On Hopkins’
“The Wreck of the Deutschland”

—for Eleanor Cook

So much thoughtful and brilliant commentary about Hopkins’ great poem has been published that nothing much might be hoped for in the way of further enlightenment. My comments are accordingly a set of localized observations on a well-known and well-annotated poem about which, for all that, I hope to provide some innovative observations; and I suspect that at least one point I mean to raise will be met with anything from resistance to outrage. My intention, however, is not to be shocking but to seek clarification, even in the swampy realm of conjecture about the possibility that the text of the poem as we have come to know it is, quite simply, faulty and imperfect.

The poem is divided into two parts, and while the stanzas of both parts appear identical, they are not. In Part One, the first line of each stanza is a dimeter line, while in Part Two that first line becomes a trimeter. The rest of the lines in both parts are clearly meant to be identical in length as far as sprung rhythm, with its lavish admission of unaccented syllables, will allow; and the rhyme scheme of the elaborate stanza—ababcba—remains consistent throughout.

A great part of the power and impetuosity of the poem is created by bold enjambments (“Thou mastering me / God!”), which serve not only to confer emphasis when desired but also to lend the whole poem a kind of headlong breathlessness that belongs to the twin dramas that lie at the poem’s core. The enjambments affect not only the rapidity of movement

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–89) is technically a nineteenth-century poet. However, his poems were first assembled and edited with notes by Robert Bridges in 1918; a second edition, with an Appendix of Additional Poems and a critical introduction by Charles Williams, was published in 1930. Accordingly, Hopkins’ true role and influence as a poet lies firmly in the twentieth century.
but the very sound of the lines, including the rashness and daring of some of the poet’s rhymes. Hopkins himself called this device “rove over,” and his friend and first editor, Poet Laureate Robert Bridges, explains, “This expression is used here to denote the running on of the sense and sound at the end of a verse into the beginning of the next.”¹ For example, in the fourteenth stanza the word “leeward” (line 1) is made to rhyme with “drew her” (line 3), the final d sound required for a genuine rhyme borrowed from the first letter of the word Dead, which begins the fourth line. Lest we think this an idle and incidental trick, the same kind of borrowing occurs in the thirty-first stanza, where “unconfessed of them” (line 4) is rhymed with “breast of the” (line 6), the requisite m sound appropriated from the word Maiden, which begins the seventh line.

This extraordinary, libertarian way with rhyming might seem artificial if employed for less serious reasons than obtain in this poem. It requires, at the very least, that the reader’s (or the reciter’s) ear remain attentively alert. The question of whether these meticulous formalities can truly be detected in an oral presentation is not easily answerable. But surely, there are many kinds of highly charged poetry, some of them nearly impenetrable, that do not yield themselves to full apprehension until after much scrutiny and many readings. (The compositors of the First Quarto of King Lear were apparently unable to distinguish Shakespeare’s prose from his verse.)

As to the twin dramas, I take it that the two parts of the poem are related to each other, not with the first as prologue or introduction to the second but because both are about conversion: Part One is about the personal conversion of Hopkins himself, and Part Two about the prayed-for, hoped-for conversion of England to its early and ancestral faith. Moreover, I would claim (being led to this conclusion by Louis Martz, though he makes no such claim himself) that in Part Two Hopkins is engaged in that aspect of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises known as composition of place, through which he tries his best to imagine and to reconstruct in the most careful possible detail the actual scene of the catastrophe of the Deutschland, the suffering of the great crowd of passengers and crew, and of the martyr-nuns as particular emblems of salvation.

Richly enmeshed with both familiar and unfamiliar Christian paradoxes, the poem also keeps in play the four elements (air, earth, fire, and water) and is filled with allusions to the conundrum of unmerited suffering, as biblically exemplified by Job. God is seen in the very first stanza as both the maker and unmaker of man, and Christ as both Redeemer and as ultimate Judge. Moreover, the wind that becomes the source and power of the storm has behind it the ambiguous words of John 3:8: “The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh or whither it goeth. So is everyone that is born of the Spirit.” The wind, which is spirit, the breath of God, was breathed into Adam, conferring life; but it is no less the whirlwind out of which God speaks to Job, the sign of the destructive powers later to be described in Revelation. In the first stanza God is called “Lord of living and dead,” and these two constituencies, one vastly larger than the other, are both subject to a Judgment of which the initial version was the Fall, with its penalty of the calamities of this life, and of which the final version is yet to come.

Hopkins’ conversion from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism was in certain ways a painful experience, both for him and for John Henry Newman, whose counsel he had sought and who, in due course, received him into the Roman Church. They were both concerned, among many necessary considerations, about the great pain this conversion was infallibly destined to cause Hopkins’ parents, both of them devout Anglicans. The bliss that might be expected of conversion—the embracing of a newfound clarity, certainty, sanctity, and hope—cannot but be tainted to some degree if it must come at the price of the suffering of others. Paddy Kitchen, one of Hopkins’ biographers, writes that about October 8, 1866, “Hopkins returned to Oxford and wrote to his parents about his decision. On 15 October he reported to Newman that their replies had been so ‘terrible’ he could not read them through more than once. They begged him to wait until after he had taken his degree . . . In answer to a plea by Manley Hopkins [the poet’s father] to consider the family estrangement his conversion would cause, he replied that he had had months to think over everything.” Not the least part of his parents’ pain was caused by their being among the last to learn of his decision. His father wrote, “All we ask of you is for your own sake to take so momentous a step with caution & hesitation; have we not a right to do this? Might not our love & sorrow entitle us to ask it? & you answer
by saying that as we might be Romans if we pleased the estrangement is not of your doing. O Gerard my darling boy are you indeed gone from me?”

Not only was this something that greatly distressed young Hopkins in his spiritual quest, but he acknowledged it as part of the paradox of any such conversion. When (st. 2) he declares “I did say yes / O at lightning and lashed rod,” he is speaking of the Passion of Christ, the torment of the flagellation, the lightning of the storm that accompanies the earthquake at the moment of Christ’s death on the cross (Matt. 27), and his saying yes is both and simultaneously a confession of faith and a willingness to accept the benefits derived vicariously from the suffering and death of another. Conversion for Hopkins means fully to apprehend the terrible price of his own salvation, which is likened to the terrors of Jonah, who called, in the words of Psalm 130, “Out of the depths I have cried unto thee, O Lord.” There may also be an allusion, more deeply hidden, to the more familiar Psalm 23, “Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me”: the rod for correction, the staff for guidance, both for better care of the flock, though one gives pain while the other does not. The pain that his conversion gave the parents he deeply loved was inextricable from Hopkins’ sense of the emotional paradoxes in which his faith was fixed. It may be that the biblical passage that most explicitly concerns the pain and breach of family feeling that may be engendered by conversion is Luke 14:25–26. “And there went a great multitude with him: and he turned, and said unto them, If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.”

From the Jonah of the second stanza Hopkins moves smoothly to the Noah of the third, with its echoes of Psalm 139, which describes an action that runs through the entire poem: of being cast down only to be raised up again, as Noah was both tested and saved by the Deluge. Spell in this stanza rhymes with tell, and both words, but especially the second, are central to the poem. Tell means, of course, recount; but it also means to acknowledge, confess (as in a confession of faith), and to know, identify, and locate—“They could tell him for hours” (st. 16); “a virginal tongue told” (st. 17). Hopkins’ heart is “carrier-witted,” equipped by instinct to come “home,” like Noah’s dove. But Hopkins is not content to think of conversion as simply instinctual, though it is at least partly that. For him
faith is both instinctive impulsion and rational assent, and in the very last stanza of Part One he compares, without discredit to either, the sudden “as once at a crash” conversion of St. Paul and the “lingering-out sweet skill” of religious controversy and philosophic calm that characterized the conversion of St. Augustine. In a paper written for Walter Pater at Oxford, Hopkins, in the words of Paddy Kitchen, declared “that although those without leisure or education to reason out their beliefs must rely on the impulse of faith, it is imperative that everyone else’s beliefs are grounded ‘on the same kind of truths’ as those which Plato and Aristotle explored.”

Hopkins’ ability to extrapolate Christ from the starry heavens in the fifth stanza (“I kiss my hand / To the stars, lovely assunder / Starlight, wafting him out of it”) is certainly meant to recall Psalm 19: “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night showeth knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard.” This audible and visible presence of God in the universe is nevertheless contrasted in the very same stanza with God’s seeming absence at certain times, especially in times of great stress (Psalm 22, which is the cry from the cross). This is “His mystery,” the “glory in thunder,” and the mystery of his purpose when he seems to be absent. “Verily thou art a God that hidest thyself, O God of Israel, the Savior” (Isa. 45:15).

The sixth, seventh, and eighth stanzas are connected in thought, logic, and syntax. The “it” in the penultimate line of the sixth stanza refers back to “His mystery” and declares that this mystery, which is nothing less than the providential purpose of God, is expressed in the history of mankind, beginning with the Creation, and obscurely understood by the early prophets. But its true meaning began to be made manifest with the birth of Christ and shall only eventually become clear and intelligible at the end of time, with the Apocalypse. The apocalyptic ending and clarification are already symbolically revealed in the paradoxical joys and sorrows of the life and death of Christ, the beginning and the end, the Alpha and Omega of the Word that spells the Truth. So that, in stanza 8, when the poet says “We lash with the best or

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worst / Word last!” that word is, in both cases, Christ! used either as prayer and blessing or, blasphemously, as execration. So powerful and all-embracing is that Word that it can express the whole meaning of the history of mankind and the purpose of God, as the whole poem is designed to declare. But in the twenty-second stanza and the twenty-ninth, as well as in the symbolic incapacity to articulate that is dramatized in stanza 28, the Word, as in John’s Gospel, becomes the theological center of the poet’s concerns. In his biography of Hopkins, John Pick quotes from an unpublished manuscript of the poet’s to this effect: “God’s utterance of himself in himself is God the Word, outside himself it is the world. This world then is word, expression, news, of God. Therefore its end, its purpose, its purport, its meaning, is God, and its life or work to name and praise him.”

Stanza 7 begins with the birth of Christ and is filled with Christian paradox, being no simple Christmas pageant in a manger with docile beasts, humble kings, and friendly shepherds. All the anguish, the pain, and the suffering that were to come not only were implicit in the birth but, by traditional belief, were also known to the Virgin at the very moment of the Annunciation. This impossible mixture of gladness and misery, horror and grace, is a necessary fusion of Christian elements. And it has a meaning, which is the meaning of the mystery. This is, that neither pain nor bliss is allotted to us by heaven in direct response and accordance to our merits but instead is meant to teach us both the joy of Christ’s birth and the anguish of his Passion. Christian doctrine (and this poem is filled with its echoes) is full of paradoxes (“Warm-laid grave of a womb-life grey,” st. 7; “Thou art lightning and love, I found it, a winter and warm; / Father and fondler of heart thou hast wrung: / Hast thy dark descending and most art merciful then,” st. 9).

But while paradoxes are often entertained merely as intellectual puzzles—If God is omnipotent, can he create a stone so heavy that he can’t lift it?—Hopkins is more earnestly concerned with those paradoxes that are chiefly emotional in character, and of these there are two in particular that concern him, and they are related. The first is the paradox of the Fortunate Fall, which, concerned with a strangely remote event, can seem like

an intellectual puzzle. But the second, and more pressing one from the poet’s point of view, is the cost in suffering and anguish of others—first of all on the part of the Sacrificial Christ, but then on the part of his own parents—which must serve as the ground for his bliss and his salvation. These emotional paradoxes are a part of what constitutes the Christian “mystery,” and they are spoken of in precisely these terms when, in *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot has Thomas Becket, nearing the hour of his expected assassination, preach a Christmas service that begins,

Dear children of God, my sermon this Christmas morning will be a very short one. I wish only that you should meditate in your hearts the deep meaning and mystery of our masses of Christmas Day. For whenever Mass is said, we re-enact the Passion and Death of Our Lord; and on this Christmas Day we do this in celebration of his birth. So that at the same moment we rejoice in his coming for the salvation of men, and offer again to God His Body and Blood in sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world. . . . Beloved, as the World sees, this is to behave in a strange fashion. For who in the World will both mourn and rejoice at once and for the same reason? For either joy will be overborne by mourning, or mourning will be cast out by joy; so it is only in these our Christian mysteries that we can rejoice and mourn at once for the same reason.

Within the body of Hopkins’ poem this paradox of feeling as emblematic of the Christian “mystery” is represented in stanza 20 by the fact that the town of Eisleben (frozen life) was both the birthplace of the

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4. In his *Life of St. Francis of Assisi* (1248), Thomas of Celano, recounting the crucial “vision of the Man in the Likeness of a Crucified Seraph,” vouchsafed to the saint “while he was living at the hermitage which was called Alverna,” describes this very mixture of commingling of emotions in a language that at certain moments seems to echo Luke’s account of the Annunciation: “When the blessed servant of the Most High [i.e., Francis] saw these things, he was filled with the greatest wonder, but he could not understand what this vision should mean. Still, he was filled with happiness and he rejoiced very greatly because of the kind and gracious look with which he saw himself regarded by the seraph, whose beauty was beyond estimation; but the fact that the seraph was fixed to a cross and the sharpness of his suffering filled Francis with fear. And so he arose, if I may so speak, sorrowful and joyful, and joy and grief were in him alternately. Solicitously he thought what this vision could mean,” and presently the marks of the stigmata appeared on his body.
detested Luther, Catholicism's foe, and the site of the convent where St. Gertrude dwelt in the thirteenth century, while, as the poem goes on to observe, “Abel is Cain's brother and the breasts they have sucked the same.”

What this sequence of three stanzas (6–8) asserts is the pivotal importance of the paradox/mystery involved in the anguish and bliss of Christian doctrine as it manifests itself in personal life, as irrefutably as the fresh burst of juice from fruit pierced by the teeth and released into the savoring mouth. It is a sensation that is undeniable: simply and unequivocally there. That biting into the fruit should remind us that Christ is variously symbolized as a grape-cluster and as the fruit tasted by Adam and restored to the Tree of Knowledge (the cross) by Christ. He is present in the wine and wafer of the Eucharist, and therefore the taste that can “flush the man, the being with it . . . Brim, in a flash, full” (st. 8) is the savor of divinity. And of suffering, as expressed in Hopkins’ “Barnfloor and Winepress”:

Terrible fruit was on the tree
In the acre of Gethsemane;
For us by Calvary's distress
The wine was rackèd from the press;
Now in our altar-vessels stored
Is the sweet vintage of our Lord.

The final stanza of Part One is a prayer in behalf of everyone, but as single individuals. It is that each and every one should come to acknowledge the power and love of God, whether through anguish (as being wrought upon at a forge, coerced, bent to the Supreme Will) or through gentleness and love (as Spring steals imperceptibly through in its slow progress): and these two ways to God are seen as analogues not merely to the different conversions of Paul and Augustine but to the paradoxically opposed yet identical means of violence and bliss, suffering and joy that form the basis of Christian “mystery.”

Part Two is both a detailed account of the maritime disaster and a meticulous application of those mysteries that find glory in suffering and life in death. It opens with Death speaking, as in those medieval poems about the Dance of Death. Here Death enumerates the modes by which
he makes himself known to mankind: sword, flange, rail, flame, fang, and flood. These are all modes for the execution of the martyrs. Despite their numbers and their fame, and the very fact of death surrounding us at every side, we contrive somehow to forget it and to imagine that we are deathless. This willful ignorance is both perverse and humanly necessary. To imagine oneself immortal is certainly folly, and spiritually impious; to dwell, however, undeviatingly upon the hour of our death is to repudiate and undervalue life itself and thereby to commit an equal and alternative impiety. This dilemma is not unrelated to the kinds of paradox and mystery that have been adumbrated in Part One. And so Hopkins takes passing note of the irony (st. 14) that, instead of “a reef or a rock,” the ship was destroyed by a sandbank (“I am soft sift / In an hourglass,” st. 4), a yielding and pliant obstacle that ought not to have proven fatal.

If Part One was private and inward, Part Two is public and outward, and with stanza 12 a recital of historical events begins. Part One is concerned with the microcosm of the individual soul; Part Two with an enlargement of that purview to include “two hundred souls in the round,” the crew and passengers of the Deutschland. But before the poem concludes, these twin perspectives give way before a vision of what is, for Hopkins, the macrocosm, the fate and future of mankind and the restoration to England of its ancestral faith. Stanza 12 also begins the composition of place, the devotional attempt to realize imaginatively in all its particularity, the time, place, and conditions that obtained on the night and morning of December 7, 1875, when the disaster occurred.

I want to turn directly to a crucial part of the scene that Hopkins reimagines, stanza 16, for it is here that I suspect a flaw. But before presenting my conjecture, a word is required about the provenance of the poem. The original holograph has been lost, presumably forever. But before it was lost, Robert Bridges, Hopkins’ editor, made a copy. Moreover, Bridges reports that though Hopkins himself “kept no copy,” he “made both corrections of copy and emendations of the poems which had been copied . . . by me.” In addition to this, “Another transcript, now at St. Aloysius’ College, Glasgow, was made by the Rev. F. Bacon” from the holograph, but without any of the emendations Hopkins adopted in Bridges’ copy. The two versions were then collated, providing what

Bridges calls “one true reading.” So I must point out immediately that any flaw I seem to find must have survived the careful copying of Bridges as later overseen and corrected by Hopkins himself, and checked against an alternate copy. I am fully aware of the audacity of my proposal, but I will advance it nevertheless.

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. What could he do
With the burl of the fountains of air, buck and the flood of the wave?

What for years of studying and teaching this poem has puzzled, irked, and provoked me is the end of the sixth line, “dandled the to and fro,” as if there were such a thing as an unhyphenated “to-and-fro.” Dandle is a transitive verb, meaning “to lift up and down on one’s knee; to fondle; to pamper” (OED). In any case, it requires an object, and the only one the poem seems to supply is “to and fro.” My solution to this problem is derived from the single source that Hopkins used as the basis of his spiritual exercise and from which he adopted the very words to and fro: the account of the event that appeared in the London Times on December 11, 1875. There it was reported that the captain of the Deutschland “(British built, and working for the North German Lloyd’s Company on the Bremen—New York route) lost his bearings and the ship went aground on the shifting sands of the Kentish Knock.” The Times proceeds to give details, some so grotesque Hopkins must have found them repellent and omitted them from his account.

At 2 A.M., Captain Brickenstein, knowing that with the rising tide the ship would be waterlogged, ordered all the passengers to come on deck . . . Most of them obeyed the summons at once; others lingered below till it was too late; some of them, ill, weak, despairing of life even on
deck, resolved to stay in their cabins and meet death without any further struggle to evade it. After 3 a.m. on Tuesday morning a scene of horror was witnessed. Some passengers clustered for safety within or upon the wheelhouse, and on the top of other slight structures on deck. Most of the crew and many of the emigrants went into the rigging, where they were safe enough as long as they could maintain their hold. But the intense cold and long exposure told a tale. The purser of the ship, though a strong man, relaxed his grip, and fell into the sea. 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 [Harwick] clasped hands and were drowned together, the chief sister, a gaunt woman 6 ft. high, calling out loudly and often ‘O Christ, come quickly!’ till the end came. The shrieks and sobbing of women and children are described by survivors as agonising. One brave sailor, who was safe in the rigging, went down to try to save a child or woman who was drowning on the 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 seen swaying to and fro in the waves. In the dreadful excitement of those hours one man hung himself behind the wheelhouse, another hacked at his wrists with a knife, hoping to die a comparatively painless death by bleeding.

What I propose is that “dandled the to and fro” ought to be read “dandled there to and fro.” This is, of course, to claim that (1) Bridges mis-copied the text, that (2) when Hopkins made his corrections and emendations he failed to notice the error, and that (3) when the Rev. Geoffrey Bliss, S. J., collated the emended Bridges text with the one made by the Rev. F. Bacon the fault once again passed unnoticed, producing what Bridges calls the “one true copy.” All this seems highly unlikely, of course. On the other hand, the text as it stands is nonsense, and the Times account of the man’s body, “swaying to and fro in the waves,” is consistent with my proposal. The only reason I have raised this small point is that no commentator I have seen has ventured to take any notice of the matter or remark on the line.

Though composition of place demands focused concentration, it does not forbid application of the facts observed to the person of the meditator
himself. The scene of the disaster, beginning with stanza 12, continues unflinchingly through the stanza I have just quoted (16) and continues beyond (17) until, abruptly, the poet challenges his curious and complex feelings about what he is contemplating. The tone of stanza 18 I take to be—at least in its opening lines—sardonic and suspicious, as if to say, tauntingly, “So you find yourself touched, do you, by your comfortable and removed contemplation of the suffering of others? Moved enough, are you, to sit down to write poetry, in the face of the protracted misery and death of others?” The tone of suspicion and reproach lingers through the stanza, reappears in stanza 24, and at some level it must have had something to do with the pain Hopkins felt he had caused his parents.

Yet there is another way to read the stanza, not unrelated to the one I have just offered, but without its obvious note of contempt. It is made most explicit in the final line’s question, “What can it be, this glee?” To be sure, the words that immediately follow (“the good you have there of your own?”) seem full, once again, of suspicion and self-accusation. But glee is an unexpected word, not easily applied to someone exempt from danger or engaged in writing a poem, much less to someone contemplating the suffering of others, unless that someone were an unembarrassed sadist. The whole stanza, I think, is a living, immediate experience of the Christian mystery of self-contradictory emotion.

In any case, after the final words of stanza 17 (“a virginal tongue told”) stanza 19, returning to the scene after the interruption of the eighteenth stanza, begins, “Sister, a sister calling.” There will now follow almost five full stanzas before the “tongue” that “told” (told) in stanza 17 actually speaks in stanza 24. And no sooner does she speak (“Christ, come quickly”) than the poet asks, thoughtfully (in the first line of stanza 25), “what did she mean?” He proposes two answers and dismisses them both. The first, the desire for martyrdom, is something, as the poet wryly observes, that the apostles themselves had no appetite for or confidence in (Matt. 14:25–33). The second is a prayer for a quick death and end of life. This second possibility seems to the poet more plausible on the ground that we instinctively think of a future time that is better, since in bad weather we naturally dream of spring; so that, even more plausibly, a devout soul will think of the treasures of heaven (I Cor. 2:9) in moments of travail. But in stanza 27, this answer, too, is rejected. (I must add paren-
thetically that the fourth line of stanza 25, “Breathe, body of lovely death,” has for my ear a distinct echo of Whitman’s “Come lovely and soothing death,” line 135 of “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d.” But the main point is that, having dismissed two conjectural answers to his own question, “What did she mean?” he turns, in stanza 28, to a sort of incoherent, fragmentary, garbled set of attempts at expression that give the effect of something stunning and inexplicable. Naturally enough, this has invited the most varied and reckless suggestions, the best known of them being that the nun who speaks has been granted a vision of Christ himself and that the poet has so thoroughly identified with her that he has joined in her vision, which, as vision, is an experience untranslatable into words.

I should like to propose the virtual opposite. What is the meaning of the prayer, “Christ, come quickly”? My answer is that the prayer is made in response to a promise repeated at least four times in the Book of Revelation (3:11; 22:7, 12, and 20).

Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown.

Behold, I come quickly: blessed is he that keepeth the sayings of the prophecy of this book.

And behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give to every man according as his work shall be.

He which testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus.

The last of these quotations is the penultimate verse of Holy Scripture. But it is not only the end of the Bible; it is the eschatological end of human and divine destiny. And in the end is the beginning: Alpha and Omega, principium et finis, the name and the incarnation of divinity qui fuit, est, et erat.

Thus saith the Lord the King of Israel, and his redeemer the Lord of hosts; I am the first, and I am the last; and beside me there is no God.

(Isaiah 44:6)
John to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace be unto you, and peace, from him which is, and which was, and which is to come.

(Rev. 1:4)

I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, saith the Lord, which is, which was, and which is to come, the Almighty.

(Rev. 1:8)

And he said unto me, It is done. I am Alpha and Omega. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely.

(Rev. 21:6)

There is a related or analogous passage in II Cor. (1:20) that invites notice:

For all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us.

By some, those promises are construed as the Old Testament, while the Amen is the New Testament. But a claim can also be made that the promises are both the prophecies and potentialities which come to fulfillment, neither at the birth of Christ, nor at his death, but at the end of time. (Also, that “yea” recalls Hopkins’ claim, “I did say yes / O at lightning and lashed rod.”) But most apposite, of course, are those verses that begin John’s Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word,” and that Word in John’s Greek is logos: (1) the rational principle that governs and develops the universe, and (2) the divine word or reason incarnate as Jesus Christ.

All this bears upon the unanswered question, “What did she mean?” After having proposed two provisional answers and having dismissed them, Hopkins, in stanza 28, adopts the rhetorical figure of aposiopesis, in which the speaker suddenly halts as if unable or unwilling to proceed. Puttenham offers five reasons for employing the figure: because nothing further needs to be said, to express shame, to express fear, to express a threat, or to express a moderation of anger. He doesn’t mention the reason for Hopkins’ use of it here, which is to express absolute awe. What the nun means by her prayer involves the whole history and destiny of mankind, the supreme will of God, the purpose, beginning, and end of everything as embodied, from the first, and forever, in the Word.
Wording it how but by him that present and past,
Heaven and earth are word of, worded by

(st. 29)

As poet, as priest, as believer, Hopkins’ devotion to the amplitude and plenuity of the Word can, in a happy paradox, leave him nearly speechless. And this is because, as stanza 9 has already declared, what he is trying to articulate is “Beyond saying sweet, past telling of tongue.” And yet, through the veil of mystery, it is known, as is the God he praises, who “heeds but hides, bodes but abides” (st. 32).

The final stanza I take to be a prayer for the reconversion of Britain to the Roman Catholic faith and the return to “English souls” of their true Christ-King. I want to focus attention on the poem’s final line, which commentators have sidled past with easy nonchalance, as though it merited no special notice and were limpidly clear. But, for one thing, in a poem whose stanzas uniformly end with hexameter lines, this one, with its insistent series of nouns, has eight strong beats. Then, too, readers have been genuinely puzzled by the accumulation of possessives and uncertain what to make of them. Here is the line, which refers to Christ.

Our hearts’ charity’s hearth’s fire, our thoughts’ chivalry’s throng’s Lord.

For clarification’s sake, these possessives can be diagrammed as a set of concentric circles enclosed within one another; which is to say that of the first group of four nouns, heart becomes the largest and outermost circle, containing within it, in diminishing order, charity, hearth, and fire. And, for purposes of simplification, it can be claimed that the words are about the fire of the heart (hence the possessive), a warmth expressed in charity to be found at the hospitality of the hearth.

By the same token, the simplification of the second set of nouns speaks of the Lord of thought. And the two contrasted, or juxtaposed, lists of nouns speak, therefore, of two, perhaps different, perhaps twinned, modes of apprehending the Divine: through emotion’s impulse (the heart) and through the rational mind (thought), as Hopkins had observed in the paper he wrote at Oxford for Walter Pater.

But something else is implied as well by the two lists. The second one includes chivalry and throng; and we immediately notice that whereas the
first list is private, interior, and personal, the second is public, social, and communal. (*Chivalry* has Jesuit connections, St. Ignatius Loyola having been a soldier who had converted military valor into inward discipline; *throng*, or crowd, being the large-scale magnification of social conventions and religious devotion implied in *chivalry.*) Hopkins is neither the first nor the last to insist that religious experience must be at once both private and public. For the utterly private experience could fall into the potential error of unauthenticated “vision-feelings” “in the solar plexus” in the words of Auden’s Herod, “induced by undernourishment, angelic images generated by fevers or drugs, dream warnings inspired by the sound of falling water.” And, on the other hand, rote observance and numb conformity to ritual presents the alternate peril of being numbered among the scribes and Pharisees, “whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones” (Matt. 23:27). Hopkins’ prayer in this last stanza is addressed to the chief nun. It is a prayer in behalf of the whole community of England, for their return to the old faith and to God’s service. It is based on the premise that faith is both individual and communal, as, in one of the choruses of “The Rock,” Eliot had also claimed:

What life have you if you have not life together?
There is no life that is not in community,
And no community not lived in praise of God.

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