

First published in *English* in 1974

The Windhover and Richard Jefferies

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IN 'The Downs', the opening chapter of Richard Jefferies' *Wild Life in a Southern County*, there is this description of a hawk in flight:

As the breeze strikes him aslant his course he seems to fly for a short time partly on one side, like a skater sliding on the outer edge.

A couple of pages later we find this:

. . . The furrows look as if traced with a ruler, and exhibit curious effects of vanishing perspective. Along the furrow, just as it is turned, there runs a shimmering light as the eye traces it up. The ploughshare, heavy and drawn with great force, smooths the earth as it cleaves it, giving it for a time a 'face' as it were, the moisture on which reflects the light. If you watch the farmers driving to market, you will see that they glance up the furrows to note the workmanship and look for game; you may tell from a distance if they espy a hare by the check of the rein and the extended hand pointing.

This concatenation of images is remarkably similar, notwithstanding the more prosaic context, to that presented in Hopkins's great sonnet. Yet no direct connection may be postulated: Jefferies' essay appeared in the *Pall Mall Gazette* for May 1878, and Hopkins assigns *The Windhover* to 30 May 1877.¹ This unusual image-pattern evidently remained with Jefferies, since it recurs in his essay on 'Birds climbing the air', which appeared in the *St. James's Gazette* for 28 July 1883:

. . . one ceases to beat the air with his wings, stretches them to their full length, and seems to lean aside. His impetus carries him forward and upward, at the same time in a circle, something like a skater on one foot. (*Life of the Fields*, 1884.)

Jefferies also remarks here:

The hawk does not always ascend in a spiral, but every now and then revolves in a circle—a flat circle—and suddenly shoots up with renewed activity.

Jefferies devoted many pages to the mechanics of bird flight, in *Bevis* (1882), in his notebooks, and especially in *The Old House at Coate* (1885; publ. 1948). In the latter he again relates flight to skating:

A swift skater conceives the will to turn, and immediately, without special effort, he turns: there is a connexion between the will and the steel bound to the foot. The bird desires to fly, to rise or turn, and the willpower, in some subtle manner, adjusts its mere mechanical means to the air. (*Old House*, ch. 9.)

The skater's curve 'on a bow bend' delighted Jefferies, who was remembered as an expert skater on Coate Water. His early essay on skating communicates this delight:

Here you may turn and revolve and twist and go through those endless evolutions and endless repetitions of curves which exercise so singular a fascination. ('Skating', *The Hills and the Vale*, 1909.)

Later in the same piece he launches into a panegyric whose animal energy echoes, in a crudely pagan mode, the feeling of Hopkins's opening lines:

¹ This invalidates the suggestion of W. C. Mercer that Hopkins might have read Jefferies before composing *The Windhover* (W. C. Mercer. *Notes and Queries*, vol. 197, 10 May 1952, p. 217).

the wind . . . strikes the chest like the blow of a strong man as you rush against it. The chest responds with a long-drawn heave, the pliable ribs bend outwards, and the cavity within enlarges, filled with the elastic air. The stride grows longer and longer—the momentum increases—the shadow slips over the surface; the fierce joy of reckless speed seizes on the mind. In the glow, and the speed, and the savage north wind, the old Norse spirit rises, and one feels a giant. Oh that such a sense of vigour— of the fulness of life could but last!

A poignant late essay, 'Hours of Spring' (1886), recreates this pleasure:

I joyed in his swift, careless flight, in the throw of his pinions, in his rush over the elms and miles of woodland; it was happiness to see his unchecked life. What more beautiful than the sweep and curve of his going through the azure sky? (*Field and Hedgerow*, 1889.)

That strange Hopkins image of the ploughed land transformed into shining furrows is also to be found elsewhere in Jefferies. The play of light, he observed, could effect a 'marvellous transformation of clods and cold matter into living things' ('The Pageant of Summer', *Life of the Fields*). Thus he once described a pond near Ewell:

Pond surface like glowing light some inches thick. Superincumbent—sparkling— sunshine. This from distance reflected low angle, near only a few ripples and no glow. By moonlight the furrows just turned by the plough glisten.² (Note for June 1880; *Notebooks*, 1948, p. 91.)

This patina recurs in a note about 'Polished furrows' (June 1883, *Notebooks*, p. 140), and in a description of the ploughshare and its 'gleam like silver as the plough turns at the end of the furrow' (May 1881, *ibid.*, p. 110). The *Windhover* image, incidentally, is prefigured in Hopkins' own journals, in a note of 3 May 1866:

On left, brow of the near hill glistening with very bright newly turned sods.' (*Journals and Papers of G. M. Hopkins*, 1959, p. 133.)

Hopkins the Jesuit might have concurred with Jefferies the agnostic in his essay 'On the Downs' (1883):

Nor does it depend on the brilliant sun— this mere clod of earth will cause it, even a little crumble of mould. The commonest form of matter thus regarded excites the highest form of spirit. The feelings may be received from the least morsel of brown earth adhering to the surface of the skin on the hand that has touched the ground. Inhaling this deep feeling, the soul, perforce, must pray. (*The Hills and the Vale*.)

In 'An English Deer-Park', which appeared posthumously in 1888, Jefferies celebrated:

the distant plough, the share of which, polished like a silver mirror by friction with the clods, reflects the sunshine, flashing a heliograph message of plenty from the earth. (*Field and Hedgerow*.)

At other times also Jefferies has shared Hopkins's vision. 'Yesterday', he wrote in 'Hours of Spring', 'I saw the ploughman and his team, and the earth gleam smoothed behind the share.' Six years earlier he had reported:

The day declined and from the clear, cold sky of March the moon looked down, gleaming on the smooth planed furrow where the plough had passed.³ ('Wheatfields', 1880; *Nature Near London*, 1883.)

Amid a host of general parallels which might be predicated of two passionate observers of nature, one further specific instance is worthy of note: at several points in Jefferies there are close affinities with the theme and substance of *Pied Beauty*?⁴

How fond -Natures is of spot-markings!— the wings of butterflies, the feathers of birds, the surface of eggs, the leaves and petals of plants are constantly spotted; so, too, fish—as trout. From the wing of the butterfly I looke'd involuntarily at the foxglove I had just gathered; inside, the bells were thickly spotted—dots and dustings that might have been transferred to a butterfly's wing. The spotted meadow-orchis; the brown dots on the cowslips; brown, black, greenish, reddish dots and spots and dustings on the eggs of the finches, the whitethroats, and so many others—so many of the spots seem as if they had been splashed on and had run into short streaks, some mottled, some gathered together at the end; all spots, dots, dustings of minute

² An image which recurs in 'The Crows', *Nature near London*.

³ Hopkins's word 'sillion', referring to a strip of land, is not found in Jefferies; but in *Red Deer* (1884) Jefferies describes an implement drawn by the plough, called a 'sull' or 'zull'.

⁴ Cf. the whole tenor of 'Nature and Books'.

specks, mottlings, and irregular markings. The histories, the stories, the library of knowledge contained in those signs! ('The Pine Wood,' *The Open Air*, 1885.)

Jefferies was a Lamarckian, or optimistic evolutionist, and his refutation of the survival of the fittest, in *The Story of My Heart* (1883); gained him a measure of notoriety. Nonetheless, his interpretation of spot-marking would have satisfied the most orthodox Darwinian:

Nature protects them in this way to some extent from the many dangers which lie in wait for them, and enables them to survive in an otherwise difficult and hostile world.' ('Protection of Nature', late MS.; *Field and Farm*, 1957.)

In one of the last notes before his early death Jefferies reverted to this phenomenon, here emphasising the imperfections of the natural world:

Nature a careless printer, dabs the design butterfly's wing on to the margin and half off at the edges, and does not ink regularly, the colours of some species fainter. (May 1887; *Notebooks*, p. 283.)

This in no way diminished his sense of wonder; for him also nature was a Heraclitean bonfire:

There is scarcely a colour that cannot be matched in the gay world of wings. Red, blue, and yellow, and brown and purple-shaded and toned, relieved with dots arid curious markings; in the butterflies, night tints in the pattern of the under wings, as if these were shaded with the dusk of evening, being in shadow under the vane. Gold and orange, red, bright scarlet, and ruby and bronze in the flies. Dark velvet, brown velvet, greys, amber, and gold edgings like military coats in the wild bees. ('The Makers of Summer', 1887; *Field and Hedgerow*.)

There are also more metaphysical resemblances. A passage in *The Story of my Heart* may remind us of Hopkins's comment in *Hurrahing in Harvest* that 'these things were here and but the beholder Wanting':

Except when I walk by the sea, and my Soul is by it, the sea is dead. Those seas by Which no man has stood—by which no soul has been . . . are dead. No matter how majestic the planet rolls in space, unless a soul be there it is dead. As I move about in the sunshine I feel in the midst of the supernatural: in the midst of immortal things.

And there is an adumbration of inscape in Jefferies's passionate cry, 'I want the soul of the flowers' ('Nature and Books', *Field and Hedgerow*).

There can be no spurious tracing of influences and cross-fertilizations here. Jefferies could not have read Hopkins's poems, composed as they were, more or less *sub rosa*; and there is no evidence of Hopkins having read Jefferies. The comparative chronology in any case makes borrowing an impossibility. Rather, analogous temperaments, utterly different by education and career, have attained a similar vision of the natural world. Indeed, Jefferies occasionally discloses a sacramental view of nature which is identical to that of the Hopkins's nature poems. In the first draft of *The Story of My Heart*, for instance, Jefferies reflects upon the necessity of knowing God through matter, 'since I can neither see, hear nor learn of You anywhere, it is only through these links that I can get at you—gazing upon a flower ... by these I beg and pray.' On a more mundane level, much in *Hodge and his Masters* (1880) might be read as a gloss on *Harry Ploughman*; and the lament for John Brown in Jefferies's last essay, 'My Old Village', possesses just the sweet gravity of *Felix Randal*. Finally, it might be justly claimed for Jefferies that the reader of his notebooks comes into contact with a strenuous and latterly anguished sensibility which has many points of contact with the Hopkins of the journals and terrible sonnets.