



Emma Mason, 'Peter Larkin: Poetry, Phenomenology, and Ecology' (2021) 13(1): 7 *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/bip.4027>



Peter Larkin: Poetry, Phenomenology, and Ecology

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This editorial introduces the special issue based on the proceedings of the symposium 'Peter Larkin: Poetry, Phenomenology, and Ecology' which took place at the University of Warwick on 26th of April 2017. It also includes the first and most up-to-date list of Larkin's published and unpublished poetry as well as his prose writings.

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Peter Larkin is one of the most important poets writing today. His career, mapped across his six collections of poetry, ten pamphlets, as well as a monograph and several critical articles, spans a period rich with poetic innovation and change. Echoes from the work of the Imagists, Black Mountain poets, Language poets, British Poetry Revival poets, and ‘radical landscape’ poets resonate in a wholly new kind of verse, ecological and religious, scarce and abundant, oblique and material.¹ His long-term focus on trees, ecological sites, and industrial environments, perceived through a profoundly theological lens, speaks to an urgent critical interest in landscape, commercial violence, and the sacred. But the voice that emerges is wholly distinctive and unique, one that ‘utters more and more about less and less’, as John Milbank notes (‘“The Beckoning Obstruction’: On the theme of scarcity in the poetry of Peter Larkin’) so conjuring rebounding prayers woven as tightly and meticulously as the layered surface of a leaf. Within the intertextures of Larkin’s prose-poem paragraphs and interrupted shards of verse resides a library of philosophical, phenomenological, and theological references that serve, not to elucidate his work, but as exegetic commentaries on the questions and ideas raised by his work. The essays included here illuminate the themes of this work—gift, scarcity, landscape, locality, entanglement, horizons, prayer, incarnation, relation—all of which refract through the poets, thinkers, and theologians to whom he is most indebted: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Christina Rossetti, G. M. Hopkins, J. H. Prynne, Philippe Jaccottet, Andre Du Bouchet, John Kinsella, David Jones, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Simone Weil, Jean-Louis Chrétien, Henri de Lubac, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and Geoffrey Hartman. Two important interlocutors—the poet and editor Anne Frances Elvey and theologian John Milbank—both contribute essays here.

Born to a French Catholic mother and English Anglican father in 1946, Larkin was educated in Bournemouth and then Cambridge, from where he came to be influenced by the British Poetry Revival poets based in Cambridge and Language poets. He read widely in French and English Romantic verse, and later became an established Coleridge scholar and leading member of both the Friends of Coleridge group and the Wordsworth Conference Foundation. Following Cambridge (a copy of his only novel, *In Place of Simon*, is now in the University Library there), Larkin trained as a teacher and then a librarian, pursuing the latter profession at the newly established University of Warwick. Specialising in literature and philosophy, Larkin was soon a vibrant member of Warwick’s foundational English and Comparative Literary Studies and Philosophy departments, in particular their innovative Philosophy and Literature program and later Centre for Research in Philosophy, Literature, and the Arts (CRPLA). A regular delegate at Romantic Studies conferences and workshops across the UK and Europe, Larkin also sustained his vocation as a poet, supported and published by Tony Frazer of Shearsman

Books. He also found community in Kenilworth, a two mile walk from Warwick's campus, and Temple Balsall, where Larkin joined the Anglo-Catholic St Mary's, a restored thirteenth-century church purported to have been built by the Knights Templar. These landscapes are careful studies in Larkin's poetry, rare expressions of the relationships between non-human (animal, plant), more-than-human (the divine) and the human in the woodlands, fields, and commons of the English Midlands.

At Warwick, Larkin built up the library's extraordinary poetry and French Philosophy collections and continued to develop his own writing. In recent years, critics have become increasingly drawn to the striking originality of Larkin's environmental politics and poetics, which consistently make stark the economy and 'scarcity' of trees in contrast to the reckless wastefulness of humans. Opening his 2001 *Terrain Seed Scarcity: Poems from a Decade*, Larkin elucidates scarcity not only as an ecological term warning of energy and food shortages, but also as a 'poetic argument' of exploration and speculation: 'If a thing is scarce it's there, rare for contemplation and happening for praise'.² For Larkin, scarcity reconnects us both to a universe that is material and divine, as well as to a 'horizon' that embeds both 'hope and transformation' through a poetic thinking made available in his work.³ It is this thinking that ushers the reader into an ethics or politics of relation, preservation and frugality, and rewards those willing to spend time with his innovative, knotted, entangled, and perplexing syntax. Reading across his works from the early 1980s to this year, it is possible to trace the influence of prose poets Charles Baudelaire, Francis Ponge, and René Char, Scottish minimalists such as Ian Hamilton Finlay and Thomas A. Clark, as well as Hopkins, Rossetti, Milbank, and T. S. Eliot, not least in Larkin's shift to theological language. As Simon Collings notes in an interview with Larkin, words like 'sacral', 'numinous' and 'prayer' shape an earthly spirituality and liturgy in his writing that has become more pronounced in recent work.⁴ Larkin's faith is essentially experiential and material, one deeply influenced by the Radical Orthodoxy movement associated with Milbank and Catherine Pickstock.⁵ As Larkin states, his 'hints of quasi-sacral entities like borders, obstructions, densities' with their resistance to 'a secularised "openness"' flourish through his references to trees and are at once 'concrete and immediate' and 'unconditional, more sheerly given'. As 'incarnational presencing', his poetry embraces a diagonalized transcendence (after Milbank) that ignores a hierarchical view of reality for an unfinished, evolving, cosmic meaning anchored and rooted in the land.⁶

The speculative drive of Larkin's work encourages a contemplative, intellectually rigorous poetic and religious rethinking of environmental violence that puts the reader in a renewed relationship with her worlds and communities. As Anne Frances Elvey notes in her essay for this issue, 'Trees' Deep Incarnation', his focus on trees illuminates

a 'non-binary, indeterminate process' in which his poetry calls to us and requires a response of attention and perhaps, if we follow Larkin's own definition of the word, prayer itself: 'prayer is the most radical moment of ontological participation, an offer of the unconditional if you like, the paradox of the divine, an always actual relation more primary than bare possibility.'⁷ Katharina Maria Kalinowski also focuses on attention in her essay, 'Scarcely Translated: Peter Larkin's Eco-poetic Entanglements', in which she develops his poetics of scarcity to survey the reparative givenness of the natural world. Eleanor Schenk explores this further in her reflection on the relationship between humans and woodlands: her essay 'Routes to admittance: a close reading of "Opening Woods" by Peter Larkin' asks how we are both granted and denied access to a landscape subject to attack and preservation. Like Kalinowski and Milbank, Simon Collings illustrates the ontological and theological vitality of scarcity in Larkin's portrayal of trees and woods. In 'Short of nothing: expanding horizons of "scarcity" in the poetry of Peter Larkin', Collings presents Larkin's interest in theological givenness and gift as cognitively and affectively attuned to the eco-social and neo-pastoral. Finally, Natalie Joelle and Dominic Hand deftly open up Larkin's poetic thinking of scarcity to theoretical provocations. While Hand's 'Reforesting the Rhizome: Peter Larkin's "Roots Surfacing Horizon" (2008)' reads Larkin's plant poetics through the rhizome philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari, Joelle's "'radical gleaning": Doing Prac Crip' redresses scarcity through leanness and its complex relationship to labour and disability.

Previous critical attention to Larkin's work has been limited to discrete articles and book chapters presented in the bibliography below. Of particular note is Amy Cutler's 2018 online collection of creative essays on Larkin's work, *Were X a Tree*, which includes commentaries by Stephen Collis, Sarah Howe, Simon Lewty, Robert Macfarlane, David Nowell-Smith, and Lissa Wolsak. These distinguished critical voices are suggestive of a surge of interest in Larkin's work as well as the importance of navigational guidance for those new to it. The recent publication of *Seven Leaf Sermons* by Luke Thompson's Guillemot Press, for example, included two short introductions by Harriet Tarlo and myself to illuminate this captivating series of fifteen-line poems illustrated by Rupert Loydell.⁸ My own experience of teaching Larkin's poetry to undergraduates in the English and Philosophy departments at Warwick has confirmed just how mesmerising his non-linear, enjambed, and diffracted fusions of poetics, ecology, theology, and philosophy are for those eager to imagine and create.⁹ This desire to discuss and find meaning in Larkin was also behind two events at Warwick in 2018: the symposium, 'Peter Larkin: Poetry, Phenomenology, Ecology', and Nick Lawrence's exhibition on the connections between his work and Howard Skempton and Simon Lewty, 'Inscriptions: Image | Text | Sound'.¹⁰ This special issue emerged from the symposium, thoughtfully

captured by Gabriel de Sousa in his conference report, and which comprised a series of keynotes, papers, and workshops. Larkin concluded the event with a reading of several new poems and, characteristically, engaged generously with questions and comments on his work from symposium delegates. A record of an exceptional and prodigious mind, Larkin's catalogue is extraordinary and in progress. I include a list of his works to date in the hope that it attracts new readers to a poet who is without parallel in contemporary poetry.

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Notes

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- ⁸ See Harriet Tarlo and Emma Mason, commentaries on Peter Larkin, *Seven Leaf Sermons*, with artwork by Rupert Loydell (Guillemot Press, 2020), <https://www.guillemotpress.co.uk/news/2020/7/29/harriet-tarlo-amp-emma-mason-on-peter-larkins-seven-leaf-sermons-48gy5>
- ⁹ For one of the best overviews of his poetics, see David Farrier, *Anthropocene Poetics: Deep Time, Sacrifice Zones, and Extinction* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018), pp. 58ff.
- ¹⁰ 'Peter Larkin: Poetry, Phenomenology, Ecology', 26 April, 2018, University of Warwick, in collaboration with Poetry at Warwick, the Centre for Research in Philosophy, Literature and the Arts, and the Oxford Phenomenology Network. <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/research/currentprojects/poetryatwarwick/conferences/larkin>; Exhibition: 'Inscriptions: Image | Text | Sound', 20 April – 2 May 2018, <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/research/currentprojects/poetryatwarwick/conferences/larkin/inscriptions>, curated by Nick Lawrence.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks for all those involved in the symposium, especially Cleo-Hanaway-Oakley from the Oxford Phenomenology Network; our keynote speakers, John Milbank and Nick Lawrence; and those who assisted with the production of this special issue, including Eileen John, Harriet Tarlo, and Graham Davidson; and Scott Thurston at *JBIP* for support throughout the process.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

