G. M. Hopkins´ "The Windhover" as an Ambiguous Symbol

Petra Smažilová

Abstract

Gerard Manley Hopkins himself called The Windhover "the best thing he ever wrote" (Peters, 81). This could be the main motive for adding "To Christ our Lord" under the title six years after the sonnet had been written. The implied ambiguities of "The Windhover," evoking different kinds of explanation, constitute one of the reasons why it "is probably the most written about short poem in the English language" (Pick, 1). The phrase "To Christ our Lord" accompanying the title was made central to the discussion, as it was believed to form the key ambiguity that utterly influences the meaning of the whole work. This essay concentrates on the line "To Christ our Lord" and on two different approaches to and interpretations of "The Windhover."

The Windhover:
To Christ Our Lord
I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,
As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding
Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird, -- the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!
Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!
No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plough down sillion
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermillion.
(Hopkins, 1548)

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844 – 1889) himself called "The Windhover," which was written on the 30th of May 1877, "the best thing he ever wrote" (Peters, 81), and this could be the main reason why, six years after composing it, he added "To Christ our Lord" under the title. The complexity of "The Windhover," embracing different interpretations, constitutes the reason why, in the English language, this piece is considered to be a poem with which many critics have been preoccupied and about which much has been written. The technical devices like "AND" in capitals, "O" used instead of "Oh" or Hopkins´ use of English itself are among many elements critics have studied, since Hopkins´ language in "The Windhover" enables the readers to uncover various meanings within the sonnet and to appreciate the careful choice of every word.

Nevertheless, the phrase "To Christ our Lord" immediately following the title was made central to the entire piece of work and was regarded as forming the initial ambiguity, as it utterly influences the meaning of the whole poem. Firstly, "The Windhover" might only be dedicated to Christ, to the creator of the bird that, because of its "brute beauty" and stunning achievements in the multicoloured sky, made Hopkins compose this masterpiece to emphasise the falcon's unique individuality. Secondly, "To Christ our Lord" may serve as a subtitle, making the entire sonnet a Christian one. The purpose of this essay is to focus on the line following the name of the work and on its interpretations. Since "The Windhover" is a poem which has been analysed thoroughly, this paper does not attempt to contribute new perspectives to those already widely discussed. On the contrary, it only tries to outline two different approaches to highlight the significance of the preoccupation with "To Christ our Lord". Moreover, the essay seeks to draw attention to those two approaches without refuting any of the interpretations, so that the reader may make his or her own decision about the role of the above mentioned phrase.

Indeed, many critics argued that the meaning of the sonnet was not dependent on the line "To Christ our Lord" which accompanies the title and which, taken from this point of view, functions as a dedication. One of the many reasons why the work is believed to be dedicated to Christ is, according to Grady, the belief that "[a] poem needed not for Hopkins to be about Christ to be for Christ" (Grady, 25) since it would be more natural to dedicate a sonnet about Christ to somebody else and vice

versa, a sonnet about a magnificent creature to its creator, Christ, to praise His endeavour. In other words, as Lisca believes, "the poem is not explicitly *about* Christ – just as a candle dedicated or offered to the Virgin is not *about* the Virgin" (Lisca, 110). What is more, the fact that "To Christ our Lord" was added to the piece six years after it had been written can be considered to be another reason the phrase is believed to be a dedication – the poem is capable of existing on its own, "independent of its title" (Pick, 4). Thus, "The Windhover" symbolises the "sacramental view of nature" that is to be esteemed, the individual power of each creature and "an innate beauty which was to be realized in some way" (Grady, 25). As Pick states:

> The key to Hopkins lies in the special way he looked at reality. According to Hopkins, each thing in the universe - whether a cloud, a tree, a man or an experience - is uniquely different from every other thing. It is almost as if each were a distinct and separate species. (Pick, 1)

Pick further claims that Hopkins coined the term "inscape" in order to indicate the uniqueness of individuality (Pick 1); hence, the very first lines of the sonnet depict the unique instant when the poet caught the sight of the kestrel, the morning's minion – the morning's favourite and servant, the falcon dappled by the dawn, when hovering high in the air and mastering the wind. It is necessary to state that Hopkins´ poetry is significant for the careful choice of expressions that have multiple meanings and that become tactile when read aloud. The verb "caught" is believed to mean "caught the sight of" and not "caught in one's hands;" thus, this very word delivers the tactility of the inscape moment when the excitement of the pure act of watching the kestrel becomes similar to the act of actual touching it. Pick explains, when analysing the very first phrases, that:

> one comes upon a favourite device of Hopkins, the compression that comes from ellipsis, so that the real meaning is something like "I caught sight of" – and even that won't do because Hopkins´ meaning is closer to the idea that he captured and locked in his mind and

> senses forever the entire experience of the meaning of the windhover. (Pick, 4)

Indeed, the poet is charmed and stirred by the feats that the windhover performs in the morning sky, by the ecstasy with which the kestrel swings, hurls and glides, by the way it rebuffs the strong wind with its wimpling wings, by "the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!" Moreover, the first part of the sestet further celebrates the "brute beauty and valour and act" and also "air, pride, plume" that buckle here and also the fire that breaks from the windhover. Thus, the pronoun "thee" refers to the kestrel as the phrase "O my chevalier!" does. The word "buckle," taken from this view, represents a verb, not a noun, in an indicative, not imperative form, meaning to join. As Harrison claims:

> The marvellous adaptation of wing to wind, the proud activity of the bird seeking food: these are beautiful in a brute unawareness, they all unite, "buckle," into a series of abstract nouns which complete the bird's inscape, a completion accented by the comma after "plume." The indicative force of the word *buckle* is obviously necessary to this explanation, as to take it as an imperative is completely out of keeping. (Harrison, 107)

If "buckle" is understood in this way, then "here" refers to the windhover in which air, pride and plume join to depict the inscape of the kestrel. It is evident that "[i]n the poem everything is motion and life. Each line spills over into the next. The rhythm follows the wings of the bird, ignores the ends of the lines, sweeps and swirls." (Grady, 27) Furthermore, when "The Windhover" is read aloud and concentrated on thoroughly, it may become apparent to the reader that the heroic acts, fighting and chivalry materialize via the falcon that hunts, entertains and functions as an emblem; in this way, the kestrel can represent a knight's servant. Clearly, the bird becomes a symbol to a man's relationship to Christ since via the bird's adroitness the falconer's work is admired and via the man's accomplishments it is Christ who is to be praised and appreciated.

Hence, the sonnet that was dedicated "To Christ our Lord" enables readers to perceive Hopkins as a poet fully preoccupied with

nature, with the mastery and uniqueness of each individual and with a particular instant, as a man who esteems the creator via the recognition of the inscape. According to Grady, Hopkins "believed that every individual thing had an innate beauty which was to be realized in some way. This realization comes about when the individual thing […] is most fully itself. By realizing itself perfectly, each individual […] proclaims the glory and power and majesty of God." (Grady, 25) This might have led Hopkins to dedicate his poem to Him to praise the holy power and to prove that everything marvellous Hopkins ever did belongs to Christ. As Woodring claims: "Hopkins dedicated the sonnet to "Christ Our Lord," […], not because the matter of the sonnet in any way concerns Christ, but simply because Hopkins felt that his best poem should be, or at least could be, dedicated to his Lord." (Woodring, 52) Thus, after six years, realising that it was the most valuable piece of work he had ever written, Hopkins dedicated it to the creator of the bird that, because of its "valour and act" and achievements in the morning sky, made Hopkins compose the poem to indicate the windhover's uniqueness. And for this reason, Hopkins′ masterpiece was given to whom it really belongs, to Christ since: "The only just judge, the only just literary critic is Christ, who prizes, is proud of, and admires, more than any man, more than the receiver himself can, the gifts of His own making." (from Hopkins′ letter to R. W. Dixon, in Grady, 25) Indeed, all the arguments mentioned above help readers to interpret the line immediately following the title as a dedication, since the sonnet is capable of existing on its own, independent of "To Christ our Lord;" and thus, "The Windhover," as Grady states, is a symbol of the "sacramental view of nature" (Grady, 25).

The question arises whether Hopkins added "To Christ our Lord" to "The Windhover" to clarify the meaning of the sonnet in which the bird is the symbol of Christ. The subtitle itself, according to Lees, is explicit enough as "[t]he poem is headed "To Christ our Lord," and I suggest that a comparison with other Hopkins subtitles and dedications will show that he is most precise in his wording of them and that "To Christ …" means "To" and not "For," "In honour of" or the like." (Lees, 79) Hence, via the kestrel, which is construed as the "morning's minion," the very first lines celebrate Christ, God's minion – the servant of God and His favourite – having been encountered one particular morning. What is more, the capitalised Falcon is also believed to be the symbol of

Christ Himself who "is not only *kingdom of daylight's dauphin*, but also dauphin of the *dom*[e] *of daylight* (the sky)" (Lisca, 110). Certainly, the word "our" in the subtitle further substantiates the view that it is a Christian piece of work as the pronoun itself refers to Christian readers. This means to everyone, as Christ is seen as the Lord of every human being whether the readers are aware of it or not. Thus, as Ritz states, "[t]he priest-poet […] meditates upon the beauty and mastery of Christ in his Heaven of Glory, hovering over the world. He then turns to Christ's stupendous coming down upon earth." (Ritz, 83-84) Obviously, the poet is moved by Christ's accomplishments, by "the mastery of the thing!" and, by "Christ's Incarnation, his lowly life in Galilee, [that] are ["a billion/Times told"] "lovelier" and "more dangerous" since they imply the redemption of men and their salvation." (Ritz, 84) Thus, the widely discussed phrases "O my chevalier!" and "the fire that breaks from thee then" and "ah my dear" in the last three lines clearly refer to Him, as Christ is addressed openly via these phrases. Indeed, the belief that "gold-vermilion" represents the blood of Christ (Woodring, 53) as "it is in the simple, wonderless, and dying world that Hopkins finds the wondrous beauty of the sacrificial, bleeding Christ" (Hollis, 4) and that the glory shines through Christ's resurrection further contribute to the idea of a Christian sonnet. Christ's resurrection and the wonder itself are explained, according to some critics, through the embers that break first when in a fire, and only then are capable of spilling the light. As Eleanor Ruggles adds: "The beauty and valor of the winging falcon are Christ's own beauty and valor in an unthinking and finite from. Thus in a sense the windhover is Christ. Christ is the windhover." (Ruggles in Donoghue, 92) In this way, the line "To Christ our Lord" functions as the subtitle, which makes the poem a Christian one.

Therefore, this piece of work in which the falcon symbolizes Christ enables readers to perceive Hopkins as an individual concerned with religion and the celebration of Christ. Many critics who believe that "To Christ our Lord" is the subtitle consider the poet's religious life that, according to many opinions, has to be taken into account, especially when analysing "The Windhover." It is widely acknowledged that Hopkins, at the age of 22, converted to the Roman Catholic Church and eleven years later, in 1877, he was ordained a Jesuit priest. It is believed to be no coincidence that "The Windhover" was written four months

before Hopkins' ordination, when the religion to him was entirely central, not only in this sonnet.

It is apparent that the line immediately following the title of Hopkins´ sonnet became the major preoccupation of many critics, whose dispute centred around the question of whether it serves as a dedication or a subtitle. Thus, this initial ambiguity enables the readers to understand the poem in two ways. "The Windhover" may celebrate individuality, as, according to many critics, Christ is not specifically mentioned. As Grady explains: "The falcon could be Christ on the Cross, fully realizing His redemptive mission. The falcon could be many things. That is why the poem is fruitful. But in the poem itself the falcon, the chevalier, the dear, is only a bird rebuffing a big wind." (Grady, 29) However, for many reasons "The Windhover" can be construed as a symbol of Christ, who is addressed directly. Clearly, "The Windhover," a complex symbol which can embrace both interpretations, supports Pick's claim that: "[f]ew poems in the English language will bear such careful analysis as "The Windhover" - and few will yield such riches. The poem itself might well be called "the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!" One can see why Hopkins could refer to it as "The best thing I ever wrote." " (Pick, 9)

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Petra Smažilová works as an Assistant for British Cultural Studies and Literature in the Department of English and American Studies of the University of Pardubice, Czech Republic. Currently she pursues her Ph.D. at the Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures, Charles University, Prague. She is interested in British drama of the second half of the 20th century and the representation of gender issues. She contributed to the anthology of Anglo-American feminist literary theory *Ženská literární tradice a hledání identit* (Praha, 2007) as a translator, and to *American and British Studies Annual* (Pardubice, 2008) with her essay "Group Dynamics and the Dramatic Surge of British Feminism in *Cloud Nine*."