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Sprung Grief: Solastalgia And The Ecological Body In The Poetry Of Gerard Manley Hopkins

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ABSTRACT

Solastalgia, Glenn Albrecht's term for the psychic distress produced by environmental change experienced in place, is a diagnostic vocabulary that emerged only in 2005. Gerard Manley Hopkins's poetry, written a century earlier amid the ecological upheavals of Victorian industrialisation, arguably stages this affective condition long before medical or environmental psychology named it. Through the reading of Hopkins's "Binsey Poplars", "God's Grandeur", "Inversnaid", and "The Sea and the Skylark", this paper proposes that Hopkins's metrical innovation "sprung rhythm" functions as a formal correlative of environmental grief. Here, the composition is analysed through the strain, compression, and self-interruption of his lines, which enact the perceptual disruption his speakers describe. The analysis is structured around three affective registers: direct loss, anticipatory dread, and sensory disruption. The essay situates this reading within an emerging body of scholarship (Parham's Green Man Hopkins, recent work on Hopkins's ecological perception) while extending it toward the psychological humanities, a field that has typically treated literary form as illustrative of affective experience. Further, this paper repositions Hopkins's prosody as evidentiary, demonstrating that his metrical strain functions as evidence of ecological grief. The paper's broader claim is that nineteenth-century nature poetry constitutes an underused archive for the psychological humanities.

INTRODUCTION

In 2005, the environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht coined the term "solastalgia" to describe a form of emotional or existential distress caused by negatively perceived environmental change. Under the lens of David Rapport's "ecosystem distress syndrome", Albrecht developed the concept of solastalgia, which studies the relationship between ecosystem distress and human distress (Albrecht 44). After the collective influences of Aldo Leopold and Elyne Mitchell, Albrecht developed the term through theoretical fieldwork, chiefly with communities affected by events such as volcanic eruptions, drought, or destructive mining. The existing solastalgic discussion

addresses its theoretical underpinnings; this paper extends the framework by analysing the metrical and rhythmic order in Gerard Manley Hopkins' poetry. Hopkins introduced a new pattern in metrical verse called "sprung rhythm", situating it as a central core in this paper. Sprung rhythm, as John Parham says, it consists of accents or stresses alone, without regard to the number of syllables, and it does not take strong or weak syllables into account (159). Parham further scrutinises the concept of sprung rhythm as a rhythm responsive to reading the metrical account at an ecological scope, pitched at the level of the energy system and social ecology (146 – 162). Hopkins's poetics covers ecosystemic threat, or what Parham calls "Victorian risk society", God's Grandeur (1877), for example "And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil/Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod" (Hopkins, lines 7 – 8). Thematically, the "shod" foot is itself a risk-society image, but the regular interruption between soil and shod conventionally captures the grief of it. Parham borrows the conception of Victorian risk society from Ulrich Beck's concept of "risk society", who examines French forestry debates of the 1800s–1830s and frames Cadet de Vaux's attribution of drought to deforestation and Arago's parliamentary committee. Beck further examines how nineteenth-century thought had already begun to reframe climatic and ecological damage as a political account (Fressoz 338). This specific layer, the nineteenth-century eco-consciousness against Western industrialisation, is distinctively articulated by numerous authors such as John Ruskin (lectures on moral and aesthetic consequences of industrial pollution, i.e "The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century" (1884) and Elizabeth Gaskell (who articulated environmental degradation as inseparable from social conditions, i.e "North and South" (1855). Among them, Hopkins's articulation captures readers' grief over environmentalism and its transformation. This paper examines and understands grief in Hopkins' poetry through his rhythmic pattern by situating solastalgia as an affective structure, predominantly discussed as a twenty-first-century diagnostic category. The analysis further investigates how prosody in Hopkins' works functions as historical evidence. The analysis extends and interrogates how prosodic strain functions as historical evidence of ecological grief by noticing the absence of a nineteenth-century clinical vocabulary for ecologically produced psychic distress and reading poems such as "Binsey Poplars," "God's Grandeur, "Inversnaid," and "The Sea and the Skylark" through three affective registers such as direct loss, anticipatory dread, and sensory disruption.

Solastalgia in the Victorian era:

The central methodological question of locating solastalgia in the Victorian era stems from the rise of industrial capitalism and the acute environmental dislocation that followed. Albrecht theorised solastalgia, which distinctly focuses on the modern and late-modern condition. Through Peter Read's "Returning to Nothing" (1996), Albrecht refers to environmental disasters such as the destruction of the city of Darwin by cyclone Tracy in 1974 or social development with the drowning of the town of Adaminaby by Lake Eucumbene in 1957 as part of the Snowy River Hydro Electric Scheme (47). Since solastalgia addresses much later environmental conditions, locating this affective structure in the Victorian period requires establishing the loss experienced in nineteenth-century Britain. Wendy Parkins and Peter Adkins analysed and asserted Victorian ecology as the changing relations between humans, animals, and their environments during the long nineteenth century. One example is the intensification of agricultural production, in which, as (qtd) Winter has shown, developments in transportation and communication enabled 'sophisticated crop rotation and a mixed farming regime that relied heavily on the use of animal fertilisers' (8). Solastalgia typically fits this area of Victorian environmentalism: the environmental concerns that are produced by individuals and smaller communities. Green Victorians, for instance, examines the intellectual contribution of Ruskin to modern environmentalism and his influence on a handful of individuals who retreated to the Lake District in the late nineteenth century to live according to

an "ethos of artful simplicity" (qtd in Williams 676). The environmental inconvenience, as Bonneuil and Fressoz explain in The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History and Us (2016), is that, during the course of the nineteenth century, Britain emitted four times as much carbon dioxide to reach a standard of living not much greater than that of its counterparts across the channel in France, not only polluting the atmosphere with a hitherto unseen intensity but establishing the blueprint for a modern fossil-fuel-dependent industrial society (pp. 116–117). This collective compression of environmental time is the precondition for solastalgia as Albrecht defines it. Distress requires that the observer's spatial continuity in a place outlast the place's stability. This grounding helps in understanding the location of solastalgia. Victorian atmosphere, as Daniel Williams quoted earlier, underwent numerous changes, and through this, an individual's psychic distress is captured. Another principal reason for analysing solastalgia in the Victorian era and literature is situated in the paper's methodology of reading Hopkins's poetry and his prosodic convention, sprung rhythm, which also undergoes an individual learning experience, and an affective structure is configured through self-interruption.

Table 1Affective Registers of Ecological Grief in Hopkins's Poetry

Affective register	**Selected poem(s)**	**Prosodic features examined**	**Interpretation in the study**
Direct loss	*Binsey Poplars*	Repeated words, clustered stresses, and chant-like closing lines	Rhythm conveys mourning for a familiar landscape after its destruction.
Sensory disruption	*God's Grandeur*; *The Sea and the Skylark*	Heavy stresses, repetition, enjambment, and dense consonantal patterns	Prosodic pressure suggests disrupted relationships between people and the natural environment.
Anticipatory dread	*Inversnaid*	Alliteration, internal rhyme, rhythmic variation, and suspended syntax	Formal interruption conveys anxiety about the possible disappearance of wild landscapes.

Source: Synthesised from the supplied manuscript. These connections represent the study's literary interpretations.

Sprung Rhythm as Methodology:

Reading Hopkins' poetry as a historical text necessitates a methodology or a specific analysis to understand prosody as an independent locus of meaning. The following sections organise the analysis around three affective registers: direct loss, anticipatory dread, and sensory disruption. A specific formal mechanism in Hopkins's sprung rhythm, as Bruce Hayes and Claire Moore-Cantwell observe, "A metre in sprung rhythm consists of an alternating sequence of S (Strong) and W (Weak) positions, beginning and ending with W. The meters are classified according to the number of S positions they contain. For example, the metrical template for sprung rhythm tetrameter is, approximately, WSWSWSWSW (5). This variation in each line helps show that the prosodic pattern generates the affective register independently of what the poem's words denote. The focal point of this study is to demonstrate that the selected Hopkins poems (Binsey Poplars, Inversnaid, God's Grandeur, and The Sea and the Skylark) are an active record of an affective structure articulated during the Victorian era.

Prosodic Registers of Grief:

This section conceptualises the affective registers of solastalgia before proceeding to the close reading. As mentioned earlier, this paper focuses on three different affective registers of solastalgia (direct loss, anticipatory dread, sensory disruption). Direct loss is something that is already lost and the feelings associated with it. Theoretically, Zhiwa Woodbury proposes a similar register in the context of trauma and climatic change, as she calls the condition "The Case for a New Taxonomy of Traumatology" (4). Anticipatory dread is solastalgia experienced as something about to be gone, and sensory disruption is solastalgia experienced as a numbing of the very capacity to perceive loss. In "Binsey Poplars" (1879), the line "All felled, felled, are all felled" (line 3) stages direct loss through its unpatterned syllable structure. Sprung rhythm keeps a strict count of stressed syllables, but the unstressed syllables can vary freely. The amalgamation of stresses is freely released one after the other, with the irregularity highlighting its percussive effect. Sometimes, sprung rhythm works in reverse direction: "On meadow & river & wind-wandering weed-winding bank." (line 8), the last line of this stanza goes unhurried with a dandling motion that acoustically recreates the leisurely landscape. The slow sound effect of the closing line of the stanza seeds to evoke the reader's emotion. Building upon Cynthia Whissell's argument, "When we hear sounds, we interpret the meaning in what a speaker is telling us because the sounds themselves are informative. This is also true when we read what writers have written because we tend to associate sounds with the muscular movements that produce them (139)". It is critical to recognise that modern reading posits interpretation on an experiential mirror. In the closing lines of Binsey Poplars: "The sweet especial scene,/ Rural scene, a rural scene,/ Sweet especial rural scene." (lines 22 – 24), the sense of rhythmic weight falls heavily on the stressed words (sweet, es-pe-cial, ru-ral). The chanting effect in the closing lines is slow and hypnotic. Hopkins uses harsh onomatopoeic sounds in the earlier stanza and avoids in the latter. The repetition in the closing lines is rhythmically melancholic and helps readers understand the grief over the damage occurred. This poem prosodically performs a rhythm through repetitions to make readers understand the register's impact concurrent with semantic content. Precisely, this is the mechanism that this analysis claims: a reader understands the poem through sounds and the beat of the poem and gets closer to the poetic subject. Sprung rhythm in God's Grandeur (1877) is a different approach to staging loss as the foreclosure of perception. "Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;" (line 5). Repetition in Binsey Poplars is melancholic, whereas in God's Grandeur the repetition of "have trod, have trod, have trod" consecutively applies heavy stresses. The mentioned line implies that humanity has marched over the earth in a mindless cycle. But the heavy stresses break the regular metrical flow to sound like heavy boots stomping monotonously on hard pavement. So the semantic meaning is overtaken by the stress structure of the line. "Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod." (line 8) (We are so cut off from nature by our own industrial products like shoes or boots that we can no longer physically feel the ground beneath us). Words like "bare" and "shod" land with sharp emphasis, carrying the terminal stress of the line without being softened by a predictable metrical bounce. It jars the readers to understand the separation between man-made shoes and bare earth. The perceptual lag between naming the contaminated ground and confirming its bareness is a mirroring method of syntax. Sensory disruption compiles individual interruption, which is a case of enjambment across "soil" and "Is bare". This interrupted disturbance brings readers close to an atmosphere of poetic grief. The meters of both God's Grandeur and The Sea and the Skylark (1877) are heavy and process the raw acoustic energy. In The Sea and the Skylark, "In crisps of curl off wild winch whirl, and pour" (line 7) piles up heavy consonants (c, w, r, ʃ) that work under the sibilance. The consonantal density of the line carries five stressed syllables in rapid succession with minimal unstressed release between them, so that the stress-clustering itself

withholds the "energy exchange". Sibilant sounds evoke emotions in poetry through mimetic components such as whispering, hushing and so on. This makes the readers' auditory experience deeply psychological. As Hamida Riahi observes, the repeated voiced/d/sounds in poetry generate a dirge-like rhythm that evokes deep sorrow. The seminal argument is that the interspersed voiceless sounds and mimicked pauses or sobs disrupt the regular meter (6). The exact argument presented is that sprung rhythm, which breaks traditional poetic structure to capture raw human emotion, matches the pattern that Riahi observes. The phonetic texture of words should physically embody their meaning. The voiced dominance creates a heavy sonic landscape. Sprung rhythm utilises this dense phonetic layering to ensure that the listener, or perhaps the reader, with stipulated phonetic conditions, physically feels the weight of mourning/lamenting through the rhythm itself. "Sprung rhythm transformed Hopkins' descriptions of nature. Freed from the constraints of syllabic metre he was able, for example, to engage in more precise description facilitated long passages of natural description (such as, for example, those of the ascent and song of the lark in 'The Sea and the Skylark' or the course of the burn in Inversnaid) (Parham 160)".

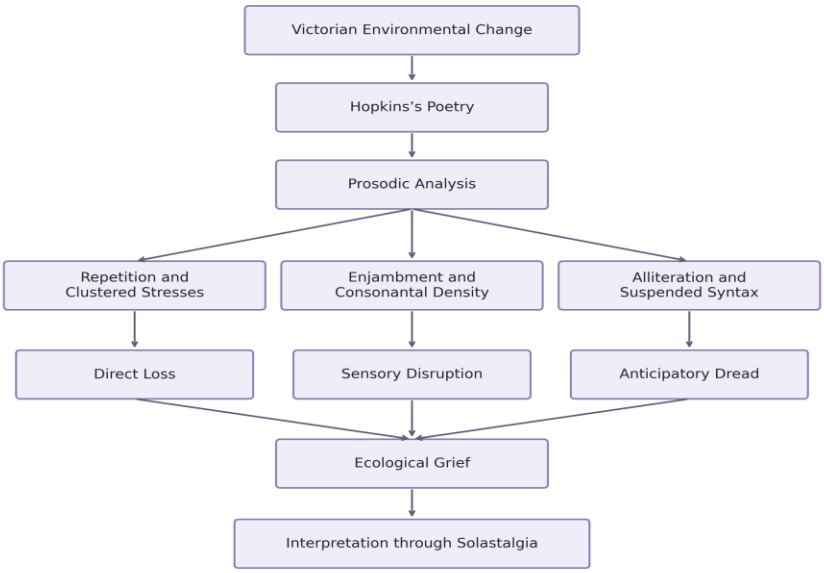


Figure 1Conceptual Framework for Reading Ecological Grief through Hopkins's Prosody

Anticipatory dread in solastalgia theory is a newly developing concept that has the affective burden of expecting ecological loss before it physically appears. As Lars Moratis calls it, "anticipated solastalgia," he further defines the concept not just about the lived experience of environmental restoration and accompanying feelings of distress (Albrecht's concept of solastalgia), but also about the anticipation of lived experiences of continued or recommenced environmental degradation and ecological loss as the externalities of a revived economic machinery (412).

A windpuff-bonnet of fawn-froth

Turns and twindles over the broth

Of a pool so pitchblack, fell-frowning,

It rounds and rounds Despair to drowning. (lines 5-8)

In the poem Inversnaid, the acoustic texture is stacked with alliteration and internal rhyme (windpuff-bonnet, fawn-froth, fell-frowning). The coined kinetic verb, "Turns and twindles",

speeds up the rhythm and stutters it simultaneously. This reproduces the vortex effect where the current sucks the surface debris downward. “What would the world be, once bereft/ Of wet and wildness? Let them be left (line 13 – 14)”, the syntactic completion of loss (bereft of what) is withheld across the line is assertive about why the line break after "bereft" gives a small suspension. The notion of anticipatory solastalgia is supported through the irregular rhythm articulated in Inversnaid. The poem refuses to go with the syntactic pattern; let the poetic subject collide with irregular rhythm. It hangs the reader, as it hangs the landscape, irregularity becoming the acoustic equivalent of an anonymous positive/negative emotion.

Conclusion:

Hopkins’s poetry, through sprung rhythm, therefore, stages the three affective structures (direct loss, sensory disruption, and anticipatory dread). The sense of temporal trace towards solastalgia has always been located within the late industrial era. The endeavour of reading the affective registers together is to present Albrecht’s environmental vocabulary in a Victorian context. The temporal totality in Hopkins’s four selected poems is unable to locate ecological grief in any one tense because the loss in question is neither fully past nor safely deferred. Also, a study of four poems and one author across the annals of writing cannot establish that Hopkins’s sprung rhythm is the only prosodic system to achieve eco-grief in a metrical sense. The study is solely attributed to Hopkins’s poetry and did not undergo any comparative practices with other poets. This reading establishes a method to recover the affective architecture through a formal prosodic analysis. The core interrogation asserts that the environmental emotion (negative) has always existed, and what is newly visible is the shape of feeling recovered by reading the poetry as a formal record central to prosody and rhythm.

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