

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend'

Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend
With thee; but, sir, so what I plead is just. Pray request
Why do sinners' ways prosper? and why must
Disappointment all I endeavour end?

Wert thou my enemy, O thou my friend,
How wouldst thou worse, I wonder, than thou dost
Defeat, thwart me? Oh, the sots and thralls of lust
Do in spare hours more thrive than I that spend,
Sir, life upon thy cause. See, banks and brakes
Now, leavèd how thick! lacèd they are again
With fretty chervil, look, and fresh wind shakes
Them; birds build – but not I build; no, but strain,
Time's eunuch, and not breed one work that wakes.
Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain.

In the first four lines of the poem, the poet is shown willing to admit that Lord God is just and that, in any disputation, he must indeed acknowledge God's justice. And yet a doubt has arisen in the poet's mind, and he must therefore express this doubt which seems to him justified too. The poet then asks why it is that sinful persons thrive in this world. He asks also why all his endeavours, both in respect of his profession as a priest and in respect of the exercise of his poetic faculty, end in disappointment and failure. It is to be noted that the poet, in the second line of the poem, addresses God as "Sir".

Wert thou my enemy, O thou my friend,
How wouldst thou worse, I wonder, than thou dost

Defeat, thwart me? Oh, the sots and thralls of lust

Do in spare hours more thrive than I that spend,

Sir, life upon thy cause. See, banks and brakes

The poet through this extract then acknowledges God's love and affection for him. But even if God had been his enemy, he could not have done more to defeat and frustrate the poet's endeavours than he is doing as his friend. What puzzles the poet is that drunkards and lechers – that is, sinners of various kinds – prosper even in their spare or idle moments much more than the poet who is sending his whole life in the service of God. Here again, the poet is noted to be addressing God as "Sir".

Now, leavèd how thick! lacèd they are again

With fretty chervil, look, and fresh wind shakes

Them; birds build – but not I build; no, but strain,

Time's eunuch, and not breed one work that wakes.

In these four lines, the poet now draws the attention of God to some phenomena in the world of Nature. Already in the middle of March the hedgerows and thickets of the countryside are thick with fresh leaves; they are once more intertwined with chervil, and they are being shaken by the fresh wind. The birds too are busy building their nests in the trees and hedges. But so far as the poet is concerned, he finds himself unable to build or to achieve anything. He can only strain or exert himself with futile efforts at poetic composition, without being able to produce even one great poem that will live for ever. He calls himself Time's eunuch that is one who has been rendered unproductive by the passing time.

Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain.

In this final line, the poet, addressing God as "lord of life" is shown praying to Him to send rain to fertilize the dry roots of his poetic inspiration. This way, the poem comes

to an end with a renewal of faith and an appeal for divine help in producing great poetry.

Why did Hopkins write this sonnet?

In January 1888, Hopkins had written: “What is my wretched life? Five wasted years almost have passed in Ireland. I am ashamed of the little I have done, of my waste of time, although my helplessness and weakness is such that I could scarcely do otherwise. All my undertaking miscarry. I am like a straining eunuch.”

In the year too, Hopkins had, in a letter to Bridges, had written: “All impulse fails me: I can give myself no sufficient reason for going on. Nothing comes: I am a eunuch – but it is for the kingdom of heaven’s sake.”

The above mentioned observations thus provide a clue to the mood wherein the sonnet, titled, *Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend*, was composed.

Critical Appreciation

Thus, this is a highly finished sonnet which, written towards the end of Hopkins’s life sums up the author’s final considered judgment on his life’s work. In his agonizing prayer to God, Hopkins here comes face to face with the fragmentary nature of his work, his unachieved aims, and his blighted prospects as priest, scholar, and poet.

The manner in which God has been addressed in this poem (“sir”, “thou my friend”) is in sharp contrast with anything to be found in Hopkins’s earlier poetry. The attitude here is not one of adoration or deep reverence. Hopkins here speaks to God respectfully enough, but the respect is of the kind a man might show to another, wiser and more experienced, from whom he seeks guidance and enlightenment. Hopkins no longer adopts an attitude of self-abasement; he has become almost self-assertive. He speaks to God on equal terms, and he seems to insist that his queries should be answered:

Why do sinners’ ways prosper? And why must

Disappointment all I endeavour end?

Hopkins would like to know the reason behind his disappointments. The earlier Hopkins would no doubt have replied that his faith was being tested through these disappointments. But this no longer satisfies him. The problem that now confronts him is that of reconciling faith and reason.

Can faith be entirely divorced from reason, and, if so, how to distinguish between faith and mere reason?

To deny one's intelligence, to forget the questioning mind, is to deny one's humanity, and this Hopkins cannot now do. However, the belief in god is still strongly here. For one moment Hopkins, dares to contemplate the possibility of God's being against him, but immediately it is followed by a rush of affection.

Conclusion

The poem, *Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend*, ends on a slightly plaintive note, culminating in a request which is a cross between a plea and a demand. For a moment, Hopkins is carried away by his delight at the coming of spring. But the resurgence of life serves only to remind Hopkins of his own sterility – a sterility of feeling marked by the failure to produce poetry. However, “plaintive” though the ending is the ray of hope is clearly perceptible.

Finally, it is a relief to turn from the bewildering, obscure poems of Hopkins to turn to this one which is remarkable for its clarity and lucidity. There is nothing either in the vocabulary or in the syntax here to baffle us. Some irregularities are there, of course: for instance: “birds build- but not I build.”

The word ‘mine’ at the beginning of Line 14 too does not fit into the construction of the sentence. But on the whole the poem is easy enough, despite our unfamiliarity with “fretty chervil” which is a kind of wild plant with finely indented leaves.