

Hopkins and Alchemy

by James Leggio

THROUGH both his priesthood and his poetry, Gerard Manley Hopkins pursued the vocation of alchemist. As priest he acknowledged the tradition of sacred alchemy behind the doctrine of transubstantiation. And early and late in his literary career he wrote alchemical poems, notably "The Alchemist in the City" and "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire." Hopkins cultivated hermeticism precisely because it enabled him to resolve the conflict between priesthood and poetry, a conflict which had led him to burn his poems before entering the novitiate. Eventually he mastered an hermetic mode of speech, one capable of accommodating both callings. Both priest and poet practice an alchemy of the Word; each aspires to the linguistic *imitatio Christi* which transforms and redeems the soul. By recognizing Hopkins' persistent concern with alchemy, we gain new access to his theology of art.

Alchemy shares its symbolism with Christianity, manipulating a consistent parallel between the refinement or transmutation of metals and the refinement or progress of the soul. As M. H. Abrams notes, "The description of the laboratory operation served as objective correlative for the human regimen of religious redemption."¹ In this allegory metals assumed the names of their presiding astrological bodies, such as Sol (gold) and Luna (silver); the Vessel, Furnace, or Athanor in which transmutation took place symbolized Man; Christ played the role of catalyst, whether called the Philosopher's Stone or (if powder or liquid) the Elixir. Though the actual use of this terminology was a little loose, varying from writer to writer, the general purpose and direction remained constant: purgation of dross, transformation of the base into gold as analogy for the soul's progress toward grace and salvation. One manipulated the elements of the alchemical Trinity (sulphur, salt, and mercury) to extract by distillation the Noble Tincture or Quintessence, that fifth element latent in all things. Once extracted, it could be used to "tincture" lesser things, infusing them and drawing them toward greater perfection. Becoming tinctured brought forth "the New Birth," the transmutation of the soul. The goal of the spiritual alchemist, like the religious converts William James described in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, was rebirth, becoming the "Twice-Born Soul," in James's phrase.

Like Christ, the "Concealed Stone of Many Colors" and the Elixir gave not only spiritual purity but physical health. They cured all disease and granted the secret of eternal life, just as Christ cured _____ and promised the Heavenly Kingdom.

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Hopkins inherits this tradition from the 17th century devotional poets. During the Renaissance the symbolism of Christianity could still absorb the new science, especially the infant and still quasi-magical science of chemistry, whose laboratory operations resembled nothing so much as the orthodox sacraments. John Donne's poetry furnishes an almost complete illustration of the two systems' coincidence. In "Resurrection, imperfect" (whose title simply indicates the poem is incomplete) Donne wrote of an hermetic Christ, both Sun and gold:

Sleep sleep old Sun, thou canst not have repast
As yet, the wound thou took'st on friday last;
Sleep then, and rest; The world may beare thy stay,
A better Sun rose before thee to day . . .

Whose body having walk'd on earth, and now
Hasting to Heaven, would, that he might allow
Himself unto all stations, and fill all,
For these three daies become a minerall;
He was all gold when he lay downe, but rose
All tincture, and doth not alone dispose
Leaden and iron wills to good, but is
Of power to make even sinful flesh like his.

Christ first undergoes a change himself. While buried he changes from gold to tincture, that is, gains the "power to make even sinful flesh like his." He goes from gold-Sun to tincture-Son, the "better Sun," a process which enables him to tincture others, drawing them through a similar alchemical transformation; to undergo redemption is to undergo a chemical change. Hopkins eventually outlines a parallel process of saving transformation, and another of Donne's poems exploits the very term Hopkins will find so crucial. In the course of his verse letter "To the Countesse of Huntingdone" he writes of her recently dead sister:

She gilded us: But you are gold, and Shee;
Us she inform'd, but transubstantiates you;
Soft dispositions which ductile bee,
Elixarlike, she makes not cleane, but new.

The startling use of "transubstantiation" alerts us that the most magical of sciences and the most magical of sacraments, the eucharist, become indistinguishable in Christian alchemical lore.

We cannot be sure that Hopkins read these particular poems, or even that he read Donne at all; and we must always be cautious of facile equations of Hopkins and Metaphysical poetry. Such equations are often the fictions of critics writing during the post-Grierson Metaphysical Revival, when these poets were rediscovered and Hopkins read for the first time. But we can be sure he read George Herbert and to a lesser extent Henry Vaughan. In 1904 William Addis

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recalled of the undergraduate Hopkins, "George Herbert was his strongest tie to the English Church."² He did not abandon Herbert along with the Church of England, as we shall see. At any rate, in a letter to R. W. Dixon as late as 1879 he still speaks warmly of Herbert and of Vaughan, the most explicitly alchemical of the Metaphysical poets. He quotes from memory Vaughan's "Regeneration."³ Reading on four stanzas past his quotation we find: "The unthrift Sunne shot vital gold/A thousand peeces. . . ." The stanzas which follow work out an hermetic allegory of the soul's regeneration and redemption: "diverse stones" (the "Concealed Stone of Many Colors"), the last of which is "Nailed to the Center," the gold-generic sun, psychological transformation, and so on. Some of Vaughan's poems, such as "Cock-Crowing," are even more explicit than this, drawing on the hermetic practice of his twin brother Thomas, an adept.

Such examples made the hermetic tradition readily available to Hopkins. And the idea of supernatural transformation was kept alive too by his contemporaries, notably in the debate between Protestants and Catholics over transubstantiation versus consubstantiation—whether the eucharist became entirely Christ or only partly. Victorian devotional poets, always mindful of Herbert, touch on the Elixir, whether as the "heavenly balm" of the poem "Holy Communion" of Keble's *Christian Year*, or in the verse of Manley Hopkins, Gerard's father. The elder Hopkins published a volume entitled *A Philosopher's Stone* in 1843; the title plays upon the word "stone," making it both the hermetic artifact and the headstone of a grave. The younger Hopkins' first tentative use of this traditional material produced "The Alchemist in the City" (1865), written the year before his conversion to Rome.

HOPKINS' alchemist wishes to transform lead into gold and himself into the substance of Christ. Like Hopkins' Pilate, who would crucify himself, the alchemist gropes toward an *imitatio Christi*. But lacking the stone, the catalyst which transmutes metals, he must consistently equate himself with defective or incomplete laboratory apparatus. Adepts used a tower filled with coal as a self-regulating fuel supply to keep the furnace's temperature, like the body's, constant. One could not just add more coal; when the tower emptied the operation was over, whether complete or not. This tower figures prominently in Hopkins' poem.

—perhaps if my intent
Could count on prediluvian age,
The labors I should then have spent
Might so attain their heritage,

But now before the pot can glow
With not to be discovered gold,

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At length the bellows shall not blow,
The furnace shall at last be cold.

His life like his coal supply is strictly limited, and indicates a failure of self-sufficiency. Because of the Fall, he cannot count on the prediluvian age necessary to discover the Elixir on his own; his transformation must come from outside.

The alchemist longs for the freedom ("Windhover" fashion) seen in the flight of birds. Their freedom, their unbridled ability to perform, results from a perfect give and take with things outside themselves; they fly not only by their own exertion but by the answering pressure of "the bearing air." Unthinking things, they cannot aspire to self-sufficiency like the alchemist; their example alters the nature of his aspiration. They suggest to him compensation by powers greater than his own, and by the poem's end he wishes to efface himself before the heavenly symbol both of those powers and gold—the sun:

There on a long and squared height
After the sunset I would lie,
And pierce the yellow waxen light
With free long looking ere I die.

What the alchemist hates, "the lore that holds no promise of success," would be abandoned. He abandons hope of free action and settles for visual freedom, "free long looking." Moving from the active to the optic, substituting the fire of the sun for the fire of his own furnace, he would see, not make, gold. But it is too late for even that because the sun has already set. It is after sunset, after the Fall, after the crucifixion; Christ, the new Son, has not yet risen all tincture.

Christ has not yet risen for the young Hopkins, I believe, because of a largely doctrinal impediment. Like many of the poems written as he approached Catholicism, this one concerns the doctrine of the real Presence. But unlike the others, this one is more specifically about the concomitant act of transubstantiation, an act which Protestants do not perform and which therefore, to Hopkins' growing anxiety, keeps them from having Christ really present. The desire to perform transubstantiation necessarily involves him not only in the desire to become a Catholic, but a Catholic priest as well. In order to obtain that which transforms other things the alchemist must first transform himself—first into a Catholic, then into a priest, a process like Donne's "Resurrection, imperfect" of turning *into* the Elixir, becoming a holy Midas. By 1865 Hopkins' alchemy forecast his imminent conversion and his eventual priesthood.

The rather literal way he could interpret self-transformation as a chemical reaction reveals itself through his amusing disagreement with Robert Bridges about Robert Louis Stevenson. And although Bridges' side of the correspondence does not survive, we have here an unusual opportunity to hear from both. With a view toward their publication, Bridges wrote marginal notes on Hopkins' letters

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to him; the asterisked notes at the end of this passage are his:

This sour severity blinds you to his great genius. *Jekyll and Hyde* I have read. You speak of "the gross absurdity" of the interchange.* Enough that it is impossible and might perhaps have been a little better masked: it must be connived at, and it gives rise to a fine situation. It is not more impossible than fairies, giants, heathen gods, and lots of things that literature teems with—and none more than yours.** You are certainly wrong about Hyde being overdrawn: my Hyde is worse.

*No—of the means employed, wh. is physical & shd. have been magical

**but does not make chemistry of⁴

Bridges bridles at the magical extension of chemistry which appeals to the author of "The Alchemist in the City," seeming to feel that magic is somehow more "literary" than chemistry. Hopkins, on the other hand, sees both as useful metaphors for the psychological transformations of character. Of course *Jekyll and Hyde* has marked alchemical overtones, especially as Dr. Jekyll describes the distillation of elements in his "Final Statement," or discovers the fatal impurity in his original chemical stock; then too, he hopes his preparation will produce an elixirlike effect, extracting the quintessence of character. But perhaps it is Hopkins' own very typical use of the word "interchange" when he means "transformation" that should interest us. This use helps us see the connection he sensed between religious conversion and transubstantiation. Five years before this letter, Hopkins wrote in his spiritual notes that God converted men to him in one of two ways. He either adjusted some small part of the man, letting the individual do the rest, or else took over and transformed him completely. This second way involved

an exchange of one whole for another whole, as they say in the mystery of Transubstantiation, a conversion of a whole substance into another whole substance, but here is not a question of substance; it is a lifting from one self to another, which is a most marvelous display of divine power.⁵

The distinction between consubstantiation and transubstantiation plays a part here, and hence the emphasis on utter change, but the central issue is God's act. His way of changing souls and gaining converts is much like a priest's way of changing bread and wine into body and blood. Both are inter-changes, substituting one thing for another. Mutuality is central here; the communion wafer and wine symbolize divine love, and "love consists in mutual interchange on either side" (S, 192). Christ took Man's place in the sacrifice of the Cross; Man takes Christ's place in the sacrifice of the Mass. The focus remains on substitution and exchange because they are deeply implicated in the nature of transubstantiation.

Such substitution defines the priest's ability to perform what Hopkins' urban alchemist could not: the priest's power derives from Christ. Doing what Christ

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did, turning bread and wine into body and blood, makes him Christ's substitute. This is the origin of the title Vicar of Christ; Christ acts vicariously through his Vicar. And not only the priest but the poet can succeed by imitating Christ; like the "just man," the priest-poet

Keeps grace: that keeps his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is—
Christ. For Christ plays in ten thousand places . . .

"Play" has partially the sense of reflection here, as light plays on a shiny surface. But more important, since the just man "acts" and Christ "plays," there is a theatrical sense too. Hopkins once noted that in his earthly life Christ played the "role of the ideal man" (*S*, 185). The two vocations are two such roles. The priest mimes Christ through the rituals called sacraments; he acts out baptism and reenacts the sacrifice of the Cross. The poet too plays Christ, by emulating Christ's manner of speech, imitating Christ the way Aristotle said a play imitates an action.

HOPKINS liked to think of Jesus as a literary artist; in a sermon he called the Savior "an orator and poet, as in his eloquent words and parables appears" (*S*, 35). Though beyond literature, Christ is its proper goal: "No stories or parables are like Christ's, so bright, so pithy, so touching . . . nowhere in literature is there anything to match the Sermon on the Mount" (*S*, 37). His words are not only divinely sanctioned but beautiful and effective: he is the ideal user of language. As verbal craftsman, the poet is the proper person to imitate, and so to praise, him. Read in the light of what Hopkins wrote about the action of grace, "As kingfishers" becomes an *ars poetica*. Acted on by grace, the soul corresponds or answers to the Actor: "It is as if a man said: That is Christ playing at me and me playing at Christ, only it is not play but truth; that is Christ *being me* and me being Christ" (*S*, 154). Acted on by Christ, the poet "finds tongue" to tell of him.

The "tongue" Hopkins found to tell of him is characterized by verbal procedures based on that central idea of substitution, exchange, or transposition. In an undergraduate discussion of Richard Garnett's "Nix" he shows how his idea of transformation-as-exchange eventually became absorbed by his idea of poetic language. Describing how the nix steals the hair and eye color of the speaker, substituting her own, Hopkins' voice in the essay says, "You see, it turns on an antithesis: if we put the central idea, that one central idea which critics say is what makes the essence of lyrical poetry, in its most concrete pictorial light, we shall find it is that of the transformation of the golden hair and azure eyes with the black hair and eyes of flame."⁶ Such an idea of lyrical poetry he found echoed in the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation. His own poetry displays

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frequent phonetic metathesis, consonance, and reversible rhythmic patterns; through them Hopkins extended his concern with transposition and mutual substitution to the level of individual words in a line and sounds in a word. His protracted experiments with interchanging sound patterns—whether the substitution of one vowel for another (“heaven-haven”), or the mutually substituting feet of a reversible rhythm (“her earliest stars, earlstars, stárs principle”)—reflect not only a poet’s but also a priest’s concern with the nature of the Word. The theological counterpart to those verbal experiments would have been constantly apparent to Hopkins, perhaps the only 19th century prosodist who was also a trained metaphysician.

The most significant connections between his two vocations are to be found well above the level of such textural features, however. Hopkins learned from Herbert that a right vocation should itself be the Philosopher’s Stone. Glossing a passage in the *Sermons and Devotional Writings*, Christopher Devlin quotes Herbert’s “The Elixir,” an address to the Lord:

All may of thee partake:
Nothing can be so mean,
Which with this tincture (for thy sake)
Will not grow bright and clean.

A servant with this clause
Makes drudgerie divine:
Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws,
Makes that th’action fine.

This is the famous stone
That turneth all to gold:
For that which God doth touch and own
Cannot for less be told.

A vocation serving God transforms itself—a proper vocation tinctures. Hopkins takes this progression one step further, saying that his only proper vocation is making “Love’s proper food,”⁷ which is the eucharist. The priest’s calling is to reenact the “Lovefeast” (S, 95) of the Last Supper. The poet’s vocation becomes proper only when its aims are equally alchemical: not only to imitate Christ’s conversion of bread and wine, but also to imitate his conversion of individual souls. Hopkins proclaimed that Christianity’s mission was “to convince and convert the world” (S, 74); his underlying motive was always to draw others after him into Catholic sacramentalism. His great discovery for art was that a poet, as verbal imitator of Christ, could participate in both kinds of conversion: the poet’s words could win converts for the Church, and could also, like the liturgy, imitate Christ’s act of transubstantiation. Whether converting souls or bread and wine, whether speaking as priest or poet, Hopkins consistently practices an alchemy of the Word.

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Even his adolescent infatuation with Keats points to this final unity of vocations. In 1864 he copied into his journal the passage from Keat's "Ode to Psyche" beginning "Yes, I will be thy priest. . . ." Keat's easy displacement of priest by poet later troubled Hopkins, threatening his sense of proper subordination. To preserve his own hierarchy of values, in which priesthood retained the dominant position, Hopkins had to burn his poems when he entered the Jesuits, his "Slaughter of the Innocents." He could begin writing again, and resolve the conflict between priesthood and poetry, only when he found a sacerdotal rationale for the rhetorical aims of poetry—not only to "convince" but to "convert." Having given up a poetic vocation to follow a priestly one, he began writing again first to explain that change of mind, then to draw others after him into Catholicism. This is one of his reasons for sending his poems to the agnostic Robert Bridges. A letter to R. W. Dixon seems to hint at his reasons for writing to Bridges. It begins with an interesting slip of the tongue.

Thomas Vaughan's poems were reprinted not so long ago. He was a follower of Herbert both in life and style: he was in fact converted from worldly courses by reading Herbert's poems on a sickbed and even his muse underwent a conversion (for he had written before).

(*L*, II, 23-24)

Hopkins inadvertently uses the first name of the alchemist, Thomas Vaughan, instead of his poetry-writing twin brother, Henry. Perhaps he made the mistake because his mind is already jumping ahead to the next sentence, on conversion. His description of Herbert's effect on Vaughan is startlingly similar to the effect he himself hoped to have on Bridges. That he intended this parallel of himself as Herbert and Bridges as Vaughan can be seen in letters to Bridges. Sometimes he speaks of drawing him into the Church: "You understand of course that I hope to see you a Catholic" (*L*, I, 60); at other times of converting him not to his theology but his poetics. After Bridges advised Hopkins to revise one poem, Hopkins refused and wrote back:

I cannot think of altering anything. Why shd I? I do not write for the public. You are my public and I hope to convert you. (*L*, I, 46)

The relationship between the two conversions is illuminated by the Dixon letter; Hopkins wanted a follower "both in life and style."

HIS ambition did however extend beyond Bridges. He often classified his literary acquaintances by whether they liked his poems or not. "Mr. Patmore did not on the whole like my poems, was unconverted to them" (*L*, I, 191). Sometimes a note of sectarian jealousy enters his praise of Bridges' poems: "Mr. Tyrell expresses his deep admiration for your muse, his conversion, so to speak"

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(*L*, I, 247), as if the two were rival churches fighting over converts. Extending to a whole nation, his enthusiasm confuses his interest in the Welsh language with his desire to convert: "Looking all round but most in looking up in the valley I felt an instress and charm of Wales. Indeed in coming here I began to feel a desire to do something for the conversion of Wales. I began to learn Welsh too but not with very pure intentions perhaps. However on consulting the rector on this, the first day of the retreat, he discouraged it unless it were purely for the sake of laboring among the Welsh. Now it is not and so I saw I must give it up" (*J*, 258).

Hopkins feels justified in writing poetry only when he can make it part of his priesthood. One could learn Welsh only to labor in Wales, not to write poetry imitating Welsh "chiming of consonants." That moral reservation colors his career generally, so much so that he used it to explain his very small poetic output. To Bridges he wrote of Christ:

Feeling, love in particular, is the great moving power and spring of verse, and the only person I am in love with seldom, especially now, stirs my heart sensibly and when he does I cannot always "make capital" of it; it would be sacriligious to do so. (*L*, I, 66)

But Bridges chose not to understand, and Hopkins found him at all times inert as lead to the most active of verbal catalyts.

Nevertheless, after Bridges finally published his deceased friend's poems, at least one critic recognized the implicit intent to convert. A few years after the "popular" edition of 1930, Joan Bennet wrote *Four Metaphysical Poets*. In her concluding chapter on "Religious Poetry" she took up the issue of doctrine, especially of how a reader who does not like or does not understand the poet's creed will take his poems. Happily, she selects a poem by Hopkins as her example, saying that even it cannot "convert" such a reader, but that it can perform a "transference" of values. She begins by positing a reader much like Bridges:

Suppose a reader, sensitive to poetry, but repelled by or indifferent to the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, reads Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem, *The Caged Skylark*. . . . The poem does not convert such a reader to the doctrine implied, in the same sense in which a theological treatise might conceivably do so. And yet in some sense the thought and feeling in the poem are transferred to him. . . . Finally the reader possesses, not Hopkins' beliefs, but his feeling of what it would be like to meet the body again in its resurrected state.⁸

The early readers of Hopkins' published works recognized that the poems have designs on even those who reject doctrine and resist formal conversion. Though gaining intellectual assent to a technically formulated dogma—what Newman's manual of conversion, the *Grammar of Assent*, calls "notional assent"—lies out-

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side the scope of perhaps all poetry, nonetheless something just as important happens in reading. Hopkins "transfers" his feelings, gaining what Newman called our "real assent." And that is a step toward the most genuine, lasting conversion.

Already accustomed to thinking of his post-*Deutschland* verse as a means of transforming souls, Hopkins later considered it a vehicle for transubstantiation—a language of spell or charm. The "power of the word" is a not uncommon idea, even among the writers we know Hopkins read. In *Modern Superstition* De Quincey, for example, connects such words of power to Christ through the idea of speech as a performance.

And here, by way of parenthesis, I might stop to attempt an explanation of the force attached to that scriptural expression "*Thou hast said it.*" It is an answer adopted by our Savior; and the meaning seems radically to be this:—the popular belief authorized the notion, that simply to have uttered any great thesis, though unconsciously, simply to have united verbally any two great ideas, though for a purpose the most different or even opposite, had the mysterious power of realizing them in act. . . . Words . . . oftentimes, it was thought, executed themselves.

The idea of self-executed words, though an ancient one, is akin to our modern term "performative utterance" and to certain verbal acts described by J. L. Austin in *How to Do Things with Words* and Richard Ohmann in *Speech Acts*. Such acts are built into the liturgy and the Bible as well. God says "Let there be light" and light there is. Christ says "This is my body," and bread becomes flesh. In the mouth of the Word, strictly performative utterances (like "Verily, I say unto you . . .") shade off into commands, as they do for the Father. Many of Christ's most important acts, verbal or otherwise, are phrased as imperatives: "Arise and sin no more." Such acts are inherent in the Old Testament idea of creation, as God *calls* the universe into being.

A number of Hopkins' poems (notably "No worst," "Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves" and "Heraclitean Fire") use such imperatives in related ways. "Heraclitean Fire" employs imperatives to order a change in the condition of matter: "Flesh fade and mortal trash/Fall to the residuary worm." Hopkins attempts this daring act on the basis of his understanding of the Word made Flesh, what he called God's speaking of himself. Commenting on Ignatius he wrote:

God's utterance of himself in himself is God the Word, outside himself is this world. This world then is word, expression, news of God. Therefore its end, its purpose, its purport, its meaning, is God and its life or work must be to name and praise him. (*S*, 129)

His poems are attempts to name and praise God because they thereby made the Word manifest, conjured him up, let him utter himself through his vicar. In a sermon Hopkins called his congregation's attention to Christ's verbal acts or

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spells: "*He said Ephphetha, Be opened*—the Evangelist tells us the very word which had this magical or rather miraculous effect" (S, 18). The word is valued because, as in *Deutschland*, it embodies "him that present and past,/Heaven and earth are word of, worded by."

HOPKINS' quest for the divine name, the ultimate verbal embodiment of God, involves the despair of "Carrion Comfort." One wrestles with an angel to find out its name, as Jacob did in *Genesis* 32:21-32. Though the speaker's temptation to eat carrion plays upon the Biblical dietary restriction that the Jacob story illustrates, the quest for the name is the dominant theme. Hopkins uses three different speech acts in trying to name God; blaspheming, praying, and alluding combine in saying "wrestling with (my God!) my God."⁹ The explosive exclamation approaches blasphemy while the second "my God" is a supplication; taken together the two allude to Christ's words on the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" This brilliantly conceived and daringly executed syntactical coup succeeds almost too well, pushing the act of naming into a verbal imitation of Christ. Hopkins' syntactical audacities sometimes overwhelm their theoretical rationale, here a syneresis of the speech acts available to name "my God," and suggest new avenues of experiment. Success in the two acts of naming gives rise to a third, an allusive *imitatio Christi*, imagining oneself speaking from a cross. It is an astonishing grammatical situation, one which Hopkins would exploit further in "Heraclitean Fire."

A verbal act of sacramental transmutation changes not only Word into flesh but flesh into bread. Christ is the perfect, the sacred, alchemist, able to change all things into himself, as he did with bread by saying "This is my body." In this Christ is first of all a user of language, for "Never a man spoke like this man" (S, 37). He provides the model for "Carrion Comfort" because even in the performative utterances at the Last Supper, he too alludes. A distinguished exegete explains how:

One fact should attract our attention, and this is the choice made by Christ Himself of bread and wine as the visible matter of the Eucharist. In fact, if we remember the extent to which the deeds of Christ were charged with reminiscences of the Old Testament, it seems probable that the choice of bread and wine in itself contains an allusion to the gesture of Melchisedech who also offered bread and wine. . . . an allusion willed by Christ and not imagined by the Fathers.¹⁰

Exploiting that allusion himself, Hopkins takes the configuration of type and antitype to its typological extreme. He claims that Christ was not alluding to Melchisedech because Melchisedech never truly existed; he was alluding to *himself*, uttering himself:

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Further I suppose Melchisedech to be a theophany of Christ in human shape out of this pre-human being of his and to differ from other theophanies in that when Christ appeared as an angel he might be "installed" or "steaded" in some real and personal angel, as St. Michael or St. Gabriel, and this was their dignity to be vessels of Christ, but that there was no man Melchisedech, no such person but in person Christ. (S, 171)

We must pass over in silent wonder Hopkins' breathtaking ease in asserting that Christ, "installed" or "steaded" in St. Gabriel, announced his own conception to Mary. For our purposes it will be enough to note that in alluding to Melchisedech Christ alludes to himself, and that by speaking the words "This is my body" assumes the role he created when in the person of Melchisedech. Priests, we must remember, are ordained into "the order of Melchisedech." As Christ became a priest (a "high-priest" in *Deutschland*) through a certain kind of allusive, performative speech, so too does the religious who recites that speech in Christ's stead.

Hopkins' poetic version of that fiat occurs in the great culminating poem, "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection." Its conclusion is my major concern:

Enough! The Resurrection,
A heart's-clarion! Away grief's gasping joyless days, dejection.
 Across my foundering deck shone
A beacon, an eternal beam. Flesh fade, and mortal trash
Fall to the residuary worm; world's wildfire, leave but ash:
 In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,
 Is immortal diamond.

A great many things demand comment here; the remainder of this essay will note some of them, then conclude. The first thing to be noted is an unusually frequent use of intransitive verbs: "I *am* . . . Christ *is* . . . he *was* . . . I *am* . . . *Is* immortal diamond." Such usage recalls Christ's "This *is* my body" (which in turn echoes Jehovah's "I am what I am") and performs the same act as Christ's words. In saying he is what Christ is, the poet verbally transforms himself into Christ, just as he would through the liturgy of Eucharist. Transubstantiation is the act this poem describes, for the immortal diamond is not only Christ, but the Philosopher's Stone.¹¹ Performing it, Hopkins first makes then touches the stone, tincturing himself, becoming consubstantial with the Son as the Son is consubstantial with the Father. Identification of the diamond-Christ as the Philosopher's Stone finds confirmation in "The Starlight Night"; "Down in dim woods the diamond delves! the elves'-eyes!/The grey lawns cold where gold, where quickgold lies!" A back-formation from the quicksilver in the hermetic Trinity, alchemical or "quick" gold finds its proper burial with diamonds.

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Like Christ, diamonds ripen underground. Christ was buried, and rose all tincture. Similarly, diamonds were lowly pieces of coal, but inside the earth they are heated, purified by a hard gem-producing flame, finally coming to the surface as pure crystalline, a jeweled phoenix. Hopkins has imagined all of Nature as an Athenor refining the Christly crystal, the fires inside the earth which actually produce gems being associated with the metaphor (or Heraclitean) fire of which Nature itself is composed. And adding layer to eucharistic layer, Hopkins has further imagined "nature's bonfire" as an oven: "in pool and rut/peel parches/Squandering ooze to squeezed dough, crust, dust." The human life-cycle of dust to dust is superimposed on the process of turning dough into bread, for the "crust" is Flesh made bread. A "peel" is a baker's tool for separating a loaf of bread or pie crust from the pan. Hopkins uses it to bend his description of sun-baked clay in the direction of the clay in *Genesis*.

He manipulates so many versions of transubstantiation here because his deepest subject is a further transformation: the Last Judgment, when "we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump," that final transformation which will end all change. This terminal change is the end of time itself, and so Heraclitean flux turns into gem-like fixity, the temporal world into an *immortal* diamond. As in Heraclitus, each thing calls forth its opposite, and in the end Heraclitean fire turns into ice. Other Hopkins poems associated ice with gems; in "Winter with the Gulf Stream" for example, "the bugle moon" is both "so glassy white" and "so like a berg of hyaline." The association of jewels with ice arises early in Hopkins, and he thinks of ice as a final condition. In a companion piece to "Heaven-Haven" Hopkins makes a voyage "Toward wastes where round the ice-blocks tilt and fret/Not so far from the pole" (*P*, 128). At the very end of the quest, near the ultimate point of the pole where the world ends geographically, the oceans transform themselves—matter goes crystalline. The voyage to the end of the earth is always a type of the happy shipwreck; the foundering deck described in "Heraclitean Fire" is the deck of the ship in this poem and of the *Deutschland* itself. Both earlier and later poems embark on a voyage toward the ultimate transformation of matter.

The apocalyptic inversion of Heraclitean fire gives way to a last concern with "comfort." To appreciate what Hopkins means by that word, we must recall that he is the most oral of poets, that the keenest of his senses is taste:

I am gall, I am heartburn. God's most deep decree
Bitter would have me taste: my taste was me. (*P*, 101)

In his Commentary on the Exercises, too, he wrote of "my self-being . . . that taste of myself" (*S*, 123), and in *Deutschland* of the sloe "mouthed to flesh-burst . . . the being with it, sour or sweet." How crucial the eating of eucharist would be to such a sensibility cannot be overemphasized, especially when we

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realize how closely related are speaking and eating to the priest who makes the Word flesh and then eats it. In "The Bugler's First Communion" he calls Christ a "treat" for the child-like soldier of Christ, the "Lord of Eucharist" a spiritual candy for the youngster. The mouth is a crucial locale for Hopkins, the only sense-area to properly apprehend the Word made bread because both speaking and eating take place there. Hopkins found taste the most mysterious sense, the only one to consume its object, and so he came to echo the Psalmist's words, "How sweet are thy words unto my taste" (Psalm 119).

It amused him to press the association of eating and speaking to absurd lengths. He once wrote that Browning had "a way of talking (and making his people talk) with the air and spirit of a man bouncing up from the table with his mouth full of bread and cheese and saying that he meant to stand for no blasted nonsense" (*L*, II, 74). On another occasion he wrote that to some people "'dogma' [is] a word they almost chew" (*L*, I, 187). Hopkins' own verse is rather chewy; lines like "the roll, the rise, the carol, the creation" require a lot of repetitive labial and dental action. More important, eating and speaking are related in a way suggested by his admired Milton. In *Paradise Lost*, when Gabriel and Adam sit down to a meal together, Milton writes:

So down they sat,
And to their viands fell; nor seemingly
The Angel, nor in mist (the common gloss
Of Theologians) but with keen dispatch
Of real hunger and concoctive heat
To transubstantiate: what redounds transpires
Through Spirits with ease, nor wonder, if by fire
Of sooty coal the Empiric Alchemist
Can turn, or holds it possible to turn,
Metals of drossiest Ore to perfect Gold,
As from the Mine. (Book V)

One transubstantiates by eating and digesting the Word, as well as by speaking it.

HOPKINS' concern with taste and with "comfort" suggests one final dimension to "Heraclitean Fire." In "St. Winifred's Well" the murderer says:

My other self, this soul,
Life's quick, this kind, this keen self-feeling,
With dreadful distillation of thoughts sour as blood
Must all day taste murder.

Distillation, self-taste, and the taste of blood come together again in "Heraclitean Fire" under the aspect of alchemical refinement—extraction of the quintessence. A letter to Bridges suggests this dimension of the poem: "Lately I sent

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you a sonnet, on the Heraclitean fire, in which a great deal of early Greek philosophy was distilled; but the liquer of the distillation didn't taste very Greek, did it?" (*L*, I, 291). Hopkins here responds to the fact that Heraclitus' term for the motion of flux also means "stir," the way one stirs an unhomogenized mixture together, keeping all those Heraclitean opposites in suspension; his apocalypse describes what happens when the stirring stops and the mixture of opposites separates out into layers, what is called fractional distillation. Recalling that such distillation is a principal aim of alchemy, we may see what kind of "comfort" Hopkins extracts.

He often uses the word comfort in conjunction with taste, as in Poem #54's alternatives of "comfort" and "salt." The "terrible" sonnets, which immediately precede "Heraclitean Fire," are dominated by the search for a comfort one can taste. Poem #69, for example, associates being "comfortless with being unable to find "thirst's all-in-all in all a world of wet," alluding to the Ancient Mariner's predicament. "Carrion Comfort" involves eating, like Shakespeare's Antony, strange flesh that some did die to look upon. Poem #68 asks "where is he who more and more distills/Delicious kindness?" Originally, comfort meant the giving of strength, like giving brandy to someone cold or faint. Through one of philology's little ironies, this original meaning survives only in the brand name of an American liqueur—"Southern Comfort." That meaning is Hopkins' too. Not quite the taste of blood as in "St. Winifred's Well," it is still the Most Precious Blood, the sacramental wine. The "liquer of the distillation" is finally the Elixir of Eternal Life, and thus the "comfort" of the Resurrection. Tasting the Elixir, tincturing himself with the eucharistic wine, becomes the final goal of Hopkins as priest and poet, and the ultimate aspiration of Hopkins the alchemist. At the Last Judgement he hoped for the transmutation of self into sacrament he saw prefigured in the Last Supper. Of Christ's "Lovefeast" he wrote:

The Eucharistic Sacrifice was the great purpose of his life and his own chosen redemption: perhaps he would have instituted it and into it have disappeared—as at Emmaus. (*S*, 162)

And so at the last trump did Hopkins hope to disappear into an immortal diamond.

NOTES

¹*Natural Supernaturalism* (New York: Norton, 1971), p. 160.

²Quoted in G. F. Lahey, *Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Oxford University Press, 1930), p. 19.

³*The Correspondence of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Richard Watson Dixon*, ed., Claude Collier Abbott (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 24; hereafter cited in text as "*L*, II."

⁴*The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*, ed., Claude Collier Abbott (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 238; cited as "*L*, I."

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- ⁵ *The Sermons and Devotional Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed., Christopher Devlin (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 151; cited as "S."
- ⁶ *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed., Humphrey House and Graham Storey (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 112; cited as "J."
- ⁷ *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed., W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 28; cited as "P."
- ⁸ *Four Metaphysical Poets* (New York: Vintage, 1960), pp. 133-4.
- ⁹ On prayer and blasphemy here, see Sigurd Burkhardt, "Poetry and the Language of Communication," in *Hopkins*, ed. Geoffrey Hartman (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p. 166.
- ¹⁰ Jean Daniélou, S. J., *The Bible and the Liturgy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1956), p. 145.
- ¹¹ See James Finn Cotter, *Inscape* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972), p. 356, on the diamond as eucharistic philosopher's stone.

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