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**"TO MINISTER THAT MATTER":
MARY AND THE TRINITY IN HOPKINS'
"THE BLESSED VIRGIN COMPARED TO THE AIR
WE BREATHE"**

*Mary McDevitt, Ph.D**

Introduction

Almost six centuries after Duns Scotus defended the Immaculate Conception, and twenty-five years after the definition of that dogma, the English Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins said this about, if I may use a play on words, his country's "*matrimony*" in a sermon for that feast day:

It is a comfort to think that the greatest of the divines and doctors of the Church who have spoken and written in favor of this truth [the Immaculate Conception] came from England: between 500 and 600 years ago [Duns Scotus] was sent for to go to Paris to dispute its favour. The disputation or debate was held in public and someone who was there says that this wise and happy man by his answers broke the objections brought against him as Samson broke the thongs and withies with which his enemies tried to bind him.¹

The writer of these words had himself a lyric voice of great power, a voice that also broke the "thongs and withies" of the sometimes pedestrian English religious verse of his time, as later generations would discover. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that Hopkins, with his *tour de force* verbal manipulations, his intricate weaving of metaphor, imagery and word-

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¹In *The Sermons and Devotional Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Christopher Devlin (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 45.

play with an incarnational vision, not only recaptured both the medieval lyric's complex theology and the wit of the metaphysical or baroque lyric, but revealed a fresh poetic voice. Perhaps less familiar than his sonnets and the "Wreck of the Deutschland," however, are Hopkins' pieces devoted to Mary, no less ardent in their devotion to her than his medieval hero's defense of the Immaculate Conception. Two in particular, "The May Magnificat" and "The Blessed Virgin compared to the Air we Breathe," are superb works. In this paper, I will discuss the latter poem, focusing in particular on Hopkins' representation of Mary's relationship with the Trinity.

In a May 1883 correspondence with his literary champion (an unfortunately sometimes undiscerning champion) and friend Robert Bridges, Hopkins was somewhat dismissive of the piece:

We hang up polyglot poems in honour of the Blessed Virgin this month [May]. I am on one in English in three-foot couplets. . . . It is partly a compromise with popular taste, and it is too true that the highest subjects are not those on which it is easy to reach one's highest.²

Some critics, perhaps prejudiced by this rather too harsh self assessment, have classified the piece as one of Hopkins' minor works, overlooking, I think, the grace and skill—and, yes, wit—with which Hopkins combines a rich mariology with his sacramental vision and poetics while avoiding a certain nineteenth-century maudlin spirituality that perhaps Hopkins had in mind when he speaks of "popular taste." Like the best of medieval English religious lyrics, this 126-line poem is a work of dense theology expressed in compressed, carefully crafted, but affecting language. One need only think of the delicate fifteenth-century "I Sing of A Mayden," which has the charm of a courtly love lyric (in the spirit of the Song of Songs, Mary is represented on one level as a medieval maiden in her bower awaiting her beloved) wed to an incarnational theology

²In Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Selected Letters*, ed. Catherine Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 184.

that exploits traditional biblical typology and symbolism, all set in a beautifully simple and well-crafted architecture.³

But I would like to focus on Hopkins' work not only because it is testimony to the ability of the post-medieval writer to create a devotional piece that has both artistic and theological maturity, but more particularly because this work, written at the end of the last century, speaks to us today at the beginning of a new millennium. It is a work that both recaptures tradition and looks ahead to the mariology of our own times, expressed so well in *Lumen Gentium*: "In her life the Virgin has been a model of that motherly love with which all who join in the Church's apostolic mission for the regeneration of mankind

³The lyric's text follows:

I sing of a maiden
That is makeles,
King of alle kinges
To here sone she ches.

He cam also stille
Ther his moder was
As dew in Aprille
That falleth on the gras.

He cam also stille
To his moderes bowr
As dew in Aprille
That falleth on the flour.

He cam also stille
Ther his moder lay
As dew in Aprille
That falleth on the spray.

Moder and maiden
Was never non but she:
Well may swich a lady
Godes moder be.

Text from *Middle English Lyrics*, ed. Luria and Hoffman (New York: Norton 1974). Note the threefold repetition of the first line of the middle verse—this is certainly a Trinitarian reference.

should be animated." (65). I will discuss "The Blessed Virgin" from two main perspectives that I believe illustrate not only Hopkins' power as poet and theologian and devotional writer but his understanding of Mary's role in the divine economy as well. First, Hopkins' *theopoetics*: theology is not something to be extracted from or ignored in a discussion of Hopkins' poetics—the two are inextricably bound together. By means of his imagery, metaphoric language, and other such literary elements, Hopkins defends the reality of the metaphysical and the dignity of the human person while celebrating the relationship of Mary and the Trinity. Second, Hopkins' *theoaesthetics*: as evidenced in "The Blessed Virgin," Hopkins the artist and poet was always sensitive to the transcendent nature of beauty, a divine attribute.

In his Marian works, and most successfully in "The Blessed Virgin," Hopkins emphasizes Mary's beauty as mirror of the Trinity—mirrored in the beauty of his form, language, and image.

Theopoetics in "The Blessed Virgin Mary"

During the long retreat of his tertianship in 1881, Hopkins wrote the following of the Incarnation:

It is as if the blissful agony or stress of selving in God had forced out drops of sweat or blood, which drops were the world, or as if the lights lit at the festival of the 'peaceful Trinity' through some little cranny striking out lit up into being one 'cleave' out of the world of possible creatures. The sacrifice would be the Eucharist, and that the victim be truly victim like, like motionless, helpless, or lifeless, it must be in matter. Then the Blessed Virgin was intended or predestined to minister that matter. And here then was that mystery of the woman clothed with the sun which appeared in heaven. She followed Christ the nearest, following the sacrificial lamb 'whithersoever he went.'⁴

This prose passage, with its striking, difficult hopkinsian imagery, in some measure represents what the poet Hopkins

⁴In *Sermons and Devotional Writings*, 197.

expresses with even more mastery in "The Blessed Virgin compared to the Air we Breathe," namely, the communion of love in the Trinity that perforce expresses itself in creation; the Incarnation and Eucharist borne of love; and Mary as the "minister" of the communion of love that manifests itself—"selves itself," to use Hopkins' terms—"in matter." The mystery of the Trinity and God's "selving" "in matter" is central to Hopkins' poetics—and therefore necessarily central to his interior life. Walter Ong asserts that

The interior dynamism of the Three Persons in One God was not for Hopkins some sort of formula for theological juggling acts but was rather the centre of his personal devotional life and thus of his own 'selving.' His prayer and his daily activities were embedded in his felt relationships in faith to Father, Son and Holy Spirit.⁵

In "The Blessed Virgin," air (and by extension breathing) is of course the central metaphor—and a particularly meaningful and multivalent central metaphor. Air, the unseen but essential element, is nothing less than a reminder of the reality of the unseen, a defense, if you will, of the metaphysical, of grace, of mysteries such as the Trinity—particularly meaningful given the historical context of Hopkins' poem, a context concisely summed up by Daniel Brown: "in Hopkins' day . . . positivistic science often claimed to supersede metaphysics entirely."⁶ Hopkins clearly perceived this challenge to metaphysics, as other of his writings attest to. This is not to say that Hopkins turned his back on the material world or science itself—far from it, as I have already noted in regard to the former. The "truths" of nature itself reflect—partake of—the Creator. Hence air is not merely an *apropos* symbol—but has a kind of real sacramentality; it is an actual manifestation, we might say, of God's grace—life-giving, essential, necessary to being. Moreover, in his extended comparison between air and Mary as the

⁵Walter Ong, S.J., *Hopkins, the Self, and God* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 119.

⁶Daniel Brown, *Hopkins' Idealism: Philosophy, Physics, Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 2.

conduit of God's glory and mercy (itself perhaps a nod to St. Bernard's famous description of Mary as aqueduct), Hopkins exploits a contemporary scientist's thesis about the sky's azure color; William Tyndall, whose work was known to the Jesuit, asserted that air itself was not blue, but that blue was a result of reflected light. Gillian Beer summarizes Tyndall's argument:

Tyndall writes: 'Pure unsifted solar light is white' but 'turned into their equivalents of sensation, the different light-waves produce different colours.' 'The light of the firmament,' Tyndall argues, 'is reflected light.' . . . White light, he argues, is directly transmitted light, azure is the result of reflected light.⁷

Beer goes on to show how in "The Blessed Virgin" Hopkins "draws an extended metaphor from this discussion" with Mary as the medium through whom the light (God) flows.⁸ The metaphor is, in other words, a scientific "take" on traditional metaphoric language and imagery associated with Mary—Mary as the immaculate, the perfect, "mirror" of God's light—the moon, the star, and, in Hopkins, the blue sky to the sun. In reference to Hopkins' use of the sky as metaphor, Norman MacKenzie quotes this from one of Hopkins' sermons: "St. Bernard's saying, All grace given through Mary: this is a mystery. Like the blue sky, which for all its richness of color does not stain the sunlight, . . . so God's graces come to us unchanged but all through her. . . . the grace he gives not direct but as if . . . drawing it from her vessel."⁹ Hopkins' use of science in the service of both poetic image and theology is certainly a deliberate one; he is eager to show how all creation, all laws, far from precluding the existence of a Creator, stem from and lead to their Creator. Both natural beauty and natural fact, poetry and science—man's heart and his head—attest to the existence of a Divine—and Personal—Architect.

⁷Gillian Beer, "Helmholtz, Tyndall, Gerard Manley Hopkins: leaps of the prepared imagination," in *Comparative Criticism* 13 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 134.

⁸Beer, "Helmholtz, Tyndall," 134.

⁹From *The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Norman MacKenzie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). 437. All quotations from Hopkins' poems are from this edition.

In comparing Mary to the air, Hopkins furthermore reminds us that Mary was as "hidden" yet as essential as air, as unobserved, yet as indispensable. But Hopkins is also depicting Mary's relationship to the Trinity by means of this metaphor—in a sense he collapses the Marian and Trinitarian metaphor together, for there is no denying that air, breath, is for Hopkins also a metaphor for the life-giving God, the Trinity. Take for example, his opening lines in "The Wreck of the Deutschland":

Thou mastering me
God! giver of breath and bread.¹⁰

Here Hopkins recalls God breathing life into Adam, Christ breathing into the Apostles the Holy Spirit.¹¹ Later on in the same poem, Hopkins invokes the Holy Spirit as Breath: "Breathe, arch and original Breath" (Stanza 25, line 194). This is echoed in his sonnet "God's Grandeur," when, in his magnificent closing lines, Hopkins offers hope to a weary world: "Because the Holy Ghost över the bent / World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings."

Mary, then, is not only the air, but, on another metaphoric level, the one who enfleshes the Divine "Breath"—daughter of the Father, dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, and mother of the Son that she is. By means of his extended and polysemous metaphor of air and breath, Hopkins reminds the reader that Mary gave flesh to the Unseen, making present in time and space the timeless. The very framework of the poem brings us back to this fact: that in Mary, the "arch and original Breath" is made manifest—in a mother. In their association between air and the maternal, the first lines are evocative of this:

Wild air, world-mothering air,
Nestling me everywhere,
.....
This needful, never spent,
And nursing element;
(ll. 1-2; 9-10)

¹⁰ Hopkins, from *The Poetical Works*, ed. Norman MacKenzie, 119.

¹¹ See notes to "The Wreck of the Deutschland" by Norman MacKenzie in *The Poetical Works*.

Building on his metaphor of air, Hopkins then compares Mary to the atmosphere that allows the sunlight to reach us without harming us:

A mother came to mould
Those limbs like ours which are
What must make our daystar
Much dearer to mankind;
Whose glory bare would blind
Or less would win man's mind.
Through her we may see him
Made sweeter, not made dim,
And her hand leaves his light
Sifted to suit our sight.

(ll. 104-113)

As if to reflect the eternal nature and integrity of the God who has made His dwelling place in the Virgin Mother, and by so doing has given her as mother to all, Hopkins brings his poem to a full circle with an echo of the opening. But he does it with a variation as he addresses Mary in a prayer invoking her maternal care for her child, that is, the speaker—that is, us all. It is an “I” who speaks to Mary in the informal, more intimate second person—“Be thou then, O thou dear / Mother, my atmosphere” (ll. 114-15). Mary is not mother to an anonymous mob (what does mother mean in that context in any case?) but to each individual. Note also that the first line of the poem is reversed in this later line, just as man’s fate was reversed when “Eva” became “Ave” and the Word became flesh:

World-mothering air, air wild,
Wound with thee, in thee isled,
Fold home, fast fold thy child.

(ll. 124-26)

Thus Hopkins both likens and juxtaposes air with Mary’s flesh, the particular with the universal, infinity with infancy:

This air, which, by life’s law,
My lung must draw and draw

Now but to breathe its praise,
 Minds me in many ways
 Of her who nót only
 Gave God's infinity
 Dwindled to infancy
 Welcome in womb and breast,
 Birth, milk, and all the rest
 But mothers each new grace
 That does now reach our race—

(ll. 13-23)

The text not only celebrates the great mystery of the Infinite's manifestation in Mary, but also evidences Hopkins' reverence for all creation and for the human person, mirrors too the Trinitarian communion of love. Hopkins shared in what Walter Ong calls the nineteenth century's "fascination with particularity and the self"¹² in an intense way, in a way shaped by his faith and the sacramental vision that all that *is*, is numinous. We return again to the opening lines of the poem, which attest to this vision:

Wild air, world-mothering air,
 Nestling me everywhere,
 That each eyelash or hair
 Girdles; goes home betwixt
 The fleeciést, frailest-flixed
 Snowflake; that's fairly mixed
 With, riddles, and is rife
 In every least thing's life.

(ll. 1-8)

By means of the ebullient tone, created by his typically masterful use of alliteration and assonance, diction and syntax, as well as by the juxtaposition of the imagery of "wild air" (surely recalling Christ's statement about the Spirit that "the wind bloweth where it listeth" [John 3:8]) and the delicate image of the snowflake, Hopkins evokes the great design and variety and uniqueness and *life* in creation, all reflections of the infi-

¹² Ong, *Hopkins, the Self, and God*, 3.

nately fruitful Creator. "Each eyelash or hair" moreover echoes what Christ says of God's Providence: "Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings? And yet not one of them is forgotten before God. Yes, the very hairs on your head are numbered" (Luke 12: 6-7). Hopkins' verse in general and this poem in particular are witnesses to God's regard and love for each creature. We recall again that the last lines of the poem are a prayer of the individual speaking to Mary tenderly and intimately as one child to his mother: "Fold home, fast fold thy child." Ong observes: "[Hopkins] is the most relentlessly articulate of Victorians in his attention to differentiation outside, to 'dappled things' and to differentiation inside, in his acute awareness of the self as irreducibly and utterly different from all else. . . . However, for Hopkins different beings are not simply constituted out of their differences. . . . Each being is constituted by its positive selfhood."¹³ That selfhood is redeemed and given integrity by means of the Incarnation, that "selving" of the Trinity in time and space. Hopkins writes in notes on the *Spiritual Exercises*:

The Trinity made man after the image of Their one nature but they redeem him ('*faciamus redemptionem*') by bringing into play with infinite charity Their personality. Being personal They see as if with sympathy the play of personality in man below Them, for in his personality his freedom lies and this same personality playing in its freedom not only exerts and displays the riches and capacities of his one nature . . . but unhappily dis-unites it, rends it, and almost tears it to pieces. One of Them therefore makes Himself one of that throng of persons, a man among men, by charity to bring them back to that union with themselves which they have lost by freedom and even to bring them to a union with God which nothing in their nature gave them.¹⁴

And Mary, to use Hopkins words, is the "minister" of that redemptive Incarnation, who gave God "Welcome in womb and breast, / Birth, milk, and all the rest." Note Hopkins' very concrete and bodily diction here—it is most deliberate. For our very corporeality—our bodily dependence on air ("This air, which,

¹³ Ong, *Hopkins, the Self, and God*, 3-4.

¹⁴ In *Sermons*, 171.

by life's law, / My lung must draw and draw . . . Minds me in many ways" —ll. 13 ff.) brings us back to the center of it all—the Incarnation, and Mary's reality, her corporeality, her motherhood. Here is no etherealized or sentimentalized Mary, no goddess of myth, no mere symbol of some female life principle, but Mary of Galilee, a woman of flesh and blood, an individual, who moulds "Those limbs like ours" (l.105) in her womb:

Mary Immaculate,
Merely a woman, yet
Whose presence, power is
Great as no goddess's
Was deemèd, dreamèd. . . .

(ll. 24-28)

Here is no antique pawn of divinity's power; Hopkins subtly reminds us of Mary's active participation in man's redemption—she proffers "hospitality" to the Triune God: "Gave God's infinity / . . . / Welcome in womb and breast" (ll. 18 ff.). She actively cooperates with the Father's plan that "we may see him / Made sweeter, not made dim" (ll. 110-111). Because Mary, one woman, gave infinity welcome in her womb, she is the mother of all the selves redeemed by "God's infinity / Dwindled to infancy" (ll. 18-19):

If I have understood,
She holds high motherhood
Towards all our ghostly good
And plays in grace her part
About man's beating heart, . . .

(ll. 46-50)

By means of yet another "twist" on the air metaphor—this time juxtaposing air with flesh—Hopkins also calls us to reflect on another central and ancient teaching about Mary. He uses the image of air to remind us that we, *because* of Mary's fiat, her enfleshing of the Word, we too can bear the Word—not in the flesh, but in the spirit. In *Redemptoris Mater*, when John Paul II speaks of the faith "which Mary professed at the

Annunciation as the 'handmaid of the Lord' and in which she constantly 'precedes' the pilgrim People of God throughout the earth" (no. 28), he is reiterating an ancient theological theme that runs also as a subtext under Hopkins' poem: Mary as model and prototype of the members of the Body of Christ. In her we see what we will become; being like her, in giving *our* "fiat," we move toward that end. In being like her, we bear the Word anew in spirit. In being like her, we become more Christ-like and hence *more* ourselves:

Of her flesh he took flesh:
He does take fresh and fresh,
Though much the mystery how,
Not flesh but spirit now
And makes, O marvellous!
New Nazareths in us,
Where she shall yet conceive
Him, morning, noon, and eve;
New Bethlems, and he born
There, evening, noon, and morn—
Bethlem or Nazareth,
Men here may draw like breath
More Christ and baffle death;
Who, born so, comes to be
New self and nobler me
In each one and each one
More makes, when all is done,
Both God's and Mary's Son.

(ll. 55-72)

"The Blessed Virgin," then, attests to something that has to come to be ever more emphasized in the theology of our day, in particular in the writings of John Paul II: the dignity of the human person—a dignity that springs from Mary's participation in the Trinity's redemptive love, which love makes the person whole and a participant in the life of the Trinity as an adopted son or daughter. And by becoming other Marys, we too bear Christ. If we open ourselves to God's grace, as did she, "New Bethle[he]ms, New Nazareths" are made in us, and we

are made "new sel[ves] and nobler" (l. 69). This is powerfully articulated in the last lines of one of Hopkins' sonnets:

. . . 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.¹⁵

These lines also remind us that for Hopkins, beauty, as manifested so perfectly in Mary and Christ, is a road to and from the Trinity.

Hopkins' Theoaesthetics—Mary as *Via pulchritudinis*

Georges Bernanos' wise Curé de Torcy says to his saintly young clerical colleague in *Diary of a Country Priest*: "I will define a Christian people by their opposite. The opposite of a Christian people is a people sad, a people old."¹⁶ Hopkins' verse is, it seems to me, an attempt to capture in language a joyful and childlike delight in beauty that was lacking in a generally old and sad late-nineteenth century. In his sonnet "The World is Charged with the Grândeur of God" we find this bleakness powerfully evoked: "Générações have trod, have trod, have trod; / And all is seared with trade, bleared, smeared with toil; / And wears man's smudge and shares man smell: the soil / Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod" (ll. 5-8). Although Hopkins himself suffered periods of aridity and depression, referring to himself in one of his "terrible sonnets" as a "eunuch"—barren, unproductive—he nevertheless struggled to express in his words the hope manifest in the lines of the sonnet that follow the rather grim view of the lines above: "Ánd for all this, náture is never spent; / There lives the dearest freshness deep down things; / . . . / Because the Holy Ghost óver the bent / World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings" (ll. 9 ff.).

Hopkins continually represented the immanence of the Word in the world, the love of the Trinity, and the beauty of God's being which, he felt, beauty of language could also re-

¹⁵"As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame." See *The Poetical Works*, 141.

¹⁶"Je vais te définir un peuple Chrétien par son contraire. Le contraire d'un peuple Chrétien, c'est un peuple triste, un peuple de vieux."

flect. Elizabeth Jennings, the late twentieth-century English Catholic poet, says it well in a piece addressed to Hopkins: "God's Presence / Was granted a new kind of immanence in your lines."¹⁷ One sees in Hopkins a physically frail, sometimes spiritually suffering man nevertheless burning with a desire to express as powerfully as he could this one startling fact: that God became man out of an immeasurable love for, to use Hopkins' words, "this poor potsherd" man, giving the human person an unspeakably great beauty that is not merely skin deep but reflects the Triune beauty; he says in another poem:

In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
I am all at once what Christ is, / since he was what I am, and
This Jack, jóke, poor pótsherd, / patch, matchwood, immortal
diamond,
Is immortal diamond.¹⁸

Mary is the *via pulchritudinis*,¹⁹ the model of this beauty—for the believer and for the poet. As Hopkins says elsewhere:

Like blue sky, which for all its richness of colour does not stain the
sunlight, though smoke and red clouds do, so God's graces come to us
unchanged, but all through [Mary]. Moreover, she gladdens the
Catholic's heaven and when she is brightest so is the sun her son:
he that sees no blue sees no sun either. . . .²⁰

In a wonderful litotes in "The Blessed Virgin compared to the Air we Breathe," namely, that Mary's "one work" is to "let all God's glory through" (ll. 29–30),²¹ Hopkins both looks back to centuries of praise of Mary's beauty such as this from St.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Jennings, "Hopkins in Wales," in *Collected Poems 1953–1985* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1986).

¹⁸ "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection," ll. 21–25.

¹⁹ Paul VI, in closing address to the participants of the Mariological Congress in Rome, 1975, as cited by Johann Roten, S.M., in "Mary and the Way of Beauty," *Marian Studies* 49 (1998): 109.

²⁰ In *Sermons*, 29.

²¹ We might note the following from Hopkins' notes: "The first intention . . . of God outside himself or, as they say, *ad extra*, outwards, the first outstress of God's power, was Christ; and we must believe that the next was the Blessed Virgin. Why did

John Damascene: "The *Theotokos* is 'the beautification of the human race, the ornament of all creation, through whom all creation is blessed,'"²² and ahead to John Paul II, who says in *Redemptoris Mater*,

she who belongs to the "weak and poor of the Lord" bears in herself like no other member of the human race, that "glory of grace" which the Father "has bestowed on us in his beloved Son," and this grace determines the extraordinary greatness and beauty of her whole being.²³

In her womb is fashioned the presence of God's beauty. Elsewhere in "The Blessed Virgin," Hopkins, exploiting, as noted above, the science of his time as metaphor²⁴ (for the natural world always manifests God's truth), compares Mary to the atmosphere that allows the light of the sun to reach us:

. . . this blue heaven
The seven or seven times seven
Hued sunbeam will transmit
Perfect, not alter it.
Or if there does some soft,
On things aloof, aloft,
Bloom, breathe, that one breath more
Earth is the fairer for.

(ll. 86-93)

Mary is thus at the center of Hopkins' artistic endeavor as the exemplar of the "new"—the New Eve, the bearer of the good news—the rebirth of humanity; she is the sign of hope, full of grace.²⁵ As such, she is also the mirror of a Divine Beauty ever young—a particularly important model for the Christian artist

the Son of God go thus forth from the Father not only in the eternal and intrinsic procession of the Trinity but also by an extrinsic and less than eternal, let us say aeonian one?—To give God glory . . ." (*Sermons*, 197).

²² Quoted in John Saward, *The Beauty of Holiness and the Holiness of Beauty* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 121.

²³ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, no. 11.

²⁴ See discussion of Tyndall above (text sourced in n. 7).

²⁵ I must mention a Middle English carol of the Annunciation that proclaims in its refrain "Nova, nova: Ave fitt ex Eva." This captures well the exhilaration of the event

who seeks to mirror the aesthetics, if you will, of the Divine Artist in his or her work. In a kind of multi-mirroring action in "The Blessed Virgin," Hopkins strives, through the beauty of his imagery and language, to reflect the beauty of the Virgin who herself reflects the Triune beauty. Expressing wonder at the splendor of the heavens, which of course represent Mary's beauty in being, Hopkins says, with a graceful allusion to Dante's famous image of Mary's "ensapphiring" the heavens:²⁶

Again, look overhead
How air is azurèd;
O how! Nay do but stand
Where you can lift your hand
Skywards: rich, rich it laps
Round the four fingergaps.
Yet such a sapphire-shot,
Charged, steepèd sky will not
Stain light. Yea, mark you this:
It does no prejudice.

(ll. 73-82)

These lovely lines, somewhat startling in their otherness, so typical of the piece's lushness of image and sound—with diction cut like gems ("air is azurèd / . . . / rich, rich it laps / Round the four fingergaps. / . . . sapphire-shot")—compel us to look upward not only physically, but spiritually: to see with new eyes. They call the reader to revel in the beauty of creation, a mirror of Divine Beauty.

Conclusion

When I read Hopkins' "The Blessed Virgin," particularly these lines:

The glass-blue days are those
When every colour glows,
Each shape and shadow shows
(ll. 83-85),

as well as the newness Mary's "fiat" brings about—"News! News!" or "new things, new things!"

²⁶*Paradiso*, xxiii, 100-2.

my mind turns to a visual analogue in stained glass—the gloriously blue windows of Chagall in the Church of St. Stephen in Mainz. These windows rose out of the physical destruction of the church at the end of the Second World War as a testament to God's peace, as a sign of hope and reconciliation. Chagall's blues, through which light continually streams, represent the transcendence *and* presence, the all-encompassing nature, of God. Just as Chagall's light-filled blues speak, as Klaus Mayer puts it, of "the unfathomable God, who has created everything, who sustains all creation, whose works are manifest in the Biblical events depicted [in the windows],"²⁷ so the blue sky in Hopkins represents the mercy and grace of the Trinity transmitted through Mary. Hopkins represents Mary's perfect imitation of the Son's glorification of the Father when he says that her "one work" is to "let all God's glory through." Like Mary, it is the work of the religious poet, the religious artist, to let "all God's glory through"—to be a "minister of [God's] matter." Indeed, a good symbol of the artist's task is stained glass, a visual symbol itself. The light that flows through the brilliant windows of the Gothic cathedral and the twentieth-century windows of Chagall calls the observer to be mindful of Mary's "magnification" of the Lord, God's light and illumination transmitted through the beauty of Mary. Hence the artist who would move the reader, the observer, to a more profound participation in the love of God allows—like a window, like Mary—God's light to shine in and through him or herself. Hopkins achieves this transparency in "The Blessed Virgin." In his exhortation that we "Look overhead / How air is azurèd," he echoes the great Marian literature of the past, from St. Bernard's "respice stellam" to Dante, whose *Commedia* contains so many exhortations to look up at Mary. These writers, who in their creations so well represent the Marian *via pulchritudinis*,

²⁷ Klaus Mayer, "St. Stephan in Mainz," *Schell Art Guide* (Regensburg: Verlag, Schnell and Steiner, 1997), 9.

move us to cast our downward glance upward and, in so doing, find the way home:

Be thou then, O thou dear
Mother, my atmosphere;
My happier world, wherein
To wend and meet no sin;
Above me, round me lie
Fronting my froward eye
With sweet and scarless sky;
Stir in my ears, speak there
Of God's love, O live air,
Of patience, penance, prayer:
World-mothering air, air wild,
Wound with thee, in thee isled,
Fold home, fast fold thy child.

(ll. 114-126)