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A Diminished Thing:
The Changing Role of Religion in the Post-WWII Poetry of Smith, Hughes, and Larkin

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Many historians have concluded the decades between the two world wars to be a time of great social restructuring around Europe. Besides recovering from the unprecedented loss of human life, the wake of political and economic tensions precipitated a general sense of disillusionment around Europe, especially with regards to established systems of influence such as government or the church. The role of religion in British society in particular was being reevaluated for the better half of the century, and the commercial markets' push for products guaranteeing instant gratification only aggravated the discrepancy between belief and the quickly secularizing world. Although devotion still lingered in the background for many, the people of Britain's approach to Christianity became increasingly more interactive, often even scrutinizing the primary tenets of the faith. Three poets in particular, Philip Larkin, Ted Hughes, and Stevie Smith, highlight this dialogue in their writing to determine the necessity of religion and find new ways to adapt it to the changing world they were living in. By comparing Smith's nonsensical musings in "Our Bog is Dood" and "Sunt Leones" to the pithy rhymes of Ted Hughes's "Theology" or Larkin's wry, emotional rhetoric in "High Windows," it is clear that by challenging the fundamentals of Christianity, the poets ultimately conclude that religion is irrelevant to modern life.

Although she openly rejected all forms of organized religion, Stevie Smith's contemporary Philip Larkin noted how "the language and history of the Church of England and its liturgy [were] in her blood," and also played heavily on the themes in her writing; there are echoes of hymns and psalms in her poetry, like the parallel line structure in "Our Bog is Dood" (Schray 53). In "Our Bog is Dood," the narrator's interrogation of the children's ideology exposes the underlying flaws Smith herself sees in Christianity. The poem begins with the repeated phrase "our bog is dood," a deliberately ambiguous subversion of the mantra "God is Good." Smith opposes typical poetic representations by portraying the "darlings'" innocence and youthful devotion, usually positive qualities, as foolishly immature (l. 6). She mocks the children's mindlessly lisped repetition to reemphasize their naïve belief in something before they can even pronounce the words for it, thereby also reducing religion to the realm of child's play. They readily admit their impressions of "Bog" are based solely on wishful thinking rather than on reason, and no "sooner do they demonstrate their piety by bowing their heads...then they turn on each other" over differing perceptions (Najarian 489). When questioned about their Bog, their immediate response is violent, and as "they [grow] a little wild" the meaning of the title begins to change, transforming from the Christian affirmation into the denunciatory "God is Dead" (l. 3). The narrator senses the futility of the debate, "for what was dood, and what their Bog/They never could agree," and in the end, that indecision renders their entire practice meaningless (l. 23-24).

In the final stanza the narrator has left them behind, and walking along the beach declares her freedom from that nonsense. Much of Smith's poignancy comes from her juxtaposition of subtle imagery with overt references to the larger canon of literature, like the Bible, in which she was well versed. For instance, the children's blatantly sacrilegious threat of crucifixion to any

who doubt their practice reinforces their own pettiness towards disputes and the vindictive nature of Christianity itself. The poem closes with the image of a "sea that soon should drown them all/ that never yet drowned" the narrator (l. 29-30). While the ocean's swell can be read as an allusion to the restorative power of water, as seen in the Biblical story of the Ark or the common practice of baptism, it also raises the question of being a nonbeliever during a period of religious purification. Despite being a self-proclaimed agnostic, Smith nevertheless admitted that she often found herself "in danger of falling into belief," and she grapples with this skepticism in many of her works, including the poem "Our Bog Is Dood" (Stallworthy et al. 2373). The "yet" in the final line corresponds to Smith's precarious stance on the brink of belief in a society that has generally accepted Christianity. While her position saves her from "drowning" along with the rest of her peers, her sense of freedom is always tempered by the alienation caused by feeling like an outsider in one's homeland.

Smith later wrote about her tumultuous devotion that she "threw away the sweetness of Christianity and remembered the harsh bones that lay beneath" (qtd. in Bryan). Although her struggle with religion left her wanting for belief in a higher power, the poetry that emerged from that discourse had a large influence on the literary circuit during her time, including on fellow agnostic Philip Larkin whose "own canon contains the "Language of Christianity" that he had ascribed to Smith (Schray 53). Larkin uses many of her techniques to similarly explore the role of religion against the evolving British landscape, but while the hallmark of Smith's poems is Christianity as viewed through the lens of skepticism, Larkin wavers in his appraisal of faith. In an interview once, he distinguished himself from Smith by stating that he was "not someone who lost his faith; [he] never had it" (qtd. in Schray 52). Regardless of this assessment, the abundance of religious imagery in his works seems to imply a different relationship, and critics are quick to view his treatment of belief not as outright denial as he claims, but rather as a "desperate struggle to understand some tangible need" of his peers (Schray 52). Where there is humor to be found in Smith's nursery-like rhymes, Larkin's depiction of religious icons is deeply foreboding and frequently wrought with emotional imagery; unlike Smith, "Larkin's attitude toward traditional Christian belief is rarely bitter or satirical; instead...his characteristic tone regarding the difficulty or impossibility of religious faith...is sadness" (King).

The 1950s, when both Smith and Larkin began using poetry as an outlet has been identified in history as "a period of accelerated decline in faith" (Schray 54). The aftermath of WWII coupled with the onset of mass consumer culture, as symbolized by the "combine harvester" in "High Windows" that consolidated three jobs into one, contributed greatly to the push for secularization and resulted in a society with expectations that simply didn't align with the Christian lifestyle and philosophies (l. 7). It is likely, therefore, that "Larkin's own inability to accept traditional Christian belief may have at the back of it nothing more than...the feeling, simply, that religion may have been possible once but is now outmoded" (qtd. in King). In "High Windows" the narrator seems to agree as he says, "sweating in the dark/about hell and.../what you think of the priest," implying not that Christianity is perverted, as Smith believes, but that it is no longer necessary to be a Christian (l. 12,14). As the narrator thinks about the free sexuality of the youth he sees, he realizes now, "eternal bliss no longer is reserved for the faithful as a heavenly reward; instead, the sacramental image of paradise can be found in the here and now...in the momentary vision of sexual climax" (King). The children's gratification is instant, and the need for retribution in the afterlife has been made obsolete. Christian theology used to describe life as a gradual ascent towards Heaven, while in the poem the narrator makes reference twice to "everyone young going down the long slide/To happiness, endlessly" in the opposite

direction, an "allusion to the fall of man, [that] undercuts this apparent paradise" (l. 8, 9, King). Opposed to a languorous life of devotion, living has become its own reward.

"High Windows" also deals with religion in regards to generation gaps, between the speaker and his parents' age group as well as between him and the young boys and girls he imagines fornicating. While he wistfully says he knows "this is [the] paradise/Everyone old has dreamed of all their lives," he also wonders if anyone viewed him in his youth and "thought, *That'll be the life*" (l. 4-5,11). The older generation thought about him as he does about the new youth, "but with one crucial difference: forty years ago the older generation envied the freedom the young would have regarding religion" if the fear of hell and other restraints of religion were lifted (King). During Larkin's formative years, an observational study showed that "half the churchgoers disbelieved in...life after death... [and] a sixth of the people said they didn't believe in God" (qtd. in Schray 55). Like Smith, Larkin associates with the atheist in the poem, whose notion of "No God any more" emphasizes religion as an antiquated tradition of a past generation (l. 12). He even views them as corrupt for having accepted the hypocrisy, letting it govern their lives for as long as they did. Nevertheless, the self-interest and moral atrophy of the present day doesn't appear to be a preferable choice either, and it is debatable whether the ennui felt by the narrator is synonymous with the happiness he describes.

The final stanza illuminates the "high windows:/ the sun-comprehending glass,/And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows/Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless" (l. 17-20). These sacramental motifs suggests "rather than finding paradise through a throwing off of restraints, he finds his skepticism tempered by a difficult to articulate, metaphysical longing that brings about an affirmation regarding human existence" (King). The "high windows" could refer to a church, where light was often manipulated to create a more spiritual atmosphere within, but it could also be a physical marker between the present and the infinite. Ironically, this stanza is also the most formal in construction despite the subject matter. "High Windows" begins with the groundbreaking use of profanity and virtually no rhyme scheme; however, the poem tightens as it continues and ends with a traditional ABAB rhyme for alternating lines of verse. It's almost as if the poem is searching for order, whether moral or schematic, in a world disaffected by the ideals of the past. The narrator's observation of the children "fucking" from his God-like vantage point behind high windows takes away their innocence, and this realization is accompanied by the sadness of someone who has become detached from life (l. 2). By the end it is clear that the distance the poem attempts to contain is greater than the difference between the narrator and the youth, or the high windows and the street below, or even the sky and the earth as suggested by the final stanza; it is primarily about the growing distance between people and God.

These previous poems by Larkin and Smith focus primarily on human elements, and how different subsets of the population, like atheists or children, react to the question of religion. However, there was another poetic tradition emerging as well. In Smith's "Sunt Leones," and "Theology" by Ted Hughes, the authors evaluate the usefulness of Christianity by reinterpreting Biblical history in satirically critical ways. By undercutting the foundational pillars of the church, they also negate the subsequent institutions that are supported by them. "Theology" in particular chooses a venerable topic to confront, the creation story of Adam and Eve from the book of Genesis, when Eve is seduced by a snake into tasting the forbidden fruit of knowledge. This transgression ultimately leads to both her and Adam's exile from the idyllic Garden of Eden. In Hughes's subversive retelling, the serpent is no longer the impetus for the mistake, as he wryly states "that's simply/Corruption of the facts" (l. 3,4). Instead, it was "Adam [who] ate the apple," then "Eve ate Adam" and finally, "The serpent ate Eve" (l. 5-7). There is a very philosophical

relationship to this dialectic equation, an if-then matter-of-factness that so bluntly undercuts the religious teaching that it becomes an equally plausible replacement for it. In Hughes' story Adam and Eve, the ancestors of the human race according to Christian didacticism, are not cast out and forced to face the world but are instead sent to live in the "dark intestine" of existence inside the serpent, where society continues to reside today (l. 8). The role of God is repudiated entirely, as he is either unaware of the past occurrences or powerless to affect the future, and forever left "querulous[ly] calling" after the disregarding serpent (l. 12).

It is hard to read "Theology" and not take note of its brevity. The forty-eight-word poem consists of twelve lines, split into three stanzas of approximately equal length. The succinctness gives it a tongue-in-cheek sense of humor reminiscent of Stevie Smith's poems, and it also brings diction to the forefront for analysis. The poem opens with a sardonically expostulatory "no," as if it were refuting a claim the reader had made (l. 1). One effect of the conversational tone is that the poem throws its audience directly into the conflict, while the "no" simultaneously projects and contests a belief that the reader may or may not have. It strips the creation story of its power by implying there was no glory in Adam's fall, because in the end both he and Eve succumbed to the same fate: death. While there is no rhyme or definite meter, there is significant alliteration. The predominate "s" sounds of the first and third stanzas are an obvious allusion to the function of the serpent, a hiss of indignation over being a scapegoat for mankind's indulgence. The blithe tone of the third stanza in particular illustrates the serpent's indifference to the situation. As it's read it almost forces the reader's mouth into the same smile of the serpent as he "sleeps his meal off in Paradise" (l. 10). On the other hand, the second stanza's focus on consumption is described in the "a" sound of a mouth agape and waiting to be fed. The thrice parallel repetitions of "ate...ate...ate" reinforces humanity's principal capacity to be its devouring nature (l. 5-8).

The short, unpretentious language of "Theology" is in part what grounds its believability, with the exception of one word in the final line. The reference to God's repeated pleas as "querulous" is in sharp contrast to the distinctly humble composition of the rest of the poem and immediately draws attention from the reader. Querulous, meaning petulant and whining, is an interesting word to use because it deconstructs the traditional loving and almighty God, as described in the Gospel, and leaves in its place the image of a fractious child, who despite his tantrum has no affect on the world around him.

In "Theology," Hughes rewrites the position of the snake from Eden, arguably one of the most significant and well-known symbols of the Bible and Stevie Smith takes on a similar task in her poem "Sunt Leones." Translated to "there be lions," the title stems from a warning found on ancient maps to signify dangerous areas to avoid, and playfully interacts with the subject of the poem on early Christian martyrs during the Roman Empire who were often thrown into the Coliseum to be attacked and eaten by lions for sport. Rather than espouse pity for the victims, Smith perversely states "it rather looked/As if the part the lions played was being overlooked" (l. 19, 20). By removing the focus on the martyrs themselves and instead concentrating on the circumstances that lead to their status as such, Smith is subtly attacking the foundational liturgy "on which the Church has grown" (l. 18).

"Sunt Leones," as with her other poem, "moves from free conversational rhythms to traditional verse, on occasion becoming—to ironic effect—almost doggerel" as in her rhyme of "arena" with "seen a" (l. 1, 2, Stallworthy and Ramazani 2373). She also later jokes, "if the Christians felt a little blue" about their impending death, "well people being eaten often do" (l. 11, 12). The nonchalance of her writing almost undermines its effectiveness, but her guile nevertheless prevails in challenging everyman's approach to religion. In "Theology," Hughes lack

of complete clauses adds to the feelings of unfulfillment discussed in the poem, and in "Sunt Leones" the use of enjambment similarly produces effects of dissonance amid her silly rhymes. As Smith describes the violence of the spectacle she says,

"By indulging native appetites played what has now been seen a
Not entirely negligible part
In consolidating at the very start
The position of the Early Christian Church." (l. 2-5)

The continuation of syntax onto sequential lines without adequate punctuation forces the reader to hurry through the first three in anticipation of a semantic conclusion of the sentence. This flow increases the urgency of the reading with each succeeding line, until it abruptly drops off at the phrase "Early Christian Church." It is important to note that these three words are also capitalized to reference the specific institution rather than a more general practice of Christianity, and are also the only unrhymed unit in the poem, further drawing attention to it.

The poem suggests that without these initial martyrs, the Church would probably not have gained such recognition and would have failed to ever become the global construct that it did. Her florid language momentarily lapses into stilted archaic writing reminiscent of the Bible: "Theirs was the death, and theirs the crown undying" (l. 13). Dying in the name of their religion guaranteed, in the eyes of the Christians "on the sands of the arena," entrance into heaven and belied the fear of their demise (l. 1). However "satisfying" their sacrifice might have felt, Smith gives credit instead to the lions, who "by chewing up blood gristle flesh and bone," procured the initial Eucharist rites that the Church was founded upon (l. 13, 17). She continues by saying all Christians have a "debt to Lionhood" for the "benefits and blessings [that] were begotten" towards the furthering of Christianity. This is a continuation of the anthropomorphism of the lions found in the rest of "Sunt Leones." Earlier in the poem it accredits them with making "a study/Of dyeing Coliseum sands a ruddy/Liturgically sacrificial hue" (l. 8-10). By portraying the lions as contemporary artists, making a conscious effort towards creation, she inverts traditional stereotypes of lions as vicious creatures, because it was the Church that inadvertently benefited from the bloodbath. The culminating effect of the poem breaks the reader of any preexisting bias concerning early Christian history, and in turn causes a reevaluation of the perfunctory dogmas that have ensued.

In his poem, "The Oven Bird," Robert Frost addresses the question of "what to make with a diminished thing," and in the context of the mid-twentieth century many people seemed to be trying to answer this with regards to the changing role of religion in England. The time around the 1950s in particular was marked by a rapid decline in belief of Christian theology, as people began to grow more wary of the institution of religion and embrace a more secularized society. At the forefront of this budding generation were Stevie Smith, Ted Hughes, and Philip Larkin, three poets whose struggles to understand faith became major themes in their literature. Their poetry exposes the trials of a nation coming to terms with disbelief, yet within their discourse the language of Christianity is so deeply embedded that at times it seems hard not to draw connections between them. With Smith and Hughes, the reader is introduced to the negative aspects of religion, and the burden faith places on an individual by forcing them to accept something so blindly. All that remains, as in Larkin's "High Windows," is a custom that despite its flaws will probably remain "endless" (l. 20).

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