Back in the twentieth century, Jim McConkey, a much loved novelist and critic, regularly taught a course called “Literature and Value,” where he invited colleagues to speak about literary works that had figured importantly in their lives. This didn’t lead to a syllabus of the greatest works of world literature: people didn’t propose Hamlet, The Odyssey, or Moby Dick, but usually admittedly minor works which had somehow struck a chord, provoked a strong response. Apparently, it is scarcely predictable what works will most affect your life; if it were, we could create a bucket list of crucial books everyone should read, but literature works more serendipitously than that.

In my case, the first work to exercise a powerful effect on me was a now forgotten novel, Babbitt, by Sinclair Lewis, who went on to win the Nobel Prize for literature, but is seldom read today. Through the figure of George F. Babbitt, a successful American businessman and civic booster in a mid-western city, it satirizes the materialism, conformity, and empty boosterism of middle-class American life. Babbitt feels twinges of dissatisfaction with the American dream of prosperity, and in a feeble attempt at revolt, goes camping to get away from it all, hangs out with bohemians and flappers, has an affair, and declines to join the Good Citizens League, thus risking his reputation; but he is still dissatisfied, and when his wife falls ill he drifts back into his old life. Not much of a plot, certainly. What was the appeal of this book? It is hard to say, but it helped me imagine an America I did not want to be
part of and perhaps also offered a sense that rebellion is not as easy as one might imagine. It provoked not a plunge into bohemian life but a desire to read and possess all of Sinclair Lewis: I began to haunt used book stores and eventually acquired most of his 22 novels.

It is hard to reconstruct the impact of this work, but clearly it was potent social satire for me and helped me construct a sense of self as anti-bourgeois, anti-establishment, but perhaps more important, it provoked devotion to an author: a desire to get to know this body of work, to explore its range, to possess it. But *Babbitt* did not make me a student of American literature, and until today I have never been tempted to write anything about Sinclair Lewis.

A more profound effect came from a strange poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins, a Jesuit priest of the late 19th century, whose obsession with sensuous and etymological dimensions of English words would have made him a prolific poet, had he not been convinced that such pleasure in language was, if not downright sinful, at least a temptation to be resisted. A long poem called “The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo,” so struck me more than fifty years ago that I felt I must learn it by heart to be able to declaim it and savor it. Its verbal pyrotechnics provide a labile pleasure that is sonorous but not musical, a pleasure specifically of language, in play of words where meaning is secondary. The opening “Leaden Echo” asks
HOW to keep—is there any, is there none such, nowhere known some, bow or brooch or braid or brace, lace, latch or catch or key to keep

Back beauty, keep it, beauty, beauty, beauty, ... from vanishing away?

Ó is there no frowning of these wrinkles, rankéd wrinkles deep,

Dówn? no waving off of these most mournful messengers, still messengers, sad and stealing messengers of grey?

No there's none, there's none, O no there's none,

Nor can you long be, what you now are, called fair,

Do what you may do, what, do what you may,

And wisdom is early to despair:

This energetic proliferation of chiming verbal forms ("lace, latch or catch or key") is followed by a stunning "Golden Echo," an astonishing literalization of the Catholic doctrine of the resurrection of the body: God will preserve youthful beauty down to the least eyelash. The Leaden Echo ends "Despair, despair, despair, despair," and the Golden Echo answers,

Spare!

There is one, yes I have one;

There is a place, the poem assures us,

Where whatever's prized and passes of us, everything that's fresh and fast flying of us, seems to us sweet of us and swiftly away with, done away with, undone,

Undone, done with, soon done with, and yet dearly and dangerously sweet

Of us, the wimpled-water-dimpled, not-by-morning-matchèd face,

The flower of beauty, fleece of beauty, too too apt to, ah! to fleet,
Never fleets móre, fastened with the tenderest truth
To its own best being and its loveliness of youth:

The daring gratuitousness of “undone, undone done with” and “too too apt to, ah, to fleet” captures a pleasure of language in its fleetingness, as we are urged to give back to God our

sweet looks, loose locks, long locks, lovelocks, gaygear, going gallant,
girlgrace—
Resign them, sign them, seal them, send them, motion them with breath,
And with sighs soaring, soaring sighs deliver
Them; beauty-in-the-ghost, deliver it, early now, long before death
Give beauty back, beauty, beauty, beauty, back to God, beauty’s self and beauty’s giver.

Then “not a hair is, not an eyelash, not the least lash lost,” and

the thing we freely forfeit is kept with fonder a care,
Fonder a care kept than we could have kept it, kept
Far with fonder a care (and we, we should have lost it) finer, fonder
A care kept.— Where kept? Do but tell us where kept, where.—
Yonder.— What high as that! We follow, now we follow.— Yonder, yes yonder, yonder, Yonder.

For someone who is not religious, this ending is positively embarrassing, It is hard to avoid a half-smirking grandiloquence when I recite these “yonders.” But despite its hyperbolic doctrinal claims, it — perversely — can seduce
even those who find its assertions absurd. More than any other poem I know this one dares to give in to the play of language, allowing one word to generate the next in a play of sound and proliferation of particularities. The poem tells us to give up beauty, but in the telling, in the energetic naming, the poem celebrates the intriguing beauty of words. But the effect is puzzling: it’s not that language is made beautiful by the crafting of subtle euphony, for instance. This poem poses the problem of how poetry seduces, as its extravagance takes poetry to a height of achievement – if not “yonder,” to a place of embodiment, an incarnation of verbal energy, and of course great pleasure. It is the sort of work that makes you want to spend time — perhaps even your career — reading poetry.