Praying with Christopher Smart

Peter Steele

‘I’d as lief pray with Kit Smart as any one else’
Dr Johnson

Down on your knees in the street as if a goldsmith pouncing the metal, you still alarm us, for all that your yard-and-a-bit of bones are buried.

I remember a student calling your ‘Song to David’ a berserk thing, and though he was wrong the fling of a raw, unkenneled heart had caught him, as it could many. You found the trace of its music when stashed and barred for exhibition in your century’s nightmare, the foetid warren of Bedlam, and rejoiced, though God knows how, at seeing the Lamb, all radiant victim and focal creature, where knave and fool and we the bewildered are welcomed.

So I too would be glad to pray, if you came to this other world, where the mettlesome stars patch the darkness after a different fashion of the thing we call the cosmos, meaning always something beautiful, something entire: glad to be taught by someone unguarded, the lilt of jubilation practised at every hour, and the coarse roads conceived as channels of grace, that naked investment of love. So come, for a season at least, to a country of goshawk and ibis, where the diamondbird flickers in tilted leaves and the needletail swift feeds and drinks on the wing, where reindeer moss, and sea tassel, and fireweed come out with archaic flair, and leopard and tiger and waxlip are so many orchids, and heal-all and hound’s-tongue and bulrush and running postman are out for show with the black swans, the crimson rosellas, the wedge-tailed eagles, and the swallows:

come down, little man, in your dirty linen, and your need for help back from the alehouse, and your love of the one whose beauty sent you to sea for pearls.