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Redeeming the Time

In her cogent and illuminating *Sartre*, Iris Murdoch claims that:

The smaller, expanding world of the nineteenth century, where the disruptive forces were not only dispossessed and weak, but incoherent, disunited, and speechless, could think itself a single world wherein rational communication on every topic was a possibility.

One looks nervously for a hidden language-game: e.g. the century could think itself a single world, could cherish the hypothesis; but probably it did not; or, if it did, perhaps it deceived itself. Some major questions are begged, not only as to the area of possibility but also as to the limits of metaphor in 'speechless'. Henry Adams, it is true, remarked that 'Beyond a doubt, silence is best' but Adams, in his several substantial volumes, was the patentee of one of the most obliquely cautious of modern styles; and in any case he was dispossessed only in an acutely specialized sense of the term. Those who were dispossessed in the more mundane demotic fashion, deprived of rightful franchise, income, and leisure, tended to be vociferous rather than speechless. E. P. Thompson, a scholar whom one may fairly call left of centre, has drawn attention to 'that demagogic element, inevitable in a popular movement excluded from power or hope of power, which encouraged the wholly unconstructive rhetoric of denunciation'. R. H. Tawney, equally sympathetic towards the principles of democratic progress, wrote of 'the orgy of mob oratory in which Chartism finally collapsed'. Anything less like a 'single world' than the nineteenth century it would be hard to discover; and without moving outside the circumference of Iris Murdoch's model arena one encounters the violent clashing of contradictions. It is at least open to suggestion that the epoch was marked by a drastic breaking of tempo and by an equally severe disturbance of the supposedly normative patterns of speech.

It should not be thought, however, that in referring to the possibility of a ‘language-game’ one is being lightly dismissive, or underrating those implicit and explicit tactics whereby a class or faction might contrive to project itself as ‘the world’. Ethical definitions have been said to ‘involve a wedding of descriptive and emotive meaning, and accordingly have a frequent use in redirecting and intensifying attitudes’. The confines of a determined world ‘give’ so as not to give; tropes are predestined to free election; the larger determinism allows for the smaller voluntarism. It has been said that Locke, in his presentation of the institution of ‘lawful government’, appeals to his readers

by the use of a compelling *image*—the image of a body which cannot move except in the direction in which ‘the greater force’ carries it. The image is clearly drawn from dynamics, and would have had a special appeal in the age of Newton.

Even in this pseudo-Newtonian world, the by-products of entropy may be expected: among them the trivia of decayed good taste and the ‘demagogic . . . rhetoric of denunciation’:

Here I stand the Factory King, declared King by the most contemptible enemies of the Cause. Yorkshire is mine! (*Cheers.*) Lancashire is mine! (*Cheers.*) Scotland is mine! (*Cheers.*) All Christendom is mine! (*Cheers.*) WE WILL HAVE THE BILL.

These words are Richard Oastler’s, ‘feverish’ they have been called, and such utterance has been attributed to:

the striking change of disposition that had come over Oastler in the months since he had first discovered his platform powers . . . [T]hat at least a part of his personality found a dangerous delight in the thunders of the multitude it was now too obvious to doubt.

‘Disposition’ and ‘personality’ are insecure bases upon which to build speculation, whereas the nature of a man’s occupation, the range of his expectations and the limits of his security might well be influential in forming not only the terms in his vocabulary but also the rhythms and cadences of his speech. Richard Oastler, like the father of George Eliot, was a land-agent; he was an agrarian ultra-Tory and a devout Anglican; he was also resident in the West Riding of Yorkshire at the time of its greatest social upheaval. To allude to the range of his expectations and the limits of his security is neither to impugn the disinterested courage of his actions nor to

bring the discussion round in a full circle to speculation about individual disposition and personality. England has been described, in a congested metaphor, as ‘the classic soil of . . . transformation’ from a largely agrarian to an urban proletarian society, and whether one chooses to let the phrase stand, with all its thronging connotations, or to isolate the three terms ‘classic’, ‘soil’, and ‘transformation’, Engels’s words are not inappropriate to the fortunes and misfortunes of nineteenth-century English styles. Oastler’s words are decidedly unfortunate. When allowance has been made for the effect of partisan enthusiasm or prejudice upon the style of contemporary reporting, Oastler remains caught in the involuntary comedy of his voluntary stance. Phrases redolent of heroic Protestantism (‘here I stand’, ‘enemies of the Cause’) and presumably chosen for that reason, are degraded into a mummer’s rant. The ‘classic’ oration of a tribune of the people suffers a grotesque ‘transformation’, ‘soiled’ by the outflow of a fractured tradition. A rooted man, faced by the uprooted, by a floating population of the new proletariat, is unable to prevent his own words floating. Their hectic nature has possibly less to do with any personal fever than with the contagion of circumstance. Elsewhere in radical utterance a more circumstantial manner of address is itself an acknowledgement of determinism, as in the declaration of the Nottingham branch of the United Committee of Framework-Knitters, *c.*1812:

It is true that Government has interfered in the regulation of wages in times long since gone by; but the writings of Dr. Adam Smith have altered the opinion, of the polished part of society, on this subject. Therefore, to attempt to advance wages by parliamentary influence, would be as absurd as an attempt to regulate the winds.

By ‘circumstantial’ one means that the authors of this passage try to account for circumstances and also that they ‘go about’ their direct task with language that is itself enclosed, ‘fenced round’ by idioms of the society which determines the realities of the situation. They are writing up, and writing up to, the subject; and writing up involves the acceptance of terms that have come down. The canting locution ‘polished’ had been thoroughly drubbed by Johnson as early as the middle years of the eighteenth century. Johnson was familiar with the brutality and drudgery underlying the polished life but he was also his own master and capable of exerting mastery. His sardonic stoicism resurfaces, in the working-class Nottingham of 1812, as an intelligent but etiolated fatalism. In his view ‘the polished part of

society' seemed vain and foolish; the framework-knitters of 1812 know that the polish is that of adamant.

An enquiry into the nature of rhythm must first attempt to account for the inertial drag of speech. Language gravitates and exerts a gravitational pull. Oastler is not 'compelling' but compelled. Social locutions which to others might be scarcely more than half-comic irritants impose upon the Nottingham framework-knitters a force as shiftless as that of nature itself. In Wordsworth's 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality', published in 1807, the line

Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!

is a weighed acknowledgement of custom's pressure; stanza eight is allowed to settle onto this line. However, the poet immediately breaks continuity, thrusts against the arrangement, the settlement, with a fresh time-signature

O joy! that in our embers
Is something that doth live.

It has been pointed out that in this poem 'the prevailing rhythm is merely iambic' and the Ode has been further described as 'broken-backed'. Saintsbury may be technically correct; but Wordsworth's strategy of combining a pause with a change of time-signature within the 'merely iambic' prevailing rhythm overrides both the propriety and the pressure. The Ode is indeed broken but the break, far from being an injury sustained, is a resistance proclaimed. If language is more than a vehicle for the transmission of axioms and concepts, rhythm is correspondingly more than a physiological motor. It is capable of registering, mimetically, deep shocks of recognition. This quality in Wordsworth's Ode was finely perceived by Gerard Hopkins and explained in his letter of 23 October 1886 to Canon Dixon:

There have been in all history a few, a very few men, whom common repute, even where it did not trust them, has treated as having had something happen to them that does not happen to other men, as having *seen something*, whatever that really was... [H]uman nature in these men saw something, got a shock... [I]n Wordsworth when he wrote that ode human nature got another of those shocks... [H]is insight was at its very deepest... The rhymes are so musically interlaced, the rhythms so happily succeed (surely it is a magical change 'O joy that in our embers').

Hopkins's praise is to my mind in no way extravagant and his remarks constitute a major contribution to the study of rhythm. Wordsworth's 'insight was at its very deepest' and he 'saw' rhythmically. To do justice to

the quality of his seeing one must refer again to Richard Oastler and to the Nottingham framework-knitters. Writers on linguistics employ a term 'stress-pitch-juncture'. "Juncture" is that particular configuration of pause and pitch characteristics by which the voice connects linguistic units to each other or to silence.' In this case one requires a modified term, 'stress-pitch-disjuncture'. Oastler, instead of being able to subsume the satirical attacks of his opponents, is made, through his own verbosity, an accessory to their mockery. The Nottingham men are made to mouth the vulgarisms of their betters and to repine half-heartedly for 'times long since gone by'. Energy and perception have been driven apart. Perception has turned to fatalism, energy has flung into frenzy. If Wordsworth has indeed 'seen something' he has seen, or foreseen, the developing life-crisis of the nineteenth century. In the Ode the shock to be suffered by Oastler and the Nottingham men, among many others, is redeemed by the silence between stanzas eight and nine and by the immediate, abrupt surge with which the 'joy' of nine's opening lines resists, pulls away from, the gravitational field of the closing lines of stanza eight. Wordsworth transfigures a fractured world. As Hopkins truly said 'surely it is a magical change "O joy that in our embers"'. This is one of the rare contexts in which the debased word 'magical' regains some of its pristine power. Yet although 'magical' is allowable, 'change' is the key-word and should take precedence. To show why this is so, some comparison is necessary.

George Eliot is a writer with a fine sense of traditional rhythmic life, as is shown by chapter 18, 'Church', of *Adam Bede*:

But Adam's thoughts of Hetty did not deafen him to the service; they rather blended with all the other deep feelings for which the church service was a channel to him this afternoon, as a certain consciousness of our entire past and our imagined future blends itself with all our moments of keen sensibility. And to Adam the church service was the best channel he could have found for his mingled regret, yearning, and resignation; its interchange of beseeching cries for help, with outbursts of faith and praise—its recurrent responses and the familiar rhythm of its collects, seemed to speak for him as no other form of worship could have done.

Here, 'recurrent responses' is a wide-ranging term. The responses are to be understood both as recurring within the limited time-span of a particular Anglican evensong, following the established pattern of the rubric, and as recurring over an implied and indefinite number of years, Sunday by Sunday, season by season. It is by such means that 'channels' are created;

by the joint working of abrasion and continuity. ‘Responses’ is the correct term for the established form of congregational participation in the liturgy. At the same time, over and below this literal meaning, the word connotes the continuity of human response in general to an ancient process of parochial and national life. The collects of the Anglican Church are composed of liturgical prose; they could properly be said to possess rhythm, though not metre. Here again, however, ‘familiar rhythm’ is both liturgical and extra-liturgical, telling of a rhythm of social duties, rites, ties, and obligations from which an individual severs himself or herself at great cost and peril, but implying also the natural sequences of stresses and slacks in the thoughts and acts of a representative human being. In George Eliot’s last book, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879), there is an essay called ‘Looking Backward’ in which the fictitious narrator is the son of a country parson in the Midlands. In this essay George Eliot writes significantly of ‘the speech of the landscape’. It is as though, at the end of her creative span, the author could compress into a phrase of five words the essence of paragraphs and chapters of earlier work such as *Adam Bede* (1859). The ethics are right—whether or not one happens to share them is immaterial—she is happy with the theme and the theme is happy with her. It is of course ‘organic’ and half-feudal, imbued with ‘affectionate joy in our native landscape, which is one deep root of our national life and language’. Such a style can unite the strength of the ‘deep root’ with an evocation of the concomitant torpor of ‘fat central England’. To praise the quintessential mastery of this late essay is not to abandon, nor even to qualify, one’s praise of chapter 18 of *Adam Bede*, which could fairly be discussed under the general heading of ‘poetics’.

It is instructive and saddening to set alongside these passages of masterly conflation such an example of blatant, disingenuous compounding as is the 1868 pamphlet *Address to Working Men* by Felix Holt:

But I come back to this: that, in our old society, there are old institutions, and among them the various distinctions and inherited advantages of classes, which have shaped themselves along with all the wonderful slow-growing system of things made up of our laws, our commerce, and our stores of all sorts, whether in material objects, such as buildings and machinery, or in knowledge, such as scientific thought and professional skill... After the Reform Bill of 1832 I was in an election riot, which showed me clearly, on a small scale, what public disorder must always be; and I have never forgotten that the riot was brought about chiefly by the agency of dishonest men who professed to be on the people’s side.

The source of one's objection must be clearly defined: it is in an area where misunderstanding is all too easy. An early critic of the piece protested that 'Felix Holt the Radical is rather Felix Holt the Conservative; he is not even a Tory-Democrat'. It would not be within our area of debate to attack the pamphlet on *a priori* political grounds. If George Eliot is a conservative here she is equally so in the beautiful essay 'Looking Backward'. The falsity of the pamphlet lies in its rhythmic gerrymandering and not in its basic code of beliefs. George Eliot has denied us the cross-rhythms and counterpointings which ought, for the sake of proper strategy and of good faith, to be part of the structure of such writing. In short, she has excluded the antiphonal voice of the heckler. Felix's argument is fair enough but it ought to be fairly heckled, as for instance: 'in our old society, there are old institutions . . . which have shaped themselves' (antiphonal voice of heckler: 'Shaped themselves? how? as naturally and as easily as leaves on the tree?'). Or: 'I have never forgotten that the riot was brought about chiefly by the agency of dishonest men' (heckler: 'Name three.'). George Eliot has denied us 'the drama of reason'.

The phrase is Coleridge's. On 28 January 1810 he wrote to Thomas Poole. He noted that he had been studying *The Spectator* 'with increasing pleasure & admiration' but immediately qualified this praise with the suggestion that Addison's paper had 'innocently contributed to the general taste for unconnected writing'. 'Innocently' seems in every sense a judicious emphasis. Coleridge's suggestion seems to be that a style which, around the year 1710, issued from and upheld a genuinely humane sensibility had, by 1810, been run down into the 'fixities and definites' of a mere 'law of association', into the inert 'general taste' and cliché-ridden fancy that served to gloss over the barbarous prejudice of 'the polished part of society'. In the same letter of 1810 Coleridge defends his own style by anticipating likely objections:

Of Parentheses I may be too fond—and will be on my guard in this respect—. But I am certain that no work of impassioned & eloquent reasoning ever did or could subsist without them—They are the *drama* of Reason—and present the thought growing, instead of a mere Hortus siccus.

For one whose 'thought' has been popularly presented as fetching 'wide circuits' and as coming 'to no visible end' Coleridge maintained a striking continuity and consistency in his meditation of many years upon the drama of reason. Of crucial significance is his desiderated 'moral copula' which

would, he believed, ‘take from History its accidentality—and from Science its fatalism’. His sense of the moral copula, though not exclusively grammatical, was attuned to the minute particulars of grammar and etymology:

For if words are not THINGS, they are LIVING POWERS, by which the things of most importance to mankind are actuated, combined, and humanized.

The words ‘actuated, combined, and humanized’ take the strain against ‘the general taste for unconnected writing’:

On some future occasion, more especially demanding such disquisition, I shall attempt to prove the close connection between veracity and habits of mental accuracy; the beneficial after-effects of verbal precision in the preclusion of fanaticism, which masters the feelings more especially by indistinct watch-words.

At this point the question might well be raised as to what precisely we have in mind when approving Coleridge’s disapproval of ‘unconnected writing’. It would be a fair question and one hopes that it could be fairly answered. As Coleridge’s reserved praise, or laudatory reservations, about Addison’s style serve to indicate, the issue cannot be reduced to a simplistic quarrel between epochs. On the contrary, some lessons on the right conduct of the moral copula might be drawn from an author whose style Coleridge considered ‘detestable’, from Gibbon’s use of the conjunction ‘but’:

The architecture and government of Turin presented the same aspect of tame and tiresome uniformity; but the court was regulated with decent and splendid economy.

By fencing with so skilful a master, I acquired some dexterity in the use of my philosophic weapons; but I was still the slave of education and prejudice.

Of the first of these examples it might be said that it is a bland modulation of the ‘trimming’ style. If that is so, it must be conceded that the trimming is so openly and palpably effected as to preclude objection. Exception cannot be taken, because exemption has not been claimed. The style which pronounces judgement is open to receive it. In the second example Gibbon achieves a plain style which, in a basic and necessary sense, establishes empirical connectives. As such it is to be fairly distinguished from persuasion by means of ‘tendentious equivocation’ or ‘compelling... image’ or by means of ‘wit’, as in Chesterfield:

[Chesterfield is] best satisfied when he has reduced his idea to the *atom* of prose, the ‘detached thought,’ which is the natural medium of wit.

As Coleridge’s ‘copula’ could be said to have been anticipated in Swift or Johnson or Gibbon, so his own criteria are frequently reminiscent of Augustan ideals. His definition of prose as ‘words in their best order’, the emphasis upon ‘Good Sense’ and ‘very plain language’ have obvious precedents. It is the very strength with which he endorses such qualities that underlines the merit of his readiness to risk convolution and incommunicability in the effort to draw men ‘thro’ . . . words into the power of reading Books in general’. It was apparent, even later, in Victorian England, that the eighteenth-century patrimony of speech remained a source of mixed blessings and embarrassments:

[Newman’s] language is that of the ordinary educated persons of his day. [His terms] are drawn from the tradition of British empiricism. They had become so much a part of educated speech that it is a nice question whether they ought to be considered technical terms at all.

These comments are intended to apply only to Newman’s Anglican period. That his later style was a more complex procedure is suggested by Walter E. Houghton. Referring to Newman’s method of argument in two sentences of the *Apologia* Houghton remarks:

The structure here is so intricate and involved, the meaning so hard to follow at first reading, that one is tempted not to praise the style but to charge it with unnecessary awkwardness and obscurity . . . And yet, in return for that sacrifice (and it is a deliberate sacrifice: he could, of course, write with perfect clarity of form when he chose), Newman’s structure has caught and projected the very sense of wavering, of being pulled back and forth and forth and back, which he was undergoing.

Houghton’s analysis is well glossed by John Beer who notes that, at this specific point, Newman’s writing ‘diverges from the normal pattern of Victorian prose by the undertow of reluctance in its arguments’. This is excellently said, provided that we do not lose sight of the fact that the words are immediately applicable to two sentences and that Houghton’s own footnotes refer us to, at most, another half-dozen brief passages of comparable pattern. To point to the sparsity of examples is not to imply a reproach. Newman’s proper economy is admirable and one may see it anticipated by Coleridge in the letter of 1810:

I shall endeavor to pitch my note to the Idea of a common well-educated thoughtful man, of ordinary talents; and the exceptions to this rule shall not form more than one fifth of the work—. If with all this it will not do, well! And *well* it will be, in its noblest sense: for *I* shall have done my best.

Houghton's 'deliberate sacrifice' which has particular sacramental relevance in the case of Newman is by no means irrelevant to a consideration of Coleridge, whose passages of self-criticism, which claim precedent and authority from the example of Hooker, strike the reader as being diagnostically resolute rather than symptomatically irresolute. He writes in *Biographia Literaria*:

If I may dare once more adopt the words of Hooker, 'they, unto whom we shall seem tedious, are in no wise injured by us, because it is in their own hands to spare that labor, which they are not willing to endure'.

And *Table Talk* records that:

All that metaphysical disquisition at the end of the first volume of the *Biographia Literaria* is unformed and immature; it contains the fragments of the truth, but it is not full, nor thought out. It is wonderful to myself to think, how infinitely more profound my views now are, and yet how much clearer they are. The circle is completing; the idea is coming round to, and to be, the common sense.

However much irony and reservation is directed towards Coleridge's real and hypothetical neuroses as the source of his convolutions and hesitations, the rectitude of his decision seems unassailable. He surely foresaw the obligation to enact the drama of reason within the texture of one's own work, since nothing else would serve. His parentheses are antiphons of vital challenge.

The value of the antiphonal style was perceived by Matthew Arnold in 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time':

Mr Roebuck will have a poor opinion of an adversary who replies to his defiant songs of triumph only by murmuring under his breath, *Wragg is in custody*; but in no other way will these songs of triumph be induced gradually to moderate themselves.

Arnold's sentence is a little scenario and *Wragg is in custody* is abruptly expressive within the scenario. 'Defiant' is an epithet ironically accorded Mr Roebuck, whose 'triumph' is then defied by Arnold 'under his breath'.

It is a brief comic masterstroke in counterpoint. Its effectiveness exposes all the more drastically the failure of an adjacent passage:

has any one reflected what a touch of grossness in our race, what an original shortcoming in the more delicate spiritual perceptions, is shown by the natural growth amongst us of such hideous names,—Higginbottom, Stiggins, Bugg! . . . by the Ilissus there was no Wragg, poor thing!

The indignation has glided aside into something much less. One can plot the swerve, the graph of descent. ‘Wragg is in custody’ appals Arnold, and rightly, because it speaks with the voice of the beadle, the complacent harshness of the penal code lopping off ‘the superfluous Christian name’, a process endorsed by the jubilant tribunes of the vox populi. However, the name Wragg itself strikes Arnold’s sensitive ear as horridly vulgar; the critic who has warned against catch-words is caught by a word and, in an unguarded moment, righteous anger and unrighteous taste become compounded. The indignation of a just and compassionate man is degraded into a whinny of petty revulsion. Is she ‘poor thing’ because of her hideous life or because of her ‘hideous’ name? In 1836 a factory inspector had discovered a Rochdale weaver ‘passionately fond of ancient history’ who had named his daughters in accordance with his passion. ‘But only think’, wrote the inspector, ‘what a word was added to each, a word which the poor weaver could neither change nor modify; Barraclough—Pandora Barraclough!’

The issue would seem to be between two forms of sacrifice: sacrifice *of* or sacrifice *to*. The first involves making a burnt offering of a powerful and decent desire, the desire to be immediately understood by ‘a common well-educated thoughtful man, of ordinary talents’. Its structure is a recognition and a resistance; it is parenthetical, antiphonal, it turns upon itself; its most consistent practitioners, in the nineteenth century, are Coleridge, in the prose works, and Hopkins; isolated, significant examples are to be found in Newman and T. H. Green. Its text might be taken equally from Coleridge, Green, or Hopkins. Hopkins wrote to Bridges on 6 November 1887:

Plainly if it is possible to express a sub[t]le 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.

Hopkins wrote elsewhere to Bridges 'it is true this Victorian English is a bad business' and his remark may be interpreted in two interrelated ways. His own syntax, in the letter of 6 November 1887, is a bad business; it is, to apply one of his own terms, 'jaded'. If we were to enquire why, apart from the commonly invoked private neurasthenic reasons, Hopkins's style should be so near the end of its tether, we might well find the answer in a different form of bad business. In 1832, John Stuart Mill observed that 'a certain laxity in the use of language must be borne with, if a writer makes himself understood'. He added the important rider that 'to understand a writer who uses the same words as a vehicle for different ideas, requires a vigorous effort of co-operation on the part of the reader'. If Mill may be regarded as speaking here for a dualistic mode of acceptance, Hopkins may be considered as standing for the minority mode of non-acceptance. The 'general taste' of which Coleridge wrote is, as he knew, no innocent datum but something vicious, even if 'innocent'; to an extent the innocence compounds the vice. This much was evident as early as Burney's review of the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*, and Burney's tonality may have been haunting Wordsworth's mind when he complained, in the 1802 additions to the Preface, of

men who speak of what they do not understand; who talk of Poetry as of a matter of amusement and idle pleasure; who will converse with us as gravely about a *taste* for Poetry, as they express it, as if it were a thing as indifferent as a taste for rope-dancing, or Frontinac or Sherry.

George Eliot was aware of the detrition of general taste. Mrs Transome, in *Felix Holt*, was one of those who, in youth, 'had laughed at the Lyrical Ballads and admired Southey's Thalaba' and her laughter is certainly meant, in retrospect, to ring hollow.

It is the difference, essentially, between vital and inert structures. If these terms appear portentous and suggestive of a 'certain laxity', they may be partly redeemed by close illustration. The 'magical change' between stanzas eight and nine of the 'Immortality' Ode is vital; Oastler's speech and Arnold's 'has anyone reflected' are inert. To these categories one must add a third: where a malign activity is made possible by the very inertia of general taste:

It is, in fact, the constant aim and tendency of every improvement in machinery to supersede human labour altogether, or to diminish its cost, by substituting the industry of women and children for that of men; or that of ordinary labourers, for trained artisans.

The *OED* defines ‘or’ as ‘a particle co-ordinating two (or more) words, phrases, or clauses, between which there is an alternative’. Scarcely ever can a ‘particle’ have been employed with such brutal power as in Dr Ure’s suave persuasion. Suavity of this nature casts its silvery filaments around those virtues which nineteenth-century artisans were permitted to cherish. George Howell visited the Great Exhibition of 1851:

I cannot express my feelings as I entered that vast palace of iron and as I glanced around the multifarious and magnificent collection of the products of the world there represented. All dreams of fairy land were eclipsed in a moment.

If one takes issue with this it is because one can look beyond Howell’s ‘dreams of fairy land’ to Dr Ure’s hive of industry.

If Fancy deals, as Coleridge says, with ‘fixities and definites’, then Howell’s delight at the Crystal Palace is fanciful, not imaginative. One’s protest is directed not so much against as on behalf of Howell’s dream. It is the blatant coexistence in nineteenth-century England of his ‘I cannot express’ and Dr Ure’s ‘or’ that distresses. Howell’s words may be juxtaposed with a radical statement of some twenty years earlier:

How strange that machinery should have an inverted and continually diverging effect upon society, rendering the condition of those attendant upon it worse and worse while others are reaping its amazing productiveness in pernicious luxury.

The two passages are in some respects strikingly complementary: ‘amazing productiveness’ correlates with ‘multifarious and magnificent’ but far more noteworthy than any similarity is the antithetical and divergent nature of what is argued. The Huddersfield men are perceptive (‘diverging’ is their word, and it is right) but they are also overborne, and know it. They are angry yet half-numbed by the monstrous nature of the world. It is in the syntax: ‘How strange’ introduces a sequence that ought, in justice, to be far-fetched but is in fact the glacial drift of their lives. George Howell, in contrast, is not overborne but rather borne up on the warmth of his astonishment and delight. Historians may point to a relative easing of conditions in the 1850s, as contrasted with the 1830s. When that much has been conceded we are left with Howell’s ballooning platitudes, further symptoms of a diremption between perception and utterance, energy and effect. It is as though an iron wedge had been driven between the two passages.

There is some justification here for Coleridge's stress upon the 'moral copula' to 'take from History its accidentality—and from Science its fatalism'. It might perhaps be added that the significance of Coleridge's distinction between primary and secondary imagination, particularly when read in the light of later pronouncements in *Table Talk*, is that the first represents an ideal democratic birthright, a light that ought to light every person coming into the world. In the event, the majority is deprived of this birthright in exchange for a mess of euphoric trivia and, if half-aware of its loss, is instructed to look for freedom in an isolated and competitive search for possessions and opportunity. Therefore the secondary imagination, the formal creative faculty, must awaken the minds of men to their lost heritage, not of possession but of perception. Within certain contexts, such as that of Ure's *Philosophy of Manufactures*, even such virtues as 'rigorous self-improvement' might be fanciful rather than imaginative. F. M. Leventhal, describing the influence of Methodist teaching on the young George Howell, remarks that:

the prescription of obedience and industry concealed an underlying ambiguity. Without denying that moral indiscipline could lead to social rebelliousness, it was equally clear that moral rectitude encouraged self-reliance. The logical outcome of education and perseverance was ambition for self-betterment, not a humble acceptance of inferior status.

It could be said, however, that 'ambition', like 'humble acceptance', is more than a matter of belief or attitude; it is a matter of what is available or allowed. Even so, Leventhal's choice of terms is helpful. It is at least open to suggestion that each of the terms or concepts, 'obedience', 'industry', 'indiscipline', 'logical outcome', adumbrates its own distinctive rhythm, or rhythmic disjuncture, and that an 'underlying ambiguity' governs the nature of rhythm as much as it does the nature of ethics.

Hopkins wrote that he employed sprung rhythm as being 'nearest to the rhythm of prose, that is the native and natural rhythm of speech'. In the context which this present discussion has attempted to establish it could be argued that the citation of a uniquely 'native and natural rhythm of speech' is itself highly selective, even ideological. This is not said in reproof. A study of the underlying ambiguity of nineteenth-century society enhances rather than detracts from one's respect for Hopkins's achievement. If asked to explain in more detail the nature of this alleged ambiguity, one would turn for support to authoritative discussions of 'the commodity status of time' and of 'mechanical time versus organic time'. The opportunity to refer to

such extensive, complex and subtle arguments permits one's own suggestion to be made much more simplistically. Crudely stated, the difference is between being 'in' stride and 'out of' stride. The 'magical change' in the 'Immortality' Ode is perhaps the greatest moment in nineteenth-century English poetry; but in choosing this term one is suggesting restriction as well as potency. The recognition and the strategy to match the recognition—the cessation of 'stride', the moment of disjuncture, the picking up of fresh 'stride'—were of their very nature inimitable; they were of, and for, that moment. It could be said, however, that in his choice of themes and methods, Hopkins is attempting a correlative pattern. The achievement of sprung rhythm is its being 'out of stride' if judged by the standards of common (or running) rhythm, while remaining 'in stride' if considered as procession, as pointed liturgical chant or as shanty. In 'Harry Ploughman' the man is in stride, his craft requires it; and the poem itself, in its rhythm and 'burden lines', is the model of a work song. In the companion-piece, 'Tom's Garland', the dispossessed are thrown out of work and out of stride and the piece is, both discursively and rhythmically, perhaps the harshest, most crabbed, of all Hopkins's poems. It is as though the poet is implying that, because the men cannot work, therefore the poem itself cannot. Hopkins's persistent sense of being 'jaded' may, as has already been conceded, have neurasthenic causes; but this concession does not diminish the respect that is due to him for encompassing in his rhythm not only 'the achieve of, the mastery of the thing' but also 'the jading and jar of the cart'. 'Tom's Garland' is a failure, but it fails to some purpose; it is a test to breaking point of the sustaining power of language.

In arguing for Hopkins's vital perception of the underlying ambiguities in nineteenth-century speech rhythms one comes to recognize the central importance of two phrases in particular. They are 'abrupt self', in 'Henry Purcell', and '(my God!) my God', in '[Carrion Comfort]'. For Hopkins man is revealed in his intense selfhood and in his most frightful splintering. In the contemporary *Times* reports of the 1875 wreck of the *Deutschland* Hopkins could have read of a desperate man hacking at his wrist with a penknife in the hope of a comparatively painless death by bleeding, of another hanging himself behind the wheelhouse, of a last message placed in a bottle, even as he read of a gaunt nun calling out 'O Christ, come quickly!' and 'My God, my God, make haste, make haste' till the end came.

The power of short prayer is discussed in chapter 37 of the *Cloud of Unknowing*:

A *man* or a *womman*, affraied wip any sodeyn chaunce of fiir, or of mans deep, or what elles þat it be, sodenly in þe heizt of his speryt he is dreuyn upon hast & upon nede for to crie or for to prey after help. 3e, how? Sekirly not in many woordes, ne 3it in o woorde of two silabes. & whi is þat? For hym þinkeþ to longe tariing, for to declare þe nede & þe werk of his spirit. & þerfore he brestip up hidously wip a grete spirit, & cryeþ bot a litil worde of o silable, as is þis worde FIIR or þis worde OUTE.

Helen Gardner in her essay ‘Walter Hilton and the Mystical Tradition in England’ glosses the essential meaning of the author of the *Cloud*:

the mind must be emptied of all thought, save that which is contained in the short words ‘God’ and ‘Love’, and by this unknowing alone can God be known and loved, not God in His goodness or in His mercy, but the ‘nakid beyng of him’.

If we remove the phrase ‘nakid beyng’ from its immediate and proper theological context and apply it somewhat impressionistically, we may consider that it has a strong connotative impact, and, further, that the connotations aid our study of Hopkins. ‘Aid our study’ is tentative; one could not legitimately go beyond it. The following remarks proceed by analogy, not by evidence. Man, as well as God, could be a ‘nakid beyng’: man destitute; essential man. Wordsworth uses ‘naked’ in this double sense.

In a letter to his mother, written from Stonyhurst, 2 March 1871, Hopkins devotes half the available space to a demonstration of the characteristic Lancashire intonation ‘Ay!’ The letter is designed to entertain and divert the recipient but the overt intention does not conceal the close attention paid to the phonology and physiology of the utterance. Hopkins describes the conversation of two gardeners:

What the one says the other assents to by the roots and upwards from the level of the sea. He makes a kind of Etna of assent, without effort but with a long fervent breathing out of all the breath there is in him. The word runs through the whole scale of the vowels beginning broad in the barrel of the waist and ending fine on the drop of the lip. For this reason I believe it is a natural sign of agreement and not conventional . . . It is always intoned.

Intonation can refer to the ‘manner of utterance of the tones of the voice in speaking’ as in ‘that unfortunate intonation of Aberdeenshire’. ‘An “intonation pattern” is the amalgam of features of stress, pitch, and juncture which occur as part of a spoken phrase.’ It is also a technical term in church music: ‘The opening phrase of a plain-song melody, preceding the Reciting-note,

and usually sung either by the priest alone, or by one or a few of the choristers.’ The range of the two words ‘scale’ and ‘intoned’ in Hopkins’s letter is potentially that of the two words ‘responses’ and ‘rhythm’ in chapter 18 of *Adam Bede*.

Here again, however, the differences are as significant as the resemblances. A rhythm of ‘interchange’ was available to George Eliot as it was not to Hopkins. To say this is not to ignore either her self-excommunication from the Church of England or the social ostracism endured by Lewes and herself. In 1859, the year of *Adam Bede*, she wrote in a letter of ‘a sympathy . . . that predominates over all argumentative tendencies. I have not returned to dogmatic Christianity . . . but I see in it the highest expression of the religious sentiment that has yet found its place in the history of mankind’. Being able to think in these terms—Hopkins would have considered it a sloppy form of idealism—enabled her to stay imaginatively, if not actually, ‘in stride’ with Anglican parochial and national life. The power of this Anglican ‘rhythm’ should not be underrated:

The medieval cathedrals and churches, the rich ceremonies that surround the monarchy, the historic titles of Canterbury and York, the social organization of the country parishes, the traditional culture of Oxford and Cambridge, the liturgy composed in the heyday of English prose style—all these are the property of the Church of England.

These are not the words of an Anglican apologist; they are those of Evelyn Waugh, explaining the initial sense of loss sometimes experienced by English converts to Rome. Hopkins wrote to his father, 16 October 1866:

I am surprised you shd. say fancy and aesthetic tastes have led me to my present state of mind: these wd. be better satisfied in the Church of England, for bad taste is always meeting one in the accessories of Catholicism.

Michael Trappes-Lomax had pointed out that in the mid-1830s, at about the time of Pugin’s conversion, the Mass, ‘except for the private chapels of rare wealthy Catholics and a few other places, was said in garrets, in tawdry assembly-rooms, in lofts over stables’. It would be wrong to suggest that the tawdriness was the sole prerogative of Catholics. Before his submission to Rome Pugin had been disgusted by the damage done to English churches either by neglect or by the ‘folly and arrogance’ of misguided restorers. He had been equally horrified by the manners of some of the Anglican clergy: he complained that ‘the Rev.— goes to perform the service in *top boots*

and *white cord breeches*' and that the son of a bishop had 'lost £7,000 at the last Lincoln races'. I do not think that such evidence alters the basic fact that Anglicanism, however debased and abused, could offer a 'rhythm' of responses and that the English convert to Rome, however much he might gain, nonetheless suffered an abruption of this familiar rhythm. George Eliot, in *Adam Bede*, as in the late essay 'Looking Backward', establishes a pattern of inherited living, in which the interchange of expectation and limitation constitutes the private drama. In Hopkins virtually the reverse is true: he begins with 'nakid beyng' and proceeds to build up a 'scale'. Walter J. Ong has commented:

If Hopkins' claims for his rhythm are acceptable, he must have been, consciously or unconsciously, hearing it everywhere . . . the rhythms of a language are already rooted when the poet arrives, and the real question to be answered concerning Hopkins' sprung rhythm is, What was this thing he was discovering all around him?

One of the aims of this present discussion has been to question, albeit tentatively and inadequately, the premise of 'rooted' speech-rhythms. This may seem an astonishing suggestion in the light of the phrase 'assents to by the roots' in the Stonyhurst letter of 2 March 1871. My opinion, which is of course open to challenge, is that the essential word is the reiterated 'assents . . . assent'. To assent by the roots is to become an entire embodiment of *assent*. What seems to have delighted Hopkins was the simple coherence of spirit, voice and body: a humorous corollary to his most intense concern. When D. P. McGuire states that Hopkins 'comprehended . . . the characteristic features of the oncoming world: the still increasing tempo . . . of modern life' his terms merit serious consideration. One answer to Ong's question 'what was this thing [Hopkins] was discovering all around him?' could be 'increasing tempo'; another answer could be 'the ambivalent power of the "short words"'. The short words are neither rooted nor uprooted, graced nor ungraced; they may go with the 'tempo' or they may be made to react against it. They are the most elemental material, and they are the abrupt selving of prayer: 'We lash with the best or worst | Word last!'

The task of the Catholic poem, at least as practised by Hopkins, could be seen as corresponding to the task of the tall nun who 'christens her wild-worst Best'. The poet, who made sensitive reference in his letters to the gifts and sacrifice of the Elizabethan Jesuits Campion and Southwell and who

must have known also of the staunchness and death-agonies of the Carthusians martyred at Tyburn in 1535, must have sensed also how the morphemes of demotic speech, the irreducible 'Ay!' of subsistence, could be reconciled both with the mystic discipline of 'short prayer', with the significance of the Corpus Christi procession, and with the sustained melody of Gregorian chant. In the death-cry of Prior Houghton there is for us a dreadful mingling of physical agony and willing oblation, of helplessness and horror struggling to transmute themselves into a voluntary sacrifice. To one with Hopkins's theological and poetic discipline the cries could be more meaningfully (it would be offensive to say more easily) assimilated into the liturgy and emblems of martyrdom:

The copy of the *Summa* which Campion was using . . . survives at Manresa College, Roehampton; it is annotated in his own hand and opposite an argument on baptism by blood occurs the single *mot prophète et radieux*, 'Martyrium'.

The 'short word', 'mot prophète et radieux' ('ah! bright wings'; 'ah my dear'), tackles the brutality, buffoonery, and mere obtuseness of English and transfigures it. 'Wragg, poor thing' or 'WE WILL HAVE THE BILL' are there in "Some find me a sword; some | The flange and the rail; flame, | Fang, or flood", goes Death on drum', 'They fought with God's cold—', 'And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell'; and they are answered by 'I did say yes' and by 'Christ, King, Head'. What we have termed the ambivalent power of the short words is most eloquently realized in the final line of 'Carrion Comfort': '(my God!) my God'. The abrupted experiences once more commune with each other: the expletive of a potentially filthy bare forked animal ('I wretch', 'carrion') and the bare word of faith.

'Extremes meet': the appropriate term is Hopkins's own. He is writing of his own art, and of Whitman:

Extremes meet . . . this savagery of [Whitman's] art, this rhythm in its last ruggedness and decomposition into common prose, comes near the last elaboration of mine ['The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo'].

This may not be good Whitman criticism but it is good Hopkins criticism. In suggesting that our 'rhythm' enacts our life-process, or that life-process involves rhythm ('you cannot eat your cake and keep it: he eats his off-hand, I keep mine. It makes a very great difference'), he verges upon a symbolism of society and of history as pertinent and as vulnerable to challenge as those

of Henry Adams and W. B. Yeats. Unlike them he had no need to extend his perception into a formula. It was his gain but in some respects, possibly, our loss. The tension between 'off-hand' and 'keep', and between 'eat' and 'keep' is an essential tension, particularly when the partaking of the elements at Mass is borne in mind. There is a consuming which is part of the process of 'organic' dissolution, and there is an absorption which is not. In a letter written some time afterwards, Hopkins noted:

The only good and truly beautiful recitative is that of plain chant . . . It is a natural development of the speaking, reading, or declaiming voice.

'Decomposition' (explicit) is poised against 'composition' (implicit); we break down into 'common prose', we build, we scale up from, common prose. Taking the two letters together one can see that the pattern is too fluid to be 'rooted'; at the same time one recognizes that 'fluid' is suggestively approximate to those processes of dissolution which the theologian Hopkins rejected. One senses again that the letter to his mother on the morpheme of Lancashire speech and the letter to Bridges on the Corpus Christi procession may be more significant to a study of his poetry than has perhaps been realized. 'Ay!' could be simply inclusive of passion and belief; the Corpus Christi procession was sacramentally inclusive of passion and belief. Highly popular as well as richly liturgical, it did not spill over into the demotic but drew the demotic in. Possibly the best description of Hopkins's poetic method would be his own 'recurb' and 'recovery'.

All this could legitimately be termed 'paternalistic', 'conservative', even 'reactionary'. Such descriptions would not be value-judgements on the poetry itself. One word which, in my opinion, ought not to be applied is the word 'decadent', yet it figures prominently in a distinguished and widely known essay on Hopkins:

Hopkins wrote in a decadent age, and if he is its greatest poet, he may be so because he cultivates his hysteria and pushes his sickness to the limit. Certainly he displays, along with the frantic ingenuity, another decadent symptom more easily recognized, the refinement and manipulation of sensuous appetite . . . Much of his work, in criticism and poetry alike, is concerned with restoring to a jaded palate the capacity for enjoyment.

Donald Davie's critical diction is here richly allusive rather than 'pure'. The phrase 'cultivates his hysteria' is an allusion to the entry in Baudelaire's *Journal*, 'I have cultivated my hysteria with delight and terror'. If one wishes

to imply decadent 'sensuous appetite', would it not be more accurate to speak of a 'sated' rather than of a 'jaded' palate? Hopkins referred to himself as 'jaded'—exhausted by overwork and by nervous stress. To use this word and to suggest that it is precisely synonymous with satiety seems to me just a little tendentious.

That Hopkins wrote in a decadent age is unarguable; but to see him as quintessential of that condition is to fail to comprehend what decadence truly is. In contrast to Coleridge and Hopkins, it was 'decadent' of Mill to concede 'a certain laxity' for the sake of ease of communication: acquiescence requires quiescence. Ure's *Philosophy of Manufactures* is a degrading work. It was 'decadent' of Arnold to stoop to the indulgence of his more delicate spiritual perceptions: with all his intelligence and compassion he could not stop himself falling for the sneer, and such 'falling' is 'decadence'. It was decadent of George Eliot to write two separate essays, 'Address to Working Men' and 'Debasing the Moral Currency', the first of which betrays the priorities implied in the second, with no sense of contact or coherence between them. To fall for these things or to conspire so that others fall for them is decadence. Against all this Hopkins's poetry established a dogged resistance. Both ethically and rhythmically, his vocation was to redeem the time.