HOPKINS AND THE EXERCITANT

By PAUL EDWARDS

As TERTIANS we had each to present a conference on some 'spiritual' topic. One fellow tertian wickedly suggested to me that he might present a paper on 'The New Testament: had St Ignatius read it?' To the Inigolatrous the query might seem an irreverent and gratuitous sneer, but it is actually quite a penetrating question. The Ignatius of Manresa had not read at all extensively in the New Testament. He had been hearing gospel stories all his life, and, no doubt, stories from the Acts of the Apostles and heard St Paul quoted in sermons, but he had little acquaintance with the actual text because it was available only in Vulgate Latin. The first bible in Spanish was produced by a Lutheran after Ignatius's death, and the Inquisition saw to it that it did not circulate widely. A Catholic translation became generally available only in the eighteenth century. Hence the great importance to Ignatius of Ludolph of Saxony. Would the Exercises have been at all different in content or style if the younger Ignatius had been steeped in St Paul? Did the wider knowledge, which presumably came to him with his studies in Spain and in Paris, in any way modify his giving of the Exercises?

One could ask a similar, though less realistically based, question about Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Exercises: 'The Spiritual Exercises: how well did G.M.H. know them?' The answer has to be, 'Very well indeed!' He made the Long Retreat as a novice and as a tertian. He made his ritual annual retreat in the days when that retreat was expected to be a collapsed version of the Exercises. His poetry is patently impregnated with the Exercises. Yet if I were a dogmatic neo-primitive orthodox in my view of the Exercises, I could still press the question in part. G.M.H.'s retreats were preached retreats. Even if the novicemaster or tertian instructor saw his charges on their own frequently, which with half-a-dozen novices and nine tertians was quite feasible, they would still have been expected to move forward as a group with the same material proposed for all at each meditation. Was the dynamic of the Exercises not bound to suffer some distortion, or at least to be partially impeded when submitted to such squad tactics? Did G.M.H. himself ever give the Exercises? I have never

come across mention of his having done so. If he had, again he would have preached them to a group. He would never have had the opportunity to watch at first hand the gestation, the gradual evolution of the full Ignatian response in another soul, an experience which, I think, most directors find affords them a clearer, because more objective, appreciation of the Exercises than their own retreat(s).

Do I think then that G.M.H. had an impoverished understanding of the Exercises? Of the giving of the Exercises, of the Exercises as a process, probably yes. Of the content of the Exercises, of their essential inspiration, certainly not. His conduct of his own life, his poetry, both brim over with the yield of the Exercises. Does the method of giving the Exercises matter, if G.M.H. benefited so richly from preached retreats? Yes, it does, but perhaps sometimes less than we think. A contemporary of mine, while a theology student, wrote his first book. He had never been to a university. His only experience of higher education was the prevailing seminary diet of four lectures a day, of never being required to search out anything for oneself, of never having to express one's knowledge on paper. His book was rigorously researched and lucidly written. Do I deduce that those seminary routines constituted an effective method of intellectual training? Not at all. I would conclude that people's intellectual and their spiritual development are less conditioned by a system of teaching or direction than educators and directors may be tempted to think. Actually, the wiser and more experienced teacher or guide is less likely to be intolerantly dogmatic about method than his or her clients and fans. He or she will use what they consider the better tool. They will not be disconcerted if a method, *a priori* quite inferior, sometimes produces equally good results. If someone has experience only of preached retreats, it does not follow that their spiritual development on Ignatian lines has been seriously impoverished. That Ignatian inspiration can win through quite triumphantly is plain from Hopkins's poetry and the lives of so many of his contemporaries, both Jesuits and religious women.

G.M.H.'s own writings on the Exercises have reinforced for me another lesson with which he himself does not deal. Reading his notes was not fun. His observations are often subtle, elaborate, analytical, lengthy and painstakingly expressed. They demand a good deal of sustained concentration from the reader. They are emphatically 'intellectual'. This would seem to be in conflict with the Ignatian principle, set out in the second paragraph of the Exercises, 'it is not much knowledge that fills and satisfies the soul, but the intimate understanding and relish of the truth'. In the light

of that principle the 'intellectual' being objective, impartial and judicial becomes suspect. Then the word 'cerebral' lapses into a term of derogation and the 'intellectual' is deemed not merely suspect, but something to be condemned out of hand. The ultimate degeneration is when 'feeling' becomes all and the unspoken criterion is, 'I feel, therefore I am in the right'.

Ignatius's maxim is sometimes re-expressed as 'Bring it down from the head to the heart', which is a perfectly valid restatement, provided we do not imply that the 'head' is to be left behind, and the sooner the better, and even that the optimal process, if possible, would be to bypass the 'head' altogether. St Ignatius was not the man to despise the 'head'. He spent eleven years studying, beginning in his thirty-third year. In 1534, before the Montmartre vow he and his companions made several unanimous decisions. One of the first was, 'they needed to do more study, since they were determined to consecrate their lives to the service of others'. They were men of academic calibre from the University of Paris. Gerard Manley Hopkins had distinguished himself at Oxford. In his notes on the Exercises we can see him stretching that first class intelligence to understand revelation more deeply in the light of those Exercises. His search is emphatically cerebral. It is also passionate. His heart, his whole heart, goes into the pursuit of understanding, of clear vision, as in his poetry it will go into his quest for the right word, the right rhythm, the precise sound. With Gerard the world of the strenuously seeking intellect is not dim, chill and inhuman. The fire breaks from it. It gashes 'gold-vermilion'.

G.M.H. enlisted his learning, his high intelligence, his exceptional imagination, his considerable emotional force to understand the Exercises, to govern his own conduct by them and also to express something of them in his poetry. He is passionate and meticulous in all three areas. He wrestled with the Exercises and his own theological speculations; he wrestled with moral choices (Should he learn Welsh? Was the writing of poetry consistent with a Jesuit vocation?) and he wrestled, energetically, persistently with his verse to make it say with appropriate exactness what he wanted it to say, to find the most suitable rhythm, to use the most expressive and evocative sound. These are not dry-as-dust intellectual occupations. They engage the entire man.

Exercitants are on retreat neither to reassess the intellectual foundations of their faith, nor to find inspiration for a handful of sonnets. They are there to relish the truths already accepted. They have suspended their ordinary occupations; they have not abandoned them. They are to return to them 'with aim now known and hand at work'. They are living the rather extraordinary life

of retreat to dress their daily lives to a more 'dexterous and starlight order'. Somewhat similarly, they are to concentrate on 'interior relish', the work of the 'heart'; but not to divorce it from the 'head'. A surgeon does not, I believe, amputate an organ to operate on it. He concentrates his action on it, but as a part of a living whole, interfering with the organic unity as little as possible and restoring it to full operation as soon as possible. The retreatant is to focus on 'interior relish', to let him(her)self be flooded with conviction, not to perform a self-inflicted cephalectomy. 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind.' Gerard Manley Hopkins seems to me a signal instance of a person who came very close to that total and integrated response, that organic unity which is manifestly present in his poetry.

One facet of the poet—a hypothetical one—was offered for my comment the other day by an intelligent and reflective woman, who suddenly remarked, 'I wonder what it would have been like to be directed by Hopkins?' I have been trying ever since to reach a verdict and finding the evidence hard to come by. He undoubtedly had the first requisite, being steeped in both the text and, more importantly, the spirit of the Exercises. Secondly he was apostolic, with nothing of the storming revivalist, but deeply anxious to see God 'complete thy creature dear O where it fails'. He took immense pains over his preaching and he would undoubtedly have been a solicitous director. He would also have shown himself readily and profusely sympathetic. It was the characteristic most emphasized by his contemporaries, none of whom refer in their obituary accounts to his poetry. They speak movingly of 'his gentleness, tender-heartedness, and his loving compassion' and of his 'kindness of heart and unselfishness (which) showed themselves in a thousand ways'. Was he a good listener? Of his interest I would have no doubt. How perceptive would he have been? He was keenly aware of his own feelings. Did he have insight into those of other people with a quite different temperament? He was extraordinarily observant of physical things, of shapes and colours and sounds. Did he similarly observe people's moods and unspoken attitudes? He would have given one of his attention quite unthreateningly, asked questions while respecting one's reticences and made his suggestions without dictating.

My principal misgivings would come from two remarks: 'His mind was of too delicate a texture to grapple with the rougher elements of human life' and 'The high order of his intellect . . . was of a somewhat unpractical turn'. A retreat director does not have 'to grapple with the rougher elements of human life' if the

phrase refers to the squalor and brutalities of the Victorian industrial slum. He does have to act often enough as a lightning conductor for a retreatant's moods, which can include hostility, frustration, transferred resentments and—to use the phrase of a colleague—'a basinful of anger'. G.M.H. would have suffered under such treatment, but he probably experienced rather worse from students. A director must be practical in dealing with his retreatants, fitting the material, the pace, the depth, the stage by stage development of the Exercises to the individual exercitant. Does the comment 'of a somewhat unpractical turn' rule that out? Not necessarily, if the judgement was in terms of material practicalities and school and parish administration. To be unpractically speculative in discussion does not entirely rule out shrewdness and deftness in the actual direction of an individual. I cannot but feel that the man who invented the phrase 'a lingering-out sweet skill' had the root of the matter in him. Of one thing we can be fairly confident, a retreat from G.M.H. is unlikely to have been an unimaginative and routine affair. He could hardly help being original in any matter to which he gave his mind. Finally, no matter what his possible shortcomings as a director, no one could have resented them for long from 'a man so loveable that we shall not soon look on his like again'.

It is only ten days since the lady raised her query and I intend to go on reflecting on it. It intrigues me because it requires one to list the qualities of a good director and then to assess the personality of Hopkins in that context, and, as yet, I have but sketched a possible answer. The question is strictly hypothetical, and the time has come to consider one which is entirely practical and realistic, viz. 'Can Hopkins's poetry be of use to today's retreatant?'

I believe it can. In the first place some of the qualities of that poetry are among the qualities of a good retreat. At the head of a list of those qualities I would put commitment. G.M.H. responds to a stimulus from the depth of his being. He is profoundly stirred, whether with ecstatic delight in the kestrel's aerial ballet, by quivering dismay at his 'aspens dear' fallen to 'strokes of havoc' or to a heartfelt yearning that the innocent young be preserved in their Mayday. So often we can feel the whole man vibrate to a single experience. Frequently enough his mind and heart open up for us as we read, so that we can see his deepest concerns and watch his intellect and emotions leap towards God as a powerful compass needle swings to the pole. The basic vibrant orientation of his life shows itself particularly in his nature poetry, of which 'The Windhover' and 'Pied Beauty' are patent examples. When Ignatius asks for 'an intimate understanding and relish' it is this

vivid response of the whole person which he is asking for. He wants the truths he proposes to come home to us where we live.

Secondly G.M.H.'s poetry is dramatic. Behind the incident which he is celebrating and his own response to it is a universal element taking us into another dimension. The dead shoeing-smith, a sad enough figure of himself, also symbolizes the inevitable decline of young, hale strength into illness, weakness and death. The compassion of the priest for his condition also evokes a sense of a universal compassion and through 'our sweet reprieve and ransom' the infinite Compassion beyond. A shipwreck is a dramatic enough event in itself. G.M.H. does not only do rich justice to the storm, the disaster to the ship and the loss of life, but the drowned nun leads him into the mysteries of the incarnation, the passion and the glory of 'our passion-plunged giant risen'. The truths of Christianity are dramatic. They give our lives an eternal dimension and even our minor choices a profound significance. St Ignatius wants to soak us in this drama. The Exercises themselves are a drama in four acts for which Ignatius gives us, not our lines, but a rather pedestrian version of what our role is about. Every exercitant will have to find his or her own role and discover his or her own lines as the drama, differently experienced by each, unrolls under the co-authorship of God and the exercitant.

Drama, but please no soap opera! It is quite possible for exercitants to wallow in emotion for the sake of emotion, creating for themselves a star part and suborning the director into connivance by casting him/her as the Wonderful Friend and Brilliant Director, perhaps after a few intimidating days as Uncaring Incompetent. A retreat, like a Hopkins poem, should be authentic throughout. G.M.H. writes a little light verse—perhaps too little—and some playful occasional verse. The rest is not only serious, it is utterly genuine in feeling. The emotion rings true from start to finish. The poet is never out to dramatize himself. He does not put himself in the centre of the stage. If he finds himself there, his palpable awareness of God in the wings makes the reader similarly aware. The sonnet 'No Worst, there is None' is an exception, but in it the poet plays no hero's role.

A further quality of Gerard's poetry which I would propose for the exercitant's imitation is its energy. The emotion in it is usually strong, spontaneously so. Behind that strength of feeling there is an intellectual vigour, giving direction and coherence to the poem, admitting no irrelevance and tolerating no inconsistency. What energy must have drained into his meticulous search for the most expressive word, the careful maintenance of his selected rhythm, each consonant, one feels, having to pass a severe scrutiny! Perhaps

his compassion for the dying farrier, Felix Randal, sprang in part from the fellow feeling of a wordsmith, who in the 'random, grim forge' of his mind, and in the glowing heat of his passionate feeling, hammered at his lines until they served his purpose as neatly, as exactly, as the 'bright and battering sandal' fitted the large hoof of 'the great grey drayhorse'. Let the exercitant learn to work away in the same steady, muscular fashion following the directions of Ignatius, perhaps 'to strive to grieve, to be sad and weep', perhaps in response to the King's offer, 'whoever wishes to join me in this enterprise must be willing to labour with me'. Ignatius wants his exercitant to hammer his/her own thinking, feeling and particularly choosing into the full Christian shape, and some of us are not metal easily tempered.

Hopkins's poetry is not inspired, intellectual though he was, by abstract reasoning. It commonly springs from a personal experience, being woken by the moonlight, receiving a gracious answer from a lad helping in the sacristy or from his sense of isolation and frustration in Ireland. 'Spring and Fall', behind which there is no actual incident, though deftly and charmingly rendered, has the less force in consequence. An exercitant is always well advised to use personal experience wherever he or she can. What we have seen, felt and known is far more likely to bring us 'interior relish' than any printed description or general concept. I have seen the impact of the passion narrative on a woman who visualized it against the background and atmosphere of the Nigerian town in which she had worked at the period of public executions. I have listened to a nun's description of a long drive across a desert, which she then used as the background for the temptations of Christ. The strange thing to this untravelled director is that he often has to use a great deal of persuasion to get the retreatant to accept that this use of their personal experience is legitimate. Once accepted, the technique can transform meditation after meditation.

G.M.H.'s work can also be used, I suggest, to illustrate some of Ignatius's techniques, whose simplicity can be masked by their being referred to in awed tones with a technical nomenclature. The word 'colloquy', which surely only means 'speaking with', can be made to sound a quite esoteric device. Ignatius, who did not go in for mystification, describes it simply enough: 'The colloquy is made by speaking, exactly as one friend speaks to another'. The spontaneity of G.M.H.'s colloquies with God, emerging quite naturally from his experience and his reflection on that experience, can serve to show us that moving into 'colloquy' is a most natural, normal process. He revels in the beauty of spring; reflects on its spiritual equivalent, the innocence of the

young, and then begs Christ to preserve that 'Innocent mind and Mayday'. Relishing the beauty of Wales, brooding on the—in his view—spiritual poverty of its people, he simply asks God to change them. 'Thou are indeed just, Lord' is pure colloquy from the start, putting one in mind of the uninhibited, disgruntled protests of Elijah and Jonah, a form of prayer not to be found in our Roman liturgy. When it comes unbidden in the prayer of an exercitant I can only be pleased at its genuineness.

If the term 'desolation' should require illustration, and it can be easily misunderstood, some of the sonnets written in Dublin have it by the sackful. In desolation 'the soul is wholly slothful, tepid and sad' says Ignatius. 'Selfyeast of spirit a dull dough sours' says Hopkins of himself. 'Darkness of spirit, turmoil of soul' says the text of the Exercises. 'Oh the mind has mountains; cliffs of fall/ Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed', cries G.M.H. 'Separated as it were from its Creator and Lord', concludes the Ignatian definition. G.M.H.: 'And my lament/Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent/To dearest him that lives alas! away'. Some of the Ignatian rules for dealing with desolation are also to be found applied in these awesome sonnets. 'In times of desolation we should never make any change', is Ignatius's first axiom. When Gerard feels, 'No worst, there is none', he never even considers any change of attitude or conduct. Ignatius: 'he can resist with the help of God, which always remains, though he may not clearly perceive it'. G.M.H.: 'Can something, hope, wish day come, not choose not to be'. Ignatius: 'he should strive to persevere in patience'. G.M.H.: 'Patience fills His crisp combs, and that comes those ways we know'. Ignatius: 'consolation will soon return . . ' G.M.H.: 'whose smile . . . as skies betweenpie mountains—lights a lovely mile'.

At an earlier stage of this article I intended to suggest that Hopkins's poetry might also be used to illustrate the 'application of the senses'. I have come to doubt it. Certainly the poet's own powers of sensible perception were extraordinarily developed, his reactions to sense impressions very strong and his ability to express those sensations in words seem to me unequalled in English. I have, however, come to doubt whether he is really going to be of help to someone who has difficulty setting their sensible imagination to work. Someone who has difficulty imagining the scene of the nativity is not really going to be helped by reading about 'crush-silk poppies aflash', nor find it easier to put words into the mouth of St Joseph because he has tried to hear the woodlark in 'Teevo cheevo cheevio chee'. For those who find it difficult to imagine sense impressions Ignatius seems to me to have set an easier task than G.M.H. presents with them. From my original intentions I

have salvaged only this: devotees of Hopkins, their own sensuous imagination developed and refined through their enjoyment of his poetry, should have little difficulty in appreciating the theory and the practice of 'applying the senses'. They have come, I think, the longer way round.

In a different sphere G.M.H. can certainly serve some retreatants. Ignatius is solicitous that his retreatant remain in the mood of the retreat and of that section which he or she has reached, not only in times of meditation, but between them. 'When I wake up, I will not permit my thoughts to roam at random, but will turn my mind at once to the subject I am about to contemplate . . .' He goes on to recommend that we keep some suitable scene in mind. For some retreatants a phrase summing up, or in part recapitulating and recalling what they have thought and felt, or preparing them for what they are due to contemplate is a definite plus. G.M.H. is an obvious source. His words are terse, eloquent and memorable, the distilled, concentrated essence of his own Ignatian contemplations. It would be possible to compile a glossary of such phrases for use during the different 'weeks' of the Exercises and even for key points during the weeks.

I am not going to offer such a list. To have their full value they should be discovered, or rather have been discovered, by the retreatant in their context. Conspicuous examples are: 'Thou mastering me God!', 'the wild and wanton work of men', 'spend-savour salt', 'our ruins of wrecked, past purpose' for use with regard to the 'Foundation' and the Exercises on sin. During the 'Kingdom' period one could select from: 'Pride, rose, prince, hero of us, high-priest,/Our hearts' charity's hearth's fire, our thoughts' chivalry's throng's Lord'. Preferable for many would be, 'first, fast, last friend'. At the start of the Second Week, '. . . his going in Galilee: Warm-laid grave of a womb-life grey; Manger, maiden's knee . . .' For the Third Week: 'The dense and the driven Passion' and 'the sodden-with-its sorrowing heart'. In the Fourth: 'Our passion-plunged giant risen' and 'Let him easter in us'. Echoing almost the last words of the 'Contemplation': 'Thee, God, I come from, to thee go/All day long I like fountain flow . . .' So rife is the sense of the 'Contemplation' in the early nature poetry that one could almost pick out suitable lines with a pin. I think that I have also found some 'farewell' phrases for the exercitants to take with them as they go off to put their retreats into practice: 'There is your world within, There rid the dragons, root out there the sin'. and: 'The widow of an insight lost she lives, with aim Now known and hand at work . . .' I find I have to omit the poet's next three words, 'now never wrong'. I confess that as I share

something of Gerard's disposition, without any of his ability to express it in powerful and original sonnets, the line I most frequently quote to my self is: 'Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain'. It has many applications in and out of retreat.