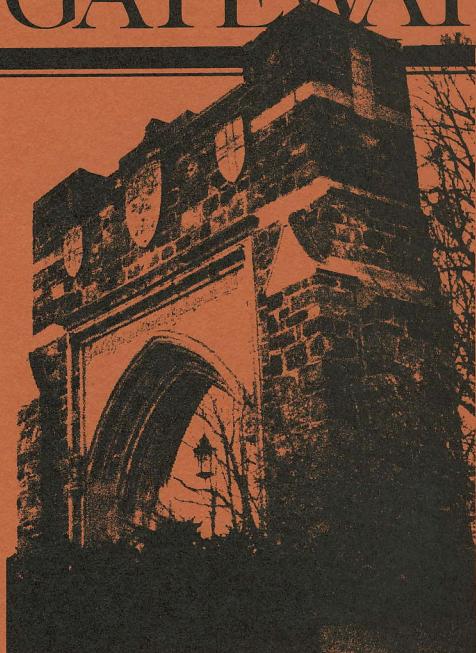


# THE DREW GATEWAY

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# The Christhood of Things

This essay is dedicated to Stanley Romaine Hopper

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Things participate in Christhood whenever they open themselves to the ground from which they are ventured forth. This ground is the abyss of God and serves as the fecund ground of all ventured forth things. Things return to their ground by finding the Christic-stem at their core. In order to enter the region in which these stems appear we must engage in a sustained meditation on Christhood and things in their inner nature. Our guide down this path will be the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins.

We must first exhibit the nature of Christhood in its full ontological dimension. This will prepare the way for a poetic query into the nature of those faithful things that nurture and sustain Christhood. From this query we should gain access to the radiant sphere of Christic-power.

## I

The first distinction demanded by an ontological analysis of Christhood is that between Jesus and the Christ. Jesus was a finite historical being who passed decisively out of being on the cross. This Jesus cannot be God. Yet Jesus became the historical point through which God could come-to-appearance in a final way. Jesus was faced with the decision as to whether he should remain simply Jesus or negate himself so as to become obedient to the abyss of God. By deciding to become transparent to God he ceased to be the finite will known as Jesus. At that point he became the final cipher of the Holy. A cipher is that which points to the infinite. It becomes a cipher by becoming empty. The proper term for this emptying is "kenosis." Jesus emptied himself by taking the cross into his being. This cross is the highest symbol of the destruction of the powers of finitude. All merely triumphal elements were negated by the crucifixion.

By dying on the cross Jesus became the Christ. Yet we must be careful of merely personal associations. The notion of the Christ is an ontological notion. It is not a personal predicate of Jesus. Thus we cannot use the proper name, Jesus Christ. Instead, following Tillich, we must say, Jesus as the Christ. Christhood is something Jesus entered into. Yet we are right to associate Jesus with the Christhood because he entered into it in a decisive way. He totally rejected all earthly projections upon his person. He refused to be seen as something, for to be seen as something is to bear specific ontological traits. Because of his refusal to

bear projections from his community he has become the norm for our understanding of the Christ event.

As to the nature of Christhood, we can take some clues from Schleiermacher. Christhood is the condition of total transparency to the infinite. It is personal only in the sense that it represents the ground of self-hood. Christhood could only appear through a person. Yet this Christhood is not itself a person. Thus Jesus became the normative historical cipher of Christhood. Christhood stands as the link between the finite and the infinite. It is the condition of openness to the abyss of God. As such it is not a thing or person to be worshiped. There is no room for the idolatry of Jesus. Rather, Jesus must be left behind so that the abyss can come-to-appearance through him.

The Christ event (that is, the coming-into-presence of the infinite as infinite) is the norm by which we judge all epiphanies of God. It is normative in that no person or event can achieve this total transparency. One cannot will to become the Christ. One is grasped by the infinite and emptied of all personal content. By insisting that this event has already occurred we become free of any idolatry which seeks for a new decisive manifestation of Christhood. The norm of Jesus as the Christ judges all such attempts.

When Jesus died on the cross he rose up into Christhood. The greatest, and most difficult, symbol of this event is the symbol of the resurrection. We must certainly reject any merely physical understanding of this central Pauline concept/experience. To be resurrected is to finally become free from the forces of estrangement and finitude. It is to be born into the pure power of Being-itself. Being-itself is the eternal power which sustains all ventured forth things. Jesus became the New Being by overcoming the Old Being of history and estrangement. The powerful symbol of the resurrection speaks of the conquest of the old order. This is not to be seen as the physical ascent to a different region of space/time but as the emergence of the dimension of depth and meaning into space/time. Death is overcome. Death is the final outcome of sin, if sin is understood as estrangement from the infinite. Death is also that side of Non-Being which appears to mortals. It is the showing-forth of the possible closure of world and thing. Thus death is the reign of closure. The resurrection decisively negates this closure and assures the region of openness. To overcome death is to overcome the demonic structures of Non-Being, if Non-Being is seen as closure. Thus the symbol of the resurrection stands as the highest symbol of Christhood as the emergence of the New Being.

But we must push beyond the primary event of Jesus as the resurrected Christ. The Christ event is now to be seen as the inner telos of all ventured forth things. That is, it stands as the source and goal of all being-things. We can assert that to be is to be underway toward Christhood. Yet this drive is not limited to persons. All things strive to participate in the New Being that has been revealed by the resurrection. Things are ventured forth from the worlding-workshop and stand over the abyss of Non-Being. They are precarious. Yet the simple things of nature remain closer to the power of the New Being in that they do not have the freedom to turn away from Being-Itself. Only persons stand

under the double "not." Persons stand under the "not" of Non-Being (as do things) and under the "not" of pride. The "not" of pride is the pull of the finite self-will (as understood by Schelling). This pull is the pull of the self-exaltation of the finite. The finite wishes to be more than finite, namely, to be in-finite. This pull is the demonic power of Non-Being. Only by conquering this pull can we become the radiant arena through which the New Being can come-to-appearance.

II

The first clues we have as to the direction of this conquest of demonic Non-Being come from things. Their faithfulness stands before us a cipher of our own entelechy. To gain access to this faithfulness we must listen to the words of a poet who has sensed the power of Christhood in a being-thing. The following poem comes from Gerard Manley Hopkins and was written on May 30, 1877:

The Windhover

To Christ our Lord

I caught this morning morning's minion, kingdom of  
daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his  
riding.

Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding  
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing  
In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,

As a skat's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl  
and gliding

Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding  
Stirred for a bird,—the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume here  
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion  
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my Chevalier!

No wonder of it: sheer plod makes plough down sillion  
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,  
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermillion.

The first thing to be noted is the title. The "windhover" is the bird which hovers over the winds and finds its dominion there in the abyss of the sky. Yet the poet immediately dedicates this poem of the falcon to "Christ our Lord." This hints in the direction of the poem proper. We quickly learn that the bird points toward the inner meaning of Christhood. This means that the windhover is the faithful thing which bespeaks the power of the New Being as revealed in "Christ our Lord." Thus, as we listen to the "way" of the falcon we can gain access to that which is sought by all being-things.

Hopkins uses the technical term "inscape" for the inner and essential togetherness of the elements of a thing. A thing's inscape is its propor-

tionate togetherness of parts to whole. It is the way of a thing's ringing-presence to and for itself. The inscape of the falcon, as revealed in the poem, will bring us into the region of the inscape of the Christ event. They belong together in simple oneness. Let us then learn to listen to the inscape of the faithful thing.

The poet speaks of his morning walk. On this walk he chances to see a falcon circling high above him in the open abyss of the radiant sky. He names this falcon, "morning's minion." A minion is a servant, namely, one who attends to the will of his Lord. His Lord is the radiant presence of morning's light. He serves this lord by faithfully circling above the earth. Thus the bird of prey is also a humble servant. Yet the poet next informs us that the falcon is also the "kingdom of daylight's dauphin." A dauphin is a prince, namely, one who is the first son of his lord. Thus the falcon has a dual nature. He is daylight's servant and son. He both attends to the daylight and holds dominion on daylight's kingdom. Here we see the dual nature of the falcon's Christhood.

The falcon is also, "dapple-dawn-drawn," which means that he is the place where the light plays in simple delight. As dappled he gathers the light to himself so as to be the place where radiance comes to abide. He is the un-hidden one.

As the un-hidden one he rides forth over the steady air. The phrase "Of the rolling-level-underneath-him-steady-air" is an extended adjective construction, which means that the modifiers are brought together in simple oneness. The falcon rides over the air that rolls level beneath him. It provides the support for his circling/ringing dance. Thus the air (as the worlding of the world) is the enabling ground of his proper thinging. It is the enabling ground in that it gives support for his ownmost way. By fulfilling his inscape the falcon rises up into the region of true thinging. The falcon falcons. We can thus see the air as the arena of openness that allows the hovering bird to have its proper inscape. Landscape grants the region for inscape.

The falcon is high above the domain of the earth-bound. He gathers our diverted glances to himself. This gives us our proper measure. Yet the high-flying falcon is not without his own measure. He "rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing," which means that he reigns himself in by pulling his wings closer to the arch of his body. A wimpled wing is a bent wing—gathered together into its proper inscape (proportionate togetherness of parts to whole). This shows that the falcon achieves his own disciplined measure. This disciplined measure is the source of his ecstasy. His ecstasy comes from his measured ringing-dance through the sky.

Yet from this ringing-dance he swings off to hurl and glide much as a skater rings-around a frozen pond. This measured hurling and gliding enables the falcon to rebuff the big wind, that is, to preserve the proper distance between himself and the worlding of the world. This gives his inscape its fullest measure.

The poet's heart, participating in the inscape of the falcon, stirs. The bird has achieved mastery of the wind in a way be-fitting its nature. The poet too wishes to find his own measure through listening to the falcon. Through his feeling he hopes to find the way to his own inscape.

The beauty and valour of the hovering falcon stand for our own lost beauty. The faithful thing reminds us of our own proper way. We reveal in its beauty and power of Being. Yet here the poem initiates a turn. The poet tells us that: "oh, air, pride, plume here Buckle!" Air, pride, and plume belong together as symbols of our loss of our proper inscape. These three symbols of our arrogance buckle and fall under the impress of the falcon's faithfulness. Just as we were ready to imitate the falcon's pure power of Being we are shown that pride must be rejected. Here the radical turn toward Christhood appears.

As our pride buckles we witness the dramatic appearance of the fire that outshines the fire of pride. This fire is "a billion Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my Chevalier!" It flares-out and overwhelms all finite fire. It comes from the fire at the center of things and lights up the world of the finite. Yet this lovely fire is also a dangerous fire. It consumes pride and plume and re-makes the inscape of things. The fire of self-arrogance is much dimmer than the Holy fire which springs forth from the ground of Being. This Holy fire is the fire of the New Being which is granted by God. Through its light the world becomes the arena of radiance.

Yet the poet takes us even further toward the inner essence of things. This fire which springs forth from the Christ-falcon is to be found even in the humblest things. Here we see the emergence of the Christic-stem which speaks of the Christhood of *all* things. The poet says, "No wonder of it: sheer plod makes plough down sillion (furrow in a field) Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear, Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion." Thus even the seemingly meaningless toil in the field produces a furrow which shines with the power of Christhood. It does this by allowing Holy radiance to appear within its dark cleft.

Even the darkest things can glow with the light of the Divine. The seemingly dead embers (the dying Jesus of the cross?) can fall open and burst forth with the radiance of the resurrection. They gash "gold-vermilion" and show their true Christic-stem.

Thus the poet enables us to sense the power of the Christ event within the inscape of the simplest things. The inner-most nature of each ventured thing is its Christic-stem—the stem or root which holds it within the radiance of the Holy. We can find this stem only by becoming open to the New Being which has already been given to us.

### III

Stepping outside the inscape of the poem we can exhibit more fully the dynamics of thinging and the nature of Christhood. Out of this should emerge an awareness of the Christhood of things.

Things are ventured forth from out of the worlding-workshop. This means that things belong to the ringing-play of the worlding world. The worlding world is the ever active world of landscape and inscape. It grants the arena within which inscapes can flower. It is the enabling ground of all proper thinging. The worlding shepherds things. Yet things shepherd world. Together they shepherd each other into perduring in the venture. At the hidden "center" of this perduring is the drive toward self. Hopkins calls this drive toward self, "selving." Selving is the

generic drive toward uniqueness in each and every thing. Yet "personality" belongs only to the most fully selved things. The most fully selved things are the most precarious things. Because of this, Christhood became manifest most decisively through a person. Yet even things without personhood are precarious.

The drive toward uniqueness is found throughout nature. Each thing struggles to become more than a member of "its" class or genus. Selving is this drive away from generic oblivion. It is thus appropriate to ventured things. The danger within selving emerges whenever the thing loses contact with the infinite background from which it emerges. Here selving becomes demonic. The selving thing sees itself as more than finite. When this happens to non-human things we sense that the thing is no longer appropriate to its place. It has become dis-placed. Further, it has usurped the power of proper placement granted by the worlding world.

This danger, buried deep within selving, is most dangerous in persons. For persons have the finite freedom to turn away from the infinite ground and abyss. The newly emergent self, as personality, assumes that it is the center of the world and that the infinite is part of its own dominion. This produces a "full" self. A "full" self is that self which is solipsistically ringed-around its own "treasures." In essence, it has lost its proper horizontal placement. The Divine itself becomes closed, along with the arena of openness which grants "it" its appearance. Demonic selving has negated Christhood.

Yet buried deep within this "full" self lies a certain dis-ease. The fullness begins to cloy and become oppressive. The full self realizes its own nullity. At this point this nullity is only negative. It is a nullity filled with loss of meaning—a nullity of despair. The self is nothing. Yet *this* nothingness of the self contains another possibility. This possibility emerges whenever the "full" self becomes aware of its Christic-stem.

The "full" self wishes to purge itself of its demonic fullness. The fire of the Holy flashes forth to re-mold the self's inscape, to bring it into harmony with the worlding world. Here the self passes quickly over into radiant emptiness. It empties out its content, to become the open arena through which the power of Being can come-to-appearance. The old self dies and the radiant self emerges into its New Being. Selving, whether of things or of persons, has its deepest goal in this final kenosis into Being. The kenosis is made possible by the Christic-stem that is the New Being. New Being is the path to Being-Itself.

Here we can begin to sense the relationship between thinging and Christhood. Thinging has as its highest drive the movement of selving. Selving has as *its* highest drive the movement toward radiant emptiness. The most faithful things speak to us of this emptiness. This emptiness is the Same (Heidegger) as that attained by Jesus when he rose up into Christhood on the cross and though the resurrection into New Being. In essence, Christhood belongs to the telos of all selving, whether in thinging things or in persons. In either case selving fulfills itself by letting go of the "full" self and becoming open to the Christic-stem which grants the New Being.

With the kenosis of the self into its ground and abyss we at last arrive at the region where all things show forth their Christic-stems. The worlding world becomes transparent and still as the chorus of thinging things point toward the power of Being which sustains each and all. The Christhood of things points to the grandeur of God. This grandeur is exhibited by Hopkins when he says,

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;<sup>1</sup>

In the shining of the Holy persons at last can find their proper inscape. This inscape is preserved by the radiant fire which remakes and redeems all things.

At this point we must ask a fateful question. Will theology have the courage to risk itself before the grandeur of God as experienced in the Christhood of things? Will it too be willing to let go of its "fullness," so as to become an arena of radiant openness? Or will it remain bound to preliminary gods and images? As yet "pride and plume" remain in the path and block all creative listening. For the theologian must find his or her proper inscape first. Perhaps we can learn more from the simple faithfulness of things than from the gods of tradition. Theology must place itself over the abyss of infinite meaning if it is to achieve that radiant emptiness which will at last allow God to be God. For in the Holy fire, granted by the Christic-stem of faithful things, theology can purify itself and become free. But this can only come through Grace. For this we can only wait and give thanks.

#### Notes

1. From the poem, "God's Grandeur," in the anthology, *Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed., W.H. Gerdner, (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963), p 27.