

New Artistic Rhythm Practices and Conceptions (1857-1897) - part 1

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The concept of *rhuthmos* progressively reappeared in the second half of the 19th century through various and sometimes very convoluted paths. In the 1850s and 1860s Baudelaire and Wagner explicitly belittled “rhythm” they associated with “meter” and “architecture” and preferred to celebrate “harmony” and “melody” considered as more fit to grasp the “lyrical impulses of the soul.” In *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (1872) though, Nietzsche equally praised “rhythm” and “harmony” that he considered both necessary to music and lyrical theater because they expressed respectively the Apollonian and Dionysian sides of art. But after 1875, Hopkins and Mallarmé explicitly placed “rhythm” before “harmony” and “melody”, thus seemingly reversing the main artistic opinion concerning rhythm. However a closer look shows two points:

1. The same aim actually governs these apparently quite divergent attitudes: how to get rid of the traditional artistic constraints and rules? How to get rid of metric?
2. Even when rhythm is decried or depreciated, artists are developing practices that make it actually close to *rhuthmos*.

Poetic Prose vs Rhythm (Baudelaire - 1857-1867)

In the very famous dedication of his 1862 *Small Prose Poems*, Baudelaire declares he wants to write poetic prose “without rhythm and without rhyme”:

Which one of us, in his moments of ambition, has not dreamed of the miracle of a poetic prose, musical without rhythm and without rhyme, supple enough and rugged enough to adapt to the lyrical impulses of the soul, the undulations of reverie, the jibes of conscience? It was, above all, out of my exploration of huge cities, out of the medley of their innumerable interrelations, that this haunting ideal was born. (*Small Prose Poems*, 1862)

This assertion should not mislead us though. Baudelaire’s program is not aimed at obliterating

rhythm or rhyme *per se*. It is only rooted in the desire to rid poetry of the old metric constraints, the alexandrine in particular, with its twelve syllables, its accents on the 6th and the 12th, its rhyme pairing modes, etc. This does not mean that poetry even poetic prose should or even could dispense with any order at all. On the contrary it must develop new modes of organizing speech that will no longer be based on symmetry, periodicity, number and codified repetition, but only on accent grouping and sound echoes. Baudelaire tries to get rid of classical metric forms and to write a new kind of poetry that would be like an organized flow of sounds or a flowing sound organization.

Only this new poetry can “adapt, he says, to the lyrical impulses of the soul” - an assertion through which, obviously owing to his own poetic practice, Baudelaire strikingly retrieves not only the German Romantics’ endeavor to “reach the soul through the music of speech”, but also Diderot’s definition of rhythm: “It is the very image of the soul rendered by vocal inflection.”

What emerges in the *Small Prose Poems* was actually already in the making in *The Flowers of Evil* published in 1857, where the very famous poem “Correspondances”, first sonnet in the volume, exposes the core of Baudelaire’s poetics. Poetry is certainly about correspondences between the senses, synesthesia, but it is also about interactions and echoes between the sounds of the poem itself. Only these correspondences can trigger the synesthetic feeling by which one may not only get back to the “vie antérieure” of the lost Paradise but also delineate a new sphere of experience, a new kind of *subject*.

CORRESPONDANCES

La nature est un temple où de vivants piliers

Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles ;

L’homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles

Qui l’observent avec des regards familiers.

Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent

Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité,

Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté,

Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.

Il est des parfums frais comme des chairs d’enfants,

Doux comme les hautbois, verts comme les prairies

- Et d'autres, corrompus, riches et triomphants,
Ayant l'expansion des choses infinies,
Comme l'ambre, le musc, le benjoin et l'encens,
Qui chantent les transports de l'esprit et des sens.

CORRESPONDENCES

Nature is a temple in which living pillars
Sometimes give voice to confused words;
Man passes there through forests of symbols
Which look at him with understanding eyes.

Like prolonged echoes mingling in the distance
In a deep and tenebrous unity,
Vast as the dark of night and as the light of day,
Perfumes, sounds, and colors correspond.

There are perfumes as cool as the flesh of children,
Sweet as oboes, green as meadows
— And others are corrupt, and rich, triumphant,

With power to expand into infinity,
Like amber and incense, musk, benzoin,
That sing the ecstasy of the soul and senses.

(Trans. William Aggeler, 1954)

his poetry and relation to 19th century French society and culture. But in this studies, he contended that “one cannot find here [in this particular poem] any simultaneous ‘correspondances’ like the ones that will be later promoted by the symbolists.” In my opinion, Benjamin missed here something important and took the *enunciated* as its face value without looking at what the *enunciation* does and whispers : “It is the past that whispers through the ‘correspondances’ described by Baudelaire, he said.” (Benjamin, 1939)

Contrarily to this mystical reading of a mystical theme, one might find in Baudelaire’s poetry “prosodic and rhythmic correspondences” that create one personal rhythm which refers to present. Therefore the “correspondances” are not only a poetic theme or a dream of an earlier rhythimized world. They actually expose a rhythmic experience of one subject in language *here and now*.

A first striking feature of this poem is that some verse support a string of accents that largely overcomes the traditional accentuation on the 6th and the 12th syllables.

1[^] 2[^] 3[^] 4[^] 5[^] 6[^] 7[^]

5 U U U — U — / U U — U U —
 — 8
 U
 6 Dans...

In this line, the doublet “**Comme de longs échos**”, paired by the sounds

[kə]/[kə]

and by a mirroring position in the hemistich, associates the analogical operator “comme” to the theme of the “écho”. Thus the natural analogies, that according to Baudelaire have been almost completely lost, are linked with what is for him “the lyric word *par excellence*” (Dessons, 1991, p. 68), the linguistic operator of the analogical power of human imagination. This fundamental fact is underlined by an over-accentuation of the line which comprises not less than 6 counter-accents plus another one that strides across the enjambement to the next line. This series is noted here by the numbers 1 to 8 ; accentuated syllables are noted — ; unaccentuated U (Bourassa, 2015). The words “**comme**” and “**échos**” are simultaneously connected to “**confondent**” which agglomerates, both in its sound structure and signified, the continuum between natural analogies and comparisons through speech.

This prosodic series expands in the wake of this line through a remarkable repetition of the word “comme”, proclaiming in an incantatory manner the human power of analogy : “**comme** la nuit et **comme** la clarté”, “**comme** des chairs d’enfants”, “**comme** les hautbois”, “**comme** les prairies”, “**comme** l’ambre”. Only “**corrompus**” introduces a nuance of something rotting which is a discrete reminder of the original Fall but is immediately transcended by its association with “riche et triomphant”.

[kɔ][rɛs][pɔ̃][dãs]
CORRESPONDANCES

A second striking feature of this sonnet is the spreading, dissemination and return in the whole text of the sounds that compose its title. As soon as *The Flowers of Evil*, Baudelaire generalizes internal rhymes. The periodic structure is already dubbed with a flowing and harmonic web of sounds. The *signifiance* produced by this organized dissemination reveals a *subject* which, while referring at the perfection of the lost world, affirms its power to transcend here and now the sinful and obscure nature through the power of imagination and poetic rhythms (for a full analysis see [Michon, 2010](#)).

Thus Baudelaire, much before the Symbolists, practiced “the simultaneous correspondences” which Walter Benjamin quite wrongly denied him, and engaged in a transformation of experience [1]. For sure, as Benjamin suggests, there is in this poem a kind of nostalgia for an “immemorial past”, a pre-adamic model of “full experience” and “anterior life” that the senses and imagination could enable us to foresee. The first quatrain, in particular, represents nature as a reality degraded by sin, where man can only perceive in a confused way some echoes of the original Word.

However, two important poetic facts minimize the impact of this quite traditional introduction. On the one hand, the emphasis on the pleasures given by senses is so important in the rest of the composition that the interrogation about the lost paradise retreats into the background to the benefit of a celebration of “the ecstasy of the soul and senses.” Baudelaire devotes 10 lines out of 14 to this celebration and, last but not least, he makes it the *clausula* of his poem. A sensualism inherited from the 18th century, which attributes a full moral dignity to the human sphere, counterbalances the Romantic religiosity and the theology of the sin which are expressed in this first quatrain.

On the other hand, if the word “comme” is used as a flag to announce the capacity of man to escape his dereliction thanks to the synthetic power of imagination, it does not carry it out all by itself. Actually, the whole speech weaves the analogies and supports by its associating capacity the imaginative power that gives to Man the means to extract himself out of fallen Nature and to enjoy again a “full experience.” All prosodic and rhythmic series agglutinate around crucial points of the discourses that celebrate the power of imagination and connect words often very distant from each other or separated by the syntax.

The real object of celebration of this poem is thus the poetic speech itself, because it intertwines sets of prosodic and rhythmic correspondences which are at the same time dispersed and relatively well organized. Poetry is a use of language that is characterized by an organized movement of the *signifiance* (Meschonnic, 1982). This poem can thus be read like a poetic manifesto that speaks in praise not of a “former life” nor of “whispering past” but of power of language and present life.

If we now superimpose these two orientations, we clearly see that the Baudelairean objective to transcend the dereliction of “Flesh” and “Nature” by “Art” - the very famous : “You gave me your

mud and I turned it into gold” – appears in a way that is quite different from Benjamin’s view. The analogical signifying force of language makes it possible for the body to extract itself out of its historical corruption. Thanks to its own synthetic aspect, it offers to Man the possibility to create *here and now* a sphere – the art – in which “the ecstasy of the soul and senses” are no longer separate. Thus Baudelaire, like Diderot and the German Romantics, like Proust later, does not seek only to go backwards to the plenitude of an earlier experience but he already proposes *in present time an experiment in subjectivation* through a dissemination-organization of signifying networks in the language and an anti-religious celebration of the powers of the body. In addition, he does not only open a way for the imprisoned experience ; he gives also to it a voice, it embroiders it in a rhythmic fabric which will enable it to circulate through time and people. Poems are – do we have to recall it ? – intended to be read, i.e. to create their readers and their *public*.

Now, we must not be impressed or misguided when Baudelaire rejects “rhythm and rhyme”. He actually seeks to give to each piece of poetry a specific *rhuthmos* that will allow its author to reform his or her experience and give its readers the power to fight against the dominant forms of life of the time, e.g. the forms related to the rise of the press, the urban development, and the increasing commoditization. Less than a will to regress into a prehistory that would be, as Benjamin would put it, “out” or “before time”, poetry is an attempt to take control over it by being both *subject* and *trans-subject*, at the same time *present* and *trans-temporal*. Modern poetry is about taking advantage of the general de-rhythmization of life to create through language new rhythms or new forms of life, that are simultaneously strictly personal but completely shareable by other people. It is about mutually creating individuals and a public composed of individuals, a true *democracy of poetry*. To put it in a nutshell, Walter Benjamin’s critique of Baudelaire was still too much influenced by theology and tended to forget the “politization of art” that Benjamin himself has helped to understand.

Concerned by the new forms of social interaction in the “enormous cities”, by “the entanglement of their innumerable relations” and the vast number of shocks that they continuously produced, concerned by a de-rhythmized society that spread in fluid and chaotic ways in streets and boulevards, concerned by an experience that was more and more degraded and that would be soon mechanized, Baudelaire invented a new kind of poetry which simultaneously enabled him to represent those new aspects of modern world and to oppose them through a “personal prosody”, a “poetic rhythm”, which reinstalled the conditions for full experience and fight.

Harmony vs Rhythm (Wagner - 1870-1883)

In 1870, in his *Beethoven*, Richard Wagner argues, debating Schopenhauer’s views on music, that “harmony” prevails on “rhythm” as the “noumenal” on the “phenomenal.” “Harmony”, he notes, is “music’s most essential element”, beyond “space and time”; “rhythm” only gives to “harmony” a “plastic” form by manifesting it in the double form of gesture and speech, i.e. in “space and time.” The value of music therefore lies primarily in the power of the latter which expresses the inner world of the noumenal, and which is incommensurable with that of the former, which gives only to musicians the means to engage with the exterior, phenomenal world of appearance.

While the *harmony* of tones, which is something that belongs to neither space or time, continues to be music’s most essential element, the creative musician will use the *rhythmic* temporal sequence of his utterances to come to an agreement with the waking world of appearances [...] By organizing his tones *rhythmically*, the musician thus comes into contact with the visual, plastic

world. (GS, IX, p. 76)

But this depreciation of “rhythm” to the benefit of “harmony” once again should not delude us. It is close to Baudelaire’s and, although it concerns a different medium in which language does not play a central role, it has broadly the same meaning.

Wagner’s aim is not to reject rhythm *per se* since rhythm is actually indispensable to music:

Human gesture, which seeks to make itself understood in dance through expressively changing regular movement, appears to be to music what solids are to light. For light could not shine without solids to refract it, and similarly we can say that without rhythm, it would not be possible for us to perceive music. (GS, IX, p. 76)

It is only to escape “regular rhythmic order” with the purpose of filling the music with its “own spirit”. At the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century, musical phrases were indeed often symmetrically organized. Set with equivalent duration, they were divisible by two, or better by four. This periodic distribution was called “quadrature,” with reference to four equal sides of a square, opposing by pair. Meters were few and quite regular during the same piece.

In 1844, Arthur Schopenhauer clearly outlined the nature of this dominant symmetrical structure.

The musical period consists of several bars, and it has also two equal parts, one rising, aspiring, generally going to the dominant, and one sinking, quieting, returning to the fundamental note. Two or several periods constitute a part, which in general is also symmetrically doubled by the sign of repetition; two parts make a small piece of music, or only a movement of a larger piece; and thus a concerto or sonata usually consists of three movements, a symphony of four, and a mass of five. Thus we see the musical composition bound together and rounded off as a whole, by symmetrical distribution and repeated division, down to the beats and their fractions, with thorough subordination, superordination, and co-ordination of its members, just as a building is connected and rounded off by symmetry. Only in the latter that is exclusively in space which in the former is exclusively in time. (*Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, II, On the Metaphysics of Music, 1844)

There is, according to Schopenhauer, an analogy between musical rhythm and architecture because both are founded on “symmetry” of fractions and “similarity” between “ultimate constituent parts.”

Rhythm is in time what symmetry is in space, namely division into equal parts corresponding to each other [...] as in architecture that which orders and holds together is symmetry, in music it is rhythm [...] As the ultimate constituent parts of a building are the exactly similar stones, so the ultimate constituent parts of a musical composition are the exactly similar measures; yet by being weak or strong, or in general by the measure, which denotes the species of time, these are

divided into equal parts, which may be compared to the dimensions of the stone. (Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung, II, On the Metaphysics of Music, 1844)

Despite the deep transformations that had occurred in the meantime, in his *System der musikalischen Rhythmik und Metrik* (1903), Hugo Riemann still professed at the beginning of the 20th century a full respect for the rhythmic norms of the Classic-Romantic period:

The musical beat culminated in the “eight-bar period.” Riemann called it a “normative basic schema.” The eight-bar period could be extended by augmenting or shortened by diminution. [...] The complete musical period for Riemann was characterized by a proposition (*Austellung*) and response (*Beantwortung*). It was a perfectly symmetrical unit of musical thought. (Herz, 1987, p. 8)

Wagner was not actually the only one to reject these conventions. From the 1840s on, musicians already experienced an evolution that led to contest the “quadrature” of the melodic phrase and the standard of the “eight-bar period.” Some Romantic musicians, like Chopin and Liszt, already made use of unequally organized melodic phrases and uneven measures, they revived baroque improvisation and ornamentation during performance and introduced non measured tempo changes like rubato. But actually the struggle to free the music from its old forms gained its full strength only around the middle of the century with Wagner and was brought to new heights by his successors, Debussy, Mahler and others.

In *Tannhäuser* (1845) and *Lohengrin* (1850), the periodic unit was still a structural norm but it was abandoned in later works. Against the quadratic conventions prevailing in Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Mendelssohn and the great romantic opera, Wagner started to write uneven and open-ended phrases, to fragment and mix various meters, to promote changing tempo during interpretation. By so doing, he did not want to eliminate or even minimize the role of rhythm. He only attempted to return it to its changing nature and release it from too rigid structures.

Roger Allen describes, in a scene of *Tristan und Isolde* (1857-1859), this tense relation between harmony “directing inwards” and rhythm “directing outwards” but he also shows clearly Wagner’s great attention to the latter:

In *Tristan und Isolde*, Act III Scene I (bars 1209-84), the dramatic expression of Tristan’s agony, Wagner’s harmony directs the drama inwards towards the delirium generated by insatiable longing through an intensely chromatic harmonic vocabulary. After the sighting of Isolde’s ship, the meter in Scene II fragments into an irregular pattern alternating between 3/4, 4/4 and a rare use of 5/4 in the accumulated frenzy of excitement whipped up by the orchestra as Tristan awaits the arrival of Isolde. This overt manipulation of rhythm thus directs the drama outwards towards an external event: Isolde’s arrival. (Roger Allen, Introduction in *Richard Wagner’s Beethoven*, 2014, p. 19)

Just as Baudelaire wanted to get rid of classical metric forms and write poetry as sheer organized flow of sounds, from *Tristan und Isolde* on Wagner completely abandoned quadratic melodic forms, regular meters and experimented the building of entire dramas through shifts in harmony, collage of melodic fragments and complex use of meters and tempo.

The opening of Wagner's *Tristan* prelude is also a paratactic structure. No clear tonality houses the three-bar motif. Instead of a complete periodic idea, Wagner begins the prelude with a chain of fragments, each one freely bonded to the next. [...] Here Wagner abandons the symmetrical unit of the period with its traditional coupling of antecedent and consequent clauses housed within the limits of a clear tonality. [...] Wagner takes a small motive, a mere fraction of a normal musical period, and begins to develop it sequentially. Instead of a period, one finds a series of small ideas that are linked together until they have huge repercussions. Here harmonic movement obfuscates the establishment of a tonality. [...] Since the small phrase of measures one through three is not closed but open-ended, Wagner is able to attach as many repetitions of it as he needs to fit his dramatic requirements. A full period is signified by a clear closure. Wagner dispenses with closure and thus rids himself of the need either to repeat the old period or to begin a new idea expressed in the form of another periodic structure. [...] Musical punctuation is defunct at the expense of organic continuity. (Hertz, 1987, p. 18)

In his *Beethoven*, Wagner claimed that music cannot reach the "mystic ground" of "the unconscious" through the "artificial "systematization of rhythmic structure". Instead, Palestrina's music, without the artificial "*Periodenbau*", achieved the most successful realization of the "inmost dream image of the world."

Thus the main objective of this new way to compose music was not to rid the latter of any rhythm but, as David Herz rightly remarks, to "generate a naturally flowing music that organically reflects the 'inner depth of soul-events' (*die Tiefen der inneren Seelenvorgänge*)." (Herz, 1987, p. 37) In this new music, harmonic movement would make up "the only audible rhythm." (quoted in Hertz, 1987, p. 37)

Sprung Rhythm vs Running Rhythm (Hopkins - 1875-1889)

Another very important artistic innovator of this period is Gerard Manley Hopkins, although most of his work remained unpublished during his life time. Hopkins is famous for having opposed "sprung rhythm" to "running rhythm." What does that opposition mean?

Poetry for Hopkins aims principally at grasping or receiving what he calls "inscapes":

There is one notable dead tree in the N.W. corner of the nave, the inscape markedly holding its most simple and beautiful oneness the up from the ground through a graceful swerve below (I think) the spring of branches up to the tops of the timber. (*Journal*, 15 Sept. 1871)

This act of grasping or perceiving the inscape of a thing, a building, a landscape, a river, a poem, etc. he calls "instress":

Hard frost, bright sun, a sky of blue “water.” On the fells with Mr. Lucas. Parlick Pieke and that ridge ruddy with fern and evening light. Ground sheeted with taut tattered streaks of crisp gritty snows. Green-white tufts of long bleached grass like heads of hair or the crowns of heads of hair, each a whorl of slender curves, one tuft taking up another—however these I might have noticed any day. I saw the inscape though freshly, as if my eye were still growing, though with a companion the eye and the ear are for the most part shut and instress cannot come. (*Journal*, 12 Dec. 1872)

“Inscape” designates the unified complex of characteristics that gives each thing its uniqueness and beauty, while “instress” sometimes means the force of being which holds the “inscape” together, more often the impulse from the “inscape” which carries it whole into the mind of the beholder.

These notions have well known philosophical and theological background. As Spinoza, Leibniz and Diderot before him, Hopkins addresses the problem of individuation in a world that is recognized as dynamic and perpetually flowing. “Inscape” and “instress” are reminiscent of what was called *conatus* in 17th century or *tendance* in the 18th century (Michon, 2015). They refer to the unique force that holds together, drives and makes it interact with others each unique being, animate or inanimate. They are the prime elements of a dynamic and pluralistic worldview.

But, as a title of a 1888 poem shows, Hopkins balances his belief in a “Heraclitean nature” with the “comfort” brought by Christianity:

That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection (*Poems*, 1888)

Because he rejects Spinoza or Diderot-style metaphysical deflation of a world without Creator and Incarnation, and because he draws from the same scholastic medieval source, i.e. Duns Scotus, Hopkins is closer to Leibniz for whom the Creation by God has set up a world populated by an infinity of strictly individualized things yet remaining bound together by pre-calculated interactions, among which some are called by Leibniz “appetitions” and “aperceptions” and by Hopkins “instresses.”

According to Duns Scotus and to Leibniz, *haecceitas* or “thisness” inheres in every created thing, inanimate, animal or human. It is the mark of its Creation by God, and it is active. So it is lived out in action and in movement: each thing veers towards a particular destiny or purpose. Although God, because of his omniscience and omnipotence, knew in advance, when he created the world, each particular destiny, he was and is also infinitely good and righteous, and consequently cannot have predestined some individuals to salvation and others to damnation. Therefore, for Hopkins as for Leibniz and Duns Scotus, each destiny involves free will, which expresses one’s own individuality bestowed by God.

[Hopkins] felt that everything in the universe was characterized by what he called *inscape*, the distinctive design that constitutes individual identity. This identity is not static but dynamic. Each being in the universe “selves,” that is, enacts its identity. And the human being, the most highly

served, the most individually distinctive being in the universe, recognizes the inscape of other beings in an act that Hopkins calls *instress*, the apprehension of an object in an intense thrust of energy toward it that enables one to realize specific distinctiveness. Ultimately, the instress of inscape leads one to Christ, for the individual identity of any object is the stamp of divine creation on it. (Stephen Greenblatt *et al.*, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 2006)

In the opening passage of *Comments on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola*, Hopkins points out that each “finite” being is unique and has a “perfection” of its own, which it must manifest to honor its Creator.

Nothing finite can exist of itself. For being finite is limited and determined in time and space, as the mind is limited and determined to particular dates of time and place by the body. And apart from the body it is determined. I say apart from the body because it may be maintained that the mind has no bound from space nor even from time, for it may exist after death and may have existed before birth. Nevertheless it is finite in its own being, as said above, and determined. [...] Nevertheless the being it has got has a great perfection, a great stress, and is more distinctive and higher served, than anything else I see, except other such minds, in nature. Now to be determined and distinctive is a perfection, either self-bestowed or bestowed from without. (*Comments on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola*, 20 Aug. 1880)

In the poem *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*, the “just man justices,” he “acts” what he “is.” The existence performs the essence. In fulfilling his divine calling, he is, in fact, reflecting the Incarnation of his Creator in Jesus Christ. The paradox is that, as humans express their uniqueness, they are all reflecting the glory of God as expressed in Christ: it is the same Christ in all, yet differently expressed in each person.

[...] Í say móre: the just man justices;
Kéeps gráce: thát keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God’s eye what in God’s eye he is-
Chríst-for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
[...] (*Poems*, 1882)

The poet’s perfection, then, is to be writing poetry in a unique way, but this poetic aim has nothing to do with a mere Romantic search for originality or petty bourgeois selfness. For Hopkins, this ability is “bestowed from without,” firstly by God, then by the language the poet is given to use. It is then the artist’s task to perceive and express such uniqueness, either in art or through words, in order to glorify each part of the Creation and its Creator.

But as air, melody, is what strikes me most of all in music and design in painting, so design,

pattern, or what I am in the habit of calling “inscape” is what I above all aim at in poetry. (Letter to Robert Bridges, 15 Feb. 1879)

The reference to this philosophical and religious background of the notions of “inscape” and “instress” constitutes the most common way Hopkins’s poetry has been read since it was published at the beginning of the 20th century. But one may wonder whether this *reductio ad philosophiam et theologiam* tells the whole story. Hopkins was first of all a great poet, observing nature, analyzing human perception and producing a new poetics, a poet who has been exceptionally influential since his work was discovered in the 1920s. And that is what still matters to us nowadays, especially when we are not Christian.

If we consider first the subjects that appealed to him, we realize his particular and lifelong attention to flowing elements like sea waves, running waters, shifting clouds or fountain-like weeping branches.

Hopkins used to concentrate on clouds to discover their “inscape,” i.e. their distinctively unifying pattern.

I have been watching clouds this spring and evaporation [...] One day early in March when long streamers were rising from over Kemble End one large flake loop-shaped, not a streamer but belonging to the string, moving too slowly to be seen, seemed to cap and fill the zenith with a white / shire of cloud. I looked long up at it till the tall height and the beauty of the scaping—regularly curled knots springing if I remember from fine stems, like foliation in wood or stone—had strongly grown on me. It changed beautiful changes, growing more into ribs and one stretch of running into branching like coral. Unless you refresh the mind from time to time you cannot always remember or believe how deep the inscape in things is. (*Journals*, March 1871)

In his *Journals* and *Notebooks* Hopkins mentions many times running waters or tumultuous rivers whose “scaping” he longs to discover.

Laus Deo [Praise God]—the river today and yesterday. Yesterday it was a sallow glassy gold at Hodder Roughts and by watching hard the banks began to sail upstream, the scaping unfolded, the river was all in tumult but not running, only the lateral motions were perceived, and the curls of froth where the waves overlap shaped and turned easily and idly.—I meant to have written more. (*Journals*, 20 Oct. 1870)

In a beautiful essay, Jerome Bump showed that this attraction for rhythms of flowing elements already shined through the sketches he made with his brother Arthur from the cliff in Freshwater Bay on the Isle of Wight during summer 1863. While Arthur focused on an unusual bridge-like rock formation in the sea, Gerard tried to reproduce the pattern made by the waves below.

Note: The curves of the returning wave overlap, the angular space between is smooth but covered with a network of foam. The advancing wave, already broken, and now only a mass of foam, upon the point of encountering the reflux of the former. Study from the cliff above. Freshwater Gate. (*Journals*, 23 July 1863)

Bump rightly underlines the rhythmic—or more appropriately the *rhuthmic*—dimension of this observation. The uniqueness of the “inscape” depends on “returning or recurrent pattern,” “internal network of structural relationships,” “integrating laws.”

A common misconception of the word [inscape] is that it signifies simply a love of the unique particular, the unusual feature, the singular appearance, but that meaning fits *Arched Rock* [Arthur’s painting] better than it does Gerard’s note on waves. Gerard lost interest in what was merely unique; as in the wave study he usually sought the distinctively unifying design, the “returning” or recurrent pattern, the internal “network” of structural relationships which clearly and unmistakably integrates or *scapes* an object or set of objects and thus reveals the presence of integrating laws throughout nature and a divine unifying force or “stress” in this world. (Bump, 1982, p. 18)

If we now consider his writing, we see that Hopkins claims that each poem should have an “inscape” of its own and that beauty depends utterly on poetic uniqueness.

[Irish poetry is] full of feeling, high thoughts, flow of verse, point, often fine imagery and other virtues, but the essential and only lasting thing left out—what I call *inscape*, that is species or individually-distinctive beauty of style. (Letter to C. Patmore, 7 November 1886)

Inscape is the very soul of art. (Letter to Richard Watson Dixon, 30 June 1886)

But “poetic inscape” is defined by Hopkins as shape of speech. In an extraordinary way, antagonistic to an immemorial tradition, the meaning loses its primacy and is used only as necessary support for the signifier pattern.

Poetry is speech framed for contemplation of the mind by the way of hearing or speech framed to be heard for its own sake and interest even over and above its interest of meaning. Some matter and meaning is essential to it but only as an element to support and employ the shape which is contemplated for its own sake [...] Poetry is in fact speech only employed to carry the inscape of speech for the inscape’s sake—and therefore the inscape must be dwelt on. (*Journals and Papers*, “Poetry and Verse”, Sept. 1873-July 1874)

In many of his attempts to describe “inscape” of landscapes or seascapes, Hopkins refers to “inner laws.” He seems especially fascinated by parallel lines as such laws of form. Concurrently Hopkins is also very interested in the old Bishop Lowth’s theory on parallelism in the Old Testament. For these

various reasons it has been argued that, for Hopkins, “poetic inscape” is based on parallelism, much like in Hebrew poetry. Figures of speech, especially metaphor, simile, antithesis, could be seen as parallels of thought; whilst repeating patterns of rhythm, rhyme and alliteration could be seen as parallels of sound. (e. g. Prickett, 1986, Lichtmann, 1989)

This idea of parallelism, which dates back to the 18th century, is already quite debatable when it is applied to the Hebrew Bible (Kugel, 1981). Meschonnic has convincingly argued that it reintroduces Greek rhetoric, semiotics and metrics into a entirely different kind of poetry free of all dualistic concerns (Meschonnic, 1982, p. 469 *sq.*). But it bears little meaning for Hopkins’s poetry either, whose rhythm it tends to reduce to a set of intricate dualistic devices, i.e. once again to rhetoric and metrics, instead of showing how precisely it frees itself from them and establishes a entirely new kind of organization of speech. Some scholars confused what Hopkins said he was doing and what he was actually doing.

As a famous online encyclopedia recalls:

Much of Hopkins’s historical importance has to do with the changes he brought to the form of poetry, which ran contrary to conventional ideas of meter [and one may say to the idea of meter itself, PM]. Prior to Hopkins, most Middle English and Modern English poetry was based on a rhythmic structure inherited from the Norman side of English literary heritage. This structure was based on repeating groups of two or three syllables, with the stressed syllable falling in the same place on each repetition. Hopkins called this structure “running rhythm,” and though he wrote some of his early verse in running rhythm he became fascinated with the older rhythmic structure of the Anglo-Saxon tradition, of which *Beowulf* is the most famous example. (*Wikipedia*, “Gerard Manley Hopkins”)

If Lowth’s theory had an impact on Hopkins’s poetic theory and practice, it only was by helping him to get rid of traditional metric. Indeed Lowth intended to show how the Hebrew poetry of the Old Testament of the Bible was structured by a series of “parallel” or similarly expressed phrases, usually in pair and therefore could not be measured like English poetry, that is, by meter. Beyond this everything belongs only to Hopkins.

Hopkins calls his own rhythmic manner “sprung rhythm.” This new rhythm breaks free from the traditional repetitive structures and introduces variability in the succession of stresses. It is constructed from feet in which the first syllable is stressed and may be followed by a variable number—between one and four—of unstressed syllables. Because stressed syllables often occur sequentially in this patterning rather than in alternation with unstressed syllables, the rhythm is said to be “sprung.”

Hopkins claims to have discovered this previously unnamed poetic rhythm in the natural patterns of English, in folk songs, spoken poetry, nursery rhymes, Shakespeare, Milton and others.

I had long had haunting my ear the echo of a new rhythm which now I realized on paper. To

speak shortly, it consists in scanning by accents or stresses alone, without any account of the number of syllables, so that a foot may be but one strong syllable or it may be many light and one strong. I do not say the idea is altogether new; there are hints of it in music, in nursery rhymes and popular jingles, in the poets themselves. (Letter to Richard Watson Dixon, 6 October 1878)

But some critics believe he merely coined a name for poems with mixed, irregular feet, like free verse, which he would therefore anticipate by a few years. Others object to this view that while “sprung rhythm” allows for an indeterminate number of syllables to a foot, Hopkins was very careful to keep the number of feet he had per line consistent across each individual work, a trait that free verse does not share.

The latter claim is fairly correct but what matters here is first that Hopkins saw “sprung rhythm” as a way to escape the constraints of “running rhythm,” which he said inevitably pushes poetry to become “same and tame.” (*Author’s Preface*, c. 1883) Although he remained faithful to verse and did not go as far as writing poetic prose, his research strongly resembles Baudelairean late endeavors against metric, as much as 19th century French and 20th century English free verse poetry. One might say without exaggeration that “sprung rhythm” vs “running rhythm” constitutes an English version of the opposition we have already encountered in French literature between poetic prose and meter. It is simultaneously “the least forced” i.e. the most “natural,” “the nearest to the rhythm of prose” and the most powerful, “the most rhetorical and emphatic of all possible rhythms.”

Why do I employ sprung rhythm at all? Because it is the nearest to the rhythm of prose, that is the native and natural rhythm of speech, the least forced, the most rhetorical and emphatic of all possible rhythms. (Letter to Robert Bridges, 21 Aug. 1877)

The second important point is that “sprung rhythm” is simultaneously inspired by spoken and popular poetry and designed to both emulate and magnify the rhythm of natural speech.

Sprung rhythm gives back to poetry its true soul and self. As poetry is emphatically speech, speech purged of dross like gold in the furnace, so it must have emphatically the essential elements of speech. Now emphasis itself, stress, is one of these: sprung rhythm makes verse stressy; it purges it to an emphasis as much brighter, livelier, more lustrous than the regular but commonplace emphasis of common rhythm as poetry in general is brighter than common speech. (Letter to Everard Hopkins, 5 Nov. 1885)

Hopkins uses diacritical marks on syllables to indicate which should be drawn out (acute e.g. á) and which uttered quickly (grave, e.g., è) :

The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo

(*Maidens’ song from St. Winefred’s Well*)

THE LEADEN ECHO

How to kéep—is there ány any, is there none such, nowhere known some, bow or brooch or braid
or brace, láce, latch or catch or key to keep

Back beauty, keep it, beauty, beauty, beauty, ... from vanishing away ?

Ó is there no frowning of these wrinkles, rankéd wrinkles deep,

Dówn ? no waving off of these most mournful messengers, still messengers, sad and stealing
messengers of grey ?

[...]

The third point is that “sprung rhythm” entails an extensive use of alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia and rhyme, both at the end of lines and internally, as in the famous poem:

As Kingfishers Catch Fire

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies dráw fláme;

As tumbled over rim in roundy wells

Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell’s

Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;

[...]

As the flow of sounds in Baudelaire’s *Correspondances*, this intensive play with signifiers results in saturating the speech line with sound echoes and resonances that over-determine the syntactic production of meaning.

Thus we could certainly say that Hopkins’s belief in Incarnation is translated into the “inscapes” of his individual poems by means of “sprung rhythm.” Hopkins wants every poem to have its own rhythmical as well visual “inscape,” making it distinct from every other poem, as created things are distinct from each other. But this doesn’t explain why Hopkins and his “sprung rhythm” have been so influential for the last century and will probably remain so for a long time.

I think most of it can be explained by the *modernity* of his poetics—which ought not to be confused with a mere *Modern* poetics and which is actually independent from his Christian belief. As Diderot, the German Romantics and Baudelaire, Hopkins hoped to free poetry from metrics, to make sound come to the foreground, to think of rhythm as a complex organization of the flow of speech instead of mere repetition of regular stresses. “Inscape” or “inner law” are analogs of “hieroglyph,” “calculable law” or “correspondences.” All these concepts refers to the same experience in making poetry and to the same concept of rhythm as an organized each time unique *rhuthmos*.

This common line of thought based on fabrication, craft, practical experience appears so clearly that one wonders whether we could not re-interpret Hopkins's theology and ontology on entirely materialist and empiricist grounds. As noted above, "inscapes" and "instresses" are very close to two famous materialist ways to figure out individuation in a radically dynamic and flowing world: *conatus* and *tendances*.

Indeed, save the belief in Creation and Incarnation—which is not little I must admit—everything else in Hopkins's worldview is consistent with the rhythmic conception we traced already in Spinoza, Leibniz and Diderot (Michon, 2015) and that we have been following throughout this book. "Sprung rhythm" appears as a typical *rhuthmological* enterprise that participates, in its own Christian way, in a strong artistic and philosophical movement that gets its main inspiration from 18th century radical Enlightenment and is going to expand across Europe until the end of 19th century and beyond.

[Free Verse Rhythm vs Metric Rhythm \(Mallarmé - 1886-1897\)](#)

Footnotes

[1] It is not the place, here, to determine whether these phenomena are conscious or not, but I cannot leave these interrogation on the side. I would say the following, without seeking to justify it. It seems to me that rhythm and these kinds of literary phenomena precisely transgress the opposition of conscious and unconscious and that there is, in poets and more largely in writers, a "consciousness of the ear" which is different from the "consciousness of the brain". Although one is not mobilizing clear and distinct ideas, one knows nevertheless when a line, a poem, or a text is right.