

BLACKFRIARS

GERARD MANLEY TUNCKS

Tuncks is a good name. Gerard Manley Tuncks. Poor Tuncks. [*The Note-books and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, p. 32.]

IT is Narcissus who sees in the unrippled water the transfiguration flash back of its liquid clearness. He is like a god, so perfectly is his vision proportioned to his seeing, so uniquely has the element reserved for him a significance which is for him alone. Completely and wholly it is for him, but for the pool he gazes on is this interchange of light and of looks anything less than the end possessed, the entelechy and the consummation of its being? For this it was made, that it should receive this imprint of light from above and so render it. A clarity-in-general become indelibly *this* clarity, uniquely its and his. The word which utters it is a new thing in the scale of creation.

It seems to me that poetry ceased to form itself upon the Liturgy in order to form itself upon the poet's own likeness seen in the mirror of the world. (Or is the statement "simplicist," *a priori*, slick?) Tuncks, then, in his naked individuality, creeps out from Choir to choose between the apple orchards and the wilderness. It has commonly been one or the other, according, perhaps, as the sense of sight in his non-spatial anatomy lies nearer the heart or the intelligence, or to the liver, source of black bile and sombre landscapes. So with his note-book Gerard Manley Tuncks searching the inscapes of clouds and flowers, the ash-tree and "weeds in wheels" for the reflection of his own countenance which is in the eyes of Jesus Christ, but vicariously in "the bluebell I have been looking at. I can tell the beauty of our Lord by it."

Tuncks here is the poet of any period since the liturgical. Gerard Manley Tuncks is Hopkins's own name for himself. But it was an early entry in the note-books.

* * * *

The frontispiece of the book¹ is dandelion, hemlock and ivy drawn in (of all places) Croydon. It has the inscape and patterning in marked degree, but static, that the dynamic structural rhythms of the later sonnets have. In the earlier note-books the poet's marginalia and unpieced gleanings bear more directly on the later Hopkins whom we know than any of the early poems do. There is infinite pains in the finding of epithets for natural phenomena, exhaustive etymologies and analysis of the structural elements of verse. "Poetry is speech framed for contemplation of the mind by the way of hearing" (p. 249). Was there ever such a satisfying definition uttered with comparable economy of syllables? And ("let me spell poet with a little 'p' and perish") the "Essence of pure poetry" is for Hopkins a structural essence. Poetry is "speech framed"; it is not a quality of emotion or a mode of experience. So much should indicate certain dangers in dismissing Hopkins as a romantic. At least it argues that we should seek precisions.

As early as 1865 on the same page as "The butterfly perching in a cindery dusty road and pinching his scarlet valves. Or wagging, one might say"; "Mallowy red of sunset and sunrise clouds," there are signs of the quality and seeming unsuccess of his prayer:

Unclean and seeming unforgiven
My prayers I scarcely call to pray.

A warfare of my lips in truth,
Battling with God, is now my prayer.

Instinctively, too, in these early days he speaks of his love as wounded, showing as do the early poems printed elsewhere that the quality of his early emotional life has something of that sickliness which Keats detected in himself.

* * * *

In contrast to the poets of mood, of emotional nuance and desiderative gesture, his *materia poetica* has that objectivity

¹ *The Note-books and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited with notes and a preface by Humphry Hoase. (Humphrey Milford; Oxford University Press; 25/-.)

BLACKFRIARS

which the senses have and that subjectivity too. For the vision of sense is the vision of Narcissus; vision of nature, yes, but as showing back his own bodiliness, a communication from the world of nature delivering the flavour of self. It is the assimilation of all things to sense, a likening in which the intelligence alone, whose deeper hunger is for identity, can experience the polarity and the irresistible attraction of the *other* (not because it is like to the own self of the intelligence but because it is other and inviolably so). Yet "sense is a kind of reason." True, our senses have their reference to the vegetable man, to growth, appetite, animality, preservation and reproduction, but as we are not only that, not only animals, neither are our senses only such. They are winged with a reasonably clarity, patterned with the inscapes of the world, handmaids of contemplation. They are by Christ set free, but at a price, and into a freedom altogether different from the latria of self that fallen nature left alone will lead them to discover.

There is a weaning, how well the poet knows it, *sicut ablactatus est super matre sua, ita retributio in anima mea*, and there is a rediscovery, how fervently he desires it. A moment in which his prized individuality is not stamped out but given, and returned, yes, literally a hundredfold (if number in such a context can be a literal measure) in the community of the saints. Of Hopkins it would be difficult either to say or to deny that such self-discovery was his by experience. That it was his by the fact of self-surrender is apparent. It does not inform his poetry. His way was more individual and more painful.

For Hopkins it seems that the *soif d'infini*, not at all expressed in abstract terms, being in him a metaphysical but not a metaphysician's thirst, abides always on the side of desire, becoming conscious in a heightening of the intensity of experience. It is the inscape of things instressed by the mind that is the creative tension, but it is the affective will which is the mainspring of his expression. And it is the concrete seized in experience which evokes from him a mode of expression as concrete as sense experience, but tensed and

vitalised by the mind's instress and, perhaps more significantly, the instress of the will.

Vitalized but not generalized. One must add with profound thankfulness: Thank Heaven for that. But there is a something lacking. Not that we should be justified in rounding upon Hopkins for not being the same kind of portentous and universal figure that Vergil was. That critical attitude would be curiously childish. But we do miss in him the attitude of mind of a Catholic, or more precisely Thomist, universality.

Let us try to banish from the concept of universality the merely logical, or at most merely abstract, idea of generalization. It is the quality of a generalization to offer to the mind a pseudo-objective substitute for reality and for experience. It is the quality of universality in thought to set the mind free of the true objectivity of the real (with that sense of freedom which is in the phrase "the freedom of the city") and consequently set the whole world free *in us* to be what God makes it, and not merely to provide instances to our theories. To the Thomist it is always a greater happiness to know that good exists than to know that he could explain it whether it existed or not. And this is to say that contemplation is better than explanation, and is better even than the love which leads to it. For Hopkins, following Scotus in this, love is better than contemplation; love which particularizes, individualizes, isolates, experience foredrawing the world of experience and, ultimately, the person of Jesus Christ to a self-reference and evoking a personal, individual, and in some sense isolated response. *Dilectus meus mihi*. Not that the way of individual love and desire is in any sense opposed to the liberty of contemplation and the universality of intelligence. There is a valid contrast and the question is one of emphasis and predominance. The words Hopkins uses in developing his psychology of the contemplation of natural phenomena (the psychology which underlies his poetic creation, and of which some development may be traced in this book), particularly the word "instress," indicate in him a dwelling on the value of sheer effort in the will's response, and of effort rather particularized in its expression than universalized in its object. This is, I suppose, what has been

BLACKFRIARS

called in *Colosseum* Hopkin's individualism and subjectivism. I have merely named his quality individual. If you want an "ism" for him the best is voluntarism, for that lies nearer his deeper beliefs.

It may be remarked in passing that the principles of a truly universal philosophy do not "characterize" as do, apparently, those of a contemporary political creed. It is possible to say without disparagement that Hopkins was not a Thomist poet any more than the bluebell in which he contemplated the beauty of Christ was a Thomist bluebell. The epithet could never be anything but an improper one. To say that he was a Scotist poet in the same sense as Stephen Spender is a Communist one would probably be a little unkind to Scotus but nevertheless gives some hint of the creative tension which characterizes his work. The same may perhaps be said of the qualification "Jesuit." The deepening of his psychological theories, theories which bear most intimately on the mode of his observation and poetic expression, which may be followed in the notes on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius is in this connection peculiarly suggestive.²

Considering him again with the aid of the light shed by the present book not as an exponent of the Church's catholicity but as an individual witness to Christ, it is possible to recognize some effects of a development in which his life as a poet is not unrelated to his life as a Jesuit. It is a long step from

O feel-of-primrose hands, O feet
That want the yield of plushy sward,
But you shall walk the golden street
And you unhouse and house the Lord.

to

I am gall, I am heartburn. God's most deep decree
Bitter would have me taste: my taste was me;
Bones built in me, flesh filled, blood brimmed the curse.
Selfyeast of spirit a dull dough sours. I see
The lost are like this, and their scourge to be
As I am mine, their sweating selves; but worse.

² Cf. an article on the significance of the Spiritual Exercises in the life and poetry of Hopkins by Christopher Devlin, S.J., in the December, 1935, *BLACKFRIARS*.

but the second is the later development of the same theme as the first. Starting from that beginning we may consider that other developments were possible, but the logical category of possibility and the individual vocation of a living man on the lips of Christ are two different things. For Hopkins it is apparent that the step involved the pruning of a rich sensuality to the dictates of the naked will in love with Christ, and always aware, sometimes distressingly, of the *vulnera naturae*. And if we are to judge of this development as charity should teach us to judge, it is apparent that the bitterness of the flavour of self which so startles us in the "terrible sonnets" is not altogether a different flavour from that our Lord drank in the Garden. Speaking of the life of grace Hopkins says: "It is as if a man said: This is Christ playing at me and me playing at Christ, only that it is no play but truth; That is Christ *being me* and me being Christ."

It is at least manifest that the poetry of what may be called romantic sensuality, following the line of its own development towards some ultimate solution, finds one of two things: the end wall of a blind alley as in Joyce or the crucifix as in Hopkins. After that, with the accession of further light, there may be freedom and order, but the immediate thing is the cross. And it is difficult to say how much of human suffering is due to the fire which consumes our impurities, how much to the fire which, through the sacrifice of Christ, unites us to God.

* * * *

Generous recognition is due to the sympathetic and orderly understanding with which the book has been edited. In fact the mass of inaccessible information garnered into the notes at the end of the book is a marvel of literary sleuthing. In addition to furnishing fresh materials for criticism the notebooks abound with examples of a prose not to be matched elsewhere. The translation from St. John Chrysostom is a gem.

BERNARD KELLY.