

28. Visual embodiments

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In the blink of an eye – eye-movement of individual readers and the sonnet form

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Between “Nerves” and “Figure” : Physiology and the Ontology of Lyric in Gerard Manley Hopkins

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In the blink of an eye – eye-movement of individual readers and the sonnet form

Combining quantitative and qualitative studies of lyric, I will probe into what eye movement may tell us about the sonnet form. Eye tracking studies with respect to reading poetry usually focus on phonological and visual aspects (cf. Carminati et al. 2006), the exception being, perhaps, enjambment (cf. van 't Jagt et al. 2014), and, more recently, the alignment of the lines of a haiku (cf. Müller et al. 2017). I will present the results of an explorative study which suggests, for example, that readers direct their attention to the beginning of lines rather than to their end. Most importantly, fixations and saccades of individual readers do not easily support the claim that “[t]he sonnet inscribes in its form an instruction manual for its own creation and interpretation” (Levin 2001, xxxvii). I will argue that eye tracking data call for a phenomenological approach, i. e. a more dynamic conception of form, which, according to Angela Leighton, “starts to alter the very thing we mean by knowing” (2007: 27). Reading sonnets, the eye tracking data suggest, requires a “particular mode of organizing and amplifying” images and thought (Levin 2001, xxxvii) but that mode does not simply map onto traditional conceptions of the sonnet form.

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Between “Nerves” and “Figure” : Physiology and the Ontology of Lyric in Gerard Manley Hopkins

I argue that Gerard Manley Hopkins’ understanding of the “lyric” can add philosophical complexity and depth to current discourse about the genre. For Hopkins, the lyric is characterized by an ontological tension between two distinct foundations, one of which is physical, and the other a figurative design or process. Hopkins’ attempt to reconcile these two perspectives reveals his participation in a larger epistemic problem of his time: the questions around the nature of subjectivity that begin to be asked in the 1870s and 1880s, as the rise of physiological psychology provokes a reaction in the form of qualitative, anti-positivistic theories of the self in the works of such figures as Franz Brentano, William James, and Henri Bergson.

In his early work, Hopkins suggests that poetry has both a physiological substrate in the mind, and an active performance exceeding that substrate. In his manuscript “Notes on Greek Philosophy,” he defines poetry as emphatic language, and language itself as “the expression, the uttering of the idea in the mind.” He claims that this “idea” itself is made up of two terms: (1) “the image ... which is in fact physical,” and (2) “a refined energy accenting the nerves.” This two-part “idea,” half physical, and half accented energy, is transiently “uttered” in the mind; poetry seems to be an action that passes through the physical substrate without being defined by it; it has both an embodied and an immaterial aspect. By 1874, Hopkins seems to break with the physiological account; poetry now finds its elements in language itself, rather than its utterance. Poetry has its own “inscape,” and the poet “dwells” on words in order to “detach it to the mind.” However, he also claims here that the essence of poetry is figuration: poetry is “speech wholly or partially repeating some kind of figure which is over and above meaning, at least the grammatical, historical, and logical meaning.” This ontological account of poetry emphasizes formal design, rather than physiological presence.

In 1885, when John Dewey announces a “new psychology” that will describe “touch of reality in the life of the soul,” Hopkins himself begins to discuss the soul of poetry. Lyric, he claims, has been historically reduced to a “whisper” and “mental effect,” instead of the “performance” which is its proper “soul.” His sprung rhythm, he argues, “gives back to poetry its true soul and self.” The “soul” for Hopkins is a fraught term, as it also refers to God’s incarnational presence in his creation, which gives every object an “inscape.” How can it be the work of human making? Hopkins’ turn from physiological accounts to a patterned and “soul”-based account of poetry, I argue, relies in large part on changes in his conceptions of “instress” and “inscape,” whose meaning comes to include the essence of an artwork. His deployment of “instress,” “soul,” and “inscape,” together with their lyrical embodiment in sprung rhythm or emphatic speech, participates in the turn towards phenomenological studies of human experience and materiality emerging in the 1870s and 1880s. Hopkins’ theory of the lyric, when set beside philosophical works of the period such as Henri Bergson’s *Matter and*

Memory, not only enriches our understanding of his own poetry, but complicates core themes in current discussions of the relations between lyric, materiality, utterance and embodiment.