A Close Reading of Seven Poems by Gerard Manley Hopkins: Part IV

Peter Cash

7. THOU ART INDEED JUST, LORD (17th March 1889)

‘Man was created to praise, revere and serve God’
(Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola 1491-1566)

In ‘As kingfishers catch fire…’, the italicised statement which concludes the octave—‘What I do is me: for that I came’—is a triumphant assertion of Hopkins’ self-worth, responding (as it does) to St. Ignatius Loyola’s explanation for each man’s existence on earth: namely, to worship God. Writing twelve years later, Hopkins can find no such reason for his existence; in this late sonnet, he is able to express only a profound sense of personal inadequacy. It is a very solemn poem: on 20th March, he writes to Robert Bridges that ‘it must be read adagio molto and with great stress.’

During January 1888, Hopkins retreated from Dublin (where he had been working for five years) to St. Stanislaus College Tullabeg in the Irish countryside; in the course of this retreat, he put himself through a rigorous self-examination. This sonnet is a result of the ‘conscientious self-questioning’ (Gerald Roberts) which he undertook there. It concerns itself partly with the pointlessness of his academic work at University College, Dublin:

What is my wretched life? Five wasted years have passed almost in Ireland. I am ashamed of the little I have done. All my undertakings miscarry; I am like a straining eunuch.

(Devotional Writing, 1st January 1889)
In Dublin, he then composes a sonnet in which he tries to come to terms with the self-loathing which he, as a diligent Jesuit, had not been expecting to experience. The octave is a theodicy: that is, a stanza in which he sets out to justify to himself the ways of God whom he (as required) ‘praises, reveres and serves’. At once, there is a tension between Hopkins’ assertion that God is ‘indeed just’ and his subsequent taking to task of God for being unjust; in this sonnet, Hopkins’ strategy is to juxtapose his familiar conviction that God is just with a series of rhetorical questions which imply that he is not. The result is an ironic conflict, not unlike the tense conflict between ‘father and fondler’/‘martyr-master’ in ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’ 1875.

Hopkins finds himself speaking in the voice of the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah (Chapter 12, Verse 1); this act of ventriloquism is entirely appropriate to his situation in that Hopkins, though he never doubts God’s existence, begins seriously to wonder what kind of God he is dealing with. First, he echoes Jeremiah in conceding that God has always dealt with him in a just way, but then—in a rhetorical outburst of lese majesté—begs to point out that he deserves just treatment: ‘but, sir, so what I plead is just’. Such justice is only to be expected on account of his reasonable pleas for it. Why, he wonders, have his pastoral endeavours not been rewarded with more success? Drunkenness and prostitution still thrive in the back streets of Liverpool and Dublin. Consequently, Hopkins asks three rhetorical questions in which it is impossible not to hear a tone of reproach:

Why do sinners’ ways prosper? and why must
Disappointment all I endeavour end?
Wert thou my enemy, O thou my friend,
How wouldst thou worse, I wonder, than thou dost
Defeat, thwart me?

The drunks who visit the brothels (‘the sots and thralls of lust’) seem to be having a much better time of it than their priest is; although theirs is a sinful way of life, it is not one on which he, in spite of his calling, has had any reforming impact. ‘Comforter, where, where is your comforting?’ he seems to be asking again. For once, Hopkins’ language is direct. With an ironic indignation, he tells God: “Although you are ‘my friend’, you could not have treated me ‘worse’/thwarted me more often if you had been ‘my enemy’”. Although Hopkins (‘I that spend, sir, life upon thy cause’) has devoted his life to the Lord’s work, he has nothing to show for it. In the end, he sounds as if he is admonishing his Lord for lacking a sense of fair play, rebuking him for having unfairly inflicted upon his servant a sense of ‘defeat’.
Gerald Roberts (1994) states that ‘the entire sonnet is a complaint about the poet’s personal plight’. In the sestet, Hopkins suddenly turns his attention to the natural re-growth of the ‘banks and brakes’ in Spring: ‘laced they are again with fretty chervil’. He draws a sardonic contrast between the annual re-awakening in the natural world and his annual failure to achieve anything in the human world:

birds build—but not I build; no, but strain,
Time’s eunuch…

By this epithet, Hopkins is indicating that the ‘strain’ of five years of unproductive work has emasculated him: impotent or sterile, he is unlike even the plants and the birds that ‘build’ around him. Peter Feeney (2006) is aware of the frequency with which Hopkins has recourse to this humiliating image from St. Matthew’s Gospel (Chapter 19, verse 12) and he writes that it ‘conveys a sense of futility, even maybe of self-contempt’.

It is no accident that the fourteen rhyme-words of this sonnet are all arid monosyllables. Hopkins writes: ‘Nothing comes: I am a eunuch, but it is for the kingdom of heaven’s sake...’ (Letter to Bridges, 18th January 1889). For this reason, he ends his sonnet with an extension of the seasonal metaphor:

Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain.

To the end, he is refusing to despair and imploring his just Lord to reciprocate the faith which he has kept in Him through the black hours.