CHAPTER 2

Morning Songs

Death is so persistently part of the world's most enduring literature that we run the risk of "mortality fatigue" if we try to assemble an overview: at a flyover level, life's end can seem more clichéd than compelling. But when we focus in on precisely how the topic is handled by great writers, such concerns vanish. To take just two examples set at very different compass points, compare Hamlet's introspection—where "not to be" is presented as if it were an equipoised choice, a selectable symmetry with existence—with Anna Karenina's (seeming) impulsiveness: one second there is life and its possibilities on a train platform; the next, they are gone.

Like drama and the novel, poetry done with skill and conviction can range widely over the fields of emotion associated with dying, to enlightening effect. But it takes a special combination of technical and emotional equipment to give authentic expression to the fear of obliterating death. For an example, we can turn to a highly regarded English poet of our own time. While it is far too early to place any contemporary writer in some kind of pantheon, at this early stage in the unfolding of Philip Larkin's posthumous reputation we can at least say with some confidence that his work has a good chance of standing the test of time. A friend called Larkin the most death-haunted man she had ever met, and that characterization is borne out when we look at his collected verse.[1] His poems return again and again, with unsparing honesty, to the challenge of mortality.

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At or near the apogee of his entire output is "Aubade," written at the end of November in 1977: 50 lines of concentrated anxiety at the prospect of nothingness. Although only a few decades old, the poem has already made a deep impression on discerning readers, especially but not exclusively those who share Larkin's skepticism. Let's take a few moments to look at it closely, because the effort will be repaid with some insights that may surprise you.

"Aubade" is, above all else, a poem of desolate clarity. Through his art Larkin fits bone and sinew to a recurring posture among secular thinkers: the desire to see things in sharpest focus, stripped of tempting self-delusions, no matter the consequences. It is a stance too often bloodless and analytical, and it takes a superlative poetical skill to give it life. Larkin wastes no time getting to the task. The poem opens:

> 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,

whose advance blocks out everything else from the poet's consciousness. Four o'clock in the morning, alone, tomb-quiet: What better time for the contemplation of ultimate things? Natural light will soon come, but for now clear-sightedness is enabled by simple dread. The deep predawn darkness blots out all distractions, all false consolations. It is illuminated at intervals by pulses of fear, like the gray outlines of a nocturnal landscape lit up in ghastly white flashes from lightning bursts in a thunderstorm.

The poet is now thoroughly, harrowingly, awake. The precipice he finds himself on is not that of dying itself, but the condition of being dead, the bottomless and certain extinction that we peer down into. What recourse do we have? Not to religion; it is a sumptuous tapestry gone ratty, a worn-out trick "created to pretend we never die." Even less is Larkin buying the idea, first put forth by so great a figure as Lucretius, the father of Western secular thought, that we should not regret a state of post-mortal oblivion because there is no "we" left to feel its pangs.[2] No, this is "specious stuff" precisely because it fails to see

> That this is what we fear—no sight, so sound,
>
> No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,
>
> Nothing to love or link with.

The terror of death, then, is not to be located in pain. The terror in this catalogue of deprivations is threefold, and mortally literal: it comes by our being desensitized, by our capacity for understanding being obliterated, and by our being excommunicated, dispossessed of earthly community.

Once we resign ourselves to the inevitability of this state of deadness, awareness of it—Larkin sees it as "a small unfocused blur"—can never be banished, not for one hour, one minute, one second. Irritatingly, implacably, "it stays just on the edge of vision," and long before death does happen, life is sucked out of life by the paralysis its end can induce in us. The only residue left is a sulphurous "furnace-fear" that no amount of bravado can extinguish.

We have now traversed four of the poem's five stanzas. These first 40 lines are a razor-cut delineation of fear and despondency. The words press on us no less relentlessly than death's approach itself. The final stanza offers nothing like a pat resolution; needless to say, had Larkin attempted something like that the poem would have been ruined. Yet as I read it, what he does offer is the beginnings of understanding, of the means to glimpse a way forward out of desolation.

There is a pronounced joint between the fourth and fifth stanzas, and there we can cleave the poem philosophically. To start the final verse, we are carried over dawn's threshold: "Slowly light strengthens, and the room takes shape." The effect is to dispel the darkness, physically of course, but more importantly psychologically. We might venture even something more, for the daybreak carries with it a markedly different state of being. Dawn is nothing short of a resurrection, after all. Having undergone a mental and emotional death along with the poet, the new day's coming reminds us that annihilation of the individual is not the absolute last word.

What was once formless is now discernable. We first make out the homeliest of objects, a chest of clothing, an emblem of what we know: that largely unexamined procession of everyday life, which is, for most people, the full sum and substance of reality. The storm-flickering emotional landscape of 4 o'clock is replaced by a flatter, less dramatic, but more useful neutral light—a "sky as white as clay, with no sun"—and

with it a very different type of clarity emerges. The entire atmosphere of the work shifts, from shadows, ultimacy, and a lone man *in extremis,* to light, embodiments, and a city about to wake up and embark on commonplace activities. We move, in short, from the extraordinary to the ordinary, and that is of the utmost significance.

It is not that the light of day heals the lacerations of nocturnal death-fear. We have just been told that there is no relief that can simply negate or erase that anxiety like some kind of existential analgesic. Yet the dawning brings into view as well two elements of an understanding of our mortality, two building blocks that we can use to start developing a larger context for finding not just meaning, but a sense of well-being in the fact that our earthly lives are finite.

The first is the necessity of human community. Larkin has already suggested as much in the crucial line "Nothing to love and link with": connecting with others to pursue common cause provides the deepest kind of satisfaction of which humans are capable. To make and keep those connections, we must communicate. As he prepares to close the poem, he warns us away from the banal, time-filling exchanges that grease the hours of most days. They may be unavoidable, but if allowed to get out of hand they become positively predatory, ready to devour us. And then the verse concludes:

> Work has to be done.
>
> Postmen like doctors go from house to house.

Larkin began by declaring himself to be squarely among the common folk who must earn their living each day. At the end he closes the circle by invoking the needfulness of work in everyday life: the second element of an understanding of the human predicament. In the final line, we are invited to ponder an equivalence we probably hadn't thought of before. Postmen—a means by which we communicate—play, in their way, the same role as doctors, the prolongers of mortal life. Both are methodical, making their rounds every day, because they are dedicated to the work that has to be done, the work of knitting together a human community. And both go from "house to house," whose occupants, we may reasonably suppose, have just slept through the night largely untroubled by existential torments. Perhaps they lack the poet's courage to stare down death. More likely their fears have been assuaged by a species of faith.

Or it could be—as long as we're guessing—that they sleep well simply because they understand and embrace the dignity of everyday life.

The latter possibility should be accounted as one which is live and real. That is how the great American philosopher and psychologist William James saw things. He understood well how the simple act of carrying on grows in significance as we pass from youth to maturity to old age. Once we have had a full share of all the usual pleasures of living, it is the residual mundane world of toil that, surprisingly, turns out to be the most meaningful:

> What was bright and exciting becomes weary, flat, and unprofitable. The bird's song is tedious, the breeze is mournful, the sky is sad…. The friends we used to care the world for are shrunken to shadows; the women, once so divine, the stars, the woods, and the waters, how now so dull and common; the young girls that brought an aura of infinity, at present hardly distinguishable existences; the pictures so empty; and as for the books, what *was* there to find so mysteriously significant in Goethe, or in John Mill so full of weight? Instead of all this, more zestful than ever is the work, the work; and fuller and deeper the import of common duties and of common goods.[3]

"The work, the work": projects, no matter how humble, are what we cannot do without. In fact, as James saw, satiety with life (and how, by the way, is that different from wisdom?) does not have to lead to incurable despair. I think that something much like this is finally what Larkin has gotten to at the end of his remarkable verse.

In a short, penetrating reflection on "Aubade," the novelist Thomas Rayfiel also homes in on its final ten lines and in so doing comes very near to the heart of the matter, as I view it. He too sees the poem pivoting at the beginning of the last stanza. Having emphasized the narrative quality of the work, "containing the movement and mystery of an entire novel," he finds that in the last ten lines the poem takes a novelistic "turn."

> He sees the day, next in a series of unchanging trials, taking shape before him. What lukewarm comfort he finds is in the very physicality of the world, to which his physical being—visible now along with the "wardrobe" and "telephones" and other materially verifiable facts—still belongs. It's hardly a trumpet blare of victory but rather a deeply human and moving recognition that he is still, in some sense, supposed to be here.

Yes, yes, that last sentence—yes. What Larkin is telling us, and what Rayfiel recognizes, is that being-in-the-world is what we humans were born to, what we belong to, what is right for us, what we all share, and what we ought to embrace and not avoid or explain away through religion. Where I part from Rayfiel's reading is in his characterizing this as "lukewarm comfort." One of my main tasks in this book is to try to demonstrate that it can be much more than that.

Rayfiel sees "Aubade" as "an obvious keeper in the canon, if ever there was one" by virtue of the author's masterly handling of form coupled with his "deliberately unheroic stance." The poem is held in high esteem by other contemporary writers who also know how difficult it is to make verse-song in a register deeply melancholy yet not funereal. For Julian Barnes—whose book-length rumination on dying, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, manages to be obsessive and mordant and funny on almost every page, starting with the title's double entendre—it is Larkin's "great death-poem," "a perfect definition" of what dying means to a human being beset by sadness. Yet a third novelist, Ian McEwan (who, like Barnes, is no believer in God) regards it as "one of the supreme secular meditations on death."

McEwan's close friend Christopher Hitchens also absorbed the poem, and it seems to have absorbed him. It was on his mind in his prime—he included it in a massive atheist anthology that he edited, and managed to mention it favorably in a review of a volume of Larkin's letters—and at the very last, with this note among the unfinished fragments left behind at his death in 2011: "Larkin good on fear in 'Aubade,' with implied reproof to Hume and Lucretius for their stoicism. Fair enough in one way: atheists ought not to be offering consolation either."[4] To be sure, "Aubade" does not violate Hitchens' precept. Still, as I have claimed, it does at the last offer something to contemplate other than unqualified annihilation.

So too does a second Larkin morning song: this one earlier, more compact, not nearly as famous, but in my opinion equally beautiful. It is "Sad Steps," written in April 1968. The title is taken from the opening line of the thirty-first in the sonnet sequence *Astrophel and Stella* by the Elizabethan Sir Philip Sidney. Sidney's verse, which apostrophizes the moon as an oracle of love, poses in a courtly vein some mocking questions on inconstancy, pride, and ungratefulness. Larkin's poem takes a similar sardonic tone, though in an acidly modern idiom, and he begins with an expression of surprise:

> Groping back to bed after a piss
>
> I part thick curtains, and am startled by
>
> The rapid clouds, the moon's cleanliness.

As in "Aubade," the time is precisely 4 o'clock—that hour of dark clarity—but here, instead of brooding in the blackness, waiting for the curtain edges to grow light, with only fear-flashes to illuminate his plagued mental topography, Larkin takes control by going to the window and looking out. And just as before, he creates a specific atmosphere for his message by modeling light like a master painter. The predawn light and shade is made explicit, and exquisite: "wedge-shadowed gardens lie/Under a cavernous, a wind-picked sky." The moon pours through clouds loose as "cannon-smoke," sharpening roof lines in a "stone-coloured light."

He is left incredulous, finding the whole scene laughable, with the moon so "high and preposterous and separate." So much for consulting it, or the stars, or for that matter anything in the heavens, in hopes of finding answers to what troubles us. No, instead "one shivers slightly, looking up there" through the hard, bright light, the nocturnal equivalent of the clay-white, sunless sky of the final stanza of "Aubade." As it did there, here too the special quality of the light—flat, all-revealing, full of documentary propensities, a photographer's light—presages the telling of a truth that is not consolatory, yet not wholly despairing either. For on this night, the light of the moon

> Is a reminder of the strength and pain
>
> Of being young; that it can't come again
>
> But is for others undiminished somewhere.

What should we make of this? A lament, of course: as individuals we age, and with aging comes an almost irresistible temptation to wish one's self younger again, problems and all. Postponing senescence if we could, warding off the decline of our powers and the narrowing of our interests and ambitions—as we get older, we become more local—these seem intensely human things to wish for.[5] At the same time, though, if we have been paying attention over the years and cultivated an active appreciation of the world's scope and diversity, we should be able to

look beyond the immediacy of our lives and recognize the continuity of our existence with that of other lives on earth. With that recognition comes a kind of wisdom. Not in the sense of accrued knowledge, but in an increased capacity for creative apperception. Wisdom reflects on past experience and transforms it into concern for something greater than ourselves.

That is the thrust of Larkin's magnificent final line. However fragile my own existence is, even in decline it is enriched by understanding that there are others, and these others are my fellow-beings, and for at least some of them the zest for meeting the challenges of life is undiminished. It deepens James' insight about aging, and in so doing produces an unexpectedly uplifting sentiment, but one available only to those who comprehend how our individual lives are part and parcel with the existence of a species through time, and that that species itself fits into a much bigger communal picture. Later in the book, I will situate all this explicitly in an evolutionary context, because for secularists that is and should be the primary framework for organizing our thinking. For now I simply want to bracket this concept with the two others discussed earlier, so that we have now three elements to carry forward as we try to understand how our finite mortal lives fit into a larger, sustaining context: the necessity of connection among humans and with the rest of life; the satisfaction of work, of carrying out projects; and an awareness of the vitality of continuity on an evolutionary, even cosmic, time scale. These are, potentially, cornerstones we can lay down as the part of the foundation of a meaningful secular life—and its counterpart after death.

I don't want to oversell my reading of what I believe Larkin is telling us here. "Aubade" and "Sad Steps" are not optimistic in any conventional sense. They are unflinching verses about death. Yet in both, our personal annihilation is not in fact the bitter end. Instead, he offers in the respective final stanzas chastened (in contrast to the lavish promises of religion) insights into the dignity of life on earth, precarious and transient though it is for us as individuals. They are the rewards for our having taken the time to closely read these two fine poems.

Larkin, sad to relate, was not able to draw sustenance from any such interpretation at the end of his own life. He could not, by means of will or otherwise, overcome the terror of obliterating death. He had reason to feel that terror in full measure. Like his admirer Hitchens after him, the poet was killed by cancer of the esophagus, and, as a biographer relates, his final days eroded into ignominy, leaving him at last to fall in

the lavatory, "whispering pitifully" for help as he lay, unable to move, with his face pressed against a hot pipe. Taken to the hospital, he was ushered unto death with the assistance of copious sedatives, staring past the banal images of the TV that heartlessly had been turned on in his room. Had he not been drugged, a friend said, "he would have been raving. He was that frightened."[6]

I hope that none of us reading these words, whether we are religious or not, will be so smug as to imagine ourselves doing any better. There is much too much that we cannot control as we approach the threshold, no matter how well-armed we think ourselves, whether through reason or through faith. As Larkin himself had foreseen, at the very moment of death life does not smoothly flow into a "merciful oblivion"; rather, the confluence of mortal experience with the sea of non-existence "must be a little choppy," for at that river's mouth "the currents of life fray against the currents of death."[7]

A "sea of non-existence" … really? Is that what it is? To keep our thinking about the afterlife in trim, we should probe all such metaphors and see if they hold up.

Notes

1. So said the novelist Elizabeth Howard (cited in Barnes 2008, p. 125). Larkin's collected poems are in Larkin 2003.
2. See Luper (2009, Chap. 4), for a discussion; also Lamont (1990, p. 16).
3. James (1890, pp. 1: 232, 233–234).
4. Rayfiel (2015, pp. 268–269); Barnes (2008, pp. 41, 61); McEwan (2007, p. 352); Hitchens (2007c); Hitchens (2011, p. 331), in the essay "Loving Philip Larkin"; Hitchens (2012, p. 92). For more on Larkin's place in Hitchens' final days, see McEwan (2011). I am citing secular writers by design, but even believers have acknowledged the poem's excellence. A.N. Wilson "converted" to atheism in early mid-life only to (more haltingly) re-embrace Christianity 20 years later (Wilson 2009). Yet he still maintains: "If I had to name one poem, written in England in my lifetime, of unquestionable greatness, it would be Philip Larkin's 'Aubade,'" though at the same time he finds parts of the poem and too much of Larkin's other verse bordering on the officious (Wilson 2008).
5. Reporting on the work of psychologist Laura L. Carstensen, Jonathan Weiner writes: "When we have a reason to believe that we have decades ahead of us—our whole life ahead of us, as we say—we focus our energies on adventures, new experiences, learning new things: the advancement of

learning. When we believe that we have very little time left, we focus more on experiences that have emotional meaning for us; the meaning we have found and made" (Weiner 2010, p. 228). This is not surprising: we are consolidating.

6. Motion (1993, p. 521); citing Michael Bowen. Barnes takes note of this too in *Nothing to be Frightened Of* (2008, p. 204).
7. Motion (1993, p. 520); citing a letter of Larkin to Patsy Strang, 10 September 1953.

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