Andrew Rihn wrote his paper “No Worst?” for Prof. King’s Literature in English II (ENG 25002) course. The students were asked to choose a poem from the course and explicate, or unfold it, line by line.

No Worst, There Is None
By Gerald Manley Hopkins

No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief,
More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder
wring.
Comforter, where, where is your comforting?
Mary, mother of us, where is your relief?
My cries heave, herds-long; huddle in a main, a chief
Woe, world-sorrow; on an age-old anvil wince and
sing -
Then lull, then leave off. Fury had shrieked ‘No ling-
ering! Let me be fell: force I must be brief’.

O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne’er hung there. Nor does long our small
Durance deal with that steep or deep. Here! creep,
Wretch, under a comfort serves in a whirlwind: all
Life death does end and each day dies with sleep.

Upon my first (and second, and third, and
fourth) reading of Hopkins’ No Worst, There Is None,
I found myself in complete agreement with William
Logan, finding it unreadable, repulsive, and tasting
“like ash in my mouth” (Logan 47). Logan acknowl-
edges four main stumbling blocks for readers of
Hopkins: religiosity, stumbling rhythm, compressed
“curdling” language, and a smug, high-sounding diction.
All four elements are evident throughout this
poem. However, not everyone views these traits as
complete negatives. These “Hopkinsian” traits (along
with alliteration, repetition, compounding) can be
used as keys to get the reader into the interior world of
Hopkins (Curtis 38). By first learning what it is Hop-
kins was doing in his work, the reader is able to then
translate, or at least traverse, the poem. After mapping
out Hopkins plan, and considering his relation to
religion, I was able to come to terms with No Worst,
There Is None (Christ).

Hopkins does not set up the usual lyric or nar-
native style in his writing. Instead, he jumps around
throughout a reflection on the nature of Sin, using
many different tactics of description. Hopkins pre-
sents the emotions in an unfettered, direct way. He
layers emotion upon emotion, phrase upon phrase,
letting the words act upon one another and add up
rather than letting them flow in a more linear style.

In line one, Hopkins immediately sets the read-
er on edge, distancing the reader with the words “No
worst, there is none.” That is hardly even a sentence,
let alone an intriguing hook for a poem. However,
it sets the stage that the subject is to be set apart from
anything else. There would, for Hopkins, be nothing
worse than sin. But he also deals with the knowledge
of original sin; that sin is lamentable yet inevitable.
For Hopkins, this is the terrible tragedy that he writes
about. He begins at the bottom, a sense of original sin,
so the reader can only go up. This first line also clues
the reader in for the broken syntax, or stumbling, that
is going to characterize the rest of the poem. It also
acts as a warning to the reader – “If you don’t like this
line, do not continue.”

Hopkins moves right along, compres-
sing and twisting the meaning and power of his
words. “Pitched past pitch of grief/More pangs will,
schooled at forepangs, wilder wring.” This line is
terribly complex and convoluted to the point of Wil-
liam Logan’s unreadability, yet is also displays such
Hopkinsian traits. There is alliteration, repetition,
density, and repetition. The word “pitch” has several
meanings, and Hopkins uses two of them in his word
play. Pitch can mean “to throw” and it can also mean
“tone” (as in musical pitch). In other words, “Pitched
past pitch of grief” can be re-read as “Moved beyond
the tone of grief.” He then begins referring to “pangs”
and “forepangs” and how they can wring a person
out. These pangs are the temptation, the prelude
to sin. A pang is something sudden, unconscious,
and painful. That humanity is imbued with original
sin is beyond our control. We cannot escape it, only
lament it. We will make mistakes, and even though
we may repent, and possibly learn from them, we are destined to make them over again. Schooled at forepangs, these reoccurring sins or temptations will sting even more, because we should be aware of them and feel as though we should know better. Since we know that sin is both terrible yet inevitable, a sense of looming dread can fill our days. Hopkins, in Line Four, asks Mary, the comforter, “where is your relief?” He gets no reply save the emptiness of the stanza break.

Stanza two open with another play on words; “My cries heave, herds-long.” “Herd” is a homonym meaning a large group (herd) or the past tense of hear (heard). The cries Hopkins refers to are large and herd-like. They are also loud and long; they are heard for a long time. The cries also huddle on an age-old anvil. The anvil is a sign of man’s ingenuity and progress, but conversely is not something wants to be put upon. Here the anvil represents humanity, or the human quality of life. It is that divine spark of life that offers both salvation and damnation. This reference can also be a tie between Hopkins and the Romantics with the view of the paradox of progress. The Romantics believed nature to be superior to human creation and viewed industrialization with much skepticism. Likewise, Hopkins views nature as superb because it represents the achievement of God’s gift. Hopkins again confronts paradox on the anvil because he can both “wince and sing.”

In line seven, his cries die down, and we hear the voice of Fury; “No ling-fering! Let me be fell: force I must be brief.” This line presents a series of challenges to the reader, and leaves that unmistakable impression of unreadability. Hopkins is either completely changing the rules of grammar or he is inviting us to change the text he has written. I suggest the latter. Hopkins stated he wanted his poems to be read “with the ear,” that is, to be read aloud not from the page (Curtis 38). The sound of the word trumps the textual grammar. This is how he is able to play on sentence structure and the use of homonyms. If we alter the punctuation a little and use a little wordplay, we find the voice of Fury addressing the notion of force. “No lingering! Let me befall force. I must be brief.” Force, that is, physical acts, are by definition brief in comparison to the everlasting afterlife. Worldly life is brief, no one lingers here, and yet it is so dear to us. This is another subtle paradox on the essence of human existence.

The last stanza sees Hopkins again stacking language like bricks, building them up upon one another rather than laying them out side by side, as on does in narrative or lyrical writing. It reads almost as stream of conscious; “cliffs of fall/frightful, sheer, non-man-fathomed.” Here again is his use of alliteration, an appeal to the ear. In line eleven he brings forth paradox from another bit of wordplay. “Nor does long or small/durance” is to say “Our small durance does not long.” But the closer “small” and “long” are on the page the more the contradiction stands out. The last stanza acts almost as a repository or summation of all the literary tricks and games Hopkins has played throughout the poem. Line nine uses repetition of the word “mind” (also wordplay – mind can be read as “minded”). Line twelve features both strong alliteration as well as internal rhyme. In this last stanza, he draws comparisons between three disparate ideas: cliffs of the mind (stepping off to sin), the chasm of death, and the metaphor of death and rebirth that “each day dies with sleep.” Our mind is a dangerous place, says Hopkins. It has mountains with deadly cliffs we can fall from. This is the final reference to sin in the poem, and a fitting one. The image of falling from a cliff is reminiscent to the fall from grace of original sin. Line twelve states that our durance does not want to “deal with that steep or deep.” We want neither the sin nor the damnation that follows from it. Yet there they both still stand. The same is true of death. It is unwelcome but inevitable. The final line of the poem touches on that; “all life death does end to each day dies with sleep.” It is fitting that the final line of the poem deals with the finality of death. But here again Hopkins uses his tool of paradox. Each night brings with it the rebirth of the morning. One day must end so another can begin. It is the same with life; we must die so that we can be reborn in the afterlife. And Jesus died, only to resurrect himself for us. So neither sleep nor death truly ends anything, they just change things somewhat. The same is true of the whirlwind he mentions in Line thirteen. The whirlwind might seemingly destroy a house or some possessions, but all it can do is change the structure of physical objects. It cannot destroy a person whose core is their faith. Faith transcends the merely physical, as does life.
No Worst, There Is None is considered one of Hopkins’ “terrible” sonnets, because of the morbid and depressing subject matter. It is understandable to take that position, particularly when looking at the list of terms Hopkins stacks against us; grief, pangs, cries, sorrow, wince, shrieked, fall, wretch, whirlwind, death (Dixon 35). We can add up the sum total of the words he uses and think we have the answer. But language does not follow the rules of math, and much much more can be hidden among them. In this poem, I see an underlying sense of optimism in the spiritual world. While things may be bad here on earth, while we may be tested (and fail) at every turn, things are not without purpose and through our diligence we will be rewarded. Hopkins takes a very severe, critical look at the physical, at sin, and this is not without cause. The eternal soul is a rather important subject, one to be looked at with much clarity and precision, and No Worst, There Is None does precisely that.

Works Cited


