

Hopkins, Gerard Manley (1844–1889)

Poet, was born on 28 July 1844 at 87 The Grove, Stratford, London, eldest of the nine children of Manley Hopkins (1818–1897), average adjuster in marine insurance and consul-general in London for Hawaii, and his wife, Catherine (Kate; 1821–1920), daughter of Dr John Simm Smith, a fashionable family doctor, and his wife, Maria.

Youth, 1844–1863

Having left school at fourteen, and having made his way in the City of London by hard work after his father's career had failed, Gerard's father Manley started his own firm of average adjusters, about the time of his eldest son's birth. Business prospered, and Gerard was brought up in a comfortable social position and home, usually with three or four servants, though he did not mention in letters his father's job and hard path to success, and it was never assumed that he would carry on the business (his nearest brother, Cyril, fulfilled that role). His lifelong silence on his father's Hawaiian connection is also remarkable. (Manley often exaggerated the importance of this largely honorary position, which had comic and embarrassing aspects.)

Always small and delicate (at Oxford he was known as Poppy), Gerard was his mother's favourite, and was tutored by his aunts: Annie, Manley's sister, whose mawkish portrait of him, aged ten, is in the National Portrait Gallery; and Maria, Kate's sister, who encouraged his sketching, particularly of countryside and trees. Another early interest was Gothic architecture, stimulating him to focus on detail. It was a refined and lively bourgeois household, with parlour music, dramatics, humour, and poetry; Manley wrote poetry and was an avid reader who published several books and articles on insurance and a wide variety of other subjects, and passed on his mental voracity to Gerard. The family religion was conventional and domestic, moderately high-church, mainstream Anglican in its repudiation of Roman practices; there were family prayers and Bible readings daily.

In 1852 the increasingly prosperous Hopkins family moved to Oak Hill Park, Hampstead, comfortably near the countryside, the heath, with its ponds for swimming, and central London, whose cultural resources, particularly art exhibitions and churches, Gerard appreciated. Their parish church was the nearby St John's, a classical building of 1745, which Hopkins, with his Gothic prejudices, found 'dreary', and whose clergy he made fun of. After two years at a private school, Hopkins in 1854 started boarding at Highgate School, whose headmaster, Dr Dyne, emphasized classics, ancient history, and divinity in preference to modern studies; though narrow, the syllabus provided Hopkins with a good grounding in the elements of language and poetry. Another major influence at school was an unconventional younger boy, Marcus Clarke, a high-spirited and gifted writer, who passed on to Hopkins his enthusiasm for contemporary English artists, especially Frederick Walker and J. E. Millais. Hopkins started writing poetic descriptions of nature and weather effects, and poems of many types and lengths. 'The Escorial' won the school poetry prize in 1860, and shortly before he left school his 'Winter with the Gulf Stream', filled with lively but discrete images, was published in the national journal *Once a Week*.

Hopkins's experimentalism, stands on principle, and rebelliousness were remembered by schoolfriends, particularly his battles with the headmaster, once because for a bet he had stopped taking liquids for three weeks. Several times threatened with expulsion, in the sixth form he became a day boy to avoid further trouble, but nevertheless won prizes and the school exhibition for a university. When nineteen, at his second attempt, he gained another exhibition, to Balliol College, Oxford.

Oxford, 1863–1867

Hopkins's moral and intellectual being was formed at Oxford University. He made deep and lasting friendships there, particularly with Robert Bridges and Mowbray Baillie, his two major correspondents

in adulthood. The letters and diaries he wrote soon after his arrival in Oxford reflect his energy and breadth of interests, including frenetic socializing between studies; the voice is youthfully patronizing and self-congratulatory, in the manner of a Punch social cartoonist, a livelier version of what his professional artist brothers, Arthur and Everard, became.

Hopkins had gone up to Oxford in April 1863 intending to be a painter, although his surviving drawings suggest only an ordinary middle-class talent. He followed Ruskin's precepts of accurate and close observation of nature's details, and in his journal's highly distinctive verbal descriptions showed his intense desire to explore and record not merely the look but the behaviour of natural phenomena. Closely associated with this in his early diaries and journals was his creative apprenticeship in linguistics, building a useful vocabulary hoard while forming groups of words and etymological notes that go well beyond contemporary theories of onomatopoeia and word origins; in particular he listed similar sounding words of related meanings, and (several years before coining the term 'inscape') he was obsessed with the inscapes of individual words and the things they stood for.

After passing responsions, the elementary undergraduate test, Hopkins spent five terms working for classical honours moderations, which focused on the detail of major texts and accuracy of language; he was placed in the first class, and in Lent term 1865 entered Oxford's chief honours school, that of *literae humaniores*, or Greats—a pre-eminently philosophical school, with a preponderance of Plato's Republic and Aristotle's Ethics. Under Benjamin Jowett, his rigorous tutor for Greats, Hopkins became fluent in Latin and Greek, practised and spirited in thinking and writing about language, art, and poetry, and more careful about his own poetic style and exactness of expression. As a disciple of Ruskin and Pugin in their medievalist battle for Gothic architecture against Greek servility and lack of aesthetic and moral imagination, he was critical of several aspects of classical civilization, and never assimilated the

methods of modern critical scholarship advocated by Jowett. Hopkins rejected also the radical social ideas of T. H. Green, Balliol's chief teacher of philosophy, who advocated personal involvement in political questions; to Hopkins, inward virtue was of pre-emptive importance. For one term Hopkins was coached by W. H. Pater of Brasenose, but direct influence is not obvious.

Although Hopkins's studies deeply affected the formal and aesthetic theories and practices of his mature poems, most of his undergraduate poetry is, though competent, not distinctly personal, and is largely derived from the Romantic poets. The first poems and dramatic fragments Hopkins wrote at Oxford are bewildering in range and number, in speed of composition, and in their intermingling with his social life. This wealth of activity and interest came to be seen by Hopkins as promiscuity; he became afraid that he was a natural 'blackguard' (Hopkins, Letters, 139; Further Letters, 242), his self-indulgent life needing external control. Reacting strongly against contemporary liberalism and Darwinism, in his first fortnight at Oxford Hopkins had turned against the dangerously modern ethos of Balliol to the eminent high-churchmen Canon H. P. Liddon and Dr E. B. Pusey, to both of whom he confessed. He became familiar with ritualist doctrines and practices close to Roman Catholicism, making detailed daily notes of all his sins.

Most of Hopkins's 'sins' show over-scrupulousness, and that he was mainly, but not exclusively, attracted by his own sex—hardly unusual in public schools and universities of the 1860s—though no sexual acts with other people are recorded. Throughout his life he was particularly susceptible to people's looks. His close relationships were all with men, usually students with high-church leanings. He became infatuated with a sixteen-year-old schoolboy relative of Bridges, Digby Dolben, who flamboyantly leant towards Rome; Hopkins copied out Dolben's poems and took on some of his enthusiasms, particularly those for Savonarola and the Virgin Mary, before whose picture Hopkins kissed the floor each morning. He started writing poems about and practising painful physical

austerities as helpful for the soul. His confessor Liddon had forbidden contact with Dolben, but Hopkins could not help continually mentioning him to friends and writing sonnets of longing and separation. He became despondent and inert, and copied into his diary John Clare's poem 'I am! yet what I am who cares or knows', which anticipates his own sonnet of 1855, 'To Seem the Stranger'. Two years later, on Dolben's death by drowning, Hopkins wrote: 'there can very seldom have happened the loss of so much beauty (in body and mind and life) ... seldom ... in the whole world' (Hopkins, Letters, 16–17).

Hopkins decided to give up the prospect of becoming a professional artist, as the passions would be too strongly involved. But his poetry writing continued, and several poems show stages of his conversion to Roman Catholicism: a Pre-Raphaelite picture of professional religious life ('The Habit of Perfection'), or religious doubt, asking similar questions to Tennyson's in *In Memoriam* ('Nondum'), or self-disgust ('Trees by their Yield'), or John Henry Newman's image of the Church of England as *The Half-Way House* between atheism and Roman Catholicism.

Hopkins's conversion anguished his parents—'O Gerard, my darling boy, are you indeed gone from me?' wrote his father (Hopkins, *Further Letters*, 97)—but, to Hopkins's surprise, they soon came to accept it, as they did later on when Gerard's sister Milicent became a high-church Anglican nun (none of his brothers retained a religious faith beyond adolescence). In 1867 Hopkins obtained first-class honours in *Greats*, and was offered a teaching post at the Oratory School, Birmingham, by Newman, who had received Hopkins into the Roman Catholic church, and whose spiritual autobiography, *Apologia pro vita sua*, written to gain converts of Hopkins's type, had influenced him. Hopkins was unhappy as a teacher—the only secular job he ever had—finding the self-discipline unpalatable, with few opportunities to continue self-education or to see Oxford friends. He decided to remedy feelings of aimlessness and the sordidness of ordinary life by becoming a professional religious. He burned his poems—'slaughter of the innocents', he called

this act (Hopkins, *Journals and Papers*, 165)—though he had previously sent copies of them all to Bridges, and three months later remarked with pride on a peculiar beat he had introduced into his new verse. He chose the most severely disciplined of the Counter-Reformation orders, the Society of Jesus.

First, however, following the Romantic lead of Wordsworth and Ruskin, Hopkins took a walking holiday in Switzerland. There his uncensored journal writing achieved heights of liveliness and inventive imagery, using the new terms 'inscape' and 'instress'. His account includes human scenes with women as well as alpine descriptions, and makes one regret the controlled, comparatively limited subject range in his journal writing once he had become a Jesuit.

Early Jesuit years, 1868–1874

The appeal of the Society of Jesus to Hopkins was its highly structured system, as manifested in St Ignatius's spiritual exercises, of conquering oneself and regulating one's life, a counter to the undergraduate guilt and insecurity he still experienced after his conversion. But a Jesuit seminary was an encompassing institution with tensions of a community life which constricted individual personality and self; normal privacy and emotional sustenance were feared. The exercises were unsuited to his temperament, which was predisposed to melancholia. Hopkins was considered by his fellow Jesuits odd, whimsical, eccentric, too delicate; few appreciated him. He was naïvely surprised at being forbidden to take Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* with him into the novitiate at Manresa House, Roehampton.

Hopkins resolved to keep only weather notes, but fortunately, in his second year, the journal expanded considerably into natural observations, stories, and accounts of words, dreams, and visits. In September 1870 he took his vows, and moved north to the philosophate, at Stonyhurst College, in rural Lancashire. In spite of his pessimism about the wintry climate, recording and dwelling on

deaths obsessively, and finding the course hard and wearisome, while everyday life was 'as dank as ditchwater' (Hopkins, *Further Letters*, 113), his journal's extended descriptions of Stonyhurst's natural surroundings record joyful experiences, particularly around its three beautiful rivers, though most show him as lonely and intense. His dull professional life contrasted with the vivid seascapes bejewelling the journals he wrote during community holidays on the Isle of Man, excitedly conveying intense discoveries and images of the textures, shapes, and colours of sea water. 'Inscape' and 'instress' frequently occur as the looked-for and perceived qualities in nature, and he was now 'flush with a new stroke of enthusiasm' (Hopkins, *Journals and Papers*, 221) about Duns Scotus, the medieval theologian who, although disapproved of by Hopkins's superiors, helped to sanction his way of perceiving and recording nature. Hopkins had 'resolved to write no more, as not belonging to my profession' (Hopkins, *Correspondence*, 14), but nevertheless wrote some Latin and two English poems, a May exercise, officially encouraged, to honour the Virgin Mary; one of them, 'Ad Mariam', closely imitates Swinburne.

In August 1873 Hopkins was posted back to Roehampton for a year's teaching. In spite of a comparatively easy year, with exhibition visits renewing his interest in modern English painting, his teaching left him very tired and deeply cast down; however, on a summer holiday to Devon he recorded feelings of intense love for the coomb scenery around Teignmouth.

St Beuno's, 1874–1877

At the end of August 1874 Hopkins travelled to a remote part of north Wales, to study theology for four years at St Beuno's College. Again he immediately fell in love with the landscape: the glens, woods, and trees of the deep Elwy valley, and the densely wooded hills and long-drawn valley of the River Clwyd, with the Snowdonian mountain range and the sea in the distance. Hopkins felt 'an instress and charm of Wales' (Hopkins, *Journals and Papers*, 258), delighted in

word-painting the countryside, and began to learn Welsh, which he associated with poetry and mythology. In spite of discouragement from his rector unless he intended to convert local Welsh speakers, Hopkins enthusiastically persisted with lessons, and tried his hand at the intricacies of classical Welsh verse.

Hopkins became fascinated by the appearance, legend, and traditions of St Winefride's Well, composed a Latin and an English poem on the saint, and planned a drama, 'St Winefred's Well' (with which he sporadically toyed for more than ten years, but never finished). However, the bleak weather, his health, and particularly his studies were sources of tension and unhappiness during his first year: he barely passed the examination.

During Hopkins's Roehampton teaching his lectures on poetry had emphasized sound, repetition, and rhyme in its widest sense of sound-similarity. Although not understanding its detailed rules, he was now attracted by the Welsh *cynghanedd* metrical form for its variety of binding and enriching systems, and its focus on sound. Poetry was spoken sound, not the printed word, which was only its representation; his own poetry, he always said, had to be read aloud. Something greater was imminent, and in December 1875, strongly affected by and seeing religious and symbolic implications in a newspaper account of a shipwreck in which five nuns lost their lives, Hopkins set to work at a poem on a modern Catholic martyrdom, using the Pindaric ode form. 'The Wreck of the *Deutschland*' is an idiosyncratic shipwreck poem, using vigorous sea, storm, and narrative description, a story of the tall nun's victory against the odds, and the poet's account of the shaping of his own dramatic conversion and discovery of God's purpose behind apparently incoherent tragedy. The powerfully awkward 'sprung rhythm', vigorous language, and personal excitement counter echoes of fatalism and disenchantment in this vast experimental poem.

Hopkins never again composed a poem of this length and ambition. The culmination and justification of his lengthy and deep poetic thinking

and practice, its acceptance by his superiors would have transformed his life and future poetry, as well as giving him a new and invigorating sense of purpose in the society. But after initial encouragement the editor of *The Month* persistently delayed publication until Hopkins resigned himself to its rejection; he told a friend that the Jesuit periodical 'dared' not print it (Hopkins, *Correspondence*, 15). Representing officially sanctioned orthodoxy, the journal's decision gave Hopkins a lasting feeling of rejection by his community, and set up a barrier between himself and authority. He returned to his old guilty feeling about his art: as his poetry making was not approved, he could not allocate more than an occasional short piece of leisure time to it. The majority of his subsequent poems were sonnets, a form that Hopkins could carry in his head while officially 'recreating'. This rejection also meant that Bridges now had the crucial role of guardian of Hopkins's poetry.

Ironically, while composing his great ode, Hopkins was writing three minor and stilted occasional poems on his bishop's silver jubilee, one each in Latin, Welsh, and English; the last, published as part of a celebratory pamphlet, was one of the handful of his poems he ever saw in print. In spring 1877, although he found 'going over moral theology over and over again and in a hurry is the most wearisome work' and was so tired that he was 'good for nothing' (Hopkins, *Further Letters*, 143), he rejoiced in the first primroses, and wrote 'The Starlight Night' and 'God's Grandeur' for his mother's birthday. These started the great series of lyrical sonnets, which include 'The Lantern out of Doors', 'As Kingfishers Catch Fire', 'The Sea and the Skylark', 'Spring', 'The Caged Skylark', 'In the Valley of the Elwy', 'The Windhover' (his favourite poem of that year), 'Pied Beauty', and 'Hurrahing in Harvest'.

Many of these poems from 1877 celebrate Hopkins's joyful observations of nature. Sometimes he is at his poetic best, as in the octave of 'The Windhover', where the medley of sound-devices, the personal excitement of the narrator, and the imitation of the bird's intense hovering are simultaneously perfect,

or in the successful achievement of complex, passionate argument in 'The Caged Skylark', or in the fondness, enthusiasm, and sexuality of Hopkins's most ecstatic poem, 'Hurrahing in Harvest'. But sometimes there is deep rejection of and disgust with everyday life and everything man-made, or the hidden biographical comparison between the sweet peace of the Elwy household and Hopkins's customary harsh institutional surroundings. The joyful accounts of nature throw into relief his loneliness and misanthropy; his idealism was constantly undermined by disillusion.

In July 1877 Hopkins failed his theology examination, being too Scotist for his examiners. 'Much against my inclination I shall have to leave Wales', he wrote to Bridges (Hopkins, *Letters*, 43). Not only was he unable to continue into his fourth year of theology, but he also would never reach the highest ranks and posts in the society. However he was ordained to the priesthood in September of that year, and after an operation for circumcision took his last look at Wales, the 'true Arcadia of wild beauty' (Hopkins, *Further Letters*, 370) and 'always to me a mother of Muses' (Hopkins, *Letters*, 227).

Fortune's football, 1877–1884

Each September almost every Jesuit shifted to another location, in changes known as 'general post'; a basic condition of Jesuit life, the process still hurt. The saddest of his St Beuno's poems, showing Hopkins at his most vulnerable, is 'The Lantern out of Doors', which laments being deprived of people to whom he had grown attached. In his loneliness, the only counter to his daily surroundings, which appear as 'much thick and marsh air', is the presence of some man:

whom either beauty bright

In mould or mind ... makes rare

He wrote to his mother: 'Ours can never be an abiding city nor any one of us know what a day may bring forth' (Hopkins, *Further Letters*, 142).

In July 1883, after six years of his own constant removals, Hopkins wrote: 'I have long been Fortune's football and am blowing up the bladder

of resolution big and buxom for another kick of her foot' (Hopkins, Letters, 183). Since leaving Wales he had been posted to Mount St Mary's College, near Sheffield, for seven months of secondary-school teaching, but having become 'very fond of the boys' (Hopkins, Further Letters, 158) had been given only a week's notice before being sent to Stonyhurst College to coach a few boys for external university degrees. After three months he was sent south to London to act as curate at Farm Street Church in Mayfair, where he remained for five months, before, in December 1878, becoming curate at St Aloysius's Church, Oxford. Ten months later he took up a similar position at St Joseph's Church, Bedford Leigh, in Lancashire. Then after only three months there he was posted as curate to St Francis Xavier's Church, Liverpool, where he stayed for one year and seven months, before going as relief temporary curate to St Joseph's, Glasgow, for two months. At the end of that period he started his year's tertianship at Roehampton, and having completed it was appointed teacher at Stonyhurst College again, where he remained for one year and four months. He travelled to Dublin to take up his professorship at the University College in February 1884, having been in eleven postings, in four countries, in eight years.

Hopkins was pessimistic about the Mount St Mary's post before he arrived there—'the work is nondescript', the countryside 'not very interesting' (Hopkins, Further Letters, 148)—and he found life at the college was 'as dank as ditchwater and has some of the other qualities of ditchwater'; he had been 'reduced to great weakness by diarrhoea' (Hopkins, Letters, 47). His muse had 'turned utterly sullen in the Sheffield smoke-ridden air' (ibid., 148), but he composed another shipwreck poem, 'The Loss of the *Eurydice*', much simpler than 'The Wreck of the *Deutschland*', but far less distinguished: The Month again rejected it for publication. Then at Stonyhurst another Marian poem, 'The May Magnificat', was refused permission to be placed before the Virgin Mary statue. Hopkins started a friendship and correspondence with one of his former Highgate teachers, Canon R. W. Dixon, by regretting the lack of due recognition suffered by writers. At Oxford

Hopkins complained of overwork, illness, and disaffection from his parishioners, but wrote several poems, including 'Henry Purcell', and two, 'Binsey Poplars' and 'Duns Scotus's Oxford', expressing modern man's insensitivity to landscape and his own deep rejection of modern religion and civilization. Many poems show Hopkins's lack of inward comfort and ease. His parish work in working-class Lancashire and Glasgow was 'very wearying to mind and body', and as a sheltered middle-class southerner he was shocked to see the ghastly cost of industrial prosperity. Liverpool was 'a most unhappy and miserable spot' (Hopkins, Correspondence, 42), where 'one is so fagged, so harried and gallied up and down' (Hopkins, Letters, 110), while Glasgow was a 'wretched place' (ibid., 135) and 'repulsive to live in' (Hopkins, Further Letters, 248). Even less suited to these than to his other Jesuit posts, he suffered the indignity of having his Liverpool sermons censored by his rector because of incorrect theology (Scotus was, again, partly to blame). Nevertheless in the Lancashire countryside he produced the sad but charming 'Spring and Fall: to a Young Child', and by Loch Lomond his Scottish poem 'Inversnaid'.

Hopkins's tertianship at Roehampton was intended to enable him by withdrawal from the world to recover his primal Jesuit fervour; he completed his formal training as a Jesuit when he took the simple vows of a spiritual coadjutor in August 1882, fourteen years after he had entered the society as a novice. At Stonyhurst, where he taught university-standard classics, Hopkins was allowed time to write on academic subjects, and he planned a work on Greek lyric art, but was hampered by ignorance of contemporary classical scholarship, self-doubt, and 'a wretched state of weakness and weariness, I can't tell why, always drowsy and incapable of reading or thinking to any effect' (Hopkins, Letters, 168). He wrote the brooding 'Ribblesdale', 'The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo', and three letters published in the scientific journal *Nature*, consisting mainly of skyscape descriptions. He started a friendship with Coventry Patmore, a Roman Catholic poet he already admired.

Dublin, 1884–1889

In spite of strong opposition from the archbishop of Dublin and his successor, Hopkins early in February 1884 was elected to a fellowship of the Royal University of Ireland, and to a junior classics chair at University College, Dublin—successor to the Catholic University of Ireland founded by Newman, and now taken over by the Irish Jesuits. It was an inauspicious appointment, Hopkins having been attacked because of his nationality, and supported by reason of his Oxford background and his salary, which was needed by the ailing college. The head of the English Jesuit province had written of his 'oddities', and an old Balliol acquaintance had supported him for his originality and 'curiously delicate perception' (White, Hopkins: a Literary Biography, 361), not qualities suitable for teaching and controlling students less educated and sophisticated than those he had known at Oxford.

For his first year Hopkins taught nothing but was given continuous examining, at one time having '557 papers on hand: let those who have been thro' the like say what that means' (Hopkins, Correspondence, 123). By April his depression was worsening: he was 'in a great weakness' (Hopkins, Letters, 192) and had suffered 'a deep fit of nervous prostration ... I did not know but I was dying' (ibid., 193). He started writing perhaps his most intense and terrifying poem, 'Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves', in which the doomsday portent of an oracular sunset overpowers the vulnerable aesthetic qualities of nature.

In summer 1885 Hopkins wrote to Bridges of his 'continually jaded and harassed mind' (Hopkins, Letters, 221). More isolated than ever, he was seen unsympathetically and distantly by colleagues and pupils alike (see his sonnet 'To Seem the Stranger'). The label by which they diminished what they could not understand was that of a typical aesthetic Newmanite convert; his sense of humour was not recognized in Ireland, though it is apparent in almost every letter he wrote, even when at his most miserable: a Liverpool organist

got drunk at the organ (I have now twice had this experience: it is distressing, alarming, agitating, but above all delicately comic; it brings together the bestial and the angelic elements in such a quaint entanglement ... for musicians never play such clever descants as under those circumstances ...) ... He was a clever young fellow and thoroughly understood the properties of narrow-necked tubes. (Hopkins, Letters, 264)

Shy and effeminate, slight and not more than 5 feet 2 inches tall, he was sometimes mistaken for a teenager, although now in his forties (his glossy light-brown to tawny hair partly greying). His Oxford and Balliol mannerisms did not go down well in the comparatively primitive college, hostile towards Britain; unable to cope with classroom discipline, he was ragged by students. He was disgusted that two Irish archbishops backed rebellion against British government, and could not condone what he saw as disloyalty to the crown, but painfully admitted that home rule was inevitable because the Irish were ungovernable. After his death the few Dublin stories of him concerned his eccentricity: he had got a student to drag him on his back round a table to demonstrate Hector's death, and had once told a class that he regretted never having seen a naked woman.

But to define and explore his mental disturbances Hopkins had poetry, now his sole resource. Whereas the originality of many of his pre-Dublin poems had been compromised by the required religious conclusion, the uncontrollable strength of his psychological turmoil in Ireland took him well beyond the limits of conventional religious diagnosis and terminology; and poetry itself was driven beyond commonly recognized subject and means of expression. His 'desolate' or 'terrible' sonnets of 1885, such as 'I Wake and Feel the Fell of Dark' and 'No Worst, There is None', have become classic explorations of modern psychic despair and torment, with widely known images and phrases such as 'cliffs of fall' and 'O the mind, mind has mountains'.

Hopkins had a few friends outside Dublin, such as the Cassidys of Monasterevin, where he composed

the unfinished 'On the Portrait of Two Beautiful Young People', an elegy on human beauty, which he had previously tried to justify according to his religion's precepts in the sonnet 'To what serves mortal beauty?' Besides being obsessed by Irish politics he became more jingoistic, writing three poems on military virtues, and denigrating the lack of realism in Irish myths and the woolliness of modern Irish writing and painting, although he made an interesting and humorous collection of Hiberno-English words and phrases. On holiday in 1887, Hopkins wrote two of his most idiosyncratic poems, sonnets lengthened beyond recognition. 'Harry Plowman' is to be heard, not silently read; the man is created in natural images, sound-devices connecting different senses. In the companion piece, 'Tom's Garland', expressing Hopkins's conservative social thinking, symbols clash with realistic description, obscuring the argument.

So often in Dublin Hopkins had felt unable to 'breed one work that wakes' ('Justus tu es', l. 13), but his final group of three sonnets, composed in March and April 1889, which bewail his lack of poetic inspiration, is ironically some of his most distinguished work. Soon afterwards Hopkins caught typhoid, which developed into peritonitis, probably from the defective plumbing of the University College drains, and he died on 8 June 1889 at 85 St Stephen's Green. He was interred on 11 June in the Jesuit burial plot in the Prospect cemetery, Glasnevin, on the north side of Dublin.

Literary reputation

Hopkins was soon forgotten in Dublin; twelve years after his death a student of the same college who was keen on literature reported that Hopkins was 'practically unknown'. Robert Bridges, however, on whom the poet had relied to keep, treasure, and conceivably publish the poems after Hopkins's death, believed that they must be printed, and was soon planning an edition with a short memoir. Delay was caused by his respect for the private nature of the letters, by his feeling that Hopkins's melancholia should not be publicly exposed, and by fear that the public would not

understand the peculiarities of the verse. He gradually introduced small groups of the poems into anthologies, but it was not until 1916 that he received the public encouragement for which he was waiting. The sensitive, handsome, and almost complete small edition, edited and largely designed by Bridges, was published at the end of 1918. Hopkins did not use his middle name, but Bridges introduced 'Manley' on the first edition title-page to distinguish him from his nephew, also Gerard Hopkins.

The edition of 750 copies had still not sold out when, in 1930, a second edition was called for by the poetry public who were demanding new, difficult poetic voices. Advocated especially by I. A. Richards, F. R. Leavis, William Empson, and Michael Roberts, so that his poems appeared in general and modernistic anthologies, followed by university and school syllabuses, Hopkins had suddenly become a popular modern poet. It was not until the 1960s that his Victorian qualities were appreciated. In the second half of the twentieth century with both protestant and Roman Catholic faiths searching for new voices, the use of Hopkins's writings considerably increased, but there are signs that the distinctive literary qualities of his poetry, journals, and letters (he was one of the best letter writers of the nineteenth century) are being valued less, and his unorthodox characteristics hidden. As one of his biographers said, no one else writes with such strength and vivacity about the extreme human emotions of joy and pain.

Norman White

Sources

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