CHATTERTON LECTURE ON AN ENGLISH POET

THE FIRE I' THE FLINT: REFLECTIONS ON THE POETRY OF GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

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WHAT I have to say about Gerard Manley Hopkins springs from the slightly predatory curiosity of a poet interested in the creative processes of another poet. For years, much of the discussion of Hopkins's work had been a form of special pleading, a special pleading that began in Hopkins's own letters to his friends Robert Bridges and Canon Dixon, and was amplified in the writings of Bridges, F. R. Leavis, W. H. Gardener, and other commentators. Their criticism tends to begin at a point in Hopkins's own thought or sensibility, in his catholicism, his notion of the incarnation, his philological passion, his aesthetic/philosophical vocabulary of inscape and instress, his metrical theories, and so on—it begins at a point beneath the poetry and the critical act then becomes a lever whose work it is to move the mass of the poetry through a distance of incomprehension, indifference, or hostility, into what these critics perceive to be its proper place, that is, as an inevitable and organic part of the structure of the English literary tradition. I assume that this work of leverage or persuasion has been successfully completed, and my critical instrument at this point will not be the lever but rather the tongs or the calipers. I want to cross a couple of ideas about poetry on each other, and hinge them in such a way as to take hold of and take some measure of the Hopkins opus. I want to approach him from the circumference of his art rather than from the centre of himself.

The title of the lecture is taken from a speech by the Poet in *Timon of Athens* where Shakespeare seems to be glossing the abundance and naturalness of his own art briefly and completely. The Poet has been murmuring to himself, composing on the tongue as Wordsworth and Yeats were prone to do years afterwards, to the consternation of Cumberland peasant and

Coole Park house-guest alike, when the Painter, who is bringing a picture as a gift to Timon, addresses him:

> You are rapt, sir, in some work, some dedication
> To the great lord

to which the Poet replies:

> A thing slipp'd idly from me.
> Our poesy is as a gum which oozes
> From whence 'tis nourished: the fire i' the flint
> Shows not till it be struck; our gentle flame
> Provokes itself, and, like the current, flies
> Each bound it chafes.

Much could be said about this spawn of metaphor in which the four elements combine and coagulate by sleight of word, but I want to look at just one aspect, implicit in the very quick of the word 'slipp'd', which acts like a tuning fork for the music and movement of the whole piece. 'A thing slipp's idly from me'—the poem is apparently dismissed as something let go or let fall almost accidentally; there is an understated tone to the phrase, an understatement artists are prone to when speaking about a finished work in order to protect the work's mystery and their own. Yet while the tone protects this mystery, and the immediate sense of 'slipp'd' makes light of the poem, behind the immediate sense lies a whole range of meanings and associations which insist on the poem as something nevertheless momentous in its occasion if momentary in its occurrence. Slip, after all, has also to do with unleashing energy; with propagation by separation from an original growth point; and (if one were to engage in special pleading) with the moment of arrival, words coming safely and fluently towards us out of the uncharted waters of the unconscious. All in all, what is accidental, energetic, and genetic in the poetic act is hinted at here in one syllable: the slipping is the slipping envisaged by Robert Frost when he declared that 'like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting'. So the nonchalance of the Poet's tone is complicated by big—as in 'big with child'—implications in the word's ramifying meanings and associations. And it is these ramifications which begin to spread and net in the following lines:

> Our poesy is as a gum which oozes
> From whence 'tis nourished . . .

The slip has become the slip almost of mucus, the smoothness

of the verse insinuating a sense of natural release, the intimations of propagation becoming explicit in the ooze and nurture of the gum tree. And later, when 'our gentle flame provokes itself', the stirrings of the flame are as involuntary as the sexual stirrings which initiate growth and life itself; in fact, the flame is something of an aura, the flicker at the edge of the ovum under the microscope, a totally different kind of incandescence from the frigid sparks out of stone with which it is explicitly contrasted because, unlike this organic, oozy marshlight,

> the fire i' the flint
> Shows not till it be struck.

You may now have begun to see my drift, but I want you to be patient while, like the current, I fly the bound I chafe. Or, to use a subsequent speech of the Poet's on his own procedures:

> my free drift
> Halts not particularly, but moves itself
> In a wide sea of wax—

a wax which I hope to mould before the end of the lecture.

The kind of poetry in the speech I have just considered—perhaps too particularly—is the kind of poetry which Eliot had in mind when he spoke of the auditory imagination, that feeling for word and syllable reaching down below the ordinary levels of language, uniting the primitive and civilized associations words have accrued. It is a poetry that offers a continuous invitation into its echoes and recesses:

> Light thickens
> And the crow makes wing to the rooky wood;
> Good things of day begin to droop and drowse . . .

It is the kind of poetry symbolists wrote at the end of the nineteenth century and poets with an aspiration towards symbolism required in the twentieth: 'A poem should be palpable and mute . . . wordless/as the flight of birds . . . A poem should not mean/but be'—the popularity of Archibald McLeish's poem is striking evidence of how current this view of poetry became.

To put it another way, the function of language in much modern poetry, and in much poetry admired by moderns, is to talk about itself to itself. The poem is a complex word, a linguistic exploration whose tracks melt as it maps its own progress. Whether they are defining poetry or writing it, the sense of poetry as ineluctably itself and not some other thing

persists for modern poets. Here is Wallace Stevens defining it, in 'Adagia':

> Poetry creates a fictitious existence on an exquisite plane. This definition must vary as the plane varies, an exquisite plane being merely illustrative.

And here is T. S. Eliot writing it, on an exquisite plane, in 'Marina':

> Bowsprit cracked with ice and paint cracked with heat.
> I made this, I have forgotten
> And remember
> Between one June and another September.
> Made this unknown, half conscious, unknown, my own.
> The garboard strake leaks, the seams need caulking.
> This form, this face, this life
> Living to live in a world of time beyond me; let me
> Resign my life for this life, my speech for that unspoken,
> The awakened, lips parted, the hope, the new ships.

Now while this derives from a situation in Shakespeare's *Pericles*, knowledge of the derivation does not limit but liberates the scope of the poetry. For here we have 'de la musique avant toute chose'. The ear has incubated a cadence, a cadence which is to be found in the epigraph to the poem itself and which may well have constituted, in Valéry's terms, the poem's donné:

> Quis hic locus, quae
> regio, quae mundi plaga?

Eliot himself has discussed all this in 'The Three Voices of Poetry' and C. K. Stead has followed the trail admirably in *The New Poetic*. The self conspires with the self and hatches not a plot but an image. The voice pays back into itself and argues nothing. 'It cannot be too strongly stated that a poem is not the expression of a feeling the poet had before he began to write', Laforgue insisted with a bored wink to Eliot who took the tip and affirmed:

> It is the poet's business to be original . . . only so far as is absolutely necessary for saying what he has to say; only so far as is dictated, not by the idea—for there is no idea—but by the nature of that dark embryo within him which gradually takes on the form and speech of a poem.

And again, in another context:

> He is going to all that trouble, not in order to communicate with anyone, but to gain relief from acute discomfort. And when the words are finally arranged in the right way . . . he may experience a moment

of exhaustion, of appeasement, of absolution, and of something very near annihilation which is in itself indescribable.

The symbolist image of poetic creation, one might say, is the unburdening of the indefinable through pangs that are indescribable, where the poem survives as the hieroglyph of a numinous nativity. At any rate, from Shakespeare's ooze to Eliot's dark embryo, we have a vision of poetic creation as a feminine action, almost parthenogenetic, where it is the ovum and its potential rather than the sperm and its penetration that underlies their accounts of poetic origins. And out of this vision of feminine action comes a language for poetry that tends to brood and breed, crop and cluster, with a texture of echo and implication, trawling the pool of the ear with a net of associations.

To take one final well-known example of the kind of work I am thinking of:

O rose, thou art sick!
The invisible worm
That flies in the night,
In the howling storm,

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy:
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

These eight lines of Blake's are like four loaves and four fishes that shoal and crumble as we try to consume their meaning. A rose is a rose is a rose but not when it's sick. Then it becomes a canker, a corruption, a tainted cosmos. The poem drops petal after petal of suggestion without ever revealing its stripped core: it is an open invitation into its meaning rather than an assertion of it.

Now I wonder if we can say the same of this poem, also short, also living off the life of its images:

Heaven-Haven

A nun takes the veil

I have desired to go
Where springs not fail
To fields where flies no sharp and sided hail
And a few lilies blow.

And I have asked to be
Where no storms come,
Where the green swell is in the havens dumb
And out of the swing of the sea.

In each case the verse lives by its music and suggestiveness, but with one important difference: the suggestiveness here condenses on a stated theme, 'a nun takes the veil', and the heaven–purity–cold idea equates with the haven–nunnery–quiet images in a relationship that is essentially allegorical rather than symbolic. The Hopkins poem is fretted rather than fecund. In the Blake poem the rose might be a girl but it remains a rose. Yet it is also a rose window, bloodshot with the light of other possible meanings. The rose and the sickness are not illustrative in the way the lilies and the haven are. In 'Heaven-Haven' it is the way things are exquisitely wrought, the way a crystal is sharp and sided and knowable rather than the way a rose is deep and unknowable that counts. Hopkins's art here is the discovery of verbal equivalents, in mingling the purity of images with the idea of a vow of chastity. The words are crafted together more than they are coaxed out of one another, and they are crafted in the service of an idea that precedes the poem, is independent of it and to which the poem is perhaps ultimately subservient. So much for the dark embryo. We are now in the realm of flint-spark rather than marshlight. 'Heaven-Haven' is consonantal fire struck by idea off language. The current of its idea does not fly the bound it chafes but confines itself within delightful ornamental channels.

To take another comparison with a poet whose nervous apprehension of phenomena and ability to translate this nervous energy into phrases reminds us also of Hopkins: take this line by Keats, describing autumn as the season of fulfilment:

> Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun

and compare it with a Hopkins line that also realizes a sense of burgeoning and parturition, imagining Jesus in Mary's womb:

> Warm-laid grave of a womb-life grey.

Both lines rely on the amplitude of vowels for their dream of benign, blood-warm growth, but where Keats's vowels seem like nubs, buds off a single *uh* or *oo*, yeasty growths that are ready at any moment to relapse back into the original mother sound, Hopkins's are defined, held apart, and in relation to one another rather than in relation to the original nub: if they are full they are also faceted. Hopkins's consonants alliterate to maintain a design whereas Keats's release a flow. I am reminded of something T. S. Eliot wrote comparing Shakespeare and Ben Jonson. In Jonson, Eliot remarked,

unconscious does not respond to unconscious; no swarms of inarticulate feelings are aroused. The immediate appeal of Jonson is to the mind; his emotional tone is not in the single verse but in the design of the whole.

We must say much the same of the Keats and Hopkins lines. Keats has the life of a swarm, fluent, and merged; Hopkins has the design of the honeycomb, definite and loaded. In Keats, the rhythm is narcotic, in Hopkins it is a stimulant to the mind. Keats woos us to receive, Hopkins alerts us to perceive.

I think that what is true of this single Hopkins line is generally true of the kind of poetry he writes. For in spite of the astounding richness of his music and the mimetic power of his vocabulary, his use of language is disciplined by a philological and rhetorical passion. There is a conscious push of the deliberating intelligence, a siring strain rather than a birth-push in his poetic act. Like Jonson, he is *poeta doctus*; like Jonson's, his verse is 'rammed with life', butting ahead instead of hanging back into its own centre. As opposed to the sympolist poetic, it is concerned with statement instead of states of feeling. Indeed, at this point it is interesting to recall Ben Jonson's strictures on the Shakespearian fluency, rejecting linguistic mothering in favour of rhetorical mastery. Jonson, you remember, was not impressed by the way Shakespeare's current flies each bound it chafes:

> I remember the players have often mentioned it as an honour to Shakespeare that in his writing, whatsoever he penned, he never blotted out line. My answer hath been, 'Would he had blotted a thousand.' . . . He was, indeed, honest and of an open and free nature wherein he flowed with that facility that sometime it was necessary he should be stopped . . . His wit was in his own power: would the rule of it had been so too.

Jonson believed that energy should not be slipped but kept leashed. He values control, rule, revision, how things are fit, how they are fitted. And the same is true of Hopkins: the rule of his own 'wit' was Hopkins's study both as priest and poet. He valued what he called 'the masculine powers' in poetry, the presence of 'powerful and active thought'—it was typical that when he realized his 'new rhythm' he had to schematize it into a metric. The following extracts from a letter to Coventry Patmore in which Hopkins discusses Keats are illuminating:

> It is impossible not to feel with weariness how his verse is at every turn abandoning itself to an unmanly and enervating luxury. It appears too that he said something like 'O for a life of impressions rather than thoughts'. . . Nevertheless, I feel and see in him the beginnings of

something opposite to this, of an interest in higher things, and of powerful and active thought . . . His mind had, as it seems to me, the distinctly masculine powers in abundance, his character the manly virtues, but while he gave himself up to dreaming and self-indulgence, of course, they were in abeyance . . . but . . . his genius would have taken to an austere utterance in art. Reason, thought, what he did not want to live by, would have asserted itself presently.

As is so often the case when a poet is diagnosing the condition of another poet, Hopkins is here offering us something of a self-portrait. The development he divined for Keats was one which he had already undergone himself. For Hopkins, as a schoolboy and undergraduate, had aspired to the life of sensations rather than thoughts, had luxuriated poetically and had been touched by the gem-like flame of Walter Pater's influence at Oxford. His masculine powers of powerful and active thought were consciously developed, as consciously as his theories of sprung rhythm and his private language of instress and inscape: behind the one was a directed effort in Welsh and Classical versification, behind the other a scholastic appetite for Scotism. We have only to look at his early poem 'A Vision of Mermaids' to realize that when he spoke of 'an unmanly and enervating luxury', he was speaking from experience.

> From their white waists a silver skirt was spread
> To mantle o'er the tail, such as is shed
> Around the Water Nymphs in fretted falls,
> At red Pompeii on medallion'd walls.
> A tainted fin on either shoulder hung;
> Their pansy-dark or bronzen locks were strung
> With coral, shells, thick-pearlèd cords, whateer
> The abysmal Ocean hoards of strange and rare.

This is gum oozing from whence 'tis nourished all right, from that enervating, luxurious Keats whom the mature Hopkins rounded on. In spite of the felicity of 'pansy-dark' and the resonance of the fourth line, what we miss here is what Hopkins described in his own mature poetry:

> But as air, melody, is what strikes me most of all in music and design in painting, so design, pattern or what I am in the habit of calling 'inscape' is what above all I aim at in poetry.

In fact, he might have been speaking as his own ideal reader when he expressed his reaction to the music of Henry Purcell:

> It is the forgèd feature finds me; it is the rehearsal
> Of own, of abrúpt sélf there so thrusts on, so throngs the ear.

In this earliest work there is no sense of the poetic emotion distinguishing itself. His posture here is one of surrender to experience whereas in his maturer work it is one of mastery, of penetration. His own music thrusts and throngs and it is forged. It is the way words strike off one another, the way they are drilled, marched, and countermarched, rather than the way they philander and linger among themselves, that constitutes his proper music. Hopkins's sound and sense always aim to complement each other in a perfectly filled-in outline: his poems are closer to being verbal relief-work than to being a receding, imploding vortex of symbol.

I wish to make one final comparison with another poet in order to clarify this 'masculine' element in his approach. W. B. Yeats is also a poet in whom we are offered the arched back of English in place of its copious lap; and again in Yeats we are constantly aware of the intentness on structure, and the affirmative drive of thought running under the music, of which the music is the clear-tongued pealing. Like Hopkins, he was impatient of 'poetical literature, that is monotonous in its structure and effeminate in its insistence upon certain moments of strained lyricism' and he was possessed of

> the certainty that all the old writers, the masculine writers of the world, wrote to be spoken or to be sung, and in a later age to be read aloud for hearers who had to understand quickly or not at all.

These sentiments not only re-echo Hopkins's strictures upon Keats, but they also recall Hopkins's famous, impatient directions on how to get the best out of his work, for he too wrote to be spoken or to be sung:

> Take breath and read it with the ears, as I always wish to be read, and my verse becomes all right.

And in another context:

> Declaimed, the strange constructions would be dramatic and effective.

So I am setting up two modes and calling them masculine and feminine—but without the Victorian sexist overtones to be found in Hopkins's and Yeats's employment of the terms. In the masculine mode, the language functions as a form of address, of assertion or command, and the poetic effort has to do with conscious quelling and control of the materials, a labour of shaping; words are not music before they are anything else, nor are they drowsy from their slumber in the unconscious, but athletic, capable, displaying the muscle of sense. Whereas in

the feminine mode the language functions more as evocation than as address, and the poetic effort is not so much a labour of design as it is an act of divination and revelation; words in the feminine mode behave with the lover's come hither instead of the athlete's display, they constitute a poetry that is delicious as texture before it is recognized as architectonic

Yet Hopkins's poetry is immediately appealing or repellent, depending on the reader's taste, just because of its texture: is its immediate appeal not to the nervous system? It has worked its passage as modern rather than Victorian poetry not because it was published in 1918 but because, as Geoffrey Hartmann has written,

> I. A. Richards, William Empson, and F. R. Leavis championed Hopkins as the classic example of the modern poet. They agreed that his strength was immediately bound up with the immediacy of his relation to words: he seemed to fulfil the dream that poetry was language speaking about itself, language uttering complex words that were meanings *as* words.

He seemed, in other words, to possess those characteristics that I have made typical of the feminine mode; yet I still believe that he is essentially closer to the masculine, rhetorical mode.

Let us take a celebrated example of Hopkins's modern imagist technique—taking imagist in Pound's sense of 'that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in a moment of time'. This is the famous fourth stanza of 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' where the protagonist has emerged from the experience, at once terrible and renovating, of Christ's sudden irruption into his life:

> I am soft sift
> In an hourglass—at the wall
> Fast, but mined with a motion, a drift,
> And it crowds and it combs to the fall;
> I steady as a water in a well, to a poise, to a pane,
> But roped with, always, all the way down from the tall
> Fells or flanks of the voel, a vein
> Of the gospel proffer, a pressure, a principle, Christ's gift.

Here Hopkins's procedures and eccentricities almost insist on being appreciated. His interest in dialect and archaism, in the use of the Welsh 'voel', meaning a small hill; his tendency to invert the functions of parts of speech, making 'proffer' a noun instead of a verb; and his incredible precision in making the gospel a 'proffer', with its suggestion of urgency and obligation

to accept, so much more alive than 'offer'—all of this invites comment. As does the fact that 'proffer' alliterates with 'pressure' and 'principle', three piston-strokes heightening the pressure down the line. Moreover, Hopkins's total possession of the silent contradictory motions of sand in the neck of an hourglass and water in the bowl of the hills, his completely exciting apprehension of these things in sound and sense allows one to comprehend easily what 'inscape' meant, and what he meant when he once wrote in his journal: 'I saw the inscape freshly, as if my eye were still growing.'

Now all this has the status of an imagist poem in its verbal life, but it has the status of analogy within the argument and structure of the whole poem. It works like this. The streaming of sand down the sides of the glass is faded into the downpour of streams on the fells or flanks of a hill, and what had been at the bottom a sinking becomes a source, because this downing motion from above sustains, and rises as, a spring. So that suddenly the downing motion of Christ, his dark descending, becomes not something to make the soul sink in a quicksand of terror but to steady and be sustained by descending graces—Hopkins could well cry here, 'See where Christ's blood streams in the firmament.' Once more, as in 'Heaven-Haven', but in a much more complex manner, the whole figurative life of the piece is analogous and diagrammatic; what is mimetic in the words is completely guaranteed by what is theological behind them, expressing the mystery of Christ's efficacy and action in human life:

> Thou art lightning and love, I found it, a winter and warm;
> Father and fondler of heart thou hast wrung:
> Hast thy dark descending and most art merciful then.

If one still needed convincing about how designed and intended all this was, how it lives not only in its linguistic elements but in the poet's pre-verbal intention and intellection, one might compare it with another stanza of linguistic virtuosity, of considerable imaginative force, written by another poet with a sacramental apprehension of the world. Dylan Thomas's lines in 'The Force That Through The Green Fuse Drives The Flower' also concern water and quicksand:

> The hand that swirls the water in the pool
> Stirs the quicksand; that ropes the blowing wind
> Hauls my shroud sail.
> And I am dumb to tell the hanging man
> How of my clay is made the hangman's lime.

This is much more the 'logic of imagination' than the 'logic of concepts', more the yeasty burgeoning of images from a dark embryo than the delighted and precise realization or incarnation of a mystery. It is not so much the word made flesh as the flesh made word. If we ask the question, whose hand swirls the quicksand, or who is the hanging man, we cannot and perhaps should not expect a precise answer. It is not that kind of poem. It is incantation, it deploys heraldic images—admittedly with excitement—but it does not aspire to spell an exact proposition. Whatever truth the poem proposes it is only co-extensive with the poem itself.

Whereas 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', of course, is the utterance of Hopkins's whole reality, of his myth, if you like, and this reality or myth has been lived as the truth by generations before and since Hopkins. Yeats had to write his own holy book, *A Vision*, before he could embody its truths in poems, and those truths were finally 'a superhuman/Mirror-resembling dream', the creation of a Romantic fiat. But Hopkins's holy book was *The New Testament*, its commentary was the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius Loyola, its reality was in his own experience of conversion and vocation to the Jesuit rule. His intellect was not forced to choose between perfection of the life or of the work but was compelled to bring them into congruence.

I wish to suggest that Hopkins did indeed embody this congruence, that his understanding of the Christian mystery and the poetic mystery were structured in the same way; and in this respect, a remark by Ted Hughes in his Afterword to *A Choice of Shakespeare's Verse* is very pertinent. Hughes writes:

> Poetic imagination is determined finally by the state of negotiation—in a person or in a people—between man and his idea of the Creator. This is natural enough, and everything else is naturally enough subordinate to it. How things are between man and his idea of the Divinity determines everything in his life, the quality and connectedness of every feeling and thought, and the meaning of every action.

Whether or not this holds generally, it is particularly true of Hopkins. His journals are scrupulous and slightly shocking evidence of the way his imagination was in constant, almost neurotic negotiation with his idea of the Creator, as on 24 September 1870 when he saw the Northern Lights and in the entry immediatly following that:

> At first I thought of silvery cloud until I saw that these were more luminous and did not dim the clearness of the stars in the Bear . . .

This busy working of nature wholly independent of the earth and seeming to go on in a strain of time not reckoned by our reckoning of days and years but simpler and as if correcting the preoccupation of the world by being preoccupied with and appealing to and dated to the day of judgement was like a new witness to God and filled me with delightful fear.

Oct 20—Laus Deo—the river to-day and yesterday.

Again, the intimate negotiation was in progress—as abnegation—the previous year, in the entry beginning under 24 January 1869:

The elms have long been in red bloom and yesterday (the 11th) I saw small leaves on the brushwood at their roots. Some primroses out. But a penance which I was doing from Jan. 25 to July 25 prevented my seeing much that half-year.

But perhaps the most succinct and celebrated intimacy is his remark about the bluebell: 'I know the beauty of Our Lord by it.'

His relationship with the idea of the Divinity not only determined the quality and connectedness of every feeling and thought, but it underlay his poetic imagination and provided, in Hughes's word, the groundplan of the poetic act as he conceived it. For Hopkins, this act was closer to having fire struck from him than it was to oozing gum; and the striking of flame, 'the stroke dealt' from above is how he images God's intervention in his life in 'The Wreck of the Deutschland'. God appears in the opening stanza in powerful aspect, as much Thor as Jehovah, ready to deal blows with his hammer:

> Thou mastering me
> God! Giver of breath and bread;
> World's strand, sway of the sea;
> Lord of living and dead;
> Thou hast bound bones and veins in me, fastened me flesh,
> And after it almost unmade, what with dread,
> Thy doing: and dost thou touch me afresh?
> Over again I feel thy finger and find thee.

This is a far more mature and demanding vision of the religious vocation than that which we saw in 'Heaven-Haven': not quiet retreat, not the religious life viewed from the outside but uttered from the quick centre. The bronze notes of the verse only serve to reinforce Hopkins's declaration to a bewildered Bridges:

What refers to myself in the poem is all strictly and literally true and did all occur; nothing is added for poetical padding.

It would be possible to read the first ten stanzas of the poem and relate the poetic mode, the psychological states, and the theological implications line by line, but I will confine myself to quotation and commentary relevant to my particular purpose.

Christ's storming of the soul is presented in images of lightning and fire:

> I did say yes
> O at lightning and lashed rod:
> . . . . .
> And the midriff astrain with leaning of, laced with fire of stress.

It is as if the 'sweep and hurl' fanned him into a glow, a glow which ignites his heart into a leaping flame of recognition and love:

> My heart, but you were dovewinged, I can tell,
> Carrier-witted, I am bold to boast
> To flash from the flame to the flame then, tower from the grace to the grace.

After this refining fire, he is soft sift that steadies and is sustained by the gospel proffer. He perceives Christ instressed in creation and stresses Christ's reality by imitation: stanzas 5, 6, 7, and 8 are an orthodox meditation on and affirmation of the mystery of Christ's incarnation, its redemptive effect on all nature and the consequent sacramental efficacy of natural phenomena. Then in stanza 8 he returns to the moment of personal crisis, the realization of Christ in his own life, when 'the stress felt', 'the stroke dealt' bursts like a sloe on the tongue, 'brim, in a flash, full'. And there follows the clearest statement of the paradox of the religious vocation, of the Christian relationship with a master who demands all obedience from his creature in order that the creature may be perfectly himself:

> Thou art lightning and love, I found it, a winter and warm;
> Father and fondler of heart thou hast wrung:
> Hast thy dark descending and most art merciful then.
>
> With an anvil-ding
> And with fire in him forge thy will
> Or rather, rather then, stealing as Spring
> Through him, melt him but master him still.

This act of mastery is an act of love: the creature was 'trod' and now he is 'melted but mastered'. A sceptical critic might be forgiven, indeed, for thinking of Yeats's 'Leda and the Swan' rather than George Herbert's 'The Collar'.

But what I want to note is the striking correspondence between the imagery used to describe this central event in Hopkins's religious life and the central action in his life as a poet, that is, the experience of the poetic act itself. In each case a bolt from the blue, a fire that strikes, a masculine touch, initiates the action. The sonnet 'To R.B.' is worth quoting in full:

> The fine delight that fathers thought; the strong
> Spur, live and lancing like the blowpipe flame,
> Breathes once and, quenchèd 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.

Obviously Hopkins cannot escape, in this figure, the mothering function of his imagination, but what is important is that this is not in his case parthenogenetic but comes about through the union of distinct sexual elements, and the crucial element is the penetrative, masculine spur of flame, 'sweet fire the sire of muse'. The mastering God who came with lightning and lashed rod and 'the strong/Spur, live and lancing like the blowpipe flame', partake of the same nature. The fire in his heart only shows when it is struck.

There can be no more explicit illustration of the interconnectedness of Hopkins's poetic and religious vocations than his account of the origins of 'The Wreck of the Deutschland'. The passage from his letter to R. W. Dixon in October 1878 is well known but worth recalling at some length:

> You ask, do I write verse myself. What I had written I burnt before I became a Jesuit and resolved to write no more, as not belonging to my profession, unless it were by the wish of my superiors; so for seven years I wrote nothing but two or three little presentation pieces which occasion called for. But when in the winter of '75 the Deutschland was wrecked in the mouth of the Thames and five Franciscan nuns, exiles from Germany, aboard of her were drowned I was affected by the account and happening to say so to my rector he said that he wished someone would write a poem on the subject. On this hint I set to

work and, though my hand was out at first, produced one. I had long had haunting my ear the echo of a new rhythm which now I realized on paper. . . . After writing this I held myself free to compose but cannot find it in my conscience to spend time upon it; so I have done little and shall do less.

Composition, in other words, was not just a matter of natural volition and personal appeasement but had to be a compliance with and an enactment of the will of God, and the will of God was the rule of his order, and the rule of his wit, in Jonson's term, was as much in the mastering grip of his rector as it was in the grip of his rhetoric. So much is explicit here, but implicit is the siring figure we find in his sonnet to Bridges. The new rhythm that was haunting his ear had the status of dark embryo, but it needed to be penetrated, fertilized by the dark descending will; the rector's suggestion had the status of an annunciation in what Stephen Dedalus, that other scholastic artist, called 'the virgin womb of the imagination'.

Moreover, since Hopkins's poems were conceived as the crossing of masculine strain on feminine potential, it is natural that they are most fully achieved when siring vision is most rapturously united with a sensuous apprehension of natural life. United, and not simply in attendance upon each other. The sonnet 'Spring', for example, while being a delightful piece of inscaping, with its

> thrush
> Through the echoing timber does so rinse and wring
> The ear, it strikes like lightnings to hear him sing,

is nevertheless structurally a broken arch, with an octave of description aspiring towards a conjunction with a sestet of doctrine. Doctrine and description only hold hands, as it were, in 'Spring' but in 'The Windhover' they are in intense communion, the spirit holding intercourse (the Wordsworthian locution is entirely appropriate) with beauty. In fact, 'The Windhover' is an extended mime of the process described in the sonnet to Bridges, an anatomy of the moment of inspiration and illumination, when the blowpipe flame of delight and insight lances the sensibility:

> I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
> dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
> Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
> High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
> In his ecstasy!

The octave of the sonnet constitutes 'the fine delight that fathers thought' and the thought is delivered in the moment of appeasement—'the achieve of, the mastery of the thing'. There follows the much interpreted sestet where Hopkins's imagination is luminously determined by his idea of the creator, 'with aim/Now known and hand at work now never wrong'. Human perfection in the Christian sphere is not just a matter of dealing out physical being, or of flashing 'honour . . . off exploit', as in the case of the animal and secular worlds: all the panoply of such mastery must be downed when Christ is master, must buckle under the 'anvil ding' and be tempered to a new brilliance. The final lines do indeed vault into the consciousness with the lift of symbol, and yet, despite the gleam and deliquescence and intense sufficiency of the verbal art, they are still intent on telling a truth independent of themselves, that the fire in the flint of nature shows not till it be struck, and that nature's 'bonniest . . . her clearest selvèd spark/Man' is only completely selved and achieved in a selfless imitation of Christ. And this conclusion is not rhetoric in the pejorative sense, not the will doing the work of the imagination: not a mustered hurrah for asceticism in face of full-blooded exultation, but a whole man's 'wincing and singing':

> No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plough down sillion
> Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
> Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermillion.

When I settled on 'the fire i' the flint' as the dark embryo for this lecture, I wanted to explore my notion that the artist's idea of the artistic act, conscious or unconscious, affected certain intrinsic qualities of the artefact. I hope I have clarified my sense of the artistic act in Hopkins as a masculine forging rather than a feminine incubation, with a consequent intentness rather than allure in his style. His idea of the Creator himself as father and fondler is central to the mastering, design-making rhetoric and fondling of detail in his work. And just as Christ's mastering descent into the soul is an act of love, a treading and a melting, so the poetic act itself is a love-act initiated by the masculine spur of delight. But Hopkins was no doubt aware that even the act of love could be read as a faithful imitation of Christ, a sign of grace, insofar as the Church fathers perceived the sign of the cross in the cross and splay of a man and woman in their ecstacy.