CHAPTER V

THE MAZE OF IMAGERY
Imagery is the most important ingredient of poetry. It has been called the life-principle of poetry and the poet's chief test and glory.\(^1\) A poet is often judged by the force and originality of his images. With Hopkins the metaphoric percentage is higher than it has been for any previous poet. This is partly accounted for by the shortness of his text. According to one estimate, his language is more crowded with metaphors than the richest passages in Spenser, Shakespeare or Donne.\(^2\) An attempt will be made in the present chapter to consider Hopkins's imagery and the metaphorical significance of his metrical innovations.

Hopkins's mature poems express almost without exception some facet of divine life in human beings. His vision of reality is focused

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most clearly on the operation of Christ's life stemming from the centre of the Trinity, divinizing the hearts of acquiescent humans reaching even to animals, birds, trees and the good earth itself. Hopkins's imagery points to this divine activity, and his most interesting and complex metaphors and similes reveal their ultimate natures and functions.

Hopkins's images are quite literal and descriptive, specially in "The Wreck of the Deutschland", which is basically a narrative poem. The language is rich but not constantly metaphorical and contains occasionally telescoping complex details:

... lovely felicitons providence
Finger of a tender of, 0 of a feathery delicacy, the breast of the Maidan could abey so, be a bell to, ring of it, and Startle the poor sheep back. 3

The concern of the Providence here is not the maiden, but the other passengers, 'the rest of them'. They seen, at first glance, a deserted and comfortless flock. But, actually, as the image makes it clear, God is using the cry of the nun as a means of gathering His flock back into the fold. The comforter, the Flinger of God (both terms applied to the Holy Ghost), touches the nun in two ways: as He touched the poet in the part I of the poem, bringing him to assent to God's mastery, to share in the Sacrifice, and be an instrument to call others to that same assent, to share in that same Sacrifice. The same Providence touches the nun through 'wrecking the storm' and finds the complete and unwavering assent of the martyr from her, expressed in her great cry:

Sister, a sister calling
A master, her master and mine.
And the inboard seas run swirling and hawling;
The rash smart slogging brine
Blinds her, but she that weather sees one thing, one,
Has one fetch in her: she rears herself
to divine
Ears, and the call of the tall nun
To the men in the tops and the tackle
rode over the storm's
brawling.  

But while she is crying only to divine ears,
He is using her cry to reach the ears of His
wandering sheep. A 'church bell', when it
sounds out, simply 'speaks itself', acts its
own nature, but the man who rings it intends the
sound to reach the ears of the faith-ful and
call them to the Sacrifice. Thus the Providence,
the good Shepherd, swings His bell not only for
her own sake but for his scattered flock. The
brawling and beating of the romping brutal waves
come from that same Finger which masters 'the sway
of the sea'. It is that motion which swings
throughout the poem and for the most part it is
neither tender nor delicate. It is the
physical power through which He derives the
malice of man to the point where it must stand
and accept God or reject Him. But the Finger
which swings the waves also touches the spirit.

4 "The Wreck of the Deutschland", Poems,
p. 51.
"... it can penetrate deeper than any two-edged sword reaching the very division between soul and spirit to distinguish every thought and design in our hearts".  

God's touch is of a 'tender ... of a feathery delicacy'. The physical effect of His divine power is analogous to the inner sway and balancing of the will. He sways the poet in part I of "The Wreck" and the nun in part II and finds them responsive. In the image cited above, He calls to the spirits of His sheep startling them from their 'comfortless unconfessed' state with the call to confess to Him, as the poet did in the second stanza:

I did say yes  
O at lightning and lashed rod;  
Thou heardest me truer than tongue confess  
Thy terror, O Christ, O God.  

The nun also confessed, so that they too may be comforted by having Him, 'for the pain, for the patience', by having Him wafted out to them for

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5 Robert Boyle, Metaphor in Hopkins  

the 'glow, glory in thunder'. It is this spiritual touch which is 'lovely - felicitous' 'feathery'. The metaphor 'the breast of the Maiden could obey so, be a bell to, ring of it' can be grasped only in relation to the central fact of the whole poem, the Sacrifice of Christ. The various elements of the metaphor, otherwise irreconcilable, meet and are fused in the call of sinners to the Sacrifice of the Lamb. In first part of the poem the poet describes his own storm before the altar, his flight to the heart of the Host, the Victim, and his consequent rise on the wings of the Dove, or his and the Dove's wings. The martyred virgins in stanza 22 of the poem are lettered with the mark of the Lamb. Boyle elucidates:

Do not lay waste land or sea or wood, until we have put a seal on the foreheads of those who serve our God ... The Lamb who dwells where the throne is, will be their Shepherd, leading them out to the springs whose water is life; and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. 7

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7 Metaphor in Hopkins, p. 6.
In yet another stanza Hopkins makes the nun stand in relation to the other passangers as Simon Peter and the Blessed Virgin stand in relation to all men. She gives a demonstration of profound faith, as Peter did, and is therefore called (as Simon was by Christ) a rock. The nun is appropriately a Roman rock, the Tarpeain rock, unaffected by the blasts of the storm raging outside, of weak and evil nature, or of Satan inside. She shines out like a beacon with the 'heart's light' who enlightens every man coming into life as she guides others, as Peter did in the case of Shepherd, offering them by her example, support in faith.

Hopkins's comparisons of the nun with Peter and with Mary not only express the nun's attainment of Christ and her complete union with Him, but also conveys that she is used as a Christ's instrument. The nun is not appointed to preach the word to the Whole world; she is very much like the bell for she simply 'selves':

... each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out
broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and
the same;
Deals out that being indoors each
one dwells;
Selves - goes itself; myself it speaks
and spells;
Crying what I do is me, for that I came. 8

Yvor Winters points out that the strength
and subtlety of Hopkins's imagery is an unequivocal
proof of his poetic genius. It is interesting
to observe, he adds, the manner in which he
achieves the precision he needs. He manages it
with such skill that it gives an apt illustration
of the poet's mastery in the use of metaphor. 9
For example, in his brilliant phrase:

'on an age-old anvil, wince and sing'; 10

The anvil is presumable God's discipline and on it lies the poet as a piece of metal. The two verbs, the first with its sense of human suffering combined with metallic vibration, the second with its sense of metallic vibration

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8 "As Kingfisher's Catch Fire", Poems, p. 90.
10 "No worst there is none", Poems, p. 100.
combined perhaps with human triumph make: the
metal suffer as metal under the hammer. Hopkins's
images of suffering are vivid. We suffer with
the metal under the blow, and we forget that the
literal metal does not suffer. The metal and
blow are used here figuratively, and the human
half of the figure is incomplete.

Hopkins's images are highly ingenious. Some
of them even look somewhat far-fetched. Most of
his poems are not easy to understand. The fixed
form of the poem "The Windhover", for example, is
filled with a very concentrated subject - matter.
The poem makes use of two figures:
a falcon in the expanse of morning and a ploughshare
in the furrow. The two are related, however,
to a third and more essential theme. Without
changing their identity, they make us feel the
existence of the main theme. The dedication
"To Christ Our Lord" orients us further towards it.

In the quatrains of the sonnet a series of
images drawn from widely disparate areas of
experience make the falcon vividly present.
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,11

The images are not developed independently but
are rather made to coalesce. The early images
are of a royal court. The bird is the 'minion'
of morning, and the 'dauphin' or heir - apparent
of the 'kingdom of daylight.' He rides the air and
in his strength makes it seem to roll 'level
underneath him steady'. Thus, implicitly, the
image of a ship travelling on the swell of a
gently rolling sea is brought into play.
'Rung upon the rein' is a description of the bird
flying with one wing dipped and one up. The
metaphor is taken from the breaking-in of horses,
who are first made to trot round in a circle,
held on a leading rein by a man in the middle.

The wing turned towards the centre of the circle is seen at first as the line, then immediately as a wimple fluttering in the breeze. The precision and dexterity of motion is conveyed by the image of a skate’s heel gliding across ice. The image changes once again and the ‘hurl and gliding’ runs up against the ‘big wind’ and rebuffs it.

Nature appears to the poet in the fullness of its presence. His is, however, a nature in motion from within, which transforms itself to become fully what it is ‘the achieve of the mastery of the thing’. The expression ‘of the thing’ relieves the figure of the bird of any assumption of familiarity. The bird becomes something strange and its archetype or inescape radiates from it.

Images are used to bring reality to its highest pitch. The light drenched atmosphere of the dawn and the powerful flight and the vigour of the bird’s circling verge on ecstatic self
transcendence. Hopkins goes further. The ecstasy here described (the word 'ecstasy' is actually used for falcon) differs from mythical versions, in that nature does not remain self-contained but answers a higher power that strives to reveal itself through nature. The observer's feeling also responds to it; 'My heart in hiding/Stirred for a bird'.

Within this self-manifested idea, conveyed through images, Hopkins senses a further idea which cannot be interpreted from the world as we know it. It stirs him to presentiments yet remains confined till God's Word should release and name it. A reference to that Word is provided by the dedication "To Christ Our Lord" under the poem's title. The unexplained ecstasy which hangs over the octet is supposedly explained in the sestet:

Brute beauty and valour and act,
Oh, air, pride, plume here
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks
from thee then, a billion
Time told lovelier, more dangerous,
O my Chevalier!
No wonder of it: sheer plod makes plough down sillion
Shine, and blue—bleak embers, ah my dear,
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold—vermillion. 12

The sestet is devoted to a revelation of a beauty beyond this beauty, 'a beauty, which is a billion times told lovelier, more dangerous; than the purely natural and triumphant flight. From it ensues the greatest achievement which transcends any achievement or mastery.

It is in the act of "buckling" that the Windhover swoops down and its flight is crumpled. The 'brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume' in an act of self-immolation send off a fire finer than any natural beauty. This is, however, not to be wondered at, for this is true even of humble little things. The sheer of common earth shines out when the plough breaks it into furrows; and fire breaks from fire only in the moment of its own destruction. Beautiful

was Christ's public life, but a billion times told
lovelier was His self-immolation on the Cross. His
Sacrifice was transmuted by the Fire of love
into something far greater than any mere natural
beauty. Pick comments:

More beautiful than any natural
achievement was Hopkins's own
humble and plodding continuance
of the ethic of redemption
through his own mystical self
destruction, his own humble
following of Christ to the very
Cross of Calvary. And the beauty
of Christ and the beauty of the
Jesuit to eyes that see more than
this world is the beauty of their
dying to live. 13

The difficulty of Hopkins's imagery is
due to the lack of evidence in the text. J. Pick
selects one of the several possible meaning of
'buckle'. For him the word means 'collapse'.

Eleanor Ruggles interprets the poem in
terms of the concept of haecceity, inscape or
selfhood, which so obsessed Hopkins, and so keeps
the poem closer to the bird which it apparently
describes. For her 'buckle' means to concentrate

13 John Pick, Gerard Manley Hopkins:

Priest and Poet (New York: OUP, 1942),
p. 71.
all one's powers. According to her, the 'Chevalier' is the bird itself. She supports her interpretation citing other passages. In terms of her interpretation, we have a conclusion in the second tercet, which merely points out that much less impressive actions give off their own fire as is evident from the plodding effort of the plowman, humble but active, and the passive action of the coals when they fall and light up. It is no wonder that the striking action of the bird should give off a superior fire.14

Hopkins is often accused of overcrowding his poems with images. The percentage of his simple replacements is, however, higher than anyone else's, except perhaps that of Thomas.

All great poets manipulate the rhythms of their language to express the richness of the object of which they write or the resonance they feel within themselves. Hopkins, with the help of Spring Rhythm and other rhetorical devices like

alliteration, assonance, rhyme, etc., brings out the subtleties of his thoughts and experiences.

For example, in "Spelt from Sybil's Leaves", the poet tells us effectively about the evening which is deepening into night:

\[ \textit{Earnest, earthless, equal, attuneable,\
    vaulty, voluminous ... stupendous\
    Evening strains to be times vast, womb - of - all,\
    home - of - all, hearse - of - all night.\
    Her fond yellow hornlight wound to the west,\
    her wild hollow hoarlight hung to the height.\
    Waste; her earliest stars, earl stars, stars principal, overbend us.} \]

The poet not merely tells us that evening is deepening into night, but with the help of alliteration and rhyme also makes us feel that the evening is straining to become night. The progression is brought about effectively by the use of the sequence of adjectives; the evening is at first sweet, solemn, serene, etherealizing and harmonizing, and then becomes less tranquillizing and more awful, and, finally, ends in the blackness of night:

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Her fond yellow hornlight wound to the west, her wild hollow hoarlight hung to the height

Waste .... 16

The 'yellow hornlight' is, of course, the setting moon - fond, tender, soft, sympathetic and somewhat reluctant to go, the slow gentle sinking being felt in the movement and modulation of the verse. The 'hoarlight' is the cold, hard starlight, "wild" and hollow - remote, inhuman, a kind of emptiness in the hollow vault in contrast to the "fond yellow" moonlight. The verse movement itself with the inevitable rest upon 'height' seems to hang. The 'dapple' of the earth which Hopkins loved so much, has gone, merged into neutrality. The poet all of a sudden realizes all this as a parable, and he sees an outward symbol and significance in these dappled things. The heavy stress his rhythm enables him to put upon 'our' brings in the poignant realization. His heart 'sounds' him, i.e. whispers and 'rounds' upon him' with the thought that he has sacrificed the dapple of existence for the stark dichotomy of

right and wrong:

Only the beak-leaved boughs dragonish damask
the tool-smoother bleak light: black,
ever so black on it. 17

The trees are no longer beautiful; 'beak-leaved'
suggests the cold, hard light, and, lastly, the poet
surrenders to the realization of right and wrong
signifying the realization of the pain of
remuneration:

... Our tale, O our oracle! Let life
waned, ah let life wind
Off her one skeined stained veined variety
upon, all on two
Spools, part, pen, pack
Now her all in two flocks, two folds -
black, white, right, wrong ... 18

Hopkins's practice of the art of metaphorical
rhythm would be evident even from a casual examination
of his work. The early prize poem, "The Escorial",
written when he was fifteen, foreshadows his skill
in using rhythms and sound:

But from the mountain glens in autumn late
Adown the clattering gullies swept the rain;
The driving storm at hour of vesper's beat

18 Ibid, p. 97.
Upon the mould'ring terraces again;
The altar - tapers flared in gusts; in vain
Louder the monks drou'd out Gregorians slow,
Afar in corridors with pained strain
Door slamm'd to the blasts continually;
more low,
The pass'd the wind, and sobb'd with
mountain-echo'd woe. 19

Here the fifth and sixth lines are in contrast,
working together to express rhythmically the two
events they signify. The juxtaposition of two
strong accents in 'Doors slamm'd' is rhythmically
expressive. The meter is set up beforehand only
in regard to the number of beats, and not in
regard to the number of syllables.

In "A Vision of Mermaids" Hopkins indicates
how well he had learnt from Milton to reproduce
in the rising movement of the verbal rhythm and
in the aptness of sound the motions and the sounds
of the object itself:

Some, diving merrily, downward drove,
and gleam'd
With arm and fin; the argent
bubbles stream'd

19 "The Escorial", Poems, p. 3.
Airwards, disturb'd; and the scarce troubled sea
Gurgled, where they had sunk, melodiously.
Others with fingers white comb among
The drenched hair of slabby weeds the swung Swimming ...

The expression 'the argent bubbles streamed'
conveys in its rising movement the rise of the bubbles, with the flowing line emphasized in the lengthened vowel of 'streamed'. The rising movement stops in 'airwards' to be replaced by the rocking movement of airwards disturb'd, which in its sound echoes the small bursting of the bubbles on the rocking surface.

Hopkins's rhythmic skill was realised on paper fully for the first time in The Wreck of the Deutschland. In the following stanza, for example, the meter (or repeated beat or 'measure' of rhythm) imitates primarily the motion of the sea, conveys in its various rhythms also the motion of the choppy waves, the gusts of the strong wind, and, above all, the spirals (small,

larger, largest; "wiry, white-fiery, and whirl-wind - swivelled") of the snow sweeping past the ship on its long spinning descent into the sea:

Into the snow she sweeps,
Hurling the haven behind,
The Deutschland, on Sunday; and so the sky keeps,
For the infinite air is unkind,
And the sea flint-flake, black-backed
in the regular blow,
Sitting eastnortheast, in cursed quarter,
the wind;
Wiry and white-fiery and whirl-wind
- swivelled snow
Spins to the widow-making unchilding
unfathering deeps. 21

Hopkins's imagery is thus an integral aspect of his poetic language. His images are expressive of his thoughts and feelings. They have not been used merely for accidental effects. His words, which are almost invariably inevitable and adequate, are very frequently replaced by images. The poet is able to say, with the help of his images, what he would otherwise find almost incommunicable.