

THE POET AS THEOLOGIAN

HOPKINS AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF HISTORY

The occasion of this workshop is the coinciding of this year's CTSA convention, with its theme of Providence and History, with the centenary of the death of the Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins. Over the years I have come to see Hopkins not only as a great poet—surely the most daring and original verse-experimenter of his age—but as a creative theologian of the first order. He is the latter because he is the former: not, that is, a theologian who happens also to be a poet, or a poet who was also a theologian, but both together, inseparably. As a poet-theologian, Hopkins is a speaker of those "primordial words" (*Urwörter*) which Karl Rahner declared more basic and more original than the "utility words" of everyday speech. He utters words which make present the realities they refer to, disclosing the infinite hidden in the depths of the finite. His lyrics envision a world "charged with the grandeur of God," where each unique, "fickle and freckled" thing is fathered forth by the God whose beauty is "past change"; a dynamic world of flux where each being and person actively "selves, goes itself," speaking out a word expressive of its inmost essence, a word ultimately identical with the Christ-word spoken by God.

THE POET AS THEOLOGIAN: HOPKINS AND HISTORY

The single work of Hopkins which has the greatest relevance to the theme of providence is "The Wreck of the Deutschland." This 35-stanza ode, written in 1875 in response to maritime disaster off the English coast, is in part a meditation on the mysterious presence of God in suffering and tragedy. At the dramatic climax of the poem, a nun, one of five Franciscan sisters who are among the sixty victims drowned in the shipwreck, cries aloud, "O Christ, Christ, come quickly!" Hopkins, meditating on the meaning of her cry, feels deeply the impulse (at once desperate and hopeful) behind it. In the poem, he reads her call in the light of his own experience of being torn asunder ("almost unmade, what with dread, thy doing") by God. This experience of stress, of being pushed to the ultimate limit by divine power, causes the person who undergoes it to utter a supreme and final word—a word which gathers in one dense utterance the entire being of the one who makes it. It not only identifies the speaker but names the objective situation, turning it into an event either of salvation or damnation. Thus the cry of the nun transforms the scene of tragedy and impersonal wrecking into a personal advent, loss into rescue and triumph: "the cross to her who calls Christ to her, christens her wild-worst Best" (stanza 24, line 8).

Thus an act of inspired (even, in a sense, *driven*) naming is at the heart of the transformation of history. As Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane "speaks into the

darkness and calls it Father," so the nun speaks into the brawling storm and calls it "Christ." This christening of disaster and death is not, as Hopkins sees it, merely wish-fulfilment, the projection of personal intentions upon an indifferent or hostile universe. It is instead a deeper insight into the reality of the situation, as the nun-heroine "read the unshapeable shock night and knew the who and the why" (29,3-4). Such insight is an act not of the mind alone but of the heart—"unspeakably after evil, but uttering truth," pushed to the last extremity. "What none would have known of it, only the heart, being at bay, Is out with it!" (7,8; 8,1). The terrible ambiguity of time is redeemed by the utterance of this word of the heart, a word which does not so much passively accept suffering as actively embrace it. It is the word of love, creating a "lovescape crucified" (23,4).

Not only the world of stars and storms, but God too is saved by the word. For as the poem makes clear, apart from this outspoken word, God is mystery and paradox beyond comprehension—a source at once of bliss and agony, extreme violence and utter gentleness: that which God makes, and the dread which unmakes, are both alike "Thy doing" (1,7). Only the speaking of the Christ-word reveals this God "past all grasp" as merciful in his very destructiveness ("Hast thy dark descending, and most art merciful then"—9,8). For only "the Christ of the Father compassionate, fetched in the storm of his strides" (33,8) shows God as God really is: only by virtue of the Christ-compassionate can he be, and be known as, Father—compassionate. In this sense Christ is, for Hopkins, truly the justification of God.

For this reason the utterance of the poem, the composition of "The Wreck of the Deutschland," is not external to the event which inspired it. It is a prolongation of the sister's cry from the midst of her sufferings. At the heart of the poem is an act of profound metaphorical identification between the dying nun and the living poet—both the man who suffers and the self which creates. As stanza 28 with its broken sentences makes clear, the poem itself is a struggle to give voice to a vision "looming there," but glimpsed only in moments of extremest, God-wrought agony. It is a giving-birth, not merely analogous to but actually one with Mary's conceiving and "birthing" of Christ. It is a "heart-throe, birth of a brain" (30,7). It is the continuation in time of an act begun in eternity, in God's eternal utterance of the Word which is simultaneously the creation of the world ("wording it how but by him that present and past, Heaven and earth, are word of, worded by"—29,5-6). Thus Hopkins' great theological poem is conceived, not only as a participation in the event it celebrates, but as one of the very "drops of sweat or blood" forced out by the blissful agony of "selving" in God, "which drops were the world."

One of the convention's speakers during the first plenary session, Sister Barbara Doherty, defined "providence" as "that name of God which brings the polarities of existence into meaning." It would be hard to frame a definition of providence more appropriate to the Hopkins of "The Wreck," for whom that name of God is the all-comprehending word "Christ."

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