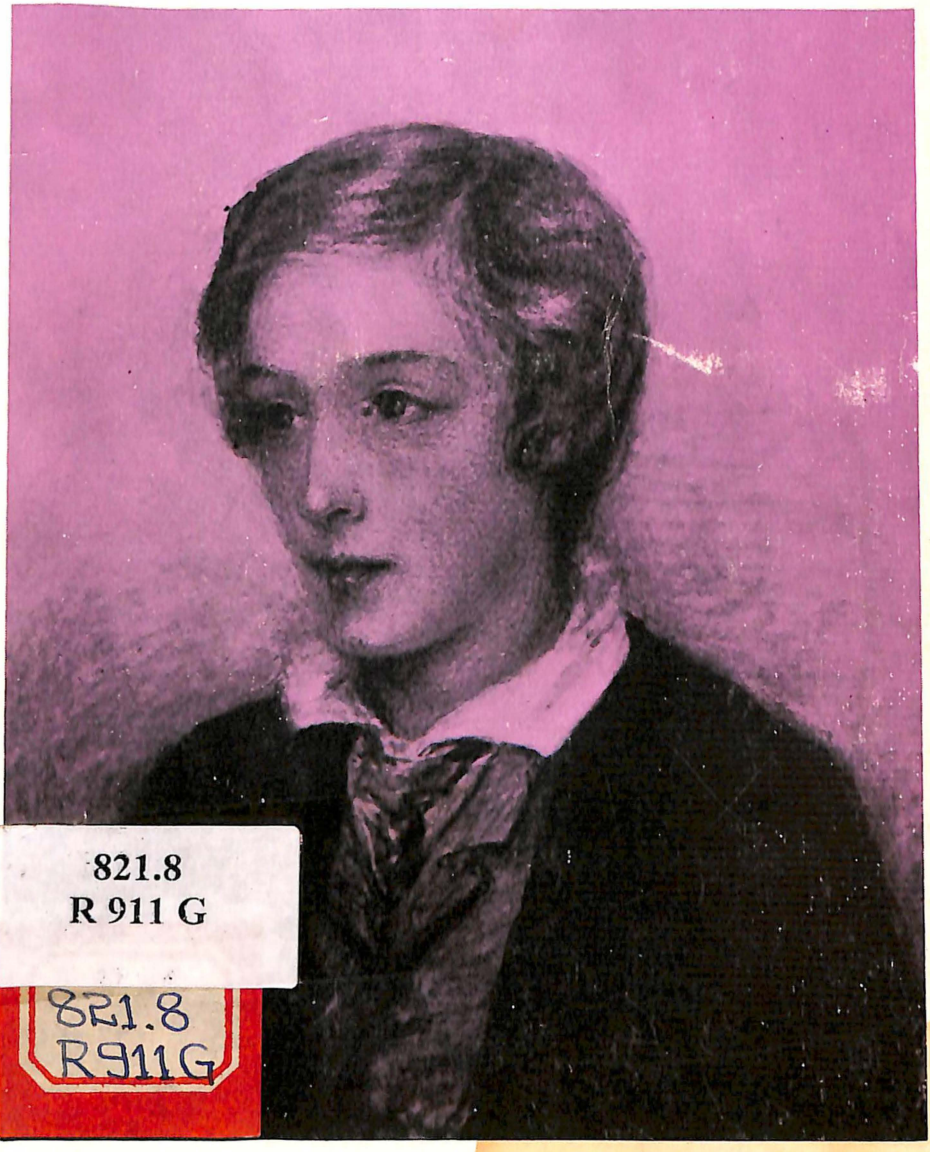
Macmillan Critical Commentaries

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS: POEMS

J. F. J. Russell



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CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON Gerard Manley Hopkins's 'Poems'

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MACMILLAN

First Published in 1971

Published by
MACMILLAN EDUCATION LTD
Basingstoke and London
Companies and representatives throughout the world

Printed in Great Britain by
ROBERT MACLEHOSE AND CO LTD
The University Press, Glasgow

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Foreword

The present series of Critical Commentaries is offered in the belief that, faced with a work of exceptional density of texture or complication of structure, the reader may be helped in his appreciation by a 'conducted tour' or point-by-point critical exposition. These commentaries are intended as a supplement to the material normally supplied in a scholarly edition and not, of course, as a substitute for it. A 'further-reading list' will normally be provided, together with selected questions for discussion.

Introduction

SENTIMENTALIST OR PHILOSOPHER?

What interest has Hopkins's poetry for the reader of today? A tentative answer might run as follows: the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins demands the attention of the serious reader because it embodies a vision of the universe seldom equalled in its intensity and vividness – an intensity and vividness which drove Hopkins to question the nature of human experience, and the values of the world and society in which he lived. Hopkins's stature as a poet rests upon the challenge that his poetry presents to us, today, to the way we think and feel about life – and at the present time his work is peculiarly relevant, for the trend towards the destruction of natural beauty by reckless industrialisation, which so horrified Hopkins, seems to be reaching its climax, particularly in England. Hopkins forces us to ask ourselves whether human beings need to come into contact with fields, woods, meadows and streams to develop fully as human beings, or whether concrete runways and skyscrapers are perfectly adequate substitutes. To be human is not simply to belong to a particular biological group – it is to be able to feel and recognise certain feelings such as love, sympathy, pity and wonder. To Hopkins, a man who could not experience and wonder at the beauty of a starlight night or the coming of spring was not a human being at all in the true sense of the words. So that when Hopkins laments the destruction of Binsey Poplars he is not a sentimentalist objecting to the cutting down of a few old trees – his protest goes far deeper than that. He sees human beings being robbed of one of the most signifi-

cant experiences in life. We may not attach quite the same importance to the experiences which he embodies in his poetry as Hopkins himself seems to do, but we still have to recognise it as a serious challenge requiring answer.

HOPKINS'S POETIC DEVELOPMENT

Hopkins's poetry, like that of Keats, developed and matured rapidly throughout his poetic career. T. S. Eliot has written that 'maturing as a poet means maturing as the whole man, experiencing new emotions appropriate to one's age, and with the same intensity as the emotions of youth', and in many ways these words are true of Hopkins. Certainly the intensity of experience found in the early poem, 'A Vision of Mermaids', is present with equal intensity in the final 'Terrible Sonnets'. But the newness of Hopkins's emotions in his later poetry requires some qualification. As this Commentary tries to show, Hopkins, again rather like Keats, seemed to foresee right from the very beginning of his career the kind of development his life would take. In a poetical squib Hopkins once poked fun at Wordsworth's saying, 'The child is father to the man', yet Hopkins himself is an illustration of the truth of it. In at least one case ('The Alchemist in the City' and 'Thou art indeed just, Lord') there is a remarkable similarity between very early and very late poems. What distinguishes the latter from the former is the intensity with which the feeling of sterility and isolation is expressed. In the early poem Hopkins seems simply to be toying with a conventional Victorian poetic sentiment – the isolation of the creative artist in an industrial civilisation, whereas in the later poem the isolation is personally felt and emerges naturally from the dramatic situation

which the poem suggests; it is embodied in the movement of the verse, not merely talked about. Thus there is a unity in Hopkins's work which consists of a gradual refining and deepening of certain experiences present in the poet from the very beginning, rather than in the discovery of new experiences. It is, perhaps, as though there was available to him a certain range of feelings which the whole of his life was devoted to understanding and experiencing more fully. The question that confronts every reader is whether, for him, the poems encompass sufficient of what seem to most human beings to be the really significant experiences of life to justify describing Hopkins as a great poet.

HOPKINS'S USE OF LANGUAGE

The refining and deepening of feeling which has been referred to is to be found in the manner in which Hopkins uses language, rather than in any increasing complexity of ideas. Every human being is, to a great extent, conditioned by the age in which he lives, and that conditioning process takes place mainly through language. We are able consciously to feel and express what contemporary language allows us to – after that, in delving into experience, we are making, in Eliot's words, 'raids on the inarticulate'. The freshness of language and perception in young children's writing results from their ignorance of adult cliché; they are aware of individual objects as objects rather than as parts of a pattern imposed upon them by adult values. As the child grows up, so its language takes on the characteristics of adult speech, and with it the sense of values predominant in the adult world. Many of Hopkins's feelings were too real to him to be fitted into the conventional poetic vocabulary of the nineteenth century, and the development of his poetry thus reflects not merely the

working out of an inner emotional drama, but his progress in finding a language and mode of speech which would enable him to express his own deepest feelings without appearing precious or sentimental. In his search for this (and partly, as will be mentioned later, as a result of his philosophical beliefs) he at times coined new words or revised archaic ones.

Twentieth century criticism has seen long and heated arguments about the 'correct' language and movement of poetry. The 'metaphysical' poets and modern poets such as T. S. Eliot have been praised for their use of the spoken language of intelligent men whilst other poets, particularly Milton, have been criticised for distorting the natural order, vocabulary and movement of good colloquial speech. The conscientious critic has to resist the temptation to erect this kind of particular judgement into a critical yardstick. There is no God-given law that all poems that contain novel or archaic words are bad, and all which employ everyday language are good. There are no such short cuts in criticism. In every such case the critic must look at the words and movement in their context in the poem; decide, if he can, what the poet is trying to do, whether he achieves his aim and whether it was worth while.

It is a useful exercise, when reading Hopkins's poetry for the first time, to underline the unusual words, and to question their purpose and effectiveness in their context. On a delicate question such as this may hang our judgement of the success or failure of a particular poem. Generalised discussion of Hopkins's idiosyncratic usage is also frequently misleading because it leaves the reader with the impression that this kind of usage occurs uniformly throughout his work. In fact it doesn't. It is most frequently found in 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' and the subsequent poems up to about 'Harry Ploughman'. In the final 'Terrible Sonnets' it disappears almost completely.

In the Commentary comparatively little stress has been placed on this aspect of Hopkins's poetry because it is essentially subordinate to the main aim of the criticism – that of suggesting an approach to Hopkins's works which will enable the interested reader to explore them further for himself. Concentration on unusual words can easily become a mechanical exercise in which the fact that it is only justified in an attempt to account for our response to a particular poem is overlooked. The most important developments in the use of language in Hopkins's poetry are those which take place between the 'Early Poems' and 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', and from the 'Middle Poems' to the 'Final Poems'. The first change is from a conventionally Victorian poetic style to one so intensely personal as to be idiosyncratic. As will be suggested later, however, the language and tone of 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' operate to exclude the critical faculty, and it is only when the poem is examined carefully that we realise that the intensity of it springs partly from its exclusion of whole areas of experience. The second change, from the 'Middle' to the 'Final Poems', may be described as a movement from looking outwards to looking inwards. The 'Middle Poems' are, without exception, concerned with outward events, and Hopkins's feelings enter in only as reactions to these events. The world of the 'Middle Poems' is a comparatively simple one, and Hopkins's attitudes towards it are equally simple – his moods can usually be characterised by one word – ecstacy, bitterness, disgust – they are seldom a mixture of conflicting attitudes. His interest in language is basically a concern to use words that reproduce the texture of their subject, and to embody them in an aesthetically satisfying pattern. In the 'Final Poems' Hopkins turns to his own feelings as his main subject matter, and the complexity of these is suggested by the increasing variety in the move-

ment of the verse. The predominant tone of the 'Middle Poems' is that of ordinary speech, but it is the speech of one who is certain of what he thinks. In the 'Final Poems' this is no longer so – the language reflects the movement of the mind under the pressure of immediate experience. Words are no longer savoured for their sensuous qualities as if they were part of the beauty of external nature – they are the means through which feeling becomes conscious, and are valued for their contribution to the understanding and ordering of inner emotional conflict. Hopkins's preoccupation with experience and language is thus, towards the end of his life, the same as that of Shakespeare and the 'metaphysical' poets, and he turns to them, as Eliot was to do later, for assistance in creating poetry adequate to his experience. Hopkins, in the 'Final Poems', is a 'modern' poet in the sense that all great poets are 'modern' – they appeal not solely to an aesthetic or literary-historical interest, but to the undying concern of man with his own nature.

POETRY AND BELIEF

The problem of the extent to which it is possible for a person to appreciate the achievement of a writer whose religious beliefs he does not share, is one which has to be confronted in reading Hopkins's poetry; for 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' is largely an account of his conversion to Roman Catholicism and how such conversion comes about, the 'Middle Poems' interpret experience in religious terms, and the 'Final Poems' are an exploration of the significance of feelings resulting from his vocation as a Jesuit. In the Commentary this issue is discussed where the poetry gives rise to it, and it is for the reader to decide whether the criticisms made of certain poems are justified

by close reading of the poetry or merely disguised prejudice. The point that is being made is that, if we are to appreciate Hopkins's poetry properly we must read exactly what Hopkins has written, and attempt to define the effect the poetry has on us. We have to ask ourselves whether Hopkins is thinking and feeling for himself, exploring his own personal experience, or whether he is merely versifying accepted ideas. He has to convince us that to him the religious interpretation was a part of the experience, and his success in doing this is a question for criticism rather than for theology.

Closely connected with the problem of religious belief is that of the philosophical ideas present in the poetry, and in particular that of 'inscape' which he derived from the medieval philosopher Duns Scotus. It was only to be expected that a person as sensitive and intelligent as Hopkins should be driven to reflect on the significance of his experience and to turn for help to the great minds of the past. He quite clearly treated Duns Scotus not as a remote object of academic study, but as a living being who had been disturbed by his experience as deeply as Hopkins had, and who had achieved a philosophical explanation of it which to Hopkins was self-evidently true. Hopkins's study of Duns Scotus was thus really a process of self-discovery; it made him more conscious of what he already intuitively knew. And Hopkins certainly hoped that the same kind of relationship would exist between himself and the reader of his poetry – that the poetry would revitalise the reader's perceptions, and awaken him to essential human experiences to which the nineteenth century ethos seemed hostile. The poetry is thus not intended to persuade the reader of the truth of any philosophy by rational argument, but so to alert him to the true nature of his own experiences that the philosophy is self-evidently true.

Something of the relationship between Hopkins and

Duns Scotus is suggested by the following summary, by W. H. Gardner of part of an article by Christopher Devlin, S.J.

'. . . Hopkins's inspirational view of poetic creation roughly corresponds to the Scotist concept that the 'first act' of knowledge is intuitive, a particular 'glimpse' into the universal Nature, 'a confused intuition of Nature as a living whole'; and the vividness of the glimpse depends upon 'its nearness to the individual degree'. Hence to Hopkins an inscape was something more than a delightful sensory impression; it was an insight, by divine grace, into the ultimate spiritual reality.'

By 'inscape' is meant that particular active quality of being that gives to any object its individuality. Hopkins attempted, in much of his poetry, to make men aware of the 'inscape' of objects of natural beauty. He did not want to convey the philosophical idea of 'inscape', but the experience itself which was so vivid that it demanded to be named.

In the poems discussed in the Commentary 'inscape' is seldom explicitly referred to, although it is usually the individuality of objects that Hopkins tries to recreate through language. The word he frequently uses for this is 'self', and it is essential to bear this in mind as some lines are otherwise difficult to understand. One such is 'self in self steepèd and pashed' in 'Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves' where Hopkins is referring to the way objects lose their individuality and merge into each other in the dusk. It is also important to remember that success in conveying the 'inscape' of objects does not automatically make great poetry, and that what seemed to Hopkins to be the essence of an object may not be the same to us. This is particularly so in a poem such as 'Harry Ploughman'.

More important to the critic is Hopkins's belief that poetry had an 'inscape' of its own, only tenuously con-

nected to meaning. Before composing 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' he wrote:

'Poetry is speech framed to be heard for its own sake and interest even over and above its interest of meaning. Some matter and meaning is essential to it but only as an element necessary to support and employ the shape which is contemplated for its own sake – and therefore the inscape must be dwelt on.'

This, no doubt, in part explains what at times seems to be Hopkins's interest in the music of language to the detriment of meaning, and the critical problems to which this gives rise are considered in the discussion of 'Felix Randal' and 'Harry Ploughman'. In the 'Final Poems', the interest in the 'inscape' of poetry, as of other objects, disappears. The concern with meaning, in the widest sense of the word, replaces the apparently self-justifying exploitation of the sensuous qualities of language found in some of the earlier poetry.

SPRUNG RHYTHM

Nothing has been said in the Commentary of the technical side of Hopkins's experiments with metres, as these are best approached through a reading of the Letters to Robert Bridges and R. W. Dixon, and of the 'Author's Preface' which is printed in the 'Collected Poems'. In attempting or studying such analysis it is essential to keep in mind the question whether our labour is repaid by increased understanding of the poetry. This approach is justified by the exasperation one senses at times in Hopkins's letters to R. W. Dixon at the latter's interest in the technique of poetry at the expense of the poetry itself. The most important point to be made about 'Sprung Rhythm' is that made by Hopkins himself – that it is 'the

most natural of things'. 'Sprung Rhythm' is the means through which Hopkins captured the movement of common speech in poetry, and we recognise its presence not through technical analysis but because it is the rhythm of the language we ourselves speak.

THE STRUCTURE OF THIS COMMENTARY

The Commentary has been divided into four sections, each of which marks a distinct step in Hopkins's poetic development. The poems which are discussed in some detail have been chosen either for their intrinsic quality or (particularly with the 'Early Poems') for light they shed on Hopkins's poetic career. In each case an attempt has been made to say something of the interest of the poetry as poetry. Minor poems of major poets, although sometimes interesting as sidelights on the important works, still remain minor poems. It must be emphasised also that the Commentary is intended not as an end in itself but as a basis for discussion and fruitful disagreement. No attempt has been made to comment on every one of Hopkins's poems or even on all those poems on which Hopkins's reputation must finally rest. It aims rather at raising the issues which must be considered before making a personal judgement on Hopkins's stature as a poet.

The Poems

1 EARLY POEMS

Hopkins destroyed most of his early poems (the poems written before 'The Wreck of the Deutschland') when he became a Jesuit. Those which survived did so by chance, and had Hopkins written nothing more it is doubtful whether they would ever have been thought worth publishing, at any rate in book form. For the reader interested in Hopkins's later poems, they have a threefold importance. Firstly, they show Hopkins imitating and learning from other poets – both established classics and contemporaries. Secondly, they show him discovering where his real powers lay, and which influences he found most congenial. Thirdly, it is possible to trace certain attitudes and ideas which Hopkins was later to develop in more personal form.

Every young poet, once he consciously writes poetry, learns his craft by imitating other poets, and at times consciously echoes them. Hopkins is no exception. The extent to which he soaked himself in the works of other writers may be gauged from the echoes of George Herbert, Blake, Wordsworth, Keats, Tennyson and many others found in his poetry. Two examples of echoes from Tennyson will make the point. Thus, in 'The Escorial' Hopkins writes,

> Here play'd the virgin mother with her Child
> In some broad palmy mead, and saintly smiled,
> And held a cross of flowers in purple bloom;

Here the subject matter and tone are reminiscent of Tennyson's,

Or the maid-mother by a crucifix,
In tracts of pasture sunny warm,
Beneath branch work of costly sardonyx
Sat smiling, babe in arm.

From 'The Palace of Art'. Hopkins takes quite naturally to the tradition of word painting in Victorian poetry, adding to the Tennysonian picture the 'flowers in purple bloom' which is distinctively his own. Hopkins's 'Heaven Haven' (subtitled 'A nun takes the veil') is another example of possible influence:

I have desired to go
Where springs not fail,
To fields where flies no sharp and sided hail
And a few lilies blow.

And I have asked to be
Where no storms come,
Where the green swell is in the havens dumb,
And out of the swing of the sea.

The kind of paradise described by the nun bears obvious similarities to Tennyson's well-known description of the island-valley of Avilion in 'Morte D'Arthur':

. . . Where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow,
Nor ever wind blows loudly; but it lies
Deep-meadowed, happy, fair with orchard-lawns
And bowery hollows crown'd with summer sea, . . .

The escapist attitude present in the Hopkins poem (for the haven is seen in entirely negative terms), although there attributed to the nun, is something which Hopkins at times shares with Tennyson, Matthew Arnold and other Victorian poets. Compared with, say, the age of Shakespeare, the world of the poet seemed, in the nineteenth century, to be severely circumscribed. The discoveries in the physical sciences, and the achievements of industry,

seemed to make the poet appear rather effeminate; his productions were not as immediately impressive, of such obvious use, as those of his more practical contemporaries. No one was more conscious of this than Hopkins and Matthew Arnold. Both, in their very different ways, felt that civilisation had taken a wrong turning, and that men were ignoring values that alone make life meaningful. And both Hopkins and Arnold felt their own helplessness against the unfeeling materialism of their age.

Something of this attitude finds expression in 'The Alchemist in the City'. The whole of this poem is spoken by the Alchemist, but the sentiments expressed are those of Hopkins himself, scarcely disguised:

> My window shows the travelling clouds,
> Leaves spent, new seasons, alter'd sky,
> The making and the melting crowds:
> The whole world passes; I stand by.
>
> They do not waste their meted hours,
> But men and masters plan and build:
> I see the crowning of their towers
> And happy promises fulfill'd.

Hopkins, even at this early stage of his life, seems to recognise in himself a certain insufficiency. He watches what happens as a by-stander rather than as a participator. There is no sense of urgency in the poem; the movement is leisurely, relaxed. Perhaps the tone of the second verse suggests envy of the 'men and masters' – certainly there is no sign of condemnation. But Hopkins is not stirred to activity by the sight – he accepts his own situation as something which cannot be changed:

> Yet now it is too late to heal
> The incapable and cumbrous shame
> Which makes me when with men I deal
> More powerless than the blind or lame.

The verse is awkward – natural speech order is distorted by saying 'when with men I deal' instead of 'when I deal with men', and this gives the reader the impression that he is reading versified ideas rather than listening to direct speech asserting an unpleasant fact that cannot be ignored. In spite of this, Hopkins's early poetry itself lends some support to this early analysis of his own situation. The point may perhaps be made by saying that Hopkins could never have been a novelist. A novelist must imaginatively enter into the thoughts and feelings of his characters, and create a world in his story which exists in its own right. This Hopkins could never do. His poetry is, almost without exception, concerned with analysing his own feelings; and these feelings seem never to have been touched by the rough and tumble of nineteenth-century life of the kind that we find in the novels of George Eliot and Dickens. Hopkins never feels himself part of a pulsing civilisation – he always remains an observer.

What distinguishes Hopkins from the majority of people who merely cut themselves off from the world of their day is his consciousness of his own situation, the sensuous vitality of his vision as embodied in his poetry and the moral honesty with which he accepted the consequences of his own choices. The first of these has already been touched upon insofar as it affects the early poems. The second, the sensuous vitality of his vision, can be seen in 'A Vision of Mermaids', which owes much to the influence of Keats. The first six lines of this poem, which set the scene, are interesting for the mixture of detailed observation, the engaging conversational tone and the occasional awkwardness which perhaps indicates a lack of experience in handling the couplet:

> Rowing, I reach'd a rock – the sea was low –
> Which the tides cover in their overflow,

Marking the spot, when they have gurgled o'er,
With a thin floating veil of water hoar.
A mile astern lay the blue shores away;
And it was at the setting of the day.

Hopkins addresses the reader as if he were actually present; the brief aside 'the sea was low', slipped in almost as an afterthought, establishes a certain intimacy. We feel Hopkins there actually talking to us about an interesting experience that happened to him. The language is colloquial, and remarkably forceful as in a word like 'gurgled', where we both hear and feel the wave passing over the rock. The fourth line is in odd contrast with the others; the colloquial language disappears and is replaced by conventional poetic diction. How dead an inverted phrase like 'water hoar' seems to evoke the frothy foam on the surface of the sea. It is as if Hopkins, in this line, takes his eye off the object he is describing, and thinks of a pretty rather than a visually and aurally accurate means of evoking the scene.

When Hopkins comes to describe the sunset, however, although there is no doubt of his almost uncontrollable rapture at the magnificence of the scene, his command of language fails him; we are made conscious of Hopkins's response to the setting sun, rather than of the setting sun itself:

Now all things rosy turn'd; the west had grown
To an orb'd rose, which, by hot pantings blown
Apart, betwixt ten thousand petall'd lips
By interchange gasp'd splendour and eclipse.
The zenith melted to a rose of air;
The waves were rosy-lipp'd; the crimson glare
Shower'd the cliffs and every fret and spire
With garnet wreaths and blooms of rosy-budded fire.

It is absolutely impossible to derive any clear picture of

the sunset from these lines; what Hopkins seems to do is to work himself into a trance by the repetition of 'rosy' and allied words, with slight overtones from the vacabulary of passionate love. The reader is left with a feeling of tremendous pent up energy in the poet which fails to find clear expression in the poetry itself. The basic idea of the poem seems to have been derived from Tennyson's 'The Vision of Sin', where the lips/eclipse rhyme is also found, together with many of the key words used by Hopkins.

Much of Hopkins's poetic career was to be spent trying to find adequate words and images in which to express his feelings, and in trying to grasp their significance. Every human being searches for some kind of meaning in life, even if the search only leads to the conclusion that human experience is too complex for any meaning to be found. The more vivid a person's experience is, so much the more is he forced to try to explain it. Hopkins gloried in the splendour of the sunset, of the vision of mermaids, but at the same time the intensity of the experience made him aware of its transience:

> White loom'd my rock, the water gurgling o'er,
> Whence oft I watch but see those Mermaids now no more.

Even in these early poems Hopkins is conscious that life will not go on for ever: that a thinking human being cannot content himself with a life of sensuous indulgence. 'Spring and Death', a poem which foreshadows 'Spring and Fall' (which is discussed in a later section) is almost a parable of the experience of growing up. The slightly whimsical, almost off-hand tone disguises the truth to experience:

> I had a dream. A wondrous thing:
> It seem'd an evening in the Spring:

– A little sickness in the air
From too much fragrance everywhere:–
As I walk'd a stilly wood,
Sudden, Death before me stood:

Spring is not simply the season of the year, but also the spring of life. The sheer happiness, richness of childhood, Hopkins seems to be saying, makes the child feel that it is all too good to be true and to sense the underlying menace of death. The fragrance of the flowers is too rich, almost as if intended to disguise the smells of the sick room. Then, suddenly, the child comes face to face with Death, whose existence he has dimly felt before. After a few lines, which remind one of Blake, the poem continues:

'Death', said I, 'what do you here
At this Spring season of the year?'
'I mark the flowers ere the prime
Which I may tell at Autumn time.'
Ere I had further question made
Death was vanished from the glade.

The verse is verbose. Words such as 'time' and 'season' are redundant, and in reading the poem aloud it is necessary to struggle against the metre if the natural speech rhythms are to be stressed. Nevertheless, Hopkins's demand for information, the brief reply of Death and his subsequent slightly sinister disappearance embody fairly successfully the manner in which Death first crosses the experience of a young child. At the time the child does not fully understand what happens, and yet the knowledge of the existence of death can never be stamped out from the consciousness. Hopkins, throughout his life, seems to be driven to find a meaning in his experience; driven by the sense that life is short and leaves little time for self indulgence.

2 'THE WRECK OF THE DEUTSCHLAND'

It is in 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' that the full force of Hopkins's genius is first seen. The ostensible object of the poem was to commemorate five Franciscan nuns who had been exiled from Germany for their faith, and who were drowned when the Deutschland, on which they were travelling, was wrecked in the mouth of the Thames. The bravery of these, related in the second part of the poem, evoked in Hopkins the same feelings which he had experienced on conversion to Roman Catholicism. In the first part of the poem he re-lives this experience in all its intensity, seeing it as part of the continuous process through which God wins man to his purposes.

Part the First

The poem opens in the middle of a struggle between Hopkins and God – God forcing Hopkins to recognise the divine hand in the drowning of the nuns:

> Thou mastering me
> God! giver of breath and bread;
> World's strand, sway of the sea;
> Lord of living and dead;
> Thou hast bound bones and veins in me, fastened me flesh,
> And after it almost unmade, what with dread,
> Thy doing: and dost thou touch me afresh?
> Over again I feel thy finger and find thee.

The struggle is almost over – the word 'mastering', with its movement of steady inevitability, shows the uselessness of struggling against God's will, whilst the brief word 'God', in the second line, suggests that the poet is giving up the fight. He is forced to a confession of the omnipresence of God, and the magnificence of His power is conveyed in

the sweeping movement of the lines, the constant alliteration and patterning of vowel sounds. A line such as,

World's strand, sway of the sea;

with its deep plangent note and repetitive rhythm suggesting the timelessness of the breaking of the waves is emotionally as exciting and stirring as the rhythmic beating of a drum. It attunes the reader to a mode of experience different from that to which he is accustomed, so that he ceases to be a mere reader and becomes a participator in a universal drama. In the world of 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' God is constantly active, 'binding', 'fastening' and 'unmaking'. Now, at this particular moment in time, stirred by the thought of the five nuns, Hopkins recognises the shaping hand of God.

Over again I feel thy finger and find thee.

The 'f' alliteration registers the actual process of feeling – at first the uncertainty whether there *is* anything to feel, and then the growing conviction as the movement of the line quickens with the similarity of vowel in 'finger' and 'find' until it pounces on 'thee' with absolute assurance at the end.

Right from the opening of the very first stanza we feel ourselves in contact with a living human being. The movement of the verse is varied, changing from the subsiding tension of the opening, through the sweeping recognition of God's grandeur in the following lines, to the slightly querulous,

. . . and dost thou touch me afresh?

to the conviction of the final line. The writer is obviously very alive. He knows the feeling of being overcome by a more powerful force, the sense of awe and

wonder which occasionally overtakes one; he has obviously responded to the primeval mystery of the sea. It is this kind of vitality which makes great poetry, and to respond to its vision with a half sense of familiarity it is not necessary to share all of Hopkins's conscious beliefs.

From the 'touching afresh' by God through the faith of the five nuns, Hopkins's mind moves back to the occasion of his original conversion to Roman Catholicism and we re-live, through the poetry, the stresses, tensions and terrors that drove him to make his decision:

> I did say yes
> O at lightning and lashed rod;
> Thou heardst me truer than tongue confess
> Thy terror, O Christ, O God;
> Thou knowest the walls, altar and hour and night:
> The swoon of a heart that the sweep and the hurl of thee trod
> Hard down with a horror of height:
> And the midriff astrain with leaning of, laced with fire of stress.

It is almost as if Hopkins is reminding God of the previous occasion when he 'touched' him, in the hope of being spared this new visitation. His conversion is evoked in language which suggests the wrecking of a ship in a storm. Just as one of the nuns stood on the deck of the sinking ship testifying to her faith in Christ, so Hopkins was driven to recognise God's presence by 'lightning and lashed rod', the kind of worldly experience which forces a person to come to some decision about the meaning of life. Through the poetry we experience the agony that preceded conversion . . .

> I did say yes
> O at lightning and lashed rod. . .

The first line builds up to a climax as the word 'yes' is

wrung from God's victim as if he can no longer stand the pain of denying God's presence:

> Thou heardst me truer than tongue confess
> Thy terror, O Christ, O God;

Again the lines build up to a pitch, almost to a scream, much as the unfeeling waves broke over the sinking ship. Hopkins's mind moves back to the specific place of his conversion, the evocative words 'walls', 'altar', 'hour', 'night' conveying the way in which every detail of the torment of his experience is indelibly printed on his mind. The determined, crushing power of God is felt in a phrase like 'trod/Hard down' with its firm 'd' alliteration, emphasising the smallness of man in the face of God.

And then, the agony of decision:

> The frown of his face
> Before me, the hurtle of hell
> Behind, where, where was a, where was a place?

Hopkins was driven to conversion by a frowning, an angry God; the poet seemed to find himself trapped between hell and a cruel God. We feel the grasping for some security, some relief in,

> . . . where, where was a, where was a place?

as if a man in danger of drowning is making his final effort to reach the shore. Then, says Hopkins,

> I whirled out wings that spell
> And fled with a fling of the heart to the heart of the Host.

The line skips to its conclusion, reflecting Hopkins's relief that the decision has now finally been taken. 'Spell' here means a round in a fight. Hopkins's fight with God

had gone on at intervals throughout his life, but on this particular occasion Hopkins was forced to give in. 'Host' here is perhaps slightly ambiguous, combining the idea of Hopkins fleeing to the heart of the enemy (i.e. of God) and the idea of the 'Host', the consecrated bread in the Mass, symbolising his conversion to Roman Catholicism. The rest of the stanza is on a slightly calmer note:

> My heart, but you were dovewinged, I can tell,
> Carrier-witted, I am bold to boast,
> To flash from the flame to the flame then, tower from the grace
> to the grace.

The tone is one of fatherly affection; the 'heart' had the intelligence of a carrier pigeon and accepted God before Hopkins knew in his reason and intelligence what was happening.

Stanza 4 is an attempt to express in intellectual terms the emotional experiences conveyed by the preceding stanzas. The sweeping, slightly overwrought movement is replaced by one of detached contemplation:

> I am soft sift
> In an hourglass – at the wall
> Fast, but mined with a motion, a drift,
> And it crowds and it combs to the fall;

Human life slips away just as 'soft sift' (one responds almost unconsciously to the delicate texture of the fine sand and its drifting movement so firmly embedded in the language) through the neck of an hourglass. But nevertheless,

> I steady as water in a well, to a poise, to a pane,
> But roped with, always, all the way down from the tall
> Fells or flanks of the voel, a vein
> Of the gospel proffer, a pressure, a principle, Christ's gift.

The 'steadying' must, it seems, refer to the settlement of the sand before it passes through the neck – as some of the sand slips through, so the rest levels itself off again. As the sand of human life runs out, so what remains takes on a definite shape. 'Voel' is Welsh for 'bare hill'. As the bare hill is 'roped' (one notes the visual accuracy of the image) by a stream, so life is 'roped' by the gospel, the gift of Christ, which gives it its shape. In this stanza we feel Hopkins explaining to himself the significance of the three previous stanzas. The crisis is over, and things may now be seen in their true perspective.

Stanza 5 seems to suggest that when Hopkins referred, in stanza 4, to the 'vein of the gospel', he was thinking not so much of Christ's teaching as of the continuous communication between God and man which, for Hopkins, was embodied in man's response to objects of natural beauty:

> I kiss my hand
> To the stars, lovely-asunder
> Starlight, wafting him out of it; and
> Glow, glory in thunder;
> Kiss my hand to the dappled-with-damson west;

After the stress of recalling the experience of his conversion, Hopkins turns to natural beauty with an enhanced sense of its wonder – the calm after the storm. But how ineffectual the words 'natural beauty' are in conveying the experience of the poetry! Hopkins manages to evoke the actual experience that must precede our recognition that such a thing as natural beauty exists at all. We become so used to assuming that starlight is beautiful, that we frequently fail to feel that beauty for ourselves. To read Hopkins is an exhilarating experience – he has the enthusiasm and absence of self consciousness of a child; he

is not afraid of his feelings, or afraid of showing them. His responses are robust but at the same time delicate. He 'kisses his hand' to the stars, with a mixture of respect and admiration for their almost feminine beauty; the delicacy is felt in the soft 's' 'l' alliteration of the language. But thunder is masculine, something to identify oneself with, and in the 'g' alliteration we hear the thunderclap itself and share Hopkins's elation at its power. The feelings which scenes of natural beauty evoke in man are one of the ways through which man comes to know God, and therefore to glory in this beauty is itself a religious experience. Compared with the previous stanza the movement of this verse seems slightly relaxed, but the relaxation is that of a man who has found what he has been searching for. Hopkins's religious questionings are now resolved; he is certain of the truth he has discovered, and prepared to accept that anything he does not understand will be resolved in God's good time:

> For I greet him the days I meet him, and bless
> when I understand.

The colloquial language of this line – it is almost as if Hopkins is referring to a friend whom he occasionally passes on the way to work – is a remarkable instance of Hopkins's genius, bringing home his ability to move from one level of experience to another; from the height of religious rapture to the everyday. It makes plain the connection between Hopkins's experience of God and his ordinary life. He is not constantly aware of God in the intense way that he was at his conversion, but nevertheless he still has moments of illumination, times when he seems to be able to see the hand of God at work. And it is moments such as these which are the 'veins' which guide him and shape his life.

Hopkins next turns, in stanza 6, to examine in more universal form the way in which men are brought to Christ:

> Not out of his bliss
> Springs the stress felt
> Nor first from heaven (and few know this)
> Swings the stroke dealt –

The stress mentioned is the tension, the uncertainty and questioning about the meaning of life, the place of man in the order of things, which precedes conversion. It is the same stress which Hopkins embodies in stanzas 2 and 3 and which he sees as an essential part of the phenomenon of religious experience. Men are brought to God by suffering, by some kind of 'stroke' delivered in the natural course of events:

> Stroke and a stress that stars and storms deliver,

but the stroke, however it may seem to one who cannot see God's purpose behind it, is in fact part of God's kindness towards man:

> That guilt is hushed by, hearts are flushed by and melt–

The stress brings about conversion and a sense of relief from all the problems and perplexities that have previously riddled the unquiet mind. The heart is 'flushed', cleansed like the atmosphere after a thunderstorm, and can now feel things with the childlike freshness and joy which we find in stanza 5. This stroke continues Hopkins, 'rides time like riding a river', and then attempts to explain exactly what he means:

> It dates from day
> Of his going in Galilee;

> Warm-laid grave of a womb-life grey:
> Manger, maiden's knee;
> The dense and the driven passion, and frightful sweat;
> Thence the discharge of it, there its swelling to be . . .

Hopkins tries to compress all he has to say into the fewest words possible, frequently omitting unimportant words in order to maintain the emotional and intellectual intensity of the poem – he develops an extremely personal form of shorthand. Thus here, the first line in normal prose would read, 'It dates from the day'. The general structure of the lines is usually adequate to enable one to discover precisely what Hopkins has done and what the meaning is. The overall effect is impressionistic. In three words, 'Manger, maiden's knee' Hopkins succeeds in bringing before our minds the Nativity and childhood of Christ. But the central point that Hopkins is here trying to make is that there is a relationship between the suffering that the individual undergoes in the process of conversion, and Christ's suffering on the cross. The two are, for Hopkins, mystically linked, and the individual undergoing conversion is in fact participating, in however small a way, in the agony of the Passion and Crucifixion. In the line,

> Thence the discharge of it, there its swelling to be,

'it' refers back, through the 'It' beginning the first line of the stanza, to 'stress' in stanza 6. The stress which Christ underwent was 'discharged' in the Crucifixion, but from that time numerous people (including Hopkins) have felt the same kind of stress and been brought by it to God. The 'discharge' actually took place at the Crucifixion,

> Though felt before, though in high flood yet –

before Christ's death men dimly apprehended the truth

and now, after his death, the same stress is still felt:

> What none would have known of it, only the heart, being hard at bay,
> Is out with it! . . .

We have to remember that Hopkins saw religious conversion as an emotional experience in the first place; only later does the mind understand what has happened. In stanza 3 he praises his heart, the centre of his feeling, for its intelligence in fleeing to Christ. Only in stanza 4 does he analyse the experience of conversion with his reason. So here the 'heart', utterly overwhelmed by the 'stress', recognises its divine meaning, ('is out with it') although no-one could have known it by reason. Hopkins is almost repeating Pascal's famous thought, that the heart has its reasons of which the reason knows nothing. For Hopkins, conversion is something which simply happens; the mind attempts to justify it afterwards. Then, in a tone of rueful acceptance, Hopkins comments,

> . . . Oh,
> We lash with the best or worst
> Word last! . . .

In an argument we save up a parting shot for the end. Our hardest struggle against accepting the truth is at the end, when the heart is finally overwhelmed. That 'We', coupled with the idiomatic expression, is a mark of the greatness of the achievement of this part of the poem. Hopkins manages to make the most complicated religious ideas and experiences which he has described seem part of normal human experience. It is because we recognise so many of the feelings that Hopkins conveys that we are prepared to listen to him even when he is attempting to put over the most involved explanations of our feelings in

everyday life. Hopkins knows his ideas are involved, but what he is constantly insisting on is that human experience itself is so complicated that only an involved intellectual explanation can possibly do justice to its many facets. The emotional experience of conversion may be conveyed more simply:

> . . . How a lush-kept plush-capped sloe
> Will, mouthed to flesh-burst,
> Gush!-flush the man, the being with it, sour or sweet,
> Brim, in a flash, full! . . .

The image is similar to that of Keats in the 'Ode to Melancholy', where Melancholy is,

> . . . seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue
> Can burst joy's grape against his palate fine;

As a man toys with a sloe in his mouth till it finally bursts, so do human beings toy with their experiences until their true significance finally bursts upon them.

The final three stanzas of the first part of the poem are occupied with a plea to God to hasten the conversion of all mankind.

It is impossible for anyone at all sensitive to poetry not to be moved by the first part of the poem. In it the language of everyday speech is heightened and transformed into what is virtually a new medium through which the reader participates in the spiritual crisis of a highly sensitive and intelligent human being. The immediate effect is both overwhelming and bewildering.

But respect for the integrity of a poet and admiration for his achievement should not be used as an excuse for abrogating the critical function – that of attempting to decide exactly how important the work is. In the first part of 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' Hopkins is laying claim

to an experience of universal significance, one which gives an insight into the nature of human existence. The task of the critic is not that of deciding the reality of Hopkins's experience – of that there is no question – but whether the experience as embodied in the poem is capable of bearing the weight of significance which Hopkins attaches to it.

Formulated in this way, the question is one which never seems to occur to Hopkins himself in the course of the poem. The intoxicating language and hypnotic rhythm overpower the critical, self-questioning faculty, and give the poem an almost adolescent self confidence and sureness. The dominant movement of the verse is sweeping and swooning – words such as 'sway', 'swoon', 'sweep', 'hurtle', 'whirl', 'fled', predominate, words which invite emotional identification to the exclusion of the intelligence. There is in the poem the exhilaration of the young convert – and with it a tendency to gloss over the contradictions of experience, or to glory in them in a way that suggests that they mean nothing to him personally. A line such as

(And here the faithful waver, the faithless fable and miss)

with its implication that Gerard Manley Hopkins doesn't, comes dangerously close to smugness. It is not that Hopkins may not be right in his religious beliefs, but that he seems to have arrived at them by a short cut. It may well be that the 'wavering faithful' and 'faithless' have been confronted with problems of which Hopkins is ignorant, and which have a concrete reality that will not allow them to be transmuted so poetically into 'lightning and lashed rod'. Compared with the final 'Terrible Sonnets', the first part of 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', whilst a work of genius and one of the great poems of the language, seems curiously lacking in any real humility.

Part the Second

It is in the second part of the poem that Hopkins's limitations become most apparent. Here, Hopkins turns from formulating his religious philosophy of life to applying it to life itself as seen in the actual wreck. But to deal with life convincingly one must first know life, and it soon becomes apparent in the poem that Hopkins is intent on fitting the disaster of the wreck into a particular philosophical scheme, and that in order to achieve this he is prepared to manipulate his own human responses.

Hopkins set himself a difficult, perhaps an impossible task. The problem of reconciling belief in an all-loving God with the cruelty and suffering seen in the world, is one that has exercised many minds. There are two possible approaches. One is to confess to an inability to understand the matter, and to claim that it is entirely a question of faith – human vision is distorted because it sees only a small part of the divine order. The other approach, which is the one Hopkins adopted, is to claim that human beings can, by divine illumination, sufficiently share the divine understanding so as to see suffering as contributing to man's understanding of God, and hence as a good in itself. To succeed in convincing the reader of this, Hopkins would have to show himself fully aware of what suffering means, and yet at the same time convey to the reader sufficient of the divine vision as to throw the suffering embodied in the poem into its true perspective. The temptation in such an undertaking is to achieve the reconciliation by portraying suffering as something less than it really is, and so running the risk of being considered unfeeling.

Hopkins's narrative of the human drama of 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' is entirely impersonal:

One stirred from the rigging to save
The wild woman-kind below below,
With a rope's end round the man, handy and brave –
He was pitched to his death at a blow,
For all his dreadnought breast and braids of thew:
They could tell him for hours, dandled the to and fro
Through the cobbled foam-fleece. What could he do
With the burl of the fountains of air, buck and the flood of the wave.

The vagueness of the description ('wild woman-kind') and the generality of the adjectives ('handy and brave') reduce the scene to mere spectacle. Moreover, Hopkins exults in the inability of the man's strength to save him on his merciful errand. It is precisely the reverse of Miranda's response to the shipwreck in 'The Tempest':

. . . O! I have suffered
With those that I saw suffer: A brave vessel,
(Who had no doubt some noble creature in her!)
Dashed all to pieces: O the cry did knock
Against my very heart . . . poor souls, they perished . . .
Had I been any god of power, I would
Have sunk the sea within the earth, or e'er
It should the good ship so have swallowed, and
The fraughting souls within her.

It is extremely difficult to criticise convincingly poetry which embodies religious belief – there is a tendency to criticise belief rather than poetry; but there is what one may call an essentially human response to certain situations, and one such situation is human suffering. Dr Johnson would pontificate on the evils resulting from giving money to beggars, and yet no man was more generous when he actually met one. There we see the essential human response, and the same is true of Miranda's. Hopkins revels in the power of God, and virtually suggests that God is intensifying the storm so that the death in faith of the five nuns will be all the more to

His glory. Here is the crux of the matter: it is possible though intensely difficult, to understand a person saying that to believe this is a matter of faith, but it is tempting to find the glorying in it an indication of a lack of awareness on the poet's part of what actual suffering is really like – ignorance of the kind of suffering that characterises the final sonnets:

> Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend
> With thee; but, sir, so what I plead is just.
> Why do sinners' ways prosper? and why must
> Disappointment all I endeavour end?

The Hopkins of 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' would never have been puzzled by such querulous questions – he would, one feels, have produced his book of rules and given the answers straight away. Yet for all its questioning, the later poem is that of a wiser man, and of one, perhaps, far closer to his God.

The same kind of comment may be made on stanza 21. In this, Hopkins addresses God as:

> Thou martyr-master: in thy sight
> Storm flakes were scroll-leaved flowers, lily showers – sweet
> heaven was astrew with them.

This is artificial – and, by stating how the wreck appeared to God (which immediately makes us think of God as a human being, and hence as a cruel one), cheating. Could Hopkins have stood on the shore, watching the hailstones beating into the faces of doomed men and women, and calmly remarked on the beauty of the scroll-leaved flowers around them? Of course he couldn't – human experience is far more complex than this, and in criticising the poem one is criticising Hopkins's failure to respond fully to his subject matter. Hopkins falsifies by omission. He avoids the problem of reconciling human suffering with

a belief in an all-loving God by pretending that the problem doesn't exist.

Stanza 31 provides another example of the way in which Hopkins skates over the difficulties in his religious beliefs. Supposing, for example, that we accept that for the five nuns death is a blessing, as they die as martyrs for their faith. What, we may ask, happens to those who are not Roman Catholics, who die in sin and are perhaps as unfortunate as the nuns are fortunate? Hopkins is too thoughtful not to realise this problem, but he does so only to push it aside:

> Well, she has thee for the pain, for the
> Patience; but pity of the rest of them!
> Heart, go and bleed at a bitterer vein for the
> Comfortless unconfessed of them –
> No not uncomforted: lovely-felicitous Providence
> Finger of a tender of, O of a feathery delicacy, the breast of the
> Maiden could obey so, be a bell to, ring of it, and
> Startle the poor sheep back! . . .

The purely rhetorical address to his heart is no substitute for human sympathy. Hopkins makes it all sound rather like a fairy story – 'and they all lived happily ever after'. There is nothing here but pious hope – all Hopkins is saying is, 'Well, no doubt God will look after them', and so avoiding seriously considering the situation of the 'comfortless unconfessed'; to have done so would have been to write a different poem.

Thus the second part of 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' seems flawed at the centre. In almost the same way as Milton, Hopkins sets out to justify the ways of God to men, and he fails because of his ignorance of certain important human feelings. This failure is in some ways indicative of the limitations of poetry in the second half of the nineteenth century – the point may again be made by

saying that Hopkins, Tennyson and Arnold could never have been novelists – they lack the ability of the great novelist to enter into the lives of others, respecting them as separate existences; and this constitutes a serious criticism of them, for it results in the absence from their work of a range of feelings which occupy a place in the lives of most people. Hopkins seems to lack any understanding of the lives of ordinary people, and from this point of view a poem such as 'Harry Ploughman' is embarrassing to read. To Hopkins, the ploughman is little more than a piece of human landscape, to be described in exactly the same way as the beauty of the country. There is absent any sense of a shared humanity, of underlying warmth and sympathy which we find, for example, in George Eliot and Dickens.

The 'Wreck of the Deutschland' is throughout a difficult poem, and one which demands continued application if it is to yield anything like its full meaning. In the first part, this labour is amply repaid, whereas in the second half many of the distortions of language seem to be perpetrated for purely technical reasons rather than for concentration of meaning. In stanza 12, for example, we find 'Two hundred souls in the round' which is just an awkward way of saying 'a round two hundred souls'. Later in the same stanza we find

> . . . nor ever as guessing
> The goal was a shoal, of a fourth the doom to be drowned.

The last phrase merely means, 'the doom of a fourth was drowning'. Can any rhythmic gain compensate for the irritating difficulty of understanding this distortion of natural speech order frequently causes? Further, much of the alliteration in the second part of the poem seems merely decorative and meretricious, and a line like,

> The keener to come at the comfort for feeling the combatting keen?

would almost qualify as a schoolboy tongue-twister.

These comments have no authority except that which they derive from the text which prompts them; they are the result of an attempt to come to terms with an extremely difficult poem, but it is only this kind of struggle which leads to worthwhile results. In many ways it seems as if Hopkins has said all he wants to say in the first part of the poem, but as the subject was intended to be the actual wreck, he was forced to make some show of writing about it. The technical skill used to such effect in the first part of the poem is still present, but its justification is lacking and it is frequently in danger of becoming mere technique instead of the vehicle of intense experience.

3 MIDDLE POEMS

Printed in the collected edition of Hopkins's works between 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' and 'Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves' is a collection of poems, mainly sonnets, which includes the most frequently anthologised pieces. In them Hopkins manages, through his command of the rhythms of spoken English and his feeling for the texture of words, to convey something of what the 'skeined stained veined variety' of life meant to him; but their mood varies from the childlike enthusiasm of 'The Starlight Night' to the more sombre, almost bitter tone of 'Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves'. Classified by mood (which need, of course, have nothing necessarily to do with their chronological order) the poems reveal Hopkins's increasing awareness of areas of experience which found no place in 'The Wreck of the Deutschland'.

'Pied Beauty' is basically nothing but a paean of praise for the beauty derived from contrast, and an assertion that God is directly responsible for its creation: but Hopkins's overwhelming gratitude, the loving care with which he recreates the very beauty he is marvelling at through the choice of the most exact words, and the interplay of assonance and alliteration which make the poem a living instance of 'pied beauty', are intensely moving:

> Glory be to God for dappled things –
> For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
> For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
> Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
> Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow, and plough;
> And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim.

The poem bursts into life with the hard 'G' of 'Glory' and the deep open vowels, as if Hopkins can no longer contain his feelings and is forced to unload his treasury of 'dappled' images. The rapidity with which these follow each other suggests that they are the result of accumulated experience, and points to a habit of precise observation which, although not indicated by the rapid movement of the poem itself, must obviously have preceded it. The comparison of the sky flecked with clouds to the patches of colour on a brinded cow is the achievement of a discipline of observation and language. A contrived word such as 'couple-colour', with its balanced alliteration and vowel sounds, enacts the tension implicit in our perception of contrast and penetrates to the nature of our experience of dapple. As far as possible, Hopkins avoids similes, for to say that one thing is like another has the effect of detracting from the uniqueness of the original. Thus the 'moles'

upon the trout are not a particular type of mole, individually and in a cluster bearing some resemblance to roses – they are 'rose-moles' (the hyphen is important) existing in their own right, and as far as he can Hopkins conveys it in one compound word. In this way he attempts to revitalise language, which through constant use, has lost its power to direct the mind to the actuality which it represents. Language and experience have become divorced, and Hopkins is forced to create a new language to avoid falsifying his feelings.

'The Starlight Night' is rightly one of Hopkins's most popular poems. It possesses a greater range of mood than 'Pied Beauty', and opens on a note of childlike wonder:

> Look at the stars! look, look up at the skies!
> O look at all the fire-folk sitting in the air!
> The bright boroughs, the circle-citadels there!
> Down in dim woods the diamond delves! the elves'-eyes!
> The grey lawns cold where gold, where quickgold lies!
> Wind-beat whitebeam! airy abeles set on a flare!
> Flake-doves sent floating forth at a farmyard scare! –
> Ah well! it is all a purchase, all is a prize.

The enthuiasm is infectious. Hopkins sees the stars and responds to the beauty of the night with the energy of a child whose responses are unconditioned by the clichés of the adult world. Just as a child tugs at the sleeve of the unresponsive adult to insist on its attention to something that the child finds interesting but the adult does not; so Hopkins tugs at the reader's sleeve, insisting that he really look at the stars, instead of commenting on their beauty in the conventional way, which means he does not really perceive their beauty at all. It is this enthusiasm and energy which carry the next lines which might well otherwise appear almost funny:

O look at all the fire-folk sitting in the air!
The bright boroughs, the circle-citadels there!

The unfolding of the poem follows the movement of Hopkins's mind. He is not content merely to talk about the stars, but is forced to try to bring out their living quality – beauty is electric, dynamic; not cold and dead. The patterned variety of the star clusters fascinates him; some groups look like 'boroughs', with lights everywhere like the lights of streetlamps and houses; other clusters are more austere like ancient 'citadels', illuminated Stonehenges. From the contrast between the dark sky and the brilliant stars the mind moves to the dark woods of earth and the mysterious flashes of reflected light there in the darkness, flashes of moonlight on the frost-encrusted grass. It is now the idea of movement and contrast that dominates Hopkins's mind, and takes him from 'quickgold' to the silver-flashing of the whitebeam, and the leaves of the white poplar suddenly set trembling by the wind so that the tree looks like a living flame. From leaves the mind moves to fluttering feathers and then, as if the imagination can no longer sustain the pace, the poet relaxes with the reflection,

Ah well, it is all a purchase, all is a prize.

The meaning of this is suggested by the following:

Buy then! bid then! – What? – Prayer, patience, alms, vows.

Natural beauty is of religious significance, and to perceive it properly, to possess it in any real sense of the word is a matter of religion as much as of aesthetics. Life is an auction, at which man bids for insight into the true nature of things. But Hopkins is not concerned with

religion here except as an explanation for the intensity of his feelings – the beauty surrounding him is more vivid than the theology, and it is the sense of ecstasy that he most wishes to convey:

> Look, look: a May-mess, like on orchard boughs!
> Look! March-bloom, like on mealed-with-yellow sallows!
> These are indeed the barn; withindoors house
> The shocks. This piece-bright paling shuts the spouse
> Christ home, Christ and his mother and all his hallows.

The ending is perhaps slightly contrived. The image of the barn is a biblical reference, but a barn is essentially a solid, serviceable building with little similarity to 'piece-bright paling'. If we find the transition to the final image acceptable, it is because Hopkins's tone of conviction ('This is indeed . . .') manages to suggest that the idea has been at the back of his mind throughout, although he has not previously mentioned it. But this is at most a minor flaw. The success of the poem is perhaps derived as much from what is absent as from what is actually present. There is no hint at all of preciosity in 'The Starlight Night', no suggestion that Hopkins regards his responses as being in any way abnormal or that he regards himself as superior because he feels in this way. Far from it! He assumes that his feelings are those of all normal human beings, and that the reader has only to be prodded to be galvanised into the same kind of ecstasy. It is as if Hopkins regards a human being's sensitivity to such beauty as being a hallmark of his humanity, and the experience itself as so moving that we must communicate our wonder at it. The language of the poem, whilst including one or two slightly recondite words, is essentially the spoken language, and the movement is that of intelligent speech. The alliteration and patterning of vowel sounds serve to enhance the individual

images, making the poetry itself an object of aural beauty:

> . . . Flake-doves sent floating forth at a farm-yard scare!

The 'f' alliteration, combined with the open vowel sounds, gives the line a floating movement, like the feathers it refers to. Language and meaning are so fused, that any attempt to paraphrase the meaning would inevitably distort it.

It is obvious that anyone as sensitive as Hopkins was to natural beauty, must be equally sensitive to its destruction, and the nineteenth century, with its rapid industrialisation probably saw more of this than any century except our own. Hopkins, in his concern about this, was not a sentimentalist – he possessed a coherent and profoundly felt sense of values, and high in that scale of values was the kind of experience embodied in 'The Starlight Night'. This, Hopkins believed, was essential if man was to attain any true understanding of his own nature. Destroy natural beauty so that man is deprived of this kind of experience, and you are conditioning him as much as by brain washing.

'Binsey Poplars' exemplifies both the strength and weakness of Hopkins in what Dr E. J. Mishan has described as 'the thankless aim of protesting against noise, smoke, pollution and the destruction of wildlife and natural beauty, that follows in the wake of expanding industry and communications':

> My aspens dear, whose airy cages quelled,
> Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun,
> All felled, felled, are all felled;
> Of a fresh and following folded rank
> Not spared, not one
> That dandled a sandalled
> Shadow that swam or sank
> On meadow and river and wind-wandering
> weed-winding bank.

On a casual reading the poem appears to be merely descriptive, but closer scrutiny reveals the knowledge of place which can only be achieved by constant frequentation – a knowledge which no camera can ever reproduce. The affection for the trees is essentially a personal one ('My aspens dear') but Hopkins manages to convey something of the experience which warrants it. The presence of the poet is firmly felt, protected by the 'airy cage' of the poplar trees, watching the sun rising higher in the sky like a wild animal gathering its strength to pounce. The image of the trees dandling their criss-cross shadows as a mother dandles her sandalled child suggests the way in which the poet has entered into the life of the place. But the final impression of the trees which remains with the reader is a curiously timeless one, as if the knowledge of them which Hopkins has achieved amounts to more than the sum of the individual experiences. It is that knowledge which T. S. Eliot attempted to express in 'Burnt Norton':

> To be conscious is not to be in time
> But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,
> The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,
> The moment in the draughty church at smokefall
> Be remembered; involved with past and future.
> Only through time time is conquered.

In the second stanza Hopkins moves from re-creating what Binsey Poplars meant to him, to reflect on what he believes to be one aspect of mankind – mankind's ignorance of his own nature, and of the consequences of his own acts:

> O if we but knew what we do
> When we delve or hew –
> Hack and rack the growing green!
> Since country is so tender

To touch, her being só slender,
That, like this sleek and seeing ball
But a prick will make no eye at all,
Where we, even where we mean
To mend her we end her,
When we hew or delve:
After-comers cannot guess the beauty been.

To Hopkins, it seemed that human beings did not own the world, to do with it what they liked, but must regard themselves as trustees for future generations. Against the despairing tone of the first three lines can be heard the strokes of the axe in the internal rhymes and alliteration. Then the tone changes to one of reasoned pleading, which leads into a kind of reverie:

Ten or twelve, only ten or twelve
Strokes of havoc únselve
The sweet especial scene,
Rural scene, a rural scene,
Sweet especial rural scene.

Hopkins's reasoned remonstrance against the destruction of Binsey Poplars is made on a quiet, slightly plaintive note which seldom attracts attention, as he himself knew:

England, whose honour O all my heart woos, wife
To my creating thought, would neither hear
Me, were I pleading, plead nor do I: . . .

His horror at the ugliness of much human activity never galvanises him into the creative fury that one finds in D. H. Lawrence, for example. His gift is that of conveying the delicacy of his own perceptions, in the hope that this will awaken the deadened sensibility.

Amongst these 'Middle Poems' may be traced an increasing pessimism on Hopkins's part about man's nature. In

'Binsey Poplars' Hopkins seems to regard the destruction of natural beauty as a comparatively isolated event; but in 'God's Grandeur' man's insensitivity to his surroundings takes on an historical aspect. In the opening lines Hopkins conveys his sense of the power of God latent in the world through three plain statements – no attempt is made to excite the reader's emotions by closely packed images as in 'The Starlight Night' and 'Pied Beauty'. As in the 'Final Poems' Hopkins seems to feel that the experience is too profound to be re-created through poetry – he can merely indicate what he has felt, and hope that he has said sufficient to draw a response from those who have felt something similar:

> The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
> It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
> It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
> Crushed.

The imagery of the thunderstorm – at first the sense of brooding expectancy and then the burst of lightning – is closely connected with that of 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', where Hopkins's conversion was brought about by 'lightning and lashed rod'. But here Hopkins is concerned with why other people do not respond as he did, and suggests the answer:

> Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
> And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
> And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
> Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

The process described is basically evolutionary, except that instead of seeing man as developing his inborn nature, Hopkins sees him as betraying it. Man has given himself up to trade, to industrialisation and materialism. He has cut

himself off from the sources of knowledge to be found in nature, allowing his greed to destroy his natural sensitivity to beauty. Hopkins's sweeping condemnation of nineteenth century industrialism comes extremely close to condemnation of man himself – 'shares man's smell', although it could possibly refer to smells in manufacturing, suggests physical loathing. But at this stage in Hopkins there is still an underlying optimism and faith:

> And for all this, nature is never spent;
> There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;

Natural beauty is still a living force to him, and a constant reassurance of God's concern for the world.

The most important aspect of these poems in which Hopkins contrasts the beauty of nature with the ugliness of mankind's works, is the recreation of that beauty in the poetry. He does not merely state the beauty of Binsey Poplars and rely on our accepting his word for it, but makes us feel what they meant to him personally. This concreteness of detail, where we share the experience which prompts the value judgement, is in sharp contrast with his references to industrial ugliness, where a mention of trade and smell is made to suffice. It is as if Hopkins's sensitivity to beauty was so delicate that he was unable to consider industrialisation except with overwhelming horror. He never enters into the life of industrial society, and finds it wanting – he merely stands at a distance and condemns. He cannot, as Dickens can, perceive and wonder at the persistence of human love, sympathy and pity in even the worst surroundings.

That this is a weakness in Hopkins becomes apparent in 'The Sea and the Skylark' where his wonderful creative gift assumes a slightly mechanical appearance. Both sea and skylark are present in the poem in a way that only Hopkins could achieve:

On ear and ear two noises too old to end
Trench-right, the tide that ramps against the shore;
With a flood or a fall, low lull-off or all roar,
Frequenting there while moon shall wear and wend.

One responds immediately to the movement of the verse as it echoes the breaking of the waves and one admires the technique by which it is achieved. But the sea and the skylark are there merely as a setting for the rhetoric of the sestet:

How these two shame this shallow and frail town!
How ring right out our sordid turbid time,
Being pure! We, life's pride and cared-for crown,

Have lost that cheer and charm of earth's past prime:
Our make and making break, are breaking, down
To man's last dust, drain fast towards man's first slime.

The 'town' has no concrete presence in the poetry comparable with that of the sea and the skylark; its 'shallowness' and 'frailty', and the 'sordid turbidness' of the time, are mere assertion. It is impossible to attach any real meaning to the statement that the sea and the skylark are 'pure' – both are simply being used as a stick with which to beat mankind. The 'cheer and charm of earth's past prime' is at the very least a gross oversimplification of the history of the human race. The poem tells us not so much about the nineteenth century as about Hopkins himself – that the underlying optimism about human nature, which was present in 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', has faded, and has been replaced by a sense of foreboding. Whereas previously Hopkins looked forward to a wholly Christian world, he now looks nostalgically back to the past.

In the early poem 'The Alchemist in the City', the speaker refers to his powerlessness 'when with men I deal'.

In Hopkins's 'Middle Poems', concerned as they are mainly with natural beauty, one feels at times a certain human emptiness, which reminds one of D. H. Lawrence's comments on the skill of English painters at landscape:

'Landscape, however, is different. Here the English exist and hold their own. But for me, personally, landscape is always waiting for something to occupy it. Landscape seems to be meant as a background to an intenser vision of life, so to my feeling painted landscape is background with the real subject left out.'

Where human beings do feature in Hopkins's poetry, they are always treated with an air of fatherly pity, or else their individuality, their humanity is smothered by poetical technique. An example of the former treatment is 'Felix Randal' – a poem one hesitates to criticise adversely in view of Professor Gardner's description of it as 'superb'. Yet in it Hopkins's description of the long-drawn-out illness and death of one who,

> . . . at the random grim forge, powerful amidst peers,
> Didst fettle for the great grey drayhorse his bright and battering sandal!

seems curiously nonchalant. If it be argued that it is the technique which is superb, then one can only feel that a technique which makes a writer lose his grip on the essential nature of his subject matter is a very dangerous one indeed. The scene evoked by the opening of the poem is of Hopkins being brought news of the farrier's death:

> Felix Randal the farrier, O he is dead then? my duty all ended,
> Who have watched his mould of man, big-boned and hardy-handsome
> Pining, pining, till time when reason rambled in it and some
> Fatal four disorders, fleshed there, all contended?

It is impossible to read that 'O he is dead then?' with

any show of feeling – the casualness almost parodies itself; moreover, the first thought which crosses Hopkins's mind on the news is 'my duty all ended'. If Hopkins used the dramatic opening merely as a means of introducing his subject matter, then he has seriously miscalculated, for his subsequent failure to show any concern at the death suggests an emotional inadequacy. He is unable to identify himself with the man, to sense the horror that Felix Randal must have felt as his strength ebbed away. To Hopkins, Felix's cursing was simply rather naughty:

> . . . Impatient, he cursed at first, but mended
> Being anointed and all;

Hopkins's feeling for Felix is at most that of a man for a child. He cannot feel the death of Felix as a reminder of the tragedy of the human situation in which he too, Gerard Manley Hopkins is involved. It is only in the final 'Terrible Sonnets' that he realises that faith, however strong, does not exempt a man from the sufferings of humanity.

'Harry Ploughman' does not, strictly speaking, belong amongst the 'Middle Poems', but in tone and manner it seems to belong with them rather than with the 'Final Poems'. About it, Hopkins said, 'I want Harry Ploughman to be a vivid figure before the mind's eye; if he is not that the sonnet fails', and that much of the detail is vivid is unquestionable:

> Hard as hurdle arms, with a broth of goldfish flue
> Breathed round; the rack of ribs; the scooped flank; lank
> Rope-over thigh; knee-nave; and barrelled shank –

The unyielding consonants of the opening suggesting the bony hardness of Harry's arms give way to softer ones as Hopkins's attention turns to the delicate fluff that covers

them. When the poem is read aloud the over-running of the first line, coupled with the 'br' alliteration, places the main stress upon 'breathed' as though the divine breath is at that very instant creating the down. The following details of Harry's anatomy are superb examples of Hopkins's power to capture the essential nature, the 'inscape' of an object. Then, to unify the individual parts Hopkins stresses the sinews that run through the whole of Harry's body. This first part of the poem, which might well be described as verbal sculpture, leads to the climax of the poem, as Harry bends to the plough:

> He leans to it, Harry bends, look. Back, elbow, and liquid waist
> In him, all quail to the wallowing o' the plough: 'S cheek crimsons; curls
> Wag or crossbridle, in a wind lifted, windlaced—
> See his wind–lilylocks–laced;

The stress on 'leans' and 'bends' suggests the effort, the physical strain of ploughing; and if this precision of observation, and the ability to embody it in language is all we require from poetry, then 'Harry Ploughman' is great poetry. But the question that must be raised is the extent to which it is possible, for most people, to separate their feeling for a man as a man from their appreciation of him as an aesthetically satisfying object – for Hopkins's ploughman is the latter rather than the former. Fundamentally, he is nothing more than a human horse. When Hopkins speaks of 'Churlsgrace, too, child of Amansstrength', there is nothing to suggest that he dissociates himself from the derogatory overtones of the word 'churl'. He rather seems to marvel at such a 'churl' having such 'grace'. The reference to the hair of a sweating ploughman as 'lilylocks' verges on the sentimental – that sentimentality with which the physically weak but artistically natured frequently treat the strong, and which is dis-

turbingly present at times in the work of Richard Jefferies, amongst others. In 'Harry Ploughman' the vividness of visual description serves only to highlight the absence of human warmth.

Accompanying the change of attitude towards human nature, found in 'The Sea and the Skylark', there may also be found in the 'Middle Poems' an increasing consciousness of the effect of age on human experience and values. In 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' Hopkins had assumed that he would continue to be aware of God's presence through natural beauty for the whole of his life. But then Hopkins seems to find the vision fade, and his only link with it is through watching people younger than himself perceiving it. 'Spring' is essentially a poem in which Hopkins, whilst still retaining the vision, is conscious of its transient nature. In the first part he recreates the beauty of spring through an appeal to all the senses, and then turns to enquire its significance:

> What is all this juice and all this joy?
> A strain of the earth's sweet being in the beginning
> In Eden garden.—Have, get, before it cloy,
> Before it cloud, Christ, lord, and sour with sinning,
> Innocent mind and Mayday in girl and boy . . .

The enjoyment of spring is something which is confined to 'girl and boy'. And in 'Spring and Fall' we see Hopkins attempting to understand the emotions of a girl, Margaret, who in her sensitiveness to nature is obviously like the young Hopkins. It is in this poem that Hopkins comes closest to sympathising with another person:

> Márgarét, are you gríeving
> Over Goldengrove unleaving?
> Leáves, líke the things of man, you
> With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?

The poem is throughout in direct speech; there is no attempt at scene-setting, for none is required. We visualise the poet having come across Margaret weeping silently by herself, and in the slightly tentative, sympathetic questions with which the poem opens sense the mixture of perplexity, curiosity and fear of upsetting the girl which troubles the poet's mind. Can it really be that Margaret is so sensitive to nature that she can be upset over something so minor as the falling of the leaves? – 'unleaving', with its echo of 'undressing', suggests the essential naturalness of the process. The 'freshness' of Margaret's thoughts seems to come as a slight shock to the poet, making him realise the comparative insensitivity of his own feelings. The poignancy of that realisation is concentrated in the 'Ah' which begins the next line:

> Áh! ás the heart grows older
> It will come to such sights colder
> By and by, nor spare a sigh
> Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;

Although Hopkins generalises about the human situation, behind the lines we feel his consciousness of his own position: once Hopkins, too, might well have wept over, the falling of leaves (one remembers that early poem 'Spring and Death' which foreshadows 'Spring and Fall') but now he cannot 'spare a sigh'. In Margaret he recognises his own youth, and the distance that he has travelled from it. Natural beauty, instead of being a revelation of God, is increasingly seen as a reminder of the shortness of his own life and of his own mortal nature. The next line of the poem, through its ambiguity, focuses the continuity between child and adult:

> And yet you *will* weep, and know why.

As Empson has pointed out, this can mean either that Margaret will still weep when she is no longer able to be upset by the falling of leaves, and that then she will know the real cause of her sorrow, or that Margaret at the moment when Hopkins is speaking to her insists upon weeping and knowing the cause. As always in Hopkins, feeling precedes understanding. Margaret is intuitively aware of man's mortal nature although she does not fully understand it, in exactly the same way as Hopkins's conversion to Roman Catholicism was an emotional experience which was only subsequently explained by his reason.

The poet's manner towards the child is essentially soothing and sympathetic, almost fatherly:

> Now no matter, child, the name:
> Sórrows springs áre the same.
> Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
> What heart heard of, ghost guessed:
> It ís the blight man was born for,
> It is Margaret you mourn for.

The tone of slight bewilderment with which the poem opened is replaced by one of conviction that he really has discovered the true cause of Margaret's sorrow – a conviction felt in the monosyllables of 'Sórrow's springs áre the same' and in the stressed 'is' of the penultimate line. All sorrow, Hopkins is saying, has one root cause – mortality, deriving from sin, and this is so whether we are conscious of it or not. Margaret will realise this in the future in exactly the same way as Hopkins does now.

In discussing 'Spring and Fall' in this way, partly paraphrasing its meaning, there is a danger of losing sight of the poem as a poem. What is immediately moving about the poem is not its 'thought content' as such but the way in which in a mere fifteen lines we share with Hopkins a significant emotional and intellectual experience, for the lines,

> Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
> What heart heard of, ghost guessed:

apply just as much to Hopkins's discovery of the cause of Margaret's sorrow as they do to Margaret's own experiences. When Hopkins comes across Margaret one senses, from the delicacy of manner with which he questions her, that he already really understands the nature of her sorrow – his bewilderment derives from his inability to believe intellectually what he already knows intuitively to be true. The poem enacts the interplay between Hopkins's feelings and his mind which leads to his admitting a new truth which before he had only dimly recognised. Hopkins is attempting to convey the process by which we arrive at new ideas, and is probing at the very nature of human experience. Moreover, this theme is linked with 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' and all the more important 'Middle Poems'. Experience precedes understanding, and some experiences such as those of natural beauty are more important than others. Most of Hopkins's poems begin with a personal experience which he then analyses. In 'Spring and Fall' experience becomes understanding, and through the medium of language we share in perhaps the greatest creative process known to mankind – the enlargement of the consciousness.

The nature of Hopkins's achievement in 'Spring and Fall' becomes clearer if it is compared with 'The Windhover', a poem frequently cited as an instance of Hopkins's gifts and yet at the same time one about which few critics seem entirely happy. The major success of the poem lies in the opening account of the bird itself:

> I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
> dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding

Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
In his ecstacy! then off, off forth on swing,
As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding
Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird, – the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!

Here, in contrast with 'Harry Ploughman', technique is the servant of vision, and once the grammatical structure of the lines has been grasped, the distortion of natural speech order ceases to disturb. Hopkins conveys both the objective movements of the bird, and his own joyous participation in its mastery of flight. But, as with the sea and the skylark, Hopkins is unable to let the bird merely be; he seems to be unable to enjoy any intense sensuous experience without justifying it by moral reflection. There is, of course, nothing necessarily wrong in this, but in Hopkins's poetry the vividness of natural description has the effect of making the philosophical moralising appear crude and mechanical. Whereas in 'Spring and Fall' Hopkins enables the reader to share the emotional and intellectual drama which leads to the conclusion, in 'The Windhover' the philosophical ending bears little relation to the opening description, and draws no support from it. This is so however we understand the word 'buckle', the various possible meanings of which are found in Professor Gardner's notes on the poem. Whether the opening of the sestet is a plea or a plain statement, it is clear that no attempt at the kind of reflection found in 'Spring and Fall' is being made. The latter is written in the present tense – it could almost be a piece of dialogue from a poetic drama. 'The Windhover' is an attempt to endow with moral significance an experience which, according to Hopkins's description, had little of the moral in it at the time it took place.

In 'Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves' the more sombre attitude towards nature which is found in 'Spring and Fall' is taken a stage further. The poem opens with a magnificent evocation of evening, when it is neither light nor dark; but the twilight is not merely that of daytime, but of life as well; that period of life when everything is seen with a clarity which escapes the eye of youth:

> Earnest, earthless, equal, attuneable,' vaulty, voluminous, ... stupendous
> Evening strains to be tíme's vást,' womb-of-all, home-of-all, hearse-of-all night.
> Her fond yellow hornlight wound to the west, her wild hollow hoarlight hung to the height
> Waste; her earliest stars, earl-stars,' stárs principal, overbend us,
> Fire-féaturing heaven.

The opening lines are a superb example of Hopkins's poetic genius – they must be read aloud for the full effect to be felt. Hopkins does not talk about the overpowering beauty of the evening, but attempts to create that beauty for us from the elements of which it is composed. The crescendo of the opening line, with its gradual opening out of vowel sounds as evening attempts to contain everything within itself, enacts also a process of consciousness. The poet is trying to take in every aspect of evening which contributes to his experience, to discover the atoms of which his experience is composed. But the aspect of experience which now most attracts his attention is the starkness of contrast between light and dark. One can no longer see the intricate details which fascinated Hopkins in 'Pied Beauty', for example. At night, and also as one gets older, these lose their importance:

> ... For earth' her being has unbound, her dapple is at an end, as–
> tray or aswarm, all throughther, in throngs;' self ín self steepèd and

páshed-quíte
Disremembering, dísmémbering' all now. Heart, you round me right
With: Óur évening is over us; óur night' whélms, whélms, ánd will end us.

In bidding farewell to the 'dappled' beauty of earth, Hopkins seems to recognise the passing of the spontaneity and joy of youth. The experiences which were then so real and virtually an end in themselves appear to him now, in perspective, to have been simply a passing stage on the way to something more important. Keats had asked, in 'Sleep and Poetry', whether he would ever be able to pass beyond writing sensuous, romantic poetry:

> And can I ever bid these joys farewell?
> Yes, I must pass them for a nobler life,
> Where I may find the agonies, the strife
> Of human hearts.

Hopkins, in 'Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves', has arrived at exactly that position. He senses the spiritual torment that lies ahéad when the experiences on which he had based the whole of his life would no longer be available to him as they had been before. No longer would he be able to write,

> For I greet him the days I meet him, and bless when I understand.

for there would be no more such meetings. All that would be available to him would be memories of the past. This situation Hopkins seems to foresee:

> . . . Lét life, wáned,
> ah lét life wind
> Off hér once skéined stained véined varíety' upon, áll on twó spools; párt, pen, páck
> Now her áll in twó flocks, twó folds – black, white;' right wrong; reckon but, reck but, mind

> But thése two; wáre of a wórld where bút these twó tell, each off the óther; of a rack
> Where, selfwrung, selfstrung, sheathe-and-shelterless, thóughts agaínst thoughts ín groans grínd.

And as always, throughout his life, Hopkins trusts his feelings rather than his reason. In 'Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves' it is his heart which warns him, 'Our evening is over us; our night whelms, whelms and will end us'. It is his instinct which warns him to concentrate his whole attention on 'black, white; right, wrong', for only by doing this will he avoid the 'rack' which the mind, tormented by doubts, makes for the intelligent human being.

'Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves' has strong claims to be considered as one of the greatest of Hopkins's poems presenting us, as it does, in dramatic form, with the consciousness of a man approaching the evening of his life knowing perfectly well that everything by which he has so far lived is to be put to the test, and by no means certain that it will come out of that test unshaken. The hideous, nightmare world of the rack where, 'selfwrung, selfstrung, sheathe-and-shelterless, thoughts against thoughts in groans grind', lies ahead.

4 FINAL POEMS

Had Hopkins been able to follow the advice of his heart in 'Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves' and been able to avoid letting his mind stray over his own predicament, the last poems as we now have them would never have been written. But Hopkins was too intelligent a man and too honest to be able to shut off his brain completely. He had to expose his beliefs to all the assaults of doubt and despair that he was capable of conceiving; he was unable to

accept obstinacy as a substitute for genuine belief. If he had doubts, he had to face up to these and to struggle with them; he could not simply pretend that they did not exist. The struggle, for Hopkins, is between his belief in a loving God and the temptation towards what he sees as the false comfort offered by despair:

> Not, I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee;
> Not untwist – slack they may be – these last strands of man
> In me or, most weary, cry *I can no more*. I can;
> Can something, hope, wish day come, not choose not to be.

The emphatic 'not', which opens 'Carrion Comfort' (the comfort which feeds on the flesh, destroying the man it comforts) and appears three times in the first line, stresses not merely Hopkins's determination to avoid giving in to despair, but the strength of the temptation; Hopkins is trying to hypnotise himself into not giving in by constantly repeating the word 'not'. Beneath the assertions we feel that Hopkins is on the very verge of despair. Here, at the beginning of 'Carrion Comfort' is a struggle as vivid as that which opens 'The Wreck of the Deutschland'; but whereas in 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' it is God who is 'mastering' Hopkins, in the later poem it is Hopkins who is 'mastering' Despair. In the opening three lines is felt the determination to persist in the battle at all costs; just for a second the determination seems to falter slightly in 'slack they may be', as if Hopkins is allowing one of his adversary's points, but again it gathers a certain weary strength until Hopkins is victorious in the triumphant assertion, 'I can'. Yet the victory is not an entirely satisfactory one – a refusal to give in to despair is negative, and leaves untouched the problems that made despair such a very real temptation. It is to these that Hopkins turns his attention in the next four lines:

But ah, but O thou terrible, why wouldst thou rude on me
Thy wring-world right foot rock? lay a lionlimb against me? scan
With darksome devouring eyes my bruisèd bones? and fan,
O in turns of tempest, me heaped there; me frantic to avoid thee and flee?

The repeated alliteration ('rude', 'wring', 'right', 'rock', 'bruised bones',) suggests the intense misery of the poet, akin to physical pain inflicted by blows in a struggle. But the misery is the misery of incomprehension; for the first time in his poetry Hopkins's faith is being put to the test. It is one thing to write glibly of

(And here the faithful waver, the faithless fable and miss),

as Hopkins had done in 'The Wreck of the Deutschland'; quite another to be (almost) part of that wavering. It is one thing to talk, from a comfortable distance, of hailstones as 'lilyshowers', quite another to suffer them. And it is indicative of Hopkins's honesty that he refused to be satisfied with abstract theology – he gave himself fully to his experience; to know that suffering is part of a divine purpose does not obviate its experience – it merely offers a slender thread to save one from despair.

In 'Carrion Comfort' Hopkins has at first little difficulty in answering the questions he puts to God:

Why? That my chaff might fly; my grain lie, sheer and clear.
Nay in all that toil, that coil, since (seems) I kissed the rod,
Hand rather, my heart lo! lapped strength, stole joy, would laugh, chéer.

Hopkins sees his own temptation towards despair, and the misery of the struggle with it, as the equivalent of what happened to the five nuns in the wrecking of the Deutschland. In each case God is trying the faith of his disciples.

The buoyant assurance of these three lines reminds one of 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', although the ease with which Hopkins finds the answer to his despair strikes one as slightly mechanical. The poet realises this. The enthusiasm of the young convert, which swept all before it in that early poem, fails to satisfy the older man. The word 'cheer' operates as a reminder to Hopkins that in all struggles there are two sides, each with its own supporters. The gush of language is suddenly checked and replaced by bewilderment:

> Cheer whom though? the hero whose heaven-handling flung me, fóot tród
> Me? or me that fought him? O which one? is it each one? That night, that year
> Of now done darkness I wretch lay wrestling with (my God!) my God.

Here Hopkins seems to be asking whether in fact his devotion to God is as wholehearted as he has sometimes led himself to believe. Is there not, perhaps, a sneaking admiration for the Hopkins that 'fought him'? Has not Hopkins been deriving an almost masochistic pleasure from self-abasement? Hopkins does not answer the question he sets himself – he deliberately avoids it by losing himself in the emotional ejaculations of the final line. It is certainly much easier to exclaim '(my God!) my God' than to formulate a reply.

The language of 'Carrion Comfort' is closely related to that of 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' – one example is the reference to Christ as 'the hero whose heaven-handling flung me', similar to 'hero of Calvary' in the earlier poem. In both instances Hopkins seems to regard God as a hero of romance, endowed with super-human powers, and to derive a certain emotional satisfaction from flinging himself (metaphorically) at God's feet. After 'Carrion

Comfort' this slightly extrovert emotionalism disappears, and with it the highly coloured vocabulary. When a poem like 'Carrion Comfort' is compared with 'No worst, there is none' the contrast suggests that in some ways Hopkins enjoys his despair in the former poem with a wild madness, whereas in the latter he realises that mental torture is nothing but unrelieved pain. He sees that what he had previously thought of as despair was merely a slight foretaste of what was to come:

> No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief,
> More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring.
> Comforter, where, where is your comforting?
> Mary, mother of us, where is your relief?

The colloquial terseness of the opening conveys the mood of the speaker as well as does a speech in a late Shakespearian play. The tone is that of a man finally resigning himself to a truth that he has long struggled to avoid, and the reader, sensing the weight of experience that lies behind the lines, is forced to treat Hopkins as he would a living man speaking about his own deepest feelings. Hopkins is being forced to quit the world of familiar experience, where even fear is enjoyable because there is an underlying assurance that all will turn out well, and to enter unmapped realms. The appeal to the Comforter and to Mary echoes the question in 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' –

> . . . where, where was a, where was a place?

But whereas in that early poem there is a confidence that there *is* a place of safety, if only it can be found, the near-despairing questions of the later poem suggest a doubt as to the existence of the comfort sought. The control over the movement of the verse, and the accuracy of observa-

tion characteristic of the 'Middle Poems' are still present, but instead of being displayed for their own intrinsic interest, they have become the instruments through which Hopkins grasps his own experience:

> My cries heave, herds-long; huddle in a main, a chief –
> woe, world-sorrow; on an age-old anvil wince and sing–
> Then lull, then leave off. Fury had shrieked 'No ling–
> ering! Let me be fell: force I must be brief'.

The phrase 'herds-long', suggesting perhaps an interminable line of cows passing down a country lane, briefly and vividly conveys the monotonous regularity with which new 'pangs' 'wring' new 'cries' from Hopkins. The pangs, hammer blows on an anvil, are like bursts of a storm. 'Then lull, then leave off' echoes in both language and movement 'low lull-off or all roar' in 'The Sea and the Skylark', but its function is different. In the first poem it is simply a felicitous description, whereas in 'No worst, there is none', the words derive an emotional force from the inner drama they enact. Hopkins, under the pressure of his experience is being forced, as never before, to think through poetry – the speech movement follows the attempt of the poet to conceptualise his feelings:

> O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
> Frightful, sheer, no-man fathomed. Hold them cheap
> May who ne'er hung there. Nor does long our small
> Durance deal with that steep or deep.

The pause after 'mind', as though a climber is resting to regain his strength to renew his assault on a peak, suggests not merely the massiveness of the mountain but the effort that it costs Hopkins to arrive at this truth. An otherwise trite image thus becomes an instrument of inner awareness; Hopkins re-endows the image with its original significance.

An apparently simple statement like 'Hold them cheap/ May who ne'er hung there' derives its force not from what it says but from the weight of experience which the tone suggests lies behind it. The invitation in the final lines,

> . . . Here! creep,
> Wretch, under a comfort serves in a whirlwind: all
> Life death does end and each day dies with sleep.

embodies more human sympathy and understanding than the whole of 'The Wreck of the Deutschland'. Hopkins has lost the self-confidence that enabled him to pronounce with such assurance on other people's sufferings, and feels himself at one with those whom he formerly admonished for their lack of faith.

'No worst, there is none', is arguably Hopkins's greatest achievement, both in the humanity of its feeling and the unobtrusive accomplishment of its technique. It exemplifies the way in which, in the most successful of the final poems, language becomes a more delicate and sensitive instrument than ever before in his works, capable of responding to and conveying the most delicate and intricate contradictions of feeling – the language is articulate emotion. Something of the same intensity is present in another of the final poems:

> I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.

The one word 'fell', gives the darkness an extraordinarily real physical presence. The alliteration, with its suggestion of the dawning consciousness realising that night is still present, rises to the ambiguity of 'not day'. The poem may either be, 'I wake and feel the fell of dark, not of day', or the 'not day' be taken as direct speech, a cry of anguish at the realisation as full consciousness

comes with a jerk. The mind turns to contemplate the horror of the past night – a night both literal and metaphorical – the long drawn out 'o' sounds seeming never ending:

> What hours, O what black hours we have spent
> This night!

Then a note of amazement creeps in as Hopkins considers the varieties of torture that the imagination can impose upon humanity:

> . . . what sights you, heart, saw; ways you went!

only to be checked by the slowing of the next line on the realisation that night is still present:

> And more must, in yet longer light's delay.

From the controlled power of the opening Hopkins proceeds to draw an analogy between his experiences of the night and of his life:

> 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.

There is perhaps a slight tendency here to self-dramatisation and almost to self-pity, which can be detected in the emotional crescendo from 'hours', to 'years', to 'life'. There is nothing in the poem to support the application of one night's events to the whole of the poet's life, and in its context it seems little more than emotional self-indulgence. In contrast, the tone of the sestet is one of calm acceptance. God, for some reason known only to Himself, has chosen that Hopkins's life should be like this.

The final lines are most moving, for in them Hopkins arrives at that pity for others which springs from the realisation of one's closeness to those pitied:

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

The tone is very much that of 'There, but for the grace of God, go I'. Nothing could be further from the facile optimism of parts of 'The Wreck of the Deutschland'.

This new depth of experience, reflected in the changed tone and language, is clearly seen in 'Thou art indeed just, Lord'. The manner in which God is addressed is in sharp contrast with anything to be found in Hopkins's earlier poetry. Gone entirely is the 'hero' style of approach. Instead Hopkins speaks to God in the same respectful manner that he might use in seeking enlightment from another more experienced and wiser human being. The use of the second person singular, far from appearing pseudo-biblical, gives to Hopkins's relation with God an intimacy which makes one ponder whether the dropping of this person of the verb from spoken English is an indication of the impersonality of human relationships in modern society:

> Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend
> With thee; but, sir, so what I plead is just.
> Why do sinners' ways prosper? and why must
> Disappointment all I endeavour end?

The tone is eminently reasonable. No longer does Hopkins derive a pleasure from self-abasement – he has become almost self-assertive. He speaks to God on equal terms – his pleading is as just as God's insistence on obedience and, Hopkins seems to imply, by natural justice his queries should be answered. What is the purpose behind

Hopkins's disappointments? The earlier Hopkins would no doubt have replied that it was a testing of his faith. But this no longer seems to carry very much weight. The problem that now confronts Hopkins is that of reconciling faith and reason. Can faith be entirely divorced from reason, – and if so, how does one distinguish between faith and mere unreason? To deny one's intelligence, to attempt to forget the questioning mind, is to deny one's humanity, and this Hopkins cannot do. But the belief in God is still strongly there:

> Wert thou my enemy, O thou my friend,
> How wouldst thou worse, I wonder, than thou dost
> Defeat, thwart me? Oh, the sots and thralls of lust
> Do in spare hours more thrive than I that spend,
> Sir, life upon thy cause.

For one instant Hopkins dares to contemplate the consequences of God being against him, but immediately it is followed by a rush of affection 'O thou my friend' as if even to suppose this is insupportable. It is impossible to imagine Hopkins in 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' even dreaming of addressing God as 'O thou my friend', yet in its context the very simplicity of the language conveys a feeling that is absent from that earlier poem. In spite of his inability to understand God's purposes, he shows no desire for any worldly interests – he can only view with contempt those who give themselves up to mundane pleasures as 'the sots and thralls of lust'. The sonnet ends on a slightly plaintive note, culminating in a request which is a cross between a plea and a demand:

> See, banks and brakes
> Now, leaved how thick! laced they are again
> With fretty chervil, look, and fresh wind shakes

> Them; birds build – but not I build; no, but strain,
> Time's eunuch, and not breed one word that wakes.
> Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain.

For a minute Hopkins is carried away by his delight at the coming of spring, and the poetry reminds one vividly of 'The Starlight Night' where the same desire to share experience is found. But the resurgence of life serves only to remind Hopkins of his own sterility – a sterility of feeling marked by the failure to produce poetry. Yet, paradoxically, it was that very sense of sterility that produced some of Hopkins's finest poetry.

It is frequently difficult to avoid reading into Hopkins's 'Final Poems' more than the poet has himself put there. The reader supplies from his own personal experience, or from his knowledge of Hopkins's life, the particular details which are not present in the poem itself:

> To seem the stranger lies my lot, my life
> Among strangers. Father and mother dear,
> Brothers and sisters are in Christ not near
> And he my peace my parting, sword and strife.

Loneliness is an emotional subject, and these lines are an open invitation to self-identification. The key emotional words, 'stranger', 'father and mother dear', 'brothers and sisters', are too vague by themselves to convey the poet's situation, and so the reader is forced to substitute his own personal associations, and to write the poem for himself from the hints which Hopkins has given. In the fourth line 'sword and strife' is mere rhetoric, for the poem contains no experience to which we can attach the words to give them meaning. The movement of the verse is relaxed, and there is little clear connection between the various ideas. Hopkins simply drifts from one thought to another:

England, whose honour O all my heart woos, wife
To my creating thought, would neither hear
Me, were I pleading, plead nor do I: I weary of idle a being but by where wars are rife.

It is difficult to see what prompts the references to idleness and war – there is certainly no sense of inevitability about the movement of Hopkins's mind. Even the final lines of the sestet, in which Hopkins refers to his own poetic sterility, seem contrived:

Only what word
Wisest my heart breeds dark heaven's baffling ban
Bars or hell's spell thwarts. This to hoard unheard,
Heard unheeded, leaves me a lonely began.

The lifelessness of this is obvious if it is compared with 'Thou are indeed just, Lord'. In the latter poem the sense of sterility, of poetic impotence arises naturally from the dramatic situation which is there developed. Its poignancy is felt in 'birds build, but not I build', where Hopkins's rush of enthusiasm is suddenly deflated, and the pitch of the line falls. There is no equivalent variety of movement in 'To seem a stranger', which is a mere recital of facts. 'Word wisest' is but a poor way of describing poetry, and phrases such as 'dark heaven's baffling ban' and 'hell's spell' crude substitutes for the frustration which is a living experience in 'Thou art indeed just, Lord'.

The tone of 'My own heart let me more have pity on', is one of resigned acceptance of what Hopkins now sees as the human condition:

My own heart let me more have pity on; let
Me live to my sad self hereafter kind,
Charitable; not live this tormented mind
With this tormented mind tormenting yet.

The contrast here made between the heart and the mind is the same as that which has already been commented on in relation to 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', 'Spring and Fall' and 'Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves'. In each of these poems Hopkins saw the heart as sensing the truth before the mind came to grasp it, and so it is only natural he should interpret his own self-questionings in these terms. The mind, divorced from feeling, becomes an instrument of torture because it searches within itself for answers to problems which can only be resolved through the feelings. Hopkins's experience here is in some ways very similar to that related by John Stuart Mill in his 'Autobiography'. Mill, although of very different background and beliefs from Hopkins, also experienced a sense of emotional sterility:

> 'And there seemed no power in nature sufficient to begin the formation of my character anew, and create in a mind now irretrievably analytic, fresh associations of pleasure with any of the objects of human desire.'

He turned for relief to the poems of Wordsworth because,

> 'In them, I seemed to draw from a source of inward joy, of sympathetic and imaginative pleasure, which could be shared in by all human beings . . .'

Mill's explanation of his experience is couched in terms of utilitarian psychology, whereas Hopkins adopts a theological explanation, but their underlying feelings are obviously very similar, and are closely related to those of other nineteenth century thinkers.

In 'My own heart let me more have pity on', Hopkins attempts to take a grip on his mind by conscious intellectual effort. The movement of the poem is deliberately

restrained, as though in the attempt to avoid returning to the world where 'thoughts against thoughts in groans grind'. The torture which the uncontrolled mind inflicts upon itself is concretely present in the tormented language of 'not live this tormented mind/With this tormented mind tormenting yet.' He states to himself his own situation as he sees it in the light of his beliefs:

> I cast for comfort I can no more get
> By groping round my comfortless, than blind
> Eyes in their dark can day or thirst can find
> Thirst's all-in-all in all a world of wet.

The hard, unyielding alliterative consonants suggest the absence of relief, and 'Thirst's all-in-all in all' the mental giddiness that results from unrelieved self-questioning. The experience, and the language in which it is expressed, are inseperably fused. Then, in the sestet, we feel Hopkins making the effort to reassert the balance that should exist between heart and mind:

> Soul, self; come, poor Jackself, I do advise
> You, jaded, let be; call off thoughts awhile
> Elsewhere; leave comfort root-room; let joy size
>
> At God knows when to God knows what; whose smile
> 's not wrung, see you; unforseen times rather – as skies
> Betweenpie mountains – lights a lovely mile.

The colloquial vigour of these lines, and the manner in which Hopkins addresses himself, suggests the influence of the 'metaphysical' poets, and particularly of Herbert's poem, 'The Collar':

> . . . leave thy cold dispute
> Of what is fit, and not; forsake thy cage,
> Thy rope of sands,
> Which pettie thoughts have made, and made to thee
> Good cable . . .

And in the same way as Herbert, at the end of this poem and at the height of his rebellion against God hears the Divine voice, so Hopkins accepts that God's smile cannot be 'wrung' by intellectual effort, but must be patiently awaited.

The theme of patience, which marks the end of Hopkins's spiritual pilgrimage, is explored in another of the final poems:

> Patience, hard thing! the hard thing but to pray,
> But bid for, Patience is! Patience who asks
> Wants war, wants wounds; weary his times, his tasks;
> To do without, take tosses, and obey.

Hopkins is here attempting to realise the full meaning of patience by considering concrete situations in which it is felt, thus giving the oft-praised virtue a reality which the abstract word frequently loses. The sonnet has an almost classical simplicity – in its economy and precision of language it is a triumph of Hopkins's art. The imagery seems to arise naturally from the subject matter, and is subordinated to the main theme of the poem:

> Rare patience roots in these, and, these away,
> Nowhere. Natural heart's ivy, Patience masks
> Our ruins of wrecked past purpose. There she basks
> Purple eyes and seas of liquid leaves all day.

The statement, 'Patience masks/Our ruins of wrecked past purpose', would not be out of place in T. S. Eliot. Hopkins has achieved a mode of expression which makes poetry capable of dealing with the living interests of intelligent men, and which makes demands on our fullest and most sensitive responses. The emphasis falls naturally on the words which the speaker would choose to stress:

We hear our hearts grate on themselves: it kills
To bruise them dearer. Yet the rebellious wills
Of us we do bid God bend to him even so.
And where is he who more and more distils
Delicious kindness? – He is patient. Patience fills
His crisp combs, and that comes those ways we know.

In reading the poem the inbuilt onomatopoeia of 'grate' and 'bend' is accentuated – the quality of the poetry is seen to be in part the result of qualities in the English language. Technique in the normal sense of the word ceases to exist, for all such mechanical ideas are submerged in the one aim of fidelity to feeling. It would be difficult to find language more greatly charged with meaning.

In these last poems, 'No worst, there is none', 'To seem the stranger lies my lot', 'I wake and feel the fell of dark', 'Patience, hard thing', 'My own heart let me have more pity on', 'Thou art indeed just, Lord', and 'The fine delight that fathers thought', we are made aware of the situation of an essentially isolated man – isolated as much by choice as by chance – exploring exactly what it is that he feels; an intensely sensitive man, convinced of the rightness of his beliefs, yet whose honesty will not let him escape from the difficulty of them. We may criticise these poems for what they ignore; we may feel that their intensity results from this ignorance, from the difference between Hopkins's experience and that of the average human being. But their compelling power remains.

It was suggested at the beginning of this Commentary, that Hopkins seemed to foresee, right from the start of his career, the kind of direction his life would take, and that many of his later poems expressed sentiments which he had felt earlier in life, although then without the same intensity. The idea derives some support from the sonnet dedicated to Robert Bridges:

> The fine delight that fathers thought: the strong
> Spur, live and lancing like the blowpipe flame,
> Breathes once and, quenched faster than it came,
> Leaves yet the mind a mother of immortal song.
> Nine months she then, nay years, nine years she long
> Within her wears, bears, cares and combs the same:
> The widow of an insight lost she lives, with aim
> Now known and hand at work now never wrong.

Here the experience, which provides the seed of the poem, is likened to a sexual orgasm – a moment of heightened excitement separated from the general run of life. In the same way as the human seed takes nine months to develop before it becomes the child that is actually born, so does the experience take nine months to develop into the poem that is finally written – and then Hopkins hurriedly corrects himself; it does not take nine months but nine years. Hopkins draws a picture of the poet nurturing the seed, attempting to understand his experience so that it may be embodied in the poem as accurately as possible. It has already been suggested that 'Spring and Death' and 'Spring and Fall' show Hopkins dealing with the same basic experience at different stages of his career. There is a connection also between 'The Alchemist in the City' and 'Thou art indeed just, Lord'. In both poems there is a sense of sterility felt in contrast with other living things. In the early poem it takes the following form:

> My window shows the travelling clouds,
> Leaves spent, new seasons, alter'd sky,
> The making and the melting crowds:
> The whole world passes; I stand by.
>
> They do not waste their meted hours,
> But men and masters plan and build:
> I see the crowning of their towers,
> And happy promises fulfill'd.

In the later one:

> . . . birds build – but not I build; no, but strain,
> Time's eunuch.

In spite of the difference in tone, and the fact that in the earlier poem the words are attributed to the Alchemist, the similarity of sentiment is obvious. It is difficult to believe that when Hopkins wrote the later poem he did not, consciously, know the way in which he had previously used the word 'build' in a very similar context. The more one examines Hopkins's poetry, so much the more does one come to understand the way in which he worked as a poet, and to trace the development and burgeoning of different experiences and ideas. Hopkins's 'Collected Poems' is not merely a volume of individually moving experiences – it is an introduction to the part played by poetry in the development of a man's understanding.

Questions for Discussion

It is essential for anyone who wishes to discuss Hopkins's poetry cogently, to familiarise himself as much as possible with the individual poems. The best way of doing this is by discussing individual poems in great detail, so that one becomes attuned to the music of the verse; distinguishing the internal rhyming and subtle manipulation of vowel sounds, etc. Learning to read Hopkins is like acquainting oneself with a new language.

The following questions are intended as a supplement to criticisms of individual poems:

1 Compare 'Binsey Poplars' with Cowper's poem, 'The Poplar Field'.
2 Most of Hopkins's poems originate in a personal experience which leads on to philosophical reflections. Try to show this pattern in three of the 'Middle Poems'.
3 Do you find the terms 'nature poetry' and 'religious poetry' useful in discussing Hopkins? Bring out the difficulties in using these terms by reference to particular poems.
4 'The poetry of the final sonnets is the poetry of plain statement'. What do you think is meant by this, and does it seem to you to be true?
5 Hopkins has often been described as a 'difficult' poet. Try to point to passages where you think the poetry is 'difficult' because Hopkins has something difficult to say, and to others where the difficulty seems unjustified.
6 Hopkins frequently makes up new words or uses archaic ones. Pick out examples of such words, and try to explain why you consider their use successful or unsuccessful.

7 To what extent do you think your enjoyment of Hopkins's poetry has been enhanced or impaired by your sharing or not sharing his religious beliefs? Try to point to relevant passages.
8 'Hopkins's poetry is lacking in human interest'. How would you support or attack this statement?
9 How would you set about persuading someone to read Hopkins's poetry? Or wouldn't you? Give your reasons.

Further Reading

EDITIONS

The standard edition of Hopkins's poems is:
'The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins'. W. H. Gardner and N. H. Mackenzie (O.U.P. 4th edition 1967).
Two useful selections of his works are:
'Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins', selected and with an introduction and notes by W. H. Gardner (Penguin Books, 1953).
'Selected Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins', edited with an introduction and notes by James Reeves (Heinemann, 1953). This contains many useful notes for the reader studying Hopkins for the first time.

BIOGRAPHY AND CRITICISM

The following books and essays are some of the most informative and provocative in the study of Hopkins.

Those by Weyand and Gardner contain extensive bibliographies.

W. H. Gardner, 'Gerard Manley Hopkins – A Study of Poetic Idiosyncracy in Relation to Poetic Tradition' (2 vols. (1948-9); new edition, O.U.P. 1958). These two volumes are a mine of information on Hopkins. The best way to use them is to browse through the chapter headings in a library, and then consult them when you require any information on any particular aspect of Hopkins's work.

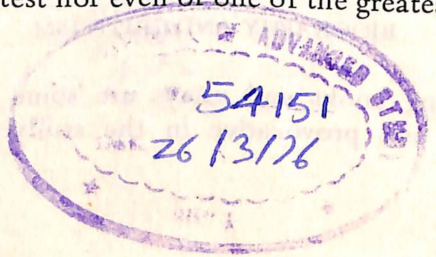
G. F. Lahey, S.J., 'Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Life' (O.U.P. 1930).

F. R. Leavis, essays on Hopkins in 'New Bearings in English Poetry' (Chatto and Windus, 1932) and in 'The Common Pursuit' (Chatto and Windus, 1952). These essays reflect Professor Leavis's thoughts on Hopkins over a period of years. The later volume contains a useful warning against the misuse of Hopkins's extra-poetical writings.

W. Walsh, essay in 'The Use of the Imagination' (Chatto and Windus, 1959).

Norman Weyand, S.J., 'Immortal Diamond: Studies in Gerard Manley Hopkins' (Sheed and Ward, 1949).

Yvor Winters, essay in 'The Function of Criticism' (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962). Winters is one of Hopkins's severest critics. He concludes his essay by saying: 'If one were to name the twelve or fourteen best British poets of the nineteenth century, Hopkins would certainly deserve a place among them, and I think his place will be permanent; but the place is not the place of the greatest nor even of one of the greatest'.



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