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A Student's Poetry: Earth Day Pledges

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Why are we here, the poet asks? To burrow lice-like into some giant wheel of cheese, surrounding ourselves with the fat of the world until death takes us? Or are we here to recognize what we have been given – air, water, light, nourishment, knowledge, friendship, art – and thus give praise back to our Creator. “Glory be to God for dappled things,” Hopkins sang, for the kaleidoscopic variety and freshness in all things,

For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches’ wings...

For if the world is charged with the grandeur of God, then we are charged with acknowledging that grandeur, since we are the only creatures consciously aware of that beauty and so of praising the Creator of Brother Sun and Sister Moon. For where else, Hopkins tells us as he witnesses the terrible effects of strip mining which leaves huge brow-like slags to scar the earth for generations after. How else can the earth cry out in its hurt? What other “eye, tongue, or heart else, where/ Else, but in dear and dogged man?” Man, so dear to his Creator, and yet so “selfbent” on himself “that he would strip “our rich round world bare,” without a care for those who come after. Earth with those monstrous slagheaps for eyebrows, not unlike that massive methane leak in California’s Aliso Canyon. Methane in the air we breathe, lead in the water we drink, waste everywhere. The poor, the poor everywhere, without work, their dignity stripped from them, “Undenizened, beyond bound/ Of earth’s glory, earth’s ease,” he wrote late in his too-short life. The unemployed no longer a viable part of the commonwealth, and no one to share that care. This, he warned us, was to weigh those about us down with a hangdog dullness, a dullness which would morph to despair and then rage, turning those hangdogs to man wolves, whose packs would infest the age.

Paul Mariani is University Professor in the department of English at Boston College. His is the author of seven books of poetry and multiple biographies, including Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Life (2008) and, most recently, The Whole Harmonium: The Life of Wallace Stevens (2016). He is also author of a memoir, Thirty Days: On Retreat with the Exercises of St. Ignatius (2002).