

Lorenzo and the Graveyard Poets

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Barbara Pym's writing makes much mention of Edward Young and his major poetic product, *Night Thoughts* – which may account for the nickname she bestowed on Henry Harvey at Oxford, "Lorenzo".

Edward Young was born in 1683 at Upham, educated at Winchester, and became a Bachelor of Laws at Oxford in 1714. He was Orator at the foundation ceremony of the Library of All Souls; was granted a Doctorate, and became tutor to Lord Burleigh, elder son of the Earl of Exeter. In 1724 he became a Deacon, and with the patronage of Robert Walpole, received a grant of £200 p.a. from the King. He was presented with the Rectory of Welwyn, Hertfordshire, one of All Souls' best livings, in 1730, where he remained until his death in 1765.

Young loved poetry, especially Milton's, and wrote much himself. He became one of the 'Graveyard Poets', described in the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* as '18th-century poets who wrote melancholy, reflective works, often set in graveyards, on the theme of human mortality'. Others of the school were Robert Blair and Thomas Gray – both also much quoted by Pym.

Among Young's major literary productions were *The Last Day*, 1000 lines of heroic couplets on The Last Judgement, and *Paraphrase on Part of the Book of Job*. His tragedy, *Busiris, King of Egypt*, was produced at Drury Lane, proving successful and influential. *The Revenge*, produced in 1721, was also very popular. In 1727 he wrote *Cynthio*, a funeral poem; 1728, a series of seven satires: *Love of Fame, The Universal Passion*. He refused the post of Poet Laureate in 1729 (it went to Colley Cibber). His *Conjectures on Original Composition* of 1759 was regarded as a landmark in European literary criticism. He wrote his final poem in 1762, *Resignation*.

Young's works were published in four volumes in 1757. His poetry won the acclaim of Dr Johnson, who wrote of him in his *Lives of the English Poets*, 'with all his defects, he was a man of genius and a poet'. Thackeray wrote (in *The Four Georges*, 1855) that Young 'discoursed on the splendours of the stars, the glories of Heaven, and utter vanities of this world'. Others thought less highly of his work: according to the *Oxford Literary*

Guide to the British Isles, 'The bluestocking Mrs Chapone, who admired the man and his philosophy, wondered how he could have "blundered so egregiously as to imagine himself a poet". George Eliot attacked him in 1857 in *The Westminster Review*: 'Worldliness and other worldliness', calling him 'a cross between a sycophant and a psalmist'.

In 1730 Young married the widowed granddaughter of King Charles II, Lady Elizabeth Lee, who had three children by her first marriage. She died only six years later, in 1736, and her son and his wife died in 1740. Young was seriously ill himself, and with these bereavements came to suffer depression and insomnia. He then wrote *The Complaint, or Night Thoughts on Life, Death and Immortality*.

The poem consists of nine parts, totaling approximately 9000 lines of blank verse. Part II, *Night the Second, is On Time, Death, Friendship*; Part IV is *The Christian Triumph*; V, *The Relapse*. Dr Johnson called *Night Thoughts* 'melancholy and angry'; William Blake provided illustrations for it in 1797. Margaret Drabble describes it in the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* as:

A didactic and reflective poem, a somewhat rambling meditation on life's vicissitudes, death, and immortality, including lines which have become proverbial such as 'Procrastination is the thief of time'. The poet deploras deaths ... loosely identified as [of] his wife, his stepdaughter, and her husband; he also addresses much reproof and exhortation to the worldly and infidel young Lorenzo. Thus a certain narrative and autobiographical interest is added to his evocations of 'delightful gloom' and the 'populous grave'.

The recipient of all the precepts of the poem is 'the worldly and infidel young Lorenzo'? – Surely this must be why BP chose 'Lorenzo' as her private name for Henry Harvey, especially as we find in *A Very Private Eye*, in a letter to Henry Harvey, August 1936, this:

I wish I knew something about the modern poets. Nobody will listen to me (except Jock) when I say that I am very fond of Young's *Night Thoughts*. I wish you would teach me about them and tell me which ones to read and how to understand them.

References to *Night Thoughts* then abound in Pym's early works. In *Civil to Strangers* (written 1936 – chapter 7) Mr Paladin tells Miss Gay, 'I agree with the poet Young, "Darkness has more divinity for me" – don't you find that sublime thoughts come most often with the darkness?'. Then, in 'Gervase and Flora' (1937-8, page 202) Flora thinks:

All this must surely be a dream and she must really be in the drawing room at the vicarage, listening to the wireless, knitting, cutting out a dress on the floor, reading the new *Vogue*, or even Young's *Night Thoughts*. Lorenzo of the *Night Thoughts* might have looked like Ooli Ruomini-Forstenborg – thin, sharp features and bold green eyes.

Night Thoughts is frequently mentioned in *Some Tame Gazelle*. It is there on the first page:

a light would shine in [Belinda's] mild greenish eyes ... at the mention of Young's *Night Thoughts*.

The poem is clearly a favourite of Archbishop Hoccleve's, who quotes it at every opportunity he can contrive. In chapter 8, 'in his pulpit voice', he tells Belinda: 'I have lately been reading Young's *Night Thoughts*. There are some magnificent lines in it that I had forgotten'. He quotes five of them, and goes on to pontificate on the quality of Young's theology and poetry. In chapter 10, during a sermon, having quoted six lines from Robert Blair's 'The Grave':

He seemed to be implying that each person listening to him this morning was little better than the unknown Lorenzo, for whose edification the poem had been written

and goes on to give a reading from Young. In chapter 12, Belinda thinks of the 18th century and 'her favourite, Young'; the Bishop observes in chapter 18, 'What a fine poem Young's *Night Thoughts* is'; and Hoccleve reverts to this favourite theme when presenting Mr Donne and Miss Berridge with their wedding present (chapter 21).

There are later references too. In *Less than Angels* (1955 – chapter 18) Professor Mainwaring comments on a portrait of his ancestor, 'he was addicted to fits of deep melancholy, you know it was a fashion-

able cult at the end of the 18th century – Who reads those great poets – Wharton, Blair and Young – now?’

Night Thoughts makes its final appearance among the books in Aylwin Forbes’ library in *No Fond Return of Love* (1961.

– chapter 14). Finding it grouped there with *The Rosciad*, *The Pleasures of Imagination* and *The Bastard* – all in fact also long 18th-century poems, by Charles Churchill, Mark Akenside and Richard Savage – Mrs Williton assumes they are a

salacious collection, and ‘turned away, shocked and confused’.

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