

Literature Insights
General Editor: Charles Moseley

*Gerard Manley
Hopkins: Selected
Poems*

John Gilroy



PUBLICATION DATA

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Published by *Humanities-Ebooks.co.uk*
Tirril Hall, Tirril, Penrith CA10 2JE

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ISBN 978-1-84760-012-7

A Note on the Author

John Gilroy took his BA at the University of Newcastle and his MPhil at the University of Warwick. He is co-author of *A Commentary on Wordsworth's 'Prelude' 1-5* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983) and has contributed to various literary publications. He was Senior Lecturer in English at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge from 1974 until 2006, and is a course director for the University of Cambridge's International Programmes.

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank: Charles Moseley for valuable editorial advice; The National Portrait Gallery, London, for permission to reproduce the two portraits of Hopkins; and the Tate Gallery, Millbank, London for permission to reproduce the picture, 'Snowstorm – Steam Boat off a Harbour's Mouth' by J. M. W. Turner. Work in copyright is reproduced by permission of Oxford University Press on behalf of the British Province of the Society of Jesus.

Gerard Manley Hopkins: Selected Poems

John Gilroy

Bibliographical Entry:

Gilroy, John. *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Selected Poems*. Literature Insights. Tirril: Humanities-Ebooks, 2007

*In memory of
Mgr K.F.Nichols (1929-2006)
Poet and teacher*

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Part 1. Life and Times

1.1 Early life and Schooldays

Gerard Manley Hopkins was born in 1844 at Stratford in Essex, the eldest of nine children, several of whom were talented. Two of his brothers, Arthur and Everard grew up to be artists and illustrators for prominent publications such as *Punch* and the *Illustrated London News*. A brother, Lionel, became a Consul in China and an expert on the Chinese language, while a sister, Grace, had skills as a musician and composer. The children's father, Manley Hopkins, acted as Consul-General for Hawaii, pursued a profession as a marine insurance adjuster and was, by degrees, mathematician, poet, novelist and reviewer. His wife, Kate, was well-educated with literary and musical tastes and a competence in languages, and his sister, Ann ('Aunt Annie'), a



'Gerard Manley Hopkins'
by Anne Eleanor Hopkins (1859)
National Portrait Gallery, London

talented painter, produced the portrait of G. M. Hopkins at the age of fourteen which is now in the National Portrait Gallery, London. In Gerard, it seems, all these various accomplishments in language, in literature, art and music came together to produce in the course of time the unique corpus of poetry that would make him famous.

The Hopkins family was solidly middle-class and Anglican in religion. From childhood, Gerard shared their devoutness which deepened as he matured, leading finally to his conversion to Catholicism and ordination into the Roman Catholic priesthood. When he was eight years old the family moved from Stratford to fashionable Hampstead in North London and he was sent to Highgate School. There he became friendly with, among others, Marcus

Clarke who wrote the novel, *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1870), and Ernest Coleridge, grandson of the poet who had lived, died and was buried at Highgate. Perhaps Coleridge's most famous poem, 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere', had something to do with the much-quoted schooldays episode of Hopkins's abstinence (ostensibly for a bet) from all liquids for three weeks. 'The real reason', wrote a schoolfriend, Charles Luxmoore, was 'a conversation on seamen's sufferings and human powers of endurance' (FL 395). 'With throats unslaked, with black lips baked' (l.162) is certainly similar to a schoolfellow's recollection of 'Gerard showing him his tongue just before the end and it was black' (FL 395). Manley Hopkins, in his youth, had written a poem, 'The Philosopher's Stone', in the manner of the 'Ancyent Marinere', and two of Hopkins's poems from his schooldays, 'Spring and Death', and 'Winter with the Gulf Stream' contain phrases on which Coleridge's poem has obviously been something of an influence. In any event, the story points to an early strength of will and the kind of rigorous determination which would characterise the poet for the rest of his life.

Hopkins's years at Highgate were academically distinguished and he proved to be a brilliant classical scholar as well as a potentially talented poet, winning school prize for a composition entitled 'The Escorial' in 1860. The poem, in Spenserian stanzas,¹ with its echoes of Keats and its interest in architecture, and another early illustrated poem, 'A Vision of the Mermaids' with 'Winter with the Gulf Stream' in the notoriously difficult terza rima form² bring together, at this comparatively early stage, many of the mature poet's characteristics, the visual, sensual and formalist elements associated with his later work.

1.2 Oxford

In April 1863 Hopkins went on a scholarship to Balliol College, Oxford, to study Classics. One of his tutors, Benjamin Jowett, University Professor of Greek and later the Master of Balliol, was leader of the Broad Church movement there. The Broad Church faction at Oxford University, at this time an ecclesiastical institution run exclusively by dons who were celibate and in orders, was attempting to reconcile the fundamental truths of Christian belief with the increasingly invasive rationalism of the nineteenth century. In his collection entitled *Essays and Reviews* (1860), Jowett

1 A stanza form used by Edmund Spenser for *The Faerie Queene* (1590-96) in which the first eight lines are in iambic pentameter and the ninth is an iambic hexameter (an Alexandrine).

2 Interlinked tercets where each is joined to the one following by a common rhyme: aba, bcb, cdc, and so on.

had caused a furore among the authorities for what were considered to be heterodox notions inimical to the very basis of Christianity. Broad Church adherents were somewhere between the two other branches of belief within the University during Hopkins's time. At one end of the spectrum were the Evangelicals, subscribing to a literal interpretation of biblical revelation and firmly within the Protestant tradition. At the other was the High Church party, associated particularly with E. B. Pusey, the Professor of Hebrew, and Canon H. P. Liddon of Christ Church. The High Church in principle was essentially Catholic, but purist, avoiding what it saw as the errors of Protestantism and Catholicism alike. Espousing ritualism, it shared many Catholic beliefs, the fundamental exception being the Church's teaching on the Real Presence of the body and blood of Christ in Holy Communion. Pusey had originally been part of the Oxford Movement during the 1830's, an attempt, through a series of publications called *Tracts for the Times*, to throw back the advance of atheistic rationalism by stressing the importance of established beliefs and traditional modes of worship. Prominent among the Tractarians, as they were known, was John Henry Newman whose famous 'Tract XC' had been an important milestone on his progress along the road to full communion with the Catholic Church and to which he in fact converted (with many of his followers) in 1845. He became a Catholic priest in the following year, and in 1847 founded the Oratory School at Birmingham where Hopkins would teach for a short time after he was received into the Church by Newman in 1866. In the meanwhile, however, he was, at Oxford, an avowed High Churchman associating with groups of like-minded undergraduates within the orbits of Pusey and of Liddon who became his confessor. His aesthetic side obviously responded to High Church ritualism, yet when he did eventually go over to Rome he was especially anxious to stress to his devastated father that the aesthetic dimension of Catholicism had played no part in his decision: 'I am surprised you shd. say fancy and aesthetic taste have led me to my present state of mind: these wd. be better satisfied in the Church of England, for bad taste is always meeting one in the accessories of Catholicism' (FL 93).

Apart from his academic programme and theological preoccupations, Hopkins had time to enjoy other aspects of being a university student, and it was in these years that he made the acquaintance of and friendships with tutors and peers who would become influential in his comparatively short future life. Apart from Jowett, himself, also to be mentioned are Walter Pater, who was a leading figure in the later nineteenth century Aesthetic ('Art for Art's sake') movement, and T. H. Green, his tutor in philosophy. Undoubtedly the single most important friendship that Hopkins made was with his fellow student, Robert Bridges, the later Poet Laureate and first

editor of a collected edition of his poems in 1918. Their relationship was always slightly coloured, however, by the fact that Bridges did not share, and was somewhat irritated by, his friend's beliefs and eventual vocation. By profession he was a doctor and, like Keats before him, would later abandon medicine for poetry. Along with Canon Dixon, a some time teacher of Hopkins at Highgate, and Coventry Patmore, the celebrated Victorian poet and author of 'The Angel in the House', whom Hopkins met later in life, Bridges was virtually the only reader of Hopkins's poetry during the poet's lifetime. His *Editor's Preface* in 1918 was not uncritical of his friend's work but, nevertheless, without his careful custodianship of the legacy, Hopkins's poems might never have been known at all. Bridges's very touching [sonnet](#) to him is to be found placed before Hopkins's own *Author's Preface* in the first edition.

As an undergraduate Hopkins wrote many poems in a variety of styles. These are the verses to which he was probably referring in his Journal entry for 11 May 1868, 'Slaughter of the Innocents' (J 165), and of which he speaks ten years later to Canon Dixon:

What I had written I burnt before I became a Jesuit and resolved to write no more, as not belonging to my profession unless it were by the wish of my superiors; so for seven years I wrote nothing but two or three little presentation pieces which occasion called for (LD 14).

The details underlying this important episode are discussed in *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins* pp.165 and 538. The seven years to which Hopkins refers obviously represented for him a period of remarkable development between the slightly mannered and derivative verse of his early creative period, and his extraordinary achievement in 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', the poem with which he broke his poetic silence in 1875. By this time, of course, he was a member of the Jesuit order and regarded poetry as a merely tangential activity to what he now considered to be the sole purpose of his life. The Oxford years, however, established much that was carried into his later creativity and the early diaries and journals are a fruitful resource for the critical examination of the major work. One significant influence on Hopkins's detailed visual perception was John Ruskin, soon to be appointed to the Chair of Art at Oxford, and it is clear that the accounts of natural phenomena which permeate Hopkins's early writings, as well as his accomplished drawings of the natural world and of architecture,¹ owe their accuracy to the close attention to detail associated with Ruskin in works such as *Modern Painters* (1843-60).

¹ See plates between pp. 455 and 456 of *The Journal and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*

A writer who had also read *Modern Painters* and to whom Hopkins bears some striking resemblance is the American naturalist, Henry David Thoreau (1817–62), and it is worth considering Thoreau for a moment in this connection. In his *Journal* Thoreau expressed some disappointment at not finding in *Modern Painters*, ‘a more out-of-door book’. Ruskin does not describe Nature as Nature, he writes, ‘but as Turner has painted her, and though the work betrays that he has given a close attention to Nature, it appears to have been with an artist’s and critic’s design’ (Thoreau, *Journal*.X.69, Oct. 6 1857)¹. With his own ‘out-of-door’ observations of the feathers of frostwork on panes of glass Thoreau writes: ‘I was never so struck by the gracefulness of the curves in vegetation, and wonder that Ruskin does not refer to frostwork’ (Thoreau, *Journal*.X.209, Nov. 27 1857). Hopkins’s own visual sense, like Thoreau’s, could often be very individual, even surprising, in expression, and one might imagine, therefore, Thoreau being sympathetic with a journal entry such as the following, written during the second year of Hopkins’s Jesuit novitiate at Roehampton when part of his duties involved washing out the urinals there: ‘The slate slabs of the urinals even are frosted in graceful sprays’ (J 196); or with his description of the Giessbach Falls with ‘curled edges [...] like the crispiest endive’ (J 173), or mountain snow ‘cut off short as crisp as celery’ (J 174). The latter two entries made during his journey in Switzerland in 1868 are typical of the individuality of Hopkins’s perceptions for which he constantly needed space and solitude. ‘Even with one companion’, he writes, [he was travelling with a friend, Edward Bond] ‘ecstasy is almost banished: you want to be alone and to feel that, and leisure – all pressure taken off’ (J 182). Similarly, Thoreau: ‘I thrive best on solitude. If I have had a companion only one day in a week [...] I find that the value of the week to me has been seriously affected’ (Thoreau, *Journal*.IX.200, Dec.28 1856).

Some details are very close indeed, as in the following examples. In the ‘Spring’ chapter of *Walden* (1854) Thoreau makes an organic metaphor out of the movement and shapes of earth and sand which he notices in a cutting:

Few phenomena gave me more delight than to observe the forms which thawing sand and clay assume in flowing down the sides of a deep cut [...] Innumerable little streams overlap and interlace one with another, exhibiting a sort of hybrid product, which obeys half way the law of currents, and half way that of vegetation’.

Compare Hopkins’s *Journal* entry:

¹ Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen eds. *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, 2 Vols (New York: Dover Publications, 1962)

I think it was the same day I saw where rainwater had run through one of the cuttings made to carry it off in the turf by the side of the road, and the gully being sandy, it had carried the sand down into the road, throwing it in clear expression into a branched root or, if you looked at it from above downwards, a “treated” tree head’ (J 157).

The thawing sand and clay leads Thoreau to some linguistic speculations, very similar to those which Hopkins deploys throughout his early diaries:

No wonder that the earth expresses itself outwardly in leaves, it so labours with the idea inwardly [...] The overhanging leaf sees here its prototype. *Internally*, whether in the globe or animal body, it is a moist thick *lobe* [...] (...*labor*, *lapsus*, to flow or slip downward, [...] *globus*, lobe, globe; also lap, flap, and many other words); *externally*, a dry thin *leaf*, even as the *f* and *v* are a pressed and dried *b*. The radicals of *lobe* are *lb*, the soft mass of the *b* (single-lobed, or B, double-lobed), with the liquid *l* behind it pressing it forward. In globe, *glb*, the guttural *g* adds to the meaning the capacity of the throat.

Here is a typical Hopkins diary entry of 1863:

‘*Flag*, (droop etc), flaccere, notion that of waving instead of rigidity, flowing (as we say of drapery). Hence *flag* the substantive. *Fledge* to furnish with wings with which to compare *fly*, *fled*, etc above. With fillip, flip cf. flap, flob. Cf. the connection between *flag* and *flabby* with that between *flick* and *flip*, *flog*, and *flap*, *flop* (J 11–12).

In *Walden* Thoreau scrutinizes the frozen pond in winter:

I look down into the quiet parlor of the fishes, pervaded by a softened light as through a window of ground glass, with its bright sanded floor the same as in summer; there a perennial waveless serenity reigns as in the amber twilight sky, corresponding to the cool and even temperament of the inhabitants. Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads (Ch.16)

A journal entry finds Hopkins at Stonyhurst College in 1870 similarly employed:

Looking down into the thick ice of our pond I found the imprisoned air-bubbles nothing at random but starting from centres and in particular one most beautifully regular white brush of them, each spur of it a curving string of beaded and diminishing bubbles (J 201–2).

This emphasis on the steady observing eye was something that Ruskin, Thoreau and Hopkins inherited from the Romantics. Wordsworth, for example, often makes use of phrases such as, ‘I looked and looked’, ‘I gazed and gazed’, ‘I stopped and stared’. ‘At all times’, he said, ‘I have [...] endeavoured to look steadily at my subject’.¹ A sense of reciprocity between the observing poet and the natural world stems from this close attention. ‘What you look hard at’, writes Hopkins, ‘seems to look hard at you’ (J 204), a statement anticipated by one of his favourite poets, Keats:

Hyperion arose, and on the stars
Lifted his curved lids, and kept them wide
Until it ceased; and still he kept them wide;
And still they were the same bright, patient stars²

What was important for Hopkins, however, and equally important for Wordsworth, Ruskin and Thoreau, was the spiritual and moral value attaching to such close observation. To see nature accurately was also to be made good by it, to achieve a moral perception.

1.3 Conversion to Catholicism

The most momentous episode for Hopkins during his time at Oxford was undoubtedly his conversion from the Anglican faith to Catholicism. This was a decision he had reached by the autumn of 1866. The period leading up to it from 1865, however, is very much bound up in the story of his encounter with a seventeen year old youth, and a distant relative of Bridges, named Digby Dolben. A former pupil at Eton College, Dolben was a High Church Anglican with strong Catholic leanings and also a burgeoning poet of somewhat highly wrought, emotional religious verse. He intended eventually to enter Balliol College and, with this in mind, visited Oxford in February 1865 where he met Hopkins. Although there was never another meeting between them it is clear that, on Hopkins’s part at least, a deeply spiritual as well as an emotional and physical attraction ensued. Victorian society certainly countenanced the kind of male homosocial relationships which are perhaps now, in our own century, in danger of being misconstrued. But while there is no surviving evidence of anything specifically homosexual in Hopkins’s behaviour with Dolben, the episode does point

1 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* 1800. This Preface which is now regarded as an integral part of the collection did not appear in the first edition of 1798

2 *Hyperion*, 1, ll.350–3

up the extent to which the physical and spiritual are closely integrated within his personality. Dolben's religiosity was a predominant part of his appeal to Hopkins and at a particularly sensitive time for him when he was contemplating a radical change in his spiritual life. There is, indeed, plenty of evidence throughout the poetry and writings of an aesthetic appreciation of physical beauty, and very often male physical beauty as in, for example, 'Harry Ploughman', or in 'To What Serves Mortal Beauty?' where, in the latter, 'mortal beauty' is described as 'dangerous'. In a letter of 1868 to his friend, Alexander Baillie, Hopkins acknowledged this 'danger' when remembering how, earlier in his life, he had wanted to be a painter: 'But even if I could I wd. not I think now', he wrote, 'for the fact is that the higher and more attractive parts of the art put a strain upon the passions which I shd. think it unsafe to encounter' (FL 231). When all is said and done, this one obvious and deeply emotional affection for Dolben was perhaps only to be expected at a time in Hopkins's very early manhood, and when male bonding in what was almost exclusively a male-dominated Oxford society was the norm rather than the exception. As things turned out, Dolben's life ended tragically in a drowning accident in 1867, by which time Hopkins was able to write to Bridges with a certain amount of detachment about him:

I find it difficult to realise his death or feel as if it were anything to me. You know there can very seldom have happened the loss of so much beauty (in body and mind and life) [...] seldom I mean, in the whole world, for the conditions wd. not easily come together (LB 16–17).

Meanwhile, Hopkins's resolve to become a Catholic was strengthening. On a walking holiday with his friend, William Addis, in the summer of 1866, he met Canon Paul Raynal at the Benedictine monastery at Belmont in Herefordshire. According to Addis, Canon Raynal made a firm impression on both of them, and just over a month later, on 17 July, Hopkins wrote in his journal, 'It was this night I believe but possibly the next that I saw clearly the impossibility of staying in the Church of England' (J 146). In September, having approached him by letter for advice, Hopkins met with Newman whose famous *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, describing his own path to Rome, had been published two years previously. To the dismay of Dr Pusey, and of Canon Liddon who tried desperately, at Manley Hopkins's request, to get Hopkins to change his mind, he was received into the Roman Catholic Church by Newman at the Birmingham Oratory on 21 October, 1866.

The most devastating effect was on his parents. That a much loved son had abandoned their Church without any apparent feelings for them, or consideration, as they

thought, for what he was really doing, produced a painful exchange of letters. (FL 91–100). Catholicism in England at this time was only gradually emerging from centuries of persecution and suspicion and, until the period when Hopkins was a student at Balliol, colleges had made it obligatory for undergraduates to be members of the Anglican community. Not only did Hopkins's degree seem imperilled by his decision, but also the whole of his future life and expectations seemed likely to be compromised by his conversion. As it turned out, however, Balliol College removed its penalisation of Catholic undergraduates and Newman encouraged Hopkins to sit for his degree, even though the official position of the Church was to deny Catholics attendance at the ancient universities, suspecting Oxford and Cambridge of being potentially heretical environments. Far from thoughtlessly converting as his father had implied, however, it was clear from one of Hopkins's letters to him that the process had been thoroughly considered:

My conversion is due to the following reasons mainly [...] (i) simple and strictly drawn arguments partly my own, partly others', (ii) common sense, (iii) reading the Bible, especially the Holy Gospels, where texts like "Thou art Peter" (the evasions proposed for this alone are enough to make one a Catholic) [...]so pursued me that at one time I thought it best to stop thinking of them, (iv) an increasing knowledge of the Catholic system [...] which only wants to be known in order to be loved – its consolations, its marvellous ideal of holiness, the faith and devotion of its children, its multiplicity, its array of saints and martyrs, its consistency and unity, its glowing prayers, the daring majesty of its claims, etc etc (FL 93).

With Hopkins securely within the fold of the Church of Rome relations with his parents gradually improved, he gained a first-class degree and, after a brief excursion to Paris with a friend, took up a teaching post at Newman's Oratory School in Birmingham. Teaching for him was never a congenial occupation, even though his future career would require him to undertake it on a fairly regular basis, and a retreat at the Oratory in Holy Week, 1868, given by the Jesuit Father Henry Coleridge, seems to have been crucial in his decision some weeks later to apply for acceptance into the Jesuit order as a priest of the Roman Catholic Church.

1.4 Hopkins the Jesuit

If Catholicism was still regarded as a 'foreign' religion, the Jesuit order, founded



Manley Hopkins by Forshaw and Coles (1880)
National Portrait Gallery, London

in the mid-sixteenth century as a spearhead of the Counter-Reformation, was regarded by many as its secret society. From their beginnings the Jesuits have been the intellectual arm of the Catholic Church and their lives as teachers and missionaries organised with military discipline. When his decision had been made, Hopkins wrote to his one time confessor, Canon Liddon: ‘After a few weeks’ tour in Switzerland which I am hoping to make I am going to enter the Jesuit noviciate at Roehampton: I do not think there is another prospect so bright in the world’ (FL 49). Five years later his mind has not changed; to Baillie he writes: ‘this life here [at Stonyhurst, Lancs.] though it is hard is God’s will for me as I most intimately know,

which is more than violets knee-deep’ (FL 235).

In his Swiss tour of July 1868, Hopkins was accompanied by an Oxford friend, Edward Bond and, though it was of shorter duration, the expedition is in many ways reminiscent of the walking tour of the Alps made by Wordsworth and Robert Jones in the summer of 1790. Hopkins’s detailed accounts, his descriptions of waterfalls ‘shooting in races’ with droplets ‘blown upwards by the blast of the vapour as it rises’ (J 177) are close to Wordsworth’s ‘torrents shooting from the clear blue sky’ and ‘stationary blasts of waterfalls’,¹ and often his observations prefigure in their descriptions the kind of lines to be encountered in his own later poems. The reason for the tour in the first place was Bond telling Hopkins that the Jesuits ‘[were] strictly forbidden the country’ (FL 53). This was, therefore, his last opportunity to travel freely in a landscape which had been inspirational to so many writers including, more recently, and significantly for Hopkins, John Ruskin. To read through the journal entries with their delighted sense of freedom, descriptions of large vistas and impassioned perceptual detail is also to discover gradually the sense of confinement, the narrowing of horizons, in the literal sense, of Hopkins’s world when, just over a year later, one comes across the following kind of remark with a very ‘indoors’ feeling: ‘A few days before

1 *The Prelude*, 1805, VI, ll. 561-558

Sept.25 a fine sunrise seen from no.1, the upstairs bedroom' or again: 'About the same time a fine sunset [...] looked at also from the upstairs windows' (J 192). These notes are a reminder that, henceforward, Hopkins's movements would inevitably be restricted by the demands of the order to which he had now committed his life.

The routine of a Jesuit is based upon the Spiritual Exercises of his community's founder, St Ignatius Loyola. They are a methodical and logical sequence of meditations encouraging repentance, reformation and a desire to imitate Christ to the exclusion of everything else in this life. The opening sentences of the 'First Principle and Foundation', therefore, must be understood as the very basis of Hopkins's daily existence and the *sine qua non* for readers, it has to be said, for any real understanding of what he saw as the true purpose behind his life and work. They read:

Man was created to praise, reverence and serve God Our Lord, and by so doing to save his soul. And the other things on the face of the earth were created for man's sake and to help him in the carrying out of the end for which he was created (SD 122)

When he embarked as a 'scholastic' on the lengthy Jesuit training, Hopkins was moved among the various houses of the order. After his two year 'Novitiate' at Manresa House, Roehampton, near London, he went on to Stonyhurst College in Lancashire for a three year period of study in mathematics and philosophy (the 'Philosophate'). He then returned to Roehampton for a year to teach 'Rhetoric' before entering his final phase at the Jesuit house, St Beuno's, in North Wales. Here he spent his three year 'Theologate', a rigorous study of moral theology – in all, an exacting nine years of training leading to ordination in 1877. Although each of these periods had its significant role to play in his development, by far the most important for his achievement in poetry was the time that he spent in the beautiful Welsh rural surroundings of St Beuno's. Here, at a hint from its Rector, Fr Jones, he wrote his masterpiece, 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', an occasional poem about a shipwreck in 1875 at the mouth of the Thames. And although his attempt to publish it with the Jesuit *Month* was rebuffed (as was later 'The Loss of the Eurydice' in 1878) and led to his abandonment of any further publishing ambitions, Hopkins now felt that at least he was no longer under restraint from his order and was free to write poetry if he wished to do so.

His new voice, an extraordinary and innovative blend of intensity and technique, is at once evident in the 'core' poems he wrote at St Beuno's in 1877, among which are many of those for which he is now best known: 'Spring', 'The Windhover',

‘The Starlight Night’, ‘God’s Grandeur’, ‘The Lantern Out of Doors’, ‘Hurrahing in Harvest’ and ‘Pied Beauty’ – all of them wonderfully expressive achievements, full of a joyful celebration of the natural world and a profound reverence for the God he describes as being ‘under the world’s splendour and wonder’.¹

Throughout his ministry a Jesuit priest expects to be moved from place to place. In the seven years that followed his ordination Hopkins was variously Sub-minister in Chesterfield, Select Preacher at Farm Street Church in Mayfair, London, and a priest at Oxford, Bedford Leigh, Manchester, Liverpool and Glasgow, as well as being teacher of classics at Stonyhurst. During this whole period he continued to write poetry, but the sheer number of placements suggests that the order was clearly finding it difficult to establish someone as idiosyncratic as Hopkins in a situation suitable to his particular talents. The time spent in the industrial North was the most trying for his temperament. His references in letters to mills and coal pits, the stench of sulphuretted hydrogen rolling in the air and forming on railing and pavement (LB 90), his ‘sorrow and loathing’ at ‘the base and bespotted figures and features of the Liverpool crowd’ (LB 127) and his ‘unbearable thought that by degrees almost all our population will become a town population and a puny unhealthy and cowardly one’ (FL 293) reflect a particularly Victorian anxiety shared by figures such as Dickens in *Hard Times* (1854) and ‘Condition of England’ writers like Thomas Carlyle, Mrs Gaskell and John Ruskin. Even amidst the ‘grey beauty’ of Oxford Hopkins would notice the ‘base and brickish skirt’ of the industrial suburbs steadily encroaching on the ‘rural keeping’ of the ancient city (‘Duns Scotus’s Oxford’).

Eventually, the Jesuits despatched him to Ireland where, in February 1884, he took up the post of Professor of Greek at the Catholic University College in Dublin. The last five years of his life, divided between teaching (a colleague was Thomas Arnold, brother of Matthew Arnold and Professor of English) and an overwhelming commitment to the marking of hundreds of examination papers drawn from all over the country several times a year, inexorably wore down his stamina. ‘It is killing work to examine a nation’, he wrote to Dixon (LD 154). He had always suffered from variable degrees of physical frailty but now, added to it, was a psychological condition arising, it seems, from a number of causes. One was his personal situation made difficult by friction between his deeply patriotic sentiments and his attitude to the Irish Home Rule movement. Hopkins, as a Catholic, found himself, at odds with the Irish Protestants, but his opposition to nationalism made him an unsympathetic figure in Catholic eyes. Added to this dilemma, and no doubt exacerbated by his chronic

1 ‘The Wreck of the *Deutschland*’ st. 5

nervous exhaustion, was a pervasive sense that having given up so much by his conversion and then, shortly afterwards, his vocation, he had been abandoned by the God in whom he continued so fervently to believe. The mental agonies he suffered, fortunately for posterity, found expression in six great sonnets of desolation, most of them written in 1885: ‘I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day’, ‘No worst, there is none’, (‘Carrion Comfort’),¹ ‘Patience, hard thing!’, ‘My own heart let me more have pity on’ and ‘Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend’. These sonnets, more conventional in form than his other experimental ones, are among the greatest devotional verses in the language. They are the culmination of the fourteen years of Hopkins’s mature output, in all amounting to fewer than fifty poems but all of which are now regarded as of major importance, and most of them almost completely unknown until practically thirty years after his death.

Hopkins is very much a man of his age in aspects of his cultural nationalism and, amongst other things, in the associations he can be shown to have with prominent nineteenth century contemporaries such as Tennyson, Browning, Swinburne and Christina Rossetti. On the other hand, his extraordinarily original poetry in terms of its semantics, formalism, prosody, symbolism, syntax and textual structuralism anticipates later developments, and it was therefore the more surprising for his first twentieth century readers to discover that by 1918 the poet had been dead for almost thirty years. The difficulty of where exactly to ‘place’ Hopkins has always been at the heart of critical debate about him.

After a short illness Hopkins died, at the age of forty-four, of typhoid fever on 8 June 1889. He was buried in the Jesuit plot of Glasnevin cemetery, Dublin, where only his name, with those of other members of his order, is to be found recorded on a monument there. Since the first collected edition of his poetry was published, Hopkins’s reputation has continued to grow. Seldom, if ever, has a comparatively small body of work met with such wide acclaim, or a poet with a devotion to ‘contempt of the world’ been so honoured and celebrated by it.

1 Not Hopkins’s title

Part 2. Strategies

2.1 Introduction

Hopkins was a classical scholar and to read his journals and letters is to recognise it at once in the ease and competence with which he handles complex matters of verse structure, metrical form and scansion. His ‘ear’ for rhythm is very accurate. In this example he is assessing a poem by his friend and correspondent, Canon Dixon, in which he hears literary echoes: “Rattled her keys, unfavourable sign, /And on her turning wheel gan to decline”. The first line is like “The Rape of the Lock”: “Spadillio first, unconquerable lord” – the second like Spencer [sic]’ (LD 83). Two of his primary interests, music and architecture, he describes as ‘the only two arts that have any science to speak of’ (LB 249) and he recognises ‘a world of profound mathematics in this matter of music’: (LD 135). As might be expected he applies a rigorous critical logic to the written word:

I will give a glaring instance from Browning of false perspective in an image. In his *Instans Tyrannus* he makes the tyrant say that he found the just man his victim on a sudden shielded from him by the vault of the sky spreading itself like a great targe over him, “with the sun’s disc for visible boss.” This is monstrous. The vault of heaven is a vault, hollow, concave towards us, convex upwards; it therefore could only defend man on earth against enemies above it, an angry Olympus for instance. And the tyrant himself is inside it, under it, just as much as his victim. The boss is seen from behind, like the small stud of a sleeve-link. This comes of frigid fancy with no imagination (LD 56-7)

Hopkins’s own poems defy such criticism with their combination of feeling, observational accuracy and a powerful imagination. They are remarkable not so much for the things they are written about as for the unique way in which these things are given expression. In fact Hopkins is like no other poet. His voice, as C. Day Lewis remarked, ‘seems to come out of the blue, reminding us of nothing we have heard

HYPERLINKED TEXT

Hopkins's 'Red Letter' to Bridges

I must tell you I am always thinking of the Communist future [...] I am afraid some great revolution is not far off. Horrible to say, in a manner I am a Communist [...] it is a dreadful thing for the greatest and most necessary part of a very rich nation to live a hard life without dignity, knowledge, comforts, delight, or hopes in the midst of plenty – which plenty they make. They profess that they do not care what they wreck and burn, the old civilisation and order must be destroyed. This is a dreadful look out but what has the old civilisation done for them? As it at present stands in England it is itself in great measure founded on wrecking. But they got none of the spoils, they came in for nothing but harm from it then and thereafter. England has grown hugely wealthy but this wealth has not reached the working classes; I expect it has made their condition worse. Besides this iniquitous order the old civilisation embodies another order mostly old and what is new in direct entail from the old, the old religion, learning, law, art, etc and all the history that is preserved in standing monuments. But as the working classes have not been educated they know next to nothing of all this and cannot be expected to care if they destroy it. The more I look the more black and deservedly black the future looks, so I will write no more (LB 27–8).

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