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John Vogelgesang

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Hopkins' Sonnet To R. B.

JOHN VOGELGESANG

The fine delight that fathers thought; the strong
Spur, live and lancing like the blowpipe flame,
Breathes once and, quenched faster than it came,
Leaves yet the mind a mother of immortal song.
Nine months she then, nay years, nine years she long
Within her wears, bears, cares and combs the same:
The widow of an insight lost she lives, with aim
Now known and hand at work now never wrong.

Sweet fire the sire of muse, my soul needs this;
I want the one rapture of an inspiration.
O then if in my lagging lines you miss
The roll, the rise, the carol, the creation,
My winter world, that scarcely breathes that bliss
Now, yields you, with some sighs, our explanation.¹

I

THIS sonnet, inscribed very simply *To R. B.*,² is Hopkins' Dejection Ode in which he does in briefer fashion what Coleridge had done in his much longer poem. He laments the loss, or at least the temporary subsidence, of that "sweet fire," that "fine delight" which his soul needs in order that it may sing again songs that will be immortal. Since the

¹ *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* W. H. Gardner ed. (London 1953) p. 114. Quoted by permission from the English Province of the Society of Jesus, owner of the copyright.

² "R. B." was of course Robert Bridges, Hopkins' friend and school fellow, who later, as poet laureate of England, published the first edition of Hopkins' poems.

sonnet embodies many of Hopkins' familiar poetic techniques it can conveniently serve as the point of departure for a discussion of the priest-poet's theory of poetic inspiration, his ideas on poetic language and some of his customary techniques.

The sonnet itself is not difficult to understand. It was written in the last year of the poet's life when a combination of circumstances had caused an apparent waning of his poetic faculties. It is, in fact, only a poetic version of the poignant lament to which Hopkins had given expression as early as February 1879. Writing at that time to his friend Bridges he said:

I cannot in conscience spend time on poetry, neither have I the inducements and inspirations that make others compose. Feeling, love in particular, is the great moving power and spring of verse and the only person that I am in love with seldom, especially now, stirs my heart sensibly and when he does I cannot make capital of it, it would be a sacrilege to do so. Then again I have of myself made verse so laborious.³

In the present case it is not so much the laboriousness of verse-making that the poet bewails as his utter lack of inspiration.

II

"Inspiration" was an essential element in Hopkins' theory of the poetic art.

Sweet fire the sire of muse, my soul needs this;
I want the one rapture of an inspiration.

On another occasion in a letter to Bridges he said: "I shall shortly have some sonnets to send you, five or more. Four of these came like inspirations unbidden and against my will."⁴ Poetic inspiration therefore is something over which the poet exercises no control. It comes unbidden and often against his will. Hopkins goes even further and compares it on at least one occasion to a kind of divine inspiration. In a letter to Coventry Patmore he chided the poet because

³ *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges* C. C. Abbott ed. (London 1955) p. 65.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 221.

In the midst of a poem undertaken under a kind of inspiration from God and to express what, being most excellent, most precious, most central and important and even obvious in human life, nevertheless no one has ever yet, unless passingly thought of expressing, you introduce a vice, the germ of widespread evils, and make the highest relish of pure love come from the base "smell of mortality."⁵

Not only does inspiration, in Hopkins' theory, move the poet to compose, it also influences the kind of verse he will write in the process of composition. Therefore Hopkins divided the language of verse into three kinds according to the greater or lesser influence of inspiration in its composition. In a lengthy letter to Alexander Baille he wrote:

I think then the language of verse may be divided into three kinds. The first and highest is poetry proper, the language of inspiration.⁶

Lest the word *inspiration* should prove to be a stumbling block he defines it as

a mood of great, abnormal in fact, mental acuteness, either energetic or receptive, according as the thoughts which arise in it seem generated by a stress and action of the brain, or strike into it unasked.⁷

A variety of causes, "physical generally" Hopkins says,⁸ accounts for this mood. What is significant is the fact that the poetry of inspiration can be written only in this mood and only by those who are true poets. While all men may experience such moods, all cannot write the poetry of inspiration because not all are poets.

The second type of the language of verse is what Hopkins calls "Parnassian" and which he divides into "Parnassian proper" and "Castalian." While Parnassian proper can be spoken only by poets, it does not constitute poetry of the highest order since that particular mood of mind in which the "poetry of inspiration" is written is not here required. When the poet speaks the language of inspiration he is, as

⁵ *Further Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins* C. C. Abbott ed. (London 1956) p. 307.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 216.

⁷ *Loc. cit.*

⁸ *Loc. cit.*

Hopkins puts it, "raised above himself." But when he writes in the Parnassian style he uses a language "which genius speaks as fitted to its exaltation, and place among other genius, but does not sing... in its flights." Each poet speaks his "own dialect as it were of Parnassian,"⁹ a statement that agrees with Hopkins' other assertion that "each poet is like a species in nature (not an *individuum genericum* or *specificum*) and can never recur."¹⁰ And he concludes that "In a poet's particular kind of Parnassian lies most of his style, of his manner, of his mannerism, if you like."¹¹

"Castalian" is the second species of Parnassian. Hopkins calls it a "higher sort of Parnassian" and "it may be thought the lowest kind of inspiration." While beautiful poems may be written entirely in Castalian, it is too characteristic of the poet, "too so-and-so-all-overish, to be quite inspiration," as Hopkins remarks.¹²

The third language of poetry Hopkins calls *Delphic* and of it he says "the third is merely the language of verse as distinct from that of Prose, Delphic, the tongue of the Sacred Plain, I may call it, used in common by poet and poetaster."¹³ Hopkins himself does not elaborate further on this particular type.

III

Many of the characteristics of Hopkins' poetry become intelligible only when they are considered in relation to his definition of poetry. In a brief essay written about 1873-74 he proposed the following definition:

Poetry is speech framed for contemplation of the mind by the way of hearing or speech framed to be heard for its own sake and interest even over and above its interest of meaning.¹⁴

He hastens to explain, however, that meaning is not something merely incidental to poetry.

⁹ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 370.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 216.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 219.

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 220.

¹⁴ John Pick ed. *A Hopkins Reader* (New York 1953) p. 83.

Some matter and meaning is essential to it but only as an element necessary to support and employ the shape which is contemplated for its own sake. (Poetry is in fact speech only employed to carry the inscape of speech for the inscape's sake—and therefore the inscape must be dwelt on. Now if this can be done without repeating it, *once* of the inscape will be enough for art and beauty and poetry but then at least the inscape must be understood as so standing by itself that it could be copied and repeated. If not repetition, *oftening*, *over-and-overing*, *aftering* of the inscape must take place in order to detach it to the mind and in this light poetry is speech which *after*s and *offens* its inscape, speech couched in a repeating figure and verse is spoken sound having a repeating figure.)¹⁵

Because Hopkins had discovered that only too often the inscape of anything could not be grasped immediately, but that “aftering” and “oftening” were frequently required, his own poetry is rich in both rhythmical and metrical patterns and in metaphor, simile and other figures of speech. Whenever he found that one image was not enough to convey an impression of a definite inscape, he repeated and altered his images until he was certain that he had succeeded as perfectly as possible. A remarkable instance of this is found in the sonnet *As kingfishers catch fire* where six separate figures are used to express one and the same idea.

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.*¹⁶

Perhaps it was Hopkins' awareness of this need for “aftering” and “oftening” that led him to the conclusion that “the artificial part of poetry, perhaps we shall be right to say all artifice, reduces itself to the principle of parallelism.”¹⁷ He goes on to distinguish two kinds of parallelism—the one “where the opposition is clearly marked, and (the other) where it is

¹⁵ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁶ *Poems* (Gardner ed.) p. 95.

¹⁷ *Pick op. cit.* p. 80.

transitional rather or chromatic." The first he calls "the marked or abrupt kind of parallelism" and it includes "metaphor, simile, parable, and so on, where the effect is sought in likeness of things, and antithesis, contrast, and so on, where it is sought in unlikeness." The second type of parallelism he names "chromatic" which embraces "gradation, intensity, climax, tone, expression (as the word is used in music), *chiaroscuro*, perhaps emphasis."¹⁸

IV

Now if we apply some of the foregoing observations to the sonnet under consideration it may be safe to hazard the opinion that *To R. B.* is written in Hopkins' peculiar dialect of "Parnassian" since it exemplifies so well his manner and mannerisms.

The fundamental image which is sustained throughout the octave is an apt metaphor to describe the idea Hopkins has in mind. "The fine delight" of which the poet speaks is "inspiration." It fathers thought because it drops as it were a seed into the fertile womb of the poet's mind where the seed will germinate and flower forth as thought. This image is not a new one with Hopkins. In 1886 he had written to R. W. Dixon: "There I had an inspiration of a tune. The disproportion is wonderful between the momentary conception of an air and the long long gestation of its setting."¹⁹ In verse form the same idea is expressed thus:

the strong
 Spur, live and lancing like the blowpipe flame,
 Breathes once and, quenched faster than it came,
 Leaves yet the mind a mother of immortal song.
 Nine months she then, nay years, nine years she long
 Within her wears, bears, cares and combs the same.

The fundamental image of the octave refers to the human generative act, delicately intimated in such phrases as "the fine delight that fathers thought," the strong spur, live and

¹⁸ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁹ Abbott *Further Letters* p. 135.

lancing" and in lines 5 and 6 which beautifully describe the condition and the activity of a pregnant woman.

Nine months she then, nay years, nine years she long
Within her wears, bears, cares and combs the same.

Not only does the mother *bear* the infant in her womb, but she may be said to *wear* it as a sign of her physical condition. And all the while she bears the child, "she cares and combs the same."

The word *combs* is ambivalent. It is used in the sense of *unravel* and also of *store* and *mature*, as in a honeycomb.²⁰ Just as the infant's body, so to say, is gradually unravelled and matures in the mother's womb, so a poem, *conceived* under the influence of poetic inspiration, gradually *unfolds* in the poet's mind and *grows* to maturity. When at last, after "long long gestation" it is *viable*, the poet can put it down on paper unerringly.

The concluding lines of the octave, while they sustain the fundamental image in its maternal aspects, introduce a slight variation. But the variation is altogether appropriate. In the preceding lines the poet had said "the fine delight that fathers thought . . . breathes once and, (is) quenched faster than it came." In the very moment that the mind becomes a "mother of immortal song," she is widowed. "The widow of an insight lost she lives." But the seed planted in her by that "insight lost" will grow with unerring and undeviating accuracy—"with aim Now known and hand at work now never wrong."

Perhaps the poet could have chosen no apter image to describe the process of poetic inspiration and gestation than this one borrowed from the realm of human conception and birth. In fact, one is reminded of the remark of I. A. Richards in his introduction to Hugh R. Walpole's *Semantics* that "of all the metaphors with which man has tried to picture the transmission of ideas, by far the best is that which too often lies dormant in the word "conceive" itself."²¹ Also in this con-

²⁰ *Poems* (Gardner ed.) p. 253 (note for poem 75).

²¹ Hugh R. Walpole *Semantics: The Nature of Words and their Meaning* (New York 1941) p. 11.

nection, one wonders whether Hopkins was not expressing poetically what Wordsworth had said somewhat more prosaically when he defined poetry as "emotion recollected in tranquillity."

The octave of the sonnet affords an example of what Hopkins meant by "aftering" and "oftening." While the basic image of the octave is that of human generation, Hopkins uses a second one to reinforce an idea that is already implicit in his major image. Thus the phrase "the fine delight" is further described in the line "the strong spur, live and lancing like the blowpipe flame." The poet is at pains to make his readers sense the intensity, the penetrating quality of that momentary inspiration. Since the spur has been described as "live and lancing like the blowpipe flame" there is no incongruity in saying that it "breathes once." The personification is sustained even though the image varies. The progression from "the fine delight that fathers thought" to "the mind a mother of immortal song," to "within her wears, bears, cares and combs the same," to "the widow of an insight lost she lives," is a fine example of fidelity to a fundamental image that still varies sufficiently to convey an inescapable impression of the thought the poet is endeavoring to express.

The sestet is a heartfelt lament in which the poet bewails the loss of that "sweet fire" which is the "sire of muse." His soul needs that "sweet fire" but unhappily he wants "the one rapture of an inspiration." Because this inspiration is lacking his lines will necessarily lag. "The roll, the rise, the carol, the creation" will be missing from them. In his "winter world" the "bliss," "the fine delight" that could father thought is sadly wanting. The life-giving breath of the octave has become a lifeless, listless, even hopeless sigh in the sestet.

V

Both types of the parallelism referred to above are evident in this poem. The abrupt parallelism of metaphor and simile runs through the entire sonnet. There is contrast and antithesis between the octave and the sestet not only in

thought-content but also in imagery. The octave contains many images that are vital and vitalizing. Even the reference to the "widow of an insight lost" is softened by the addition of the words "she lives." The widow is not simply a widow but first and foremost a mother fostering an infant in her womb. In the sestet we are in a "wintry world," a world of death or dormition. It is a world that scarcely breathes the bliss of which the octave is full. It is a world of "some sighs."

This fundamental contrast between the two sections of the sonnet is carried over into the diction and tonal qualities of the verse. In the octave the words are relatively light and airy in accordance with the generally cheerful tenor of the whole. In the sestet the words are heavier, the tone is predominantly low. There is plodding movement from the wistful first line of the sestet to the hopelessness of the last line:

Now, yields you, with some sighs, our explanation.

Hopkins' explanation may indeed explain why he no longer wrote in "the language of inspiration."

I want the one rapture of an inspiration.

But it does not explain what caused the well-springs of his inspiration to run dry. For the reasons for this failure of poetic inspiration we must look elsewhere. The biographers and critics of Hopkins have listed a number of contributory causes, chief among them the poet's almost continuous ill health. Martin J. Carroll in his essay *Hopkins and the Society of Jesus* asserts categorically that Hopkins' ill health is a cause that cannot be overstressed.²² And when we remember that in Hopkins' theory of poetic inspiration there existed a direct relation between physical well-being and inspiration, then certainly the sad state of the poet's health especially in the last years of his life seems as good an explanation as any for the waning of his poetic faculty. Ill health was Hopkins' constant companion during life and in his last years "he began to be more subject to murderous colds and rheumatism, to nervous pros-

²² Norman Weyand S.J. ed. *Immortal Diamond: Studies in Gerard Manley Hopkins* (New York 1949) p. 45.

tration approaching madness, to blinding eye trouble of a particularly painful nature."²³ When his health failed completely, so did his spirits and also his inspiration. Henceforth he could "not breed one work that wakes." Little wonder that he could cry out "Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain."²⁴ But the rains came no longer.

²³ *Loc cit.*

²⁴ *Poems* (Gardner ed.) p. 113.