Simon Leek

Professor Jacques Khalip

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Immanent impressions as the descriptive object and production of G. M. Hopkins' poetry

Dream sensations, Hopkins posits in an 1869 journal entry a few days before Christmas, must be produced by a "reverse action" of the sensory nerves which in waking life process sense information. The resulting quasi-images are thus seen "between our eyelids and our eyes," as the reproduction of an impression is experienced by the dreamer like a new exposure to that stimulus (Hopkins 200). Only these productions of inverted sense perception have a compromised character, flatter, possessing "little or no projection … and often one seems to be holding ones eyes close to them" (Ibid 200). This immanent closeness allows the impression to become a special record of contact between beauty internal and external to the beholder, instress and inscape, as the experience of the beautiful falls upon the beholder, producing the beautiful experience. His poems don't so much record internal events as produce the experience of them on the reader, wavering between a pious attunement to divine beauty in the world and the dangerous, sometimes profane exploration of pleasurable sensory experience. The poems mimic the same sensory impressions that they describe by shifts in register, swings in and out of alliterative and internal harmony, and an attention to rhythm as a basic structure for pattern establishment and disruption.

The poem "Binsey Poplars" illustrates this dynamic well, containing first a description in which such a sensory imitation is performed and then commentary that relates the tenuousness of

beauty directly with that of the eye that sees it. The poem begins with two lines of opposite stress patterns, the first iambic and the next trochaic:

> My aspens dear, whose airy cages quelled, (1)
> Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun, (2)

Together these opening lines form two twin lines of trees on opposite banks, with the regular iambs of the first leading the eye down the one bank, changing direction around the double use of "quelled," and traveling back along the other bank by trochees. The racing off of the iamb (whose stress leans forward) is quelled and redirected through that "quelled" itself, sent back in harmonious returning trochees. This rhythmically plays out the entry and withdrawal from the pleasurable remembered image, carrying the reader into and then back out of reverie. The sighing, stressed "a"s of "aspen" and "airy" breathe in the special air they describe, while the alliterative play of the second line stirs the activity higher until the "leaping sun", leaving off a syllable short of an even match to the first line. Seeking the unstressed next syllable to follow that "sun," the reader instead meets the cutting next line of "Áll félled, félled, are áll félled;" (3) The admonishment of this impossibly stress-heavy line repeats, now with the beautiful rhythmic swing of the first lines removed, a sensory impression of the scene. "Félled, félled" matches the "quelled, Quelled" of the opening lines, only here there is no pleasurable turn taken. Instead, the sentence returns to the unnatural, elision-breaking stress of "are áll." The alliterative "l"s of "leaves the leaping sun" now reverse, become punitive and bitter, just as the leaping action reverses into falling. It is as though the sun itself has fallen. With the "d"s pronounced fully, it sounds oathlike and deliberate, with any harmonious blending between the sounds forbidden by

awkward sounds. If instead the “d”s are clipped a little, there is an echo of a “felt” behind them present in the pathos of their falling.

A set of inset lines follow the semicolon and recover, a little, the scene’s description:

Of a fresh and following folded rank (4)
Not spared, not one (5)
That dandled a sandalled (6)

More space and variation has been allowed back into the meter, but the effect of the felling of line 3 will resonate throughout the description going forward. The “f”s and “l”s continue into line 4, with “fresh,” “following,” and “folding” replacing the three “félled”s in the line previous. These words gradually act out their own fall as they sonically slip back toward the “félled” from which the poem has tried to recover. It is as though the attempt to restart the poem’s invocation of the scene before the felling is itself folding, returning to another clipped phrase in line 5. By the time the strong internal rhyme of “dandled a sandalled” shocks the poem back into action, the scene has changed. Now the poem is at once in the remembered river grove and under the collapsed canopy. The poem has fallen onto the reader under the weight of the felled trees, darkening the sensory landscape as the earlier pleasure garden loses its airiness and gets low to the ground. There is the suggestion of a pleasure that does not have to do with pure open air and dappled sunshine, but rather

Shadows that swam or sank (7)
On meadow and river and wind-wandering weed-winding bank. (8)

The sibilant hiss of strange semi-aquatic life, along with the continued falling action of “sank,” evoke a dangerous indeterminate space of shadowy, morphing things. The danger is exciting though, different than the earlier pleasure in the regular straight trees. Here a lively, almost

tricksterish variety and mutability is acted out by the last long line of description. As "wind-wandering weed-winding" winds "wind" twice through itself, the word changes in meaning before our eyes, slithering along like the ghost-snake behind the "s"s of "sandalled Shadow that swam or sank." The arresting "d" repetitions of line 3 returns to haunt this long river of a line, calling subtly to the absent trees as stumps. The section terminates with the precipitous "bank," incling with the vertigo of "sank" toward the waters and a romantic death wish to leave the scene of the slaughter forever.[1] The verbal action of the last line does not merely animate the organic scene, but also points toward this departing: wandering, winding, flowing off, blowing away. Under the crushing force of keeping the description alive, the poem makes with this line its last great effort before following the escape it has begun, flowing off to a more indirect discussion of the event. The description reads as an attempted memory, already so eroded by the tragedy that the verse buckles inward, requiring intentional restartings of the poetry by the language.

If this can be read as an attempt to replicate, in the experience of the reader, something of the impression that struck Hopkins on seeing the felled trees, it is because he considers the impression itself a beautiful and complex object. Rather than simply an elegy for lost trees, it is a study of the poets reaction to the tragedy—or its linguistic replication. The massive falling in which everything is implicated is a general collapsing movement that turns a kind of annihilation beautiful, finding in the effacement of something the possibility of its (even just partial) recovery. Like the tiger skin or "deep fell of some other animal" that he imagines letting "fall and so clasp and lay round" a contours ("two ends or falls") of a glacier, what is dangerous in falling —the gravitational swoon—is also what brings the falling object into intimate contact with

[1] Likewise Hopkins, on witnessing the felling of an ash tree wrote: "at that moment came a great pang and I wished to die and not see the inscapes of the world destroyed any more" (Hopkins 359).

whatever it falls on, forming a mutual impression. Here, he recovers from the tragic occurrence something of the beauty which it extinguished, or the beauty of its extinguishing—it's hard to tell the two apart, for they form the same impression. The easiness of its destruction is in fact a condition of its beauty.

> Since country is so tender (12)
> To tóuch, her béing só slénder, (13)
> That, like this sleek and seeing ball (14)
> But a prick will make no eye at all (15)

The delicacy of both parties, the beautiful scene and its beholder, is what charges the interaction between the two.

The emergence of pleasure from the threat of obliteration also drives the short poem "Late I fell in the ecstacy":

> Late I fell in the ecstacy (1)
> And saw the men before the flood (2)
> Which once were disobedient. (3)

Although the three-line poem does not have the same feeling of exacting composition as "Binsey Poplars," the more subtle harmonies act out a restraint in the remembering of the pleasurable event. The rhymes are slight, like the beauty which is showing only barely, at seams. The internal rhyme of "the ecstacy" encodes the privacy of an internal joy, as well as a sort of delayed release through the longer, bled-into "ecstacy." Likewise, between "flood" and "disobedient" there is a yet more suppressed, barely noticeable rhyme. The reader experiences the end of the decadently long "disobedient" with pleasure without knowing exactly why. In both cases, the rhyme is made by the only non-Germanic words in the poem, the Greek "ecstacy" and the Latin "disobedient." They both infuse the otherwise few-syllabed Germanic-English register with flavors of antiquity

and Biblical naughtiness: the Fall (also evoked by “Late I fell”) and the times before the Flood. The fanciness of these words joins them by distinction from the rest of the poem (also ending as they do the only moments of rhyme), so that the ecstacy is attached to the “disobedient.” The falling movement that begins with “I fell” is here, as in “Binsey Poplars,” staged as the collapsing of the beholder and the beheld. The “I” falls away in the ecstacy—ecstacy being a self-displacement—and although nominally only a viewer, is implicated in the disobedience by the ecstatic immersion. It is not the “saw” of beholding, but that immanent dream-sight produced, in Hopkins’ understanding, by the reverse action of sensory nerves with the flatness now figuring as the restraint of desire. The impression, understood that way, is the natural aim of his poetry, recording as it does an interaction between the beauty of an object and a beholder, between inscape and instress. Reproducing the impression in poetry is then the reenactment of a fall and the falling of that reenactment onto the reader, mixing self-delight with self-obliteration until the two states can no longer be distinguished.

Works Cited

“Late I fell in the ecstacy” and “Binsey Poplars” pp. 30 and 142 respectively in Hopkins, Gerard Manley. *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works*. Oxford, OUP Oxford, 2009.