

Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Stigma of Meter

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Construed by critics as “always obscure” and “on the whole disappointing; . . . too often needlessly obscure, harsh, and perverse” (qtd. in Roberts 89, 111), the first edition of Gerard Manley Hopkins’s poems, published in 1918, baffled more readers than it converted. In September of 1926, I. A. Richards published a review in the *Dial* which begins: “Modern verse is perhaps more often too lucid than too obscure,” and makes a case for “some slight obscurity in its own right” (qtd. in Roberts 140, 141). Hopkins, wrenched out of his historical moment, was praised for his mastery: a mastery of obscurity in narrative, grammar, and, most importantly, meter. This metrical obscurity would surely repel what Richards disdainfully called the “light-footed reader” (qtd. in Roberts 141) who Richards imagines has been conditioned to expect a certain kind of clarity by the easy metrical poetry of the Edwardians and Georgians.

Even though Richards had no objections to Hopkins’s metrical obscurity, Richards was uncomfortable when faced with the physical form of meter, the mark that indicated Hopkins’s rhythm. In his 1929 book, *Practical Criticism*, Richards erases Hopkins’s mark over the word “will” in a line from the poem “Spring and Fall”: “And yet you will weep and know why” (9). Richards’s excuse for the erasure (indeed, he erases all the marks on Hopkins’s poem)—“to avoid a likely temptation to irrelevant discussions”—demonstrates a critical unwillingness to engage with meter’s material, historical, and spiritual presence (qtd. in Roberts 155).

ABSTRACT: This essay reconsiders Hopkins’s uses of the metrical mark—the physical, material mark on the page—that has been erased in many editions and critical considerations of his poetry. I argue that our engagement with the poet’s meter has missed the mark: it has failed to note Hopkins’s complicated relationship with (and resistance to) the physical mark, which acts as the indicator not only of his innovative sprung rhythm but also, more importantly, of his spiritual hopes for an English nation united (and disciplined) by meter. In *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, Hopkins struggles with the stigma of the metrical mark; words are made flesh, scored and scarred, and meter is transformed into spiritual and national allegory. The mark, then, is essential to understanding Hopkins’s metaphysics, his way of seeing words as things, things as words, and the stress that governs them both.

This line, if we reinsert the mark, gestures to its own possible reception. The alliterative “will,” “weep,” and “why,” demote the stress on “know,” so that the stanza prevents the reader from knowing why he or she *will*weep. We are commanded to recognize the “sights” (6) that bend our critical will to react, “by and by” (7). Richards effaces this reading, refusing even to recognize the metrical pun of the poem’s title—“Spring and Fall.”¹ By removing the mark, Richards, in effect, erases his own willingness to engage with meter on Hopkins’s specific historical and spiritual terms.

In Hopkins’s poems, journals, and sermons we see him figuring out the mark as not only the indicator of his innovative sprung rhythm but, more importantly, as an indicator of his spiritual hopes for the English language and for England. By reversing the tendency to read Hopkins’s poems for sound, my reading of *The Wreck of the Deutschland* (1918) argues that understanding Hopkins’s metrical marks is crucial to understanding Hopkins’s metaphysics, his way of seeing words as things, things as words, and the stress that governs them both.

During the last decades of the nineteenth century, a number of English poets and prosodists were concerned with the greatness of the English language and the role that poetry played in preserving that quality. Poetry was the symbol of the nation’s greatness in its highest form. For Hopkins, Robert Bridges, and Coventry Patmore, the forms of English meter were not only implicated in measuring English poetry but in measuring England’s character. In 1886, Hopkins wrote to Patmore, praising his poems as the kind that might be best suited to save England from the spiritual dismay it was spreading into the Empire. “Your poems,” Hopkins writes, “are a good deed done for the Catholic Church and another for England, for the British Empire.” He then asks, “What marked and striking excellence has England to shew or make her civilization attractive? . . . I hold that fine works of art . . . are really a great power in the world, an element of strength even to an empire” (*Further* 218-19). Hopkins’s letter uses the phrase “marked and striking” as if to emphasize that meter has become a crucial site for resolving dilemmas both personal and spiritual concerning England’s wavering Christianity. Hopkins’s idea of the marked and striking power of English poetry evolved over his lifetime into a philosophy that was influenced by his work in the classics, by his intense reading in philology, and by his spiritual struggles.

Hopkins’s concern with meter was also more markedly visual than even his own instructions have led us to believe. The visual nature of the English language was being debated in this period in philological circles,

a discourse in which Hopkins participated (Plotkin 74-145; Taylor 142-43, 168-71). The fascicles of the *New English Dictionary* (1884-1928) began to transform speech into standardized visual signs for sounds during the final decades of the nineteenth century, classifying and constructing an abstract idea of sound with symbols. Philologist Richard Chevenix Trench, an early editor of the *Dictionary*, had done a great deal to establish England's superiority through his moral and spiritual exploration of English etymology. His two texts, *On the Study of Words* (1851) and *English Past and Present* (1855), argued that the written history of English, inscribed in its letters, should in no way be subordinate to the mere sounds of words; the important ancestry of English words could only be represented in script:

A word exists as truly for the eye as for the ear, and in a highly advanced state of society, where reading is almost as universal as speaking, as much perhaps as the first as for the last, that in the *written* word moreover is the permanence and continuity of language and of learning, and the connection is most intimate of true orthography with all this, is affirmed in our words "letters," "literature," "unlettered," even as in other languages by words entirely corresponding to those. (117)

Trench made a case for textual philology as opposed to the popular study of English phonology. In text, the English language presented traceable etymological paths to the roots of a particularly English morality and character. In *On the Study of Words*, he wrote that language is a testament, a "faithful . . . record of the good and evil which in time past have been working in the minds and hearts of men," and that English may be considered "a moral barometer, which indicates and permanently marks the rise or fall of a nation's life. To study a people's language will be to study *them*" (40). Words "indicat[e]" or "permanently mar[k]" the "rise or fall of a nation's life," just as Patmore's poetry benefits the nation's life because of its marked and striking excellences.

Hopkins's reading in philology reinforced his thinking that the moral life of a culture could be allegorized in the written word. In 1878, two years before Hopkins read Trench, he considered the physical material of words in terms of sprung rhythm. In his essay "Rhythm and other Structural Parts of Rhetoric—Verse," Hopkins writes: "we may think of words as heavy bodies. . . . [E]very visible palpable body has a centre of gravity round which it is in balance and a centre of illumination . . . up to which it is lighted and down from which it is shaded. . . . English is of this kind, the accent of stress strong" (*Journals* 269). The importance of perceiving words visually, as bodies, is directly related to Hopkins's meta-

physical theories of inscape and instress. How is instress (the balance, the illumination) related to the metrical mark for stress—the actual, physical mark for accent that Hopkins scored above words in his poems? And how does that mark play a part in his hopes for the nation?

In Hopkins's early diaries, his observation of patterns in the natural world precipitated the theory of inscape and instress. Put simply by Glen Everett, "inscape is the unified complex of characteristics that gives each thing its uniqueness and that differentiates it from other things," and instress is "the force of being that holds the inscape together." Instress is the impulse or force of a pattern that "carries it into the mind of the beholder" (Everett). In his 1868 "notebook on the history of Greek philosophy, etc.," Hopkins begins to define the instress of language, of words. He writes: "A word then had three terms belonging to it, 3 *opoi*, or moments—its prepossession of feeling; its definition, abstraction, vocal expression or other utterance; and its application, 'extension,' the concrete things coming under it" (*Journals* 127). In other words, a word possesses a subjective state, is a thing itself, and names something in the objective world. In the next essay in his notebook, on Parmenides, Hopkins further defines language as the very stress or force that carries the mind over into things, and things over into the mind. "Stress" is crucially related to the copula "to be." He writes that without it "there would be no bridge, no stem of stress between us and things to bear us out and carry the mind over: without stress we might not and could not say / Blood is red" (*Journals* 129). He continues: "Being and thought are the same. The truth in thought is Being, stress, and each word is one way of acknowledging Being and each sentence by its copula *is* (or its equivalent) the utterance and assertion of it" (129). When stress is uttered, a word becomes being. By emphasizing the word *stress* as a particular assertion of being, Hopkins implies that language, uttered in a certain way and perceived in a certain way, becomes an assertion of being. And what measures language more markedly than metrical stress?

From Hopkins's journals we know that he considered the graphic mark as a kind of being on its own, possessing its own possibility of inscape or uniqueness. Patterns in nature possess inscape and are coded with the divine. A journal passage from 1871 considers the power that looking at the mark can have on a body. He writes:

Mesmerised a duck with chalk lines drawn from her beak sometimes level and sometimes forwards on a black table. They explain that the bird keeping the abiding offscape of the hand grasping her neck fancies she is still held down and

cannot lift her head as long as she looks at the chalk line, which she associates with the power that holds her. This duck lifted her head at once when I put it down on the table without chalk. But this seems inadequate. It is most likely the fascinating instress of the straight white stroke. (*Journals* 207)

The fascination of the chalk line creates the effect of stress on the bird—the instress of a “straight white stroke” has power over the being that perceives it. Hopkins marked his meter with a blue chalk stroke. His attention to the stroke of the white chalk shows his concern with the potential power of metrical signs—here a power that holds as long as it is being visually perceived.

In Hopkins’s correspondence with Coventry Patmore, he defines metrical stress explicitly, in order to counter Patmore’s notion that stress is somehow imaginary:

Stress appears so elementary an idea as does not need and scarcely allows of definition; still, this may be said of it, that it is the making of a thing more, or making it markedly, what it already is; it is the bringing out of its nature. Accordingly, stress on a syllable (which is English accent proper) is the making much of that syllable, more than of the others; stress on a word or sentence (which is emphasis) is the making much of that word or sentence, more than the others. (*Further* 179)²

Stress finally emerges, here, as a kind of material manifestation of accent. But Hopkins was reluctant to use marks for accent at first. Hopkins wrote that he put his poems to paper “with repugnance” and that relying on a graphic sign for stress seemed to put an unnatural pressure on the words and on the poem (*Letters* 379). Caught between two trends in philology—the belief that the word was a sacred history of England and should be left intact as a historical artifact, and the contrary belief that words should represent the sound of speech—Hopkins was anxious about the marks that littered his manuscript pages. His simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from the physical mark was reinforced by Bridges and by the editors who rejected his long poem *The Wreck of the Deutschland* because of its mess of marks.³ The poem, therefore, is a commemoration of five Franciscan nuns who died in the shipwreck, but it is also a commemoration of Hopkins’s struggle to reckon with the stigma of the metrical mark, a struggle in which he transforms stress from a mere external indicator of accent into a defining element of his conception of meter as both spiritual and national allegory.

Though the poem is too long to discuss in its entirety, a few representative stanzas will show how Hopkins “mak[es] much” of his

marked words and how, in his consideration of stress, we can see him marking the body of English and England for salvation. The poem begins, daring us to master its new meter—sprung rhythm:

Thou mastering me
 God! giver of breath and bread;
 Wórl'd's stránd, swáy of the séa;
 Lord of living and dead;
 Thou has bóund bónes and véins in me, fástened me flésh,
 And áfter it álmost únmade, what with dréad,
 Thy doing: and dost thou touch me afresh?
 Óver agáin I féel thy fínger and fínd thee. (1-8)⁴

Here, as we can see, Hopkins physically marks the stresses in lines 3, 5, 6, and 8, but we are given no hints as to where to place the two stresses on the first line's "Thou mastering me." Hopkins thus leads generations of critics to wonder whether he sees himself as equal to the Lord (if "thou" and "me" both carry stress); whether he is attempting to alliterate and allude to Anglo-Saxon strong-stress meter ("mast" and "me" carry stress); or whether he might be punning on other meanings in the syllables with his stresses ("Thou" and "mast") to show that the Lord is both the master of the poet and the "mast" of the ship. We know, from his introduction, that each line carries a different number of stressed syllables, but we are not given any indication as to where these syllables occur in each line.⁵ The stresses are interpretive unless Hopkins marks them for us, and our possible interpretations have both philological and theological consequences.

In the second stanza, Hopkins asserts that all things are "laced with the fire of stress" (16). The fourth and fifth stanzas connect Christ's mystery with instress and the patterns of metrical stress. This is in the penultimate line of stanza four: Christ's gift is stressed, as are the words that lead to it: "a préssure, a prínciple" (32). The stress of Christ's gift, the pressing burden of it, is a theme of the entire poem. The stress of the word "prince" in "príncipe," with its implication that Christ is the prince, hints at the multi-dimensionality of language that Hopkins often exploits. Stanza five goes on: "Since, thóugh he is únder the wórl'd's spléndour and wónder, / His mystery múst be instréssed, stressed; / For I greet him the days that I meet him, and bless when I understand" (38-40). The second-to-last line of stanza five is missing Hopkins's fourth marked emphasized stress; it is as if Hopkins knew that the reader would know to stress "stressed" of all words, and he chose to leave off the blue chalk

mark. Hopkins suggests, using stress marks, that the mystery of Christ is potentially readable. By “mete-ing” or measuring Christ in verse with the appropriate stress, Hopkins is able to greet Christ.

Indeed, Christ’s measure and judgment and the inverse, “measuring” Christ, take a violent turn in stanza six:

Not out of his bliss
Sprints the stress felt
Nor first from heaven (and few know this)
Swings the stroke dealt—
Stroke and a stress that stars and storms deliver,
That guilt is hushed by, hearts are flushed by and melt—
But it rides time like riding a river
(And here the faithful waver, the faithless fable and miss). (41-48)

Even Christ’s anger, his stress and strokes, are cyclical, metrical: his anger rides time like riding a river. The penultimate line of the stanza carries the only indicated stresses, as if to emphasize the marked regularity of Christ’s eventual rage. “The stroke dealt” is not only a blow from the Lord but also the “strike” of stress above the line, particularly noticeable in this primarily monosyllabic stanza. The parenthetical final line, “and here the faithful waver, the faithless fable and miss,” might indicate the true and false readers of Hopkins’s meter—the faithless might miss the beats he intends, whereas the faithful will catch them, though they will be forced to “waver.” The line also refers to the process of marking the “strokes of stress” on a poem about divine transformation, itself a process in which the poet wavers.

Wavering over whether or not to mark, or indeed, *how* to mark the divine word is writ large in the example of the nun’s death. In stanza seventeen, the women are “wailing” (134). The dissolution of spoken words is evident in the accusation of stanza eighteen, “make words break for me here all alone, do you” (139) and in the desperation of stanza nineteen: “Sister, a sister calling / A master, her master and mine!” (145-46). Hopkins likens himself to the nun, here, serving the same master, yet speech breaks and will fail them both. The stanza continues: “but shé that wéather sees óne thing, óne”:

Has óne fetch ín her: she réars hersélf to divíne
E’ars, and the cáll of the táll nún
To the mén in the tóps and the táckle rode óver the stórms brawling.
(150-52)

The nun is calling out to her “master,” the Lord, but her voice is drowned out by the sound of the storm. There is vision but no hearing, despite the repetition of “ear” in “rears” and “ears.” The word “E’ars” is broken, the metrical mark to the side. By isolating the “E” of “E’ars,” Hopkins introduces a pun on “ars,” on arsis, the Greek word we (mis) understand to mean the stressed syllable.⁶ By emphasizing the marked, stressed syllables in the stanza, we learn that Hopkins’s marked words “one,” “one,” “one” tell us precisely what the nun is about to become. She is both “nun” and “none,” one part of a larger pattern of inscape that marks her for transformation into the divine.

The transformation foreshadowed here is one in which Hopkins transforms the nuns, who are martyred by God (the “mártyr-máster,” as he is called in line 167), into holy marks. Hopkins allegorizes the five nuns who perish in the wreck, just as there are five wounds of Christ and five marks of the stigmata. With Christ watching, the poem narrates the transformation of the nuns’ bodies into text: “in thy síght / Storm flákes were scróll-leaved flówers” (167–68). Flakes, for Hopkins, means sea-flints but also flesh. It is the nuns’ flesh that is “scróll-leaved,” inscribed by their own salvation. Hopkins turns directly to Christ’s marked flesh in stanza 22:

Five! The finding and sake
 And cipher of suffering Christ
 Márk, the márk is of mán’s máke
 And the word of it Sacrificed,
 But he scores it in scarlet himself on his own bespoken
 Before-time-taken, dearest prizèd and priced—
 Stigma, signal, cinquefoil token
 For léttering of the lámbs fléece, rúddyng of the róse- fláke. (169–76)

The poet must mark the word, both sacrificing and guaranteeing its sanctity by doing so. Hopkins used blue chalk to “score” the poem, his own “bespoken” verses, knowing that the marks both litter and “letter” the purity of any poem he writes. By this point, two-thirds of the way into the poem, we might begin to see the stressed words in the fifth and sixth lines of the stanza—the two lines which are required to carry five stressed syllables by the rule of Hopkins’s stanza form: “score,” “scar,” “self,” “own,” “spoke”; and “fore,” “take,” “dear,” “prized,” “priced.” These two sets of five words spell out the mark of sacrifice and salvation. All of the words in the second-to-last line (“stigma,” “signal,” “cinquefoil,” “token”) are synonyms for the chalked-in mark, the arsis. The chalk mark hovers over “man”

whose “mark” must “let” the “lamb’s” “fleece,” must turn “ruddy,” so that he, the man, mankind, might be saved. The marked stress on the “let” of “lettering” emphasizes the blood-letting that comes from scoring the scarlet, a metaphor linking metrical form to sacrifice and the crucifixion.

The “róse-fláke” of Christ’s flesh is more than a mere “ruddying” of the figure of Christ. In the word “flake” we can read deeper understanding of Hopkins’s philological joining of the word “flesh” with the word “cut.” The word “flesh” cannot be separated from the mark, the stigma of meter, above it. In his early diaries, where Hopkins records numerous etymologies—often false—he considers the words flesh, or flake and strike, or cut, to be related.⁷ With this in mind, the last line of the first stanza bears new significance: “Óver agáin I féel thy fínger and fínd thée.” Over the letters is the whip, the punishing spiritual devotion between Christ and the poet, between the word and its stress. The poem has been “shaped or produced by such touches” as the poet’s hand applies (*Journals* II).

The final stanza of the poem addresses and emphasizes an imagined community in thirty-three stressed syllables, more marks than in any other stanza:

Remémber us in the róads, the heaven-háven of the
rewárd:
Our Kíng back, Oh upon Énglish sóuls!
Let him éaster in us, be a dáyspring to the dímnness of us, be a
crímson-cresseted east,
More bríghtening her, ráre-dear Britáin, as his réign rólls,
Príde, rose, prínce, hero of us, hígh-príest
OÛr héart’s charity’s héarth’s fíre, oÛr thóughts’ chivalry’s
thróng’s Lórd. (275–80)

Here the religious and national are reconnected. If the word is flesh, then this stanza imagines an English word, the flesh of English citizens whose salvation must be marked. The “king” is not upon English “soil,” but upon English souls. Reading Hopkins’s marks here, we see that the metaphysical transformation of the English language and the religious conversion of England are bound by the discipline of this new meter. The process that the poem performs, of wavering into faith, is bound to hopes for a national meter, a kind of instinct that Hopkins tries to bring back to England as a whole. By performing the process of reckoning with the words as flesh and that flesh as scored and scarred, the poem is

riddled with its own anxiety about the necessary wavering that “reading” those marks requires. If we have wavered, with the marks, into the right understanding, the stigma will be transferred from the page and into our minds and effect a kind of transformation (or a verse-conversion). Meter is a stigma, but the anxiety it produces might resolve itself, if we follow the marks, in a final unity between the spiritual and the national. I. A. Richards, in the post-war moment of 1929, refuses this transformation by simply erasing the mark. By showing the genealogy of stress and its material manifestation in the “mark” in and on Hopkins’s writing, I hope to re-historicize the critical wavering with meter in Hopkins’s period and in our own. My larger project, of which this paper is a small part, seeks to reveal meter as a complex cultural category—not simply to transcend meter’s stigma but to understand historically its origins.

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NOTES

¹To be fair, Richards excises the titles of all the poems he printed in *Practical Criticism*, but he avoids referencing the pun even as an indicator of possible metrical readings. From Hopkins’s 1880 version of the poem: “Áh, ás the héart 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” (5-9) (*Poetical* 166-67).

²Hopkins continues: “Also what we emphasize we say clearer, more distinctly, and in fact to this is due the slurring, in English, of unaccented syllables; which is the beauty of the language, so that only misguided people say Dev-it, six-pence distinctly” (*Further* 179).

³Foreshadowing Hopkins’s reception by Richards, Bridges removed almost all of Hopkins’s metrical marks when he fair-copied the poems. Bridges would then mail them back to his friend, for “corrections,” and Hopkins would inevitably add the marks again. In 1885, ten years after composing *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, Hopkins still struggled with the question of marking: “This is my difficulty,” he writes, “what marks to use and when to use them: they are so much needed and yet so objectionable” (*Letters* 215). Hopkins volunteered to remove the marks when the poem was rejected by the Catholic magazine *The Month*. Bridges did not print them in either the (slightly changed) excerpt in his 1917 *Spirit of Man* or in the 1918 edition of *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*.

⁴There is a long story I will not tell here of the loss of the original autograph, the proven authenticity of Bridges’s faithful recording (twice) of Hopkins’s entire poem, and an Infrared Image Converter used by tireless scholar Norman MacKenzie to determine the marks that he then restores to the poem in his excellent *Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (1990), which is my source text for this version of the poem. I reproduce the stanzas as Bridges and Hopkins reproduce them, with spaces to indicate the number of beats per line; the stanzas lean to the right, like a large mark for stress when perceived from far away.

⁵Hopkins's introduction reads, in part, "Be pleased, reader, since the rhythm in which the following poem is written is new, strongly to mark the beats of the measure, according to the number belonging to each of the eight lines in the stanza, as the indentation guides the eye, namely two and three and four and three and five and five and four and six" (118).

⁶Arsis means "the act of raising or lifting" the foot and thesis the stomping down of the foot, corresponding in Greek quantitative meter to the short and long part of the metrical foot. In Latin accentual verse, the meaning was reversed: arsis came to mean the long part of the foot and thesis the shorter. This misinterpretation held when English accentual verse translated short and long feet into unaccented and accented syllables.

⁷Hopkins writes: "*Flich, fillip, slip, fleck, flake*. *Flick* means to touch or strike lightly as with the end of a whip, a finger, etc. To *fleck* is the next tone above flick, still meaning to touch or strike lightly (and leave a mark of the touch or stroke) but in a broader less slight manner. Hence substantively a *fleck* is a piece of light, colour, substance, etc. looking as though shaped or produced by such touches. *Flake* is a broad and decided *fleck*, a thin plate of something, the tone above it. Their connection is more clearly seen in the applications of the words to natural objects than in explanations. It would seem that *fillip* generally pronounced *flip* is a variation of *flick*, which however seems connected with *fly, flee, flit*, meaning to make fly off. Key to meaning of *flick, fleck, and flake* is that of striking or cutting off the surface of the thing; in *flick* (as to flick off a fly) something little or light from the surface, while *flake* is a thin scale of surface. *Flay* is therefore connected, perhaps *flitch*." (*Journals* 11).

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