Catholic Predilections in the Poetics of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Seamus Heaney

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Abstract
Seamus Heaney has reiterated the importance of Gerard Manley Hopkins in shaping his own poetic voice. This essay studies the way Hopkins's and Heaney's poetics are related to their Catholic formation. While their sacramental approaches to language and their ideas of grace and self-discipline result in similar linguistic and formal features in their poems, the two poets' different understandings of the temporality of the world/Word also gives rise to the contrast between Hopkins's poetic rendering of dynamic, variegated existence and Heaney's vision of a realm of "verbless" purity. Based on an understanding of the world as ever-occurring Incarnation, Hopkins's poems often foreground a dialogic, transgressive element, trying to capture the vivifying principle of the Word, whereas Heaney's anxiety to override the contingencies of time gradually lures him to a visionary space where time is momentarily suspended and actions frozen.

Keywords
Seamus Heaney, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Catholicism, the body of language, discipline, the Living Word

Despite their distinctive differences, Seamus Heaney claimed Hopkins as one of the major shapers of his own poetic voice. While Hopkins's distinctive voice owes much to his sacramental understanding of language, Heaney's preference for tactile, sensuous words and his sensitivity to the transformative linkage between physical and numinous dimensions in words themselves are also related to his Catholic formation. Deeper than this linguistic compatibility is the attraction of Hopkins's "siring strain": the fatherly "sire of the muse" that demands a tight, disciplined design, an
inscape of the poem, instead of the spontaneous oozing out, the fluent and facile outflow of Romantic verse.¹

That said, the two poets are still fundamentally different. Hopkins’s poems, embodying the Ignatian principle of being “created to praise,” are prayers and psalms in poetic form—addressing, questioning, and glorifying the ultimate listener, God. Heaney rightly observes that “Hopkins’s intensity is the intensity of dialogue, of blame and beseeching: a ‘thou’ is being addressed” (“Joy” 345). In Heaney’s poems, we can also see a sustained, sometimes failed, attempt to establish a certain kind of relationship with a transcendent presence. Entangled in the political tumults of his homeland, he reaches out in his poems for a realm “beyond,” seeking in contemporary events a meaningful register of concourse between the poetic “I” and a Higher Being that can guarantee the integrity of his art. For Hopkins, a dialogic, dynamic, transgressive element echoes the eternal Word, present at a deeper level of reality than politics. In fact, what his “irregular” poetics tries to capture is the temporality that marks his understanding of the world as ever-occurring Incarnation, a constant communication between the time-bound and the timeless. Hopkins’s poetry is, in this sense, about narrating and being narrated by the Living Word. While Heaney also strives for moments of transcendence, his anxiety to override the contingencies of time gradually leads him, especially in Seeing Things, to a visionary space where time is momentarily suspended and actions frozen. The paradox of Heaney’s religious refusal to discredit real presence and his distrust of his immediate temporal-spatial context, accordingly gives rise to the airy, trance-like quality in some of his later poems, and his former faith in “pure verbs” sometimes dissolves into a near “verbless” purity.

I The Body of Language and the “Siring Strain”

When one considers Heaney and Hopkins together, the first impression of affinity appears on the surface. Heaney owned his indebtedness to Hopkins phonetically. A special susceptibility to sound made young Heaney a

¹ In “The Fire I’ the Flint,” Heaney takes Keats and Hopkins to exemplify two contrasting visions of poetic creation: “Keats has the life of a swarm, fluent and merged; Hopkins has the design of the honeycomb, definite and loaded. In Keats, the rhythm is narcotic, in Hopkins it is a stimulant to the mind.” For Heaney, Hopkins represents “a siring strain rather than a birth-push,” a masculine disciplined poetics rather than a feminine Shakespearean ooze or Eliotian “dark embryo.” See Preoccupations 85.
ready prey to Hopkins’s seductive voice. Reading too much Hopkins as a young student, he admits, resulted in an unconscious addiction and automatic imitation. The bumpy rhythm and heavily-compounded lines of his first poems, as in “Ghosting the roof of bog-oak, turf-sods and rods of willow,” attest to the overwhelming influence of Hopkins’s distinctive music.

It did not take Heaney very long, however, to grow out of the obsession with these more obvious elements of Hopkins’s style. But a natural as well as cultural affinity continued. In retrospect, Heaney recognizes a more “physical” reason for his attraction to Hopkins—the regional dialect of Northern Ireland:

> It is true that the Ulster accent is generally a staccato consonantal one. Our tongue strikes the tangent of the consonant rather more than it rolls the circle of the vowel…It is energetic, angular, hard-edged, and it may be because of this affinity between my dialect and Hopkins’s oddity that those first verses turned out as they did. (Heaney, “Feeling” 45)

Another shared “dialect” of the two poets’ voices, however, is more deeply rooted in a different language: the liturgical incantations of their “common” Catholic background. Heaney owes to his Catholic upbringing “a sense of a light-filled, Dantesque, shimmering order of being,” where “[y]ou conceive of yourself at the beginning as a sort of dewdrop, in the big web of things” (Heaney and Miller 36). This web of things expresses a living relationship that implicates all creation and the Creator, which, in Hopkins’s poems, inaugurates recurrent images of connectedness—being “lovelaced,” “roped,” and “reeved.” Words and vowels key into each other through the technical means of “consonant chime,” assonance, and repetition, creating an intricate web of piedness and dappledness in Hopkins’s poems. This interlaced world, woven through with God’s creative love, is intimately felt, in different registers of significance in Hopkins and Heaney as a kind of precipitating pressure.

Physicality, therefore, is more than a technical consideration for both poets. The physical, sensuous element is the very body of Hopkins’s religious poems, and also constitutes to some degree the ambiguous world of early “naturalist” Heaney. In his letters, Hopkins repeatedly defends his poetry as oratorical (Letters 46). The native rhythm of the words used bodily is for Hopkins an antidote to the mannerism of “Parnassian” poeticizing. With his sacramental understanding of the created world,
Hopkins makes a strong literal use of language, working it, forcing it in such a way that its materiality is recovered and its semantic, referential role downplayed. Words enjoy a visceral physical existence with their “word- hood” foregrounded by the twisted syntax of his lines. He means to reinvigorate not only the sound, but the flesh and bones of words, so that their living body can be felt. Indeed, for Hopkins, “Poetry is in fact speech only employed to carry the inscape of speech for the inscape’s sake” (Notebooks and Papers 249). Hopkins’s literal use of words, his stress on the phonetic and syntactic body of words, and the oral nature of his poetic voice, are actually an attempt to restore the inscape of speech, the exuberance and plenitude of which, like that of other created things, are not abridged by but actualized in the unifying presence of Christ. Thus the more distinctive and unique the inscape of the speech is, the more concentrated and intense is the effort to “glean” Christ. Hopkins’s poems are accordingly marked by their “thronging” of short, Anglo-Saxon words and regional dialects with particular meaning, with their redeployment of words, often against grammatical principles and poetic norms, in such a pattern that their sense is more intensely and immediately felt.

For Heaney, too, the sound, the physical, the “body” of language and its music, is never a mere medium, but always intrinsic to what is realized in poetry itself as a genre. It is interesting to note that the images of festering, fermented, stinking, clotting, buttery, eely, and slimy substances make frequent appearances in Death of a Naturalist and Door into the Dark, the first two collections of Heaney’s poems. For the early Heaney, the seeming grossness of such images indicates an intimate involvement with nature. The sensuous, tactile language, employed to deliver a sense of lushness and mortality of life, gradually ripens into a preoccupation with the tactility of language itself. A later poem, “Alphabets,” attests to Heaney’s in-grown sense of “shape-note language,” as a divine given, at one with the physical and numinous world:

The risen, aqueous, singular, lucent O
Like a magnified and buoyant ovum—
Or like my own wide pre-reflective stare
All agog at the plasterer on his ladder
Skimming our gable and writing our name there
With his trowel point, letter by strange letter.²

²) Opened Ground 294. All other references to Heaney’s poems are to Opened Ground, unless otherwise indicated.
The morphology of alphabets is indistinguishable from the hieroglyphs of the created world. In Heaney’s earlier poems, the subtle undulations of consonants and vowels in the names “Undine,” “Anahorish,” “Moyola,” “Broagh” are highlighted, dramatized, and conflated with the sensual and topographical, to produce the central metaphor that Heaney finds for his country: the bogland. The bogland is rich in life, fertile and feminine. For the poet, the touch of language and the touch of land constitute two equally strong sources of pleasure. This double seduction is expressed in the “guttural water” of Moyola, “soft gradient of consonant, vowel-meadow,” and “lobe and larynx of the mossy places.” Different from the “touch” in Hopkins’s poems, a touch that is meant to release the charged divine love in every object and make it “give off sparks and take fire, yield drops and flow, ring and tell of Him” (Devlin 195), Heaney’s touch is more literally “earthly.” In Wintering Out and North, Heaney’s “chthonic” mystique of his native land is fully exploited. It is Heaney’s signature moment when the terrestrial, the linguistic/Gaelic, and the somatic are immersed and indistinguishable in one description. The place Derrygarve and the river Moyola, in “A New Song,” both bear the answer to the poet’s pursuit of the “vanished voice” of Irish history and culture. Their Gaelic names, the hush sound of “Derrygarve” as the smell of potent musk, and the long, guttural sound of “Moyola” resembling the shape of the river, are evidences of “bedding the locale in the utterance” (“Gifts of Rain”), of a narrative of terrestrial “vowels and history.”

The conflation of the physical, sensual, linguistic, and topographical with the historical, either in the form of the Bog Queen, the ancient Irish terrestrial numen who takes adult men as human sacrifice for her annual rejuvenation, or as the flooding water goddess that “rises to pleasure me,” seems to be a hybrid result of Heaney’s syncretic, pagano-Catholic view of nature and his regional, cultural allegiance. The intimately felt bogland is a naturalistic alternative history of his native land. With every layer having been camped on before, it is a living record of the past. If Hopkins’s poetic world, when touched, would “ring and tell of Him,” then the touch and feel of Heaney’s bogland bespeak a lived indigenous history of itself.

Heaney is also attracted by the masculine restraint exhibited in Hopkins’s poems. Poetry, for Hopkins, should task “the highest powers of man’s mind,” and the exacting, the wringing of the mind is naturally translated into “an emphasis of expression stronger than that of common speech or writing” and “an emphasis of thought stronger than that of common thought” (Collected Works 121). In this respect, many of the Romantics, Hopkins argues, often fall short of their full poetic potential by
constantly allowing themselves to lapse into weak, receptive modes and sloppiness of structure. In contrast, the struggle with language and the concentration of mind seldom slacken in Hopkins. This tautness of language, tone, and form is exemplified in the “Buckle!” moment in Hopkins’s “The Windhover,” where a contracting pressure is exerted, condensed, and released, to fall, gall itself, and “gash gold-vermillion.”

Hopkins believes that divine significance impresses, imprints, and informs every individual object, imparting meaning to it. What is stressed in his poetry is the sacramental embodiment of God’s truth; its instress is God’s entering into and charging nature. The charged nature always bears the form of a certain inner pattern, carries a certain design. This inscape, the design or pattern, is a masculine, restraining force, opposite to the free-flowing, oozing ease of spontaneous, feminine poetic grace. Heaney is keen to observe this deeper dimension of Hopkins’s masculinity; in keeping with Hopkins’s poetic and spiritual temperament, Heaney defines it in terms of the “siring strain” and “mastering father” (Heaney, “The Fire” 85), in contrast to the conventional feminine Muse figure of inspiration.

The Father figure, in a more direct sense, is also present in Heaney’s poems. The inward and downward digging of his forefathers is translated into his earliest and most basic poetic stance, and the silence of his own immediate father imposes its own kind of masculine restraint, a “government of the tongue” on his poems. “The Stone Verdict” is passed not only on his father’s lingering spirit, but on the poet’s lines. The “old disdain of sweet talk and excuses” has been expressed elsewhere by Heaney as an innate distrust for the literary voice, probably inherited from his reticent family. The “sweet talk” of poetry runs the risk of varnishing death and injustice “with morning dew,” as his murdered cousin accused him of doing in “The Strand at Lough Beg.” Moreover, the ungoverned tongue would miss the moment of truth simply by having “said too much.” Though every poem is for Heaney an experience of overcoming this doubt, he is still in a sense governed by the silence principle, not only because of ancestral speechlessness, but because “in the ultimate court,” words are inadequate means to convey judgment: “It will be no justice if the sentence is blabbed out. / He will expect more than words in the ultimate court / He relied on through a lifetime’s speechlessness” (280). A more solid, unsweetened, and unchangeable verdict is delivered in the form of stones, which are proper to Hermes, the god of crossing-over and interpreting. The delivery of meaning, the poet seems to imply, requires a more restrained, reliable, “stony” language of feel and touch.
It is natural, therefore, that forceful physical labor and farm activity, expressed in quick successions of lean, substantial verbs, should have a privileged existence in Heaney’s early poems. The actions of divining, thatching, forging, pumping, and digging are construed as an intimate, inspiring contact with nature, especially the land. The early Heaney, with an intention to roughen up his language and curb it with stony control, indulges in concrete, short verbs and consciously reduces the sweet talk of descriptive and affective adjectives to the minimum. “Thatcher” is a typical poem that allows little space for the ungoverned, babbling tongue. Instead, it magnifies solely the part of action. “Bespoke for weeks,” the thatcher “turned up some morning,” until:

He shaved and flushed the butts, stitched all together
Into a sloped honeycomb, a stubble patch,
And left them gaping at his Midas touch. (21)

After beginning with a past principle “bespoke,” falsely promising some kind of passivity, the poem then rains on its readers a dizzying volley of forceful, concrete verbs—eyed, poked, opened, handled, flicked, twisted, fixed, snipped, sharpened, bent, pinning down, shaved, flushed, stitched—almost to the exclusion of adjective accessories. The rapid succession of lean verbs finally build up to the last line, where the thatcher, after shaving and stitching the butts together into a sloped honeycomb, “left them gaping at his Midas touch.” The temporal verbs of the thatcher’s actions finally solidify into a timeless gesture, a stone verdict in a sense, captured in the finishing moment of thatching and entering the realm of the constant. In an interview, Heaney describes this verbal restraint as a poet curbing his “self,” as if holding a grudge against his own genius. The self-forgetfulness thus produced is for him the essence of lyric poetry (Heaney and O’Driscoll 88).

II Poetry as Colloquy or Poetry as a Freeze-Frame Moment of Concentration

Despite these elements of affinity and influence, the poetry of Hopkins and Heaney are fundamentally different. It is notable that an underlying faith in poetry as a mode of communicative existence distinguishes the poems of both Hopkins and Heaney. But it is also the divergence in
the content, constancy, and certainty of such a faith that mark the major
difference between the two poets.

An exercitant of St. Ignatius’s *Spiritual Exercises*, Hopkins the poet may
be seen engaging in an equivalent poetic exercise: employing his five senses,
physically and imaginatively, to see, hear, smell, taste, and touch the reality
both of worldly creatures and the Three Divine Persons, and contemplat-
ing the sins that persons on the earth are indulging in light of the holy
Incarnation that the Three Divine Persons are effecting. In Ignatian spiri-
tuality, the objects that present themselves to the senses are in constant
flux, and the supreme object of contemplation, the divine Incarnation, is
never a finished act. Reflection on the “senses,” integrating the reality of
the earthly and the divine, often constitutes the octave in Hopkins’s son-
et, while the “contemplation” is realized in the sestet. Uniting the plethora
of senses in the octave with the condensation of contemplation in the
sestet, the general dialogic tone of the poem resembles the “Colloquy” that
is made at the end of each *Exercise*. Hopkins’s poems are literally prayers of
thanksgiving, glorification, confession, intercession, and petition address-
ing Christ in a way “just as one friend talks to another, or a servant to his
master, now asking for some favor, now blaming himself for some ill deed,
now disclosing his affairs and seeking counsel in them” (Ignatius 28). This
dialogic and dynamic character of Hopkins’s poems, which is the funda-
mental root of his physicality and “siring” restraint, distinguishes him
from most other poets, including Heaney. Hopkins aims at a poetry that
imitates the reality of the Word Incarnate through the body of poetic
words and lines, of capturing the Living Word in the pulsing flow of lan-
guage, and most fundamentally, of enacting the entering, crossing-over,
and communicating of the Word through the dialogic voice in his poem.

In contrast, Heaney’s search for a transcendent addressee is more prob-
lematic. It is first expressed in his privileged “darkness,” which is taken “as
a passageway to an enabled realm.” His poetic persona is seen engaging in
dialogue with various terrestrial gods and goddesses, ghosts and sybils of
the dark. But darkness gradually shifts to light, clamor is absorbed into
silence, and the solid, temporal, ominously dark gives way to the weight-
less, static, airy light.

On the one hand, Heaney’s involvement with academia in the 1990s
subjected him to the influence of “speechifying and theory-speak.” While
the academic world, with its deconstructive passions, challenges the nor-
mative world of his County Derry farmyard background and Catholic
upbringing, Heaney confesses that “there is a countervailing impulse (in
him) at work, a refusal to discredit ‘the real thing’, however much it may be melting.” He describes this resistance as “a contest going on between Derry and Derrida” (Heaney and O’Driscol 287). The reluctance to let go of the “real thing,” however, is inevitably complicated by his inability to grant to anything a solid, let alone sacramental presence. Hence also the profusion of terms such as “nowhere,” “hiatus,” “emptiness,” “nothingness,” and “forgetfulness” in his later poems.

On the other hand, the later Heaney’s predilection for airy, motionless, suspended trance is also related to his longtime Miloszian struggle “between contemplation of a motionless point and the command to participate actively in history” (Heaney and O’Driscol 302). It seems that his urge to transcend historical and political contingency and allegiance in search of a free zone of artistic freedom gradually gravitates him toward the “motionless point.” A general expectation that poets should address social and political wrongs is countered by the poet’s resistant urge to stay loyal to nothing but his art. The rejection of direct intervention as a proper role for poetry seems to spill over into a growing mistrust in forceful transitive verbs. Heaney even draws on the beautifully narrated story from the Gospel of John 8:3–11, where Jesus suspends judgment on the adulteress, to exemplify his understanding of poetry: “Poetry is like the line Christ drew in the sand, it creates a pause in the action, a freeze-frame moment of concentration, a focus where our power to concentrate is concentrated back upon ourselves” (Heaney, “The Government” 207–8). This ideal of “holding attention for a space” leads Heaney to a poetry of concentrated vision, a spatial presence momentarily stripped of temporal solidity.

These two contending tendencies give rise to the changed ambience of some of Heaney’s later poems. The refusal to let the “real thing” melt away, together with a somewhat misplaced distrust of actions and a “nostalgia” for the “motionless point” of poetic concentration, engender the distinct spellbound atmosphere in these poems. In this pervasive trance, things do exist—they are juxtaposed, contrasted, piled up—but their existence is often summed up in various projections of nothingness and emptiness. Such a vision, in my view, is symptomatic of Heaney’s challenged Catholic eye—by “Seeing Things” robbed of their temporality, he actually holds on to a created world of “real things” somehow divorced from the vivifying or “living Word” of the Creator. If the Catholic idea of continuous, ever occurring Incarnation demands a reader, or rather a listener, to ongoing stories and narratives, then the poet, though willing to “be dazzled” and “see things,” becomes instead a mere observer of still life.
objects—literally, *la nature morte*—and misses the vivifying principle. In his attempt to transcend the gravitational pull of reality by means of the “pure verbs” of poetry, Heaney sometimes seems to have sought purity at the expense of the verbs. The airy, weightless, motionless light in some of Heaney’s later poems is a problematic counterweight to the earthbound, to history and its necessities. Consciously stripped of time, the poetic world is characterized rather by emptiness and nothingness of being. For some, this is a kind of “generative emptiness” that serves as a latter-day substitute for Hopkins’s God.

### III Poetic Light and the Poet’s Self

Readers of Heaney notice a major shift of poetic orientation in his 1979 book of poems, *Field Work*. In the five preceding books of poems, Heaney writes of digging, divining, burrowing downward and inward to the alluvial memories of a dark, underground past. Poetry, as the title of one of these books shows, is primarily a “door into the dark.” Particularly in 1972’s *Wintering Out* and 1975’s *North*, Heaney is seen making conscious, if not desperate, efforts to excavate the dark recesses of cultural memory, be it the Bog Queen of Irish myth or the Tollund Man of ancient Norse ritual. The ambiguous darkness and amorphous bogland seem to represent a more privileged poetic insight, richer, freer, and more enabling than the prescribed clarity of “daylight” sociopolitical reality. This elected darkness comes in the form of express admonition in “North,” the titular poem of his 1975 collection, where “I” was told by the spirit of ancient Celtic warriors to

\begin{verbatim}
Lie down
in the word-hoard, burrow
the coil and gleam
of your furrowed brain.
Compose in darkness.
Expect aurora borealis
in the long foray
but no cascade of light. (99)
\end{verbatim}

Light, however, gradually finds its way into Heaney’s poetry after *Field Work* and culminates in his most recent book of poems, *Electric Light*,
where, as Heaney himself noted, “there was light all over the place” (Brown 103). In “Sybil,” a part of “Triptych,” the oracular command to burrow into the hidden treasures of both his furrowed mind and his native land is now modified and suspended, because

The ground we kept our ears to for so long
Is flayed and calloused, and its entrails
Tented by an impious augury.
Our island is full of comfortless noises. (Opened Ground 148)

Excessive tapping of the bogland as his country’s memory bank, and the conscientious forging and re-membering of a coherent identity, have subjected the poet to an overwhelming gravitational pull of his immediate socio-political reality. The Sybil’s call for change, therefore, refers not only to the “thinking-money and talking weather” people, but also to the poet, the very form of whose poetry is “bound to change.” The problems of Northern Ireland, Heaney believes, would not be solved “Unless forgiveness finds its nerve and voice /.../ And the fouled magma incubate / Bright nymphs...” (141). If “foul magma” had a prominent presence in Heaney’s early poems, then “bright nymphs” were about to assert themselves in the later ones.

The shift from dark to light, from inward to outward, was construed by critics, using one of Heaney’s favorite tropes, as “the allegorical victory of the ‘sky-born’ Hercules over native, earth-grubbing Antaeus.”3 If the atavist, chthonic cultural past, the earth-bound Antaeus, stands for Heaney’s conscious efforts to shape a distinct national, local memory, to identify with his “Birthplace” physically and intellectually, then his deliberate switch to the more affirmative realm of light can be understood as “his determination to be the determined by history no longer” (Morrison 75): to transcend his tribal obligations and “turn the almost morosely self-entranced voice outwards in some more sociable kind of address” (Corcoran 127).

The shift, however, is by no means abrupt. “Determined” as Blake Morrison believes Heaney to be, the poet is never fully comfortable with the

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3) Andrews 142. This victory is portrayed in Heaney’s “Hercules and Antaeus”: “Hercules lifts his arms / in a remorseless V, / his triumph unassailed / by the powers he has shaken, / and lifts and banks Antaeus / high as a profiled ridge, / a sleeping giant, / pap for the dispossessed” (130).
transition from Antaean darkness to Heraculean light. In fact, “Oysters,” the first poem of Field Work, portrays a poet who is exasperated by the fact that his “trust cannot repose in the clear light,” and that he has to indulge in eating the day “deliberately” in order to be quickened “all into verb, pure verb.” Given the sexual implication of “oyster” itself, and such phrases as “Alive and violated,” “philandering sigh of ocean,” and “Glut of privilege,” the speaker seems to be trying to articulate some feeling of guilt. Words related to the oysters are all passive: violated, ripped, shucked, and scattered. The complete passivity of the oysters seems to have stirred up a sense of guilt in the speaker, and then from guilt towards anger, then towards “eating the day deliberately” and hoping its tang might drive towards pure verbs. Here, the unusual adjective “pure” contrasts with the sexual, sinful, gluttonous ravaging of oysters in previous stanzas. In this sense, verbs, active actions, are cleansing, purifying for a poet. The poem thus can be read as an explication of one of Heaney’s major concerns as a poet situated in political turmoil: how to strike a balance between poetic freedom, the right of poets to “[lay] down a perfect memory / In the cool of thatch and crockery,” and the sense of responsibility motivated by guilt and injustice, which makes it so that his “trust could not repose / in the clear light, like poetry or freedom” (Opened Ground 139). In a later poem, “Weighing in,” the dilemma is recast as the “weighing” of two options, whether it is “passive / suffering makes the world go round,” or should we “cast the stone” when “only foul play cleans the slate.” Heaney both questions and yearns for what Jesus did at the cross, “the power / Of power not exercised” (323). This power of unexercised power seems to be comparable to the grace of poetry and its pure verbs, unburdened by obligations. It is the only activity that poetry is capable of; it is free of the gravity of casting the stone, yet at the same time exonerated from the charge of passive abandonment, and able to redress the balance of justice. In “Oysters,” though the poet is exasperated by his inability to completely trust and repose in the freedom of poetry, though he has to eat “deliberately,” he nonetheless yearns for this power of unexercised power, contained in the concentration of pure, unburdened verbs.

The transcending light, therefore, does not burst in with any kind of extravagance. Mistrust lingers in Heaney’s following books, with 1987’s The Haw Lantern constituting a kind of midpoint. The titular poem of this book is a fraught expression of the poet’s unsettled and conflicting faith in poetry, artistic freedom, poetic self, and its audience. The much sought-
after light is now transformed into the problematics of poetic sight. In the first part of the poem, the wintry haw, red in color, provides:

...a small light for small people,
wanting no more from them but that they keep
the wick of self-respect from dying out... (275)

The account of the haw lantern actually echoes a perennial concern for Heaney (and perhaps for all poets): How does poetry hold up against what is going on around it? For Heaney, the haw lantern offers a close analogy: stubbornly burning out of season, self-consciously modest, fueling the ambers of human spirit, sustaining light without the pretension of blazing illumination. This is exactly the stance that the poet would like to assume. In an essay “On W. B. Yeats and Thoor Ballylee,” Heaney asserts that it is “the triumph of this art (poetry) to confront a despair at the very notion of art as triumph” (“The Place” 260). The tempered insistence of the haw lantern seems to be a proper way of being for poetry, a way to reconcile “the spirit’s affirmative impulses and the mind’s capacity to ironize and mock those impulses as self-serving fictions” (“The Place” 260). The latter half of the poem, however, veers toward another direction:

But sometimes when your breath plumes in the frost
it takes the roaming shape of Diogenes
with his lantern, seeking one just man. (Opened Ground 275)

While with the lantern/poetry analogy, the poet seems to be with the party of the “seer”—the illuminator, the lantern-holder who disseminates light in the first part of the poem—his position is drastically changed by the lantern into that of the illuminated party: the examined and interpreted. With the shift of position comes the ominous turn of tone. In the first part, the self-conscious modesty of “small light” barely veils a sense of condescension towards the “small people.” The poetic site of the “I” enjoys a privileged existence in this poem. “Wanting no more from them but” and “not having to blind them with” exhibit an obvious feeling of charitable condescension: the lantern seems to have deliberately toned down its light to suit a people from whom not much can be expected and to whom not much can be given. By the subtle management of tone, the poet asserts his view of both poetry and poetic audience. However, this apparently
compliant modesty on the part of the poet is ruthlessly driven off in the latter half. The lantern seems to have changed hands. Now it is the cynic Diogenes who is holding it, scrutinizing “you,” and passing “you” on. The excruciating experience of being closely examined, tested, scanned, and finally disqualified for the status of a just man makes “you” flinch, and the poetic voice also changes from the easy confidence of the first part to consternation and shame in the second. In an uncanny way, the aesthetic experience of lantern-light is transformed into the ethical judgment of the poet-observer. The beauty and light of poetic sight are finally subject to moral scrutiny. The judgment implied in Heaney’s yearning for “pure verbs” now becomes more pronounced in the failed test of the purity and untaintedness of “one just man.” The poem, however, does not actually suggest a means of transcendence. The same encounter, we might well think, would prompt Hopkins to write a similar sonnet to “Myself unholy, from myself unholy / . . . / No better serves me now, save best, no other / Save Christ; to Christ I look, on Christ I call.”4 Yet here in Heaney, the possibility of an illuminator—who at once diffuses light and is perfect light itself, who unites the aesthetic and the ethical—is not given.

Interestingly, Hopkins also wrote a sonnet about a lantern. Though not singular in its contrast between the holiness of Christ and the limitation of “I,” “The Lantern Out of Doors” is also a rethinking of poetry particularly relevant to Heaney’s concerns:

Sometimes a lantern moves along the night,
That interests our eyes. And who goes there?
I think; where from and bound, I wonder, where,
With, all down darkness wide, his wading light?
Men go by me whom either beauty bright
In mould or mind or what not else makes rare:
They rain against our much-thick and marsh air
Rich beams, till death or distance buys them quite.

Death or distance soon consumes them: wind
What most I may eye after, be in at the end
I cannot, and out of sight is out of mind.
Christ minds: Christ’s interest, what to avow or amend

4) Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins 26. All additional references to Hopkins are to Poems, unless otherwise indicated.
There, éyes them, heart wánts, care haúnts, foot fóllows kínd,
Their ránsom, théir rescue, ánd first, fást, last friénd. (71)

Hopkins’s sonnet, similar to Heaney’s poem, records the poetic voice’s transition from confidence to self-scrutiny. In “The Lantern Out of Doors,” the octet presents a poetic “I” as an interested observer of the lantern moving along the night. The interest is conditioned by the “sometimes” at the very beginning of the poem, and is expressed in a series of questions: who, where from and bound? It seems, therefore, more like a whimsical interest sustained by detached, voyeuristic curiosity. This interest becomes more concrete but is also further qualified in the next few lines: the lantern attracts “my” eye because of the “beauty bright,” corporeal and mental, revealed by the light. Hopkins’s fascination with the physical beauty of men and nature is well documented in his journals, notes, and letters. The “I” here can therefore be seen as a poet-persona whose natural inclination towards beauty of all kinds renders him a momentary captive of the lantern light. Perceptiveness of and sensitivity to beauty seem to be the proper nature of poets, with whom the “I” seems to readily identify. But there is a slight overtone of pride and ease in this assertion of observant interest throughout the octet. His interest is not only occasional, aroused only by “rareness” and “beauty,” but sounds unhurried, easeful, and lukewarm. In the end, it is a patronizing vision with too many qualifications.

The sestet, as usual, brings a transition. Even the “I” realizes his inadequacy: “I cannot.” The most fundamental limitation of the lantern observer’s interest is the limitation of time, its finitude. An interest fueled by human sight is doomed to be flimsy: “out of sight is out of mind.” The last tercet brings out the resolution in a contrast. The contrast between “I” and Christ is made all the more effective and forceful without a “But” between them: “I cannot, and out of sight is out of mind. / Christ minds: Christ’s interest…” The negative of human observer, the limitation of his sight as well as his concern, is placed side by side with the positive attention of Christ. The word “minds,” being a smart word play following the “out of mind” to strengthen the assertion, means not only “cares” but also “takes charge of.” “Christ’s interest” is totally different from that of “I,” because the objects of Christ’s interest are Christ’s “interest”: that is, his property, his purchase. He minds both in the way a fond father cares for his children and in the way a homeowner keeps his estate. Therefore, the interest of Christ in his people, cannot be detached, since there is a real stake, a relationship involved. With this intimate involvement, His sight cannot be
easeful, but careworn and intense: “heart wánts, care haúnts, foot fóllows kind.” The last line echoes back to the octet and makes the contrast complete: “Their ránsum, théir rescue, ánd first, fást, last friénd.” The assertion of “their” is a deliberate reminder that there is too much of “our eyes” or “I think, I wonder” going on in the octet. Being “their” ransom and rescue, Christ the observer and his observed creatures have an interest in each other. A bond is realized in the sight. The ending of the poem, “first, fast, last friend” echoes back to the first word “sometimes.” Christ is the Omega and Alpha, and his interested sight is a constant, whereas the beauty-attracted sight of “I” is conditional and temporal.

Though apparently talking about different things when referring to the lantern outdoors, the two poems of Heaney and Hopkins share the same misgivings about the adequacy of poetic vision and the soundness of the poet-self’s integrity. Popular as he is, Heaney is either hailed as the spokesman of Northern Catholics or denigrated as the leading “popish propagandist.” In either case, the poet is propped up by the politics into which he was born. The site of his poetic “I” is suspected even by himself of being impure, tainted by the contingencies of his time. The self in his early poems, either in its confidence of cultural re-membering or in its despair of falling short of achievement and understanding, is oftentimes more a formal “masque” than a personal self. In this projected, formal capacity, the poet’s projected self holds to a vision of enlightening his people with the light of poetry, of articulating the uncreated conscience of his nation. But as the poem shows, what often ends up being enlightened by the impersonal force of poetry are the poet’s own inadequacies.

Hopkins as a poet seems unencumbered by any sense that his responsibility is to “enlighten.” The poetic light emanating from people and things with rare beauty in themselves makes the poet-I an interested observer, importuning the objects of his sight with self-interested questions. If that constituted the whole picture, then we would have merely a Hopkins exacting meticulous details from the starlight night, the windhover, the kingfisher, the pied beauty of nature, purely for his transitory interest’s sake, which in turn would render the unusually exacting attention and the meticulousness of particulars in his poems an artificial, narcissistic affectation, or perhaps an enormous affective fallacy. In other words, Hopkins’s poet-self would prove to be divorced from Ignatian principles and bereft of its nourishing relationship with God. Fortunately, his “finite” poetic vision is never dissociated from the lasting “eyeing” and “minding” of Christ. Since “The Habit of Perfection,” where Hopkins surrenders all his senses
to God, his view of the world is always mediated by an incarnational perspective. Sensing the created world with the five senses is for Hopkins synonymous with sensing the Lord Christ. He binds and “lovelaces” everything together in a living web of relations. All distinctive beings in the world are “Christ’s interest”: He ransomed us. He is our purchaser, and it is also our proper role to buy him back, to repay, to sustain the relationship. The poet’s poem, therefore, is part of a tremendous poem engaging the whole of nature, addressing itself to a deeply interested God:

Much more has God a purpose, an end, a meaning in his work. He meant the world to give him praise, reverence, and service; to give him glory. [...] It is an estate he farms: what should it bring him in? Praise, reverence, and service; it should repay him glory. [...] It is a glass he looks in: what should it show him? With praise, reverence and service it should show him his own glory. It is a book he has written, of the riches of his knowledge, teaching endless truths, full lessons of wisdom, a poem of beauty: what is it about? His praise, the reverence due to him, the way to serve him. (Note-books and Papers 302)

All the interested observations of Hopkins’s poet-I are based on this understanding. He resorts to God in a similar way to Heaney’s yearning to be quickened into “pure verbs.” In God, beauty and light are united. He not only transcends the failure of the impure “I” to bear scrutiny, but transcends the cynicism of Heaney’s Diogenes. The very beauty of his poems lies in this reciprocity established between God and self, which is the source and guarantee of meaning. Its difference from Heaney’s flinching poet-I is that, though, as in Heaney’s poem, the poet here is also observed and revealed; he is not observed and revealed by some suspicious Diogenes with his cynical negativity, but by a universal Observer, to whom all observations and sight must ultimately return.

This life-giving dialogue between self and an ultimate Addressee is therefore the major difference between Hopkins and Heaney, or perhaps, between Hopkins and all the modern poets who followed. Yet this dialogic dimension of Hopkins might also be what influences Heaney the most. In “The Redress of Poetry,” Heaney compares what poetry can do to the action of “redress,” more in the obsolete sense of “set something up again,” “re-establish,” and “restore,” than in the direct sense of remedying or rectifying. The redress of poetry is therefore not only in remedying and alleviating the wrongs of sociopolitical reality, as many contemporary readers
think, in their habitual demand for direct, transitive actions. Though left unsaid in the essay, I think what Heaney meant by the redress of poetry has more to do with “re-establishing,” “restoring” a relationship with a higher being, a source of both self-interpretation and self-transcendence. Despite his doubts, Heaney holds a belief in poetry as a grace (Heaney and Miller 32). In his later poems, he has a deeper, more Hopkinsian answer to the question of “what can poetry do?”: “[Poetry] suggests that there is an overall purpose to life; and it does so by the intrinsically poetic action of its rhymes, its rhythms and its exultant intonation. These create an energy and an order which promote the idea that there exists a much greater, circumambient energy and order within which we have our being” (Heaney, “Joy” 346). In other words, poetry, by the working of its intrinsic mechanism, is an intensified reminder bearing testimony to this “circumambient energy and order,” which, in Acts 17:28, is referred to as God himself, “for in Him we live and move and have our being.” Yet, as we may see in some of Heaney’s later works, the urge to refuse direct, transitive actions in poetry, to transcend the immediate necessities of time, gradually pushes him in the direction of a timeless, weightless realm. The fear of contamination, the taint of earthly obligations, magnifies the “purity” principle of Heaney’s poetic ideal. If “pure verbs” used to be Heaney’s ideal, now “pure” is sometimes overplayed at the expense of the verbs, their actions, and time.

IV Verbless Purity and the Living Word

The “airiness” and trance-like quality of Heaney’s more recent poems, especially his 1991 work Seeing Things, mark a gradual outgrowing of his former “digging” self and urge for “pure, pure verbs.” The tactile intimacy and pungency of his early poems, and the deliberately lean lines “quickened” by such lucid verbs, seem now to be mellowed into a kind of airy lightness. Extended parallelism of nouns and noun phrases, rare in Heaney’s former poems, now creates a web of memory, mesmerism, and suspended action:

Hazel stealth. A trickle in the culvert.
Athletic sealight on the doorstep slab,
On the sea itself, on silent roofs and gables.
Desire within its moat, dozing at ease—
Like a gorged cormorant on the rock at noon,
Exiled and in tune with the big glitter.

Re-enter this as the adult of solitude,
The silence-forder and the definite
Presence you sensed withdrawing first time round. (342)

As one of the “Settings” poems in Seeing Things, this short piece is by no means singular in its juxtaposition of noun phrases, either as motionless objects or objects captured in a specific moment in memory. “Desire within its moat” seems to suggest some potential of flowing or overflowing, but the potential is securely contained in the mode of “dozing at ease,” and “like a gorged cormorant,” is “in tune with the big glitter” of the remembered hot noon. The only substantial verb in the poem commands a re-entering of the scene as an adult. But unlike Wordsworth’s vividly dancing daffodils when recollected, what is sensed here (actually re-sensed) is the definite presence withdrawing, and not as a result of diluting memory, but as a withdrawal already sensed the “first time round” in the original moment of happening. The presence of the past is no more real than what is felt in the present. The “silence-forder” and the originally sensed withdrawing presence are the appositives of “this,” the object of the present “re-enter,” which grammatically cancels the differences between past entering and present reentering. Disregarding this temporal rift between past and present is the apposition of the two noun phrases, which claims a kind of suspended, arrested presence of negativity. In this sense, Helen Vendler is right in arguing that Heaney’s representation of memory in his later poems is reconstructing it transfixed but projected forward…a way to create a third realm, neither one of pure memory actively revived nor one of present distanced actuality, but rather one of the past remembered.

5) In The Breaking of Style, Vendler reads different stages of Heaney’s poems in terms of four different parts of speech: noun, verb, adjective and adjectival phrases, and adverbial phrases and clauses. Vendler focuses on how Heaney’s change of style is marked by his changed “concentration on a single grammatical element” (41).
forward as prophecy. The past now is necessarily conceptualized and therefore kinetically immobile; it is sensed in nouns of almost paradisal balance—mutual antecedents, apposition, omnipresence, equilibrium, brim.6

It is also notable that the past, which is now “kinetically immobile,” used to be bodied forth in the sensuous, living revelations of terrestrial *numen*, topographized language, or ancient folklore figures. By and by, the past has ossified into solid stones. In “Sandstone Keepsake” (from 1985’s *Station Island*), the “reliably dense and bricky” sandstone bears the messages of “hell’s hot river” and the “damned Guy de Montfort,” and “I,” holding the red stone in hand, is no longer concerned about “setting times wrong or right,” but “stooping along, one of the venerators” (217). In another poem of the same book, “Granite Chip,” Heaney invokes the biblical Rock, a symbol of spiritual relief, only to reverse this image at the end. The stone is not sustaining, but “punitive and exacting.” If Heaney’s former excavation of the past is motivated by his wish to redress the balance of justice, to seek a history-informed possibility of future freedom, then such a past is now recognized as unfulfilling. No longer burdened with the mission of setting things right, the “I,” from his “free state of image and allusion,” seems to have been liberated from the “reliably dense and bricky” detritus of the past, and he becomes instead a venerator of what is far less solid and reliable: ephemeral visions, dead souls, and transcendent beings. Heaney’s poems now assume a new stance, teeming with urges and admonitions to take flight (“The First Flight” in *Opened Ground* 273–4), “make strange,” and “go beyond what’s reliable” (“Making Strange” 221–2); to be “on the road” and “keep at a tangent” (“On the Road” 286; “Station Island” 268). His flight from the solid, familiar, and reliable is expressive of his wish to restore the proper role of the poet as venerator.

However, Heaney’s craving to go beyond what is solid and reliable, to overcome the earthly gravity of his immediate context, is so urgent that his veneration seems to go to its direct opposite: the weightless, the ungraspable, and the soundless. It is time, in Heaney’s words, to rend “the veil of the usual,” and time “for the air to brighten / Time to be dazzled and the heart to lighten.” Obviously, his veneration differs from that of Hopkins,

6) Vendler 48. The last line of Vendler’s comment is quoted from one of the “Settings” poem of Heaney: “Air and ocean known as antecedents / Of each other. In apposition with / Omnipresence, equilibrium, brim.”
who spent most of his time, not attempting to rend the veil of the usual, but rather to glean the veiled God from the wonderfully variegated existence of the usual. In some poems, Heaney becomes a venerator more like Philip Larkin, who constructs his “religion” in the endlessly congregating light refracted in “Water.” Heaney has mentioned this poem in his essays and interviews several times. The endlessly congregating light claims a kind of speechless veneration not only different from the confident redeployment of national past in Heaney’s early poems, but distinct from the devout rhapsodizing of Hopkins. This Larkinian realm of the silent, weightless, absorbing void, or a kind of negative presence, appears more frequently in Heaney’s later poems. In “Hailstones” (from 1987’s *Haw Lantern*), “I” makes a ball of hailstone “out of the melt of the real thing / smarting into its absence” (302). The melting of the real thing is exactly how Heaney envisions the dilemma of his religious outlook, a tug-of-war between his Catholic faith in the sacramental “real thing” and his doubt of its solid presence. One of the “Clearances” poems in the same book presents an alternative; the open, cleared land is imagined as a productive, fulfilling source for an ever ramifying soul:

I thought of walking round and round a space
Utterly empty, utterly a source
Where the decked chestnut tree had lost its place
In our front hedge above the wallflowers.

............... 

Deep-planted and long gone, my coeval
Chestnut from a jam jar in a hole,
Its heft and hush became a bright nowhere… (290)

The chestnut tree, planted at “I”’s birth (“my coeval chestnut”), when chopped down, is transformed into a forever ramifying if silent soul: an utterly empty space, but also “utterly a source.” It is a suspended moment from the world of action, of planting and chopping, and an emptied void which the poet finds more enabling than the plenitude of reality. Moreover, an elegiac tone steals through the poem. The poetic voice once again belongs to a stooping, silent venerator.

Some critics construe Heaney’s void space, silent sound, empty source as a quasi-deconstructive “generative emptiness,” but others consider it a
way of deliberate “decreation,” of emptying the self as a purified receptacle to experience grace, of surrendering justice and judgment to God. In my view, it is probably more of an attempt at reconciliation, symptomatic of the pull between “Derry and Derrida,” his early Catholic education and later developed doubt. Or, as better expressed in his poem, “The Riddle”:

... work out what was happening in that story
Of the man who carried water in a riddle.
Was it culpable ignorance, or was it rather
A via negativa through drops and let-downs? (300)

The pun about carrying water in a riddle might be the best way to exemplify Heaney’s problematic faith. “Riddle” is taken here to mean both a sieve and an enigma. In Heaney’s poems, water is often symbolic of the sacred and transcendent. The poet is uncertain whether attempting to carry water in a sieve, or couching the certainty of truth in ambivalent riddles, represents a case of “culpable ignorance,” or if it is the only way that water / truth can be carried and experienced, that is, through the negative “drops and let-downs.”

The “utterly empty, utterly a source” space is also emblematic of the many trance-like, even Zen-like moments in 1990’s Seeing Things and 1996’s The Spirit Level. “The Pitchfork” describes a somewhat “Taoist” epiphany “Where perfection—or nearness to it—is imagined / Not in the aiming but the opening hand” (344). Or, in one of the “Settings” poems, “Nothing prevailed, whatever was in store / Witnessed itself already taking place / In a time marked by assent and by hiatus” (369). Heaney, like many Western poets, enjoys reading Han Shan as a source of Eastern wisdom and an “alternative” poetic state of mind. The static ruminative trance that expands in Han Shan’s poems is often condensed into an epiphanic moment of memory, nature, or history in Heaney, like that of “St. Kelvin and the Blackbird”:

A prayer his body makes entirely
For he has forgotten self, forgotten bird
And on the riverbank forgotten the river’s name. (384)

7) See, for instance, Daniel Tobin’s Passage to the Center and John F. Desmond’s Gravity and Grace.
The “forgetfulness” sounds Eastern, but is also vestigially Catholic. Self-forgetfulness is what Heaney considers the source of all lyric poetry, which is a divine grace rather than an individual invention. Emptying the self into Christ, St. Kelvin’s body becomes a prayer. This body, however, is absorbed into a timeless space, a motionless trance, when living actions are suspended. The all-forgetting trance of St. Kelvin and the blackbird, therefore, seems to be the result of Christian altruist principles grafted onto a non-Christian, static, contemplative wisdom. It becomes a purified sight, a freeze-frame intending to juxtapose the bodily prayer of St. Kelvin and the living grace of God.

Compared with Heaney, while facing the created world, Hopkins is more like a reader of dynamic narratives than an observer of static objects. Time is not only factored into his representations of physical world and human selves, but is actually the very point of his poetry. “That nature is a Heraclitean fire,” displays a constant flux of discordant opposites that are forever being harmonized in the ultimate concordance of God. The “dappledness,” the diversity and variegation, the apparently “fickle” and “freckled,” are the distinct “selving” of the creative God, whose creation is never a finished act but a process of constant “charging” and renewing, though “whose beauty is past change.” For Hopkins, the foremost Christian mystery is the paradox of time and its transcendence in the living Word, the ever occurring Incarnation. He believes, as Augustine did, that God is the Eternal Present, and the Word is “spoken eternally, and by It are all things spoken eternally” (Augustine 257). Such an understanding of God’s Eternal To-day, of all things being spoken together and eternally, foregrounds the consciousness of time, and more importantly, eliminates the sense of finishedness, of ended actions and replaced past in Hopkins’s poems. The “entering” into earthly time of the Incarnated Word informs the world of living meaning, charges it with “dearest freshness” that renews it constantly and keeps it from “being spent.” For Hopkins, to live in Christ is to be receptive to the ceaseless dynamism of being “Christed,” being reinvigorated by and in the living Word, “for Christ plays in ten thousand places” (Poems 90).

This belief in the ongoing Incarnation, the permanence of its “entering,” determines Hopkins’s own taste for forceful verbs and electrified imagery. “Hurl,” “break,” “throng,” “gash,” “fling”: these verbs of disruption and disturbance make frequent appearance in Hopkins. As Gardner observes, “life itself must be shaken, disturbed, jarred, before the deepest instress can be felt and their virtues (the highest beauty) can appear”
(Gardner 230). Actually, just as the mystery of the Trinity has such an invigorating effect on the believers that “their knowledge leaves their minds swinging; poised, but on the quiver” (Letters 188), so is Hopkins’s poetic imagination poised on the quiver of the living, dialoguing, interacting flux of the divine Word.

It is interesting, however, to note that the mystery of the Incarnate Word, as the concourse between the created and the uncreated, between time and the timeless, is often rendered by Hopkins through spatial metaphors. Since “entering” is always envisioned as the passing through of a threshold from one realm to another, Hopkins’s engagement with the mystery of Incarnation also borrows from spatial images, often liminal.

The use of the Anglo-Saxon “bone-house” as a kenning for human body appeals to both Hopkins and Heaney. While Heaney’s fascination is more with the “love-den, blood-holt, / dream-bower” of pleasure and history in the archaic “language of touch” (“Bone Dreams”), Hopkins’s preoccupation is more Christian. The bone-house is a recognition of God’s creative love and fatherly care: “Thou hast bound bones and veins in me, fastened me flesh,” (The Wreck of the Deutschland in Poems 51), as in Job 10:11. But the constructedness of the house is also a reminder of God’s justice and power; what has been made can always be “unmade,” or remade when the touch of God’s finger is felt afresh (The Wreck 51). The bone-house bespeaks its purpose: to fence in the soul, to provide a “mean” dwelling place of “man’s mounting spirit” (“The Caged Skylark” 70). In his poems, Hopkins’s imagination often seems to be spatially, especially liminally, programmed. “Heaven-Haven” is filled with the predominant search for a “where,” a haven to house in the eternal spring and keep out the blowing storm. The Wreck, however, witnesses the breaking of the walls, when the haven was hurled behind and “million of rounds of thy mercy” seem not to “reeve even them in.” “The starlight Night” and its wondrous beauty are here not metaphors, but “are indeed the barn; withindoors house / The shocks. This piece-bright paling shuts the spouse / Christ home” (66).

“The Lantern Out of Doors” and “The Candle Indoors,” meant to be twin pieces, place on the two sides of the door the infinity of Christ’s loving and redeeming interest, and the “spendsavour salt” of our own fading conscience. The threshold image of “doors,” while recognizing the difference of earthly and divine realms, actually foregrounds the possibility of passing through and the possibility provided by the passing through. “The Caged Skylark” compares the bird in its cage to man in his bone-house. Though equally imprisoned in their worldly “cells,” man is blessed with
the chance of entering into other-worldly freedom through the Resurrection of “bones risen.” The bone-house of man is therefore not a prison, but an enclosure, because of the possibility of “opening” provided by the act of Resurrection. It is notable that “house” and “home” are often used as verbs in Hopkins, as in to “house” the wonders of Christ and “Home at heart, Heaven’s sweet gift” (“To What Serves Mortal Beauty?”). House, haven, home is therefore less a demarcated place than a two-directional act of housing in, homing and owning, as well as dealing out, passing over and transgressing.

The celebratory poem “As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame” expresses Hopkins’s idea of selving. Instead of finding or claiming a motionless self, identities of man and created world are rendered as an act of selving:

Each mortal being does one thing and the same:  
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;  
Selves—goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,  
Crying what I do is me: for that I came. (90)

Selving is to deal out what is housed indoors, and the “dealing out” is realized through speaking, spelling, crying—in a word, narrating the self “out” to interact with the non-self, or other. Such a passing through the threshold of self is an imitation of Christ entering earthly time. The interaction, traffic, and communication established in the Word made flesh, which is the ultimate selving of God, are being established and relived every instant through the selving of God’s created beings. And the suspension of such selving action, in Hopkins’s poems, would result in an enclosed, secluded self cursed by its stale, soured being:

God’s most deep decree  
Bitter would have me taste: my taste was me;  
Bones built in me, flesh filled, blood brimmed with curse.  
Selfyeast of spirit a dull dough sours. I see  
The lost are like this; and their scourge to be  
As I am mine; their sweating selves; but worse. (“I wake and feel the fell of dark” 101)

The shift from the spatial to the temporal, the static to the fluxing, is best exemplified in “The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo.” The poem begins
with the question of how to keep back beauty, presenting a series of locking or fastening objects (bow, brooch, brace, latch, catch, etc.) to concretize the attempt of locking in and keeping at bay beauty in an enclosed space. This quest inevitably leads to leaden despair. The Golden Echo that follows announces itself with an exclamatory “Spare,” to intimate a light of hope from the pervasive despair that ends the previous part. A “somewhere,” a “place” is similarly proposed, “Where whatever’s prized and passes of us, everything that’s fresh / and fast flying of us, / . . . / Never fleets more, fastened with the tenderest truth / To its own best being and its loveliness of youth” (92). This place of eternal beauty, however, is finally revealed and described, not as a heavenly realm, but as an action—an admonition to “Give beauty back” to God. The undying beauty which was formerly envisioned as a substance capable of being spatially contained and was sought after as a blessed place, now unveils itself as involving a set of reciprocal acts of giving back: “resign,” “sign,” “seal,” “send,” “motion” and “deliver” the sweetest beauty in us, back to the Giver of beauty. In this act of reciprocating, beauty is realized, perpetuated, and “kept with fonder a care” by God, who is the only one that can hold back decaying beauty, “being mighty a master,” and the only one that cares enough to do so, “being a father and fond” (“In the Valley of Elwy” 67). The poem ends with a reiteration of the question of where: “where kept?” The answer, again, is not a where, but a how: “Yonder—what high as that! We follow, now we follow.— / Yonder, yes yonder, yonder” (93). Perpetual beauty is only attainable through resigning the keeping of beauty to the care of a fatherly Creator, and forever seeking, following, approaching his ultimate Beauty.

The foregrounding of the temporal, the transgressing, and the selving instant in Hopkins’s poetic world over the static and the spatial is manifest in almost all his mature poems. His understanding of the “stress” of being as “the bringing out of its nature” in turn demands a linguistic style that can “instress” this mysterious dynamism; hence the predominance of forceful verbs in Hopkins.

The action captured in Hopkins’s poems also resides in his insistence in the aural-oral quality of his poems. He repeatedly asserts that his poems are meant to be exclaimed, shouted out, or even sung. Walter J. Ong, in The Presence of the Word, points out how the ancient aural-oral world has given way to the visual and typographical, and that the Word of God is primarily an action, an event, an address, and the Gospels, tied to the spoken word, show that the Christian church is inevitably a missionary church,
“driven by the Word to maximum communication” (Ong 13). This communicative character, however, is lost with the ascent of the visual, especially the script and the print. The dominance of the visual tends to make man regard the world chiefly as external objects of observation. In fact, history, nature, human existence, are an interior as well as exterior reality, exemplified in the spoken Word/word, which is “a partial exteriorization of an interior seeking another interior” (Ong 179). In this sense, Ong argues, with a Jesuit understanding similar to Hopkins’s, that “presence” cannot be equated to “being-in-space”: “picturability is not the measure of actuality.” Rather, presence is an inward-outward communicative action, a dynamism which our typographicized mind has become insensitive to: “A presence is an interiority bearing toward and calling to another interior, an inwardness which is simultaneously an utterance or ‘outerance’ or ‘outering’ insofar as the other is outside” (Ong, 308–9). Ong’s arguments can be read so as to shed light on Hopkins’s action-packed, verb-filled lines, which are not merely employed as a linguistic, stylistic “medium” to represent a world of charged forces. Indeed, Word/word, in its living, spoken vigor, is itself presence in Hopkins’s poems.

Presence in Hopkins’s mature poems is precisely an utterance/outerance in Ong’s sense. His kingfisher is a kingfisher catching fire; his windhover is one buckling, galling, and gashing. His “I” is “soft sift” in an hourglass, “mined with a motion,” is water in a well “roped with” “a vein / Of the gospel proffer, a pressure.” Instead of still objects, Hopkins’s poems register moments in which “agents” are being disturbed, shaken up, especially passing the threshold, dealing out the previous mode and entering into another. They are not objects on display to be observed, but rather, narratives to be unveiled, storytelling of actions to be heard. And his denial of static presence and enclosed identity is by no means attempting to deny the reality of presence and identity. The actions, stories, and narratives of every selving object are rooted and mediated in the metanarrative of the tripartite Godhead, or in Hopkins’s words, “The Utterer, Uttered, Uttering” (“Margaret Chlitheroe” 185).

The interconnectedness and mutuality of the three modalities of the Utterance/utterance is best exemplified in The Wreck. While reading the poem, we are not given a descriptive shipwreck account, but are listening and trying to understand the story of Hopkins listening and trying to understand the nuns’ story, with all the listening and understanding mediated through the unifying Master Utterance of Christ’s Passion. The narrativizing of the wreck, the praying nun, and the speaking self, becomes
more like an encounter, a confrontation, in the sense that it involves two interacting “actants” instead of an observer and its object. The stormy night is not to be described or discovered. Instead,

Read the unshapeable shock night
And knew the who and the why;
Wording it how but by him that present and past,
Heaven and earth are word of, worded by?” (61)

The night is to be “read,” but, interestingly, only by means of “wording it.” Reading and wording are woven into the same web of narrative. The presence of this unshapeable and unintelligible “shock night” can only be realized and understood by narrating a story over it, and the narrating is only possible through the story of the tripartite Word. The poem does not begin with the drowned nuns, but with a passionate plea from “I”:

Thou mastering me
God! Giver of breath and bread
World’s strand, sway of the sea;
Lord of living and dead. (51)

“I” is found in a spiritual shipwreck, yearning for the touch, trod, and stress of God’s terror and grace. “I” knows that “His mystery must be instressed, stressed,” but how?—“Not out of his bliss / Springs the stress felt,” but from the Passion of Christ. Christ’s suffering enables us to understand His mystery, and in suffering we seek remedy and redemption. “I”’s spiritual stress in Part One prepares for the actual shipwreck in Part Two. “I”’s saying yes “at lightening and the lashed rod” of God’s terror parallels the nuns’ calling of “O Christ, Christ, come quickly.” Both stories of suffering, mental and physical, are then reinterpreted and ultimately interpreted in stanza thirty:

Jesu, heart’s light,
Jesu, maid’s son,
What was the feast followed the night
Thou hadst glory of this nun?—
Feast of one woman without stain
For so conceived, so to conceive thee is done;
But here was heart-throe, birth of a brain,
Word, that heard and kept thee and uttered thee outright. (61)
The ambiguity of pronouns and references here is typical of Hopkins. It can be read as the virgin nun, who by her consecrated life and death and by her passionate “uttering” of the name of Christ has given Christ a new birth; but, it is also Christ, the Word, recharging and renewing the life of the drowned nun. Moreover, it is also the poet, with his spiritual agony, conceiving and rearticulating the story of Christ/nun with poetic words, and by means of this, being conceived and rearticulated by Christ with the “birth of a brain.” The ambiguity of references in Hopkins’s poems often subject them to double readings, where both Christ and “I” can be giver and receiver of actions at once, and the fluxing reciprocity of God and his creation is best embodied in this blurring of directions. Here, all is implicated in the lovelace of the Word. Wording it through the Word, therefore, is Hopkins’s encounter with both nature and his poetic self. The solid connectedness of created things and their Creator, realized in this all-implicating living narrative, is fundamentally different from the realm of all-forgetting quietness and lightness of being in some of Heaney’s later poems.

Works Cited


