

HOPKINS COMMEMORATED

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS, 1844-1889. *A Centenary Commemoration, being the first of two volumes by W. H. Gardner (Secker and Warburg, 25/-).*

Ironically, Gerard Manley Hopkins may now safely be called an established poet, while Bridges, who only thirty years ago was sponsoring him from the basis of an apparently assured prestige, is increasingly 'placed'. And yet, after these hundred years, Hopkins is still sufficiently a live topic of literary controversy, and holds a place in nineteenth-century poetry so peculiarly his own, as amply to justify Dr. Gardner's painstaking and thorough attention. Superficially, Hopkins still tends to present a curious knot of anomalies, and the general critical tendency, particularly of recent years, has been to dissect the poet in order to discover some obscure disease of which the inner conflict expressed here and there in his work is felt to be symptomatic. This clinical approach, presupposing as it does some unhealthy constriction in the poet's nature, regarding a fundamentally religious conflict as abnormal instead of commonplace in itself, is inadequate for a complete evaluation of Hopkins. He demands from the reader a willingness to approach his own set of values with a certain delicacy and respect, if not for themselves, at least for the scrupulous honesty and sensitivity with which he holds them. The type of mind which can grant him this sympathy is becoming increasingly rare, as religious experience comes to be taken less and less for granted. He is unfortunate in so far as present-day readers are concerned. Those who are best qualified to appraise his matter find his manner a hindrance, while the most enthusiastic admirers of his manner are all too often baffled or alienated by much of his matter. Dr. Gardner's chapter of potted criticism shows with how many and how varied reservations Hopkins has been accepted, and the tentative way in which he is approached by those who find elements which please and elements which alienate inseparably knitted together in his verse. Even Miss Phare, who is given more space than she deserves, has an uneasy feeling that she may be indulging in 'peevisish fault-finding', and Mr. G. M. Young's attack on Hopkins's metrical theories—'the root of his error lay in an ignorance of the subject so profound that it was not aware that there was anything to know'—is almost the only comment which carries behind it an uncompromising Victorian conviction of what poetry should be like. But the problems which Hopkins appears to present are less attributable to the poet himself than to the intellectual climate in which he is read. An ear attuned to Tennyson's verse can only find Hopkins jarring, no matter how sympathetically it can receive his sentiments, while the 'scientific' mind, responsive as it may be to Hopkins's technique, is no less likely to feel hostile or condescending towards the religious tensions of the poems. It seems suitable,

after a century, to consider why a defence as scholarly as Dr. Gardner's should not seem out of place, and why Hopkins still appears to present obstacles to readers who can enjoy both Herbert and Eliot.

The commonest and easiest obstacle is the persistent feeling that being at once a poet and a priest involves some essential contradiction. It is this feeling, perhaps, which gives Dr. Gardner his title for his first chapter—'The Two Vocations'—and he is at pains to show that no contradiction exists. The aestheticism of the late nineteenth century is indeed incompatible with Hopkins's religious belief; but Hopkins's mature work bears no relationship to that aestheticism. His obvious delight in sensuous beauty is informed with a deep ethical interest quite beyond the followers of Pater; his interest in 'form' is different in kind from theirs. And so when Dr. Gardner says that 'few English poets have been actuated so powerfully and consistently by the principle enunciated in Pater's "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music"' one is compelled to note that this principle means little or nothing if applied to the poetry of Hopkins, and that the most obvious quality of his verse is his success in finding or creating the right word and the right inflection, and not the 'beautiful' word or cadence in the sense which Pater intends. Hopkins's religious preoccupations give a wider context to the minute and delicate perceptions of his senses; his asceticism places them in relationship to a depth and complexity of human experience outside the limited scope of art for art's sake 'proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass and simply for those moments' sake'. Hopkins has a standard beyond gratification of the senses by which the 'highest quality' can be judged. One may well believe that Walter Pater had not. Dr. Gardner rightly points out that Pater's attitude was 'opposed to the mature Hopkins's more profound reconciliation of aesthetics and ethics'. That Hopkins is at once a poet and a priest, withdrawn into himself and at the same time acutely aware of the world outside him should thus not present any serious difficulty; a similar complexity of personality is a characteristic of the seventeenth-century poets. It is a complexity which, by comparison, makes the poetry of Tennyson and Swinburne appear naïve. Hopkins's religious background should present no more difficulty than that of Chaucer, and certainly less than that of Blake, being more closely connected with a main European tradition in letters. Finally, it is necessary only to recall the constriction of his talent which Gray felt so acutely to realize that a sense of being 'Time's eunuch' is not a perquisite of a particularly exacting religious conscience or persuasion.

More worthy of serious consideration, as an obstruction to a satisfactory reading of Hopkins, is the tendency to regard him too simply as a modern poet—a poet to stand with Yeats, Eliot and Pound. This Hopkins certainly is not in many ways, and the reader who approaches him with the feeling that he ought to be is bound to feel some confusion. His sensibility is 'modern', of course, compared with Tennyson's, or Arnold's. He is, of course, a 'live'

poet and influence in the same way as are Donne or Wordsworth, but it would be misleading to suggest that his affinity with poets writing since the last war was greater than that of either of the earlier poets. In some respects he remains Victorian; in others he may probably be more adequately related to the poets of two or three centuries before him than to those of a century later. The sense of a more than personal frustration and debility, of a disease spreading through the whole structure of society and extending even to the supernatural order, have no place in the poetry of Hopkins. The feeling of universal disorder and disruption, of present inadequacy and ultimate uncertainty expressed by Yeats and Eliot, and now become so much part of our intellectual background :

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world . . .

belong to an age and temperament as foreign to Hopkins as to Dryden. His feeling for the sourness of industrial civilization, though given a richer particularity, has more in common with the 'strange disease of modern life' of Arnold than with the Waste Land of Eliot. He is nearer to the spirit of the religious poems of Donne or Herbert than to *Ash Wednesday*. His poetry carries different suggestions, postulates a different state of mind and society, from that of his successors. For the contemporary tendency is to suggest ultimately a social predicament, while Hopkins suggests a personal one. Thus, comparing a Hopkins sonnet with a part of *Ash Wednesday* on a not dissimilar theme, it will be noticed that the suggestiveness of Eliot is an outward move, which stretches from the intimate personal experience to embrace the predicament of a whole social group, while Hopkins centres inwards to a more complete and concise definition of his own personal experience. The rapid shift from the personal 'I' to the social 'us' is typical of Eliot :

And I pray that I may forget
These matters that with myself I too much discuss
Too much explain
Because I do not hope to turn again
Let these words answer
For what is done, not to be done again
May the judgment not be too heavy upon us . . .'

Hopkins's sonnet involves himself only :

My own heart let me have more pity on; let
Me live to my sad self hereafter kind,
Charitable. Not live this tormented mind
With this tormented mind tormenting yet . . .

and concentrates more and more particularly on self as it proceeds :

Soul, self; come poor Jackself, I do advise
You, jaded, let be; call off thoughts awhile
Elsewhere; leave comfort root-room . . .

He is concerned, in fact, not with the social aspect of a given situation, but fundamentally with an approach to

The selfless self of self, most strange, most still,
Fast furled and all foredrawn to No or Yes.

His 'criticism of life' is thus of a different order from that which is now peculiarly our own. It is made by firmer and more rigid standards. The criticism of Eliot and of Yeats is directed outwards, against an environment and a cultural situation and the standards by which it is made are the result of a deliberate and fastidious choice on the part of the poet, the products of a critical, not a religious, discipline. Hopkins arrives naturally at a certainty about fundamentals which Eliot attempts to reach with so much scrupulous consideration. But beyond that certainty there are still tormenting doubts and problems which are Hopkins's domain. The question is of the adequacy of self, not of the adequacy of society. His unquestioning acceptance of a code of conduct, an unequivocal attitude towards the moral values endorsed by the Church, combined with a scholastic intricacy and precision in defining them, make him appear naïve where the poets of the 'thirties are sophisticated, sophisticated where they are naïve. It is not necessary to drag in the now completely unacceptable Hopkins of

Immortal beauty is death with duty

—unacceptable because the words used no longer carry a simple suggestion, have acquired, in this arrangement, a taint from use for cheap ends—in a demonstration of this sophistication, and absence of it. Compare, for example, the sonnet

Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend
With thee; but sir, so what I please is just . . .

with Auden's

Sir, no man's enemy, forgiving all . . .

and the poise of the one dwarfs the other to the dimensions of a schoolboy's prize-piece. On the other hand, Hopkins's attitude towards honour and patriotism, at its extreme in the line

Where is the field I must play the man on? . . .

has a schoolboyish flavour as compared with the urbane manner of Gerontion

Think
Neither fear nor courage saves us. Unnatural vices
Are fathered by our heroism. Virtues
Are forced upon us by our impudent crimes . . .

It is convenient to note too how the whole movement and vocabulary of the Eliot passage is that of polite speech, with the inflections of a mannered and cultivated voice, like nothing in Hopkins. Hopkins

has the quality common to dialect speech of all types of expressing immediately and forcibly what is felt, regarding the object before the audience. As Charles Williams says,

‘It is as if the imagination, seeking for expression, had found both verb and substantive at one rush, had almost begun to say them at once, and had separated them only because the intellect had reduced the original unity, into divided but related sounds’.

The same is not true of Eliot, who, unlike Hopkins, is acutely aware of the literary associations of the words he uses, and of the types of social milieux in which one might hear them spoken. Hopkins is thus very different as a ‘modern poet’ from the poets of the post-war period, and allowances must be made for this difference if he is to be understood. The many unsuccessful imitations of Hopkins which Dr. Gardner adduces prove how little his derivatives find themselves in harmony with what is essential in his poetry, no matter how fascinated they may be with his technique. Hopkins, in fact, was not an innovator in the sense that Eliot is; he was not equipped to found any important school. His importance lies in having returned, in an age of which the poetic temper was Spenserian, smooth and, in a bad sense, simple, to the Shakespearean tradition in English—to the vigorous, the energetic and the concrete expression, in preference to the languid and the general. No reading which attempts to relate Hopkins to a school or clique, rather than to a tradition, can be satisfactory. He must, to a large extent, be read with a certain historical perspective; the time has come, or should have come, at which his verse can be seen as an achieved whole, and criticism of him fitted into a general critical theory of English poetry—a theory, of course, modified by his verse as by that of any original poet, but not still in the process of modification by it (as by that of a strictly contemporary poet), and hence capable of a disinterested and balanced assessment of his poetic value. It must be admitted, of course, in theory, that a new verse might arise which would place him in a new perspective, underline in him quite different qualities from those which now seem his most just claim to be read. If that were so, however, it would involve also a radical reassessment of the tradition to which he belongs; the importance and particular virtues of that tradition have been sufficiently defined and stressed, here and elsewhere, to make it unprofitable to dwell on them further. Or so one would have thought.

Yet one is a little surprised to find Dr. Gardner, after very justly relating Hopkins to Shakespeare, the Metaphysicals, and Keats, quoting a passage from *The Wreck of the Deutschland* with the following comment:

‘It is this dramatic, motile imagery which is so characteristic of Hopkins, and which assimilates him, as we have already remarked, to no other poet so much as to Shelley—the dynamic, Heraclitean Shelley of *The West Wind*, *The Cloud*, and “Worlds on Worlds are rolling ever”.’

There is unfortunately no space here for a detailed comparison of the use of language in and the sensibility behind *The Wreck of the Deutschland* and *The Ode to the West Wind*; but one cannot help but comment on the superficiality of any similarity which exists. *The West Wind*, in its way a successful poem, carries one on breathlessly through a succession of loosely related images; it is an able piece of programme music, puts in plangent English a series of connected general impressions. But the English is not the urgent, vigorous language of Hopkins at his best, nor are the images more than pleasant and appropriate pictures compared with the reinforced, searching metaphor of *The Wreck of the Deutschland*. Shelley's poem has a unity of mood, but he does not here or in any other poem achieve the unity of conception which informs the best of Hopkins, extends and increases the meaning of every metaphor, and moulds the language to the form of the experience to be conveyed. Shelley's affinities are rather with Tennyson than with Hopkins.

Dr. Gardner, however, is not often as challenging as this. It is doubtful if anyone will find anything startlingly new in his study of Hopkins, though as the blurb says, this is probably the first time that a complete and balanced review of his achievement has been attempted. If Hopkins had faults (and I think he had), it is perhaps, to be expected that they should be disregarded in a volume celebrating his centenary. Dr. Gardner's able and sensitive appraisal of Hopkins's virtues more than recompenses one for the absence of the slightest note of unfavourable criticism in this volume. The particular criticism of individual poems is a valuable contribution to the understanding of Hopkins, and those whose interests run to the technicalities of metrical innovation and virtuosity will find them considered in an admirably thorough manner. The second volume, not yet published is to contain further appreciations of individual poems, and a summing up of Hopkins's status as a poet. From the sympathy with which Dr. Gardner approaches his subject in this volume, and from the wealth of evidence with which he supports his case, one cannot doubt that Hopkins will emerge from the complete and careful study with claims to consideration as strong as those of any poet writing in the last hundred years, and stronger than those of most. Whether Dr. Gardner will succeed in getting those claims more generally recognized than at present, and Hopkins removed from the laboratory into the library, remains to be seen.

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TRISTAN AND ISOLT

TRISTAN UND ISOLT: A POEM BY GOTTFRIED VON STRASSBURG, edited with introduction, notes, glossary and a facsimile, by August Closs (German Medieval Series, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 8/6).

The poverty of German literature in the three centuries preceding the age of Goethe and Schiller—apart from the great event of Luther's Bible—has perhaps given rise to an idea that literary culture in Germany began with these poets. It is true that Germany was singularly lacking in anything approaching our 'Elizabethan Age', but it is equally true that she excelled any other single European country in the cultural achievement of the Middle Ages: of the four greatest poetic works belonging to the era, two are German—the *Parzival* of Wolfram von Eschenbach and *Tristan und Isolt* by Gottfried von Strassburg—and the incontestably greatest lyric poet of the times is also a German, Walther von der Vogelweide. A number of only less remarkable writers, such as Hartman von Ouwe, Wernher der Gartenaere, Konrad von Würzburg and Hugo von Trimberg, help to show how the Court Epic and the *Minnesang* were to the medieval German poets what the drama was to English poets of the sixteenth century: the form and the spirit meeting to produce not one or two solitary works but a whole school of genius.

Messrs. Blackwell are to be thanked warmly for their German Medieval Series, in which they have already published *Der Arme Heinrich* (Hartman von Ouwe), *Meier Helmbrecht* (Wernher der Gartenaere), a volume of *Essays on the Medieval German Love Lyrics* with a facsimile and translations by M. F. Richey, and now Gottfried's *Tristan und Isolt*, with a selection from Walther von der Vogelweide in preparation.

Mr. Closs's introduction and notes to the (abridged) *Tristan und Isolt* are very helpful, his remarks on Gottfried's sources and the various literary versions of the Tristan saga are unusually lucid and interesting, and the glossary is invaluable (I wish it could have been more comprehensive). Gottfried's work is, or should be, of general interest: the reader with a fair working knowledge of modern German will not find the language difficulty insuperable since the vowel-shifting is easily allowed for (Middle High German *i* developed into the modern German *ei*, *û* into *au*, etc.), grammatical differences are often elucidated by the context, the vocabulary of the *höfische Epik* is limited and conventional and the forms and customs of medieval chivalry are a matter of general knowledge. In addition there are Mr. Closs's glossary and a number of translations into modern German, not easily obtainable at the present moment.

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There is no call to approach *Tristan und Isolt* (written about the year 1210) in a spirit of antiquarian curiosity, since it is pro-