THE POETRY OF
GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

I

THE French, an orderly nation, like to begin the study of a poet by considering the place which he should take in the ranks of the poets as a whole. It is possible in Paris to find a bookseller's window placarded with the discovery that the place of Lautréamont, for instance, is between Rimbaud and Baudelaire. There is something to be said for this habit. Nothing, certainly, is more difficult than to make a study of a poet's work in complete isolation: to consider it purely as and for itself. The approach is made very much easier if, to begin with at any rate, we make an effort to see it beside the works which it most resembles. Sometimes these will be the works of contemporaries: sometimes of poets who are distant from him in point of time but connected with him by some sort of temperamental affinity.

With Hopkins this is extraordinarily difficult. No bookseller's window, so far as I know, has ever been placarded with the discovery that the place of Hopkins is between So-and-So and Such-and-Such; and we may doubt whether it is likely to be; at any rate for some time. There was never a more difficult case for the literary historian who likes to see litera-ture as a chart of tendencies and groupings in which every poet finds his place. There is no group of names

with which his is inevitably associated; it is with hesitation that we describe him as a Victorian— almost one of the loosest classifications imaginable— since, although Hopkins lived from 1844 to 1889, most of his poetry was published for the first time in 1918, and it is generally taken to belong in spirit and by adoption to the twentieth century. On the other hand, there is certainly no warrant for describing this Jesuit poet as a Georgian or as a post-Georgian. Using a classification based on one of the most obvious and superficial characteristics of his poetry, we might choose to associate him with the other poets of his time who were experimenters in prosody: Patmore, notably, and Bridges. Or we might couple him with Browning as a poet who founded his rhythms on common speech and disregarded con-ventional syntax. It is true that from time to time in Hopkins's poetry we come across lines or short passages which strikingly resemble Browning, such, for instance, as

"But how shall I...make me room there
  Reach me a...Fancy, come faster—
  Strike you the sight of it? Look at it loom there,
  Thing that she...there then! the Master,
  Ipse, the only one, Christ, King, Head:
  He was to cure the extremity where he had cast her."

But there is no Victorian poet whose innovations strike the eye as odd, bizarre, far-fetched, in the degree that those of Hopkins do; and none in effect, it may be added, whose actual accomplishment in modifying our poetic vocabulary is comparable to

(2)

his. It would scarcely occur to a reader unacquainted with Hopkins to identify such lines as

"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—qúite
  Disremembering, dísmémbering, | áll now"

as the work of even the most experimental of Victorians.

The fact that Hopkins spent his life from the early twenties onwards under the discipline of Loyola may perhaps have contributed something to his singularity; as a Jesuit he was necessarily to some extent a man apart. The fact that his poetry bears so few marks of his age suggests that his name should be associated with those of the other poets who in every century have occupied themselves with themes drawn from Christian dogma and experience; that not very large group, in English, which includes the Jesuit Southwell, Quarles, Herbert, Donne, Crashaw, Vaughan, Traherne, Smart, Patmore, Christina Rossetti, Alice Meynell, T. S. Eliot, and some others. But the whole content of Hopkins's verse is not devotional. As one critic has already said, we do not feel that Hopkins's poetry springs directly out of his religious vocation. Temperamentally he seems to have been, like Donne,

"Apollo's first, at last the true God's priest"

(although actually, no doubt, the poet in him was kept in subordination to the Jesuit). To call Hopkins a devotional poet would be to suggest that the religious

element in his poetry accounts for all that is most remarkable in it: which is not by any means the case.

How, then, is this bizarre, difficult, Modernist-Victorian poet to be approached? With whom shall we compare him? A number of affinities have been suggested. Dr Bridges several times associates him with Milton, and this is a comparison which deserves consideration, particularly as Hopkins himself seems to give it countenance. In a letter of 1879 he writes: "My poetry errs on the side of oddness. I hope in time to have a more balanced and Miltonic style". I do not take Hopkins to mean more than that he hoped in time to master his own modification of the English language as completely as Milton had mastered his. There is little likeness between the modifications in question: in many respects they compose an antithesis: Hopkins's version, for instance, exaggerates the English or Anglo-Saxon element in the language, as Milton's exaggerated the Latin.

"Delightfully the bright wind boisterous⎪ropes,
        wrestles, beats earth bare
  Of yestertempest's creases; in pool and rut peel
        parches
  Squandering ooze to squeezed⎪dough, crust, dust;
        stanches, starches,
  Squadroned masks and man-marks⎪treadmill toil
        there
  Footfretted in it"

is one of many passages in Hopkins which with their appearance of rough vigour, their insistent heavy alliteration, their delicate rhythm which resolves

(4)

what at first strikes the ear as monotony into in-
numerable delicate separable tones which bring
back to the reader's mind any impressions of Anglo-
Saxon poetry that he may have. There is not on the
face of it much likeness between Hopkins's modifi-
cation of English and that which produces such
passages as the following:

"Hear all ye Angels, Progenie of Light,
  Thrones, Dominations, Princedoms, Virtues,
        Powers,
  Hear my Decree which unrevok't shall stand.
  This day I have begot whom I declare
  My onely Son, and on this holy Hill
  Him have anointed, whom ye now behold
  At my right hand: your Head I him appoint:
  And by my self have sworn to him shall bow
  All knees in Heav'n and shall confess him Lord:
  Under his great Vice-regent Reign abide
  United as one individual Soule
  For ever happy; him who disobeyes
  Mee disobeyes, breaks union and that day
  Cast out from God and blessed vision, falls
  Into utter darkness, deep ingulft, to place
  Ordaind without redemption, without end."

Even so, a surprising number of resemblances can be
made out. Milton's fondness for using a series of
words which are almost puns:

              "...Begirt the Almighty throne
Beseeching or besieging..."
"famish him of breath, if not of bread..."
"At one slight bound high overleaped all bound"
"And feats of war defeats", etc.,

(5)

is considerable enough to provide the searcher with
a number of lines which might be made out to fore-
shadow Hopkins. But the likeness so established
would not be a great one. In fact this fondness for
marking the progress of a thought by the progress of
sound may be found in most poets who have used
the language as virtuosos: semi-puns of this kind are
to most English poets what grace-notes or warbles
are to pipes: things desirable in themselves.

It is interesting to compare Hopkins and Milton
as modifiers of the language. No one will dispute
that Milton deserves the title. "Through all his
greater works", says Johnson, "there prevails a
uniform peculiarity of diction, a mode and cast of
expression which bears little resemblance to that of
any former writer: and which is so far removed from
common use, that an unlearned reader, when he first
opens his book, finds himself surprised by a new
language." Addison says that our language "sunk
under him". There is a general feeling that Milton,
in indulging his desire to use English words with a
foreign idiom, did a disservice to the poets who
succeeded him. Johnson blames and acquits him in
the same sentence. "Of Milton it may be said what
Jonson says of Spenser, that 'he wrote no language'
but has formed what Butler calls 'a Babylonish
dialect' in itself harsh and barbarous, but made by
exalted genius and extensive learning the vehicle of
so much instruction and so much pleasure, that,
like other lovers, we find grace in its deformity."
T. S. Eliot, however, looking at Milton as one of a

long chain of English poets, describes him as having in his blank verse erected a Chinese Wall; that is to say, having done something which makes further progress on the same lines impossible.

Now Hopkins's modification of English cannot be explained by his desire to use English words with a foreign idiom, or even with an Anglo-Saxon idiom. Even if he read Anglo-Saxon it is unlikely that he read enough of it to give him an ear which could tolerate no other cadences. There is no analogy here between Hopkins's relation to Anglo-Saxon and Milton's relation to Latin. Hopkins's version of English, unlike Milton's, was created almost entirely by personal idiosyncracy, and the ultimate source is usually Hopkins himself. In prosody, too, in spite of his appeal to Greek and Latin lyric verse, to Piers Plowman, and the choruses of *Samson Agonistes*, it seems that he was really very much a law to himself. His prosodical rules are elastic enough to make it possible to justify any collocation of syllables: it looks as though the ultimate appeal was always to his own ear.

Finally, it seems likely that Hopkins's treatment of the language is likely to have results very different from those which followed on Milton's modification of English. Hopkins, as far as can be judged, has done posterity a signal service: so far from setting up a Chinese Wall, he has broken down several barriers which no longer served any purpose: and the publication of his poetry in 1918 has left English poetry in a condition which seems to have many new possibilities.

(7)

Hopkins and Milton, then, have little in common:
but there are, I think, two poets with whom Hopkins
has enough in common to make it possible to in-
stitute a comparison. These are Crashaw and Words-
worth: names rarely found in conjunction. It might
be permissible, I think, to describe Hopkins as a
poet who combines the ingenuity of imagery, some-
thing too of the rather forced, excessive, sweetness
of the most florid of English poets with the wide,
pure, and, in a sense, unsophisticated sensibility of
the poet of Nature. It is not only by his ingenious,
exaggeratedly logical intellect that Hopkins re-
sembles Crashaw; there is also a likeness of tone,
more easily caught than defined, a likeness which is
audible, I think, in such a pair of stanzas as the
following:

Hopkins:

"Had she a quince in hand? Yet gaze;
  Rather, it is the sizing moon.
  Lo, linkèd heavens with milky ways!
  That was her larkspur row.—So soon
  Sphered so fast, sweet soul?—We see
  Nor fruit, nor flowers, nor Dorothy."

Crashaw:

"Hark, she is called, the parting hour is come.
  Take thy farewell, poor world, heaven must go
    home.
  A piece of heavenly earth, fairer and brighter
  Than the chaste stars, whose choice lamps come to
    light her

(8)

> While through the crystal orbs, clearer than
>   they,
> She climbs, and makes a far more milky way.
> She's called; hark, how the dear immortal dove
> Sighs to his silver mate, 'Rise up, my love,
> Rise up, my fair, my spotless one:
> The winter's past, the rain is gone,
> The spring is gone, the flowers appear,
> No sweets, but thou, are wanting here.'"

The early poem from which I have quoted—it was written while Hopkins was still at Balliol—shews that Hopkins's poetry is at times "conceited" in the sense in which that term is applied to the poetry of the Metaphysical School; and it is, of course, chiefly by this aspect of his work that he resembles Crashaw, who is said to be the most baroque of all seventeenth-century poets. Dr Praz describes the baroque mentality as one which saw the universe under the likeness of conceits; which discovered mysterious witticisms in every aspect of heaven and earth, and sublime symbolic meanings in every living creature. One need only take such a poem as *The Blessed Virgin compared to the Air we Breathe* in order to see that this mentality was very much that of Hopkins. By another side of his work, however— though this is a comparison that cannot be taken very far—Hopkins has some affinity with Wordsworth; and the two sides of his nature are sometimes seen to be in conflict. Hopkins's sensibility revolts from the thin, methodical conception of the universe which is forced on him by his intellect. As a symptom of this revulsion it may be noticed that "wild"

in Hopkins's poetry is nearly always a term of
praise:

"Wild air, world-mothering air"

is the rapturous opening of the poem which I have
quoted as shewing his likeness to Crashaw. This
reminds one that Alice Meynell, herself the least
spontaneous of poets, said nevertheless that the
poetry which she liked best was characterised by a
quality only to be described as wildness. The ex-
planation may perhaps be that as to the urban
civilised mind of the eighteenth-century gardener a
wilderness seemed a delightful thing, so to the tidy,
cut-and-dried mental world of the Jesuit, a thing
that is wild is valuable merely on account of its
naturalness, its unaccountableness. By his intellect
everything is seen as tidy, orderly, part of a pattern;
the world as viewed in the light of Catholic dogma is
a riddle solved. In his poem on *Dun Scotus's Oxford*
Hopkins describes the theologian as *an unraveller of
reality*: the activity of the philosopher is directed
towards reducing the complexity of reality into a
single comprehensible design. The same is true of the
baroque religious poet; the Crashaw who works out
a detailed comparison between the new-born Christ
and the rising sun, the Hopkins who likens the
Blessed Virgin to the air we breathe, are doing very
much the same thing. But there is also the Hopkins
who in such poems as *Inversnaid* and *Pied Beauty*
rejoices in wild Nature as providing an antidote to
the dullness and flatness which one imagines would

(10)