



## The Poet as Suffering Servant in ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’

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**ABSTRACT:** The Victorian poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins was by nature a scrupulous person in religious matters. Naturally he always feared that his poetic art was in danger of becoming an end in itself. This fear created in him a rigid dichotomy between his nature as a poet and his desire to be a pious ascetic Jesuit priest. Out of an unhealthy tension between these two extremes, Hopkins developed a sense of sin and guilt which accompanied him till the end of his life. Hopkins reached a terrible crisis, ending up in almost a depression towards the end of his life as a consequence of his personal fear and tension. However, to a great extent, he gracefully accepted his sufferings as part of his priestly mission. Hopkins identified himself as the Suffering Servant of God in his poems, particularly in his masterpiece, ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’. He was a priest who is also a suffering servant in his poetry – the way of his priestly sacrifice in personal experience as one finds him in good many of his poems; here he is made aware by bitter experience of the sacrificial nature of the priest not only as victim but also as suffering servant of God.

**KEY WORDS:** Scruples, sin and guilt, Jesuit, Suffering Servant, Flagellation.

### I. INTRODUCTION

The Victorian poet Gerard Manley Hopkins’ character and verse are firmly rooted in the Christian (Ignatian) Spiritual Exercises and his fundamental and lasting experience as a Jesuit priest was one of Christian (Ignatian) consolation. If this is so, one wonders how his poetry could be so tragically replete with intense sufferings and conflicts in the evening of his life. A staunch believer in God who was convinced that he had the divine call, a vocation, to be His minister, and who sang the praises of that God and Master in the major part of his life, is found fighting and quarrelling with his God towards the end of his life. How is it that Hopkins, who was privileged to grow up in a highly healthy environment at home, and thus was blessed with a happy childhood life and who later on was equally privileged to associate with great scholars, poets,

artists and spiritual leaders of the time, felt so weak in spirit and guilty about himself for his sins at a time when he got the highest honour in his life as the Professor of Greek at University College, Dublin? These are some of the serious, pertinent questions one cannot overlook in a meaningful study of the Jesuit poet Hopkins.

### II. GUILT AND VICTORIAN ENGLAND

Hopkins suffered from intense feelings of guilt. His guilt seems partly to do with his highly exaggerated Western individualism. In Hopkins’s England especially, Victorian England, guilt was an enormous factor in every person’s life, from the earliest childhood. Not only does Christianity postulate original sin, which assumes everyone guilty from birth, but society itself was extremely judgmental, and young people typically grew up with terrible feelings of guilt in relation to their parents and other authorities, feelings which motivated them to suppress their pleasurable instincts and led a constrained life of acceptable virtue. Victorian England was notoriously hostile to the erotic instincts especially.

The sexual prudishness of the puritan England tended to think of guilt primarily as guilty feelings about one’s body, and one’s sexuality especially. But the question relevant here is, how Hopkins, with his Christian (Ignatian) spirituality, dealt with his guilt. He, like most other Western people of his time, wrestled with guilt from earliest childhood. Even after joining the Jesuit Order, the situation was apparently no better with regard to sin and guilt. Hopkins feels guilt, even late in his Jesuit career, as in this verse: “Once I turned from thee and hid, / Bound on what thou hadst forbid; / Sow the wind I would; I sinned; / I repent of what I did” (‘Thee, God, I Come From’).

Hopkins seems to have had a reasonably happy childhood, so the guilt developed out of the kind of relationship in the family that intrigued Freud (who developed his ideas about sexual guilt by analyzing people of Hopkins’ Victorian generation) cannot be applicable in his case. For some reason Hopkins became overwhelmed by feelings of guilt



during his Oxford years. It is at Oxford that he developed the practice of flagellating himself (as some of his friends also did). Flagellation was common in Western society, particularly in Victorian England, and Hopkins continued it even after joining the Jesuit Order. The Jesuits used to flagellate themselves to overcome their temptations or to suppress their feelings of anger, sex and other unholy feelings. According to Ignatian spirituality, discernment of the movements of the spirits within oneself is of paramount importance. While indulging in bad thoughts, one is being led by the evil spirit. Therefore one has to become aware of the attack of the evil spirit through the examination of conscience, which a Jesuit is expected to do three times a day. Naturally, like his Jesuit companions, Hopkins too flagellated himself.

### III. HOPKINS' POEMS AND CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF SUFFERING

In his sufferings the poet G. M. Hopkins finds Christ suffering with him and for him and thus his own suffering becomes a meaningful oblation. Suffering is a reality in life and every human being has to face it at some point or other in life. Keats has perhaps expressed this human experience most poignantly in his 'Ode to a Nightingale': "The weariness, the fever, and the fret / Here, where men sit and hear each other groan; / Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs, / Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies; / Where but to think is to be full of sorrow. . . ." Hopkins' dark sonnets are thus, as Shelley sings in 'To A Skylark', "our sweetest songs . . . that tell of saddest thought".

Hopkins' dark sonnets must be seen against the actual Christian theological and ascetical background actively influencing the author's mind. St. Theresa of Avila's *Interior Castle* describes the 'night of the soul' in the sixth Mansion and St. John of the Cross in *Book I*, Ch. 9-14 and *Book II*, Ch. 2-10 describes the 'dark night of the soul'. In both, two levels of experience are explained: the night of the senses and the night of the spirit, with the intention of purifying the powers of persons. The mind is cast into darkness; the will is barren of hope; the affections are immersed in aridity and the memory is clouded in obscurity. The Ignatian description of desolation manifests similar characteristics in a lesser degree. Hopkins' sonnets of desolation are specially suited to the cathartic, purging function because they are prayers as well as poems. Like Jesus' cry on the cross, Hopkins' sonnets of desolation are addressed to God and are themselves consolations. He now relives Dante's experience of hell and purgatory, earning his right to rediscover paradise. The allusions

to Jesus, Dante, and other followers of Christ are no longer merely literary, they become the deepest, most personal identification with the texts and authors possible (Bump. GMH. 193).

Hopkins' sufferings – as in the case of every genuine follower of Christ – are also to be seen as apostolic and thereby redemptive, rather than merely as human tragedy. Suffering cannot be a welcome friend, and one can normally neither entertain it nor derive joy out of it. In fact, the mission of every Christian is to be a good Samaritan by alleviating and removing human pain. However, once one becomes a prey to it, one has to gracefully accept it as part of one's vocation in fulfilling Christ's mission. Regarding salvific suffering, St. Paul the Apostle puts it quite appropriately when he speaks to the people of Colossae: "In my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the people of God" (Col. 1: 24). From the novitiate-long-retreat onwards, Hopkins was aware that trial and suffering bring the soul "to hero of Calvary, Christ's feet" ('The Wreck' 8) and he always held before him the ideal of sacrifice and suffering in union with Christ as the highest perfection on earth. Hopkins' choice of the Biblical passage from Philippians (ii 5-11), about Christ's annihilation expressive of "the root of all holiness", is central to his spirituality. Hopkins always alludes to Christ's great sacrifice on the Cross: "The love of the Son for the Father leads him to take a created nature and in that to offer him sacrifice" (Abbott: NP 417). All sufferings point downwards to Christ – Incarnation and Crucifixion – and upwards to Christ as He is in His heavenly life with the Father – Resurrection and Glorification; hence he wrote in an untitled fragment: "Hope holds to Christ the mind's own mirror out / To take His lovely likeness more and more" ('Hope holds to Christ the mind's own mirror out'). Christ's life, agony and career always stood before him; hence he wrote to Dixon:

See . . . Christ Our Lord: how his career was cut short . . . He was doomed to succeed by failure; his plans were baffled, his hopes dashed, and his work was done by being broken off undone. However much he understood all this he found it an intolerable grief to submit to it. He left the example: it is very strengthening, but except in that sense it is not consoling (Abbott: CH 137-8).

As some of Hopkins' biographers have rightly said his poetry is priestly poem or poetic prayer - characteristic utterance of a priest who is at the same time a poet. In the words of Peter Milward "these two vocations of his were not opposed to each other. Or rather, in their very opposition they come together like fire and water in a thunderstorm – to



achieve a single result” (Milward 8). Hopkins the Jesuit priest experienced God not only as the God of Nature but also as the Triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – which is essential and most fundamental to his Christian faith. He looks to “the dearest freshness deep down things” not only to the grandeur of God with which the world is charged but also specifically to the Holy Ghost who “over the bent world broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings” (‘God’s Grandeur’). In that ‘ah’ Milward feels the climax of Hopkins’ poem, the very moment of priestly vision and poetic inspiration, as the priest-poet suddenly catches the glimpse of the Spirit himself. This priest sees Christ in every human person: “Christ plays in ten thousand places, / Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his / To the father through the features of men’s faces” (‘As Kingfishers Catch Fire’).

A priest is a person of God who, while offering sacrifices to God, offers himself to God. He is the sacrificer as well as the sacrificial lamb. Prophet Isaiah in the Old Testament of the Bible speaks of a suffering servant who is so willing to commit himself to God’s will that the servant suffers and is killed despite innocence.

He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces; he was despised, and we held him of no account. Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed (Isaiah 53: 3-5).

#### IV. THE POET AS SUFFERING SERVANT

The New Testament of the Bible interprets and identifies Jesus as the suffering servant. In this Christian perspective, Hopkins was a priest who is also a suffering servant in his poetry – the way of his priestly sacrifice in personal experience as one finds him in his terrible sonnets; here he is made aware by bitter experience of the sacrificial nature of the priest as victim and suffering servant of God. Michael W. Murphy talks of violent imagery in the poetry of Hopkins. He rightly observes that images of bleeding, mutilation of the body, torture of various kinds, and violent death form an important element of Hopkins’ poetic language. However, his interpretation of these images, at least partly, looks far-fetched and does not fully agree with the character and personality of the poet. Murphy attributes Hopkins’ violent images to a sadomasochistic element in his personality, his acute

sensitivity to pain and suffering, the influence upon him of other writers or his Jesuit training, his awareness of the poetic value of violent imagery, or some combination of all these factors (Murphy 1). According to Murphy, Hopkins, whose Miltonic plea in ‘Il Mystico’ at the age of eighteen to be freed from the “rank and reeking things” of the senses, to be released from all the fleshly encumbrances of the body so that he might “drink that ecstasy / Which to pure souls alone may be” was never answered till his death after living for twenty seven years more. As Murphy says, Hopkins never did succeed in escaping entirely the physical side of man.

In his interpretation of the violent images in Hopkins, what Murphy sadly lacked and knowingly or unknowingly excluded is the biblical aspect of the suffering servant which is perhaps most significant in Hopkins’ life as a priest, which got reflected in his use of violent images in his poetry. For example, in his Dublin sonnet, ‘I wake and feel the fell of dark’, Hopkins’ use of the violent imagery in “blood brimmed the curse” the sacrificial aspect of the priest as suffering servant is quite evident. Again, as the suffering servant of God, Hopkins laments in ‘The Stranger’ sonnet, he is cut off, as it were by a sword of parting, from “father and mother dear”, from “brother and sister” and from England as “wife to my creating thought” (‘To Seem the Stranger’) and also feels cut off from God himself; so he cries with Christ, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mt. 27:46). The violent imagery as a reflection of Hopkins’ sacrificial dimension of a suffering servant becomes also evident from the lines, “We hear our hearts grate on themselves: it kills / To bruise them dearer. Yet the rebellious wills / Of us we do bid God bend to him even so” (‘Patience, Hard thing!’).

As the mediator between God and people, a priest expiates guilt by prayer and sacrifice, and secures blessings from God for his people. The priest’s sacrifice and his surrender to God is a compensation for whatever duties towards God people have unwittingly failed to perform. Thus, as suffering servant of God, Hopkins cries: “My cries heave, herds-long; huddle in a main, a chief- / woe, world-sorrow” (‘No worst, there is none’). As God’s suffering servant, Hopkins knows that he has to take not only his own sorrows and pains to his God, but also those of his people. Therefore Hopkins says, “With witness I speak this. . . / And my lament/ Is cries countless, . . . / To dearest him that lives alas! away” (‘I Wake and Feel the Fell of Dark’).



## V. THE POET AS SUFFERING SERVANT IN 'The Wreck of the Deutschland'

After his long silence since his joining of the Jesuit novitiate, Hopkins breaks his poetic silence during his theology at St. Beuno's only to rise as a priest in his poetry. He, as a priest, is a suffering servant like his master Christ. Therefore, just as his master, Christ, suffered for others, he too must suffer with those who suffer. In stanzas 2 and 3 of 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' Hopkins expresses his own spiritual and mental anguish. He experienced terror, "the swoon of the heart" at "the hurl of thee trod / Hard down with a horror of height", as if he were being thrown from a great height. As the poem progresses in the narration of the wreck, we find the poet almost identifying himself with those suffering in the shipwreck. Hopkins' own experiences of suffering seem to have sensitised him to the sufferings of those being shipwrecked. Through his own sufferings and the sufferings of others Hopkins realizes that God too suffers for his sake and for the sake of others. Hopkins has been exhorting himself to bear all sufferings with patience. But towards the end of his life in Dublin he learns the hard lessons of suffering that are expected of him as a priest: God is patient while going through the ordeal of suffering and torture. Therefore Hopkins says, "He is patient. Patience fills / His crisp combs" ('Patience, hard thing!'). It is by his personal experience of suffering and sacrifice that he is a priest, who by profession is a preacher, but here is a poet – preaches patience to his fellow-men and women through his poems and devotional writings.

There is at the heart of Hopkins' 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' – the first poem he wrote as a Jesuit scholastic after seven years of intense religious formation for priesthood - the poet's vision of God's presence not only in scenes of natural beauty but also in events of human disaster such as a shipwreck. Sympathetically he interprets the exclamation of the drowning nun, "Christ, come quickly!" as her response to a vision of Christ walking to her across the stormy waves even as he came to the disciples in their boat over the lake of Genesareth. This is the view quite aptly emphasized by Schneider when he says: "The nun's cry really is beyond the power of speech except for breathless, fragmentary exclamation: "look ... There then! the Master, ipse ..." ('The Wreck' 26) - his very self" (Schneider 113).

It is Christ who is in the storm, and Christ who manifests in "lightning and lashed rod", the mercy and love of divine Providence. Hopkins takes the storm and wreck to be God's action on souls; the nun's prayer is her acknowledgement of His mastery,

and serves as a grace to the others on board to bring them also to His compassionate heart. So far from such disasters being unmitigated evils, they are precisely sent by God as Providential means of salvation, a harvest to "startle the poor sheep back" ('The Wreck' 31). It is in them even more than in the beauties of nature that God is present, drawing people "to hero of Calvary, Christ's feet". It is the suffering servant in Hopkins who speaks here for Hopkins believed that it is through the experience of the Passion and death that humanity must go to Christ. This is a deep insight which Hopkins himself experienced in all its bitterness all through his life, particularly in his later life. Therefore Hopkins could tell Bridges: "I may add for your greater interest and edification that what refers to myself in the poem is all strictly and literally true and did all occur; nothing is added for poetical padding" (Abbott: LHB 47). Hence Schoder affirms: "Hopkins had his own shipwreck and tossing by storm and "carrier – witted" ... fled with a fling of the heart of the Host": and he had thrown himself into the hands of God "father and fonder of the heart thou hast wrung": "I did say yes" (Schoder 59). It is this life-changing *yes* to God and to his vocation as a Suffering Servant which Hopkins recalls, with mixed trembling and joy, when he sees the parallel to it in the nun's choice of the cross and the self-immolating Christ, christening her wild-worst her Best, her goal, her all (Schoder 60). This *yes* was Hopkins' readiness for total surrender to his vocation as a suffering servant of God.

Hopkins' scrupulous conscience made him think that he was a sinner. This created great guilt feeling in him which further made him think that he was not living as expected of a good priest. However he believed in the Providence of God. He was sure that God, who called him to this way of life, also would be gracious enough in guiding him all through his life. It is with this hope that he lived his vocation as a Suffering Servant. Hopkins said to Canon Dixon in 1881:

When a man has given himself to God's service, and when he has denied himself and followed Christ, he has fitted himself to receive and does receive from God a special guidance, a more particular providence . . . This is my principle and this in the main has been my practice . . . but when one mixes with the world... to live by faith is harder, is very hard; nevertheless by God's help I shall always do so (Abbott: CH 93).

When Dixon expressed some concern over Hopkins' great sacrifice, Hopkins promptly replied: ". . . my mind is here more at peace than it has ever been and I would gladly live all my life, if it were so to be, in as great or a greater seclusion from the world





and be busied only with God” (Abbott: CH 75). It is only natural that what is suppressed should somehow get expressed and that is what happened when his silenced muse, after seven long years of hibernation, roared with the violent waves of the deep ocean to sing, “Thou mastering me God. . .” (“The Wreck of the Deutschland”)

## VI. CONCLUSION

The gloriously tumultuous poem on ‘The Comfort of the Resurrection’ comes after the “terrible sonnets” like a diamond forged out of pressure. The suffering servant of Yahweh in Hopkins now begins to see “A beacon, an eternal beam.” Therefore Hopkins sings, “Manshape, . . . / . . . death blots black out; . . . beats level. Enough! The Resurrection, / A heart’s-clarion! Away grief’s gasping, joyless days, dejection.” Through the power of Christ’s resurrection, Hopkins now realizes that he who was “This Jack, joke, poor potsherd . . . / Is immortal diamond”.

Once again, as in the bright sonnets, the poet begins with a detailed description of the scenery in Nature and finds light again, but the light is a different one from the bright light of his early sonnets. Earlier he sang in ‘Hurrahing in Harvest’: “And, eyes, heart, what looks, what lips yet gave you a / Rapturous love’s greeting of realer, of rounder replies?” Now in his final surrender – death, he finds peace and reconciliation with God and everlasting life after the turbulent period. When he sent Bridges the sonnet dedicated to him ‘R.B.’, he was ill; but even this illness which coincided with ‘the most pressing time of university work’, brought him unexpected relief. It worsened, but he endured it cheerfully. He wrote to his mother “At many such times, I have been in a sort of extremity of mind, now I am the placidest soul in the world” (Abbott: FLH 197). This ray of light peculiar to the spirit of his priestly vocation as Suffering Servant breaks through the path to remind him of the sea of glory awaiting him when the trial is passed and he may at last “bathe in his fall-gold mercies, to breathe in his all-fire glances” (“The Wreck of the Deutschland” 23), for we hear him speak of the ordeal as past: “That night, that year / Of now done darkness I wretch lay wrestling with (my God!) my God” (‘Carrion Comfort’).

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