

Research Space

Conference paper

**“A few green leaves can make such a difference”: Pym, Larkin
and Rural Retirement**

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“A few green leaves can make such a difference”: Pym, Larkin and Rural Retirement

Most here, if not all, will be aware of Barbara Pym’s long correspondence with the poet Philip Larkin. Their correspondence began on the 16th of January 1961 with a polite enquiry: “Dear Miss Pym, I wonder if you are preparing to publish another novel soon?”. The letters would continue until Pym’s death in the January of 1980. Three years prior to her death, she would be twice nominated as “the most underrated author of the 20th century” by both Larkin and Lord David Cecil; this would re-direct public attention onto Pym, if only for two more full years.

Her final novel, *A Few Green Leaves*, would be published posthumously in 1980. While often considered a somewhat *lesser* novel, Paul Bailey, reviewing the novel in *The Observer* notes that it “shows no signs of having been written against the clock” and continues to comment that it is “notable, rather, for the quiet confidence of its unhurried narrative”. *A Few Green Leaves* first appeared in draft in early 1979, written with the author’s transition from London to Oxfordshire in mind and features some undeniably autobiographical elements. The novel would be Pym’s final swansong, containing elements of her lived experience and all that she had observed. The novel’s protagonist, Emma Howick, is a middle-aged anthropologist whose observations of the village folk mould and alter the reader’s own perception. Emma, is the primary observer in the novel and in her descriptions, illustrates a set of characters who embody village life in England; there is a co-dependency between them, notably between Tom the lonesome rector and his parish. Yet, “*Further research* [is] *needed*” before a conclusion of them can be had. Although the dedication notes on “this story of an imaginary village”, there are various parallels to be drawn with Pym’s own introduction to rural life. This “imaginary village” holds a similar narrative to *all* English villages, with each character in the novel taking roles of Durkheim’s organ analogy: each character needs to function in order for the *village* to function. In a letter to Larkin on May 29th, 1972, Pym writes: “Quite a lot of news since I last wrote! My sister and I have bought a cottage at Finstock (14 miles N.W. of Oxford)”. Like in the “imaginary village”, Pym’s letters mention “a coffee morning in aid of the church” and a “jumble sale in aid of our local history society” and it becomes apparent that this village is traced from Pym’s reality. *A Few Green Leaves*, with its many components of autobiography, opens on the first page to “the Sunday after Easter”, or “Low Sunday, Emma believed it was called”. Easter, as we all know, is a period of rebirth, much like Pym’s relocation to rural Oxfordshire. For Barbara Pym, art imitates life and as literary critic Anthony Kaufman states, she “transmutes her own personal emotional situation” into fiction, becoming the central figure in her novels. Yet, with Emma Howick, there is the noticeable difference of age and temperament, a difference which distinguishes Pym from her semi-fictional self. Unlike the *égoïste* Leonora Eyre in *The Sweet Dove Died*, Miss Howick is able to sustain a modest sympathy for others, while sustaining her critical, anthropological eye.

“Spring, of all seasons most gratuitous/
Is fold of untaught flower, is race of water,
Is earth’s most multiple, excited daughter;
And those she has least use for see her best,
Their paths grown craven and circuitous,
Their visions mountain-clear, their needs immodest”.

In Larkin’s work, the floral often comes to bloom. Quoted here are the final two stanzas of his poem ‘Spring’, first published in *The Less Deceived*. It can be seen both as a commentary on the fragility of spring and the fragility of youth, or the “untaught flower”. Like the beginning of *A Few Green Leaves* and its commencing on Low Sunday, Larkin is also presenting a birth and a beginning. The “multiple, excited daughter” of spring is personified, humanised as selfless and likened to invasive flora: her purpose is growth, her “needs immodest”. Spring, in her humanised form, can be likened to Emma Howick; the narrative orbits around her needs and whether modest or immodest and they both exist for creation, be it for “*Further research*” or floral growth. In the 1964 episode of ‘Monitor’, John Betjeman states his preference of the “saplings of sycamore, nettles, elder in among the tombstones” over the “neat-ordered housing estate of the new cemetery”; Larkin responds, stating that “it gets me into perspective, it gets my worries into perspective”. One could almost say that to Larkin, “a few green leaves can make such a difference”.

In Larkin’s second novel *A Girl in Winter*, first published by Faber & Faber in 1947, a rural escape proves remedial for the protagonist Katherine Lind. The novel begins with perhaps the finest description of an English winter in the twentieth century:

“There had been no more snow during the night, but because the frost continued so that the drifts lay where they had fallen, people told each other there was more to come. And when it grew lighter, it seemed that they were right, for there was no sun, only one vast shell of cloud over the fields and woods”.

What follows is an account of the tedium in her life and her gruelling experience at a provincial lending library. The novel is divided into three sections, the first and third being in winter. These sections frame the central narrative of Katharine's first visit to England, preceded and proceeded with an account of her experiences here. The centre section is an account of her first trip to England from a long-debated native country; most suspect Germany, due to her "small Olympic badge" and the 1936 Nazi Olympics being in near *media-res*. Her visit is prompted by correspondence with young gentleman Robin Fennel, who appears by name in the first section and in body, the third. Upon her arrival, an account of her lodgings is given: "She liked the room; crossing to the window, she looked out from the side of the house onto a small lawn edged by poplar trees [...]. She thought she could hear water, but decided after a few moments that it was only the unfamiliar hush of silence in the country". To Katharine, pastoral living is unfamiliar and at the Fennel residence, the nearest mark of civilisation is accessible only by punt or car. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, states that the adolescent girl "will devote a special love to Nature: still more than the adolescent boy, she worships it. [...] when she takes possession of it, she also proudly takes possession of herself". Katherine, with Eveian curiosity, is inquiring on pastoral landscape of England and there is a trifling account, in which she "got up and went out quietly into the clouded daybreak", discovering "a small frog in the grass, stuck to immobility by her presence". This extract ends in self-reflection, with Katherine wishing "this new love [to] be taken off her before it betrayed her into actions she could regret". One could state that she is exercising a "special love to Nature", taking possession of it and thus taking possession of herself. Some years later, she re-ignites her correspondence with the Fennels, reminded of the way "all had collapsed" with Robin. The novel concludes just as it had begun, with a description of winter. This description, now given context, also describes the "moving from darkness further into darkness" of their relationship; now back in the present and with all paradise lost.

Where Larkin presents pastoral England as desolate and lost, Pym frequently notes the many comforts of country living. If not the church "organising a clothes sale" or "the history society [and] its monthly meetings", then Pym's letters would discuss literary matters and would often describe her floral surroundings. She described her village life as being "very full" and often with little time for true retirement. Larkin himself never retired and would remain the Hermit of Hull until his death in 1985. Hull would be immortalised in the poem 'Here': "Here domes and statues, spires and cranes cluster/ Beside grain-scattered streets, barge-crowded water". Almost all of the following poetry would be written from the rented attic room of 32 Pearson Park and the reality of Mr Bleaney would commence. Larkin would live on the edge of things, solely for his post as librarian at the Brynmor Jones Library, often with the thought of retirement as something unreachable. It was his *timor mortis*, or fear of death, which made retirement seem a mere impossibility. Larkin often confided in his nearest and dearest with these fears, and to his "loaf-haired secretary" Betty Mackereth, he states "I can't understand why you, on waking in the morning, don't think of death". In a letter, he enclosed to Pym a copy of 'Aubade', or "the fear-of-death thing" as he called it. Pym responds directly to the poem, rather than the letter itself and produces the unheard response one can imagine from Mackereth: "When I wake in the small hours I don't think of death, I always try to switch my thoughts to something frivolous like clothes or planning a scene in a novel". Pym's mind appears at ease with death, yet one can't overlook Pym's "always try[ing]" to switch her thoughts. For those who are unfamiliar with 'Aubade', I will read the first stanza:

"I work all day, and get half-drunk at night./ Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare./ In time the curtain-edges will grow light./ Till then I see what's really always there:/ Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,/ Making all thought impossible but how/ And where and when I shall myself die."

The poem ends with a visionary ending, typical of Larkin's work. I term visionary endings as an expression of both form and sentiment; the poetry often ends with obscure, yet seemingly rational expressions, and within the body of the poem, there is an array of conclusions. The lines "This is what we fear – no sight, no sound,/ No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,/ Nothing to love or link with,/ The anaesthetic from which none come round." are themselves a conclusion, but not in form. James Booth notes that "The anaesthetic from which none come round" is not a figure of speech, but "from the Greek *an-aesthesia*, the negation of the senses". Amidst the contemplation of death, the poem rests on an image of light and the "sky is white as clay". Andrew Swarbrick terms these obscure lines as "metaphysical absolutes, [or] states of being imagined". The final couplet of 'Aubade', in literal meaning, notes the impossibility of retirement: "Work has to be done./ Postmen like doctors go from house to house". It is here that the "toad work" squats on his life. Booth notes that "with 'Aubade' he consciously signalled that his oeuvre was complete, and his creative life is over" and while this is indeed true, work still had to be done. 'Aubade' flirts with the possibility of escapism, beginning and ending with death, but in places concerned with an alternative; this resonates with *A Girl in Winter* some three decades prior. Like 'Aubade', it begins and ends with work, the central section being concerned with the alternative of pastoral England.

For most, failure to retire is often due to one's financial situation, but not for Larkin. In 'Money', he expresses dissatisfaction with economy: "You can't put off being young until you retire,/ And however you bank your screw, the money you save/ Won't in the end buy you more than a shave". This is the sole mention of 'retirement' in Larkin's poetic oeuvre, accurate at least to *Collected Poems* edited by Anthony Thwaite. It is a scornful yet comical commentary on money, illustrating the struggles of the everyman. Larkin himself left behind a large estate and could, if he reached retirement, indeed "buy more than a shave". Pym retired when she moved to Finstock, retiring from the International African Institute, marking near three decades in the post and two decades of editing the anthropological journal *Africa*. Larkin himself made a few appearances in Finstock, with a visit in 1976 leaving Pym to reflect: "Philip Larkin came to tea then walked up to the church to see the T.S. Eliot memorial. So, two great poets and one minor novelist came for a brief moment (as it were) together. Philip took photos of us all with two cats outside the cottage". While it was a passing visit with Monica Jones, this meeting is loosely translated in *A Few Green Leaves*, with Emma Howick thinking "a little Eliot, a line of Larkin" inadequate solace. Reflecting on Pym's funeral, the T.S. Eliot memorial makes a second appearance in a letter to Anthony Thwaite: "It took place in the parish church, where T.S. Eliot was baptised in 1927 [...]. I regret her death very much; we used to correspond. Even at the funeral I found myself looking forward to getting a letter from her describing it all". Here Larkin tells of the strength of their correspondence, their mutual literary interest and their shared friendship. Larkin begins the letter to Thwaite with financial matters, ending the paragraph with "I have a sore throat and don't feel at all cheerful": the inevitable was in sight.

An unlikely friend to animals, Larkin had a strong animal empathy; from 'At Grass', 'Take One Home for the Kiddies' and finally, 'The Mower', his empathy becomes a likeness, or rather an identification with the animal. The latter mention poem, 'The Mower', is a touching elegy on the death of a hedgehog. A steward to his unfavourably large garden, Larkin duly cared for the lawn and in June of 1979, a life was "mauled [...] unmendably". The poem narrates this death: "The mower stalled, twice; kneeling, I found/ A hedgehog, jammed up against the blades./ Killed". Often, animal poetry is made up of symbolism or deep metaphor, a notable example being T.S. Eliot's 'The Hippopotamus'. Larkin's poem is simply a touching elegy to an unobtrusive soul and a very real one indeed. Monica Jones expressed to Andrew Motion that after the "mower stalled", he had "come in from the garden howling. He was very upset.". It seems, on surface merely trivial that Larkin should mourn so strongly, yet it was his aforementioned *timor mortis* which dictated 'The Mower' and the realisation that "Next morning I got up and it did not". Larkin became mortally aware of himself and others, illuminating the sentiment in the final three lines: "we should be careful/ Of each other, we should be kind/ While there is still time". The poet mourns all living things, transferring sentiment from animal to man and in 'Cut Grass', to the grass itself: "Cut grass lies frail:/ Brief is the breath/ Mown stalks exhale./ Long, long the death/ It dies in the white hours/ Of young-leaved June/ With chestnut flowers". The poem concludes with, as previously discussed, a visionary ending, with the "high-built cloud/ Moving at summer's pace", again exercising that the poet's mind shifts to the importance of elsewhere.

In *A Few Green Leaves*, Daphne, Tom the rector's older sister, contemplates the natural landscape (and animalia) with a similar lens to Larkin. In just the first chapter, there are several mentions of flowers, be it bluebells, or daffodils and their "Wordsworthian exuberance"; Miss Lee expresses her favour of the daffodils, but Daphne presents a dependency on the growth of the bluebells. The first typescript of *A Few Green Leaves* reads "'One goes on in the hope of seeing another spring,' Daphne said with a rush of emotion", whereas the first edition reads "Oh, but soon there'll be bluebells in these woods – another reason for surviving the winter". Daphne's dedication to her brother and her "annual Greek holiday" were her sole reason for living and throughout the novel she grasps for other possibilities, be it a dog or a move to Birmingham. There is something quite farcical about Daphne and all her Grecian passions relocating to Birmingham, her brother agrees, "burst[ing] out laughing" at the first mention. While Larkin did not move to Birmingham, and would most likely have reacted similarly to Tom at the thought, he was aware of the importance of elsewhere. It was that in the poem of the same title that expressed, wherever it may be, "no elsewhere underwrites my existence". First drafted in 1954, the poem would be published a decade later in *The Whitsun Weddings*. This highlights that a decade later, the thoughts of elsewhere would remain valid, yet the "Strangeness made sense". The elsewhere in question is of course Northern Ireland, written while holding post of sub-Librarian at Queens University Belfast. While the poem outlines the need for escapism and indeed elsewhere, the speaker finds comfort when thinking about his "customs and establishments" of England. There is a desire in 'Poetry of Departures' to up and leave it all, yet the commitments of vocation root him to the ground.

In his 1982 interview with *The Paris Review*, Larkin remarks that "It's unlikely that I shall write any more poems"; poetry had left him. In two letters to Barbara Pym, written three years apart, Larkin states that "Poetry has deserted me". The phrase "Poetry has deserted me" indicates that it was entirely one-sided. In each of these cases, the first in 1964 and the second in 1967, there is also little truth. Larkin would still publish numerous

poems, not forgetting *High Windows* in 1974. In the late 1970s, poetry did indeed desert him, but librarianship marched onwards. There are various components to consider here. The first one reverts us to Larkin's *timor mortis* as alluded to in 'Aubade'. His father, Sydney Larkin, died in 1948 aged 63 of oesophageal cancer; this would influence Larkin's *timor mortis* further, believing himself that he would die aged 63. In 1961, he writes to Monica Jones: "You know what horrors are associated with livers for me, through my father". What manifested in Larkin was a severe health anxiety, an anxiety which tragically proved true. He, like his father died aged 63 of oesophageal cancer.

Published in the same year as *High Windows* was Kingsley Amis's "wild[ly] and cruelly funny" novel *Ending Up*. In this chilling comic commentary of age, Amis presents the grim retirement of many. While indeed a comic novel, each of the elderly characters meet their geriatric death, with chapter forty beginning:

"Nobody except the postman, who noticed nothing out of the ordinary, came to Tuppeny-hapenny Cottage for several days, because nobody else had reason to: no milkman arrived to find bottles not taken in, no shop keeper missed Adela's custom, and Keith having conscientiously tried to telephone his wife's grandmother with news of his success and failed to get through, had assumed that Adela was once more neglected to pay the bill and had been cut off".

Several things are of note here. The first being an indirect rejection of Larkin's visionary ending in 'Aubade'. While the postman and milkman continued to arrive and depart, there is no "Work [...] to be done". Larkin yearns for a continuation whereas the final two pages of *Ending Up* present a finality. Each character is not known to be dead until Stanley with his "North American accent" finds Bernard, a face he only "knew from photographs" deceased and covered in leaves. They are not missed. On one hand, one could see this as a visionary ending and, if I am tentative here, Amis could be hinting at Romantic themes with Bernard "Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,/ With rocks, and stones, and trees". Yet, it is startlingly obvious that Amis is conjuring his *own* reality of retirement and that is, like Larkin's, abandonment. In Keith we see the inability to reach family ("no sight, no sound") and share good news and in Adela, we see a belligerence to rising economy. These are themes which Larkin himself contributes to in his work, as seen in 'Money' and of course 'Aubade'. This portrait of age comes from a novelist who, famously states that "No pleasure is worth giving up for the sake of two more years in a geriatric home". But, is it reliable?

Flicking again to the retirement of Barbara Pym, we see her following a well-established template, something which Larkin lacked in his parents. As discussed, Pym's retirement from the International African Institute was followed by her and her sister Hilary retiring to rural Oxfordshire. Here, they both lived out their final years as spinsters, both without family of their own. It was a modest end to a modest life. Unlike Larkin, writing did not leave Pym and it remained her purpose for living until her death. Larkin, now in his sixtieth year and living at 105 Newland Park, his "ugly little house", would begin living for others. In 1983, a letter to Kingsley Amis reads "the last four months have been fucked up by poor Monica getting shingles"; while not married, nor retired, Larkin would become primary caregiver for Monica Jones until his own end. Alongside her own illness, she became "absolutely marvellous" to him. Patient, supportive and stoical, she became a beacon in Larkin's dying day. He had, in fact, "henceforth pledged himself to Monica" in 1978, but it was the reality of extinction which brought them closer. On the 2nd of December 1985, Larkin went to the inevitable, leaving Monica to "retire into seclusion".

I think the death of Philip Larkin is perhaps the *only* way to conclude this talk. Whist I concluded that Larkin lived out his life for others, it is arguable that Pym followed a similar narrative. Her final days in retirement were stoical in the face of death and diligent in the face of literature. In her final full-length letter to Philip Larkin, there are mentions of her finishing her "country novel" and her "writing this in bed" due to the "inexorable progress of this 'tumour'" - chronologically, the literature comes first. At the beginning of this talk I noted that that *A Few Green Leaves* is considered a somewhat *lesser* novel, it *should* be remembered as the coda to the great literary legacy of Barbara Pym. It is in *A Few Green Leaves* that Pym makes a visionary ending of her own, an ending to which I think the words of Geoffrey Trease are more suited: "It is as though she had forgotten the bitterness of the wilderness [literary neglect], begun to enjoy her belated recognition, (and whatever the state of her health was) worked on with new confidence and zest. A writer benefits from appreciation as well as adversity. So, though this posthumous book is most regrettably her last, its quality can be rated empathically Pym's No.1".

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