

FINE, DULL, BEAUTIFUL<sup>1</sup>

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THE last of Gerard Manley Hopkins's writing is an unfinished note, made during a retreat in Dublin, on the wedding feast at Cana: 'There has been no stint, but there has been an unwise order in the serving'. It might stand, Father Devlin suggests, 'for posterity's estimate of him as well as the steward's of the wine'. For that matter it might stand for the two volumes that now complete the gathering together of all the fragments of Hopkins's writing. Rarely can a poet's papers have been edited with such care, and at first one wonders at the industry that has been devoted to editing material which is often trivial and even tedious. Simply as an editorial achievement, the work of the late Humphry House (completed by Mr Graham Storey) and of Father Devlin will surely remain of classic importance. Here, exactly ordered and sympathetically annotated, is all the detailed record that remains of Hopkins's curiosity about words or weather ('Sept. 17. Dull. Sept. 18. Cold. Sept. 19. Dull, I think.'), of doubts and decisions (usually cryptically indicated), with often penetrating glimpses at the world that was his—Oxford, holiday journeys, Jesuit houses. Unfair, then, to say that much in both these books is unimportant. In themselves the diary entries and the retreat notes, the undergraduate essays and the sermons, are hardly likely to earn for Hopkins a new fame. There is little that distinguishes much of them from the papers of any scholarly priest of his period—and there were many—who had lived in Oxford during the years after Newman's conversion and who shared the taste of the time for botany, country walks, music and ecclesiology. What matters, of course, is the light that is thrown on his poetry by opening the door on what is, so to say, the lumber-room of his mind and imagination.

The *Journals and Papers* consists of early note-books containing fragmentary diaries (1862-6), undergraduate essays, a journal (1866-75), lecture notes on Rhetoric and appendices on Hopkins's drawings (of which thirty-three are reproduced), his music

<sup>1</sup> *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. Edited by Humphry House. Completed by Graham Storey. (Oxford University Press, 63s.)

*The Sermons and Devotional Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. Edited by Christopher Devlin, S.J. (Oxford University Press, 42s.)

(with numerous quotations), his philological notes, and a complete catalogue of Hopkins manuscripts at Campion Hall. The meticulousness of the editing may be gathered from the fact that editorial notes extend to nearly half the 580 pages of this admirably arranged book. Humphrey House had originally edited Hopkins's note-books and papers in 1937, but since then much new material has been discovered. It was as recently as 1947 that three additional journal note-books were discovered at Farm Street, and the death of Hopkins's last surviving brother in 1952 made available many new letters, sketches and papers of every kind. It was decided to divide the labour of editing the papers (the letters of course had already been edited by Professor Abbott): House was to deal with the secular papers, and Father Devlin with the religious writings. After House's death in 1955, Mr Graham Storey completed the first book, and in the meantime Father Devlin prepared the spiritual writings, now published for the first time and consisting of four sets of sermons (preached at Oxford, Bedford Leigh and Liverpool), commentaries on the *Spiritual Exercises* and some 'isolated discourses and private notes'.

It used to be assumed, and Robert Bridges (who edited the first edition of the *Poems*) seemed to lend his authority to the view, that Hopkins was unhappy as a Jesuit and that his religious life inevitably restricted his freedom as a poet. The imposing series of studies on Hopkins (and particularly Professor Gardner's work) has by this sufficiently disproved what was at best a crude simplification, showing little understanding of the element of sensitive scrupulosity that was inherent in Hopkins and was certainly not created by the discipline of religious life. It is there very early, and the first entry in the diaries is a curious piece of self-analysis for a schoolboy. ('I told him that he might find many friends more liberal than I had been but few indeed who would make the same sacrifice I had; but I could not get him to see it.') The journals rarely specify the obsessive theme of motive, but with the assumption of the rule of Jesuit life Hopkins was to find in the Ignatian analysis (as in the 'Rules for the Discernment of Spirits') a formulation of moral choice to which we may suppose him in any case to be naturally drawn. Father Devlin has emphasized in an article in this journal<sup>2</sup> how closely one can trace the charac-

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Devlin, S.J., *The Ignatian inspiration of Gerard Hopkins*. BLACKFRIARS, December 1935, pp. 887-900.

teristic Ignatian themes in the very structure of his poetry. His extreme sensibility, which is so apparent in the *Letters*, is not merely the result of the griefs and disappointments of his life as a religious. These were real enough, but the whole cast of his mind, it is apparent from the start, was inordinately subtle and quick to respond to the slightest touch of pleasure or pain. To quote the 'terrible' sonnets in any other context than that of a spiritual agony which he experiences but *accepts*, is to fail to see the particular genius of Hopkins as a poet for whom the whole of human experience is charged with the presence of God: in darkness no less than in light.

The curiosity that records so precisely the 'fine, soft round curdled clouds bathed with fleshy rose-colour in wedges' or 'a bright sliver-tackled waterfall parted into slender shanks' or 'the skeleton inscape of a spray-end of ash' has, of course, its spiritual counterpart. The drawings, meticulous and somehow frozen, of clouds and flowers and Gothic tracery, express that exact anxiety, striving for the answer, striving too hard, which made his preaching apparently so unsuccessful. His sermons indeed have echoes of the sort of splendour one would expect. Thus, 'This life is night, it is a night, it is a dark time. It is so because the truth of things is either dimly seen or not seen at all. The thoughts in men's hearts are dark, they are not seen, because this life is night. One man is in God's grace, another is in sin, but they look alike, for life is night and all things are alike in the dark. Good is done but is unspoken of and unrewarded, because this life is night; evil is done but is unsuspected and unpunished, because this life is night.' But the imperative note is absent: some gap seems to lie between preacher and hearer. He worries away at the idea he has, sees it too subtly as having implications as amazing if as unsuspected as his beloved flowers. ('The bluebells in your hand baffle you with their inscape, made to every sense: if you draw your fingers through them they are lodged and struggle with a shock of wet heads; the long stalks rub and click and flatten to a fan on one another like your fingers themselves would when you passed your palms hard across one another, making a brittle rub and jostle like the noise of a hurdle strained by leaning against.'))

Yet there is much that is moving in the efforts he makes, as in a sermon preached at Bedford Leigh on drunkenness (a subject one suspects to have been suggested by his Rector). It is awkward, it

never seems to flow. ('Nay, it breaks home quite up, breaks the bond that God fastens, what he has joined it puts asunder, wife runs from drunken husband or husband from drunken wife.') In his more personal spiritual writings he is only concerned with his own enlightenment, and the notes on the *Spiritual Exercises* are to that extent freer, though their interest to those unfamiliar with Jesuit spirituality will be slight. Father Devlin has already written extensively on the affinity between Scotus's thought and that of Hopkins, and a useful appendix to his book summarizes the influence of the Subtle Doctor. In particular, Scotus's theory of the Incarnation is seen to have had a profound importance for Hopkins's own spiritual perception, and so for its poetic expression. But, quite apart from any particular teaching of Scotus (and Father Devlin has interesting things to say about Scotus's incarnational theories even in relation to the problem of redemption and possible life on other planets!), it was perhaps the whole turn and accent of the Franciscan Doctor's mind that had a special appeal for Hopkins. It would be foolish to overestimate the 'subtle' label, but it is precisely the speculative, not to say hair-splitting, delicacy of Scotus's teaching—its almost scepticism—that finds a ready echo in Hopkins's own understanding of created reality. There is perhaps not such a gulf after all between the early questioning and cataloguing and the mature speculations on the Fall.

Now that Gerard Manley Hopkins is so securely enshrined in whatever pantheons exist for poets, it is perhaps a blessing that these two volumes, with all their clutter of trivial odds-and-ends, should appear to remind us of the Victorian priest. For in so many respects Hopkins, despite the astounding invention of his poetry and his almost prodigal imaginative daring, remains deeply rooted in his own time and place. Through all the hundreds of meticulous notes supplied by the energy and erudition of the editors there runs a steady thread of Victorian nostalgia: the professional comfort of his father's house in Hampstead; the monstrous breakfast-parties at Oxford; the chilly Northern presbyteries; the English gentleman looking at birds, looking at flowers, looking at the Welsh. For Hopkins's poetry, however supremely it transcends the circumstances of time and a place, springs from the world he knew and saw and, we may say, saw through to God.