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A Psychoanalytic Approach to the Idea of 'Vision' and Greek Imagery in Hopkins' Poetry

Kumiko Suwa

G. M. Hopkins is well known as a religious poet, and most of his poems express his devotion to Christianity. Accordingly, the rest of his works concerning Hellenistic themes are comparatively few though he wrote the sonnets like 'Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves' (1886) and 'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and the comfort of the Resurrection' (1888), which reflect the thought of the Greek phiosopher Heraclitus. Other works on the Greek myth and imagery are 'A Vision of the Mermaids' (1863) and 'Andromeda' (1879). Except for 'A Vision of the Mermaids', these poems have Christian implication, for they are somewhat connected to Hopkins' priesthood after 1877. The present essay focuses on the meaning of 'vision' in 'A Vision of the Mermaids' and Greek imagery, with the help of Jungian psychoanalysis, which will add some light on Hopkins' poetics from new angle.

First, I look into the meaning of 'vision', which is used in the title of 'A Vision of the Mermaids'. The word can be considered in Jungian terms when we remark the poem's dream-like and symbolic descriptions. OED defines 'vision' as

1. Something which is apparently seen otherwise than by ordinary sight; esp. an appearance of a prophetic or mystical character, or having the nature of revelation, supernaturally presented to the mind either in sleep or in an abnormal state.
2. The action or fact of contemplating something not
actually present to the eye; mystical or supernatural insight or foresight.

3. The action of seeing with the bodily eye; the exercise of the ordinary faculty of sight, or the faculty itself.

The first signification can be considered as Jung’s ‘vision’, which means the invasion of the unconscious into the domain of consciousness.¹ The second is concerned with poetic imagination, and the third is also important for my argument of the action of seeing of the narrator in ‘A Vision of the Mermaids’. All three are relevant in this poem, so the word ‘vision’ is the key to understand it.

At first, the narrator of the poem rowed and reached a rock, which could be seen at that moment, but is covered by the water at high tide. The scene is similar to the dream of a person which Jung exemplifies as hypnagogic visual impression: ‘By the seashore. The sea breaks into the land, flooding everything. Then the dreamer is sitting on a lonely island’. Then, he interprets it: ‘The sea is the symbol of the collective unconscious, because unfathomed depth lies concealed beneath its reflecting surface’, and he notes: ‘The sea is a favourite place for the birth of visions (i.e., invasions by unconscious contents)’.² This interpretation of the dream makes me consider the symbolic imageries in the poem as the creation of unconsciousness.

The opening scene of the poem, however, is at low tide:

Rowing, I reach’d a rock — the sea was law —
Which the tides cover in their overflow,
Marking the spot, when they have gurgled o’er,
With a thin floating veil of water hoar.
A mile astern lay the blue shores away;
And it was at the setting of the day. (ll. 1-6)

The description here is calm as consciousness still reins the
narrator's mind.

I have already argued on this poem with the title 'Fluidity and Subjectivity in G. M. Hopkins' "A Vision of the Mermaids"', where I regard the first person point of view with the act of seeing suggested in such verbs as 'see', 'gaze' and 'watch' as the representation of subjectivity and the changing world around the observer as that of fluidity. Here I define the former as the conscious and the latter as the unconscious. The perfection of the Self should be attained through the unity between the conscious and the unconscious. In this light, Hopkins' early poems show the separation between the conscious and the unconscious. He uses the terms 'overthought' and 'underthought' to describe the essence of poetry and literary works in general. Overthought is the meaning of a poem which everyone can understand and underthought is

conveyed chiefly in the choice of metaphors... and often half realized by the poet himself, not necessarily having any connection with the subject at hand but usually having a connection and suggested by some circumstances of the scene or of the story... 3

When these two are united, Hopkins considered that poetry can be created, and this is applied to his concept of metaphor. It is clear that 'overthought' can be interpreted as the conscious and 'underthought' as the unconscious. Jung's definition of symbol well fits Hopkins' concept of metaphor, for, according to Jung, symbol is created from the unity between the opposites. In this process, the conscious and the unconscious are united by the transcendent function, and metaphor is the unity of the opposites which nevertheless have something in common. 4 In other words, the poetic language is created by the invasion of the unconscious into the conscious. Also, Jung's remarks on the symbol in poetry can be applied to underthought
‘suggested by some circumstance of the scene or of the story’ as archetype: ‘The work presents us with a finished picture, and this picture is amenable to analysis only to the extent that we can recognize it as a symbol’. Then he introduces the dictum of Gerhard Haupmann referring to the case of a symbolic work, ‘Poetry evokes out of words the resonance of the primordial word’, and continues: ‘The question we should ask, therefore, is: “What primordial image lies behind the imagery of art?”’.  

Hopkins’ poetics and Jung’s psychoanalytic theory parallel in many ways. First, Hopkins’ terms ‘overthought’ and ‘underthought’ indicate the conscious and the unconscious, and their unity is what Jung calls the unity of opposites which bears symbol and metaphor. Second, Jung’s concept of archetype can be seen in Hopkins’ concept of underthought. Anthony Stevens explains the similarity between Jung’s archetype and Plato’s ideas. He explains the latter as ‘pure mental forms existing in the minds of the gods before human life again’ and they ‘were consequently above and beyond the ordinary world of phenomena’. Then he goes on to say that:

They were collective in the sense that they embodied the general characteristics of a thing, but they were also implicit in its specific manifestations. Archetypes similarly combine the universal with the individual, the general with the unique, in that they are common to all humanity, yet nevertheless manifest themselves in every human being in a way peculiar to him or to her.

Hopkins’ concept of inscape is influenced by Plato, and consequently inscapes act in the same way as Jung’s archetypes in that they ‘combine the universal with the individual’. Third, Hopkins’ inclination for monism is linked with Jung’s unus mundus, or ‘unitary world’. Jung uses the term to show each
layer in existence is closely related to all the others.' Jung's archetypes are connected to *unus mundus*, for:

He conceived archetypes to be the mediators of the *unus mundus*, responsible for organizing ideas and images in the psyche as well as for governing the fundamental principles of matter and energy in the physical world.

... [T]he archetypes which order our perceptions and ideas are themselves the product of an objective order which transcends both the human mind and the external world. At this supreme point physical science, psychology, and theology all coalesce.  

There are Greek imageries all over 'A Vision of the Mermaids' as we see in the words 'Cyclads' (l. 37), 'Hector's casque' (l. 42), 'Tyrian dye' (l. 47), 'red Pompeii' (l. 51), 'a Nereid company' (l. 74), 'Mermaidens' (l. 98), 'Siren' (l. 127) and 'Mermaids'. What do all these Greek imageries mean? We scarcely find them in other Hopkins' poems but in the sonnets like 'Andromeda', 'Sibyl's Leaves' and 'Heraclitean Fire'. Apart from the last two sonnets, 'Andromeda' is quite different from 'A Vision of the Mermaids' in atmosphere. In contrast to the abundance of imagery in 'A Vision of the Mermaids', 'Andromeda' is plainer and has unified imagery. It also has Christian connotations in its theme, for Andromeda is compared to the Church and Perseus to Christ. Compared to Christian connotations in 'Andromeda', 'A Vision of the Mermaids' does not have an apparent Christian theme. One reason for the difference between them lies in the fact that the latter was written before Hopkins' conversion to Catholicism in 1866, and the former was written after he had entered the Society of Jesus in 1868. This seems to suggest that the latter shows Hopkins' pure poetic characteristics, and the former shows his characteristics as a priest.
In this light, 'Sibyl's Leaves' reveals the conflict between the poet and the priest in him, and they are united in 'Heraclitean Fire'. Both of them show fluidity, which reflects the thought of Heraclitus:

\[
\text{EARNEST, earthless, equal, | vaulty, voluminous,} \\
\text{... stupendous} \\
\text{Evening strains to be tîme's vást, | womb-of-all,} \\
\text{home-of-all, hearse-of-all night.} \\
\text{Her fond yellow hornlight wound to the west, | her wild} \\
\text{hollow hoarlight hung to the hight} \\
\text{Waste; her earliest stars, earlstars, | stárs principal,} \\
\text{overbend us,} \\
\text{Fire-féaturing heaven. For earth her being has unbound;} \\
\text{her dapple is at end, as-} \\
\text{tray or aswarm, all throughther, in throngs; | self in self} \\
\text{steepèd and pánhed — qúite} \\
\text{Disremembering, dísmembering | áll now. Heart, you} \\
\text{round me right} \\
\text{With: Óur evening is over us; Óur night | whélms,} \\
\text{whélms, ánd will end us. (ll. 1-8)}
\]

The title of the poem is derived 'from the requiem hymn, Dies Irae, which speaks of the Day of Judgment as prophesied by both David and the Sibyl': 9 'Dies irae, dies illa, /Sovet seclum in favilla:/Teste David cum Sibilla' (Day of wrath, that day shall dissolve this world in ashes, as David and the Sibyl foretold). 10 The scene is filled with the imageries of death which can be seen in such expressions as; 'hearse-of-all night'; 'earth | her being has unbound; her dapple is at end'; 'self in self steepèd and pánhed — qúite /Disremembering, dísmémering | all now'; and, 'Óur evening is over us; óur night | whélms, whélms, ánd will end us'. Dapple is the symbol of uniting each being, which is here dissolved. All things are in motion toward death and darkness, and 'Fire-féaturing heaven' suggests
Heraclitean fire, which is regarded as the agent of transmutation among the four elements. The description of 'self' seems to suggest that the two selves in Hopkins as the poet-priest are in conflict.

The influence of Heraclitus is more explicit in 'Heraclitean Fire': 'CLOUD - PUFFBALL, torn tufts, tossed pillows flaunt forth, then chevy on an air-built thoroughfare: heaven-roysterers, in gay-gangs they throng; they glitter in marches' (l. 1). The descriptions and atmosphere here are quite similar to 'Sibyl's Leaves'. The descriptions of the four elements and of the fire as the agent of transmutation can be seen here:

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
Squandroned masks and mammarks | treadmire toil there
Footfretted in it. Million-fuelèd, | nature's bonfire burns on.

The symbol of fire expressed in line 8 embodies Heraclitus' thought in which he regards fire as the eternal life. Though the atmosphere and the influence of Heraclitus in the two sonnets are comparable to 'A Vision of the Mermaids', the poetic techniques used in the former are much more complicated than the latter. The description of man as 'clearest-selvèd spark' is related to the 'self' in 'Sibyl's Leaves':

But quench her bonniest, dearest | to her, clearest-selvèd spark
Man, how fast his firedint, | his mark on mind, is gone!
Both are in 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. Enough! the
Resurrection,
A heart’s-clarion! (I I. 9-16)

Here is the description of the death of man’s ego. The man as
’spark’ and ‘star’ seems to be connected to Heraclitus, for he
’said that the soul is a spark of the essential substance of the
stars’.

The expressions such as nature’s ‘clearest selvèd
spark’, ‘his mark on mind’ and ‘Manshape, that shone / Sheer
off, disseveral’ show the characteristics of ‘inscape’ as the inner
self of each being, which is at once particular and general.
Here Hopkins uses the word ‘mark’ to describe man’s individu-
ality, which is repeated in line 13, yet man once had the con-
nection with nature, as the expression ‘her clearest selvèd
spark’ shows, and Hopkins’ coinage ‘disseveral’ is ‘interpretable
as dis + several, with dis-acting . . . as a negative prefix’,
and consequently means “not several”, therefore only one,
“unique”.

The scene suggests the death of inscape and of the
unity between nature and man, which is also described in
’Sibyl’s Leaves’. In ‘Heraclitean Fire’, however, the Resurrection
occurs, which is compared to the final stage in the process of
alchemy by Jung.

Heraclitean imagery and fluidity in ‘A Vision of the
Mermaids’, ‘Sibyl’s Leaves’ and ‘Heraclitean Fire’ seem to sug-
gest the unconscious. Jung explains the unconscious as the
pagan and archaic levels:

At a certain point it [the unconscious] even develops a
tendency to regress to lower and more archaic levels. It
may easily happen, therefore, that a Christian who believes
in all the sacred figures is still undeveloped and un-
changed in his inmost soul because he has “all God
outside" and does not experience him in the soul. His deciding motives, his ruling interests and impulses, do not spring from the sphere of Christianity but from the unconscious and undeveloped psyche, which is as pagan and archaic as ever.  

With his view of the unconscious, 'A Vision of the Mermaids' shows the process of symbolization, for symbols are created from the unity between the conscious and the unconscious which has also mentioned in my interpretation of the first signification of 'vision' in OED. If we regard the Greek imagey in the poem as the representation of the unconscious and regression 'to lower and more archaic levels' before transformation, and 'I' as the conscious, the solitary state of the narrator can be interpreted as the disharmony of the conscious with the unconscious. With the invasion of the unconscious into the conscious, the poet does not know the means by which to contact God. The poet needs to get the balance between the conscious and the unconscious, or to create symbols and metaphors which consciously introduce the unconscious into his words to express God and to unite himself with Him. Jung defines metaphor as the poetic devise used by the conscious, and presupposes that the mind infers imaginarily, which is closest to analogy and metaphor. In this presupposition, he recognizes that the archetype as a storehouse of image which cannot be represented exists in the depth of the mind. For Hopkins, the purpose of writing poetry was to transform his vision into poetic language, which is the means to reach a higher level.

'Sibyl's Leaves' expresses the inflation of the ego or the conscious. According to Jung, it means the regression of the conscious to the unconscious, and this happens when the conscious takes on too much of the context of itself and cannot distinguish between them:
... If conscious is cramped and obstinately one-sided, and there is also a weakness of judgment, then the approach or invasion of the unconscious can cause confusion and panic or dangerous inflation.

In the category of 'the dark sonnets' of Hopkins which includes 'Sibyl's Leaves', 'I wake and feel' (1885) well expresses the situation of the inflation of the ego:

I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.
What hours, O what black hours we have spent
This night! what sighs you, heart, saw; ways you went!
And more must, in yet longer lights delay.
With witness I speak this. But where I say
Hours I mean years, mean life. (ll. 1-6)

The inflation of the ego separates us from the outside world, which makes us insensible to time and space, and the situation is described as darkness. The dark sonnets well expresses the situation. Man possessed by the ego does not have the inscape which unites man with nature and God, and suffers the scourge in Hell: 'Selfyeast of spirit a dull dough sours. I see / The lost are like this, and their scourge to be / As I am mine, their sweating selves; but worse' (ll. 12-14). Now the situation in 'Sibyl's Leaves' is understandable: 'For earth her being has unbound; her dapple is at end, astray or aswarm, all throughther, in throngs; | self in self steepèd and páshed' (ll. 5-6). Then, there is the colloquy between the poet and his heart as we have seen in line 3 of 'I wake and feel', and the situation of the two sonnets are quite similar: 'Heart, you round me right / With: Óur evening is over us; óur night | whélms, whélms, and will end us' (ll. 7-8).

The scene of the Last Judgment is described both in 'Sibyl's Leaves' and 'Heraclitean Fire', but their conclusions are opposite. In 'Sibyl's Leaves', all are separated in two:
Lét life, wánéd, ah lét life wind
Off hér once skéined stained véined variety | upon,
áll on twó spools; párť, pen, páck
Now her áll in twó flocks, twó folds—black, white; |
right, wrong; reckon but, reck but, mind
But thése two; wáre of a wórld bút thése | twó tél, 
each off the óther; of a rack
Where, selfwrung, selfstrung, sheathe-and shelterless,
| thóughts agáinst thoughts ín groáns grínd.
(ll. 10-14)

The scene is associated with Matt. 25:31-33:

All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. 19

In the sonnet, the poet is still in his moral understanding of the world, distinguishing right from wrong. This means that he is not out of the rein of the conscious as lines 13 and 14 show, which is similar to ‘I wake and feel’ in their description of the self. In the dark sonnets, we notice the poet’s cry for God which is similar to Job’s. In his Answer to Job (1952), Jung analyzes Job, who suffers from calamities though he is morally right. In ‘Thou art indeed just, Lord’ (1889), Hopkins quotes from Jer. 12:1: ‘Justus quidem tu es, Domine, si disputem tecum; verumtamen justa loquar ad te: Quare via impiorum prosperatur? &c’: This is translated into English in the first quatrain of the sonnet: ‘THOU art indeed just, Lord, if I contend / With thee; but, sir, so what I plead is just, / Why do sinners’ ways prosper? and why must / Disappointment all I endeavour end?’ (ll. 1-4) The poet’s situation is similar to Job, who faces the duality of God: ‘Wert thou my enemy, O thou my friend, / How wouldst thou worse, I wonder, than thou dost
Defeat, thwart me?' (ll. 5-6) Job complains of God's unfair judgment to his friends (Job. 9:15-17, AV). Job does not know the dialogue between God and Satan, in which Satan proposes God to test Job in order to prove he has true faith to God, who finally agreed with Satan and said: 'Behold, all that he hath is in thy power; only upon himself put not forth thine hand' (1:12, AV). Job believes that he is just and cannot endure his friends' slander that God causes him to suffer because he must have done something wrong. One of his friends, Elihu, says Job's attitude comes from his pride: 'There they cry, but none giveth answer, Because of the pride of evil man' (36:12, AV). Job's pride is essentially derived from moralism, which logically prescribes the way of God, and, after all, this is based on the conscious. God is at once moral and without morals, and Job cannot help but face God's duality. This makes him realize the dead end of the logic of moralism, which means that he proceeds from the level of the conscious to the domain of the unconscious. From this standpoint, the situation of Job psychologically fits the dark sonnets. He needs to transcend the rein of the ego to be resurrected, as is described in 'Heraclitean Fire' (ll. 13-17). The inflation of the ego and insensibleness of time and space which we have seen in 'Sibyl's Leaves' and 'I wake and feel' are here dissolved by accepting the unconscious, which is described in the resurrection. The description of the Last Judgment here is different from that of 'Sibyl's Leaves', for the poet reaches the higher level to be united with Christ: 'In a flash, at a trumpet crash, / I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am' (ll. 21-22).

In 'A Vision of the Mermaids', the mermaids are uniquely described:

This was their manner: one translucent crest
Of tremulous film, more subtle than the vest
Of dewy gorse blurr'd with gossamer fine,
From crown to tail-fin floating, fringed the spine,
Droop'd o'er the brows like Hector's casque, and sway'd
In silken undulation, spurr'd and ray'd
And was as tho' some sapphire molten-blue
Were vein'd and streak'd with dusk-deep lazuli,
Or tender pinks with bloody Tyrian dye. (ll. 38-47)

In this description of the mermaids, the masculine image of 'Hector' and the feminine one of silk are combined together. According to Jung, mermaids represent anima.²¹ Hopkins' description of the mermaids transcends femininity, which can be applied to the fourth stage of anima as the representation of Sapientia. Sapientia symbolises all goods, whether religious or unreligious. When the conscious begins to interact with the unconscious, anima begins to have influence on artistic creativity and religious inspiration.²² Analysing the poem in this way, the androgynous description of the mermaids in the poem symbolises anima's influence on the poet's artistic creativity.

We also see the description of gems like 'sapphire' or 'lazuli' (ll. 45-46). We find even more as we continue to read the poem, and the imagery of gems represents the unconscious. The imagery of 'A Vision of the Mermaids' is continually changing, and even gives us the impression of untidiness, which reveals the illogicality of the unconscious. W. H. Gardner points out the instability of expression and 'the flux of nature' in the poem. According to Gardner, its significance to Hopkins 'lay first in the sheer beauty of "sliding" inscape, and then, through that, in the numinous emotion, the mystical apprehension of the immutable One behind the changing Many'.²³ God, at once one and many, shows His duality, and to apprehend this, the poet must proceed from the level of the conscious to that of
the unconscious, as we have seen in the example of Job. This is connected to 'the numinous emotion'. Jung defines the numinous quality as 'empirical manifestations of unconscious contents' which bear 'all the marks of something illimitable, something not determined by space and time'. He regards this as alarming: 'It is all the worse when it becomes increasingly clear that numina are psychic entia that force themselves upon consciousness. . . .' 24 If the poem represents the numinous emotion of Hopkins, the mermaids and changing Many as fluidity can be interpreted as numina which 'force themselves upon' the consciousness of the poet. According to Jung, the conscious contents overwhelm the conscious personality breaking through the restriction of the ego in the religious experience. 25 Unless the poet accepts numina as an aspect of God-image, he cannot understand God.

The mermaids, as the representation of the unconscious and anima, 'crowded to my rock' (l. 98); in other words, they were in a moment of overwhelming the ego. Jung takes an example of visual impression in which the 'dreamer is surrounded by nymphs', which seems to fit the scene of the poem. He analyses that the 'mutiplicity of female character' in the dream shows the 'regressive character of the vision'. From their figures of classical nature, Jung regards the dream as an example of the historical regression, for 'the splitting of the anima into many figures is equivalent to dissolution into . . . the unconscious', and he concludes from this 'that a relative dissolution of the conscious mind is running parallel with the historical regression. . . .' 26

At last, the sun, representing the element of fire, 'had lapsed to ocean' (l. 136), and the tide is in. The flowing tide 'quench'd the rosy isles' (ll. 139-40), and the narrator was left alone: 'White loom'd my rock, the water gurgling o'er, / Whence oft I
watch but see those Mermaids now no more’ (ll. 136-143). In alchemy, the symbol of a mermaid means mercury, for mercury unites or ‘drowns’ solid opposites, as a mermaid drowns sailors, luring them to come toward her. In this light, the mermaids in the poem represent the unity between the conscious and the unconscious, and the solitary state of the narrator means that they are not united in him. The unique description of mermaids in ‘A Vision of the Mermaids’ is connected to the unconscious, and the poem symbolises the beginning of uniting the conscious and the unconscious for Hopkins as a poet-priest.

Notes

7. Cf. The section of ‘unus mundus’ in CDJA.
8. Stevens, 41-42.
11. Jung, Psychology and Alchemy, 120.


15. Cf. The sections of ‘transformation’ and ‘regression’ in *CDJA*.


25. Cf. The section of ‘numinosum’ in *CDJA*.
