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Inverted Religious Imagery in Hopkins' 'Carrion Comfort'

by *Christina J. Murphy*

"Carrion Comfort," the first of Gerard Manley Hopkins' "terrible sonnets," generally has been analyzed as the culminating expression of Hopkins' ideational use of language. Such analyses as Ann Louise Hentz' "Language in Hopkins' 'Carrion Comfort'"¹ make Hopkins' view of the metaphorical complexities of language the central concern of the poem but fail to observe that the thematic and emotional intensity of the sonnet is dependent upon an underlying, inverted use of images drawn from Christian theology. While the significance of Hopkins' theory of language cannot be denied as a shaping factor of the sonnet, neither can the relevance of the unusual religious imagery of "Carrion Comfort" to Hopkins' theological views be minimized. The nature of Hopkins' God, long assumed to be the traditional Christian God of love and mercy, cannot be understood independent of the unconventional religious imagery of "Carrion Comfort."

The sonnet begins:

Not, I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee;²

The line focuses upon death and despair. The comfort described as "carrion" calls up associations of Christ and the sacrament of Holy Communion. There, too, the feast is upon a "carrion comfort," leading to greater joy and love of God. This association is strengthened by the reference in lines 9–10 to the chaff and the grain—grains of wheat being, of course, the essential element of the Eucharistic host or wafer. But in this "Gethesemane of the mind"³ depicted in the poem, the theological order is inverted. Not Christ but Despair as a type of God-figure provides "carrion comfort." The word "feast" in

¹ *Victorian Poetry*, 9 (1971), 197–202.

² All citations of Hopkins' poetry are from *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poems and Prose*, ed. W.H. Gardner (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1968).

³ Patricia A. Wolfe, "The Paradox of Self: A Study of Hopkins' Spiritual Conflict in the 'Terrible' Sonnets," *Victorian Poetry*, 6 (1968), 85.

this context takes on a self-indulgent quality. The experience of Despair is one which is despised, but one which is also enjoyed, to some extent, as a form of emotional release.

The next three lines of the poem:

Not untwist—slack they may be—these last strands of man
In me or, most weary, cry *I can no more*. I can;
Can something, hope, wish day come, not choose not to be.

emphasize that feasting upon Despair is a self-destructive gesture, untwisting the last strands of man in Hopkins. This image can have two meanings. The first recalls “carrion” of line one and emphasizes that Hopkins, in despairing, is separating himself from God and is undergoing a kind of spiritual or psychic death. The second would make “these last strands of man in me” his last efforts of will. “Most weary,” thus, would emphasize that Hopkins has been fighting the enervating battle of will against Despair and now finds himself ready to cry, “*I can no more.*”

The poem seems strongly to suggest the second interpretation. The conflict is one of the self and of the self's will. Romano Guardini would have the “sheer plod” in the last section of “The Windhover” equal motions directed by effort and will.⁴ Perhaps the despair in the opening lines of “Carrion Comfort” is so intense precisely because “sheer plod” is missing. Hopkins no longer has the will to align himself and his being with God. He remains isolated and apart from Him, crying “*I can no more.*” But such a stark realization brings forth a new type of determination which states that Hopkins “can do something.” He can “hope,” hope to be delivered from this dark night of the soul into the brilliance of the day. He can “hope” and he can “not choose not to be.” Introduced in this line is the paradox of the self. In a letter to Coventry Patmore, Hopkins stated, “I cannot follow you in your passion for paradox: more than a little of it tortures.”⁵ There is “more than a little” paradox in the line “not choose not to be.” As Patricia A. Wolfe states in “The Paradox of Self: A Study of Hopkins' Spiritual Conflict in the ‘Terrible’ Sonnets”:

⁴ “Aesthetic-Theological Thoughts on ‘The Windhover,’” in *Hopkins: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1966), p. 78.

⁵ *Further Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Claude Collier Abbott, (London, 1956), p. 388.

The surrender of man's mortal selfhood can be considered either a glorious transition from a lower to a higher state or a torturous sacrifice of human identity in order to achieve union with God's eternal spirit. Man's reaction to it is based entirely on his own personal willingness to relinquish his limited potency in favor of the omnipotence of God. At best it is a struggle which divine grace alleviates through the gift of implicit faith. At worst, it is an introspective agony in the garden when man, keenly aware of his gradual loss of human individuality, kneels at the edge of a spiritual cliff and looking downward into the vast chasm, utters weakly: "Abba, Father, all things *are* possible to thee; take away this cup from me: nevertheless not what I will, but what Thou wilt" (Mark *xiv.* 36).⁶

The spiritual conflict Hopkins depicts in "Carrion Comfort" has larger paradoxical implications than those which Miss Wolfe delineates. Inherent in the image of feasting upon "carrion comfort" is the idea that feeding upon death leads ultimately and only to spiritual and psychic death. Self-annihilation is the final end of feasting upon the "carrion comfort" of Despair. The other alternative, the one Miss Wolfe emphasizes, leads to either a greater awareness of the self through God or, as Miss Wolfe writes, "a torturous sacrifice of human identity," which is in itself a form of self-obliteration. Placed in the boundary situation of confronting the void, Hopkins rejects the self-defeating course of Despair and places implicit faith in God that "the surrender of man's mortal selfhood"⁷ will lead to greater glory. This turning from Despair to hoped-for release and awareness is engendered, in part, by the degree and intensity of Hopkins' Despair-suffering:

But ah, but O thou terrible, why wouldst thou rude on me
Thy wring-world right foot rock? lay a lionlimb against me? scan
With darksome devouring eyes my bruised bones? and fan,
O in turns of tempest, me heaped there; me frantic to avoid thee and
flee?

Peter L. McNamara in "Motivation and Meaning in the 'Terrible Sonnets'" states that the "opponent" referred to in these lines as "terrible" (in the sense of being able to inspire terror) and as viewing the poet with "darksome devouring eyes" is God.⁸ In McNamara's

⁶ Wolfe, pp. 89-90.

⁷ Wolfe, p. 89.

⁸ "Motivation and Meaning in the 'Terrible Sonnets,'" *Renascence*, 16 (1963), 80.

reading, "Carrion Comfort" takes on a theodical quality in which the whole focus and intensity of the poem centers upon the "Why?" voiced in line nine:

Having passed through his struggle with doubt and confusion, Hopkins is given the joyful illumination of recognizing that in "That night, that year / Of now done darkness I wretch lay wrestling with (my God!) my God." The immensity of his discovery makes Hopkins catch his breath with the thrill of the honor done him (signified by the parenthetical "my God!").⁹

No textual support exists for McNamara's reading, but for such a reading support may be found in the concern that Hopkins' poetry "reflect an attitude in keeping with his religious vocation,"¹⁰ the very concern that McNamara attacks and disdains but nevertheless employs. "O thou terrible" may refer just as easily to Despair as it can, in McNamara's reading, to God. Following the rather basic but still necessary rule of associating the meaning of a pronoun with the noun to which it refers, "O thou terrible" can refer only to Despair. No direct reference to God is made in the poem until the last line. Thus, in such a reading as I propose, it would be Despair which rudely upon Hopkins the "wring-world right foot rock," that scans "with darksome devouring eyes" Hopkins' "bruised bones," and that fans "O in turns of tempest, me heaped there; me frantic to avoid thee / and flee." "Why?" thus would answer the question of why Hopkins is so frantic "to avoid thee / and flee." The answer: "That my chaff might fly; my grain lie, sheer and clear." Avoiding, fleeing Despair, Hopkins can rid himself of the chaff of human weaknesses and limitations and can allow his "grain," his spiritual essence, to lie "sheer and clear."

Realizing through the weakened state Despair has engendered in him man's dependence upon God for spiritual fulfillment, Hopkins then turns the focus of his attention upon the strength to be derived from a love and an awareness of God. Obedience ("I kissed the rod") is stressed as an essential factor of "my heart lol lapped strength, stole joy, would laugh, / cheer." But a major conflict is emphasized in "cheer whom though?" Should the poet praise God "whose heaven-handling flung me, / foot trod"—the God who creates man and allows man to suffer in His name; or should the poet praise "me that fought

⁹ McNamara, pp. 80, 94.

¹⁰ McNamara, p. 78.

him?"—the individual self, the will of man, which withstood the test and fought against the "heaven-handling" "foot trod" of Despair? The parenthetical "my God!" need not be, as McNamara states, "the thrill of the honor done him" in "having passed through his struggle with doubt and confusion,"¹¹ but may well be Hopkins' startling and perhaps even terrifying realization that he was fighting not only against himself in attempting to overcome Despair but also with his God.

This recognition has been foreshadowed, almost foreordained, from the first line of the poem, in which Despair, described as an inverted Christ-figure of "carrion comfort," took on the characteristics of being an emissary or representative of God. The emotional intensity of the parenthetical "my God!" thus becomes symbolic not of Hopkins' awareness and acceptance of God's will, but of his devastating realization that man's relationship to God is determined not by comfort and compassion but by conflict.

¹¹ McNamara, pp. 84, 90.