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Hopkins' Poetics as Alchemy:  
the Motif of Death and Resurrection  
in Hopkins' Poetry  

Kumiko Suwa  

Hopkins early poems have some imageries in common. Critics have pointed out that they show the loneliness of the narrator, who can be interpreted as Hopkins' hidden self, and the world around him which is continually changing. I have already argued on such imagery in an essay, 'Fluidity and Subjectivity in “A Vision of the Mermaids”'. In turn, this essay will focus on 'The Alchemist in the City' (1865), which was written three years later than 'A Vision of the Mermaids'; this essay will also argue on the connection between Hopkins' poetics and the concept of alchemy by consulting other poems.  

'The Alchemist in the City' expresses the loneliness of the narrator, who is confined to the laboratory for his experiment in alchemy. He longs for the changing world outside:

My window shews the travelling clouds,  
Leaves spent, new seasons, alter'd sky,  
The making and the melting crowds:  
The whole world passes; I stand by.  

(St. 1)  

The situation in which a narrator fixed in one place is looking at the changing world, is quite similar to one in 'A Vision of the Mermaids'. The alchemist, however, is just looking at the world outside, and he has not united himself with it. The contrast between the individual self and the changing world or moving crowds can be interpreted as that which C. G. Jung calls the opposition between individual and community.
Jung focuses on the unity of the opposites and death and resurrection after it in an alchemic process, and regards the process as the self transmutation or the character formation in psychology and sociology. In ‘The Alchemist in the City’, it seems that the narrator longs to merge into the community or the world around him. He compares his own situation with that of the people in the city:

They do not waste their meted hours,  
But men and masters plan and build:  
I see the crowning of their towers,  
And happy promises fulfill'd.

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

But now before the pot can glow  
With not to be discover'd gold,  
At length the bellows shall not blow,  
The furnace shall at last be cold. (St. 2-4)

While the people in the city are productive, the alchemist cannot re-create himself, which analogically parallels the process of alchemy, as well as he cannot make gold. Regarding the world outside as unconsciousness and the laboratory as consciousness, the narrator cannot unite consciousness with unconsciousness. In Hopkins’ poetics, consciousness and unconsciousness are described as overthought’ and ‘underthought’:

... [I]n any lyric passages of the tragic poets. . . there are — usually. . . two strains of thought running together and like counterpointed; the overthought, that which everybody, editors, see. . . and which might. . . be. . . paraphrased. . . ; and the underthought, conveyed chiefly in the
choice of metaphors etc. used, and often only half realized by the poet himself, not necessarily having any connection with the subject in hard but usually having a connection and suggested by some circumstance of the scene or of the story." 3) Hopkins' ideal is to make these two thoughts successfully intertwined. Thus, Hopkins tries to show what Jung calls the unity between consciousness and unconsciousness sought by alchemists.

Hopkins wrote 'The Alchemist in the City' one year before his conversion to Catholicism in 1866, and the alchemist in this poem seems to be a representation of Hopkins' persona, who has not yet established his own poetics connected to theology. Concerned with Hopkins as a modernist poet, Rainer Emig explains that the alchemist is 'an allegory of the poet on the borderline of a new aesthetic, aware of the collapse of the old centuries of his craft, yet unwilling to leave them behind'. 4) It is obvious that after a break of seven years since 1868, when Hopkins had become a Jesuit, his style in poetry dramatically changed as we see in 'The Wreck of the Deutschland'. Yet the question remains: why did Hopkins have need to change his style? The answer is not an easy one, but one most important factor is Hopkins' feeling for the crisis of metaphysics in the nineteenth century. As he describes in his essay 'The Probable Future of Metaphysics', positivism or Darwinism was prevalent in his time, and Platonism or metaphysics, on which he depended, was in a critical situation:

THE Positivists foretell and many other people begin to fear, the end of all metaphysics at hand...

The tide we may foresee will always run and turn between idealism and materialism. . . .
... one sees that the ideas so rife now of a continuity without fixed points... of species having no absolute types and only accidentally fixed, all this is a philosophy of flux opposed to Platonism and can call out nothing but Platonism against it. And this, or to speak more correctly Realism, is perhaps soon to return.  

This essay was written two years later than 'The Alchemist in the City', but the poem already hints at the uneasiness expressed in the essay. In order to support Platonism, Hopkins creates his own poetics, which assumes monism, or the existence of God, as the source of energy. In this regard, Hopkins' ideal is similar to the concept of alchemy (which is largely influenced by Neoplatonism), has the proposition that all things are manifested by the sole energy as their source and can be united by it, and surely relates to Christianity in the theme of Christ's death and resurrection.  

The loneliness of the alchemist in 'The Alchemist in the City' is also related to the individual procedure in the work of alchemist. One of the differences between alchemy and chemistry lies in the fact that while the work of alchemy must be done individually, the work of chemistry must be done in cooperation with others. In contrast to chemistry which contributes to the development of industry, alchemists never reveal their knowledge to the public. The position of Hopkins as a poet is similar to that of an alchemist, in that he is against positivism and industrialization. His poem is not for the public, but to symbolize his ideal and his wish to be one with Christ. And the situation of the alchemist in the poem significantly represents the position of Hopkins as a poet: he hoped to establish new poetics which must express Platonic ideals, but he was unable to do so at that time.  

In the latter part of the poem, the alchemist wishes to go to
the wilderness / Or weeded landslips of the shore' (St. 6). He wants to be a bird which can fly freely outside the city: 'I see the city pigeons veer, / I mark the tower swallows run / Between the tower-top and the ground / Below me in the bearing air' (St. 7-8). Descriptions of birds appear quite often in Hopkins' poems, the most remarkable example being 'The Windhover'. Here the narrator's yearning for the bird's flight is emphasized and he finally assimilates himself with the falcon:

**The Windhover:**

*To Christ our Lord*

I CAUGHT this morning morning's minion,

king-dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn

Falcon, in his riding

Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding

High there, how he rung 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!

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here

Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plough down sillion

Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,

Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.

The narrator is impressed by the falcon riding the 'steady air'.
It is often regarded as Christ in some reason. As the title suggests, the poem is dedicated to Christ, and the expression such as 'kingdom of daylight's dauphin' and the personification of 'Falcon' strengthens the impression of the bird as the symbol of Christ. In the expression 'dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon,' 'dapple' means the unity of different colours, hence the nature of Christ as the mediator of man and God. The Real Presence also shows 'some connection between the divine and humanworld.' The analogical nature of Hopkins' poetics, or the doctrine of 'inscape,' derives from the nature of Christ, and through his life, Hopkins tried to unite himself with God by using analogical technique in his poetry.

So it is natural that Hopkins was interested in Newton's doctrine of prism, using the analogy between the colours of the rainbow and the tones of the musical scale. While Hopkins was against Darwinism and atomism, he was concerned about some kind of science which assumes monism and has an analogical nature. According to Daniel Brown, a notable example is energy physics:

Energy physics, by positing a fixed principle which describes all physical powers in nature, encouraged speculative theories of monism akin to that which emerges from Hopkins' 1868 meditations on Parmenides' 'Pantheist idealism' (J. 127).

Energy physics, by adapting the Aristotelian principle of form and renewing a German idealist principle of monism, effectively reinvigorated the metaphysical concepts by which the early British idealists opposed positivism and both understood and facilitated religious belief. While the researches of Darwin and his followers lent credibility to positivism, energy physics provided an understanding of the universe in which all things are unified as manifestations of a single constant power, which during
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the 1860s was often identified with God and used to counter the atheistic and agnostic implications of Darwinian biology.\(^{10}\)

Hopkins' interest in analogy can be seen in the fields of religion as evidenced by Catholic doctrines; art, as we see in poetry, music, pictures and architecture; and science, through energy physics, optics and astronomy. He seems to have tried to reconcile those fields by using the analogical method, and attainment of this synthesis was attempted by alchemists, especially in the Renaissance. As the method of chemistry was developing apart from alchemy, alchemy almost entirely disappeared by the nineteenth century. The methodological difference between alchemy and chemistry is that the former is deductive while the latter inductive.\(^{11}\) Hopkins relies on the former because the deductive method used in idealistic philosophy gives positive proof that each creature has an inalterable pattern which derives from God. Also, alchemy's nature is essentially religious because its philosophy aims at uniting nature into one mechanism created by God, and alchemists regarded the world as the actualization of the idea which God has thought.\(^{12}\) Hopkins’ ideal in his poetics seems to be akin to that of alchemists. The end of metaphysics, felt by Hopkins in the nineteenth century, is reflected in the fruitless art of the alchemist in ‘The Alchemist in the City’, but with his new poetics, Hopkins tried to recover Platonic ideal in a method similar to that of alchemy.

‘The Windhover’ is an example. As I mentioned before, Hopkins' yearning for the bird's flight is frequently shown in his poetry, which seems to be connected to alchemy. The flying bird means vaporization in the analogical explanation used by alchemists.\(^{13}\) In ‘The Windhover’, it is when the narrator assimilates himself with the bird that fire breaks from it:
'Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here /
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion /
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!'. The narrator's assimilation with Christ is compared to the fusion between two different materials by the fire. Alchemists also compared the experimental phenomena to man's life, and vaporization represents the spirit flying out of the body. The narrator in the poem is first looking up to the bird from the earth, but his spirit flies out of his body in order to assimilate himself with it. The fiery bird is also associated with Phoenix, which symbolizes death and resurrection, and in alchemy the perfect transmutation.

In 'The Windhover', there is the unity between Christ and man as the representation of the poet himself, and also the motif of death and resurrection which can be seen both in Christ and alchemy. The unity between man and Christ is demonstrated in the bird from which the fire breaks. As I commented before, this suggests the vaporization in alchemy. The spirit of man flies out of his body and becomes one with Christ, and then in the next stage he should be recreated or resurrected: '... séer plód makes plough down sillion / Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear, / Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion'. Though alchemy disappeared in practice, its analogy with man's rebirth still attracted people's attention in the nineteenth century. In the final tercet, the vaporized spirit conjoined with Christ finally becomes a solid and resurrected spiritual body. The images used in alchemy well describe the situation. The bird flying up represents vaporization (Fig. 1) and the bird flying down to the earth means that gas becomes a solid material through reduction (Fig. 2). Through such a process, alchemists thought that gold could be created (Fig. 3 & 4). In the final tercet, there is an
analogy between the alchemist's work and the dying fire. Here the tone becomes calm compared with the first tercet. By uni-
ification with Christ, man is resurrected and has the same na-
ture as Christ. The 'blue-bleak embers' are dying, but as Christ, 
who is resurrected through death, it becomes 'gold-vermilion',
and 'vermilion' also suggests the colour seen in the final proc-
ess of alchemy. In contrast to this, 'the yellow waxen light' in
the final stanza of 'The Alchemist in the City' suggests the
colour before turning to red as the final stage:

There on a long and squarèd height  
After the sunset I would lie,  
And pierce the yellow waxen light  
With free long looking, ere I die. (St. 11)

The alchemist hopes to be resurrected but he has not reach
the state. In 'The Windhover,' it seems that Hopkins made an
achievement technically and also in the alchemical association.
In the final line, the alliteration of 'g' interacts with the
significations of 'gall' and 'gash' to express the pain which
Christ felt in the Passion, and this symbolically suggests that
Christ is resurrected or becomes 'gold' through death.

In 'The Starlight Night,' the stars in the sky are compared to
the diamond and gold in the earth: Look at the stars! look,
look up at the skies! . . . Down in dim woods the diamond
delves! . . . The grey lawns cold where gold, where quickgold
lies!' (ll. 1-5) As gold was regarded as the imitation of the sun
in alchemy, here is the description of the correspondence be-
tween the macrocosm and the microcosm. In line 6, the image-
ries of wind and fire are associated with the process of
alchemy in which alchemists made wind to blow up flame:
'Wind-beat whitebeam! airy abeles set on a flare!' This poem is
written three months before 'The Windhover,' and there is also
the description of bird in line 7, in which the doves flying up which are compared to the stars represent the vaporization: ‘Flake-doves sent floating forth at a farmyard scare! —’ The word ‘Flake-doves’ itself suggests the unity between two different things, in which the concept of alchemy is similar to that of metaphor of Hopkins in his compounds. The sestet turns us to Christ in heaven:

Buy then! bid then! — What? — Prayer, patience, alms, vows. Look, look: a May-mess, like on orchard boughs!

Look! March-bloom, like on mealed-with-yellow salows!
These are indeed the barn; withindoors house
The shocks. The piece-bright paling shuts the spouse
Christ home, Christ and his mother and all his hallows.

(II. 9-14)

James Finn Cotter explains line 9:

The way to ascend to gnosis is to lower oneself and follow the path of sacrifice expressed in deeds of love and giving; the line ends with the culminating gift of religious imitation of the servant Jesus through the three vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience.  

In the final tercet, there is the description of harvest which means the final stage in the alchmical process. Finally, Christ is described as ‘the spouse,’ which can be understood in terms of alchemy, in which marriage symbolizes the unity between opposite things. Then, Christ as the spouse represents the uniter of opposite things, and also the philosopher’s stone which means the transmutation of volatile material into solid, or, the unity between opposite things, as alchemists compared it with Him. Also, in the alchemic text in the fifteenth century, *Aurora consurgens*, there is the analogy between the philosopher’s stone and Christ as the spouse in Cant., with his
In 'To R. B.', Hopkins compares the process of writing poetry with the process of man's birth:

THE fine delight that fathers thought; the strong Spur, live and lancing like the blowpipe flame, Breathes once and, quenched faster than it came, Leaves yet the mind a mother of immortal song.

Nine month she then, nay years, nine years she long Within her wears, bears, cares and combs the same: The widow of an insight lost she lives, with aim Now known and hand at work now never wrong.

Sweet fire the sire of muse, my soul needs this; I want the one rapture of an inspiration. (ll. 1-10)

In the first quatrain, though 'father' is a verb, it is associated with the meaning of a noun, which is contrasted to 'a mother of immortal song.' To create poetry, the poet needs an inspiration, which is here regarded as 'that fathers thought.' Lines 1 and 2 connote the state in which the poet is inspired, and also, the fire in an alchemic experiment, by which the father and mother as the source of poetry are united by the marriage in alchemy. Here the mother represents the imagination which fosters the inspiration. Alchemists compared man with the container used in alchemic experiments, and also with the base metal which should be reborn through death. In this poem, the poet's mind is compared to the container, in which the inspiration and imagination are fused by fire. As the marriage in alchemy, the father as the inspiration and the mother as the imagination are united in order to create poetry. Though the inspiration 'quenched faster than it came,' the 'immortal song' is fostered by the imagination. In this regard, the process of making poetry described in 'To R. B. is similar to the process
of alchemic experiments, in which gold was considered to be made through the unification of two opposite things and then the death and resurrection. Thus, metaphors of Hopkins generate alchemic associations, and Hopkins hoped to make his poetry immortal by uniting different things with analogy.

The most notable poem which well expresses Hopkins’ ideal is ‘That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and the comfort of the Resurrection’:

Down roughcast, down dazzling whitewash, | wherever an elm arches,
Shivelights and shadowtackle in long | lashes lace, lance, and pair. (ll. 3-4)

The light and the shadow, or two opposite elements, are mixed together. In this poem, the thought of Heraclitus can be seen in the description of air, earth, water and fire:

Delightfully the bright wind boisterous | ropes, wrestles, beats earth bare
Of yestertempest’s creases; | in pool and rutpeel parches
Squandering ooze to squeezed | dough, crust, dust;
stanches, starches
Squadroned masks and manmarks | treadmire toil there
Footfretted in it. Million-fuelèd, | nature’s bonfire burns on. (ll. 5-9)

The description shows the fusion of air and earth by a violent movement of the wind, which then attacks the water. Man’s footprints or ‘manmarks’ are dried out by the wind and are transformed to dust. This is reminiscent of the words from the Old Testament: ‘Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return’ (Gen. 3:19). This refers to man’s death, but then the imagery of fire appears most abruptly, symbolizing reproduction, which is mentioned in the works of Heraclitus. Hopkins’
interest in Heraclitus can be seen in his poems, especially in the imagery of fire, which appears frequently in his poetry. Heraclitus aligns himself with the propositions of alchemy, and claims that fire is at the root of everything on earth. He also defines reproduction as the way of rise or vaporization, and putrefaction as the way of fall or fixation. Though ‘nature’s bonfire’ hints the way of rise or resurrection, the former part of the poem shows a descension, which suggests the death of man:

But quench her bonniest, dearest | to her, her clearest-selved spark
Man, how fast his firedint, | his mark on mind, is gone!
Both are in an unfathomable, all is in an enormous dark Drowned. O pity and indig | nation! Manshape, that shone Sheer off, disseveral, a star, | death blots black out; nor mark
Is any of him at all so stark
But vastness blurs and time | beats level. (ll. 10-16)

As the ‘manmarks’ returns to dust, the fire as man’s self is gone. Hopkins thinks that man’s individuality is so unparalleled that he cannot be connected to others and ultimately to God. The terrible sonnets, or dark sonnets, written before ‘Heraclitean Fire’ show the situation well. For Hopkins, lack of contact with God means death. Then resurrection soon follows death, as the bonfire suggested before: ‘Enough! the Resurrection’ (l. 16). The darkness is broken by a ‘beacon, an eternal beam’ (l. 19). At last, the motif of death and resurrection is clearly mentioned:

...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. (ll. 19-24)

After the putrefaction of the flesh, as the Phoenix is resurrected from ashes, the spirit of the poet becomes one with Christ. The transmutation of man as 'ash' into 'immortal diamond' represents the process of alchemy. This suggests the similarity between the foundation of Hopkins' poetics and that of alchemy: both aim at creating a resurrected spiritual body in their analogy. Thus 'Heraclitean Fire' well explains this theme.

Notes

* This paper was presented at the 50th annual conference of Chugoku-Shikoku branch of the English Literary Society of Japan, 1 Nov., 1997, at Hiroshima Women's University, Hiroshima.

5) *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Humphry
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House (London: Oxford UP, 1959), 118-120.


7) Japanese tr. of Klossowski de Rola, 290-291.


12) Ibid., 293-94.


15) Ibid., 281.


18) Cf. Jung, Psychology and Alchemy, Part III, Ch. 5, sec. 2.

19) For the symbol of marriage in alchemy, I refer to the Japanese tr. of Taylor, 179.

20) Ibid., 282.

21) Japanese tr. of Klossowski de Rola, 16 & 49. See also the figures.
‘Sapienscia vetrum philosophorum sive doctrina eorumdem de summa et universalis medicina’ in *De Summa* (18th century) [de Rola, *Alchemy*]