bubbles into mirth as he explains, “but permanence with us is ginger-bread permanence; cobweb, soapsuds, and frost-feather permanence.”

The poet’s often eccentric playfulness may be lost on readers interested primarily in his spirituality or his technical invention. But all of these elements are of a piece, as Mariani demonstrates in his biography primarily by stitching together passages from the rich legacy of materials available—manuscript versions of poems, printed revisions, private letters, public sermons, journals and the correspondence of others during and after Hopkins’s life—a legacy that enriches the range of perspectives from which this kindly but complex character may be viewed.

If the book has a shortcoming, it lies in the thoroughness of telling detail; it is not an introduction to Hopkins but a study that will be most gratefully read by those already familiar with the poetry and with the complicated Victorian culture in which it emerged. Mariani, a professor of English at Boston College, speaks as a sympathizer and even a disciple who has internalized his subject’s peculiar habits of mind and who speaks his idiosyncratic language. Moving chronologically through the material, he serves as a tour guide to a spiritual and creative life strenuously lived, offering little by way of critical comment on the poems except to contextualize and sometimes clarify.

Along the way we learn to read the poetry in terms of the pressures, some of them extreme, to which Hopkins was responding in the only—and the best—way he knew how, bringing language to the altar, as bread and wine are brought, to be wrought and transformed into an acceptable sacrifice. Or, if not that, at least into a new song sung to the Lord and only secondarily to the frail, fickle, half-formed audiences whose tastes gave no reliable measure of what Hopkins offered. Protestant and Catholic readers alike will be summoned back to poems they may have let lie silent in the pages of long-shelved anthologies to find in them a vitality that still serves in the midst of our own fog of culture wars, poems that remind us how faithful is the One who “Fathers forth, whose beauty is past change,” and who still broods over the bent world with “Ah! bright wings.”