

# The Devil's Étude

## *An Exercise in Polyphony*

by [Jeffrey Burghauer](#) (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-  
Ñíli. 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 [*astounding 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 supplicant'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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