

PoetrySlabs at FEAST

3 December 2017

For this afternoon's poetic entertainment, we'll be leaving behind the jangle of jingle bells, the winsome scent of ginger wine, and the sibilant sighs of piping-hot pies and reading instead a selection of verse that's best described as almost exclusively devotional. I know this doesn't sound terribly exciting or conducive to the kind of comfort associated with nodding off until teatime following the Queen's Speech and the plodding mastication of Christmas pudding soaked in a vast slug of cream, but it actually has more to recommend it than one might imagine. We'll be reading the work of seven very different British poets, four of them men, three of them women. With the exception of a soldier-poet and a famously grumpy Welsh priest, they all believed, in one way or another in Jesus, God, Christmas, the creeds, the Virgin Birth, the Second Coming, and Easter. They considered their Christianity to be foundational to their lives despite the fact that – as they would all have admitted quite openly – they knew perfectly well that none of them, one might say, came up to scratch. We'll begin with the peerless John Milton's 'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity', which he wrote in 1629 and much of whose language and imagery prefigures what might be called the kaleidoscopic aspect of his masterpiece, 'Paradise Lost', written in the 1660s. The Milton poem will set the scene for what follows: an intermingling of pieces by the six other poets designed to provide a panoramic glimpse of responses to Christmas across the almost 400 years separating us from the period that saw the death throes of the Elizabethan Settlement and the birth pangs of the English Civil War. Most of us have sung carols and hymns by the 19th century's Christina Rossetti, who was, of course, first and foremost a poet – and an extremely devout Anglican. (She actually has her own feast day in the Church of England's liturgical calendar.) She had no illusions about human perfectibility, as even a cursory reading of her 'Goblin Market', which pretty much dives headlong into the Dantean murk of human sexuality, will reveal. Her strictly devotional work is no less impassioned or occasionally startling. Ursula Fanthorpe needs almost no introduction – deservedly popular, widely anthologised, unobtrusively religious, and unusually good at 'containing explosions', at capturing the essence of a miraculous event in a handful of lines that sparkle like surgical steel. Elizabeth Jennings, a very devout 20th-century Catholic, led a largely humdrum existence that in fact cocooned a burning core of constant awareness of the mystery and magic of life – her 'vision', her eye for the 'inscape', is not entirely unlike that of Gerard Manley Hopkins. TS Eliot also needs no introduction other than a gentle admonition to his readers to remain constantly aware of the fact that his religiosity informed even the most apparently secular poems he wrote following his conversion from Unitarianism to Anglicanism. His spirit of inquiry goes all the way back to Christian Platonism and the complexities of Aquinas. As to the matter of RS Thomas, the contrarian priest I mentioned earlier, I'll simply quote a recent commentator: 'Thomas's fierceness is reflected in his lifelong battle with God. This battle consisted of Thomas stubbornly waiting upon God's equally stubborn silence, with Thomas commenting upon this state of affairs in his poems. The battle was made a great deal more piquant by the fact that Thomas served as an Anglican priest for 42 years, ministering to rural parishes in Wales (the subject of another of his love-hate relationships).' I've also included a single not-terribly-well-known poem by Robert Graves, which I stumbled across while searching the internet for one of his better-known Christmas poems. 'The Christmas Robin' is a peculiar blend of joy and resignation, as one might perhaps expect from a man who was both a fierce warrior and an exemplar of rough-hewn humaneness. So ... on to John Milton.

ON THE MORNING OF CHRIST'S NATIVITY
By John Milton

[PRELUDE]

This is the month, and this the happy morn,
Wherein the Son of Heav'n's eternal King,
Of wedded Maid, and Virgin Mother born,
Our great redemption from above did bring;
For so the holy sages¹ once did sing,
That he our deadly forfeit should release,
And with his Father work us a perpetual peace.

That glorious Form, that Light unsufferable,
And that far-beaming blaze of Majesty,
Wherewith he wont at Heav'n's high council-table,
To sit the midst of Trinal Unity,
He laid aside, and here with us to be,
Forsook the courts of everlasting day,
And chose with us a darksome house of mortal clay.

Say Heav'nly Muse, shall not thy sacred vein
Afford a present to the infant God?
Hast thou no verse, no hymn, or solemn strain,
To welcome him to this his new abode,
Now while the heav'n, by the sun's team untrod,
Hath took no print of the approaching light,
And all the spangled host keep watch in squadrons bright?

See how from far upon the eastern road
The star-led wizards haste with odours sweet:
O run, prevent them with thy humble ode,
And lay it lowly at his blessed feet;
Have thou the honour first thy Lord to greet,
And join thy voice unto the angel quire,
From out his secret altar touch'd with hallow'd fire.

¹ the Old Testament prophets

THE HYMN

It was the winter wild,
While the Heav'n-born child,
 All meanly wrapt in the rude manger lies;
Nature in awe to him
Had doff'd her gaudy trim,
 With her great Master so to sympathize:
It was no season then for her
To wanton with the Sun, her lusty paramour.

Only with speeches fair
She woos the gentle air
 To hide her guilty front with innocent snow,
And on her naked shame,
Pollute with sinful blame,
 The saintly veil of maiden white to throw,
Confounded, that her Maker's eyes
Should look so near upon her foul deformities.

But he, her fears to cease,
Sent down the meek-eyed Peace:
 She, crown'd with olive green, came softly sliding
Down through the turning sphere,
His ready harbinger,
 With turtle wing the amorous clouds dividing;
And waving wide her myrtle wand,
She strikes a universal peace through sea and land.

No war or battle's sound
Was heard the world around;
 The idle spear and shield were high uphung;
The hooked chariot stood
Unstain'd with hostile blood;
 The trumpet spake not to the armed throng;
And kings sate still with awful eye,
As if they surely knew their sovran Lord was by.

But peaceful was the night
Wherein the Prince of Light
 His reign of peace upon the earth began:
The winds with wonder whist,
Smoothly the waters kist,
 Whispering new joys to the mild Ocean,
Who now hath quite forgot to rave,
While birds of calm sit brooding on the charmèd wave.

The Stars with deep amaze
Stand fix'd in steadfast gaze,
 Bending one way their precious influence;
And will not take their flight,
For all the morning light,
 Or Lucifer² that often warn'd them thence,
But in their glimmering orbs did glow,
Until their Lord himself bespake, and bid them go.

And though the shady gloom
Had given day her room,
 The sun himself withheld his wonted speed,
And hid his head for shame,
As his inferior flame
 The new-enlighten'd world no more should need:
He saw a greater Sun appear
Than his bright throne or burning axle-tree could bear.

The shepherds on the lawn,
Or ere the point of dawn,
 Sate simply chatting in a rustic row;
Full little thought they than
That the mighty Pan
 Was kindly come to live with them below:
Perhaps their loves, or else their sheep,
Was all that did their silly thoughts so busy keep;

When such music sweet
Their hearts and ears did greet,
 As never was by mortal finger strook,
Divinely warbled voice
Answering the stringèd noise,
 As all their souls in blissful rapture took:
The air such pleasure loth to lose,
With thousand echoes still prolongs each heav'nly close.

Nature, that heard such sound
Beneath the hollow round
 Of Cynthia's seat, the airy region thrilling,
Now was almost won
To think her part was done,
 And that her reign had here its last fulfilling:
She knew such harmony alone
Could hold all heav'n and earth in happier union.

² in this context, the Morning Star

At last surrounds their sight
A globe of circular light,
That with long beams the shamefaced Night arrayed;
The helmèd Cherubim
And sworded Seraphim
Are seen in glittering ranks with wings display'd,
Harping in loud and solemn quire,
With unexpressive notes to Heav'n's new-born Heir.

Such music (as 'tis said)
Before was never made,
But when of old the sons of morning sung,
While the Creator great
His constellations set,
And the well-balanc'd world on hinges hung,
And cast the dark foundations deep,
And bid the welt'ring waves their oozy channel keep.

Ring out ye crystal spheres!
Once bless our human ears
(If ye have power to touch our senses so)
And let your silver chime
Move in melodious time,
And let the bass of heav'n's deep organ blow;
And with your ninefold harmony
Make up full consort to th' angelic symphony.

For if such holy song
Enwrap our fancy long,
Time will run back and fetch the age of gold,
And speckl'd Vanity
Will sicken soon and die,
And leprous Sin will melt from earthly mould;
And Hell itself will pass away,
And leave her dolorous mansions to the peering day.

Yea, Truth and Justice then
Will down return to men,
Orbed in a rainbow; and, like glories wearing,
Mercy will sit between,
Thron'd in celestial sheen,
With radiant feet the tissued³ clouds down steering;
And heav'n, as at some festival,
Will open wide the gates of her high palace hall.

³ woven

But wisest Fate says no:
This must not yet be so;
 The Babe lies yet in smiling infancy⁴,
That on the bitter cross
Must redeem our loss,
 So both himself and us to glorify:
Yet first to those ychained in sleep,
The wakeful trump of doom must thunder through the deep,

With such a horrid clang
As on Mount Sinai rang
 While the red fire and smould'ring clouds outbrake:
The aged Earth, aghast
With terror of that blast,
 Shall from the surface to the centre shake,
When at the world's last session,
The dreadful Judge in middle air shall spread his throne.

And then at last our bliss
Full and perfect is,
 But now begins; for from this happy day
Th' old Dragon⁵ under ground,
In straiter limits bound,
 Not half so far casts his usurpèd sway,
And, wrath to see his kingdom fail,
Swinges the scaly horror of his folded tail.

The oracles are dumb;
No voice or hideous hum
 Runs through the arched roof in words deceiving.
Apollo from his shrine
Can no more divine,
 With hollow shriek the steep of Delphos leaving.
No nightly trance or breathèd spell
Inspires the pale-eyed priest from the prophetic cell.

The lonely mountains o'er,
And the resounding shore,
 A voice of weeping heard, and loud lament;
From haunted spring, and dale
Edged with poplar pale,
 The parting Genius is with sighing sent;
With flow'r-inwoven tresses torn
The Nymphs in twilight shade of tangled thickets mourn.

⁴ in the sense that the child is too young to be able to speak

⁵ Satan

In consecrated earth, And on the holy hearth,
The Lars⁶ and Lemures⁷ moan with midnight plaint;
In urns and altars round,
A drear and dying sound
Affrights the flamens⁸ at their service quaint;
And the chill marble seems to sweat,
While each peculiar power forgoes his wonted seat.

Peor and Baälim⁹ forsake their temples dim,
With that twice-batter'd god of Palestine;
And moonèd Ashtaroth,
Heav'n's queen and mother both,
Now sits not girt with tapers' holy shine;
The Libyc Hammon shrinks his horn;
In vain the Tyrian maids their wounded Thammuz mourn.

And sullen Moloch, fled,
Hath left in shadows dread
His burning idol all of blackest hue:
In vain with cymbals' ring
They call the grisly king,
In dismal dance about the furnace blue.
The brutish gods of Nile as fast,
Isis and Orus, and the dog Anubis, haste.

Nor is Osiris¹⁰ seen
In Memphian grove or green,
Trampling the unshower'd grass with lowings loud;
Nor can he be at rest
Within his sacred chest,
Naught but profoundest Hell can be his shroud:
In vain with timbrel'd anthems dark
The sable-stolèd sorcerers bear his worshiped ark.

He feels from Judah's land
The dreaded Infant's hand,
The rays of Bethlehem blind his dusky eyn;
Nor all the gods beside
Longer dare abide,
Not Typhon huge ending in snaky twine:
Our Babe, to show his Godhead true,
Can in his swaddling bands control the damnèd crew.

⁶ the ancient Roman gods of the home

⁷ the spirits of the dead in ancient Roman belief

⁸ ancient Roman priests

⁹ ancient Near Eastern deities

¹⁰ an ancient Egyptian god

So when the Sun in bed,
Curtain'd with cloudy red,
 Pillows his chin upon an orient wave,
The flocking shadows pale
Troop to th' infernal jail,
 Each fetter'd ghost slips to his several grave,
And the yellow-skirted fays
Fly after the night-steeds, leaving their moon-lov'd maze.

But see, the Virgin blest
Hath laid her Babe to rest:
 Time is our tedious song should here have ending.
Heaven's youngest-teemèd star,
Hath fixed her polished car,
 Her sleeping Lord with handmaid lamp attending;
And all about the courtly stable,
Bright-harnessed Angels sit in order serviceable.

ADVENT

By Christina Rossetti

This Advent moon shines cold and clear,
These Advent nights are long;
Our lamps have burned year after year
And still their flame is strong.
'Watchman, what of the night?' we cry,
Heart-sick with hope deferred:
'No speaking signs are in the sky,'
Is still the watchman's word.

The Porter watches at the gate,
The servants watch within;
The watch is long betimes and late,
The prize is slow to win.
'Watchman, what of the night?' But still
His answer sounds the same:
'No daybreak tops the utmost hill,
Nor pales our lamps of flame.'

One to another hear them speak
The patient virgins wise:
'Surely He is not far to seek' –
'All night we watch and rise.'
'The days are evil looking back,
The coming days are dim;
Yet count we not His promise slack,
But watch and wait for Him.'

One with another, soul with soul,
They kindle fire from fire:
'Friends watch us who have touched the goal.'
'They urge us, come up higher.'
'With them shall rest our waysore feet,
With them is built our home,
With Christ.' – 'They sweet, but He most sweet,
Sweeter than honeycomb.'

There no more parting, no more pain,
The distant ones brought near,
The lost so long are found again,
Long lost but longer dear:
Eye hath not seen, ear hath not heard,
Nor heart conceived that rest,
With them our good things long deferred,
With Jesus Christ our Best.

We weep because the night is long,
We laugh for day shall rise,
We sing a slow contented song
And knock at Paradise.
Weeping we hold Him fast
Who wept
For us, we hold Him fast;
And will not let Him go except
He bless us first or last.

Weeping we hold Him fast to-night;
We will not let Him go
Till daybreak smite our wearied sight
And summer smite the snow:
Then figs shall bud, and dove with dove
Shall coo the livelong day;
Then He shall say, 'Arise, My love,
My fair one, come away.'

THE VISITATION

By Elizabeth Jennings

She had not held her secret long enough
To covet it but wished it shared as though
Telling it would tame the terrifying moment
When she, most calm in her own afternoon,
Felt the intrepid angel, heard
His beating wings, his voice across her prayer.
This was the thing she needed to impart
The uncalm moment, the strange interruption,
The angel bringing pain disguised as joy,
But mixed with this was something she could share
And not abandon, simply how
A child sprang in her like the first of seeds.
And in the stillness of that other day
The afternoon exposed its emptiness,
Shadows adrift from light, the long road turning
In a dry sequence of the sun. And she
No apprehensive figure seemed,
Only a moving silence through the land.
And all her journeying was a caressing
Within her mind of secrets to be spoken.
The simple fact of birth soon overshadowed
The shadow of the angel. When she came
Close to her cousin's house she kept
Only the message of her happiness.
And those two women in their quick embrace
Gazed at each other with looks undisturbed
By men or miracles. It was the child
Who laid his shadow on their afternoon
By stirring suddenly, by bringing
Back the broad echoes of those beating wings.

SONG

By R S Thomas

I choose white, but with
Red on it, like the snow
In winter with its few
Holly berries and the one

Robin, that is a fire
To warm by and like Christ
Comes to us in his weakness,
But with a sharp song.

A CHRISTMAS CAROL

By Christina Rossetti

Thank God, thank God, we do believe,
Thank God that this is Christmas Eve.
Even as we kneel upon this day,
Even so, the ancient legends say
Nearly two thousand years ago
The stalled ox knelt, and even so
The ass knelt full of praise, which they
Could not express, while we can pray.
Thank God, thank God, for Christ was born

Ages ago, as on this morn:
In the snow-season undefiled
God came to earth a little Child;
He put His ancient glory by
To live for us, and then to die.
How shall we thank God? How shall we
Thank Him and praise Him worthily?
What will He have Who loved us thus?
What presents will He take from us?
Will He take gold, or precious heap
Of gems? or shall we rather steep
The air with incense, or bring myrrh?
What man will be our messenger
To go to Him and ask His will?
Which having learned we will fulfil
Though He choose all we most prefer: –
What man will be our messenger?

Thank God, thank God, the Man is found,
Sure-footed, knowing well the ground.
He knows the road, for this the way
He travelled once, as on this day.
He is our Messenger beside,
He is our door, and path, and Guide;
He also is our Offering,
He is the gift that we must bring.
Let us kneel down with one accord
And render thanks unto the Lord:
For unto us a Child is born
Upon this happy Christmas morn;
For unto us a Son is given,
Firstborn of God and Heir of Heaven.

THE CHRISTMAS ROBIN

By Robert Graves

The snows of February had buried Christmas
Deep in the woods, where grew self-seeded
The fir-trees of a Christmas yet unknown
Without a candle or a strand of tinsel.

Nevertheless when, hand in hand, plodding
Between the frozen ruts we lovers paused
And 'Christmas trees!' cried suddenly together,
Christmas was there again, as in December.

We velveteed our love with fantasy
Down a long vista-row of Christmas trees,
Whose coloured candles slowly guttered down
As grandchildren came trooping round our knees.

But he knew better, did the Christmas robin –
The murderous robin with his breast aglow
And legs apart, in a spade-handle perched:
He prophesied more snow, and worse than snow.

CAROL

By R S Thomas

What is Christmas without
snow? We need it
as bread of a cold
climate, ermine to trim

our sins with, a brief
sleeve for charity's
scarecrow to wear its heart
on, bold as a robin.

A HYMN FOR CHRISTMAS DAY

By Christina Rossetti

The Shepherds watch their flocks by night,
Beneath the moon's unclouded light,
All around is calm and still,
Save the murm'ring of the rill:
When lo! a form of light appears,
And on the awe-struck Shepherds' ears
Are words, of peace and comfort flowing
From lips with love celestial glowing.
Spiritual forms are breaking
Through the gloom, their voices taking
Part in the adoring song
Of the bright angelic throng.
Wondering the Shepherds bend
Their steps to Bethlehem, and wend
To a poor and crowded inn: –
Tremblingly their way they win
To the stable, where they find
The Redeemer of mankind,
Just born into this world of danger,
Lying in a humble manger.
And they spread abroad each word
Which that joyful night they'd heard,
And they glorified the name
Of their gracious God, Who came
Himself to save from endless woe
The offspring of this world below.

BLIND NOËL

By RS Thomas

Christmas; the themes are exhausted.
Yet there is always room
on the heart for another
snowflake to reveal a pattern.

Love knocks with such frosted fingers.
I look out. In the shadow
of so vast a God I shiver, unable
to detect the child for the whiteness.

BC : AD

By UA Fanthorpe

This was the moment when Before
Turned into After, and the future's
Uninvented timekeepers presented arms.

This was the moment when nothing
Happened. Only dull peace
Sprawled boringly over the earth.

This was the moment when even energetic Romans
Could find nothing better to do
Than counting heads in remote provinces.

And this was the moment
When a few farm workers and three
Members of an obscure Persian sect
Walked haphazard by starlight straight
Into the kingdom of heaven.

JOURNEY OF THE MAGI *By TS Eliot*

'A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The way deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.'
And the camels, sore-footed, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voice singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.
Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,
And three trees on the low sky,
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.
But there was no information, and so we continued
And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.
All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt.
I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

CHRISTMAS EVE

By RS Thomas

Erect capital's arch;
decorate it with the gilt edge
of the moon. Pave the way to it
with cheques and with credit —

it is still not high enough
for the child to pass under
who comes to us this midnight
invisible as radiation.

WHAT THE DONKEY SAW

By UA Fanthorpe

No room in the inn, of course,
And not that much in the stable
What with the shepherds, Magi, Mary,
Joseph, the heavenly host –
Not to mention the baby
Using our manger as a cot.
You couldn't have squeezed another cherub in
For love or money.

Still, in spite of the overcrowding,
I did my best to make them feel wanted.
I could see the baby and I
Would be going places together.

NATIVITY

By RS Thomas

The moon is born
and a child is born,
lying among white clothes
as the moon among clouds.

They both shine, but
the light from the one
is abroad in the universe
as among broken glass.