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Poetic Individuality in Clare, Hopkins, and Edward  
Thomas

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PhD in English Studies  
Durham University

2014

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## Declaration, Statement of Copyright, and Acknowledgements

The thesis is solely the work of the author, Andrew Hodgson, under the supervision of Professor Michael O'Neill. Passages from Chapter 1, Chapter 3, and the Coda draw on material which appeared, in an earlier form, in an MA dissertation submitted to the University of Durham in 2010. A section from Chapter 2, also in an earlier guise, was published in 'Form and Feeling in Clare's Sonnets', *John Clare Society Journal* 31 (2012): 51-66.

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I would like to thank Professor Michael O'Neill for his guidance, commitment, and insight. I would also like to thank Professor Stephen Regan for his advice and encouragement. I am grateful to my parents for their kindness, support, and understanding.

# Abstract

## Poetic Individuality in Clare, Hopkins, and Edward Thomas

John Clare, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Edward Thomas form a trio of disparate yet tantalisingly related poets. What distinguishes them also conjoins them: the desire, in Hopkins' words, to invest their poetry with 'an individualising touch'. The poetic achievement of all three is animated by the effort to discover an idiom that answers to the pressure of a unique cast of mind, feeling, and vision of experience.

All three poets stand consciously apart from their period. They articulate a recurrent counter-voice in English poetry of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, grounded in an effort to imbue poetic language with an acutely personal bearing. The Introduction establishes the interrelation of their personal and poetic individuality, exploring the way their poems formulate and embody shared aims.

Clare once enthused over Keats's description in *Isabella* of an eye 'Striving to be itself'. The phrase gets purchase on the spirit of embattled innovation that the three chapters on Clare's poetry locate in his language. The first seeks to characterise the haphazard ingenuity of Clare's style, pursuing his trust in a brand of seemingly improvisational inventiveness as a means of discovering new modes of expression. Chapter 2 concentrates on the more controlled aspects of Clare's experimentalism, attending to his poems' twinning of actual and literary discovery. Chapter 3 focuses more explicitly on the disarmingly personal nature of Clare's poetry, thinking about its strange marriages of personal fervour and literary archetype.

Hopkins insisted on 'originality' as a 'condition of poetic genius'; but his poetry is alert to originality's costs as well as its virtues. The concern of Chapter 4 is with how Hopkins' valorisation of distinctiveness sits in tension with his wariness of 'Parnassian' – the quality of 'being too so-and-so-all over-ish'; it contends that Hopkins is most himself at his most unpredictable. Chapter 5 extends an emphasis on Hopkins' blend of craft and spontaneity, and the intricacy and fervour of his expression of feeling, into a consideration of the rich presence his poetry affords to the heart. Chapter 6 attends to the ways in which Hopkins' nerviness about the potentially alienating qualities of his individual style feeds back into the distinctive tenor of his voice.

Thomas thought that 'nothing so well represents [...] singularity as style'. The first chapter on his poems explores takes off from T. S. Eliot's notion of the 'auditory imagination' to explore the fusion of poetic and personal 'singularity' in Thomas's harnessing of the postures of speech, and experimentation with the forms and rhythms of folk song. A large part of the individuality of Thomas's style owes to the intricacy and tenacity of his syntax, and Chapter 8 explores the way in which his poetry's distinctive voice arises out of an effort to trace the contours of thought and feeling. A final chapter devotes itself to the way in which, for all his idiosyncrasy, Thomas, like Clare and Hopkins, strives to achieve intimacy with a reader, contending that his best poems often invite us into the confidence of a personality that remains finally elusive.

A coda emphasises the inventiveness and personal candour that unites the three poets' language.

## Note on Texts

### Clare

Poems are quoted from:

*The Early Poems of John Clare, 1804-1822*, 2 vols., ed. and introd. Eric Robinson and David Powell (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1989). Hereafter *Early Poems*.

*Poems of the Middle Period, 1822-1837*, 5 vols., ed. and introd. Eric Robinson, David Powell, and P. M. S. Dawson (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1996-2003). Hereafter *Middle Period*.

*The Later Poems of John Clare, 1837-1864*, 2 vols., ed. and introd. Eric Robinson and David Powell (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1984). Hereafter *Later Poems*.

The particular volume and page reference of each of Clare's poems is documented throughout in footnotes.

Letters are quoted from *The Letters of John Clare*, ed. and introd. Mark Storey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985). Hereafter *Clare's Letters*.

Autobiographical writings are quoted from *John Clare: By Himself*, ed. and introd. Eric Robinson and David Powell (Manchester: Fyfield-Carcenet 2002). Hereafter *By Himself*.

### Hopkins

Poems are quoted from *The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Norman H. Mackenzie (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1990). Hereafter *Poetical Works*.

Letters are quoted from *The Complete Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Volumes I & II: Correspondence*, ed. and introd. R. K. R. Thornton and Catherine Phillips (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013). Hereafter *Correspondence*.

Journals are quoted from *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Humphrey House, completed Graham Storey (London: Oxford UP, 1959). Hereafter *Journals and Papers*.

Sermons and meditation notes are quoted from *Sermons and Devotional Writings*, ed. Christopher Devlin (London: Oxford UP, 1959). Hereafter *Sermons*.

## Thomas

Poems are quoted, unless otherwise stated, from *The Annotated Collected Poems*, ed. and introd. Edna Longley (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2008). Hereafter *Annotated Collected Poems*.

Letters are quoted, unless otherwise stated, from *Edward Thomas: Selected Letters*, ed. R. George Thomas (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995). Hereafter *Selected Letters*.

Prose is quoted, wherever possible, from *A Language not to be Betrayed: Selected Prose of Edward Thomas*, selected and introd. Edna Longley (Manchester: Carcanet in association with Mid-Northumberland Arts Group, 1981). Hereafter *Selected Prose*.



I thought sometimes that I surely had a taste peculiarly by myself and that nobody else thought or saw things as I did

– John Clare ‘Sketches in the Life of John Clare’, *By Himself* 17.

The effect of studying masterpieces is to make me admire and do otherwise. So it must be on every original artist to some degree, on me to a marked degree. Perhaps then more reading would only *refine my singularity*, which is not what you want.

– Gerard Manley Hopkins, letter to Robert Bridges 25 September 1888, *Correspondence* 963.

Each great new writer is an astonishment to his own age, if it hears him, by the apparent shrillness and discordancy of the speech he has made in solitude.

– Edward Thomas, *Walter Pater in Selected Prose* 159.

# Introduction

‘The style is the man’, complex or simple, in his individuality, his plenary sense of what is really has to say, his sense of the world; all cautions regarding style arising out of so many natural scruples as to the medium through which alone he can expose that inward sense of things, the purity of this medium, its laws or tricks of refraction: nothing is to be left there which might give conveyance to any matter save that.

– Walter Pater, ‘Style’<sup>1</sup>

## I

Clare, Hopkins, and Thomas make for an odd trio, and part of my motivation in bringing them together here is their oddness. The thesis investigates their pursuit of a poetic style expressive of and attuned to their keen sense of individuality.

The work of all three poets stands consciously askew from their contemporaries. Dissatisfaction pervades Clare’s relations with Romantic-period poetry, Hopkins’ with Victorian poetry, and Thomas’s with both Georgianism and modernism. Yet they also resist assimilation into a coherent ‘line’ of their own. Though there are tantalising points of contact between Clare and the two later poets – Hopkins knew a version of Clare’s ‘I Am’, and had possibly read Clare’s second volume *The Village Minstrel*; Thomas was one of Clare’s most illuminating early twentieth-century critics<sup>2</sup> – any influence seems local and incidental rather than sustained. As Tim Chilcott has said: ‘There is little sense in which [subsequent poets] are compelled squarely to confront his achievement, to wrestle with its implications, in order to

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Pater, ‘Style’, *Appreciations, with an Essay on Style* (London: Macmillan, 1907) 35-6.

<sup>2</sup> Hopkins transcribed a version of Clare’s ‘I Am’ into his diary on, or in the days following, 17 June 1865 (‘Early Diaries’, *Journals and Papers* 63). For a discussion of the potential influence on Hopkins’ ‘Binsey Poplars’ on Clare’s ‘Helpstone Green’, see Kelsey Thornton, ‘Sentimental Ecology, John Clare, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Trees: A Note’, *JCSJ* 31 (2002): 43-50.

advance imaginatively'.<sup>3</sup> Between Hopkins and Thomas the possibility of influence is even less plausible: by the time Robert Bridges published Hopkins' poems in 1918, Thomas was a year dead.

Accordingly, this is not a march of chapters tracing a continuous line of development. Instead it aims to bring the poets into mutually-illuminating contact with one another whilst upholding their individuality and originality; it explores their varied accomplishment of a shared imaginative endeavour. Each chapter deals with one aspect of their effort to wrestle language towards the expression, in Pater's words, of their 'inward sense of things'. The first part of this Introduction establishes points of overlap by investigating the ways in which the three poets used poetry as a means of forming and embodying their aims; it then pans out to consider their efforts to achieve an acutely personal expressiveness within the broader context of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century poetry.

## II

The letters, criticism, and poems of all three poets obsess over the importance of finding, and writing in, an individual style. Clare always regarded the authenticity of the personal voice as a touchstone. He expressed 'dislike' for his early long poem *The Village Minstrel*, on the grounds that 'it doesnt describe the thoughts and feelings of a rhyming peasant strongly and localy enough'.<sup>4</sup> His efforts to define and assert that 'strength' and 'localness' are often embattled: 'Clare's identity is created in and through the language he uses,' says Tom Paulin, but it is 'distorted by the changes

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<sup>3</sup> Tim Chilcott, *A Real World and a Doubting Mind: A Critical Study of the Poetry of John Clare* (Hull: Hull UP, 1985) 250.

<sup>4</sup> John Clare, 'Autobiographical Fragments', *By Himself* 113-4.

forced on him by the need to tame that language in order to sell the poetry it speaks'.<sup>5</sup>

Clare admired in Keats's *Isabella* the description of how:

– 'Often times  
'She askd her brother with an eye all pale  
'*Striving to be itself*

– and in *Hyperion* the phrase:

'A stream went *voiceless by*'.<sup>6</sup>

The italics are Clare's and the phrases they highlight pinpoint his feeling for the difficulties of self-expression and the poignancy of going unheard. The impulse behind his truest poetry is a struggle to find and assert his own voice: 'all I want now is to stand upon my own bottom as a poet without any apology as to want of education or anything else and I say it not in the feeling of either ambition or vanity but in the spirit of common sense',<sup>7</sup> he wrote to Eliza Emmerson in 1832. That spirited, unsentimental plea to be taken on his own terms ('all I want...') recurs as a bass-note throughout the letters: 'All I want is to see my own success in my own profession to stand in my own strength to meet the storm'.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Tom Paulin, 'John Clare in Babylon', *Minotaur: Poetry and the Nation State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1992) 53.

<sup>6</sup> *Clare's Letters* 81.

<sup>7</sup> *Clare's Letters* 604.

<sup>8</sup> *Clare's Letters* 575.

Hopkins' principal aesthetic concern was with 'inscape': 'species, or individually-distinctive beauty of style', as he explained it to Coventry Patmore.<sup>9</sup> His own coinage, the term suggests in itself the creative pressure Hopkins' need to articulate the world from his own perspective placed on his language. It indicates the ways in which his highly-tuned attentiveness to the external environment is mirrored in the qualities of his own poetry, the intensity with which it wrings expression from the individual components of language: 'verse', he wrote in a journal entry, 'is inscape of spoken sounds, not spoken words'.<sup>10</sup> '[P]oetry must have, down to its least separable part, an individualising touch', Hopkins said, again to Patmore.<sup>11</sup> '[E]very true poet', he wrote in a letter of 1878, 'must be original and originality a condition of poetic genius; so that each poet is like a species in nature [...] And can never recur.'<sup>12</sup>

Thomas felt similarly. A writer's 'style', he argued in his study of Walter Pater, is a manifestation of his 'singularity'; poetry should aim at what he felt Pater's prose lacked: 'a personal accent'.<sup>13</sup> Like Clare and Hopkins, Thomas was alert to the traffic between the intensity of one's perceptions and the peculiarity of one's style, so that his poems, as he said of Keats's, seem 'curiously and deliberately true to the facts of outward form and inward feeling'.<sup>14</sup> 'Style', he felt, should not be but an ossified construction, but – as he also wrote of Keats – 'quick', living.<sup>15</sup> He accused Pater of using words 'like bricks', which prevented them from falling 'into the rhythms which only emotion can command'.<sup>16</sup> One of the excitements of his poetry is the feeling that,

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<sup>9</sup> *Correspondence* 835.

<sup>10</sup> 'Poetry and Verse', *Journals and Papers* 289.

<sup>11</sup> *Correspondence* 601.

<sup>12</sup> *Correspondence* 809.

<sup>13</sup> Edward Thomas, *Walter Pater: A Critical Study* (London: Martin Secker, 1913) 101.

<sup>14</sup> Edward Thomas, *Keats* 1915 (Cheltenham: The Cyder Press, 1999) 34.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas, *Keats* 57.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas, *Walter Pater in Selected Prose* 160.

rather than being a static articulation of pre-meditated feeling, its forms and rhythms are at work to clarify what those 'emotions' are. '[A]t last I have stepped into the nearest approach I ever made yet to self-expression',<sup>17</sup> he wrote in 1915, six months after he had started to write verse: the remark is in itself intricately phrased, depicting 'self-expression' less as a pronunciation of personal feeling than an effort to uncover and impose upon language the impression of one's innermost nature.

Granted that the pursuit of individuality is a defining preoccupation, an objection raises its head immediately, which is that you could find examples of most poets saying something similar. All writers seek to assert their own idiom, to get language on their own terms. It might be thought of a test-case of good writing that it should achieve, in Al Alvarez's words, the impact of 'a voice unlike any other voice you have ever heard' that is 'speaking directly to you [...] in its own distinctive way'.<sup>18</sup>

But to concede this need not be to deny that Clare, Hopkins, and Thomas pursue distinctiveness with special intensity. Thomas's phrase 'a personal accent' helps to define that intensity. For each of these poets, the pursuit of 'distinctiveness' is 'personal'; it is driven by a feeling for the pressure upon their voice of an intensely individual character. Hopkins is the exemplary instance. He is not only sensitive to his distinctiveness, but the mode and acuity of that sensitivity is in itself distinctive:

I find myself both as a man and as myself something most determined and distinctive, at pitch, more distinctive and higher pitched than anything else I see; I find myself with my pleasures and pains, my powers and my

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<sup>17</sup> Eleanor Farjeon, *Edward Thomas: The Last Four Years* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1958) 146. Thomas's conception of 'self-expression' as at once deliberate and involuntary is apparent in his attestation in *Walter Pater* to 'the kind of self-expression which no man escapes' (*Selected Prose* 157).

<sup>18</sup> Al Alvarez, *The Writer's Voice* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005) 15.

experiences, my deserts and my guilt, my shame and sense of beauty, my dangers, hopes, fears, and all my fate, more important than anything I see.<sup>19</sup>

Clare's language, if less explicitly preoccupied with the nature of the self, fizzles with the challenge of translating its experiences into words. As an illustration one might dip into the terrified comedy of his accounts of his increasing mental and physical unease through the 1830s and 40s: 'I awoke in dreadful irritation thinking that the Italian liberators were kicking my head about for a foot ball [...] I dislike this prickly feel about the face & temples worse than any thing & a sobbing or beating when I lay my head down on the pillow was first felt last night for a long time.'<sup>20</sup> Like much of Clare's best writing, this is characterised by an improvisational vigour responsive to the way that the uncharted waters of unique personal experience might call into being unique and original modes of expression. Thomas, too, was attuned to the pressures exerted by irreducibly personal experience: 'Everyone must have noticed, standing on the shore, when the sun or moon is over the sea, how the highway of light on the water comes right to his feet, and how those on the right and on the left seem not to be sharing his pleasure, but to be in darkness', he observed in some remarks on lyric poetry in 1901;<sup>21</sup> and thirteen years later the image made its way into a poem:

A light divided the swollen clouds  
And lay most perfectly  
Like a straight narrow footbridge bright  
That crossed over the sea to me;  
And no one else in the whole world  
Saw that same sight.

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<sup>19</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'First Principle and Foundation', *Sermons* 122.

<sup>20</sup> *Clare's Letters* 537.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas, review of new verse, *Daily Chronicle* 27 Aug 1901, *Selected Prose* 63.

(‘An Old Song II’, l. 7-12)

The wide-eyed monosyllables of that closing observation channel a sense of wonder in response to a private experience shared by ‘no one else in the whole world’ that is a source of creativity for all three poets.

To emphasise this sensitivity is not to cast these poets as egotists, but rather to remark how the uniqueness of their poetic voice takes root in a super-tuned awareness of the uniqueness of their experiencing selves. Thomas’s lines might sound as much like a contraction of poetic vision as an elevation of the self (and after all articulate an experience of uniqueness, which, strangely, ‘Everyone must have noticed’), and all three can seem at once the most self-assertive and self-abnegating of writers. It is often in their ability to find a language that walks a line between these two poles that their distinctiveness consists. An exemplary piece of phrasing in this regard is the opening of Clare’s ‘I Am’: ‘I am, but what I am none cares or knows’ (l. 1).<sup>22</sup> Here, Clare’s effort to fit his language to his ‘inward sense of things’ is less a matter of the initial burst of self-assertion as of the way that energy recoils on itself across the line, as his tone fluctuates between vaunting, hollow, saddened, and sardonic. A comparably doubled impact plays out in Hopkins’ opening to *The Wreck of the Deutschland*: ‘Thou mastering me | God!’ (l. 1-2). The lines have the effect of playing down the self’s importance, even as their angular syntax announces an unmistakable accent: ‘Chief among the many oppositions that structure the poem is the tension between self-effacement and exuberant self-assertion in the poet’s voice’, as Jill Muller

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<sup>22</sup> *Later Poems* i. 396.



says.<sup>23</sup> 'Exuberance' is not a quality one would tend to associate with Thomas's voice, but a similar nexus of withdrawal and revelation characterises his manner at its most personal:

I, too, often shrivel the grey shreds,  
Sniff them and think and sniff again and try  
Once more to think what it is I am remembering,  
Always in vain.

(l. 26-9)

The wrinkles and agitations of Thomas's voice seem under the sway, in Michael O'Neill's words, of 'a near-obsessive pull to something deep in the poet's experience'.<sup>24</sup> The restless energies of the verse articulate even as they chase an inner essence that comes to seem the more elusive the more intricately it is pursued.

### III

Seamus Heaney's essay 'Feeling into Words' helps define the shared endeavour which brings the three poets together. Heaney writes that 'Finding a voice means that you can get your own feeling into your own words and that your words have the feel of you about them'.<sup>25</sup> He goes on to articulate his sense of a 'connection between the core of a poet's speaking voice and the core of his poetic voice, between his individual accent

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<sup>23</sup> Jill Muller, *Gerard Manley Hopkins and Victorian Catholicism: A Heart in Hiding* (New York: Routledge, 2003) 66.

<sup>24</sup> Michael O'Neill, 'Edward Thomas', *Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry: Hardy to Mahon* ed. Michael O'Neill and Madeleine Callaghan, Blackwell Guides to Criticism (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011) 30-31.

<sup>25</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'Feeling into Words', *Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968-78* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980) 41.

and his discovered style'.<sup>26</sup> That connection manifests itself, he suggests, less through the surface artifice of 'craft' than the deeper quality of 'technique', a quality which, as Heaney defines it, articulates the unique, personal bearing of each poet's language:

Technique [...] involves not only a poet's way with words, his management of metre, rhythm, and verbal texture; it involves also a definition of his stance towards life, a definition of his own reality. It involves the discovery of ways to go out of his normal cognitive bounds and raid the inarticulate: a dynamic alertness that mediates between the origins of feeling in memory and experience and the formal ploys that express these in a work of art. Technique entails the watermarking of your essential patterns of perception, voice and thought into the touch and texture of your lines; it is that whole creative effort of the mind's and body's resources to bring the meaning of experience within the jurisdiction of form. Technique is what turns, in Yeats's phrase, 'the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast' into 'an idea, something intended, complete'.<sup>27</sup>

Yeats's remarks provide an appropriate moment in Heaney's description to pause, since part of what distinguishes Clare, Hopkins, and Thomas is their incorporation into their style of more 'accident and incoherence' than Yeats's conception of the poet would allow. Their most individual poetry is rarely the product of a successful effort to fashion the self into something 'complete'. Their style pursues as much as it crafts uniqueness. In this respect, some speculations by another twentieth-century poet, Stephen Spender, provide an illuminating complement to Heaney's essay. Late in his autobiography *World Within World*, Spender remembers a former anxiety to 'be my ideal self': 'But I came to see that direction is everything [...] Perfection implies arriving

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<sup>26</sup> Heaney, 'Feeling into Words' 43

<sup>27</sup> Heaney, 'Feeling into Words' 47.

at a goal and staying there. But actually we never arrive anywhere'. He then turns his mind to the question of poetic form, conceived of as 'the struggle of certain living material to achieve itself within a pattern'. He contemplates the difference between prose, conceived of as language used in such a way that the things being referred to 'could be discussed in quite other words than those used, because they exist independently of the words', and poetry:

...directly the language tends to create, as it were, verbal objects inseparable from the words used, then the direction of the language is poetic. It is moving towards a condition where, as in poetry, the words appear to become the object, so that they cannot be replaced by other words than the ones used to convey the same experience.<sup>28</sup>

The phrasing rewards attention, since it leaves a gap between language whose 'direction' is 'poetic', and 'poetry' as an 'intended' (to use Yeats's word) ideal. It hints at the way that (as in those lines from Thomas's 'Old Man') the irreducible distinctiveness of poetic language might be attained incidentally on the movement towards that ideal. The distinction is helpful as a way of pinning down the way these poets' distinctive idioms arise out of an effort to apprehend states of feeling that resist verbalization. The remarks chime with Thomas's dislike of Pater's 'repellent

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<sup>28</sup> Stephen Spender, *World Within World: The Autobiography of Stephen Spender* 1951 (London: Faber and Faber, 1977) 313-4. Spender offers as an example the way 'the tormented statements of Gerard Manley Hopkins, in which living material endeavours to force itself into the mould of the sonnet, suggest the sonnet far more powerfully than the correct sonnets of his friend Robert Bridges' (314). His remarks about the irreducible uniqueness of poetic language reverberates with Thomas's protestation in *Walter Pater* 'A thing which one or a thousand men would be tempted to express in different ways is not one, but many, and only after a full realization of this can we agree with Pater's statement that in all art, 'form, in the full signification of the term, is everything, and the mere matter nothing' (202).

preoccupation with an impersonal and abstract kind of perfection',<sup>29</sup> and with his thought in *George Borrow* that 'every man has more or less clearly and more or less constantly before his mind's eye and ideal self which the real seldom more than approaches'. Edna Longley brings that remark to bear on Thomas's poem 'The Other', a poem she praises for creating its 'own language for the workings of the psyche':<sup>30</sup>

Once the name I gave to hours  
Like this was melancholy, when  
It was not happiness and powers  
Coming like exiles home again,  
And weaknesses quitting their bowers,  
Smiled and enjoyed, far off from men,  
Moments of everlastingness.

(l. 81-87)

Thomas's syntax is stretched to breaking-point here as it strains to define a mood that is neither 'melancholy' (though it was once mistaken for it), nor 'happiness' (though it seems to bear similarities to it), but on which each of those opposed tempers exerts a pressure. The language chases intuitions in a manner self-reflexively vignettted in the stanza's gnomic, elliptical, conclusion:

...fortunate my search was then  
While what I sought, nevertheless,  
That I was seeking I did not guess.

(l. 88-90)

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<sup>29</sup> Thomas, *Walter Pater in Selected Prose* 153.

<sup>30</sup> Longley, 'Notes' *Annotated Collected Poems* 156-7.

The lines sketch and embody the 'struggle' towards the definition of an 'ideal' through which the individuality of these poets' language often arises.

Heaney separates off 'technique' from the more learnable 'capable athletic display' that he terms 'craft'.<sup>31</sup> The distinction is pertinent to the complex of artifice and spontaneity that characterises the style of all three of these poets as they strive to 'watermark [their] essential patterns of perception, voice and thought into the touch and texture of [their] lines'. Their writing captures the nature of selfhood so vividly for its negotiations between intuition and conscious skill: 'deliberateness and patience alone can hardly make any writing perfect, unless it be a notice to trespassers or a railway guide' said Thomas, 'there must be an impulse before deliberate effort and patience are called in'.<sup>32</sup>

Clare's writing often seems charged by a disarmingly close contact with that 'impulse'. It is difficult to think of another poet who raises so often the question of whether he knows what he is doing. As Stephanie Kuduk Weiner has remarked, he provokes 'a persistent worry [...] that he wrote from impulse rather than craft, that for all his genius he possessed a gift he little understood and could scarcely control.'<sup>33</sup> My stance throughout what follows is that Clare's expressive 'gift' is often liberated through his lapses of 'control'. He would seem a good example of the rare possibility entertained by Heaney of a poet with a 'real technique and a wobbly craft'.<sup>34</sup> Hopkins is at the opposite end of the scale, and the challenge for him is often to invest the precision of his 'craft' with the impression of spontaneity. Heaney elsewhere described

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<sup>31</sup> Heaney, 'Feeling into Words' 47.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas, *Walter Pater* in *Selected Prose* 156.

<sup>33</sup> Stephanie Kuduk Weiner, *Clare's Lyric: John Clare and Three Modern Poets* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014) 52.

<sup>34</sup> Heaney, 'Feeling into Words' 47.

Hopkins' style as the product of the 'conscious push of the deliberating intelligence';<sup>35</sup> but the style is more open to surprise than that allows, in a way that Hopkins' description of Henry Purcell's music helps to define: 'it is the rehearsal | Of own, of abrupt self, there so thrusts on, so throngs the ear' (l. 5-6). The feeling for paradox in the notion of a 'rehearsal' of something 'abrupt' catches the way Hopkins allows the unexpected, the energy suggested by Spender's word 'direction', to erupt in to an achieved style. Thomas upheld these concerns into the twentieth century. He rejected Pater's self-conscious craft as resulting in a 'lack of an emotional rhythm in separate phrases'.<sup>36</sup> His poetry bears the imprint of his belief in writing as 'a pursuit, not of knowledge, not of wisdom, but of one whom to pursue is never to capture'.<sup>37</sup> 'There would be no poetry if men could speak all that they think and all that they feel',<sup>38</sup> he affirmed.

#### IV

The individuality of each poet shaped, and was shaped by, their independence from their poetic milieu. All three belong amongst that 'relatively small class of poets' in which W. H. Gardner classed Hopkins, 'who, not content with the language as they find it, tend in varying degrees to create their own medium of expression.'<sup>39</sup> When Mark Sandy flags up Clare's phrase 'The clouds were other country mountains' from 'Decay A Ballad' as 'anticipatory' of Hopkins' description of the 'skies' which

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<sup>35</sup> Seamus Heaney 'The Fire i' the Flint', *Preoccupations* 85.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas, *Walter Pater in Selected Prose* 153.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas *The South Country in Prose Writings: A Selected Edition, Volume II: England and Wales*, ed. Guy Cuthbertson and Lucy Newlyn (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011) 255.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas, *Walter Pater in Selected Prose* 159.

<sup>39</sup> W. H. Gardner, *Gerard Manley Hopkins (1884-89): A Study of Poetic Idiosyncrasy in Relation to Poetic Tradition* 2 vols. (London: M. Secker and Warburg, 1944-49) 116.

'Betweenpie mountains' in his sonnet 'My own heart let me more have pity on', he glimpses a small instance of the spirit of inventiveness that sends filaments between the language of either poet.<sup>40</sup> It is not that Clare's phrase is likely to have directly influenced Hopkins', but rather that each offers a distilled example of the way each poet has of opening up their idioms to the pressure of their 'inward sense of things'. Clare's phrase comes at a moment in his poem when he is remembering the (now faded) brilliance of childhood mornings:

The sun those mornings used to find  
When clouds were other country mountains  
& heaven shone upon the mind  
With groves & rocks & mottled fountains  
(l. 31-4).<sup>41</sup>

These lines are brimming with Clare's characteristically slippery suggestiveness. There is uncertainty, only gradually dissipated, as to whether 'find', held out at the end of the first line, is a transitive or intransitive verb; ambiguity as to whether heaven is the subject in its line, or the object of 'The sun'; and the fourth line is open to being held in apposition with any of the three previous ones. The phrase 'other country mountains', plunging back into the idiom of a lost state in which clouds appeared like mountains in a far-off country, typifies their improvisational dash. It encapsulates Clare's ability to match his language to a childlike freshness and peculiarity of perception without seeming gauche. What is equally remarkable is that lines proceed

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<sup>40</sup> Mark Sandy, *Romanticism, Memory, and Mourning* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013) 143.

<sup>41</sup> *Middle Period* iv. 114.

as if unconscious of their flowering complexities. Often the charm of Clare's originality is the feeling that he is not wholly aware of how original he is being.

Hopkins' 'Betweenpie mountains' delves similarly, if more intently and explicitly, into the recesses of a private idiom. It finds a simile for the surprisingness of moments of divine grace:

...whose smile  
'S not wrung, see you; unforseentimes rather, like skies  
Betweenpie mountains, lights a lovely mile.  
(l. 12-14)

Again the lines are at ease with their own idiosyncrasy. Though the resources of language are being pushed to their limits here, the effect is not of strain: Hopkins' quirks (the enjambment of 'smile | 'S', the fastidiousness of 'unforseentimes') mingle with conversational touches ('see you') which imbue a saving intimacy. Amid all this Hopkins concocts a verb out of the adjective 'pied' (a word he had already made his own in 'Pied Beauty') to describe the way skies appear between mountains, modifying their appearance. It is a word which, in the impression it creates of needing to go back to the roots of the language to make something seen for the first time, justifies Tom Paulin's description of Hopkins as a 'primitivist visionary'.<sup>42</sup> As Laura Riding and Robert Graves pointed out in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, it manages to sound at once 'homely' and daring (the word itself is patched together, 'pied'), and is remarkable fundamentally for its 'accuracy': as is frequently the case in these poets,

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<sup>42</sup> Tom Paulin, 'Great Expectations', *Minotaur* 129.



Hopkins' inventiveness derives from his desire to maintain fidelity to the peculiarity of things as he experiences them.<sup>43</sup>

Thomas creates his own 'medium of expression' only partly through his diction, whose 'special quality', in Michael Kirkham's words, is often its 'plain', 'timeless' feel;<sup>44</sup> more fundamentally his irregularity emerges through his language's idiosyncratic movement. He expressed his discontent with the rhythms inherited from a late-Victorian poetic idiom dominated by Swinburne, which, Thomas said, 'do everything save speak'.<sup>45</sup> Where Swinburne depended, according to Thomas, on 'a sound and atmosphere of words' which 'suggest[s] rather than infallibly express[es] his meaning',<sup>46</sup> Thomas's own rhythmic and syntactical adventurousness is geared towards the exact discovery and articulation of feeling:

Never will

My heart beat so again at sight  
Of any hill although as fair  
And loftier. For infinite  
The change, late unperceived, this year,

The twelfth, suddenly, shows me plain.  
Hope now, – not health, nor cheerfulness,  
Since they can come and go again,  
As often one brief hour witnesses, –

Just hope has gone for ever.

(‘When first’ l. 8-17)

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<sup>43</sup> Robert Graves and Laura Riding, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (London: Heinemann, 1929) 92.

<sup>44</sup> Michael Kirkham, *The Imagination of Edward Thomas* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986) 162. I am indebted throughout to Kirkham's account of Thomas's style and technique (144-167).

<sup>45</sup> Thomas, *Algernon Charles Swinburne in Selected Prose* 42.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas, *Algernon Charles Swinburne* 44.

The language of these late, elusively personal stanzas is 'plain', the form a simple cross-rhymed tetrameter quatrain. But the simplicity serves to bring into relief the angularity of the language and the strangeness of the mind with which it is in contact. Throughout, Thomas imbues his medium with an 'awkwardness', which, to apply Kirkham's remarks about a different poem, 'answers to the strangeness of the feeling expressed'.<sup>47</sup> The apparently valedictory cadences of the initial sentence jar as they pass into the next one, whose tangled abruptness captures with near tangible force the 'suddenness' of a change impressing itself on the consciousness. But the writing is never melodramatic. The agility of the lines that follow show how a sentence becomes in Thomas's hands a vehicle for subtle gradations and discrimination of feeling. What begins as a potential cry of despair ('Hope now...') interrupts itself and sifts through its emotions to an unsentimental assessment of exactly what has and hasn't been lost: 'Just hope has gone for ever'.

Each poet was acutely conscious of the solitariness of their powers, and each evoked it affectingly within their poems. Clare wrote a fragment in the mid-1820s in which he catches sight of a crane flying over the fens:

High overhead that silent throne  
Of wild & cloud betruvelled sky  
That makes ones loneliness more lone  
Sends forth a crank & reedy cry  
I look the crane is sailing oer  
This pathless world without a mate  
The heath looked brown & dull before

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<sup>47</sup> Kirkham, *Imagination* 164.

But now tis more then desolate<sup>48</sup>

Fragmentary as it is, this is one of Clare's most beautifully shaped lyrics; and what gives it its shape is its poignant sense of reciprocating loneliness. Clare and crane amplify one another's isolation. The sky 'Sends forth' a 'cry', the phrasing hinting at a plea for recognition; but hearing it only deepens Clare's alienation: 'The heath looked brown and dull before | But now tis more then desolate'. Rather than offering solace, the whole experience 'makes ones loneliness more lone' as Clare has it in a phrase which quietly seeks company in its echo of Wordsworth's sunnier portrayal of solitude in 'I wandered lonely as a cloud'.<sup>49</sup> Clare's own voice can seem like a 'crank and reedy cry', its rough edges at once authenticating it and alienating it from any mellifluous poetical 'standard'. The sense of being faced with 'a pathless world' suggests the untrodden expanse that faced him as he tried to make his way as a poet on his own terms. Here the poem's laconic downturn makes it difficult to consider the prospect of such a world as anything but gloomy; but in a happier mood the notion of a 'pathless existence' might invite thoughts of freedom and opportunity, too. So in his poem 'The Mores', Clare protests at a sign saying 'no road here' (l. 70) being hung on a tree 'As though the very birds should learn to know | When they go there they must no further go' (l. 73-4);<sup>50</sup> the objection draws some of its power from the thought that the air might be thought to contain anything so constraining as 'roads' at all.

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<sup>48</sup> The lines, which fed into Clare's poem *St Martins Eve* (*Middle Period* iii. 269, l. 10-18) are printed as a separate lyric in *The Major Works*, ed. introd. Tom Paulin (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004) 241.

<sup>49</sup> For a discussion of the subtlety of Wordsworth's attitude towards loneliness in that poem, see Christopher Ricks, 'Loneliness and Poetry', *Allusion to the Poets* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002) 272.

<sup>50</sup> *Middle Period* ii. 347.

Hopkins also characterised self-expression as a ‘cry’. The octave of ‘As kingfishers catch fire...’ unfolds a cacophonous vision of ‘Each mortal thing’ ‘Crying *What I do is me! For that I came!*’ (l. 8). If Clare’s use of the word indicates the timbre of his own voice, Hopkins’ offers similar insight: a ‘cry’ might be either involuntary or premeditated, so that the word comes to suggest something of the mix of the seemingly spontaneous and the calculated through which Hopkins (like Clare and Thomas, too) achieves his distinctive note. Hopkins might be remembering Shakespeare’s use of the same word in *The Tempest* as Prospero describes to Miranda how he left Milan with ‘thy crying self’,<sup>51</sup> a phrase Coleridge seized upon as an instance of Shakespeare’s language working ‘to produce that energy in the mind as compells [sic.] the imagination to produce the picture’.<sup>52</sup> Hopkins’ ‘Crying’ also ‘compells the imagination’, though differently. Where Shakespeare’s word achieves its effects, as it were, in passing, Hopkins’ is under pressure, and imagines a self under pressure: the verb makes ‘speaking and spelling’ one’s identity sound as much a matter for anguish as jubilation.

The most piecing ‘cry’ in Thomas’s poems also entails a poetic self-portrait. In ‘The Owl’ Thomas’s comfort is ‘salted’ by a reminder of suffering elsewhere:

All of the night was quite barred out except  
An owl’s cry, a most melancholy cry

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<sup>51</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* I. ii. 132, *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. John Jowett, William Montgomery, Gary Taylor, and Stanley Wells (Oxford: Clarendon, 2005) 1224. All further references to Shakespeare are to this edition.

<sup>52</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ‘1811-12 Lectures on Shakespeare and Milton: Lecture Nine’, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Vol. 5: Lectures, 1808-19 on Literature*, 2 vols., ed. R. A. Foakes (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987) i. 362. Hazlitt, recalling Coleridge, remarked upon how the phrase ‘flings the imagination instantly back from the grown woman to the helpless condition of infancy, and places the first and most trying scene of his misfortunes before us, with all that he must have suffered in the interval’ (‘On Shakespeare and Milton’, *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, ed. Duncan Wu (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1998) vol. ii. 209.

Shaken out long and clear upon the hill,  
No merry note, nor cause of merriment,  
But one telling me plain what I escaped  
And others could not, that night, as in I went.  
(l. 7-12)

The owl's cry functions, in Edna Longley's words, as a returning 'inner voice'.<sup>53</sup> A month earlier, in a more sanguine poem, 'Ambition', Thomas had described a landscape in which 'With loud long laughter then a woodpecker | Ridiculed the sadness of the owl's last cry' (l. 8-9), projecting his own aesthetic dilemma onto the external scene. Here that cry, laughed off in the earlier poem, returns, shedding Shakespearean 'merriment' for an accent that 'tells plain' of human suffering. Again, the poetry seeks correspondences between the 'cry' and its own voice: 'Shaken out' implies something wrung involuntarily; it also hints at the aesthetic luxuriance that ghosts the inversions and elongations of Thomas's syntax. Thomas's position in relation to the owl mirrors his position as a poet in relation to 'others', who react uneasily to a voice at once otherworldly and 'plain', its 'melancholy' edged by the unattained possibility of 'merriment'. The poem breathes Thomas's darkly ironic sense of his own alienation, something which he both accentuates and mourns.

## V

Wordsworth, remembering Coleridge, wrote that 'every great and original writer, in proportion as he is great and original, must himself create the taste by which he is to

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<sup>53</sup> Longley, 'Notes', *Annotated Collected Poems* 198.

be relished'.<sup>54</sup> These poets' sense that their 'originality' works against the grain of established 'taste' is reflected in their attraction to what might be called vocational poems: works which announce and embody the kind of poet their author wants to be. Clare wrote scores, the best of which is probably 'The Progress of Ryhme', composed in the late 1820s and described by Jonathan Bate as 'the manifesto for the mature Clare'.<sup>55</sup> The title gives a taste of the hotchpotch of poetic convention and individual voice with which the poem speaks: 'Progress' puts it in the eighteenth-century mode of Collins, or Gray; 'Ryhme' indicates the struggle not only with literary models, but linguistic standards themselves that everywhere invigorates Clare's work.<sup>56</sup> Some lines from near the start of the poem take us to the heart of his effort to make himself heard:

I felt that Id a right to song  
& sung – but in a timid strain  
Of fondness for my native plain  
(‘The Progress of Ryhme’, l. 80-1)

The dynamics of these lines, wavering between boisterous self-confidence and rueful self-regard, point to the confictions of a poetic voice that is by turns daring and tentative in laying claim to 'a right to song': '& sung' announces itself with brash

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<sup>54</sup> William Wordsworth, letter to Lady Beaumont 21 May 1807 *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, 2: The Middle Years, Part 1: 1806-11*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1969) 150.

<sup>55</sup> Jonathan Bate, *John Clare: A Biography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; London: Picador-Pan Macmillan, 2003) 384.

<sup>56</sup> Zachary Leader, arguing against the practice of preserving Clare's texts in their 'raw', unedited state, argues against attributing such misspellings any expressive significance: 'The prime effect of such misspellings is to draw attention away from the poem itself to its provenance, to the poet as peasant' (*Revision and Romantic Authorship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) 229). But if individual misspellings might appear insignificant in isolation, this is to ignore their cumulative impact. The irregularity of Clare's printed voice testifies to the awkward pressure of his individuality on a standardised language. For further discussion see Chapter 1.

assurance across the line-ending, only to be undercut by the hesitancy of the ensuing concession of a 'timid strain', where 'fondness' is winningly understated. The 'native' timbre of Clare's poetry is both acknowledged as potential limitation and clung to as proof of its authenticity and independence.

But 'The Progress of Ryhme' is hardly a 'timid' poem. It faces down Clare's anxieties about his 'right to song' in rapid tetrameter couplets whose momentum answers to Clare's cheerful surprise at his own verbal facility: 'From my own heart the music sprung' (l. 210). The poem succeeds through its interlacing of modesty and self-confidence. A characteristic, elongated sentence late in the poem begins with Clare finding the most unpretentious of images for his standing in the literary world:

The pea that independant springs  
– When in its blossom trails & clings  
To every help that lingers bye  
& I when classed with poesy  
Who stood unbrunt the heaviest shower  
Felt feeble as that very flower  
& helpless all –

(l. 299-305)

There is a charming sense of humour on show in Clare's contentment to find his reflection in a pea.<sup>57</sup> Yet, with a characteristic sleight of hand, the lines protest helplessness whilst demonstrating resourcefulness. A climbing pea, with its tendrils spiralling around any available branch, is a brilliantly apt image for someone helping

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<sup>57</sup> Clare may be remembering Keats's lines from 'I stood tip-toe': 'Here are sweet peas, on tip-toe for a flight: | With whings of gentle flush o'er delicate white, | And taper fingers catching at all things, | To bind them all about with tiny rings' (l. 57-60, *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Miriam Allott (Harlow: Longman, 1970) 85; Keats is quoted from this edition throughout).

themselves up the social scale, as anyone familiar with the sight will recognise. The image is a quiet show of strength, despite the lines' ostensible expression of 'helpless[ness]' at being 'classed with poesy'. At this point, Clare's sentence turns mid-line upon a 'but', cheering itself temporarily with the thought that 'beauty's smile | Is harvest for the hardest toil' (l. 305-6) before quickly rebounding into a less abstract self-portrait that at once apologises for and asserts the value of Clare's rusticity as it concedes it 'little thought to win' that 'smile':

With ragged coat & downy chin  
A clownish silent haynish boy  
Who even felt ashamed of joy  
So dirty ragged & so low  
With nought to recommend or show  
That I was worthy een a smile  
(l. 308-13)

As Tom Paulin has pointed out, these lines exhibit Clare's ability to lend a homespun touch to prestigious poetic models. He 'stands before us' here in the metre of Milton's 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso', says Paulin;<sup>58</sup> yet the language is Clare's own. 'Haynish' means 'awkward', and finds itself enmeshed in a tangle of assonance and alliteration ('downy...clownish...haynish...ashamed') that is happy to brandish that awkwardness as a poetic virtue. That last rhyme word 'smile' goes on to find in the line that follows the same rhyme-partner as it had only six lines previously, as Clare continues by speculating how he would have felt 'amid my toil' (l. 314) had he known that he would win fame as a poet 'in the blush of after days' (l. 317) (the image sees Clare's poetic

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<sup>58</sup> Tom Paulin, 'Introduction', *John Clare: The Major Works* xx.



success as both embarrassing and bathed in a rosy glow). By repeating the same rhyme sounds so close together Clare again flaunts his 'haynish' inelegance, but also drives home a more complex effect: to the eye the off-rhyme sets the one against the other, 'toil' against 'smile', to suggest their incompatibility; to the ear, the rhyme asks that if we want to bring the two words closer together, we speak the verse in a rustic Northamptonshire accent: *smoile*. The printed page is brought into contact with the vernacular.

'Had I but felt' this possibility of success, Clare finishes the passage by saying, 'My heart with lonely fancy warm | Had even bursted with the charm.' Again the lines pay their poetic dues, playing a knockabout variation on the fate of Shakespeare's Gloucester, whose heart 'Burst smilingly' (*King Lear*, V. i. 198).<sup>59</sup> Yet their vigour owes equally to their grammar's childlike exuberance ('bursted'). They also give us, in 'lonely fancy warm', a piece of phrasing typical of Clare's ability to find idioms that bears the impression of erratically mingled feelings. The phrase is in itself a characteristic product of a 'fancy' whose combined isolation and independent zest issue in a haphazard inventiveness.<sup>60</sup>

Hopkins' forays into the genre are by no means so numerous or explicit, partly, no doubt, because he was less concerned to see himself as 'a poet',<sup>61</sup> but also, perhaps, because the process of finding a voice happened for Hopkins far more suddenly. What

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<sup>59</sup> Unless otherwise stated, references are to *The Tragedy of King Lear*.

<sup>60</sup> The phrase offers a good example of how the absence of punctuation in Clare's texts makes you work to decipher his meaning. As you 'punctuate' the lines internally, the possibility arises that Clare's meaning is 'my heart burst with lonely fancy warm'. This has to be rejected thanks to second 'with', and on the grounds of Clare's tendency to cut his phrasing to the length of his lines (though some of his best poetry disturbs this relation), but it is raised as possibility, and puzzling such tangles out is a fundamental aspect of the experience of reading Clare, and of his poetry's characteristic suggestiveness. For further discussion see Chapter 1.

<sup>61</sup> For the coincidence of Hopkins' poetic and spiritual lives see John Pick, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Priest and Poet* (New York: Oxford UP, 1966).

for Clare was a relentless struggle to be heard on one's own terms was in Hopkins an abrupt and brilliant realisation of what those terms were: 'I had long had haunting my ear the echo of a new rhythm which now I realised on paper',<sup>62</sup> Hopkins wrote to his friend R. W. Dixon about the composition of *The Wreck of the Deutschland*. Hopkins was conscious of the poem's audacity: the Catholic journal *The Month* 'dared not print it', he remembered to Dixon; and even sympathetic readers were troubled by the force and demands of its originality, as Robert Bridges' comparison of the poem to 'a great dragon folded in the gate to forbid all entrance' in his edition of Hopkins' poems most famously attests.<sup>63</sup> Jill Muller has argued that in itself Hopkins' 'decision to join the Church of Rome was an action of self-definition through dissent',<sup>64</sup> and *The Wreck* continues that act of self-definition into the poetic sphere. It stands at the head of Hopkins' mature output as a poem, in Christopher Ricks's words, of 'announced mastery'; though that 'mastery' is everywhere announced not – as in Clare – through a forthright assertion of poetic authority, but rather as an unignorable feature of the language, so that any stanza might be chosen as an implicit demonstration of the possibilities of the poem's new voice:

I admire thee, master of the tides,  
 Of the Yore-flood, of the year's fall;  
 The recurb and the recovery of the gulf's sides,  
 The girth of it and the wharf of it and the wall;  
 Stanching, quenching ocean of a motionable mind;  
 Ground of being and granite of it: past all  
 Grasp God, throned behind

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<sup>62</sup> *Correspondence* 317.

<sup>63</sup> Robert Bridges 'Notes', *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins Now First Published* (London: Humphrey Milford, 1918) 116.

<sup>64</sup> Jill Muller, *Gerard Manley Hopkins and Victorian Catholicism: A Heart in Hiding* (New York: Routledge, 2003) 3.

Death, with a sovereignty that heeds but hides, bodes but abides;  
(l. 249-256)

This comes four stanzas from the end of the poem, as Hopkins is gathering himself for a finale in which he presents himself, in Muller's words, as the 'bardic voice of English Catholicism'.<sup>65</sup> But the opening gambit at first feels anything but 'bardic': 'I admire thee' lays its cards on the table in an apparently everyday register that seems coolly at odds with the force of the poem's idiosyncrasy; but it contains within itself a stricter, more intense meaning of 'admire' as 'wonder at': the effect is of Hopkins' language discovering a latent intensity of feeling in common speech. And the stanza is a cluster of similarly recognizable Hopkins effects: the feel in the alliteration of something at once cacophonous and elegantly ordered; the prosodic inventiveness that at the same time taps into an ancient, vernacular linguistic heritage ('Of the Yore-flood, of the year's fall'); the sense of a poet unostentatiously in control of a consciously evolving language, so that in a phrase like 'The recurb and the recovery' the newness of the coinage 'recurb'<sup>66</sup> is dampened by the way it nestles into the poem's alliterative patterns; the feeling that all this experimentation is not being conducted for its own sake, but straining to evoke the nature of a divinity, in the terms of Hopkins' reaching enjambment, 'past all | Grasp'.

For Hopkins, the effort of finding a voice is far more of a technical struggle than Clare makes it appear; and one of the things that makes *The Wreck's* newness so thrilling is the intimacy with which it invites us in on that struggle. There is a hectic

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<sup>65</sup> Muller, *Victorian Catholicism* 38.

<sup>66</sup> 'The curved shape of an oscillating surface produced at the extreme point of oscillation': Hopkins' use as a noun is the solitary instance in the *OED*.

immanence about the moment in the poem's twenty-eighth stanza when he struggles to find words to articulate the drowning nun's vision of Christ:

But how shall I ... Make me room there;  
Reach me a ... Fancy, come faster –  
Strike you the sight of it? look at it loom there,  
Thing that she ... There then! the Master,  
*Iipse*, the only one, Christ...

(l. 217-221)

'Hopkins' language is nowhere so bold, so innovative, and so confident, and yet the poem seems to falter' says Isobel Armstrong, wonderingly.<sup>67</sup> *The Wreck* may be a poem of 'mastery', but much of its excitement lies in the way it invites us in on the sight of that mastery being pushed to its extremes by the challenge of paying tribute to its own 'Master'. The limit of those 'extremes' here is not the vocal faltering of the ellipses, but the point in an alien tongue, the Latin *Iipse* ('his very self'), to which they reach. It is a word whose 'unvoiceable density' in Eric Griffiths' words, registers an effort to stress Christ's presence in the language of a Catholic liturgy Hopkins felt to be at once estranged and deeply English.<sup>68</sup>

Thomas's self-definition as a poet is at once withdrawn and all-pervasive. One of the assumptions underlying Edna Longley's 2008 *Annotated Collected Poems* is that Thomas's whole poetic career can be seen as an implicit *ars poetica*. Her notes to that edition make it their aim to colour in 'the rich hinterland that sustained a uniquely

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<sup>67</sup> Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poets and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993) 422.

<sup>68</sup> Eric Griffiths, *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1989) 352.

intense poetic journey,<sup>69</sup> tracing ‘Thomas’s intensive journey from poem to poem’,<sup>70</sup> and point up ‘how often the poems themselves “reflexively” encode aesthetic principles’.<sup>71</sup> One such poem is ‘Sedge-Warblers’, composed six months into Thomas’s poetic career, in May 1915. A poem of ‘aesthetic self-correction’,<sup>72</sup> in Longley’s terms, it shows Thomas turning from a former poetic self, exchanging a luxuriantly-expressed ‘dream’ (l. 11) of ‘beauty’ (l. 1) for a plainer, more elemental voice, like that of the Sedge-Warblers, whose song ‘Quick, shrill, or grating’ (l. 21) starts up at the end of the poem:

Their song that lacks all words, all melody  
All sweetness, almost, was dearer then to me  
Than sweetest voice that sings in tune sweet words.  
This was the best of May – the small brown birds  
Wisely reiterating endlessly  
What no man learnt yet, in or out of school.  
(l. 24-29)

The ‘small brown birds’ constitute a prosaic downgrading of Romanticism’s nightingales and skylarks, as unspectacular as Hardy’s withered ‘Darkling Thrush’; and yet they offer a model to which these lines show Thomas unable wholly to subscribe, or at least a model which is more complex than it first appears. Their song might lack ‘all words, all melody’, but it remains a ‘song’, and it only ‘almost’ lacks ‘All sweetness’: traces of its lyrical edge remain. The same might be said of Thomas’s verse. A line like ‘Than sweetest voice that sings in tune sweet words’ might raise the ghost of a former

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<sup>69</sup> Edna Longley, ‘Introduction’, *Annotated Collected Poems* 11.

<sup>70</sup> Longley ‘Introduction’, *Annotated Collected Poems* 24.

<sup>71</sup> Longley ‘Introduction’, *Annotated Collected Poems* 21.

<sup>72</sup> Longley ‘Notes’, *Annotated Collected Poems* 241.

style only to banish it, but the way the line sings in spite of itself suggests that lyrical beauty has a lingering allure. The closing lines, with their sandwiching of verbal ornamentation between unspectacular monosyllabic plainness, convey their message implicitly, reminding us that part of the distinctiveness of Thomas's voice lies in its range and flexibility (just as the sedge-warblers sing 'a song to match the heat | Of the strong sun, nor less the water's cool' (l. 21-2)). Thomas said of his 'three word line' that 'I thought it was right somehow, though there was nothing intentional about it'.<sup>73</sup> The comment is in tune with the untutored feel of those closing lines as a whole. They intuit a manner that can never be wholly 'learnt'.

## VI

As a prominent critic and reviewer, Thomas had more space to articulate his critical perspectives publicly than Clare and Hopkins. He did this most succinctly in his three reviews of Robert Frost's *North of Boston* in 1914, finding in Frost's 'revolutionary' and 'original' book many of the poetic qualities which, applied to a more personal brand of lyric, he would make his own. He inveigled against 'the "glory of words" which is the modern poet's embarrassing heritage', and admired Frost's freedom from 'the poetical words and forms that are the chief material of secondary poets': Frost had 'gone back, as Whitman and Wordsworth went back, through the paraphernalia of poetry into poetry again'.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Farjeon, *The Last Four Years* 146.

<sup>74</sup> The reviews are gathered in *Elected Friends: Robert Frost and Edward Thomas to One Another* ed. and introd. Matthew Spencer, foreword Michael Hoffman, afterword Christopher Ricks (New York: Other-Handsel, 2004) 16-25.

Thomas's invocation of Wordsworth there provides one context for locating these poets' achievements. Wordsworth's 'attempt at a poetry eschewing a "poetic" idiom for something closer to "the language of men" stands at the head of a vigorous modern tradition', as Seamus Perry has observed; and Clare, Hopkins, and Thomas are each a part of that tradition.<sup>75</sup> Yet Wordsworth's repudiation of a 'gaudy and inane phraseology' governed by 'pre-established codes of decision'<sup>76</sup> in the 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads* is a complicated as well as fecundating presence behind their work. As Derek Attridge says in a book whose title, *Peculiar Language*, is drawn from the terms of Wordsworth's essay, 'The enemy throughout the "Preface" is the idiosyncratic, the idiolectal, the arbitrary':<sup>77</sup>

...the Poet is chiefly distinguished from other men by a greater promptness to think and feel without immediate external excitement, and a greater power in expressing such thoughts and feelings as are produced in him in that manner. But these passions and thoughts and feelings are the general passions and thoughts and feelings of men. And with what are they connected? Undoubtedly with our moral sentiments and animal sensations, and with the causes which excite these; with the operations of the elements and the appearances of the visible universe; with storm and sun-shine, with the revolutions of the seasons, with cold and heat, with loss of friends and kindred, with injuries and resentments, gratitude and hope, with fear and sorrow. How, then, can his language differ in any material degree from that of all other men who feel vividly and see clearly? It might be *proved* that it is impossible. But supposing that this were not the case, the Poet might then be allowed to use a peculiar language, when expressing his feelings for his own

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<sup>75</sup> Seamus Perry, 'Literary Criticism and Theory', *Romanticism: An Oxford Guide*, ed. Nicholas Roe (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005) 598. Emerson R. Marks elucidates the contradictions and complexities of attitudes towards 'poetic diction' since the Renaissance in *Taming the Chaos: English Poetic Diction Theory since the Renaissance* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1998).

<sup>76</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Preface to *Lyrical Ballads, with Pastoral and Other Poems*', *The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008) 591.

<sup>77</sup> Derek Attridge, *Peculiar Language: Literature as Difference from the Renaissance to James Joyce* (London: Routledge, 2004) 72.

gratification, or that of men like himself. But Poets do not write for Poets alone, but for men. Unless therefore we are advocates for that admiration which depends upon ignorance, and that pleasure which arises from hearing what we do not understand, the Poet must descend from this supposed height, and, in order to excite rational sympathy, he must express himself as other men express themselves.<sup>78</sup>

Wordsworth's prose advances a moving appeal for the common humanity of the poet. Its passion is for the 'general' over the 'peculiar', 'linguistic authenticity' over 'linguistic distinctiveness', to take two touchstones of literary value that Attridge invokes.<sup>79</sup> But it is curiously blind to the possibility that 'distinctiveness' and 'authenticity' might co-exist; that individual 'men' might themselves speak a 'peculiar language'. Clare, Hopkins, and Thomas all explore that possibility. They find that a 'real' language is necessarily an idiosyncratic one.

For Wordsworth, 'a large portion of the language of every good poem can in no respect differ from that of good Prose'.<sup>80</sup> For Clare, Hopkins, and Thomas, by contrast, the model for poetic language is speech. Their poetry comes from the 'the living heart of a language', as Tom Paulin has said memorably of Clare: it has 'the in-dwellingness of spoken language'.<sup>81</sup> All three discover in the rhythms and energies of speech a medium flexible to the idiosyncrasies of the individual. Clare's grounding in the speaking voice is more innate than deliberate. As Tim Chilcott has described it, it is based on an understanding of poetry as related to the 'rhythms and intonations of the

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<sup>78</sup> Wordsworth, 'Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*' 607-8.

<sup>79</sup> Attridge, *Peculiar Language* 4.

<sup>80</sup> Wordsworth, 'Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*' 602.

<sup>81</sup> Tom Paulin, 'Strinkling Dropples: John Clare', *Writing to the Moment: Selected Critical Essays, 1980-1996* (London: Faber and Faber 1996) 168-9. For Paulin, Clare's 'uniqueness expresses a communal vitality' (168); the present thesis places emphasis on the way Clare's harnessing of spoken energies liberates a distinctively personal accent.



spoken language', which if, 'conservative', is so in a manner that is atavistic and disruptive.<sup>82</sup> It gives his poetry its 'local' force and characteristic raggedness. Hopkins' assimilation of the speaking voice is more sophisticated and programmatic. He employed sprung rhythm for its proximity to 'the native and natural rhythm of speech',<sup>83</sup> and on numerous occasions expostulated on speech as a raw material of poetry.<sup>84</sup> As Joshua King has said: 'To presume to have captured in poetry the native character of spoken rhythm is to presume to have captured at least some of the native character of its speaker'.<sup>85</sup> Hopkins' speech rhythms liberate his 'personal idiosyncrasy', as Eliot observed, and help to 'give the impression that his poetry has the necessary fidelity to *his* way of thinking and talking to himself'.<sup>86</sup> In Thomas, too, the effort to recreate the effects of the speaking voice is related to a desire to afford the language a more personal bearing. Although Thomas praised Frost on the grounds that his medium was 'common speech' [my emphasis], his own style reaches after a more recondite expressiveness: the task of the poet, he said, is to 'make words of such a spirit, and arrange them in such a manner, that they will do all that a speaker can do by innumerable gestures and their innumerable shades, by tone and pitch of voice, by speed, by pauses, by all that he is and all that he will become'.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Chilcott, *Critical Reading* 229.

<sup>83</sup> *Correspondence* 282.

<sup>84</sup> See, for example, Hopkins' notes on 'Poetry and Verse' (*Journals and Papers* 289-90) and his letter to his brother Everard of 5-8 Nov. 1885 (*Correspondence* 745-751).

<sup>85</sup> Joshua King, 'Hopkins' Affective Rhythm: Grace and Intention in Tension', *Victorian Poetry* 45.3 (2007): 209.

<sup>86</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'The Music of Poetry', *Selected Prose*, ed. John Hayward (Harmondsworth: Penguin in Association with Faber and Faber, 1953) 61.

<sup>87</sup> Thomas, *Walter Pater* in *Selected Prose* 159. Compare Thomas's criticism of Francis Thompson that 'he never seems to have got on terms, as it were, of married familiarity with words [...] in the written word the artist has to make up for all those advantages of tone and look and gesture and other unspoken speech, of which he is deprived, in solitude' (review of *Selected Poems of Francis Thompson*, *Morning Post*, 12 Nov. 1908, *Selected Prose* 48).

Part of the imaginative context of the 'Preface's endorsement of unadorned language is Wordsworth's effort to achieve an unadorned presentation of things: 'I have at all times endeavoured to look steadily at my subject', he promised.<sup>88</sup> That is an aim which unites Clare, Hopkins and Thomas, too, and they often 'look' with an intensity which goes beyond 'steadiness'. 'Clare's faculty of sheer vision is unique in English poetry', as John Middleton Murry said in 1920, 'far purer than Wordsworth's'.<sup>89</sup> Such a quality might seem distant from any reaction against a poetic diction, but actually, as Robert Graves and Laura Riding pointed out in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, the two are entwined: 'the poet is called upon again to remind people what the universe really looks and feels like, that is, what language means. If he does this consciously he must use language in a fresh way or even, if the poetical language has grown too stale and there are few pioneers before him, invent a new language.'<sup>90</sup>

The 'purity' of Clare's vision is often felt to be the distinguishing quality of his lyric art. Such mimetic fidelity is usually characterised as running counter to any concern with individuality. 'Self-effacement rather than self-expression is Clare's truest impulse before Nature; he has great humility', writes David Constantine, touching a recurrent note of praise.<sup>91</sup> But Clare's descriptive attentiveness is often a matter of self-definition, too. It entails his 'watermarking' his 'essential patterns of perception, voice and thought into the touch and texture of [his] lines', as Heaney would have it. As Stephanie Kuduk Weiner has recently argued, Clare's is a poetry in which 'the lyric subject is made vivid and immediate as he perceives, feels, and thinks about the

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<sup>88</sup> Wordsworth, 'Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*' 600.

<sup>89</sup> John Middleton Murry, 'Clare and Wordsworth', *Clare: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Mark Storey (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul) 360.

<sup>90</sup> Graves and Riding, *Modernist Poetry* 94-5.

<sup>91</sup> David Constantine, 'Outside Eden: John Clare's Descriptive Poetry', *An Infinite Complexity: Essays in Romanticism*, ed. J. R. Watson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP for the U of Durham, 1983) 189.

world.<sup>92</sup> Matthew Arnold said of Wordsworth that ‘It might seem that Nature not only gave him the matter for his poem, but wrote his poem for him’: ‘He has no style’.<sup>93</sup> But in Clare observation always bears the imprint of an unmistakable ‘style’. His vision is acute, but also acutely personal. The poetic effort ‘To find a flower I never knew before’, as he puts it in a slyly self-assured sonnet ‘To Wordsworth’ (l. 12),<sup>94</sup> goes hand in hand with the discovery of the language which articulates his unique perspective on that flower. Characteristically, his poems are ‘precise, not merely to a fact, but to an emotion’, as Middleton Murray put it.<sup>95</sup> Donald Davie remarked of the lines ‘I love to see the shaking twig | Dance till the shut of eve’ (l. 7-8), from ‘Autumn’,<sup>96</sup> that ‘even in a scrap like that one can isolate Clare’s peculiar purity, in the prosaic word “shaking”, so honestly and unfussily Clare’s name for what a twig does’.<sup>97</sup> What we get is not just fidelity to nature, but fidelity to Clare’s perceptions: ‘Clare’s *peculiar* purity’ [my emphasis].

Hopkins, in his response to Wordsworth, displayed a similar itch towards descriptive precision. One early fragment recasts the closing couplet of Wordsworth’s

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<sup>92</sup> Kuduk Weiner, *Clare’s Lyric* 3. Weiner’s book examines Clare’s representational techniques alongside a diverse trio of twentieth-century poets who owe a debt to those techniques: Arthur Symons, Edmund Blunden, and John Ashbery.

<sup>93</sup> Matthew Arnold, ‘Wordsworth’, *Selected Criticism of Matthew Arnold*, ed. and introd. Christopher Ricks (New York: Signet-New American Library, 1972) 380.

<sup>94</sup> *Later Poems* i 25. As Johanne Clare points out, there is no evidence that Clare read Wordsworth’s ‘Preface’, and he ‘does not appear to have known or understood what Wordsworth was attempting to do in *Lyrical Ballads*’ (*John Clare and the Bounds of Circumstance* (Quebec: McGill-Queens UP, 1987) 152. But poems such as ‘To Wordsworth’ and his ‘Sonnet after the manner of x x x x x’ (*Middle Period* ii. 7), a parody of ‘Composed upon Westminster Bridge’, demonstrate some feeling for the implications of Wordsworth’s project and achievement, at least as it is embodied in his poems.

<sup>95</sup> Middleton Murry, ‘Clare and Wordsworth’ 336.

<sup>96</sup> *Late Poems* i. 532.

<sup>97</sup> Donald Davie, ‘John Clare’, *Critical Heritage* 441. Mina Gorji takes issue with Davie’s designation of ‘shaking’ as an innately ‘prosaic’ word, pointing out its present in Shakespeare’s Sonnet 73 (‘those boughs which shake against the cold’ (l. 3)) and remarking that ‘it would be surprising to find a critic interpreting Shakespeare’s ‘shake’ in the way that Davie has read Clare’s “shaking”’ (‘Clare’s Awkwardness’, *Essays in Criticism* 54.3 (2004): 220).

'I wondered lonely as a cloud', 'And then my heart with pleasure fills | And dances with the Daffodils' (l. 17-18), around the same 'prosaic' verb as Clare:

– and on their brittle green quilts  
Shake the balanced daffodils.

Hopkins' verbal inventiveness walks a continuous tightrope between corroborating and creating new ways of seeing things. The daffodils are seen again with meticulous care, but it is also a care which reveals something of the meticulousness of Hopkins' own mode of perception. A nexus of naturalness and peculiarity everywhere animates the language of his poems. One might think, for example, of the opening line of 'As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame', where those opposed qualities match up to the line's compounding of an impression of casual noticing with scrupulous construction. There the distinctive alliterative 'in-scaping' that sees 'catch fire' and 'draw flame' emerge alliteratively out of 'kingfishers' and 'dragonflies', proves an instance of how Hopkins finds in the language a radar-like sensitivity to precisely what it is that things do. For all its inimitable brilliance, his line has a modesty which claims not so much to channel a unique way of seeing, as a way of seeing the surprising uniqueness of things.

And it is just this sort of effect that Peter Sacks is thinking about in Edward Thomas when he speaks of his poems as manifesting 'Not the swagger of 'make it new', but the humility, attentiveness, and open clarity of perception to "find" it so'.<sup>98</sup> 'It is extraordinary to find how close one is brought to the actual substance of the objects

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<sup>98</sup> Peter Sacks, 'Introduction', *Edward Thomas: Collected Poems and War Diary* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004) xii.

he raises before the mind's eye in his verse', as Hardy once remarked.<sup>99</sup> Such comments have in mind what C. H. Sisson called the 'extraordinary tact with external reality' that completes Thomas's 'workmanship'.<sup>100</sup> 'But these things also', with its firm sense of running obliquely to a main tradition, yields a quotable example:

But these things also are Spring's –  
On banks by the roadside the grass  
Long-dead that is greyer now  
Than all the Winter it was;

The shell of a little snail bleached  
In the grass; chip of flint, and mite  
Of chalk...

(l. 5-7)

'What is privileged here is the intimate, the small-scale, the humble: closing in tightly on "chip" and "mite", the poet raises the possibility that the marginalised and unspecified alternative is an altogether more expansive view of spring', says Jem Poster.<sup>101</sup> He catches the way Thomas's minute attentiveness sharpens into a quiet manifesto for a poetic manner at once modest and self-assured, whose careful rhythms bring an external world and a inimitable perceptiveness into mutually authenticating focus.

## VII

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<sup>99</sup> Thomas Hardy, letter to Helen Thomas, 2 May 1920, *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy, Vol. 8: Further Letters, 1861-1927*, ed. Richard Little Purdy and Michael Millgate (Oxford: Clarendon; New York: Oxford UP, 2012) 179.

<sup>100</sup> C. H. Sisson, *English Poetry, 1900-1950: An Assessment* (London: Methuen, 1981) 74.

<sup>101</sup> Jem Poster, 'I Cannot Tell: Edward Thomas's Uncertainties', *Branch-Lines: Edward Thomas and Contemporary Poetry*, ed. Guy Cuthbertson and Lucy Newlyn (London: Enitharmon P, 2008) 43.

In 1956 an unsigned review of the Tibbles' *John Clare: Life and Poetry* considered Clare alongside Hopkins as an 'intruder into the canon': 'he demands discernment, in a situation not already mapped out and signposted'.<sup>102</sup> The difficulties criticism has faced in categorising all three poets are testimony to their uniqueness. Their achievements resist and even challenge the accepted qualities and characteristics of their periods. Hopkins 'threatens by practice and precept and the exciting demonstration of poetic essences, a great deal of nineteenth-century verse', as the same reviewer put it; Clare, meanwhile, 'strips away certain current pretensions about verse-reading as an intellectual exercise and not a central experience'.<sup>103</sup>

And yet part of the appeal of all three is that they remain outsiders, troubling critical definition. When the three of them are enlisted into a broader tradition, as, for instance, by J. P. Ward in *The English Line: Poetry of the Unpoetic from Wordsworth to Larkin*, the grounds for inclusion are often so broad that it mutes their recalcitrance. Ward's sense of these writers as poets for whom 'words are enjoyed not for their own sakes [...] but as embodying the rhythm and shape that seem to manage and ease' the feelings they express, admittedly illuminates the qualities I am trying to pursue here.<sup>104</sup> But his book's emphasis, taking its cue from Wordsworth, is on their deployment of a 'simple and unadventurous language'.<sup>105</sup> There is little that speaks to the idiosyncrasies that animate their individual poetic personalities.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> 'Clare as an Intruder into the Canon', *John Clare: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Mark Storey (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973) 420-1.

<sup>103</sup> 'Clare as an Intruder', 416, 421.

<sup>104</sup> J. P. Ward, *The English Line: Poetry of the Unpoetic from Wordsworth to Larkin* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1991) 11.

<sup>105</sup> Ward, *English Line* 9

<sup>106</sup> For a study aligning Clare and Thomas (though not Hopkins) behind Wordsworth on the grounds of the perspectives they take towards nature see W. J. Keith, *The Poetry of Nature: Rural Perspectives in Poetry from Wordsworth to the Present* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1980).

Hopkins is included in Ward's study as an outlier, who, for all his verbal inventiveness, nonetheless 'never wholly renounced the inward pull of mind and emotion as starting points'.<sup>107</sup> One of the effects of placing him more centrally, and ranging Clare and Thomas alongside him, is to bring into focus the verbal originality and daring that animates the work of all three. If Clare and Thomas lack Hopkins' extravagance, their language is no less adventurous in its responsiveness to the 'inward pull of mind and emotion', its efforts to embody a uniquely personal bearing.

Critics are sometimes anxious that Clare's singularity is a critical imposition rather than an innate characteristic. His early reviewers get a bad press for caricaturing him as a 'peasant poet'; and at its most patronising the term denotes novelty rather than originality.<sup>108</sup> But the best of these reviewers were strikingly perceptive about the nature of Clare's achievement: 'when his attention is attracted by objects which he cannot define by ordinary language, he invents new forms of expression, as singular as they are vigorous and appropriate',<sup>109</sup> one unsigned article commented in 1820. John Taylor praised Clare in the *London Magazine* for not 'affecting a language', and for 'compos[ing] his phraseology for himself: 'words must be [...] put into combinations which have been unknown before, if the *things* which he

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<sup>107</sup> Ward, *English Line* 6.

<sup>108</sup> As David Constantine points out, the 'peasant poet' was fine as a vague idea, but less acceptable once its realities came into sharper focus: 'The peasant poet could not be taken neat. There was a certain charm in rusticity, which palled somewhat if the poet could not spell, had no notion of grammar, overdid the dialect words, and dealt with country matters' ('Out of Eden' 181), as Roger Sales' puts it, in the fullest class-based account of Clare's career, 'It evoked images of sturdiness and independence, but crucially within an overall acceptance of a deferential society' (*John Clare: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2002) 26. A more helpful label, acknowledging the brand of unorthodox intelligence and education Clare brings to his writing, is 'self-taught' (see John Goodridge 'Introduction', *The Independent Spirit: John Clare and the Self-Taught Tradition*, ed. Goodridge (Helpston: John Clare Society and the Margaret Grainger Memorial Trust, 1994) 15-16.)

<sup>109</sup> Unsigned review of *Poems Descriptive* in *Critical Heritage* 68.

is solicitous to express, have not been discovered and expressed before.’<sup>110</sup> Clare’s best critics have always found ways of dealing with him as a poet who makes himself, in Johanne Clare’s phrase, ‘his own authority’.<sup>111</sup> As Mark Storey has acknowledged, ‘Some of the most useful work on Clare has been built on the premise that, whatever his literary debts and allegiances, Clare is a poet *sui generis*, and that to demonstrate this it is necessary to look at Clare’s work with the kind of detailed intense gaze that he himself proffered to the world in which he lived.’<sup>112</sup>

The effect of placing Clare into a literary tradition is often to emphasise his independence from it. The most influential account of his poetry, John Barrell’s *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place 1730-1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare*, holds him up as a pastoral poet emerging out of the eighteenth-century topographical tradition of Thomson and Cowper, only to bring literary convention hard up against lived experience (‘Clare marks the end of pastoral poetry, in the very shock of its collision with actual experience’,<sup>113</sup> as Raymond Williams remarked, stirringly). Barrell’s Clare is distinguished by his discovery of new modes of expression for a selfhood conceived ‘as something *constituted* by one’s different perceptions rather than as *transcendent* and so unchanged by them’,<sup>114</sup> as he puts it in a related study.

Tim Chilcott describes ‘the question of its historical placing within the traditions of English poetry’ as ‘the broadest and most complex of the debates

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<sup>110</sup> John Taylor, from ‘A Visit to John Clare’, *Critical Heritage* 161.

<sup>111</sup> Johanne Clare, *Bounds of Circumstance* 59.

<sup>112</sup> Mark Storey, ‘Clare and the Critics’, *John Clare in Context*, ed. Geoffrey Summerfield, Hugh Haughton, and Adam Phillips (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994) 47. Storey’s helpful survey of Clare criticism might now be supplemented by Greg Crossan’s ‘Thirty Years of the *John Clare Society Journal*: A Retrospective Survey’, *JCSJ* 31 (2012): 5-22.

<sup>113</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973) 141.

<sup>114</sup> John Barrell, *Poetry, Language, and Politics* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1998) 15.



generated by Clare's work'.<sup>115</sup> Barrell's book has influenced a long line of criticism cherishing Clare as a corrective to the perceived egotistical excesses of Romanticism, piqued no doubt by Harold Bloom's judgement in *The Visionary Company* that 'Clare does not [just] imitate Wordsworth and Coleridge. He either borrows directly, or else works on exactly parallel lines, intersected by the huge Wordsworthian shadow'. That might well seem to fall short of doing Clare justice, but Bloom is nevertheless concerned with holding up Clare as 'the most genuine of poets',<sup>116</sup> and his metaphor is careful: 'parallel lines' acknowledges the independence of Clare's discoveries, even as it suggests they were overshadowed.

Bloom's consideration of Clare alongside such apparently contrasting poets as Beddoes and Darley foreshadows recent attention to Clare as a 'third generation' Romantic poet. The grouping mirrors that made by the present study in that, as Michael Bradshaw points out, 'one of the defining features that does make [it] a coherent grouping is the fact that it is beset by problems of classification.'<sup>117</sup> The term is useful in as much as it identifies a poetry which is neither simply a footnote to the main event, nor absolutely a corrective to high Romanticism. It suggests a cluster of poets whose independence is complexly interrelated with their immediate predecessors: both feeding off them and calling them into question from the margins. These poets 'sometimes convey a sense of watching a modern canon take shape and

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<sup>115</sup> Chilcott, *Critical Study* 236

<sup>116</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962) 434. For a rejection of Bloom's efforts to associate Clare with other Romantic period poets see James McKusick, 'Beyond the *Visionary Company*: John Clare's Resistance to Romanticism', *John Clare in Context* 221-237; for an account more open to the ambivalence of Clare's engagement with Romantic poets, and especially Clare, see P. M. S. Dawson 'Of Birds and Bards: Clare and His Romantic Contemporaries' *John Clare: New Approaches*, ed. John Goodridge and Simon Kövesi (Helpston: John Clare Society, 2002) 149-58.

<sup>117</sup> Michael Bradshaw, 'Third Generation Romantic Poetry: Beddoes, Clare, Darley, Hemans, Landon', *The Cambridge History of English Poetry*, ed. Michael O'Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010) 543.

being excluded from it, a sense of awkwardness and failure to fit in', as Bradshaw says.<sup>118</sup> Clare's poetry responds to and cultivates such awkwardness, at heart resisting critical appropriation in a manner that has been best articulated by Richard Cronin:

It is not possible to understand Clare as an English poet amongst other English poets, distinguished from them only by a knowledge of the English countryside that they could not match, and neither is it possible to understand him as a villager amongst his fellow villagers, remarkable amongst his neighbours only in that he, unlike them, was able to articulate their common experience. Clare on occasion strikes each of these attitudes [...] But his true place, and the place from which he writes his most compelling poems, is neither of these, but an uncomfortable position in which familiarity and estrangement coincide.<sup>119</sup>

Cronin's feeling for Clare's outsidership even inflects recent accounts of Clare's sociability and gregariousness by John Goodridge and Mina Gorji. As Goodridge acknowledges in his study of Clare's engagement in various kinds of 'community', 'the "loner" Clare is never far away'.<sup>120</sup> Nor need Gorji's contention that 'Clare did not write his best verse from a position of literary isolation but drew on and contributed to a rich communal culture of allusion',<sup>121</sup> diminish one's feeling for his independence, since Clare's subtle and eclectic allusiveness is one way in which he manifests that independence.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Bradshaw, 'Third Generation' 543.

<sup>119</sup> Richard Cronin, 'In Place and Out of Place: Clare in *The Midsummer Cushion*', *New Approaches* 145-6.

<sup>120</sup> John Goodridge, *John Clare and Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013) 6.

<sup>121</sup> Mina Gorji, *John Clare and the Place of Poetry* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2008) 6.

<sup>122</sup> For more on the quirks of Clare's allusive practice see Mina Gorji, 'Clare and Community: The "Old Poets" and the *London Magazine*', *New Approaches* 47-63.

When readers began to come to terms with Hopkins' poetry, some years after its publication by Robert Bridges in 1918, it was as an art whose oddness was at one with its originality, and which, amongst late Victorian poetry, had been ahead of its time. In 1932, F. R. Leavis's *New Bearings in English Poetry*, ranging Hopkins alongside Pound and Eliot as a pioneer of a new eloquence, fastened on to an effort 'to get out of his words as much as possible unhampered by the rules of grammar, syntax, and common usage': 'He is now felt to be a contemporary, and his influence is likely to be great'.<sup>123</sup>

After the initial excitements, Hopkins has been allowed to settle back into the Victorian era, partly, perhaps, on account of his poetry's 'influence' being more difficult to accommodate than Leavis anticipated: Hopkins 'is not nearly so much a poet of our time as the accidents of his publication and the innovations of his metric have led us to suppose. His innovations certainly were good, but like the mind of their author, they operate only within a narrow range, and are easily imitated though not adaptable for many purposes', Eliot averred in *After Strange Gods*.<sup>124</sup> He is 'extremely idiosyncratic and cannot readily be adapted to one's own sensibility. When it's attempted, what you end up with is simply Hopkins-and-water',<sup>125</sup> Auden said. It is not so much that Hopkins was not an influence (as for the poets of the 1930s he patently was), but that his influence of a troublesome sort, since it is so 'idiosyncratic', it is difficult to disguise.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> F. R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry: A Study of the Contemporary Situation* 1932 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979) 121, 142.

<sup>124</sup> T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1934) 47.

<sup>125</sup> W. H. Auden, 'The Art of Poetry, No. 17', interview with the *Paris Review*, online <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3970/the-art-of-poetry-no-17-w-h-auden>> last accessed 12<sup>th</sup> June 2014.

<sup>126</sup> W. H. Gardner provides an absorbing survey of Hopkins' influences on modern poetry in *A Study of Poetic Idiosyncrasy in Relation to Poetic Tradition* (London: M. Secker and Warburg, 1944) 245-281.

Hopkins' re-absorption as a Victorian poet from the middle of the twentieth century went hand-in-hand with an acknowledgement that eccentricity was not so alien to the Victorian imagination after all. '[E]ccentricity, individualism in this sense, was a nineteenth century and especially British habit', said Arthur Mizener in an essay on 'Victorian Hopkins' in 1945;<sup>127</sup> Wendell Stacy Johnson argued in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Poet as Victorian* that 'Hopkins' "Victorianism" is hard to define [...] not only because he is deliberately peculiar, but also because he springs from an age of peculiar writers, an age full of variety and contradiction',<sup>128</sup> Alison Sulloway, in *Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Victorian Temper*, fleshed out the ways that, 'Highly idiosyncratic as it is, [Hopkins' manner] transcends private idiosyncrasy to speak of Victorian concerns.'<sup>129</sup> 'For the past couple of decades critics have emphasised the importance of historicising Hopkins, of relocating him among the Victorian writers whom he read, and in the religious, political, and social contexts in which he lived', as Alice Jenkins puts it, surveying the scene.<sup>130</sup>

So accommodating Hopkins amongst the varied achievements of Victorian poetry need not diminish our sense of his oddness. There is still something to sympathise with in Cecil Day Lewis's claim that 'Hopkins has no affinities [...his] voice seems to come out of the blue, reminding us of nothing we have heard before.'<sup>131</sup> And the best Hopkins criticism remains attuned to his sense, at once troubled and

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<sup>127</sup> Arthur Mizener, 'Victorian Hopkins', *Gerard Manley Hopkins*, The Kenyon Critics (London: Dennis Dobson, 1949) 99.

<sup>128</sup> Wendell Stacy Johnson, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Poet as Victorian* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1968) 6.

<sup>129</sup> Alison G. Sulloway, *Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Victorian Temper* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972) 5.

<sup>130</sup> Alice Jenkins, *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Sourcebook*, ed. Alice Jenkins (London: Routledge, 2006) 7. Titles such as Catherine Phillips *Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Victorian Visual World* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007) and John Parham, *Green Man Hopkins: Poetry and the Victorian Ecological Imagination* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010) testify to the developing understanding of Hopkins' engagement with the defining concerns of his epoch.

<sup>131</sup> Cecil Day Lewis, *A Hope for Poetry* cited in Jenkins, *Sourcebook* 57.

ingrained, of intractability and outsidership. Hopkins remains ‘modern’ in the sense that he was, in Stephen Spender’s words, ‘forced by the intensity of his lived experience and the pressure of surrounding life to invent new forms and a highly individual idiom.’<sup>132</sup> His language, as James Milroy has shown, is obstinately ‘original and has its own selfhood’.<sup>133</sup> It corresponds, in Helen Vendler’s words, to ‘his most fundamental intuition of the beautiful – that it was dangerous, irregular’.<sup>134</sup> As Vendler said in a recent review: ‘he belongs among the poets of extremes’.<sup>135</sup>

It is tempting to say that criticism has struggled to find a way of grasping Thomas’s achievement as a poet, too. One could cite Thomas’s uneasy fit as a ‘war poet’ (when his best ‘war’ poems view the war out of the corner of their eye),<sup>136</sup> or his resistance to accommodation within any attempt to divide early twentieth-century poets into a conflict between the Georgians or Modernists. But actually, the contention would hold increasingly little water. First, because recent criticism has enriched our sense of the complications of that period, and the degree of interaction between its different poetic and critical factions.<sup>137</sup> And secondly, because the sense that Thomas provides a

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<sup>132</sup> Stephen Spender, *The Struggle of the Modern* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1963) 98.

<sup>133</sup> James Milroy, *The Language of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1977) 6.

<sup>134</sup> Helen Vendler, *The Breaking of Style: Hopkins, Heaney, Graham*, Richard Ellmann Lectures in Modern Literature (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995) 9.

<sup>135</sup> Helen Vender, ‘I Have Not Lived Up To It’, rev. *The Complete Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Volumes I-II: Correspondence*, ed. R. K. R. Thornton and Catherine Phillips, *LRB*, 3 April 2014, online <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n07/helen-vendler/i-have-not-lived-up-to-it>> accessed 25<sup>th</sup> May 2014.

<sup>136</sup> For a good account of Thomas as a ‘war poet’ in this respect see Andrew Motion, *The Poetry of Edward Thomas* (London: Hogarth P, 1991) 91-137.

<sup>137</sup> C. K. Stead argues for Thomas’s poems as ‘excellent examples of the common direction of what was best in the original Georgian movement’, and attributes critics’ reluctance to apply the term to Thomas to the fact that ‘any critic writing of Thomas at some length wants the poems treated with respect, and knows that for years ‘Georgian’ has been a term of abuse’ (*The New Poetic: Yeats to Eliot* (London: Hutchinson U Library, 1964) 101). But ‘Georgian’ hasn’t entirely shaken off its derogatory edge, and its significance as a label is hazy, anyway: ‘it started as a crusade to popularise poetry by opposing the sentimentality, rhetoric, and facile patriotism of late Victorian and Edwardian poetry with aggressive realism and directness; but it ended in the 1920s as the epitome, in many influential minds, of

(particularly English) ‘alternative’ to either of the two usual groupings – that he somehow eludes critical labels – has been one of the causes of his success. As Peter McDonald suggested, rightly, though a touch surprisingly, in a review of Edna Longley’s *Annotated Collected Poems*: ‘Critically speaking, few British poets enjoyed a better twentieth century than Thomas’.<sup>138</sup>

Whilst that comment might not say quite so much as it first seems (it is easy to think of poets of arguably greater standing who have not been quite so fortunate ‘critically speaking’: Auden, for instance, whose career has been interpreted as one long falling off; or Larkin, whose achievement was soured for some towards the end of the century by the revelations about his life), it remains broadly true. F. R. Leavis enlisted Thomas in *New Bearings* as ‘a very original poet who devoted great technical subtlety to the expression of a distinctively modern sensibility’;<sup>139</sup> and the torch has been carried most energetically since the second half of the century by Edna Longley, through her contention, elaborated throughout a series of essays and editions, as to Thomas’s importance ‘to the history of twentieth-century poetry in English because he developed specific qualities of English poetry itself’.<sup>140</sup>

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reactionary and pallidly agreeable retreat’, as Richard Hoffpauir says, and ‘this has deflected and obscured the reputations of people like Hardy and Thomas’ (*The Art of Restraint: English Poetry from Hardy to Larkin* (Newark, DE: U of Delaware P; London: Associated University Presses, 1991) 60). Peter Howarth has established Thomas’s ambivalence towards the movement, and the complexity of the early twentieth-century poetic landscape as a whole (*British Poetry in the Age of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005)). Matthew Hollis also offers a colourful portrait of Thomas’s engagement with his literary contemporaries in *Now All Roads Lead to France: The Last Years of Edward Thomas* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011).

<sup>138</sup> Peter McDonald, ‘Into the Unknown’, rev. of *Edward Thomas: The Annotated Collected Poems*, ed. Edna Longley, *TLS*, 12 Nov 2008, online < [http://www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/reviews/literature\\_and\\_poetry/article711400.ece](http://www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/reviews/literature_and_poetry/article711400.ece)>, accessed 25<sup>th</sup> May 2014.

<sup>139</sup> Leavis, *New Bearings* 55.

<sup>140</sup> Edna Longley, ‘Worn New: Edward Thomas and English Tradition’, *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1986) 47.

The important word in that sentence is ‘developed’. It insists on Thomas as, in Longley’s neat phrase, a ‘radical continuator’,<sup>141</sup> a poet who, in Richard Hoffpauir’s words, ‘found ways of being modern without ceasing to be traditional’.<sup>142</sup> Emphasis on Thomas’s originality and strangeness is necessary as a way of guarding against what might otherwise lapse into a celebration of cosiness. The dubiousness underlying Andrew Webb’s remark that “Edward Thomas” has become shorthand for the formally traditional poetry of a continuing English line, one that is directly opposed to modernism’ is representative.<sup>143</sup> Webb himself has sought to re-affirm Thomas’s strangeness by emphasising his Welsh heritage. This promises much in its endeavour to apply Thomas’s description of Irish writing as ‘in a real sense foreign, though written in English’ to his own work, and pays dividends in enriching our sense of how ‘Thomas’s consciousness of a Welsh identity’<sup>144</sup> informed his prose writing; but when it comes to the poems themselves the approach falls short, amounting to little more than an (albeit intriguing) catalogue of ‘Thomas’s adaption of Welsh-language forms and metres into his English-language poetry’.<sup>145</sup>

More suggestive, and germane to the interests of this study, is McDonald’s remark in his review about Thomas’s ‘own sense of his oddness’: ‘the ways in which his writing was only imperfectly acceptable to his time, is somewhat played down, as though it were a kink to be ironed out now by posterity’s more just appreciation’, he says of Longley’s approach.<sup>146</sup> In trying to arrive at a reading of Thomas’s poems which

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<sup>141</sup> Longley, ‘Worn New’ 47.

<sup>142</sup> Richard Hoffpauir, *The Art of Restraint: English Poetry from Hardy to Larkin* (Newark: U of Delaware P; London: Associated UPs, 1991) 26.

<sup>143</sup> Andrew Webb, *Edward Thomas and World Literary Studies: Wales, Anglocentrism and English Literature* (Cardiff: U of Wales P, 2013) 72.

<sup>144</sup> Webb, *World Literary Studies* 25.

<sup>145</sup> Webb, *World Literary Studies* 123.

<sup>146</sup> McDonald, ‘Into the Unknown’.

teases out something of what that might mean, this thesis orientates itself according to J. P. Ward's characterisation of Thomas's voice as 'solitary not only in the loneliness which so sadly tenses against the sociality implied by the voiced language, but solitary also in the singleness of voice of the result'.<sup>147</sup> It regards Thomas as occupying the kind of position that Andrew Motion imagines for him in his darkly tantalising 'Imaginary Life' of the poet. There Motion speculates as to the trajectory of Thomas's life and career had he not died in the battle of Arras, seeing him writing into the 1920s in a voice 'plain as familiar speech, but compressed and nervous to a degree which marks a distinct break with his Georgian origins.'<sup>148</sup> Had he lived, Motion suggests, we would have been able to see him more clearly as an 'English modernist'.<sup>149</sup> The phrase has a frisson of paradox, and answers to the spirit of innovation that persists through all three of these poets and stretches the ingenuity of critical terminology.

## VIII

Clare, Hopkins, and Thomas share a spirit of creative antagonism to the prevailing principles and practice of their periods. Their individual and poetic individuality is at one. They articulate a recurrent counter-voice in English poetry of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, centred upon an exploration of the connections between lyric voice and the uniqueness of the individual self.

That might sound a surprising stance to take given how readily words like 'originality' and 'individuality' leap to mind as terms expressive of fundamental

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<sup>147</sup> J. P. Ward, 'The Solitary Note: Edward Thomas and Modernism', *The Art of Edward Thomas*, ed. and introd. Jonathan Barker (Bridgend: Poetry Wales P, 1987) 60.

<sup>148</sup> Andrew Motion, 'Edward Thomas: An Imaginary Life', *Ways of Life: On Places, Painters, and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008) 117.

<sup>149</sup> Motion, 'Imaginary Life', 117.



Romantic ideals. Thomas Carlyle spoke in 1827 of an age fascinated by ‘discovering and delineating the peculiar nature of the poet from his poetry’.<sup>150</sup> And M. H. Abrams has shown a concern for literature as ‘a revelation of what Carlyle called the “individual specialities” of the author’ to be a specifically Romantic, and, by extension, nineteenth-century pre-occupation.<sup>151</sup> As Richard Cronin has argued: ‘Amongst the tenets inherited by the Victorian poets from their Romantic predecessors was the very high value attached to originality and the notion that style should express the individuality of the poet’.<sup>152</sup>

Yet even as the tenet was ‘inherited’ it was challenged. Robert MacFarlane has noticed how ‘Victorian writers and thinkers began to speak out against the overvaluation of originality as difference, and against the excessive animus which existed towards literary resemblance’.<sup>153</sup> Partly in reaction against a caricatured Romantic emphasis on individuality as disdainful of influence or tradition, the distinctiveness of a work of art came to be viewed as less essential to its success.

Arthur Hallam’s 1831 review of Tennyson’s *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* offers one influential instance. Though instrumental in setting the terms of admiration for Tennyson’s poems, it still found space to complain about ‘a painful and impotent straining after originality – an aversion from the strong simplicity of nature and truth’, shaped by ‘the return of the mind upon itself, and the habit of seeking relief in

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<sup>150</sup> Thomas Carlyle, ‘State of German Literature’, *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* 5 vols., ed. H. D. Traill (New York: AMS Press, 1969) i. 51.

<sup>151</sup> M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1953) 226-7.

<sup>152</sup> Richard Cronin, ‘Victorian Poetry: An Overview’, *The Cambridge History of English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010) 576.

<sup>153</sup> Robert MacFarlane, *Original Copy: Plagiarism and Originality in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007) 7.

idiosyncrasies rather than community of interest'.<sup>154</sup> This is helpful as a barometer of a critical attitude, but from our perspective it feels an odd description of Tennyson, whose poems might rather seem to embody the qualities these poets define themselves against. As Poet Laureate, Tennyson 'became the public voice of English poetry, and part of a literary tradition reaching back beyond John Dryden', as Marion Sherwood says.<sup>155</sup> *In Memoriam*, though troubled by the degree to which the experience it speaks of is 'common' ('That loss is common would not make | My own less bitter, rather more: | Too common!' (VI. l. 5-6))<sup>156</sup> often gains its power through their ability to move towards the expression of general truths from private suffering ('Tis better to have loved and lost | Than never to have loved at all' (XXVII. l. 15-16)), or to test such truths and consolations against private experience. Though the poem's 'public voice' maintains heartbreaking contact with private experience, its power to move often depends on the feeling that it is reaching through Tennyson's own sorrow to access a more general truth. "Tennyson found in the depth of his own suffering a way of reaching into anxieties that defined an epoch", as Seamus Perry puts it.<sup>157</sup>

Matthew Arnold's critical ideals appealed beyond his 'epoch' to 'the great primary human affections: to those elementary feelings which subsist permanently in the race.'<sup>158</sup> He is thinking there of Wordsworth, and of his poetry's pursuit of

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<sup>154</sup> Arthur Henry Hallam, 'On Some of the Characteristics of Modern Poetry', *Victorian Scrutinies: Reviews of Poetry 1830-1870*, ed. Isobel Armstrong (London: Athlone P, 1972) 91.

<sup>155</sup> Marion Sherwood, *Tennyson and the Fabrication of Englishness* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 81. Compare Tom Paulin's split vision of an English poetry divided between the language of the people and the language of the court (and including Clare, Hopkins, and Thomas amongst the latter strand) in *Thomas Hardy: The Poetry of Perception* (London: Macmillan 1975) 3-11.

<sup>156</sup> Alfred Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam, Tennyson: A Selected Edition*, ed. Christopher Ricks (Harlow: Longman, 2007) 349.

<sup>157</sup> Seamus Perry, 'Laureate of Melancholy', rev. of John Batchelor, *Tennyson: To Strive, to Seek, to Find*, *Literary Review* Dec. 2012 <[http://www.literaryreview.co.uk/perry\\_12\\_12.php](http://www.literaryreview.co.uk/perry_12_12.php)> accessed 25<sup>th</sup> May 2014.

<sup>158</sup> Matthew Arnold, 'Preface to First Edition of *Poems 1853*', *Selected Criticism of Matthew Arnold*, ed. and introd. Christopher Ricks (New York: Signet, 1972) 29.

Wordsworthian ideals that helps it to bring into relief by contrast the qualities shared by the poets in this study. Although, as Lionel Trilling observed, ‘the grave cadence of the *speaking voice*’ runs through his work, that voice in Arnold is characterised by ‘the urbanity of the ancient poets [...] which assumes the presence of a hearer and addresses him – with a resultant intimacy and simplicity of manner that is often very moving’.<sup>159</sup> It is a speaking voice shorn of its personal quirks and idiosyncrasies. ‘Urbanity’ is at the opposite pole to the ‘note of provinciality’ which Arnold objected to in English literary culture; and which, in different respects, makes for a suggestive description of all three poets considered here: ‘The provincial spirit’, he argued in ‘The Literary Influence of Academies’ ‘gives one idea too much prominence at the expense of others’, it sponsors ‘the *eruptive* and *aggressive* manner in literature [...] The provincial tone is more violent, and seems to aim rather at an effect upon the blood and senses than upon the spirit and intellect’.<sup>160</sup>

‘Arnold is wrong about provincialism, if he means anything more than a provincialism of style and manner in exposition’, said Thomas Hardy: ‘A certain provincialism of feeling is invaluable. It is of the essence of individuality, and is largely made up of that crude enthusiasm without which no great thoughts are thought, no great deeds done.’<sup>161</sup> Hardy’s self-penned *Life* (whose procedures are on their own testament to his peculiarity) is a treasure trove of critical aperçus which might seem to bring him squarely within the horizon of this study’s concerns:

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<sup>159</sup> Lionel Trilling, *Matthew Arnold 1939* (London: Unwin U Books, 1963) 144.

<sup>160</sup> Matthew Arnold, ‘The Literary Influence of Academies’, *Selected Criticism* 83.

<sup>161</sup> Thomas Hardy, *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Michael Millgate (London: Macmillan, 1984) 150.

The whole secret of a living style and the difference between it and a dead style, lies in not having too much style – being, in fact, a little careless, or rather seeming to be, here and there.

My art is to intensify the expression of things, as is done by Crivelli, Bellini, etc., so that the heart and inner meaning is made vividly visible.

There is no new poetry; but the new poet – if he carry the flame on further (and if not he is no new poet) – comes with a new note. And that new note it is that troubles the critical waters'.<sup>162</sup>

And it was Hardy, too, whom Philip Larkin praised in terms which might seem to pinpoint the qualities being explored in these three poets: 'When I came to Hardy it was with the sense of relief that I didn't have to try and jack myself up to a concept of poetry that lay outside my own life-this is perhaps what I felt Yeats was trying to make me do. One could simply relapse back into one's own life and write from it. Hardy taught one to feel rather than to write – of course one has to use one's own language and one's own jargon and one's own situations – and he taught one as well to have confidence in what one felt.'<sup>163</sup>

But Hardy is a deliberate as well as significant omission. The quality of his idiosyncrasy is less 'personal' than it is in my chosen poets. It is more a confection of his artistry than something that artistry pursues. Donald Davie once arbitrated over a distinction between Hardy and Lawrence in a note on poetic 'Sincerity', which later became part of *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry*:

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<sup>162</sup> Hardy, *Life and Work* 108, 183, 324.

<sup>163</sup> Philip Larkin, 'The Poetry of Hardy', *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces, 1955-1982* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983) 175-6.

What he [Kenneth Rexroth] is saying to start with is simply and bluntly that Lawrence is always sincere, whereas Hardy often isn't; and Lawrence is sincere by virtue of the fact that the 'I' in his poems is always directly and immediately himself. In other words, the poetry we are asked to see as greater than Hardy's kind of poetry, though it is called 'prophetic' poetry, is more accurately described as confessional poetry. Confessional poetry, of its nature and necessarily, is superior to dramatic or histrionic poetry; a poem in which the 'I' stands immediately and unequivocally for the author is essentially and necessarily superior to a poem in which the 'I' stands not for the author but for a persona of the author's – this is what Rexroth asks us to believe.<sup>164</sup>

One might demur at Davie's assumption that Hardy always appears in a 'persona';<sup>165</sup> and nor does 'confessional' feel an entirely helpful label for the poets here in question, when the pressure of individual experience upon their voice is often submerged and implicit. But the feeling of Hardy's idiosyncrasy as something crafted, where the idiosyncrasy of these poets answers to something more innate, does make for a valuable point of contrast; and a language in which one can be 'directly and immediately himself', would make for a good description of what the poets in this study are after.

Even when 'pointedly individualised', says Richard Cronin, the voice of Victorian poetry appears to be something 'forged rather than found':<sup>166</sup> 'in almost all Victorian poems the voice is dramatic even as it dramatises [...] the voice of the poet himself'.<sup>167</sup> That is not the sense one gets when reading Clare, Hopkins, or Thomas. In their best poems, their craft follows rather than forges their individuality; they give the

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<sup>164</sup> Donald Davie, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973) 135.

<sup>165</sup> Though Hardy did remark in his preface to *Time's Laughingstocks and Other Verses* that his poems 'are to be regarded, in the main, as dramatic monologues by different characters' *The Complete Poetical Works of Thomas Hardy*, 5 vols., ed. Samuel Hynes (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1982-95) i. 235.

<sup>166</sup> Cronin, 'Victorian Poetry' 577.

<sup>167</sup> Cronin, 'Victorian Poetry' 583.

sense of the artist working on material from the inside, rather than from without. It is 'poetry as voice rather than artifice' as J. P. Ward has said of Thomas;<sup>168</sup> and that, in some of its manifestations, is what this thesis is going to pursue.

## IX

The individual chapters attend to the three writers as poets concerned, in Heaney's words, with 'the watermarking of [their] essential patterns of perception, voice and thought into the touch and texture of [their] lines'. Their language is shaped by the pressure of an acutely-felt individuality. They are driven, as W. H. Gardner remarked of Hopkins, 'to create their own medium of expression'.

Perhaps the most immediately striking aspect of Clare's poetry is its abundance, and there is an attractive case, best articulated by Michael Bradshaw, that his art creates its most forceful impression as a cumulative entity: 'Clare's body of work must be interpreted as a continuous whole: a coherent interpretation of Clare's prolific output, with its profusion of generic voices and detailed lyrical observation, must engage with the central theme of endangered and fractured identity, a capacity for self-formation in language that is intimately connected to the contours of the landscape it inhabits.'<sup>169</sup> Rather than trying to locate Clare's voice as something stable, then, then, the chapters characterise its distinctive variations and focus and intensity, its instability and profuse energy. 'The distinctiveness of his language first makes its impact in a form which seems to be merely visual, but is actually of structural

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<sup>168</sup> J. P. Ward, 'Solitary Note', 52-3.

<sup>169</sup> Bradshaw, 'Third Generation' 552.

significance',<sup>170</sup> says Barbara Strang, with Clare's absence of punctuation in mind. The first chapter explores some of the characteristic modes of expression that this 'structural significance' helps to liberate. It attempts to characterise Clare's trust in a seemingly spontaneous, improvisational, brio as a means of uncovering new and unique angles of expression. Chapter 2 focuses on the more controlled aspects of Clare's experimentalism, attending to his poems' twinning of actual and literary discovery. It argues that Clare's 'descriptive' writing is at its most personal and engaging when alive with a sense of its own inventiveness, striving to uncover a language that traces an identity imprinted with the 'contours of the landscape it inhabits'. By focusing on Clare's distinctive handling of language, these first two chapters seek to adjust the perception advanced by an anonymous reviewer in 1956 that 'Clare hardly reshapes his language to a characteristic degree; he hardly produces a Clare language'.<sup>171</sup> Chapter 3 considers Clare's individual handling of more communal modes. It shifts attention more explicitly the 'intensely personal' quality of Clare's writing, its 'direct response to the anguish of living' which, in Mark Storey's words, is accomplished with an 'intimacy [...] rarely found in the work of other poets of the period'.<sup>172</sup> It contemplates the strangeness of voice that arises from the fact that the texture of Clare's most 'personal' poems is often surprisingly impersonal: he places a disarming trust in cliché and convention, and the result is a poetry whose distinctive tenor resides in its odd marriages of personal fervour and literary archetype.

Hopkins insisted on 'originality' as a 'condition of poetic genius'; but his poetry is alert to originality's costs as well as its virtues. His strategies are more intricate and

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<sup>170</sup> Strang, 'Clare's Language' 160.

<sup>171</sup> 'Intruder in the Canon', *Critical Heritage* 419.

<sup>172</sup> Storey, *Critical Introduction* 5.

careful than Clare's, but also more wary of the forms of complacency poetic individuality might assume. Chapter 4 starts off from Hopkins' strictures about 'Parnassian', taking its cue in particular from his seemingly paradoxical remark about 'the effort of inspiration': at its best, Hopkins' style challenges Cronin's sense of the individual voice of Victorian poetry as something dramatically performed; it appears at once highly wrought and spontaneous, cultivating surprising changes of direction and endlessly resisting classification. Hopkins turned to Swinburne for an example of the self-replicating poetic dialect he sought to avoid: 'Swinburne's genius is astonishing, but it will, I think, only do one thing'; 'It expresses passion, but not feeling, much less character'.<sup>173</sup> 'Feeling' and 'character' are integral to my concerns in Chapter 5, which extends an emphasis on Hopkins' blend of craft and spontaneity, and the subtlety and fervour of his expression of 'feeling', into a consideration of the rich presence his poetry affords to the heart. Barely a Hopkins poem goes by without mention of the heart, and its recurrence emphasises his simultaneous collaboration with and resistance to poetic tradition. It bears testimony to his desire, shared with Clare, that his poetry should speak with directness and intimacy. Chapter 6 attends to the ways in which Hopkins' nerviness about the potentially alienating qualities of an individual style feeds back into the distinctive tenor of his voice as it negotiates the competing urges to individualise and communicate.

It is a missed opportunity of literary history that Thomas never got to read Hopkins, since he would surely have found stimulus in his demonstration of the possibilities inherent in developing the rhythms of the speaking voice, and much to identify with in a poet who shaped his voice through an initial absorption in, then

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<sup>173</sup> *Correspondence* 354.



reaction against, the style and principles of Walter Pater. The chapters on Thomas go under the aegis of his remark in his study of Pater that ‘The more we know of any man the more singular he will appear, and nothing so well represents his singularity as style’.<sup>174</sup> The first explores the relationship between Thomas’s individuality and his poetic innovation. It focuses on two characteristic features of Thomas’ style, his harnessing of the postures of speech, and experimentation with the forms and rhythms of folk song, to show how his originality is entangled in a style that strains to articulate the ‘singularity’ of his feelings, perceptions and character. A large part of the integrity and distinctiveness of Thomas’s manner springs from the intricacy and tenacity of his syntax, and Chapter 8 explores the way in which his poetry’s distinctive voice arises out of a scrupulous effort to trace the contours of thought and feeling. It explores the way Thomas’s language, in Leavis’s phrase, tunes itself in to ‘the finer texture of living’.<sup>175</sup> Chapter 9 passes from intricacy to intimacy, to consider the way in which, for all his idiosyncrasy and recalcitrance, Thomas, like Hopkins and Clare in their own ways, strives to establish connections with his audience, contending that his best poems often invite us into the confidence of a personality that remains finally elusive.

A coda emphasises the inventiveness and personal candour that unites the three poets’ language.

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<sup>174</sup> Thomas, *Walter Pater in Selected Prose* 159.

<sup>175</sup> Leavis, *New Bearings* 55.

## Chapter 1

### Clare I: 'A Helplessness in the Language'

Language has not the power to speak what love indites  
The soul lies buried in the Ink that writes

- Clare<sup>1</sup>

#### I

One of the hallmarks of Clare's poetic voice is a seemingly hit-and-miss brilliance that leaves it difficult to judge how in control he is of his own effects.<sup>2</sup> Arthur Symons remarked of Clare's 'ballads and love-songs' in the introduction to his 1908 selection of Clare's poems that they 'have very little value, and there is often a helplessness in the language, which passes from the over-familiar to the over-elevated'.<sup>3</sup> Yet it might be observed that a certain 'helplessness' in the face of feeling is often a peculiar strength as well as failing of Clare's poetry. Inarticulacy was often an authenticating experience for Clare, and a paradoxical source of creativity. He wrote of his first encounter with Thomson's *Seasons* that 'I still remember my sensations in reading the opening of Spring I cant say the reason, but the following lines made my heart twitter with joy'.<sup>4</sup> That remark in itself traces a characteristic arc of feeling in its gesture towards 'sensations' which are too intense for words, which then blossoms into a half-clichéd, half-inspired description of their effect in making his heart 'twitter with joy'. Clare's

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<sup>1</sup> *Late Poems* ii. 1015.

<sup>2</sup> This chapter is indebted to, even as it deviates from Mina Gorji's illuminating accounts of the more calculated forms of irregularity in Clare's poetry. See 'Clare's Awkwardness', and 'John Clare and the Poetics of Mess' *Moveable Type* 5 (2009): 1-11, where Gorji argues that Clare's 'poetic messes were not just failings, they could be artful and imaginatively suggestive' (3).

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Symons, "'Introduction' to *Poems by John Clare* (1908)", *Critical Heritage* 302.

<sup>4</sup> Clare, 'Sketches in the Life of John Clare', *By Himself* 10.

distinctive idiom often arises out of such moments. His language is invigorated by the challenge of responding to new or unexpected sensations and experiences.

The poems Symons is likely to have had in mind are the numerous 'Songs' and 'Ballads' that clutter Clare's early career, struggling to articulate the intensity of his feelings for childhood sweetheart Mary Joyce, who takes on within them a half-real, half-idealised existence. They appear as so many throwaway lyrics, content to entrust themselves to a particular rhythm or current of feeling and see where it takes them:

Mary fate lent me a moment of pleasure  
Just to insure me in ages of pain  
Just bid me meet thee & wish for the treasure  
To frown back & tell me I wished it in vain

(*Ballad: Mary fate lent me...* l. 1-4)<sup>5</sup>

This seems conventional enough to begin with in its predictable, if jaunty, rhymes and rhythms. But on second hearing, the lyric facility proves a little hobbled. 'Just to insure me' catches the ear as a moment where the lines fall short of the fluency that they appear to be aiming at, landing uneasily between those poles of elevation and familiarity that Symons identifies as Clare's problem ('insure' not being a word that glides naturally into the customary language of pastoral love poetry). The stumble opens up a suggestive ambiguity. The primary sense seems to be that the 'moment of pleasure' acts as a consoling 'insurance' against the 'ages of pain' that lie in wait in its aftermath. Yet such cheerfulness runs counter to the mood of the lines as a whole, so that one is also inclined to hear them as saying, wearily, that 'ages of pain' are what

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<sup>5</sup> *Early Poems* ii. 81.

must inevitably follow a moment of pleasure (as if what Clare really meant was 'ensure': a reading reinforced by the fact that in a manuscript variant the line reads 'ensnare').<sup>6</sup> The lines happen upon a way of illuminating succinctly the double-life (soothing and tormenting) that 'moments of pleasure' live in the memory.

At its most characteristic, Clare's language prompts, and leaves unresolved, such possibilities of meaning in ways that frustrate attempts to pin down the level of poetic intelligence at work. Even if one wishes to attribute the above effect to a subtle linguistic command, there remains to be contended with the less felicitous clumsiness of the succeeding lines, out of which it is a struggle to make any sense at all:

Just bid me meet thee & wish for the treasure  
To frown back & tell me I wished it in vain

The rhythms seem to accelerate away from the sense, giving the impression, as Jonathan Barker has remarked of Clare's prose, of being 'written at the speed of thought with the pen following just behind the mind's insights.'<sup>7</sup> Yet even there the confusion might be said to answer something psychologically penetrating: Clare's intention must be something like 'you raised my hopes only to disappoint them', but his phrasing, 'Just bid me...', makes him sound like he is egging Mary's teasing on. When Tim Chilcott fastens on to a similarly haphazard expressiveness in a much later poem, *Don Juan*, he speaks of Clare's language 'generating at best only half-lights of changing corruptible meaning, at worst a sort of frenetic opacity': 'it is not so much

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<sup>6</sup> *Early Poems* ii. 81.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Barker, 'The Songs of Our Land are like Ancient Landmarks', review of *The Oxford Authors John Clare*, ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell, *The Natural History Prose Writings of John Clare*, ed. Margaret Grainger, *The Later Poems of John Clare, 1837-1864*, ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell, *Agenda* 22.3-4 (1985): 82

that Clare has (to borrow T. S. Eliot's phrase) dislocated language into his meaning, but rather that meaning, dislocated into language, lurches towards the anarchic'.<sup>8</sup> That speaks eloquently about the strangeness of Clare's language at moments such as this, the impression it gives of Clare trying to cram his meanings through a medium that is alien or at least resistant to the precise nature of what he wants to convey. Yet what Chilcott diagnoses in *Don Juan* as the product of bitterness and mental disorder is a quality more endemic to Clare's style than he allows. The peculiarity of his language resides in its marriages of casual energy and awkward precision. Clare's 'poems scan beautifully but they often parse difficultly' remarks Stephanie Kuduk Weiner, isolating the combination of 'facility and rebelliousness' that makes Clare's voice seem simultaneously a product of inspiration and conscious craft.<sup>9</sup> This chapter is an effort to characterise the unmistakable expressiveness of that voice.

## II

Inarticulacy was a cornerstone of Clare's poetic identity. If the early caricatures of Clare as a 'peasant poet' pigeonholed him as a 'peasant', they did at least offer a way of being a 'poet', too; and it should be said that, while he inhabited the role with a certain amount of unease (some deferential early letters are signed 'A Northamptonshire Pheasant'),<sup>10</sup> he wasn't always averse to playing up to its stereotypes. The concept had emerged at the end of the eighteenth century from an intersection of pastoral with the cult of the sentimental, a tradition whose 'touchstone moments', as Jerome McGann says, 'involve failure as well as a discourse of apparently non-articulate (or at any rate

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<sup>8</sup> Chilcott, *Critical Study* 156.

<sup>9</sup> Kuduk Weiner, *Clare's Lyric* 34.

<sup>10</sup> *Clare's Letters* 4.

non-rational) communication'.<sup>11</sup> The appeal of such a tradition is evident; it provided Clare a ready model for articulating his distrust of poetic fancy:

Learning may polish up love wi fine feelings  
Wit on thy charms may rich graces impart  
But plain rural love the true language of nature  
Still boasts the feelings that speak to the heart  
(Ballad, 'Learning may polish up love wi fine feelings', l. 1-4)<sup>12</sup>

As in the above 'Ballad' to Mary, there is a slipshod suggestiveness in these lines: the claim that it is *love* that 'Learning' polishes up with 'fine feelings' triggers a second glance as you realise that the poem is sustaining an attack on a mode of refined feeling itself, as much as the language that articulates it. But on the whole the writing endorses a formulaic sort of authenticity, a riskily facile repudiation of language in favour of what the poem goes on to call 'loves simple lookings' (l. 7).

Clare writes more convincingly when he finds a means of asserting a counter voice to the 'polish' and 'rich graces' of 'Learning'. Amongst Clare's forerunners, Burns had shown the way most powerfully. A song such as 'O were I on Parnassus hill' is instructive in its manner of proffering apology for its uncouthness with the one hand whilst driving home a roughened eloquence with the other:

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<sup>11</sup> Jerome J. McGann, *The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996) 4. The term "peasant poet" was applied liberally amongst early reviews of Clare's poems. For some of the principles guiding late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century taste in pastoral, see Hugh Blair, "Pastoral Poetry – Lyric Poetry", *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, 7th ed., 3 vols. (London, 1798) ECCO, Web. iii. 107-46. For one account of the role of the cult of sensibility and sentimental taste in fashioning the image of the peasant poet see Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1986) 54-7.

<sup>12</sup> *Early Poems* ii. 416.



– Clare, no less individually, with a sharp awareness that the initial rapture of love is a fleeting affair, and a commitment in the face of change that makes Burns’s conception of love feel a little idealised by comparison:

& by pale ages winter coming  
The charms & casualties of woman  
I will forever love thee  
(“The Meeting” l. 22-4)<sup>16</sup>

Whilst Burns worries about the articulacy of his own language, Clare turns his fire on the expressive power of language in general:

Had but words the power to spell  
Had but language strength to tell  
I wou’d say how I love thee  
(l. 6-8)

Clare’s ‘helplessness in the language’ often moves towards sounding out a ‘helplessness’ inherent in the language itself. Symons’ phrase is well judged in this regard, as it gets a handle on criss-crossing stances: a feeling that Clare is not at home in the language of poetry, and a sense that language itself is helpless to articulate the particular intensity of his feelings. The more conventional early poems might tend to emerge out of the gap between emotion and Clare’s capacity to express it in words (‘fancy flies an hopeless void | And leaves me naught to say’ (Song, ‘When Chloe’s gone

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<sup>16</sup> *Early Poems* i. 463.



then fancy lays' (l. 11-2)),<sup>17</sup> but at his most confident, Clare lays the charge of inarticulacy upon words themselves.

The 'inadequacy' of language to the workings of the imagination is a common enough Romantic theme. Wordsworth writes in his note to 'The Thorn' that 'every man must know that an attempt is rarely made to communicate impassioned feelings without something of an accompanying consciousness of the inadequacies of our own powers, or the deficiencies of language'.<sup>18</sup> And Michael O'Neill has written, with that quotation in mind, of the way for Romantic writers inarticulacy often precipitates a 'crisis that at once threatens and makes possible poetry': 'adequately to convey the inadequacies of our own powers becomes a means of communicating impassioned feelings'.<sup>19</sup> Clare's poems sometimes find this, too; often, as in, say, 'Sabbath Bells', with the impression that words offer too crude a way of getting a hold on the changefulness and contradictoriness of individual feelings: 'And I have listened till I felt | A feeling not in words [...] A melancholly joy at rest | A pleasurable pain' (l. 17-22).<sup>20</sup> ('Joy' and 'pain' are rarely far from a consciousness of their opposite in Clare, and he writes about them in a way that suggests individual words are not flexible enough to match this inherent complication.) But Clare more often leads his feeling for the inadequacies of language in a different direction to Wordsworth. Instead of straining against 'the inadequacies of [his] own powers, or the deficiencies of language', Clare is fond of writing with the grain of that inarticulacy. He often finds his own voice in a surrender to language's insufficiencies, an implicit recognition that if words cannot

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<sup>17</sup> *Early Poems* i. 122.

<sup>18</sup> Wordsworth, "Note to 'The Thorn'", *The Major Works* 492.

<sup>19</sup> Michael O'Neill, "'Wholly Incommunicable By Words': Romantic Expressions of the Inexpressible", *Wordsworth Circle* 31 (2000): 17.

<sup>20</sup> *Middle Period* iii. 573.

adequately articulate one's feelings or imaginings, then there is no need to push them too hard to do so. The product is a poetic idiom whose very looseness becomes a means of fitting words to the precise nature of what Clare wants to say.

### III

One poem from the mid-1820s which probes the insufficiency of words is 'Pastoral Poesy'. Although it is often published in selections of Clare's poetry, it isn't always regarded as an example of what he does best: 'Not an exciting poem, it states in awkward language too simple for the purpose something of Clare's belief in the inherent poetry of nature', says Mark Storey.<sup>21</sup> But that is a more revealing comment than it is perhaps intended to be, because the sense of a language awkwardly unfit for purpose, or at least not quite doing what it purports to be doing, is integral to the poem's hold on our attention. The poetry makes its claims about the 'universal feelings' which Clare elsewhere described as 'the stuff which true poesy is made of'<sup>22</sup> in a language whose kinks and slips are stamped with Clare's individuality.

The poem begins by setting down the charges against 'words':

True poesy is not in words  
But images that thoughts express  
By which the simplest minds are stirred  
To elevated happiness

(l. 1-4)<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Storey, *Critical Introduction* 146.

<sup>22</sup> Clare 'Autobiographical Fragments', *By Himself* 53.

<sup>23</sup> *Middle Period* iii. 581.

Clare has some admiring remarks on Charlotte Smith which provide a useful gloss on what the stanza has in mind: 'she wrote more from what she had seen of nature than what she had read of it therefore those that read her poems find new images which they have not read of before tho they have often felt them and from those associations poetry derives the power of pleasing in the happiest manner'.<sup>24</sup> He is groping towards a definition of poetry where 'words' are there just to translate or bring back to mind emotions or experiences that are democratically open to everyone in nature: 'images that thoughts express'. But this disparagement of words has a verbal interest all of its own. That phrase, 'images that thoughts express', for instance, refuses to settle into place quite in the manner that it seems it should do. Presumably, to make it fit with the reading above, 'images' is to be taken as the subject of 'express' and 'thoughts' as the object. But because of the inversion, that reading takes some working out, and one of the possibilities that is raised in the process, even if only to be discarded, is that the grammar falls more in line with the word order, and that it is actually 'thoughts' that is the subject of 'express'. When such a reading is entertained the line says something slightly different, incorporating as it unfolds an awareness of the role of human creativity in poetry that challenges the apparently dominant idea in the poem that poetry is merely a matter of copying down nature, as if to say: 'it is not just that poetry consists of images that capture or recreate familiar thoughts and feelings, but actually of images that are "expressed" *by* or the product *of* them.'

Clare's poems are littered with disturbances that refuse to come into focus in the precise way that one anticipates. There are more examples as 'Pastoral Poesy' continues:

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<sup>24</sup> *Natural History Prose* 34.

...poesy is a language meet  
& fields are every ones employ –  
The wild flower neath the shepherd's feet  
Looks up & gives him joy

A language that is ever green  
That feelings unto all impart  
As awthorn blossoms soon as seen  
Give may to every heart

(l. 9-16)

Here the poem starts to display its debt to the words of other writers, even as those words are put through the mill of its own complicating manner. That wild flower sounds an echo of the Immortality Ode's lines, 'The pansy at my feet | Does the same tale repeat' (l. 54-5). In Wordsworth's poem this couplet deflates the rhythms of his fourth stanza to precipitate a moment of crisis: 'Whither is it gone the visionary gleam? | Where is it now the glory and the dream?' (l. 56-7). Clare shuns this anxiousness, allowing the lines instead to blossom into what seems a simple elaboration of his faith the lasting significance of nature's 'poesy': 'A language that is ever green | That feelings unto all impart'.<sup>25</sup>

That phrase has the memorability of an axiom, but it is also the point at which the seemingly transparent flow of the lines becomes muddied.<sup>26</sup> What the lines give

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<sup>25</sup> Compare a similar straightening out of complexities in first stanza, where Wordsworth's the intricate path of feeling traced by Wordsworth's 'presence that disturbs me with the joy | Of elevated thoughts' (l. 95-6) is flattened out into 'elevated happiness' (the ambiguity of Clare's 'elevated' – he means 'intensified' as much as 'superior' – issues a challenge to Wordsworth's grandeur). For more on Clare's ironing out of the kinks in other writers' phrasing in this poem see Chapter 2.

<sup>26</sup> Raymond Williams takes inspiration from the phrase for the title of a chapter covering Clare in *The Country and the City*. He describes the line itself as articulating 'a way of feeling that is also a way of writing' (139).

the impression of saying is that poetry is something that exists at its purest in nature, something that stirs up, or 'gives' feelings or experiences to everyone. And that is what their imagery suggests:

The wild flower neath the shepherd's feet  
Looks up & gives him joy

...awthorn blossoms soon as seen  
Give may to every heart

But it is not quite what that phrase that is sandwiched between them says. If you wanted it to fall into line with these images you would have to read it slightly differently:

A language that is ever green  
That feeling unto all imparts

This might be what the poetry feigns to say. But it is not what Clare wrote. He does not say that poetry imparts feeling to everyone, but rather that it is a language that 'feelings unto all impart', that poetry is a mode of expression that 'feelings' inherently grant to everyone, irrespective of education or articulacy. As in the earlier 'Ballad', the writing takes on a holographic quality: whether through helplessness or skill it seems to be saying two opposed things at once.

#### IV

Edward Thomas latched on to the productive looseness of Clare's in *Feminine Influence on the Poets* in 1910, two years after Symons's edition:

He reminds us that words are alive, and not only alive but still half-wild and imperfectly domesticated. They are quiet and gentle in their ways, but are like cats – to whom night overthrows our civilization and servitude – who seem to love us but will starve in the house which we have left, and thought to have emptied of all worth. Words never consent to correspond exactly to any object, unless, like scientific terms, they are first killed. Hence the curious life of words in the hands of those who love all life so well that they do not kill even the slender words but let them play on; and such are poets.<sup>27</sup>

If words are 'like cats', then that is to say – as is suggestively the case in 'Pastoral Poesy' – that a poet is always faced by their refusal to behave precisely in the way he wants: they are always liable to slip and slink away from one's originally intended meaning. What Thomas draws from Clare here is a sense that poetry might suffer from being over-zealous in its efforts to herd words too neatly into line, that there might be a certain virtue in just letting their suggestiveness 'play on'.

Thomas's insight that a quality of wilful imprecision is central to the ways in which Clare's poetry achieves its distinctive life might be developed in relation to the most immediately distinguishing feature of his printed voice, his refusal to 'domesticate' his language through the imposition of standard grammar and punctuation. Clare defended this refusal in some well-known remarks to Eliza Emerson in 1829: 'I am gennerally understood tho I do not use that awkard squad of

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<sup>27</sup> Thomas, *Feminine Influence on the Poets* in *Selected Prose* 29-30.

pointings called commas colons semicolons and for the very reason that altho they are drilled hourly daily and weekly by every boarding school Miss who pretends to gossip in correspondence they do not no their proper exercise for they even set gramarians at loggerheads'.<sup>28</sup> It is hard to take an unconflicted stand on the seriousness of Clare's dismissal of grammar. For all it can seem (as in this letter) a matter of principled resistance to arbitrary standards, it just as frequently comes across the result of genuine cluelessness, or eagerness for an easy way out. Equally, its importance to Clare's efforts to communicate himself authentically on the printed page seems by turns cosmetic and deep-seated. The quirks and idiosyncrasies it liberates in his language can seem accidental, but they can also challenge 'general understanding' in a manner integral to his expressive individuality and precision. Jonathan Bate complains that presenting Clare's 'raw' unedited voice 'makes him look different from every other poet in the English language' before you have even started reading him.<sup>29</sup> But that difference might be real and valuable: John Lucas is amongst the most vocal of those for whom the 'ruthless editorialising' undertaken by Taylor and Hessey 'denied [Clare] his own voice'.<sup>30</sup> But then what would it imply about Clare's voice if it could be so easily be 'denied'? An editor has to decide whether its individuality so tied up with its resistance to conventional grammar and punctuation that it cannot withstand their

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<sup>28</sup> *Clare's Letters* 491. Companion pieces to this statement are legion, as are essays on it and its implication for the handling of Clare's texts: see amongst arguments for presenting Clare's poetry in its 'raw', unpunctuated state, Eric Robinson and Geoffrey Summerfield, 'John Taylor's Editing of Clare's *The Shepherd's Calendar*,' *Review of English Studies* 14.56 (1963): 359-69, John Lucas, 'Revising Clare', *Romantic Revisions*, ed. Robert Brinkley and Keith Hanley (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992) 339-353, and James C. McKusick, 'John Clare and the Tyranny of Grammar', *Studies in Romanticism* 33.2 (1994): 255-77; and, for the case against this 'editorially primitivist' approach, Zachary Leader, *Revision and Romantic Authorship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) 206-261, and Jonathan Bate, 'Introduction' *Selected Poems* xxx-xxxiv; Simon Kövesi makes the case for resolving the debates surrounding the editing of Clare's texts through a pluralist, online edition ('Beyond the Language Wars: Towards a Green Edition of John Clare', *JCSJ* 26 (2007): 61-75). Kelsey Thornton offers a lucid overview of the debates in 'Review Essay: The Raw and the Cooked', *JCSJ* 24 (2005): 78-86.

<sup>29</sup> Bate, *Biography* 565.

<sup>30</sup> Lucas 'Revising Clare' 343.

imposition, or if the strength of Clare's idiosyncrasy strong enough to withstand interference.

John Taylor felt that Clare's individuality would survive editing. He punctuated and standardised Clare's texts for publication in *Poems Descriptive* in 1821, but he still felt moved in his introduction to prepare the reader for the unorthodoxy of Clare's verbal imagination:

Another peculiarity in CLARE'S writing, which may be the occasion of some misunderstanding in those who are critically nice in the construction of a sentence, is the indifference with which he regards words as governing each other; but this defect, which arises from his evident ignorance of grammar, is never so great as to give any real embarrassment to the reader [...] CLARE, as well as many other poets, does not regard language in the same way that a logician does. He considers it collectively rather than in detail, and paints up to his mind's original by mingling words, as a painter mixes his colours. And without this method, it would be impossible to convey to the understanding of the reader an adequate notion of some things, and especially of the effects of nature, seen under certain influences of time, circumstance, and colour...<sup>31</sup>

Taylor is no longer demonised for his handling of Clare's texts in the way that he once was, but he still warrants a little more admiration for the sympathy and insight of his criticism at moments like this.<sup>32</sup> For all it is advertised as a 'defect', the passage announces a willingness, shared by Thomas a century later, to countenance the possibility that something valuable might arise out of Clare's inarticulacy, his restraint

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<sup>31</sup> John Taylor, "Introduction to *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery*," *Critical Heritage* 48-9.

<sup>32</sup> The most sympathetic accounts of Taylor's handling of Clare are by Zachary Leader (*Revision*, 206-61) and Tim Chilcott (*A Publisher and his Circle: The Life and Work of John Taylor, Keats's Publisher* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972)). Paul Chirico explores Taylor's early critical accounts of Clare's work in *John Clare and the Imagination of the Reader* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 5-17.



from being overly 'nice' in the construction of his phrases. An impressionistic habit of considering language 'collectively rather than in detail', Taylor argues, is central to the way Clare 'paints up to his mind's original'. To illustrate his point, Taylor turns to the final stanza of 'A Reflection in Autumn', in which Clare's mind moves from thoughts of the coming winter to a meditation on his own demise:

Just so 'twill fare with me in Autumn's Life;  
Just so I'd wish: but may the trunk and all  
Die with the leaves; nor taste that wintry strife,  
When sorrows urge, and fear impedes the fall.  
(l. 9-12)<sup>33</sup>

As Taylor points out, 'Autumn's Life' means 'the Autumn of Life', but Clare's phrasing falls somewhere short of that cliché, and achieves an expressiveness at once subtler and more powerful in its characterisation of autumnal decay as having its own febrile life.

'Autumn's Life' is an idiosyncrasy which survives punctuation. Elsewhere, however, the trademark energies of Clare's voice are more fragile or resistant to standard grammar. Some lines from 'The Yellow Hammers Nest' illustrate the intricacy and excitement of a style that refuses to be drawn straightforwardly into focus. Clare finds the bird's nest

Lined thinly with the horses sable hair  
– Five eggs pen-scribbled over lilac shells  
Resembling writing scrawls which fancy reads

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<sup>33</sup> The lines are quoted with Taylor's punctuation reinstated. Clare's original is presented in *Early Poems* i. 396.

As natures poesy & pastoral spells  
They are the yellow hammers & she dwells  
A poet-like...

(l. 12-17)<sup>34</sup>

John Goodridge tells us that the patterns on the shells caused the bird to become known as the 'scribbling lark', 'so when Clare draws attention to the scribbles he is drawing on a known tradition of seeing the egg patterning as a kind of writing'.<sup>35</sup> But there is more to be said about the 'scribbled' quality of Clare's own writing, here: Goodridge's anxiety to emphasise Clare's 'literariness' as a poet obscures the freshened contact with experience that is one of the excitements of his poetic language. The irruption '- Five eggs...' typifies a manner that is briskly notational, its urgency to communicate the discovery overriding any grammatical niceties. The remainder of that line follows a more subtly strange syntactical curve. It skirts, but refuses to coalesce into, any standard grammar. The temptation would be to try to punctuate it as follows:

- Five eggs, pen-scribbled over lilac shells,  
Resembling writing scrawls...

Or perhaps like this:

- Five eggs, pen-scribbled over lilac shells  
Resembling writing scrawls...

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<sup>34</sup> *Middle Period* iii. 515.

<sup>35</sup> Goodridge, *Clare and Community* 139.

Or even like this:

– Five eggs, pen-scribbled over lilac shells  
Resembling writing, scrawls that nature reads...<sup>36</sup>

But none of those will do exactly, since it is the ‘pen-scribble[s]’, not the eggs or the ‘shells’, which resemble ‘writing scrawls’.<sup>37</sup> The effect, as one works to unpick the sense, is of a combined retardation and fluency as the words refuse quite to cohere into expected structures. As the lines continue they offer up another instance of the expressive possibilities enabled by this manner of writing in that description of how the bird ‘dwells | A poet-like’. The hesitant strangeness of Clare’s phrase as it lands between adjective and noun responds to a sense that the bird is both more and less than a poet. When the poem was published in *The Rural Muse* this was altered to ‘Most poet-like’, but that dispenses with the feeling Clare’s language offers of being contorted under the pressure of previously unarticulated experiences and modes of experience. As Kelsey Thornton argues, ‘the reproduction of his idiosyncrasies may be the only way of preserving the exact individual perception of the world that was

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<sup>36</sup> This is how Geoffrey Summerfield punctuates the lines in *Selected Poems*, ed. and introd. Geoffrey Summerfield (London: Penguin, 1990) 134.

<sup>37</sup> I take ‘reads’, in ‘fancy reads’, to mean ‘interpret’; there is a possibility that it means ‘decipher’, so that the sense could run ‘eggs/shells which fancy reads as it would read writing scrawls’, although a variant reading has ‘fancys read’ for ‘fancy reads’, which suggests that my interpretation is what Clare primarily had in mind. Nevertheless, that ‘interpret’ cannot totally be discounted as a possibility augments the lines’ suggestiveness and the interpretative work they require of a reader. That the line is troubling is implicitly acknowledged in Jonathan Bate’s lightly punctuated version of the poem, based on that eventually printed in *The Rural Muse*, which overcomes the issue by replacing the line with a variant: ‘Five eggs, pen-scribbled o’er with ink their shells | Resembling writing scrawls which fancy reads | As nature’s poesy and pastoral spells’ (Bate, *Selected Poems* 185). This clarifies some of the hurry of the lines, but doesn’t wholly cut through the ambivalence over just how to construe ‘reads’.

Clare's'.<sup>38</sup> Rather than being just the sort of slack impressionism that we are supposed to let pass in Clare, or should expect an editor to tidy up, such slippages contribute to an irrepressibly off-kilter idiom that is integral to Clare's distinctive brand of poetic success.

## V

The stutterings and idiosyncrasies of Clare's 'raw' texts are a persistent index to the collision of an unconventional imagination with a common, inherited language. Words form an awkward conduit for what he wants to convey; and that feeling of difficulty is mirrored in the work that his poetry's unorthodox life requires of a reader. The sonnet 'Decay', composed in the mid-1820s and published (in an edited version) in 1835's *The Rural Muse*, offers a good point of focus for that life, since the two versions of the poem offer a feel for how the editorial interventions might hinder, or struggle against, his voice's expressive force. Here is the poem in its unpunctuated state:

### DECAY

Amidst the happiest joy a shade of grief  
Will come – to mark in summers prime a leaf  
Tinged with the autumns visible decay  
As pining to forgetfulness away  
Aye blank forgetfulness that coldest lot  
To be – & to have been – & then be not  
Een beautys self loves essence heavens prime  
Mate for eternity in joys sublime  
Earths most divinest is a mortal thing

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<sup>38</sup> Thornton, 'The Raw and the Cooked' 84. Thornton touches on the lines from 'The Yellowhammers Nest', arguing that editorial intervention renders the verse 'halting and unnatural' (82).

& nurses times sick autumn from its spring  
& fades & fades till wonder knows it not  
& admiration hath all praise forgot  
Coldly forsaking an unheeding past  
To fade & fall & die like common things at last<sup>39</sup>

It is a characteristically disorientating poem to read. Its looping, haphazard progress entangles what one takes to be the ending of one line of thought with the beginning of another. The octave alone provides an astonishing illustration of the shapeshifting waywardness of Clare's voice. Starting out as if it wants to be a piece of eighteenth-century reflective verse, it veers, via Keatsian diction and strategy, into an odd appropriation of *Hamlet*, before seemingly derailing and turning its arguments on their head. It does these things in a way that is entirely Clare's own. It is hard to imagine these energies being wholly submerged in the later, punctuated, version of the poem. But the ensuing instances of revision will help fix a hold on exactly how much, and what, is altered.

As the poem flows between its first and second quatrains, concrete imagery morphs into abstraction. The leaf, tinged with 'visible decay' is imagined:

As pining to forgetfulness away  
Aye blank forgetfulness that coldest lot  
To be – & to have been – & then be not

'Forgetfulness' here does not mean a state of not being able to remember something, or at least not primarily: it may be shaded by a suggestion that beauty's 'decay' brings

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<sup>39</sup> *Middle Period iv.* 251.

about a situation of having forgotten one's past self. Principally, though, it takes 'forgetfulness' as a condition of being forgotten – 'a coldest lot'. It is a typically idiosyncratic way of using the language, a kind of mangled Augustanism; and it is an effect which is preserved in the edited version, despite its more portentous garb:

As pining to forgetfulness away, –  
Aye, blank Forgetfulness! – that coldest lot,  
To be, – and to have been, – and then be not.<sup>40</sup>

The inventiveness of Clare's phrasing survives. As does the brio with which Clare makes Hamlet's phrase his own as he plumbs the depths of what fading into others' 'forgetfulness' might be like: he imagines a state burdened by a consciousness of what it is 'to have been', where 'To be' *and* to 'be not' are crowded into the same instant.

The lines that follow are no less individual, and more enigmatic:

Een beautys self loves essence heavens prime  
Mate for eternity in joys sublime  
Earths most divinest is a mortal thing  
& nurses times sick autumn from its spring

This is a particularly striking instance of how a Clare poem, in grappling to find the words with which to come to terms with an experience, will pass on the challenge of making sense of what is being said to the reader. One possibility is to take the first two lines as a self enclosed sentence: 'the most intense forms of beauty enjoy an eternal existence in their experience of joy'. But this would sit oddly with the points about

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<sup>40</sup> I have re-punctuated according to textual commentary in the Oxford English Texts edition.

decay being inherent in everything that Clare makes either side of the lines. Alternatively, you might read the lines as saying that ‘Even the most intense forms of beauty – “Earth’s most divinest” – are transient, “mortal”’. But this leaves the problem of the line in the middle about how they ‘Mate for eternity in joys sublime’. In truth, the moment is impressive for its peculiar way of throwing the reader into a state of confusion, making language fail against the feelings that it wants to express. Inserting punctuation into these lines forces a decision either way – neither can be entirely satisfactory – and though it cannot strangle the unparaphrasable life of the lines, it is distracting in its implicit suggestion that some clear-cut sense *can* be made out of them:

E’en beauty’s self, love’s essence, heaven’s prime,  
Meet for eternity in joys sublime,  
Earth’s most divinest, – is a mortal thing,  
And nurses Time’s sick Autumn from its Spring;...

This punctuated version, one might add, cannot banish, though it muddies, the other ambiguity present here, which is the description of how even the most divine beauty ‘nurses times sick autumn from its spring’. The thought delineates beauty’s simultaneous susceptibility to ‘decay’ and capacity to ‘nurse’ and soothe it; it also glimpses a darker suggestion that beauty brings its own ruin upon itself, that it ‘nurses’ and nurtures its own sickness. ‘[I]ts spring’ meanwhile leaves us uncertain as to whether it is referring to the first growth of the ‘sick Autumn’, or to the first ‘spring’ of beauty itself, with the suggestion that beauty is entwined with sickness even from its birth.

There are two ways of hearing the syntax of the poem's closing lines. They might be read as if punctuated like this:

Earth's most divinest is a mortal thing  
[...]  
& fades & fades till wonder knows it not –  
& admiration hath all praise forgot,  
Coldly forsaking an unheeding past –  
To fade & fall & die like common things at last.

In this reading, the train of the sentence's main clause is spliced by a two-line interjection describing the way 'admiration' turns its back on beauty. The lines evoke, though dizzying tautology, the way even the 'most divinest' beauty, in a dizzying tautology, 'fades & fades...To fade & fall & die'. Alternatively, one can go with *The Rural Muse*:

...and fades, and fades, till Wonder knows it not  
And Admiration hath all praise forgot;  
Coldly forsaking an unheeding past,  
To fade, and fall, and die, like common things at last.

Here, rather than 'admiration', it is beauty which, as it wanes, 'coldly forsakes an unheeding past' to join the fate of 'common things'. It is tough to make a convincing case as to which reading should take precedence: the advantage of the unpunctuated version is that it keeps both possibilities in play. Zachary Leader cautions against attributing too much significance to Clare's ambiguities, pointing out that 'if Clare never punctuates his poems there are bound to be moments [...] in which readerly



uncertainty yields performative benefits.<sup>41</sup> But that is only to say that Clare writes in a manner which is always liable to throw such ‘uncertainty’ up. As no other poet’s does, Clare’s voice treads a borderline between chance expressiveness and cultivated effect, hinting at permutations of meaning and holding unresolved possibilities in suspension. Apparent vagueness or inarticulacy crystallises into suggestiveness in a way that disturbs habitual or expected modes of thought and feeling.

## VI

Clare does not always write with such wayward suggestiveness as he does in ‘Decay’: his poetry finds a plethora of different voices which respond to a shifting, sometimes unstable, poetic identity. There are plenty of occasions on which he appears, in Hugh Haughton’s words, as ‘an intimately sophisticated and self-conscious writer’.<sup>42</sup> Even the ‘openness’ of Clare’s forms, the syntactical fluidity that can result from his resistance to punctuation, has usually been regarded as being put to more self-conscious effect – whether, as in John Barrell’s account, to relay the experience of a landscape apprehended as ‘one complex manifold of simultaneous impressions’,<sup>43</sup> or, in the terms of recent criticism, as one weapon in achieving a quality of ‘artful artlessness’, a means of transferring a consciously ramshackle and dishevelled self-image onto the page.<sup>44</sup> At the same time, if Clare does a fine line in ‘artful artlessness’, the phrase seems ripe for turning on its head: there are also plenty of occasions when Clare’s ability to get language on his own terms seems the result of a kind of ‘artless

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<sup>41</sup> Leader, *Revision and Romantic Authorship* 226 n.1

<sup>42</sup> Haughton, ‘Progress and Rhyme’ 52.

<sup>43</sup> Barrell, *Idea of Landscape* 157.

<sup>44</sup> See Gorji, *Place of Poetry* 15-31.

artfulness', a conscious openness to happenstance and the words that come spontaneously to mind, that is disarming precisely because its local effects are the opposite of 'intimately self-conscious'.

Saying as much risks falling into some old traps of Clare criticism, and no doubt stumbling across some new ones. But if it might seem embarrassing to revisit the valorisation of Clare as a 'wonderful child of nature' exhibiting his 'spontaneous display of Native Genius' that was a feature of so many early reviews,<sup>45</sup> it is also to remind oneself of the degree to which the implications of that characterisation, taken seriously, challenge the notion of poetry as an arena of intense concentration and control; the carefully-chosen 'best words in the best order'. Clare himself often framed his admiration for his contemporaries in terms of praise for their spontaneity. Wordsworth, in his sonnets, for example, 'defies all art & in all the lunatic Enthuseism of nature he negligently sets down his thoughts from the tongue of his inspirer';<sup>46</sup> Keats is 'a child of nature warm & wild'.<sup>47</sup> And it is a way of speaking that helps to suggest the unique, disorderly spirit of Clare's own verbal fluency. This is true even of the works such as the 'birds' nest' poems of the late 1820s and early 1830s that are usually regarded as being among Clare's most controlled achievements. Their language flourishes with unpredictable energies. There is a representative instance in Clare's description of his poetic practice in 'The Moorehens Nest' (a poem which begins, with appropriately cascading verbal abandon, 'O poesys power thou overpowering sweet'):

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<sup>45</sup> 'E. P', 'Remarks on the spontaneous display of Natural Genius', *Critical Heritage* 111.

<sup>46</sup> *Clare's Letters* 87.

<sup>47</sup> *Clare's Letters* 80.

I pick out pictures round the fields that lie  
In my minds heart like things that cannot die  
Like picking hopes & making friends with all  
(l. 11-12)<sup>48</sup>

There are plenty of Clare's hallmarks in these lines: the mix of awkwardness and serendipity in the movement through 'pick...pictures...picking' (like when you see someone tripping up but then incorporating the stumble into their momentum); the felicitous coinage 'minds heart', tossed out as if it were idiomatic; the feeling that the lines are trying to cram in more things than they have the words for (an impression shaped by the way the sense warps around the enjambment 'round the fields that | Lie in my minds heart', to veer between the initial understanding that these 'pictures' lie in the 'fields' and the suggestion that they exist in Clare's imagination); the refusal to resolve this ambiguity before adding to the confusion with the seemingly ungrammatical next line (what does 'picking hopes' mean? and how can 'pictures' be like either 'picking hopes' or 'making friends'?). All of this contributes to the lines' power to overwhelm. It is hardly the sort of thing that one would claim as a calculated effect. Much seems to arise as a by-product of Clare's effort to keep up with the flow of the poetry's rhythms and rhymes. But what you might say, remembering Thomas's remarks about poets letting words 'play on', is that the lines realise the possibilities of a kind of principled carelessness. They court an improvisational vigour that unearths the potential for expressiveness in not worrying too scrupulously about getting words into place, instead trusting language to find its own expressive patterns.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> *Middle Period* iii. 468.

<sup>49</sup> Angela Esterhammer has observed with regard to Romantic-period concern with improvisation that 'Being "in the moment" implicitly demands a correspondence with both the speed and direction of

A few lines later in 'The Moorhens Nest', Clare describes the fragility of these poetic visions:

Hopes casket breaks & I the gems resign  
Pain shadows on till feelings self decays  
& all such pleasures leave me is their praise  
(l. 16-18)

It's one of those moments in Clare's poetry whose sense becomes the more teasing and elusive the more you try to pin down exactly what he means. The message might seem simple enough: the joy captured by poetic vision is transient. But the way the language feels out the contours of that transience is uniquely Clare's own. First, the pain of these visions' disappearance 'shadows on', the verb implying a suffering that is somehow both persistent and diminishing; then, when that pain finally fades, it is 'feelings self' that disappears, as if to describe a bereavement of vision that passes into a numbing of one's whole sensibility; then, in summary, Clare says that all that is left behind of pleasures is 'their praise', a phrase that slots into the lines' patterns of rhyme and alliteration happily enough, but is again difficult to construe: it seems caught between a suggestion that all that remains is the praise that Clare's lines gave to these 'pictures' in the form of his poetry, and saying that Clare himself wins a sort of praise through writing about them. The complexity is twofold, rooted in the strange path of

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time's arrow that is different from what is usually associated with poetic or musical composition, where the pace of writing can vary and the writer can turn back with second thoughts. It is an art form, as Pierre Bourdieu writes, quoting Merleau-Ponty, in which "thought and expression" are constituted simultaneously' (*Romanticism and Improvisation* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008) 3). Esterhammer's concerns are with more public forms of improvisation, but her account translates neatly to the pacy, instinctual qualities of Clare's writing.

feeling being described, and in the proliferating suggestiveness of language that describes it.

In his introduction to *Poems Descriptive*, Taylor had spoken of ‘those unusual and unprecedented combinations of words which must be made, even by the learned, when they attempt to describe perfectly something which they have never seen heard or expressed before’.<sup>50</sup> Again, it would be possible to pick apart Taylor’s condescension here, but the insight can be read most usefully as illuminating Clare’s capacity to conjure out of apparent inarticulacy an idiom that matches the uniqueness of his vision. Often that power can be isolated in a single line. The opening of the Clare’s brief asylum vignette ‘The thunder mutters louder & more loud’,<sup>51</sup> for example, uncovers an inimitable eloquence in its apparent carelessness. Partly this is a matter of what Donald Davie identifies as the virtue of Clare’s seemingly clumsy repetitions, their determination to apply the right word, without regard for the claims of ‘elegant variation’: ‘more loud’ is unpretentious in its accuracy.<sup>52</sup> Mostly, though, the line’s force resides in the surprising expressiveness of its apparent linguistic naivety: the line brings us into contact with an imagination struggling to find a word for something amplified and yet the same; its strange indecorum renders the impression of the thunder’s repeated ‘muttering’ all the stranger, too.

Such ‘unusual and unprecedented’ variations and idiosyncrasies in Clare’s phrasing bear out, in their own manner, T. S. Eliot’s sense of how originality manifests itself through ‘the perpetual slight alteration of language, words perpetually

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<sup>50</sup> John Taylor, ‘Introduction to *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery*,’ *Critical Heritage* 47.

<sup>51</sup> *Later Poems* i. 194.

<sup>52</sup> Davie, ‘John Clare’, *Critical Heritage* 441.

juxtaposed in new and sudden combinations'.<sup>53</sup> They achieve insights into a world 'heard & felt & seen' (to take Clare's phrase from 'Shadows of Taste' (l. 73))<sup>54</sup> from a unique, previously unarticulated, perspective. 'The Nightingales Nest' is usually regarded as an epitome of Clare's achievement,<sup>55</sup> and one manifestation of its force is its demonstration of how, at Clare's most characteristic, such 'new and sudden combinations' occur in a seemingly unpremeditated fashion, refusing to advertise their ingenuity. The poem begins with an invitation:

Up this green woodland ride lets softly rove  
And list the nightingale – she dwelleth hear  
Hush let the wood gate softly clap – for fear  
The noise may drive her from her home of love  
(l. 1-4)<sup>56</sup>

The diction announces its debts to the language of poetry ('list', 'dwelleth'), but also its deviations from it: to 'softly rove' surprises by harnessing two apparently opposed energies, capturing the poem's finely balanced mood of excitement and careful respect, an effect that recurs with the unbothered repetition of the same adverb two lines later – 'softly clap'. In imagining the nightingale's 'home of love' the poetry smuggles in a phrase that passes itself off as idiomatic, but is distinctive in its sudden shift into something abstract and unvisualisable: it understands home as a place that one 'loves', but also a place that is made 'of love'. The rhyme the phrase completes

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<sup>53</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'Philip Massinger', *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* 1920, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. (London: Methuen, 1932) 128.

<sup>54</sup> *Middle Period* iii. 303.

<sup>55</sup> It was, for example, the poem Ted Hughes chose to read out when Clare was received into Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey in 1989.

<sup>56</sup> *Middle Period* iii. 456.

with the poem's first line, as Hugh Haughton says, 'balances our freedom to "rove" with the bird's fostering local "love"'.<sup>57</sup> A similar point about the difficult relations of freedom and intrusiveness is made through the phrase's juxtaposition with 'fear' at the end of the preceding line: 'fear' is what would drive the nightingale away, but Clare's own 'fear' anticipates this, and in so doing amounts in itself to a kind of love; the writing sounds out Clare's sympathetic apprehension of non-human perspectives.

Later, the poem is moved to imagine the bird singing with 'mouth wide open to release her heart | Of its out sobbing songs' (l. 24-5). Again the originality of the poem's voice emerges out of the precision of Clare's effort to imagine the nature of the bird's song. It is both a matter of 'releasing the heart' (whether as an expression of joy, or a liberation from pain), and releasing from it a burden of song that is 'out sobbing', that seems to 'sob' involuntarily from it; much like Clare's own poems, the bird's song is understood as articulating a complex and shifting quality of feeling. So the poem goes on, its language repeatedly enlivening itself with quiet deviations from its expected course, as Clare evolves 'unprecedented combinations' of words that answer to the peculiar sensitivity of his experience. Similar admiration for Clare's ability to discover an intricately individual idiom might be cast towards the lines in which he imagines the bird's nest being protected by 'safetys guard | Of pathless solitude' (l. 62-3); or the burgeoning suggestiveness of his description of the harebells around the nest which seem 'bowing with the beautiful in song' (l. 73) (bowing to a beautiful song? or bowing to the bird's song with other beautiful things? or as if their beautiful 'bowing' was itself a kind of song?); and even the touching empathy (and even aura of Christian

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<sup>57</sup> Haughton, 'Progress and Rhyme' 60.

forbearance) in the phrase with which Clare labels the plants and animals that live in similar concealment around the nest: 'solitudes deciples' (l. 85).

In the Autumn of 1832, around the time that 'The Nightingale's Nest' was written, Clare wrote to Henry Francis Cary, the translator of Dante, reflecting on his achievements:

I sit sometimes & wonder over the little noise I have made in the world until I think I have written nothing as yet to deserve any praise at all so the spirit of fame of living a little after life like a name on a conspic[u]ous place urges my blood upward into unconscious melodys & striding down my orchard & homestead I hum & sing inwardly those little madrigals & then go in & pen them down thinking them much better things than they are until I look over them again & then the charm vanishes into the vanity that I shall do something better ere I die & so in spite of myself I rhyme on...<sup>58</sup>

The enthusiastic hurry of Clare's prose embodies energies I have been pursuing in this chapter ('living a little after life' flits neatly between 'living a little afterlife' and 'living on a little, after life'; 'vanishes into the vanity' effects its own linguistic vanishing act). Whether consciously or not, it also furnishes a fine language for describing them: '& so in spite of myself I rhyme on' Clare says, giving an excellent description of the way his poetry achieves its distinctive voice by slipping the noose of self-consciousness; and it would be hard to think of a better description of the products of that voice than 'unconscious melodys'.

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<sup>58</sup> *Clare's Letters* 595-6.



## Chapter 2

### Clare II: 'I Found the Poems in the Fields'

...if I touch aright that quiet tone  
That soothing truth that shadows forth their own  
Then many a year shall grow in after days  
And still find hearts to love my quiet lays

– Clare, *The Eternity of Nature*, l. 55-8<sup>1</sup>

#### I

Clare's readers have recurrently felt a want of human presence in his poetry. Keats conveyed by way of John Taylor his worry that in Clare's early poem 'Solitude' 'Description too much prevail[s] over the Sentiment'.<sup>2</sup> Taylor elaborated: 'I think he wishes to say to you that your Images from Nature are too much introduced without being called for by a particular Sentiment [...] his remark is applicable only now and then when he feels as if the Description overlaid and stifled that which ought to be the prevailing Idea'.<sup>3</sup> One hundred years later, Middleton Murry could praise Clare's 'faculty of vision' as 'unique in English poetry', but lamented that it could not 'pass beyond itself'; 'we feel it must demand so complete an engagement and submission of the whole man that it leaves no margin for other faculties'.<sup>4</sup> Even John Barrell, to take the most influential of Clare's later twentieth-century critics, is moved to justify the

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<sup>1</sup> *Middle Period* iii. 527.

<sup>2</sup> The remark was relayed to Clare through John Taylor: see *Clare's Letters* 38 n.4.

<sup>3</sup> *Clare's Letters* 99 n. 7. For an account of 'the Clare-Keats dialogue', see Goodridge, *Clare and Community* 59-82.

<sup>4</sup> Middleton Murry, 'Clare and Wordsworth' *Clare: Critical Heritage* 360.

poetry's absence of 'human content',<sup>5</sup> rather than counter the charge as a whole. Clare's poems do not so much fail to 'pass beyond themselves' as refuse to, says Barrell. They deal with concrete, localised observations which by their 'very nature incapable of being abstracted, and it is in its incapacity for being abstracted that the knowledge consists'.<sup>6</sup> What distinguishes the poetry, on this reading, is the very absence of explicit 'sentiment'.

Clare himself seems to reinforce this perspective. It is hard to think of a more self-effacing retrospective than his well-known lines from 'Sighing for Retirement': 'I found the poems in the fields | And only wrote them down' (l. 15-16).<sup>7</sup> The lines appear to downplay Clare's presence both as a human and an artist. But it is tempting to detect some disingenuousness in Clare's tone. Not least because Clare's poems are unusually sensitive and wide-ranging in their realisation of what it is to 'find'. The word is the conduit for a variety of 'sentiment' in his writing. It precipitates his poems' moments of surprised gratitude:

Well, in my many walks I rarely *found*  
A place less likely for a bird to form  
Its nest...

(*'The Pettichaps Nest'*, l. 1-3)<sup>8</sup>

It channels their careful respect for the things that they discover:

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<sup>5</sup> Barrell, *Idea of Landscape* 172. Barrell also explains the fact that 'the people we meet in Clare's poems have no character, no reality' on the grounds that the notion of 'strong individual character' is the result of a 'bourgeois social philosophy' which as 'nothing to do with the society Clare describes' (172); Clare himself, however, clearly had a 'strongly individual' sense of self.

<sup>6</sup> Barrell, *Idea of Landscape* 131.

<sup>7</sup> *Later Poems* i. 19.

<sup>8</sup> *Middle Period* iii. 517.

...near  
Her nest she sudden stops – as choking fear  
That might betray her home so even now  
Well leave it as we *found* it...  
(‘The Nightingales Nest’ l. 59-62)

And it is at the heart of his reassurance they find returning to the familiar:

In thy wild garb of other times  
I *find* thee lingering still  
(‘Emmonsales Heath’, l. 1-2)<sup>9</sup>

If it is the occasion for tributes to good luck:

On you I *found* my all for here  
‘Twas first my patty met me  
(‘Ye Swampy Fells of pasture grounds’ l. 7-8)<sup>10</sup>

It also pinpoints, as in his dealings with Mary, moments of disappointed realisation:

Returned home out of Essex & *found* no Mary – her & her family are as  
nothing to me now tho she herself was once the dearest of all<sup>11</sup>

‘For Clare’, as Jonathan Bate puts it, ‘description is sentiment’;<sup>12</sup> it is at one with  
discovery and the range of feelings that discovery provokes.

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<sup>9</sup> *Middle Period* iii. 363.

<sup>10</sup> *Early Poems* i. 367.

<sup>11</sup> John Clare, *Journey out of Essex* in *John Clare: By Himself*, ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell (Manchester: Fyfield-Carcanet, 2002) 265.

Part of the excitement that accompanies moments of discovery in Clare's poetry surrounds the business of finding the right *words*. He says of the 'rough rude ploughman' (l. 14) in the early poem 'Dawnings of Genius' that 'joys delight him which he cannot name | Ideas picturing pleasing views to mind | For which his language can no utterance find' (l. 24-6).<sup>13</sup> This is a predicament which the poem sympathises with, without wholly admitting itself to share in. And with some justice: it proves its own capacity to find the right 'utterance' in the unostentatious brilliance of a line like 'The opening beauties of a daisys face' (l. 18), where the notion of a daisy having a 'face' opens out of the etymological roots of 'daisy' ('day's eye') in a manner that is at once natural and surprising. And yet, for all 'only wrote them down' makes light of the issue, the struggle to match 'utterance' to the uniqueness of what it wishes to 'utter', is, as the previous chapter suggested, part of the peculiar exhilaration of Clare's writing; the pleasure of finding 'poems' in the fields runs parallel with his excitement at finding a way of putting those 'poems' into words. This is a chapter about the more self-conscious strand of this twinned actual and poetic discovery.<sup>14</sup>

## II

At its most extreme, Clare's commitment to 'Description' produces passages of astonishing verbal daring and originality. The closest thing to purely 'found' poetry

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<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Bate 'Introduction', *John Clare: Selected Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003; London: Faber and Faber, 2004) xvii.

<sup>13</sup> *Early Poems* i. 541.

<sup>14</sup> For other readings of the presence of character and 'feeling' in Clare's description see Constantine, 'Out of Eden' and Kelsey Thornton 'The Transparency of Clare', *JCSJ* 21 (2002): 65-79. Constantine argues that 'although Clare is known as a descriptive poet [...] the essential element in his response is not to *describe* those things in Nature by which his feelings are excited, but to express his feelings' (196); Thornton makes the case that Clare's descriptive fidelity extends to 'the intimate landscape of his mind' (71).

amongst Clare's output comes in a series of notebook entries, probably from 1832, which attempt to transcribe a nightingale's song:

Chee chew chee chew chee  
chew – cheer cheer cheer  
chew chew chew chee  
– up cheer up cheer up  
tweet tweet tweet jug jug jug

wew wew wew – chur chur  
woo it woo it tweet tweet  
tweet jug jug jug

tee rew tee rew thee rew – gur  
gur – chew rit chew rit – chur-chur chur  
chur will-will will-will tweet-em  
tweet em jug jug jug jug

grig grig grig chew chew

wevy wit wevy wit  
wevy wit – chee-chit  
chee-chit chee chit  
weewit weewit wee  
wit cheer cheer  
cheer – pelew  
pelew pelew –  
bring a jug bring a  
jug bring a jug<sup>15</sup>

The lines are spread over a series of pages in Clare's notebook, so it would not be accurate to call this a poem; but it would be right to speak of it as a fragmentary kind

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<sup>15</sup> *Natural History Prose* 312.

of poetry, and it is an exemplary instance of Clare's fusion of actual and poetic exploration, the way his poetry finds a unique language to communicate a unique attentiveness. The experimentation is unpretentious, driven by a genuine curiosity about how close language might come to 'writing nature down', and unembarrassed by those moments when its attempts to use words drained of their semantic content produce something incongruous or banal: 'bring a jug bring a | jug bring a jug' (the hesitation incurred by the line-break shades the lines with a self-ironising wit). The lines are as innovative as they are self-effacing, and it is testimony to their daring that it is difficult to think of a better account of what they accomplish than T. S. Eliot's statement of his ambition, nearly a century later, 'to write poetry which is essentially poetry, with nothing poetic about it, poetry standing naked in its bare bones, or poetry so transparent that we should not see the poetry, but that which we are meant to see through the poetry'.<sup>16</sup>

The difference lies in the exuberant sense of personality Clare's lines exude. Clare's sense of what he is up to in these lines becomes clearer when he makes them the basis of a passage in 'The Progress of Ryhme'. There, for all the lines are framed shyly in the poem's narrative as a moment where Clare is merely 'listening' to the nightingale's song; they exhibit his boldness as a poet, featuring, in Hugh Haughton's words, as 'a wonderfully undignified poetic riff',<sup>17</sup> that speaks straight from the heart of this manifesto poem. The writing displays an effort 'To mock the birds with artless skill' (l. 216) – where that playful oxymoron crystallises the paradox that the very effort

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<sup>16</sup> Eliot's remarks are quoted from an unpublished lecture on 'English Letter Writers' by F. O. Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot: An Essay on the Nature of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959) 89-90. Eliot was responding to Lawrence's reflection in a letter that a 'stark, bare, rocky directness of statement, this alone makes poetry today'.

<sup>17</sup> Haughton 'Progress and Rhyme' 80.

to bring poetry close to what is 'found' in the fields requires a conscious craft that marks it off as something different:<sup>18</sup>

- 'Chew-chew Chew-chew' – & higher still  
'Cheer-cheer Cheer-cheer' – more loud & shrill  
'Cheer-up Cheer-up cheer-up' & dropt  
Low 'tweet tweet tweet jug jug jug' & stopt  
One moment just to drink the sound  
Her music made & then a round  
Of stranger witching notes was heard  
As if it was a stranger bird  
'Wew-wew wew-wew chur-chur chur-chur  
Woo-it woo-it' – coud this be her  
'Tee-rew tee-rew tee-rew tee-rew  
Chew-rit chew-rit' – & ever new  
'Will-will will-will grig-grig grig-grig'  
(*The Progress of Ryhme* l. 239-51)

There may be, as Richard Cronin suggests, 'a deep nostalgia' in this passage for 'a language that evaporates, leaving no barrier between the reader and the natural world it represents'.<sup>19</sup> Clare did remark wistfully in a note accompanying the lines in his notebook entry that 'many of her notes are sounds that cannot be written the alphabet having no letters that can syllable the sounds'.<sup>20</sup> But the attitude is complex. Any 'nostalgia' is balanced by an exuberant delight in the strangeness of the bird's sounds on the tongue, and the passage probes the possibilities for harmonising natural and human voices in verse, whilst retaining its consciousness of their separateness. The

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<sup>18</sup> Kuduk Weiner also emphasises that 'When Clare harnesses the note for his poem he transforms the bird's song into his own lyric, altering its rhythm and phrasing and introducing rhyme' (*Clare's Lyric* 42).

<sup>19</sup> Cronin, 'In Place and Out of Place' 138-9.

<sup>20</sup> *Natural History Prose* 312.

two join together in a spirited duet as the strains and rhythms of the nightingale's song come alive in the movements of Clare's couplets: there is the accompanying shift in voice with the description of how the song 'dropt | Low', and the expressive pause two lines afterwards when we are told that the bird 'stopt | One moment', or later, 'all was still | A minute' (l. 254-5). At the same time, Clare's questioning interjections ('coud this be her', 'and ever new') intersperse the twitterings with what sounds like a running commentary on their own efforts to replicate the bird's song; even if excited, the writing retains a dry scepticism about its own pretences.

Still, it is hard to think of another poem which takes such unrepressed joy in the possibilities of taking language in idiosyncratic new directions. The writing is nervous with the thrill of discovery. It finds a new voice that is at once uniquely Clare's own and involves the near abandonment of poetic identity to something else.

### III

David Constantine says that 'Clare was not very well able to reflect on his own art'.<sup>21</sup> This may well be true to the extent that his best poems on the subject rarely make orderly advances upon a fixed conclusions; but the charm and excitement of Clare's poems about poetry is often the feeling they communicate of breaking new poetic ground at the same time as they are engaged in the business of finding the words to describe that ground.

'Pastoral Poesy', discussed briefly in the previous chapter, is an argument about poetry as a 'found' quality, at root a matter of 'The fancies that the shepherd finds | To make his leisure sweet' (l. 19-20). But the poem provokes questions more than it settles

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<sup>21</sup> Constantine, 'Outside Eden' 195.



issues: 'fancies' (like 'poems' in the lines from 'Sighing for Retirement', or indeed 'Poesy' in the poem's title) is a word poised noncommittally between saying that the flora and fauna one finds in the fields are sufficiently poems in themselves, and that they exist as fountains of inspiration for later acts of creativity.<sup>22</sup> Throughout, the poetry lives a rough, provisional life; it is teased and teasing about poetic language as something that both intrudes upon and intensifies the mind's engagement with nature. Seven stanzas in, Clare reworks the language of his opening quatrain<sup>23</sup> to have another go at explaining the evolution of poetic feeling; he explores how an image of summer, for instance, might 'Create a summer in ourselves' (l. 23):

An image to the mind is brought  
Where happiness enjoys  
An easy thoughtlessness of thought  
& meets excess of joys  
(l. 25-8)

The phrasing is tantalisingly elliptical in a way that suggests Clare is grappling with a notion that he hasn't yet got his head round (in Tim Chilcott's words, 'markedly compressed, if not actually confused').<sup>24</sup> The puzzlement has a certain aptness, since the sort of pleasure Clare is describing involves being cut loose from rational understanding. At the heart of this is the paradox 'thoughtlessness of thought'. The

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<sup>22</sup> Barbara Strang remarks of Clare's choice of *The Midsummer Cushion* as the title for the volume in which 'Pastoral Poesy' was to be included that it 'embodies the image of poetry (*poesy*) as *posey*, something *found* in *nature* and set forth by the poet to give pleasure, however ephemeral ("I found the poems in the fields | And only wrote them down") this is a complex of images and words that runs deep in him' ('John Clare's Language' 160).

<sup>23</sup> See p. 73-4.

<sup>24</sup> Chilcott, *Critical Study* 93. The thought in the stanza finds some parallel in Clare's remark that 'I always feel delighted when an object in nature brings in ones mind an image of poetry that describes it from a favourite author' (*Natural History Prose* 39).

phrase sweeps up into itself Clare's own use of the word from his opening stanza ('elevated thought' (l. 4)), and, perhaps via a memory of 'the feel of not to feel it' from 'In drear-nighted December' (l. 21), recalls the way Keats's urn 'tease[s] us out of thought' ('Ode on a Grecian Urn' l. 45), to suggest that poetic pleasure precedes or transcends 'thought', just as, perhaps, it eludes Clare's own stanza's efforts to account for it. The allusion is part of a wider network of references to Keats's ode which include 'ever green' (l. 16) against Keats's stifled 'for ever new/young' (l. 24/7), 'unruffled quietness' (l. 41) as against 'unravished bride of quietness' (l. 1), and Clare's faith in 'a silence that discourses more | Than any tongue can do' (l. 39-40) as against Keats's ambivalence about 'unheard melodies' (l. 11). The impulse alive in Clare's reworking of Keats's words is always to enliven Keats's 'Cold pastoral' (l. 41), resisting Keats's poem's conception of the work of art as a 'silent form' (l. 44) to re-imagine poetry as an active process rather than a finished product. Where Keats's urn 'teases' by providing an image of life which is painfully different from life, Clare's sense is of poetry as an art which brings us into a sensuous and imaginative contact with nature that short-circuits the need for 'thought' in favour of 'feeling':

The world is in that little spot  
 With him – and all beside  
 Is nothing all a life forgot  
 In feelings satisfied

& such is poesy its power  
 May varied lights employ  
 Yet to all mind it gives the dower  
 Of self creating joy

(l. 29-36)

The rhythms and enjambments here, dissipating the lilt of the ballad quatrain to still the poem's movement momentarily, capture that 'thoughtless' unification with nature where we feel 'The world is in that little spot'. The phrasing, refined by that delayed 'With him', suggests not only a state in which nothing else matters, but one where 'The world' seems to come to one's side offering succour and companionship. The stanzas – as the poem effects another change in its terms of literary reference – are suffused with Coleridge's 'Dejection: An Ode': 'Joy, Lady, is the spirit and the power, | Which wedding nature to us gives in dower | A new earth and a new Heaven' (l. 67-9),<sup>25</sup> an allusion which works simultaneously to affirm and quietly undermine Clare's argument. Coleridge's 'new earth' parallels the deeper imaginative experience of 'The world' that Clare speaks of, yet for Clare it is 'poesy', not 'Joy' that weds nature to us; for Clare, 'joy' is a product of that wedding.

'Self creating joy' is an apt description of what sustains the poem. Its argument that poetry is to be 'found' in nature is at once enlivened and contradicted by its excitement at discovering a poetic idiom all of its own. The writing's shifting charms lie in its vivacious experimentalism, its attempt, as Johanne Clare describes it, playing Clare off against Wordsworth, 'to discover new forms of eloquence, a new way of conveying meaning less clamorous in its assertion of "what we are", more receptive to the influences of nature "as she is"'.<sup>26</sup> Clare has Wordsworth in mind when he speaks in the poem's pre-penultimate stanza of a life lived in tune with nature as the epitome of 'poesys power that gives to all | A cheerful blessedness' (l. 104), contracting *Tintern Abbey's* 'cheerful faith that all which we behold | Is full of blessings' (l. 134-5). Those

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<sup>25</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Dejection: An Ode', *The Complete Poems*, ed. William Keach (London: Penguin, 2004) 307. All further quotations are from this edition.

<sup>26</sup> Johanne Clare, *Bounds of Circumstance* 160.

lines come at a point in that poem where Wordsworth catches in his sister's words 'the language of my former heart' (l. 118), expounding the 'wild ecstasies' (l. 139) of a life more simply at one with nature. Such an attitude chimes with the hopefulness, if not the countervailing sadness, of Clare's final two stanzas. Modulating into an affectingly personal, even prayer-like voice, they make a wish that the poet himself might again enjoy such a relationship with nature:

So would I my own mind employ  
& my own heart impress  
That poesys selfs a dwelling joy  
Of humble quietness

So would I for the biding joy  
That to such thoughts belong  
That I life's errand may employ  
As harmless as a song

(l. 108-15)

The writing acknowledges the difficulty of reconciling a conception of poetry as 'humble quietness' with the impulse to celebrate the 'biding joy' of such a way of living in 'song'; it plays off the winning modesty of what it conceives 'poesys self' to be against the poignant implication in the stanzas' repetitions ('So would I... So would I') that this might be a 'joy' from which Clare, as a poet, is necessarily alienated. In the first stanza, Clare speaks of a desire to 'impress' this sense of what poetry is upon his own heart, as if to quell an innate ambitiousness; in the second his attitude seems to have shifted, even turned inside out. As ever, Clare's simplicity is of a sort that makes exact paraphrase almost impossible, but one might venture as a reading of that last

stanza something like: ‘the abiding joy of dwelling quietly in nature brings with it such “thoughts” that I cannot resist expressing them in song’. The stanzas could then be seen as sketching a rueful cycle in which the assertion that poetry inheres in a ‘quiet’ dwelling in nature provokes such joy that it is impossible not to sing about it, even as that singing overturns the notion of poesy as simply dwelling (a circuitousness traced neatly by the chiasmic pattern of the rhymes (‘employ...joy...joy...employ’)). Yet if Clare hopes that his ‘song’ might be ‘harmless’, in speaking of it as an ‘errand’ he keeps an eye on the threat that it might entail an amount of error-strewn ‘wandering’ as well as a ‘calling’: a betrayal and an abandonment of nature that are part of the life of art. As Jonathan Bate has remarked: ‘if “poesys self” was really nature, then Clare could not dwell there. He was a creature of language: though found in the fields, his poetry existed on the page.’<sup>27</sup>

#### IV

Clare’s sonnets might be said to practice an art of ‘humble quietness’. Their mode of dwelling perceptively in and on the landscape justifies Bate’s contention elsewhere that Clare’s poems channel ‘a letting go of the self which brings the discovery of a deeper self’.<sup>28</sup> Their focus seems at first glance to be upon findings rather than feelings, observation rather than imagination. But self-effacement in Clare’s poetry is often a peculiar mode of self-expression, and at their best the sonnets are animated by a sense of discovery that is poetic as much as it is actual. Their mobile marriages of

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<sup>27</sup> Bate, *Biography* 185.

<sup>28</sup> Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (London: Picador-Macmillan, 2001) 155.

chance discovery and formal innovation bespeak an effort to put traditional form at the service of unique individual vision.

Formally, as Stephanie Kuduk Weiner observes, the sonnets are ‘idiosyncratic’: ‘Enunciating at once craft and spontaneity [...] they test how malleable elements of received forms can be made to be’.<sup>29</sup> The excitement of a newfound formal possibility drove Clare’s haranguing of Taylor in 1824: ‘I have made it up in my mind to write one hundred sonnets as a set of pictures on the scenes & objects that appear in the different seasons & as I shall do it solely for amusement I shall take up w<sup>h</sup> gentle & simple as they come whatever in my eye finds any [intere]st these things are resolves not merely in the view for publication but for attempts’.<sup>30</sup> Clare’s casual air fashions a sense of the sonnet as a form nimble enough to take things as it finds them (‘simple as they come’), responsive to ‘whatever in my eye finds any interest’; a way of putting it which, telescoping ‘whatever my eye finds interest in’, and ‘whatever catches my eye’s interest’, communicates these poems’ slippery marriages of chance and agency.

Like a lot of Clare’s schemes (the plan he set out to Taylor and Hessey in the 1820s to write ‘100 popular songs’ would be another), these sonnets never saw publication in a unified volume.<sup>31</sup> But Clare’s notion of them as a ‘set of pictures’ has helped to shape their reception. Most influentially, it has been picked up by John Barrell, who locates the poems’ originality in their swerve from the conventions of eighteenth-century loco-descriptive poetry to convey a landscape distinctively

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<sup>29</sup> Kuduk Weiner, *Clare’s Lyric* 50.

<sup>30</sup> *Clare’s Letters* 288.

<sup>31</sup> Many were included amongst the poems Clare collected for his proposed volume *The Midsummer Cushion* in the early 1830s, but the selection was thinned down by the time the project eventually saw publication as *The Rural Muse* in 1835. *The Midsummer Cushion*, containing all the poems Clare had originally envisioned, was eventually published in 1979 (John Clare, *The Midsummer Cushion*, ed. Kelsey Thornton and Anne Tibble (Ashington: Mid-Northumberland Arts Group-Carc Janet, 1979).

experienced as ‘one complex manifold of simultaneous impressions’. The distinguishing quality of the sonnets, says Barrell, is their effort, exemplified in poems such as ‘Emmonsails Heath in Winter’ and ‘Beans in Blossom’, to subdue the intrusion of artistic craft, to shape a syntax ‘not content to go along with the order which language must inevitably impose, [but] that attempts instead to conceal it’.<sup>32</sup>

Barrell is insightful about the distinctive sense of identity Clare’s achieves through such artistic ‘surrender’. But the best sonnets are more dynamic and more alive with Clare’s personality than his account allows. The most distinctive and engaging amongst them dramatise their exploratory spirit instead of presenting themselves as straightforward copies of natural ‘scenes & objects’. These sonnets are fraught with questions of tact and responsibility, aware that discovery might also be intrusion, and hesitant about the poet’s own authority. Their most affecting moments play sympathy and curiosity against compassionate respect for the privacy of other creatures. There is a quietly witty and moving example in the first section of the double sonnet on ‘The Wood larks Nest’ from *The Midsummer Cushion*, which ends by homing in on the nest that the bird builds on the ground: ‘As safe as secrecy her six eggs lie / Mottled with dusky spots unseen by passers bye’ (l. 13-14).<sup>33</sup> Clare shapes a gentle irony here, and an atmosphere of careful intrusion as his desire to show and share the eggs (‘unseen’ speaks as if the ‘secrecy’ were a shame) is tempered by a knowledge that secrets, like eggs, must be handled respectfully, lest they be broken.

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<sup>32</sup> Barrell, *Idea of Landscape* 164. There is by now a reasonable body of criticism on Clare’s sonnets. See Scott Hess, ‘John Clare, William Wordsworth, and the (Un)Framing of Nature’, *JCSJ* 27 (2008); Simon J. White, ‘John Clare’s Sonnets and the Northborough Fens’, *JCSJ* 28 (2009): 55-70; Sarah Lodge, ‘Contested Bounds: John Clare, John Keats, and the Sonnet’, *Studies in Romanticism* 51.4 (2012): 533-554. Joseph Phelan also has some remarks on Clare in *The Nineteenth-Century Sonnet* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

<sup>33</sup> *Middle Period* iv. 321.

The second of the paired sonnets shifts its attention to those moments when the bird gives away its own secret, as ‘startled by the rustle [of a passer by] from her rest’ (l. 3), she ‘flutters out & so betrays her home’ (l. 4). Clare is moved to wonder:

...how birds could be  
So wise to find such hidden homes again  
& this in sooth oft puzzled me – they go  
Far off & then return – but natures plain  
She giveth what sufficeth them to know  
That they of comfort may their share retain  
(l. 23-8)

The moment is true to the spirit that animates Clare’s sonnets more widely in its refusal to slide into the assumption that ‘truth to nature’, the virtue Clare valorises in his manifesto-poem ‘Shadows of Taste’ (l. 77),<sup>34</sup> always corresponds with a right to the truth *about* nature. The archaic accents they assume (‘in sooth’, ‘giveth’, ‘sufficeth’) impart a slightly arch humour, but they also speak wisely about the limits to the poem’s authority. A sense of these limits is enacted in the poetry’s rhythms, as the surprised interjection ‘they go | Far off and then return’ is spliced expressively over two lines, as if hearkening after the bird, before the contented acceptance that ‘natures plain’ ushers in a more settled coincidence of line and phrasing at the poem’s close. The lines’ restrained curtailing of curiosity implies that finding a ‘poem’ in the fields entails finding the point of balance between one’s own ‘puzzlement’ and that which it ‘sufficeth [...] to know’.

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<sup>34</sup> *Middle Period* iii. 303.



Perhaps this makes the poems sound a little po-faced, but that is far from the case. Clare was an underrated raconteur, and his sonnets include some of his best stories. The following sonnet, warmly alive to the comic unpredictability of nature, was written in the autumn of 1835, after Clare had moved to unfamiliar surroundings in Northborough:

One day when all the woods were bare & blea  
I wandered out to take a pleasant walk  
& saw a strange formed nest on stoven tree  
Where startled piegon buzzed from bouncing hawk  
I wondered strangley what the nest could be  
& thought besure it was some foreign bird  
So up I scrambled in the highest glee  
& my heart jumpt at every thing that stirred  
Twas oval shaped strange wonder filled my breast  
I hoped to catch the old one on the nest  
When something bolted out I turned to see  
& a brown squirrel pattered up the tree  
Twas lined with moss & leaves compact & strong  
I sluthered down & wondering went along<sup>35</sup>

This achieves the archetypal Clare blend of the quotidian with the unexpected, the conversational with the intricately crafted. The poem's journalistic attentiveness to the matter-of-fact is played against a skilled orchestration of the sonnet's internal movements in such away as elevates chance occurrence into a moment of quiet emotional resonance. The assonance in the opening lines of 'blea' and 'pleasant' cheerfully takes pleasure in what is dreary, and triggers a rhyme that is sustained

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<sup>35</sup> *Middle Period*, v. 290.

through all three quatrains, building suspense in the first two as part of an *abab* pattern, before appearing in the third as the second of two rhyming couplets, these being the climactic lines in which the squirrel emerges:

When something bolted out I turned to see  
& a brown squirrel pattered up the tree

The surprise of the moment is caught by the rhythms, which disturb the regular iambic opening maintained through all but one of the rest of the sonnet's other lines ('& a *brown squirrel*' – the single other divergence is, appropriately, '& my *heart jumped*' [my emphasis]). The revelation strikes us as being mildly incongruent with the poet's elevated enthusiasm ('strange wonder filled my breast'), yet the potential for bathos yields to Clare's assiduous attention to what is surprising in the commonplace. Here such attention prompts that stress on 'brown', which emphasises a quality slightly unexpected to modern ears, given the tendency to classify the squirrel as either Red or Grey, but accurate to the shade of the former's winter coat (the woods are after all 'bare and blea').

Clare enjoys setting up such moments of calculated bathos only to show how they are not quite as disappointing as they might first seem. He achieves something similar with the poem's ending, as he ignores the squirrel which has been the cause of the poem's excitement and instead details with quiet composure the qualities of its nest. If initially that decision appears anticlimactic, it is grounded in sound common sense: to learn that a squirrel's nest is 'lined with moss & leaves' is far more interesting

than anything that might be said about the appearance of the creature itself, with which we are after all likely to be familiar.

The poem combines its eagerness to inform with a minute attention to the development of feeling. It conducts its response to the events it records through apparently artless repetitions, clustered around the words 'wander' and 'wonder'. The pairing is a fertile one for Clare, because it allows shifts between casual indirection and imaginative engagement. Here it mobilises the poetry's openness to the value of accident. In the first quatrain there is 'wandered' and 'strange'; the two merge in the second to become 'wondered strangely', which in turn becomes 'strange wonder' in the third quatrain, the transition from commonplace verb to enthralled noun subtly heightening the thrill of the revelation. The final couplet then has 'wondering', replacing, but punningly incorporating, the initial 'wandered' - 'strange' having apparently disappeared, though ghosting behind 'strong' at the end of the penultimate line. In its final guise, 'wondering' refuses to let on whether it means 'marvelling' or, more prosaically, 'pondering': it distils the poetry's response to apparently plain fact with a sense, good-humoured but unsettled, of nature's recalcitrant peculiarity.

Clare's Northborough sonnets often evoke the surprise of a chance occurrence through the felicitousness of their own openings, as in the poem which begins 'I found a ball of grass amongst the hay'.<sup>36</sup> Here the word 'found' focuses the poem's collision of perspectives: what is strange to one being is familiar to another. When the poem returns to the word in its twelfth line, finding again the cadences of its opening as it

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<sup>36</sup> The surprise of the poem's opening is reduced, when, as in most modern editions, the poem is given a title such as 'The Mouse's Nest': as the poem initially stood it makes us wait until the fifth line to discover what Clare has found. In 1822 Clare declared of a sonnet he had sent to Hesse 'If printed no name remember as I like sonnets best without' (*Clare's Letters* 237). Kuduk Weiner considers the implications of the open-endedness of Clare's sonnets in *Clare's Lyric* 74-85).

does so, it is with a sense of the mouse's relief at having recovered her home safely:  
'She found her nest again among the hay'.

I found a ball of grass among the hay  
& proged it as I passed & went away  
& when I looked I fancied something stirred  
& turned agen & hoped to catch the bird  
When out an old mouse bolted in the wheat  
With all her young ones hanging at her teats  
She looked so odd & so grotesque to me  
I ran & wondered what the thing could be  
& pushed the knapweed bunches where I stood  
When the mouse hurried from the crawling brood  
The young ones squeaked & when I went away  
She found her nest again among the hay  
The water oer the pebbles scarce could run  
& broad old sexpools glittered in the sun<sup>37</sup>

Seamus Heaney memorably described this as 'seven couplets wound up like clockwork and then set free to scoot merrily through their foreclosed motions'<sup>38</sup>. But the sonnet's skilful bridging of the contrasting senses of what it is to 'find' suggests the presence of a more self-conscious shaping hand, curbing this energy and turning the poem's movement of mind back upon itself in an effort to comprehend as well as record experience. Outside the final couplet the sonnet's rhymes sounds allow the poem's narrative to unfold with beautiful concentricity: 'the hay'/'went away' and 'went away'/'the hay'; then 'stirred'/'bird' against 'stood'/'brood'; all ripple outwards from two rhymes shot through with an 'ee' sound. Clare's poetic shaping allows emotions to

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<sup>37</sup> *Middle Period*, v. 246.

<sup>38</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'John Clare's 'Prog'', *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose, 1971-2001* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002) 277.

well up and re-settle. It sharpens an awareness of how what one ‘finds’ in ‘the fields’ depends upon one’s relation to them: what to the poet is a ‘ball of grass’ is to the mouse ‘her nest’.

The force of the poem’s enigmatically suspended closing lines, Sarah Houghton-Walker observes, has to do with their ‘overwhelming sense of quotidian life just going on’,<sup>39</sup> where ‘overwhelming’ is attentive to the mysteriousness that shadows their ordinariness: ‘The water oer the pebbles scarce could run | & broad old sexpools glittered in the sun.’ Overhanging the sonnet’s main narrative unaccompanied by any explanation, the couplet, in its own laconic way, fulfils Clare’s claim to have ‘only’ written things down. But Clare’s lack of comment might reflect his own puzzlement as much as it engenders ours, as is suggested by the energies concentrated in ‘glittered’ as it picks out the activity of the ‘sexpools’ [puddles]. The word’s power owes to the way its elegance glints against the dialect word to discover something new and precious in what is ‘old’ and commonplace. Yet amidst the eerie stillness of the poem’s closing line it flickers, too, with an unpindownable suggestion that ‘glittering’ is something the ‘sexpools’ do all of their own accord; the description is meticulous, but at the same time luminous with a sense of not having understood all that is going on.

‘If ever a poet wrote with his eye on the object’, say the editors of Clare’s *Poems of the Middle Period*, ‘it is Clare in the Northborough poems’.<sup>40</sup> Yet if his eye remains ‘on the object’, it is always quickly alert, too, to the feelings that the object provokes. And for all these poems seek to authenticate themselves through their precision, they convey an abiding sense that ‘To find the poems in the fields | And only write them down’ is not necessarily always to understand what one finds.

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<sup>39</sup> Sarah Houghton-Walker, *John Clare’s Religion* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009) 186.

<sup>40</sup> *Middle Period*, v. xxiv.

This holds true of a lot of Clare's most obviously 'descriptive' writing; it is one means through which 'Description' and 'Sentiment', to return to Keats's terms, become intertwined. There is a lyrical side to Clare's adherence to the empirical facts which is less a matter of direct self-expression than a willingness to let feeling emerge indirectly through the turns of the voice as the poetry works intently at the imaginative coalface of the natural world. Often what communicates Clare's distinctive presence in these poems is the feeling of being offered a window on the act of description as well as upon the thing being described. This is self-consciously to the foreground in the sonnets above, but it is a presence in some of more plainly documentary pieces, such as the sonnet 'The Blackcap' from *The Midsummer Cushion*, composed when Clare was still at Helpston:

Under the twigs the blackcap hangs in vain  
With snowwhite patch streaked over either eye  
This way & that he turns & peeps again  
As wont where silk-cased insects used to lie  
But summer leaves are gone the day is bye  
For happy holidays & now he fares  
But cloudy like the weather yet to view  
He flirts a happy wing & inly wears  
Content in gleaning what the orchard spares  
& like his little couzin capped in blue  
Domesticates the lonely winter through  
In homestead plots & gardens where he wears  
Familiar pertness – yet but seldom comes  
With the tame robin to the door for crumbs<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> *Middle Period* iv. 346.

This gives hushed and meticulous observation pride of place. But the writing, in its concern to get at the facts, holds down undercurrents of feeling. The poem seems motivated by quiet compassion and perhaps even admiration for the bird's cheerful persistence through poverty, and follows an emotional trajectory which sees the receptive alertness and understated pity ('in vain') of the first quatrain shelve into melancholic reflection in the second ('But summer leaves are gone') before the poetry steels itself by bringing to mind the bird's 'Content[ment]' with the move into the sestet.

But the writing's sense of privileged intimacy with the bird is tempered by perplexity. Its attempts to imagine into and sympathise with the bird's feelings and motivations are, for all their minute sensitivity, always aware that they are only attempts. The blackcap peeps around the hedge 'As wont where silk-cased insects used to lie', where 'As wont' identifies a certain affectionate familiarity with the bird's habits; yet when winter comes and the blackcap 'fares / But cloudy like the weather' the bird's feelings and behaviour become more elusive: 'to view / He flirts a happy wing & inly wears / Content'. Here 'to view' acknowledges its distance from the bird's true feelings, whilst the picture is further clouded by the complexly suggestive 'inly wears', whose implication of intimacy with what the bird feels 'inly' is held in check by 'wears', with its suggestion of a mood that is merely put on or adopted.

And yet the very nimbleness of the poet's shifting sympathy testifies to a form of success. Clare's best sonnets often feel their way through idiosyncratic rhyme schemes whose unobtrusive inventiveness both lays claim to the poem's own formal distinctiveness and pays tribute to the peculiarity of the creature or landscape it depicts. The twisting progress of the rhymes through this poem (*abab bcdc cddc ee*)

enliven its own agile manoeuvring ‘this way and that’ in order to gain as comprehensive an understanding as possible of the blackcap’s behaviour; it might even be said to mimic the ‘turns and peeps’ of the bird itself (Clare’s entry on the ‘Marsh Titmouse or Black cap’ in the ‘Bird List’ he kept at Helpston remarks that ‘it keeps constantly in motion’).<sup>42</sup> Such agility enables the enjambment of the twelfth line into the first line of the final couplet, where its momentum is pulled up short at the caesura, causing the rhythms of the poem as it reaches its close to take on the ‘familiar pertness’ of the bird. The enjambment in turn mutes the force of this couplet, so that, in tune with the poem’s finely modulated sense of its own authority, the closing reflection leaves us with anything but the crisply conclusive last word. Contemplating an apparently innocuous fact with unassuming mystification, the ending reaffirms the sympathetic gulf that exists between bird and poet, but in doing so it remains characteristic of the peculiar blend of self-assured detail and affectionate fascination through which Clare’s sonnets bring the natural world into focus at their most humanly and humanely engaging.

## V

Clare’s sonnets fall broadly into two groups: those written at Helpston in the late 1820s and early 1830s (like ‘The Blackcap’ and ‘The Wood Larks Nest’), and those (like the poems on the squirrel and the field mouse) written at Northborough, mostly from 1835-36. The division straddles one of the turning points in Clare’s life and career, his ‘flitting’ from Helpston to Northborough in the spring of 1832. Though Clare had approached it cheerfully, the move was, in his Oxford editors’ sharply exact word, a

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<sup>42</sup> *Natural History Prose* 145.



‘deracination’.<sup>43</sup> ‘He was going out of his knowledge, away from the parish of Helpston that had mapped the contours of his very being’, says Jonathan Bate.<sup>44</sup> ‘Decay A Ballad’ is one of a group of poems written around this period in which Clare explores new modes of articulating this newly shaken sense of self.<sup>45</sup> Its ballad-like ten-line stanzas, rhymed *abab cdcd ee*, strain to impose a familiar, archetypal structure upon a welter of shifting, unstable feelings. They lament the loss of an old voice which is at the same time the uncovering of a new one:

The stream it is a naked stream  
Where we on sundays used to ramble  
The sky hangs oer a broken dream  
The brambles dwindled to a bramble  
O poesy is on its wane  
I cannot find her haunts again  
(l. 45-50)

Moments of discovery in these Northborough poems often equate to realisations of loss. They encounter a nature bereft of personal significance in a voice bereft of personal colour; a style accommodated to ‘things as they are, naked of associations’ in Barrell’s words.<sup>46</sup> That is a distinctive tone in itself, however, and it might be observed how that word ‘find’ here finds itself caught up in a cascade of assonance and internal rhyme (‘stream... stream... ramble... dream... brambles... dwindled... bramble... find’) whose drab music demonstrates Clare’s capacity to wring a newly toughened poetic

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<sup>43</sup> Eric Robinson, Eric Powell and P. M. S. Dawson, ‘Introduction’, *Middle Period* xxii.

<sup>44</sup> Bate, *Biography* 387.

<sup>45</sup> The poem is generally grouped alongside ‘Remembrances’ and ‘The Flitting’ as a trio of poems which rise to the occasion of his move. See Barrell, *Idea of Landscape* 173-77 and Chilcott, *Critical Reading* 108-118.

<sup>46</sup> Barrell, *Idea of Landscape* 175-6.

voice out of his loss. The attention of these poems often falls upon incidents which resonate with a subdued weight of implication about Clare's attempt to come to terms with a newly impersonal world. There is minute tragedy in a poem on the groundlark:

Close where the milking maidens pass  
In roots & twitches drest  
Within a little bunch of grass  
A groundlark made her nest  
The maiden touched her with her gown  
& often frit her out  
& looked an set her buckets down  
But never found it out  
The eggs where large & spotted round  
And dark as is the fallow ground  
The schoolboy kicked the grass in play  
But danger never guest  
& when they came to mow the hay  
They found an empty nest<sup>47</sup>

This is an inventively stripped-down sonnet. Its subtlety is evident in its rhyming. Amidst three *abab* ballad-quatrain, Clare arrives at his couplet in the ninth and tenth lines. It focuses a moment of discovery which might normally be the poem's climax, but here is the precursor to an upsetting outcome. The weight of feeling is carried by the hollow return of the word 'found' (twice rhymed with, though not in, the couplet) in the final line. It might at first seem fortunate that the girl cannot find the nest; in fact, it prevents her warning against its destruction. The movement reprimands us for any assumption that the girl would want to do the eggs harm, and opens up a miniature window on the cruelty of fate. In light of this close to the poem Clare's

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<sup>47</sup> *Middle Period* v. 367.

surprising choice of tense ('The eggs where [i.e. 'were'] large & spotted round') takes on a tragic colouring: the eggs 'were' like this, but they are no longer.

The moping low spirits of 'I wandered out one rainy day' are comparable in their restrained power to affect. This poem about a quail's nest again pivots on that word 'found':

The nest was full of eggs & round  
I met a shepherd in the vales  
& stood to tell him what I found  
He knew & said it was a quails

For he himself the nest had found  
Among the wheat and on the green  
When going on his daily round  
With eggs as many as fifteen

Among the stranger birds they feed  
Their summer flight is short & slow  
Theres very few know where they breed  
& scarcely any where they go

(l. 9-20)<sup>48</sup>

The loop formed by 'round...found...found...round' is an inspired piece of uninventive rhyming, as if to say 'there is nothing new to see here'. The writing picks up echoes from Wordsworth and Keats, but the kind of lyric it wants to be is Clare's own; its allusions do not rest upon those poets, but cast them into the gloom of its own drab style, as trying to drain them of colour: 'I wandered lonely as a cloud', becomes 'I wandered out one rainy day'; 'I met a lady in the meads' ('La Belle Dame Sans Merci' l.

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<sup>48</sup> *Middle Period* v. 291.

13) becomes 'I met a shepherd in the vales'; 'very few to love' and 'few could know' ('She dwelt among th'untrodden ways' l. 4, l. 9) feed into those last two lines, 'Theres very few know where they breed | & scarcely any where they go', and help to shape their double impact of stating plainly the secretiveness of the bird, and leaving it at that in a way that holds open the impression that something has gone untold.

#### IV

The spirit of innovation which I have been illustrating in this chapter was linked to Clare's desire, extending through the 1820s and into the 1830s, to forge a distinctive – and successful – poetic identity. If that attempt finds itself on the back foot in the Northborough poems, it understandably diminished further in the years after 1841, when Clare was committed to an asylum for the second time. 'Oh, poetry, ah, I know, I once had something to do with poetry, a long while ago: but it was not good', one visitor records him as saying in 1843.<sup>49</sup> The achievements of those years, though frequently astonishing, feel sporadic, less driven by the desire to 'stand on my own bottom as a poet' that Clare broadcast to Eliza Emmerson in 1832.<sup>50</sup> But isolated instances of experimentation remain. A case in point is the often-overlooked lyric 'Spring' ('Pale sunbeams shine'). It is, on the face of it, a modest piece of description, but, in its rhythmic control, and the creative assurance with which it incorporates the ambivalences and uncertainties that result from its absence of punctuation, it proves unlike anything else Clare wrote. The poem consists of seven five-line stanzas, their lines ranging between dimeter and pentameter, unshackling themselves from any pre-

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<sup>49</sup> Spencer. T. Hall 'Bloomfield and Clare', *Critical Heritage* 279.

<sup>50</sup> *Clare's Letters*, 604.

established pattern. They track the tentative and shifting moods that characterise the arrival of spring, and in doing so rehearse a quietly expressive new voice:

Pale sun beams gleam  
That nurtur a few flowers  
Pile wort & daisey and a sprig o' green  
On white thorn bushes  
In the leaf strewn hedge

(l. 1-5)<sup>51</sup>

What is immediately striking is the pace. The usual Clare lyric on 'Spring' bounces along at a fair lick (thus 'Some Days Before the Spring': 'There's a gladness of heart in the first days of Spring | There's a pleasure in memory to hear the bird's sing' (l. 1-2)).<sup>52</sup> But this is far more measured: Clare handles the arrival of each individual word with unusual delicacy. 'These harbingers | Show spring is coming fast' (l. 6-7), Clare announces at the start of his second stanza. '[H]arbingers' there is typical of the way this heightened carefulness enables Clare to select words outside of his usual range (perhaps he is remembering Herbert's 'The Forerunners' or Milton's 'Song, On May Morning': 'Now the bright morning Star, | Dayes harbinger, Comes dancing from the East' (l. 1-2)). Along with the surprising 'fast', it unsettles the opening's placid descriptive mood to establish an ominous undercurrent that runs through the poem and holds back any urge to uncomplicated sunny optimism. For now, however, it contents itself with an affectionate vignette:

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<sup>51</sup> *Later Poems* i. 203. Another of Clare's rhythmically experimental later poems, 'Winter' (*Late Poems* ii. 813) is discussed by James McKusick as an illustration of 'the stubbornly unconventional quality of Clare's asylum poetry' in 'Tyranny of Grammar' 275-6.

<sup>52</sup> *Later Poems* i. 424.

...these the schoolboy marks  
& wastes an hour from school  
Agen the pasture hedge

Cropping the daisy  
& the pile wort flowers  
Pleased with the Spring and all he looks upon  
He opes his spelling book  
& hides her blossoms there

(l. 8-15)

The effect Clare wrings from that line 'Pleased with the Spring and all he looks upon' is integral to the way the poem generates its faltering forward movement. Janus-like, it might be the end of one unit of sense ('picking the flowers, he is pleased by the spring') or the beginning of another ('pleased by the spring, he opens his book...'). In other poems by Clare this might seem chanced-upon; here, it appears calculated, the result of an effort to find a form responsive to the faltering development of the spring itself.

The poetry's nuances of tone and feeling are allied to the alert precision of its observations. Both are brought to life by the controlled rhythmic irregularity that shows itself to its best advantage in the poem's third stanza:

Shadows fall dark  
Like black in the pale Sun  
& lye the bleak day long  
Like black stock under hedges  
& bare wind rocked trees

(l. 11-15)

The three strokes of emphasis (*'Shadows fall dark'*) on which the stanza opens put an end to the tentative hopefulness sustained throughout the opening three stanzas and strike out a staccato rhythm that interlaces the stanzas pared back alliterative music ('dark... black... bleak... black... stock... rocked'). This is a spring whose progress seems to have frozen, or even reversed, to precipitate an eerily apocalyptic vision: 'Shadows fall dark', meaning they fall darkly, but also that they become darker in themselves; they do so 'like black', a simile which wrests morbid force from its apparent inarticulacy; shadows spread the ground like 'stock', deadened vegetation, but with a hint of something 'lifeless' or 'motionless' more generally (hence 'stock still').

It is a skilled and remarkable change of atmosphere. But the poem never allows itself to settle into a single mood; it is always on the move, matching its unfolding tones with the teasingly unpredictable developments of its lyric voice. In the succeeding stanza it takes us until the fifth line to realise that the first line is meant as a self-contained unit of sense:

Tis chill but pleasant  
In the hedge bottom lined  
With brown seer leaves the last  
Year littered there & left  
Mopes the hedge Sparrow

(l. 16-20)

The realisation is all the more affecting for the way it is precipitated by 'Mopes', which, paradoxically, gives its own sentence an unexpected kick of energy. The fluidity of Clare's writing here is such that, though the end of the stanza invites us to pause, the

invitation is deceptive, because the sentence in fact presses on into at least the first two lines of the stanza that follows:

...Mopes the hedge sparrow

With trembling wings & cheeps

Its welcome to the pale sunbeams

Creeping through and further on

Made of green moss

The green eggs are seen

(l. 20-5)

The third line again exploits the ambiguities that result from the absence of punctuation, diffracting into two potential interpretations depending upon whether we take 'Creeping through' as rounding off the previous sentence, describing the motion of the 'pale sunbeams', or as inaugurating the one that follows, as if beckoning us on.

The poem's repetitions help create the impression of a poetry which, for all its descriptive precision, is acutely conscious of its own lyrical veneer. Here the 'pale sunbeams' on which the second line comes to rest recall both the poem's opening words, and the 'pale Sun' of the fourth stanza; the image befits the poem's own wan brilliance. The final stanza picks up on and intensifies this stanza's Marvellian 'green',<sup>53</sup> and its closing movements also pivot, wonderingly, on repetitions, shaping

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<sup>53</sup> Clare had imitated Marvell in the 1820s in a poem called 'Farewell & Defiance to Love' (for its inclusion in a letter to William Hone see *Clare's Letters* 342) and took lines from 'The Garden', 'How could such sweet and wholesome hours | Be measured but with herbs and flow'rs' (l. 71-2) as the epigraph for *The Midsummer Cushion*.



the impression, as Tim Chilcott describes it, 'of a new world poised on the point of happening':

All token spring & every day  
Green & more green hedges & close  
& everywhere appears  
Still tis but March  
But still that March is Spring  
(l. 31-5)

What moves us is the poetry's hesitant wonder at a moment of awakening; an awakening taking place simultaneously of the natural world, and the poetry's responsiveness to that world. The poem's experimentalism is quiet, but its testimony to Clare's effort to find new, intricately personal modes of expression is no less genuine because of that.

## Chapter 3

### Clare III: 'Poetical Prossing'

A peasant in his daily cares –  
The Poet in his joy

Clare, 'The Peasant Poet', l. 15-6<sup>1</sup>

#### I

When Clare was committed to the Northampton General Lunatic Asylum in 1842, it was, according to Dr Fenwick Skrimshire, who filled out his admission papers, 'after years addicted to poetical prossing' [i.e. 'prosing'].<sup>2</sup> It is a suggestive phrase in all kinds of ways, gesturing at the compulsiveness with which Clare wrote, at his loose focus and breezy energy. The supposedly typical Clare lyric might be said to demonstrate the merits of a kind of 'poetical prosing', its virtues those of a sketch – nimble, rough-edged:

#### TO THE FOX FERN

Haunter of woods lone wilds & solitudes  
Where none but feet of birds and things as wild  
Doth print a foot track near where summer's light  
Buried in boughs forgets its glare and round thy crimped leaves  
Feints in a quiet dimness fit for musings  
And melancholy moods with here and there  
A golden thread of sunshine stealing through  
The evening shadowy leaves that seem to creep

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<sup>1</sup> *Later Poems* ii. 845.

<sup>2</sup> See Bate, *Biography* 5.

### Like leisure in the shade<sup>3</sup>

This is an early poem, eight and a half lines which make their apostrophe to the fox fern, and having completed it, find they have nothing else to say. It contains a lot that might go under the name of ‘prosing’: the suppleness of its single exploratory sentence; the willingness, where necessary, to overflow or undershoot the bounds of the pentameter in order to stay true to the facts; the chanced-upon evocativeness of the phrase ‘evening shadowy leaves’. All these features help to dishevel the ‘poetical’, sensibility-filled talk of ‘solitudes’, ‘musings’ and ‘melancholy moods’. We might feel that there is a degree of self-portraiture going on, too: Clare is as much a ‘Haunter of woods’ as the plant itself is, and the plant’s qualities, its ‘crimped’ textures, ‘with here and there | A golden thread of sunshine stealing through’ match those of the verse – a skilfully shambling mix of the prosy and the poetical which answers to Dr Skrimshire’s description nicely.

Clare’s present advocates tend to emphasise the ‘prosy’, ‘awkward’ side to his work. For Tom Paulin his power as a poet has to do with the roughened ‘textures he seeks out – all those crizzling, crimped, crinkled, bleached, shaggy, tattered, wrinkling, stunted, dented, dimpling, ragged, scribbled, and blotted surfaces, which are partly images for his efforts to set words down on paper with his “jobbling pen”’.<sup>4</sup> Mina

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<sup>3</sup> *Early Poems* i. 469. Jonathan Bate points out the surprising glimpse of Clare’s more mature manner in this early lyric, noting that for all its ‘quiet perfection in its precision and lack of pretension’ the poem was ‘passed over for Clare’s early collections’ (*Biography* 153).

<sup>4</sup> Tom Paulin, ‘Introduction’, *John Clare: The Major Works* ed. and introd. Eric Robinson and David Powell, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004) xxv.

Gorji sees him as ‘an exemplary prosaic poet’: ‘his verse manifests [...] a jerky, uneven, awkward quality which might be described as a prosaic effect’.<sup>5</sup>

It is often this authentic, scruffy, provincial image of Clare to which editors appeal in justifying the decision to present Clare’s texts in their original, unpunctuated state. ‘The very grain of Clare’s language was smoothed and planed away by Taylor in his insistence on the need to “purify the dialect of the tribe”’, argued Geoffrey Summerfield and Eric Robinson in 1965, and, on the whole, critics since have agreed.<sup>6</sup> But there is a case that this creates a slightly misleading idea of Clare’s voice; its movements are not always so straightforwardly at odds with the conventions of print. In 1821 Clare and his publisher John Taylor debated an indifferent stanza from Clare’s poem ‘The Approach of Spring’ (presented here in the punctuated form in which Taylor returned it to Clare):

And, fairest Daughter of the year,  
Thrice welcome here anew;  
Tho’ gentle Storms tis thine to fear  
The roughest blast has blew.<sup>7</sup>

Taylor to Clare: ‘I cannot mend this Verse, pray help me out with it. *Blew* ought to be *blown*.’<sup>8</sup> Clare in reply: ‘Your verse is a devilish puzzle I may alter but I cannot mend grammer in learning is like Tyranny in government – confound the bitch Ill never be her slave & have a vast good mind not to alter the verse in question – by g-d Ive tryd

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<sup>5</sup> Mina Gorji, ‘Clare’s Awkwardness’, *Essays in Criticism* 54.3 (2004): 221.

<sup>6</sup> Though see Chapter 1 for more recent challenges to this stance.

<sup>7</sup> The stanza is quoted in Taylor’s punctuated version (*Clare’s Letters* 231 n.1). For Clare’s original see *Early Poems* i. 520.

<sup>8</sup> *Clare’s Letters* 231 n. 1.

an hour & cannot do a syllable so do your best or let it pass'.<sup>9</sup> Critics are inclined to be stirred by Clare's bullishness here, excerpting his remarks about the 'Tyranny' of grammar as testimony to a poet suspicious of the formalities of standard English. It is this phrase, for instance, which provokes James McKusick's politically-charged attack on Taylor's editorial interference: 'Clare's unstopped lines provide multiple branching pathways of possible meaning, thereby challenging the tyranny of grammar and its prescriptive requirement of unambiguous expression'.<sup>10</sup> Yet this account is hardly true of these lines, where the impression is rather of a piece of phrasing cast immovably into the mould of its particular form. The word 'blew' which is at the root of all the problems *may* be a stubborn manifestation of Clare's freedom in introducing an ungrammatical vernacular into poetry, but it might just as well be a product of his voice's submission to the demands of lineation and rhyme. Clare may well have rejected that 'awkard squad of pointings called commas colons semicolons',<sup>11</sup> but as T. S. Eliot observed, 'verse, whatever else it may or may not be, is itself a system of *punctuation*',<sup>12</sup> and one which is liable to make its presence felt more prominently when other systems are abandoned. The reader coming to Clare anticipating a lyric voice flamboyantly expressive of its own 'freedom' in its transgression of boundaries and conventions is likely to be uneasy about the extent to which in extricating itself from the control of the one 'system' of punctuation and grammar, Clare's poetic voice reveals itself to be 'slave' to another.

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<sup>9</sup> Clare's *Letters* 231.

<sup>10</sup> McKusick, 'Tyranny of Grammar' 261.

<sup>11</sup> Clare's *Letters* 491.

<sup>12</sup> T. S. Eliot, letter to the editor of the *TLS*, 27 Sep 1928, *The Letters of T. S. Eliot, Vol. 4: 1926-28*, ed. Valerie Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 2013) 260.

## II

What is very often striking from the perspective of any attempt to pin down the uniqueness of Clare's voice is the anonymity, rather than the distinctiveness of his manner. Time and again his poems discover an outlet for intensely personal feeling in clichéd, impersonal, 'poetical' not 'prosaic' textures. The early songs and ballads, whose blandness Symons protested against, again provide a way in.<sup>13</sup> Their dealings with Clare's adolescent affections for Mary Joyce are charged with an authentic current of feeling, but they veer between autobiographical candour and poetic convention. 'Ballad: I've often had hours...', to take a typical example, builds from a cheerful opening, in which the poet's rakish persona is in tune with the brisk lilt of the rhythms ('I've often had hours to be meeting the lasses | & wisht that the sun in his setting coud stay' (1-2)) to a moment of sudden intensity in its second stanza, as Clare sets his feelings for his addressee apart:

But never o never such 'lectrified feeling  
Ere throbd thro my heart be as fair as they be  
When round thy sweet charms my embraces was stealing  
My soul stood spectator in presence of thee

(l. 13-16)<sup>14</sup>

Clare's Oxford editors argue that this shift in intensity makes us 'aware we are dealing with more than convention';<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Bate identifies an 'electricity' in the lines

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<sup>13</sup> On the whole, the regularity is a result of the fact that 'Clare makes the line the natural syntactical unit, as it commonly is in the song tradition', as John Lucas points out (*John Clare, Writers and their Work* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1994) 7).

<sup>14</sup> *Early Poems* ii. 81.

<sup>15</sup> Eric Robinson, David Powell and Margaret Grainger, 'Introduction', *Early Poems* i. xiv.

which suggests they were inspired by ‘renew[ed] acquaintance with Mary’.<sup>16</sup> But if the lines express feeling which transcends ‘convention’, they do so in a language which takes convention to extremes. The excitement owes to the way the poetry, in giving a jolt to the notion of the heart’s ‘throbbing’ through that nonchalant ‘lectrified’, for instance, or through the endearing clumsiness of ‘embraces was stealing’, refuses its own status as cliché.

The rhythms are energetic, but hardly supple. It is instructive to contrast the movements of this poem with the grain of Clare’s voice in his accounts of his relationship with Mary in his prose of the period. The following passage appears in his *Autobiographical Sketches* (1821):

we played with each other but named nothing of love yet I fancyd her eyes told me her affections we walked together as school companions in leisure hours but our talk was of play & our actions the wanton innocence of childern yet young as my heart was it woud turn chill when I touchd her hand & trembled and I fancyd her feelings were the same for as I gazd earnestly in her face a tear woud hang in her smiling eye & she woud turn to whipe it away her heart was as tender as a birds but when she grew up to woman hood she felt her station above mine at least I felt that she thought so...<sup>17</sup>

The flexibility of the prose, free from the ‘punctuation’ of verse, affords Clare’s personality a far fuller presence. The voice is agile enough to animate and re-inhabit past feeling, but also to keep a degree of distance, in a tender apprehension of the simultaneous comedy and pathos of adolescent love. Clare’s phrases seem to hang on

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<sup>16</sup> Bate, *Biography* 138.

<sup>17</sup> Clare, ‘Autobiographical Fragments’, *By Himself* 87.

to the coattails of feeling, charting a nervous ebb and flow of hopefulness and hesitancy, an interplay of passion and uncertain comprehension. For instance, the pace slows as Clare shifts from general recollection to a vignette of how ‘a tear would hang’ in Mary’s ‘smiling eye’ as he ‘gazed earnestly in her face’; the regular progression of Clare’s verse would not allow for movement like this, just as it would not allow for the surprise of a word like ‘earnestly’, which balances its acknowledgement of the depth of Clare’s former feelings with a willingness to poke fun at them.

The headlong energy of the prose gives phrases like ‘her heart was as tender as a bird’s’, which in another’s hands might sound clichéd or embarrassing, an unpremeditated, precariously original, feel; it testifies to Clare’s unself-conscious spirit of innovation. That facility is on show again in a slightly later passage which describes an accident that, as Clare puts it, ‘hurt my affection unto the rude feelings of imaginary cruelty’; there is a sense of as-yet-unarticulated emotions struggling into voice:

I cannot forget her little playful fairey form & witching smile even now  
I remember an accident that roused my best intentions & hurt my affection unto the rude feelings of imaginary cruelty when playing one day in the church yard I threw a green walnut that hit her on the eye she wept & I hid my sorrow and my affection together under the shame of not showing regret lest others might laugh it into love – my second was a riper one Elizabeth N[ewbon]...<sup>18</sup>

Again the tone shifts rapidly: the fond hilarity of the walnut incident yields to the surprising strength of feeling in ‘wept’ and Clare’s poignant admission that he hid his

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<sup>18</sup> Clare, ‘Autobiographical Fragments’ *By Himself* 88.



‘sorrow and affection’ lest others might, in his lilting phrase, ‘laugh it into love’, before the pun on ‘riper’ (recalling the ‘green walnut’) strikes an altogether brusquer, devil-may-care attitude as Clare moves on to his next love.

By comparison, the texture of the vast body of Clare’s poetry can seem disappointingly thin. Edward Thomas observed of Clare’s handling of song forms that ‘for so singular a man he added little of his own, and the result was only thinly tinged with his personality’.<sup>19</sup> This is the case even of the love poems Clare was writing late into his career. ‘First Love’, composed in the Northampton asylum in the mid-1840s, is a poem whose predictable idiom at first seems tainted by the adolescence it celebrates.<sup>20</sup> Evan Blackmore uses the poem as an instance of a strand of Clare’s poems whose ‘language conveys little of the texture of real life or personal experience’: it ‘might’ve been written by a 15-year-old boy.’<sup>21</sup> And it is true that the poem opens in a manner whose blandness makes the poetry’s claims about the distinctiveness of its feelings seem hollow:

I ne’er was struck before that hour  
With love so sudden and so sweet  
Her face it bloomed like a sweet flower  
And stole my heart away complete  
(‘First Love’ l. 1-4)<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas, *Feminine Influence on the Poets in Selected Prose* 25.

<sup>20</sup> There is some irony in the title, since the poem is in many ways as far from being a ‘First’ as possible, its entire subject being a poetic commonplace. As Greg Crossan notices, the poem owes a debt to a poem of the same title (lending further irony to its use of ‘First’) by William Kennedy, a copy of which Clare had in his library: ‘I longed to say a thousand things, | I longed, yet dared not speak, | Half-hoped, half-feared, that she might read | My thoughts upon my cheek’ (17-8) (‘Clare’s Debt to the Poets in His Library,’ *JCSJ* 5 (1986): 37-46 at 36).

<sup>21</sup> Evan Blackmore, ‘John Clare’s Psychiatric Disorder and Its Influence on his Poetry’, *Victorian Poetry* 24.3 (1986): 226.

<sup>22</sup> *Later Poems* i. 677.

And yet the poem charms through its ability to persuade that it is experiencing these clichés afresh. The bareness of the language gives the impression of gaining contact with an irreducible core of feeling. It warrants Thomas's more positive description, later in the same essay, of Clare's 'unprejudiced singing voice that knows not what it sings', which makes us 'believe that poets are not merely writing figuratively when they say "My love is like a red, red, rose", that they are to be taken more literally than they commonly are, that they do not invent or "make things up" as grown people do when they condescend to a child's game'.<sup>23</sup> The second stanza opens with a rush:

And then the blood rushed to my face  
And took my eyesight quite away  
The trees and bushes round the place  
Seemed midnight at noonday  
(l. 9-12)

In a sudden change of pace and focus, the rhythms tauten, shortening each alternative line to a trimeter ('Seemed midnight at noonday') and establishing a metrical pattern which continues into the second half of the stanza:

I could not see a single thing  
Words from my heart did start  
They spoke as chords do from the string  
And blood burnt round my heart  
(l. 13-16)

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<sup>23</sup> Thomas, *Feminine Influence on the Poets in Selected Prose* 30.

Blackmore is right to identify the preponderance of cliché, but less so about the poetry's handling of it. He does not notice how strangely the lines deal with the trope of being blinded by love: 'The trees and bushes round the place | Seemed midnight at noonday'. The serenity of movement, what Tim Chilcott labels the asylum poems' 'imperturbable lucidity',<sup>24</sup> gives the impression that nothing odd has gone on here, but to say that the 'trees and bushes' 'seemed midnight' paints a surprisingly surreal picture. Clichés are applied with disarmingly literal force. 'Words from the heart' is a conventional enough way of describing poetry or impassioned speech, but Clare's plain-spokenness gives the impression that he actually means it;<sup>25</sup> the spondaic thump of 'blood burnt' socks home with a force that suggests the 'burning' is to be taken with similar literalness, and the constrictions of the feeling it evokes are brought home by the suffocated repetition of 'heart' as it moves from the middle of the line to the closing rhyme position.

It is just as tricky to construe precise meaning in the closing stanza, despite its continued air of simplicity:

Are flowers the winters choice  
Is love's bed always snow  
She seemed to hear my silent voice  
Not loves appeals to know  
(l. 17-20)

Here the stanza's opening line has also withered to a trimeter: perhaps, if we are to understand these as the words that 'started' from the poet's heart, to indicate a

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<sup>24</sup> Chilcott, *Critical Reading* 145.

<sup>25</sup> One variant reading has, weirdly, 'Words from my eyes did start'.

moment of direct speech; perhaps just to underscore Clare's pained questioning (his isolation after the initial thrill of love is felt all the more fully across the stanza break for the way that its talk of 'winter' and 'snow' follows hot on the heels of 'blood burnt'). The poem offers no indication either way, and the situation is all the murkier for Clare's mention of his 'silent voice' in the line that follows (does it refer to his inner voice? or is it a way of describing the way his physical gestures give 'voice' to his feelings?). The way that 'Not' conjoins the lines is another crux. Simon Kövesi glosses 'loves appeals' as 'the rituals of normal courtship', and suggests that the line implies the woman 'is able to comprehend a truer language of love, which is an instinctual and inexpressible mode of communication'.<sup>26</sup> But the Oxford editors regard 'Not' as a mistranscription for 'And', a reading which either sees 'loves appeals' as the appeals that Clare himself is making, or allows for a more ironic reading of 'loves appeals' as the dubious appeal of being in love: that is, that the woman knows them and rightly shuns them. After this, the final four lines unfold more straightforwardly, though Clare's decision to close on a dash makes for an intriguingly open-ended effect:

I never saw so sweet a face  
As that I stood before  
My heart has left its dwelling place  
And can return no more –  
(l. 21-24)

The force of 'First Love' has to do with its idiosyncratic deployment of cliché. It epitomises a strand of Clare's lyricism which is bold in its very refusal to strain after

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<sup>26</sup> Simon Kövesi, 'John Clare's "First Love": A Close-Reading Workshop', 16 September 2003, online <<http://www.johnclare.info/main/1stlove.htm>> accessed 24<sup>th</sup> May 2014.

originality; and it convinces as to the veracity of its feelings through its confidence that they have strength enough to make an archetypal situation its own. Inadvertently, Blackmore's claim that it 'might've been written by a 15-year-old boy', pinpoints the source of its success.

### III

Clare's voice recurrently takes on a double-character of something at once intensely personal and shaped by poetic convention. The union is on show in a different guise in the imitations of Byron Clare composed in 1841, *Don Juan A Poem* and *Child Harold*. By this time Clare's initial fame had long faded: 1827's *The Shepherd's Calendar* had sold poorly; 1832's *Midsummer Cushion* had gone unpublished; in 1838 Clare had been consigned to High Beach asylum in Essex. So there is a degree of fantasy and wish-fulfilment in Clare's adoption of the persona of the era's most famous and successful poet, and a persistent question in reading Clare's Byron poems is just how aware Clare is of the distance between Byron and himself.<sup>27</sup> Late in *Don Juan*, he presses his claim to put on Byron's mantle: 'Though laurel wreaths my brows did ne'er environ, | I think myself as great a bard as Byron' (l. 285-6). The inventive rhymes do their own Byronic work with a dogged charm, but how witty one judges the lines to be will depend upon the degree of self-awareness one grants to that 'I think'. It is possible to regard the

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<sup>27</sup> Clare had happened upon Byron's funeral procession during a visit to London, and was stirred by his fame and reputation upon the common people: 'the Reverend the Moral and fastidious may say what they please about Lord Byrons fame and damn it as they list - he has gaind the path of its eterni[t]y without them and lives above the blight of their mildewing censure to do him damage' (*Autobiographical Fragments, By Himself* 157). The experience informed his 1825 'Essay on Popularity' (*Prose* 206-210). Clare's relationship with Byron has been covered by Mark Storey, (*Critical Introduction* 152-173) and Tim Chilcott (*Critical Reading*). More recent accounts include: Anne Barton, 'John Clare Reads Lord Byron', *Romanticism* 2.2 (1996): 127-48; Mark Storey, *The Problem of Poetry in the Romantic Period* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2002) 154-177; and Adam White, 'Identity in Place: Lord Byron, John Clare and Lyric Poetry', *Byron Journal* 40.2 (2012): 115-127.

lines as an exuberant assertion of poetic authority; but there is a despondent core of honesty to Clare's writing in these poems, and it is tempting to hear 'I think' as being laced with a wry display of Clare's delusions of grandeur. Clare's candour is characteristically more upfront than that, though. Frequently, what takes one by surprise, in *Don Juan* in particular, is not Clare's poetic ventriloquism, but the ferocity of his personal voice:

Marriage is nothing but a driveling hoax  
To please old codgers when they're turned of forty  
I've wed & left my wife like other folks  
But not until I found her false and faulty  
(l. 25-8)

The writing is petulant and misogynistic, but has a hysterical vigour. It grips the attention through its hilarious disregard for decorum and its cynical glee in being able to say what it wants, even its cheery self-justification: 'other folks' have 'wed & left' their wives – at least I waited until 'I found her false and faulty'. It conveys 'the peculiar urgency of a mind baffled by the maze of its own obsessions', in Tim Chilcott's elegant diagnosis.<sup>28</sup>

Clare admired Byron's 'undisguised honesty'.<sup>29</sup> The paradox of his Byron poems is that their – at times startling – honesty is released through the donning of a literary disguise. Imitation serves Clare as a means of accessing his individuality. In *Child Harold*, he effects a bold mix of the Spenserian stanza of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* with the verve of *Don Juan* to fashion his own thumbnail self-portrait:

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<sup>28</sup> Chilcott, *Critical Study* 156.

<sup>29</sup> Chilcott, *Critical Study* 147.

My life has been one love – no blot it out  
My life has been one chain of contradictions  
Madhouses Prisons wh-re shops – never doubt  
But that my life hath had some strong convictions  
That such was wrong – religion makes restrictions  
I would have followed – but life turned a bubble  
& clumb the jiant stile of maledictions  
They took me from my wife & to save trouble  
I wed again & made the error double

(l. 145-53)<sup>30</sup>

Clare begins by striking a grand posture only to 'blot it out' before the first line is through. His stanza's twisting rhymes and flowing enjambments mobilise a poetry whose lyric 'I' conveys a Byronic sense of the self as ever-changing, resistant to its own projections and intentions. But that 'I' speaks through an idiom which in its convolutions, and sense of making heavy weather of things is all Clare's own. The rhyming is not urbane, but contorted, liable to provoke juddering turns in direction rather than elegant transition: 'contradictions' triggers a contradictory rhyme with 'convictions', though the force of those 'convictions' is wryly muted by the 'some' that precedes it. The third rhyme in the set then turns the screw in speaking of the 'restrictions' of religion, only for these to be given the slip by the enjambment into 'I would have followed', as the verse floats free of such scruples onto the altogether lighter rhyme on 'bubble' and into the rueful reflection of the closing couplet. The mood wavers between celebration and lament.

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<sup>30</sup> *Later Poems* i. 40.

The whirling, angular rapidity of a stanza like this does not so much *shape* a sense of identity as chase it. The poetry is volatile; it catches, in Tim Chilcott's words, 'a spirit of intermittent impulse'.<sup>31</sup> The lines encapsulates the procedure of *Child Harold* as a whole as they swerve between ecstatically testing the liberation offered by poetry, and wrenching inspiration from the depths of personal experience. It is characteristic of the way the whole poem moves that this stanza, with its Byron-like sense of the self as rewritten in the heat of poetic creation, should be followed by one which dwells upon Clare's incarceration at High Beech, 'Among a low lived set and dirty crew' (l. 156): 'Now stagnant grows my too refined clay | I envy birds their wings to flye away' (l. 161-62). And yet even here, as the poetry moves, as Mark Storey puts it, 'from doggerel to an almost Shakespearean desire for release'<sup>32</sup> (the sudden sure-footedness of that final line being one of those moments where Clare seems superbly and surprisingly in control), there is evidence of poetry's ability to transform and re-fashion identity.

*Child Harold* is a difficult poem to read not only for its persistent changes in tone and direction, but because at times it touches Clare's anguish in a manner that is unpalatably raw: 'My Mind Is Dark & Fathomless & Wears | The Hues Of Hopeless Agony & Hell' (l. 1011-2). Clare's capitalization, prevalent throughout the poem's increasingly ragged later stanzas, invites torrid, meticulous emphasis, pushing feeling to the surface of every word. Such passages provoke Valerie Pedlar's question as to whether the writing's 'value as poetry is limited by its function as therapy'.<sup>33</sup> But they also bear witness to a bedrock of authentic feeling which becomes the launch pad for

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<sup>31</sup> Chilcott, *Critical Study* 157.

<sup>32</sup> Storey, *Problem of Poetry* 166.

<sup>33</sup> Valerie Pedlar, 'John Clare's *Child Harold*,' *JCSJ* 8 (1989): 16.



the poem's tonal agility. Though John Ashbery speaks of the poem's 'sombreness and austerity',<sup>34</sup> Clare's sorrow is made the bass-note to surprisingly lively variations in mood and register, and a chameleon-like adoption of conflicting voices. The poem intersperses its almost-Spenserian stanzas<sup>35</sup> with songlike lyrics. Early in the poem the keynote is struck by a ballad of pellucid simplicity, whose counterpointing of lament and consolation setting the poles between which the whole poem oscillates. On the one hand Clare grieves:

My hopes are all hopeless  
My skys have no sun  
Winter fell in youths mayday  
& still freezes on

(l. 30-3)

The stanza's transparency wrinkles upon closer inspection, its play with paradox and idiom precipitating the puzzle of 'hopeless' hopes (as often in Clare, feelings are felt to tumble into their opposites) and the strange imagining of movement-in-stasis in 'freeze on'. On the other hand he offers brilliant affirmations:

True love is eternal  
For God is the giver  
& love like the soul will  
Endure – & forever

(l. 38-41)

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<sup>34</sup> John Ashbery, 'John Clare: "Grey Openings Where The Light Looks Through",' *Other Traditions*, The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000) 13.

<sup>35</sup> 'Almost-Spenserian', because, in one of those alterations which being convincingly construed as either deliberate or a mistake, the closing lines of Clare's stanza is usually a pentameter rather than alexandrine.

Up to this point, this particular ballad's phrasing has coincided entirely with its lineation, so the enjambment over the final line break, 'Will | Endure', disturbs the poem's neat counterpoint and conveys the effort of will involved in placing faith in 'love'. At this, the fragile simplicity of Clare's singing voice expands into the vatic authority of the immediately succeeding stanza:

& he who studies nature's volume through  
& reads it with a pure unselfish mind  
Will find God's power all round in every view  
As one bright vision of the almighty mind  
(l. 42-5)

The agility with which the poem wrests itself from despair into confidence across this series is impressive. Typically, however, the poem's progression is more haphazard, its transitions more jolty. The impression is of an autobiographical poetry which, if it cannot sustain the 'mobile duality between the new life gained in the act of writing poetry and the experiential self that must exist for the desire to write poetry to come into being' that Michael O'Neill locates in Byron,<sup>36</sup> does win a sane awareness of the limits to the freedom from the suffering self that art can offer. As Ashbery observes the effect: 'each stanza seems to begin at the beginning, producing a curious effect of stasis within movement'.<sup>37</sup> Throughout, postures are tried out and illusions temporarily sustained before being discarded as partial-truths, or deceptions. Sometimes the disjunction between autobiography and Clare's persona within the poem is effected by a disruption so momentary as a line-ending, as when in a song

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<sup>36</sup> Michael O'Neill, "'Tears Shed or Unshed': Romantic Poetry and Questions of Biography," *Romantic Biography*, ed. Arthur Bradley and Alan Rawes (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003) 6.

<sup>37</sup> Ashbery, *Other Traditions* 20-1.

early in the poem Clare indulges in an idealised imagining of himself and Mary: ‘She in the Lowlands & I in the glen | Of these forest beeches’ (64-5). There the rising rhythm and natural pause between the lines encourage us to take the first line as a self-sufficient unit, so that reading over the line-ending with the enjambment necessitates a sudden shift in intonation, Clare’s fantasy becoming grounded by the immediate presence of ‘*these* forest beeches’ [my emphasis] and his actual surroundings in Essex. More often, shifts occur in the gaps between stanzas and songs, as when later in the poem Clare temporarily recaptures the pastoral ease of his youthful voice, ‘About the meadows now I love to sit | On banks bridge walls & rails as when a boy’ (l. 723-4), and accompanies it with songs of tranquil contentment –

I will love her as long  
As the brooks they shall flow  
For Mary is mine &  
Whereso ever I go  
(l. 791-3)

– only for this oversimplification to rebound, via a stanza that laments how ‘lies keep climbing round loves sacred stem’ (l. 799), into a melodramatic dramatization of Clare’s torment:

The lightnings vivid flashes – rend the cloud  
That rides like castled crags along the sky  
& splinters them to fragments –  
(l. 804-6)

The lines might be said to find an image for the shape of the poem itself.

In *Child Harold* Clare is not – or is only sporadically – successful in ‘being Byron’. But his Byronic voice does offer him a way of ‘being Clare’. The poem has a Byronic relish for the protean sense of identity poetry affords. It suggests that finding an authentic voice for the self is finding one appropriate to its momentary moods. It comes to rest, exhaustedly, in the language of eighteenth-century retirement poetry:

Hail Solitude still Peace & Lonely good  
Thou spirit of all joys to be alone  
[...]  
The hearts hid anguish here I make it known  
& tell my troubles to the gentle wind  
Friends cold neglects have froze my heart to stone  
& wrecked the voyage of a quiet mind  
(l. 1274-81)

The stanza owes its chill to its twist from repose to anguish, a transition drawn to a point through Clare’s affecting deployment of that ungrammatical ‘froze’ (for frozen). The pathos of the final image, with its soft echo of Cowper’s ‘The Castaway’, one of Clare’s favourite poems,<sup>38</sup> lies in its modestly heroic notion of the mind’s ‘voyage’, and most of all in the unassuming adjective ‘quiet’, which fends off the pressure of its troubled antithesis ‘unquiet’ to offer up a resigned and understated plea against the cruelty of fate.

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<sup>38</sup> Cowper, parodied in Clare’s poem ‘My Mary’, was a favourite from an early age. Clare recalled his early fishing trips with his friend Thomas Porter: “he used often to carry a curious old book in his pocket very often a sort of jest book [...] and he felt as happy over these while we wild away the impatience of a bad fishing day under a green willow or an odd thorn as I did over Thomson Cowper and Walton which I often took in my pocket to read” (‘Autobiographical Fragments’ *By Himself* 53). For shipwreck imagery more generally in Clare’s poems, and its “conjunction of shipwreck and solitude or absolute isolation” (19) see Edward Strickland, “The Shipwreck Metaphor in Clare”, *JCSJ* 8 (1989): 17-23.

#### IV

Clare's description of 'the voyage of a quiet mind' invites a sad contrast between his own travails in *Child Harold* and the more confident travel that underpins Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. It is often in its adoption of the motif of life as a journey that Clare's poem is able to voice personal suffering most affectingly. The motif (drawn from the ballads, as well as from Byron) often allows him to bring 'experiential self' and 'the new life gained in the act of writing poetry' into contact through the interposition of a single word, as in the ballad that starts up:

In this cold world without a home  
Disconsolate I go

(l. 934-7)

Here the pathos, and the sense of an individual speaker, is kindled by 'Disconsolate', with its prosy disruption of the song's limpid rhythms,<sup>39</sup> but held in check by the restraint of that ballad-verb 'go' with its bland reduction of life to a matter of 'going', journeying on. Clare travels 'without a home', but that is the case, his ambiguous phrasing implies, because it is a 'world without a home' that he travels through.

Clare knew what 'journeying' entailed. In July 1841 he spent four days on end walking home to Northampton from an asylum in Essex in the belief he was returning to Mary (she had in fact died in 1838). There is a harrowing account of this in his *Journey out of Essex*, the road-diary in which he recorded the trip. Its relentless prose

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<sup>39</sup> Jonathan Barker describes how the achievement of this poem, and other lyrics like it, 'guided through the form of the poem by [Clare's] instinct for the sounds and movement of the words in the line, rather than a preconceived form or tune' ('Songs of Our Land' 86).

proves a fine vehicle for what Seamus Heaney calls Clare's sense of the 'one-thing-after-anotherness of the world':<sup>40</sup>

at length I came to a place where the road branched off into two turnpikes one to the right about & the other straight forward and on going bye my eye glanced on a milestone standing under the hedge so I heedlessly turned back to read it to see where the other road led too & on doing so I found it led to London I then suddenly forgot which was North or South and though I narrowly examined both ways I could see no tree or bush or stone heap that I could recollect having passed so I went on mile after mile almost convinced I was going the same way I came and these thoug[h]ts were so strong upon me that doubt and hopelessness made me turn so feeble that I was scarcely able to walk yet I could not sit down or give up but shuffled along...

As the journal goes on, Clare's entries for each day get longer, and the paragraph breaks that interrupt those entries become scarcer, generating an encroaching feeling of directionlessness, of there being no end in sight. Clare had delusionally believed he was returning home to Mary. On the night of his return, learning of her demise, he wrote one of *Child Harold's* most affecting songs, 'I've wandered many a weary mile':<sup>41</sup>

Ive wandered many a weary mile  
Love in my heart was burning  
To find a home in Mary's smile  
But cold is loves returning  
The cold ground was a feather bed

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<sup>40</sup> Heaney, 'John Clare's "Prog"' 282. Heaney is speaking about Clare's poems, but the observation translates suggestively to the momentum of his prose, too.

<sup>41</sup> The *Journey Out of Essex* records Clare's refusal to believe that Mary had died: 'Mary was not there, neither could I get any information about her further than the old story of her being dead six years ago, which might be taken from a bran new old newspaper printed a dozen years ago, but I took no notice of the blarney having seen her myself about a twelvemonth ago alive and well and as young as ever' (264).

Truth never acts contrary  
I had no home above my head  
My home was love and Mary  
(l. 92-9)

There is a near-heartbreaking candour here, but it is refracted through a prism of literary archetype. The writing channels the diary's piercingly direct account Clare's suffering through a pattern of bold contrast in imagery (heat against cold, wandering against home) and sound (the interlaced *ws* and *ms* of the opening line, the alternating masculine and feminine rhymes) characteristic of a more impersonal, ballad-like speaker. Clearly there is a risk of bathos. And yet the poetry is saved by its honesty. An example is the line 'Love in my heart was burning', where that slightly strange imperfect tense 'was burning' does two things. First, it touches a note of calm reportage, as if, for all the hurt intimacy of the writing, Clare does not want to fuss. Secondly, like Clare's images in 'First Love', it refuses to strain after effect: it says something like 'I am not bothered that this is hackneyed, since it is an accurate statement of how I felt.' As Jonathan Barker remarks, 'In someone else's hands the line might appear clichéd, but here it strikes us as true to feeling and the poet's experience'.<sup>42</sup>

For all its directness, the poem also exhibits the increased rhythmic subtlety and control that sets the voice of Clare's mature songs apart from his earlier efforts. After the second stanza has re-asserted his devotion to Mary ('And changing as her love may be | My own shall never vary' (l. 13-4) – a promise borne out by each stanza's

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<sup>42</sup> Barker 'Songs of Our Land' 88.

manner of winding round to an unvarying closing rhyme on 'Mary'), the third effects a change in key:

Nor night nor day nor sun nor shade  
Week month nor rolling year  
Repairs the breach wronged love hath made  
There madness – misery here  
(l. 108-111)

It is certainly possible to read this with a songlike lilt, but doing justice to the weight of feeling demands a heavier imposition of stress, allowing the rhythms to slow and pull against the underlying metre:

*Nor night, nor day, nor sun, nor shade,  
Week, month, nor rolling year  
Repairs the breach wronged love hath made  
There madness – misery here*

Again, the poetry draws power from its autobiographical base: 'There madness – misery here', is not an abstract gesture, but rather distils Clare's situation into a single line of bare counterpoint, the chiasmic patterning outlining his plight between 'madness' in the Essex asylum and 'misery' at home. Clare's anguish precipitates a pained questioning in the second half of the stanza:

Lifes lease was lengthened by her smiles  
– Are truth & love contrary  
No ray of hope my life beguiles  
Ive lost love home & Mary



(l. 112-115)

'Lifes lease was lengthened': the alliteration draws out the length of the line itself. But its gratitude soon subsides into a suspicion, hinted at in 'lease', that love only works to deceive, covering up the nature of 'truth'. This tough-minded stance continues through the closing lines' attitude towards 'hope': 'beguiles' might seem to be there only to satisfy the rhyme, but it also signals, even as the line admits of a yearning for 'hope', a hard-bitten wariness about hope's power to deceive. The poetry, for all its fragility, deserves Harold Bloom's praise: Clare's 'pathos is redeemed by his immediacy, and moves us because in its integrity it seems not to need us.'<sup>43</sup>

## V

In 1841, whilst working on *Child Harold* and *Don Juan*, Clare composed a note on the theme of '*Self-Identity*'. Its movements of mind are intertwined with Clare's strategy in those poems. It yearns not to be forgotten, but its shifting cadences give shape to an incipient awareness that the abandonment of any fixed '*Self-Identity*' is the sacrifice necessary in order that this may be so:

A very good commonplace counsel is *Self-Identity* to bid our own hearts not to forget our own selves & always to keep self in the first place lest all the world who always keeps us behind it should forget us altogether – forget not thyself & the world will not forget thee – forget thyself & the world will willingly forget thee till thou art nothing but a living-dead man dwelling among shadows & falsehood<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Harold Bloom, *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, ed. Bloom and Lionel Trilling, Oxford Anthology of English Literature 4 (New York, NY: Oxford UP, 1973) 560.

<sup>44</sup> John Clare, 'Self-Identity', *By Himself* 271.

On one level it is a carefully balanced bit of writing. The phrasing, with its exhortation to 'bid our own hearts not to forget our own selves' betrays a wariness of how easily 'our own selves' may be forgotten when our hearts are set on others. Yet the passage is also alert to the dangers of disengaging oneself from others entirely: identity emerges from a compound of one's own projection of oneself with how one is seen by others, as the first line of Clare's 'I Am', a poem which clings to '*Self-Identity*' even as it bristles with tormented awareness of the temptation of oblivion, is well aware: 'I am – yet what I am, none cares or knows' (l. 1).

From another perspective the prose proves finely unbalanced. The sentence construction, with its considered setting out of alternatives, 'forget not thyself... forget thyself...', momentarily achieves a poised – if faintly grandiose – antithesis, but the note of tender solicitation speedily freewheels out of control: the words seem to tumble into the nightmarish realm of 'shadows & falsehood' that they describe.

This feels like a loss of composure, and yet it is hard not to remain impressed by the swift-footedness with which the writing keeps pace with its imaginings. Part of the passage's hold on the attention comes from the feeling it generates of '*Self-Identity*' being up in the air in the very moment of composition. This is partly down (as in Clare's earlier autobiographical passages) to the freer movements available to prose, its responsiveness to the way Clare's distinctive feeling for identity as being inherently in flux, always at risk of slipping away; but such instabilities can be thought of as being at work in some of Clare's poems of the period as well. The sonnet 'I feel I am – I only know I am', a sister poem to the more well-known 'I Am', counterpoints its anguish at

having been forgotten with a Byronic sense of how identity flares into life in the act of writing:

I feel I am – I only know I am  
And plod upon the earth as dull and void:  
Earth's prison chilled my body with its dram  
Of dullness and my soaring thoughts destroyed,  
I fled to solitudes from passion's dream  
But strife pursued – I only know I am,  
I was a being created in the race  
Of men disdaining bounds of place and time –  
A spirit that could travel o'er the space  
Of earth & heaven like a thought sublime,  
Tracing creation, like my maker, free –  
A soul unshackled – like eternity,  
Spurning earth's vain and soul-debasing thrall.  
But now I only know I am – that's all.<sup>45</sup>

Clare's voice seems at once liberated and constricted by its self-assertions, and this is reflected in its interactions with the poem's form. The sonnet's first six lines, rhymed *ababaa*, form a ramshackle sestet, the rhythms of their largely endstopped lines enacting the 'plodding' existence they describe, and the abrupt return at the end of the sixth line to the words that close the first – a rhyme that is in fact, flatly, a repetition, so that the reiteration of the words 'I am' sounds at once stubbornly insistent, and hollow – suggests Clare's feelings of constraint: 'I only know I am'. And yet this repetition is also the trigger for the poem to 'unshackle' itself and recover in the act of writing a more fluid sense of selfhood. One can hear the poem lurching into life in the heavy metrical stress the transition demands: 'I *am* | I *was*'; the effect is like that of

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<sup>45</sup> *Later Poems* i. 397.

running in one direction and having to heave one's momentum towards the other. If the lines that follow gain in poignancy from being coloured by that past tense, they are also able to re-enact in their enjambments and instabilities Clare's former 'disdain' for 'place and time'. Their surging rhythms propel a dazzling series of comparisons that achieves its force less through its precision than its assertive momentum. Clare's fluid string of similes does little to clarify the nature of his personality, but the way they career into one another communicates a thrilling sense of a language endlessly chasing means of articulating a persistent state of becoming.

Like many of the asylum lyrics, 'I feel I am...' is both a poem of vaunting self-assertion and weary of its own selfhood. It dazzles in places, but a more affecting note is struck by the final half-puzzled, half-resigned shrug on which it comes to land: 'But now I only know I am – that's all'. That prosy touch is not always a feature of the asylum poems, whose 'customary voice' Jonathan Bate characterises as 'impersonal, almost disembodied'.<sup>46</sup> The most well-known amongst them tend to launch themselves free from quotidian realities into an atmosphere of pure imagination – hence the title of the most famous amongst them, 'A Vision'. There tend to be two opposed responses to this manoeuvre. For one camp, including Bate, 'A Vision' is an imaginative 'triumph', through which Clare 'break[s] free of the confines of the asylum';<sup>47</sup> it is the poem in which Clare 'finds his true identity', says Mark Storey, going even further.<sup>48</sup> For the counter view one might turn to Edward Strickland, who sees in 'A Vision' a feeble, if pathetic, act of delusion; 'a consciousness struggling against fatality with worn-out phrases and second-hand sublimity as its only

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<sup>46</sup> Bate, *Biography* 504.

<sup>47</sup> Bate, *Biography* 504.

<sup>48</sup> Storey, *Critical Introduction* 189.

weapons'.<sup>49</sup> The poem, he says, is 'facile in its diction as in its escapism, less a series of visions than a collection of clichés'.<sup>50</sup> That is a valuable check against the mode of critical idealising that 'A Vision' can encourage – the poem *is* to a degree a weft of clichés; but Strickland neglects the energy with which it wields them; for what drives the poem, as Storey says, is its 'absolute conviction in its own inspiration':<sup>51</sup>

I lost the love, of heaven above;  
I spurned the lust, of earth below;  
I felt the sweets of fancied love, –  
And hell itself my only foe.

I lost earths joys, but felt the glow,  
Of heaven's flame abound in me:  
'Till loveliness, and I did grow,  
The bard of immortality.

I loved, but woman fell away;  
I hid me, from her faded fame:  
I snatch'd the sun's eternal ray, –  
And wrote 'till earth was but a name.

In every language upon earth,  
On every shore, o'er every sea;  
I gave my name immortal birth,  
And kep't my spirit with the free.

2<sup>nd</sup> August, 1844<sup>52</sup>

The life is in the verbs, which kick against one another and trace the course of an existence that has ricocheted between acting and being acted upon, accenting the

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<sup>49</sup> Edward Strickland, "Approaching 'A Vision'," *Victorian Poetry* 22.3 (1984): 241-2.

<sup>50</sup> Strickland, 'A Vision' 245.

<sup>51</sup> Storey, *Critical Introduction* 189.

<sup>52</sup> *Later Poems* i. 297.

poem's patterns of loss and re-assertion: 'I lost', 'I spurn'd', 'I felt'. They fire the poem's swift transitions in feeling, its way of cataloguing experience in a manner that is at once lucid and abstract, and disdainful of further explanation. They assert agency with a suddenness integral to the volatile sense of self that the poem presents: identity in the poem lives in disconnected bursts, which flare and spend themselves over the course of a line.

One of the strangest qualities of the poem is its use of the past tense, which leaves its energies, for all their brashness, curiously dampened. Lines such as 'I loved, but woman fell away' are typical of the poem's capacity to sum up experience in a single resonant phrase, giving the impression that there's nothing more to be said (what Strickland calls its 'eerie compression').<sup>53</sup> But they also sound quietly despondent. The poem may be 'a triumph', in Bate's words, but the tone is not wholly triumphant; the tenses ensure that a strain of calm reportage is also part of the blend.

The pathos of Clare's life is always liable to impinge upon the poetry, because closeness with which it documents and draws on his experiential self; it is, as Mark Storey says, 'a direct response to the anguish of living'.<sup>54</sup> In spite of the moments of vision achieved in the asylum lyrics, it was the drabber note that finally grounds 'I feel I am', and is faintly audible on fringes of 'A Vision', that remained to the end. There was a lull in Clare's output in the 1850s, but a few final lyrics are constellated around the period prior to his death in 1864. His final poem, 'Birds Nests' provides a neat symmetry with the 'prosing' sketch with which this chapter started. Prefaced by two misremembered lines from Robert Burns, it turns its back on them to assert its own, quieter, poetic idiom:

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<sup>53</sup> Strickland, 'A Vision' 234.

<sup>54</sup> Storey, *Critical Introduction* 2.

BIRDS NESTS

*The very child might understand  
The de'il had business on his hand*

Burns

Tis spring warm glows the south  
Chaffinchs carry the moss in his mouth  
To the filbert hedges all day long  
& charms the poet with his beautiful song  
The wind blows blea oer the sedgely fen  
But warm the sunshines by the little wood  
Where the old Cow at her leisure chews her cud<sup>55</sup>

Jonathan Bate records that the poem is 'scratched' onto its sheet of paper, and marked with more corrections than was usual for Clare. This information seems at odds with the lyric's serene movements, but then much of its life, as often, lies in those moments that disturb its apparently calm surface: the inimitable grammatical clash in the second line, the uncertainty as to whether it is the 'Chaffinch' or the 'poet' who has a 'beautiful song'; the lovely possibility that 'sunshines' is not a mistranscription of 'sunshines' but rather Clare's invented noun for patches of sunlight on the ground. It is always tempting to find images of the poet in Clare's descriptions of natural creatures, and the cow chewing her cud here would be one of the most peculiar, but in its way touching and appropriate candidates for that role. Its relaxed movements are true to the freedom from poetical trappings that this poem enjoys, and an odd sign that, in the peaceful manner of this final poem, Clare had found another way of being himself.

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<sup>55</sup> *Later Poems* ii. 1106.

## Chapter 4

### Hopkins I: 'Unlike Itself'

...the poetical language of an age shd. be the current language heightened, to any degree heightened and unlike itself..

– Hopkins, to Robert Bridges<sup>1</sup>

#### I

Clare's idiom frequently appears instinctual: it seems to 'spring into its place [...] without any trace of choice of forethought on the poet's part', to adapt an observation of Seamus Heaney's.<sup>2</sup> Hopkins' individuality is more intense, and more intent. 'He is so often most himself when he is most experimental', I. A. Richards observed.<sup>3</sup> Eliot felt the experimentalism grew wearisome: 'His innovations certainly were good, but [...] they sometimes come near to being purely *verbal*, in that a whole poem will give us *more* of the same thing, an accumulation, rather than a real development of thought or feeling.'<sup>4</sup> Yeats complained along similar lines: 'His meaning is like some strange sound that strains the ear, comes out of words, passes to and fro between them, goes back into words, his manner a last development of poetical diction.'<sup>5</sup> But the way Yeats's phrasing slips and slides there (Hopkins' 'meaning' is like a 'sound', his 'manner' is a 'diction') betrays the extent to which, for all its distinctiveness, Hopkins' style resists easy definition. With an eye to Hopkins' career as a whole, W. W. Robson

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<sup>1</sup> *Correspondence* 365.

<sup>2</sup> Heaney, 'John Clare's "Prog"', 278.

<sup>3</sup> I. A. Richards, 'Gerard Hopkins' *The Dial* 81.3 (1926) cited in Jenkins, *Sourcebook* 54.

<sup>4</sup> T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1934) 52.

<sup>5</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'Introduction', *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, 1892-1935* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936) xxxix.



afforded Hopkins the admiration Matthew Arnold devoted to Thomas Gray: 'he has a capacity for constant development'.<sup>6</sup> That 'constant development' is just as active within as between Hopkins' poems, and the contention of this chapter is that Hopkins' individuality is more shifting and conflicted than it is sometimes felt to be. He is at his most distinctive when least predictable.

Hopkins valued art which showed 'an individualising touch'; but he was alert to the dangers of just offering 'more of the same'. He was wary as well as enthusiastic about the way a poetic voice might become distinctively one's own. When, as early as 1864, he began to 'doubt Tennyson', it was on the grounds that certain habits in Tennyson's writing had become too familiar, so that he was led to wonder whether poets might have ways of becoming too recognizably themselves:

Great men, poets I mean, each have their own dialect as it were of Parnassian, formed generally as they go on writing, and at last, – this is the point to be marked, – they can see things in this Parnassian way and describe them in this Parnassian tongue, without further effort of inspiration. In a poet's particular kind of Parnassian lies most of his style, of his manner, of his mannerism if you like.<sup>7</sup>

Hopkins' complaint is that Tennyson's capacity for originality has grown stale. It is the slackening off from 'style' to 'manner' to 'mannerism' that catches the process, tracing a complacent movement from a poet's development of a distinctive voice through to a state where that voice becomes too predictable a substitute for what Hopkins labels – with a sure sense of the labours involved – 'the *effort* of inspiration' [my emphasis].

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<sup>6</sup> W. W. Robson, *Modern English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1970) 124.

<sup>7</sup> *Correspondence* 68.

I think one had got into the way of thinking, or had not got out of the way of thinking, that Tennyson was always new, *touching*, beyond other poets, not pressed with human ailments, never using Parnassian. So at least I used to think. Now one sees he uses Parnassian; he is, one must see it, what we used to call Tennysonian.<sup>8</sup>

Part of the strength of Hopkins' criticism in this letter resides in the way it enacts the movements beyond Parnassian which it describes, and an agile wit is at work as the reversal across 'got into the way of thinking, or had not got out of the way of thinking' disentangles itself from its own Parnassian habits of mind. Its brilliance as a piece of criticism is at one with its courtesy as a letter, the modesty and inclusiveness with which its pronouns ('I used to think...one sees...one must see...we used to call') trace a journey from individual error to shared realisation. And what is realised is a need to 'touch' beyond not only other writers, but oneself; the need, to adapt the language of his later letter to Bridges, to be continually 'unlike oneself'.

It is always surprising to remember that Hopkins wrote this letter, with its assured intuition of his independence from the poetry of his era, when he was only twenty. At this stage, Hopkins confined the embryonic idiosyncrasy of his own voice to private journals and notebooks. Through the early 1860s he entered into these several probing riffs upon the meanings and relations of different words which in their wit and inventiveness raise themselves from the status of technical exercises to the level of miniature prose poems. So, for example, '*Flos, flower, blow, bloom, blossom.*

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<sup>8</sup> *Correspondence* 70.

Original meaning to be inflated, to swell as the bud does into the flower'<sup>9</sup> is itself a verbal blossoming, a swelling into bloom. Some are comically truncated: '*Mucus, muck*'.<sup>10</sup> Others veer surprisingly down less welcoming byways: '*Hollow, hull* (of ships and plants), *κοίλος, skull* (as *κεφαλή*, and *caput* that which holds, contains), *hole, hold*, etc. *Hell*',<sup>11</sup> where the descent from 'hollow' through 'skull' to arrive, with a dead note, at 'Hell' travels along filaments that are metaphorical as well as etymological. The entries feed upon an atmosphere of private discovery, as though blowing the dust off patterns and relationships in the language that are being uncovered for the first time, or have long lain unseen.

One outlook on these experiments, so far as they constitute specimens of Hopkins' voice in the raw, might be that they presage a manner of writing that is not so different from the sorts of verbal opulence he reacted against in Tennyson; 'a last development of poetical diction', in Yeats's words. But this would be to ignore Hopkins' capacity, alive even in these pre-emptive forays, to lead off in surprising directions, and their testimony to the imaginative effort involved in doing so. These verbal flurries grind and stutter, and it is no coincidence that many of them take grinding and stuttering as their theme: '*Grind, gride, gird, grit, groat, grate, greet, κρούειν, crush, crash, κροτειν* etc. Original meaning to *strike, rub*, particularly *together*. That which is produced by such means is the *grit*, the *groats* or crumbs, like *fragmentum* from *frangere*, *bit* from *bite*. *Crumb, crumble* perhaps akin'.<sup>12</sup> Here it is as if the passage is reflecting self-consciously on its own process as it goes: new words appear like 'the *grit*, the *groats* or crumbs' broken down from the body of previous

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<sup>9</sup> Hopkins, 'Early Diaries', *Journals and Papers* 13.

<sup>10</sup> Hopkins, 'Early Diaries', *Journals and Papers* 16.

<sup>11</sup> Hopkins, 'Early Diaries', *Journals and Papers* 12.

<sup>12</sup> Hopkins, 'Early Diaries', *Journals and Papers* 5.

words. Others explore awkwardness, resistance, and deviation: ‘*Crook, crank, kranke, crick, cranky*. Original meaning crooked, not straight or right, wrong, awry.’<sup>13</sup> Hopkins’ willingness to ‘strain the ear’ amplifies the ‘strain’ of his own originality.

If Hopkins is finding his voice in these passages, discovering a way of using the language that is distinctively his own, then they lay bear the struggle as much as the spontaneity of that process: ‘the effort of inspiration’. A line or so of Tennyson like

The glows  
And glories of the broad belt of the world

– of which Hopkins said in his letter ‘I could scarcely point anywhere to anything more idiomatically Parnassian, to anything which I more clearly see myself writing *qua* Tennyson’<sup>14</sup> – feels like it could roll on and on of its own accord eternally; it is not freshened by any living contact with ‘the world’. The texture of Hopkins’ voice, by contrast, in its braiding together of fluency and abrasiveness, is testimony not only to its distinctiveness, but its effort to remain distinctive, to be both recognizable and always ‘new’.

Nobody has characterised the laborious quality of Hopkins’ lyricism more eloquently than Eric Griffiths, who talks superbly of the way his words take on ‘a simultaneous character of independent life and willed contrivance, as they look both like compiled anagrams and evolutionary processes’.<sup>15</sup> Hopkins himself identified something like this fusion of ‘independent life’ with ‘willed contrivance’ in the

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<sup>13</sup> Hopkins, ‘Early Diaries’, *Journals and Papers* 5.

<sup>14</sup> *Correspondence* 69. Tennyson’s lines are from *Enoch Arden* (l. 574-5).

<sup>15</sup> Griffiths, *Printed Voice* 275.

workings of sprung rhythm – which might be thought of as one thing above all others that grants his voice its distinguishing tenor. ‘Why do I employ sprung rhythm at all?’ he asked rhetorically in a letter to Bridges.

Because it is the nearest to the rhythm of prose, that is the native and natural rhythm of speech, the least forced, the most rhetorical and emphatic of all possible rhythms, combining as it seems to me, opposite and, one wd. have thought, incompatible excellences, markedness of rhythm – that is rhythm’s self – and naturalness of expression...<sup>16</sup>

‘Markedness’ and ‘naturalness’ of rhythm, if we are to understand by them something like artificial emphasis and colloquial fluency, might well appear ‘incompatible’; opposed qualities that would seem to mark out very different kinds of poetic voice. Seamus Heaney once distinguished between Wordsworth and Yeats according to Valéry’s notions of *les vers données* and *les vers calculés*: Wordsworth’s voice being characterised by its ‘surrender’ to a given line; Yeats’s by the urge to ‘discipline’ it (‘Yeats does not listen in but acts out’).<sup>17</sup> Hopkins’ rhythms, however, manage to sustain the impression of both, and their achievement in doing so is attuned to (and embodies) the mixture of craft and spontaneity that goes in to shaping any identity. ‘Each mortal thing’ (l. 5), he says in ‘As kingfishers catch fire...’,

Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;  
Selves — goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells  
(l. 6-7).

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<sup>16</sup> *Correspondence* 282.

<sup>17</sup> Heaney, ‘The Makings of a Music’, *Preoccupations* 61, 72.

The first line here manages to sound both ‘calculated’ and ‘given’; it is too patterned to be natural speech, but its ripple catches the accents of a voice at ease with itself. The sounds seem to unfold out of that central ‘indoors’, and the gracefulness of the writing enacts the innate manifestation of selfhood that the line talks about. It is, in Matthew Campbell’s words, a good instance of Hopkins’ way of having ‘the natural and the expressive become one in the act’ of writing.<sup>18</sup> But the ‘effort of inspiration’ would soon start looking less than laborious if ‘markedness’ and ‘naturalness’ could always be so fluently combined, and Hopkins is adept at having that fluency break down. So in the line that follows, the halting, staccato effect produced by the six stresses that throng together in an ostensibly pentameter line (*‘Selves — goes itself; myself it speaks and spells’*) makes acting out its own rhythmic identity a struggle, and it serves as a reminder that finding ways of being oneself can – and, in a poem, perhaps should – be a struggle, too. One of the things that is so good about Hopkins’ ‘new rhythm’, as he referred to it in a letter to R. W. Dixon,<sup>19</sup> is that it doesn’t claim that it is easy, or without cost, to be new. Hopkins’ phrasing reflects this. To say something ‘goes itself’, might be to imagine identity as something flung off casually, even involuntarily, as one ‘goes’, or it might be to imagine identity as something that consciously has to ‘get itself going’.<sup>20</sup> ‘Rhythm’s self’, like other selves, involves a compaction of the effortful and the inspired.

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<sup>18</sup> Matthew Campbell, *Rhythm and Will in Victorian Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999) 196.

<sup>19</sup> *Correspondence* 317.

<sup>20</sup> Compare the effortless union of bearing and identity implied by Clare’s more ballad-influenced use of the word: ‘In this cold world without a home | Disconsolate I go’ (see p. 148).

## II

Donald Davie was suspicious of Hopkins' efforts to achieve distinctiveness through 'form and design'. Remembering some remarks Hopkins made to Bridges about the importance of 'masterly execution', he complained: 'What is meant by "execution" and "inscape" is the Renaissance idea of poem as artefact, a shape in space and time, added to creation, thrown out by will and energy, and the more elaborate the better'.<sup>21</sup> But 'form' in Hopkins' poetry is a more protean entity than this allows. The rhythms of individual lines refuse to ossify into predictable patterns, and poems lead in unexpected directions on the level of syntax and stanza form, too. The winding opening sentence of 'As kingfishers catch fire...' busies itself in an evolving process of 'speaking and spelling' the poem's own distinctive 'shape':

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 *Whát I dó is me: for that I came.*

(l. 1-8)

'There are two kinds of clearness one should have', said Hopkins, 'either the meaning to be felt without effort as fast as one reads or else, if dark at first reading, when once

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<sup>21</sup> Donald Davie, *The Purity of Diction in English Verse and Articulate Energy* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1992) 146. For Hopkins' remarks on 'masterly execution' see *Correspondence* 792.

made out *to explode*'.<sup>22</sup> These lines are a good example of the second of those alternatives. The unfolding of their syntax is just that, an unfolding from uncertainty to clarity: it is not evident until half way through the third line that those repeated 'As's mean 'just like' and not 'whilst'; then the way the opening quatrain's accumulation of examples are left to jostle in the absence of a main verb is disorientating, as if the poem sees, for a while, the potential for chaos as well as richness amidst all this diversity – everything seems to be defining itself in terms of something else, and it proves difficult to find a foothold. ('Each mortal thing does one thing and the same' speaks with its lips slightly curled, slyly aware of the paradox of everything asserting its individuality by doing 'one thing and the same'.) Only in the second quatrain, when the lines arrive at their hammering reiteration of the main point, does the whole meaning burst upon us with exhilarating clearness.

Hopkins' '*What I do is me*' keeps company with Coleridge's definition of the Primary Imagination as 'the repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM'<sup>23</sup> and Christina Rossetti's 'Who I was I am, who I am I am, who I am I must be for ever and ever'<sup>24</sup> as meditations on the nature of identity that take root in Yahweh's 'I AM THAT I AM'. But Hopkins' lines leave space for development within 'repetition'. '*What I do is me: for that I came*': there, parallelism accentuates the difference as much as the similarity between the two statements.<sup>25</sup> As Campbell

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<sup>22</sup> *Correspondence* 367.

<sup>23</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Vol. 7: Biographia Literaria, or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions* 2 vols., ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1983) i. 349.

<sup>24</sup> Christina Rossetti, *The Face of the Deep: A Devotional Commentary on the Apocalypse* (London: SPCK, 1892) 47. For a discussion of Rossetti's skirting of a 'repetitive energy dangerously close to inertia' see McDonald, *Sound Intentions* 252.

<sup>25</sup> Compare Hopkins' earlier transition 'iteslf; myself' (l. 7) where the self's fundamental likeness and unlikeness in relation to other things is figured in that inexact mirroring across the middle of the line. We feel the struggle of articulating in a shared language something that is by nature uniquely personal.



observes, the line is distinguished by the way it ‘stresses the necessity of action in any conception of the identity of natural things’;<sup>26</sup> it encodes identity in the way things behave, so unlike Rossetti’s powerfully spiralling evocation of selfhood, Hopkins’ leaves scope for identity to change. And though Hopkins is talking about ‘natural things’, the thought might be extended to include artificial things, too – such as the voice of his poems. As a form, the sonnet offers plenty of opportunity changes in direction, which ‘As kingfishers catch fire...’ exploits. Its sestet opens by setting Hopkins’ ‘I’ against the italicised, general, ‘I’ of the previous line:

I say more: the just man justices;  
Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;  
Acts in God’s eye what in God’s eye he is –  
Christ.

(l. 9-12)

‘I say more’ as in ‘I say more than what the octave has said’, but also ‘I say more than “*What I do is me: for that I came*”’: I say that I came to fulfil myself through God’s grace and for God’s sake. Hopkins often appears to discover his own strangeness in the act of composition, and this shift across the middle of the poem is one example of that. Alongside the quiet experimentalism of Hopkins’ language in these lines, which transforms nouns into verbs (‘justices’) and verbs into nouns (‘goings’), the turn enacts the principle Hopkins outlined in his letter on Parnassian: ‘In a fine piece of inspiration every beauty takes you as it were by surprise [...] every fresh beauty could not in any way be predicted or accounted for by what one has already read. But in

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<sup>26</sup> Campbell, *Rhythm and Will* 189.

Parnassian pieces you feel that if you were the poet you could have gone on as he has done, you see yourself doing it, only with the difference that if you actually try you find you cannot write his Parnassian.<sup>27</sup>

Hopkins' poems are more accommodating of 'surprise' than they might at first seem, always capable of 'saying more'. The effort to avoid becoming 'too characteristic [...] too so-and-so-all-over-ish',<sup>28</sup> to return to the 'Parnassian' letter, is a constant source of formal and linguistic agility. Hopkins' stanza in *The Wreck of the Deutschland* is a case in point. In itself his own invention, it undergoes subtle adjustments throughout the poem: not only via the addition of an extra foot to its first line in *Part the second*, but because sprung rhythm allows a persistent variation in the number of syllables in each line, so that each particular stanza takes on its own distinctive cast. The *abab* quatrain with which it begins has at its foundation a jaunty shanty-like lilt:

On Saturday sailed from Bremen  
American-outward-bound,  
Take settler and seamen, tell men with women,  
Two hundred souls in the round –  
(l. 89-92)

This was the first stanza of the poem that Hopkins composed,<sup>29</sup> and part of the skill of Hopkins' sprung rhythms lies in the way, to varying degrees throughout the poem, the other stanzas encourage or disturb this musicality. So these lines, describing the

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<sup>27</sup> *Correspondence* 69.

<sup>28</sup> *Correspondence* 70.

<sup>29</sup> *Correspondence* 280.

outset of the voyage, have a cheery sway that in retrospect comes to seem chillingly misjudged. Their buoyant cadences are felt as an ironic echo beneath even most angular and horrifying of the other stanzas:

Sister, a sister calling  
A master, her master and mine! –  
And the inboard seas run swirling and hawling;  
The rash smart slogging brine  
Blinds her...

(l. 145-9).

It is possible to read the first four lines of this according to a similar rhythm to the stanza above (and the internal rhymes and repetitions half encourage it), but doing so brings the voice up with a lurch at the point where the words overflow the fourth line ('Blinds her'), just like the sailors' initial confidence goes awry on reaching choppy waters.

The endless shiftiness of Hopkins' stanzas in *The Wreck* allows them to voice a sense of identity as being in constant flux. This is brilliantly the case in the poem's fourth stanza:

I am soft sift  
In an hourglass – at the wall  
Fast, but mined with a motion, a drift,  
And it crowds and it combs to the fall;  
I steady as a water in a well, to a poise, to a pane,  
But roped with, always, all the way down from the tall  
Fells or flanks of the voel, a vein  
Of the gospel proffer, a pressure, a principle, Christ's gift.  
(l. 25-32)

‘He conceived of poetry as self-expression at its most relentless, as a vehicle for the individual will to impose itself on time’, complained Davie.<sup>30</sup> But this underrates the struggle between the urge towards self-definition, and the feeling for identity’s shiftiness and evanescence on show in a stanza like this. The writing is enlivened by Hopkins’ sense of how the self is subject *to* time. It gives the impression of form adjusting itself to, as much as it adjusts, the voice’s intonations. The enjambment ‘at the wall | Fast’, for instance, where ‘Fast’, means ‘static’, but holds out its more usual meaning, too, pays homage to the shifting sand’s appearance of being stationary; the rhymes set movement against stasis, placing ‘sift’ against ‘drift’ (where ‘sift’ is used as a noun even as it implies potential for movement), ‘wall’ against ‘fall’, ‘pane’ against ‘vein’. And, just as Hopkins exploits the possibilities the sonnet affords for changes in direction in ‘As Kingfishers catch fire...’, so here the expansion into a freer, more flexible line across the middle of the stanza enables a reappraisal of what the self is like.<sup>31</sup> Although the two images feign as if to exist in parallel, closer inspection proves the second to offer a corrective vision to the first, counterpointing the initial conception of the self as ‘mined with a motion’, running away to nothingness, with an understanding of it as endlessly replenished, ‘roped’, by God’s grace. The language impresses as unravelling out of itself, sustaining itself but evolving –

*...always, all the way down from the tall  
Fells or flanks of the voel, a vein...*

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<sup>30</sup> Davie, *Purity of Diction* 116.

<sup>31</sup> Martin Dubois has observed that ‘The particular quality of the stanza employed in *The Wreck* is its capacity for such variability, at one moment bunching its stresses and in another dispersing them again’ (‘Hopkins and the Burden of Security’ *Essays in Criticism* 63.4 (2013): 447).

– before the presence of Christ, ‘a proffer, a pressure, a principle’, stabilises an anxiety that all this fluidity might be becoming troublingly evanescent. ‘[S]uddenly the downing motion of Christ, his dark descending, becomes not something to make the soul sink in a quicksand of terror but to steady and be sustained by descending graces’, as Seamus Heaney puts it,<sup>32</sup> finding in the stanza a concentrated mirror of the evolution of perspectives within the poem as a whole.

### III

Hopkins’ style also resists easy definition through its adeptness at holding contradictory qualities in suspension. The letter to Bridges of 1879 from which this chapter takes its title articulates a sense that the language of poetry should be internally divided, resistant to classification:

I cut myself off from the use of *ere*, *o’er*, *wellnigh*, *what time*, *say not* (for *do not say*), because, though dignified, they neither belong to nor ever cd. arise from, or be the elevation of, ordinary modern speech. For it seems to me that the poetical language of an age shd. be the current language heightened, to any degree heightened and unlike itself, but not (I mean normally: passing freaks and graces are another thing) an obsolete one. This is Shakespeare’s and Milton’s practice and the want of it will be fatal to Tennyson’s Idylls and plays, to Swinburne, and perhaps to Morris.<sup>33</sup>

The letter’s restless refusal to allow ‘the poetical language of an age’ to be too definitely one thing is attuned to the instabilities of Hopkins’ own language. His best

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<sup>32</sup> Heaney, ‘The Fire i’ the Flint’, *Preoccupations* 89.

<sup>33</sup> *Correspondence* 365.

poetry speaks in a variety of different tones and postures that are never wholly 'ordinary speech' or loftily poetical (just as, in introducing these comments, he wittily turned his fire on archaism using an archaising allusion to *Hamlet*: 'I hold that by archaism a thing is sicklied o'er as by blight'). Hopkins' mature style courts yet estranges itself from the 'current language'; common speech haunts its peripheries to intricately expressive effect. The dynamics of its relationship with 'current' usage befit a poet shyly uncertain of his own capacity to fit in, but also enable Hopkins to articulate complex states of feeling. His poetry emerges, as Eric Griffiths has shown, through a complex of 'collaboration' with and 'resistance' to 'the language-using community'.<sup>34</sup> The impassioned prayer of the opening stanza of *The Wreck of the Deutschland* catches up into itself colloquial idioms, so that its language sounds deeply personal and everyday:

Thou hast bound bones and veins in me, fastened me flesh,  
And after it almost unmade, what with dread,  
Thy doing...

(l. 5-7)

Here 'what with dread' speaks breezily (as one might say, 'what with all the rain we've been having...') in a manner that belies the emotional stress that the verse finds itself under. In doing so it attunes itself to the poem's complaisance with God's violence as proof of his love. But its casual register never loses sight of His force: for there is audible, looming behind the phrase, the more monumental apprehension of God's terror that would result from switching around just two of its words: 'with what dread'.

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<sup>34</sup> Griffiths, *Printed Voice* 290-3.

When read aloud, half of the phrase's impact is of an idiosyncratic inversion designed to thrust emphasis onto 'what' (just as, for instance, Hopkins speaks of 'Marcus Hare, high her captain' in *The Loss of the Eurydice* (l. 45)).

At other times proverbial idioms can live a ghostly life in Hopkins' verse, as in the inspired transition in 'God's Grandeur':

And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastwards, springs –  
(l. 10-11)

Hopkins' verb 'went' focuses the lines' capacity to surprise. Understood in the past tense, as part of a concessive clause, it allows the line to make mention of an apocalyptic disappearance of the world's 'last lights' whose suddenness and extremity feels unprepared for by the description of more gradual degradation in the poem's preceding lines. But the lack of prior preparation might lead one to understand the verb in the subjunctive, too, as part of a conditional clause ('And even if the last lights went...').<sup>35</sup> In this reading Hopkins' grammar becomes subtly and affectingly irregular as we arrive at the present indicative 'springs'. The imbalance in the tenses contributes to the beautiful effect whereby the one line seems to rise up before the previous one has sunk down. The pressure placed on the verb brings to the surface the submerged presence in 'West went' of the idiom 'go west' as meaning 'to die', a phrase popularised during the First World War, but which first has its appearance in English in 1532, and with its roots particularly in Celtic associations of the setting sun with the abode of the

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<sup>35</sup> This is how Griffiths reads the line: 'the verb is subjunctive and the line should be paraphrased as: "if the sun were to become extinct"' (*Printed Voice* 283).

dead, as in the its citation from the *Edinburgh Magazine* of 1833: 'The Irish, and the Scottish Highlanders, always describe persons lately dead as having *gone west*' (*OED*). All this is held at bay: oblivion is fleetingly contemplated as a transient presence at the end of the line, but only to be distanced by the rising 'morning' that 'springs' at the horizon of the new one. If Hopkins' poems are pitched aslant to 'the current language', they are at an angle which reveals a keen ear for its nuances.

The conflications between 'poetical' and 'common' speech in Hopkins' voice are ingrained in one of the distinguishing features of his verse, its density of exclamation.<sup>36</sup> Jonathan Culler has argued that exclamation, as it shades into apostrophe, brings with it an inherent self-importance, it is 'the pure embodiment of poetic pretension: of the subject's claim that he is not merely an empirical poet, a writer of verse, but the embodiment of poetic tradition and of the spirit of poesy.'<sup>37</sup> But in Hopkins the device serves to authenticate as much as elevate the voice; it is as likely to keep a line open to common speech as it is to embody 'poetic pretension': 'since exclamations are characteristic of spoken language rather than written prose, they reinforce the personal tone of his poetry', as James Milroy observes.<sup>38</sup> More than that, they aim to convey an impression of spontaneity; accordingly, the risk they take is that they might appear calculated:

That night, that year  
Of now done darkness I wretch lay wrestling with (my God!) my God.  
(*'Carrion Comfort'* l. 13-4)

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<sup>36</sup> On Hopkins' exclamations see Peter Milward SJ, 'Exclamations in Hopkins' Poetry', *Renascence* 42.1/2 (1989/90): 111-18, and Milroy, *Language of Gerard Manley Hopkins* 197-201.

<sup>37</sup> Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981) 143.

<sup>38</sup> Milroy, *Language* 197.



The collision of registers there is a brilliant embodiment of the self's disjunctions, but it is hard to believe in it as a moment of surprised recognition. Hopkins' interjections shape a more believable immediacy when woven more fluidly into his verse. In 'Duns Scotus's Oxford', for instance, he draws consolation from the new ugliness of urban expansion: 'Yet ah! this air I gather and release | He lived on' (l. 9-10). That 'ah!' might seem at first mere poetical afflatus, an appeal to 'the spirit of poesy', but its aspirations are more grounded: as it resonates through the rest of the line ('Yet *ah!* this *air* I *gather* and *release*') it makes tangible the physical act of inhaling and exhaling as one speaks: this is a physical, as well as poetic voice. Hopkins is skilled at allowing exclamation to interrupt the flow of his syntax; feeling in his poetry does not seem premeditated, it shocks the voice, as in another pair of lines from the sonnet 'In the Valley of the Elwy':

God, lover of souls, swaying considerate scales,  
Complete thy creature dear O where it fails  
(l. 12-13)

If these were rewritten, as they might have been by a lesser poet, so that they began 'O God, lover of souls', the 'O' would do little but puff the voice up for what follows. But standing as they do, they wring from the interjection an articulation both of Hopkins' dismay at the 'failure' of God's creature and of the intensity of his appeal to God to atone for this failure. They speak to a God whose justice is 'considerate' both in the care it affords, but also, if one hears 'considerate' more colloquially, its considerable

sway. The interjection is typical, too, of Hopkins' manner of searching out precision by wrenching common speech from its familiar order. It risks sounding banal ('dear O' sounds like an inversion of 'O dear'), but also invites an expressive re-settling of the syntax so that we hear of not only a 'creature dear' but a 'creature dear O where it fails', as if to intimate the potential 'deariness' or costliness of this failure. It is a 'heightening' of the 'current language' that puts it in contact with the voice of 'poetic tradition', making both expressively 'unlike themselves'.

#### IV

Time and again Hopkins' voice tests the meeting of the elevated and the colloquial, just as his poems often take as their occasion the meeting of the miraculous and the everyday. His most recognizable accent manages to sound at once spoken and composed, simultaneously responding to and shaping a sense of his individuality. Writing to Bridges in 1879 Hopkins described 'The Windhover' as 'the best thing I ever wrote',<sup>39</sup> and one of the reasons behind that judgement might have been the poem's dexterity in reconciling such opposites. Its opening lines give the impression of something at once casually flung out and carefully composed:

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-  
-dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding  
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding  
High there how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing  
In his ecstasy!

(l. 1-5)

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<sup>39</sup> *Correspondence* 362.

One thing that ‘I caught this morning...’ catches is the colloquial register one might use to introduce an offhand remark, or to open a dairy entry. The writing gives the impression of hardly being aware that it is in a poem at all. The rhymes are at once a *tour de force* and barely visible; they act like the kestrel does against the wind, providing a still outline through which the voice of the poem surges. The rhythms, too, devote a virtuoso performance to the impression of naturalness, and again capture the kestrel’s marriage of movement and stasis, giving the impression of ‘rolling’ back on themselves, for instance, as they pass through the sequence ‘the rolling level underneath him steady air’ (the air being at once ‘rolling level underneath him’ and ‘underneath him steady’).

The poem’s diction is equally tricky to categorise. Hopkins’ description of how the bird’s ‘hurl and gliding | Rebuffed the big wind’ (l. 6-7) drags itself through a series of words which begins and ends in the viscerally primitive (‘hurl and gliding’ wrench nouns out of verbs; ‘big wind’ is daringly simple), but opens a path into a language of more abstract speculation: ‘Rebuffed’, pressured by the enjambment, packs a thump, to be sure, but it is alive, too with Hopkins’ sense that individuality comes into being through energetic opposition, assertion of difference (just as the kestrel’s distinctive ‘hovering’ is the result of exactly opposing the direction of the wind); the word will return in a sadder key in Hopkins’ retreat notes to describe how other selves ‘rebuff me with blank unlikeness’.<sup>40</sup> The octave ends by encouraging us to appreciate ‘the achieve of, the mastery of the thing’ (l. 8). It finds a fittingly fluctuating register for its admiration of the bird (the slightly arch note struck by the use of ‘achieve’ to mean ‘achievement’ grounding itself against the accent of blunt commonsense that treats

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<sup>40</sup> Hopkins, ‘First Principle and Foundation’, *Sermons* 123.

the bird, finally, as a ‘thing’<sup>41</sup>), and, we might think, casts a self-conscious glance towards the nature of its own achievement, too.

This makes for a bumpy landing; the flaring and subsiding of verbal intensity in the poem’s sestet is a more graceful affair:

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here  
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion  
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

No wonder of it: sheer plod makes plough down sillion  
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,  
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.

(l. 9-14)

‘Buckle’ has understandably fastened people’s attention, an obvious source of its power residing in what we might begin to think of as its typically Hopkinsian way of being two opposed qualities at once; it buckles together contrasting meanings of ‘join together’ and ‘crumple’ in the same word.<sup>42</sup> But equally admirable is the way that, having worked itself to this climax of urgency and excitement, the poetry is content in the second tercet just to quieten and subside, rather than strain after further fireworks. ‘No wonder of it’, is wonderfully cool in its way of bringing things back

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<sup>41</sup> Mark Sandy points out that ‘the kestrel has a long-established reputation as the least useful and lowliest of hawks in ornithological taxonomies’ (“‘Echoes of that Voice’: Romantic Resonances in Victorian Poetic Bird Song”, *Romantic Echoes in the Victorian Era*, ed. Andrew Radford and Mark Sandy (Farnham: Ashgate, 2008) 170).

<sup>42</sup> As everyone knows, the word has prompted a great deal of critical ingenuity. The usual response is to draw on an obscure usage of ‘buckle’ and argue its applicability to the situation, sometimes sensibly, as in suggestions that the word continues the octave’s metaphors of bird facing the wind as a Christ-like soldier, buckling his armour for battle; sometimes outlandishly, if suggestively, as when, drawing on the term “turn-buckle” as a device for coupling electric wires, N. H. Mackenzie imagines that Hopkins “may possibly have had in his mind that the buckling completed an electric circuit”, the divine energy released being comparable in its “dangerousness” to an electric charge (*A Reader’s Guide to the Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981) 82-3). Mackenzie helpfully documents some of the possibilities in *Poetical Works* 382-3.

down to earth, and perhaps even has a touch of sly humour in its glance towards the breathlessness of the previous three lines. This is not to say that the closing tercet speaks without its own, perhaps even more deeply suffused, sense of wonder, at one with its sense of the beauty inherent in the ordinary. '[S]heer plod' stands leaden-footed in contrast to the suppleness of the octave, but its movements, too, bring a shine to the plough (the word order of 'plough down sillion | Shine' holds open the possibility that it is the ground, as well as the plough blade, that is made to shine by this activity, as if 'plough down sillion' were to be taken as a phrase itself, describing the ploughed clods: Hopkins had also recorded in a journal entry the sight of a 'near hill glistening with very bright newly turned sods').<sup>43</sup> And the closing rhyme on 'gold-vermilion', emerging out of 'billion' and then 'sillion', draws an unexpected iron from the fire, brandishing a poetic beauty from unpromising verbal stock.

## V

Rhyme might seem to be inimical to the kinds of changefulness I have been documenting here, acting as a means through which a poem overhears itself and perpetuates what it already is, or luxuriates in its own beauties. 'All beauty may by metaphor be called rhyme, may it not?' a character speculates in Hopkins' 'On the Origin of Beauty: A Platonic Dialogue'.<sup>44</sup> But rhyme is crucial to the distinctiveness of Hopkins' voice because he deployed it in innovative, often flamboyant ways. It exerts a pressure that enables him to lead his poems off in unexpected directions. As 'The

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<sup>43</sup> *Journals and Papers* 133. For a discussion of the ambiguity as to whether it is the plough or the soil that shines, see Peter Whiteford, 'A Note on Hopkins' Plough in "The Windhover"', *Victorian Poetry* 39.4 (2001): 617-620.

<sup>44</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'On the Origin of Beauty: A Platonic Dialogue', *The Complete Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Volume IV: The Oxford Essays and Notes, 1863-1868*, ed. Lesley Higgins (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006) 153.

Windhover”s closing rhyme on ‘vermilion’ suggests, Hopkins found rhyme’s relation to ‘beauty’ in its spotlighting of difference and variety, as much as its sameness; its capacity to spring surprises: “What is rhyme?” said the Professor. ‘Is it not an agreement of sound – ?’ ‘With a slight disagreement, yes’ broke in Hanbury’, Hopkins has his protagonists in the ‘Dialogue’ say, wittily dramatising a ‘slight disagreement’ in the process.<sup>45</sup>

In some undergraduate notes on ‘Poetic Diction’ Hopkins spoke about ‘parallelism’ as a principle of ‘the artificial part of poetry’, giving some examples: ‘To the marked or abrupt kind of parallelism belong metaphor, simile, parable, and so on, where the effect is sought in the likeness of things, and antithesis, contrast, and so on, where it is sought in unlikeness.’<sup>46</sup> Rhyme does not get a mention here, perhaps tellingly, since it would seem to be a feature of verse which kept a foot in either camp, seeking effect in the ‘likeness’ and ‘unlikeness’ of things; it combines ‘regularity with disagreement’, in the words of the *Dialogue*’s Professor.<sup>47</sup> Like Hopkins’ chains of assonance and alliteration, it allows a poem to develop out of itself. As a case in point, one might turn to Hopkins most hectically rhymed poem, ‘The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo’, where a near-untrackable gamut of rhyming resources from alliteration via half-rhyme to repetition fuels the poem’s unspooling:

How to keep – is there any any, is there none such, nowhere known  
some, bow or brooch or braid or brace, lace, latch or catch or key to keep  
Back beauty, keep it, beauty, beauty, beauty,...from vanishing away?  
(l. 1-2)

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<sup>45</sup> Hopkins, ‘Origin of Beauty’ 153.

<sup>46</sup> Hopkins, ‘Poetic Diction’, *Oxford Essays and Notes* 121.

<sup>47</sup> Hopkins, ‘Origin of Beauty’ 153.

The whole poem is instinct with a sense of ‘echo’ as something that both recapitulates and varies what has gone before:

So be beginning, be beginning to despair.  
O there’s none; no no no there’s none:  
Be beginning to despair, to despair,  
Despair, despair, despair, despair.

#### The Golden Echo

Spare!  
There is one, yes I have one (Hush there!);  
Only not within seeing of the sun.

(l. 13-20)

Here, top-like, the poem wheels almost to a standstill before being given another spin. The new life is bred not only through the rhyming on ‘despair’/‘Spare’ (which unfolds into the parenthetical rhyme on ‘Hush there!’ – the poem rounding on itself more tenderly than the interjection a line previously), but through the Golden Echo’s brightening from ‘none’ through ‘only’ into ‘sun’, as the poem turns its rhymes, and its pessimism, on their head. Hopkins’ rhymes at once stall and propel the poem.

Nonetheless, Hopkins remained sensitive to the possibility that rhyme might strangle spontaneity. The choice to rhyme on a certain word inevitably narrows down the subsequent directions a poem might take. He felt that ‘rhymes announcing too visibly desperate an expedient mar a poem, seeming to force the author back on what he would not otherwise have chosen to say’, argues Peter McDonald.<sup>48</sup> The matter arose in a debate with Bridges in 1883. Hopkins took issue with the phrase ‘golden foil’

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<sup>48</sup> McDonald, *Sound Intentions* 277.

one of Bridges' sonnets: 'it has to me an unspontaneous artificial air [...] the images of gold and crimson are out of keeping: brilliancy is the only way'.<sup>49</sup> Bridges had defended the phrase by saying he was 'driven to it', by his previous choice of rhymes, but this raised Hopkins' hackles, and, turning to distinguish Bridges' rhyme from his own rhyme on 'foil' in 'God's Grandeur', he offered a defence:

You were, you say, driven to it: I protest, and with indignation, at your saying I was driven to the same image. With more truth it might be said that my sonnet might have been written expressly for the image's sake [...] no other word whatever will give the effect I want. Moreover as it is the first rhyme, presumably it engendered the others and not they it.<sup>50</sup>

Hopkins is bullish in his assertion that the proper attitude is to drive one's intentions through rhyme, rather than be driven by it. But we might think of this as a moment when Hopkins' practice disproves his principles. For what he says of 'foil' is less obviously the case of the rhyme that follows it:

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.

(*'God's Grandeur'* l. 1-4)

It looks very much as though Hopkins *has* been 'driven' to 'oil' (and his afterthought, 'presumably it engendered the others and not they it' half-concedes as much). As

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<sup>49</sup> *Correspondence* 559.

<sup>50</sup> *Correspondence* 559.



McDonald observes, 'To get from lightning to an oilpress in the space of a single couplet is no mean feat' and 'any inherent naturalness in the connection is probably more than can be reasonably claimed.'<sup>51</sup>

But might not Hopkins' ability to work his way out of the difficult corners that rhyme backs him into accentuate, rather than diminish, the impression of spontaneity? The pressure created by rhyme in Hopkins' poems is often as suggestive as it is constraining; it can engender supple changes in direction and propel the voice into unusual postures, working as a principle of 'independent life', to recall Griffiths' phrase. It is often in answering the expediencies of rhyme that Hopkins is driven to some of his most characteristic – and characteristically inspired – imaginative turns, at once unpredictable and discovering 'the effect I want'. The poetic flair that enables Hopkins' voice to access the recesses of his character often makes itself felt with particular acuteness, for instance, at the end of his poems, at the very moment when rhymes would seem to be running out. '[G]old-vermilion' in 'The Windhover' is one example. One might also think of the surprise of 'sandal' (l. 14) at the end of 'Felix Randal', which Hopkins needs for a rhyme on 'Randal' (l. 11), as he remembers:

How far from then forethought of, all thy more boisterous years,  
When thou at the random grim forge, powerful amidst peers,  
Didst fettle for the great grey drayhorse his bright and battering sandal!  
(l. 12-14)

George Orwell showed how Hopkins' use of the word transcends 'coincidence' to achieve exactly 'the effect I want':

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<sup>51</sup> McDonald, *Sound Intentions* 275.

The best touch, one might say the especial touch, in this poem is due to a verbal coincidence. For the word that pins the whole poem together and gives it finally an air of majesty, a feeling of being tragic instead of merely pathetic, is that final word 'sandal' which no doubt only came into Hopkins' mind because it happened to rhyme with Randal. I ought to perhaps add that the word 'sandal' is more impressive to an English reader than it would be to an oriental, who sees sandals every day and perhaps wears them himself. To us a sandal is an exotic thing, chiefly associated with the ancient Greeks and Romans. When Hopkins describes the carthorse's shoe as a sandal, he suddenly converts the cart-horse into a magnificent mythical beast, something like a heraldic animal. And he reinforces that effect by the splendid rhythm of the last line — 'Didst fettle for the great grey drayhorse his bright and battering sandal' — which is actually a hexameter, the same metre in which Homer and Vergil wrote. By combination of sound and association he manages to lift an ordinary village death on to the plane of tragedy.<sup>52</sup>

This is wonderfully perceptive and insightful, not least in restoring some of the colour to an item whose exoticism has faded a little in intervening years. But another context for the word might be its appearance (not as a rhyme, but in a poem about rhyme) in Keats's sonnet 'If by dull rhymes our English must be chained':

If by dull rhymes our English must be chain'd,  
And, like Andromeda, the Sonnet sweet  
Fetter'd, in spite of pained loveliness;  
Let us find out, if we must be constrain'd,  
Sandals more interwoven and complete  
To fit the naked foot of Poesy...

(l. 1-6)

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<sup>52</sup> George Orwell, 'The Meaning of a Poem' *The Collected Essays, Journals and Letters of George Orwell, Vol. VIII: My Country Right and Left, 1940-1943*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970) 157-61.

Keats's sonnet asserts its individuality (much like Clare's do) by 'finding out' its own 'interwoven' rhyme scheme (*abcabdca bcdede*); it makes felt the way in which the 'chains' of rhyme might connect as well as 'constrain' thought. Hopkins' sonnet follows a more orthodox *abbaabba ccdccd* pattern, but his closing rhyme pays tribute to Keats's poem in its feeling for the way the pressure of rhyme might create the atmosphere necessary for one's individual voice to emerge.<sup>53</sup>

Another instance arises when Hopkins sets down as the first *b* rhyme in the octave of 'Hurrahing in Harvest' the word 'behaviour'. He has consciously painted himself into a corner: the *Penguin Rhyming Dictionary* supplies only two rhyme-words for *behaviour*, one of which is *paviour* ('a person who lays paving') and probably of limited use for someone attempting to turn rhyme to 'the finest and most imaginative effect'.<sup>54</sup> But Hopkins requires four rhymes on the word in his sonnet. His solutions bring his verbal resourcefulness up against the limits of the language. First by allowing 'behaviour' (l. 2) to drift into 'wilful-wavier' (l. 3), a near-coinage which plays on the rhyme-sound in a manner appropriate to the 'moulding' and 'melting' in the skies that Hopkins' poem attends to, then in two contrasting guises when the rhyme returns in the second quatrain:

I lift up heart, eyes  
Down all that glory in the heavens to glean our Saviour;  
And, eyes, heart, what looks, what lips yet gave you a  
Rapturous love's greeting of realer, of rounder replies?  
(l. 5-8)

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<sup>53</sup> Hopkins has a playful internal rhyme on 'sandalled' and 'dandled' in line 6 of 'Binsey Poplars'.

<sup>54</sup> *The Penguin Rhyming Dictionary*, comp. Rosalind Fergusson (London: Penguin Reference, 1985).

'Saviour' discovers a natural partner in 'behaviour'; Christ is what the 'lovely behaviour' of the clouds *should* reveal: the 'natural effect' of the rhyme is at one with the 'natural effect' of looking at the skies.

The second rhyme is more disarming. On the one level, it parades Hopkins' agility; on the other, thanks to the enjambment, it masks the presence of a rhyme at all. It is at once an obvious contrivance and remarkably natural-seeming. Critics have tended to disapprove of this sort of effect in Hopkins. 'In explicitly comic verse' rhyming in this manner 'does not feel jarring; but in any other generic context, it is inevitably problematic', says McDonald;<sup>55</sup> Griffiths feels that it only suits the 'self-bantering' style of a Byron or a Browning.<sup>56</sup> But might any 'problematic' unsettling of decorum not be part of the effect? Why shouldn't we allow for a degree of 'bantering' in Hopkins' own manner, of a sort directed as much at the reader's expectations as his own verse? The most notorious instance of Hopkins rhyming in this manner comes in the poem in which he combines risky colloquialism with formal awkwardness most jarringly, 'The Bugler's First Communion', where the rhymes seem to sound out something of Hopkins' uneasiness with being at ease:

This very very day came down to us after a boon he on  
My late being there begged of me, overflowing  
    Boon in my bestowing,  
Came, I say, this day to it – First Communion.  
(l. 5-8)

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<sup>55</sup> McDonald, *Sound Intentions* 260.

<sup>56</sup> Griffiths, *Printed Voice* 325.

Bridges disliked this: 'The rhyme to *communion* in 'The Bugler' is hideous, and the suspicion that the poet thought it ingenious is appalling'. Hopkins' intention, says Bridges 'is that the verses should be recited as running on without pause, and the rhymes occurring in their midst should be like a phonetic accident, merely satisfying the prescribed form'.<sup>57</sup> But the two angles of Bridges' attack collide suggestively: on the one hand he criticises a kind of shyness about rhyme and the way Hopkins' voice seems diffident about its own status as poetry, a wish that they should seem merely 'phonetic accidents'; on the other he takes Hopkins to task for a wish to flaunt, rather than subdue, his ingenuity. But it is these jostling possibilities that seem to me to give such moments their brilliantly awkward life. The impression they create is of common speech surprised to find itself poetry, a miniature, self-directed, instance of the way in the most inspired poetry 'every beauty takes you as it were by surprise' that Hopkins spoke about in his letter on Parnassian. The combination of awkwardness and delight in idiosyncrasy is in itself a distinctive Hopkins note, the trademark of a unique poetic identity that endlessly eludes definition.

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<sup>57</sup> Bridges, 'Notes', *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* 179.

## Chapter 5

### Hopkins II: 'A Really Beating Vein'

Is not all language, is not common talk, is not eloquence, is not poetry, all  
full of mention of the heart?

– Hopkins, 'On the Sacred Heart'<sup>1</sup>

Incomparable treasure, heart's blood spilt  
Out of heart's anguish, high heart, all-hoping heart,  
Child-innocent, clean heart, of guile or guilt,  
But heart storm-tried, fire-purged, heaven chastened...

– Monk Gibbon, 'The Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins'<sup>2</sup>

#### I

Exchanging letters in 1879, Hopkins and his friend R. W. Dixon took issue with Tennyson's poems for lacking heart. Dixon complained about the versification of 'Locksley Hall': 'It has the effect of being artificial and *light*: most unfit for intense passion, of which there is nothing in it, but only a man making an unpleasant and rather ungentlemanly row.'<sup>3</sup> Hopkins agreed: 'not only *Locksley Hall* but *Maud* is an ungentlemanly row and *Alymer's Field* is an ungentlemanly row and the *Princess* is an ungentlemanly row. To be sure this gives him vogue, popularity, but not that sort of ascendancy Goethe had or even Burns, scoundrel as the first was, not to say the

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<sup>1</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'On the Sacred Heart', *Sermons* 102.

<sup>2</sup> Monk Gibbon, 'The Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins' quoted in Gardener, *Poetic Idiosyncrasy* 276.

<sup>3</sup> R. W. Dixon, letter to Gerard Manley Hopkins, 10<sup>th</sup> Jan. 1879, *The Correspondence of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Richard Watson Dixon*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., ed. and introd. Claude Colleer Abbott (London: Oxford UP, 1955) 17.

second; but then they spoke out of the real human rakishness of their hearts and everybody recognised the really beating, though rascal, vein'.<sup>4</sup>

One might say that Hopkins' poems, too, get their 'really beating vein' from a willingness to speak from a 'real human' (if not exactly 'rakish') heart. The distinctiveness of his poetry is rooted in its candour and intensity. If Tennyson's versification is 'artificial and *light*', Hopkins' lays bare his heart's feelings with authenticity and force. It is more than fit for 'intense passion'. It warrants the admiration that Hopkins himself granted to Dryden: 'his style and his rhythms lay the strongest stress [...] on the naked *thew* and *sinew* of the English language'.<sup>5</sup> 'Sinew' as if to imagine language itself as a muscle, or a beating heart, and 'thew' as in 'The bodily powers or forces of a man (Latin *vires*), might, strength, vigour', a sense illustrated in the *OED* by two quotations from Hopkins, including this from an 1873 journal entry: 'A floating flag is like wind visible and what weeds are in a current; it gives it *thew* and fires it and bloods in it'.<sup>6</sup> For the flag in the wind and the reeds in a current one might read the 'beating vein' of Hopkins' verse as a conduit for 'passion': 'it gives it *thew* and fires it and bloods in it'.

To speak of Hopkins' 'heart' in these terms is to emphasise his poetry's resilience, its willingness to fall back on the resources of the self, even its 'manly character', to invoke the phrase Hopkins used three months later when comparing Burns and Tennyson in a letter to Robert Bridges.<sup>7</sup> This is the Hopkins whose verse provokes Donald Davie's abhorrence for its 'muscle-bound monstrosity'.<sup>8</sup> And

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<sup>4</sup> *Correspondence* 347.

<sup>5</sup> *Correspondence* 906.

<sup>6</sup> *Journals and Papers* 233.

<sup>7</sup> *Correspondence* 374.

<sup>8</sup> Davie, *Purity of Diction* 150.

certainly a robust independence is never far from Hopkins' invocations of the heart. 'What we call heart is not the piece of flesh so called, not the great bloodvessel only but the thoughts of the mind that vessel seems to harbour and the feelings of the soul to which it beats', Hopkins said in a sermon on the Sacred Heart as an object of Catholic devotion;<sup>9</sup> and even as this attempts to shift attention onto less tangible matters, to speak of how the 'great bloodvessel [...] beats' leaves its physical presence thundering in our ears. Hopkins addressed the sermon to those for whom the Sacred Heart has 'a strange sound, an unmeaning sound, or even an unpleasing and repulsive sound';<sup>10</sup> he might have spoken similarly about the 'strange sound' occasioned by the presence of the heart in his poetry. But the 'feelings of the soul' to which Hopkins' poetry resounds are more varied than might first seem the case; the heart is a source of tenderness as well as toughness, compassion as well as courage. His poetry's own 'beat' expresses delicacy as well as force.<sup>11</sup> Hopkins catches some of the range and vigour that animates his poetry as he breaks off into a riff on the metaphorical life of the heart within the language:

...we speak so often of the heart, a great heart, a narrow heart, a warm heart, a cold heart, a tender heart, a hard heart, a heart of stone, a lion heart, a craven heart, a poor heart, a sad heart, a heavy heart, a broken heart, a willing heart, a full heart, of heart's ease, heartache, heartscald, of thinking in one's heart, of loving from one's heart, of the heart sinking, of taking heart, of losing heart, of giving the heart away, of being heartwhole.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Hopkins, 'On the Sacred Heart', *Sermons* 103.

<sup>10</sup> Hopkins, 'On the Sacred Heart', *Sermons* 101.

<sup>11</sup> As Matthew Campbell has shown, 'Sprung rhythm can be light as well as heavy' (*Rhythm and Will* 200): it is capable of opening words up to different shades of stress.

<sup>12</sup> Hopkins, 'On the Sacred Heart', *Sermons* 103.



‘[I]t would be endless to name all the ways we bring the heart in’ Hopkins remarked, an observation given point by the tireless energy of the passage. Something similar holds true of Hopkins’ own poems; and the fervour and variety with which they ‘bring the heart in’, discovering in this most central of poetic images a language to articulate sharply individuated passion, is the subject of this chapter.

## II

Poetry is ‘full of mention of the heart’, as Hopkins says in the epigraph above; so the stress his poems place on it indicates their readiness to assert their individuality within a literary tradition. The defining influence here is Romantic poetry, both in terms of the courage with which it makes private feeling the basis of poetic expressiveness, and the precision with which it articulates that feeling. It is easy to forget the daring involved in Keats’s beginning ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ with the words ‘My heart aches’:

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains  
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,  
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains  
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:  
‘Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,  
But being too happy in thine happiness, –  
(l. 1-6)

The lines epitomise Romantic poetry's concern to communicate 'the essential passions of the heart', in the words of Wordsworth's 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads*;<sup>13</sup> and yet they also remind us how finely and unexpectedly the best Romantic poetry delineates those 'essential passions'. The 'ache' they communicate is nothing vaguely defined: what 'pains' Keats's 'sense' is its being 'numbed' to feeling; the precision of the lines leaves one surprised and half-perplexed by the effort to imagine an 'ache' occasioned by one's happiness in another's happiness.<sup>14</sup> Keats's heart is not quite Hopkins'. Hopkins was suspicious of Keats's poetry for 'abandoning itself to an unmanly and enervating luxury';<sup>15</sup> and where Keats's heart 'aches', Hopkins' is 'sodden-with-its-sorrowing' (*The Wreck of the Deutschland* l. 212), as if energetically busying itself in grieving. But with the subtlety, openness, and trust in feeling in these lines Hopkins has much in common.

Later in the 'Preface' Wordsworth speaks of poetry's concern as being 'truth, not individual and local, but general, and operative [...] carried alive into the heart by passion'.<sup>16</sup> Hopkins might have been in accord with second part of that statement, though not the first; like Keats, he is concerned to locate truth in the 'individual and local' feelings of 'My heart'. A defining contrast here might be with a later poet, Yeats. In a line like 'I feel it in the deep heart's core' ('The Lake Isle of Innisfree', l. 12)<sup>17</sup> the heart serves as a guarantor of authentic feeling, but also, as '*the* heart', betrays an urge

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<sup>13</sup> Wordsworth, 'Preface' 597.

<sup>14</sup> The best commentary on the lines in this regard is Christopher Ricks's: 'So familiar is the poem that it is easy to be glazed to the way in which this opening is so surprising and yet so immediately acknowledged as a truth. Who, after all, would have assumed that the ache, the numbness, the pain was likely to have been caused by envy of the nightingale's happiness?' (*Keats and Embarrassment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974) 150).

<sup>15</sup> *Correspondence* 930.

<sup>16</sup> Wordsworth, 'Preface' 605.

<sup>17</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree', *W. B. Yeats: The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London: J. M. Dent, 1994) 60. All further quotations from Yeats's poetry are taken from this edition.

that feeling should transcend itself into the symbolic; the heart in Hopkins stays resolutely, rawly, personal. Yeats says 'I cast my heart into my rhymes' ('To Ireland in the Coming Times', l. 45), where the implied bravura of 'cast' is restrained and complicated by the competing sense of 'mould' or 'fashion'; a line such as Hopkins' 'I am gall. I am heartburn' ('I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day' l. 9) gains in intensity what it loses in urbanity in its exposure (Keatsian in its physical inwardness, Hopkinsian in its violence) of the heart's afflictions.<sup>18</sup>

And yet the distinguishing strain Hopkins' poetry places on the heart has largely gone unremarked. Kirstie Blair, for instance, is surprisingly brief on the subject in *Victorian Poetry and the Culture of the Heart*. She contends that, for Hopkins, the heart 'stands for the fallible self, which must be chided and put down by God'.<sup>19</sup> There is truth in this assertion: Hopkins was anxious that to license the heart's feelings may be to indulge a 'rascal vein'. He often urged the heart's submission to Christ, as in some meditation notes made on Ash Wednesday in 1884: 'Crown him king over yourself, your heart'.<sup>20</sup> And if his poems can seem to 'beat' to the heart's movements, the mechanics of verse also offered a means of controlling its wayward impulses, a possibility brought into play in the fragmentary late sonnet, 'To His Watch':

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<sup>18</sup> For an illuminating account of the way Yeats's poems 'speak from the heart or appeal to the heart as a way of announcing their own authenticity', see Stephen Regan, 'Later Poetry', *W. B. Yeats*, ed. Edward Larissy (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2010) 75-77.

<sup>19</sup> Kirstie Blair, *Victorian Poetry and the Culture of the Heart* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006) 239.

<sup>20</sup> Hopkins, 'Dublin Meditation Points', *Sermons* 254. As Jill Muller points out, critics have sometimes interpreted the fervour of his Catholic devotion as a sublimated homosexuality: 'Norman MacKenzie speculates that the "unruliness" of Hopkins' passions may have been the "hidden emotional spur" to his "determination to devote his whole being to God."' [Richard] Dellamora observes that while there is "reason to admire the sincerity and seriousness of Hopkins' religious commitment, it does also permit him to conserve and to celebrate a considerably more troubling difference—namely his attraction to other males." He later suggests that "life as a religious promised to valorise masculine desire by focusing it on Christ while folding Hopkins into a range of 'safe' male homosocial relations.'" (*Victorian Catholicism* 24).

Mortal my mate, bearing my rock-a-heart,  
Warm beat with cold beat[,] company, shall I  
Earlier or you fail at our force and lie  
The ruins of, rifled, once a world of art?  
(‘To his Watch’, l. 1-4)

‘Heart’ and ‘art’ is not an unusual rhyme pairing,<sup>21</sup> but Hopkins gives it an individualising twist. ‘[R]ock-a-heart’ grants Hopkins’ heart a vibrant life of its own, and the rhyme focuses a dilemma as to whether verse should either discipline or shape itself to the ‘Warm beat’ of the heart. You can read the lines, as Blair does, as sharing in a Victorian anxiety that the heart should come to seem a sterile mechanism (‘framed to fail and die’ (l. 6), as a later line has it), the ‘warm’ beat of their rhythms as they ‘rock’ between iambs and trochees dodging the constraints of a ‘cold’ iambic pulse.<sup>22</sup> But they also manage to sound rather attracted to the notion of the heart as a ‘world of art’ [my emphasis], something constructed, intricate, and expansive. And for all they work to resist the ‘cold beat’ of a mechanical ticking, they welcome the way its ‘company’ holds the motions of the heart in check, in a way that lends support to Blair’s sense of Hopkins’ worries about the heart’s fallibility.

Yet if these lines are ambivalent, what is most striking is the degree of trust that Hopkins’ poems place in the heart, their willingness to place their ‘art’ at its service. In the ‘Curtal-Sonnet’ ‘Peace’,<sup>23</sup> Hopkins commits to a nuanced fidelity to its impulses:

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<sup>21</sup> It appears on Shakespeare’s Sonnets 24, 125, 139, for instance.

<sup>22</sup> Blair, *Culture of the Heart* 84.

<sup>23</sup> A ‘Curtal-Sonnet’ as Hopkins defined it in his ‘Author’s Preface’ is a sonnet ‘constructed in proportions resembling those of the sonnet proper, namely 6+4 instead of 8+6, with however a halfline tailpiece’ (‘Author’s Preface on Rhythm’, *Poetical Works* 117).

I'll not play hypocrite  
To own my heart: I yield you do come sometimes; but  
That piecemeal peace is poor peace.

(l. 6-8)

Hopkins described his inversion 'own my heart' as 'merely "my own heart" transposed for rhythm's sake and then *tamquam exquisitus*',<sup>24</sup> but it amounts to more than convenience or affectation. Rhythmic fluency comes at a cost of grammatical strain, and the phrasing, as Eric Griffiths observes, introduces 'an apt searching of the word "own" in its relation to "heart"'.<sup>25</sup> Making 'own' sound like a verb, it releases in the word the potential meanings of 'confess' or 'possess'. The first meaning accentuates the lines' vow against self-deception, ingraining a stubborn unwillingness to exaggerate feeling for poetic effect. The second raises the question of control: it knows that we are not always securely in command of our own heart's urges, and glances at the way the heart's contact with our inmost feelings may take us by surprise. As Hopkins put it in his Sacred Heart sermon: 'The heart is of all the members of the body the one which most strongly and most of its own accord sympathises with and expresses in itself what goes on within the soul. Tears are sometimes forced, smiles may be put on, but the beating of the heart is the truth of nature'.<sup>26</sup>

Hopkins allows his feeling for the heart's innate truthfulness to drive his poetry in a way that belies Blair's comments about its 'fallibility'. In a sonnet, 'The Handsome Heart', which shares its title with the phrase he used in a letter to Bridges as a

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<sup>24</sup> *Correspondence* 680-1.

<sup>25</sup> Griffiths, *Printed Voice* 344.

<sup>26</sup> Hopkins, 'On the Sacred Heart', *Sermons* 103.

synonym for 'beauty of character',<sup>27</sup> Hopkins marvels at 'What the heart is!' (l. 5). He rejoices in the heart's capacity for spontaneous virtue:

Heart to its own fine function, | wild and self-instressed,  
Falls as light as, life-long, | schooled to what and why.  
(*'The Handsome Heart'* l. 7-8)<sup>28</sup>

The heart in Hopkins' poems generally reveals its character under a more violent degree of stress than this. But the fervour of his writing often owes to its efforts to find a language responsive to the heart's 'self-instressed' life, its way of behaving according 'to its own fine function'. Hopkins is often delighted, and put on his mettle, by the sense that the heart speaks, as he puts it in *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, with a depth 'truer than tongue' (l. 10), even as his poetry finds ways of bearing witness to that 'truth'. *The Wreck* announces Hopkins' maturity as a poet, but its opening movements enact a loving surrender to God's 'mastery'. From the off, its rhythms draw us into a turbulent inner life, capturing 'The swoon of a heart that the sweep and the hurl of thee trod | Hard down with a horror of height' (l. 14-15). Hopkins' alliteration sees the 'h' of 'heart' dragged through a train of physical buffetings ('hurl', 'Hard', 'horror', 'height') as the momentum of the anapaests careers into the bunched emphasis of 'trod | Hard down'.<sup>29</sup> But what 'really beats' in the writing is not so much a

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<sup>27</sup> *Correspondence* 374.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted from Hopkins' revised version of the poem. In an earlier draft the lines had read 'To its own function fine, wild and self-instressed | Falls light as ten years long taught how to and why'. Tom Paulin calls the revised version a 'stammering inchoate wreck of a fine sonnet' (*'Hopkins on the Rampage'*, *Minotaur* 98), but in these lines, at least, its rhythmic swiftness seems more attuned to its sense of the heart's grace.

<sup>29</sup> Martin Dubois remarks of these lines that 'With 'thee trod', and across the line-ending, Hopkins' frenetic elation has steadied into something closer to settled conviction' (*'Burden of Security'* 446).

desire to see the 'fallible' heart put in its place as an awed sense of its resilience and spiritual rightness:

The frown of his face  
Before me, the hurtle of hell  
Behind, where, where was a, where was a place?  
I whirled out wings that spell  
And fled with a fling of the heart to the heart of the Host.  
My heart, but you were doveswinged, I can tell,  
Carrier-witted, I am bold to boast,  
To flash from the flame to the flame then, tower from the grace to the grace.  
(l. 17-24)

If the precise nature of this encounter is a matter of debate,<sup>30</sup> it is worth noting that Hopkins left it so. His faith roots itself in what Jill Muller labels an 'affective experience of God's immanence'.<sup>31</sup> Yet he also, as Muller says, 'shared Newman's "great dread of going by my feelings," or at least of appearing to do so'.<sup>32</sup> Still, the lines recount a moment when 'feelings' were given rein. Although they 'boast' about the heart's behaviour, they are not smug. Without denying agency or responsibility ('the heart is the part of the body that acts *most* of its own accord' [my emphasis]), their rhythms shape the impression that when they speak of a 'fling of the heart' it is the heart, rather than the poet himself, that is doing the flinging. Yes, it was 'My heart' that 'fled' to find God under such pressure, Hopkins says wonderingly, but it was 'doveswinged', 'Carrier-witted', apparently under the command of something other than conscious will.

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<sup>30</sup> Mackenzie goes through a list of seven possibilities, the most prominent among which are Hopkins' conversion and his choice of a vocation ('Commentary', *Poetical Works* 324).

<sup>31</sup> Muller, *Victorian Catholicism* 110.

<sup>32</sup> Muller, *Victorian Catholicism* 29.

The lines enact the possibilities of relying on a ‘fling of the heart’ in a poetic sense, too. They give the impression of following an instinctual energy as the pressure that builds up through the breathless questioning ‘where’s of the third line unfurls itself through ‘whirled’, ‘wings’, and ‘fling’ (‘I whirled out wings that spell’ means ‘I sprouted wings for a short time’, but awkwardly so, and you can also hear in the line a claim about the spreading of poetic wings). Hopkins maintained that ‘feeling, love in particular, is the great moving power and spring of verse’.<sup>33</sup> The remark gestures towards the expressive force of rhythm. Although Hopkins said that he employed sprung rhythm for its proximity to ‘the native and natural rhythm of speech’,<sup>34</sup> it is time and again the rhythms of the heart to which Hopkins’ poems seem to beat. The equation of the heartbeat with a steady iambic beat is a commonplace; but Hopkins finds a more idiosyncratic movement, as Helen Vendler observes: ‘The regular measures of ordinary verse simply did not seem to Hopkins to represent the felt texture of his experience’.<sup>35</sup> His rhythmic flurries often give the impression that the heart is bursting in on a poem. In ‘The Windhover’, a riskily chiming internal rhyme enacts the heart’s nervously unselfconscious awakening in the presence of beauty:

My heart in hiding  
 Stirred for a bird...  
 (‘The Windhover’ l. 7-8)

This captures the heart’s unease about showing itself: does it stir ‘in hiding’, or is it the ‘stirring’ that brings it out of hiding? There are similar stirrings all through Hopkins’

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<sup>33</sup> *Correspondence* 333.

<sup>34</sup> *Correspondence* 282.

<sup>35</sup> Vendler, *Breaking of Style* 15.



poems; they give the sense of a voice startled and bearing shocks: they impart the spontaneity whose absence Hopkins complained of in his letter on Tennyson's 'Parnassian'. In 'Hurrahing in Harvest' the heart becomes *birdlike* in its response to beauty:

The heart rears wings bold and bolder  
And hurls for him, O half hurls earth for him off under his feet.  
(*'Hurrahing in Harvest'* l. 13-4)

Here the exhilaration is conveyed through the gathering of momentum in the lines' incremental repetitions, and through way in which they launch themselves from the packed stresses of the first line into the giddy expansiveness of the second (a line which leaves us with a disturbed sense of where to place its own metrical 'feet'). 'To What Serves Mortal Beauty?' is one occasion where Hopkins has to be more on its guard against the heart's urges:

To what serves mortal beauty? Dangerous; does set danc-  
Ing blood.  
(*'To What Serves Mortal Beauty?'* l. 1-2)

'Danc-|Ing' is set trippingly over the line ending there, as the line's pulses are set racing by a 'beauty' whose 'Dangerous' allure the staccato rhythms of the rest of the poem attempt to hold at arms length: 'own | Home at heart, heaven's sweet grace; | then leave, let that alone' (l. 12-13). Staccato rhythms take a different hold in 'Carrion

Comfort' as the heart's abrupt seizure of 'strength', 'joy', and 'cheer' break from the contortions of the verse like the sudden uncoiling of a spring:

Nay in all that toil, that coil, since (seems) I kissed the rod,  
Hand rather, my heart lo! lapped strength, stole joy, would laugh, cheer.  
(‘Carrion Comfort’, l. 7-8)

In ‘Spelt from Sybil’s Leaves’ the heart makes a gentler intercession:

Heart, you round me right  
With: Our evening is over us; our night | whelms, whelms, and will end us.  
(‘Spelt from Sybil’s Leaves’ l. 7-8)

Here the heart calms, rather than stirs up, the rhythms, and Hopkins draws courage from what it tells him (‘round me right’ as meaning ‘round upon what I am saying’, but also ‘put me back to rights’). But the effect of the lines is not wholly comforting: when earlier the poem had spoken of ‘us’, in its fourth line (‘her earliest stars, earl stars, | stars principal, overbend us’), it was to give the impression that ‘us’ was meant in general, collective terms; but here ‘us’ has been whittled down to just the poet and his heart, left to face the encroaching apocalyptic ‘evening’ in isolation.<sup>36</sup>

This series within Hopkins’ poems might be said to reach its crescendo in ‘That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection’, a poem pulled clear of impending despair by a ‘heart’s clarion’ that is both a cry of the heart (Christ’s) and to the heart (Hopkins’):

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<sup>36</sup> Leavis notes the way ‘round’ calls into play the archaic sense of ‘whisper’, which helps to contribute to this more sinister atmosphere (*New Bearings* 137).

Enough! the Resurrection,  
A heart's-clarion! Away grief's grasping, | joyless days, dejection.  
(‘That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire...’ l. 16-17)

The best comment on this ‘uncouth anacoluthon’ is Geoffrey Hill’s: ‘It is a great moment, one of the greatest grammatical moments in nineteenth-century English poetry. It has been criticised for its arbitrariness, but arbitrariness is the making of it. The Resurrection is a kind of eschatological anacoluthon; no amount of standard grammar can anticipate or regularise that moment.’<sup>37</sup> In emphasising their abruptness, one wouldn’t want to simplify the feeling in these lines. Hopkins’ language has a terse suggestiveness: ‘grief’s grasping’, catches both one’s ‘grasping’ around for consolation amid grief, and grief’s gasping after oneself; the rhyme on ‘dejection’ causes the feeling to linger even as it is banished. But Hill’s remark conveys their excitement, and in a scaled-down version it might be applied to all the moments above: they explore the ways in which verse might entrust itself to ‘a fling of the heart’. Each amounts to a superb realization of sprung rhythm’s ability to combine ‘opposite, and one wd. have thought, incompatible excellences, markedness of rhythm [...] and naturalness of expression’.<sup>38</sup> The impression of ‘naturalness’ and spontaneity may be just that, an impression, but Hopkins is adept at making it look authentic. That technical adeptness is no mere matter of pulling off a clever trick; the achievement has a moral force, too. It might feel surprising that Hopkins should be content to surrender to the heart’s impulses like this when we remember his criticism of Keats’s ‘unmanly and

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<sup>37</sup> Geoffrey Hill, ‘A Postscript on Modernist Poetics’, *Collected Critical Writings*, ed, Kenneth Haynes (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008) 570-1.

<sup>38</sup> *Correspondence* 282.

enervating luxury'. But such surprise would ignore the way the heart often enters a Hopkins poem with an urgency that arrests any tendency towards despair or sensuous indulgence. Hopkins allows the heart to take his poems by the scruff of the neck. He was stirred by the heart's justness under pressure. In lines imagined as spoken by Christ, he was touched by its ability to mirror and respond to divine compassion:

To him who ever thought with love of me  
Or ever did for my sake some good deed  
I will appear, looking such charity  
And kind compassion, at his life's last need  
That he will out of hand and heartily  
Repent he sinned and all his sins be freed.

The stroke of genius here, at once casual and profound, is 'heartily'. It forms only an appropriately imperfect rhyme with divine 'charity', but is made to describe a way of speaking whose vigour is alive with the truthfulness and compassion of the 'inmost heart', in the words of the passage from *The Life and Revelations of St Gertrude* of which the lines are a paraphrase.<sup>39</sup> It would be a fine way of characterising the candour and energy with which Hopkins' own poems speak.

### III

In laying such stress on the heart, Hopkins' poetry revitalised a sacred, as well as a poetic symbol. Its originality centres around the assertion of a distinctively Catholic

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<sup>39</sup> The poem translates a passage from *The Life and Revelations of St Gertrude* (1865): 'When I [Christ] behold anyone in his agony who has thought of Me with pleasure, or who has performed any works deserving of reward, I appear to him at the moment of death with a countenance so full of love and mercy, that he repents from his inmost heart for having ever offended Me, and he is saved by his repentance' (cited by Mackenzie, 'Commentary', *Poetical Works* 388).

poetic idiom. The second half of the nineteenth century saw a surge of interest in the Sacred Heart as an object of Catholic adoration: Hopkins' 1881 sermon on the theme reflected on what had become 'one of the dearest devotions of the Church'.<sup>40</sup> As early as 1863, whilst still a High Church Anglican, Hopkins had advised E. H. Coleridge that religion needed to be seen as 'loveable' [Hopkins' italics].<sup>41</sup> 'Christ only has to be known in order to be loved and if the Sacred Heart is but understood devotion of itself will follow',<sup>42</sup> he said in his sermon; in a 1866 letter to his father following his decision to convert, he defined the visceral sympathy that activates that understanding, urging his parents to 'approach Christ in a new way [...] casting yourselves into His sacred broken Heart and His five adorable wounds'.<sup>43</sup>

*The Wreck of the Deutschland* is, amongst other things, an effort to prove the 'loveable' heart of Catholicism. It endeavours to discover God's love amidst His apparent hard-heartedness, to experience His 'stroke' (l. 44) as a loving caress rather than a violent blow. Its rhythms seek to prove that discovery upon the pulses: 'It must be read with the heart as well as the eyes and mind', says Michael O'Neill, 'and thus entails a passionate participation'.<sup>44</sup> This is not to suggest that the poem coerces assent. Although Robert Bridges objected to the poem's 'full-blooded' Catholicism,<sup>45</sup> it is far

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<sup>40</sup> For the increasing popularity of the sacred heart in Victorian Catholicism, see Mary Heimann, *Catholic Devotion in Victorian England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995) 43-4, 126-7, 151-3, and Muller, *Victorian Catholicism*, which points out that '[Henry Edward] Manning published his *Glories of the Sacred Heart* in 1875, the year in which Hopkins began *The Wreck of the Deutschland*. The Sacred Heart was venerated as the source of divine compassion and the last recourse of sinners. Heimann attributes the English popularity of this devotion to the acute scrupulosity that seems to have been characteristic of many Victorian Catholic converts' (56). Cardinal Newman's crest bore three red hearts with the motto *Cor ad cor loquitur*. Duc Dau discusses the importance of the Sacred Heart to Hopkins and Catholicism more generally in *Touching God: Hopkins and Love* (London: Anthem P, 2012) 109-113.

<sup>41</sup> *Correspondence* 62.

<sup>42</sup> Hopkins, 'On the Sacred Heart', *Sermons* 101.

<sup>43</sup> *Correspondence* 117.

<sup>44</sup> Michael O'Neill 'Infinite Passion: Variations on a Romantic Metaphor', *Romantic Echoes in the Victorian Era*, 184.

<sup>45</sup> Cited by Mackenzie, 'Commentary' *Poetical Works* 349.

from bloody-minded. The poem's early stanzas may suggest that the way to intimately 'know' Christ is by sharing in His redemptive suffering, but one effect of Hopkins' emphasis in those stanzas on how remarkable his heart's behaviour seems is to concede that perceiving God's love and providence amidst suffering is often far from intuitive, and to mitigate against any easy exhortation that others should be able to take solace in seeing things the same way. It is one thing to embrace one's own suffering, another to say that others should be happy to embrace theirs.

The poem is strengthened and humanised as it moves into its account of the shipwreck itself by its patience with the alternate standpoint which has reservations as to just how 'loveable' God's behaviour is. Its voice, as Martin Dubois has observed in relation to some later stanzas, retains a 'capacity for tenderness, even while forcing the verbal issue'.<sup>46</sup> The closing stanzas of *Part the first*, for all their insistence that God has to be cruel to be kind (He is 'lightning and love' 'a winter and warm' (l. 70)), cannot banish a counter voice that urges God to take a gentler tack. 'Be adored among men, | God' (l. 65-6) the penultimate stanza of this section begins. Though that appeal passes into encouragement to 'wring thy rebel [...] with wrecking and storm' (l. 67-8), at the end of the final stanza the supplication returns: 'Make mercy in all of us, out of us all | Mastery, but be adored, but be adored King' (l. 79-80). These lines are careful to remember where they stand (God is still 'King'), but they find themselves caught between a pained plea and a warning. The distinctive Hopkins note is audible in the way the repetition, in its pleading insistence, makes it difficult not to hear the colloquial sense of 'adored' bleeding into the stricter theological one, so that a call for

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<sup>46</sup> Martin Dubois, 'Burden of Security' 437.

compassion, something like ‘please make it easy for us to love You’, wells up beneath the ostensible devotion.<sup>47</sup>

A troubled apprehension of a disjunction between divine and more ordinarily human standards of what is ‘loveable’ is crucial to much of the *Wreck’s* most imaginatively engaged writing. The poem has at its own heart two stanzas which, in their account of the shipwreck, are touched by the question of whether it shows greater heart to be moved to appalled sympathy and protest by the extremes of human suffering, or to maintain faith in God’s providence amidst one’s awareness of such horrors. Stanza seventeen opens with an eye on the hard details of the shipwreck that challenge the poem’s attempt to imagine ‘God’s cold’ as evidence for God’s love:

They fought with God’s cold –  
And they could not and fell to the deck  
(Crushed them) or water (and drowned them) or rolled  
With the sea-romp over the wreck.  
(l. 129-132)

Those parentheses harbour a matter-of-factness which might be deemed either heartless detachment or shocked numbness: as Eric Griffiths says, ‘Voicing these lines, a reader is thrown between a reporter’s indifferent noting and a truly participative

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<sup>47</sup> Eric Griffiths has observed of Hopkins’ remarks about ‘one adorable point of the incredible condescension of the Incarnation’ in an 1866 letter to E. H. Coleridge (*Correspondence* 86) that the phrase asks that we discriminate between the strict and idiomatic senses of ‘adoration’ (i. e. “adorable” as “worthy of adoration” which would be applied by Hopkins only to a religious mystery or to God, and as “extremely attractive, charming”): ‘His phrase requires us to take ‘adorable’ in the strict sense, and ‘incredible’ in the colloquially exaggerating sense (he does not mean that it is part of the charm of the Incarnation that nobody could believe in it)’ (*Printed Voice* 335-6). The effect of the repetition in these lines is the opposite. It makes it difficult not to hear the colloquial sense of ‘adored’ bleeding into the stricter theological one.

intake of dismay'.<sup>48</sup> The rhythms and imagery of the next line, which imagine the 'searomp' as a sort of child's rough-and-tumble, might even justify the detection of a flicker of sardonic pleasure at God's show of strength. Further uncertainties jostle in the succeeding two lines: 'Night roared, with the heart-break hearing a heart-broke rabble, | The woman's wailing, the cry of child without check' (l. 133-4). Is night's 'roar' a snarl of aggression or, as 'with' suggests, a howl of sympathetic anguish? For Hopkins himself, hearing the cries is a matter of 'heart-break', and the second of these lines has an alliterative sweep that cannot but prove heart-breaking (and sound heart-broken) in itself: 'The woman's wailing, the cry of child without check'. And yet they are equally the cries of a 'heart-broke rabble', where 'heart-broke' suggests their fractured courage, and 'rabble' looks on with appalled compassion at the state to which the strugglers are reduced.<sup>49</sup>

Emotional confliction is a conscious effect of these lines, and it takes the nun who arises in the stanza's closing lines, 'a lioness [...] breasting the babble' (l. 135), to cut a way through it all to God's providence, and, as the poem sees it, to sort the 'rabble' out. Like 'rabble', with which it forms an incongruously buoyant rhyme, 'babble' risks detachment in coming close to dismissing the 'wailing' and 'crying' of the sufferers as nonsense.<sup>50</sup> But it is Hopkins' verb 'breasting' that most channels the energies gathered in the nun's behaviour. To 'breast' the babble might be to set one's breast against it, to steel one's heart and see clearly through it; or it may be to take it to heart and seek to comfort it – to take it to one's breast. The verb recalls the

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<sup>48</sup> Griffiths, *Printed Voice* 355.

<sup>49</sup> As the word's entry in the *OED* shows, its use in the sense of a 'group or collection' is always tending towards the derogatory, even dehumanising.

<sup>50</sup> It also activates 'rabble's etymological meaning of 'confused speech': 'A long string or series of words, opinions, etc., esp. such as have little meaning or value or are derogatory in nature' (*OED*).



‘dreadnought breast’ (l. 125) of the sailor described in the previous stanza jumping from the rigging in an attempt to save the drowning passengers, and who had been ‘pitched to his death at a blow’ (l. 124). The braver course, Hopkins’ juxtaposition implies, is not attempting to ‘fight’ with God’s actions, but to perceive their justice; to take heart from God’s grace even amidst seemingly heart-breaking degrees of suffering.

The stanza that follows effects a moving and surprising shift in focus. Leaving the narrative of the wreck suspended at this moment of crisis, it turns inwards to scrutinise the response of the poet’s own heart, drawing upon the ambivalence of ‘you’ as a form of address which, in Robert Douglas-Fairhurst’s words, might seem ‘either involved or detached, affectionate or chilly’:<sup>51</sup>

Ah, touched in your bower of bone  
Are you! turned for an exquisite smart,  
Have you! make words break from me here all alone,  
Do you! – mother of being in me, heart.  
(l. 137-140)

This is from the eighteenth stanza out of thirty-five, and it makes for a troubled, and troubling, heart to the poem. It shows the poem’s demand for ‘passional participation’ in full swing. Matthew Campbell calls it ‘a dramatic pause, a turning back to the moved poet, and the moved readers’.<sup>52</sup> For all they turn inward, the lines seem to reach out of the poem and scrutinize our own responses, too. The lines trouble, in part, on account of the ambiguity they create about just how they imagine the heart as

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<sup>51</sup> Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, ‘Address’, *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry*, ed. Matthew Bevis (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013) 63.

<sup>52</sup> Campbell, *Rhythm and Will* 200.

being moved. The difficulty relates to how they are to be spoken. 'No rhythmic overflow could be more natural [...] As with a sob, each line stumbles and falters over the threshold of the next', wrote W. H. Gardener.<sup>53</sup> But is this quite the case? Hearing the lines as Gardener does means following what certainly seems the most 'natural' cadence, as if they were a series of questions, with the stress falling upon the first word of the line ('Are you?', 'Have you?', 'Do you?'). Read like this, they would present Hopkins rounding on his heart either tenderly or tauntingly; either soothing its sorrows, or chastising it for being 'touched' by something by something it should not be touched by: 'Moved to sympathy by the sight of all this suffering, are you?' they might be asking. But although the lines comport themselves like a series of interrogations, Hopkins' exclamation marks actually ask that we voice each phrase, with a slight jauntiness, by placing the stress upon 'you'. That is, they are in fact stirred to excitement at the heart's response, and the implication is that what 'touches' the heart here is not the pathos of the women and children foundering in the shipwreck, but the courage of the nun to overcome it. The words that Hopkins' 'heart' makes 'break' from him are not heart-broken; they 'break' forth in the way that song does; they are inspired to take heart from the nun's example. The intricacy of the writing causes us to refine our first impressions. So, for instance, the small word 'for', where one might have expected 'from', in 'turned for an exquisite smart', nuances our initial expectations to suggest a heart which, far from flinching, is opening itself to the trials of experience. And yet it is crucial to the lines' effect that those accents of pained interrogation should make themselves heard beneath the surface of the verse. What the moment communicates is a struggle with mixed emotions, a heartened response

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<sup>53</sup> Gardener, *Poetic Idiosyncrasy* i. 48.

the nun's behaviour which must come to terms with and subdue the impulse towards pity and horror at what 'God's cold' has wreaked.

#### IV

Hopkins' poems are frequently perturbed by their own seeming heartlessness. '[T]wo attitudes, of detached watching and of urgent pity', Griffiths says, are felt to jostle in his poems 'as co-equals in any attempt to understand suffering as both humanly undergone and part of a divine plan'.<sup>54</sup> The heart serves as the arena for warring impulses of humane but 'fallible' sympathy (to return to Blair's word) and spiritual fortitude, in a way that complicates any notion of what it might mean to 'speak from' it. 'The beating of the heart' may be 'the truth of nature', but that is not to say poetry has straightforward access to that 'beating'.

The accents of 'Felix Randal' strive to articulate a trust in divine compassion that doesn't lose sight of the costs of human suffering. The sonnet's second quatrain is bookended by conversational idioms which might be construed as brisk attempts to put on a brave face ('Sickness broke him' (l. 5)) or a ventriloquised quasi-folk trust in God and in the inevitability of human 'offence' ('God rest him all road ever he offended' (l. 8)); but its speech rhythms also animate a reciprocal tenderness:

This seeing the sick endears them to us, us too it endears.  
My tongue had taught thee comfort, touch had quenched thy tears,  
Thy tears that touched my heart, child, Felix, poor Felix Randal...  
(l. 9-11)

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<sup>54</sup> Griffiths, *Printed Voice* 168.

The rhythms and near-palindromic sound patterns orchestrate Hopkins' sense of how suffering 'endears' those that witness it. In their movement back and forth through 'touch...tears...tears...touched', the lines trace a transition from Hopkins' physical 'touch' to the rebounding emotional 'touch' of Randal's 'tears'. The verb, central to the writing about the heart in *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, too, plays on an understanding of the heart's twinned physical and emotional susceptibility. J. F. J. Russell complained that the poem shows only the feeling of 'a man for a child'.<sup>55</sup> But this is to ignore the fact that the tender intimacy of that 'child, Felix, poor Felix Randal' is caught up in a more variegated pattern of feeling. This pattern fulfils itself in the classical dignity of the resounding final image of Felix 'powerful amidst peers' (l. 13) in his prime. Here, with elegiac force, Felix is a 'Childe' in the heroic sense of the term, momentarily bringing to mind one of Charlemagne's paladins. Earlier, he is a 'child' in the sense of being a dying parishioner receiving 'comfort', including the sacrament of extreme unction, from his priest, a priest who acts on behalf of the 'broken' man's heavenly Father. Hopkins conveys a powerful sweep of feelings across the space of six lines, bringing home just how care for the sick involves mutual 'endearment'.<sup>56</sup>

Hopkins did address one poem explicitly '*To a Young Child*', but that poem, 'Spring and Fall', is exemplary of his ability to keep sentiment in check. The poem braces the flexible accents of concerned, intimate speech within its taut tetrameter

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<sup>55</sup> Cited by Mackenzie, 'Commentary', *Poetical Works* 419.

<sup>56</sup> Tracing Victorian notions of 'gentlemanliness' back to virtues valorised in the court of late medieval France, Alison Sulloway notes how 'The would-be Victorian gentleman adopted not only the manly virtues of 'prowess, loyalty, and honour' typical of northern France, but also the Provençal virtues of courtesy; and courtesy and pathos became the Victorian version of 'the gentle heart' (*Victorian Temper* 118).

couplets. It opens amid half-wondering, half-sceptical questioning directed towards the child's capacity for selfless sensitivity:

Margaret, are you grieving  
Over Goldengrove unleaving?  
Leaves, like the things of man, you  
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?  
(l. 1-4)

The delicately disturbed rhymes in the third and fourth lines anticipate the intricately disturbed rhyme of 'view you, then' (l. 5) and 'knew you then' (l. 7) that F. R. Leavis commented on in Hardy's 'The Voice'.<sup>57</sup> Hopkins' lines raise the possibility of, but turn their back on, poetical jingle to assume the more intricate postures of the speaking voice. Throughout, the poem 'speaks from the heart' in a language expressive of the nuances of the heart's feelings. As it moves out of these opening questions, the poem refuses to allow its wonder at the child's perspective to intrude upon its awareness of what the mature heart is like:

Ah! as 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.  
(l. 5-9)

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<sup>57</sup> Leavis notes how the shift in stress on the rhyme ('view you then', 'knew you *then*') has banished the jingle from it' (*New Bearings*, 49).

The poise of these lines has to do with Hopkins' skilled realisation of the ambiguities latent in exclamation, the mode of speech that would seem to grant the most direct, uncomplicated expression to the heart. 'Ah' pitches itself – as, say, 'Oh' or 'O' would not – precisely on the line between the opposed dangers of knowing condescension and sentimental indulgence that the poetry negotiates. As a hurt intake of breath it is saved from mawkishness by not being an excessive cry of pain ('O!'); as a warning, its sympathetic edge apprehends what lies in wait for the girl tenderly, and even mournfully ('by and by' is similarly moving in its blend of gentleness and unruffled indifference). The poetry may advise Margaret that she won't 'spare a sigh' over similar loss in future, but the poem itself is moved to do just that at the thought of the experiences that wait in store for her. Those experiences will be 'colder' sights for the heart to square up to, but they will be met by a heart which, hardened by experience, will come to such sights 'colder' in itself. The shift is modelled in the poem's closing lines, which clinch its transition from concerned questioning to clear-eyed assertion:

Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed  
What heart heard of, ghost guessed:  
It is the blight man was born for  
It is Margaret you mourn for.

(l. 11-14)

The tentative breathiness of the first two lines is sensitive to the unspoken intuitions of Margaret's own 'heart'; the crisp rhythms of the closing couplet give clear definition to those as-yet unexplained stirrings.

## V

As Hopkins' own heart 'grew older', his poetry increasingly drew on its capacity to 'mourn' and endure his own suffering. He wrote to Bridges in May 1885: 'I have after long silence written two sonnets, which I am touching: if ever anything was written in blood one of these was'.<sup>58</sup> The phrase 'written in blood' characterises the robust individuality of these late poems, but also the candid vulnerability that shadows it. It carries the suggestion of a way of writing that does away with words for the very stuff of feeling itself, a poetry whose 'passionate particularity', to use Barbara Hardy's term in an essay to which the ensuing discussion is indebted, emerges out of its concern not so much to 'name' as 'explore and enact the complexity and fluidity of feeling.'<sup>59</sup>

If these poems speak from the heart, Hopkins also develops in them an affecting manner of speaking to the heart – of expressing concern for its sufferings, and calling upon its resources. One of the sonnets Hopkins had in mind when writing to Bridges was probably 'I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day', and that begins with a remarkable diffraction of the self into its component parts:<sup>60</sup>

I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.  
What hoûrs, O what black hours we have spent  
This night! what sights you, heart, saw, ways you went!  
And more must in yet longer light's delay.

(l. 1-4)

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<sup>58</sup> *Correspondence* 736.

<sup>59</sup> Barbara Hardy, 'Forms and Feelings in the Sonnets of Gerard Manley Hopkins', *The Advantage of Lyric: Essays on Feeling in Poetry* (London: Athlone Press, 1977) 55, 62.

<sup>60</sup> Daniel A. Harris offers an account of Hopkins' 'imagery of corporal dissolution' (55) and 'dissection of himself into component areas' (57) in *Inspirations Unbidden: The Terrible Sonnets of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1982) 55-71.

'I...we...you...you': the chasm that opens up between the poet and his heart is both disconcerting in its evocation of a self riven by despair and consoling in its glimpse of the possibility that the heart and its agonies might be held at a distance as something separate from the self. The stalling of the rhythms at 'you, heart, saw', animates this ambivalence, as Hopkins' voice is caught between concern for his heart's sufferings and quiet gratitude for its company. The quatrain manages to sustain this note of tentative solace into its final line, the effect of whose subtly ambiguous syntax has been finely characterised by Christopher Ricks: 'it is as if, thinking apparently only of the fact that it will be a long time before God's peace comes, Hopkins also remembers that when the light of eternity does come, it will be *longer* than the darkness of this life'.<sup>61</sup> Such hopefulness is stamped out, however, upon the poem's move into its sestet with its juddering return to the here and now:

I am gall. I am heartburn. God's most deep decree  
Bitter would have me taste: my taste was me;  
Bones built in me, flesh filled, blood brimmed the curse.

Selfyeast of spirit a dull dough sours. I see  
The lost are like this, their scourge to be  
As I am mine, their sweating selves; but worse.

(l. 9-14)

All of a sudden it is as if the heart's pains, in William Cohen's excellent phrase, are 'felt from the inside out'.<sup>62</sup> The writing responds to a sense of the self as less agent than predicament, a condition whose confinements are sounded, as Peter McDonald has

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<sup>61</sup> Christopher Ricks, *Milton's Grand Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963) 91.

<sup>62</sup> William A Cohen, *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2009) 128.



pointed out, in the way the poem's rhymes upon 'be' and 'me' draw surrounding words into their orbit: 'decree... me... me... me... Selfyeast... see...'.<sup>63</sup> But what is impressive is the way the poem achieves against the claustrophobic pressure of its own distress an awareness of what lies beyond the self: the movement traced by the poem is of an awakening comprehension of the suffering of others: 'I see | The lost are like this'. This awareness is not sentimental: the verb 'see', held steady at the end of its line, has an understated coolness which implies that if the lines empathise with the fate of those who are 'lost', they are discompassionate about the causes of that fate. What impresses about the writing is its care in articulating exactly what and how it feels. The poem's closing lines had originally read:

The lost are like this, with their loss to be  
Their sweating selves, as I am mine, but worse.

Hopkins reworked them to mute the inference that he was in the same boat as 'the lost', akin to them in being a worse version of his usual 'sweating self'. And yet the finished lines, which make clear that the 'lost' are more than simply their 'sweating selves' at a low ebb, do not abandon this alternative suggestion entirely. They raise it only to hold it at bay through their carefully positioned semi-colon, as if to leave a trace of the process whereby they have arrived at a more honest and level-headed assessment of their position: 'I'll not play hypocrite | To own my heart'.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> McDonald, *Sound Intentions* 292.

<sup>64</sup> That is not to say that the poem derives a cruel consolation its awareness of others whose fate is 'worse' than his own. Its taut final line, with its memory of Edgar's chastened observation 'worse I may be yet: the worst is not | So long as we can say "This is the worst"' (*King Lear*, IV. i. 40-1) peers into an abyss and steels itself for the prospect of further suffering.

'I wake and feel...' concludes by withholding tenderness from those who have brought their 'scourge' upon themselves. Hopkins' 'terrible sonnets' more commonly explore the difficulties of extending tenderness to oneself. When Hopkins begins a poem with the words 'Patience, hard thing!', his terse phrasing answers to a sense that 'Patience' involves the hardening of the heart against suffering, but also that such hardening is a 'hard thing' to achieve: 'the hard thing but to pray, | But bid for, Patience is!' (l. 1-2). Patience is difficult to 'bid for' firstly, as the poem is wryly aware, because to 'bid for' it is to betray one's *impatience*, but also (as the Latin root of the word, *patior*, implies), because seeking it is to invite onto oneself more of the suffering and endurance that are necessary to put patience to the test: 'Patience who asks | Wants war, wants wounds' (l. 2-3).

The 'terrible sonnets' are 'terrible'; but they leave space for patches of hope. One might, therefore, speak of their 'heart', referring to their spirit, or cheerfulness. The second quatrain of this sonnet, which envisions 'Patience' as the plant that roots in harsh soils to which it lends its name, shifts attention from the difficulties of achieving patience to its rewards:

Natural heart's-ivy Patience masks  
Our ruins of wrecked past purpose. There she basks  
Purple eyes and seas of liquid leaves all day.  
(l. 6-8)

It is a lovely moment, whose charm is rooted in the sudden and strange effect of that 'There', through which Hopkins again shifts as if to look at his heart from the outside,

achieving a throwaway luxuriance as he contemplates the prospect of patience basking there 'all day'.

Still, the degree of comfort this affords depends on how one reads 'masks': does 'Patience' mask the 'ruins of wrecked past purpose' from its bearer, or only from the outside world? Hopkins' phrasing (speaking of not just 'the ruins of past purpose', but the ruins of a purpose that is already 'wrecked') has a precipitous quality, which, alongside the abrupt change in mood and intensity at the sonnet's *volta*, inclines us to believe the latter: 'We hear our hearts grate on themselves: it kills | To bruise them dearer' (l. 9-10), he writes, effecting, as in 'I wake and feel...', a brilliant switch of perspective, taking us abruptly inward into the heart's workings. The lines' clenching vowel-sounds ('Hear...hearts...grate') sound out the inner struggle of will, invisible to the world, it takes to sustain patience. 'Dearer', glossed by Mackenzie as 'more grievously',<sup>65</sup> focuses the combined tenderness and self-immolation that animates this struggle. On one level it operates as Mackenzie implies, to evoke a heart that cannot take any more suffering; but it also retains something of its more usual sense to suggest, grimly, that there is a certain cruel tenderness in inviting more suffering onto the heart, since it is only in this way that patience can be attained.

Among the most illuminating discussions of the heart in literature is Christopher Ricks's comparison of the 'dramatic inwardness' of Shakespeare's writing about the heart in, say, *Hamlet*, with Milton's obdurately external treatment of it: whilst Shakespeare makes us 'feel intensely with Hamlet', Milton characteristically 'does not use his words to enforce a sense of that heart within us'.<sup>66</sup> Hopkins manages

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<sup>65</sup> Mackenzie, 'Commentary', *Poetical Works* 461.

<sup>66</sup> Christopher Ricks, 'John Milton: Sound and Sense in *Paradise Lost*', *The Force of Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984) 62, 67. See also Ricks's remark about Macbeth's end-line repetitions of 'Amen' in

a mixture of the two. The language of the heart in his poetry repeatedly achieves a dual perspective, combining the inculcation of a harrowing intimacy with a perplexed animation of the feeling of being shut out from its workings. That complex of perplexity and inwardness is at play in 'My own heart let me more have pity on', the sonnet in which Hopkins' voice is at its most idiosyncratically human. The poem begins by returning us to the wording that is placed so suggestively under strain in 'Peace', but leaves it untroubled: this is a sonnet more concerned to comfort its 'own heart' than explore the complexities of speaking out of it:

My own heart let me more have pity on; let  
Me live to my sad self hereafter kind,  
Charitable; not live this tormented mind  
With this tormented mind tormenting yet.  
(l. 1-4)

What is so affecting about the lines is their unassuming lack of entitlement, their refusal to take it for granted that one should show 'pity', 'kindness', or 'charity' towards oneself. They appeal to the heart with the tender courtesy of King Lear's self-address 'Break, heart; I prithee, break' (V. iii. 311).<sup>67</sup> The modesty of their entreaty is underscored by that 'let' (which receives a gentle emphasis from the repetition that moves it from the middle of the line into the rhyme position) and by the tender jerkiness of their accents ('kind, | Charitable'), which form the impression of someone only tentatively suggesting at the comforts they might be afforded. In the writing's

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II. ii. as 'an incomparable feat of dramatic art which at once takes you fully within another's feelings and at the same time keeps you at an extraordinary distance from them' (*T. S. Eliot and Prejudice* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988) 144-5).

<sup>67</sup> Quoted from *The History of King Lear*; in the *Tragedy* version the lines are spoken (whether to Lear, or to himself) by Kent.

evocation of 'sadness' there is none of the violent extreme of feeling that characterises a sonnet like 'I wake and feel...', (even as the phrasing of 'sad self hereafter' negatively inverts the effect Ricks identifies in 'yet longer light's delay' and hovers on the cusp of glimpsing a sadness that will endure indefinitely). There is even a surprising willingness to glimpse some humour in the predicament: the contortions of the third and fourth lines, whilst they articulate Hopkins' inner turmoil, circle around a tormented comedy.

Like 'Patience', the poem does not pretend, having established what it is that it needs, that 'pity', 'kindness', or 'charity' towards oneself are easy to achieve: not least because it is difficult to work out the logistics of bringing 'pity', 'kindness' or 'charity' to bear on one's own heart when the heart is just where those qualities might be said to reside; again, there is a glimmer of hapless humour to all this. The poem's bewilderment crystallises in Hopkins' description of himself in the second quatrain as 'groping round my comfortless' (l. 6), where the startling use of 'comfortless' as a noun brings one's reading up short in an evocation of Hopkins' suffocated inability to find 'comfort'. The sestet gradually extricates itself from this predicament:

Soul, self; come, poor Jackself, I do advise  
You, jaded, let be; call off thoughts awhile  
Elsewhere; leave comfort root-room; let joy size  
At God knows when to God knows what; whose smile  
'S not wrung, see you; unforseentimes rather – as skies  
Betweenpie mountains – lights a lovely mile.

(l. 9-14)

This speaks to and from the heart; as is often the case, Hopkins finds his most authentic voice in self-communion. The writing moves us through its jumble of conversational and oddly polite registers ('I do advise | You': again, one thinks of Lear's blend of cordiality and desperation), and through its rhythms. Its stuttering opening movements catch a nervous unwillingness to be too generous to oneself and the uncertain accents of someone trying to coax someone round from a black mood: 'Soul, self; come, poor Jackself'. There is an affecting mateyness about this. 'Jack', the *OED* tells us, is often 'Prefixed to another noun [...] so as to form a *quasi*-proper name, or nickname', which befits the way these poems, though they explore extremes of suffering and alienation, from time to time allow a strand of level-headedness to surface that refuses to see their suffering as anything out of the ordinary. The fragile success of the poem's endeavour to cheer itself up registers through the subtle lengthening of the phrases that compose the sestet's single sentence, an effect that culminates in the poem's beautifully achieved crescendo, whose simile for God's love, 'as skies | Betweenpie mountains', Hopkins allows to break through the middle of its sentence like the patches of sunlit sky that it evokes. There is something of this happy expansion, too, in the poem's closing rhyme, 'lights a lovely *mile*', which spreads out of and broadens the 'smile' from which it emerges. This slackening of Hopkins' usually packed intensity intimates the success of his struggle to 'leave comfort root-room'. The idiosyncratic expressiveness of the rhythms typifies a poetry whose textures maintain intimate contact with the passions and character of the heart.

## Chapter 6

### Hopkins III: 'Oddity and Obscurity'

Plainly, if it is possible to express a sub[t]le and recondite thought on a subtle and recondite subject in a subtle and recondite way and with great felicity and perfection, in the end, something must be sacrificed, with so trying a task, in the process, and this may be the being at once, nay perhaps even the being without explanation at all, intelligible.

– Hopkins, to Robert Bridges<sup>1</sup>

I wish he would explain his Explanation...

– Byron, *Don Juan*<sup>2</sup>

#### I

Hopkins' language is shaped by his awareness of the costs as well as the virtues of individuality. If his voice is characterised in part by its pursuit of 'subtle and recondite' modes of expression for 'subtle and recondite' thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, it is no less distinctive for its responsiveness to a good-humoured patience that worries (often, as in the sentence above, with a rueful sense of working against the odds) at making itself 'intelligible'. The conflicting impulses are embodied in the careworn eloquence of the closing lines of Hopkins' final poem, 'To R. B.':

I want the one rapture of an inspiration.  
O then if in my lagging lines you miss

The roll, the rise, the carol, the creation,  
My winter world, that scarcely breathes that bliss

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<sup>1</sup> *Correspondence* 905.

<sup>2</sup> Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, 'Dedication' l. 16, *The Major Works*, ed. Jerome McGann (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000) 373.

Now, yields you, with some sighs, our explanation.

(l. 10-14)

Here, 'inspiration', the quality of being 'always new, always touching beyond other poets' that Hopkins spoke of in his letter on Parnassian, passes naturally enough into 'creation', only for that to give way (in a paradoxically inspired touch) to the prosaic 'explanation'. The rhymes pinion 'creation' with the opposed impulses which exert their pressure upon Hopkins' own creativity: on the one hand the influence of an intensely individual and perpetually surprising imagination; on the other the underrated anxiety to clarify and communicate.

The poem itself was offered as an explanation. Bridges described it as 'a sonnet to me, explaining some sort of misunderstanding which [Hopkins] thought existed'. Bridges burned the letters in which the 'misunderstanding' was borne out, but it is supposed that Hopkins (in one of his less self-aware moments) had been making fun of the tiny print runs for Bridges' poems, and Bridges bit back.<sup>3</sup> The 'explanation' here in question is as much an apology as a clarification. Still, the fact that words like 'misunderstanding' and 'explanation' can be tilted to encompass both *quarrels* and *confusions* is not entirely beside the point: the eccentricities and obscurities of Hopkins' innovations are often characterised as wilful or perverse in themselves. Christopher Ricks joins a lengthy queue of objectors when he urges us to recognise how 'rebarbative' Hopkins is as a poet, the 'sheer price that Hopkins paid for the solitude of his powers and the intransigence of his innovations'.<sup>4</sup> Ricks is picking up

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<sup>3</sup> See Mackenzie's notes on the incident ('Commentary', *Poetical Works* 506).

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Ricks, rev. of Robert Bernard Martin, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Very Private Life* in *Reviewery* (London: Penguin, 2002) 6-7.



on the ‘principled hostility’ of A. E. Housman, who, on receipt of a copy of Hopkins’ poems from Robert Bridges, trained his suspicions on their originality: ‘originality is not nearly so good as goodness, even when it is good. His manner strikes me as deliberately adopted to compensate by strangeness for the lack of pure merit’.<sup>5</sup> And even Bridges himself, when he published most of the poems for the first time in 1918, felt the need to fend off any hostility towards their strangeness with a pre-emptive strike: ‘The extravagances are and will remain what they were [...] they may be called Oddity and Obscurity’.<sup>6</sup> ‘The only result’ of reading *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, said Fr. Sydney Smith, when Hopkins offered it for publication in Catholic journal *The Month* in 1877, ‘was to give me a very bad headache, and to lead me to hand the poem back to Fr. Coleridge with the remark that it was indeed unreadable’.<sup>7</sup>

The suspicion is that Hopkins’ individuality is blinkered or contrary. But though Hopkins did pay a price (in solitude) for the solitude of his powers, his individuality seems to me far from ‘intransigent’. We can sympathise with Coventry Patmore’s dry understatement in expressing himself to Hopkins ‘a little amused by your claiming for your style the extreme of popular character’,<sup>8</sup> whilst still recognising the pains his poems take to keep in touch. Martin Dubois speaks of ‘the peculiarity Hopkins acknowledged others saw in him, even if he struggled to see it in himself’,<sup>9</sup> which catches the generosity of his self-awareness. His distinguishing accent often emerges out of a simultaneous effort to defer to and challenge the grounds of others’ perceptions. Its energies can be comic (as in the meticulous unfurling of the sentence

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<sup>5</sup> A. E. Housman, ‘To the Poet Laureate Robert Bridges’, *Collected Poems and Selected Prose*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Penguin, 1988) 460.

<sup>6</sup> Bridges, ‘Notes’, *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* 173.

<sup>7</sup> *Journals and Papers* 382.

<sup>8</sup> *Correspondence* 668.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Dubois, ‘Styles of Translation: Hopkins’ Bibles’, *Victorian Poetry* 50.3 (2012): 279.

to Bridges in the epigraph), or they can take on a more tragic tenor, audible in the line from which Housman seizes his buzz-words 'originality' and 'strangeness', Hopkins' praise to God in 'Pied Beauty' for 'All things counter, original, spare, strange' (l. 7). There Hopkins makes a stand for strangeness and outsidership, whilst quietly uttering something more all-encompassing: 'Glory be to God for *all* things, each in their own way counter, original, spare, strange'. But 'spare', which is tinged with a sense of 'superfluity', sets a tremor of doubt resonating through the line's enthusiasm. It reminds us that Hopkins was often productively dubious about his own 'originality'. Uniqueness worried him because it is inherently isolating: something 'odd' is both individual and uncoupled; something 'strange' is always liable to become 'estranged'.

## II

'In his early poems was the promise of something better, if less original', said Housman.<sup>10</sup> He was half right. The most memorable amongst the early poems offer fairly exemplary nineteenth-century fare in their equation of the life of the artist with separation and withdrawal: 'The whole world passes; I stand by' as 'The Alchemist in the City' puts it (l. 4), making its reserve sound wiser and more resolute than it is. But a poem like 'Heaven-Haven' (subtitled '*A nun takes the veil*') is troubled as well as attracted by isolation, and its apprehension is conveyed through prosy disturbances in its poetic idioms, so that even here there are incipient stirrings of Hopkins' later, more 'original', manner:

I have desired to go

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<sup>10</sup> Housman, letter to Robert Bridges, 30 Dec. 1918, *Poems and Prose* 460.

Where springs not fail  
To fields where flies no sharp and sided hail  
And a few lilies blow.

(l. 1-4)

Jill Muller judges the tone to be one of 'calm finality, of self-assertion at the moment of self-surrender'.<sup>11</sup> But disturbances in the poem's phrasing send ripples through its tranquillity, and allow us to find in the lines another form of 'self-assertion': the blossoming of an individual style.<sup>12</sup> The phrasing may be limpid, but it is also peculiar. 'Where springs not fail' might mean 'where failure doesn't spring', or where 'springs (of joy, life) do not fail'; 'hail' is not just 'sharp-sided', but 'sharp and sided', as though a metaphor for the buffetings of religious debate.<sup>13</sup> Unsettlingly, it is not 'I desire', but 'I have desired'; this might be to say that to will something is to have one's wish granted, but it might also suggest a speaker suspended in a moment of limbo. The fourth line imagines a place of modest fruitfulness, but it also sounds out a more wearying estrangement. 'Blow' is a poetical way of saying 'bloom', but, under pressure from the 'hail' of the preceding line, and the 'storm' (l. 6) that comes two lines later, it tends towards its more usual meaning as well, so that what ghosts behind the line is a desolate apprehension of the hoped-for solitude as having the fragile beauty of 'a few lilies' battered in the storm.

Such apprehensiveness is telling, for though the shape of Hopkins' career after the rejection of *The Wreck of the Deutschland* might make him look like a poet

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<sup>11</sup> Muller, *Victorian Catholicism* 5.

<sup>12</sup> James Milroy offers a comparable interpretation of the poem's carefully-weighted rhythms: 'the young Hopkins has begun to break away from the poetic canon and is beginning to seek the basis of his heightening in the rhythms of current language' (*Language of Gerard Manley Hopkins* 110-1).

<sup>13</sup> There is an anticipation here of Hopkins' description of the eye as a 'sleek and seeing ball' in 'Binsey Poplars' (l. 14), though the earlier phrase is if anything more successful in its ear for common idioms, since you can't have something 'sleek-seeing' like you can have something 'sharp-sided'.

content to mine his own isolation, he was not. *The Wreck* itself is worried about Hopkins' distance from events 'Away in the loveable west, | On a pastoral forehead of Wales' (l. 185-6). Being cut off is a recurrent worry, and his poems are, for all their eccentricities, remarkable sociable, keen to transcend loneliness, to keep in touch. One of the poems Hopkins sent to Bridges from St Bueno's in 1877, 'The Lantern Out of Doors', was about feeling cut adrift:

Sometimes a lantern moves along the night,  
That interests our eyes. And who goes there?  
I think; where from and bound, I wonder, where,  
With, all down darkness wide, his wading light.

Men go by me whom either beauty bright  
In mould or mind or what not else makes rare:  
They rain against our much-thick and marsh air  
Rich beams, till death or distance buys them quite.  
(l. 1-3)

It is not one of Hopkins' most popular or brilliant poems. The writing keeps an amused eye on the way that in darkness a lantern 'moves along' as if of its own accord, but mostly its accents are despondent, even bored. Yet its moping spirits are quietly affecting. Hopkins' characteristic exuberance flares and sputters, the language repeatedly warming itself up to the rhythmic and alliterative heights before trailing off into a more humdrum sort of phrasing. And those modulations are at one with its beleaguered reticence. The enjambment 'And who goes there? | I think' catches Hopkins' mood as his interest in these passers-by piques and subsides over the line

ending, his accents shaping themselves to the sound of something ‘almost being said’, to borrow a phrase from Philip Larkin.<sup>14</sup>

These fluctuations continue into the sestet. Its first tercet begins by going back over the phrasing of the octave, as though it was just idly looking for something to say; then it undergoes an abrupt, angular, wrenching of the idioms, before a return to something more familiar:

Death or distance soon consumes them: wind,  
What most I may eye after, be in at the end  
I cannot, and out of sight is out of mind.

(l. 9-11)

Bridges was irked by this – and with good reason, one might reflect, given the poem’s supposed anxieties about communication. But his complaints provoked in Hopkins a patient defence of the crux of the problem, which is his unusual verb construction ‘winding the eyes’:

No doubt my poetry errs on the side of oddness. I hope in time to have a more balanced and Miltonic style

(Even there, there is something quirky, since one ‘errs’ on the side of ‘caution’, not eccentricity.)

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<sup>14</sup> Philip Larkin, ‘The Trees’, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Archie Burnett (London: Faber and Faber, 2012) 76. All further quotations from Larkin’s poems are from this edition.

It is the vice of distinctiveness to become queer. This vice I cannot have escaped. However 'winding the eyes' is queer only if looked at from the wrong point of view: looked at as a motion in and of the eyeballs it is what you say, but I mean that the eye winds/only in the sense that its focus or point of sight winds and that coincides with a point of the object and winds with that. For the object, a lantern passing further and further away and bearing now east, now west of one right line, is truly and properly described as winding. That is how it should be taken then.<sup>15</sup>

This is a typical blend of reconciliation and defiance. Hopkins starts off sounding as though he is conceding the point, and that sets the tone through which the whole passage is conducted; but when it comes to specifics he backs himself to the hilt. It is one of those moments that reveals just how much the 'strangeness' of Hopkins' poetry owes to its scrupulous effort to set down 'truly and properly' the details of everyday actions we take for granted; his 'distinctiveness' has a way of making us end up wondering whether his apparent 'queerness' might not be at least as much a consequence of our own way of thinking as it is of his.

That is not to make Hopkins sound bullish. His very singular, and potentially estranging, way of using the language seeks to understand 'looking' as being a process of overcoming isolation and physical distance, of connecting and 'coinciding' with what or who it is you are looking at. Taken as a whole, 'The Lantern out of Doors' moves persistently between individuating and communal idioms. There is a risky yet engaging carelessness about the relaxation of focus in the second stanza's description of passers-by beautiful 'In mould or mind or what not else' (l. 6), for instance – as if Hopkins could not be bothered to find the right words. And there is another such

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<sup>15</sup> *Correspondence* 334.

instance in the lines above, with their grateful subsidence into the proverbial: ‘and out of sight is out of mind’.

What saves these more casual expressions from slackness is the latent suggestiveness Hopkins discovers in them. ‘Out of sight is out of mind’ is usually thought of as being a comforting thing to say – ‘homely’ is Norman Mackenzie’s word<sup>16</sup> – but at this juncture of the poem it is not entirely consoling. Not only do the passers by seem lost to Hopkins, but the phrase reflects unhappily on Hopkins’ place in the minds of others, too. And it could quite easily have been the occasion for some maudlin reflections on his own isolation; but the closing lines take a generous turn, channelling their concern towards the wellbeing of the passers by:

Christ minds: Christ’s interest, what to avow or amend  
There, eyes them, heart wants, care haunts, foot follows kind  
Their ransom, their rescue, and first, fast, last friend.  
(l. 12-14)

The lines pivot on a compaction of ‘mind’ as a noun and as a verb: to ‘mind’ is not just a matter of casual concern (as one might ask, ‘do you mind?’), but fully to commit one’s mind to someone else. At ‘Christ minds’ Hopkins’ language intensifies, and feeling twists and deepens; a poem which had seemed to have as its subject Hopkins’ own loneliness turns out to concern itself with the isolation and consolation of others.

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<sup>16</sup> Mackenzie, *Reader’s Guide* 94.

### III

Hopkins was often touchingly distressed about his failures to make himself understood. 'It is somewhat dismaying to find that I am so unintelligible [...] especially in one of my very best pieces', he wrote forlornly to Bridges of another sonnet, 'Henry Purcell'. Dismaying, but not surprising, since if the poem is one of Hopkins' 'very best pieces' it is so by virtue of its being a poem on the innate individuality of great art that manages to manifest such individuality itself. Hopkins was more than usually troubled regarding 'Henry Purcell' about the costs such individuality might bring in obscurity. He was moved to preface the poem with a plain-spoken explanatory note:

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 note the very make and species of man as created both in him and in all men generally.

The chatty informality of 'wishes well', and the serene clarity of the whole sentence make comically short work of the clotted intensity of the poem itself. Set against the opening quatrain, the note seems to speak with a voice other than that of 'The poet':

Have fair fallen, O fair, fair have fallen, so dear  
To me, so arch-especial a spirit as heaves in Henry Purcell,  
An age is now since passed, since parted; with the reversal  
Of the outwards sentence low lays him, listed to a heresy, here.  
(l. 1-4)



The difficulties begin, in a sense, before the poem has even started, since its opening phrase asks us to supply words before the first line has begun (just as the prayer is for God to have bestowed fairness on Purcell in the past). The poem spins off from an everyday idiom to find out a strikingly elliptical way of saying ‘Please let it be the case that fairness has befallen you...’. Hopkins explained in a series exchanges over the meaning of these lines with Bridges in January 1883, nearly four years after the poem was written, that ‘*Have* is [...] the singular imperative (or optative if you like) of the past, a thing possible and actual both in logic and grammar, but naturally a rare one. As in the second person we say “Have done” or in making appointments “Have had your dinner beforehand”’.<sup>17</sup> As Hopkins’ pleasingly humdrum examples show, the strangeness of the phrase arises out of an idiosyncratic feel for the expressive possibilities of common speech.

Hopkins had two goes at glossing the sentence as a whole. The first was pithily non-sectarian: ‘I hope Purcell is not damned for being a Protestant, because I love his genius’. The second became amusingly verbose: ‘May Purcell, O may he have died a good death and that soul which I love so much and which breathes or stirs so unmistakably in his words have parted from the body and passed away, centuries since though I frame the wish, in peace with God! So that the heavy condemnation under which he outwardly or nominally lay for being out of the true Church may in consequence of his good intentions have been reversed’.<sup>18</sup> This offers more assistance in filling out some of the quatrain’s ellipses, which give the impression that Clare sometimes creates, too, of the poem wanting to say more things than the lines it has

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<sup>17</sup> *Correspondence* 568-9. The whole exchange was conducted, on Hopkins part, with an amusing mix of patience and exasperation: “This is a terrible business about my sonnet ‘Have fair fallen’, for I find that I still “make myself misunderstood”.

<sup>18</sup> *Correspondence* 560-1.

available to say them in. To trace the sense as Hopkins outlines it, one has to supply an ‘Although’ between the second and third lines, understand ‘with the’ as ‘by the’ or ‘through the’, and ignore the third line’s unhelpful semi-colon. Yet, in its exclamations, hesitations, and loopings back on itself, it is less a paraphrase than an effort to retrace all the nooks and crannies of the verse, and perhaps even visit a few more for good measure. What arises out of the exchange as a whole is a sense of the futility of trying to paraphrase a poem which lays so much emphasis on its own particular ‘mark and species’.<sup>19</sup> This was Robert Graves’s and Laura Riding’s point when they spoke of Hopkins’ ‘extraordinary strictness’, so that his poems ‘*had to be understood as he meant them to be, or understood not at all*’.<sup>20</sup> At its most unproductive it leaves both poet and reader at an exasperating impasse – as in the story of Eliot being asked what he meant by his line from *Ash-Wednesday* ‘Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper-tree’, to which he replied: ‘I mean, “Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper-tree”’.<sup>21</sup>

But Hopkins’ poem manages to envisage a more fruitful exchange with the reader. The kind of attention it hopes for and invites is responsive to poetry’s individuating features, not one concerned to translate them into other terms. It models that exchange in Hopkins’ own relationship with Purcell’s music:

It is the forged feature finds me; it is the rehearsal  
Of own, of abrupt self there so thrusts on, so throngs the ear  
(l. 7-8).

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<sup>19</sup> Hopkins did entertain the possibility, in the same letter from which this chapter takes its epigraph, of prefixing ‘short prose *arguments* to some of my pieces’, but either had second thoughts or never got round to doing so (*Correspondence* 905-6).

<sup>20</sup> Graves and Riding, *Modernist Poetry* 90.

<sup>21</sup> The anecdote is related by Stephen Spender, *Eliot* (London: Fontana, 1975) 129.

'Finds me' there is revealing. It says that, if allowed to do so, art will do the work of making itself understood; and it suggests the power of artistic individuality to awaken the individuality of its audience. So elsewhere in the poem Purcell is not only 'dear', but 'dear | To me'. And when the sestet remarks that 'only I'll | Have an eye to the sakes of him', the prominence of 'I'll' in the rhyme position serves to emphasise the specialness of Hopkins' own sensitivity (who else but Hopkins would have an eye to the 'sakes' of something?),<sup>22</sup> so that 'only' might be read as not just meaning something like 'it's just that', but as shaping a sense of how Purcell's music has a way of finding your ear and making you feel as if it is addressing you intimately apart from all the rest of its listeners. The poem is concerned as much with its own individuality as with the way for a reader as for a listener, art's 'individual sound', to borrow another phrase from Larkin, 'Insists I too am individual' ('Reasons for Attendance', l. 14-15).

#### IV

'Henry Purcell' ends with a resounding image of artistic strangeness:

...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.

(l. 11-14)

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<sup>22</sup> Hopkins conceded that the word was 'hazardous': 'I was more bent on saying my say than being understood in it' (*Correspondence* 561). Gardener surveys the 'matrix of particular and private meaning' at play in the word (*Poetic Idiosyncrasy* i. 120-1).

Here the poem itself seems itself to take flight, as a complexly unfolding sentence leads off in unpredictable directions. Hopkins thought that alexandrine lines were ‘very tedious’ ‘unless much broken [...] by outrides [i.e. extra-metrical feet]’,<sup>23</sup> and their impact here has much to do with the way he manages to marry their stateliness with something more casual. The opposed manners are interwoven through the sestet’s rhymes, as the sonorous clang of ‘under/thunder/wonder’ plays against the more colloquial accents caught in ‘I’ll/while/smile’. The impressiveness of the writing derives from the way it embodies some of the casual majesty of the ‘stormfowl’ itself. The coolly elliptical phrasing captures the isolated self-possession of the bird as it ‘walks his while | The thunder-purple seabeach’. The bird’s superb unselfconscious grandeur is entirely at one with the poem’s sense of how individuality should be unforced, ‘scattered’ involuntarily in a ‘colossal smile’. There is something ominous about that ‘smile’ as well, and the whole image is not without its unnerving weirdness: the ‘colossal’ scale, the imposing but unidentifiable ‘great stormfowl’ and the repeated regal and mysterious ‘purples’ all lend a tempestuous otherworldiness to the comparison. The individuality of art is not solely a matter of quirkiness, the poem seems to suggest, but a more powerful, even disconcerting, strangeness.

Yet ‘Henry Purcell’s ‘great stormfowl’ has an unperturbed alienation that is not typically Hopkins’ own. He is characteristically more hesitant about his own strangeness, anxious about its costs in isolation. He knew those costs could amount to more than scepticism about the merits of a poetic style. Conversion to the Catholic Church in 1860s England brought with it estrangement both socially (an 1828 act permitted any ‘Jesuit, or Brother or Member of any other such Religious Order,

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<sup>23</sup> *Correspondence* 705.

Community, or Society [...] to be banished from the United Kingdom for the Term of his natural Life'),<sup>24</sup> and from one's family. Hopkins' obdurate but gracious willingness to defend the individuality of his poetic voice is mirrored in an affecting and self-assured passage in a letter that he wrote to his mother around the time of his conversion, which remonstrates with her assumption that his decision betrays an aggressive and unyielding stance:

Your letters, wh. shew the utmost fondness, suppose none on my part and the more you think me hard and cold and that I repel and throw you off the more I am helpless not to write as if [it] were true. In this way I have no relief. You might believe that I suffer too.<sup>25</sup>

What is tactful and courageous about this is the way it manages to turn a mirror on the 'hardness and coldness' of his mother's prejudice without falling into the trap of seeming 'hard and cold' itself: 'You might believe that I suffer too'. As things turned out, initial hostilities cooled. But the rift could not be bridged entirely and those accents of hurt protest surfaced again in a poem written around twenty years later, when Hopkins was working at University College, Dublin. The sonnet 'To seem the stranger...' emerges from a sensitivity to the discrepancy between one's own self-image and the way one is seen by others:

To seem the stranger lies my lot, my life  
Among strangers. Father and mother dear,  
Brother and sister are in Christ not near

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<sup>24</sup> See Griffiths, *Printed Voice* 298

<sup>25</sup> *Correspondence* 127.

And he my peace/my parting, sword and strife.

(l. 1-4)

The lines are pitched between a shrugging willingness to shoulder estrangement as simply Hopkins' 'lot', and complaint that the condition of being a 'stranger' is alien to Hopkins' real nature. 'To *seem* the stranger', positioned alongside a submerged pun on 'lies', protests that appearances can be deceptive, raising the question of whether a 'stranger' is something someone makes of oneself, or of what others make of you. At the same time, the line flickers with an apprehension of Hopkins' feeling for his own strangeness, an anxiety that, away in Ireland, he is coming to 'seem a stranger' to himself.

Eric Griffiths has written beautifully about how these lines tease themselves with hopes of reconciliation, veering towards articulating something that they can never quite let themselves say. So 'Father and mother dear' shapes as if to make an address, as at the start of a letter, before the syntax takes a different direction, as though thinking better of it. The succeeding line, with its inversion 'are in Christ not near', follows a course which suggests momentarily that it is comforting itself with the thought 'Father and mother dear, | Brother and sister are in Christ', before the hope is removed: 'the line makes a tentative approach to a returned language of domestic ease, but the words for a rapprochement are askew and escape from what he might personally like to say'.<sup>26</sup> One gets the sense (that goes on to underlie the whole poem) of a voice being withheld, of things left painfully unsaid.

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<sup>26</sup> Griffiths, *Printed Voice* 299.

In 1859, Newman had published a lecture, ‘Catholic Literature in the English Tongue, 1854-8’, which lamented the impossibility of ever forging a ‘Catholic’ canon: ‘In no case can we [i.e. Catholics], strictly speaking, form an English Literature; for by the Literature of a Nation is meant its Classics, and its Classics have been given to England, and have been recognised as such, long since’.<sup>27</sup> *The Wreck of the Deutschland* had, in part, been an attempt to answer Newman’s challenge and write an exhortatory Catholic English poetry, that would shift the centre ground, matching up, to the triumphant tone of Newman’s 1852 sermon, ‘The Second Spring,’ with its urge for Catholic ‘voices, grave and musical’ to renew ‘the old chant, with which Augustine greeted Ethelbert in the free air upon the Kentish strand’.<sup>28</sup> In the closing stanzas of *The Wreck* Hopkins’ enthusiasm emboldens a manner that is both optimistic, and ready to speak on behalf of England: ‘Our King back, Oh, upon English souls! | Let him easter in us, be a dayspring to the dimness of us’ (l. 276-7). In these stanzas, as Martin Dubois observes, ‘Strenuous emphasis works to achieve communal feeling as the stanza’s run of collective pronouns (‘our door’, ‘our shoals’, ‘Our King’, ‘the dimness of us’, ‘hero of us’) culminates in a line labouring under the pressure of an ardent desire to see England returned to the Catholic fold: ‘Our hearts’ charity’s hearth’s fire, our thoughts’ chivalry’s throng’s Lord’.<sup>29</sup> That is not exactly Hopkins’ English at its most direct, however, and its ‘strenuous’ awkwardness may well be seen as betraying an

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<sup>27</sup> John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University: Defined and Illustrated: I. In Nine Discourses Delivered to the Catholics of Dublin. II. In Occasional Lectures and Essays Addressed to the Members of the Catholic University*, ed. and introd. Ian T. Ker (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1976) 254. For the development of a tradition of Catholic literature in English since the nineteenth century see Ian Turnbull Ker, *The Catholic Revival in English Literature, 1845-1961: Newman, Hopkins, Belloc, Chesterton, Greene, Waugh* (Notre Dame, IN: U of Notre Dame P) 2003).

<sup>28</sup> John Henry Newman, ‘The Second Spring’, *A Newman Treasury*, ed. Charles Frederick Harrold (London: Longmans, 1945) 217. *The Wreck* emphasises that the *Deutschland* ran aground on the ‘Kentish Knock’ (l. 108), if not echoing Newman’s phrasing, then drawing on the same cultural memory to imagine the disaster as the trigger for a second wave of conversions.

<sup>29</sup> Dubois, ‘Burden of Security’ 444.

awareness of the marginal position from which ‘Catholic voices’ were doomed to speak.<sup>30</sup>

In later assessments, Hopkins wavered in his view of *The Wreck*: ‘I think the best lines in the *Deutschland* are better than the best in the other’, he wrote to Bridges: ‘One may be biased in favour of one’s firstborn though. There are some immaturities in it I should never be guilty of now.’<sup>31</sup> This was in 1881, three years before Hopkins echoed the poem’s closing lines when confiding in his notebook a yearning to crown Christ ‘king of England, of English hearts and of Ireland and Christendom and the world’.<sup>32</sup> But the more ‘mature’ Hopkins would settle for a more restrained, though no less staunchly independent, approach in his poems:

England, whose honour O all my heart woos, wife  
To my creating thought, would neither hear  
Me, were I pleading, plead nor do I: I wear-  
Y of idle a being but by where wars are rife.

(‘To seem the stranger...’ l. 5-8)

This is forlorn, but dignified, and one might speculate that one of the things that seemed ‘immature’ about *The Wreck* from this more world-weary perspective was its extravagant championing of a cause; heedless jubilation is seldom liable to win people round. For Hopkins to ‘plead’ the case for Catholicism (by publishing his poems, for instance) would only provoke further alienation – the ‘wars’ – religious debates – that ‘wear-|Y’ him. The stanza promotes a gracious silence, but the clenching of its vocal

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<sup>30</sup> Muller offers an account of ‘the deflation of Catholic hopes during the second half of Victoria’s reign and the turn within the Roman Church in England from a triumphalist rhetoric of conversion to a more introverted and insular spirituality’ (*Victorian Catholicism* 5).

<sup>31</sup> *Correspondence* 424.

<sup>32</sup> Hopkins ‘Dublin Meditation Points’ *Sermons* 254.



textures ('pleading, plead'; 'I: I') attests to the inner struggles it has to overcome in keeping it.

In this light we might feel justified in hearing the move into the sonnet's sestet as heralding the relief of a new start: 'I am in Ireland now' (l. 9). But the tone of that line is elusive, its hopefulness weighed down by what follows it: 'I am in Ireland now; now I am at a third | Remove' (l. 9-10). Being 'at a third | Remove' combines the cadence of something breezily idiomatic (like being at a loose end) with a weight of desperation: after his estrangement from his family and alienation from English society, geographical displacement in Ireland constitutes a separation that can also seem like a 'remove' in the sense of an eradication (so when Claudius speaks of Hamlet as 'most violent author | Of his own just remove' (IV. v. 80-81), the word primarily means 'banishment', but shimmers with Claudius's expectation that Hamlet will be murdered).<sup>33</sup> The *OED* shows that there was also, suggestively, a phrase current in Victorian English, 'three removes are as bad as a fire' (meaning move house three times and you might as well start a new life, such is the loss and damage incurred to one's possessions). It would be characteristic of the way in which Hopkins' poems work along the peripheries of common tongue were he to be drawing this into the atmosphere of the poem, marking a bitter awareness of how easily hoped-for new beginnings may turn out as charred remains.

In these later stages of the poem its sentences shorten. The effect is in part to lend its dealings with its predicament an efficient paciness, as if the poem had become a list of bullet-points, but also to force the voice through lines of clotted intensity:

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<sup>33</sup> The phrase might also be an allusion to George Herbert's 'Jordan (I)', 'Must all be vail'd, while he that reads, divines, | Catching the sense at two removes?' (l. 9-10), alive with a rueful sense of the further distance Hopkins' manner seems to interpose between him and his audience (*The English Poems of George Herbert*, ed. Helen Wilcox (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011) 197).

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

(l. 11-13).

The collisions and cross-currents packed into the language here suggest Hopkins' embattled inarticulacy in the face of a world where even 'heaven' seems to have turned 'bafflingly' against him ('baffle' as meaning to 'bewilder' or 'confound', but also, in the presence of 'Ban', retaining an older sense of 'subject to public disgrace or infamy' (*OED*)); and yet they imply, too, an individuality that can only be won against the grain of that bafflement. Eric Griffiths says pertinently that the lines ask us to feel the stretching and straining of the voice 'both as a racking and a perseverance', where 'perseverance' cuts to its etymological roots with a violence worthy of Hopkins himself.<sup>34</sup>

'Perseverance' is crucial to the poem's final effect: Hopkins is not going to crumple into self-pity; his sense of independence is tougher than that. What impresses is the poetry's trust in its own utterances, a trust bred, for instance, in the way that phrase 'Only what word' gropes around for eloquence in the white space between stanzas only for its efforts to blossom into the steady surprise of 'Wisest' at the start of the next line ('Wisest' as meaning well-judged, or intelligent, but also, perhaps, 'truest', most characteristically oneself – as 'The Bugler's First Communion' has 'self-wise' (l. 24)). It is a trust that also seeps into the poem's closing line, even as the rhythms of that line seem to shape themselves around an admission of creative defeat:

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<sup>34</sup> Griffiths, *Printed Voice* 312.

‘This to hoard unheard, | Heard unheeded, leaves me a lonely began’ (l. 13-14). ‘This’ holds in suspense a range of significances: it may be the poet’s ‘wisest word’, it may be the fact of that word’s bafflement, or it may be the whole predicament of the poem, whose words, this ending reminds us, are to be imagined as ‘hoarded unheard’: it is, in Griffiths’ terms ‘a supplication for hearing rather than an oratorical performance before an audience’.<sup>35</sup> Yet even as that invented word ‘began’ focuses Hopkins’ private sterility, it supplies something unique and original, an instance of how Hopkins is often at his most creatively strange when driven to find a way of describing his own estrangement. It is a testament to the resourcefulness and independence of Hopkins’ poetic powers, the locus of a strangeness which his poetry both laments and fights for.

## V

Hopkins wrote to Bridges in 1882 about ‘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’: ‘It is most difficult to combine this bidding, such a fugitive thing, with a monumental style’.<sup>36</sup> There is a certain aptness about Hopkins’ grasping after the right way of putting it, given his poems’ anxieties about not being able to communicate effectively. Successful ‘bidding’ is likely to entail curbing one’s idiosyncrasies. As Griffiths observes, Hopkins ‘underwent difficult choices set by the fact that a poet needs to be biddable, pliant to his culture, in order to bid it or please it

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<sup>35</sup> Griffiths, *Printed Voice* 327.

<sup>36</sup> *Correspondence* 547.

with his bidding'.<sup>37</sup> The poems of the 1880s are increasingly fraught and chastened by the problems of going 'unheard' or 'unheeded'. But it is not so much the ear of a whole 'culture' whose absence troubles these poems as the intimate attention of a solitary listener, and the accompanying consciousness that the loss or absence of that audience is all the more alienating. 'No worst, there is none', poses anguished, unanswered questions whose falling on deaf ears is the more dreadful for the way they are directed to a particular addressee: 'Comforter, where, where is your comforting? | Mary, mother of us, where is your relief?' (l. 3-4); Hopkins' 'us' offers an affectingly momentary stay against isolation. 'I wake and feel the fell of day, not dark', laments its 'cries countless, cries like dead letters sent | To dearest him that lives alas! away' (l. 7-8). Those lines achieve a blend of the impassioned and the domestic: 'Dead letters' were letters that proved undeliverable, and the phrase helps to ground a potentially histrionic despair by imagining poetry as a routine matter of correspondence. But 'dead letters' also attests Hopkins' sense of lifelessness in the 'letters' that make up the words of his own poems, a concern, to return to 'To R. B.', that in the absence of an interlocutor his 'lagging lines' lack 'The roll, the rise, the carol, the creation' (l. 12) of inspiration.

The manner of Hopkins' last poems reflects a feeling of creative barrenness induced by isolation. Yet one can also see it as an attempt to atone for such isolation through a style directing itself 'right to or at the hearer, interesting him, holding him in the attitude of correspondent or addressed or at least concerned'. If 'lagging' is one way of putting it, 'reserved' is another: 'It is lamentable that Gerard Hopkins died when, to judge by his latest work, he was beginning to concentrate the force of all his

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<sup>37</sup> Griffiths, *Printed Voice* 329.

luxuriant experiments in rhythm and diction, and castigate his art into a more reserved style' felt Bridges.<sup>38</sup> The sonnet beginning 'Thou art indeed just, Lord' takes as its 'correspondent' a schoolmasterly God. It is a poem whose Latin heading, *'Justus quidem tu es, Domine, si disputem tecum; verumtamen justa loquar ad te: quare via impiorum prosperatur?'* is not so much a title as a clearing of the voice. It advances a cloaked murmuring of the protest that is eventually translated in the opening quatrain with a plainness that answers to the simplicity and candour of the question it poses to God:

Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend  
With thee; but, sir, so what I plead is just.  
Why do sinners' ways prosper? and why must  
Disappointment all I endeavour end?

(l. 1-4)

This pares down, but retains the spirit of, the King James translation, whose prose runs more ornately than Hopkins' verse, though still with a striking directness ('let me talk with thee'): 'Righteous *art* thou, O LORD, when I plead with thee: yet let me talk with thee of *thy* judgements: Wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper? *wherefore* are all they happy that deal very treacherously?' The Authorised Version's italics are there to indicate when the translators have had to supply an extra word, but they have the unintentional effect of highlighting the daring strain of address that points the prose and the poetry alike: 'let me talk with thee of *thy* judgements'. This is one of Hopkins' most moving assertions of independence, but part of the effect of the

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<sup>38</sup> Bridges, 'Notes', *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* 182.

translation is to shape a sense that he is speaking in a poetic voice other than his own. His characteristic self-fertilising verbal life can be heard being stamped out almost as soon as it flares up as that closing succession 'endeavour end' returns flatly upon itself. The surprisingness of the writing is instead made apparent in its refusal to strain after verbal effect. This refusal allows Hopkins' speech rhythms to achieve simple emphasis as they accommodate themselves to the structure of the poem. There is a flicker of half-sardonic subservience in Hopkins' reintroduction of 'indeed' into the equation (translating the Latin *quidem*, where the King James had omitted it), and there is self-confidence in his alteration of the Authorised Version's 'plead' into 'contend' (here poet and God are on a more equal footing). The inner tensions are sounded out, too, in the device of placing 'just' and 'must' into a rhyme trusts in the notion that whatever is, is right, even as the poetry's questions strain against it.<sup>39</sup>

Martin Dubois characterises the whole impact of the poem finely when he speaks of the 'particular dignity' that accrues to its 'combination of outspokenness and restraint [...] as if its speaker were chastened by years of sterility [...] but resolute in the conviction that an injustice has been committed and that his case will stand up in God's Court of Appeal.'<sup>40</sup> That dynamic makes itself felt in the second quatrain, whose 'bidding' is directed through vocatives which brace supplication against self-confident protest:

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<sup>39</sup> Martin Dubois contends of Hopkins' Biblical references that 'Broadly speaking, when [Hopkins] quotes from lesser-known passages of Scripture in his sermons, and, one senses, has cause to refer to the text itself, Hopkins follows the Roman Catholic versions – presumably translating from the Latin Vulgate, and thus staying close to the English Douay-Rheims Bible. When the passage in question is well-known, however, and, it seems likely, is quoted from memory, the resonances with the King James Version are unmistakable ('Styles of Translation' 280-1).

<sup>40</sup> Dubois, 'Styles of Translation' 289.

Wert thou my enemy, O thou my friend,  
How wouldst thou worse, I wonder, than thou dost  
Defeat, thwart me? Oh, the sots and thralls of lust  
Do in spare hours more thrive than I that spend,

Sir, life upon thy cause.

(l. 5-9)

‘To spend || ...life upon thy cause’ makes devotion sound like a prison sentence and the resentment is made all the more pointed for the strained ‘Sir’ with which Hopkins interjects the phrase. The pressure built by the delay over the stanza break causes this to ring out with a sharper edge than the quieter, more acquiescent, ‘sir’ in the opening stanza. The suppressed edge of something accusatory – even sardonic – prickling underneath the verse has been building up since the faux-speculative ‘I wonder’, in the quatrain’s second line. And yet the poem’s force and virtue are dependent upon the way it keeps this note of accusation bitten back, so that even as anger at God’s perceived injustice wells up, it is held in check and eventually disperses into exasperated demonstration as, in its sestet, the sonnet turns to the contrasting vitality of nature:

See, banks and breaks  
Now, leaved how thick! Laced they are again  
With fretty chervil, look, and fresh wind shakes

Them...

(l. 9-12)

The imperatives 'See' and 'look' uphold the poem's act of 'bidding', but with an altogether chattier urgency than the 'sirs' that precede them. As the poem is carried into its closing tercet these anxious rhythms are affectingly stalled and slowed as the poet's thoughts turn back to himself:

...birds build – but not I build; no, but strain,  
Time's eunuch, and not breed one work that wakes.  
Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain!  
(l. 11-14)

'Nothing comes: – I am a eunuch – but it is for the kingdom of heaven's sake': so Hopkins had articulated his artistic sterility in an earlier letter to Bridges.<sup>41</sup> The image perpetuates the poem's motif of imprisonment – captives in the Old Testament are frequently castrated – and N. H. Mackenzie compares Hopkins here with Paul, 'who described himself as "a slave of Jesus Christ" in all his epistles'.<sup>42</sup> But the poetry marries submission with independence. Even as it provides a startling metaphor for Hopkins' artistic sterility, 'eunuch' sets going the internal chiming through 'one work' and then 'wakes' that traces on the level of sound a subtle awakening that goes on as the textures of the verse work against the explicit claim of the line.<sup>43</sup> Again, the poem's sounds awaken incipient anticipation of creative renewal in the closing line, whose rhyme, 'roots rain', hovers half-way between engaging 'but strain' two lines earlier as either a masculine or feminine rhyme: the impression is of a poem left upon a moment

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<sup>41</sup> *Correspondence* 914.

<sup>42</sup> Mackenzie, *Reader's Guide* 204.

<sup>43</sup> Earlier versions of the line had read 'Eunuch, and never of all my works one wakes', and 'Eunuch, and never a work that I breed wakes' (see *Poetical Works* 502). The rhythmical struggle of both lines expresses a more frustrated inspiration than the final version.



of tentative re-flowering. The final line as a whole achieves, in Geoffrey Hill's words, a 'structural compounding of bidding with monumentality'<sup>44</sup> that makes it, for all its apparent simplicity, deeply characteristic of Hopkins' style at its best. That the line truly achieves such 'bidding' is the result of the humility which conducts the shift from the capitalised 'Lord' of the opening line, which one might suspect, like the repeated 'Sirs', of paying only lip-service to God's authority, to the uncapitalised but more credible address to the 'lord of life', whose sincerity the surrounding lines of the sestet bear witness to. The line's 'monumentality' is at one with the manner in which, through the assertive placing of stresses ('*Mine...my*'), it accomplishes this turn-around whilst upholding a sense of the self's integrity and importance, and raises the line's urgent, 'fugitive', monosyllables into a resonant rhythmic conclusion.

'Thou art indeed just, Lord...' makes a successful poem out of the failure of prayer. It provides a vantage point from which to detect a countervailing note of consolation amidst the apparently subdued accents of those lines with which this chapter started:

I want the one rapture of an inspiration  
O then if in my lagging lines you miss

The roll, the rise, the carol, the creation,  
My winter world, that scarcely breathes that bliss  
Now, yields you, with some sighs, our explanation.

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<sup>44</sup> Hill, 'A Note on Modernist Poetics', *Collected Critical Writings* 527.

We do ‘miss’ something of Hopkins’ distinctive, ‘live and lancing’ (l. 2) style here, even as the rhythms half-supply ‘The roll, the rise’ that the poetry professes to lack. And the usual reading takes this as a sad end to Hopkins’ career: ‘The sonnet goes in a diminuendo down to the last flat dull word “explanation”’, said Elizabeth Phare.<sup>45</sup> But we can hear the lines as awakening a mode of success, too, grounded in an accomplished act of ‘bidding’. The effect of the lines depends upon their ability to balance loss against gain, so that as the rhymes trace their descent from ‘inspiration’ to ‘explanation’, what is achieved has the feel of the discovery of a new voice, a poise of regret against anticipation.

Hopkins’ care in achieving that poise is evident from his revisions. An earlier version had spoken of ‘This withered world of me, that breathes no bliss’.<sup>46</sup> This glimpses selfhood as a claustrophobic ‘world’ of mirrors, a ‘withered’ consequence of Hopkins’ sense of experience as being infused with ‘my consciousness and feeling of myself, that taste of myself, of *I* and *me* in all things’. Hopkins’ revised version is less jaded, able to find more grounds for cheer: selfhood conceived of as a ‘winter world’ retains its chill, but ‘a winter world’ might have a snowy beauty, too, and the phrasing also allows for the possibility that the ‘winter world’ is one over which the self retains a mercurial command.

In another draft the lines had taken a different form:

Believe my withered world knows no such bliss  
Rebuke no more, but read my explanation.

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<sup>45</sup> Elizabeth Phare, *The Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Survey and Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1933) 28.

<sup>46</sup> Mackenzie catalogues the drafts of the lines in *Poetical Works* 508.

The imperatives here sadly hold their addressee by the lapels – ‘Rebuke no more’ is itself in danger of turning into a rebuke. Hopkins’ final version has courtesy: its gentler rhythms ‘yield’ an ‘explanation’ but do not enforce it; they are themselves ‘yielding’. The explanation is yielded with ‘some sighs’. This might mean, ‘with some considerable (in number or weight) sighs of regret’, or it might mean ‘with a few sighs of reservation’, but the lines don’t let on. Instead, they impress through their confident grace and *politesse*. It is worth remembering Hopkins’ strictures upon Tennyson’s ‘ungentlemanly row’, with which the previous chapter began: just as Bridges gestured with embarrassed delicacy towards ‘a sort of quarrel’, so Hopkins’ poem retains its poise through its refusal to enter into the details of personal grievance (it is magnanimous, too, that the poem’s title keeps things a private affair: its initials speak with friendly intimacy to their addressee but withhold his identity from the outside world).

One might even regard the poem’s courtesy as extending to its own ‘lagging lines’. Originally they had been ‘laboured lines’, but this would have been to ignore the degree to which ‘labour’ and the ‘strong | Spur’ (l. 1-2) of ‘inspiration’ are actually often at one in a Hopkins’ poem (‘the effort of inspiration’). Yet ‘lagging’, if it attests to fading poetic powers, still engenders a note of pity for their exhaustion and even gratitude for efforts. Not that Hopkins tries to distance himself from his poem: the back-and-forth personal interchange (‘my...you...My...you’) undergoes an expansion into the plural in the poem’s final phrase: ‘our explanation’. These lines are the best I can do, he seems to say, take them or leave them, and I will stand and fall with them.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> ‘Our’ is also generous in its inclusiveness towards Bridges. ‘My explanation’ might be at risk of allowing itself to sound resentful or expectant (‘where is yours?’); ‘our’ explanation says something like ‘this will do for the two of us’.

And these doubled energies – regret, tempered by atonement – are present, too, in the dilemma that the closing lines pose for the voice. If you read them as the punctuation directs, they fall into sense units as follows, with ‘Now’ emphasising the present barrenness of Hopkins’ ‘winter world’:

My winter world, that scarcely breathes that bliss now  
Yields you, with some sighs, our explanation.

But the poem’s lineation encourages you to hear them as if there were a comma at the line-ending after ‘bliss’, and to stress ‘Now’, in a way that gives the closing line the fuller rhythmic sweep of a new start:

My winter world, that scarcely breathes that bliss  
Now yields you, with some sighs, our explanation.

The holographic impression catches the poem in a moment of transition from despondency to achieved ‘explanation’.

Bridges spoke of ‘*Justus quidem tu es, Domine...*’, and ‘To R. B.’ as being ‘full of a strange fitness for the end’.<sup>48</sup> He might have added that this is in part down to the strange fittingness of their endings. They show the language of Hopkins’ poetry to be at its most personal when most intimate. The rhythms of both sound out a resilient independence and awakening hopefulness that emerges through the strains of isolation and alienation. They shape a sense of the self as a ‘winter world’ which, if

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<sup>48</sup> Cited by Mackenzie, ‘Commentary’, *Poetical Works* 505.

'scarce' in inspiration, is still able to 'yield' at least something, and which blossoms with the warmth of human contact.

## Chapter 7

### Thomas (I): 'Not Making a Song of It'

...there is a music of words which is beyond speech; it is an enduring echo of we know not what in the past and in the abyss, an echo heard in poetry and the utterance of children.

– Thomas, *Walter Pater*<sup>1</sup>

#### I

Thomas's career as a poet is usually thought of as beginning upon his acquaintance with Robert Frost in 1914. But Thomas had already tried his hand at verse in the early 1900s. An undergraduate letter from Oxford contains what sounds like a rejected draft from *Lyrical Ballads*:

Margaret is alone:  
The forest moans, each tree a voice;  
The vale is vocal with affright:  
Yet Margaret in her lonely toil seems to rejoice.  
(‘Margaret’ l. 13-16)

‘There is no music there, and no imagination, it is after the manner of Wordsworth’, Thomas commented.<sup>2</sup> That sounds like a joke at Wordsworth's expense, but it perhaps conceals some of Thomas's own creative investment in these lines. Their emphasis on nature's ‘voice’ invites attention upon their own manner of speaking, which is of a studiously un-musical sort: the wonky rhythms (a dimeter line, two lines of

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<sup>1</sup> *Selected Prose* 161.

<sup>2</sup> The poem was included in a letter to Helen Noble of 7 June 1898 and is printed by R. George Thomas in *Collected Poems* 458.

tetrameter, then a hexameter line) and the varied degrees of internal echo and off-rhyme ('alone'/'moans'; 'voice'/'vocal', 'vale'/'toil') mean that it is not so much a matter of the stanza having 'no music', as of its cultivating peculiar disharmonies. The lines suggests that from early in his career Thomas had an ear for how he might find his own 'voice' in a disturbed lyrical 'music'.

Still, not much came of this immediately, and it was Frost who would help Thomas really uncover and release that voice, and whose 1914 collection *North of Boston* Thomas held up as a model for the poets of his time: 'Their language is free from the poetical words and forms that are the chief material of secondary poets. The metre avoids not only the old-fashioned pomp and sweetness, but the later fashion also of discord and fuss. In fact, the medium is common speech'.<sup>3</sup> Thomas upholds the value of the unfashionable and the apparently unfashioned here: unadorned 'common speech' as the basis for a poetic idiom which holds its own between the 'pomp and sweetness' of late Victorianism and 'discord and fuss' of modernism. It is instructive, though, to note how he refined his position a year later, after he had again started writing poems himself. Writing to Gordon Bottomley he warned against being 'misled into supposing that Frost wanted poetry to be colloquial. All he insists on is what he believes he finds in all poets – absolute fidelity to the postures which the voice assumes in the most expressive intimate speech.'<sup>4</sup> Those remarks are well known, and tend to be taken as a tagline for a poetry which endeavours to recreate the intonations of the speaking voice, that turns its back on lyrical 'music'. But their familiarity can

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<sup>3</sup> Edward Thomas, 'A New Poet' rev. of Robert Frost, *North of Boston, Elected Friends: Robert Frost and Edward Thomas to One Another* ed. Matthew Spencer, foreword Michael Hoffman, afterword Christopher Ricks (New York: Handsel-Other, 2003) 16.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Thomas, letter to Gordon Bottomley, 30 June 1915, *Letters from Edward Thomas to Gordon Bottomley*, ed. and introd. R. George Thomas (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1968) 250-1.

disguise the amount of leeway that they allow. The emphasis has shifted from ‘speech’ to the voice’s ‘postures’, and what Thomas is envisaging sounds rather like the possibilities of using ‘speech’ as an anchor against which to strain and deviate that one finds in Hopkins: ‘So long as these tones & postures are there he has not the least objection to any vocabulary whatever or any inversion or variation from the customary grammatical forms of talk’.<sup>5</sup>

Those ‘variations’, in Thomas, often betray a half-indulged attraction to ‘old-fashioned sweetness’. ‘[A]lways he is speaking quietly, not making a song of it’,<sup>6</sup> wrote Norman Nicholson. The construction is apt on account of its suggestion of the way in which ‘song’ haunts and defines Thomas’s voice – as, embryonically, in those early lines on ‘Margaret’ – as a rejected or unrealised possibility. The opening lines of ‘November’, the second poem Thomas wrote after he began writing again in 1915, show this conflicted lyricism taking shape:

November’s days are thirty:  
November’s earth is dirty,  
Those thirty days, from first to last;  
(‘November’, l. 1-3)

Follow the rhymes, and the writing swings to the beat of the rhyme ‘Thirty days has November’, inaugurating a brand of poetry whose contact with ‘song’ often involves accommodating the most rough and ready of popular forms. Follow the grammar, and the weather-rhyme’s singalong cadences are allowed to take hold only momentarily, tricking the voice: Thomas’s punctuation, which couples together the second and third

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas, *Letters to Gordon Bottomley* 251.

<sup>6</sup> Norman Nicholson, *Man and Literature* (London: SCM Press, 1944) 41.



lines, rather than the rhymed first and second, releases his syntax from the shackles of the song's rhymes.<sup>7</sup> The off-key musicality of the lines brings together two distinguishing features of Thomas' poetic idiom on which this chapter is going to concentrate: first, the subtlety with which his blank verse and stanzaic lyrics orchestrate the 'postures' of the speaking voice into a hesitant lyricism; secondly, his innovative adoption of the forms and rhythms of folk song. Both aspects show Thomas 'going back through the paraphernalia of poetry into poetry again', to find a voice whose originality is grounded in its sensitivity to his personal and artistic individuality.

## II

'Thomas as a poet commands two important technical skills, one prosaic and one musical. His control of syntax is masterly; and he abundantly possesses what Eliot called the auditory imagination', says Carol Rumens.<sup>8</sup> Eliot defined the 'auditory imagination' as 'the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to an origin and bringing something back [...]

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<sup>7</sup> Perhaps it is significant that 'Thirty days has November' is a rhyme whose initial brio, in some versions, undergoes a comically unmusical collapse: 'All the rest have thirty-one | Except for February, which has twenty-eight, | Or twenty-nine if it's a leap year'.

<sup>8</sup> Carole Rumens, 'Poem of the Week', *The Guardian* 25 Feb 2008

<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2008/feb/25/poemoftheweek29>> last accessed 20<sup>th</sup> May 2014. A sensitivity to Thomas's 'fusion of the poetic and the colloquial' is one of the strengths of Michael Kirkham's account of Thomas's poetry; he is alert to the way the confusions of Thomas's voice align themselves with opposed imaginative standpoints: the angular, spoken registers, like the 'awkwardness' Thomas was drawn to in Hardy's poetry, typical of a voice set to accommodate the intransigence of 'fact'; the mellifluous, 'songlike', qualities signifying an urge to adorn and beautify, and a longing to transcend the everyday and the commonplace. See especially his chapter on 'Language and Movement' (*Imagination* 143-166).

fusing the most ancient and civilised mentalities.<sup>9</sup> This would speak finely to Clare's intuitive trust in the cadences of a feeling, and to Hopkins' more considered wrestling with the incarnational potency of sounds; but it is especially helpful in illuminating the peculiar expressiveness of Thomas's poetry, and the way his combinations of 'musical' lyricism and 'prosaic' syntactical contortions reach after otherwise unverbalizable nuances of feeling.

Thomas set down in *Walter Pater* the conviction that 'There would be no poetry if men could speak all that they think and all that they feel':

...men understand now the impossibility of speaking aloud all that is within them, and if they do not speak it, they cannot write as they speak. The most they can do is to write as they would speak in a less solitary world. A man cannot say all that is in his heart to a woman or another man. The waters are too deep between us. We have not the confidence in what is within us, nor in our voices.<sup>10</sup>

In Thomas's finest poetry this sense of impermeable solitude is met both as an anxiety and a challenge. 'The Unknown Bird' finds an analogy for the predicament in its attempts to recall and communicate an elusive snatch of bird song. Thomas's flexible pentameters, now relaxing, now tautening, enact a half-frustrated, half-successful attempt to get purchase on what they can never perfectly recall:

Three lovely notes he whistled, too soft to be heard  
If others sang; but others never sang  
In the great beech-wood all that May and June.

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<sup>9</sup> T. S. Eliot *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* 1933 (London: Faber and Faber, 1964) 118-9.

<sup>10</sup> Edward Thomas, *Walter Pater* in *Selected Prose* 158-9.

No one saw him: I alone could hear him  
Though many listened. Was it but four years  
Ago? or five? He never came again.

(l. 1-6)

The poetry evokes a state of frustrated self-enclosure, a feeling of having privileged access to a source of inspiration without having the language to share it, to 'make another hear':

Oftenest when I heard him I was alone,  
Nor could I ever make another hear.  
La-la-la! he called, seeming far-off –  
As if a cock crowed past the edge of the world,  
As if the bird or I were in a dream.  
Yet that he travelled through the trees and sometimes  
Neared me, was plain, though somehow distant still  
He sounded. All the proof is – I told men  
What I had heard.

(l. 7-15)

If that closing rejoinder articulates doubts, it also places trust in poetry as an instrument of telling, capable of bridging the 'waters...between us'. The lines illustrate how Thomas's 'auditory imagination' manifests itself in the suppleness of his blank verse. As early as 1902 Thomas was able to envisage the form as 'an infinitely varied line of usually ten syllables'.<sup>11</sup> What is striking, in a poem written barely six weeks after Thomas had committed to writing poems, is how intuitive Thomas's mastery of those

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<sup>11</sup> Edward Thomas, rev. of Mark H. Liddell, *An Introduction to the Scientific Study of English Poetry* cited in Andrew Motion, *The Poetry of Edward Thomas* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980) 61.

‘infinite variations’ is. In the carefully plotted approach and withdrawal of his penultimate sentence here he shapes his rhythms to the contours of experience:

Yet *that* he travelled *through* the trees and sometimes  
Neared me, was plain, though somehow distant still  
He sounded.

The bird’s tantalising proximity registers in the disturbance of the rhythms as the sentence curves over the line ending. The inverted stress on ‘*Neared* me’ responds to the bird’s approach without upsetting the alternating pattern of emphases. Momentum then stalls, before the iambic pattern reinstates itself across the rest of the sentence, its fluency the greater for the way the second enjambment re-channels the run from ‘was plain’ to ‘He sounded’ into its own neat five-foot unit.

Yet the poetry chases an experience whose precise nature lies beyond the fringes of articulation. Peter Howarth has shown how ‘Three lovely notes’ play along, without ever reconciling themselves to, the rhythms of the poem: the notes of the bird have a rhythm that in music would be called three-over-two; that is, there is space in the line for two beats, but the identical phonemes give no clues as to where the stresses should fall. Are they ‘Lá-la- lá!’, or ‘La- lá- lá!’, or ‘Lá-la- lá!’?<sup>12</sup> Likewise, Thomas’s attempt to get a hold on the experience through simile in the above passage – ‘As if a cock crowed past the edge of the world’ – is accompanied by a subtle displacement of the poem’s rhythms, the flattening out at the end of that line registers the shock of the song’s peculiarity. The subsequent line’s return to a more regular iambic rhythm (‘As if the bird or I were in a dream’) might seem to take the edge off

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<sup>12</sup> Peter Howarth, *British Poetry* 87.

the strangeness of the first simile. But the comparison earns its keep through the way it further muddies the poetic waters; ‘as if the bird *or* I’ [my emphasis] is carefully and crucially different from ‘as if the bird *and* I’. If the bird is the one in the dream, then its ‘lovely notes’ are just pleasing escapism; if it is the poet, then that places the bird on a plane more real than the world of common experience. The writing strains against, only to deepen its awareness of, the ‘impossibility of speaking aloud all that is within’.

### III

Thinking about the flexibility of Thomas’s blank verse, J. P. Ward has described how he ‘trusts his copulative and skeletal language to find its own boundaries, to stop pushing outwards when the mind’s rhythm ceases naturally to ask for it’.<sup>13</sup> That invites consideration of the ways in which Thomas’s verse lines ‘find their own boundaries’, in particular the peculiar kind of boundary that might be marked in blank verse by the presence or proximity of rhyme. Thomas had shown in his prose a keen ear for expressive potential of an unexpected regularity:

All she could see there was nothing but the beeches and the tiny pond beneath them and the calves standing in it drinking, alternately grazing the water here and there and thinking, and at last going out and standing still on the bank thinking.<sup>14</sup>

The rhyme that passes into a repetition at the end of each even-lengthed clause here, ‘drinking...thinking...thinking’, gives a shape to the movements of a mind half-

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<sup>13</sup> Ward, ‘Solitary Note’ 58.

<sup>14</sup> Edward Thomas ‘The White Horse’ cited by Longley ‘Notes’, *Annotated Collected Poems* 144.

reposing, half-suffocated in its own familiar thought rhythms. When Thomas reworked this passage as the basis for some lines in his first poem, 'Up in The Wind', the auditory stranglehold was loosened:

...two calves were wading in the pond,  
Grazing the water here and there and thinking,  
Sipping and thinking, both happily, neither long.  
The water wrinkled, but they sipped and thought...  
(‘Up in the Wind’, l. 110-13)

Thomas jettisons some of the frustrated music of his prose here for a tissue of internal chimes ('wading... Grazing... thinking... Sipping... thinking... wrinkled... sipped... thought'), whose stalling and re-establishment of momentum, though supple, feels more obviously 'composed' than the more upfront impact of the earlier passage. But some of Thomas's most imaginative blank verse demonstrates how such paralysed re-iterations, in approaching, only to fall short of or withdraw from, the possibility of rhyme, might make felt the energies of a voice straining at the limits of the expressible. 'March', written only two days later, offers a case in point:

Not till night had half its stars  
And never a cloud, was I aware of silence  
Stained with all that hour's songs, a silence  
Saying that Spring returns, perhaps tomorrow.  
(‘March’, l. 29-32)

The reiteration of the same word at the end of successive lines of blank verse creates something at once fuller and more hollow than a rhyme. Those contradictory

reverberations are inevitably intensified when the word being reiterated is one with such suggestive relations to rhyme as 'silence'. Thomas's lines are attuned to the silence's tremulous evocativeness. They evoke the way, in H. Coombes' words, silence 'comes back and [...] exists at the back of every sound'<sup>15</sup> as both a muting and an amplification of its suggestiveness: a muting because of the deadened return of 'silence' against itself; an amplification because the dynamic of that return plays against the fact that neither of the lines ending in 'silence' ends *with* silence. Each flows over into another line, enacting the poetry's ongoing efforts to decode what the silence is 'Saying'.

Such ambiguously suggestive sound patterning is a crucial technique in a poetry persistently on the cusp of intuitions. It has a complicated relation to Arthur Hallam's observation about rhyme's 'constant appeal to memory and hope'.<sup>16</sup> In 'March' the device expresses tentative anticipation. Elsewhere, as in 'Wind and Mist', it can articulate a harassed inability to shake off the burden of memory:

I had forgot the wind.  
Pray do not let me get on to the wind.  
You would not understand about the wind.  
(*'Wind and Mist'*, 54-6)

It can also, as Thomas puts it to use in 'Old Man', express the frustrations and failings of memory:

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<sup>15</sup> H. Coombes, *Edward Thomas: A Critical Study* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1956) 197.

<sup>16</sup> Arthur Hallam, 'Oration on the Influence of Italian Works of Imagination', *The Writings of Arthur Hallam*, ed. T. H. Vail Motter (New York: MLA, 1943) 222.

Even to one that knows it well, the names  
Half decorate, half perplex, the thing it is:  
At least, what that is clings not to the names  
In spite of time. And yet I like the names.

(‘Old Man’ l. 5-8)

The turns of the verse enact a struggle to pass beyond ‘the names’ to ‘the thing it is’; there is a deadlock of persistence against failure. And yet what they also make audible is the poem (which had after all begun by rolling the names ‘Old Man, or Lad’s-Love [...] Lad’s love, or Old Man’ around on its tongue) ‘clinging’ to the names even as the plant itself does not; partly for their own sake (‘And yet I like the names’) and partly as if pressed hard enough they might open a portal to past experience. Christopher Ricks captures the effect when he says that the poem ‘perfectly judges the accommodation that it reaches with imperfection, the mind fully bent upon that which must remain half perplexed’.<sup>17</sup>

‘Old Man’ is Thomas’s masterpiece in seeking out expressiveness in such musically unmusical blank verse. Its oscillations between hope and disappointment are in tune with Thomas’s description of the relation between memory and song in *The Childhood of Edward Thomas*:

The songs, first of my mother, then of her younger sister, I can hear not only afar off behind the veil but on this side of it also. I was, I should think, a very still listener whom the music flowed through and filled to the exclusion of all thought and of all sensation except of blissful easy fullness, so that too

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<sup>17</sup> Christopher Ricks, *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988) 147. Ricks illuminates different poets’ use of such repetitions in his surrounding pages (141-153). Peter McDonald discusses the place of such reiterations within Wordsworth’s feeling for repetition (*Sound Intentions* 60-113).



early or too sudden ceasing would have meant pangs of expectant emptiness.<sup>18</sup>

‘Pangs of expectant emptiness’ would be a good description of the effect created by those repeated line endings (‘the names... the names’), and by similar repetitions that pulse through Thomas’s verse over the course of the poem, raising, only to disappoint, the musical possibilities and mnemonic function of rhyme. The poem’s handling of the word ‘nothing’ is one example. It asks us to listen carefully to the way, having been held out at the end of the first line (‘in the name there’s nothing’), it is woven through the body of the poem (the description of the girl ‘shrivelling | The shreds at last onto the path perhaps | Thinking, perhaps of nothing’ (l. 13-15)) before moving back out into a rhyme position, the movements tracing the mind’s efforts to transcend a nothingness which is itself thickening into ‘something’: ‘I sniff the spray | And think of nothing; I see and hear nothing’ (l. 32-3).<sup>19</sup>

More darkly, perhaps, there is the pressure placed on the word ‘door’ at the close of the last two full lines of the poem’s second paragraph, which envision:

...a bent path to a door  
A low thick bush beside the door, and me  
Forbidding her to pick.  
(l. 23-4)

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<sup>18</sup> Edward Thomas, *The Childhood of Edward Thomas in The Prose of Edward Thomas: A Selected Edition, Volume I: Autobiographies*, ed. Guy Cuthbertson (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011) 187.

<sup>19</sup> In their feeling for the importance of repetition to ‘the auditory imagination’, and their sense of ‘nothing’ as a word endlessly spinning between emptiness and something Thomas’s repeated ‘nothings’ anticipate Eliot’s ‘I can connect | Nothing with nothing’ from ‘The Fire Sermon’ (*The Waste Land* l. 301-2, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969) 70.

The lines imagine a girl sniffing the leaves, as Thomas himself had done, and wonder 'how much hereafter | She will remember' (l. 19-20). The figure of Thomas 'Forbidding her to pick', warns of memory's inevitable fading. So whilst 'door' refuses to close so fully against itself as 'names' does in the previous paragraph, as if leaving an opening to the past ajar, the repetition is ominous, and its positioning, a foot away from the line-ending (held back, significantly, only by Thomas's warning presence: 'and me') gives a feeling of how close the girl is, too, from inheriting the alienation from past experience that to which the distinctive slipping and shifting of Thomas's verse answers.

The only other word in the poem to recur at separate line-endings is 'scent' (l. 20, 29) – appropriately so, since scents, like names, provide a teasingly insubstantial access to the past. But the hopes raised by that particular non-rhyme reach into, and find a sort of fulfilment in, the poem's final line, where the poet's efforts at recall bring him to 'an avenue, dark, nameless, without end' (l. 39). Thomas took care over how he pitched this. The closing sentence of the prose passage from which the poem emerged had read:

No garden comes back to me, no hedge or path, no grey-green bush called old man's beard or lad's love, no figure of mother or father or playmate, only a dark avenue without an end.<sup>20</sup>

Thomas's first draft of the poem retained, even intensified, the unruffled prosaic flatness of this through its final return to the word 'name':

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<sup>20</sup> Longley, 'Notes' *Annotated Collected Poems* 150.

Only an avenue dark without end or name.<sup>21</sup>

In this version the dismal potency of the poem's shutting down is reinforced by the ambiguities released by the inversion, which imagines not only a 'dark avenue', but an avenue darkened by its very lack of 'end or name' (a subdued paradox stirs in the contemplation of an endless 'avenue', given the word's connotations of arrival).<sup>22</sup> But the final version, whose elongating phrases culminate in a distant half-rhyme between 'end' and 'scent', achieves a more resonant music: it experiences memory not as a total blank, but rather a darkness whose endlessness speaks as much for its capacity to tantalise as overwhelm.

#### IV

'Old Man' approaches and retreats from a lyrical music which it refuses wholly to abandon itself to. The other of Thomas's most recognizable lyrics, 'Adlestrop', gives the attractions of verbal music freer rein in its attempt to gain a purchase on an experience which, to return to Eliot's words, 'penetrates far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling':

#### ADLESTROP

Yes. I remember Adlestrop –  
The name, because one afternoon  
Of heat the express-train drew up there  
Unwontedly. It was late June.

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<sup>21</sup> Longley, 'Notes', *Annotated Collected Poems* 150.

<sup>22</sup> The word derives, via French, from the Latin *advenire*, 'to come' (*OED*).

The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat.  
No one left and no one came  
On the bare platform. What I saw  
Was Adlestrop, only the name

And willows, willow-herb, and grass,  
And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry,  
No whit less still and lonely fair  
Than the high cloudlets in the sky.

And for that minute a blackbird sang  
Close by, and round him, mistier,  
Farther and farther, all the birds  
Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.

One way of thinking afresh about this familiar poem might be to look at it through the lens of some dryly unimpressed remarks Philip Larkin made about a similar lyric of his own, 'Cut Grass':

Its trouble is that it's 'music', i.e. pointless crap. About line 6 I hear a kind of wonderful Elgar river-music take over, for which words are just an excuse [...] There's a point at which the logical sense of the poem ceases to be added to, and it continues only as a succession of images. I like it alright, but for once I'm not a good judge.<sup>23</sup>

Does 'Adlestrop' float free from the development of 'logical sense' and become 'pointless crap'? Like 'Old Man' it is a poem about the evocative power (and limitation) of 'names', the sense Thomas spoke of in *Walter Pater* that "The music of

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<sup>23</sup> Philip Larkin, letter to Monica Jones, 1 Aug 1971, *Letters to Monica*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 2011) 423.

words carries an enduring echo of we know not what in the past and in the abyss,'<sup>24</sup> and one of the things that it has to keep an eye on is the risk of surrendering to that evocative power too cheaply. There is a trade-off to be managed between a name's exactness and its suggestiveness: all the associations that well up in the second half of the poem testify to the rich evocative potential of the name 'Adlestrop', but at the same time they risk spiralling out of its reach, blurring its precision, and stretching the relation between 'the name' and 'the thing it is' to breaking-point. Part of what makes that final half-rhyme between 'mistier' and 'Gloucestershire' so beautiful is its precariousness; it gives the sense of catching a moment when word and 'logical sense' are on the verge of drifting apart.

But the poem authenticates such verbal 'music' through its willingness in its first two stanzas to confront the possibility that words are just words; that their 'music' carries no evocative 'enduring echo'. Those stilted sentences that make up the second stanza are quietly daring in their contentedness to twiddle their thumbs for a while, as if dramatising a poem coming up against the 'bare platform' of language itself, filling in a few faintly tedious details whilst waiting for the words to yield up their significance. (Thomas was careful to make the lines as prosaic as possible: the poetical touch of an earlier version "Twas June', for example, has been flattened out into 'It was late June'.)<sup>25</sup> In a similar spirit, Thomas's repetitions of 'Adlestrop' both emphasise and scrutinise the word's suggestiveness. The word appears once in the title (creating a dizzyingly telescopic effect: this poem about the complexities of the name 'Adlestrop' is itself named 'Adlestrop') then it is held out suggestively at the end of the first line, so that momentarily significances and associations are allowed to well

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<sup>24</sup> Thomas, *Walter Pater in Selected Prose* 161.

<sup>25</sup> Longley, 'Notes', *Annotated Collected Poems* 177.

up before the opening of the next line hastily keeps a lid on them: 'I remember Adlestrop – | The name'. Then there is an even more finely managed moment of equivocation when it resurfaces. 'Saw' peers out at the end of the seventh line – but what exactly is it that is seen? It might be –

What I saw | *Was Adlestrop*

– where the emphasis would imply a movement beyond 'the name'. Or it might be, fitting a little more neatly with the metre –

What I saw | *Was Adlestrop*

– which would be more attuned to the succeeding movements of the line, which again enact a deflation:

What I saw  
Was Adlestrop, only the name...

And yet that 'only' wrong-foots us slightly, since 'the name' is not followed up, decisively, with a full stop, but rather an expansion:

What I saw  
Was Adlestrop, only the name

And willows, willow-herb, and grass,  
And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry...

And so on into that flowering of associations and significances that make up the second half of the poem, where though the word 'Adlestrop' itself has disappeared, its cadences re-echo through 'willow-herb' and 'meadowsweet', and then, more faintly, through 'Oxfordshire' and 'Gloucestershire'. Buttressed by such scrupulous attentiveness to the suggestiveness of a single word, the poem's burgeoning lyricism is shaped by an awareness of its own risks. As the writing strains to get beyond 'the name' to the essence of what the name represents, it remains conscious that it is in danger of abandoning itself to spurious verbal 'music', a poetic equivalent of staring into the middle distance.

Thomas's responsiveness to the pull between the 'music' and 'logical sense' of names in 'Adlestrop' brings into focus the complexities of his attitude towards 'the music of words' more broadly. Characteristically, his voice is quizzical as well as yearning, distinguished by its restless scrutiny of its own articulacy. The language of the short lyric 'She Dotes' (which replays scenario of 'The Unknown Bird' from the distance of the third person) at once embraces and ironises the appeals of 'song'. The poem, in Michael Kirkham's words, 'half reveals and pityingly half conceals the consoling fantasy of the woman crazed by the death of her lover – a mad, shy willingness to suspend disbelief in miracles':<sup>26</sup>

She dotes on what the wild birds say  
Or hint, or mock at, night and day, –

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<sup>26</sup> Kirkham, *Imagination* 111.

Thrush, blackbird, all that sing in May,  
And songless plover,  
Hawk, heron, owl, and woodpecker.  
They never say a word to her  
About her lover.

(l. 1-7)

The movements of the opening lines shift between the songlike and the spoken in a manner that enacts the poet's uncertainty about the birdsong's worth: speak the line as a self-contained unit to emphasise the rhyme, and that the birds 'say' something has firm certainty; carry the momentum over into the enjambment and you can hear the mind's attempt to get a hold on meaning that slides into increasing uncertainty: 'say | Or hint, or mock at'. Thomas skilfully orchestrates the movements of his sentences against the larger shape of his stanza form. Resisting the natural point of division after the first short line, his accumulating list accentuates the imbalance of the stanza so that it arrives with a slight note of anti-climax at the closing two lines: 'They never say a word to her | About her lover.' The banal common sense of this sounds a note of amused impatience (of course they never say 'a word': they are birds), but its accommodation of the idiom 'never say a word', with its concession of a tentative hope that they might at least say *something*, tempers any incredulity with quiet pathos.

The next stanza is more open about nature's indifference to human affairs. The birds 'see her going loverless' (an odd word: as if the very absence of her lover were visible in her movements), but either through perceived 'childishness' or 'carelessness' they:

sing and chatter



Just as when he was not a ghost,  
Nor ever ask her what she has lost  
Or what is the matter.  
(l. 12-14)

The writing wrings a quirky poignancy from the angular idiom that views life as if it were merely preparation for becoming 'a ghost'. It then settles into a closing two lines which, as they waver on the edge of a kind of nursery-rhyme simplicity, are pitched between trivialising the woman's grief and catching her troubled aching with affecting understatement.

The final stanza sustains the poem's balance of amused detachment towards the belief that nature should offer elegiac consolation ('she has fancied blackbirds hide | A secret' (l. 15-6)) and a compassionate understanding of the impulse. The poem ends in a position not dissimilar to that evoked in 'Old Man', with the mind refusing to give in in its efforts to discover a meaning in that which intransigently refuse to give one up:

And she has slept, trying to translate  
The word the cuckoo cries to his mate  
Over and over.  
(l. 19-21)

To label the woman's search for meaning as merely, in Kirkham's words, a 'consoling fantasy' underplays the extent to which the poetry, too, wishes to believe that 'blackbirds hide | A secret', and is itself beguiled by 'The word the cuckoo cries to his mate | Over and over'. That closing rhymed phrase (rhyme being a way of saying

something 'over' again), channels this ambiguity nicely. '[O]ver and over' can be understood as referring to the woman's obsessive but futile attempt to 'translate' the cuckoo's 'word'. But it is also open to being heard, more sympathetically, as describing the repeated, tantalising cry of the cuckoo itself, looking forward to the 'pure thrush word' Thomas himself hears cried out 'Over and over again' (l. 22), but can't translate, at the end of 'The Word'. The poem's sympathy is that of a poet attuned to the dilemmas of trying to fit language to experiences that resist translation.

## V

'She Dotes' is a poem about the imaginative allure and deceptions of song, but it also reveals Thomas's adeptness at conducting his voice through songlike stanzaic structures. The poem's bobbing and wheeling *aaabccb* stanzas operate like a homespun version of Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott' (an appropriate poem to have in mind, given its concern with the entrancements of an ideal world), but seem to be derived, ultimately, from a song of Clare's called 'Adieu', which Thomas picked out in *Feminine Influence on the Poets* as catching the accents of 'those mad maids and their songs that are so characteristic of English poetry'.<sup>27</sup>

I left the little birds  
And sweet lowing o the herds  
And couldn't find out words  
Do you see  
To say to them goodbye  
Where the yellow cups do lye  
So heaving a deep sigh

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<sup>27</sup> Edward Thomas, *Feminine Influence on the Poets* (London: Martin Secker, 1910)

Took to sea

(‘Adieu’ l. 25-32)<sup>28</sup>

Clare’s breeziness here – the pathos of his struggle to ‘find out words’ to communicate with the birds as it plays off against the conversational familiarity with the reader (‘Do you see’); the deceptively artless way that the conversational ‘see’ turns, on ‘heaving’ and ‘deep’, into the looming ‘sea’ – provides a contrast with Thomas, who is typically highly self-conscious about stanzaic form’s orchestration of the speaking voice. But Clare’s ease in moving through his stanza also begs comparison with Thomas’s handling of another major and distinguishing influence, the traditions of ballad and folk song.

Edna Longley locates Thomas’s interest in these traditions within ‘a movement of indigenous cultural retrieval that had begun in the eighteenth century, with Burns and Wordsworth, and was then renewing itself’,<sup>29</sup> and characterises it as that of a poet keen to forge new expressive poetic directions by ‘starting with people rather than with books’.<sup>30</sup> Thomas himself professed to ‘prefer any country church or chapel to Winchester or Chichester or Canterbury Cathedral, just as I prefer ‘All round my hat’, or ‘Somer is icumen in’, to Beethoven’.<sup>31</sup> But Thomas’s absorption in and of these native modes is not simply gruff populism. What appealed to Thomas about folk song,

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<sup>28</sup> *Later Poems* ii. 973.

<sup>29</sup> Longley, ‘Notes’, *Annotated Collected Poems* 167.

<sup>30</sup> Longley ‘English Tradition’, *Poetry in the Wars* 54.

<sup>31</sup> Edward Thomas, *The South Country in England and Wales* 254. Clare made a similar remark in a letter to Thomas Pringle in 1828: ‘I would sooner be the Author of Tam o shanter then of the Iliad & Odyssey of Homer’ (*Clare’s Letters* 437). For a reading of Thomas’s engagement with folk song as part of a conservative, communally-orientated ‘English line’ that includes Clare, too, see Jonathan Barker’s valuable survey ‘*The Pocket Book of Poems and Songs for the Open Air: Edward Thomas and the Folk Tradition*’, *The Art of Edward Thomas* 133-46.

as much as its 'indigenous' quality, was its strangeness: it can 'move us suddenly and launch us into an unknown' he said in *The Heart of England*.<sup>32</sup>

That remark captures some of the exploratory drive that these poems harness. Thomas resists as much as embraces folk song's communal roots. He discovers in it a means of sounding out a recalcitrant individuality. The cogs of lyric and folk voices can be heard interlocking in the two 'Old Songs' Thomas composed in December 1914, within a month of his decision to start writing poetry. In 'An Old Song I' each of the four-line stanzas works its way round to a refrain borrowed from 'The Lincolnshire Poacher', a song Thomas had included in his *Pocket Book of Poems and Songs for the Open Air*:<sup>33</sup>

For if I am contented, at home or anywhere,  
Or if I sigh for I know not what, or my heart beats with some fear,  
It is a strange kind of delight to sing or whistle just:  
'Oh, 'tis my delight of a shiny night in the season of they year.'  
(l. 17-20)

This bespeaks and embodies the 'strange' liberations offered by song. As Thomas puts it in a moment of curious self-fulfilment in the next stanza, with 'this melody on my lips [...] I am for a moment made a man that sings out of his heart: | 'Oh, 'tis my delight of a shiny night in the season of the year' (l. 21-4).

But Thomas's rhythms are never entirely liberated into this 'delight'. The line 'It is a strange kind of delight to sing or whistle just', for instance, opens with an unexpected shift in cadence from the two that have gone before, a shift which, in

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<sup>32</sup> Thomas, *The Heart of England in England and Wales* 212.

<sup>33</sup> Edward Thomas (ed.), *The Pocket Book and Poems and Songs for the Open Air* 1907 (London: Faber and Faber, 2008) 81.

performance, causes an awkward re-adjustment of the voice, a refusal to be carried away by the lilt. Thomas zoomed in on the line as a product of his effort to shake his style free from rhetorical glitz: ‘As to “sing and whistle first”’ he wrote to Eleanor Farjeon, slightly misquoting himself, ‘I don’t think “to whistle and to sing”, which is formally correct is as good. If I am consciously doing anything I am trying to get rid of the last rags of rhetoric and formality which left my prose so often with a dead rhythm only’.<sup>34</sup> But it is not clear that ‘to sing and whistle just’ is unequivocally the least ‘formal’ of the two options. Yes, it gives the voice a slightly more awkward posture: ‘to whistle or to sing’ sings, but risks sounding singsong. But whether that posture comes over as artificial or colloquial depends upon what one takes ‘just’ to be referring to: if it gestures forward to the line that follows then it achieves casual panache (‘it is a strange kind of delight to whistle just a snatch of song like this’); but if – as seems equally likely – it refers to the verb ‘whistle’ (‘it is a strange kind of delight just to whistle...’) then it teeters on the edge of sounding precious, still haunted by the ‘rhetoric and formality’ Thomas is seeking to get rid of.

The hesitations and uncertainties here are typical of a voice which finds its unique character at the intersection of two traditions. Thomas’s engagement with vernacular poetry and song is distinguished by the tact and frank self-awareness with which he fends off the pretension that poetry can easily rid itself of its literariness, or that oral can be unresistingly incorporated within literary, art. He handled the delicate negotiations between folk and literary cultures in a poem written a month after his ‘Old Songs’, ‘The Gypsy’. It is another poem which captures in its aural textures the excitement and uneasiness Thomas’s idioms experience as they grapple with these

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<sup>34</sup> Farjeon, *Last Four Years* 110.

new modes of expression. Thomas admired in the gypsies a quality of ‘native’ estrangement: ‘they keep their language and their tents against the mass of civilization and length of time. They are foreigners but as native as the birds’.<sup>35</sup> The poem he wrote about them, shaped around an awkward exchange on the way to the fair, both cherishes and is unsettled by such ‘foreignness’:

‘Give a penny  
For the poor baby’s sake.’ ‘Indeed I have not any  
Unless you can give change for a sovereign, my dear.’  
‘Then just half a pipeful of tobacco can you spare?’  
I gave it. With that she laughed content.  
I should have given more, but off and away she went  
With her baby and her pink sham flowers to rejoin  
The rest before I could translate to its proper coin  
Gratitude for her grace.

(l. 5-13)

The poet’s embarrassment is audible in his phrases: the pompousness of ‘Indeed I have not any’; ‘I gave it’, which rings out with a finality that is either resigned or begrudging; ‘I should have given more’, where ‘should’ wavers between self-reproach and embarrassed self-justification. It infiltrates the poem’s rhythms, too. Peter Howarth has shown how you can hear the poem’s hexameter rhythms as carrying either a four or six stress emphasis. So the poet might say ‘*Unless you can give change for a sovereign, my dear*’ (which sounds superior and sarcastic) or ‘*Unless you can give change for a sovereign, my dear*’ (lighter and more at ease with itself). In turn the gypsy’s response can be heard as either ‘*Then just half a pipeful of tobacco can you*

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<sup>35</sup> Longley, ‘Notes’ *Annotated Collected Poems* 189.

*spare?* (weary, annoyed) or ‘Then just *half a pipeful of tobacco can you spare?*’ (cheery, hopeful).<sup>36</sup> The unease of the cultural transaction comes over in the meeting of hesitance and fluency in the poem’s form.

In the lines that follow, the tables turn. The delicate social and economic anxieties surrounding the financial exchange with the girl spill over into the question of how literary art can give ‘proper coin’ to the gratitude it owes folk cultures:

And I paid nothing then,  
As I pay nothing now with the dipping of my pen  
For her brother’s music when he drummed the tambourine  
And stamped his feet, which made the workmen passing grin,  
While his mouth-organ changed to a rascally Bacchanal dance  
‘Over the hills and far away’.

(l. 13-18)

The poem’s loose hexameters begin to pick up a ‘rascally Bacchanal’ rhythm of their own here. The self-conscious immediacy of the writing (‘now’) gives the implication that the music fuels the poet’s own composition, something furthered by the suggestion in ‘dipping’ not just of the pen in the ink pot, but of the rhythmic up-and-down movement of the pen itself as it writes, as if to the memory of the song itself. Yet this gratitude is shadowed by guilt: the generosity with which the gypsy freely gives his song darkens the poet’s own earlier stinginess. Thomas is also careful that his poem’s absorption of the gypsy’s song is not a matter of cosily accommodating its ‘foreignness’. Instead, its title, ‘Over the hills and far away’, suggests its capacity to ‘launch us into an unknown’:

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<sup>36</sup> Howarth, *British Poetry* 97.

That night he peopled for me the hollow wooded land,  
More dark and wild than stormiest heavens, that I searched and  
scanned

Like a ghost new-arrived. The gradations of the dark  
Were like an underworld of death, but for the spark  
In the Gypsy boy's black eyes as he played and stamped his tune  
'Over the hills and far away', and a crescent moon.

(l. 23-8)

There is a precedent for Thomas's nervousness about the proper attitude to adopt towards the gypsies in the debate surrounding Wordsworth's poem 'Gipsies'. Wordsworth casts scorn on a group of gypsies for their idleness: 'oh better wrong and strife | Better vain deeds or evil than such life! | The silent Heavens have goings on; | The stars have tasks – but these have none' (l. 21-4). Hazlitt condemned the poem for its 'Sunday-school philosophy';<sup>37</sup> Coleridge punctured its 'mental bombast': Wordsworth 'expresses his indignation in a series of lines, the diction and imagery of which would have been rather above, than below the mark, had they been applied to the immense empire of China improressive for thirty centuries'.<sup>38</sup> In contrast to Wordsworth's loftiness, Thomas stresses the gypsy's individual connection with him ('That night he peopled *for me*' [my emphasis]); and finds a poetic texture and idiom which befits his song's influence. His lines recall Wordsworth's night scene, but rework it as the backdrop for an illustration of the gypsies' vitality. The 'spark' of the gypsy's song holds out against and exposes the 'dark' of a 'wooded land' that has been 'hollowed' of its cultural and social traditions; a bleak enough vista of early twentieth-

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<sup>37</sup> William Hazlitt, 'On Manner', *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt, Volume 2: The Round Table, Lectures on the English Poets*, ed. Duncan Wu (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1998) 46 n.

<sup>38</sup> Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* ii. 137.



century England. The moon, which Wordsworth deploys in his poem to signal his disapproval towards the gypsies' indolence ('they | Regard not her' l. 20-1), is called up by Thomas as an image of inspiration in league with this 'spark'. But how far the poem discovers in folk cultures the seeds of a social and cultural renaissance, Thomas leaves it hard to say. His syntax, which holds the image of the moon out on the end of a complexly unwinding sentence, ensures it has a fragile potency:

...but for the spark In the Gypsy boy's black eyes as he played and  
stamped his tune 'Over the hills and far away'  
and a crescent moon.

On top of this there is the craftiness of the adjective 'crescent', which sounds at first like it describes the moon's waxing tendency, but which also applies – more commonly, the *OED* says – to the crescent moon's 'convexo-concave' shape, whether waxing *or* waning. We are left with a traditional figure of poetic inspiration whose initially optimistic appearance becomes clouded with ambiguity.<sup>39</sup>

The point to emphasise is the experimentalism driving Thomas's harnessing of these influences. Thomas was anxious that literary engagement with folk traditions would not manifest itself as anything more than nostalgia or connoisseurship:

I cannot help wondering whether the great work done in the last century  
and a half towards the recovery of old ballads in their integrity will have any  
effect beyond the entertainment of a few scientific men and lovers of what  
is ancient, now that the first effects upon Wordsworth and his

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<sup>39</sup> In the background, perhaps, is Coleridge's ambivalent deployment of the lines 'Late, late yestreen I saw the new Moon | With the old Moon in her arms' from 'The Ballad of Sir Patrick Spence' as the epigraph – a source of inspiration and foreboding – to 'Dejection: An Ode'.

contemporaries have died away. Can it possibly give a vigorous impulse to a new school of poetry that shall treat the life of our time and what in past times has most meaning for us as freshly as those ballads did the life of their time?<sup>40</sup>

One lyric poet who did harness this ‘vigorous impulse’ was Yeats, of whom Thomas wrote in a 1909 review that he ‘combines the beautiful simplicity of language, the rich tales, and sometimes the ballad forms of the people with a subtlety of feeling for which there is no parallel in any other age [...] He seems to have got beyond our critical interest in old things, folk lore, spiritualism etc. as much as Wordsworth got beyond Percy’.<sup>41</sup> Thomas’s own folk-influenced poems, too, ‘get beyond’ nostalgia most effectively when they combine the ‘beautiful simplicity’ of ‘the ballad forms of the people’ with the ‘subtlety of feeling characteristic of lyric’ in a way that often involves occupying a hinterland between the spoken and the songlike, the individual voice and an impersonal communal accent. What interests him, says Stan Smith, ‘is the moment of separation between individual voice and community’.<sup>42</sup> That ‘separation’ is audible in the tense, awkward progress of Thomas’s movement through the ballad-influenced stanzas in the first of his poems called ‘Home’:

This is my grief. That land,  
My home, I have never seen  
No traveller tells of it,  
However far he has been.

And could I discover it,

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<sup>40</sup> Thomas, *The South Country in England and Wales* 254.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas, review of *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*, *Daily Chronicle* 5 Mar. 1909, *Selected Prose* 86.

<sup>42</sup> Stan Smith, *Edward Thomas* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987) 167.

I fear my happiness there,  
Or my pain, might be dreams of return  
Here, to these things that were.

(l. 9-16)

A point of contrast might be with Clare's movement in a poem Thomas included in his *Pocket Book of Poems and Songs for the Open Air* under the folksy title 'Clare's Desire':

Beside a runnel build my shed  
With stubbles cover'd oer;  
Let broad oaks o'er its chimney spread,  
And grass-plats grace the door.

The door may open with a string,  
So that it closes tight:  
And locks would be a wanted thing,  
To keep out thieves at night.

('After Reading in a Letter Proposals for Building a Cottage' l. 1-8)<sup>43</sup>

Clare's words bounce along to rhythms to which they seem entirely at home (even if he has to wrench the syntax to make them so: 'And locks would be a wanted thing'). Thomas's cadences, as befits his poem's more complicated relationship with 'home', are less at ease. And, though closer to the on-off patterns of a classic ballad stanza, his rhymes, too, are far less comfortable with one another. The rhyming on 'there' in the second stanza, for instance, jolts the lines out of kilter, so that what one hears is something more like an uneven triplet, triangulating the uncertain 'homes' Thomas finds himself caught between:

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<sup>43</sup> *Early Poems* ii. 60. Longley suggests that Clare's poem might also have been an influence on Thomas's 'For These' ('Notes', *Annotated Collected Poems* 254).

I fear my happiness there,  
Or my pain, might be dreams of return here,  
To these things that were.

The accents capture an uneasy sense of belonging.

Another defining contrast might be with Hardy. In Hardy's ballad poems, as Thom Gunn says, the 'first person speaks as a sample human being with little personality displayed and with no claims for uniqueness – with as little distinguishing him beyond his subject matter, in fact, as distinguishes the personages of the ballads beyond their actions.'<sup>44</sup> In Thomas's experiments, 'personality' is not absorbed by the voice of convention, but achieves unique articulation in its patterns of approach and retreat from it. Like similar junctions of the traditional and the personal in Clare, though with more delicacy, they are sensitive to the weight of an archetypal situation bearing down upon individual experience. In this respect, a fitting endpoint for this chapter is 'Early One Morning', a poem of June 1916. The poem treads the borderline between literary lyric and popular song to shape an exploration, at once personal and universal, of leaving the past behind as both liberating possibility and near-tragic necessity of living in time:

Early one morning in May I set out,  
And nobody I knew was about.

I'm bound away for ever  
Away somewhere, away for ever.

(l. 1-4)

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<sup>44</sup> Thom Gunn, 'Hardy and the Ballads', *The Occasions of Poetry: Essays in Criticism and Autobiography*, ed. and introd. Clive Wilmer (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1999) 34-5.

The first line could be the opening line of a song, but the gusto of its anapaestic rhythms proves impossible to sustain into the line that succeeds it ('And *nobody I knew was about*': we have to tread carefully to avoid the more fluent '*nobody knew I was about*'). The voice then picks up momentum again as it passes into the indented lines and sets up what one expects will become a refrain. The lines shift the poem into the present tense, and sound as if they come from a different plane, as if the lyric voice had been supplanted by, or found freedom in the inflections of a communal mode of expression – perhaps enacting the liberation it speaks of.

Two folk songs went into the making of the poem: 'Early One Morning', a lament of an abandoned maiden, from which the poem takes its title and its two line stanza structure, and 'Rio Grande', a sea shanty full of wanderlust which supplies the materials for the refrain, and whose influence Thomas acknowledged in a letter to Eleanor Farjeon: 'I'm sending you a set of sober verses to the tune of Rio Grande, but I doubt if they can be sung'.<sup>45</sup> In practice, the poem makes it more than 'doubtful' whether it can be sung. For after the first stanza has set up the expectation of a refrain, the poem proceeds in a series of self-contained two line stanzas which disappoint it:<sup>46</sup>

There was no wind to trouble the weathercocks.  
I had burnt my letters and darned my socks.

No one knew I was going away,  
I thought myself I should come back some day.

I heard the brook through the town gardens run.

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<sup>45</sup> Farjeon, *Last Four Years* 199. Thomas included both poems in his *Pocket Book of Songs and Poems for the Open Air*.

<sup>46</sup> In draft, the poem had proceeded with the refrain between each stanza, but Thomas removed it on Eleanor Farjeon's advice (Farjeon, *Last Four Years* 200).

O sweet was the mud turned to dust by the sun.

A gate banged in a fence and banged in my head.

'A fine morning, sir,' a shepherd said.

I could not return from my liberty,

To my youth and my love and my misery.

(l. 5-14)

And yet, part of the poem's strange impact resides in the way it is almost impossible not to hear the refrain's absence after every verse. It plays off against the convention whereby in a printed songbook a chorus will be written out once and then assumed. The absence makes itself audible, and makes the progress of the couplets feel flat-footed: the effect is like the repetition of 'names' in 'Old Man' in creating of 'pangs of expectant emptiness'. The hobbled progression of the two-line units (no isolated pair of lines share the same number of syllables) is concomitant with a creeping uneasiness in the speaker about the nature of the freedom he has won, as his inner turmoil increasingly jars against the freshness of the 'morning': 'A gate banged in a fence and banged in my head. | "A fine morning, sir," a shepherd said'; the lines shape an eerie discord between lyric inwardness and folksy joviality. Step by step, the poem discovers the limits to the 'liberty' it has sought. By the last of these couplets this liberty is treated with mixed feelings as something the poet 'could not return from' (and therefore a curious sort of 'liberty'), but then again may not want to return from, given the prospective 'misery' which it glances at in a suggestive half-rhyme. When the refrain is picked up again in the final stanza, it has changed from a celebration of freedom into a frightened lament at the impossibility of return:

The past is the only dead thing that smells sweet,  
And the only sweet thing that is not fleet.  
I'm bound away for ever,  
Away somewhere, away for ever.  
(l. 15-18)

'For ever...for ever' the repetition takes on a claustrophobic feeling as the prospect of being 'bound away' comes to sound not so much like a description of being carried somewhere new as a kind of paralysis. The poem finds in its patterns of approach to and retreat from traditional forms a language suited to its restless emotional state: one which it both locates in tradition, and makes its own.

## Chapter 8

### Thomas (II): 'Myriad-Minded Lyric'

The very truthfulness of the agitated voice, rising and falling in honest contemplation of common sorrows [...] Its shape is the shape of an emotional mood, and it ends because the emotion ends. It is music and above or independent of, logic.

– Thomas, *Richard Jeffries*<sup>1</sup>

#### I

Readers of Thomas's poetry have always felt it to be distinguished by its capacity to render the unique textures of thought and feeling. 'One of the distinctive features of Edward Thomas's poetry is its concern with the 'feel' of an experience, with what the mind does to an experience' wrote Hugh Underhill: 'the corrugations of the verse realise for us the acute discomfort of a state of consciousness, a psychological disposition, in which more or less normal experience becomes an almost intolerable burden, to be mentally heaved and strained at in an effort to get it into some sort of manageable form.'<sup>2</sup> Underhill is talking about Thomas's relation to Keats, and for him this quality embodies a 'passive extinction of the self in the experience of the moment';<sup>3</sup> but if that is so (as I have tried to suggest of Clare's immersion in the details of a landscape, too) it is also an enriching of the self, a saturation in 'the experience of the moment' from the self's perspective.

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Thomas, *Richard Jeffries: His Life and Work* (London: Hutchinson, 1909) 304-5.

<sup>2</sup> Hugh Underhill, 'The "Poetical Character" of Edward Thomas', *Essays in Criticism* 23.3 (1973): 237.

<sup>3</sup> Underhill, "Poetical Character" 239.



As early as 1901 Thomas had been speculating suggestively upon lyric poetry's relationship with 'individualism', its 'exquisite' responsiveness to structures and trajectories of feeling:

...the lyric will prosper, at least so long as individualism makes way in literature. Increasing complexity of thought and emotion will find no such outlet as the myriad-minded lyric, with its intricacies of form as numerous and as exquisite as those of a birch-tree in the wind.<sup>4</sup>

Few poets trace the complicated unravellings of 'thought and emotion' with such intricacy and tenacity as Thomas. The uniqueness of his manner emerges out of his pursuit of the exact textures and structures of personal experience. His poems' syntax, rhythms, and transitions enact, in Edna Longley's phrase 'back-and-forth trawls for meaning';<sup>5</sup> they are geared towards a faculty, as J. P. Ward has put it, of 'trusting very directly the cadence of his own mind as it occurs in words on each occasion'.<sup>6</sup>

Ward's phrase 'on each occasion' is worth lingering over. It suggests Thomas's poems' apparent fidelity to the present moment, the way, in F. R. Leavis's words, they 'seem to happen'.<sup>7</sup> When Coleridge spoke of 'our *myriad-minded* Shakespear'<sup>8</sup> he presumably had in mind Shakespeare's dramatic imagination, but the phrase serves as an apt label, too, for what James Longenbach calls the 'interlaced energy of surprise and inevitability that distinguishes alert conversation' that constitutes 'the sound of

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas, review of new verse, *Daily Chronicle* 27 Aug. 1901, *Selected Prose* 62-3.

<sup>5</sup> Edna Longley, 'Edward Thomas and Robert Frost, *Poetry in the Wars* 42,

<sup>6</sup> Ward, 'Solitary Note' 55.

<sup>7</sup> Leavis, *New Bearings* 55.

<sup>8</sup> Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* ii. 19.

Shakespeare thinking'.<sup>9</sup> And that is the sense in which it might be best applied to Thomas's poems. Like Shakespearean soliloquy, they respond in the moment to the proliferating by-ways of thought and feeling; 'they appear to think aloud, rather than be a means of delivering finished thoughts', as Andrew Motion has put it.<sup>10</sup> They are often their own 'occasion', finding it sufficient to work through an experience and leave it at that. Their 'shape', as Thomas says of Jeffries' sentences in the epigraph above, 'is the shape of an emotional mood and it ends because the emotion ends.'

## II

Thomas speaks, in those remarks about Jeffries, of the 'truthfulness of the agitated voice'. That 'truthfulness' is audible in Thomas's own poetry as both fidelity to the contours of thought and feeling and an effort to define precisely what the nature of a given feeling is. 'Beauty', composed on 21<sup>st</sup> January 1915, is amongst the first poems in which Thomas's readiness to 'trust in the cadence of his own mind' makes itself felt:

What does it mean? Tired, angry, and ill at ease,  
No man, woman, or child alive could please  
Me now.

(l. 1-3)

Michael Kirkham holds up the acerbic charge of this as an instance of 'what Thomas meant by "personal": 'It has an emotional rhythm, gesture, an advancing motion' garnered from the impetus of each sentence towards its verb, and its attendant

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<sup>9</sup> James Longenbach, 'The Sound of Shakespeare Thinking', *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare's Poetry*, ed. Jonathan F. S. Post (Oxford: Oxford UP. 2013) 623.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Motion, 'Foreword', *Branch-lines* 11.

‘savagery of emphasis’.<sup>11</sup> The lines’ caustic intensity is matched by their agility. It is typical of the paths of feeling trailed in a Thomas poem that he should drive this initial burst of resentment up against an ‘And yet’, which at once amplifies and complicates their mood:

And yet I almost dare to laugh  
Because I sit and frame an epitaph –  
‘Here lies all that no one loved of him  
And that loved no one.’ Then in a trice that whim  
Has wearied.

(l. 3-7)

A phrase like ‘almost dare to laugh’ encapsulates the fineness with which these poems delineate feeling. Writing ‘almost laugh’, for a poet whose poems, in Peter Howarth’s words, are ‘thickets of yets, ifs and buts’,<sup>12</sup> would have been to risk what Hopkins termed ‘Parnassian’; ‘almost *dare to laugh*’ surprises by nuancing Thomas’s mood. The impulse to laugh scorn upon this ‘epitaph’ as nihilistic posturing is checked, but the result is an uneasy accommodation with that epitaph’s truth. The colloquial insouciance of ‘Then in a trice that whim | Has wearied’ affects indifference, but cannot wholly conceal its affectation, its despondency with a mood in which inclinations arise and swiftly ‘weary’.<sup>13</sup> Having banished thoughts of laughter, the poem then launches into a twisting ten-line sentence in which Thomas wriggles free of his black humour:

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<sup>11</sup> Kirkham, *Imagination* 152. The remarks allude to Thomas’s criticism of Pater’s prose as having ‘no gesture, no advancing motion’ and being ‘painful to read aloud’ (*Walter Pater* 97).

<sup>12</sup> Howarth, *British Poetry* 70.

<sup>13</sup> The thought is further nuanced by the uncertainty over whether it is the ‘whim’ to frame an epitaph, or the whim to laugh at that inclination that has ‘wearied’.

But, though I am like a river  
At fall of evening, while it seems that never  
Has the sun lighted or warmed it, while  
Cross breezes cut the surface to a file,  
This heart, some fraction of me, happily  
Floats through the window even now to a tree  
Down in the misting, dim-lit, quiet vale,  
Not like a pewit that returns to wail  
For something it has lost, but like a dove  
That slants unswerving to its home and love.  
(l. 7-16)

‘Though I am like a river, my heart is like a dove’: the lines demonstrate the strangeness of the language Thomas has to use to see himself clearly. Summarised like that, they sound nonsensical; but considered in their particularities, they reveal the precision with which Thomas can get a hold on his own emotions by thinking in metaphor: ‘His most powerful effects are achieved when he contrasts a clearly visualised external world and a tenuously apprehended inner world’, says Michael Schmidt.<sup>14</sup> As Longley points out, Thomas’s comparison of himself to a river has its source in a letter of Shelley’s to Mary Godwin: ‘my mind without yours is dead & cold as the dark midnight river when the moon is down’;<sup>15</sup> but Thomas makes the image his own through deftly ambiguous touches such as ‘seems’ in ‘it seems that never | Has the sun lighted or warmed it’: if we take this to mean ‘seems to outsiders’, then it articulates their midsjudgement of what he is like; if it means ‘seems to Thomas himself’, then it attests to the ephemerality of the ‘light’ and ‘warmth’ lent by love. The

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<sup>14</sup> Michael Schmidt, *Lives of the Poets* (London: BCA-Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1998) 548.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas, *Feminine Influence* 41.

'Cross breezes' that 'cut the surface to a file' evoke Thomas's unrest (whilst 'cross' is shadowed by an intimation of Thomas's bad temper) and find an image for the characteristic 'myriad-minded' shape of a Thomas poem: a sinuous line of thought whose course is itself rippled by counter-currents and qualifications. The unfolding of the sentence itself is a good example of that. It begins, after all, with a 'But', initiating a turn away from the poem's initial gloominess, but that in itself is immediately intersected by a 'though' and the image of Thomas's fluvial coldness; when the upturn does eventually arrive it is cut across by misdirections and qualifications. Thomas for a moment turns haughtily upon the heart that 'happily | Floats' free from his misery as 'some fraction of me', where 'fraction' not only implies a restoration that is only partial, but returns to its etymological roots in *fracture* to shadow the line with the image of a heart 'breaking'. And the assertion of 'unswerving' positivity involves sifting through and rejecting the possibility of nostalgia: Thomas has to raise and discard an image for what he is *not* like, in order to find one that fits.

Whether the optimism and contentment of that last image do in fact quite 'fit' is open to question. The poem ends with a couplet, 'There I find my rest, and through the dusk air, | Flies what yet lives in me. Beauty is there' (l. 17-8), which Longley describes as 'therapeutic';<sup>16</sup> but its potency, and its truthfulness to Thomas's feelings, relies on it remaining more circumspect: 'what yet lives in me' (like 'some fraction of me') is tight-lipped, and those "There"s that bracket the couplet, labelled by Longley as 'affirmative', also point to something that remains at a distance. 'Beauty' is 'there', not 'here'.

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<sup>16</sup> Longley, 'Notes' *Annotated Collected Poems* 187.

Thomas's exactness rarely allows him to apprehend abstract concepts such as 'beauty' without qualifications; their presence in his poetry often serves to sharpen a sense of his own distance from an ideal. 'The Glory', described by Edna Longley as dramatising 'a clash between Romantic idealism and literary modernity', meditates upon imperfection as an aesthetic as well as personal concern; 'it offers a chance of ecstatic communion', says Andrew Motion, 'only to record the difficulty he finds in enjoying it'.<sup>17</sup>

The glory of the beauty of the morning –  
The cuckoo crying over for the untouched dew;  
The blackbird that has found it, and the dove  
That tempts me on to something sweeter than love;  
White clouds ranged even and fair as new-mown hay;  
The heat, the stir, the sublime vacancy  
Of sky and meadow and forest and my own heart: –  
The glory invites me, yet it leaves me scorning  
All I can ever do, all I can be,  
Beside the lovely of motion, shape, and hue,  
The happiness I fancy fit to dwell  
In beauty's presence.

(l. 1-12)

The sound of Thomas's thinking here lacks the tenacious fidelity to a connective tissue of thought that animates 'Beauty', but that may be part of its point. The poetry is dealing with a 'beauty' that persistently eludes its grasp, and its various forms of repetitiousness – the piling up of genitive constructions in the opening line, the assembly of details which tempt Thomas on to a vaguely-apprehended 'something

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<sup>17</sup> Motion, *Edward Thomas* 52.

sweeter than love', the circling of the sentence back upon itself in the eighth line as it takes a turn in direction pinpointed by the rhyme of 'scorning' against 'morning' – all communicate a struggle to apprehend a loveliness that remains nebulous, as though line after line were grasping and feeling it slip through its fingers.<sup>18</sup> It is only when the poem starts to question its direction that the syntax recovers purpose and bite:

Shall I now this day  
Begin to seek as far as heaven, as hell,  
Wisdom or strength to match this beauty, start  
And tread the pale dust pitted with small dark drops,  
In hope to find whatever it is I seek,  
Harkening to short-lived, happy-seeming things  
That we know naught of, in the hazel copse?  
(l. 12-18)

The force of the passage resides in the way it begins to explore and embody answers even before it has got its question out (even as those answers complicate, rather than clarify, Thomas's sense of what he 'seeks').<sup>19</sup> Squeezing in the deft touch 'as hell' before the end of the second line, for instance, reveals alertness to the possibility that to 'seek [...] heaven', may only be to exacerbate one's awareness of one's distance from it. The exquisitely-imagined start to that search in 'tread[ing] the pale dust pitted with small dark drops', sees all efforts after such transcendence as beginning in earth. The line's attentiveness reveals Thomas's affection for that earth; its fineness, and sense that the 'pale dust' may be a more fertile source of poetry than 'heaven', is brought into relief

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<sup>18</sup> Leavis spoke of Thomas giving the impression of 'trying to catch some shy intuition on the edge of consciousness that would disappear if looked at directly' (*New Bearings* 55).

<sup>19</sup> 'The more he questions, the more he obscures his goal', as Jonathan Kertzer puts it (*Poetic Argument: Studies in Modern Poetry* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 1988) 98).

by the line that follows, with its searching uncertainty about ‘whatever it is I seek’. Cocking a sceptical ear to the song of birds as that of ‘short-lived, happy-seeming things | That we know naught of’, the writing suggests that the very effort to work through what it might mean to access ‘something sweeter than love’ only sharpens one’s awareness of the illusoriness of such ideals.

The restless density of Thomas’s thought intensifies as the poem starts to layer questioning possibility upon questioning possibility, calling vision into dispute even as it fashions it. He first entertains the alternative of remaining ‘content with discontent | As larks and sparrows are perhaps with wings’ (l. 19-20), where that ‘perhaps’ is typically adroit in its wry concession of the despondency of the line’s speculation: even *with wings*, the line supposes, we might find cause for remaining dissatisfied. And yet, as in the near-contemporary poem ‘Health’ (l. 28-9), the poetry is driven on by its refusal to be ‘satisfied | Even with knowing I never could be satisfied’ (that meeting of ‘satisfied’ against ‘satisfied’ offering another of Thomas’s resourcefully half-satisfying rhymes). The too easy temptation to ‘let [...] go’ (l. 23) all thoughts of beauty (l. 22) and ‘happiness’ (l. 23) either in ‘gladness’ or ‘weariness’ is in turn eschewed for an ending which makes peace with the necessity of discontentment only diffidently, and which, in its blend of the casual and the lyrically intricate, finds a voice to match that diffidence:

Or shall I perhaps know  
That I was happy oft and oft before,  
Awhile forgetting how I am fast pent,  
How dreary-swift, with naught to travel to,  
Is Time? I cannot bite the day to the core.

(l. 24-28)



The lines toy with the thought that one can be happy only in the occasional unlooked for moments when one forgets one's time-pent condition. Leavis worried about the limitations inherent in their fidelity to 'the modern disintegration, the sense of directionlessness'.<sup>20</sup> But their endorsement of that 'directionlessness' is itself half-hearted, something Thomas commits himself only to 'perhaps know'. The final sentence seems a clinching expression of his inability to get to the heart of experience. But, as Coombes remarks, 'the language and the image [...] have a strength and a sharpness which show at least that he knows fully what "biting" means and involves':<sup>21</sup> it achieves satisfying crispness even as it denies its ability to achieve such satisfaction; it comes to the realisation that 'Beauty' and 'happiness' exist by their very nature on the periphery of apprehension; its confession of inadequacy is gripped by a penetrating self-awareness.

### III

Thomas criticised in Pater's prose 'the stiffness, the lack of an emotional rhythm in separate phrases, and of progression in the whole, the repellent preoccupation with an impersonal and abstract kind of perfection'.<sup>22</sup> Real, rather than abstract 'perfection', Thomas realised, was accomplished more spontaneously: 'deliberateness and patience alone can hardly make any writing perfect, unless it be a notice to trespassers or a railway guide [...] There must be an impulse before deliberate effort and patience are

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<sup>20</sup> Leavis, *New Bearings* 57.

<sup>21</sup> Coombes, *Critical Study* 201.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas *Walter Pater in Selected Prose* 153.

called in'.<sup>23</sup> As Martin Scofield has demonstrated, the realisation informed the newfound expressiveness of Thomas's style as he moved from verse to prose. Where 'The fixed habits of the prose style led to a self-conscious preoccupation with style itself', the verse discovers a 'means of letting certain aspects of reality break in on the conscious mind', catching 'the continual surprisingness of reality'.<sup>24</sup> 'Rain' furnishes an example. Behind the poem is a passage from Thomas's 1911 book *The Ickniel Way* which goes on for over a thousand words sounding like this:

I have been glad of the sound of rain, and wildly sad of it in the past; but that is all over as if it had never been; my eye is dull and my heart beating evenly and quietly; I stir neither foot nor hand; I shall not be quieter when I lie under the wet grass and the rain falls and I of less account than the grass...<sup>25</sup>

'The greatness of Edward Thomas's poem, audible in its achieving so much more than either acquiescence or repining, is the more evident in contrast with the interminable flowing and even flattened prose in which Thomas had earlier failed to convince his nerves', says Christopher Ricks.<sup>26</sup> 'Audible' is just right, since the cadences, rhymes, and obdurate repetitions of 'Rain's opening sentence are testimony to the sensitivity of Thomas's 'auditory imagination'; self-absorption is supplanted by focused attentiveness to the self's experiences. The lines strain the boundaries of conventional syntax as their mental and actual soundscape accretes:

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<sup>23</sup> Thomas, *Walter Pater in Selected Prose* 156.

<sup>24</sup> Martin Scofield, 'Edward Thomas: Syntax and Self-Consciousness', *English* 31.139 (1982): 20.

<sup>25</sup> The passage is supplied in full by R. George Thomas in *Collected Poems* 407.

<sup>26</sup> Christopher Ricks, *Beckett's Dying Words*, The Clarendon Lectures, 1990 (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1993), 22.

Rain, midnight rain, nothing but the wild rain  
On this bleak hut, and solitude, and me  
Remembering again that I shall die  
And neither hear the rain nor give it thanks  
For washing me cleaner than I have been  
Since I was born into this solitude.

(l. 1-6)

What is traced is less a linear unfurling of thought than the revolutions of a mind ceaselessly circling back upon the significance of the same bare facts: 'Rain, midnight rain, nothing but the wild rain'. Thomas's feeling for the way words breed and seep into one another bears some comparison with Hopkins, though Thomas achieves a more sombre, less kinetic impact: the effect of those weary internal rhymes and assonances on 'rain' and 'me' is not of a capricious verbal and mental energy, but of a mind wearied by its own motions, unable to free itself from its oppressive consciousness of 'rain' and its own 'solitude'.

The lines are another fine instance of Thomas's capacity to unify his attention to inner and outer weathers; and yet, as often, feelings become blurred beneath the concretely actualised external surface. The poem steels itself to the plain fact 'that I shall die', but it is not clear whether the thought is approached with relief or unhappiness. The syntax lives a double life dependent upon whether or not we understand 'Remembering again' to be an act of conscious control. If we do regard it as a willed act of memory, then the poetry seizes upon the thought of death as a relief: after death, Thomas will be freed from having to 'hear' the 'rain', from dealing with misery and suffering. If we think of it as denoting unconscious recollection, then the bleakness of the rain brings the still bleaker thought of death to mind involuntarily.

'Rain' emerges from Thomas's experience of the self at its most isolated. In the prose of *The Ickniel Way* Thomas had meditated on 'the solitary note' of a bird he hears during a storm:

Once I heard through the rain a bird's questioning watery cry – once only and suddenly. It seemed content, and the solitary note brought up against me the order of nature, all its beauty, exuberance and everlastingness like an accusation. I am not a part of nature. I am alone.<sup>27</sup>

That 'questioning watery cry' sounds analogous to the bird call in 'The Owl', 'Shaken out long and clear upon the hill' (l. 9) and telling Thomas 'plain what I escaped | And others could not, that night, as in I went' (l. 11-12). But in 'Rain', and in this passage, it is Thomas who is exposed. The 'solitary note' of the bird holds up an isolating echo to Thomas's own voice: the bird's note is 'solitary' since, as Thomas says, it comes 'once only and suddenly'; Thomas's because in channelling a shared human condition through personal experience ('I', not 'we') it realises the pressure of an isolation that is twofold: from an indifferent natural world, and from the other humans within that world. Yet part of what moves us in 'Rain' is the poem's effort to overcome this isolation, its generous expansion out of the suffering self to elicit sympathetic connection everybody else who might be 'listening to the rain'.

Blessed are the dead that the rain rains upon:  
But here I pray that none whom once I loved  
Is dying tonight or lying still awake  
Solitary, listening to the rain,  
Either in pain or thus in sympathy

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<sup>27</sup> Thomas, *Collected Poems* 407.

Helpless among the living and the dead,  
Like a cold water among broken reeds,  
Myriads of broken reeds all still and stiff,  
Like me who have no love which this wild rain  
Has not dissolved except the love of death  
If love it be towards what is perfect and  
Cannot, the tempest tells me, disappoint.

(l. 7-18)

The passage demonstrates the sympathy that it professes itself to be incapable of. Although Thomas presents himself as having ‘no love which this wild rain | Has not dissolved except the love of death’ – and how felicitously ‘love’ is dissolved in ‘diss-o-l-v-e-d’ – the claim is discredited by the larger act of compassion that is self-consciously grounded in the poem’s own words (‘thus’, ‘here’), an which affectingly shows the poet’s love to endure for those whom he claims only to have loved ‘once’.

The compassion is at one with a syntax which allows its description of ‘solitude’ to sustain a double focus: it at once describes Thomas’s own situation, and his anxieties about the situation of others. The divided attention is enabled by a verbal shimmy as the lines pass from simile to simile. Thomas begins by saying that he hopes no one is lying awake like him, helplessly thinking about others ‘Like a cold water among broken reeds’; but then his attention is taken over by the ‘broken reeds’ themselves, in which, ‘all still and stiff’, he finds an image for his own lifeless isolation. The image illustrates well the contact Thomas maintains with colloquial idioms – ‘broken reed’ has an idiomatic significance as ‘a weak or ineffectual person’ (*OED*). Thomas’s lines pick up on the phrase but restore its literal significance, so what exists most forcefully in one’s mind is less the common idiom than the image itself. The

intricacy of the sentence offers another instance of the responsiveness of Thomas's syntax to the pressure of a unique cast of mind. The fineness of its movement plays off against the firmer rhythms of the closing lines:

If love it be towards what is perfect and  
Cannot, the tempest tells me, disappoint.

Trying to pin down what made the cadences of these lines so distinctively 'exquisite and [...] magisterial', Donald Davie found the answer to be in the shot of rhythmic life which they grant to their sentence: 'The last conditional clause, on which the poem and the sentence seemed about to die away, is surprisingly and strongly stiffened, at the last possible moment, by that firm parenthesis "the tempest tells me".'<sup>28</sup> Davie's phrasing in observing how the parenthesis helps prevent the sentence from 'dying away' is itself well judged, because the sentence's refusal to lie down and die is at one with the poem's last gasp refusal to acquiesce in taking the easy way out. Even as it firms up the rhythms of the final line, the parenthesis 'the tempest tells me' interposes a pause between 'Cannot...disappoint' that introduces a note of doubt as to whether what 'the tempest tells' is to be trusted. Far from cutting loose from the pressure of the self and abandoning it to death, the cadences seek out its hesitant, intimate, questioning voice. As Richard Hoffpauir argues, 'quietening intelligence rather than the extreme emotion has the last word'.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Donald Davie, "Lessons in Honesty", *TLS*, 23<sup>rd</sup> Nov 1979: 21.

<sup>29</sup> Hoffpauir, *Art of Restraint* 80.

#### IV

Hoffpauir's 'quietening' is finely attuned to Thomas's understanding of how 'intelligence' might conduct, and conduct itself through, the dynamics of verse. One of Hoffpauir's strengths as a reader of Thomas's poetry is his ability to find in Thomas's intricacies 'delicate, poised complexities of statement' which need not be pushed 'over the edge into mysteries and paradoxes',<sup>30</sup> something akin to the 'minute' 'accuracy in feelings and their expression' [my emphasis] that Graves and Riding admired in Hopkins.<sup>31</sup> Yet, as in Hopkins, the scrupulous intensity of Thomas's effort to articulate one's individuating 'mark and species' (Hopkins' phrase from the headnote to 'Henry Purcell') can incur costs in alienation. Though Thomas is not usually thought of as a 'difficult' poet, there are times when the intensity of his concentration on the complexities of 'thought and emotion' provokes recoil. Thomas worried to Eleanor Farjeon that the 'opaqueness' of his poem 'Liberty', for example, might be off-putting. Actually, 'opaqueness' isn't quite the issue; rather the poem's difficulties arise out of its near-obsessive clarity, the effort to fit words to complications and convolutions of thought and feeling with 'absolute fidelity': it is, in David Bromwich's phrase, a poem of 'intense consciousness'.<sup>32</sup> The poem pushes the characteristic intricacies of Thomas's style to an extreme (and in doing so provokes the question of whether it is at that extreme that Thomas is most characteristically himself). It begins with the poet in a moonlit landscape, experiencing solitude so dark and quiet it is as though he and the moon are the only things left in existence:

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<sup>30</sup> Hoffpauir, *Art of Restraint* 76.

<sup>31</sup> Graves and Riding, *Modernist Poetry* 90.

<sup>32</sup> David Bromwich, *A Choice of Inheritance: Self and Community from Edward Burke to Robert Frost* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989) 212.

The last light has gone out of the world, except  
This moonlight lying on the grass like frost  
Beyond the brink of the tall elm's shadow.  
It is as if everything else had slept  
Many an age...

(l. 1-5)

John Danby praised these lines for their 'special wakefulness',<sup>33</sup> the quality of alert responsiveness invested in the verse by the positioning of that 'except' at the end of its opening line, for instance; or through the way the phrasing, whilst conflating Keats's 'for many a time | I have been half in love with easeful death' ('Ode to a Nightingale' l. 51-2) with the same poem's call for 'a draught of vintage that hath been | Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth (l. 11-12), remains on guard against using Keatsian sensuousness as fast-ticket to imaginative transcendence. As often in Thomas, this opening movement doesn't so much outline a fixed position, as postulate a vision of experience which the poem will go on to explore and qualify. Thomas interrogates the kind of 'liberty' this imaginative landscape affords with proliferating awareness of its complexities:

Both have liberty  
To dream what we could do if we were free  
To do some thing we had desired long  
The moon and I.

(l. 9-12)

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<sup>33</sup> John F. Danby, 'Edward Thomas', *Critical Quarterly* 1.4 (1959): 310.



Here, the poem's phrasing starts to encircle itself. It is hard to think of another poet who ties together thought and syntax with quite this scrupulousness: the direction is altered with the falling into place of each individual word. An initial statement ('Both have liberty') is qualified by the enjambment ('Both have liberty | To dream'), and the 'liberty' being talked about does not seem to amount to much 'liberty' at all; the impression is reinforced by the rest of the line, whose rhyming of 'free' against 'liberty' sardonically retracts the initial impression of freedom. Dizzily, the sentence does not stop there, but presses on to pin down exactly what the poet and moon are not 'free' to do: 'To do some thing we had desired long'. One speculates that they are not free to act on long-held desires because the kind of 'liberty' imagined in the opening vista is one that involves being isolated from any sense of past or memory or living in time at all. All these movements of mind are ensnared in a circuitous syntax ('Both have liberty [...] The moon and I') which circles the paradoxical apprehension that too much 'liberty' can be paralysing.<sup>34</sup>

The poem becomes caught between an intent fidelity to its own evolving thoughts, and the irony of its realisation that such intense self-consciousness about one's freedom is constricting to that freedom:

There's none less free than who  
Does nothing and has nothing else to do,  
Being free only for what is not to his mind,  
And nothing is to his mind.

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<sup>34</sup> Thomas's thought in the poem perhaps owes something to Wordsworth's 'Ode to Duty', as its balances its complaint 'Me this unchartered freedom tires; | I feel the weight of chance desires' (l. 37-8) against the wish, in supplicating to 'Duty' to 'feel past doubt | That my submissiveness was choice' (l. 43-4). Where Wordsworth unfurls the complications of the thought through a series of intricately-structured stanzas, Thomas's ambivalent 'liberty' is enacted in a form whose irregular rhymes (which leave 'grave' (l. 8) troublingly unrhymed) subjects the voice to less discipline.

(l. 12-15)

There the distinguishing touch – the stroke of inspiration that takes the scrupulousness beyond ‘Parnassian’, in Hopkins’ terms – is that last half line. ‘It is no sort of freedom if one is paralysed by having nothing to use it for’, the lines begin by arguing; the complication comes in with the switchback forced upon us as the sentence doubles back on itself: ‘free only for what is not to his mind, | And nothing is to his mind.’

The spiralling arguments of the poem, in laying claim to the ability to ‘wonder whether I was free or not’, both exhibit Thomas’s ‘liberty’ and, through that liberty, arrive at an awareness of his imaginative confinement:

If every hour  
Like this one passing that I have spent among  
The wiser others when I have forgot  
To wonder whether I was free or not,  
Were piled before me, and not lost behind,  
And I could take and carry them away  
I should be rich; or if I had the power  
To wipe out every one and not again  
Regret, I should be rich to be so poor.

(l. 15-23)

‘If every hour (like this one in which I am writing the poem), except for those rare moments when I was wise enough to forget about worrying whether or not I was free, were piled up before me so that I could relive them, I would be rich: I could use them properly this time; or if I could simply wipe them all from my memory so I did not

ever regret their waste, I would be enriched by the loss of their burden.’ Accounts of the poem are often driven, like this, to find a language that mirrors the lines’ befuddling impact. And yet, just as in Hopkins’ attempts to explain his poems, paraphrase becomes infected with the complexity of what it is trying to clarify. This is as true of something so apparently succinct as Danby’s description of ‘Liberty’ as a poem which meditates on ‘the delusoriness of freedom from involvement in delusions’,<sup>35</sup> as it is of a more recent account such as Peter Howarth’s:

It is liberty to ‘dream what we could do if we were free’, but those dreams would be about using the hours spent dreaming of freedom for something more worthwhile, or for not caring about their loss. It is liberty to dream about the freedom of not dreaming about freedom, in other words; the more liberty is insisted upon, the more it becomes mired in self-absorption, regretting its own regrets and all the while freely doing nothing.<sup>36</sup>

‘Liberty’, as Andrew Motion contends, is one of the best examples of Thomas’s deployment of ‘extended, convoluted sentences which attempt to capture the events described in their full complexity’.<sup>37</sup> But the outcome of that ‘attempt’ is as much to re-emphasise as clarify the complexity of experience; it is, in Jonathan Kertzer’s twisting phrase ‘an inconclusive meditation by a precise mind whose thoughts both liberate and confine it’.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Danby, ‘Edward Thomas’ 310.

<sup>36</sup> Howarth, *British Poetry* 101.

<sup>37</sup> Motion, *Edward Thomas* 75.

<sup>38</sup> Kertzer, *Poetic Argument* 86. Kertzer’s account (86-8) is the reading which best manages to elucidate without simplifying the poem’s complexities.

## V

Arthur Symons remarked of Clare that 'He begins anywhere and stops anywhere'.<sup>39</sup> John Ashbery has described that unemphatic tendency as marking out 'for want of a more exact term, his seeming modernity'.<sup>40</sup> Thomas's fidelity to the 'occasion' of a thought, so that each poem 'is the shape of an emotional mood and [...] ends because the emotion ends', produces poetry with a similar capacity to intrigue through its seeming inconsequence. His poems take place with a minimum of fuss. The June 1916 lyric 'There was a time' is a case in point. The poem operates like a dejected, solitary counter-voice to the Ode of Wordsworth's from which it takes its opening words. It abandons Wordsworth's grand patterns of loss and recompense to follow a trajectory where recollected dissatisfaction passes into a vain refusal to concede the disappearance of what it once had but undervalued:

There was a time when this poor frame was whole,  
And I had youth, and never another care,  
Or none that should have troubled a strong soul.  
(l. 1-3)

The poem swerves immediately from the nostalgic lyricism of Wordsworth's opening into a more dispassionately analytic register: the third line is pure Thomas in its simultaneous checking of potential hyperbole and introduction of a note of doubt (does it say that he *was* a 'strong soul', but remained 'troubled' nonetheless? or does it deny he was a 'strong soul' at all?). These initial qualifications are exacerbated as the

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<sup>39</sup> Symons, 'Introduction', *Critical Heritage* 305.

<sup>40</sup> John Ashbery, *Other Traditions*, The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, 1989-90 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000) 15.

poem's thought pivots on a 'Yet' (l. 4) and unwinds according to a characteristic Thomas strategy, complicating and interrogating its initial statement of feeling. This 'youth' may have been free from 'care', but it was not a time of contentment:

I never would acknowledge my own glee  
Because it was less mighty than my mind  
Had dreamed of. Since I could not boast of strength  
Great as I wished, weakness was all my boast.  
I sought yet hated pity, till at length  
I earned it. Oh, too heavy was the cost.  
(l. 7-12)

The plainspoken self-awareness is as disarming in its way as is Clare's patient attention to natural fact; we are left to admire a conscientious, anti-lyrical presentation of self-knowledge. That self-knowledge shows itself in the surprise of a world like 'glee', whose intimation of an unbridled elation which would make itself felt whether 'acknowledged' or not, complicates the self-portrait in a way that the emotion suggested by, say, 'joy' would not. For all their directness, the lines still demand our attention within the larger drama of thought in the poem as a whole. The impact of small transitional words like 'But' and 'And yet' in a Thomas poem is often to conduct half-, or quarter-, rather than about-turns, demanding that we devote close attention to working out just how one cast of mind is being set against another. So when in the next line the poem turns upon a 'But now', there is some uncertainty as to what it is turning against:

But now that there is something I could use

My youth and strength for, I deny the age,  
The care and weakness that I know – refuse  
To admit I am unworthy of the wage  
Paid to a man who gives up eyes and breath  
For what would neither ask nor heed his death.

(l. 13-18)

If you hear the 'But now' as responding to the lines immediately preceding it, these lines sharpen the poem's self-ironising cast: 'I used to exaggerate my weaknesses, but now that they are self-evident, I refuse to admit them'; if you hear it delving further back, and answering the anticipation of some qualifying remark established by the poem's opening words, then the sense communicated by the poem as a whole is not just of the ironies and contradictions inherent in Thomas's own behaviour, but of the ironies of time itself: 'when I was youthful, and had strength, I had no chance to prove it; now I have got the chance to prove it, I have not got the strength'.

The tone of the lines themselves is complex. They sound like a resigned admission, but they actually constitute a refusal 'to admit'; and what they 'refuse to admit' is worked out with typical precision through the scrupulous persistence of the rhythms and enjambments in the final four lines. Eleanor Farjeon described the sentiment as 'sick'.<sup>41</sup> Certainly its impact is troubling in its willingness to abandon itself to a death that is neither 'asked' nor 'heeded', and its equation of 'care' and 'weakness' with 'unworthiness'. And it is difficult not to hear 'death is the wages of sin' lurking behind the lines, so the thought comes across as paralysed and tautologous:

refuse

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<sup>41</sup> Farjeon, *Last Four Years* 201.

To admit I am unworthy of the *death*  
Paid to a man who gives up eyes and breath  
For what would neither ask nor heed his death.

And yet it is hard not to sympathise with Thomas's hurt pride, too, when he defended them: 'I thought it was more than a shade heroic'.<sup>42</sup> One admires the wry-self knowledge with which he regards a 'refusal' that is to some degree against his better judgement, and the clear-eyed awareness of the discrepancy between self-sacrifice as viewed from the perspective of the individual, and from the perspective of a cause which would not even 'heed' it'.

When Thomas wrote in a letter of Rupert Brooke's 'nervous attempt to connect himself with the very widespread idea that self sacrifice is the highest self indulgence'<sup>43</sup> he was both on guard against potential self-delusion and firm in his resistance to acquiescing in a 'widespread idea' which might fine out the complexities of the 'sacrifice' involved. Thomas's own decision to volunteer for overseas service precipitated one such complication. Over 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> January 1917 he said goodbye to his family. Two days later, he made a note in his diary: 'Cold drizzle [...] Even wrote verses'.<sup>44</sup> Those 'verses' were 'The sorrow of true love': an isolated poem, the only one Thomas composed in 1917. Typically variegated, it paints an understanding of 'true love' in which relief, sadness, remorse, and hopefulness jostle, and articulates a complicated sense of what and who was involved in his 'sacrifice':

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<sup>42</sup> Farjeon, *Last Four Years* 201.

<sup>43</sup> *Selected Letters* 111.

<sup>44</sup> Edward Thomas 'War Diary', *The Collected Poems of Edward Thomas*, ed. R. George Thomas (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978) 463.

The sorrow of true love is a great sorrow  
And true love parting blackens a bright morrow:  
Yet almost they equal joys, since their despair  
Is but hope blinded by its tears, and clear  
Above the storm the heavens wait to be seen.

(l. 1-5)

Intricacies of feeling well up beneath the brooding music of the opening line. ‘The sorrow of true love’ might mean ‘the sorrow that true love, which is otherwise a joy, is accompanied by’, or it might mean ‘the sorrow that true love constitutes in its entirety’; either way, the next line implies, release from true love doesn’t constitute relief, since its ‘parting’ (whether for good, or just temporarily) is also sorrowful.

Pivoting on an ‘And yet’, the next three lines shape a counterstatement, implying that whatever the sorrows of true love are, they result from its proximity to a kind of perfection: ‘their despair | Is but hope blinded by its tears’. The emotional punch of that image prevents it from being wholly consoling, however, and the ostensible meaning of the lines is graced by further nuances of expression: does ‘clear | Above the storm’ mean that these heavens are easily observable, or at a good distance? Does ‘wait to be seen’ suggest that in ‘true love’ the ‘heavens’ may easily be attained when ‘hope’ wipes its eyes? Or does it operate with the more sceptical accents of conversation as when one says something ‘waits to be seen’, implying that one does not expect it to be? As so often in Thomas, the drive to clarify feeling brings with it a proliferating awareness of its complexities.

Having already advanced one counterstatement against the poem’s opening line, the next sentence, seven lines which constitute the remainder of the poem,



unfolds another. It adjusts attention from 'true love' to a drabber kind of affection, 'true' in its routine realism, rather than its purity:

But greater sorrow from less love has been  
That can mistake lack of despair for hope  
And knows not tempest and the perfect scope  
Of summer, but a frozen drizzle perpetual  
Of drops that from remorse and pity fall  
And cannot ever shine in the sun or thaw,  
Removed eternally from the sun's law.

Again, the lines exhibit Thomas's skill in getting a handle on inward experience through a vivid rendering of the external world. This 'lesser love' 'knows not tempest and the perfect scope | Of summer' (where 'and' rather than 'or' is telling – 'true love' involves a consciousness of both extremes), but a 'frozen drizzle perpetual | Of drops that from remorse and pity fall', whose feel, recalling the weather conditions noted in Thomas's diary entry, is evoked by words which themselves seem to drizzle into their place in the sentence one by one.

The structure and balance of the poem might lead one into thinking that Thomas is setting an idealised notion of 'true love' against his own 'truer' experience of its realities. But the poem is laconic and evasive (the non-committal bend in the voice at 'has been' backs away from any straightforward confessional candour), and might equally be construed as playing off the 'sorrows' of a more abstract idea of love such as one feels in intense moments like 'parting' against an underlying awareness of the more humdrum 'sorrows' of its day-to-day realities. 'The kind of love I am experiencing now, at this poignant moment of separation, is one version of love', he

seems to say, 'but it won't do to be too sentimental, because I also know from past experience of another, more ordinary one'. It is not that the one is 'truer' than the other – rather that a comprehension of the truth involves a 'myriad-minded' apprehension of both. One of the surprises of Thomas's 1901 review is his assumption that not only 'thought' but 'emotion' will become 'increasingly complex'. The rationale behind that line of thinking might have to do with the complicating powers of lyric itself: certainly Thomas's poems, in their drive to find modes of expression for his own 'thoughts and emotions', sharpen our awareness of their elusiveness and complication. That dynamic of clarification and obscurity is true of Thomas's personality as it appears in his poems more generally, and their combinations of intimacy and evasiveness will form the subject of next chapter.

## Chapter 9

### Thomas (III): 'Intimate Speech'

*intimate, adj.*

1. a. Inmost, most inward, deep-seated; hence, Pertaining to or connected with the inmost nature or fundamental character of a thing; essential; intrinsic...
2. Pertaining to the inmost thoughts or feelings; proceeding from, concerning, or affecting one's inmost self; closely personal.
3. a. Close in acquaintance or association; closely connected by friendship or personal knowledge; characterised by familiarity (with a person or thing); very familiar...

– OED

#### I

Clare's lyrics are often thrillingly candid; even his most descriptive pieces achieve what John Ashbery calls an 'instant intimacy'.<sup>1</sup> Hopkins' poems also depend upon a personal, if more guarded and strained connection with their audience. Thomas, too, was drawn to breed connections between his poetic and 'inmost' selves. He wrote of Keats's Odes that 'Of the sources in his daily life there was no more shown than made his poems quick instead of dead';<sup>2</sup> his own poems have more of the qualities of 'an intimate poetic journal' that he admired in Keats's earlier 1817 *Poems*, the 'fidelity to the observation and feeling of the hour'.<sup>3</sup> 'Fidelity' and 'intimacy' both crop up, too, in Thomas's description of the qualities he admired in Frost: 'absolute fidelity to the

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<sup>1</sup> Ashbery, *Other Traditions* 16.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Thomas, *Keats* 1916, introd. Richard Emeny (Gloucester: The Cyder Press, 1999) 57.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas, *Keats* 36.

most expressive intimate speech'. The presence of the word 'intimate' there is often taken for granted, but it illuminates both the manner and pre-occupation of much of Thomas's poetry.

For John Burrow, the 'privateness' of Thomas's poems, his refusal to attain 'the clarity of public utterance' that characterises Keats's Odes, is confining: a failure of ambition that limits his achievement to 'minor', rather than 'major' status.<sup>4</sup> '[F]idelity to the observation and feeling of the hour' threatens as much as 'quickens' Thomas's achievement. But Thomas was wary of grand themes or poses. He once remarked that 'anything, however small, may make a poem; nothing, however great, is certain to', since by 'concentration something is detached from the confused immensity of life and receives individuality';<sup>5</sup> and his poems often test the degree to which moderation might manifest confidence as much as a lack of ambition:

Some day, I think, there will be people enough  
In Froxfield to pick all the blackberries  
Out of the hedges of Green Lane, the straight  
Broad lane where now September hides herself  
In bracken and blackberry, harebell and dwarf gorse.  
(*'The Lane'*, l. 1-5)

These are the opening lines of 'The Lane', and they illustrate nicely the apparent provinciality Burrow has in his sights. Place names are deployed not to so much to advertise as scale down significance (compare what Thomas said of Hardy: 'The rustic

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<sup>4</sup> John Burrow, 'Keats and Edward Thomas', *Essays in Criticism* 7.4 (1957): 412-3.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas, *Maurice Maeterlinck in Selected Prose* 55-6.

names, if anything, emphasise the littleness, yet save it from abstraction’):<sup>6</sup> the lines find inspiration in the local, sensitive to a beauty that ‘hides itself’ in unnoticed details. They implicitly pledge allegiance to a brand of poetry which arises out of seemingly inconsequential speculation that is both casual (‘Some day...’) and precise (the documentary patience of the fifth line).

But their narrowness is at one with their daring. At the heart of the matter is the phrase which the whole poem opens out of, ‘I think’. It can be heard as both a diminution of the poetic voice and an emboldening of the value of private experience. Thomas was careful to remain ambivalent about the virtues of ‘self-expression’ in his account of ‘individualism’ in lyric poetry in 1901: ‘The lyric then is self-expression, whether by necessity or by mere malice aforethought. Those that practise the art include men who have spent a laborious life in sounding their own stops, like Shelley or Sidney, and also the men (and women) who mistake the lowest form of vanity for the highest form of art.’<sup>7</sup> He later criticised Morley Roberts for his ‘too abundant’ use of the ‘first personal pronoun’: ‘He has not been drawn inevitably into self-expressions’.<sup>8</sup> To give such prominence to a phrase like ‘I think’, then, involves risks. But the ‘self-expressiveness’ of Thomas’s own poetry is in inverse proportion to its ‘vanity’. He avoids ‘the exaggeration of rhetoric’ (as he said Frost’s poems did)<sup>9</sup> to speak quietly on his own terms; he achieves a disarming marriage of self-expressiveness and self-abnegation. As John Bayley has put it, Thomas often ‘realise[s]

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas, *A Literary Pilgrim in England in Selected Prose* 75.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas, review of new verse, *Daily Chronicle* 27 Aug. 1901, *Selected Prose* 63.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas, review of *The Wingless Psyche* by Morley Roberts, *Daily Chronicle* 8 Dec. 1903, *Selected Prose* 140.

<sup>9</sup> Edward Thomas, ‘A New Poet’ rev. of Robert Frost *North of Boston*, *Elected Friends* 16.

himself in the poem by means of his own removal from it'.<sup>10</sup> Bayley's example is the second stanza of 'Tall Nettles':

This corner of the farmyard I like most:  
As well as any bloom upon a flower  
I like the dust on the nettles, never lost  
Except to prove the sweetness of a shower.  
(l. 5-8)

Bayley draws attention to 'the difference between the first and the second 'I' – the first emphatic and expansive, stating its feeling, the second merged and obscured by the presence of the weeds themselves, and the dust on them'.<sup>11</sup> 'We do not linger over a literary effect; we are surprised deeper into the experience',<sup>12</sup> as Michael Schmidt says of Thomas's verse more generally. A similar surprise colours the final stanza of 'Birds' Nests', which again organises itself around a colon:

And most I like the winter nest deep-hid  
That leaves and berries fell into:  
Once a dormouse dined there on hazel-nuts,  
And grass and goose-grass seeds found soil and grew.  
(l. 13-16)

Here Thomas's 'I' disappears entirely in the second half of the sentence, as the voice re-adjusts itself across the middle of the stanza to settle into a quieter manner. The first two lines sustain a regular iambic rhythm, and in their inversions and poeticisms

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<sup>10</sup> John Bayley, 'The Self in the Poem' *The Art of Edward Thomas* 41.

<sup>11</sup> Bayley 'The Self in the Poem' 41.

<sup>12</sup> Schmidt, *Lives of the Poets* 548.

(‘most I like’, ‘deep-hid’) come over a little staged. Even a phrase like ‘the winter nest’ sounds studied: Thomas fretted in his drafts over whether ‘nest’ or ‘nests’ was the better fit; his choice of the singular aimed at concrete precision, but it risks the generalising touch of the connoisseur (as one might advertise one’s preference for ‘the later Mozart’). But as the lines tunnel inwards, their registers relax. The two lines following the colon address us with a plainer force that is a matter both of their freer (though still resonant) rhythms, and their willingness, for instance in differentiating between ‘grass and goose-grass’, to uphold precision at the risk of flat-footedness (‘Nothing so much as the writer’s rhythm can give that intimate effect “as if he had been talking”’, Thomas wrote in *Walter Pater*).<sup>13</sup> The peculiarity of Thomas’s perceptions is animated by the incongruity of ‘dined’, whose ‘amused tenderness’, in Michael Kirkham’s phrase,<sup>14</sup> lends Thomas’s naturalism a fantastical *Alice in Wonderland* feel. Shedding formality, the lines find their own fertile poetic ground.

‘Self-expression’ in such lyrics is a matter of ‘necessity’ rather than ‘malice aforethought’. It occurs inherently as the poems lower their voice to speak in a more familiar register (‘removing the poet as poet’, to take another phrase of Bayley’s).<sup>15</sup> The writing reminds us that the ‘intimacy’ of Thomas’s voice is allied to its absorption in the world around; like Clare, he is often most himself when least self-advertising. His poems have a way of breeding connections between their sharp-eyed observation of the natural world and the familiarity they afford us with the movements of Thomas’s own mind. The hushed suddenness of the opening lines of ‘A Tale’ is a case in point:

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas, *Walter Pater* in *Selected Prose* 161.

<sup>14</sup> Kirkham, *Imagination* 198.

<sup>15</sup> Bayley, ‘The Self in the Poem’ 42.

There once the walls  
Of the ruined cottage stood.  
(l. 1-2)

The poem takes hold through that arresting opening word, ‘There’, with its twofold effect of bringing something vividly before us and also setting us alongside Thomas himself. The effect is diminished in Thomas’s revised version of the poem, where, despite the more particularised description of the scene, ‘Here’, supplanting ‘There’, lacks some of its muted drama: ‘Here once flint walls | Pump, orchard and wood pile stood’.<sup>16</sup>

Other poems follow the strategy taken by ‘Birds’ Nests’ in inviting us inward more gradually, trusting in the imagination’s capacity to pursue paths that ‘fancy alone | Can creep through with the mouse and wren’ (‘Fifty Faggots’ l. 4-5). An example is the way ‘First known when lost’ brings itself into focus over the course of its four stanzas to arrive at a precisely-rendered image:

And now I see as I look  
That the small winding brook,  
A tributary’s tributary, rises there.  
(l. 14-16)

Thinking about lyric in 1901, Thomas had meditated upon the incommunicable uniqueness of the experiences that fuel a poem: ‘Everyone must have noticed, standing

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<sup>16</sup> In manuscript, Thomas cancelled his initial version of the poem, composed on 28<sup>th</sup> March 1915, and replaced it with the later version, dated 31 March. But when Thomas’s *Last Poems* was published in 1918, the initial version was published, suggesting, as Longley notes, that he had ‘third thoughts’ (‘Notes’, *Annotated Collected Poems* 208).



on the shore, when the sun or moon is over the sea, how the highway of light on the water comes right to his feet, and how those on the right and on the left seem not to be sharing his pleasure, but to be in darkness'.<sup>17</sup> But in moments like this Thomas's poems draw us in to the origins of their inspiration without sacrificing their distinctiveness. Their inclusiveness suggests individual vision need not be isolating.

And yet, without shutting us out, the super-tuned empirical fidelity that accompanies the quietening of the voice at such moments often brings about an awareness of the evasiveness of the self and its experiences. 'It is odd [...] how frequently the poetry conveys its most potent sense of Thomas's elusive selfhood at the very moment that self nears the brink of dissolution', remarks Mark Ford, thinking back to Bayley's observations;<sup>18</sup> 'Edward Thomas's writing was often curiously elusive', says J. P. Ward.<sup>19</sup> The 'intimacy' his manner affords can feel oddly fragile and capricious. Here, again, 'The Lane' is exemplary, since the quality of attentiveness that allows the poem to sustain the naturalistic fidelity of its opening five lines also enables it to push beyond it:

Today, where yesterday a hundred sheep  
Were nibbling, halcyon bells shake to the sway  
Of waters that no vessel ever sailed...

(l. 8-10)

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas, review of new verse, *Daily Chronicle* 27 Aug 1901, *Selected Prose* 63.

<sup>18</sup> Mark Ford, 'Weasel, Magpie, Crow' rev. of Edna Longley (ed.) *Edward Thomas: The Annotated Collected Poems*, *LRB* 31.1 (2009) <[www.lrb.co.uk/ezphost.dur.ac.uk/v31/no1/mark-ford/weasel-magpie-crow](http://www.lrb.co.uk/ezphost.dur.ac.uk/v31/no1/mark-ford/weasel-magpie-crow)> accessed 25<sup>th</sup> May 2014.

<sup>19</sup> J. P. Ward, *Branchlines* 229.

The poetry plunges into the language of a less knowable self. The idioms of the verse shift from plainspoken blank verse (its precision snagged in that verb ‘nibbling’) into a lyricism which in its half-audible rhymes (‘Today... sway’) is suited to peripherally-apprehended epiphany. Familiarity yields to evasiveness. This is a characteristic manoeuvre: Thomas’s poems are adept at seemingly opening themselves up to us even as he gives us the slip. They often depend for their effect on the impression of allowing us into a secret whilst withholding the entirety of what they have to say.

## II

Thomas reflects on the near-incommunicable nature of individual vision in ‘I never saw that land before’. The poem’s voice is unparaphrasable: both precise and mysterious. Its opening lines respond to an evanescent moment of insight:

I never saw that land before  
And now can never see it again  
(l. 1-2)

The whole scope of the lines is unsettling in its swift modulation from past to future; but their impact hinges upon the way the first line establishes a steady iambic rhythm which the second line fails to sustain, requiring an awkward adjustment of the voice in order to accommodate the small word ‘it’ (as though to intimate the visionary moment has passed already). The movement demonstrates the expressive potential of the fluctuation between songlike and spoken modes explored in my earlier chapter, and, like the examples above, conducts a descent from a formally poetical to a grounded

and intimate manner. The poem goes on to recount a feeling of intimate connection with nature provoked by an imaginative 'land' that it has seen only fleetingly:

As if by acquaintance hoar  
Endeared, by gladness and by pain,  
Great was the affection that I bore

To the valley and the river small,  
The cattle, the grass, the bare ash trees,  
The chickens and the farmsteads, all  
Elm-hidden, and the tributaries,  
Descending at equal interval.

(l. 3-10)

Again the poetry descends from the highly-wrought to the plain-spoken, as if in the process of coming to terms with the strangeness of its experience. Its detailing of a landscape that remains 'Elm-hidden' is characteristic of a poetic manner poised between concealment and revelation, finding its corollary in the 'breeze' which, later in the same poem, 'hinted all and nothing spoke' (l. 15). There Thomas's chiasmus gives shape itself to the reticence of that 'breeze', and intimates its mirroring of his own voice in the poem. The vision of this imaginary 'land' becomes a moment of self-fulfilment and revelation which Thomas's language strains to capture and communicate: 'some goal | I touched then' (l. 17-18). His phrasing surprisingly anticipates Spender's remarks, discussed in the Introduction, about the desire to 'be my ideal self': 'Perfection implies arriving at a goal and staying there.'<sup>20</sup> Like Spender, Thomas's poem discovers 'that direction is everything', even as it half-laments its

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<sup>20</sup> See p. 16-17.

inability to crystallise such ideals. His language is at once tentative and sure-footed as it documents a 'goal' that was 'touched', but not secured; and the movement of the phrasing as it curves over the end of the line suggests how that 'goal' is already disappearing into the distance to become, more vaguely, 'some goal'. The poem passes into a self-reflexive meditation upon poetry's ability to express an inmost self that is near-incommunicable. Its inimitable intricacy is drawn out of its sensitivity to what remains ineffable:

...and if I could sing  
What would not even whisper my soul  
As I went on my journeying,

I should use, as the trees and birds did,  
A language not to be betrayed;  
And what was hid could still be hid  
Excepting from those like me made  
Who answer when such whispers bid.

(l. 18-25)

The lines are as gnomic as they are memorable, and require some unpacking. The first thing to notice is that they are governed by a conditional ('if I could sing...'):<sup>21</sup> they nowhere claim explicitly that they *could* use such a language as they describe, though the deftness of their workings implicitly belies their modesty. Then there is the awkward scrupulosity of that construction 'if I could sing | What would not even whisper my soul', which, I suppose, is to say something along the lines of 'if I was able

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas's strategy, where an implied admission of artistic defeat prepares the way for artistic success echoes Coleridge's at the end of 'Kubla Khan', where the lines 'Could I revive within me | Her symphony and song' (l. 42-3) herald a resonant finale which demonstrates something of Coleridge's success in 'reviving' that song in his poem.

to use a language which anyway would only offer some “whispered” intimation of what my “soul” is *really* like’. Following that comes the aphoristic line ‘A language not to be betrayed’, within which ambiguities cluster: the phrase in itself refuses straightforwardly to betray its meaning. What stands at risk of ‘betrayal’ may be the poet’s ‘soul’, in which case you have to read the line as meaning something like ‘I should use a language *in order* not to be betrayed’ (i.e. a language that would keep my identity covert). Or, and this seems grammatically more probable, it may be the ‘language’ that stands at risk of betrayal – in which case the poetry commits itself to a way of speaking that has both a code-like intimacy with what it expresses, and that involves the poet in a secretive community with ‘the trees and birds’ exclusive of the outside world. Both possibilities are shadowed by the feeling that language’s capacity to ‘reveal’ meaning is in league with a tendency to ‘falsify’ what it expresses; and both imagine a poetry which expresses the poet’s ‘soul’ as much through its reticence as its suggestiveness. And yet far from shutting us out, the poem ends by collusively inviting us in on its secretive ‘language’, leaving a door open in its closing two lines for ‘those like me made | Who answer when such whispers bid’. That closing rhyme of ‘bid’ and ‘hid’ finely delineates the distinctive way that Thomas’s poems reveal his personality: decoding the poetry’s deceptive meanings, we ‘touch’ a fragile intimacy with the poet’s ‘soul’ that parallels his interchange here with the natural world.

‘I never saw that land before’ characterises Thomas’s combination of reserve and defiance with a lucid delicacy matched only by ‘Aspens’, composed a year previously in July 1915. ‘Aspens’ meditates obliquely upon the relationship between poetry and history, and speaks a language at once familiar with and estranged from ‘men, and times’ (l. 18). Thomas’s opening image implicitly figures poets as trees

standing watch over the goings on of society, but with their ability to affect them left in doubt:

All day and night, save winter, every weather,  
Above the inn, the smithy, and the shop,  
The aspens at the cross-roads talk together  
Of rain, until the last leaves fall from the top.  
(l. 1-4)

The trees stand at a potentially symbolic 'cross-roads', but remain there passively until time wastes them, 'until the last leaves fall from the top.' That enjambment, 'talk together | Of rain' (l. 3-4), underscores an innate pessimism about the course of events. Yet the writing is dryly self-aware about its own bleakness, too, and Thomas refuses to assume a prophetic confidence. He aligns himself with 'the whisper of the aspens' (l. 9), where 'whisper', as in 'I never saw that land before', characterises a voice that is assured but unobtrusive, declining the grandeur of public utterance. The noises of society's goings-on – 'the ringing | Of hammer, shoe, and anvil' from the blacksmith's, 'the clink, the hum, the roar, the random singing' from the inn (l. 6-8) – assert their cheerful counter-claim without drowning out the poet-like aspens. Thomas characterises the effect of the trees' mournfulness subtly. Their whispering 'calls' the 'ghosts' of 'smithy and inn' 'from their abode' (l. 9-10), turning 'the cross-roads to a ghostly room' (l. 16). But these are ghosts whose 'abode' is not in the past, but the future: the implication, Thomas's idiosyncratic imaginative turn implies, is that poetry offers a visionary warning of what waits in store: a scaled-down Shelleyan

‘mirror of futurity’.<sup>22</sup> But, again, it is a warning coloured by Thomas’s keen self-awareness: there is a wary hint, in that verb ‘calls’, that such pessimism may be wilfully self-fulfilling.

Thomas’s ‘I’ is reserved from entering the poem until its final stanza, as it culminates in a defence of its own unobtrusive defiance:

Over all sorts of weather, men, and times,  
Aspens must shake their leaves and men may hear  
But need not listen, more than to my rhymes.

Whatever wind blows, while they and I have leaves  
We cannot other than an aspen be  
That ceaselessly, unreasonably grieves,  
Or so men think who like a different tree.

(l. 18-24)

‘About “Aspens” you missed the turn I thought was essential’, Thomas wrote to Eleanor Farjeon, ‘I was the aspen. “We” meant the trees and I with my dejected shyness.’<sup>23</sup> But the lines achieve more than ‘dejected shyness’; they work towards a mode of self-expression that blends humility with robust self-confidence. The saddened disapproval with which aspen and poet ‘shake their leaves’ (trees’ leaves and poet’s pages converging) over the trajectory of history never elevates itself into preachiness; the sense of duty inherent in ‘must’ is balanced against the acceptance in ‘may’ that ‘men’ have no obligation to take heed of their warnings. And yet even as the poetry accommodates itself to the likelihood of being ignored, it embodies a delicate

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<sup>22</sup> Shelley speaks in ‘A Defence of Poetry’ of poets as ‘the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present’ (*Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, ed. and introd. Zachary Leader and Michael O’Neill 2003 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009) 647).

<sup>23</sup> Farjeon, *Last Four Years* 152-3.

act of self-assertion: the rhyme of 'times' against 'rhymes' intimates its own capacity for insight into the course of history; and the poem's final turnaround steels itself against this neglect with a mixture of diffidence and tough-minded confidence: 'ceaselessly, unreasonably grieves,' appears to cede ground (even as the *aes* and *ies* of that line uphold a ceaseless grieving of their own), and yet any concession is edged by the sardonic glint as the syntax turns round the corner of the final line into 'Or so men think'. The poem leaves us disdainful of those who take such ground up. All this is carried off in lines which have an air of unforcefully inviting us into their confidence. They embody the blend of stubbornness, diffidence and attractive modesty that characterises Thomas's own 'difference'.

### III

Thomas nowhere else characterises his peculiar union of independence and 'dejected shyness' as deftly as at the close of 'Aspens'. But a sense of his own unyielding solitariness inflects all that Thomas writes, and intersects fascinatingly with the sense of personal contact his style affords. It is this mix that stamps Thomas's accent on the unconventional series of poems which, in Matthew Hollis's words, 'mine, or struggle to mine, the subject of love'<sup>24</sup> that Thomas composed in the spring of 1916. The poems tease as to their sincerity. 'He understood that the most apparently intimate poem may be a performance [...] Nevertheless, there were moments in his poetry when the distance between art and life seemed barely anything at all', says Hollis.<sup>25</sup> In them, Thomas appears at once candid and anti-lyrical, guarded about his affections, and

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<sup>24</sup> Matthew Hollis, *Now All Roads Lead to France: The Last Years of Edward Thomas* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012) 261.

<sup>25</sup> Hollis, *Last Years* 269.



sceptical about his capacity for tenderness. He nurtured a longstanding feeling that he was not cut out for love. As early as 1898 he had included in a letter to Harry Hooton a poem exploring the awareness that 'We cannot always love':

Weary of April's over-sweet –  
Anemone and marigold –  
I turned my feet  
To her the meek and bold.

'Let me but speak to thee, or thou  
To me unhastily, of naught:  
Of love not now,'  
I moaned with heart distraught (!)

Wistfully smiling, then, she stept  
To lift me with love's best, though I  
Unheeding wept  
And cared not to reply.

Ah! when repose came – cruel bliss –  
To her sweet toil she turned and wove,  
And bitter 'tis  
We cannot always love.<sup>26</sup>

The problem with this is that its voice doesn't quite correspond with its professed 'weariness' of 'over-sweet' romantic ideals. The second stanza epitomises its strengths and weaknesses. You hear 'Let me but speak to thee', initially, as a plea for plain-talking; as the syntax unwinds, meaning is elaborated through a sentence whose contortions, if a touch laboured, stay true to the desire to avoid 'over-sweet' poetic idioms. But the effect is spoiled, as Thomas's self-ironising exclamation mark

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<sup>26</sup> Longley, 'Notes' *Annotated Collected Poems* 278.

acknowledges, by that histrionic last line. 'Let me but speak to thee': on the whole, the poem's language is not nearly direct enough.

Still, the poem's angularity and deadened cadences foreshadow the bareness that Thomas's language takes on more potently in the poems he composed in early 1916. Their manner both strips away and authenticates sentiment; Thomas's style distinguishes itself, in Richard Hoffpauir's words, through its 'minimal metaphoric cover'.<sup>27</sup> Yet the terseness cannot altogether conceal a latent vulnerability to feeling. 'Those things that poets said' begins as if to shake off the delusions of a romantically-inclined earlier self and accentuate Thomas's distinctiveness from other poets:

Those things that poets said  
Of love seemed true to me  
When I loved and I fed  
On love and poetry equally.

(l. 1-4)

The opening line adopts a typically ambivalent stance towards other 'poets', marking out Thomas's difference with a momentary evocativeness which might be either dismissive or wistful. The line is allowed to shimmer momentarily as a standalone unit, before being swept along by the current of the enjambments that drive the sentence through the quatrain. The lines sound like a plainspoken response to disappointed ideals. Yet for all its analytic thrust, the poem never straightforwardly dismantles of what 'poets said | Of love'. Its tone is complicated in its second and third stanzas by the vulnerable self-doubt of its 'wish':

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<sup>27</sup> Hoffpauir. *Art of Restraint* 85.

But now I wish I knew  
If theirs were love indeed  
Or if mine were the true  
And theirs some other lovely weed:

For certainly not thus  
Then or thereafter, I  
Loved ever. Between us  
Decide, good Love, before I die.

(l. 5-12)

The poem's attempt to deny susceptibility to love as 'poets' experience it cannot conceal its fragility (formally, the poise of each stanza overflows in its elongated final line). Throughout, in Kirkham's words, 'the poem's air of impersonal rationality encounters vibrations from another voice, wistful, tender, wry, quizzical'.<sup>28</sup> The effect of that bracing 'certainly' at the start of the second stanza quoted, for instance, is partly to introduce a note of *uncertainty*, as though belying an attempt to keep an embarrassed distance from the intensity of past feeling. Kirkham's 'vibrations' persist as the poem attempts to set its feelings straight in the closing stanza:

Only, that once I loved  
By this one argument  
Is very plainly proved:  
I, loving not, am different.

(l. 13-16)

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<sup>28</sup> Kirkham, *Imagination* 187.

It is another final stanza that that adjusts its vocal posture around a colon, but here the movement from 'once I loved' to 'I, loving not', brings Thomas's 'I' into the foreground. The gesture enacts and mourns Thomas's apparent alienation from a past self that 'once [...] loved' and is now unable to. And yet nothing is quite so 'very plainly proved' as the poem's 'argument' wishes to make out. Feelings slip and glide beneath the poem's rational façade. To argue that what one felt in the past was 'true' love on the grounds that 'loving not' one is different, is to pursue a false logic: all it amounts to is a recapitulation of changed state of feeling the poem has been speaking of all along. Thomas closes the poem by staging a moment of urbane self-defeat.

But that final line garners pathos, too, from the way (like the opening line) it strains to pull loose from the rest of the poem as an angular, self-contained expression of Thomas's feeling for his 'difference' from others. Edna Longley glosses it with a quotation from one of Thomas's letters to Helen: 'You know how unlike I am to you, and you know that I love, so how can I? That is if you count love as any one feeling and not something varying infinitely with the variety of people'.<sup>29</sup> The poem is the richer for never untangling the issue of whether love is 'one thing' or something 'varying infinitely with the variety of people'. Thomas went on in the letter to articulate his understanding that he was incapable of love: 'you know that my usual belief is that I don't and can't love and haven't done for something near 20 years. You know too that you don't think my nature really compatible with love, being so clear and critical'.<sup>30</sup> This is hardly a comforting message from one's husband of seventeen years. But the remarks compensate for their lack of affection through their frankness. Their 'clarity' emerges from a closeness that is something like intimacy, even if it lacks

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<sup>29</sup> *Selected Letters* 119.

<sup>30</sup> *Selected Letters* 119.

the tenderness usually associated with that word. In this respect, they hold something in common with the spare and personal style of these Spring 1916 love poems, which, if dismissive of the idealism with which ‘poets’ speak of love, often work by playing a curt dismissal of the possibilities of intimate feeling against a voice which approaches such feeling through the candour of its private address.

‘I may come near to loving you’, addressed to Thomas’s father, and unpublished until 1928, is an example. Behind the poem’s title and opening line is a nasty surprise: ‘I may come near to loving you | When you are dead’ (l. 1-2). The first line comes near to saying something potentially warm-hearted, but any thoughts of an incipient tenderness have the rug pulled out from under their feet by the direction taken by the sentence as it exploits the surprisingly blunt cadence of the stanza’s two-beat second line. Throughout, the poem sets reproach alongside regret. ‘To repent that day will be | Impossible’, the second stanza begins, where the pointed pause created by having ‘Impossible’ take up a whole line to itself is filled out with momentary ambiguity as to whether the thought is offered in warning (‘act now, since you won’t be able to repent when you are dead’) or disaffection (‘even then, I will find it impossible to repent’) until the sentence rounds itself off:

To repent that day will be  
Impossible  
For you and vain for me  
The truth to tell.

(l. 5-8)

The final line further upsets the balance. Is it colloquial, taking the whole stanza in its compass ('Truth be told...')? Or does it balance out two opposed strands of the sentence ('Repentance will be impossible for you; speaking truthfully will be pointless for me')? Such ambiguities are vital to the poem's reserve. They are a sharper, more laconic instance of Thomas's capacity to invite one into his confidence and at the same time keep something withheld. Even in the final two stanzas, as the poem seems to allow its attitudes to soften before they recalcify in the closing two lines, the writing is coloured by doubts as to whether its 'sorriness' amounts to pity or contempt:

I shall be sorry for  
Your impotence:  
You can do and undo no more  
When you go hence,

Cannot even forgive  
The funeral.  
But not so long as you live  
Can I love you at all.

(l. 9-16)

The lines are not exactly freighted with the compassion that 'intimate speech' implies, yet their calm honesty could hardly be targeted at someone with whom the poet was not familiar. The impact of their parting shot is characteristic, and its force – not quite anti-climactic, but disconcertingly stark in its laying bare of feeling – typifies a certain kind of extremity in these poems. They daringly test the extent to which poetry can be made out of unadorned statement.

Central to the discomfiting impact of Thomas's 1916 love poems is their way of fixing a hold on their addressee through their insistent use of the second person pronoun, 'you' (it occurs seven times in sixteen lines in 'I may come near...', with one 'Your'). Even more pressure is applied on the word in 'No one so much as you', which Thomas said was addressed to his mother, but whose struggle to come to terms with a love that it cannot reciprocate suggests that he might also have had Helen in mind.<sup>31</sup> The poem cycles forwards through a series of self-contained quatrains, each one documenting an intensity of feeling to which it cannot respond, and arriving at its concluding full stop with an implicit acceptance of its own inability to spark feeling into life:

No one so much as you  
Love this my clay,  
Or would lament as you  
Its dying day.

You know me through and through  
Though I have not told,  
And though with what you know  
You are not bold.

None ever was so fair  
As I thought you:  
Not a word can I bear  
Spoken against you.

(l. 1-12)

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<sup>31</sup> As Helen herself seems to have thought: 'Fancy your thinking those verses had anything to do with you', Thomas wrote to her, a touch awkwardly, on 24 Feb 1916 (*Selected Letters* 119).

The word 'you' is recycled through these stanzas with an insistence that Edna Longley describes as 'tender and relentless'.<sup>32</sup> It is repeated in the first and third rhyme positions of the first stanza, pointedly denying the satisfactions of a full rhyme. In the second stanza it moves to the start of the first and fourth lines, as well as appearing near the end of the third. By the third, it has returned to a rhyme position, but this time at the end of the stanza's second and fourth lines. It recurs, too, as the fourth stanza regrets its inarticulacy ('All that I ever did | For you seems coarse | Compare with what I hid' (l. 13-15)) and in the fifth stanza (again in the first rhyme position), so that the sixth stanza is the first in which the pronoun doesn't appear:

We look and understand,  
We cannot speak  
Except in trifles and  
Words the most weak.

(l. 21-4)

After so much pressure upon a pronoun that marks off its addressee from its speaker, 'We' arrives as a relief. The stanza speaks of a union, even as, poignantly, what unites the two is an understanding that they share intimacy that stops short of mutual compassion. And yet from this point, the poem opens up. Its final sentence stretches across four whole stanzas and the deftness of its movements give shape to a conversational warmth and lightness of touch which its paraphrasable content denies:

For I at most accept  
Your love, regretting

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<sup>32</sup> Longley 'Notes', *Annotated Collected Poems* 279.



That is all: I have kept  
Only a fretting

That I could not return  
All that you gave  
And could not ever burn  
With the love you have,

Till sometimes it did seem  
Better it were  
Never to see you more  
Than linger here

With only gratitude  
Instead of love –  
A pine in solitude  
Cradling a dove.

(l. 25-40)

The whole impact of the sentence turns on that final verb 'Cradling', which seems to express more than 'gratitude', as though Thomas had been taken by surprise by his own compassion.

A similar unostentatious capacity for affection animates the cadences of 'And you, Helen', the last in the sequence of 'household poems' Thomas composed the same spring.<sup>33</sup> 'And you, Helen, what shall I give you?', the poem begins, rounding upon its addressee with a gentleness that belies the poet's claims about his insensitivity. It is a poem which knows from experience that love falls short of what 'poets say' of it, but

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<sup>33</sup> Thomas used the phrase to describe four poems written to his family members ('If I should ever by chance', 'If I were to own', 'What shall I give?' and 'And you, Helen') in a letter to Gordon Bottomley (*Letters to Gordon Bottomley* 266). R. George Thomas used it to label the poems as a group, but as Longley suggests ('Notes', *Annotated Collected Poems* 285) 'Thomas's phrase suggests a genre rather than a title'.

trusts at the same time that poetry might be directed towards atoning for those failings:

I would give you back yourself,  
And power to discriminate  
What you want and want it not too late,  
Many fair days free from care  
And heart to enjoy both foul and fair,  
And myself, too, if I could find  
Where it lay hidden and it proved kind.  
(l. 16-22)

These are lines in which the poem's tone of gentle reconciliation becomes augmented by a more serious depth of purpose. Their affection is bordered by a mixture of sadness and self-reproach at the compromise and damage that an unloving marriage has inflicted upon Helen, and also a troubled sense of what it has inflicted upon Thomas himself. The lines are ostensibly more uncertain about their capacity to unearth a 'hidden' intimate self than the endings of other Thomas poems are, and yet their very uncertainty is authenticating. In the effort to 'find' a true self, and their doubtfulness as to whether, even if found, it would prove 'kind' that is brought to focus in the closing rhyme, the lines go some way towards its discovery.

#### IV

'Men have written little poetry on love of their friends' Thomas wrote in *Feminine Influence on the Poets* in 1910.<sup>34</sup> If Thomas's love poems are disarmingly candid in their

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<sup>34</sup> Cited by Longley 'Notes', *Annotated Collected Poems* 297.

manner of withholding intimacy, his output is more generous in its celebration of friendship.<sup>35</sup> ‘The sun used to shine’, in which he remembers the months spent with Robert Frost in the summer of 1914, is a poem about the love of a friend, and the love of friendship. ‘[T]here is now no man living with whom I can be completely myself – Frost nearest of all, but I think not quite, because I am a little anxious to please him,’ Thomas once said.<sup>36</sup> The manner of ‘The sun used to shine’ bears out that observation in poetic terms. The flexible tetrameters of its cross-rhymed quatrains show Thomas at his most relaxed and seemingly unpremeditated – a way of being himself at the opposite pole to the wrought intensities and anxieties of, say, ‘Liberty’. The poem both celebrates and cultivates intimacy. It begins with a moment of nostalgic, but precisely-rendered, reminiscence:

The sun used to shine while we two walked  
Slowly together, paused and started  
Again, and sometimes mused, sometimes talked  
As either pleased, and cheerfully parted

Each night.

(l. 1-5)

The days recalled are in the past, but the poem gives the impression, through its unobtrusive ‘we’, that the intimate conversation it evokes continues into the present.

The casual flow of the enjambments – Frost’s ‘sentence tones [...] thrown and drawn

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<sup>35</sup> For an account of Thomas and friendship (and especially his friendship with Frost) see Christopher Ricks, ‘Afterword’, *Elected Friends* 195-216. For the two poets’ mutual influence see Edna Longley, ‘Edward Thomas and Robert Frost’, *Poetry in the Wars* 22-46.

<sup>36</sup> Cited by Longley, ‘Notes’, *Annotated Collected Poems* 298.

and displayed across spaces of the footed line<sup>37</sup> – creates a warmth far from the icy self-containment of the quatrains composed in early 1916. It attests, too, to shared aesthetic principles. The easy coincidence of its rhymes is appropriately Frost-like: ‘walked’ and ‘talked’ fall in step, as if speech followed the natural rhythms of the two men’s footsteps; ‘started’ and ‘parted’ catch the ebb and flow of friendship through meeting and separation. The friendship’s dissipation ‘Each night’, the enjambment of that phrase into the start of the next stanza implies, is comforted by the knowledge that it will recommence tomorrow.

‘The to be | And the late past we gave small heed’ (l. 6-7), Thomas writes; but that is not true of the poem itself. What saves its sunny contentment from passing from intimacy into cosiness is its peripheral awareness of larger historical processes looming at the fringes of its temporary private idyll.<sup>38</sup> At the end of the second stanza, the poets’ talk turns from ‘men or poetry || To rumours of the war remote’ (l. 8-9). That line holds war at a distance, but also registers the tremors of its encroachment. If at first you hear it as talking of ‘rumours’ which in themselves are ‘remote’; the war’s presence edges closer as one comprehends the equal possibility that the ‘remoteness’ refers to the war itself. And yet, like Auden’s ‘Out on the lawn I lie in bed’, with which it bears similarities, part of Thomas’s poem’s response to the threat that undermines its idyll is to feel a responsibility to enjoy the good fortune that grants it such moments. And so the ‘rumours of the war’ incline the poets to savour an apple

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<sup>37</sup> Robert Frost, *Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays*, ed. Richard Poirier and Mark Richardson (New York: Library of America, 1995) 690-1.

<sup>38</sup> Matthew Hollis reports Seamus Heaney’s admiration for Thomas’s attitude to the way in ‘As the Teams Head Brass’: “He savoured what he termed its apparent ‘dailiness’, its lower key that disguised, in his phrase, ‘a big wheel of danger’ turning behind it” (Mark Brown, ‘New Seamus Heaney Poem Published’, *The Guardian* 23 Oct. 2013 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/oct/25/seamus-heaney-last-poem-published>> accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2014.

‘undermined’ by wasps (l. 12), ‘a sentry of dark betonies’ (l. 13), and some ‘Pale purple’ (l. 16) crocuses; images which compose a pastoral shaded but also made more valuable by an awareness of the costs of war. When thoughts of the war re-enter explicitly it is with another trick of perspective:

The war  
Came back to mind with the moonrise  
Which soldiers in the east afar  
Beheld then.

(l. 17-20)

‘Afar’ sounds like it has been stuck in for a rhyme on ‘war’, but it works subtly: it is not just that the soldiers in the east are ‘afar’, but that the ‘moonrise’ is something which the soldiers in the east ‘afar | Beheld’ themselves. The syntax allows for an intermeshing of perspectives, shaping an understanding that if war seems far off for the two poets, there is, too, a place from where their rural happiness seems equally distant.

The ending of the poem is a remarkable draining away of vision, which accelerates through a surprising shift into the present tense. ‘Everything | To faintness like those rumours fades’ (l. 22-3), writes Thomas, where ‘rumours’ again introduces a play of perspective: if ‘rumours’ fade that is not because they held no truth, but because the war they heralded has become all the more a reality:

...like those walks  
Now – like us two that took them, and  
The fallen apples, all the talks

And silences – like memory’s sand

When the tide covers it late or soon,  
And other men through other flowers  
In those fields under the same moon  
Go talking and have easy hours.

(l. 26-34)

The thought is similar, though less achingly expressed, to Larkin’s acknowledgement at the end of ‘Sad Steps’ (another moon poem) of those ‘others’ for whom youth is ‘undiminished, somewhere’ (l. 18). But the manner in which the poem expands out from the self to see its own experiences as special, but not necessarily unique, is uniquely Thomas’s own. Central to the effect is the movement through the twice-repeated ‘other’ in the pre-penultimate line to the more specific ‘those’ and then ‘same’ in the line that follows; this landscape does not belong exclusively to Thomas, but is one in which other people and other memories can intrude, too, it implies. The feeling is less unhappy than in Larkin, more a plain statement of one’s existence in a larger scheme of things; even so, that closing ‘hours’ intimates darkly that ‘others’ time in the sun may be just as brief.

One of the things that tempers the potential for sadness at the end of ‘The sun used to shine’ is the way that the sense of an experience held in common, even with people one does not know, breeds its own tentative brand of intimacy. This is a recurrent feeling in Thomas’s poems. It dissolves isolation by finding a kind of unconscious company in the fact that other people are sharing, however distantly, in the same moment. ‘As the team’s head brass’, for example, gains its power to affect partly through its poignant imagining of a counterfactual history (‘Everything | Would

have been different' (l. 29-30)); but another clue to its impact lies in that temporary 'As' with which the poem begins:

As the team's head brass flashed out on the turn  
The lovers disappeared into the wood.  
I sat among the boughs of the fallen elm...  
(l. 1-3)

The subjects of the first and third lines soon begin to intertwine; the lovers, meanwhile, 'disappear'. But at the back of the poem is always an awareness that they are sharing this moment of time too, perhaps equally memorably, and their presence is re-asserted when they re-emerge at its close: 'Then | The lovers came out of the wood again' (l. 32-3). It is a mode of poetic modesty, a refusal to commandeer attention; it lets you know that other things are going on at the same time as the poem, and it seeks to atone for, rather than accentuate, artistic seclusion.

A similar feeling infuses 'February Afternoon', which begins with the thought that 'Men heard this roar of parleying starlings, saw, | A thousand years ago even as now, | Black rooks' (l. 1-3); one might think, too, of the fragile communion Thomas holds with soldiers who, though the strata of history, 'Once laughed, or wept, in this same light of day' (l. 10) in the second of the two poems he called 'Digging'. Precisely because he values such moments, troubling lapses and failures of personal connection also remain a source of creativity for Thomas. Frequently in his poems communion is fleeting, only partially shared. The valedictory note of his final poems often feeds off an atmosphere of secrecy and withdrawal. In the innocuous sonnet 'That girl's clear

eyes', the failure to communicate ricochets from girl to poet, and from poet to poem and reader:

That girl's clear eyes utterly concealed all  
Except that there was something to reveal.  
And what did mine say in the interval?  
No more: no less. They are but as a seal  
Not to be broken till after I am dead;  
And then vainly. Every one of us  
This morning at our tasks left nothing said,  
In spite of many words. We were sealed thus,  
Like tombs.

(l. 1-9)

'One is absolutely friendless here. Everybody has something to conceal and he does so by pretending to be like everybody else', Thomas wrote to Walter de la Mare in a letter Edna Longley quotes in a note to these lines.<sup>39</sup> It is a fitting remark to call on (though it was written six months after the poem), for it shares with them a note of willed reticence that nonetheless laments its own isolation. The poem's phrasing beckons only to fend off interrogation, carefully leaving if not 'nothing', at least little, 'said' (Thomas's idiom has its own taciturn originality – one would usually leave nothing 'unsaid'). There is the redundant intensity, given the 'Except' that follows on its heels, of 'utterly concealed all'; the false precision of 'No more: no less' (what would it mean to say 'more' or 'less' than what the girl does?); the way 'And then vainly' causes its sentence to snap back shut on itself; and the self-reflexive flourish of 'sealed thus | Like tombs', whose technique anticipates Eliot's 'my words echo | Thus in your mind'

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<sup>39</sup> Longley, 'Notes', *Annotated Collected Poems* 311.



in 'Burnt Norton' (l. 14-15). Thomas's own words attain a clarity which, like the girl's eyes in the poem, works to 'conceal' as much as to 'reveal'.

## V

The experience of becoming well-acquainted with a distinctive authorial voice is one of the pleasures of reading. We enjoy 'the feeling of familiarity we obtain when we read a work that has all the hallmarks of the author in question: characteristic ways of handling syntax and rhythm, immediately recognizable similes, well-known devices of plot, and so on', as Derek Attridge says.<sup>40</sup> But familiarity can harden into cosiness, or predictability, so it can just as well become a downfall, too, as Hopkins' Parnassian letter brilliantly sets out: 'it is a mark of Parnassian that one could conceive oneself writing it if one were the poet [...] In a fine piece of inspiration every beauty takes you as it were by surprise'.<sup>41</sup> Hopkins avoided this danger through his meticulous shiftiness, his 'effort of inspiration'; Clare managed to escape it too, through the sheer florabundance and variegated intensities of his output, and through his improvisational verve; both poets are at most characteristic at their most surprising. This chapter has traced something similar in Thomas in its attention to his poetry's variety of 'intimate' voices, its enigmatic marriages and elisions of closeness and withdrawal. His poems simultaneously fend off and invite attention upon his 'inmost self'.

In its combination of intimacy and reticence, Thomas's brief late lyric 'The Long Small Room' makes an appropriate end point for these considerations. The poem

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<sup>40</sup> Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004) 76.

<sup>41</sup> *Correspondence* 69.

engineers shifting angles upon a typically inconsequential, idiosyncratic image of a 'long small room' which, Thomas's daughter Myfanwy suggests, corresponds to a real life 'stone out-building' that he liked to write in,<sup>42</sup> but whose significance, like the poem itself, outgrows its empirical point of reference:

The long small that showed willows in the west  
Narrowed up to the end the fireplace filled,  
Although not wide. I liked it. No one guessed  
What need or accident made them build so.  
(l. 1-4)

The lines are meticulous, but mysterious; they are exemplary of Thomas's way of writing with apparent clarity about something whose suggestiveness eludes reductive definition. The clipped assertion 'I liked it' concentrates the effect. It is a simple statement of feeling, but its simplicity vibrates with unspoken implication in a manner that recalls 'That girl's clear eyes'; 'making a show of ingenuous candour, [it] actually reveals little and conceals whatever secrets the room is presumed to hold', is how Kirkham puts it.<sup>43</sup> 'No one guessed' perpetuates the feeling: 'guessed', rather than, say, 'knew', retains the hint of some privileged knowledge which the poet himself is in on and others are not.

The perplexity mirrors our own position as reader. This is a poetry which shields rather than explicates; it allows potential significances to gather but remain submerged (is the room supposed to provide a 'Narrowed' vision of human destiny? of consciousness?). It would be hard to pin down exactly what this is a poem 'about'.

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<sup>42</sup> Myfanwy Thomas, *One of these Fine Days: Memoirs* (Manchester: Carcanet P, 1982) 47.

<sup>43</sup> Kirkham, *Imagination* 182-3.

Room and poem find echoes in one another, answering to Thomas's sense of the nebulousness of experience itself. Both host experiences whose mysterious inner life remains inscrutable from without:

Only the moon, the mouse and the sparrow peeped  
In from the ivy round the casement thick.  
Of all they saw and heard there they shall keep  
The tale for the old ivy and older brick.

(l. 5-8)

The movement of those lines, as they pivot between the intricately-imagined, if fleeting, insight of 'peeped | In' and the secretiveness of 'keep', follows a characteristic trajectory. And yet, if the writing holds us at a distance, the poem comes to imply that time has shut out Thomas, too, from an understanding of his own experience; and in coming to share our vantage point, the closing stanzas establish a countervailing closeness with their reader:

When I look back I am like moon, sparrow and mouse  
That witnessed what they could never understand  
Or alter or prevent in the dark house.  
One thing remains the same – this my right hand

Crawling crab-like over the clean white page,  
Resting awhile each morning on the pillow,  
Then once more starting to crawl on towards age.  
The hundred last leaves stream upon the willow.

(l. 9-15)

It is a typical Thomas strategy. The shielded evocation of concealed inspiration in the earlier stanzas makes way for a more easily-visualised image for the poet: one that involves a stripping away of poetic pretence in order to bring tangible intimacy ('this') with the poet's physical self. That too then gives way to something stranger, a standalone final line whose 'Japanesey suddenness'<sup>44</sup> Thomas was sceptical of, but whose switchback to the 'willows' of the opening line injects the poem with a 'foreignness' like that which Thomas garners from his contact with folk techniques. The 'streaming' leaves suggest vitality amid adversity. They share their double impact with the image of Thomas's writing hand, which, alongside its Lear-like resignation of powers (resolving to 'Unburdened crawl towards death' (l. i. 41)) copies Keats's 'This living hand, now warm and capable', and makes a quietly confident claim to Thomas's place among the English poets.

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<sup>44</sup> Cited by Eleanor Farjeon, *The Last Four Years* 221.

## Coda: 'To Be, & Not To Be'

In Book III of *The Prelude* Wordsworth defines his poetic endeavours in a way that helps to orientate the achievement of the three poets gathered in this thesis:

Points have we all of us within our souls  
Where all stand single; this I feel, and make  
Breathings for incommunicable powers.<sup>1</sup>

The lines epitomise many of the qualities and preoccupations that I have been tracing in Clare, Hopkins, and Thomas. They emphasise the 'singleness' of the self as a source of poetic creativity. They balance that emphasis with a democratic awareness, alive in the recurring pull of the word 'all', that such singleness is unique to everyone. And their language gets its personal bearing from the warping of its grammar as it strives to articulate that uniqueness: the strangeness of 'feel, and make | Breathings', pivoted on the uncertainty as to whether 'make' is in apposition or succession to 'feel', responds to a sense that such singleness lies 'far hidden from the reach of words' (l. 185), but also authenticates that 'singleness'.

Yet Wordsworth's manner here exhibits a grandeur that these poets' more awkward, homespun style sets itself against. Their poetry prioritises speaking from the self over speaking about it. They never make the self the subject for 'heroic argument' (l. 182) as Wordsworth does in these lines. It is not so much 'singleness' as the

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<sup>1</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* of 1805, in Thirteen Books, *The Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams and Stephen Gill, Norton Critical Edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979) 100, III. l. 186-88.

idiosyncrasies of character suggested by Thomas's word 'singularity' that they trace. Mark Storey helps to isolate the distinctive 'personal' individuality that separates Clare off from Wordsworth and makes him a fitting starting point for this study when he speaks of an 'intimacy' in Clare's writing 'rarely found in the work of other poets of the period, a privacy that certainly removes his poetry from the realms inhabited by, say, Wordsworth or Keats'.<sup>2</sup> Clare brings poetic language closer to the individual's everyday existence than Wordsworth does (just as Thomas praised Clare's authenticity on the grounds that 'No man ever came so near to putting the life of the farm, as it is lived, not as it is seen over a five-barred gate, into poetry').<sup>3</sup> Clare distrusted Wordsworth's 'affectations of simplicity';<sup>4</sup> he valued unvarnished candour and integrity. Although he cannot have known those lines from the *Prelude*, which were published in 1850, he comes close to his own version of them at the ending of an early song, 'I tell thee love I love thee dear'. The lines in question have none of Wordsworth's impressiveness, but they capture the honesty which stamps its force on his language. Clare promises his beloved that 'every word of love to thee | Are breathings of the soul' (l. 15-16).<sup>5</sup> Clare's 'breathings' shares with Wordsworth an acknowledgement of the strain language must undergo to reach the delicacy necessary to any effort to 'whisper one's soul', to adapt Thomas's construction from 'I never saw that land before' (l. 19). But 'Are breathings' is more direct and ungainly than the calculated poise of Wordsworth's 'make | Breathings'. The ungainliness grounds any portentousness such as might accompany, say, 'breaths of the soul', and signals a means of expression whose awkwardness wins an intimacy with feeling. Clare's genitive construction 'of the soul' speaks on behalf of

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<sup>2</sup> Storey, *Critical Introduction* 2.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas, *A Literary Pilgrim in England in Selected Prose* 27.

<sup>4</sup> *Clare's Letters* 231.

<sup>5</sup> *Early Poems* ii. 498.

Hopkins and Thomas, too, in its suggestion of the way that as well as expressing feeling, 'words' embody identity: the individual character of these poets' language makes it a 'breathing' not just 'from' the soul, but 'of' the soul itself.

One way of viewing these poets' divergence from Wordsworth's precedent might be to say that their individuality avoids what Keats called the 'wordsworthian or egotistical sublime'.<sup>6</sup> Their 'personal accent', to use Thomas's phrase, just as often emerges out of an effort to downplay as to elevate the self. Again, Clare is representative. In a letter to Eliza Emmerson of March 1830 he dramatises a desire to 'get rid of the 'company' of the word 'I':

I am growing out of myself into many existences & wish to become more entertaining in other genders for that little personal pronoun 'I' is such a presumption ambitious swaggering little fellow that he thinks himself qualified for all company all places & all employments go where you will there he is swaggering & bouncing in the pulpit the parliment the bench aye every where even in this my letter he has intruded 5 several times already [...] often an O would be a truer personification<sup>7</sup>

John Goodridge takes this 'rodomontade', naturally enough, as an illustration of Clare's anti-individualist streak, observing that 'the self-confident 'I' of the first-person pronoun is for Clare [...] a denizen of a male establishment [...] from which the writer is careful to distance himself/herself'.<sup>8</sup> And yet Clare is harassed by the recurrent involuntary intrusion of the word 'I' into his letter, and the energy and humour of the writing betray his individual presence. The prose itself has a 'swaggering' verve as it

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<sup>6</sup> John Keats, letter to Richard Woodhouse, 27 Oct 1818, *The Letters of John Keats, 1814-1821*, 2 vols., ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1958) i. 147.

<sup>7</sup> *Clare's Letters* 504.

<sup>8</sup> Goodridge, *Community* 3.

gets to grips with the 'presumption ambitious swaggering little fellow' which it ruefully acknowledges cannot be shaken off. The distinctive character of all three poets manifests itself in comparable ways: it emerges less through deliberate self-assertion than as an innate quality of their voice. Their best poetry manifests an apparently unpremeditated, spontaneous vigour that chases, rather than crafts individuality, and convinces of the immediacy of the personality behind the writing.

'[O]ften an O would be a truer personification': these poets' language is frequently at its most singular and inventive when giving voice to the self at its most precarious or attenuated. The individuality of their voice is often sharpened by a sense of the unfamiliarity of the self from which it speaks. They are all poets who, towards the end of their careers, articulated the anguish of an identity in crisis. They often deploy repetition, which might be thought of as a mode of self-affirmation and enforcement, to come to terms with the warping of their personality in its strange persistence through adversity. In Clare's 'I Am', which speaks from the heart of his incarceration in the Northampton Asylum, repetitions both cling to and question identity. The poem's opening line instantaneously turns self-assertion into self-negation: 'I am, but what I am none cares or knows' (l. 1). The turnaround establishes the pattern for a voice which earns its individual accent through its agile manoeuvring around the self. Each repetition of the opening phrase gains a doubled perspective on an identity that is at once inescapable and vacant; Clare simultaneously laments and asserts: 'I am the self-consumer of my woes' (l. 3); 'And yet I am, and live – like vapours tost // Into the nothingness of scorn and noise' (l. 6-7). 'He repeats, not in order to inquire more deeply or singularly, but to endorse more fully a familiar understanding'



Tim Chilcott says of Clare's early technique;<sup>9</sup> that is emphatically not the case here. Clare's repetitions accentuate his estrangement from himself. They trace the contours of a 'sad non-identity', in the words of another asylum poem, 'An Invite to Eternity' (l. 14). Yet they show that 'non-identity' to take on a paradoxically 'singular' character of its own. In 'An Invite' itself, the haunting lilt of Clare's repetitions drives his language to what Harold Bloom calls a 'vertigo of vision'<sup>10</sup> from which it quivers between supplication and sardonic challenge:

Say maiden wilt thou go with me  
In this strange death of life to be  
To live in death and be the same  
Without this life, or home, or name  
At once to be, & not to be  
That was, and is not – yet to see  
Things pass like shadows – & the sky  
Above, below, around us lie

(l. 17-24)

The poetry circles round a hollowed-out sense of self with weary fascination. It ricochets with echoes yet speaks in a hauntingly idiosyncratic voice.<sup>11</sup> There is a mixture of pathos and sly humour in Clare's bold appropriation of *Hamlet* to describe a state of simultaneous being and non-being; he also breathes new life into Coleridge's 'Night-mare Life-in-Death' (*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* l. 193) drawing the

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<sup>9</sup> Chilcott, *Critical Reading* 229.

<sup>10</sup> Bloom, *Visionary Company* 442.

<sup>11</sup> The poem re-works sub genre of pastoral invitation poem, the most famous example of which is Marlowe's 'Come live with me and be my love', but the genre also includes Herrick's 'Corinna's Going A-Maying' and Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress'. On the poem's inversion of this genre, see Edward Strickland, 'Conventions and their Subversion in John Clare's "An Invite to Eternity"', *Criticism* 24.2 (1982): 1-15.

distinctions between 'life' and 'death' through a tangle of antitheses that takes us to the brink of the unimaginable. The kaleidoscope of voices befits a poetry which affects through its power to communicate Clare's bewildered sense of his own strangeness. Clare's vulnerability is audible in the unshowy accuracy of his adjectives: the redundancy of 'strange' in 'this strange death of life to be' (18); the understated appeal to our pity of 'sad' in the phrase 'this sad non-identity' (14). The word 'this' in those lines, repeatedly attempting to familiarise what is vague and uncertain, is typical of how the poetry operates through the pressuring of apparently minor words; similar pressure accumulates on the word 'go', which ostensibly beckons the maiden to journey with the poet through the peculiar 'Eternity' of the title, but is always tending towards a secondary sense of 'vanish', or 'disappear': 'wilt thou go with me'. The bareness of the writing owes a debt to the ballads, but it discovers a strange authenticity all Clare's own.

Hopkins found in the distressed eloquence of Clare's 'I Am' a language to articulate the rescue of a threatened selfhood at the close of 'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire':

I am all at once what Christ is, | since he was what I am, and  
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, | patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,  
Is immortal diamond.

(l. 22-24)

'By compressing "I am, and" into "diamond", Hopkins honours not just Christ, but also the tortured soul that linked him to Clare in Northampton General Lunatic Asylum',

says Tom Paulin.<sup>12</sup> Hopkins' repetitions stabilise the self by absorbing it into something greater than itself. Simple wonder colours the cadences of 'he was what I am', a statement Hopkins' rhythms step through with near-disbelief; rhyme compacts the loose-strung (and grammatically incomplete), 'I am, and', into something whose resounding permanence is sounded out not only in the repeated 'diamond' but the pressure impacted on the closing line by having its first word also rhyme with the first word of the line preceding it ('This'/'Is').<sup>13</sup> But even as it achieves permanence, the writing is remarkable for its mobility. Hopkins' flair shows itself in the rapidity with which he manages the shift in register that accompanies the transition from a self conceived of as 'Jack, joke, poor potsherd, | patch matchwood' (where the language, drawing vigour from colloquialisms of an everyman it disparages, jitters between sympathy with and denunciation of the fragile self) into the solid affirmation of the soul as 'Immortal diamond'.

The most recognizable quality of Hopkins' voice is its unpredictability. 'Repeatedly he asks [...] the question "Who am I?"' remarks Wendell Stacey Johnson:<sup>14</sup> Hopkins' language is energized by the effort to embody a continually developing answer. 'What ho'urs, O what black hours we have spent', he cries to his heart in 'I wake and feel...' (l. 2), the repetition causing exclamation to wobble towards troubled questioning; the line, in Paulin's words, becomes a 'terrible ululation', as its auditory textures grasp for a hold on unstable personal experience, the guttural Northern Irish

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<sup>12</sup> Paulin, 'Introduction', *Major Works* xxix. Peter McDonald also points out Hopkins' interest in Clare's poem in an essay which brings together Hopkins and Thomas as two poets whose control of rhyme demonstrates how 'an acute consciousness of technique is bound up with a problematic awareness of the self' in post-Romantic poetry ('Rhyme and Determination in Hopkins and Edward Thomas', *Essays in Criticism* 43.3 (1993): 233).

<sup>13</sup> McDonald points out that the two 'I am's are 'unlikely to be sounded out in quite the same way', the first tripping through an anapaestic rhythm towards a stress on 'all', the second stressed more firmly to balance 'he was' (*Sound Intentions* 298).

<sup>14</sup> Wendell Stacey Johnson, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Poet as Victorian* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1968) 24.

inflection of that first 'hoŭrs' forcing the voice to plunge anguished depths.<sup>15</sup> The personality behind Hopkins' poetry often feels both distinctive and precarious, and often most distinctive when precarious:

Not, I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee;  
Not untwist – slack they may be – these last strands of man  
In me or, most weary, cry *I can no more*. I can;  
Can something, hope, wish day come, not choose not to be.  
(‘Carrion Comfort’ l. 1-4)

The strained, insistent cadences of Hopkins' repetitions access the inmost resources of his self with a pained obduracy. They drive towards the expression of an inner essence, bearing out Hopkins' description of poetry as 'emphatically speech, speech purged of dross like gold in the furnace'.<sup>16</sup> Like Clare, Hopkins turns to Shakespeare to find a language for the self at the limits of its experience; and again he proves his individuality by playing idiosyncratic twists on the words he turns to. The first echo is of Mark Antony, whose dying words, 'Now my spirit is going; | I can no more' (*Antony and Cleopatra* IV. xvi. 60-1), Hopkins raises only to refuse. More strikingly, there is another memory of Hamlet, whose most famous phrase Hopkins imbues with his own distinctive note just as strangely and potently as Clare had. Where Clare's 'At once to be, & not to be' achieves a dizzying and perplexed marriage of being and non-being, Hopkins' 'not choose not to be' knots together persistence and negation with a desperate brilliance typical of his voice when most uniquely responsive to the stress of a unique self.

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<sup>15</sup> Paulin, 'Hopkins on the Rampage', *Minotaur* 98.

<sup>16</sup> *Correspondence* 748.

Thomas's language is characteristically less hectic than either Clare's or Hopkins'. The pressure that repetition brings to bear on their voices is liable to manifest itself in Thomas's poetry in league with form (as, for instance, in the haunted self-questioning effected through his reiterative line-endings).<sup>17</sup> It is Thomas's feeling for the way form can work to exert as well as act-out the pressure of an individual personality on the voice that makes him, rather than say, Hardy, an appropriate end point for this thesis. In Thomas's penultimate poem, 'Out in the Dark', the self confronts dissolution:

Out in the dark over the snow  
The fallow fawns invisible go  
With the fallow doe;  
And the winds blow  
Fast as the stars are slow.

Stealthily the dark haunts round  
And, when the lamp goes, without sound  
At a swifter bound  
Than the swiftest hound,  
Arrives, and all else is drowned;

And star and I and wind and deer,  
Are in the dark together, – near,  
Yet far, – and fear  
Drums on my ear  
In that sage company drear.

How weak and little is the light,  
All the universe of sight,  
Love and delight,  
Before the might,

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<sup>17</sup> See p. 259-65.

If you love it not, of night.

As Edna Longley has pointed out, Hardy, who admired Thomas's poems, appears to have recognised his own influence upon Thomas's diction here, and 'reclaimed a debt'<sup>18</sup> in his own brief lyric 'The Fallow Deer at the Lonely House':

One without looks in tonight  
Through the curtain-chink  
From the sheet of glistening white;  
One without looks in tonight  
As we sit and think  
By the fender-brink.

We do not discern those eyes  
Watching in the snow;  
Lit by lamps of rosy dyes  
We do not discern those eyes  
Wondering, aglow,  
Four-footed, tiptoe.

Both poems are hauntingly idiosyncratic, but through differing means. The distinctiveness of Hardy's poem is made felt through the intricacy of its construction, its interleaving of tetrameters and trimeters in six-line stanzas rhymed *abaabb* (one might recall Davie's characterisation of Hardy's technique as something 'engineered', 'a shape *imposed* on the material, as it were with gritted teeth').<sup>19</sup> Thomas's idiosyncrasy is not so much a 'construct' of his poem as something which it feels bearing down upon it. His five line stanzas, rhymed *aaaaa*, are certainly unusual, but

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<sup>18</sup> Longley, 'Notes', *Annotated Collected Poems* 320.

<sup>19</sup> Davie, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* 23, 16.

they exert a pressure that seeks to impress upon the language a more withdrawn, oblique sense of personality. Thomas's 'I' is withheld from the poem until the third stanza, where it is set in sparse company: 'star and I and wind and deer | Are in the dark together'. Those patient 'ands' demark isolation as much as togetherness. These others are 'near, | Yet far' from Thomas: the phrase curves back on itself round the corner of the line under the pull of the rhymes, giving shape to the recurrent sense Thomas articulates of being similar to yet intractably separate from others. As 'far' passes into 'fear', the pressure of Thomas's rhyme scheme makes itself felt. Thomas's phrases are made to return to the rhymes at a series of elongating intervals, as though the voice were struggling to escape from a 'fear' which nonetheless defines it:

...and fear  
Drums on my ear  
In that sage company drear.

The poem then passes from description into a final stanza of moral reflection. Again the syntax and cadences are shaped by Thomas's feeling for his own singularity. The accumulation of endstopped lines brings into relief the twist in the sentence in the poem's final line, where 'If you love it not' is typical of the way Thomas's syntax attunes itself to the intricacies of thought and feeling through sleight of hand and implication. The language is more guarded than to express an explicit 'love' for 'night'; instead it darkly intimates a mind caught between sympathy and solidarity with those who do not 'love' night and a braced readiness to embrace it. The diffracting inwardness of the thought is very different to the pieced-out oddity of Hardy's closing rhythms. As is often the case, Thomas's personality is more forcefully present for its

reticence. The stanza places strain on Thomas's voice; but as in Clare and Hardy, such strain exacerbates as much as it threatens Thomas's strangeness.

Writing on personality in literature in 1901, Thomas identified the 'one new and common element in modern books' as 'the assertion of the individuality of the individual'. He expressed his wariness of a 'too abundant' use of the first person pronoun, suggesting instead that writing should be 'drawn inevitably into self-expressions'.<sup>20</sup> Clare, Hopkins, and Thomas himself meet these demands. Their technique is directed, as Michael Kirkham has written of Thomas, towards 'a compression of the mind's fullness rather than an expression of the man'.<sup>21</sup> Their pursuit of a language expressive of 'the individuality of the individual' results in a poetry in which individuality is an innate product of 'style', not something 'asserted'.

Hopkins' stylistic individuality is the most obvious of the three. Setting Clare and Thomas alongside him allows him to illuminate the idiosyncrasy of two writers usually situated in an 'English line' that critics characterise by its poetic conservatism. In all three poets artistic and personal individuality are at one. They are not, like Wordsworth at one end of this thesis's time scale, or Eliot at the other, writers who pursue an artistic project, or concern themselves with shaping a poetic career: the individuality of their language arises on a poem-by-poem basis out of freshened contact with feeling and experience. But that is not to downplay their inventiveness, and it is suggestive that the poetry of all three should have started to achieve recognition at the beginning of the twentieth century, in a literary climate receptive to experiment and seeking new directions. Partly such timing is down to accidents of

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<sup>20</sup> Thomas, review of *The Wingless Psyche* by Morley Roberts, *Selected Prose* 140.

<sup>21</sup> Kirkham, *Imagination* 143.



publication history. But in each case the manner of their individuality was welcomed, to return to a phrase John Ashbery uses of Clare, for its 'seeming modernity'.<sup>22</sup> Arthur Symons was ambivalent when he described Clare as containing 'more reality than poetry' in introducing his 1908 selection of the poems,<sup>23</sup> but the remark fastened on to a resistance to the 'poetical' which might be thought of as peculiarly 'modern', and for which Clare has recurrently won admiration; H. J. Massingham struck a similar note in his review of Edmund Blunden's edition of *Poems, Chiefly from Manuscript* in 1921, praising 'The objective, the ordinary, the plain speaking in Clare, which makes even his flattest diarising so vivid and individual'.<sup>24</sup> Hopkins' more evident newness might have prompted A. E. Housman's dry rejoinder that 'originality is not nearly so good as goodness, even when it is good';<sup>25</sup> but the force and 'goodness' of that originality caused Robert Graves and Laura Riding, and F. R. Leavis, to enlist Hopkins into the vanguard of modern poetry: 'no one can come from studying his work without an extended notion of the resources of English.'<sup>26</sup> And Leavis also championed Thomas as 'a very original poet who devoted great technical subtlety to the expression of a distinctively modern sensibility'.<sup>27</sup> His blank verse is 'as individual as anything that has

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<sup>22</sup> Ashbery, *Other Traditions* 15.

<sup>23</sup> Symons, 'Introduction', *Critical Heritage* 301. Symons' remark appears to be disparaging, but it fastens on to a quality for which Clare has recurrently won admiration. For an account of the importance of Symons edition, alongside Normal Gale's *Poems by John Clare* (1901) in the history of Clare's reception, see Stephanie Kuduk Weiner, 'The Aesthetes' John Clare: Arthur Symons, Norman Gale and *Avant-Garde Poetics*', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 51.3-2008: 243-265. Kuduk Weiner notes how both editors' 'interpretations of Clare grant him a newfound originality' (261).

<sup>24</sup> H. J. Massingham, review of *Poems, Chiefly from Manuscript* in *Critical Heritage* 326.

<sup>25</sup> Housman, letter to Robert Bridges, 30 Dec. 1918, *Collected Poems and Selected Prose* 460.

<sup>26</sup> Leavis, *New Bearings* 143.

<sup>27</sup> Leavis, *New Bearings* 55.

broken through the “Chinese wall” of Milton’, said John F. Danby, with Eliot’s remarks on the need to express ‘complicated, subtle, and surprising emotions’ in mind.<sup>28</sup>

Clare, Hopkins, and Thomas all extended surprisingly adventurous poetic accents into the twentieth century. One index of the vitality and peculiarity of those accents is the collective impression they had on Ivor Gurney, the first poet to have read and absorbed the influence of all three. Gurney’s poems can seem to speak as a concoction of their individual voices. Like Clare, he was capable of a pellucid lyricism interrupted by a syntax fraught by its own impetus; he learned from Hopkins’ tormented angularity and clattering sound effects; he shared Thomas’s feeling for expressive intersections of cadence and lineation. He held in common with all three a tenderness towards what the title of one of his poems calls ‘The Dearness of Common Things’, and trusted in the sharp particularity of his perception as a means of self-revelation. As with Clare, Hopkins, and Thomas at their most intense, his style emerges out of an effort to ‘work out in verse crazes of my untold pain’.<sup>29</sup> He shows himself as an inheritor of their qualities and preoccupations in the following lines which, for all they protest their own inarticulacy, bear the impression of a distinctive individual character:

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<sup>28</sup> Danby, ‘Edward Thomas’, 313. Eliot’s remarks occur in ‘Notes on the Blank Verse of Christopher Marlowe’ *The Sacred Wood*: ‘after the erection of the Chinese Wall of Milton, blank verse has suffered not only arrest but retrogression [...] Every writer who has written any blank verse worth saving has produced particular tones which his verse and no other’s is capable of rendering’ (87).

<sup>29</sup> Ivor Gurney, ‘The Last of the Book’, l. 2, *Collected Poems*. ed. and introd. P. J. Kavanagh (Manchester: Carcanet-Fyfield, 1984) 231. All further quotations from this edition. ‘Crazy’ was the word that came to Gurney’s mind on his first reading of Hopkins: ‘Why all that [...] Hopkins or what’s his names of the crazy precious diction?’ he asked Ethel Voynich upon reading a selection of Hopkins’ poems printed in Robert Bridges’ anthology *The Spirit of Man* in 1916 (letter to Ethel Voynich, 28 Aug. 1916 *Collected Letters*, ed. R. K. R. Thornton (Ashington: Mid-Northumberland Arts Group & Carcanet P, 1991) 140); but following the publication of the poems by Bridges in 1918, Gurney’s attitude altered. John Lucas discusses Gurney’s debts to Hopkins and Thomas in particular in *Ivor Gurney, Writers and their Work* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2001), 16, 25, and 36-9; Andrew Motion contemplates Gurney as a poet who, like Thomas, ‘secured and sustained a poetic line that was specifically English but nevertheless flexible and inclusive’ (‘Ivor Gurney: Beaten Down Continually’, *Ways of Life: On Places, Painters, and Poets*. London: Faber and Faber, 2008) 214).

Dawn overpowering me past my own power of making;  
Glorious as west country dawns show, day's first most-sacred hour.  
No music in me fit that great life-in-flood awakening,  
To walk only, in other men's poetry  
Saying my heart in passion out, or deep musing.

(‘Dawns I Have Seen’, l. 11-15).

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