

The Enclosure of an Open Mystery

Sacrament and Incarnation
in the Writings of Gerard
Manley Hopkins, David Jones
and Les Murray

Stephen McInerney

PETER LANG

The similarities and differences between poetry and worship have intrigued writers since at least the nineteenth century, when John Keble declared that poetic symbols could almost partake of the nature of sacraments. Since then poets, philosophers and literary critics alike have evoked the terms 'sacrament' and 'incarnation' to make claims about art and poetry. Extending and challenging this critical tradition, this book explores the influence of sacramental belief on the works of three Roman Catholic poets: the nineteenth-century Jesuit priest Gerard Manley Hopkins, the Anglo-Welsh artist David Jones and the Australian poet Les Murray. The author explores the idea that the incarnation and the sacraments embody both God's immanence and God's transcendence and argues that Hopkins, Jones and Murray all endeavour to enclose the 'open mystery' of the Divine while recognizing that it cannot be imprisoned. The volume sets their writings in conversation with each other's, as well as with literary, philosophical and theological discourse. The result is a study that shows the wonders, the mysteries and the difficulties of the sacramental worldview and its central place in the writings of these three major Catholic poets.

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The Enclosure of an Open Mystery

Modern Poetry

Series editors:

David Ayers, David Herd & Jan Montefiore, University of Kent

Volume 7



PETER LANG

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Bibliographic information published by Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data is available on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:

McInerney, Stephen, 1976-

The enclosure of an open mystery : sacrament and incarnation in the writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins, David Jones, and Les Murray / Stephen McInerney.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-3-0343-0738-3 (alk. paper)

1. Religious poetry, English--History and criticism. 2. Hopkins, Gerard Manley, 1844-1889--Criticism and interpretation. 3. Jones, David, 1895-1974--Criticism and interpretation. 4. Murray, Les A., 1938--Criticism and interpretation. 5. Incarnation in literature. 6. Sacraments in literature. 7. Transubstantiation in literature. 8. Immanence of God in literature. 9. Religion and poetry. 10. English poetry--Catholic authors--History and criticism. I. Title. II. Title: Sacrament and incarnation in the writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins, David Jones, and Les Murray.

PR508.R4M35 2012

821.009'3823-dc23

2012030089

ISSN 1661-2744

ISBN 978-3-0343-0738-3 (print)

ISBN 978-3-0353-0400-8 (eBook)

© Peter Lang AG, International Academic Publishers, Bern 2012

Hochfeldstrasse 32, CH-3012 Bern, Switzerland

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Printed in Germany

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Preface and Acknowledgements

In setting in conversation the writings of the Catholic poets Gerard Manley Hopkins, David Jones and Les Murray, this study brings together three of the most engaging writers in the English language and seeks to demonstrate the numerous points at which their works, in reaching out to embrace the divine Other, 'touch' one another. It aims to demonstrate the relevance of a 'sacramental poetic', which touches many of the most crucial themes of contemporary critical discourse – the body, presence, the problem of the one and the many, and the tension between a 'manifestation' (to use David Tracy's expression) and the plenitude that exceeds such a physical, tangible, verbal or iconic realization in time and space. In particular, this book situates this tension within the context of its resolution – within the realm of analogical similarity-in-difference, the point where the same and the different, the present and the absent, the transcendent and immanent, meet in the kiss of peace.

An assessment of Hopkins's work in the light of serious liturgical scholarship is long overdue, as is a discussion of the question of the 'body' and embodiment in his work, which relates his 'bodies' to a broader liturgical and sacramental view of reality. This study extends the boundaries of Hopkins criticism through original readings of key sonnets and 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', by showing how Hopkins's work reaches into central areas of scholarly discourse, and by using a governing metaphor derived from Catherine Pickstock – 'the enclosure of an open mystery' – as a window through which to peer into Hopkins's poetic world. It also demonstrates how certain of Hopkins's principal themes and images – the interaction of 'touching' bodies, the intressing of the divine – prepare the way for a more complete understanding of two of his later followers in David Jones and Les Murray.

Jones extends the sacramental aesthetic of Hopkins, making explicit the idea that a 'shape in words' is a sacrament and that the making of

shapes is itself a fundamentally incarnational activity, one that seeks to bring the divine ‘content’ into a human ‘form’, to contain what cannot be contained. By situating Jones’s work in the purview of the insights of William F. Lynch and David Tracy, this book points out the important implications, both for art and ideology, of Jones’s engagements with the problem of the one and the many and the theme of modern and historical ‘disembodiment’. By showing that the tension between the ‘fact man’ and the artist is fundamentally a tension between the ‘univocal imagination’ and the ‘analogical imagination’, it strives to show that Jones’s seemingly idiosyncratic terminology forms part of a much broader philosophical and theological tradition.

In setting the work of Les Murray alongside Hopkins and Jones, the study aims to illustrate Murray’s universal reach by exploring the relationship in Murray’s work between presence as ultimate mystery, embodiment and sacrifice, wherein the work itself is configured as a sacramental body, a manifestation that holds in creative tension the divine Other and the human desire to make rational order through ‘action’. By bringing the insights of Lynch, Kilgour, Foucault and others to bear on Murray’s work, I also hope to show its importance for current critical discourse. Murray’s images of sacrifice, his theory of the importance of the body for an understanding of the ‘whole’ person, and his explorations of all the places where God is ‘caught, not imprisoned’, illustrate the perennial relevance and adaptability of a ‘sacramental poetic’.

Taken together, Hopkins, Jones and Murray offer an example of unity in difference. Drawing from a common religious tradition, in particular from Catholicism’s principal ritual and from the central Christian doctrine, the career of each poet marks a unique and significant point in the history of creative responses to the themes of Sacrament and Incarnation.

* * *

Part of Chapter 1 initially appeared as ‘David Jones’s Blessed Rage for Order: The “Will toward Shape” in *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* (Spring, 2011): pp. 59–81. Parts of Chapter 4 first appeared in ‘Ch. 12: “Art With its Largesse and Its Own Restraint”: The Sacramental Poetics of Elizabeth Jennings and Les Murray’ in *Between Human and*

Divine: the Catholic Vision in Contemporary Literature, ed. Mary Reichardt (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010): 207–225. I am grateful to *Logos* and to the Catholic University of America Press for permission to reuse the relevant material. Margaret Connolly and Associates (acting on behalf of Mr Les Murray) have granted permission to quote extensively from Sonnet 70 of *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral*, and I acknowledge my gratitude to them. I am also grateful to Margaret Connolly and Associates, to *Carcanet* (UK) and to *Farrer, Straus & Giroux* for permission to quote extensively from Les Murray's *Fredy Neptune*.

I am grateful to Professor Barry Spurr, Chair of Poetry and Poetics at the University of Sydney, for his detailed assistance with this work, particularly in its earlier form as a doctoral thesis, and for his urging me to publish it. I am also thankful to the late Dr Noel Rowe who offered crucial guidance and insights during the final two semesters of my doctoral candidature at the University of Sydney. Professor David Parker of the Chinese University of Hong Kong suggested I submit the manuscript to Peter Lang, and I am grateful for this advice, as I am to the editors and staff of Peter Lang for their guidance and expertise. Any imperfections in the work, needless to say, are entirely my responsibility.

For their constant encouragement and support as I was writing this study, I wish to thank my parents, Gerard and Helen, and my siblings, who contributed in so many different ways. Finally, I owe a special debt to my wife Eleni, to whom this book is dedicated.

The Enclosure of An Open Mystery

In his inaugural address at the Collège de France in 1984, the French poet and critic Yves Bonnefoy assessed the acute philosophical dilemma of one his predecessors, Roland Barthes:

After having wanted only to describe the functioning of language, of which literature would merely have been a partially unconscious intensification, he came to the conclusion – through an experience of grief which involved his whole being, which was an intuition as much as an act of reason – that all language is as such an order, that every order is an oppression, that every act of speech, be it even of scientific truths, is consequently an act of power.¹

Bonnefoy himself would note that even if the ‘elaboration of a definite meaning is only a fabric of illusions, it nonetheless has its own laws ... Above all, writing is enclosure’.² He goes on to assert that the ‘most primitive notches are a sign that speaking has always meant asserting oneself’. The written and spoken words, it seems, are implicated in the lineaments of a Foucault-like power, and may even be little more than its incarnation. As though in response to this, ‘every monument is the metaphor for this will to be through words and yet against them’, a sign of humanity’s impatience with language’s inevitable uncertainty and its concomitant suspicion of any linguistic claims to embrace truth, and yet a sign too that deep inside ourselves we recognise the need to trust words, to exist ‘through’ them. It is here, Bonnefoy argues, that poetry throughout the ages has been ‘the very act in which ... these certainties recovered themselves in the midst of

1 Yves Bonnefoy, ‘*Image and Presence: Yves Bonnefoy’s Inaugural Address at the Collège de France*’, trans. John T. Naughton, *New Literary History*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (1984), 436.

2 Ibid., 441.

their distortions, unity in the heart of multiplicity'. Writing is 'enclosure', to be sure, but the task of the poet, he stresses, 'is to re-establish openness'.³

Though writing against rather than within a tradition that asserts a primacy of presence, Bonnefoy here identifies a key shared feature of the three poets whose work forms the subject of this study – the nineteenth-century Jesuit priest, Gerard Manley Hopkins; the Anglo-Welsh artist, David Jones; and the Australian poet, Les Murray. In examining the representations of sacramental belief in their works, this book explores the way in which these Roman Catholic poets reconcile 'openness' and 'enclosure', multiplicity and unity, by holding these in analogical harmony. For these poets, the definite meaning which is enclosed is no mere 'fabric of illusions' (as it is for Bonnefoy), but a real mediated presence, and yet it is a presence that necessarily exceeds any given embodiment, linguistic or otherwise. To use Les Murray's memorable phrase, it is a presence 'caught, not imprisoned'.

A belief in the Incarnation and the sacraments, 'which have their efficacy from that very Incarnate Word',⁴ informs both the thematic content of the writings of Hopkins, Jones and Murray and their beliefs about the nature of their art. In setting their writings in conversation with one another and with a diverse range of literary-critical, philosophical and theological scholarship, a recurring theme emerges: the tension between the divine Other's embodiments in time and space and its inexhaustible plenitude – the enclosure of an 'open mystery' in the Incarnation, the sacraments and, by analogy, in nature and art. The objective of this book is not so much to defend or reject the truth of such an idea, rather to trace its possible dimensions and to show how these poets believe and employ it. This will include an analysis of the way each poet configures the human body in his sacramental worldview and the way each poet's work manifests some of the characteristics of what William F. Lynch (among others) calls

3 Bonnefoy, *Image and Presence*: Yves Bonnefoy's Inaugural Address at the Collège de France, 446–448.

4 Thomas Aquinas, from *Summa Theologiae*, 'Third Part, Question 6', *Thomas Aquinas: Selected Writings*, ed. Ralph McInerney (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 771.

the ‘analogical imagination.’⁵ Striving to hold unity and diversity, enclosure and openness in analogical harmony, Hopkins, Jones and Murray position their writings in contrast to, and against the pressures exerted by univocal immanentism in its various manifestations – both personal and (in the case of Jones and Murray) political.

The ‘enclosure of an open mystery’, which forms a core part of a broader sacramental vision, is characterized by two main features in the writings of Hopkins, Jones and Murray. On the one hand, their poems abound with images of natural, historical and artistic manifestations of divine presence (this is the ‘enclosure, ‘containment’ or ‘catching’ of the divine or, more generally, the Other); and on the other hand, the recognition that no given embodiment can exhaust the mystery of what it encloses and mediates (this is the ‘open’ infinitude of the Other, which is reflected by the poem’s thematic ‘openness’ to it).

I have taken the expression ‘open mystery’ from Catherine Pickstock, a philosopher who belongs to the ‘Radical Orthodoxy’ movement that originated, in the late 1990s, at the University of Cambridge.⁶ Pickstock has argued that the Catholic teaching of transubstantiation has important philosophical implications for language as a whole. (This teaching is explained below). In pursuing this theme, she suggests that the Catholic

5 William F. Lynch, *Christ and Apollo: The Dimensions of the Literary Imagination* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960).

6 A ‘contemporary theological project made possible by the self-conscious superficiality of today’s secularism. For this new project regards the nihilistic drift of post-modernism (which nonetheless has roots in the outset of modernity) as a supreme opportunity ... [What] finally distances it from nihilism is its proposal of the rational possibility, and the faithfully perceived actuality, of an indeterminacy that is not impersonal chaos but infinite interpersonal harmonious order, in which time participates ... In what sense *orthodox* and in what sense *radical*? Orthodox in the most straightforward sense of commitment to credal Christianity and exemplarity of its patristic matrix ... Radical, first of all, in the sense of a return to patristic and medieval roots ... second, in the sense of seeking to deploy this recovered vision systematically to criticise modern society, culture, politics, art, science and philosophy with an unprecedented boldness’ John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward, eds, *Radical Orthodoxy* (London: Routledge, 1999), 1–2.

understanding of the Eucharist as the Real Presence of Christ under the signs of bread and wine cannot be harnessed to a Derridean notion of presence as 'a total, exhaustive arrival'.⁷ Rather, Christ's Real Presence in the Eucharist is a 'genuine open mystery which, by being partially imparted through the sign, and therefore recognisable *as* mystery, has a positive – but not fetishizable – content'.⁸ Such a reading of the Eucharist acknowledges the real, physical presence of the incarnate God who by definition is inexhaustibly mysterious, thus playing with and – she argues – outwitting 'the distinction between both absence and presence, and death and life'.⁹

I have described as 'enclosure' both the process by which, and the artistic space *in* which, this 'open mystery' is made present (according to the mytho-poetic of each poet). A belief that the sacrament of the Eucharist makes God really present but present as an 'open mystery', parallels, informs (and is possibly informed by) each poet's affirmation of the role of the body, physical reality and language in the mediation of divine plenitude, as well as their acknowledgement of the necessary inability of these various signs to exhaust the mystery they manifest, thus holding the transcendent and immanent in balance.

In the work of Hopkins, a belief in the need for divine 'enclosure' can be discerned in the poet's affirmation that the inexhaustible mystery of the Incarnate Word 'must be instressed'.¹⁰ This, for Hopkins, is achieved superlatively in the Eucharist, but it is analogously realized in the natural world, human interaction and poetry. Yet, paradoxically, God must be 'instressed' repeatedly precisely because, and in spite of the fact, that he is 'past all / Grasp' (*Poems* 62); human beings must 'spell' and 'instress'

7 Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 265.

8 *Ibid.*, 253.

9 *Ibid.*

10 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', in G. M. Hopkins, *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, W. H. Gardner and N. H. Mackenzie, eds (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 53. All subsequent references to Hopkins's poems will refer to this edition and will be abbreviated in the text as *Poems*.

a God who is yet 'beyond saying sweet, past telling of tongue' (*Poems* 54), and they must provide enclosure for a God who is 'too huge' for the spaces in which he is enclosed ('The Bugler's First Communion', *Poems* 82). This inability to exhaust the Godhead means that the enclosed mystery is 'open'. The same paradox informs Jones's belief that the capacity of human beings to make form and order is analogous to the mystery of the Incarnation, where that which 'the whole world cannot contain, is contained',¹¹ and therefore with the sacrament of the Eucharist, which contains God 'under certain signs'.¹² Yet for Jones, true analogical order, as distinct from its univocal parody, is guaranteed by the fact that what is represented *exceeds* its representation (it *cannot* be contained) and hence final appropriation by the 'fact man'.¹³ For Murray, 'only art can contain an idea',¹⁴ 'Jesus is like a literal poem', the 'sacramental is the body; it's the mystery of embodiment ... [W]ords form a body called a poem',¹⁵ which is, at the same time, a bodily distillation of a basic human need to offer blood sacrifice. And yet even as 'things' are mediated and incarnated by words, they are 'so wordless' ('Noonday Axeman', *CP* 4); even as God is 'caught' in religion and, by analogy, in a poem, he is nonetheless 'not imprisoned'

- 11 David Jones, *The Dying Gaul and Other Writings*, ed. Harman Grisewood (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), 142. Hereafter cited as '*Dying Gaul*'. Jones adapted the phrase from the 'Gradual' of the Mass for the Feast of the Motherhood of the Blessed Virgin Mary: '*Virgo Dei Genitrix, quem totus non capit orbis, in tua se clausit viscera factus homo*'. ('O Virgin Mother of God, He whom the whole world cannot contain, enclosed Himself in thy womb, being made man.') *My Daily Missal* (Sydney: Pellegrini & Co Ltd., 1946), 155. All subsequent references to the Tridentine Roman liturgy will refer to this publication and will be hereafter cited as '*My Daily Missal*'.
- 12 David Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, ed. Harman Grisewood (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), 163.
- 13 The 'fact man' is a term used throughout Jones's work to describe the type of person who fails to see the value of art's gratuitousness and who values a thing only in so far as it is 'utile'.
- 14 Les Murray, 'The Life Cycle of Ideas', *Collected Poems* (Potts Point: Duffy & Snellgrove, 2002), 437. All subsequent references to this edition will be incorporated in the text with the abbreviation *CP*.
- 15 William Scammell, 'Les Murray in Conversation', *PN Review*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (1998), 31.

(‘Poetry and Religion’, *CP* 265); and even as a poem ‘is a tremendously contained thing which holds down these tremendous energies’,¹⁶ at the same time it can also be – like the Eucharist – ‘open and expansive, with unforeclosed potentials’.¹⁷

In the writings of Hopkins, Jones and Murray, openness to the Other, to what Pickstock calls ‘repeated divine arrival’¹⁸ in time and space, reflects a more general openness to variety and difference: to ‘All things counter, original, spare, strange’ (‘Pied Beauty’, *Poems* 70), to ‘the blessed differences’¹⁹ and the ‘infinite detailed extent’ of God’s creation (‘Equanimity’, *CP* 180). Each poet celebrates the particularities and details of natural and human individuation. At the same time, each poet discloses a vital and vibrant need to order the detail and variety of life in a meaningful way that yet does not harm or undermine individuation. The resolution of the many into the one, in an artistic harmony that seeks to preserve difference within unity and order, parallels the dynamic described above by which the Other is enclosed in such a way as to remain an ‘open mystery’. I follow Lynch’s use of the term ‘analogical imagination’ to describe this resolution of the problem of the one and the many which, he argues, is exemplified in Christology.²⁰ We will explore Lynch’s arguments in greater detail – and relate the three poets’ works to these – towards the end of this chapter, to clarify the use of the phrase the ‘analogical imagination’ in this book. Before arriving at that point, however, the use I make of the other key terms needs to be explained.

16 Ibid.

17 Les Murray, *A Working Forest: Selected Prose* (Potts Point: Duffy & Snellgrove, 1997), 360. Hereafter cited as ‘*A Working Forest*’.

18 Pickstock, *After Writing*, 215.

19 David Jones, ‘The Tribune’s Visitation’, *The Sleeping Lord and other Fragments* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), 54. All subsequent references to this book will be noted in the text with the abbreviation *SL*.

20 Lynch, *Christ and Apollo*, 15.

Defining an Incarnational and Sacramental Aesthetic

The most obvious point at which to start is with a definition of 'the Incarnation' and 'sacrament', two theological terms whose meanings are all-too-often taken for granted in general descriptions of the natural world, art or poetry as 'sacramental' and 'incarnational'. After all, surely such descriptions derive much of their strength from the theological uses of the terms; and surely one reason that poets, artists and critics use such analogies in the first place is to elevate the natural world, art or poetry above a more general notion of mediation so as to compare these to the deepest religious experiences of Christian believers.

First, 'the Incarnation' refers to the orthodox Christian teaching that, in the person of Jesus Christ, God became man in time and space, such that Christ is true God and true man. Probably the most famous scriptural description of this teaching is that found in the prologue to John's Gospel: 'In the beginning was the Word, the Word was with God and the Word was God ... And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt amongst us'.²¹ Second, a sacrament, as famously defined in the catechism of the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*, is 'an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given unto us; ordained by Christ himself, as a means whereby we receive the same, and a pledge to assure us thereof'.²² There is nothing in this definition in and of itself which contradicts the general Catholic explanation of a sacrament; on the contrary it is almost identical with that definition traditionally used in the Roman Catholic Church: 'Sacraments are outward signs of inward grace instituted by Christ for our sanctification'.²³ While Christians of various denominations disagree about the number

21 John 1:1, 14. *The Holy Bible: Douay Rheims Version* (Rockford, Illinois: Tan Books, 2000). All subsequent scriptural references will refer to this edition unless otherwise indicated.

22 *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church* (New York: The Church Pension Fund, 1945), 581.

23 *Catholic Encyclopaedia*, Vol. XIII, C. C. Herbermann et al., eds (New York: The Encyclopaedia Press, 1913), 295.

of sacraments, how precisely they work and the extent to which they are necessary for salvation, those Christians who at least accept the existence of some sacraments (and this is the vast majority) in most instances would find nothing to dispute in these definitions as such.

Along with the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Catholic tradition in Anglicanism, the Roman Catholic Church recognizes seven sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation (or Chrismation), Penance (or Confession), Extreme Unction (or anointing of the sick), Matrimony, Holy Orders (or priesthood) and the Eucharist. Of the seven, the Eucharist is the centre of the Church's life. The Eucharist, the Real Presence of Christ under the signs of bread and wine, is the fruit of the liturgical ritual commonly known as the Mass.²⁴ The Church teaches that the Mass itself is a true, efficacious sacrifice in which the victim is Christ offered to God by a priest *in persona Christi*. 'Although the Sacrament and the Sacrifice of the Eucharist are performed by the same consecration, still they are conceptually distinct.'²⁵ The Church teaches as a matter of faith that 'in the Sacrifice of the Mass and in the Sacrifice of the Cross the Sacrificial Gift and the Primary Sacrificing Priest are identical; only the nature and mode of offering are different.'²⁶ In general, the Mass is considered the 'unbloody' re-presentation of the Crucifixion, where the general fruits of redemption won on the Cross are offered for and applied to specific individuals – both living and dead. The Crucifixion is described as the 'absolute sacrifice', while the Mass which makes it present is a 'relative sacrifice' dependent upon it.²⁷ In Catholic teaching, the actual process by which the bread and wine becomes the

24 In the Eastern churches – both the Orthodox and Eastern Catholic churches in communion with the Bishop of Rome – the term 'Divine Liturgy' is used. 'Mass' derives from the Latin 'Missa'. Within the Catholic Church, 'The Eucharist' and 'The Liturgy' are sometimes used as synonyms for 'Mass'. 'Holy Communion', used in the Anglican Church to describe the ritual itself, tends in Roman Catholicism to denote the eucharistic elements, or the act of receiving them, but rarely if ever the whole rite as such.

25 Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, ed. in English by James Canon Bastible (Cork, Ireland: Mercier Press Ltd, 1966), 402.

26 Ibid., 408.

27 Ibid., 407.

Eucharist is known as transubstantiation. This doctrine states that the words of consecration ('This is my body' and 'This is my blood') said over the bread and wine by the priest, actually effect a change in the substance of the elements – the substances of bread and wine become the true body, blood, soul and divinity of Christ, only the 'accidents' (including the appearance, taste, smell and feel) of bread and wine remain. This is then received as food, giving rise to 'an intrinsic union of the recipient with Christ', preserving and increasing the supernatural life of the soul, and acting as 'a pledge of heavenly bliss and of the future resurrection of the body'.²⁸

In Catholic belief, the reception of the Eucharist also acts as an effective sign of the communion of believers, since they partake of the one body of Christ. As with all the sacraments, the Catholic Church teaches that the Eucharist not only indicates the inner sanctification of the recipient but also effects sanctification *ex opere operato*, meaning it is an objective means of grace and objectively the true body of Christ, independently of the beliefs and dispositions of those who receive it.²⁹ The Church also teaches that she herself is the extension of the Incarnation ('The Mystical Body of Christ'), and that the sacraments she dispenses are the extensions of Christ's historical work of redemption. From the Church's point of view, the Incarnation and the sacraments are thus inextricably linked.

When poetry and art are described as 'sacramental' or 'incarnational', the description potentially sets any or all of the above ideas in play. These expressions can mean anything from 'a vague sense of the numinous, or enthusiastic religious emotion, or sometimes references to liturgical practices',³⁰ to the idea that God is mediated through the particular work,

28 Ibid., 394–395.

29 'The formula "ex opere operato" asserts, negatively, that the sacramental grace is not conferred by reason of the subjective activity of the recipient, and positively, that the sacramental grace is caused by the validly operated sacramental sign ... [T]he subjective disposition of the recipient is not the cause of grace; it is merely an indispensable disposition of the communication of grace'. Ibid., 330.

30 Waterman Ward certainly believes the 'numinous, religious emotion, and liturgy all appear in Hopkins's poetry', but she finds it unfortunate that certain Hopkins scholars restrict 'sacramental' to these meanings – for 'to look for the intellectual

that the work is itself in some way a means of grace and even a 'sacrifice', that artistic *mimesis* is in some way comparable to the re-presentation of Christ's sacrifice in the Mass, even to the extent that the work *is* the body of Christ.³¹ Ascertaining the resonance a poet or critic wishes the terms to have can consequently be very difficult, for in many cases it is not absolutely clear which meanings are being included and which excluded in the analogy. When certain Hopkins scholars, for instance, argue that Hopkins 'crafts a poem as a kind of Mass'³² and that the 'poem, for Hopkins, is the Body of Christ',³³ they do not state whether they intend to suggest that Hopkins believed this literally or whether or not he believed that the poem acts *ex opere operato*, a most unlikely prospect given that such an idea can have no real meaning when referring to the inevitably subjective interaction of reader and text: one does not genuflect to a poem upon opening a book.

Writers, artists and critics are inclined to make use of the terms 'sacrament' and 'incarnation' (and their correlatives) without stating which aspect of each reality (sacrament and art, or sacrament and nature) is being compared with the other. The reader must therefore be careful to ascertain precisely the sense in which the writer is using these terms. For example, Jones's comparison of art and sacrament, and Murray's affirmation that a poem is a sacrament that in some way satisfies a human desire for sacrifice, appeal to some dimensions of Catholic sacramentalism while obviously

core of his work is to move beyond ritual and well beyond a mere generalized feeling about something spiritually nourishing in the beauty of the world. Sacramentality is sacrificial, having to do with loss as well as joy; it perceives God's action in scenes not at all attractive to the senses. Moreover, sacramental theology is an intellectually self-consistent system'. Bernadette Waterman Ward, *World as Word: Philosophical Theology in Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 131–132.

- 31 As we shall see through the course of this work, at least three Hopkins scholars – Lichtmann, McNees and Ballinger – use the term 'sacramental' in this manner.
- 32 Eleanor J. McNees, *Eucharistic Poetry: The Search for Presence in the Writings of John Donne, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Dylan Thomas, and Geoffrey Hill* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1992), 77.
- 33 Maria Lichtmann, 'The Incarnational Aesthetic of Gerard Manley Hopkins', *Religion and Literature*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (1991), 44.

not drawing attention to the *ex opere operato* dimension. Yet the terms will not stay still, and so writers occasionally feel the need to qualify their bold statements. Jones, for example, says that he ‘speaks by analogy only’ when comparing art and sacrament,³⁴ and he precedes one such analogy by saying ‘I hope it is permitted to say’.³⁵ Murray uses paradoxical similes (‘Jesus is like a literal poem’)³⁶ and hesitant qualifying terms (as when he calls the work of poetry ‘quasi-priestly’).³⁷

Such hesitations disclose these writers’ awareness of those aspects of a poem or artwork that are unlike a sacrament, and *vice versa*. Such a realization is apparent in the well-known declaration by John Keble, the Anglican poet-priest who was a leading light of the Oxford Movement. In the peroration of his *Lectures on Poetry* delivered in the first half of the nineteenth century, Keble declared: ‘Poetry lends religion her wealth of symbols and similes; religion restores them again to poetry, clothed with so splendid a radiance that they appear to be no longer symbols, but to partake (I might almost say) of the nature of sacraments’.³⁸

Is the point Keble is trying to make that poetry, when put in the service of religion, actually mediates the divine, and that in this sense it is a ‘sacrament’? Keble both makes and unmakes this claim in the same sentence. The words in parenthesis (‘I might almost say’) open a space for the reader to acknowledge all the ways in which the symbols and similes of poetry are not sacraments – for instance, as products of a writer’s subjective imagination rather than objective means of grace directly instituted by Christ; as words on a page, rather than words which correspond with physical, ecclesial actions involving the use of water, oil, bread and wine, and so on. Did Keble hesitate at the crucial moment because he was in fact fearful of

34 *Epoch and Artist*, 171.

35 *Dying Gaul*, 287.

36 Scammell, ‘Les Murray in Conversation’, 31.

37 ‘Unpublished letter, Les Murray to John Barnie, 6 August 1981: JB’, quoted and sourced by Peter Alexander, *Les Murray: A Life in Progress* (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2000), 155.

38 J. Keble, *Lectures on Poetry: 1832–1841* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 2003; first published at Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), Vol. II, 481, 483.

the implications of his own daring analogy? Did he perhaps sense that in claiming that the symbols and signs of poetry were sacraments, that the comparison could have the reverse of the intended effect? Rather than elevating poetic symbols and similes to the level of the sacred, might it not reduce religion to the mere symbols and similes of poetry? After all, it was only fifty or so years later that Matthew Arnold would do just that when he argued that since the 'fact' had failed religion (since, in Arnold's opinion, the theory of evolution and scientific progress had undermined religious claims to truth) then the strongest part of religion was the 'unconscious poetry' of its rites and rituals.³⁹

When authors and critics qualify a daring analogy they naturally tend to do so in an understated way, much as Keble does with his parenthetical hesitation. Consider the following appraisal of the work of the American poet, Ron Rash, by B. H. Fairchild: 'In *Raising the Dead*, good and evil, the living and the dead, and much of human suffering and exaltation contained therein stalk the rural earth of a people whose very blood *would seem* to exist by transubstantiation in Rash's true poetry of embodiment'.⁴⁰

Fairchild goes on to say that there 'is nothing else quite like this work in American poetry at the present time', and if Rash's work can transubstantiate its subjects, is there any wonder! Fairchild seems to be using this term to emphasize Rash's success in accurately conveying his poems' subjects, doubly reinforced by the claim that the work is 'true poetry of embodiment', which is perhaps another way of saying that he brings his subjects 'to life'. This exemplifies another use to which terms like 'incarnational' and 'sacramental' are often put. Rather than evoking the thematic content of any given work, the terms can serve as literary-critical appraisals, measurements of the level of artistic achievement. Rash, a southern Baptist writing about southern Baptists, uses virtually no imagery in his work that could be described as Catholic; and Fairchild's use of the term 'transubstantiation'

39 Matthew Arnold, *Essays in Criticism*, Second Series (London: Macmillan, 1903), 1.

40 B. H. Fairchild, back cover blurb to Ron Rash's *Raising the Dead* (Oak Ridge, TN: Iris Press, 2002).

does not imply that the work mediates the divine. Yet Fairchild still feels the need to qualify his description ('would seem').

In an essay on Les Murray, "'This Country is My Mind": Les Murray's Poetics of Place', Martin Leer uses the language of 'transubstantiation' in a variety of different ways: to describe certain images in Murray's work; to describe a philosophical theme of Murray's work; and to describe the 'effects of Murray's meditations'.⁴¹ Leer does not explain the shifting meanings such uses generate. We will look briefly at three examples from this essay, in order to demonstrate how a single theological term with a precise meaning in scholastic and dogmatic theology is sometimes used in flexible and not strictly logical ways.

In one of a number of similar examples, Leer refers to 'the trans-substantiating barbeque' in Murray's 'Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle'.⁴² Quite contrary to Fairchild's use of the term, Leer does not use the term to appraise the work, but to describe the way the barbeque is imaged in the work as an efficacious sign of communion among country people and their city relatives visiting on holiday. The barbeque becomes another example of what Leer earlier calls 'the trans-substantiating place'.⁴³ It also evokes the role of the meat of the killed animal (as sacrificial victim), although Leer does not make this explicit. Related to both these meanings, the term could also suggest that divine grace is communicated through the act of eating the meal together; or that the peace, harmony and joy of the holiday are embodied in the barbeque and flow from it as a sign of God's grace. Yet this use of the term is Leer's, not Murray's, which raises the question of whether or not Murray intends, or the poem justifies, such a reading. In another example, Leer refers to the man ploughing a furrow in 'Toward the Imminent Days', suggesting that '[i]nner and outer horizons cross over here (the furrow lengthening into intimate country, place

41 Martin Leer, "'This Country is My Mind": Les Murray's Poetics of Place', in Laurie Hergenhan and Bruce Clunies Ross, eds, *The Poetry of Les Murray: Critical Essays* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2001), 31.

42 Ibid., 37.

43 Ibid., 26.

trans-substantiating into mind)'.⁴⁴ Does Leer mean that the landscape is now only an 'accidental' appearance, dependent on the 'substance' of the poet's mind? Given that one of Murray's themes is the disappearance of an older Australia (both indigenous and colonial-settler) this may well be the case analogically, but Leer does not let us know. When he refers to 'the trans-substantiating effects of Murray's meditations',⁴⁵ the meaning is different again. Here the term is used to describe the process by which 'the idea first localized and then here literally ploughed into the ground, may, having thus proved its validity, be turned into a universal ideal'.⁴⁶ Leaving aside the unlikely possibility that Leer is making a theo-critical claim (that is, that the 'trans-substantiating effects of Murray's meditations' refers to the 'effects' the poetry has on the reader) he is perhaps appealing to the idea that Christ (existing once in history in a localized way – in Bethlehem, Nazareth, Galilee) has, through the Eucharist, become a universal presence. Murray's work may analogously show the universal importance of the local and particular values of Australian rural life. But again, Leer sets the term loose, free to requisition its own associations but, in doing so, diluting itself of its primary theological meaning (and therefore potentially losing some of its value in the context of literary criticism).

Sacramental language abounds in Hopkins scholarship. As well as the theological aesthetician, Hans Urs von Balthasar,⁴⁷ a number of literary critics have made the connection between poem and sacrament in

44 Ibid., 29.

45 Ibid., 31.

46 Ibid.

47 In *The Glory of the Lord*, von Balthasar devotes a chapter to Hopkins, which includes a section titled 'Sacramental Poetry'. Hopkins, according to von Balthasar, sees that Christ 'stands once more in the place of the eternal idea, which shines through ... phenomena: but he is idea as living God and living man, as personal majesty, self-sacrifice'. God, through the Incarnation, is immanent in nature in such a way that all of creation has a sacramental capacity to show forth Christ. Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, Vol. 3, trans. John Riches (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986), 390.

Hopkins's work, in particular Maria Lichtmann,⁴⁸ Eleanor McNees,⁴⁹ Philip A. Ballinger⁵⁰ and Margaret R. Ellsburg.⁵¹ We will explore the Jones and Murray scholarship at greater length in the following chapters devoted to the work of each poet. At this point, however, it is worthwhile analysing the work done on Hopkins in this area, since it helps establish a more general climate in which to test, explore and elucidate what writers and critics mean when they speak of poetry as 'sacramental'.

* * *

As we have already seen, Lichtmann suggests that: 'The poem, for Hopkins, is the Body of Christ. It is the Eucharist in the sense of bearing the motionless, lifeless Real Presence of Christ, of acting with sacramental, transforming instress on the reader as Hopkins has himself instressed nature.'⁵²

While Lichtmann explains her meaning, it remains unclear whether the idea of 'sacramental, transforming instress' is supposed to correspond to the grace effected *ex opere operato* in the Mass.

McNees is equally daring and equally unclear, arguing that Hopkins 'crafts a poem as a kind of Mass in which all words work to voice the one Word – Christ. The successful poem enacts the Eucharistic process ... The moment of sacrifice is the culmination of real presence in the reader.'⁵³ McNees goes so far as to say that transubstantiation '(like metaphor) for Hopkins is finally tautological as all substance leads back to Christ.'⁵⁴

48 Maria Lichtmann, *The Contemplative Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989) and 'The Incarnational Aesthetic of Gerard Manley Hopkins', *Religion and Literature*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (1991): 37–50.

49 Eleanor J. McNees, *Eucharistic Poetry: The Search for Presence in the Writings of John Donne, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Dylan Thomas, and Geoffrey Hill* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1992) and 'Beyond "The Half-way House": Hopkins and Real Presence', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (1989): 85–104.

50 Philip A. Ballinger, *The Poem as Sacrament: The Theological Aesthetic of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Leuven: Peters Press, 2000).

51 Margaret R. Ellsburg, *Created to Praise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

52 Lichtmann, 'The Incarnational Aesthetic of Gerard Manley Hopkins', 44.

53 McNees, *Eucharistic Poetry*, 77.

54 Ibid., 75.

However, while all substance may *lead back* to Christ, the Church's teaching of transubstantiation states that the substance of the Eucharist *is* Christ, and this is an important difference which McNees neglects (necessarily, if her analogy is to work). She also does the reader a disservice by using one complex theological idea to explain another: 'The moment of sacrifice is the culmination of real presence in the reader'. Actually, the idea that Lichtmann and McNees describe in these passages appears to have far more in common with certain Protestant teachings of the Eucharist (which emphasize the dependence of Christ's presence on the subjective dispositions of the communicant) than with the Catholic *ex opere operato*.

Like both McNees and Lichtmann, Ballinger also makes an explicit connection between the eucharistic 'species' and poetry. A communion takes place between reader and poet, he argues, through the sacramental extension of the poet in the poem; but more than this, precisely because the poet has first discerned God in the subject of the poem and then realized this presence in the poem, in 'Eucharistic terms, a blessed instress occurs in this dynamic at the moment the worded, poetically inscaped Word is offered under the elements of the inscaping poem to the communicant'.⁵⁵ Despite the radical nature of his claims, Ballinger is forced to acknowledge that although he has deduced 'a certain "systematic" theology from Hopkins's poetry ... Hopkins himself probably did not consciously adhere to such a theology'.⁵⁶

Margaret R. Ellsberg initially appears more sober than McNees, Lichtmann and Ballinger, claiming that 'a belief in transubstantiation informed Hopkins's view of nature and the language he chose to describe it',⁵⁷ although she later extends the analogy all the way to identification, claiming that poetry 'is the sacrament of flesh, word and spirit charged by their interpenetration with each other'.⁵⁸

55 Ballinger, *The Poem as Sacrament*, 221–222.

56 Ibid., 224.

57 Ellsberg, *Created to Praise*, 17.

58 Ibid., 45.

Of those in favour of the notion of 'poem as sacrament' in Hopkins scholarship, Jeffrey B. Loomis and Bernadette Waterman Ward are the most cautious. Loomis is careful to make some important distinctions when he commences his discussion. Although through the course of his work he expresses the idea that some poems are attempts to enact a type of eucharistic action, he begins by distinguishing between the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church and the 'sacraments' as a description 'of many rites that the Church does not call sacraments today ... [but which] the earliest Christians and their later medieval counterparts' did call sacraments, and argues that 'Hopkins seemed to extend his sacramental theology outside the bounds of the seven "ecclesial" Christian mysteries.'⁵⁹ Waterman Ward's reading reflects this stance. 'A sacramental vision permeates Hopkins's poetic themes and practices', she writes, and 'the sacramental act of Hopkins's poems ... seeks to evoke not approbation of an idea but an encounter with the reality of God in the true and the Beautiful'.⁶⁰ In this reading, a poem would seem to have more in common with a general emotional experience of the numinous, than with God's objective, localized and bodily presence in the Eucharist.

The claims that equate sacramentals or the central Catholic sacrament with poetry are obviously daring and they have troubled some critics. Nathan Cervo has argued:

By definition, a *sacrament* is an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace. A *sacramental* is an action or object of ecclesiastical origin that serves as an indirect means of grace by producing devotion. In neither case, it seems to me, is 'sacramental' appropriate to Hopkins criticism – 'things' are not of ecclesiastical origin, nor is a poet a priest endowed with the power to transubstantiate 'things' into the equivalent of the Blessed Sacrament.⁶¹

59 Jeffrey B. Loomis, *Dayspring in Darkness: Sacrament in Hopkins* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1988), 17.

60 Waterman Ward, *World as Word*, 131, 133.

61 Nathan Cervo, 'Scotistic Elements in the Poetry of Hopkins', *Hopkins Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (1983), 64.