

HOPKINS THE VICTORIAN- POSTMODERN /-IST: HIS MANIPULATION OF GENRE

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The aim of this article is to reflect upon the widely acknowledged phenomenon of Hopkins's modernity and to suggest that this is not merely a matter of poetic form and language but that it also has to do with or is also a consequence of, say, his proto-postmodern treatment of genre.

In this respect, two of his famous lengthy shipwreck poems ("The Wreck of the Deutschland" and "The Loss of the Eurydice") are considered from postmodern and Genre Theory assumptions. This procedure reveals the two poems' intrinsic generic complexity which goes beyond traditional genre typification, a complexity which, undoubtedly, enhances the semantic content of both poems.

"... It is precisely against the background of the tradition that innovation is conceived..."

(R. Jakobson, "The Dominant", 1986: 46)

If as Habermas (1986, 1987) proclaims modernity starts with the Enlightenment, also, as Lyotard (1984) asserts, the postmodern condition is transhistorical, and, besides, according to McHale, "not-irreversible" (1986: 74), Gerard M. Hopkins can be legitimately observed from the perspective of the postmodernity we currently share.

I am not the first to make this observation. A few years ago (1998) in a short yet stimulating article entitled "Postmodern Indeterminacy and the Search for Meaning", Harold Fulweiler¹ considered a "near paradox" the fact that Hopkins: "... the poet of uncompromising faith in a definite "something", nonetheless writes poems as conflicted and problematic as could be desired by the most committed New Critic of the past or Poststructuralist of today..." (:84), and fundamentally attributed Hopkins' postmodernity to the "indeterminacy" (unpredictability, undecidability) which underlies his best poetry.

¹ "Postmodern Indeterminacy and the Search for Meaning: Why Hopkins Matters to Me", *HQ.*, XXV, 3-4, Summer-Fall (: 84-87)

For my part, I share Fulweiler's proposal and wish to enlarge it with my own reflections, namely, that, in my view, the postmodern dimension in Hopkins' poetry is not so paradoxical and can be considered to a great extent a consequence both of his vital and personal circumstances, and that, besides, this dimension becomes highlighted by Hopkins' treatment of *genre*.

We know that the two great cultural trends of the 20th century, Modernism and Postmodernism, arise in periods of crisis (Brooker, 1992), and I am not going to reveal now the deep historical crisis that frames the Victorian period which contextualizes our poet (when different current "master narratives" begin to break up) nor his no-less-critical religious-existential conflict which sets him up also as an odd-man-out of Victorianism (Anglo-Catholic). From both crises, historical and existential (let us remember his "Deutschland" triggering off the break of his "poetic silence"), the postmodernity, both notional and stylistic, discernible in Hopkins' poetry, becomes comprehensible.

I

From a notional perspective first, in which we must remember that the term *postmodern* "... will have to be understood as a condition connecting ethics and aesthetics..." i.e. a condition producing a poetry which is "responsive to the particular" (McCorkle: 46); Hopkins' best poetry reveals certain features currently deemed postmodern: (i) the scepticism (Lyotard) of his darkest poems, the Terrible Sonnets²; (ii) the populism (Brooker) evident in Hopkins' sensitivity towards the popular social strata represented in the figures of the farrier ("Felix Randal"), the farmer ("Harry Ploughman"), the unemployed ("Tom's Garland"), the bugler ("The Bugler's First Communion") etc; (iii) the ecological component of his poetic "spiritual warning" (Brown) implicit or explicit in his Nature poems ("God's Grandeur"³, "Binsey Poplars (felled 1879)", "Duns Scotus's Oxford"); (iv) Hopkins' sense of the "insubstantiality of the contemporary" (Brown), only remedied by his hope in the Resurrection in his beautiful Heraclitean poem (n° 72).

² "...*Cheer whom though? The hero whose heaven-handling flung me, fóot tród / Me? Or me that fought him? O which one? is it each one? ...*" (N° 64 "Carrion Comfort"); "... *Comforter where is your comforting? / Mary, mother of us, where is your relief? / My cries heave, herds-long; huddle in a main, a chief- / woe, world-sorrow ...*" (N° 65 "No worst..."); "... *This to hoard unheard, / Heard unheeded, leaves me a lonely began.*" (N° 66 "To seem the stranger ..."); "... *I cast for comfort I can no more get / By groping round my comfortless, than blind / Eyes in their dark can day or thirst can find/ Thirst's all-in-all in a world of wet. /*" (N° 69 "My own heart let me more have pity on ..."); "... *Birds build but not I build; no, but strain, / Time's eunuch, and not breed one work that wakes. ...*" (N° 74 "Thou art indeed just, Lord ...").

³ "... *Generations have trod, have, trod, have trod, / And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil / And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil / Is bare now, nor can foot feel being sod. / And for all this nature is never spent; ...*" (ll. 5-9).

A collateral question here is, say, the social transhistoricity and reversibility of Hopkins' ecological plea. As has been studied⁴, our popular or non-academic postmodern contemporaries often make use of Hopkins' lines (especially from the Nature poems) to support ecology movements.

Beside these features, two others add to Hopkinsian postmodernity: an anti-realism (Graff) and its evolution towards a Neo-realism (Brooker), in my view singularly evident in the two "shipwreck poems", the "Deutschland" and the "Eurydice", where, in the former, a fiercely lyrical anti-realism in the climatic stanza 28 appears combined with fragments of overwhelming realism ("D": st. 13, 14, 16, 17; "E": st. 10, 11, 15-18). This combination converges with autobiographical genre (Brooker), (i.e. in this case with Hopkins' sensitivity towards shipwrecks: one wonders what he might have done with the sinking of the *Titanic* for instance) and also with the consequence of such combination: the transgression of boundaries between fiction and reality (D'Haen), a transgression which also affects genre limitations.

This last aspect has prompted me to start my considerations with regard to Hopkins' postmodernity on a **generic-stylistic** level which will make up the second part of this exposé. So far I have briefly delved into Hopkins as postmodern, let me now follow the trail of Hopkins as postmodernist.

II

F. Lyotard brings together the above-mentioned relationship between transhistoricism and the postmodern condition in a discourse responsive to the *formal* or aesthetic dimension of the same: in Lyotard's terms, a relation "... perpetually flushing out artifices of representation which make it possible to subordinate thought to the gaze..." (1986: 80). This aspect leads me to evoke the ontological *dominant*⁵ which, according to McHale, presides Postmodernism⁶: "... Postmodernist writing is designed to raise such questions as: ... What is the mode of existence of a text...? etc (1986: 60).

The modes of existence of a postmodern text, the latter's "... ontological plurality and instability..." (: 60) can be summed up in:

- (a) an essential fragmentarism (Woods: 6) expressive of non-realist strategies of literary representation (Perloff, 1996) which becomes a sort of atomization of represented reality;

⁴ Fennell, F.L. 1996. "Familiar Hopkins: The Popular Use of His Poetry", *HQ.*, XXII, 1-2, Winter-Spring (31-41).

⁵ A non-unified concept, praised by McHale given its wide range of application: "...the dominant is a "floating" concept, applicable at different levels of analysis and over different ranges of phenomena..." (1986, 55-56) .

⁶ In contrast to the epistemological which rules Modernism.

- (b) such atomization produces fragmented subjects of uncertain identity (Perloff, 1966) a fact that, in poetry, leads to a consistent dissimulation or blurring of the dominating lyric “I”. This is a relevant phenomenon because it reveals the famous “postmodern reconfiguration of the lyric” (McCorkle, 1997) and implies “...a re-visioning of the authorial voice and its reception...” by which poetry distances itself from individual emotion and takes shape in a plurality of voices (polyphony): “... Parody, elegy, allusion and all forms of heterogeneous voices surface in the postmodern lyric...” (: 46);
- (c) the will of authenticity against modernist artifice, singularly evident in the poetic realm which usually embodies the presence of living speech (dialogism) (Kern, 1978).

Beside these, another mode of existence of a text (postmodern or not) has to do, undoubtedly, with its treatment of *genre*, an aspect whose absence of boundaries in postmodern texts is highlighted by Hassan (1985: 123) and others (Perloff, 1989; Woods, 1999) as one of the specific features of Postmodernism⁷. This aspect has also been significantly instrumental in a transcending of the exclusive association of poetry with the lyric (Perloff, 1996).

The lack of generic limitations leads to generic combination or, rather, to the *hybridization* of the generic universals often consubstantial with the postmodern text (Derrida, 1979; Cohen, 1991). This question prompts me to consider Jakobson’s concept of *the dominant* as “the focusing component of a work of art”⁸, as well as Opacki’s concept of “royal genre”; the latter also highlights the fact that: “... The hybridization of genre forms is a determinant of the evolution of poetry...” (Duff: 121).

These acknowledged processes of poetic evolution and genre hybridization by which the three generic universals (lyrical, narrative and dramatic) combine in different proportion whilst one of them becomes dominant⁹, produce the notorious postmodern effect of blurring the lyric subject, and, in my view, also take place in the best Hopkinsian poetry, a phenomenon which, for page limitations, I am going to comment on in the restricted context of the two “shipwreck poems”.

⁷ Postmodern instability, transferred to the matter of *genre* has produced a permanent trend towards “... nonrationalistic and wholesale appropriation of other genres, both high and popular...” (Perloff, 1989: viii).

⁸ In Jakobson’s terms: “... The dominant may be defined as the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components. It is the dominant which guarantees the integrity of structure...” (1987: 41).

⁹ In a way that: “... within the set of poetic norms valid for a given poetic genre, elements which were originally secondary become essential and primary. On the other hand, the elements which were originally the dominant ones become subsidiary and optional...” (Jakobson, 1987: 44).

III

The question of generic description and the hybrid poem is largely considered by Postmodern Genre Theory from the two milestones as represented by the contributions of Jacques Derrida (“The Law of Genre”, 1979) and twelve years later, Ralph Cohen (“Genre Theory, Literary History and Historical Change”, 1991)¹⁰, milestones which put an end to the traditional theory of genre (classificatory) and proclaim the current reconceptualisation of the same as *descriptive*¹¹.

The descriptive approach to genre favours an analysis of the hybrid postmodern poetic text which, from a discursive or stylistic point of view, often combines the three *modes*¹² of discourse, belonging to the three generic universals, in such a way that the latter remain recognizable. In Alastair Fowler’s terms: “... hybrid mixture depends on the components remaining unfused...”, and Fowler also emphasizes the relevance of titles and allusions as “genre markers” (: 88ff).

Another genre theorist, Opacki, is more specific and openly speaks of stylistic genre contamination or “stylisation”, a phenomenon which he understands as “... connected with the introduction – into the heart of one genre – of stylistic elements of a second genre...” (Duff: 125).

The process of hybridization can be, in my view, effectively observed in the poetic text taking into account, for instance, on the one hand, Paul Hernadi’s categorisation (1972, 1978) of three *modes of discourse*: lyrical (= representing vision); narrative (= imagining action) and dramatic (= representing action or dialogue); and, on the other, the more formalist conceptualisation of the *lyric mode* offered by Käte Hamburger (1977, 1986) as “utterance of reality” (*énoncé de réalité*) (1986: 54), an utterance uttered by the lyric subject who is able to transform the poem into an impression of *lived* reality.

IV

The *hybridization* phenomenon in “The Wreck of the Deutschland” and “The Loss of the Eurydice” offers, in principle, a strong inclination towards the *narrative* mode with both titles as genre markers evoking two different stories with a powerful central concern: shipwreck. Also, the stories are told rather extensively in

¹⁰ See: Duarte, 1999 and Abad, 2002.

¹¹ Which, more specifically: “... doesn’t limit the number of possible kinds and doesn’t prescribe rules to authors It supposes that traditional kinds may be “mixed” and produce a new kind ... Modern genre theories minimize classification and maximize clarification and interpretation ...” (Cohen, in Lucy (ed): 295-296).

¹² Modes of utterance, *modalités d’énonciation*, (Schaeffer: 73).

the 3rd person, and, as a consequence, both poems exceed the usual brevity of the lyric; in addition, the stories contain memorable characters.

This generic-narrative mode is of similar length in both poems (12 stanzas in the “D”: 12-17, 19-21, 24-25; and 13 in the “E”), with an also similar time-sequence:

- (a) the peaceful start of the voyage with the respective account of passengers (200 in the “Deutschland”, st. 12) and crew (300 in the “Eurydice”, st. 1);
- (b) the storm causing the shipwreck with the date and the specific geographical position (“D”, “...Dec. 7th, 1875” and st. 13,14; “E”, “*Foundered March 24, 1878*” and st. 8);
- (c) the desperate situation of the shipwrecked characters represented in the five German Franciscan nuns in the “D” (st. 19-20), and more individualized in the “E” which includes the tragic lot of her captain (Marcus Hare, st. 12) and the sailor Sydney Fletcher (“*Bristol bred*”, st. 15).

These characters appear fairly characterised in both poems: the courageous Mother Superior is represented under the three possibilities of characterization: description (*lioness, prophetess, virginal tongue*, st. 17; *tall nun*, st. 19), action and expression (st. 24); and the no-less-courageous sailor Fletcher appears characterised by action, in his painful fight with the “*wintry waves*” (st. 18) and extensively described in his virile appeal (st. 19, 20, 21).

These ostensibly narrative generic components appear combined with other *lyric* ones such as: verse form (the “D” octets: abab cbca; the “E” quartets: aa bb), a most postmodern feature¹³, and the presence of the 1st person lyric subject; and then other *dramatic* ones, both scenic and dialogic. Indeed, only ultimately does the *lyric* component become dominant given its blurring process mainly determined by the strongly narrative surface effect.

The scenic component becomes particularly eye-catching with two memorable scenes in the “D”: (i) the brave and generous man who loses his life trying to no avail to save other people (st. 16); (ii) the extended scene which tells of the tragic fate of the “tall nun” throughout 5 stanzas (17; 19-22). The dramatic component is also evident in the “E” with one similarly extended and no-less-memorable scene which tells of the no-less-tragic destiny of sailor Fletcher and which includes 6 stanzas (15-21).

This combination or hybridization of the three universal modes of discourse is responsible both for the episodic or sequential aspect of the poems and for their postmodern essential fragmentarism.

Above all else both poems start (and conclude) lyrically. The “Deutschland”, more extensive, with its first five stanzas showing the direct presence of the dominating lyric “I”, whilst the next five (6-11) give up the first person lyric subject

¹³ “... Formal structures ... or metrical forms are found throughout the practice of postmodern poetry...” (McCorkle: 49).

altogether, this remaining absent until stanzas 24, 28, 32. In other words, the lyric subject is explicit only in 8 of the 35 stanzas which build up the poem, a fact that adds to the above-mentioned effect produced by the narrative component as the main item responsible for the dissimulation of the seminal lyric element.

The blurring effect is even more striking in the “Eurydice”, where the first person lyric subject appears late in the poem and is explicit in only 3 (22, 23, 25) of the 30 stanzas of the poem, a fact that again highlights the superior ostensibility of the narrative mode in the poem.

The above-mentioned time-sequence builds up the “start” and “core” of the different shipwreck stories, yet their “outcome”, as we shall see, is expressed in *lyrical* terms, terms which include two other postmodernist features. The first one is dialogic, inclusive of the *speech* factor in poetry, which helps in the process of hybridization and again brings into the poetic discourse the generic-dramatic component alert to the second person pronoun (you), rather THOU or THEE, a presence, by the way, which raises great expectations with regard to the lyric subject’s addressee. The second one is polyphonic, with the lyric subject dramatising other voices, the nun’s in the “D” and several in the “E” (st 11, 13,14).

The combination of lyrical and narrative elements appears more fragmented in the “D”, given also the more evidently involved situation of the narrator/lyric subject, to the extent that its climatic stanza 28 combines the three modal possibilities: lyrical-dramatic = 1st and 2nd person pronouns (*/ But how shall I .../ Reach me a .../ Strike you the sight of it? ...*) and narrative = 3rd person (*/ He was to cure the extremity where he had cast her .../*).

But, as I have said, the outcome of both poems is *lyrical*. The two poems “represent vision” (Hernadi) in the sense that the narrator/ lyric subject has NOT experienced firsthand the hard experience of shipwreck and its aftermath, as evident in another scenic (dramatic) component:

*/Away in the loveable west,
On a pastoral forehead of Wales,
I was under a roof here, I was at rest,
And they the prey of the gales; .../ (D. st 24)*

However, the essential Christian “vision” which inspires and universalises the poems, or, more specifically, the Christologically Hopkinsian vision of the tragic events, produces the fundamental lyric effect: it creates the impression of *lived* reality (Hamburger). In other words, the lyric subject internalises the object, he transforms objective reality into existential or subjective reality, and by so doing he gives the impression that he is part of the events:

*/ She to the black-about air, to the breaker, the thickly
Falling flakes, to the throng that catches and quails
Was calling `O Christ, Christ come quickly': .../ (D. st.24)*

And a similar effect takes place in the “Eurydice” (st 9), with also the ultimate appeal to the figure of Christ the Saviour:

/ But to Christ lord of thunder
Crouch; lay knee by earth low under:
Holiest, loveliest, bravest,
Save my hero, O Hero savest./ (st 28)

As a final consequence the two shipwreck poems follow the pattern of the postmodern **long** poem from the point of view of *genre*: both are arranged paratactically or discontinuously “... as an accumulation of lyric moments ... and not as a narrative moving toward a culminating closure...” (McCorkle: 48).

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