

# PERVERSE FORM AND VICTORIAN LYRIC

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
of Cornell University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

by

Alan Andrew Young-Bryant

August 2011

© 2011 Alan Andrew Young-Bryant

## PERVERSE FORM AND VICTORIAN LYRIC

Alan Young-Bryant, Ph.D.

Cornell University 2011

*Perverse Form and Victorian Lyric* examines a tradition of lyric expressivity, exploring connections between language, subjectivity, and agency. By attending to salient formal issues in the work of three Victorian poets for whom pattern becomes persona—Algernon Charles Swinburne, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Gerard Manley Hopkins—the dissertation argues for a poetic counter-tradition defined in opposition to major aesthetic commonplaces of the nineteenth and twentieth century. More particularly, this study shows how the voice of lyric—commonly regarded as the expression of a central self—is, in late Victorian writing, not the product of an organizing subjectivity, but the effect of apparently derivative formal technique. Rather than being grounded in the individual subject, the rhetorical and formal urgencies of Victorian poetry create situations of utterance where human characteristics, such as feeling, thought, and desire, hang on patterns of sound and line—what is here called *perverse form*.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Alan Andrew Young-Bryant was born in 1980. He attended the Northfield Mount Hermon School, and graduated from Tufts University in 2003 with a B.A. in English Literature. In 2001, he spent a semester in the Williams College Program in Maritime Studies in Mystic, Connecticut. He earned an M.A. at Cornell University in 2006, and received his Ph.D. in 2011. During the academic year 2009-2010 he was an Exchange Scholar in the Department of English at Princeton University. Originally from Vermont, he has lived in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Maine, New York, New Jersey, Herrliberg (Switzerland), Istanbul (Turkey), and Berlin (Germany).

*For Alexis*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is a pleasure to recognize the family, friends, and colleagues who have supported the writing of this dissertation. Judy and Peter van Wageningen, my parents, shared their love of words with me long before they could have known where it would lead (and they are probably still waiting to find out). My sister, Noelle, and her two sons, Perley and Isaac Ellis, have been a welcome reminder of life beyond the university.

At Cornell, Alexis Briley returned me to poetry at a critical time in graduate school, and has been with me every step and page of the way. If “perverse form” could belong to anyone, it was Alexis’s from the start. Outside of Ithaca, John Hicks and Elizabeth Moriarty provided a different slant of light when it was needed the most. I have benefited over the years from John’s expertise; he has also given these pages more attention than they asked for. Douglas McQueen-Thomson, Ben Glaser, Daniel Wilson, Alike Herreshoff, Heidi Arsenault, Christina Dobrescu, Sean Franzel, Aaron Hodges, Jess Keiser, and Bradley Depew deserve special mention for their rare wits and fine spirits. Martha C. Goss provided generous support during my year as an Exchange Scholar at Princeton in 2009-2010, one of the two years when this project had a life beyond Cornell’s institutional walls.

My doctoral committee, directed by Jonathan Culler, played a critical role in the shape of the project from the start. Their own scholarship has been a model for me, and I thank them for guidance and support, particularly in the early and later stages of writing. Graduate seminars with Ellis and Cynthia expanded my thinking about rhetoric and form, and a seminar on lyric, co-taught by Jonathan and Debby, helped to frame the scope of the dissertation. The plan for this project was re-imagined several times over, and I thank the committee for patience in the presence of the protean creature that eventually became *Perverse Form and Victorian Lyric*.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	v
Introduction	1
Chapter 1 Swinburne: “The Sweetest Name”	48
Chapter 2 D.G. Rossetti: “Silence for a Little Space”	89
Chapter 3 Hopkins: “The Form Speaking”	145
Bibliography	202

## Introduction

The following introductory remarks, divided into five parts, attempt to define the perversity of nineteenth-century poetic pattern and to motivate as well as complicate the terms of its analysis. I regret that I am not able to exemplify more immediately certain general comments, remarks for which attention to concrete poetic instances seems the best possible justification. The later chapters of this study attempt to provide that elaboration. In an effort to avoid consigning the language of criticism to a position inferior to that of the poetry that provokes this project, *Perverse Form and Victorian Lyric* begins with some attention to the critical shape of topics and questions that excite the readings of the Victorian poets appearing in later chapters.

Part I of the Introduction (“Perverse Form”) offers a definition of perversity vis-à-vis what has been called the “scandal of form,” outlining the poetic counter-tradition that is the focus of this study; Part II (“Perverse Formalisms”) examines the language of recent critical efforts to renovate formal analysis, and suggests how formalism itself is a perverse critical practice; Part III (“Beyond New Criticism?”) focuses on several legacies of New Criticism important for current thinking, and identifies a need to unsettle certain configurations of “voice” and pattern within theories of lyric, something that Part IV (“Poetics, History, Form”) develops by suggesting

how “historical poetics” attempts to move beyond New Criticism. Part IV concludes by complicating several of the terms and aims of “historical poetics” in order to present the rationale and direction of the chapters that follow. Part V (“Victorian Lyric”) discusses more specific issues of the Victorian period and of the kinds of poems and the modes of analysis engaged in the later chapters.

•

## **I. PERVERSE FORM**

Perhaps it is poetry’s congenital condition to contend with neglect or outright attack. The poetic defense or apology—an ancient and vibrant genre nearly as old as poetry itself—instances how poetry has always, in some way, had to legitimate itself by countenancing its own fragility and possible obsolescence. Scholars of poetry, meanwhile—particularly proponents of formal analysis—seem destined to become eulogizers of their own objects and methods of study. In spite of the fact that the criticism of poetry has often sounded a plaintive tone, in recent years poetry and its formal study have become, if not forgotten, effectively displaced by other genres and methods of reading. While prose forms and historical-contextual methods abound, poetry has suffered a peculiar degree of neglect. At the same time, the declining stature of poetry has

coincided with the atrophy of formal literary analysis, although not for want of critics skilled in the techniques of close reading. And yet, it may be for good reason that progress has been slow for this kind of criticism; indeed, the reasons why it has been so remain oddly unexamined, and critics more readily lament the decline of poetry than work to articulate what might be done in response. As so often, jeremiad is more ready to hand than a searching aetiological analysis of the nagging complaint. Situated within this larger critical context—while aiming to perform neither committed jeremiad nor antiseptic critical triage—*Perverse Form and Victorian Lyric* examines poetic artifice and lyric formation in Romantic and post-Romantic literature. Its larger objective, meanwhile, is to articulate a theory of reading with wider implications for literary and humanistic study.

In its overarching argument, the study considers lyric in its formative modern phase, from the publication of Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) to Hopkins's poetry at the end of the century. Using these works as a frame, I take the lyric poem in this period as my object of study in order to unfold the ramifications of a simple but rich contradiction: *the literary genre most closely associated with the speaking voice and with private experience is a pungent expression of the non-human and the non-intentional*. Or, to put this differently, lyric persistently plays out a contest between authenticity and artifice, and it is this artifice which layers lyric

with what I call its non-human, non-intentional strata. The following chapters, each of which focuses on the work of a single poet, aim to show, therefore, that rather than serving obediently as index, register, or repository of a central or controlling subject's feeling, the "superadded" patterning of lyric form—rhyme, meter, assonance, repetition, stanza—in essence conjures up that subjectivity. The latticework of stanza on which lyric utterance may be arrayed, the grid of rhyming recurrences that appear to serve the expressive needs of the utterer, and the salient system of sonorities that might be construed as responding to the subject's urgencies of speech: all these, I aim to show, construct *the fiction of a feeling subject*. And yet, at the same time, the formal dimensions of lyric put in question the very premise on which so much reading of modern lyric rests: an idea of poetry which sees its language and formal patterns as the trace, token, or icon of an intentional and would-be autonomous human subject, a subject whose speaking or singing "voice" is regarded as animating and organizing lyric utterance. Put simply, my thesis is that lyric's value and lyric's absorbing powers are generated by and sustained through the formal fabric of its patterned language, exemplary instances of which are to be found in nineteenth-century poems that conjure scenes of hearing, speaking, and sonorous sounding more generally. Such poems, which comprise a sub-canon of the Romantic and Victorian works I consider, call for and reward attention for how they are emblematic of, and performatively engaged

with, some of lyric's most traditional topics, at the same time making a show of lyric's most inventive resources and techniques.

While my readings resist subjectivizing the lyric scene, I am not interested in relegating such concerns to what would count as a naïve or pre-critical phase of literary attentiveness. On the contrary, my readings rely on and engage with lyric's proximity to subjective experience. What the readings resist, or, more accurately, what the readings mirror their prompting poems in resisting, is the urge to locate and entertain what has recently been called the "drama of the lyric subject" (Robinson 49-50). Nevertheless, the shapes and workings of the poetic designs that my chapters bring out largely depend upon, for what I regard as their "perverse" effects, an awareness of the ambiguously humanizing vectors of lyric's lines. Although by "perverse form" I do not mean to suggest the existence of a normative standard against which particular examples could be said to conform or differ as a matter of fact (although I do not exclude this possibility outright), my readings do presuppose the existence of a standard upon which to chart the turnings and re-turnings of lyric's perversity. More often than not, that standard is constituted by the conventions and generically dictated expectations of lyric. Specifically, the definition of lyric that I leverage and also call into question is that posed by Hegel, a definition that informs—explicitly or implicitly—most

modern studies of the genre. As Hegel writes, deploying several central terms in what I would call the litany of lyric's generic hit-list (as both chart-topper and fated target): "inner subjective life is the proper source of lyric." However, as Hegel suggests, the self is never far from the murmurings of lyric utterance. From Romanticism to Modernism, by way of the Victorians, I argue, English lyric complicates its longstanding association with the self as both subject and source of literary invention. By looking at Victorian poets, this study explores a number of critical turns in the history of lyric, and, in the process, tries to show the usefulness of historical periodization while also suggesting how such distinctions can distort the very objects they mean to enrich.

By attending to salient formal issues within the work of individual Victorian poets—D.G. Rossetti, A.C. Swinburne, and G.M. Hopkins—my readings seek to show what each writer contributes to a poetic counter-tradition, one which is defined in opposition to major aesthetic commonplaces of the nineteenth and twentieth century, most notably, what Jerome McGann has called Coleridge's "basic ideology of poetry and the power of the creative imagination" (102). This is the belief, as Coleridge writes in the *Dejection Ode*, that one could not "hope from outward forms to win / The passion and the life, whose fountains are within." Moving between Romantic and Victorian poetry, I suggest how the Victorians, in

particular, allow us to notice something critical about modern poetry of the “self.” In a rich variety of ways, the Victorians labor under, scrutinize, and ultimately reject the positioning of “passion and life” against “outward forms.” By harnessing passion to form, where form drives passion rather than passion driving form, the Victorian cart is always in some way ahead of its horse, the prosthesis leading the host. Nonetheless, it is not the case that the Victorians merely sweep up after the Romantics, revising the ratios of their poetic predecessors in the service of a more complete poetic knowledge and practice. If form is perverse for giving rise to what Coleridge said it could not—“the passion and the life”—then the Victorians remind us that form’s perversions were not invented or discovered with the ascension of Queen Victoria, or, for that matter, with the mid-century passing of Wordsworth. Ostentation of ornament indeed became a period-style by the end of the century, and it was domesticated by the figure of the Victorian “treasure-house,” a many-roomed mansion bristling with bric-a-brac and bedecked in what we might now regard as a very anti-Bauhaus aesthetic of the overwrought and the overloaded. What the Victorians do is exaggerate, or, as one recent study would have it, electrify, the potential of poetry’s forms, sounding at a higher pitch a note that had been humming throughout

the century, even, or especially, within the poetry of the Romantics.<sup>1</sup>

In considering the nature of this poetic and aesthetic counter-tradition, I make use of a range of existing critical positions about poetry and poetic language in the nineteenth century. My arguments, however, seek to engage aspects of poetic language that are not strictly bound by historical timelines or confinable to a period style. Although the problem at the center of this inquiry is framed by calling upon central enabling fictions of literary history and periodization throughout the century, the readings I offer tend to stray from the conclusions that would be drawn by more historical, cultural, or biographical forms of criticism. The focus of my analyses, and the conclusions I draw, are primarily linguistic and literary rather than historical, social, or political, although I do not mean to imply the incompatibility of these frameworks. Indeed, the historical or more broadly cultural potential of formal analysis is something these chapters seek to explore in a variety of ways (if not always explicitly or at the surface)—and in ways that should look familiar to critics of poetry from different periods—Romantic, Victorian, and Modernist. In emphasizing the complex verbal texture of the poems I consider, I hope that the results of my readings help justify the methods I employ. However, since one of my aims is to consider various prominent

---

<sup>1</sup> See Jason Rudy, *Electric Meters: Victorian Physiological Poetics*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009.

arguments about literary form and formal analysis, I have also tried to cast a more skeptical eye on my own procedures than I might otherwise have been inclined to do. Exploring connections between Victorian and Romantic literature and criticism, the following chapters pose a set of central questions in terms wider than what is available to any single historical period: *to what end does modern lyric pattern the self*, and *what are some possible futures of formal analysis within literary studies and in the humanities more broadly?*

In casting doubt onto “outward forms,” Coleridge inaugurates a tradition that the Victorians were to assume while at the same time questioning many of its premises. As he writes in “On Poesy or Art,” “since Dryden, the meter of our poets leads to the sense; in our older and more genuine poets, the sense, including the passion, leads to the meter” (quoted in Wesling *NP* 61). Insisting on the primacy of passion, Coleridge says that “meter *itself* implies a passion, i.e., a state of excitement...in the poet’s mind.” By “implies” is meant that meter communicates passion or excitement—whatever it is that the poet has determined to impart; meter can *implicate* such things as passion or excitement, but its nature is to follow behind passion, as in the “older and more genuine poets” invoked by Coleridge in “On Poesy or Art.” What is objectionable for Coleridge about poetry since Dryden is

that meter should “lead to the sense.” The prosodic apparatus, in this case, usurps more than its due, in the process (as Coleridge would have it), cheapening the prosodic dimension and rendering it lifeless as a fixed form, one whose meanings are not open to reinvention.

In contrast to this neo-classical notion of form, as Donald Wesling has argued, is a Romantic and post-Romantic understanding that “to be creative in the fullest sense is to be most oneself, without contingent dependence on other writers or existing formal molds” (*NP* 55-6). Echoing this is Marianne Shapiro’s observation (offered in the context of her study of the sestina) that “the rule of language over poetry has often seemed like a tyranny of inert material over creative inspiration” (234). What poses a challenge to traditional verse is what Wesling calls “an insurgent prosody of the individual intonation” (*NP* 87). The invention of “authorial self as voice,” Wesling suggests, is in Romantic and post-Romantic poetry closely tied to a prosodic agenda, one for which “individual intonation” is taken to be at odds with established or already familiar forms, primarily (but not exclusively) the accentual-syllabic norm of English verse (*NP* 80). Here, form comes to seem like mere echo, and is downgraded for seeming derivative. Surveying Romantic and Modern poetics, Wesling proposes how a new poetic idea reconfigures poetry’s relationship to prosodic tradition:

“We have, then, the text that hopes to efface all the marks of the labor of its production,” something that leads to various attempts, Wesling writes, to “strip off the veil of form.” This stripping of the veil is itself a reduction of ornament and a movement toward an allegedly plain style, one that implies the “ceding of versification to grammar” (NP 72, 94). Shifting away from “versification,” Wesling proposes the term “grammar,” which suggests the phrasal, spoken cadences of English as a potential literary dominant (in the sense the term carries in Russian Formalist criticism). Such a grammar is taken to assume the place of an abstract metrical pattern, where grammar is preferred to versification because it is seen as more closely allied with colloquial utterance.

The aspiration to “collapse poetry back into speech, rhetoric into grammar” is haunted by what Wesling calls the “scandal of form”: the persistence of prosodic features that betoken the constitutive formality and rhetoricity of poetic language, features which weave the veil of form whereby “personal intonation” becomes derivative of, and subordinate to, the dead letters of language (NP 110).<sup>2</sup> I depart from Wesling by lingering

---

<sup>2</sup> The developments traced by Wesling would benefit from comparison with the idea of “poetry as discourse,” Anthony Easthope’s thesis that major shifts in English poetry occur according to a set of fundamental oppositions between poetry and the nature of the subject in its relation to language. Using Benveniste’s terms *histoire/discours*, Easthope argues for an idea of poetry as “discourse,” whereby he means a kind of poetry that, to use Wesling’s terms, does not seek to “efface all the marks of the labor of its production.” Easthope’s argument (and at times his

over and extrapolating from poems in which formal scandal is the norm, not the exception, as is the case in Wesling's analysis. The lyric counter-tradition that is the basis of my own study is perhaps best summed by what Hopkins calls "pied beauty," a tradition touching "all things counter, original, spare, strange, / Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?) / With swift, slow;

---

manifesto) about poetry as *discourse* attempts to resist the centrality of iambic pentameter as the dominant mode of poetry in English, a mode that, according to Easthope, asserts a transcendental position for the ego and seeks to obscure the poem as "enunciation" in favor of a transparent presentation in which the act of enunciation is obscured. The nature of the connections of such a thesis to Wesling's reading of post-Romantic poetics is fairly clear, although Wesling, unlike Easthope, does not aim to critique the possible ideological component of the "new poetries" in the aspiration to "collapse poetry back into speech." In Easthope's discussion of a poetry of the enounced, in contrast to a poetry of the enunciation (again using Benveniste's definitions), the reader, like the poet before her, is shown to occupy the position of a speaking subject that the poem treats as closed and replete. In contrast to this tradition of iambic pentameter (which is taken to be the "natural" prosodic vehicle for depicting the speech and thought of the reflecting subject) is both earlier poetry (Medieval ballads, tetrameter verse, and various other forms of poetry as "song"), as well as later modern poetry (primarily Pound and some of Eliot). Easthope's aim is to question the naturalness of an idea of poetry as expression controlled by a central self who orients poetic discourse. In place of this, he turns to both modern and pre-modern poetry that explores the way in which the self/author of a poem is an effect of the poem *as poem*—as a material, verbal creation whose historical language-production (enunciation) fails to unify the poem or suggest a composed speaking presence behind it. Where I differ from Easthope is that I reject any *essential* connection between poetic form or prosody and the social or political content of those forms. Easthope, however, assumes this kind of connection. For example, the non-iambic poem, according to him, keeps open the syntagmatic line, allowing a range of associations and meanings that preclude the transparency and transcendental aims of the iambic tradition in English poetry. There is clearly much to question in Easthope's reading, but it poses the problem of the self in poetic language in a provocative and engaging manner. One central question is how Easthope's argument distorts ("High") Romanticism in order to present it as in some way seeking plenitude. Quotations drawn from P. Shelley and W. Wordsworth are meant to show a Romantic position that Easthope reads in terms of the Lacan's Imaginary, one in which the subject is whole unto itself and not yet aware of its own division. The general objection, and the simple one here, is that such an argument is explicitly tendentious and uses its evidence—poems by Pope and Wordsworth (in addition to Shelley), "Rape of the Lock" and "Tintern Abbey"—to find what his own argument requires, thereby avoiding the complications that the very same poems should pose to his argument. This is a version of what Northrop Frye calls the Little Jack Horner method of criticism—*he put in his thumb, and pulled out a plum*. Nonetheless, what Easthope and Wesling suggest, and what is important for my own argument, is how poetic form is a crucial, if problematic, site for pursuing questions of subjectivity and the self (Anthony Easthope, *Poetry as Discourse*. Methuen & Co., 1983).

sweet, sour, adazzle, dim.” Personal intonation, as these poets demonstrate, comes into being by virtue of formal patterns—patterns “counter, original, spare, strange”—which, when rung, sound the perverse voice of lyric.

Important for all of the poets I examine, then, is what Wesling has called the “scandal of form”—a designation that is not strictly historical, although it does delimit movements and groupings within nineteenth-century poetry.<sup>3</sup> In Wesling’s usage, the “scandal of form” describes a situation in which poetry, seeking to bring itself closer to the allegedly “ordinary” cadences of spoken language, nonetheless continues to rely on bold devices of patterning—devices that are “scandalous” for how they undercut the attempt to speak directly. Building on and extending this work, my own project centers on Victorian poetry (unlike Wesling’s) for the reason that the second half of the nineteenth century, a critical moment in the formation of both “Romanticism” and “Modernism,” marks an important and still contested phase in the history of lyric. The critical problem that interests me could be described in terms of the tension that Hopkins identifies, and then elides, between sprung rhythm and everyday speech. Hopkins is in many ways an exemplary figure, both because his writing seems to belong to all three periods—Romantic, Victorian, and Modernist—

---

<sup>3</sup> “The scandal of form, and of theories of form, is that form is not altogether congruent with

while exceeding the confines of each, and because his comments about his own poetry complicate the idea that apparently elaborate and finely-worked phrasing is necessarily opposed to what Wordsworth called the “real language of men.” Sprung rhythm—typically regarded as a flash-point of nineteenth- and even twentieth-century prosodic scandal—is, for Hopkins, the poetic analogue to written prose and otherwise everyday speech. At least at one level, then, sprung rhythm is far from scandalous.

The core of the project explores the work of the Victorians, particularly the second-generation Victorians, including D.G. Rossetti, Swinburne, and Hopkins. These writers receive emphasis despite the fact that they have long been regarded as exceptional figures along the main line of lyric’s literary history (although they have always been poets’ poets). Rather than seeing these poets as minor satellites orbiting around the major planets of Victorian verse—Tennyson, Browning, and Arnold—I seek to show how their writing pursues many of lyric’s most central preoccupations. Starting in the nineteenth and extending into the twenty-first century, it became almost *de rigueur* to celebrate Victorian poetry, particularly later Victorian poetry, for its virtuosic craft; at the same time, however, that craft received scant serious attention other than the occasional passing remark, a

---

other historical progressions, at least not in any single or easily describable way” (Wesling 107-8).

regard that was more often derogatory than not. It is not that modern criticism has passed over Victorian poetry—Jerome McGann, Isobel Armstrong, Hebert Tucker, Elizabeth Helsinger, and Yopie Prins, to name just several critics, have brought keen insight to the period’s writing—but compared to the trove of critical material on Romantic writing, the Victorians have fared rather poorly. Certainly the Victorians did themselves few favors in this regard, often wrangling with critics and popular audiences alike when their writing was noticed at all. Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that with the exception of the dramatic monologue, Victorian poetry’s prowess continues to be hard to specify. It might be said that the lesser Victorian lyric, in contrast to the Greater Romantic Lyric, has always evaded the status of theory and the officialdom of an explicit poetics. As Joseph Bristow writes, commenting on the modern reception of Victorian literature, the period tends to be seen as one that has “not produced classics, just individual styles” (12). Recognizing “Romantic” as itself a Victorian formation, Bristow notices how this situation (that there are no Victorian classics, just individual styles) was in no small part due to the fact that the Victorians, unlike the Romantics, failed to produce critical documents that “spoke purposefully of a self-conscious project” (2). Mill and Arnold’s efforts, however vigorous, were not sufficient.

The marginal status of the figure of the poet and of poetry as a cultural discourse is in many ways connected to the increasing novelization of the literary marketplace throughout the nineteenth century. At the same time, purely contextual readings of Victorian poetry that regard poetry's status in terms of prevailing tastes and habits during the period have a way of reinforcing the marginalization of that poetry. The self-image of the Victorian poet is an important issue, and in this sense the landscape of nineteenth-century reading cultures and the textual appetites of different audiences is indispensable for understanding what Victorian poets were engaged in. However, as I explore in later chapters, such an approach perpetuates what has long been the case, namely that Victorian poetry is rarely regarded with the kind of imaginative and analytic attention displayed by its creators. The story of poetry's growing marginalization throughout the century is by now a familiar one, and yet the topic continues to reveal new insights about nineteenth-century literature, such as those made by Dino Felluga in *The Perversity of Poetry: Romantic Ideology and the Popular Male Poet of Genius* (2005), a work with which my own project has surprisingly little in common, despite the shared terms of their titles. Felluga's interest is primarily directed at the role of different nineteenth-century discourses (literary, critical, medical) in shaping understandings of the figure of the poet

and of the place of poetry, taking Scott and Byron as representative cases. My own attention to perversity is weighted rather differently, inclining toward a renewed attention to the particular formal workings of Victorian poetry, something I take to be oddly underserved despite a consensus that Victorian verse presents a dazzling display of craft.

If certain Victorian poets deserve to be regarded as perverse, this characteristic should ideally tempt a new and deeper kind of attention, one fixed on concrete aspects of their writing, such as rhyme, meter, stanza and trope. One risk of calling the poetry “perverse,” however, is that like all critical acts of naming, to do so threatens to congeal the referent into something familiar. Such an outcome, particularly in this case, would be depressingly counter-productive. At the same time, the alleged “perversity” of poetry is also undesirable if it serves merely as a sophisticated marketing campaign, flashed like an advertisement to draw gawkers by promoting poetry’s oddities. If anything, such a reading of the poets whose work I consider is already the familiar reading, certainly so for Swinburne and Hopkins, odd bedfellows that these two poets are. The perversity of poetry, then, is in some respects to be resisted or at least downplayed on the critical front. If, as I would like to argue, one of the ways that Victorian poetry has been underserved is by its being classed as an eccentric late-century

experiment that eventuates in decadence—albeit with the help of a strongly-scented French land-breeze from across the channel—insisting on the “perversity” of Victorian poetry seems unhelpful, an entrenchment of the very view that ought to be contested. Nevertheless, I preserve the term “perverse” because it continues to suggest a poetic practice that is stridently at odds with its critical justifications and supposed aims, even as articulated by the poets themselves. Some misunderstanding of the term “perverse,” then, is both intentional and an accurate reflection of the divorce (or disarticulation) between poetic and critical practice that typifies the Victorian moment and which is itself an important topic for my study. In raising these concerns, then, my interest is to underscore how any reading of nineteenth-century poetry and its forms calls for careful attention to the purposes and techniques of criticism’s own language. The larger critical context within which *Perverse Form* is engaged is that of a renewed interest in formal analysis as a productive—if historically tainted—direction for literary studies and other types of cultural criticism. The form of such criticism is itself a significant topic, and the figures and figurative registers at play in these critical texts call for scrutiny, particularly given the aims of a project such as this, which uses a bifocal lens to read a particular body of literary texts alongside recent critical works that trouble many of the terms by which these

literary texts have been regarded.

## **II. PERVERSE FORMALISMS**

If poetry was perverse in the nineteenth century, in the twenty-first century it seems to have become more so. Within the academy, even, poetry occupies a strange position, as does the formal analysis of poetry, which has long been viewed askance as a perverse and reactionary vestige of the literary critic as cultural mandarin. A whiff of philological tedium hangs around even the most theoretically up-to-date formalist. It is worth noting, however, that the formal study of narrative has become more familiar, and accepted, than the formal study of poetry, which continues to provoke some antagonism.

Formalism has been slighted in favor of historicist methods, with the implication that the two methods are natural enemies—an assumption that recent criticism has put into question. How or why these developments have come about, however illuminating, is less relevant than the particular forms taken by their articulation. In each case, careful attention deserves to be given to the language and figurative register that critics deploy when identifying problems and proposing solutions.

In the words of one critic, E. Warwick Slinn, “poetry has become something of a neglected genre in literary studies, where the intensive use of

language in poetry appears to have become marginalized amidst thematic approaches to the politics of social discourse” (1). Promoting a response that focuses on the performative dimensions of literary language, Slinn, whose position represents a larger trend, writes that “we need to restore attention to that language, no matter how specialized its use—without losing sight of its continuity with social and historical contexts” (1)<sup>4</sup>. Slinn thus aims to “redress the balance by analyzing poetic content and process in order to show how poetry may enact a cultural critique through its self-conscious formalism, its foregrounding of just those language acts that many of the literary scholars most sympathetic to cultural critique have seemed least to take into account” (1). The phrasing of Slinn’s claims—“restore attention,” “without losing sight,” “redress the balance”—strikes a judicial tone, as if to justify the critical practice he favors in the most neutral way, and re-level a playing field that has been decidedly slanted toward thematic and cultural considerations.

A scholar of Victorian literature, Slinn draws primarily on examples from nineteenth-century poetry, but similar comments can be found without

---

<sup>4</sup> The possibility of mediation and reconciliation is memorably rejected in Bloom’s “The Breaking of Form”: “whether one accepts a theory of language that teaches the dearth of meaning, as in Derrida and de Man, or that teaches its plenitude, as in Barfield and Ong, does not seem to me to matter. All I ask is that the theory of language be extreme and uncompromising enough” (*Deconstruction and Criticism* 4).

much difficulty in the writing of critics working across a range of periods and with different methodologies. Richard Cronin, a Romanticist, sounds a similar note: “the urgent task for the critic of Romantic poetry is not to choose between these two apparently antithetical approaches [historical and formal criticism], for both remain too valuable to be rejected. The need is rather to find a critical manner through which the two may be reconciled” (13-14). Yet the notion of reconciliation is precisely what is in question. Drawing on a different figurative register, Herbert Tucker, who is in various ways a model critic here, uses the language of health and well-being to describe the rise of historical approaches as a potentially harmful antidote to the ailment which historical methods initially sought to treat, a reigning New-Critical formalism that once seemed as unquestioned as historical methods may appear today. “Without going so far as to call this cure worse than the disease,” Tucker writes, “we may still admit that its rigor has deformed literary studies in unwholesome ways. For some time now, a knee-jerk contempt for formal inquiry as such has, in its own turn, become as firmly established within programs of advanced training as the dogma of formalism used to be” (85).<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Tucker, “Tactical Formalism: A Response to Caroline Levine,” (*New Literary History*, Autumn 2006). The language of illness and health in Tucker’s essay would repay more extensive commentary for how it frames current discussion of criticism. The use of a figurative register that

Whether deploying a language of redistributive justice or medical diagnosis, recent calls for a renewal of formal criticism have an uncanny way of sounding *pro forma*. The form of such claims, to the extent that a single shape can be discerned, can resemble the apology or defense. The rhetorical gesture of apology is often accompanied by rallying cries for a return or renewal of formal study framed more in the mode of elegiac lament than as a manifesto or prophecy. At the center of several such timely and admirable interventions, however, is a potentially disabling language of return, renewal, and restoration. For example, Slinn, like others, seeks to move criticism in the direction of form not by avoiding “social and historical contexts” but by incorporating such contexts into a formal project, thereby returning form to the social moorings that have always anchored it. The style of this particular tactic is familiar to classical rhetoric as *procatalepsis*—a figure of anticipation or presupposition, one whereby imagined objections are softened or refuted.

Any preemptory suggestion that form is already historically implicated cannot solve the problem if what is at stake is understanding the nature of the relation between form and history. This larger problem—hardly new and perhaps ultimately insoluble—is what is circumscribed by the critical practices of “historical poetics” and “cultural neo-formalism”— methods of

---

draws on the language of pathology and the clinic is pervasive, and is employed in Tucker’s

reading whose procedures and provenance deserve closer attention. Despite the variety of this work, current attempts to rehabilitate formal study are united by a sense of uncertainty about what form as a critical category is or should be—an unrest which suggests that there is no orthodoxy and little consensus about how to practice the kind of criticism which once would have been called formalism but now seems anxiously in need of another name.<sup>6</sup> As Caroline Levine writes, “a fundamental formalist question may now be at stake: *what kind of a thing is form?*” (*Literature Compass* 13).

The prominence of hermeneutic and contextual approaches within literary studies accounts for part of the neglect alleged by these critics, but a more immanent and less institutional explanation also seems necessary. One reply is that the formal dimension of poetry poses an extreme challenge to all hermeneutic imperatives. Accordingly, the attempt to produce formal “interpretations” of literary works persistently runs up against the semantic indeterminacy of textual features like alliteration, meter, and lineation—features whose significance is not easily gauged or coaxed into plausible

---

analysis without explicit foregrounding or apparent ironization.

<sup>6</sup> “Historical poetics” does not have a meaning that is shared by all of its users. A partial list of references illustrative of this heterogeneity might include Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight* (p. 241ff.); Michal Glowinski, “Theoretical Foundations of Historical Poetics” (*NLH* 1976); Shira Wolosky, “The Claims of Rhetoric: Toward a Historical Poetics (1820-1900)” (*ALH* 2003); M.M. Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes Toward a Historical Poetics” (*The Dialogic Imagination*). Igor Shaitanov’s essay, “Aleksandr Veselovskii’s Historical Poetics: Genre in Historical Poetics” (*NLH* 2001) offers the best account of the critical tradition

accord with the kind of extra-literary phenomena that can be seen as necessary to justify attention to the literary in the first place.<sup>7</sup> In this respect, formalism itself, at least in Hollander's sense of formalism as the study of the signifying power of verbal pattern, is perverse for being attracted to questions that pose a challenge to literary studies as an interpretive enterprise. Despite all that it enables, formalism, strange to say, might be called the resistance to interpretation.

### **III. BEYOND NEW CRITICISM?**

That a renewed attention to the formal study of literature is of more than passing interest may be gauged by different iterations of the topic in a diverse body of criticism. Beyond the fields of Romanticism and Victorian studies, Paul Alpers has recently sought to devise historically sensitive formal analyses of Renaissance poetry by using categories developed by Kenneth Burke. Speaking broadly about Renaissance lyric, Alpers recalls the language of sight and perspective found in Slinn: "Asking Burkean questions of Renaissance poems enables us to recover our sense of their life and

---

called "historical poetics," although current American practice seems not to notice or much consider this background.

<sup>7</sup> The following comments by Marjorie Perloff and Northrop Frye, separated by some fifty years, register the importance of sound as a critical, and problematic, category for the study of poetry. It is telling that the later comment resembles the earlier one: "However central the sound dimension is to any and all poetry, no other poetic feature is currently as neglected" (Marjorie Perloff, 2008);

individuality *without closing our eyes* to the way that aesthetic life is entangled in worldly contexts and dilemmas” (309, 321, my emphasis).<sup>8</sup> The language of sighting that is used to describe the relation between formal and contextual situations may be innocent enough as a figure of speech, but there may also be more to it. Precisely insofar as social contexts and worldly dilemmas are figured as entities that are to be “held in view” and “kept sight of,” what we must not *close our eyes to* can seem less and less real, implying a version of the fantasy of speculative engagement that Aristotle saw as one of sight’s most alluring, if intangible, gratifications. As he writes in *Metaphysics*, the faculty of sight is more pleasing than the other senses: “not only with a view to action, but even when we are not going to do anything, we prefer sight to almost anything else.” This is not to say that history or context is available by more immediate means than “sight”—an optical figure for historical understanding as “seeing” or “reading”—but rather that the function of the critic is impaired when historical context and social factors are presented as

---

“The study of the complex sound-patterns of poetry has greatly lagged behind the study of the complex patterns of meaning, largely because of the lack of a notation” (Northrop Frye, 1956).

<sup>8</sup> It should be said that Early Modern studies, more generally, is an important site of recent formalisms, as evidenced by the essays collected in *Renaissance Literature and Its Formal Engagements* (Palgrave, 2002, edited by Mark Rasmussen). The presence of Kenneth Burke in Alpers’s analysis perhaps indicates a reversal of what David Bromwich has called the “anti-Anglo-Saxon bias” of modern theory (272). Burke, and also Empson, Bromwich suggests, comprise a significant (if little explored) earlier tradition of criticism for which the social implications of rhetoric are unavoidable in any “literary” analysis. The “later rhetoricians” noted by Bromwich, for whom Burke and Empson are the earlier and rarely noticed types, are Derrida and de Man, a connection that is shadowed more than elaborated in what Bromwich writes. Alpers, “Renaissance Lyrics and

entities that the critic as *reader-seer* can know as soon as the lens of vision is wiped clean and the eye is trained properly upon its object.

Borrowing a figure from Harry Levin, Alpers sees the “pendulum of criticism” swinging from context to form, but with an important qualification: “it goes without saying that any aesthetic interpretation that is convincing now will be different from that practiced by the New Criticism or, to use the broader term I prefer, modernist criticism” (309). But the figure of the pendulum may be inapt—and inept—as a pacemaker for tracing the rhythms of literary study, especially for how the pendulum figure itself implies a monotonous and routine shuffling between fixed positions. As such, the pendulum embodies just the sort of plodding predictability that has haunted formalist and historicist criticism. A Manichean metric like the pendulum, which seems to swing between just two points—i.e., historicism and formalism—places one in a sort of critical pit, and, as Poe imagined so vividly, pits and pendulums have a way of becoming dangerously confining. More to the point, however, is that the figure of the pendulum seems especially counter-productive, given that Alpers himself suggests how formalist criticism that appears “convincing” will not reiterate the moves of New Critical practice, effectively interrupting the pendulum’s course. What

---

Their Situations.” *New Literary History* (2007), No. 38. Bromwich, “Literature and Theory,” in *A*

close analysis of the language of criticism reveals, here as elsewhere, is that new figures are needed.

In specifying a need to move beyond New Criticism, Alpers's statements index familiar objections to New Critical modes of reading that understood poetry as necessarily dramatic. In casting suspicion onto the dramatic model, later critics question whether, as was the case for the New Critics, the task of poetic analysis should be to reconstruct scenes of human utterance vis-à-vis the particular attitudes, values, and judgments of a poetic speaker. To understand this tendency in more detail one might consider the legacy of Robert Langbaum's *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (1957). As Dwight Culler first demonstrated in "Monodrama and the Dramatic Monologue" (1975), the sympathy/judgment model that Langbaum proposed for the dramatic monologue eventually led to an over-generalization of "ironic" readings, in which lyric was taken to function like dramatic monologue. Following out the arc of this exegetical pendulum, the critic was led to discover a speaking voice within a given lyric, only to show the failure of the speaker to comprehend their own situation. This failure on the part of the speaker, according to Langbaum, is what produces an ironic effect when the reader's

---

*Choice of Inheritance: Self and Community from Edmund Burke to Robert Frost* (Harvard UP, 1989).

own pendulum of attention swings between sympathy and judgment.

Within this context, Caroline Levine is another critic who seeks to articulate a definition of formalism that moves beyond New Criticism. Suggesting that New Criticism's legacy is not merely an error to be shaken off, her writing is valuable for how it avoids the polarizations that can haunt analyses of critical methods. Rather than being an error in need of correction, New Criticism continues to have much to offer, particularly for how it demonstrates the usefulness of typological abstraction as a way to touch what is most critical—not only for understanding the workings of literature and language, but also in fields of cultural studies, where formal and structural comparability is a potent enabler of inventive inquiry into the connections between otherwise disparate cultural products.<sup>9</sup> But before any version of formal study can be justified in theory or practiced with a clean conscience (a sense of guilt and anxiety haunts even those critics who champion formal study), the question of “form” itself, as Levine and others

---

<sup>9</sup> See Levine, “Strategic Formalism: Toward a New Method in Cultural Studies” (*NLH* Summer 2006), and also her more recent article on the same subject, focusing on the history of formal vs. historical methods in Victorian criticism, “Formal Pasts and Formal Possibilities in Victorian Studies” (*Literature Compass* 5 (2007)). To fully gauge the status of the debate in the field of Victorian studies, Tucker and Dever's responses to Levine's “Strategic Formalism” ought to be taken into account (published in *NLH* Autumn 2006). Both responses are sympathetic. Tucker seeks to specify Levine's proposals with what he calls “micro-level” readings that consider aspects such as versification, while Dever suggests widening the scope of formalism to include not only literary form but “form” across the humanities more broadly. In contrast to Levine's view is Virginia Jackson's idea of “lyrical suspension,” which reads New Criticism differently.

point out, calls for fresh attention. Rather than take the literary text as a formal given—as an entity known to display a standard set of prosodic features, ones whose particular balance the critic discovers through a careful but routine formalist titration—critical scrutiny might rather address the nature of “form” itself.

The questioning of commonplace assumptions and terms such as “form” has produced a range of significant criticism, foremost among which are essays by Yopie Prins that undertake a critique of poetic “voice,” something that has long been taken for granted in the reading of poetry. In a punning contraction, where “voice in verse” becomes “voice inverse,” Prins, like Alpers and Levine, expresses the need for different approaches to the study of poetry, questioning the premises of predominant methods of reading lyric and its related forms. Focusing on Victorian poetry, Prins argues more generally about matters of form and voice:

While Victorian poets were astonished that a metaphor (voice) could be carried by technology, it seems that we at a different historical moment are carried away by the desire to recover and discover the voices of Victorian poetry. Why do we insist on reading literally what the Victorians understood to be a metaphor? What is the voice we are looking for, or think we hear, when we read a Victorian poem? How can we reverse our tendency to read these poems as the utterance of a speaker, the representation of speech, the performance of song? Perhaps we need to look for the various inversions of voice in Victorian poetry, to read again its remarkable performance of voice inverse (*Victorian Poetry* 44).

Prins is thus critical of a practice of “read[ing] Victorian poetry anthropologically in order to hold on to an idea of the human, at a time when humanities seem increasingly in question. The pathos of this lyric humanism is that we try to insert the human in the places—or poems—where it is least certain” (46). Through a criticism informed by the resources of prosody, Prins would draw attention to the displacement of voice in the work of poets who “disturb and disrupt lyric utterance through various kinds of metrical mediation” (*PMLA* 230).<sup>10</sup> By “voice inverse,” Prins refers to the way in which the shaping frames of prosody enact an “inversion of voice in which lyric reading is alienated from, rather than attached to, the speaking voice” (*PMLA* 233). By treating poetic form as a constitutive mediation, Prins’s reading resists a dramatic, speaker-based model for lyric, and, I would contend, offers a model that looks beyond the dramatic monologue and New Critical voices more generally.<sup>11</sup>

The interest evident in Prins’s writing in the instrumentality of poetic

---

<sup>10</sup> Prins, “Historical Poetics, Dysprosody, and *The Science of English Verse*.” *PMLA* (2008), vol. 123, no. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Levine, writing in a different but similar vein: “Setting aside external causes and authorial intentions like the most faithful of New Critics, the strategic formalist locates political effectiveness in the impersonal operations of forms themselves” (“Strategic Formalism,” *NLH* Summer 2006, 647). One way to complicate Levine’s proposals and suggest alternative approaches is to consider Empson’s position on authorial intention. For Empson, excluding an author’s intentions was not only impoverishing to the critic but indicative of a self-enclosed formalism that needed to be resisted. For discussion of Empson’s difference from the New Critics on the topic of intention, see Christopher Norris, *William Empson and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism* (1978).

voice takes up a central problem in the criticism of Victorian poetry, one first articulated by William Buckler in a discussion of what he calls the “impersonative mode” (a discussion not mentioned by Prins). Marking the difference between Romantic and Victorian writing, for Buckler the impersonative mode also serves as the chief contribution of the Victorian era to twentieth-century poetry. Writing in 1973, Buckler’s comments deserve to be re-positioned within current thinking about problems of voice in nineteenth-century poetry:

In order to accept the “impersonative mode” as indispensable to the way in which the Victorian poets moved the tradition forward toward the twentieth century (gave poetry a new psychological orientation and a new pace, variegated its language, and renovated for its use endless myths and prosodic models) one must amend quite dramatically the established tendency to impose upon Victorian works an autobiographical matrix. This tendency has been especially inimical to the creative efforts of Arnold, Swinburne, and Hardy. For each it has reduced the voices of his poetry to one voice (the author’s), and all his subjects to one subject (the author). (Buckler, xvii)

The current, and continued, necessity of the work described by Prins is given by her observation that the task of “questioning voice” taken up in the essays collected in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism* (1985) remains “still unanswered in lyric theory” (*Victorian Poetry* 58). One may wonder, however, how a task whose very form is questioning could ever achieve a definitive answer, and yet a paradox of incompleteness is perhaps the purpose of a criticism that seeks to unsettle the place of voice in theories of the lyric.

#### IV. POETICS, HISTORY, FORM

By yoking the “formal” with the “historical” study of poetry, “historical poetics” may suggest a fruitful direction for correlating poetic structures with particular cultural practices. Doing so may enable us to begin to listen to sounds within lyric that are not reducible to those of the human voice, even if that “voice” is regarded as the projection of a complex persona. And yet, the challenge faced by “historical poetics” is implied already by the very name given the enterprise. A return to earlier formalist criticism may help illuminate this problem. Despite the observations (by now *idées reçues*) from Tynjanov and Jakobson that the opposition between synchrony and diachrony is deceptive (as they write of this opposition, “it loses its importance as soon as we recognize that every system necessarily exists as an evolution, whereas, on the other hand, evolution is inescapably of a systemic nature”),<sup>12</sup> a practice of “historical poetics” faces extreme difficulty, or at least opens itself to contradiction, insofar as it avoids confronting the theoretical problem of fusing poetics, which is a transhistorical method, with practices of historical contextualization. Unless “historical poetics” seeks to define a new and different notion of “poetics,” it will, by virtue of its very

---

<sup>12</sup> Jurij Tynjanov and Roman Jakobson, “Problems in the Study of Literature and Language” (1928), trans. Herbert Eagle. *Readings in Russian Poetics*. Ed. Ladislav Matejka & Krystyna Pomorska. Dalkey Archive Press, 2002.

name, provoke skepticism about its own operations.

A neglected formalist figure of the later nineteenth century, Aleksandr Veselovskii was the first to develop an explicit notion of historical poetics. As Igor Shaitanov has recently written with reference to Veselovskii's *Historical Poetics* (a work first published in 1913 but written much earlier): “‘Historical poetics’ sounds like a paradox, bordering on an oxymoron, especially if one recollects that since the sixteenth century, European poetics, modeled on Aristotle, was considered anything but historical” (433).<sup>13</sup> As Shaitanov shows, however, as early as the nineteenth century, Veselovskii sought to contest the distinction between poetics and historical criticism. In much the same way, one could suggest that current criticism using the term “historical poetics” seeks to reconcile—or at least attend to—the tension between the formal and the historical urgencies of literary works, urgencies which, taken together, comprise the warp and woof of literary language’s

---

<sup>13</sup> Shaitanov seeks to show that Russian formalism is fundamentally indebted to Veselovskii’s work, which has never received thorough recognition: “the figure who is conspicuous for his absence in Western reconstructions of Russian theoretical thought is Aleksandr Veselovskii. Without him contemporary literary theory in Russia lacks its source, unity, and continuity. No matter how distant the extremes to which Bakhtin and the formalists may have run, they were always aware that they worked within the field which bore the name given to it by Veselovskii—*historical poetics*” (441). Historical poetics as practiced by Bakhtin and others, Shaitanov notes, places primary importance on genre (as does my own study). Genre is a point of reference that is not widespread within “historical poetics”—indeed, the abstraction that genre represents is what is resisted by “historical poetics.”

deep structure and give the stitch to its absorbing surface textures.<sup>14</sup>

Historical poetics need not, however, confine itself to the study of the cultural work that poetry performs. What is needed, in fact, is a clearer concept of what “historical” means when adjectivally harnessed to “poetics.”<sup>15</sup> Whereas historical poetics as limned by critics such as Prins implies contextualizing prosody within specific cultural spheres, the historical dimension of poetics or prosody can itself be treated in terms of the history of poetic form and convention, along a diachronic axis with its own synchronic character. But precisely what historical poetics contests is the synchronic approach to literary study, and in this sense it may count neither as formalism nor poetics. One may concede with historical poetics that purely synchronic formalism fails to touch literary history. As Hollander writes, albeit in a different context, such formalism thereby “neglect[s] the diachronic dimension along which formal devices work—the shifting patterns of historical allusiveness which make a genuine poem’s relation to a form a revisionary, and hence an original, one” (Hollander xvi). The task,

---

<sup>14</sup> That current attempts to practice “historical poetics” are fundamentally engaged in a deeper criticism of an idea of the lyric could be demonstrated with reference to Hegel, whose comments on *poèmes d’occasion* in the *Aesthetics* are the most pointed modern extension of the Aristotelian distinction between the poet and the historian, although Hegel figures this difference as a conflict internal to lyric poetry itself. (*Aesthetics*, vol. II, 1118).

<sup>15</sup> Glowinski differentiates “historical poetics” from “descriptive poetics,” writing that “historical poetics aims at devising its own methods,” as opposed to “descriptive poetics,” which aims for the “systematization of literary forms and the description of their immanent structure treated in

then, becomes one of investigating the historical dimensions of tropes and concrete instances of formal patterning, such as line length, alliteration, and syntactic variation—a task that, for all its efforts to historicize poetry, historical poetics is oddly reluctant to undertake.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, a synchronic view of the formal dimension of lyric seems to be the stumbling block of historical poetics, evidenced in the fact that the method promotes a kind of analysis that treats poetry chiefly as cultural discourse, directing attention not onto the poetic text, but rather onto the material conditions of poetry’s discursive production, circulation, and reception. This is a valuable pursuit, but it deserves mention that historical poetics has so far produced new readings of poetic cultures, rather than new readings of the poems by which those cultures warrant closer attention. Perhaps, then, “historical poetics” seeks to relinquish poetics for yet further historical study. Although my own study is in dialogue with this recent criticism, the following chapters on nineteenth-century poetry venture a kind of reading that is no doubt more formal than historical. While it is tempting to take up and renew the

---

isolation,” what Glowinski calls the “typological objectives” of descriptive poetics. (“Theoretical Foundations of Historical Poetics” *NLH* 1976, p. 237).

<sup>16</sup> One example of such work is Wesling’s *The Chances of Rhyme*: “we attain a strong reading only when we have seen the poem’s conventions not as laws of nature but as historical occurrences, for then we have freed structural analysis from the myth of structure” (137). His book as a whole is a treatment of rhyme along these lines. The locus of debate for “historical poetics,” I would contend, is to define the nature of a “historical occurrence” of a poetic convention or form.

historical study of poetic form, the act of reading poetry's patterns may make such a double-task impossible. As the later chapters suggest, criticism does seem bound to practice *either* poetics *or* hermeneutics. The forms of Victorian poetry, meanwhile, however much they might be contextualized, continue to exist as something perverse—counter, original, spare, strange.

## V. VICTORIAN LYRIC

Given the familiarity of these issues in most versions of the period's literary-history, it might rightly be asked why another study of the strange breaking up of the later Victorians is needed. Are these poets not by now familiar as figures at odds with their time, even strangers to themselves? They are commonly familiar as such, but the wildness of their words remains nonetheless under-charted. In other respects, however, the Victorians are over-mapped. And yet, the premises that have led to the conclusion that the later Victorians are mannered and peculiar are often misunderstood and misapplied. In this context, the readings presented are motivated by the fact that despite—or because of—critical consensus about the perversity of the work of these poets, their texts have not been regarded in ways that would be both most obvious and most responsive to perversity. How to respond to and possibly counter-sign such perversity is itself a critical question that

readers of Victorian verse are still starting to explore. The decision to attend primarily to the rhetorical and prosodic dimension of Victorian poetry is thus partly motivated by the fact that Victorian lyric form (in which I include rhetoric and prosody) has received scant sustained attention. A more historically oriented articulation of Victorian poetic perversity might be possible, but any historical rendering of poetic form will always be an enterprise separate from engaging and being engaged by poetic language at the level the letter. Whether this formal engagement should be given a name—“formalism” or some other term—seems inessential. It is worth noting, however, that the formalist moment, even at its height, never really touched Victorian verse, especially its shorter forms, such as lyric. For this reason, the Victorians are ideal candidates for rethinking formalism and “form” itself, and it is pertinent to recall Geoffrey Hartman’s remark that any move beyond formalism will occur within formalism. It might perhaps be objected that only a formalist (in the bad sense) would offer such synchronic pronouncements about critical method, but Hartman’s point is valid and valuable for how it resists an easy distinction between “historical” and “formal.”

To describe this critical problem differently, the formal perversity of the later Victorians has been under-regarded for the reason that their writing

has so often been superficially identified (and self-identified) as peculiar and outré. The outer guise of perversity has itself authorized a write-down, even a write-off, of the value of this poetry more generally. While criticism has generally recognized the most salient features of these poets' works as sonic superficiality, conspicuous formal pattern, and extreme artifice of all kinds, these features have often been regarded as demerits, flaws, or poetic ticks—perversions of normal speech and proper poetry. In literary-historical terms, the second-generation Victorians are an example of Romanticism's belated miscarriage, one that was later to be called out by Modernist and later anti-formalist writers seeking a poetry of common speech. In this sense, the perverse effects of these lyrics have been suppressed in a curious turn of modern critical history and poetic reception. Hidden in plain sight, at once obvious and apparent, the superficial perversity of later nineteenth century poetry has obviated its more careful study. Criticism, one might say, has been blind to its own insights.

Reading, hearing, speaking: it could be said that lyric, *in nuce* or most radically, occurs at the intersection of these three acts, remarking and remaking them all. Lyric collects and plays out different configurations between them. By attending to voice-events where form speaks at high volume, the following discussion elaborates the nature of formal speaking,

and aims to give back a measure of lyric's unaccountable perversity. In the case of the three poets at the center of this study, the hypothesis is that formal voice is the only voice worth listening to. This is a bold claim, and one that comes at a cost. But the cost, to extend Barbara Hardy's terms, is what counts as lyric's "advantage." Lyric's "disadvantage" would be a topic for another study, and, as Hardy suggests, narrative is what takes best advantage of lyric's leavings.

On the subject of formal voice as the only voice worth listening to, it seems to be the case that readers do not have much choice, and poems such as those by Swinburne, D.G. Rossetti, and Hopkins can be said to "speak" only insofar as speaking is recognized as something preeminently formal. It is not, that is, as if readers could tune poetry to a more "human," less "formal" channel; the human is the formal and the formal is the human, and yet lyric refuses to settle for or with either. Perversity names the effect of this process. Whether this is typical in lyric in general would seem the next question. In any case, the perversity of form is nothing more than the formality that constitutes all speaking and writing as the iteration of prior signs, and poetic writing as iteration layered by secondary or tertiary patterns of equivalence, suprasegmental discourse which marks the artificiality of its original utterance. Form is perverse, then, only to the extent that passion and

feeling are assumed to be natural, pre-given and anterior to signs and signaling—entities that would, therefore, seem supra-, anti-, or non-formal. Similarly, form is perverse only insofar as what it “ex-presses” is regarded as determining or otherwise primary. The distinction between form and passion in this definition of perversity is not easily sublated or dispensed with, and as Victorian lyric suggests, the lyric event relies in no small part on the recoil delivered by the qualifier “only” in the previous formulation of perversity.

The readings at the center of this study therefore emphasize pattern over persona, but not in the service of demystifying a naive lyric stance, “Romantic” or otherwise. The central concern is different: although poetry’s formality is what speaks loudest in lyric, formal over-voicing does not trivialize feeling or passion. Lyric’s potential, in fact, is the resistance to compromise on both sides: submitting fully to neither feeling nor formalization, lyric resists capitulating to either drive. Victorian lyric, then, might be the suspense between, and the unaccountable mixing of, dry artifice and impassioned speaking voice (or impassioned artifice and dry speaking).

At the risk of stating what might already be apparent, it is not as if a structuralist or post-structuralist critique could dispense with lyric by revealing the speaking voice to be already structured in and by language.

Constitutive formality does not imply closure—organic or otherwise—nor does it down-grade the reality or value of feeling or any other unpredictable affective experience. Constitutive formality, then, is in no way a demystification of poetry’s passionate effects. On the contrary, formal and rhetorical reading leads toward heightened sensitivities to the dynamism of poetry as wrought utterance. If anything, formal reading informed by the insights of structural and so-called post-structural analysis is in the service of attending more emphatically to the multiplicity of technique and effect in lyric. Noticing the formal dimension of lyric, therefore, does not occur at the expense of feeling or passion, or of the human as such—lyric being the genre most closely associated with inner thought and feeling, as well as with the subject as a reflecting, individualized, and self-conscious agent. Lyric is the resistance to compromise on both sides, where poetic expression and poetic statement is neither entirely a product of passion or of formalization. But lyric’s deployment of and difference from each is perverse.

In recent criticism, the perversity of poetry is a topic explored most recently by Dino Felluga in *The Perversity of Poetry: Romantic Ideology and the Popular Male Poet of Genius* (2006). Felluga’s focus on “perversity” is primarily cultural, where poetry as a cultural discourse is perverse for seeming or being infantile, inward, Romantic, and onanistic. My own interest, in distinction,

centers on poetic form and poetic formality as a critical locus of the perverse. Unlike Felluga, I take verse's perversity to be preeminently formal. Most concisely, verse form is perverse form. This is because poetic form plays at a level that is independent of poetic utterance. This line of argument takes structuralism seriously while also considering the limits of structure and the inevitable transgression of those limits, but without seeking to discredit or invalidate structuralist modes of analysis. What poems say is formed, and what poems say is form as well as the disforming of their own saying. A poem's meditation on its own shape, then, often becomes a meditation on misshape. Victorian poetry is exemplary because it is a flash-point of formal and prosodic scandal: it ostentatiously insists on the elaborate structure of its own utterance as a formal process, while staging the undoing of this structure. This dynamic exists at the level of the individual poem as well as at the level of genre. Individual chapters in this study aim, therefore, to suggest how the code of genre is always under revision in nineteenth-century poetry: the genotype of "lyric" is nowhere present apart from the singular perverse turns taken by its protean phenotype. And yet, the urge to imagine a movement from phenotype to genotype drives reading, something which need not be interpreted as universalizing or totalizing in a way that would neglect a poem's singularities. This urge, as urge, exists as

potential, as desire and drive. If it were a *fait accompli* there would be nothing left. One of the stranger potencies urged by nineteenth-century lyric is that genre is not only inevitable but in some way hysterical: lyric is the persistent interruption and resumption of a search for the idiosyncratic tell which tips the master-code. As the impassioned tracing of artful utterance, lyric is exemplary for how its concise urgings dilate the drive of genre.

At the most elementary level, poetry is perverse in that it turns and returns, literally and figuratively. These turnings, as literal or value neutral “perversions,” are, however, freighted with additional meanings, effects, and values. One of the chief perversities of poetry, then, is how literal turning acquires figurative force. The turning between the two registers is almost always strange and disarming, and is a process that seems at the source of the literary. But the louder form speaks, the more readers seem inclined to ignore it or trivialize it: to attribute form to a speaking “voice,” one for which poetic pattern becomes an outline or an epiphenomenal protrusion. It is always hard to resist reading short, emotive poems in terms of a “voice” that seems far from formal, in the sense of artificial. Indeed, a poem’s rhetoric of authenticity often depends on a certain formal muting and the invisibility of artifice. Form’s permissiveness, its pliability in letting itself fall behind voice and appear as an outgrowth of a poem’s original and vivid

uttering, is a further dimension of its perversity. Form's fungible role in lyric is part of its strange nature.

Noticing form, attending to it as at the center of the critical act, is itself a mode of reading that is perverse. Reading for form seems a willful refusal and an obstinate differing from critical norms for which poetry, especially lyric, is considered a mode of private utterance, personal expression, and subjective rumination. In considering later Victorian poems, my argument is that it is impossible to satisfactorily explain or account for form. Form's effects elude being pronounced upon in any ultimate way. In this sense, form is a perverse type of context for how it tends to ironize the explanatory or hermeneutic gesture typically involved when "context" is adduced within literary analysis. If form can be regarded as a context, it is one that seems too close to the text itself to be meaningful in the way that social or historical contexts are usually taken to indicate relevant dimensions of a particular work. Because my analysis aims primarily to elaborate contexts of the double-staging of formal voice, where form and voice cross each other, underwriting and overwriting one another, as the case may be, I find the term "lyric" both useful and relevant. If the objective had been to elaborate formal voice in other contexts, "lyric" might not be pertinent. Whether formal voice is indeed characteristic is therefore a question engaged

and pursued throughout these chapters. Even if there are reasons to doubt the presence of formal voice as a common trait of short poems, the poems in this study have been regarded as examples central to the idea of lyric. One of the arguments of this study is that it continues to make sense to regard these poems as lyric, provided that “lyric” is a category continually read and re-read, written and re-written.

•

Beyond the use of the term “lyric,” it might be asked why this study looks at these particular poets—Swinburne, D.G. Rossetti, and Hopkins. On the one hand, it might be desirable to assert that these three poets are the only eligible candidates for inclusion. But this would be implausible and misleading, not to mention confining. Other poets no doubt could have been included. In lieu of a principled rationale justifying the decision to look at these writers and not others—one that would admittedly be open to further critique—the following chapters aim to accumulate observations and refine lines of inquiry on a central topic, that of lyric voice, using examples that have seemed especially apt. A more historical case for the clustering of authors could be made, but given the familiarity of their association it seems unnecessary to say more about it at this point.

However, several more specific comments about the kinds of poems

looked at might be appreciated, particularly since there are certain similarities in the poems across the separate chapters—similarities that should not be consigned to happenstance, although at the time of deciding which poems to focus on there was rarely, if ever, any effort at choosing certain kinds of poems to the deliberate exclusion of others. But choices were inevitably made, even if, as it turned out, the criteria for selection emerged more clearly in retrospect.

For each of the three poets at the center of this study readers are rarely permitted to forget that what confronts them on the page is a finely crafted linguistic object. They are poems that draw attention to their status as things labored upon. In most cases, readers discover poems that are perhaps obsessively wrought, if that could be said without attaching any stigma. A primary outcome of this is that the interested observer of Swinburne, Rossetti and Hopkins is asked, even urged, to admit and reckon with particular formal exigencies, ones that might conceivably be elided by a different sort of poet, or even evaded by the reader. Such poems, in turn, become a convenient if not necessarily a natural incubator for critical reflection about the act of reading and the poetics of lyric.

But beyond this rather general description, it is worth mentioning at the start that the poems considered in this study focus, with unusual

intensity, on acts of hearing, looking, and sounding. As such, they are poems that deliberate, for good or ill, over the mediating role played by certain sensory faculties in the construction of what is most often a pointed experience (e.g., the touch of another's hand; the sound of bells or the name of a beloved; the appearance of rushing water, the sound of birds). Sensory mediation is thus a central topic, and the lyric subject who sees, hears, or sounds-out within the space of the poem inevitably also comes to fabricate anew, at a second or third remove, through a poetic "voice" that invites readerly interest in the construction of the poem at hand (such as in terms of trope and lineation).

A poem's existence as a material object available to eye and ear is something that lyric poems are always reminding readers about, but the "made-ness" of lyric becomes newly pressing in poems "on" or "about" what it means to see, touch, or hear. And poems that belabor events of sensing arguably call for and perhaps reward a reciprocal kind of labor on the part of the reader. Such a belief has at least motivated the comments appearing in subsequent chapters, which attend to poems that enact and reflect on the nuances of particular ocular, oral, or aural engagements with the world as construed in and by the art of poetry.

## Chapter 1

### Swinburne: “The Sweetest Name”

“You have a subtle riddling skill at love  
Which is not like a lover.”

-Swinburne, *Chastelard*, I.ii (1865)

#### **I. “A REED THROUGH WHICH ALL THINGS BLOW INTO MUSIC”**

For a writer of such range and variety—dramatist, novelist, critic, and, of course, versifier—responses to Swinburne’s poetry tend to embody an oddly limited number of judgments. There have been objections to the musicality of the poetry as an instance of sound turning too much on itself, which is an objection, at bottom, to a perversion of the referential dimension of language, one that imputes to Swinburne’s poetry a barren circuit where words germinate neither things nor ideas but return to themselves and to other words. T.S. Eliot’s response to Swinburne is the epitome of this reading. Considerable attention is also given to states of difference and otherness based on depictions in the poetry of moral and sexual acts or attitudes coded as abnormal or otherwise awry. In this instance, what has been called the “impersonative mode” of Victorian poetry is recognized in

Swinburne as a way to consider how Victorian poets adopted other selves. In the case of Swinburne, however, the impersonation is usually taken to be flawed and failed in that the voice of his poetry is most often read as *his* voice, despite the contortions this creates. His poems are particularly liable to being read in terms of what Buckler has aptly termed the “autobiographical matrix.” In Buckler’s analysis, the imposition of an autobiographical matrix has lingered over, and hampered, the most experimental, and important, Victorian poets—precisely those writers who tried on voices that were anything but autobiographical.<sup>17</sup>

That poetry’s volume is turned up in Swinburne needs little verification; what remains is to understand the techniques whereby Swinburne raises the pitch, as it were, something that has been recognized at least since Empson lodged a complaint against T.S. Eliot’s dismissal of the wild-eyed poet whom Arnold referred to in 1863 as a “sort of pseudo-Shelley.” Empson’s remarks will be returned to after several more general

---

<sup>17</sup> Writing in 1973, Buckler describes this larger trend and identifies a history of reading whose effects continue to interfere with an understanding of Victorian verse. As Buckler writes, “In order to accept “the impersonative mode” as indispensable to the way in which the Victorian poets moved the tradition forward toward the twentieth century (gave poetry a new psychological orientation and a new pace, variegated its language, and renovated for its use endless myths and prosodic models) one must amend quite dramatically the established tendency to impose upon Victorian works an autobiographical matrix. This tendency has been especially inimical to the creative efforts of Arnold, Swinburne, and Hardy. For each it has reduced the voices of his poetry to one voice (the author’s), and all his subjects to one subject (the author).” William E. Buckler, ed. *The Major Victorian Poets: Tennyson, Browning, Arnold* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1973), p. xvii.

comments. Swinburne in some ways remains the most neglected recovered poet of the period: he is now widely included in the central canon of Victorian poetry, and yet his uniquely demanding body of work has not received close scrutiny into the forms and verbal strategies that give rise to effects taken to be scandalous, grotesque and lurid—effects for which he is most remembered but whose origin is least understood. Critical reaction to Swinburne’s provocative poems from his first published volume, the *Poems and Ballads* of 1866, can be illustrative. One recent critic suggests that the erotics of Swinburne’s poetry are due to a “systematic indefiniteness of reference,” an explanation remarkable, if odd, for how it reiterates, but with a reversal in value, the same charges against Swinburne and the Pre-Raphaelites made in 1871 by Buchanan in his famously negative review-essay, “The Fleshly School.”<sup>18</sup> Critics on both sides have seemed to agree that Swinburne’s writing is, as Sieburth writes, “indefinite.” But this designation has encouraged a view that results in less not more attention to the poems themselves.

Writing on Baudelaire and Swinburne, a fascinating connection, Sieburth attributes these two poets’ “obscenity” to a “systematic

---

<sup>18</sup> Richard Sieburth, “Poetry and Obscenity: Baudelaire and Swinburne,” *Comparative Literature*, vol. 36, no. 4 (1984): 350.

indefiniteness of reference.” Yet whether Swinburne’s poetry is as “indefinite” as his apologists and detractors suggest is unclear. The collapse of distinctions (“indefiniteness of reference”) becomes valorized as a source of strength in the poetry whereas before it was an index of its weakness. Readings of Swinburne’s verse, therefore, tend to gravitate toward features of language taken to produce effects seen as dissolution, blurring, and vagueness—important, but not necessarily the only ones.<sup>19</sup> These effects are, in some cases, projected into extra-linguistic contexts and taken to be symptomatic of historical dynamics, as is the case in Isobel Armstrong’s view of Swinburne’s so-called hysteria, which she reads as symptomatic of capitalist frenzy in the late nineteenth century.<sup>20</sup>

There is, in addition, a curious view that Swinburne’s poetry

---

<sup>19</sup> One of the reviewers of Swinburne’s first published book, *The Queen Mother and Rosamond* (1860), referred to the language as “painfully distorted, vague, elliptical, and bristling with harsh words.” This estimate has persisted into modern criticism, and occasionally as cause for approbation rather than dismissal. Rikky Rooksby, *A.C. Swinburne: A Poet’s Life* (Brookfield: Scolar Press, 1997), p. 64.

<sup>20</sup> As Armstrong writes of Swinburne in *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, Politics* (1993), “Hysteria is a displacement...and it is instructive to consider what structural relationship this language has to other discourses in the culture” (406). The primary discourse to which Armstrong relates Swinburne’s poetry is the discourse of finance capital. As she writes in the same essay, “the underground chains of linguistic substitution begin to mimic the inflationary production of those chains of indirectly devolved credit which, as we have seen, characterised the finance of the 1860s” (408). Although an association between poetics and economics arguably pertains, it would be reductive to read Swinburne’s poetry as a literary super-structure that mimics a presumably determining economic reality. Armstrong’s reading is no doubt subtler than this. But given Swinburne’s lack of interest in finance, any such interpretation would rely on the existence of a deep congruence linking Swinburne’s poems to credit markets or financial instruments that the poet himself would have been decidedly uninterested in. The argument need not rely on authorial intention, nor should it, but a context in which critics would be satisfied to think of Swinburne’s poetry as mimicking Victorian credit markets might itself deserve closer analysis.

approaches a condition of pure sound, sonorousness for the sake of sonorousness. That Swinburne's poetry played to the ear in daring and often overdone ways is beyond doubt; what still remains in question is to what end Swinburne's sonorousness is employed, and, by extension, how his legacy has been shaped by assumptions that his own verse's sonorousness has in fact always worked to challenge.

An idea of sonorousness for the sake of sonorousness—an understandable but simplistic reading when applied to Swinburne's poetry—is complicated by the dubious premise that language could ever be mere sound or noise. Readers might more readily admit the grounds for their resistance, but that seems unlikely. In any case, hostile reactions have a way of being revealing. Despite the complication that pure sound is a difficult reality for poetry to attain to (at least at the end of the nineteenth century), Swinburne has been taken to be a poet of obscurity and empty musicality. Perhaps *the* poet of obscurity and musicality. His techniques and purposes are consequently often avoided for the sake of confirming the ostentatious, which his verse always risks. Undoubtedly the writing deploys challenging and complex figures of thought and devices of patterning (metalepsis, hyperbaton, and anacoluthon at the syntactic level, and the various types of sound-chiming for which he is notorious). One does not have far to look in

order to confirm the standard estimation of him as a poet of torturous style, a writer of congeretic webs of description and seemingly endless qualification.

Cecil Lang's work on Swinburne responds to this problem, and yet it is safe to say that the "fundamental brainwork" of Swinburne's poetry still remains insufficiently understood.<sup>21</sup> Calling Swinburne a "thinker," Lang—who was an important early critic and also the modern editor of Swinburne's letters—means to counter the one-sidedness of Tennyson's notion that Swinburne was a "reed through which all things blow into music." Echoing Rossetti, Lang maintains that Swinburne's poetry embodies "fundamental brainwork," and of a kind that interfuses thinking with ornately crafted sound.<sup>22</sup> The magnitude of the conflict between Swinburne as a *thinker* (Rossetti's "fundamental brainwork") and Swinburne as a *poet* (Tennyson's "reed through which all things blow") has never attained Wordsworthian

---

<sup>21</sup> In this sense Swinburne's position indicates something that exists on a larger scale within twentieth-century criticism of Victorian poetry, what Kerry McSweeney refers to as a "history-of-ideas approach to Victorian poetry, which analyses poetic works in the context of the moral, intellectual, and religious preoccupations of the age. There is of course much to be gained from such an approach; but there are dangers as well, particularly the tendency to confuse high seriousness with imaginative achievement, or moral concern and spiritual struggle with vital poetry." Gauging from the resurgence of interest in poetic form within Victorian literary studies, McSweeney's remarks from 1981 may indeed appear dated, yet they are significant for describing a critical tendency that is sharply put into relief by current engagements with the forms of Victorian literature. Kerry McSweeney, *Tennyson and Swinburne as Romantic Naturalists* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), p. xi.

<sup>22</sup> Cecil Lang, *Letters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959-1962), p. xix.

heights, but the alleged dichotomy between Swinburne the poet and Swinburne the thinker is still central to his legacy.<sup>23</sup>

In a survey of the modern criticism and reception of Swinburne, Jerome McGann identifies William Empson as the first to complicate the distinction between thinker and poet. Tennyson's "reed" metaphor, widespread as the standard reading of Swinburne well into the twentieth century, was the implicit target of Empson's remarks: "people are oddly determined to regard Swinburne as an exponent of Pure Sound with no intellectual content...as a matter of technique [Swinburne] is full of subdued conceits and ambiguities, [and] as a matter of content, his sensibility was of the intellectual sort which proceeds by a process of analysis."<sup>24</sup> Whereas critics and contemporary readers have often written off Swinburne's verse for its supposed musicality or because of a "displaced decorum" in which classical literature is used to depict and celebrate forms of desire and intimacy taken to be obscene, as Sieburth suggests, Empson owned a more historical rationale for cautioning readers against Swinburne's work, as, for example, when he wrote that its effects "depended on a tradition that its [own]

---

<sup>23</sup> Wordsworth's long poems are the nineteenth-century's *locus classicus* for preoccupying the rift between poet and thinker, a topic that is the subject of Simon Jarvis's *Wordsworth's Philosophic Song* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>24</sup> William Empson, quoted in *Algernon Charles Swinburne: Major Poems and Selected Prose*, ed. Jerome McGann (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. xxi.

example was destroying.”<sup>25</sup> Although Empson countered Eliot’s criticisms, Empson’s own comments do not exactly amount to a defense of the Victorian poet. When he turned to Swinburne in *The Seven Types of Ambiguity*, for Empson it was necessary to address the Victorian and also the modern prejudice that had made his writing seem anathema. And while he regarded him with a seriousness usually denied to the poet, Empson also saw Swinburne as dangerous, even parasitic, as in the passage quoted above. Swinburne, for Empson, was traditionalist who had nonetheless plundered the vaults holding the specie that backed his own poetic currency.

Following Empson, instead of resisting the notion that Swinburne’s effects are connected to “Pure Sound,” McGann takes the aspect of musicality as central to Swinburne’s importance. As McGann writes, “when Swinburne forces the reader to negotiate language through its tactility and sound, he is moving to enlarge our perceptual resources. To speak of his verse as “Pure Sound” is to register Swinburne’s critique of the dominance that visual imagination had gained in poetic theory and practice. That critique, along with the reforming practices entailed by it, is perhaps Swinburne’s greatest legacy to poetic tradition.”<sup>26</sup> Without choosing, as does McGann, to regard Swinburne as a poet writing against the “visual

---

<sup>25</sup> Empson, quoted in McGann, p. xx.

imagination” (one might cite Swinburne’s ekphrastic “Hermaphroditus,” consisting of four linked sonnets inspired by a statue of Hermaphrodite seen at the Louvre in 1863), the conspicuousness of language as matter or shaped stuff gives Swinburne’s poetry a significant place in the history of prosody and for modern poetry more generally.

That a prosodist such as Swinburne might be a progenitor of anti-formalist poetic efforts in the twentieth century is an important topic, and one that calls for more attention than this chapter can provide. But to return to T.S. Eliot, that modernism’s *doyen* reacted so strongly against Swinburne’s poetry reveals more about Eliot’s aesthetic program than about actual features of Swinburne’s verse. As a complication to Eliot’s disavowal, Carol Christ’s *Victorian and Modern Poetics* (1984)—a work which treats the role of Victorian formal innovation in modern poetry (chiefly in the monodrama and dramatic monologue)—documents the extent to which twentieth-century aspersions of Victorian poetry express anxieties appearing in the wake of the unprecedented formal experimentation of the Victorians. A further complication, one absent in Christ’s study, however, is that the modern dismissal of Victorian poetry reveals a strange inconsistency: at the same time that later nineteenth-century poetry was discredited by Eliot and

---

<sup>26</sup> McGann, p. xxv.

others, seventeenth-century verse was praised by modernist figures for having qualities arguably similar to what modernists objected to in the Victorians. As Christ reveals, modernism's Victorian predecessors were slighted even as Victorian poetic form was seminal to modernist efforts. One need hardly be a theorist of influence to recognize how the contradictions structuring this inter-generational relationship signal a meaningful anxiety. Indeed, this anxiety has persisted in different forms, one notable manifestation being criticism's own avoidance of formal analysis and Victorian verse, in particular, as sketched in the introductory chapter.

## II. RHETORICAL FIXATIONS

At the center of objections to Swinburne's verse is the aversion to an alleged rhetorical fixation or verbal excess. Ifor Evans's criticism provides a good example. In an otherwise judicious study of later nineteenth-century poetry, Evans regards Swinburne's works (especially the trilogy *Chastelard* (1865), *Bothwell* (1871-4), and *Mary Stuart* (1881)) as mere study-pieces and experiments in which Swinburne is guilty of having "succumbed to the temptations of rhetoric." In an important sense Evans was here merely reiterating a long-held view. What distinguishes his is that, unlike many other critics, Evans shows evidence of having read the works he takes issue with.

But Evan's judgment of the poet, hardly new in the later twentieth century, was commonplace in the British press throughout the 1860s and 1870s, starting when the poems first appeared in publication. The negative popular view worked to taint Swinburne's literary reputation even among more learned audiences, and rumors circulated, many of them indeed self-propagated or at least self-fueled, in which the poet had succumbed to temptations less readily mentioned than those of "rhetoric."<sup>27</sup> One example was when Swinburne and George Powell named their Normandy lodging after a detail from de Sade, calling a cottage they had rented the *Chaumière de Dolmancé* and marking it with an inscription over the entryway. In the eyes of readers such as T.S. Eliot and others influenced by Eliot's criticism of the Victorians, the fact that Swinburne's excesses might become manifest in the form of an imitation or a citation from the work of others—in this case, in Normandy, taken from Sade's *Philosophy in the Bedroom*—could be regarded as evidence that Swinburne was not only in jest, but derivative even in his *outré* gestures.

---

<sup>27</sup> Ifor Evans, *English Poetry in the Later Nineteenth Century*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Methuen, 1966), p. 67. Swinburne was himself concerned at times about something like rhetorical temptation, and his shift from writing erotic poetry ("early work") to political poetry ("late work") has been explained, not always convincingly, in terms of a growing concern about rhetorical indulgence, what Swinburne once called "luscious verbosity."

To move from the life to the writings, which offer a record that the life fails to provide, the scandal of *Poems and Ballads* (1866) now seems quaint, perhaps a typical Victorian over-reaction. And yet, the volume's rhetorical scandal is not easily forgotten. Another view, one that underlies this chapter, is that Swinburne's formal-rhetorical scandal was went largely unappreciated in the midst of the louder uproar around the subject-matter of erotic poems such as "Laus Veneris," "Dolores," and "Anactoria." For modern readers, the sexuality of the poetry was not as problematic, but Swinburne could still be discredited for succumbing to the allure of rhetoric (in fact it seemed almost necessary to do so). Since, in this case, the language of rhetoric may have always been a periphrasis for speaking bluntly about desire and sexuality in Swinburne, reading Swinburne in the wake of his detractors—both moral and aesthetic, although the two are hardly separate in the end—is to notice how the ostensibly safe vantage offered by the language of rhetoric and aesthetic form is perhaps the most direct approach to what is still perverse in Swinburne, long after his poetry's sadomasochistic frisson has been domesticated in a post-decadent era. Rather than avoid his poetry's ostentatious rhetoric, addressing it directly could be the most productive way to understand his contribution to lyric tradition.

### III. *POEMS AND BALLADS* (1866)

A prosodic topic that focuses these larger problems is Swinburne's management of rhyme, particularly in love poems in *Poems and Ballads* (1866) in which the voice of the poet-lover actively works against the epideictic conventions of amorous verse. The acoustic mimicries pose the question of Swinburne's scandal in a new way, one where lyric language becomes untethered from the controlling designs of a speaker or a persona whose processes of thought or contours of feeling might be taken to dictate the poem's sonorousness. Swinburne's achievement is therefore more broadly significant within the genre of lyric, making his verses not only provocative within their immediate cultural context—something that has always been recognized—but also significant for lyric tradition (precisely what Empson was worried that Swinburne had undermined).

#### **“FÉLISE”**

The rhyming of proper names offers an especially interesting case. “Félice” and “Faustine,” both from the 1866 volume, demonstrate the peculiarity of lyric language arrayed across a grid of rhyming recurrences in which the addressee (Félice or Faustine) is made desirable for aural properties and textures of sound capable of being born along by the proper name itself. Here I will focus on “Félice,” a poem which mimes conversation between

parting lovers as a way to place the charms of lyric formula and pattern over the dramatic pathos of a lyric “I.” The poem is an exemplary text for considering the perverseness of Swinburne’s lyric form. The congruities of rhyme in this poem, particularly as they bisect the name “Félise,” would seem to confirm the notion that rhyme, as one prominent critic of the subject has written, is “a language habit...[that] seems a derangement, seems to say something only about language...but there is always the possibility that it is also telling us something about ourselves.”<sup>28</sup> The “derangement” of rhyme in this quotation is in fact another name for the kind of referentiality on display in poetry, where reference is drawn out and re-imposed through verbal disorderings that have an order or rank of their own making, even if their hierarchies seem out of sorts. In a poem primarily about order and the fraught imperatives entailed by design (in both secular and religious senses), “Félise” deranges presumptions about correspondence and answerability at several levels at once—theological, sexual, and poetic. Rhyme as a reciprocal device hinging on the pledged responsibilities of sound and syllable has a way of bringing larger problems into smaller compass, and yet the “derangement” of language brought about by rhyme challenges the

---

<sup>28</sup> Donald Wesling, *The Chances of Rhyme: Device and Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 98.

expectation for consonance, especially in those cases where similarity appears to pass through negative moments and emerge on the other side, more fully “itself” for having been lost at an earlier stage. The way in which rhyme in “Félise” is a figure for continuity in difference that abruptly turns into a repudiation of historical and temporal answerability is one of the things that makes Swinburne’s form perverse.

At a first level, “Félise” is an extended *ubi sunt* lyric, but Swinburne’s touch is to frame a philosophical rumination on transience and religious faith in terms of a scene of separating lovers, a dramatic setting that the poem curiously forgets about as it progresses.

What shall be said between us here  
    Among the downs, between the trees,  
In fields that knew our feet last year,  
    In sight of quiet sands and seas,  
This year, Félise?<sup>29</sup>                      (ln. 1-5)

The syntax of the first stanza stretches the opening line (“what shall be said”) across three middle lines in such a way that the question mark comes almost as an afterthought, and the first line creates an expectation for grammatical completion through predication, as in “what shall be said between us here *is that...*” And the poem eventually concludes its opening

---

<sup>29</sup> A.C. Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads and Atalanta and Calydon*, ed. Kenneth Haynes (London: Penguin Books, 2000). All subsequent Swinburne quotations refer to this edition.

line, but only at its end and after specifications and redirections in the course of fifty-seven stanzas that at times bury the interrogative gesture of the opening. In its penultimate stanza, the poem recursively picks up where it starts, answering its original question through the jussive case (“let this be said...” ln. 286), an answer hovering between an indicative statement and the mild imperative to *let* something be said, an answer that answers without precisely locating utterance:

Let this be said between us here,  
One love grows green when one turns grey;  
This year knows nothing of last year;  
Tomorrow has no more to say  
To yesterday. (ln. 286-290)

To ask the question “what shall be said?,” as Swinburne does in the first stanza, is to beg the question of commencement. The poem’s “saying” has already begun in the asking of the question itself, and “what shall be said” is a questioning answer to the question *what shall be said?* Poems such as this begin in an echo chamber, hearing themselves speak about the question of what they will speak about, yet in the best cases it is not to the point of infinite regress.<sup>30</sup> The sense in which the potentially flat question “what shall

---

<sup>30</sup> *Atalanta and Calydon* introduces the invocation of Artemis with a similarly questioning formula: “Where shall we find her, how shall we sing to her, / Fold our hands round her knees, and cling?” (ln. 81-82). The question of where the Chorus will find Artemis is oddly belated for how it follows the earlier conventional address, “Come with bows bent and with emptying of quivers, / Maiden most perfect lady of night” (ln. 73-74). Swinburne’s questions often congregate around

be said?” reveals contours and echoes by begging the very question that it pretends not to have answered, thereby turning on its own status as a question, is enforced by other elements of poetic structure.

To tentatively separate what could be called a rhetorical contour (the echo effect produced by questioning the act of saying when saying has already begun) from a prosodic contour, the poem can be seen to answer, or at least to specify by prolonging, its initial question through meter and sound patterning. The stanza opens with the boilerplate jargon of a speaker who knows exactly what to say and seems to feign ignorance, of someone who senses that the writing is already on the wall, as suggested in the example of the non-question, “what can I say?” But we would not have heard what the poem is saying if we read its opening question only in this manner. The question it poses is not “what shall be said?” but *what shall be said in the particular situation, in the context of utterance in which this saying will take place?* To hear the way the poem poses the question is to hear it and see it as lineated language, hearing across and against the enjambments that focus attention on the deictic and locative energies of questioning:

---

asking after the origins and causes of speech (“What do ye singing? what is this ye sing?” *Atalanta*, ln. 121; “Who hath given man speech? or who hath set therein / A thorn for peril and a snare for sin? *Atalanta* ln. 1038-39) and of birth (“What hadst thou to do being born, / Mother, when winds were at ease, / As a flower of the springtime of corn, / A flower of the foam of the seas?”

What shall be said between us here  
    Among the downs, between the trees,  
In fields that knew our feet last year,  
    In sight of quiet sands and seas,  
    This year, Félise?

The obvious answer seems to be “nothing,” or perhaps the further, frustrated question, “how should I know?” The question is a leading one, and coerces an invitation to continue speaking, as if the only sensible response would be in the form of an imperative, “you tell me—you seem to have thought about it already.” This is partly a function of the question itself, where the poem establishes its topic by asking a question to which only it can know the answer. In this case, as often in poems that contain questions in their opening sections, the interrogative mode is a figure for authorizing and enjoining the poem to start up and get underway.<sup>31</sup> This authorization is created by projecting silence onto the addressee, “Félise,” from whom any response would cause the poem to stumble over its opening scheme. Such silence is enforced by the unusual specificity of the question, made by the stanza unfurling itself across five end-rhymed lines, each imposing a limitation on the form that a response could take. At the same time that the stanza outlines the characteristics of an appropriate response, it also imposes upon itself a set of constraints—*ababb* rhyme, iambic rhythm, patterns of line

---

*Atalanta*, ln. 762-65).

length (four lines of tetrameter followed by a dipodic line—a terminal abbreviation with effects comparable to those in “La Belle Dame sans Merci”)—that artificially shape the language of the question. The stanza thus instructs a response that is sensitive to matters of placement, to the way in which “what shall be said” is interlaced with the prepositional landscape of the question, a scene made oddly specific through the locative narrowing of successive phrases: “Between us here / Among the downs, between the trees, / In fields...” The effect of the accretion is to suggest that an answer would need to insert itself in *this* place and in *this* landscape, a chance made unimaginable by the obsessive energy of qualification that shapes the question. As a consequence, the capacity and potential for response is diminished by the stanza’s fierce qualification of the linguistic landscape.

The running syntax of the opening stanza lets prepositional qualifiers accumulate without producing an effect of incompleteness, and we can stop at any point after a prepositional phrase and the stanza will comprise a fully grammatical unit. The commas enforce such pauses, splitting the second line down the middle, for example, yet the stanza modifies the “here” of the first line with an energy that partly overruns and blurs the phrasal boundaries and caesuras that separate the items in the locative catalogue. “Here” (ln. 1) is

---

<sup>31</sup> See John Hollander, “Poetic Imperatives,” in *Melodious Guile* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1988).

taken up as a topic for wider dilation, and despite the devices of patterning (end rhyme, iambic rhythms, parallelism) that order the phrase units, the meanings of “here” are made to be more encompassing than expected. The multiplicity of the poem’s “here” is first suggested through the enjambment “here / among,” contrasting the monosyllabic, acoustically sharp and closed “here” with the vocalic openness and nasal glide of the disyllabic “among.” In the parallelism that follows (lines 2-4), “here” is aligned with prepositions in such a way that the meaning of “here” is shaded by *between*, *among*, and *in*—nebulous function-words that make “here” into a ghostly pointer. The “here” of the poem’s opening lines thus kaleidoscopically points *over there*, “among the downs,” “between the trees,” “in fields,” and “in sight of.” The emotional complication between the speaker and the addressee is born along by the running together of *here* and *there*, as if one were equivalent to the other.

The *ababb* stanza-rhyme that connects *here/year* in the *a* position and, for the *b* rhyme, *trees/seas/Félice*, points “here” not only into “year,” but, more specifically, “last year,” marking the distance in time through consecutive stress and interrupting the iambic pattern at the end of the line: “In **fields** that **knew** our feet **last year**.” The concept of “here” that has been spatially defined through a string of prepositional phrases (lines 2-4)

now takes a temporal qualification (“last year”), relating the features of landscape to an earlier state of existence. The deixis of “here” is colored, then, not only by the pressures of a spatial relation given through prepositional phrases, but by a simultaneous temporalization of these relations, as if “here” is best defined through apposition: *here—among, between, in last year*. What the stanza forces in a quiet way (“in sight of quiet sands and seas”) is a recognition that “here” is not necessarily “now,” a present-tense marker that remains curiously absent. The closest approximation to “now” occurs in line five, a two-beat line concluding the stanza (“This year, Félise”) and whose palpable brevity is exploited elsewhere in the poem to carry gnomic utterance, pointed reversal and deliberately flat conclusion. The reversed foot of “**this** year,” with emphasis falling on the demonstrative rather than on the noun, gives the line a stronger medial pause after the demoted “year,” and the fall in pitch after “this” in the half-line “**this** year” creates a minor effect of diminuendo extending into a longer pause after the comma separating “Félise.” Although the lines evade saying “now” even as they build the expectation for it, prioritizing the scene as a spatial experience does not exclude the temporal dimension of the question, “What shall be said between us here...this year, Félise?” On the contrary, the location of utterance in a particular moment in time (“this year”)

becomes a central topic in the poem, one posed via the interrogative first stanza culminating in the calling out of the name “Félice.” The conspicuous absence of dialogue or conversation between the speaker and addressee is, then, set against the productivity that is rung on and out of the name “Félice.” To say “Félice” is less an act of address than a ciphered invocation that calls forth a charm or spell. The poem thus uses the interrogative voice to conjure the props of a conversation in which to say “Félice” is less the uttering of a name than the naming of a particular kind of utterance, one that subjects lyric language to the temptations of rhyme and sound similarity over and above the expressive needs of a speaker. The riddle-like questioning at the start of the poem enjoins a silence on all sides in order to authorize the lyric voice as an echoing return of difference and similarity sounded on the words embodied by the stanza. Muteness projected onto the named addressee and the absence of dialogue or conversation thus becomes a ground for a more literal sounding of the name “Félice” itself. And if “Félice” as interlocutor is incapable of a response at the level of semantic context, the poem shows how acoustic similarity and the impersonal responsiveness of recursive sound is ultimately a more answerable agent for the lyric voice.

The question of beginning is posed at start of “Félise” in the refrain from François Villon’s *The Testament*, “mais où sont les neiges d’antan?” In this epigraph to Swinburne’s poem—a line Rossetti translated as “but where are the snows of yesteryear?”—we read not only the *ubi sunt?* topos, but an indication of the verbal wit and acrostic imagination of Villon that places particular stress on proper names. The epigraph creates a context that Swinburne’s poem deploys and manipulates for a singular purpose. We will later return to the problem of *ubi sunt*, the largest formal backdrop in front of which Swinburne’s poem unfolds, albeit in an oblique way. With reference to the manipulation of proper names, a topic framed by the Villon epigraph, Swinburne does not go so far as to use “Félise” as an acrostic grid for producing individual lines and stanzas, as Villon will do. He prefers, instead, to play with the name by other means.

In the context of the poem in which it appears, the word “Félise” both is and is not a proper name: *Félise* is the particular subject of the poem, the imagined human presence whose relation to the speaker the poem describes. And yet *Félise* is also a word like any other word, abstract and general, a fact the poem points up through rhyming instances in which *Félise* consists primarily of acoustic elements whose meaning depends on the formal

patterning of syntax and sound.<sup>32</sup> One might speculate that very name may have attracted the poet's attention for its anagrammatic potential, permutations of the name being *self*, *feel*, *life*, *lies*, and *flies*, all words whose semantic value sets them within the poem's purview. The effect, once noticed, creates another, more unnerving outcome, that the lettering of *Félice* may be derived from the playful spelling out of such words as *self*, *feel*, *life*, *lies*, and *flies*. Although Swinburne does not create anagrams of the name, the implication of an anagrammatic framework for "Félice" is apt insofar as it draws attention to how the name is felt and heard throughout the poem as a sound whose acoustic materiality is valuable for itself. Part of its value resides in its resources for invention, what the rhetorical tradition that is never far from Swinburne—despite his status as a romantic or post-romantic—knows as the *copia* of proper names. In the case of "Félice," the name is made multiple, serving as the title to the poem in addition to figuring as the addressee apostrophized throughout. Yet the name "Félice" is predominately a sound with particular acoustic properties, and it is "the sweetest name that ever love / grew weary of" (ln. 44-45). The name is taken

---

<sup>32</sup> The poetic handling of names intersects with what Kenneth Burke notices as the duplicity of proper names. Despite having the appearance of singularity and concrete particularity (in contrast to words in general, which are class-concepts, terms for "classes of objects"), proper names can also "readily lend themselves to the resources of classification, as when we speak of "Hamlets" or "Napoleons" or "Madame Bovarys." Such resources are deployed elsewhere in Swinburne,

up as a topic for dilation in a crucial stanza further into the poem:

I loved you for that name of yours  
Long ere we met, and long enough.  
Now that one thing of all endures —  
The sweetest name that ever love  
Waxed weary of. (ln. 86-90)

Informing many of the poem's nearly sixty stanzas, as here, is a hum or under-chant of a question, the answer to which is "Félise," the poem's meditative center. Whether we should hear the epigraph from Villon imposing itself as refrain throughout Swinburne's poem, as it does in *The Testament*, goes to the center of the problem of "Félise." What is in part so ghostly about Swinburne's poem is how it organizes itself under the rubric of a title that collects a discontinuous set of entities: the poem as a literary work, the former beloved who is apostrophized in questioning form in the opening stanza, and elements of nature likened to one another through a process of association with "Félise" as a sound more than as a proper name. If the poem can be said to belong to a particular lyric subgenre, it is the valediction set to the frame of the art ballad, combining as well elements of the *recusatio* poem for the way it insists on not being a love poem of nostalgic

---

especially in "Faustine." Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 489.

or elegiac recollection.<sup>33</sup>

The act of rejection or refusal is foregrounded by the poem's first two stanzas, through three variations on the question "Who knows what word were best to say?" (ln. 6), a question that, adopting Hollander's distinction, can be called *poetic* rather than *rhetorical*: "rhetorical to the degree that it specifies an answer, but poetic to the degree that what is specified is the response that the question is unanswerable."<sup>34</sup> If there is a single word that "were best to say," it would be the proper name "Félise," a name that the poem does violence to by treating it as a word subject to deformation and displacement, a poetic effect which the poem manages by questioning the referential uniqueness of the proper name. Within the poem's questioning mode is also a riddling discourse that tends toward formulaic pattern and suggests the poem's status as an event of language arising more from mechanistic invention based on sound quality than from felt dramatic pathos:

You loved me and you loved me not;  
A little, much, and overmuch.  
Will you forget as I forgot?  
Let all dead things lie dead; none such  
Are soft to touch. (ln. 61-65)

---

<sup>33</sup> Such handling of the proper name also evokes Poe's chiming juxtaposition between "Lenore" and "nevermore" as an affective sound effect rather than as just words or names.

<sup>34</sup> *Melodious Guile*, p. 37.

By summarizing the relationship in a form that cites a children's game-song, the experiential details of the relationship between the speaker and addressee are elided by a pattern whose repetitions create a sense of present inevitability: "you loved me and you loved me not" (ln. 61). The simple, conjoining power of "and" in the line averts any sense of deeper intrigue or emotional complexity in the movement from past to present (or perhaps the conspicuous simplification belies a more subtle situation, but in any case the poem refuses to tell). The stanza in fact avoids the present tense, locating action in the past in such a way that the mere fact of sequence (*this, and this*) assumes priority over narrated development. The effect is to cast doubt on whether the relationship was significant enough to allow for transformation of any sort, whether, that is, it had meaningful substance that could pass through stages of change, a circumstance that makes narrated development appear inappropriate. The local effect is achieved by a carefully managed but seemingly off-hand understatement that vitiates the expectation of pathos, recognition and reversal that the narrative staging of the lovers' story establishes from the outset of the poem. Such instances of riddling and formulaic pattern suggest not only that poetic invention is generated out of such forms, but that the empirical situations to which they allude may partake of a similarly patterned structure, a pattern organized not around the

lyric subject as a dramatic speaker but the lyric subject as an effect of conspicuous artifice. Swinburne's language, here as elsewhere, thus appeals to a jaded sense of inevitability that the formal patterns encourage, as if the lyric voice becomes a victim of its own artifice.

To return to the opening question of the poem, "what shall be said?" is a *poetic* question to the extent that "what is specified is the response that the question is unanswerable."<sup>35</sup> But the fact that the question may be unanswerable is not a dead-end. Indeed, the apparent unanswerability of the question is a pretext for testing out a series of responses to it. In the case of this particular poem, the name "Félise" is "the one thing of all [that] endures" (ln. 87). The perversity of names and naming in the poem contains the unsettling idea that the beloved was only ever desirable for having a certain name: "I loved you for that name of yours / Long ere we met" (ln. 86-87). The riddling operation of the lines "You loved me and you loved me not; / A little, much, and overmuch" is here taken a step further by attributing the causes of love to an even more arbitrary source. But if the beloved is desired—"long ere we met"—for having a certain name, it is not to trivializing effect. The poem draws out the consequences of what is in one sense arbitrary (a name) by using that name to motivate referential aspects of

---

<sup>35</sup> *Melodious Guile*, p. 37.

narrative that are then subordinated to non-narrative motives such as rhyme, sound patterning, and syntax. And there is more to a name, especially if that name is “Félise,” than such an arbitrary process of selection would seem to imply:

Like colours in the sea, like flowers,  
Like a cat’s splendid circled eyes  
That wax and wane with love for hours,  
Green as green flame, blue-grey like skies,  
And soft like sighs –

And all these only like your name,  
And your name full of all of these.  
I say it, and it sounds the same –  
Save that I say it now at ease,  
Your name, Félise. (ln. 91-100)

The sounding of “Félise” enumerates a series of objects and properties of objects— colours in the sea, flowers, a cat’s eyes—introduced with a hanging, assimilative “like” (ln 91) that repeats differently across the two stanzas. In the first instance, “like” (ln. 91) lacks the second element of comparison, and we are seemingly meant to supply the elided object, “your name,” to the beginning of the stanza, the qualities and objects listed in the enumeration being somehow “like” the name “Félise.” The effect of suppressing the first member of the comparison is to give the stanza a riddling, enigmatic character in the sense that the figure of enigma tends to

---

resemble a “closed simile” in which the typical formula of simile, “X is like Y,” is reorganized or deranged in the form of a question, “What is X like?”<sup>36</sup> The sense of fulfillment through comparison generally produced by simile is thus suspended across a stanza break—one of two instances in the poem where entire stanzas are run together, the other instance equally demanding (ln. 116-125)—that recognizes its own disjunction in a re-framing of the initial comparison, as if to affirm, belatedly, that a comparison has been suggested, “And all these only like your name” (ln. 96). The language of the comparison itself generates an interpretive problem posed by “only” in the comparison, “only like...” (ln. 96). Are the objects mentioned the only items that are like the name “Félise,” as if to suggest that the list of colours, the sea, etc., exhausts the set of things similar to the name, or are the objects only *like* the name, shadowed approximations that fall short of the thing itself?<sup>37</sup> This difference, the ambiguously restrictive difference of “only like,” may explain why “Félise” is “the sweetest name,” a question the poem begs

---

<sup>36</sup> Eleanor Cook, *Enigmas and Riddles in Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 32.

<sup>37</sup> See Nowotny, for whom simile and metaphor are “two linguistically different ways of thinking”: “It would seem to be implied that metaphor would be particularly useful for dealing with phenomena and experiences not so far named by common language” (60). “It may, however, well be true that suggestion is usually better done by simile [than by metaphor]. Simile (when simple) does not indicate the respect in which one thing is like another thing. It says things are alike; it is up to us to see why” (66). Winifred Nowotny, *The Language Poets Use* (New York: Oxford UP, 1962).

by predicating “sweetness” to “Félice.”<sup>38</sup>

The reply to the poem’s original question from Villon, “mais où sont les neiges d’antan?” is not precisely “gone, all gone” in Swinburne’s poem. The poem indeed marks a kind of death in its opening stanzas (“last year’s leaves lie dead and red / On this sweet day, in this green May” ln. 7-8) but the purpose of noting sterility is primarily to foreclose the possibility of a repetition. At the same time, death does enter the poem, for it is impossible to “wax weary” (ln. 90) after Tennyson, an act the poem associates with the name “Félice,” without invoking death. In response to the *ubi sunt* epigraph comes the unsettling reply that poetry displaces into itself what has passed away: “Love awake or love asleep / Ends in a laugh, a dream, a kiss, / A song like this” (ln. 18-20). The knowing wisdom of the assertion is counterpointed and undercut by the deliberately weak rhyme (“a dream, a **kiss**, / a song like **this**”), questioning whether “a song like this” is truly where love eventuates, in addition to provoking a further question about

---

<sup>38</sup> A remarkable feature of how “sweet” and its forms appear in Swinburne’s poem is that where “sweet” is customarily used as an affectionate term connoting intimacy, in “Félice,” “sweet” is attributed not to the imagined lover but rather to the lover’s name only, suggesting associations with “sugared speech” or “honeyed language.” The name is a “sweet” sound in the ear. “Sweet” belongs to the lover’s name only. Greek and Latin etymons of sweet—*hedone* and *suadere*—are no doubt on the tip of the tongue in “Félice,” as is “bitter,” a paradoxical connection which in Swinburne’s poem recalls what Freud writes of as the antithetical meaning of primal words. “Sweet” in the seventeenth-century and earlier (the literature of these centuries being close to Swinburne) means primarily “in tune,” a sense Swinburne’s poem relies upon. Only later does “sweet” come to mean “dear.” See Hollander, “Wordsworth and the Music of Sound,” in *New*

what kind of song “this” song truly is. Irony such as this pervades Swinburne’s writing more widely colors several of the most crucial passages in this poem, complicating the ability to determine tone in moments where sincerity and inauthenticity are most in need of differentiation.

The problem of the proper name is expressed in terms of forgetting as a solution to failed love, the work of forgetting having the power to erase, but not entirely: “I loved you for that name of yours / Long ere we met, and long enough. / Now that one thing of all endures – / The sweetest name that ever love / Waxed weary of” (ln. 86-90). While claiming to have the power to forget (“Can I forget? Yes, that can I” ln. 81), the speaker also places the name “Félise” beyond the boundaries of forgetfulness—“now that one thing of all endures – / The sweetest name that ever love / Waxed weary of.” At this point the name of the beloved verges on supplanting any substantial notion of the beloved herself, the word “Félise” calling up chains of association by rhyming with other words: *seas* (ln. 4), *breeze* (ln. 27), *these* (ln. 72), *ease* (ln. 99), *seize* (ln. 127), and *knees* (ln.187). That the name *Félise* rhymes felicitously, if slantly, with the plural noun *seas*, a rhyme pair that occurs six times in the course of the poem, suggests the possibility that the proper name *Félise* is motivated less by the unique identity of an individual

whose inclusion in the poem enables the poet to create an atmosphere of imagined dramatic exchange with an addressee, but rather by the chiming potential of the name's two syllables "fé" + "lise" as productive of a particular kind of love poem, one in which lyric poetry is set to work as an ironic and formulaic kind of invention.<sup>39</sup>

In this sense, it is possible to interpret the poem as an ambiguous lament or complaint against banality, ambiguous insofar as banality is lamented in a mode that valorizes and deploys indifference and banality to make its point. The poem figures banality as a threat of stasis, and against the recognition of change and decay stands a positive claim for the endurance of poetry as a strange act of making: "For many loves are good to see; / Mutable loves, and loves perverse; / But there is nothing, nor shall be, / So sweet, so wicked, but my verse / Can dream of worse" (ln. 161-165). Poetic making is thus stated as a challenge capable of surpassing what is possible in love. The mock-prophetic tone of "there is nothing, nor shall

---

p.49.

<sup>39</sup> Richardson's readings in *Vanishing Lives* intersect with Buckler's comments about the "impersonative mode" of Victorian poetry, and the central question, which the recent work of Yopie Prins helps to focus, concerns the place voice and self in Swinburne, what Richardson calls Swinburne's "counterimpulse to drive beyond elegiac dissolution to an anti-self of cold clarity, strength, indifference, and restraint. This half of Swinburne normally finds its image in the sea, or in woman with the indifferent strength of the sea. But these imagined purities, even in the moment of their imagining, are soiled with self and self-loathing. Nonhuman indifference becomes inhuman cruelty. Cold clarity becomes pain." James Richardson, *Vanishing Lives: Style and Self in Tennyson, D.G. Rossetti, Swinburne and Yeats* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988), p. 129.

be..." asserts itself capable of a power of dreaming whereby it will outdo the most perverse forms of sweetness and wickedness. The perversions of verse, that is, will always be "worse" than the perversions of life. It may appear as the worst cliché to notice a stanza in which Swinburne claims that poetry is the *ne plus ultra* of perversion: "There is nothing, nor shall be...but my verse / Can dream of worse," and we might be drawn to the archive of Swinburne to substantiate or deepen this claim, one that in any case is bound to mean what we want it to in the case of Swinburne. But what would it mean to have verse that is "perverse," not to mention "worse" than "perverse"? The rhyme that the stanza imposes on the question produces a sense of unease and frustration, as if it were hardly necessary to insist on the point in the ear through the harmonies of rhyme. The statement of extra-ordinary creativity, or *worse verse*, to compact the rhyme-words in an instance of compression that the elided middle of rhyme tends to produce, takes the form of a dreaming dissociated from any intentional act on the part of the poet: "my verse / can dream of worse," where the dreaming agent is identified with "verse" itself. Without denying the biographical and historical meanings that perversion can be made to take in Swinburne,<sup>40</sup> we can notice that his poetry

---

<sup>40</sup> vid. "Poetic Perversities of A.C. Swinburne," Richard Dellamora, *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

is a site of “perversion,” perhaps “worse” than perversion, in several senses: simply in its constitution as verse in the sense of the *versus* that describes the rhythmical turning at a regular pivot to produce a swaying movement by rounding at the end of the line; in its elliptical turning away from declarative modes of statement (in the language of an 1860s reviewer, “painfully distorted, vague, elliptical, and bristling with harsh words”); and in its exploration of erotic states that run counter to a normative standard. In this sense the claim is less startling than it may seem, where the pun on “turning” contained in the rhyme-pair “perverse/verse” registers the fact that insofar as language assumes the shape of lineation (verse), there are necessarily turns and counter-turns (perversions). This is not to bowdlerize the erotic undertone of the stanza, where “mutable loves and loves perverse” recall many of Swinburne’s more explicitly erotic moments such that the line could easily serve as a thematic summary of many of his other works. But the surface-level provocation of the stanza only becomes truly provocative

---

<sup>24</sup> A wider context for the critique of the sound-sense relationship in poetry is sketched by Simon Jarvis in “Prosody as Cognition,” where Swinburne’s “musicality” is one of several examples. Jarvis’s discussion of Swinburne is too brief to warrant detailed treatment here, although it suggests a potentially productive extension and riposte to interpretations of Swinburne’s musicality offered by Isobel Armstrong in *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics* (1993). See Jarvis, “Prosody as Cognition,” *Critical Quarterly* 40.3 (Autumn 1998).

or perverse when set in relation to the larger claim about poetry. Poetry is set against empirical reality in the style of a *paragone* where the dreaming of verse is “worse,” in the sense of more intense or outré, than those “loves” that are “good to see.” The following stanza further develops the comparison in a way that alludes to the relative merits of the poet and the historian: “For we that sing and you that love / Know that which man may, only we. / The rest live under us” (ln. 166-168). Nearer to Swinburne than the *Poetics* of Aristotle would be Baudelaire’s line from “The Albatross,” “Le Pöete est semblable au prince des nuées.” The figure of the poet, made plural in Swinburne’s choric (“we that sing”), is associated with what is possible or potential in the turns and reversals of perversion, or what Swinburne offers as “worse verse.”

#### IV. “LUSCIOUS VERBOSITY” REVISITED

Without thematizing it, critics have always known, whether viewed as an asset or shortcoming, that Swinburne’s poetry is somehow perverse. The musicality of Swinburne’s writing has historically been considered a point of failure, where musicality instances a priority of sound-effect over poetic idea or primary feeling. As T.S. Eliot famously wrote of Swinburne’s poetry, “the object has ceased to exist...because language uprooted adapt[s] itself to an

---

independent life of atmospheric nourishment” (“Swinburne as Poet”).

Eliot’s is now the famously flawed response, but even when it first appeared, his reading was not original—Tennyson’s comment that Swinburne was a reed through which all things blow into music poses the same issue, as do many reviews starting in the 1860s. In a reversal of Eliot’s evaluation that is still underway, Swinburne’s poetry might now be said to offer its own kind of nourishment—atmospheric, perhaps, but bodily as well—one that is derived from the possibilities created by imagining feeling and desire to be effects of sound that are consequences of a poetic artifice desired *long ere* there was a human object to substitute for it. The unsettling realization that the substitutions of rhyme delivered up by a proper name can be more attractive and significant than the human being attached to that name is one reason why Swinburne’s verse, in the end, will always remain several turns worse than perverse.

Swinburne was acutely concerned about a susceptibility to rhetorical temptation, and yet critics who point out the poet’s failures—literary and personal—often fail to notice this self-awareness. Ifor Evans, for example, in the passage cited at the beginning of this chapter, referred to Swinburne as a poet who had uncritically and unselfconsciously “succumbed to the temptations of rhetoric.” That Swinburne was aware of the rhetorical

indulgences of his writing seems unimportant to Evans. The topic extends to how critics have understood the poet's *oeuvre* over his long and varied career, which extended into the first decade of the twentieth century.

The perceived movement from the early erotic poetry to Swinburne's later political poetry is typically explained in terms of a growing concern about rhetorical indulgence. This indulgence Swinburne himself called "luscious verbosity." The phrase is, in fact, not really a self-endorsement. Appearing in a letter to the critic Morley, from 1872, his criticism of his own "luscious verbosity" arises in the context of a discussion of the memorial poems that Swinburne composed for Gautier. With these poems in mind, Swinburne writes that "the danger of such metres is diffuseness and flaccidity...a tendency to the dulcet and luscious form of verbosity which has to be guarded against, lest the poem lose its foothold and be swept off its legs, sense and all, down a flood of effeminate and monotonous music, or lost and split in a maze of what I call draggle-tailed melody."

Readers might well ask whether such self-criticism expresses an anxiety that was original to Swinburne, or if his criticism here is rather a reiteration of the negative reviews that the poet was familiar with by 1872. It is important to note that Swinburne wrote this to Morley, the critic who authored the first truly damning review of the 1866 *Poems and Ballads*. But it

would be a simplification to say that Swinburne was bowing to the views of someone he knew to have once been a hostile reader of his verse. When Swinburne writes of “luscious verbosity” it does seem that he has a serious intent. Merely paying lip service to what he knew to be the prevailing opinion of his poetry was not something he would have done.

What Swinburne in this letter calls “sense and all” is of primary value, and is, he says, threatened by “monotonous music” and “draggled-tailed melody.” Another negative view of his poetry—perhaps easily disregarded when coming from the pen of a critic like Morley—was, however, arriving from someone less easily disregarded—Mazzini, the Italian patriot Swinburne took as one of his heroes (along with Victor Hugo). The poet’s Italian muse wrote a letter similar in spirit to Morley’s after receiving a gift-copy of *Atalanta* from Swinburne in 1867. Mazzini’s letter urges Swinburne into what he thought was a new direction: “The poet ought to be the apostle of a crusade,” Mazzini writes, “his word the watchword of the fighting nations and the dirge of the oppressors. Don’t lull us to sleep with songs of egotistical love and idolatry of physical beauty: shake us, reproach, encourage, insult, brand the cowards, hail the martyrs, tell us all that we have a great Duty to fulfill, and that, before it is fulfilled, Love is an undeserved blessing, Happiness a blasphemy, belief in God a Lie.”

What Mazzini notices here, among many other topics, is the inevitable and problematic sensuousness of language. At issue are the sounds and patterns, as of syllables, that give poetry its character, or perhaps lose it, as is sensed by Swinburne's figure of the maze in which, as he writes, the poem slips up, "losing its foothold and be[ing] swept off its legs, sense and all, down a flood of effeminate and monotonous music." The poet here becomes a rhapsode, a writer possessed by the energy of their own music in the chanciness of its elaboration. It is a dangerous figure of inspiration. But the opposite extreme is equally to be avoided. That is, if dulcet and luscious verbosity leads into frenzy, a poem without the dulcet chimes of rhyme becomes what Swinburne calls "a maimed thing, a rhymeless lyric that halts and stammers in the delivery of its message" ("Matthew Arnold"). In this same essay, Swinburne writes that rhyme "gives half the power and half the charm of verse."

The danger, then, is that rhyme might be credited with more than its fair share of the power of poetry. In this case, the allegedly subservient formal aspects of a poem would turn the tables on the fiction that sound is echo to sense. If this relation is re-ordered, sense following from sound, the architecture and the essence of the poem looks rather different. The notion of musicality, which in Swinburne criticism is historically seen as a point of

failure, suggests that sound effects have been given greater priority than the so-called poetic idea or argument, or what could be called the feeling. Worse yet, as in “Félise,” feeling might be an *effect* of sound, a consequence of a poetic design that might be the poem's primary inspiration. Rhyme is meaningful for how it makes a simple case of urging these larger problems—the idea of equivalence being at the heart of most prosodic questions—and, in the case of rhyme, relations of equivalence become impossible to miss and yet frustrating to explain. But, in Swinburne, that is precisely the point.

In closing, Swinburne’s example helps us reconsider the place of rhyme in lyric, and a poem such as “Félise” points readers toward a different understanding of how rhyme is involved in lyric expression. At this point it might be instructive to consider another central voice in these issues, that of the critic and prosodist George Saintsbury. As he writes in *A History of English Prosody*, “on the whole, rhyme should come at the end of something.” Saintsbury’s remark is of course accurate in suggesting the role of rhyme in creating effects of closure, but it also suggests that rhyme should come *after* feeling or thinking, and that these emotional or conceptual processes pre-exist lyric expression. Swinburne’s example proposes just the opposite.

## Chapter 2

### D.G. Rossetti: “Silence For a Little Space”

For reading Rossetti, as for the other poets examined here, the notion of the “scandal of form,” outlined in the introductory chapter, is of value for suggesting the wider connections between Victorian, Romantic, and Modern poetry and poetics. Although the scandal of form is not strictly historical, it does delimit movements and groupings within nineteenth-century poetry.<sup>41</sup> It refers to those poets, preeminently Swinburne and Hopkins (although the list could include many others, such as Rossetti, as I argue), whose writing employs overt devices of patterning at a time when poetry sought to bring itself closer to the cadences of spoken language. Such writing, paradigmatically through meter and rhyme, insists on “egregious type[s] of equivalency or overdetermination” (Wesling 63). As I have argued with reference to rhyme in Swinburne in the previous chapter, such overdetermination at the level of the line and in the ear (rhyme dictating both line structure as well as sound-shape) entails the over-determination of extra- or non-literary structures such as feeling, memory and thought. How Rossetti engages similar problems within a group of his early lyrics will be

---

<sup>41</sup> “The scandal of form, and of theories of form, is that form is not altogether congruent with other historical progressions, at least not in any single or easily describable way” (Wesling 107-8).

the concern of this chapter, which begins with some discussion of key issues in the critical history of Rossetti's reception. Whereas in the previous chapter specific effects of rhyme were considered, in the case of Rossetti, I explore "egregious equivalency" from a different perspective, by looking at poems in which sound and voice are imagined in terms of silence and acoustic withdrawal. The concern in this chapter is with sensory cross-ruffing as a particular mode of lyric experience, one that Rossetti's poems comment upon as they engage readers in the complexities of the experiences evoked.

### **I. ROSSETTI'S *ARS POETICA***

"By thine own tears / thy verse must tears impart." Rossetti's redaction of Horace's *si vis me flere* appears in one of the unruled pocket-sized notebooks he used for a variety of mnemonic purposes—to record lists of bills, titles of borrowed books, individual words and rhyme pairs, as well as lines from other poets. These notebooks, four in number (known as the British Library Notebooks), span Rossetti's final decade, 1871-81, and read as a mix between a commonplace book and a business agenda, a poet's messy word-hoard that shares space with household lists and bills.

In the same notebook from the period 1879-1881 in which the Horatian lines quoted above appear is a curious and representative sheet. At the top of the page is written "When we are senseless grown, / to make

stones speak,” and appearing on the same page are two fragmentary entries: “The Shakespearean English / of Blake’s poetry,” and, at the very bottom of the sheet, the lone word “groyne,” defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as a timber or masonry breakwater, and, more generally, as any projection of rock. Two unsteady horizontal lines separate the three entries from one another, presumably indicating a division of time or topic, one that has proved useful to Rossetti’s editors in organizing the entries. Looking at the page as a whole, the word “grown” from Donne’s “Epitaph on Himself” (Rossetti does not attribute the lines to Donne) makes a kind of rhyme with Rossetti’s free-floating jotting of the word “groyne,” both words occupying the right side of the notebook page. It would be trivial to speculate on the logic of a possible connection between the three entries (indeed, the notebooks are valuable for the heterogeneity of their materials), although the idea of extension in space is common to both “grow” and “groyne,” giving the words a semantic as well as a phonetic alliance. Even more suggestive might be the way in which a speaking stone or epitaph, as Donne’s lines invoke, could be seen as a kind of miniature “groyne,” one that, like a breakwater, serves some protective or ministrative function. While it is not my intention to suggest that Rossetti’s notebooks deserve to be read with the kind of intensity called for by his published works, these memorabilia

illustrate the stirrings of his wide-ranging and at times oddly fecund imagination: they speak to the preliminary infrastructure of his creativity, the listed items, borrowings and self-corrections that occurred to him throughout his daily routine. This particular notebook's recapitulation of Horace ("By thine own tears / thy verse must tears impart") would eventually become the opening line of Rossetti's famous sonnet "The Song-Throe" (1881), a poem that one of Rossetti's most far-reaching early critics has called a "fragment of an *ars poetica*" (Baum 157). The basis of that *ars poetica*, as told by "The Song-Throe," is that the power of poetry, as Horace would also have it, is connected to a poet's ability to figure-forth emotional sincerity. The issue is introduced by a hortatory address in the first four lines of "The Song-Throe":

By thine own tears thy song must tears beget,  
O Singer! Magic mirror thou hast none  
Except thy manifest heart; and save thine own  
Anguish or ardour, else no amulet. (ln. 1-4)

The consequences of poetic success—the precondition of which is the ability to first move a listener—are figured violently in the sonnet's sestet in the image of a wounded poet who deflects Apollo's rhetorical arrows onto a similarly "pierced" audience:

The Song-god—He the Sun-god—is no slave  
Of thine: thy Hunter he, who for thy soul  
Fledges his shaft: to no august control

Of thy skilled hand his quivered store he gave:  
But if thy lips' loud cry leap to his smart,  
The inspir'd recoil shall pierce thy brother's heart. (ln. 9-14)

Poetic power in this instance is rendered as a derivative and involuntary moan (an “inspired recoil”), one whose effectiveness is proved through a kind of figurative fratricide, the poet’s “loud cry” transuming Apollo’s verbal arrows into another rhetorical dart that is able to “pierce thy brother’s heart” (ln. 14). For a poem that sets out to establish the importance of emotion and sincerity unadorned by technical artistry, as this poem seeks to (e.g., “Magic mirror thou hast none/Except thy manifest heart”), the elaborateness of the poem’s own organization comes as a surprise. Its classical allusiveness and syntactic inversions, its complex central conceit and unusual phrases (e.g., “Cisterned in Pride,” ln. 5) all combine to make the act of reading unusually taxing. Indeed, despite the fable of poetic expression as sincerely felt emotion imparted in the absence of contrivance, the poem seems hamstrung by the fiction it seeks to dispel. Even at the point where the poem reinforces its point by imagining an antithetical scenario, it seems to garble its message: “Cisterned in Pride, verse is the feathery jet/ Of soulless air-flung fountains; nay, more dry/ Than the Dead Sea” (ln. 5-7). The poem makes itself into an example of the elaborateness it means to dispel, but the heuristic display of poetry’s “feathery jet” seems to overtake the poem in the end.

In sketching this brief analysis of “The Song-Three,” I mean to indicate how Rossetti’s poetry can be complexly at odds with its own apparent meanings. But I would like to make this point in a way that neither celebrates obscurity for its own sake nor makes an emblem of the interpretive aporias that Rossetti’s poetry so often suggests. To do so would valorize Rossetti’s writing according to terms dictated by his earliest detractors, among others. While I seek to complicate these criticisms, my aim is not simply to invert the standard of judgment and make a virtue of what previous critics and readers have objected to.<sup>42</sup> To this end, in part of the discussion that follows I turn to certain critical objections leveled at Rossetti’s poetry, but my comments sidestep the well-documented story of the Buchanan affair and its legacy in an effort to connect Rossetti’s poetry to arguments about poetic language and the nature of lyric experience. It is tempting to rehearse the catalogue of pungently worded barbs against Rossetti’s work, but readers are familiar enough with this history that only a few examples will suffice for my purpose, which is to consider Rossetti in relation to several larger critical landscapes as a way to motivate an argument about problems of sound and vision in several of his early lyrics, a rarely

---

<sup>42</sup> Catherine Maxwell’s recent book *Second Sight: The Visionary Imagination in Late Victorian Literature* (Manchester 2008) elaborates the moment in Rossetti’s modern reception when sympathetic critics assumed Buchanan’s terms but with a reversal in value.

discussed group of poems written close to 1849 and published at various times over the next four decades, in one case not until 1911, nearly thirty years after his death.

## **II. EARLY REACTIONS AND THE “ROMANCE OF DECAY”**

Starting with the publication in 1870 of his first volume of original writing, *Poems*, Rossetti could never escape the imputation that his poetry was a product of the sort of “magic mirror” renounced by the speaker in “The Song-Three.” Whatever powers Rossetti’s “skilled hand” may have actually had, it was notoriously difficult to define them apart from the enchanting spell that his poems seemed to create. Critics such as Buchanan actually denied that his poetry contained any supernatural or mystical valence, which was a cagey tactic for someone making the argument that Rossetti’s poetry was offensive for being entirely of the flesh and was without any higher message. But Emerson, for one, was more perplexed. Of the initial print-run of *Poems* in 1870, one-fifth of the total (two hundred and fifty copies) was sent to the American market. Despite some success abroad and his eventually finding an American publisher in Mosher, Rossetti never really reached American readers. To borrow again from the terms of “The Song-Three” quoted earlier, his poetry seemed all amulet and magic mirror, as

attested by Emerson's statement that "we scarcely take to the Rossetti poetry; it does not come home to us, it is exotic; but we like Christina's religious pieces" (quoted in Doughty 450). With several exceptions, Emerson could have been describing the response Rossetti received at home. In contrast to this, a notable voice in support of Rossetti was Mary Robinson, but it was from the perspective of 1882, soon after his death, that she wrote of the 1870 volume that "Few books have been so immediately successful. A very few weeks after publication he was generally admitted to be one of the greatest living English poets" (Robinson 699). *Poems* in fact sold exceedingly well, and it quickly ran to multiple printings within the first year of its appearance. And sales were fueled by more than the well-placed reviews that Rossetti had contracted for ahead of time from friends such as Swinburne and William Morris, but these partisan reviews helped lift the book's early sales.

While Rossetti's writings now enjoy a position long denied to them in most genealogies of modernist poetry, their neglect for more than fifty years is perhaps easily forgotten. The major arguments for Rossetti's secondary or minor position can thus be instructive to recall, even if, like Swinburne, Rossetti now seems securely ensconced in the history of Victorian literature. Jerome McGann, admittedly Rossetti's foremost champion among recent

critics, writes of the 1870 edition that it was “arguably the single most important volume of English poetry to be published between Browning’s *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845) and Yeats’s *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919)” (McGann *CWP*). Such a robust argument on behalf of the 1870 *Poems* still remains to be made, but what makes McGann’s comment provocative—many might doubt this punctuation of the history of English poetry between 1845 and 1919—is how it recalls the long-standing bias against Rossetti’s work, several salient points of which are worth exploring in more detail before considering several individual poems.

At issue for many reviewers was a perceived excess in both the 1870 volume as well as in Rossetti’s second and last collection, *Ballads and Sonnets* (1880). One reviewer, writing in *The Art Journal* in March 1882, reported that “the best of the sonnets will not be generally considered those in which a foreboding and pathetically passionate love is celebrated with what we can only call an immoderation which affronts against virile self-control” (quoted in Doughty 644). No doubt such a perspective was too familiar by 1882 for anyone to be astonished by it, but even as early as 1872 Rossetti’s poetry was criticized in *The Quarterly Review* as “emasculated obscenity,” while *The Edinburgh Review* of April 1882 objected to *Ballads and Sonnets* as “the result of self-conscious elaboration, rather than of genuine poetic fervor” (quoted in

Doughty 497, 644). Rossetti's own *ars poetica*, in which "self-conscious elaboration" is decidedly cautioned against, as in "The Song-Three," was no doubt lost on the many readers and critics who took his verse to be indulging in the kind of insubstantial performance that his own example warned against. From one perspective, his poetry, particularly *The House of Life* sonnet-sequence, was at fault for presenting a voice that seemed too candidly to reflect the "manifest heart" of its author, the biographical Rossetti whose "anguish and ardour" was assumed to be on vulgar display in the sonnets. In less evaluative terms, Cardinal Newman wrote to Edmund Gosse shortly before Rossetti's death in 1882 commenting on the "ethical quality" of Swinburne and Rossetti: "As regards Swinburne and Rossetti, their poems are soaked in an ethical quality, whatever it is to be called, which would have made it impossible in the last generation for a brother to read them to a sister" (quoted in Doughty 504). What Newman hinted at was perhaps what a later critic of Rossetti had in mind in noticing "a certain weary fever of the body, a passionate voluptuousness which offends and must offend the temperate and controlled spirit" (Benson 135). As these quotations suggest, critics were characteristically unable or unwilling to separate their moral and aesthetic responses, and the formal elements of Rossetti's poems were often called upon as evidence in a trial whose

outcome was already determined, thereby collapsing moral and aesthetic descriptions in such a way that the linguistic shape of the work could be seen either as an accomplice abetting an immoral intention, or, alternately, as the inciting cause itself. What was shameful about the case of Rossetti was not simply that the poetry was “voluptuous,” but rather that it failed to be passionate in the very way that previous poets had succeeded at expressing strong desire and ardent feeling: “other poets, such as Shakespeare, Milton, Keats, and Browning, have been voluptuous enough without offending. In Rossetti, what offends is a certain softness of execution, but more a want of reserve, which makes him appear at times as if overmastered by a kind of sensuous hysteria” (Benson 135). On this view, Swinburne, an early admirer of Rossetti and his student in many respects, would be the nineteenth century’s hysterical poet *par excellence*,<sup>43</sup> and the pathologization of the Victorian poet—both sexually and prosodically—was to become a commonplace reaction among early twentieth-century writers who sought to

---

<sup>43</sup> Isobel Armstrong associates the writing of Swinburne with that of Hopkins in just this respect in her important *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, Politics*. (Routledge, London and New York: 1993). As she writes of Swinburne, connecting his poetry to Hopkins’s according to what Armstrong refers to as the hysteria of language: “A way to begin taking his work seriously without normalising it is to think of him [Swinburne] as the uncanny twin or perverse double of Gerard Manley Hopkins...What brings both poets into a fully dialectical relation to one another is a quality that can only be termed *hysteria* of language” (403).

distance themselves from the Victorians.<sup>44</sup>

Perhaps with the trauma of the Buchanan affair still in mind (an event that precipitated the distress that led to Rossetti's failed suicide attempt in 1872), before publishing his 1880 volume Rossetti drafted a statement about the poems that was meant to serve as a head-note to the newly expanded *House of Life*. His intention had been to announce that the sonnets enacted a "disavowal of personality," but he refrained from printing the comment, most likely due to Watts-Dunton talking him out of it. The statement sought to deflect the charges of "self--conscious elaboration" that were easily anticipated by Rossetti by the end of the 1870s. A more moderate statement was prepared for the Fitzwilliam manuscript of *The House of Life*, in which Rossetti wrote:

To speak in the first person is often to speak most vividly; but these emotional poems are in no sense 'occasional.' The 'life' involved is representative, as associated with love and death, with aspiration and foreboding, or with ideal art and beauty. Whether the recorded moment exist in the region of fact or of thought is a question indifferent to the Muse, so long only as her touch can quicken it (quoted in Baum *HL* 47).

Rossetti was here in part elaborating upon an existing disagreement with his brother over the nature of the sonnets. William, by contrast, in his "prose

---

<sup>44</sup> Carol Christ's *Victorian and Modern Poetics* (University of Chicago, 1984) is still the standard study of this complex relationship. See also Jan Goldstein, "The Uses of Male Hysteria: Medical and Literary Discourse in Late Nineteenth-Century France," *Representations* (Spring 1991): 134-65.

paraphrase” of *The House of Life* (published after his brother’s death), fully asserted the occasional character of the poems: “The sonnets are mostly of the kind which we call “occasional”; some incident happened, or some emotion was dominant, and the author wrote a sonnet regarding it. When a good number had been written, they came to form, if considered collectively, a sort of record of his feelings and experiences, his reading of the problems of life—an inscribed tablet of his mind” (*Designer and Writer* 181-2). Gabriel’s denial of the classification of his sonnets as “occasional” is a complex question and raises questions I am not able to explore in this chapter, but the gesture was no doubt motivated by a number of factors, poetic and personal, and the poems at the center of the debate have proven to be a fabulous case for the blurring of literary and biographical agendas. The larger context of the denial of his poems’ occasional nature would include the many palinodes and explanatory essays written by Victorian poets in the face of hostile public reaction. Swinburne, for one, was adept at finessing the question of the “reality” depicted in his writing, often sidestepping charges of obscenity by invoking the multiple and distanced voices of the dramatic monologue. But for a readership in search of moral instruction through literature it was not automatically to be assumed that an author’s voice might be ambiguously related to the voices of their fictional speakers. For Rossetti,

insisting on the “representative” nature of his writing may have helped complicate simple-minded biographical speculation that regarded each poem as a record of its author’s personal history, but another effect of distancing the work from personal circumstance was to open it to a common modernist criticism that took Rossetti to be primarily a mystical poet occupied with melodious explorations of such vague topics as Love and Life.

But a merely oppositional view that takes Rossetti’s poetry to be at odds with Victorian culture is also misleading. For as much as his poetry and personal image made him a target of ridicule, the success he achieved was largely won by means of that very same image.<sup>45</sup> As Catherine Maxwell has noticed, for a number of modern critics Rossetti was the first English poet to represent the figure of the *poète maudit*, an identification that is far from complete while still being useful for gauging the conditions of his reputation (23). In his sympathetic but less than fair study, Evelyn Waugh touches on the advantages won by artists at a time when public expectation rewarded traits that were otherwise reprehensible: “To the muddled Victorian mind it seemed vaguely suitable that the artist should be melancholy, morbid,

---

<sup>45</sup> Rossetti’s own self-fashioning encourages the view of him as an exceptional and atypical figure, and his reputation in the twentieth century suffered from this. Why his position was to be one of existing on the margins of Victorian culture, interesting as this topic is, is now not such an urgent issue. Despite the habit of seeing him in conflict with Victorian norms, as Rees points out, Rossetti is in many respects typical of the period. His writing, alongside that of Arnold and

uncontrolled, and generally slightly deranged. ...In Rossetti's own day, not a little of the adulation he aroused came from this romance of decay—a sort of spiritual coprophily characteristic of the age” (226). Rossetti is still often best known by the biographical details that can make his poetry appear as the pendant and record to his more fascinating personality. Arthur Benson, for one, relates the typical view that Rossetti himself was more important than what he wrote or painted because his work “carelessly and inevitably radiated from him, hurled out from an inner restlessness. The medium in which he worked, whether words or colours, was a hindrance rather than a help to him” (203). The image of Rossetti that even now tends to overshadow his work is the figure of the paranoid, nocturnal chloral addict, the gloomy zoo-keeper who kept exotic animals in his London backyard—the figure who was fond of ransacking auction houses and second-hand shops in search of the blue and white china that he competed against Whistler in collecting, not to mention the figure of the grave-robber who in a moment of narcissistic betrayal permitted the exhumation of his wife's coffin to repossess the sheaf of poems that would become the manuscript of his first published collection. And yet Rossetti's image is ultimately more

---

Tennyson, as Rees writes, is “historically representative...of mid-nineteenth-century crisis” (Rees 15).

significant for posing questions of poetic rather than of moral value, even as he is a useful barometer for measuring Victorian tastes and habits. It is perhaps needless to say that critical opinion was not to remain always so hostile. For example, Arthur Symons's high estimate of Rossetti as a poet whose influence was analogous to that of Baudelaire seems surprisingly generous, even from a perspective where "voluptuousness" is no barrier to poetic excellence, but it indicates an important revision in Rossetti's reception. As Symons writes in *The Symbolist Movement*, "what would French poetry be today if Baudelaire had never existed? As different a thing from what it is as English poetry would be without Rossetti" (quoted in Decker 77).

### III. SCANDALS OF FORM

"Here lies the true charge against Rossetti as poet—excess of artistry. Too often one feels that sense of strain which Hazlitt felt in Milton. The rack and torture of composition become a little too apparent" (Baum *HL* 34). Writing in 1928, Baum's comment suggests what had been suspected about Rossetti from the beginning of his career, namely that he was too dependent upon, indeed "overmastered" by, his own medium—a medium that, to cite a different critic, was "a hindrance rather than a help to him" (Benson 203). In

this light, the problem Rossetti poses, and what connects him to Swinburne and to Hopkins, is that his writing remains affiliated with bold devices of patterning when post-Romantic and soon-to-be modern poetics sought to avoid or otherwise obscure the prominence of the poetic function, and, in connection, to downplay the suggestion that the poet's voice might be tied to institutional, formal, and possibly inhuman histories of language. In an essay of 1937, Baum illuminates Rossetti's neglect with reference to a prevailing "fashion for psychological realism," a taste that made Rossetti's writing somewhat less than attractive although not without interest, as in fact Walter Pater was the first to describe in his 1883 essay on Rossetti collected in *Appreciations* (Baum liv). Rather than avoid Rossetti on moral grounds, as the Victorians so often did, for some, such as early twentieth century readers, he was to be avoided for what were primarily aesthetic reasons. It was, that is, not simply that he had irregular habits in his own life, but that they sprung from his art, and in this sense his art gave a new and uncomfortable authority to poetry and painting for how art could be more than mimetic. As Baum writes, summing up what was objectionable from the standpoint of psychological realism, "his art was rather the cause than the result of his emotional life." This picture turns the tables on previous estimates in a way that indicates those aspects of Rossetti's poetry that

continue to occupy critics of Victorian literature and of poetry and poetic language more broadly. As Baum's comment suggests, it is ultimately Rossetti's artificiality and his verbal extravagance that deserve attention: "it seems in fact that even his sensualism was a product of his art, that his loves and sufferings and indulgences were submitted to for the sake of what they might yield him in sonnets and pictures. His art was rather the cause than the result of his emotional life—a strange inversion, a difficult paradox: unreal and unnatural, and uncomfortable for the reader" (Baum liv). What such comments underscore is how Rossetti's poetry achieves its effects by modifying nineteenth-century aesthetic commonplaces, most notably what McGann has called Coleridge's "basic ideology of poetry and the power of the creative imagination," the belief, as McGann quotes Coleridge in saying, that one could "not hope from outward forms to win / The passion and the life, whose fountains are within" (*Romantic Ideology* 102).

#### **IV. "THE MOSS ON A ROCK OR THE NOTE OF A CHAFFINCH"**

The central problems suggested by the "scandal of form" were, in various ways, always wrestled with in Rossetti's writing. Much of his poetry, in fact, can be read as an exploration of the distinctions and tensions pointed to in the previous pages. To restate the topic in different words, the larger

problem at issue is what one twentieth-century critic, writing in a different literary context, refers to in noticing how the “rule of language over poetry has often seemed like a tyranny of inert material over creative inspiration” (Shapiro 234). Rossetti in fact admitted as much about his own writing in a comparison he made between himself and Swinburne: “I am the reverse of Swinburne. For his method of production inspiration is indeed the word. With me the case is different. I lie on the couch, the racked and tortured medium never permitted an instant’s surcease of agony until the thing on hand is finished.” That Rossetti may have been influenced by happenstance associations between words and sounds is allowed up to a point, but beyond that (and the threshold has been rather low), it becomes a matter of impropriety and poetic failure. Like the rhapsode of Plato’s *Ion*, to admit that one is a medium worked upon by external powers is the first concession leading to the conclusion that the person inspired by other forces knows nothing at all and is a mere slave, one subject to the agency of another source. In the context of the later Victorian poets, that source was often feared to be the “rule of language” itself, as reflected in the belittling notion of the Victorian poet as a technical virtuoso with little intellectual or emotional substance.

To amplify this issue with respect to what has been said in an earlier section of this chapter, for Rossetti's poems to be regarded as "occasional" would court the stigma of mundane triviality on the one hand and, on the other, the stigma of personal confessionality. Such a disclosure would be objectionable for making a show of immoral or vulgar experience, which was essentially sexual in the context of the later nineteenth century. At the same time, the "occasional" categorization would make an explicit theme of non-monumentality as such, and, from another vantage, such poems might be seen to monumentalize kinds of experience thought to have no business being elevated in the first place—"occasion," like the "rule of language," exerting another type of suspect control over poetry and creative inspiration. Swinburne's classicizing tendencies, touched on in the previous chapter, were considered misguided for a similar reason, where the blunt treatment of sexual topics under the guise of a Hellenistic ideal was taken to be an obscene mixing that debased whatever it touched. In a different but related context, the initial shock delivered by Pre-Raphaelite painters around 1850 and soon after was served in much the same manner and elicited withering condemnations from reviewers. Dickens, in a famous example, thought the ordinary, "Pre-Raphaelite" depiction of Biblical scenes disgusting, excoriating Millais's *Christ in the House of His Family* (1849) because the holy

family seemed to him unrecognizable in the unsteady hand and exaggerated coloring of Millais's technique. As Millais's example suggested, Pre-Raphaelite artists, both painters and poets, were victims of contradictions that their own art promulgated and even in a sense depended upon for its significance. Simultaneously too abstract and too concrete, at once richly sensuous in coloring and yet compositionally austere, Pre-Raphaelite works had little ground for defense against a kind of criticism whose aesthetic preferences were already decided against such mixing.

Even William Michael, who championed Gabriel with the expected filial sympathy, was aware that his brother's poetry was, as he wrote, "abstract in thought and ornate in structure" (WMR, *Designer and Writer* 181). As his brother's editor and explicator, William had no reason to shun the recondite corners of Gabriel's work, and, like their father, who elucidated what he took to be the anti-Papist esotericism of Dante, William also made a career of clarifying poetry's dark figures. But a more impartial and insightful critic is Walter Pater, who was also drawn to the abstract and the ornate in Rossetti's poetry, but felt no urge to apologize for what he called a "forced and almost grotesque materialising of abstractions" (*Appreciations* 217). In combination with such "grotesque materialising of abstractions" was what Pater saw as an odd "definiteness of outline," and the blending of the two

was for him the source of the more bizarre effects of Rossetti's work—ultimately a sign of his “poetic mania.” For Pater, that is, the possibility that Rossetti might have been the “racked and tortured medium” of his own efforts was an indication of his significance as a poet touched by a variety of Plato's divine mania. Rossetti's particular kind of maniacal word-weaving was thus capable of producing an “insanity of realism” that was a liability to his reputation, and, at least for Pater, was also the most compelling cause for reading and promoting his poetry. The challenge for Rossetti's poetry, however, was that it seemed to need to establish its meanings not by way of but despite its own status as poetic language.

Like Pater, Coventry Patmore was struck by a quality of precision in Rossetti's rendering of detail, and his response registers similar concerns. As for Pater, Patmore was drawn in by the peculiarity of his verse—what Patmore saw as Rossetti's representative eccentricity. Writing about the lyric “Even So” (written in 1859, first published in 1870), Patmore's remarks, which focus especially on the poem's third stanza, recall the “forced and almost grotesque materialising of abstractions” noticed by Pater. Patmore was clearly impressed by “Even So” and commended the third stanza for how it seems “scratched with an adamantine pen upon a slab of agate,” yet his praise is qualified by an unexplained distaste for how Rossetti's writing

has a tendency to interrupt itself: “in Rossetti, as in several other modern poets of great reputations, we are constantly being pulled up, in the professedly fiery course of a tale of passion, to observe the moss on a rock or the note of a chaffinch” (quoted in WMR, *Works* 668). Although he does not specify the objection, what seems to concern Patmore in “Even So” is that the speaker imagines ships on the horizon as “black flies” that are “soon to drop off dead.” The speaker’s initial animated passion, Patmore implies, is left behind when the poem expands upon the appearance of the ships seen at the water’s edge:

The sea stands spread  
As one wall with the flat skies,  
Where the lean black craft like flies  
Seem well-nigh stagnated,  
Soon to drop off dead. (ln. 9-13)

The implication is that the “fiery course of a tale of passion” is halted by the act of noticing details that cannot be absorbed as elements motivating the speaker’s “tale of passion.” Here the interruption occurs as a particularization (ships that have become flies) that is indeed out of place in the context of the poem’s breezy reflection on the loss of love between the speaker and the former lover who ostensibly listens to the speaker’s utterance. Although he does not put it this way, Patmore’s objection echoes a common Victorian dissatisfaction with the Pre-Raphaelite tendency toward

embroidery effects and a fondness for peripheral ornament valued for its own sake rather than as a support to narrative sequence. In this sense, Patmore's description of being "pulled up" by Rossetti's poetry is apt for identifying a central technique of his verse.

#### **V. IMAGES OF VOICE: "SILENCE SHALL GROW TO AWE WITHIN THINE EYES"**

What Patmore considered a temporal or narrative "pulling up" in Rossetti—exemplified by the obtrusive piece of moss or bird-song that becomes a distraction—has another dimension, one made urgent by a group of Rossetti's lyrics from 1849 in which images of voice and various kinds of sound are subjected to what, to borrow Patmore's phrase, could be called auditory and sonic "pulling up." An interest in suspended action is itself at the center of some of Rossetti's most well-known poems, including many of the *Sonnets for Pictures*, particularly "For A Venetian Pastoral" (1849) and "For an Allegorical Dance of Women" (1849), both of which are poems that linger over interrupted musical performances. A remarkable feature of both sonnets is how they are staged as scenes of looking at and listening to a music that is drawn and imagined in the silence of the pictorial field. Rossetti's ekphrastic speakers here depict musical occasions only to insist on silencing the picture's admittedly imagined sound—a music that is, of

course, never really heard or even audible in the first place. But poems concerned with visual depictions of music-making, such as “For A Venetian Pastoral” and “For an Allegorical Dance of Women”—both of which exemplify a little-remarked but fascinating ekphrastic subgenre of poems addressed to paintings of musical performance—confront the fact that there is no name for the experience of creative inner hearing that would be analogous to the verb “to visualize.” For the phrase “to see in the mind’s eye” there is no equivalent expression regarding sound, e.g., “to hear in the mind’s ear.”<sup>46</sup> Despite its usefulness in capturing an experience that our language seems ill-equipped to handle, such an expression (i.e., “to hear in the mind’s ear”) would be a clumsy sort of back-formation of its visual counterpart. “Seeing in the mind’s eye” is not only idiomatic but also somehow acceptable as true to experience, no doubt largely because of long-standing affiliations between seeing and thinking as related processes, whereas acts of hearing are not as closely tied to conceptual or theoretical

---

<sup>46</sup> Christopher Ricks observes that there is no verb for “to audibilize.” Ricks’s comments are made in a context that is quite different from mine—a Keats-Shelley Association panel discussion of the film *Bright Star* (recorded on Sept. 13, 2009). As Ricks comments, “The great thing that literature does is capitalize on the fact that we have a verb ‘to visualize.’ We have it for this alone of the senses. That is, to ‘imagine seeing’ is what literature again and again does for us. It [i.e., literature] may help us to imagine hearing, touching, tasting, smelling, but we don’t have verbs for those—we don’t have a verb for ‘to audibilize’ (though we do imagine hearing things), or ‘to tactilize.’” The panel discussion (the participants were Stuart Curran, Christopher Ricks, Timothy Corrigan and Susan Wolfson) is available on-line as an audio file from Romantic Circles: <http://www.rc.umd.edu/audio/BrightStar.mp3>

events.<sup>47</sup> In what is perhaps a compensation for this inequality, or at least a compromise for it, ekphrastic poems about images of music-making admit the near inescapability of the visual, even (or especially) in the case of acoustic experience. Rossetti's famous ekphrastic poems thus suggest that *looking* at the production of sound or music is analogous to *hearing* an image or picture (insofar as both acts involve a transposition of sense). In composing spectacles of sound, such poems admit that the act of "imagining" sound, however seductive and powerful an experience, is somehow flawed because it involves conceptualizing sound in visual terms. The best that the ekphrastic poem can do in this case is to imagine—in the sense of "image"—what is ultimately an unimaginable, non-visual sound event. In this light, such poems might understandably be regarded as examples of the "sensuous hysteria" that Rossetti had been thought to indulge in or fall victim to, although the normative evaluation implied in this description ("sensuous hysteria") has surely been a barrier to taking such

---

<sup>47</sup> My comments here draw on Jean-Luc Nancy's remarks on the language of sense and the philosophical weight of different kinds of sense perception (seeing vs. listening, most prominently). As he writes in *Listening (À l'écoute)*: "There is, at least potentially, more isomorphism between the visual and the conceptual, even if only by virtue of the fact that the *morphe*, the "form" implied in the idea of "isomorphism," is immediately thought or grasped on the visual plane. The sonorous, on the other hand, outweighs form. It does not dissolve it, but rather enlarges it" (2) (*Listening*, trans. Charlotte Mandell, Fordham UP, 2007. (originally published in 2002 as *À l'écoute*)).

poems seriously.<sup>48</sup>

While the ekphrastic poem is known to trade in silent images and the aphasia of the visual, Rossetti's particular handling of it introduces a less familiar situation by exploring how silence might be entrusted with powers of vision. In many of Rossetti's poems silence thus comes to imply or generate acts of vision, and sound is often associated with blindness. What could be called a rhetoric of muteness provides a point of entry to the richly synaesthetic poems from 1849 that are the concern of the remainder of this chapter. Poems such as "Song and Music," "The Sea-Limits," "The Carillon," "Afterwards" and others exemplify the problems mentioned above for how they create images of voice that are silenced and often rearticulated in visual or tactile terms—while images are silent, silence is itself imagined, literally and figuratively, as a repository of vision.<sup>49</sup> The image, which for a time has been given voice or made to sing within the space of the poem, is finally "returned" to silence. The strangely persuasive logic of such an imagining is that demonstrating voice's ability to be quieted will affirm or insure its status as a true and authentic voice in the first place. To measure the significance of sound and voice in terms of silence, as this

---

<sup>48</sup> "Sensuous hysteria," in Benson's usage, is meant to describe what could be called a generalized oversensitivity to sensation. Benson's reference to hysteria, is, in this sense, pre-psychoanalytic.

<sup>49</sup> My use of the term "image of voice" refers to and borrows from Hollander's discussion in

does, is thus to figure inspiration by an adept inversion: any poetic speaker sufficiently emboldened can call upon the muse or produce sound of their own accord, but a more sophisticated gesture—and a more resourceful move—is to dilate on states of silence, dramatizing the impotency of voice, what Rossetti in one place calls “silent song” (“The Love-Letter” (1870)).<sup>50</sup> In the absence of another name, this might be called a poetics of exhalation or respiration, one that is at odds with the more storied history of the poetics of inspiration in Western lyric. To command silence or narrate sonic diminishment, as these poems do, seems in some way a fuller sign of poetic authority, as if evoking quiet was more than reciprocal to asking for inspiration. And while this might seem a triumphant gesture and a sure sign of the romantic agony whereby later nineteenth-century writers make an asset of their deprivations, Rossetti’s poems suggest something different.<sup>51</sup>

The explorations of sound and silence in Rossetti’s 1849 poetry have been understandably somewhat overshadowed by those of his poems that deal explicitly with works of visual art and problems of the relation between images and words. But the importance of the other sense (i.e., hearing), as

---

*Images of Voice: Music and Sound in Romantic Poetry.* Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons, 1968.

<sup>50</sup> For further discussion of this poem, see Phyllis Weliver’s contribution in *The Figure of Music in Nineteenth-Century British Poetry* (Ed. Weliver. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

<sup>51</sup> To return to Benson’s terms but in an explicit psychoanalytic framework, Rossetti’s poems that concern silence and sonic diminishment could plausibly be read as “hysterical” texts for how they simultaneously aspire to and undermine poetic authority.

Elizabeth Helsinger has recently shown, is a major concern in Rossetti's poetry.<sup>52</sup> The sister arts tradition and the rich Pre-Raphaelite contributions to painting make it almost inevitable that problems of visuality should be of primary interest to critics. In addition, Rossetti himself at times seemed to favor painting to poetry, and in his role as leader of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood he urged younger artists to paint rather than write poetry, as is recalled in his well-known remark, "if any man has any poetry in him he should paint it...the next Keats ought to be a painter" (Rees 21). It would be unprofitable to ask whether Rossetti was ultimately a painter or a poet (could one have ontological priority over the other?) when the fact is that at various times and in different circumstances Rossetti represented his interests differently. It is something of a commonplace in the criticism to rehearse the evidence on both sides and show Rossetti to be ultimately divided in his artistic identity.<sup>53</sup> Certainly it is the case that like other Victorian artists, such as Meredith and Hardy, Rossetti would have preferred to write poetry but for financial considerations which led him to divide his time on more lucrative efforts. While he was no doubt known as an accomplished painter

---

<sup>52</sup> vid. Elizabeth Helsinger, "Listening: Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Persistence of Song," *Victorian Studies*, Spring 2009 (vol. 51, no. 3).

<sup>53</sup> Rossetti's sonnet "Lost on Both Sides," as Rees points out, has been seen as an apt description of Rossetti's career vis-à-vis his commitments to painting and poetry (Rees 17).

during his lifetime, his refusal to publicly exhibit his works kept him from ever attaining the reputation he would have had had he sought a larger audience—something he was able to avoid because his coterie following was prepared to pay dearly for his works. So while his public reputation, small as it was, was intimately connected to his status as a fabricator of exquisite and haunting images—nearly all of which were female portraits—in his literary reputation he was likewise remarkable for a quality of language that tended to be considered in terms of the image and the ability to conjure a striking scene or an arresting detail. His powers as a poet, that is, were measured in images, often without regard for the incompatibility or non-translatability between the verbal and the visual registers. It is noteworthy that when William published those of his brother's poems written while travelling in France and Belgium in 1849 he privileged the visual aspect of poems in which the aural dimensions of experience are arguably as vital. "In these descriptive verses," William wrote of his brother's travel poems, "he was bent on the Preraphaelite plan—that of sharply realizing an impression on the eye, and through the eye on the mind" (quoted in Fredeman, *Letters*, I, 107). In drawing attention to the eye-mind circuit, William seems not to notice or care that so many of the poems he included in his grouping were in

---

fact about listening and sound, and, to revise his description of what he called the “Preraphaelite plan,” are in fact poems that concern *realizing an impression on the ear, and through the ear on the mind*.

The poems from France and Belgium that William collected in 1886 in *Family Letters* and enlarged again in 1911—most published for the first time in both cases—show Dante Gabriel writing in a variety of lyric styles: the topographical sonnet, the ekphrastic sonnet, and blank verse poems of landscape and travel, among others. With the exception of “The Sea-Limits,” a commonly anthologized poem, most of the 1849 travel poems are outside the central Rossetti canon that is now current. Interestingly, William did not include the six *Sonnets for Pictures* in this group despite the fact that the ekphrastic poems were written at the same time as the others, and, in their own way, chronicle some of the most important moments of Rossetti’s trip and could thus be regarded as travel poems. The ekphrastic sonnets were perhaps more conspicuous than the other poems for reasons of Rossetti’s drawing attention to them in the correspondence he had with the rest of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and their early appearance in *The Germ* further helped to establish their prominence in Rossetti’s oeuvre. In any case, they deserve to be seen in the larger context of the other writing Rossetti did at

the time, both for their status as self-conscious poems of Rossetti and Hunt's *Bildungsreise*, and as poems that share aesthetic preoccupations with the travel poems from which they were separated. While the *Sonnets for Pictures* are not my focus in this chapter, a fuller estimate of Rossetti's aesthetic might benefit from seeing the ekphrastic poems in connection with the so-called "travel poems." While several of the poems I consider in this chapter belong to this group, several do not, and the principle of selection for the poems I study relies more on the coincidence of certain topics in poems written close to 1849 than on the overly tidy category of Rossetti's "travel poems."

Of these poems as William grouped them, many are concerned with listening and sound, and often place silence in close relation to the source of poetry's power. But narrating sonic diminishment is not primarily, as I have suggested, a matter of authority, although it might look like it at first. A reading that sees a poem's silences as self-aggrandizing would assume that the poem strives to control sound to such an extent that even a command over silence could be equated with literary prowess. But how could a poem control silence, and what would be the reasons for undertaking such a task? To suggest one response, what does it say that these poems measure the significance of sound and voice in terms of silence?

## VI. “SONG AND MUSIC”

Many of the 1849 poems create their initial impression through curious and far-fetched circumlocution, exploring experiences of sound and listening by way of the intervening “silent” faculties of sight and touch. Such is the case, for example, in the closing lines of “Song and Music,” a short poem that depicts a singer breathing song into the eyes of a poet-listener who is both subservient to and awkwardly in command of the poem’s eroticized singer:

The soul may better understand  
Your music, shadowed in your hand,  
Now while the song withdraws.            (ln. 14-16)

“Song and Music” seems at first to assert a positive knowledge about the nature of the experience it evokes. Its own ending, quoted above, sums up the problem of the poem, suggesting a confidence in and an inevitable finality to its utterance—both as a speech act and as an experiential claim. Closing the poem with a statement about sonic withdrawal no doubt works in the service of poetic closure: the poem makes its own end coincide with the end of another song—that produced by the unnamed singer whose hand opens the poem and whose “lifted throat” creates an “aching pulse of melodies” (ln. 11-12). It is, importantly, in or after the moment of ending and at the point of acoustic withdrawal that understanding is said to occur. The suggestion is that music’s meaning is granted after the fact, after sound

has ceased and from a perspective of silence. But music and song are given meaning not through complete silence, in fact, but in the moment of sound's diminishment and decrease, the "now" of the poem's final line that occurs in the moment of silencing: "lean nearer, let the music pause: / The soul may better understand / Your music, shadowed in your hand, / Now while the song withdraws" (ln. 13-16). The poem's crucial moment is thus one of suspended sound—"now while the song withdraws"—that is, a sound on its way out, an event of diminuendo or decrescendo that might in fact not be an end but a pause before starting back up again. But why should it be that understanding occurs "Now while the song withdraws"? What is it about this moment, in particular, that makes for better understanding, and what is the nature of the understanding that is said to occur in "Song and Music"? These questions are impressed by the form of the poem's two stanzas, each of which rounds off with a statement connecting the present tense action of the poem to an experience of understanding:

O Leave your hand where it lies cool  
    Upon the eyes whose lids are hot:  
Its rosy shade is bountiful  
    Of silence, and assuages thought.  
O lay your lips against your hand  
    And let me feel your breath through it,  
While through the sense your song shall fit  
    The soul to understand.

The music lives upon my brain  
Between your hands within mine eyes;  
It stirs your lifted throat like pain,  
An aching pulse of melodies.  
Lean nearer, let the music pause:  
The soul may better understand  
Your music, shadowed in your hand,  
Now while the song withdraws.

It makes a kind of imaginative sense for this to be a poem with its eyes closed, as it is, since its title announces an acoustic experience (“song and music”), but the situation is made stranger still by the singer’s voice and breath being directed into the eyes of the poet-listener.<sup>54</sup> The blindness in which the poem begins is a reaction of a sort to too much thought, cognitive activity having made the poet-listener’s eyelids uncomfortably warm. The over-heated, fatigued poet is then literally inspired by the singer, who is instructed in supplicatory tones to place her hands on the poet and breathe and sing onto him by placing her mouth against her hands (“O lay your lips against your hand / And let me feel your breath through it” (ln. 5-6). A strange image, to be sure, one that might suggest that the poem is working to render a pictogram whose meaning is in question—it seems to create an image of the commonplace or folk-intuitive idea that seeing is equal to knowing (or that sight and knowledge are closely tied), and that “hearing” is

---

<sup>54</sup> The poem, as William says, was originally titled “Lines and Music,” a fact that makes its blindness additionally odd (“lines” being explicitly visual).

itself equal to understanding, here in this poem pictured by a kind of ocular “hearing” that makes the sight organs receptive to sound, musical understanding occurring via the passageway of the eye. The poem thus provokes by short-circuiting the aural channel, placing song and music into connection with sight, or rather with the eye in its freshly imagined role as a kind of ear (the poem’s only clearly visualized moment comes in line three, where the singer’s hand gives a “rosy shade”—interestingly also a deprivation of sense-stimuli). The poem not only shuts its eyes, as it were, but it imagines music and song as an experience occurring in the absence of hearing, an experience, that is, in the eye’s ear, as it is here imagined.

This unusual scene is presented in convincing earnest partly by means of the grammatical moods invoked, the poem’s imperative and jussive language working to conjure a reality that compels assent to its own norms. We do not object, for example, that the poem does not describe the singer’s voice in a more conventional manner. But the surreal nature of the experience depicted does not interfere with the poem’s own fluency. Its vocative-imperative voice (“O leave your hand”; “O lay your lips”) and its jussive constructions (“And let me feel your breath”; “let the music pause”) generate an eventfulness that seems immune to outside doubt or objection,

---

and the speaker's more perplexing statements that follow from such moments come to seem not only plausible, but valid in such a way that it would be a logical mistake to question them. The jussive + modal design thus succeeds by a kind of unimpeachable circularity. The speaker's premises, to call them that, are not open to critique by virtue of the imaginative freedom granted to the jussive "let," and what hangs on this poetic premise is similarly self-authorizing (the poem's vocative "O" also furthers this conjuring authority). The poem's rightness thus seems complete, or at least sufficient as an imaginative act, and yet one of the poem's purposes is to provoke the question of why song and music are rendered as they are, as sound events that have value outside or beyond the ear and beyond the aesthetics of hearing and of listening. The poem's manipulation of its own sound effects, such as rhyme, make these questions more complex, but the poem nonetheless plies the conceit that song and music are best grasped and experienced by means that exceed those of hearing. This idea is discreetly argued for by how the poem plays with poetic closure and different kinds of poetic "end." "Song and Music" associates its own poetic terminus with musical understanding, as if making an end was in itself equal to achieving understanding. The literal, syntactic end or close is thus made to coincide with another, different, end, that of the poem's goal

or purpose of securing understanding. One is led to feel that the poem's terseness and reluctance to explain more is therefore justified by the scenario being sketched, where music and understanding are realized during, and perhaps only after, the withdrawal of song. If, as the poem suggests, better understanding comes through silence and the withdrawal of song, to say or sing more would be counterproductive for expressing song's meaning.

The dramatic situation of the poem, as previously noted, is that of someone singing into the eyes of another. This strange staging is called for by the figure of the poet-listener who choreographs the singer's movements and comments on the song she produces: "O leave your hand where it lies cool / Upon the lids whose eyes are hot" (ln. 1-2). It is unclear until some lines later in the first stanza that the eerily disembodied eyes mentioned in line two belong to the poet-listener, and his relation to the singer seems as uncertain and distant as his relation to his own organs. The basis of the scene's intimacy is also left unexplained, and despite the close and at times almost erotic connection between the two figures, the poet-listener's instruction of the singer's movements keeps us from knowing anything about the singer's own desire. Accordingly, the singer is valued as much for her status as an instrument capable of generating musical noise as for anything else. Indeed, except for the attributive "your music" at the end of

the poem, the song almost seems to belong to the poet-listener.

There is, however, a tension within the poem between the affective power of sound and sound as something to be understood—between sound as a non-semantic inducement to feeling and sensation and sound as a carrier of ideational meaning. Of the music and song at the center of the poem we are allowed to know only very little. Part of the poem's purchase, in fact, is how it insists on announcing the all-important nature of the music it hears (and which it helps to make) without revealing many details about that music. The closest the poem comes to defining or characterizing its music is noticing the effect it has upon the singer: "It stirs your lifted throat like pain, / An aching pulse of melodies" (ln. 11-12). The woman's song is arguably most significant not for the discursive meaning it might have (of that the poem says nothing), but as an occasion for a bodily encounter between the singer and the poet-listener. The singer's body, chiefly her lips and hands, is as important as the music she makes. In this moment the singer's effect is made not by the content of the song, or even by the tonal-acoustic properties of her music, but it is her breath as a physical thing that is efficacious. The feeling of breathed air upon the skin is what matters. Her song is thus meaningful not simply as a rhythmical sound in the ear or as meaningful language, but as a pretext for bodily contact between her and the

poet-listener. By placing sound and song into the hand, as the poem does, human voice is displaced from its customary source. The poem treats sound as a physical object to be “handled” by the poem and its singer. In passing breath through the hand, the hand comes to resemble a mouthpiece, figuring the hand as a prosthesis of voice—an image that literalizes the idea that sound and song are “gripping” and “touching.” It occurs when the poet-listener’s request, “O lay your lips against your hand / And let me feel your breath through it” (ln. 5-6), transforms the singer’s fingers into musical reeds through which air is forced in order to produce a certain noise and timbre. But in this particular image, the hand not only shapes voice, but, at the same time, also casts a shadow upon the face of the poet-listener (“Its rosy shade is bountiful / Of silence, and assuages thought” ln. 3-4). The hand’s position between the poet’s face and the light source (which is absent but necessary, according to the poem’s image) casts a shadow, and the darkening atmosphere comes to characterize the singer’s music, conferring the optical aspects of the scene onto the acoustic event so that the singer’s music is “shadowed” in her hand (ln. 14). Music is thus not simply imagined in the abstract, but literally (if such a thing could be possible, the poem seems to insist), imaged and visualized in a moment where the poem strains against conventional sense-making by playing against expectations about the

experiential parameters of particular senses and the sense-specific vocabularies for describing stimuli.

If Rossetti had not been such a Francophobe, the crux of “Song and Music” might more readily be described as an exploration of the possibilities of meaning in the French words *entendre* and *sens*, both of which telegraph the larger problems of the poem—the connection between “hearing” and “understanding,” and the proximity or remoteness of the five senses to intellectual meaning and conceptual significance (“sense” as sensation and as meaning). The cross-lingual comparison is nonetheless useful for marking the density that these terms have in Rossetti’s poem and in ordinary usage. Of the tension mentioned earlier between two views of sound, the first, sound’s affective capacity, is elaborated in the image where song “fits” the soul to understand (ln. 7). Song here makes the soul able to understand, and in a sense creates the capacity and potential for understanding. It is not really a matter of understanding or “making sense” of music and song, although the poem is also concerned with this, but of song’s own sense-making powers, where song has an almost prehensile motor-skill and the dexterity to shape and arrange experience as well as the listening body, which is figured in “Song and Music” as a resonant chamber and vessel for song. Song is thus “fitting” for being appropriately timed (prosodically and socially), and for

actively working upon an object, “fitting” it by adjusting and reshaping its parts.

## VII. “THE CARILLON”

If “Song and Music” seems surrealistic as a poem about sound that avoids the ear and the aural-oral circuit in favor of what is imagined as an oral-manual-optical connection, a more familiar approach to similar problems is taken in “The Carillon,” a poem published in *The Germ* in 1850 and significantly altered by William in his 1886 collection of Gabriel’s poetry in *Family Letters*. The version of the poem discussed in what follows is that from 1850 (for reasons that will become clear in the analysis to come). Like “Song and Music,” “The Carillon” concerns the power of sound, but in this case as the sound of bells rather than of human vocal song, and it is similarly animated by a speaker sensitive to what hearing means—“hearing” both as a physiological event and as a process of conceptual ordering and mental attunement. While the model of lyric speaker as listener carries over from “Song and Music,” the speaker in “The Carillon” is more active but less apparently goal-oriented than the speaker in “Song and Music.” The claustrophobic closeness of the two figures in “Song and Music” is absent in “The Carillon,” which is more drawn out as a poem (it consists of six six-line

stanzas, each arranged into four lines of envelope rhyme (*abba*) with two final lines reiterating the earlier rhymes (*ab*), and for the experience it describes, the speaker climbing bell towers in Antwerp and Bruges and moving in other parts of each city. The poem's effect is partly made by how it combines these elements, using an open-air city poem featuring a peripatetic speaker to focus on specific acts of hearing. Although "The Carillon" does not treat sound by circumventing the aural faculty, as does "Song and Music," the acoustic insights it reaches are realized through sense experience that is not exclusively, or even predominately, aural. Here, as elsewhere in Rossetti's poetry, sound is given significance for its capacity to bring into being sensations of a different, non-sonic type, in this case especially those of touch. As in "Song and Music," "The Carillon" suggests that musical value is not primarily a matter of the manifestation of acoustic phenomena but is, instead, found in moments of sonic interruption.

The Carillon  
(Antwerp and Bruges)

\* \* In these and other of the Flemish towns, the *Carillon*, or chimes which have a most fantastic and delicate music, are played almost continually. The custom is very ancient.

At Antwerp, there is a low wall  
    Binding the city, and a moat  
    Beneath, that the wind keeps afloat.  
You pass the gates in a slow drawl

Of wheels. If it is warm at all  
The Carillon will give you thought.

I climbed the stair in Antwerp church,  
What time the urgent weight of sound  
At sunset seems to heave it round.  
Far up, the Carillon did search  
The wind; and the birds came to perch  
Far under, where the gables wound.

In Antwerp harbour on the Scheldt  
I stood along, a certain space  
Of night. The mist was near my face:  
Deep on, the flow was heard and felt.  
The Carillon kept pause, and dwelt  
In music through the silent place.

At Bruges, when you leave the train,  
—A singing numbness in your ears,—  
The Carillon's first sound appears  
Only the inner moil. Again  
A little minute though—your brain  
Takes quiet, and the whole sense hears.

John Memmeling and John Van Eyck  
Hold state at Bruges. In sore shame  
I scanned the works that keep their name.  
The Carillon, which then did strike  
Mine ears, was heard of theirs alike:  
It set me closer unto them.

I climbed at Bruges all the flight  
The Belfry has of ancient stone.  
For leagues I saw the east wind blown:  
The earth was grey, the sky was white.  
I stood so near upon the height  
That my flesh felt the Carillon.

*October, 1849.*

The occasion for “The Carillon” (composed in 1849 while Rossetti was abroad, first published in *The Germ* in March 1850) is that of the “fantastic and delicate music” produced by bells, and yet the poem’s moment of intensity and its organizing epiphany is one in which the music it hears is silenced and translated into a different kind of experience. Sound is made powerful at the point where it falters or breaks fluency,<sup>55</sup> and the poem hovers on the verge of an experience that is richly sonorous but where sound’s meanings are addressed to more than the ear. As a poem concerned with what it means to exist within a space known by its sound properties, its premise is that the lyric agent is subjected to external stimuli specific to the place. The conjuring voice of “Song and Music,” with its instructions and gentle commands, is thus absent here: the lyric speaker in “The Carillon” is a traveler conjured by the sounds he happens into, and this speaker, unlike the speaker in “Song and Music,” is not an active agent involved in generating song or sound—or rather the speaker is fraught by his own unsettling capacity to sound. Instead, he emerges into a landscape where sounds circulate without participation on his part, although the poem is interested in how listening can imply acts of engagement. The space is so saturated with

---

<sup>55</sup> This could be described with reference to “For A Venetian Pastoral” and “For An Allegorical Dance of Women,” among other poems.

the music of the bells—bells which are played “almost continually,” as the poem’s head-note says—that the speaker seems forced to be more lyric listener than lyric utterer. It is not surprising, then, that the poem’s central character and orienting locus of action is less the speaker than the Carillon.

The poem goes about this characterization from the beginning, when upon entering within the city walls of Antwerp the speaker says “If it is warm at all / The Carillon will give you thought” (ln. 5-6). The implication is that the Carillon will give pause, i.e., that it is something one seems forced to notice and drawn to reflect upon when entering the city. But the line also carries a more literal suggestion to the effect that it says the Carillon will put thoughts into the head of whoever hears its music—the difference between the Carillon giving a listener pause and literally giving thought to whoever hears it—the second implying something forceful and assertive, much like the singer’s song in “Song and Music.” Rossetti thus lets the ordinary meaning of “give thought” assume the less familiar but no less literal sense of the words. This is, perhaps, what it means that the music of the bells is “fantastic,” the bells having a power not only to suggest thought, but the more robust capacity to confer thought ready-made: the power not only to let a listener carry on their own particular train of thought but to impose ideas upon them. The bells’ particular agency is figured in terms of pressure

and an animated sense of motion, the “urgent weight of sound” that is carried by the Carillon’s tune (ln. 8). From the vantage of the stairway in the bell-tower the speaker notices how “the Carillon did search / The Wind” (ln. 10-11), its noise both rustling through the wind, upsetting it, but also “searching” in the root sense of circling round, like the nearby circling birds that also seem called by the church-bells and which congregate beneath the building’s gables. Part of the poem’s interest is to indicate how the searching energy of sound conduces to and even imposes thought while leaving the substance of that thought unspecified. As in “Song and Music,” sound is significant for shaping the capacity to understand, “fitting” the understanding into a position to carry out its activities. It is, again, not that sound needs to be made sense of so much as its own sense-making resources be recognized as generative of understanding and sense (as both “sensation” and as “meaning”).

The experience of hearing the Carillon, however, introduces a challenge to the understanding, one where whatever song the bells make seems to be more *fitful* song rather than *fitting* song, as “Song and Music” imagines it. If the coincidence of the poem’s end with that of the singer’s song in “Song and Music” emblemizes the lyric’s ability to integrate performance and comprehension, there is little of that in “The Carillon.” In

animating the bells of Antwerp and Bruges, the poem attributes qualities to them that would more typically belong to a lyric speaker. But the “urgent weight of sound” and the “delicate and fantastic music” of the Carillon is not that of lyric voice or of the lyric agent who beholds the scene, and the overall effect of the poem is not to suggest an analogy between the sound of the bells and the actual or possible sounds of poetry. Rossetti’s interest is not in adopting the sounds of the Carillon into his own poetic repertoire, nor is it a matter of establishing appropriative voice or of using the Carillon as a metaphor for poetic making. Such is seen by the poem’s plain design, divided into two sections, one for Antwerp and one for Bruges, each with three stanzas, all of which cohere around a rhyme pattern of *abbaab*. This structure provides some recursive sonority—the *a* rhymes sealing up the *b* rhymes in their middle, as is done by envelope rhyme—but the poem’s rhyme scheme is not an attempt to mimic the complex ringing of Carillon bells—for that purpose, a more interlaced rhyme grid and assonantal effects would be more fitting. Rossetti is more concerned with how the Carillon’s music works upon a listener than with faithfully rendering the noise it makes.<sup>56</sup> That the bells are ringing (or “singing,” as they are described in line

---

<sup>56</sup> But his magnificent poem “Chimes” does mime the sound of bells, or rather imagines how language might mimic bell-sound.

20; one might also think of blood singing in one's ears) is as important as whatever tune they make, and, as in "Song and Music," the poem communicates little about its particular sound qualities. Indeed, the continual presence of the bells makes them a feature of the landscape in such a way that their noise seems more often ignored or merely overheard than closely noticed. The poem's speaker is energized by them and at the same desires to know more, climbing the bell-towers of Antwerp and Bruges to inspect the source of a music that can be heard everywhere else in the city—an act that invites a comparison between the speaker and the birds in the second stanza as creatures both attracted by the bells. Unlike the speaker, the birds' proximity seems arbitrary and unrelated to the noise, but as occupants of the bell-tower they become endowed with significance as the customary audience for the Carillon's sound, perching "far under, where the gables wound" (ln. 12). They are intimate, if unwitting, listeners. Patmore's comment about being "pulled up" by a surprising use of detail in Rossetti would be equally relevant here, where it is difficult to see the birds as contributing to the poem's forward movement. Likewise, that the poem names the painters John Memmeling and John Van Eyck (ln. 25) is arguably a distracting detail if the poem is taken to be chiefly about the Carillon. The two painters are in fact connected to the bells, but the link is tenuous at

best—the speaker imagines his closeness to the fifteenth-century artists by virtue of their also having once heard the music of the Carillon: “The Carillon, which then did strike / Mine ears, was heard of theirs alike: / It set me closer unto them” (ln. 28-30).

The problem of listening in this poem is that the source-music, the Carillon, turns out to be hard to isolate. It is not that the bells create a sound that cannot be heard, but rather their noise is so all-encompassing that it drowns out other sounds. The crucial fourth stanza, which William removed (along with the first) for his 1886 edition, introduces the problem of hearing the bells:

At Bruges, when you leave the train,  
—A singing numbness in your ears,—  
The Carillon’s first sound appears  
Only the inner moil. Again  
A little minute though—your brain  
Takes quiet, and the whole sense hears. (ln. 19-24)

The “singing numbness” that overwhelms the listener effectively disables the aural faculty. That the Carillon appears “only the inner moil,” that is, as a confused sound originating within the listener’s body rather than imposed from without, refers to a scene of listening where sound’s source is momentarily unknown. The lyric listener internalizes the music of the Carillon, taking it in but also perceiving the Carillon’s sound to be a

projection on the part of the receptive and re-creative listening mind—“only the inner moil.” After a short lapse (“again a little minute” ln. 23) during which the bells presumably continue to sound, the listener undergoes a new kind of hearing, one that seems a correction for the previous mistake but which is itself hard to fathom: “A little minute though—your brain / Takes quiet, and the whole sense hears” (ln. 23-24). That the grammatical subject is “you” (as in the first stanza) lends a tentativeness to the scenario and suggests a hypothetical stance—one that William perhaps took to be out of place when he revised the poem in 1886 (the two stanzas he excised, the first and the fourth, both feature a “you,” whereas the rest of the poem is written in terms of an “I”). The lines “when you leave the train, / —A singing numbness in your ears” seem both personal and imaginatively general, as if such an experience would befall anyone getting off the train in Bruges. The stanza is a retrospective summary of the speaker’s experience, and as such it feels odd for also setting that experience at a distance in the context of the poem’s more immediate first-person discourse (e.g., “I climbed the stair in Antwerp church”; “In Antwerp harbour on the Scheldt / I stood along. The mist was near my face”).

The confusion of inner sound and outer sound whereby the Carillon appears at first “only the inner moil” is on the surface resolved by a more

discriminating act of hearing, but the nature of the correction is far from straightforward. It occurs, in fact, by way of a more complete kind of silence, but unlike in “Song and Music,” here the speaker does not exert control on the sounds being made. The “singing numbness” which led to mistaken hearing (in which the speaker thinks the Carillon’s sound is his own) subsides, and an arguably more perfect numbness takes its place, one where the brain “takes quiet.” It is as if thought itself has a certain noise, a noisiness, in fact, and one that interferes with accurate hearing and which must be silenced if inner and outer sounds are to be differentiated (the initial situation of “Song and Music” is similar, where the singer’s hand is needed to “assuage thought”). But the surprise comes when instead of producing the boundary between inner and outer as a way to affirm that the Carillon exists separately from the “inner moil,” the speaker rather alleges that “the whole sense hears” (ln. 24). If the ear is corruptible, subject to the confusion of a “singing numbness,” the “whole sense” seems immune to any such fallibility. The suggestion is thus that the initial error was a problem of partiality, of not hearing fully. But instead of hearing everything, the solution arrived at is to make the listener into a sort of vast auricular chamber—what is implied by “the whole sense hears.” That this should occur in the absence of thought and the noise of the brain suggests that the precondition for

hearing is not simply the absence of interfering ambient noise, but a death-like inner quietude, “the brain takes quiet” suggesting a torpor that Rossetti elsewhere writes of when differentiating between the “quiet, which is death’s” and another sound that he calls “the mournfulness of ancient life, / Enduring always at dull strife” (“The Sea-Limits”). That it is not clear what exactly is heard at this moment in “The Carillon” seems beside the point. The meaning of the episode is suggested in its very emptiness, as if hearing according to the “whole sense” was not equal to any specific or particular exercise. In any case, the poem enacts a kind of listening that is only in part associated with the ear. Powerful sound—and sound’s power—is revealed not to the ear, or even to the intellect, but rather to the body’s surface—a kind of imprinting of sound that imagines the “appearance” of sound in ways other than acoustic or aural. Rather than using the Carillon and its association with religious music to suggest an intellectual experience of sound where the bells are heard as a worldly approximation of a more tuneful divine music, “The Carillon” asks that listening be imagined as a physical event, one whose significance is realized on the non-thinking surface of the body more than anywhere else. In moving from a position of doubt or confusion about the Carillon’s sound to one of thoughtless whole hearing (a generalized sensing), the poem is less interested in resolving the

sounds of the bells than in affirming a stranger kind of acoustic experience, one given in the poem's final stanza as a tactile hearing, as felt sound and as touching music:

I climbed at Bruges all the flight  
The Belfry has of ancient stone.  
For leagues I saw the east wind blown:  
The earth was grey, the sky was white.  
I stood so near upon the height  
That my flesh felt the Carillon. (ln. 31-36)

As the previous discussion indicates, dramas of listening and of hearing—central moments in Rossetti's poetry—have a surprising way of becoming scenes of silence and interrupted or broken music. The focus of these poems persistently falls on moments of pause or rupture, moments that exist within a larger scene of song or sound. Such “pulling up,” to recall Patmore's phrase, focuses attention on the meaning of hearing and, as is often the case, the hearing of meaning. Enabling this chiastic movement between hearing and meaning is a punning insistence on the multiple significations of the word “sense,” one that condenses the problem of hearing and meaning that is at the center of these poems. But whether, or how, such chiastic reciprocity might be achieved is what is at issue. The aspiration to make hearing congruent with meaning or understanding is pursued with doubt and ambivalence, and yet at the same time these poems

urge hearing and understanding into some sort of accord. At a lexical level, this accord is posited by the word “sense” itself, a word that serves Rossetti as an English equivalent to *entendre*, where “hearing” is phonologically undifferentiated from “understanding” and vice versa—or, as the case may be, the fiction of their identity is served by the suasion of homonymy.

The 1849 travel poems are distinctive for offering gnomic, irrational, and, in some cases, patently bizarre utterances—sayings that often involve a confusion of the normal functioning of sensory organs, as in “Song and Music” and “The Carillon.” In this regard, the poems are partly “visionary,” even if they are not, in the end, examples of “sensuous hysteria.” Considered as a group, the travel poems are diverse in subject and form, and repay attention for how they introduce topics and styles that persist throughout Rossetti’s poetic career. But the poems also deserve attention for their own sake. No doubt some readers may find them secondary to the texts that have made Rossetti’s reputation, such as the *House of Life* sonnets. Indeed, it would not be hard to find other, more well known poems in the poet’s body of work that address similar questions to those pursued here through “Song and Music” and “The Carillon.” By treating these early poems with the kind of critical attention that has not been generally applied to them, I have considered the more obscure corners of Rossetti’s poetry in an attempt to

demonstrate how even allegedly inferior Victorian poems involve readers in questions that are central to the poetics of lyric. The next chapter, on Hopkins, works in a similar fashion, although the particular questions of lyric that it explores are of a different nature.

## Chapter 3

### Hopkins: “The Form Speaking”

Fine but sky overcast with transparent cloud, which was sometimes zoned and blown in wild ‘locks’—altogether a moody sky. There were both solar and lunar halos, faint: it deserves notice. I do not know how long the first was but the latter may have lasted hours.—A budded lime against the field wall: turn, pose, and counterpoint in the twigs and buds—the *form* speaking.

-Hopkins, April 6, 1868

Shall I call thee Bird,  
Or but a wandering Voice?

-Wordsworth, “To the Cuckoo” (1802)

Repeat that, repeat,  
Cuckoo, bird, and open ear wells, heart-springs, delightfully sweet,  
With a ballad, with a ballad, a rebound  
Off trundled timber and scoops of the hillside ground, hollow hollow hollow ground:  
The whole landscape flushes on a sudden at a sound

-Hopkins, undated fragment in *H*

Clouds preoccupied Hopkins, and the remarks in his journal for April 6, 1868 would be unremarkable as one of many skylscapes he recorded except for the reference to what he calls “form speaking.” As he writes at the end of the journal entry, following a dash that suggests a transition not written in words, “—A budded lime against the field wall: turn, pose, and counterpoint in the twigs and buds—the *form* speaking” (italics in original). The later Victorian short poem, like Hopkins’s lime tree, calls attention to itself for how it turns its own formal shape into a theme for poetic expression. With characteristic compression, Hopkins calls this event “form speaking.” That form speaks over and above the speaking of human voice is characteristic of

the poems in this study, and formal over-voicing is typical in the brief, highly patterned mode of utterance that defines lyric. How and what form speaks is the primary concern in this chapter, which considers how poetic voice in Hopkins is forcefully yet precariously articulated by “form speaking.”

•

Perhaps the most perverse reading of Hopkins’s poetry would understate its patent strangeness, downplaying the customary view that Hopkins’s writing, to use his own language, is “fickle, freckled.” While there may be reasons to further such reading, and critics have written on Hopkins in this manner—moderating the Hopkins *in extremis* interpretation that largely characterizes his reception—the vital drive in his writing, nonetheless, is closely connected to its formal perversity. To downplay this aspect would miss something fundamental about Hopkins’s writing.<sup>57</sup> But this is not the foremost concern for reading Hopkins; if anything, his peculiar lines and words draw too much flame, catch too much fire. Perhaps, then, as Hopkins wrote in late 1864 in a line both apt and misleading as autopoetic statement, “diamonds are better cut.”

The strangeness of Hopkins’s language will always strike first. But

---

<sup>57</sup> Lawler suggests this antithetical, and, in my terms, anti-perverse reading, in his *Hopkins Re-Constructed*.

Hopkins himself was never certain that his poetry was in fact striking, a concern which is at the center of this chapter as well as the poems it considers. For readers, however, the surge of Hopkins's poetic force has become almost too familiar and a touch predictable. Hopkins's eccentricity—poetic and personal, although the emphasis here is poetic—is a critical commonplace, and one which tends to eventuate in commentary that is far from freckled, such as discussion about what *inscape* and *instress* might really mean, or how Hopkins's poems exemplify these concepts. Hopkins was unfortunate in many ways, most of all, perhaps, for having devised what still passes as acceptable meta-language capable of accommodating what is most unaccountable in his writing. It is surely perverse that his words might be naturalized by applying his critical terms to his own verse. As Hopkins writes of Wordsworth, *the words are wild*. And what would the world be, as Hopkins writes elsewhere, once bereft of wildness?

The Victorians still suffer from their own pretense to civility, and yet there are powerful Victorian voices that cultivate and linger over wildness, and not simply in the mode of nostalgia or mannerism evident in much late-century Medievalism. Hopkins's interest at Oxford in the Pre-Raphaelites, for example, was largely prompted by what he regarded as their disruptive wildness. In noticing that perfection in art is often spurious, Hopkins saw

the Pre-Raphaelites as offering a radical corrective. Writing about painting, he comments that previous realism undermines the truthful presentation of detail: “under the pretence of a realism which keeps all things in the due proportions of nature, realism is undermined; details are subordinated, neglected, falsified, till all is true and all is untrue” (*J&P* 78-9). The Pre-Raphaelites seemed, to Hopkins as to others, able to offer a worthwhile, if startling, response: “recovery must be made by a breaking up, a violence, such as was the Preraphaelite school” (*J&P* 79). These early remarks, written around 1864, might be disregarded as youthful Ruskinian echo, were it not for Hopkins’s continued attention to art’s technical aspects as a source of power. In the early “Health and Decay” essay, from 1864, the relevant remark gives prominence to prosody in poetry and the unmentioned but presumably analogous technical parts of visual and plastic art: “As the metre and rhymes, conditions and restrictions of verse, are the unexpected cause of the rise of all that we call poetry, so do the conditions of painting, sculpture, and the rest of the arts contain their greatness, their strength and their decline” (79). In insisting on art’s “lawful objects” being Truth and Beauty, “On the Signs of Health and Decay in the Arts” feels forced, especially when compared to his formulation in February of 1889 in a letter to Bridges in which Hopkins objects to an article on opera by one Carl Rosa. Rosa’s piece

contains what Hopkins see as the dubious claim that “the first touch of decadence destroys all merit whatever.” In response, after quoting Rosa, Hopkins writes “This is a hard saying. What, all technical merit—as chiaroscuro, anatomical knowledge, expression, feeling, colouring, drama? It is plainly not true. And, come to that, the age of Raphael and Michelangelo was in a decadence and its excellence is technical. Everything after Giotto is decadent in form, though advancing in execution. Go to” (*L* 300). Here, as in his own poetry, Hopkins seeks to hold technical excellence hand in hand with what is wild, barbarous, and decadent.

### **I. THE COUNTER: SPEAKING FORM**

In the case of Hopkins, a writer of surface and profundity at once, his poetry focuses the power of the counter, a poetic example of which is the dappled play of “pied” or “barbarous” beauty, a play including “all things counter, original, spare, strange, / Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?) / With swift, slow; sweet, sour, adazzle, dim” (ln. 7-9). What Barbara Hardy has called the “advantage of lyric,” to tap Hopkins’s own word-hoard, is closely connected to lyric’s “spareness,” lyric’s countering, and, by extension, lyric’s tenuous attunement with the strange: “whatever is fickle, freckled.”<sup>58</sup>

---

The form of this pied or barbarous beauty in Hopkins—its poetics—is a question contained, and overwhelmed, in the line that introduces it here. In “Pied Beauty” and in Hopkins’s poetry more generally, poetic and critical dynamism work the same line and jockey for space at a single blow: “Whatever is fickle, freckled (*who knows how?*)” (emphasis added). The line turns to question itself before it ends, and it does not really end. It runs to congeries, to a list introduced by a kind of word-adjacent epanalepsis: “With swift,” where the “w” and “t” sounds in “with swift” doubly prepare the “withing” and whizzing that collects the “slow; sweet, sour, adazzle, dim.” If we could imagine Hopkins glossing Barbara Hardy’s terms in a literary-critical metalepsis that seems fair in the scene of reading, lyric’s advantage is its peculiar “deal,” which is quintessentially “spare,” and “spare” despite and amid the richness of lyrics like Hopkins’s. The question, then, is what is the spare, the counter? Furthermore, as “Pied Beauty” puts the question of its own form, *who knows how?*

In brief, and too sparsely, for now, the counter in Hopkins is the voicing or speaking of form, what Hopkins calls “form speaking” in the journal entry from April 6, 1868. “Form speaking” is a prime example of form’s perversity, and how such “speaking” occurs within Hopkins—what its techniques and ends are—is the focus of this chapter. To anticipate with a

prosaic example, to look at a lime tree, for Hopkins, is to experience the tree as speaking form. Using this scene to frame the reading of individual poems and to indicate a larger poetic mode in which such poems participate, this chapter explores several characteristic operations of language and poetic form in Hopkins, in a way that aims to suggest something about the nature of lyric more generally. To borrow from the terms by which Hopkins describes his own attentiveness under the limelight, what “deserves notice” in Hopkins’s poetry, and in lyric generally, is the speaking of form. How such formal speaking is characteristic in lyric—and characteristically hard to hear—is therefore the larger concern of this chapter.

If “form speaking” is an example of perversity, to whom, or of what, does form speak (*who knows how?*), and does a communicative model—message, sender, receiver—even apply? “Form speaking” is on display in several ways. One is by taking wing or brooding, as in the many poems in Hopkins’s small corpus where birds or instances of their song are prominently placed. Birdsong is representative of a kind of sonic energy and authority that is always desired by the lyric “voice” that ostensibly “hears” outer song—a spare song that prompts and yet towers over the poem’s existence. The bird is a figure for form as such as well as a figure for voice as a particular kind of formed sound. The bird-poetic, that is, forms sound, and

also sounds form; the bird's form, in essence, is sound and song, and in certain cases that sound becomes "voice." There are many such poems beyond the "The Windhover," and in almost all cases, the bird-poetic is a literal and figurative example of heightened and moving sound. These poems present sound as both the subject and the object of movement, where sound moves itself and whatever it touches. This double movement, if not achieved, is at least the desideratum. Whether, and by what means, voice is felicitous in its performance is always the question engaged.

## **II. "STRANGELY ELEMENTED IS MY MIND'S WEATHER"**

Recorded in lapidary prose that inclines to iambic rhythms, the act of noticing the budded lime in the journal entry from 1868 transposes the seen into the heard, and turns looking into a new and unfamiliar sort of listening, one that resembles what Hopkins in a different context calls "reading with the ear." To view the lime tree is not simply to see it, but also to hear it, or at least to see it speaking. In particular, it means hearing or seeing the muted speaking of the tree's form, which is identified with the swaying and rocking of choral or odic rhythm: "turn, pose, and counterpoint in the twigs and buds." Plant form is poetic form here, but the comparison is not in the service of an organic poetics, and the terms are not reversible. Poetic form is

not modeled on the tree's growth. Nature is instead shaped by a superinduced application of poetic design. Accordingly, the lime tree is given dynamism by borrowing from the resources of literature. Nature is describable in terms of art, specifically in terms of literary form ("turn, pose, and counterpoint"). In a critical move, this dynamism is transposed from the eye to the ear, and nature's speaking voice derives from the literary pattern that is projected onto the twigs and buds. In Hopkins's description, it is as if the future growth of the tree's now incipient parts will occur through the sequenced stanzaic lapsing of a choral ode. Trellised onto the architecture of a structure rooted in literary pattern, the lime tree is a form that has or is given a voice, where the ambivalence between having voice and being given voice is critical.

Hopkins's poetry characteristically involves readers in a process similar to what occurs under the limes on April 6, 1868. This involvement, outlined in the embowered scene in which Hopkins is for once interested in the limelight, is the ambivalent crossing between listening and voicing. The ambivalence is due to formal speaking being something that is listened to as well as something that is voiced or given voice in lyric. Formal speaking sounds something typically mute and mutes something typically sounded. It is akin to watching the mute mouthing of utterance. This sort of thing spoke

to Hopkins, and not as an agonistic poetical maneuver whereby he was able to tender his own sound. During his Swiss walking-tour, for example, lines and outlines spoke to him on several occasions: “Alpine cows dun-coloured and very well made. Melodious lines of a cow’s dewlap” (July 9, 1868). Of his climb of the Wylerhorn (“how fond of and warped to the mountain it would be easy to become”), he notices a melodious outline on a larger scale:

Firs very tall, with the swell of the branching on the outer side of the slope so that the peaks seem to point inwards to the mountain peak, like the lines of the Parthenon, and the outline melodious and moving on many focuses.—I wore my pagharee and turned it with harebells below and gentians in two rows above like double pan-pipes.—In coming down we lost our way.

Mountains whose summits have been reached submit to the poet’s melodizing, even if Hopkins admits to having a “dangerous slide down the long wet grass of a steep slope” (July 11, 1868). It is all sport here. But mountains for Hopkins would later become sublime, a landscape sounded with pangs and shrieks of wilder wringing, an inner place without melody or beauty: “the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall/Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap/May who ne’re hung there” (ln 9-11). The fecund mixing of the semantic fields associated with the terms central to the scene on the Wylerhorn—“melody,” “lines,” “branching,” “steep”—energizes a poem such as the late, and unfinished, “Ashboughs” (so-titled by Bridges):

Not of all my eyes see, wándering on the world,  
 Is anything a milk to the mind so, só sighs déep  
 Poetry to it, as a tree whose boughs break in the sky.  
 Say it is áshboughs: whether on a December day and furled  
 Fast or they in clammyish láshtender combs creep  
 Apart wide and new-nestle at heaven most high.  
 They touch heaven, tabour on it; how their talons sweep  
 The smouldering enormous winter welkin! May  
 Mells blue and snowwhite through them, a fringe and fray  
 Of greenery: it is old earth's groping towards the steep of Heaven  
 whom she child us by.

The tree that “só sighs déep/Poetry” plays upon the sky, “tabour[s]” on  
 heaven with its tender lashes. Ashboughs, bittersweet, resemble bird claws at  
 their branch tips: “their talons sweep/The smouldering enormous winter  
 welkin.” The poem almost takes flight on invisible wings that would seem,  
 by implication, to be tied up in the ash tree, wings metonymically present by  
 virtue of the “talons” of the boughs. But the vantage remains earthly, and  
 the tree is sighted from a position upon the ground. As such, the sky is seen  
 through a break in the branches, in a charged interstice through which  
 “May/Mells blue and snowwhite.” Mixing, as of color (blue and white), is  
 the first and primary meaning of “mells,” but the more striking and  
 hammering senses of the word also impinge. Accordingly, the poem’s mood  
 treads between violence and repose, and “mells” suits for how it touches  
 senses harsh and sweet—“mell” as a noun connecting May’s liveliness with  
 the “honey” that brings the poem into precarious relation with things

melodious. “Láshtender” hereby comes to sound like a new translation of “bittersweet.” On this same axis, the trestling of branch is hive-like in Hopkins’s rendering, “láshtender combs creep.” The comb-structure of the tree’s pattern sways at a honeyed pace, where branches move about and “creep” as if dripping from the comb. “Mells” also charges the poem with another kind of sonorousness, that of birdsong or human conversation. Hopkins mells his way through the poem’s lines in another sense, in the hammering and pounding that “mells” denotes. This is a hammering that is spatial in the figure of the tree’s lashing boughs and sonic in the poem’s sound-work: “furled/Fast or they in clammyish láshtender combs creep.”

The lashing of May, arresting in “Ashboughs,” is less out of place in the powerful fragment “Strike, churl” (ca. 1885), a May poem memorable for its unseasonable weather:

Strike, churl; hurl, cheerless wind, then; heltering hail  
May’s beauty massacre and wispèd wild clouds grow  
Out on the giant air; tell Summer No,  
Bid joy back, have at the harvest, keep Hope pale.

The disjunction of season and scene is darkly inspiring. May mells with violence, bringing out what remains contained within and beneath the surface of “Ashboughs.” In “Strike, churl,” malediction is breathed without reservation, inspired by the “heltering hail” and “cheerless wind” that occasions description. The poem’s conjuring of corruption is Swinburnian

for being quasi-celebratory. Perhaps the leaden echo is merely missing its golden pair in this fragment? It is impossible to say, but the energy of the fragment is its embrace of entropy: “May’s beauty massacre...have at the harvest, keep Hope pale.” The poem’s strange bidding recalls Keats’s picture of the figure of Joy in the “Ode on Melancholy,” whose “hand is ever at his lips bidding adieu.” Joy’s grape bursts in “Strike, churl,” but with an energetic detachment that resists the stasis of melancholic involvement.

### III. “EVERYTHING AFTER GIOTTO IS DECADENT IN FORM”

Speaking form sounds an echoic voice that is heard insofar as it seeks to elide its identity as echo. Like shining from shook foil, authentic voice is the brilliant rustle of artifice. Yet this rustle is not failure, dearth, or impoverishment; neither is it a scene in which privation as such becomes a source of appeal: *asceticism* is not the new dispensation. Lyric is formal speech, and lyric “voice,” in Hopkins, is formal shining: “it strikes like lightnings to hear him sing.” Form itself is a ventriloquist, expert at hurling voice, and lyric subtilizes and also figures its own vocal events, “finds tongue to fling out broad its name...*myself* it speaks and spells,/Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*” In the case of the lime tree passage, which can be read as a *koan* for lyric agency as perverse form, formal reading is figured as a particular kind of

seeing, a looking for and a seeking out of voice that is sounded on and against the arrangement of particular parts: twigs, buds, lines, syllables, and stanzas. Hopkins's branches are literal and figurative, always swaying in forests real and rhetorical.

The challenge of promoting formal voice is difficult and yet simple. "*Form speaking*," noting Hopkins's emphasis on "form," suggests that the locus of voice is outer structure rather than inner substance ("turn, pose, and counterpoint" refers to the tree's external shape). Hopkins does not write "voice," and so perhaps to reinsert it would be in error. The "voice of form" is then a catachresis, a metalepsis whereby form, as an effect of voice, is turned around so that voice follows as an effect of form. In this reversal form precedes voice, spatially and temporally, rather than vice versa.

Whether what is produced in this process is still "voice" in any conventional sense is a question close to all lyric, and is one exaggerated in later Victorian poetry. Lyric condenses and displaces the metalepsis of voice and form, and the dynamism of this reversal enables and structures poetic utterance. In the observation "the *form speaking*," form is subject and object. The stress on the word "form" in Hopkins's journal cues the fact that what is spoken is form itself, however foreign or ultimately unspeakable that form remains. In the example of the lime tree, what form utters is its own rhythmic swaying.

What form has to say is form, and when it speaks it tells its own shape and acts of shaping.

Poems with a marked interest in the shaping of their own utterance have an uncanny way of uttering shape. Such poems show utterance to be the mouthing of form: “shape nothing, lips; be lovely-dumb:/It is the shut, the curfew sent/From there where all surrenders come/Which only makes you eloquent.” Lips are literally brought to a close in the first line here with plosive sounds in “shape,” “lips,” and “dumb.” The partial choking back of sound and release of air at the lips is necessary to articulate the line “shape nothing, lips; be lovely-dumb,” which ends with an alveolar-labial sequence (“dumb”). Countering its own close-lipped message of dumbness, however, the subsequent lines draw out sound through an emphatic clustering of open vowels: “From there where all surrenders come/Which only makes you eloquent.” To object to this situation as an instance of the prison-house of language seems to miss the mark. Lyric poems characteristically fixate on their own forms and their own fraught events of formation. Why this fixation might be found embarrassing or objectionable (a prison to be sprung from) is a rich topic, and the resistance to hearing form speak is a closely connected issue, one that Victorian and Romantic poems explore by elaborating their own highly wrought forms. What Hopkins calls “form

speaking” allows for the possibility that a poem may shape little or nothing beyond its own form. For this reason, formal artifice can be read as a symptom of insufficiency at various levels—poetic, moral, intellectual, and spiritual. Looking ahead to an exemplary twentieth-century complication, however, Wallace Stevens—no formalist partisan—suggests that formally superficial verse, the kind of decadent poetry that is written by poets with “little or nothing to say,” is, or will be, the poetry that matters (“Two or Three Ideas,” 1952).

Hopkins’s exchanges with Bridges often turn on moments of non-comprehension in his poetry, and Bridges’s requests for elucidation are valuable for drawing Hopkins out, but Hopkins also gave difficulty an essential role in his poetry. Difficulty was not a sign of shallowness or a symptom showing that Hopkins had little or nothing to say; resistance was meant strategically, as in what Hopkins in 1888 called the “violent but effective hyperbaton and suspension” within “Tom’s Garland” (*L* 273). Further discussion between the two came over the “difficult syntax” of “Harry Ploughman.” Hopkins tells Bridges that he has become decided on prefixing “short prose *arguments*” to some of his poems, presumably his challenging later lyrics, although he does not say which poems:

One thing I am now resolved on, is to prefix short prose *arguments* to some of my pieces. These will expose me to carping, but I do not

mind. Epic and drama and ballad and many, most, things, should be at once intelligible; but everything need not and cannot be. Plainly if it is possible to express a subtle 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. (*L* 265-6)

Intelligibility was not a primary criterion in the lyric, but the prose argument could supply something of what was meant, exemplified by the note to “Henry Purcell” (“the poet wishes well to the divine genius of Purcell and praises him...”). The rationale for needing any such “argument” in lyric is more interesting than the actual arguments themselves. Hopkins’s poetry seeks a different criterion of excellence than intelligibility. The “sacrifice” made in “subtle and recondite” writing is likely to be intelligibility—with or without explanation. Being intelligible in lyric is therefore almost inappropriate, and the mark of difference from epic and drama is that lyric is not “at once intelligible.” Sonic repletion and acoustic force matter above being intelligible.

#### **IV. HOPKINS’S DRY ROOT**

If it is possible to use “artifice” in a neutral sense, without stigma, anxieties about formal artifice in the nineteenth century embody the concern that poetry’s supplementary supports might become foundational or essential—

and that voice and the feeling it carries and is carried by might be supports to form rather than supported by form. Objections such as those of Arnold to the presumed myopic self-regard of poems that are bent on telling allegories of the poet's own mind are freighted with a host of anxieties, explicit and implicit. In a paradigmatic instance, rhyme stands for the potential inanity of all systems of poetic equivalence to mirror or ape rather than to generate or re-generate. Hopkins's "self-sentenced" lines from 1865, "Trees by their yield/Are known; but I—/My sap is sealed,/My root is dry" can be usefully heard in this context. A line like "My sap is sealed," however, touches a concern different than that expressed in the lissome speaking form of the lime tree noticed three years after this poem. The disarming message of this early poem—a poem that is, aptly, one of Hopkins's many fragments—is that a sealed yield can nonetheless still compound itself.

Trees by their yield  
Are known; but I—  
My sap is sealed,  
My root is dry.  
If life within  
I none can shew  
(Except for sin),  
Nor fruit above,—  
It must be so—  
I do not love.

Will no one show  
I argued ill?  
Because, although

Self-sentenced, still  
I keep my trust.  
If He would prove  
And search me through  
Would He not find  
(What yet there must  
Be hid behind (1865)

As is suggested in “Trees by their yield...,” dry roots can still flower.

What is disconcerting is that a fruitless flower may blossom sinfully. In a strange turn, this possibility permits the poem’s ravishment, as spoken in the lines, “If He would prove/And search me through.” The “if” of the poem’s proving conditionally affirms the presence of something more redemptive, and affirmation is literally tenuous in that the poem, as a fragment, is deracinated, or perhaps was never rooted. The poem ends, and also fails to end, with a provocation about the fact that its final fragmentariness seems fitting because emblematic of the act of hiding alleged at the poem’s abrupt close. Yet for as much as “Trees by their yield...” would like to affirm its own barren fruitlessness, the pruning of poetic and spiritual growth makes for a new kind of shape, albeit one severely trimmed, or circumcised, to engage the ritualistic language that seems always close and yet far removed from Hopkins’s poems. As these oddly fruitful lines suggest, poetry’s self-regard makes for disarming events of proliferation, disarming because poetic production occurs by way of equivalencies that are rooted in the ephemeral

eventfulness of spare utterance.

The proliferation of poetic equivalence in the later nineteenth century has always been taken to be more or less onanistic. In this sense, the perverse frisson of rhyme, as well as that of other schemes by which poems touch their own sonic selves, exemplifies the potential for poetry to be facile projection and repetition. For an era so involved in exploring the systems and structures that make and re-make human life, it is striking that Victorian poetic writing which self-consciously insists on the linguistic shaping of human form could arouse such animosity or be so thoroughly trivialized. The problem seemed to be that the mechanism of language was not wholly bent on advancement or progress, and poetic language, more particularly, was an outspoken reminder of the fact, even if Hopkins's own language waited until 1918 before finding itself fully lettered. As late Victorian writing shows, lyric, at its perverse best, is a non-teleological meditation on form and the richly vexed voices produced by poetic and linguistic shaping. Tapping this vein of sap within the massy trunk of Victorian poetry remains a critical challenge, especially in the lyric, where the constitutive nature of linguistic process is evident primarily in the performative enactment of poetry's formality. Unlike the dramatic monologue or other longer forms, lyric plays out its highly compressed voice-events through schemes and tropes which

are performative in ways not found in longer poetic modes. Poems by Hopkins featuring bird sound and movement provide a series of pertinent examples. Hopkins's birds are so central as to be easily overlooked.

Notwithstanding his assertions of poetic and spiritual root-rot, Hopkins's poems on birds and birdsong pose central questions of poetic voice, and embody his most central concerns as a poet, early and late in life. Listening closely to these poems, even as they resist being "searched through" in a final proving, suggests that there is, as Hopkins seems to hope in "Trees by their yield...", always something hidden behind. Whether, and to what end, lyric's yield is sealed is a question that animates Hopkins's poetic impulse, early and late, and is a topic made vivid in poems in which poetic voice is figured by birds and birdsong, lyrics such as "The Nightingale," "The Sea and the Skylark," "The Caged Skylark," and "The Windhover." These and other poems (e.g., "Ashboughs" and "Epithalamion") speak through a densely cross-hatched lexical and associative landscape in which birds their metonyms—trees, branches, sky—come into being as carriers of poetic sound and voice in powerful and unsettling ways. A pun on the forest of rhetoric is only the first of many moves made in these poems, and the Hopkinsian arboretum and its avian inhabitants keys an entire poetic apparatus. Always a step ahead, these

poems stage acts of listening that model readerly engagement with Hopkins's own lyrics, where force and repletion of sound is set above intelligibility. In addition, poems such as these, which listen closely to the worlds they render, always work, despite and through their particularity, to touch larger questions, such as the nature of aural and oral experience, of lyric formation, and of poetic authority.

Hopkins's bird poems depict and perform acts of listening as an occasion to speculate about the possibility for poetry's own sounds to become audible and efficacious in their turn. What is risked in these lyrics is that if the poem has ears, then surely the poem must have tongue and voice; if the poet can listen, then surely he can speak? The listening poem, accordingly, is always a periphrasis for talking about whether the poet's own words might have voice. The listening poem in this sense is a concession to the threat that poetic voice might be muted (or actually mute), and it is symptomatic that such poems recoil outer sound into the world as fresh poetic voice. But it would be reductive to interpret a preoccupation with sound and listening as merely the token of vocational anxiety. Such a reading is called for to an extent, but is also limiting. Taking bird-poems as an exemplary sub-species for studying traits characteristic of genus Hopkins, birds and birdsong are conspicuous and complex figures for poetic voice as

the striking, breaking, and skeining of sound. In an inversion that turns voice into the object rather than the subject of formation, Hopkins's poetry also enacts the striking, breaking, and skeining of voice.

## V. "TO THE NEST'S NOOK I BALANCE AND BUOY"

Hopkins's poetry broods upon birds for a host of reasons. If not the most complex reason, first is the *copia* the poems discover in avian being. The bird is poetically attractive because it is fundamentally dynamic, not only with respect to sound. Rich as the bird's acoustic lining is, the bird's lines are also visual, and are inscribed upon the eye, "as a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend." Birds inspire, and in excess of the amount of air they themselves draw. To take sight of a bird on wing bends eye and ear heavenward. As he writes in "Hurrahing in Harvest," a poem that "rears wings" to become airborne in a way that many of his other poems do not, harvest-time is an inspiring scene of lofty and lofted accumulation: "I wálk, I líft up, Í lift úp heart, éyes,/Down all that glory in the heavens." In this poem, looking is praising, but it is not always so.

Contrasting with the summer poem "Hurrahing in Harvest" (1877) is the autumn poem, "Now I am minded" (1864), written much earlier than "Hurrahing," although the earlier poem's posture of poetic and seasonal

tardiness reaches for maturity. This is marked in terms of the pastoral or georgic lyric as the customary starting point for a professional poet. Poetry as a vocation is highly vexed in Hopkins's case, but his early writing strikes out fully aware of the traditional generic trajectory of a poetic career in the model of Milton, and his generically-mixed "Wreck," appearing after his seven-year silence, reaches beyond his earlier lyrics to offer public and national statement of epic proportion. In "Now I am minded," autumn is out of time and ill-timed. The poem's calendar is October, at a moment just before the leaves will color and fall ("scarcely does appear/The Autumn yellow feather in the boughs" ln. 4-5). But the anticipated decay of the season, as well as the self-consciousness of a willfully belated song, are morbidly inspiring. In a line that recalls "fruit ripening in stillness" from Keats, the "hush'd earth" of Hopkins's "Now I am minded" has fruit hanging "loose upon the stem," and the time of year is "so late there is no force in sap or blood." The presence of "fruit upon the wall" is out of sync with the surrounding season ("these should have starv'd with the green broods of spring,/Or never been at all" ln. 14-15), and yet the occasion for growing poetic voice could not be finer: "Now I am minded to take pipe in hand/And yield a song to the decaying year." The poem opens by trumpeting the energy of being "minded" to produce poetic fruit just when

time is running out, marking its own odd existence with a deictic “now” as the timely first word of a belated song. The authentic cadence is self-consciously green in this poem, even if it claims to discover the ripeness of late fruit. Although the poem is typically classed with Hopkins’s first experiments, it speaks to his lifelong sense of being out of time, being “Time’s eunuch,” as in “Justus quidem tu es, Domine” from 1889. Nature’s strange hanging growth, as well as the poet’s own song, are temporally unaccountable, “too late or else much, much too soon.” The anachronism of the poem’s fruit, read at another level, captures something essential about Hopkins’s place in the calendar of literary history, in which his writing is neither Romantic nor Victorian, and also not yet Modern.

“Now I am minded” is a fitting frame for exploring the sounding of birds as a sonic scene staged within Hopkins’s verse because birdsong, like the poet’s autumn piping, fills out space and strikes the ear in curious, untimely, and yet powerful ways. Such striking often occurs while the perch of the bird is ambiguous, unknown, and possibly undiscoverable. Like Keats, Hopkins is a poet who listens darkly, and the authentic cadence was always discovered late. Recalling Milton’s nightingale sonnet, Hopkins’s bird poems hear a “liquid note” that arrives or is at risk of arriving too late for anyone’s relief. Indeed, the “rude bird of Hate” whose song competes against the

nightingale's in Milton's poem stands for a counter-song that Hopkins's Victorian birds have mostly internalized. But while the bird's physical body is often veiled from sight, its sonic effects work in the world. A degree of invisibility at the source, in fact, seems requisite for the sonic potency discovered in Hopkins's poems. And where is the listener, even at a third remove, who could resist hearing such a call? Birds take pipe in hand without much, if any, minding. And yet their song is timelier for coming on its own schedule. It is not that birdsong is arbitrary. Birds are an archetype of loco-description, and the bird's song is almost indelibly one with the genius loci. What matters is how human hearing is itself often out of sync, the ear out of tune and thereby ripe for receiving birdsong as a countering presence. But the bird has an unquestioned relation to its own voice, and is to be valued for this reason, even if its song annoys. As Robert Frost writes in "A Minor Bird" (from *West-running Brook*, 1928), "the bird was not to blame for his key" (ln. 6). The bird's lack of decorousness and its disregard for *kairos* defined in human terms empowers its song while also predisposing it to be offensive to hearers of a different key. But, as Frost concedes in "A Minor Bird," "of course there must be something wrong/In wanting to silence any song" (ln. 7-8).

In a reversal of the lime-tree scene from 1868, in which looking becomes listening, in poems featuring bird noise scenes of hearing are often scenes of looking. The lyric poet is a listener who hears a tune and subsequently looks for the source of the sound. Often it is to no avail. And yet the pleasure derived from such sensory cross-ruffing is not diminished. The enjoyment is usually heightened by frustration, goaded by impediment, and birding has perhaps never been as fleshly as Hopkins makes it. Rossetti's "Day-Dream," the sonnet and the paired painting, makes for suggestive reading in this context. "The Day-Dream" is a work in which bird-song is projected from beyond the frame of what the eye can see such that sound's invisible source as a literal fact (the bird is outside the frame) triggers acts of searching and speculation which become powerfully figurative. The sound of water in Hopkins's poetry, as in much of Rossetti's, is similarly seductive, and birdsong and water-song (Milton's "liquid note") are yoked together in Hopkins's verse in a variety of ways.

Like birdsong, the ephemeral quality of water-noise is central to its appeal. In the early fragment from 1865, "I hear a noise of waters," for example, water which passes out of sight becomes "double-musical" when traced by the ear:

I hear a noise of waters drawn away,  
 And, headed always downwards, with less sounding  
 Work through a cover'd copse whose hollow rounding  
 Rather to ear than eye shews where they stray,  
 Making them double-musical. And they  
 Low-covered pass, and brace the woodland clods  
 With shining-hilted curves, that they may stay  
 The bluebells up whose crystal-ending rods  
 . . . . . in their natural sods.

("I hear a noise of waters")

The seduction of listening here is largely due to the decisive yet ambiguous forcing of water. Waters are "drawn away" (ln. 1) as if ladled off by some acting agent, but the source of that agency is unstated and irrelevant. The rhyme of *away/stray* marks out the odd combining of guided and unguided motion in the water's wandering. The "work[ing] through" of water into the earth escapes the eye and appeals to the ear, which "shews" in another register than does vision. Water's passing through the wood's "hollow rounding" audibilizes shape in a way that makes the water's course something that can be figuratively "shown" to the ear. Waters (Hopkins uses the unusual plural form) hereby become "double-musical." The sensory sharing that energizes this poem picks up on a wider preoccupation with the crossing of sight and sound, and of loaning out the terms of the one to the other. The pastoral and wooded imagination of Hopkins's poetry designates the sound and movement of water and birds as the leading performers in

moments “double-musical.”

A fascination with falling as a powerful visual and acoustic event is the central link between water and bird. The propensity for both to be “skeined” is critical, and for Hopkins “skeining” appeals to eye and ear. The destination of the waters in “I hear a noise of waters” is the “woodland clods” in which plants and flowers such as the bluebell are stayed up by the water’s turgidity. The pattern of bluebells is elsewhere skeined in Hopkins’s writing:

In the green spots of that wood  
Were eyes of central primrose: bluebells ran  
In skeins about the breaks.                    (“Woods in Spring,” 1864)

The visual running of skeined flowers is also detected in the falling of water, whose shapes and lines run together to make a similar pattern: “More white,/Than a skeinèd, than a skeinèd waterfall” (Fragments, 1864). The emphasis on color (“more white”) adds an additional layer to this fragment, but Hopkins was in general taken by waterfalls as skeined objects worthy of attention for a twisted and folded complexity that drives surface into depth. In his journal for July 11, 1868, for example, he notices “waterfalls not only skeined but silky too—one saw it from the inn across the meadows.” The flesh-like contiguities of skeining are powerful but implicit connections in both of these observations. In the first example, “more white” refers to a

woman's body, while in the second, from the 1868 journal, "silky" characterizes water as potentially soft to the touch, like flesh. The primary meaning in this passage is visual, as in the "glistening" that Hopkins later writes of in the same entry, where rock and water meet in the waterfall.

Adding to their interest, skinned surfaces are like written surfaces in their densely varied texture. The watery image of a turned, kinked, and twisted visual detail becomes page-like in Hopkins's imagination in the 1864 poem "It was a hard thing." The poem was first written out in his journal, just before a self-portrait sketch titled "Gerard Hopkins, reflected in a lake, August 14." In this sketch, a youthful Hopkins regards his reflected self, and his body is posed in a seated position, legs hanging down to the water as if he is seated on a dock or a firm ledge. His neck and head show between his legs as reflected from beneath, and the whole is framed by a faint sky behind. The self-portrait is a reminder that the attraction of water in the poems is inevitably associated with water's properties of reflection. In "Gerard Hopkins, reflected in a lake," water is the literal ground for self-picturing, but elsewhere in his poems water takes a more figurative role as a textual surface. In "It was a hard thing," the sun "writes" onto water a text that is "yet in the eye or in the thought":

The sun on falling waters writes the text  
Which yet is in the eye or in the thought. ("It was a hard thing," ln.8-9)

Despite the implication of self here, the poem wants to insist on objectivity. The earlier lines pull back from subjective authority with an almost dismissive remark about the limits of invention: “The rainbow shines, but only in the thought/Of him that looks. Yet not in that alone,/For who makes rainbows by invention?” (ln. 2-4). For all of these varied processes, birdsong is the supreme condensation. “Cooing,” for example, resembles water, wind, and the falling of leaves, and the bird’s autonomy of physical movement in flight trumps the figurative and literal power of water’s motion because the bird has the ability not only to enter a controlled free-fall, but the power to raise itself up for further falling. An example of birdsong’s similitude with other processes appears in the 1864 journal, composed around the same time as the other passages noted:

Or else their cooings came from bays of trees,  
Like a contented wind, or gentle shocks  
Of falling water. This and all of these  
We tuned to one key and made their harmonies.

(“Or else their cooings”)

The “unnumbered sounds” of evening in Keats’s “How Many Bards Gild The Lapses of Time” press closely onto Hopkins’s voice. But in Keats’s poem, the “songs of birds” (ln. 10) and the “voice of waters” (ln. 11) make “pleasing music,” whereas in Hopkins such sounds characteristically occur

with what Keats says they do not, “wild uproar” (ln. 14). Hopkins hears such sounds in a more visceral and uncomfortable way than Keats. Unlike Hopkins, Keats can claim to “brood” without trouble. The composure of brooding secures the kind of order and confidence that Keats alleges and which Hopkins can only avow in a negative mode (“birds build—but not I build; no, but strain,/Time’s eunuch, and not breed one work that wakes,” “Justus, quidem tu es, Domine” (ln. 12-13)). The “throng” (ln. 6) of other voices at first intrude upon the composing Keats, but they are transmuted into “pleasing chime,” a shift which gives the sonnet its turn and also models a mode of hearing the sounds of evening: “So the unnumber’d sounds that evening store...Make pleasing music, and not wild uproar” (ln. 9ff.). It is rarely so in Hopkins, where “thronging,” a vital word, marks a confused coincidence of strident noise or mixed color. In “Henry Purcell,” for example, “it is the forgèd feature finds me; it is the rehearsal/Of own, of abrupt self there so thrusts on, so throngs the ear” (ln. 7-8). A different throng, a thronging at the eye, occurs in both “Spelt from Sibyl’s Leaves” (“her dapple is at énd, as-/Tray or aswarm, all throughther, in thongs”) and “That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire” (“Cloud-puffball, torn tufts, tossed pillows flaunt forth, then chevy on an air—/Built thoroughfare: heaven-roysterers, in gay-gangs they throng; they glitter in marches”). The anxious

crowding of “throng” occurs first, and most literally, in his partial translation in 1862 of *Prometheus Bound*, in Hopkins’s rendering: “Foe of Zeus and hate of all/That wont to throng Zeus’ banquet-hall.”

The thronging of sound occurs in an exemplary way in “The Woodlark” (ca. 1876), an unfinished poem where water-song and birdsong are hooked in the bird’s tune, a parsimonious pour that gives “so tiny a trickle of song-strain” (ln. 4). Water-song also mixes with birdsong in the late, unfinished “Epithalamion” (1888), a poem a billion times told lovelier for how it fails to properly mark its prompting occasion, the wedding of Hopkins’s brother Everard, which occurred in April 1888 despite Gerard’s missing poem. In “Epithalamion,” the poet has become a “listless stranger,” a critical detail in this late and free poem, and one by which Hopkins makes himself resemble the pastoral figure of Richard from his earlier experiments in the 1860s:

He was a shepherd of the Arcadian mood,  
That not Arcadia knew nor Haemony.  
Affinèd to the earnest solitude,  
The winds and listening downs he seem’d to be.

He went with listless strides, disorderedly.  
And answer’d the dry tinkles of his sheep  
With piping unexpected melody.                    (“Richard,” ln. 1-7)

As if tired of being “affinèd to the earnest solitude,” the speaker in “Epithalamion” comes upon a “gluegold-brown/Marbled river, boisterously

beautiful” (ln. 5-6) and decides to dip into a pool where he is drawn by the sound of boys swimming, “beckoned by the noise.” The poem’s invisible and listless poetic walker (“unseen/Sees the bevy of them, how the boys...” ln. 15-16) is bird-like in motion (“drops” ln. 15), movement (“beckoned by the noise” ln. 14; “wings” ln. 34), and posture (“lips crisp” ln. 32). The water he eventually sports in, “frolicklavish,” is itself a kind of oversized embowered bird-bath: “he hies to a pool neighbouring; sees it is the best/There; sweetest, freshest, shadowiest” (ln. 22ff). The scene is so thoroughly saturated with its metaphorical charges that water “warbles,” bird-like, in a final beckoning (ln. 38). In both “The Woodlark” and in “Epithalamion,” the energy of looking for sound, casting about to place, put, or fix noise, is an energy both pleasing and vexing. These late poems offer performatively what his earlier poetry often treats thematically or situationally (although still lyrically), as in “When eyes that cast” (1865), a poem that moves from eye to ear by means of the lark’s “spark” (ln.5):

When eyes that cast about the heights of heaven  
 To canvass the retirement of the lark  
 (Because the music from his bill forth-driven  
 So takes the sister sense) can find no mark,  
 But many a silver visionary spark  
 Springs in the floating air and the skies swim,—  
 Then often the ears in a new fashion hark,  
 Beside them, about the hedges, hearing him:  
 At last the bird is found a flickering shape and slim.

At once the senses give the music back  
The proper sweet re-attributing above.  
That sweetness re-attributing above.— (“When eyes that cast”)

Connections between the eye and the ear also informed how Hopkins read his own verse, and play an important part in how he desired to be read by others. In later years, in Ireland, Hopkins was closely eyed by the Jesuit censors, who looked at everything he wrote. Their authority to read his writing impinged upon him in ways both trivial and critical, and their hovering presence was a source of anxiety in Hopkins’s already fraught relation to his ability to compose. As he writes to Bridges in January 1888, the censors were a nagging and real externalization of inner vexations:

It is now years that I have had no inspiration of longer jet than makes a sonnet, except only in that fortnight in Wales: it is what, far more than direct want of time, I find most against poetry and production in the life I lead. Unhappily I cannot produce anything at all, not only the luxuries like poetry, but the duties almost of my position, its natural outcome—like scientific works. I am now writing a quasi-philosophical paper on the Greek Negatives: but when shall I finish it? or if finished will it pass the censors? or if it does will the *Classical Review* or any magazine take it? All impulse fails me: I can give myself no sufficient reason for going on. Nothing comes: I am a eunuch—but it is for the kingdom of heaven’s sake. (L 270)

A concern over being seen and accepted in print works itself into his well-known statements about how his poetry—what was written of it—deserved to be read. What he wrote, as he said to Bridges in 1887, was “for recital, not for perusal (as by nature verse should be)” (L 263). That his religious

superiors were merely perusing his texts was only part of the problem. But even readers with a better ear, who were poets and also personal friends, like Bridges, found trouble in what they read. How much this difficulty was sought out by Hopkins and how much was taken by him to represent a hindrance is questionable. For all that he protested against being misunderstood, his own poetry asks for resistance at every turn. In the same letter in which he tells Bridges that his poetry is meant for recital rather than perusal, he provokes with a comment about the enclosed copy of “Harry Ploughman”: “From much considering it I can no longer gather any impression of it: perhaps it will strike you as intolerably violent and artificial” (*L* 263). Hopkins here appears more eager than worried that the sonnet will offend, but in other cases, as when Bridges was not his only audience, he had more true concern about striking readers (including himself) with violence.

Artificial and violent effects were for the most part associated with perusal rather than recital. Indeed, recitation was for Hopkins the seeming solution to his verse’s apparent oddness, and reading with the ear, as opposed to the eye, was a distinction more often made than explained. A relevant instance comes in the case of his second “wreck” poem, the *Eurydice*. Hopkins was concerned that the poem was likely to be

misunderstood, by which he meant that it would be read with the eye rather than the ear. As he writes in a letter from April 22, 1879:

Everybody cannot be expected to like my pieces. Moreover the oddness may make them repulsive at first and yet Lang might have liked them on a second reading. Indeed when, on somebody returning me to the *Eurydice*, I opened and read some lines, reading, as one commonly reads whether prose or verse, with the eyes, so to say, only, it struck me aghast with a kind of raw nakedness and unmitigated violence I was unprepared for: but take breath and read it with the ears, as I always wish to be read, and my verse becomes all right. (*L* 79)

Hopkins does not further explain how it is that the poem in the ear is different from the poem in the eye. The difference appears conventional, but his language also suggests something more involved. Reading with the ear provides a measure of safety. The eye, by contrast, is vulnerable, and liable to let language strike with “raw nakedness and unmitigated violence.” In these terms, the ear clothes and mitigates what for the eye is naked and unmitigated. Reading with the ear cooks what is otherwise raw, naked, and violent, tempering what is visually repulsive. Looking, or reading with the eye, by contrast, subjects the reader—the eye’s “I”—to a sort of uncivilized wildness (“unmitigated violence”), whereas ear-reading buffers language’s potential savagery. And yet, Hopkins does not entirely sanitize language: the formulation “unmitigated violence” suggests a difference in degree, where

mitigated violence remains a possibility. What is intolerable is *un*mitigated violence; the ear mitigates, but without eliminating violence altogether.

As this important letter suggests, Hopkins desires a degree of invisibility, and the “I” of “as I always wish to be read” refers doubly to his poetry and to himself as its embodied author. He wishes to be heard, not seen (in either letter or in body). He desires to be played by ear rather than eye. Although he does not explicitly say so in the April 22 letter, one of the aspects of the *Eurydice* that could likely have struck Hopkins’s eye aghast is the occasional “overreaving” of the poem’s lines, in which rhymes play out across and within stanzas rather than simply at the terminus of lines. When the poem is heard, overreaving registers upon the ear without much strain, but read with the eye, the equivalencies within a stanza are drawn out in a way that makes the poem’s symmetries difficult to fetch. Hopkins admitted as much in a letter to his brother in 1886, when said that the “run-over rhymes were experimental, perhaps a mistake; I do not know that I should repeat them. But rhyme, you know, is like an indelible process: you cannot paint over it.” Several examples of overreaving are the eye-straining couplets in the “Eurydice” such as “But what black Boreas wrecked her? he/Came equipped, deadly-electric” (ln. 23-4), and, later in the poem, “But his eye no

cliff, no coast or/Mark makes in the rivelling snowstorm” (ln. 67-8), where “coast or/Mark” pairs with “snowstorm.”

To eye-read is inevitably to I-read. Looking at the words of the *Eurydice* returns Hopkins to an “I” that strikes him “aghast” as raw, naked, and violent. To hear, or ear-read, by contrast, provides distance from the unsettling effects of eye-reading (“take breath and read it with the ears, as I always wish to be read, and my verse becomes all right”). As Keats writes in a poem deceptively at ease with the potential disturbance of other voices, “distance of recognizance bereaves.” In Hopkins’s letter, the admission of a split between the look and the sound of his own language is critical, but it is also unaddressed. To eye-read means to look at a written page, to see language in print, or at least lettered in script. That the occasion for Hopkins’s reflections on this topic is the text of the *Eurydice* is arguably coincidental, and his remark about wishing to be read with the ear has been taken by critics to apply to Hopkins’s poetry and poetics generally. But the violent desire of looking that stands out in this letter is also at the center of the classical myth that names both the Victorian vessel and the poem Hopkins wrote to commemorate its wreckage. The important difference is that the violence of looking in Hopkins’s letter recoils onto the looking subject, not onto the object regarded (“it struck *me* aghast,” emphasis added).

In this sense, poetry internalizes the figures of the myth, as if Orpheus's backward gaze at Eurydice had become an inward gaze at something belonging to the seer himself. For Hopkins, then, to look at the text of the *Eurydice* is not to regard another ("wife to my creating thought"), but rather an unsettling version of his own self. The threat of looking thereby renders poems—even non-lyrical, occasional works such as "The Loss of the Eurydice, foundered March 24 1878"—dangerously mirror-like in their ability to give back a sense of self in which the poem and the "I" that eyes it appear raw, naked, and violent. The mirroring, however, is not direct, because the eye that reads encounters an image of "I" that is similar but unfamiliar. The context of familiarity—Hopkins "returns" to his own poem—induces an expectation for similarity that is not found in the event of reading. In returning to the *Eurydice*, Hopkins's fresh readerly wreck is that "I" founders on "eye." The eye that looks outward sees something unexpected that recoils onto the I that sees within. Like Freud's uncanny self-regard in the mirror of his train-car, Hopkins's own verse strikes him aghast when the "eye" sees something incongruent with his prevailing image of "I." His own face looks back at him as that of another, and a scene of recognition goes awry. It is not any recognition, but that most essential and intimate sort of identification, the recognition of self as imaged by the body.

The reader's gaze, in Hopkins's letter, returns in an unanticipated way, and in the process returns something which resists assimilation. In this moment, reading is not recognition or return but, more accurately, misrecognition, and a misrecognition that becomes oddly striking. The presumption is that what is encountered will be familiar, a resemblance that complies with existing consciousness. What arrives, however, is foreign, as if spoken by a different voice; indeed, Hopkins consigns this difference to the visual register as a difference of appearance to the eye, one that can be smoothed over by the ear. In this process, the implication is that the poem's voice has not been modified, and yet the earlier misrecognition contradicts this notion. The unsettling result is that the poem's voice exists as a visible thing, eyed in the lining and lettering of written phrase and stanza. Voice thereby relies on a written and printed counterpart, one less fixed than one might assume, and more counter than part, as Hopkins's reaction to seeing his own words attests. The visual or built object, as Hopkins writes in "How all is one way wrought," is an "instrument which overvaulted voice."

## **VI. THE SONG OF SYRINX**

To return to birdsong, the sounding of birds is at first striking for how it is largely heard and not seen, and is unlettered in the moment of its striking.

Birdsong occurs poetically, as mitigated violence. There is never a choice about “reading” birdsong with the eye; it strikes the ear and enters the brain “unmasked,” as Hopkins writes of inspired poetry. The attraction of birdsong is that it seems to exist as anti self-consciousness, where “I”/“eye” involvement is peripheral or absent. What energizes Hopkins’s poems of birdsong, however, is how they counter the distinction between seeing and hearing, and show birdsong and the ear-reading which receives it to be no less violent or ghastly than the eye-reading from which it seems to differ in Hopkins’s poetics. Hopkins writes with a vivid sense of the depletion of the visual world (“bleared, smeared with toil...the soil/Is bare now”), but his response is not to try to cleanse the lens of vision. His poems rather desire the ear, and a new kind of hearing, but one that runs counter to the presumed safety of “reading with the ear.” Fragmentary although it is, “The Woodlark” is a *summa* of the genre for how it alights upon nearly all of the rhetorical branches of the form, and is a poem worth remarking before looking more closely at other similar pieces in which ear reading becomes hardly safe.

“The Woodlark” performs double and triple work by not only listening to but ventriloquizing the eponymous bird. As a further turn, ventriloquized birdsong comes to resemble, in lexis, rhythm and syntax, the

“voice” of the poet: “The ear in milk, lush the sash,/And crush-silk poppies  
aflash,/The blood-gush blade gash/Flame-rash rudred...” (ln. 28-31). In  
these lines the poem tips its central conceit: that poems on or about birds or  
birdsong are ineluctably poems on or about song in general and poetic  
sounding more particularly. But the bird, as a figure for the poet and poetic  
voice, also substitutes for the poet and the poet’s own power of utterance.  
“The Woodlark” takes wing on this conceit and revolves it several turns  
beyond. As a spokes-creature for the poet, the woodlark becomes fully  
fledged within the poem’s analogic nest, but the comparison is also made  
literal. The bird’s watery tune, its “trickle of song-strain” (ln. 4), resounds in  
a way that is uncannily similar to the sound of a poem by Hopkins.

Does the poet wake or sleep in this landscape? Is the bird without or  
within, and is its sound an original call, or rather an echo? More pointedly,  
how might echo be or become an original call, and what sort of voice and  
vocation would that be? If birds are worth listening to, as “The Woodlark”  
and other poems insist, it is because these questions are always in play. Yet  
birds are never simply metaphorical figures for poetic process or merely  
icons of bardic manufacture. Birds can be all of these, but Hopkins’s poetry  
is interested in birding for the more perverse reason that birdsong might be  
more poetic, because more striking, than the poet’s own human song. The

bird is not the vehicle in a metaphor whose tenor is known in advance. At the same time, avian rustle seems largely echoic, an oddly audible reverberation from the empty mouthing that poetic voice is often feared to be: “my lament/Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent” (“I wake and feel”); “Only what word/Wisest my heart breeds dark heaven’s baffling ban/Bars or hell’s spell thwarts. This to hoard unheard,/Heard unheeded leaves me a lonely began” (“To seem the stranger”). More literally, Hopkins detested allusive echo in his own and others’ poetry, calling echoes a “disease of education.” “Literature is full of them,” he continues, “but they remain a disease, an evil” (February 6, 1885. *L* 206). That his own poetry might be like echo, then, was a possibility both fundamental to his own poetics and yet also one almost unspeakably bitter. Echoes were to Hopkins like the “dead letters” of “I wake and feel,” which return to their sender as “gall” and “heartburn”: “God’s most deep decree/Bitter would have me taste: my taste was me” (ln. 9-10).

## **VII. “THE CURRENT LANGUAGE HEIGHTENED”**

It is not simply that birds are poets plumed in miniature. The poet, in fact, may himself be largely birdlike, which is a reciprocity suggested or desired in most of Hopkins’s bird poems. The call made and heard in “The Woodlark”

and other poems, however, suggests that the bird/poet analogy is always on the verge of wreck, never far from running afoul on the ground of its own artifice; identity fledged on the turns of such a reversal is rarely stable. The woodlark, nonetheless, speaks for the poet on several levels, and speaks over or against the poet at the same time. In the language of “How all is one way wrought,” birdsong’s formal speaking “overvaults” voice—the poet’s and the bird’s together. Listening to birdsong, then, is an unsettling confession that outer song may be inner song, and inner song outer song. The recognition is that lyric voice is never truly phenomenalized, but is flung between cause and effect in a strained metalepsis of voice. But lyric’s own energy, reduced and guardedly diminished, is more potent or yeasty in this attenuated strain.

One of the larks practiced by “The Woodlark” is the suggestion that poetic voice is best perched on birdsong rather than anything else. The poet, by extension, should be more bird than bard—birdic style offering something more original and attractive than the bardic styling of Parnassian that Hopkins found in Tennyson and Wordsworth. In the poetic and critical canon of Hopkins, birdsong is an ideal counter-trickle to Parnassian, although the way it strikes is never fully soothing. Birdsong itself is an especially fleet example of “form speaking,” and Hopkins’s bird-poetic is a

literal and figurative instance of a kind of speaking that is preeminently formal.

Something that explains and complicates the inspiring power of birdsong comes in a letter to Baillie in which Hopkins elaborates what he means by “Parnassian,” distinguishing Parnassian as a lower form of poetry from what he takes to be true and inspired poetry. The noises of birds can be read as replicating the “mood” that Hopkins associates with true poetry, “a mood of great, abnormal in fact, mental acuteness, either energetic or receptive, according as the thoughts which arise in it seem generated by a stress and action of the brain, or to strike into it unasked” (10 September 1864, *Letters* iii, p. 216). That birdsong strikes unasked both is and is not true in Hopkins’s lyrics. His poems stage their own scenes of aural discovery, where the conceit is that the poetic listener is surprised and arrested by unasked striking. Yet the poem’s event is to orchestrate striking, to time it and set it off. But a bird in lyric’s slight hand is worth at least two on the branch, and the bird’s forcible singing and inspired gliding make it an ideal, if problematic, poetic figure.

A poem such as “The Windhover” makes its naturalistic occasion—“I caught this morning...”—into an opportunity for crafting transcendent desire: “my heart in hiding/Stirred for a bird,—the achieve of, the mastery

of the thing!” (ln.7-8). The urge to be close to or actually like the bird is the most conventional handling of the theme, but the bird is not a uniform object in poems whose own flights give rise to bird motion and song. There is a different bird for every possible poetic occasion, but like most poets, Hopkins’s bird-poetics does not strive for unilateral equivalence at the ornithological and poetic levels. The journals and letters show that he was attentive to the differences between the birds he noticed, but his poems do not fix a specific relation between bird and poetic occasion. All told, there are around fifteen different birds that feature in his poetry, the lark (of sky and wood) being the most common by a factor of three or four. In some well-known pieces, such as “Let me be to Thee,” “The Half-Way House,” “God’s Grandeur,” and “Henry Purcell,” the bird remains unspecified. Its essential ability to fly, brood, and to call is by and large the most important factor, and further specification is meaningful in some but not in all cases. The ideal, most directly, is to attain proximity to what is elevated, an ideal figured by the circling of flight in “Let me be to Thee” (1865), which moves from flight to sound:

Let me be to Thee as the circling bird,  
Or bat with tender and air-crisping wings  
That shapes in half-light his departing rings,  
From both of whom a changeless note is heard.  
I have found my music in a common word,  
Trying each pleasurable throat that sings

And every praised sequence of sweet strings,  
And know infallibly which I preferred.

(“Let me be to Thee,” ln. 1-8)

The ideal of a “changeless note” is marked as desired yet frustrated. The chafing and groaning of Hopkins’s later poetry make this early lyric appear naïve in its claim to having “found” its music, a preference said to be known “infallibly.” But the claim to have found music indicates that the search is still on, as later poems show. The analogy with the bird is often deployed to point up a frustrated lack of identity between the speaking voice and its desired model. In some cases, however, the power to notice or project a winged presence is almost enough, as in the end of “God’s Grandeur,” which marvels at what appears: “The Holy Ghost over the bent/World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings” (ln. 13-14). Sacred brooding, however, is close to but different from terrestrial brooding, the sort of inner speculation that haunts lyric voice in a poem like “The Caged Skylark.” Here the bird-human analogy is explicit:

As a dare-gale skylark scanted in a dull cage,  
Man’s mounting spirit in his bone-house, mean house, dwells—  
That bird beyond the remembering his free fells;  
This in drudgery, day-labouring-out life’s age.

Though aloft on turf or perch or poor low stage  
Both sing sometimes the sweetest, sweetest spells,  
Yet both droop deadly sometimes in their cells  
Or wring their barriers in bursts of fear or rage. (ln. 1-8)

The skylark is no brooding and hovering kestrel, and the smaller bird signals a vexed attitude toward human embodiment. Despite this poem's closing attempt to salvage the body as a site for spiritual excellence ("man's spirit will be flesh-bound, when found at best"), the poem's admission of a caged existence haunts its larger design. The similitude struck by the basic analogy in "The Caged Skylark" is elsewhere absent, and indeed the split between lyric voice and the animal it comments on, addresses, or ventriloquizes is often pointed up, as at the beginning of "The Half-way House" (1865): "See Love, I creep, and Thou on wings dost ride" (ln. 3). The poetic stance here is made by a humble abasement to what rides on wings. Spatial heightening in these cases suggests the grandeur that is longed for, but lyric voice in Hopkins also catches its own grandeur and heightens itself through the emphatic marking of its own sounds and churning rhythms.

As if in recognition that the ideal is unmet, that infallible circling and the changeless note are elements of fantasy, Hopkins's later lyrics turn birdsong into a hammering presence that strikes and pelts human ears. The intelligibility of conventional religious bird iconology falls to the wayside and is ultimately less potent than the wild sounding made by Hopkins's smaller birds, as in "Spring" (1877) and "The Sea and the Skylark" (1877). Here, sound assumes a purifying force, and yet the poems exceed the confines of

familiar terms and situations. Birdsong's agency is at the ear, which receives a "rinsing" and a "wringing" that is far from comfortable or predictable, as in the opening lines of "Spring," which moves from the beautiful to something more violent:

Nothing is so beautiful as Spring—  
When weeds, in wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush;  
Thrush's eggs look little low heavens, and thrush  
Through the echoing timber does so rinse and wring  
The ear, it strikes like lightnings to hear him sing. (ln. 1-5)

Hopkins's rite of spring turns an idyllic scene into a thrashing at the ear, figured visually in the lightning noise made by the thrush's song, which mells its hearer and the woods as well ("echoing timber"). The poem's "argument," if it can be said to have one, seems to be that what is needed is a cleaning of the ear, where the ear stands for a more generalized attentiveness and potential for humane receptivity to the world. But the hot singing performed by the thrush "through the echoing timber" creates a timbre that makes singing singe, as in a bath of fire directed at the ear cavity. What the thrush has to tell is not explainable. The force of its subtle and recondite song is what matters. The play of "wring" and "ring" and "timber" and "timbre" suggests the physicality of a kind of voicing that relies on palpable material to be sounded. The smithy within which the thrush works its heated product is paired in Hopkins's own picturing of his poetic

process, as when he writes to Bridges in 1887 to say that “a sonnet is hot on the anvil and wants a coda” (L 263). Here as elsewhere, Bridges assisted with the striking that Hopkins self-consciously identified himself with in the scene of writing. Hopkins also pictured his own self upon the anvil, as when, referring to several sonnets he intended to send to Bridges in 1885, he says they “came like inspirations unbidden and against my will” (L 221). To notice the poet’s own admission of being forced (“unbidden and against my will”) seems supererogatory after looking at the poems themselves, which enact the force that, when written about in the letters, might seem like poetical touches and conventional nods. The striking of birdsong, however, attests to a power of utterance that is always questionable in Hopkins. Unquestioned voice is what nominates the bird to carry such importance, where singing comes unbidden and unselfconsciously, and yet purposively. Birds build, they are makers, and their songs are signals with context. Poetic voice, by contrast, perpetually fumbles after the ground of its own being, something which leads to the harboring of energy and holding back of voice and writing, as if to restrain from doing a thing could be the best indication of ability—something that lends weight to the *wring/ring* equivalence in his poetry. Hopkins is exemplary for showing these processes at work and for reflecting on them as well, as when he comments on himself as “time’s

eunuch” in a letter from 1885: “It is the refusal of a thing that we like to have. So with me...but it kills me to be time’s eunuch and never beget” (*L* 222). As further demonstration of sonic begetting, and despite Hopkins’s denials, the skylark in “The Sea and the Skylark” (1877) pelts listeners to shame by pouring out music:

Left hand, off land, I hear the lark ascend,  
His rash-fresh re-winded new skeinèd score  
In crisps of curl off wild winch whirl, and pour  
And pelt music, till none’s to spill or spend.

How these two shame this shallow and frail town!  
How ring right out our sordid turbid time,  
Being pure! We, life’s pride and cared-for crown,

Have lost that cheer and charm of earth’s past prime:  
Our make and making break, are breaking, down  
To man’s last dust, drain fast towards man’s first slime. (ln. 5-14)

The power of sound here is no longer what it was in a poem such as “Or else their cooings,” where birdsong came “like a contented wind” and fell with “gentle shocks.” The heightening of language in “The Sea and the Skylark” performs the processes adduced: “his rash-fresh re-winded new skeinèd score/In crisps of curl off wild winch whirl, and pour/And pelt music, till none’s to spill of spend.” The skeining and pouring of sound in these lines thus occurs doubly, by the skylark and by the poem that makes it, but the poetics of birdsong make it difficult to interpret “skeining” and “pouring” as mimetically enacted in the poem itself. The design and the

agency of sound might be given a name (e.g., skeined, pelting), but these terms resist being final explanations of the poem's sonorousness. The point seems to be that the words are new and unfamiliar, and thereby complicate the desire to explain the poem in its own terms. The skeining of sound no doubt permits an analogy with the consonant chime that Hopkins took inspiration from in Welsh, but the bulk of the poem's force resides in the sheer strangeness of the sounds and the names given them within the poem.

Forcible singing compels without logical or narrative support, and it is always potentially bothersome for this reason. Hopkins's birds would be unremarkable if they did not manipulate sound in foreign and dangerous ways. The bird's power of song, its forcible music, is finally compelling for how it finds itself forced into what it itself creates. Its noise is not voluntary, and yet such singing always strikes down listeners, and at times threatens to end the singing voice itself, as in "The Nightingale" (1866), perhaps the most powerful of all of Hopkins's poems in this sub-genre.

"The Nightingale" is a monologue spoken by a woman who is named in the final stanza as Frances. Her sleep is disturbed by a near noise that happens to coincide, unbeknownst to her, with the distant drowning of her husband (the poem's "You"), who is being wrecked at sea just as Frances wakes in the stillness of morning. The main interest falls in the poem's

middle stanzas:

I did not mean to sleep, but found  
I had slept a little and was chill.  
And I could hear the tiniest sound,  
    The morning was so still—  
The bats' wings lispings as they flew  
And water draining through and through  
The wood: but not a dove would coo.

You know you said the nightingale  
In all our western shires was rare,  
That more he shuns our special dale,  
    Or never lodges there:  
And I had thought so hitherto—  
Up till that morning's fall of dew,  
And now I wish that it were true.

For he began at once and shook  
My head to hear. He might have strung  
A row of ripples in the brook,  
    So forcibly he sung,  
The mist upon the leaves have strewed,  
And danced the balls of dew that stood  
In acres all above the wood.

I thought the air must cut and strain  
The windpipe when he sucked his breath  
And when he turned it back again  
    The music must be death.  
With not a thing to make me fear,  
A singing bird in morning clear  
To me was terrible to hear.

Yet as he changed his mighty stops  
Between I heard the water still  
All down the stair-way of the copse  
    And churning in the mill.  
But that sweet sound which I preferred,  
Your passing steps, I never heard  
For warbling of the warbling bird.

(“The Nightingale,” stanzas 3-7, lines 15-49)

The plain style of the poem forgoes skeining for a ballad-like simplicity that ushers events that are disturbing in how they exist within the easy timing of the poem's mostly four-beat lines. The beauty and violent power of the nightingale's singing is utterly arresting, rather like the poem's three-beat lines, which bisect each stanza and also mark abrupt and central turns within the poem's development. The poem shows a microscopic view of the reactions triggered by the bird's forcible singing: "The mist upon the leaves have strewed,/And danced the balls of dew that stood/In acres all above the wood" (st. 5). Driving deeper still, the bird's throat is entered and the straining of air inspected: "I thought the air must cut and strain/The windpipe when he sucked his breath" (st. 6). The poem's final turn seems to offer some relief or the possibility for the man's return, which is introduced by way of the welcome presence of water-sound, audible when the nightingale "changed his mighty stops/Betweens" (st. 7). The water runs "still/All down," flowing into the mill and yet standing still in another sense. The bird's song is not only a nuisance but also a bodily intrusion ("he began at once and shook/My head to hear," st. 5). The poem's "sweet sound" is not birdsong at all, but rather the imagined and unrealized stepping of the speaker's husband, a stepping that competes with the bird's own overbearing "stops." It appears almost as if the husband's steps are present, but merely

inaudible beneath the “warbling of the warbling bird.” In addition, the music that at first seems to omen the bird’s own demise (“And when he turned it back again/The music must be death”) turns out to be an unwitting but “timed” soundtrack to the death the absent husband.

Twenty years after “The Nightingale” was written, and close to the time of his own death, Hopkins returned to drawing, an art he had largely abandoned but also sustained in another respect, in the vivid detailing that makes his poetry at times pictorial. Like the strange timing of the nightingale, a bird that goes beyond his normal course to sing an unwelcome but apt song, Hopkins times his return to drawing at what is perhaps the most inopportune moment to do so. His eyesight seems to be failing, a complaint he calls “rheumatism in the eyes,” writing to Bridges in 1888: “can there be gout or rheumatism in the eyes? If there can I have it. I am a gouty piece now” (7 September 1888; *L* 283). He soon starts wearing glasses, and seems to be improving, but despite his doctor’s assurance, his eyes continue to cause him difficulty. A return to drawing, or reading with the eye, seems especially unfitting given these circumstances, but Hopkins draws a perverse energy from being out of time. As he tells Bridges in October 1888, his timing is due to his own perversity:

The oculist says my sight is very good and my eye perfectly healthy but that like Jane Nightwork I am old. And, strange to say, I have

taken to drawing again. Perverse Fortune or something perverse (try me): why did I not take to it before? And now, enough, for I must whet myself, strop myself, be very bitter, and will secrete and distil a good deal beforehand. (*L* 296)

Like the nightingale, whose own breath is a source of peril, an untimely return to drawing timed by “Perverse Fortune” or something perverse (“try me,” he writes) leads to the stropping and whetting of self, a self-sharpening that secretes and distils an image of watery running that might be Hopkins’s final diamond skein.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alpers, Paul. "Renaissance Lyrics and Their Situations." *New Literary History* (2007) No. 38.

Armstrong, Isobel. *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, Politics*. New York: Routledge, 1993.

Baum, Paul Franklin, Ed. *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Poems, Ballads and Sonnets. Selections*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1937.

Benson, Arthur C. *Rossetti*. New York: Macmillan, 1904.

Bloom, Harold. *Deconstruction and Criticism*. London: Continuum, 2004.

Bristow, Joseph. *The Victorian Poet: Poetics and Persona*. London: Croom Helm, 1987.

Bromwich, David. *A Choice of Inheritance: Self and Community from Edmund Burke to Robert Frost*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989.

Buckler, William E. Ed. *The Major Victorian Poets: Tennyson, Browning, Arnold*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973.

Burke, Kenneth. *Language as Symbolic Action*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968.

Christ, Carol. *Victorian and Modern Poetics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

Cook, Eleanor. *Enigmas and Riddles in Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Cronin, Richard. *The Politics of Romantic Poetry*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000.

Culler, Dwight. "Monodrama and the Dramatic Monologue." *PMLA* vol. 90, no. 3, 1975.

- Dellamora, Richard. *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990.
- Doughty, Oswald. *A Victorian Romantic: Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. London: Oxford UP, 1960.
- Easthope, Anthony. *Poetry as Discourse*. London: Methuen & Co., 1983
- Evans, Ifor. *English Poetry in the Later Nineteenth Century*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. London: Methuen, 1966.
- Felluga, Dino Franco. *The Perversity of Poetry: Romantic Ideology and the Popular Male Poet of Genius*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2005.
- Hardy, Barbara. *The advantage of lyric: essays on feeling in poetry*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1977.
- Helsing, Elizabeth. "Listening: Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Persistence of Song." *Victorian Studies*, Spring 2009 (vol. 51, no. 3).
- Hollander, John. Forward to *Celestial Pantomime*, by Justus George Lawler. London: Continuum, 1994. New Expanded Edition.
- . *Melodious Guile*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1988.
- . "Wordsworth and the Music of Sound," *New Perspectives on Coleridge and Wordsworth*. Ed. Geoffrey Hartman. New York: Columbia UP, 1972.
- . *Images of Voice: Music and Sound in Romantic Poetry*. Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons, 1968.
- Hopkins, G.M. *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works*. Ed. Catherine Phillips. New York: Oxford UP, 2009.
- . *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*. Edited with notes & an introd. by Claude Collier Abbott. New York: Oxford University Press, 1970.
- . *Journals and Papers*. Edited by Humphrey House. Completed by Graham Storey. New York: Oxford University Press, 1959.
- Jackson, Virginia. *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005.
- Jarvis, Simon. "Prosody as Cognition," *Critical Quarterly* 40.3 (Autumn 1998).

- Keats, John. *Complete Poems*. Ed. Jack Stillinger. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1982.
- Langbaum, Robert. *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition*. New York: Norton, 1957.
- Lawler, George. *Hopkins Re-Constructed*. New York: Continuum, 1998.
- Levine, Caroline. "Strategic Formalism: Toward a New Method in Cultural Studies." *New Literary History*, Summer 2006.
- . "Formal Pasts and Formal Possibilities in Victorian Studies" *Literature Compass* 5 (2007).
- Maxwell, Catherine. *Second Sight: The Visionary Imagination in Late Victorian Literature*. New York: Palgrave, 2008.
- McGann, Jerome. *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1983.
- . Ed. *Algernon Charles Swinburne: Major Poems and Selected Prose*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2004.
- . Ed. *Collected Poetry and Prose: Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2003.
- McSweeney, Kerry. *Tennyson and Swinburne as Romantic Naturalists*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. *Listening*. trans. Charlotte Mandell. Fordham UP, 2007.
- Norris, Christopher. *William Empson and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism*. London: Athlone Press, 1978.
- Nowotny, Winifred. *The Language Poets Use*. New York: Oxford UP, 1962.
- Pater, Walter. *Appreciations, with an essay on Style*. London: Macmillan, 1889.
- Prins, Yopie. "Voice Inverse." *Victorian Poetry* (2004), no. 17.

- . “Historical Poetics, Dysprosody, and *The Science of English Verse*.” *PMLA* (2008), vol. 123, no. 1.
- Rasmussen, Mark, Ed. *Renaissance Literature and Its Formal Engagements*. New York: Palgrave, 2002.
- Rees, Joan. *The poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Modes of self-expression*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
- Richardson, James. *Vanishing Lives: Style and Self in Tennyson, D.G. Rossetti, Swinburne and Yeats*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988.
- Robinson, Jeffrey. *Unfettering Poetry: Fancy in British Romanticism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- Rooksby, Rikky. *A.C. Swinburne: A Poet's Life*. Brookfield: Scolar Press, 1997.
- Rossetti, Dante Gabriel. *The Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. Ed. William M. Rossetti. London: Ellis, 1911.
- . *Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Collected Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Jerome McGann. New Haven: Yale UP, 2003.
- . *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. 9 v. Ed. by William E. Fredeman. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002-2001.
- Rossetti, William Michael. *Dante Gabriel Rossetti as Designer and Writer*. London: Cassell & Company, 1889.
- Rudy, Jason. *Electric Meters: Victorian Physiological Poetics*. Athens: Ohio UP, 2009.
- Shaitanov, Igor. “Aleksandr Veselovskii’s Historical Poetics: Genre in Historical Poetics.” *New Literary History*, 2001.
- Shapiro, Marianne. *Hieroglyph of Time: The Petrarchan Sestina*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980.

- Sieburth, Richard. "Poetry and Obscenity: Baudelaire and Swinburne," *Comparative Literature*. Vol. 36, no. 4 (1984).
- Slinn, E. Warwick. *Victorian Poetry as Cultural Critique*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003.
- Swinburne, Algernon Charles. *Letters*. Edited by Cecil Lang. New Haven: Yale UP, 1959-62.
- . *Poems and Ballads & Atalanta and Calydom*. Ed Kenneth Haynes. London: Penguin Books, 2000.
- Tucker, Herbert. "Tactical Formalism: A Response to Caroline Levine," *New Literary History*, Autumn 2006.
- Tynjanov, Jurij and Jakobson, Roman. "Problems in the Study of Literature and Language." Trans. Herbert Eagle. *Readings in Russian Poetics*. Ed. Ladislav Matejka & Krystyna Pomorska. Dalkey Archive Press, 2002.
- Waugh, Evelyn. *Rossetti: His life and works*. London: Duckworth, 1931.
- Weliver, Phyllis. *The Figure of Music in Nineteenth-Century British Poetry*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).
- Wesling, Donald. *The Scissors of Meter: Grammetrics and Reading*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996.
- . *The New Poetries: Poetic Form Since Coleridge and Wordsworth*. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1985.
- . *The Chances of Rhyme: Device and Modernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.