Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Difficulties of Victorian Poetry

George P. Landow, Professor of English and the History of Art, Brown University

Dick Sullivan raises a really important point when he asks, "What might have happened to English-language poetry if [Hopkins had] been published in his lifetime and had to compete with Tennyson, Swinburne, and Browning?" ["Hopkins and the Spiritual"] Looking at the reception of the early, radically experimental poetry of Tennyson and Browning, the answer seems fairly obvious: almost certainly nothing would have happened unless Hopkins had resolutely kept publishing and been lucky enough to find a few critics who would defend his work in print. Like these other poets, Hopkins would have been greeted with complete non-comprehension when he was noticed or reviewed at all, and if and when he was reviewed, he would probably have received the same kind of mockery they did. Now that the three poets to whom Sullivan compares Hopkins have become canonical — which means in practice "read in secondary schools and universities" — we forget how the Victorians at first found them amazingly difficult to read.

Why Did their first readers find Browning, Tennyson, and Swinburne so difficult?

Let's begin with Browning because in some ways his difficulties for the reader have so much in common with Hopkins's. Readers long found Browning's poetry incomprehensible for the following reasons:

- He created a radically new form for which his audience did not know the rules.
- He used difficult, often arcane words.
- He made difficult, often obscure allusions.
• He did not, in other words, write with a conventional sense of audience.

Taking the second and third points, I should point out that both Swinburne and Tennyson present the same difficulties, Tennyson, for example, anticipating e.e. cummings by a century and coining new words, using nouns as verbs, and so on. Browning, unlike the other two poets, was home-schooled and self taught, and he enjoyed reading obscure biographies and reference works with the result that he had an unsure sense of what he could expect his readers to know. (He didn't always realize when he was being difficult!) The scholarly and equally well-read Swinburne similarly often showed little attention to the needs of his audience, characteristically attempting to popularize his political and poetic hero Victor Hugo with a poem filled with dozens of allusions to the French author's works that only a someone who had practically memorized them could possible recognize. What we see here with all four poets, in other words, is the Modernist elitist attitude toward the audience that assumes it's the reader's job to work hard to understand the text or work of art. Or as one of the great twentieth-century novelists (Joyce? Faulkner?) put it, "You can't read my novels. You can only re-read them." Don't expect to get it on the first read!

As difficult as might be these poets' choice of words and allusions, their novel poetic forms created the most serious problems for readers. Let's look at Browning, who used a radically new poetic form — essentially a new genre with its own rules — and readers simply did not know what to do. Along with Tennyson and Rossetti, Browning invented the dramatic monologue, particularly that form of it in which the speaker does not represent the poet and, therefore, his statements were certainly not those that the poet himself believed. Accustomed to taking it for granted that the first-person speaker was either the poet or his idealized persona, audiences did not know what to do when they encountered the homicidal maniac of "Porphyria's Lover" and the even more terrifying Duke in "My Last Duchess." It's as hard to over-estimate the importance of this point as it is even to realize it after so many years of teaching Browning in secondary schools as an exercise in close reading: Early and mid-Victorian readers simply had no clue what to do first when encountering a
speaker in a poem who did not serve as an obvious stand-in for the author and whose statements therefore had to be received with scepticism or at least reservation of judgment. If this statement doesn't seem obvious, go back to those two famous Browning dramatic monologues and take note of the point at which you first realized you could not trust the speakers. Browning, as contemporary anecdotes demonstrate, was simply unreadable for most in his intended audience: all biographies of Browning tell the story of a well-known person who was given a copy of Browning's admittedly difficult Paracelsus while recovering from an illness; horrified by the fact that he could not understand the poem at all, the invalid thought that the illness had destroyed his mind and was considering suicide until others assured him they couldn't understand it either.

What happened so that secondary school students can now read — and understand — Browning (or at least the shorter dramatic monologues)? Are we so much more intelligent than the Victorians? Hardly. Wordsworth explains it all when he stated in the 1815 edition of Lyrical Ballads that great poets have to "create the taste by which they are to be enjoyed." In other words, readers have to learn the new rules — the signals to the readers — that let them know what to do next. The idea of combining two different forms or modes in the dramatic monologue (drama and lyric) was just as unsettlingly unexpected as Wordsworth and Coleridge's similarly joining two supposedly opposed ones in lyrical ballads, since the lyric was a non-narrative form while the ballad was essentially narrative. But readers learn. Remember, although early twentieth-century readers found stream-of-consciousness narration of James Joyce and Virginia Wolfe initially incomprehensible, after three or four decades undergraduates learned the rules, and now pop genres, such as detective stories and science fiction novels, use the technique.

**Tennyson's experimental poetic forms**

Tennyson and Swinburne also write with new forms. In addition to his early use of the then-novel dramatic monologue, Tennyson wrote radically experimental challenges to narrative in his two great long poems, In Memoriam and Idylls of the King. Anticipating (and certainly heavily influencing T. S. Eliot), he builds a poetry of
fragments in *In Memoriam* that challenges all previous elegies, calling into question their too-easy linear movement from grief to consolation. (His use of poetic segments containing moments of illumination and climax incidentally provides the model for Hopkins's "Wreck of the *Deutschland*.") *In Memoriam* makes such a radical challenge to both conventional poetic form and narrative that more than any other work intended for print — more even than Cortazar's *Hopscotch*, Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, or Coover's "The Babysitter" — this poem anticipates computer-based hypermedia. When I teach and write about the ways one can both satisfy readers with the individual blocks of texts (or lexias) in hypertext and yet make them want to continue (i.e. follow links), I point students to *In Memoriam*, which also shows how chains of imagery, such as the poems's use of "hand," "dream," and "type," can provide a new kind of unity in a networked text (See *Hypertext*, pp. 37-38, 141-43). Tennyson continues his experimental poetic project in *The Idylls of the King* (1859-1888), in which his characteristic use of flashbacks, parabolic commentary, and complex plotting anticipates the modernist narrative of Faulkner.

**Swinburne the anti-Hopkins?**

And then there is Swinburne, probably the Victorian poet as far from Hopkins in just about every way one can imagine: whereas Hopkins published almost nothing, Swinburne, the leading expert of his time on Jacobean drama, published many critical books, including one of the first on Blake, as well as many volumes of poetry and poetic drama; whereas Hopkins was a politically conservative, devout christian who led a celibate, abstemious life, Swinburne, the radical democrat and atheist, first became known as the bard of perversion before he became the bard of the great leftist cause of the Victorian period — the liberation and unification of Italy. Perhaps the one poetic quality that most separates the two authors appears starkly in the length of their poems. Many of Hopkins's finest works take the form of the sonnet and its variants — extremely dense poems with layers of imagery; with the exception of Swinburne's *Dirae* (curses), bitterly satirical sonnets on political themes, all of his major poems are very long, and, unlike those of both Hopkins and Tennyson, they do not build towards moments of vision but employ a circular
structure that returns again and again to a provisional imaginative center, adding layer after layer of image and meaning. Nonetheless, one must not overemphasize the differences between the poets, for a comparison reveals surprising similarities. In their early careers both wrote fine dramatic monologues — Swinburne's "Hymn to Proserpine" and Hopkins's "A Soliloquy of one of the Spies left in the Wilderness." Both frequently employ sophisticated biblical allusions — both in fact draw upon the types of Christ and Satan in Genesis 3:15 — though Swinburne usually does so satirically and Hopkins as a center to his devotional poetry. Perhaps surprisingly, both men use masochism and masochistic imagery as a means of expressing their sense of being in the world. Both men went through periods of intense depression and personal crisis that significantly marked their poetry.

Finally, both men create a poetry of meditation that provides multiple ways into a main point of belief, and to do so both employ dense layering of allusion as a means of overcoming the shortcomings of language. Of course, devout belief and fervent atheism divide them pretty sharply, allowing us to see certain parings of their poems as binary opposites, at least on this one point. Thus, just as Rossetti's House of Life is (as Dick Fredeman pointed out long ago) an anti-In Memoriam, so Swinburne's brilliant landscape meditation, "Evening on the Broads" (text), is very much an anti-"Windhover." But "Evening on the Broads" nonetheless reveals points of convergence with Hopkins. This dense poem, which presents the brief moment the sun hovers on the horizon before plunging into night as an image of human life, struggles to find language adequate to a transient existence, as does Hopkins's "Spring and Fall;" Hopkins, like the Tractarian poets, such as Keble and early Newman, believes earthly phenomena to be divinely intended symbols of Christ, heaven, and spiritual truths. Swinburne, in contrast, finds that such phenomena symbolize nothing, except perhaps death, time, and change.

Hopkins and Poetic Difficulty

In some ways Hopkins's best poetry has turned out to be easier to read and therefore more widely read than Swinburne's finest works,
and this fact derives significantly from their length: the brevity of Hopkin's poems made them perfectly suited to the word-by-word and line-by-line close reading of the New Criticism (whose adherents created Hopkin's fame and position in the canon). The poetry of Hopkin's, far more than that of Swinburne, has that most crucial of qualities: it is teachable and therefore frequently taught. In contrast, because Swinburne really doesn't fit any pedagogical method, he creates hard work for teachers. Both Hopkin's and Swinburne write a poetry of meditation, but the very brevity of Hopkin's best poems makes ruminating on individual words and lines seem more attractive than trying to unravel Swinburne's individual lines, in which he builds metaphors upon metaphors, emphasizing both the shortcomings of human language and the fact that poetry really exists only in the language; for him it's all we have.

References


or