THE IGNATIAN INSPIRATION OF GERARD HOPKINS

SO much has been written about the effect of Gerard Hopkins' vocation on his poetry that it may seem tedious to say anything more. Yet when the sum of things said has established a first-class misunderstanding, it is tantalising, if not requisite, to attempt a reconciliation.

Assuming, then, that Jesuits are provided with a mould *in which each after his own fashion may mould himself* (please note italics for subsequent reference), that mould being the Spiritual Exercises, and assuming further that the poet could not change his character without in some way changing his poetry, a double question arises, making room for two misunderstandings. First, as to the importance of the change—was it an inside transformation or merely an outside limitation? Secondly, as to its quality—was it for better or worse not only in Hopkins but in the general development of poetic expression?

The answer to both, which avoids alike religious enthusiasm and anti-religious dyspepsia, is that the Exercises were circumstances which channelled the poet's working just as other sets of circumstances, poverty, blindness, war, etc., have done to other poets, so that their importance though considerable is not strictly *poetic;* they make the critical occasions but are not the intimate origin of poetic thought. Their qualitative effect therefore is indifferent; not bad, because helping perhaps that chastity of mind and spare tautness of diction so much admired to-day; but hardly good because of repressions, etc. So: indifferent. If not the Jesuit training, some other thread would have assisted results poetically equivalent however widely different in other respects. This answer is balanced, and likely to prove the acceptable one. So it seems relevant to point out that it is wrong. Especially since it would certify a too extreme reaction to the original misstatement that Hopkins was a mystic in the same sense as St. John of the Cross.

I say then that the Exercises were not the occasion but the origin of Hopkins' poetic thought, and by the Exercises I mean: (1) his assimilation of them, (2) the consequent outpouring of the Holy Spirit through this His chosen channel —"Digitus Dei est hic." In other words his prayer. And here I want to establish no general connection between prayer and poetry, but only their connection in one particular poet.

According to Hopkins' own theory of knowledge, one state and two acts are necessary before thoughts become speakable. The state is a habitual union of object and subject in the unconscious. It results in a confused pre-conscious intuition which is the first act. The second act is an abstraction of this intuition out of the stream of consciousness so that it becomes an isolated event. But, when sometimes the confused intuition recognizes, reflects, identifies itself in an inscape of sight or sound, a complexus of sense, imagination and memory, then body and soul rejoice in one, thoughts find their own words, emotions their own melodies, and knowledge becomes what it ought to be, life. Call this state two.

State one is the union of Creator with creature, of God the Son with human nature, and we are not directly aware of it. To form abstract concepts or images accompanied by acts of love about this presence of Christ is prayer of two specified kinds: meditation, and active contemplation: we think about a fact known by faith and not by experience, or we construct pictures which, as far as we are concerned, remain pictures and nothing more. In these forms of prayer it will always be possible for the ordinary soul, even, wandering the gas-lit tenements of abstract reason or imagination, to strike upon a door that opens suddenly into dark expanses of the Spirit where there is no word nor image but only the infinite possibility of self-surrender, where the saint begins and the impure soul draws back in terror chattering to itself. But this experience would have no possible publicity value for poetry because the poet would have experienced—nothing.

However, passing from state one to state two, and supposing that the first act or pre-conscious intuition floods over and becomes clarified, as has been described, in sense and intellect at once, then again argument and picture-making is suspended and there come tears and sweetness, "a melting, a madrigal start." This is the union of soul and bodily form with Nature, Personified Nature. In prayer St. Ignatius calls it Consolation; in poetry Hopkins calls it Insight.

Not that consolation in the Ignatian sense is to be identified with poetic inspiration. The stress in either case is quite different. In prayer it is the union through the will which is important, and the substantial increase of faith, hope and charity. In poetry it is the union through the feelings and intellect. But there is this radically common to both, that the soul pierces through the created Nature and cleaves to the Person; it becomes directly acquainted with Christ to whom all Nature identically belongs. St. Ignatius describes the state as "when the soul can love no created thing on the face of the earth *in itself*, but only in the Creator of them all; and when it sheds tears that move it to love of its Lord, either for sorrow at its sins or at the suffering of Christ our Lord, or for something else that leads directly to his service and praise." And this description can be verified in almost any of Hopkins' poems between 1875 and 1879. And please remember again that it is only to Hopkins that the above remarks apply, and not to prayer and poetry in general.

Moreover even in Hopkins' case I do not wish to portray him as leaping to and fro between his pridieu and his desk to jot down apt phrases. There is a distinction of time as well as of emphasis. He tells us himself that after the fine delight, which like St. Ignatius he likens to a stab of flame, has vanished, there must elapse a long period of parturition in which the mind deliberately searches for the patterns of words which it knows already insofar as it knows what they are not.

> Nine months she then, nay years, nine years she long
> Within her wears, bears, cares and moulds the same:
> The widow of an insight lost she lives, with aim
> Now known and hand at work now never wrong.

Once the words are found there is no doubt of their parentage and the poet cannot be fully satisfied with any lesser source of inspiration:

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

It is not necessary, indeed, that this inspiration or consolation should come always in time of prayer or directly from God: it might result from secondary causes in nature whose final outcome from a religious point of view might be good, bad or indifferent.[1] Nevertheless the majority of his poems seem to trace themselves back to a direct intervention of God, and to have their ultimate origin in either consolation or desolation in prayer. The more important ones resulting from desolation will be dealt with later.

But what evidence is there for this identification of consolation with inspiration in Hopkins, or that Hopkins himself so identified them? Well, consider the events. At first he is turning out refined and anaemic verse about St. Dorothy's basket, etc. Then he burns all those, changes entirely his mode of life, and makes a thirty days' retreat. Now, when a poet embraces some system of thought, he frequently begins to disparage poetry by discarding or suborning it. When he falls in love, on the other hand, poetry becomes all the more necessary to him as an outlet for exaltation—or for irony. Both these contrary states result from the Exercises; related however to a single object and making at once for silence and for speech. So with Hopkins there is silence for seven years, but during those seven years he is haunted by a new rhythm. Then an incident taps the source of his inner experiences. He breaks into the first lines of *The Wreck of the Deutschland,*

Thou mastering me . . . .

In that drab little book of the Exercises, which when first lived makes a more profound and marvellous journey than all the three books of Dante, there are certain tremendous moments where the sublime vagabond of Montserrat stays in breathless suspense and tells his followers to stay because the Holy Ghost will here more than elsewhere wish to change their lives. The first of these moments is the realization of one's own finiteness and contingency and all that that implies: how at this very moment I am *being* created, and my thoughts, my loves, my nervous messages have no meaning or existence except as coming and going to and from Him, as when one puts pressure on a torch. "He holds my breath in His hands and all my ways." It was to find a rhythm and diction that would embody this suspended swaying in His creative embrace that Gerard Hopkins' faculties were working during these seven years of silence. How else explain that tremendous heaving stretch greater than anything even of Shakespeare's in its sheer effort, except as a glorious effort of the finite body and mind to compass what it is born for, the Infinite, but cannot in this life achieve?

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[1] Cf. St. Ignatius, *Rules for Discernment of Spirits,* rules 2 and 5.

There comes another moment shortly after, when the soul, biting deep and tasting the squalid pus of sin as against this same Infinite sweetness, holiness and beauty, looks, like Adam, for a place to trail and hide its filthy burden. Then, just in the extreme pitch of hypnotized self-horror, it sees instead of itself GOD MADE MAN upon the cross, made more hideous than any man to look upon by reason of voluntary suffering for those same sins of ours, yet begging not punishment for us, but pity *from* us. It is to the soul just what Gerard Hopkins likens it to, a flash of lightning revelation in a pitch-black storm.

Thou art lightning and love, I found it, a winter and warm.

Not at the throne of the Most High but in the ghetto of human misery which Chirst haunts till the end of time comes the first reconciliation. The abrupt intrusion of humanity asking for pity is a masterpiece of psychology—or rather, since it was the work of a cavalier with no outward experience except of ballrooms and battlefields, it is a flash of God's own Mind; and St. Ignatius obviously expects this to be no mere picture of Christ in the imagination, but that the Spirit of Jesus will draw aside the curtain of phantasm and Himself step through to the soul in consolation. Other than this visitation, which afterwards becomes an invitation, I think there can be no adequate explanation of the poetic thought and dramatic effects of the first ten verses of *The Wreck of the Deutschland*. Naturally there is here and there an impure or artificial image which Hopkins has worked in afterwards to bridge the gaps in inspiration; but because he has called in a sensitive organ to supply an image in default of the higher powers of the soul, it is silly to make that organ the ultimate origin of the whole poem. The fact that he uses it only as an occasional auxiliary is the precise reason that he is a so much greater poet than any of his modern imitators.

> Beyond saying sweet, past telling of tongue
> . . . . . .
> Father and fondler of heart thou hast wrung:
> Hast thy dark descending and most art merciful then.

In the quiet radiance of the shadow of the Eternal Father, not as a wretched sinner but as a joyous son, so ends the First Week of the Exercises and so ends the first part of this poem.

At the beginning of the next week comes the meditation on the Kingship of Christ. It is a formation for conduct and for character rather than a touch upon the inner personality. Of the same kind is its counterpart, the Meditation on Two Standards which comes a little later. Nevertheless the thoughts and images of these two prayers are clearly present at the end of both the first and second part of the poem—and that at a time when the Kingship of Christ was not a common conception at all.

> . . . . but be adored, but be adored King.

> Our King back, oh, upon English souls!
> . . . . our thoughts' chivalry's throng's Lord.

Mea voluntas est subjicere totum mundum, et omnes hostes, et sic intrare in gloriam Patris mei.

> Not a doomsday dazzle in his coming nor dark as he came;
> Kind, but royally reclaiming his own;
> A released shower, let flash to the shire, not a lightning of fire
> hard-hurled.

Christus Dominus noster se sistit in amoeno campo, in loco humili, speciosus et amabilis.

But the second prayer of the second week, the contemplation on the Incarnation, is the one which is most particularly designed to come as an inward inspiration. St. Ignatius goes into more detail over this than almost any other; it was probably a vision to him during his vigil-at-arms at Montserrat. And its effect on Gerard Hopkins must have been proportionately great, because he spends all the rest of this poem in working up to and recapturing it.

The contemplation is a triptych: the wide chequered world in its drugged unheeding round of birth, copulation, death, and the waking up therefrom: above, in light inaccessible the Blessed Trinity looking for some means, some free human will, through whom They can revive their creation; and then back to the world again, narrowing it down and down like a gramophone record, Empire, near East, Palestine, Galilee, Nazareth, till there! alone, a lily among thorns, a sinless virgin takes God into her womb to save the world. Almost involuntarily Gerard Hopkins relives this contemplation in the first part of the poem—

> Be adored among men, God, three-numberèd form . . . .

—and then the ship. The ship is the sinful, unheeding world, "O Father, not under thy feathers," full of crude natural goodness and lovable human weakness. Then the wreck, and one only, a woman, stands straight and hallows God as Father in the confusion. And it was this reincarnation, so to speak, of the Incarnation, this likeness of a maiden to the Maid, that ran through to his marrow and started him off at all on the poem—

> . . . . a lioness arose breasting the babble,
> A prophetess towered in the tumult, a virginal tongue told.

There is no doubt that he is comparing this nun with Our Lady at the Incarnation; he says so explicitly in verse 30, and verse 31 shows Our Lady again, saving the sinful world in spite of itself; while in verse 34 there is a flashing light which obviously comes straight from this same contemplation—

> Now burn, new born to the world,
> Doubled-naturèd name,

The heaven-flung, heart-fleshed, maiden-furled
Miracle-in-Mary-of-flame,
Mid-numbered He in three of the thunder throne.

To anyone who gives the matter proper attention along the lines of these references and quotations the connection between *The Wreck of the Deutschland* and the Spiritual Exercises ought to be beyond question. The poem springs primarily and spontaneously from the intimate experience of the first week and the first half of the second week; with special stress upon the twin mysteries of Creation and Incarnation. Moreover in this great poem are contained the seeds of many of his poems to come. The nature poems of the next few years, however artificially wrought they may be in parts, are in essence cries wrung from him of wonder and delight at how the Incarnation flashes forth Creation as the Son flashes forth the Father—*lumen de lumine*. The cue is given by St. Ignatius' counsel that we should take heed how God dwells in creatures:

Quomodo Deus habitat in creaturis:
In elementis, dans esse;
In plantis, dans vegetare;
In animalibus, dans sentire;
In hominibus, dans intelligere:
Et ita in me dans mihi esse, vivere, sentire, et faciens me intelligere:
Item, faciens me templum Sui cum creatus sim ad similitudinem et imaginem suae Divinae Majestatis.

From the beginning he is led inevitably to Franciscan philosophy, paramountly that of Duns Scotus, which in turn derives through the great Greek Fathers from the Gospel of Saint John. He knows that his whole natural life, physical and mental, as well as supernatural, is only a sharing in the life of Christ's created nature (he describes this as accurately as he can in Poem 37, "Wild air, world-mothering air"). He half experiences, or experiences confusedly, this life-giving nature in his soul, and he tries to complete and clarify this experience in the senses and imagination, according as the Church's prayer to the Holy Ghost ordains: "Accende lumen sensibus." He tries to pierce through the Nature to the Person, to paint Nature in such an inspired yet accurate way that it will flash forth Christ as Christ flashes forth the Father. Hence for the most part he shuns similes as specious short cuts which do not really get there (which probably explains his dissatisfaction with the "May Magnificat") and hopes to find Christ anonymously by describing things as they really are, for Our Lord did not say He was *like* the light, He said, "I AM the Light." But this awesome and fascinating enquiry, though initiated by the Exercises, goes into speculation and therefore beyond the Exercises and beyond the scope of this article. There are later poems, however, which show the Exercises-inspired thought of the "Deutschland" recurring more vividly and maturely after the passage of years. Read the sestet of Poem 39 (August 1885) and compare the description of Christ, the soldier-king, with the words of Christ in St. Ignatius' contemplation: "Qui voluerit venire mecum, debet mecum laborare, ut sequens me in poena, etiam sequatur me in gloria." Read Poem 32, and consider how the dominant picture of the world in black and white would be forced irresistably on the imagination by the Meditation on "Two Standards." But the clearest proof of how the Exercises have grown upon him comes in one of his Irish poems. Compare the struggling pain of,

Thou mastering me,
God, giver of breath and bread,

with the effortless simplicity of,

Thee, God, I come from, to Thee go,
All day long I like fountain flow.

Lines like these, and like the one in the marriage poem, taken in its context,

I to him turn with tears

clearly also disprove the assertion that he was never really at home with God in his prayer. "Thee, God, I come from, to Thee go" approaches, surely, very near to the sublimest ejaculations of the saints—call them mystical or not as you like to interpret that abused word.

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But now, having established as I think beyond question that the Exercises formed, for better or for worse, the very stuff and not merely the accidental channel of Hopkins' poems, the next question arises: Was it for better or for worse?

The accusation that it was for worse rests on the contention that Hopkins' spiritual outlook was too subjective, too morbidly preoccupied with his own progress in perfection, his own doubts and fears about salvation, instead of with the Grandeur of God which ought to put such niggling self-scrutinies into the shade; and this criticism of Hopkins is generalized into a criticism of the disintegrating effect of the Exercises upon post-reformation spirituality. It will be best to recognize at first what there is of truth in this. There is undoubtedly in Hopkins a strain of something narrow and almost morbid. It seems to be a sort of absorption with pain, combined with scrupulosity, a struggling with God as in a sick-room with the blinds down, which is reminiscent of Kierkegaard. There is a hint of it in the opening of *The Wreck of the Deutschland*—"Thou *mastering* me," and it is supposed to come out most noticeably in the "terrible sonnets" towards the end of his life as the expression of frustrated hopes and desires. Before dealing with the "terrible sonnets" there are three things to be said:

(1) There is poem upon poem from the beginning to the end of his published works, from "The world is charged with the grandeur of God" to "Enough! the Resurrection, a heart's clarion!" which show that if there is a strain of scrupulosity in Hopkins it is certainly not the dominant one.

(2) To connect scrupulosity with the subjectivist trend of post-Cartesian thought by way of the "Examination of Conscience" proposed by St. Ignatius is a "gaff" almost too crass to be taken seriously. The "Examination of Conscience" is only a slightly more methodical form of an elementary piece of common sense designed to safeguard not only one's spiritual but even one's temporal advancement, used by Christians from the earliest times as well as by such extravert Deists as Benjamin Franklin. Since conscience is only the emotionless indication of right reason in moral questions, the examining of one's conscience has no con-

nection with any kind of psychoanalytical introspection into one's consciousness. The especial significance of the Examination for Religious is that they have vowed themselves in marriage to Christ Our Lord, and must therefore be careful that that vow does not become undermined. But the Examination can also be usefully applied to correcting slovenly habits of mind and body.

(3) It is possible that Hopkins may have tended to dwell too much on the "Consideration of one's Sins" which comes early in the first week of the Exercises. It is even possible that some directors in giving the Exercises may have encouraged him in this, but that is not likely nor would it have much importance, because a Jesuit priest is to a great extent his own spiritual director, and it is only towards the end of his life that any profound sadness becomes noticeable in Hopkins' poems. But the important thing to note is that the whole scheme of the Exercises militates against sadness, self-scrutiny and subjectivism. The remorse of the first week is drowned in the mercy of God, and in its stead emerge the shining resolves of the second week. After that the eye of the soul is kept exclusively fixed upon Christ in the Gospels. The second half of the second week is devoted to the example of Our Lord in his preaching life, by the villages and roadsides and waters of Galilee. The third week is the Passion. But even the Passion is to be considered not so much as the effect of our sins but as the perfect manifestation of His love for us. Then comes the fourth week, the Risen Life, where scars are turned to radiance and we are bidden to cast off sorrow, think joyous thoughts and see how Christ in perfect joy uses all the playful devices of friendship to console his friends. The effects of these last three weeks are summed up in the words, "Illuminare—Confortare—Transformare." After that comes a contemplation on the Love of God of which it has been said, and the lives and writings of many saints of the Society of Jesus bear it out, that it is capable of lifting a soul to the highest possible point of prayer. Moreover it is in this spirit and in the spirit of the fourth week that those who live by the Exercises are bidden to live; and they are to return to the considerations of the first week only

when it is necessary to offset by their own nothingness the goodness and sweetness of God. And it seems to me that a careful reading of Hopkins' poems shows that if he exceeded these instructions it was not to any very great extent.

Thus, though I admit there was a morbid strain in Hopkins' nature (in whose is there not?) I do not think the "terrible pathos" of the last sonnets is best explained by it. The explanation is that Hopkins, after he had ceased for the most part to find verbal inspiration in the Exercises, did not cease but rather continued more intensely to *live* them. And their effects, increasingly now metamorphosed by his own psychological and physiological states, such as loneliness, sleeplessness, etc., are still profoundly present in his poems, not in strict but in quite remarkable chronological order.

Thus the Public Life of Our Lord (second half of the second week) comes out clearly in the poems during the years after his ordination. He does not write about Christ, in a manner he *is* Christ comforting sinners, and the bugler-boy is a boy Christ, and the farrier is Christ too, and so are all the others, as He said He would be, "in the least of these my brethren." But woe comes on apace.

As in the inner life of every great soul who is striving for the closest possible union with Christ there comes Gethsemane before Olivet, so there came the third week to Gerard. It came to him most overwhelmingly in Ireland. He makes no mention of the Passion; perhaps—there is evidence in the Diaries—he imagined the bodily pain too keenly to speak about it. He does not write about the Agony in the Garden, but in a manner he lives it. It was not the "Dark Night of the Soul" but it was just desolation as St. Ignatius describes it.

> Voco desolationem omne contrarium (consolationi) ut, obtenebrationem animae, turbationem in illa, motionem ad res infimas ac terrenas, inquietudinem variarum agitationum et tentationum, moventem ad diffidentiam, sine spe, sine amore; cum se reperiat anima totam pigram, tepidam, tristem, et veluti separatam a Creatore ac Domino suo.

Previously in his loneliness among men he had had consolation from God, reassuring pledges of his marriage-vow, but now he has desolation. In everything the reverse side is presented. As consolation shaped his rhythm before, so now does desolation. They are still love-poems, but a hopeless, unsatisfied love that turns to bitterness in the mouth. All the signs are there. "Darkness'd soul," says St. Ignatius. And Hopkins says, "Dark heaven's baffling ban" . . . "O what black hours we have spent." "Tumult in the soul": "My cries heave, herds-long." "Self-disgust": "Selfyeast of spirit a dull dough sours." "As it were separation from God": "Cries like dead letters." And the causes? St. Ignatius says, either our own tepidity, or else a mysterious visitation of God, even an attack by the Devil permitted by God to cleanse the soul for Himself.

> Dark heaven's baffling ban bars or hell's spell thwarts.
> God's most deep decree bitter would have me taste.

And the remedies? St. Ignatius says, to stand firmly and endure: "Patience, hard thing!" etc.—and to recall past favours and consider how God is sure to come back soon: "let joy size at God knows when to God knows what; whose smile . . . ," etc.

In these poems it cannot honestly be said that there is any absolute tragedy, any more than there was an absolute tragedy in Gethsemane on Maundy Thursday evening. Gerard knows that it is only "*as it were* (veluti) a separation"; he knows the reason for it, however hurt and baffled at the time he is; and he knows the remedies and employs them. He knows as he knew fourteen years ago, only far more vividly now, that some day he will come to find the Risen Jesus who is now so carefully disguised:

> The keener to come at the comfort for feeling the combating keen.

And we know that it was so. The glorious paean on *The Comfort of the Resurrection* comes after the "terrible sonnets" and even if the joy of that is dimmed by the long wait afterwards for death, we know that his last words were: "I am so happy, I am so happy." I repeat that these sonnets are love-poems in a far deeper sense than his earlier ones. And it is misleading at the least to say that there is "nothing specifically Christian about them." I do not think that in many, if any, "not specifically Christian" writings you will find such hints of the marriage-bond with God-made-Man as in such lines as:

> Brothers and sisters are in Christ not near.
> Mary, mother of us, where is your relief?
> To dearest him that lives, alas! away.

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