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The FURROW

A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Padraic Brennan

Hopkins –
Reminiscing a
Century Later

February 2018

Hopkins – Reminiscing a Century Later

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The first edition of Gerard Manley Hopkins' poetry was published in 1918, some twenty nine years after his death. This the centenary year of that significant event is perhaps an apt time to reminisce again on the legacy of his work. The purpose here is not to explore the literary qualities of Hopkins' poetry or its standing within the history of English literature. An appreciation of such matters is best left to the literary scholars. It is proposed instead to take another look at the 'faces of God's presence' in this poetry and at the poet's search for God at times of his 'apparent absence'. This is undertaken not in any comprehensive all embracing way but by dwelling briefly on a selection of Hopkins' poems that come to mind in relation to the themes being explored.

THE GRANDEUR OF GOD

For Hopkins 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God' ('God's Grandeur'). In 'Pied Beauty' he sees this not only in 'skies of couple colour', 'trout that swim', 'finches wings' and 'landscape plotted and pieced'. He also sees it in all the 'gear' of human activity and in the endless variety of so many things 'counter, original, spare, strange'. God's presence speaks to him too in the fresh beauty of Spring – in the song of the thrush, the 'racing lambs', the leaves and flowers of the 'glassy peartree' and even in weeds 'long, lovely and lush'. For all these things he would say praise Him 'whose beauty is past change'. The 'juice' and 'joy' of Spring is for Hopkins 'a strain of earth's sweet being' before it became 'sour with sinning'. In a similar vein he suggests the innocence of youth – 'innocent mind and Mayday in girl and boy'

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gives us a glimpse of what our world was like before, in his vision of things, paradise was lost. Coming to the poem 'As Kingfishers Catch Fire' we find Hopkins reflecting on how everything is meant to be *itself* – true to its own nature. In the human sphere 'the just man' embodies what the human is meant to be in the world: Christ for others. This picture of the human at its best is captured in the striking, haunting and thought provoking lines:

“For Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his,
To the Father through the features of men’s faces”.

Hopkins is, however, very much conscious of the fact that human behaviour often falls far short of the ideal. He is painfully aware in 'God's Grandeur' how, in a scramble for wealth, generations have despoiled the world around them:

“All is seared with trade, bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell”.

In the lament that 'the soil is bare now' he implies that humankind has trampled the beauty and life of creation into the earth. His thoughts on this topic are very relevant today, at a time when the world at large is so much concerned with environmental pollution. Hopkins picks up on this theme in another way in 'Binsey Poplars'. Here we can feel his sense of dismay and sadness that his 'aspen dear' are 'all felled, felled, are all felled'. His anguish and pain at the thoughtless violation of plant life comes through in the lines:

“O if we but knew what we do
When we delve or hew –
Hack and rack the growing green!”

In this poem Hopkins shows his sensitive awareness of the vulnerability of nature and how easy it is to upset its balance. For him 'the country is so tender', he compares it to an eye ball, so delicate that 'but a prick will make no eye at all'. In many ways this poem, 'Binsey Poplars' was prophetic at a time when so little notice was being taken of the damage being done to the environment by unsustainable forms of human activity.

Despite all this Hopkins believes that nature always has an underlying capacity to burst forth into new life. In 'God's Grandeur', after lamenting how much selfish human activity had desecrated the face of the earth, he comes back with the lines:

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“And for all this nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things”.

Just as surely as, after daylight disappears ‘off the black West’, morning ‘springs’ from the East, so too new life emerges from the bowls of the disfigured earth. He has this conviction:

“Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.”

Here is manifest Hopkins’ faith that the Holy Spirit is ever present penetrating and renewing all things. No doubt in this he has in mind, not only the physical order, but also the renewal of the spiritual domain of the human heart as well. In the phrase ‘the bent world’ one wonders is there a double play on the word ‘bent’. Perhaps at one level he is referring to the curvature of the earth and at another at the pathetic state of a world ‘bent over’ by human folly. The phrase ‘broods with warm breast’ evokes the idea of the Holy Spirit hovering with a warm tender presence and lovingly nurturing new life in our world at all levels. The image of a bird hatching her chicks comes to mind here. The Spirit at the same time broods with ‘bright wings’, suggesting a presence that is not only loving and gentle but also one that is majestic, powerful and full of light. Taken together these two lines constitute a remarkable depiction of the presence and the action of the Holy Spirit in our world.

THE WINDHOVER

‘The Windhover’ meditates on a different face of God, that of Christ himself. This poem Hopkins saw as the pinnacle of his poetry. The importance he attached to it is underlined by the way he dedicated it ‘to Christ our Lord’. Here he first describes how a falcon, a fast flying bird with pointed wings, ‘striding high’, threads the air and then daringly takes off in sweeping glides across the sky as smoothly ‘as a skate’s heel sweeps smooth on a bow bend’. In the process the bird ‘rebuffed the big wind’. Marvelling at the falcon’s exploits, struggling with and conquering the elemental force of the surging gales, Hopkins exclaims ‘the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!’ He then declares ‘a billion times told lovelier’ is the ‘achieve of’ Christ whom he addresses with the words ‘O my Chevalier!’ The ‘brute beauty, and valour and act’ of the falcon, in his battles with the air currents overhead, he intimates is as nothing compared to the sacrificial love of Christ even unto death, in his struggle with evil and ‘non love’ all around him. Both the radical depth and triumph of this sacrificial love are highlighted in the last three lines

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of the poem. These more than anything else he wrote elsewhere sum up for Hopkins the significance of the Christ Event:

“No wonder of it: sheer plod makes ploughed down sillion
Shine, and blue bleak embers, ah my dear,
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold vermillion”.

TWO COMMONPLACE IMAGES

Here Hopkins uses two commonplace images from human experience to illuminate the glory of resurrection bursting forth from a life totally given in love. The first focuses on how a field of upturned wet soil, polished by the sock of the plough, through the efforts of man and horse ‘plodding’ all day, glistens and shines in the rays of the setting sun. No one expects the dull mucky clay of the earth to radiate anything. Yet here at the tired end of a laborious day, there emerges from it a dazzling light, created by the ‘sheer plod’ of man and horse. In the context of the poem it is clear that Hopkins sees this as an image of Christ making his way by ‘sheer plod’ through the crucible of suffering up the hill of Calvary, only for there the grim spectacle of death to be transformed into the radiant beauty and light of resurrected life.

The second image is that of half dead, already ‘blue bleak embers’ falling and how they, as they break apart, in one last burst of fire ‘gash gold vermillion’. Here the portrayal of the last chapter of the Christ Event on earth is much more startling and indeed violent. The use of the words ‘fall’, ‘gall’ and ‘gash’ suggest the cruel brutality of Christ’s death. At the same time the idea of the embers exploding in a flash of ‘gold vermillion’ light points to the radical and instantaneous transformation of Christ in his humanity into a glorified state of being.

THE DARK YEARS

In the latter stages of his life Hopkins suffered from declining health. Physical ailments were compounded by a melancholic state of mind. This was reflected in his poetry where he struggled with two closely related themes: the apparent triumph of evil and God’s absence in what he considered his own worthless life. While in the first place centred on himself, his exposition of these themes has at another level universal application. For in the process of trying to make sense, or more often to describe the ‘non sense’, of his own life, he paints a picture of humanity’s struggle to find light and meaning in the pain and darkness that is so often part of the human experience, albeit manifesting itself in very different ways for different people.

In ‘Thou art indeed just, Lord’ Hopkins is frustrated by his own

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sense of failure, as he sees it. Not that he considers that he has nothing to offer but that he can find no means to be heard. In this poem he re-echoes a sentiment that has, down the ages, tortured many a human mind both biblical and philosophical:

“Why do sinners’ ways prosper? And why must
Disappointment all I endeavour end?”

In ‘To seem the stranger lies my lot, my life’, Hopkins, now in Ireland, bemoans the fact that he feels estranged from everyone. His family ‘are in Christ not near’, he being the only member to have converted to Catholicism. At the same time in Ireland he is at a ‘third remove’ from his beloved England. While not mentioned here, there is also the fact that Hopkins was both unhappy and felt an abject failure in his main role in Ireland, as a lecturer in UCD. As regards his poetry ‘what wisest his heart breeds’ he has to ‘hoard unheard’. With an obvious reference to his disappointment that his Jesuit superiors would not let him publish his poetry, he does not know whether to blame more ‘dark heaven’s baffling ban’ or ‘hell’s spell’.

In ‘No worse there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief’ Hopkins cries out:

“Comforter, where, where is your comforting?
Mary, mother of us, where is your relief?”

– implying God is nowhere to be found or Mary either. We get a sense of his restless, agitated and tortured mind in such words as ‘My cries heave on an age-old anvil wince and sing’. The awful depths of darkness and despair that engulf him are captured in the lines:

“O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed.”

W H Gardner in a comment in the notes of ‘The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ (Fourth Edition) sees this poem as the first of Hopkins’s sonnets to ‘sound the uttermost depths of what St. Ignatius calls ‘desolation’.’ That ‘desolation’ is no less deep in ‘I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day’. Here Hopkins dwells on the ‘black hours’ of sleepless nights spent in torturous thoughts of self condemnation. He goes on to say ‘hours I mean years, mean life’ intimating that his whole life is like a troubled sleepless night, where he exclaims ‘God’s most deep decree bitter would have me taste; my taste was me.’ He ends by comparing himself with the damned:

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“The lost are like this, and their scourge to be
As I mine, their sweating selves; but worse.”

WRESTLING WITH GOD

But even in some of his blackest poems the hope of better things lurks in the background. For instance he says the lost are like him ‘but worse’. In other words his hell, while like, is not the same as the hell of the damned that can have no end. ‘Thou art indeed just, Lord’, which we saw highlights his own sense of failure, ends with a cry ‘O thou Lord of life, send my roots rain’. This shows that despite his near despair the poet still clings to a hope in a God who can give life to the ‘roots’ of his efforts. In ‘Carrion Comfort’ he directly confronts ‘Despair’. He will not ‘feast’ on what only gives the comfort of ‘carrion’, that is of rotting animal flesh. Though oppressed by Despair’s ‘darksome devouring eyes’ scanning his ‘bruised bones’ and feeling the weight of its ‘lionlimb’ against him, he ‘can something, hope, wish day come, not choose not to be’. In this almighty struggle he searches for a meaning. The line: ‘Why? That my chaff might fly; my grain lie sheer and clear’ suggests he finds it in a process of cleansing and purification. The lines at the end of the poem further substantiate this. Here we see Hopkins come to the awesome realisation that in all of this: ‘I wretch lay wrestling with (my God!) my God.’

In two other poems ‘Patience, hard thing’ and ‘My own heart let me more have pity on’ Hopkins, in a calmer mood, attempts to come to terms with his lot and, in patience, self acceptance and waiting, find hope. In ‘Patience, hard thing’ Hopkins is honest about how difficult he finds the virtue. He says ‘We hear our hearts grate on themselves’ with the effort. Despite this he values patience enough to ‘bid God bend to him’ the ‘rebellious wills of us’. He implies the fruit of patience is a great peace when he says of her:

“There she basks,
Purple eyes and seas of liquid leaves all day”.

But this is achieved only at a great price. To reach it we must be prepared to ‘bruise’ our hearts ‘dearer’ or in other words die to ourselves more fully.

WAITING FOR ‘UNFORESEEN TIMES’

In ‘My own heart let me more have pity on’, as this opening line suggests, Hopkins sees the way forward as living ‘to his own self hereafter kind’. He realises that in wallowing around in his own sense of worthlessness and self disgust he can no more find comfort than ‘blind eyes in their dark can day’ find or than ‘thirst

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can find thirst' in 'a world of wet'. So instead he advises his 'poor Jackself' to lay off his torturous thoughts awhile. He must 'let joy size, at God knows when to God knows what', or in other words whenever and however God chooses. He sees God's blessing cannot be forced, – something he acknowledges when he speaks of the God 'whose smile is not wrung'. There is in this poem a great sense of the need to wait patiently in hope and trust for the 'unforeseen times' of God's grace to surprise even as 'skies between piemountains – lights a lovely mile'. While scholars wrestle with the exact meaning of 'between piemountains' the general idea is clear. Hopkins is comparing the light of God touching our lives to the light that can suddenly appear in a gap between overshadowing mountains to illuminate for us 'a lovely mile' of the road we are on. Perhaps in this poem Hopkins reaches his wisest and most profound insight into how the faith journey, often lived in darkness, is best pursued.

What happened in the aftermath of his own life, is a living testimony to the truth carved with such feeling and expression in this masterpiece. When the last 'blue bleak embers' of Hopkins' life fell in death, it must have appeared to most people, even among the majority of the small circle of those who thought they knew him, that this event marked a miserable end to a miserable life, that served no obvious worthwhile purpose. Who would have thought then that by the time the sun set for the last time on a twentieth century day, Hopkins would have long since been hailed as one of the greatest English poets of modern times and that he would have brought so much joy to so many lovers of poetry? Or who could have imagined that the same poetry of Gerald Manly Hopkins S.J. would become such a source of inspiration for so many fellow travellers in faith, who, often trudging by 'sheer plod' through dark valleys in life, likewise wait in hope for 'unforeseen times' when God will for them 'light a lovely mile'? 'Unforeseen times' indeed!