In 1918 Robert Bridges, Poet Laureate of Britain and friend of Hopkins, published Hopkins’s poems thirty years after his death with a print run of 750 copies. Interest in this previously unknown poet and his “sprung rhythm” piqued enough by 1930 to justify a second edition.

Each of the subsequent editions in 1948, 1967, and 1990, besides serving as an indicator of increased scholarly interest in Hopkins, is the beneficiary of the availability of the poet’s private papers and closer examinations of his manuscripts and transcriptions that added clarity to the man himself, his intent, and his marks of rhythm in the poems.

Libraries in the US, the UK, Europe, and Africa account for 128 copies of the 1918 first edition. It is unknown how many copies exist in private collections.

Thanks to the generosity of the Jesuits of Le Moyne College a rare copy of the 1918 first edition was purchased for the library in 1982 in celebration of the completion of the new library building.

Unopened pages are the result of the need to reproduce a signature or block print of an image onto a large sheet that is then folded into the final text block before binding. Printers could trim the edges and remove the folded part that is blank, or not. Readers often used “paper knives” to open the pages.

Le Moyne’s copy of the 1918 first edition has such pages. You can see the image of the poet’s signature reproduced from his private papers in the lower image.
Before his conversion to Catholicism, Hopkins’s poems, influenced by the poetry of Keats and the aestheticism of his Oxford tutor, Walter Pater, were skillful but metrically conventional. Only drafts survive, since Hopkins burned his poems when he became a Jesuit, believing that his religious vocation required renunciation of merely aesthetic pleasure. His years of poetic silence, during which he still dreamed of an experimental “new rhythm” in poetry, ended when his Jesuit superiors encouraged him to write a poem on a recent disaster. In the winter of 1875, a German steamship ran aground in a blizzard; of the 78 persons lost, five were German Franciscan nuns. Hopkins set to work. But the result, the metrically and linguistically astonishing elegiac ode, The Wreck of the Deutschland, was too revolutionary to be fully understood let alone published.

Like the shorter poems that came rapidly on its heels, the Deutschland ode utilized what Hopkins called “sprung rhythm,” in which only accentual stresses count in the metrics of a line, a line typically electrified by spondees and by emphatic alliteration and assonance, and often marked as well by the disruption of conventional syntax. The ode was followed by stunningly innovative poems, the best of them sonnets: novelty and power intensified by being cast in this most traditional of poetic forms. These remarkable, often magnificent poems remained for decades known only to a close circle of friends, and to the man who became Hopkins’s literary executor, Robert Bridges, himself a fine if conventional poet.

When Bridges finally published the poems in 1918, almost thirty years after the poet’s death, they fell essentially stillborn from the press. Only when the book was reissued in 1930 did it have its famously explosive impact on contemporary poets, and on the generations that followed. Without being immersed in Hopkins, Dylan Thomas could not have written his elegy “A Refusal to Mourn,” any more than Ted Hughes could have written “The Thought Fox” without having read Hopkins’s “The Windhover.” Without knowing “As Kingfishers Catch Fire,” in which Hopkins captures Duns Scotus’s idea of “individuation,” Seamus Heaney would not have described poetry as “the consonantal fire struck by idea off language.”

Given the belated publication of his work, his syntactical and metrical innovations and their influence on 20th-century poets, we think of Hopkins as a “modern” poet. He is; but, above all, he is a Victorian late Romantic, as revealed by his emphasis on a natural world perceived in rapture but ordered and enhanced by what Coleridge called “the shaping spirit of imagination.” For Hopkins, Pater’s full “aesthetic moment” required the fusion of three elements: a sensuous, ecstatic relishing of ever-changing, “pied” or “dappled” nature; intellectual “shaping”; and an assertion of ethical value—in Hopkins’s case, a world “charged with the grandeur of God” and the glory of Christ.

The spiritual moral is never “tacked on,” as in inferior didactic verse. In Hopkins, it is an integral element of the very structure of his poetry: poems incarnating the vision of a sacred unity underlying the beautiful multiplicity of nature to which he responded with such rapture and poignancy. And, at times, such agony, as in the “terrible sonnets” of 1885, which describe in harrowing detail the plight of a man of faith struggling in the dark night of the soul, and surviving “that year/ Of now done darkness I wretch lay wrestling with (my God!) my God.”

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