

# Inscape, echo, and elegy in "binsey poplars"



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Elegy is a poetic form to which Hopkins continually returns. In one of his most famous poems about death, "Spring and Fall," Hopkins's speaker uses the occasion of "Goldengrove unleaving" to teach a child about her own mortality (2). In an earlier poem, "Binsey Poplars," Hopkins also writes about trees to reflect on the nature of loss. This poem features a tension between humans and the natural world: it mourns humanity's destructive influence on nature in its description of a group of trees that have been "all felled" (3). Indeed, the poem's primary focus is to recover the lost sense of inscape surrounding the trees' destruction. In order to rectify the violence of mankind toward the natural world and thereby reconcile the poem's conflict, Hopkins writes "Binsey Poplars" as an elegy that seeks to reconstruct an echo of the trees both in his memory and in the poem. The idea of inscape permeates "Binsey Poplars," as well as a number of Hopkins's other poems. Catherine Philips defines inscape both as "the characteristic shape of a thing or species," and, "more importantly," as "the crucial features that form or communicate the inner character, essence, or 'personality' of something" ("Introduction" xx). In addition, Paul Mariani defines inscape as "the underlying energy force and deep form holding things like trees and bluebells and concertos and paintings together" (19). Both definitions focus on an object's inner nature as reflected in its visible, outer form and identity. Another idea relating to the concept of inscape might be found in the writing of Duns Scotus, from whom Hopkins drew the idea of haecceitas: "thisness, individuation—that which makes this oak tree this oak tree only...something unique and separate" (Mariani 110). The notion that, for Scotus, individuation applies only to living things is especially relevant in examining an elegy like "Binsey Poplars." In his journals, Hopkins specifically remarks

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on the lost sense of inscape or 'thisness' that he feels in connection with the felled trees of the poem: upon seeing a tree being cut down, he writes, "I wished to die and not to see the inscapes of the world destroyed any more" ("Notes" 359). The stanza divisions in "Binsey Poplars" reflect the tension that arises out of this loss of inscape. The poem progresses from recreating the trees' outer characteristics through imagery in the first stanza to focusing almost exclusively on Hopkins's critique of humanity in the second. The first stanza presents different aspects of nature as in tandem with each other: the "leaves" interact with the "leaping sun," while the trees' "shadows" interact with the "river" (2, 7, 8). Furthermore, the phrase "Meadow and river and wind-wandering weed-winding bank," through its amalgamation of several different elements of nature (such as wind and weeds) to describe the riverbank, certainly represents nature as a unified force (8). Additionally, the scene is peaceful and almost Edenic. With the beginning of the second stanza, which introduces the human presence in the poem with the pronoun "we," the more specific representations of nature that are present in stanza one disappear; rather, nature is presented vaguely as the "country" and the "growing green" (12, 11). The implied result of this division, according to Hopkins, is that humanity is ignorant of the "havoc" it wreaks on nature (21). This is most evident at the beginning of the second stanza in the line "O if we but knew what we do" (9). Later in the stanza, he similarly states that "after-comers cannot guess" at the trees' inscapes, which places a focus on humanity's limited understanding of the significance and beauty of each fallen tree (19). Furthermore, these two statements are the shortest free-standing sentences in the poem, making them stand out for their directness and simplicity; this perhaps indicates

that, ironically, the only concepts that the poet represents and grasps clearly are his own human shortcomings. The simile in the second stanza, as well, points to human ignorance or misunderstanding in its implications of blindness: "like this sleek and seeing ball / But a prick will make no eye at all" (14-5). Because he groups himself with the rest of humanity with the word "we" in line 9, Hopkins must therefore contend with the difficulties associated with successfully reimagining the poplars' uniqueness in writing his elegy. It is through his personal, elegiac concern for the lost inscapes of nature that Hopkins effectively reconciles the tension of the poem's subject matter. His connection with the trees, exemplified in the way he refers to them in the first line as "my aspens" and as "dear" to him, provides an alternative, positive representation of the relationship between humanity and nature. Hopkins also personifies the trees throughout the first stanza, further bridging the gap between mankind and the natural. He describes the "shadow [of a tree] that swam or sank / On meadow and river," which suggests that the shadows are playfully and purposefully interacting with the landscape as people would (7-8). The use of the word "dandled," as well, refers both to the movement of the branches and the act of "bouncing a child up and down" on one's knee, injecting a definite human element into the natural scene (6, "Notes" 359). The internal rhyme in this line, "sandalled," also perhaps vaguely connotes that the trees or shadows might somehow appear to be wearing sandals (6). The simile of the second stanza, as well, suggests the delicacy of nature and brings humanity and the natural together through the evocation of a human eyeball. Through these elegiac lines, Hopkins attempts to undo the damage that humanity has done to the trees' inscapes by temporarily capturing the inner uniqueness of the felled

poplars. At the beginning of the poem, Hopkins uses repetition to show that each now-"unselved" tree once had a unique inscape in life (21). He writes that the trees are "All felled, felled, are all felled" (3); in repeating and metrically stressing the word "felled" three times, the poem reenacts the individual fall of each tree and indicates their haeciettas. This constant repetition, exemplified in the poem's last four lines describing the "sweet especial rural scene," also creates an echoing effect and suggests that, though the trees' physical forms are gone, their inscapes still reverberate in Hopkins's memory (24). According to Philips's understanding, inscape is always "the result of mental analysis and perception" and can be considered "an artist's analysis" ("Introduction" xx); as a result, viewing, analyzing, and writing about the trees allows Hopkins to better comprehend and make sense of their inscapes in his mind. Indeed, several puns in the second stanza show Hopkins to be conscious that the act of writing his elegy is a way to assuage his grief. The most noticeable of these puns is on the word "stroke" in the phrase, "ten or twelve / Strokes of havoc" (20-1). While "stroke" here refers, on the literal level, to strokes from an axe, the word might also refer to the "movement of a pen" (OED). The phrase "hew or delve" contains a similar secondary meaning; the word "delve" means not only to dig but metaphorically to "make laborious search for facts" (OED). Finally, the verb "hack," up until 1884, meant "to stammer," which perhaps accurately describes another effect of the poem's repeating lines (OED). The presence of these puns, two of which signify a kind of "laborious" struggle or difficulty with the writing process, allude to the limited ability of any poet to fully reanimate a lost person or object in an elegy. One reason why the elegy will only ever have limited success in fully evoking the lost trees'

inscapes is the nature of inscape itself: Mariani characterizes inscape as “evanescent” and claims that “one can catch it, [but] only for an instant” (12). Hopkins alludes to the impossibility of fully remembering the lost trees’ uniqueness through the poem with the line “after-comers cannot guess the beauty been” (19). The “after-comer” that this line references may be any reader of “Binsey Poplars”; the reason that the reader “cannot guess” at the trees’ inscapes is because he or she has only experienced suggestions of them through the filter of the poem, rather than personally observing and “analyzing” them. “Binsey Poplars,” like many elegies, succeeds in reminding the reader of the “transience of the things of this world” and the delicacy of their inscapes (Mikics 100). By reconciling humanity and nature through his own deep grief, Hopkins successfully resolves the tension introduced in the destruction of the trees. Due to the fleeting nature of inscape itself, however, each tree’s uniqueness ultimately seems irrevocably lost. Indeed, reading this elegy against Hopkins’s idea of inscape reveals that the only place in which the poplars still truly exist is in the poet’s memory. As a result, readers are left with the poem’s last, sad, echoing lines as a reminder that the “Binsey Poplars” they have experienced through reading the poem are not the actual trees, but only echoes of their former, living, inscaped selves.

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