

The Common Aesthetic Commitment - the Divine as seen by Bharati and Hopkins

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a sustained comparative study of Subramania Bharati and Gerard Manley Hopkins, two poets separated by geography, language, religion, and historical circumstance, yet united by a shared aesthetic commitment to perceiving the divine within the ordinary. Rather than approaching their work through thematic parallels alone, the paper traces the chronological maturation of each poet's vision, showing how a disciplined attention to the particular becomes, in both cases, an ethical and spiritual act. Bharati's poetic journey, rooted in early classical inheritance and radicalised through nationalism and social awakening, culminates in a vision where God is recognised in the most disregarded forms of life. Hopkins, writing within the tensions of Victorian modernity and Jesuit discipline, develops his concepts of inscape and instress as modes of reverent perception under strain. By bringing these two poets into a shared field of attention, the paper argues that their aesthetics converge in a common labour of seeing, one that resists abstraction, hierarchy, and habitual blindness. The comparison reveals how poetic perception itself becomes a form of moral and spiritual formation. The paper is based on close readings of the poems of Subramania Bharati and Gerard Manley Hopkins, informed by critical discussions on aesthetics, sacramentality, and poetic vision.

Keywords: Subramania Bharati; Gerard Manley Hopkins; inscape; divine ordinary; comparative aesthetics

Introduction:

Subramania Bharati and Gerard Manley Hopkins are two prominent names in the pantheon of poets for whom aesthetic vision is inseparable from moral and spiritual responsibility. Separated by language, geography, and religious tradition, they nonetheless share a profound commitment to poetry as a disciplined act of seeing rather than a vehicle of ornament or escape. In their work, the world is not deficient in meaning; it is human perception that has grown inattentive. Poetry therefore becomes a corrective practice, restoring attention to what habit, hierarchy, and abstraction have rendered invisible.

For both Bharati and Hopkins, poetry is not an indulgence of feeling nor a retreat from the world's pressures, but a rigorous discipline of attention. To write poetry is to learn how to see, slowly and truthfully, against the grain of habit and inherited valuation. Ornament, in this context, is not rejected but subordinated; it is permitted only insofar as it serves perception. Likewise, poetry is never an escape from social, ethical, or spiritual responsibility. On the contrary, it sharpens responsibility by refusing abstraction. The poet's task is to remain faithful to what stands before the eye, whether exalted or overlooked, and to render it visible without distortion or hierarchy. In this sense, poetic vision becomes an ethical act, training the reader to encounter the world not as a field of symbols or utilities, but as a presence demanding recognition.

For Bharati and Hopkins, the function of poetry is neither embellishment nor instruction in the narrow sense, but transformation of perception. Poetry does not tell the reader what to think; it trains the reader in how to attend. By slowing the gaze and intensifying awareness, the poem reorders the relation between the self and the world. What has been ignored becomes present, what has been diminished recovers weight. In this way, poetry performs a formative role. It shapes sensibility before it shapes belief. The reader emerges not persuaded by argument, but altered by encounter, having learned to recognise significance where none was previously granted.

Comparative literary studies focus on influence, proximity, or shared traditions. This paper focusses on the shared *act* of perception and how each poet, though separated geographically, behold the divine along the same lines that converge at the same point across continents. Subramania Bharati and Gerard Manley Hopkins never read one another. They do not belong to the same linguistic, religious, or cultural worlds. Their lives do not overlap in time. Yet both poets devote their finest energies to a single, demanding task: the recovery of poetic vision. For Bharati and Hopkins, poetry is not merely an expression of belief or emotion, but a discipline of attention. The world, they suggest, is already charged with meaning, sanctity, and value, the grandeur of God, as Hopkins would say.

This study suggests a look at the deepest affinity between Bharati and Hopkins in their aesthetic affirmation of the Divine Truth. Both poets arrive, through different looking

routes, at a poetics that insists on the irreducible significance of the particular. The crow, the stone, the field, the child, the moment – all of which habit has taught us to overlook. These are not symbols pointing elsewhere. They are sites of presence. To see them rightly is already to participate in a moral and spiritual reorientation.

Bharati's poetic development unfolded rapidly albeit under the pressures of colonial modernity, political urgency, and spiritual reimagining. Hopkins' work is to be positioned within Victorian England, Jesuit discipline, and in the background of the tension between the pull of sensory richness and ascetic restraint. The poets speak of God, but without their perception sounding like a moral instruction, forcing the readers to accept God. Both poets point the torch in that direction and leave the readers to behold / feel the power in the blackness of the crow, the greenery of the tree and the majestic falcon.

Subramania Bharati: Life, Chronology, and the Education of Perception

Subramania Bharati was born in 1882 and died in 1921, his short life unfolding during one of the most turbulent periods of Indian history. His active poetic career spans barely two decades, yet within this compressed time Bharati moves through distinct phases of aesthetic and ideological development. Chronology matters deeply in understanding his work, because Bharati's poetry is not static conviction but an evolving practice of seeing.

In his early phase, roughly the first years of the twentieth century, Bharati writes under the influence of classical Tamil poetry, Sanskritic tradition, and bhakti devotional modes. Beauty here is still elevated, often idealised. The divine appears in recognisable forms. Nature is lyrical and harmonised. Yet even at this stage, Bharati shows an impatience with ornamental excess. His language seeks immediacy. There is a restlessness in his voice, a refusal to allow beauty to remain distant or merely inherited.

In this early phase of Bharati's poetic life, the divine appears in recognisable and inherited forms, drawing deeply from classical Tamil and Sanskritic devotional traditions. Gods are named, invoked, and praised within familiar mythic frames, and nature is presented as lyrical, ordered, and harmonised with human emotion. Landscapes echo inner states; flowers, rivers, dawns, and skies participate in a shared aesthetic rhythm that reassures rather than unsettles. Beauty here is still mediated through convention, shaped by received modes of reverence and poetic grace. Yet even within this harmony, Bharati's voice carries an undercurrent of impatience, a desire to move closer to immediacy. The lyric calm does not yet break, but there is a certain impatience, an urgency, as though beauty must soon shed its ceremonial distance and enter more directly into lived experience. In hymns addressed to Shakti and Krishna, the divine is praised through familiar epithets of radiance, compassion, and protection, echoing bhakti inheritance. Nature, too, appears as harmonised accompaniment rather than disruption. In poems describing dawn, flowers, or flowing rivers, the world unfolds in ordered beauty, mirroring emotional states rather than challenging them. Lines celebrating blossoming lotuses, gentle breezes, or the rhythmic movement of water

present nature as a sympathetic presence, attuned to human feeling and spiritual aspiration. The divine is encountered through elevation and grace.

In these early poems, Bharati often figures nature as a sympathetic and harmonious presence, responsive to human emotion and spiritual yearning. Blossoming lotuses rise as emblems of inner awakening, as in lines that speak of flowers opening their hearts to the sun. Gentle breezes are invoked as bearers of joy and reassurance, moving softly through the world as if participating in human hope. Rivers and flowing waters appear in rhythmic motion, their ceaseless movement suggesting continuity, order, and grace.

In *Chinnanchiru Kiliye*, the bird itself becomes the medium of divine intimacy. Nature is tender, companionable, and emotionally intelligent. The bird is a living presence through which love, protection, and spiritual closeness are felt.

In *Sindhu Nadhiyin Misai*, the river is not just geographical. Its flow, rhythm, and vastness hold a kind of concrete spiritual aspiration. The divine is sensed through the living movement of water and land. In *Kaatru Veliyidai*, the breeze is not a neutral physical force. It moves as a messenger, carrying tenderness, awakening, and emotional resonance. The wind participates in inner life and becomes almost a companion.

Bharati's poetry had been largely devotional, lyrical, and focused on the intimate harmonies of nature and the divine. Rivers, breezes, flowers, and birds were not mere ornaments but companions in a disciplined act of seeing, teaching the reader to perceive presence, significance, and the sacred in the everyday. Yet even in these earlier works, there is an undercurrent of urgency, a restlessness that hints at a world beyond the garden, a world that demands engagement. The refinement of perception, cultivated in quiet lyricism, prepares Bharati to confront larger moral and social questions. It is against this foundation of attentive seeing that the decisive transformation occurs as Bharati becomes deeply involved in the nationalist movement. Politics, for Bharati, is never an external addition to poetry.

The decisive transformation occurs as Bharati becomes deeply involved in the nationalist movement. Politics, for Bharati, is never an external addition to poetry. It is a catalyst that forces aesthetic re-evaluation. Under the pressure of colonial injustice and social stagnation, Bharati's poetry begins to dismantle hierarchies of worth. Gods descend from temples into streets. Women speak not as allegories but as agents. The poor and marginalised are no longer scenery; they become bearers of truth. Beauty is redefined as vitality, courage, and awakened consciousness.

This middle phase intensifies Bharati's aesthetic commitment. Poetry becomes an instrument of awakening, not by didactic proclamation, but by re-training perception. Freedom is imagined not only as political self-rule but as liberation from inherited blindness.

Bharati's diction grows more direct, his rhythms more urgent, his imagery more rooted in everyday life. The divine is no longer distant, yet it is not trivialised. It is re-situated.

In his later years, Bharati arrives at a remarkable stillness. The urgency does not vanish, but it is carried with greater confidence. Language becomes lean. Images are stripped of grandeur. It is here that Bharati's mature aesthetic fully emerges. The divine is not argued for, nor symbolised. It is simply recognised. Poems such as "*Kaakkai Siraginile Nandalala*" do not announce a philosophy. They enact it. The crow is not elevated into metaphor. It is allowed to remain what it is. The essence of the discovery lies in the reader's realisation that sanctity was never absent, only unnoticed.

Bharati's chronology of aesthetic growth reveals an aesthetic education that moves from reverence, through rebellion, into radical simplicity – a simplicity that is the distilled essence of the poetic journey of Bharati.

Bharati's Divine.

His poetic vision insists that divinity is not located elsewhere, waiting to be reached through refinement, but present in the very textures of ordinary existence. In Bharati's mature work, the crow on a rooftop, the rustle of leaves, the dust of the village street, and the cadence of everyday speech become carriers of sacredness. The ordinary is no longer incidental; it is charged with presence, demanding attention and ethical recognition. The poet's task is to awaken the reader to this, to insist that no detail is too small, no moment too common to escape the divine gaze. Here, lyricism and realisation converge: every couplet becomes both a song and a call, an aesthetic delight that simultaneously trains perception and cultivates moral attentiveness. Bharati's genius lies in this fusion — the capacity to celebrate beauty, to evoke wonder, and to sustain the pressure of deep content without its appearing compelled. Poetry, in this phase, is a discipline of participation, inviting readers to inhabit a world where God, nature, and human life are inseparable. Ordinary perception is transformed into reverent attention; the world, once overlooked in its seeming mundaneness, reveals its fullness, rhythm, and sacred resonance.

The mature Bharati refuses distinctions between sacred and profane, beautiful and ugly, worthy and worthless. His poetic vision insists that divinity is not located elsewhere, waiting to be reached through refinement, but present in the very textures of ordinary existence. This insistence is not sentimental. It is demanding. To see God in a crow's wings is not to romanticise the crow, but to dismantle the habits of perception that render certain lives invisible.

Bharati's aesthetic therefore carries ethical weight. The recognition of the divine in the overlooked becomes a critique of social hierarchy. The poem does not merely offer consolation. It exposes prejudice. It asks why certain forms are dismissed, why attention is withheld. In this sense, Bharati's poetics align perception with justice. To mis-see the world is already to participate in its injustice.

Language, in these poems, performs transparency. The simplicity is earned, not naive. Bharati's long apprenticeship allows him to trust the image without explanation. The poem becomes an act of pointing, not persuading.

To a reader who has engaged closely with both Bharati and Hopkins, there are unmistakable echoes that resonate across continents and centuries. One finds oneself pausing over a Bharati line and sensing, in the heightened attention to ordinary presence, the very same intensity that animates Hopkins' meticulous observation of the world. Both poets insist that divinity, wonder, and moral significance are embedded not in distant realms but in the textures of everyday life: the flutter of a bird's wing, the shimmer of dew, the rhythm of flowing water. The ethical and aesthetic act in each case begins with perception, a disciplined seeing that trains the mind and soul to apprehend what habit or abstraction might otherwise obscure. Bharati's charged ordinary — the crow on the rooftop, the sway of the mango tree, the village street alive with human rhythm - finds its counterpart in Hopkins' Victorian landscapes, where even a common stone or a falcon's shadow carries sacramental weight. It is this shared insistence on attentiveness, on *the simple presence as meaning*, that forms the hinge upon which the reader's vision turns from Bharati's garden to Hopkins' disciplined vision of the divine.

Gerard Manley Hopkins was born in 1844 and died in 1889, his life unfolding within the moral, industrial, and intellectual tensions of Victorian England. Unlike Bharati, Hopkins published little during his lifetime. His poetic career is marked by hesitation, suppression, and interior struggle. Chronology again matters, because Hopkins' aesthetics are forged through restraint rather than public engagement.

The pivotal moment in Hopkins' life occurs in 1866, with his conversion to Catholicism and subsequent entry into the Jesuit order. This decision reshapes his relationship to art, sensation, and self-expression. For several years, Hopkins abandons poetry, believing it incompatible with his vocation. When he returns to writing, he does so under severe discipline. Poetry must now justify itself as an act of praise.

It is within this context that Hopkins develops his concepts of *inscape* and *instress*. *Inscape* refers to the unique, irreducible form of a thing, its inner pattern of being. *Instress* names the dynamic energy by which this form is apprehended and held by the perceiving mind. These are not abstract theories. They arise from intense, often exhausting acts of attention. Hopkins' mind is a mind overwhelmed by particularity, straining to register the world faithfully without giving in to aesthetic indulgence.

For Hopkins, the world is sacramental not because it symbolises God, but because it bears God's signature in its distinctness. Each thing is charged with divine meaning precisely as itself. This conviction rescues the particular from being merely illustrative. A stone is not

valuable because it stands for something else, but because it is this stone and no other. For Hopkins, the world is sacramental not because it symbolises God, but because it bears God's signature in its distinctness. Each object, creature, and moment possesses a unique identity — an *inscape* — that reveals the divine precisely in its particularity. A leaf, a stone, a bird in flight, or the curve of a falcon's wing does not point to God elsewhere; it is God's presence made manifest in its form, rhythm, and texture. This is not metaphorical ornamentation. It is the realization that the sacred resides in the concrete, in the perceptible world, demanding attention and responsiveness. To perceive fully is to encounter God, not in some distant, transcendent realm, but in the living, breathing particularity of existence. The ethical dimension is inseparable from the aesthetic: attentiveness becomes a moral exercise, a way of acknowledging the presence, significance, and value of each entity.

Hopkins' insistence on distinctness is inseparable from the discipline under which his poetic vision was formed. His Jesuit training demanded rigorous attention, obedience, and self-scrutiny, and this spiritual discipline finds its aesthetic counterpart in his poetry. To see a thing truly is, for Hopkins, an act of fidelity. The mind must resist haste, generalisation, and abstraction in order to apprehend the singular being of what stands before it. This is why his poems often slow perception to an almost painful intensity. The reader is made to linger over stresses, sounds, and images, reenacting the poet's own struggle to remain present. In a world increasingly shaped by industrial repetition and mechanised uniformity, Hopkins' poetry becomes an act of resistance, preserving the uniqueness of creation against forces that flatten difference. His sacramental vision is thus not merely theological, but ethical and aesthetic, insisting that to overlook or reduce the particular is to fail in attention, and therefore in reverence.

Hopkins' mature poetry emerges from a sustained tension between sensory richness and spiritual discipline. Unlike a poet who indulges perception for its own sake, Hopkins approaches the world with a vigilant seriousness, aware that attention itself is a moral act. His intense focus on colour, movement, and texture is never casual. It is governed by restraint, by the knowledge that perception must be disciplined if it is to remain truthful. This explains the density of his language and the deliberate difficulty of his poems. Meaning is not offered effortlessly; it must be earned through attentive reading, mirroring the effort required to perceive the world rightly. In poems such as *The Windhover* and *Pied Beauty*, the sheer vitality of creation is celebrated not as spectacle but as revelation, each distinct form praising God simply by being fully itself. Hopkins' poetry insists that the divine does not erase individuality but perfects it. The world's diversity, its "dappled" character, is not a deviation from sacred order but its very expression. To encounter this diversity with care and seriousness is, for Hopkins, an act of worship, a completely new perception of divinity and one's transaction with it.

Hopkins' vision is marked by tension. Industrial modernity threatens to flatten difference. Religious discipline threatens to suppress sensation. Hopkins stands between these pressures, seeking a form of attention that honours creation without idolising it. His poetry bears the marks of this struggle. Joy is intense but fragile. Praise is shadowed by fatigue. The effort to see rightly is never complete.

In *Pied Beauty*, Hopkins articulates with remarkable clarity his vision of a world whose sacredness lies precisely in its variation. The poem's praise is directed not toward uniform perfection, but toward dappledness, contrast, and irregularity. Skies streaked with colour, spotted animals, variegated landscapes, and human labour itself are gathered into a single act of thanksgiving. What is celebrated is not order imposed from above, but order revealed through difference. Each thing praises God by being unmistakably itself. The divine signature is not found in sameness, but in the creative delight that permits multiplicity. The poem's compressed structure mirrors this vision: brief, charged phrases accumulate without excess explanation, compelling the reader to attend to each detail as an instance of sacred presence.

In *The Windhover*, this vision is intensified through movement rather than pattern. The falcon's mastery of air, its poised hovering and sudden plunge, becomes an image of disciplined energy held in perfect balance. What arrests Hopkins is not the bird as symbol, but the act itself, the moment when control, power, and grace converge. The falcon's flight is an event of revelation, a lived enactment of inscape, where form and force coincide. In both poems, perception is stretched to its limit. The reader is trained to see slowly, attentively, and reverently. Beauty is not decorative or soothing; it is demanding. It requires the surrender of habitual seeing and the acceptance of presence as something that commands response.

Hopkins' mature poems are marked by linguistic compression, sprung rhythm, and sonic density. Language here does not aim for transparency but for fidelity. The difficulty of the poems mirrors the difficulty of perception itself. To see truly is labour. It requires effort, humility, and endurance.

The **crow in Bharati** and the **falcon in Hopkins** function as emblematic figures of attention, though they emerge from very different imaginative worlds. Bharati's crow is ordinary, familiar, even dismissed in daily life. Its blackness and ubiquity mark it as overlooked. Yet Bharati insists on its dignity, compelling the reader to reconsider what habit has taught them to ignore. Hopkins' falcon, by contrast, is majestic, rare, and arresting. It commands attention immediately. Yet Hopkins' purpose is similar: not to romanticise the bird, but to hold the moment of perception steady, to dwell in the act of seeing until it becomes revelation. One poet elevates the overlooked; the other intensifies the already arresting. Both train attention.

Flowing water in Bharati and hovering flight in Hopkins represent movement disciplined into meaning. Bharati's rivers and streams move with continuity and rhythm, suggesting harmony, sustenance, and the quiet persistence of life. They do not dramatise effort; they enact belonging. Hopkins' falcon, suspended in air before its plunge, embodies controlled energy and precision. The motion is tense rather than continuous. Yet in both cases, movement is not chaos. It is form held in balance, revealing an underlying order that perception must learn to recognise.

Bharati's village street and Hopkins' rural landscape serve as sites of sacred presence without sanctification. Bharati locates divinity amid dust, labour, and common speech, refusing to separate holiness from lived social space. Hopkins, writing in a rapidly industrialising England, retreats to fields, skies, and hedgerows not out of nostalgia but to preserve perceptual integrity against mechanised sameness. Both landscapes resist abstraction. They are not backdrops but fields of encounter, where attention becomes an ethical stance.

The lyric voice in Bharati and the strained voice in Hopkins reveal different tonal strategies serving the same end. Bharati often writes with clarity, directness, and musical openness, inviting participation. Hopkins' voice is compressed, knotty, and demanding, resisting easy entry. Yet both voices refuse passivity. The reader must respond, either by entering the flow or by wrestling with resistance. In each case, poetry reshapes the reader's habits of attention.

Finally, **beauty itself functions differently yet convergently**. Bharati's beauty expands outward, becoming social, national, and ethical, carrying the weight of collective awakening. Hopkins' beauty intensifies inward, becoming sacramental, concentrated in the irreducible particular. One widens the field; the other deepens it.

What unites Bharati and Hopkins is not shared imagery, belief, or historical circumstance, but a common aesthetic commitment to attention as a moral and spiritual discipline. Both poets refuse the idea that the divine must be sought in abstraction, transcendence, or symbolic distance. Instead, they locate sacredness in the immediacy of the world as it is encountered. Whether in Bharati's village streets, birds, and flowing rivers, or in Hopkins' dappled landscapes and poised falcon, the ordinary becomes a site of revelation through sustained, disciplined seeing. Poetry, for both, functions as a training of perception rather than a delivery of doctrine. The reader is not instructed what to believe, but invited to see differently. In this convergence, beauty is neither escape nor ornament. It is a summons to attentiveness, responsibility, and reverence. Across cultural and linguistic divides, Bharati and Hopkins arrive at a shared conviction: that to see the world rightly is already to stand in the presence of the divine.

Convergence : Seeing together

When Bharati and Hopkins are brought into comparison, the point is not to erase difference but to understand the convergence. Both poets insist that the ethical and spiritual task begins with attention. Both refuse abstraction. Both trust the particular as the site of meaning.

Yet their temperaments differ. Bharati's confidence emerges from social engagement and philosophical synthesis. Hopkins' hesitancy emerges from interior discipline and theological caution. Bharati's language clears space. Hopkins' language compresses it. But the act beneath the style is shared. To look steadily at what is before us, without hierarchy, without haste, without dismissal.

Having traced the mature poetic visions of Bharati and Hopkins in their own distinct historical and spiritual contexts, it becomes possible to pause and look across the distance that separates them. The differences remain evident: language, tradition, cultural inheritance, and lived circumstance. Yet the deeper one attends to the structure of their seeing, the less decisive these differences appear. Beneath divergent forms and vocabularies lies a shared labour of perception, a common insistence that poetry must train the eye and the mind before it persuades or instructs. It is at this level of aesthetic discipline, rather than doctrinal agreement or thematic similarity, that the two poets begin to speak to one another. If Bharati points and trusts recognition, Hopkins strains and holds. Together, they reveal that the divine ordinary is not easily won. It demands either courage or endurance, often both.

Conclusion:

Subramania Bharati and Gerard Manley Hopkins converge in an aesthetic ethics of perception. Across cultural and historical distance, both poets commit themselves to the recovery of sight in a world dulled by habit, hierarchy, and abstraction. Their poetry insists that the divine is not elsewhere, waiting to be reached, but here, waiting to be seen.

By tracing their work chronologically and placing their mature visions in dialogue, the paper shows that attention itself becomes a moral act. To see the crow, the stone, the field, or the child rightly is already to resist injustice, alienation, and spiritual impoverishment. Bharati and Hopkins do not offer escape. They offer return. To the world as it is, seen at last with reverence.

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