

SOUND AND MEANING

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS (1844-1889)

God's Grandeur 1877

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;¹

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil

Crushed.² Why do men then now not reckon his rod?³

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil

Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;

¹⁰ There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;

And though the last lights off the black West went

Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent

World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

¹ *shaken gold foil*

² *4 Crushed: Olives crushed in their oil;*

The subject of this poem is announced in the title and the first line: “The world is charged with the grandeur of God.” The poem is a celebration of the power and greatness of God’s presence in the world, but the speaker is also perplexed and dismayed by people who refuse to recognize God’s authority and grandeur as they are manifested in the creation. Instead of glorifying God, “men” have degraded the earth through meaningless toil and cut themselves off from the spiritual renewal inherent in the beauty of nature. The relentless demands of commerce and industry have blinded people to the earth’s natural and spiritual resources. Despite this abuse and insensitivity to God’s grandeur, however, “nature is never spent”; the morning light that “springs” in the east redeems the “black West” of the night and is a sign that the spirit of the Holy Ghost is ever present in the world. This summary of the poem sketches some of the thematic significance of the lines, but it does not do justice to how they are organized around the use of sound. Hopkins’s poem, unlike Southey’s “The Cataract of Lodore,” uses sounds in a subtle and complex way.

In the opening line Hopkins uses alliteration — a device apparent in almost every line of the poem — to connect “God” to the “world,” which is “charged” with his “grandeur.” These consonants unify the line as well. The alliteration in lines 2 and 3 suggests a harmony in the creation: the *f*s in “flame” and “foil,” the *sh*’s in “shining” and “shook,” the *g*’s in “gathers” and “greatness,” and the visual (not

alliterative) similarities of “ooze of oil” emphasize a world that is held together by God’s will.

That harmony is abruptly interrupted by the speaker’s angry question in line 4: “Why do men then now not reckon his rod?” The question is as painful to the speaker as it is difficult to pronounce. The arrangement of the alliteration (“now,” “not”; “reck,” “rod”), the assonance (“not,” “rod”; “men,” “then,” “reck”), and the internal rhyme (“men,” “then”) contribute to the difficulty in saying the line — a difficulty associated with human behavior. That behavior is introduced in line 5 by the repetition of “have trod” to emphasize the repeated mistakes — sins — committed by human beings. The tone is dirgelike because humanity persists in its mistaken path rather than progressing. The speaker’s horror at humanity is evident in the cacophonous sounds of lines 6 to 8. Here the alliteration of “smeared,” “smudge,” and “smell” along with the internal rhymes of “seared,” “bleared,” and “smeared” echo the disgust with which the speaker views humanity’s “toil” with the “soil,” an end rhyme that calls attention to our mistaken equation of nature with production rather than with spirituality.

In contrast to this cacophony, the final six lines build toward the joyful recognition of the new possibilities that accompany the rising sun. This recognition leads to the euphonic description of the “Holy Ghost over” (notice the reassuring consistency of the assonance) the world. Traditionally represented as a dove, the Holy Ghost brings

love and peace to the “world,” and “*broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.*” The effect of this alliteration is mellifluous: the sound bespeaks the harmony that prevails at the end of the poem resulting from the speaker’s recognition that “nature is never spent” because God loves and protects the world.

The sounds of “God’s Grandeur” enhance the poem’s theme; more can be said about its sounds, but it is enough to point out here that for this poem the sound strongly echoes the theme in nearly every line. Here are some more poems in which sound plays a significant role.