

Gerard Manley Hopkins, A Life—by Paul Mariani ( New York: Viking, 2008)

I have been re-reading and, indeed, praying Gerard Manley Hopkins' poems these last days , under the spell of my metaphorically imbibing Paul Mariani's new biography of the Jesuit poet. I realize that Hopkins is not everyone's cup of tea, either as a poet or a person. Hopkins' poems can ,sometimes seem, in his own words:" works of infinite, of over-great contrivance". They can be dense and, in some lines, hard to cipher. His close friend, the poet laureate Robert Bridges ( who eventually published Hopkins' poems, some twenty-five years after Hopkins died) dubbed them as Pettotaus—a Greek word meaning "unusual, remarkable and over subtle."

By any yardstick, Hopkins, as a person, was quite eccentric, often anguished and depressed, even almost suicidal toward the end.. He died tragically young at 44 years of typhus in Ireland. He felt himself a sort of exile or stranger on earth. He engaged in strong ascetical practices ( destroying his extant poems when he entered the Jesuits). By ordinary accounting, his Jesuit ministry to Irish exile communities in parishes in Glasgow and Liverpool or, later, as a Professor of Classics in Dublin, were not conspicuous successes. He himself, toward the end of his life, could write in a dark sonnet:

“ Birds build—but not I build; no, but strain, Time's eunuch, and not breed one work that wakes. Mine, o thou Lord of life, send my roots rain”

Yet, by any sober reckoning, Hopkins was a stunningly original poet, the greatest religious poet of the nineteenth century and ranking with John Donne, George Herbert, John Milton and T.S. Elliot as the greatest religious poets in the English language. Hopkins' innovative new metric rhythm for poetry ( what he called ' sprung rhythm', based on a word stress) stands out as daringly original . He inspired many twentieth

century great poets, such as Hart Crane, John Berryman, Robert Lowell, Seamus Heaney. Hart Crane said, upon first reading Hopkins, that his words “ come so near a transfiguration into pure musical notation—at the same time retaining every minute literal signification!—What daring!”

Hopkins is also a poet for ecological sensibility. “ What would the world be, once bereft of wet and wildness? ”, he once asked. Also, although he knew, as one of his most famous poems puts it, that “ The world is charged with the grandeur of God. It will flame out, like shining from shook foil; it gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil crushed.”-- yet he laments that generations have trod, have trod and seared the world, such that “ the soil is bare now”. Even those who might be put off by some of the more dense poems of Hopkins can easily resonate with his ecological poems: *God’s Grandeur*; *Spring*; *The Windhover*; *Pied Beauty*; *Hurrahing in Harvest*. Writing in his journal once, Hopkins noted: “ I do not think I have ever seen anything more beautiful than the bluebell I have been looking at. I know the beauty of the Lord by it”.

Hopkins, tutored out of tune with much of nineteenth century Catholic thought by Duns Scotus, was enamored by haecceitas—the utter thisness of things, as revelatory of God. As Hopkins puts it in his poem, Pied Beauty ,giving glory to God for dappled things: “ All things counter, original, spare, strange; Whatever is fickle, freckled ( who knows how ?) With swift, slow; sweet, sour, adazzle, dim; He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change: Praise him”. Like Scotus, he saw the incarnation as continuing, such that “ Christ plays in ten thousand places, lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his, to the Father through the features of men’s faces” So, Hopkins sought to help us to see what he called, borrowing the idea from Scotus, inscape: the spiritual value of each spare and

different and incomparable thing, as an introduction to God. Writing in his journal, while making the thirty-day retreat, on the Ignatian Contemplation of the Love of God, Hopkins notes: “ All things, therefore, are charged with love, are charged with God and if we know how to touch them, give off sparks, and take fire, yield drops and flow, ring and tell of him”.

There have been other relatively recent biographies of Hopkins. Robert Martin’s, Gerard M. Hopkins: A Very Private Life ( Harper Collins, 1991) presented an essentially Freudian account of an anxious and tortured Hopkins, wracked by guilt and consumed by his repressed homo-erotic desires. Martin seemed to miss that, besides the dark sonnets, Hopkins had a perennially playful and witty side, as well. Norman White’s, Hopkins: A Literary Biography ( Oxford University Press, 1995), brilliantly recreates the milieu of Victorian Oxford and late nineteenth century Ireland. White, however, was not terribly religiously musical or sensitive. The virtue of the Mariani life ( it might have better been sub-titled, “ a spiritual biography”) is that Mariani is himself a poet, himself a believing Catholic, closely attuned to Jesuit life (Mariani’s son, Paul, is a Jesuit priest of the California Province).A few years ago Mariani, himself, made a thirty day retreat ( cf. his On Thirty Days Retreat With the Exercises of Saint Ignatius Viking, 2002). He has spent most of his adult life consumed with Hopkins. Mariani’s doctoral dissertation became his first book, A Commentary on the Complete Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins ( Cornell University Press, 1970). One reviewer of the biography said that Mariani almost channeled the persona of Hopkins in his book.

Despite his deep depressions and external failures, Hopkins did stay true to his poetic vocation. His friend Canon Richard Dixon ( the only poet in Hopkins’ time who

thought he must be published) once said to Hopkins that, perhaps, his poetry was his essential vocation as a Jesuit. Hopkins himself, wary of mortal fame, seems to have agreed at his core. As he wrote in one poem: “ 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.”. By any sober reckoning of Hopkins’ life, in the end it must be said that it was for his poetry that he came. Perhaps Hopkins would have been a more fecund poet, if he had not become a Jesuit. He would have, however, been a different poet entirely, lacking the religious vision driving the poetry.

What to learn, spiritually, from such an unusual man ? From a tragic life ? From one who knew no external vindications., who had to be content, not with fame, but with the one exacting critic of his poetry, Christ ? Of someone who, in deep desolation in his exile in Ireland, could speak of his cries in prayer being “ like dead letters, sent to dearest him, that lives, alas! Away.” However unlike ours Hopkins’ life and gifts, in his story we see the story of any human who faces bravely, in Mariani’s words, “ into the intense fire surrounding the face of God, in praise as in anguish, without flinching or drawing back.” Or as one reviewer of Mariani’s book ( Gale Swiontkowski in America) put it: “ We try to remain standing as best we can; we try to understand the power and the mystery confronting us as best we can; and eventually, hopefully, we learn to revalue our weakness and incompleteness as our strengths. In this sense, we are all sick and anguished—and all the more grateful to Hopkins for helping us to feel our way beyond the limitations inherent in human mortality to the life giving’ juice’ and ‘ joy’ of this world.”