

## THE JOY OF CHASTITY

IN THE POETRY OF GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

THAT misconception which interpreted the moderative virtues as habitual repressions only, seems to be vanishing in many significant quarters from the modern mind; and it will now be perhaps very largely conceded that chastity and temperance may possess other vital elements than an automatic negation of corporal pleasures. It is in proportion as these vital elements are understood that Gerard Hopkins will be appreciated, for they are the integrating factors of his great sensitive and poetic powers.

*Castitas dupliciter sumitur: . . . . et metaphorice . . . . pro moderatione delectationis quae oritur ex conjunctione mentis ad objectum.* Moderation, here, as always, is the operative word, and it is significant of the times we live in that it should at once suggest, not conformity to order and right reason, a vital use informed by the intelligence, but a less than full use. But rightly a use conformable to reason is a full use *par excellence*, not only on the part of the intelligence which vindicates its proper activity, but also on the part of the thing used, be that the erotic faculty or the poetic sensibility, which, by direction towards its proper end, gains power and does not lose it, gains joy also and does not lose it; because the intelligence alone can use it according to the true nature of its being. It is arguable that a man unchaste and disbelieving in the principles by which chastity is a true virtue may be wider and more vehement in his pleasures than a chaste man, but he is denied the joy of the chaste man, to which pleasure is but fuel, because he has set his senses to war against the real nature both of his mind and of the pleasures involved.

It is this joy of chastity that concerns us in considering the fundamental nature of Hopkins's poetry, for the distinction between pleasure and joy is exactly the distinction between a great deal of Keats and Hopkins's most characteristic work.

*Delectatio quae oritur ex conjunctione mentis ad objectum.* The delight of the sense in pleasurable sensation is a preliminary and a bait to the delight of the mind in its known object. To swallow the bait and refuse the hook is a sensualism from which modern poetry is by no means free. Chastity in poetry is a vitalising of sensation by the intelligence. Look for chastity where there is most life.

So much by way of preamble, that may be made clear by a right reading of some few of Hopkins's poems. *The Windhover*, his own first choice which he dedicated, 'To Christ our Lord,' exemplifies three principles of his manner of creation, his intensely poetic sensibility, the ride and mastery of his intelligence, the fecundating of sensation into further intensity by the intellectual spark. These in terms of technique are the astounding onomatopoeic power of his words and rhythm, the essentially dramatic climatic point (below on the word, 'buckle'), and the fusion of profound intelligibility with increased sensible beauty in the denouement.

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-  
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his  
riding

Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding  
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing  
In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,

As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend : the hurl and  
gliding

Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding  
Stirred for a bird,—the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here  
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion  
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

No wonder of it : sheer plod makes plough down sillion  
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,  
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.

Father Lahey has rightly said that the whole sonnet hangs like a pendant from the world 'Buckle.' The significance which the drive of meaning explodes from this

homely word is staggering. Buckle = buckle to my intelligence, burst from potential intelligibility into the act of intellection in which the mind and its object are one. Then the mind, as by right of conquest possessing the object in its intelligible being, holds power over the fecundity of all its sensible properties. But how is this buckling brought about? ' . . . sheer plod makes plough down sillion Shine,' . . . clearly by passing from its own proper potentiality to its own proper act, for it is by their proper act that things are intelligible. So the plough perfects not only its own functional nature in the act of ploughing, but also its intelligibility by reason of it. Hopkins bears out this interpretation in these lines from another sonnet:

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;  
 As tumbled over rim in roundy wells  
 Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's  
 Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;  
 Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:  
 Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;  
 Selves—goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,  
 Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*

The italics are his.

So far the thesis would seem clear, and what has here been called the joy of chastity in Hopkins would seem nothing more than the reinstatement of the intelligence in its mastery of the most subtle of human arts. Were this the whole truth, then another word would have been better than chastity. *Castitas a castigando dicitur*. Oh, there is evidence enough of this!

The poet necessarily seeks from his art a simultaneous joy of the intelligence and the senses; he lays claim to that integrity which is the condition of the earthly paradise. But we carry ancient wounds, and to that paradise there is no road back. Meanwhile the intolerable crags of Parnassus appal with their very spiritual aridity, and the primrose path of the passions has become a waste land. There would seem to be nothing for the poet to do but despair.

## BLACKFRIARS

. . . . nor mark  
Is any of him at all so stark  
But vastness blurs and time beats level. Enough! the Resur-  
rection,  
A heart's clarion! Away grief's gasping, joyless days, dejection.  
Across my foundering deck shone  
A beacon, an eternal beam. Flesh fade, and mortal trash  
Fall to the residuary worm; world's wildfire, leave but ash:  
In a flash, at a trumpet crash,  
I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and  
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal  
diamond,  
Is immortal diamond.

This is the only tolerable, the only possible answer to the modern poetic dilemma. It is not an easy answer. *Castitas a castigando dicitur*. The logical sequence of its application may be felt by reading in this order, *The Blessed Virgin Compared to the Air We Breathe*, *To What Serves Mortal Beauty*, the so-called terrible sonnets in the order in which they are printed, and *The Windhover*. The secret is that the crucifix has its work to do between the eye and its delight, between the mind and its truth. This done, Hopkins had the right to say, 'God's utterance of Himself in Himself is God the Word, outside Himself is this world. This world then is word, expression, news, of God. Therefore its end, its purpose, its purport, its meaning, is God, and its life or work to name and praise Him.'

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