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LARKIN'S 'CHURCH GOING': A SOURCE

James Underwood

Philip Larkin admired and read for pleasure T.S. Eliot's 1935 verse drama *Murder in the Cathedral*.¹ He included two passages from the play in his 1973 *Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse*, and made at least two attempts at the verse drama form in his lifetime.² It is surprising, therefore, that no critic has noted *Murder in the Cathedral* as a source for 'Church Going', one of the major poems of Larkin's *oeuvre*. Both Raphaël Ingelbien and Archie Burnett detect echoes of Eliot in the poem; however, both point to Eliot's *Four Quartets* as a potential influence, whilst Ingelbien constructs Larkin's narrator as a kind of hapless Prufrockian figure.³ The debt to Eliot's play remains unnoticed, despite sharing characteristics at the levels of language and theme.

Both texts are 'about' the Church in crisis, though the contexts differ. Eliot's crises are historical *and* immediate: they are the assassination of Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of

¹ Philip Larkin, 'An Interview with *Paris Review*', *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982* (London, 1983), 66.

² Philip Larkin, *Early Poems and Juvenilia*, ed. A.T. Tolley (London, 2005), 317-46.

³ Philip Larkin, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Archie Burnett (London, 2012), 368-73; and Raphaël Ingelbien, *Misreading England: Poetry and Nationhood Since the Second World War* (Amsterdam, 2002), 22.

Canterbury (the subject of his play), and the role of the Church in the early twentieth century (arguably the real subject of his play). For Larkin, it is the decline of the Church in both a spiritual and material sense: his poem is as much about the decline in *church-going* as it is literally about *the church going*. It is interesting to note that Larkin was partly prompted to write his poem after reading an appeal by a later Archbishop of Canterbury to save Britain's church buildings from decay.⁴

Confronted with the physical space of a church, whether Canterbury Cathedral, or the imagined one of Larkin's poem, both writers pose the question: why come *here*? Indeed, 'here' becomes a significant verbal and theatrical device in *Murder in the Cathedral*, recurring throughout the play. Similarly, Larkin's narrator pronounces "'Here endeth' much more loudly than I'd meant".⁵ 'Are we drawn by danger? Is it the knowledge of safety, that draws / our feet / Towards the Cathedral?' asks the Chorus at the opening of Eliot's play.⁶ The narrator of 'Church Going' concludes their visit 'much at a loss', 'Wondering what to look for'. Further links between these texts are to be found in the ways in which their authors seek to answer those questions.

In one passage from *Murder in the Cathedral* (the first of the two selected by Larkin for his *Oxford* anthology), the church-setting is celebrated as a space in which the landmark moments of human existence are unified: 'We have seen births, deaths and marriages', pronounces the Chorus.⁷ But with their beloved Archbishop in grave danger, 'a great fear is upon us', and this fear is described as 'A fear like birth and death, when we see birth and

⁴ Larkin, *Complete Poems*, 369-70.

⁵ Larkin, *Complete Poems*, 35-7.

⁶ T.S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral, The Complete Poems & Plays* (London, 2004), 239.

⁷ Philip Larkin (ed.), *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse* (Oxford, 1973), 247-9.

death alone / In a void apart'.⁸ The disintegration of faith and stability is therefore related to the divorce of social rites normally practised in this one space. In 'Church Going', this list of rituals is merely rearranged; the Church is acknowledged as a place which 'held unspoil / So long and equably what since is found / Only in separation – marriage, and birth, / And death'. For both Eliot and Larkin, then, the declining status of the Church in the twentieth century has the serious consequence of a separation of social rites, a splintering of human existence.

At the end of Eliot's play, the Chorus once again praises the sacred space which the Cathedral building represents:

For wherever a saint has dwelt, wherever a martyr has given his

blood for the blood of Christ,

There is holy ground, and the sanctity shall not depart from it

Though armies trample over it, though sightseers come with

guide-books looking over it...⁹

In Larkin's poem, one can detect a strong myrrhic whiff of those lines by Eliot, particularly 'Or, after dark, will dubious women come...'. Eliot's sightseers clutching guide-books could also be Larkin's 'crew / That tap and jot and know what rood-lofts were', or his 'ruin-bibber, randy for antique', or his 'Christmas addict'. More generally, Larkin's poem shares with Eliot's play a similar accumulation of clauses, and the same blend of anachronistic syntax and vocabulary with more contemporary, demotic speech.

⁸ Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*, 244.

⁹ Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*, 281-2.

Of course, Larkin's treatment of the church, whether as celebration or elegy, is a much more secular one than Eliot's, who in 1927 had converted to Anglicanism. There could be no poems about Christian martyrdom within Larkin's worldview. But where these two writers do meet is on the 'serious earth' (Larkin's phrase) which the Church represents. Whatever the status of the Christian faith in the twentieth century, each writer finds a social significance haunting this holy ground.

It should be said that reading Larkin's poem in dialogue with Eliot's play has implications beyond a merely 'enriched' interpretation of the former. There has been a recent turn in Larkin scholarship, towards a fuller appreciation of the cacophony of citations to be found in this poet's work. Larkin himself affected to deplore Modernism, as represented by the heinous triumvirate of 'Parker, Pound, Picasso', and was not reticent in denouncing what he called the 'common myth-kitty'.¹⁰ Nevertheless, John Osborne's 2008 monograph broke the critical orthodoxy by extensively excavating the vast site of Larkin's citations, showing his reliance upon, as well as his rebellion against, Modernism. 'As for Eliot', Osborne writes, 'his influence is so pervasive that it is possible to detect echoes of his work in nearly forty Larkin poems'.¹¹ Burnett's authoritative edition of the *Complete Poems* added approximately 200 citations to the 120 already detected, and in a recent talk to the Philip Larkin Society, Burnett said he has added to this figure since its 2012 publication.¹² Noting the influence of Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, then, adds to the ever-swelling and diverse list of citations

¹⁰ Larkin, 'Introduction to *All What Jazz*', *Required Writing*, 297; Larkin, 'Statement', *Required Writing*, 79.

¹¹ John Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence: A Case of Wrongful Conviction* (Basingstoke, 2008), 56.

¹² Professor Archie Burnett, 'Biography and Poetry in the work of Philip Larkin', Philip Larkin Society, 8 June 2013.

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present in Larkin's poetic *oeuvre*, and further damages the conventional view of his work as monolithically English, untouched by either cosmopolitanism or Modernism.