

Philip Larkin and the Metaphysics of Mortality

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In a survey of readers conducted by The Poetry Book Society in 2003, Philip Larkin (1922–85) was voted the nation's best-loved poet, ahead of well-known contemporaries such as Seamus Heaney, Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath; while his poem "The Whitsun Weddings" (written in 1958) was voted the most popular of post-war poems. Larkin's iconic status continues to be affirmed with a string of critical studies, and yet his current reputation is surprising when one considers that (unlike Heaney) he never won the Nobel Prize for Literature, he published only 155 poems during his lifetime (one more than the total number of Shakespeare's Sonnets), and his personal reputation weathered considerable controversy following the publication of his selected letters in 1992 and the biography by Andrew Motion in 1993.¹

Larkin's popularity must be due partly to a certain "Englishness" that appeals to readers' sense of time and place, not to mention the fact that his poems (especially "The Whitsun Weddings") have appeared regularly on examination syllabi, but it may also be quite simply because he was a highly gifted writer. As his gravestone testifies, Larkin wanted to be remembered as "a writer" rather than as "a poet", ahead of Golding, Orwell, Murdoch and their ilk. It has to be said that in addition to the poems there is also a considerable body of fiction, jazz and book reviews, diaries and letters, all of which substantiate the unique literary persona he had found for himself by around his thirtieth year, and much of them written with the same ruthless emotional honesty he applied to his poetry. The recently published *Letters to Monica* (2010), the letters written over a period of thirty years to his lover Monica Jones, are revealing not only of the background to many of his poems but also of the development of his literary style.

Larkin is a poet, therefore, who makes us want to know what it means to be

a writer, and so in this article I propose to examine the literary qualities of one of his greatest, if most austere poems, "Aubade" (*Collected Poems*, 190–191). Published in *The Times Literary Supplement* on 23rd December, 1977, this was at fifty lines the last major poem that Larkin published in his lifetime; he wrote hardly any poems at all during the last eight years of his life. Even though Larkin was only 55 when he wrote "Aubade", the poem has an undeniable air of finality. It was written in memory of his mother Eva who had died that November at the age of 91, and through a long widowhood of almost thirty years had been even more of a creative muse for Larkin than had Monica Jones. The publication of the poem at Christmastime suggests some quiet fulfilment of a mother's dreams, even if the sentiments expressed are hardly orthodox.

If the poem is an elegy, then it is also a lamentation, since for the first time in his life, Larkin was to spend Christmas without his mother, and as the poem makes clear, the poet had no personal religious hope that he would ever again see his mother in any shape or form.² In this context, the poem's universality lies in the poet's willingness to tackle one of the great taboos of 20th century literature, namely the taboo of death.³ Yet, as I will argue, it does so not in the hindsight of Darwin or Nietzsche, but very much on the back of a poetic tradition that in an earlier age had accepted the existence of an afterlife as unquestioningly as Larkin and his contemporaries questioned it.

The poem is written in five stanzas, each of ten lines. In the first stanza, the poet describes how he wakes early in the morning "to soundless dark" (line 2), and how his thoughts turn to mortality: "Unresting death, a whole day nearer now" (5). The phrase "a whole day nearer now" is effective in establishing the precise and yet abstract tone of the poem, since although the poet can in no way predict the date of his own death (2nd December, 1985), the statement is entirely logical; since he must himself die one day, then the date of his death can only be getting nearer. In the second stanza, Larkin goes on to state his position on the nothingness of death, "the total emptiness for ever" (16). Since Larkin insisted that the role of the poet was to tell the truth,⁴ one can appreciate that having coming to write a poem on a topic (death) compared to which there was "nothing more true" (20), he might as a consequence have lost his

reason for writing any more poems.

In the third stanza, the poet defines the fear of death as a unique fear of extinction, or “special way of being afraid” (21) that “No trick dispels” (22). Larkin mocks first religion and then philosophy not so much for their dishonesty but because they appear to deny human feelings:

Religion used to try,
That vast moth-eaten musical brocade
Created to pretend we never die,
And specious stuff that says *No rational being*
Can fear a thing it will not feel, not seeing
That this is what we fear — no sight, no sound,
No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,
Nothing to love or link with,
The anaesthetic from which none come round. (22–30)

In the fourth stanza, Larkin evokes the fear of death as something that is always on our minds, “A small unfocused blur” (32) that defies objectivity. Even “Courage is no good: / It means not scaring others.” (37–38)

This sense that death is the only human activity that goes without the promise of tangible rewards contributes to its universal significance. Yet since the poem’s material is shaped by the stuff of which it is not, the reader may find temporary relief in the fifth and final stanza, where what after all began as an episode of broken sleep breaks into the light of a new day. The sentient world may seem “uncaring” (46) and “rented” (47) but at least it is a world where people communicate with each other:

Postmen like doctors go from house to house. (50)

This stanza, especially when compared with what is described in the second stanza as the abstract “glare” (11) of “sure extinction” (17), hints at the origins of human belief in an afterlife: in other words, the basic observation that day follows night, although Larkin appears to unsettle this assumption since on this day “The sky is [emphatically] white as clay, with no sun.” (48)

“Aubade” is a bleak poem, born of an age in which a decline in religious

faith has been matched by a growth in material comforts, and where the new social contract has often been found spiritually wanting. Yet, it is also a pleasurable one: not least as most of its readers will still be very much alive when they read it but mainly because it is written with all the tricks that a poet has at its disposal, and as a poetic fiction in itself, cannot therefore be justified on logical grounds. In other words, the poet's apparent intent to make death seem terrible is undermined by his wish to create a beautiful poem as well. In a recent study, M.W. Rowe notes in particular the strength of the final stanza in moving the reader forward and out of the poem, concluding that the poet

discovers that a truthful treatment of death cannot give pleasure; the topic that has come to dwarf all others in his consciousness is therefore beyond the powers of literature to depict. For all its unflinching, wintry bleakness, "Aubade" is still a poem, it is still literature, and that means it falsifies to entertain. (200)

Perhaps the pleasure of "Aubade" is no different, then, from that of listening to some hardened atheist or agnostic articulate their views with all the wit and sincerity they can muster. My argument, *pace* Rowe, is that as literature the poem is crafted in a poetic tradition that once took for granted a belief in the hereafter: not only in the Christian resurrection but as a distinct echo of the materiality of language, a spiritual firmament that both transcended and enveloped poetic language. This sense of what comes before "Aubade" is not immediately apparent, but it is apparent — to start with — in the poem's genre, which also serves as its title. Like the sonnet, the aubade is a lyric form that originates in the Middle Ages, was often sung rather than spoken, and was written specifically to mark the separation of lovers at the break of day; the word comes from the French *aube*, meaning "dawn". Unlike the sonnet, however, the aubade was not a major form within Elizabethan lyric poetry, which dealt mainly with unsatisfied love, but its celebratory tone did appeal to meta-physical poets such as John Donne. The aubade was meant to have something of the quality of birdsong, proudly greeting the new day.

No doubt because of the psychological limitations imposed by its format, the aubade has never been as popular as the sonnet, but even in the 20th century there were a number of notable contributions, such as one by William

Empson ("Aubade", 1937) (Empson 316) from his time in Japan, when the poet and his Japanese lover are woken by an earthquake and they both decide that, what with the clouds of war threatening, "the best thing [is] to be up and go" (40). Larkin included Empson's "Aubade" in his *Oxford Anthology of Twentieth Century English Verse* (1973), but to his great embarrassment mistakenly omitted the second half of the poem. As Rowe suggests (170), therefore, the aubade brought with it negative associations for Larkin, although with or without these associations, Larkin does not treat the form wholly ironically, remaining true poetically at least to its fundamental optimism.

Larkin usually gave his poems thematic titles (e.g. "Here") or the names of people and places ("Dockery and Son", "Sunny Prestatyn"), but "Aubade" is the only one of his entire published opus to be named after its poetic form; in this sense, the poem is not just "an aubade" but also a poem about the convention of the aubade. This is similar to the way that Larkin writes in an almost philosophical mode about sex and human relationships, while saying little if anything about his actual lovers. He is reluctant to name the feelings of his intimates, concentrating exclusively on the feelings of the first person, which is another reason why Larkin's world becomes so insistently our own. In his "Aubade", there is no somnolent figure to be left beneath the sheets, nor any lark to beckon him outside: simply the realization that he can only get older, that he must get up whether he wants to or not, and that the early morning darkness seems eerily like death,

Making all thought impossible but how
And where and when I shall myself die. (6–7)

This is also one of those moments when the poet is "caught without / People or drink." (36–37) Larkin is known to have drunk heavily in his final years and, in addition to frequent socializing as a senior officer of his university, had up to three relationships going at one time.⁵ Yet such distractions are evident by their absence in this poem, all the more so as Larkin attempts to express an ultimate truth.

The poem's bleakness makes one wonder what may lie behind the poem, and it is in looking for answers to that question that one becomes aware of

how much does lie hidden there. To start with, if a genre of the setting moon sets the scene, then the moon itself may play a part. Interestingly, the word “moon” does not appear once in the poem, which is probably because the poet is lying in bed with the curtains closed. This condition of helpless stasis suggests the death bed as a scene for death itself:

no sight, no sound,
No touch or taste or smell, (27–28)

These lines may well be an ironic echo of the conclusion to Jaques’ “Seven Ages of Man” speech in *As You Like It*, also on the topic of mortality:

Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans eyes, sans everything. (2.7.166)

Jaques slips into the French *sans* (“without”) as a means of dramatising a condition that cannot be dramatised with the same realism as the other ages: “the infant, / Mewling and puking in the nurse’s arms.” etc. (2.7.143–144) Yet Jaques’ assumption that the seventh age, the age of death, should follow seamlessly from the previous six is surely at odds with Larkin’s viewpoint, and indeed one can almost “hear” the poet chuckling with ironic glee at the self-delusion of the self-appointed philosopher of Arden in the jazzy rhyme and syncopated rhythms with which he develops the argument:

nothing to think with,
Nothing to love or link with,
The anaesthetic from which none come round. (28–30)

The possibility of an ironic allusion to a Shakespeare play — as well as to the medieval and Renaissance tradition of death poetry — is reinforced by the ironic use of the medieval aubade genre. Shakespeare wrote aubades in their traditional lyric sense, but, according to Rowe,

Larkin invariably uses French words and French titles ironically. For him, French is the language of style, sophistication, sensuality, urbanity, passion and worldliness: it is the language of *la politesse*, *sens d’occasion* and *savoir vivre* — all qualities he felt he and his world conspicuously lacked. (167)

Larkin's negative capability does not necessarily extend itself to Shakespeare, since he seems more disinterested than uninterested in 16th and 17th English poetry as a whole, but it does extend here to the aubade genre.

One subtle lunar reference may come in the first line of the second stanza: "The mind blanks at the glare." (11) The moon glares, not only because it is white and bright, but also as a well-tried symbol of chastity. Nine years before "Aubade", Larkin had written a poem on this very subject, "Sad Steps" (*Collected Poems*, 144), in which returning from a nocturnal toilet excursion, he parts "thick curtains" (2) and is

startled by
The rapid clouds, the moon's cleanliness. (2–3)

"Sad Steps" is a poem about another kind of separation: the separation from that which once was. At first, he finds the moon unreal and even ludicrous:

The way the moon dashes through clouds that blow
Loosely as cannon-smoke to stand apart (7–8)

It is only when he considers the moon's romantic associations that he recalls his own youth of not so long ago:

One shivers slightly, looking up there.
The hardness and the brightness and the plain
Far-reaching singleness of that wide stare

Is a reminder of the strength and pain
Of being young; that it can't come again (13–17)

Larkin's sense of lost youth is underscored by the literary genealogy of the poem, which refers quite obviously to a poem written by another "lost youth" of the English poetic tradition and Larkin's namesake,⁶ Sir Philip Sidney's Sonnet 31 from *Astrophil and Stella* (1581–82):

With how sad steps, O moon, thou climb'st the skies;
How silently, and with how wan a face. (Sidney 132; 1–2)

Larkin probably justified his borrowing by the fact that it had been done before, and by one of his favourite poets, William Wordsworth, in a sonnet of

1806:

With how sad steps, O Moon, thou climb'st the sky,
 "How silently, and with how wan a face!" (qtd. in "Literary Connections"; 1–2)

As with the Shakespearean reference, the originality of Larkin's poem lies in its stinging mockery of rhetorical expectations:

Lozenge of love! Medallion of art!
 O wolves of memory! Immensements! (11–12)

Sidney wonders whether the moon and other celestial bodies love as mortals do, while Wordsworth praises the moon's solitary beauty. Larkin is having none of that: "his mind blanks at the glare" of something he can neither accept nor understand. Yet, in an oblique fashion, his poem conflates both Sidney's and Wordsworth's into his own; his description of the moon is memorable and beautiful, while the sense of lost youth makes us wonder about the poet's love life, as about love in general. Finally, one might note that while the six verses of "Sad Steps" make it four lines too long to be counted a sonnet, it does "turn" like a sonnet with the rhetorical outburst in lines 11 and 12. At 46, Larkin feels that he has lost "the strength and pain" of his youth, but the rhetorical force, or capacity to talk about his feelings, is still very much alive, as is the poetic tradition of which he is himself part.

One poet rather closer to home than Sidney would be the 17th century Metaphysical Andrew Marvell, who was born near the city of Kingston upon Hull (where Larkin worked as university librarian for the second half of his life) and who represented the city in parliament. Marvell's reputation as a moderate Puritan turned Restoration libertine is close also to Larkin's somewhat mixed personal reputation, and finds unique expression in a poem like "To His Coy Mistress", which was possibly written in the early 1650s when Marvell was tutor to the daughter of Cromwell's commander-in-chief, Sir Thomas Fairfax. This is a poem in which the Puritan aesthetic of simplicity rubs up against the realities of human biology:

The grave's a fine and private place,
But none, I think, do there embrace. (Marvell 50–51; 31–23)

Marvell's rhyme memorably reiterates the duality of time and place on which the poem hinges. The mistress' desire for "more time" is finessed by the poet into becoming a spatial expanse as well:

Thou by the Indian Ganges' side
Shouldst rubies find: I by the tide
Of Humber would complain. (5–7)

Yet this imagined infinity can, in reality, lead only to the ultimate contraction: the woman's desire for "a little space" leads ironically to just that, the grave. We can observe a similar, if contrary tension in Larkin's poem between courage in the face of death and the unmoving reality of death:

Being brave
Lets no one off the grave. (38–39)

The allusion to Marvell is not one that has been mentioned by other critics, although Larkin probably was thinking of Marvell's "Mower" poems in a short poem published in the Hull Literary Club magazine in 1979, entitled "The Mower". In the later poem, Larkin takes pity on a hedgehog he accidentally kills while mowing his lawn, but the mood of "Aubade" is altogether less sentimental. The resonance with "To His Coy Mistress" is that of the clean, open rhymes ("place" / "embrace" and "brave" / "grave"), the subject of the grave, the typically Metaphysical conceits, not to mention the likelihood that Larkin was waking to a Hull morning. In this context, the mistress' reluctance to lose her virginity is no more than a reluctance to give in to one of life's "little deaths" before the final confrontation with eternity: "Death is no different whined at than withstood." (49)

Metaphysics is unlikely territory for a poet like Larkin, who has otherwise been described as a realist and a symbolist (although seldom as a modernist), and whose main poetic debt is to Thomas Hardy. The metaphysical, when understood in its original neo-Platonist sense as an exploration of abstract, spiritual concepts through language, seems in Larkin's case to be no more than "That vast moth-eaten musical brocade" (23) one associates with the religious

poetry of the 17th century that seems to sing heaven into existence. Yet taken as a whole, “Aubade” does seem quite metaphysical in its grappling with the abstract concept of nothingness; it is only in the final stanza, as “light strengthens” (41), that the language becomes reassuringly mundane. If “Courage is no good” (37), then the one emotion that is central to the poem is anger at the inevitability of death, coupled one supposes with anger at the lies people tell to shield themselves from the inevitable:

realisation of it rages out
In furnace-fear (35–36)

This is one of the most powerful images in the poem, suggesting a visceral emotion in the pit of the stomach (“the furnace”), perhaps even that after an evening of alcohol the poet is irritable and unsettled as he wakes to sobriety.⁷ His rage is an instinctive, animal response to the object of fear, but in Larkin’s expression the two emotions become almost one, and since objectivity is palled and even lost altogether when emotions are confused in this way, one wonders whether in this very objective poem, such confusion or duplicity of emotion is not in fact something more subliminal, something as “mysterious” as the nothingness that the poem is about.

Emotional duplicity is characteristic of another, albeit rather different aubade of the 17th century, John Donne’s “The Sun Rising” (date unknown). In Donne’s poem, the poet famously expresses his anger at the sun for waking the poet and his lover; the sun is personified as the archetypal busybody of Renaissance literature, who is actually without body:

Busy old fool, unruly sun,
Why dost thou thus,
Through windows, and through curtains, call on us?
Must to thy motions lovers’ seasons run? (Donne 80; 1–4)

The poet comically commands the sun to shine elsewhere, and so wake up others, before realising through his metaphysical logic that to admit the sun into his room is to put himself and his lover where they want to be, namely at the centre of the universe. Larkin’s anger is aligned with fear, but Donne’s irritation is spiced with sexual humour and excitement, especially when one

considers that “the busy son” may be no more intrusive than whatever intrusions the poet has been visiting on his lover. Yet compared with the other allusions mentioned so far, Donne’s aubade seems to be the one most absent from Larkin’s poem, except in the basic formal sense that both poems reach towards a conclusion that recognises the dissolution of night and arrival of morning. One ironic, if somewhat discrete allusion, however, may relate to the fact (as I have previously mentioned) that Larkin’s “Aubade” was written to commemorate the recent death of Larkin’s mother and published just before Christmas. Larkin may have been all too conscious of the reality that in his middle age he has become “the busy old fool”, who “work[s] all day, and get[s] half-drunk at night”, who already in “Sad Steps” and numerous other poems of the 1960s has lamented his lost youth.

Larkin’s endings are usually memorable, as they gently release the reader from the music of the poem into the world beyond it, or else focus attention on some calming perspectival detail. For an example of the former technique, one thinks of the ending of “The Whitsun Weddings” (1958):

A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower
Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain. (*Collected Poems* 92–94;
79–80)

And for a key focal point of “Home is so Sad” (1958):

The music in the piano stool. That vase. (*Collected Poems* 88; 10)

“Aubade” is no exception in offering an apparent release from the bleakness of what has come before:

Postmen like doctors go from house to house. (50)

As in “Days” (1957), the mention of doctors denotes ill health and dying, but at least the line connects the poet and his readers with the spheres of activity and communication. The line may also contain a hidden meaning that hints at the poem’s overall meaning, for postmen deliver letters, a word that is homonymous with the letters of the alphabet out of which words and poems are fashioned. Likewise, almost all addresses in residential streets in the United Kingdom are numbered (including Larkin’s own 105 Newland Park), so that

when a postman delivers a letter in the morning, he or she is quite literally connecting a letter with a number, or (if you will) the relatively decipherable system of human language with the system of numbers that can mean almost anything. In prosody, numbers play the significant role of organising linguistic units into an aesthetically pleasing and meaningful whole, and in that sense the poem is representative of all other activities that combine letters with numbers (e.g. medical tests).

It is in the poem's literariness that it takes a step back from the nothingness it envisages, and so, in the final part of this article, its literary qualities are considered in terms of its prosody. As has already been noted, the poem is written in iambic pentameters using a rhyme scheme of a-b-a-b-c-c-d-e-e-d in each stanza, but with a number of significant variations in each stanza that open a space between the absoluteness of the poem's message and an underlying scepticism. Of course, of all poetic meters the iambic pentameter is the one most open to the variations of human speech, although as the meter developed through Wordsworth and on into the 20th century these variations became less pronounced, if no less present. In the case of a poet as recent as Larkin, the reader may not even be aware that he is writing in iambic pentameter, much less his variations, which is all the more reason for examining them in detail. The following variations can be identified:

x / x / x / x / /
And where and when I shall myself die. (7) (final syllable omitted)

x / x x / x /
Of dying, and being dead, (9) (uneven iambic trimeter)

x / x / x / x / x x /
And shall be lost in always. Not to be here, (18) (additional syllable generating anapaest in final beat)

/ x x / x x
Not to be anywhere, (19) (consecutive dactyls)

x / x / x / / / x x / /
And specious stuff that says *No rational being* (25) (one or two addi-

tional syllables allowing for broken rhythm)

x / x / x / x / x / x

No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with, (28) (syncopated rhythm triggered by additional syllable)

x / x / x / /

Nothing to love or link with, (29) (syncopated rhythm open to further variation)

x / x / / x x / x / /

And so it stays just on the edge of vision, (31) (insignificant extra syllable)

/ x x / / x / x /

People or drink. Courage is no good: (37) (final syllable omitted)

x / x / x /

Lets no one off the grave. (39) (iambic trimeter)

/ / / x x / / x / x x /

Meanwhile telephones crouch, getting ready to ring (45) (broken rhythm with two additional syllables that is open to various readings)

x / x / x x x / x x / x

In locked-up offices, and all the uncaring (46) (another disrupted meter with two additional syllables suggesting perhaps the outer world preparing to intrude upon the inner)

x / x / x / x x /

The sky is white as clay, with no sun. (48) (the same deadening effect as in ll. 7 and 37)

/ / x x /

Work has to be done. (49)

We can see from the above that the rhythms become slightly more complex in the second half as the sense of order that accompanied the poet's nocturnal awakening is dissolved at first by something within the rhetoric and then by the increasing daylight; this is a poem of transition, an aubade, when the usual physical and psychological symmetries may not always be evenly balanced. It

is difficult exactly to locate the rhetorical fissure, but given that this is a poem about incompleteness, about a finality that cannot be described, then the jarring catalectics in lines 7, 37 and 48 and the trimeters in the ninth line of each stanza suggest emotional or psychological barriers that transcend the poet. In other words, in this poem there can be no antonyms expressed to “die” (7), to “good” (37), nor to “sun” (48).

Larkin is a writer who consciously rejected traditional metaphysics in his life and poetry, and yet one wonders to what extent he is affected by the metaphysics inscribed in the poetic tradition on which his “Aubade” seems to draw. The great emotional risks that Larkin takes as a poet is surely evidence of a tension between orthodoxy and his own agnosticism, while Larkin’s rejection of the modernists, with their art that “helps us neither to enjoy nor endure” (Larkin 1985, 27), aligns him with a Romantic desire for transcendence. The ironic effect of “Aubade” may in fact be to make death more tolerable for his readers.

Notes

1 These revealed that Larkin’s father, Sydney, had been an active sympathiser with German Nazism during the 1930s, and that Larkin himself was prone to racist and sexist comments. Against the popular image of him as introverted and bookish, Larkin also had several love affairs during his life, including one with a married woman.

2 Larkin was baptised an Anglican, and had an Anglican funeral, but from his youth was avowedly agnostic.

3 It is sometimes said that whereas 19th century writers were reluctant to discuss sexuality, the decline of religious belief in the 20th century has led to a similar reluctance to discuss death.

4 An anxiety about telling the truth and the deceptions of art is a prevalent theme of Larkin’s writings on poetry.

5 At the time of writing “Aubade”, Larkin was involved with three separate women, including a secret affair with his secretary.

6 Sidney may be considered “a lost youth” in the sense that he died young, killed in battle at the age of 32.

7 The hint of a private joke, as “Courage” is also the name of a popular British brand of beer.

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