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Introduction

Gerard Manley Hopkins's last poem, the sonnet 'To R. B.', was completed on 22 April 1889. Written to make up a minor quarrel with its addressee Robert Bridges, the poem was enclosed a week later with a letter to Bridges that made brief reference to what would turn out to be Hopkins's final illness. He died of typhoid in June of that year, aged forty-four. 'To R. B.' was not intended to be valedictory, but as Bridges himself would later acknowledge, it is 'full of a strange fitness for the end':[1]

> The fine delight that fathers thought; the strong
> Spur, live and lancing like the blowpipe flame,
> Breathes once and, quenchèd 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.
>
> Sweet fire the sire of muse, my soul needs this;
> I want the one rapture of an inspiration.
> O then if in my lagging lines you miss
>
> The roll, the rise, the carol, the creation,
> My winter world, that scarcely breathes that bliss
> Now, yields you, with some sighs, our explanation.

'To R. B.' is a quieter work than is usual for Hopkins. One would not guess from it that he could be called by Elizabeth Bishop 'the most intricate of poets technically and the most taxing emotionally'.[2] In describing what his poetry lacks, however, Hopkins also manages to intimate a high aesthetic ideal, an ideal close to that envisaged in a letter of 1886: the notion that works of art 'have an absolute excellence in them and are steps in a scale of infinite and inexhaustible excellence'.[3] The *Ars Poetica* of the octave, with its allusion to Horace's idea of the long gestation of the poem,

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treats of the aesthetic on its own terms. 'Soul', on the other hand, at the beginning of the sestet, along with 'carol' and 'creation' in line 12, hints that the immortality of 'immortal song' may not be only aesthetic. Of course, what we encounter here are acoustic qualities (an earlier version of line 12 had read 'The wild wing, waft, cry, carol, and creation').[4] The comedown of the final line, moreover, with its flat return of 'explanation' upon 'creation', seems too humdrum to sustain a connection between the life of poetry and the life of God. Yet 'creation' still stands out, connoting less poetry's flow of words (as do 'roll', 'rise', and 'carol') than the entire act of artistic production. Conceiving of inspiration as a type of fertility, Hopkins in 'To R. B.' makes an analogy between sexual procreation and the begetting of poems. With 'creation', parallels for poetic invention extend yet more widely, so that human agency seems to reciprocate divine agency in the word's religious echoes. Despite making play of its slightness, then, the poem also edges on the idea that art's reaching for transcendence implies the sacred. Hopkins's rueful disclaiming of eloquence carries a latent aesthetical boldness.

This is an apt combination for a writer of immense daring and ambition who yet tended to be equivocal about the spiritual worth of his compositions. Bishop was right to see that for Hopkins 'to be a poet was not the be-all, end-all of existence'.[5] Seldom could he imagine his own compositions in the manner of 'To R. B.' as acts of human creation that parallel the divine creation. Instead, Hopkins worried that poetry failed to answer the special demand for ordinary service he saw God had made upon his life. Not the least of the remarkable things about his sonnet 'The Windhover', which Hopkins in 1879 considered 'the best thing I ever wrote', is that he was able several years after the poem was first composed to dedicate it in the title 'to Christ our Lord'.[6] The confidence this dedication expresses in poetry's capacity to be an authentic gift to God was usually much less entire. One reason why Hopkins was rarely seen in print until after his death, aside from a few minor verses and translations, is that his daring formal innovations baffled those who might have published his poetry; another is that Hopkins himself worried that publication would not sit well with his vocation as a Jesuit priest. For a long time even the composition of poetry seemed to him at best a distraction, and at worst improper. Before commencing his Jesuit training, and with a new poetic rhythm still haunting his ear, Hopkins burnt copies of his poems in what he theatrically called a 'Slaughter of the innocents'.[7] He then imposed almost complete written silence on himself for seven years before relenting, in a blaze, with 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' in 1875–76. 'The Wreck' inaugurates

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Excerpt
More Information

Hopkins's poetic maturity. What it did not remove was Hopkins's caution about whether the energy he expended on poetry was well spent: 'After writing ['The Wreck'] I held myself free to compose,' he explained in a letter of 1878, 'but cannot find it in my conscience to spend time upon it; so I have done little and shall do less.'[8]

None of this has prevented Hopkins's critics from seeing his poetry as the outgrowth of a unified project of philosophical understanding. Hopkins was strongly given to intellectual speculation and is famed for the theories he developed about language and about the nature of reality. These theories guide many discussions of his work. The emphasis in such discussions is on the grand system of ideas seen to define the early phase of Hopkins's poetic maturity, occurring ahead of his ordination as a priest. Often out of view are the more incomplete and unstable perceptions of his later writing – perceptions such as that found in 'To R. B.', in which regret for a lack of creative impulse is traced with a sense of poetry's spiritual worth. Such poems fit less neatly than earlier work with the conceptual scheme with which Hopkins is usually identified, and their concern with individual spiritual history has made them appear of more limited significance than the poems of bold proclamation for which he is best known. Our sense has been that when Hopkins is not comprehensive and consolidative he is strictly inward and intimate.

This book seeks to recover the diversity in Hopkins's writing by focussing on the way in which he imagines the individual lived experience of religious belief. Such experience provides a subject for Hopkins's poetry as well as a perspective from which it is offered: there are poems inspired by incidents in priestly life, in which Hopkins searches his responses to persons to whom he had ministered, and there are those that imagine the situation of individual belief, dramatising conditions of spiritual joy and confidence as well as of dryness and difficulty. His poems of religious experience have been more reputed for their feeling than for their thought. When seen against the poised and far-reaching vision typical of the dazzling early phase of Hopkins's poetic maturity, it is all too easy to think of them as a retreat into the private drama of inward self. Thus the earliest full-length study of the poet divided his work into two classes, distinguishing between poems which 'deal in an intellectual way with something which is more or less in the nature of a maxim or aphorism' and those 'which are records of experience, which deal with moods rather than maxims'.[9] The same division has become embedded in the binary preoccupations of Hopkins criticism, drawn to concentrate either on systematic metaphysical proposition in his poetry or on how it expresses private and individual spiritual history.

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More Information

Hopkins's poems of religious experience require us to move beyond this division. This book does not seek to establish another scheme by which to understand Hopkins but rather highlights what can be gained from a more flexible approach to his writing. The building of Hopkins's ideas into a tight system by his critics has certainly helped refute the old impression of the poet as wholly unable to reconcile a delight in sensuous beauty with strict religious commitment; yet it has also created an imbalance in what we appreciate of him. One obvious danger is that the effort to harmonise Hopkins's poetry with his prose writings according to a consistent intellectual programme means we neglect what is distinctive to each of the forms in which he wrote. Another is that little allowance can be made for contradiction and anomaly when all of his work is expected to adhere to a set conceptual standard. I aim to show that his poetry's thought does not run in a single pattern, but instead it takes different forms, sometimes striving for logical consistency and unifying principles, and on other occasions appearing more provisional and exploratory. Hopkins emerges here as a poet just as much occupied with the contingency of spiritual process as with the assertion of a uniform vision. This too lay within his roll, rise, carol, and creation.

Parts and Wholes of Hopkins

The first edition of Hopkins's poetry did not appear until nearly three decades after his death. Yet although largely unpublished in his lifetime, he was something other than a private poet and, at least initially, did make efforts to publish his mature work. Overcoming his scruples to begin work on 'The Wreck' needed the encouragement of his Jesuit superiors and the likely hope that the poem might eventually appear in a Jesuit journal.[10] Anxieties remained – 'You must never say that the poem is mine', Hopkins warned his mother at a point when he expected that 'The Wreck' might be published – but the prospect of honouring his religious profession by poetry appears to have been essential to Hopkins taking up his pen again after a long period when it had been largely at rest.[11] This prospect faded once another shipwreck poem, 'The Loss of the Eurydice' (1878), suffered the same fate as 'The Wreck' in finally being rejected by the same Jesuit journal. Even so, the disappointment of Hopkins's hopes for his poetry after this rejection was far from total. In 1881 Hopkins eagerly pursued the possibility of being published in an anthology of sonnets, 'even though it meant going against his stated edict not to seek, or at least force, notoriety'.[12] Again, he was turned down as a result of the novelty of his poetic methods. In retreat notes written two years later, Hopkins

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More Information

> earnestly asked our Lord to watch over my compositions, not to preserve them from being lost or coming to nothing, for that I am very willing that they should be, but that they might not do me harm through the enmity or imprudence of any man or my own; that he should have them as his own and employ or not employ them as he should see fit.[13]

The hope that his poems might in some way render service to God may be distressingly frail here, but it remains clearly discernible – as it does also in the desire Hopkins once expressed 'that my pieces could at some time become known but in some spontaneous way, so to speak, and without my forcing', a statement which is characteristic both in the reluctance to seek fame and in the hope that recognition might arrive by means unprompted.[14]

At the same time, it is evident that the rejection of his poems for publication hardened Hopkins's feeling that such pieces were a distraction from more substantial employment. In effect, a tension seen earlier in Hopkins's creative life re-established itself in new form. Norman H. MacKenzie nicely identifies the 'curious paradox' of Hopkins's undergraduate verses as being that 'the only really telling pieces are religious, and yet his religious conscience was restraining him from composition'.[15] The poetry written later, from 'The Wreck' onwards, no longer occasioned the angst of these early verses, when poems had been interspersed with tortured confessional notes in his journal. In one sense Hopkins grew more relaxed about the time he gave to literary composition. But even if found to be less problematic, the notion he had of poetry as 'unprofessional' – the term he used in a letter of 1884 – revived strongly once 'The Loss of the Eurydice' had been rejected, even as religious belief remained Hopkins's most frequent and telling subject.[16]

These doubts about the merit of composing poetry were personal to Hopkins and did not apply to the literary labours of those with whom he corresponded. Attempting in a letter of 1878 to console a fellow poet whose work had not achieved wide fame, Hopkins felt able to declare that 'The only just judge, the only just literary critic, is Christ, who prizes, is proud of, and admires, more than any man, more than the receiver himself can, the gifts of his own making.'[17] Writing several years later on a similar theme to Robert Bridges, of Bridges's own poetry, and concluding on this occasion that works of art must be known to do good, Hopkins was equally able to find in them a spiritual virtue: a 'true rule' in the question of art and fame, Hopkins told Bridges, was 'what Christ our Lord said of virtue, Let your light shine before men that they may see your good works (say, of art) and glorify yr. Father in heaven'.[18] These pronouncements diverge: in one

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Excerpt
More Information

case, Christ's interest renders fame secondary; in the other, being known is what best honours God. Neither represents Hopkins's view of his own art. Its virtue in the eyes of God seemed to him less certain, so that the encouragement he occasionally received to seek literary recognition was once met with the rejoinder that 'there is more peace and it is the holier lot to be unknown than to be known'.[19]

The demands of Hopkins's professional life also limited his opportunity to write poetry. Hopkins's work as a Jesuit was often arduous. During his years in a vast Jesuit parish in Liverpool, he was part of a group of nine priests serving a local Roman Catholic population of nearly ten thousand; these priests sometimes collectively heard in excess of eighty thousand confessions in a single year.[20] Later, having been appointed to an academic position in Ireland, Hopkins's energies were equally stretched, especially by what he called the 'great, very great drudgery' of examination work.[21] It was difficult in these circumstances for Hopkins to find time and energy enough to compose poetry, let alone make efforts to have it published. This was to him not entirely a matter of regret. 'When a man has given himself to God's service', Hopkins once told his friend Richard Watson Dixon, 'when he has denied himself and followed Christ, he has fitted himself to receive and does receive from God a special guidance, a more particular providence':

> This guidance is conveyed partly by the action of other men, as his appointed superiors, and partly by direct lights and inspirations. If I wait for such guidance, through whatever channel conveyed, about anything, about my poetry, for instance, I do more wisely in every way than if I try to serve my own seeming interests in the matter. Now if you value what I write, if I do myself, much more does our Lord. And if he chooses to avail himself of what I leave at his disposal he can do so with a felicity and with a success which I could never command. And if he does not, then two things follow; one that the reward I shall nevertheless receive from him will be all the greater; the other that then I shall know how much a thing contrary to his will and even to my own best interests I should have done if I had taken things into my own hands and forced on publication. This is my principle and this in the main has been my practice: leading the sort of life I do here [at Roehampton, where Hopkins spent his tertianship, a year of relief from pastoral work] it seems easy, but when one mixes with the world and meets on every side its secret solicitations, to live by faith is harder, is very hard; nevertheless by God's help I shall always do so.

Hopkins's reluctance to seek fame may have served partly as a protection against the likelihood of further rejection of his work by editors. Once appointed to an academic post, Hopkins still occasionally managed to

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Excerpt
More Information

produce poems, but he was unable to complete the scholarly publications expected of him: evidently misgivings about his poetry becoming known did little to reduce the appeal of its composition. Obscurity also provided a form of validation when seen as a consequence of the novelty of his creative methods; it is no coincidence that several of Hopkins's particular heroes were figures whose originality he saw to have gone unappreciated in their own time ('I hope you will long continue to work out yr beautiful and original style', Hopkins told his favourite architect, William Butterfield, in a letter of 1877: 'I do not think this generation will ever much admire it').[22] Even so, Hopkins's desire to wait upon God's will for his writing deserves to be taken seriously on its own terms. It is not that Hopkins believed his composition of poetry was of itself sinful or corrupting; rather, it is that he required much persuasion that literary endeavours had a true relation to his religious calling. 'Our Society values, as you say, and has contributed to literature, to culture', Hopkins's letter to Dixon continues, with regard to the Jesuits, 'but only as a means to an end. Its history and its experience shew that literature proper, as poetry, has seldom been found to be to that end a very serviceable means.'[23]

Hopkins had on more than one occasion to answer the charge that he had forgone a potentially brilliant artistic career for the religious life. His reported response to such claims was disarmingly simple and typically playful: '"You wouldn't give only the dull ones to Almighty God."'[24] In one way it seems remarkable that Hopkins's Jesuit obituary makes no mention of his literary writing, commenting only that 'his acquaintance with poetry was extensive, and his judgements differed upon various poets considerably from what most people entertain'.[25] The obituary has sometimes been thought evidence of how little his literary talent was appreciated by those among whom he lived and worked; it appears to join with the sorry tale of the rejection of 'The Wreck' from publication in a Jesuit journal in the unwitting neglect of Hopkins's genius by the religious order in which he served. In another sense, though, the omission is in keeping with Hopkins's own sense that the chief purpose of his life lay elsewhere. Although often applied to Hopkins, the epithet 'priest-poet' (or its alternative: 'poet-priest') is not one that he himself would have much understood. This priest and poet rarely saw his two vocations as constituting part of the same venture.

The relation of poetry to religious duty was for a long time a main concern of Hopkins criticism. As early as 1926, eight years after the appearance of the first edition of Hopkins's poems, I. A. Richards's trailblazing essay on Hopkins in the *Dial* suggested 'that the poet in him was often oppressed

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Excerpt
More Information

and stifled by the priest' – a claim that other early studies were determined to refute.[26] The debate continued to exercise commentary on Hopkins well into the second half of the twentieth century, when the idea of 'Hopkins's commitment to religion before literature' still had prominence.[27] It has now largely disappeared from recent studies, to be replaced by the notion that poetry was for Hopkins an act of spiritual dedication and formed part of his attempt to reconcile a philosophical and theological faith in God with sensitivity to natural beauty. Hopkins's inclination for theorising in his prose writings (of which the twin concepts of 'inscape' and 'instress' are the most famous product) has in particular led a number of critics to evoke a direct and exact relation between the epistemology pursued in certain of his undergraduate essays and early journals and aspects of belief that enter into poems written across a far longer period. For some of these critics, most notably Isobel Armstrong, the potential for poetic language to trouble fixed meanings and theological prescriptions reveals the fault lines in what they declare to be Hopkins's intellectual and aesthetic scheme.[28] For others, equally taken with what they understand to be the systematic nature and orientation of his poetry's thought, it is a much more achieved project.[29] Either way, the general perception now is that, as Helen Vendler has recently proposed, 'The subjects that interested Hopkins were chiefly intellectual ones; even his most sensuous responses to the natural world were immediately referred to the intellect, which, in the poetry, meant referral to philosophical or theological thought.'[30]

This view of Hopkins is weighted towards the early phase of his poetic maturity and misses his concern with how matters of belief are received in time and combine with individual history. A different sense of Hopkins emerges from consideration of how his poetry grapples with faith as it is lived out in personal experience. The individual experience Hopkins imagines is of course never pure; it is not pre-conceptual or free from abstraction. Indeed, this book attends closely to the broad theological and spiritual resonances of Hopkins's interest in individual histories of belief. Yet it is also the case that Hopkins's poems on this topic have a less formal engagement with intellectual understanding than is suggested by Vendler's remark. The youthful poems Hopkins wrote before the advent of his poetic maturity are at once self-denying and world-denying; they tend to perceive of experience as the arena of spiritual combat, a testing ground for the life to come. This sense never disappears in Hopkins, but it is increasingly in tension with sacramental confidence that spiritual realities are to be encountered (and not only prepared for) in everyday lived circumstance. That the tension remains unresolved means that his poetry

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Excerpt
More Information

finally offers no single view of the significance of ordinary religious experience in spiritual understanding, at points appearing to embrace it, and at other times seeming to suspect its lack of grasp upon permanent and immutable truths. As such, religious experience cannot provide a key to Hopkins's thought in the manner favoured by totalising interpretations of his poetry as the elaboration of a philosophical and theological scheme. The study of religious experience in Hopkins has instead different merits, enabling detailed attention to be given to poems that usually lie outside the scope of synthesising approaches to his work, and, just as importantly, allowing for what is unresolved or elusive in Hopkins's meaning to signal more than the failure of a project of intellectual distillation.

By 'religious experience', it should be said immediately, I do not mean the private and anthropocentric experience with which the term 'spirituality' is now often associated, but rather that which for Hopkins always and finally had to be directed to self-transcendence in God. The enormous influence William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) has had in various fields of study means that religious experience is commonly seen in opposition to institutional religion as well as to doctrines of faith. James sets religious experience against 'theology and ceremony and ecclesiastical organization': 'In the more personal branch of religion it is on the contrary the inner dispositions of man himself which form the centre of interest, his conscience, his deserts, his helplessness, his incompleteness.'[31] The notion of religious experience appropriate to Hopkins could not be more different. In the Spiritual Exercises of the Jesuit founder, St Ignatius Loyola (1491–1556), he practised a method of prayer in which, according to a modern understanding, 'the stress is on the exercitant's distinctive experience, shaped as it is by a particular history'.[32] Yet the significance Ignatius attaches to personal experience in the Spiritual Exercises is always more than private. This experience is not meaningful for him unless sustained and guided by the doctrine and practice of the Catholic Church. The emphasis of the Spiritual Exercises on inner dispositions is intended to deepen a person's commitment to the divine: 'by means of a retreat of this kind', Ignatius observes, a person's 'intellect being less drawn in different directions than before, and his whole thought being collected and reduced to one thing, – namely to obeying God his Creator … he uses his natural powers in a freer and more unencumbered way in seeking what he so much desires'.[33]

For Hopkins there can be no dichotomy of formal truth and individual awareness. As Geoffrey Hill declares: 'To view him as an ecstatic, solipsistic rhapsodist, without reference to the solid grounding in Catholic dogmatics and the tactics of nineteenth-century Catholic proselytising, is to fail

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Excerpt
More Information

to be in earnest … with the distinctive quality of his genius.'[34] Hopkins's poetry always has a theological and ecclesiastical discipline. This discipline takes various forms across his poetry. Some of his poems can be said to present 'stages in doctrinal discourse' (as Hill argues of 'The Windhover'), whilst others give less methodical shape to their religious thoughts.[35] Such variety means it is worth countenancing in Hopkins's writing the 'rough division' the theologian Philip Endean makes 'between approaches to the one theological mystery of God's self-gift among us focusing primarily on regulative sources and principles on the one hand … and, on the other, those which begin from ongoing experience'.[36] Endean is referring to theology and spirituality as disciplines of study, but the distinction can also help indicate the range of insight to emerge from Hopkins's poetry. It can recall us from the wish always to organise it into a system of knowledge.

In his study of Hopkins, Philip A. Ballinger is careful to acknowledge that 'nowhere in his writings did Hopkins attempt a synthesis of his theological aesthetic'. As a result, 'the scholar is therefore required to construct a synthetic whole from bits and pieces framed in the various contexts of Hopkins' poems, sermons, letters, and personal musings', a whole from which 'there emerges the beginning of a comprehensive theological aesthetic'.[37] From this perspective, the trend of Hopkins's thought is 'anatomical', to use Carlo Ginzburg's term, and reflects on particulars by means of general, encompassing principles that are capable of being organised into a complete system.[38] It is a view of Hopkins which is profoundly in tune with 'The Wreck' as well as with certain of Hopkins's nature sonnets, especially the untitled poem which begins 'As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame' (1877). Of the poems inspired by priestly experience, 'The Handsome Heart' (1879) is most obviously traced with a far-reaching personal metaphysic in admiring how the heart 'To its function fine it, wild and self-instressed, | Falls light as ten years long taught what and why' (ll. 7–8). This praise for the way the heart follows its natural impulse is bound up with delight in unique selfhood, selfhood which is found to be so strongly individuated that it has to be described in correspondingly particularised terms. Here too it is appropriate to speak of 'a comprehensive theological aesthetic'.

Other works, especially those written after the early phase of his poetic maturity, are less well served by the expectation that Hopkins's writing aims always to be synoptic. The claim of this book is that the effort of much of Hopkins's poetry is actually less comprehensive than has been proposed, and that the theological and spiritual awareness manifested in his writing is often more inductive and conjectural, tending to the knowledge Ginzburg describes as 'born of experience, of the concrete and individual'.[39] Such is

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