

Item #10

On Hopkins and the Intuition of Fall

This was Entry #48 in my previous website. It is an example of how ancient Scripture and modern Poetry can meet.

The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889) was an English Jesuit priest who lived in 19th century England. He is the author of the following poem.

Spring and Fall

To a young child

Margaret, are you grieving
Over Goldengrove unleaving?
Leaves, like the things of man, you
With your fresh thoughts, care for, can you?
Ah! As the heart grows older
It will come to such sights colder
By & by, nor spare a sigh
Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;
And yet you will weep & know why.
Now no matter, child, the name,
Sorrow's springs are the same.
Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
What heart heard of, ghost guessed:
It is the blight man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for.

The rather unconventional format of fifteen verses has the symmetrical rhyme scheme of aa-bb-cc-ddd-ee-ff-gg. The rhymes help set off the artfully simple sing-song rhythm which provides the background for the allusive language set in a poem with the subtitle “to a child”.

Margaret is the young child. She is lamenting the disappearance of the glorious foliage of the trees in a large English estate known to Hopkins called Golden Groves. Hopkins is speaking as a priest versed in the mysteries of the human person set in the context of Christian faith. He projects the bleak English fall unto the mystery of the Fall of the Genesis myth, a myth from a time when myths were mainly true. He projects Margaret's present spring in life into the more mature, less spontaneous “fall” of her personal life when the “worlds of wanwood leafmeal” lie all around her in the form of lives blighted by the evil of the Fall of man. This is “the blight man was born for”, i.e., the aftermath of the Fall.

In her present sadness on the passing of the glories of a leafy English Spring into the dreariness of a leafless English Fall Margaret is unwittingly mourning in advance the passing of the spontaneity and wonder of her glorious Spring-like childhood. What lies before her, unknowing as she is, is the dreariness of an elderly Margaret burdened by the experience of evil within and without.

Because this is classic verse—perhaps even great classic verse—“Spring and Fall” transcends the time and place of Victorian England. Hopkins here confronts as a priest the problem of evil in human existence. By his own admission he confronts it imperfectly—he himself said that he was not entirely happy with what he wrote. But then who is ever entirely happy when confronting the problem of evil? *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* discusses the problem and concludes in effect that no solution is possible to the human mind, even in the context of Christian revelation.

The name “Margaret” is derived from a Greek word for “pearl”. For Hopkins, a man steeped in the classics of Latin and Greek, the choice of this name for the young girl is not without significance. He associates her with the “pearl of great price” of the gospels, the treasure Christians all receive gratuitously at baptism—eternal life. It is eternal life and its unique value which underlies the entire poem. In the poem the word works its way by association, of course, and not by any logical inference: the joys of the springtime of youth in the presence of such a great gift tend, if there are no preventive measures, to become dulled as the autumn of life arrives. In modern terms, an unbalanced form of the “hermeneutics of suspicion” takes over under the weight of the experience of evil in oneself and in others. An unbalanced form of “the hermeneutics of suspicion”, as has been well said, can be the reducing of wonder to banality. When all is said and done, sin is banality, and thus an offense against the God of wonders and against His wonder, man. For the children of Adam and Eve the sneer is all too handy as a tool not only against others but also against oneself.

Hidden deep within “Spring and Fall” is the intuition of Hopkins the priest and poet that awareness of the aftermath of original sin, even for those conscious of their great privilege of life in Christ, is needed if the search for the Pearl of Great Price is to be carried out in a Christian way. That is to say, if the search for the Pearl is to be carried out with wonder, with awareness of one’s responsibility to all one’s fellow men in love. To all without exception. Witness, yes. Witness always. But witness in love. There are Margarets everywhere.

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