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A Priesthood of the Pen

EAMON MAHER

IT WAS with some foreboding and not a little feeling of *'mauvaise foi'* that I took the floor at this year's Hopkins' Summer School. Because, you see, Gerard Manley Hopkins wasn't someone whom I enjoyed reading when I was a student. I realise now why that may have been the case. He is a complex and difficult poet who, in order to be understood, requires readers to have endured hardship and despair in their own lives.

In this he resembles Jean Sullivan (1913-1980), a writer I know a good deal better. I had the privilege of translating into English Sullivan's memoir of the death of his mother, *Devance tout adieu* or *Anticipate Every Goodbye* (Veritas, 2000), to use its English title. The memoir does not hide or soften in any way the intense pain her departure from this world represented for the priest-writer. Sullivan liked to quote Nietzsche, who, towards the end of *Zarathustra*, wrote that sadness is also joy – '*Schmerz ist auch eine Lust*'. Sullivan interprets in the following manner:

Those who don't understand in flesh and in spirit that *sadness is also joy*, have never lived outside a world of appearances and have never written, no matter how widely they have published.¹

This theory of sadness also being joy is a constant in Sullivan's work. In the same way, the joy that Hopkins got from seeing the Divine in nature was always tinged with a sadness that the intensity of the perception could not always be fully grasped, even in poetry.

Both writers were priests, Sullivan a product of a diocesan seminary formation that he found intellectually unchallenging in that it encouraged a blind conformity and failed to provide an adequate questioning

1. *Petite littérature individuelle*, Paris: Gallimard, 1971, p. 22. (Sections of the book translated by Joseph Cunneen were published in *Religion and Literature* 26.3, Autumn 1994, pp. 59-79.)

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of what constitutes the Christian path. Hopkins was a convert from the Anglican tradition who decided to join the Society of Jesus. He found plenty of intellectual stimulation among his Jesuit mentors and confreres but, like Sullivan, he was always something of an outsider. Leaving the Church of England meant detaching himself from his family and many of his friends in Oxford – it was not in any way an easy choice. Hopkins was English, Sullivan French. Hopkins died in 1889, Sullivan in 1980: there is almost a century separating them. Sullivan lost his father in the trenches during the Great War, an event that left a deep scar. He would look on himself in later life as suffering from a complex as being a fatherless child, the son of a dead man – ‘*de fils sans père, de fils de tué*’. World War I rocked the French people in a way that I think is not properly understood by many people. The deaths of millions of its young men in circumstances that made no real sense paved the way for the subsequent emergence of existentialism,

The deaths of millions of young French men in World War I paved the way for the emergence of existentialism, with its emphasis on the absurdity of the human condition.

with its emphasis on the absurdity of the human condition. I wonder what a sensitive poet like Hopkins would have made out of the events of the twentieth century.

So much for differences between two writers separated by time, culture, training, two writers who chose different forms in which to express themselves (Hopkins is renowned for verse, Sullivan for prose). How am I now going to establish some connection between them? Well, the more I read of Hopkins' poetry and the critical studies of his *oeuvre*, the more I begin to see that both he and Sullivan saw literature as a way of living out their priestly vocation.

SACRAMENT

This marriage of religion and aesthetics can pose serious problems for the artist. The ‘true’ and the ‘good’ have tended to be much more acceptable within faith traditions than the ‘beautiful’. God tends to be referred to far more frequently as the signifier of goodness and love than of beauty. The thesis I wish to develop will be that both Hopkins

and Sullivan, priests and writers, saw themselves as being agents of creation. They were people who named God in the world, were conscious of God's hidden presence among us.

I must acknowledge a debt of gratitude for some of my thoughts on this issue to Philip Ballinger who, in his monograph, *The Poem as Sacrament: The Theological Aesthetic of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, captures Hopkins' complex view of his art as being sacramental. The main point made by Ballinger is that the poet creates a certain atmosphere, reveals signs of the Divine, but the reader must in turn be in a state of readiness to accept the offering – just as is the case with the sacraments. I quote from this study:

For Hopkins, the world is 'Worded', and this 'Wording' is the source of the world's intelligibility. Hopkins moves from the divine 'Wording' of the world which brings it into being, to knowing the world via each thing's or person's unique 'Wording', to humanly 'wording' the world via poetic language, thereby 'capturing' and conveying inscape, and its potential transforming power, to others.²

When I read these lines, I was reassured, as there is a definite link between the two writers on this issue of the Word (or *Logos*) being inseparable from the word/literature. I am no theologian but the Word represents God-made-man, proclaimed in the Gospel. It is a mystery and, as such, is beyond human comprehension. When artists embark on their work of creation, they assume a role first carried out by God. By 'naming' or 'wording' people and things, they are embarked on an enterprise that has obvious divine overtones. Sullivan often commented on the close link between his writings and the Word. Hopkins felt that his poetry could give readers glimpses of the incarnated Christ.

The fact that God became man was highly significant for both men. It meant that there are traces of God in the physical world. Sullivan's spiritual journal, *Morning Light*, provides some important insights into his views on literature. He didn't want to be a recruiting agent for the Catholic Church. He wanted his writings to choose the few who were capable of interior change, those who were willing to abandon a comfortable mode

2. Philip Ballinger *The Poem as Sacrament: The Theological Aesthetic of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, Louvain Press, 2000, p. 188.

of existence and to follow the Gospel message of unconditional love. There are no simple comforts offered by Sullivan because, in his view, the Christian life is primarily about uprooting, rebirth, challenge. We come across the following lines in *Morning Light*:

But to write is to forget, to allow memory to become flesh until there emerges the millennial word of that instant which is also eternity – that is, that glimmering of life and death when they meet between the nothingness of the past and the night of that which is to come.³

Nothing simple about these sentiments. The word Sullivan is seeking is located on the thin line between the present moment and eternity. It clearly has transformational powers.

INSPIRATION

He goes on to talk about the 'Breath' which allows language to transcend ordinary interpretation – in this he is most likely referring to the Holy Spirit. The rhythm of his prose is such that it, like the Gospel, should be read aloud. Hopkins said the same about his poetry. Sullivan's mother, a simple Breton peasant, read the Gospel aloud to her young son, and he, in turn, began to realise that the origins of the Word were oral. What are now the Scriptures were transmitted as part of a Palestinian oral culture before being captured in written form.

Parables, with their hidden meaning, always held a fascination for Sullivan. In fact, many of his novels and short stories take their inspiration from the Gospel parables. In this regard, the opinion of Susan Rubin Suleiman is relevant: 'Jesus spoke in parables, not in order to facilitate the communication of his message, but to prevent its being relayed to people who weren't deserving of receiving it.'⁴ Hopkins and Sullivan weren't too interested in attracting a wide audience: they were seeking out those who were in a state of readiness (or worthiness) to receive their veiled message. Their quest for an authentic language leads them to embark on a spiritual journey that only ends after death. They never reach the grail (to see God is to die) and thus they realise that their

3. *Morning Light: The Spiritual Journal of Jean Sullivan*, (trans. Joseph Cumneen and Patrick Gormally) New York: Paulist Press, 1988, p. 8.

4. R. Suleiman, *Le Roman à thèse ou l'autorité fictive*, Paris: PUF, 1983, p. 47.

search transcends the boundaries of time and place. Margaret Bottrall gives the following telling assessment of Hopkins' quest:

Given that there is no possibility of conveying the innermost core of his self-being to others, the poet – any poet or artist – has to strive for an individual mode of utterance that will be as true as he can make it. This Hopkins did. He is, literally, an inimitable poet. He is also a poet who makes great demands on the intelligence of his readers. Yet because the quality of his mind and spirit was so exceptional, his poetry will surely never cease to fascinate, move and enrich those who are prepared to respond to it.⁵

The last lines of this quotation seem to me the most important. Committed readers of Hopkins' poetry enter into a pact with the writer. They know that to read is to embrace the 'Breath' and rhythm of a style that is dense and complex. The subject-matter, especially that of the 'Terrible Sonnets', is often sombre and depressing. It is what comes after the reading – the digesting, the 'communing with' the words – that renders the effort worthwhile. Because out of sorrow can emerge joy.

We can see this in the course of the sonnet beginning with the lines: 'No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief,/ More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring'. This cry of despair at the absence of a comforting God also expresses a desire that the pain end. In the final six lines, however, a more resolute tone is adopted and the poet seems slightly more upbeat:

O, the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
 Frightful, sheer, no-man fathomed. Hold them cheap
 May who ne'er hung there. Nor does long our small
 Durance deal with that steep or deep. Here! Creep,
 Wretch, under a comfort serves in a whirlwind: all
 Life death does end and each day dies with sleep.

It is true that the joy is faint compared to the pain, but there is a feeling of solace in the last line emphasising that life ends and that 'each day dies with sleep'. The spiritual struggle is intense, and neither Hopkins nor Sullivan makes any attempt to disguise that fact. Sullivan wrote: 'There

5. Margaret Bottrall (ed.), *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poems*, London: Macmillan, p. 22.

is no spiritual life that does not encounter deception and disillusionment, suffering and confusion.’⁶ In another book, he remarked: ‘The struggle for a language that is more true than false is the struggle for the spiritual life.’⁷ For both men, Christ is the beginning and the end of their deliberations, the alpha and the omega. They see him as the conduit between themselves and God. Incarnation was hugely important for Hopkins – which is why he could write:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed.

Words are the inadequate vehicle the poet must manipulate to convey the grandeur that is all around us. Ordinary people don’t have the heightened sensitivity of the poet, the capacity to ‘word’ the most intense interior experiences. Hopkins moves from being to knowing to wording. As Ballinger says:

The Beautiful, just as the Good and the True, is an attribute of the Divine in Hopkins’ eyes. Furthermore, beauty is given in creation. It is there to be known and to be worded.⁸

Such a task is not easily accomplished. Sullivan fought long and hard to find a style that would allow him to express what he felt in his innermost being. He saw the risk of the success syndrome that could lead to him prostituting his art in search of notoriety and sales.

Having neither the courage nor the grace of the martyr, held back by my own mediocrity, all I have to offer is a written word with which I may be able to nourish a few rebels.⁹

CONVERSION

The success of his enterprise is determined by whether his words reach a small number of readers who are receptive to them and, if receptive,

6. *Morning Light*, p. 103.

7. *Petite littérature individuelle*, p. 16.

8. *The Poem as Sacrament*, p. 242.

9. *Morning Light*, p. 24.

willing to change their way of life. Although working through the medium of literature, Sullivan's objective is to reproduce some of the poetry of the Gospel, with all its paradoxes and its calls for rebirth:

And why should the Gospels be readily accepted? Breath, rhythm, gesture, parable and paradox – poems – are at once simple and secret, and can be only gradually unveiled. A poem accomplishes what it speaks of, but through a process that is never complete. The persons who receive it must return into darkness where they will never finish exploring it.¹⁰

REVELATION

Doesn't such a philosophy resemble that of Hopkins, a poet who set out to shine a light into the darkness of the world and reveal something new? The revelation is not immediate. Rather, readers 'will never finish exploring it'. This is what brings us back to the Gospel with all its layers of meaning, all its complexities. Each time you read it, another interpretation suggests itself. It demands constant thought and consideration, like all good art. The purpose of the poem is not to simplify that which is mysterious. Rather, it is to capture through its nuances and rhythm the elusive Truth, Beauty, Love – call it what you will – that is God. The mystery of God takes form in the world through the Word, which is what led Hopkins to make the following famous observation:

God's utterance of himself in himself is God the Word, outside himself is this world. This world then is word, expression, news of God. Therefore its end, its purpose, its purport, its meaning, is God and its life or work to name and praise him.¹¹

This is what Hopkins and Sullivan set out to do: to name and praise God – I think the verb 'praise' might have caused some problems for Sullivan, however. They did this by developing styles that disguise as much as they reveal, that provoke as well as comfort, that descend to the depths of despair before rising to a crescendo of joy when they get a glimpse of the Divine.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 22

11. Quoted by Ballinger, *op. cit.*, pp. 174-5.

They are very different writers with different views on literature and yet they share some common goals. They seek Truth and Beauty, and are attached to the Word that guides their every step. They offer no simple solutions, no easy comforts. Priests and writers, they do not believe in providing ready-made answers where none exists. I hope that I have at least suggested some convergence between two literary and spiritual testimonies that require great effort on the part of readers who are anxious to understand something of the mystery that is life.

I'll end with a quotation from Sullivan that sums up the approach of both himself and Hopkins:

The books which count are an invitation to live above ourselves and our mediocrity. Anything that merely relates, explains, or even more so, denigrates, is insignificant. I invite you therefore to search for real books, which spring from an authentic experience, that are written with blood, joy and pain.¹²

SOME SULLIVAN TITLES AVAILABLE IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION

Morning Light: The Spiritual Journal of Jean Sullivan, New York: Paulist Press, 1988.

The Sea Remains

Eternity My Beloved, River Boat, 1998.

Anticipate Every Goodbye (trans. Eamon Maher) Dublin: Veritas Publications, 2000.

12. *Bloc-Notes*, Paris: Editions S.O.S., 1986, pp. 45-6.