

Church Going

Once I am sure there's nothing going on
I step inside, letting the door thud shut.
Another church: matting, seats, and stone,
And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut
For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff
Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;
And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,
Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off
My cycle-clips in awkward reverence,

Move forward, run my hand around the font.
From where I stand, the roof looks almost new-
Cleaned or restored? Someone would know: I
don't.

Mounting the lectern, I peruse a few
Hectoring large-scale verses, and pronounce
"Here endeth" much more loudly than I'd meant.
The echoes snigger briefly. Back at the door
I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence,
Reflect the place was not worth stopping for.

Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,
And always end much at a loss like this,
Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,
When churches fall completely out of use
What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep
A few cathedrals chronically on show,
Their parchment, plate, and pyx in locked cases,
And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.
Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?

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,

A shape less recognizable each week,
A purpose more obscure. I wonder who
Will be the last, the very last, to seek
This place for what it was; one of the crew
That tap and jot and know what rood-lofts were?
Some ruin-bibber, randy for antique,
Or Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff
Of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh?
Or will he be my representative,

Bored, uninformed, knowing the ghostly silt
Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground
Through suburb scrub because it held unspilt
So long and equably what since is found
Only in separation - marriage, and birth,
And death, and thoughts of these - for whom was
built

This special shell? For, though I've no idea
What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth,
It pleases me to stand in silence here;

A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognised, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete,
Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious,
And gravitating with it to this ground,
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,
If only that so many dead lie round.

Church Going is a poem published in *The Less Deceived*, Larkin's first important collection of verse which appeared in 1955. In 'Church Going', the speaker abandons his safe comfortable zone and crosses to another that proves to be dangerous. This invasion of forbidden grounds remains most of the time unrealised and virtual except on rare occasions when the narrative persona makes the unguarded gesture and ventures in. 'Church Going' is such an instance. The contemplative calibre, the sophistication of the poem, which emerges as 'a self-ironic meditation on the place of spirituality in a world without God', and in the long run, its ambience of sobriety are widely acknowledged. Larkin's narrator ends up preaching his own version of faith. Nevertheless, the poem is an intellectual crusade to endorse pondering and questioning as the verb 'wonder', three times used in the poem, invites readers to do.

Right from the very first line, the narrator is anxious to assert his agnosticism so that his readers should know beyond doubt that this is not a pilgrimage nor an occasion for piety. He is not a pilgrim, but frequents churches out of habit or curiosity. The various arguments are glued together by the awareness that it is a purely secular visit and that the church is appreciated not for its religious value, but for its aesthetic, architectural, and archeological assets. Indeed these senses are summed up by his next shrewd, but derogatory observation— ‘Another church: matting, seats, and stone, / And little books’— and an inventory of various odds and ends of the church contents unfolds, which earns him justly the title of ‘a wry reporter’.

He does not want to be confused with regular worshippers, yet the title portrays church going in the sense of disappearing as well as churchgoing, only of a peculiar type. The ‘tense, musty, unignorable silence, / Brewed God knows how long’ or habit, and not necessarily a residual faith, imposes the mock solemnity of taking the cycle-clips off. He runs his eyes like a tourist and antiquarian around the furniture and the roof and passes his hands over the font. He ends up confessing his ignorance (‘Someone would know: I don’t’ (p. 36)) at such an insignificant thing as the state of the roof, but it defines an ignorance of a more disconcerting nature. More important, however, is his reflection that ‘the place was not worth stopping for’, pronounced as if to ward off any thoughts contrary to his opening thesis.

For somebody who has lost his faith, stopping by churches must seem nostalgic or even regressive. Therefore, he is keen to shake off the intimation and channel his thoughts into a direction he estimates to be more impersonal and less threatening. The strategic wondering hardly does the trick.

The secular pilgrim is stimulated to explore further, implementing ‘wondering’ or perhaps wandering into what Booth calls ‘a mock-heroic futurist panorama of the Decline of Faith, with perhaps a faint hint of the rationalist prophecies of H. G. Wells behind it.’ Accordingly, the mind runs into such a tight crevice like ‘wondering, too, / When churches fall completely out of use’. So the ‘if’ prospect of ‘a few cathedrals’ kept ‘chronically on show’ for purely aesthetic and archeological ends is taken for granted. His mind tells him that this will be the case if churches fall into disuse, become ‘rent-free to rain and sheep’ or it is his wishful thinking that paints such a desolate future of religion. The question appended: ‘Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?’ then hardly seems a surplus, even when viewed in relevance to or placed almost on par with the ensuing contradictory questions with a mixture of healing and superstitious vocations tagged on. ‘But superstition, like belief, must die’, the narrator admonishes and consoles his faith-bereft self, and feels the victory of skepticism.

A far deeper antithesis is thrust in ‘And what remains when disbelief has gone?’, etching further on the scenario of churches falling into disuse. It is his ‘disbelief’ that lures him to frequent churches so as to double-check, perhaps, the truthfulness of the disbelief that he has embraced. But when disbelief is replaced by indifference or something even more extreme, as when disbelief is dispensed with both as concept and dogma, the church will become indiscernible. Its mass will be gradually overgrown with plants and weeds to the point of disguise and camouflage: ‘A shape less recognisable each week, / A purpose more obscure.’ The mind finds this picture barely sufficing. Until the churches turn virtually into obscure grassy knolls, a speculation unproven so far, they will continue to attract and magnetise.