Reflections on Mortality: Death in the Poetry of Philip Larkin

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Abstract
Perhaps only second to the theme of love, the theme of death has exercised the imaginations of poets and litterateurs from time immemorial. In the field of English literature, death has been an unwavering presence in the lines of poets. From Chaucer to Shakespeare, from Edward Young and Robert Blair to Browning and Tennyson, from Emily Dickinson to T. S. Eliot death has been a recurring theme. This paper takes a close look at Philip Larkin’s death-centric poems like “Next, Please”, “Going”, “Absences”, “Dockery and Son”, “Ambulances”, “The Old Fools”, “The Building” and “Aubade”. It shows how images and symbols, diction and metrics contribute to the production of an emotive charge in Larkin’s representations and reflections upon death. As a poet writing in England in the middle of the twentieth-century when faith had declined, belief had dimmed and hope was evanescent, Larkin realized that there is no life after death. Nevertheless, since death is inescapable and a fundamental fact in human existence, it is unavoidable. As a poet voicing the concerns of his readers, Larkin looks at death steadily in (as it were) the eye. The result was a range of brilliant poems which have enriched English literature.

The concept of death has been addressed in human thought and literature in various ways. In general, from time immemorial, death has been considered as the most mysterious of all mysteries since no one who has experienced it has lived to speak of the experience. In fact, death is not even an experience *per se*, but the end of all conscious experiences. Such truisms, however, have not prevented men and women from reflecting upon death and from attempting to come to terms with it in their own singular ways. Religious poets like Emily Dickinson and T. S. Eliot have associated death with notions of eternity and immortality. In the middle Ages, to the anonymous authors of *Pearl* and *Everyman*, equally as to Chaucer’s Pardoner, death was a haunting folkloristic figure. During the Early Modern Period Francis Bacon who was more of a materialist than a religiously minded man, looked at death dispassionately in his essay “Of Death”. To Bacon’s contemporary Shakespeare, death was a cruel take-away of life and beauty. To the later and more Christian poet Milton, the death of his young friend Edward King was an occasion initially for lamentation but finally a cause of celebration on the ground that the dead friend would have the benefit of “all the saints above, / In solemn troops and sweet societies”(Milton, 39) entertaining him after death. In the tradition of English literature that followed, reflections on mortality were the forte of the eighteenth-century “Graveyard Poets” like Edward Young, Robert Blair and Thomas Gray. Much less melancholy about death was the early and late nineteenth-century English poets. Browning’s poem on death, “Prospice”, refers to mortality as “the Arch Fear in a visible form”, but yet ends with the reassuring thought that “a peace [will come] out of pain” (Browning, 496-497). Similarly, Tennyson in his poem “Crossing the Bar” visualises death as a transition or rite of passage into everlastingness. This optimism seems to have been lost in the early twentieth-century when T. S. Eliot wrote in his poem “Whispers of Immortality” that “Webster was much possessed by death / and saw the skull beneath the skin;” (Eliot, 52). The other English poet after Eliot who was evidently obsessed with the idea of death was Philip Larkin. To his friend John Betjeman, Larkin confessed: “Everything I write, I think, has the consciousness of approaching death in the background” (cited in Booth, 172). The truth of this statement may be seen from such of his poems as “Next, Please”, “Going”, “Absences”, “Dockery and Son”, “Ambulances”, “The Old Fools”, “The Building”, “Aubade” and so on. In the first of these poems, “Next, Please”, written in 1951, Larkin reacts to the death of his father Sidney Larkin who had died three years previously. Larkin’s father had been a shaping
and affirmative influence on the poet’s mind and in his poem the poet argues that while we always hope for something good to happen in our lives, our expectations “leave us holding wretched stalks of disappointment”. The title of the poem suggests an idea of infinite progression, of one thing or event following an earlier one *ad infinitum* but what the poem registers is that the only fulfilment that is achievable in the human sphere of existence is the coming and the arrival of death. A typically Larkinesque image of a lurking horror concludes the poem:

Only one ship is seeking us, a black-
Sailed unfamiliar, towing at her back
A huge and birdless silence. In her wake
No waters breed or break.

(Larkin’s *Collected Poems* [hereafter CP], 50)

The image of death as a ship or a boat is, of course, not exclusive to Larkin. One is reminded, for instance, of a rather similar image in Shelley’s *Adonais* where the poet speaks of his “spirit’s bark” being ‘driven / Far from the shore’” (Shelley, 987). In Larkin’s poem the ship of death is far more sinister, for it is not only ominously “black-sailed” but also “unfamiliar” and pulling behind it “a huge and birdless silence”. The final sentence which is suddenly broken by a line-ending to indicate the suddenness of death contains also an image of an uncanny motionless movement. For though the ship moves forward in death, it leaves no trail behind it. As “a huge and birdless silence”, death in Larkin’s poem becomes a noiseless and sterile emptiness.

If “Next, Please” may have had a personal point of origin, the poem “Going” is an oblique meditation on the gradual approach of death. Larkin initially entitled the poem “Dying Day” but quite appropriately changed the name of the poem to “Going” since life itself is perpetually engaged in the process of going on a journey to death.

The opening lines of this short poem are extremely evocative, describing as they do the coming of an evening:

There is an evening coming in
Across the fields, one never seen before,
That lights no lamp. (CP, 51)

The “fields” here are of course the fields of time, of life and existence, and the evening coming in across them is of course death. Since death is unexperienced by the living, it is an evening that has never been seen before. Unlike an ordinary evening which would have
caused lamps to be lit, this one is all-extinguishing in its quenching darkness. Nevertheless, Larkin does admit over the next few lines of his poem that death may in very exceptional circumstances be seen as pleasurable. As Larkin puts it, perhaps remembering Keats’s line “I have been half in love with easeful Death” (Keats, 1057), “Silken it seems at a distance”. Yet, in an ironical acknowledgement of the undesirability of death, Larkin states:

When it is drawn up over the knees and breast
It brings no comfort. (CP, 51)

Here the poet indicates that no actual close encounter with death is a pleasant experience. The implied metaphor of a blanket or sheet or coverlet being pulled up over one’s body when one is cold also carries the ominous significance of a shroud being drawn up over a dead body. But from this point, the poem moves to a far more religious speculation as Larkin writes:

Where has the tree gone, that locked
Earth to the sky? (CP, 51)

The tree is of course the Rood or the Cross of Jesus which is symbolic of the Christian religion. The acknowledgement that the tree is now gone is a statement of the fact that at the time of Larkin’s writing of the poem in the late twentieth-century men had no longer any faith in institutional religions like Christianity. At one time, one’s faith in Christ or God would have had reconciled one’s conviction about the connection between the earth (or the materiality of existence) and the sky (or the divine realm of God beyond death). This meditation on the loss of faith modulates in the last lines of the poem to an imaginative realisation of the sense of dying:

What is under my hands,
That I cannot feel?

What loads my hands down? (CP, 51)

In Andrew Motion’s view, a “set of feelings – dread overcoming desire, emptiness swallowing fulfilment, sexual anxiety converting into fear of mortality – produced ‘Going’” (Motion, 137).

Another of Larkin’s poems on death is “Absences” which was written in 1950 when Larkin was only twenty-eight. This poem, as James Booth puts it, “seems to transcend the plight of mortality by gladly accepting the annihilation of self” (Booth, 195). The poet vividly describes a stormy seascape without ships or coasts, and with only a horizon and a sky where clouds gather and then disentangle:
Rain patters on a sea that tilts and sighs.
Fast-running floors, collapsing into hollows,
Tower suddenly, spray-haired. Contrariwise,
A wave drops like a wall: another follows,
Wilting and scrambling, tirelessly at play
Where there are no ships and no shallows.
Above the sea, the yet more shoreless day,
Riddled by wind, trails lit-up galleries:
They shift to giant ribbing, sift away (CP, 70)

In the above two stanzas, the transformation that perpetually occurs in the world of nature is highlighted. Larkin seems to say that there are no fixed limits to life and death in nature, for even if “A wave drops like a wall: another follows”. In other words, there are no real “Absences” in nature, for all apparent absences are actually changes and transformations that recur perpetually in the endless cycle of natural existence.

The one-line final stanza of “Absences” reveals the poet’s transformation from self-obsession to self-abnegation:
Such attics cleared of me! Such absences!(CP, 70)

The thought that strikes the poet on observing the erasure of the ribs of sand is that life itself is full of “clearings” or “absences”. According to Lolette Kuby, “Beginning with a six line stanza, diminishing to a three line stanza, the poem ends with one line, as though, the poem itself were fading into the oblivion it speaks of” (Kuby, 146). In fact there can be little doubt that Larkin in this poem is reflecting on death and its power to efface, erode or to create absences out of presences.

From the beginning of his poetic career, Larkin was always haunted by the contemplation of death. In “Dockery and Son”, one of his most admired poems; Larkin puts emphasis on the misery of old age and the inevitability of death. The poem describes a visit the poet had made to Oxford for attending the funeral of Agnes Cuming who was his predecessor as librarian in Hull University. The poem is simply a reaction to the news that Dockery’s son is now a student at the university. Looking back on his previous life, the speaker starts to think deeply about Dockery and himself. Dockery had a son and a family life at an early age while the speaker had “no son, no wife, no house or land”. Then he argues that although there is a vast difference between two individuals in their hopes in this world, their fears are common – the fear of death. They have no control over the end of their lives, for lives inexorably end in
death. The conclusion of the poem is not just a description but a generalized statement on life:

   Life is first boredom, then fear.
   Whether or not we use it, it goes,
   And leaves what something hidden from us chose,
   And age, and then the only end of age. (CP, 109)

These concluding lines of the poem bleakly register the opinion that our existence is meaningless, for in it the only certainty is that of death.

“Ambulances” in Larkin’s volume of poems entitled *The Whitsun Weddings* concerns the frightening and depressing sight of an ambulance, a potent symbol of illness, disease and death. As Larkin shows us in this poem, the arrival of an ambulance in a quiet residential locality one afternoon creates a sense of unease in the minds of the onlookers. The poem starts with an evocative description of ambulances:

   Closed like confessionals, they thread
   Loud noons of cities, giving back
   None of the glances they absorb.
   Light glossy grey, arms on a plaque,
   They came to rest at any kerb. (CP, 104)

As an ambulance comes to a stop at a kerb, children playing by the roadside and women (presumably their mothers) coming home from shopping look at “A wild white face” of a patient being carried away to hospital in an ambulance and eventually realize the nothingness, the emptiness and the meaninglessness that lies underneath human existence. When the ambulance moves away “in deadened air”, the women express sympathy for the dying patient, not realizing that the expression “poor soul” which they use about the patient is really a reflection of their own mortality. Then the poet meditates on the sad plight of the dying patient who had led a meaningful life which now has lost all its significance. The line that follows in the poem – “The traffic parts to let go by” – is a typically Larkinesque crux. The parting of the traffic to allow the passage of an ambulance is, of course, an empirical fact. But here, it takes on the significance of a meaningful trope as the patient isolated in hospital is akin to the ambulance separated out from the normal flow of human traffic.

   The last two lines of the poem:
   Brings closer what is left to come,
   And dulls to distance all we are. (CP, 104)
are set on an opposition between the words “closer” and “distance” on the one hand and “left to come” and “all we are” on the other. What the lines indicate is that we are living at present but facing a death “to come”. It is death that will come close to us and life will inevitably become distant to mortals. The poem registers the fact that nothing can mitigate the terror of death. It also suggests that life loses all its meaning and significance in the face of death.

“The Old Fools”, one of Larkin’s most mature poems written when Larkin was fifty-one years old, embodies a close observation of a quotidian life that culminates in a recognition of the inevitable fact of old age and death. In this poem Larkin broods over the plight of those people who are old or are close to death. At the beginning of the poem the poet shows his anger and disgust towards the old people who are unaware of their own disabilities. The poet indicates that old people do not know what is happening to them, and what strikes him most is their loss of self-awareness. Subsequently, however, Larkin shows a greater sympathy towards the situation of old people by using the second person pronoun “you” instead of employing the third person:

At death, you break up: the bits that were you
Start speeding away from each other for ever
With no one to see. (CP, 131)

The third and the fourth stanzas in fact reflect the poet’s respect for “the old fools” who have reached the final stage of their lives. Understanding their pathetic condition, the poet arrives at the melancholic observation that suffering followed by death is the common lot of everyman. The fact is that it is not only old people, but also we who are equally ignorant of our own inexorable decline into oblivion. Thus the poet ultimately merges himself with the old people. So it is that as the poem progresses towards its climax, Larkin’s resentment is transformed into compassion: “Well,/ We shall find out”. It is an indication of Larkin’s skill as a poet that the line break after “Well” in the line quoted above makes possible Larkin’s wry observation on his own and our own advancing comprehension of death.

“The Building”, from Larkin’s volume of poems entitled High Windows, is a desolate poem. This poem literally symbolizes the hospital which is associated with sickness and death. As Terry Whalen rightly observes, “The hospital is a natural symbol, not of healing, but of the undeniable fact of death”(Whalen, 103). The poem begins with a picture of a hospital building. The building seems to be like a hotel or “an airport lounge” where people are always continually moving here and there or waiting for others. As the speaker passes through the sights of the hospital, he observes the gestures of the patients and senses an
atmosphere of fear and confusion condensed into and expressed through the phrase “a frightening smell”. Later, when the poet looks out from the hospital, he sees the church locked. By this the poet indicates that religion can do nothing in the face of death.

But it is only in the final stanza of the poem that we are introduced with the inevitable reality – death:

All know they are going to die.
Not yet, perhaps not here, but in the end,
And somewhere like this. That is what it means,
This clean-sliced cliff; a struggle to transcend
The thought of dying, for unless its powers
Outbuild cathedrals nothing contravenes
The coming dark, though crowds each evening try
With wasteful, weak, propitiatory flowers. (CP, 137-138)

The poem ultimately ends with an image of flowers offered by the visitors to their hospitalized friends and relatives. Only ironically enough, Larkin implies that the offering of flowers is an empty ritual, for death will never be merciful even to those who bring the flowers.

“Aubade”, one of Larkin’s most pessimistic poems, was started in April 1974 and completed on 29 December 1977. Larkin himself referred to this poem as “in-a-funk-about-death poem” (cited in Booth, 197). Here the poet gives a bitter twist to the traditional meaning of the word “Aubade” that signifies an early morning song by focusing on a series of depressing reflections on death. In this poem, as Andrew Swarbrick says, “the traditional dawn which separates the lovers is now a horrifying reminder of mortality” (Swarbrick, 151).

Throughout the poem Larkin expresses his intense fear of death from which there is no way to escape. He dismisses all the conventional tricks – religion and logic – by which men have habitually sought to overcome the fear of death. Then, in a vividly graphic portrayal, Larkin depicts death through a series of absences and negatives:

No sight, no sound,
No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,
Nothing to love or link with. (CP, 190)

Following upon this, in a typical Larkinesque line that combines devastating wit with an inexorable truth, we are told that death is “The anesthetic from which none come round”. As the poet further imagines it, life and death are engaged in a perpetual conflict in which “one
side”, obviously the side of life, will have to surrender or acknowledge defeat. Gradually, the poet comes to accept the ineluctability of death in a spirit of calm resignation.

The last line of the poem – “Postmen like doctors go from house to house” – is significant and meaningful. The line contains both positive and negative implications. By delivering letters postmen make connections between living human beings. In the same way, visiting doctors are not messengers of death but agents who extend life. Therefore, both postmen and doctors are symbols of life, activity and dynamism. At the same time, the same line can be interpreted in a negative tone, for when postmen deliver letters containing death-news, they become harbingers of death and somewhat similarly like ambulances and hospitals, doctors too may be taken to represent disease and death.

What is typical about the poetry of Larkin centered on the theme of death is the poet’s avoidance of all romanticisations of death and the expression of an attitude that is in turn realistic, rational, occasionally ironical, but always stoical. As a poet writing in England in the middle of the twentieth-century when faith had declined, belief had dimmed and hope was evanescent, Larkin realized that there is no life after death. Nevertheless, since death is inescapable and a fundamental fact in human existence, it is unavoidable. As a poet voicing the concerns of his readers, Larkin looks at death steadily in (as it were) the eye. The result was a range of brilliant poems which have enriched English literature.
Works Cited


