

Studies in English, New Series

Volume 10

Article 17

1-1-1992

Gerard Manley Hopkins, Jesuit A.M.D.G.

John Stasriy

West Virginia University (Emeritus)

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Stasriy, John (1992) "Gerard Manley Hopkins, Jesuit A.M.D.G.," *Studies in English, New Series*: Vol. 10 , Article 17.

Available at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new/vol10/iss1/17

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Studies in English at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in English, New Series by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS, JESUIT: A.M.D.G.

John Stasny

Emeritus, West Virginia University

As editor of *Victorian Poetry* I have been helping in the commemoration of what one of our Victorian colleagues lugubriously described as “these years of the deaths.” Last year we celebrated with special issues of our journal the centennials of the deaths of Arnold and Edward Lear; this fall we are going to publish a Browning centennial commemorative. We are already looking forward to 1992 and the Tennyson centennial. In some ways I feel that *Victorian Poetry* is remiss in not doing an issue on Hopkins. Therefore I especially welcome this opportunity to pay my personal tribute to Hopkins. In a very real sense I owe my academic career as a Victorian specialist to Hopkins and to that pioneer Hopkins scholar, John Pick, and to the Jesuits at Marquette University who gave me my first university teaching position.*

Believe me when I say that I am resisting valiantly the temptation to nostalgia, but I simply cannot pay tribute to Hopkins without acknowledging my debt to John Pick, spectacular and flamboyant teacher. It is exactly forty years ago this spring that Pick came to our small Catholic college in Minnesota to give a lecture on Gerard Manley Hopkins; I had never heard of Gerard Manley Hopkins. I had taken a course in Victorian poetry, but we skipped Hopkins; all I remember about the course is that our instructor teaching Tennyson’s “The Lotos Eaters” finally succumbed to the hypnotism of the poem and drifted slowly off to sleep reciting “Oh rest ye, brother mariners, we will not wander more.” Pick introduced me to Hopkins and I decided that very evening “In a flash, at a trumpet crash” that I must study with Pick—and incidentally learn more about Hopkins.

In the fall of 1949 I took Pick’s seminar on Hopkins at Marquette. Only about thirty years earlier Robert Bridges had introduced Hopkins to the world. I remember that we felt as though we were studying something excitingly new—to think that I was studying a Victorian poet almost as a contemporary artist.

In that seminar we were able to read absolutely everything that had been written on Hopkins. We read both volumes of W. H. Gardner’s

* Professor Stasny, founding, now retired, editor of *Victorian Poetry*, delivered a slightly different version of this essay as a lecture, CUNY, 5 May 1989.

just completed *Gerard Manley Hopkins, 1844-1889: A Study of Poetic Idiosyncrasy in Relation to Poetic Tradition*. Remember that the subtitle of Gardner's book is "A Centenary Commemoration." He, too, was celebrating a centennial year. Father Peters's *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Critical Essay Towards the Understanding of His Poetry* had been published in 1948. The pioneer collection of essays, edited by Norman Weyand, *Immortal Diamond* was brand new. We studied the *Notebooks and Papers of G. M. H.*, edited by Humphry House in 1937—the edition that was superseded by *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins* in 1959. Pick's own book, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Priest and Poet* was only seven years old.

There were a few things that we didn't read; we read Ivor Winters as an exercise in refutation: he was not truly a Hopkins convert. There is an enigmatic entry in my forty-year-old yellowed classnotes: "G. H. Leahy—Don't read." And I obeyed; I read Father Lahey's book (G. F. Lahey, S. J., *Gerard Manley Hopkins* [1938]) for the first time just a couple of weeks ago. His book turns out to have not even very much historical interest; he does, however, give a rather intriguing picture of Hopkins as a kind of adolescent G. Gordon Liddy—temperamentally a likely successful candidate for the exercise of Jesuit asceticism (pp. 6-7).

Forty years ago in Pick's seminar we spent most of our time in arduous line by line explications. Pick taught us to read as though we were following musical notation: "Earnest, earthless, equal, attuneable / vaulty, voluminous,...stupendous."

We were gate crashers doing battle with the "Dragon at the Gate." We didn't really see ourselves as students of Victorian poetry. F. R. Leavis in 1932 in *New Bearings in English Poetry* had, after all, written of Victorian poetry, "It is not so much bad as dead." About Hopkins, however, Leavis did comment: "He is likely to prove, for our time and the future, the only influential poet of the Victorian age, and he seems to me the greatest." Our seminar didn't need Leavis to tell us that; we had Pick, and we left that seminar as true believers.

In 1949 we used the third edition of the *Poems*. It was our sacred book. Gardner, Peters, and Pick and only a few others were apostolic missionaries. One might describe the atmosphere in which we studied Hopkins in the words of "The Document on Priestly Formation" of the Second Vatican Council in 1965: "Students will accurately draw Catholic doctrine from divine revelation, understand that doctrine profoundly, nourish their own spiritual lives with it, and be able to proclaim it, unfold it, and defend it in their priestly ministry" (p. 451). I am, in fact, almost tempted to quote the passage that follows in that

document, describing in Newmanian terms the development of doctrine from the original “deposit of faith,” through its “transmission and illumination” by the fathers, to the “penetration more deeply with the help of speculative reason exercised under the tutelage of the [great doctors].” The development of Hopkins scholarship traces a similar path.

I can not claim now as I could have claimed in 1949 to have read all of Hopkins scholarship. I have read a lot though; *Victorian Poetry* has published since 1963 over sixty articles on Hopkins, and I have read and rejected a lot more than that. (At one time I was tempted to declare a moratorium on papers on “The Windhover” and “God’s Grandeur.”) One circumstance that has always made me curious, however, is why after his conversion to Roman Catholicism, Hopkins decided to become a Jesuit priest. I chose the occasion of this essay to do a little unsystematic exploration, especially among the Jesuits themselves.

The Jesuits are fascinating and even intimidating. Let me read a passage from Emile Zola; it was written in 1889, so we can use it as a centennial commemoration:

It’s them—and its always them—hiding behind everything. You think you know all about it, but really you know nothing of their abominable deeds and their unseen power—the Jesuits! You should expect the worst of every one of them you see slinking along in his shabby old cassock, with a flabby, deceitful face like a sanctimonious old nun...all of Rome belongs to the Jesuits, from the most insignificant priest to His Holiness Leo XIII himself! (Manfred Barthell, *The Jesuits: History and Legend of the Society of Jesus* [1984])

I suppose that my first encounter with the Jesuits was in 1935 when Father Issac Jogues, S. J., and his companions, the North American martyrs, were canonized saints by Pope Pius XII. I was in Catholic grade school, and all of us altar boys wanted to get in to our canoes and go as black robes to seek out some Indians so that we could be tortured and become saints.

I later learned that The Jesuits had been *persona non grata* in the Catholic Archdiocese of St. Paul/Minneapolis since the days of Archbishop John Ireland, the social reformer, a liberal, and perhaps even a representative of the Modernist or Americanist heresy. John Ireland would not have been surprised at all that many years later Richard Nixon had a Jesuit in the White House.

Anyway, my next encounter with the Jesuits came only after I had become an undergraduate English major. Let me quote: "That is a true conqueror, true to the motto of our order: *ad majorem Dei gloriam!* A saint who has great power in Heaven, remember: power to intercede for us in our grief, power to obtain whatever we pray for if it be for the good of our souls, power above all to obtain for us the grace to repent if we be in sin. A great saint." That's a Jesuit priest speaking; he might have been talking about Gerard Manley Hopkins, S. J., a priest who had died less than twenty years earlier—but he's not. The speaker is the Jesuit retreat master in Joyce's *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*. He is actually talking about St. Francis Xavier, who is one of the inspirations that leads Stephen for a while to imagine himself The Reverend Stephen Dedalus, S. J. The sermon on Hell, straight out of the *Spiritual Exercises*, sent me running off to confession just as it had sent Stephen.

Somehow, I have always had difficulty associating Hopkins—who had a problem as a teacher deciding whether a student should get a 72 or a 74—with decisive or sinister Jesuits. Jesuits, I thought, should be made of sterner stuff [Peters, p. 24]. You remember, of course, the so-called Act of Catholic Emancipation in England in 1829. Do you remember, however, one of the provisions of that act? I refer to 10 George IV, cap. 7, *An Act for the Relief of His Majesty's Roman Catholic Subjects* (13 April 1829), Sec. xxxiv: "And be it further enacted, that in the case any person shall, after the commencement of this act within any part of the United Kingdom, be admitted or become a Jesuit, or brother or member of any other such Religious order...he shall be deemed and taken to be guilty of a misdemeanor...and shall be sentenced and ordered to be banished from the United Kingdom for the term of his natural life." Hopkins the Jesuit was a criminal, a sinister enemy of the state, a patriot, who chose the Jesuits knowing full well that he was liable to banishment not merely to Ireland but to Australia maybe or, worse, to the Baltimore Province of the Society of Jesus in the United States of America. I have always found that difficult to understand!

Alfred Thomas, S. J., in *Hopkins the Jesuit* (1969) finds "a trifle overdramatic perhaps, but possibly true nonetheless," David Downes's suggestion that "to a youth on fire with religious derring-do the Jesuits are a kind of lure that the French Foreign Legion has..." (p. 16). The first chapter in Thomas's book contains a quick survey of the history of the Jesuits in England and a brief account of Hopkins's conversion: his stay with Newman and the Oratorians in Birmingham, his retreat with the Benedictines, and finally his admission to the Jesuit novitiate in

September 1868. Thomas cannot document Hopkins's choice of St. Ignatius over St. Benedict—or for that matter over Newman's beloved St. Philip Neri. Thomas simply quotes Newman's famous response to Hopkins's letter, announcing his choice of the Jesuits: "I think it is the very thing for you. Don't call the 'Jesuit discipline hard,' it will bring you to heaven" (p. 21).

Bernard Basset, S. J., in *The English Jesuits From Campion to Martindale* (1968), has the following passage about Hopkins and the Jesuits and, especially St. Beuno's College, where Hopkins wrote "The Wreck of the Deutschland": "Posthumous glory came to St. Beuno's with the discovery of Fr. Gerard Manley Hopkins as one of the poets of the century. Hopkins, a brilliant man with a high university degree, was universally loved by his contemporaries; when he died the Jesuits wrote with feeling of his courtesy, his scrupulous attention to his students' compositions, his taste, shyness, charm and charity. They even mentioned his talent for music but wrote little about his poetry." Basset continues, "Hopkins was no great success in the classroom or in the pulpit; the university world suited his inclinations and he achieved his most fruitful work in Dublin, in which city he eventually died. His sudden discovery as a poet proved no embarrassment to his fellow Jesuits. [A startling statement!] As religious Orders exist for other ends, many talented religious live and die without recognition and with unusual gifts unsung....In Victorian days personalities were two-a-penny and, in Jesuit circles, Gerard Manley Hopkins never seemed unique" (Basset, pp. 396-97). I rather think one might call those remarks "Jesuit hybris" or even "Jesuite chutzpa."

The remark that "religious orders exist for other ends" reminds us again of the issue of Hopkins's priestly vocation and poetic avocation—if we are indeed to interpret his Jesuit life in that way. A Jesuit, with his quasi-military training, should never be off duty. Father Peters discusses "the conflict between Hopkins the very human poet and the Jesuit" (Peters, p. 84). But Peters, in his really very poignant recent tribute to his fellow Jesuit adds: "I would like my readers and admirers of Hopkins to know that the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius were, and are, never meant to form a soldier but a man of prayer in love with his Lord, a man deeply concerned about the well-being not just of the Catholic church but of all mankind, in fact of all creation" (p. 84).

Father Peters also says, "Readers conclude that Hopkins is a religious poet because he was a religious and a priest, with the implication that it was his duty and vocation to be pious, to set a good example, to edify, and to write in order to bolster the Church."

"Nothing," adds Father Peters, "is further from the truth. That is why the controversy about the poet and the priest is rooted in a false perspective."

"Hopkins is not a romantic poet, nor is he a nature poet, nor is he a religious poet," says Father Peters. "What then?" he asks, and he answers, "Hopkins is the poet he is because he was—and I knowingly use the word—so *terribly* human, a man in love with whatever is, as always, fathered by God: and hence a man well acquainted with... disappointments and pain." Peters concludes, "I have a strong suspicion, not to say conviction, that it is this human-ness that endears him to me, and to many others" (pp. 51-52). Peters might have added—and to God. And that's what saints are made of.

Walter J. Ong, S. J., in *Hopkins, the Self, and God* (1986) has an extended discussion of the famous Ignatian expression, "ad majorem dei gloriam," abbreviated A.M.D.G., "to the greater glory of God" (pp. 78ff). This expression "virtually defin[es] the Society of Jesus and 'Jesuitness.'" Ong says, "The expression hinges on a comparative *majorem*, 'greater'—and thus clearly involves binary separation or division, and most radically, free choice between separate alternatives. A.M.D.G. tells exactly...how insistently the *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius* feed Hopkins' nineteenth-century explicit preoccupation with freedom for the greater glory of God" (pp. 79-80).

Ong quotes another Jesuit, an Indian Jesuit ascetical theologian, Anthony De Mello who, commenting on the Exercises wrote, "For you there is no reality that is closer to God than yourself. You will experience nothing closer to God than yourself. St. Augustine would therefore rightly insist that we must restore man to himself so that he can make of himself a stepping stone to God" (p. 144).

Ong continues: "Hopkins expressly thought of his poetry in this framework of self-in-relation-to-God, as he thought of everything else in this framework." He then quotes Hopkins himself writing to Dixon explaining the goals of the Society of Jesus: "As it values other created things, our Society values...literature...as a means to an end." "The end," says Ong, "being interior union of the human person with God. Poetry was not salvific in itself at all but, like other human creations, it was truly worthwhile and could serve salvific ends." "Like all of us," says Ong, Hopkins "anguished over...the ways his poetry served" for the greater glory of God, but Ong acknowledges that Hopkins apparently made the providentially correct Jesuit choice: "The poetry," he says, "has contributed not only to poetic enjoyment but also to the faith of thousands of readers far more than Hopkins at times seemed to have allowed for even as a possibility" (p. 145).

Victorian Poetry has published over the years articles on Hopkins by about a half dozen Jesuits. One of the earliest was by Father Francis Xavier Shea in our second volume in 1964, entitled "Another Look at 'The Windhover'"—we had already published five articles on Hopkins, two of which were on "The Windhover." Shea's article is, I think, still valuable. At one point he says, "A clerical critic like myself, particularly a Jesuit, must be very grateful to the labors of Professor W. H. Gardner, which have for twenty or more years, illuminated so much of Hopkins. Professor Gardner's vigorous objections to the imputations of wavering faith and vocational dissatisfactions in Hopkins have, one hopes, laid those ghosts for good....they have saved me and others in my position the ungrateful task of offering counter-statements which would have been only too open to charges of polemicism or even of personal special-pleading" (*VP* 2 [1964], 230).

Most recently we published a poignant valitudinarian tribute to his fellow Jesuit by the pioneer Hopkins scholar, Robert Boyle, S. J., entitled "Hopkins, Brutus and Dante"—yet another article on "The Windhover." At one point, however, Boyle comments: "The oriflamme of glory for the Jesuit, in the call of Christ our Lord in 'The Kingdom of Christ' exercise [from *The Spiritual Exercises*], follows labor and sufferings. Christ, according to Ignatius, says to every human: It is my will to conquer the whole world and all my enemies, and thus to enter into the glory of my Father" (*VP*, 24 [1986], 5). Boyle concludes, "Thus Hopkins demonstrates some more than modest claim to be for modern hearers of poetry a voice like Dante's in medieval times: a voice that reaches beyond the limits of sense and reason, past the abilities of fancy, to stir the deepest longings and willings of the human spirit—maybe even of faithless ones, if indeed there really are any such" (*VP*, p. 12).

I will complete this survey of collegial tributes to their fellow Jesuits with a reference to *Understanding Hopkins: The New Spring Poetry* written by A. Devasahayam, S. J., and published in 1981 by Karnataka Viceprovince of the Society of Jesus at St. Joseph's College, Bangalore, India. The book is one of those strange monuments to the Victorian colonial heritage. For over 350 pages, Devasahayam effuses over commonplaces in Hopkins scholarship. He concludes, however, with the following remarks:

Modern critics mistaking [Hopkins's] perpetual striving after the more perfect for struggle due to misapprehension of good and evil, have taken him to represent the divided soul of modern man. However...the true struggle in

Hopkins, apart from the conflict common to all sensitive artists is not between light and darkness but between the bright and the brighter, the good and the better. This is perfectly in tune with the motto of the Society of Jesus of which he had become a totally devoted member, **For the greater glory of God**. This endeavor after the more perfect vision and more devoted service, drove him to give his best in his poetic creation, in which consequently there emerges a perpetual glow of a spiritual aura like the brightness in the Fra Angelico paintings....Hopkins was indeed unique as a scholar, critic, counsellor, priest, Jesuit, preacher and teacher, ignored during his life-time and, after his death, unheard of for thirty long years till men were ready to receive his legacy....Coincidentally, his unique perception and sensibility expressed in the striking words, *Inscap* and *Instress*, form part of his very name so that what we present of his personality may be aptly termed *Hopkinscap* and *Hopkinstress*. (p. 371)

Commenting on Hopkins "*Inscap*" J. Hillis Miller says "the poet poets." One might, indeed, say of Hopkins "the Jesuit Jesuits." Jesuit missionaries from the time of St. Francis Xavier and Matteo Ricci to the time of the missionaries to America, such as Father Marquette, brought faith to thousands world-wide. Father Hopkins—one might call him the missionary to English majors—carried on, even though posthumously, the great tradition of Jesuit missionary services—A.M.D.G.

In "*The Wreck of the Deutschland*" Hopkins saw a source of grace for "rare-dear Britain," and celebrated the event as priest and poet. One might say that an English teacher trying to decide on an examination between a 72 and a 74 might seek inspiration if not intercession from Hopkins himself.

My most consoling Hopkins poem is the sonnet entitled "In Honour of St. Alphonsus Rodriguez Laybrother of the Society of Jesus." It presents a poignant figure for the less than overtly successful Jesuit career of Hopkins himself; it is a source of support for me as a teacher when I have to decide between a 72 and a 74—A.M.D.G., "For the Greater Glory of God":

Honour is flashed off exploit, so we say;
And those strokes once that gashed flesh or galled shield
Should tongue that time now, trumpet now that field,
And, on the fighter, forge his glorious day.
On Christ they do and on the martyr may;

But be the war within, the brand we wield
Unseen, the heroic breast not outward-steeled,
Earth hears no hurtle then from fiercest frey.
Yet God (that hews mountain and continent,
Earth, all, out; who, with trickling increment,
Veins violets and tall trees makes more and more)
Could crowd career with conquest while there went
Those years and years by of world without event
That in Majorca Alfonso watched the door.

Hopkins performed his duties in similar obscurity. Did Newman's prophecy for Hopkins come true? "Don't call the 'Jesuit discipline' hard: it will bring you to heaven," he had told Hopkins.

I wonder if we will meet Saint Gerard in Heaven and whether Heaven will be like the Eakins's swimming hole described in Philip Dacey's wonderful poem, "Gerard Manley Hopkins Meets Walt Whitman in Heaven" (1982)? I wonder if I'll meet there that other Hopkins aficionado, Professor Grieving of Golden Grove College and Anthony Burgess's *The Clockwork Testament* (1975)? I wonder whether "When the roll is called up yonder I'll be there"? When I think of Heaven, I think of Hopkins's "The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo":

O then, weary then why should we tread? O why are we so
haggard at the heart, so care-coiled, care-killed, so fagged,
so fashed, so cogged, so cumbered,
When the thing we freely forfeit is kept with fonder a care,
Fonder a care kept than we could have kept it, kept
Far with fonder a care (and we, we should have lost it)
finer, fonder
A care kept.—Where kept? do but tell us where kept, where.—
Yonder.—What high as that! We follow, now we follow.—
Yonder, yes yonder, yonder,
Yonder.