

REVIEWS

Easter 2003: a time when Larkin comes into his own

*Night of sadness : Morn of gladness evermore.
Eia! eia!
After many troubles sore,
Morn of gladness evermore, and evermore.*

(This Christmas/Epiphany carol, adapted from “Resonet in laudibus” (*Piae Cantiones*, 1585), may yet be found in its anglicised version, in *The Cowley Carol Book*. We used to sing it, with heart and voice, at Prep-school carol services, in the late 1940s.)

*My flesh in hope shall rest,
And for a season slumber:
Till trump from east to west
Shall wake the dead in number.*

(Anglicised words written for the tune of *Hoe groot de vrugten zijn*, from David’s Psalmen, Amsterdam, 1685. We, that is, the choir, sang it from the Gallery, on Easter mornings, at St Mary’s Church, the Boltons, West London.)

In his “End Column” for the *Daily Telegraph* (April 4th) A. N. Wilson confessed:

It is a curious fact, but if I want a poet who will get me in an
Easter frame of mind,
I turn not to [George Herbert, Milton, W. H. Auden, etc.], but
to that out-and-out
atheist and self-confessed nihilist Philip Larkin.

Mr Wilson goes on to quote Larkin’s three-stanza-poem, “The
Trees”, with its sougning conclusion:

*Last year is dead, they seem to say,
begin afresh, afresh, afresh.*

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There is more than one curious fact here; and a number of interesting questions surface. Auden, “an Orthodox Christian poet”, we are told, “‘believed’ in a risen Christ.” That is, we are not told that he *actually believed* in him, but that he ‘believed’ in him—a qualification calculated to bring Auden comfortingly closer to his perplexed post-modern readers, who find it impossible, now, to stand up and say “I believe” (not simply in the C of E Creed and rubric, but even, I dare say, in . . . well, anything). T. S. Eliot, a poet who seems to have made himself finally unpopular (with the sort of “intellectual” reader who admired his scepticism of the 1920s) by confessing—at least, to the extent of attending various West London “High Anglican” churches—the Christian faith, is not mentioned in Mr Wilson’s “Easter” context. A question of column inches? Or is Eliot too obscure, too mystical, for the coffee-table?

But to the curious facts, and questions.

What *is* “an Easter frame of mind”? Of what nature is the compulsion of a man-who-cannot-believe-in-the Christian message of “the Resurrection” to get into an Easter frame of mind? What is an “Easter frame of mind”, for him? What are its origins? What will it accomplish for him?

What is it (other than the grisly turmoil of the Cromwellian period) that separates, say, George Herbert’s lyrical acceptance of the Gospels’ resurrection doctrine from a scepticism which claimed Milton (so Mr Wilson alleges) “in grown-up life”, so that he “abandoned orthodox Christianity, as his *De Doctrina Christiana* proves, and became a sort of Judæo-Stoic.” Of course, we don’t *know* that he died in the sure and certain hope (as the Prayer Book puts it) of the resurrection; by the same token, we don’t know that he didn’t. William Empson’s book *Milton’s God*, hilarious as it often is, marshals its assault on the assumption that it is Christianity, not Scepticism, which Milton champions. But perhaps, like Auden, old Milton just used to like bashing out hymns on the chamber organ in his house, to please himself and his visitors, because they reminded him of boyhood Sundays, of “Faith”. Philip Larkin’s last words (to the nurse who held his hand *in extremis*) were: “I am going to the inevitable.”

Mr Wilson does not, one assumes, disassociate himself from the rational uncertainties of “grown-up life”; in other words, he too has abandoned orthodox Christianity. What does he mean, then, by “an Easter frame of mind”? What is left for us, when the Creed (especially in its post-ASB formulations) dies on our lips and we “no longer believe in Christ’s resurrection as a historical reality”? Ah. Then the “great [Christian] festival of rebirth and coming back to life” is simply something we associate with “the return to earth of the spring”. Why am I reminded of that 1920s Underground poster for May, showing Kenwood (slim young women, deckchairs—as if by magic etc.)?

... Where the dogs play,
Where the larks sing,

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Where the rabbits sport
And where you too can play and sing and sport.

There. Isn't that nice?

So that's it? I have to suggest that the "spring" on which Mr Wilson focuses is not the dangerously ambiguous, savagely pagan, thing celebrated by Stravinsky; nor do any Hughes-ian images spoil the picture. This must be a spring of frisking lambs and greening trees. A spring which can reconcile us to "pushing up the daisies", as we used to hear folk say—our dateless dissolution. The haunting bathos of the Underground's Kenwood blurb has already set the tone for our embarrassing predicament. If we can no longer believe in the great Gospels, what makes us think we can say anything meaningful about "spring"? If this is what we mean by "an Easter frame of mind", let's not claim that it embodies any sort of substitute for the Faith. For the Faith is "the transmission of the living body of Christ himself" and "to enter into it is to share his suffering as the essential preliminary to receiving his glory", as Edward Norman (*Out of the Depths*, Continuum Press) reminds us. Painful as the fact is, there simply is no "Easter frame of mind" for the non-Christian. Edward Norman doubts if the real thing enters at all into the consciousness of most modern Christians: "The religion of Jesus is no longer perceived as a body of teaching, but as a sensation for emotional gratification." What is needed, says the Chancellor of York Minster, "is a call to the Holy Spirit". And I accept that. As someone who can no longer (after fifty years of saying it) stand up and say "I believe ..." I accept that there can be no "Easter frame of mind" for me. The attempt to create, or infuse, such a thing is not spiritual striving, it is sheer sentimentality; sentimental moping. "Moping up England", that was the cruelly witty expression a pupil of mine came up with after two or three of Larkin's train-journey poems.

As for Larkin's "Trees" poem, "one of the most beautiful poems in our language", according to Mr Wilson, well many years of school-teaching familiarised me with the sense of uncomprehending glumness (not, I hardly need to point out, confined to this piece of Larkin's in particular) which most young readers, after being put to the effort of *reading* it, brought away from "The Trees". It had no more to offer them than Eliot's "April is the cruellest month" line, of which it offers barely more than an extended paraphrase. But as far as I am concerned, the trees' greenness is *not* "a kind of grief", and I acknowledge nothing tender, or pathetic, or heroic, or noble, or wise, in saying it is. *Begin afresh, afresh, afresh*. A call to "begin afresh" is not the same as a call to the Holy Spirit. And look where it brings us, this determination to save—if not all appearances—an appearance of some sort. Flinching from Herbert's "quick-eyed Love",

*Love bade me welcome, but my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust, and sinne ... ("Love")*

we pass with relief to Larkin's unresting castles, that "thresh" (isn't

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it sexy!) in full-grown thickness, every May.

This is not Playing the Game, is it? It is not gentle, not bonny. Questioning the *donné* of a poem was about the worst thing you could do, in the “academic” poetry-reading circles I used to be admitted to. It showed you were not just “not in the vein”, but also barbarous, really. *I’ll get my coat*. And for the *donné*, isn’t letting last year be dead and beginning afresh the best most of us can rise to, now, at the start of another, almost post-Christian, millennium? Well, perhaps. But in the wider picture, Larkin’s “Trees” is no more (no less) beautiful than, say, Tennyson’s “Tears ...”.

I am no longer a teacher, or the parent of youngsters. Do children read poetry, still? I don’t know. Are they given the Faith (which Matthew Arnold predicted poetry would, in many lives, replace)? If they are Moslems, or Jews, maybe. But little English Christians (the non-Catholics anyway) are required only to learn about religions so as to avoid political incorrectness and racial prejudice. Who now opens his mouth in a parable: who declares hard sentences of old, which we have heard and known: and such as our fathers have told us? that we should not hide them from the children of generations to come? ... To the intent that when they came up, they might shew *their children* the same? If the wonderful words I’ve just quoted don’t move you as much as trees do, you haven’t the root of an “Easter frame of mind” in you, not by a long chalk.

“If the Bible is the great book of life [a friend encourages me], why isn’t the best literature a continuation of that, that tells you how to live?” Oh, a good question: what a good question! But who, out there, wants his dried tubers, his nice, dry weekly column, his poetree-pleeeze poems, his coffee-table, disturbed and rained on like that? No. I should think not.

Best Seller

or

The Triumph of Cliché

It must be true to say that, if you don’t read a book to the end, you might miss something good, but what if it’s like plunging your head into boiling water?

Dr Iannis had enjoyed a satisfactory day in which none of his patients had died or

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got any worse. He had attended a surprisingly easy calving,
lanced one abscess,
extracted a molar, dosed one lady of easy virtue with
Salvarsan, performed an
unpleasant but spectacularly fruitful enema, and had produced
a miracle by a feat
of medical prestidigitation.

This facetious style introduces the cliché, of that engagingly
backward Mediterranean world where distinctions between doctors,
dentists and vets are easily blurred, and a sympathetically knowing
reader can enjoy a Rabelaisian moment provided by the
conventionally supercilious “surprisingly fruitful”. Dr Iannis is a
cliché in himself: benevolent, wise and having the intellectual reach
to be writing a history of Cephalonia.

It may be that the political-historical ground upon which the
novel is based appeals to the current orthodoxy but such “political
maturity” seems to be compatible with an extraordinary literary
naïvety. “Absolutely brilliant”, says Jeremy Paxman in *The Sunday
Express*, which presumably includes the schoolboy psychology of
this account of Mussolini:

Come here. Yes, you. Come here. Now tell me
something; which is my best profile, right or left? Really,
do you think so? I am not so sure. I think that perhaps the
lower lip has a better set on the other side. O, you agree
do you? I suppose you agree with everything I say? O,
you do. Then how am I supposed to rely on your
judgement? What if I say that France is made of bakelite,
is that true? Are you going to agree with me? What do
you mean, yes sir, no sir, I don't know sir; what kind of
answer is that? Are you a cretin or something? Go and
fetch me some mirrors so that I can arrange to see for
myself.

Heartening as it was, during the Second World War, to be told that
Mussolini was a pompous self-dramatising ass, that Hitler was an
evil demagogue, the joke has become stale—even with “bakelite” to
assure us the account is chronologically authentic.

Any cliché you can think of could have its place in this book:

New empires were now lapping against the shores of
the old. In a short time it would no longer be a
question of the conflagration of a valley and the death
by fire of lizards, hedgehogs, and locusts; it would be
a question of the incineration of Jews and
homosexuals, gypsies and the mentally afflicted. It
would be a case of Guernica and Abyssinia writ large
across the skies of Europe and North Africa,
Singapore and Korea. The self-appointed superior
races, drunk on Darwin and nationalist hyperbole,

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besotted with eugenics and beguiled by myth, were winding up machines of genocide that soon would be unleashed upon a world already weary to the heart of such infinite foolery and contemptible vainglory.

Journalese, cliché, cant. Yet: “an emotional, funny, stunning novel which swings with wide smoothness between joy and bleakness, personal lives and history ... it’s lyrical and angry, satirical and earnest” (*The Observer*); or, “Louis de Bernières is in the direct line that runs through Dickens and Evelyn Waugh ...” (A. S. Byatt, parodying F. R. Leavis—whereas, if Leavis *were* to be invoked, shouldn’t it be his analysis of cliché, in the lecture on C. P. Snow?).

This being a contemporary novel we are given the homosexual angle, but through a stereotype, a set of attitudes, accompanied by an idiom that is self-consciously heroic in the “mediterranean” style: “I Carlo Piero Guercio, write these words with the intention that they should be found after my death, when neither scorn nor loss of reputation may dog my steps nor blemish me ... etc.” Dr Iannis has a daughter, Pelagia, a cliché of nubile femininity:

She left off slicing a pepper, brushed a stray hair from her face, and replied, “You’re as fond of him as I am.” “In the first place, I am not fond of the ruminant, and in the second place you will not argue with me. In my day no daughter argued with her father. I will not permit it.” Pelagia put one hand on her hip and pulled a wry face. “Papas,” she said, “it still is your day. You aren’t dead yet, are you? Anyway, the goat is fond of you.” Dr Iannis turned away, disarmed and defeated. It was a most damnable thing when a daughter pulled feminine wiles upon her father and reminded him of her mother at the same time.

Isn’t every gesture, every turn of phrase, every thought, a fragment in a mosaic of commonplaces? A gathering of literary and cinematic memories?

Pelagia has an admirer, Mandras, accidentally shot in the backside by a showman, a giant of a man, the *pièce de résistance* of whose act is to fire an ancient cannon from the hip. Mandras’s buttocks would be marked for life with certain terracotta spots—all part of that zany Mediterranean world shortly to be shattered by war, a world of cardboard characters and *Beano* jokes. Do we care what happens to it? Doesn’t it travesty the real people who suffered that fate?

Father Arsenios is the local priest, a fat drunk stereotype. In the following passage, he has been drinking the wine his parishioners leave him (among other things) to make up for indignities they heap upon him:

Father Arsenios peeped through the hole to ensure that he would not be heard, lifted his cassock, and released a formidable

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stream of urine into the bottle. It hammered against the glass of the bottom, and then splashed and hissed as the bottle filled. He noted with alarm that as the neck of the bottle narrowed, it filled at an exponential rate. “They should make bottles uniformly cylindrical,” reflected the priest, and was promptly taken by surprise. He rubbed the splashback into the dust of the floor with his foot, and realised that he would have to wait in the church until the damp patches on his robes had dried. “A priest,” he thought, “cannot be seen to have pissed himself.” He put the bottle of urine down and reseated himself. Someone came in and left him a pair of socks.

This is certainly better written, and his last thought makes a good joke. But the description of vomiting that follows, which is meant I suppose to be “Rabelaisian” or “Joycean”—Dr Iannis “beheld the supine priest, helplessly recumbent in a pool of urine and vomit”—would be disgusting, if there were any life in it. Compare it with Joyce’s description in *Ulysses* of the interior of a Dublin eating-house at lunchtime, where disgust, filtered through Bloom’s fastidiously “scientific” mind, is turned into comedy. Here all we've got is schoolboy humour.

A related passage is a politically correct account of Pelagia’s menstruation. She is sitting on the toilet. She thinks her period is about due and, in a Molly Bloom type reverie, though couched in syntactically formal prose, she soliloquises:

Poor little Chrysoula, poor little girl, what a terrible thing to happen. Papas coming home late at night, shaking with rage and distress, all because Chrysoula got to the age of fourteen and no one had ever told her that one day she would bleed, and she is so horrified, she thinks that she has some loathsome secret disease, and she can’t tell anyone, and she takes rat-poison. And Papas is so angry that he takes Chrysoula’s mother by the neck and shakes her like a dog shakes a rabbit, and Chrysoula’s father just goes out with the boys as usual and comes home drunk as if nothing had happened, and underneath Chrysoula’s bed is a pile of paper as thick as a bible, full of her prayers to St Gerasimos for a cure, and the prayers are so sad and desperate that they make you weep.

The proper sentiments, the proper thoughts! And good old Dr Iannis (though I don’t see why he doesn’t put the matter right himself). Could this be a sample of that “whole-hearted prose” (*The Scotsman*)? that “fluid and elegant writer” (*Mail on Sunday*)? who “tells one hell of a story, and he tells it straight, with only interludes of high comedy [why high?] to interrupt the flow” (*The Spectator*)? part of a “vast tapestry woven in tiny, colourful, intricate detail” (*Irish Times*)? by someone who “has only to look into his world, one senses, for it to rush into reality, colours and touch and taste” (A. S. Byatt)?