

The Charge of God: *Laudato Si'* read through Chesterton, Wordsworth, and Hopkins

At the close of his quietly coruscating essay from 1909, “The Little Birds Who Won’t Sing”, G. K. Chesterton offers a nudging aside: “Every one knows the story of the solicitors’ corps of volunteers who, when the Colonel on the battle-field cried ‘Charge!’ all said simultaneously, ‘Six-and-eight-pence.’”¹

It’s not much of a joke. But it is not *merely* a joke. As so often with Chesterton, the light touch is to serious purpose. Although his gag arises *en passant*, it is to be appreciated within a broader scheme of significance with which his essay as a whole is concerned.

Why is it, he asks, that the modern trades have no ritual poetry? How is it that people chant while pulling ropes or gathering fruit, or even when rallying themselves to fight, while “the most important and typical *modern* things could *not* be done with a chorus”? Chesterton’s meditations chronicle his failed attempts to introduce some hale and hearty verses of his own devising into offices and workrooms of these modern professions, from the bank to the post-office. The narrative is whimsical – but the emerging morality tale could hardly be more solemn.

“And at the end of my reflections”, Chesterton muses, “I had really got no further than the sub-conscious feeling of my friend the bank-clerk—that there is something spiritually suffocating about our life; not about our laws merely, but about our life. Bank-clerks are without songs, not because they are poor, but because they are sad. Sailors are much poorer”.

Chesterton’s socio-spiritual *cri de cœur* coalesces in the essay’s final three sentences, as his gathering gloom is redeemed, at the very last, by a sudden, paradoxical insight:

As I passed homewards I passed a little tin building of some religious sort, which was shaken with shouting as a trumpet is torn with its own tongue. THEY were singing anyhow; and I had for an instant a fancy I had often had before: that with us the super-human is the only place where you can find the human. Human nature is hunted and has fled into sanctuary.²

Culminating in this way – with an urgent anthropology figuring modern man as hunted by the conditions of modernity itself – lends Chesterton’s pun new ontological depth. On its own terms, it is a rather feeble bit of wordplay. Interpreted as the bloom on the dialectical method of the essay as whole, however (to paraphrase C. S. Lewis on how to read Chesterton’s verbal antics: with a mind to Aristotle’s pedagogical praxis), his humour is no laughing matter.³ When that fabled Colonel cries “Charge!”, and the fantasised solicitor-soldiers responds, “Six-and-eight-pence”, two tragically incommensurable worldviews collide. Technocratic trades, we are spurred to see, recognise only the lexicon of capital. Even the clamouring fury of war cannot unsettle this transactional logic; the semantic charge of the word “charge” is only and always that of monetary exchange. Modernity is “disenchanted” (as Max Weber would frame it eight years later, in his lecture on “Science as Vocation”), but for a few shouts in clamant tongues, heard far off.

What Chesterton has to say here is governed by how he says it. His punchline draws its punch, but also its fullest meaning, for being what William Empson called a “compacted doctrine”.⁴ The meaning of “charge” is amplified by the act of verbal compression itself: interpreting it is like opening an overfull suitcase that spills out everywhere, or perhaps more accurately, it is like when two magnets whose fields repel fling suddenly apart – the force of repulsion mutually-defining their separate, opposing elements.

Reading Chesterton in this way, together with similar expressive moments from William Wordsworth and Gerard Manley Hopkins, reveals how far these three writers anticipate the animus of the Pope Francis's second encyclical, *Laudato Si* (2015), against the dominant assumptions of technocratic capitalism. More surprisingly, they expose also how far *Laudato Si* challenges the dominant, avowedly progressive assumptions of contemporary eco-activism with which it in many respects appears to converge. Finally, Chesterton, Wordsworth, and Hopkins do more than simply foreshadow and clarify the theological stakes of a papal document. These writers contain multitudes, as Walt Whitman would say, and their particular modes of containment, of compacting their doctrines, prove more imaginatively affective, as well as – this essay's boldest gambit – more theologically adequate than the communicative formalities available to the theological treatise as a genre.

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That the potency of Chesterton's essay exceeds its paraphrasable content is immediately clear from the fact that, propositionally, it is obviously not saying anything very new. Its "doctrine" against disenchantment has a significant pre-history. Modernity started before modernism. Wordsworth raised the alarm more than a century earlier. "The world is too much with us" figures life laid waste by the same acquisitive impulse against which Chesterton rails: "getting and spending" degrades not only the natural world, Wordsworth worries, but even our capacities to appreciate what we have degraded. "We have given our hearts away," he exclaims, "a sordid boon!" Here is the poem:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;—

Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not. Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.⁵

No reader could wonder about this poem, as Shelley wondered of Wordsworth's *Peter Bell the Third*: "is he joking?"⁶ At the same time, it is hard to imagine he is being entirely serious, either. Perhaps Shelley's question is too blunt in its binary, presuming as it does that jokes cannot be made in earnest, or with an earnest of earnestness. Matthew Bevis's recent study of *Wordsworth's Fun* falls short of claiming that the Laureate was actually much fun, far less what might be called funny; and Bevis's book does not anywhere mention "The world is too much with us". Nonetheless, its essential thesis, that Wordsworth is wont to make his readers "feel somehow confused — or compromised",⁷ offers a hint for how to cut Shelley's Gordian knot. The poem might be trying to provoke rather than to prosecute a thesis.

Contemporary readers would certainly have been thrown back on their heels by its scoffing profanation. *Rather be a pagan?* "Outworn" seems to concede the desperation as well as the futility of his proposal. I do not positively wish to be a pagan; it's a hoary creed. But

under current circumstances, I would *rather* be one. It all reads more like an impious pose than a substantial commitment. Versified virtue signalling, if you like; or more correctly, vice signalling. While some contemporaries, such as Walter Savage Landor, evidently mistook the poem for celebrating the enduring power of the pagan imagination, as Thomas de Quincey better understood, the target is in fact negative: “the death-like torpor of London society in 1808, benumbed by conventional apathy and worldliness”.⁸

Where Chesterton looks to the Christian religion for an antidote to this torpor, apathy, and worldliness, Wordsworth’s feint towards neo-paganism indirectly puts his faith in the vitalising splendours of nature. He presses a similarly indirect case a few years later in “The Excursion”, in which “even superstition” is cast as preferable to “the soul-deadening slide into materialism and its resulting despondency”.⁹ In these and other poems, Wordsworth’s admiring, protective, and hopeful investment in nature should put him in good standing with the literary-critical turn known as eco-criticism, but it has in fact excited cries of eco-colonialism. His attitude has been ungenerously construed “as another form of fetishized nature ‘worship’ dependent on an egoic spiritual self”.¹⁰ His approach is said to be an “individualized, aesthetic appreciation” consistent with an attitude of the “autonomous self” that “lies at the heart of modern global capitalism and consumerism”.¹¹ His “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” have been called “problematically human- and even male-centred”.¹² Even his milksoppy, “I wandered lonely as a cloud”, is fingered for treating natural phenomena “overwhelmingly as a psychic resource, to be celebrated in almost consumerist terms for their contribution to personal growth and pleasure (‘I gazed and gazed, but little thought / What wealth the show to me had brought’).¹³

A poet presumes to be writing in celebration of nature against capitalist predations, and yet – by lingual inklings newly uncovered – we may see how far he is in fact implicated within the avaricious culture he disdains. His ovation to nature follows the same philosophical

grammar, even the very same diction, of commerce. A wincing irony. But surely Wordsworth would have been aware of the lexical hares he has set running. Creative writers are, Walter Pater well reminds us in his 1888 essay on “Style”, also scholars of language, super-sensitive to its colloquial, technical, and literary lives and histories. Wordsworth was prodigiously well-read. If there are subterranean meanings in his writing, the more credible question to ask is not, what do his words tell us of his unwitting worldview, but rather, what was he doing with his words, quite wittingly?¹⁴

To read Wordsworth as primed to polysemy would actually mean expanding the standard eco-critical prospectus, following W. B. Wimsatt’s steer that, “In literary art only the wedding of the alogical with the logical gives the former an aesthetic value”.¹⁵ Direct references to buying and selling, and of wealth, come into view. But so also might rather more oblique advertences, such as come within ear-shot of the word “brought”, which, but for an easily elided “r”, sounds a lot like “bought”. Wherever the boundary of semi-sequitur semiologies is drawn, it matters greatly whether Wordsworth is expressing or repressing, being critical of, or finding himself complicit within, an exploitative framework. There is clearly something self-defeating in the reverie of a “nature poet” whose greedy ego makes nature all about him. On the other hand, reading Wordsworth as knowing what he was doing with his verbal repertoires opens up the possibility that, like Chesterton, he might after all be in on the joke that appears to be at his own expense.

All reading is interpretation, from the comparatively obvious and objective (orthography, diction, grammar, syntax) to the more elusive implicatures peeping out from “the edge of words”.¹⁶ But when does reading become overreading, or misreading? It is a question of some nicety, to know when readerly judgement becomes idiosyncratic: ingenious, perhaps, but ultimately implausible. Outside of the academic dance known as deconstruction – a scholar’s game that effectively denies the status of language as a mode of communication –

language has limits. To recognise, to celebrate, the scope for words to resist exhaustive definition (when they act as symbols rather than signs, say), or to mean several things at once, or to suggest more than they explicitly claim, or indeed to be in tension with what the author claims: these things may all be granted without conceding that texts do not ever really mean anything – because they can always mean everything. Empson’s idea of a “compacted doctrine” has been taken as the cue for this essay not because it suggests the potential boundlessness of the hermeneutical exercise, but because it suggests just how much even single words *can* mean, while at the same time remaining bound by limits, and so remaining meaningful.

Empson was one of the most brilliantly creative close readers of the last century; he has been called a “conjurer” for his seemingly effortless power to draw out the most extravagant verbal implicatures from any given text, like rabbits from a hat.¹⁷ But even he cautioned against paying attention to “merely irrelevant ambiguities”.¹⁸ Then again, his caution on ambiguity is itself somewhat ambiguous. What is the difference between “irrelevant” ambiguities as against those that are “merely” so? More pointedly, aside from his occasional pronouncements on how *not* to read, his own critical readings frequently throw into question what associations might properly be called “relevant” in the first place.

There is in the end a defining difference, however, between what Empson advocates for interpreting what he calls “complex words” and the “hermeneutics of suspicion” by which critics claim to uncover a writer’s “sedimented ideology”. That salutary difference might be argued at length, but briefly here, it turns on the extent to which a text’s meaning – the force of its utterance, as J. L. Austin would say – remains connected with a notion of authorial intention, even when the text may be at odds with that conjectured intention. Or to say the same in reverse: the text is primary, but its words are nonetheless delimited by the wider contexts from which they have arisen, above all by the author. “While poetry attempts to convey

something beyond what can be conveyed in prose rhythms,” T. S. Eliot allows, even poetry – the most subtle as well as the most intense form of language – “remains, all the same, one person talking to another; and this is just as true if you sing it, for singing is another way of talking”.¹⁹ Paul Ricœur, the person who coined the phrase “hermeneutics of suspicion”, provides a neat phrase for keeping the reader honest in this respect: not by an interpretation *of* the text, or *about* the text, but as “an interpretation *in* the text and *through* the text”.²⁰ Practically, returning to the particular case of Wordsworth, Ricœur’s prepositional preferences invite the possibility that the poet’s ardent anxiety might yet find an authentic voice, not in spite of, but *in and through* his indignant bluster. The ironies that appear to expose Wordsworth’s supposedly sublimated self-interest have already been anticipated and positively repurposed by the author.

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Between Chesterton and Wordsworth, chronologically, but also in some ways metaphysically, Hopkins made his own arresting intervention on the modern condition. Of these three wise men, Hopkins comes closest to envisioning what, more than a century later, Pope Francis would call an “integral ecology”.²¹ Wordsworth presses on the natural ecology, and humans’ relationship to it; Chesterton, our human ecology as it relates to divinity. Hopkins most fully explores how these respective kinds of interrelation might themselves interrelate. That is what is meant by integral ecology, defined in *Laudato Si’* as the belief that human life is grounded in “three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself” (*LS* 66). It is hard to overstate the importance of this credo for Hopkins, and as the avowed occasion for *Laudato Si’*, the reason for its writing; namely, to show how and why “these three vital relationships have been broken, both outwardly and within us” (*LS*

66). Such thoughts on interrelation find exquisite handling within Hopkins's "God's Grandeur":

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.
And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.²²

Like Wordsworth, Hopkins is appalled by man's destructive searing, blearing, and smearing. Like Wordsworth, too, the relationship he observes between man and nature is broken not only outwardly, but also (as *Laudato Si'* emphasises) within us: "nor can foot feel, being shod" refers to the literal buffering of footwear – but there is an implied spiritual separation too.

If, within this alienated condition, there might be a way of feeling again, it is within a sanctuary of the sort Chesterton stumbles upon at the end of his essay. "Through our worship of God," *Laudato Si'* avers, "we are invited to embrace the world on a different plane" (*LS*

235). The precondition for worship, however, is recognising that God is there to be worshipped. That means forsaking the sordid boon, of escaping the suffocating atmosphere that makes us blind to a world outside of merely self-interested exchange – but that need not mean worshipping within a church. Nature is its own sacred space. “These things, these things were here and but the beholder; / Wanting”, Hopkins writes memorably in “Hurrahing in Harvest”.²³ More directly echoing “God’s Grandeur”, he records in his spiritual notes: “All things therefore are charged with love, are charged with God and if we know how to touch them, give off sparks and take fire, yield drops and flow, ring and tell of him”.²⁴

Hopkins’s essential conjunctive, “and if we know how”, would be more accurately cast as a sharper conditional: “but only if we know how”, or “yet only”, *sine qua non*. To behold God’s charge in the world, we must be attuned to do so. This is what Chesterton meant as well when he wrote quipped that human beings “are perishing for want of wonder, not for want of wonders”.²⁵ Which is in turn a version of Wordsworth’s haunting line: “we have given our hearts away”. Where Wordsworth parts company with Chesterton and Hopkins is through his Romantic tendency to strain after sublimity: the noble mountain, the majestic waterfall. Hopkins thrills to such showpieces too – starlit nights, birds of prey – but his appreciation is also conspicuously cosmopolitan. Wordsworth comes down to the Victorians as a kind of priest of nature,²⁶ but his clerisy tends to high-Church priggishness. He may be charmed by daffodils, but little more.

Wordsworth does, to be fair, have luminous moments when nature’s most humble creations become sites for high philosophising; his several poems on the daisy, for instance, entertain their “function apostolical”.²⁷ It is the very modesty of that flower, its “less ambitious aim”, that enables his intellect to roam, precisely because it allows him to suspend his “stately passions” – in this case, aroused by war – that “in me burn”.²⁸ Still, there is something different between regarding nature analogically, or as a catalyst for thinking, and believing it directly

expresses the divine. When Hopkins looks at the modest bluebell and knows “the beauty of the Lord by it”, his conviction is unmediated: the modest material of creation offers immediate access to the grandest of visions. The bluebell does not serve as a sign or a symbol or a stimulation: it offers a glimpse of God.²⁹ Here is his poem “Pied Beauty”.

Glory be to God for dappled things –
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches’ wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow, and plough;

And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim.
All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.³⁰

The ordinary is seen as extra-ordinary here, in the way Hopkins’s poem “Spring” likewise lights on Thrush’s eggs that “look little low heavens”, but also mere “weeds”, to be marvelled at for their “wheels” that “shoot long and lovely and lush”.³¹ Hopkins also valorises variegation itself, as a sacramental triumph of God’s infinite generativity. “Though the mere multitude of created things is itself wonderful, still more wonderful is the *variety* which appears in that multiplication, and it leads us more easily to the knowledge of God”.³² Those words are not by Hopkins, but written centuries earlier, by another Jesuit, Saint Robert Bellarmine, in his 1614

treatise on *The mind's ascent to God through the ladder of created things*. The same epistemological optimism rings through Hopkins's writings, as it does through *Laudato Si'*, by a shared faith in the divine purposiveness of creation, which in turn excites and obliges a response.³³

“By the word of the Lord the heavens were made”: *Laudato Si'* quotes Psalm 33.6 (*LS* 77), noting, by extension, that “The Psalms frequently exhort us to praise God the Creator” (*LS* 72). That is, of course, the headline exhortation of the encyclical itself (*Laudato Si'*: Praise Be to You), and it has a universal Christian character.³⁴ “Praise him”, given voice in the last hurrah of “Pied Beauty”, is at the same time unmistakably Ignatian: finding God in all things. “All things are charged with love, are charged with God” – literally, *all* things, even (or especially) those “counter, original, spare, strange”. Aidan Nichols OP has suggested that “Pied Beauty” is so explicit in respect of its Ignatian character that it could have been specially written to illustrate the Jesuit motto, *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam* (to the greater glory of God).³⁵

Seeing the world resplendently, calling us to praise, is nothing like the right wrist-twisting *techne* demanded by a kaleidoscope. Nor is it the merely aesthetic induction of John Ruskin's innocent eye. It flows instead from Chesterton's conviction that “thanks are the highest form of thought”, and that “gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder”.³⁶ “I believe about the universal cosmos, or for that matter about every weed and pebble in the cosmos,” Chesterton elsewhere observed, “that men will never rightly realize that it is beautiful, until they realize that it is strange”.³⁷ The world's integral ecology becomes legible at the point at which we suspend our enculturated complacency, so that we can – through the happiness and wonder of the encounter – see it as it is, in its irreducible particularity.

Chesterton sighed that the super-human was the only place where one can still find the human, as Wordsworth before him yearned for the natural world to come supernaturally alive: “Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea; / Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.”

Hopkins's vision is more confident than either, for the way he recurs to the conviction that, however depleted, the natural world has an abiding relationship with the divine ("for all this, nature is never spent"); and also, that the relationship between God and man abides too: "It will flame out."

Against "The world is too much with us", then, the first line of "God's Grandeur" countermands, "The world is *charged* with the grandeur of God". Hopkins said that his poem took its origin and justification from this opening, electrical metaphor that is drawn through the next line, "like shining from shook foil". He wrote to Robert Bridges: "my sonnet might have been written expressly for the image's sake", explaining that he meant "foil in its literal sense of leaf or tinsel": "Shaken goldfoil gives off broad glares like sheet lightning and also, and this is true of nothing else, owing to its zigzag dints and creasings and network of small many cornered facets, a sort of fork lightning too."³⁸

Hopkins may have been thinking of a gold-leaf electroscope, which registers charge through the flaring lightning-like movements of its hanging foil,³⁹ though he likely had the more dangerous idea of actual lightning in mind too. Drafts show that he did in fact consider "lightning" over the word "shining"; and he writes of lightning in several other contexts, poetic and scientific.⁴⁰ More immediately, "charge" finds a symmetrical valence of affect, for how we may be moved by that which we cannot see but only feel. In a letter to Richard Dixon, Hopkins speaks of Plato in these terms, as well as, it so happens, Wordsworth. He counts Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode" as one of those rare visionary moments when "human nature in these men saw something, got a shock", setting "the English speaking world", perhaps "the world at large world", "in a tremble ever since". Hopkins is not describing something vague or abstract. He is confessing something visceral and personal: "I am, ever since I knew the ode, in that tremble." He goes on:

You know what happened to crazy Blake, himself a most poetically electrical subject both active and passive, at his first hearing: when the reader came to “The pansy at my feet” he fell into a hysterical excitement. Now commonsense forbid we should take on like these unstrung hysterical creatures: still it was a proof of the power of the shock.⁴¹

What’s being described here sounds a lot like J. A. Froude’s memory of hearing John Henry Newman preach on the Lord’s passion at Oxford, when it felt as if “an electric stroke had gone through the church, as if every person present understood for the first time the meaning of what he had all his life been saying”.⁴² The experience is more than emotional. It has an epiphanic character, of the sort Geoffrey Hill proposes in his prospected “theology of language”. Such a language, Hill explains, would consider how “the shock of semantic recognition must also be a shock of ethical recognition”.⁴³

Explaining his first encounter with the poetry of Freiderich Holderlin, Martin Heidegger preferred a different analogy. Rather than electrical shock, he said it felt like an “earthquake”.⁴⁴ There is a certain fungibility to the figures. Both imply a sudden release of energy, and perhaps displacement. Yet there is something specially rich and topical about analogising the newly-emergent electrical and physiological sciences, which served “as a touchstone for nineteenth century poets” in general, for “reflecting on the complex interactions of thought, emotion, and physiological experience”.⁴⁵ Hopkins was also more alive to the scientific meanings of charge than most (maybe more than any) of his poetic contemporaries, understanding, for instance, that “charge” can be suggestive of potency and potential even without shock. He wrote to Bridges describing the quality of the air in Liverpool as “charged with smoke”.⁴⁶ He published a letter in *Nature* magazine describing sunsets, in which “the sky of England is not heavily charged enough with vapour to carry shadow”; or else it is “too much charged”, such that – according to Hopkins’s empirical scrupulosity – “the edge of the shadow

becomes lost with distance and with the thickening of the air towards the horizon before the convergence of the beams eastwards is marked enough to catch the eye.”⁴⁷

To read “charged” in Hopkins’s poetry, then, is to find a word that cuts in several suggestive and technical directions, and not only scientific. In the same letter where he writes of Wordsworth’s Ode, he commends the plenitude of its diction for being “so charged ... in beauty and yearning”.⁴⁸ Another word for this might be “heightened”, which was how he liked to refer to the special intensity of poetic as language in general.⁴⁹ And looking also across from aesthetics to ethics, as Hill enjoins, we may notice that he sometimes uses “charge” in ways that carry further suggestions of human import. He writes to his mother of his “little charges”, meaning the schoolboys he is teaching. On another occasion, he writes to her of the “iniquitous charges” – not so little, it turns out – against which he is keen to defend the Society of Jesus (he names everything from “instigating” the Gunpowder Plot to “murdering Cardinal I forget who in China”, to “introducing brandy among the Canadian Indians”).⁵⁰

These further, ethical senses of “charge” likely seem irrelevant, in the way that Empson warned against. Whatever winks out at us from the first line of *God’s Grandeur*, it is far from obvious that teaching schoolboys and historical accusations against his chosen religious order have anything to do with it. John Parnham’s *Green Man Hopkins* (2010), the first and still the most substantial book-length study of Hopkins’s ecology, covers a lot of ground, much of it compelling, some of it contestable (such as Hopkins’s “essentially Gaian notion of the earth”),⁵¹ without ever speculating in these directions. Yet there is surely a warrant to do so, especially when “*God’s Grandeur*” is viewed in the broader context of Hopkins’s other writings. Here is a third poem by Hopkins, perhaps his most metaphysically explicit:

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 *Whát I dó is me: for that I came.*

I say *móre*: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: *thát* keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is —
Chríst — 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.⁵²

How different from Wordsworth's imaginary. The supernatural (Christ) "plays in ten thousand places" within the natural order, but that by no wise implies that nature is itself divine. *Laudato Si'* acknowledges that nature may be shot through with divinity for the person who experiences "the intimate connection between God and all beings" (LS 234). But experiencing the connection between God and the created order is not to conflate God with creation. The logic of the Incarnation, by which the creation "speaks and spells" its name, is instead "a privileged way in which nature is taken up by God to become a means of *mediating* supernatural life" (LS 235).⁵³ This is Hopkins's intuition and Ignatian formation through and through.

"My life is determined by the Incarnation down to most of the details of the day", he recorded in his spiritual notes towards the end of his life,⁵⁴ and the terms and categories with which he engages that determination have been variously picked over by scholars – most often

focusing on his ideas of inscape and instress, specially as they relate to Duns Scotus's haecceity.⁵⁵ It is relevant to add here an element not so often noticed: the faith he shares with Thomas Aquinas's claim, cited in *Laudato Si'*, that the created world's multiplicity and variety comes "from the intention of the first agent", and that God's goodness "could not be represented fittingly by any one creature" (*LS* 86).

Continuous with what has already been said about "Pied Beauty", Hopkins allows that even stones find divine expression, as they tumble over rim in roundy wells, amply affirming Aquinas's concomitant that while angels are higher beings than stones, it is better in the end to have stones *and* angels.⁵⁶ There is a suggestive continuity with Chesterton on this score too, when he writes in a letter to his wife-to-be, Frances Blogg:

I do not think there is anyone who takes quite such a fierce pleasure in things being themselves as I do. The startling wetness of water excites and intoxicates me; the fieriness of fire, the steeliness of steel, the unutterable muddiness of mud. It is just the same with people.... When we call a man "manly" or a woman "womanly" we touch the deepest philosophy.⁵⁷

To take Hopkins and Chesterton together for their ingenuous fixations on the quiddity of the created world is to see how they stand athwart the dominant strain of eco-criticism, on two fronts. Firstly, the pleasure Chesterton and Hopkins take is no merely aesthetic appreciation: it touches the "deepest philosophy". "Each mortal thing" doing "one thing and the same" has a metaphysical logic and value that expresses itself through the physical. As Aquinas emphasised and *Laudato Si'* is at pains to reiterate: "each creature has its own purpose. None is superfluous. The entire material universe speaks of God's love" (*LS* 84). Secondly, Chesterton and Hopkins

think of human beings in a way that is incompatible with the eco-critical tendency towards posthumanism; that is, towards humbling human beings into just another kind of animal.

There are historical lessons to learn about the dangers of going down this road. Gerhard Weinberg's study of Hitler's Germany makes plain that, "An especially significant facet of the racist doctrine was its rejection of the biblical distinction between man and other creatures".⁵⁸ Of course, the dominant facets of eco-criticism are pursuing self-consciously progressive agendas; they are worlds away from the Nazi's "new paganism", within which "racial purity and selective breeding" were "the necessary instruments of progress".⁵⁹ Nonetheless, it remains the case that denying the special status of human beings within the created order comes with inherent perils for how it might be taken up.

Posthumanism comes in various shapes and sizes,⁶⁰ but its presence within ecocriticism is inevitably felt as a will to overcome human exceptionalism, to establish animals as "companions in a precarious world", through "a shared victimhood" in the neoliberal machine.⁶¹ This might sound salutary, or at least innocuous, except that its rationale easily curdles into misanthropy.⁶² Being against anthropocentrism may encourage a more collaborative and respectful attitude towards that natural world. But it may also abet dehumanising ideologies. One does not have to look to obscure eruptions of this possibility. The tightly braided, historical relationship within the United States between environmentalism and racism – most associated with Madison Grant (for whom there was "an unsettlingly short step from managing forests to managing the human gene pool") – is impossible to miss.⁶³

Nor is this problem merely historical. While the posthumanist principles of "deep ecology" informing "the portrayal of a wild Africa and of a tropical Edenic trope in colonialist discourse" have become "a minority position in ecocriticism",⁶⁴ there remains something sinister in contemporary eco-activist discussions of population control that is inevitably directed towards Africa and Asia. Sir David Attenborough first came to celebrity for opening

up the wonders of the natural world, but his more recent support for environmental causes has been edged with the Malthusian alarmism of the UK-based charity Population Matters, of which he is patron.⁶⁵ The Voluntary Human Extinction Movement is another, even more extreme rallying point.

The fault-lines between *Laudato Si'* and the avowed “liberatory politics of the progressive left” may not always be clear,⁶⁶ until, as in such examples, they suddenly open up into a gulf of mutual-incomprehension. “Since everything is interrelated,” *Laudato Si'* segues from a discussion of anthropocentrism, “concern for the protection of nature is also incompatible with the justification of abortion.” Such a claim is anathema to the politics of ecocriticism. But *Laudato Si'* forces the question as an inexorable outcome of the doctrine of the *imago Dei*: “How can we genuinely teach the importance of concern for other vulnerable beings, however troublesome or inconvenient they may be, if we fail to protect a human embryo, even when its presence is uncomfortable and creates difficulties?” (*LS* 120).⁶⁷

Where posthumanism does exhibit a sense of the created world as more than material, it imagines nature speaking and spelling its name as a kind of animism. “Thinking like a mountain”, the striking term coined by Aldo Leopold in 1949, is a precursor to some of the richest work in eco-criticism, for the ways in which it elucidates the interconnectedness of the elements in the ecosystems.⁶⁸ “Ecologists are concerned with relationships of interdependence”, notes Leslie Thiele, together with the fact that “the first uses of the term *interdependence* in reference to natural phenomena occurred in the 1870s and 1880s just as ecology was developing as a discipline”.⁶⁹ Theodore Roszak repairs to the same axiom, that “Ecology is the study of connectedness”.⁷⁰ This surely sounds a lot like integral ecology, but it is actually far from it, for running in only one or two rather than three directions. It means thinking about the interconnectedness of the natural world, or the interconnectedness between

human beings and the natural world. God, the third of those fundamental and closely intertwined relationships predicated by *Laudato Si'*, is absent.

“For most ecocritics,” Timothy Clark observes, “human abuse of the natural world is best understood as the corollary of unjust or oppressive systems of governments and economics, and forms of social organisation (hierarchy, plutocracy, patriarchy)”.⁷¹ Sounding the same note, Terry Gifford speaks of how “our exploitation of the environment has emerged from the same mind-set as our exploitation of each other”.⁷² These claims may well be true,⁷³ but they inevitably beg the question of what constitutes injustice, oppression, and exploitation in the first place. It is hard to assess never-mind change a “mindset” without a developed metaphysics, and much eco-criticism has indeed proved itself unable to define itself outside of the materialist systems of thinking it hopes to dismantle. Jedediah Purdy – with no religious agenda to press, it should be said – puts the pragmatic cat amongst the principled pigeons in his 2019 study, *This Land Is Our Land*. Ecocriticism has yet to reckon with his trenchant exposure of “how thoroughly even wholehearted environmental work today belongs to the dominant ways of thinking about value—that is, through the prism of price”.⁷⁴

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What other prism is there? When it comes to diagnosis, *Laudato Si'* is in many respects convergent with the general eco-critical conclusion that human beings have got ahead of themselves: “presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations”, and to have “distorted our mandate to ‘have dominion’ over the earth (cf. Gen 1:28), to ‘till it and keep it’ (Gen 2:15)”. This distortion is moreover understood to be pervasive: “sin is manifest in all its destructive power in wars, the various forms of violence and abuse,

the abandonment of the most vulnerable, and attacks on nature” (*LS* 66). So far so similar, except for the rubric of sin, on which turns nothing less than everything.

Ecocriticism tends either to ignore, or to be actively hostile towards religion, the Western form of Christianity most especially, for being (as Lynn White would have it) “the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen”.⁷⁵ But the very notion of anthropocentrism itself needs to be unpacked. *Laudato Si’* likewise aims to check human self-centeredness and its attendant presumptions, to usurp God no less. From a Christian point of view, however, it would be an overcorrection to therefore relegate human beings to the level of the other animals, even by Hamlet’s uplift, as their “paragon”.⁷⁶ And it would be a symmetrical mistake to have man subserve nature, by the commonplace metaphorical conceit of Mother Nature, a heresy Chesterton confronted directly in his consciously-named, *Orthodoxy*:

The main point of Christianity was this: that Nature is not our mother: Nature is our sister. We can be proud of her beauty, since we have the same father; but she has no authority over us; we have to admire, but not to imitate. This gives to the typically Christian pleasure in this earth a strange touch of lightness that is almost frivolity. Nature was a solemn mother to the worshippers of Isis and Cybele. Nature was a solemn mother to Wordsworth or to Emerson. But Nature is not solemn to Francis of Assisi or to George Herbert. To St. Francis, Nature is a sister, and even a younger sister: a little, dancing sister, to be laughed at as well as loved.⁷⁷

If the distinctiveness of human beings is not to be entirely dissolved, nor completely inverted in respect of nature, but more subtly re-calibrated, humans may assume their station *between* God and the rest of creation. Humans are not, by that parsing of anthropocentrism, placed at the centre: they are instead understood to operate within the mediating middle of a harmonious

whole.⁷⁸ Never mind theologically: psychologically, that inveterate hedger, Blaise Pascal, long ago intuited that it would be wholesome to be braced in this way, by dialectical correction. His point is severely practical:

It is dangerous to show man too clearly how much he resembles the beast, without at the same time showing him his greatness. It is also dangerous to show him too clear a vision of his greatness without his baseness. It is even more dangerous to leave him in ignorance of both.⁷⁹

Duly alert to such “dangers” as well as to “greatness”, re-read once more now, “The world is charged with the grandeur of God”, and we may hear how it might after all carry Hopkins’s sense of his “little charges”. Because human beings stand at the head of the created world, and yet at the same time under God, they must assume the charge, must take charge. Deputed to steward, they have been *charged* with, put *in charge of*, creation. The world is our common home: the world is our charge.

The grammar of the poem is not quite so theologically clean, perhaps, allowing as it does the possibility that the “charge” of responsibility might fall on the created world at large, and not just humans alone. Even if the reference in the first line of “God’s Grandeur” to “the world” is to be read strictly as “human world,” in the Pauline and Johannine senses, the pronoun introduced in line two and also line three (“It”) gives “world” the meaning of “created world”.⁸⁰ That is certainly complemented by the emphasis in “Pied Beauty” on “Each mortal thing”, not only human beings, to realise they God-given uniqueness. Yet humans are, in this reading of “God’s Grandeur”, still charged in a way that non-human creation is not, when it comes to consciously recognising and celebrating – praising – the uniquely inflected divinity which creation is charged to express. Non-human creation does “glorify God”, Hopkins elsewhere

reflects in his spiritual notes; but, crucially, underlined by him for emphasis, “*they do not know it*”:

The birds sing to him, the thunder speaks of his terror, the lion is like his strength the sea is like his greatness, the honey-like his sweetness, they are something like him, they make him known, they tell of him, they give him glory, but they do not know they do, they do not know him, they never can, they are brute things that only think of food or think of nothing. This then is poor praise, faint reverence, slight service, dull glory. Nevertheless, what they can, *they always do*.⁸¹

By contrast, human beings “can know God”, and as such – again, underlined for emphasis – “*can mean to give him glory*”. This double capacity is indeed the very reason man was made: “to give glory to God, and to mean to give it”.⁸² Such an emphatic *telos*, reserved for human over non-human creation in the world (angels are another matter), comes with its own correspondingly emphatic concomitant, also reserved for humankind alone, as expressed in the condemnatory inflection of “charge” from line four of “God’s Grandeur”. “Why do men then now not reckon his rod?” is barbed with disbelief that men do not in fact generally reckon (“reck”) as they should with God (metonymically suggested by “rod”, the sceptre or staff of divine right). The same accusatory sentiment appears in other poems too, notably “Ribblesdale”, in which “dear and dogged man” emerges from the picture of “sweet” earth as an antagonistically sullyng, thriftless heir to the riches of which he has not shown himself worthy.⁸³ The model of stewardship that emerges from these criss-crossing senses of charge – applicable to all creation in some ways, uniquely so to humans in others – refines the relationship even closer to the theology of *Laudato Si'*, in which human beings are at once nested within a “universal communion” of creation (*LS* 89), but at the same time set apart: at once a threat to that

communion, at the same time with a distinctive role to protect the world, and to exercise the honour due to God for that world.

What finally emerges through a full conspectus of “charge” in Hopkins’s lexicon is not an accidental pluralism, but purposeful compaction. We do not find a set of options for glossing; we must instead confront the challenge of reading its many meanings simultaneously, even when – especially when – they have different terms of reference. Notably, the ethical connotation of “charge” as stewardship cannot be fully understood without a contingent understanding of God’s electrical-like force in the world. For Hopkins’s incarnational faith is implicitly Trinitarian, according to what Hans Urs von Balthasar called “theo-drama”, or what *Laudato Si’* dubs “Trinitarian dynamism” (*LS* 240). In plainer language, human beings have the potential for “going out of ourselves towards the other”, by which we may be entwined “with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself.” “Unless we do this,” *Laudato Si’* warns – go out of ourselves towards the other – “other creatures will not be recognised for their true worth” (*LS* 208).⁸⁴ The gift thereby goes both ways. Going out of ourselves also enriches us, for reasons that relate to the nature of our consciousness but also to our moral lives. Iris Murdoch makes this case very brilliantly, by appeal to common experience:

I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but the kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important. And of course this is something which we may do deliberately: give attention to nature in order to clear our minds of selfish care.⁸⁵

Murdoch must surely be remembering Hopkins's "The Windhover", the poem he thought his best, in which he catches sight of a kestrel that then catches him: "My heart in hiding / Stirred for a bird".⁸⁶ How to orientate the "self" is at the heart, in the fullest sense of that metaphor, of what both Hopkins and Murdoch understand about a right relationship with God and creation. That is not anthropocentrism as imperialism, putting the human self at the autocratic centre. It is the very opposite. Murdoch calls it "an occasion for unselfing".⁸⁷

Genesis teaches that the created world is good (Genesis 1:31), which is, *Laudato Si'* stresses, "a collective good", "the patrimony of all humanity and the responsibility of everyone" (LS 95). It implies something different from contractual obligation, as binds a solicitor who charges for work done. It operates according to a different economy that includes emulating God's own care, in which, as Hopkins has it in "The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo", "not a hair is, not an eyelash, not the least lash lost".⁸⁸

The perversion of unselfing is sheer selfishness, or what *Laudato Si'* identifies as "rampant individualism", which is the root-cause of what has ruptured our integral ecology. This is where the intension of "charge" as formal accusation for wrongdoing emerges. We are blessed by, but at the same time stand indicted by, the grandeur of God; God's grandeur elevates us even as it exposes the selfishness by which we have failed in our responsibilities.

Laudato Si' thus emphasises the aetiology of environmental problems within a scheme that transcends transactionalism. Whatever else it means to live in harmony with the world, it cannot be grasped in technological-cum-technocratic terms. *Laudato Si'* bucks against the modern tendency "to make the method and aims of science and technology an epistemological paradigm which shapes the lives of individuals and the workings of society" (LS 107): "It cannot be maintained that empirical science provides a complete explanation of life, the interplay of all creatures and the whole of reality. This would be to breach the limits imposed by its own methodology" (LS 199).

But it is not only science that is limited when it comes to redeeming our dis-integrated ecology. The denouement of this essay's argument is granted by *Laudato Si'* itself, where it concedes the unavoidable starchiness of its own style. "Theological and philosophical reflections on the situation of humanity and the world can sound tiresome and abstract" – the activist's perennial challenge – "unless they are grounded in a fresh analysis of our present situation" (*LS* 17). The point is well taken, and makes vivid the value of Wordsworth's and Chesterton's and Hopkins's respective interventions, precisely because they present their reflections in a *fresh* way: provocatively, playfully, with the singular charge that the literary mode affords. "Revealed Religion should be especially poetical—and it is so in fact", opined Newman, who, as we have seen, knew a thing or two about how to make abstruse and well-worn notions come shockingly alive.⁸⁹

The defamiliarizing language of the writers considered in this essay overcome the reader's mental inertia by strategies denied to the normative formalities of the treatise. By compacting their doctrines, they avail themselves not only of the force of verbal pressure that comes with such compression but also the productive opportunities that come with wordplay. Such play, *in and through* language, includes, at its pitch, what Henri De Lubac commended as the theological richness of paradox to "make sport of the usual and reasonable rule of not being allowed to be against as well as for".⁹⁰ The stringencies of the didactic and dogmatic mode have their place, but the temptation to read all language as amenable to being parsed into its single, stable, separately-defining parts is mistaken, especially when confronted with doctrines defined *in and through* their antinomies. "The eternal story of the Pharisee starts afresh in each of us", de Lubac counsels: "To get hold of the elusive truth again, we should perhaps seek it in its opposite, for it has changed its sign. But often we prefer to hug its rotten corpse. And we go rotten with it".⁹¹

Catching the living theology of “charge” in the writers surveyed in this essay means reading them for the multiplicity of the meanings in their writings, but also and above all for their unreconciled tensions and oppositions. To see the world as “charged with the grandeur of God” is to register and at the same time to refuse the money-minded meaning of its operative word. It would make for weak rhetoric simply to state as much. That is the corresponding power of compacted doctrine, because it is simultaneously a *paralepsis*. All three writers exemplify this possibility in different ways, but Hopkins is here the supreme exemplar, for the bold and filigree ways he draws the intensity and theological texture of his “charge” out of the fiscally acquisitive meaning from which it seeks redemption. The verbal compaction is extreme, and so therefore is the effect. Dark clarifies the light. The benison informs the burden. To assent to God’s animating presence, as unseen and yet as intimate and actual as an electrical “charge” enables and enjoins us to steward creation, and to be duly charged when we fail to do so.

“One of two kinds of clearness one shd. have,” Hopkins thought: “either the meaning to be felt without effort as fast as one reads or else, if dark at first reading, when once made out to explode”.⁹² For poetry, he always preferred the latter, an aesthetics of delay, allowing a longer fuse as it were, so that his meanings might in the end impress our imaginations with a mightier bang. This is more than a matter of mere affect; it pertains to the efficacy of the theological mode itself. For it is never in the end the “doctrine” alone, but the idea as it takes expressive form that moves people to the deepest understanding and belief, to what Newman called “real” as against “notional assent”.⁹³

Whereas atheists might find themselves in awe of nature’s accidental aesthetic merits, and Deists find those same merits to be proof of a divine but detached architect, Hopkins finds God playing in ten thousand places, in a world towards which we have an irrefragable liability. Once again, the negative charge of Hopkins’s pun paradoxically enhances its positive. Talk of responsibility, which necessarily raises the shadow of failed responsibility, does not invite

catastrophising pessimism; that would be incompatible with providential faith. In the same optative spirit of Chesterton's essay, *Laudato Si'* reckons seriously with "our struggles and our concern for this planet", but by insisting in the same breath: "Let us sing as we go" (LS 244). Far less does the language of responsibility sanction the Schopenhauerian sins of anti-natalism and racism – both forms of othering (the latter from other human beings, the former from the divinely ordained goodness of human life itself); and both are confounded by the participatory metaphysics of Trinitarian unselfing.

"[W]hat you look hard at seems to look hard at you", Hopkins wrote in one of his notebooks, a shocking affect that is the gratuitous prompt for doxology.⁹⁴ The preciousness of creation as well as its precarity is forever and always redeemed by intimations of "the dearest freshness deep down things": of the Holy Ghost who over the bent world broods with "warm breast and with ah! bright wings".

¹ Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles* (London: Methuen & Co., 1909), p. 200.

² *Ibid.*, 201

³ G. K. Chesterton: *The Critical Judgements, 1900-1937*, ed. D. J. Conlon (Antwerp: Antwerp Studies in English Literature, 1976), p. 513.

⁴ Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words*, ed. Helen Thaventhiran and Stefan Collini (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 142. See also Alan Durant and Colin MacCabe, "Compacted Doctrines: Empson and the Meanings of Words", in Norris, Christopher and Mapp, Nigel (eds.), *William Empson: the Critical Achievement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 170-195.

⁵ *Poems of Wordsworth, In Two Volumes* (London: W. Kent and Co., Paternoster Row, 1880), II, pp. 247-8.

⁶ Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Peter Bell the Third", in *The Major Works*, ed. Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 433.

⁷ Matthew Bevis, *Wordsworth's Fun* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2019), p. 5.

⁸ "Milton Versus Southey and Landor," *The Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. David Masson (Edinburgh, 1890), XI, 459. For a fuller discussion of this poem's and Wordsworth's imaginative relationship to Greek mythology, see Alex Zwekjdling, "Wordsworth and Greek Myth", *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 33.4 (July 1964), pp. 341-354.

⁹ Derek Lowe, "Wordsworth's 'Unenlightened Swain': Keats and Greek Myth in 'I Stood Tip-Toe upon a Little Hill'", *Keats-Shelley Journal*, Vol. 57 (2008), pp. 138-156 (149).

¹⁰ Emma Mason, *Christina Rossetti: Poetry, Ecology, Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 7.

Mason makes the further, telling observation that such a dismissal of Wordsworth can only be sustained by overlooking his later and largely discounted Christian poetry, which “unfolds its own participatory ecological vision” (p. 7).

¹¹ Scott Hess, *William Wordsworth and the Ecology of Authorship: The Roots of Environmentalism in Nineteenth-Century Culture* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), p.3.

¹² Timothy Clark, *The Value of Ecocriticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 11.

¹³ Ibid. Clark notes: “For an ecofeminist reading of this poem, critical of its appropriative individualism, see Scott Hess, ‘Three “Natures”’: Teaching Romantic Ecology in the Poetry of William Wordsworth, Dorothy Wordsworth, and John Clare’, in *Romanticism, Ecology and Pedagogy*.

¹⁴ I am here aligned with Iris Murdoch’s conviction that “The great romantics”, at their best, “transcended ‘romanticism’”: “The Sovereignty of Good and other Concepts”, in *The Sovereignty of Good* (London and NY: Routledge Classics, 2001), p. 83.

¹⁵ W. B. Wimsatt, “One Relation of Rhyme to Reason”, in *The Verbal Icon. Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1958), pp. 152-66.

¹⁶ See Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (Bloomsbury Continuum, 2014). For an account of Williams’ approach as against a scientific-linguistic understanding exemplified by Steven Pinker, *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person’s Guide to Writing in the 21st Century* (Allen Lane, 2014), see Michael D. Hurley and Marcus Waithe, “Introduction: Thinking, Thinkers, Style, Stylists”, *Thinking Through Style: Non-Fiction Prose of the Long Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); also, Hurley, “Style”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Prose*, ed. Daniel Tyler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021)

¹⁷ I. A. Richard described how Empson could take a poem “as a conjurer takes his hat”, and produce “an endless swarm of lively rabbits from it”: quoted in Christopher Ricks, *Dylan’s Visions of Sin* (New York: Viking, 2003), p. 1.

¹⁸ Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1949), “Preface to the Second Edition”, p. xiii.

¹⁹ Eliot, “The Music of Poetry”, *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (Faber & Faber, 1975), p. 111. For a fuller discussion of the role of authorial intention within literary-critical interpretation, see Michael D. Hurley, “The Pragmatics of Prosody”, *Style* 41.1 (2007): 53-113.

²⁰ “The question is rather whether there is, before the philosophical-theological interpretation, an interpretation that would not be an interpretation of the text or an interpretation about the text, but an interpretation in the text and through the text”: Paul Ricœur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and the Imagination*, trans. Donald Pellauer (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), p. 140.

²¹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home* [Encyclical, 2015], paragraph 66. Vatican website: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html (LS 66). Hereafter cited in-text as LS plus paragraph number.

²² *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works*, ed. Catherine Phillips (Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 66.

²³ Ibid., p. 70.

²⁴ Jude V. Nixon and Noel Barber, S.J. (eds), *The Collected Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins, V: Sermons and Spiritual Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 471.

²⁵ This sentiment is widely attributed to Chesterton, but there is no extant source for citation.

²⁶ See Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth and the Victorians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 40.

²⁷ “To The Same Flower” (‘Bright Flower!’), l. 23.

²⁸ “To the Daisy” (“In youth from rock to rock I went”), l. 29, 49. See Philip Shaw’s subtle and suggestive account of the daisy poems: *Wordsworth After War: Recovering Peace in the Later Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 10-28.

²⁹ “I do not think I have ever seen anything more beautiful than the bluebell I have been looking at. I know the beauty of our Lord by it”: *Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Humphry House and Graham Storey (London, 1959), p. 199.

³⁰ *Hopkins: The Major Works*, p. 69.

³¹ Ibid., p. 67.

³² Robert Bellarmine, SJ, *The mind’s ascent to God through the ladder of created things* (1614). Quoted A. O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Harvard University Press, 1936), p. 91; discussed in Norman H. Mackenzie, *A Reader’s Guide to Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Thomas and Hudson, 1981), pp. 84-5.

³³ On epistemological optimism and its prompts to doxology, see Aidan Nichols’s account of Hans Urs von Balthasar, *A key to Balthasar: Hans Urs von Balthasar on Beauty, Goodness and Truth* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2011).

³⁴ *Laudato Si’* stresses this universality across Catholic cultures (noting the “thought-provoking observation” from the bishops of Japan: “To sense each creature singing the hymn of its existence is to live joyfully in God’s

love and hope” (LS 85)), as it cuts across Christianity in the broadest ecumenical terms too, according to many biblical accounts to which *Laudato Si’* refers.

³⁵ Nichols, *Hopkins: Theologian’s Poet* (Ann Arbor: Sapienta Press of Ave Maria University, 2006), p. 53.

³⁶ Chesterton, *A Short History of England* (The Floating Press, 2011), p. 58.

³⁷ Chesterton, *Collected Works* (Ignatius Press), Vol. 20, p. 48

³⁸ *The Collected Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. R. K. R. Thornton and Catherine Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), II, p. 559.

³⁹ See Hugh Pendexter III: “Hopkins’ ‘God’s Grandeur’, 1-2”, *The Explicator*, 23(1), p. 5.

⁴⁰ He published a meteorological paper in the scientific journal *Nature*, and the word recurs through many poems – three times in “The Wreck of the Deutschland”, for instance, including in a phrase that points directly to God as captured by the double character of “lightning and love” (*Hopkins: The Major Works*, p. 54).

⁴¹ Hopkins, *Collected Works*, II, p. 821. For a discussion of Hopkins’s reaction to Wordsworth’s Ode, see Michael D. Hurley, “Theologies of Inspiration: William Blake and Gerard M. Hopkins”, in *Constructing Nineteenth-Century Religion: Literary, Historical, and Religious Studies in Dialogue*, ed. Joshua King and Winter Jade Werner (Ohio State University Press, 2019), Ch. 14.

⁴² James Anthony Froude, *Short Studies on Great Subjects*, fourth series (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1910), p. 188. For a discussion of this episode as part of a wider account of Newman’s power to shock the imagination, see Michael D. Hurley, “John Henry Newman, thinking out into language”, in *Thinking Through Style: Non-Fiction Prose of the Long Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), Ch. 6.

⁴³ Hill, “Language, Suffering, and Silence”, in *Geoffrey Hill: Collected Critical Writings*, ed. Kenneth Haynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). p. 405. I am indebted to Michael Rizq for bringing this reference to my attention.

⁴⁴ Heidegger, *On the Way to Language* [1957], trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 78.

⁴⁵ Jason. R. Rudy, *Electric Meters* (Ohio University Press, 2009), p.17

⁴⁶ Hopkins, *Collected Works*, I, p. 367.

⁴⁷ Hopkins, *Collected Works*, II, p. 549.

⁴⁸ Hopkins, *Collected Works*, II, p. 822.

⁴⁹ “For it seems to me that the poetical language of an age shd. be the current language heightened, to any degree heightened and unlike itself”: Hopkins, *Collected Works*, I, p. 365.

⁵⁰ Hopkins, *Collected Works*, I, p. 288, 243.

⁵¹ John Parnham, *Green Man Hopkins: Poetry and the Victorian Ecological Imagination* (Boston: Brill, 2010), p. 117.

⁵² *Hopkins: The Major Works*, p. 90.

⁵³ Hopkins calls the doctrine of the Real Presence to be the “great aid to belief and object of belief”, promising indeed “all Catholic truth” (Hopkins, *Collected Works*, I, p. 62). *Laudato Si’* likewise accents the incarnational mystery of “the Word becoming flesh” (99); “it is in the Eucharist that all that has been created finds its greatest exaltation” (236).

⁵⁴ *The Collected Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, VII, eds. Lesley Higgins and Michael F. Suarez S.J. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 262.

⁵⁵ For an overview, see Maria R. Lichtmann, ‘The Incarnational Aesthetic of Gerard Manley Hopkins’, *Religion & Literature*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Spring, 1991), pp. 37-50.

⁵⁶ “Although an angel, considered absolutely, is better than a stone, nevertheless two natures are better than one only; and therefore a universe containing angels and other things is better than one containing angels only; since the perfection of the universe is attained essentially in proportion to the diversity of natures in it, and not in proportion to the multiplication of individuals of single nature”: Aquinas, I *Sent. dist.* 44, q. 1, a2, quoted in Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, p. 77. Mackenzie cites this reference in *A Reader’s Guide to Gerard Manley Hopkins*, noting that Hopkins illustrates and expands these ideas within in his sermons).

⁵⁷ Maisie Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1944), pp. 97-101.

⁵⁸ *The Foreign Policy of Hitler’s Germany: Diplomatic Revolution in Europe 1933-36* (Chicago UP, 1970), p.4.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ See Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), pp. 38–50.

⁶¹ Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance in African Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 5.

⁶² “Questioning humans’ exceptionality in their relation with other species has dangers of its own”: For an account of the difficulty that the posthuman turn has had in avoiding indifference if not hostility towards human as against non-human creation, see Ursula K. Heise, Jon Christensen, Michelle Niemann, eds., *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 5 (passim).

⁶³ Jedediah Purdy, “Environmentalism’s Racist History”, *The New Yorker*, August 13, 2015. The UK has its own story of eco-fascism, not least through the Soil Association, whose founders included members of the British Union of Fascists (Jorian Jenks, closely linked with Oswald Mosley).

⁶⁴ ‘Practitioners of postcolonial ecocriticism, including Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, equally found deep ecology complicit in the project of Western imperialism because it upheld the portrayal of a wild Africa and of a tropical Edenic trope in colonialist discourse’: Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa Ecological Violence*, p. 7. See Huggan and Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (London: Routledge, 2010); also, Michael Dash, *The Other America: Caribbean Literature in a New World Context* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998).

⁶⁵ For a Chestertonian response to Attenborough’s remarks on population, see Laura Keynes’s letter to *The Tablet*, “Where could Attenborough’s comments on population control lead?”, 6th Nov. 2013: <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/blogs/1/110/where-could-attenborough-s-comments-on-population-control-lead->

⁶⁶ Clark, *The Value of Ecocriticism*, p. 3; see also Greg Garrad, *Ecocriticism*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 3-4.

⁶⁷ The question of abortion has become even more likely to stir strong and polarising opinion since the publication of *Laudato Si’*, with the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022. The strain of thinking on abortion in *Laudato Si’* is, however, absolutely inseparable from its vision of an integral ecology, as confirmed by the way that it was taken up again in Pope Francis’s subsequent encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti* (2020), as part of a sustained criticism of the ways which some “parts of the human family” are “readily sacrificed for the sake of others”, when “persons are no longer seen as a paramount value to be cared for and respected, especially when they are poor and disabled, ‘not yet useful’ – like the unborn, or ‘no longer needed’ – like the elderly” (18).

⁶⁸ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949)

⁶⁹ Leslie Thiele, *Indra’s Net and the Midas Touch: Living Sustainably in a Connected World* (MIT Press, 2011), p. 3.

⁷⁰ Theodore Roszak, “Where Psyche Meets Gaia,” in *Ecopsychology*, ed. Theodore Roszak, Mary Gomes, and Allen Kanner (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1995), 8. Quoted in Thiele, *Indra’s Net*, p. 3.

⁷¹ Clark, *The Value of Ecocriticism*, p. 3

⁷² Terry Gifford, “Gary Snyder and the Post- Pastoral”, in *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction*, ed. J. Scott Bryson (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press , 2002), pp. 77-87 (p. 84). Quoted Clark, *The Value of Ecocriticism*, p. 3.

⁷³ Even critics who continue to press for reimagining the purview of ecocriticism concede that “most forms of criticism are now socially inflected”: Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa Ecological Violence*, p. 7.

⁷⁴ Purdy, *This Land Is Our Land: The Struggle for a New Commonwealth* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 143. “Our world, then, functions as a kind of totalitarian system of value, imposed through the mechanics of price and through the material infrastructure of our ecological interdependence and harm.” (p.145).

⁷⁵ Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis”, *Science* 155 (1967): 1203-1207. Mason notes that the “mainstream critical refusal to attend to the specifics of the history of Christianity and ecology” persists to the present (*Christina Rossetti*, p. 2), observing also that White concludes his analysis with a discussion of the patron saint of ecology, Francis of Assisi. To this irony might be added the further, instructive fact that Francis of Assisi is not only the saint after whom Jorge Mario Bergoglio chose his name after his election as Pope; he is also the saint whom he directly credits as the inspiration for *Laudato Si’*. Where the formative power of religion, including *Laudato Si’*, is granted within ecocriticism, such as in Robert S. Emmett and David E. Nye, *The Environmental Humanities: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2017), it is – still – typically underestimated. For a rare example of a posthumanist theorist who does acknowledge a debt to religious and theological formation, see Donna Harroway’s account of how her “soul” is “indelibly marked by a Catholic Formation”, so that she hears “in species the doctrine of the Real Presence”, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), p. 15. (Real Presence in *A Companion Species Manifesto*).

⁷⁶ “If humans are – or more precisely, if they are *only* – puppets of the stars or beasts of the field, or ‘man machines’, or accidental primates, or creatures of their desires, or marionettes of their genes, they are not really the kind of creature envisaged by the world’s religions”: Nicholas Spencer, *Magisteria: The Entangled Histories of Science and Religion* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2023), p. 8. There could be a version of posthumanism consistent with religious faith, insofar as it refined the vision of ‘humanism’ born out of the European renaissance (see, for instance, arguments by Norman Wirzba, *From Nature To Creation: A Christian Vision For Understanding And Loving Our World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), and *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), Introduction: Who Is the You That Eats?). Mostly, though, the term is deployed with a metaphysics fundamentally at odds with

religion, and may antedate the idea of renaissance humanism, as part of a longer tussle over the status and agency conferred on human beings by the major religions.

⁷⁷ Chesterton, *Heretics; Orthodoxy; The Blatchford controversies*, ed. David J. Dooley, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), p. 317.

⁷⁸ An anthropocentric perception of creation by no means necessitates *anthropomonism*, a point robustly made by The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I: see Alexander Maros, 'The Ecological Theology of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I', *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 8:1 (2017), 146-177.

⁷⁹ Blaise Pascal *Pensées* (1659), fragment 347.

⁸⁰ I am grateful to one of the anonymous journal reviewers of this essay who raised this point, made suggestions, and pressed for clarification.

⁸¹ Hopkins, *Collected Works*, V, p. 525.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Hopkins: The Major Works*, p. 156-7.

⁸⁴ For an account of Hopkins "ecological perception", a perceptual modality involving the dynamic interaction between human bodies and environmental givens or potentialities, see Daniel Williams, Down the Slant towards the Eye: Hopkins and Ecological Perception. *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 48:1 (2020), 127-154.

⁸⁵ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 82.

⁸⁶ *Hopkins: The Major Works*, p. 69.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* Murdoch's use of "unselfing" suggests a further connection with Hopkins, who uses the cognate coinage of "unselving" ('Binsey Poplars', l. 21), negatively, in the context of ecological havoc wreaked by human beings. Both terms are suggestively related to John Ruskin's account of how industrial production within modernity "must un-humanize [the workers]" so that "all the energy of their spirits must be given over to make cogs and compasses of themselves" (*Unto this Last* 10.192). For a somewhat different account of the implications of anthropocentrism in Hopkins, challenging humanity's "ethical privilege" that comes by virtue of its soul, see Julia Saville, "Anthropocentrism and the Soul of Hopkins's Ecopoetics", *Victorian Poetry*, Volume 56, Number 2, Summer 2018, pp. 129-146 (144).

⁸⁸ *Hopkins: The Major Works*, p. 92.

⁸⁹ Newman, "Poetry, with reference to Aristotle's Poetics", in *Essays Critical & Historical, Volume 1* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907), p. 23.

⁹⁰ Henri de Lubac, *Further Paradoxes*, trans. Ernest Beaumont (London: Longmans, Green; Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1958), p. 11.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 14. For a discussion of de Lubac's account of paradox, as it relates to Chesterton's expressive strategies as an essayist, see Michael D. Hurley, *G. K. Chesterton* (Northcote House/British Council, 2012), Ch. 3.

⁹² Hopkins, *Collected Works*, I, p. 90.

⁹³ Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (London and New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1903), Ch. 4.

⁹⁴ Hopkins, *The Journals and Papers*, p. 204.