

TAMING THE DRAGON

Gerard Manley Hopkins and *The Wreck of the Deutschland*

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I first came under the spell of Hopkins' [*The Windhover*](#) when I was in my late forties. It was an unforgettable entry point into the nuanced yet paradoxically razor-sharp mind of the priest-poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. I knew immediately that it was a big poem but was strangely challenged by the elusiveness of its meaning.

This was one of my first lessons in the *apprehension* - the grasping, the holding - of the quicksilver language that slipped from phrase to phrase, from image to image, from sound to sound with a current-like fluidity throughout the poem. As I became more acquainted with it, I found myself carried through sonic textures that gradually yielded their meaning. The spoken poem would often leave faint onomatopoeic traces of Hopkins' intent in the wake of each successive voicing. I began to understand just what Hopkins meant when he once wrote to his friend and fellow poet Robert Bridges: "My verse is less to be read than to be heard, as I have told you before." In a later communication about *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, he reiterated: "Take breath and read it with the ears, as I always wish to be read, and my verse becomes all right."

Even so, Hopkins' work remains difficult and calls for - demands rather - commitment and active engagement. I early learned the truth that Enda McDonagh [once voiced](#): "A Hopkins poem will often take many readings and many listenings."

Some years later, I took up *The Wreck of the Deutschland* and read it through in a single sitting. The fascination and perplexity that I had earlier experienced with *The Windhover* were entirely dwarfed by this new poem. I understood clearly that it was about far more than the wrecking of a German ship at the mouth of the Thames in early December 1875. But even after several re-readings, I was still grappling with the themes that symphonically arose and subsided throughout the poem. I was, however, entranced. The poem held a magisterial quality that was infused throughout by a continuous searching for, a constant chasing of the words that would sufficiently

voice the barely graspable intensity of Hopkins' intention and the depth of his lived experience.

Early in the poem, Hopkins declares:

*I kiss my hand
To the stars, lovely-asunder
Starlight, wafting him out of it; and
Glow, glory in thunder. . . .*

This is no lightly-voiced dramatic flourish, but expresses Hopkins' near-daemonic pitch of experience and his determination to poetically transmit the nature of that experience. Regarding *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, Hopkins remarked to Robert Bridges: "What refers to myself in the poem is all strictly and literally true and did occur; nothing is added for poetical padding." We begin to get some sense of the life-world inhabited by Hopkins.

As with *The Windhover*, it would eventually take many voicings on my part to discern and to gradually explicate the wondrously infolded spiritual and emotional worlds inhabited by the young Gerard Manley Hopkins during the final years of his Jesuit training, the time when this quietly explosive poem irrupted out of the self-imposed seven year period of literary silence that Hopkins had maintained since entering the novitiate.

No Artist Arises in Isolation

True art requires fertile soil. Hopkins' language, sensitivity, philosophical depth and creative independence all emerged from a childhood lived within a rich cultural milieu. His Anglican parents were highly literate and their library held books in Italian, German and French in addition to English titles. Painting and music were integral to Hopkins' family culture. By the time he had completed his secondary education, his knowledge of literature, poetry, theology and history was encyclopaedic.

His father was an accomplished man of the world who served as British consul-general for the Hawaiian Islands. His mother, from whom he is said to have inherited both sensitivity and deep spirituality, devoted her own energies to the raising of the eight Hopkins children of whom Gerard was the eldest.

Like [Simone Weil](#) after him, Hopkins appears to have been born with a less-than-robust physical constitution but with a strong ascetic disposition conjoined to a powerful intellect. To his mother's great distress, he would often undertake prolonged fasts during his adolescent years. She eventually found it necessary to forbid such practises out of concern for his health. Hopkins' scholar W. H. Gardner relates the following anecdote drawn from his time at Highgate Grammar school: "Observing that nearly all the people around him 'consumed more liquids than was good for them', he resolved to prove his theory by drinking nothing for a week. The result was that he collapsed at drill. But when this feat of abstinence was doubted by a master, a schoolfellow exclaimed: 'He tell a lie? Why, he would sooner die.' So early appeared that moral scrupulosity which played so large a part in his attitude to life and poetry."

Hopkins' poetic abilities were highly developed even as a young man. He twice won the school poetry prize while at Highgate, the first when he was 16, the second when he was 18 years old. He went on to win a scholarship to study Classics at Balliol College Oxford and thereby entered the second major formative period of his life.

Among Giants

Hopkins was a natural scholar and fully absorbed the intellectual nourishment that was so abundant at Oxford. His later writings reveal that he was fully familiar with the works of Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth and Keats. He also followed the writings of more contemporary poets such as Christina Rossetti (with whom he had met while at Oxford), Alfred Lord Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and Walt Whitman. Hopkins did not simply read their poems but sought to understand the nature of the poets themselves. His appreciation of the worth of an artist rested as much in the way they lived their lives as in their technical and creative mastery. He acknowledged a deep sympathy with the unique style of the proud and tumescent Walt Whitman even though he had read but few of his poems, but went on to politely refer to him as a "very great scoundrel." And of the decadent aesthete Swinburne, the young Hopkins wrote: "It is impossible not personally to form an opinion against the morality of a writer like Swinburne." Ten years later, he was to describe Swinburne as "a plague of mankind" even while conceding the man's occasional genius.

Hopkins made a number of life-long connections while at Oxford. It was here that he met Robert Bridges, the future poet laureate who became a close confidant and gently (and sometimes not-so-gently) combative critic of his poems. While at Oxford, he secured a copy of Richard Dixon's [*Christ's Company*](#), a poetic exploration of the lives and thoughts of those - including Mary Magdalene - who were part of the inner circle of Jesus during his earthly ministry. Dixon was already known to Hopkins as he had taught poetry at Highgate while Hopkins was a student there. They maintained a strong correspondence that continued until the time of Hopkins' death at the age of 44 years in 1889. The letters written by Hopkins to Bridges and Dixon remain a treasure house that reveals the powerful currents of both doubt and of certainty that carried Hopkins through his life as poet and priest.

Beyond familiarising himself with the works of fellow poets and of the poetic traditions, Hopkins also began to examine the essential foundations of his own life while at Oxford. In 1866, at the age of 22, Hopkins eschewed his high Anglican affiliations and was baptised into the Catholic church. Two years later, he gathered together all of his earlier writings and consigned them to the flames. He then began his training for the Jesuit priesthood. Soon after being ordained ten years later, he wrote to Richard Dixon: "What [verse] 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 the wish of my superiors."

In December 1875, seven years into his training, Hopkins was profoundly moved on learning of the death by drowning of five Franciscan nuns when the German trans-Atlantic steamer *The Deutschland* foundered on a sand bank at the head of the Thames during a severe snow storm. In his letter to Dixon, he continued: "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 Falck 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."

The poem that Gerard Manley Hopkins produced remains one of the most searching explorations of the notion of Divine presence in a world riven by human desire and human tragedy that has ever been penned.

Entering the Gate

In order to understand the revolutionary nature of Hopkins' poem, it is helpful to have some sense of the poetic milieu within which he found himself and to know a little of his own relationship to the poetic structures of his time. Even before he entered Oxford, Hopkins was deeply familiar with the poetic tradition as it had developed in England. He was strongly attracted to the works of Milton and often mentioned him in his later communications. He was also familiar with the less structured work of the Romantic poetics and was conversant with the different currents that flowed through the poetry of the Victorian era.

His seven years of intense interior work as a Jesuit priest-in-training and his conscious decision to totally eschew the pursuit of poetic expression during that time gave him an unusual independence and freedom. He was not part of any poetic circle, yet inhabited a world of intense poetic sensibility. He had a fascination with language and the deeper layers of expression that lay hidden in colloquial forms of engagement in spoken English, a language that had historically been shaped by numerous influences from its early Celtic roots and many dialects, by contact with the Romans, and later by Nordic and French infusions. His highly individuated understanding of language was projected in its fullness in *The Wreck of the Deutschland*. It also charged the entire canon of his poems that eventually saw the light of day after Robert Bridges published his works 30 years after Hopkins' death.

Hopkins made a conscious choice to break away from the constraint of the strict metrical forms that characterised the work of many of the early poets he had studied and that were sustained in the work of such contemporaries as Swinburne, Tennyson, Arnold, Bridges and others. *The Wreck of the Deutschland* introduces what was to become the signatory form that carried much of the energy within Hopkins' poems - sprung rhythm. Through the use of sprung rhythm, he effectively fractured the formal and metronomic rhythmic structures that gave drive and coherence to the better-known poems of his time. Yet remarkably, this was done within a highly-disciplined pattern of rhyming sequences. Consider the first stanza:

*Thou mastering me
God! giver of breath and bread;
World's strand, sway of the sea;
Lord of living and dead;
Though has 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.*

A quick structural analysis reveals external rhyming in the 1st, 3rd and 8th lines, in the 2nd, 4th and 6th lines, and in the 5th and 7th lines. This ab ab cb ca pattern is consistently reproduced throughout all 35 stanzas of the poem. This accomplishment is as exacting as Dante's use of the *terza rima* sequence throughout the entirety of *The Divine Comedy*. But unlike Dante or Spenser or his contemporary Swinburne, Hopkins' rhyming pattern effectively vanishes in the voicing of the poem where the placing of syllabic emphasis or stress is more conversational or dramatic. Compare this with the first stanza of the chorus from Swinburne's *Atalanta in Calydon* published at the time Hopkins was a student at Oxford:

*Before the beginning of years
There came to the making of man
Time, with a gift of tears;
Grief, with a glass that ran;
Pleasure, with pain for leaven;
Summer, with flowers that fell;
Remembrance, fallen from heaven,
And madness risen from hell;
Strength without hands to smite;
Love that endures for a breath;
Night, the shadow of light,
And life, the shadow of death.*

The rhyming sequence here is straightforward while the alliterative pounding of consonants and the string of assonances in virtually every line all serve to reinforce the strong iambic metre of the stanza. Hopkins' drive comes from another source. His assonant and alliterative elements will often determine the variable rhythmic sequence of stresses: *Thou has bound bones and veins in me, fastened me flesh*. The poem is thereby given a near-conversational fluidity that effectively carries one through the density of Hopkins' language and the intensity of his images and ideas.

Yet the poem is no romp. It can be hard going at times, but is a labour that yields ever-renewing spiritual and experiential riches with each pass. Describing the poem for his friend and mentor Richard Dixon, Hopkins wrote: "It needs study and is obscure . . . I was not desirous that the meaning of all be quite clear, at least unmistakeable . . . without the effort that to make it all out would seem to have required." He continued: "What seems at first sight meaningless will yield up its sense when one brings it the requisite background and analytic study."

Little wonder then that Bridges referred to the poem as: "a great dragon folded in the gate to forbid all entrance." In its essence, *The Wreck of the Deutschland* is as much an exquisite explication of mystical, theological and existential thought as it is one of the most enigmatically wrought poetic pieces in the English language.

Feeling the Dragon's Breath

Though the poem is nominally about the wrecking of a ship at the mouth of the Thames, it encompasses virtually all of the concerns that tested the sharp and testing mind of the young Hopkins during his final years of Jesuit training.

The Wreck of the Deutschland is written in two parts, Part I comprising the first 10 stanzas, and Part II the remaining 25 stanzas. The story of the Deutschland and her ill-fated passengers does not begin until stanza 12:

*On Saturday sailed from Bremen,
American-outward-bound,
Take settler and seamen, tell men with women,
Two hundred souls in the round. . . .*

Part I of the poem centres more on the person of Gerard Manley Hopkins than on the wrecking of the Deutschland. Within a short few stanzas, Hopkins reveals his transformation from a young man of high passion questing for meaning, into a fully committed Christocentric soul of high degree. From the outset, Hopkins alludes to his own near-wreckage long before the Deutschland foundered on *the combs of a smother of sand* at the mouth of the Thames:

*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.*

Hopkins here acknowledges that he is not a self-created entity, but one of the many manifestations of the *giver of breath and bread* who has been somehow touched by his maker and rescued from an uncertain fate in a dissolute world. Having been touched by the finger of God, he is shown the way that he must thereafter travel.

He then speaks of the forces that moved him to abandon the faith of his birth (much to his parents' distress) and be received into the Catholic faith. His conversion was so complete that within two years, Hopkins had entered the most demanding of priesthoods - the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits. He offers a glimpse of the intensity of emotion that preceded his decision:

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

Hopkins hereby affirms the degree of his commitment through images of the most powerful forces in nature and aligns that commitment to that of Jesus in Gethsemane as he prepared himself to be led into the passion of his crucifixion. Despite his mystical disposition, the experience of *terror* and *horror* never entirely left Hopkins. Ten years after penning *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, [he was to write](#):

*O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne'er hung there.*

Hopkins continues:

*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.*

Was this a confessional remembrance of the time immediately prior to his conversion, when this powerful but sensitive intelligence was contending with the anarchic libertinism espoused by most of his poetic contemporaries? Was his ascetic disposition contending with the swoons of his own heart in such a milieu? Hopkins may have experienced *the sweep and the hurl* of God as a crushing *trod-hard-down* force that could shake him from the heights of faith. And while the Victorian women of the time were tightly lacing corsets around their constrained midriff, Hopkins gave voice to the testing of his own libidinous energies when he wrote of the *fire of stress* that tightened his own strained midriff.

The third stanza describes the next movement, his radical flight *to the heart of the Host*:

*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 . . .*

The frown can be a sign of displeasure. It can also be a sign of expectation. Hopkins was being drawn by a will greater than his own, one that would place *the hurtle of hell behind* him, that would free him from the relentless hound intent on devouring the time into which he had been hurled. His inner agitation and the urgency, the necessity of finding refuge find graphic expression as he asks, *where, where was a, where was a place?* The poet then whirls out *wings that spell*, the angelic wings that, through voiced poetic forms, could lift him above the tumult that he felt in danger of being engulfed by, and simultaneously, the voiced *spell* that binds intention and summons powerful forces to do their work as he *fled with a fling to the heart to the heart of the Host*. Hopkins here voices from the depths of his being, from *the heart* that infuses the whole poem, his complete commitment to reaching the depths of Jesus made manifest through the Eucharistic sacrament. And the heart of Jesus is not other than his own heart - *My heart*.

Hopkins fully accepted that such a mystical assimilation was not only possible, but fully in keeping with the traditional understanding of Christian mystics from the time that Saint Paul uttered the unforgettable words, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." Hopkins reaffirms this acceptance in the final stanza of the poem when he declares: *Let him easter in us, be a dayspring to the dimness of us, a crimson-cresseted east. . .*

This search for mystical union was to carry him throughout his whole life. It found exquisite rendering in a later poem, [*That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire*](#) where Hopkins exclaims:

*I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond
Is immortal diamond.*

His individuated theology is further elaborated in the remaining stanzas of Part I. Hopkins will have no part in the liberal secularism that dominated post-Enlightenment

thought in the middle and latter decades of the 19th century. He affirms both his position and his commitment:

*Be adored among men,
God, three-numbered form:
Wring thy rebel, dogged in den,
Man's malice, with wrecking and storm. . . .*

The first two lines extend the sentiment voiced in the Lord's Prayer, "hallowed be thy name" to encompass the triune nature of the divinity - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Man's malice* is the *rebel, dogged in den*, the animal within that brings on *wrecking and storm*, be it physical or psychological.

In the final stanza of Part I, Hopkins calls upon historical precedent both to exemplify and to amplify the revolutionary nature of true conversion:

*With an anvil-ding
And with fire in him forge thy will
Or rather, rather then, stealing as Spring
Through him, melt him but master him still:
Whether at once, as once at a crash Paul,
Or as Austin, a lingering-out sweet skill,
Make mercy in all of us, out of us all
Mastery, but be adored, but be adored King.*

Hopkins here moves between fire and ice, between the tempering of the soul on fire with *an anvil-ding* - the energetic ring and the illuminative spray of incandescence as metal is shaped according to the will of the maker, to the softer, slower, deeper seasonal transformations that melt the heart of a man as winter ice is thawed by the coming of spring. And such radically different modes of transformation are made manifest firstly in the person of St. Paul who *once at a crash* was cataclysmically blinded while on the outskirts of Damascus, and secondly by St Augustine (*Austin*) who through *a lingering-out sweet skill* - through careful thought and rhetorical application - navigated the Manichaean divide of his times to reach his own Christocentric harbour.

God is to make himself known to each soul in his own way and in his own time according to the qualities of that soul. We are to be transformed by the experience of *mercy* and come to gain *mastery* over our fallen animal natures. Along with Hopkins, we thereby come to know and to adore the Love that brings forth and sustains all being.

Having described in Part I the struggle whereby a sense of meaning and purpose were wrested from his own near-wrecked self, Hopkins now searches out the possible meanings held in the tragic and untimely death of five Franciscan nuns with over 70 other passengers and crew when the Deutschland foundered on *a smother of sand* at the mouth of the Thames during a wild snow storm in the early hours of December 6th 1875. He thus engages with the perennial task of theodicy - the attempt to reconcile the existence of a providential God when faced with the reality of human tragedy.

On Saturday Sailed From Bremen

At the time the *Deutschland* was preparing to steam out of Bremerhaven on its last voyage, Gerard Manley Hopkins had entered the final three years of his Jesuit training at St. Bueno's in Wales. The previous seven years had been a time of focussed discipline and assimilation of the deeper currents of European philosophical and spiritual thought and Hopkins was riding at the peak of his powers. News of the foundering of the ship and the subsequent death of the five nuns and many of their fellow passengers and crew broke over him like a storm. When the rector of St Bueno's, Fr James Jones mentioned in passing that someone should write a poem on the subject, he could never have anticipated the immense surge of creative energy that his casual comment would unleash in Hopkins.

The work that Hopkins submitted six months later to Fr Henry Coleridge, editor of the Jesuit *Monthly* outreached the scope and style of any poetic work that Coleridge had ever encountered. He did not know what to do with the poem. Coleridge offered some lame comments regarding the scansion of the poem and promised to publish it later in the year. He never did. The poem eventually saw the light of day in 1918, thirty years after Hopkins' death and 42 years after it was written.

From the very first lines of Part II, Hopkins makes explicit the full force of his philosophical and existential position:

*But we dream we are rooted in earth - Dust!
Flesh falls within sight of us, we, though our flower the same,
Wave with the meadow, forget that there must
The sour scythe cringe, and the blear share come.*

Death is built into all of life. And if we have the good fortune to live a long life, we will come to know and accept that *flesh falls within sight of us* as we age. Yet there are times when the expected order of life is subverted, and, while in full flower, we are cut down by the *sour scythe* of an adverse or tragic fate and *the blear share* does its work, turning our spent bodies back into the earth as with a ploughshare. So how are we to come to terms with tragedy when it irrupts into our lives? And beyond that - and this is something that Hopkins progressively develops throughout the poem - how are we to come to know that we are not simply *rooted in earth*, but are embodiments of a spiritual principle that transcends our individual existences? Hopkins was neither the first nor the last to address such testing realities as [Heather Oldham has shown](#) in her own study of the poem. Having early set the central theme, he now returns to the story of the ship and its passengers:

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

The conditions were unfavourable when the *Deutschland* set sail. Hopkins moulds the language in his poem to recreate the tumult and the terror of the storm into which the ship was steaming: *And the sea flint-flake, black-backed in the regular blow*. The

alliterative clash of consonants in this line reproduces the tempestuousness of a sea that slapped and buffeted the ship as she plied through the *wild waters*. And the highly assonant pitch of the *wiry and white-fiery* air is fully charged with the flashing presence of lightning itself. Hopkins follows on immediately with a visual evocation of the thickly patterned waves of windswept flakes that enveloped the scene in *whirlwind-swivelled snow*. His extraordinary use of language, of word, sound and image in these lines reflect the profound transformation that had taken place in the schoolboy poet by over a decade of deep introspection combined with a mystic immersion in the essences of the phenomenal world - what he had come to refer to as the *inscape* of things. This unique and highly individuated use of language that found its first expression in *The Wreck of the Deutschland* was to become characteristic of Hopkins' poetic offerings thereafter.

The details implied in Hopkins' narrative confirm how closely he followed the reports that appeared daily in *The Times* newspaper throughout the week after the actual shipwreck. On December 10th 1875, *The Times* published the captain's account of what had happened. A little before 5 am on Monday 6th December, the captain realised that the ship had been blown off course during the night. His crew monitored the water depth and it became obvious that they had been carried into shallow waters. He immediately cut the engines and the ship drifted for "a minute or two." Members of the crew then sighted large breakers near the ship and realised they were approaching a shallow sand bank. The captain ordered the steamer "to go at full speed astern", but within seconds of putting the engines under full power, the propeller screw broke off "and the vessel was left at the mercy of the wind and the waves." A few minutes later, she had struck the sand-bar:

*And she beat the bank down with the bows and the ride of her keel:
The breakers rolled on her with ruinous shock
And compass and canvass, the whorl and the wheel
Idle forever to waft her or wind her with, these she endured.*

Over the next 12 hours, attempts were made to relay their circumstances to passing ships by both flares and signals, but none responded due to the poor visibility and the extremely dangerous conditions. The crew dumped all of the cargo into the sea in an attempt to lighten the ship and raised the sails hoping to lift her off the sand bank, but to no avail. In the early hours of the next morning the ship began taking on water. All passengers were ordered on deck as many of the cabins filled with water with the rising tide. A witness described the scene in the following terms: "All came up. Most of the people got up the rigging, but fell off, chiefly from cold and exposure, and some of the bodies were carried through the broken glass of the skylights into the cabin."

More details gradually came to light. On December 11th, *The Times* reported: "The shrieks and sobbing of women and children are described by the survivors as agonising. One brave sailor, who was safe in the rigging, went down to try and save a child or woman who was drowning on deck. He was secured by a rope to the rigging, but a wave dashed him against the bulwarks, and when daylight dawned his headless body, detained by the rope, was swaying to and fro with the waves." These accounts of human courage and sacrifice in the face of overwhelming danger moved Hopkins deeply. He envisioned the events of that night in the following terms:

One stirred from the rigging to save
 The wild woman-kind below,
 With a rope's end round the man, handy and brave -
 He was pitched to his death at a blow,
 For all his dreadnought breast and braids of thew:
 They could tell him for hours, dandled the to and fro
 Through the cobbled foam-fleece

This is as close as Hopkins gets to formal meter anywhere in the poem. Every word is pitched at high tension as Hopkins calls upon his fluid repertoire of language. He fully honours the completeness of the brave seaman's sacrifice made while at the peak of his manly powers. For Hopkins, the sailor was a quintessential embodiment of courage and strength, possessed of a *dreadnought breast* - a fearless heart - and *braids of thew* - a powerful body. The term *thew* is an old English term for muscle and sinew, so Hopkins here depicts the sailor as a man of rippling muscularity who could easily have rode out the storm by simply holding his place on the rigging. Instead he chose to use his physical strength for the ultimate sacrifice, and thereby lived the "no greater love" referred to in St. John 15:13.

Through his highly-charged images, Hopkins dramatically reproduces the unspeakable terror of that night, but with a sharp turning that manifests in the final two lines of the next stanza where he invokes the salvific presence of *the tall nun*:

They fought with God's cold -
 And they could not and fell to the deck
 (Crushed them) or water (and drowned them) or rolled
 With the sea-romp over the wreck.
 Night roared, with the heart-break hearing a heart-broke rabble,
 The woman's wailing, the crying of child without check -
 Till a lioness arose breasting the babble,
 A prophetess towered in the tumult, a virginal tongue told.

The towering *prophetess* was one of the five Franciscan nuns who drowned when the *Deutschland* was overtaken by the savage wind and the wild water. Her entry into the narrative occurs precisely at the mid-point of *The Wreck of the Deutschland* and returns our attention to the sub-title given by Hopkins to the poem: "To the happy memory of five Franciscan Nuns exiles by the Falk Laws drowned between midnight and morning of Dec. 7th. 1875."

The Lioness

Hopkins was a master of form. It was probably not coincidental that he chose this pivotal mid-poem moment to introduce the leonine figure whose call *rode over the storm's brawling*. But before he reveals what her *virginal tongue told*, he side-steps the narrative and in the next stanza, interposes a deeply personal reflection on the emotional surge he experienced while writing the poem in the safety of St. Bueno's College in Wales:

Ah, touched in your bower of bone
 Are you! turned for an exquisite smart,
 Have you! make words break from me here all alone,
 Do you! - mother of being in me, heart.
 O unteachably after evil, but uttering truth,
 Why, tears! is it? tears; such a melting, a madrigal start!

Although a man of incisive intellect, Hopkins here reveals the true centre out of which he lived, the out-reaching heart beating within its *bower of bone*, the heart that reached out far enough to hear *the call of the tall nun* and to feel the cold despair of those whose lives were torn asunder by the storm's fury, the heart that brought forth a torrent of tears as salty as the sea into which so many had been swept away that terrible night. This disclosure of his own emotional turmoil signals that Hopkins is about to embark on the deeper story held in the wreck of the Deutschland, which he then proceeds to do.

The nuns had not boarded the ship of their own free will. They had been expelled from Germany as a result of the intensely anti-Catholic Falk Laws enacted under Bismarck in 1873. They were crossing the Atlantic to join a community of Franciscan nuns in Missouri. Deutschland had become for them *double a desperate name*. Firstly, as the name of the ship on which their collective fates had been sealed; and secondly, as the Deutschland from which Martin Luther, *beast of the waste wood* had proclaimed his reformist doctrine that would, three and a half centuries later, give rise to the legislation that resulted in the nuns being both *loathed for a love men knew in them* and *banned by the land of their birth*. Hopkins put aside any semblance of political correctness in his description of Luther. He was fully aware that in 1872, one year before the Falk Laws were enacted, Bismarck had also implemented the *Jesuits' Law* that prohibited outright the establishment of the Society of Jesus - the Order of Jesuits to which Hopkins had committed his life - from the German Reich. Hopkins draws deeply from his knowledge of history to give voice to the change that had overtaken Germany:

*O Deutschland, double a desperate name!
O world wide of its good!
But Gertrude, lily, and Luther, are two of a town,
Christ's lily and beast of the waste wood:
From life's dawn it is drawn down,
Abel is Cain's brother and breasts they have sucked the same.*

Hopkins here [invokes a poetic resonance](#) between *the tall nun* and St. Gertrude the Great, the 13th century German Benedictine nun, mystic and teacher who is said to have been born in Eisleben, which was also the birth-place of Martin Luther. St. Gertrude came to be known as "the lily of the Sacred Heart", hence *Christ's lily*. Mutability and reversal are built into life itself *from life's dawn*. And the same source can give rise to both sublimity and treachery: *Abel is Cain's brother and breasts they have sucked the same*. Hopkins was no stranger to the divisions within Christianity that had occurred in his own country under the aegis of both Henry VIII and his daughter Elizabeth I during the 16th century. Yet behind such turnings and reversals, Hopkins ever held out hope for transformation and healing. This hope was to be given full voice in the final stanza of the poem, where Hopkins calls for a reawakening of the living Christ in the divided hearts of his own countrymen.

Hopkins honours the patron of the Order to which the nuns belonged, the stigmatist St. Francis of Assisi who carried the five wounds of the crucified Christ in his own body:

*Joy fall to thee Father Francis,
Drawn to the Life that died;*

*With the gnarls of the nails in thee, niche of the lance, his
Lovescape crucified
And seal of his seraph-arrival!*

Hopkins was fascinated by the irruptions of the miraculous that so often occurred in the lives of many Catholic saints. Such events were for him both an echo and an affirmation of the miraculous works manifested by Jesus when he walked the earth. By welcoming such realities he drew ever more distant from the austere and rational spirituality of his Anglican confreres. For Hopkins, Saint Francis embodied in an incontrovertible way the truth of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and the promise of a life of the spirit both within and beyond human embodiment. He continues:

*. . . and these thy daughters
And five-lived and leaved favour and pride;
Are sisterly sealed in wild waters,
To bathe in his fall-gold mercies, to breathe in his all-fire glances.*

Having earlier noted the inevitable sweeping of the *sour scythe* through every life, Hopkins here begins to reveal more openly his eschatology, his view of what lies beyond death. These five nuns whose bodies were *sisterly sealed in wild waters* were now in the luminous enveloping presence of their master's *fall-gold mercies*, no longer sustained by air but by the *all-fire glances* by which all things are animated and renewed.

The Call of the Tall Nun

Hopkins paid close attention to the accounts published in *The Times* in the days after the foundering of the ship. The following report appeared in the edition of December 11th: "Women and children and men were one by one swept away from their shelters on the deck. Five German nuns, whose bodies are now in the dead-house here, clasped hands and were drowned together, the chief sister, a gaunt woman 6 ft. high, calling out loudly and often 'O Christ, come quickly!'"

As it happened, the bodies of only four of the nuns were recovered, the fifth having been washed away. More details were published two days later, just before they were to be buried: "The deceased appeared to be between the ages of 30 and 40, and their faces wore an expression of calmness and resignation. . . . One, noted for her extreme tallness, is the lady who, at midnight on Monday, by standing on a table in the saloon, was able to thrust her body through the skylight, and kept exclaiming in a voice heard by those in the rigging above the roar of the storm, 'My God, my God, make haste, make haste.'"

Hopkins offers his own telling of that event in stanza 19:

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

The nature of the actual *call of the tall nun* is not revealed for a further five stanzas when, for the second time, Hopkins diverges from the narrative and recalls his own comfort in the safety of St. Bueno's *on a pastoral forehead of Wales* at the time of the storm:

*. . . I was under a roof here, I was at rest,
And they the prey of the gales;
She to the black-about air, to the breaker, the thickly
Falling flakes, to the throng that catches and quails
Was calling 'O Christ, Christ, come quickly':
The cross to her she calls Christ to her, christens her wild-worst Best.*

When, during the early hours of Tuesday December 7th, the captain realised that the *Deutschland* was taking on water with the rising tide, he ordered all passengers on deck. Those who had the strength and the capacity took to the ship's rigging. To have even considered climbing the ropes was simply out of the question for the nuns. They were in the midst of total chaos. As the situation became increasingly desperate, one man hung himself behind the wheelhouse and another took a knife to his wrists hoping for a more rapid departure. The five nuns went below where they joined hands in prayer while others cried, called and wept. At a certain point, the tall nun made the salvific call that was heard by many of those struggling with the wind and the water: *O Christ, Christ, come quickly*. Was she calling for a miraculous arrival of help, or was she calling for the transcendental presence of the *martyr-master* to carry the *harvest* of souls to their eternal home?

In the next stanza, Hopkins recalls the calming of a tempest by Jesus when he was crossing over the sea of Galilee with his apostles:

*They were else-minded then, altogether, the men
Woke thee with a we are perishing in the weather of Gennesareth.*

Like the stricken apostles on the fishing boat caught in a storm while sailing across the Sea of Galilee, the nun sought to awaken the presence of her master, imploring him to *come quickly*. Regardless of the outcome, he would *cure the extremity where he had cast her*, would bring her and her companions to an unknown but expectant fulfilment of their calling, of their vocation as women whose lives - and deaths - were dedicated to his service. And at this point in the poem, Hopkins grapples with the deeper meaning of an otherwise senseless and tragic situation, a situation that tested his faith in a transcendental and providential power in the face of an apparently meaningless tragedy, yet one of countless similar tragic events indelibly seared into human memory throughout the generations.

Is the Shipwreck Then a Harvest?

The nun invoked the presence of her master in that moment of *extremity*. For Hopkins, *the tall nun* voiced a prophetic call that *rode over the storm's brawling* to proclaim her faith in a destiny that lay beyond the crashing of waves, the shattering of wood and glass and the harrowing cries of anguish. The nun was not calling for personal salvation or release, but was performing a sacramental act equivalent to a christening, a salt-water baptism, an awakening that would transform the *wild-worst*

reality imaginable into a call for collective redemption. Hopkins had in an earlier stanza revealed his own view of that night of terror as part of a bigger story:

*... but thou art above, thou Orion of light;
Thy unchallenging poising palms were weighing the worth,
Thou martyr-master; in thy sight
Storm flakes were scroll-leaved flowers, lily-showers - sweet heaven was astrew in them.*

For Hopkins, the tall nun was a *heart right* who knew the *who and the why*. She had become a divine mediator for the *comfort* of all on the ship in their time of unspeakable terror. Rather than praying in quiet resignation with her companions as the waters steadily rose, she pulled herself to her full height and sent out a call not only to her master but to all who would hear and to all who needed to hear. Hopkins reflects:

*Heart, go and bleed at a bitterer vein for the
Comfortless unconfessed of them.*
Then, abruptly reconsidering and revising his thought, he haltingly continues:
*No, not uncomfited: lovely-felicitous Providence
Finger of a tender of; O of a feathery delicacy, the breast of the
Maiden could obey so, be a bell to, ring of it, and
Startle the poor sheep back! Is the shipwreck then a harvest, does tempest carry the grain for thee?*

Hopkins envisions the nun's presence on the doomed ship as a gift of Providence that, in the moment of greatest panic and confusion, leapt forth from *the breast of the maiden* into the chaos of the night, ringing as clearly as the sounding of *a bell* that would *startle the poor sheep back*, that would awaken in them dormant memories of life beyond death, of a place beyond tragedy where souls are *harvested*, gathered and returned to the source through which they were created and to which every created thing will return. Hopkins continues:

*I admire thee, master of the tides,
Of the Yore-flood, of the year's fall;*

Hopkins here revisits the intensity of commitment with which he began the poem, where *the giver of breath and bread* is lauded as *sway of the sea*, as *master of the tides*, as the power that acts in and through and beyond this world. This power sustains life, but as *Lord of living and dead*, is also Lord of the *Yore-flood*, of the great flood which was ridden out by Noah and his family, the power that both creates and destroys and restores again through phoenix-like renewal. And this is the same power that more gently manifests in the turning of the earth's seasons, in the *year's fall* that renders the *airy cages* that *quenched in leaves the leaping sun* barren, yet is poised in anticipation of the exuberant flush and flourish of new growth at the turning of spring.

All this *splendour and wonder* is accomplished not by a random cascade of chance happenings, but by the ineffable and inscrutable will of the *past all grasp God*, the power and the love *throned behind death with a sovereignty that heeds but hides, bodes but abides*, the mysterious and hidden presence, the *inscape* that abides in all things. And that presence is *worded* through the incarnation of *the double-natured name*, of the *mid-numbered he of the thunder-throne*, of his master, Jesus.

The penultimate stanza of the poem must rank as one of the most beautifully wrought prayers ever voiced in the English language:

*Now burn, new born to the world,
Double-natured name,
The heaven-flung, heart-fleshed, maiden-furled
Miracle-in-Mary-of-flame,
Mid-numbered He in three of the thunder-throne!
Not a dooms-day dazzle in his coming nor dark as he came;
Kind, but royally reclaiming his own;
A released shower, let flash to the shire, not a lightning of fire hard-hurled.*

This paean to his master is in part a response to the paganism, the nature-worship, and the self-glorification proclaimed by such contemporary poets as Algernon Charles Swinburne and Walt Whitman at the time. Hopkins uses all the linguistic and imaginal power available to him to reveal the absolute uniqueness of the one to whom he had dedicated his entire will and his entire life, the master who offered unconditionally a *mercy that outrides the all of water*, and who knew intimately what it was to be cut down in the midst of abundant life. His nature was not that of the Greek and Roman deities, whose wrath would irrupt into the world of men as *a lightning of fire hard-hurled*. He was rather the *passion-plunged giant risen* who showed in his own person the impermanence of both life and death.

In the final impassioned stanza, Hopkins calls upon *the tall nun* who *drowned . . . among our shoals* to *remember us in the roads, the heaven-haven of the Reward*, and puts out his own call for a reawakening of the faith and the trust of a people broken by sectarian divisions and seduced by a modernist hubris and positivism that had been [identified nearly a century earlier](#) by his fellow-countryman William Blake. Hopkins implores:

*Let him easter in us, be a dayspring to the dimness of us, be a crimson-cresseted east,
More brightening her, rare-dear Britain, as his reign rolls.*

In his own way, Hopkins here echoes *the call of the tall nun* and himself calls out, *O Christ, Christ, come quickly*.

Concluding Thoughts

We are all on the *Deutschland*, though not locked on *a smother of sand*, but rather in the process of being slowly smothered by the exhalations of a civilisation in deep decay and abandonment where military adventurism, environmental degradation and ecosystem collapse, economic opportunism, and familial, urban and ethnic violence begin to reach epic proportions.

In this rare and timeless poem, Hopkins calls upon us to find our centre in prayer and in action wherever possible, to actively reflect upon and penetrate to the deeper dimensions of life and death, to seek refuge in the beneficent and transcendental reality of which the world is a stormy shadow, and to become embodiments of the love that has given form to all things visible and invisible.

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