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Conference report

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CONFERENCE REPORT

Conference Report: 'Peter Larkin: Poetry, Phenomenology, and Ecology', 26th of April 2017, University of Warwick

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This is a report detailing the 'Peter Larkin: Poetry, Phenomenology, and Ecology' symposium which took place at the University of Warwick on 26th of April 2017. It functions as an introduction to a forthcoming special issue of the *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry* of articles based on the proceedings of the symposium, guest edited by Professor Emma Mason of the University of Warwick.

Keywords: Peter Larkin

Peter Larkin: Poetry, Phenomenology, and Ecology took place on the 26th of April 2017 at the University of Warwick. It was convened jointly by the *Oxford Phenomenology Network* and the newly formed *Poetry at Warwick* research group, along with Warwick's *Centre for Research in Philosophy, Literature, and the Arts*. The day served as a celebration of the poetry of Peter Larkin, who previously worked for over 35 years as the Subject Librarian for Philosophy and Literature at Warwick; and as part of a broader project exploring the relationship between phenomenology on one hand and poetry on the other. The Symposium involved two keynotes, two panels, and a number of readings by Larkin, who was present for discussion throughout the day; and was accompanied by an exhibition in the university library, entitled 'Inscriptions', tracing the interaction between Larkin's poetic work and the visual and musical works of Howard Skempton and Simon Lewty (both artists who, like Larkin, have worked for a long period in the vicinity of the University of Warwick).

Professor Emma Mason (Warwick), who organised the symposium, introduced Larkin as a poet influenced by French prose poetry; Welsh praise traditions; objectivism; the form of the haibun; and especially the Romantics, with whom he shares an interest in experience as gift, and of thinking about divinity through nature.

The symposium was divided into a morning and afternoon session, with the morning session placing particular focus on phenomenology and theology, and the afternoon session on ecology, political theory, and poetics. The first paper of the day, entitled 'Leaves of Field as a Phenomenological Text,' was delivered by Dr. Eoghan Wells (Lancaster). Wells noted that it is a common claim (more so among phenomenologists than among poets) that 'all poetry is phenomenology.' He pointed to the possible looseness of this idea, and set out to explore and complicate it. He first sketched outlines of the phenomenologies of Husserl and Heidegger, so that we might proceed with a thicker and more particular conception of what phenomenology is. Next, he worked through parallels and disjunctions that arose between the features of these phenomenologies on one hand, and various poems on the other (focusing on, but not limited to, selected poems of Larkin's). In particular, Wells emphasised three central steps of a Husserlian methodology: reduction, free variation, and eidetic intuition. The first step, reduction, involves an 'immersion in appearance,' rejecting concern for whether appearances actually 'are.' Here, Wells found parallels to the experience of reading Larkin's poetry: his 'uncomfortable language' forces us to abandon our normal ontological preconceptions, pushing us towards a spirit of greater openness. Next, free variation: as Wells put it, 'a cubist explosion of looking at things from as many different angles as possible.' The parallels to Larkin's work, Wells argued, continue here: his poems deny us any single, stable standpoint, but instead lead us to explore their subject matter, presenting us instead with a 'turbulence of layers.' Larkin departs from Husserlian phenomenology, however, at the third step, 'eidetic variation.' Here, for Husserl, we arrive at a 'perfect idea' (the 'tableness of a "table"' in his classic example); but Larkin, on Wells' view, offers us no such conclusive resolution. In absence of tight rhythmic structures or line endings, 'one event overlaps another'; and while there are moments of

'truthing' at which things appear briefly clear, we stay largely within the realm of free variation.

Dr. Cleo Hanaway-Oakley (Oxford), founder of the Oxford Phenomenology Network, delivered the conference's second paper, entitled 'Horizoning by non-invasive extraction.' She drew her title from Larkin's *Stone Forest*, a long poem set in the fossil forest above Lulworth Cove in Dorset, where stone 'sockets' remain as evidence of ancient, long-since vanished trees. Hanaway-Oakley began by drawing a distinction between a 'phenomenological reading' on one hand, and 'reading phenomenologically' on the other. The latter, she suggested, would involve a readiness to 'meet literary texts in the open, inquisitive spirit' of phenomenology, and was hinted at in certain aspects of Dr. Wells' paper. The former, on the other hand, might be a kind of 'reading for phenomenology,' looking for parallels with phenomenological ideas within particular texts. Pursuing primarily a phenomenological reading, she emphasised the 'sockets' of *Stone Forest* as navigating and complicating the boundaries of being and nothingness (echoing Sartre's famous work), and visibility and invisibility. There are questions, Hanaway-Oakley suggested, about the present-moment nature of these sockets, of the apparently absent trees that created them, and of the relationship between the two. Are the trees still present? Are they active subjects? And, if anything resembling a Husserlian reduction is going on, what is performing it: the trees, or the reader? Here, she suggested that the idea of gestalt psychology (especially as it shows up in the work of Merleau-Ponty, emphasising the active role of the subject in the act of perception) might be of use in our reading. Larkin's 'sockets' prompt and demonstrate active perception much in the same way as do gestalt images like duck-rabbit illusions. Hanaway-Oakley concluded her paper by questioning whether her phenomenological reading may have prevented reading phenomenologically: whether the very nature of phenomenological reading might conflict with the open spirit, and the appeal to direct conscious experience, of reading phenomenologically. She noted that her reading had focused on the reader and the poem, but not on the author. Invoking the work of Georges Poulet, she expressed an interest in a phenomenological reading aiming at the conscious experience of the author, and finally returned to the gestalt image, speculating that the consciousness of the reader and

the consciousness of the author might be in a constant dynamic relation through the process of reading.

The third and final paper of the day's first panel was by Dr. Anne Elvey (Monash), and entitled 'Trees deep incarnation: the scarcity gift of Peter Larkin's "praying // \\ firs."' Dr. Elvey herself did not attend the symposium, choosing to absent herself from proceedings in order to avoid the environmental impact of the long journey from Melbourne to Warwick, and the paper was delivered on her behalf by Professor Kate Rigby (Bath Spa). Elvey argued that Larkin's work expressed a kind of animism, most significantly expressed within the recurrent image of praying trees. She located this image as operating alongside a tradition of nature read alongside scripture to reveal the divine. From here, she developed questions about perspectivity and subjectivity raised in Dr. Hanaway-Oakley's paper, suggesting that in Larkin's work it is never quite clear 'who it is that is praying' – reader, tree, or both. In turn, she developed a picture of Larkin's poetry as involving the ecotheological idea of Deep Incarnation, wherein divinity is abundant, enmeshed in human kind and enmattered in all creation. She quoted Niels Gregersen, who created the term, as claiming that it describes a divinity 'at once vibrant and vital and vulnerable to decrease and decay.' Ideas of 'scarcity' and 'gift' saturate Larkin's work, she pointed out, picking out terms that would remain central for the remainder of the day. Understood within the context of Deep Incarnation, she pointed out, Larkin's poems provide a way to unify divinity and ecological trauma; yet, she argued, in their performance they find a way to transform this scarcity, experienced as an absence, into a gift, experienced as a presence. In this way, they betoken an ethics of attentiveness, and point towards a human response to human-induced ecological trauma.

In the discussion that followed this first panel, conference delegates (including Larkin himself) drew out further aspects to the experience of reading Larkin's poetry, and the ways in which phenomenology may echo, or incorporate itself into, this experience. Dr. Rigby noted that the 'shimmering' effect of Larkin's poetry can be unnerving, usually leaving us without something specific to 'grab onto', to 'see.' Larkin responded to this observation by noting that he was 'suspicious of lucidity'

as a value in itself: that he aims at language which is not descriptive, but rather 'speculative-contemplative,' speculating rather than fixing relations, always working towards the reflective horizon of free variation. In turn, this led to a conversation about the best way to go about reading Larkin's poetry, with Larkin (who had read with his work projected behind him) emphasising the visual alongside the sonic element. Professor Mason highlighted that in her experience of teaching Larkin's poetry, students ended up working together to 'unpick' his works rather than (as can often be the case) talking past each other; and, building on this, Dr. Hanaway-Oakley suggested that to advance in reading Larkin's often quite difficult work, we may have to pursue a reading that is both communal and cosmopolitan.

Professor John Milbank (Nottingham), co-founder of the Radical Orthodoxy movement, concluded the morning session with the day's first keynote. Professor Mason introduced Milbank as an 'Anglican theologian, philosopher, political theorist, and poet' whose work has had an important influence on Larkin, and who is interested in 'rethinking what he would perceive as the violence of modern secularism.' Milbank began his keynote by exploring a potential tension between different elements at play in Larkin's work and in the symposium. Phenomenology, he noted, takes human observation as its centre; while ecology (and especially its sub-strand of Deep Ecology) often centres around a radical resistance to anthropocentrism. Milbank argued that the only way to resolve this tension within Larkin's work is by reference to Larkin as a distinctively Catholic poet. Larkin, he claimed, is a poet who 'appears to write more and more about less and less': in particular, about trees, about their nature, and about the activity in which they are engaged. He emphasised Larkin's treatment of the living growth of trees (which growth, as Wells had earlier noted, occurs on an essentially inhuman scale) as a sort of reaching, or 'abandonment of root origins,' towards the 'celestial.' By way of Gilles Deleuze, Tristan Garcia, and Alain Badiou, he argued that there is a complex dialectic between scarcity and plenitude in Larkin's work: 'Plenitude... threatens to swallow particularity.' It is against this backdrop that Milbank sketched his view of Larkin as enacting a poetic project ultimately less 'vague' than any project of philosophy, phenomenology included: by

stripping a particular object (a tree) to its irreducible essence – by 'subtracting it in its scarcity' from a plentitude of givens – Larkin 'adds to reality.' Where phenomenology, at least in Husserlian form, rests on the accessibility of essence to rational inquiry, Larkin's work requires a creative act to 'complete nature's stuttering attempt at signification.' This project he linked to a realist ontology 'beyond postmodernism,' in which the tree is received as no longer a 'mere given' but rather an 'inexplicable gift'; and to a redemptive theology in which all things participate in an infinite divine. In this theology, poetic creation, subtracting essence from a flattened 'plentitude of givens,' bridges a gap between the human and the infinite plentitude of God. 'Only about less and less,' said Milbank, 'is there more to be said.'

A question and answer session following this first keynote further developed, in more general terms, the relationship between ecology, phenomenology, and theology in Larkin's work. Milbank suggested that Larkin's work holds two things in tension: on one hand a keen interest and investment in nature as it exists in itself; and on the other a theological picture of nature that features humans as central. Where Larkin's work parallels phenomenology, he claimed, it does so in terms of a radical rejection of certain ordinary metaphysical commitments, a skepticism towards phenomena's susceptibility to certain kinds of theoretical law, and a concomitant exploratory spirit; but where it conflicts with phenomenology, it does so because Larkin is essentially interested not just in the appearances of trees but in their natures as they exist radically beyond these appearances. Hermeneutics, Milbank had earlier suggested, is ultimately dominant over phenomenology in Larkin's work.

The afternoon session began with the day's second keynote 'Inflection Points: the New Enclosures,' delivered by Dr. Nick Lawrence (Warwick). Lawrence's keynote (which, he noted, he delivered from a 'slight tangent,' emphasising an Adorno-influenced eco-Marxist approach over a phenomenological one) focused primarily on *Enclosures*. *Enclosures* is a work in which Larkin established his 'open-ended prose block form', and one which Lawrence approached as a work of greater 'specificity' than much of Larkin's work in its close and concrete relation to the plantations of the New Forest. Indeed, Lawrence noted, address to a 'you' indexed by eroticism plays a central role in the work. This address, he argues, builds on a Romantic tradition in

which a retrospective of a journey is prompted by an absent companion, and serves as a very personal element in the work of a poet often received as intensely distanced (a theme which would be further explored in the following three papers). Lawrence began his argument with Raymond Williams' analysis of enclosure, which he read as presaging Marc Augé's concept of a 'non place' in which 'the truth of experience no longer coincides with the place in which it takes place'. He develops this line of thought by reference to Clare, whose work as read by Williams is 'testimony to the survival of human feeling in a factual dispossession' – and, Lawrence added, 'factual displacement.' It is fruitful, Lawrence argued, to develop Williams' line of thought in light of the more recent designation of the anthropocene, in which (in Lawrence's view) 'the thematic of modernity appears in a new guise.' He framed enclosure as an 'ongoing and contested practice' (emphasising 'contested'), in which enclosures such as those of plantations of the New Forest serve as 'sacrifice zones' for the expansion of capitalism, and 'ecotones' in which 'human and extra-human ecologies' exist in tension with one another. Larkin's work, argued Lawrence, provides a vital resource in contesting this practice. If an enclosure is an anti-utopian non-place, Lawrence found in Larkin's treatment of these non-places an emergent note of utopianism, quoting Paul Éluard: 'There is another world and it is in this one.' In this way, he suggested, Larkin's 'conservative radicalism' (the poet's own term) might play an important role in responding to enclosure. Lawrence picked up especially on Larkin's phrase, from *City Trappings*, 'counter-diminished': 'Larkin's work is not only testament to what to make of a diminished thing, but a re-innovated Green language, offering cognitive and affective maps of resistance.'

In the discussion following Dr. Lawrence's keynote, delegates noted that the ever just-lost golden age explored in Williams' work seems conspicuously absent from Larkin's poetry. Larkin replied that this was very much in-keeping with his intention, disclaiming interest in the idea of a primordial landscape now lost or ruined, and declared his concern for poetry as what David Jones called 'the work of the now.'

In her paper 'Unbrokenly tenuous, or tenacious,' Dr. Harriet Tarlo (Sheffield Hallam) explored Larkin's work through close reading, and developed an emerging theme by approaching Larkin as a poet responding radically to (quoting Jonathan Skinner) the

'(il-)logic of capitalism.' Her focus was on what she called 'fragments' (a term encompassing both prose poems and introductory notes) from *Terrain Seed Scarcity* and *Scare Norm Scarcer Mean*. In her reading of a fragment from the former, she argued that the close sonic parallel between 'tenacious' and 'tenuous' make an indelible connection between the two in our experience of Larkin's work. This (despite and above the 'or' that joins them) suggests that the two may not be so mutually exclusive as they appear. Tarlo saw in Larkin's work certain shared features with Whitman's: while Larkin is a much more self-effacing poet, she argued, 'at every horizon' in his poetry we may find a trace of Whitman's 'Do I contradict myself? Very well, I contradict myself.' She drew attention to the way in which Larkin's work mingles intensely personal and affective diction on one hand with legalese and environmental officialese on the other, and the way in which his wordplay and double-meanings ('good' to market 'goods', mathematical 'mean' to 'meaning') expose hypocrisies and unveil concealed values. This she read as an 'answer' to capitalist logics, nurturing idealism and hope amongst (as Larkin might term it) the conditions of scarcity: a hope, predicated on what Tarlo reads in Larkin as nostalgia for the commons, that a 'fantasy of sharing' may become a present reality. Indeed, she perhaps drew out another note of hope in Larkin's work in arguing that Larkin is a poet who recognises 'the sameness of the human and more than human work is exciting more than its difference.' Bringing out a further aspect to 'horizon' to the technical phenomenological one explored in the morning session, and therein perhaps another of Larkin's double meanings, Tarlo explored Larkin's imagining of roots as stretching beyond the horizon of earth. This horizon, said Tarlo, along with that of the sky, may provide depth and containment to our perception, but is not truly an 'end-point.' Larkin's 'oddly lyrical pressured language' allows us to follow the root beyond this horizon, extending our experience beyond the bounds of our ordinary visual perception.

Ian Heames (Face Press Books) approached his paper on Larkin via his work on the American poet Stephen Rodefer. The work of both poets, he argued, is receptive to the view that poetry can 'report on how things are,' while at the same time 'setting limits' and 'inventing worlds,' putting itself in a dialectic with a 'larger world-order.' His work on

Rodefer, he said, led him to consider poetry as 'only quasi-autonomous,' inseparable from the poet who wrote it. Where Rodefer's correspondence grounded a 'sense' of his poetry, no direct analogue exists for such a grounding of Larkin. Insofar as we have a sense of Larkin, Heames argued, it is because he is present through his diction of 'engrossed self-effacement' and 'consistently even temper.' Indeed, Heames said, Larkin's tone sometimes might be characterised as 'apathetic,' calling towards Wittgenstein's remark that 'the truth has no tone.' Larkin's work, Heames concluded, is social, but 'obliquely' so, existing on its own terms, and not centrally turned towards the reader.

Dr. Jonathan Skinner's (Warwick) paper (the last of the day) focused largely on Larkin's work since *Imparkments*, on which the two had collaborated. In his paper, entitled 'Plantations, Imparkments, Traps: Larkin's Nearby Walks,' Skinner approached Larkin's work as both a practicing poet and an ecocritic, and with special consideration of what Larkin called in an early issue of *Ecopoetics* (edited by Skinner) 'the phenomenology of landscape – or, even looser, landscape allegory.' He drew attention to the more specific, localised elements of Larkin's work, especially those grounded in walks around particular places and spaces, focusing on Larkin's topographical note to *Coronation Spinney*, which declares that the work is based on walks among the titular sixteen-acre wood, but also on walks in the outlying woods of Berkswell Hall. These more particularly localised elements of Larkin's work, argued Skinner, are 'persistently haunted into more specific reference.' He admired the role of 'ground-truthing walks' in Larkin's loco-descriptive work as 'ecopoetics as practice,' and framed Larkin's willingness to make his writing part of the diction of his scenes, rather than 'politely kept from the frame,' as a bold poetic choice commensurate with Larkin's own priorities in ecopoetics. Skinner traced Larkin's term 'scarcity' through John Brinckerhoff Jackson's etymology of 'landscape' as emerging from 'land' as a measure of a field or ground, and 'sheaf' as a collection of similar things. In this way, he arrived at a sense of 'landscape' importantly different from landscapes in the aestheticised sense of being simply a view contained within a visual field, and presented a new interpretation of a foundational aspect of Larkin's poetics.

To bring the symposium to a close, Larkin read from some of his most recent, yet-unpublished work. Throughout his readings, Larkin referred to the academic work in response to which much of his poetry had been composed; and not a panel or keynote had passed without reference to conversations, walks, and academic discussions that any number of delegates had shared with Larkin. One would have been hard-pressed to leave the symposium with the impression that the day had involved a divide between poetic theory and praxis. Indeed, the day provided a vivid impression of a long and productive dialogue between Larkin and those who had assembled to discuss his work. In an earlier panel discussion, Larkin had said that he had begun his poetry with no specific landscape in mind; until, in 'damaged Sweet Chestnut trees,' – 'There it was! I found one!' Having started with abstractions, 'Once I got trees into it, things began to happen.' It was in this sort of exploratory spirit that the day had seemed to proceed. 'Now that everything that can be known about my work has come into the world,' Larkin quipped, 'there's no need for me to write any more poems!' But perhaps one of the great successes of the symposium lies in the impetus and the resources it has provided for future work: academic, poetic, and in the fertile interaction between the two.

Competing Interests

The author of this conference report was at the time of writing a student of Professor Emma Mason, who organised the symposium.

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