A Close Reading of Seven Poems by Gerard Manley Hopkins: Parts II & III

Peter Cash

Part II

Introduction

Nottingham University, October 1968: As a fresh undergraduate, my first-ever class was on the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins. It says something about first impressions that, no matter how much of a shock they are, they stay with you. Although I am not a Catholic, I’ve found that, throughout my career as an A-Level teacher, I’ve chosen to teach Hopkins whenever the opportunity has arisen, including 1981 and 1993 when, in the course of class discussions, I dictated a variety of sentences, but never went so far as to complete my own analysis of a poem.

For its A2-Level Unit 2710 Poetry & Drama, OCR (for 2006) chose Gerard Manley Hopkins’ Selected Poems (in an edition by Catherine Phillips of Downing College, Cambridge). Upon seeing this prescription again, I decided that it was about time that I employed for Hopkins’ work the technique which I have for some years been bringing to the teaching of individual poems: that is, compose for each sonnet a commentary or an exegesis which sets out to encompass the Assessment Objectives. Rather than scribble down somewhere the words and the phrases by which quotations were to be illuminated, my students would be able to have these critical terms in their grammatical contexts, their usages explicit, ready for high-lighting.

The Use of English (Spring 2009) begins on p 87 with the heading ‘A Close Reading of Seven Poems by Gerard Manley Hopkins: Part I’. What is not explained there is that the three poems which I analyse in Part I are not any three poems by Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889). One unique difficulty which attends the exegesis of a Hopkins sonnet involves his concept of ‘inscape’: without explaining what ‘inscape’ is, it is not possible
fully to explain the poem. For this reason, Part I concerned itself with the three poems (As wingfishers catch fire, The Windhover, Binsey Poplars) which rely conspicuously and prominently upon ‘inscapes’ for their inspirations; in Part I, my commentaries on those three poems, each one not so much repeating as reinforcing points made in the other two, endeavour to prepare the way for my teaching of other sonnets to which an understanding of ‘inscape’ is indispensable. In Part II, there follow my commentaries on two poems (4. Spring, 5. Hurrahing In Harvest) for which my earlier commentaries therefore provide the context.

4. SPRING (May 1877)

Here lies the great conflict of Hopkins’ heart: the great attraction of beauty on the one hand, the call to subordinate it to spiritual and moral values on the other.

But these pictures recall the innocence of a world that was, not the one that is, for Hopkins is rarely content to accept beauty unalloyed by moral values.

Gerald Roberts (1994)

In this sonnet, Hopkins has two aims which ‘conflict’ with each other: first, to write an octave in which he composes a description of the ‘great attraction’ of Spring; second, to write a sestet in which he composes a ‘spiritual and moral’ reflection upon the ‘beauty’ of this season. Frequently, it seems that Hopkins cannot set out his sensuous appreciation of Nature without reference to God’s part in its creation.

In the octave, Hopkins’ aim is to give a pictorial impression of Spring. He opens the octave with a declarative statement – ‘Nothing is so beautiful as Spring’ – which he then seeks to justify in the following seven lines. He isolates those natural phenomena by which Spring can be readily identified and crafts them into a composite picture of the season. According to J. Hillis Miller, ‘the fundamental method of Hopkins’ poetry is to carry as far as it will go the principle of rhyme’; in the octave of Spring, Hopkins’ method is to rhyme four –ush sounds [to convey the lusciousness of the vernal growth] and four –ing sounds [to suggest the resonance of birdsong throughout the woodland]. To describe Spring, he selects those sights and those sounds (those ‘inscapes’) which characterise it; by these onomatopoeic means, he mirrors or echoes them.

Hopkins’ verse is remarkable for its texture: its rhymes and its alliterative rhythms. In addition to the two rhyme-sounds, Hopkins sets up ten
networks of alliteration. The function of the resulting rhythm is to convey the dynamic onset of Spring 1877 and further to imply its luxuriance: first, the weeds, which grow through the wooden spokes of cartwheels, ‘shoot long and lovely and lush’; then, there is the thrush song ‘through the echoing timber’; beneath a blue sky, ‘all in a rush with richness’, come ‘racing lambs’. The simile for the cathartic sound of the thrush’s song (‘it strikes like lightnings’) is a synaesthetic image; it suggests that Spring bombards the senses to the point at which they, together with singulars and plurals, become confused. The adjective for the pear-tree (‘the glassy pear-tree leaves and blooms’) pays attention to the lacquered texture of its leaves and anticipates another form of lushness.

As Roberts points out, Hopkins as a Catholic priest has an ulterior motive for writing about the natural plenitude of Spring; he is describing it only in order to moralise upon it. In the sestet, it becomes clear that Spring appeals to Hopkins ultimately because it is a season in which God’s grandeur is manifest; in the sestet, he subordinates his physical description to a spiritual reflection/justifies it in terms of Catholic doctrine. The question with which the sestet opens—

What is all this juice and all this joy?

—is by no means rhetorical because it receives an immediate answer: explicitly, it [Spring] is ‘a strain of the earth’s sweet being in the beginning in Eden garden’. In Hopkins’ imagination, England on Mayday 1877 is a pastoral paradise only in so far as it manages approximately to reproduce conditions in the Garden of Eden. This being so, Hopkins’ imperatives – ‘Have, get before it cloy, before it cloud’ - urge ‘girl and boy’ to make the most of this ‘beautiful’ and ‘innocent’ world before it disappears. He draws a parallel between an English Spring and the pre-lapsarian climate of Eden/between the season’s beauty before it fades and man’s ‘sweet being’ before it grew ‘sour with sinning’.

5. HURRAHING IN HARVEST (September 1877)

Hopkins’ exultant descriptions of the countryside are combined with a profound sense of God’s presence in Nature.

Gerald Roberts (1994)

For the title of this sonnet, Hopkins makes use of a noun which the OED defines as ‘an expression of exultation or approbation’; he presses this
noun into activity as a verb, relying in the process upon its even more common usage as an exclamation (cf. “Hooray!”) which expresses joyful satisfaction ‘or approbation’. If Hopkins is ‘hurrahing in harvest’, then – so his present participle suggests - he must be celebrating an achievement, rejoicing at a discovery of some kind.

In this sonnet, Hopkins divides the octave into two quatrains, each of which gives an ‘exultant description’ of an ‘inscape’. The function of the first quatrain—

Summer ends now; now, barbarous in beauty, the stooks rise
Around

—is to give a simple description of an autumn landscape in the Vale of Clwyd; the chiasmic movement of the line (‘ends now; now ...) enacts the transition from one season to the next. In the course of this description, Hopkins compares the pattern of ‘barbarous’ stooks in a field to the ‘lovely’ pattern of ‘silk-sack clouds’ in the ‘skies’. It is a pastoral scene that invites superlatives: ‘has wilder, wilful-wavier meal-drift’ ever before ‘melted across skies’? Dense with verbal effects, Hopkins’ rhetorical question asks us to consider whether cirrus cloud-formations (‘meal-drift’) have ever been ‘wilder, wilful-wavier’, thereby giving such cause for celebration and exultation (‘hurrahing’).

Famously, this sonnet was said by Hopkins to have been ‘the outcome of half an hour of extreme enthusiasm as I walked home alone one day from fishing in the Elwy’ [16th July 1878]. Such a comment confirms that Hopkins’ poems grow directly out of his own experiences and observations. The function of the second quatrain is to explain his ‘extreme enthusiasm’ for this walk back from the River Elwy to St Beuno’s College. It becomes clear that his enthusiasm is not so much for the literal harvest-time (when ‘all is safely gathered in’) as for a metaphorical harvest. In the second quatrain, he asks rhetorically ‘what lips yet gave you a’ more ‘rapturous’ answer to the question: what can we ‘glean’ of ‘our Saviour’ from this ‘sweet especial scene’? To this question, ‘all that glory in the heavens’ (to which he has just opened his ‘eyes’) gives affirmative ‘replies’. Here, the conceit is not dissimilar to the conclusion of The Wreck, Stanza 31: ‘is the shipwrack then a harvest, does the tempest carry grain for thee?’ Indeed, his very rhyme-scheme (‘behaviour’/ ‘wilful-wavier’/ ‘our Saviour’/ ‘gave you a’) has been designed to accommodate this idea. Were it not for the position of ‘our Saviour’, the compound-adjective ‘wilful-wavier’ would not exist and the three words ‘gave you a’ would never find themselves ending a line of English poetry. Such is Hopkins’ technical daring.
In the sestet, Hopkins supplies us with a confirmation of his belief that ‘our Saviour’ is manifestly present in the countryside. The ninth line of the sonnet states explicitly that ‘the azurous hung hills are his world-wielding shoulder’: that is, that Christ is an integral part of the Welsh landscape. Here, Hopkins’ perception is not that Christ is an Atlas-figure holding up the hills on his shoulder nor that the geological shape of the hills resembles Christ’s shoulder; rather, he states that the contour of the hills is Christ’s shoulder. For this reason, J. Hillis Miller (1963) concludes that ‘Hurrahing In Harvest is the most ecstatic expression of Hopkins’ vision of the ubiquity of Christ in Nature.’

In the sestet, Hopkins rejoices (‘hurrahs’) at this moment of epiphany. He explains that ‘these things, these things were here’ all along, but that ‘the beholder’ [himself] had been found ‘wanting’: until 1st September 1877, he had not lifted up his eyes and seen the ‘glory’ of the coming of the Lord in quite this form; till then, ‘instress’ had not come. Hopkins repeats these things in order to convey his incredulity that he could have been so imperceptive/so unreceptive. It had not previously occurred to him that Christ was physically implicit in the landscape. To finish the poem, he marks the moment when the ‘two’ perceptions [the geological form of the hills and Jesus’ physique] ‘meet’ or (as in The Windhover) ‘buckle’:

The heart rears wings bold and bolder
And hurls for him, O half hurls earth for him off under his feet.

Hopkins describes his feeling of elation: upon recognising ‘God’s presence in Nature’, the fusion between God and ‘earth’, his heart takes flight. He does away with a regular beat, inserting that ‘O’ in order to suggest the sensation of being swept off his feet. ‘Hopkins often marks by an exclamation the very moment in the poem when he reaches the height of wonder’ (R K R Thornton, 1973). Both in God’s Grandeur (‘with ah! bright wings’) and in this last line, he expresses his sense of wonder/joy by an apt, but unexpected interjection.

Part III

The reasons for reading Hopkins today, for setting his work as an A-Level text, are given in Part I and Part II: if he had written only his ‘dark sonnets’, his ‘terrible sonnets’, his ‘sonnets of desolation’, poems all composed after 1884, then I doubt seriously whether he would have found his way into the canon. Rather than enter the academic
mainstream, he would have remained on the banks, his complicated agonisings subjects only for PhD theses. A-Level Examiners forget this and, more often than not, set questions which demand that 18-year-old candidates consider his nature sonnets alongside his later work. Consequently, Part III consists of two commentaries (I Wake and Feel,) which dutifully prepare my candidates for the inevitability that their appreciations of Spring and The Windhover, no matter how lucid, will not be enough.

6. I WAKE AND FEEL May 1885

In 1884, Hopkins became Professor of Greek and Latin at the University of Dublin. By 1885, it was a post with which he had become deeply frustrated and disillusioned. Subsequently, he descends into a slough of despondency:

I have after long silence written two sonnets, which I am touching: if ever anything was written in blood one of these was …

Letter to Robert Bridges, May 1885

Although Hopkins’ letter does not identify this sonnet, W. H. Gardner (Penguin, 1953) believes that Carrion Comfort [Bridges’ eventual title for the poem] nevertheless analyses the effects of the identity-crisis through which Hopkins went as a result of his posting to Dublin: ‘this may be the sonnet “written in blood” about which G.M.H. wrote to R.B. in that year. During his ‘dark sonnets’, Hopkins’ first tendency is to express a painful bewilderment at the demoralising circumstances in which God has placed him; according to R.K.R. Thornton, he ‘sees himself as a failure and fails to see God’s purpose in him’. His second tendency is to fear the consequences of this wavering faith in his calling and to seek a solution.

In these ‘terrible sonnets’, Hopkins’ contorted syntax is expressive of his contorted thought-patterns; it is functional in conveying the sheer difficulty which he experiences in coming to terms with his religious doubt. More vividly than the other ‘sonnets of desolation’, this sonnet describes the symptoms of Hopkins’ crisis. It appears to begin where Carrion Comfort and No Worst, There Is None end: ie. ‘I wretch lay wrestling …’ In this sonnet, Hopkins seems to have awoken from the sleep with which ‘each day dies’ and in which his spiritual agonies were anaesthetised. Once more, the setting for a ‘dark sonnet’ is the cold bedroom in which Hopkins awakens to find that his painful doubts are
waiting for him. This sensation—

   I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day

—creates an ironic situation in that he wakes not to a 'dapple-dawn', but to a metaphorical experience of 'dark, not day' which makes a physical impact upon him: ironically, day-break feels like night-fall. Even though it is actually day-time, to Hopkins, in his tormented state of consciousness, it still feels dark. To suggest the nature of this experience, he puns upon the word 'fell': its first usage relates his spiritual desolation to a 'fell' [= a bleak moorland]; its second usage simultaneously suggests the 'fell' nature [cruel, dreadful, rude] of this awakening. To comfort himself in his predicament, Hopkins addresses his own 'heart':

   What hours, O what black hours we have spent
   This night! what sights you, heart, saw; ways you went!

Within this couplet of iambic pentameter, his punctuation constructs each individual phrase so that its cadences convey the movements of a mind in the act of thinking. So thoughtful is the rhythmic organisation of Line 2 that the plural noun 'hours' is to be imagined as having one syllable in 'What hours' and two syllables in 'O what black hours'; when it is repeated, it has gained a syllable in order to emphasise the length of the black night. In the second quatrline, Hopkins compares the hours which he has spent at a distance from God to 'years'.

To illustrate his sense of privation, he compares himself to a man writing frantic letters to a loved one from whom he has been forcibly separated:

   And my lament
   Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent
   To dearest him that lives alas! away."

Both the simile ('cries like dead letters') and the mid-line exclamation ('alas!') are designed to express his feeling of remoteness from Christian salvation. The positioning of the interjection 'alas!' is typically skilful; it punctuates the pentameter so that a reader cannot help but place a solemn accent upon the final iamb 'away'; the punctuation-mark keeps it waiting to rhyme mournfully with 'I say' (of Line 5).

In the sestet, Hopkins compares the physical effect of this separation from God to a form of acid indigestion, burning his oesophagus and keeping him awake at night: 'I am gall, I am heartburn'. Clearly, Hopkins' literal 'heartburn' [= his reflux oesophagitis] is a metaphor for the pain
with which his heart burns upon being distant from God; in a very obvious sense, this sonnet is about the burning ache of this separation. Finally, Hopkins finds for his state of spiritual despondency another metaphor which he extends in a declarative statement:

Selfyeast of spirit a dull dough sours.

Quite! In this case, he compares his ‘spirit’ to the ‘yeast’ which should enable a flaccid lump of dough (‘dull dough’) to rise in an oven and turn into a sweet loaf of bread; extending the metaphor of heartburn, he regrets that his own spirit is no longer able to lift itself. In this condition, Hopkins identifies readily with ‘the lost’ to whose ‘sweating selves’ he compares himself; the difference between Hopkins and ‘the lost’ [presumably, those ‘sweating’ it out in Purgatory] is that he - for some self-punishing reason - is ‘worse’. Consequently, the mood of this sonnet is an unrelieved agony.