

# The Devil's Étude

## *An Exercise in Polyphony*

by [Jeffrey Burghauser](#) (August 2022)



*Crows in Winter*, N. C. Wyeth, 1941

*This song of Lucifer's was a dwelling on his own beauty, an instressing of his own inscape, and like performance on the organ and instrument of his own being[.]—Gerard Manley Hopkins, "Notes From a Long Retreat" [\[\\*\]](#)*

**The glances of** women say I am the pin  
Existence stuck into itself till it hurt.

I'm sipping espresso, and fastened within  
A pucker-necked infantry sweater, alert,  
Commanding, inside a repurposed château—  
An affable, elderly interviewee  
Who (decades ago) ran a gas chamber. Oh,  
I love how this résearcher marvels at me!

She's sketching my essence's arches & camp-  
Ānīli. However, there's something amiss:  
That cornice, that turret, that octagon lamp,  
That spire. For reasons that silently hiss,  
She cannot gain purchase on all of my damp  
Divisions. She's frustrated (pity the youth!)-  
Upset as a dentist who struggles to clamp  
Her pliers upon a decay-softened tooth.

For I am the pin whose proximity pricks.  
According to Radner, august, middle-aged  
Rousseau wrote to Boswell in seventeen six-  
Ty-something (...and just before Boswell engaged  
The Master aware that a language foresees  
Its matrix, as Time must occasion the Clock):  
"Although you're malicious, I find it's a pleas-  
ing malice—a malice I do not dislike." [\[†\]](#)

And Boswell himself was a sketcher of men;  
His *Life* of the Master, as good as may be  
Expected from someone whose competent pen  
Lacked all sense of irony. She isn't he,  
However; and Johnson, I'm not. [*Flames confess*  
*Christ's Majesty.*] Johnson says where words belong,  
And I am the doer of what, were it less  
Inevitable, would be Perfectly Wrong.

"You ask what I think I deserve—I, who stood,  
Defending my people...without me—I'll show  
Statistics, reports—the catastrophe would  
Have turned out, believe me, a hundred—or no:

A *thousand* times bloodier. I had the nerve,  
A Soldier, restoring respect for the Laws,  
For Heritage. What do I think I deserve?  
A good place to start: this Tribunal's applause."

However, my register's intimate now:

"You never will know me unless you agree  
The loveliest smell that a life may allow  
Is cigarette smoke in the summer. Some tea?"  
My anger is racing with more absolute  
Dispatch than a droplet of sweat through a square  
Of terrycloth. Every passion is brute,  
And every name is a lame *nom de guerre*.

The glances of women [*O Heaven above!*]  
Say I am the pin [*Sweet Jerusalem's pen*]  
Existence stuck into [*composed me for love.*]  
Itself till it hurt. [*Glory, find me again,*  
*Corrupted;*] I'm sipping espresso, [*the quote*  
*You noticed & mastered*] and fastened within  
A pucker-necked infantry sweater, [*by rote,*  
*Undone with errata.*] alert, [*Thus, begin,*]

Commanding, [*Salvation! Some mercy, my Lord;*  
*Some mercy.*] inside a repurposed château—  
An affable, [*There, on the emerald sward*  
*The maidens are*] elderly [*dancing. So show*  
*Me everything*] interviewee [*Jesu has.*  
*So show me some mercy consistent as snow,*]  
Who (decades ago) ran [*astonishing as*]  
A gas chamber. [*treason. Some mercy, Lord.*] Oh,

I love how this *résearcher* marvels at me,  
Conjecturing what I might do in the night,  
For I am inventive & lethally free,  
The panic of those asking "Who?" in the night.  
Behold her examining one of the tin  
And amethyst brooches I strew in the night.

The suppliant's story transparently in-  
Sincere in the daytime is true in the night.

A nocturne. O listen. It's either the din  
Of innocent love or a coup in the night.  
unrighteousness moistly was shedding its skin,  
And leaving it drifting, a clue in the night.  
I grin at your wince at this harrowing grin;  
You shiver. I recognize you in the night.  
O frozen moon, [*Let me be Your violin,*  
*O Heaven!*] alone as a Jew in the night.

The glances of women say I am the site  
Where Roux bottles culture this genus of Sin.  
Unfortunate questioner, try as you might,  
Alas, neither you nor your scholarly kin  
Shall tally amid such disordering, light-  
Bewildered & damp Dionysian spin  
Exactly how many of Heaven's despite-  
Ed angels can dance on the head of a pin.

[\*] Quoted in Ellsberg, Margaret R. *The Gospel in Gerard Manley Hopkins*. (Walden, New York: Plough Publishing House, 2017). p. 186.

[†] Radner, John B. *Johnson and Boswell: A Biography of a Friendship*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012. p. 42.

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