The Art of Reading Gerard Manley Hopkins

AUSTERITY MADE SUBLIME

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THE poets in my orbit have a uniform reaction when they discover that I spent a year studying the work of the nineteenth-century poet Gerard Manley Hopkins under the eminent English poet Geoffrey Hill: first incredulity, then envy, then a bit of bafflement. Why a novelist would choose such tutelage is a kind of hieroglyphic they can't quite crack. The others in my Hopkins graduate seminar at Boston University in 2003 must have felt a similar species of astonishment: I was the only nonpoet among them, out of their coven and off in a corner scratching down Hill's every sentence as only the worshipful will. The younger novelists in my orbit skip the incredulity and envy and arrive immediately at bafflement. If I mention that Hopkins and Hill have meant more to me than Melville and James, their foreheads wrinkle. They have nary an inkling of what I might mean, but they suspect that this cross-genre scholarship is peculiar if not out-and-out blasphemous. How does a novelist benefit from the close study of a poet?

In the clutches of a medieval melancholy, living with a woman who no longer loved me, straining to complete a graduate degree and the manuscript of a god-awful novel about a biblical flood, I went to Hill and Hopkins—the two most austere wordsmiths in our tongue, separated by a hundred and fifty years of English verse—as both a penance and purification. Penance because every former Catholic feels the guilt pangs of apostasy, and purification because my sorrow had me feeling downright defiled—emotionally, spiritually, literally. (Hopkins was an apostate too: He abandoned Anglicanism for Roman Catholicism in 1866 and, eighteen years later, quit England for Ireland.) I had wandered briefly across Hopkins's rock-ribbed earth during my critical excursions into Donne's "Holy Sonnets" and Wordsworth's *Prelude*, and knew of Hill as the gravest, most formidable living poet in English—he makes Seamus Heaney look like Shel Silverstein—but I couldn't have divined the degree to which these two poets would lay siege to my waking hours, alter my artistic temperament, and permit me to take part in literary creation at its highest level. Heart-wrecked and outcast, I woke each dawn with a trench carved through

my center and reached for Hopkins the way others cling to Christ. Eighteen times a day I crooned the Hopkinsian first line of Hill's debut collection, *For the Unfallen* (1959), as if it were an ecstatic mantra assuring my own miracle: "Against the burly air I strode / Crying the miracles of God."

Because Hill's objective correlative is often esoteric English history or an opaque tract of theology—in *Tenebrae* (1978) Hill quips that "theology makes good bedside reading"—and because his vision will not apologize for unfettered erudition, willfully confused critics charge him time and again with a paucity of feeling, as if the only acceptable expression of emotion must (A) be easefully understood, and (B) contain daffodils and lonely clouds. But a poet's meaning—any sublime writer's meaning, Hill lectured—always resides in language (a notion he first gleaned from Allen Tate, who was responsible for transforming the teenage Hill into a poet). In addition to offering us the objective correlative, T. S. Eliot insisted that "genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood." It achieves that communication through sound (meter and rhyme), which appeals to feeling the same way music does. This is why you can delight in hearing Hopkins all day long with only an inchoate comprehension of his intent—why you can know what he means without at first knowing precisely what he means.

Hear is the crucial term. Hopkins composed all his verse for reciting, a fact he repeatedly emphasized in letters to his steadfast friend, the poet Robert Bridges. Whenever Hill delivered Hopkins to us in his sonorous Worcestershire brogue, we froze as if from fear—fear of missing a single syllable in that refulgent recitation. Hopkins sounds like no one else in English, but he is not the obscurantist some readers have taken him for. His poems, like Hill's own, are arduous the way all important poetry is arduous. "Difficult art is democratic," Hill maintained, "while simplified language is tyrannical." Elsewhere Hill has said that the democratic quality of difficult poetry derives from "doing your audience the honor of supposing that they are intelligent human beings." The intellectual anemia of "populist poetry," on the other hand, "treats people as if they were fools."

Hopkins's only audience during his lifetime was the risen Christ—to Hopkins no fool—and those few friends, such as Bridges and R. W. Dixon, who were privileged enough to receive his sound by post. Hear this, the first half of "No Worst," among the "Terrible Sonnets"—also called the "Sonnets of Desolation"—which Hopkins composed in Dublin during that dolorous year of 1885:

> No worst, there is none. Pitched
> past pitch of grief,
> More pangs will, schooled at
> forepangs, wilder wring.
> Comforter, where, where is your
> comforting?
> Mary, mother of us, where is your
> relief?
> My cries heave, herds-long; huddle
> in a main, a chief
> Woe, world-sorrow; on an age-old
> anvil wince and sing—
> Then lull, then leave off. Fury had
> shrieked 'No ling-
> ering! Let me be fell: force I must
> be brief.'

Or this, the second half of "I Wake and Feel," also among the "Terrible Sonnets":

> I am gall, I am heartburn. God's
> most deep decree
> Bitter would have me taste: my taste
> was me;
> Bones built in me, flesh filled, blood
> brimmed the curse.
> Selfyeast of spirit a dull
> dough sours. I see
> The lost are like this, and their
> scourge to be
> As I am mine, their sweating selves;
> but worse.

Memorize those lines like liturgy (Harold Bloom has contended that if

you commit Hamlet's words to memory you will *know him*, and the same is true for Hopkins), recite them to yourself every hour during your dark night of the soul, *feel* their "inner vibrations"—Irving Howe's term for the metrical buzz of Eliot's verse—and by morning's shine you will understand what they mean: the pitch, the forepangs, the herds-long, and the anvil; the bitter taste, the flesh filled, the blood brimmed, and the scourge. Hill instructed me to memorize the "Terrible Sonnets" if I truly wanted to live in them, if I wanted them to breathe in me, and now their clanged rhythms are as large a part of my consciousness as the faces of my sons.

THERE can be meaning in rhythm before there is meaning in definitions, in diction. What you hear in Hopkins is "sprung rhythm," an emotion-pressed metrics—influenced by the nursery rhymes he treasured as a child—that makes complete use of the accentual possibilities of the language. The lines are marked by definitive stresses, major and minor, instead of syllables. (Hopkins turned poor Robert Bridges batty with his obsessive stressing—"stress is the life of it," he wrote Bridges about his meter.) Each unit or "foot" of a line holds up to four syllables but only a single stress. These are two lines from the second stanza of his moiling masterwork "The Wreck of the Deutschland"—the thirty-five-stanza poem Bridges dubbed "a great dragon folded in the gate to forbid all entrance"—with the stresses in bold: "The **swoon** of a **heart** that the **sweep** and the **hurl** of thee **trod / Hard down** with a **horr**or of **height**." And from stanza three: "I **whirl**ed out **wings** that **spell** / And **fled** with a **fling** of the **heart** to the **heart** of the **Host**."

Sing that—rap it if you want. Hip-*hop* is a more deserving nomenclature than rappers realize. They've been unwittingly sampling Hopkins from day one, their bang-bang Anglo-Saxon rhythms and alliterative melodies—cadence from clangor—mere copies of the master's art. Bob Dylan once had the humility to recognize that he requires music to make poetry of his words, whereas for the genuine poet—he was thinking of Eliot—the words *are* the music. For the sheer ecstasy of the acoustic, neither Whitman nor Swinburne surpasses Hopkins: His stanzas are perfectly carpentered amphitheaters. Half a century ahead of his time, he performed the feat of being modern while remaining loyal to tradition, a poet for whom common Victorian English simply would not do. Each time we return to his verse we are confronted by its bewitching intricacy.

A sculpture of Gerard Manley Hopkins by Rowan Gillespie.

ROWAN GILLESPIE

Hopkins's syntactical and metrical innovation was not an iconoclastic reaction against iambic pentameter or a mere eccentricity, but rather a dire and humble spiritual initiative. The intensity of his music aims always to commune with the messiah he feels he does not deserve, to grasp Him, to gain respite from the crisis gnawing his spirit. That music can be mysterious the way God must always be. In Hopkins, style, structure, and theology are inextricable—his style *is* his substance. He devised sprung rhythm because unconventional communication was necessary in order to behold God's grace. His innovation takes some wearing, but you need not be privy to his mechanics of "instress" and "inscape," or his Wordsworthian program of holiness manifest in nature, to be stirred by Hopkins's verse—especially the "Terrible Sonnets," that blistering chronicle of a poet caught in the molars of melancholy. With the possible exception of Donne's "Holy Sonnets," their intensity of feeling is unrivaled in English-language poetry. To hear them is to enter the tarred abyss that Hopkins was sunk in during their composition.

Hill could not brook those indolent critics who have branded Hopkins a poet of despair. They fail to recognize that for Hopkins—a Jesuit priest of extreme piety, of Ignatian austerity—despair meant doctrinal despair, the sin of shunning God, of shucking all hope of salvation in Christ. This shunning is akin to the Augustinian idea of evil as complete alienation from God, and Hopkins knew that despair meant the damnation of his eternal soul—the very spiritual suicide for which Marlowe's Faustus is yanked hellward. The "Terrible Sonnets" are documents of desolation; the agon at work in

Hopkins is against the Ignatian immediacy of affliction, not despair. The evidence waits at the start of "Carrion Comfort": "Not, I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee." And in "The Leaden Echo," that echo proclaims, "So be beginning, be beginning to despair," but Hopkins counters with: "O there's none; no no no there's none."

Still, the anguish in the "Terrible Sonnets" *feels* like despair, in our colloquial use of the term as synonymous with depression. Hopkins grappled with melancholy throughout most of his abbreviated life. (He died of typhoid in 1889 at the age of forty-four.) His decision to convert to Roman Catholicism as an undergrad at Oxford proved tortuous; he considered it a betrayal of his family and his country, both staunchly Anglican. He took his religious orders into the Society of Jesus in 1868, just two years after his conversion, and then for more than a decade held numerous clerical and teaching positions all over Britain. He torched much of the verse he composed as a student—an incalculable loss—and didn't write any poems at all for nine years as he struggled to reconcile the poet's mission with the cleric's constancy. His only obligation was the exalting of Christ's glory—Saint Ignatius insisted that "man is created to praise"—and poetry was impossible unless it served that end. In 1884 he moved to Ireland and plummeted into darkness.

Hopkins was nearly inconsolable teaching Greek at University College in Dublin. Harassed by health problems, hounded by a repressed homosexuality, he missed his beloved homeland and his family. In a letter from that time, he writes of "that coffin of dejection and weakness in which I live, without even the hope of change." In another, he writes of the "three hard wearying wasting wasted years" he has spent in Dublin. The writing of the "Terrible Sonnets" in such an almost existential state required what F. R. Leavis named "the heroic quality of Hopkins's genius." Robert Bridges, always of two minds about that genius, waited an unforgivable twenty-nine years after Hopkins's death to give the world an edition of his extraordinary verse.

THE sublime, the ecstatic, the Keatsian appreciation of nature—these are everywhere in Hopkins, despite their being birthed by the religious melancholy of an anguished man. Hill called Hopkins's vitality "the energy of the self," and it's true that Hopkins at his best scarcely has an equal in his presentation of self. As for Hill—what seems like obscurantism and cryptic or hybridized Christianity in his verse is really an assertion that ideas are experiences, that the mind has a

life—that art, music, belief, and history rendered in the organic quagmire of language uncover something essential about our existence. A disciple of Hopkins, Hill nevertheless has his own vision of our fallen state. Hopkins would not have been capable of these two stanzas by Hill, from *Tenebrae*:

> I cannot turn aside from what I do;
> you cannot turn away from what I
> am.
> You do not dwell in me nor I in you
>
> however much I pander to your
> name
> or answer to your lords of revenue,
> surrendering the joys that they
> condemn.

As a teacher, Hill surrendered no joy. The effect of his understated comedy in the classroom was sharpened in contrast to the gravity we all expected, to the grave aura he emitted. Hill was seventy-one years old when he was my teacher, nearly a decade ago, slow moving and somewhat slumped, and yet he astounded us weekly with his comedic flares. During a thirty-minute discussion about Hopkins's use of a particular comma, Hill said that the use illustrates "the fragility of a comma," and then paused to consider the phrase, whispered it again to himself, and exclaimed "Ahh," kissing three fingers the Italian way. About the semicolon before "cliffs of fall" in "No Worst," he remarked on "the delicate membrane of a semicolon," then stood—slowly—to bow. "It's the most important semicolon in English poetry," he said, sitting. "Of course you can't prove me wrong." About Hopkins's aesthetic sensibility: "True beauty presupposes duty"—pause—"I should have gone into advertising. It's too late now." The day after President George W. Bush's State of the Union address, a student joked that she had hoped Bush would quote Hopkins, to which Hill replied, "If the president had quoted Hopkins he would be quite a different person, wouldn't he?" At one of my visits to his book-gorged office in the Theology Building—after the Hopkins seminar ended I continued to study informally with Hill each week; he always wore black sweat suits assaulted by cat hair—I commented that Saint Ignatius "sure is a tedious fellow," and Hill quaked with laughter for well nigh a minute. Imagine my bliss at having unintentionally cracked up the living titan of English verse.

By the time I crossed genre lines and studied Hopkins with Hill, I had been writing fiction in earnest for nearly a decade: three novels and dozens of stories, most of them Hemingway-cum-Carver counterfeit, handily begotten and almost worthy of a disinfected Dumpster. An aptitude for storytelling is not enough. One must learn to live in

language, and this living was not possible for me before Hopkins and Hill, despite my immersion in the best prose stylists in English, from Sterne to Nabokov to Updike to Barry Hannah to Martin Amis. Hill led us in our staunch attention to pairs of words in Hopkins—"disabling cold" and "chilling remembrance" and "baffling ban"—and inspired in me a reverence for words as gravid *things* neither to be rushed nor thought of as satisfied gifts from the muse, but rather as deliberate instruments of assertion painstakingly chosen for their specific function.

Attention to language seeks value and believes that value can be found. In his conviction of art's hierarchy, Hill urged us to trace down to the minutest detail how and why something is superior to something else—Dickinson is superior to Rossetti just as Bellow is superior to Mailer, and that superiority can be substantiated by language. Don't let anyone tell you that it's impossible to prove how one book is better than another. The difference between a major poet and a minor one is that the major poet *writes into* the density of language while the minor one merely floats on top of it, and the same holds for prose writers. "Hopkins," Hill said, "enters language as a bird takes off into the air," and that's exactly what you feel when reading Nabokov and Bellow at their most vibrant. You know when you're holding a novel whose language betrays a staggering lack of register, every noun and verb the available jargon, every adjective limply obvious, a morass of cliché without vigor or revelation, abrupt sentences that have arrived on the page without a commitment to the dynamism and dimensions of language. What's the chief defect that makes Tom Clancy vastly inferior to Nadine Gordimer? The lame inevitability of his language, flogged sentences that disclose a mind incapable of activating self-knowledge or delighting in analogues, and a pandering to the simplistic and reductive, which is precisely how propaganda works.

In his 1982 biography of John Berryman, John Haffenden quotes the poet: "Everything good in the end is highbrow; all the artists who have ever survived were intellectuals." You might not believe that, but believe this: If your novel is yet another domestic drama about middle-class malaise, one more researched exegesis on "the way we live now," a cataract of suburban realism rendered in yawnful detail, in sentences that smirk at their own flaccid confection, expect to be forgotten. In *The Orchards of Syon* (2002), Hill claims: "Last days, last things, loom on: I write / to astonish myself." Last days and last things are always looming. The time for astonishment is short. Stretch for austerity made sublime. Cry the miracles of God.