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With scientific accuracy and artistic vision, both Gerald Manley Hopkins and Henry David Thoreau observed, described, and classified the natural world and its creatures throughout their lives. As writers and philosophers, however, these men sought a deeper and more fundamental understanding of their subjects. To help create and analyze the highly personal significance that certain animals held in their own lives, Hopkins and Thoreau studied the mythological and spiritual symbolism of animals in various modern and ancient societies.

One such animal—appearing as the subject of Hopkins' "The Windhover" and surfacing occasionally throughout Thoreau's *Walden*—is the hawk. Placed in its historical and cultural context, the hawk generates and illuminates many themes in Hopkins' verse and Thoreau's prose. Many of the most subtle—but most profound—truths in these texts, however, stem from the alternate name of the pigeon-hawk: the merlin. Together, the symbolic history of the hawk and the legendary figure of Merlin the Enchanter inform and permeate the works and worldviews of Hopkins and Thoreau.

The most basic treatment of the hawk in these texts is the admiration of its salient physical characteristics. In "The Windhover," Hopkins glorifies the brute power and animal beauty of the bird ("Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here" [30]), while in *Walden* Thoreau alludes to the keen eyesight of the creature that circles

above the forest "like a mote in the eye, or in heaven's eye" (150). "An aerial brother of the wave which he sails over and surveys" (*Walden* 109), the hawk also responds naturally and effortlessly to changes in the wind. This ability to respond quickly to a changing environment is equally lauded in "The Windhover," as the bird struggles against the wind but then glides with it ("the hurl and / gliding / Rebuffed the big wind" [30]).

Thoreau and Hopkins thus admire the hawk for many of its fundamental physical characteristics: power, vision, and ability to adapt to change. Historically, many societies developed the spiritual symbolism of an animal from such physical traits. In general, the hawk was associated with light, royalty, power, the sun, the wind, watchfulness, and the heavens. In ancient Egypt, the hawk was considered a royal bird and a symbol of the soul; in Greco-Roman mythology, the hawk was the swift messenger of Apollo. Polynesian tribes associated the hawk with healing and prophecy, and the Native American Lakota tribe respected the hawk for its speed, boldness, and sharp eyesight.

Hopkins and Thoreau, however, discover many levels of spiritual significance that extend beyond the basic physical characteristics of the hawk. For example, the hawk is naturally independent, free from the restrictions of society; with no necessary ties to others, it is the quintessential animal of solitude. To Thoreau, "the scream of a hawk sailing over some farmer's yard" (*Walden* 109) signifies its wild and unpredictable nature, unfettered by modern society. Hawks transcend the artificial boundaries of the world, as T. H. White notes in his classic work *The Goshawk*: "Hawks were the nobility of the air . . . [and the]

only creatures for which man had troubled to legislate. [We] never troubled to lay down rules for the birds themselves" (18). Thus, as a symbol of "no master, no property, no fetters" (*Goshawk 39*), the hawk serves an alluring ideal for the naturally hermetic Hopkins and Thoreau.

The fierce individualism of the hawk also reveals its inner power and beauty, a certain spiritual "thusness" that remains difficult to detect and describe adequately. For both Hopkins and Thoreau, this deeper essence of the hawk proves much more interesting than its physical characteristics or natural freedom, as Hopkins indicates in "The Windhover": "AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion / Times told lovelier, more dangerous" (30). Hopkins refers to the distinctive nature of the hawk as its "inscape," a term that describes "the outward reflection of the inner nature of a thing" (Gardner *xx*). Inscapes, Hopkins believed, are evidence of God's work in the world and an intuitive link between the mundane and the divine; when grasped and condensed through poetry, they connect the poet, the reader, the natural world, and God.

As in the majority of Hopkins' verse, inscape in "The Windhover" is expressed through bold experimentation with rhythm and word choice (linked to Hopkins' desire to interpret the symbolic order of the world and its creatures through linguistic relationships) and through intense fusion and compression of language (an effort to "weld together, in one concentrated image, all the essential characteristics of an object, to inscape them in words, to communicate to the reader the same 'instress of feeling' which first moved the poet himself" [Gardner *xxxiii*]). For example, alliteration ("daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-

drawn Falcon") in "The Windhover" helps to unify Hopkins' description of the hawk into a single bright and noble image. The frequent employment of adjectives as adverbs ("sweeps smooth"), on the other hand, creates a language without traditional boundaries through which Hopkins can better detect and illustrate the essence of the hawk.

Sensing and glorifying the inscape of the hawk, however, also proves dangerous to Hopkins. He can only love the hawk secretly with his "heart in hiding" ("Windhover" 30), indicating that he is afraid to take complete joy in the contemplation of an earthly being. The hawk thus highlights an internal conflict in Hopkins' life between service to God and license to love life upon earth. As will become evident later in this analysis, the hawk frequently appears in both Hopkins's and Thoreau's works as such an animal of conflict and contradiction—it occupies a tension-filled realm of transition between worlds.

Nevertheless, the hawk also represents many unchanging values and ideals of nobility and chivalry for Hopkins and Thoreau. Hopkins' hawk appears as a part of the Court, both as the servant of the morning ("morning's minion") and as the prince of daylight ("kingdom of daylight's dauphin") ("Windhover" 30). In "riding" on the air and halting itself by pulling upon a rein ("High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing") (30), the hawk becomes a knight ("Oh, my chevalier!") that readies itself for combat or adventure ("Buckle!"). Such a sight, Thoreau notes, reminds him "of falconry and what nobleness and poetry are associated with that sport" (*Walden* 296).

T. H. White's *The Goshawk* provides considerable insight into the significance that the sport of hawking achieves in the works of Tho-

reau and Hopkins. On one level, hawking links the modern world to a simpler and more chivalrous past; it allows the hawker to understand "the small race now underground, strangers of a vanished species safe from comprehension, almost from imagination: monks, nuns, and the eternal villain . . . [as he becomes] as close to them as anybody now, close even to Chaucer 'with grey goshawk in [hand]'" (*Goshawk* 81). The very process of training and caring for a hawk, White explains, also forces one to simplify as Thoreau did in *Walden*, to discover "what things [are] not necessary [and] what things one really [needs]" (*Goshawk* 71). This simplification of daily life is crucial because hawking requires complete concentration and enormous patience, a type of total commitment to an activity about which one "cannot be slip-shod" (*Goshawk* 212). Hopkins, intensely driven to express his understanding of the world through language, and Thoreau, consistently focused on only one task at a time in the wilderness, would have appreciated the mind of a hawker.

More importantly, however, both Thoreau and Hopkins would have understood the imperfect nature of the human-hawk relationship and the significance of such imperfection. Searching for a connection with the natural world in all of its strength, beauty, cruelty, and irrationality, the hawker loses a part of himself or herself forever, sacrificing true domination and power over nature in an attempt to understand one of its creatures. Hawking exposes the idea of total control as an illusion that ends in failure where "at last we should come to nothing, with all our creances in a tangle about us, our curtains unhemmed and unraveling, and the tools confused and broken" (*Goshawk* 109). As Hamlet, as

"Ludwig of Bavaria," (192) as "wild [princes] of Teutonic origin" (147), as "frantic heritors of frenetic sires [that are] in full health more than half insane" (92), hawks are —on some fundamental level— untamable. Realizing this fundamental truth that nature can never be fully controlled, Hopkins and Thoreau choose the alternate path: to exist and participate in the natural world, rather than to become an enemy of it.

The hawk thus has a variety of symbolic characteristics and historical roles in *Walden* and "The Windhover," which include its extraordinary vision, ability to adapt to change, independent nature, position as a creature of transition, link to nobility and chivalry, and participation in the sport of hawking. A more profound and human level of significance in the hawk, however, is suggested when Thoreau cryptically uses the bird's alternate title: "the Merlin it seemed to me it might be called, but I care not for its name" (*Walden* 296). While the name "merlin" was not used to represent the Roman word for falcon or *corwalch* until medieval times (*Crystal* 7) and its derivation from the old French word *esmerillon* (referring to a female hawk) is somewhat uncertain (519), the character of Merlin has occupied a prominent position in various Arthurian legends and myths of which Thoreau and Hopkins were likely aware. Many of the symbolic relationships and parallels between Thoreau, Hopkins, and the Merlin of legend are striking.

In Mary Stewart's modern Arthurian trilogy, Merlin's greatest gift is Sight—the ability to see not just the physical world with great detail, but to transcend its boundaries, to glimpse the hidden things between dreams and reality, between the future and the past. Building

from the pseudo-historical figure from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, Stewart creates her Merlin as a character that "[grows] out of and [epitomizes] the time of confusion and seeking that we call the Dark Ages" (*Hollow* 459). The Sight of this Merlin represents a certain "multiplicity of vision" that Geoffrey Ashe describes in his book *From Caesar to Arthur*: "When Christianity prevailed and Celtic paganism crumbled into mythology, a great [period of transition occurred]. Water and islands retained their magic . . . haunted hills became fairy-hills . . . unseen realms intersected the visible . . . [and] theme by theme the Celtic imagination articulated itself in the story. Yet any given episode might be taken as fact or imagination or religious allegory or all three at once" (*Hollow* 459-60). Merlin thus emerges as a "link between the worlds" (460) during a period in which everything was changing, a transitional figure much like Hopkins and Thoreau in their own times.

The first worlds that the figure of Merlin connects are temporal ones; he spans the impassable abyss between the past, present, and future. In T. H White's *The Once and Future King*, for example, Merlyn the magician lives backwards in time, growing younger and telling of his experiences in the future while Arthur and other characters age normally (*Once and Future* 35). Unable to exist properly in the present, Merlyn becomes a visionary and messenger of Fate, explaining to the Court that "there is a thing about Time and Space which the philosopher Einstein is going to find out. Some people call it Destiny" (286). Stewart's Merlin assumes a similar role, occasionally glimpsing fragments of the future and the past to provide essential military and

political information for Aurelius Ambrosius (*Crystal* 225).

From his extraordinary and otherworldly Sight, however, Merlin also develops a large amount of specifically human wisdom. A modern social visionary living in the Dark Ages, White's Merlyn seeks to educate Arthur about the concepts of "Might and Right" (*Once and Future* 246) and the horrors of war by changing him into a variety of different animals. When humans can intuitively understand and coexist with creatures of the natural world, Merlyn explains to Arthur, they will finally solve the problems of their own species: "the imaginary lines on the earth's surface . . . [that] the airborne birds [skip] them by nature . . . [would disappear] for Man if he could learn to fly" (*Once and Future* 639). This central theme that Merlyn and merlins reveal, the need of human beings to look outside themselves towards nature (*Book of Merlyn* 25) in order to simplify their existence and reduce their destructive hubris, was fundamentally important in the lives of Thoreau and Hopkins.

While they possessed no fantastic powers of Sight, both Thoreau and Hopkins maintained a broad vision of historical events and the modern dilemma. One facet of this dilemma involved the conflict between the natural and industrial worlds. In their time, Thoreau and Hopkins watched as technological and urban progress conquered much of the remaining wilderness. Like Stewart's Merlin writing alone in his crystal cave while wars were fought and kingdoms constructed, these authors achieved a rare understanding of technology, science, politics, the natural world, and—most importantly—human nature. Professing the value of direct personal experience (through inscapes and through

time spent in solitude) and the worth of the individual in an increasingly objective and materialistic society, Thoreau and Hopkins thus stood as transitional figures in an era of change.

Transition and change for Merlin, Thoreau, and Hopkins are also linked to the spiritual realm. Stewart's Merlin sees no inherent contradiction between disparate gods or embodiments of the divine spirit; Ambrosius, reflecting Merlin's own viewpoint, explains that "you will find [that] all gods who are born of the light are brothers, and in this land, if Mithras who gives us victory is to bear the face of Christ, why, then, we worship Christ" (*Crystal* 385). Watching from the "caves of glass, the invisible towers, the hollow hills where he now sleeps for all time," Merlin thus observes the older, druidic gods of nature fade before the God of Christianity and serves as an instrument through which "all the kings [become] one King, and all the gods one God" (*Hollow* 460). Both Hopkins and Thoreau maintained a similar communion with all aspects of the divine, symbolizing the importance of natural spirituality in an increasingly physical and secular world. In *Walden*, every element and creature of nature—including the hawk—helps to prevent being "shipwrecked on a vain reality" (*Walden* 305) by revealing spiritual unity and truth in the world. God is omnipresent in "The Windhover" as well, appearing in the frequent poetic inscapes that allow an intuitive perception of the divine through Hopkins' description of the hawk.

Symbolizing transition and change, however, is difficult; the price for moving between worlds—between the past and the future, nature and human society, and the secular and the divine—is high. In re-

turn for God's gift of sight, Stewart's Merlin often becomes "human-blind," stating, "when I exchanged my manhood for power it seemed I had made myself blind to the ways of women" (*Hollow* 390). While Merlin was not asexual, he was primarily nonsexual, living as a virgin for the majority of his life. Merlin's sacrifice and suppression of his "desire for a normal manhood" (*Hollow* 460) reflect an ancient belief: the pursuit of truth and spiritual vision often requires a certain level of purity and physical sterility. As a Catholic priest, Hopkins made a similar sacrifice, trading earthly pleasure and love for divine favor. Thoreau, consciously or unconsciously, also dissociated himself from the normal scope of human desire and feeling, practicing mild sexual asceticism and revealing little emotion throughout *Walden*.

The asceticism of Merlin, Hopkins, and Thoreau extended into their separation from society, a form of enforced isolation from other humans. Like Thoreau and Hopkins, Merlin was a recluse by nature, a learned sage that lived at the outskirts of civilization and sought knowledge mainly for its own sake. Yet as Thoreau attempted via *Walden* and Hopkins attempted in his poetry, Merlin occasionally imparted his wisdom to other individuals in society. Commonly cast as a tutor for young Arthur and as first councilor to the King, Merlin existed as a perpetual source of advice in a kingdom threatened by foreign armies, internal power struggles, and spiritual decay.

Ultimately, however, Merlin, Hopkins, and Thoreau emerge as somewhat tragic figures, creatures of solitude that can often only observe inevitable change. Stewart's Merlin foresees but cannot prevent the death of many friends, and he weeps for them and for himself, "for

Merlin the enchanter, who saw, and could do nothing; who walked his own lonely heights where it seemed that none would ever come near to him" (*Last Enchantment* 145). A source of creativity, discovery, and wisdom, Merlin's solitude is at last only a lonely residence, a place from which he can understand and influence—but never truly join—human society. Merlin, like Thoreau and Hopkins, eventually accepts this imperfect existence with a combination of resignation and quiet satisfaction, stating: "I am nothing, yes; I am air and darkness, a word, a promise. I watch in the crystal and I wait in the hollow hills. But out there in the light I have a young king and a bright sword to do my work for me, and build what will stand when my name is only a word for forgotten songs and outworn wisdom" (*Hollow* 409).

Multiple levels of significance are thus evident in the treatment of the hawk in Thoreau's *Walden* and Hopkins' "The Windhover." Both authors admire the physical characteristics of the merlin, value its independent nature and historical symbolism, and relate closely to the legendary figure of Merlin the Enchanter. In studying the relationship between Thoreau, Hopkins, and the hawk in these works, the reader gains a more profound understanding of the authors and the complex creature that they describe.

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