

Hopkins's Clouded Judgment

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Many of Hopkins's speakers find themselves under a cloud. One of his earliest poems describes how 'clouds come, like ill-balanced crags,/ Shouldering', and the dramatic persona of his fragmentary play, *Floris in Italy*, envisages the 'fine morsels of a dwindling cloud/ That piece themselves into a race of drops'.¹ Like his Alchemist, then, who watches the 'travelling clouds [...] The making and the melting crowds', Hopkins is drawn back to this meteorological phenomenon which drifts in and out of his verse. Often attached to intransitive verbs like those in these examples, Hopkins's clouds have an unspecified and indeterminate movement, frustrating our inquiries into time and place. More suggestively, his Arcadian shepherd forges a link between clouds and fleeting kinds of composition when he's found 'Shaping his outlines on a field of cloud'. Several lines later, he 'sat and wrought his outline on a cloud'.² This connection between clouds and other changeable forms would prove a lasting one. To have a clouded judgment, then, might not necessarily mean to be misguided. For Hopkins, it could also be a source and a means of creativity.

One vision of a clouded horizon, in particular, held Hopkins's gaze, as his diary entries from 1865 show:

A noise of falls I am possessèd by
of ~~water~~ streams; and clouds like mesh'd and parted moss
of water. Clouds like parted moss
Attain the windy levels of the sky
Wh. between ash-tops suffers loss
Of its concavity.³

Whereas Wordsworth's ear might have stayed pinned to that sound of the stream, Hopkins's eye is drawn onwards to the interwoven clouds. Textual revisions likewise part and mesh, as those two images are left to co-exist, offset from the main body of the poem,

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¹ Hopkins, *The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. N. H. MacKenzie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 20, 39. *PW* in future references.

² Hopkins, *PW*, 75, 60.

³ Hopkins, *The Collected Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins III: Diaries, Journals, and Notebooks*, ed. L. Higgins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 319.

and momentarily create an enjambement of their own in 'parted moss/ of water'. In its process of revision, it's as if the poem makes good on an ambition to become more cloud-like. A series of visual sketches (figure 1) and impressionist descriptions lead to these draft lines of verse. According to them, the clouds made 'spokes' of light on the horizon and formed 'a wonderfully symmetrical band or skein of cloud on which they fell'.⁴ The result, as these illustrations note, is that the clouds are left with 'mysterious rosy edges', blending a Homeric formula of 'rosy-fingered dawn' with a more modern perplexity with hazy perceptions. By their nature, clouds are intellectually fixed but they are also variable in our experience of them, and Hopkins's return to poetry reveals an inadequacy of the static image to account for these elusive states.

Commentary on Hopkins has insufficiently attended to the wayward aspects of his nature writing. One of the chief characteristics of his early poems, in Catherine Phillips's eyes, is 'the note of authenticity that the precision of Hopkins's observations of nature give his work. In the mature poetry this is made significant through its application to Christian ideas.'⁵ This is not the whole picture of Hopkins's 'mature' poetry. Because of the presumption that 'mature' was synonymous with 'religious' for Hopkins, poems that did not fall in line with this caricature of his writing were excluded from earlier editions of his work, and a certain view of the poet has persisted. More recently, Seán Hewitt has argued that the poet 'asserted close scientific study as an idiosyncratic method of divine apprehension', leading to his study of atmospheric phenomena, including clouds, being recruited into a joint scientific-theological mission.⁶ My intention is to query this implicit hierarchy, where the questions of aesthetics raised by clouds come second to this mission.

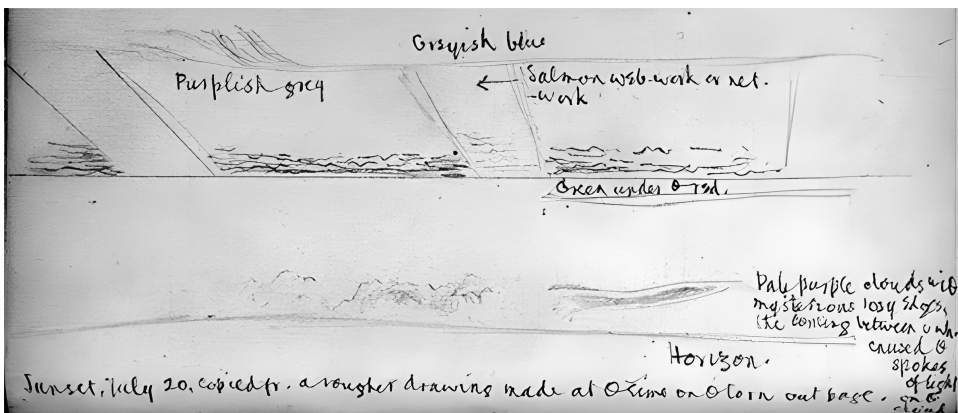


Figure 1. 'Diary for 1865' in Campion Hall, Oxford. Reproduced in *Diaries, Journals, and Notebooks*, 317.

⁴ Hopkins, *Diaries, Journals, and Notebooks*, 318.

⁵ Catherine Phillips, 'Hopkins and the Lost Beloved: The Making of "A Voice from the World" and "Binsey Poplars"', *Poetry in the Making: Creativity and Composition in Victorian Poetic Drafts*, ed. Daniel Tyler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 167–186: 174.

⁶ Seán Hewitt, 'Gerard Manley Hopkins's "Skies of Couple-Colour"', *Victorian Poetry* 58 (2020), 291–314: 292.

For instance, Hewitt proposes that one crucial poem sees Hopkins trying to untangle a 'lock of clouds', something that is a 'real and physical presence'. It's worth remembering, however, that the original version of this fragmentary text read '*look* of clouds', an equally, if not more, suggestive image that highlights how apprehension itself was placed front and centre.⁷ In this respect, Hopkins isn't, as Bragg has claimed, a writer of 'nature poetry', nor is nature the 'supreme site' where God 'reveals Himself to the poet'.⁸ 'Reveal' makes that experience sound too direct, revelatory, or known. What this essay will focus on is how clouds become a recurrent site of contingency in Hopkins's writing. Specifically, it asks what these unstable, evasive formations might have to say about unstable or unresolved textual formations in his notebooks, poems, and poetic drafts. I suggest that these are questions Hopkins takes seriously, an argument which goes against the grain of what has been considered his 'mature poetry' but which plays into one of his first speaker's attractive prospects of 'Ending in sweet uncertainty | 'Twixt real hue and phantasy'.⁹

How to go about describing clouds was not a point of confusion only for Hopkins. It also posed a challenge to scientific commentators in the nineteenth century. It wasn't until 1803 that the Latinate terms to classify clouds emerged when Luke Howard published his *Essay on the Modification of Clouds*. Meteorology comes under fire from Howard, who points out certain limitations in the discipline. In attending 'only to his instruments', Howard remarks, the meteorologist 'may be said to examine only the *pulse* of the atmosphere'.¹⁰ Like the still life of a photograph, to have only the snapshot of a cloud formation would be to miss out on those essential qualities of clouds that caused the problems of definition to begin with. Howard attempted to correct for this issue in his nomenclature by coining terms that focused on that modifying period, the in-between states, of cloud formation. Hence, we find not only 'cirrus' and 'cumulus' clouds but also 'cirro-cumulus' and 'cirro-stratus' for 'intermediate Modifications'.¹¹ The *Essay*'s refrain 'Clouds in this Modification' reminds us how Howard's interest in clouds lies in their unfixed and changeable properties. For the last 'compound Modification', 'Cumulo-cirro-stratus', Howard puts forward the more concise 'nimbus' as an alternative.¹² 'Nimbus' and 'nebulous' are cut from the same etymological fabric, and where Howard's definitions like 'well defined' are juxtaposed with the more guarded 'roundish', we see how the elusiveness of this aerial phenomenon runs over into the scientific language attempting to pin it down.

One meteorologist later in the century would still note that 'the want of sufficiently exact language to designate the protean forms in which cloud masses present themselves', and that a secondary problem arises in 'identifying the particular kind of cloud' from

⁷ Hopkins, *Diaries, Journals, and Notebooks*, 275.

⁸ Quoted in Adrian Grafe, 'Gerard Manley Hopkins', *Victorian Poetry* 58 (2020), 350–361: 351.

⁹ Hopkins, *PW*, 10.

¹⁰ Luke Howard, *Essay on the Modifications of Clouds* (1803; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 2.

¹¹ Howard, *Modifications of Clouds*, 3–4.

¹² Howard, *Modifications of Clouds*, 5–6, 4.

purely verbal descriptions.¹³ But to describe a cloud is to be paradoxically uncloud like. Among the other systems that came before, Howard's Latinate terms offer a preconceived idea of fixed kinds of clouds and predetermined characteristics. Hopkins's 'Platonic Dialogue' from his undergraduate compositions is suggestive in this respect because it pushes back against the kind of language Blanford sees as ideal for defining clouds. Not far into a Socratic back and forth, Hopkins's Professor laments, 'when one sets out with – a priori notions – I am afraid I have lost the only chance of a disciple I ever had'.¹⁴ What Hopkins's Oxonian avatar has to say about *a priori* descriptions works well with this criticism of naming cloud formations, given their intrinsic variability. In other words, it would be a category error to be overly categorical about clouds. Moreover, a glance at John Ruskin's lectures on 'The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century' (1884) reveals how the study of clouds was no longer an innocent fancy. Cumulative references to 'plague-wind and plague-cloud' contribute to an overbearing sense of degradation and decay, and his descriptions of 'terrific streams of reddish-violet fire, not forked or zigzag, but rippled rivulets' are as messy as the context cloud studies had become.¹⁵

It was amid these re-descriptions of clouds that the poet penned his letters to *Nature*, responding specifically to a letter by Marc Dechevrens. Several of the images found in Hopkins's letters can be traced to Dechevrens's '*bands* of a tiny varying from the faintest to the deepest *blue* [...] seemingly radiating from a common centre [...] from the very position of the sun, or from both points at once' or the 'atmosphere over-charged with aqueous vapour'.¹⁶ 'Charged' is a richly suggestive word for Hopkins, a term which can stretch from electrical, to moral, aesthetic, and other implications. He reuses the term from Dechevrens in his own letter when he observes that it might not be the case that 'the sky of England is not heavily charged enough with vapor to carry shadow. Rather it is too much charged'.¹⁷ More than a decade before, however, he had put it in close proximity to his description of clouds and 'instress': 'The blue was ~~marked~~ ^charged^ with simple instress, the higher, zenith sky earnest and frowning, lower more light and sweet. High up again, breathing through woolly coats of cloud or on the quains and branches of the flying pieces it was the true exchange of crimson'.¹⁸ 'Instress' is central to Hopkins's conception

¹³ H. F. Blanford, *A Practical Guide to the Climate and Weather of India, Ceylon and Burmah and the Storms of the Indian Seas* (London, 1889), 56. For more on the linguistic problem of clouds in the nineteenth century, see Katharine Anderson, 'Looking at the sky: the visual context of Victorian meteorology', *The British Journal for the History of Science* 36 (2003), 301-332: 330-332.

¹⁴ *Oxford Essays and Notes*, 146. Emphasis in original.

¹⁵ John Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin, Vol. 34: The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century*, eds. E. D. Cook and A. Wedderburn (1908; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 38. See the particularly troubling portrayal: 'the air one loathsome mass of sultry and foul fog, like smoke; scarcely raining at all, but increasing to heavier rollings, with flashes quivering vaguely through all the air, and at last terrific streams of reddish-violet fire, not forked or zigzag, but rippled rivulets—two at the same instant some twenty to thirty degrees apart, and lasting on the eye at least half a second, with grand artillery-peals following; not rattling crashes, or irregular cracklings, but delivered volleys' (37).

¹⁶ Marc Dechevrens, 'A Curious Halo', *Nature* 27 (1881), 30-31: 30. Italics are Dechevrens's own.

¹⁷ 15 Nov. 1883, *The Collected Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins II: Correspondence 1882-1889*, eds. R. K. R. Thornton and C. Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 549.

¹⁸ 22 Apr. 1871, *Diaries, Journals, and Notebooks*, 508.

of an object's individuality because it is the force that keeps an object 'charged' with its complex and defining characteristics.¹⁹ But this individuality can become obscured.

Each *Nature* contributors' language of 'bars', 'bands', and 'texture' closes in on the modifying effect of clouds that Howard was keen to press, as they shape and manipulate sunlight into discernible shapes and patterns.²⁰ These 'accidental shapes', as Hopkins calls them, reframe what the eye perceives in new and perplexing ways.²¹ Accordingly, he sees in the challenge of clouds a chance to understand what Kumiko Tanabe has called a 'new Realism', in which physical forms, although they are on the move, stay fixed mathematically at the roots in the metaphysical realm.²² Hopkins's final letter to *Nature* refers to clouds as 'phases' and insists that it is 'right and important to distinguish phenomena really new from old ones first observed under new circumstances'.²³ This investigation into 'new circumstances', novelty, and changing phenomena that Hopkins carries out in his personal experience is, I suggest, equally revealing about the incompleteness he harnesses in his textual life.

Rounding off one of his letters, the poet notes that our impressions of clouds are 'merely an effect of perspective, but a strange and beautiful one'.²⁴ Here, Hopkins is continuing a pre-existing interest in the extent to which clouds complicate ideas of perception, which is shown in Dechevren's recurring verbs of sight and seeming: 'It does not seem', 'are seen', 'are first seen', 'greatly different from anything else to be seen'.²⁵ What's more intriguing is that Hopkins thought of his own poetry as strange or odd. The association between 'strange' and 'beautiful' echoes George Grote, whom Hopkins had read during his time at Highgate School. Grote himself had described 'gorgeous clouds of fancy and feeling', qualities that can be felt in the poet's study of these phenomena.²⁶ These letters, then, encapsulate how Hopkins was tapping into an ongoing and lively discussion about the way in which clouds were a centrepiece in broader debates over perception, change, and contingency. As I will now go on to suggest, these effects might similarly refer to the experience of verse, form, and the changes made through textual revision.

Hopkins wasn't alone in making clouds a parallel for unresolved states of mind. Mary Jacobus's study, *Romantic Things*, has observed how clouds, among other aerial phenomena,

¹⁹ It can also be the 'stem of stress between us and things to bear us out and carry the mind over', as Hopkins puts it in his 'Notes on Greek Philosophy'; *The Collected Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins IV: Oxford Essays and Notes*, ed. L. Higgins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 313.

²⁰ See 15 Nov. 1883, *Correspondence 1882–1889*, p. 637 and 3 Jan. 1884, *Correspondence 1882–1889*, 651–654.

²¹ 3 Jan. 1884, *Correspondence 1882–1889*, 649.

²² Kumiko Tanabe, *Hopkins and the Poetics of Fancy* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 19–20.

²³ 30 Oct. 1884, *Correspondence 1882–1889*, 687.

²⁴ 15 Nov. 1883, *Correspondence 1882–1889*, 637. Hopkins published four letters to *Nature* on this subject from 1882 to 1884.

²⁵ Dechevren's, 'A Curious Halo', 30–31.

²⁶ George Grote, *A History of Greece*, 12 vols. (London: 1846), i. 576. See Hopkins's remark to Bridges that 'No doubt my poetry errs on the side of oddness'; 15 Feb. 1879, *The Collected Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins I: Correspondence 1852–1881*, eds. R. K. R. Thornton and C. Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 334.

offered writers like John Clare 'a relief from seeing and being seen, as well as a language for undirected states of thought and feeling'.²⁷ It's not so much a 'relief' that clouds offer Hopkins; they're more like an imaginative through-line for questions surrounding how 'acts of apprehension apparently simple are largely influenced by the imagination'.²⁸ Looking at the poet's compositional practice, we see how this equally applies to the indeterminate states of composition. One of his especially fragmentary poems complicates precision the more closely Hopkins looks back at his vision of a cloud:

~~With~~ ^In^ more precision now of light and dark
 The heightening dawn with milky orience
 Rounds its still-purpling centreings of |cloud.

—
 Now more precisely touch'd ~~with~~ ^in^ light and ~~dark~~ ^gloom^,
 The place of the East with ~~heighten'd~~ ^earliest^ milky morn
 Rounds its still-purpling centre darks of cloud.
 Dawn that the pebbly low-down East
 Covers with shallow ~~silver~~, that unsets
 The look of clouds betimes and hangs the day.

—
~~Dawn~~ Dawn that the low-down pebbly East
 Covers with shallow ~~silver~~, the look of clouds
 That early 'sperses, and high hangs the day.²⁹

If one view of Hopkins is that he aspired to a 'trained vision' and 'knowing' God, clouds draw our attention to the insufficiency of knowledge to account for particular experiences. Revision, correspondingly, is not a form of training in order to access knowledge of a subject. Those 'still-purpling centreings of cloud' above see grammatical categories disintegrate, by which the poem's language is preserved in a state of instability. Unstable grammatical forms come to describe forms in nature that cannot be wholly pinned down. Nature simultaneously becomes deliquesced and dispersed as the 'Look of clouds', which "sperses" in the reworked text, gains a force of expansion. Like the cloud in motion, the poet's thoughts become multi-directional. In setting that continuous, 'still-purpling centre' against the 'darks of cloud', Hopkins's revisions come to make the abstract more concrete, as he tests out the limits of his writing's own trajectory on the page.

Recall his remark in one of his letters to *Nature*, that what he could see was 'merely an effect of perspective'. This observation finds more than a poetic rendering in this poem because the changes in this manuscript see the poet trying to retain something of the arresting effect that such a perspective might provide. His re-rendering of 'light and dark' as 'light and gloom' tracks a movement back into the murkiness of what he saw, rather than tidying it up into the idealized oppositions of darkness and light; and when he twice reworks 'With' to 'In', these references to 'precision' and 'light' no longer fulfill strictly

²⁷ Mary Jacobus, *Romantic Things: A Tree, a Rock, a Cloud* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2012), 18.

²⁸ Hopkins, *Oxford Essays and Notes*, 231.

²⁹ Hopkins, *Diaries, Journals, and Notebooks*, 275.

instrumental functions. These small, and yet pointed changes, provoke larger questions. If Hopkins is saying that clouds are not something that can be captured *with* precision, then what might it mean for them to be somehow captured *in* it?

As I have been arguing, Hopkins's engagement with clouds is part of a larger nineteenth-century investigation into problems of perception, categorization, and definition. Restoring Hopkins's multi-valent thinking about clouds to frame of his writing, I have suggested, demonstrates how seriously he took these questions outside his religious pre-occupations. This essay now brings the fluctuation of cloud states into dialogue with the poet's writings on aesthetics in order to show how a seemingly uncharacteristic pull toward the indistinct was a cornerstone of Hopkins's poetic thinking. I start by examining the ways in which clouds become an imaginative shorthand for questions about the relationship between order and disorder in composition, before turning to what the 'drift' of clouds reveals about other kinds of imaginative and compositional drift in his verse.

The potential of Hopkins's clouds to illuminate unstable modes of thought and composition began decades before his *Nature* letters. Looking to his undergraduate philosophical and aesthetic investigations, the poet's 'Platonic Dialogue' is a prime instance of this connection where the sight of 'rows of level cloud' provoke a philosophical discussion of irregularity and beauty. These rows, one of Hopkins's interlocutors points out, 'are pretty symmetrical. They are straight and parallel with sky-line and each other, and of a uniform colour'. It is notable that this row of clouds is only '*pretty* symmetrical', not wholly regular.³⁰ The ensuing observations over the composition of leaves lead the Professor to conclude:

Of course everyone wd. allow as a truism that in making beautiful shapes (and the same will hold for the other kinds of abstract beauty) we must not have things too symmetrical; and most wd. allow we must not have them too unsymmetrical and rugged.³¹

Cloud formations offer up a secular way of attending to the relationship between order and disorder. Across this dialogue, we see the young poet justifying beauty in nature without reference to the divine and, here, the description of 'making beautiful shapes' points to the compositions of beauty in life as Hopkins witnesses it. But the poet then goes one step further in that parenthesis to note the same of 'other kinds of *abstract* beauty', elevating his observations to a compositional principle. To blend the 'symmetrical' with the 'rugged' might not only be a feature of experience, then, but a rubric for beauty.

If there's a slight dig in Hopkins's 'Platonic Dialogue' at how 'slight inequalities or imperfections as are always to be found in nature' are 'not to be expressed at all in an idealized' version in art, then his compositional process shows him in the process of correcting this.³² His conception of beauty, as a blend of likeness and difference, is also worked into the formal aspects of the poetry. A practical demonstration of this form of revision, textual

³⁰ Hopkins, *Oxford Essays and Notes*, 139. Italics are my own.

³¹ Hopkins, *Oxford Essays and Notes*, 142.

³² Hopkins, *Oxford Essays and Notes*, 142.

and rhythmic, is offered by the compositional history of 'Hurrahing in Harvest', a poem which deals with the 'lovely behavior' of clouds in increasingly uncertain terms:

Summer ends now; now, bárbárous in béauty, the stóoks rise
 Around; up above, what wind-walks! what lovely behaviour
 Of sílk-sack clóuds! Has wilder, wilful-wávier
 Méal-drift moulded ever and melted acróss skies?
 I wálk, I líft up, I líft úp heart, éyes,
 Down all that glory in the heavens to glean our Saviour;
 And, éyes, héart, what looks, what lips yet gáve you á
Rápturous love's greeting of realer, of rounder replies? (PW, 148)

Multiple changes to these lines across its manuscript drafts disclose an allegiance between Hopkins's process of revision and the ways these lines become shaped by patterns of rhythm and stress. Had he retained the original text of the first line, we would have been thrust into a more immediate present hammered out into the flat stresses of 'It is harvest: *nów*'. In their revised version, 'Summer *ends* now; now, *barbarous*' smudges the edges between the ending of summer and the beginning of autumn. It's not entirely clear whether that second *now* should be stressed, which intimately connects with the way in which we are left wondering whether each 'now' is referring to the same moment in the present or whether the poet is more concerned with endings or new beginnings. Meanwhile, shimmering extensions of lines check the acoustic outline of the poem as extrametrical 'behavior' and 'wávier' themselves waver between three or four (and two or three) syllables, and so become a particularly deft model of the struggle between design and disorder.

English meter, as Hopkins would have been well aware, can be as slippery as the movements of clouds this poem describes. Unlike the more regimented quantitative meter of Classical verse, the accentual-syllabic meter of English can be uncertain and 'sprung rhythm' is an especially heightened version of this flexibility. Writing about this poem to Bridges in 1878, the poet took his time in pointing out that 'the outriding feet are not to be confused with dactyls or paeons, though sometimes the line might be scanned in either way.'³³ This note might be more confounding than clarifying, but this is part of the point of the rhythmic figure in question, as Hopkins's gloss in his lectures notes suggests: the 'paeon is recommended by the complexity of its ratio, which is hard to catch, and by its length, which makes the longs and beats wide apart and so also hard to catch the particular rhythm of, though rhythmical.'³⁴ Some of his most famous poems, from 'The Windhover' to 'Pied Beauty' and 'The Caged Skylark', return to the elusive potential of the paeon. In other words, this particular foot is not just possible reading in that poem above; it is an emblem of what is 'hard to catch'.

³³ Hopkins to Bridges, 16 Jul. 1878, *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*, ed. C. C. Abbott, revised ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), 56.

³⁴ Hopkins, *The Collected Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins VI: Sketches and Scholarly Studies*, ed. R. K. R. Thornton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 325.

Being ‘hard to catch’ does not come without its drawbacks. One noticeable absence from future versions of ‘Hurrahing in Harvest’ is what Eric Griffiths has called ‘the prime, calling word of poetry’—that ‘O’ which had heralded ‘O eyes, O heart, and eyes’ in a previous draft. Its very shape was perhaps too perfect a reminder of the ideal it embodies. As Griffiths notes in another context, the invocation of an ‘O’ is associated with the ‘aim of the ascetic discipline, its aim at something beyond itself, its possible fertility’.³⁵ Naturally, in Hopkins’s case, there is the religious dynamic, but there’s more than one way poetry can be an ‘ascetic discipline’. In becoming more nebulous, for instance, a poem risks being misunderstood or misapprehended, but this masks a more urgent anxiety that it might not reach *any* reader. As the poet had noted, the beauty and effect of clouds was wholly a result of apprehension, then the poem likewise might suffer the same silence that meets its rhetorical questions. Hopkins’s original line, however, did not run on to speak of ‘lips’ giving ‘rounder replies’ but to ‘Print or pen such overwhelming replies’, as if the poet was attempting to exorcise the anxieties of his current predicament as he composed. Indeed, the revisionary relationship between lines or between the poet with his work might be one solution to these anxieties. By converting his voice into a textual form of process, the poet projects his voice into the future but makes a gamble that it will be picked up in future periodicities of rhythm and form on the page or in the continued voicing and rewriting of his text.

In its most striking example, the tussle between the ordered design that Hopkins would take from his religious life and this more wayward view of composition comes in ‘That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection’. That ‘and’ turns the ‘Comfort of the Resurrection’ into something bordering on an afterthought. Put another way, a religious telos is allowed to co-exist alongside a worldview with which it is mostly incompatible. This dynamic plays out in the two modes of experience that the poem not only imagines but stages in corresponding kinds of revisionism. The original vision ‘Cloud-puffballs’ yields a proliferation of images which are only loosely associated in their sequencing but reveal layers of variation that take place over underlying patterns:

Cloud-puffballs, torn tufts, tossed pillows | flaunt forth, then chevy on
an air-

Built thoroughfare: heaven-roysterers, in gay-gangs | they throng;
they glitter in marches.

Down roughcast, down dazzling whitewash, | wherever an elm
arches,

Shivelights and shadowtackle in long | lashes lace, lance, and pair.

Delightfully the bright wind boisterous | ropes, wrestles, beats earth
bare

Of yestertempest’s creases; in pool and rutpeel parches

Squandering ooze to squeezed | dough, crúst, dust; stánches, stárches

Squadroned masks and manmarks | treadmire toil there

Fóotfretted in it. Million-fuelèd, | nature’s bonfire burns on. (PW, 197-8)

³⁵ Eric Griffiths, *The Printed Voice in Victorian Poetry*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 250.

The poem starts *in medias res*, but it seems happy to stay there. Hopkins's attraction to nature and 'dappled things' (to borrow his phrase from 'Pied Beauty') in the moment makes his sense of wonder seem less dependent on his religious convictions. The poem's underlying design culminates in the decisive repetition of 'Immortal Diamond', but within this structure, phonetic transitions mimic energetic thought, as Hopkins tries to find a verbal shape for things that are inherently shapeless. Take a line like 'Shivelights and shadowtackle ín long | lashes lace, lance, and pair'. There's something more conceptually ambitious going on than the poet revelling in musicality. The mobility of the cloudscape produces an equally mobile syntax, as alliteration stages the broader patterns of revision at the smallest level of the letter, and so lends the poet a suitable model for the processes of thought.

At the poem's close, however, a marked change in direction leads him to assert, 'I am all at once what Christ is [...] immortal diamond,/ Is immortal diamond.' It's a sudden shift into a teleological organisation of experience, which allows the poet to figure Christ as both an individual and a type across history. What we are left with is the poem's dual commitment to a mode of experience that depends on the permanence of underlying relations, be they the structures of belief or the sonnet form, and the sort of experience that is mobile and contingent. Michael Hurley is right to observe that 'The Windhover' is 'to some extent dependent (as his agonistic sonnets are) on working itself out *as* poetry', and the same is certainly true of this poem.³⁶ The provisional workings out, self-confrontation and self-effacement, we might expect from the draft stages of a poem fuel the imaginative struggle in its more completed version. What poetry seems to be for Hopkins is something like an extension of the mechanics at work in his 'sprung rhythm', whereby processes of revision or the 'recasting' of speech keep the negotiations going between teleological and contingent handlings of experience.

It's revealing that one of Hopkins's essays talks about the added irregular element being something particular to poetry:

In art it is essential to recognise and strive to realise on a more or less wide basis this unity in some shape or other. [...] There is an important difference to be noted here. In art we strive to realise not only unity, permanence of law, likeness, but also, with it, difference, variety, contrast.³⁷

What makes art distinct from other kinds of efforts to make sense of experience is its ability to reconcile permanence and dissonance, and so it's only inevitable that Hopkins's practice of revision strives toward 'realizing' these elements—both in the sense of acknowledging and creating. Revision for Hopkins works like the form in his final poems, preserving and generating irregularity, and so keeps poetry as poetry.

When Hopkins thinks of clouds, he does not only think of their settled patterns; he was also entranced by their movement. Images of 'drift' suggestively arrive hand-in-hand

³⁶ Michael Hurley, *Faith in Poetry: Verse Style as a Mode of Religious Belief* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 123.

³⁷ Hopkins, *Oxford Essays and Notes*, 221.

with Hopkins's visions of clouds, and so contribute to their air of flux and changeability in his work. Unlike Ruskin, who felt an anxiety to eliminate the compositional problems he encountered when drawing clouds, Hopkins not only strove to preserve the peculiarities of 'drift' as he revised but in forms of revisioning.³⁸ So while his contemporary would try to get us to see clouds as something more definite and defined—'they are not more *drifted* into form than they are *carved* into form'—Hopkins saw the imaginative potential offered up by this process.³⁹ Just after those lines on 'still-purpling centreings' I discussed earlier, we find the fragmentary line 'Whorlèd wave, whelkèd wave,—and drift.'⁴⁰ Elsewhere, the poet likens the mystical sight of approaching mermaids to a '— a crowd/ Of filmy globes and rosy floating cloud: —/ So those Mermaidens crowded to my rock,/ And thicken'd, like that drifted bloom'.⁴¹ Matched with an impressionist soundscape and grammar, the drift of these clouds keeps them one step ahead of the poet. The intense specificity of 'that drifted bloom' might point us back to Wordsworth's most famous instant of cloud-watching: 'I wandered lonely as a Cloud/ That floats on high o'er Vales and Hills,/ When all at once I saw a crowd/ A host of golden Daffodils'.⁴² As Wordsworth's golden 'bloom' drifts into his own poem, we see Hopkins revising the language of someone who had formerly used the language of religion for secular purposes. In this context, composition might helpfully be understood as a type of drift, because the transitions between where Hopkins's work on one poem finishes and the next begins are not so much invisible as absent on the manuscript page. New poems come about not so much as a staged development, but as snapshots into an ongoing process of thought.

While the process of 'drift' can be enticing it can start off by giving the poet pause. Consider, for instance, the concession in 'The Bugler's First Communion': 'Though this child's drift// *Seems* by a divine doom channeled, nor do I cry/ Disaster there'.⁴³ Following the stanza break, the stress falls squarely on the fact that the 'child's drift' only *seems* to end in disaster. In the end, this 'drift' manages to escape a deterministic hand on the scales. It's not surprising that Hopkins gravitates toward the movement of a cloud's drift because it neatly captures his theory of motion more broadly as the 'the synthesis of a number of impressions of the same thing perceived in a number of different spots continuously'.⁴⁴ At the same time, this phrase could just as well be describing critical features we encounter in a poem. Devices such as rhyme, rhythm, and verbal motifs can work like optical and aural

³⁸ See Ruskin's remark in *The Elements of Drawing*: 'Because they move so quickly, one 'must try therefore to help what memory you have, by sketching at the utmost possible speed the whole range of the clouds; marking, by any shorthand or symbolic work you can hit upon, the peculiar character of each, as transparent, or fleecy, or linear, or undulatory; giving afterwards such completion to the parts as your recollection will enable you to do'; *The Works of John Ruskin*, eds. E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1903-12), xv. 128-9.

³⁹ Ruskin, *Works*, xv. 130.

⁴⁰ Hopkins, *PW*, 54.

⁴¹ Hopkins, *PW*, 13.

⁴² Wordsworth, *Poems, in Two Volumes, and Other Poems 1800-1807*, ed. J. Curtis (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 207-8. 'Golden' from 1815 edition of the poem.

⁴³ Hopkins, *PW*, 162 (my emphasis).

⁴⁴ Hopkins, *Oxford Essays and Notes*, 232.

allusions in that they can return to us the same thing in different spots on the page. If the visual sketch mentioned at the start of this was somehow inadequate to do justice to the phenomenon of 'drift', then what Hopkins's forms of revision in the context of modeling clouds shows is how he increasingly comes to rely on the double life of a poem instead. A poem is a fixed pattern on the page, but we make sense of it bit by bit in the process of reading.

On this question of the experiential process of verse, Hopkins's notes for lectures on poetry are again helpful. These were composed at a time when the poet denied himself the opportunity to write poetry due to his commitments as a Jesuit. As the editors of his *Sketches and Scholarly Studies* point out, his research into "rhetoric" allowed him to follow his irresistible commitment to poetry without yet betraying his resolution to "write no more".⁴⁵ Poetry enters his imaginative activity by a kind of subterfuge, taking advantage of the permeable boundary between the discipline of writing poetry and that of theorising it. Moreover, the draft state of his lecture notes continues to speak to his creative process more broadly, leaving blank spaces to return to and sidenotes, which seem to crystallize what Hopkins later realized he was thinking about, coexist with the collection of thought that led to them. One such sidenote remarks, 'Breaking the monotony does not take away unity', and accompanies the following:

All of intermittent elements of verse, as alliteration, rhyme
It shd. be understood that these various means of breaking the sameness of rhythm and
especially caesura do not break the unity of the verse but on the contrary; they make it
organic and what is organic is one.⁴⁶

These intermittent aspects in Hopkins's verse, I suggest, are revealing about the intermittent nature of his verse. Rhyme, especially, equips Hopkins with an imaginative resource for investigating the ways in which forms of revisioning are both backward- and forward-looking in his poetry.

Consider this sequence from one of his earliest poems 'Il Mystico', where rhyming couplets are put to work enabling a series of images to fuse into one another in a particularly lucid scene of drift:

Or, like a lark to glide aloof
Under the cloud-festoonèd roof,
That with a turning of the wings
Light and darkness from him flings;
To drift in air, the circled earth
Spreading still in its sunned girth;
To hear the sheep-bells dimly die
Till the lifted clouds were nigh,
In breezy belts of upper air
Melted into aether rare. (PW, 8)

⁴⁵ Hopkins, *Sketches and Scholarly Studies*, 5.

⁴⁶ Hopkins, *Sketches and Scholarly Studies*, 336.

Over the short course of these lines, the homogenous singular of the ‘cloud-festooned roof’ modulates into the plural ‘lifted clouds’—a transformation from synthesis to fragmentation that’s enhanced by the poem’s acoustic structure. Rhyme’s twin allegiance can reflect the compositional development of a poem, as Peter McDonald has suggested. Its ‘forked tongue’, he says, ‘is akin to that of verse’s “slow cumulative growth”, for it answers to the two-way function of rhyme in poetic composition itself: a rhyme-word casts itself forwards into the next lines of a poem, but it also a mode of listening backwards within the poem, so that every rhymed utterance is also an echo of itself.’⁴⁷ I would add that the aural loops and self-revisioning of rhyme can be a way of resisting ‘cumulative growth’. As often happens in Hopkins, the cumulative has a habit of turning cumulous. Bridges once chastised Hopkins’s handling of rhyme, saying that his ‘intention in such places is that the verses should be recited as running on without pause, and the rhyme occurring in their midst should be like a phonetic accident, merely satisfying the prescribed form’.⁴⁸ Viewed in the context of Hopkins’s research into poetics, rhyme is not used to bring structure and cohesion. It is designed to break up ‘monotony’ like the roughing-up of his process of revision.

‘Intermittent’ devices in Hopkins’s verse play out a revisionary pattern that one of Hopkins’s undergraduate experiments in the Socratic form referred to as ‘the drift of [...] context’.⁴⁹ But his references to ‘drift’, ‘Melted’, and ‘Spreading still’ could be getting at a broader revisionary history underpinning the poem. As he composed the poem, Hopkins wrote to Ernest Coleridge, inquiring ‘Now is that or is it not a plagiarism from Tennyson’s *Eagle*, “Close to the sun in lonely lands”’.⁵⁰ He had already admitted that of the ‘good many poetical snatches’ he had recently composed, the ‘best thing I have done lately is *Il Mystico* in imitation of *Il Penseroso*, of which I send you some extracts. It is not finished yet’.⁵¹ We might also note as a precursor Shelley’s ‘To a Skylark’ whose ‘profuse strains of unpremeditated art’ now find mediation in Hopkins’s own poem. As Harold Bloom makes clear in *The Anatomy of Influence*, ‘influence anxiety [...] exists between poems and not between persons’. ‘All that matters for interpretation is the revisionary relationship between poems, as manifested in tropes, images, diction, syntax, grammar, metric, poetic stance.’⁵² So in a poem that is composed with a heightened degree of self-consciousness over its literary inheritance, Hopkins’s clouds concentrate these issues because they too

⁴⁷ Peter McDonald, *Sound Intentions: The Workings of Rhyme in Nineteenth-Century Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 12. McDonald is supplementing Robert Douglas-Fairhurst’s observations about Alexander Pope’s use of rhyme; ‘Alexander Pope: “renown’d in Rhyme”’, *Literary Milieux: Essays in Text and Context Presented to Howard Erskine-Hill*, eds. David Womersley and Richard McCabe (Newark NJ: University of Delaware Press, 2008), 239.

⁴⁸ Robert Bridges, *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins: now first published: Edited with notes by Robert Bridges Poet Laureate* (London: Humphrey Milford, 1918), 99–100; repr. in *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins: Fourth Edition*, eds. W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 242.

⁴⁹ Hopkins, *Oxford Essays and Notes*, 148.

⁵⁰ To E. H. Coleridge, 3–6 Sep. 1862, *Further Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins: including his correspondence with Coventry Patmore*, 2nd ed., ed. C. Abbott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 14.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 8.

⁵² Harold Bloom, *The Anatomy of Influence: Literature as a Way of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 6.

involve subjecting recognizable types, or tropes, to the 'drift of context' the young poet mentions. Like the skylark-poet surrogate within the text, the compositional state of the poem captures Hopkins in the ongoing 'drift' of literary tradition.

Of course, this is not the only way of thinking that a study of clouds has underpinned. How they have been recruited into forms of idealism by philosophers such as Plato provides a helpful contrast to the ways in which clouds are put to work in resistance to this outlook. Looking to one of Hopkins's notes on Plato's theory of art, for example, we see how his own writing on clouds reworks the philosopher's hierarchy that privileges clouds as a metaphor for idealism: 'In the clouds is the Idea, on the earth is its phenomenal copy, thirdly its art-copy, fourthly the dialectical copy, wh. is nearest the Idea.' 'As God is unchangeable He is good and as good unchangeable. Now as matter is concrete it is bad and as bad concrete.'⁵³ Clouds as Hopkins actually witnesses them take him away from such theories of transcendent or unchangeable forms—uni-linear theories which Hopkins seems to find ironically grounding. If Plato's idea of dialectic represents multiplicity in unity, at least until one achieves the supreme form, then Hopkins is more interested in the possibilities of those provisional and wayward stages.

Measured against Plato's framework, Hopkins's process of composition would not fare well, given its efforts to provide anything but an idealized version of its subject. But his engagement with Plato's ideas of change and process proved to be a lasting one in order to calibrate his own responses to these questions to the provisional. Not only is the philosopher's *Timaeus* Hopkins's source for the image of 'Heraclitean Fire', it is also the central preoccupation of 'The earth and heaven, so little known'—one of Hopkins's earlier, incomplete poems from 1866. *Timaeus* describes the divine Form 'consummated from fire (ἐκ πυρός ἀπειργάζετο)' at the centre of the universe, surrounded by a world of 'becoming'. 'For the present, then,' Plato argues, 'we must conceive of three kinds,—the Becoming [τὸ μὲν γιγνόμενον], that "Wherein" it becomes, and the source "Wherefrom" the Becoming is copied and produced'.⁵⁴ Plato's notion of the 'becoming' world is woven into his participial verbs, as we find 'that which we now call "water" becoming (γινώμενον) by condensation, as we believe, stones and earth; and again, this same substance, by dissolving and dilating (τηρόμενον δὲ καὶ διακρινόμενον), becoming breath and air; and air through combustion becoming fire'.⁵⁵ His language comes to stage the unfolding it describes.

'The earth and heaven, so little known' illustrates a recognisable version of this Heraclitean cycle. Whereas Plato's theory of 'becoming' envisages one kind of revisioning whereby an original idea deteriorates through replication and duplication, Hopkins's poem takes the various forms clouds might change into and out of and uses them to imagine a world rejuvenated by our experience of its 'becoming':

The earth and heaven, so little known,
Are measured outwards from my breast.

⁵³ Hopkins, *Oxford Essays and Notes*, 243.

⁵⁴ Plato, *Timaeus*, ed. and trans. Robert G. Bury (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), §50d.

⁵⁵ Plato, *Timaeus*, §49c.

I am the midst of every zone
 And justify the East and West;
 The unchanging register of change
 My all-accepting fixed eye,
 While all things else may stir and range,
 All else may whirl or dive or fly.

There is a vapour stands in the wind;
 It shapes itself in taper skeins;
 You look again and cannot find,
 Save in the body of the rains.
 And these are spent and ended quite;
 The sky is blue, and the winds pull
 Their clouds with breathing edges white
 Beyond the world; the streams are full
 And millbrook-slips with pretty pace
 Gallop along the meadow grass. –
 O lovely ease in change of place!
 I have desired, desired to pass
 [.....](PW, 85-86)

The sequence of verbs that track the movement of ‘vapor’ reflects the different kinds of movement Plato discerns in the ‘becoming’ aspect of experience, but the poet’s ‘all-accepting fixed eye’ revises the permanent substrate in Plato’s universe: ‘if we describe her as a Kind invisible and unshaped, all-receptive, and in some most perplexing and most baffling way partaking of the intelligible, we shall describe her truly.’⁵⁶ ‘Becoming’ is not simply the condition of an imitative and indeterminate world in Hopkins’s poem; it is also the means by which he structures his approach. As the poet says in the first stanza, he *is* the ‘midst of every zone’ and not simply in it. We might also notice that he exchanged ‘Down the world’ to ‘Beyond the world’, implicating the ‘cloud with breathing edges white’ in a pleasure dwelling on what is ‘so little known’. This is an invitation to consider what else is ‘beyond’ us, and in positioning that exploration in the static and simultaneously mobile realm of clouds, Hopkins suggests that such investigations rely on that ‘becoming’ quality of experience where even the most transcendent inquiries begin and end.

That the process of a poem can be used to think through responses to these broader questions of experience and apprehension is a further testament to that idea. ‘It is rhyme we like, not echo, and not unison but harmony’, Hopkins once mused, and the two critical rhymes in this poem are ‘change’ and ‘range’, a pairing Hopkins most likely inherited from Tennyson.⁵⁷ Whereas in *In Memoriam*, we tend to find ‘range’ modulating into ‘change’, as if to test out the limits of something’s ‘range’ before it transforms into something else entirely, the reversed trajectory of these rhymes here suggests a will to retrieve something of ‘change’ in more organized design. Just as the speaker observes of the clouds ‘You look

⁵⁶ Plato, *Timaeus*, §51a-b.

⁵⁷ Hopkins, *Oxford Essays and Notes*, 221.

again and cannot find', he is similarly unable to retrieve his original desire, trailing off, 'I have desired, desired to pass'. That caesura, another of Hopkins's 'intermittent' devices, is used to disrupt the glimmer of a teleological path and the text lapses into incompleteness at the very moment he reaches toward a kind of explanation.

The experience of revision is embedded in Hopkins's models and modeling of clouds. In this essay, I have been arguing that the multi-faceted appearances of these aerial phenomena throughout his writing direct his focus on the wayward nature of experience. But the intellectual problems posed by clouds also provoke a striking collision of teleology with contingency both in Hopkins's compositional experiments with unstable forms and in the imaginative revisioning of forms in his completed poems. From the poet's interest in expansive motions of drift to patterns of disorder, a close relationship between Hopkins's practice of revision and forms of surplus has started to emerge. By refocusing our attention on the nebulous horizons of his verse, I have suggested one way we might enrich our picture of the imaginative life the poet's composition. Like his study of clouds, the poet finds a trajectory of his composition that is beyond him and yet part of this world, ever-changing, and grasped by glimpses.