

BEAUTY'S GHOST IN THE BODY

By JOHN McDADE

*To man, that once would worship block or barren stone,
Our law says love what are love's worthiest, were all known;
World's loveliest—men's selves. Self flashes off frame
and face.*

*What do then? how meet beauty? Merely meet it: own,
Home at heart, heaven's sweet gift; then leave, let that
alone.*

Yea, wish that though, wish all, God's better beauty, grace.

(‘To what serves Mortal Beauty?’ OA p 167)

THE QUESTION, ‘What do then? how meet beauty?’ was superfluous in the view of many of Hopkins’s contemporaries, aesthetic connoisseurs such as Pater and Swinburne. What Pater called ‘the supreme artistic view of life’—a surrogate post-Christian religion of artistic gratification—required no diagnostic discussion of the status of beauty such as Hopkins feels compelled to offer in this poem. His is a painful strategy which proposes a disjunction between the encounter with created beauty and the higher encounter with grace: the injunction—addressed more to the author than to the reader, one suspects—is to ‘merely meet’ and ‘own’ beauty, then relinquish it, in favour of ‘God’s better beauty, grace’. It is a gesture of prayerful renunciation of earthly beauty, formally composed and restrained, but, nonetheless, deeply felt and devout.

This culminating disavowal of the status of earthly beauty in comparison with the beauty of God’s action comes after the recognition, earlier in the poem, that mortal beauty keeps ‘warm men’s wits to the things that are’, and that the beauty of English children brought Christian faith to England by its impact on Pope Gregory. But these acknowledgements do nothing to dampen the power of the first word which answers his opening question, ‘To what serves mortal beauty?—*dangerous*’. Why the tension, since beauty is manifestly God’s work? Like all simple questions, its answer can only be complex because simple, foundational questions confuse the mind.

Hopkins's strategy is carefully nuanced in the light of Christian sensitivity towards the dramatic tension between the two great themes of creation and redemption: between beauty set unequivocally in the context of a good creation, and beauty perceived in the context of the working out of salvation. In more contemporary terms, it is the tension between saying that the creation is a place of original blessing, in which we participate in a matrix of divine grace in company with our fellow-creatures, and saying that human beings are culpably wayward in their status as creatures. The complex elusiveness of the notion of 'original sin' testifies to its character as a powerful symbolic expression of our sense of disjointedness within an atmosphere of grace. The emergence of consciousness, both as a species and as individuals, is vertiginous in the perspective it offers of the freedom to do good or to do evil. The world may be paradisaical in its beauty and goodness, but in the human species, creation acquires the double-edged capacity to build or destroy, love or damage, cherish or abuse innocent beauty.

But to return to the poems: an instructive parable of the reserve with which Hopkins encounters erotic beauty may be given in the unfinished 'Epithalamion' which he tried to compose for his brother's wedding, but marriage is far from the content of the poem: in the central fantasy, a stranger comes across a group of boys swimming in the river. He is so excited by their 'downdolfinry and bellbright bodies huddling out' that their playing raises in him 'such a sudden zest/ Of summertime joys/ That he hies to a pool neighbouring'. There he swims alone, delighting in the 'flinty kindcold element' of the river water. The message is clear: 'To seem the stranger lies my lot . . .'

The swimmers in the river may be graced with the beauty of God's action, without their being aware of it, but for the observer of human beauty—the stranger in the poem—contact with this beauty is problematic. Kingfishers may catch fire, as he says in another sonnet, and dragonflies may draw flame when they are 'stressed' with God's creative energy: the beauty of the world honours God by simply existing, 'this throng and stack of being, so rich, so distinctive, so important'.¹ But we are not kingfishers: by contrast, the human being in his/her relationship with God is faced with a more complex task because human creatureliness is to be achieved often at the price of sacrifice and struggle among the competing claims of personal experience. Sometimes the stranger has to swim alone because of the constraints of God's will: human beauty may be met by a divided self, torn between physical attraction and moral rectitude. Although, as Hopkins acknowledges in his Kingfisher sonnet, 'Christ plays in ten thousand places,/

Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his', the moral imperative implied in the earlier lines of the poem, 'the just man justices;/ Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces', registers a sensitivity to ethical and religious dimensions which are central to the unfolding of human creatureliness.

Hopkins knew as well as did Kierkegaard that the pleasure of the aesthetic impulse implodes destructively if it does not form a confluence with the other streams of ethical and religious commitment: pleasure is not an end in itself. For both writers, beauty cannot be encountered without moral and ascetic constraints, or it will deal a death-blow to the workings of God's action in the individual. It is to be acknowledged, loved, valued passionately, and yet it must not, literally for Hopkins, bear the marks of human hands when it is delivered back to God and enfolded in the person's praise of the Creator. A fearful restraint—because there is a potent erotic charge—is the undercurrent in Hopkins's strategy in the presence of what he considers achingly desirable human beauty. Whatever is meant by that impossible word, 'transcended', is explicable in the rhetoric which catches fantasies and delivers them to God as the substance of breathless prayer in 'The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo':

Come then, your ways and airs and looks, locks,
maidengear,
gallantry and gaiety and grace,
Winning ways, airs innocent, maidenmanners, sweet looks,
loose locks, lovelocks, gaygear, going gallant, girlgrace—
Resign them, sign them, seal them, send them, motion
them
with breath,
And with sighs soaring, soaring sighs, deliver
Them; beauty-in-the-ghost, deliver it, early now, long
before death
Give beauty back, beauty, beauty, beauty, back to God
beauty's self and beauty's giver.

Again, there is a renunciation of earthly beauty in favour of what is construed as the 'higher' beauty of God. Hopkins's response to human beauty in these poems is Augustinian in its conflictual character, because the Father of the Western Church offers the paradigm for all subsequent Christian handling of the relationship of Eros and the divine. Hopkins's formal gestures of prayer in 'To what serves Mortal Beauty?' and 'The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo' re-enact, in a Christian context, the Platonic/Augustinian

programme of progressive detachment from human beauty towards the unseen, but real, form of absolute and perfect Beauty. The pre-Christian sage Diotima, from Plato's *Symposium*, and her Christian follower Augustine, are Hopkins's mentors as he formulates a programme of prayerful ascent which forms the dramatic resolution of these poems. Christian reponse to beauty has been haunted by this Platonic ghost, at the expense of another strategy, the natural sacramentalism of all created beauty.

Bluebells and the senses

There is a striking contrast between Hopkins's strategy in 'The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo' of consigning the yearning and soaring sighs or erotic fantasy to the care of God who, alone, can be trusted to protect and cherish human beauty ('and we, we should have lost it'), and the directness and enthusiasm of how he perceives God's presence in the non-human creation. He cannot despatch human beauty to the sole care of God without flinching, but non-human beauty, on the other hand, is experienced by him as an innocent and sacramental witness to the 'divine stress' which vivifies it. There is no need for compunction and strain in the precise and passionate intensity of his visual engagement with the non-human order. Few poets—Clare, certainly, and perhaps Hughes and Heaney in our own time—can rival him in his energetic and tactile description of nature. His feel for bluebells, for example, recorded in his journal:

. . . if you draw your fingers through them they are lodged and struggle with a shock of wet heads; the long stalks rub and click and flatten to a fan on one another like your fingers themselves would when you passed the palms hard across one another, making a brittle rub and jostle like the noise of a hurdle strained by leaning against; then there is the faint honey smell and in the mouth the sweet gum when you bite them.²

All the senses come into play as Hopkins investigates what he later called the 'inscape' of things: it is a perfect enactment of Rimbaud's search for a 'hyperaesthesia' in which there is a total activation of sensory experience. But, unlike Rimbaud, for Hopkins sensory experience is not a devastating bombardment (*dérèglement*) of identity, but profound centring of the self in what will be, in his mature poems, the discernment of the immediate presence of God in the creation. His account signals a physical rootedness in nature, a probing of the character of the created order, which finds in the feel of things a communion and an instinctive contact which

flows immediately from the texture of the self: there is no posture of rhetorical instruction here, such as he feels compelled to offer in 'To what serves Mortal Beauty' and 'The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo'. Instead, we are very close to George Eliot's marvellous, almost Blakean, comment on what perception *might* be like, could we but see:

If we had a keen vision of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow or the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of the roar which is on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well-wadded with stupidity.

In his consideration of human beauty, one looks in vain for developed signs of the sacramentalism which inspires his treatment of the relationship between the beauty of the non-human creation and God, but he seems to have been unable to reach a personal equilibrium in which he could rejoice without wariness in the enfleshed and engraced forms of human beauty. Hopkins's perception of creation as a tangible sacrament of God, experienced by all the senses (his great nature poems are multiple testimony), contrasts with the strategy of renunciation and prayerful ascent with which he meets erotic beauty. He has no doubt that the beauty of the non-human world signals the downwards movement of God's presence, and is the abiding sign of God's indwelling presence in the creation; consequently, he can delight in it and celebrate it.

Human beauty, on the other hand, provokes a different response, a flight upwards, away from the enfleshment of beauty towards its archetypal source. Instead of sacramental celebration of human beauty as an energizing instance of divine presence, discomfort and a nervous unease accompany the Platonizing resolutions with which he formally relinquishes human beauty. Before human beauty, *seeing without touching* is the necessary, but tantalizing, ploy. His reserve in this area registers the sense that while human beauty is equally epiphanic and luminous of divine glory, an unfettered and unambiguous affirmation of the 'divine stress' in the faces and bodies he was drawn to could not be made.

Selving, pitch and stress

The nub of the matter for Hopkins is that human 'selving', the development of the inscape of personal life, centres not on bodiliness, but in the ethical and religious 'pitch' to which the person is brought by God to a higher pitch than the rest of the creation. This pitch is a dialectic of stress and praise, and consequently, the 'justicing' of the just man is a more problematic process of 'selving'

than occurs in the rest of creation. In the non-human order, Hopkins pictures the 'divine stress' as the brooding and maternal Spirit of God nurturing the earth, but when God's finger touches 'the very vein of personality, which nothing else can reach and man can respond to by no play whatever, by bare acknowledgement only, the counter stress which God alone can feel³', the same action of the Spirit is experienced, and described, differently. Within the person, the Spirit creates what is sometimes a conflictual conjunction of two mysteries of freedom: God's freedom to love and draw individuals to a high pitch of 'selfhood' and praise, and human freedom which, although it is never violated, is subject to a sometimes painful modification by grace, a modulation of identity by God, which Hopkins calls 'instressing the affective will⁴'. An instance of self-examination is given:

... when I consider my selfbeing, my consciousness and feeling of myself, that taste of myself, of *I* and *me* above and in all things, which is more distinctive than the taste of ale or alum, more distinctive than the smell of walnutleaf or camphor, and is incommunicable by any means to another man . . . Nothing else in nature comes near this unspeakable stress of pitch, distinctiveness and selving, this selfbeing of my own . . . Searching nature I taste *self* but at one tankard, that of my own being. The development, refinement, condensation of nothing shows any sign of being able to match this to me or give me another taste of it, a taste even resembling it.⁵

In a passage like this, Hopkins is investigating the character of the 'introspective conscience' which has been the dominant focus of European investigation of personal identity, both in its religious tradition (Paul, Augustine, Luther, Ignatius, Pascal, Dostoievski), and in the secular probing of the workings of the self by Montaigne, Kafka, Sartre and Beckett. In this tradition, God is encountered in the inner self, and it is the divine 'instressing' of his emotions and will which actively shapes the strategy Hopkins adopts towards erotic beauty. The 'divine stress' on the personality is a more profound stirring than the stimulus from anything created, since it originates in God's relationship to his creatures. This core of creaturely identity cannot be ignored or relegated to a secondary position, because authentic selfhood derives from this 'vertical' axis:

... there is a scale or range of pitch which is also infinite and terminates upwards in the directness or uprightness of the 'stem'

of the godhead and the procession of the divine persons. God then can shift the self that lies in one to a higher, that is/ better pitch of itself; that is/ to a pitch or determination of itself on the side of good.⁶

This is a re-working of Augustine's saying that God is more intimate to me than I am to myself, that the touch of God's action within the individual is more fundamental than all the varied ways in which the person relates to the world. In Hopkins's terminology, 'pitch, moral pitch, determination of right or wrong' is the original and foundational core of the creature-Creator relationship, which takes precedence over all other claims on the person, such as, for example, the impact made by created beauty.

From beauty to drama

Inevitably a more elusive account then arises of God's relationship to the world because the unqualified affirmation of the goodness of the visible creation is countered with a more dramatic and complex experience of struggle within the human experience of freedom. The move inwards, away from the external and visibly engraced world, towards the fluidity and tensions of inner experience and the conflicts which arise there, marks the shift from religious aesthetics to religious drama.

It is a shift which, in more formal theological terms, is recorded in the recent work of the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar: after proposing that the shape of God's revelation may be considered as the presentation of a created 'form' (the humanity of Jesus) which, literally, embodies the radiance of divine love (a 'theological aesthetics'), he formulates a 'theological dramatics' in which God's gift of himself in Jesus engages human beings in a prolonged drama of divine love and human resistance. Contemplation of the beauty of the 'form' of God's revelation gives way to the enactment of the drama in which God exercises the transcendent freedom of the Creator to take fallen creatureliness into the Trinitarian life, and human beings in their weakness are prompted by the Holy Spirit to share in the self-offering of Jesus to the Father. The Cross is, of course, the focus of this engagement, signalling both the depth of God's self-abasement, and the height of creaturely self-offering to the Father.

Because he is a poet both of the visible natural order and of the more strained order of personal life, the complexity of Hopkins's work incorporates the two categories of aesthetics and drama: his response to the beauty of the non-human creation belongs securely within the category of his 'aesthetic' engagement with God, but

his response to human beauty passes into the category of drama and struggle. It is a shift which is not without precedent in Christian tradition: Jesus, whose early preaching delighted in the beauty of the lilies of the field, dismisses the beauty of the Temple in the light of the approaching eschatological struggle (Mk 13,1-2).

Although Christian theology follows its Jewish instructors in affirming the intrinsic goodness of the *physical* creation, and although it regards the *enfleshed* Son of God as the uniquely radiant form of divine glory, and although it images the destiny of the creation in supremely physical terms ('the resurrection of the *body*') it is haunted by the Platonic strategy of regarding the physically beautiful as the occasion for an ascent towards a condition in which bodiliness can be sloughed off. Both 'To what serves Mortal Beauty?' and 'The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo' are weakened by the posture of Platonic ascent with which they conclude. The endings are feeble, partly because Hopkins adopts a received posture of ascending renunciation of the flesh—much as the idioms of classical culture flow into Christian iconography—and partly because the aesthetics of nineteenth-century English poetry require that the end of a poem be wrapped up, resolved, concluded. His poetic innovations do not escape from these formal boundaries. (The serene agnosticism of Matthew Arnold's 'On Dover Beach' has a similar formal resolution.) Temperamentally and aesthetically, Hopkins could not allow himself what Wallace Stevens later described as the right of a poet to be a 'thinker without final thoughts'.

And yet, if we look for the correct coda to these poems it will be found neither in their rhetorical conclusions, nor in a purported synthesis with his sacramental perspective of the non-human order, but rather in the drama of the 'terrible sonnets' of Dublin and in the nakedly Christian hope for resurrection in 'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection'. In these poems, the dramatic register of a Gethsemane struggle, illuminated by the transformative significance of the incarnation/resurrection, makes its presence felt. Here are no 'final thoughts', but an earnest participation in the pain and hope of the paschal mystery. This is the third 'strategy', alongside the far neater Platonic and sacramental approaches, in which sensitivity to morally ambivalent beauty forms part of the strain and debilitating futility which he experiences. In his most complex poems from this period, 'Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves' and 'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire . . .', his early optimism about the world's beauty gives way to an apocalyptic vision of confinement and dissolution in the darkness which consumes and overwhelms the world. The beauty of the earth is at an

end within the (metaphysical) 'womb-of-all, home-of-all, hearse-of-all night', which is the world experienced in the trauma of personal disintegration:

For éarth | her béing has unbóund; her dápple is at énd, as-
 Tray or aswarm, all throughther, in throngs; | self in self stéepèd and
 páshed—quíte
 Disremembering, dismembering | all now. Heart, you round me right
 With: Óur évening is óver us; óur night | whélms, whélms, ánd will
 énd us.

This is the proper context for the question 'To what serves Mortal Beauty?': when the earth's being is unbound, when its dappled beauty is ended, when the mind can no longer compose formal dispositions of serenity and renunciation that Diotima would have approved, the facile Platonic resolution Hopkins adopted in the poem of that name here becomes unthinkable. Here, no rhetorical resolution is offered: the complexity of the dappled world has become a terrifyingly simple separation of good and bad, right and wrong, and '. . . a rack/ Where, selfwring, selfstrung, sheathe- and shelterless, thoughts/ against thoughts in groans grind'.

The conclusions of these two poems should be read in conjunction, since they counterpose the pain of Gethsemane, the last judgement and the transforming power of the resurrection proclaimed in the sudden cry of command with which the Lord descends from heaven to raise the living and the dead (1 Thess 4, 16). With this juxtaposition, Hopkins finds his way back to archetypal patterns of Christian experience and faith in which the dialectic of the paschal mystery expresses the reality of Hopkins's personal suffering and God's promise of vindication:

Lét life, wáned, ah lét life

wínd
 Off hér once skéined stained véined varíety | upon, áll on twó spoos;
 párt, pen, páck
 Now her áll in twó flocks, twó folds—black, white; | ríght, wrong; réckon
 but, réck but, mínd
 But thése two; wáre of a wórld where bút these | twó tell, each off the
 óther; of a ráck
 Where, selfwring, selfstrung, sheathe- and shelterless, | thóughts
 agáinst thóughts ín groans grínd.

Enough! the Resurrection,
 A heart's-clarion! Away grief's gasping, | joyless days, dejection.
 Across my foundering deck shone

A beacon, an eternal beam. | Flesh fade, and mortal trash
 Fall to the residuary worm; | world's wildfire, leave but ash:
 In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
 I am all at once what Christ is, | since he was what I am, and
 This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, | patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,
 Is immortal diamond.

Two passages from his prose writings illuminate the endings of these poems. In them, Hopkins uses the same image, that of the 'cleave' of being—its opening outwards, its point of contact beyond itself—to describe both the individual's openness to God, and the triune God's condescension towards the creation. The process of human 'selving' and of divine 'selving' culminates in the sacrifice of the Cross: human beings are 'stressed' by God's action to bring them to the point of self-sacrifice in union with the Son of God. If we bear in mind Hopkins's ambivalence about human beauty, then his struggle is surely one of the 'countless points' to which he refers:

Therefore in that 'cleave' of being which each of his creatures shews of God's eyes alone (or in its 'burl' of being/ uncloven) God can choose countless points in the strain (or countless cleaves of the 'burl') where the creature has consented, does consent, to God's will in the way above shewn . . . This shift is grace. For grace is any action, activity, on God's part by which, in creating or after creating, he carries the creature to or towards the end of its being, which is its self-sacrifice to God and its salvation.⁷

Next, his marvellous account of the corresponding 'outstress' of the Blessed Trinity, in which the sacrifice and death of Jesus arises from the 'stress of selving in God'. God's life is directed towards the moment when the Son's love for the Father is expressed in the physicality of *matter*. Divine 'selving' and human 'selving' meet in the mortal beauty of Jesus's death:

Why did the Son of God go thus forth from the Father not only in the eternal and intrinsic procession of the Trinity but also by an extrinsic and less than eternal, let us say aeonian one? To give God glory and that by sacrifice, sacrifice offered in the barren wilderness outside of God, as the children of Israel were led into the wilderness to offer sacrifice. This sacrifice and this outward procession is a consequence and shadow of the procession of the Trinity, from which mystery sacrifice takes its rise . . . It is as if the blissful agony or stress of selving in God had forced out drops.

of sweat or blood, . . . or as if the lights lit at the festival of the 'peaceful Trinity' through some little cranny striking out lit up into being one 'cleave' out of the world of possible creatures. The sacrifice would be the Eucharist, and that the victim might be truly victim like, like motionless, helpless or lifeless, it must be in matter.⁸

The question, 'To what serves Mortal Beauty?', when asked of the death of Jesus, must be given a different theological answer in the light of these reflections, because they present the incarnation and death of the Son as both the descending curve of God's 'selving' and the apex of the creation's struggle to become 'served' in perfect worship of the Creator. 'The blissful agony or stress of selving in God' reaches downwards towards the creation, towards 'matter', and issues directly, one might say, in the 'agony or stress of selving' of Jesus in his death. And in his struggle to make his death a perfect sacrifice of praise on behalf of the creation, mortality becomes the medium of perfected creatureliness. The mortal beauty expressed there is truly divine in its saving presence.

What I have called Hopkins's 'third' strategy concerning beauty is based on the assumption that the struggle with his response to human beauty forms an important part of the strain of his last years. It is, I suggest, assimilated within the painful processes recorded in his later poems, and articulated in his theological reflections in his notebooks. Earlier, I suggested a parallel between him and Kierkegaard in their refusal to grant the autonomy of the aesthetic from the ethical and religious. Hopkins's 'third' strategy derives from his focused concentration on the priority of the religious perspective, within which the other dimensions are framed. The strategy comes to light in the context of his later years of futility, struggle and emptiness—an impasse partly created by his difficulties with erotic beauty—and the corresponding purification of his hope in the resurrection. It also signals the shift from aesthetic to dramatic concerns as his years as a Jesuit take their toll on his personal life, and the deeply Christian pattern of anguish and hope surfaces as the single constant concern. The beauty of diamonds is created through pressure, and the immortal diamond, the risen body of the resurrection, glorious and beautiful, is no exception. The beauty wrought in salvation surpasses the initial beauty of the creation, and Hopkins's third strategy testifies to this faith.

NOTES

The references are to *The Oxford authors: Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited by Catherine Phillips (Oxford University Press, 1986).

¹ p 282.

² p 208.

³ p 287.

⁴ p 284.

⁵ p 282.

⁶ p 283.

⁷ p 284.

⁸ p 289.