

## 9. Exploding Meanings: On the Poetry of G.M. Hopkins

In any discussion of how poetry should be experienced, the case of Gerard Manley Hopkins must be of particular interest. More than any other English poet he insisted that his poems be listened to; at the same time most of them are so difficult and condensed that they demand prolonged study. In examining the conflict between these two ways of experiencing his poems, I shall begin with Hopkins's own views on the subject. Using the types of evidence presented earlier I shall then show how the clash between listening and study is reflected in the texts of his poems, in particular in the sonnet "Harry Ploughman." Finally, I shall have a look at the critical reception of Hopkins and show how both Bridges' difficulties with his friend's poetry and its sudden modernist fame are related to the conflicting ways of experience the texts suggest.

As his criticism of Dixon's poetry in a letter to Patmore shows<sup>1</sup>, Hopkins was aware of the difference between listening and visual reading:

Canon Dixon has a hateful and incurable fancy for rhyming *Lord* to *awed*, *here* to *idea*, etc., and, what takes away all excuse, he nevertheless uses the ordinary licence of rhyming *s*'s proper or sharp to *s*'s flat or *z*'s, *th* proper to *dh = th* and so on.<sup>2</sup>

Hopkins seems to imply that rhymes may be correct either visually or aurally (in Standard English), but that a poet must not use the two norms beside each other. In his next letter to Patmore he clarifies his view:

About rhymes – to imperfect rhymes my objection is my own and personal only; to what are called cockney rhymes with suppressed *r*'s I object *cum communi criticorum*, though they have Keats's (in this matter) slight and boyish authority; but what I am clear about is that it is altogether inexcusable to combine the two sorts, the defence of either being the overthrow of the other. (22-VIII-1883, Abbott, *Further Letters*, 1956, p. 297).

Hopkins is aware of his own craft in the context of reading and listening. He does not reject visual reading; he takes it for granted as a common way of experiencing poetry. However, he considers his own poetry different in kind from that of his contemporaries, and for it mere reading is not enough. In a

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<sup>1</sup> On 29-VII-1888 he writes on Dixon's "Eudocia": "I see no good in dropping a syllable (that is in giving a superfluous syllable) a few times at a stop. It is lawful and effective in dramatic verse ...; but in smooth narrative, in couplets, that highly polished metre, and for private reading I think it needless and faulty and that it puts the reader out." (Abbott, *Correspondence Dixon*, 19552, p. 155/156).

<sup>2</sup> Abbott, *Further Letters*, 19562, p. 296. Letter to Patmore, 16-VIII-1883. Cp. also Abbott, *Correspondence Dixon*, 19552, p. 37, letter of 22-XII-1880.

letter to Patmore he writes: "Such verse as I do compose is oral, made away from paper, and I put it down with repugnance";<sup>3</sup> and to Robert Bridges: "My verse is less to be read than heard, as I have told you before; it is oratorical, that is the rhythm is so." (21-VIII-1877, Abbott, *Letters to Bridges*, 1955, p. 46).

These remarks leave little doubt as to how Hopkins wanted his poems to be experienced. Nonetheless, the qualification concerning rhythm is striking, and similar qualifications are implied in many of his references to the experience of his poetry. Hopkins distinguishes rhythm and sound from other elements of the text quite explicitly in his lecture notes on "Rhythm and the Other Structural Parts of Rhetoric – Verse": "Verse is speech having a marked figure, order / of sounds independent of meaning and such as can be shifted from one word or words to others without changing." (House 1959, p. 267). To Coventry Patmore he writes:

Some matter and meaning is essential to [poetry] but only as an element necessary to support and employ the shape which is contemplated for its own sake ... Poetry is in fact speech only employed to carry the inscape of speech for the inscape's sake. (House 1959, p. 289).

– where we may understand *inscape* as "pattern," "design," "unity."

The experience of the music of speech-sounds in Hopkins depends on the text being heard, but the meaning of the text cannot be understood in listening. The meanings are "dark at first reading" (8-IX-1879, Abbott, *Letters to Bridges*, 1955, p. 90), but explode when once made out. Hopkins's friends often reminded him of the problem of obscurity.<sup>4</sup> In a late letter to Bridges he writes:

To return to composition for a moment: what I want there, to be more intelligible, smoother, and less singular, is an audience. I think the fragments I wrote of *St. Winifred*, which was meant to be played, were not hard to understand.<sup>5</sup>

This shows that Hopkins ascribes the difficulty of his texts, in part at least, to a lack of pressure from an audience. At the same time, Hopkins indirectly concedes in this passage that most of his poems were not intended for performance.

Hopkins had no solution for the conflict between the demands made on the recipient by the music of his sounds, and those made by the obscurity of his meaning. His texts, that is,

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<sup>33</sup> 12-V-1887, Abbott, *Further Letters*, 19562, p. 380. Cp. also letters on 11-XII-1886 (on "Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves") and on 11-X-1887 (on "Harry Ploughman"), Abbott, *Letters to Bridges*, 19552, p. 246 and p. 263.

<sup>4</sup> Cp., e.g., the letters to Bridges on "The Wreck of the Deutschland," 21-VIII-1877, 13-V-1878, 30-V-1878, and 22-VI-1878. Abbott, *Letters to Bridges*, 1955, p. 46, 50, 54, 79.

<sup>5</sup> 25-IX-1888, Abbott, *Letters to Bridges*, 19552, p. 291. Incidentally, Yeats included passages from *St. Winifred's Well* in his *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*.

show elements of both aural and visual poetry. Had his poems been intended for visual experience we would expect Hopkins to be radical enough to make full use of visual elements like typography in his texts. But even a cursory glance at his poems shows that his typography is traditional. The quatrains and sestets of the sonnets are separated by blank lines. There is some indentation, which in stichic verse may mark new paragraphs; but often the continuation of an over-long verse on an additional indented line disturbs any visual pattern which may have appeared.

The typography is not entirely traditional, however. In a head-note to "The Wreck of the Deutschland" Hopkins defines his use of indentation

Be pleased, reader, since the rhythm in which the following poem is written is new, strongly to mark the beats of the measure, according to the number belonging to each of the eight lines of the stanza, as the indentation guides the eye ... ; not disguising the rhythm and rhyme, as some readers do, who treat poetry as if it were prose fantastically written to rule (which they mistakenly think the perfection of reading), but laying on the beats too much stress rather than too little. (Gardner and Mackenzie 1967; 1970, p. 255/56).

This means that the printed text is meant to serve in part as a score for performance (see above, pp. 29-30).

Hopkins also uses diacritical and related marks to guide performance. In a letter to Bridges he explains the background of this usage:

I do myself think, I may say, that it would be an immense advance in notation (so to call it) in writing as the record of speech, to distinguish the subject, verb, object and in general to express the construction to the eye; as is done already partly in punctuation by everybody, partly in capitals by the Germans, more fully in accentuation by the Hebrews. And I daresay it will come.

But he ends on a despairing note: "It would, I think, not do for me: it seems a confession of unintelligibility."<sup>6</sup>

We have an interesting example of this kind of notation in "The Windhover":

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume,  
here

Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a  
billion

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<sup>6</sup> 6-XI-1887, Abbott, *Letters to Bridges*, 1955, p. 265. It is interesting to note that Hopkins refers to marking the grammatical features, which are not directly related to rhythm and intonation. The implicit model here is that the signs on the paper first lead the reader to an understanding of the meaning, and from there to a correct enunciation of the poem. This view, with which I have dealt above on p. 26, does not agree with Hopkins's notion elsewhere that his poetry needs to be listened to for an adequate experience.

Times told lovelier ...

(Gardner and Mackenzie 1967; 1970, p. 69).

It is significant for the approaches invited by Hopkins's text that *AND* has been interpreted both in terms of how it sounds and of what it means. Gardner considers it "a curious expedient ... to point out that although the word counts in the scansion merely as a slack syllable, in the actual reading aloud it must be pronounced with speed and stress" (Gardner 1966, p. 99-100), an interpretation that is supported by an earlier version (Gardner and Mackenzie 1967; 1970, p. 267) of the text which has "And". Schoder, on the other hand, offers another interpretation which Gardner accepts in the notes to his edition (Gardner and Mackenzie 1967; 1970, p. 268) of Hopkins's poems: "The very way in which 'AND' is emphasized reveals its importance in the development of the thought. It is the 'and' of consequence, equivalent to 'and as a certain result'." (Schoder 1949, p. 298). The difference between the two interpretations reflects that between the rhythmical-oratorical and grammatical-logical uses of punctuation, and that between aural and visual texts.

Given Hopkins's views on how his poetry should be experienced, one may be surprised to find purely visual effects in his poetry. Such effects indeed occur. In "Carrion Comfort" he has the lines

why wouldst thou rude on me

Thy wring-world right foot rock?

(Gardner and Mackenzie 1967; 1970, p. 99).

*Wring*, the meaning of which is not supported by its context, is only visually distinguished from *ring*, the word that in listening is suggested by the alliteration with *right*. *Wring*, however, alliterates visually with *world*.

Such visual alliteration is fairly frequent in Hopkins, and, once the temptation to rule it out on principle is overcome, its effect may be quite striking. Often, alliterating consonants are followed by vowels spelled identically but pronounced differently. In "The Windhover" (Gardner and Mackenzie 1967; 1970, p. 69), for example, we find the passages:

*daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn* (line 2)

and

*gall* themselves, and *gash* gold-vermilion. (line 14)

In some cases the repetition of letters, as against sounds, seems to be so insistent as to make coincidence unlikely. Line 12 of "The Windhover" runs

No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plough down sillion.

It is followed by a line which does not contain the letter *o*. Of course, it cannot be the shape of the letter *o* alone that creates an effect when being repeated, but there is also a sound generally associated with it (see above p. 35) – the vowel in *plod* the repetition of which may express the monotony of man's daily toil.

Once we admit such effects, it is clear that Hopkins's texts are not only scores for performance, but offer – in the terms introduced in chapter 4 – visual comments on the text to be listened to, sometimes even contradicting it.

In considering how Hopkins's poetry should be experienced, the criterion of length (see above, pp. 25-26) yields interesting results. All his major poems, with the exception of "The Wreck of the Deutschland," are short. The typical form of his mature poetry is the sonnet, which is short enough to allow for study at a single event. The sonnets are not, as a rule, arranged to be experienced in sequence.<sup>7</sup>

Hopkins was aware of the problems that the length and obscurity of "The Wreck of the Deutschland" presented. He advised Bridges:

If it is obscure do not bother yourself with the meaning but pay attention to the best and most intelligible stanzas, as the two last of each part and the narrative of the wreck. (21-VIII-1877, Abbott, *Letters to Bridges*, 1955, p. 46).

And a few months later he wrote, somewhat impatient about his friend's lack of understanding:

Granted that it needs study and is obscure, for indeed I was not over-desirous that the meaning of all should be quite clear, at least unmistakable, you might, without the effort that to make it all out would seem to have required, have nevertheless read it so that lines and stanzas should be left in the memory and superficial impressions deepened, and have liked some without exhausting all. I am sure I have read and enjoyed pages of poetry that way. (13-V-1878, Abbott, *Letters to Bridges*, 1955, p. 50).

In other words, Hopkins suggests that Bridges should first be content with the experience of isolated passages, and put off a full experience of the text until after a later study of it, something Bridges was obviously not ready to do.

Study is often demanded by Hopkins's vocabulary, his choice of archaic and dialectal words, his use of familiar words in unfamiliar meanings, his neologisms, and his unusual compounds. Study is demanded by his syntax, too. Fragmentation and dislocation often entail obscurity, whatever the words themselves may signify (Baker 1967, p. 87).<sup>8</sup>

William E. Baker, in his study of syntax in English poetry, has observed:

Hopkins contorts or cuts off sentences more often than not ... Some of his fragments are more complex, more elaborate, than most sentences. Some of the dislocations

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<sup>7</sup> "The Terrible Sonnets" (No. 64-69) have been grouped together because they express the desolate mood in which Hopkins seems to have been in 1885. Attempts to see them as a sequence (cp. Wolfe 1968, pp. 85-103) are only possible if Bridges' arrangement of the poems is abandoned.

<sup>8</sup> See also James Milroy (1977).

are unprecedented and involve such odd innovations as the interruption of single words or phrase patterns by displaced modifying elements. (Baker 1967, p. 87).

Although brevity and difficulty both suggest a visual experience, Hopkins's sonnets also show characteristics which we would rather expect in aural texts. Thus his sonnets have clearly marked beginnings and endings. Many of them - e.g., "Spring," "The Windhover," "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire" - begin with the description of natural phenomena, i. e. of God's creation. Man, weighed down by original sin, is then introduced, often in stark contrast to nature. In the last part, the salvation offered by Christ is presented. The poems may be considered public addresses<sup>9</sup> or sermons with a rhetorical structure. The priest celebrates the beauty of God's creation, contrasts man's fallen state to it, and then reminds his congregation of the redemption offered through Christ.

This pattern, it should be noted, has also been compared to the meditations prescribed in St. Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*.<sup>10</sup> These exercises consist of three preludes, the meditation proper, and a colloquy with God the Father, Christ, or Mary. In "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire" the description of nature in the poem has been taken to correspond to the second prelude of the meditation, in which a vivid and detailed picture has to be imagined of the place where the story meditated on is located. This is followed by a meditation on the mortality of man - "Dust" is his fate - and by a renewed meditation on mortality in view of Christ's sacrifice and resurrection (Walliser 1977, p. 122-124). The comparison between Ignatian meditation and the poems only partly succeeds because the poem does not end in the prescribed colloquy with God.<sup>11</sup> The reading of Hopkins's sonnets as meditations does, however, remind us of the conflicting demands that his texts make. Hopkins's poems indeed require that we dwell on words and phrases in order to see what they stand for.

Hopkins's poems then are difficult to experience. They show characteristics both of aural and visual poetry. The text is presented as a score, the music of sounds is at play, the text has a beginning and an ending. At the same time the syntax, mainly due to fragmentation, and the choice of words, make the texts difficult; and they are, as a rule, short.

This dichotomy is illustrated by the late sonnet "Harry Ploughman," a poem of which Hopkins himself thought

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<sup>9</sup> The character of Hopkins's poetry as address is also stressed by Donoghue 1959, p. 273.

<sup>10</sup> See Martz [1966] 1969, p. 213; and especially Walliser 1977, pp. 121-124.

<sup>11</sup> Why Hopkins deviates from this pattern "is a matter of conjecture" (Walliser 1977, p. 123).

highly.<sup>12</sup> He seems to have been aware nonetheless that he had reached in it limits beyond which it was impossible to go. When he sent the sonnet to Bridges he added the note:

I will enclose the sonnet on Harry Ploughman, in which burden-lines (they might be recited by a chorus) are freely used: there is in this very heavily loaded sprung rhythm a call for their employment. The rhythm of this sonnet, which is altogether for recital, not for perusal (as by nature verse should be) is very highly studied. From much considering it I can no longer gather any impression of it; perhaps it will strike you as intolerably violent and artificial. (11-X-1887, Abbott, *Letters to Bridges*, 1955, p. 263).

And about a month later he wrote:

I want Harry Ploughman to be a vivid figure before the mind's eye; if he is not that the sonnet fails. The difficulties are of syntax no doubt. Dividing a compound word by a clause sandwiched into it [see line 15] was a desperate deed, I feel, and I do not feel that it was an unquestionable success. (6-XI-1887, Abbott, *Letters to Bridges*, 1955, p. 265).

As the printed editions of the poem do not reproduce Hopkins's diacritical marks they are here supplied from manuscript;<sup>13</sup> they indicate how the text should be performed.

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<sup>12</sup> See letter to Bridges, 28-IX-1887. Abbott, *Letters to Bridges*, 1955, p. 262.

<sup>13</sup> i.e. Ms A, according to Gardner and Mackenzie 1967; 1970, p. 232. The text is given in Abbott, *Letters to Bridges*, 1955, as the illustration facing p. 262.

Hard as hurd<sup>l</sup>é arms, with a broth of goldish flue  
 Breathed round; the rack of ribs; the scooped flank; lank  
 Rope-over thigh; knee-nave; and barrelled shank -

Heá and foót, shoúldér and shánk -

- (5) By a grey eye's heed steered well, one crew, fall to;  
 Stánd at stress. Each limb's barrowy brawn, his thew  
 That onewhere curded, onewhere sucked or sank -

Sóared ór sánk -,

Though as a beechbole firm, finds his, as at a rollcall, rank

- 10) And features, ín flesh, w<sup>h</sup>át deed he éach must do -

His sinew-service where do.

He leans to ít, Harry bends, loók. Back, elbow, and liquid waíst  
 In him, all quáil to the wallowing o' the plough. 'S cheek crímsons; cúrls  
 Wag or crossbridle, in a wind lifted, windlaced -

- 15) See his wind- lilylocks -laced;

Chúrlsgrace too, chíld of Amansstrength, how it hangs or húrls  
 Them - bróad ín bluff híde his frówning féet lashed! ráced  
 With, along them, cragiron under and cold fúrls -

With-a-fountain's shining-shot furls.

Hopkins explains these diacritical marks as follows:

- (1) ^ strong stress; which does not differ much from
- (2) ^ pause or dwell on a syllable, which need not however have the metrical stress;
- (3) ' the metrical stress, marked in doubtful cases only;
- (4) ~ quiver or circumflexion, making one syllable nearly two, most used with diphthongs and liquids;
- (5) ^ between syllables slurs them into one;
- (6) ^ over three or more syllables gives them the time of one half foot;
- (7) ^ the outride; under one or more syllables makes them extrametrical: a slight pause follows as if the voice were silently making its way back to the high-road of the verse.

(Gardner and Mackenzie 1967; 1970, p. 104).<sup>14</sup>

Beyond this notational system the music of sounds also suggests that the text should be listened to. Before saying anything about verbal music, it should perhaps be pointed out how little attention this phenomenon has received - not only in Hopkins criticism but also in literary criticism in general. Critics are usually content with treating sound as purely supportive of meaning; they take it for granted that the sound should seem an echo to the sense. This may be due to a lack of tools to deal with this aspect of poetry; but it also reflects a preoccupation with meaning - a preoccupation that is problematic in texts that the

<sup>14</sup> Abbott, *Letters to Bridges*, 1952, illustration facing p. 262. See also Gardner 1949; 1958, p. 94, and Gardner and Mackenzie 1967; 1970, p. 293.



poet insists should be listened to, but in which the meanings are so complex as to require study.

In my analysis of the sound-music<sup>15</sup> in "Harry Ploughman" I restrict myself to the first syntactic group of the text, and deliberately resist the temptation to link sound with meaning.

Hard as hurdle arms, with a broth of goldish flue  
Breathed round;

All the consonants are voiced, with the exception of the two /h/ at the beginning of the line, /θ/ in /brəθ/ and the cluster /ʃ/ /f/ in /gəʊldɪʃ flu:/. All these voiceless consonants are fricatives. Thus there are no abrupt onsets and offglides - in the case of /ʔa:mz/, the "slur" excludes an abrupt onset.

All the stressed vowels are either long monophthongs, or diphthongs, again with one exception, the /ə/ in /brəθ/. Between /ha:d/ and /bri:ðd/ the quality of the stressed vowels gradually moves from full and dark (low back in articulatory terms) to pointed and bright (high front). This movement is stressed by the vowels following the alliteration /br/: first /ə/ (short middle back) then /i:/ (long high front).

As to rhythm, stressed and unstressed syllables alternate in the first line, with the exception of /'hə:dl 'a:mz wiðə/, a variation which emphasizes /a:mz/ (and thus also the /a:/-assonance with /ha:d/), and /brəθ/ which follows the two unstressed syllables, and forms, as we have seen, an alliteration with /bri: ðd/. Thus, rhythm helps to emphasize the progression of vowels from /a:/ to /ə/ and then to /i:/. The intricacy of patterning in this first syntactic group is typical of the sonnet.

It is not only the verbal music and Hopkins's notation that suggest the poem should be performed. The text shows another trait which is common in aural poetry. The short, additional lines, which Hopkins calls burdens (lines 4, 8, 11, 15, 19) create a certain amount of semantic redundancy which facilitates the understanding of the spoken text (see p. 39).

These, however, are the only instances of semantic redundancy in the poem; otherwise, we are confronted with problems we cannot possibly solve as we listen. Several words and forms may at first seem ambiguous. *Rack* in line 2 may refer to a framework on which things can be placed, or it may be a verbal noun referring to stretching or torturing. The 's after *limb* in line 6 may be the shortened form of *is* or a Saxon genitive. Features in line 10 may be a verb or a noun. It is not clear what *he* in line 12 and *his*<sup>16</sup> in lines 9 and 11 refer to. *Lashed* in line 17 may mean "hit" or "fastened." Performance does not help much to answer these questions, as the example of *features* may

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<sup>15</sup> I follow Hermann Pilch's discussion of the problem in *Phonemtheorie* (Pilch 1974, pp. 41-58).

<sup>16</sup> He in line 12 probably refers to Harry, his in line 9 to the personification limb, and in line 11 to either of them.

show. In his edition Bridges explains it as a verb<sup>17</sup>, and this may be brought out by a pause after *rank*. Hopkins does not indicate this pause in his notation; we may have to take the line-ending as marking a pause. If that reading is allowed, then *curls* in line 13 could also be taken as a verb, parallel to *crimsons*; but this is clearly wrong.

Ambiguities may be resolved by the context, but here the context often consists of words which themselves need elucidation. Gardner and Mackenzie's edition, for example,<sup>18</sup> explains the following words (Gardner and Mackenzie 1967; 1970, p. 292): *knee-nave* (1.3), *curded* (1.7), *-bridle* (1.14), *churlsgrace* (1.16), *frowning* (1.17).

The syntactical relationships are not easy to understand either, and the difficulty is not limited to the tmesis *wind-lilylocks -laced* in line 15. The last four lines (16-19), for example, have been called "a passage of incomparable tortuousness." (McChesney 1968, p. 170). According to McChesney *it* in line 16 refers back to *churlsgrace*, *them* in lines 17 and 18 forward to *furls*. Gardner, however, links *them* in line 17 with *feet*. In any case, the difficulty results from dislocation and fragmentation (Baker 1967, p. 87). The noun *feet*, for example, appears only long after references to it; it is further postponed by adjectival groups (line 17).

In these lines we also find one of the passages in which Hopkins creates an effect which only succeeds in visual reading. *Of Amansstrength* means and has to be pronounced *of a man's strength* (McChesney 1968, p. 170) (as Hopkins's notation indicates, *strength*, too, carries stress). But the capital letter and the fact that the words are not separated by spaces create a personification; according to McChesney it should be understood as "like elemental Man or a primitive Norse God." (McChesney 1968, p. 170).

The reader of a Hopkins poem ... finds himself sometimes at a loss to make out the meaning of the words. There is an impression of vitality and masculinity created by the language, but the impact of the idea is not at first felt. You patiently work out the collocation of phrases, you look up the meaning of unfamiliar or uncertain words, you determine the exact sense of other emphatic words in the passage or poem. (Noon 1949, p. 264)<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup><sup>17</sup> Quoted in Gardner and Mackenzie 1967; 1970, p. 292.

<sup>18</sup> For further examples of syntactic difficulty and ambiguity, see Baker 1967, pp. 87-91. Another striking example is to be found in "Carrion Comfort," Gardner and Mackenzie 1967; 1970, p. 99/100: Does the clause "since (seems) I kissed the rod" belong to *toil and coil* before or to *lapped strength* after it? The parsing is crucial to the interpretation of the poem.

<sup>19</sup> The passage is followed by a description of how stanza 4 of "The Wreck of the Deutschland" would be read. - Cp. also the remark "All the devices which for the casual reader produce only obscurity are really intended to prevent the reader from understanding anything until he can understand everything." (Daiches 1940, p. 32. Quoted by Noon 1949, p. 263.

The reading demanded by such a text is extremely arduous, and William T. Noon's account of the experience probably applies to most readers of Hopkins:

These difficulties make it impossible to experience the sound and the meaning of a poem simultaneously. The two experiences have to follow each other, and the order of their sequence will have a bearing on both. If we listen to the poem without reading it we get the full music of the sounds, but only a suggestion of the meanings. In analyzing the meanings after this we will be guided by the effects of sound, rhythm, and speed. If, however, we first analyze the poem we will appreciate the richness of its meanings, but the music of its sounds will only be faint. The sounds will remain something thought of as added, or mistaken as an illustration of meaning.

This split between sound and meaning in Hopkins's poetry is reflected in the reception of his poetry.<sup>20</sup> The strange history of its sudden spring to fame in the thirties and forties of our century has often been commented on. Factors as diverse as Hopkins's status as both a convert and a Jesuit, and the rejection of Georgian poetry by Modernists played prominent roles in his establishment. Here I shall concentrate on the question of how the opinions of Hopkins's critics are related to their experience of his poems. I restrict myself to the period between 1918 and 1948, which comprises one swing of the pendulum<sup>21</sup> between the two extremes of Hopkins criticism.

When Robert Bridges published his edition of Hopkins's poems in 1918, he wrote an introduction to the notes that Hopkins's admirers find it hard to forgive him for. Bridges criticizes Hopkins's obscurity.

He could not understand why his friends found his sentences so difficult: he would never have believed that, among all the ellipses and liberties of his grammar, the one chief cause is his habitual omission of the relative pronoun ... The grammar should expose and enforce the meaning, not have to be determined by the meaning. (Gardner and Mackenzie 1967; 1970, p. 241).

Another source of obscurity are the homophones:

In aiming at condensation he neglects the need that there is for care in the placing of words that are grammatically ambiguous. English swarms with words that have one identical form for substantive, adjective, and verb; and such a word should never be so placed as to allow of any

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<sup>20</sup>e.g., Gardner 1949; 1958, vol. 1, pp. 198-244; Bender 1966, pp. 5-70.

<sup>21</sup> Hopkins's greatness as a poet was challenged soon after it had come to be accepted. Cp. Yvor Winters, "The Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins" in his *The Function of Criticism* (Denver, 1962), pp. 101-156 (first publ. in 1949) and Donald Davie (1952). - Harold Bloom calls him "the most misrepresented and overpraised" Victorian poet (Kermode and Hollander 1973, vol. 2, p. 1465).

doubt as to what part of speech it is used for; because such ambiguity or momentary uncertainty destroys the force of the sentence. (Gardner and Mackenzie 1967; 1970, p. 242).

Bridges' emphasis on the clarifying function of syntax indicates that he expects poetry to be understood, whether listened to or read continuously.

Bridges gives reasons for Hopkins's "Oddity and Obscurity" (Gardner and Mackenzie 1967; 1970, p. 240):

It was an idiosyncrasy of this student's mind to push everything to its logical extreme, and to take pleasure in a paradoxical result; as may be seen in his prosody where a simple theory seems to be used only as a basis for unexampled liberty ... One would expect to find in his work the force of emphatic condensation and the magic of melodious expression, both in their extreme forms. (Gardner and Mackenzie 1967; 1970, p. 243).

It is Bridges' merit to have pointed out the dichotomy of sound and meaning in Hopkins's poems. Being cautiously reformist, he cannot quite approve of Hopkins's bold ventures in either area.

John Middleton Murry, in an essay published in 1919, echoes Bridges' views, but places more emphasis on Hopkins's sound-music: "He aimed at complex internal harmonies, at a counterpoint of rhythm."<sup>22</sup> This led him to formalism and rigidity, "and in this case the rigidity is bound to overwhelm the sense." (Murry 1919 in Bottrall 1975, p. 51). Middleton Murry concludes from Hopkins's use of sound and rhythm that

the communication of thought was seldom the dominant impulse of his creative moment, and it is curious how simple his thought often proves to be when the obscurity of his language has been penetrated. Musical elaboration is the chief characteristic of his work, and for this reason what seem to be the strangest of his experiments are his most essential achievement. (Murry 1919 in Bottrall 1975, p. 52).

Like Bridges, Middleton Murry sees a conflict between music and meaning in Hopkins's poems, and he, too, judges them as works to be listened to or read continuously. Unlike Bridges, he plays down the importance of meaning, and emphasizes the musical qualities of Hopkins's poems.

Approaches to Hopkins's poetry changed radically after the publication of I. A. Richards's essay "Gerard Hopkins"<sup>23</sup> in 1926, an essay so influential that it "replaced Bridges' critical preface as the dominant evaluation of Hopkins's work." (Bender 1966, p. 14). It is no surprise that it should have been I. A. Richards who started Hopkins's rise to fame. His approach reflects the relationship between the recipient and the literary

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<sup>22</sup> J. Middleton Murry, "Gerard Hopkins," *Athenaeum* (June, 1919); also in his *Aspects of Literature* (London, 1920). Quoted from Bottrall 1975, p. 51.

<sup>23</sup> The *Dial* 81 (1926), pp. 195-203. I am quoting the essay from Bottrall 1975, pp. 69-77.

artefact suited to modernist poetry (see above, p. 64). Richards praises the very things Bridges deplored. He defends Hopkins's obscurity on general grounds.

Modern verse is perhaps more often too lucid than too obscure. It passes through the mind (or the mind passes over it) with too little friction and too swiftly for the development of the response. Poets who can compel slow reading have thus an initial advantage. The effort, the heightened attention, may brace the reader, and that particular 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 ... We should be clear (both as readers and writers) whether a given poem is to be judged at its first reading or at its nth. (Bottrall 1975, p. 69/70).

This clearly shows that Richards is of the opinion that poetry should primarily be read slowly, haltingly, or even that it should be studied.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, he speaks of "the state of intellectual enquiry, the construing, interpretative, frame of mind" (Bottrall 1975, p. 70) required in the reading of poetry.

Listening still has a role to play, if a small one. Speaking of "The Windhover" Richards says that "unless we begin by listening to it, [it] may only bewilder us." (Bottrall 1975, p. 72). This listening has no direct relation to understanding the poem: "I have to confess that [it] only became all right for me, in the sense of perfectly clear and explicit, intellectually satisfying as well as emotionally moving, after many readings and several days of reflection." (Bottrall 1975, p. 72).

In *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930)<sup>25</sup> William Empson makes full - often too full - use of the possibilities offered by Richards's approach. Ambiguity now becomes one of the main virtues of Hopkins's poetry. These ambiguities make it difficult to read the poems aloud:

You may be intended, while reading a line in one way, to be conscious that it could be read in another; so that if it is to be read aloud it must be read twice; or you may be intended to read it in some way different from the colloquial speech-movement so as to imply both ways at once. Different styles of reading poetry aloud use these methods in different proportions. (Bottrall 1975, p. 87)

Hopkins's "Spring and Fall," for example, "shows the first case being forcibly included in the second." (Bottrall 1975, p. 87). The last quoted sentence probably means that the speech-movement, which is colloquial, should be understood as being at the same time different from colloquial speech-movement if the ambiguity is to be brought out. The suggestion is as ingenious as it is self-defeating.

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<sup>24</sup> Richards explicitly states that poetry should be read visually (Richards [1924] 1926, pp. 116-118).

<sup>25</sup> I am quoting from Bottrall 1975.

Empson gives as examples lines 9 and 12/13 from "Spring and Fall":

MÁRGARÉT, áre you gríeving  
Over Goldengrove unleaving?  
Leáves, líke the things of man, you  
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?  
Áh! ás the heart grows older  
It will come to such sights colder  
By and by, nor spare a sigh  
Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;  
And yet you will weep and know why. 9  
Now no matter, child, the name:  
Sórrów's spríngs áre the same.  
Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed 12  
What heart heard of, ghost guessed: 13  
It ís the blight man was born for,  
It is Margaret you mourn for.

(Gardner and Mackenzie 1967; 1970, p. 88/89).

Empson distinguishes several meanings in line 9. *You will weep* may mean "you insist on weeping, now or later" or "you will weep in the future." *Know* may be an infinitive following *will* as *weep* is; or it may be a present tense form ("you already know why you weep") or an imperative ("listen and I shall tell you").

I. A. Richards, who discusses this poem in *Practical Criticism* (1929, p. 83), expresses the opinion that the underscoring of *will* removes the ambiguity: *will* is not an auxiliary but the present tense of *to will*. Empson rather sees the ambiguity intensified by the emphasis on *will*. It indicates that the main meaning of the word must be "insist upon."

But the future meaning also can be imposed upon this latter way of reading the line if it is the tense which is being stressed, if it insists on the contrast between the two sorts of meaning, or including *know* with *weep*, between the two sorts of knowledge. Now it is useful that the tense should be stressed at this crucial point, because it is these two contrasts and their unity which make the point of the poem. (Bottrall 1975, p. 88).

The two sorts of knowledge are the intuitive and the intellectual. According to Empson these two are embodied in the ambiguities in lines 12/13, "which may help to show they are really there in the line about *will*." (Bottrall 1975, p. 88). *Mouth* and *mind* may belong to Margaret or to somebody else; *what heart heard of* goes both forward and backward, i.e. it is the object of either *expressed* or *guessed*; and *ghost* in its grammatical position "means both the profundities of the unconsciousness and the essentially conscious spirit." It "brings to mind both immortality and a dolorous haunting of the grave." (Bottrall 1975, p. 88).

Empson's interpretation, especially of lines 12/13, is ingenious - perhaps over-ingenious.<sup>26</sup> For the argument of this study, however, another point is more important. Empson's interpretations often make the adequate communication of the meaning by way of the human voice impossible; various senses can only come out in study. One of the very phenomena which Bridges criticized in Hopkins's poetry - syntactical ambiguity - becomes a mark of its greatness. Words and phrases which can be ambiguous are taken as central points, as nodes, around which the poem develops its meaning.

One of the most interesting - and strangest - readings of Hopkins's poems made possible by Richards's and Empson's approach is that of W. A. M. Peters, published in 1948. He writes:

If it is true that great poetry never yields all its beauty at a first reading, we do well to realize that this applies to the poems of Hopkins in a very special manner. Precisely because he inscaped the words, they could never become mere parts of a whole, of the line or the stanza; they retained their own individuality as well. And in order fully to understand what every word, as inscaped by the poet, contributes to the meaning of the line, many readings are necessary ... Each word should be allowed to assert itself in our minds with its complex of sounds. By concentrating on the music of the word in this way, we shall be reminded of other sounds and these will cast round the word a melody that greatly adds to the expression of the experience. (Peters 1948, p. 142).

It is difficult to see what exactly Peters means by "the music of the word." He may be thinking of onomatopoeic effects, or of words of a similar sound, whose meanings may then be related to that of the word that called up the association. In any case, the relationship will be one between several meanings rather than sounds, creating intensity rather than extension (see above, pp.50-51). The melody that is "cast around the word" is not an aural, but a visual one.<sup>27</sup>

Peters lists a great number of homophones which Hopkins uses; he considers all the possible meanings to be pertinent all the time.<sup>28</sup> He also discusses combinations of letters,

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<sup>26</sup> I should rather see a juxtaposition of *mouth* and *mind* (as standing for conscious knowledge) to *heart* and *ghost* (intuitive knowledge). I do not think that the mind can belong to anybody else beside Margaret. As to line 9, there is little possibility of proving that the ambiguities which Empson sees in it are not there.

<sup>27</sup> See the examples below, and Peters 1948, p. 148.

<sup>28</sup> Sometimes Peters strains his argument. In a line on the drowning nuns from "The Wreck of the Deutschland," *Are sisterly sealed in wild waters* (Gardner and Mackenzie 1967; 1970, p. 59) Peters interprets *sealed* as "having received the imprint of suffering Christ," and also a "picture of the wild waters closing over these sisters and thus 'sealing' their common grave." (Peters 1948, p. 164). It is only good taste, however, which hinders us from including a further meaning of *sealed* ("turned into seals").

in dealing, for example, with these lines from "The Loss of the Eurydice":

But his eye no cliff, no coast or

Mark makes in the rivelling snowstorm. (Gardner and Mackenzie 1967; 1970, p. 74, lines 67/68).

Peters comments:

Is there a suggestion of 'ark'? or perhaps better, was there such a suggestion contained in the lines for the sensitive ear of Hopkins? ... I grant that normally 'mark' does not call up 'ark'; but if we observe that Hopkins could separate the 'm' from 'mark' and use it as the final element of his rhyme-group 'st-or-m', this example may grow less incredible and admittedly possible. (Peters 1984, p. 169).

This is indeed a striking example. It only works in visual reading; it is improbable that Peters's interpretation could be reflected in performance since this would presuppose that the ending of the line is not marked at all, in spite of what Hopkins says (see above, p. 77), and that *or* still carries as much stress as *storm*. Perhaps most important, the words *storm* and *ark* stand isolated, as two nodes of meaning - and the syllable *coa* is left as an independent unit which does not make sense.

Peters gives another example from the same poem:

And flockbells *off* the aerial [my italics]

Downs' forefalls beat to the burial. (Gardner and Mackenzie 1967; 1970, p. 72, lines 7/8).

He sees the word *soft* incorporated in the first line - an obvious indication that he (unlike Hopkins) works only with the signs he sees on the page, not the sounds they stand for. The last sound of *flockbells* is voiced, the letter *t* at the beginning of the part of the transcription of the phoneme /ō/.

Peters's reading of Hopkins is an extreme case of a purely visual approach, of one that takes study to be the only correct way of experiencing Hopkins's poems. His interpretations only work if we look selectively at single words and even single letters. As such his reading forms a total contrast to those of Bridges and Middleton Murry, for whose evaluation of Hopkins's achievement clarity and the music of sounds were decisive.

The conflict between the judgements of Hopkins's poetry reviewed here is not simply a reflection of developments in critical theory. It has its roots in Hopkins's poetry itself. It is no coincidence that his poetry was instrumental in establishing Modernism as a critical force, and that still today Hopkins is considered a poet of the twentieth rather than the nineteenth century.

The conflicting judgements are the result of a conflict in the demands that Hopkins's poetry makes on the recipient, a conflict apparent in Hopkins's programmatic remarks, in the texts of his poems, and in the way they were received. Sound, rhythm, and rhetorical structure demand that his poems should



be listened to; difficulty demands study. The two experiences do not complement each other. Study makes it difficult for the music of words to be heard. Listening to the harmony of sounds may easily result in disregarding meaning. Because Hopkins tried to achieve both supreme harmony of sound and supreme condensation of meaning, he made it impossible for the recipient to experience his texts in a single adequate way. We may therefore expect his achievement to remain a matter of controversy in criticism as it has been in the past.