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How to Cite: Schenk, E. 2021. Routes to Admittance: A Close Reading of 'Opening Woods' by Peter Larkin. *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, 13(1): 2, pp. 1–10. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/bip.3406>

Published: 22 April 2021

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ARTICLE

Routes to Admittance: A Close Reading of 'Opening Woods' by Peter Larkin

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In the following article, I explore the imagery of openness and admittance in Peter Larkin's poem, 'Opening Woods'. I discuss the opposition portrayed between the openness of woodlands and natural processes, against human interference and industry. I come to argue that Larkin's poem encourages us to strive to have a reciprocal relationship with woodlands and to see their inherent value. A main focus is how the concept of 'Open' itself has two sides in the poem: that of allowing and admittance, which is connected with trees, and that of openness being a puncture or wounding, which is attached to humans. Larkin draws us to look differently at trees and ourselves. For example, the shelter trees provide all year round and their own 'productivity'. They are open but not hollow. It is humans who puncture them, leaving wounds. In the concluding paragraphs, I explore how woodlands are perhaps being pushed too much and that they may one day refuse admittance, or be gone completely. It is us, as humans, who need to step out and back from the woodlands, giving them space and allowing us to see them properly. I argue that Larkin is wanting us to understand that only then, once this space has been sheltered, should we enter again.

Keywords: Peter Larkin; trees; shelter; eco-poetics; scarcity

In 'Opening Woods', part of the *Open Woods* sequence of poems, Peter Larkin explores the routes of admittance humans take into woodlands, how this may be forced, denied, earned and granted. Today there are opposing forces in society, those removing trees, and those striving to preserve them, whether that be with the rain-forests of the Amazon, or the ancient woodlands in the path of a high-speed rail-link in the UK. 'Open', as given in the title, is a motif throughout the poem. The motif, however, appears with bilateral connotations: open can at once mean free and allowing, but then also wounded and vulnerable. Openness and admittance is commu-

nicated through a range of images, such as those to do with fire, constructions and textiles, and through the form of the poem itself.

Peter Larkin's work is radical in its use of form, content and language. Larkin admits us into a thicket of poetry, but he leaves much interpretation up to the reader. Larkin himself calls his poetry a 'try-on' whereby not all meanings or relations are given away.¹ This creates an openness, between the reader and writer, between observer and subject, which is translated into a space between humans and trees in the poem. Space is needed for sight, to see beyond what one ignores or wants to see. Understanding this is arguably what is needed most if one is to be deserving of admittance into woodland.

The first image of the poem is one of fire:

where woodland is generator the stimulus
might be a seared interior, there flames of
clearance don't invoke passage.²

Fire is a force that does not wait for admittance, it simply enters. The line, 'the stimulus | might be seared interior' at first evokes the natural process of forest fires, which can stimulate re-growth and the creation of secondary woodland; heat can often stimulate dormant seeds in the ground.³ The final part, however, of 'there flames of clearance don't invoke passage' does not imply a natural continuation. The demonstrative 'there' draws a reader's focus to how this is different. The flames are ones of 'clearance', evoking the practice of burning down forests for arable land. These flames also do not 'invoke passage', suggesting a route has not been made, but has been cut-off. The 'passage' could be the natural succession from primary, or pio-

¹ Edmund Hardy, 'Less than, more at: an interview with Peter Larkin'. *Intercapillary Space*, (2007) <www.intercapillaryspace.blogspot.co.uk/2006/04/part-1.html> [accessed 25 November 2017].

² Peter Larkin, 'Opening Woods', in *Leaves of Field*, (Exeter: Shearsman Books Ltd., 2006), pp.81–94 (p.81), ll.1–3.

³ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'Secondary succession', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, (2019) <<https://www.britannica.com/science/secondary-succession>> [accessed 21 October 2020].

neer species, such as birch, to more established ones, such as beech and oak. These will be replaced with a different route: the one to man-made plantation forests. Here, passage is cut-off as succession is stopped at the secondary woodland, with only selected timber species allowed to grow. Fire is shown to be an important image connected to openness. On the one hand it can create an opening for new growth and new species to enter, on the other hand, fire can destroy, leaving a gaping hole.

Routes cut-off provide an image of closure and holes. Humans have left unavoidable gaps by forcing their way into woodlands and clearing them. The violent actions can sometimes hide a truth that humans were never barred from woodlands to begin with. It is

as though nature produces
coppices without shields of exclusion, but with
unpierced films of admittance.⁴

The imagery of warfare, often tied to humans, is shown to not apply to these coppices, as they do not have weapons or 'shields of exclusion'. Perhaps, these are woods that have been managed sustainably through coppicing, which is a management practice used since Neolithic times. Humans receive materials and fuel, and, in turn, the life of some trees, such as the Hazel, is extended greatly.⁵ The 'films of admittance' of these woodlands have not been violently opened, as 'unpierced' implies that what was already open to begin with, has not been forced further. There is still a barrier or film, but it is one that is permeable, like the walls of plant cells. These images call attention to 'unexpose | openings',⁶ or ways woods can be entered without harming and exposing them.

Humans, however, for too long, have taken an adversarial position and seen woods as an obstruction:

⁴ Larkin, 'Opening Woods', p.82, ll. 36–38.

⁵ Edward Mills, 'A Brief History of Coppicing', *Small Woods Association*, [n.d.] <<https://smallwoods.org.uk/our-work/woodland-products/a-brief-history-of-coppicing/>> [accessed 21 October 2020].

⁶ Larkin, 'Opening Woods', p.82, ll. 42–43.

Woods always the hereditary enemy of receding
grassland were also the wide pursuing spine
of *its* incorrigible defile of opening⁷

Woods will naturally take over grassland, they are the 'hereditary enemy' that will conquer, if left untamed. To humans, this is seen as a threat to a way of life, one that, for centuries, has been founded on agriculture and their need to sustain this through 'incorrigible defile of opening[s]' or clearances. Woods, survive only on the 'spine' of land, places not conducive to farming or living. One can see this on a map, as trees are forced into scattered forests, thin valleys and lone copses. The use of the anatomical image, however, of the 'spine' reminds one of trees' irreplaceable part in nature. What they do, in terms of habitats and the production of oxygen, can be seen as holding nature up.

In opposition to human destruction and shutting-off, woods and trees are shown to be open:

Holly trees tell winter food
stunted by the wild
sheltered at a shunned gate
In a cleft of steading
= a history of openness⁸

The holly trees 'tell', or as can also be said *provide* sustenance and shelter, perhaps to animals and insects, as many trees do. The trees, however, for once are not stunted by man, but by 'the wild', by nature. They are perhaps stunted by other plants, or by a lack of nutrients. They follow a natural route of admittance, or lack of admittance, in the environment. Nevertheless, it is 'sheltered', as is emphasised by how it is in a 'cleft of steading', which evokes an enclosed, safe space ('cleft'), to put roots down ('steading'). It is by a human route of admittance, a 'gate', but one that is avoided and

⁷ Ibid., p.86, ll. 165–168.

⁸ Ibid., p.82, ll. 52–56.

'shunned'. The trees are admitted into the places away, forgotten about by humans. The visual use of the equal sign makes clear the simplicity of these 'holly trees', how they are not controlled or managed. They have naturally established a habitable world for themselves and others, as 'a history of openness' encapsulates.

In a wood without humans, Larkin portrays the openness of the natural processes. For example, between the 'unreleasable poles of shelter',⁹ between the crown growing horizontal and trunk growing vertical there is space. Light can 'shave through' to the ground beneath.¹⁰ This fracturing of light seemingly creates a kaleidoscopic world below the canopy, perhaps symbolising the possibility for multiple organisms and lives. Admittance is also given to other tree species, ones that will colonise: 'How softwood canopy is being infiltrated by | broadleaf condensing opens'.¹¹ The line appears again to depict the natural succession of woodland, in comparison to a forceful entry. Softwood is usually attributed to coniferous trees, as grown in plantation forests. If left unmanaged and in a suitable climate, other species (such as beech and oak) will colonise. Larkin uses the verb 'condensing' to describe this opening. The combination of liquid and gaseous in 'condensing' communicates a growth that is not forceful, or explosive, but gently brimming. The new species add 'texture to cover',¹² suggesting an increase in shelter, and in scientific terms, it can be seen as a metaphor for an increase in biodiversity. Images of fabric and layers (as with texture and cover), all suggest a richness that is created by the natural admittances.

Richness is also not just described through the imagery Larkin uses, but also the layout of the poem itself (see **Figure 1** below):

The visual pattern of lineated sections beside prose paragraphs mirror on the page the trunks, canopies, thickets and openings of woodlands. One moves from the thickets of prose to the meadows of verse. Larkin's creation of space through imagery and form has also been noted by other readers. Mark Dickinson says Larkin's poetry 'reminds us of the intimacy and otherness of our surroundings' and Sophie Seita

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.87, ll. 208.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.87, ll. 210–211.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.87, ll. 249–250.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.89, ll. 253.

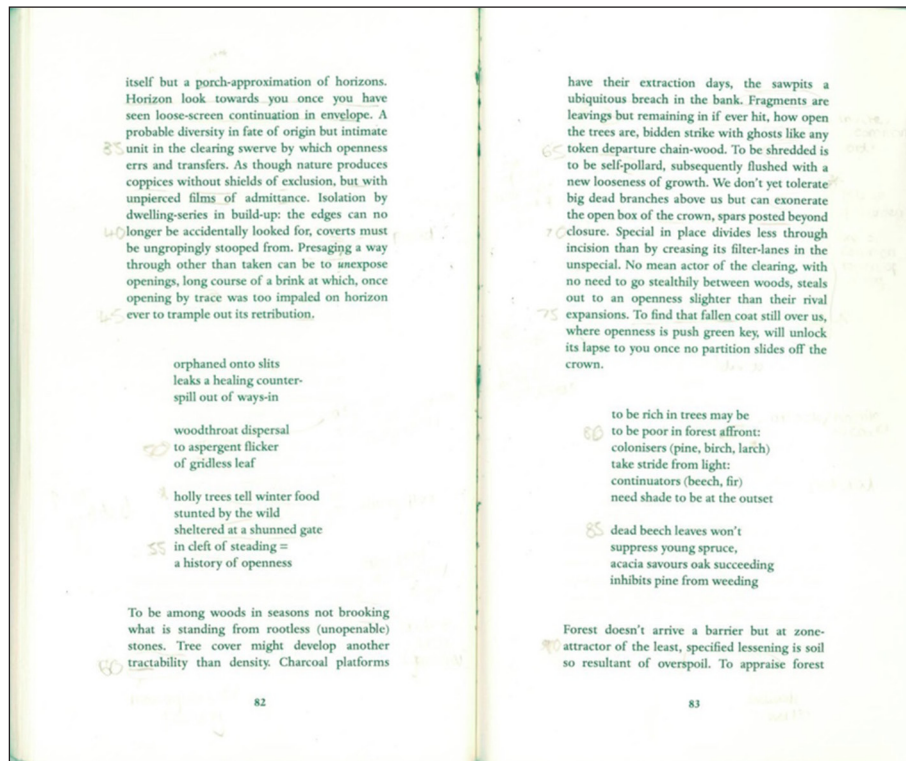


Figure 1: Peter Larkin, from *Leaves of Field*, Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2006.¹³

states that his poetry communicates that ‘there is room for a human dedication to nature’.¹⁴ There is space between the ‘intimacy and otherness’ and there is ‘room’. I would go further to argue that this engendered sense of space between nature and the human, in regards to ‘Opening Woods’, reinforces the idea that woods and forests provide space and admittance. When inside, humans are in the ‘hollow wrap of foliage unapparent | until horizon telescopes’.¹⁵ As the horizon and sight enclose

¹³ Ibid., p.82–83.

¹⁴ Mark Dickinson, ‘Peter Larkin’s Knowledge of Place’, *Cordite Poetry Review*, 01 August 2010, <www.cordite.org.au/features/mark-dickinson-peter-larkins-knowledge-of-place/> [accessed 25 November 2017].

Sophie Seita, ‘The Ethics of Attention in Peter Larkin’s ‘Leaves of Field’’, *Cordite Poetry Review*, 01 December 2013, <www.cordite.org.au/scholarly/the-ethics-of-attention/> [accessed 25 November 2017].

¹⁵ Larkin, ‘Opening Woods’, p.90, ll. 282–283.

inwards in the forest, so does the mouth as it speaks the 'o' vowel in 'telescopes'. The word 'hollow' often suggests an empty space, but considering the imagery of the wrap and the sides of a telescope, it seems that the other traditional connotation of hollow as a way carved out through use with enclosing sides (a Holloway) is more fitting. All contribute to the feeling of a safe space.

The natural appears to be inherently open. This is true of natural processes, such as fire stimulating secondary succession, allowing new species to grow. For part of the year a tree's crown is open, absent of leaves. Larkin says that we 'can exonerate | the open box of the crown, spars posted beyond | closure'.¹⁶ The line makes one equate the naked branches of winter with 'spars' (poles used in masts, or in aeroplane wings or in the rafters of houses), as they reach up to the sky. Larkin again reminds a reader of the integral use of trees in human constructions. One can perhaps forgive the lack of shelter physically in winter, for the shelter they bring all year round. The 'fallen coat' may be felled timber, that is 'still over us'. The 'spars' go beyond 'closure', they go beyond being felled. Just as natural processes can be open, human management systems such as coppicing and timber construction perhaps can be open too, if we see and appreciate the source.

Humans, however, can overstay their admittance, echoing the man-made fires and forced entry earlier discussed. Trees will suffer 'everything | which presses the open to come out of'.¹⁷ The word 'everything' carries a weight, especially in its placement at the end of the line, where it seemingly forces the following words onto the next line. It can be read as humans pushing trees too much, perhaps through the demands for timber productivity, or even for our recreational needs, as the poem says 'trees no longer | guaranteed a world we stood outset too'.¹⁸ Woodland will not always accommodate. Trees will eventually respond and become 'rigid for choice', and they will not 'select for openness'.¹⁹ This can be seen as a metaphor for how the trees, perhaps through climate change, may change to be not what we need, or tree

¹⁶ Ibid., p.83, ll. 68–70.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.90, ll. 290–291.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.93, ll. 424–425.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.92, ll. 302–303.

species could disappear altogether, removing 'choice'. The reality is that today, woodland is 'rounded up in a *scatter* of small woods'.²⁰ They are not whole, but in pieces.

Trees will only survive with 'an unexposed and undegraded openness',²¹ whereby admittance by humans is not forced, or taken for granted. Larkin asks the important question 'how | do you "leave open" the woods so that their | horizon also invites outgrowth to stay overhead, simply as coasting the site of donation?'.²² One way the question can be seen is how do people connect to woods, if they should not be admitted into them due to the damage they cause, and thus, only 'coasting the site of donation'? The verb 'coasting' suggests a glancing or fleeting visit, something free and unmanaged. The question makes a reader consider woods as their own entities with their own 'horizon'. One must see beyond their use as materials:

a lowly amount of profusion
 how forests yield:
 unbroken in the grain
 unsealed in the texture –²³

Words have their meaning reversed, or opened-up, through the affixation of 'un-', as with 'unapparent' and 'unexposed and undegraded openness' before. The adjectives 'unbroken' and 'unsealed' suggest something beyond the human quantification of the grain or texture of timber. The lineation of the verbs also depicts something uniform, but the words themselves ask a reader to read between and beyond the lines. It can be argued that to 'leave open' woods to grow means making a concerted effort to *undo* people's actions. However, for humans to achieve (as Seita says) this 'dedication to nature', humans must first stand outside woodland, so that there is 'an open | not to look out from but gaze within blinds of | furthers'.²⁴ By standing outside, looking in, through 'blinds' of branches, trunks, and the lines of the poem, one can see

²⁰ Ibid., p.92, ll. 308.

²¹ Ibid., p.92, ll. 311.

²² Ibid., p.85–86, ll. 151–154.

²³ Ibid., p.87, ll. 200–203.

²⁴ Ibid., p.92, ll. 404–406.

'furthers'; as said before, 'the horizon telescopes',²⁵ what once was small is made bigger and clearer. Humans will perhaps see a wood's inherent value beyond their need, and in turn, see the damage they have done, the openings they have inflicted.

It, however, may be too late, for "Today a | tree shelters leanly because open as we are, not | learning the forest's ravage until its hole is a cry of scarcity".²⁶ Larkin proposes in his critical work that scarcity can be a stimulus, as by having less, it means the possibility for more, and perhaps there is more of an appreciation of something if there is less.²⁷ However, here the scarcity is too much, as it is now a cry of suffering. Humans use and abuse woods as a resource and force themselves into their spaces, while only giving them the unwanted corners of their world. To see this damage, one must step outside and see that 'the highly open can never be lightly wooded'.²⁸ The adverbs in the line create a natural rhythm and balance, one that humans must strive to restore. For to be open means having more trees.

The 'scarcity of cover | does draw the open toward'.²⁹ By realising what could be lost – admittance, shelter – one becomes more *open* and willing to change. People see their wrong and are drawn towards trees. Larkin's final line, however, is a reminder not to draw too close. One must 'go quotiently' (in pieces, or portions, not in a mass) to see 'the failing | acres | open woods are near you sheer of your full cycle'.³⁰ The adjective 'sheer' evokes imagery of thin materials, but also of a *shear* blade. It portrays a close encounter, but not a touching or penetration; in a sense, it is like 'coasting'.³¹ It is a final reminder to step back and to see the scarcity in the 'failing | acres'. What Larkin has been drawing towards is that more of the whole can be seen by standing further apart.

²⁵ Ibid., p.90, ll. 282–283.

²⁶ Ibid., p.92, ll.425–428.

²⁷ Peter Larkin, 'Relations of Scarcity: Ecology and Eschatology in "The Ruined Cottage"' *Studies in Romanticism*, 39.3 (2000), 347–64 <DOI: 10.2307/25601455> [accessed 25 November 2017].

²⁸ Larkin, 'Opening Woods', p.93, ll. 441–442.

²⁹ Ibid., p.94, ll. 459–460.

³⁰ Ibid., p.94, ll. 459–460.

³¹ Ibid., p.85–86, ll. 151–154.

Through this final poem in Larkin's *Open Woods* sequence, one sees the course that must be taken towards being deserving of admittance into woodland. By portraying the natural processes of trees and woodland management against the violent actions and the forced admittances, such as cutting woodland relentlessly down for resources and space and forcing it into smaller and smaller parcels of land, a reader sees a change is needed. The radical form of the poetry and language, such as the neologisms and the structure of shorter and longer verses, emphasises the message given that trees should be stood apart from; at a distance, trees can be seen for all they are. Only then can one understand that trees have a right to their own space and dwelling, going from them making our homes, to woods being a home in themselves. The woods Larkin writes are ones of inherent openness and space, such as in the gaps left between branches and leaves where light can fall through to the floor. In that space is injected a sense of possibility and change. It is an opening to be sheltered. Only when ones see this, is one deserving of admittance into woodland.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

How to cite this article: Schenk, E. 2021. Routes to Admittance: A Close Reading of 'Opening Woods' by Peter Larkin. *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, 13(1): 2, pp. 1–10. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/bip.3406>

Published: 22 April 2021

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