

Canon and Blues: Diverse Influences on Philip Larkin's "Aubade"

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When considering writers who represent diversity, in terms of work as well as their life, one rarely encounters Philip Larkin. Especially after the publication of his collected correspondence, Larkin's reputation seems to have been cemented as that of a crotchety conservative, an upholder of traditional verse as well as traditional values. Such a way of viewing Larkin the man, it should be stated, is not necessarily incorrect (his letters abound, after all, in expressions of admiration for Margaret Thatcher, subtle jabs at modernist literature, and even some casual racism). When applied to his poetry, however, this way of viewing him is not only reductive and simplistic but downright incorrect. Much in Larkin's poetry suggests that he was not a complete literary conservative, but that, in crafting his unique and nuanced work, he drew on varied elements from canonical literature, modernism, and even the popular blues music of his time.

Although Larkin wrote four distinct volumes of poetry, and many uncollected poems, this analysis shall focus on one poem, "Aubade," which is arguably the most representative of his entire work. It came to fruition in 1977, near the end of Larkin's life, a period of nearly total creative stagnation. Thus, "Aubade" is perhaps his dreariest and most pensive poem, a bleak and candid reflection on the inescapability of death. As with many of his poems, it is at first glance a simple work with a simple theme; however, it reveals upon closer examination that he was not the typical, homogeneous English poet he is sometimes made out to be.

The Movement

Some (though not all) of the context needed to understand the origins of "Aubade" can be derived by understanding the literary movement Larkin belonged to, at least during his early career: "the Movement." "The Movement" is characterized as embodying "a general post-war period of reconstruction" in its approach to literature.¹ Movement poets sought a "return to traditional forms and regular structures of rhyme and rhythm," just as the English were seeking a restructuring of their society after the devastating events of the second World War.² This, supposedly, meant a turning away from the modernist aesthetics of pre-war American poets like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound in favor of newer, simpler verse (whether

or not Larkin himself completely avoided Eliot's influence in particular shall be examined later).

Larkin seemed to embody the Movement's aesthetic of simplicity not only in his poetry but in his humble working life as a librarian in the northern coastal town of Hull. He never had pretensions about being upper-class, and in fact seems to have been quite opposed to the stuffy, snobbish attitude that upper-class Englishmen (and especially Englishmen of letters) embody. His working-class sensibilities entailed a "lifelong enthusiasm for jazz," as well as an "irreverent rejection of the pieties associated with 'highbrow' arts."³ His personal artistic ethos was one of understandability: he wanted to write poetry that even England's uneducated laity could relate to and comprehend.

The very first line of "Aubade" is one that any working-class man, from any country for that matter, could perhaps relate to: "I work all day, and get half-drunk at night" (1).⁴ The rhythms and diction of the beginning of "Aubade" in particular are stark and simplistic, following strict iambic pentameter and consisting largely of monosyllabic words, thus maximizing its accessibility even to those who have no idea what the words "iambic" and "monosyllabic" mean. However, one should not be tricked by the gambit of simplicity at the poem's beginning, and thereby underestimate the ways in which "Aubade" is more than it seems. For, despite Larkin's publicly expressed wish that his poetry be simple and pure, almost as if it originated in a vacuum, much in this last great poem of his suggests the contrary.

Tradition and the Western Canon

The very title of "Aubade" goes against the philosophy that Larkin, and by extension the Movement, supposedly upheld. Rowe is quick to point out the French origin of the title, something that is rare for Larkin as he usually "took the official Movement line on foreign cultures;"⁵ namely, that to reference or use any language other than English was something of a *faux pas*. Sometimes the *mot juste* simply does not exist in English, which is ostensibly the case for "Aubade," a word that no one who has not studied literature extensively (whether they be upper, middle, or lower class) will fully comprehend.

Osborne defines an aubade in these terms: "a type of lyric in which (i) a narrator of one sex (ii) sings a love song (iii) to a member of

the opposite sex (iv) at dawn..."⁶ By this definition, Larkin's "Aubade" seems to be a traditional aubade only in the sense that it takes place at dawn.⁷ While it is not necessary to know the definition, etymology, and history of its title to enjoy or even understand "Aubade," possessing this information opens the poem up to further interpretation. The word "love" is used only twice in "Aubade," first in relation to remorse ("the love not given" (12)), second in explicit relation to death ("Nothing to love or link with" (29)), making Larkin's poem an ironic subversion of the traditional form.⁸ In Larkin's world, love is not only powerless in the face of death, but subordinate to it. Love is not even considered as a means of escaping or conquering death, whereas other means are considered and duly met by Larkin with acerbic skepticism.

Critical attention seems to be most often directed at "Aubade's" atheistic view of religion, a "vast, moth-eaten musical brocade," (23) but Larkin also examines and dismisses classic philosophical methods of confronting death, albeit in terms that the layman may easily digest.⁹ In addition to religion, "Aubade" also takes aim at two major Greek philosophical systems, Epicureanism and Stoicism, though neither is mentioned by name in the poem. Only the most basic ideas of these two philosophies are suggested and criticized, with the Epicurean viewpoint on death being the first to visit the examination table. "Aubade" finds "an aporia in the proposition that '*No rational being / Can fear a thing it will not feel*'..." a way of looking at death that is central to Epicurean philosophy.¹⁰ Larkin turns this sentiment on its head by arguing that "losing the means to feel is precisely 'what we fear.'"¹¹ Speaking of death in these distanced terms is tantamount to an attempt to escape or deny it, making it little better than religion's explicit denial of death in favor of an afterlife. For Larkin, the sheer emotional horror of death should not be overlooked but faced—although we also cannot face it with a so-called "stoical" attitude.

With regards to Stoicism, "Aubade" is at odds with this philosophy in both its ancient and modern conceptions. Original Stoicism could indeed have passed as a religion or cult, and one of the main Stoic beliefs was "that death is not the losing of life but the returning of it to its Creator."¹² It may not fall into the category

of “moth-eaten musical brocade” (an epithet obviously aimed, most of all, at Christianity), but it still seems to be an idea that the speaker of “Aubade” would find suspect. Equally suspect is modern Stoicism, which is defined as an attitude of “courage or fortitude, indifference to pain or fear,” an attitude that hardly fits this poem’s speaker.¹³ The poem contradicts these sentiments with lines that are brimming with an almost sing-song mockery: “Being brave / Lets no one off the grave” (38-39).¹⁴ Courage in the face of death is something to be treated sneeringly. Any expressed lack of fear in the face of death is most likely a pretense; everyone possesses at least a modicum of said fear, and denying it is pointless. So much for philosophy. With “Aubade,” Larkin firmly maintains that the philosophies of antiquity, as revered and influential as they are, and with their notions of rationality and indifference, offer no true respite against the overwhelming terror of death.

As if incorporating and then subverting classical Greek philosophy in his poetry were not enough, Larkin does the same for the most revered English writer of all time: William Shakespeare. It needs hardly to be said that, at least when one writes in English, one cannot avoid Shakespeare’s influence—nor, for that matter, avoid comparison to him, especially when one’s verse becomes as well-known and potentially canonical as Larkin’s is. Larkin, naturally, was aware of all this. Many of his earlier poems use phrases and expressions culled directly from Shakespeare, though the material is often treated with a “schoolboy irreverence” as in the poem “Toads,” where “the desire to shout ‘*Stuff your pension!*’ to one’s employer is ‘the stuff / That dreams are made on.’”¹⁵ Larkin’s attitude towards Shakespeare could perhaps be seen as that of a sort of working-class jokester who, while acknowledging Shakespeare’s indispensability, is still not afraid to poke fun.

Parallels may also be drawn between Larkin and the most famous of Shakespeare’s characters, Hamlet. These two are similar in that they can both be equally “melancholy and sardonic” and both have an obsession with death that can best be observed in Larkin’s “Aubade” and Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy.¹⁶ However, Larkin still finds ways to differ from the greatest creation of the greatest English writer. “For Hamlet, Epicurus works; the thought of absolute annihilation cures his fear of death,” whereas for Larkin no such remedy exists, least of all in ancient Greek philosophy.¹⁷ In Larkin’s case, death is also explored with an intense, autobiographical candor (“Aubade”, whose first word is “I,” testifies to this), whereas Shakespeare creates a character who may or may not be autobiographical to think about death for him. Larkin’s poetic approach to death is unique; it is distinct, though perhaps not fundamentally different, from Shakespeare’s.

Modernism...?

Though Larkin’s own personal way of incorporating and subverting tradition in his poetry is unique, the very act of incorporation and subversion is not. To assert the contrary would be to ignore one of the most fruitful literary movements in history, modernism, which, in poetry, has arguably its greatest representative in T.S. Eliot. Larkin’s attitude towards Eliot seems to have been somewhat ambivalent, judging at least by his letters and critical writings, although he has had much to say about other notable representatives of modernism, one of whom is almost incessantly named alongside Eliot. He expresses a bald “dislike of Pound and Picasso,” in the introduction to *All What Jazz*, his collection of music reviews, and further inveighs against the entire modernist movement, as represented not only by Pound in poetry and Picasso in visual art but by Charlie Parker in music, by saying that “it helps us neither to enjoy nor endure.”¹⁸ (One wonders if the same argument could not also be made against “Aubade” itself.) In any case, Larkin’s expressed disdain for modernism would appear to preclude the influence of Eliot.

Yet dislike for a literary movement or artist is not enough to escape their impact, especially when they have been as impactful as Eliot has. The Movement may have designated Eliot the official status of *bête noire*, but unofficially his influence still seems to sift its way into the work of Larkin, supposedly the most representative poet of the Movement. Russell finds the most prevalent convergence of Eliot with Larkin in “Aubade,” arguing that the line “[t]he anaesthetic from which none come round’... has clearly borrowed from Eliot’s vision of the evening ‘Like a patient etherized upon a table’ in ‘Prufrock.’”¹⁹ One wonders, however, if this image was so “clearly borrowed.” Has Larkin intentionally lifted this image from Eliot’s *second* most well-known poem, or has he simply come up with a similar (not the same) image unconsciously? Furthermore, if the former is the case, might this also be categorized as a “subversion,” in the vein of the more obvious, aforementioned subversions of canonical work?

In any case, an Eliot influence on Larkin, and especially on “Aubade,” cannot now be dismissed too easily. Their poetry shares not only extremely broad themes of death but narrower themes of the dehumanizing effects of modernity and city life—although the degree of subtlety with which Larkin and Eliot each approach these themes varies. Both “Aubade” and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” concern themselves with these themes, but (and here Larkin’s distance from Eliot may be observed) they do so from opposite viewpoints. A younger man is clearly the speaker of Eliot’s “Prufrock,” a man who recognizes death but only as a remote certainty, embodied for him chiefly in the thinning of one’s hair. Although

the rough age of the speaker in “Aubade” is not so easily estimated, it seems hard to imagine death is as remote for him, especially in the lines “Not to be here, / Not to be anywhere, / And soon...” (18-20).²⁰ It bears repeating that Larkin wrote these lines when (though he did not know it at the time) he had less than a decade to live, whereas Eliot composed “Prufrock” when he was still young, with *The Waste Land* still ahead of him—a work that would appear to bear even less of an influence on Larkin.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to imagine a Larkin without Eliot, or for that matter, Larkin without modernism in general. That which he viewed negatively still had an effect on him, and in some ways his entire oeuvre including “Aubade” can be viewed as an answer to modernism (whether or not it is a *refutation* of modernism is contentious). One would be remiss however to focus mainly on things that Larkin himself viewed either negatively or ambivalently (some of which may have landed in his poetry only subconsciously), because, contrary to appearances, there were some things that he enjoyed and which influenced him. Larkin, like any adequate poet before him, did not find inspiration solely in the antiquated or even in the recent past, but also in the present, in the form of the popular jazz and blues music of his time.

Jazz and Blues

An appreciation for jazz had possessed Larkin from a young age, although his love for it is sometimes seen as peculiar. In his biography of Larkin, Booth writes that “[for] Larkin jazz was a private passion, shared with a small number of male friends. He never tired, in particular, of the ‘inexhaustible vitality of the blues’...”²¹ One would hardly expect Larkin, whose poetry in addition to his personal demeanor seems so saturnine, to be associated with something that possesses an “inexhaustible vitality.” And yet this phrase belongs to Larkin himself; it is culled from *All What Jazz*. Larkin’s admiration for jazz and blues was deep and sincere, and the influence of this music upon him may be observed not only in *All What Jazz* but in his poetic work.

The simplicity of certain types of jazz and blues songs especially affected Larkin’s poetry: “The twelve-bar blues formula, that modern version of the ancient aubade...gave him the example of a strict but infinitely variable artistic discipline: for all its formal simplicity it is rarely monotonous.”²² “Formal simplicity” would appear to be the key phrase here, another quotation from *All What Jazz*, the introduction to which has already been acknowledged above as a key text for Larkin’s aesthetic philosophy, in poetry as well as jazz. His stance against jazz with modernistic tendencies, as exemplified by Parker, Davis and Coltrane, was firm. Jazz

after Coltrane “started to be ugly on purpose”; it was characterized by “chaos, hatred and absurdity,”²³ and while one could make the case that “hatred” can sometimes be found in Larkin’s poetry, “chaos” and “absurdity” seem mostly to be absent. Chaos and absurdity preclude accessibility for Larkin, which is arguably his central aesthetic tenet. The jazz and blues influences in Larkin’s poetry, rather than muddling the message of the poem, serve to make the message even clearer and more digestible for the average reader.

Leggett provides a detailed analysis of the blues influences in Larkin’s last great poem, arguing that “‘Aubade’ is not a blues, but...we can trace its strength to the blues.”²⁴ “Aubade” would, in other words, be a radically different (and probably less interesting) poem without the influence of blues music flowing through it. Leggett pays special attention to the first line of “Aubade,” with its dab iambic pentameter and its references to “[w]orking and drinking,” both of which “are...common properties of the blues.”²⁵ These coarse, simplistic terms are blues terms. A more traditional poem (a more *poetic* poem, one might even say) would certainly have found more eloquent ways of phrasing these subjects, if it decided to portray them at all. Larkin, however, is not concerned with being flowery, or with veiling the essential meaning of his lines. He, like many blues musicians, wishes to state the situation as matter-of-factly as possible. It is here that his poetry differs drastically not only from his modernist predecessors but from even earlier relatives like Hardy or Yeats, who most of the time refrained from such blunt expression.

Though the blues undeniably flows through “Aubade,” it is important to recognize that a white Englishman’s poem can only come so close to the true form. For as much as Larkin is concerned with being genuine, “Aubade,” if it can be considered blues, would be an inauthentic example of the genre, not only due to Larkin’s background, but also because it uses “an oral tradition within a written form.”²⁶ (Thus, even the Beatles’ attempts at blues are more authentic than Larkin’s.) The blues are meant to be sung aloud with plaintive, furious cries, not imparted to a sterile page. That the genre is a product of the long and painful struggle of black Americans for freedom and creative expression means that it can never be faithfully copied by someone such as Larkin. Nevertheless, Leggett makes the bold claim “that ‘Aubade’ is much closer to a blues tradition than to the long English tradition that preceded it.”²⁷ Larkin does not copy the blues, but, as with the works of English tradition, seeks to reinterpret them not just in terms of form but also of content.

Analyzing the content of “Aubade,” one returns to a consideration of its main and arguably only subject, death, which, it goes

without saying, is a wholly unoriginal theme in the grander context of world literature. Innumerable libraries could be stuffed with books of mediocre death-poems. “What is untraditional in [‘Aubade’],” what differentiates this poem from reams of dross “is its method of dealing with an anxiety that is both unacceptable and inescapable.”²⁸ This “method” involves complete sincerity, something which is undeniably derived from the blues, a form of music that is built around plain-spokenness. The lexicon of “Aubade” is largely simple, and when metaphors appear (which is rare), they are characterized by a distinct lack of whimsy. One might even criticize these few metaphors for being unimaginative: “The sky is white as clay” (48)²⁹ by no means scintillates with originality, nor is it intended to do so. This and other analogies in “Aubade” serve as crushing reminders of the grounded nature of death: it is a certainty of life that is as plain as “clay,” a word that could fit perfectly in the earthy vernacular of the average blues singer.

If such an analogy is not brimming with uniqueness, it is, however, easily comprehended. In no way does it betray Larkin’s professed desire to be genuine and understandable, to craft his poetry so that it is accessible even to the simplest layman—in short, to tell the truth. In this he has more in common with the blues than with most English-language poets that came before him, and this desire for truthfulness is found even in his earliest work. Who else, after all, would write a poetry collection entitled *The Less Deceived*, other than someone who wanted people to be “less deceived” by poetry, to find in poetry not inaccessible fluff but ideas and language that were close to their everyday experience? “Aubade,” as a later Larkin poem, is exceptionally in-tune with everyday experience, with its talk of postmen, wardrobes, curtains, et cetera. It possesses as well a subject that everyone can understand, as everyone must one day face death. “Aubade” “is as much about being *undeceived* as it is about death.”³⁰ The idea of being undeceived is one that Larkin *did not* derive from the English canon. Rather, he found it in the blues.

Conclusion

It is something of a commonplace that works of fiction and poetry that serve a blatant political or moral message tend not to last. Less of a commonplace (perhaps because it seems even more obvious) is the idea that work which either bears its influence obviously or, conversely, bears only one obvious influence, also tends not to last. The poetry of Philip Larkin generally, and “Aubade” as the possible crown jewel of his entire oeuvre, do not fall into any of these amateurish traps. Unless one looks at “Aubade” through a quite myopic lens, one inevitably finds not one, overwhelming influence but multiple diverse ones, which, although they make themselves apparent under

close examination, are, in the end product of the poem, kneaded together so seamlessly that the eye of the layman (as well, sometimes, as the professional) fails to notice them. Aubade, philosophy, modernism, blues: it is possible to see “Aubade” as both the synthesis of all of these things and the antithesis of them. All of these elements come together, under Larkin’s hand, to form something new: his “Aubade.”

References/Footnotes

- ¹Swarbrick, A. (2008) *Out of Reach: The Poetry of Philip Larkin*. Macmillan Pres. Pg 70.
- ²Ibid. Pg. 71.
- ³Ibid. Pg. 70.
- ⁴Larkin, P. (2012) *The Complete Poems of Philip Larkin*, edited by Archie Burnett. Farrar-Straus-Giroux. Pg. 115.
- ⁵Rowe, M.W. (2011) “Aubade’: Death and the Thought of Death.” *Philip Larkin: Art and Self: Five Studies*. Palgrave Macmillan. Pg. 167.
- ⁶Osborne, J. (2014) “Radical Citation: ‘Aubade.’” *Radical Larkin: Seven Types of Technical Mastery*. Palgrave Macmillan. Pg. 207.
- ⁷Even this could, however, be complicated by the poem’s first line, which implies repetition. “Aubade” may not describe one particular dawn but a great many which have come to morph together in the narrator’s mind.
- ⁸Larkin, P. (2012) *The Complete Poems of Philip Larkin*, edited by Archie Burnett. Farrar-Straus-Giroux. Pp. 115-116.
- ⁹Ibid.
- ¹⁰Osborne, J. Pg. 231.
- ¹¹Ibid.
- ¹²Ibid. Pg. 233.
- ¹³Ibid.
- ¹⁴Larkin, P. (2012) *The Complete Poems*. Pg. 116.
- ¹⁵Kerrigan, W. (1998) “Larkin and the Difficult Subject.” *Essays in Criticism: A Quarterly Journal of Literary Criticism*. 48.4. Pg. 294.
- ¹⁶Ibid.
- ¹⁷Ibid. Pg. 298.
- ¹⁸Larkin, P. (1985) *All What Jazz: A Record Diary 1961-1971*. Farrar-Straus-Giroux. Pg. 27.
- ¹⁹Russell, R.R. (2007) “Echoes of Eliot’s ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ in Larkin’s ‘Aubade.’” *Heldref Publications*. Pg. 235.
- ²⁰Larkin, P. (2012) *The Complete Poems*. Pg. 115.
- ²¹Booth, J. (2014) *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*. Bloomsbury. Pg. 317.
- ²²Ibid.
- ²³Larkin, P. (1985) *All What Jazz*. Pg. 21.
- ²⁴Leggett, B. (1999) *Larkin’s Blues: Jazz, Popular Music, and Poetry*. Louisiana State University Press. Pg. 95.
- ²⁵Ibid. Pg. 97.
- ²⁶Ibid. Pg. 99.
- ²⁷Ibid. Pg. 102.
- ²⁸Ibid.
- ²⁹Larkin, P. (2012) *The Complete Poems*. Pg. 116.
- ³⁰Leggett, B. Pg. 108.