

# Reassessing Gilbert and Gubar: Women, Creativity, Hopkins

Duc Dau

Gerard Manley Hopkins is the first target of Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their groundbreaking feminist study, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979). The book begins:

Is the pen a metaphorical penis? Gerard Manley Hopkins seems to have thought so. In a letter to his friend R. W. Dixon in 1886 he confided a crucial feature of his theory of poetry. The artist's 'most essential quality,' he declared, is 'masterly execution, which is a kind of male gift, and especially marks off men from women, the begetting of one's thoughts on paper, on verse, or whatever the matter is.' In addition, he noted that 'on better consideration it strikes me that the mastery I speak of is not so much in the mind as a puberty in the life of that quality. The male quality is the creative gift.' Male sexuality, in other words, is not just analogically but actually the essence of literary power. The poet's pen is in some sense (even more than figuratively) a penis. (3-4)<sup>1</sup>

After identifying Hopkins as 'a representative male citizen', Gilbert and Gubar declare,

the patriarchal notion that the writer 'fathers' his text just as God fathered the world is and has been all-pervasive in Western literary civilization, so much so that, as Edward Said has shown, the metaphor is built into the very word, *author*, with which writer, deity, and *pater familias* are identified. (4)

Said, they note, links the words 'author' and 'authority': 'a person who originates or gives existence to something, a begetter, beginner, father, or ancestor, a person also who sets forth written statements' (4). A few pages later, the two critics return to Hopkins' letter: 'when Hopkins wanted to explain to R. W. Dixon the aesthetic consequences of a lack of male mastery, he seized upon an explanation which developed the implicit parallel between women and eunuchs, declaring that "if the life" is not "conveyed into the work and ... displayed there ... the product is one of those *hen's eggs* that are good to eat and look just like live ones but never hatch"'. Elaborating on their argument, Gilbert and Gubar turn to Hopkins' final poem, 'To R. B.', arguing, 'when, late in his life, he tried to define his own sense of sterility, and his thickening writer's block, he described himself ... both as a eunuch and *as a woman*, specifically a woman deserted by male power: "the widow of an insight lost," surviving in a diminished "winter world" that entirely lacks "the roll, the rise, the carol, the creation" of male generative power, whose "strong / Spur" is phallically "live and lancing like the blowpipe flame"' (10; Gilbert and Gubar's emphasis).

Gilbert and Gubar's identification of Hopkins with Victorian sexism has undoubtedly influenced Hopkins studies. Since the publication of *The Madwoman in the Attic*, several Hopkins critics have speculated that the poet's wish for 'masterly execution' appears to betray his own fear of becoming unmanly or effeminate in his art and life.<sup>2</sup>

This anxiety, if true, may well have been part of a broader sense of disquietude felt by male authors under the reign of Queen Victoria.<sup>3</sup> Unlike Jeffrey B. Loomis ('Birth Pangs'), my intention is not to contest Gilbert's and Gubar's claims of chauvinism. I agree that Hopkins clearly exhibited sexist attitudes, not simply in the letter to Dixon but elsewhere, as Alison G. Sulloway and Lesley Higgins have demonstrated. Regarding Hopkins as a man of his time, Sulloway suggests, 'it may be that the actual world of women offered him few other models', apart from that of 'the unearthly woman, silent wife or heroic martyr, or the Medusa, the monster, the slut' ('Gerard Manley Hopkins', 44). Higgins adds, 'Hopkins' path took him from one intensely homosocial situation (public school, Oxford) to another (the Society of Jesus, and the priesthood). Consequently, we could say that he was trained not to think about women (at least not positively): not as points of social or cultural reference, not within the realm of intellectual endeavour' ('She rears herself', 132; original emphasis). Nor do I dispute that Hopkins' view of creation is often gendered. However, I contend that what passes unrecognised by Gilbert and Gubar is that Hopkins held not simply one but several theories of artistic creation. As Rebecca Melora Corinne Boggs argues, '[his] vision of the work of art as man's fruit mediates between the two more prevalent and distinct views of art as spontaneous selfing, which takes music as its model, and art as procreation, which mimics human reproduction in requiring a male figure to inspire/impregnate the receptive female partner' ('Poetic Genesis', 837).<sup>4</sup> It seems, then, that in the letter to Dixon, Hopkins is asserting this first view of art, particularly given that the letter is concerned, ultimately, not with Hopkins' views about women artists but with the 'technical imperfection' of a male artist, Edward Burne-Jones. While recognising the charges of sexism against Hopkins, Jerome Bump believes it is possible to read feminist elements in Hopkins' views of creativity:

another model suggests that creativity consists of a revolt against dualisms such as masculine versus feminine, group versus individual. When we look at Hopkins from this other point of view, we see balancing, simultaneity, and paradoxical fusion of opposites as a key to Hopkins's creativity and that of some of his critics, rather than a single-minded focus on masculinity, individuality, or self-referential language. (5)

He continues: 'Ultimately, we can find even in Hopkins's life and art some support for a more feminist sense of creativity as the product of relationships with others, rather than, say, the pathological narcissism of our current stereotype of the creator, Victor Frankenstein' (5).

In this essay, I appeal to Bump's model of reading creativity when focusing on Bogg's second view of poetic creation, 'art as procreation'. As I will discuss in more detail, Gilbert and Gubar disregard the agency Hopkins accorded female creativity and motherhood in 'To R. B' and other poems. They also overlook the extent to which males and females are co-creators in his poetry. What's more, when Gilbert and Gubar associate feminisation with a male's author's metaphorical impotence, they essentially equate the former with that which is unquestionably negative. However, through a series of close readings of Hopkins' writings, I will demonstrate that the Virgin Mary, the female *authority* of the Roman Catholic Church, provided Hopkins with a model to depict, with greater frequency, positive female figures.<sup>5</sup> By eschewing generalisations, we can see that the Catholic Hopkins was unlike Protestant male authors in his identification with the Virgin Mary and her pregnancy. In this regard he

was not ‘a representative male citizen’. Indeed, Hopkins’ images of female procreators and creators, particularly the Virgin Mary, eventually led him to occupy a feminised – and more feminist – position in his final poem, ‘To R. B.’. In short, I argue, like Sulloway, that ‘the moments in Hopkins’s poetry when he transcended his bitter perspectives upon women are among the most brilliant and often the most poignant’ (‘Gerard Manley Hopkins’, 35).

In the beginning was the egg. As we have seen, Gilbert and Gubar note the association that Hopkins made between the best art and ‘live’ eggs. However, the two authors do not draw a connection between the egg and female creativity in his poetry. Hopkins was well aware that in certain ancient mythologies the egg represented the primordial universe. In one of his undergraduate lecture notes on Greek mythology he observed, ‘Earliest form of philosophy, cosmology. Problem solved by mythology before Thales. Great egg the ἀρχή {first cause, principle} of the world before water’ (*Collected Works*, IV, 210, n1; original emphasis). Hopkins had an enduring interest in mythology and wrote an undergraduate essay entitled, ‘The Connection of Mythology and Philosophy’ (*Collected Works*, IV, 208-11). The eminent mythologist and linguist, Friedrich Max Müller, was still teaching at Oxford at the time Hopkins was a student at Balliol College (1863-1867). A young Hopkins copied extracts on Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism from Müller’s *Chips From a German Workshop* (1867), a work devoted to comparative mythology and religion (*Collected Works*, IV, 295-99). While an undergraduate, Hopkins evoked the concept of the primordial egg when tracing a possible etymological link between such words as ‘shell’, ‘hollow’, ‘hell’ and *caelum*, the Latin for ‘heaven’ (*Journals and Papers*, 25). Once more, he assumes this link in the poem ‘Spring’, written 13 years later, in which he remarks that ‘Thrush’s eggs look little low heavens’.

The roundness and function of eggs suggest, at a human level, the swollen belly in pregnancy and the protective nature of the womb. Motherhood features often in Hopkins’ thoughts on creation. The key maternal figure was for him the Virgin Mary, whose popularity rose among Roman Catholics in the second half of the nineteenth century. According to Sally Cunneen, ‘For European Catholics this was a Marian century, the high point of enthusiasm for apparitions at Lourdes and elsewhere, and of attempts to maximize Mary’s role in God’s plan of salvation’ (*In Search*, 227). On 8 December 1854, Pope Pius IX declared the Immaculate Conception (Mary’s preservation from the guilt of Original Sin) a dogma of the Church. The idea had been debated for centuries and was a point of contention between Roman Catholics and Protestants. John Henry Newman, a convert who received Hopkins into the Catholic Church, had argued for the Immaculate Conception five years before it became dogma (*In Search*, 250). Mary was a marker of Roman Catholicism, and responses among English Protestants to Marian devotion ranged from ambivalence and suspicion to derision and contempt. Anti-Catholic sentiment involved accusations of effeminacy, whereas ‘The “manliness” of Protestantism was a commonplace of nineteenth-century Protestant historiography’, says Michael Wheeler (*Old Enemies*, 106). Unsurprisingly, Marian devotion did not appeal to the assumed ‘masculine intellect of England’ (*In Search*, 231).<sup>6</sup>

While Samuel Wilberforce, Bishop of Oxford, preached that the Roman Catholic Church had become a ‘harlot’ for introducing the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception (*Old Enemies*, 234), Anglicans nonetheless – though with varying degrees

of ease – tended to associate Mary with virginity and motherhood, as Carol Marie Engelhardt has argued ('Paradigmatic Angel', 159-160).<sup>7</sup> Speaking of the 'eternal type of female purity', Gilbert and Gubar see 'a clear line of descent from the divine Virgin to the domestic angel' in the nineteenth century (*Madwoman*, 20). And yet the reception of Mary in Victorian England problematises this argument. As Engelhardt notes, 'Victorian Anglicans, with the exception of members of the Oxford Movement and Ritualists, remained uncomfortable with the figure of the Virgin Mary, and no Anglican upheld her as the feminine ideal'. Indeed, Engelhardt believes that the Virgin Mary 'posed fundamental challenges to the ideal of the Angel in the House'. For the majority of Anglicans, virginity was valued, but only until marriage, 'for an equally important part of the angelic woman's identity was as a mother' ('Paradigmatic Angel', 160, 160, 166, 167). This emphasis on marriage and motherhood was the chief reason behind the opposition towards Anglican convents in the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> As a perpetual virgin, 'Mary repudiated Victorian family values. Her virginity opposed the family system, within which women were expected to marry and bear children', argues Engelhardt. Mary was an imperfect role model for married Protestant women because her eternal virginity was recognised as a source of her power and independence from the bonds of human marriage; 'it was this independence and power that prevented her from joining the Angel in House as the ideal Victorian woman' ('Paradigmatic Angel', 162, 168).<sup>9</sup>

Wheeler calls Hopkins 'the unpublished laureate of the Blessed Virgin' (*Old Enemies*, 240). The poet's devotion to the Virgin Mary would have placed him at odds with most of his Protestant male peers. So, too, would his penchant for depicting pregnancies – the 'womb-life grey' ('The Wreck of the Deutschland', st. 6) – at a time when pregnancy 'was virtually unacknowledged in popular discourse'.<sup>10</sup> A classicist and theologian, Hopkins would have been aware that the word, *tókos*, from *Theotokos*, meaning, 'Godbearer' (a title conferred on Mary), derives from the verb, *tiktō*, which also means, 'to lay eggs'.<sup>11</sup> Hopkins describes the eggshell as the protector and nourisher of life in 'The May Magnificat', a poem about Mary. He describes the blue eggs thus:

Cluster of bugle blue eggs thin  
Forms and warms the life within;  
And bird and blossom swell  
In sod or sheath or shell.

All things rising, all things sizing  
Mary sees, sympathising  
With that world of good,  
Nature's motherhood.

Their magnifying of each its kind  
With delight calls to mind  
How she did in her stored  
Magnify the Lord. (ll. 21-32)

The world in springtime evokes comparison with the world before the Fall; the phrase, 'that world of good', alludes to the newly created world that God deemed good (*Genesis* 1:31). The springtime renewal of the world corresponds typologically

with the resurrection of Christ, the Second Adam. For Hopkins, this typological association is made possible only because of Mary, the Second Eve. 'Nature's motherhood' links to Mary's motherhood. Mary 'sees, sympathising', and her very name contains the word, 'May'. Just as Mary's womb 'stored / ... the Lord', May's cluster of eggs 'Forms and warms the life within'. And it goes without saying that these eggs are the colour traditionally associated with Mary's blue mantle.

Hopkins wrote several other poems celebrating Mary's status as Godbearer. In rendering Mary's conception of the Word, Hopkins invites the reader to literalise the Word's conception and consider God as 'the Utterer', Christ as 'the Uttered' and the Holy Spirit as the 'Uttering' ('Margaret Clitheroe', l. 25). The idea that the Word was ejaculated in God's utterance, and his conception nurtured by an act of listening, is not new. For instance, popular medieval legend held that Mary conceived the Word through her ear. In Hopkins' Latin hymn, '*Ad Matrem Virginem*', possibly based on a medieval example, the speaker asks of Mary about the unborn Word:

Quae tu tum dicebas  
Et quae audiebas?  
Etsi fuit mutus  
Tamen est locutus.

What were you saying to Him then,  
And what were you hearing?  
For even though He was mute  
Yet (in the depths of your soul)  
He (the eternal Word) is speaking. (ll. 59-63)<sup>12</sup>

Mary's communication with the Word is literalised. Hence, when the speaker asks, 'what were you hearing?', he is referring not only to the eternal communication between Mary and Christ, but also to the conception of the Word through her ear. Hopkins asks us to consider the conception of Christ through such literalisation in his longest and best-known poem, 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', which commemorates the drowning of five German Franciscan nuns aboard the wrecked ocean liner, the Deutschland, on the eve of the feast of the Immaculate Conception. In stanza 26, Hopkins asks, 'What bý your méasure is the héaven of desíre, / The tréasure never éyesight gót, nor was éver guessed whát for the héaring?'. The 'tréasure' that one cannot see but only hear is the Word, an allusion to the story of Thomas (*John* 20:24-31). For Hopkins the story is significant, as it shifts the focus of faith towards the ear. Note his translation of '*S. Thomae Equinatis Rhythmus ad SS. Sacramentum*', a hymn once ascribed to St Thomas Aquinas, in which the speaker says, 'Seeing, touching, tasting, might mislead me here / But in faith I follow what is taught the ear' (ll. 5-6), and, 'I am not like Thomas, wounds I do not see, / But I can confess Thee Lord and God as he' (ll. 13-14).

Hopkins openly privileges the ear over the eye in an unfinished poem, 'Repeat that, repeat', in which he aligns the physical landscape with the inner scape of the ear. The speaker urges the cuckoo bird to 'open ear wells, heart-springs ... / With a ballad, with a ballad, a rebound' (ll. 2-3). The repetition, 'With a ballad, with a ballad', creates a literal echo to mimic the song that 'rebound[s] / Off trundled timber and scoops of the hillside ground, hollow hollow hollow ground' (ll. 3-4). The ground's

hollowness provides a reflective mirror for the bird's song. In fact, the word ballad is a pun on the word ball; we can indeed imagine the ball(ad) 'rebound[ing]' off the 'scoops' of the 'hollow hollow hollow ground'. Todd K. Bender notes a link between 'scoops' and 'hollow', with the two words echoing each other in meaning:

The set of words used to signify shovelling or hollowing out, scoop, scooped, scoops, appear in three cases. In 'Il Mystico' the persona banishes 'sensual gross desires' to 'Scoop you from teeming filth some sickly hovel, / And there for ever grovel'. 'Harry Ploughman' is described as 'the rack of ribs; the scooped flank; lank / Rope-over thigh; knee-nave; and barrell'd shank –'. And the cuckoo's song echoes 'Off trundled timber and scoops of the hillside ground' .... In all these contexts, scoop appears to mean a '*hollow place shaped as if scooped out*.' ('Scope', 121-22; emphasis added)

Hopkins draws a striking parallel between the scoops of the ground and the function of ears. Compare the unfinished poem to his sermon on the deaf and dumb man – delivered at around the same time as the poem's composition – in which he says Christ's finger 'opened' the man's 'barred up' ears (*Sermons*, 18). Similarly, in the poem, the bird is asked to unblock and 'open ear wells'. The suggestion is that listeners must have a receptive or 'open' ear and, that, in order to echo or return a sound, they must first be able to hear well.

The 'hollow', given its likeness to the ear, is that which, in a sense, conceives by catching words (and the Word), just as a scoop catches a ballad, a well catches rainwater, and a hand catches a ball. In his observation of another cuckoo call, Hopkins likens an echoing, hollow ground to the catching and throwing function of the hand: 'Sometimes I hear the cuckoo with wonderful clear and plump and fluty notes: it is when the hollow of a rising ground conceives them and palms them up and throws them out' (*Journals*, 232). By using the word, 'conceives', Hopkins compares the reception of sound to an act of conception. Here, conception is made possible by the catching of sounds. As Daniel Brown suggests, the act of catching is both active and receptive (*Hopkins' Idealism*, 290), and it implies a degree of agency. In order to catch, the hand must have the potential to grasp the object it gets (or begets) in the hand. A flat hand is unlikely to catch a ball, but once it is made hollow, it becomes receptive. By its receptiveness, the hand is able to grasp the object. In the same way, it is the very hollowness of an eggshell that allows it to hold life and foster 'the life within'.

The act of holding precedes, and is necessary to perform, the act of throwing. The theological implication is evident: spiritual conception is the act of catching the Word, pregnancy the act of holding the Word, and birthing the act of echoing the Word back to God. Hopkins uses the image of the ball and the act of catching in several poems. For instance, 'The Windhover' begins, 'I caught this morning morning's minion, kingdom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding' (l. 1). Brown argues that in this poem, 'The object "caught" by the poet-persona ... is effectively the Parmenidean ball of Being, which is identified in Hopkins' Christian ontology with that great ball of fire, the sun' (*Hopkins' Idealism*, 291). This 'great ball of fire' is the person of Christ; in 'The Blessed Virgin compared to the Air we Breathe', the brilliant sun, her son, is referred to as a 'blinding ball' (l. 97). To the eyes of the earthbound looking up, the air to which Mary is compared certainly

appears to be carrying this fiery foetal ball, the ball from which kingfishers ‘catch fire’ (‘As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame’, l. 1; emphasis added).

The significance that Hopkins attaches to ‘catching’ the ‘ball’ is traceable to his etymological speculations briefly mentioned above and quoted in full below:

*Gulf, golf.* If this game has its name from the holes into which the ball is put, they may be connected, both being from the root meaning hollow. *Gulp, gula, hollow, hold, hilt, κοιλός, caelare* (to make hollow, to make grooves in, to grave)[,] *caelum* [heaven], which is therefore same as though it were what it once was supposed to be a translation of κοιλόν, *hole, hell*, (‘The hollow hell’) *skull, shell, hull* (of ships and beans). (*Journals*, 25; original emphasis)

Elsewhere, Hopkins alludes to receptive containers when he describes eye sockets as the ‘Cups of the eyes’ (*Journals*, 72). The eye is a ball, as he makes clear in ‘Binsey Poplars’: ‘this sleek and seeing ball / But a prick will make no eye at all’ (ll. 14-15). This discussion of eyeballs and hollows may at first appear trivial; however, it is in the etymological richness and playfulness of words that many of Hopkins’ ideas take root and flourish.<sup>13</sup> These concepts very often revolve around the indwelling presence of Christ in a person:

God *in forma servi* rests *in servo*, that is / Christ as a solid in his member as a hollow or shell...; which can only be perfectly when the member is in all things conformed to Christ. This too best brings out the nature of the man himself, as the lettering on a sail or device upon a flag are best seen when it fills. (*Sermons*, 195)

The individual, ‘as a hollow or shell’, is like a bell that rings from its concavities. As Kunio Shimane explains,

The metaphor of the bell in *The [Wreck of the] Deutschland* is based on a comparison between the human body and the actual bell, as both are resonators. The head, containing the skull, nasal cavity, mouth and tongue, is rightly compared with the bell, for the sound made by the tongue and other organs resonates in the mouth, nasal cavity, and even the skull itself, just as the sound made by the tongue resonates in the bell. (*Poetry of Hopkins*, 174)

‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’ contains the following description of a bodily bell:

Fínger of a ténder of, O of a féathery délicacy, the bréast of the  
Maiden could obey so, be a bell to, ring óf it, and  
Stártle the poor shéep back! (st. 31)

The divine ‘Fínger’ delicately touches the nun’s ‘bréast’, which responds like a bell to the touch of a human hand. The speaker depicts the nun as one who has been struck with divine speech. Her vocalisations are contrasted to the sounds of human distress:

The woman’s wailing, the crying of child without check –  
Till a líoness aróse bréasting the bábble,  
A próphetess tówered in the túmalt, a vírginal tóngue tóld. (st. 17)

The sudden introduction of rhythmic, accented stress in the final two lines, particularly of the first syllables, suggests the striking of a bell, and, as Shimane observes, 'told' is a pun on the word 'toll'd' (*Poetry of Hopkins*, 171).

If the nun is a 'prophetess', and if prophets were traditionally assumed to be the mouthpiece of God, then her utterances evidently resonate with divine inspiration. The human 'bábble' comprises the confusing sounds of a woman's wailing and the child's cry. Indeed, 'bábble' – inarticulate sounds – refers directly to the Tower of Babel and the confusion of tongues. The Hebrew verb for Babel (*Balal*) means, 'to confuse', and Hopkins refers to this definition when he says that Lucifer 'is always ... brought to confusion and vice.... And God is continually confounding the builders of Babel or of Babylon' (*Sermons*, 180). In Genesis, God created the confusion of languages to confound the hubristic builders of the tower of Babel (Genesis 11:7-9). In contrast, by describing the nun's 'tóngue' as 'vírginal', Hopkins implies her speech is pre-Babel, pristine, like the legendary language of Adam.<sup>14</sup> By 'bréasting the bábble', the nun rides over what Hopkins calls 'the stórm's brawling' (st. 19). This 'brawling' is the linguistic disorder into which humanity has fallen. The storm parallels the universal chaos before creation. In fact, stanzas 17 and 19 allude to the movement of the Holy Spirit upon the waters of chaos and the subsequent initiation of order at creation (*Genesis* 1:2). By associating the ontological turmoil of the pre-created world with the linguistic confusion of Babel, Hopkins equates divine order with linguistic order. The nun's tolling tongue is thus an echo of God's speech at creation. This example provides a female equivalent to Gilbert and Gubar's assertion that 'the writer "fathers" his text just as God fathered the world'.

When God created the world, he 'said, Let there be...' (*Genesis* 1:3; emphasis added); that is, he created from utterance. For Hopkins, Christ was made flesh in the same manner. Like Mary, to whom she is compared, the nun in 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' catches the spoken word:

For so conceivèd, so to conceive thee is done;  
But here was heart-throe, birth of a brain,  
Wórd, that héard and képt thee and úttered thee óutright. (st. 30)

The word, 'képt', is significant in terms of catching and holding. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the obsolete definitions of 'keep' include catching, seeking, receiving, holding, taking in with the ears and mind, and caring. At the end of her pregnancy, the nun gives birth by uttering the Word back to God. Since Christ is the 'heaven-flúng' (st. 34), the neologism, 'heart-throe', may well be a pun on 'heart throw'. The human heart, in the 'throe[s]' of giving birth, 'throws' back to God the 'heaven-flung' Word it has caught and kept. The speaker wishes to be like the nun: 'make words break from me here all alone / ... móther of béing in me, héart' (st. 18). He seeks to be the 'móther' of words – of perhaps miniature reproductions of the original Word – wishing they might erupt and issue from his 'héart', his unisex womb.

Hopkins holds to the feminine and maternal nature of utterance in the composition of poetry. The prestige he confers on the role of the poet is comparable, if not in degree then certainly in manner, to that which he bestows on the Virgin Mary and the nun in



‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’. Hence, in his final poem, ‘To R. B.’, he describes the poet as a mother, not just of song but of ‘immortal song’ (l. 4). The sonnet follows the poetic convention whereby the speaker bemoans the lack of poetic inspiration and, yet, in the articulation of his grievance, creates the text:

The fine delight that fathers thought; the strong  
 Spur, live and lancing like the blowpipe flame,  
 Breathes once and, quenched faster than it came,  
 Leaves yet the mind a mother of immortal song.  
 Nine months she then, nay years, nine years she long  
 Within her wears, bears, cares and combs the same:  
 The widow of an insight lost she lives, with aim  
 Now known and hand at work now never wrong.  
 Sweet fire the sire of muse, my soul needs this;  
 I want the one rapture of an inspiration.  
 O then if in my lagging lines you miss  
 The roll, the rise, the carol, the creation,  
 My winter world, that scarcely breathes that bliss  
 Now, yields you, with some sighs, our explanation.

Named after his friend and fellow poet, Robert Bridges, the poem draws a link between divine inspiration and poetic inspiration. It also, if only momentarily, puts forward an image of a nuclear family – the husband, the wife (though soon-to-be-widowed) and their offspring. This dynamic, in which the poet takes the position of the wife, enables Hopkins to circumvent the depiction of male-male intimacy, though whether this was his main intention remains unknown. The importance of male energy in this poem lies not in its ability to bring the poem to fruition – it seems this is the role of the female element – but in its capacity to fertilise the mind. That is, the only role assigned to the male muse is that of inspiring the feminised poet to conceive. It is she who is most active, who labours to nurture and give voice to the poem. In another feminist twist, the ‘mother’ of poetry is not the ‘heart’ but the ‘mind’. Hopkins therefore inverts the commonplace that links the heart with the feminine and the mind with the masculine. The skull, in essence a container, is listed in Hopkins’ etymological speculation on the words, ‘gulf’ and ‘golf’. That the skull houses the brain might account for the reference in ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’ to the birth of Christ as the ‘birth of a brain’ (st. 30). Just as Mary’s womb contained the Word, so the skull ‘holds’ and nurtures words and ideas.

‘To R. B.’ evokes images of procreation, pregnancy, labour and birth. While the imagery is sexually charged, it nonetheless exists within the context of another virgin conception – this time in the poet’s mind. The ‘bliss’ of creation is the consequence of the ‘one rapture of an inspiration’. The mind is originally seized by ‘the fine delight’ that dies ‘faster than it came’. The poet must then laboriously nurture to its birth that sudden spurt of ‘insight’. Poetry is generated by a combination of breath and flame, traditional signs of the Holy Spirit. The fire of generation resembles the vital heat of life itself, what Hopkins calls the ‘spark of life’ (*Sermons*, 31) and addresses in the poem, ‘That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection’. The image of fiery potency also suggests a contemporary Victorian concept of maleness and male energy. According to Herbert Sussman, this interior energy was regarded as an inchoate force that was partly but not exclusively sexual, and was consistently

imagined in the metaphors of fluid and flame (*Victorian Masculinities*, 10). Similarly, in his discussion of the poem, 'God's Granduer', Jude Nixon argues that the electrical energy it depicts is a kind of divine 'seminal fluid ... flow[ing] from God' ('Death blots', 144).<sup>15</sup> In like manner, the flame of inspiration in 'To R. B.' does not originate from the feminine energy traditionally exemplified by the Greek muses. Instead it is sparked by a masculine force, a sinuous blaze, a fine *de-light*.

The *de-light* of paternal 'thought' plants the seed, fertilises the feminised imagination and leaves the poet's mind its 'widow'. Being 'quenched faster than it came', it dies the moment it makes its presence known. In all this, as Julia Saville asserts, the poet appears passive.<sup>16</sup> However, this passivity lasts only a moment; 'the lengthy gestation of the 'immortal song' is envisaged as painstaking domestic work ("Nine months she then, nay years she long/ Within her wears, bears, cares and combs the same")' (*Queer Chivalry*, 198). For anyone who has studied Hopkins' poetry manuscripts, it is difficult not to notice the amount of work he devoted to his craft, to the number of drafts and changes he made to his poems. Using the analogy of the catching hand, I argue that, while it is the muse who has the 'sweet fire' and appears to have all the 'delight', it is the poet who has the equally – if not more important – task of bringing the poem to fruition. The responsibility for the actualisation of a work on the page from its mere potential in the mind lies with the poet.<sup>17</sup> Poetic creation is therefore not a one-way act. It occurs not simply through the lodging of a seed or homunculus into a passive receptacle, but takes place when the muse meets with the active principle of the receptive mind. The phrase, 'hand at work now never wrong', describes the poet who crafts, cares for and secures the poem into being. The hand is synonymous with action; as Heidegger asserts, 'The hand acts [*Die Hand handelt*]'. He says, 'The hand holds in its care the handling, the acting, the acted, and manipulated' (*Parmenides*, 84). The hand handles and cares for the handi-craft. The word, 'craft', as he notes elsewhere, 'literally means the strength and skill in our hands' (*What is Called Thinking?*, 381). The skilled hand creates and carries the work towards its birth.

With an active hand in the poem's gestation, the poet 'wears, bears, cares and combs' the work. Poetry writing, while difficult at times, or perhaps because of this difficulty, is an expression of love and intimacy. The word 'wears' suggests clothing. Clothes make a statement; they express the personality of their wearer. Similarly, for Hopkins, words express the meaning of a thought. Additionally, the word 'wears' suggests a close attachment to what the wearer 'bears'. Like a second skin, clothes embrace, press against and mould themselves upon the wearer. We feel the clothes we wear, even as a mother feels the foetus within her and the foetus feels her – each 'wears, bears' the skin of the other. This connection between mother and unborn child is reinforced by the word, 'combs'. The word, seemingly unusual in this context, makes sense if we think of it in relation to hair. In a letter to Dixon, Hopkins says, 'I think the images I like best of all are in [your long poem] *Love's Consolation* about the quicksilver and the heart combed round with hair'.<sup>18</sup> The relevant section reads thus: 'and of us some / About our hearts meshed the loved hair with comb / Of our great love, to twine and glisten there'.<sup>19</sup> The 'loved hair' would have originally been embedded in the skin of the beloved. Representing 'our great love', the hair now forms a 'twine' around the heart of the lover. The image of the binding hair recalls similar images in Hopkins' poetry. In a scene from his dramatic poem, 'St. Winefred's Well', a character exclaims, 'The deeper grows her dearness / And more and more times laces | round and round my heart' (Act 1, Sc. i, ll. 12-13). Similarly, in

‘Brothers’, the speaker remarks, ‘How lovely the elder bróther’s / Life all laced in the óther’s, / Lóve-laced!’ (ll. 1-3). These images of the love lace bear strong affinity to that in ‘The Blessed Virgin compared to the Air we Breathe’. With possible reference to the umbilical cord binding the mother and her foetus, the speaker says to the Virgin Mary that he is ‘wound with thee, in thee isled’ (l. 125). Such images of entwinement and love lend weight to the notion that the poet is intimately ‘wound with’ her handiwork.

With all this discussion about writing, we must not forget that Hopkins’ theories of poetry extended well beyond the page. He believed that poems must be given full expression through utterance; after all, God did not write the world into existence. The writing of poetry is secondary to its vocalisation. Writing confines the word, whereas utterance liberates it. There is nothing in Hopkins’ writings to suggest that men are better able than women to read poetry aloud. Sulloway has explored the Victorians’ penchant for reading aloud and listening. Exploring the influence of Ruskin on Hopkins, she says,

[Ruskin] extolled not only ‘the pleasure of sight’, as gifts of heaven, but the pleasures ‘of hearing’; and the gifts of heaven in which Christians could take legitimate pleasure were ‘the melody in the voice’ and the ‘majesty in the thunder’ .... Attending lectures was almost as fashionable a pursuit among the middle classes as reading aloud was among most classes, and many of Ruskin’s works were first delivered as lectures. He designed his sonorous style to appeal as fully to the ear as to the eye and the conscience. George Eliot described her intense pleasure in reading Ruskin aloud to George Lewes ‘for an hour or so after dinner’. (*Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 67)

Poetry must likewise be uttered. In a letter to Bridges, Hopkins insists that a reader ‘take breath and read [“The Loss of the Eurydice”] with the ears’.<sup>20</sup> In another letter he declares, ‘My verse is less to be read than heard, as I have told you before’.<sup>21</sup> To his brother Everard, Hopkins reiterates the relationship between speech and poetry. Calling poetry ‘the darling child of speech, of lips and spoken utterance’, he asserts, ‘*till it is spoken, it is not performed*, it does not perform, it is not itself’.<sup>22</sup> He also says,

The play or performance of a stageplay is the playing it on the boards, the stage: reading it, much more writing it, is not its performance. The performance of a symphony is not the scoring of it however elaborately; it is in the concert room, by the orchestra, and then and there only.<sup>23</sup>

Just as a play is truly a play when it is being performed on the stage, poetry is truly ‘itself’ when it is being spoken.

Performance is vital to Hopkins; it is the ‘play’ by which the poem takes shape and becomes what it was meant to be. In another letter to Bridges, Hopkins compares the utterance of poetry to the act of singing. (Hopkins also composed songs and airs.) He instructs his friend thus:

Of this long sonnet above all remember what applies to all my verse, that it is, as living art should be, made for performance and that its performance is not

reading with the eye but loud, leisurely, poetical (not rhetorical) recitation, with long rests, long dwells on the rhyme and other marked syllables, and so on. The sonnet shd. be almost sung: it is most carefully timed in *tempo rubato*.<sup>24</sup>

The performance of song, of poetry, promotes 'living art'. Just as a house 'performs when it is now built and lived in',<sup>25</sup> a poem lives when it fulfils its purpose for being. Hopkins' analogy of the house is reminiscent of an auditorium, a building made to house musical performances. An auditorium is a structure in which, through the very hollowness of its design, music resonates. An unoccupied house is like an empty shell, but an occupied house is a structure performing its function. Similarly, the written poem awaits performance, and its potential is realised through its interaction with another being. Thus, poetry, like a house, 'is not itself' until it is experienced by another who enters into it, breathes it and dwells in its being. By entering the poem, the performer, the speaker, becomes not so much the child but the mother, the *tókos* who carries that 'darling child of speech' into the world.

From his early poems of the Virgin Mary to his last poem of poetic creation, Gerard Manley Hopkins had a lasting interest in theories of creativity and images of creation. He was keenly interested in how he, as a male and celibate priest, might be involved in the act of creation. Important to his thinking on this matter was his understanding of motherhood, which would eventually lead him to see himself as a mother of poetry. Gilbert and Gubar thus ignore the extent to which Hopkins depicted and valued female creation and identified with female creators in his poetry. While acknowledging the existence of Hopkins' sexism, I have also attempted to show that he held several views of poetic creation. In one of these, 'mothers' are as integral as 'fathers' to the provenance of art and its liberation from the confines of the page.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Letter from Gerard Manley Hopkins to Richard Watson Dixon, dated 30 June 1886. *The Correspondence of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Richard Watson Dixon*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., ed. Claude Collier Abbott (London, 1955), p. 133.

<sup>2</sup> See Julia F. Saville, *A Queer Chivalry: The Homoerotic Asceticism of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Charlottesville, 2000), p. 89; and Lesley Higgins, "'She rears herself': Feminist Possibilities in Hopkins's Poetry", *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 84 (1995), pp. 138-139. Interestingly, while Higgins points to other feminists, she makes no mention of Gilbert and Gubar or of subsequent feminist scholarship in Hopkins studies.

<sup>3</sup> Gail Turley Houston believes that Victorian male writers, including Thomas Carlyle and Alfred Tennyson, feared that the age, along with the writing profession, 'had lost its virility' and was becoming 'feminized' – an anxiety brought on by the fact that their sovereign was a woman and best-selling writer. Gail Turley Houston, *Royalties: The Queen and Victorian Writers* (Charlottesville, 1999), pp. 63, 65. Against the wishes of her family and advisors, the queen published two extracts from her journals, *Leaves from the Journal of Our Life in the Highlands* and *More Leaves from a Journal of Our Life in the Highlands*. The first went on to outsell many books that came out in 1868, including Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone* and Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book* (p. 60).

<sup>4</sup> While Boggs cites Hopkins' now-notorious letter to Dixon, she makes no mention of Gilbert and Gubar's charges of sexism. Joseph J. Feeney provides a useful gloss on 'art as procreation' in "'I do otherwise': Hopkins' Patterns of Creativity", *Studies: An Irish Quarterly* 86 (1997), pp. 116-125. Like Boggs, he does not mention Gilbert and Gubar.

<sup>5</sup> Like Loomis ('Birth Pangs in Darkness'), I will discuss images of pregnancy and birth. However, while Loomis focuses mainly on the so-called Terrible Sonnets, I will examine a broader range of poems and conclude with a discussion of 'To. R. B.'

<sup>6</sup> Consider the words of Henry Soames, Rector of Shelley, in Essex: 'The masculine intellect of England is above a theatric worship, and superstitious toys; auricular confession, and sacramental absolution; mediators, whom neither Scripture warrants, nor reasons says, can hear' (cited on p. 106, n.120).

<sup>7</sup> Carol Marie Engelhardt, 'The Paradigmatic Angel in the House: The Virgin Mary and Victorian Anglicans', in Anne Hogan and Andrew Bradstock (ed.), *Women of Faith in Victorian Culture: Reassessing the Angel in the House* (Houndmills, 1998), pp. 159-160.

<sup>8</sup> 'Even more threatening to the English Protestant mind than the Catholic and Tractarian ideal of a celibate society was their ideal of sisterhoods, set apart from mainstream society, led by women and open to unspeakable abuses' (Wheeler, *Old Enemies*, p. 214).

<sup>9</sup> Kimberly VanEsveld Adams argues that Mary was a feminist figure for female authors, Anna Jameson, Margaret Fuller and George Eliot, all Protestants by background. These authors, she believes, used the Virgin Mary 'in arguments designed to empower women' (Kimberly VanEsveld Adams, *Our Lady of Victorian Feminism: The Madonna in the Work of Anna Jameson, Margaret Fuller, and George Eliot* [Athens, Ohio, 2001], p. 1).

<sup>10</sup> Despite that fact that the Victorians sentimentalised children, 'pregnancy was virtually unacknowledged in popular discourse', partly because the body of a pregnant woman announced she was no longer a virgin (Engelhardt, 'The Pradigmatic Angel', pp. 163, 164).

<sup>11</sup> I thank Serena Ceccarelli for her assistance with this etymology.

<sup>12</sup> Translated by Robert Boyle, quoted in *Poetical Works*, p. 302.

<sup>13</sup> For more on Hopkins' playfulness, see Joseph J. Feeney, *The Playfulness of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Aldershot, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> When Adam 'named' the animals, he is said to have uttered their true names (*Genesis* 2:19-20).

<sup>15</sup> For more on electricity in Hopkins' poetry, see Jason Rudy, *Electric Meters: Victorian Physiological Poetry* (Athens, Ohio, 2009), pp. 111-136.

<sup>16</sup> As Saville puts it, 'in rhetoric similar to that in "The Wreck of the Deutschland," Hopkins assumes the passive, feminized role of one impregnated by the Word' (*A Queer Chivalry*, p. 198).

<sup>17</sup> This language derives from Aristotle. For more on the influence of Aristotle's philosophy on Hopkins, see Duc Dau, "'Beautiful Action": Hopkins and the Perfect Body', *The Hopkins Quarterly* 35 (2008): pp. 3-18.

<sup>18</sup> Letter from Gerard Manley Hopkins to Richard Watson Dixon, dated 23 October 1881. *Correspondence of Hopkins and Dixon*, p. 77.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77 n.4.

<sup>20</sup> Letter from Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges, dated 22 April 1879. *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., ed. Claude Colleer Abbott (London, 1955), p. 79.

<sup>21</sup> Letter from Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges, dated 21 August 1877. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>22</sup> Letter from Gerard Manley Hopkins to Everard Hopkins, dated 5/8 November 1885. Anthony Bischoff, 'Hopkins's Letters to his Brother', *Times Literary Supplement*, December 8 1972, p. 1511; emphasis original.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Letter from Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges, dated 11 December 1886. *Letters of Hopkins to Bridges*, p. 246.

<sup>25</sup> 'Hopkins's letters to his Brother', p. 1511.

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