The Golden Echo: Old English, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and the lyrics that stick in our heads

Abstract

Why do certain words, lines of poetry, and snippets of song-lyrics get stuck fast in our minds?

In England before the coming of written language, the Anglo-Saxons depended upon memorability to keep a literary culture alive. In their oral poetic tradition, words are organized to create alliteration, assonance, and meter – all patterns of sounds and stresses that aided memorization and created an effect pleasing to the ear.

Nine hundred years later, a Jesuit priest and poet named Gerard Manley Hopkins was among the first in centuries to study the Old English language during a revival of its study at the University of Oxford. His poetry is uniquely memorable and sound-driven: both autobiographical evidence and the experience of reading it aloud indicate that his work is more music than message, meant to be spoken and not merely viewed on the page. It effortlessly remains in the ear of the hearer, repeating in the mind like lyrics to a pop song.

This research explores the connection between Hopkins’s poetry and the Old English oral poetic tradition. What can sound-patterns repeated nine hundred years apart reveal about the memorability of words and poetry? Through a biographical study of Hopkins’s scholarship, a phonological analysis of sound-patterns in both his poetry and surviving Old English works, and a consideration for lines and lyrics that exhibit the same patterns today, the essential connection between sound-pattern and memory arises. The results show that the same lines that get stuck in our heads today have been doing so for more than a thousand years – and that “catchiness” can be reproduced in both word and song.