Two Images in the Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins

THE distinctiveness of Hopkins' vocabulary has been remarked on as one of the virtues of design of his poetry. In his word coinages in the unusual compounds, the resuscitations of obsolete words and the dialect usage, could be traced both his own representation of the special quality of a thing—its "instress" or "inscape"—and its natural extension of meaning for the poet. The potencies of many of Hopkins' words can course be appreciated only by reference to the whole body of the poems, and by the evidence of the letters and journals. Certain words recur in a fashion which suggests cypher, a private vocabulary to be decoded by the investigation of larger extracts. In Hopkins the word is not only a referent of some symbolic value, it is itself a symbol.

48. See Jennings, The Law and the Constitution (2nd or 3rd edition), Appendix and the authorities there quoted.
This article proposes to take two examples from his vocabulary and to them to analysis in order to discover what light is thrown upon the the words "wimpling" or "wimpled," and "hurl." These words likely to give any difficulty to the general reader. For Hopkins how these words have special senses and perform special functions. In the core of the word denotes the particular visual pattern so that Hopkins was early interested in the etymology of the word "curve" a shape like the wimple which frames the face, something which Hopkins had been represented by the figure of a V inverted, the opposite of the "V pattern of the woodlark's flight—see The Woodlark. The word denotes the physical aspect of a certain shape, oval, rounded. Its immediate references would be to the covering of the face, the nun's wimple which covers and protects; then anything which is covered and protected, that which is enclosed in a tegument, that which swells within, the seed, the kernel, the precious juice surrounded by the rind. All such ideas attracted Hopkins sensuously, and his sensuous apperception would immediately throw off an equally gratifying religious feeling, so that where this particular word is used; we are aware of the effect upon him first of all of a sensuous pattern, and

All references to Hopkins' poems are to the 2nd Edition, 1930.

1. Hopkins comments on a line in Bridges' A Passer By—"When skies are cold and misty, and hail is hurling"—as follows: "Hail is hurling" did remind me of myself but I do not well know why: "I have something about hail and elsewhere several things about hurling, but that does not amount to hail hurling." The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges. Ed. Abbot, p. 80.


3. Hopkins insists that everything on this earth is vaulted over by the heavens. The thought is a commonplace, but the way in which he states it is to be noted. He objected to Bridges' "domeless courts" in Prometheus the Firegiver, not only because the Greeks did not know domes, and that courts anyhow are "roofless, a fortiori domeless," also because "when anything, as a court, is uncovered and roofless, speaking, mine is just the one kind of roof it may still be said to have and especially in a clear and on a mountain, namely the spherical vault or dome of heaven. What can you Letters I, pp. 243/4.

In objecting to an image in Browning, he writes "I will give a glaring instance crowning of false perspective in an image. In his Instans Tyranus he makes the say that he found the just man his victim on a sudden shielded from him by the the sky spreading itself like a great targe over him, 'with the sun's disk for boss.' This is monstrous. The vault of heaven is a vault, hollow, concave us, convex upwards; it therefore could only defend man on earth against enemies t, an angry Olympus for instance. And the tyrant himself is inside it, under it, much as his victim. The boss is seen from behind, like the small stud of a ak." Letters II, p. 50.
then of impulses which develop, interestingly enough, in contrary directions. There is the feeling of keen enjoyment in that which is enfolded, protected, lapped (the word "laps" comes naturally to him), and this at once receives a new direction as an article of religious faith and emotional belief in that which laps everywhere round. The "wimpling wing" of The Windhover, the "wimpled lip" and "the wimpled-water-dimpled, not-by-morning-matched-face" express both the attractiveness of a distinct pattern and the proof and evidence of a mystical quality which the poet accepts as an article of belief. These suggestions progress by movement in contrary directions, both the sensuous physical and the visionary spiritual, to an individual emotional tension which is the mark of Hopkins' poetry.

That there is a chain of idea in which this definite physical pattern, the emotion of being protected, the sensuous feel of that which lodges in the core, of the eggs warmed by the bird in the nest, of the heart in its close vault, the child in the womb are links, could be seen in numerous places in the poetry. It could be claimed that Hopkins' ideas of human individuality gave him the opportunity of gratifying this fancy of his, since individuality was what lay "furled" and enclosed within the organism, it was the distinctiveness (his own word is "keepings") which occurs throughout the letters) which related man to God. So in the Journal he writes "Therefore in that 'cleav' of being which each of his creatures shews to God's ages alone (or in its 'burl')".

4. See The Blessed Virgin Compared to the Air we Breathe 11, 75 foll: 

"O how I may do but stand
Where you can lift your hand
Skywards: rich, rich it laps
Round the four faggots."  

See also St. Wines' Well:

"Her head, sheared from her shoulders, fall,
And lapped in shining hair, roll . . ."

5. In Morning Mid-day and Evening Sacrifice Hopkins changed his original "Silk-ashed but core not cooling" into—

"In silk-ash kept from cooling
And ripest under rind — "

The reasons for the change reveal Hopkins' attribution of a special sense to "core" which his reader might have found difficult or missed. He writes "But the line 'Silk-ashed,' etc. in the Sacrifice is too hard and must be changed to 'In silk-ash kept from cooling'I meant to compare grey hairs to the flakes of silky ash which may be seen round wood embers burnt in a clear fire and covering a 'core of heat,' as Tennyson calls it. But core there is very ambiguous, as your remark shews." Letters I, pp. 97-98.  

6. In answer to Bridges' query about the lines in The Loss of the Eurydice—

"One stroke
Felled and furled them, the hearts of oak."

Hopkins replied "How are hearts of oak furled? Well, in sand and sea water. The image comes out true under the circumstances, otherwise it could not hold together. You are to suppose a stroke or blast in a forest of 'hearts of oak' (at preposition, sound oak-timber) which at one blow both lays them low and buries them in broken earth." Letters I, p. 52. "Furl" in Hopkins' poetry always has the sense "wrapped in."


9. There are numerous references in the Psalms to the Psalmist's desire to take refuge from his enemies under the shadow of the wings of the Lord. Perhaps the best known is "And I said, Oh that I had wings like a dove then would I fly away, and be at rest . . . I would haste me to a shelter from the stormy wind and tempest." Psalm 55.  

10. Abbott has a choke pear of his own grafting here. He objects that "this . . . is, perhaps because of rhyme-greediness, over-wrought. A sloe is not 'lush,' it 'burst' on the tongue like a grape. It is a spare fruit, and must be bitten. This sharp astrangency of taste experienced is here lost." Letters I, p. xxxii.

11. This were so—I am not competent to judge—it does not invalidate my point that derives a sensuous gratification from the feel of the soft mass, first of all enclosed, then contained in the whole body. "Rhyme greediness" and "sweet." The latter is itself a recurring symbol in Hopkins. If there is a literary on for the image it surely is Keats' Ode on Melancholy.
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The wished for state is that of being "wound" in a greater enfolding and protecting power—the word "wind" is another of Hopkins' cyphers—both use and feeling suggest the Mutterleib Phantasie.

That the poet responds with heightened emotions to these suggestions could now be clear.13 The visual image of the "curved" form supported by associations of the bird protecting its nest, religious symbols, and Hopkins' notions about individuality would give "wimpled" a deeper emotional reality than would at first sight seem justifiable. Both the keenly perceived "Christ our Lord" and the deeply felt religious exaltation co-exist here, so that in The Woundwort when "wimpling wing" occurs, it is more than ever clear that much more than the bird or even brute beauty crowds into the poet's consciousness—it is "Christ our Lord."14

Examination of the word "hurl" would again throw light on Hopkins' attitude and his habits in poetry. Here, once again, there is a common set of associations linking the "inscape" of the action depicted by the word with the poet's sensuous and religious intuitions. By meaning and sound the word "hurl" would lend itself to connection with "hurtle," and "hurly" as a dialect word, or as the first element in the common "hurly-burly." The visual picture would be of strong quick movement through the air of a mass propelled by a superior force away from it. In "+" poems "hurling" or "hurl" (whether used as noun or verb) record the poet's impression not of the movement of mass alone, but of movement in opposite directions which comes from the collision of two masses. The word implies the presence of hurfer and thing hurled.

This is surely the statement in Hurrahing in Harvest where the heart rears wings bold and bolder—

And hurfs for him, O half hurts heart earth for him off under his feet.

13. Further proof of the persistence of this image might be provided by Hopkins reading of Dixon's poetry. He commented on two images he liked in Dixon's poetry: "I think the images I like best of all are in Love's Consolation about the quicksilver and the heart combed round with hair." Dixon's lines as quoted by Abbott are as follows: "and of us some About our hearts meshed the loved hair with comb Of our great love, to twine and glisten there, And when 'twas stiffened in our life blood dear, Then was it rent away."

When Hopkins provided a short note on Dixon's poetry in T. Arnold's Manual of English Literature he remembers this: "But he is likest and owes most to Keats, and description and imagery are realised with a truth and splendour not less than Keats' (see the scene of the nine lovers in Love's Consolation: the images of the quick silver and of the heart fastened round with hair, ibidem)." Letters II, pp. 71 and 177—rendering of Dixon's lines is significant.

14. Herbert Read's description of The Windhover as "a poem which has no obvious reason to any beliefs at all" is surely perverse. He continues "The Windhover is entirely objective in its sensual catalogue: but Hopkins gets over his scruples by eating the poem "To Christ our Lord." But this is a patent deception."
The earth is described as being pushed away, hurled away by the heart, the earth hurled under the heart rearing wings upward. In *The Loss of the Eurydice* the sudden cloud bringing the squall in which the ship foundered is pictured as follows:

Now near by Ventnor town
It hurls, hurls off Boniface Down.

The movement of the cloud (note the sense of riding in the air) portrays the action of throwing apart and away from it Boniface Down. In *Harry Ploughman* there is the following:

Churlsgrace, too child of Amansstrength, how it hangs or hurls
Them—broad in blufthide his frowning feet lashed! raced
With, along them, cragiron under and cold furls—

Here "hurls" portrays the movement of the boot as it meets the earth and with the impact pushes it away from under the foot. "Hangs" marks the foot "broad in blufthide lashed" raised in the air, and "hurls" is Hopkins’ exact notation for the action which follows the next movement. The effect of the mass, its weight and force are well seconded by the actual shape and implications of "Amansstrength" and "blufthide." This seems to be much more likely than that "hurls" is merely fast movement of the foot as it races. Here very definitely it must refer to motion following upon the contact of two forces. In *Tom’s Garland* the same image is paralleled in—

then Tom’s fallowbooth fellow piles pick
By him and rips out rockfire homelife—

When one considers now *The Wreck of the Deutschland*—

The swoon of a heart that the sweep and the hurl of thee trod
Hard down with a horror of height:

"hurl" conveys the impression of dire strength, the weight which impinges on the heart and throws it down from the upper regions of the air. "A horror of height" could be the heart’s swooning at the imminence of the shock of God sweeping down upon it, and also the heart’s horror at the dizzy abyss below it as it is flung by God’s superior force. The image repeats the known terror of the universal dream of falling from a great height.

In *The Windhover*—

High there, how he hung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
In his ecstasy, then off, off forth on swing,
As a skate’s heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding
Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird,—the achieve of, the mastery of the thing.

Surely here the bird (and all it means for the poet) soars triumphant with a power which colliding with the wind “rebuffs” it.

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The answer to the question why this image recurs so often in Hopkins’ work are instances in *The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo*, in No. 56 by Bridges Ashboughs, and in the unfinished *Epithalamion*, and religious and spiritual connotations might be, would be provided by seeing his constant sense of a personal struggle with God—his feeling impact upon him of a force which pitches him past pitch of grief. Nos. 40, 41, 45, 47 would supply the evidence. In No. 40, God is—

the hero whose heaven-handling
flung me, foot trod
—Me...

Heaven-handling,” “flung,” “foot trod,” they repeat ideas discussed. This is one aspect of the poet’s relation with God—the terrible father hurl, just as definitely as the other is of the protecting mother who smiled.” Hopkins holds both attitudes together, both are sensuously vivid and emotionally experienced. That this should be so is not surprising. The quality of a good image can fairly be translated by metaphors describe it as the natural growth of the poet’s attitude as it is expressed in words; dissection would show in the tissues the distinguishing trait of the organism. Hopkins’ words share certain features of his imagery, they “shadow” and repeat something of the structure of his thought and the disposition of his emotion.16 The single word and the image call up two seemingly opposed lines of feeling, in the poetry the “core” is not so much conflict as the ambivalence of his emotions. *The Windhover* looked at again is the transcription not of a struggle between two equal and opposite sets of
feeling succeeding each other in time—“brute beauty” and an asceticism which can find compensation in another sort of beauty of a less vivid kind—but of a frame of mind in which “naked sensualism,” if you like, and spiritual rapture are, and can be, held together. The Windhover is always both bird and not bird, both Pegasus and Christ the Chevalier, both “wimpling wing” and the terror of “hurls.” This is Empson’s feeling about the poem. He sees in the last three lines which profess to come to a single judgment on the matter a more beautiful record of the conflict. I would make a plea for stressing not conflict but ambivalent attitude. The attitude itself might be explained in various ways, but such things lie outside the scope of this article.

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