

'Terrible' Transcendence? Hopkins' Dublin Sonnets as Flesh-Made-Word

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Perhaps it's some basic human propensity that causes it — an itch for order, a craving for balance, for the alignment of a bewildering universe of *stuff* into neat conceptual polarities. 'Dualism,' of course, is a baggy term if ever there was one, and many diverse and discrete heuristics might be accommodated beneath its banner, but given the strong possibility that our dichotomising tendency originates in biology (or at least in something basically embodied),¹ one particularly fascinating instance of dualism to consider is that opposition which refers back to the body: the opposition — celebrated, argued over, endlessly debated — of *mind-versus-matter*. Since its apparently earliest articulation by Plato, various versions of this schema — each opposing some transcendent plane of Ideas to a lesser reality patched together out of transient Shadows — have proliferated in various textual forms. Whether the preferred labels are 'spirit' and 'flesh,' 'soul' and 'body,' or 'thought' and 'extension,' the attractions of such a ghost-and-machine metaphysics are well attested. A brief historical tour might meander (via early Christianity and, of course, René Descartes) right from the gates of Eden to current debates in the study of consciousness, as this tenacious idea pops up again and again in works of theology, philosophy and — inevitably — of literature.

It's curious, then, that a group of poems as deeply concerned with these metaphysical binaries as Gerard Manley Hopkins' 1885-6 sonnets should have been received in such a spirit of critical monism, and univocally labelled 'Terrible,' 'Dark' or 'Desolate.' 'Gerard's failure and

¹ See, for example, Mark Turner, *Reading Minds: the Study of English in the Age of Cognitive Science* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991), who points out that 'our bilaterally symmetric body makes it particularly easy for us to understand oppositional forces...' (p. 120).

melancholy seem to be essentials,² wrote Robert Bridges, upon his publication of a few of the works — more eulogically than appreciatively — after his friend's death, and many critics since have clung faithfully to this dictum, reading the works as expressions of an experience which is predominantly spiritual, and of a spirituality, moreover, which is predominantly in decline.³ And it is true, by and large, that any reading which strays very far from this orthodoxy is also a reading which resists the argument which the works themselves seem to set out. The seven Sonnets position themselves as dark and desolate poems.⁴ They flesh out a physicality estranged from 'higher' consolation, and as arguments, they provide a bleak assessment of human agency: it's not possible, they claim, to escape the terrible body. A soul which yearns to soar indeed is grounded by the earth; a mind which rises mountainously defines, rather famously, the terrors which surround it:

cliffs of fall,
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne'er hung there.⁵

But a reading which doesn't question this bifurcation of the transcendent soul from the *gravity* (in multiple senses) of embodiment is also a reading which risks falling headlong into those very same contradictions which the writer himself — both priest and poet, ascetic and aesthete — struggled throughout his life to escape. Failure and melancholy may indeed prove essentials, but it is worth keeping in mind that *melancholia* etymologically

² Letter to Mrs Manley Hopkins dated February 24 1893, *The Selected Letters of Robert Bridges*, ed. Donald E Stanford, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1983), p. 238.

³ See, for example, Gerald Roberts, '“I Know the Sadness, but the Cause Know Not”: Reflections on Hopkins's Melancholy,' *Hopkins Quarterly* 18:3 (1991); Norman White, *Hopkins in Ireland* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2002), p. x.

⁴ Bridges established the canon by referring to 'the terrible posthumous sonnets' in his 'Preface' to *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* in 1918 (reprinted in *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 3rd edn, ed. W. H. Gardner (London: Oxford UP, 1948) p. 209) — 'To seem the stranger', 'I wake and feel', 'No worst, there is none', 'My own heart', 'Carrion Comfort', and 'Patience;' in addition to these, a number of non-posthumous works share thematic and stylistic common ground, such as 'Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves.'

⁵ 'No worst, there is none,' lines 9-11. All citations of Hopkins' poetry follow *The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Norman H. Mackenzie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

denotes an ailment of the body, and that Hopkins, accordingly, was writing in black bile as much as black ink.⁶

A Cartesian dualism, which privileges *res cogitans* over *res extensa*, may well prove a compelling interpretive frame for the Sonnets. But an alternative perspective presents itself upon an exploratory approach from the other side of our dualistic bias — an approach (if you like) from its Shadowy underbelly: a reading of the works *with the body*. Because whilst as *arguments* the Sonnets certainly invoke a terrible physicality, simultaneously, of course, they are *poems* — poems written by a man who revelled in the sound of words, in the musculature of language, the thrill and throng of syllables — and this complicates their argument substantially. Considered in light of their poetic of the spoken word, which articulates a vision of oppressive embodiment via a voice which is emphatically, expressively embodied, the seven Dublin Sonnets reveal a relationship between spirit and flesh which might be regarded as not dichotomous, but rather — and strikingly — synthetic.

Such an approach to the Sonnets lets loose, subsequently, some fascinating questions. How does language fit into a dualistic schema which segregates upper from lower, transcendent from terrible? How might the physics and metaphysics of the inscribed poem, that art form shimmering, for so many aestheticians, between the plastic and temporal, between the permanence of the page and the elusiveness of dance, be reconciled with such a rubric? In considering Hopkins' Dublin sonnets as objects of embodiment, the curious phenomenon of reading only appears still curiouser. 'Every work of art,' Hopkins had written, 'has its own play or performance.'⁷ Letting the Sonnets achieve their own performance, in this way, requires a mode of reading attuned to ambiguities: a reading, that is, more akin to *audition*, and an audition, moreover, which keeps the body uppermost in mind.

⁶ Or alternatively, consider Hopkins' own assessment, in a letter dated May 17 1885: 'I have after long silence written two sonnets... if ever anything was written in blood one of these was.' (*The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*, ed. Claude Colleer Abbott (London: Oxford UP, 1970), p. 219). (Subsequently cited as *Letters*.)

⁷ Letter to Everard Hopkins dated November 5/8 1885, *Selected Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Gerald Roberts (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980), p. 137. Subsequently cited as *Selected Prose*.

1. Reading With The Ears

It is probably fair to say that Gerard Manley Hopkins is best known for two things. The first is his language: language which seems to have struck so many subsequent readers with a kind of violence, making first encounters with Hopkins so often impossible to forget. 'I couldn't believe what I was reading,' recalls the American poet Stanley Kunitz, rather typically, 'it really shook me, because it was unlike anything else I had ever read before.'⁸ The combination of what Hopkins termed 'sprung rhythm' — a metre shaped by the stresses of exhaled breath rather than the counting of accented and unaccented syllables — with dense-patterned vowelism and lushly lavish alliteration, remains prosodically startling even now — well after the poetic innovations of the early twentieth century with which, according to many writers, it may be fruitfully grouped.⁹ In 1876, emerging somewhat improbably from the pen of a Jesuit novice, such innovations provoked a response no less vehement than those which were to follow. Hopkins' superiors would not publish 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' in the magazine *The Month*; Robert Bridges, on receiving it in the mail, refused to read the poem again 'for any money.'

This refusal may be conjugated with a second notable point about Hopkins, and it is a point which has less to do with his poetics than his personality: his feeling that poetry was incompatible, somehow, with ministry; the resistance of his erstwhile public.¹⁰ Famously, his poems were not published until 1918 — thirty years, that is, after his death — and in an edition, moreover, which Bridges had smoothed over to remove so far as possible what he described as 'blemishes ... of such quality and magnitude as to deny him even a hearing from those who love a continuous literary

⁸ Video interview, *The Favorite Poem Project*, ed. Robert Pinsky, available at <<http://www.favoritepoem.org/thevideos/kunitz.html>> (prod. David Roderick), accessed 30 April 2007.

⁹ See, for example, Bernard Bergonzi, *Gerard Manley Hopkins* (New York: Macmillan, 1977), p. 177; Rainer Emig, *Modernism in Poetry: Motivations, Structures and Limits* (London: Longman, 1995), 10-36.

¹⁰ See, for example, his letter to Richard Dixon dated December 1/16 1881: 'Genius attracts fame and individual fame St. Ignatius looked on as the most dangerous and dazzling of all attractions ... You see then what is against me ...' (*Correspondence of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Richard Watson Dixon* (London: Oxford UP, 1970), p. 96).

decorum.¹¹ Forgivenness, neglect, obscurity. It is unsurprising that towards the end of his life this lack of an audience — this denial, importantly, of a *hearing* — should resonate in a lyric of profound dislocation:

To seem the stranger lies my lot, my life
Among strangers. Father and mother dear,
Brothers and sisters are in Christ not near
And he my peace / my parting, sword and strife.¹²

Estranged from family and friends by his conversion to Catholicism, estranged from the Jesuit Church by his unconventional Scotist theology, estranged from his own creativity by an innate perfectionism, Hopkins, it seems, had 'served himself' into an utterly strange singularity. So it is obvious, then, that these two outstanding features about Hopkins — his linguistic oddness, his lifetime's neglect — are not altogether unrelated. In Hopkins, so frequently, sense seems an echo to the sound, and this secondariness — this belatedness — renders him a stranger to his own poetic age. Or to put it otherwise (if equally derivatively), if poetry is that in which meaning comes at us *slant*, then Hopkins' lack of a contemporary audience, made palpable in the despairing Terrible Sonnets, might be regarded as the product of a poetics of impeccable slantness.

But Hopkins knew that his verse tended towards opacity; he knew that his efforts to describe sprung rhythm, his manuscripts flecked and dashed with diacritical markings, could seem spikily repellent. Compelled to justify such unconventional prosodic tactics, he defined, in response, a poetics of vocalisation, according to which a reader's breath would breathe into the 'presumptuous jugglery [sic]'¹³ on the page a visceral and vital intelligibility:

Why do I employ sprung rhythm at all? Because it is
the nearest to the rhythm of prose, that is the native
and natural rhythm of speech ... My verse is less to

¹¹ 'Preface' to *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* in 1918 (reprinted in *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Gardner, p. 205).

¹² 'To seem the stranger,' lines 1-4.

¹³ Letter to Bridges dated August 21 1877, *Letters*, p. 46.

be read than heard, as I have told you before; it is oratorical, that is the rhythm is so.¹⁴

Even if 'The Wreck' remained, for Bridges, beyond salvage,¹⁵ this message was clear. Meaning, Hopkins was suggesting, was less a teleological end-point of reading than a process in itself, demanding the reader's participation. 'To do the Eurydice any kind of justice,' he wrote of another early poem, 'one must not slovenly read it with the eyes, but with your ears, as if the paper were declaiming it at you.'¹⁶ The phrase, though facetious, is telling: Hopkins was defining a poetic which would allow the body and its organs their own sentience, challenging the bifurcations of Cartesianism by integrating meaning within the phenomenal, sensory world.

It is certainly a commonplace — obvious to the point of emptiness, perhaps — that poetry involves sound as well as semantics, physics as well as metaphysics. But Hopkins provides an object lesson in the necessity of a consciousness of this enfleshment, in the way in which even silent reading, in our literate society, is never something going on entirely in the mind but always engages a body with agency — the body articulated in the motion of lips, lung, tongue — even if that body remains crouched and quiescent whilst that reading occurs. Any dualist impulse to distinguish 'upper' from 'lower' — to quarantine the transcendent from the terrible — does not map easily onto poetry, and does not sit comfortably, in particular, with the Sonnets. As much as they are works expressive of a kind of estrangement between soul and body, they might also be understood as the swansong of a poetic career which had been remarkably insistent upon the way in which poetry opens a space of overlap between the two.

Poetry was originally meant for either singing or reciting; a record was kept of it; the record could be, was, read, and in time by one reader, alone, to himself, with the eyes only. This reacted on the art Sound-effects were intended, wonderful combinations even, but they bear the marks of having been meant for the whispered, not even whispered,

¹⁴ Letter to Bridges dated August 21 1877, *Letters*, p. 46.

¹⁵ 'I must tell you I am sorry you never read the Deutschland again,' Hopkins wrote to Bridges nine months later. (Letter dated May 13/21 1878, *Letters*, p. 50.)

¹⁶ Letter to Bridges dated May 13/21 1878, *Letters*, pp. 51-2.

merely mental performance of the closet, the study, and so on.¹⁷

But *real* poetry, real lyricism, is something else altogether:

This is not the true nature of poetry, 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 elements of speech.¹⁸

Emphatically, Hopkins was setting out a critical framework, and a broader philosophy of language, within which his works — in all their self-enfolding syntax, baffling agogics, and clotted diction — should be framed. Within four years he would be dead, killed by typhoid in his lodgings at University College Dublin. But within those four years he produced works which bring his personal, philosophical and poetic concerns into what is arguably a final chorus. ‘This sonnet,’ he wrote of ‘Spelt from Sibyl’s Leaves’, the only one which he sent to Bridges for criticism, ‘shd. almost be sung: it is most carefully timed in tempo rubato.’¹⁹ Even as they mark the tail end of Hopkins’ career, the Terrible Sonnets both thematise and exemplify his poetics of embodiment, demonstrating how the human voice must remain a product of the flesh, even as it scales the spiritual heights of ‘immortal song.’²⁰ Less to be read than heard, less to be interpreted than inhabited, the final works forge a new dialectic between the body and that language which both contains it and lets it go.

2. *A Flesh Made Word*

It only takes a glance at the appellations bestowed upon Hopkins’ Dublin Sonnets — Dark, Desolate, Terrible — to recognise the dominant

¹⁷ Letter to Everard Hopkins dated November 5/8 1885, *Selected Prose*, p. 137.

¹⁸ Letter to Everard Hopkins dated November 5/8 1885, *Selected Prose*, p. 137. [Original emphasis.]

¹⁹ Letter to Bridges dated December 11 1886, *Letters*, p. 246.

²⁰ ‘To R.B.’ line 4.

interpretive paradigms to which they have been subject. Readers, from Robert Bridges onwards, have perceived within the works a corporeal predicament. The body which they describe is most overtly a form which encloses a physical and spiritual pain: a 'rack,'²¹ that is, and a wreck, of solipsistic selfhood. One critic perceives a body which is 'impotent, disease-racked, sweating, tortured';²² another writes of 'a dis-Incarnation' consistent with the Ignatian *meditatio*, that 'the soul is a prisoner... condemned to live amongst the animals on this earth';²³ and another recognises an agency 'cut off from everything outside and [shrunk] into the impenetrable enclosure of itself,' as a paradigmatic Victorian experience of the withdrawal of God from the phenomenal world.²⁴

Consider, for example, the somatic co-ordinates of the following:

I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.



What hours, O what black hours we have spent
 This night! what sights you, heart, saw, ways you went!
 And more must, in yet longer light's delay.
 With witness I speak this. But where I say
 Hours I mean years, mean life. And my lament
 Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent
 To dearest him that lives alas! away.
 I am gall, I am heartburn. God's most deep decree
 Bitter would have me taste: my taste was me;
 Bones built in me, flesh filled, blood brimmed the 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.

²¹ 'Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves,' line 13.

²² Lesley Higgins, "'Bone-House' And 'Lovescape': Writing the Body in Hopkins's Canon," *Rereading Hopkins: Selected New Essays*, ed. Francis L Fennell (Victoria, British Columbia: English Literary Studies, 1996), pp. 26-7.

²³ Daniel Harris, *Inspirations Unbidden: The 'Terrible Sonnets' Of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 55-6.

²⁴ J Hillis Miller, *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 353.

The metaphysics at play here is insistently dualist: the body becomes personified as a poor substitute for a God who is addressed but will not respond in kind. Instead, we — and the poem's speaker — must make do with a poignantly exclamatory conversation with the heart (a heart which seems to have jauntily set off, in true Victorian style, as a mere tourist to existential despair), which rapidly stalls at the beginning of the sestet as the speaker admits he has been talking only to himself: 'I am gall, I am heartburn.' The sonnet concludes, then — rather appropriately, given the cardiac metaphor — with emphatic tropes of somatic circularity, an assertion that the self, far from transcending the physical, is rather *identical with the body*; is made, instead, of *meat*. Flesh is inimical to spirit, it seems; any hopes for Eucharistic redemption reduce down to the 'dull' taste of the human body — a bread which, the poem suggests, must remain irredeemably unrisen.

Beyond this undercurrent of binaries, though, 'I wake and feel' might also be regarded as especially exemplary of the Sonnets in its final note: its insistence upon the painfulness of the body, not only as a bundle of nerve endings but also as an emblem of what that embodiment means — that which Hopkins elsewhere terms 'the blight man was born for.'²⁵ In its figuration as a feeling body, a nervous body, a body refined into an exquisitely sensitive wire, the flesh in the Sonnets braces itself against the prospect, always, of *worse*. Throughout the group, the language of sensation is prominent — groans 'grind' in 'Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves',²⁶ bones are 'bruised' in 'Carrion Comfort',²⁷ and cries 'wince' in 'No worst',²⁸ — and even where such images appear to function as symbolic gestures towards an agony which is purely spiritual, the trope is nevertheless subject to slippage from the language of allegory to the discourse of the clinic, from a heart which 'woos' in 'To seem the stranger' to the 'heartburn' of 'I wake and feel' (allowing one critic, extraordinarily, to read the latter in light of his own experience of anaphylactic heart-death²⁹). In the Sonnets, the physical and the ontological share a single point of rupture. There are fruitful analogies, perhaps, to be drawn with the psychology of torture, where the

²⁵ 'Spring and Fall,' line 14.

²⁶ Line 14.

²⁷ Line 7.

²⁸ Line 6.

²⁹ Raymond Ventre, 'The Body Racked with Pain: Hopkins's Dark Sonnets,' *ANQ* 13:4 (2000), pp. 37-46.

defining action of pain might be understood, as Elaine Scarry argues, as the amplification of corporeal discomfort into cognitive agony:

Though indisputably real to the sufferer, [pain] is, unless accompanied by visible body damage or a disease label, unreal to others. This profound ontological split is a doubling of pain's annihilating power: the lack of acknowledgement and recognition (which if present could act as a form of self-extension) becomes a second form of negation and rejection, the social equivalent of the physical aversiveness.³⁰

As Scarry goes on to suggest, this 'annihilating power' denies the possibility of objectivity or self-transcendence, reiterating the subjection of mind to matter, tightening the sheathing of the soul. Pain, to appropriate these terms, might be understood to function as a token of the Sonnets' nihilism — as an estrangement from meaning, consolation, succour; a corporeal sentence of life-long aloneness. 'Comforter, where, where is your comforting?' asks the speaker, and receives only his own 'cries heav[ing], herds-long' in echoing answer.³¹ The body, it seems, has become a kind of vacancy, a 'bone-house, mean house' without 'a rainbow footing it'³²: terrible, and desolate, indeed.

Given such an emphatically charted topos, it would be obtuse, therefore — not to mention unhelpful — to challenge those assessments which respond dualistically. But what such readers fail to account for is the presence of that *other* body in the Sonnets — the body implicit in the poetics of the spoken voice. This second body, in its materiality, necessarily modifies the vision of somewhat Manichaean desolation which the works otherwise set out. And whilst it is difficult to analyse with any degree of precision the way in which Hopkins' spoken body interacts with his somatic imagery — since, after all, the body in the voice mediates the body in the poems, and so both speak, as it were, in unison — it is worthwhile considering the senses in which the Sonnets' carnality is plural. What becomes apparent, upon a reading with the ear, is that the spoken body

³⁰ *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford UP, 1985), p. 56.

³¹ 'No worst, there is none,' lines 3-5.

³² 'The Caged Skylark,' lines 2, 14.

challenges the Cartesian bifurcation of matter from mind, remaking a corporeal language which is both prison *and* liberation, oppression *and* expression, and which finds some solace amidst the desolation — some transcendence within what's terrible.

To return, once again, to 'I wake and feel' — a work so apparently solipsistic, and yet which modulates, upon closer listening, with a faint 'underthought' (to use Hopkins' own term)³³ of affiliation. The sonnet's sestet, as noted, seems to insist upon a psychological reflexivity: the speaker ultimately identifies himself *as* his body — 'I *am* gall, I *am* heartburn' — and confronts what seems to be a bitter fact of embodied existence: 'Selfyeast of spirit a dull dough sours.' Yet implicit within these words, in all their ironic inversion of Eucharistic communion, there lies an alternative notion of human embodiment: *Selfyeast of spirit a dull dough's ours*. Breathed into being, the line invokes — through what Garrett Stewart terms 'transegmental drift'³⁴ — a quiet mutuality which turns the parodied communion around into a real communality, and which enlivens the phoneme 'ours' which has ghosted throughout the sonnet, in the diphthongal 'hours' and in 'scourge.'

Of course, such an interpretation might appear 'resistant,' or contrary to the intention (presuming that there is one) of the poems themselves. Stewart's own term, indeed, gestures towards the tectonic reshuffling of assumptions that such an approach requires. But in response, it is worthwhile, again, to return to Hopkins' own assessment of his work:

Poetry is speech framed for contemplation of the mind by way of hearing or speech framed to be heard for its own sake and interest even over and above its interest of meaning. Some matter and meaning is essential to it but only as an element necessary to support and employ the shape which is contemplated for its own sake. (Poetry is in

³³ Letter to A.W.M. Baillie dated January 14 1883, *Further Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Claude Collier Abbott (London: Oxford UP, 1956), pp. 252-3.

³⁴ *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 38.

fact speech only employed to carry the inscape of speech for the inscape's sake ...).³⁵

Hopkins' theory of 'inscape' can be understood, in many respects, as a theory of immanence³⁶ — but given his spoken poetic, that which is immanent within speech might be understood not only as some kind of 'higher' reason, but as what many dualisms might consider such reason's subliminal shadow. The spoken word *fleshes out* its power directly into the body; it is erotic as well as noetic; and its poetry takes place somewhere between mind and matter³⁷ — as what might be termed, in Hopkins' own spirit of linguistic portmanteaux, an *incohearing*.

The physicality of speech, in other words, generates meaning which is surplus to that inscribed on the page. It does so by animating the text into a string of sounds, rendering lexical boundaries more fluid than those established by the graphemic certainties of print, and loosening the question of meaning, therefore, from the stasis of letters. A rush of deformed, transient morphemes, consequently, run parallel to the sense which is set down in black and white, syncopating the semiotic certainties of the written text against something far more volatile. And this volatility has one important implication for those who approach a text 'with the ears': it positions the reader as a kind of writer in themselves — a kind of 'cryptographer.'³⁸ By liberating meaning from the domain of authorial intention, the voicing of transegmental drift generates an ambiguity which inheres in response as much as in lexis,³⁹ blurring the boundaries between textual production and textual consumption, and transforming the poem, accordingly, into a collaborative rather than solipsistic artefact: *A dull dough's ours*.

³⁵ *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Humphry House (London: Oxford UP, 1959), p. 289. (Subsequently cited as *Journals*.)

³⁶ See, for example, Geoffrey Hartman, *The Unmediated Vision: An Interpretation of Wordsworth, Hopkins, Rilke and Valéry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966), pp. 64-7; Walter Ong, *Hopkins, the Self, and God* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), p. 156.

³⁷ See, for example, Amittai F Aviram, *Telling Rhythm: Body and Meaning in Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), pp. 5-14. Aviram argues that poetry as sound — in particular, as rhythm — is perceived as a direct somatic appeal, bypassing the conscious mind, and can be understood to operate, as a result, outside of the semiotic system (p. 226).

³⁸ I adopt this term from John Shoptaw, 'Lyric Cryptography,' *Poetics Today* 21:1 (2000).

³⁹ Scott, *The Poetics of French Verse: Studies in Reading*, 87.

Whether there can be such thing as a *methodology* of 'reading with the ears' is, of course, an altogether more difficult issue. Roman Jakobson, famously, suggested the presence of motivated correspondences between speech sounds and 'symbolic values' based upon acoustic frequency: 'high' vowel sounds such as [i] (as in 'tick'), he argued, are synaesthetically associated with various concepts of diminution — smallness, brightness, lightness, hardness — whereas the 'lower' vowels [u] ('tuck') and [o] ('tock'), produced at the back of the throat, suggest softness, heaviness, darkness and largeness.⁴⁰ Other writers suggest some consonantal analogies with facial gesture, such as a tendency of bilabial affricatives ([pf] or [f]) to connote distaste by evoking gestures of lip pursing or spitting.⁴¹ As controversial as such claims remain — speech sounds seldom occur, after all, in the absence of a referential context — they nevertheless indicate one sense in which the gestures of the spoken body retain an expressive agency which is independent of linguistic intentionality: as Hopkins recognised in his philological notes, the sounds of words constitute a kind of meaning in themselves. 'The onomatopoeic theory of poetry has not had a fair chance,' he wrote. 'Cf *Crack, creak, croak, crake, graculus, crackle*.'⁴² Giving a 'fair chance' to the idea of a bodily onomatopoeic means recognising the manner in which spoken verse positions the body as the home as well as the conduit of meaning, of motivated rather than merely arbitrary significations, and recognising its capacity, therefore, to transcend those groundings of 'gall,' 'heartburn,' and, essentially, meat.

In this way, the poetic body might be regarded as gesturally, as well as instrumentally, significant: as the home of a language which extends

⁴⁰ Roman Jakobson and Linda Waugh, *The Sound Shape of Language* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), pp. 188-94. Julia Kristeva goes further: 'We shall bear in mind the oral drive of the liquids (l'), (r'), (m') and of the closed anterior vowels; the anal drive of the open posterior vowels; the urethral drive of the unvoiced constrictives (f), (s), (ʃ) and eventually the tendency to phallicize this drive in the voiced constrictives (v), (z), (ʒ); the aggressive drive, of rejection, in the unvoiced explosives (p), (t), (k) or the voiced explosives (b), (d), (g); the phallic-erectile drive of the apical (r).' ('Phonetics, Phonology and Impulsional Bases,' *Diacritics* 4:3 (1974), p. 35).

⁴¹ See Reuven Tsur, 'Onomatopoeia: Cuckoo-Language and Tick-Tocking: The Constraints of Semiotic Systems,' *Iconicity in Language* (2001), available at <http://www.trismegistos.com/iconicityInLanguage/Articles/Tsur/default.html> (accessed 30 April 2007).

⁴² *Journals*, p. 5.

beyond itself into abstraction and yet remains speaking as well as spoken, *here* as well as *there*. Returning to the Sonnets, though, this definition might be expanded still more broadly, upon the somewhat fundamental principle that a body which speaks — even if it does so with a cry of pain — is also a body which (for better or worse) *is*.

I see
The lost are like this, and their scourge to be
As I am mine, their sweating selves; but worse.

As if in response, another of the Dublin Sonnets picks up the theme and runs with it:

No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief,
More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring.
Comforter, where, where is your comforting?
Mary, mother of us, where is your relief?
My cries heave, herds-long; huddle in a main, a chief-
Woe, world-sorrow; on an âge-old ánvil wince and síng —
Then lull, then leave off. Fury had shrieked ‘No ling-

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

As a number of readers have noted,⁴³ the opening assertion recalls Edgar’s insight in *King Lear* — ‘The worst is not / So long as we can say ‘This is the worst’⁴⁴ — and in doing so traces a faint optimism amidst the ‘chief / Woe, world-sorrow.’ Following Shakespeare (and one work, in particular,

⁴³ See, for example, W. H. Gardner, *Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889): A Study of Poetic Idiosyncrasy in Relation to Poetic Tradition* (London: Oxford UP, 1966), vol. 1, p. 174; Julia Saville, *A Queer Chivalry: The Homoerotic Asceticism of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), p. 152.

⁴⁴ William Shakespeare, *King Lear: 1623 Folio Text*, ed. Stephen Orgel, *The Pelican Shakespeare* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), Act IV.1.

which has a lot to say about the flesh and its various symbolic valencies), Hopkins articulates a conundrum which might be considered a natural corollary of his poetics of speech: it is not possible to speak about the body's abjection, he realises, without betraying one's own meaning. 'So long as we can *say*' the worst, then 'there is none' — the physical act of speaking denies the allegation of inarticulate, inert physicality. Throughout this poem, as a result, tropes of negation prove less nihilistic than they might first appear. 'Pangs' which are 'pitched past pitch of grief' nevertheless remain present in phonic resonances — in the rhyming harmonics of 'relief,' 'chief,' and 'brief.' A 'Fury' who forbids 'ling- / Ering,' demonstrates its own tendency, despite itself, to leisurely chiming. And those mental mountains labelled 'no-man-fathomed' prove soundable, nonetheless, by words. As long as the poem itself exists, then the flesh, it seems, has not reached its nadir — indeed, '*there is none*'. One contemporary Victorian conceit imagined poetic rhythm as a kind of textual heartbeat⁴⁵; in these terms, the body in the Sonnets, though depicted as a self-grating 'heartburn,' continues to assert its agency in its very act of depiction — as a pulse, that is, within the muscle of language itself.

This, of course, is a very a modest claim. In a most basic sense, the speaking body's materiality — that very same excruciating self-presence which identifies 'my taste' as 'me' — proves a rampart against the poems' nihilism. But this presence of the body in poetry is precisely what many readers of the Sonnets have forgotten — and curiously so, given the poet's much-discussed religious milieu. 'In the beginning was the Word,' begins the Gospel of John, which Hopkins would have recited daily, in Latin, at the conclusion of the Mass, 'and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.' Discounting the verse's dualist (or otherwise) implications — a segue into Christian metaphysics is probably best avoided here — it is not a large leap, surely, to see how the Incarnation's 'hypostatic union' of human and divine presents a paradigm conjunction of phenomenal opposites.⁴⁶

Given this theological exemplar, it is unsurprising, therefore, that Hopkins' poetic should realise itself within a corpus which is very much

⁴⁵ Kirstie Blair, *Victorian Poetry and the Culture of the Heart* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2006), pp. 63-4.

⁴⁶ E. A. Weis, 'Incarnation,' *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. Gale Virtual Reference Library (Detroit: Gale Group, 2003), p. 374.

alive. 'Poetry,' writes Julia Kristeva, allows the phonemes of language to 'reacquire the topography of the body which reproduces itself in them,'⁴⁷ and this process, as Kristeva's phrase implies, occurs bilaterally — as a fleshing of words, and simultaneously a wording, a Wording, of the flesh. The result is a state of affairs in which body and language are barely distinct; in which mind and matter have become reciprocal rather than oppositional. The body exists not merely as an object — not merely a receptacle for pain, dissociated from selfhood or consciousness. It is also a subject. The flesh is not simply spoken *of*; it also *speaks*; it simultaneously speaks *about itself*, and by doing so it reconciles the radical scission between self-as-subject and self-as-object upon which the label 'desolation' has historically rested. And thus there emerges, in the Terrible Sonnets, something faintly transcendent: a kind of *flesh-made-word*.

3. Wrestling With God

Hopkins had always been conscious of the metaphysics at play in his work. Prior to his conversion to Catholicism and decision to enter the priesthood, he had taken his Literae Humaniores at Oxford, and read conscientiously — exasperatingly so, according to his new friend Bridges⁴⁸ — in all that the course of study entailed. 'The defect of the Platonic as of all transcendental theories,' concluded the budding poet at the time, 'is that it confines itself to the upper world without caring at all ab[ou]t the sensible as if the abstraction were truer than the thing it was meant to explain.'⁴⁹

Coming at the other end of his career, two decades later, the Dublin Sonnets might be regarded as a kind of exemplary return to this early insight. Even as the poems express dismay at the estrangement of the sensible from the 'transcendental,' positioning the body as a topos of solipsistic constriction, the language with which they do so functions in a manner which is both sensual and meaningful, bringing such poles into conjunction and also, perhaps, to a unity of sorts. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty has noted:

⁴⁷ 'Phonetics, Phonology and Impulsional Bases,' p. 34.

⁴⁸ *The Poems of Digby Mackworth Dolben*, ed. with 'Memoir' by Robert Bridges (London: Oxford UP, 1915), p. ci.

⁴⁹ Unpublished Oxford Note D8, quoted in Maria R Lichtmann, *The Contemplative Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 102.

It has always been observed that speech or gesture transfigure the body, but no more was said on the subject than that they develop or disclose another power, that of thought or soul. The fact was overlooked that, in order to express it, *the body must in the last analysis become the thought or intention that it signifies for us*. It is the body which points out, and which speaks.⁵⁰

In this way, the spoken poem becomes a vehicle of transcendence by reforming flesh as word; by making language *matter* — and in doing so, it confounds any radical distinction between soul and body, or mind and matter, or ideal and real. It is fitting, therefore, that those lines of the Sonnets which are most emphatically aural are also lines which thematise this conciliation of opposites, bridging the gap between self and other, human and divine; between despair and redemption, and ‘carrion’ and ‘comfort’:

Not, I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee;

Not untwist — slack they may be — these last strands of man
 In me ór, most weary, cry *I can no more*. I can;
 Can something, hope, wish day come, not choose not to be.
 But ah, but O thou terrible, why wouldst thou rude on me

Thy wring-world right foot rock? lay a lionlimb against me? scan
 With darksome devouring eyes my bruised bones? and fan,
 O in turns of tempest, me heaped there; me frantic to avoid thee and
 flee?

Why? That my chaff might fly; my grain lie, sheer and clear.
 Nay in all that toil, that coil, since (seems) I kissed the rod,

Hand rather, my heart lo! lapped strength, stole joy, would laugh,
 cheer.

⁵⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962), p. 197. [Emphasis added.]

away?⁵¹

Given Hopkins' poetic of speech, one might beg to differ from Hopkins' Golden Echo, and reply to its Leaden sister, No: because for 'everything that's fresh and fast flying of us,' this vulnerability to decay — far from threatening some soaring quality of soul, or mind — is precisely what grants to such transcendence a voice.

This is what the Dublin Sonnets demonstrate: they demand a recognition of the way in which the painful, sweating, oppressive body nevertheless makes beauty possible. Reading them with the ears invites a new insight into Hopkins, and, surely, into verse in general: as a materialisation of the immaterial, a physicalisation of the metaphysical — or, if you like, as a kind of wrestling with God. As much as the Sonnets bewail the body, they also, in this way, affirm its necessity. Because a world of pure mind would be completely silent. And terribly — *truly* terribly — bereft of poetry.

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⁵¹ 'The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo,' lines 1-2. Of course, this poem is all about the Catholic doctrine of Resurrection; giving 'beauty ... back to God.'