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Hopkins and Modern Poetics

Gregory T. Polletta

Is Hopkins as unreadable now as he was when he did not publish? He is in print, and that is visibly one difference between now and then, but has his poetry ever been anything or anywhere but in print? Or, to be more particular, for he himself proclaimed, in one of a score of such pronouncements to Bridges, "my verse is less to be read than heard":¹ Is Hopkins recitable or unrecitable? What kind of hearing does he solicit? Has he elicited? And what does any or all of this tell us about modern poetics, the newer varieties of modern poetics? Or modern poetics about Hopkins? He is clearly an exemplary figure. But of what and for whom? What figure of the poet and of poetry has Hopkins been made to assume?

These are the questions I should like to address, or to touch upon, and I have posed them so, provocatively, because Hopkins is a poet of provocation. He both calls forth and calls out a rejoinder, as we might be provoked into the *contentio*, to cite his own words, "the strain of address, which writing should usually have" (L. III, 380). And it strikes

¹ *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Claude Colleer Abbott (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), p. 46 — henceforth identified parenthetically as L. I, with appropriate page references. Citations from Hopkins's other writings will be identified as follows: L. II is *The Correspondence of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Richard Watson Dixon*, ed. Claude Colleer Abbott (London: Oxford University Press, 1935); L. III is *Further Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Including His Correspondence with Coventry Patmore*, ed. Claude Colleer Abbott, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1956); S is *The Sermons and Devotional Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Christopher Devlin, S. J. (London: Oxford University Press, 1959); P is *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W. H. Gardner and N. H. Mackenzie, 4th ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1967).

me that Hopkins has not been absorbed or eased into the sounds, the voicings, the vocal traditions of English poetry. Nor perhaps has he been accommodated into the vocations of English poetry. He is still strange to our ears.

Bridges, baffled and repelled by the novelties of “The Wreck of the Deutschland,” receives another poem, and Hopkins admonishes, he implores, his reader: “To do [it] any kind of justice you must not slovenly read it with the eyes but with your ears, as if the paper were declaiming it at you . . . Stress is the life of it” (L.I, 51–2). In a later letter Hopkins puts himself in the reader’s place with the poem in question: “I opened and read some lines, reading as one commonly reads whether prose or verse, with the eyes, so to say, only,” and the poem “struck me aghast with a kind of raw nakedness and unmitigated violence I was unprepared for,” whereupon he entreats, he exhorts, his reader to listen, “take breath and read it with the ears, as I always wish to be read, and my verse becomes all right” (L.I, 79). But Bridges, though he professes admiration for his friend’s originality and genius, is not appeased, not allured, not converted. Hopkin’s voice is still like that of no other poet. Singular, distinctive, but still odd, even queer. Disconcerting.

And I have no desire to make him otherwise. I want to keep him that way, for this strangeness to the ear is, to use one of the lovely locutions Hopkins made his idiom, his *keeping*. There is little or nothing that is melliflous or nonchalant about Hopkin’s poetry, little or nothing that is easy or euphonious. No matter how many times we declaim or proclaim it so. We still have to cup our ears and strain every capacity to catch his utterance: his wordings and his voicings.

Hopkins *tries* the ear. He sends Dixon some poems, which he fears are “of over great contrivance,” and this is how he bespeaks a hearing: “They are meant for, and cannot properly be taken in without, emphatic recitation” – “which nevertheless is not an easy performance” (L.II, 153). And later in his career, in a letter to Patmore, he explains that he finds “writing prose easy and pleasant” but “not so verse” – “though indeed such verse as I do compose is oral, made away from paper, and I put it down with repugnance” (L.III, 379). Perhaps, then, it is Hopkins’s writing that perplexes the issue of the readability of his poetry. Perhaps it is his writing that perplexes the ear, for any reader no less than for Bridges, Dixon, and Patmore.²

² When Bridges released Hopkins’s poems from his keeping, he stressed, in his prefatory remarks to the first edition of 1918, the faults of taste and style in

So this is the relation that I should like to make my quarry, this contention between poetry written and poetry spoken in Hopkins that I should like to make my game and the site of my probings. But there is a lot of ground to cover, and to come to the contention quickly and simply, let us say that what sets Hopkins apart in the evolution of English poetry, what is commonly acknowledged to be his innovating intention, is that he revolutionized, he re-composed, the flow of energies in the English poetic line. This was his poetical character: to strain and re-strain the turnings and measures of English verse. To borrow from and echo John Hollander's paper here, Hopkins forced English verse onto a different footing.

I do not believe I have to dwell upon the stylistic features of Hopkins's poetry – in his idiom, its *markings*. His novelties of rhythm, his audacities of alliteration and assonance that quiver between consonance and dissonance, his inventions of internal- and end-riming that ride and over-ride the line, his artful deformations of grammar and syntax into and by the meter, his insistent pointings and counterpointings, the strange beatings of his verse: all of these are familiar enough not to need any fuller inventory. As is the look and feel of his poetry, its texture; its density and compression and coilings of what is expressed; Hopkins's stress on, as he said to Bridges, his stressing of the "naked thew and sinew of the English language" (L.I, 267), which produces a texture that is muscular and knotty and *burling*, as Hopkins said: articulations as strained and straining as if the words were miming the actions and motions of an athlete. As if the verbal figures of a poem were not metaphors merely but an enactment of the lines cut into the ice by a skater or the figures whirled to a pitch of extremity by a dancer or the

Hopkins's poetry that "are of such quality and magnitude as to deny him even a hearing from those who love a continuous literary decorum," and in order "to put readers at their ease," to disarm their hostility and pre-empt the arguments they would bring to bear, Bridges took it upon himself to define the "oddities and obscurities" that had to be over-ridden or tolerated for "any enjoyment from the author's genius." In particular, he averred: "There is nothing stranger in these poems than the mixture of passages of extreme delicacy and exquisite diction with passages where, in a jungle of rough root-words, emphasis seems to oust euphony; and both these qualities, emphasis and euphony, appear in their extreme forms." Bridges meant well, assuredly, but it is an odd performance, all around, for nothing could seem to come closer to Hopkins's own words than what he says — and yet nothing could be a more complete *mistrusting* of what Hopkins meant and means.

agile fingerings that so entranced Hopkins in music or the high-wire “daring,” as he put it, of “verse in intricate meter” (L.III, 393). These qualities, these properties of Hopkins’s poems, the impressions they make in reading, are familiar enough as descriptions, analytical or figurative, of his markings as a poet. The way his verses are packed and stressed and strained to the bursting point, as if his poetic line cannot hold, cannot contain, cannot express all that the words want or mean to utter. The way his verse, as he said in his sonnet on Purcell, “so throngs the ear” (P, 80).

A comparison with Yeats may serve to illustrate Hopkins’s singularity. Yeats was critical of Hopkins when he compiled *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* in 1936. In his introduction to that odd volume he dismissed Hopkins’s style (with that seigniorial manner he affected in his “last phase”) as nothing more than “the last development of poetic diction.” But Yeats seems to have been sufficiently intrigued by what he had read or heard of Hopkins’s poetry to attempt some novel rhythmic effects of his own, if not to spring his lines, as, for example, in “Lapis Lazuli,” where he declaims:

That if nothing drastic is done
Aeroplane and Zeppelin will come out,
Pitch like King Billy bomb-balls in
Until the town lie beaten flat.

Recall and read any of Hopkins’s characteristic lines, say the line from “The Windhover” that is arguably the most commented-upon single line in modern English poetry:

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
Buckle! (P, 69)

Compared to this, there is no buckling in Yeats’s verse but a poise that commands the measure, and also a pose, a pluming, an unabashed delight in the poet’s prowess, his exploit, that makes his verse not sprung rhythm but high talk.

And, indeed, Yeats’s poem of that title, “High Talk,” invites further comparison with Hopkins’s poetry because of what is for Yeats the unusual length of its verse line and because of what the poem, with its figure of the poet as a stilt-walker, tells us of the difference in their conceptions of the poetical character and the vocation of poetry. Here is Yeats:

Malachi Stilt-Jack am I, whatever I learned has run wild,
 From collar to collar, from stilt to stilt, from father to child.
 All metaphor, Malachi, stilts and all.

And here is Hopkins, in the famous close of "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire":

In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
 I am all at once what Christ is,' since he was what I am, and
 This Jack, joke, poor potsherd,' patch, matchwood, immortal
 diamond,

Is immortal diamond. (P, 106)

We can hear the differences instantly and distinctly. Yeats metaphorizes the subject, allegorizes the poet as a player, Malachi Stilt-Jack, stalking with measured though lumbering tread, a joking jauntiness, a roguish air, towards the apocalyptic moment that is the finale of the poem, and once that "breaks" upon him, he divests himself of the role he has been playing, he drops his colloquializing, and continues under the light of his vision: "I, through the terrible novelty of light, stalk on, stalk on." Hopkins likewise presents the poet as a player, a poor player, tumbling "in a flash" and "all at once" through a series of transformations, first lifted up, exalted, by his identification with what Christ is, a poor player like himself, what Christ chose to play, to be "what I am," and then felled, pitched downwards through a succession of splinterings of the matchwood of the self, of selvings, to that immortal diamond which is the real presence of Christ. The player becomes Christ-like in playing Christ and thereby compacted into immortal diamond – or reduced to ashes, for the interpretation can go either way. "It is as if a man said," Hopkins remarked in a telling passage in his *Sermons* which is a lustrous, the perfect, gloss for the poem, "That is Christ playing at me and me playing at Christ, only that it is no play but truth; That is Christ *being me* and me being Christ" (S, 154). But the strain of the playing, the effort to sustain the match, told on Hopkins's performance in ways that never troubled Yeats. Yeats could appear to be rueful or remorseful, as when, in "The Circus Animals' Desertion," he seems to reproach himself for the "players and painted stage" of his poetical characters who "took all my love,/And not those things that they were emblems of," but he never wavered in his poetic vocation, his confidence in his poetic powers never faltered. Whatever sense of failure he professed was an "act," and whatever failings of utterance he lamented were parts of the traditional repertory of poets who present their shortcomings: the

“lines” that are familiar words for expressing the demands high talk exacts from poets. There is no *strain* of utterance in Yeats’s poetry, no need for him to *spring* his lines, whereas for Hopkins it was an exigency. Hopkins’s verse was wrought to so daunting and dauntless a model of the poetical character, the imitation of Christ, it strained after such a pitch of perfection that his line had to spring forth with, so to speak, breathtaking risk and engagement. Which is why Yeats is always recitable, always masterful, always firmly astride the verse line, through all its rises and falls and turns, and Hopkins only haltingly so. Or rather, as he said once of the knowledge of the mystery of the Trinity that leaves the “mind swinging,” his verse is “poised, but on the quiver” (L.I, 188).

We used to think, to return to the funny way I posed my opening question as to whether Hopkins is as unreadable now as he was when he did not publish, we used to believe that Hopkins did not publish because he was discouraged by the reception of his poems by Bridges and Dixon and Patmore (with Patmore speaking for all three, only more forthrightly, in his letter of 20 March 1884, when he doubted he “could ever become sufficiently accustomed to . . . ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’ to reconcile” him “to its strangeness” [L.III, 353]), and that it has taken a revolution in poetic taste and the vocal traditions of English poetry for him to achieve proper recognition, the right hearing. Or we used to think that Hopkins, relenting on his resolution “to write no more” when he became a Jesuit by writing “The Wreck of the Deutschland,” was so dejected by the unwillingness of the editors of the journal of his Order to publish the poem, after an initial acceptance, so disheartened because they “dared not print it,” that he resolved to submit no more and relapsed into a secret solicitation of poetry. In consequence of which he felt so heavy a load of guilt at the strain between his vocation as a priest and his avocation as a poet that he vowed to renounce any attempt at publication. That this decision and this strain fettered his creative powers and ended by rendering him silent and sterile: “time’s eunuch,” in that famous lamentation of his, “never to beget” (L.I, 222).

We used to believe that is what happened because Hopkins told us so, in his own words, but such accounts, of course, are interpretations and orderings, narrative as well as explanatory orderings, of what he said and did, *slantings*, and there are many other ways, virtually indeterminate, of telling the story of his life in poetry and of placing his career as a poet. One slanting is to take the view that Hopkins was gifted in his

readers, small though that group was by his own choice, for as he declared to Bridges: "I do not write for the public. You are my public" (L.I, 46). And arguably this select public recognized his gifts. They gave him a serious and generous hearing. Moreover, to take another slant, the question has been raised as to how much in advance of his contemporaries, how out of place, Hopkins actually was in his poetry. An argument might be made that his practice of violently yoking strangeness with beauty was an extravagant expression of, but essentially in keeping with, the spirit of late Victorian poetry and poetics. Any attempt, therefore, to account for Hopkin's failure to publish by appealing to the so-called "modernity" of his poetic experiments and the lack of comprehension by his contemporary readers needs revision. The story of Hopkins's life in poetry needs rewriting.

These slants have a certain interest, to be sure, but I am not sure that the historicizing of his career and place in English poetry isn't one more attempt to accommodate and ease his individual talent into a tradition: a recuperation of "his specific, his individual markings and mottlings, 'the sakes of him'" (L.I, 170) into a poetic lineage that is less disturbing and safer, more traditional and more "readable," so to speak. What I find much more interesting and much more compelling are the revisions and rewritings of the story of Hopkin's career as a poet that have been undertaken by a number of recent critics who are versed in the newer varieties of modern poetics, in particular the figure of the poet and of poetry Hopkins has been made to assume.

I am speaking of that revision of Hopkins's poetry that has been launched under the auspices of the so-called "linguistic moment" in modern poetics. That moment when we become fully self-conscious not only about language but in language. When we situate consciousness, the self, nature, God, or whatever, within language, within discourse, and not prior to or outside of it. When the real thing, the only real thing, language can call into being, into consciousness, is more language, language with differences, but ontologically incapable of being other than itself. The moment when language is *beside* itself.

A succinct way of depicting the changes in disposition towards Hopkins, and the changes in position wrought by the newer varieties of modern poetics, is to summarize the revisions in J. Hillis Miller's view of the poet. Miller is one of the large company of discerning readers Hopkins has inspired in recent criticism and his change of position is therefore all the more noteworthy. In writing about Hopkins in his

book of 1963 on *The Disappearance of God*, Miller presented him as one of five nineteenth-century writers who played out the drama of the “event” designated by the title; in particular, as a poet struggling to enact his belief in God’s immanence, to write poems in celebration of that persuasion, in a world and at a time which was suffering the absence, the disappearance of God. This is what Miller says:

Beginning with a sense of his own isolation and idiosyncrasy, Hopkins turns outside himself to nature, to poetry, and to God. Gradually he integrates all things into one chorus of many voices all singing, in their different ways, the name of Christ . . . The isolation of the poet in his selftaste has turned out to be apparent, not real, and Hopkins’s early experience of the absence of God has been transformed into what is, in Victorian poetry, an almost unique sense of the immanence of God in nature and in the human soul.³

And to show the change in Miller’s view of Hopkins, consider the following passage from a lecture he delivered in 1975 on “The Linguistic Moment in ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’”:

There are indeed two texts in Hopkins, the overthought and the underthought. One text, the overthought, is a version (a particularly splendid version) of western metaphysics in its Catholic Christian form. In this text the Word governs all words, as it governs natural objects and selves . . . On the other hand the underthought, if it is followed out, is a thought about language itself. It recognizes that there is no word for the Word, that all words are metaphors — that is, all are differentiated, differed, and deferred. Each leads to something of which it is the displacement in a movement without origin or end . . . The individual natural object and the individual self, by the fact of their individuality, are incapable of ever being more than a metaphor of Christ — that is, split off from Christ. They are incapable by whatever extravagant series of sideways transformations from ever becoming more than another metaphor.⁴

And so, he says, “the tragic limitation of poetic language lies in the fact that the Word itself cannot be said.”

Here, then, is what modern poetics has begun to make of Hopkins: a poet of the “linguistic moment,” which Miller characterizes as “the

³ *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, repr. 1975), pp. 323–4.

⁴ “The Linguistic Moment in ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’,” in *The New Criticism and After*, ed. Thomas Daniel Young, the John Crowe Ransom Memorial Lectures 1975 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976), p. 58. Cf. Miller’s companion piece, “Nature and the Linguistic Moment,” in *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, ed. U. C. Knoepfelmacher and G. B. Tennyson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 440–51.

moment when language as such, the means of representation in literature, becomes a matter to be interrogated, explored, thematized in itself." We did not need this variety of modern poetics to call our attention to Hopkins's fascination with language. That has been perfectly plain, apart from the poems, from the moment his early diary speculations on etymology and linguistic transformations were published.⁵ What is different about the view of the present linguistic moment is the displacement in the reading of what Hopkins's poetry is "about", from the representation of the poet's religious experience to the problematics of the representation in language. As Miller instances the change: "If the overthought of 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' is the story of the tall nun's salvation and its musical echo before and after by the poet's parallel experience of grace, the underthought of the poem is its constant covert attention to the problems of language. This linguistic theme is in a subversive relation of counterpoint to the theological overthought."⁶ Subversive because the theological subject cannot be expressed, cannot be brought forth by and into language.

Miller has made a new story, a new drama, a new agon, for Hopkins, and he has made him even more heroic, for his struggle now is played on a larger, if more common, stage and scale, and the outcome is even more dubious. In the first drama Hopkins suffers the same fate as his contemporaries, for, like them, "he believes in God, but is unable to reach him. Deserted by his nature, he is left with a blind violence of will toward a God who keeps himself absent."⁷ In the second drama Hopkins battles valiantly against the tragic limitation of language, a tragic fall into language: "The words of human language, for Hopkins, seem to have been born of some primal division, a fall from the arch and original breath into the articulate. This fall has always already occurred as soon as there is any human speech." And the upshot is that Hopkins becomes a figure of, one of the modern masters of, what has been called by a number of recent critics, notably Joseph N. Riddel, "the poetics of failure."⁸

Miller has changed his position because of his attempt to incorporate

⁵ See, for example, his speculations of 24 September 1863 on the word "horn" in *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W. H. Gardner (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 89.

⁶ "The Linguistic Moment in 'The Wreck of the Deutschland,'" p. 54.

⁷ *The Disappearance of God*, p. 359.

⁸ "Scriptive Fate/Scriptive Hope," *Diacritics* 6 (Fall 1976), p. 22.

the poetics of deconstruction that has become identified with his own institution, the so-called Yale School of Critics, and in particular under the influence of Jacques Derrida, but there is a theme that is common to both the earlier and the later positions, and that is the narrative, the drama, Miller makes of Hopkins's career, which is that of a declension in creativity, a descent into spiritual and poetic impotence in Hopkins's later years, a depletion of his procreative energies.

Edward W. Said has given a somewhat similar account of Hopkins's career, though to a radically different purpose, in his momentous book *Beginnings* of 1975. Said makes the notion of *career* a crucial part of his critical enterprise, for the career — which “permits one to see a sequence of intelligible development, not simply of accumulation” of dispersed and discrete performances — is the very act and problematic of what he means by willing and beginning a text. He presents the career of Hopkins as an exemplary demonstration of his theory of beginnings, and his treatment of Hopkins's poetry in that light is as powerful as it is rich in detail. This is Said's “general account” of his view of Hopkins's career:

Hopkins's poetry begins as a confirmation and a repetition of a divine metaphysic of creation, which involves both beginning and creating. Later his poetry self-consciously considers itself to be a rival to divinity, so strong has the authority of the poetic self become. Finally, the poet and his project discover themselves imprisoned on a sterile plot totally isolated from God. By this time, however, the poetic career has already been divorced (Hopkins's word is “widowed”) from the divine thrust: the poet is now a spiritual eunuch, his text a linguistic mutant that has issued forth from an emasculated pen.⁹

Said is as fully informed about the European critics and theorists who have spurred Miller to change his poetics, his reading of Hopkins, but Said is far more critical about the work of Derrida. Indeed, it is Derrida, with his “grasp of the bewildering dilemma of modern critical knowledge . . . its awareness of the debilitating paradoxes that hobble knowledge,” his “nihilistic radicality,” who represents that impasse of modern poetics Said wants to break out of in order to begin his text affirming a creative will and intention. And for this endeavor Hopkins's career is an exemplary history of the perils and triumphs, the obstacles and the achievements, the problematic of beginning a text.

More recently yet, Michael Sprinker, in his book of 1980 on Hop-

⁹ *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), p. 265. The citation immediately following is from p. 341.

kins's aesthetics and poetry, has gone even further than Miller did in inscribing Hopkins in the poetics of the linguistic moment and making him "radically textual." Sprinker is less equivocal about Hopkins's language-centeredness, for he argues that Hopkins is neither immanential nor incarnational in his poetry and poetics:

The language of Hopkins's poetry is generated by analogical correspondence in which the poem produces a heterocosm, a world structurally parallel to but ontologically distinct from objects and events in nature . . . For Hopkins, poetry is the structuration of language, and language is structured by laws and relations that are intrinsic to itself.¹⁰

Although Sprinker is less reserved than Miller in his identification of Hopkins with this position, he is equally alive to the dramatic consequences of such a persuasion. Sprinker, too, has a story to tell, a drama to unfold, and his turns on the figure of a poet fully bound within the Nietzschean prison-house of language. To illustrate how this commitment affects the interpretation of Hopkins's poetry, Sprinker reads "The Wreck of the Deutschland" as a poem "'about' Hopkins's will to master language and his realization of the degree to which he is finally and necessarily mastered by it." He concludes his book by reflecting on the poem "To R. B." and arguing, with a great show of force and reason, that because Hopkins performs "the extreme *askesis*, characteristic of so much modern poetry since Wordsworth, which denies the poet's exuberant celebration of himself and of nature and which makes of poetic excess and sublimity a tempting but forbidding demon," it is with him, with Hopkins, "at the end of his career," that "modern English poetry properly begins."

I shall come more directly in due course to the question of how modern poetics, and its dispositions towards the linguistic moment, textuality, and the writing of poems as allegories of poetry, bears on Hopkins's poetry spoken and poetry written: the question of whether his verse is less to be read than heard and what that has to do with the "readability" of Hopkins's poetry. But first I should like to pause for some reflections on the figure-making process which is at work in these recent revisions of Hopkins and in modern poetics at large.

One of the curious features of these essays is that though they lean so

¹⁰ "A Counterpoint of Dissonance": *The Aesthetics and Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), p. 64. The citation immediately following is from p. 109.

heavily on theory in their argumentation of how Hopkins should be read and placed, they resort continuously to narrative, to stories, myths, and allegories, to so many of the resources of fiction and history, as well as to modes of dramatization, in the conduct of their critical discourse. They make a drama out of Hopkins's career, with beginnings and endings, agons and triumphs, crises and liberations, blindness and insight. Which is not to say that they *personalize* Hopkins's poetry or make it an expression of personal experience.

None of the critics I have mentioned attempt to recuperate the subjectivization of the self, the personalization of the text, the intentionalizing of a work that have been discredited, first, by the American New Critics, and then by the so-called French New Criticism. Miller, Said, Sprinker are all perfectly aware of the divesting of an author's privilege and "fathering" authority by Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida, and they are obviously not bent on restoring anything like this sense of Hopkins as a figure of the poet and of poetry.

Miller, in his essay on "The Linguistic Moment in 'The Wreck of the Deutschland'" reports a telling exchange he had with Kenneth Burke on the occasion of its delivery as a lecture. Burke had remarked that Miller neglected to show the multiple meanings of the word *wreck* in the title of Hopkins's poem. The poem, Burke said, is about Hopkins's wreck. This, Miller acknowledged, "was a powerful plea to relate the linguistic complexities, or tensions, back to their subjective counterparts," and characteristic of Burke, for whom "literature is always incarnated in the flesh and blood and nerves of its writer or reader." Miller admitted some justice to the plea, Hopkins "is speaking of his own wreck in the sense of personal disaster, fragmentation, or blockage," but he demurred from giving this central importance, for "the danger in Burke's suggestion ... is, as always, the possibility of a psychologizing reduction, the making of literature into no more than a reflection or representation of something psychic which precedes it and which could exist without it." Miller says that he "should prefer to see Hopkins's personal wreck as his inextricable involvement, 'in flesh and blood,' in a chain or net of signs, figures, concepts, and narrative patterns. The exchanges, permutations, contradictions, latent aporias, untyings and typings of these elements he had the courage and the genius to 'live through' in his writing and in his experience."

Whether this account is or is not a better or truer story or drama than Burke's, it is very much a story and underwrites or even authorizes the

“analysis” Miller performs of Hopkins’s poems and the figure he makes of him as a poet of the linguistic moment. He makes Hopkins’s life in poetry a kind of “continual allegory” (to cite Keats’s phrase in his memorable letter of 14 February – 3 May 1819), an allegory of poetry-making. He turns Hopkins’s poetry into a kind of “life”, an exemplary life. As do Said and Sprinker in their own ways; they, too, make a story out of Hopkins’s poetry and career. It would seem, then, that recent critics have transposed the drama of the poet’s life as expressed or represented in the text to another and more defensible site, the production and the representation of the text itself. They have personalized and dramatized, so to speak, text-making and textuality, and stamped that playing space with their own signatures, as readers, rather than in the name of the poet. This is a captivating turn in modern criticism, with powerful advantages and attractions, and not the least of its appeals is what might be construed as the motive for such figure-making: to deepen the sense of a human engagement in the writing and reading of poetry — with no loss of the philosophical reach and grasp of “modern critical knowledge.” And it is bemusing that modern criticism which is so often accused of being “in theory” arid and abstruse is saturated with human interest stories.

But there is a swarm of conceptual difficulties and problems in such a practice, different though these are from what are posed in familiar critiques of “explanatory fictions,” and while it would be impertinent for me to attempt any ample discussion of them here, especially as I believe the critics I have cited provide some of the best readings we have ever had of Hopkins’s poetry and the best accounts of his career, one set of difficulties needs touching upon because it bears crucially on the question of *placing* Hopkins. To assert that with Hopkins “modern English poetry properly begins,” what does this purport precisely, whom as well as what does it take in, to whom is it addressed, and what kinds of backing are convincing for its purpose — or its several purposes? If the argument goes as we have seen, that modern English poetry properly begins with Hopkins because, under the visitation of the linguistic moment, he practiced its characteristic *askesis*, and that he wrestled with, shaped his career by, his consciousness of the tragic limitations of language, is this meant to be the history of what actually happened, is it an event, or is it the narrative of one poet, one figure, who exemplifies some condition which is ahistorical and atemporal, the awareness of which, as in an experience of conversion, becomes a mo-

ment rather than an event? And if that condition is not merely one condition among many possible conditions, but the condition or disposition or body of theories that dislodges and supplants the congeries of theories, the conditions, the so-called "logocentric thinking," which supposedly held sway up to the linguistic moment, does this consciousness constitute the markings of modern poetry? If such is what the argument purports to establish, there would be nothing fatal in countering that it is simply *making* literary history — indeed, its cogency and appeal would derive in part from this very recognition — but we would still be left with the question of whether the making and re-making of literary history under the auspices of the linguistic moment is the best, or the most interesting, we might imagine. In other words, just how supreme a fiction is the linguistic moment? And how good an example is Hopkins of what modern poetry has been made to comprise in its name? Or to put these question another way: What other ways of constructing Hopkins's career and placing him in literary history might be imagined? How might we come closer to the scene of writing poetry? To the act, the actuality, of writing?

In speaking to these issues we might stop to consider who the interested parties are, what community of readers it is that are concerned and caught up by the tragic limitations of language Hopkins exemplifies. Who are his readers and listeners, and what kind of hearing — not only what kind of interpretation, but what kind of *hearing* — do they give to Hopkins? Hopkins received his first public hearing, his first public critical appreciation, by poets. He inspired admiration and imitation by the example of his writing. If it is true, as commonly asserted, that his poetry has waned as a model and an example for poets, if (to cite *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature*) Hopkins's poetry "no longer excites poets as it did some decades ago," I believe this to be of capital importance in any accounting of his career, a development that should be taken into account in any example we critics make of Hopkins as a figure of the poet and of poetry. Because the reception of Hopkins's poetry by poets may bear, should bear, on whatever we propose in theory about the status and significance of his career.

Take the case of Robert Lowell. I am picking him rather than others, say Yeats or Pound, who are closer to the beginnings, the chronological beginnings at least, of modern poetry, because with Lowell there is a semblance of influence. But I would mention Yeats and Pound because theirs is a very different poetics from that which has been ascribed to

Hopkins, and because the drama of waning poetic energies is hardly what constitutes their "modernity." In the event, Lowell was palpably excited by the poetry of Hopkins. He published an essay on Hopkins in 1945.¹¹ And there are echoes, distinct echoes, of Hopkins in such poems as "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket." "The Wreck of the Deutschland" is manifestly a precursor for Lowell's poem. But the construction of Hopkins's example, its convoluted density, its strained and stressed verse, embodied precisely the stylistic properties Lowell labored to divest himself of as he developed his career. Lowell has left his own account of how he was spurred by the oral performances of poets in San Francisco in 1957 into making a line that was lighter and nimbler and less constrained, less muscle-bound, than his earlier verse. How he tried to get some breathing space into his lines. I would not want to use Lowell's career as an example of the "anxiety of influence" or related notions that have been much discussed of late, for that theory, Harold Bloom's theory, too, is another story, albeit a particularly imaginative one, of how poets fashion their careers, which at least has the virtue of trying to explain one writer's career by interaction with another's. My point would be that any history we construct of Hopkins's "modernity," any attempt we make to place Hopkins as an inaugural figure in modern poetry has to take into account, not simply what has "actually" happened to his status and influence with poets, but also *what kind of example he has been for poets*. The question, in effect, is whether the exemplary figure we make of Hopkins as critics and readers meets and matches the example poets have made of him. In particular, the question is whether "the poetics of failure," and all that implies by way of the figure of the poet and of poetry, is in fact an exemplary concept at all — for poets.

But what interests me more about the example, the instance, of Lowell's relation to Hopkins is the problem it suggests of poetry spoken and poetry written in Hopkins's career. His insistence on the importance of speaking poetry, on the role of speech in the making of poetry, of poetry as speaking, is too well-known to need more extensive citation and documentation than those pronouncements I have quoted already on the need to recite and declaim poetry. I will just recall his avowal of "the true nature of poetry" as

¹¹ "Hopkins' Sanctity," in *Gerard Manley Hopkins by the Kenyon Critics* (Norfolk: New Directions, 1945), pp. 89–93.

the darling child of speech, of lips and spoken utterance: it must be spoken; *till it is spoken it is not performed*, it does not perform, it is not itself. Sprung rhythm gives back to poetry its true soul and self. As poetry is emphatically speech, speech purged of dross like gold in the furnace, so it must have emphatically the essential elements of speech.¹²

And if we are going to speak of beginnings, the beginnings of Hopkins's career, the place I would want to mark, emphatically re-mark, is the testimony he left in the memorable letter telling of how he began "The Wreck of the Deutschland" at the behest of his rector that he write about the shipwreck in the winter of '75: "I had long had haunting my ear the echo of a new rhythm which now I realised on paper" (L.II, 14). A new rhythm haunting his ear. Not some inchoate desire or will or intention, not an amorphous impulse or energy, not some logocentric thought or flash of the linguistic moment, but a distinct creative form and faculty: a new rhythm waiting to be called forth by an occasion and by words to be realised on paper. Hopkins begins writing again, after long silence, by an act of voicing — that is itself the "true soul and self" of poetry.

But in writing poetry so emphatically in this spirit Hopkins had to contend with the resistance of Dixon and Bridges and Patmore, those few readers who were prepared to listen or to whom he permitted himself the liberty to show and speak of his poems. Hopkins had to implore and woo and disarm their hearing. Dispell their perplexity and bafflement. Which results in some comic passages. As instance when he writes to Bridges about "Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves," which is one of the most contorted and tongue-tying of all his performances at verse, one of the most audacious and amazing of all of his poems: "Remember ... that it is ... made for performance and that its performance is not reading with the eye but loud, leisurely, poetical (not rhetorical) recitation ... This sonnet should be almost sung" (L.I, 246).

Hopkins's notions of the music of poetry, and the relation between song and poetry, are fragmentary, elliptical, and exceedingly complex, fragmentary, perhaps excessively or plainly obscure, but the statement does affirm a desire and an intention that were dear to him. And the kind of singing he has in mind by such remarks is not necessarily or exclusively the fiendishly intricate varieties of Church music: he some-

¹² From his letter of 5/8 November 1885 to Everard Hopkins, in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Selected Prose*, ed. Gerald Roberts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 137.

times means a pure vocality. We may have become so preoccupied in modern criticism with "the poetics of difficulty" that we overlook those poems and lines where Hopkins achieves a simpler and singing performance. Poems both early and late, such as the early poem "Heaven-Haven" or the late poem "To R. B." Perhaps we need in criticism "a poetics of simplicity," along with those of difficulty, for that too would be a map, a part of the map of modern poetry, and as challenging a problematic, I believe, as its contrary or counterpart.

"Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves," however, is dauntingly difficult to recite, let alone sing; its performance needs a trained ear and voice, steeped in the strange articulations of Hopkins's verse. Indeed, it seems to defy performance, in any ordinary apprehension of that act, for it calls for a new recitation every time it is read aloud, one which imposes a strain by forcing a shifting of accents or rhythms from those preceding. It is a poem that is radically unstable in its vocalization.

Hopkins was not only perfectly conscious of how unreadable and unrecitable his poetry must look and sound to his readers, he was not only defensive and self-justifying about his practice, he went to great lengths to train and re-train the ears of his listeners. To that end he took pains to provide markings as to how his poems are meant to be read. He desired speech, he emphatically wanted his poems to speak for themselves, he wanted his lines to move with the energies of speaking, so he *scored* his verse, so to speak, with various markings for accent and beat and measure to guide the reader in performance.

But, of course, scoring of this sort is a graphic device, scriptive, however much its intention is to serve as a cue for recitation. The expedient is problematic, and it is rather the same problem as William Carlos Williams's use of typography as a "script for performance," for in both cases the graphic devices, the scriptive markings or the typographic layout, are not definitive or even decisive for how the poem might actually be recited or performed. Indeed, Hopkins offered several different scorings for the same poem. And whichever of them we let stand as the best script of the lot, they may pose a counter solicitation to the reader or performer. They may place a burden on the ear. And in fact they may be only a *figure* of speech, a fiction or myth asserting the belief in the primogeniture and primordiality of speech. But such a figure might be negated, or at least called into question and brought under suspicion, because the scorings, once they are left in print, become a part of the written text rather than the spoken poem. In which

case we are thrown into a debate that has so exercised modern theories of discourse: the issue of whether speech is more natural, more "original," prior to and privileged over writing.

Hopkins scored his verse, let us say, but scoring is also, of course, an effacing and a defacing of a text or a tablet or any writing surface. And one of the markings of Hopkins's poetic character, one of the features of his writing, is the way he dismembers words — both written words and sounds. His disjunctions and decompositions and all the other modes we designate by such prefixes; his rips and cuts and rupturings, his *scorings*, are familiar keepings of his repertory and a major source of his exploits of instress and inscape.

And we might give the word "scoring" one more turn by going to the Old Norse root of the word, *skora*, which, I am told by my colleague at Geneva, Paul B. Taylor, signifies among so many other things: to carve or scratch runes, i. e., spells or charms. And the moment we call that series into play, it is hard to restrain the spellings and the spillings forth, the spiralling force of the turnings and lacings of the collocations. Not associations, free associations, but collocations: verbal strings that are phonic and phrasal. Or, to cite Hopkins, *wordings* and *voicings*. Soundings.

And what all of this brings me to is a musing upon the word "wreck" in "The Wreck of the Deutschland." I would certainly agree with those recent critics I have mentioned that the poem is gripped by the spells and mysteries of words, that it performs an act of creation, and treats the conditions of creating, in the act of trying to represent the wonders and terrors of the Creation, that it incarnates a verbalization of the Incarnation, and that it inscribes and enacts the scorings both verbal and spiritual by which the poet endeavors to utter that which is moving him to speech, to poetry, to publication, to prayer. I would wholeheartedly agree that the poem is highly textual, perhaps even supremely so, in its telling. But I am not sure that I would want to stop there. For the poem is a structure of turnings, or rather a composition of turnings, by saying which I would want to bring Hopkins closer to the "high energy construct" of Charles Olson and his poetics than to the modernist, the so-called "high modernist" poetics with which Hopkins is commonly affiliated.

"The Wreck of the Deutschland" turns and returns its contents, its *aboutings*, and one of its turnings is to return and recall us to the world, to return and reinscribe and replace us in the situation of the poet, the

situation of the reader and the listener — but without coming to rest there, in any of these places, for the windings that move to that point are equally a series of rew windings along the armature of the poem's textuality. I am not sure, that is to say, we are constrained to read the poem as if our imaginings, our thinking, our feelings, our wordings and voicings adhere to the text — are caught by and held fast to its textuality.

It strikes me that we are pulled and strained at many points, in several directions, towards and away from everything that is uttered. Too often we speak of strain, of tension, as a stretching between two points, whereas there are any number of figures we might evoke where the strain is purchased at several points. A sail, say, or Christo's running fence, or Serra's sculptures or other post-modernist constructions. And if we plot Hopkins's poems as a vector of forces, textuality would be one axis, but the other could be, in my opinion should be, what Edward Said calls the "worldliness" of the text.

Take "The Windhover" as an instance. Michael Sprinker claims that "among the innumerable commentaries" on the poem, "none ... has recognized in this poem an allegory of the writing of poetry," and he proceeds to read the "poem as a figural presentation of poetic figuration": an example (underwritten in large measure by Harold Bloom's theories) "of the poet's struggle to identity through the writing of poems." As one of the moves in his carefully wrought argument he confronts what most previous readers have admired as the mimetic exactitude and vivacity with which Hopkins renders the flight of the kestrel. Its status "as the representation in language of a perceptual experience, a mimesis of the physical world inhabited by the poet" is precisely what Sprinker is intent on dislodging and deconstructing. He pays due respect to the inscape of Hopkins's observations of the bird's flight, but that is, obviously, not what the poem is "about":

If the bird in the poem has a referent outside the poem itself, it is not so much the kestrel as all those birds so preternaturally present in the Romantic lyric: Keats's nightingale, Shelley's skylark, Tennyson's eagle, Hardy's darkling thrush, Yeats's falcon and golden singing bird, and Stevens's blackbird. In each of these poems, the song or the flight of the bird becomes an emblem of the poet's own voice, of his vocation, in the original sense of a 'calling or summons,' as a poet.¹³

¹³ Sprinker, p. 6.

This is a powerful reading of the poem — in Harold Bloom's vocabulary, a "strong" reading — and behind it is the whole complex of modern poetics that is incorporated in Paul de Man's *Allegories of Reading* (1979), but it raises some difficult problems, some interesting questions, and of these the one that interests me here are the differences, the crucial differences, between Hopkins's figure, and the vocation it emblemizes or allegorizes, and the figures of the other poets. Hopkins's bird is so distinctly different from Yeats's golden singing bird, say, that our imaginations turn differently. Yeats's bird holds us fast to its "artifice," to its textuality, whereas Hopkins's returns us to what is incarnated or inscribed, imprinted in the world. And their representations not only treat the same concern with the vocation of poetry, they end by straining our recitations in opposite directions, Hopkins's towards the imagination of an engagement with the world, Yeats's towards disengagement. Curiously, it is Yeats rather than Hopkins who appears to be more receptive to a reading by modern poetics, for it is Yeats who deconstructs and decenters the self, "All metaphor, Malachi, stilts and all." It is Yeats, by comparison, though only by comparison, who holds us closer to the textuality of his poems — to the kind of play and recognition of artifice that has been advocated by Derrida's followers — even when he affirms the need to return to "the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart." Whereas Hopkins so physicalizes and materializes his representations of the things of this world that it might well be argued he wants to disfigure any literary lineage and re-inscribe the world in his poetry. Hopkins's tropes may be only one more addition, a supplement to "the figures of Romanticism," as Sprinker claims, but the pitch of his turnings may be to sheer that figuration: to decompose the *literariness* of such representations.

In any case, as far as "The Wreck of the Deutschland" is concerned, the poem resists being brought to a standstill, even when interpretation centers it in writing, makes it turn about "an allegory of writing poetry," and decenters its representation of a shipwreck which tells on the poet's two vocations in the depiction of his faith in certain relations among self, nature, and God. For the word "wreck" is a very rich hoard in Old English and Old Icelandic, as I have been informed by my colleague Paul B. Taylor. The word *wrekan* pulls several ways at once, it sheers, for *wrekan* means to drive out, expel, cast out, as a people might be cast out, and to drive out, expel, cast out, *as we expel or utter words*. The word "wreck", then, embeds both exile and recitation. To

wreck is to utter and cast forth the words that signify the poem's *aboutings*.

That might look like one more embroidering stitch in the weave, the linguistic web, that has been worked by modern poetics, or alternatively, a detailing of what has never been disputed or underplayed: the polyphonic and polysemous character of the language of Hopkins's poetry. But the larger point I am getting at has been suggested already, not by the critics I have mentioned, but by Geoffrey H. Hartman, who, I believe, for all his affiliations with the recent poetics of "the Yale School," takes a slant in his reading of Hopkins that strains, and perhaps even buckles, the linguistic moment. Commenting upon a journal entry where Hopkins reflects on "the expression, *uttering* of the idea in the mind," Hartman observes that "there is, in Hopkins, an audacious effort to conceive words generically, as beings in their own right and not merely the carriers of an idea. In some later poems there is a method of rhythmic stuttering, as it were, that would make the word a point, the strongest non-referential intention of speech." And Hartman concludes suggestively: "The final tendency is toward purely vocative speech, what Hopkins would call the *inscape* of speech."¹⁴

I think it might be worth adding that there is a straining in Hopkins's line, in Hopkins's poetry, towards expressing things that cannot be realized, made real, in language, that is, outside of language, as the critics of the linguistic moment contend, and there is a straining towards purely vocative speech, as Hartman asserts, but there is also a straining against those things that language can express only too well, only too easily. If poetry, as Keats said, "should surprise by a fine excess and not by singularity," Hopkins is singularly unrefined and exorbitant, not only in his demands, but in the way he throngs and surfeits the ear. "I could wish," he once said wistfully, "that my pieces could at some time become known but in some spontaneous way, so to speak, and without my forcing" (L.II, 28). He was quite conscious of what his performance exacted. He was conscious of the costs of production — but not only in the sense this notion has come to assume in modern criticism, as the price he paid in creative expenditure: he was also aware of the risks of facility and fluency. Which is how I would explain his famous jaded judgment of Keats, who was, of course, an early enthusiasm of Hop-

¹⁴ "The Dialectic of Sense-Perception," in *Hopkins: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. G. H. Hartman (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966), pp. 127-8.

kins's, or, if one likes, an early influence and precursor. "It is impossible not to feel with weariness," Hopkins wrote in 1888, "how his verse is at every turn abandoning itself to an unmanly and enervating luxury" (L.III, 386). Hopkins's own career may have suffered the enervation that recent critics have emphasized, but he strained against "a fine excess" and "enervating luxury," for his "forcings" sought a different footing and a more precarious purchase.

One reason, then, why Hopkins is so hard to recite and to read is that his writing, his poetry, unleashes verbal energies that are difficult to contain and control. Impossible to master. Because words are "beings in their own right," because they have a life of their own, or rather because Hopkins's wordings and voicings act as if that were the case. Or perhaps because he makes them freely-playing signifiers. How can one constrain the significations of the "wreck" of the Deutschland? Or how can one enclose and disclose the ricocheting figures of just the title of "Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves"? The technical problem would be a twisting of the familiar fascination of what's difficult, for it is not simply a question of loading and overloading a phrase or a line, but so constructing it that the words set in motion move in so many directions at once, vertically and diagonally and every which way, bucking against the flow and forward surge of the lines on a page, the script. Even, to mention just one possible move, one turn, where the wording or the voicing wants to arrest and hold the line to a point. But that would be to make poetry, Hopkin's poetry, closer to the dynamics of speech or music or dance than to the sense or figure of the text, the poetic text, that is the object or the quarry or the contention of the newer varieties of modern poetics.

I have obviously been miming my subjects in this paper or, as it was given originally, this talk. I have been playing with the language of the issues in modern poetics. Indeed, I have been sporting with the figure of play by which Derrida inaugurated a decisive turn in the career of modern criticism.¹⁵ Hopkins's way with words is infectious, and it is hard not to fall into travesty when speaking about him. And this sort of mimicry is equally irresistible when one is captivated, as I am, by the discourse of modern poetics. It is hard not to fall into parody in writing

¹⁵ "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), pp. 247-65, esp. p. 264.

of the linguistic self-consciousness of recent readings of Hopkins. Our discourse echoes as it delivers our persuasion — but it also bespeaks the pitch, pause, and stress of conviction. And persuaded as I am in theory by the power and cogency of the linguistic moment in modern poetics, there is one strain I would contend against. Most of us who are sympathetic to what has been happening in modern poetics, any of us who have been drawn into the poetics of the linguistic moment, can perform the sort of practices I have cited or mimicked. That is, we can take the words of a poetic text and in our own discourse of criticism gloss them, dig up their etymologies and breed new combinations or implications of meaning, spread them around the page, preface and postface them, decompose and recompose them at will, playing freely. But what we cannot do in the discourses we perform — even if, as some critics have been urging, we call this activity “creative,” because discourses of criticism, too, create new texts — what we cannot do is to move our words into poetry. We want that power by which our wordings become voicings. Voicings in all the senses Hopkins meant by that term. Not that this want of a poetic voice renders us servile as readers or as critics and without occupation or vocation. It is simply so. Different and distinct. There is, I would contend, all the difference in the world between the linguistic moment and the *poetic* moment, even if, in theory, the poetic moment begins and takes place and ends in the linguistic moment. Or should I say that the poetic moment takes flight from the linguistic moment and leaves it behind?

As an example of what I am trying to get at I should like to say something about a poem by Ted Hughes that appeared in *The Observer* on 16 January 1983. It is entitled “The Kingfisher,” which obviously calls to mind Hopkins’s “As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame” as well as, in turn, Charles Olson’s poem “The Kingfisher,” and that series of adjacent texts or string of precursors and successors would offer an apt illustration, easy game, for the discourse of intertextuality that has become so capital a feature of modern criticism. But I want to go on to something else. I shall not cite the whole of Hughes’s poem, only the first 8 of its 25 lines:

The kingfisher perches. He studies.

Escaped from the jeweller’s opium
X-rays the river’s toppling
Tangle of glooms.

Now he's vanished — into vibrations.
 A sudden electric wire, jarred rigid,
 Snaps — with a blue flare.

He has left his needle buried in your ear.

Once again, John Hollander's remarks on echoes are apposite, for in these lines by Ted Hughes I hear the echo of the first quatrain of Hopkins's last poem, "To R. B.":

The fine delight that fathers thought; the strong
 Spur, live and lancing like the blowpipe flame,
 Breathes once and, quenched faster than it came,
 Leaves yet the mind a mother of immortal song. (P, 108)

There is here a simplicity that runs so contrary to the clamorous complexity and exuberant energy of so many of Hopkins's poems, there is so little of an exploit in the utterance, and it tolls its notes with what may sound like so mournful a ring, that no wonder the poem has been read so emphatically by recent critics as sealing the coffin of his career. As cadential, a dying fall, and exemplary of his career as a poet. As a plangent epitaph of the costs, the expenditure, of his poetic powers. This is the way the poem has been read — and movingly, eloquently, poignantly read — by the critics I have been discussing.

I myself would not read it so, or at least I would slant it differently, I would want to supplement and qualify this way of placing and exemplifying the poem. Not that we should ignore that it comes at the end of his career. I have no quarrel with the *sense of an ending* that figures in the interpretations I have cited. The question is what kind of an ending does it represent, can it be made to represent? Hopkins's co-religionists have no problem with its place in the history of Hopkins's vocation; Robert Boyle, S. J., as instance, remarks of the last lines of the poem: "They are good lines for a follower of Christ to end with, since they suggest that the patience he wanted to share with his Master had endured the rack and overcome the disgust at last."¹⁶ And while this may be too comforting a conclusion, a saving of its appearances, even if the Christian doctrine is made analogous to a poetic *askesis*, there is obviously something to be said on its behalf. The bleakness, the blankness, of the poem's close, with its image of sinking into the "winter world" that

¹⁶ *Metaphor in Hopkins* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1960), p. 134.

has supplanted "the roll, the rise, the carol, the creation" and "that scarcely breathes that bliss/Now," the poet says, speaking to R. B., "yields you, with some sighs, our explanation," sounds like so muted a closing, so low and far a fall from the "arch and original Breath" that inspired "The Wreck of the Deutschland," so crestfallen that it is hard to read the poem as anything but a decisive resignation of his poetic powers. And yet even here Hopkins is speaking *faithfully*, for as he explained in one of his sermons, "even the sigh or aspiration itself is an answer to an inspiration of God's spirit" (S, 156). So the argument might go over this poem, resisting any closure in our interpretations and yielding a variety of contending disclosures.

What impresses me, however, is not the ending as such of "To R. B.," but the place it has in a series of poems Hopkins wrote in the last year of his life. Poems that disclose the access of a new resolution and energy, not in the expression of what the poems are about, but in the poetic style and voice of his endeavors. Any career which includes "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire" and "Thou Art Indeed Just, Lord" in the last year of the writer's life is hardly the exhaustion of a poet's powers. The poems declare an exhaustion, unquestionably, but the torment, the doubts, the weariness expressed go back long before. They are an old refrain in Hopkins's letters and other prose. His castigation of himself as "time's eunuch" in "Thou Art Indeed Just, Lord," for example, is a phrase that occurs in a letter of 1 September 1885 to Bridges, three and one-half years earlier than its appearance in the poem, and a like phrase, "a straining eunuch," occurs in retreat notes Hopkins recorded 1 January 1889, nearly three months before. The point I would draw from this is that Hopkins not only confides in his letters and prose what he feels about what is happening to him; he *stores up* the words that will become voiced as poems. Hopkins is quoting himself in the poem. As is characteristic of poets, he is re-citing himself. Helping himself to expression, replenishing himself, in a manner of speaking, by what he himself identified as the poet's act of "self quotation."¹⁷

¹⁷ It might be argued that the nearer use of "eunuch" in the retreat notes is more telling of what Hopkins seems to say about his career in "Thou Art Indeed Just, Lord," for in the notes he grieves: "What is my wretched life? Five wasted years almost have passed in Ireland. I am ashamed of the little I have done, of my waste of time, although my helplessness and weakness is such that I could scarcely do otherwise. And yet the Wise Man warns us against excusing ourselves in that fashion. I cannot then be excused; but what is life without aim,

To my view, what is of capital importance about "To R. B." the place to begin any interpretation of the poem, is that it is addressed to Bridges, a fellow poet, and thereby different from the address of, say, "The Windhover." "To R. B." is written to Bridges, and perhaps written *for* him, not only in commemoration of their long friendship, not only as a gift or offering in token of their fellowship as poets, but as one of the products of their working relationship in poetry: their collaboration. Not that this was a harmonious relationship or that they were of the same mind as to what poetry is and how it should be written. Their collaboration was always contentious. But Hopkins listened, and one way of accounting for the style of the last poems he wrote is to read them as a flowering of the "Miltonic plainness," the "more balanced and Miltonic style," he spoke about many years before in his exchanges with Bridges. Indeed, a case might be made, as Elisabeth Schneider has attempted,¹⁸ that Bridges was responsible for Hopkins's late "plain style": that he was a direct influence on the final turn in the poet's career. And certainly Bridges was gratified by the "gift" of this poem to him, for apart from its homage to their friendship, the austerity and restraint of its style was taken as a vindication of what he had been urging upon his fellow poet through the whole of their working relationship. As he remarked in his preface to the 1918 edition of Hopkins's poems: "It is lamentable that Gerard Hopkins died when, to judge by his latest work, he was beginning to concentrate the force of all his luxuriant experiments in rhythm and diction, and castigate his art into a

without spur, without help? All my undertakings miscarry: I am like a straining eunuch" (S, 262). Which would seem to be what he expresses in the poem. But consider the way he uses his Scriptural texts. In the retreat notes he recounts "that course of loathing and hopelessness which I have so often felt before, which made me fear madness and led me to give up the practice of meditation except, as now, in retreat" and "here it is again." So, he continues, "I could therefore do no more than repeat *Justus es, Domine, et rectum judicium tuum* and the like, and then being tired I nodded and woke with a start." The Scriptural text in meditation is recited by rote, it not only offers no relief, in inspires no response. Whereas in the poem it is the Scriptural text which calls forth and, as it were, bespeaks the utterance. Moreover, although both the retreat notes and the poem are a beseeching, the "loathing and hopelessness" of the former are modulated in the latter into a truer lamentation and prayer. I would cite this poem, then, as an example of how Hopkins's *poetic* vocation came to the aid of, ministered to, and revived his flagging spirits in the exercise of his *religious* vocation.

¹⁸ *The Dragon in the Gate* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).

more reserved style" (P, 243). This also has a sense of an ending, a story to tell, which, unlike so many subsequent accounts, takes the form of assigning a new beginning to the end of the poet's life in poetry. But while that has its partialities, its oddities, perhaps even its touches of belittlement, for Hopkins's "luxuriant experiments in rhythm and diction" were often misconstrued or misheard by his friend, his pleas frequently fell on deaf ears so that he was left "sighing" his "explanations," they were bound together, these friends, these contentious friends in poetry, by "the strange comfort afforded by the profession," to cite the title of a story by Malcolm Lowry, and this too has a part to play, whether as a leading or supporting role, in any story we might make of the poetic career of Hopkins. This too might be a figure of what "To R. B." signifies. By which I mean simply and emphatically that if we are going to make of Hopkins a figure of the poet and of poetry we ought to begin and end with the particulars, the markings, the practice of his working relationship to poets and the writing of poetry.

But I should like to drop this contention and remark that the career of the poem "To R. B." does not end there, with what it may be made to say *about* Hopkins's abandonment of poetry, his renunciation of his calling. It has a continuing life, an after-life, in the example it offers to poets who follow in its wake. The echoes of "To R. B." I hear in Ted Hughes's poem "The Kingfisher" are a figure, an example, of the potency of its words, "live and lancing like a blowpipe flame," to beget more and other words, more and other poems. Which is pretty much what the critics of the linguistic moment have been saying, to be sure, except that I would want to underscore the role of *voice* in the transaction. I would want to stress and emphasize, to privilege, in fact, that is to say, to give first place and capital importance to the voice "live and lancing" in the ears of readers who are poets, as well as in the ears of those of us who read not only what poets write but *as* they write their poems. As performances in words "less to be read than heard."

To say this is not to assert that Hopkins has been absorbed into the traditions and vocations of English poetry. He is distinctly not an example of what is authorized by T. S. Eliot's account of "tradition and the individual talent." The strangeness of his individual talent is his keeping. Hopkins's voice is "live and lancing," assuredly, but as ever lancing. And his example is that of a *spur*: a word that is voiced in "To R. B." and quoted, so to speak, from many of his letters to Bridges.

Hopkins spurs poets and is a spur to poetry by the force of his example rather than as a model for imitation. His career is marked by the authority of his performance. He may be exemplary of the poetics of failure, but he succeeded in writing enough poems that enact “the achieve of, the mastery of” his radically distinct conceptions of poetry. That proclaim the distinction of his poetic voice. He has left poems that are among the strongest and most astounding performances in words in the language. That are themselves an example of what can be wrought in language: an example of all that might be said by, and about, language “wrought to its uttermost.”

This phrase happens to be a citation from Yeats’s “Lapis Lazuli,” and in his use of the word he evokes the sense of an ending, the uttermost end, the last thing that can be said before death and silence. Indeed, he revives the sense of an ending that attaches to the word “utterance” and is moribund in our ordinary and current vocabulary. Yeats’s phrasing, then, is as complex as it is striking, but he underplays what Hopkins always emphasized: that which he called “the earnestness or in-earnestness of the utterance” (L.I, 89). And this is what stresses Hopkins’s verse and makes his lines heave with such a straining burden towards a final springing and release of the utterance. It is this earnestness or in-earnestness that sets Hopkins apart from Yeats and most other poets. That makes him what he is and no other poet. And so difficult a model to follow or to hear aright. But still an example. A spur.¹⁹

¹⁹ Comparisons have a way of imposing partialities, and to redress any impression I may have given that all comparisons are one-sidedly in favor of Hopkins over Yeats, I should like to remark that nothing stamps Hopkins so surely a poet as well as priest of his time, nothing dates him so sharply, as the letter of 17 May 1885 in which he chastises Bridges for writing about the Greek gods in *Ulysses*: “Believe me, the Greek gods are a totally unworkable material ... they are poor ignoble conceptions ennobled bodily only (as if they had bodies) by the artists, but once in motion and action worthless — not gentlemen or ladies, cowards, loungers, without majesty, without awe, antiquity, foresight, character; old bucks, young bucks, and Biddy Buckskins. What did Athene do after leaving Ulysses? Lounged back to Olympus to afternoon nectar. Nothing can be made of it” (L.I, 217). Whereas, by contrast, nothing marks Yeats so surely a poet of his time as the poem of 1939, “News for the Delphic Oracle” — because of its air and diction (which, curiously enough, echoes the brio and saltiness of the style of Hopkins’s reproof), because of the way it addresses and voices the subject, and because of the mastery of its verse. Yeats exhibits to advantage in this poem, one among so many, the very quality Hopkins identified (L.I, 146), with a proto-Joycean coinage, as *verjuice*.

And this would be in perfect keeping with Hopkins's own principles, for as he declared once, with a fine flourish of self-confidence: "The effect of studying masterpieces is to make me admire and do otherwise. So it must be on every original artist to some degree, on me to a marked degree" (L.I, 291). I find this statement especially telling because it appears in a letter to Bridges of 25 September 1888 — in the last year of his life. So there may be more to the story of Hopkins's career than we have been led to imagine by the profound dramaturgy of modern poetics. And more to what can be made of his example. Or the figure of the poet and of poetry he can be made to represent. Because it is his *voice* that is so original and in so marked a degree. Because it has lodged itself so deeply, live and lancing, in any ear for poetry. Because, like Ted Hughes's kingfisher, Hopkins has "left his needle buried in the ear."

Hopkins, then, is exemplary as a poet less because he so perfectly and completely expresses the linguistic moment in modern poetics, less because he is so sheerly a figure of that persuasion, than because he strains his visible inclinations in that direction towards very different points of purchase and pitch. Hopkins's poetry, because it enacts his conviction that poetry "is less to be read than heard," because it turns wordings into voicings, provokes the question that is less a confirmation than a *contentio* for modern poetics. To catch one last echo from John Hollander's paper and play upon one of the lines by Milton he evoked, I mean the question of whether in reading Hopkins's poetry, in reading poetry at large, we are in that situation and activity of language "where more is heard than meets the eye."