

WARTON LECTURE ON ENGLISH POETRY

THE POETRY OF  
GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS:  
'CATCHING THE DEMI-URGE IN THE ACT'

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I MUST be honest; my subtitle is not a picturesque *jeu d'esprit* of my own—would that it were!—nor is it from a newly discovered Hopkins manuscript. It comes from what might, in a Hopkins context, seem a very unlikely source: an essay entitled *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, by the eminent and controversial American orientalist, Ernest Fenollosa. Written some time before his death in 1908, and found among his papers, it was first edited in 1920 by his fervent admirer, Ezra Pound, who called it an *Ars Poetica*.<sup>1</sup>

Let me give the paragraph (from near the end of the essay) from which the phrase I have taken comes:

I have seldom seen our rhetoricians dwell on the fact that the great strength of our language lies in its splendid array of transitive verbs, drawn both from Anglo-Saxon and from Latin sources. These give us the most individual characterizations of force. Their power lies in their recognition of nature as a vast storehouse of forces. We do not say in English that things seem, or appear, or eventuate, or even that they are; but they *do*. Will is the foundation of our speech. We catch the Demi-urge in the act. I had to discover for myself why Shakespeare's English was so immeasurably superior to all others. I found that it was his persistent, natural, and magnificent use of hundreds of transitive verbs. Rarely will you find an 'is' in his sentences. 'Is' weakly lends itself to the uses of our rhythm, in the unaccented syllables; yet he sternly discards it. A study of Shakespeare's verbs should underlie all exercises in style.<sup>2</sup>

Donald Davie, whose admirable book *Articulate Energy* first drew my attention to Fenollosa—although not in the context of Hopkins, a poet of whom he has in fact been very critical—made

<sup>1</sup> My own quotations are from the edition published by City Lights Books, San Francisco, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> *The Chinese Written Character*, p. 29.

Fenollosa the central figure of three chapters devoted to 'Syntax as Action'. Among other things, he did precisely what Fenollosa has suggested here; offered a brief—and brilliant—analysis of the power of the *verbs* in a Shakespeare speech, King Henry's invocation of sleep in 2 *Henry IV*, and concluded:

No one before Fenollosa looked at Shakespeare as he has done, and Shakespeare, looked at in this way, shines out magnificently alive.<sup>1</sup>

What I want to do in this lecture is to look at the poetry of Hopkins in this way, and to see how much some of *his* remarkable effects owe to the number and power of his verbs and to his recognition of nature as what Fenollosa called 'a vast storehouse of forces'. Before going further into Fenollosa's poetic theory and comparing it with some of Hopkins's well-known axioms about his own poetic intent, let me look briefly at two examples of Hopkins's practice, one early, *God's Grandeur* (1877), one late, *That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection* (1888).

Here is the octet of *God's Grandeur*:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.  
 It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
 It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
 Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?  
 Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
 And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
 And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil  
 Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.<sup>2</sup>

There are nineteen verbs there, a quite remarkable number for the octet of *any* English sonnet, even if they do include three of the copula 'is', so sternly condemned by Fenollosa (he refers to it elsewhere as 'the dead white plaster', whose 'indifference' 'the true poet' 'resolves . . . into a thousand tints of verb'). 'Tint' is hardly strong enough for the verbs here. They create an absolute antithesis: between the world charged, for Hopkins, with the power and beauty of God—charged, as a battery is charged (Hopkins liked 'electrical' imagery; he used it in both *The Wreck of the Deutschland* and *The Loss of the Eurydice*)—and the world as heedless man has made it. And they communicate an extraordinary sense of energy. The repeated verbal monosyllables tell most, of course ('trod, have trod, have trod'); as do the variations on one

<sup>1</sup> Donald Davie, *Articulate Energy*, London, 1955, p. 55.

<sup>2</sup> *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 4th edn., ed. W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie, Oxford, 1967, p. 66.

repeated syllable ('seared, bleared, smeared'). And almost all the monosyllabic verbs in the second half of the octet reveal openly what so impressed Fenollosa—their Anglo-Saxon roots. But the verbal noun and past participle in the second line, 'like shining from shook foil'—to describe the electrical power of the God-charged world—communicate great power too. Hopkins had to explain this image to Robert Bridges (and we should be eternally grateful to Bridges—as too many critics have not been—not only for preserving his friend's poems, but for misunderstanding them; so that Hopkins's letters are full of marvellously clear explanations of what he was doing). Here is this one:

I mean foil in its sense of leaf or tinsel, and no other word whatever will give the effect I want. Shaken goldfoil gives off broad glares like sheet lightning and also, and this is true of nothing else, owing to its zigzag dents and creasings and network of small many cornered facets, a sort of fork lightning too.<sup>1</sup>

This shows, not only the energy, but the remarkable amount of precise observation Hopkins was able to pack into two verbal forms. Fenollosa, to give an example of English abstraction as against the concreteness of Chinese characters, took in fact the verb 'to shine', and commented: 'If we want a corresponding adjective we take a different word, "bright". If we need a noun we say "luminosity".' Whereas [I quote again] 'The Chinese have one word, *ming* or *mei*. The ideograph is the sign of the sun together with the sign of the moon. It serves as verb, noun, adjective.' And interestingly enough, as we think of Hopkins's 'like shining', Pound commented on Fenollosa's passage in a footnote: 'A good writer would use "shine" . . . "shining", and "the shine" or "sheen".'<sup>2</sup>

Here, now, is my second example, the opening nine lines of *That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire*:

Cloud-puffball, torn tufts, tossed pillows ' flaunt forth, then  
 chevy on an air-  
 built thoroughfare: heaven-roysterers, in gay-gangs ' they  
 throng; they glitter in marches.  
 Down roughcast, down dazzling whitewash, ' wherever an  
 elm arches,  
 Shivelights and shadowtackle in long ' lashes lace, lance,  
 and pair.

<sup>1</sup> *Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*, ed. C. C. Abbott, Oxford, 1935, p. 169.

<sup>2</sup> *The Chinese Written Character*, p. 18n.

Delightfully the bright wind boisterous 'ropes, wrestles, beats  
 earth bare  
 Of yestertempest's creases; ' in pool and rutpeel parches  
 Squandering ooze to squeezed ' dough, crust, dust; stanches,  
 starches  
 Squadroned masks and manmarks ' treadmire toil there  
 Footfretted in it. Million-fuellèd, ' nature's bonfire burns on.<sup>1</sup>

Twenty-four verbs there build up that picture of Nature's energy: an endless play of racing clouds (Hopkins's *Journal* is full of cloudscapes), light and boisterous wind. It is perhaps the most *sustained* exuberant description in all his poems, written, as he told his friend Canon Dixon, on a day off from examining in Dublin—an activity that played havoc with him—'one windy bright day between floods'. As in *God's Grandeur*, the verbs are of all forms: transitive, intransitive, participles, present and past. In *l. 4*, the three intransitive verbs, 'lace, lance and pair', vividly conjure up the movement of light—'Shivelights and shadowtackle', strips of light and shadow-patterns ('tackle' suggests a ship's sails)—on such a day. But it is the six *transitive* verbs governed by 'the bright wind boisterous'—'ropes', 'wrestles', 'beats', 'parches', 'stanches', 'starches', all done to yesterday's flooded and creased earth—that fulfil exactly what Fenollosa claimed, you will recall, for the *transitive* verb in poetry:

These give us the most individual characterisations of force. Their power lies in their recognition of nature as a vast storehouse of forces . . . Will is the foundation of our speech. We catch the Demi-urge in the act.

And, earlier in the Essay:

The verb must be the primary fact of nature, since motion and change are all that we can recognise in her.<sup>2</sup>

There is—as many of you will well know—one notorious difficulty of meaning in this poem: in *ll. 8-9*, where the wind 'starches'—stiffens—

Squadroned masks and manmarks ' treadmire toil there  
 Footfretted in it.

Here again Fenollosa's essay seems to me to support strongly both Hopkins's practice and his declared intent. The difficulty vanishes once we realize that Hopkins has omitted the expected relative pronoun between 'manmarks' and 'treadmire'. The line

<sup>1</sup> *Poems*, p. 105.

<sup>2</sup> *The Chinese Written Character*, pp. 29 and 19.

can therefore be paraphrased: 'The wind stiffens the multitude of impressions and footmarks of man *that* his toiling in the mud has stamped in it.' But *Quo warranto?* What defence for such omission? First, Hopkins's own defence. In a letter to Bridges, of 4 November 1882, Hopkins commended in poetry what he called 'a nameless quality which is of the first importance, both in oratory and drama . . . I sometimes call it bidding. I mean the art or virtue of saying everything right *to* or *at* the hearer, interesting him, holding him in the attitude of correspondent or addressed or at least concerned, making it everywhere an act of intercourse—and of discarding everything that does not bid, does not tell.'<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, as here, relative pronouns by no means always *told* for Hopkins. There are three perhaps better-known examples of their similar discarding towards the end of *The Loss of the Eurydice*:

O well wept, mother have lost son;  
Wept, wife; wept, sweetheart would be one.

and, in the next stanza, the beautiful invocation to Christ:

Holiest, loveliest, bravest,  
Save my hero, O Hero savest.<sup>2</sup>

In all three the relative pronoun has been jettisoned as redundant; to a complaining Bridges, Hopkins glossed the final one: 'Hero of a Saviour . . . be the Saviour of my hero.'<sup>3</sup>

But, secondly, Fenollosa takes such dislocation or disruption of syntax much further. With the Chinese written character as his ideal, he virtually declares war on the necessity for grammar in poetry at all. 'The Chinese language naturally knows no grammar', he says:

Nature herself has no grammar. Fancy picking up a man and telling him that he is a noun, a dead thing rather than a bundle of functions! A 'part of speech' is only *what it does*.<sup>4</sup>

Hopkins never discarded grammar as such—his classical training would never have allowed him to—but his determination to make every word in a poem bid and tell, to give everything its maximum vividness and expressiveness, produces a telescoping, a sharp and dense enmeshing of actions and things acting and acted on, that can cause difficulties, but would surely have earned Fenollosa's highest praise. Discussing the process of *abstraction*

<sup>1</sup> *Letters to Bridges*, p. 160.

<sup>2</sup> *Poems*, pp. 75, 76.

<sup>3</sup> *Letters to Bridges*, p. 78.

<sup>4</sup> *The Chinese Written Character*, p. 16.

as the antithesis to the concreteness and visibility of the Chinese character, Fenollosa says—in a splendid phrase:

We may go on for ever building pyramids of attenuated concept until we reach the apex 'being'. . . . At the base of the pyramid lie *things*, but stunned, as it were.<sup>1</sup>

Hopkins had his own poetic doctrines of 'inscape' and 'instress', to keep at bay the possibility of things being stunned. Far from accepting such quietism, he wrote that poetry, 'when once made out', should '*explode*' on us; otherwise it fails.<sup>2</sup>

Let me take a passage—famous, but famously difficult—the sestet of *Henry Purcell* (Hopkins's favourite composer), that seems to me to do all the things that I have just outlined in Hopkins's poetry at its best: it telescopes syntax to make the maximum effect, it sharply and densely enmeshes, it keeps both the tenor and the vehicle of its image vividly before both our eyes and ears; with its freshness and unexpectedness, it does just what Hopkins said poetry *should*; it explodes on us:

Let him oh! with his air of angels then lift me, lay me!  
     only I'll  
 Have an eye to the sakes of him, quaint moonmarks, to his  
     pelted plumage under  
 Wings: so some great stormfowl, whenever he has walked  
     his while  
 The thunder-purple seabeach plumèd purple-of-thunder,  
 If a wuthering of his palmy snow-pinions scatter a colossal  
     smile  
 Off him, but meaning motion fans fresh our wits with  
     wonder.<sup>3</sup>

What is most remarkable there is the way in which Purcell and the great stormfowl which images him, are enmeshed together. The 'sakes of him' is, as Hopkins explained to Bridges, Purcell's distinctive genius; but already that genius has *become* the seabird's 'quaint moonmarks'—the crescent-shaped marking on its quill-feathers—the 'pelted plumage' under its wings. Just as Fenollosa found the strength of the Chinese character in its *visibility*, so here Hopkins has made that usually most impalpable of all qualities, individual genius, visible too. The 'quaint moonmarks' anticipate the full image: Purcell's genius not only reveals its splendour—the markings of the great seabird's purple

<sup>1</sup> *The Chinese Written Character*, p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> *Letters to Bridges*, p. 90.

<sup>3</sup> *Poems*, p. 80.

plumage—but it does so unconsciously, incidentally, with the *surprise* of true genius:

If a wuthering of his palmy snow-pinions scatter a colossal  
smile  
Off him, but meaning motion fans fresh our wits with  
wonder.

The bird, as it beats its giant wings, means only to fly; but the beating, to our wonder, unconsciously reveals the splendidly marked feathers beneath. Syntax is not dislocated there; rather the opposite: that last sentence drives home its unexpected point through its transitive verb: ‘fans fresh our wits with wonder’. It communicates both that wonder and a great sense of energy.

It is a verb-based energy of movement that most characterizes the ten great celebratory sonnets that Hopkins wrote in North Wales during 1877, the year after *The Wreck of the Deutschland* and the year of his ordination as priest that September: from *God’s Grandeur* to *The Lantern out of Doors*. Formally, as Louis Martz has so well shown, in *The Poetry of Meditation*, these sonnets are meditations: they carry out the Ignatian principle of ‘seeing with the eyes of the imagination’; they ‘compose the place’, as St Ignatius puts it, re-create the subject, here the joys of Christ’s Kingdom—the wonder of starlight night or harvest or kestrel—then turn the reflection into a spur to virtuous action through a ‘colloquy’ with God. They carry out the first rule of St Ignatius’s *Spiritual Exercises*: ‘Man was created to praise’. But what we are most aware of in all of them is the remarkable energy: an energy that transforms meditation into action. And it is the verbs and verbal nouns that communicate that energy most strongly.

Let me turn to Fenollosa again. In his essay he makes the point that where the poet *has* to use a noun, he should wherever possible use one that shows its verbal origins. Evidence of force, of ‘nature as a vast storehouse of forces’, as he puts it, should never be far away. The great obstacle to poetry, for Fenollosa, is the *intransitive* verb. ‘The beauty of Chinese verbs’, he says (and I take it we must believe him), ‘is that they are all transitive or intransitive at pleasure. There is no such thing as a naturally intransitive verb.’ And the ‘ultimate weakness’ of poetic language is the universal copula ‘is’. ‘It has come’, as he puts it, ‘from generalising all intransitive words into one’; weak, intransitive verbs are ‘reduced to the abstractest state of all, namely bare existence’. And he goes on to one of his most daring claims:

‘There is in reality no such verb as a pure copula, no such

original conception; our very word *exist* means “to stand forth, to show oneself by a definite act”. “Is” comes from the Aryan root *as*, to breathe. “Be” is from *bhu*, to grow.’ And—his most picturesque example—

In Chinese the chief verb for ‘is’ not only means actively ‘to have’, but shows by its derivation that it expresses something even more concrete, namely, ‘to snatch from the moon with the hand.’<sup>1</sup>

There are, admittedly, *some* copulas in these ten Hopkins sonnets (although not many): Hopkins clearly did not share Fenollosa’s horror of them. And there are a great many intransitive verbs, besides numerous nouns that reveal clearly their verbal origins. But the strongest intransitive verbs are clearly those that have simply dropped their reflexive object: they transmit the force of the transitive verbs from which they are derived. Let me take one of Hopkins’s favourite verbs, which he uses both transitively *and* intransitively and as a verbal noun in at least five poems, the verb ‘to hurl’. (I often wonder whether he was first drawn to the word by its use by Henry Vaughan, one of the seventeenth-century poets he most admired, in *The World*:

Like a vast shadow mov’d, In which the world  
And all her train were hurl’d).

In perhaps the most simply ecstatic of these exultant sonnets, *Hurrahing in Harvest*, he uses it twice in the final line, transitively, with immense effect:

These things, these things were here and but the beholder  
Wanting; which two when they once meet,  
The heart rears wings bold and bolder  
And hurls for him, O half hurls earth for him off under his feet.<sup>2</sup>

Hopkins’s experience of the presence of Christ in the harvest and the windswept clouds and the blue hills has become a *physical* exhilaration that only a violent physical verb can express. Violence in poetry never worried Hopkins; rather the reverse. Bridges’ sonnets, he told his mother once, ‘are very beautiful, designedly written in Miltonic rhythms, . . . not violent like mine’. He was not deprecating himself.

He had used ‘hurl’ twice before. It is one of three verbal nouns in a single line of *The Wreck*, st. 2:

The swoon of a heart that the sweep and the hurl of thee trod,  
where ‘hurl’ is part of God’s terror: a frightening rather than an

<sup>1</sup> *The Chinese Written Character*, pp. 14, 15.

<sup>2</sup> *Poems*, p. 70.

exhilarating experience. And, in *The Windhover*, it is one of two most physically expressive verbal nouns that give us, following the image of the skater's turn, the falcon's magnificent dive:

... then off, off forth on swing,  
As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend; the hurl and gliding  
Rebuffed the big wind.

Twice more he used it: intransitively, and repeated, to describe the apocalyptic force of the fatal storm in st. 8 of *The Loss of the Eurydice*:

It hurls, hurls off Boniface Down.

And finally, and transitively again, in *Harry Ploughman*:

Churlsgace, too, child of Amansstrength, how it hangs or hurls  
Them—

The object of 'hangs or hurls'—though we do not reach it for two more lines—is 'furls', furrows; and this time 'hurls', in the sense of violently throwing some furrows away from the plough, contrasts, exactly and visually, with 'hangs', of the furrows that slowly coil round it. Force, in Hopkins, never precludes precision.

One of Fenollosa's precepts, to which I referred earlier, was that the good poet, when using verbal parts of speech, will find words that reveal their verbal origins: words, like Chinese characters or ideographs, which, as he puts it, carry in themselves 'a verbal idea of action'. I cannot resist giving his two examples: the ideograph meaning 'to speak', 'a mouth with the words and a flame coming out of it'; the sign meaning 'to grow up with difficulty', 'grass with a twisted root'. They may look like *things*, nouns; they are in fact—I quote him—'shorthand pictures of actions or processes'.<sup>1</sup>

Great numbers of Hopkins's *grammatical* nouns, subjects, are, surely, just that. What else is the Windhover or the azurous hung hills of *Hurrahing in Harvest*—'God's world-wielding shoulder / Majestic'—or Harry Ploughman? Sometimes we can see the transformational process itself: a noun becoming a verb. In what seems to me his finest, most individual passage of prose, the opening passage of the Commentary he began on the *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola*—on what Ignatius called *The Principle or Foundation*—Hopkins wrote of the miracle of selfhood: what he called 'that taste of myself, of *I* and *me* above and in all things, which is more distinctive than the taste of ale or alum, more distinctive than the smell of walnutleaf or camphor, and is

<sup>1</sup> *The Chinese Written Character*, pp. 9, 10.

incommunicable by any means to another man (as when I was a child I used to ask myself; What must it be to be someone else?).’ A few lines earlier in the passage, he asks himself the origin of this ‘selving, this selfbeing of my own’: ‘And when I ask where does all this throng and stack of being, so rich, so distinctive, so important, come from / nothing I see can answer me.’<sup>1</sup>

There are two words there that reappear significantly in two of Hopkins’s sonnets: ‘throng’ in *Henry Purcell* and ‘selving’ (or, rather, ‘Selves’) in *As kingfishers catch fire*. We might indeed expect the repetition, as both sonnets show the strong influence of Duns Scotus—the medieval philosopher Hopkins much preferred to Thomas Aquinas—just as the prose-passage on selfhood does. But in *Henry Purcell* ‘throng’ is not just repeated; it is now transformed into a verb:

It is the forged feature finds me; it is the rehearsal  
Of own, of abrupt self there so thrusts on, so throngs the ear.

The ‘argument’ Hopkins prefixed to the poem is all-important here:

*The poet wishes well to the divine genius of Purcell and praises him that, whereas other musicians have given utterance to the moods of man’s mind, he has, beyond that, uttered in notes the very make and species of man as created both in him and in all men generally.*<sup>2</sup>

‘The very make and species of man’ is the miracle of selfhood Hopkins so cherished; in revealing, through his music, his unique individuality, Purcell not only possesses the listener (‘throngs the ear’), but conveys to him the ‘throng and stack’ of his being.

‘Throng’ was clearly a word, like ‘hurl’, that fascinated Hopkins. *Ribblesdale*, written when he was back teaching Classics at Stonyhurst, opens with its use; but this time as an adjective, meaning ‘dense’, taken from Lancashire dialect:

Earth, sweet Earth, sweet landscape, with leavè throng . . .

In *As kingfishers catch fire* the transformation of noun to verb was no longer necessary: he had already coined his new verb, to ‘selve’, to realize and energize fully one’s selfhood. The whole sonnet employs its remarkable number of verbs—there are twenty-six, including past participles—to celebrate the fulfilling of their own distinctive natures by all created things, animate and even in-animate. In this way, for Hopkins, they praise God; man can do

<sup>1</sup> *The Sermons and Devotional Writings of G. M. Hopkins*, ed. Christopher Devlin, Oxford, 1959, pp. 122–3.

<sup>2</sup> *Poems*, p. 80.

the same only through Christ's Incarnation. As perhaps the most *verbal* (verb-based) of Hopkins's celebratory sonnets, it illustrates my title, the 'catching of the Demi-urge', best, and I should like to read it complete:

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;  
 As tumbled over rim in roundy wells  
 Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's  
 Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;  
 Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:  
 Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;  
 Selves—goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,  
 Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*  
 Í say more: the just man justices;  
 Keeps gráce: that keeps all his goings graces;  
 Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is—  
 Christ. For Christ plays in ten thousand places,  
 Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his  
 To the Father through the features of men's faces.<sup>1</sup>

What is most impressive there is the sound—or, rather, the variety of sounds—that Hopkins has created, or re-created, to capture the individual vibrations of ringing stones, plucked strings, and swung bells. He has used all his skills of 'chiming', alliteration, and assonance to do this: through sound, objects that we usually regard as inanimate are given life, *their* kind of life, as individually distinctive to them as the brilliant colours of the kingfishers and dragonflies of the first line in flight. In a passage on 'Contemplation for Obtaining Love' from his Commentary on the *Spiritual Exercises*, probably of December 1881, Hopkins wrote: 'All things therefore are charged with love, are charged with God and if we know how to touch them give off sparks and take fire, yield drops and flow, ring and tell of him.'<sup>2</sup> The sonnet, in strikingly similar language, clearly energizes that conviction; just as the earlier sonnet, *The Grandeur of God*, energizes the first confident statement of it, that all things are charged with love, charged with God.

I was anxious to read one sonnet complete, because Hopkins insisted again and again, mostly in his letters to Bridges, that his poems, to do them justice, *should* be read aloud. 'My verse is less to be read than heard', he told him, after his bewilderment at *The Wreck*; 'it is oratorical, that is, the rhythm is so.' And again, of *The Loss of the Eurydice*, 'to do the Eurydice any kind of justice you must not slovenly read it with the eyes but with your ears, as if the

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>2</sup> *Sermons and Devotional Writings*, p. 195.

paper were declaiming it at you. For instance, the line "She had come from a cruise, training seamen", read without stress and declaim, is mere Lloyd's Shipping Intelligence; properly read it is quite a different thing. Stress is the life of it.<sup>1</sup> Stress was the declared aim of his sprung rhythm too; and in the lecture-notes that he prepared when he was teaching Rhetoric to the Jesuit Juniors at Roehampton in 1873-4, he referred to 'stress or emphasis and pitch or intonation of single syllables one against another'; and, again, to a continuous stress 'running through the sentence and setting word against word as stronger or as higher pitched'. The terms are always of speech—or music—*heard*. He put it all in a long and splendid letter of 5 November 1885 to his youngest brother Everard, like so many of the Hopkins family an artist and illustrator. I will quote some of it, as it does not appear in the published collections of letters: it was discovered by Fr. Anthony Bischoff and published by him in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 December 1972. It seems to me the clearest statement of his major aim in poetry that we have.

Here, then, are some extracts from it:

I am sweetly soothed by your saying that you could make anyone understand my poem by reciting it well. That is what I always hoped, thought, and said. It is my precise aim . . . Every art then and every work of art has its own play or performance. The play or performance of a stage-play is the playing it on the boards, the stage: reading it, much more writing it, is not its performance. The performance of a symphony is not the scoring it however elaborately; it is in the concert room, by the orchestra, and then and there only. A picture is performed or performs, when anyone looks at it in the proper and intended light. A house performs when it is now built and lived in . . . Poetry was originally meant for either singing or reciting . . . Some effects were intended, wonderful combinations even. . . . Merely mental performance of the closet, the study and so on . . . 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 essential elements of speech. Now emphasis itself, stress, is one of these: rhythm makes verse stressy.

*QED*, one is tempted to add: he makes it sound extraordinarily simple.

I have so far looked only at what we might call Hopkins's *positive* poems, his poems of celebration, culminating in that paean to

<sup>1</sup> *Letters to Bridges*, pp. 46 and 51-2.

individual selfhood, *As kingfishers catch fire*. As a climax of emphasis or stress, that sonnet needed the newly coined verb 'to selve'. But before that (if we accept late 1881 as its most likely date) Hopkins had coined another verb, to express the exact *opposite*: 'to unselve', to *destroy* selfhood. It comes at the end of that sad poem, *Binsey Poplars | felled 1879*, written at Oxford, when he was serving at St Aloysius's:

Ten or twelve, only ten or twelve  
Strokes of havoc únselve  
The sweet especial scene,  
Rural scene, a rural scene,  
Sweet especial rural scene.<sup>1</sup>

Destruction of trees was something Hopkins found hard to forgive; as a first-year undergraduate he damned the philosopher T. H. Green (later liked and admired by him) for having a beech felled in Balliol Garden quadrangle. Green is, he wrote to his mother—perhaps a little primly—'of a rather offensive style of infidelity, and naturally dislikes the beauties of nature'. But within a few years of *Binsey Poplars*, when he had made his final move to University College, Dublin, *unselving*, destruction of selfhood, become one of his recurrent nightmares. It haunts *Spelt from Sybil's Leaves*, the first of the five self-tormenting sonnets written in Dublin in 1884–5:

For earth ' her being has unbound; her dapple is at an end, as-  
tray or aswarm, all thoughter, in throngs; ' self ín self steepèd  
and páshed—quite  
Disremembering, dísmémbering ' áll now.<sup>2</sup>

The terror there is that nature's 'dapple'—the gloried-in dapple and piedness of *Pied Beauty*—has ended, all earth's distinctive selfhoods have been destroyed. In the four later sonnets the agony moves inward to his own selfhood, and in one of them, '*To seem the stranger lies my lot*', to the frustration of what he felt most intensely was his own finest self, the poet: a self accepted only when he knew that through poetry he could praise God. 'Man was created to praise' he had written three times—each time larger—on the manuscript sheet of *Spelt from Sybil's Leaves*. And now, at the end of '*To seem the stranger lies my lot*':

Only what word  
Wisest my heart breeds dark heaven's baffling ban  
Bars or hell's spell thwarts. This to hoard unheard,  
Heard unheeded, leaves me a lonely began.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Poems*, p. 79.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

The paradox there is that what seems a negation, 'the very process of frustration, the very realizing of failure' (as F. R. Leavis well called it),<sup>1</sup> is communicated with such positive poetic power.

This apparent paradox interested Fenollosa—to come back to him—very much. If there are no negations in nature, how can there be in poetry? To quote him again:

In nature there are no negations, no possible transfers of negative force. The presence of negative sentences in language would seem to corroborate the logicians' view that assertion is an arbitrary subjective act. *We* can assert a negation, though nature cannot. But here again science comes to our aid against the logician: all apparently negative or disruptive movements bring into play other positive forces. It requires great effort to annihilate.<sup>2</sup>

The message for the good poet is clear: he will, wherever he can, rearrange negations, so as to make them the subject—or object—of positive verbs. And this is just what Hopkins has done in those three-and-a-half lines. There are ten verbs there, including what is surely a coined verbal noun at the end—'a lonely began'—five of them transitive. Only two, 'unheard' and 'unheeded', express negations—the terrible negations of frustration and failure—in a syntactically negative form: the others express them with the maximum expenditure of positive, indeed combative, accusatory energy:

Only what word  
Wisest my heart breeds dark heaven's baffling ban  
Bars or hell's spell thwarts.

*You will have noticed, in my quotations from Fenollosa, that his criterion is always nature. He never questions that true syntax reflects a 'natural process'. The power of transitive verbs, he says, 'lies in their recognition of nature as a vast storehouse of forces'; 'in nature there are no negations'; and, further: 'The sentence form was forced upon primitive men by nature itself. It was not we who made it; it was a reflection of the temporal order in causation.'*<sup>3</sup> Contrasting Fenollosa's insistence on simple verbal syntax as the basis of language and poetry with T. E. Hulme's preparedness to jettison syntax from poetry altogether, Donald Davie, in the study I have already mentioned, *Articulate Energy*, ch. iv, made the additional point: that, as against Hulme, Fenollosa was

<sup>1</sup> In *New Bearings in English Poetry*, new edn., London, 1972, p. 127.

<sup>2</sup> *The Chinese Written Character*, p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

an unquestioning humanist; he made no distinction whatever between man and nature.

If this stresses his difference from Hulme, it stresses his *ultimate* difference from Hopkins even more. This is in no way to deny the remarkable similarities between Fenollosa's poetic precepts and the effects of some of Hopkins's finest poems; but the impulses they satisfied were clearly utterly different. Fenollosa's 'Demi-urge' was the supreme *natural* force, what many Renaissance thinkers called *Natura Naturans*, Shakespeare's 'great creating Nature'. Hopkins's equivalent was and could only be God. In discussing 'As kingfishers catch fire', I suggested 'selves' as the climactic verb, as indeed it is—of the octet. But the sestet explicitly goes further:

Í say more: the just man justices;  
Keeps gráce: thát keeps all his goings graces;  
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is—  
Christ.

*Justices*, as Raymond Schoder pointed out in *Immortal Diamond*, bears a special theological sense: 'acts in a godly manner, lives fully energized by grace, justness, sanctity'.<sup>1</sup> It prepares us for the sonnet's final conviction and force: that only through becoming what Hopkins called 'Alter Christus', 'another Christ', can man attain his perfect selfhood.

It is tempting to see Hopkins's use of 'inscape' and 'instress' (and he used these two coined words as both noun and verb) as *his* way of catching the Demi-urge in the act:

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-  
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn  
Falcon, in his riding . . .

I kiss my hand

To the stars, lovely-asunder  
Starlight, wafting him out of it; and  
Glow, glory in thunder;  
Kiss my hand to the dappled-with-damson-west:  
Since, tho' he is under the world's splendour and wonder,  
His mystery must be instressed, stressed;  
For I greet him the days I meet him, and bless when I  
understand.

A famous Journal entry, of 18 May 1870, three and a half years after *The Wreck*, makes quite explicit what he found in common

<sup>1</sup> *Immortal Diamond: Studies in G. M. Hopkins*, ed. Norman Weyand, SJ, London, 1949, p. 210.

in falcon, starlight, thunder and dappled-with-damson-west—  
'my treasury of explored beauty', as he called it in a letter to his  
Oxford friend, Alexander Baillie:

I do not think I have ever seen anything more beautiful than the blue-  
bell I have been looking at. I know the beauty of our Lord by it. It[s  
inscape] is [mixed of] strength and grace, like an ash (tree).<sup>1</sup>

That, I think, is the true explanation of the 'Demi-urge'  
Hopkins catches—continually and often miraculously—in his  
finest poems.

<sup>1</sup> *Journals and Papers of G. M. Hopkins*, ed. Humphry House, completed by  
Graham Storey, Oxford, 1959, p. 199. (Hopkins's brackets.)