

A HEART UTTERING TRUTH

By PHILIP ENDEAN

IN THE COURSE OF its history, the Society of Jesus has come to possess many priceless artistic treasures, but few can be more poignant than a manuscript notebook of Gerard Manley Hopkins, dating from 1884–5. Known as the Dublin Notebook, it contains odd scribblings on many learned subjects: among others, Cicero, poetic metre and the poems of Hopkins's friend, Canon Dixon. There are also several pages of mere ticks and numbers, evidence of Hopkins's conscientiousness at the frustrating task of marking examinations. If one opens the book in the middle, one sees on the left a series of ticks, interrupted by an exasperated complaint:

To q.4 d. no 1772 answers "the daughter of Tyndaris. (I suppose Helen" He supposes well, but what is the meaning of talking of the daughter of Tyndaris? No. 1775 is much stranger about "the Tritonian woman"¹

On the facing page, emerging as it were out of this thankless tedium, one finds an early version of what became 'Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves', a bleak and weighty evocation of the onset of night and of the final end, a poem which Hopkins described as 'the longest sonnet ever made and no doubt the longest making'. In the accepted published version, it begins:

Earnest, earthless, equal, attuneable, | vaulty, voluminous, ...
stupendous
Evening strains to be tíme's vást, | womb-of-all, home-of-all,
hearse-of-all night (OA pp 175, 380).²

The notebook illustrates in rare fashion the doubleness of Hopkins's life and ministry. On the one hand, he was employed in tasks of everyday Jesuit routine, 'day-labouring out life's age' as he had put it in 'The Caged Skylark'. Less than five years after making these notebook jottings, on 8 June 1889, Hopkins had died, still in Dublin, and a victim of typhoid. He became famous only in our century. Yet out of his unobtrusive, frustrating Jesuit

lifestyle (whether despite it or because of it is a moot point), great poetry came. Probably no other Jesuit of the nineteenth century has touched so many hearts, both inside and outside Christianity.

The facts of his life

Gerard Hopkins³ was born in 1844, in Stratford, Essex. He grew up in a well-to-do pious Anglican family, who moved to Hampstead while he was still a child, and was educated at Highgate School. From there he went up to Balliol College, Oxford, in 1863, where he spent four years of intense intellectual and artistic vitality, and was caught up in the religious ferment of the day. Consciously following Newman's path, he was converted to Roman Catholicism, being received by Newman himself on 21 October 1866. He graduated in the summer of 1867 with a double first class degree, and went off to teach for a year at Newman's school in Birmingham. During the year he resolved to enter the Jesuit novitiate at Roehampton in September 1868. His two years noviceship were followed by three years at St Mary's Hall, Stonyhurst, studying philosophy, and a year back at Roehampton teaching Jesuit scholastics Greek, Latin and English. In 1874 he was sent to St Beuno's to study theology.

Since shortly before the time of his entry into the Society, he had written hardly any verse. Indeed, during that period, he had symbolically destroyed some of his undergraduate poems—though not without making sure that his friend, Robert Bridges, had some fair copies kept safe. The catalyst for a change was a newspaper report. A German ship bound for the United States, the *Deutschland*, had run aground on a sandbank off Harwich during a storm on the night of 6-7 December 1875. Five Franciscan sisters were drowned, and it was reported in *The Times* that 'the chief sister, a gaunt woman 6 ft. high' was calling out 'loudly and often "O Christ, come quickly"'.⁴ Hopkins later wrote that on hearing this news,

I was affected by the account and happening to say so to my rector he said that he wished someone would write a poem on the subject. On this hint I set to work and, though my hand was out at first, produced one. I had long had haunting my ear the echo of a new rhythm which now I realized on paper (OA p 334).

It sounds like a throwaway remark on the rector's part, and certainly the result was something quite beyond all expectation. Hopkins's enormous creative energy had found expression only in his journals for seven years; now he produced, without warning, verse of remarkable and totally unconventional vividness:

They fought with God's cold—
 And they could not and fell to the deck
 (Crushed them) or water (and drowned them) or rolled
 With the sea-romp over the wreck.
 Night roared, with the heart-break hearing a heart-broke rabble
 The woman's wailing, the crying of child without check—
 Till a lioness arose breasting the babble,
 A prophetess towered in the tumult, a virginal tongue told (OA p 114).

The middle stanzas describing the storm are probably the best starting point for reading this formidably difficult poem. But its real subject is the action of God in Christ, mastering the poet himself 'on a pastoral forehead in Wales', and 'royally reclaiming his own' in the storm. And 'his own' here refers both to the sisters themselves, and to the other 'comfortless unconfessed' victims of the accident:

With a mercy that outrides
 The all of water, an ark
 For the listener; for the lingerer with a love glides
 Lower than death and the dark.
 A vein for the visiting of the past-prayer, pent in prison,
 The-last-breath penitent spirits—the uttermost mark
 Our passion-plungèd giant risen,
 The Christ of the Father compassionate, fetched in the storm
 of his strides (OA p 118).

In fact, what the rector said seems to have catalyzed a profound change in Hopkins's theology and spirituality. Up to this point, he had kept separate sacred and nature journals. His spiritual journal was burnt after his death by his sisters, but it certainly did exist; and, well known though they are, there are only a handful of places in the nature journal like that where he says he knows the beauty of God by a bluebell.⁵ But in February 1875 the nature journal breaks off; it is as though he has discovered—or rediscovered—that religious commitment need not exclude love of beauty, art and nature. At least a partial reconciliation had been achieved.⁶

During the remaining eighteen months at St Beuno's he wrote poetry regularly, and from this period come the joyful, dense sonnets on God's presence in nature, such as 'God's Grandeur' and 'The Windhover'. After his ordination in September 1877, he worked in a variety of places, though never for long in any one of them. In the four years between ordination and tertianship, he was teaching at Mount St Mary's and Stonyhurst, and on church or parish staffs in London, Oxford, Bedford Leigh (on the outskirts

of Manchester), Liverpool and Glasgow.⁷ Tertianship followed at Roehampton, in 1881-2, during which he wrote some difficult and fragmentary material on the *Spiritual exercises*—material which is, nevertheless, of great importance and originality, and has not yet been fully absorbed.⁸ The seven years of life that remained were spent in two places. From the tertianship, he returned to Stonyhurst; and then, on 18 February 1884, he moved to Dublin, as professor of Greek and Latin Literature at University College.⁹ These last years were marked by frustration, depression and aborted projects—an experience of suffering that he sometimes was able to express in a new, more terse, poetic idiom:

I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.
 What hours, O what black hours we have spent
 This night! what sights you, heart, saw; ways you went!
 And more must, in yet longer light's delay.

With witness I speak this. But where I say
 Hours I mean years, mean life. And my lament
 Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent
 To dearest him that lives alas! away (OA p 166).

And yet there were also moments of a costly, hard-won, serenity:

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 (OA p 181).

A witness that expands us

The contributors to the obituary of Hopkins written for private circulation among the then English Province Jesuits were probably unaware that he wrote poetry at all, and certainly of that poetry's importance. Yet they were aware of something distinctive and special. One Father wrote:

His mind was of too delicate a texture to grapple with the rougher elements of human life, but his kindness of heart and unselfishness showed themselves in a thousand ways... .

The high order of his intellect was at once made evident to all who came into serious contact with him. True it was of a somewhat unpractical turn, but the various and often amusing extravagations into which it was from time to time in consequence beguiled, only added another point of attractiveness to his character. The result

was a man so loveable that we shall not soon look upon his like again.¹⁰

Hopkins's life, witness and dedication have made our world different. As Ignatius prayed that Mary should place him with her Son, so Hopkins wrote once of how Mary conceives Christ 'fresh and fresh' in men and women down the ages,

And makes, O marvellous!
New Nazareths in us,
Where she shall yet conceive
Him morning, noon, and eve (OA p 159).

In one sense this process occurs in all Christians, indeed in all human beings. But in Hopkins it happened in a rare and distinctive fashion that is of lasting significance for ourselves who come after. His poetry and his history reveal new possibilities for being Christ-like, permanently enriching our own discipleship. Rowan Williams makes this point in the course of an attempt to describe the distinctiveness of the Catholic tradition within Christianity as a whole. He writes of a 'tradition' of human biographies as a means of enlarged access to truth:

If Christian orthodoxy is the constant renewal of dialogue with Christ crucified and risen, each place where that dialogue is committedly undertaken may show us more of the other partner in our own dialogue. When I now attempt to open myself to the challenge of the cross, I can be helped to hear it by seeing how it is 'translated' into the lives of Polycarp, Augustine, Wesley, Edith Stein, Janani Luwum. I shall not see Christ as John the Baptist did, but only with and in the faces of his saints.¹¹

Hopkins's writing is notoriously difficult. It takes enormous, patient effort to make sense of his innovations in syntax, versification and vocabulary. Yet other, more far-reaching, difficulties arise when one steps back from his texts, and tries to specify how Hopkins's witness can enrich our discipleship. For, as Williams suggests elsewhere, authentic Christian revelation does not make things plainer, but darker.¹² It opens us to the creativity of God, beyond all our powers to predict or control. It leaves us with questions, challenging our clarities and conventions. We celebrate a great artist and Christian like Hopkins, not by simply rehearsing his achievements, but also by exploring the questions and possibilities his work reveals—or rather the questions and possibilities

which God puts to us through him. Here, as an introduction to later articles in this *Supplement*, I want simply to name two unresolved issues that Hopkins's career brings sharply before us. How far can you live by a sacramental vision of the world? And what is the nature of the truth revealed by great art?

On beauty and asceticism

One of Hopkins's poems begins with the question that serves as its title: 'To what serves mortal beauty?' The answer at which the poem finally arrives is rather unclear, however finely versified. More vivid is Hopkins's instinctive reaction, which comes in one word, placed at the outset: 'dangerous'. Hopkins's sensitivity to this world and all its richness coexisted with his keen awareness of the waywardness of the flesh, and a realization that all things pass, God alone sufficing.

In his edition of Hopkins's religious prose, Christopher Devlin discusses Hopkins's curious reluctance to have his poems published, and chides him:

His poetic genius was his very essence, his 'inscape', his special likeness to the Divine Essence. Yet Hopkins the Jesuit behaved to Hopkins the poet as a Victorian husband might to a wife of whom he had cause to be ashamed. His muse was a highborn lady, a chaste matron, dedicate to God; but he treated her in public as a slut, and her children as an unwanted and vaguely sinful burden.¹³

It is easy to criticize Hopkins for his scrupulosity, for his forgetting that Christianity is, after all, a religion of God's involvement with the created world. And yet such criticism does not touch the heart of the problem. We might be able to laugh off Hopkins's rather quaint humility—yet the problem remains with us in another form. Great art leads us to God; in Ignatian terms, it is a source of consolation. But can we *really* let ourselves be sustained by a night at the opera, or even a well-executed formal liturgy, when the resources these good things demand could be used to feed the hungry? Our Christian tradition knows the way of austerity and self-denial, and the way of finding God in created beauty. Both are important, and neither can be let go. But it is no easy matter to do justice to both.

The truth revealed by art

'The Wreck of the Deutschland' is, as has already been said, a poem about God's action. Explicitly, this action is beyond our understanding; Hopkins's verse is evocative, not descriptive.

Christ's 'stress', dating 'from day/Of his going in Galilee', is a reality of which 'none would have known'. 'Only the heart, being hard at bay/Is out with it!' (OA 112). And when Hopkins expresses what he sees as the true sense of the sister's cry to Christ, he can only stutter—and critics have long wondered just what he is stuttering about:

But how shall I ... make me room there:
 Reach me a ... Fancy, come faster—
 Strike you the sight of it? look at it loom there,
 Thing that she ... There then! the Master,
Ipse, the only one, Christ, King, Head:
 He was to cure the extremity where he had cast her;
 Do, deal, lord it with living and dead;
 Let him ride, her pride, in his triumph,
 despatch and have done with his doom there (OA p 117).

Some years afterwards, he mused on the sadness of a young child in autumn. The poem movingly and simply evokes a grief that cannot be named directly:

Margaret, are you grieving
 Over Goldengrove unleaving?
 Leaves, like the things of man, you
 With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?
 Ah! as the heart grows older
 It will come to such sights colder
 By and by, nor spare a sigh
 Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;
 And yet you *will* weep and know why.
 Now no matter, child, the name:
 Sorrow's springs are the same.
 Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
 What héart héard of, ghóst guéssed:
 It is the blight man was born for,
 It is Margaret you mourn for (OA p 152).

Through rhythm and image, Hopkins touches a reality of the heart that eludes exact description. In 1972, Pedro Arrupe, then the Jesuit superior general, gave an address to a group of Jesuit artists, and encouraged their ministry in these words:

More than the preacher's word, it is the musician's touch that is bringing the young to God again. More than the politician, it is the folk singer who draws the races hand in hand. Heart speaks to heart in mysterious ways, and it is the artist who holds the key

to the mystery. His is the catechesis not of word, but of tone and stone. He can touch the wellsprings of the human heart, and release energies of the soul that the rest of the world does not suspect.¹⁴

But what is it about this artistic ministry that makes it genuinely Christian, genuinely life-giving? After all, the Nazis used artistic resources for the most vile purposes of propaganda. Moreover, at the heart of 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', there is a sense of words breaking down. But why is this failure of words an evocation of something profound? In other contexts, such writing indicates nothing but clumsiness and muddle.

In their discussion of the use of visual art in worship, the fathers of Vatican II wrote of how the Church has always been a patron of the arts, chiefly, 'so that the things which form part of liturgical worship can be suitable, dignified and beautiful—signs and symbols of things above'. Yet they continued:

Moreover, the Church has always, with good reason, thought of itself as a kind of judge, separating out works of art that are religiously consistent with its traditions of faith, holiness and law, and that are to be regarded as suitable for use in worship.¹⁵

The point can be applied to other forms of art. Clearly, art does evoke a reality that cannot be contained by a straight descriptive formula. Yet this cannot be simply to canonize all that is beautiful. Not all works of art—not even all good works of art—open us to God, and nor can one simply equate artistic quality with edification.

It is one of the achievements of this century's theology to have recovered a sense that beauty must be taken seriously as a revelation of God. But there is still a huge question about the discernment of such revelation, of what it is that makes beauty consistent with Christian traditions of 'faith, holiness and law'. It will not suffice simply to answer, 'conformity to orthodox doctrine'. But no better answer has been systematically put forward.

'This is the best of me'

English Roman Catholicism has produced only one other work of art to rank with the finest of Hopkins's poetry: Elgar's *The dream of Gerontius*. The two are close in time; Newman's influence is evident in both; and, coincidentally, it was a Jesuit who first gave Elgar a copy of Newman's poem. On the foot of the score, Elgar wrote:

This is the best of me; for the rest I ate, and drank, and slept,
loved and hated like another; my life is as the vapour and is not;
but *this* I saw and knew; this, if anything of mine, is worth your
memory.

Whatever the questions, both Hopkins and Elgar had the gift of touching rare realities, and of evoking in others rich forms of awareness and sensitivity. Both, too, sought to integrate their art with Catholic tradition. In 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', Hopkins described how his heart stirred as he read of the sister's cry—and his words can evoke too the way we respond to his own poetry:

Ah, touched in your bower of bone
Are you! turned for an exquisite smart,
Have you! make words break from me here all alone,
Do you!—mother of being in me, heart.
O unteachably after evil, but uttering truth,
Why, tears! is it? tears; such a melting, a madrigal start!
Never-eldering revel and river of youth,
What can it be, this glee?
The good you have there of your own? (OA p 114)

NOTES

¹ For more details of the manuscript, see *Journals*, p 531, entry under G.Ia. The notebook is kept at Campion Hall, Oxford, and is cited and reproduced here by kind permission of the British Province of the Society of Jesus, the copyright owners. I refer here to f.14v and f.15r, and transcribe the punctuation without correction.

² The abbreviation OA indicates the Oxford Authors volume on Hopkins. Further details are given in the guide to literature on Hopkins on pp 12–13 below. Other abbreviations used in these notes are for the five standard volumes of Hopkins's prose—and again, full details are in the guide.

³ There is a problem with the convention of talking about Gerard *Manley* Hopkins. 'Manley' was not used in referring to the Jesuit poet until he had been dead for almost thirty years. 'By that time there was another Gerard Hopkins in the family, and Robert Bridges decided jointly with the Hopkinses to add "Manley" to the title-page of the first edition of *Poems* to distinguish the two'. White, Norman: 'Hopkins: problems in the biography', *Studies in the literary imagination*, vol 21, no 1 (Spring 1988), pp 109–119, at 109.

⁴ The text of the report in *The Times* is given in *Letters* III, pp 439–444. There may be some grounds for questioning its accuracy.

⁵ *Journals*, p 199.

⁶ For more on this, see my own article, 'The spirituality of Gerard Manley Hopkins', *The Hopkins quarterly*, vol 8, no 3 (Fall 1981), pp 107–129, especially pp 115–7. In that piece I also try to apply a distinction between Ignatian and Jesuit spiritualities to the interpretation of Hopkins's poems. Hopkins's writings were deeply influenced by the First Week of the

Exercises and the Contemplation for Gaining Love; yet there is hardly anything that can be traced back to the Election and the Contemplations on the Mysteries of our Lord.

⁷ These frequent moves were by no means unusual for a British Jesuit of the time. 'It was the Province's pattern of change that was bizarre, not Hopkins' small part in it'. Feeney, Joseph J., S.J.: 'Hopkins' frequent reassignments as a priest', *The Hopkins quarterly*, vol 11, nos 3-4 (Fall 1984-Winter 1985), pp 101-118, at p 113.

⁸ OA pp 281-90; *Sermons* pp 107-209.

⁹ For an account of the awkward religious and academic politics behind this appointment, see White, Norman: 'Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Irish row', *The Hopkins quarterly*, vol 9, no 3 (Fall 1982), pp 91-107. Religious working in similar situations today will find the dynamics of the story only too depressingly familiar.

¹⁰ 'Hopkins' earliest memorial: the Jesuit obituary of 1890', ed Joseph J. Feeney S.J., *The Hopkins quarterly*, vol 8, no 2 (Summer 1981), pp 53-62, at p 56. Some readers may find this text more easily in the 1890 volume of *Letters and notices*, a private journal of the British Jesuits.

¹¹ Williams, Rowan: 'What is Catholic orthodoxy?', in *Essays Catholic and radical*, ed Kenneth Leech and Rowan Williams (London, 1983), pp 11-25, at p 22.

¹² I allude here to Williams, Rowan: 'Trinity and Revelation', *Modern theology*, 3 (1986), pp 197-212, at pp 202-3.

¹³ *Sermons*, p 119.

¹⁴ Arrupe, Pedro, S.J.: 'Art and the spirit of the Society of Jesus', *Studies in the spirituality of Jesuits*, vol 5, no 3 (April 1973), pp 83-92, at p 91.

¹⁵ *Sacrosanctum concilium* (Constitution on the sacred liturgy), n 122. I quote from my own translation, to be published in a forthcoming parallel text edition of *Conciliorum oecumenicorum decreta* ed Giuseppe Alberigo (Bologna, 1973), which has been prepared by members of the British province of the Society of Jesus under the leadership of Norman Tanner S.J.

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A BRIEF GUIDE TO LITERATURE ON HOPKINS

Texts—The best and most convenient edition now available is the volume, *Gerard Manley Hopkins* in the Oxford Authors series, edited by Catherine Phillips (Oxford, 1986). This contains an up-to-date text of all the poems and fragments in chronological order, a generous selection of prose, helpful annotation, and a good, short biography. There is a similar, rather older volume in the Penguin Classics series; and the fourth edition of the *Poems*, edited by W.H. Gardner and Norman H. MacKenzie (London, 1970—several times reprinted) is still serviceable.

MacKenzie has two important projects nearing completion which, between them, are likely to be permanently definitive: the Oxford English Texts volume on Hopkins, containing all the variant readings; and a two-volume facsimile edition of Hopkins's manuscripts, to be published by Garland Publishing, New York.

Nearly all Hopkins's prose was edited in five volumes published in London by OUP, but now sadly out of print: *The journals and papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited by Humphry House and Graham Storey (1959); *The sermons and devotional writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited by Christopher Devlin S.J. (1959); *The letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges* (1955), *The correspondence of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Richard Watson Dixon*, and *Further letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins including his correspondence with Coventry Patmore* (1956)—all second impression, and all edited by Claude Collier Abbott.

Biography—There are important full-length biographies in progress by D. Anthony Bischoff S.J., Robert Bernard Martin and Norman White. Shorter works have been written by Bernard Bergonzi (London, 1977) and Paddy Kitchen (London, 1978). On his years of formation in the Society of Jesus, Alfred Thomas, *Hopkins the Jesuit* (London, 1969) is an invaluable source of information; and Tom Zaniello, *Hopkins in the age of Darwin* is, at present, the best guide to Hopkins's studies at Oxford.

Interpretation and criticism—Indispensable is Norman H. MacKenzie, *A reader's guide to Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London, 1981). *Gerard Manley Hopkins: the critical heritage*, edited by Gerald Roberts (London, 1987) is a useful compendium of early reactions; and *Gerard Manley Hopkins: poems—a casebook*, edited by Margaret Bottrall (London, 1975) brings together some fine later essays.

Spirituality—The standard works, though now rather dated, are: John Pick, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: priest and poet* (London, 1942); and David A. Downes, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: a study of his Ignatian spirit* (London, 1959).