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Review Article

Time's Eunuch

Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Very Private Life. By Robert Bernard Martin. New York: Putnam's, 1991. Pp. 448. \$29.95.

In October 1940 W. H. Auden wrote "The Dark Years," a poem that trades with its own time and one that could serve as an epigram to Robert Bernard Martin's *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Very Private Life*:

Returning each morning from a timeless world,
the senses open upon a world of time:
 after so many years the light is
 novel still and immensely ambitious,

but, translated from her own informal world,
the ego is bewildered and does not want
 a shining novelty this morning,
and does not like the noise of the people.

The aim of Professor Martin's biography is to present a man of genius foredoomed to failure, an ubiquitous homoerotic whose beliefs did not desert him even if the severe discipline of his Jesuit life might cruelly have wrecked his creative life. The text is not a dull grind or verbal *patisserie*; neither is it spellbound with Hopkins's brilliance, prudishly glossing over Hopkins's life before his conversion. Martin discusses the poems as they relate to Hopkins's life but his greater emphasis is more descriptive than critical. He makes no claim that Hopkins was a modern

poet born before his time or that he was disconcertingly rebelling against Victorian literary ideals; rather, Professor Martin portrays Hopkins as a man very much alone very much of his very private life.

Critical studies discussing Hopkins's affinities or theories abound. Martin is the first biographer to have unrestricted access to Hopkins's surviving papers, and it is to the biography's credit that he renders the life for a general reader, not struggling to fit that life into the context of either literary affinities or theories. Nor is the book a rebuttal of the positions taken by earlier biographers: Father Lahey's pioneering efforts have scant mention; Eleanor Ruggles's speculations and inventions no mention at all.

"Even his name is usually wrong," Martin writes in his introductory chapter. The sense behind a name is usually definitive and Hopkins disliked "Manley . . . his uneasiness with it is equally fitting." It is this lack of ease that characterized the length of Hopkins's life. Very slightly built, heavy-lidded eyes, pale skin, thin, light brown hair, Hopkins seems in decided contrast to his father who was from all reports an effective man of affairs. "Manliness is precisely what Hopkins's father wanted in his eldest son, and the name was to be his guide: the importance of being Manley."

One can speculate about the emotional conflict that might be part of such a father/son relationship. Martin takes a moderate view, suggesting that the son, the father's first-born, did not live up to the Victorian ideal of masculinity. He does not believe that Hopkins, as a consequence, became a puny exotic, abandoning himself to fleshiness, effeminacy, incontinence. There is, however, an admixture of sensuality and desire for purity dominating the life Martin narrates. These first nineteen years of Hopkins's life, scaffolding as it were, are lightly sketched in the biography's first chapter. There is some foreshadowing and parallelism: "clever and good as he was," Martin writes,

Hopkins was a real, live boy, not a saint in a school uniform, and the fact should not be forgotten if we are to understand him. Individual goodness probably came easily to him at this point in his life, but the social virtues like charity, humility, calm temper and obedience were not an innate part of his make-up; however hard he worked to cultivate them, their mastery eluded him all his life.

The life from 1863 to 1870 is covered in the biography's next ten chapters. Martin believes they were all absorbing as Hopkins made his journey into Catholicism, his conversion coming in 1866 shortly before the death of Digby Dolben. The years are years of sexual ambivalence, as Martin makes clear without placing heavy or undue emphasis on any serious homosexuality. Digby, a distant cousin of Robert Bridges, was an extravagant creature whose "contemporaries found him delightful because he had 'plenty of humour and wit, and was possessed with a spirit of mischief as wanton as Shelley's.'" It seems clear that Dolben was closely connected to Hopkins's religious crisis although Martin believes it "would be misleading to say that Dolben and Hopkins coincided in their religious views, since their personalities were different enough to affect their enthusiasms." It seems more likely that both young men loved writing poetry, and in doing so confided to each other much of their emotional natures. If Dolben had frankly confessed his feelings it may have led Hopkins to examine his "own emotions for culpability." Hopkins, "vacillating on the edge of conversion to Catholicism," may have been "inspired with a deep sense of his own sinfulness, more probably from recognizing the nature of his own feelings than from committing any specifically culpable act." That Hopkins worried about these temptations, Martin makes clear:

in totality they indicated that his *susceptibility* [my italics] was largely homoerotic. More significantly, they serve as evidence of the intense sensuousness of his nature, if not necessarily of deed, a luxuriance that frightened him and that he was at last able to turn into acceptable channels in religion and poetry.

Martin does not cite, however, a September 1865 letter by Hopkins to Alexander Baillie in which Hopkins writes that only Catholicism could alleviate the sordidness of things.

Having thus resolved to become a "religious," having "moved in that direction," Hopkins

had a sense of compulsion to go as far as possible. . . . One important ingredient that had been left out of his nature was moderation. . . . Given his usual preference for the harder of his alternatives, his choice of order seems almost inevitable, since in all obvious ways the Jesuits would be the most difficult for him, as well as for his family and friends.

Coincident with Hopkins's decision, and in Chapter X, the mid point of Martin's biography, is the slaughter of the innocents. Hopkins's burning of his poems three months prior to entering the Jesuit Novitiate at Manresa reflects his "own dilemma about the morality of poetry, which [Hopkins] believed to be guiltless enough intrinsically, even when he knew it tended to distract him from higher concerns." There begins Hopkins's seven year silence until December 1875 when he drafted "The Wreck of the Deutschland."

The years cover the novitiate (1868-1870), the philosophate (1870-1873), the year or so as a teacher of rhetoric at Manresa, to the beginning of the theologate (1876-1877). Martin does good service to these years of personal subjugation. Hopkins was now bound, learning the rules of the society, and in general training for obedience. It is a difficult chapter in which to imagine Hopkins, especially since available information is scant. There was a small budget of time for writing to friends; only two letters to Bridges survive from the Manresa novitiate. Martin skilfully weaves commentary on Jesuit life with surmises on that life for Hopkins and what might have been the attitude of Hopkins's superiors toward him. "His superiors were watchful about his health and especially careful to excuse him from anything that might endanger it; all during his religious studies his letters are full of complaint when he has been told that he must forgo penance." Corporal mortification, disciplines, chains and hair shirts were not part of Hopkins's penance, a generous and fortunate matter for Hopkins given his penchant for excess. For the most part, these are years of storing impressions, and discovering a shared identity with Duns Scotus in much the same manner as had been his devotion to Newman. "If Hopkins in part recognized Newman as his clerical father, he surely felt that in Duns Scotus he had found his theological progenitor, and in an odd way he regarded him as a personal friend." Even more so, Martin writes, citing John Pick's "The Growth of a Poet,"

Once he had come on Scotism, for Hopkins "Aesthetic and religious experience became one in the sacramental apprehension of beauty. His sacramentalism, moulded by Scotus and the Spiritual Exercises, gave him warrant for the use of the senses."

It was not as easy as it sounds; there is, on the other hand, as the biography makes clear, a sense of liberation which gave Hopkins leave

to love the phenomenal world because of its ultimate identity as part of God. This flush and enthusiasm eventually lead to a complete and excellent chapter on "The Wreck of the Deutschland" and the amount of unsympathetic reaction. In writing and rewriting, the poem became more elaborate in its composition, packed with what Hopkins himself called "oddnesses." As for its significance, Martin argues only that it is a "highly autobiographical poem" which can seem "tasteless" when it is judged by conventional standards, but it is too splendid and expansive to be amenable to "good" or "bad" taste. It is possible, too, that its forward movement is occasionally impeded by the sheer ornateness of language. But its "success or failure should be judged today within its own terms rather than by the doctrinal considerations that in part marred it for Bridges."

In the remaining six chapters Martin traces Hopkins's life from his work at St. Mary's College in Chesterfield, Stonyhurst College, St. Aloysius' Church at Oxford, St. Joseph's at Bedford Leigh, St. Francis Xavier's at Liverpool through the final years at University College at Dublin. Of the terrible sonnets begun in 1885, which Martin covers in Chapter XIX, one of the longest chapters in the book, he writes that they are

quite simply, like nothing else in English poetry since the Metaphysical poets of two centuries before . . . these frightening sonnets are the expression of a doubt so profound that it can often find comfort only in the belief that death may not be external salvation but utter and welcome annihilation. To be accurate, they do not reflect doubt of the existence of God but a belief in something far more terrifying, the certainty that He exists and an almost equal certainty that His mercy does not extend to the poet himself or that He is unaware of the individual or careless of his fate.

One does not need to multiply examples from this chapter to suggest that Hopkins was unbalanced mentally when he came to Dublin;

whether that was a result of heredity, chemical imbalance, original sin, or childhood experience, we can hardly judge at this distance, but we must accept it without total understanding, an acceptance that should be no more difficult than accepting that a totally ordered personality may exist even if we do not comprehend its sources.

Nonetheless, the sonnets may have been evidence of some success in Hopkins holding on to his sanity. They attract our attention, Professor Martin concludes, as they describe the barren state of Hopkins's soul. They are the remains of a time of intense mental anguish which most of us can only imagine. But it is also clear that the biography of this "religious" portrays Hopkins like Dante before him going down to profound depths only to go upward toward God. On 8 June 1889, he was heard two or three times to say, "I am so happy, I am so happy." Hopkins died peacefully. He was "Time's eunuch, and not breed one work that wakes" who prayed "Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain." His life was dark and narrow; in the poems he enclosed infinite enough riches to fill a world of time.

Professor Martin's *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Very Private Life* is just and generous. His commentary on the poems is equally so, blending the Jesuit priest with the Victorian poet into a man who continues to affect the modern heart.