

"The Million-Petaled Flower / Of Being Here"
Existence, Anxiety, and the Persistence of Beauty in Philip Larkin

by

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“The Desires of the Heart are as Crooked as Corkscrews”:

A Genealogy of Suffering and Beauty

“Not to be born is, beyond all estimation, best; but when a man has seen the light of day, this is next best by far, that with utmost speed he should go back from where he came.”¹ This statement by Sophocles, written in 406 BCE for his play *Oedipus at Colonus*, creates in a single phrase an account of existential anxiety which predates the official Existentialist movement by over two-thousand years. One of the most crucial issues of Existentialism is precisely that although the school of philosophical thought was technically born with Jean-Paul Sartre in the 1940’s, thinkers and artists have been grappling with its crucial elements for as long as human beings have been writing and creating. The existential condition is inherent in and inextricable from the human condition; simply to exist is to be faced with the issues of Existentialism. Sophocles presents a very particular, pessimistic existential formulation here, suggesting that the best fate for people is to never have experienced existence at all. The “next best” option is to escape from life back into non-existence as quickly as possible. In the lines that follow, Sophocles goes on to insist that life only gets worse and more full of suffering as one ages: “when he has seen youth go by, with its easy merry-making, what hard affliction is foreign to him, what suffering does he not know? Envy, factions, strife, battles, and murders. Last of all falls to his lot old age, blamed, weak, unsociable, friendless, wherein dwells every misery among miseries.”² Youth, as presented by Sophocles, appears the only period of one’s life in which any hope for “easy merry-making” exists, and once one is past that period there remains nothing but suffering to follow. The world only becomes harder as one grows older, and much of this (at least through the existentialist lens) is directly correlated to the impending prospect of death. The

¹ Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, trans. Sir Richard Jebb, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1889), ll. 1225.

² Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, ll. 1230–1235.

world is ever-occupied by the shadow of mortality, and the struggles of existence remain always present around the sufferer. It is with this concept that we emerge into the post-war landscape of twentieth-century English poetry, and find ourselves, inevitably, led towards the life and works of Philip Larkin. However, in order to understand how this existential anxiety and crucial formulation make their way into Larkin's work, we must first create some basic context for Existentialism in the twentieth-century poetic mindset. We begin, then, with Yeats.

Although Philip Larkin very rarely cited anyone as an influence on his creative output, he made a rare exception of W. B. Yeats. Despite having claimed to discard Yeats' influence after the publication of his first collection, *The North Ship*, in truth the spectre of the older poet lingered around the thematic corners of Larkin's poetry throughout the entirety of his career. Yeats was born in a small suburb of Dublin in 1865. Despite his lifelong connections to England's literary scene, he maintained a strong link to his Irish identity, Irish radical politics, and the landscapes and figures of his home throughout his life and career.³ Unlike Larkin, Yeats was a very involved man, interested not only in the literary scene but in the worlds of theatre and Irish politics. He even served, for six years, as a Senator of the Irish Free State.⁴ Despite his energetic persona and "extraordinary vitality and appetite for life,"⁵ anxiety about death and age remained a persistent theme in his poetic work over the course of his career. In 1926, he wrote a play called *Sophocles' Oedipus at Colonus* (an adaptation of the original Sophoclean text) in which he included the crucial riff:

Never to have lived is best, ancient writers say;

Never to have drawn the breath of life, never to have looked into the eye of day;

³ "William Butler Yeats," Poetry Foundation, accessed February 21, 2021, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-butler-yeats>.

⁴ "Yeats," Poetry Foundation.

⁵ "Yeats," Poetry Foundation.

The second best's a gay goodnight and quickly turn away.⁶

Yeats, of course, is working directly off Sophocles' original concept, and yet the slight difference in meaning here is critical. The addition of the "gay goodnight" suggests that, although the quick exit is still necessary, some degree of joy must feature. The phrase seems to suggest a parting which occurs after a happy evening. If one is condemned to live and wants to live well, for Yeats, joy—perhaps beauty and love, too—is vital, even if it is something from which we are forced to retreat quickly. It is fleeting, but its presence is integral nonetheless.

An interesting issue that arises with Yeats' version of the Sophoclean concept is the implied suggestion that although it would have been better to have never been born at all, undeniably the experience of the second-best (the gaiety included) would not be possible without life. Although this implication remains quite a stretch for the Yeats poem alone, the sentiment leads us directly into the realm of W. H. Auden. In 1962, Auden wrote a poem called "Death's Echo" which featured a recurring chorus of sorts at the end of each stanza. The chorus is spoken by the voice of Death, which acts as a negative contradiction to each stanza's primary positive voice who speaks of joy and hopefulness. The first stanza, for example, begins:

"O who can ever gaze his fill,"
Farmer and fisherman say,
"On native shore and local hill,
Grudge aching limb or callus on the hand?
Father, grandfather stood upon this land,
And here the pilgrims from our loins will stand."
So farmer and fisherman say

⁶ W. B. Yeats, *Sophocles' Oedipus at Colonus*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).

In their fortunate hey-day:⁷

The optimistic opinion of labor and livelihood is spoken in a “hey-day;” a moment when life—even a hard life of “aching limb” and “callous on the hand”—looks joyous in the light of momentary fortune. In darker moments, however, the voice of Death enters the poem to speak the reminder of inevitable despair:

But Death’s low answer drifts across

Empty catch or harvest loss

Or an unlucky May:

The earth is an oyster with nothing inside it,

Not to be born is the best for man;

The end of toil is a bailiff’s order,

*Throw down the mattock and dance while you can.*⁸

The final quatrain, spoken by Death, sets up the basis for the poem’s recurring theme. Each of the four stanzas performs a variation of this sentiment, which clearly and importantly recalls both Yeats and Sophocles: to have never been born would be the best case scenario, but now that we *have* been born, the next best thing we can do is to dance while we are able. To find opportunities, amidst the grim reality, for joy.

We can clearly see, in these lines, the way that Auden catches hold of that implication of gaiety in Yeats’ lines and expands it. Where Yeats focuses on the element of the quick escape, Auden emphasizes the importance of taking full advantage of the joyous moment—making the most of brief beauty. For Auden, this particular existentialist sentiment was crucial to the way he

⁷ W. H. Auden, “Death’s Echo” in *Collected Shorter Poems*, (New York: Random House Inc, 1966), 103, ll. 1–8.

⁸ Auden, “Death’s Echo,” ll. 9–15.

led his life and career. Auden was born and raised in the northern English city of Birmingham in the early twentieth-century. He emerged onto the English poetry scene with the release of his first collection, *Poems*, in 1930, and quickly became an important leader in the community.⁹ Like Yeats, Auden was not only a literary figure but quite a worldly and well-rounded one as well, engaging regularly in criticism, philosophy, and politics. He traveled widely, published in a variety of fields, and even served in the Republican army during the Spanish Civil War.¹⁰ In 1939, Auden emigrated to America, where he lived for much of the remainder of his life. Auden was a great many things to the world, to those he loved, and privately to himself: a popular public figure, a Christian grappling with his difficult relationship to Christendom, an astute intellectual, a homosexual man who struggled with his own judgements and opinions on homosexuality, a long-term romantic partner, a beloved teacher, and a great friend to so many. Maybe most importantly, though, he was a man labored by a stifling anxiety about time and mortality, and yet constantly reaching for any opportunity to find beauty, joy, and hope amidst the dark. The moving final stanza of his beloved poem “September 1, 1939” describes the world around him, on the brink of a terrible and deadly war:

Defenceless under the night
Our world in stupor lies;
Yet, dotted everywhere,
Ironic points of light
Flash out wherever the Just
Exchange their messages:
May I, composed like them

⁹ “W. H. Auden,” Poetry Foundation, accessed March 14, 2021, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/w-h-auden>.

¹⁰ “W. H. Auden,” Poets.org, accessed March 14, 2021, <https://poets.org/poet/w-h-auden>.

Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.¹¹

Always, no matter how deep the dark appears, Auden returns to us again to show that affirming flame.

Still, Auden was relentlessly haunted, throughout his entire career, by an anxiety about the passage of time, and was obsessed with the idea of the constant movement towards death. He knew the omnipresence of death in every moment of life created the pain and suffering, the great darkness and guilt and unhappiness, which are so endemic to the human experience. Yet, the persistent search for joy in the face of suffering was ever the crucial heart of Auden's poetic career. "Death's Echo" frames this existential anxiety, as well as the persistence of gaiety in its midst, through each stanza. The final refrain of the poem recognizes the inescapable presence of human pain; recognizes, again, the dream of never having been born; and yet concludes for the final time with a call for joy:

The desires of the heart are as crooked as corkscrews,

Not to be born is the best for man;

The second-best is a formal order,

The dance's pattern; dance while you can.

Dance, dance, for the figure is easy,

The tune is catching and will not stop;

¹¹ W. H. Auden, "September 1, 1939" in *Selected Poems*, ed. by Edward Mendelson, (New York: Random House Inc. 2007), 97, ll. 99–109.

Dance till the stars come down from the rafters;

*Dance, dance, dance till you drop.*¹²

It is here, in this insistence on grasping as much beauty, joy, and vitality as possible within a time and death-bound life, that Auden's existentialist lineage reaches Philip Larkin.

Larkin was born in Coventry in 1922, and spent the great majority of his adult life working as a librarian in the small northern city of Hull. Unlike both Yeats and Auden, Larkin resolutely shied away from any opportunity to be a public figure, and insisted upon remaining quite perversely provincial and antisocial throughout his entire career. Where Auden's existential anxieties formed the basis of his desire to create a large and beautiful life out of his fear, Larkin's lifelong anxieties about mortality seem only to have held him back and forced him deeper into himself. As reporter Jo Thomas noted in her obituary of Larkin for the *New York Times*, the poet was unique in his simultaneous popularity and hatred of that popularity. "He refused to give poetry readings, shunned interviews, and when asked by Kingsley Amis if he thought about becoming Poet Laureate, replied: 'I dream about that sometimes—and wake up screaming. With any luck they'll pass me over.'"¹³ Although he was adored for his work, the overwhelming consensus, even among Larkin's admirers, has often been that Larkin is the poet of ceaseless pessimism and despair. To an extent, of course, his poems prove this to be quite an accurate characterization. Larkin, in his art and in his life, knew intimately the idea that to never have been born would be best. One of his most anthologized poems, "This Be The Verse," ends with these lines:

Man hands on misery to man.

¹² Auden, "Death's Echo," ll. 57–64.

¹³ Jo Thomas, "Philip Larkin, Poet and Librarian, Dies at 63," *New York Times*, December 3, 1985, <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/12/03/books/philip-larkin-poet-and-librarian-dies-at-63.html>.

It deepens like a coastal shelf.
Get out as early as you can,
And don't have any kids yourself.¹⁴

The echoes of that familiar sentiment, particularly in terms of the original Sophoclean quotation, are obvious in this final quatrain. There is an undeniable and overwhelming pessimism being communicated. Unfortunately, however, a common reaction to Larkin's pessimistic form of existentialism, particularly in the academic environment, is to shy away from and even dismiss a more careful study of his work. There is something in Larkin that causes even some of the most poetically versed to turn away, claiming that the poet is nothing more than obnoxiously depressing. In truth, without time and willing attention, much of Larkin's verse might well be boiled down to a flat, perverse pessimism. However, when his poetic career is inspected with deserved care, the constant search for beauty and connection which we see so clearly in Auden proves to linger quietly but resolutely beneath all of Larkin's work. The task of uncovering these yearnings towards beauty is a challenge, but it is one we must undertake if we hope not only to understand the nature of Larkin's particular suffering, but to be able (with Larkin as our guide) to look into the heart of our own universal fear of the darkness. Only through unraveling the difficult truths of our fear can we ultimately discover for ourselves whether transcendence from such anxiety is possible. By studying the poetry of Philip Larkin through the lens of philosophical existentialism, not only can we gain a better understanding of the nature of this poet's struggle with the anxiety that accompanies a constant awareness of mortality, but through this understanding we can recognize how poetry's uniquely nuanced nature creates space for the subtle and inexplicable beauty we find in Larkin's work.

¹⁴ Philip Larkin, "This Be The Verse" in *High Windows* (London: Faber & Faber Limited, 1974), 30, ll. 9–12.

**“The Million-Petalled Flower / Of Being Here”:
Anxiety, Existence, and the Persistence of Beauty**

When asked, in a 1981 interview with John Haffenden, how he felt about critics who believed he was overly fixated on mortality, Philip Larkin responded: “I didn’t invent age and death and failure and all that, but how can you ignore them?”¹⁵ Anxiety about death and its creeping antecedent—“age, and then the only end of age”¹⁶—thematically underpinned Larkin’s poetry throughout his career, and in a post-war era with religiosity on the wane, one might imagine that the work of a poet who embodies this ubiquitous struggle would be embraced as an extremely relatable character. Yet, as Larkin’s verse often proves, the barriers that hinder human connection are not always easily overcome, even when the matter at hand is a common one. The ubiquity of death in life, despite being a universal cause for unease, can often prove to be a painfully difficult experience to communicate, and such is often true in Larkin’s poems. However, rather than reflecting poorly on the verse, this struggle can more accurately be understood as a defining feature of the anxiety itself, particularly when considered through an existentialist lens. Seldom has bad news been so diligently and beautifully conveyed.

In the following sections we will explore the nature of existential anxiety as it is understood philosophically, psychologically, and psychoanalytically, before turning to an in-depth exploration of Larkin’s own verse in order to identify not only the nature of his own anxiety and how that anxiety dictated an isolated and unhappy life, but to uncover—amidst overwhelming darkness—the poet’s remarkable yearnings towards beauty and universality. Only

¹⁵ Philip Larkin, interview by John Haffenden, 1981, reprinted in *Philip Larkin: Further Requirements*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2001), 51.

¹⁶ Philip Larkin, “Dockery and Son” in *The Whitsun Weddings*, (London: Faber & Faber Limited, 1964), 37, ll. 48.

through the realization of this beauty can we, as an audience, hope to discover the ephemeral opportunities for transcendence which, perhaps, exist only through the vehicle of poetry.

Kierkegaardian Anxiety and Incommunicability

The concept of anxiety lies at the heart of all Larkin's verse and thus must remain at the heart of our conversation. Even more specifically, however, the question of how anxiety relates to an inability to communicate and connect to others is imperative for our exploration. Understanding the nature of anxiety, as it is communicated through various fields of research and thought, is the crucial first step in untangling the knot of Larkin's poetic psyche. To begin, we return to W. H. Auden—specifically to his work on the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard, the man often referred to as the “father of existentialism.”¹⁷ In Auden's introduction to *The Living Thoughts of Kierkegaard*, the poet suggests that the philosopher posits anxiety to be an inherently incommunicable state because of its inextricable connection to existence. According to Kierkegaard, Auden explains, an individual's existence is itself incommunicable in that an individual can explain and question aspects of themselves—characteristics, feelings, reactions, etc.—but can never explain exactly what it is to *be* themselves:

The awareness of existing is [...] absolutely private and incommunicable. My feelings, desires, etc., can be objects of my knowledge and hence I can imagine what other people feel. My existence cannot become an object of knowledge [...] [in other words] I can legitimately speak of *my* feelings. I cannot properly speak of *my* existence.¹⁸

¹⁷ William McDonald, “Søren Kierkegaard,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, (Winter 2017 Edition): <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kierkegaard/>.

¹⁸ W. H. Auden, “Introduction to *The Living Thoughts of Kierkegaard*,” in *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden: Prose Volume III 1949–1955*, ed. Edward Mendelson, (London: Faber & Faber Limited, 2008) 287.

Auden acknowledges these communicable aspects of the self as accumulated “objects of [...] knowledge,” suggesting that there is something concrete, even object-like, about feelings and desires which make them intrinsically explicable. The condition of anxiety, however, he understands as being distinctly separate from these “objects” despite being simultaneously described by them. Much like existence, Auden posits that a state of anxiety is one which Kierkegaard considers equally “incommunicable,” and claims that this is true of a number of other states as well, such as “dread, pride [...] despair [and] faith.”¹⁹ He suggests that one can only describe a state of anxiety through interpretation of the observable phenomena expressed in reaction to that state, and thus it cannot be understood or explained in and of itself. In Auden’s words: “[Anxiety, pride, etc.] are not emotions in the way that fear or lust or anger are, for I cannot know them objectively; I can only know them when they have aroused such feelings as the above which are observable.”²⁰

In the fields of psychology and psychoanalysis, this sense of incommunicability is linked to the essential distinguishing feature that sets anxiety apart from its primary observable counterpart: fear. In his essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Sigmund Freud establishes a clear distinction between fear and two other emotions he suggests are frequently (and incorrectly) used synonymously: “apprehension” and “fright.” He explains: “Apprehension (*Angst*) denotes a certain condition as of expectation of danger and preparation for it, even though it be an unknown one; fear (*Furcht*) requires a definite object of which one is afraid; fright (*Schreck*) is the name of the condition to which one is reduced if one encounters a danger without being prepared for it.”²¹ Bert R. Sappenfield, like many of his contemporary psychologists, utilizes

¹⁹ Auden, “Introduction,” 288.

²⁰ Auden, “Introduction,” 288.

²¹ Sigmund Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” in *The Works of Sigmund Freud*, (London: Hogarth Press, 1994), 144.

Freud's theory when explaining the difference between fear and anxiety in his essay, "Anxiety, Guilt, and Inferiority Feelings": "The fundamental distinction between fear and anxiety involves the fact that fear always occurs in relation to some particular object, while anxiety is 'objectless.' An individual fears something in particular, but he suffers anxiety without knowing what he is anxious about."²² In his analysis, Sappenfield substitutes "anxiety" for Freud's "apprehension," avoiding the triangulation of the more temporal "fright," but in both cases the contrasting duality of object-possession versus objectlessness stands at the center of the distinction.

As Sappenfield suggests, the fundamentally "objectless" quality of anxiety has the effect of causing emotional reactions to occur without the subject knowing what these feelings are related to. The subject is unable to precisely communicate the nature of the anxiety's presence, despite the experience being palpable. In the case of fear, the sensation is communicable because its associated object is concrete and discernable: a spider or a contagious disease, for example. We can comprehend and explain the fear because we can comprehend and explain the object. However, if the feeling (in this case, anxiety) is attached to something inexplicable—a non-comprehensible object—it, in a sense, inherits the object's inexplicability, rendering the feeling itself incommunicable. Developing Sappenfield's argument further, Auden suggests that anxiety's incommunicability stems from the fact that it is inherently tethered to the idea of existence—itsself, by definition, an incommunicable phenomenon: a non-object. According to Auden, the inability to objectively comprehend a state such as anxiety stems from the fact that "these states of anxiety or pride, etc., are anxiety about existing, pride in existing, etc., and I

²² Bert R. Sappenfield, "Anxiety, Guilt, and Inferiority Feelings" in *Personality Dynamics: An Integrative Psychology of Adjustment*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), 160–193, chap. XIV, <http://ezproxy.purchase.edu:2048/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.purchase.edu/books/anxiety-guilt-inferiority-feelings/docview/621934077/se-2?accountid=14171>.

cannot stand outside them to observe them.”²³ In short, anxiety can never be accurately explained because it is intrinsically related to a fundamentally inexplicable existence.

What emerges, at least in the context of the Existentialists, is the idea that any body of work that focuses on the relationship between anxiety and existence will necessarily be predicated on the struggle to overcome inherited incommunicability. This is particularly striking in the case of Larkin, whose entire body of work could be seen as a devout struggle with this issue, where the relationship between anxiety and existence is tied to the issue of mortality and the event of death. For Kierkegaard, however, anxiety is not connected to the issue of mortality so much as it is to human possibility. In his 1844 book, *The Concept of Anxiety*, the philosopher describes anxiety as the “dizziness of freedom”²⁴—the overwhelming, chaotic quality of what it is to possess free will. Because we have the capacity to govern and make choices limited only by the tangible constraints of existence (birth, geography, disease, situational advantage or disadvantage, death) we are constantly faced with the prospect of unbound possibility. For Kierkegaard, it is this freedom to choose between a seemingly boundless array of possibilities that is the root cause of anxiety. However, according to Kierkegaard, this experience of anxiety, while potentially the agent of existential stagnancy, is also the vehicle that allows us to transcend it—the catalyst that spurs the active pursuit of further possibility.²⁵ For Larkin, anxiety functions on a similar trajectory, but the focus for him is almost always on mortality and the prospect of death. To exist is to be cognizant of inevitable death—for Larkin, perpetually so—and thus awareness of mortality becomes as inherent a characteristic of existence as freedom is for

²³ Auden, “Introduction,” 288.

²⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, (New York: Liverlight, 2014), 188.

²⁵ Jean Wahl, “Existentialism: A Preface,” *The New Republic*, September 30, 1945, <https://newrepublic.com/article/76994/existentialism-preface>.

Kierkegaard. In this sense, the idea of mortality runs parallel to the idea of freedom in Kierkegaard's formulation, through its same capacity to trigger anxiety.

Heideggerian Anxiety and the Realization of Death

The relationship between anxiety and death was explored directly by Martin Heidegger in his seminal work *Being and Time*, which reiterates the premise of anxiety as essentially “objectless,” but extrapolates further to suggest that what anxiety does is reframe the world, presenting the world from a new vantage point and in turn defamiliarizing us with and from it. Michael Wheeler, author of *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*'s chapter on Heidegger, explains this concept: “When I am anxious I am no longer at home in the world. I fail to find the world intelligible. Thus there is an ontological sense (one to do with intelligibility) in which I am not in the world, and the possibility of a world without me (the possibility of my not-Being-in-the-world) is revealed to me.”²⁶ In other words, according to Heidegger, anxiety causes us to experience a sensation of disorientation. The world is no longer “intelligible” to us, and thus through this unintelligibility is born an image of the world that we do not fit into—which we cannot be realized inside of. The crucial concept of non-existence arises here. In short, as Wheeler explains, “Anxiety [...] discloses my death via the awareness of the possibility of a world in which I am not.”²⁷ According to Heidegger, this awareness of death only becomes possible through the experience of anxiety, and as such the two (anxiety and consciousness of our own mortality) are inextricably linked. This, for Larkin, is a crucial and inescapable duality.

It is in Heidegger that we find a philosophical explanation that seems most reflected in Larkin, and this philosophical definition can help to frame and inform our conversation as we

²⁶ Michael Wheeler, “Martin Heidegger,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, (Fall 2020 Edition): <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/heidegger/>.

²⁷ Wheeler, “Heidegger.”

move forward into a close study of Larkin's poetry. As we will see clarified in the following sections, Heidegger remains a crucial framework for understanding Larkin's Existentialism particularly because inside his concept of "being-towards death," Heidegger suggests that anxiety functions to reveal to the self the omnipresence of death in life.²⁸ Because every moment of life is reflected back off the nearing horizon of death, existence becomes inevitably imbued with an immense value. As we will see moving forward, the enormous value and beauty of life that the fact of its ephemerality demands will become paramount to our analysis of Larkin. We begin by digging into a poem that helps us to begin the process of decoding Larkin's anxiety as it relates to the fact of his existence.

"The Old Fools": Larkinian Anxiety and Existence

Larkin reportedly spent the majority of his life in a state of abject anxiety about the prospect of death, exacerbated by the struggle to live in a world he perceived as dominated by death's looming inevitability. In his late poem, "Aubade," he describes the nature of his days:

I work all day, and get half-drunk at night.
Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.
In time the curtain-edges will grow light.
Till then I see what's really always there:
Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,
Making all thought impossible but how
And where and when I shall myself die.²⁹

²⁸ Simon Critchley, "Being and Time part 6: Death," *The Guardian*, July 13, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/jul/13/heidegger-being-time#:~:text=For%20human%20beings%2C%20time%20comes%20to%20an%20end%20with%20our%20death.&text=This%20is%20what%20Heidegger%20famously,the%20fact%20of%20our%20death>.

²⁹ Philip Larkin, "Aubade," in *Collected Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989) 208, lines 1–7.

This anxiety subsumed his personality, shadowed his relationships, governed his life choices, and shaped who he was as a poet. Many of Larkin's poems can be understood as attempts to clarify and define anxiety through repeated vocalization of the feelings and reactions it incites in him. Again, according to Kierkegaard (by way of Auden), this frustration is the result of anxiety being inexplicable by definition. The act of expressing it through explicable feelings constitutes the poetry. In order to get as close as we can to understanding the nature of that anxiety, we must first attempt a more robust understanding of those feelings as expressed in the verse. One of Larkin's critical poems exploring the perceivable feelings surrounding an anxiety about mortality is "The Old Fools."

The poem opens with a harsh, condescending tone. The whole first stanza is brash, sneering, and even cruel. Larkin describes the old people as "fools," suggesting that they may be responsible for their behavior which he finds unsightly and grotesque. He repeatedly scoffs at their condition, making sarcastic remarks like,

[...] Do they somehow suppose
It's more grown-up when your mouth hangs open and drools,
And you keep on pissing yourself, and can't remember
Who called this morning? [...] ³⁰

The lines would seem to have little purpose other than to offend. However, if we consider the statement as an observable reaction (an emotion explicable by way of its connection to an object) we can begin to identify the underlying anxiety lingering more subtly beneath the lines. His disgust is clearly an example of fear, tethered to the idea of old people nearing death. The harshness of tone and the revulsion towards the helpless actions of the old people clearly indicate

³⁰ Philip Larkin, "The Old Fools" in *High Windows* (London: Faber & Faber Limited, 1974) 19, lines 2–5.

the underlying presence of fear, and act as the tangible embodiments of Larkin's own anxiety about mortality. The critical, although somewhat facetious, question he posits at the end of the first stanza—"Why aren't they screaming?"³¹—is further confirmation of the poet's own fear. It seems clear he does not actually expect them to be relentlessly screaming, and yet he cannot help but imagine his own reaction to a situation so emblematic of existential anxiety, which would be to scream. This theme persists through the following three stanzas, and as such the poem serves as a lens through which we can infer the presence and nature of the poet's anxiety. As we move forward through this exploration, however, the issue of ambivalence arises when we begin to look more closely at the context in which Larkin's unique form of existential anxiety breeds. In the following section we will turn to look more closely at the nature of Larkin's solitary lifestyle by focusing specifically on the way in which his fraught ambivalence over the opposing draws of existence and non-existence is both a product of and contributor to his anxiety.

The Role of Ambivalence in the Construction of an Unhappy Life

Although Larkin's anxiety tends to focus directly on the issue of non-existence, by implication anxiety about the prospect of being dead is inherently coupled with anxiety about what it feels like to be alive. For Larkin, this tension between existence and non-existence (what the point of living is if it only ends in death) is a complicated one. Larkin was a man for whom, as Clive James describes it, "poetry was a life sentence. He set happiness aside to make room for it."³² The consensus amongst those who encountered Larkin is that he was a persistently unhappy man, seemingly by choice. He never married and had no children, his few romantic relationships were largely unrewarding, he only infrequently traveled beyond the small northern city of

³¹ Larkin, "The Old Fools," ll. 12.

³² Clive James, "Somewhere Becoming Rain" in *Somewhere Becoming Rain: Collected Writings on Philip Larkin* (London: Picador, 2019) 12.

Hull—which he referred to in his poem “Here” as the place “Where only salesmen and relations come / Within a terminate and fishy-smelling / Pastoral of [...] Tattoo-shops, consulates, grim head-scarfed wives”³³—where he worked and spent his life perversely avoiding commonplace sources of joy. He lived what Katha Pollitt called, in her 1990 essay, “almost a kind of anti-life, one might say, avoiding with equal adroitness the cozy constraints of conventional husband-and-fatherhood and the roaring-boy privileges of the poet.”³⁴ The constant leakage of anxiety about death into his daily existence seemed to foster this solitary conduct and general misanthropy and kept him (or so it appeared) from any fulfilling engagement with life. Because Larkin’s most compelling reflections on his life—its overwhelming anxieties and its occasional joys—are contained within the poems, one might argue this sense of curmudgeonly loneliness was simply the tone of his art. However, if we take seriously James’ assertion that poetry was, for Larkin, “a life sentence,” we begin to get an idea of just how real the presence of death was, not only in his creative sphere, but in his day-to-day life as well.

Larkin adamantly viewed himself as an individual, decisively separate from the general public. To be included in the body politic, in Larkin's estimation, would have been to become:

[...] that spectacted schoolteaching sod
(Six kids, and the wife in pod,
And her parents coming to stay) [...]³⁵

Although his primary reaction to this population is clearly scorn, there always lingers a sense of curiosity about what might have been missed. We face, then, as we approach Larkin’s poems, two dichotomies, one of which can be understood as a more specific embodiment of the other.

³³ Philip Larkin, “Here” in *The Whitsun Weddings*, (London: Faber & Faber Limited, 1964), 3, ll. 18–21.

³⁴ Katha Pollitt, “Philip Larkin,” *Grand Street* vol. 9, no. 3 (1990): 250–260. *JSTOR*.

³⁵ Philip Larkin, “The Life With a Hole In It” in *Collected Poems*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989), 202, ll. 14–16.

First, the tension between anxiety about death and anxiety about life, and second, the tension between scorn for “normal life” and a simultaneous yearning to engage in it.

As we have already addressed, Larkin cruelly objectifies “the old fools” in the first stanza of the poem, and yet cannot help but project himself into their plight. In a sense, he is imaginatively synonymous with the very figures that disgust him. In terms of the human condition, he is them. Clearly, he is profoundly aware that they share a fate, although the choices they make (we might recall Kierkegaard’s concept of freedom here) on the path to the inevitable are different. There is a sense of ultimate sameness already arising. In his poem “Dockery and Son,” he describes the ultimate equalizing of choices between himself and a former schoolmate: “[...] For Dockery a son, for me nothing, / Nothing with all a son’s harsh patronage.”³⁶ Still, a crucial separation persists between the poet and the people he looks at. Larkin would reach his end by a very individual route, brought about by the lifestyle he constructed to ensure that breach between himself and the population. We see, coming to bear in this first stanza of “The Old Fools,” the ambivalent tension of this division: the struggle between hatred towards these people and a simultaneous and complicated longing to be one of them. Larkin suggests that the old people are foolish to suppose that—

[...] if they only chose,
They could alter things back to when they danced all night,
Or went to their wedding, or sloped arms some September.³⁷

The statement is made within the context of other degrading, sarcastic comments and thus carries an air of sarcasm itself. However, looked at in isolation, the suggestion feels much more

³⁶ Philip Larkin, “Dockery and Son” in *The Whitsun Weddings*, (London: Faber & Faber Limited, 1964), 37, ll. 43–44.

³⁷ Larkin, “The Old Fools,” ll. 5–7.

melancholy. The scenes he imagines in the minds of the old people are tender and romantic, punctuated by moments of joy and intimacy—happy experiences that Larkin frequently suggests were absent from his own life. In this sense, while he exhibits absolute revulsion at their condition, there still persists an underlying fear that the old people might be in a *better* position than he will be when faced with the same imperative. This difference, perhaps, is an aspect of why they listlessly “sat through days of thin continuous dreaming / Watching the light move” while Larkin imagines himself screaming. In effect, Larkin’s horror is not at them, but at a projected version of himself.

This sense of ambivalence is critical to an understanding of Larkin’s persona and work, and in many ways mirrors and can be understood alongside Freud’s “Dual Instinct Theory.” Freud posits the theory in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where he suggests that each person is governed by two opposing forces: Eros and Thanatos. Eros represents the instinct to strive towards “sexuality, development, and increased life activity,”³⁸ whereas Thanatos represents the instinct to strive towards “reduction of tension and life activity.”³⁹ Larkin emerges as a figure paralyzed between the opposing pull of these two forces, doggedly committed to Thanatos but ever-tempted by the presence of Eros. The poem “Reasons for Attendance” further exhibits and clarifies this tension.

Dual Instinct Theory and “Reasons for Attendance”

The poem is divided into one quatrain followed by three quintets, making it almost perfectly divisible into two halves standing in opposition to each other. For this context, we might understand the thematic resonance of this structural division as representing Eros in the first half, and Thanatos in the second. The poem opens with the sound of a trumpet, compelling

³⁸ APA Dictionary of Psychology, s.v. “Eros” <https://dictionary.apa.org/eros>.

³⁹ APA Dictionary of Psychology, s.v. “Thanatos” <https://dictionary.apa.org/thanatos>.

the poet to gaze through a lighted window at a group of people dancing inside, “shifting intently, face to face, / solemnly on the beat of happiness.”⁴⁰ He imagines that the act of dancing with a partner among other dancers is somehow representative of a serious kind of happiness. This kind of movement communicates joy, and yet, for the poet, does so in a distanced way (from the outside looking in) revealing his own unfamiliarity with the scene. “—Or so I fancy, sensing the smoke and sweat,”⁴¹ he begins the first line of the second stanza. For the lingering poet, the interior space represents the tug of Eros, characterized by the active motion of the dancers and, importantly, the presence of sex. “Why be in there?” he asks, and quickly answers his own question: “Sex, yes ...”⁴² The interior of the dance hall becomes an embodiment of the force of “sexuality” and “increased life activity,”⁴³ and, if only for a moment, this force tempts the poet. “Surely, to think the lion’s share / Of happiness is found by couples,” he begins, setting forth an Eros-fueled supposition, before completing the sentence as the poem bridges into the third stanza: “—sheer // Inaccuracy, as far as I’m concerned.”⁴⁴ It’s a complicated movement, and perfectly delineates the tonal shift from the first half of the poem to the second. He posits the idea that happiness is most keenly experienced in romantic and sexual relationships, and suggests (“Surely, to think”) that he himself has likely thought this to be the case. As in “The Old Fools,” Larkin speculates about whether the people he observes are experiencing true happiness and are therefore better off than he. Still, by the end of the sentence and the stanza, his own commitment to Thanatos has prevailed.

⁴⁰ Philip Larkin, “Reasons For Attendance,” in *The Less Deceived* (London: Faber & Faber Limited, 2011), 16, ll. 5.

⁴¹ Larkin, “Reasons,” ll. 6.

⁴² Larkin, “Reasons,” ll. 8.

⁴³ APA, s.v. “Eros.”

⁴⁴ Larkin, “Reasons,” ll. 9–11.

This return to Thanatos, however, proves complicated, as what Larkin suggests is the alternative to the Eros space does not necessarily seem to align with the idea of reduced life activity:

What calls me is that lifted, rough-tongued bell
(Art, if you like) whose individual sound
Insists I too am individual.⁴⁵

Art would not inherently seem to be something which spurs the reduction of life activity, and yet in the case of Larkin, as we have discussed, a secluded and antisocial lifestyle seems to have accompanied his art-making in a way that is unique and crucial to him. In this sense, the act of returning to art does in fact represent a return to the small (and notably “reduced”) life of poetry writing. In contrast with the social and sexual activity beyond the window, the poet’s retreating figure seems almost a personification of Thanatos. As the poet imagines himself drawn back to the sound of the “rough-tongued bell,”⁴⁶ his essential individuality is reasserted. He insists that although the bell of art is not uniquely tolling for him, nevertheless it is something that he and any other art-makers for whom it tolls will not be able to hear together, or at least not in the same way. The individuality of the listener is paramount: “It speaks; I hear; others may hear as well, / But not for me, nor I for them[.]”⁴⁷

Larkin suggests that there is something in the nature of art that intrinsically demands individuality. Art, like anxiety and existence, evades direct explanation. For Larkin, if the tolling bell was to be heard, it required separation—isolation from all others, even those who shared his artistic endeavors. This staunch individualism necessitated a very quiet and uneventful life,

⁴⁵ Larkin, “Reasons,” ll. 12–13.

⁴⁶ Larkin, “Reasons,” ll. 14.

⁴⁷ Larkin, “Reasons,” ll. 14–15.

something Larkin pursued (although not without remorse) to the end. The final stanza clarifies Larkin's thinking, acknowledging that one position does not negate the other—it is a matter of choice. Again, we recall Kierkegaard's concept of freedom. Both parties remain where they are, respecting each other's right to choose and acknowledging the great distances between them. Eros and Thanatos are safely, distinctly separate. Until, that is, the shocking final line:

[...] Therefore I stay outside,
Believing this; and they maul to and fro,
Believing that; and both are satisfied,
If no one has misjudged himself. Or lied.⁴⁸

Here, the doubt from the former half of the poem returns cryptically. The final line (and especially its final two words) throws off the poem's entire structure of careful reasoning, rendering it a potential house of cards. Has Larkin misjudged himself? Have the dancers? Have the risks involved in engagement (possible humiliation; the potential for loss, and with loss, pain) coerced the poet's judgment into choosing solitude? Or, worse still, has he lied? This, of course, is the more interesting question. Its sudden appearance in the poem seems to posit that perhaps he has. Perhaps he has lied about not being tempted to join the dancers, or secretly suspects that happiness actually does lie in shared experience—the “maul to and fro” of human contact. Or maybe he understands that a solitary life committed to art is not enough, and that it was a commitment born of fear which he has lied in claiming satisfies him. It is clear that a longing towards another kind of life—that of partnership, of love, of dancing, and of engaging in frivolous and enjoyable activity—persists. The potential for any and all of these lies exists in that short final statement. The abrupt ending is deeply significant, as it throws everything said in the

⁴⁸ Larkin, “Reasons,” ll. 17–20.

rest of the poem into doubt. Larkin is suddenly clearly aware (if it is true that he has lied) that the consequences could be as dramatic as the wasting of a life. As he admits at the end of “Dockery and Son”:

Life is first boredom, then fear.
Whether or not we use it, it goes,
And leaves what something hidden from us chose,
And age, and then the only end of age.⁴⁹

Larkin’s complicated ambivalence proves to have played a serious part in the creation of this uniquely isolated life, primarily by rendering him immobile between the draws of existence and nonexistence. However, as we have already seen at play, a crucial aspect of this dynamic is the way in which Larkin himself perpetuates and participates in his own suffering. In the following section we will look more closely at Larkin’s purposeful maintenance of his anxiety and pain, with particular focus on the Sartrean concepts of authenticity and bad faith.

Authenticity, Bad Faith, and the Commitment to Suffering

As James suggests: “It ought to be obvious that Larkin is not a universal poet in the thematic sense—in fact, he is a self-proclaimed stranger to a good half, *the* good half, of life.”⁵⁰ Throughout much of his career, Larkin claimed that his fixation with mortality and, importantly, his willingness to court suffering placed him in a position to confront the difficult truths of the human condition better than others. Although his sense of ambivalence bothered him consistently, he maintained a belief in his intellectual superiority. He believed he held access to a deeper knowledge than the general public did, not because he had some naturally enhanced

⁴⁹ Larkin, “Dockery and Son,” ll. 45–48.

⁵⁰ Clive James, “Wolves of Memory” in *Somewhere Becoming Rain: Collected Writings on Philip Larkin* (London: Picador, 2019) 14.

capacity for sight, but because he accepted the experience of suffering that inherently accompanies a constant awareness of existence—even relishing in it, at times, as an avenue to superior understanding. He saw more because he permitted himself to see more. James believes wholeheartedly in the clarity of Larkin’s vision, and insists that the omnipresence of misery that we find in so much of the poet’s verse directly correlates to this intense capacity for clear sight. As the critic suggests in the introduction to *Somewhere Becoming Rain*: “When Larkin seems set on being even more miserable than T. S. Eliot about the paucity of events while walking in a country lane, it’s important to remember that Larkin might be seeing even more than his great predecessor, and certainly seeing more than us.”⁵¹ In his essay “Agnosticism, Masks and Monologues in Philip Larkin,” István D. Rácz (referencing the recollections of Larkin’s friend and publisher, Jean Hartley) further personalizes this idea and draws Larkin’s agency into direct question, concluding that Larkin believed that “there was absolutely no deception involved in suffering.”⁵² Like James, Rácz suggests a correlation between truth and suffering, but places the emphasis more directly on the poet’s own ideas; Larkin understood the sufferer to be the less deceived, and thus “suffering becomes the only hope for cognition.”⁵³

In many ways, the idea of facing the truth unshielded seems to align with one of Jean-Paul Sartre’s primary concepts—authenticity. In his 1946 essay “Anti-Semite and Jew,” Sartre explains that “[a]uthenticity [...] consists in having a true and lucid consciousness of the situation, in assuming the responsibilities and risks that it involves, in accepting it in pride or humiliation, sometimes in horror and hate.”⁵⁴ This clearly echoes Larkin’s principle of “no deception involved in suffering.” However, a number of salient questions arise here. The first,

⁵¹ Clive James, *Somewhere Becoming Rain: Collected Writings on Philip Larkin* (London: Picador, 2019) xi.

⁵² István D. Rácz, “Agnosticism, Masks and Monologues in Philip Larkin,” *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)*, vol. 1, no. 2, (1995), 98. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/41273900.

⁵³ Rácz, “Agnosticism,” 98.

⁵⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, “Anti-Semite and Jew” in *Anti-Semite and Jew: An Exploration of the Etiology of Hate*, trans. George J. Becker (New York: Schocken, 1995), 90.

and maybe most troubling, is the question of whether authenticity is worthwhile—whether it is advantageous to have an increased capacity for sight if it means a lifetime of suffering. When the end result is a life largely void of happiness, the value of clear cognition has to be questioned. And, of course, as we have already seen within a single stanza, Larkin himself poses the question often. Small pieces of evidence crop up everywhere, suggesting that Larkin did not so wholeheartedly believe in this glorified view of suffering. Anxiety about this dilemma—blissful ignorance versus a ceaseless awareness of reality—punctuates his entire poetic output, and contributes significantly to this overarching anxiety about existence and non-existence.

Larkin is aware that time spent untroubled by contemplation of the existential condition (even if that means willful ignorance or blind self-deception) might make for a more peaceful, even a happier, life. This theme appears briefly in “The Old Fools,” but is extrapolated further in many other poems. “Born Yesterday,” Larkin’s message to his friend Kingsley Amis’ daughter at her birth, functions as an appeal on her behalf that she will be blessed with the gift of being “ordinary.”⁵⁵ He hopes, for her sake, that she will be—

Not ugly, not good-looking,
Nothing uncustomary
To pull you off your balance,
That, unworkable itself,
Stops all the rest from working.⁵⁶

We recognize this idea, of course. Larkin suggests that it is the “unworkable” aspects of a person which throws them off balance and conspires to make them “uncustomary,” set them apart, and prevent them from functioning healthily within the systems of regular society. The characteristics

⁵⁵ Philip Larkin, “Born Yesterday” in *The Less Deceived* (London: Faber & Faber, 2011) 11, line 12.

⁵⁶ Larkin, “Born Yesterday,” ll. 15–19.

he prays the young girl will not inherit are essentially those he identifies in himself. It becomes easier to understand Larkin's urge to self-identity as a misanthrope who courted and cultivated his own unhappiness when we see how willingly he admits the fundamental limitations which lie underneath this dismal facade. These unworkable—and therefore unworked—facets of his personality caused him to be largely excluded from the “ordinary” aspects of life that tend to bring other people joy and comfort. Despite imagining that he possesses superior knowledge and foresight (a grasp on the realities of mortality) than those of the “customary” crowd, still there is a yearning for the simple joys of life and love that have been denied him, or that he has denied himself. Half-bitterly, half-tenderly, he ends the poem with the wish that the little girl grow up to—

... be dull —
If that is what a skilled,
Vigilant, flexible,
Unemphasised, enthralled
Catching of happiness is called.⁵⁷

We certainly feel, in those final lines, that regretful longing for a dull life. By equating dullness with an “enthralled catching of happiness,” Larkin implicitly suggests a questioning of his own choices. He ends the poem ruminating on whether a duller path might actually have been worth treading if it meant the opportunity for joy.

The second major question regarding the idea of authenticity in the case of Larkin is the suspicion of disingenuousness—whether it gives too much credit to Larkin's claims about the value of suffering. Because our only perspective into the situation comes from the poet himself,

⁵⁷ Larkin, “Born Yesterday,” ll. 20–24.

we assume that Larkin's claims that suffering leads to greater understanding and clearer sight are true. Reading a Larkin poem and finding it morose to an unnecessary, even self-indulgent or melodramatic degree, we nonetheless grant him the assumption of honesty—of simply telling the truth as he sees it. But is it possible that there is a degree of strategic deception being carried out on the part of the poet, a kind of inauthentic authenticity? And, if so, why? James comments on this, implying that it is we, the readers, who are likely the more deceived: “The reader tends to find himself shut out, glad that Larkin can speak so beautifully in his desperation, but sorry that he should see the end in terms of his peculiar loneliness. There is always the edifying possibility, however, that Larkin is seeing the whole truth and the reader's defense mechanisms are working full blast.”⁵⁸ From James' perspective, it is the reader—enchanted by the words but relieved not to be the one who wrote them—who is subconsciously denying themselves the ability to see the “whole truth,” and the poet who sees clearly and responds with a “peculiar loneliness.” A concern here, however, is just how advantageous this idea is to a figure like Larkin. If the poet convinced himself that his suffering placed him in a position above those around him, not only might the burden of suffering feel more tolerable but it might also serve as fuel for his self-proclaimed misanthropy. When we associate authenticity with suffering, we run the risk of fetishizing pain and initiating a cycle in which the gratification of seeing our pain as authentic demands that we continuously seek out suffering. The results of such thinking can be alarming and widespread. This is not to say that Larkin's lifetime of suffering was entirely a product of his own mindset, but it feels undeniable that romanticizing suffering could easily get one stuck in an inescapable cycle of more or less perpetual unhappiness punctuated by a masochistic enjoyment of that unhappiness.

⁵⁸ James, “Wolves of Memory,” 22.

Clearly, as we have discussed at some length, the poet felt extremely disconnected from the world around him in physical, emotional, and intellectual ways, and yet harbored a sense of longing for active engagement. The obvious question, then, is why he was unable to make that change for himself? Why was his energy spent keeping up a lonely and curmudgeonly persona, instead of altering it for his own benefit? We can, perhaps, begin answering these questions by exploring this issue through the Sartrean concept of “bad faith.” Larkin insisted, throughout his career, that he was altogether and inescapably “uncustomary” or “unworkable,” as he suggests in “Born Yesterday.” That there was something inherent in him (what Sartre would call part of his “facticity,” or what “makes up the element of ‘givenness’ we must work with”⁵⁹) which compelled him to be who he was. In other words, he imagined himself to be awkward, antisocial, and altogether unlike other people not by choice but inescapably by nature. For Sartre, Larkin’s claim that his condition is innate and not susceptible to change qualifies him as being in a state of bad faith.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre describes bad faith as, “a lie to oneself [...] [whereby] the essence of the lie implies in fact that the liar actually is in complete possession of the truth which he is hiding.”⁶⁰ In plain terms, this would be lying to oneself about oneself, while being fully aware both of the act of lying and of the truth one is trying to conceal. Varga and Guignon, in their essay on authenticity for *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, note that:

The most familiar form of bad faith is acting as if one were a mere thing—solely facticity—and thereby denying one’s own freedom to make oneself into something very different. Thus, the person who thinks she is a

⁵⁹ Somogy Varga and Charles Guignon, “Authenticity,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, (Spring 2020 Edition): <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/authenticity/>.

⁶⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Éditions Gallimard, 1956) 48.

coward 'just as a matter of fact' is excluding from view the ability to transform her existence through changed ways of behaving.⁶¹

Being in a state of bad faith functions as a form of active self-sabotage in that it denies the freedom to enact change. Sartre calls this ability to overcome one's facticity "transcendence." When we understand ourselves to be a fixed entity, not only do we become incapable of transcendence, but we simultaneously rid ourselves of agency. By denying our ability to change, we become no longer responsible for who we are or who we could be. We are simply the product of forces over which we have no control—in a sense, a denial of the basic premise of Kierkegaardian freedom. In his interview with Larkin, John Haffenden asks the poet what he thinks about critics who suggest that he has an unyieldingly pessimistic conception of life (especially in terms of suffering) which makes for an overwhelmingly morose quality in his writing. Larkin responds by explaining that he did not decide how his life is. He did not choose how his life would be, but instead that life happened to him and he simply reacted to its movements. "If I'd been born a different person," he says, "and different things had happened to me, I might have written differently."⁶² We see how the poet strips himself of agency by positioning life as happening to him instead of being dictated by his choices. He denies himself the freedom to change his life by denying that he has had the freedom to influence its course thus far. It is, of course, an act of self-sabotage which ensures inertia for as long as he exists in a state of bad faith, but in a strange way it is simultaneously an act of self-preservation. Stripping oneself of autonomy means freeing oneself from responsibility. In this self-inflicted helplessness, there exists a sense of comfort. As we have clearly seen, Larkin's active participation in his own unhappiness is a complicated but imperative aspect of his anxiety and the existentialism

⁶¹ Varga and Guignon, "Authenticity."

⁶² Larkin, interview by John Haffenden, *Further Requirements*, 51.

expressed through his poetry. As we move forward in our analysis, we will address more directly the concrete problem of mortality and ephemerality as Larkin understands it. Through this lens, the heart of the entire study on Larkin's anxiety and existentialism will be brought to bear. By way of addressing Larkin's belief in the finality of death, the incredible value and beauty of life will begin to emerge and draw much of the poet's pessimism into a new and different light.

Oblivion, Atheism, and the Appearance of Beauty

In the second stanza of "The Old Fools," Larkin embarks upon a detailed description of the anxiety surrounding death as related to the underlying value of life. The issue of oblivion arises—the endpoint that Larkin ensures we are headed towards—and is ironically qualified in the poem as "only oblivion."⁶³ Because we understand that the idea of oblivion (or non-existence) is at the epicenter of Larkin's fundamental anxiety, the phrasing strikes one as somewhat ironic. The language almost seems to suggest a kind of familiarity. "We had it before,"⁶⁴ he says, as if to suggest that oblivion is not so much a great unknown, but a process which we have already experienced. A transitional space, almost akin to a kind of purgatory. Although certainly not gentle, the tone of this second stanza is less antagonistic, allowing for a transition into the poem's climactic statement:

[...] but then it was going to end,
And was all the time merging with a unique endeavour
To bring to bloom the million-petaled flower
Of being here [...] ⁶⁵

⁶³ Larkin, "The Old Fools," ll. 15.

⁶⁴ Larkin, "The Old Fools," ll. 16.

⁶⁵ Larkin, "The Old Fools," ll. 16–19.

To characterize life—the mortal existence which has brought the poet so much suffering—in this way is simply immense for Larkin. He posits that what made the first oblivion bearable is that it promised to end, and indeed spent its entire existence “merging” with that fantastically elusive “unique endeavor” needed to create what followed: existence. Unique in that only its contact, its intertwinement, with the oblivion can create the incredible flower “Of being here.” A central premise to Larkin’s work is illustrated here. He is not afraid of life, as strange as that seems for someone so unhappy. On the contrary, life is characterized as a many-splendored miracle. What he is afraid of is the absence of life—non-existence. In the Heideggerian model, he is aware of his status as “being-towards-death,” which allows him to properly value existence.⁶⁶ The metaphor of a flower simultaneously represents an immensely varied and multi-dimensional experience, and yet by its temporal nature, promises in its wake, eternal death. “Next time you can’t pretend / There’ll be anything else.”⁶⁷ The chance to experience this extraordinary million-petalled flower seems, for Larkin, the ultimate and only form of transcendence.

Larkin was adamantly, even scoffingly, atheistic in his beliefs, characterizing religion as “That vast moth-eaten musical brocade / Created to pretend we never die.”⁶⁸ But in this passage from “The Old Fools,” Larkin interestingly takes the Christian idea of purgatory and reverses it in a way which maintains the concept’s immensity of value. Instead of being a seemingly endless antechamber for the afterlife, it becomes a waiting room for the miracle of life itself. The lyricism of this passage serves to further elevate the value of existence to a status which we might not expect from the Larkin we know—a man so seemingly pessimistic and so constantly oppressed by his own death-centered anxiety. And yet the appearance of these small moments of brilliance, these flecks of immense beauty, illustrate precisely how we should come to

⁶⁶ Wheeler, “Heidegger.”

⁶⁷ Larkin, “The Old Fools,” ll. 19–20.

⁶⁸ Larkin, “Aubade,” ll. 23–24.

understand the Larkinian perspective: that life is extraordinary, there is nothing else to follow, and that the great tragedy of his own life was the fact that he was so crippled by his anxiety about death that he was unable to wholeheartedly enjoy the miracle of life's presence.

In his essay "Somewhere Becoming Rain," James suggests that a crucial characteristic of Larkin's poems is that, amidst lines that dip far into both the hopeless and the plain, there appear moments that astound the reader with their beauty and reveal something inertly beautiful (although so often hidden) that lies awake in the soul of both the poem and the poet. James describes such moments as, "sudden phrases of ravishing beauty, as the river in Dante's Paradise suggests by giving off sparks that light is what it is made of."⁶⁹ This is precisely the odd balance in which Larkin's poetic career exists. This critical passage describing the fantastic flower reaches towards what lies at the heart of all Larkin's poetry, and supports what William Kerrigan so aptly suggests in his essay on Larkin and death, that "the beauty of the metaphor reminds us of living, of spontaneous creative power, of what we are and can only dread to be without."⁷⁰

"Next Please" and "Coming": Presence and the Opportunity for Brief Beauty

At this point in our conversation on Larkin, we must take a moment to address directly the priority of existence over non-existence and, more specifically, the issue of conscious presence. In the prior section we saw, beginning to emerge in "The Old Fools," the idea that life is in fact an incredible phenomenon that we get only a brief chance to experience the enormity of. Larkin's 1951 poem "Next Please" takes this idea to the next level, and serves as a kind of protest against the tendency to defer the present in favor of a perceived notion of a more rewarding future. Although Larkin never explicitly states that he values being present in the

⁶⁹ James, "Somewhere Becoming Rain," 3.

⁷⁰ William Kerrigan, "Larkin and the Difficult Subject," in *Essays in Criticism* vol. 48, no. 4, (October 1998): 291, *Gale Academic OneFile*.

moment, what he certainly does is openly criticize not being so. In the first two stanzas, Larkin establishes the figures of the watchers who stand on the bluff and gaze hopefully at the distant future, wasting their entire lives in a cyclical process of waiting and watching—of being wholly un-present:

Always too eager for the future, we
Pick up bad habits of expectancy.
Something is always approaching; every day
Till then we say [...] ⁷¹

Throughout the poem, the poet expresses that this obsession with the future is a terrible mistake, and yet for someone whose entire life was spent fighting against the perpetual fear of death, this is a somewhat ironic position to take. However, the use of the “we” pronoun here is crucial. Larkin suggests an understanding (one quite out of character) that he is synonymous with the general public. He posits and acknowledges the universality of this inability to remain present. The poem’s subjects are caught in a perpetual state where “something is always approaching.” The “Sparkling armada of promises”⁷² looks fantastic to them from a distance, tempting them with gaudy, lavish displays: “[...] leaning with brasswork prinked, / Each rope distinct, // Flagged, and the figurehead with golden tits [...]”⁷³ Yet of course, by nature of these promised ships, each is “No sooner present than it turns to past.”⁷⁴ By the time it is upon us, we are already expectantly looking ahead to the next, leaving us locked into a cycle of anticipation and defeat, “[...] holding wretched stalks / Of disappointment [...]”⁷⁵ An interesting component of the

⁷¹ Larkin, “Next, Please,” ll. 1–4.

⁷² Larkin, “Next, Please,” ll. 6.

⁷³ Larkin, “Next, Please,” ll. 11–14.

⁷⁴ Larkin, “Next, Please,” ll. 15.

⁷⁵ Larkin, “Next, Please,” ll. 9–10.

poem, however, is that this lack of presence is collaborative. In part the experiences “never [anchor]”⁷⁶ because the subjects are always looking away, but the poem also suggests that they do not anchor because they are unable to stay by definition. The experiences themselves are not “seeking us.”⁷⁷

The setup of the poem creates an interesting case for presence, and its implied conclusion is somewhat difficult to unearth. What we, as readers, find ourselves looking for in the discourse of this poem is the suggestion that an obsession with the illusory beauty of the ships is a mistake, and instead a commitment to being present is the solution that will bring us to an experience of “real” beauty. Unfortunately, that suggestion never comes. The conclusion we *might* infer, however, has to do, again, with the “million-petalled flower.” If we spend our lives consumed with watching the approach of that “armada of promises,” as Larkin suggests that we (as a collective) do, we strip ourselves of the ability to see what is happening around us. Our focus is always somewhere else, and when “somewhere else” is a promised illusion, this practice can only deliver us “disappointment.” It is only if we are present in our lives that we get the chance to experience the great scope of our “million-petalled flower.” Of course, a great many of those petals will not be happy ones. So many experiences promise to be terrible or distressing or boring, but still we harbor a nagging knowledge and hope that some of them will be beautiful. In his poem, “Coming,” Larkin describes the brief experience of an idyllic moment, just at the crest of both evening and spring, where—

Light, chill and yellow,
Bathes the serene
Foreheads of houses.

⁷⁶ Larkin, “Next, Please,” ll. 14.

⁷⁷ Larkin, “Next, Please,” ll. 21.

A thrush sings,
Laurel-surrounded
In the deep bare garden,
Its fresh-peeled voice
Astonishing the brickwork.⁷⁸

The poem's landscape is lush with natural beauty, but every aspect is caught in and compounded by the ephemerality of the moment—the last light caught in the act of descending over the foreheads of the houses. “It will be spring soon, / It will be spring soon—”⁷⁹ he continues, performing a repetition that is not only uncharacteristic of Larkin, but also serves to emphasize just how striking and breathtaking this small moment is for the poet. The language itself attempts to extend the life of the poem, as if the experience might linger as long as the poem refuses to end. And yet, like the gently beautiful moment, it must end:

And I, whose childhood
Is a forgotten boredom,
Feel like a child
Who comes on a scene
Of adult reconciling,
And can understand nothing
But the unusual laughter,
And starts to be happy.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Philip Larkin, “Coming” in *The Less Deceived* (London: Faber & Faber Limited, 2011), 5, ll. 2–9.

⁷⁹ Larkin, “Coming,” ll. 10–11.

⁸⁰ Larkin, “Coming,” ll. 12–19.

The moment is small and ephemeral, but deeply affecting nonetheless. Larkin understands intimately the brief and fragmentary ways that beauty comes into our lives. As William Carlos Williams says in his poem “To Elsie”:

It is only in isolate flecks that
something
is given off⁸¹

“Coming” is an account of one lovely petal, random and isolated, but only available to us if we are prepared to be present for each of the million little petals in turn. The idea of a brief, ephemeral, but still breathtaking experience is one that Larkin holds dear, and the chance for such an experience is at the heart of this focus on presence. In almost every poem in which we see the poet experience beauty or immensity, it is not indulged in. Never would a Larkin poem move into long, purplish descriptions of beauty in the way that someone like Keats (or even, at times, Auden) might. When Larkin finds beauty—finds these tiny flecks of sublimity—it is always fleeting, and often found inside the drab of the everyday. Like these ships, it is “No sooner present than it turns to past.” In order to experience them, you must be present and awake.

Of course, as Larkin believes, “present” is precisely what the subjects of the poem are not. They tirelessly expect, as Larkin says in the penultimate stanza, that,

[...] one [ship] will heave to and unload
All good into our lives, all we are owed
For waiting so devoutly and so long.⁸²

⁸¹ William Carlos Williams, “To Elsie” in *The Collected Poems: Volume I 1909-1939* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1945), ll. 61–63.

⁸² Larkin, “Next, Please,” ll. 17–19.

Larkin's critical feelings towards religion and the concept of an afterlife arise again here. As he states in "The Old Fools" during the conversation about oblivion as experienced before life: "Next time you can't pretend / There'll be anything else."⁸³ His feelings are unwavering. In the penultimate stanza of "Next, Please," the metaphor of ships that promise to unload "all good into our lives" inherently brings to mind the impulse to believe in an afterlife. The use of the word "devoutly" in this line clearly conjures a religious tone, and the specific reference to having "wait[ed] [...] so long" indicates that this anticipated happiness is occurring at the end of a long lifetime of suffering and disappointment—the promise of Heaven. This rejection of theology is resolutely confirmed by a single chilling line—"But we are wrong"⁸⁴—which pivots the poem into its dark, devastating final stanza:

Only one ship is seeking us, a black-
Sailed unfamiliar, towing at her back
A huge and birdless silence. In her wake
No waters breed or break.⁸⁵

Larkin, as ever, allows no room for argument. The poem claims decisively, particularly when paired with a poem such as "Coming," that none of the beauty we seek is seeking us. And yet, still we might experience it in brief flecks. We might think of this as the opposite of fate. Nothing is supposed to happen to us, we can predict and expect no experiences. The only thing we can depend on with any assurance, the only "ship seeking us," is death. And for Larkin, death means absolute, silent oblivion. A "huge and birdless silence" in which "No waters breed or break." The great tension between the finality of death and the beauty and value of life in its

⁸³ Larkin, "The Old Fools," ll. 19–20.

⁸⁴ Larkin, "Next, Please," ll. 20.

⁸⁵ Larkin, "Next, Please," ll. 21–24.

brief brilliances remains central to our study as we move forward. In the following section, however, we will see Larkin's tone change slightly, revealing a softness so rarely associated with Larkin in the public opinion. Through the vehicle of this unexpected softening, the lonely poet becomes more crucially connected to us than we ever might have imagined he could.

Tenderness and Hidden Universality

The final two stanzas of "The Old Fools" mark a delicate shift, not only in the poem but in our conversation on the poet more generally. As is typical of Larkin, this poem is cleanly divisible into two equal halves, the shift occurring precisely at the half-way mark. The air of scorn never goes away, and neither does Larkin's tangible sense of superiority. But there is an undeniable tenderness that descends over the poem and shifts the trajectory in an unexpected way. The third stanza begins: "Perhaps being old is having lighted rooms / Inside your head [...]"⁸⁶ Even the first word seems to signify a softening. In the first two stanzas, the poem had been regularly punctuated with statements like, "Their looks show that they're for it"⁸⁷ (suggesting that their grey hair and wrinkled faces signify death), and "Next time you can't pretend / There'll be anything else." Decisive statements that give no glimmer of doubt about the situation. The poet's perspective is presented as fact. In the third stanza (that tellingly leads with the word "Perhaps"), he adopts a tone of uncertainty and inquiry, almost musing. The image itself, too, is much gentler than most of the previous ones. The mind, instead of being something that cripples and humiliates, robbing the old people of their ability to remember names and make choices for themselves, is here described with tenderness—an array of lighted rooms with

[...] people in them, acting

People you know, yet can't quite name; each looms

⁸⁶ Larkin, "The Old Fools," ll. 25–26.

⁸⁷ Larkin, "The Old Fools," ll. 19–20.

Like a deep loss restored, from known doors turning,
Setting down a lamp, smiling from a stair, extracting
A known book from the shelves [...]⁸⁸

The fragmented memories of people and things are presented as warm and unthreatening, a pattern of lost and half-remembered images returning now in welcome flecks. The landscape of the mind is familiar, even if the inhabitants are slightly out of reach. There are smiles, the doorways and the books on the shelves are “known,” and the whole scene is presented as something that was unhappily lost, now returned. Later in the same stanza, the poet describes the rooms themselves, occupied only by, “[...] the sun's / Faint friendliness on the wall some lonely / Rain-ceased midsummer evening [...]”⁸⁹ This tender, restorative space inside the head is far from the exterior horror story portrayed by Larkin earlier in the poem.

In the poem’s fourth stanza, we return to a more pessimistic tone, but the harshness from the earlier stanzas is here replaced by a cold sense of dread at the sudden proximity to the inevitable:

[...] the rooms grow farther, leaving
Incompetent cold, the constant wear and tear
Of taken breath, and them crouching below
Extinction's alp, the old fools, never perceiving
How near it is [...]⁹⁰

Despite this movement back towards the fatalistic, there is a notable shift that occurs in these lines. Where Larkin had previously presented the subjects as repulsive to the eye and in some

⁸⁸ Larkin, “The Old Fools,” ll. 26–30.

⁸⁹ Larkin, “The Old Fools,” ll. 32–34.

⁹⁰ Larkin, “The Old Fools,” ll. 38–41.

way culpable in their predicament, now he portrays them in a much more blameless light. It is not their fault that their own breath wears them down from the inside out. Even more importantly, not only are they now blameless, but they are universal. Into a poem about a specific group of subjects enters a deeply universalizing image: “crouching below / Extinction’s alp [...] never perceiving / How near it is.”⁹¹ The existential human experience—even for a man who insisted on his absolute, lifelong individuality—ultimately equalizes. Anxiety, dread, the knowledge of the looming alp and the absolute inability to know our distance from it—these things are universal aspects of the human experience. They are inside of each of us. We enter into the poem here, not simply as readers, but as active, complicit participants in the midst of our own story, alongside the characters and indeed the poet himself. When Larkin inserts “the old fools” midway through the final stanza, it is as if to remind us who we are discussing. They have not been mentioned by name since the very first line of the poem. It is as if the poet knows his poem has already shapeshifted—become mirror-like. Instead of gazing at them, we are gazing at ourselves. He knows because he himself is ingrained into the heart of the poem, as an individual but also as one amongst the many—amongst us. The objective nature of the poem has quietly become subjective, and along with it has come human empathy. We are in this together.

Philip Larkin is not a poet one would typically expect to be associated with a term like “universality,” and yet as an existentialist he exhibits an incredible connection to each of us, and to the collective “us”—a body constructed of individuals both distant from and somehow inextricably connected to each other. He possesses a profound awareness of the collective nature of the human experience. Of course, as is Larkin’s style, these observations emerge in an understated, almost humble way, as if he is working them out for himself alongside us. But similarly to his quietly revealed desire to be more a part of the Eros-fueled world, so his

⁹¹ Larkin, “The Old Fools,” ll. 40–42.

acknowledgement of universality underlies his poetry and reveals itself in unexpected and shrouded ways. One vital mode by which he exhibits it is through the very nature of the language itself. James describes experiencing the language and cadence of Larkin's poems, claiming: "As you read, the ideal human voice speaks in your head. It isn't his: as his gramophone records prove, he sounded like someone who expects to be interrupted. It isn't yours, either. It's ours. Larkin had the gift of reuniting poetry at its most artful with ordinary speech at its most unstudied—at its least literary."⁹² Larkin is not a poet of the obscure or the learned. His work pulls very little from literary reference, history, or mythology. On the contrary, he says what he means and (except, as we have noted, when he doesn't) he means what he says. This "reuniting" of language draws ordinary speech and delicately crafted poetic verse together, with the effect of creating a whole far greater than the sum of its parts. He creates a poetry that begs to be communicated and understood, whose words meld themselves to fit the way we think and speak, to meet the communal "us" where we are.

Although the language mode of the poems begs quietly for connection, the poet himself seems always to push back in terror against his own empathy. Almost to the very end of the "The Old Fools," Larkin insists on maintaining a separation between himself and the subjects. The prior disgust, mixed with an obvious terror, returns in the end of the final stanza:

[...] Can they never tell
What is dragging them back, and how it will end? Not at night?
Not when the strangers come? Never, throughout
The whole hideous inverted childhood? [...]⁹³

⁹² James, "Somewhere Becoming Rain," 11.

⁹³ Larkin, "The Old Fools," ll. 44–47.

That familiar and inescapable existential fear, to the very end, forces him to look at the old people as alien. What separates them from him, he insists, is their proximity to extinction's alp.

The peak that stays in view wherever we go

For them is rising ground. [...] ⁹⁴

They are imagined as so distant from himself that he simply cannot comprehend their state. Or so it seems, until the final line. "The Old Fools" ends on a note of blunt, assured resignation: "Well, / We shall find out."⁹⁵ Anxiety about death is a universal condition, intrinsic to the human experience. No matter how separate we are as individuals, our humanity requires a sameness at the end. Larkin, it seems, rarely felt that sameness in his private or public life. And so much of that dysfunction was the product of relentless existential anxiety. Yet, ironically and even salvifically, the same obsession that functions as the vehicle for isolation in the end is also the medium for connection.

Beauty, Poetry, and Love: "It's Enough"

Still, through all of this, the painful question remains: is it worth it? To suffer, to be lonely, to only be connected to others through your shared existential condition and eventual death? Without the hope of transcendence, what is the point of the journey? What is the point of writing poetry? The question of religious transcendence (the idea that death is not an ending, but rather a new beginning) was out of the question for Larkin. He saw religion as a fabrication "Created to pretend we never die,"⁹⁶ and thus it must be considered so for our conversation as well. But the concept of transcending the human condition—we are born, we live, we die—is fundamental to the condition itself. It remains such a deeply human desire. We have seen the

⁹⁴ Larkin, "The Old Fools," ll. 43–44.

⁹⁵ Larkin, "The Old Fools," ll. 47–48.

⁹⁶ Larkin, "Aubade," ll. 24.

ways in which Larkin eases this longing for transcendence into his poems—astoundingly beautiful lines that interrupt a poem seemingly steeped in drudgery. These are moments of immense beauty, when the language (even when describing desolation) bridges the divide between us and the poet. Amidst his short, somber poem, “Talking In Bed,” the poet beautifully describes how:

Outside the wind's incomplete unrest
Builds and disperses clouds in the sky,

And dark towns heap up on the horizon.
None of this cares for us. [...] ⁹⁷

The power of this beauty stretches beyond the confines of each poem, and ultimately it is the shared experience of this beauty through poetry that connects us when few other things can. It breaks the parameters of time and space. Beauty, through the vehicle of poetry, is an individual creation, crafted from the essence of our own individual existence. And yet, in an almost magical way, because it describes a shared experience, it cannot help but be universal. Its reach defies the existential limitations we live by. As Whitman says of his readers in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”:

It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not,
I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations
hence,
Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,
Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd, ⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Philip Larkin, “Talking In Bed,” in *The Whitsun Weddings*, (London: Faber & Faber Limited, 1964), 27, ll. 5–8.

⁹⁸ Walt Whitman, “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” in *The Complete Poems*, (London: Penguin Classics, 2005), 191. (London: Penguin Books Ltd. 2004), ll. 20–23.

Beauty, like poetry, defies mortality, and yet can only connect us because of our mortal state. The urgency to create—to make beauty through poetry—is itself bound by the promise of death.

To close our conversation on Larkin's poetic existentialism, we turn to his seminal 1964 poem, "An Arundel Tomb." The poem describes a visit to a crypt in Chichester Cathedral where the tombs of the 10th Earl of Arundel and his second wife, the Countess Eleanor of Lancaster, reside. Larkin describes a cursory encounter with the tomb, on which the couple are depicted as stone effigies, side-by-side. He describes the encounter, noting that,

Such plainness of the pre-baroque
Hardly involves the eye, until
It meets his left-hand gauntlet, still
Clasped empty in the other; and
One sees, with a sharp tender shock,
His hand withdrawn, holding her hand.⁹⁹

The "tender shock" moves the poet in a way he had not anticipated upon approaching something which, in all other ways, appeared plain—only notable for its "[...] faint hint of the absurd— / The little dogs under their feet."¹⁰⁰ Larkin goes on to describe the way in which he supposes the Earl and Countess would never have imagined this small emblem of fidelity to be the detail for which, centuries later, they would be remembered. The sculptor, of course, mirrors the figures in his decision to set them in such a position. It was an individual gesture undertaken by the sculptor for their own benefit and that of their friends, perhaps a tender nod to the simple humanity of the two aristocrats, now carved forever in marble.

⁹⁹ Philip Larkin, "An Arundel Tomb" in *The Whitsun Weddings*, (London: Faber & Faber Limited, 1964), 45, ll. 7–12.

¹⁰⁰ Larkin, "An Arundel Tomb," ll. 5–6.

Such faithfulness in effigy
Was just a detail friends would see:
A sculptor's sweet commissioned grace¹⁰¹

As the poet imagines, the people who came to visit the tomb and note the names of the aristocrats only faded with time. Those who came would begin “To look, not read.”¹⁰² The identities, both of the couple and of the sculptor, would eventually be erased in favor of the random, tender gesture. By the time the poet arrives, “Only an attitude remains”¹⁰³—any remaining individuality, of the artist or the figures, is gone. The final stanza of the poem reads:

Time has transfigured them into
Untruth. The stone fidelity
They hardly meant has come to be
Their final blazon, and to prove
Our almost-instinct almost true:
What will survive of us is love.¹⁰⁴

The figures and the sculptor alike are remembered not for anything that they did during their lives or for the people they were, but for an offhand gesture which indicated a “fidelity / They hardly meant [...]” Perhaps it was, as the poet imagines, only an “Untruth”—the undoing of who they were as individuals. Yet still the presence of that gesture, as the poet notes, indicates something about us. What we will cling to and ultimately remember, no matter how warped or constructed that memory is, is love. Love, like beauty, transcends even when we do not ask it to.

¹⁰¹ Larkin, “An Arundel Tomb,” ll. 14–16.

¹⁰² Larkin, “An Arundel Tomb,” ll. 24.

¹⁰³ Larkin, “An Arundel Tomb,” ll. 36.

¹⁰⁴ Larkin, “An Arundel Tomb,” ll. 37–42.

All of our evidence seems to suggest that Larkin would be disappointed to think that what survived of him was love—although not, perhaps, the beauty of his poetry. Of course, this is not all that has survived of him by any means, but the poet only died in 1985. It is quite possible we are not distanced enough to know the ways in which this particular poet will last. What we know for certain is that we do not control the way in which we are remembered. The fact that what so often survives of us is our love and the beauty that we create speaks more to the nature of ourselves as humans than it does of any individual alone. What is it within us that wants so badly to remember love? To hold on tight to beauty? Maybe it is the same thing that craves transcendence. The same thing that made an unhappy, unlikeable man turn his solitary life towards poetry.

As we know, and as Larkin so thoroughly proves by example, a life is often not sufficient enough to reach others. Conversation, touch—these modes of connection are so lacking, and our bodies are limited and ephemeral. But the production of our imaginations, our passion, our love, the beauty we make—these things do not obey the parameters of body, life, time, or death. If there is transcendence anywhere—if there is an immortality to be found for us—it is here: in poems, in the beauty of our labor. Larkin struggled to connect in his life, to see and feel others through the impenetrable fog of himself, his mortality, and the thought of death that dragged him further from others and deeper into himself. And yet the yearning persisted. It is everywhere, creeping into the corners of each poem. When we cannot find connection, or perhaps even a reason to continue living and creating; when philosophy, psychoanalysis, and theory cannot give us the answers; the hope, and when we are lucky the truth, is that poetry can. The issue of beauty, and how to communicate it, will persist. As James says at the end of “Wolves of Memory”:

“Larkin is the poet of the void. The one affirmation his work offers is the possibility that when we have lost everything the problem of beauty will still remain. It’s enough.”¹⁰⁵

As our study of Larkin comes to a close, we turn, once more, to the origin. “Not to be born is, beyond all estimation, best,” wrote Sophocles, so long before Larkin’s complicated, painful life was on any horizon. In so many ways, Larkin seems a personification of the sentiment, and yet the immense beauty of his lines tirelessly demands that we reevaluate—that we look more closely at our easy conclusions. Would Larkin, after everything, have preferred never to have lived? Of course, it is impossible to know the extent to which he would have believed in Sophocles’ statement, and it will remain a painful question every time we turn to look at Larkin and, inevitably, every time we turn to look at ourselves. Larkin provides us no definitive answers, despite our desire to find them in his verse.

Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:

The sun-comprehending glass,

And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows

Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.¹⁰⁶

In the end, amongst the endless nothing, all we have to turn to is the great beauty of the poems. It was in poetry that Larkin lived, and (perhaps the only way one can) it is in poetry that he transcends the barriers of death—that he lives on in us. When everything else falls away, it is the poetry that persists and is reborn afresh each time we return to its transcendent hum.

From inside Larkin’s painful final collection, *High Windows*, which spends so much of its time struggling in the anxious dark, a little twelve-line poem emerges for just a brief moment.

¹⁰⁵ James, “Wolves of Memory,” 25.

¹⁰⁶ Philip Larkin, “High Windows” in *High Windows*, (London: Faber & Faber Limited, 1974) 17, ll. 17–20.

“The Trees” coaxes Larkin, the collection, and us to the water’s surface, to breathe and remember our beauty.

The trees are coming into leaf
Like something almost being said;
The recent buds relax and spread,
Their greenness is a kind of grief.

Is it that they are born again
And we grow old? No, they die too,
Their yearly trick of looking new
Is written down in rings of grain.

Yet still the unresting castles thresh
In fullgrown thickness every May.
Last year is dead, they seem to say,
Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Philip Larkin, “The Trees” in *High Windows*, (London: Faber & Faber Limited, 1974) 12, ll. 1–12.

Epilogue:

The Whole World Points Homeward

Although I will never understand what it means to be Larkin, to me he has always felt no more impenetrable than any other poet—or any other person, for that matter. I will, of course, never know exactly what he felt when, in “The Whitsun Weddings,” he described that “sense of falling, like an arrow-shower / Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.”¹⁰⁸ Still, I have carried those lines in my head each time I have watched my own train car slow into a station with that strange and almost ominous feeling of falling, and I have recited them to myself. There is some magnet in me that pulls on the magnet in those lines—in him. I learned from Larkin the fragile, fleeting, and somehow breathtakingly immense nature of beauty. The way it erupts into the lines of a morose poem like the bursting-forth of grace. Like being religiously spellbound, in the most crucially atheistic, earth-tethered sense. He taught me the value, the incredible nature, of what it is to be here, even if only for this brief time.

The distances between us are so great, I often wonder how it is that I can speak and another person can hear me at all. Part of the task criticism performs, I think, is allowing its author (and, hopefully, its reader as well) to imagine just for a moment that they might understand what the poet is saying. Because I am so deeply moved by other people’s poems, I am often deceived into thinking I see myself in them—I gain the momentary illusion that I might be seeing past the great barriers that lie between each of us. Of course, it is only a momentary trick of the light, but there is a spark in that moment of connection that lasts. It does what needs to be done, and the poem and I are irretrievably bound. This, for me, is one of the most fantastic and strange things about beauty—its unmatched ability to draw us near to each other. This, too,

¹⁰⁸ Philip Larkin, “The Whitsun Weddings” in *The Whitsun Weddings*, (London: Faber & Faber Limited, 1964), 20, ll. 69–70.

has everything to do with why I write my own poems. Writing creatively attacks the problem of distance and the strangeness of beauty very differently from criticism—more intimately and in a lot of ways more painfully. My poems sometimes make me feel closer to the poets I love. Sometimes, much farther away. But for me, the neverending endeavor for connection requires both the critical and the creative. Still, amidst the seeming necessity of all this work, I often wonder what use of writing is if we enter into it knowing that we can essentially understand no one and no one can understand us? Perhaps because what we still manage to communicate to one another is our experience of beauty. Connection appears to us only through these brief and strange instances, and yet still it appears. To draw a bridge between us, built only of tiny flecks, is still to have a bridge at all. It is something. I write, both critically and creatively, because I know that beauty, in earnest, is transferable.

Now, here are some original poems.

February Sestina

This valley
folded
like quilts
under close sky.
Evening's body
rising over home

and the town filtering home
into its valley,
back into its body.
Standing at the porch folding
the low sky
into baskets. Into quilts.

Here lies my old life, quilted
into memory. The home
is more sky
than it was before. The valley
folds
my great body

into its recesses. Its great body
in my familiar hands, quilting
myself as a fold
of its topography. Homing
myself as the valley's
limb. A sky

refraction. A sky
in firelight body,
tethered to that deepest valley.
Strangled into quilts—
into language. Say "home"
little one. A life folded

into its own folds
to nuzzle its center—its sky.
The whole world points homeward.

Pulled, always, back to the body.
Back to the great round quilt.
The soft edges of my valley.

The cows shift home over the body
of the folded horizon. The wide sky.
A quilted organism rambling valley-ward.

My Father Hangs a Line To Look At Birds

There is nothing to come of it except its occurrence. Or,
(name it) more accurately, its occurring. It begins where

the glacier meets the land: here's the hand which gathers
me inward. Direction as a drawn, a home centered thing—

a harbor he'd say, for now. We read once about a man
who, on a specified night at a certain speed,

drove his car and his son into the river, reaching for
that break in the land—that narrow world's division—

he cannot fathom on his own. My father draws a clothesline
from the river to the house, and at some measured

precision—an exact and honest distance—he hangs
a feeder full of seed. It's hours we spend at the window.

They're coming, he says. I know, Dad, I say. I was
away when the brown bird came. Scattering

the seed, the first light breaking, my father turns to
an empty room. Helpless, blind, I unravel his happening.

I believe, but it does not matter. The tight-wound string
runs and I, grasping blind, will never catch hold

of what I cannot see. None return, and it must be for me
that the line hangs untethered. Still, somewhere is a honest

line: the correct division, that incision exacted so perfectly
at field and sky. There is a channel. My father draws

a new line. He fashions another tether. Each attempt
more honest, nearer, and still every time I am looking away.

Resurrection

The night before they shut the big highways, we crossed town
to test the durability of speed. In the

passenger seat I watched Lorimer Avenue pass like a river
right before it has gone renamed. We were over

the Hudson before I remembered the thing about objects
in motion—sudden severed towns flashing

into view like fat decaying remnants thrown up out of shallowed
graves. This road like an arrow—a body

in resurrection. The new day is coming, where I will move as
memory. Where I will be entering into I am

entering into what we have murdered entering into
the municipal grocery store entering into this all wrong into

the pieces of my body that will not carve away my tongue
and my teeth. The origin impulse. I like the taste

of honey and the feel of chewing on the comb. These things
appear here precisely because they will never

go away. In an old building on the edge of town, the dust flows
into a frame-like structure—a thing that has been

waiting to be seen, watching us arriving all the time. There is
light enough to watch the light fade. This is the

hardest way to do it. Watch hope disperse. Feel it thin, between
your fingers. Like satin. Like finest sand.

Walking Through Walls

Things (particles) are falling. Structure not as crumbling, exactly, but something more like dissolving. In the upstairs of an emptied building, my father is walking through walls. In the last light, in a swaying dust, he steps through a wall. He stands and stares ahead into evening, the sifted light, the next skeleton room. He turns to the wall, pauses, and steps back through again.

This is how the light goes, not with a clap but with a slow-moving sureness, a watchable decay. My father tests the boundaries of this new world, shifts his body through the memory of margin. The promise of order. For now it is all discovery and fear. But when the summer comes, he will fill these spaces, insulate out the winter, outfitting each lonely room with the memory of furniture.

Esopus Creek Closed for Season After Accident at High Water

Before a body who could not hold its water
was a sound. A sound like a boy in water.

A man looks upstream, traces the channel back to the
source that aches somewhere in his blood. Only fast water

can spit the boy out of the man and drag him back to that other
shore. His brother plays ball in the man's memory of water—

kicks towards the horizon, too far out. A rock form,
glacial and familiar, jutting from the huge water:

death on the ancient rocks so he might imagine deliverance.
Was it just fear? Or some awe at the hugeness of water,

that he hesitated for? A single breath, that stillness, which let
him reach his brother's body too late. Limp in the water—

limp, broad boy, in his brother's tiny arms. A thing a man
might ask not to remember. Vomited from a different water

comes a girl strong enough to friend her father.
Together, they are new. With her, he is a new water.

This is something severed from loss. Under
the mountain where the river turns at wider water,

in a swollen basin that reminds him nothing of home,
she splashes, laughs, pulls her father to fast water

born of a strong rain, a fast current—it is spring. Things
are opening. New calves are born all the time. Runoff water

in the valley. But like *everything*, it moves so fast. The season
doesn't ask us how we leave it, only knows we do in time. Water

as catalyst: at the catch in the river a brown changing pulls her
under. He is as close as he can be, which—in water

and carrying that fear—is further than he meant. As far as he
had been from what he was asked to save, each horrible water

he's failed to break. A body lingering just out of arms' reach.
He dives and dives again, but the divide between water

and sky is always too certain—breaching that border knowing
nothing but that this is life and it will keep going. This is water

and not a mistaken sky. It's not his death, even when he asks
it to be. He tries again, but only on behalf of the water.

Only in case someone is watching, and thinks he might have
given up too soon. The hands that reach beneath the water

to tug her from the underbrush are not her father's. This man is
the son of a dairy farmer. Every morning he leads the herd to water.

Someday he will be a dairy farmer, but for now he drives
a plow in the winter and fishes the river at high water

in the summer and dreams of the home he already lives in. He is
a good man. He draws her up, smooths her hair—the water

gliding like it hasn't murdered. He guards her face, gently. Her
father sits on the bank. Watches sun on the innocent water.

While he's here, there's no time. There's nothing he has lost. No
lives have slipped through his fingers. Only versions of water.

The Spot

You wanna see the spot he said
and I said sure man, is one spot on flat land

really any different from another and he said
I think this one might be and you'll see what I mean

because it's still happening. By the laws of an echo,
I said, it must surely be getting louder so why

do I hear it less and less all the time, and he told
me that's just part of this dream and I said

I guess so but you didn't have to say it like that,
and he said do you want a piece of gum and I said

Judah I didn't cry. Not even once. And he said that's
okay. Here it is, he said. It was morning,

but the early kind where it's still dark enough that
everyone on that stupid placeless highway between

Murfreesboro and Nashville knows the uselessness
of a country that is too large. Knows that long stretch

of space between home and wherever it is you're
going. The four-lane highway was wide and empty

and there was dust and the city slouched under us,
close and breathing off heat from the last sun

and getting ready for the coming one. Where's
your bike? I said. He said, now it belongs

to a boy who delivers pizza in Memphis,
and I said, that's bullshit, that's your bike,

why does he get to ride it, what is so much better
about him? And he said, because that kid

imagines himself like Elvis Presley before he
was fat, when the fatness was something so

far ahead that it didn't even exist, and
I only imagined myself as dead.

My friend –

They say I must not stop for Death –
Yet milky comes the light
Issued distanceless through glass –
Pooled shadowlessly white.

It's not for me the axis grinds
Yet life limps useless round.
And Death – that active churning heat –
Evades my clinging hand.

You promised – yes – he'd wait for me.
He'd stop to coax me in.
We'd farewell field – and dews – and I –
From time he would unpin.

Eternity. That's all I ask.
Push past the setting sun.
A cloven gap in atmosphere –
Freed of time's ceaseless cling.

And yet – in gasps the chill returns.
My hands – my face and heart
Tremble to remember love –
To feel him – soft – depart.

My friend. That gentlest beacon –
Our flare amidst the dark.
Extinguished into universe –
Expand the waking arc.

Gravity's pull extending arms –
Fantastic in its reach
Finds him – my darling – everywhere –
Each circle's edges breached.

Death gently drops my slackened hand
And as he turns away –
Shows blooming from his other face
Eternity in love.

North

There is a place
to know light,
and it's time to be
there now.

On a late train
bound northward,
I settle my heart
towards home:

this time it is
the final distance,
growing only quietly
shorter. But on those

higher hills above
our towns they
say I'm close to God
and so I'm not sad.

I'm not sad. I will
remember warmth
and for me that's okay.
It's enough. Winter

is long where I
come from, and if
this Spring that is
so surely in the air

today is the last one
of its kind, I'll be
glad to have seen
it happen. I'd like

to tell you what a
world-turning
thing it has been

to love you.

Moving northward
I anticipate the cold
before I feel it
fall. Passing by

a lake in the last
light, I mistook
the wide water
for snow.

Flight

Weird how all this dust looks, blown into the angled light—the afternoon eating towards dark. From up above I can see exactly where it is that I will land. The journey is long, but I am certain in my body

that it is behind me now. This is the final time I will feel for the gravitational tug. Watch the dust rising off the earth. Now only the promise of the long evening; the longer night. Still, so clearly can I remember noon

at Walden Pond, where we rested on the banks and watched the people on the beach, and you showed me how to watch them so that they looked like you and me. What did it mean when we would

travel somewhere just to see a landscape? The meticulous cataloguing of arbitrary things, all of which we will never see again. Perhaps for this. Now. The slow and churning fall from a high place: I've been

seeing it most days, careening on the edge of vision when the light is flat and I am turned correctly. And yet the certain end will not undo this flight. How brief is this thing, our time. But god, it is everything if it means

the feeling of wind on my face and back, the straight cut of your movements, close by. The land tethers like the comfort of knowing just where it is you're going. This I can understand. There is no need for flying

now, and will not be again. But still I know my wings because I remember flight. I know my worth, this body, because I have loved you. In the last light, I turn myself homeward, and call, into evening, aloud.

Lighted Windows Dappled

Lighted windows dappled across the mountain face
like drifting wayward ships enact, as murmur
of settling birds, those deep and soundless calls through
inky night. Flecks, spied through the high billowing
sheet descending uneven across a landscape nearing sleep.

From inside the field lies like an imprint, the memory of desire
to lie down. The framed valley, only beautiful as an iteration
of your body. The topography of wide shoulders, the lay of
your back as meandered hillside. The honest shadow of you
asleep in familiar light. The echoes of the day laid down.

I am learning to watch differently. Learning the deep grooves
of this thing I thought I knew, watching it unfold into expanse both
unfathomable and yet shaped, somehow, like the passage of my
own narrow hands. You undressing at the wide window is like
the shaking out of blankets in the late light of one of these last

warm days. The preparation for winter is a turning in, a quiet
watching, a lighting of the small stove, the drawing of curtains
to keep close our light. The comfort of your nearness. The way
the world grinds slowly on its axis. The way I do not think, now,
of that time before love. Before the cradle of this ache into night.

Planting Garden-Beds After the Last Frost

At the basin of the valley, squatting
together. Two wicker hats, craning

over a tiny seedling. The miraculous
birth of a familiar hope—their annually

new faith. From the ridge they are
in miniature, dwarfed by the fast

mountain's leafing—a surging
towards rebirth—every morning

keener. It is always strangest when
these things happen fast. I'm not

so accustomed to this. The way
the landscape churns away and up—

the way things change—when
you are standing still. Two pairs

of shoulders, curled. Knelt stiffly
in that old ache towards reverence,

sheltered by the breakers—tall trees—
ruffled in a new and southward

wind. Buffeting in the wide
waves—sure spring.

February

This valley
folded
like quilts
under close sky.
Evening rising
in the west and the town
at its porch steps
calling.

It has been
too long. The turn
of my hands,
my own body,
drawn topographically
as a limb
of the landscape.
Drawn in
firelight. Life
folded in
on itself to nuzzle
itself.

The cows shifting
uphill, breaking the
horizon with their
routine bodies. Feeling
the tug of a
collective blood, a
rambling slowness,
through the far valley,
towards home.

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