

Gerard Manley Hopkins

THE WRECK OF
THE DEUTSCHLAND

With Introduction and Notes by

NIGEL FOXELL

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(*this address not for correspondence*)

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The image on page 2 is an illustration of the wreck of the SS Deutschland by an unknown artist, included in *The Sea: its stirring story of adventure, peril & heroism*, Volume 1 (London, 1887).

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THE WRECK OF THE DEUTSCHLAND

To the
happy memory of five Franciscan Nuns
exiles by the Falck Laws
drowned between midnight and morning of
December 7th 1875

PART THE FIRST

1

Thou mastering me
God! giver of breath and bread;
World's strand, sway of the sea;
Lord of living and dead;
Thou hast bound bones and veins in me, fastened me flesh,
And after it almost unmade, what with dread,
Thy doing: and dost thou touch me afresh?
Over again I feel thy finger and find thee.

2

I did say yes
O at lightning and lashed rod;
Thou heardst me truer than tongue confess
Thy terror, O Christ, O God;
Thou knowest the walls, altar and hour and night:
The swoon of a heart that the sweep and the hurl of thee trod
Hard down with a horror of height:
And the midriff astrain with leaning of, laced with fire of stress.

3

The frown of his face
Before me, the hurtle of hell
Behind, where, where was a, where was a place?
I whirled out wings that spell
And fled with a fling of the heart to the heart of the Host.
My heart, but you were dovewinged, I can tell,
Carrier-witted, I am bold to boast,
To flash from the flame to the flame then, tower from
the grace to the grace.

4

I am soft sift
 In an hourglass – at the wall
 Fast, but mined with a motion, a drift,
 And it crowds and it combs to the fall;
 I steady as a water in a well, to a poise, to a pane,
 But roped with, always, all the way down from the tall
 Fells or flanks of the voel, a vein
 Of the gospel proffer, a pressure, a principle, Christ's gift.

5

I kiss my hand
 To the stars, lovely-asunder
 Starlight, wafting him out of it; and
 Glow, glory in thunder;
 Kiss my hand to the dappled-with-damson west:
 Since, tho' he is under the world's splendour and wonder,
 His mystery must be instressed, stressed;
 For I greet him the days I meet him, and bless when I understand.

6

Not out of his bliss
 Springs the stress felt
 Nor first from heaven (and few know this)
 Swings the stroke dealt –
 Stroke and a stress that stars and storms deliver,
 That guilt is hushed by, hearts are flushed by and melt –
 But it rides time like riding a river
 (And here the faithful waver, the faithless fable and miss),

INTRODUCTION

§ 1

In 1868 Hopkins decided to study for the Roman Catholic priesthood and entered Manresa House, the Jesuit Novitiate at Roehampton. On 5 October, 1878, he wrote to Canon R. W. Dixon, the minor poet:

“You ask, do I write verse myself. What I had written I burnt before I became a Jesuit and resolved to write no more, as not belonging to my profession, unless it were by the wish of my superiors; so for seven years I wrote nothing but two or three little presentation pieces which occasion called for. But when in the winter of ’75 the *Deutschland* was wrecked in the mouth of the Thames and five Franciscan nuns, exiles from Germany by the Falk Laws, aboard of her were drowned I was affected by the account and happening to say so to my rector he said that he wished someone would write a poem on the subject. On this hint I set to work and, though my hand was out at first, produced one. I had long had haunting my ear the echo of a new rhythm which now I realised on paper. To speak shortly, it consists in scanning by accents or stresses alone, without any account of the number of syllables, so that a foot may be one strong syllable or it may be many light and one strong. I do not say the idea is altogether new; there are hints of it in music, in nursery rhymes and popular jingles, in the poets themselves, and, since then, I have seen it talked about as a thing possible in critics. Here are instances – ‘*Díng, dóng, béll; Pússy’s ín the wéll; Whó pút her ín? Lítte Jóhnný Thín. Whó púlléd her óut? Lítte Jóhnný Stóut.*’ For if each line has three stresses or three feet it follows that some of the feet are of one syllable only.”

The ‘new rhythm’ was ‘sprung rhythm’, in which one stress makes one foot and may be followed by any number of unstressed syllables or by none at all. Nevertheless all feet last approximately the same time, just as bars of music do, regardless of the number of notes. In a letter to Robert Bridges, Hopkins wrote:

“Why do I employ sprung rhythm at all? Because it is the nearest to the rhythm of prose, that is the native rhythm of speech, the least forced, the most rhetorical and emphatic of all possible rhythms, combining, as it seems to me, opposite and, one wd. have thought, incompatible excellences, markedness of rhythm – that is rhythm’s self – and naturalness of expression – for why, if it is forcible in prose to say ‘lashed: rod’, am I obliged to weaken this in verse, which ought to be stronger, not weaker, into ‘lashed birch-ród’ or something?” (21 August, 1877)

§ 2

We may add that in sprung rhythm each foot has far more individuality than any standard rhythm admits. Hopkins searched for the individuality in all things; hence the vividness – and at times excentricity – not only of his rhythm but also of his language. In *Gerard Manley Hopkins*, Ch. i, Father Peters wrote:

“Hopkins habitually looked at objects with the fixed determination to catch what was individually distinctive in order thus to arrive at some insight into their essence as individuals. To express this set of individuating characteristics in a suitable term he coined the word ‘inscape.’” (Cf. note on 27.5.)

He found support for his way of thinking – and feeling – in the philosophy of Duns Scotus (c. 1265–1308). Father Peters in the same chapter says:

“Scotus distinguishes in each object three ‘formalities’, that is to say, three entities that constitute an object, which, corresponding to the logical determinations in our mind, generic, specific, and individual, have each their own reality in the object. Thus in every object there is a generic form, a specific form and an individual form. ... Now just as the specific form arises from the generic by the addition of the specific difference, so the individual form arises from the specific by the addition of an individualizing difference; and this perfection, which is the final determination of the being in its specific essence, is called by Scotus *haecceitas*, ‘this-ness.’ Thus while in the philosophy of Aristotle and St. Thomas there is no separate entity which limits the universal, determines and individualises it, there is such a separate entity in the theory of Scotus: and inscape was for Hopkins its sensible manifestation.”

We may ask ourselves whether this insistence on allowing all objects an individual dignity was not influenced by the climate of Victorian liberalism. (Cf. the opening sentences of the *Introduction to A Grammarian’s Funeral*.) It may also have been part of his reaction (nurtured by Ruskin and Pre-Raphaelitism) against the trend towards mass production; cf. the word ‘bespoken’ (22.5 and note) and the note on 1.1 and 4.

Sometimes Hopkins’ inscaping of objects so individualises them as almost to personify them – hence his frequent omission of the definite article, whereby common nouns verge on proper ones.

§ 3

From 1874 till his ordination in 1877 Hopkins studied theology at St. Beuno’s College in North Wales (see note on 24.2); here he read a quantity of Welsh poetry, a characteristic of which is the *cynghanedd*, (pronounced ‘kerng-harneth’) whereby the first part of the line alliterates with the last part or else the whole of the

first part with the whole of the last part. It occurs, though always modified, in 2.6, 7.3, 14.6, 24.8, 25.3, 32.2, 34.1 and – most elaborately of all – in 23.8:

‘To bathe in his fall-gold mercies, to breathe in his all-fire glances.’

1 2 3 4 5 6 1 2 4 3 5 6

The inversion of ‘fall’ in ‘all-fire’ is frequently paralleled throughout *The Wreck*.

Another form of *cynghanedd* called *sain* (pronounced like English ‘sign’), in which the ends of the first and second parts of the line rhyme, and the second part alliterates with the third, is found in 27.3 and 34.5, with a variant in 21.2. In *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Study of Poetic Idiosyncrasy in Relation to Poetic Tradition*, W. H. Gardner writes: ‘We may sum up by saying that if the “echo of a new rhythm” which had been haunting Hopkins’ ear before 1875 was primarily an echo of English nursery rhymes and Greek melic poetry, it was the greater precision of the Welsh system of ‘strict’ metres which gave form and clear definition to the English poet’s theory and practice’ (Vol. II, Ch. iii).

§ 4

The number of feet per line in Pt. I is 2, 3, 4, 3, 5, 5, 4, 6. The same applies to Pt. II except that there are three feet in the first line. The rhyme-scheme throughout is a b a b c b c a.

§ 5

The kind of thoughts that the shipwreck prompted in Hopkins may have been roughly as follows: ‘God is merciful. The storm was cruel. Should we therefore say that Nature was acting against God’s will? No; some years ago I suffered unspeakably in a storm raised against me, but that was a spiritual storm which Nature had nothing to do with. The real contrast is thus not between God and Nature but between the ferocity and the clemency in both. Couldn’t we be spared the ferocity? Doubtless, if our end were earthly and temporal, but it is not; it is spiritual and

NOTES

Dedication

'happy': Blessed. The word portends that the poem will be a triumphal ode rather than an elegy; cf. 23.1 and note.

'Falck Laws': should be *Falk* Laws. Adalbert Falk (1827–1900) was Bismarck's Minister of Education (1872–9) and instrument of the *Kulturkampf*. This was the conflict between the Prussian government and the Roman Catholic Church. It began after the declaration of papal infallibility in 1870, which some German Roman Catholics, known as Old Catholics, opposed. Rome demanded that the German states should dismiss all Old Catholic teachers. There followed a struggle over the clerical control of education and subsequently over the independence of the Roman Catholic Church, measures against which included the banning of Jesuits from Germany (1872) and the dissolution of most religious orders in Prussia (1875).

'between ... 1875': Though it is characteristic of Hopkins that he should be so specific (cf. *Introduction* § 2 (p.20) on inscape), he may be using the coincidence of time and date to suggest that a new day and a new year will follow, i.e. that death is not the end; cf. 10.3–4, 32.2, 35–5 and *A Grammarian's Funeral*, II. 5–8 and note.

1

Lines 1 and 4. 'mastering me' and 'Lord of living and dead': The feudal and chivalric times that saw the spread of Christianity also determined much of its imagery – God is a 'hero,' 'Lord' and 'King.' These words express the extent of His power, His relation to men collectively; but He has at the same time a personal relation to each individual, so Hopkins speaks of Him not only as 'Lord' but also as 'master' – in the sense of 'artisan,' 'master-craftsman,'

while man is sometimes the article being made (spiritually as well as physically), sometimes the apprentice; in *l.* 1 he is both: 'mastering me' suggests 'conquering me who am the material in Thy hands' and 'guiding me aright who am Thy apprentice.' And Hopkins' chief aim in this poem – to present, and offer a solution to, the problem of how the God of Lightning and the God of Love can be one and the same – is here adumbrated by the use of one and the same word, 'mastering,' in these different but cognate senses.

Why, except in st. 24, did Hopkins reject the Good Shepherd as an image of God's care for the individual? The following reasons may be offered:

- (a) the associations of a shepherd are too exclusively gentle – see, for example, *Psalm xxiii*;
- (b) shepherds were too remote from a Britain that was chiefly urban and industrial; observe, however, that Hopkins never alludes to factory production but only to the artisan and the hand-made article; cf. *Introduction* § 2 (p.20);
- (c) the *Deutschland*, representing the Church, was a steamer, and so suggested the Church in a mechanical age;
- (d) Christ was a carpenter;
- (e) since the elements are involved, we are confronted by the craftsmanship of God the Creator;
- (f) the wind and the waves were God's tools to spiritually mould the people on board the *Deutschland*;
- (g) by the image of the artisan, which writers have applied to both the Creator and themselves, Hopkins may be suggesting the divine union he sought; cf. Dryden's *Hind and the Panther* i. 253: 'The Smith divine,' Wordsworth's *Excursion* iv. 551: 'the great Artificer', and Johnson in *The Rambler*, No. 145: 'The manufacturers of literature ... like other artificers.'

The contrast between the feudal and artisan imagery is similar to that between the Society of Jesus, with its hierarchical set-up, and the Franciscans, with their emphasis on humility. On the other hand, Hopkins' artisan imagery, though particularly frequent in *The Wreck*, recurs in other poems of his.

Line 3. 'Sway': Swayer, ruler. Hopkins sometimes uses an abstract noun to render the inscape of something concrete; cf. 32.2 and *On a Distant Prospect of Eton College*, l. 13 and note.

5–8. § 1. Hopkins describes the making of his natural self by God the Creator (l. 5) and the making of his spiritual self by God the Redeemer (ll. 7–8). The image is of a craftsman who makes an article; he then sees something wrong about it and tries to bang it into shape, almost shattering it in the process; then his sensitive fingers run over the surface as he gives the final touches; ('what with dread' is elliptical for 'the blows being so severe that I was terrified.')

Hopkins is not trying to depict any particular trade but is following *Job* x. 8–11:

'Thine hands have made me and fashioned me together
round about; yet thou dost destroy me. ... Thou hast
clothed me with skin and flesh, and hast fenced me with
bones and sinews.'

If l. 5 suggests – as *Job* also does – the making of an adult body rather than one that grows, this is not due to any limitation in the artisan imagery but a reference to the creation of Adam, the representative of the human race which was 'almost unmade' because of sin, first being driven from Paradise and then, with few exceptions, drowned in the Flood, until it was redeemed by Christ on the Cross; cf. st. 32 and notes. Thus both Pt. I and Pt. II reflect not only the spiritual down and up of Christ in Holy Week (see diagrams to the *Introduction*) but also that of mankind: