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## ARTICLE

# Short of Nothing: Expanding Horizons of 'Scarcity' in the Poetry of Peter Larkin

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'Scarcity' is a key term in the poetry of Peter Larkin. It first makes its appearance in two poems from 1992, in which 'scarcity' is primarily understood either ecologically or as referring to efficiency in biological processes. In poetry written later in the 1990s 'scarcity' acquires an additional ontological, even theological, dimension, closely related to a line of thought Larkin began developing in critical essays on the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge. The expanded sense of 'scarcity', as ontological 'promise', is articulated in two of Larkin's poems published in 1998, opening the path to a rich body of writing which has continued to evolve up to the present. This essay will examine the poetry of the early 1990s in which the term 'scarcity' initially appears, and then review the emergence of the much expanded concept of 'scarcity' in poems from the mid to late 1990s. Affinities between the ideas Larkin explores poetically and those he discusses in his essays of that period on Wordsworth and Coleridge will be examined. Larkin's phenomenological approach is discussed, including the influence of Merleau-Ponty, and of the theologians Jean-Luc Marion and Jean-Louis Chrétien. The manifestation in his recent poetry of a more overtly theological concept of 'scarcity' is illustrated with reference to a poem from 2007.

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**Keywords:** Peter Larkin; scarcity; Wordsworth; Coleridge; phenomenology; ecology; theology

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'Scarcity' is a key term in the work of Peter Larkin, a concept he has described as 'equivocal' and 'plurivocal'.<sup>1</sup> It first makes its appearance in a sequence of poems *Scarce Norm Scarcer Mean* from 1992, in which 'scarcity' is primarily understood in ecological terms.<sup>2</sup> The concept also features in the poem 'Additional Trees', again from 1992, where it refers to efficiency in the processes involved in the branching of a tree. In poetry written later in the 1990s 'scarcity' acquires an additional ontological, even theological, dimension, closely related to a line of thought Larkin began

developing in relation to the poetry of William Wordsworth, and later in response to the writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. This expanded sense of 'scarcity', as attenuated ontological 'promise', is articulated in Larkin's poems 'Parallels Plantations Apart' and 'Whitefield in Wild Wheel', both published in 1998, opening a path to the development of a rich body of writing which continues to evolve up to the present day.

In the introduction to *Terrain Seed Scarcity*, the volume in which the poems mentioned above appear, Larkin says:

Scarcity as an unconditional re-emerged for many of us after ecology rescued it from being only an economic effect [...]. But for me pronouncing a scarcity in what is needed to sustain life both physically and spiritually has been firstly a poetic argument, a way of getting something to appear and ramify in poetry.<sup>3</sup>

Larkin's poetry is deliberately resistant to easy interpretation. It rejects claims to a privileged 'poetic' authority, offering instead a series of speculations. In the introduction to *Terrain Seed Scarcity* Larkin suggests that 'scarcity', in the broader sense in which he uses the term, 'might be the natural or spiritual world answering human desire'.<sup>4</sup> Spiritual references are scarce and often oblique in the early texts. The implication here seems to be that a 'natural' or a 'spiritual' interpretation might be given, either being acceptable. The poetry hints at a possible spiritual reading but then retreats from confidently embracing such a position. In later work the assertion of 'spiritual' perspectives becomes more overt, though still stopping short of unambiguous affirmation of a conventional faith position.

This essay will first examine the poetry of the early 1990s in which the term 'scarcity' initially appears, and will discuss the meaning assigned to the term in these poems. It will then review the emergence of a much expanded concept of 'scarcity' in poems from the mid to late 1990s, and the relationship of these works to Larkin's critical writings on Wordsworth's 'The Ruined Cottage' and on the 'Lucy' poems, which date from this same period. The further evolution of what has for

Larkin proved a fertile concept is then examined with specific reference to an essay on Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight'.<sup>5</sup>

Larkin's thinking is informed by a phenomenological perspective, and understanding this is critical to an appreciation of the sense in which the poetry is 'spiritual'. The later writings of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty hold particular significance for Larkin, and are discussed in the context of the essay on Coleridge. The manifestation in the poetry of a more overtly theological concept of 'scarcity' is illustrated with reference to 'At Wall with the Approach of Trees' from 2007. The essay concludes with a general summary of its main themes.

### **Ecological scarcity in *Scarce Norm Scarcer Mean***

*Scarce Norm Scarcer Mean* appeared as a chapbook in 1992. Eight of the poems were later included in the collection *Terrain Seed Scarcity*.<sup>6</sup> Unlike much of Larkin's work these poems do not directly concern themselves with trees, but offer instead a broader perspective on ecological crisis. The poems are also short, in a lyric form untypical of his early work, though sharing some affinity with the chapbook *Pastoral Advert* which preceded this volume. Stylistically, these early poems suggest the influence of J. H. Prynne.<sup>7</sup>

The term 'scarcity' is used primarily in an ecological sense. In the first poem Larkin writes critically of the intensity of our exploitation of natural resources.<sup>8</sup>

Call for mere entropy induced  
 bargate off intensity of access  
 solar wave more floe than stock  
 the choke at the environmental sink  
 renewable is no non-scarcity<sup>9</sup>

The line 'the choke at the environmental sink' suggests images of tree felling imperilling the Earth's carbon sinks. It might also evoke someone gasping in response to a deteriorating ecological situation, or more bathetically someone retching over a basin. In the next line 'renewable', the poem suggests, does not equate to a healthy

biosphere. Larkin perhaps has in mind forestry plantations which produce 'renewable' timber, but from ecologically impoverished conditions. Later in the poem we have the lines:

Engineer nature in non-  
mutual control, the scarcity phases  
of spoil, more new loan types?<sup>10</sup>

Our relationship with the natural world is out of balance, and mediated through manipulation. The spoil created when ground is prepared for planting trees, or during the construction of roads and buildings, becomes a site of ecological scarcity, the incurring of a debt which needs to be made good. Spoil of course can also be understood in the sense of damage. Larkin's reference to 'new loan types' invites a comparison with complex debt instruments such as derivatives, or simply the increasing levels of both private and public debt which fuel economic growth. Bathos again underscores the point. The future is mortgaged while we live for the moment. 'Where will one park to waste?' the last line of the poem asks.<sup>11</sup> Here 'to waste' might be to reduce, to despoil, and 'park' may signify the manipulation of a landscape to 'improve' on nature. Or the poem may be asking how we can ever side-line (park) both the wasting and wastage involved in current industrial and agricultural practices.

Subsequent poems include phrases like: 'scarce of means ubiquitous',<sup>12</sup> 'aggrieved as resource, no prize in variables of scarcity',<sup>13</sup> 'from unshorn opportunity leave the site scarce-adorned',<sup>14</sup> and 'a docked scarcity rudely a plant- | ation of enough'.<sup>15</sup> In all of these cases the predominant sense is one of a biosphere ravaged by an economic system which accepts no limits. 'As property group competitive exclusion | does only finishing work; simply relax', advises poem viii.<sup>16</sup> This is the logic of quantifying and measurement. 'What is nature worth has no means to the instruments', says poem vi, and later it continues: 'It is not for nature to evolve *into* conservation | abundantly difficult to protect from universals of green'.<sup>17</sup> 'Is there anything I do in earth-savings' this poem asks.<sup>18</sup> Our response to the crisis, Larkin seems to say, is *scarcely* adequate: 'the exactly salvaged stuff an ecology | of smoke' (poem viii).<sup>19</sup>

This disparity between the scales of harm and remediation is neatly articulated in the title of the sequence, through a complex pun on 'norm' and 'mean'. These can function as statistical terms, but 'norm' can also signify normative, the accepted way of doing things, while 'mean' can indicate 'have as a consequence', or 'result in'. 'Mean' also evokes ideas of an unwillingness to share, aggression, and/or being in an impoverished state.

### **Principles of efficiency in *Additional Trees***

Larkin published a further work in 1992, *Additional Trees*, which again makes use of the term 'scarcity', though here in a very different sense. 'Scarcity' occurs mainly in the prolepsis to the poem, where it is used five times (the word 'scarcely' also has a single occurrence). In the body of the poem 'scarcity' is used only once (p. 30) while 'scarce' appears three times (pp. 20, 32 and 33). The image around which this poem circles is that of the exemplary frugality with which a tree achieves growth. The underlying principles of economy informing a tree's shape can be represented mathematically.

Larkin typically provides clues to the primary subject matter of a poem in some form of preface, or postlude.<sup>20</sup> Here the prefatory material is called 'Tending: Prolepsis', a prolepsis being a rhetorical device in which a speaker anticipates and answers possible objections to an argument. 'Tending' signifies both the tentativeness of the remarks offered, and the biological processes the poem will later describe. The prolepsis to *Additional Trees* is in three parts mirroring the tripartite division of the poem itself. The first describes a tree's growth as 'Diverging from revision as much as from any vertical', and underlines this in its concluding sentence: 'So no autonomy of revision but fidelity to the scarcity given'.<sup>21</sup> A tree grows from the extremity of its branches, new growth adding to what the tree can no longer revise.

Energy is costly to capture, and plants which use energy with maximum efficiency have a greater chance of prospering than plants which are inefficient. Over time individual plant species have evolved highly efficient ways of functioning which are fitted to their environments. In the case of the trees Larkin has in mind in the poem, a general principle operates of seeking to maximise exposure of leaves to

sunlight. Thus 'addition [...] *affords* scarcity as origin'.<sup>22</sup> The logic of this principle is what creates the shape of any given tree.

The second section of the prolepsis restates this, where the 'over that adds *from* scarcity' is said to be 'lateral only as the followed outshare of origin'.<sup>23</sup> The idea is further elaborated in the third part of the prolepsis when Larkin writes: 'Addition here doesn't increase but ramifies the inclusiveness of the scarcely ordained'.<sup>24</sup> The addition is not a 'revision' or an 'increase', but a following through of the logic of resource conservation. A further dimension is added with the concept of 'shelter' in the phrases 'the equable shelter of little' and 'renders any such forking from scarcity shelterable'.<sup>25</sup>

In a 2006 interview with Edmund Hardy, Larkin described his work as: 'a form of textual speculation which doesn't prize its own complexity but seeks to bring a set of quandaries or figurative clusters to some sort of edge. It is optative or promissory'.<sup>26</sup> *Additional Trees* is an early example of this approach in the poet's work. Larkin draws on a wide range of sources, assembling material from his varied readings as part of the process of preparing a work. These sources are not used directly as collage, but are moulded and transformed in the writing.<sup>27</sup> The result is a complex assemblage of ideas, which cannot be easily paraphrased.

What we encounter, when we approach the text of *Additional Trees*, is a series of elliptical observations which hover around the core 'figurative clusters'. Each section is comprised of short prose paragraphs, some accompanied by short verse 'tails' or 'pendants'.<sup>28</sup> A colon, followed by a gap, precedes each paragraph, suggesting that we read them as 'additional' material, an elaboration upon an opening proposition which here remains unstated.

In the convoluted phrasing we catch fragments of meaning which seem to echo across the text: 'conservant in its disperse-to-branch',<sup>29</sup> 'we [...] arrive at the under-rest of bough length by a maximum parsimony principle',<sup>30</sup> 'this consideration of least effort rides the branchings'.<sup>31</sup> These passages, I would suggest, all relate to the theme of a condition of efficiency. Mathematical modelling of tree growth, or the describing of tree forms in the language of geometry, is referenced in the poem in phrases

like: 'tree bound disorder cisoid as a totality flown to division along infinite branch where you have no cusp', 'a symmetrical obliquity doubled to remaining beside', and 'the quadric stance in beat of branch'.<sup>32</sup> In mathematics the term 'quadric' refers to a surface such as an ellipsoid or paraboloid defined by a quadratic equation.<sup>33</sup> The image evoked here is of the 3-D shape created when a parabola is rotated through 360 degrees, i.e. the idealised profile of a tree.

The ability of random processes operating within constraints to produce complex structures, as shown by the mathematician Benoît Mandelbrot, might also be inferred from: 'decision-tree model | on errant select', 'branching in random environment', 'constrained random walk', 'variance in random walk', and 'a fractal carrying set is the branch-slide's innovatory reserve'.<sup>34</sup> Fractals are generated by random events occurring within defined constraints. The tree's growth then is the product of a multiplicity of causally disconnected events bounded by a limiting constraint of 'scarcity'. It is a process capable of producing an infinite number of specific outcomes: 'the bower of nondeterminism in polybranched bounded case, the width of scarcity's addition'.<sup>35</sup>

Towards the end of the poem Larkin employs the image of division to comment on humanity's relationship with nature. 'We are more to our behalf than needs add, we reached branch a division ago, the half that ramifies below; what remains on site has partitioned basis'.<sup>36</sup> In other words our consumption of resources exceeds what is required simply to meet need, and this has been the case for some time, the natural world increasingly parcelled up to satisfy our insatiable demands. A few pages earlier Larkin writes: 'pliants across multiple refirms | sacral poor in sold divergence'.<sup>37</sup> 'Sacral' here is clearly used in the sense of 'relating to sacred rites or symbols', not anatomically. The single reference to a possible 'spiritual' perspective, of something 'sacred' being violated, is characteristic of the reticence with which Larkin uses religious vocabulary at this period, but is an indication that more is at stake here than purely economic relations.

### **The 'ontological' turn**

'Scarcity' then, in the poems in which it first appears, encompasses both ecological depredation and biological efficiency, albeit with hints at broader ontological



and 'spiritual' concerns. The term reappears in *Parallels Plantations Apart*, written in 1995–96, but with the sense greatly expanded.<sup>38</sup> Ecology and biology remain major areas of interest for Larkin, but 'scarcity' at this point begins to acquire additional resonances.<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, Larkin uses both 'insufficiency' and 'scarcity' in this poem, employing the former with greater frequency, suggesting that he had not yet settled on 'scarcity' as the more expressive term.

The text concerns four forestry plantations, each located in a different part of the country. Larkin grew up in the New Forest, and plantations have been a resource for his poetry from his first published book *Enclosures*.<sup>40</sup> Plantations are the result of human intervention in nature, and are influenced by a social and economic context. At the same time they afford possibilities of engagement which go beyond the purely instrumental or economic, are an opening upon nature. They are sites where the human and the natural are entangled at the most everyday level, within the compass of our common experience, devoid of the cultural freight associated with virgin forests and 'sublime' scenery. These are anything but romantic, and yet they retain an ability to capture us imaginatively and emotionally. It is their very ordinariness which prompts Larkin's attention.<sup>41</sup>

David Farrier, in a recently published book, recognises Larkin's particular fascination with these diminished sites of naturalised infrastructure, 'sacrifice zones' as he calls them, borrowing a phrase from Naomi Klein.<sup>42</sup> 'Larkin shows', he writes, 'how shadow places, unpeopled but not unpopulated, are distinctly lively, because the desires and consumption patterns of so many of us are *lived through* them'.<sup>43</sup> Farrier links Larkin's work to studies such as Anna Tsing's on the matsutake mushroom, which highlight the ways in which unexpected multi-species collaborations persist within plantations despite the efforts of commercial forestry to simplify and reduce nature. An awareness of such complexities is certainly present in Larkin, and Farrier is right to draw attention to them. But Farrier's analysis misses, to a significant degree, the ontological and theological dimensions of Larkin's poetry.

Farrier recognises the importance of the idea of 'scarcity' in Larkin, but reads this ecologically. Thus plantations 'instantiate the complex of salvage projects and multispecies world-making from which the particular lifeway of the twenty-first-century

Western human subject emerges, as well as the insistent drive to simplify that obscures this density of entanglements'.<sup>44</sup> He quotes a line from 'Plantations Parallels Apart' – 'production rushes a spectre of world to sector lacking spathe' – and comments: "'Spathe" refers to the leaf or leaves that enclose a cluster of flowers; thus the semiotics of organic growth are rudely excluded by the impoverished rush to reduce "world to sector"'.<sup>45</sup> In a slightly earlier passage Farrier says that it is in 'cultivating an art of noticing the dense arrangement of relations in ostensibly simplified environments, where we discover the principle that underpins his [Larkin's] poetics of scarcity'.<sup>46</sup>

But Larkin intends more than this by 'scarcity' in 'Plantations Parallels Apart', as a reading of the text soon shows. The sites with which the poem engages also offer the possibility of a different kind of ontological or 'spiritual' relation. Larkin says in the preface: 'The fraying between the natural distribution of an ecological network and a plantation's psychic charge (as a saturated object) is basic to my poem.'<sup>47</sup> He is here alluding to the theological writings of Jean-Luc Marion who, building on Husserl and Heidegger, and on his one-time teacher Jacques Derrida, rethinks phenomenology in terms of the 'givenness' of being, and then of being as 'gift'. The term 'saturated phenomenon' in Marion denotes an experience which is non-objectifiable, a phenomenon which cannot be seen but paradoxically remains visible through its overwhelming givenness, a counter-experience of a non-object.<sup>48</sup> Larkin is here adapting Marion's concept to encompass trees.

Later in the preface Larkin says: 'Heidegger's genius was such that almost any meditative language one wishes to call on finds itself largely local to the haunts of his philosophic turn.'<sup>49</sup> Larkin is clearly writing from a philosophical viewpoint which spans broader concerns than the strictly ecological.<sup>50</sup> One of the epigraphs to the poem, from Richard Jeffries, includes the line: 'I feel that there are infinities to be known, but they are hidden by a leaf.'<sup>51</sup> Another, from Emily Dickinson, reads: 'Ring, for the scant salvation!'<sup>52</sup>

Larkin tells us that the poem 'attempts a study of greened enclosures, manufactured as grids or reserves. It counters a world in which the purely open has for too long been compromised, stimulated, by urban expansionism'.<sup>53</sup> But he also says that

plantations may 'be on the way to instilling a renewable shade, may teach us again the stickiness of fragments of reserve'.<sup>54</sup> The natural world can afford us 'shelter', understood here as 'where we do not live, physically or culturally, but where we come to desire our terrestrial dependence to be both a natural continuity and a non-natural sense of concern'.<sup>55</sup> It is the compromised character of the sites written about which itself generates this 'stickiness'. 'A plantation', Larkin says, 'is [...] a delegate (from primal forest) impoverished enough to refer to the human appetite for shelter.'<sup>56</sup>

What is at stake here is not just our economic relationship with nature, but our whole stance towards a world in which we also seek security and nurture. Such a relationship Larkin believes is necessarily unequal; what is given by nature is insufficient to satisfy us because too scarcely given, but this 'insufficiency of nurturing power available to the human person' can, he says, 'illuminate a given reserve of the world which we agree to cherish'.<sup>57</sup> It is the very scarcity of what is given from plenitude which demands reverence and dedication. 'Insufficiency', Larkin continues, 'is non-negative difference: scarcity's sleight-of-hand, however ontologically devious, is for us, I want to imagine, a moment of loyalty.'<sup>58</sup>

The poem returns constantly to this idea of 'insufficiency', alongside the sense of being as 'gift'. In the final section of the poem, which concerns a 'small rectangle of wood in north Cotswolds', known as Centrals, Larkin writes:

the gift cannot be unlearned, much finitude as this is doesn't have projections spent in used terms of its kind. The only convertibility is desire toward unmastered receipt, the added ground less than, scarcity *within* scaled up apposition: the torque of desire at desire's prayer still continent in insufficiency.<sup>59</sup>

The reference to 'prayer' here is significant. Larkin also makes reference in the text to 'soul', 'praying', 'eden', 'sacral', and 'sacred'. Such vocabulary remains scarce in the work, but appears with greater frequency than in any of the previous poetry.

### **Wordsworth's 'The Ruined Cottage'**

'Scarcity' emerges as the term upon which Larkin finally settles in 'Whitefield in Wild Wheel', a poem I will examine in some detail. Before doing so I propose to consider

one of Larkin's essays on Wordsworth, composed around the same time as 'Whitefield in Wild Wheel'.<sup>60</sup> Here Larkin develops the ontological sense of 'scarcity' in a discussion of Wordsworth's 'The Ruined Cottage'. In this essay, he writes:

I nudge 'scarcity' toward an ontological stance rather than confining it to resource economics. 'Scarcity' relates to a mode of finite being where what needs to be given for human life to ground itself in natural life has been given, but not so as to constitute sufficiency as such.<sup>61</sup>

Wordsworth's poem began as an account of the miseries and eventual dissolution of a rural family suffering under the impacts of economic crisis occasioned by the war with revolutionary France.<sup>62</sup> The earliest draft dates from 1795, and reflects Wordsworth's preoccupations with social injustice at this time. It is a grim tale recounted by a pedlar to the narrator of the poem. It tells of a woman, Margaret, whose husband, pressed by hardship and poverty, joins the army. He leaves his enlistment pay for his wife and children as a stay against hunger, and sets out, never to be seen again. The woman struggles on, grieving for the absent husband. The cottage and its garden fall into ruin, as the pedlar observes on his periodic visits. The situation is unsustainable, both children die, and eventually the woman too succumbs. In May 1798 Wordsworth decided that the ending was too stark and wrote what critics refer to as the 'reconciling addendum', a long passage in which the pedlar tries to discover a ground for consolation. It is this addendum that Larkin particularly focuses on.

The passage has attracted considerable critical comment with many scholars arguing that the pedlar's counselling of the young narrator 'to temper his emotions by a renewed sympathy with a mutely witnessing natural world', is insufficient to answer the moral questions raised by the family's sufferings, a plight in which 'nature is implicated' by Wordsworth.<sup>63</sup> For eco-criticism, Larkin says, this passage presents a particular challenge where: 'nature is brought to the fore, but where its capacity to play a meaningful role in any moral resolution is most in dispute'.<sup>64</sup>

Larkin summarises Jonathan Bate's response to the addendum which rejects the idea of a timeless, unchanging nature, a viewpoint no longer sustainable in the

1990s, drawing instead a chastening moral from the text: that 'humanity only survives *in nature*'.<sup>65</sup> Larkin contrasts this view with that of the critic Karl Kroeber, whose reading is informed by what he sees as an 'anti-transcendental bias' in Romanticism.<sup>66</sup> Kroeber argues that, in the absence of a sense of transcendence, the poem's 'contradictory dual vision of nature' cannot be reconciled. Nature is simultaneously both vital and renewing on the one hand, and also that which destroys individual consciousness. Larkin comments: 'Kroeber leaves us with two thoughts: that ambivalence will continue to characterise the most intense experience of creatures at once natural and cultural and that Wordsworth could not sustain his original naturalistic, materialistic ambivalence.'<sup>67</sup> It is Kroeber's reading which for Larkin 'opens a path' to what he describes as a "scarcity of relation" obtaining between the carelessly changeful vitality of natural communities and the indelible "difference" that vitality can inflict on the narrower capacities of human beings'.<sup>68</sup>

Larkin argues, with Kroeber, that Wordsworth abides with the awareness of the seeming indifference of nature in the face of human suffering, and the insufficiency of our experience of nature in reconciling us to our finitude. He does not duck the moral difficulty raised by the pedlar's story, but tries to tease out how a relationship founded in insufficiency might nevertheless provide solace. What is haunting in 'The Ruined Cottage' Larkin writes,

is the sense that the opportunity to encounter the suffering of others must be local and occasional, dependent on where one is and on whom one meets on the road. Likewise, any purification of the imagination that can afford to suffer with another's plight without voyeurism is still incomplete and partial. The purification is embodied in a life lived on amid a continuing landscape, the latter overlays and alters any motif of remembrance as much as it remains witness.<sup>69</sup>

If tranquillity is to be found in 'The Ruined Cottage' it is incomplete. Such consolation as nature affords is oblique and always at risk of rupture. As Larkin puts it: 'there is no occasion of ecstatic trust: it is a tenuous bond maintained from within a

prevailing scarcity in the capacity for relation itself, where human need, though not reducible to excess, is still too much, and where the limited ability of the natural world to protect and nurture, though not amounting to enmity, is still too little'.<sup>70</sup> Wordsworth enacts in the addendum what Larkin terms a '*shift* in the grounds of consolation', towards a willingness to accept the gap between human grief and what nature can offer, towards 'a ground of scarcity'.<sup>71</sup>

Larkin carefully distinguishes what he means by 'scarcity' in this context. He summarises the emergence of scarcity as an economic concept in the eighteenth century, and the assumption within economics that the satisfying of 'indiscrete' desires, as opposed to merely meeting need, constitutes the major driver of economic growth. The consumer societies we encounter everywhere today are a product of this logic, with no prospect apparently in sight that we will ever reach a plateau. Product innovation creates ever more desire. The flipside of this material abundance, Larkin asserts, is an ontological impoverishment. No matter how much we own, satisfaction eludes us. This damaging and unsustainable trajectory must, Larkin believes, be replaced with an economics founded on a principle of 'frugality', but also requires a shift towards a 'dedication' to nature.

In the addendum the Pedlar reflects on the impotence of grief and how such impotence might constitute a blessing rather than a denial'.<sup>72</sup> Memories of Margaret haunt the spot where the cottage stands, and the shaded plot where she 'sleeps in the calm earth'. But our capacity to identify with those who have died is finite and unfinished. 'Suffering may be infinite', Larkin writes, referring to Wordsworth's play *The Borderers*, 'but the mourning it provokes constitutes a response falling short of adequate relation, a persistence of scarcity that mutates without merely occluding the infinity it arises out of'.<sup>73</sup> It is this sense of the insufficiency of mourning that the pedlar ruminates upon, as he seeks in the calmness of acceptance a means not of forgetting but of keeping faith with the memory of Margaret. Larkin here argues that the pedlar is 'extolling a *scarcely completed* mourning, one that has borrowed back the exception of life from death itself and completed its mourning *as scarcity*'.<sup>74</sup> Larkin is not denying the reality of death, but arguing that it is the ability of the

pedlar to recall Margaret to life through his storytelling which enables a completion of mourning. Larkin continues:

Wordsworth places the argument of his addendum on the cusp of a grieving understood as a frugal measure of survival and as the inherently scarce completion of the work of mourning. The Pedlar's wisdom emanates from a philosophy of frugality [...] bringing desire and sorrow into bounds. [...] Scarcity shadows frugality as a spiritual value, but whereas frugality is the conscientious modesty of sufficiency, scarcity persists at an inalienable horizon of insufficiency.<sup>75</sup>

Recognising these dual aspects of our relationship with the world can, Larkin proposes, form the basis of a different kind of environmental ethics, one which 'by taking [human] uniqueness to betoken fragility rather than dominance [...] opens a relation with scarcity, or of dedicating to nature whatever vulnerably exceeds nature.'<sup>76</sup>

Wordsworth's poem circles the mute image of the ruined dwelling which, as Larkin says, quoting Geoffrey Hartman, 'resists fluency of moral reflection'.<sup>77</sup> 'Nature cannot function as a fully ethical [...] partner to the grieving of the human mind', Larkin writes. 'Equally, from within such an exchange of scarcity, what it means to be a human ethical subject is moved towards willingness to waive any ideal reciprocity, to draw back from transcending the asymmetry of nature'.<sup>78</sup> Larkin resists, as Wordsworth does, the pressure to locate ultimate meaning in a transcendent realm. He endorses James Averill's observation that Wordsworth stops short of 'absolute affirmation of the One Mind', arguing that Wordsworth does so 'because the two kinds of sympathy, that of humankind with nature and nature with the human [...] are not [...] even narrowly comparable'.<sup>79</sup> It is this 'intuition into the scarcity of relation between the human and the natural', which can, Larkin believes, afford us a 'logic of belonging', a way of being in the world that conserves 'a primordial relation to natural plenitude in its ethical nonidentification with it, a drawing back that then puts forward its "addendum" of rededication'.<sup>80</sup> This, Larkin says, is what Wordsworth 'experiments with' in 'The Ruined Cottage', the idea of 'a faithfully unsatisfying gift of the scarce'.<sup>81</sup>

## Whitefield in Wild Wheel

The Yale scholar Geoffrey Hartman has been an important influence on Larkin and, as mentioned, is quoted in the essay on 'The Ruined Cottage'. Hartman's reflections on that poem were also an important stimulus for Larkin in the writing of 'Whitefield in Wild Wheel', which is concerned with an aura of a presence encircling, or wheeling round, a clump of trees. Three of the four 'notes' attached to the preface to the poem reference the American scholar. In the first of these Larkin quotes Hartman's comment on 'The Ruined Cottage': 'yet we glimpse already a centrifugal movement, which encompasses more in nature than specific place, and whose shape approximates a circle'.<sup>82</sup> In another passage quoted by Larkin, Hartman observes: 'a fatality of centre persists and defies definition...at [the] centre is something too central: fixed and scarcely human'.<sup>83</sup> Hartman notes 'an omphalos feeling, familiar to archaic religion', the cottage serving as a locus around which both the poet's feelings and the story of Margaret circle. Hartman speaks of Wordsworth's poem having 'two centres': 'of the imagination, which is radically in excess of natural fact; and of nature, which has the power to deceive or attract imagination'. The 'naked, self-staring ruin' is a symbol joining the worlds of imagination and 'alien nature'.<sup>84</sup>

In Larkin's poem, Whitefield Clump, a small conifer plantation in the New Forest, functions in a manner similar to the ruined cottage of Wordsworth's poem. Larkin's poem is comprised of sequences of short prose paragraphs, here without 'tails'. Larkin first wrote about this plantation in *Enclosures*, where he described it as: 'barely a double row of sightable trees not divisible into an arresting idea or of hardly enough mat dross to be divided from one, not simply proposing the unenterable but unlikely to be walked near'.<sup>85</sup> In the preface to 'Whitefield in Wild Wheel', he describes the site as 'a token huddle increasingly ragged in recent years'.<sup>86</sup> Having at first considered the clump too rudimentary to write about, it now becomes a 'cynosure to lure a walk around', a pittance of hub around which attachment circles. It is a place from which 'you feel immediately drawn out again towards that distended immediacy which seems to wheel beyond it'.<sup>87</sup> Thus Whitefield emerges as a locus of circuit, in both a physical and an imaginative sense. Larkin writes: 'who or what



wheels the poem cannot say, though it knows what can be carried in the motion, and the terrain is definite enough'.<sup>88</sup>

The plantation is diminished both ecologically and as an object of possible relation:

There is a sense of scarcity (very much available to a mourning for environmental degradation), which takes to itself an emblematic brittleness, one below renewable relations but here given access to a degree of core around which what is scarce does renew in a non-indifferent (if not reconstructed) way.<sup>89</sup>

So a specific, environmentally 'wounded' terrain is 'commemorated' while at the same time a more generalised negotiation of possible relation is being advanced. 'It is the two together perhaps (dynamic offence in time and a symbolic perfection of damage out of time)', Larkin writes, 'which eventually take up the flow, a flow of retentions but in which broken retentions flow.'<sup>90</sup> Consistent with the analysis of Wordsworth's position in the 'addendum', Larkin offers no suggestion here of a transcendent order which might answer human need, and he is careful to deflect the reader from such an interpretation. 'Though scarcity itself accesses a moment of transcendence', he writes, 'we do only shift the point of scarce dependence, *not as beyond* but further round' (emphasis added).<sup>91</sup>

Section 1, titled 'Prelude', introduces the principal motifs of a diminished hub which nevertheless impels both a physical and imaginative perambulation:

There is no *stretch* in avoidance ending, save at the wheeling. Where a place of extinguished compass is at large across sheerer keeping

[...]

the stunted originary target. Physically lost (hounded) onto position but reforwarded in a wheeling unladen towards reliance.

[...]

Bare taxing of horizon unnaturally requited by things wheeling in place.  
 Trustful infinities of departure before a shared origin of untended finitude.  
 Too focal for any more distance than at wheeling remove

[...]

What is normal in place is its broken sanction as location, relational model  
 de-limbed, excluded from lateral expedition

[...]

Poverty as space, wound on refuge, both defect from wild tenuity: as protec-  
 tive a breadth of weightlessness in the wheeling.<sup>92</sup>

Much of the poem circles around these core ideas of an impoverished physical presence and an accompanying sense of the numinous. Section three, titled 'A fragment striates', describes 'this fragment of plantation' as a 'subaltern of ruin sweeping the non-empty. A fixity of quasi-wreckage' and later offers: 'A stopped pore ruins the rarification, is plundered for its spoilt solid until pivotal.'<sup>93</sup> The references to 'ruin' here are not, I think, accidental, the 'wreckage' evoked both temporal and symbolic, as in Wordsworth's poem. But this 'ruin' is not nothing. Larkin's poetry rejects nihilism, proposing in its place a possibility of relation albeit a relation of scarcity. Thus he writes: 'a void cannot exist without body', and further on: 'what avoids a snapped boundary newly thrown on limit is genuine concision of multiple body'.<sup>94</sup> What the pines sweep, Larkin proposes, is 'the non-empty'.<sup>95</sup> Thus, even in this diminished state, the plantation is capable of offering 'shelter', even if only within the wider aura of presence it generates.

Hartman's allusion to 'two centres' in Wordsworth's poem might be applied equally to Larkin. The physical and symbolic topographies of the poem are inextricably tied, though not identical. Without the 'fragment' represented by the trees there would be no pivot around which the poem might circle. But it is in the wheeling that the poem realises a means of recovering the site, of mourning it and finding solace in what has been given. But the gap between human sympathy and nature's mute

offering of itself remains, the two positions, as Larkin observed in the context of Wordsworth's writing, 'not even narrowly comparable':

Wheeling is grace on perimeter but an otherness of confinement unrepleatable in what is not yet another piece of place, but in direct glue of asymmetric fragment. The same boundless space wheeling poorer rounds.<sup>96</sup>

In the fifth and final section, 'Love's Plenary Analogy', Larkin develops a further line of speculation which moves the poem towards a horizon of consolation. In the preface Larkin speaks of a 'swirl by rota of love' circling the 'uncoupled hub' represented by the plantation, and of a 'poetry of love'.<sup>97</sup> In the last part of the poem this theme of 'love' is taken up and elaborated. The section starts with a restatement of the terrain already traversed. Whitefield is 'a scant base wheeling, at a parch of not closing down, stalked by solace'.<sup>98</sup> It is 'not as not at all, but brightly scarce', the 'wreckage [...] wry outcome that these same things resemble generosity to'.<sup>99</sup> The sixth paragraph in this section invokes the 'saturated phenomena' we encountered in 'Parallels Plantations Apart'. Larkin here applies Marion's concept to the ragged clump of pines: 'attracted to wheeling stead is what is there to spin out from saturated starving board'.<sup>100</sup>

The image of 'love' enters with paragraph ten which begins: 'Sheered wheeling of a love not proud enough in time to die of pure set of place in change'.<sup>101</sup> This love is 'lodgement let into mourning's motion', it is a 'flexural stillness amplified, grown roundly stopped, an insufficiency of furnishing hampered by slight touch into tightness of love'.<sup>102</sup> As in 'The Ruined Cottage' there is no 'occasion for ecstatic trust' being proposed, but a 'tenuous bond maintained from within a prevailing scarcity'.<sup>103</sup> The same sense of a disparity between human sympathy and mute nature we found in Wordsworth, re-emerges in Larkin's poetry, the disparity itself generative of the love described, 'its source a division by symmetry-mistake, a lesser of two selves wheeling'.<sup>104</sup> It is a love which waives any claim to reciprocity: 'it gives grace to itself [...] wheeling beside the opacity of attraction'.<sup>105</sup> It is a love 'no taller than a point of entry, shrivelled to a kernel in the round, as a community of the widest desire is propped abjuringly'.<sup>106</sup> The wheel 'is passing love from love, within the loved-awhile but not as from love *to* love'.<sup>107</sup>

The use of the word 'love' in this final section invites associations with mystical religious verse, but it is nowhere identified as 'divine' love. Who or what wheels, as Larkin has told us, 'the poem cannot say'. Religious language is present in the poem, but only sparsely used. 'Numinous' appears twice, 'numinously' once. There are single references to 'grace', 'sacral', 'faith', and 'prayer'. Referring to the clump as 'a still-point' is perhaps an oblique allusion to Eliot's 'at the still point of the turning world',<sup>108</sup> but overall the vocabulary does not require a theological exegesis, though it might support one.

The poem concludes with a paradox, mirroring the way the addendum to 'The Ruined Cottage' ends without resolution. 'It *is* enigmatic', Larkin writes, 'if love has caused itself out without being able to cross the span: reliance is the crater sworn to raze all but curve and more scarcely here than it is greater'.<sup>109</sup> Just as 'The Ruined Cottage' is not only the tragic story of Margaret, but a reflection upon loss and grief, so 'Whitefield in Wild Wheel', is about more than an impoverished fragment of New Forest woodland. It is about what sort of access such a site, diminished as it is, might afford to a sense of nurture and of belonging in the world.

### **The 'Lucy' poems**

Issues of scarcity and transcendence again provide the focus in Larkin's essay on Wordsworth's 'Lucy' poems, published in 2004.<sup>110</sup> He discusses 'scarcity' as an economic term, but then goes on to talk of the 'scarcity of meaning' in the postmodern world. This expanded use of 'scarcity' as a concept developed, Larkin says, 'by way of parrying the deconstructive readings of romantic poetry by Paul de Man and others'.<sup>111</sup> He mentions the idea advanced by the theologian Catherine Pitstock, of a 'more numinous trace, neither fully present nor wholly absent but in a mode of gift and elicitation', but pulls back from embracing a language of affirmation.<sup>112</sup> Instead he proposes 'such a trace' as 'an authentic "scarcity" in a positive sense, emerging from a strong absence as absence's own weak and negotiable other, as what can grant plenitude, or presencing, but not as itself or as presence itself'.<sup>113</sup> He goes on to offer:

a theological poetics which doesn't broach scarcity as arising from a world only partially present, but as discovered from within a world fully given in

unconcealment but at once placing itself before an horizon of scarcity, an horizon which engages also with rarity and wonder. Part of that wonder is the thought of the gift itself.<sup>114</sup>

Wordsworth's 'Lucy' poems, in Larkin's reading, exemplify such a poetics. Discussing 'Three Years She Grew', he quotes the critic Mark Jones asking whether in the poem 'benevolent nature has failed, malignant nature has succeeded, that Nature is indifferent, or that its benevolence passes understanding'.<sup>115</sup> These possibilities, Larkin argues, suggest no answer is sufficient, 'not as an equivocal oscillation but from within the figuration of scarcity itself'.<sup>116</sup> As with the pedlar's mourning of Margaret, the recalling of Lucy to the poet's mind involves a 'sparseness of return appropriate to memory and mourning'.<sup>117</sup> Lucy's presence in the poems:

becomes visitational and intermittent, glimpsed in the reverie of a horizon not fully available to the light of the ordinary with its frugal sustainabilities and terminations. But it is the point at which a dedication arising out of the incompleteness of the bond between a graced imagination and nature waits. What is received as given now gives onto. Lucy is distributed within (is less than) the rolling earth, but attributed to more than this scattering as such, until the vestige of her presence is concentrated in a symbolic scarcity open to a horizon not itself reducible.<sup>118</sup>

Lucy is no longer physically present, but she is also not nothing, she was once a living being, and the memory of her continues to offer itself as gift. 'This moment of scarce relation,' Larkin suggests:

does not hover over an abyss but offers itself in the telling of a lessness before the presence of the other already within itself. That relational scarcity is in excess of the natural order, and in its positioning of horizon is strictly a transcendence, one for which Wordsworth at the time of the 'Lucy' poems makes no idealist claims.<sup>119</sup>

This echoes the text of the preface to 'Whitefield in Wild Wheel' quoted earlier, where Larkin speaks of 'not as beyond but further round'.<sup>120</sup> Larkin also writes in the 'Lucy' article: 'this suggests transcendence makes itself available to the response of scarcity. If so transcendence would be symbolised in poetry not just at the margins of the world but as revealing itself as mysteriously *less* than the self-sufficiency of the world.'<sup>121</sup>

### **Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight'**

Larkin's conceptual framing of 'transcendence' has its roots in his allegiance to phenomenology. I have already noted the influence of Heidegger in the early work, and of Marion. A major figure for Larkin is Maurice Merleau-Ponty.<sup>122</sup> The significance of the French philosopher's work is discussed in an essay on Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight', published in 2006.<sup>123</sup>

Coleridge, Larkin suggests, would have found much to interest him in Merleau-Ponty's work. In section IV of the essay he brings the two writers into 'conversation', and explores parallels in their respective outlooks. 'For Merleau-Ponty' Larkin says, 'the body itself is ontological because it actively places itself in the world'.<sup>124</sup> Equally, he suggests, this must 'hold true for any Coleridgean body that imagines. [...] Coleridge's own sense of self was pierced by an actual world'.<sup>125</sup> He finds affinities between Merleau-Ponty's concept of 'perceptual faith', that philosophy 'discovers itself already placed in an ongoing world, a world which elicits this insight', and Coleridge's faith in God, 'a faith not derived from experience but its ground and source'.<sup>126</sup>

At the same time, Larkin argues, Merleau-Ponty goes beyond external experience, but on the grounds that this is 'given by the world itself', 'transcendence is this very world that eludes our formal reflective grasp'.<sup>127</sup> Without such a possibility of 'going beyond' external experience, Larkin suggests, we would not be able to 'turn towards a *divine* absolute'.<sup>128</sup> This was a concern which preoccupied Coleridge, 'faced with the relentless dialectical ambitions of post-Kantian philosophy'.<sup>129</sup> While craving methodological rigour, Coleridge also 'insisted on a living God, which the human will desires to relate to personally and progressively'.<sup>130</sup>

In the final section of that essay Larkin asks if phenomenology gives us a 'purely immanent space, world primordially self-sufficient?' Merleau-Ponty, he says, in the later work approaches 'quasi-theological perspectives'<sup>131</sup> He quotes from the philosopher's essay 'Eye and Mind': 'All flesh, even that of the world, radiates beyond itself, while remaining in time and amid the carnal.'<sup>132</sup> Merleau-Ponty 'hints' Larkin says, at the possibility that 'something irredeemably absent might be among the number of our most original experiences'.<sup>133</sup> This opens up, he argues, the possibility of addressing 'the numinous' from within a phenomenological framework.

This is terrain which has been explored, controversially as Larkin says, by the theologians Jean-Luc Marion and Jean-Louis Chrétien.<sup>134</sup> The concepts advanced by these two writers clearly have a strong appeal for Larkin. In the 'Frost at Midnight' essay Chrétien's idea of the 'call' is referred to. Chrétien posits that, in Larkin's words: 'we can only beckon toward what has already manifest itself in us, calling us to call. [...] The call comes from beyond our being but never corresponds to it'.<sup>135</sup> This call, in Chrétien's thinking, is silent and we only recognise it as a trace in our own inadequate response.<sup>136</sup> Larkin here pushes beyond Merleau-Ponty into theological speculation.

### **At Wall with the Approach of Trees**

These more theological conceptions of 'scarcity' find their expression in the poetry of 'At Wall with the Approach of Trees' from 2007. Here the margin of a wood, bounded by a low wall, serves as metaphor for our ontological and epistemic horizons. The poem, like 'Whitefield in Wild Wheel', is written in short prose blocks, and the paratext has been incorporated into the body of the poem as a central section in solid prose. The term 'scarcity' is used throughout the poem but appears most frequently in this central section. Larkin's preference for negative qualification rather than positive affirmation manifests in a series of statements which touch on absence, call, gift, transcendence, and dedication.

In a passage which echoes the question posed by the pedlar as he stands before the ruined cottage, Larkin asks: 'Does our participation in finitude break up any horizon it might seem to have as we become by our turn extensions, profusions of the multiple?'<sup>137</sup> His answer:

Perhaps not if our participation is blockaded by that very multiplicity in the guise of collision or obstruction, but then called from. The over-againstness of primordial gift can be restored to us at the source/impeded border of what remains active mystery stunning plural enigma once there is the simple purification of being drawn towards.<sup>138</sup>

Thus Larkin writes: 'Our horizon is not so much an unknowable which ignores us as an incoming margin (wall) at the limits of our vulnerability.'<sup>139</sup> It is this horizon which defines us, which establishes us in the world as conscious beings. It is within this horizon of containment that we discover the possibility of shelter. So 'the wall is occupied in quietening the plantation's siege of being, recalls it into the shading of approach. [...] The open not just open but approached in silent, shade-giving accord with a walling off'.<sup>140</sup> The wall is something to be 'turned at, not penetrated'. As the poem says: 'To be imprisoned here is to be giving cover its impeding due, calling surface to the presentments of curtailing its running through.'<sup>141</sup> 'Scarcity', Larkin argues, infers resistance within 'a world largely actual in its blank given-ness, but which grants us an allowance of a more exact directional, dedicational guise of gift'.<sup>142</sup>

The sense Larkin gives to the term 'scarcity' is given a further charge by the use of the terms 'God' and 'divine' in the poem, and signals a clear shift toward an overtly theological perspective. It is at the 'incoming margin (wall) at the limits of our vulnerability', he says, where 'God intersects with the placing of the world'.<sup>143</sup> The horizon of less-than which delimits our being is, Larkin implies, the point where the 'divine' transects our world: 'Faith is the spontaneous scarcity of the finite to itself, in that scarcity beckons a counter-absence always in a state of a non-plenitude, what calls out the beforeness (horizon) of the prevention.'<sup>144</sup> Chrétien's idea of the preventient divine call comes to mind here, a call not absent but 'scarcely' apprehended only in our response. Larkin says: 'Scarcity' isn't the result of a divine withholding, but 'the "point" (stab, stub, mark or wall) of any onslaught that might intrude the divine, and it is the mark divine plenitude makes on us as we share it amid all the other faces of limit, induration, sourcelessness.'<sup>145</sup> In Chrétien's thought it is the divine call



transgressing human self-sufficiency which provokes our crying out. The infinite, Larkin says in the poem, is not 'folded into the finite' but is an 'infinity for the finite, one which can be specifically invoked'.<sup>146</sup>

## Conclusion

Larkin's concept of 'scarcity' is not static, it acquires an increasing burden of signification over the course of his writing, its horizons expanding beyond the economic and ecological to also embrace ontology and theology. The term acquires meanings, becomes richly layered and subtly complex. 'Scarcity' in its fullest sense is, as Larkin says, both 'equivocal' and 'plurivocal'. With 'Plantations Parallel Apart' he begins to 'nudge' the concept of scarcity in an ontological direction. The focus here is not only economic or ecological, but on our ability to establish a sense of belonging in a world scarce of meaning. This very 'insufficiency' can, Larkin argues, form the basis of an ethical stance in which we come to 'cherish' precisely that which is scarce. He goes on in 'Whitefield in Wide Wheel' to speak of a love born out of such a sense of scarcity, a love which waives any claim to reciprocity.

In the essays on Wordsworth and Coleridge we see an elaboration of these themes which runs parallel to the poetry. In the essay on 'The Ruined Cottage' the inability of 'nature' to provide the pedlar with the solace he seeks, and Wordsworth's response to this, provides a stimulus to Larkin's own poetic speculations. Everything we need to ground ourselves in natural life, he says, is available to us, yet we remain 'spiritually' unsatisfied, confronting a world in which 'scarcity persists as an inalienable horizon'.<sup>147</sup> Recognising our fragility makes possible a relationship with nature founded on scarcity.

In his essay on the 'Lucy' poems Larkin argues that our sense of 'scarcity' does not arise from the world being only partially present, but is discovered 'from within a world fully given'.<sup>148</sup> It is in the 'insufficiency' of the world, the less-than, that we discover transcendence, the 'sense of something irredeemably absent' which Merleau-Ponty 'hints' at, which, for Larkin 'opens up the possibility of addressing the numinous'.<sup>149</sup> The trace of the absent one, which promises presence but is not itself present.

Larkin resists nihilism, as did Wordsworth and Coleridge, stopping short of 'nothing'. Yet he does so within a framework which accepts that the phenomenal world defines our perceptual horizon. In the more recent work he borrows from theologians like Marion and Chrétien, themselves adherents of a phenomenological approach, shifting from a sense of the irredeemably absent to one of an irremediable presence, a counter-experience of what remains non-objectifiable, which calls us to an ethical dedication to the world. Larkin's 'theological poetics' assume a world in which we could be said to be 'short of nothing', however 'scarcely' this is apprehended.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Peter Larkin, *Least ways least scarce among* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2012), p. 7.
- <sup>2</sup> Author's note in P. Larkin, *Terrain Seed Scarcity* (Great Wilbraham: Salt, 2001), p. xiii.
- <sup>3</sup> Larkin, *Terrain Seed Scarcity*, p. xi.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xi.
- <sup>5</sup> All of these essays are available in P. Larkin, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Promising Losses* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). Larkin began publishing essays on Wordsworth and Coleridge in the 1980s. The early essays, while interesting in their own right, have no specific bearing on the concept of 'scarcity' as Larkin develops it. They are therefore not reviewed in this essay.
- <sup>6</sup> Larkin, *op. cit.* At the time *Scarce Norm Scarcer Mean* appeared Larkin had published *Enclosures* (1983), *Prose Woods* (1985) and *Pastoral Advert* (1988). The first of these is a long prose work, salvaged from an unfinished novel set in the New Forest. *Prose Woods* is also in prose. *Pastoral Advert* is in verse.
- <sup>7</sup> Prynne had an important influence on Larkin's early technical development. Larkin began reading Prynne's poetry in the mid-70s. After 'Enclosures', he says, 'I was trying to produce a more pastoral poetry but which sounded as taut and tough as Prynne which was of course impossible and I was close to a dead-end for some time. Once the 'scarcity' theme attracted me, I felt this was a way of creating a bit of space for myself, though with Prynne poetics (again at the technical level mostly) very much still around'. Email correspondence with Larkin 27 April 2019.
- <sup>8</sup> The numbering of the poems here refers to the selection republished in *Terrain Seed Scarcity*.
- <sup>9</sup> *Terrain Seed Scarcity*, p. 3.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- <sup>20</sup> Larkin says of his writing at this period: 'at that time, Prynne would have nothing to do with explication or notes, whereas I was impressed by the use David Jones had made of them, and didn't want my own work too assimilated to Language Poetry. So the prefaces dotted about in *Terrain Seed Scarcity*

were an attempt to move into less severe territory, though still very much in terms of a sort of high theory [...] but sceptical of what might be called “omnipolitics”. Email correspondence with Larkin 27 April 2019.

<sup>21</sup> *Terrain Seed Scarcity*, p. 13.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>26</sup> Edmund Hardy, 'Less than, more at: an interview with Peter Larkin', *Intercapillary Space*, 2006. <http://intercapillaryspace.blogspot.com/2006/04/part-1.html>. Accessed 3 March 2021.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Terrain Seed Scarcity*, p. 15.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15 and 17.

<sup>33</sup> A quadratic equation has the form  $ax^2+bx+c = 0$ , where a, b and c are constants, and there is a single variable x (all must be nonnegative.) This kind of equation is referred to as a second-order equation because the highest power is 2, as seen in the x squared ( $x^2$ ). Larkin makes use of the terms 'order', 'variable', 'nonnegative', 'squared' and 'x' at various points in the poem. Quadratic equations may have two possible solutions, rather than just one, a property which will not have escaped Larkin in a poem about branching.

<sup>34</sup> Benoît Mandelbrot, *The Fractal Geometry of Nature* (San Francisco: Freeman and Company, 1982).

<sup>35</sup> *Terrain Seed Scarcity*, p. 30.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>38</sup> 'Seek Source Bid Sink' (1995), and 'Three Forest Conformities' (1997), do not use the word 'scarcity', and 'Attached, Assoil', written between October 1994 and April 1995 and published in 1997, contains only a single reference to 'scarcity' (*Terrain Seed Scarcity*, p. 99, fifth paragraph).

<sup>39</sup> A number of later poems focus on biological processes and systems, for example 'Brushwood by Inflection' (2010) and 'Hollow Allow Woods' (2013), both included in *Give Forest its Next Portent* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2014).

<sup>40</sup> Peter Larkin, *Enclosures*, originally self-published 1983 through Prest Roots Press. Included in Larkin, *Introgession Latewood* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2017).

<sup>41</sup> Preface to 'Parallels Plantations Apart', in *Terrain Seed Scarcity*, p. 107. Asked by Edmund Hardy why he has focused so much on plantations Larkin said: 'Perhaps I have been heading off being accused of a nostalgia for primeval forest, plus the simple fact there is almost no wildwood in Britain (though recent research has been finding some unsuspected survivals). I was also afraid that I might become over-associated with a sort of Heideggerian cult of remote fastnesses (though I think most of the Black Forest is also plantations.)' *Intercapillary Space*, 2006.

<sup>42</sup> David Farrier, *Anthropocene Poetics: Deep Time, Sacrifice Zones and Extinction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 57–58.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

- <sup>47</sup> *Terrain Seed Scarcity*, p. 107.
- <sup>48</sup> See J-L. Marion, *Being Given: Towards a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. J. L. Kosky, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002). Published originally in French in 1997. See specifically pp. 309–10 on the idea of 'givenness'.
- <sup>49</sup> *Terrain Seed Scarcity*, p. 108.
- <sup>50</sup> Note: 'Scarce Norm Scarcer Mean' and 'Additional Trees' both also make use of Heideggerian terms such as 'facticity' and 'reserve'.
- <sup>51</sup> *Terrain Seed Scarcity*, p. 106.
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.
- <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.
- <sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.
- <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.
- <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.
- <sup>60</sup> Peter Larkin, 'Relations of Scarcity: Ecology and Eschatology in "The Ruined Cottage"', *Studies in Romanticism* 39, no. 3 (2000): 347–64. Republished in Peter Larkin, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Promising Losses*, op. cit. pp. 77–91. Page references are to the 2012 Palgrave text.
- <sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, footnote 2, p. 229.
- <sup>62</sup> W. Wordsworth, "The Ruined Cottage" and "The Pedlar", ed. J. Butler (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979).
- <sup>63</sup> *Wordsworth and Coleridge*, op. cit. p. 70.
- <sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- <sup>65</sup> Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 34.
- <sup>66</sup> K. Kroeber, *Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980) p. 61, quoted in *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Promising Losses* p. 79.
- <sup>67</sup> *Wordsworth and Coleridge*, op. cit. p. 79.
- <sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.
- <sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.
- <sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- <sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.
- <sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- <sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.
- <sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.
- <sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- <sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, footnote 28, p. 231.
- <sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- <sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.
- <sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.
- <sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.
- <sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.
- <sup>82</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787–1814*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), pp. 137, quoted in *Terrain Seed Scarcity*, op. cit. p. 154, note 1.
- <sup>83</sup> Hartman, op. cit. pp. 137, quoted in *Terrain Seed Scarcity*, op. cit. p. 154, note 4.

- <sup>84</sup> Hartman, op. cit. pp. 139.
- <sup>85</sup> Peter Larkin, *Introgession Latewood*, (Exeter: Shearsman, 2017), p. 172.
- <sup>86</sup> *Terrain Seed Scarcity*, p. 151.
- <sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.
- <sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.
- <sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.
- <sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.
- <sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.
- <sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 155–158.
- <sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 165 and 167.
- <sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.
- <sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.
- <sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.
- <sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.
- <sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.
- <sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.
- <sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.
- <sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.
- <sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.
- <sup>103</sup> *Wordsworth and Coleridge*, op. cit. p. 81.
- <sup>104</sup> *Terrain Seed Scarcity*, p. 178.
- <sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.
- <sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.
- <sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.
- <sup>108</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909–1962*, (London: Faber, 1963), p. 191.
- <sup>109</sup> *Terrain Seed Scarcity*, p. 181.
- <sup>110</sup> ‘Scarcity by Gift: Horizons of the “Lucy Poems”’, *The Coleridge Bulletin*, 23 (2004): 49–62. Collected in *Wordsworth and Coleridge*, op. cit.
- <sup>111</sup> Given Prynne’s early influence, Larkin’s discussion of his relationship to Prynne’s poetics in the essay he contributed to *For the Future*, ed. Ian Brinton (Exeter: Shearsman, 2017) is worth noting. There he speaks of countering the ‘severe poetic/ethical stalemate in Prynne’s later work’ via ‘a prophetic innocence of gift as ethical spring-board’, p. 108.
- <sup>112</sup> The essay includes an involved discussion of Pitstock, and of her fellow theologian John Milbank, whose ideas are important to Larkin but which he doesn’t fully share.
- <sup>113</sup> *Wordsworth and Coleridge*, p. 95.
- <sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- <sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- <sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- <sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- <sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.
- <sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.
- <sup>120</sup> *Terrain Seed Scarcity*, p. 153.
- <sup>121</sup> *Wordsworth and Coleridge*, p. 95.
- <sup>122</sup> ‘For me of course phenomenology especially means late Merleau-Ponty where he shades off into ontology’, email correspondence with Larkin, 5 April 2019.

- <sup>123</sup> "'Frost at Midnight": Some Coleridgean Intertwinings', *The Coleridge Bulletin* 26 (2005): 22–36. Included in *Wordsworth and Coleridge*, pp. 167–182.
- <sup>124</sup> *Wordsworth and Coleridge*, p. 175.
- <sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.
- <sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.
- <sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.
- <sup>128</sup> Larkin is referring to the discussion of the *cogito* in Part III of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 391. Merleau-Ponty is here arguing that without an engagement with the external world the thinking self would not be able to know other thinking selves, and by extension would also be unable 'to catch sight of a divine absolute' (an ironic reference to Descartes' claims about God).
- <sup>129</sup> *Wordsworth and Coleridge*, p. 177.
- <sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.
- <sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.
- <sup>132</sup> Larkin quotes from M. Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy of Perception*, p. 186. The quotation as cited is a contraction of the original text where Merleau-Ponty is talking about painting. It is 'the art of painting' which is 'in the carnal.' The term 'flesh' here has a specific sense. Merleau-Ponty develops a concept of what he calls 'flesh', which 'is not matter, is not mind' but a '*general thing* midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea'. It is, he says: 'facticity, what makes the fact be a fact. And, at the same time, makes the facts have meaning'. See *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northern University Press, 1968), pp. 139–140.
- <sup>133</sup> *Wordsworth and Coleridge*, p. 181.
- <sup>134</sup> Some philosophers argue that Marion and Chrétien move outside of a phenomenological framework. See for example: Janicaud, D. et al., *Phenomenology and the 'Theological Turn': The French Debate* (New York: Fordham UP, 2000), which includes Janicaud's critique and responses from key figures including Marion.
- <sup>135</sup> *Wordsworth and Coleridge*, p. 181.
- <sup>136</sup> This concept is further discussed by Larkin in the essay 'Coleridge Conversing: Between Soliloquy and Invocation', *The Wordsworth Circle* 38, no.3 (2007): 113–17 (included in *Wordsworth and Coleridge*). Larkin revisits 'Frost at Midnight' in this essay and suggests the poem could be read as a response to just such a 'call'. See also Larkin's essay 'Scarcely on the Way: The Starkness of Things in Sacral Space', *Interdisciplinary Space*, March 2010 (included in *Wordsworth and Coleridge*, pp. 107–117).
- <sup>137</sup> Peter Larkin, *Lessways Least Scarce Among* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2012) p. 62.
- <sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.
- <sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58–59.
- <sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.
- <sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.
- <sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.
- <sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- <sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.
- <sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.
- <sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.
- <sup>147</sup> *Wordsworth and Coleridge*, p. 89.
- <sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- <sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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