ECHOES OF BIRDS' SONG AND POETS' SONG

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"We've been on earth all these years and we still don't know for certain why birds sing," Annie Dillard writes in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, a 1972 collection of essays which interweave topics of the author's personal life, the natural world, and philosophy. While listening to birds sing and pondering the nature of language, she contemplates:

> It could be that a bird sings I am sparrow, sparrow, sparrow, as Gerard Manley Hopkins suggests: "myself it speaks and spells, Crying *What I do is me: for that I came."* … [However, if] the lyric is simply "mine, mine, mine," then why the extravagance of the score? .... Who, telegraphing a message, would trouble to transmit a five-act play, or Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," and who, receiving the message, could understand it? (107)

I think Dillard is right to draw this analogy between birds' song and poetry. The "extravagant" aspect of birds' song continues to delight and challenge researchers in a way that parallels the manner in which poetry continues to delight and challenge language scholars. Researchers have theorized that birds sing to attract their mates and they have found that male birds adjust their songs for preferential selection; for example, birds with strong voices may imitate the song of other suitors, while birds with weaker voices may perform a different song.[1] Although I am not using this example to propose the idea of an aesthetic consciousness in birds, this seemingly innate choice to imitate or vary a challenger's song can be anthropomorphically and metaphorically read as an example of the artist's decision to

[1] For more scientific information about birds' song, see Lahti et al. My interest in birds' song in this essay is largely as a metaphor for language. However, I want to express my gratitude to the participants at the CEA Conference 2012 "On Exile and Its Variations" in Arecibo, Puerto Rico who pointed out to me, during an earlier draft of this essay, that males, not females, are the birds who sing. I would also like to thank members of the Biology Department at UPR, Mayagüez whose conversations with me about birds' song form the basis of the connections that I make here and the further research that I did into the topic. Any misunderstanding I have about birds' song is entirely my own fault.

show his/her superior ability by performing the same work better or to display a different range of talent by performing a more enchanting variation. An interesting example of this artistic variation occurs between the very poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins to which Dillard refers above, known by its first line "As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame" (c1877, but published c1918) and Robert Frost's "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same," published in the 1942 collection *A Witness Tree*, two sonnets which begin with the aesthetics of birds and end with vastly opposed commentaries on the omnipresence of man.

Hopkins' sonnet begins with the fiery plumage of the kingfisher bird ("As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame") perhaps in the light of the setting or rising sun, a powerful visual image that transitions into predominantly auditory images in the rest of the first octave. The second, third, and fourth lines refer to "tumbled … Stones ring[ing]," "tucked string tell[ing]," and bells sounding out their essence into the world, building to the key idea in the second quatrain: "Each mortal thing does one thing and the same/...myself it speaks and spells,/ Crying *Whát I do is me: for that I came*." Here Hopkins uses the metaphor of nature sounding itself to endorse the philosophy that he dubbed inscape, the idea that each living thing announces and reaffirms its own individuality. In order to be able to focus further on Hopkins' language choices, I would like to cite the poem in its entirety:

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;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves—goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *Whát I do is me: for that I came.*

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,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

Hopkins' images, while striking, are curious—from nature, he employs two living creatures (kingfishers and dragonflies), and then the non-living stones and finally, wells (which both nature and man have a hand in making). Connected through similes, the kingfishers' brilliant display is likened to each being's self-making in the world. Was the bird chosen for its name's reference to both kings and fishers as well

as fishers of kings and the religious connotations of those ideas? Are catching fire and drawing flame allusions to some type of holy spirit that gives life to all creatures, foreshadowing the idea of "tongue[s]" in the fourth line? Was Hopkins, as Dillard does above with her native birds, merely musing about the common kingfisher, fellow inhabitant of Great Britain? Was it for the alliteration of the [k] in king and catch and [f] in fishers and fire? Could "catching fire" and "drawing flame" refer to auditory images, making a parallel between sounds in the world and alliteration in the line? From the first word "As," Hopkins sets the poem up as a comparison between auditory images in the world and what they represent, giving a sort of speech to all things. Yet with his careful attention to alliteration and rhyme, he shows the poem to be another object that sounds itself.

In the octave, Hopkins sets up the issue that everything lives in a way that tells its own existence. In the sestet of the sonnet, Hopkins proposes that each being's representation of only itself is the result of what God intended, writing: "Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is" (line 11). His resolution in the sestet is that God can be seen in all these shows of individuality and distinction. Hopkins uses the form of the Petrarchan sonnet to put God at the center of his meaning. For Hopkins the fact that each mortal thing speaks itself is the effect in the world of God. The *volta* reveals that living things do not just represent themselves, but show the existence of the creator in the world.

In his analysis of Hopkins' poetry, Joseph Hillis Miller reads Hopkins as saying that "What is important in poetry is neither the inner expression of the poet, as some romantic poets had thought, nor the imitation of something in the external world, as Aristotle had said. Poetry, like music, is an autonomous art... Poetry makes patterns of sequences of words." In Hopkins' own journals he writes:

> Poetry is speech framed for contemplation of the mind by way of hearing, or speech framed to be heard for its own sake and interest over and above its interest of meaning. Some matter and meaning is essential to it but only as an element necessary 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.

As Joseph Hillis Miller reads Hopkins' assertion, poetry is the form. Each poem speaks itself as a poem, showing through its careful construction that it is a poem in every line, through the syllable count, through the devices, through the rhyme, etc. "As kingfishers…" demonstrates Hopkins' careful attention to form. The first octave establishes a series of beautifully crafted images that all contribute to the same simile. Moreover, every line of the poem demonstrates a pattern

of alliteration or repetition. For example, line 13: "Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his" uses alliteration of the [l] and repetition of the phrase "Lovely in" as well as the assonance of [i] in "in," "limb," and "his." In his analysis of the sonnet, Desmond Egan counts 15 images and 20 verbs. "As kingfishers…" is a poem which reveals greater and greater "patterns of sequences of words" upon each reading.

Hopkins' definition of poetry as seen through his journals and Joseph Hillis Miller's explication can be further compared to Dillard's discussion of birds' song and beauty. When listening to the birds, she thinks:

> My brain started to trill why why why, what is the meaning meaning meaning? It's not that they know something we don't; we know much more than they do, and surely they don't even know why they sing. No; we have been as usual asking the wrong question... The real and proper question is: Why is it beautiful? ... Beauty itself is the language to which we have no key; it is the mute cipher, the cryptogram, the uncracked, unbroken code. And it could be that for beauty, … that there is no key, that [it] will never make sense in our language but only in its own, and that we need to start all over again, on a new continent, learning the strange syllables one by one. (108)

Already in Dillard's writing, there is a reference to the patterns, to the sequences of words. After listening to the birds' song, she hears in her own head the trilling or repetition of the words "why" and "meaning." She (instinctively?) imitates the pattern that she hears, but her instinct also directs her to the meaning. Then her intellect turns instead from the unknowability of birds' song to the incomprehensiveness of beauty. We can know and understand the pattern, but the meaning of beauty eludes us. Like Hopkins before her, she takes the birds' song, along with other spectacular shows in nature and finds in them an essence, which she (and other philosophers such as Kant) call beauty and which Hopkins (and other believers) call God.

The beauty in the poem, it seems, derives from the structure of the poem. Just as there is the assertion by the suitor or the territorial competitor in the birds' song, there is a message in the poem, but it is not as important as the sounding of speech itself. Although Hopkins claims the inscape is more important than the content of the poem, "As kingfishers…" has traditionally been read as both an illustration and explanation of inscape. The sonnet, while speaking the idea of inscape, exemplifies his idea of inscape in poetic form.

However, while the language of the sestet serves to underscore the idea of God's creations in the world, in fact, it also calls attention to the poet's role in the creation of the poem. Not only does "each mortal thing" cry "*Whát I do is me: for that I came*," but Hopkins' first person speaker "say[s] more." Although Hopkins expects a focus

on the inscape to show us the way God reverberates in all creation, a focus on this phrase "Í say móre," reveals the poet's concern with what the poet is saying. Hopkins has put the poet-speaker into the poem in the act of saying the poem. Moreover, the accents on "I" and "more," the first and third syllables of the line, are examples of sprung rhythm, a poetic form associated with Hopkins, which he believed more closely imitated speech than iambic pentameter. In his speaker's way of saying more, Hopkins has alluded to himself within the poem.

While it's hard to see this trace in the poem of the poet-speaker as intentional on Hopkins' part, it is this idea that Frost copies and reformulates in "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same" (which I cite here for further comparison):

> Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same
>
> He would declare and could himself believe
> That the birds there in all the garden round
> From having heard the daylong voice of Eve
> Had added to their own an oversound,
> Her tone of meaning but without the words.
> Admittedly an eloquence so soft
> Could only have had an influence on birds
> When call or laughter carried it aloft.
> Be that as may be, she was in their song.
> Moreover her voice upon their voices crossed
> Had now persisted in the woods so long
> That probably it never would be lost.
> Never again would birds' song be the same.
> And to do that to birds was why she came.

I have not found an overt reference that Frost was familiar with Hopkins' poem; however, Frost did spend two periods in England working with poets who were admittedly influenced by Hopkins. Hopkins' collected works were published in 1930, twelve years before the publication of Frost's book containing "Never Again…" Moreover, there is the obvious detail that both poems contain references to birds, nature, and poetry, as well as the more remarkable details that both poems are sonnets, a form which both poets employed, but not for the majority of their poems and that the partial line "for that I came," is echoed in Frost's line "for that she came."

Frost's poem ostensibly tells the story of how Eve's voice is part of birds' song. Frost's speaker begins by "declar[ing]" that the voice of Eve has been added to the song of birds, continues by explaining that "her voice upon their voices crossed" has been occurring for such a long time now "that probably it never would be lost," and finishes by asserting that "to do that to birds was why she came." In contrast to the message of Hopkins' sonnet, Frost's sonnet contends that birds'

song shows not God's, but man's influence on the natural world.

The use of the sonnet with this echoed but transformed line is the primary reason that I believe Frost's poem to be an example of the artistic imitation with variation to which I alluded in my introduction. Hopkins' key line "Crying *Whát I do is me: for that I came*" comes at the end of the Petrarchan octave as compared to Frost's key line "And to do that to birds was why she came" which instead occupies the powerful last line in a Shakespearean couplet. Frost has taken this line from Hopkins' poem, but he has varied it to give it his own spin. Whereas Hopkins creates an almost prelapsarian world where each feature exhibits God's presence, Frost revises this meaning by moving his version of the echoed line to the end of the couplet where it serves to radically change the idea he had been developing in the first three quatrains. These three quatrains suggest that Eve's voice has become mixed in birds' song in an almost accidental way, yet the final couplet suggests that her influence, or man's influence, on nature is intentional. Frost uses the form of the Shakespearean sonnet to put man at the center of his meaning. For Frost each living thing is over-sounded or voiced over by man. Hopkins imagines each being as having an essence that shines forth and that essence is God; Frost counters that what we actually see and hear is the sound of our own voices.

Like Hopkins, Frost pays intense care to the technical aspects of the poem. His sonnet follows the traditional rhyme scheme for a Shakespearean sonnet and emphasizes sound imagery as well (for example, line 3 "daylong voice" and line 8 "when call or laughter carried it aloft). While he employs less alliteration, he does use a tighter meter and syllable count, breaking 10 syllables only in the line "Moreover her voice upon their voices crossed." However, Frost pays particular attention to having the form of the poem parallel the message. Frost's first quatrain asserts the idea that Eve's voice is in birds' song. The second quatrain further details this point. The third quatrain establishes the ubiquity of the idea. The final couplet then shows the deeper consequence of the point that the first three quatrains establish. So in Frost's sonnet, poetry is not revealing only the properties of poetry itself as Hopkins intends his sonnet to do, but Frost reveals an important content about the nature of language as well, namely that there is something of man it.

Just as Hopkins' speaker slips into the sestet and speaks himself, so Eve's voice slips into birds' song and sounds humanity's recognition of its own voice in the language of nature. Frost suggests that perhaps this slippage is inevitable in art. While Hopkins may be correct that "each mortal thing… speaks and spells itself," art, and

specifically poetry, likewise speaks man's ability to create.

Critics have pointed out that the title "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same" and its repetition in the penultimate line of the sonnet hints at the speaker's, and mankind's, nostalgia for Eden.[2] Yet with the force of the last line, Frost essentially dismisses this nostalgia for something purer or better. It is nature, and not man, that has been most clearly affected by man's exile from the Garden. Neither man nor birds will ever know what their song would have been like without Eve's voice. So the naturalness, or the part of birds' song that belongs to birds only, that characterizes birds' song as specifically their own, or the otherness of birds' song is inextricable from the part of the song that we can recognize as Eve's voice. Yet Eve's voice makes the birds' song something special, something notable, something important for humans. Because Eve's tone of meaning can be found mingled in birds' song, birds' song can be known by man to that extent.

The last line, "To do that to birds was why she came" indicates that man was never supposed to be one with nature; rather that man's position right from the beginning was to overwrite the sounds of the animals with man's own sound. Judith Oster notes, "Eve's influence, as we have been told again and again before ever having read this poem, ... lost man Eden. Eve's influence introduced mortality," and I would add more importantly, Eve's influence introduced the knowledge of mortality. However, in this revision, Eve's taking fruit from the tree of knowledge was not a mistake on Eve's part or something she was tricked into by the cleverer almost always masculinized Satan. Taking fruit from the tree of knowledge was inevitable because "to do that to birds [and apparently to men] was why she came." Through the eviction from Eden and the projection of her own sound, Eve gains a voice for man as a whole in the world. Eve's tone of meaning can be heard in birds' song.

As the birds who sing are usually male birds, we can see how Frost could be talking about his own poem, for Eve is in the speaker's song, and in Frost's song as well. The idea of Eve's tone of meaning in the birds' song can be taken as a metaphor for poetry's tone of meaning in language; just as Eve's tone affects the language of nature so does poetry affect the nature of language and understanding. Poetry in general and poets in particular have affected the way that we understand language. Instead of seeing language as something alien to ourselves, only necessary because of our fragmentation from the natural world, we are able to glimpse ourselves and our place in

[2] See Wargacki and Oster among others.

nature through the influence of poetry on language. What results from this crossing of Eve's voice (poetry) and birds' song or the natural world (language) then is a moment of synthesis revealing the great beauty and meaning of language.

Frost's poem challenges Hopkins' not only in terms of the meaning but in the very way it presents its ideas. Hopkins' speaker unquestioningly asserts that the images in his poem reflect the presence of God in the world; in contrast Frost's speaker employs the adverbial smoothing of "admittedly," "be that as it may," and "moreover." Critics have pointed out that such language typically characterizes the presentation of an argument or a reasoned type of nonfiction writing as distinguished from literature or poetry. However, Frost's use of this language could be seen as challenging Hopkins' concept of poetry. According to Joseph Hillis Miller, for Hopkins "Poetry is not distinguished from other uses of words by its intensity or complexity of meaning. The meaning is there only as a necessary support for the pattern." It would seem then, that Frost is refuting this very conception of poetry. Just as the unidentified "He" of the poem, hears Eve's tone of meaning in birds' song, so man hears his tone of meaning in poetry, perhaps because of the pattern, to which both Hopkins and Frost attach importance, although not to the same extent. Dillard confirms the importance of the pattern as well when she notes that the birds' song "becomes more and more beautiful as it becomes more and more familiar" (108). The birds' song and the pattern of the poem are indelibly marked with this tone of meaning.

In contrast to Hopkins though, Frost privileges the tone of meaning over the pattern of the poem. Frost's first line "He would declare and could himself believe," which inverts a more logical order of believing something first and then declaring it, characterizes this very point. What is declared in the poem becomes what is believed. Frost's speaker spends three quatrains declaring that Eve's voice is in birds' song and by the final couplet, the poet takes this as a given and gives us the consequences "Never again would birds' song be the same/ and to do that to birds was why she came."

This play between the poems confirms that by the final couplet, we are no longer talking about birds' song, but rather poems themselves. The troubling last line "And to do that to birds is why she came" is not expressing human dominion over nature, but rather the idea that what humans do is to put meaning in language, through art forms like poetry, and to put meaning in the world as they perceive it. The comment is not necessarily an assertion of man's power over nature. Rather it speaks of man's engagement with language. Language cannot just be a meaningless form; it must contain our "tone

of meaning;" it must be marked by human involvement.

A similar point, that we must find our "tone of meaning," is echoed and transformed by Adrienne Rich in her 10 line free verse poem "In a Classroom," published in *Time's Power: Poems 1985-88*, which closes with the lines "a presence like a stone, if a stone were thinking/ What I cannot say, is me. For that I came."[3] The title of Rich's poem moves us from birds, nature, and the woods to a classroom, filled with old dusty poetry books and uninterested students. The speaker in the poem, assumed to be the teacher in the class, singles out one student, Jude, whose face is "opaque," "a presence like a stone," presumably due to boredom and lack of comprehension of the poetry. By the time of publication of Rich's poem, even Frost has been dead twenty plus years and there is nothing still alive in the poetry that the students are studying. The teacher comes with arms full of books and the reader can feel the immense weight of poets like Hopkins and Frost and their definitive ideas about what poetry was as she plops the books down on the table.

The speaker's students "[talk] of consonants, elision,/ caught in the how, oblivious of why." While "consonants" harkens back to the alliteration of Hopkins and "caught in the how" also makes a passing reference, it is interesting to note that the homonym "consonance" means agreement and harmony. "Oblivious of why" reiterates the students' lack of connection to the message and vocabulary of the poem. Hopkins' and Frost's kingfishers and dragonflies have been replaced by dust motes. Rich's choice of "elision" as the other poetic device they discuss is curious since it can also be read as any type of omission, specifically the omission of Rich and her students from this world of poetry. For all their above mentioned differences, Hopkins and Frost share in a harmony of language and poetry that these students, and even their teacher, do not seem to be able to access.

Rich's turn of phrase in the final lines, though, indicates that the situation is not hopeless. While her description "a presence like a stone" may seem derogatory, it also serves as an allusion to Hopkins' sonnet where the ringing stones function as an important example of the presencing he discusses. For Rich and her students, what the poetry does not say, is them. Their voice is not in these poems. However, with the creation of her poem and the addition of the period in the final line, Rich seeks to change that: "What I cannot say, is me. For that I came." For what previous poets have not yet said, Rich has come to poetry. To say what has been elided and omitted, Rich and

[3] I do not pretend to know every poem that uses some variation of this line. In fact, this is the only other instance I know. Moreover, this instance was brought to my attention by a student doing a presentation on Adrienne Rich.

her students have come to poetry.

While Frost meets Hopkins on his own playing field of the sonnet, Rich breaks from this tradition, this pattern. Instead she goes back to his image of the reverberating ring of a stone tumbling down a well, sounding its yawp into the world. In his revision of Hopkins' ideas about the role of poetry and of the poet's responsibility to make meaning in the world, Frost anticipates Rich's later revision. "Be that as it may, she [is now] in their song." Just as Frost describes with the voice of Eve, Rich's tones of meaning now echo in Hopkins' and Frost's songs, catching readers in the how and why of poetry.

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