

Plant culture: thirteen seasonal pieces

March – say it is ashboughs

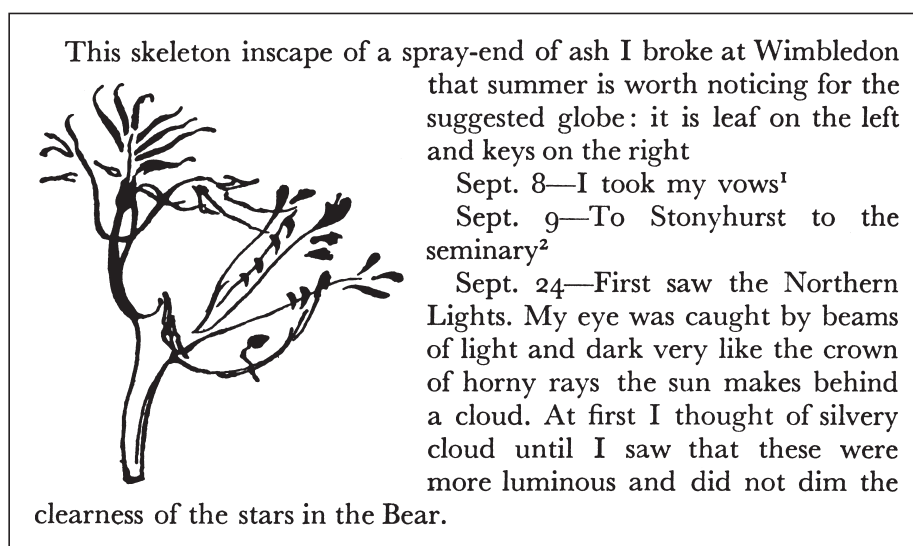
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The Jesuit priest and poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, was moved by the natural world. Through its dynamics and lineaments he experienced the majesty of God. He used the word ‘inscape’ to describe nature as he felt it, and his poems tried to convey the depth and intensity of his response. Here one example is given, as a contrast to our scientific analysis.

In his journal entry for 25 August 1870, Gerard Manley Hopkins makes a sketch (Fig. 1), and alongside it he says, ‘This skeleton inscape of a spray-end of ash I broke at Wimbledon that summer is worth noticing for the suggested globe: it is leaf on the left and keys on the right’. Then, under ‘End of March and beginning of April, 1871’, he records, ‘This is the time to study inscape in the spraying of trees, for the swelling buds carry them to a pitch which the eye could not else gather—for out of much much more, out of little not much, out of nothing nothing: in these sprays at all events there is a new world of inscape’. Then he proceeds to a detailed description of the buds and branches of ash and the changes at bud break as the flowers appear. He is absorbed by nature, by the lines of the tree and by the process of change as its buds unfold in the spring. By inscape he means the pattern of these things and their interrelation over time; his artistic purpose is to recreate this unity.

Hopkins was an original, in poetic style and in his preoccupation with the grandeur of God and its expression through the natural world. His poetry aims to reflect this world, both by sounding like speech, and in its actual physical form. For instance, ‘hangers’ (extra syllables not counted in the rhythm) are often found and seem like the loose inner branches of a tree. The language he uses is similar in its economy and intensity to science writing: reading ‘Ashboughs’

Fig. 1. Skeleton inscape of a spray-end of ash. Entry for 25 August 1870 in the journal of Gerard Manley Hopkins. From *The Notebooks and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, Humphrey House (ed.), 1959. Reproduced by permission of Oxford University Press.



(below) is a bit like reading a ‘Methods’ section of a molecular biology paper—you need patience and some degree of extra knowledge to penetrate it fully. But, unlike science papers, the poem can be appreciated simply by its sound and shape:

Not of all my eyes see, wandering on the world,
 Is anything a milk to the mind so, so sighs deep
 Poetry to it, as a tree whose boughs break in the sky.
 Say it is ashboughs: whether on a December day and furled
 Fast or they in clammyish lashtender combs creep
 Apart wide and new-nestle at heaven most high.
 They touch heaven, tabour on it; how their talons sweep
 The smouldering enormous winter welkin! May
 Mells blue and snowwhite through them, a fringe and fray
 Of greenery: it is old earth’s groping towards the steep
 Heaven whom she child us by.

But the special relevance of Hopkins for plant scientists is that his overall achievement challenges us. As a response to the natural world, is his reverence, manifest as poetic expression, or our analytical reduction, more insightful, more lasting?

Bibliography

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