

Editing in the Bath

Or, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Intentionality,
and the Man from Petrograd

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between authorial intention and the work of textual editing is often vexed, particularly if the author does not themselves intend to be published at all. Cue Gerard Manley Hopkins. In Hopkins' case, though, things become still more complex when we attend to the fact that the only person who is said ever to have desired, or intended, that Hopkins be published may not really have existed. Or, if he did exist, he may well have been someone who ended his life in a bath, in Oxford, in 1929.¹

I SHALL HERE FOCUS ON EDITING AND AUTHORIAL INTENTION, OR rather one particular case of authorial intention — namely the intention of that difficult Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, most famous for *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, a shipwreck (of a) poem which, like almost all Hopkins poems, was not published in his lifetime.

So, what was Hopkins's intention when writing? Well, he makes it very clear: it was, alarmingly, that he might convert his editor; or rather, that he might convert the man who would *become* his editor, his posthumous editor — namely his Oxford friend, Robert Bridges. Witness his 1877 letter to Bridges: "I do not write for the public. *You* are my public and I hope to *convert you*" (ABBOTT 1935, 46, *my emphases*). Bridges, we should note, was *not* a Catholic.

When Bridges eventually does get round to editing Hopkins, he writes of the published volume, "th[is] book will be one of the queerest in the world" (STANFORD 1984, 2.735). So, why does Bridges consider this book, this book that he himself has edited, to be so very queer? Is it because, as Hopkins intended, the poetry *had* in fact converted Bridges? If so, then is

1. This essay draws on material first explored, though in a very different mode, in SCHAD 2012.

this volume, in some sense, the record of an editor's conversion? Perhaps. Perhaps not.

Either way, would it be possible to *imagine* what such an edition might look like? Might it be, say, a volume in which it is clear that the editor is gradually drifting away from *editing* the poems and toward being, instead, *converted* by them? Would the cool, scholarly notes very gradually turn into intense, confessional scraps of repentance, revelation, and prayer? Indeed, would the actual work of editing be simply abandoned, or at least much deferred?

Well, this last is precisely what did happen with Bridges. For when Hopkins dies, in 1889, although the poems are passed promptly to Bridges, for almost thirty years he does *not* edit the poems — and no one knows why. Indeed, he only ever edits them when a mysterious man finally tells him to do so:

Oxford

September 7, 1917

Dear Mrs Hopkins,

I have had lately some very authoritative appeals for the publication of all Gerard's poetical remains. And this afternoon I met a man who had just come from Petrograd, who was very urgent about having a complete edition.

— Letter from Bridges to Hopkins' mother
(STANFORD 1984, 2.714)

So, who is this mysterious figure? This man from war-torn and revolutionary Petrograd. Is he real? Or a metaphor? Or even a ghost? No one knows; or rather, no one cares, since he has been almost completely overlooked, simply not taken seriously. But what if we *did* take the man from Petrograd seriously, this man from Hopkins's twentieth-century future, his Oxford future? And what if we attempted to identify the man?

Well, after some research we might just conclude he was Neville Forbes, a professor of Russian who *was* in Oxford in 1917, who *did* know Robert Bridges, who *had* visited Petrograd, and who *did* know of Hopkins's poetry.² Forbes, we might also note, spent the First World War deciphering coded German communications, was possibly homosexual ("queer", as it were), and, one night in 1929, ran a hot bath, slit both his neck and his wrists, and bled to death.

So, can we imagine an edition of Hopkins that has the editing done by he who actually *intended* it — namely, the man from Petrograd himself, that is to say Professor Forbes? What would such an edition be like? Would

2. For full details of the research see SCHAD 2012.

the pages be damp from bath water? Or smeared with blood? And, under the gaze of this very particular editor, would the poems themselves turn out to be quite other than has ever been previously understood?

Would they, for instance, prove to be, in truth, revolutionary Bolshevik tracts?

August 2, 1871

My Dear Bridges,

I am always thinking of the Communist future. [. . .] Horrible to say, in a manner, I am a Communist.

—Letter from Hopkins (ABBOTT 1935, 27)

Or, lamentations for all the Oxonian boys who fell at Flanders?

O fair, fair have fallen.

—‘Henry Purcell’

All fell, all fell, / Not spared, not one.

—‘Binsey Poplars’

These lovely lads, windfalls of war’s storm.

—‘To What Serves Mortal Beauty’

(GARDNER and MACKENZIE, 80, 78, 98)

Or even encrypted messages sent from Germany, that is to say “Deutschland” or rather that *wreck* of a Deutschland which was all that was left of Deutschland in October 1918 but that was very heaven compared to that *absolute* wreck of a Deutschland which was all that was left of Deutschland by June 29, 1944, when, just a few weeks after D-Day, Hopkins’ poem *The Wreck of the Deutschland* was read aloud on the BBC Home Service?

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