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Doubt, Hope, and the Comfort of the Apocalypse:
Hopkins Concludes the Christian Narrative with

That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection

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I.

In a letter dated July 29, 1888, the poet-priest, Gerard Manley Hopkins, disclosed to his close friend and literary confidante, R. W. Dixon, that on a bright, windy day that previous week, during a respite from relentless rainstorms, he “went out for the day and conceived a sonnet.”¹ On the day described, the generally accepted date of which is July 26, 1888, Hopkins walked along the muddy Dublin streets in the blustering wind beneath a clearing sky and saw a vision of the end of time that he captured in an unusual sonnet form. For many scholars, the sonnet entitled That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection, stands as a kind of summa of Hopkins’s theology and poetics.

This essay argues that to appreciate the poem, one must first appreciate its underlying narrative. For Hopkins that narrative contains the story of God’s temporal relationship with the world and of Hopkins’s abiding communion with that story--the story of how God has revealed, and will reveal, Himself in the continuing narrative vision of all things in their infinite variety united in the body of Christ (Frye, The Great Code, 17). The narrative, or story, as told in scripture has a beginning (Creation), a middle or a development part of the story (Incarnation) and it has a conclusion where time ends and existence continues, but transformed to another level

in direct communion with God (Apocalypse). For the purpose of this essay’s discussion, I refer to God’s interactions with his Creation, past and future, as recorded in Scripture, and which comprise the narrative in which Hopkins immersed his poetics, in terms of three mythic aspects of Christian cosmic reality that move cumulatively through time toward final completion or consummation: Creation; Incarnation; and Re-Creation. God makes the world, God enters into the world and, according to the narrative, God ultimately takes the world into Himself and replaces the fallen world with a new heaven and a new earth inhabited by the new man. In *Heraclitean Fire*, Hopkins turns what Paul Mariani aptly refers to as the poet’s “extraordinary linguistic insight into the adamantine inscape of man’s immortal spirit” (309) that comes into being at the culmination of temporal history and the commencement of eternal fellowship with God, that is, the eternity where, as Hopkins imagines it in the poem, “time beats level” (16).  

*Heraclitean Fire* is almost universally paired with another innovative form of sonnet entitled *Spelt from Sybil’s Leaves*, completed approximately 18 months earlier, in that it too contemplates the moment when the created order will cease to exist. The biographical discussion that records the context of Hopkins’s Dublin years of 1885-1889 and the works produced during that period lies beyond the scope of this paper. However, the subject matter of these two

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2 Robert Webber in his recent book *Who Gets to Narrate the World* uses this particular expression of the traditional Christian myth or narrative in his wide-ranging discussion of the nature of spiritual narratives and the dynamics of the clash of these narratives from historical and contemporary perspectives.

3 Line references to the poem are italicized; the poem with numbered lines is reproduced and appended hereto.

4 Exhaustive studies of Hopkins’s life in Dublin after his appointment as a Professor of Classics at University College, and equally extensive comment and opinion about Hopkins’s work and thought during the final four and a-half years of his life may be found in biographies by Robert Bernhard Martin, Paul Mariani, Jill Muller, and Norman White.
distinctive poems suggests an expansion of his incarnational poetic vision wherein Hopkins’s poetry partakes of a natural world infused by Christ through a way of seeing the immanent Christ in that world and an apocalyptic vision where Christ returns to re-create the world: to “make all things new” (Rev. 21:5). 5 While Spelt is also beyond the scope of this essay, it is useful to note that these two poems written during this period correspond to the final two of seven phenomena that occur during the apocalypse, which Anthony Hoekema identifies in his study, The Bible and the Future, the final two of which are “The Day of the Lord” (this is the subject of Spelt) and “The New Heaven and The New Earth” (corresponding to Heraclitean Fire). While this essay concentrates on the latter, evidence suggests that Hopkins’s aesthetic and theological interest had in significant measure turned to cosmic closure during his last years in Dublin. Conceived and composed on a grand cosmic scale, Heraclitean Fire is a vision of ultimate reality and ultimate hope.

II.

Two broad camps divide the critical responses to the work: scholars that group the apocalyptic sonnets into what they perceive as the Hopkins’s personal despair during the Dublin years, and those that view Spelt and Heraclitean Fire as culminating statements that reflect the poet’s skill and vision. Jill Muller, for example, in her recent study Heart in Hiding concludes that, “depressed and isolated, Hopkins became increasingly preoccupied with Catholic teachings about death and the afterlife; thus, his use of eschatological imagery to describe feelings of claustrophobic solipsism and rejection by God” (8). She sees Spelt as one of the “sonnets of

5 All biblical references are to the Authorized King James Version. While Hopkins would have used the Douay Bible text in his work as a Jesuit Priest, his intense early study of scripture in his childhood home, at school, and at Balliol College, Oxford utilized the Authorized Version.
desolation” and *Heraclitean Fire* as a retelling of the prophecy in *Spelt*, except this time with a hopeful ending. With *Fire*, the poet’s “own fate [is] set apart from the world’s general dismembering” and, in defiance of “his own demons,” Hopkins “declares his faith in an optimistic Christian eschatology” wherein, after purgation of “mortal trash” the poet “looks forward confidently to an afterlife in which he will be ‘what Christ is’” (22; Muller 135-36).

Like Muller, Daniel Harris sees the poem in two movements: a vision of dissolution and flux followed by Christian consolation. In his book length study entitled *Inspirations Unbidden*, Harris focuses on “the terrible sonnets,” among which he places *Heraclitean Fire*. He takes significant note of *Heraclitean Fire* as a manifestation of Hopkins’s frustration with what the poet perceived as God’s silence in his life and as a call for “spiritual crucifixion” (38). Harris regards the *volta* at 16 of the comfort of the Resurrection in the second movement as sudden and inorganic, perhaps a symptom of Hopkins “[h]aving felt his world emptied of sacramental value, and having committed himself to an apocalyptic view of redemption, he was now confronted with an apocalypse that seemed not to happen” (38-39). Harris notes in the work an altered concept of Hopkins’s prior Christian poetics and critiques the sonnet’s use of the pathetic fallacy as an indication of Hopkins’s perception of Christ’s absence from the incarnational vision of the natural world displayed in earlier poetry. The very “stress upon the Apocalypse . . . virtually cancelled his previous focus on the essential relation that the Incarnation, as incorporation of the Word, had established” (39).

Some scholars simply regard the poem as baffling and made of irreconcilable truisms in its clash of titular images: resignation to a Heraclitean flux versus an absolute faith in the eternal life promised by the Resurrection. For Alison Sulloway, the poem manifests itself as “a study in the Christian riddle of mutability and eternity” but which at the same time appears “undeniably
cryptic” (179). For literary biographer Norman White, the riddle remains unanswered in that Heraclitean Fire “is not a solution to the earthly problem posed in its opening . . . but proposes new ones” (440). Robert Martin’s major biography omits reference to Heraclitean Fire altogether.

At least two distinguished scholars perceive seamless continuity with prior poetic vision from their particular scholarly orientations. Virginia Ellis notes Hopkins’s transformation of the sonnet form “almost beyond recognition” as an indication of the “inscaping of controlled anarchy” of its content (228-29). The instress of the Heraclitean combat of the elements in the first movement combined within the cosmic inscape revealed in the intricate expression of the interrelationships among “humanity, nature, and God” manifest the accumulated mastery of the mature poet’s “language of mystery” (231-233). “The final image triumphantly summarizes the point of the entire poem, and indeed of Hopkins’ entire life, faith, poetic career” (235).

In the same manner of Ellis’s suggestion that Hopkins intended the poem as a culminating work, Jeffrey Loomis also identifies the poem as a “seeming 'summa' of [Hopkins’s] life as a priest-poet”; however, contrary to Ellis, Loomis observes the discontinuity with the Welsh poems in that “the Hopkins of this poem now refuses to concentrate further on any visible inscape given him in nature” in favor of the “invisible . . . promised by faith in biblical revelation” (131-32). James Finn Cotter’s exhaustive study of Hopkins’s Christology, Inscape, develops the poet’s vision from a mythopoeic perspective (XVII). Accordingly, for Cotter the pair of sonnets, Spelt and Heraclitean Fire, “stand as the final grand formulation of Hopkins’s myth (214) and, even more pertinent to this essay, he sees Heraclitean Fire as the poet’s inspired expression of the “last poetic resolution of the creator redeemer” (4) and for the poet himself, a “new mythogenetic expression” (232). Unlike Ellis and Loomis, as well as
Muller and Harris, Cotter not surprisingly views Hopkins’s as cosmic *apocalypsis* perspective, not as a meditation on, or narrow concern for, personal salvation. Peter Milward, S.J., also sees the work on a theological and poetic continuum, while “more apocalyptic than incarnational” the work is a “restatement,” not a “new movement”; the incarnational and redemptive, as Milward explains, “are two poles of the Christian faith” (81). Milward points to the sudden “turn” of the sonnet at “Enough!” that ushers in the vision of the ultimate culmination of God’s plan as revealed in scripture:

> It is deeply rooted in Christian faith that Christ is not so present in all things as to redeem them in their existing forms, but sooner or later they must all be destroyed, and man with them, even as Christ himself died on the cross; but then death is the divinely appointed means to the realization of a new heaven and an new earth, centering on the new Man. (81)

Both Cotter and Milward capture the basic contour of the poem: perpetual cyclical transformations of existence presented by the pre-Socratic, pre-Christian model of the universe as a relentless reciprocating machine, supplanted by a the fulfillment of a divine plan in the transformation of the man and his fallen world through a conflagration that burns off man’s dross and leaves the adamantine substance anaphorically restated in the final burden line of the poem, “immortal diamond” (24).

III.

The unique “sonnet” form Hopkins employs in *Hericlitean Fire* is recognizable chiefly because the author refers to the poem as such. As Ellis observes, while Hopkins needed the certainty of formal structure, he freely recast the sonnet form so as to bend the form to what freedom the sonnet required in order to deliver its content (228). Scholars agree that the shape of
the poem approximates the Petrarchan sonnet structure. That is, in the sonnet proper, there is an approximate octave, consisting of nine alexandrine lines, which is actually a “nonet,” followed by an approximate sestet, which is actually six and one-half lines in length. The nine and a-half lines remaining in the 24 line sonnet are accounted for by the addition of three “coda s” and a final “burden” line.

Hopkins himself prescribes the better way to structure the poem. In Hopkins’s “Notes” included with the 1918 Poems edited by Robert Bridges, published almost 30 years after the poet’s death, Hopkins describes the sonnet as having two codas. Both Bridges and Catherine Phillips, in her recent edition, both helpfully correct the author’s statement on the subject, maintaining that the work has three, not two, codas. However, consistent with the balance of what I see as the three movements of the poem (two contained in the sonnet proper and the third movement contained in the two codas and burden line), the proportionate structure of the poem is more logically as follows: Octave of nine lines consisting of two quatrains and an extra concluding line (nonet) (1-4; 5-9); a second Octave consisting of a sestet and couplet (10-15; 16-17); and two tercet codas followed by the final chorus burden line (18-20; 21-23; 24).

This structure, is both consistent with the ideas and turns of the poem, and also solves one problem created by the three coda structure, which leaves the four-stress line 15 as an “orphan” sandwiched in between the alexandrines of lines 14 and 16, which, I suggest, is no orphan but rather the final line of the sestet and is. Defenders of the “three coda” pattern, hold that the end of the first line of each of what appears as the three tercet codas echo the end rhyme of the previous line. That is, “stark” in line 15 looks back to “mark” and the end of line 14; “deck shone” at the end of the four beat first line that begins the following coda, is possibly intended to rhyme with “dejection” at the end of the alexandrine of line 17. Similarly, the same is true with

\[6\] The poem with numbered lines is reproduced and attached at the Appendix.
“ash” and “crash” in lines 20 and 21 respectively. However, the three coda design breaks down when one notes that the end of each of the tetrameter lines that begin the final two codas (18, 21) forms an end-rhyme with the preceding couplet. However, no paired rhyme appears in the two alexandrines that precede the tetrameter line “Is any of him at all so stark.” (15).

The force of the substantive content and the imperative statement contained in what I argue is the concluding couplet (16-17) to the sestet preceding (10-15), binds the putative first “coda” firmly to the body of the amplified sonnet, thus creating the two concluding codas as discrete thoughts that cleanly carry the concluding and climactic thoughts of the poem, these being nothing less than the apocalypsis that re-creates the world as new.

While never a dogmatic follower of prescribed forms of others, Hopkins nevertheless worked fastidiously for internal precision and integrity within the piece. However, he freely altered formal poetic conventions as he saw fit in order to to suit the substance. In all cases for Hopkins, form followed function. The cosmic content of Heraclitean Fire simply required a bigger sonnet and additional content that could not be accommodated, as was Spelt, by the simple expedient of lengthening the lines. Instead, Hopkins made a balanced three section sonnet—two sections are the sonnet proper, the third section consists of the above described paired codas and burden line. The following analysis will treat the sections as such. Thus, in summary, the sonnet proper consists of a two quatrains, nine line “octave” (4 + 4 + 1) the rhyme scheme of which is abba + abba + c; balanced against an octave (6 + 2) that consists of a sestet and a concluding couplet, the rhyme scheme of which is dcdcd + cc. Hopkins balances both of these in combination against the remaining third portion of the sonnet that resolves the tension between the two sections of the sonnet proper with the seven remaining lines containing the
tercets of the two codas plus the burden line (3 + 3 +1) with the corresponding rhyme scheme

\[ cee + eff + f. \]

IV.

The title of the poem without more carries the opposed world views: the Greek and the Christian. Hopkins admitted to Bridges in a September 25, 1888 letter that his attempt to distill Greek thought may have had limited success (qtd. in Phillips 386). However, it is more likely that Hopkins intended no serious distillation of “Greek thought” but rather as the postulation of a pre-Socratic philosophical model of the universe now swept aside by a superseding narrative. For this he chose the Heraclitean notion of the visible world in a state of eternal flux, in a constant process of transforming matter through infinite cycles of regeneration and transfer through the media of fire, air, water and earth, for which fire is the primary vehicle. The ancient and venerable conceit, once thought to be authoritative, is now swept aside by a superseding narrative. Indeed, for the ultimate purpose of the poem, this is the very wisdom that God has made foolish (1 Cor. 1:20). As mentioned above, there is an ironic hint that the so-called vision of Heraclitus is at best so abstract as to be metaphysical and at worst actually more nonsensical than profound. We glean what limited understanding still survives from the several recorded references to the thinking of the Greek philosopher Heraclitus (535-475 BCE), whose work, if it ever existed in written form, was long lost. Perhaps Hopkins chose Heraclitus for both the obscurity of his work and the philosopher’s association with change as the central dynamic of the universe as a conceit with dual value: a cosmic but fragmented world view that is only capable of being pieced together and seen through a glass darkly, placed in opposition to the comfort of the
Resurrection—the unchanging reality in a changing world—which as God tells us, we will one
day experience “face to face” (1. Cor.13:12).

To carry the poem’s ambitious subject matter of ultimate cosmic reality leavened by
theological concepts of eternal significance, Hopkins deploys his full arsenal of alliteration,
assonance, and combined word imagery that create a densely textured vision, beginning with
clouds, the shape, motion and behavior of which picture an undercurrent of portent and violence.
Stephan Walliser suggests that puffball is a spore case of a kind of fungus, the purpose of which
is to explode (15), “tufts” appear “torn”; “pillows”, “tossed.” Turbulent gusts, not gentle
zephyrs, drive these “heaven-roysterers” in “thongs” in “gay-gangs” flaunting their magnitude,
marching boldly on “an air-built thoroughfare” (1-2). The violent turbulence continues into the
next line with the suggestion of clouds caught on a jet-stream down-draft and giving the
appearance of ‘roughcast,’ the stucco like mixture of lime and gravel (Phillips, note at 386). The
clouds appear “down roughcast, down dazzling” as the poet’s eye descends to the foliage at
horizon level to behold the form of an elm tree against the sky that stretches up to meet the
“whitewash” of the rough play of wind and cloud against the sun (3), whereupon “shivelights” or
splintered sunlight from behind create the backlit image of rope-like “shadowtackle” through the
structure of the tree. The foregoing compound word of “Hopkins’ own coinage” (Walliser 17),
prepares the eye for the transformation of the tree into a kind of loom with the weaving imagery
of “long | lashes lace, lance, and pair” suggesting piercing as in warriors fighting with lances, but
also in merging or pairing(17). This is a verbal key to the Heraclitean world of reciprocating
conflict, of warring elements as nature’s creative impetus.

The second quatrain takes the “boisterous wind” to the earth beating out smooth the
creases created by the previous rainstorm that has left natural pools and man made ruts to be
blown dry by the wind and parched by the sun. Here Hopkins focuses on the evidence of man, his regimented mass impressions made in the mud (“squadroned masks and manmarks | treadmire toil there / Footfretted in it” (8-9), formed, then parched, then ultimately obliterated by the relentless, ineffable, and all consuming force of nature here in the concluding line of the “nonet” which we describe as the first half of the sonnet proper, as the evocation of Heraclitean thought: “nature’s bonfire” (9). That is, the “million fueled” cosmic play described in the preceding eight lines is the figure of the unity of the wind, sun, earth, and man’s civilization itself in the constant combustion of all matter which as ascribed to the thought of Heraclitus, is the interaction of conflict and play, of destruction and creation that drives the “ongoingness of things and their unceasing alteration from one manifestation to another” (Wheelwright 38). The associations of the “bonfire” that “burns on” in this final line of the first part include both the “bon” or good or divinely ordained implication of the Heraclitean fire, one of celebration in that image of the eternal flux of the universe and the transformations and regeneration of earth air fire and water. However, more consistent with the immediately following countervailing vision of the next section the “bon” is ironic. Etymologically, “bonfire” derives from the Anglo-Saxon “bone fire” and is also associated with “bonfire night” being the celebration of the thwarting of the Gunpowder Plot (SOED), which may also be associated with the painful memory of the martyrdom of the innocent Catholic priests and laymen swept up in its aftermath, as the case may be. The image of the bonfire here may anticipate the final movement of the poem, the bonfire that burns rubbish, such as “matchwood” and “potsherd” (Walliser 22).

However in this second movement of the poem balances the first with the countervailing notion that man resists the notion of his consumption in nature’s bonfire; the “quenching” of his life so that life may recycle is no cause for celebration. Man does not go quietly into that good...
night. After all, we are nature’s “bonniest, dearest to her” (10). Loomis suggests another meaning of which Hopkins was likely aware pertinent to the ironic picture of man’s self elected separation from the destiny of the Heraclitean view of nature here: “‘bonny’ is a separate bed of ore, not forming a vein, nor communicating with any other vein’ (132; [OED]). This image resonates with the iridescent splendor of the diamond “when polished as separated ore” (132). Rather, at this moment as merely material for the “million-fueléd” bonfire of Heraclitus’s theory of nature, man is an independent “spark” that seeks to jump from the cycle of combustion, self regarded as “nature’s” clearest-selvéd spark” (10). Alas, a spark cannot live long outside the bonfire of nature and perishes in an instant: “Man, how fast his firedint, | his mark on mind, is gone!” (11). In other words, both the physical and mental existence, his ‘spark’ and his ‘firedint’ are engulfed in ”an unfathomable . . . enormous dark / Drowned” (12-13; Walliser 25).

Hopkins’s ironic hyperbole in the next phrase is underscored by the caesura that appears in the middle of the word that describes this impotent little spark’s petulance at the apparent totality of his quenching: “O pity and indig | nation!” This is the climax of the doubt part of the equation; the misplaced hope; the emotional reaction to a misconstrued apprehension of man’s fate. Man’s view as the remaining line unfolds in the self conceit that he, man, is a star, not a spark, and his fate in the Heraclitean cycle of reciprocating flux and transformation, where the individual “Manshape, that shone / Sheer off (from a great distance), now after his brief life “death blots black out” (13-14), is woefully incomplete, even unjust. There is another, more ultimate reality manifested not in the cyclical history of Hericlitus but by the central event in linear Christian biblical history, the resurrection of Christ, which is the type of the redemption of all Creation in the apocalypse which at once fulfills, and ends, world history. Thus, the couplet of lines 16 and 17 form the volta that concludes the sonnet proper and ushers in eternity: “But vastness blurs and
time it beats level.” This is a phrase that stumps Walliser and every other commentator reviewed. It is usually skipped over or conflated with “blur” or equated with death. However, the clearly eschatological imagery of the third “coda” section invite the evocation of that moment that is at once in human time, and simultaneously the moment that time ends or “beats level” in line 16 in the same manner that the consuming wind “beats earth bare” in line 5. God keeps the promise of his word to the faithful, the visible sign of which is “the Resurrection” which for the faithful is the “clarion” of hope, the shrill trumpet sound of which drives “Away grief’s gasping, joyless days, dejection” (17), and signals the Christian Apocalypse, where Christ comes again (Mariani 397) and God reclaims the faithful and takes all of Creation into Himself.

The “foundering deck” is the fallen world Christ comes to redeem. “A-cross” shines across it. The beacon, Cotter notes, is an echo of the same image from Wreck, the “blown beacon of light. / Jesu heart’s light . . .” (Wreck, stanzas 29, 31) (233). Inasmuch as “beam” is also defined as “the rood tree, the Cross” (SOED def. 2), and the principal meaning of “beacon” is a “sign, a portent” (SOED def. 1). Therefore superimposed on the image of the foundering ship, again the echo of that that claimed the earthly lives of the Franciscan Nuns in Wreck, the coal fire figure of the Passion illuminates the second coming and prepares for the resurrection of the faithful in Christ. The consuming conflagration, “world’s wildfire, leave[s] but ash” (20). However “ash” is also an exceedingly hard wood, another figure of the beam, the indestructible and unconsumed wood of the cross in contrast to matchwood (Loomis 132).

The final movement of the sonnet resolves the instruments of the deceit and oppression of the believers. The fallen world is the foundering ship; Christ incarnate is the beacon of Hope (Ultimate Reality). “Flesh”-- the temptations of the world--“fades” upon the advent of the second coming and re-creation in the Spirit. The residuary worm is the Devil who takes his own
and gathers the unredeemed of the fall (“fall to the residuary worm”). In the end, man’s dross is burnt by the “world’s wildfire” (20). What remains is man’s immortal “I am” (“diamond”) having risen from the trash of bonfire material, “incorruptible.”

In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.

1 Cor. 15:52-53.

In form and content, the poem is an astonishing, but logical development of Hopkin’s sacramental vision. In the three part narrative structure of the Christian myth--Creation; Incarnation; Re-Creation—Heraclitean Fire evokes the image of immanent Re-Creation, the New Heaven, the New Earth--and New Man: “immortal diamond.”
Works Cited


APPENDIX

THAT NATURE IS A HERACLITEAN FIRE AND OF THE COMFORT OF THE RESURRECTION

1 Cloud-puffball, torn tufts, tossed pillows flaunt forth, then chevy on an air—
2 Built thoroughfare: heaven-roysterers, in gay-gangs they throng;
   they glitter in marches.
3 Down roughcast, down dazzling whitewash, whenever an elm arches,
4 Shivelights and shadowtackle in long lashes lace, lance, and pair.
5 Delightfully the bright wind boisterous ropes, wrestles, beats earth bare
6 Of yestertempest’s creases; in pool and rut peel parches
7 Squandering ooze to squeezed dough, crust, dust; stanches, starches
8 Squadroned masks and manmarks treadmire toil there
9 Footfretted in it. Million-fueléd, nature’s bonfire burns on.
10 But quench her bonniest, dearest to her, her clearest-selvéd spark
11 Man, how fast his firedint, his mark on mind, is gone!
12 Both are in an unfathomable, all is in an enormous dark
13 Drowned. O pity and indig nation! Manshape, that shone
14 Sheer off, disseveral, a star, death blots black out; nor mark
15 Is any of him at all so stark
16 But vastness blur and time beats level. Enough! The Resurrection,
17 A heart’s-clarion! Away grief’s gasping, joyless days, dejection.
18 Across my foundering deck shone
19 A beacon, an eternal beam. Flesh fade, and mortal trash
20 Fall to the residuary worm; world’s wildfire, leave but ash:
21 In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
22 I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and
23 This jack, joke, poor potsherdl patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,
24 Is immortal diamond.