

**What Jews Can Learn from Christian Poetry**

Unholy Sonnet #6

Mark Jarman, 1994

Look into the darkness and the darkness looks—  
As if it massed before a telescope  
Or turned because behind it heart your step—  
The darkness looks at you. The idea spooks  
Some people, and their reason self-destructs.  
Seized by a love of daylight, back they jump  
Into the known, blazing like a headlamp,  
Into the senses tuned like cars and trucks.

And what about the counsel of my friend  
Who says that when we look for God, remember  
God looks for us? If that's what starts the thing,  
Then we must drive in circles till we find  
It's all one. To be looked for is to look for.  
And seeing is believing and being seen.

Yet Do I Marvel

Countee Cullen, 1925

I doubt not God is good, well-meaning, kind,  
And did He stoop to quibble could tell why  
The little buried mole continues blind,  
Why flesh that mirrors Him must some day die,  
Make plain the reason tortured Tantalus  
Is baited by the fickle fruit, declare  
If merely brute caprice dooms Sisyphus  
To struggle up a never-ending stair.  
Inscrutable His ways are, and immune  
To catechism by a mind too strewn  
With petty cares to slightly understand  
What awful brain compels His awful hand.  
Yet do I marvel at this curious thing:  
To make a poet black, and bid him sing!

## Channel Firing

Thomas Hardy, 1914

That night your great guns, unawares,  
Shook all our coffins as we lay,  
And broke the chancel window-squares,  
We thought it was the Judgment-day

And sat upright. While drearisome  
Arose the howl of wakened hounds:  
The mouse let fall the altar-crumb,  
The worms drew back into the mounds,

The glebe cow drooled. Till God called, "No;  
It's gunnery practice out at sea  
Just as before you went below;  
The world is as it used to be:

"All nations striving strong to make  
Red war yet redder. Mad as hatters  
They do no more for Christ's sake  
Than you who are helpless in such matters.

"That this is not the judgment-hour  
For some of them's a blessed thing,  
For if it were they'd have to scour  
Hell's floor for so much threatening....

"Ha, ha. It will be warmer when  
I blow the trumpet (if indeed  
I ever do; for you are men,  
And rest eternal sorely need)."

So down we lay again. "I wonder,  
Will the world ever saner be,"  
Said one, "than when He sent us under  
In our indifferent century!"

And many a skeleton shook his head.  
"Instead of preaching forty year,"  
My neighbour Parson Thirdly said,  
"I wish I had stuck to pipes and beer."

Again the guns disturbed the hour,  
Roaring their readiness to avenge,  
As far inland as Stourton Tower,  
And Camelot, and starlit Stonehenge.

Churchgoing  
-Philip Larkin

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 will 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 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 recognisable 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 which 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 recognized, 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.

Praise in Summer

Richard Wilbur, 1947

Obscurely yet most surely called to praise,  
As sometimes summer calls us all, I said  
The hills are heavens full of branching ways  
Where star-nosed moles fly overhead the dead;  
I said the trees are mines in air, I said  
See how the sparrow burrows in the sky!  
And then I wondered why this mad *instead*  
Perverts our praise to uncreation, why  
Such savour's in this wrenching things awry.  
Does sense so stale that it must needs derange  
The world to know it? To a praiseful eye  
Should it not be enough of fresh and strange  
That trees grow green, and moles can course in clay,  
And sparrows sweep the ceiling of our day?

The Still Pilgrim Considers a Hard Teaching

Angela Alaimo O'Donnell, 2016

Not just love but *cherish* it, this world—  
from the Latin, *carus*, to the French, *cher*—  
meaning *dear*, meaning *costly*, *beloved*—  
meaning *hold to your heart*, *handle with care*,  
this world, from Old English, *weoruld*,  
meaning *human race*, meaning *age of man*,  
this world, meaning our earth and her heirs,  
meaning all of us, here, now, if you can—

the suicide bomber, the killer cop,  
the war-worn refugee at the door,  
the racist, the rapist, the shooter and shot,  
the filthy rich and the dirty poor—  
this world, ever ancient and ever new,  
not just love it, but act like you do.