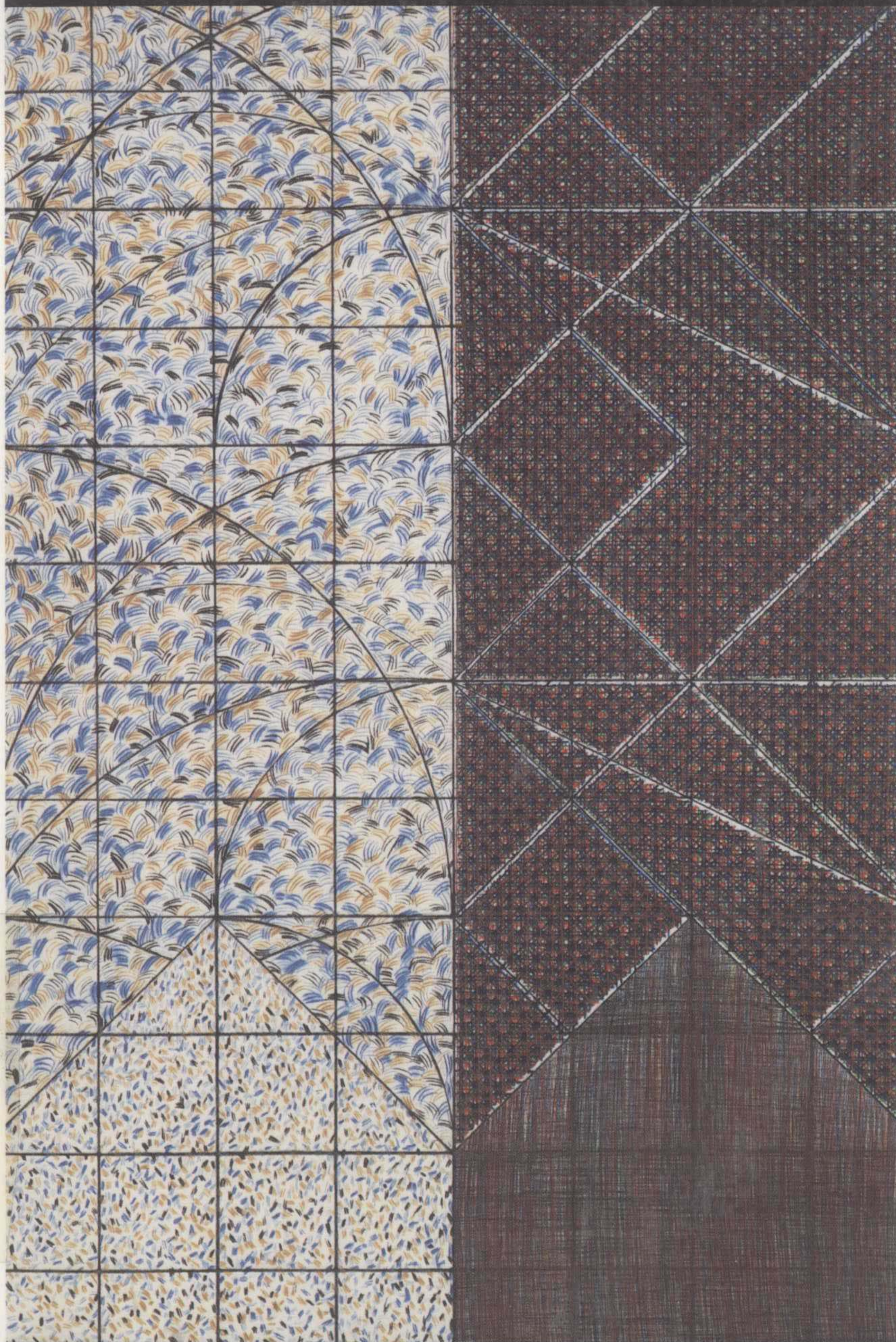


HELEN VENDLER
The Breaking of Style



HOPKINS • HEANEY • GRAHAM

The Breaking of Style

♦ ♦ ♦

HOPKINS

♦

HEANEY

♦

GRAHAM

Helen Vendler

Harvard University Press

Cambridge, Massachusetts

London, England

1995

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Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Vendler, Helen Hennessy.

The breaking of style: Hopkins, Heaney, Graham / Helen Vendler.

p. cm.—(The Richard Ellmann lectures in modern literature)

ISBN 0-674-08120-X (cloth: alk. paper).

ISBN 0-674-08121-8 (pbk.: alk. paper)

1. English poetry—History and criticism. 2. Hopkins, Gerard Manley, 1844-1889—Style. 3. Heaney, Seamus—Style. 4. Graham, Jorie, 1951—Style. 5. English language—Style. I. Title. II. Series: Richard Ellmann lectures in

modern literature

PR504.V46 1995

821.009—dc20

95-4663

CIP

The Richard Ellmann Lectures
in Modern Literature

Acknowledgments



This book was given as the Richard Ellmann Memorial Lectures (1994) at Emory University. I am most grateful to Professor Ronald Schuchard for his memorable hospitality on the occasion of my stay.

My editors at Harvard University Press, Margaretta Fulton and Maria Ascher, have made the creation of this book a pleasure.

I am indebted to Susan Welby for devoted assistance with manuscript preparation.

Author and publisher are grateful for permission to use the following material:

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Preface



When I was twenty-seven, Harvard University Press, on the suggestion of my dissertation director John Kelleher, asked to see my work on Yeats's *Vision* and the plays, and a few months later I found in my mail a note from the Press with a reader's report recommending publication. When the book was published, I learned that my reader had been Richard Ellmann. I was always grateful to him for fostering me into print. Eventually, we grew to know each other, and to my admiration for his writing there was added an affection for the person. The issue of the *Yeats Annual* compiled in his honor became, in the event, a memorial issue; the essay I wrote, as if by a final benefaction from him, spurred me to begin at last the book on Yeats's poems that I have wanted to write since I was twenty-three.

When I falter under the burden of manuscripts, letters of recommendation, and endorsements of tenure, I remember that Richard Ellmann was not too busy, long ago, to read a manuscript written by a student, and to welcome it with generous warmth. Perhaps being married to the wonderfully intelligent Mary had made him more hospitable to writing by women than many men of his scholarly generation—or maybe, and more likely, he married Mary because he liked intelligent women. His self-depreca-

tory and ironic humor prevented his ever exhibiting pomposity, even when he was wearing his Oxford gown at New College, as he was when I saw him last. He was both good to me and good for me, as he was for countless younger writers. Many other scholars have, as he had, high professional accomplishments; but memorials seem to accrue to those who are not only distinguished but also loved. The tragedy of his last illness stands as an instance of life's arbitrary cruelty to the good and the gifted; but our memories of him, and the many memorials in his honor, together with his own capacious and definitive writings, ensure that we remember, with a regenerative sense of life's copiousness, his full spirit.

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Introduction



It is still not understood that in lyric writing, style in its largest sense is best understood as a material body. When a poet puts off an old style (to speak for a moment as though this were a deliberate undertaking), he or she perpetrates an act of violence, so to speak, on the self. It is not too much to say that the old body must be dematerialized if the poet is to assume a new one. “In art, in a sense,” John Ashbery wrote in *Reported Sightings*, “all change has to be for the better, since it shows that the artist hasn’t yet given in to the ever-present temptation to stand still and that his constantly menaced vitality is emitting signals” (187). The fears and regrets attending the act of permanent stylistic change can be understood by analogy with divorce, expatriation, and other such painful spiritual or imaginative departures. It is hoped, of course, that the new body—like the new spouse or the new country—will be more satisfactory than the old, but it is a hope, not a certainty.

I have been speaking as though the invention of a new stylistic body were a voluntary act, like filing for divorce or going willingly to live abroad. But there is much that is wholly involuntary about it. A new sense of life presses unbidden upon the poet, making the old style seem unsuitable or even repellent. “Some of one’s early things,” Wallace Stevens wrote, “give one the creeps” (*Letters*, 667). Robert Lowell complained that pieces of his earlier driven and violent style kept turning up like flotsam and jetsam when he was trying to write the ironic, mild, and distanced lines

of *Life Studies*. The invention of a new phase of style, then, is often less a voluntary act than an involuntary one. One is repelled by one's present body and cannot inhabit it any longer.

To represent style, I use the word "body" (rather than the perhaps more customary image of dress) because I want to emphasize the inextricable relation of style to theme. Yeats's bravado in "A Coat" with respect to doffing his "old embroideries"—"There's more enterprise / In walking naked" (*Collected Poems*, 125)—suggests, misleadingly, that one *can*, in poetry, walk naked—and that one can easily slough off a style. Nothing could be further from the truth.

There are, of course, artists who do not exhibit dramatic breaks of style—Herbert, for instance. And there are some, like Tennyson, who attain a mature style and work deliberately within it for decades, complicating and elaborating it. Some poets pursue two very different styles at the same time (though usually in two different genres, as Wordsworth does in the *Lyrical Ballads* and *The Prelude*). But other artists perceive—sometimes even in extreme youth, as Keats did—that they cannot continue to write in the style that they have made, that they have even perfected. Keats, striking out the influence of Milton from *Hyperion*, declared, with no hyperbole intended, "Life to him would be death to me" (*Letters*, II, 212). And he wrote himself a new body in *The Fall of Hyperion*.

A dramatic change of literary body cannot be other than overdetermined. In consequence, many inferences about a poet's feelings can be made from style. Keats's declaration against Milton was in part religious, rejecting Milton's god; in part cultural, rejecting Milton's endorsement of Hebrew mythology over Greek mythology; in part linguistic, rejecting Milton's Latinity; in part gender-directed, rejecting Milton's principle of male sovereignty; in part political, rejecting Milton's monarchic and hierarchic heaven and earth. But rejection alone—whether it repudiates an adolescent style, as in Stevens; a mature but now repellent style, as in

Lowell; or a historical precursor's style, as in Keats—cannot by itself supply a positive model for a new body. The positive aspect of the breaking of style, when it appears, must, as much as the negative one, have a convergent set of creative causes. “English ought to be kept up,” said Keats (*Letters*, II, 167), suggesting that if he did not positively keep it up, English might fade and die. “I had long had haunting my ear the echo of a new rhythm,” Hopkins wrote to Richard Watson Dixon, explaining why the prosody of “The Wreck of the Deutschland” differed so from the metrics of his early verse (*Correspondence*, 14). “The goldener nude of a later day”—a positive, Botticellian idealization of the new creative Venus—beckoned to Stevens as he contemplated the present “paltry nude” of American culture (*Collected Poems*, 5–6). Seamus Heaney, writing *North*, found himself looking to the “thin” music of poetry written in the Irish language for a positive alternative body to the broad (and colonizing) placidities of the English pentameter. There must be, in short, espousals as well as rejections in the invention of the new stylistic body, not only when the new body is a permanent one but also when it is provisional, when it is adopted for a single volume or even for a single poem.

Not only aesthetic motives determine a change of style. Moral reasons, too—and at least as often as aesthetic ones, as we have seen in the case of Keats—can prompt a breaking of form. The author may be forced to admit, by a new blankness in his own perception of the world, that the absence of the (old) imagination had itself to be imagined, as Stevens put it in “The Plain Sense of Things” (*Collected Poems*, 502–503), compelling himself to face the blank that lies beneath the trials of device. We can see a comparable admission in Hopkins when he faces the truth that on the Last Day the aesthetic variety of the world will be obliterated—that earth's dapple will come to an end, and only moral choice will be left. Once such a moral admission is made, a new style must, if the writing is to remain authentic, be created to meet it and embody it. Impatient rejection, ardent and idealistic

espousal, and pained admission are all motives for the struggle toward a new permanent body to replace the old.

Yet, as I have said, there are also less permanent changes of style—changes assumed for a moment, for the purposes of a single poem perhaps. It is such temporary changes that make us see two poems, even two written by their author on the same day, as different from each other. The Protean flexibility of the poetic body is always astonishing to me, and most acutely so when I am struck by a poet's variety of strategies from poem to poem, even when the poems are written in a single recognizable style. By a "single style" I mean the general characteristics by which we identify Donne, say, or Shelley—characteristics denoting a manner which we could specify with a generally agreed-upon string of adjectives and adverbs. Yet even within that specifiable style, one Holy Sonnet does not sound like another (even if both are, let us say, startling, abrupt, intense, syntactically dense, imagistically intellectual, and so on). Nor does Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" sound like "The Cloud," though we find both of them "Shelleyan." The micro-levels of stylistic change which we must invoke to answer a question like "How does the first sonnet of Donne's *Corona* differ from the second?" need to be attended to quite as much as the macro-levels that differentiate Donne from Herbert; such micro-levels of change from poem to poem reflect changes of feeling, changes of aesthetic perception, or changes of moral stance in the poet.

Finally, between the macro-level of a permanent and total alteration and the micro-level of momentary breaking of style there is a middle ground—visible when a poet changes a single prominent aspect of style in composing a new volume. We can see such a choice when Lowell, for instance, decides, as he did in *Notebook*, to write a whole new volume in unrhymed sonnet form. As always, such a choice has many causes. Lowell was taking on a new genre, the diary (necessarily composed of short entries and therefore asking for a short form); since days are equal in length,

he found it tempting to imitate calendrical form in isometric verses; and Lowell was following (and evoking) his beloved Milton in putting the normally erotic or meditative sonnet to chiefly political use. The choice is also motivated by Lowell's lifelong restless alternation between free verse and metrical verse, between the rhymed and the unrhymed; and it arises from his wish to be loose-limbed in historical description and prophetic in political apothegm, a wish that could be satisfied by the expansive meditation and the couplet-closure available in sonnets.

In looking for three authors in whom I could examine the breaking of style and the forming of a new permanent or temporary stylistic body, I chose Gerard Manley Hopkins as a paradigmatic and famous case from the past whom I could cite to show what I mean by the breaking of style and its perceptual, aesthetic, and moral implications. I could then pass on, with those theoretical points established, to two very different but equally interesting cases in the present—Seamus Heaney, my example of temporary changes of style; and Jorie Graham, my example of how a new stylistic feature can characterize a whole volume.

Hopkins is famous for breaking his style in two: his juvenile poems were followed by a seven-year silence, after which he emerged, in "The Wreck of the Deutschland," as a poet reborn in a new prosody which he called "sprung rhythm." Since prosody is not often written about in terms of its existential meaning—as a cloning of the kinesthetic perceptions of its poet—I thought it useful to consider Hopkins' rupture of his earlier metrics as my example of a totalizing and life-reforming breaking of style.

Because the Irish poet Seamus Heaney's exquisite style, with its fluid modulation from individual poem to individual poem, has been relatively uncommented-upon, while his political attitudes have been much noticed, I decided to look to him as the example of micro-adjustments on the stylistic level. Every poem has of course many micro-levels: phonetic, etymological, prosodic, stanzaic, tonal, grammatical, syntactic, imagistic, dynamic,

and so on. I decided to look at grammar in Heaney, since he often foregrounds, in a poem, a particular grammatical “part of speech.” This grammatical level of style (now that even students of literature can no longer name or identify the parts of speech) is almost entirely neglected. Yet in defining lyric “atmosphere,” it is of crucial importance to be able to give a coherent grammatical and syntactic description of a poem. Nounness, verbness, adjective-ness, and adverbness are all “atmospheres” which help give poems their characteristic “weather,” as I hope to show using a few of Heaney’s distinctive experiments.

Finally, to represent successive breakings of style visible as a poet changes a single aspect of writing from volume to volume, I have chosen the example of changing lineation in Jorie Graham’s three volumes, *Erosion*, *The End of Beauty*, and *Materialism*. Though lineation is one of the micro-levels of style, when one form of lineation dominates a whole volume (as is the case so far with Graham), the aesthetic and moral character of the volume (a macro-level) is thereby signified, in one important way, by that very choice of lineation. Lineation (like prosody and grammar) is a feature of style that often goes unnoticed. It, too, has existential meaning—and as Graham passes from short antiphonal lines to numbered long lines to square “areas” of long-lined long sentences, her sense of the poet’s task, which changes from volume to volume, is carried precisely (if not solely) by these stylistic changes.

It is distressing, to anyone who cares for and respects the concentrated intellectual and imaginative work that goes into a successful poem, to see how rarely that intense (if instinctive) labor is perceived, remarked on, and appreciated. It is even more distressing—given the human perceptual, aesthetic, and moral signals conveyed (as I hope to show) by such elements as prosody, grammar, and lineation—that most contemporary interpretations of poetry never mention such things, or, if they do, it is to register them factually rather than to deduce their human import. The

forgettable writers of verse do not experiment with style in any coherent or strenuous way; they adopt the generic style of their era and, like “the mob of gentlemen who wrote with ease” (the phrase is Pope’s), repeat themselves in it. The three writers I take up here are led to experiment not only by their consciousness of the fluidity and adaptability of language and form, but also by their own moral and intellectual and aesthetic changes over time.

Poets are often praised for insight or wisdom, and they may, as persons and as writers, exhibit those qualities; but Pope came nearer to the truth in his clear-eyed remark that what we find in poetry is “What oft was thought, but ne’er so well expressed.” Neither poets nor their readers like to admit that poems enunciate “What oft was thought.” Yet poets are not primarily original thinkers; they, like other intellectuals, generally think with (and against) the available intellectual categories of their epoch. Philosophers, rather than poets, invent the thought of their epoch. What poets (along with other artists) invent is the *style* of their epoch, which corresponds to, and records, the feelings felt in their epoch. They do this through their gifts of expressiveness; and it is in homage to those gifts, so often slighted in their material form, that I present these brief observations—on the expressiveness of prosody broken and re-formed between youth and maturity by Hopkins; on the expressiveness of grammar broken and re-formed poem by poem by Heaney; and on the expressiveness of lineation broken and re-formed, volume after volume, by Graham.