

Hopkins and
elizabeth bishop:
evidence of "god's
grandeur" in "filling
station"



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In his essay "Action and Repose—Gerard Manley Hopkins's influence in the Poems of Elizabeth Bishop," Ben Howard notes the strong influence Hopkins had on poems like "The Prodigal" and "The Fish," by Elizabeth Bishop. Another one of Bishop's poems that seems to draw heavily, both thematically and stylistically, from Hopkins is "Filling Station," which describes a dirty gas station and the family that owns it. In its exploration of the dirt that man smears all over his environment, the poem seems to imitate several elements from Hopkins's "God's Grandeur." The most obvious connection between "God's Grandeur" and "Filling Station" is its shared subject matter. The first line of Bishop's poem, "Oh, but it is dirty!" (1) directly reflects the world "seared with trade, bleared, smeared with toil" that Hopkins describes (6). Additionally, just as Hopkins's poem focuses on the fact that it is "man" who causes this dirtiness (7), Bishop describes the "Father" and the "greasy sons" as the embodiment of the station's grime (7, 11). Finally, the most compelling image that Bishop takes from Hopkins is that of God's grandeur as "the ooze of oil / Crushed" (3-4). The words "oil" and "grease" permeate the poem, and Bishop even employs the word "crushed" in the third stanza, directly evoking Hopkins's line. Bishop takes Hopkins's image of oozing oil, however, and turns it on its head, using it to represent not the power of God (as it does in the Hopkins poem), but the influence of man. In addition, Bishop's use of the oil image differs from Hopkins's in that in "God's Grandeur," it is the action of crushing the olive and producing the oil that gives the image its significance; in "Filling Station," however, the oil stagnates in a "disturbing, over-all / black translucency" (4-5). In addition to appropriating Hopkins's subject matter of man's dirt, Bishop also employs some of his well-known stylistic features.

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The most significant of these is the creation of hyphenated, compound adjectives. They appear in Bishop's poem in lines like "oil-soaked, oil-permeated," and "grease-impregnated" (3, 17-8). Though these compound adjectives do not specifically appear in "God's Grandeur," they are prominent in many of Hopkins's other poems. "The Windhover" has perhaps the best examples of these compound descriptors in that it features a "dapple-dawn-drawn falcon" and ends with the image of "blue-bleak embers" (2, 13). Bishop and Hopkins also both employ strings of adjectives to describe the same noun: in Hopkins, the world is "seared...bleared, smeared" (6), while in Bishop the oil around the station is "disturbing, over-all black" (4-5). Finally, Bishop's poem perhaps appears to make some use of Hopkins's sprung rhythm. All the lines have either 3 or 4 major stresses, suggesting a more organized metrical scheme than free verse. At least some of the lines, such as "Somebody embroïdered the dóily. / Somebody wáters the plánt, / or óils it, máybe. Sómebody," with their consistent pattern of three stresses and varying numbers and patterns of unstressed syllables, seem to be in sprung rhythm, unmistakably reflecting Hopkins's influence. While "God's Grandeur" and "Filling Station" begin by describing filthy scenes, both poems feature a volta or turn at the last stanza. In Hopkins, this turn occurs at the start of the sestet with the phrase, "And for all this" (11). The sestet focuses on how the presence of the "Holy Ghost" in nature maintains a "dearest freshness" in spite of man's blackening influence (13, 10). In Bishop, the description of the filling station moves to the family's porch, decorated with a "doily" and a "big hirsute begonia" (30, 27); the presence of the doily, which "somebody embroidered" and which adds a personal touch to the scene, causes Bishop to reconsider her initial

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assessment of the 'dirty' filling station and focus on its unique aspects (34). The poem's turn, like in "God's Grandeur," may also revolve around the presence of nature; the family's porch not only introduces the begonia, but it also holds the doily, "embroidered in daisy stitch / with marguerites" (31-2). As a result, for Bishop as well as for Hopkins, nature reminds one of the "dearest freshness deep down things." The scene on the porch also alludes to the Hopkinsian idea of individuality or unique inscape as the main source of something's worth. Indeed, the turn in Bishop's poem comes about in the realization that "somebody embroidered the doily. / Somebody waters the plant," and that these objects are special precisely because they belong to this particular family (34-5). Another feature of the porch is a comic book, which provides "the only note of color— / of certain color" (22-3, emphasis mine). This seems to point to the idea that this filling station, as the sum of its individual parts, has haeciettas, that which differentiates it from all other gas stations. In the final stanza, with the act of "water[ing] the plant, or oil[ing] it, maybe," and the movement of the "rows of cans," the poem's predominant sense of stagnation is lost (35-6, 37); instead, the newly-appreciated filling station takes on the positive sense of movement, the "flam[ing] out" and "gather[ing] to a greatness," that characterizes Hopkins's vision of the "grandeur of God" (2, 3, 1). Just as Howard notes in the title of his essay, it is this contrast between "action and repose" that marks the ultimate influence of Hopkins on Bishop.