

## Poetry and Philosophy: Richard Rorty on Philip Larkin's *Continuing to Live*

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In the second chapter of *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, called 'The Contingency of Selfhood', Richard Rorty uses the last part of a poem by Philip Larkin (1922-1985), *Continuing to Live* to clarify his ideas about the self.<sup>1</sup> Here is the whole poem:<sup>2</sup>

Continuing to live — that is, repeat  
A habit formed to get necessities —  
Is nearly always losing, or going without.  
    It varies.

This loss of interest, hair, and enterprise —  
Ah, if the game were poker, yes,  
You might discard them, draw a full house!  
    But it's chess.

And once you have walked the length of your mind, what  
You command is clear as a lading-list.  
Anything else must not, for you, be thought  
    To exist.

And what's the profit? Only that, in time,  
We half-identify the blind impress  
All our behaviors bear, may trace it home.  
    But to confess,

On that green evening when our death begins,  
Just what it was, is hardly satisfying,  
Since it applied only to one man once,  
    And that one dying.

Rorty starts by saying: 'This poem discusses the fear of dying, of extinction, to which Larkin confessed in interviews. ... Larkin's poem suggests a way of unpacking what Larkin feared. What he fears will be extinguished is his idiosyncratic lading-list, his individual sense of what was possible and important. ... Anyone who spends his life trying to formulate a novel answer to the question of what is possible and important fears the extinction of that answer.' (CIS, p. 23) According to Rorty the fear Larkin describes in his poem is not the fear of dying, but the fear of 'not having impressed one's mark on the language' and not 'really have had an I at all.' (CIS, p. 24) This is what Harold Bloom has called the strong poet's *anxiety of influence*.<sup>3</sup> Rorty suggests that Larkin is affecting to despise his own vocation as a poet. A poet, or at least a *strong* (original) poet, is someone who has achieved what all people want, or should want, to achieve: he or she has found words or forms for his or her own

distinctiveness. This genius is the paradigm of individuality. According to Rorty Larkin seems to suggest that one might get more satisfaction out of finding something, a 'blind impress', that does not apply only to 'one man once' but that makes up the universal conditions of human existence, some essential reality, an imperishable truth. Therefore Rorty places *Continuing to Live* against the background of what he sees as the battle between poetry and philosophy. Philosophers seek the truths of life and existence, eternal truths that hold for all ages and places, whereas poets celebrate individuality and contingency.

Since Nietzsche however, Rorty says, many philosophers have seen freedom as the recognition of contingency. They 'accept Nietzsche's identification of the strong poet, the maker, as humanity's hero – rather than the scientist, who is traditionally pictured as a finder.' (CIS, p. 26) To create one's own mind one has to describe himself or herself in one's own terms, to make his or her own language. Self-knowledge is self-creation, in language. Accepting somebody else's description of oneself means failing as a poet (and thus failing as a human being). So it seems that only a creative poet, a genius can realize all potency for being a strong and original human being. Most people will fail because they accept the description of the world and their place in it as it is handed down to them. And, as Rorty puts it: 'Only poets, Nietzsche suspected, can truly appreciate contingency. The rest of us are doomed to remain philosophers, to insist there is really only one true lading-list, one true description of the human situation, one universal context of our lives. (CIS, p. 28)

In Rorty's view two distinctions must be made. There is the difference between poetry and philosophy and the distinction between the individual (contingent, idiosyncratic) and the universal (necessary). Rorty claims that post-Nietzschean philosophers like Heidegger and Wittgenstein want to exhibit in their philosophy the universality and necessity of the individual and contingent. But making a universal claim about the impossibility of universal claims involves a contradiction. If one wants to deny necessity and universality in human life, this is also the denial of the necessity or universality of the contingent.<sup>4</sup> Here Rorty himself is still a philosopher, when in his own view his claim can only be a poetic one. Now when we turn to Larkin we see that he does not eschew universal statements in his poems. He presents a philosophical view within his poetry. *Continuing to Live* is an expression of Larkin's view of life and death, a view that is to be found in some other of his poems as well. Larkin is a poet and we must not assume he is in his poetry trying to express a comprehensive view of life and death, but it may be worth our while to look at the other poems that are, at least to some extent, about death and may help us understand what *Continuing to Live* is about.

## Death

Death is a recurring theme in Larkin's poetry. What does Larkin fear, fearing death? In *Aubade* Larkin discusses explicitly the fear of death that overwhelms the 'I' of the poem during the night:

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.

Arid interrogation: yet the dread  
Of dying, and being dead,  
Flashes afresh to hold and horrify.

The mind blanks at the glare. Not in remorse  
. .  
But at the total emptiness for ever,  
The sure extinction that we travel to  
And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,  
Not to be anywhere,  
And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.

This is a special way of being afraid  
No trick dispels. Religion used to try,  
That vast, moth-eaten musical brocade  
Created to pretend we never die,  
And specious stuff that says *No rational being  
Can fear a thing it will not feel*, not seeing  
That 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.

. .  
Most things may never happen: this one will,  
And realisation of it rages out  
In furnace-fear when we are caught without  
People or drink. Courage is no good:  
It means not scaring others. Being brave  
Lets no one off the grave.  
Death is no different whined at than withstood.

(CP, p. 190)

Then slowly the light strengthens, the world rouses and people go to work again.

In *Aubade* death is the thing we have to fear most. There is no mitigation or consolation whatsoever, although religion and philosophy have tried to dispel our fears. Larkin focuses on what applies to all, the universal condition of human life: it ends. Death is necessary and inescapable and the knowledge of its nearness strikes at night. He imagines what it will be like: 'no sight, no sound, no touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with, nothing to love or link with', the ultimate void, and to this situation there will be no end. As he describes it in *The Old Fools*:

At death you break up: the bits that were you  
Start speeding away from each other for ever

With no one to see. It's only oblivion, true:  
We had it before, but then it was going to end,  
And was all the time merging with a unique endeavour  
To bring to bloom the million-petalled flower  
Of being here. Next time you can't pretend  
There'll be anything else.

(CP, p. 131)

This knowledge is the essence of his fear, and also governs his view of life, which not surprisingly is a pessimistic view. What is the meaning of life when all that one achieves will be lost? We (human beings) are always eager for the future, hoping for the good things to arrive that we have been waiting for so long, an armada of promises. We think our waiting will be rewarded, but we are wrong:

Only one ship is seeking us, a black-  
Sailed unfamiliar, towing at her back  
A huge and birdless silence. In her wake  
No waters breed or break.

(From: Next, Please, CP, p. 50)

Besides the fear of death we find in Larkin's poetry the consciousness of the futility of all our efforts to counterbalance the destructive force that will wipe out everything we have accomplished in life, or deemed important, or dreamed of or hoped for. Facing death there is nothing to be done, philosophy and religion are powerless and can offer no comfort at all. For Larkin the horror lies not in his or anyone's failure to realize what philosophers had hoped for, but in acknowledging that all achievements are futile in the end. There is no escape, no redemption. As Larkin describes it in his poem about the patients in a hospital:

... All know they are going to die.  
Not yet, perhaps not here, but in the end,  
And somewhere like this. That is what it means,  
This clean-sliced cliff; a struggle to transcend  
The thought of dying, for unless its powers  
Outbuild cathedrals nothing contravenes  
The coming dark, though crowds each evening try

With wasteful, weak, propitiatory flowers.

(From: The Building, CP, p. 136-138)

For Larkin the end of life is the surest thing about it, and death thus becomes the supreme category in his thought. *Aubade* starts with the 'I' speaking ('I work all day ...') and then turn to 'we': we, all people. In *The Old Fools* it is 'you': everyone. The particular situation and fear of the speaker of the poem lead to a general consideration of what awaits all: poet, reader and mankind. This is how Larkin

often constructs his poems: he starts with the description of some individual situation or event and in the last stanza or lines he turns to general considerations.

In *Dockery and Son* also a particular event leads to thoughts about life in general and death. The persona of the poem, having visited his old school compares his own life with that of Dockery, an old schoolmate whose son is in the same school now. Dockery had his son when he was quite young, but 'To have no son, no wife, no house or land still seemed quite natural' to the 'I' of the poem (or Larkin himself) and then he asks where the innate assumptions come from that influence the choices we make:

Unhindered moon. To have no son, no wife,  
No house or land still seemed quite natural.  
Only a numbness registered the shock  
Of finding out how much had gone of life,  
How widely from the others. Dockery, now:  
Only nineteen, he must have taken stock  
Of what he wanted, and been capable  
Of...No, that's not the difference: rather, how

Convinced he was he should be added to!  
Why did he think adding meant increase?  
To me it was dilution. Where do these  
Innate assumptions come from? Not from what  
We think truest, or most want to do:  
Those warp tight-shut, like doors. They're more a style  
Our lives bring with them: habit for a while,  
Suddenly they harden into all we've got.

And how we got it; looked back on, they rear  
Like sand-clouds, thick and close, embodying  
For Dockery a son, for me nothing,  
Nothing with all a son's harsh patronage.  
Life is first boredom, then fear.  
Whether or not we use it, it goes,  
And leaves what something hidden from us chose,  
And age, and then the only end of age.

(CP, p. 108-109)

In the end our path in life and the choices we make, all lead only to old age and death. What differs is how we deal with this knowledge. As Larkin puts it in *Nothing to Be Said* (CP, p. 82), to some it means nothing, to others it leaves nothing to be said. As this is the title of the poem (and it clearly does not mean nothing to him), we may assume Larkin himself belongs to the latter category, although this is a paradoxical position, as he in fact has written this poem, and many others, about dying. But by the end of his life he found there was not much left for him to say about the subjects that occupied his mind most. If we describe a 'lading- list' in someone's life as 'his individual sense of what was

possible and important' (CIS, p. 23) an important item on Larkin's own list is certainly this idea of life as 'slow dying' and the loss of 'interest, hair and enterprise'.

### **Larkin's Lading-list**

Rorty states that *Continuing to Live* suggests that one might get more satisfaction out of finding eternal truths, a 'blind impress' that does not apply only to 'one man once', but to all human beings, the universal condition for human existence. In his view Larkin invokes the 'pathos of finitude', which would not exist in a culture in which poetry had publicly and explicitly triumphed over philosophy (CIS, p. 40). Because we are all doomed to remain philosophers to some extent, we are bound to experience the failure ultimately, the failure to achieve what philosophy has always hoped to achieve: to find eternal truths that survive when the individual has died. Rorty says about Larkin: 'He is pretending that to be a strong poet is not enough – that he would have attained satisfaction only from being a philosopher, from finding continuities rather than exhibiting a discontinuity.' (CIS, p. 25) But in *Continuing to Live* or in his other poems, Larkin is not pretending that finding continuities would give him more satisfaction than the discontinuities of what applies to 'one man once'. He is not only not pretending this, he is not saying it at all. The pathos of finitude of Larkin's poem lies not in 'one man once', but in the last line: 'and that one dying', it lies not in the limitation of being (only) one individual, but in the inevitable end of life. Larkin himself has a lading-list, a collection of things that are important to him and that make up his life. In many of Larkin's poems, and especially in *Aubade*, we can read that he is preoccupied with the thought and dread of endless extinction, they dominate his work. So death and the fear of death must have a prominent place on this list, as well as his view on life as a process of losing that leads to the extinction of the whole lading-list of what we deemed essential in life.

Larkin's own life, as we can read in his poems and letters and in interviews, was simple: 'My life is as simple as I can make it. Work all day, then cook, eat, wash up, telephone, hack writing, drink and television in the evenings. I almost never go out.'<sup>5</sup> He worked as a librarian all his life. In 1955 he became University Librarian at the university of Hull, a position he held until his death. In the evenings, after work, he wrote his poems. He found this routine worked very well. In the poems we read that (and why) he (or the Larkin in the verse) has chosen to be a bachelor (e.g. *Self's the Man*, CP, p. 95), to have no children (*This Be The Verse*, CP, p.142), his relation to work (*Toads*, CP, p. 62-63 and *Toads Revisited*, CP, p. 89-90). There is no view of man that may be a reason to prefer one path in life to another. In *Self's the Man* he compares his own life to that of Arnold, who chose to get married. They were both out for their own ends, but: 'I'm a better hand at knowing | what I can stand...'. In *Dockery and Son* for Dockery his son is part of his 'lading-list' and the 'I' of the poem (or Larkin) is aware that there are no wife or son, house or possessions on the list of what he has made of his life.<sup>6</sup> He says that the things that make up his, or Dockery's or anyone's, life are not deliberately chosen, they are part of 'a style our lives bring with them' and at some point we find they are 'all we've got'. Larkin ponders where these innate assumptions that determine our choices come from. When we find what they have led to, we can only look back and wonder.

In *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* Rorty introduces Freud to argue that Nietzsche's (and Bloom's) strong poet is not the paradigmatic human being and 'what makes Freud more useful and more plausible than Nietzsche is that he does not relegate the vast majority of humanity to the status of dying animals.' (CIS, p. 35) Freud lets us see that Nietzsche's superman is just a strategy for coping with the contingencies of one's upbringing. There are not two different sorts of person, but

the intellectual is just a special case, 'just somebody who does with marks and noises what other people do with their spouses and children, their fellow workers, the tools of their trade, the cash accounts of their businesses, the possessions they accumulate in their homes, the music they listen to, the sports they play or watch, or the trees they pass on their way to work. ... any such thing can play the role in an individual life which philosophers have thought could, or at least should, be played only by things which were universal, common to us all.' (CIS, p. 37) The difference between the language of the strong poet, the creative genius and the language of ordinary people is that the former has found a metaphor that may be useful for others as well: 'The difference between genius and fantasy is not between impresses which lock on to something universal, some antecedent reality out there in the world or deep within the self, and those which do not. Rather, it is the difference between idiosyncrasies which just happen to catch on with other people – happen because of the contingencies of some historical situation, some particular need which a given community happen to have at a given time.'(CIS, p. 37) In an interview with the Observer in 1979 Larkin seems to confirm this: 'I think writing about unhappiness is probably the source of my popularity, if I have any – after all most people *are* unhappy, don't you think? ... Deprivation is for me what daffodils were for Wordsworth.'<sup>7</sup> But he wants to be important to his readers, to give them something new: 'I should hate anybody to read my work because he's been told to and told what to think about it. I really want to hit them, I want readers to feel yes, I've never thought of it that way, but that's how it is.'<sup>8</sup> Larkin did become a popular poet and we may assume his readers found the metaphors and views in his poetry useful to describe and comprehend their own lives. Because his poems are important to them, Larkin's work becomes a part of the 'lading-lists' of his readers as well, and his views have a wider application than the life of 'one man once', Larkin himself, but this is no comfort. The one 'eternal' truth he found was the endless extinction he feared. Besides death he also dreaded the loss of 'enterprise': work and writing. Larkin wrote two poems about work: *Toads* and *Toads Revisited*. A toad is an image for work or labor. In *Toads* he writes:

Why should I let the toad *work*  
 Squat on my life?  
 Can't I use my wit as a pitchfork  
 and drive the brute off?  
 .  
 .  
 Ah, were I courageous enough  
 To shout Stuff your pension!  
 But I know, all too well, that's the stuff  
 That dreams are made on ...

(CP, p. 62)

At the end of his life however he wrote: 'Life is depressing on all sorts of counts – work; well that one time refuge, I can see, is coming to a close ... I positively dread retirement. I have no "inner resources", no interests, nothing to fall back on.'<sup>9</sup> Work was coming to an end and in the last years of his life he could not write poems anymore either. At the memorial service for John Betjeman, who died in 1984, Larkin was asked if he would accept the post of poet laureate. He declined because he

felt he had long since ceased to be a writer of poetry in a meaningful sense. *Aubade* is his swan song. As his biographer Richard Bradford remarks:

The question of why he could no longer write has been addressed and implicitly answered in 'Aubade' ... : if every attempt to form an imaginative, finely crafted structure out of your own thoughts and experiences drags you magnetically and inexorably to the topic of death, then quite soon there really is 'nothing to be said'.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, nowhere in Larkin's poetry we can read that his work as a poet, being a poet, compensates for the thought of losing all when he dies. In fact, it does not matter what is on his, or anyone's lading-list. Death is the same for all. The only difference is that to some people it means nothing, they are not bothered by the thought of dying. But then, there is not much we can do: 'Being brave lets no one off the grave. Death is no different whined at than withstood.' There is no adequate response to death. So in the end it is the fear of death that dominated his life that prevents Larkin from writing poetry and the inability to write makes life even more depressing. Poetry is his own and only way of dealing with death and at the same time there is the realization that poetry and being an original poet will not alleviate fear or make death acceptable. Death is both the essential truth of life and the negation of all that was important in it.

Then, what is or can be the meaning of a 'lading-list', Larkin's or anyone's collection of the things that are important to him, that make up his life and make it different from anyone else's? If we take Larkin as an example: only Larkin himself can know the full extent of his own list and give the right meaning to it. The poems he has written may become part of the list of his readers as well, when they find they can use these metaphors to describe their own lives, but they are unique to him as their author. Rorty says about Nietzsche that he hoped that 'we would seek consolation, at the moment of death, not in having transcended the animal condition but in being that peculiar sort of dying animal who, by describing himself in his own terms, had created himself.' (CIS, p. 27) Larkin has succeeded as a poet, he has given an original description of himself and his view of life in his poetry, and many people who read his work have been moved by it and found truth in it. Larkin has created the list that comprises his poetry and, in its turn, refers exclusively to Larkin. The man Larkin is the single referent of this list. When he disappears, it loses its meaning. There is no consolation that his creation will survive him, it cannot do so because no one truly knows what he has created. His poems become only part of other people's lists, who can use them as they want.

The list of what makes up a life can contain many different things, everyone can add his own peculiar items. We may use all kinds of metaphors to describe ourselves and our lives. But Larkin shows us the case may be different when we regard one view or insight as true. A necessary truth is not something that is convenient or useful in describing or evaluating a life, but something that determines it. It cannot be changed or adapted to a new situation, but any situation is subordinate to it. Larkin experienced the weight of his view of life and showed the truth of it in his life and death.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony and solidarity* (CIS), Cambridge, CUP, 2005, p. 23-43. Rorty does not quote the poem correctly. E.g. he renders the last line as: 'And that man dying'.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems* (CP), edited and with an Introduction by Anthony Thwaite, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003, p. 177.

<sup>3</sup> Rorty refers to Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, Oxford University Press, 1973.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Garry L. Hagberg, 'Literature and the Constitution of Personhood' in Garry L. Hagberg & Walter Jost (eds), *A Companion to the Philosophy of Literature*, Oxford, Wiley Blackwell, 2015, pp. 120-158. Hagberg points out that Wittgenstein knew where to stop, and was not 'adopting an anti-objectivist position that itself amounted to an objective claim.' (p. 129)

<sup>5</sup> Philip Larkin, *Required Writing, Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982*, London, Faber and Faber 1983, p. 57.

<sup>6</sup> This is true of Larkin himself, who was not married, had no children and lived in bedsitting rooms and boarding houses until he rented to a small self-contained flat in Hull in 1956. When the owner of this flat, Hull University, informed him in 1974 that it had decided to sell the property and he would have to move, he bought a house for the first time in his life.

<sup>7</sup> Philip Larkin, *Required Writing, Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982*, p. 47.

<sup>8</sup> Philip Larkin, *Required Writing, Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982*, p. 56.

<sup>9</sup> In a letter to Judy Egerton, date 9 June 1983, quoted in: Richard Bradford, *First Boredom, then Fear, The Life of Philip Larkin*, London, Peter Owen Publishers, 2009, p. 255.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Bradford, *First Boredom, then Fear, The Life of Philip Larkin*, London, Peter Owen Publishers, 2009, pp. 255-256.