



Open Library of Humanities



---

## Article

**How to Cite:** Milbank, J. 2020. 'The Beckoning Obstruction': On the Theme of Scarcity in the Poetry of Peter Larkin. *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, 12(1): 34, pp. 1–20. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/bip.1923>

**Published:** 04 November 2020

---

## Copyright:

© 2020 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

## Open Access:

*Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry* is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

## Digital Preservation:

The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

---

**The Open Library of Humanities is an open access non-profit publisher of scholarly articles and monographs.**

## ARTICLE

# 'The Beckoning Obstruction': On the Theme of Scarcity in the Poetry of Peter Larkin

John Milbank

University of Nottingham, UK

[john.milbank@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:john.milbank@nottingham.ac.uk)

---

Although he writes almost exclusively about trees and one of his main themes is scarcity, Peter Larkin should not be considered only an ecological nature poet. A close examination of his verse reveals him to be also a complex metaphysician whose work is infused with subtly allegorical elements which undercut any apparent ignoring or side-lining of the human. One can approach it in terms of a revealing tension between form and content, between the astonishing plenitude of what he has to say about a remorselessly single subject-matter – trees – and his consistent invocation of their magnificent fragility. Thereby he implies a paradoxical coincidence of the fullness of Creation and creativity with the undertaken risk of weakness and rarity. Equivalently and inversely, the ascent of trees towards transcendence has to go by way of a horizontal deviation. From the resulting diagonal an intricate and enigmatic beauty results, which invites a covertly theological rendering.

---

**Keywords:** Peter Larkin; tree; scarcity; allegory; vertical; diagonal

---

Peter Larkin appears to write more and more about less and less. In this respect his poetic strategy is unique. The opposite to that of, say, Paul Celan, who wrote with supreme brevity about the overwhelming and the ineffable. Instead, Larkin writes always about specific woods, plantations and forests, and only about trees amongst the multiple flora within these woodlands, not to mention the ignored fauna. As to trees he writes only about particular trees or clumps of trees – almost never about named species.

What is more, he only ever writes precisely the same thing about trees, about their nature or what it is that they are doing. He has in a sense but one subject and

one thing to say – trees abandon the horizontal ground and rise to the vertical by virtue of their refinement or scarcity: the 'rarity of summons'.<sup>1</sup> What causes them to rise, also causes them to end or halt before a barrier: a wall or the sky. But in such ending, trees begin to call to each other – having deserted the horizontal of mere flux, they reveal a new, higher, horizontal of shade or shelter that lurks between their branches and between themselves: 'From this lessening wells the possibility of a niche of dedication'<sup>2</sup> and a 'fallout of symbolic litter'.<sup>3</sup>

In these very interstices is somehow pre-born the subjective cry – of meaning or signification or prayer: 'I saw knots beat in the skimping-bout of trees at greeting',<sup>4</sup> as Larkin puts it in a rare Vaughan-like moment of specifically visionary intrusion. From the growth of trees from their hidden roots, a growth that is also an abandonment of origins in favour of celestial reception, is derived also the roots of words and of poetry itself. It is always in Larkin's (usually) prose-verse the trees themselves who virtually speak, rendering his poetry in one sense uncannily inhuman and radically ecological. And yet any posthuman immanentism is still more radically countered by the overwhelming thematic of unaccountable verticality: the betraying of ground by a searching for height, even if this quest is doomed to a sacrificial termination that renders every tree indeed a cross, but also allows the tree fully to turn into a signifier of transcendence. Through its ultimate foreshortening which allows it to be at all, the tree aspires beyond any height it might physically reach: 'abbreviant prayerful projection' as Larkin puts it in 'In Arbour to Abbreviation', which is 'abbreviant not/abstemious'. And again, 'no natural strategy for trees|apart from this|portion elation'.<sup>5</sup>

As the natal cradle of meaning the woodlands always also suffer to relate; they win their proto-linguistic interceding just by virtue of their apparent organic stultification. In their very inability to reach each other, the branches begin to communicate: 'Tall with stases in a silo of crosses, sown by no one ensign that clips that cradle except where one thinness beckons another'.<sup>6</sup> Thus in their ascetic abandonment of the inclusivity of terrestrial surface, trees lose the world to gain by grace the greater dilation of their own souls: 'Reducing plenitude to a scarcity of receipt reveals again a fullness at the given but shares entering the poverty of the given-to'.<sup>7</sup> As such

allegorical anticipations of faith trees already in some sense exercise it, such that they are (with all things) the natural preconditions of conscious faithful assent: 'Faith is the spontaneous scarcity of the finite to itself, in that scarcity beckons a counter-absence always in a state of non-plenitude, what calls out the beforeness (horizon) of the prevention'.<sup>8</sup> (One can take this last word in the triple senses of limiting, sheltering and prevenience.) Therefore the tall firs both do not as yet pray and yet already do so: 'among the unpleading branches|I hear refrains of my soliloquy|spare density of among'.<sup>9</sup>

Nothing else than this is ever said by Larkin, and if one fails to read here a distinctly (and yet wholly ecumenical) Catholic metaphysic that nevertheless cannot be prised apart from its poetic allegory of landscape, then one is surely not reading him at all. Hopkin's *haecceitas* has been reconstrued by him in an era of ecological crisis as not just unique rarity but also scarcity, the irreplaceable. As the real which is finally manifest as vitality, and yet as life that escapes its differential continuity in order to express itself in endless entropic microcosms, the tree is most paradigmatically 'the thing' as such: trees 'put rows in the no'.<sup>10</sup> Every tree is allegorically and yet really and fractally the world-tree, a microcosm or 'short-code space'<sup>11</sup> but the world itself exists as these endlessly precarious and threatened minutiae. These are only present at all in their eventual suffering at their crest-tops of the loss of their own essential life for the sake of a proclamation that they themselves are unable to make, like insensate Baldurs, victims of a branch blindly thrown. Only human beings are able to complete their growth beyond growth into utterance – a circumstance that Larkin endlessly conveys by perfectly pitching his representations of trees between precise phenomenological description and a surplus of associative suggestion that the very completeness of description seems to require, as, for example in 'The never quite tinted attention of a tree', or 'Reeling exile around its few poles of home'.<sup>12</sup>

Yet in saying with near-monotony only ever one thing about one and the same cynosure of his uniquely inhabited world, Larkin utterly and ironically (it might seem), deserts the poetics of sparsity for one of unashamed plenitude. In this respect his virtuosity is quite simply unparalleled, in some ways beyond anything so far known to the poetic record. For he is able to say this same thing in seemingly infinite

different new ways, on page after page of dazzling variation. Thereby his poetry itself constitutes a thicket: stunningly beautiful phrases are not allowed to stand out, or be given any space to breathe – instead, with seeming poetic perversity, Larkin buries his own nuggets of talent like tangled shapes or blooms in a complex and even untidy ditch. Often, accordingly, one has to dig them out in order to let them shine.

This circumstance would almost seem performatively to contradict his constantly and unequivocally announced ontology. But in reality it does not, but rather witnesses to a deeper dialectic. Plenitude, Larkin is indicating, might seem to abide in the vital slither along the ground, as for Gilles Deleuze. But in reality, this always threatens to swallow particularity in what Tristan Garcia, in his *Form and Object*, deems 'the compact', the mere flat 'givenness' of univocal indifference where nothing asserts itself above anything else and so all is really the expression of the same, and variation is irrelevant.<sup>13</sup> Instead of this postmodern immanentist self-folding and unfolding, for Larkin there is always a 'tear' in the 'Moebius strip' – always (as for Garcia, in another way) a hidden real third thing or 'between', mediating between flux and difference, in any boundary that defines all given realities.<sup>14</sup> (William Desmond's work is here epigraphically cited.) They are only there at all by virtue of this gulf that establishes them and yet secretly escapes them and 'arises' beyond them, since as arriving event any thing is (as Garcia also affirms, along with Andrea Bellantone in a different philosophical mode)<sup>15</sup> in excess of any occasioning causation. Thus the forest-floor is inversely constituted by roots which escape to the height of trees – its firm foundation dissolves into a suspension from their very tops and its mere inert 'givenness' gives way to that inexplicable gift of which every tree proves to be truly the shaft or 'brunt' and channel: a secretion of hidden, intoxicating delight.

Thus frequently and perhaps deliberately, Larkin seems to echo the set-theoretical terminology deployed by both Garcia and his teacher Alain Badiou: trees in their scarcity are 'subtracted' from the given quasi-plenitude; their definition, as with any particular thing whatsoever, even 'the universe' which is itself but one singular thing, is only possible by virtue of a refusal of 'everything else'. Equally, as also for Garcia, such removal is never mere diminishment, as in the case of an instance of a genus. Rather, there is a certain ontological and trans-generic equality of all things

beyond any instance of inclusion or exclusion. Thus, as with Badiou, a thing-event arises from the 'diagonalising out' of an item within a set from the very totality of the set itself which is thereby derided: 'a greeter is more than|the whole, we smart|in the common all'.<sup>16</sup>

This interest in the diagonal gets intensified in a more recent sequence, 'Slant Gift, Given Slender Rift', which celebrates the slant both as nature's shoots and branches but also as the very essence of everything which has escaped the otherwise null non-characterisability of the pure vertical or the pure horizontal, or even the blank node of their mere meeting. The slender shoot is seen here as one significant step away from an otherwise constitutive hollowness of everything, as appears to us upon analysis. These slanting lines are nature's self-signings, her indication that she is an assemblage of gifts, coincident with multiply diverse yet faint expressions of gratitude.

And unlike Garcia or Graham Harman<sup>17</sup> (and in what amounts in effect to a Catholic challenge to his finally nihilistic metaphysics) Larkin does not see the irreducible 'thing' as wrenched away from the relationality and endless sub and super-inclusion of always indefinite given 'objects' (on the floor of the forest, as it were), but rather as now entering into a more *genuine* relationality of proto-signifying echo that escapes compositional immersion into the totalising flux: 'Where a given unwraps beyond relation, gift redeals its care in what is full immersion slightened to commending on behalf of, with exposure admonished (accomplished) in the frank shade resparsed by what is shed'.<sup>18</sup> This is because, for Larkin, the tree or thing is not affirmed, as for Garcia and Harman, in its particularity by a 'world' which is a transcendental nullity that levels every branch with every containing tree and every abstraction or every fantasy with every material reality – in what is but a new version, after all, of postmodern indifference. Instead, for Larkin, if the branch is equal to the tree, or a parasite to a host, or an aberrant growth from a root-stump to a fully-fledged plant,<sup>19</sup> or a mere bract to an entire flower or an entire forest (which he once compares itself to an instance of 'bract')<sup>20</sup> then this is because every reduction is a new making precise that permits both a new specificity of micro-growth and above all a new efflorescence of sense, whose specificity is the very precondition of verbal

prolixity, just as the seed is the precondition of growth. Thus Larkin reveals that *only* about less and less is there always more and more to be said, even if it requires his unique creative gifts – perhaps unprecedented in their type – in order to be able to demonstrate this by enacting it.

Or, to put all this another way, along lines which Larkin indicates,<sup>21</sup> one can only pay tribute to the rarity and uniqueness of the scarce by not appropriating it in a fraudulent poetic equivalence of pseudo-poverty, but rather by asymptotically approaching it, with genuine humility, from ever-new angles. This same poetic operation involves also not falsely trying perfectly to ape its concretion, but rather witnessing to this concretion by showing how it consists in an endlessly complex intersective fusion of multiple abstractions. Larkin's adamant refusal of any nominalism at this point again could be taken as echoing that of Garcia: abstractions are also 'things', irreducible ingredients of the real and not just human imaginings or projections. His ability to turn the abstract into the metaphorical, and yet to continue to enunciate a philosophy – to the point where his discourse is sometimes undecidably at once poetry and rigorous metaphysic – constantly demonstrates that this is the case.

Indeed in 'Slant Gift, Given Slender Rift' this ontology is taken further: it would seem that as for Buddhist philosophy, or the Romantic *naturphilosoph* Lorenz Oken,<sup>22</sup> or again in the manner of the infinitesimal 'hollowing out' of fractal geometry, everything is really composed of abstractions which are ultimately nothing: pure rifts if vertical and horizontal lines or else their intersecting dots which all merely fill their own vacuum: a 'slim dark coding'<sup>23</sup> offering 'no *nodal* thrift'.<sup>24</sup> But again, it is the diagonal swerve away from this which matters for Larkin: all is not really nothing, but rather positively created *ex nihilo* and the sign of the latter is always the remarkable 'slight' and 'frail' excess of the concrete over the abstractions of which it appears to be made up: 'catalyst sources are such|slender lines within prescription, a gift to the brief of this wood'.<sup>25</sup> These 'slender lines' are the singular arabesque details whose apparent beauty exceeds their physical constitution and whose entrance upon meaning, upon a kind of natural language, is therefore coincident with their very excess over nothing, their constant hovering at the edge of an abyss without quite tilting over.

This ontology of nature as Creation is further expounded in 'In Arbour to Abbreviation', where Larkin constantly compares the 'abbreviated' character of all living things to the 'concentrating' character of poetry, which, unlike the prolixity of prose is always searching to reduce to the densely essential, and in that sense is a kind of strangely concrete exercise in abstraction – perhaps more genuinely abstractive than the vaguer abstraction performed by philosophy. Everything in nature lives by such a reductive, hieroglyphic 'writing', while conversely poetry 'lives' insofar as it both echoes and completes this reduction. In either case it is by stripping back to an essence that one leaves as a residue what cannot be further reduced and so can be truly 'added' to the stock of reality; is truly therefore in its very leanness and scarcity full of unique potential like a seed and so able to grow indefinitely. And not just to grow: also by virtue of self-restriction to leave space for linkage with other things and eventually all other things, just as only the abstract universals of words allow thought to link everything together: 'brevity combining|repose, recourse|concise specifics,|only diagrammatic|at eventual|improvisatory calm'.<sup>26</sup> The seed grows indefinitely but still discretely and so eventually 'the shooting mass|abbreviates to|an accord of provision',<sup>27</sup> as the narrow trunk puts out branches to the branches of other trees and all of them eventually form together a canopy, an arbour, a world – indeed the world as such.

Yet this is not the reduction performed by phenomenology, though it surely has learnt from that. For one thing it is fully realist, and is also about reality reducing itself and pre-human things within the real reducing other things in a proto-subjective fashion.<sup>28</sup> For another, essences do not in Larkin's poetry ineluctably appear to an objectively-repeatable rational analysis; they must rather be judged and creatively completed by the act of human interpretation which provisionally 'finishes' nature's own stuttering attempts at signification – even though human existence can only develop itself through attention to these efforts, as the French Spiritualist philosopher Louis Lavelle insisted.

Thus the plenitude and abundant rich tangle of Larkin's writing, which the reader must constantly hack her way through, with often a sense of uncomfortable resistance and lack of any ordinary musical ease – even though it is this very halting which



also propels a more complex sort of chanting – is a necessary meta-sign of obeisance before the scarce and not at all its performative undoing. But at the same time, it is also a true witness to the performance in nature of genuinely joyful abundance and fruitfulness in ever-recurrent due season *only* by the scarce, the trans-generically unique instance of being that outdoes in difference any merely generic or specific variety. That which is 'sparse enough for generosity'<sup>29</sup> with its 'skimp|to the heart of enorm-|ous least affordance',<sup>30</sup> or that 'meagre' which 'zooms from unceasing least' which is 'more than choice given|an ill chooser' (the mere will as such, which as such must always be fallen and mistaken?).<sup>31</sup> It is a bit like the role of the 'last difference' in Aristotelian philosophy which alone defines a species – and it is the species and the specific which can alone protect itself and survive. Throughout Larkin's vision there is a kind of unmistakable dialectical process as work between the general and empty and open with the concentrated and unique. The nullity of the former, a bit like Hegel's 'bad infinite', must be refused in favour of definition, yet eventually it is the very weaving together of differences which allows a more genuine reach towards a universal coverage – a reach which however remains for nature and for us always only an aspiration.

Here though one can distil from Larkin's poetry a kind of theology that is analogical besides being dialectical. All things indeed bear witness to and participate in the infinitely divine, to which he from time to time directly alludes. Yet participation in the real transcendent infinite is only by virtue of subtraction from the immanent indefinite:

where the tree itself pauses onset against any further vertical clawing  
but the respite was always ascending via scarcity to height

crystallize enter stark anticipation, sclero-downsize but severely  
does participate at the indented take on horizon<sup>32</sup>

For this reason the limited thing is not the simple opposite of the unlimited as the transcendent. Echoing again and again a theme that is also intermittently paramount in the writings of Catherine Pickstock,<sup>33</sup> Larkin suggests that it is only by withdrawal

from the extensive morass that anything is ever able genuinely to signify or to participate in the unlimited. The definite is not just a barrier to God's plenitudinous infinite – it is also most like God precisely through being that which it is most unlike him: 'scant is deviant|plenty'.<sup>34</sup> For its very limit testifies to the unlimit that it is not, just as only the treetops evidence the sky: things held within a clump are a 'pool' that is somehow further contained within the sky's 'bay' like water within water, for this other logic of the celestial sea.<sup>35</sup> In this sense Larkin is always toying with the specifically modern thematic of the sublime as an aestheticised transcendence, as with Kant. A halt at a circumscribing wall or a hilltop before the sky (or both at once, as in the highly summatory 'Wotton Clumps') is a witness to the gulf of the unknown: 'Slopes of wall in a ring [...] where each grain's pin falls into a stop of up'.<sup>36</sup> Thus the 'lift-off' or 'arrow-flight' of pointed fir-trees is spiritual and not physical:

the small contemplative  
 dart flies into anything  
 narrowed undynamically  
 growth from grace  
 to fletched grist<sup>37</sup>

But in contrast to (the early) Burke or Kant, there is for Larkin no inclusive boundary around all things, beyond which we cannot reach. On the contrary, the boundary that the trees touch (both horizontally and vertically) is the world-ocean in which the trees swim and whose lapping tides define them – a sublime margin that weaves in and out everywhere, thereby ensuring that the unknown and refused or subtracted-from precisely coincides with the defined and affirmed. Larkin explicitly espouses a poetics of the post-Cantorian transfinite, not of Kantian bounded limitation and unqualified unknowable absence: 'brevity excitement' is 'abbreviant towards|transfinite' which is contrapuntally (according to the poem's graphics) 'an arbour's chasing'.<sup>38</sup> Thus each thing is, with the uttermost exactitude, all that it is not, and if indeed we cannot fully know the latter, then just by that token we cannot know the entire bounds of the thing either, since it coincides with just the way that it is surrounded which is also its own unique vantage-point – even if the 'interior'

habitual and habit-induced stability of this position remains a mystery of relative 'substance' (which category Garcia refuses but Larkin would appear to allow in this qualified sense).

It is for this reason that, again, in contrast with Kant, Larkin is as much concerned with the specific gestures of the trees that reach beyond, most exemplified by the 'praying firs', as with the beyond itself, because this beyond is no mere void, but in some measure known as just that vastness which gives through definition this precise instance, just like any other: 'A wall on the far side of trees shuts nothing off, but is openness most carefully vulnerable in division: that there can approach a to-be shaded for persistent obstructions of the finite, with a strong tapering of branch, conceding dedication and horizon'.<sup>39</sup> The true far side of the true wall which the real wall but allegorically indicates, is surely then most intimate to the trees' separable beings, after all.

In this respect dialectical interruption remains overtaken by analogical paradox: something of the beyond 'comes through' in the trees' unique hieratic and theurgic stances such that, if the unlimited can here only be shown by the limited, it is limit rather than the fantasy of the vague or unbounded (a valid dimension to Hegel's refusal of 'the illusory infinite') that seriously most resembles the unknown. Thus the tree gestures in its height beyond itself to the sky, but it also *all the more gestures* by remaining in its gesturing shape and concealed 'bluntness' of trunk and stalk; 'from that difference which abrades us towards it, welling up from a weakness of God towards the world: but as the divine overwhelms again through the scarcity of call'.<sup>40</sup> Prayer reaches beyond, but the beyond is most and already shown in the shape of the beseecher herself:

These intimate perfusions of semi-chaos (precipitates of wall), or a remaining open to the exposure inherent in that exposure, so far as its horizon of active dedication is a further entering (registered as a sort of stasis) of the world's body as edge, suture, lip.<sup>41</sup>

God is also the kenotic act and not just the object of worship – ultimately this is why he is incarnate, which is only possible if he is transcendent and not immanently

abstracted beyond vertical specificity back into the horizontal flux. Indeed, he may well be himself 'the common scarce source', the hyper-particular, encountered only in our inversely finite emptiness 'at an unscoured between'<sup>42</sup> that nevertheless only specific branches open to view and to viewing-through.

In respect of this horizontal-vertical balance and oscillation, Larkin, as he sometimes lexically indicates, strikes out on his very own 'diagonal' course,<sup>43</sup> when he follows the 'scouring chances of creation' that 'bids the hearth go|prowl'.<sup>44</sup> His (usually) English walks are generally along and through, gazing upwards, but ultimately also on a slant, as when he ascends Wotton Hill, on the Cotswold way, overlooking the vale of Severn on the western escarpment, at the edge of the Westridge woods, between North Nibley (where stands the monument to the Reformer William Tyndale on the same ridge) and Wotton-Under-Edge, above which the ringed clump was erected on the hill to commemorate Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee.

And just how is this diagonal also ecological? As I have already indicated, he appears at first sight to be a thoroughly posthuman poet. The trees themselves speak, the words rise from the ground more than they proceed from our mouths: the clump of firs on Wotton Hill is already in itself 'an oval cell of summary',<sup>45</sup> of both self-inclusion and invocation. Yet the fact of a dated human walled-ringing of this clump (as recorded in a footnote by Larkin) should warn us here. As I have already tried to show, this radical refusal of all fallacious pathos of its very own logic tips over into a shockingly non-secular reverse: the world we can begin to speak about before humanity is never really a flat, re-rooting and given world, snaking along the unperilous bottom (like the deeply-incised valleys locally known as 'bottoms' near to the Wotton clump) but always a forested, gifted terrain and one always incipiently meaningful, spirited and human.

Beyond the postmodern, Larkin is a remorseless realist: thus his insistence on the mystery of the vertical is in part an advertance to the fact that there is no conventionally biological explanation for the 'inflection point' of a branch, whereby its tapering and depleting energy nevertheless expresses itself as a further diminished and yet newly upward growth.<sup>46</sup> Equally, his descriptions of the mutations from seed to shoot to bract to leaf to spathe to flower, would seem to be seriously meant in a

scientifically heretical Goethian sense. But in another fashion he is equally an idealist, in that mode which refuses to reduce the subjective to structure, sign or flow, but remains with a Wordsworthian integrity of human perception, since the plasticity of our imagination can coincide with and capture the plasticity of Nature – to use Wordsworth's Cambridge Platonic terminology in *The Prelude*, perhaps transmitted to him through Erasmus Darwin.<sup>47</sup>

Yet beyond also the alternatives of mere realism or mere idealism Larkin persists (like Badiou or Garcia) with an attempted holistic embrace of both the irreducibly real material thing and of the subjective mode of 'thinghood'. Our words, idioms and prayers are no fantasies, because they are the dreams of the trees themselves. One cannot speak of trees at all, in their given reality, without invoking that excess to which they aspire and equally give rise-to and sustain.

Thus surreptitiously Larkin lards his Gallic-leaning abstractions with endless concrete metaphors: often of the naval, the military, the political or the Teutonically archaic. Trees are located at 'high seats' where certain unnamed spectres meet in 'moots' (a gathering that is also conjecturally 'mooted') to offer 'very high advice'; they march in ranks; they offer 'flags', 'ensigns' and 'masts' for their own and our celestial navigation.<sup>48</sup> In both the later poems I have already alluded to, growths on land are frequently depicted as voyaging like ships, and every persistent thing which is always a slant is also compared to the slope of beach, gradually built up by the habitual action of waves.<sup>49</sup> Equally, there is considerable use of piscatorial metaphors, as when 'reeling' is both a drawing in and a processual tottering around a new pivot that such probing for celestial catch must risk;<sup>50</sup> of economic metaphors (clearly crucial to express 'scarcity'), such as where rooting links have been 'spent' in favour of celestial prompting,<sup>51</sup> abandoning 'Speculation starved of offer',<sup>52</sup> given the divine 'need to adapt as less than any overall economy of living on';<sup>53</sup> or when the gifts of slants are contrasted with the commodifying 'hoarding' by gulfs, and finally of wounding and suffering: 'Trees keenly to the smitten of themselves'.<sup>54</sup> Here the double sense of 'keen' implies a strange shedding of tears with enthusiasm.

Human beings are not, therefore, by Larkin displaced from the centre of nature; rather nature from its very deep roots displays this centrality: 'among the unpleading

branches|I hear refrains of my soliloquy|spare density of among'.<sup>55</sup> His 'argument' for this is a poetic one – the sheer wealth of clues as to this truth, which poetry alone can disinter and convert into descended evidence, including an abundant, cunning and sometimes obsessive use of ambivalence, assonance, internal rhyme and semantic echo which always appears in Larkin to spring, Cratylus-like, as much from the essential accidents of things as from the accidents of verbal formation, as in 'taut capsular shortage of lessons for sources, the lightness of blatant gift'.<sup>56</sup> Likewise, it is the plenitude of his expression of always one and the same metaphysical theme (the escape and priority of the scarce as the vertical, and the vertical as the scarce) which tends to favour its objective truth. Seriously to grasp this one has generally to read Larkin three times over – once to savour the unlikely but sure music of his complex rhythms, twice to struggle to grasp the sense, and a third time to make both run together in order to try to render the 'diagonal' poetic surplus of sense which all of Larkin's meanings really require for their full (non)completion.

In another respect also, Larkin's ecogism is 'scarcely' what one might expect. Of course he excoriates the extermination of all that is most rare. But always and even most pervasively he adds to this a dialectical twist. 'Making scarce' is not initially an instance of diabolical human agency; to the contrary, it is the device of life itself, its own sacrificial witness to its creativity and its very way of securing plenitude as not just real but meaningful, and of saving both specificity and relation from 'compact' absorption into a single flow that is always the same tedious trickle. Thus when nature suffers ecological predations, it is indeed reduced, but also further rarefied, rendered further ingenious and further able to re-express itself. Larkin celebrates the latter with respect to the way in which parks and other portions of nature intruding into cities tend to overtake them and manifest a new wildness lacking in the tamed countryside.<sup>57</sup>

For this reason, environmental reduction is not just damage but also 'portent'. It may be (though it remains unlikely, at least in the second respect) that human beings have the power to remove their own natural preconditions of survival, along with the biosphere itself. However, for Larkin's implicit ontology, to deprive the world of trees would be also to deprive reality of things as such (since trees are for him archetypal

things), whereas there would appear to remain 'deep down things' as Hopkins put it, a 'dearest freshness' which is simply reality itself. One can raze woods to the given, but then the given will vanish, whereas the suffering-solidarity of the woods may again reveal and re-give the gift beyond the given, arising from above beyond the flattening even of the given's mere level.

Therefore the convinced reader, including the present one, may agree with Larkin that it is 'impossible to stretch a *treeless* rarity, gently taut of the deprivation surpassing it'.<sup>58</sup> Instead, we may flee to the precarious, shelled shelter of the 'conviviality of trees in upright foam (rampart crosses field) of the normative horizon-storm, one site ample-mantle per stretch'.<sup>59</sup> Under this canopy, the book of nature has been rendered by Larkin again articulate, and its coding (as once intimated by the Celtic cultures) in the alphabet of the trees has become once more, through his writings, somewhat decipherable. With him and by virtue of the firs, we may enter indeed into 'a twilight wiry enough for gratitude'.<sup>60</sup>

In Larkin's more recent verse, a further intensification occurs. The prose lines get shortened to verse ones and scarcity is thereby all the more performed, along with a consequent efflorescence and linkage that results from such greater verbal seeding. Partly in consequence, thing and word appear still more to fuse: as when our 'grasp' of trees becomes fused with the trees' own 'grasping' hold on reality in 'Slant Gift. Given Slender Rift': our grasp may be the more explicit one and yet trees remain 'taller than our assimilation'. Or when the 'salience' of the slanting thing, the beach-head – with its also military echoes – becomes virtually one with the 'salience' that is the meaning of words themselves in the same poem. Or again when the 'brevity' of the wood now becomes also a 'brief' in the sense of an allotted assignment and preparation for a task of judicial pleading which is itself a gift: once more 'a gift to the brief of this wood'.<sup>61</sup>

Altogether, there is an increased invocation of what Wordsworth described in *The Prelude* as the 'collateral' – implying itself (collaterally) not just linkage but also parallel ancestry or derivation, besides a deposit of meaning laid down as a surety against the possible loss or vanishing of the main scarce sense. Verticals that are 'straitened' suggest that this ascetic fate is also the ground of their 'straightening'.

Their stiffness 'combs' their length, implying that it is after all a borrowed quality, for all its apparent adherence – a certain stroking from elsewhere that our contemplating gaze can now repeat. Even the grass attains its modest height with difficulty and its being 'not easily speared' suggest inevitably that it also cannot 'easily be spared' either by nature or by us. All these slender lines occur 'within prescription' – implying at once both a divine pre-establishment but also a divinely medical remedy. And every natural space and artificial enclosure 'brooks a proportion of origin', which is to say that it both channels and gives rise to meaning and 'allows' it – an opening to our perception of its own eternal derivation.<sup>62</sup>

Equally, the drama of nature is now intensified. At the beginning of the same poem is appended a quotation from Geoffrey Hill: 'God who holds our memories reft at pre-birth|I would trust, intended their restitution'.<sup>63</sup> What follows reads (as we have already begun to see), as consistently a commentary on these lines, in such a way that nature is here read always in terms of three distinct yet entirely coinciding registers: gift, lapse and provisional restitution.

Obviously this has huge ecological resonance: humans have always to a degree damaged as well as upheld nature, and we now see that we must continuously try to amend this damage. Yet Larkin sets this in a bigger metaphysical context which at once deepens our despair and increases our consolation: if we tend to damage nature, that is because we belong to it and all of nature is not just created but drastically reshaped by us. Within our *aeon* nature is received always as fallen: the gift arrives only as rhyming rift, only as damaged and hollowed-out. Diagonal escape from this settled haunting and settled wreckage is fragile, even though it is ironically this exit of shootings which gradually composts to form the real solid, fertile and knotted ground above the nullity that is the flat horizontal:

scarce provision ransacking  
 creation, one first meagre gift  
 so that insufficiency offers  
 a purely groundable

here<sup>64</sup>



However, what is most striking is that Larkin views redemption, very much in line with Vaughan, Traherne and Wordsworth, as but the always prevailing and overriding of divine Creation over fallen lapse: 'slippage the sooner pledged|to rift: that any gift|is no path accuser',<sup>65</sup> such that every 'circumstance' is 'no' such mere thing but 'sheer gift fallout, a|micro-slant from|vertical occurrence',<sup>66</sup> with the suggestion that even a nuclear-scale catastrophe could only be further occasion for a further benign inclination after all.

This is because Creation already involved a positive distance from God and a shrinking of his infinite abundance. But only through this distance and reduction can all creatures, both trees and humans, relate to God as distinct and so come to pray and make those offerings to God which compose their very existence. 'Everything alive' instead of being captured and absorbed by an immanent whole (which would always be of itself nullity) is instead 'slender enough|to source a glimpse of|more than everything'.<sup>67</sup> Therefore we must retain, like the chance shell 'found in the breach' an 'attachment to|a sporadic of tree', doubtlessly recalling in our fallen reception that a 'sporadic' is a mercifully local rather than 'epidemic' outbreak of a disease.<sup>68</sup> Later we read 'That gift is never rife:|flew into the jumps, few spans|ahead'.<sup>69</sup>

Thus perversely to turn away from the gift of Creation, to seek to hoard and accumulate – to 'counter-embed' a sacramental 'niche within'<sup>70</sup> in refusal of creaturely slightness and fragility – is paradoxically merely to increase our distance from God and so to increase our relatedness to him and our dependent giftedness. Even perverse and diseased distancing is automatically outrun by merciful cure: 'the simple antidote was in|letting gift compound itself'.<sup>71</sup>

In this way every rift is immediately bridged, every fault and refusal immediately manifests itself as also grace – just as Julian of Norwich suggested that all that God can see in the sinner is someone who has fallen down a hole and must be rescued. But in an extraordinary way Larkin regards this drama between God and creation as played out in every thicket, in a constant mending of every false commencement and thwarting of every natural shoot; in nature's constant compensating measures to correct this and ensure the 'fittest' channels for the operation of her vital and psychic spirits – as the Cambridge Platonist Henry More already suggested.<sup>72</sup> Of course in

fallen nature this involves conflict within nature, but Larkin's implicit way of handling that would seem to be that the more natural things are properly confined to their genuine selves and essences, then the more also they can expand to unite with other realities in an harmonious rather than competitive manner. The lines 'Rebordering from skeletal|temporal rift given to slight gate' appear to suggest how a human, gardening activity can further this process, turning limitation to an opening advantage of connection, however tenuously established or merely hinted. Meanwhile there is much that remains tragic, such that we still only have 'void|attaches to echoes of void' to 'pepper the hem with broad grief', and is an allegory of far greater human tragedy. Yet Larkin still offers an intimation of an ultimate eschatological remedy along the lines of 'sowing', even if it be as yet 'not quite wider [...] than compactions of relief'.<sup>73</sup> 'Slanted terrain is gift-|assimilable, a counter-slope|will drop on prophecy',<sup>74</sup> because this 'sowing', however thwarted, is already a collaterally implied 'sewing' or re-binding together of reality by strongly-delicate threads.

However, the eschaton, the final end of nature, would not for him betoken any having done with scarcity or with finitude. Rather, as for Charles Péguy, he would seem to suggest that what lacks to divine perfection is imperfection, which the Creation supplies. Only through imperfection is relation to the perfect absolute established, only because of scarcity and limitation is prayer at all possible. Nature and Creation are not even finally to be evaded: 'the gift *to* nature,|only then does nature|offer a rift to itself'.<sup>75</sup> Instead of ending with the 'counter-expectation' of abolishing surprise, 'Incompletable' life will 'finally' sustain its own non-identical repetition in a perfectly ultimate 'repletable' moment – 'what a slip of|finals always al-|ready began'.<sup>76</sup>

Thus even the 'prayerful' is destined to 'swarm' like a gust of bees back into the unreceded rift of bestowing that cleaves every tree as liturgical sacrifice.<sup>77</sup> Just as the gift that all things are inevitably returns precisely as gift in gratitude to the giver, so also this very gratitude rebounds, such that in offering to God, we are still offering our tributes (most pagan as most Catholic after all) to the trees themselves, since his own offering to Creation is perpetually renewed. This drama of gift-giving as asymmetrical exchange is also for Larkin what sustains all horizontal created connections since 'exempt|gift isn't an outcast of any return reach'.<sup>78</sup> Exempt from obligation to

or expectation of return, reciprocity remains all the same its homeland of relational purpose. Finality for Larkin, as for Thomas Traherne, can only be the ultimate, spiritually sung return of this original created communion of all scarce and rare things with God and all these things with each other.

So surely these words of the contemporary French philosopher who has influenced him, Jean-Louis Chrétien, are supremely true of Peter Larkin and his 'small chantable donation':<sup>79</sup> 'Only the fragile barque of the human voice can cast its anchor into heaven'.<sup>80</sup> The double sense of 'bark' allows us to add, with the help of *les arbres, naturellement*.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> 'Sights Agreeing Trees: 5. Wotton Hill Clump' in *Lessways Least Scarce Among* (Bristol: Shearsman, 2012), p. 32.
- <sup>2</sup> 'At Wall with the Approach of Trees, 3, (*Inflections*) I' in *Lessways Least Scarce Among*, p. 58.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 62.
- <sup>4</sup> 'Wotton Hill Clump', p. 32.
- <sup>5</sup> 'In Arbour to Abbreviation' in *Ingression Latewood (Shelter Partials)* (Bristol: Shearsman, 2017), pp. 110, 101, 102.
- <sup>6</sup> 'Wotton Hill Clump', p. 35.
- <sup>7</sup> 'At Wall with the Approach of Trees, 3, (*Inflections*), III', p. 63.
- <sup>8</sup> 'At Wall with the Approach of Trees, 3, (*Inflections*), IV', p. 64. On the question of poetic addition to a nature already poetic, see Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words* (London: Bloomsbury: 2014).
- <sup>9</sup> 'praying // firs \\ attenuate I' in *Give Forest its Next Portent* (Bristol: Shearsman, 2014), p. 165.
- <sup>10</sup> 'Wotton Hill Clump', p. 36.
- <sup>11</sup> 'In Arbour to Abbreviation', p. 9.
- <sup>12</sup> 'Wotton Hill Clump', p. 33.
- <sup>13</sup> Tristan Garcia, *Form and Object: A Treatise on Things*, trans. Mark Allen Ohm and Jon Cogburn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2014).
- <sup>14</sup> 'At Wall with the Approach of Trees, 3, (*Inflections*), IV', p. 64.
- <sup>15</sup> Andrea Bellantone, *La métaphysique possible: Philosophies de l'esprit et modernité* (Paris: Hermann, 2012).
- <sup>16</sup> 'praying // firs \\ attenuate I', p. 166.
- <sup>17</sup> Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (London: Zero Books, 2011).
- <sup>18</sup> 'exposure (A Tree) presents, II' in *Give Forest its Next Portent*, p. 52.
- <sup>19</sup> 'exposure (A Tree) presents', pp. 35–57.
- <sup>20</sup> 'praying // firs \\ attenuate VI', p. 190.
- <sup>21</sup> See the 'Preface' to *Lessways Least Scarce Among*, p. 8.
- <sup>22</sup> Lorenz Oken, *Elements of Physiophilosophy* (London: Ray Society, 1847), pp. 5–27.
- <sup>23</sup> 'Slant Gift, Given Slender Rift' in *Ingression Latewood (Shelter Partials)*, p. 65.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.
- <sup>26</sup> 'In Arbour to Abbreviation', p. 102.

- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.
- <sup>28</sup> One could compare Graham Harman here, though Larkin refuses both his 'monadology without windows' and his occasionalism.
- <sup>29</sup> 'Sparse Reach Stretches the Field II' in *Give Forest its Next Portent*, p. 70.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.
- <sup>31</sup> 'Slant Gift, Given Slender Rift', p. 76.
- <sup>32</sup> 'exposure (A Tree) presents I' in *Give Forest its Next Portent*, p. 45.
- <sup>33</sup> See *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997) *passim*. Pickstock speaks of this phenomenon grammatically as 'asyndeton'.
- <sup>34</sup> 'In Arbour to Abbreviation', p. 105.
- <sup>35</sup> 'Wotton Hill Clump', p. 33.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* p. 34.
- <sup>37</sup> 'praying // firs \\ attenuate IV', p. 183.
- <sup>38</sup> 'In Arbour to Abbreviation', pp. 101–102.
- <sup>39</sup> 'At Wall with the Approach of Trees, p. 3, (*Inflections*) V', p. 66.
- <sup>40</sup> 'At Wall with the Approach of Trees, p. 3, (*Inflections*) II', p. 60.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>42</sup> 'Between Branches, I', in *Lessways Least Scarce Among*, p. 173.
- <sup>43</sup> See, for example, the 'Note' to 'exposure (A Tree) presents' in *Give Forest its Next Portent*, p. 37.
- <sup>44</sup> 'Slant Gift, Given Slender Rift', p. 76.
- <sup>45</sup> 'Wotton Hill Clump', p. 33.
- <sup>46</sup> *Give Forest its Next Portent*, Note, p. 9.
- <sup>47</sup> William Wordsworth *The Prelude* (1805), Book II, lines 380–419 in *The Prelude: The Four Texts (1798, 1799, 1805, 1850)* (London: Penguin, 1995), pp. 94–96.
- <sup>48</sup> See again, 'Wotton Hill Clump', pp. 32–38.
- <sup>49</sup> 'Slant Gift, Given Slender Rift'; 'An Arbour to Abbreviation'.
- <sup>50</sup> 'Wotton Hill Clump', p. 33 and p. 35; trees 'creel the air'.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- <sup>53</sup> 'At Wall with the Approach of Trees', 3 (*Inflections*) I', p. 58.
- <sup>54</sup> 'Wotton Hill Clump', p. 35.
- <sup>55</sup> 'praying // firs \\ attenuate I', p. 165.
- <sup>56</sup> 'Sparse Reach Stretches the Field III', p. 76.
- <sup>57</sup> See *Imparkments (The Surrogate Has Settled)* (University of Surrey: Veer Books, 2012).
- <sup>58</sup> 'Sparse Reach Stretches the Field III', p. 77.
- <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.
- <sup>60</sup> 'praying // firs \\ attenuate V', p. 184.
- <sup>61</sup> 'Slant Gift, Given Slender Rift', p. 1.
- <sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>63</sup> *Introgression Latewood (Shelter Partials)*, p. 60.
- <sup>64</sup> 'Slant Gift, Given Slender Rift', p. 65.
- <sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.
- <sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.
- <sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.
- <sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. p. 62.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>72</sup> Henry More, *The Immortality of the Soul* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), Book III, Chapter xiii, p. 267–268.

<sup>73</sup> 'Slant Gift, Given Slender Rift', p. 63.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. p. 72.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. p. 77.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>80</sup> Jean-Louis Chrétien, *Fragilité* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2017), p. 263.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

**How to cite this article:** Milbank, J. 2020. 'The Beckoning Obstruction': On the Theme of Scarcity in the Poetry of Peter Larkin. *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, 12(1): 34, pp. 1–20. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/bip.1923>

**Published:** 04 November 2020

**Copyright:** © 2020 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



*Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Open Library of Humanities.

**OPEN ACCESS** The Open Access logo, consisting of the words 'OPEN ACCESS' followed by a circular icon containing a padlock with a diagonal slash through it, signifying that the content is freely available.