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THE CONCEPTION OF TIME IN PHILIP LARKIN'S 'CHURCH GOING': WHAT THE MANUSCRIPTS TELL US

Philip Larkin's 'Church Going' has been extensively anthologised since its first appearance in 1955. The author, with characteristic self-effacement, expressed his doubts about its merits,¹ but the poem has nonetheless been widely acclaimed and discussed by literary critics.² Like most of Larkin's best poems, 'Church Going' has the virtue of being readily accessible, at least on the surface: the speaker visits a church and initially expresses scepticism about the church as an institution, but then goes on to ponder the important role it has played down the centuries, to muse about what its fate might ultimately be, and also to consider why it is that he is given to visiting churches. Closer reading reveals certain puzzling features beneath the surface, though – not least the way Larkin deals with time in the poem.

Having in stanza 3 sketched a future for the grander churches as museums* (the rest being let 'rent-free to rain and sheep'), in stanza 4 Larkin considers the possibility of another (somewhat less formal) role for the now-defunct churches. Rather than becoming museums, they will perhaps retain, in a derelict, increasingly incomprehensible form, 'Power of some sort or other'. Stanza 4 is one of the most puzzling and interesting of the entire poem, and here the manuscripts are of assistance.*

The central puzzle in this stanza is Larkin's portrayal of the future. The bulk of the poem (after the rather flippant first two stanzas, which are temporally located in the historical present) is a projection into the future: what, the speaker asks, will become of churches many years hence? The period he has in mind is not explicitly indicated, but the general thrust and tenor of the poem suggest several decades, perhaps even a century after the mid-1950s, when Larkin was actually composing the poem.

What is curious, though, is that this future time is not envisaged as some brave new world of dazzling science and technological progress, of rationalism and reason. Stanza 4 instead portrays a regression into darkness, superstition, riddles and decay. That Larkin was deliberately presenting a reversion to a pre-scientific era is evident in the details of the evolution of this stanza in the manuscripts. He made five attempts at it before it settled into its final published form (presented as item 6 below). Each of the five drafts was heavily emended, the five in effect giving rise to 13 different versions. In the interests of conciseness

and clarity, though, I will present only the most complete version of each of the five drafts, not all of Larkin's various attempts at them.

Table 1. Draft versions of stanza 4

<p>1</p> <p>And if, in spite of that, people will come To let their child touch a particular stone, To wish away a cancer, or on some Advised night see walking a lost one; For most beliefs will lie down side by side, Like these, and flower rota: Mrs Croome</p>	<p>2</p> <p>And whether, notwithstanding, men will come To let a child touch a particular stone, To charm away a chancre, or on some Advised night see walking a dead one Power of one sort or other will persist Though at the end approaches only come for whom The weedy floors and arches faintly reek Like an abandoned earth of things dispersed. The frail cruse walls already helplessly leak</p>
<p>3</p> <p>Or whether, notwithstanding, men will come To make their children touch a particular stone, To charm away a tumour, or on some Advised night see walking a dead one Power of some sort or other must go on, Though at the end they come only for whom The weedy pavements still carry a reek Like a deserted set of something gone. Already the frail walls are broken and leak</p>	<p>4</p> <p>Power of some sort or other will go on Without being understood</p> <p>Power of some sort or other may go on Without being noticed surely</p> <p>Power of some sort or other may go on Unnoticed for a time</p> <p>Power of some sort or other may go on A little while in an enfeebled form But superstition, like belief, must die</p>
<p>5</p> <p>Or, after dark, will dubious women come To make their children touch a particular stone; To charm away a cancer, or on some Advised night see walking a dead one? Power of some sort or other will go on, In games, in riddles, seemingly at random; But superstition, like belief, must die And what remains when disbelief has gone? Well, the last visitors may come, as I,</p>	<p>6 (Final published version)</p> <p>Or, after dark, will dubious women come To make their children touch a particular stone; Pick simples for a cancer; or on some Advised night see walking a dead one? Power of some sort or other will go on In games, in riddles, seemingly at random; But superstition, like belief, must die, And what remains, when disbelief has gone? Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky,</p>

Although the stanza evolves considerably from the first cluster of drafts to the final published version, it is significant that from the very outset Larkin's choice of diction suggests that future generations might well resemble ones from several hundred years back. In other words, he appears to hold the view that successive generations will not progress in a linear, ever-more-advanced way, but will instead suffer setbacks and revert to previous belief systems.

How sure can we be, though, that Larkin was deliberately suggesting this regression? Tellingly, from the very first draft (item 1 above), particularly in its second line ('touch a

particular stone’), there is the suggestion of superstition being abroad again, of a reversion to a pre-scientific mode of belief. ‘To wish away a cancer’ likewise suggests a regression from modern medical science to an earlier era of chance and superstition – from modern medicine to wishful thinking, to put it another way. The idea of reversion is also suggested in the use of the archaic ‘chancre’ and ‘simples’ instead of their modern equivalents ‘cancer’ and ‘herbs’. That people will attempt simply to ‘wish away’ or ‘charm away’ this dread disease, or, as in the final draft, optimistically ‘pick simples’ to cure cancer, conveys this sense of regression very clearly.

An ‘advised night’ on which to ‘see walking a dead one’ (‘lost one’ in draft 1) suggests a belief in ghosts and traditional times at which they can be seen, while ‘Power of some sort of other [. . .] go[ing] on’ in ‘games’ and ‘riddles’ also suggests a recursion to earlier modes of belief. That power manifests itself in these ways ‘seemingly at random’ reinforces the overall sense that this future world will be one in which chance and inexplicability, rather than greater understanding and scientific predictability, will prevail.

The point, then, is that a close examination of stanza 4 of ‘Church Going’ (with the help of the manuscripts), shows that Larkin’s view of the future is a particularly bleak one. To focus on religion, the main preoccupation of the poem: the decline of religion will not occur, in Larkin’s view, because of the triumph of reason and science over unscientific belief systems. Instead

The last three lines of the stanza contain yet another puzzle, though. The attempt to describe who (what kind of person) will still be drawn to the ruins of churches (see versions 2 and 3 as well as the stray last line of version 4 of stanza 4 above) ultimately becomes the burden of stanzas 5 and 6, and is displaced by a focus on what happens when beliefs die. Three attempts at expressing this latter thought are made – two in version 4 of the stanza and one (repeated verbatim) in version 5 (which is, barring the comma after ‘remains’, precisely what the final published version becomes):

Table 2. Draft versions of the last three lines of stanza 4

<p>4a</p> <p>But superstition, like belief, must die, And what is left when its old rhymes are gone? Only the remnants [. . . incomplete]</p>	<p>4b</p> <p>But superstition, like belief, must die, And what remains when disbelief has gone? Well, the last visitors may come, as I,</p>
<p>5</p> <p>But superstition, like belief, must die, And what remains, when disbelief has gone? Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttness, sky,</p>	

Having sketched a future in which there is a reversion to superstition, Larkin appears to move in the opposite direction in the last lines of the stanza: here we seem to be in a secular, sceptical world, one in which all superstitions and beliefs are gone, and all that remains is brute, undeniable materiality ('Grass, weedy pavement, bramble, buttress, sky'). There is no suggestion, though, that this will be a world of reason and scientific advance. Rather, a dystopian future is envisioned – a neglected, decaying social world characterised by the stark imperatives of mere survival.

There is a real surprise in the last lines of stanza 4, though. The shift from 'what is left when *its* [i.e. superstition's] *old rhymes* are gone?' (4a) to "what remains when *disbelief* has gone?" (4b) is sudden and unheralded. The first formulation here is consistent with the line that goes before: 'superstition' and 'old rhymes' are of a piece, in other words. But 'superstition' and 'disbelief' are polar opposites. Why the abrupt shift? Here the manuscripts do not help us: quite simply, 'old rhymes' is suddenly supplanted by 'disbelief'.

First-time readers of the poem are likely to misread lines 7 and 8 of stanza 4 as: "But superstition, like belief, must die, / and what remains when *belief* has gone?" This appears logical and intuitive: there is *belief*, and then, in time, this same *belief* goes. Such readers will then track back and discover with some surprise that 'disbelief' actually stands in the place of 'belief': there is *belief*, and it is *disbelief* that then goes.

Was this an inspired change by Larkin? Certainly, the contrastive pairing of 'belief' and 'disbelief' is likely to catch the reader's attention. But it does also introduce some interpretative difficulty. Perhaps the best interpretation of these lines is one that is consistent with the bleak succession of things that Larkin delineates more broadly in the poem as a whole: the pre-1950s (perhaps pre-war) era of widespread adherence to religious faiths like Christianity, followed by a collapse in organised religion and a reversion to the occult – and then, when even this fades, a post-belief/disbelief world in which mere brute survival is all that counts. For it makes no sense to be a 'disbeliever' when there is no one around who 'believes' in the first place.

Notes

1. In a letter to Monica Jones, with whom he had a relationship for some 40 years, Larkin remarks that she put her finger on a 'flaw' in the poem: 'a lack of strong continuity – it is dangerously like *chat*, 4th leader stuff'. And a few months later, when he was assembling the 23-poem manuscript of *The Less Deceived*, he remarked: 'I can't decide about *Churchgoing* – it's one of the 23, but I'm not sure'. See Philip Larkin, *Letters to Monica*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber, 2010), 112; 137.

2. There are too many discussions of this famous poem to mention here, but perhaps the most extensive and systematic of them is R.N. Parkinson's 'To Keep Our Metaphysics Warm: A Study of "Church Going" by Philip Larkin' (*Critical Survey*, 5(3) 1971: 224-233). Parkinson discusses stanza 4 of the poem in some detail (as he does the others), but does not remark on Larkin's

Philip Larkin's biographer and literary co-executor Andrew Motion notes that Larkin began drafting "Church Going" on 24 April 1954 (1993: 241). This first draft consists of 21 pages, and when it was abandoned on 24 May 1954 (the date Larkin himself jotted in his workbook – end of April, says Motion, 241), only the first four of the eventual seven stanzas were complete (or near-complete). Larkin took it up again in mid-July 1954, according to Motion (241), and completed it on 28 July 1954 (again, Larkin's date in his workbook). This second set of drafts consists of eight pages, and includes the three final stanzas of the poem in finished, or near-finished, form.

The 29 pages of manuscripts contain numerous details that offer insights into the various interpretative complexities of the poem.

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