THE LETTERS OF FATHER HOPKINS[1]

THESE letters have already been much reviewed; I briefly endorse, and need not repeat in detail, the well-deserved compliments which have been paid to their editor and their publishers. I can best show my sense of the book's importance by treating some questions which a first reading has suggested.

It is natural to refer at once to those passages in the letters which discuss the technique of poetry, and especially the technique of Father Hopkins himself. Many readers, I think, have found obscurities in the author's preface to his poems; and here some of the letters of Dixon are of great help. It is good, for instance, to have the vague reference to nursery rhymes supplemented by an analysis of *Ding Dong Bell.* Two unsatisfactory things remain. One is the use of the name 'counterpoint' for inversion of accent—this is hardly a difficulty, but it is an abuse of terms. The other is really a difficulty—an inconsistency in the use of the very important term 'sprung rhythm.' In one letter Hopkins says: 'This then is the essence of sprung rhythm; *one stress makes one foot,* no matter how many or few the syllables'; later he says: 'The word Sprung which I use for this rhythm means something like *abrupt* and applies by rights only where one stress follows another running, without syllable between.' The rhythm of the line

> The Simon Peter of a soul! to the blast

will be sprung in the first sense, not in the second. And it is said more than once that if 'common rhythm' has its accents inverted throughout it becomes sprung rhythm. Yet surely such lines as Shakespeare's

> Never, never, never, never, never,

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[1] *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges: The Correspondence of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Richard Watson Dixon.* Edited by Claude Colleer Abbott. (Humphrey Milford; two volumes, 30/-.)

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and Keats'

> Thea! Thea! Thea! where is Saturn?

are in common rhythm rather than sprung; for though the movement has changed from rising to falling, the lines are still strictly measured by feet of two syllables.

Bridges in his edition of the poems did not discuss these questions—I suppose because he had by this time developed his own theory as expounded in *Milton's Prosody,* its essence being the distinction between syllabic verse, with a fixed number of syllables and variable accents, and accentual verse, with a fixed number of accents and a variable number of syllables. Although this theory owed a great deal to Hopkins, it emphasized and opposed points which Hopkins had not, and there was a certain intersection of terms which would have made exposition tedious. Patmore was bewildered by Hopkins' experiments, not, I think, because he was insensitive—the *Essay on English Metrical Law* is as sensitive and as important as Bridges' book—but because he had studied metrical questions with a different emphasis. A Thomist might find it easier to explain Scholasticism to an intelligent young man who accepted the terms fresh as he heard them than to a mature philosopher who was thinking in terms of Kant.

In the free use of inverted accents Hopkins had more authority than perhaps he knew, for although in his earlier days he seems to have read much and in several languages, he later read less and less and also lacked books. In the published letters there is no mention of either Donne or Crashaw, both of whom used this technique, though with different effect. Donne, I think, was unhappy in these experiments, of which Jonson remarked crisply that 'Donne, for not keeping of accent, deserved hanging'; but many of Crashaw's examples seem to me both fine in themselves and remarkably like Hopkins in tone, for instance—

> Look up, languishing soul! Lo where the fair
> Badge of thy faith calls back thy care.

But a more important precedent is the usage of Italian

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poetry, where very free inversion of accent is commoner than it has ever been in English. And although in this as in other things Dante is the supreme master, the tradition is continuous; Milton must have found it in Petrarch and Tasso also, and it is maintained afterwards through Metastasio and Leopardi to our own day. No doubt it was this tradition, not merely Dante's example, which influenced Milton; and as long ago as 1855 Thomas Keightley wrote in proof of this a most interesting essay on Milton's verse, anticipating Bridges at many points and with a much fuller documentation.

Hopkins' own interest in the theory of verse has led me into this metrical excursion; the same interest seems to have disguised both from him and from Bridges the almost immense distance which separates them as poets. Even in the sensuous elements of verse they are poles apart. Bridges had a phonetician's ear, which some better poets had not; but he scarcely achieved more than a superficial grace of rhythm and an elegant play of vowels and consonants. Hopkins had the ear of a creative poet; his rhythms have an essential life and some of his phrases have that rare perfection of sound which is quite beyond analysis; 'fretty chervil' is one of them; it stands with Shakespeare's 'sea sorrow' and 'Dis's wagon' and with the 'dolphin coral' of Keats. Add to this his reserves of virility and intellectual strength, and Bridges beside him 'outshapes but small.'

If Bridges now appears as a minor poet, Dixon appears as scarcely a poet at all; yet his letters are valuable. They are written almost as well as Hopkins' own, they contain excellent criticism, and they reveal the writer as a most lovable man. Hopkins' letters to both these friends contain some detailed comments on their verse which are not of great interest; but most often his discussion even of particular points broadens into general criticism. His defence of 'obvious' rhymes (against Bridges, who called them 'vulgar') is I think unanswerable; and his objections to archaism are telling, at least as arguments *ad hominem*—archaism is dangerous as a principle, but it seems to me to have been sometimes a great success, for instance in much

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Greek verse and prose, and in some passages of Hardy, who used very old and very modern words with equal assurance.

Most of Hopkins' literary judgments have well survived changing fashions. He defended Dryden against Bridges. He preferred Stevenson to Scott and greatly admired Hardy. He has a good passage on Browning.

'He has a great deal of what came in with Kingsley and the Broad Church School, a way of talking (and making his people talk) with the air and spirit of a man bouncing up from table with his mouth full of bread and cheese and saying that he meant to stand no blasted nonsense. There is a whole volume of Kingsley's essays which is all a kind of munch and a not standing of any blasted nonsense from cover to cover. Do you know what I mean? The *Flight of the Duchess*, with the repetition of "my friend," is in this vein. Now this is *one* mood or vein of human nature, but they would have it all and look at all human nature through it. And Tennyson in his later works has been carried away with their dissimulation.'

Hopkins will not allow his correspondents to simplify judgement by confusing the artist and man or the good and bad in the artist. He admired Milton above all poets, but in reply to a phrase of Bridges he says quite simply, 'Don't like what you say of Milton; I think he was a very bad man.' Two letters to Patmore (quoted in Father Lahey's *Life*) show his austere mind sifting sympathetically the moral and intellectual qualities of Keats. Though he has much to say against Tennyson, he protests when Dixon calls him 'a great outsider' and praises the 'chryselephantine style.' He must have suffered more than most readers from Wordsworth's imperfect technique and misty theology, but he 'has it out' with Dixon when the great *Ode* is belittled.

'There have been in all history a few, a very few men, whom common repute, even where it did not trust them, has treated as having had something happen to them that does not happen to other men, as having *seen something*, whatever that really was. Plato is the most famous of these.

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Or to put it as it seems to me I must somewhere have written to you or to somebody, human nature in these men saw something, got a shock; wavers in opinion, looking back, whether there was anything in it or no; but is in a tremble ever since. Now what Wordsworthians mean is, what would seem to be the growing mind of the English speaking world and may perhaps come to be that of the world at large—is that in Wordsworth when he wrote that ode human nature got another of these shocks, and the tremble from it is spreading. This opinion I do strongly share; I am, ever since I knew the ode, in that tremble.'

Readers of the poems and *Life* already know of Hopkins' great interest in music. The letters give many details of his baffled efforts to learn the theory of music, and the editor has provided welcome reproductions of a few of his compositions; it is true that with one exception—*Fallen Rain*—they are disappointing, but it is right that specimens should be published. (I wish Beckford's editors had satisfied curiosity in the same way.) And one does sympathize completely with Hopkins' bewilderment at the harmony manuals of his time. 'I took to counterpoint not for itself, but as the solid foundation of harmony. But I soon began to suspect it was only an invention of theorists and a would-be or fancy music, for what is written in it? Not even the preludes to Bach's fugues . . . The rules are in smithereens; then *what* is in true counterpoint?' Hopkins would have rejoiced in the lucid essays of Tovey and Morris, whose criticisms he so closely anticipated. 'The rules of counterpoint,' says Morris on the Victorian manuals, 'are found to have no connection with musical composition as practised in the sixteenth century. Who invented them, goodness only knows. What, then, are we going to do? Follow Byrd and Palestrina, or follow Mr. Rockstro and Professor Prout?' But Hopkins had no better guides than Rockstro and Stainer, and longed in vain for editions of the great polyphonists. Purcell was his favourite composer, and his feeling for Handel is orthodox: 'I heard a piece of an organ-recital ending with a chorus

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by Handel; it was as if a mighty besom swept away so much dust and chaff.'

No drawings of Hopkins have at present been reproduced beyond the beautiful heading to the *Vision of the Mermaids* (in a separate and limited edition); perhaps something may yet be done. References in the letters to drawing and painting are mostly topical, but there is one notable judgement. 'The age of Raphael and Michelangelo was in a decadence and its excellence is technical. Everything after Giotto is decadent in form, though advancing in execution.'

There remain the much-debated questions of the meaning of the 'terrible sonnets' and of the 'struggle between priest and poet' and its limitation of Hopkins' work. I resist the temptation to write at large on the first question. We whose privilege it is to share Father Hopkins' faith find his theology and his experience traditional; so will anyone whose reading includes the spiritual classics. Certain admirers of Hopkins have improvised theories of his spiritual life in complete ignorance of his spiritual ancestry; we can do nothing for them until they consult the evidence.

It is easier to reply at once to the complaint that Hopkins' vocation curtailed his output of poetry. Doubtless it did; but it could not have been otherwise unless Hopkins had been another man. For twenty years Milton deserted poetry in favour of public activities whose beneficence I doubt; had he remained at home writing a lyric every day, his poetical works might have swelled to the size of Wordsworth's, but *Samson* would not have been among them; and therefore I cannot repine. Hopkins' greatest utterances, like Milton's, are the fruits of great silence. Sometimes the experience of poets has been quite fruitless to posterity; Keats' passion for Fanny Brawne did not produce a single great poem. In general, such things are accepted as inevitable, a poet's politics or love affairs being conventionally within his day's work. Why, then, should a religious vocation excite so peculiar a protest?

Bridges and Professor Abbott reveal a habit of thought

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forbidding calm judgment in the matter. The nostrils' 'relish of incense,' writes Bridges solemnly in his edition of the poems, is a perversion of human feeling; besides, he argues in a letter, Italian Catholics spit (and Hopkins provides the perfect answer). Professor Abbott says of Bridges: 'He had, and rightly, a profound distrust of the Society of Jesus'—though I should add that his note on the 'brilliant and ill-starred' Campion is charity itself. Both editors, I feel, might have recited without a smile my favourite passage from *Barnaby Rudge*: 'Repairing to a religious establishment, known throughout Europe for the rigour and severity of its discipline . . . he took the vows which thenceforth shut him out from nature and his kind, and after a few remorseful years was buried in its gloomy cloisters.'

'Poetry,' writes Professor Abbott, 'is in itself a religion.' 'If we care for fine verses,' wrote Hopkins, 'how much more for a noble life?' Here opinion divides; there stand with Hopkins many great artists of other creeds who believed nevertheless that there is a hierarchy of things in which art is not highest—among them Plato and Milton, Virgil who wished to forsake poetry and follow philosophy, Aeschylus who in his epitaph said only that he was an Athenian who fought at Marathon. Father Hopkins had no such field to boast of, and he wrote himself no epitaph; but as one reads him again and remembers the face so much like Southwell's, it seems already written:

> Yet God (that hews mountain and continent,
> Earth, all, out; who, with trickling increment,
> Veins violets and tall trees makes more and more)
> Could crowd career with conquest while there went
> Those years and years by of world without event
> That in Majorca Alfonso watched the door.

W. H. SHEWRING.

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