Lesley J. Higgins and Michael F. Suarez, S.J., eds.

The Collected Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Volume VII: The Dublin Notebook.
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One hundred and thirty years ago, Fr. Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J., brushed off an old notebook he had procured years earlier while a student at Oxford to use now for teaching and grading his own students at University College, Dublin. It's a book that for Hopkins scholars has attained an almost mythic status thanks to what it tells us of Hopkins's life and state of mind during those crucial years of his short life. Now, at last, we have the *Dublin Notebook* available to us all, thanks to the Oxford University Press (OUP) and the work of two first-rate scholars of Hopkins's work, Leslie Higgins and Michael Suarez, S.J. It undoubtedly helps us to better understand why this particular notebook is so important for understanding the man who gave us not only some of the most powerful poems written in his own generation, which saw them for the first time only thirty years after Hopkins's death, but—simply put—some of the most extraordinary poems ever composed.

For how else shall we describe poems like "To seem the stranger," "I wake and feel the fell of dark," "Carrion Comfort," "No worst, there is none," "Spelt from Sybil's Leaves", or Caradoc's havoc-ridden soliloquy from Hopkins's unfinished play, *St. Winifred's Well*? The last-mentioned has Caradoc speaking to himself with the rest of us listening in just after he has beheaded the woman he is obsessed with because he needs her so much more deeply than he can fathom. It is a soliloquy which bears comparison with that of King Lear after the final loss of his daughter, or Milton's Satan as he prepares to spend forever in a hell of his own making, or Melville's Ahab, who is willing to take his ship and his entire crew down with him in his pursuit of a creature he has come to demonize for having taken his leg. Caradoc's speech, in fact, is the mask Hopkins employs as he meditates on the fear and amazement he feels upon realizing that he—like many of us—is capable of thinking in such a manner in a futile attempt to strike back at the One who seems to have mysteriously disappeared from his life.

Among the leaves of this notebook, we find drafts of both "Sybil's Leaves" and Caradoc's soliloquy mixed in with so much else that was on the forty-year-old Hopkins's tortured mind: leaves composed not so much of green grass yellowing, as with Whitman's leaves, as of the browned leaves of bitter spelt. Now at last it has come home to him that he is expendable, and that he is moving through the darkest months of his first year in a politically volatile Ireland that has already seen the assassination of two British leaders in Dublin's Phoenix Park.

And to make matters worse, Hopkins can feel in his very marrow what it means to be at a “third remove” from his rare, dear England and Wales and his fellow English Jesuits, and he can sense his increasing separation from close friends like Bridges and Dixon and Baillie. Then too, there is his growing distance from his family as each member goes his or her own way, leaving behind the home he grew up in—all of this descending upon him as the bleak winter darkness threatens to drown him in a relentless tide of depression and despair.

Let it be said that the OUP edition of the *Dublin Notebook* is not for the faint-hearted. First of all, it is a big book, a foot tall and weighing close to five pounds, necessarily so presented in order to give us a copy of the actual pages of the original notebook along with an extremely careful transcription of what appears on the recto and verso of the notebook’s extant thirty-three pages (another fifteen having been torn or cut out by Hopkins himself).

Hopkins moved to 85–86 St. Stephen’s Green, across from what was the largest park in Europe, to settle in a room among the very buildings where the saintly Fr. John Henry Newman had come to start up a university for Irish Catholics at a time when being Catholic meant exclusion from Oxford, Cambridge, and Trinity College. It was here that Newman conceived of and wrote his magnificent *The Idea of a University*, modeled on his Oxford experience (or what he imagined Oxford to have been like prior to the changes imposed on the university by Henry VIII). But Ireland—struggling to rise again in the wake of the Irish potato famine of the 1840s, a catastrophe that had claimed a great number of Irish lives and caused many geographic displacements of families—was looking for a model different from what the English Fr. Newman imagined. After a few years, Newman left Ireland and returned to England and his Birmingham Oratory, where the young Hopkins—himself, like Newman, a recent convert from Anglicanism—had taught when fresh out of Oxford and just before joining the Society of Jesus in Roehampton.

Decades later, when Newman’s idea of a university was resurrected by the Jesuits in 1883 as University College, Dublin (UC Dublin), the Irish Jesuit Fr. Delaney petitioned the English province for members of the Society who could teach classes as well as serve as examiners for those seeking entrance into one of Ireland’s colleges. Realizing this goal would facilitate an influx of Irish Catholics who had been denied a university education because of their faith. As hundreds upon hundreds of students sought admission to Ireland’s colleges, the work of examining the applicants’ ability to translate the classics and their knowledge of basic Greek and Roman history, literature, and grammar now fell in large part to Fr. Hopkins, the only English Jesuit then assigned to Ireland. Preparing and grading six national exams in Greek and Latin per year, plus teaching morning and evening classes, would have been daunting for

anyone, but the burden fell on Hopkins's frail shoulders rather like a heavy wooden cross thudding down on his clavicle.

In addition to Hopkins's letters and poems written from Ireland, we now have the beginnings of essays and notes on sermons and spiritual meditations for feast days and memorials, as well as scratched-out and revised translations from the Latin written in idiomatic English. We also have a copy of William Collins's eighteenth-century "Ode to Evening" that Hopkins jotted down from memory—which poem he would use as scaffolding for his own "Sibyl's Leaves"—as well as notes for a short biographical entry on his friend and fellow poet Canon Richard Watson Dixon, which Hopkins wrote for his UC Dublin colleague Thomas Arnold's *A Manual of English Literature, Historical and Critical*, published in 1885. Besides these items there are page after page of check marks—produced as Hopkins graded papers into the early insomniac hours of morning—as he read exam papers written in poor Latin and worse Greek because many of the Irish students had not had adequate training in Caesar's *Gallic Wars* or Cicero's *On Duty* and possessed even less knowledge of the histories of Livy and Tacitus or the poetry of Catullus, Martial, and Juvenal.

Reading through the *Dublin Notebook* can feel—to use a contemporary metaphor—rather like channel-surfing through Hopkins's mind, and there are many facets one could focus on. But what strikes this reviewer most is the sense that Hopkins is searching for a new music for his poems, one that would have its roots in Pindar's *Odes* and the Greek tragic choruses as well as in the development of plainchant. Such music, of course, predated the piano and the *sol fa* tradition by at least 2,500 years; Hopkins therefore did not have an adequate notational system by which he could register it on paper, with the result that the musicologists he consulted about it, like Sir Robert Stewart, thought Hopkins woefully ignorant of musical structures.

But what this reviewer hears in Hopkins, especially in "Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves" and later in "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection" (composed in the summer of 1888), is a music that strains to en flesh the human cry at the heart of Greek tragedy and Pindar's *Odes*, a music not so much for the piano as for something like the bagpipe, capable of recalling the bleat of sheep or the desolate wail of suffering humanity—or perhaps even the cry of Christ from the cross, delivered as words failed him and all he could utter was a howl of desolation and wounded love, his heart breaking from what he had witnessed. For is that not what one is left with as one studies this broken-backed remnant of a notebook: the image of a despairing man who, like his Master, had started out with great promise and hope, and who could sense the finger of God in weeds and wilderness, in the winter stars, in the flight of a windhover on a May morning in Wales, in bluebells, in the sound

of a stone plunking into the bottom of a well, in the energy of a man plowing a muddy field, or in the innocent features of a young soldier—still more boy than man—who would soon be deployed to Afghanistan?

Rounding things out are the meditation notes Hopkins kept on his last eight-day retreat, which took place in January 1889 at the Irish novitiate at St. Stanislaus's College in Tullabeg. The meditations described therein only reinforced Hopkins's feeling of desolation and his pervasive sense that everything he had done in serving the Irish youth in Dublin—at the same university that a young Irish Catholic named James Joyce would attend a decade after Hopkins was gone—had come at last to nothing.

Therein lies the paradox. For out of his suffering and desolation, Hopkins created an equivalent to what Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, and other poets who served in the trenches in World War I produced from their own experiences, or what the Irishman Yeats belatedly articulated as a result of the *Troubles*: a cry, an authentic cry, captured in "Spelt from Sybil's Leaves" and bearing within it a music that we have grown more accustomed to; a shuddering, complex, contrapuntal, Psalm-like music, in which "selfwrung, selfstrung, sheathe- and shelterless, / thoughts against thoughts in groans grind." In-groan, ingrown—the words speak of something pressing unrelentingly against the mind.

It is a mysterious accomplishment. In those final retreat notes, we find Hopkins reflecting on five wasted years as he endured a week of desolation in Tullabeg, days in which nothing came and he was left with only a dry, barren submission to the will of God. Yet suddenly, in a flash, a trumpet crash, came a fall-gold wealth of insights into the mystery of Christ's life, and the exhausted Jesuit awoke to find that—as when, at the Feast of Cana, Christ turned six amphorae of water into wine of the first order—there had been for him no stint, only, perhaps, "an unwise order in the serving." Looking at human history from the perspective of two millennia, Hopkins asked himself: what matter the wars—or even the death—of Caesar (tiny stars now bleeding slivers of light), when his Master had quietly transformed everything? What matter those endless piles of papers on his small desk and his cramped quarters? Was it not all in the long run just so much spelt? And cannot we, joining in Hopkins's reflection, say that what really mattered was the impact he would have on the lives of those—then and now—that he would come in contact with? Did he not, after all, turn even his suffering—mental and spiritual—into a thing of extraordinary beauty for generations to come?

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