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*Trapped in Sibyl's Jar:  
Hopkins's Dialectic of Self  
in "Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves"*

by JOHN C. HAMPSEY

In Memory of William Van Etten Casey, S.J.

HOPKINS considered "Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves" to be the longest sonnet written in the English language. Typically, he wanted his "long sonnet" to be treated as "living art should be." As he said in a letter to Robert Bridges, dated December 11, 1886 (from University College, Dublin), "it was made for performance," and "its performance is not reading with the eye; but loud, leisurely, and poetically; not rhetorically." In fact, it should be "almost sung," he said. Hopkins carefully timed his long sonnet in tempo rubato (a flexible and spirited rhythm).

Beyond the powerful rhythm of the words, however, "Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves" traces a pattern of time, a pattern found to varying degrees in other Hopkins poems of this period (1884–86). The pattern is dialectical. It oscillates between temporal time marked by the flux in nature and a strained hope in the transcendent apocalyptic moment. Through his arcane language and the awe-inspiring images it evokes, Hopkins attempts a leap from temporality to eternity.

By the poem's end, however, the dialectic resolves into an existential condition in which the speaker is framed in a time that is neither temporal nor apocalyptic, but rather psychological—"selfwrung, selfstrung, sheathe-and shelterless, thoughts / against thoughts in groans grind."

THE FAMOUS seven adjectives which open "Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves" describe the aura which surrounds the flux of evening. Yet there is something atemporal occurring, something more than day succumbing to night. The poem's second word—"earthless"—suggests that evening not only blots out day, it dissolves the material world itself. Things become part of a different order of reality, no longer attached to earth and the normal processes of nature. The fourth word—"attuneable"—points to some harmonizing effect wrought from this metaphysical occurrence; a unison of body and soul, heaven and earth, heart and mind. The culminating adjective—"stupendous"—locks in the sense of immanent transcendence.

The sonnet's second line describes what N. H. MacKenzie called the "primal undifferentiated night" wherein evening encompasses time itself—"Evening strains to be time's vast, womb-of-all, home-of-all, hearse-of-all night." (One

might also note here the connection between evening straining beyond the boundaries of time and space and the poem itself straining beyond the limits of the sonnet form.) In any case, the notion of temporal reality ruled by Heraclitean flux completely disappears, and the stage is set for something otherworldly to occur, the “wild hollow hoarlight” being a prescient sign. The speaker joins in this metaphysical transformation, his presence announced dramatically in line four by the word “Waste.” Nature is thus indicted because diurnal time has ceased, and the apocalyptic moment awaits.

Hopkins interprets the truth of the straining evening much as the Cumaean Sibyl of the poem’s title deciphered the judgment of the gods from natural signs per order of the Roman Senate. (The word sibyl means “will of god.”) Hopkins, taking a leaf out of Sibyl’s book of prophecies, spells out the moral implications within the order of nature. Evening and night blot out the color of the day, making nature black and white. The lesson for mankind is to accept God’s judgment at the end of life, when all human actions will be bifurcated, resulting in the two flocks and the absolute categories of wrong and right. At the beginning of the second quatrain Hopkins bemoans this traumatic moment—

For earth her being has unbound, her  
dapple is at end, as—  
tray or aswarm, all throughther, in throngs; self in self steepèd  
and páshed—quite  
Disremembering, dísmémbering áll now. Heart, you round  
me right  
With: Óur évening is over us; óur night whélms, whélms,  
ánd will end us.

The fading of all light forms, the merging into a shadowing mass, coupled with the notion of the self being “pashed” and then forgotten—“disremembering,” speaks of a world that is becoming undone, its richness “dismembered,” and of a self that is losing the ability to order experience through memory. The speaker, forced to consider his own spiritual state, senses that he must give heed to the signs. Earth’s dapple, once a sign of beauty, now appears menacing.

John Ruskin, whose writings and teachings influenced Hopkins at Oxford, believed nature to have a moral and aesthetic purpose. In fact, for Ruskin, aesthetics was the basis of morality. As he stated emphatically in *Traffic*, the second lecture of *Crown of the Wild Olive* (1870), “Taste is not only a part and an index of morality, it is the ONLY morality!”

In Hopkins’s apocalyptic reading of evening’s metaphysical grandeur, morality is the undisputable quotient. The straining of the aestheticized evening results in a moral imperative: all human actions will be judged. Hopkins’s apocalyptic moment is hardly a beautiful one. His *Dies Irae* is signed with “beak-leaved boughs dragonish” which “damask the tool-smooth bleak light; black, / Ever so black on it.” Beaks of vultures, dragons’ claws, fierce symbolic shapes etch the cold sky like blades of justice—this is the dark sibylean tale that Hopkins tells.

Austere, and ever so simple, the tale also speaks of a lifelong conflict for

Hopkins, one he experienced particularly during the writing period of "Sibyl's Leaves" (1884–86). In "To what serves Mortal Beauty?" most probably composed shortly after "Sibyl's Leaves," Hopkins addresses an ancillary problem: what purpose has the world's beauty, which sets "dancing [the] blood," if it will be eventually dissolved? In "Mortal Beauty" Hopkins concludes that one must "Merely meet it [beauty] . . . then leave, let that alone." In "Sibyl's Leaves," however, the speaker is cursed with tragic reluctance.

Lét life, wáned,  
 ah lét life wind  
 Off hér once skéined stained véined varíety upon, áll on twó  
 spools; párt, pen, páck  
 Now her áll in twó flocks, twó folds—black, white; right,  
 wrong;

Ruskin, too, experienced a similar problem of piety versus sensuality. His severe evangelical prejudice would not allow him to accept fully the riches of the natural world. For Ruskin the conflict finally resolved itself during the famous moment in Turin when he encountered the Veronese painting of *Solomon and the Queen of Sheba*.

I don't understand it; one would have thought purity gave strength, but it doesn't. A good stout, self-commanding, magnificent Animality is the make for poets and artists. . . . One day I was struck by the Gorgeousness of life which the world seems to develop. . . . can it be possible that all this power and beauty is adverse to the honor of the Maker of it? Has God made faces beautiful and limbs strong, and created these strange, fiery, fantastic energies, and created the splendour of substance and the love of it . . . that these things may lead His creatures away from Him? (From *Modern Painters V*)

Ruskin's acceptance of the "animality" of art prepared him for his later acceptance of the splendors of nature which he imaginatively described in his portrait of the heathen goddess, Athena, in *The Queen of The Air* (1869).

For Hopkins, the conflict between the sensuous lure of nature and his avowed asceticism was never to be resolved. In fact, much of his poetry from the last years of his life records the ongoing spiritual and mental anguish which he experienced as a result of this conflict. This torturous "rack" is precisely where "Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves" ends. Transported from the rhythms of nature to the cusp of eternity, where there is a momentary and sobering embrace of the apocalypse, Hopkins returns finally to his tormented inner self. As in Dark Sonnet No. 65, where the "mind has mountains; cliffs of fall / Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed," Hopkins wrestles, at the end of "Sibyl's Leaves," with himself for the sake of his God. This theistic existential anguish vanquishes the awesome beauty of nature and the grand order of the apocalypse. Alienated by his own worm of conscience, Hopkins's mind gnaws and feeds inwardly—"of a rack / Where. . . thóughts / against thoughts ín groans grínd." In this sense, the poem moves away from a concern with late-19th-century aesthetics and toward a vision of the modern existential condition.

A similar scenario develops in "Heraclitean Fire," but there Hopkins holds

onto eternity by holding onto hope in the Resurrection, Christ's victory over temporal time.

O pity and indignation! Manshape, that shone  
 Sheer off, disseveral, a star, death blots black out; nor mark  
 Is any of him at all so stark  
 But vastness blurs and time beats level. Enough! the Resur-  
 rection,  
 A heart's-clarion! Away grief's gasping, joyless days, de-  
 jection.

Across my foundering deck shone  
 A beacon, an eternal beam. Flesh fade, and mortal trash  
 Fall to the residuary worm; world's wildfire, leave but ash:  
 In a flash, at a trumpet crash.  
 I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and  
 This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal  
 diamond,

Is immortal diamond.

In this sense, "Heraclitean Fire" marks a personal and spiritual triumph for Hopkins, coming as it does just after the writing of "Sibyl's Leaves."

In "Sibyl's Leaves" it is Hopkins's mind which cheats him of the eternal moment, whereas in the Dark Sonnets it is Hopkins's failing body as well as his mind and his troubled soul which deprives him of the comfort of immortality.

Throughout his life Hopkins was concerned about the shortcomings of his physical frame. This is why he so idolized the resilience in nature and the natural strength of Harry Ploughman with his "Hard as hurdle arms . . . rack of ribs; the scooped flank; lank / Rope-over thigh." In many of his later poems Hopkins's failing body acts as metaphor for the trap of temporal time, his sickly self a reminder of man's need to escape through faith.

Ironically, the Cumaean Sibyl suffered a similar fate. Loved by Apollo, she was granted the gift of prophecy and as many years of life as grains of dust she could hold in her hand. But the Sibyl forgot to ask for youth as well, and she shrunk smaller and smaller until, according to Virgil, her entire body was contained in a tiny jar. The fate of the Sibyl illuminates the paradox of "natural" perception: those most gifted at reading Nature may not recognize the existential fate of the self in the natural world. Reading nature, although an unnatural ability, does not free one from the forces of entropy. Thus the simplest scheme for transcending the terror of disintegration becomes a trap.

Like Tithonus in Tennyson's poem of the same name, the Cumaean Sibyl's mental and physical anguish is such that she desires only death. (This is what she tells Aeneas during his descent into hell.) In Dark Sonnet No. 64, Hopkins barely refrains from evoking the same desire.

Not, I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee;  
 Not untwist—slack they may be—these last strands of man  
 In me ór, most weary, cry *I can no more*. I can;  
 Can something, hope, wish day come, not choose not to be.

Knowing Hopkins, the reader might expect the hellish mental nightmare

depicted in "Sibyl's Leaves" to be particularly Christian. Yet "Sibyl's Leaves" may be the most pagan poem Hopkins ever wrote. It has none of the salient religiosity found in many of his other works. W. H. Gardner was the first to point this out. In his seminal book of 1949 (*Gerard Manley Hopkins*, Oxford University Press), he states that the poem has a "pagan austerity" rather than the expected Hopkins piety.

The strongest source of this austerity is Virgil's *Aeneid* which Hopkins believed anticipated Catholic eschatology. Like St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas before him, Hopkins, in "Sibyl's Leaves," attempts a synthesis of Christian revelation and pre-Christian metaphysics. Regardless of whether Hopkins was conscious of this synthesis or not, the poem nonetheless transcends religious differences. It speaks of the horror of a collective damnation. And in this sense the poem is the most archetypal Hopkins wrote.

Ironically, Gardner found it hard to believe that such "impassioned euphuism," as found in "Sibyl's Leaves," could be the expression of "one heart and one brain." For this reason Gardner thought the poem should be spoken in several voices like a Greek Chorus, "some parts in unison, some parts antiphonally." Otherwise "the clotted consonants, harsh staccato, and brusque emphasis [found in the poem], are hard to appreciate." Gardner maintained that if the poem were "shared out" it would produce the effect of statement and corroboration, "of tone, overtone, and echo." The poem would then "become credible."

Yet Gardner's several voices are not necessary if one recognizes the poem's dialectic. As in Kierkegaard's existential dialectic, the personal anguish in the poem evokes universality. This universality rests upon the collective recognition that human anguish is subjective and psychologically a matter of duration, "selfwrung, selfstrung, sheathe-and shelterless." It is by virtue of this existential truth that the poem is most moving and most credible.