

The best moment of the 2016 International Hopkins Festival in Ireland came on me all unexpectedly.

Because it is an international Festival, there are people attending from all over Europe and even the Far East. So the Festival regularly includes a translation workshop when the delegates try to put a GMH poem into their own language. I thought I would watch what went on. The poem chosen was 'God's Grandeur', and there were groups working on translations into French, German, Danish, Gaelic and Japanese. I couldn't contribute to any of those, so I thought, 'Why don't I try to put it into modern English prose, for people who find the original inaccessible?' And this is what emerged.

God's majesty is at work throughout the earth.  
It flashes out like sparks from a live wire;  
It bursts out in places like when you squeeze a toothpaste tube.  
So why can people not see it – and him?

Year after year they follow the same routine;  
Their vision is blinkered and blurred with the daily grind,  
Their senses clogged with human effort and human error.  
The earth feels tired. Feet in shoes cannot connect with its pulse.

And yet, and yet – the pulse is beating still.  
Look beyond the grime, and the earth is sweet and clean.  
Today wastes away in the dark of the dusk,  
But tomorrow breaks bright with the hope of the new –  
Because God's Spirit holds the worn world in her arms,  
Nurtures it close to her heart – ahhhh!

It takes a lot of liberties, of course, and loses the magic of the original. But it was a wonderfully interesting and stretching exercise to do. It made me really think what I understood GMH to be saying in each line, and how to express it in my words, not his.

A few months later we were at Stonyhurst for our own autumn Hopkins day. And Wyn Hobson asked to do the same sort of thing with one of the Stonyhurst poems, 'Ribblesdale'. He felt that people would more effectively enter and follow the poem as he read it, if they had his prose synopsis of it in front of them. This is what he produced as what he called a tentative paraphrase.

'Sweet Earth, sweet landscape, dense with leaves and slouching low grass; you that appeal to heaven, though having no tongue to plead and no heart to feel; you that can only exist, but do so for a long period of time —

you can only exist, but you exist well; your plea carries weight with Him who created, and even now lays out, your lovely dale like this, and bids your river to roll like this, and resigns everything to suffering or wrong.

And where is Earth's expressiveness to be found but in beloved and determined man? — the heir of God, so bound to his own obstinate individualism, so tied to his own chosen course,

both to incautiously and wastefully despoiling our rich round world, and to having no care about the afterlife; this is what causes Earth to wear an expression of such care and tender concern.'

Why not try it yourself with another poem? We'd be interested to see the result.