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A GLASS OF WATER: PHILIP LARKIN AND THE ECOLINGUISTIC VISION

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Abstract

This paper examines Philip Larkin's poetry through an ecolinguistic lens, exploring his understated yet profound engagement with the natural world. While Larkin is often regarded as a disenchanted poet of modernity, his works reveal a sensitivity to non-human agency, particularly in relation to water. Through an analysis of poems such as *Water* and *Cut Grass*, the study applies transitivity analysis and metaphorical reversal to highlight the way that Larkin subtly reconfigures ecological relationships, attributing agency to natural elements. His vision, though not conventionally environmentalist, challenges capitalist-consumerist ideologies and aligns with contemporary ecolinguistic concerns about re-centering the non-human. Larkin's elemental spirituality – seen in his emphasis on water and light – suggests an alternative to traditional religious structures, positioning nature as a site of transcendence. This study contributes to ecolinguistic discourse by demonstrating how poetic language can reframe human-nature relations in ways that resonate with ecological thought.

Key words

Philip Larkin; Ecolinguistics; stylistics; water; light; metaphorical reversal

Introduction

Ecolinguistics defines itself mostly in opposition to capitalist-consumerism, the dominant ideology of first world countries since the industrial revolution (Meneley 2018), and a critique of 'growthism' is found in one of Halliday's foundational texts (1992). However, Stibbe (2005, 2007, 2017, 2021, etc.) also advocates the benefits of delineating positive understandings rather than engaging in constant critique. This paper continues this tradition of positive discourse analysis applied to ecolinguistic topics (see also Ponton 2022). Philip Larkin has always been among my favourite English poets, so to study his works involves exactly the kind of uplift prescribed for discourse analysts by James Martin (2004), who encourages the study of discourse that 'inspires, encourages, heartens; discourse we like, that cheers us along' (Martin 1999: 51–52). Larkin, then; but surely there must be other poets who better embody the abstraction of the title than he? The Romantics, for example, were moved by awareness of a constant, transcendent reality underlying all things, the presence of something 'far more deeply interfused',¹

a visible manifestation of the divine. Sensitive observation of, and relationship with, the natural world features prominently in the work of others. Goatly (2017, 2022) analyses some of Edward Thomas's nature poems, and also sheds light on the eco-poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Another modern poet, R.S. Thomas, in lines that foreshadow some of the linguistic concepts discussed below (*personalisation, agency*), writes of

a few last
Leaves adding their decoration
To the trees' shoulders²

This paper thus contributes to the developing dialogue between ecolinguistics and stylistics, focusing on how Larkin's poetic language treats the agency of the non-human world. Drawing on systemic functional linguistics (transitivity analysis), conceptual metaphor theory, and pragmatic frameworks (Gricean maxims, relevance theory), it addresses the underexplored question of how Larkin's language constructs a spiritual ecology featuring natural elements. In doing so, it introduces the notion of metaphorical reversal to highlight non-human perspectives.

Philip Larkin and ecological vision

In a 1995 talk, David Perkins covered some relevant ground for this paper, underlining the social importance of the marginalised activities of poets in terms that recall Shelley's notion of poets as the 'unacknowledged legislators of the world':

Art has to do with the [...] forming of ideals. [...] As poetry has exited from society [...] it has acquired the right of hermits and other loners to be itself, freely trying out, that is, imagining lifestyles, sensibilities, ways of relating. This is the more important at a time when surely a new imagination of human life is needed. I explore this need in relation to [...] the relation of human beings to nature, that is, to the environment, to the landscape, to animals, in order to see what relation poets can now imagine as both possible and desirable.

Philip Larkin, though he builds on the tradition of English nature poetry, apparently has little of this. His is a notoriously disenchanted vision, one whose central themes are dissatisfaction with modernity, exposure of the empty rituals of bourgeois British living, a candid glance at unpleasant and inescapable realities, in particular growing old and dying. True, but even in a poem that debunks middle-class rituals such as *Vers de Société* an ecological sensibility may be observed. The narrator receives a message inviting him to a tiresome drinks party, looks out of the window and sees that '*the trees are darkly swayed*'. This nice observation prompts him to develop his instinctive repulsion at an empty ritual, contrasting the tedium of an evening 'filled with forks and faces' with the true nourishment which contact with nature may afford:

hearing the noise of wind,
And looking out to see the moon thinned
To an air-sharpened blade.

Though even Larkin, a late twentieth-century writer, feels somewhat dated now, still his critique of modernity, its rejection of globalised, industrial-consumer values such as advertising, feels more actual than those advanced by any of the poets just listed. Reading a poem like 'Essential Beauty', an exposure of the empty promises of consumerism, we mentally update the images in the following lines:

Well-balanced families, in fine
Midsummer weather, owe their smiles, their cars,
Even their youth, to that small cube each hand
Stretches towards.³

Such lines, which exemplify the mindset underlying the entire poem, recall Halliday's foundational critique of the 'growth is good' mantra, which helped kick-start Ecolinguistics at the end of the last century (Halliday 2010: 165).

In this paper I explore the nature of Larkin's ecological vision which, since it is above all conveyed through language I am calling an 'ecolinguistic' vision. The term 'vision' is not used in its common sense, thus Larkin is not being held up as a visionary, an ecological saint or even an activist. Though the term does have positive connotations, it refers to something broader, an 'ideology' in the Gramscian sense:

a conception of the world that is implicitly manifest in art, in law, in economic activity and in the manifestations of individual and collective life (Gramsci 1971: 328, in Fairclough 1992: 92)

What is meant is thus an underlying attitude or way of understanding reality, which would be shared by ecological thinkers such as Arne Naess (1973), Rachel Carson (1962), Peter Singer (2023), and others. To write lines such as those of Larkin and Thomas just discussed implies a mindset that permits their authors to 'see' like this, and it is in this sense that I am using the terms vision and visionary.

Literature review

The topic of water, in various ways, has occupied recent Ecolinguistic and Ecocystic attention, in studies that underline its crucial importance as a resource for living, as a cultural symbol, as a natural element that is often taken for granted, under-represented or abused. It is worth remembering that M.A.K. Halliday, one of the early pioneers of Ecolinguistics, quoted the following poem, in his seminal address 'New Ways of Meaning' at the AILA world conference in Thessaloniki (1990). The text, in which water appears both in its literal meaning as a resource to conserve and in a figurative sense, is reprinted at the beginning of Fill and

Penz (2018). Thus, though at times under-studied in successive years, water appears as a central part of the Ecolinguistic project from the outset:

1. Instead of riding waves of hostility,
sailing on seas of global serenity
 2. Instead of describing floods and storms as Nature's vengeful days,
referring to those as Nature's unpredictable ways
 3. Instead of running in paths of material actuality,
walking wisely in sands of spirituality
 4. Instead of increasing urban pollution,
bringing about fruitful evolution
 5. Instead of environmental rights shamefully violating,
Life-enhancing-and-sustaining responsibilities accentuating
 6. Instead of all languages ecologically abusing,
their users with ecolinguistic competence infusing
 7. Instead of allowing deforestation,
turning vegetable life into a community-supported operation
 8. Instead of using water wastefully,
implementing the global right to water wisely.
 9. Instead of railing about global decay,
Showing how language waves problems away.
- (Francisco Gomes de Matos, in Fill and Penz 2018: xi).

References to water open and close the poem, and it also provides a metaphorical source of other ecolinguistic tropes ('waves of hostility', 'seas of global serenity', 'sands of spirituality', 'waves problems away'). It also refers to key themes in later Ecolinguistic thought about water, such as the way it is represented discursively (2), its role within spiritual traditions and its nurturing potential (1, 3), its centrality in discourses of political control and local identity (8).

In an already-cited paper in *Ecostylistics*, Goatly (2022) stresses the role of water in his analysis of the Heraclitean philosophy that inspires a Gerard Manley Hopkins poem. In Chrzanowska-Kluczevska's (2022) tropological study of a novel by Nobel prize winner Czesław Miłosz, the mysterious character of the river Issa, its capacity to symbolise childhood memories and Lithuanian folk-cultural knowledge, are highlighted. The river stands for old, pagan powers and Slavic deities that underlie the adoption of a 'rather superficial Christianity'.

In Ecolinguistics, too, some of these themes are taken up; Stibbe, for instance, discusses the way water is consistently represented in media as a negative weather event, identifying a 'consistent negativity towards any kind of water, whether in the form of rain, cloud, mist or humidity' (2015: 97). Against these trends he highlights more positive, ecological patterns of representation in nature writing (Stibbe 2015: 137).

A critical perspective on the role of euphemistic language features in Alexander's (2013, 2014) studies of BP's response to the Gulf of Mexico Deep Water oil spill, where official documents and press releases use the term 'the incident' to reference the catastrophe. In similar vein Ebim (2016) deals with water pollution in an image-based study of ecosystem devastation due to the activities of western

oil companies in the Niger Delta. Alexander (2018) uses corpus linguistics in a critical assessment of CocaCola's greenwashing 'water conservation' discourse, where villagers suffer from 'rapacious groundwater extraction' (Alexander 2018, 206), concluding that under capitalism water is simply commodified.

Multimodal representations of seas and the fishing industry feature in Abbamonte's (2021) study of Greenpeace promotional videos, one of which focuses on the Arctic and highlights the sustaining, nurturing presence of the oceans and their current crises. Litvinovich (2022) investigates the metaphorical framing of water and its role within conceptualisations of Belarusian national identity. She argues that the lexical node 'water' connects traditional knowledge of everyday life matters like family relations, work, emotional states, with more abstract meanings such as ideas of purity, honesty, natural beauty and the like. From a narrative and multimodal perspective Ramadan (2020) explores the cultural and religious significance of the River Nile, showing how its significance as a living, felt presence has declined under the pressures of modernity. In the context of movements for environmental justice, damage to the waters and wetlands of the Great Lakes regions of the US inhabited by the Potawatomi is the theme of Whyte (2020). The author highlights the role of water in the 'Anishinaabe water ceremony', a rite which, as we shall see below, is most relevant to Larkin's conception of the religious potentialities of water. Whyte describes 'people sharing and drinking water, and engaging in practices, such as singing, that honor the gifts of life and health that water provides'.

While recent ecolinguistic studies have thus explored water in narrative, policy, and indigenous traditions, relatively few have addressed how canonical English poetry contributes to reimagining ecological consciousness. This paper responds to that gap by examining Philip Larkin's ecological sensibility through linguistic analysis, offering a novel account of his poetic vision that foregrounds non-human agency and elemental spirituality.

Methodology

Analysis draws on diverse linguistic frameworks to explore Larkin's engagement with ecological and spiritual themes and on the place of water in his vision. Integrating pragmatic analysis, transitivity, and metaphorical framing, it probes how Larkin's language reflects his nuanced attitudes toward nature and religion in modernity. The approach is influenced by the notion of the 'active universe' (Bate 1991: 19–20, in Goatly 2017: 96), especially how different representations via systems of agency / transitivity (Simpson 2003) may convey radically different understandings of the world and its ecologies. Transitivity, described by Bloor and Bloor (2013: 33) as 'who is doing what, which way up and to whom', has the capacity for revealing presuppositions and world-views that underlie discourse. Transitivity analysis enables us to trace patterns of representation in the poetry that sideline humans and focus on the non-human world, restoring it with a dignity that it seldom enjoys, in modern consumer-capitalist societies. As Zurru (2017: 221) writes in her study of agency in the novel *The Hungry Tide*,

'Non-human entities are presented as active Participants able to have an extraordinary impact on the world around, humans included'.

A novel methodological approach advanced in this paper concerns patterns of metaphorical reference. Typically, conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson 1980) maps abstract or unfamiliar concepts in human experience (target domains) using concrete, embodied realities (source domains). For example, we understand the passage of time through metaphors like "time is money" or "time flows." This paper proposes a reversal—using human experiences as source domains to conceptualize non-human perspectives, such as attributing emotions or consciousness to trees or grass. This inversion serves as a tool for exploring non-human agency and consciousness, offering readers ways to reimagine the world from an ecological perspective.

This methodological innovation connects to ecolinguistic traditions that critique anthropocentrism (e.g., Stibbe 2015) but extends the analysis to actively center non-human participants as agents within poetic discourse. For instance, in Larkin's poem "Cut Grass," analysed more deeply below, the non-human agents (e.g., grass, clouds) are depicted with actions and attributes typically reserved for humans. This reversal of perspective invites readers to inhabit a non-human frame of reference, broadening the scope of ecological sensibility in literature.

Pragmatic analysis, including Grice's cooperative maxims (1975) and relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986), underpins the examination of implicit meanings in Larkin's poetry. For example, in "Water," the first line "If I were called in to construct a religion" subverts expectations, highlighting the poet's ironic critique of institutional spirituality and proposing an elemental, naturalistic alternative. This poem is also analysed in more depth in the following section.

Methodological framework exemplified in samples of Larkin's eco-poetry

An ecolinguistic commonplace is that humans frequently view natural objects and creatures as so many resources to be exploited in the effort to maximise human well-being (Stibbe 2015: 2–3 etc.). Grammatically, this human-centric world view is well-described in Simpson's transitivity analysis of Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea*, in a passage featuring the old man interacting with the tuna. 'Almost invariably', he writes, 'the old man is the 'doer', doing some action to some entity' (Simpson 2003: 89–90). Some nature writing disrupts these patterns, offering instead a vision of the non-human world as endowed with agency, consciousness and hence with claims to greater consideration. In the following poem by Larkin, for example, the only actual 'agents' are non-human, consisting of 'cut grass', 'mown stalks' and a 'high-built cloud':

Cut grass lies frail:
Brief is the breath
Mown stalks exhale.
Long, long the death

It dies in the white hours
 Of young-leafed June
 With chestnut flowers,
 With hedges snowlike strewn,

White lilac bowed,
 Lost lanes of Queen Anne's lace,
 And that high-built cloud
 Moving at summer's pace.⁴

There is some human activity in this poem, some connection with the human world. In (1), the very first word, 'cut' implies an activity performed by a human agent, as is also the case with 'mown' stalks (3). Moreover the onomatopoeic resonance of the adjective 'mown', with a word denoting human grief ('moan'), also links the apparently natural world of the poem with that of humans. As has been said, human mortality is a favourite theme of Larkin's, but here it is the grass that dies, whose dying 'breath' (2) is cut short, whose passing is drawn out ('long, long' (4). Especially in the first stanza, human activities (to lie (1), breathe (2), exhale (3) are applied to the grass; even 'death' (4) and 'to die' (5) are terms more generally applied to human existence than to that of grass. Other human allusions are to bowing, in line 9, 'White lilac *bowed*', and losing (10), '*Lost* lanes'.

One way of viewing the actions described in the poem as a whole is thus via a 'human death' frame, in which the first stanza depicts the brief, rapid process of the moment of death, and the rest the longer, drawn out business of lying in state, visits, funeral rituals, and the like. This frame gives a coherence to the work, since the other elements in the later stanzas (young leaves, chestnut flowers, hedges, white lilac, Queen Anne's lace, a cloud) all so-called 'natural objects', are in this sense akin to the thing that has died, and it is thus appropriate for the grass to lie among them. This interpretation also helps account for the apparently agentless 'lost lanes' of Queen Anne's lace (lost by whom?), where 'the grass' provides the only answer to this rhetorical question. The dead grass, undergoing its process of dying, is no longer aware of the summer transformations that continue around it, nor of the progress across the sky of the high-built cloud.

Thus, humans are responsible for the death that is visited upon the grass, but significantly there are no human social actors explicitly indicated. Apart from those cases mentioned above, the verbal groups are all constructed with a natural object as the explicit or implicit agent of Material processes (cut grass + lies frail, mown stalks + exhale, it + dies, white lilac + to bow, high-built cloud + to move). This lends force to the suggestion that, in this poem, Larkin was wholly concerned with events within a natural world that largely excludes humans; that his aim is to picture a natural scene, in the manner of an English landscape artist.

Let us now look at metaphor in Larkin's poetry. In *Cut Grass*, the process of human dying appears as an extended metaphor that serves the poet's purpose, which centres on the death of the grass. A common way to understand what is

going on in metaphor refers to its potential for mapping unfamiliar concepts and experiences in the human realm (the *target* domain) via meanings drawn from our familiar surroundings (*source* domain). Thus, we understand something about time via what we know about rivers, birds, money; (male) experiences with women underlie metaphors concerning fortune (*lady luck*), and so on. Such metaphors (the flow/flight of time, time is money, luck is a lady) help us conceptualise a vague, abstract part of human experience via what we are more certain of – concrete aspects of everyday life. Shakespeare conceptualised death metaphorically ('the undiscovered country from whose bourne spelling. Not bourne but bourn no traveler returns'), a thought which Larkin echoes in *Aubade*: 'the anasthetic from which none come round'.

But supposing that we reversed the direction of this metaphorical reference, using instead what we know of human life to conceptualise things of which we have no more than an inkling such as the feelings of trees, the language of birds, the colour sense of ants? Larkin does something of this in his poem *The Trees* (1974), which, though it is also concerned with human experience, resists a simple, allegorical or human-centred interpretation. As well as using the natural world to illuminate human processes, Larkin also works the other way:

The recent buds relax and spread,
Their greenness is a kind of grief.

The source domain here is something with which we are all too familiar, grief, while the target meanings Larkin is struggling to express refer to an aspect of the consciousness of the tree which, it is assumed, are characterised by – to us – inaccessible realms of analogous feelings. 'A kind of grief' is an extraordinary phrase to use concerning a tree. Its use implies that the poet regards trees as living beings with dimensions of consciousness about which we know nothing, but which may be hinted at via specific patterns of transitivity as outlined above or, as here, by metaphor. The analysis of *Cut Grass* just presented shows familiar human experiences – if dying may be called that – mapped onto natural events, with the purpose of shifting centres of consciousness away from human social actors towards participants from the non-human world. Once the point has been appreciated that Larkin, in certain moments, is as interested in the non-human world as the human, this will be an interpretative key with which the meanings of lines like the following may readily be understood:

Night moans, and trees toss
Like women in labour (*The Ships at Mylae*)

Here the understanding is that Larkin's interest centres on the movement of the trees; the idea of 'women in labour' gives him a clue about what is going on.

In the following poem, the metaphor comes from 'bathing', in the human activity of a mother, perhaps, passing a flannel over a child's forehead. These lines mingle the associations of light and water in anticipation of the poem 'Water' which will be explored further below:

On longer evenings,
Light, chill and yellow,
Bathes the serene
Foreheads of houses.

This poem (*Coming*), from the *Less Deceived*, also contains a memorable instance of the power of agency, with which the natural world is – in Larkin's ecolinguistic vision – imbued:

A thrush sings,
Laurel-surrounded
In the deep bare garden,
Its fresh-peeled voice
Astonishing the brickwork. (*Coming*)

Since to 'be astonished' is generally a human quality, this is another instance of a human-based natural metaphor as well as a focus on the thrush as Agent. But, pragmatically, the reader asks themselves – really? Can 'brickwork' be astonished? According to a traditional Hawaiian mindset, this is not impossible. Dudley (1993: 114, in Ponton 2024: 19) claims that for such folk there is no cognitive difference associated with how so-called 'animate' and 'inanimate' objects are to be treated. He says 'confronting the world about them, they experience conscious beings at every turn', and would include items such as brickwork in this category of phenomenon. I do not think that Larkin shared this perspective, but nor do I think that such lines are to be seen entirely as 'poetic license', a concept which seems out of keeping with Larkin's poetic practise. The lines may possibly be regarded as a transferred epithet – a way of saying that it is the poet who is 'astonished' by the thrush's voice. However, bearing in mind what has been argued in this section concerning the poet's interest in the natural world for itself, as having an existence beyond merely human matters, they seem to expand a traditional western perspective on phenomena towards alternative constructions of our collective habitus.

Finally, Grice's cooperative maxims (Grice 1975) and relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986) provide a foundation for examining implicit meanings in Larkin's poetry, as just exemplified in the case of the 'astonished' brickwork, where a passage of text reveals an 'ideology' - or indeed, a 'vision' - that necessarily underlies the words used. These frameworks also help reveal how Larkin subverts readers' expectations, focusing their attention on possible contradictions, provoking thought, as in the opening lines of *Water*, which will be explored in depth below:

If I were called in to construct a religion / I should make use of water.

Does it ever happen that someone is called in to construct a religion? Is this a real possibility? The negative answer to this question leaves us pondering a mystery. Larkin's words thus carry with them an immediate, implicit disclaimer:

If I were called in / to construct a religion (but of course, like you reader,
I know that this is not only extremely unlikely, but actually contradicts all
knowledge of what religions are, how they develop)

By such means readers' assumptions are challenged, the futility of institutionalized spirituality is implicitly critiqued and a more elemental, naturalistic approach is promoted.

Philip Larkin and the non-human world

Larkin was a poet who took a long time to release the three short collections on which his reputation rests; the books appeared with roughly a decade in between *the Less-Deceived* (1955), *the Whitsun Weddings* (1964) and *High Windows* (1974). The paucity of the works and the time and care taken over each individual composition invest the texts with a canonical feeling. They represent, one feels, not so much Wordsworth's 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' as a measured, reflective and deliberate expression of the poet's mature thinking; poetry more aligned with Matthew Arnold's 'criticism of life' (Arnold 1866: 6).

In this section we will look, from a thematic perspective, at some of Larkin's more explicitly ecological poetry. Though rainbows, daffodils and other rich natural symbols from Romantic nature poetry are not abundant in his work, there are many poems by Larkin in which a deep awareness of, and response to, nature may be observed. In *Going, going..*, a poem from his final collection, for instance, we find a concern for the environment whose underlying ideology is deeply ecological in the modern sense:

I thought it would last my time –
The sense that, beyond the town,
There would always be fields and farms,
Where the village louts could climb
Such trees as were not cut down

Nature, he points out, is resilient:

Things are tougher than we are, just
As earth will always respond
However we mess it about;
Chuck filth in the sea, if you must:
The tides will be clean beyond.

The idea of Gaia's indestructibility, of her ability to absorb human industrial waste, is no longer accepted by mainstream science, nor by the poet himself, who admits that this is how he *used* to think, implying that these optimistic views are no longer held. Thus, he voices here a typical ecological complaint, quite in keeping with conservationist positions in the early 1970s.

His feeling for the non-human world is manifest in a poem like *The Mower* (1979). While mowing his lawn, he accidentally kills a hedgehog in the long grass. One of his Hull library colleagues relates his deep sadness as he told of the episode.⁵ Yet this emotional response is not prominent in the poem, which has a matter of fact tone, and a complete absence of additional detail or poetical adornment:

The mower stalled, twice; kneeling, I found
A hedgehog jammed up against the blades,
Killed. It had been in the long grass.⁶

In keeping with the style of other works, the narrative is accompanied by reflection on the content; by an attempt to sum up for himself and the reader what the experience in question has meant. In this case, his comment is simply: *Next morning I got up and it did not*. The compression, the absence of any personal, sentimental response invites readers to feel their own emotions. Moreover, it is noticeable that Larkin's attention is entirely focused on the hedgehog, on what the experience has meant for it – not for what it might mean for the poet, or more generally for humanity. This point can be appreciated if comparison is made with a better-known poem that it resembles in its theme of man's impact on the life of a fellow creature, Burns' 'To a Mouse'. This poem also empathises memorably with the victim, but concludes in a way that points a moral back to the human world and away from that of nature:

But och! I backward cast my e'e,
On prospects drear!
An' forward, tho' I canna see,
I guess an' fear!

Larkin does not do this. Though he does point a moral, there is a crucial ambiguity in the closing lines:

we should be careful

Of each other, we should be kind
While there is still time.

It is left unclear whether 'we' and 'each other' refer to fellow humans – a meaning which would shift the poem towards that of Burns – or 'humans and animals'. This latter more ecological interpretation is supported by the last line 'while there is still time', which from a species loss perspective could be paraphrased: '*while there are still animals around to be careful about*'. From the point of view of an 'ecological vision' then, this poem provides some evidence that Larkin does not view humankind as in any way above the non-human world, but rather regards all living creatures as on a par. The diction is characteristically understated, avoiding anything resembling New Age ecological hyperbole; if anything this plainness adds force to the message.

In some poems, Larkin's attention is wholly absorbed by the natural world, almost to the exclusion of any human reference, as we saw in the case of *Cut Grass*, with its concentrated depiction of an English country scene, reminiscent of a Constable miniature. In like vein, in *Pigeons* (1956), he writes:

On shallow slates the pigeons shift together,
Backing against a thin rain from the west
Blown across each sunk head and settled feather.
Huddling round the warm stack suits them best

There is no ulterior motive here, no implied meanings that bring us back to the world of human concerns. The poem features the vulnerability of pigeons to cold and wet weather, which is implicitly seen as constituting, in itself, a relevant and satisfactory topic for a poem.

Alongside *the Mower* are other 'animal poems', where Larkin demonstrates qualities of sensitivity to them as beings in themselves, in the case of new-born lambs (*First Sight* 1964), dying rabbits (*Myxamotosis*, 1955) or laboratory monkeys (*Ape Experiment Room* 1988). However, *Take One Home for the Kiddies* (1964) points a clear moral, against human superficiality and cruelty in the case of pet dogs. In this poem, outrage at the final betrayal is set up by a similar sensitivity to the creatures in their natural habitats:

On shallow straw, in shadeless glass,
Huddled by empty bowls, they sleep:
No dark, no dam, no earth, no grass

Thus, the pain of abandonment is the second instance of violence they suffer, the first being removal from the nourishment of their true environments.

In *At Grass* (1955), Larkin pictures two once famous old race-horses in a field. Though the human world of race meetings is vividly, somewhat nostalgically described, the poet's attention is also on the horses as animals, and the text is full of touches that emphasise the creatures as they are in themselves, rather than as commodities in a human industry:

Do memories plague their ears like flies? / They shake their heads.
They / Have slipped their names, and stand at ease / Or gallop for what
must be joy

Again, any social criticism here is veiled and must be unpacked from an inferential realm: the horses gallop now for 'what must be joy', implying that once they were forced to gallop to satisfy the logics of human entertainment. The meadows they now stand in are called 'unmolesting', implying that these creatures are finally free from irksome human molestation; they stand 'at ease', having 'slipped their names', again implying torments suffered in the world of racing.

Already in this brief look at some of Larkin's poems with natural themes, it is possible to note some characteristics of his unsentimental sensitivity to the

natural world. Though there is absorption in nature, there is nothing romantic in this attitude. He seems to anticipate, to a degree, modern ecological movements that insist on the attribution of consciousness (Kohn 2013, Wohlleben 2016, Ponton 2023) and even personhood (Ross 2019) to non-human elements, as well as re-evoking in contemporary times the empathy with other life forms found in other Anglo nature poetry such as that of Burns, Clare⁷ and D.H. Lawrence.

Larkin, religion and water

In one of his earliest mature works, *Wedding Wind*, Larkin explores the connection between natural elements – especially wind – and the human world. The wind aids in the portrayal of a young woman's turbulent emotional state on her wedding night, and the poem concludes with the lines:

Can even death dry up
These new delighted lakes, conclude
Our kneeling as cattle by all-generous waters?

The 'new delighted lakes' illustrate once more Larkin's animism, if it can be called that, and the poet is quite ready to compare a young couple of newly weds to cattle kneeling by a rain-pool, with no loss of human dignity. The 'all-generous' waters signal the bounty of nature, while the couple's kneeling recalls a religious act. There are other religious references in the poem: 'seeing my face in the twisted candlestick', to 'the floods', and to the Book of Ecclesiastes in the lines 'under the sun'. The conclusion reminds us of the finale of one of his masterpieces, *The Whitsun Weddings*, which again uses the water of raindrops to symbolise an indefinable positive outcome:

there swelled
A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower
Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.

For this paper, the key poem in Larkin's oeuvre is one entitled simply 'water', which focuses attention on the nature of spirituality, religion and the role of natural elements, especially water and light. This short, apparently straightforward text raises many questions which it may be useful to explore from a pragmatic perspective, to show up an interplay between Larkin's highly personal understanding of religion and that of society in general. Published as part of *The Whitsun Weddings*, it comes chronologically after an earlier poem *Church going*, from his earliest collection, *The Less-Deceived*. Like *Water*, *Church going* brings Larkin's attitude to religion into focus, and at this point it will be useful to compare the two works. Larkin had an ambivalent attitude to Christianity that can be appreciated in *Church going*, a much longer meditation on the nature of religion and the role of the church in twentieth century Britain (Wales 2020). In a typical pun, he separates the two components of the word 'churchgoing', to create a meaning

beyond that of 'the practice of going to church', along the lines of 'the church is going', i.e., *disappearing, becoming an irrelevance*. Larkin's is an agnostic, uncommitted voice; in another later poem he explicitly dismisses asceticism and God as anachronistic irrelevancies in modern societies: *No one now / Believes the hermit with his gown and dish / Talking to God (who's gone too)* (*Vers de Societé*). From such lines we can see that traditional beliefs in God are not shared by Larkin. Nor does he value the social, community-building dimension of Christianity. An aversion to this is manifest from the opening of *Church going*; the narrator can only bring himself to enter the church once he is sure that 'there's nothing going on'. His critique of organised religion is summed up by the opening verse with its contemptuous, almost mocking descriptions: 'some brass and stuff', 'the holy end', 'flowers cut for Sunday, brownish now', 'a tense, musty, unignorable silence, brewed God knows how long', 'I take off my cycle-clips in awkward reverence'.

Despite these negative signals, the poem concludes more positively as Larkin reflects that he is consistently drawn to such places, that they offer seriousness ('*A serious house on serious earth it is*'), and possibilities for personal meditation ('*It pleases me to stand in silence here*'). To an extent he does after all recognise the church's social role, since in it: '*all our compulsions meet / are recognized, and robed as destinies*'.

In this earlier poem there is no hint that he values water, or even that he is aware of its centrality. He 'runs his hand' vaguely around the font, while looking up at the roof – it is simply another object in the 'accoutred frowsty barn', whose contents are listed with meticulous care: *matting, seats and stone, little books, sprawlings of flowers, brass and stuff, the small neat organ*.

Summing up, for Larkin belief in God, an after-life and all the rituals associated with Christian faith, are seen as simply more illusions by means of which humans deceive themselves into thinking that life has meaning, alongside love (see, e.g. *Love songs in age*), sex (*Love, again*), productive work (*Toads*), social rituals (*Vers de Societé*), literature (*A Study of Reading Habits*), nostalgia (*I remember, I remember*), consumerism (*Essential Beauty*), and so on. He returns to the theme in one of his last works, which distils his disenchanted, existentialist positions:

Religion used to try,
That vast, moth-eaten musical brocade
Created to pretend we never die (*Aubade*)

So then, returning to the enigmatic opening lines of *Water* (If I were called in to construct a religion) discussed above, Larkin's implicature is that Christianity is broken and a new religion required. Even in its purest form, perhaps, Christianity was only ever another collective illusion, giving temporary solace to our existential angst. For Larkin, as for Nietzsche, God 'has gone', and what remains is simply a social ritual, something musty, unhealthy, something to which few people still cling, even fewer still believe in.

From this perspective, then, it may seem more reasonable that someone may be 'called in' to construct a new religion. From this perspective, too, the brief poem *Water* may acquire a significance that such a short poem may not appear to warrant on a first reading. We may view it as expressing something essential

in Larkin's own religious sensibility, as containing the kernel of his thinking on reality in an absolute sense, the truth about living that Christianity or other faiths may once have offered but now do not.

From a pragmatic perspective another key question is why Larkin, who we suppose to have been given *carte blanche* to create exactly the kind of religion he wanted, chose to retain an element so strongly linked with traditional Christianity. Water is prominent in the Christian faith, from the earliest pages of the Old Testament ('the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters', Genesis I.ii.) to Christ's first miracle, turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana. The fish, in early Christianity, was a symbol for Christ. Water stands, in the sacrament of baptism, for regeneration and initiation, in another tradition with roots in the gospels. Not only does this choice, then, reflect Larkin's sense of the importance of water, but it shows him continuing the dialogue with Britain's traditional religion, Christianity, stripping it of its decadent, 'moth-eaten' remnants and retaining the vital parts. There are lexical terms in the poem that recall traditional Christian worship: *religion, church, litany, congregate*. Others have religious connotations:

'a furious, devout drench' – recalls the ritual immersion of baptism
'in the East' – Churches were typically built so that the altar faced this direction⁸
'any-angled light' – recalls association between light and spirituality (enlightenment)

Water occupies a central place. Larkin would have his worshippers newly baptised at every service:

Going to church
Would entail a fording
To dry, different clothes

At the heart of the service, water is the focus for a sort of contemplation:

And I should raise in the east
A glass of water
Where any-angled light
Would congregate endlessly.

The natural elements, water and light, provide the divine element in the service. That is, they stand for, or replace the deity. Larkin's 'mass' has two aspects – a preparation phase which involves the 'drenching' and changing of dress, and a contemplation phase in which the congregation focuses on light refracted in water. There is nothing more. The sparseness of the description, the absence of Larkin's characteristic poetical flourishes, emphasise the elemental purity of his concept. For Larkin, the lived experience of seeing light on water is a type of modern mysticism – it is the essence of communion with the unseen, with what in other times would have been called God.

Conclusion

One of Larkin's most often-cited qualities is his absolute honesty, a refusal to accept existential comfort blankets of any sort. Thus, we can infer that the purpose of the immersion before his water-based mass relates to the purifying function of water in Christianity. When people go to Larkin's church, they wash themselves free of false creeds of all kinds, and open to an elemental kind of religious experience that centres on contemplation. Larkin proposes a minimalist brand of spirituality which, we should note, encourages individual contemplation over collective ritual. This will not be for everyone, to put it mildly. Awareness that Larkin is abolishing at a stroke most of the most popular aspects of church-going probably account for his ironic opening salvo (If I were called in...). As we have seen, *Water* proposes a deeply personal vision that connects the celebrant with the essence of embodied life in this world, the base elements of sunlight and water, and a rarefied sense of their potential for transcendence. This vision connects in a natural way with Larkin's broader ecological sensibility. His empathy for animals, a frequent note across his oeuvre and explored above in poems like *The Mower* and *First Sight*, and growing things (*Trees*, *Cut Grass*) underscores his insistence on the intrinsic value of the natural world. In their essence, these elements, like humans, are embodied and mortal, and have exactly the same potential to resonate with the stimuli provided by light refracted in water. In *Water*, light and water are not simply passive elements but active participants in Larkin's spiritual framework. The unifying thread is his insistence on the intrinsic value of the natural world, whether in the form of a hedgehog in the grass, or light refracting endlessly in a glass of water. This holistic perspective suggests that spirituality for Larkin extends beyond his imaginary water church to everyday life, and that one of its implications may be empathetic engagement with all life forms.

As with the other false creeds identified in Larkin's poems, there is no place for the Christian 'myth-kitty'. Worshippers in his religion have to leave at the door any notion of a virgin birth, an old man in the sky, heaven and hell. There is no moral teaching, none of Dostoyevsky's 'miracle, mystery and authority'. Instead, Larkin focuses on a direct personal experience of light, aligning himself with spiritual traditions which feature the sun, on a non-theistic tradition like Buddhism with its notion of 'enlightenment', on this natural element that still holds mysteries for modern science. By inference, having ruled out as false illusions other human values, including those proposed by the church of his time, Larkin is claiming in this poem that what he describes is the 'really true', is a vision of the *hypostasis* – to use a word from another of his poems (*To my wife*), which means the 'underlying, fundamental state or substance that supports all of reality'.

There is an irony in this, given that Larkin elsewhere mocked the 'hermit with his gown and dish' (*Vers de Societé*). If he had his way, he and his followers would, after a spell practising his religion, have renounced worldly values and chosen the path of truth and light as surely as the 'patron saint of ecologists' Saint Francis of Assisi (Boerma 2002).

Larkin's is not a predictable ecolinguistic vision, though it does feature aspects that would appeal to groups like Friends of the Earth. In its essence, it emerges

through his work in a series of epiphanies, hard won by rejecting false values with their pre-packaged 'solutions' and instead accepting the self, with its realities. These include uncomfortable aspects of existence like mortality, disappointment, selfishness, failure and something, in Larkin's words, 'toad-like'. In his acceptance of the self warts and all, and in reaching out for an honest, ecological spirituality based on natural elements like light and water, Larkin points towards an ecological sensibility that has great resonance for modern times.

This paper's approach built on foundational ecolinguistic theories while introducing the idea of metaphorical reversal as a novel tool for engaging with ecological texts. By shifting the metaphorical gaze to illuminate non-human perspectives, it contributes to our understanding of the representation of non-human agency in language (Zurru 2017, Goatly 2017, 2022). This methodological innovation not only enriches the interpretation of Larkin's works but also offers broader applications for the study of ecological narratives in literature and other forms of discourse.

Notes

- ¹ Wordsworth, Tintern Abbey, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45527/lines-composed-a-few-miles-above-tintern-abbey-on-revisiting-the-banks-of-the-wye-during-a-tour-july-13-1798>, retrieved 19.09.2024.
- ² R.S. Thomas, A Day in Autumn, <https://www.poeticous.com/r-s-thomas/a-day-in-autumn>, retrieved 5/12/2024.
- ³ Essential Beauty. Online at All Poetry: <https://allpoetry.com/Essential-Beauty>, retrieved 19.09.2024.
- ⁴ Cut Grass, online at: <https://allpoetry.com/Cut-Grass>, retrieved 5/12/2024.
- ⁵ Betty Mackereth, who worked with Larkin at the Brynmor Jones Library at the University of Hull, wrote the following comment about the poem:
 "I remember too well Philip telling me of the death of the hedgehog: it was in his office the following morning with tears streaming down his face. The resultant poem ends with a message for everyone." First known when lost. Online at: <https://firstknownwhenlost.blogspot.com/2012/03/we-should-be-careful-of-each-other-we.html>, retrieved 5.11.2024.
- ⁶ Parenthetically, an eco-friendly nuance here may not be passed over. Larkin frequently makes use of ambiguity, deliberately exploiting a double meaning, as in 'Beyond all this, the wish to be alone' (Wants, 1950). Here, alongside the surface meaning, which can be paraphrased as something like 'the desire to be on one's own trumps all the pleasures of social life', one could suggest that 'the wish to be' is the key meaning, i.e. 'the only thing that really characterises us as humans is our basic desire to exist'. Similarly, with the hedgehog, the verb 'to be' may be read in its existential sense – the creature had 'been' in the long grass, it had existed, had lived. Thus, Larkin acknowledges the hedgehog fully as – in Burns' phrase – a 'fellow mortal'.
- ⁷ See PoetryParc, Online at: <https://poetryparc.wordpress.com/2018/04/03/birds-bees-and-beasts-notes-for-a-wildlife-talk/>, retrieved 11.11.2024.
- ⁸ This tradition had biblical origins: "For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be" (Matthew 24:27)

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