

Engler, Balz. "Reading Hopkins Writing." *The Authentic Cadence: Centennial Essays on Gerard Manley Hopkins*. Ed. Anthony Mortimer. Fribourg: University Press Fribourg Switzerland, 1992. 143-151.

## Reading Hopkins Writing

Critical tradition has established a certain manner of reading Hopkins, one that places the complex meanings and associations of single words and collocations at the centre of interest. But is this appropriate? Hopkins does not seem to have been sure himself what should be done with his poems, and in his letters, besides acknowledging that they need study, he also insists that they should be listened to. As specific types of reading presuppose specific types of textuality the problem of reading affects issues well beyond reader-response. In the following I shall try to show how, for historical reasons, one particular type of reading Hopkins has made it difficult for us to grasp the nature of his texts. I shall also try to indicate the consequences of an alternative and, to my mind, more appropriate manner of reading his poems: reading Hopkins writing.

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The process of reading has been at the centre of much critical commentary in recent years, usually as part of the attempt to break away from the notion of the work of literature as an autonomous entity, as an organic whole. Useful as this move has been, it has not, I think, been radical enough. One type of reading has usually been privileged, even taken for granted, that of the [end of 143] steady advance through the text.<sup>1</sup> This is no surprise, for at least two reasons: research into reading by psychologists has usually focused on this type, often because of their interest in the remedial aspects of teaching reading, and discussions of reading in literary studies first dealt with narrative texts, where it is probably most common. However, as soon as we take into account other types of text, like poems and newspaper items, and types of reading other than reading for the plot, the situation looks different. We then have to distinguish between various types of reading. I can think of at least five, which may be labelled: *skimming*, *pacing* – the type usually taken for granted –, *halting*, *repeating* and *study*.

At least one type of reading mentioned here calls for additional comment: *study*, a type of reading that has for long been privileged by students of literature<sup>2</sup> – another name frequently used for it is *close reading*. It is based on the assumption that all the elements of a text should be present simultaneously in the reader's mind. The movement of the eyes along the sequence of writing may therefore be suspended. The eye does not only move forwards and backwards, but also up, down and across.

Every word and phrase is linked with all others in the text. Contrasting *pacing* and *study* we might say that *study* moves vertically into the depths of a text, *pacing* horizontally towards its ending, e.g. towards the resolution of the plot. *Study* seems to be best suited to short, complex texts, like lyrical poems, *pacing* to long texts like tales and novels.

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What kind of reading is appropriate with Hopkins – if reading is at all appropriate? There is a large area of conflict both in what he himself had to say on the topic, mainly in his letters, and in the way his poems have been received in history (Engler [end of 144] 1982: 83-89). On the one hand, there is Hopkins' insistence that his poems are to be listened to rather than read on the page – a claim supported both by their sound music and their rhetorical structure. On the other hand, there is the difficulty, even obscurity of his poetry, which calls for study. As Hopkins himself puts it, he wants the meanings "if dark at first reading, when once made out *to explode*" (LI: 90). As I have tried to show elsewhere (1982: 75-89), Hopkins' attempt to achieve both supreme harmony of sound and supreme condensation of meaning makes it impossible to experience his poems in a single adequate way. The conflict between different types of reception cannot be resolved. This may be one of the reasons why his poetry has remained a matter of controversy in criticism.

The appropriateness of *study* as a type of reading for Hopkins' poetry – moving into the depths of the texts – is supported by Hopkins' interest in philology, which has recently been studied by Cary H. Plotkin. Hopkins shared with the philologists of his time the interest in single words, and the belief that "roots" and their derivatives were unified by a single underlying idea (Plotkin 1989: 95) – notions that result in a concern, among others, with etymology.

Words cohere, are drawn together, by phonetic similarity. But merely phonetic coherence is insufficient; the coherence is sustained only if enforced by a shared semantic nucleus. Words in a phonosemantically defined group, moreover, *attract* or *generate* phonosemantic cognates. (102-3)

These single words begin to form groups in Hopkins' mature poetry.

Beginning with *The Wreck of the Deutschland* ... phonetic relations between words become principles of organization and coherence within lines and stanzas, and the words thus connected are raised, so to speak, above their syntactic setting. Their phonetic and semantic constituents, systematically explored in isolation from discursive or syntactic context in the philological notes, enter the structure of poetic language with a new visibility and one that entails a new obscurity to the degree that it

distracts from and im[end of 145]poses itself on the normal sequentiality of English syntax .... Instead, there is a mounting of phonetic and phonosemantic coherence upon and across the semantic linearity of the text. This mounting produces coherence and nondiscursive meaning by virtue of the elements it connects within and athwart the forward movement of narrative or description. (113-14)

Plotkin's account of the poems in terms of syntagmatics complements and sharpens the one I have offered in terms of pragmatics.

Under these circumstances it is not surprising that Hopkins was only discovered and reached the apex of his fame in a period in which complexity in poetry was highly valued, and where close reading came to be considered the appropriate manner of dealing with all literary texts, the period also in which English was firmly established as an academic discipline. Hopkins could even be taken for a contemporary. I. A. Richards, the author of *Practical Criticism* (1929), defends the difficulty of Hopkins' poems in a 1926 essay with arguments that are as valid for Modernist poetry:

that peculiar intellectual thrill which celebrates the step-by-step conquest of understanding may irradiate and awaken other mental activities more essential to poetry. It is a good thing to make the light-footed reader work for what he gets. (1976: 139)

The close reading or study invited by Hopkins' poems makes certain assumptions that affect the way we understand their textuality. The importance attributed to single words and phrases, and the perception of a profusion of phonetic and semantic links tying them together gives the text a very high degree of stability, even solidity. Single punctuation marks or the spelling of a conjunction in capitals – as with "AND" in "The Windhover" – may become pivots of critical debate; the notes of Hopkins editions are full of comment on such details. The edition by Catherine Phillips, for example, although it claims to be introductory (OA: xli), still records, in an appendix, all the minute changes that have been made to the previous standard edition by Gardner and MacKenzie.

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But the appendix I have just referred to also suggests something else: the solidity of Hopkins' texts produced by the kind of reading applied to them is – a mirage. The history of Hopkins' texts shows this, and it also illustrates how, in its course, they solidified more and more.<sup>3</sup>

Hopkins often left his poems in a fragmentary state, or, more frequently, without choosing between different versions. Of those poems he did finish he often did not even keep fair copies

"he was remiss in making fair copies of his work", as Bridges noted (OA: xl), and it was he, his first editor, who did it for him. MacKenzie compares Hopkins' attitude to his poems to that of Keats, whose friend Charles Brown rescued the scraps of paper on which the poet had jotted down some of his now famous odes and sonnets (P: I). With very few exceptions – among them "The Wreck of the Deutschland" – Hopkins never finalized a text for publication either, because his attitude towards publication, to the end of his life, remained ambivalent. Even where we have several complete autograph versions of a Hopkins poem

a comparison of the various autographs indicates how flexible was Hopkins's use of such devices as capitals, hyphens, punctuation marks and outrides: three different fair-copies of a poem, e.g., may interchange a comma, an exclamation mark, and a semi-colon. (P: lxxvii)

All this suggests that we have to reckon with a considerable degree of instability or indeterminacy with Hopkins' texts.

In many cases it was only Robert Bridges who gave stability to the Hopkins texts. When he edited the poems in 1918, he not only made selections according to his policy of making Hopkins palatable to the conventional tastes of the contemporary reading public. He also had to decide which of the versions available to him should be printed. He even went beyond choosing and [end of 147] conflated different versions. In the case of "The Handsome Heart," admittedly an extreme case,

he made three quite different attempts to blend into a satisfactory sonnet the first draft and three subsequent revisions which the poet (partly in response to his own and Dixon's suggestions) had produced. (P: l-li)

In another poem, "Epithalamion", it seems to have been Bridges who actually finished the poem. According to MacKenzie

The MS ... is in a ferment: the unfinished draft covers some eight sides of paper, some in ink, some pencil, scribbled and crossed out again, the text as Bridges has miraculously pieced it together jumping from one page to another. (P: li)

In many respects Bridges did to Hopkins' texts what a poet preparing his texts for publication would have to do himself. Bridges had some justification for this procedure: he had known the poet quite well, and Hopkins had often accepted his advice concerning specific passages. In a sense he simply continued the collaboration between two poets beyond the death of one of them. He may also have been justified to some extent by the specific needs of the first edition to present an acceptable image of Hopkins – but I do not want to join the debate on Bridges' merits as a Hopkins editor.

More serious problems lie elsewhere – with those who followed Bridges as editors and as readers of Hopkins. Bridges' text soon gained the stability demanded by the kind of reading to which Hopkins' poems were now subjected, and which Hopkins' own text so strikingly lacked. In the Fourth Edition of Hopkins' poems MacKenzie still points out: "we have followed the conservative policy of accepting Bridges's latest compromise" (P: li).

The edition by Catherine Philips in *The Oxford Authors* series, which is supposed to replace the Fourth Edition, does bring an advance in this respect. It no longer follows Bridges' latest compromise: [end of 148]

In all cases the version which I believe to be the last written has been taken for text. This policy has been followed because Hopkins's poetic powers were far from spent when he died and although questions of the influence of Bridges and Dixon arise, it is clear that Hopkins did not simply follow their advice but considered it and, even when conceding their objections, normally found his own solutions to them. (P: xli)

Apart from the somewhat weak reasons offered for this policy – why should it matter that Hopkins' poetic powers were not spent? – this policy looks more sensible than the one followed by previous editors. But it shares with their work at least one serious problem: it continues to see its aim in establishing a single text, "the best possible text" (P: lxix). All variants, except one, are banished to the limbo of the critical notes, where it becomes difficult to judge their status. All editors – supported by the readers of Hopkins – seem to take it for granted that there should be a final text and that it should reflect the final intentions of the poet.

I should argue that this urge to determine the "best possible text" is actually against the interests of the poet. It rather reflects certain necessities imposed on the editors by the customs and conditions of publication; it reflects the restrictive orderliness of print. The sooner we can obviate them the better.

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I then have to sketch an alternative account of reading Hopkins, one that harmonizes two seemingly contradictory demands: those made by the instability of Hopkins' texts, and those made by the type of reading suggested by their difficulty. In this account the coexistence of variants beside each other has to be taken seriously – there can no longer be a single, best text.

The relationship between the variants may be of essentially two kinds: They may have been considered improvements by the poet (and would then be recognizable as such – by the others being struck out, or by replacing other variants in an earlier

text). Or they may be alternatives, which stand beside each other. [end of 149]

This second type is of particular interest to us. Because of our urge to construct a final text we may also be tempted to rank alternatives, but it will prove impossible. If one of them is incorporated in the text, the second put above it, for example, this indicates dissatisfaction with the first, but not preference for the second. If we find several alternative phrases in the margin of a manuscript, it is even more obvious that we have to treat them as being of equivalent value.

There is one more complication: The relationship between alternative variants is definitely not one of Empsonian ambiguity; their meanings will not add up to a richer, more complex one. Rather they indicate the need to choose, but also the impossibility of doing so. They cancel each other out exactly where they are different from each other, and as such they produce uncertainty and vagueness.

It is as if we were sitting in front of Hopkins' manuscript, putting ourselves in the position of the poet trying – or not trying – to make up his mind between different variants. In other words, as readers we try to adopt the role of the one writing, determining why some form of expression was chosen rather than another, or why no such choice should have been made. As such our movement into the depths of the text is supplemented by one in the opposite direction, a movement towards final form.

Reading a Hopkins poem in this manner the relation between self and text, and between the empirical and poetic selves, becomes interesting, the problematic of which Harold Bloom has postulated most convincingly for poetry in the Romantic tradition. The writing of poetry is viewed as the creation not only of a poem, but also of a poetic self – The "I" in "The Windhover," for example, is not the empirical person Gerard Manley Hopkins; it is the poet as he creates himself as poet in the unfolding of the text. Where variants displace each other, self and text define each other ever more precisely – a process that is of great interest also in connection with Hopkins' thinking about how self and external world define each other.

Reading Hopkins in the manner I have suggested we can follow the process in which the poet tries to grasp and to celebrate in language the individuality of the self and of things. But we also become aware of the limitations of such an attempt, and the manner in which Hopkins tried to cope with these limitations. Where he does not choose between variants, where equivalent variants stand beside each other, the individuality of the poem and thus of the poet's self is obviously subverted.<sup>4</sup>

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Addendum, autumn 1990: With the publication of the Hopkins Facsimiles and MacKenzie's long-awaited new critical edition of

the poems we have finally been offered the material to attempt a reconstruction of Hopkins' process of writing. MacKenzie's new edition, unlike its predecessors, also acknowledges the difficulty of determining single best texts by printing more than one version of several poems (among them "The Handsome Heart"). In other words, it has finally become possible to do what I have postulated in the tide of my essay: Reading Hopkins Writing.

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<sup>1</sup> In the following I am developing an argument that I first sketched in *Reading and Listening*.

<sup>2</sup> It may be controversial to describe *study* as just one type of reading, but this cannot be discussed here. See my *Poetry and Community*, 72-85

<sup>3</sup> The most convenient account of this is offered in Norman H. MacKenzie's "Foreword on the Revised Text" (P: xxxix-lxvi)

<sup>4</sup> We also find equivalent variants in the transcriptions of oral poetry, poetry that is not authorized by a self.