

One Tuesday Night

Here is the news – an ominous pause.
The pop singer, Elvis
Presley has died ...
But the wind continues to blow,

the night labours on. Radio Luxembourg
plays only Presley; in between
people phone in to weep, the disc jockey
crumbles in his seat.

This is absolutely irrelevant
to the night and the plastic music
moaning out of my fizzling radio,
irrelevant to my life, my problems;

but it *has* got something
to do with history and
human emotions – something to do
with Northern Ireland and nuclear war.

It's got something to do with
the preacher, Jesus
Christ who died ...
Because you see they're saying OK he's dead

but he lives on, they're saying
long live the King and
dying young he'll be all the greater – he'll
live on in death as his followers increase.

This *is* what they're *now*
already saying. I suppose
when we had Jesus among us
we were less used to this kind of thing

and exaggerated the meaning
of our emotions. Elvis
freshens our tears for Him.
Arthur was the first ...

Arthur was not the first.

August 17, 1977

■

alternative version—original draft

e17/8/77. ~~The King is Dead.~~ One Tuesday Night.

Here is the news – an ominous pause.
The pop singer, Elvis
Presley has died ...
But the wind continues to blow
~~outside my window.~~

The night labours. Radio
Luxembourg plays only Presley, and in between
people phone in to weep, the disc jockey
crumbles in his seat.

This is absolutely
irrelevant to the night and the plastic discs ~~pip~~
moaning out of my fizzling radio,
irrelevant to my problems;

But it's got something
to do with history and culture
and human emotions – something to do
with Northern Ireland and nuclear war.

~~And the wind continues to blow.~~

It's got something ~~important~~ to do with
the preacher, Jesus
Christ who died ...
because ~~you see~~ they're saying OK he's dead

but he lives on, they're saying
long live the King and
dying young he'll be ~~all~~ the greater – he will
live on in death as his followers ~~will~~ increase.

This is what they are now,
already saying. I suppose
when we had Jesus among us
we were less used to this kind of situation

and exaggerated the relevance
of our emotions.
Elvis
freshens our tears for Him.

Arthur was the first.

eAugust 17, 1977.

Notes

[a full page of my poetry notebook, written in the early hours of August 17, 1977 whilst listening to Radio Luxembourg, contains this poem and related notes ; I should add that I was not a particular fan, though his sudden death was a shock to everyone: what fascinated me (as later with the reaction to the death of Lady Diana) was to be witnessing in real time the process of apotheosis and a rare actual occurrence of it – the death of someone so worshipped that his worshippers refuse to accept that death is the end of him ; my point being that in less culturally sophisticated times such people became deities ; the notes include the phrases pouring repeatedly out of the wireless that night: ‘long live Elvis’, ‘long live the King’, ‘Elvis lives’, ‘he’s going to live on’ – on the face of it an abnormal response to the sad news of someone’s death ; another quotation is ‘The whole world has been thrown into chaos because of the death of Elvis Presley’ ; at the foot of the page, squeezed under my poem, still only a few hours after the news, a final note reads ‘(A 15 year-old girl has just phoned up and read a little poem she’s just written about it)’ – so that puts me in my place! ; having revised my little poem a little (for the first time, 46 years later) in order to produce a more presentable final finished version, I give as exact as possible a transcript of the original off-the-cuff draft, omitting the notes and quotations ; parts crossed out in the original are struck through in the transcript above (ignoring mere repetitions and changes of position) ; e = early hours ; the logic of ‘Arthur was the first’ and ‘Arthur was not the first’ is that both are true: Arthur was the first to freshen our tears (for Jesus), the first dead person since Jesus whose followers refused to accept that he could possibly be dead, yet of course neither he nor Jesus was the first, by any means – over a vast timescale charismatic leaders and recipients of popular adulation had been endowed with immortality as figures in myth or religion]