

Environmental Indifference

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Taking the Ignatian principle of indifference as a point of departure, and engaging recent scholarship that contests any essential basis for a wider concept of “Nature” (e.g., Timothy Morton’s “Ecology without Nature”), this essay will consider Marilynne Robinson’s 1980 novel *Housekeeping* and poems by Gerard Manley Hopkins as texts from which we might derive a response to the notion of a universe devoid of concern for human flourishing. In Robinson’s prose and Hopkins’s poetry, we find literary figurations of an environment that has no inherent, or at least apparent, meaning—yet these texts at the same time represent (and even enact) the generative effects on human consciousness that dwelling in such a place can have. Both Robinson’s and Hopkins’s work anticipate a fundamental if still somewhat overlooked dimension of Pope Francis’s recent encyclical *Laudato Si’*. Far from simply advocating “care for our common home,” Francis develops a notion of the human person that evinces the Ignatian principle of indifference, not as a means to detach the subject from an uncaring natural surround but, on the contrary, as a way to move past the self-involvement that hinders engagement and empathy.

And hardly do we guess aright at things that are upon earth: and with labour do we find the things that are before us. But the things that are in heaven, who shall search out?

(Wis 9:16¹)

In July of 2013, Pope Francis visited with refugees on the Italian island of Lampedusa, and sounded in his homily there what would become one of the primary messages of his

¹ All biblical quotations are from the Douay-Rheims translation. <http://www.drbo.org>.

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papacy: “The culture of comfort,” he remarked, “which makes us think only of ourselves, makes us insensitive to the cries of other people.... In this globalized world, we have fallen into globalized indifference. We have become used to the suffering of others: it doesn’t affect me; it doesn’t concern me; it’s none of my business!”² The homily was no isolated statement: Francis has repeated the phrase “globalization of indifference” on numerous occasions, most notably in his encyclical *Laudato Si’*, published in 2015, which advocates for commonality instead of the unhealthy illusions fostered by isolated living: “We need to strengthen the conviction that we are one single human family. There are no frontiers or barriers, political or social, behind which we can hide, still less is there room for the globalization of indifference” (34).³ Variations of the word “indifference,” all of them indicating a rupture in the human connection to “our common home,” occur nine times in the encyclical, culminating with the *Christian prayer in union with creation* asking God to “Enlighten those who possess power and money that they may avoid the sin of indifference” (142). Against the self-oriented consumerism, environmental degradation, and heightened nationalisms that indifference occasions, Francis throughout his writing echoes but also revises the personalism of his predecessor, John Paul II, to express an ethic of solidarity and accompaniment.

And yet another indifference has long been a fundamental dimension of the Jesuit spirituality that suffuses all of Francis’s thought. In the “First Principle” to the opening week of the *Spiritual Exercises*, St. Ignatius Loyola famously argues that “we must make ourselves indifferent to all created things, as far as we are allowed free choice and are not under any prohibition. Consequently, as far as we are concerned, we should not prefer health to sickness, riches to poverty, honor to dishonor, a long life to a short life.” Long understood by Jesuits as the foundation of decisions made—and a life spent—without regard for self-interest, the Ignatian concept of indifference resonates with a particular force now for the very reasons Francis describes, because it would seem a way to resist selfishness, greed, and the instrumentalization of all that we encounter. But what are we to make of the presence in Ignatius’s vernacular of the same word Francis employs to name separations that countenance, if not cause, so much suffering? If separation in a negative sense is at the heart of Francis’s critique, so too it radically informs Ignatius’s positive notion of “indifference”: a human being must work to be apart from the objects of desire or of use that she encounters if she is to be free in her relationship with God and with others. This is no easy concept, particularly when considered in the context of the call for spiritual engagement that characterizes the *Exercises*, as Ignatius’s English translator Louis Puhl suggests. Puhl comments with some frustration on the original phrase in the text, “hallar me indiferente”: “‘Indifferent.’ I should like to get rid of this word because of the ambiguous meaning in English, but it is too deeply rooted in spiritual

2 Pope Francis, Homily of 8 July 2013, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130708_omelia-lampedusa.html.

3 Pope Francis, encyclical *Laudato Si’*, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

*For Ignatius, a human being must work to be apart
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literature, especially that of the *Exercises*. Further, *detached*, the correct word, presents difficulties in the context.”⁴ “Detachment” in English speaks too readily of withdrawal.

Recognizing that in this brief introduction I am glossing over a complicated philosophical and theological discussion in which Puhl’s comment is only one entry, I would like to seize on the parallel notions of separation that the word “indifference” connotes both in Francis’s repeated *arguing against it* as a contemporary sin and in Ignatius’s *proposing it* as a spiritual practice. Put another way: if Francis castigates us for an unfeeling separation from the world, how might this be reconciled, if at all, with the kind of separation Ignatius’s injunction attempts to set in motion? And how do these differing trajectories shape our understanding of a relation to the wider surround—call it “nature” or the “environment”—that is, at least so far as we can tell, entirely indifferent to human existence? I do not mean in what follows to suggest that Francis and Ignatius are at odds—on the contrary, I seek to open a conversation about the ways in which Francis deploys, against the globalization of indifference, an Ignatian notion of the human person. Further—and more important for my purposes as a scholar and teacher of literature—I wish with a discussion of work by Marilynne Robinson and the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins to illustrate how reading such texts, and how literary study more broadly, can invite our students to cultivate such Ignatian indifferences within themselves, especially in their own experiences of what we have come to call “nature.” These texts present the affective experience of separation, I will argue, as a means to enable the presence and empathy Francis describes.

Romantic indifferences

This question interests me in part because, as a scholar of Romantic literature, encounters with an indifferent natural world inform many of the poems I spend my days reading and teaching. Much of what we call Romanticism was an attempt to figure in poetic language the dissonances—the out of placeness and out of timeness—poets felt in their experiences of a history and a natural world indifferent to them. Among myriad potential choices, William Wordsworth’s brief poem “A slumber did my spirit seal” can serve as an example:

4 Louis J. Puhl, S.J., ed., *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: Based on Studies in the Language of the Autograph* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1968), n. 23.

A slumber did my spirit seal;
 I had no human fears:
 She seemed a thing that could not feel
 The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
 She neither hears nor sees,
 Rolled round in earth's diurnal course
 With rocks and stones and trees.⁵

Consolidating 50 years of intense conversation about the poem, Marjorie Levinson has recently commented that the two stanzas evince the speaker's movement from "a wishful or consecrating belief in immortality" (391) toward a recognition of the impersonality of a Spinozan universe.⁶ Bemoaning his previous blindness, the speaker imagines that his beloved has become part of a material world of "rocks and stones and trees"—a world that returns to him no affect or sign or meaning. That he speaks in the past tense in the first stanza indicates that the beloved has, already before the poem's first utterance, passed beyond his recall. In a now classic essay entitled "The Rhetoric of Temporality," written in 1968, Paul de Man seized on this sense of isolation as the foundation of Romantic poetry, arguing that it is typical for the poet to manifest in language how "Nature can at all times treat him as a thing and remind him of his factitiousness, whereas he is quite powerless to convert even the smallest particle of nature into something human."⁷ For de Man, as for many readers of Romanticism who followed him, poetry's continual figuration—that is, its series of linguistic formulations following one after another—not only displays but is made possible by an ongoing failure to breach the imagined divide between the human and the non-human. The issue is thus not so much that human consciousness is able to recognize a fissure between itself—between the perceiving subject—and the world, but that consciousness is figured in language as itself a product of that imagined fissure.

More recent approaches to Romanticism have taken de Man's linguistic insights in a different direction to argue that the very concept of "nature" is itself a made thing, complete with a history and a politics. To this way of thinking, the sum total of human attempts to relate to the surround—in language, and in action—is what has come conceptually to define "nature" as an entity separate from, and usually subordinate to the human. In his provocative 2007 study *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental*

5 All quotations from Wordsworth's poetry from Stephen Gill, ed., *William Wordsworth: A Critical Edition of the Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

6 Marjorie Levinson, "A Motion and a Spirit: Romancing Spinoza," *Studies in Romanticism* 26.4 (2007), 367-95, at 391.

7 Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), 214.

Aesthetics, Timothy Morton argues, for example, that “the environment was born at exactly the moment when it became a problem.”⁸ If contemporary culture reifies nature in order to either use it (capitalism) or save it (environmental movements), Morton argues that “subverting fixation is the radical goal of the Romantic wish to explore the shadow lands.”⁹ Romantic literature’s attention to the forgotten, the broken, and the difficult refuses the totalized view of “nature” so common to our collective understanding of the life around us. Advocating for what he calls “Eco-critique,” Morton echoes that Romantic wish for fraught understanding, and imagines “collective forms of identity that [include] other species and their worlds.”¹⁰ If for de Man human consciousness is defined by its continual (incomplete) attempt to represent in language the non-human universe of things, for Morton the very premise of separation between human and non-human is itself a false concept that must be discarded if we are to imagine how to inhabit the places and times in which we find ourselves.

I mention these formulations, just two in a vast ongoing scholarly exchange, less to situate my own speculation as part of their conversation than to show how concerns about relationality with the created world—which inform both Ignatius’s and Francis’s notions of human “indifference”—endure in contemporary literary scholarship. As different as their approaches may be, both de Man and Morton represent a prevailing notion of “nature’s” indifference to humans *as* humans. To explore why the endurance of this concern might matter to us and to our students, I wish now to consider the work of two post-Romantic writers. In Marilynne Robinson’s prose and Gerard Manley Hopkins’s poetry, we find literary figurations of an environment that has no inherent, or at least apparent, meaning—yet these texts at the same time represent (and enact even) the generative effects on human consciousness that dwelling in such a place can have. Most notably, each of these writers imagines separation from the natural surround as loss rather than absence, to employ Dominick LaCapra’s distinction, positing a relation that ultimately embraces longing as a condition rather than as a problem to be overcome.¹¹ Robinson’s 1980 novel *Housekeeping* presents the reader with a narrative that is biblical in tenor and intimate in scope, imagining a narrator whose consciousness is born of her continual attempts to make sense of an ever present but ever changing natural surround. Hopkins’s poems, similarly, present a speaker brought to crisis by his inability to control the environment in which he finds himself. In each case, the sheer vastness and variety of the natural sensorium elicits a response of the kind Wordsworth’s poem exemplifies: fraught, unknowing, contingent. But what might first appear as a failure of self-definition opens for both Robinson and Hopkins a new way of being in

8 Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 141.

9 Morton, 141.

10 Morton, 141.

11 Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 44-51.

*How ought we to live in a world of shifting elements
and forces that take no heed of human presence?*

the world. Because the surround refuses to become a readable system of signification, Robinson's central characters and Hopkins's speakers must—can—imagine a previously unforeseen relationality born of that indifference.

***Housekeeping*¹² and the indifferent surround**

Robinson's novel is narrated by Ruth, a young girl who along with her sister Lucille is abandoned by their mother in her family home, first to the care of their grandmother, and upon their grandmother's death to a pair of great aunts, and finally to their mother's prodigal sister Sylvie, who returns to the house to care for them after a long absence. Set in the mythical western town of Fingerbone, perched on the edge of a glacial lake, the novel recounts Ruth's coming of age amidst the sorrows of parental loss and the physical setting of the lake's floods and seasons. The drama of consciousness the novel presents might be taken as a response to the crisis Wordsworth's foundational poem expresses: how to live in a world of shifting elements and forces that take no heed of human presence. From the book's opening, the impermanence of landscape itself is at issue:

The terrain on which the town itself is built is relatively level, having once belonged to the lake. It seems there was a time when the dimensions of things modified themselves, leaving a number of puzzling margins, as between the mountains as they must have been and the mountains as they are now, or between the lake as it once was and the lake as it is now (4-5).

The vast but inexorable geological mobility of the lake and its town provides a betweenness, a world of "puzzling margins" where human existence, ever so contingently, can occur. It is the "puzzling," in fact, that makes Ruth's way of imagining herself possible. As seasons come and go, those margins shift fluidly and rapidly with them, so that

Sometimes in the spring the old lake will return. One will open a cellar door to wading boots floating tallow soles up and planks and buckets bumping at the threshold....A narrow pond would form in the orchard, water clear as air covering grass and black leaves and fallen branches, all around it black leaves and drenched grass and fallen branches, and on it, slight as an image in an eye, sky, clouds, trees, our hovering faces and our cold hands (5).

The undulating cadences of Ruth's description here, her slippery tense shift from "will" to "would," and her repetitions of "grass and black leaves and fallen branches" as "black leaves and drenched grass and fallen branches" all mirror the movement of the waters,

12 Marilynn Robinson, *Housekeeping* (New York, Picador, 1980).

even as the conclusion of the sentence with its ambiguous syntax conflates surround and self. For the “in” of “slight as an image in” could be read to take as the conclusion of its simile only “an eye” (thus “in an eye, [with] sky, clouds...,” etc.) or the entire list that follows: “in an eye, sky, clouds, trees, our hovering faces and our cold hands.” Here “eye” [I?] abides contingently amidst and within a coalescence of unrelenting forces, and it is not entirely clear how much, or what, the image is actually “in.” The bodies of the girls—their faces and hands—become equally a part of, and apart from, the non-human spaces and elements around and through which they move.

Robinson repeatedly has Ruth employ such ambiguous figurations, particularly when she is describing her experiences of water and darkness, which occur everywhere in and around Fingerbone and its lake. I offer three examples below which, though lengthy, bear considering alongside each other as a way to measure the deepening relation Ruth imagines with the natural surround. It is a relation, I would argue, that resists both the objectifying third-person safety of Wordsworth’s poem (he is, after all, meditating on the loss of another) and the refusal of distinction that Morton’s human-being-as-part-of-the-surround requires. What results is a consciousness whose separation from the elements is conceptually overcome but never materially erased—a consciousness that comes to experience itself *as that which is overcome*, and whose primary mode of affect is longing. First, Ruth’s description of skating on the lake in winter:

Lucille and I worked that winter on skating backward, and pivoting on one foot. We were often the last to leave, so absorbed we were in our skating and in the silence and numbing sweetness of the air....And as we glided across the ice toward Fingerbone, we would become aware of the darkness, too close to us, like a presence in a dream (34-5).¹³

Next, Ruth’s account of the lake’s epic groans as it melts in spring and floods the house:

But Sylvie had fallen silent again. Guessing that she must be listening to something, we were silent too. The lake still thundered and groaned, the flood waters still brimmed and simmered. When we did not move or speak, there was no proof we were there at all. The water and wind brought sounds intact from any imaginative distance. Deprived of all perspective and horizon, I found

13 The echo of a famous skating scene in Wordsworth’s autobiographical poem *The Prelude* resounds here:

And in the frosty season, when the sun
Was set, and visible for many a mile
The cottage windows blazed through twilight gloom,
I heeded not their summons...
 ...All shod with steel,
We hissed along the polished ice in games
Confederate, imitative of the chase
And woodland pleasures,—the resounding horn,
The pack loud chiming, and the hunted hare.
So through the darkness and the cold we flew,
And not a voice was idle.... (*Prelude* 1.424-7, 33-9)

myself reduced to an intuition, and my sister and my aunt to something less than that. I was afraid to put out my hand, for fear it would touch nothing, or to speak, for fear no one would answer (70).

Finally, Ruth's narrative of the night she and Lucille slept in the woods on the edge of the lake in a makeshift hut, after a long day of fishing:

For a while she sang "Mockingbird Hill," and then she sat down beside me in our ruined stronghold, never still, never accepting that our human boundaries were overrun....Lucille would tell this story differently. She would say I fell asleep, but I did not. I simply let the darkness in the sky become coextensive with the darkness in my skull and bowels and bones. Everything that falls upon the eye is apparition, a sheet dropped over the world's true workings. The nerves and brain are tricked, and one is left with dreams that these specters loose their hands from ours and walk way, the curve of the back and the swing of the coat so familiar as to imply they should be permanent fixtures of the world, when in fact nothing is more perishable (116)

In these passages, Ruth's perception of the dark natural surround progresses from frightening proximity ("too close" and "like a dream") to annihilating force ("reduced to an intuition....I was afraid to put out my hand") to a coextensive condition whose deprivations provide new insight into the "perishable" nature of all things. Preventing the illusion of self-definition—bodily or otherwise—darkness fosters in Ruth a longing for a world without "relic, remnant, margin, residue, memento, bequest, memory, thought, track, or trace" (116). The existence of the perceiving subject in an atemporal, if not eternal, state occurs not through strict identification with the natural surround but by an indifference to one's own self as it is overcome with and suffused by the elements.¹⁴

"Housekeeping," throughout the book, describes Sylvie's always temporary attempts to make a home for the girls amidst these threatening natural elements as well as in the face of growing social pressure to raise the girls in conventional ways. Ruth's gradual embrace of the precarity of her own bodiliness—and the accompanying contingency of her own consciousness—emerges from and hearkens to her aunt's irredeemable commitment to physical itinerancy. Sylvie simply refuses to provide, or is incapable of providing, the girls with a "normal" life; she is as shifting as the landscape from which she had emerged and toward which she is always bound. As the novel moves toward its conclusion, Lucille goes to live with another family in town, leaving Ruth and Sylvie to fend for themselves. Faced with the possibility that authorities will take Ruth from Sylvie, the two walk in darkness across the train bridge that spans the lake—from which Ruth's grandfather's train had fallen long ago—into the darkness and a life of continuing

14 That the final passage above gives way to an extended counterfactual narration which enlists the reader directly calls into question Ruth's own authority as a teller of her tale and blurs the line between recorded observation and imagined experience ("Say that my mother was as tall as a man....Say that my grandmother sang in her throat....Such details are merely accidental.").

movement. The two thus become living emblems of the figural mobility Ruth's narrative displays even to the level of its syntax.

Again and again Ruth's linguistic figurations of "nature" point to this outcome, situating her as both perceiver and product of water and darkness, even as water and darkness in turn become assignments of the absences that haunt her consciousness. "When did I become so unlike other people?" she wonders:

Either it was when I followed Sylvie across the bridge, and the lake claimed us, or it was when my mother left me waiting for her, and established in me the habit of waiting and expectation that makes any present moment most significant for what it does not contain. Or it was at my conception. Of my conception I know only what you know of yours. It occurred in darkness and I was unconsenting (214).

Like Wordsworth's speaker in "A slumber did my spirit seal," who from the poem's outset already knows his beloved is gone, Ruth narrates the novel from the state of having already become a ghostly drifter, and her meditations are always conditioned by that conclusion. Indeed she reads darkness backwards into her identity from its very beginning. Ruth's narrative of her encounter with the impermanent and indifferent surround always displays her awareness of the dissolution to which she is bound: she becomes a creature who knows and feels her unknowing. And the value for us in Robinson's novel lies not only in our experience of Ruth's movement into that state but also, in a perhaps more fundamental way, in the way the novel repeatedly urges the reader toward a similar way of being. I will offer one final passage to illustrate this point: in the following excerpt, Ruth reflects on a time when the girls and Sylvie are forced to live in the house amidst the flood waters and the darkneses they bring. Ordinary things in such a world, Ruth muses, become remarkable as objects of our necessarily impermanent attentions:

Every spirit passing through the world fingers the tangible and mars the mutable, and finally has come to look and not to buy. So shoes are worn and hassocks are sat upon and finally everything is left where it was and the spirit passes on, just as the wind in the orchard picks up the leaves from the ground as if there were no other pleasure in the world but brown leaves, as if it would deck, clothe, flesh itself in flourishes of dusty brown apple leaves, and then drops them all in a heap at the side of the house and goes on (73).

Here, as throughout Ruth's meditations, Robinson's first person account has a lyric dimension in its dual sense of representing experience while marking its own narrative limitations. Even as the passage naturalizes itself in such a way that the reader is asked to forget its presence as an act of mediation—to enter purely into Ruth's consciousness—there is an inescapable literariness at work that evinces the authorial (and reading) mind at work. "Drops" is the nodal point around which this operation turns because its unexpected agreement with "just as" after two conditional "as if" clauses disrupts the lengthening simile: "*just as* the wind in the orchard picks up...and then *drops*" rather

than “as *if it would* deck, clothe, flesh itself..and then *drop*.” Brought up short by the (afterwards recognized as necessary) rhetorical closure of “and then *drops*,” the “just as” that likens spirit to wind can be read both as a simile and as a signal of contemporaneity, indicating temporal sequence as well as analogy; the passage thus occasions its meaning both on the level of the actual-historical (something that happens) and the conditional-rhetorical (something that is framed and told by a thinking subject). More than this, the passage insists on the mutual constitution of both interpretations—negatively—through the impossibility of their conceptual conflation. The reader thus recalls, is recalled to, the *act of* naturalizing the spirit—that is, the act of rendering the spirit as *other than natural because imagined*.

*The indispensable condition of belief is to be found in
the passing nature of the human encounter with things.*

What I am getting at is that this passage not only offers an allegorical representation of the spirit it regards but occasions—through the interruptive effect of its own rhetoric—the reader’s meditation upon the figurative act of imagining that spirit. The passage asks the reader to pick up, and then drop, the book’s own naturalizing effects, even as Ruth imagines the wind to pick up and drop the leaves. Robinson’s narration eschews easy transcendence but refuses, by virtue of the quotidian “every” and “so” and “finally,” to do without the notion of an absolute that by virtue of contrast inheres in, and produces, a human sense of ephemerality. In fact the passage insists that the indispensable condition of belief—for Ruth as narrator but even more palpably for the reader—is to be found in the *passing* nature of the human encounter with things. Thus spirit is not natural, but it is real. Calling the reader to acknowledge this distinction, *Housekeeping* sets in motion a substantially Romantic figuration of the relation between the human and the non-human world: the vast natural surround shapes Ruth into a subject that is indifferent to herself, and in so being can grasp at, if not comprehend, experiences beyond her own cognitive capacities. Human identity—what both Wordsworth and Robinson name “spirit”—must be found via indifference, and must dwell in unknowing.

Gerard Manley Hopkins and the poetics of loss

The darkness in which Ruth finds herself in Robinson’s novel also appears in the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins. I wish now to turn briefly to two poems by Hopkins to illustrate how the lyric sensibility at work in Ruth’s narrative manifests itself in the Catholic writer’s work—for even as Hopkins evinces a vibrant Ignatian attention to “finding God in all things,” I would argue that the finding has less to do with the material content of the world Hopkins observes than in the affective state such observation adduces. That is, the measure of God’s presence is less, in these poems, about perceiving *the natural*

surround as it is about *perceiving* the natural surround, even though (or, more accurately, because) the act of perception is constituted principally as loss. Again, spirit emerges from separation. In “Binsey Poplars,” the chopping of some trees Hopkins has long admired occasions a conflict in the speaker’s mode of address, for as he attempts to narrate what has happened, his language registers, even breaks under the weight, the emotion the destruction elicits:

My aspens dear, whose airy cages quelled,
 Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun,
 All felled, felled, are all felled;
 Of a fresh and following folded rank
 Not spared, not one
 That dandled a sandalled
 Shadow that swam or sank
 On meadow & river & wind-wandering weed-winding bank.¹⁵

Self-correction and syntactically needless repetition preside here, so that line one’s “quelled” gives way to “quelled or quenched” in the following line, and line three finds the speaker in traumatic disbelief “All felled, felled, all are felled.” This shaken state, punctuated by the driving stresses, alliteration, and enjambments that characterize Hopkins’s sprung rhythm, become in the poem’s second and concluding stanza a litany of exasperation:

O if we but knew what we do
 When we delve or hew —
 Hack and rack the growing green!
 Since country is so tender
 To touch, her being só slender,
 That, like this sleek and seeing ball
 But a prick will make no eye at all,
 Where we, even where we mean
 To mend her we end her,
 When we hew or delve:
 After-comers cannot guess the beauty been.
 Ten or twelve, only ten or twelve
 Strokes of havoc unselve
 The sweet especial scene,
 Rural scene, a rural scene,
 Sweet especial rural scene.

15 All quotations from Hopkins’s poetry are from *The Major Works*, ed. Catherine Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

There is much to say about these lines, most of it outside the scope of this essay, but I will point out that amidst the rushing sequence of rhetorical ghosts and disappearing figures Hopkins presents an analogy that blurs the lines between perceived scene and perceiving agent: the human eye as a “slick and seeing ball” whose fragility is such that “just a prick will make no eye at all.” Like Ruth’s injunction that “Everything that falls upon the eye is apparition, a sheet dropped over the world’s true workings,” Hopkins’s speaker attends to the contingency of his perception. Physically as well as conceptually, he cannot determine a true relation to the natural surround. In the poem’s final three lines, the speaker’s affective state remains unresolved. Whether he is anxious, or resigned, or both, his attempts to name the “scene” offer yet another moment of tautological self-correction. Thus though there is nothing new named in each instantiation of “The sweet especial scene,/ Rural scene, a rural scene,/ Sweet especial rural scene,” these sad repetitions point to the fact that the scene is gone, incapable of being preserved by the fragile eye, and replaced only by the poet’s imaginative act of recall, incomplete as it is, incomplete as it must ever be.

The imagined self of “Binsey Poplars”—separate, alone, yet indifferent to itself because overwhelmed—finds a deeper corollary in the late poems known as Hopkins’s “dark sonnets,” and in particular his poem “Carrion Comfort.” Though not a poem about the “environment” or “nature” per se, I wish to conclude with a brief discussion of this sonnet because it manifests in clear terms the notion of indifference to self I have been developing in my analysis of Robinson’s lyric narration and the figurations of “Binsey Poplars.” I provide the poem in its entirety:

NOT, I’ll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee;
 Not untwist—slack they may be—these last strands of man
 In me ór, 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, foot trod
 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.

The speaker’s self-doubt, self-dissolution even—which is akin to the indifference we see Ruth evincing in her later meditations on darkness in *Housekeeping* and in the exasperated utterances of the speaker in “Binsey Poplars”—paradoxically becomes the

poem's object of praise. Natural metaphors abound throughout the sonnet, as everywhere in Hopkins, but what I am most interested in is the way in which the poem posits a subject-speaker for whom uncertainty and longing is *modus existantiae* rather than an obstacle to be overcome. Here the sorrow that attends the destruction of the Binsey poplars is trained upon the poet's own way of being. The first line unfolds with inverted syntax and rhetorical self-correction—thus even on the level of grammar the notion of a stable identity is rendered impossible. “not, I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee.” Beginning with negation, and offering an “I” surrounded by the threat of non-existence, the line invites the reader to read “Despair” as a verb (i.e., “I'll not Despair...”)—an impression quickly corrected by the verb “feast,” which enters belatedly as the injunction's true action. “Despair,” then, becomes (is found to be) an appositive, a renaming and further personification of “carrion comfort,” and the entire poem must be taken as an apostrophe to it.

*Carrion Comfort” presents a drama of selfhood in
which Hopkins finds God via despair itself.*

Self-interruption characterizes the speaker's utterance throughout the poem, and again Hopkins's sprung rhythm instantiates on the verse's formal level the same kind of brokenness the speaker expresses characterizing his state of being. What makes the poem among Hopkins's most radical is that—in distinction to more straightforward praise poems such as “God's Grandeur” or “As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame”—it presents a drama of selfhood in which Hopkins finds God via despair itself. If the first eight lines of the poem (i.e., the octave) express the speaker's resolution that he will not give in to despair, the poem turns at line nine toward a realization that despair actually makes his relation to God possible. Again, self-correction reveals a speaker whose identity never gains the status of a thing achieved or possessed; the questions of lines five through eight offer themselves as exclamations rather than interlocutions. Still, the poem's final six lines (its sestet) begin with a strong response to the consolidating question of Hopkins's “Why?” at line nine: “That my chaff might fly...” But that response is quickly undercut by retort, and the questions of lines 12-13 (Cheer whom though? the hero whose heaven-handling flung me, foot trod/Me? or me that fought him? O which one? is it each one?) are never answered. The poem concludes instead with a description of the act of simultaneously feeling both despair and the resistance that despair enables. The most dramatic instance of self-interruption—and in my reading therefore the truest figure of Hopkins's self-expression—occurs in the poem's final lines: “That night, that year/ Of now done darkness I wretch lay wrestling with (my God!) my God.” Like Robinson's Ruth, Hopkins's lostness in the darkness becomes itself the measure of a new kind of relational identity. The parenthetical “(my God!)”

rings truer even than the clause that encloses it as an exclamatory aside in which the poet realizes that his adversary is in fact his God—and that wrestling with God is his definitive means of relation.

At once an utterance of both affective and poetic exasperation—Hopkins is overcome by his shock and cannot without deferral finish his poetic expression—this conclusion is nevertheless *not* an expression of giving up. The exclamation “(my God!)” both enacts an intimacy with the God to whom it is indirectly addressed and anticipates the predicate—and presence—of the sentence’s concluding reference to “my God.” And the repetitive “(my God!) my God” recalls Jesus’ cry in Matthew 27:46. “And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying: *Eli, Eli, lamma sabacthani?* That is, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” If Jesus’s cry of abandonment can be read as a moment that exemplifies most clearly the nature of a God from whom brokenness—separation, even—is a constitutive condition, Hopkins’s echo of that cry takes the poet’s moment of most profoundly felt separation from God as the moment when he is in truth most deeply in relation to God.

Self-limitation is characteristic of God’s way of relating to creation, and human beings are called to the task of overcoming the perceived distance such limitation occasions.

A call to conversion

Hopkins’s cry aligns itself with Christ’s—in a way Ruth’s narration in *Housekeeping* never does, at least explicitly—and so opens for us a way back into a fundamental dimension of Pope Francis’s *Laudato Si’*. For if much of the encyclical is focused on questions of policy and institutional practice, there is in Francis’s own invocation of Jesus an assertion of the exemplary human subject as defined by both connection and separation from the world. Distinguishing between “Nature” and “Creation,” Francis emphasizes that the material surround does not exist merely for human use; indeed he recognizes that much of it stands beyond human understanding and control. This, for Francis, is to God’s purpose: “Creating a world in need of development, God in some way sought to limit himself in such a way that many of the things we think of as evils, dangers, and sources of suffering, are in reality the pains of childbirth which he uses to draw us into an act of cooperation with the Creator” (50). Self-limitation is characteristic of God’s way of relating to creation, and human beings are called to the task of overcoming the perceived distance such limitation occasions. At the same time, “Jesus lived in full harmony with creation, and others were amazed....He was far removed from philosophies which despised the body, matter, and the things of the world” (59). Francis’s imperative is that in order to change how we “care for our common home” we

must change in fundamental ways how we think about ourselves in relation to it. We must, in other words, learn to mirror both those dimensions of the image in which we were created: separation, limitation, longing, but also presence, embrace, immersion. This is an ontological conversion as much as a change in practice.

And this is the work that Catholic higher education can, and must, carry on. If one of the questions facing this Roundtable is how we might derive a response to the notion of a universe seemingly devoid of concern for human flourishing, then the Christian, Pope Francis reminds us, answers with the paradox of Jesus' being. He is at once creator and creature, at once separate from and entirely within the natural surround: a being—if we take his own words—eternally present to and yet eternally forsaken of himself. Thus a sensed, affective experience of separation becomes not merely a fracture in Jesus', and our, human condition, but constitutive of that condition itself—which is to say that our brokenness is an indispensable element of our being made in God's image. In Marilynne Robinson and Gerard Manley Hopkins we have literary works that ask their readers not only to recognize but also to inhabit that condition. This is not to say that the literature we teach has some doctrinal or conversional value in the strictest sense, but rather that the act of reading can enable all of our students to experience for themselves a more complex and vital notion of human relationality than those that our late capitalist moment offers. "Care for our common home" begins with the imagining of human persons for whom identity is a way of proceeding rather than a thing achieved, for whom the lessons of self-dissolution that Ignatius calls "indifference" become a paradoxical means of engagement, both with the natural surround and with the beings that dwell in it. Like Robinson's Ruth and Hopkins's despairing poet, we sojourn in this world contingently, temporarily, fragily, and always in the shadow of the flood to come. Only in awakening to that truth—an awakening literature can help us realize—can we attend to the world and to each other as we should, with care rather than self-interest, with freedom rather than constraint, with love rather than greed.

