

# Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource  
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## “Carrion Comfort”

Not, I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee;  
Not untwist — slack they may be — these last strands of man  
In me or, most weary, cry *I can no more*. I can;  
Can something, hope, wish day come, not choose not to be.  
But ah, but O thou terrible, why wouldst thou rude on me  
Thy wring-world right foot rock? lay a lionlimb against me? scan  
With darksome devouring eyes my bruised bones? and fan,  
O in turns of tempest, me heaped there; me frantic to avoid thee and flee?

Why? That my chaff might fly; my grain lie, sheer and clear.  
Nay in all that toil, that coil, since (seems) I kissed the rod,  
Hand rather, my heart lo! lapped strength, stole joy, would laugh, chéer.  
Cheer whom though? the hero whose heaven-handling flung me, fóot tród  
Me? or me that fought him? O which one? is it each one? That night, that year  
Of now done darkness I wretch lay wrestling with (my God!) my God.

Gerard Manley Hopkins<sup>1</sup>

## Reflections

This poem is famous for teetering on the edge of blasphemy. As an artist, Hopkins nearly loses control of the sonnet form; it feels somehow like it's barely holding it together, busting at the seams. And as a priest, Hopkins might also appear to be losing some control. His work is known for exploring a complex—if not conflicted—relationship with God. He wrestles with doubt, longing, fear, and feelings of desolation and absence; ultimately, though, Hopkins's work is anchored by piety and grace. He is regarded by many as one of the greatest Victorian poets, and *the* greatest Victorian religious poet.

It is the third line of “Carrion Comfort” that haunts me: “[I will not] most weary, cry, *I can no more*. I can...” Here we have a speaker determined to resist despair, to continue on in hope. That affirmation, albeit a feeble one, is the speaker's commitment to continuing, a promise to keep going, to “not choose not to be.” The poem is often read as a direct address to God as well as to despair, an interesting twinning of two subjects in one way opposite or paradoxical to one another, and in another way inextricably linked.

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<sup>1</sup> “Carrion Comfort” by Gerard Manley Hopkins. Public domain.

The poet's overarching question might be one many of us have as well, summarized this way: if God is indeed a merciful, benevolent, and gracious God, why must we be subjected to the depths of despair? How can God let us suffer this much? The sonnet form is famous for its obsessive way of debating with itself and even contradicting itself; many believe this is one way art mimics life, our neuroses and our paradoxes. This sonnet, in particular, is primarily concerned with an existential question, an argument as much with the self as with God, or the space we believe God should be when we doubt God is present.

Even if feasting on despair would be like, as the poem suggests, eating carrion—that is, the decaying flesh of dead animals—the poet does eventually and metaphorically feast in a resurgence of faith, of hope, and of cheer. That final moment, after a long year of darkness, is one of recognition, surprise even, and acceptance: my God! My God. I would argue that the very fact that Hopkins does *not* choose *not* to be (in other words, he chooses to be, and to *keep being*) is an affirmation of God, and evidence of mercy. This poem of immediate, urgent despair becomes, almost startlingly, one of hope. And our delight in those exact rhymes of the second stanza—clear/cheer/ year—echoes the delight of life's continuing.

It's a difficult poem, a difficult concept, but if I can get past whatever hurdles are there—the language is unfamiliar, the syntax convoluted, the subject grim—I realize that many of the questions Hopkins was wrestling with—where is God? why does God allow suffering? why do I feel alone?—are also some of the ones I wrestle with myself. This is the work of transcendent poetry: it illuminates and magnifies our human experience.

The final image is the poem's real argument and resolution; it is a way for Hopkins to say with assurance, “even in darkness—perhaps *especially* in darkness— God is near.”

### ✂ About the Poet

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889) was an English poet who converted to Roman Catholicism and later became a Jesuit priest. Regarded as one of our greatest—and most innovative—poets, Hopkins is known for developing new rhythmic effects, namely “sprung rhythm,” and was particularly interested in ways of rejuvenating poetic language. He regularly placed familiar words into new and surprising contexts and also employed compound and unusual word combinations. Toward the end of his life, Hopkins suffered several long bouts of depression during which he wrote what is known as the “terrible sonnets,” a group of poems (“Carrion Comfort” is one) in which he voices his religious doubts, describing them as “thin gleanings of a long weary while.” But, as the story goes, his last words from his death bed were much more uplifting: “I am so happy,” he famously said. “I am so happy. I loved my life.”



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