

## Trees Woods and Literature – 42

---

### The Trees

The trees are coming into leaf  
Like something almost being said;  
The recent buds relax and spread,  
Their greenness is a kind of grief.

Is it that they are born again  
And we grow old? No, they die too.  
Their yearly trick of looking new  
Is written down in rings of grain.

Yet still the unresting castles thresh  
In fullgrown thickness every May.  
Last year is dead, they seem to say,  
Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.

“The Trees” featured in *High Windows* which was Philip Larkin’s fourth collection of poems, published in 1974. Unlike many of his other works which tend towards bleakness, cynicism and pessimism, “The Trees” is uplifting with renewal as its central theme.

Born in Coventry in 1922, he graduated with a first-class honours degree in English from St. John’s College, Oxford. He then studied to become a librarian and took up a number of positions in this profession including in Queen’s University, Belfast, before his final appointment as librarian at the University of Hull where he worked for 30 years. In addition to poetry, Larkin was an essayist, jazz critic and novelist.

Larkin’s poetry while modern in its subject matter is traditional in technique and runs against the grain of contemporary 20<sup>th</sup> century work. Regardless of his subject matter with its high quotient of pessimism and cynicism and sexism, his work is accessible, thought provoking and at times affirming and uplifting. “The Trees” is an example of Larkin’s encounters with nature – an area he excels in, if all too briefly. Here he appears almost like a reborn Romantic poet which contrasts with the general bleakness of his English post war landscape. However, he rejected comparisons with the Romantics saying: “Deprivation is for me what daffodils were to Wordsworth.”

There may be a sense of self deprivation and self-deprecation in this remark because

“The Trees” is as much a celebration of nature as anything written by Wordsworth, Coleridge or Shelley who like Larkin were also writing against the backdrop of war. However, Larkin eschews sentimentality for hard-edged reality.

The poem opens with a flourish of seasonal optimism that spring offers: “The trees are coming into leaf / like something almost being said.” However, he falls back briefly to Larkinian doubt as the emerging greenness is depicted as “a kind of grief”. The words “kind of” deflect him from heading too far down his well-trodden road of negativity as the scene of renewal and regeneration almost drags a reluctant optimism out of Larkin; he was a poet Seamus Heaney admired too but who had reservations about what he called the “attractively defeatist proposition” contained in some of his poetry.

But he is not defeatist or defeated here, although he reminds us of our own and the trees mortality: “They die too.” He deliberately avoids the obvious visual references to determine the life of a tree – height growth, foliage, spreading branches – but records this aging process by delving deep into the hidden; the soul of the wood itself where age “Is written down in rings of grain”.

Yet for all that, Larkin is swayed by nature and lets the trees renewal close with the life affirming lines that only the best poetry can capture: “Last year is dead, they seem to say, / Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.”

Despite the efforts of some critics to pigeon hole Larking to another time “The Trees” is timeless. That it is written in traditional rhyming iambic tetrameter for the most part in four stresses, provides a rhythmic force. It stands up as a hymn to nature from start to finish and its rhyming ABBA four-lined stanzas give it a musical energy.

Larkin wasn’t a nature poet in the sense of Frost or Wordsworth because he too obsessed with the self for much of his poetry to explore the wilderness beyond Hull although he loved the English countryside. The archetypal English curmudgeon, he detested “abroad” and had little time for travel, rarely leaving England. He once agreed to visit China, only if he could come back the same day.

But like the painter Rembrandt who only rarely left Amsterdam, he finds enough inspiration in his own locale. In “The Trees” Larkin may be observing a grove or parkland trees from his window to kick-start the muse. Elsewhere, he relies on memory and creative imagery to position him in a forest for one of his shortest poems “XXVI” usually titled “This is the first thing” from his collection *The North Ship*:

This is the first thing  
I have understood:  
Time is the echo of an axe  
Within a wood.

Here he writes from an imaginary woodland inscape where sound is the metaphor for time. The axe may represent the brutality of war, but its echo also depicts the continuum of woodland life from the old to the new world that would emerge after

World War II which raged about him at the time of writing. Even the Roman numerals in the title and companion poems hark to an earlier invasion. Larkin volunteered for army service but due to his poor eyesight, he failed his military medical examination.

It is essential to separate the poet from the poetry when assessing Larkin. Critics have portrayed him as a misogynist and a racist although recent biographers have been more tolerant highlighting his generosity and kindness. “The Trees” along with poems such as “Church Going”, “An Arundel Tomb” and “Autumn” display a tenderness and empathy. He believed passionately that poetry should communicate and give pleasure to the reader. He maintained that like all art, poetry “is inextricably bound up with giving pleasure, and if a poet loses his pleasure-seeking audience, he has lost the only audience worth having...”. “The Trees” is therefore popular with audiences and critics because it cares about beauty and truth which are appreciated by both poet and audience.

The poet, novelist, essayist and critic Clive James acknowledged Larkin’s faults but concluded:

There might not, at first blush, seem to be much joy in him; but he gets the whole truth of life’s transience into unforgettably beautiful poetry, and it is hard to think of a greater source of joy than that.

Philip Larkin died on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1985 aged 63.

Donal Magner  
Wicklow