

Hopkins, Sacrifice and God

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My liking of Hopkins is intensely physical: I know of no other poet whose mastery of the auditory texture of words affects me so much, and this, linked to his capacity to structure a dense pattern of relationships among words and phrases, hits me every time I read him. I don't find him, at his best, easy to memorise precisely because the verbal and auditory pattern that he constructs is a deliberately constructed artistic form whose presence stands over against me, pressing me to construe it (with difficulty) and experience it. When I read them, I don't feel that I master the poems: they, rather, as chiselled shapes, simply seem to be there, before and after I read them. In a strange way, they make me feel redundant: whether I read them or not, they're there, unchanged and thick, and they don't need me meddling with them. It is purifying to be made by a work of art to feel contingent, because then the work of art acts as a sacrament of God's perfection as *Ipsum Esse*.

I also like him because he is so good on God. I feel a repugnance for an undulant spiritual rhetoric whose eloquence colonises the divine mystery. I'd much rather engage with the practices of popular devotion, with their modest signals of purpose and meaning, than read spiritual prose aimed at inducing hyper-ventilation of the soul. Speaking about God should be hard if it's to be done well; it should always have a sense of being impossible; it should be jagged and incomplete and give the reader the sense that God is not to be found *in* these words but that God begins when these words end. I've learned to trust Hopkins to get God right.

Others have written better than I can of the architectonic integration of creation, grace and incarnation in the first part of the *Deutschland*, where Hopkins evokes the majesty of God and the chiaroscuro that encompasses a person standing under and in this mystery, and the Christic sacramentality ('Christ plays in ten thousand places') evident elsewhere in his treatment of nature. I want to focus on what seems to me his miniature religious masterpiece in prose, his treatment of God and sacrifice in his 1881 Long Retreat notes on 'the Great Sacrifice':

The first intention then of God outside himself or, as they say, *ad extra*, outwards, the first outstress of God's power was Christ; and we must believe that the next was the Blessed Virgin. Why did the Son of God go forth from the Father not only in the eternal and intrinsic procession of the Trinity but also by an extrinsic and less than eternal, let us say aeonian one? To give God glory and that by sacrifice, sacrifice offered in the barren wilderness outside of God, as the children of Israel were led into the wilderness to offer sacrifice. This sacrifice and this outward procession is a consequence and shadow of the procession of the Trinity, from which mystery sacrifice takes its rise. But of this I do not mean to write here. It is as if the blissful agony or stress of selving in God had forced out drops of sweat or blood, which drops were the world, or as if the lights lit at the festival of the 'peaceful Trinity' through some little cranny striking out lit up into being one 'cleave' out of the world of possible creatures.¹

Theologically, this is an astonishing piece of writing, virtually impossible to paraphrase because of its concision, density and originality. Nowhere else does Hopkins develop this *idée maitresse*

of the sacrificial Trinity, and we can only regret this. While his sermons, such as that given on the humanity of Christ ('Christ as Hero'), come across as characteristically Victorian in their conception and expression, this passage is like a Barthian thunderbolt in a mid-Victorian sky, anticipating the great themes of Trinitarian theology which under Karl Barth's influence will come to dominate orthodox theology in the twentieth century.²

Barth, the Swiss Calvinist, taught that the determinative act of God's being, which precedes every other act of God and is the act simply of 'being God', is God's decision to be 'God for us as Jesus'. And so the movement towards Incarnation and self-sacrifice on the Cross is not an additional feature, but is the very actuality of God and, although it comes to expression at a point in our time, it is antecedent to everything else that God does. Incarnation is, we might say, God's way of being God. In this primal movement, ('in God's pre-temporal eternity', Barth repeats), a self-sacrificing condescension is inscribed in God's being so that the glorification of the Father by the self-sacrificing Son on the cross is how God freely wills to be. The idea of Christ's sacrifice thrusts its roots deep into the abyss of the Trinity.

Now this Barthian teaching is what Hopkins anticipates when he writes that Christ's sacrifice is 'a consequence and shadow of the procession of the Trinity, from which mystery sacrifice takes its rise,' but the puzzle is how he came to write it. It is customary to argue, as does Devlin, that the usual suspects, Duns Scotus and Maria Lataste, were in the background of its composition, but I cannot see how Hopkins moved from reading Scotus and Lataste (a rather tame religious thinker) to writing this primary text of immense imaginative and religious power. To my knowledge, no medieval theologian identifies the movement outwards towards sacrifice as the original, foundational movement of the life of the Blessed Trinity in the way in which Hopkins does: Scotus does not take you there, and he did not take Hopkins there.³

The passage may well have sprung, Athena-like, from Hopkins' own mind in a highly original piece of theological writing, but it is outside his normal range of Trinitarian interpretation which, in the poems, tends to be formulaic, rather than adventurous.⁴ But here, in this passage written purely for his own edification, Hopkins' poetic imagination surfaces: how wonderful to watch him switch from formal theological exposition to speak of 'the blissful agony or stress of selving in God' forcing out 'drops of sweat or blood'.

The original feature here is that Hopkins describes the stress of selving in God, which leads to the world's creation ('which drops were the world'), in ways that evoke Gethsemane, the place of Christ's *agonia* (struggle) where drops of sweat and blood are forced out of the body of Christ as he faces his death (Lk 22.44). In the remarkable stereoscopic vision which this text asks of us, we are to imagine the 'blissful agony' by which the world flows from the 'selving' of God as analogous to Christ's in Gethsemane when sweat and blood flow from him. The world is 'pressed' from God as sweat and blood are pressed from the body of Christ. I know of no parallel to this astonishing suggestion: it seems to be entirely original.

In his phrase about the 'stress of selving in God,' Hopkins, of course, is speaking analogically, moving from the created to the divine order: just as there is a dynamic within creatures to express their natures and thereby fulfil themselves, so too God's being is subject to a 'stress' from within that leads to creation and sacrifice. What Barth will refer to as the 'determinative act of God's being', Hopkins crisply calls the 'selving' in God, but in spite of the difference in linguistic register, both think of this as the movement in God which impels the divine Son towards sacrifice on Golgotha.

In these dense sentences, Hopkins muses that God's selving (already an *agonia* in eternity, and how interesting that phrase is) leads first of all to creation – hence the depth of God's immanent presence ('the dearest freshness deep down things') attested to in his great nature poems – and culminates in the Son's self-sacrifice in the barren wilderness of Golgotha. Although this latter theme receives no explicit treatment in his poems, it is surely enacted in his final sonnets of desolation ('I am gall, I am heartburn, God's most deep decree/ Bitter would have me taste') in the barren wilderness outside of God. What, we led to ask, if all this – the very existence of the creation, the redemptive sacrifice of Christ and our share in the bitterness of that offering – flows from the selving of God and is grounded in that divine *agonia*? At that point, words and theology should cease and prayer begin.

¹ C.Devlin (ed.), *The Sermons and Devotional Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Oxford University Press, 1959), 197; C.Phillips (ed.), *The Oxford Authors: Gerard Manley Hopkins*, (Oxford University Press, 1986), 288-9.

² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, 'The Doctrine of God (T.&T.Clark, 1957), 94ff. Barth's influence spreads into recent Catholic tradition through Hans Urs von Balthasar.

³ The point in the history of theology where a mystical exploration of the Trinitarian life and Christ's sacrifice comes to explicit and rich expression is in French 17th Century spiritual writings: Condren, Bérulle and their followers explore this with great rhetorical cogency. Was Hopkins familiar with this tradition? Again, to my knowledge, there is no evidence of it and I do not see it coming through in Maria Lataste's writings that Hopkins transcribed. In her account of the Annunciation, Lataste has Christ say, 'Mon incarnation était le chef-d'oeuvre des manifestations extérieures de Dieu au ciel et sur la terre. Toute l'éternité Dieu a préparé cette oeuvre.' (Devlin, *op.cit.*, 330). But there is no explicit reference to sacrifice.

⁴ 'God, three-numberèd form' (*Deutschland*); 'the Immortals of the eternal ring,/ the Utterer, Utterèd, Uttering' (*Margaret Clitheroe*)