

The Poem that Should have Changed History

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Or at least the history of poetry. And which still might, if I have anything to say about it.

In 1875 a poem was written in Wales by an English author. It was accepted for publication but then held back, we aren't told why. Its author died 14 years later, hardly known to the world. The poem was finally published in 1918 by the British Poet Laureate, but it continued to be mostly ignored. Almost nobody has heard of it to this day, not even famous living poets in England or the US. They certainly don't read it in writing workshops.

Why? Two reasons. Timing being the first one. The poem, and this poet's other work, was a revolutionary *expansion* of technique, but all the arts were contracting at that time. The poem opened the door from a small room into a huge castle, but no one was alive then to walk through that door. The poets of that time, cued by the receding culture, were moving to a smaller poetry, not a larger. The year 1875 happened to be on the cusp of Modernism, by which all the arts would be simplified, compressed, deconstructed, and eventually vaporized. So while this poet was moving one way, the world was moving another. That castle he discovered has been sitting there almost empty ever since.

The second reason has to do with the poem itself, which—though technically a huge breakthrough—was not a successful communication. It was a strange poem, and one might say it was both very good and very bad at the same time, with the good and bad being difficult for most people to separate. It wasn't that one stanza was good while others bad, it was that the form was amazingly good but the emotion mostly bad, and in a poem you can't really divide one from the other. So most people who found the poem and read it were horrified by the content, never giving the form a chance to sink in.

I admit that this was my first reaction, and I came in as a previous fan of the poet. The first time I read it I felt a strong revulsion, and that revulsion spilled over onto the form, spoiling that as well. However, once I came to terms with the content I was able to put it to the side, just looking at the poem as a new architecture. Once I did that, reading the poem outloud several times, I swooned and realized exactly what I was looking at: by one measure, **perhaps the greatest poem ever written**.

That sounds like a contradiction, I know. How could this failed poem be the greatest poem ever written? Because, overlooking the content, it was the freest, boldest, most revolutionary poem of all time, by a great margin. Without realizing it, the poet had just shaken off the chains of 2500 years of previous poems, not by moving to free verse, blank verse, or no verse, but by inventing a new richer multiverse. It was like discovering the tempered scale or counterpoint, or both at once. And he wasn't just the discover, he was a master of it from the first day. He happened to have an ear for language that was generations ahead of his time. We don't yet know how many generations, because we haven't even started to catch up to him yet. He was so far ahead of his contemporaries, they couldn't even hear what he had done. It was like a dog whistle to them. Forty years later that Poet Laureate finally started to hear it, but by then he was too old to do anything about it. He could hear the trick to some extent, but he had no ability to repeat it. He had found the door to the castle, but couldn't walk through.

So you can see that this poor poet's life was a tragedy. But in fact it was a tragedy within a tragedy, since it wasn't just a tragedy for the history of poetry that he should be buried by bad timing. His life was a tragedy in a more personal sense, for reasons you are about to discover. We are told he died at age 44 of typhoid, but more likely he died of a broken heart. I am telling you this because you have to know it to understand the content of the poem. I want you to be able to give the poem a fair listen, and to do that you have to be able to put the content aside. To put the content aside you have to understand where it comes from.

Though not unattractive in face, our poet was shy and very small, being about 5'2" tall. A sort of John Keats, but perhaps worse. In fact, he grew up just a stone's throw from where Keats had lived. He was from a family of poets and artists, but they were also very religious, being devout high-church Anglicans. They were fairly wealthy and connected, having links to the peerage, which is how our poet ended up at Oxford in the company of some of the most privileged people of his time. It was here that he met a boy named Digby Dolben, aged 17 and still at Eton, but visiting Oxford with a cousin. Digby was already a published poet by that age, but he was even more famous for his face. He was a sort of Cary Elwes of his time, or a prettier Rupert Brooke.



That's Digby in the middle. Half the boys at Eton were in love with him and the other half hated him with a high passion. Our poet fell in love with him at first sight, but this was the opposite of a flowering for him, since he knew he couldn't compete with Digby's other lovers, and since he was horrified to discover he was gay. Up to then he hadn't had the foggiest idea of it.

In short, our poet never got over it. It destroyed him. At first he was so overwrought he couldn't quit writing poems to Digby and mailing them to him. It got so bad his confessor forbade him from seeing Digby and all but ordered him to quit writing him. About a year later our poet discovered Digby was planning to convert to Catholicism. Most likely this was just another way for Digby to piss off the authorities and his family, but our poet didn't know that. When Digby died in an accidental drowning at age 19, our poet was suicidal, but finally decided the least he could do is convert to Catholicism like his love. If Digby couldn't do it, he would do it for both of them.

Like his contemporary Van Gogh, our poet had an idealist streak a mile wide, but unlike Van Gogh he

was also pathetically naive. Sometimes that makes for great poetry, and in this case it later did to a limited extent, but at the time it just led to tragedy. Our poet couldn't do anything halfway, and he didn't just convert to Catholicism, he decided to become a Jesuit priest. With Digby no longer there to draw off his feelings and give them a target, he decided the best thing to do was to stamp them out. The Anglican Bible had already told him his love was a sin, and becoming a Catholic just made that worse. So in giving up Digby, he decided to give up his poetry and art as well, along with pretty much everything else. He became so weirdly ascetic overnight his family and friends also deserted him, so it was like going into the wilderness. He actually built a bonfire and burned all his poetry, taking a vow never to write again unless given express permission by his superior.

Fast forward ahead seven years, during which he wrote nothing but a few religious hymns on request. But of course all this time the creativity was being bottled up. Ideas were in his head, but he could do nothing with them. Finally, in 1875 a ship went down in the Thames harbor, with most onboard drowning. In the reports in the newspaper, a tall nun onboard received special mention in the tragedy for her cries to God. It was the talk of England. Seeing this, our poet's superior expressly asked him to write a religious poem for the event.

Oh happy day! Everything that had been suppressed for seven years could now be put on paper!

As Paul Harvey would have said, "And now you know the rest of the story", because that ship was the *Deutschland*, the poem is [*The Wreck of the Deutschland*](#), and our poet is Gerard Manley Hopkins.



The poem is a 35-stanza eruption somewhat in the form of a Pindaric Ode. But mostly it is a barely disguised cry of pain from Hopkins, who had been torturing himself for more than a decade. At the same time it is a cry of ecstasy, since at last his feelings have an outlet. At last the world will see his new poetry! Not just his new poem, but his new poetry, which some part of him must know is the New World itself.

Before we look closer at a map of that New World, let me say one last thing about the content we will be trying to read around. Some will no doubt accuse me of unfairly dismissing the religious content here, but I assure you that is not what I am doing. It is not the Christian or even Catholic content I have a problem with. It is the particular expression of it that I hate here, both for itself and for its part in so far preventing a fair evaluation of this poem. To do that we just have to look at the first stanza:

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

All good until that sixth line, when we get “what with **dread, thy doing**”. Hopkins admits he has been almost **unmade** by dread, and he thinks it is not of his doing, but God's doing. What has Hopkins done, that he believes God should have assigned him this dread and torture and near undoing? He loved this dead boy. Unfortunate, yes, perhaps in more ways than one, but it is hardly cause for Hopkins undoing himself and pretending it was done by God. The beginning of the second stanza is even worse:

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

God as a terror, with lashed rod. You can see why most readers were already aghast by this point, not just Modern readers, but the religious readers of his own time, including his own parents. Like Van Gogh, Hopkins had always been prone to being overwrought and hysterical. Already by his late teens he was taking things too far, once going a week without water to prove people didn't need so many liquids. His tongue turned black, he passed out, and almost died. Obviously, he learned nothing from that.

So an astute reader can tell he was the author of his own tragedy in most regards, which is always hard to witness. In many of his other most famous poems, especially the shorter ones that have since been anthologized like *The Windhover*, he is able to hide that to a large extent, but here it is all out in the breeze. Faced with someone self-destructing on the page, a reader's natural response is to flee, and that is what most of them have done. I am showing you just how unfortunate that is, because while Hopkins was rhyming his own destruction, he was also constructing a new and spacious architecture for poetry, one capable of sustaining several centuries of new poets.

Now to the form. If you haven't looked at the full poem yet, you may skim that first stanza above and say, “Well, that's fine, but I don't see how that is the greatest poem ever written. Just looks like more of the same twaddle to me.” So pay attention. By the fourth word you know you are in a new world, and not because the word is “God”. Because the word is *stressed*. To say it another way, line one is iambic, with the stress on the second word. But line two is trochaic, starting long-long. In fact it is a spondee, since long-long is a spondee. So by the old rules, this is already a trainwreck, and many poets had dismissed it by the fourth word for that reason, never even getting to the dread and lashing to dismiss it for that. This didn't fit any of the old forms, so it must be bad poetry, they thought. However, if you read it aloud, you find it is still highly metrical. In fact, it seems to be somehow **super-metrical**, since it remains musical even while ignoring all the old rules of meter. Pretty soon you realize it is a *more complex* meter of some sort, more interesting than the old fixed meter. Hopkins was fully aware of that, knowing his meter was better, since he called the standard running meters “same and tame”. Which, compared to this, they are.

The poem actually starts out this way: short-long-short-short-short-long-long-short-long-short-long.

So although it begins and ends with iambs, the rest of the meter is fit to the words themselves, instead of to the fixed form. The word God has to be long, because Hopkins wants it stressed as much as possible. He not only puts an exclamation point in there, but he leads into it with three shorts, as a sort of introduction. He knows he can get away with this, and almost anything else, because he knows his music is in the longer phrase, not in each foot or even in each line. If you back out you begin to see that, because this stanza is really just two sentences, the first sentence being seven lines long. It is 47 words cut with full purpose and shape into seven lines.

No one had ever done anything like that before, and except for perhaps Dylan Thomas, no one has since then. Some other Moderns may have written long sentences like this—I don't know because I don't read the Moderns—but they certainly aren't doing it with full meter, rhyme, and shaping. It wouldn't be considered Modern, so they don't consider it. *Passé*, you know. Nothing is more *passé* than lyricism in poetry.

Most critics and poets still have no idea what Hopkins was up to, and we see that at Wikipedia, where we are told Hopkins' "sprung" meter is similar to the rolling stresses of Robinson Jeffers. No, Hopkins is nothing like Robinson Jeffers in any way and only the blind and deaf would suggest it. We are told Hopkins was isochronous, but he is not that either; rather the opposite. We also find this: Some critics believe he merely coined a name for poems with mixed, irregular feet, like *free verse*. Which is why those critics should be banned from artistic society. Dylan Thomas would have spit in the eye of any critic who suggested Hopkins was free verse. Hopkins is the opposite of free verse, since he is MORE musical and more lyrical and more poetic than previous poetry, not less. Hopkins' verse is not free, it is doubly and triply constrained, since he is using and balancing several meters at once. Hopkins has a broad and controlled complexity where free verse has no complexity, being wholly random. Hopkins is purposely and with full attention synthesizing iambs, trochees, spondees, dactyls, and everything else in a steered uber-meter, while free verse isn't doing anything or paying attention to meter at all. I don't even know why it is called verse, and it shouldn't be. It is bad yapping cut up into lines for no reason.

But we are just getting started. This stanza is crammed with alliteration and consonance, though you may not see it on a first read. Those things tend to blend in as long as they are apt: they only jump out at you when they aren't. For instance *feel finger find* in the last line. You are too busy cheering for his finding the finger of God, which reminds you of a baby holding its father's finger: you forget to notice all the other amazing things he is doing in that one line.

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

That's the fifth stanza, and as you see he is already in full stride, moving from cloud-top to cloud-top, like Mozart on one of his best days. We have to laugh to see a monk writing like this, it being the opposite of ascetic. Talk about breaking a vow of silence! Oh my God! This is some new level of lyricism, making Shakespeare lean laconic. It makes Milton seem a simpleton. Dante a dotard. For here we witness yet another of Hopkins' novelties: the hyphenated adjectives. We are told he borrowed this from Anglo-Saxon poetry like *Beowulf*, using the *kenning* to add flavor to his lines. But while he no doubt did get the idea from there, he makes his own better use of it, avoiding the clunky and often

redundant compounds of old poetry. He coins only the most lyrical, alliterative, and one might say *romantic* compounds, saving them for the most expressive points in his line. They aren't used mainly to fine-tune his descriptive elements, they are used to better adorn his most ecstatic moments, slowing the beat so that you fully taste them.

But let us return to the meter, since that is why we are here. To show you what I mean, let's look at someone who learned from Hopkins.

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
drives my green age.

That's Dylan Thomas, of course. Most critics have scanned that as straight iambic, if they have scanned it all. But it isn't. The second line is all long, but even the first line isn't iambic. You can force it to iambic, but that is to misread it and lose most of the music. "Through" isn't long, so the scansion should be

˘ - / ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ - - / - ˘ / - ˘

If anything, it switches from iambic to trochaic in the third foot, on purpose. Thomas isn't ignorant of the rhythm here, and he has chosen the words to be more lyrical, not less. So this wasn't a mistake, a breaking of form, or least of all a dodge into free verse. The greatest musicality is achieved this way, which tells us the old scansion is a muck. It is a ruler for the blind and deaf. That is one of the most musical lines in 20th century poetry, so all we were taught is a hindrance.

What Thomas learned from Hopkins that no one else did is that there is a greater lyricism available to poetry than the one given us by the old meter and scansion. It is the full musicality of **actual music**, which of course isn't based on long/short scansion. To give you another obvious example:

- ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ / - ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ / - - -

If you are a drummer, you recognize that. It is in a thousand pieces of music, many of them military. So it is fully musical. The scansion doesn't express the full musicality, since it can't relate the real timing, but that is about the best we can do. But have you ever seen it in traditional poetry? Not likely, not even in war poetry like Rupert Brooke or Siegfried Sassoon. It was forbidden for all those shorts and longs together. Even dactyls or anapests had become dangerous by the 19th century; forget about three longs in a row or four shorts. People brought up on iambs would think you didn't know what you were doing.

Most people have forgotten that all poetry was originally lyrical, meaning it was a **lyric**: words set to actual music and meant to be sung. It was, first and foremost, *a song*. Only later were the lyrics clipped from the song, losing their ability to rise and fall. But because they were fit to this ridiculous long/short scansion over the centuries, they also lost most of their ability to sing on a single line. Remember, you could fit a poem to the meter of Tchaikovsky's *Waltz of the Flowers*, if you wanted to, or to a Mozart rondo. If you did that it would be a lyric, without the rise and fall of the notes. But to do that, you would have to ditch the narrow long/short scansion and switch to actual notes. At that point you would gain notes of many lengths and rests and grace notes and triplets and all the rest of music.

This is what Hopkins was reminding us, while perhaps not realizing the full extent of it himself. He called his meter sprung, which indicates to me he didn't understand the size of the castle he was entering. He didn't comprehend what door he was walking through.

This is why Hopkins' poems sound more musical: they are. He was fitting his words to more complex music in his head, and he happened to be a very good musician. He had a great ear.

As usual I find it incredible I am the first to argue in this way, since it seems obvious. Even someone like Leonard Cohen, both poet and musician, missed it. He never walked through that door, though it was always beckoning him. He was right on the threshold. Cohen was expressive and a good storyteller, but he was only a fair wordsmith and a poor musician. He had little ear for music, and especially not this complex lyricism of Hopkins. Cohen was brave and astute enough to go back to meter and form, but he only went back to the same-and-tame iambs and running meter. It never occurred to him he could borrow from Tchaikovsky as well as Lorca. Joni Mitchell probably came closest to walking through that door, though I don't think she knew it existed. She innately understood that anything was allowed as long it was musical, and she was a far better musician than Cohen. She was as good a storyteller as Cohen, though not quite the wordsmith he was. And, like Cohen, she limited herself all along to the three-minute pop song, though it is not clear why. Money, I suppose, or the influence of her peers. The death of all art. Her creativity had to be fit to an album, you know. Why not write a 35-stanza Pindaric Ode? The radio wouldn't play it. Why not write an epic? It wouldn't fit on a side of vinyl.

So ironically, it was the musicians who came closest to walking through Hopkins' door in the 20th century. The poets walked in a beeline away from it, finally dropping off the face of the earth into a chasm of technical and spiritual nihilism, where they are still writhing and screaming.

If you still aren't convinced, I will return to the poem as more proof.

She drove in the dark to leeward,
She struck—not a reef or a rock
But the combs of a smother of sand: night drew her
Dead to the Kentish Knock;
And she beat the bank down with her bows and the ride of her keel:
The breakers rolled on her beam with ruinous shock;
And canvass and compass, the whorl and the wheel
Idle for ever to waft her or wind her with, these she endured.

That is the second stanza of the shipwreck, after a lengthy personal introduction. It may be the best stanza in the poem, and is one of the best stanzas ever, only bettered perhaps by Hopkins himself in later poems. If you don't get a shiver from that, you aren't paying attention—not just from the description, which is thrilling enough, but from the music and word choice, which is even more thrilling. Most stanzas are like that, winding up from shorter phrases to ever longer and more complex ones. If you aren't awestruck by that, keep reading it until you are. It is unparalleled genius.

Notice how he slant rhymes the last line to the first. That is his pattern in all the stanzas, though he usually achieves a full rhyme, and usually includes the third line as well. This almost invisibly or inaudibly brings the stanza full circle. He also rhymes the second, fourth, and sixth lines, tying the first half to the second and giving each stanza extra cohesion. Also notice how he uses the meter to mirror his action: when the ship hits the sand, boom, the iamb/anapest run of the first three lines hits a wall

with that colon, and we switch to dactylic/trochaic. After that, the action continues, and Hopkins is back to his favored anapests $\sim \sim \text{—}$, giving him those double shorts to re-accelerate us into the climax of the stanza.

Imagine someone thinking that is free verse! A pox on both their houses! It isn't free verse and doesn't foreshadow Modernism at all, or any dunderhead Modern poet. And likewise it leaves all previous lyricism in the dust, creating a new poetic line a thousand times more musical. Hopkins runs by Shelley, Byron, and even Keats like they are standing still. It is like a blind man seeing color for the first time or a deaf woman hearing her first symphony. And its greatness is multiplied by the even greater things it makes possible. As I say, Hopkins is almost alone in that castle, and most rooms have not even been explored yet.

Now, I admit Hopkins goes over the top in most of the rest of the poem, losing his focus and control. But remember this is one of the world's greatest poets, and he hadn't been allowed to write *for seven years*. It is like a guy getting out of jail after seven years: you can't blame him for being a tad over-excited when he first sees a naked woman again . . . or in this case man. He seems to have felt that the tragedy of the shipwreck gave him license for any amount of ecstasy or high emotion, but I am not convinced it did. Many of the stanzas cross over into mania or rococo, but that doesn't negate the performance. It just reminds us that once you allow yourself all, it is easy to go too far. The greatest possibilities demand the greatest restraint.

You also have to remember that this was Hopkins' own first foray into the castle. He wanted to run through every room screaming, and we can't really blame him. No doubt we would have done the same. But he did later learn to rein it in to a full gallop, while still letting the horse run. I have to think that after this first assay, he realized he had crashed the steed into a dozen fenceposts and overhanging limbs, and decided to curb his enthusiasm somewhat. For instance, we see him at perfect pitch again later in *Inversnaid*:

This darksome burn, horseback brown,
His rollrock highroad roaring down,
In coop and in comb the fleece of his foam
Flutes and low to the lake falls home.

A windpuff-bonnet of fawn-froth
Turns and twindles over the broth
Of a pool so pitchblack, fell-frowning,
It rounds and rounds Despair to drowning.

Here we see again the familiar switch from iambic to trochaic, while mysteriously never losing the meter for a moment. In the first line you begin to see why: there is an invisible rest at the comma, which could stand for a short, so there is no real switch to trochaic, just the appearance of such. And though the brilliant “horseback brown” is three longs, it still mirrors the iambic run, with the longs all in the right place. Line three is Hopkins' famous love affair with anapests $\sim \sim \text{—}$, since he is using them to match what they are describing: the the quickly running stream. That's also why he starts the fourth line with a long: “flutes” is describing a pause in the action as the river slows at the top of a fall before going over. He wants you to slow down and hold that word in your mouth an extra beat, as you prepare to dive over the fall with the water. So as usual Hopkins isn't matching his words to a preset meter, he is marrying the meter and the description, and then finding a music to contain it.

Let's do Hopkins' ghost the infinite favor of finally comparing him at his best, as there, to his love Digby Dolben. Although you have probably not heard of Dolben, his poems are still published at places like Allpoetry.com, which has **53 of them**. He has a good facility with language for a boy, and we have to be impressed that a lad of 19 had already written 53 poems, but there is nothing special here. Nothing that isn't same-and-tame and very boring after Hopkins. Here is the start of one, no better or worse than the rest:

Methought, through many years and lands,
I sped along an arrowy flood,
That leapt and lapt my face and hands,
I knew not were it fire or blood.

I saw no sun in any place;
A ghastly glow about me spread,
Unlike the light of nights and days,
From out the depth where writhe the dead.

Indistinguishable from a million other poems by educated men and women in our centuries. Ebay is overrun by old leather books of such poetry, now worth nothing. And beyond the boring same-and-tame meter, the problem is these poets had little or nothing to say. The poems are no more than an exercise. What could Digby Dolben have to say to us at 18, about Christ's journey or anything else? Nothing, he is just aping forms to gain notoriety or pass the time. That's fine, it is possible he would have done something more interesting later, though highly unlikely I would say. Why? Because he hadn't felt any misfortune, and wasn't likely to. Digby, like the rest of these poets, was from a privileged class that had the time to write, but hadn't experienced the crushing highs and lows necessary for art. They hadn't been lashed in terror and dread.

Which brings us back to that. Why did Hopkins succeed where all the rest failed? Was it just a greater innate talent? Or, as with Van Gogh again, was it his years in the wilderness that annealed him, the pressure that molded him into this more interesting person? Probably both, but the pressure was decisive. Without it he could not have become what he did.

So was he right? Was it God's lash that formed him? Does God create artists by purposely making them miserable and blasting them with lightning? I myself have been lashed and blasted, but I don't think it was by God. It was by my fellow men. That said, I agree it was decisive. I doubt I would have done what I did had I been coddled my whole life. It was the push that made me push back. And in that sense I believe the gods or muses did have something to do with it. I thank them every night for burying me at birth in Amarillo and Lubbock, TX, where I had to entertain myself, instead of boosting me in New York or London or someplace. That would have ruined me like it ruined the rest.

Hopkins proves this like no other, and the *Wreck of the Deutschland* is the ultimate example of it. It is like a recipe for art: take a talented young person—one with a lot of time on his hands—preferably someone lacking in social skills and a bit manic—then sit on him for many years. Tell him he can't or shouldn't do what he most wants to do, maybe even whack him around a bit—or encourage him to do it himself with various hairshirts and horsewhips. Then, after letting him boil for a while, allow him some window of opportunity and see what spills out.

What spilled out in the case of Hopkins was the greatest lyric ear of all time. We just wish he had been allowed to do more with it, or allowed himself.