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"Long Live the Weeds and the Wilderness Yet": Critical Plant Studies and Gerard Manley Hopkins' Plant Poetics

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ABSTRACT

Regardless of their scientifically established vitality and agency, plants are still typically visualized as dormant elements of nature and allocated minimal importance. In literature, equivalently, plants are treated as insensate, unresponsive background elements and ornamental devices, which are perennially overlooked. It is due to the inception of critical plant studies that plants are brought into public attention as vitally awake, cognizant individuals playing active roles in the composition of the universe as well as literature. As a response to cultural and literary neglect of plants in human life, critical plants studies underpins the mattering of plants and embarks on investigating human-plant relationships from an interdisciplinary perspective. To this end, biological and botanical understanding of plants is appropriated into the literary representation of plants with the intention of superseding the metaphoric existence of plants in literature with that of biological standing. This study, accordingly, deals with the plant poetry of a prominent Victorian poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889) whose poetry allows an insightful access to the astoundingly complicated and animated world of plants and in this way, attempts to build a non-dualistic and non-oppressive human-plant relationship through his poetry. Thus, "Asboughs", "Spring", "Binsey Poplars", and "Inversnaid" are specifically chosen poems presenting a perfect case study to demonstrate Hopkins' attentiveness towards plants. The study will further uncover Hopkins' botanical consciousness and environmental awareness propelling him to condemn humans' brutal exploitation of plants which predominantly stems from an anthropocentric view of plants as lifeless commercial objects that can be used and consumed.

Keywords: Gerard Manley Hopkins, Critical Plant Studies, Agency, Nature, Victorian Poetry

At the apex of its industrial development, the Victorian age has undergone an immense transmutation in its socio-cultural conditions, ensuing its conversion from a small-scale agricultural industry into a technologically fostered factory system that enabled the mass production and speedy distribution of materials. Running alongside its speedily altering silhouette with aggrandized cities and urbanized lifestyle, the relentlessly enhancing manufacturing industry soon transpires into an emblem of Britain's economic prosperity and national pride at the great cost of the country's natural heritage of uncultivated and unsullied lands, exempt from human intrusion. This newly burgeoning industrial age has become a vivid eyewitness of an unheralded ecological crisis occasioned by the human sacrilege of green forests and wilderness areas in the name of economic expansion, construction of railways, coal mines, and factories, which conjointly take a disastrous part in the disruption of the ecosystem and a total devastation of the natural entities. As B.W. Clapp writes, "[b]etween 1800 and 1875, for instance, coal that could not be sold was either burned at the pithead or flushed into rivers and streams; slack and dust was simply piled into heaps" causing irretrievable pollution of waters while "[i]n the air, a mixture of carbonic acid, sulphuric acid and nitrogen oxides checked the growth of some trees and destroyed others" (2013, p. 166). Likewise, in Simmons' estimation, "[i]n 1800, the UK consumption of coal was 10 million tons, in 1856, 60 million tons", underscoring a dramatic escalation in British industry's coal consumption, which caused an extensive carbon release into the atmosphere (2001, p. 150). From the beginning of the 19th century, the exorbitantly rising coal consumption of Britain became the neglected compliant of the increased acidity levels and the toxicity of the breathable air, culminating in the mass demise of air, water, and earth and endangering the proliferation of human and nonhuman life on earth while "literally fueling Britain's rise as the most powerful manufacturing, trading, and imperial power that the world had ever seen" (Thorsheim, 2018, p. 1).

The capitalist anxieties of the 19th century Britain about making the utmost economic profit out of every natural source have triggered the exacerbation of the Antropocenic interferences on the planet which, in return, have not only prompted sweeping atmospheric defilements but also the internalization of the anthropocentric mindset, which engraves a mechanical view of the universe in the minds of Victorians, according to which nature is not a living entity but a financially expandable material that can be benefited from and thrown away. Against the backdrop of this anthropocentric worldview, which concedes a ruthless utilization of natural entities, Gerard Manley Hopkins distinguishes himself as an outstanding poet whose theological education

does not eclipse his ecological perception of the world, breaking radically away from the mainstream Victorian society's human-centered ideology of nature as a disposable material. Delineated as one of the "environmentally ardent poets" by Jude Nixon, Hopkins does not comply with the radical fracture in humans' physical and emotional contact with nature taking place concurrently with the introduction of machinery into human life (2006, p. 208). Therefore, this study focuses on Gerard Manley Hopkins' plant poems from the recently arising theory of critical plant studies, which shows an assiduous commitment to reinstalling the biological and spiritual connection between humans and plants.

Critical Plant Studies

The post-humanist endeavor to reduce the cataclysmic impacts of the Anthropocenic age has stimulated the proliferation of ecocritical studies into multifarious directions like material, elemental, animal, and plant turn. Recent scientific debates about the intentionality and rationality of the other-than-human world have not only spurred the emergence of critical animal studies but also instigated the sprouting of critical plant studies which attributes personhood, intelligence, and sentience to plants. As a substitute to the "Anthropocene's singular focus on human agency", Natasha Myers suggests a new vegetal turn in literary studies, which she coins as "*Planthroposcene*" (2017, p. 299), a "call to change the terms of encounter, to make allies with these green beings" (2017, p. 300). Apart from Myers' call for making peace with plant beings, Michael Marder, in his book *Plant Thinking*, denounces the "ethical neglect" of plants on account of humans' misconceptions about plants' being "less developed or less differentiated than that of their animal and human counterparts and that therefore, vegetal beings are unconditionally available for unlimited use and exploitation" (2013, pp. 2–3). Expunging this manipulative human relationship with plants, Marder offers a radical shift in the human perception of plants and suggests a new way of thinking with plants that is what he calls as "plant-thinking" which is explained as "thinking without the head", refusing a human-oriented rationality and requiring a "de-humanized" and "plant-like" thinking (2013, p. 10). With their lucrative undertaking to construct a more ethical and responsible human attitude towards plants, both Myers and Marder are devoted to attenuating the large-scale ecological predicaments caused by the current epoch of the Anthropocene, which inordinately attributes too much value to humanity and expedites "the marginalization of nonhuman forms of agency and matter" (Dürbeck & Hüpkes, 2020, p. 4). As it is pointed out clearly by the scholars of critical plant studies, humans' plant neglect is the fundamental reason which lies deeply

at the root of human-caused problems like global warming, climate change and deforestation. Hence, critical plant studies appears as an interdisciplinary theory covering a "broad framework for reevaluating plants, their representations, and human-plant interactions" in literary, scientific, cultural, political, and philosophical grounds (Gagliano, Ryan, & Vieira, 2017, p. xvi).

The invalidation of the popular public opinion about plants' incapacity to wield any kind of agency owing to their firmly grounded life in soil and their lack of feet to enable them to move like humans or animals is placed at the head of the agenda of critical plant studies. Regardless of human repression, "plants exert their agency and vitality by injecting their own qualities into the material universe" (Bulut Sarıkaya, 2024, p. 25). Bringing in scientific discussions about the startling agency and intelligent plant behavior, critical plant studies prescribes a radical paradigm shift in the traditional human perception of plants by revealing the biological complexity and purposeful behavior of vegetal beings. In this regard, a dedicated plant biologist, Anthony Trewavas, associates intelligence with organisms' special skills of problem solving and claims for the plant intelligence by stating that a "tree gathers and continually updates diverse information about its surroundings, combines this with information about its internal state, and makes decisions that reconcile its well-being with the environment" (2014, p. 100). Problems that plants face in their social vicinity are multi-dimensional such as the "uneven distribution of light, minerals, soil structure and water, competition by other plants, variation in rainfall and wind, and variable degrees of damage by disease pests and herbivores", emerging as crucial issues that should be estimated meticulously by plants (Trewavas, 2014, p. 90). Similarly, an eminent entomology professor, Richard Karban, substantiates the highly advanced competence of plants and writes:

> In addition to sensing, plants communicate among tissues on the same individual to coordinate their responses to the environment. They eavesdrop on neighboring individuals to acquire information about future risks of competition, disease, and herbivores. They communicate with those microbes that allow them to forage more effectively and with animals that facilitate mating and move their seeds to locations where they are likely to thrive. (2017, p. 3)

Notwithstanding all these scientific evidences which prove that plants are socially mindful rational organisms who do not need a human or animal brain to think reasonably, cultural

conceptualizations insist on categorizing plants as insentient, non-intelligent, unresponsive, and "underdeveloped, inferior life forms" (Bulut Sarıkaya, 2024, p. 5). This is the crystal clear proof of the accreditation of humans' anthropocentric predilections and dualistic mindsets with an erroneous propensity to fix intelligence and intentional agency solely on humanity. That is exactly what the newly emerging field of critical plant studies altercates with. John C. Ryan, one of the leading theorists of critical plant studies, ascertains that the prejudiced human attitude to vegetal existence, "the premise of the overlooked, or marginalized plant" is placed at the center of critical plant studies, "the nascent area of inquiry into the vegetal world that incorporates diverse theoretical perspectives and methodological frames, including those of neuro-botany" (2018, p. 5).

Viewing plants as dynamic agents not only in nature's own system of networking but also in the literary domain is the optimal intention of critical plant studies, which calls for the integration of the botanical perception of plants into literary representation. To this end, Patricia Vieira introduces a distinct from of plant writing, *phytographia* which opens literary texts to the inscription of plants so that plants will not be objectified and disempowered in textual representations but play active roles in the composition of literary texts (2017, p. 218, emphasis in the original). *Phytographia* allows the confluence of plants and humans, nature and culture, and text and matter. As Vieira points out, *phytographia* "denotes one such encounter: the coming together of the wordless, physically inscribed language of plants with an aesthetically mediated form of human language in literature" (2017, p. 223). In other words, *phytographia* releases plants from the confinements of metaphoric representations where they become stable, motionless tools of human imagination. Like Vieira, Ryan considers phytography as a posthumanist form of plant writing that "involves dialogue with emerging forms of botanical research" to understand plant behavior and communicative skills and invites humans to look into the world from the perspective of plants (2020, p. 102). Hence, instead of humans being the authors of plant stories, phytography "confers to plants the right to narrate their own stories" (Ryan, 2020, p. 102). Plants are not capable of writing their stories only physically in the material universe through photosynthesis, but they are also literary active agents composing their own stories and narrations.

Plants' being storied beings is, indeed, not an improbable concept and resonates strongly with Iovino and Oppermann's materialist paradigm of the universe as a "storied matter" which denotes the idea that the universe is composed of meaningful, intentional, and communicative interaction between nonhuman entities whose stories are all

interlaced with each other (2014, p. 2). Iovino and Oppermann argue that the whole planet is constituted by "transformative stories built by telluric powers, magnetic forces, clashing and melting elements, and dawning forms of life extend the past of the earth into our present, determining the way all beings articulate their relationships to the world" (2014, p. 7). Every animate or inanimate being in nature is accomplished in "producing configurations of meanings and discourses that we can interpret as stories" (Iovino & Oppermann, 2014, p. 7). Analogously, apart from being avid participators in a purposeful interaction with their environment in the material universe, plants, in the literary sphere, emerge as the authors of their own stories and turn literature into a reciprocal exchange of human and plant persons' inter-species interactivity, instead of humans' being centralized subjects as the only creative and valuable authorial voices of literature. In this regard, critical plant studies undermines the anthropocentric privilege of humans as the only rational producers of meanings and restores the power of representation into plants. As Karen Barad convincingly argues, there is an "ongoing materialization" in the universe which comes into being through its "differential becoming" (2007, p. 180). Every natural entity in the universe has its own unique way of expressing and exerting itself. Within this differential becoming of the universe, plants are also invested with a power of making their own histories and telling their own stories. As Barad affirms, the "rings of trees mark the sedimented history of their-intra-actions within and as part of the world" (2007, p. 180). Not only with the tree rings, carrying the physical traces of its history and life story but also with repositioning themselves towards the sun, their distinguished performance of photosynthesis, vitally necessary phenomenon for the continuation of life on earth, which, even in the 21st century, cannot be achieved through any means of technology or machine, and their everlasting capacity of replicating themselves by producing new leaves and branches, plants are endowed with sufficient vegetal and literary agency to write their own stories and leave their inscriptions.

Thereupon, critical plant studies ushers in a new tradition of plant writing that requires reuniting the material world with the textual world where plants will inhabit literature with their biological identity and not with their metaphoric insinuations. The substitution of plants' virtual reality with that of their actual reality enhances the prospects of human-plant entanglement, which would enable humans to come to the awareness of their biological interconnectedness with plants and abdicate their anthropocentric prejudices, keeping them apart from and superior to plants. Initiating a new plant turn in literature, critical plant studies manifests the intersectionality of

human and plant narratives in which plants are not positioned as muted, background materials, but allowed to undertake active roles in the composition of literature, shaping and redesigning humans' cultural constructions of the nonhuman world and in this way, aiming to achieve a seamless transition from the cataclysmic age of the Anthropocene towards an age of–what is labeled by Myers as–the Planthroposcene where plants are recognized as the most indispensible units of the universe without which life would not be possible. Appropriately, a prominent Victorian poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins' poetry opens an entirely new scientific portal to the astounding world of plants, which is full of biological complexity, vitality, and convivial interactivity going on unrelentingly.

Plants in Hopkins' Poetry

In his seminal article titled "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis", Lynn White argues for the futility of expecting religious solutions for the contemporary environmental problems and accuses Christianity for the ecological crisis, which, he believes, will continue to increase "until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve men" (1967, p. 1207). In retaliation for White's incredulity in the reconcilability of religion and ecology, Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889), the 19th century priest and poet, becomes a brilliant model for the possibility of alternative solutions for environmental problems without disqualifying religion at all. With his refutation of the uncompromising nineteenth-century outlook of religion in complete discrepancy with the scientific conceptualization of the universe, Hopkins is featured as an unconventional poet of the Victorian period who extensively explores the enrapturing possibilities of the intersection of religion and science. On account of such unique exceptionality of the poet that does not comfortably fit within the traditional Victorian poetry, Dean Flower envisages Hopkins as a "surprisingly contemporary" poet who works for the "protection of environment, celebration of biodiversity, or criticism of mankind's unkindness to the earth" (2020, p. 138). Lynn Domina's ecotheological reading, on the other hand, is intended to "reveal Hopkins's understanding of divine presence in the world more explicitly" (2020, p. 186). "A fervent believer in God's immanence in creation", as Constantini observes, Hopkins "was also animated by a keen interest in science, which encouraged him to look at the world objectively" (2008, p. 494). This reconciliatory proclivity to conflate religious doctrines with scientific discoveries induces Hopkins to develop an ecological as well as a spiritual view of the universe that is constantly transmogrifying and actively evolving. Hopkins' eco-spirituality enables him to look into nature as a consecrated place, a sanctuary reflecting God's presence.

Indeed, as a keen observer of nature, Hopkins's poetry is rife with his scientific curiosity about the unremitting activism and energy of plants, which are inflicted by a divine power and constitute an unabating enticement for the poet's poetic imagination. Hopkins's understanding of nature revolves around the notion of "inscape" implying a nature "characterised by incessant motion" that is a vitally active, agentic, constantly transforming and evolving material universe in which human and nonhuman embroilment is consecrated spiritually to the veneration of God (Parham, 2010, p. 133). According to Hopkins, "all the world is full of inscape and chance left free to act falls into an order as well as purpose" (Hopkins, 1959, p. 230). Nixon confirms that Hopkins's "discourse on inscape and the energy of instress charges nature with creative, self-organizing processes" (2002, p. 139). In his journals, Hopkins identifies the end of March and the beginning of April as the best "time to study inscape the spraying of trees, for the swelling buds carry them to a pitch…in these sprays at all events there is a new world of inscape" (1959, p. 205). It is unimpeachably this idea of plants that is vitally alive and actively evolving living beings that carries Hopkins much ahead of his time since the plant agency is a nascent theoretical premise of critical plant studies, reverberating most recently as an offshoot of ecocriticism that has not arrived on the scene until the end of the 20th century.

Respectively, "Ashboughs" is a momentous poem that involves Hopkins' personal reflections on human and plant life, interwoven with each other. Apart from uncovering Hopkins' particular scientific interest in plants, the poem is quite significant in its display of plants as the physical embodiments of the relational dynamics between the material and the textual world of poetry. The poem opens with the confession of the poet that his eyes are not illuminated enough to capture the intricate heterogeneity of this complex cosmic universe, which is glittering with never-ending activity and inventiveness:

> 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. (Hopkins, 2008, p. 159)

The poet deciphers a gripping connectivity between the human mind, poetry and a tree whose branches reach into the sky while its roots go deep into the earth and, in

this sense, working fervently to form a symbiosis between heaven and earth. Elongating with its branches towards manifold directions, the ash tree is observed by the poet in a state of reconfiguring a network of interconnectivity between different natural entities by eroding unassailable boundaries between human and non-human species and proves itself as highly responsive and attentive to every incident happening in its physical and social environment. Besides, the ash tree also exhibits an immense skill of permeating into the human mind, nurturing it and, comes into being, in Hopkins' words, a "milk to the mind", sighing poetry to it (Hopkins, 2008, p. 159). Considering the poet's religious identity as a Catholic, Jesuit priest, it is quite noteworthy that the human persona is not seated at a secluded and superior position to nature; on the contrary, humans are envisioned amidst and reliant on this extremely vital universe, absolutely unprivileged, physically and emotionally interrelated to the physical universe. Human reason and imaginative capacity, in that sense, are not presented as exceptional human characteristics, but they are confirmed to be constituted and nurtured by nature, especially by plants. In view of that, Hopkins' poem overturns the anthropocentric tradition of writing in which the human mind produces a nonhuman nature through linguistic constructions and metaphoric representations. The human imagination appears, in the poem, as an artifact of plants who are embodied with stories to be told both in the material and literary platforms. Oppermann states that the universe is full of "biological, and cosmic stories that compel us to envision the physical world as storied matter, teeming with countless narrative agencies that infiltrate every imaginable space and make the world intelligible" (2013, p. 57). Similarly, Hopkins' imagination is shaped by ash-boughs who are craving for making new liaisons and transactions. The branches of the ash tree "touch heaven, tabour on it", and "hover on it; here, there, hurled, / With talons sweep" (Hopkins, 2008, p. 160). The interplay between the physical universe and human poetic imagination triggers the breeding of a "plant script" which enables its readers to look into the world with a botanical perception, allowing them to recognize how plants can inscribe themselves on the material world through their roots, seeds, branches and leaves, and the textual world by penetrating into the human mind (Ryan, 2017, p. 131). Therefore, Hopkins' poem certifies itself as a phytographic poem that entails "the interface between the inscriptions of plants in the world and the residues of botanical lives in literary productions" (2017, p. 131). Rather than using plants as motionless instruments of human literary activity, Hopkins' phytographic poem focuses on revealing the agentic faculty of plants in shaping and composing the human imagination.

The poem endorses human-plant entanglement not just merely in the physical and literary spheres but it embodies recurrent references to the spiritual magnitude of plant beings, imagined by the poet on an ethereal plane. The nurturing power of plants, in this regard, is derived from God who bestows sacredness on every human and non-human being indiscriminately. A precise emphasis is laid on the ash-boughs, which in the winter season dwell in the form of "new-nestle at heaven most high" waiting to proliferate in spring (Hopkins, 2008, p. 159). Enciphering the movements of ash-trees in a religious discourse, Hopkins' poem suggests that ash trees are more than simple biological organisms, acting mechanically and randomly and nurturing humans physically, but they are consecrated with a divine power, operating intentionally to build a spiritual magnetism between humans, the physical universe and God. The poem ends with an allusion to this magnetic power of plants that attracts humans and nonhumans to each other and ensures a constantly evolving and thriving universe where: "Of greenery and old earth gropes for, grasps at speed / Heaven with whom she childs things by" (Hopkins, 2008, p. 160). What is quite interesting in this quotation is that Hopkins' botanical evaluation of the natural world is displayed to be surpassing his religious convictions in such a way that God is not presented as the sole source of life but, "old earth" also appears to be nurturing every human and nonhuman beings, described in the poem as "things" in it, orchestrating linkages between humans, plants and God (Hopkins, 2008, p. 160). It should not be gone unnoticed that the poem's first version uses the expression of "she childs us by" (Hopkins, 2008, p. 159), while "us" is replaced by "things" in the second version of the poem (2008, p. 160). Significantly enough, this cannot be seen as an inadvertent choice of words, but the poet deliberately uses an all-encompassing term of "things" which includes human and nonhuman species, rather than using an exclusive word of "us" which will include merely human species, separated from its opponent, "them". Hence, sacredness and spirituality are not ascribed definitively to humans, but all "things" in nature are opined to be soulful and intentional actors. Hopkins' faculty of seeing a soul in plants is reminiscent of Elaine Miller's notion of "vegetative soul" which refers to the extremely advanced sensitivity and responsiveness of plants to their environment and "radically opposed to the figure of organisms as autonomous and oppositional; its [plant's] stance toward the world is characterized by the promise of life and growth" (2002, p. 5). The sanctity of vegetal existence, in Hopkins' poem, is an averment of the material disclosure of a celestial energy inflating the plant impetus to blossom and form connections with diverse species. Expressed differently, the everlasting desire for entwinement with other species and the power of reproduction in plants are consecrated traits uplifting them into the sublime and mirroring God's dexterity.

In conjunction with "Asboughs" which portrays plants as willful actors of nature, "Spring" is another exceptional poem dealing with the re-awakening of nature at an accelerated pace in the Spring season. The poem depicts Hopkins' intrinsic alertness to the biological variation and nature's self-sufficing system of revitalization, doggedly evolving co-production, and meaningful interaction between multifarious species:

> Nothing is so beautiful as Spring
> When weeds, in wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush;
> Thrush's eggs look little low heavens, and thrush
> Through the echoing timber does so rinse and wring
> The ear, it strikes like lightnings to hear him sing;
> The glassy peartree leaves and blooms, they brush
> The descending blue; that blue is all in a rush
> With richness; the racing lambs too have fair their fling.
> (Hopkins, 2008, p. 115)

Instead of considering plants as lesser life forms underneath animals and humans, the poem presents a dis-anthropocentric and equitable view of the world where plants, animals, and humans are uniformly invested with agency, intelligence, and spiritual value. The metaphoric expression of weeds in "wheels" impeccably conveys the vegetal agency which is most obviously discerned in the long shooting of leaves and branches, spotlighting an intentional motion in plant behavior that stems from an ultimate motive to move forward and exert itself in its own distinguishing way (Hopkins, 2008, p. 115). In his coherent assessment that reason is not a distinctive human attribute, Emanuele Coccia reconfigures reason as "the cosmic faculty of the variation of forms" (2017, p. 108). Reason, as Coccia claims, is a "*cosmic* and *natural* faculty (which exists in the physical world, not in the human body, and coincides with the natural course of things) of the fashioning of matter" (2017, p. 108, emphasis in the original). The seed, rhizome, branches, and leaves in this respect are explicit revelations of an intellect in plants, allowing them to think reasonably and reproduce themselves in the material world. Likewise, Hopkins' poem envisions weeds as reasonable life forms that can calculate the exact time period to blossom, towards which path to advance forward, give meaning and a purpose to their life, and thus, write their own stories in the physical universe.

Apart from their faculty of reasoning, plants are monitored by the poet to be in a fervent engagement of an inter-species communication with humans, animals, the

earth, the air and other entities. While a thrush lays its eggs on the branches of a tree, the tree does not remain unresponsive to the bird and its songs. The "echoing timber" harbors the image of a communicative tree that can indulge in meaningful conversation with its environment (Hopkins, 2008, p. 115). Norman Wirzba asserts that plant life is a "dialogical life" and although this dialogue is not "conducted in words, it is certainly carried on in the transmission of chemicals that number in the thousands" (2021, p. 84). From this standpoint, the echoing tree in Hopkins' poem is consistent with the dialogical life of plants and their unique skills of building relationships with their environments by sending chemical signals around them and finding alternative ways of communication by using other-than-human language. In almost every line of the poem it is emphasized that every natural entity has a corporeal existence in the material world, which comes into being through a process of complex and progressive interactivity between its individual parts. Humans are not necessarily extricated from this ongoing material entanglement between natural entities. As the poem affirms, nature's articulacy "rinse[s]" and "strikes" the human ear like "lightenings", charged with electricity, fuelling the human mind and body with sparks of energy and vitality (Hopkins, 2008, p. 115). As a substitute to a human-dominated universe where all agency is allocated to the human subject and every nonhuman being is diminished into static objects, Hopkins' poem depicts its human persona as completely immersed in the material universe where plants and animals vibrantly permeate into the human body. The human body, as a part of the material universe, finds itself in the middle of a reciprocal interactivity with plants and animals, what is called by Coccia as "immersion", that is defined as "an *action* of mutual compenetration between subject and environment, body and space, life and medium" (2017, p. 37, emphasis in the original). Plants, as Coccia argues, present an outstanding case in point, precipitating "a global modification of the cosmic environment, in other words of the world that they penetrate and by which they are penetrated" (2017, p. 38). In the same vein, in Hopkins' poem, humans, plants, and animals are not inactively juxtaposed in nature but they interpenetrate into each other so much so that each one, in the end, allows itself to be designed and shaped by the other.

Hopkins' biological perception of plants and the critical role of plants in the preservation of wilderness are more palpably visible in "Inversnaid", which reflects the poet's adulation of England's wildland areas, abstained from human infringement. Departing from the romantic appreciation of nature for its beauty, the poem epitomizes an avouchment of scientific and ecological understanding of nature, according to which

even the outwardly most negligible element in nature is, in fact, inherently valuable and irreplaceable peremptory for the universe. Upon his winter visits to the Scottish Highlands, the poet is enthralled by the uncontaminated landscape, waterfall and a small river with ash trees around it. A vitally alive and undisrupted view of a wild nature away from the conventional urban Victorian environment is recorded by the poet with these words: "Wiry heathpacks, flitches of fern, / And the beadbonny ash that sits over the burn" (Hopkins, 2008, p. 138). The poem pays a specific attention to the wild plants such as heath plants and flitches along with ash trees, growing at the bank of the brook, and thus, unravels Hopkins' botanical attentiveness to the imperative function of wild plants within the ecosystem that should not be perceived as trifle in comparison to the greater universe. Weeds' lively entanglement with their physical environment becomes for Hopkins a principal source of interest, spurring him to ponder upon the "vegetal existentiality" that invokes plants' physical "modes of being-in-the-world" without diminishing them into abstract conceptualizations, bereaved of their agency and vitality (Marder, 2013, p. 11). From a critical perspective of plant studies, which, most basically, "challenges the privileged place of the human in relation to plant life" (Stark, p. 180), it can be argued that Hopkins' poem re-configures humans' system of moral consideration to encapsulate plant life, not to exclude it. Weeds and trees, in that respect, are not uprooted from their physical spatiality in order to be turned into imaginary objects of poetry; on the contrary, they are shown uttermost respect and an ethical concern for being in the world physically and spatially, rather than metaphorically. Hopkins' attentiveness to vegetal existentiality is unearthed more bluntly in the following lines:

> What would the world be, once bereft
> Of Wet and Wildness? Let them be left,
> O let them be left, wildness and wet;
> Long live the weed and the wilderness yet. (Hopkins, 2008, p. 138)

Hopkins, in this quotation, directs an implicit criticism at the high-speeded industrialization process which continues uninterruptedly during the Victorian period, considering each element of nature as a capitalist commodity material to be exploited. Hopkins expresses his anxiety about the devastating consequences of Britain's industrial development, which, he fears, will not leave any area of "Wet and Wilderness" which, by all means, include wild plants (Hopkins, 2008, p. 138). Hopkins' thinking with plants allows him to understand the exigency of preserving the multifariousness of plant species to

prevent the loss of biodiversity, which is responsible for the disruption of the ecosystem. The conflation of "the weed and the wilderness" entails a distinctive plant awareness which enables the poet to see weeds not as the lowest forms of life and unwanted plants growing everywhere invasively and in need of being removed (Hopkins, 2008, p. 138). Conversely, Hopkins perceives weeds as the most crucial units of the ecosystemic balance, the termination of which would bring the collapse of the whole ecosystem. Considering the industrial infrastructure of Victorian Britain, which is built upon the exploitation of natural resources, Hopkins' call for the protection of wilderness and wild plants appears as a rightful remonstrance for the expeditious loss of biodiversity and the ubiquitous human motive to control and dominate the wilderness to open sufficient space for infringing industrial activities. This anthropocentric motive manifests itself as the greatest impediment to the likelihood of a less corrosive, non-dualistic, and non-hegemonic human-plant relationship. Randy Laist writes that "mastering a certain portion of plant kingdom" to a great extent by industrialization, "allowed human beings to urbanize, and ironically, to stop having to think about plants all the time" (2013, p. 10). In accordance with Laist's holding industrialization accountable for humans' plant negligence, Hopkins stresses the pivotal role of wetness, wilderness, and weeds for the preservation of nature's intricate system of biodiversity, which is under an outrageous menace posed by the 19th century industrial activities, causing human-plant estrangement. Elizabeth Hope Chang provides a lucid insight into the unscrupulous human-plant relationship in Victorian Britain, which widely depends on exercising intimidating control over the plant kingdom, irrespective of natural plant growth and points out that:

> [C]ultivation of plants, like other kinds of human interventions in the nineteenth century, was a sign and symptom of modernity. The changes that nineteenth-century up-to-date cultivation imposed—bringing together plants from around the globe on railways and steamships; popularizing their forms and variations in new kinds of print media; and making plants change color, size, shape and lifespan at human command—were proof of technical skill. (2019, p. 2)

The roots of the abusive and unethical human-plant relationship, as Chang compellingly argues, hinge heavily on the Victorian mindset, which untenably aligns the domestication and cultivation of plants with modernity and technological improvement. This anthropocentric ideology, which reduces plants into lifeless objects at the service of

humankind, bestows upon the human subject every authorial right to manipulate plant life by changing, altering, and commercializing plants for economic gains. In a similar manner, Hopkins' poem alludes to humans' industrial and economic colonization of plant kingdom, precipitating the loss of plant species at the highest plane of the Victorian Anthropocenic age.

In the course of the capitalist-industrial development of the Victorian age, despoiling the possibility of a non-domineering human-plant intersection, Hopkins writes another poem, "Binsey Poplars" which focuses on the problem of deforestation, showing an aggressive escalation on behalf of outstretching urban territories for humans' industrial activities. The poem is inspired by a real event of the cutting of aspen trees at Godstow on March 12, 1879, which Hopkins mentions in a letter to his friend, Richard Watson Dixon: "I have been up to Godstow this afternoon. I am sorry to say that the aspens that lined the river are everyone felled" (1990, p. 123). The poem tackles specifically the issue of environmental disaster caused by the human conduct of plants as financial materials and insentient mechanical objects. Grief-stricken over the cutting down of all the trees along the riverside, the poet counterposes the dualistic mindset of Victorian society, which sets apart humans and nonhuman beings as two opposite forces, as well as its ethical norms arranging a valid ground for annihilating trees in the best interests of humans. The following quotation gives a clear voice to Hopkins' vexation at the total extermination of aspen trees:

> My aspens dear, whose airy cages quelled,
> Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun,
> An felled, felled, are an felled;
> Of a fresh and following folded rank
> Not spared, not one
> That dandled a sandalled
> Shadow that swam or sank
> On meadow and river and wind-wandering weed-winding bank.
> (Hopkins, 2008, p. 127)

Hopkins' poignant receptiveness to the fallen trees is reflected vividly in the first line where he calls aspens as his "dear", an expression which not only carries an undertone of ethical concern and a respect for the natural life span of the aspens but also signifies a feeling of intimacy and a sense of emotional connectedness to the trees (Hopkins, 2008,

p. 127). Hopkins' botanical perception enables him to see the astounding biological complexity and agency of plants, which are more apparently observed in the second line of the poem. The leaves of trees are depicted as "airy cages" preventing the "leaping sun" from reaching into the earth straightly (Hopkins, 2008, p. 127). This is a substantial climatic role of trees and forests in filtering the direct fallout of the sunlight, and thus, balancing the heat by cooling the weather. Furthermore, another unique talent of plants, that is, photosynthesis, is described as the sun rays being "quenched in leaves" (Hopkins, 2008, p. 127), a vitally significant natural phenomenon accomplished exclusively by plants without which a single act of breathing for human and nonhuman beings on earth would not be possible. Monica Gagliano delineates this event as a "purposeful solar-tracking behavior" and writes that plants are "renowned for feasting on the radiant energy of the sun to photosynthesize, the process by which they convert light into food to nourish themselves and sustain life on Earth" (2016, p. 20). Gagliano's placing a stress on the purposefulness of plants in their performance of photosynthesis is, in effect, an underscoring of their intentional agency as well as their acute awareness of their environment. Michael Pollan considers it as a "genius" of plants that humans "really fail to appreciate" (2002, p. 5). Photosynthesis is explained as "an astonishing trick, to be able to take sunlight and water – very common elements – and create sugars, food, energy" (Pollan, 2002, p. 6). Analogously, Hopkins, in his poem, accentuates this awe-inspiring agentic faculty of plants in immersing sunlight and modifying it into energy and oxygen. Nevertheless, far from approbating the autotrophic capability of plants, humans are enticed to dismantle this profoundly operating system by destroying trees for economic and industrial expansion. Humans' capitalist exploitation of plants is insinuated in the poem as a catastrophic upshot of a human-centric ideological mechanism that arranges for humans an ethically valid ground for the total extermination of trees for gaining economic profit. Underpinning the biologically imperative role of plants in the ecosystem, Hopkins attempts to rectify human ignorance of plants, in other words, humans' "plant blindness", a scientific denomination coined by Wandersee and Schussler as a specific human indisposition to realize plants as indispensable biological agents of the ecosystem, "the inability to recognize the importance of plants in the biosphere and in human affairs" (1999, p. 82). In that respect, Hopkins' poem is contingent upon preventing humans' plant blindness in order that they may relinquish looking at plants as pecuniary objects out of which can be made economic profit. Calling fallen aspens as "dear, beloved kindreds" can be seen as Hopkins' unfeigned attempt to show the prospect of constructing alternative forms of human-plant relationship that should be predicated upon love, respect, and emotional identification rather than upon utilitarian principles, stressing the instrumental and

economic value of plants. Additionally, drawing attention to photosynthesis by describing how the sunlight is soaked by the leaves, Hopkins, in fact, unshackles plants from the imprisonment of metaphoric representations and employs a scientific view of plants by maintaining that the material universe, more particularly plants, are more complicated and stupendous than humans' imaginary, symbolic conceptualizations projected upon plants. The structural design of the poem, composed in the shape of a tree with its long and short lines, also reinforces plants' ascendency over Hopkins' poem with their physical existentiality rather than with symbolic implications. Therefore, it can easily be seen that aspen trees physically inscribe themselves in the poetry of Hopkins. In Vieira's words, "plants' signature is their inscription in the world through their bodily manifestations" (2017, p. 218). Resting on Vieira's argument, not only in the physical universe but also in the textual sphere, plants are capable of leaving their signatures as it is observed in "Binsey Poplars". In his discontentment with destructive human behavior towards plants, Hopkins intends to rehabilitate humans' plant blindness by showing, through scientific evidence, that plant life matters in itself and cannot be forsaken for anthropocentric human egomania, which is a lethal weapon used for destroying everything that is not human. As the poem asserts, "[s]trokes of havoc unselve / The sweet especial scene" (2008, p. 128). Attributing identity and personality to plants, Hopkins reinforces that plants are not just passive consumption materials vouchsafed unto human service but they are completely alive, vibrant living beings, possessing a unique identity different from humans, and thus, deserve respect and vigilance.

Conclusion

Gerard Manley Hopkins' distinctive plant awareness and the scientific essentiality of plants in human and nonhuman life on earth are laid bare through the lens of critical plant studies, which invites the botanical and biological perspectives of plants into the literary domain. Plants, most assuredly, do not occupy poetic representation as passive background materials, but they are discerned to be at the center of Hopkins' poems as attempted to be perused in this study. Plants in Hopkins' poetry are portrayed with their agentic credentials with an ability to dissolve ontological barriers between human and nonhuman beings on the basis of their intelligibility and intentionality. Hopkins' plant poetry shows a remarkable devotedness to re-designing an entirely new non-human-oriented relationship with plants, which requires an overall change of human perception of plants from being inert objects towards living individuals. Delineating human life as deeply rooted in the plant kingdom, Hopkins' plant poetics encourages

thinking with plants and molding of a more intimate human-plant entanglement that will be less aggressive and less destructive. From this vantage point, Hopkins' poems move beyond poems on plants towards poems by plants, more precisely, phytographic poems in which plants exert their agency and vitality and thus leave their physical traces on the textual spheres.

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