Set-up and Aims

To present yet another full-length commentary on "The Wreck of the Deutschland" may seem somewhat superfluous at first sight: a fair number of detailed and lengthy publications on the poem have already appeared, ranging from Gardner's epoch-making article in Essays and Studies (1935) and Hart's Ph.D. thesis (1952), through Martin's comprehensive reading in his Mastery and Mercy (1957) and Keating's excellent monograph in the Kent State University Bulletin research series (1963), to Foxell's explication in his Ten Poems Analysed (1966), Schneider's prize-winning essay in PMLA (1966), and Milward's line-by-line commentary (1968). Of these seven, Keating and Milward are by far the most exhaustive guides to an understanding of the complexities of "The Wreck." Both have their peculiar merits and demerits, depending on the purposes for which they were written. Keating's aim was "not to arrive at definite critical judgments, but to supply background information, to clarify meaning, to point out certain features of technique" (p. 10). Milward, writing specifically with the needs of his Japanese students in mind, descended "into every detail of the poem's meaning, while not forgetting its main lines" (p. 1). Dunne did full justice to both studies when noting that "for scholarly purposes Keating has probably more to offer, as [Milward] occasionally becomes bogged down in minutiae. But for 'beginners' in particular [Milward's commentary] is excellent" (p. 319). A minor flaw in Milward's study is the scant information he gives about material quoted. Veteran readers of Hopkins will have no difficulty in recognizing his abbreviations and short titles, but the author might have considered the needs of beginning students of "The Wreck," for whom his commentary was, after all, primarily intended. But, more importantly, there is no clear distinction in his book between explication and interpretation. Keating, on the other hand, does provide his readers with full references to the source of his quotations, but is considerably less detailed than Milward; he offers an interpretation (with the occasional excursion into explication) rather than a comprehensive analysis.

In the present study the emphasis is on explication: in the second part, "Discussion," a detailed analysis of words and phrases is followed by a succinct critical appreciation of "The Wreck." In the first part, "Introduction," four chapters are devoted to the historical background of the poem (a hitherto largely neglected aspect), its critical reception from 1876 to the present day, the texts of the poem (in the two surviving transcripts and the four printed editions), and its rhythm. An annotated bibliography of criticism on "The
Wreck," covering the years 1876 to 1978, and incorporating a fair number of previously unrecorded publications, constitutes the final part of the book.

The aim of the present study is to provide an up-to-date handbook of "The Wreck" for beginners and specialists alike, and to stimulate further research on the poem. For, no matter how many times "The Wreck" may have been the subject of scholarly and critical scrutiny, a definitive interpretation of the poem has not yet been achieved, nor is it likely (or indeed possible) that such should ever happen. "True poetry," Hopkins wrote to his younger brother Everard, "must be studied" (HRB, No. 4 [1973], 10), and every new generation must formulate its own unique interpretation of the poem, must extract from it a meaning and message relevant to the contemporary situation. It is a tribute to the greatness of "The Wreck" that today, over sixty years after its publication, its appeal is still growing, and that scholarly and critical interest in it generally shows no signs of abating.

General principles

In Part Two of this book an attempt is made to elucidate the complex meaning of "The Wreck" through a detailed analysis of words and phrases of the poem. Hopkins himself admitted that "The Wreck" "needs study and is obscure" (LB, p. 50), for, as he confided to Bridges, he "was not over-desirous that the meaning of all should be quite clear, at least unmistakeable" (ibid.). Though in this cryptic last remark the poet is probably referring to the theological content rather than to the verbal difficulties of the poem, in an earlier letter he specifically alludes to its surface complexity, of which he was well aware:

If it is obscure do not bother yourself with the meaning but pay attention to the best and most intelligible stanzas, as the two last of each part and the narrative of the wreck. If you had done this you wd. have liked it better and sent me some serviceable criticisms, but now your criticism is of no use, being only a protest memorializing me against my whole policy and proceedings. (LB, pp. 46-47)

The large number of differing (and sometimes mutually hostile) interpretations of the poem is perhaps a proof of its obscurity, but possibly more so of its infinite thematic and imaginative richness. At any rate, poetry needs not only to be studied, but also to be explained:

we should explain things, plainly state them, clear them up, explain them; explanation—except personal—is always pure good; without explanation people go on misunderstanding; being once explained they thenceforward understand things; therefore always explain. (LB, p. 275)

The analysis of words and phrases in Part Two is primarily based on the explications furnished by the Oxford English Dictionary (1878-1928) and its supplements (1933, 1972, 1976). It is well to realize, however, that the language of Hopkins' mature poetry is often so idiosyncratic that even today, a century after "The Wreck" was written, no dictionary can be the last word in our analysis of the poem. The language of Hopkins' major poems has firm roots in, and can often be fruitfully traced back to the etymological lists in his early diaries (JP, pp. 3-73) and the descriptive passages in his journal (JP, pp. 131-263), while his devotional writings, though for the greater part produced "during his year of tertianship, especially during the Long Retreat of November-December 1881" (SD, p. 107), may also help to clarify words and images in "The Wreck." Nor should we close our eyes to the fact that from an early
age Hopkins had a keen ear for dialectal expressions and for nautical and architectural jargon, and that during the seven years prior to the writing of "The Wreck" he was nurtured on the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola and on the Bible. Hopkins' admiration for the medieval philosopher Duns Scotus, which dated from 1872 (cf. JP, p. 221), also had an unmistakable influence on the development of his religious views and, consequently, on the religious colour of his writings. In explicating "The Wreck," all these potential sources of information must be taken into account. Many of the influences mentioned above are also noticeable in the poems written between 1877 and 1889, but it has not been thought desirable to refer systematically to other instances of Hopkins' use of identical or related words or expressions in his later poetry. Any attempt in that direction would inevitably cause the explicatory section to become overweight, because almost every single one of Hopkins' mature poems is indebted to "The Wreck" in some degree, whether for style, diction, imagery, or verse technique. Incidental references to other poems will only be made when they can reasonably be hoped to help clarify the meaning of "The Wreck."

Abbreviations of books of the Bible and of the works of Shakespeare conform to standard usage, as do all other common abbreviations (see MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations, New York: Modern Language Association, 1977, pp. 123-31); grammatical and lexicographical abbreviations conform to the usage adopted in the OED (see "List of Abbreviations, Signs, &c.," in vol. 1, p. xxvi).

Handbooks Used