

Direttore Responsabile: Domenico Cara  
Supplemento a:  
"Tracce - trimestrale di scrittura e  
ricerca letteraria"  
Edizioni Tracce  
Via Vittorio Veneto  
65100 PESCARA

ISBN 88-86676-18-2

*Volume stampato con il contributo del Dipartimento di Scienze Linguistiche  
e Letterarie dell'Università degli Studi "G. d'Annunzio" di Chieti*

**RSV**  
**Rivista di Studi Vittoriani**

---

Anno II

Luglio 1997

Fascicolo 4

---

**Direttore**

Francesco Marroni

**Comitato di Redazione**

Andrea Mariani, Gabriella Micks  
Leo Marchetti, Nick De Marco, Clara Mucci

**Comitato Scientifico**

Ian Campbell (University of Edinburgh)  
J.A.V. Chapple (University of Hull)  
Pierre Coustillas (Université de Lille)  
Cristina Giorcelli (Università di Roma III)  
Jacob Korg (University of Washington)  
Franco Marucci (Università di Venezia)  
Rosemarie Morgan (Yale University)  
Norman Page (University of Nottingham)  
Carlo Pagetti (Università di Torino)  
Alan Shelston (University of Manchester)

**Segreteria di Redazione**

Emanuela Ettore, Paola Partenza

*Con la collaborazione scientifica del C.U.S.V.E.  
(Centro Universitario di Studi Vittoriani e Edoardiani - Pescara)*

## SOMMARIO

### SAGGI

<b>James Gibson</b> — <i>Jude the Obscure:</i> A Centennial Tribute	Pag. 5
<b>Jacob Korg</b> — Browning and Italian Artists	" 25
<b>Ian Campbell</b> — Coming to Terms with the Past: The Carlyle Bicentenary	" 39
<b>Brian Arkins</b> — Style in the Poetry of Hopkins	" 51

### CONTRIBUTI

<b>Chiara Ercolani</b> — Il tema della ricezione nel <i>Sartor Resartus</i> di Carlyle	" 73
<b>Mariaconcetta Costantini</b> — Hopkins and the Scientific Dilemma	" 85
<b>Paul Tucker</b> — The Use of the Definite Article in the Fiction of Walter Pater	" 105
<b>Diego Saglia</b> — Epic or Domestic?: Felicia Hemans's Heroic Poetry and the Myth of the Victorian Poetess	" 125
<b>Maurizio Ascari</b> — The Sharp Black Line: la "chiusura" testuale nella teoria jamesiana del romanzo	" 149

Recensioni e schede di Gaetano D'Elia, Nick De Marco, Fiorenzo Fantaccini, Mary Kane, Nicoletta Pireddu, Miriam Sette, Anna Enrichetta Soccio, Mariaconcetta Costantini, Jacob Korg.

Mariaconcetta Costantini

### Hopkins and the Scientific Dilemma

"Is intellectual Science, or  
the Bible, truth; and All Truth?"  
(Charles Kingsley, *Letters and Memories*)

1. *Science as explosion: the Victorian epistemic change.* In *Kul'tura I Vzryv*, Jurij Lotman provides a comprehensive model of culture. He identifies unpredictability with the propulsive agent of cultural transformations and labels all the processes of change as either gradual or explosive. These latter, which always start unexpectedly, are responsible for the progress of mankind: they trigger off violent chain-reactions culminating in vast epistemic crises. No real advancement is given without the questioning of previous cultural models<sup>1</sup>. In the same essay, Lotman recognizes the important role of scientific discoveries, whose impact on society is equated with that of great artistic innovations: "the new in science and art is the actualization of the unexpected"<sup>2</sup>.

This statement can be applicable to the complexity of mid-Victorian culture, whose development of new forms of knowledge, and scientific knowledge in particular, effected a series of philosophical and aesthetic displacements. In the late 1850s, Darwin's evolutionary theory (expounded in *The Origin of Species*, 1859) blended with the new hypotheses and discoveries made in astronomy, geology, chemistry, and other scientific fields. As a result, the traditional view of the universe was shaken at its foundations and gradually receded. And what

<sup>1</sup> Jurij M. Lotman, *Kul'tura I Vzryv*, Moskva, Gnosis, 1993 (Italian translation, *La cultura e l'esplosione. Prevedibilità e imprevedibilità*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1993 pp. 17-18).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18, my translation.

Mariaconcetta Costantini

acquired a further evidence was the scientific picture of a vast mechanism of cause and effect, acting on physical laws that hid no Providential design — which seemed to definitely oust the Christian notions of Creation and Salvation.

The emergence of a non-teleological world was directly connected with the question of arbitrary significance: many artists were bewildered by a growing sense of ambiguity and felt a strong need to re-establish permanent categories of thought and language. Among these, Gerard Manley Hopkins attempted to work out a system that might cope with the exigencies of scientific rationalism, while resisting the eradication of the old theological order. Both his prose and his poetry display this attempt to mediate between two opposing drives: on one hand, the urgency to adopt a new epistemological method and experiment through the potentiality of language; on the other, the wish to counteract the current of doubt and scepticism that invested religion and the very conception of man.

2. *Evolution or metaphysics? The myth of the origins of man.*

During his University studies, the young Hopkins was influenced by the atmosphere of sceptical materialism that reigned in Oxford<sup>3</sup>. The combination of Darwin's evolutionism with the atomist theory derived from Lucretius generated an anti-metaphysical view of life: natural selection and cosmic events were seen as products of random variations. Several animated debates between scientists and orthodox theologians ensued from the questioning of God's creative power. Hopkins responded actively to the controversy and tried to find a personal solution to the problems posed by atomism in philosophy and science. In his essay "The Probable Future of Metaphysics" (1867) he wrote: "It will always be possible to shew how science is atomic, not to be grasped and held together,

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed account of the scientific-religious debates that took place in Oxford in the 1860s, and of Hopkins' response to them, see Tom Zaniello, *Hopkins in the Age of Darwin*, Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 1988.



part of the composition. Here the verses acquire an aphoristic and descriptive quality: the long series of adjectives and concrete nouns, which are meant to convey the image of an extremely variegated nature, and the use of specialised vocabulary (<sub>3</sub> *stipple*; <sub>5</sub> *fold, fallow*; <sub>6</sub> *tackle and trim*), testify to the poet's choice of a technical, rather than religious, register as a privileged mode of poetic expression. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that in line 8 the speaker asks a brief, but meaningful question about the mechanisms of natural differentiation: "(who knows how?)". In combining a marker of modality (*how*) with a present tense referring to knowledge (*knows*), he implicitly adopts the methodology of science, whose distinguishing features are the synthetic formulation of general statements and questions, and the pivotal role of epistemological issues (i.e. the investigation of cause-effect relationships suggested by the adverb *how*).

The blend of two antithetical registers in the sonnet is further reinforced by the eye-anagram *who = how*, which equates the idea of inscrutability (nobody seems to know the mysteries of the world) with that of analytic procedure (the rational search for laws and explanations). Confronted with the dilemma of the coexistence of opposites in nature, the speaker draws from both religion and science the means to examine and represent reality. The detailed observation of the outer world and its adequate representation in language are the first steps towards knowledge: hence the sequences of alliterations (such as, <sub>3</sub> *plotted and pieced*; <sub>7</sub> *fickle, freckled*; <sub>9</sub> *swift, slow; sweet, sour*), the many compounds (like <sub>1</sub> *couple-colour* or <sub>10</sub> *fathers-forth*), the neologisms obtained by affixation (<sub>9</sub> *adazzle*), and the lexemes meant to capture the essence of colours (<sub>2</sub> *rose-moles*, <sub>4</sub> *Fresh-firecoal*). But no principle of unity and significance is, as far as Hopkins was concerned, given without religion. The world, which consists of discrete objects and attributes, is held together by God: He is the only One who can encompass multiplicity and diversity.

Immutable and eternal (<sub>10</sub> *whose beauty is past change*), the divinity described in the poem actualizes, in a sense, the scientists' holistic dream of order. In lines 2-9 the speaker analyses and renders in details the composite nature of reality. His observation of the four elements (enclosed between two

dashes in lines 2-5), of human products and activities (line 6), and of the wide variety of life resulting from natural selection (lines 7-9), is functional to the investigation of the secret relationships between opposites: "(who knows how?)". In the last two lines, however, he seems unable to supply a deterministic answer to his question: he can only project his wish for meaning into a metaphysical dimension, where a divine agent guarantees with His presence the synthesis of antithetical notions (He joins the *material* to the *non-material*, *change* to *immutability*, *impermanence* to *eternity*).

Quite significantly, God appears as a benevolent Creator — He is the Father of every creature and object. The verbal compound *fathers-forth*, which connotes natural selection in terms of generational descent, evokes a crucial dilemma: that of the origins of life. The problem of origins, which was posed by the 'explosive' theory of evolutionism and tormented most Victorian intellectuals, is solved by Hopkins with the adaptation of pre-Darwinian paradigms to the new reality unveiled by science. The poet combines the notion of Analogy between the Book of Nature and the Bible, argued by Bishop Butler in the eighteenth century and later developed by the Tractarians<sup>6</sup>, with the image of a Great Chain of Being with God at the top. As a result, he obtains a hierarchy of living forms — earthly and supernatural —, whose arrangement reflects both the idea of natural selection and that of a Providential design. To justify the discordant degrees of perfection in the evolutionary chain, he conceives of a temporal duality in Creation: "There is therefore in the works of creation an order of time, as the order of the Six Days, and another order, the order of intention [...] In the order of intention, 'other things on the face of the earth' are created after man; the more perfect first, the less after [...] And in this way Christ is the firstborn among creatures"<sup>7</sup>. If Christ is the

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed treatment of the subject, see G. B. Tennyson, *Victorian Devotional Poetry. The Tractarian Mode*, Cambridge, Mass., and London, Harvard University Press, 1981; see also Zaniello, *op. cit.*, pp. 70-72 and *passim*.

<sup>7</sup> "Creation and Redemption. The Great Sacrifice" (1881), in *The Sermons and Devotional Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Christopher Devlin, S. J., London, Oxford University Press, 1959, p. 196 (Hereafter *Sermons*).

Mariaconcetta Costantini

first intention of God's generative will, his antagonist — the Devil — stands for death and immobility. Traditionally represented as a snake or a dragon, Satan symbolises in the poet's view "one who aiming at every perfection ends by being a monster, a 'fright'"<sup>8</sup>. The Devil's exceptional combination of many diverse qualities, which turns out to be a frightful aberration, is deliberately emphasized to show that only God presides over Creation and gives it finality. At the same time, the reptile images employed in connection with Satan offer a peculiar solution to Hopkins' riddle of how to blend theology with evolution: "Now among the vertebrates the reptile go near to combine the qualities of the other classes in themselves and are, I think, taken by the Evolutionists as nearest the original vertebrate stem and as the point of departure for the rest. In this way clearly dragons are represented as gathering up the attributes of many creatures: [...]"<sup>9</sup>.

3. *Science and teleology.* Hopkins' peculiar treatment of the myth of origins is deeply related to his view of Incarnation. "[A]ll the multitudinous degrees of perfection in created things combine like some mathematical formulae to express the intrinsic degree of Christ's created perfection. Indeed mathematical or musical terms would be better than logical ones to describe this mystical unity"<sup>10</sup>. In defining Christ's beauty, the poet explicitly refers to science as the most suitable means of rendering His "mystical unity" of body and spirit. The metaphor of the scale ("multitudinous degrees of perfection") is once again adopted to explore the composite and contradictory nature of reality: despite its arrangement in a metaphysical order, the secret mechanisms of the world are said to be reproducible through the language of mathematics, one of whose basic principles is, quite paradoxically, that of

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Sermons*, Appendix II, p. 351.

monoreferentiality<sup>11</sup>.

An emblematic connection between Creation and Incarnation is drawn in the first stanza of Hopkins' well-known poem "The Wreck of the Deutschland" (1875):

I  
Thou mastering me  
God! giver of breath and bread;  
World's strand, sway of the sea;  
Lord of living and dead:  
Thou hast bound bones and veins in me, fastened me flesh, 5  
And after it almost unmade, what with dread,  
Thy doing: and dost thou touch me afresh?  
Over again I feel thy finger and find thee (P, 51).

The interaction between the speaker and God is immediately suggested in the opening sentence ("Thou mastering me / God!"), whose unwonted construction highlights the intrinsic relatedness of the two pronouns (the idea of continuity implied by the gerund *mastering* acts as a tie between *Thou* and *me*). The sequence *Thou—me—God* establishes here a circularity, which is the index of an all-encompassing divinity. In the second line, the emphatic assertion of a divine presence is followed by some impressive images of synthesis. God includes all discrete elements within Himself: He is earth and water (<sub>3</sub>*World's strand, sway of the sea*), dispenser of life and death (line 4). The holistic quality of the divinity is enhanced by the paronomastic sequence <sub>2</sub>*breath and bread*, which equates the Biblical image of the Creator<sup>12</sup> with that of Christ's Transubstantiation (the *bread* of the Eucharist changed into His flesh). Exactly because of His dual nature (He

<sup>11</sup> "This principle of monoreferentiality is seen as fundamental in specialized literature, as a close relationship between word and referent leaves little possibility for connotation or other indirect meaning" (Maurizio Gotti, *Robert Boyle and the Language of Science*, Milano, Angelo Guerini, 1996, p. 24).

<sup>12</sup> "And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the *breath of life*; and man became a living soul" (*Genesis*, 2:7, my italics).

is Father and Son, spirit and man), God gives scope to human life. The Incarnation, which is envisaged in the same act of Creation — the verbs of tactile perception *bound*, *fastened*, *touch*, *feel* and *find* and the references to the human body stress the idea of corporality —, establishes a significant link between the Maker and His creatures. In other words, the speaker's assimilation to the divinity denies man's random placement in the Great Chain of Being and testifies to the existence of a grand teleological scheme, in which the Origin is inextricably intertwined with the End (the hoped-for Resurrection exemplified by Christ's Passion).

Functional though it is to the conveyance of a theological message, the physical imagery of line 5 also shows the strong lure exerted by science on Hopkins' imagination. God's act of assembling different bodily parts into one living creature evokes the image of a scientist at work, which can be seen as an allusion to the perils of man's experimentation<sup>13</sup>. What the poet implies here is that anatomy, and science at large, loses its threatening connotations only if applied to the perception and appreciation of a divine — and not a human — product.

A significant link between science and teleology is established in one of Hopkins' last poems: "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection" (1888). This long sonnet with *coda* opens with some impressive natural images: in the first lines, the three masses of air, earth, and water are represented in their unending processes of change. The agent of transformation is the Heraclitean fire (*nature's bonfire*), an

<sup>13</sup> A similar, albeit 'humanized' image of creation, is present in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), which is centred on the dangerous powers of science. While describing his construction of the monster, Victor Frankenstein insists on the same bodily details that are mentioned in Hopkins' verse: "I collected *bones* from charnel-houses; and disturbed, with profane fingers, the tremendous secrets of the human frame [...] His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! — Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath [...]" (*Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus*, ed. M. K. Joseph, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 1985, pp. 54-55, 57, my italics).

inextinguishable fuel that acts both as physical constituent and spiritual principle (it also forms the human soul). In line 10 the stress is definitely laid on man:

[...]  
But quench her bonniest, dearest<sup>1</sup> to her, her clearest-selvèd  
spark 10  
Man, how fast his firedint,<sup>1</sup> his mark on mind, is gone!  
Both are in an unfathomable, all is in an enormous dark  
Drowned. O pity and indig<sup>1</sup> nation! Manshape, that shone  
Sheer off, disseveral, a star,<sup>1</sup> death blots black out, nor mark  
Is any of him at all so stark 15  
But vastness blurs and time<sup>1</sup> beats level. Enough! the Resur-  
rection,  
A heart's-clarion! Away grief's gasping,<sup>1</sup> joyless days, dejection.  
Across my foundering deck shone  
A beacon, an eternal beam.<sup>1</sup> Flesh fade, and mortal trash  
Fall to the residuary worm;<sup>1</sup> world's wildfire, leave but ash: 20  
In a flash, at a trumpet crash,  
I am all at once what Christ is,<sup>1</sup> since he was what I am, and  
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd,<sup>1</sup> patch, matchwood, immortal  
diamond,  
Is immortal diamond (P, 105-106).

Described in terms of luminosity (<sub>10</sub> *clearest-selvèd spark*, <sub>11</sub> *firedint*, <sub>13</sub> *shone*, <sub>14</sub> *star*), man consists of the same ignitable essence as the elements, which makes him an easy prey of the endless cycle of permutation. The antithesis *light/darkness*, activated by the numerous references to invisibility (<sub>12</sub> *an enormous dark*, <sub>14</sub> *death blots black out*, <sub>16</sub> *blurs*), is an effective reminder of human vulnerability and transience: it conceals the frightful presence of death and annihilation. In contrast to Heraclitus' thought, which maintains that even the soul-fire is doomed to dissolve in water (<sub>13</sub> *Drowned*), a positive event of rebirth is here introduced: <sub>16</sub> *Resurrection*. The tension between *eternal* and *mortal* (line 19) is represented through the evocation of the semantic field of *glow*: on one hand, there is the everlasting light of Resurrection (which is significantly compared to a revitalizing

light for guidance: <sup>19</sup>*A beacon, an eternal beam*), on the other the perishable fire of nature (whose connotation of decay is stressed by the alliteration <sup>21</sup>*worm; world's wildfire*).

From a linguistic angle, the chiasmic structure of line 22, the iteration of the copula ("I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am"), and the verbal play <sup>22</sup>*I am, and =* <sup>23,24</sup>*diamond* emphasize the crucial role of Incarnation in the teleological design outlined by the speaker. The idea of interchangeability between man and Christ (both consisting of a mortal and immortal essence), is further reinforced by the phonetic structure of line 23, whose lexemes modulate into one another by means of alliteration, assonance, and paronomasia: "Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond"<sup>14</sup>. The gradual modification of sounds, which leads to the equation *Jack = diamond* (i.e. man = Christ), resembles here the formula of some chemical reaction reproduced in its single stages — a formula that implies both the identity and the differentiation of the original and the final substances.

The scientific intertext underlying the poem is also suggested by the axis <sup>20</sup>*ash* — <sup>23</sup>*matchwood* — <sup>23,24</sup>*diamond*, which exemplifies Hopkins' poetic and theological use of chemistry. As Haggo has ingeniously pointed out, the poet employs his knowledge of the properties and forms of matter — the chemical identity of charcoal and diamond — to reconcile ancient Greek thought (Heraclitus' view of the state of flux in the universe) with the Christian doctrine of Resurrection. "If we understand matchwood as the charcoal of a burnt match-stick, then matchwood and diamond are at once radically different and identical [...] Furthermore, as charcoal can be converted into

<sup>14</sup> This phonetic convergence has been underlined by different critics. See Jacob Korg, "Hopkins's Linguistic Deviations", *PMLA*, 92, 5 (October 1977), pp. 977-986, here p. 979; Michael Sprinker, "A Counterpoint of Dissonance": *The Aesthetics and Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980, pp. 32-33, 62-63; and Rachel Salmon, "Frozen Fire: the Paradoxical Equation of 'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection'", *The Hopkins Quarterly*, 12, 3-4 (October 1985-January 1986), pp. 65-79, here p. 75.

diamond, so can mortal man be made immortal, and fire is a fitting image for the agency of both these changes"<sup>15</sup>. No less to the point, the sonnet's title is moulded as a hypothesis to be debated and turned into a theory. Its unwonted form confirms Hopkins' adoption of the language and the standardized procedure of science, which are regarded as especially noteworthy in his process of exploration of ontological and religious dilemmas.

4. *The ugly face of progress*. Welcome though it was to the Victorians, the notion of progress concealed the frightful spectre of corruption and decay. The negative implications of Darwin's theory (advancement in the biological chain also entailed its dark reverse) generated a debate on retrogressive evolution, which found an early formulation in Ray Lankester's *Degeneration: A Chapter in Darwinism* (1880) and successively led to a grotesque proliferation of fictional dystopias<sup>16</sup>. This general fear of regress found its justification in the perception of the spoiling effects of technology and industrialization: man's challenge to nature produced an impending sense of catastrophe that negated the euphoric presumptions of Darwinian anthropocentrism (the idea of human beings as the culminating point of evolutionary change).

Hopkins' sensitivity to the dreary consequences of progress can be found in both his prose and his verse. In "Binsey Poplars" (1879), for instance, he describes nature as the helpless victim of human brutality: "Since country is so tender / To touch, her being so slender, / That, like this sleek and seeing ball / But a prick will make no eye at all, / Where we, even where we mean / To mend her we end her" (P, 78-79, lines 12-

<sup>15</sup> D. C. Haggio, "Hopkins' 'immortal diamond': A Poetic Use of Science", *The Hopkins Quarterly*, 7, 3 (Fall 1980), p. 91.

<sup>16</sup> The image of a degenerated man is at the basis of late-Victorian dystopias, such as H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds*. An accurate treatment of the theme of regress in biology and literature is provided by Peter Morton in *The Vital Science*, London, Allen and Unwin, 1984, pp. 84-117.



Hopkins and the Scientific Dilemma

Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings  
(P, 66).

What emerges in the first two quatrains is the contrast between the magnificence of the world, which is the mirror of God's beauty and perfection (<sub>1</sub>*grandeur*, <sub>3</sub>*greatness*), and the degrading effects of human labour on nature (lines 5-8). The negative connotations attached to the word <sub>8</sub>*toil* are enhanced, on a linguistic level, by the alliterative sequence <sub>6</sub>*smear*ed—<sub>7</sub>*smudge*... *smell* and the assonance <sub>6</sub>*sear*ed... *blear*ed, *smear*ed. This latter is phonetically connected with the successive image of barrenness ("the soil / Is bare now") by the verb <sub>7</sub>*wear*s that eye-rhymes with the three past participles and ear-rhymes with the adjective *bare*. Moreover, the synesthetic convergence of visual (*sear*ed, *blear*ed, *smudge*), tactile (*smear*ed, <sub>7</sub>*feel*), and olfactory (*smell*) perceptions intensifies the widespread sense of exhaustion and deterioration.

The implicit reference to science in line 1 (the world is equated to a battery *charged* by God's energy) is followed by the image of a generational chain (<sub>5</sub>*Generations have trod, have trod, have trod*) that denies any positive interpretation of evolutionism. Instead of being improved by human activities and by the development of technology, the earth is dirtied and sterilized by progress — the foot of the newborn is <sub>8</sub>*shod*, but unable to perceive the contact with nature any longer. A vertical scientific isotopy is further intensified by the lexeme *rod*, which is an implicit reference to the lightning conduct.

Line 9 marks a change of direction in the poem. The adversative *for all this* opposes the semantic field of sterility suggested in the octave ("nature is never spent") and anticipates the life-renewing image of line 10. The energy of rebirth lies exactly at the core of the old, deteriorating world: its centrality is visually rendered by the position of the word *freshness*, which is englobed by the alliterative sequence <sub>10</sub>*dearest*... *deep down* and the eye-parallelism *There... things*. Though ultimately incomprehensible for men, the mystery of life conceals an

inexhaustible spiritual strength that revitalizes nature and heals human spoiling actions. In the last lines, the appearance of a divine agent of renewal (<sup>13</sup>*the Holy Ghost*) suggests the paradoxical coexistence of the eternal and the mortal in all earthly things. Like a gigantic bird, the Holy Spirit hatches (<sup>14</sup>*broods*) the world with His warmth. The animal metaphor emphasizes nature's partaking of the same essence as its Creator: the world is compared to an egg generated by God and endowed with His immortal qualities. The Holy Spirit, who brings forth life in every creature, is an emblem of grace and benevolence that both contrasts with the authoritarian Father described in the octave (the strict figure who holds the <sup>4</sup>*rod*) and shares His own divine essence. By opening and closing the poem with the first and the third person of the Trinity, Hopkins metaphorically unites the Old and the New Testament into one meaningful text, which is intended to offer a theological solution to the thorny problem of degeneration. Against man's Promethean hubris and its dysphoric consequences, the poet envisages a divine energy stemming from the heart of things and inscrutably designed to perpetuate life in the universe.

5. *A new epistemological approach to reality.* In a letter to Richard Dixon dated 10 March 1879, Hopkins defines "prescientific" imagination as childish and highly questionable. While expressing his reservations about Dixon's poem "Fallen Rain", he rejects the idea of 'pathetic fallacy' and states the primacy of an accurate perception of reality: "[...] a perverse over-perspectiveness of mind nudges me that the rain could never be wooed by the rainbow which only comes into being by its falling nor could witness the wooing when made any more than the quicksilver can look from the outside back into the glass"<sup>18</sup>. This quotation exemplifies Hopkins' obsession with

<sup>18</sup> *The Correspondence of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Richard Watson Dixon*, ed. Claude Colleer Abbott, London and New York, Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 20 (Hereafter *Dixon*). The same letter is quoted by Patricia M. Ball as a perfect example of Hopkins' anti-Romantic attitude (*The Science of Aspects. The Changing*

details ("a perverse over-perspectiveness of mind"): he had a keen eye for peculiarities and incessantly analysed and recorded natural phenomena. His journal notes on colour and form variations, and the four letters published on *Nature* (the chief science periodical of his day), are evidence of his search for objectivity and precision.

The wish to grasp the object in itself obviously implied the rejection of the Romantic poetic legacy: to the mystifications of extreme subjectivity Hopkins opposed a new approach to reality founded on the basic criteria of scientific inquiry (namely, observation, analysis, and synthesis of the observed data). At the same time, however, the post-Humean displacement of consolidated relationships between the self and the world posed some epistemological questions, which were further complicated by the poet's metaphysical view of life. In order to reconcile the apparent diversity of nature with the reliability of sensory perception and the idea of an all-pervading divine essence, Hopkins coined the philosophical notions of "inscape" and "instress". Both terms suggest a coexistence of the material and the non-material. Their relevance is stressed in the essay "Parmenides", where the poet traces a significant equation between ontology and epistemology: "To be and to know or 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"<sup>19</sup>. The crucial function of the copula, which bridges the gap between nature, its observer, and God's immanent presence, is further emphasized in another passage from the same essay:

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

*Role of Fact in the Work of Coleridge, Ruskin and Hopkins*, London, The Athlone Press, 1971, p. 103).

<sup>19</sup> "Parmenides", *Journals*, p. 129.

Mariaconcetta Costantini

red / but only / This blood is red / or / The last blood I  
saw was red / not even that, for in later language not only  
universals would not be true but the copula would break  
down even in particular judgements<sup>20</sup>.

In Hopkins' view, stress — as well as its grammatical manifestation, the copula — appears as the only solution to the problems aroused by Hume's philosophy. It provides the connectedness between the object and the mind of the perceiver and facilitates the formation of general concepts ("Blood is red"), thereby negating the distressing view of the mind as a flux of rambling impressions ("This blood is red / or / The last blood I saw was red").

A similar exploration of sensory perceptions is conducted in a short poem dated August 1864:

It was a hard thing to undo this knot.  
The rainbow shines, but only in the thought  
Of him that looks. Yet not in that alone,  
For who makes rainbows by invention?  
And many standing round a waterfall 5  
See one bow each, yet not the same to all,  
But each a hand's breadth further than the next.  
The sun on falling waters writes the text  
Which yet is in the eye or in the thought.  
It was a hard thing to undo this knot. 10  
Maentwrog (P, 129-130).

The sight of a rainbow starts in the perceiver's mind a process of investigation of reality, whose argumentative quality is stressed by the two adversatives <sup>2</sup>*but* and <sup>3</sup>*Yet*, and by the rhetorical question "For who makes rainbows by invention?". What the speaker wonders about is: does observation result in the mere recording of discrete and individual impressions (<sup>2,3</sup>*only in the thought / Of him that looks*, <sup>5</sup>*See one bow each, yet not the same to all*)? Or does it lead to the formation of universal

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

categories? In line 4, the problem of perception blends with the idea of origins: the verb *makes* and the clause *by invention* evoke the image of a hidden creator, who does not identify with the observer. If man is unable to invent rainbows and other natural phenomena, there must be some generative entity that is responsible for their creation.

Structured like a scientific and philosophical inquiry over the functioning of the mind, the poem is not devoid of metatextual and exegetical considerations, hypogrammatically culminating in the lexeme *text*, whose pivotal role is evident. It connotes Nature as an enigmatic Book written by the elements — sun and water — and consisting of their own essence (the equation is drawn by the visual parallelism *waters writes*). The idea of a written text entails the existence of a receiver (here, man), who has to decipher its message. Yet, the reliability of human interpretation is once again questioned by the occurrence of the adversative *yet*, which breaks the relationship between perception (*eye*), reason (*thought*), and Being (nature).

The epistemological uncertainty expressed in lines 2-9 is apparently dispersed by the iterated sentence "It was a hard thing to undo this knot", which opens and closes the poem. The speaker's use of a simple past tense (*was*) and his visual rendering of the solved enigma (the metaphor of the untied *knot*) are meant to emphasize the definite resolution of the doubts that plagued his mind. Despite its positive implications, however, the repeated statement contains no adequate explanation of the hermeneutical act performed by the poetic voice: science may start and boost the various epistemological processes, but it provides no ultimate truth. As Hopkins pointed out in an essay, all human efforts to achieve knowledge through pure rationality are inevitably doomed to fail: "To know the growth from first to last is not to know the thing which grows and to know all the parts is not to know the whole"<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> *Journals*, p. 122.

6. *The science of poetic language.* Hopkins' bold experimentation with language stems from his wish to explore the mysteries of life. The verbal plays, the many coinages and the bold constructions of his poetry are inextricably linked to his view of the world as a complex network of signs, which can be interpreted and rendered in the form of linguistic relations. Throughout his life, the poet showed a keen interest in words. The long lists of terms noted in his Journal testify to his investigation of phonetic and semantic parallelisms: "*Slip, slipper, slop, slabby* (muddy), *slide*, perhaps *slope*, but if slope is thus connected what are we to say of *slant*?"<sup>22</sup>. Similarly, his definition of the copula as an essential nexus exemplifies his effort to connect grammatical and ontological categories. In "*Pied Beauty*", for instance, the verb *to be* — which occurs three times in the text (<sub>1</sub>*be*, <sub>8,10</sub>*is*) and is implied in lines 2, 3, 5, and 7 — synthesises discrete elements into a whole, as it highlights the divine origin of all the different objects and attributes of creation<sup>23</sup>.

In Hopkins' view, language is both an instrument to reproduce nature with fidelity and an emblem of metaphysical notions (the union of the material and the non-material is symbolised by the Incarnate Word: Christ). Since words can establish a relation between the world (the signifier) and God (the sign-sender), the poet — equated to the divinity in his role of sign-user — has the task of exploiting their high potential. All the lexical and syntactic innovations of Hopkins' verse are no instances of random experimentation, but derive from a precise intention to build a system of analysis and reproduction of reality. Even ungrammaticality confers significance to his verse, as it is meant to render the paradoxical relation between causality (the logical concatenation of human events) and inscrutability (their arrangement in a theological design)<sup>24</sup>. In "*Pied Beauty*",

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> The relevance of the copula is stressed by Isobel Armstrong in her perceptive analysis of this poem (*Victorian Poetry. Poetry, Poetics and Politics*, London and New York, Routledge, 1993, pp. 424-428).

<sup>24</sup> As Riffaterre acutely noticed: "[...] any ungrammaticality within the poem is a sign of grammaticality elsewhere, that is, of belonging in another system.

the ungrammatical sentence <sup>10</sup>*He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change* emphasizes God's pervasive presence in nature through the unwonted position of *whose*, thus suggesting the blend of contradictory ideas (oneness and multiplicity, immutability and change).

The search for a new poetic language is conducted by Hopkins with a mathematical precision, which is clearly seen in some of his prose writings. A letter to Richard Dixon displays his scientific interest in the form of the sonnet ("The equation of the best sonnet its:  $(4 + 4) + (3 + 3) = 2.4 + 2.3 = 2(4+3) = 2.7 = 14$ ")<sup>25</sup>, while his "Lecture Notes: Rhythm and the Other Structural Parts of Rhetoric-Verse" are mostly based on a numerical analysis of prosody<sup>26</sup>. Regarded by Jakobson as an "outstanding searcher in the science of poetic language"<sup>27</sup>, Hopkins anticipates the procedures and the goals of contemporary linguistics, which draws from science its methods of investigation of language.

This systemic relationship confers significance" (Michael Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry*, Bloomington, Ind., Indiana University Press, 1984, pp. 164-165).

<sup>25</sup> Dixon, p. 71.

<sup>26</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Journals and Papers*, ed. Giuseppe Gaetano Castorina, Bari, Adriatica, 1975, pp. 218-249.

<sup>27</sup> Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics", in *Style in Language*, ed. Th. A. Sebeok, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1964, p. 358.