# A NOTE ON TWO POEMS BY PHILIP LARKIN

John Gale

## Cut Grass

Cut grass lies frail:
Brief is the breath
Mown stalks exhale.
Long, long the death

It dies in the white hours
Of young-leafed June
With chestnut flowers,
With hedges snowlike strewn,

White lilac bowed,
Lost lanes of Queen Anne's lace,
And the high-builded cloud
Moving at summer's pace.

The poem starts with the idea that grass once cut dies quickly, as if breathing its last breath. It's an image of something or someone slain ("mown"); cut down suddenly. But sudden death is not what death itself is somehow and so the image is immediately contrasted with the long, drawn-out nature of death itself. In fact, death can be seen to be present throughout the year. The image is of the natural year of the seasons with death there just beneath the surface in June and even mid-summer as trees and flowers blossom and fade. Here the natural year stands for the life of man which passes quickly as the summer clouds move quickly across the sky. But the poet is not merely alluding to the chronological passing of life, to its brief span, as say in the *Four Last Songs* of Richard Strauss with the movement from spring through September to dusk (*in Abendrot*); or even of Mahler's *Songs of the Earth*. For although death may at first seem to us to be something that comes at the end of our lives when we briefly breathe our last breath, the truth is that death is ever present; in our innermost Being; with us and in us from youth. If we know how to look properly, we can see it present at every moment in life. As the fourteenth century monk Notker the Stammerer famously put it in his New Year's Eve antiphon: 'in the midst of life we are in death'[1].

## Vers de Société

*My wife and I have asked a crowd of craps*
*To come and waste their time and ours: perhaps*
*You'd care to join us?* In a pig's arse, friend.

[1] This is Cranmer's translation from the Prayer Book of 1662 of the Latin incipit *Media vita in morte sumus* where it is used in the service for the burial of the dead.

Day comes to an end.
The gas fire breathes, the trees are darkly swayed.
And so *Dear Warlock-Williams: I'm afraid –*

Funny how hard it is to be alone.
I could spend half my evenings, if I wanted,
Holding a glass of washing sherry, canted
Over to catch the drivel of some bitch
Who's read nothing but *Which*;
Just think of all the spare time that has flown

Straight into nothingness by being filled
With forks and faces, rather than repaid
Under a lamp, hearing the noise of wind,
And looking out to see the moon thinned
To an air-sharpened blade.
A life, and yet how sternly it's instilled

*All solitude is selfish*. No one now
Believes the hermit with his gown and dish
Talking to God (who's gone too); the big wish
Is to have people nice to you, which means
Doing it back somehow.
*Virtue is social*. Are, then, these routines

Playing at goodness, like going to church?
Something that bores us, something we don't do well
(Asking that ass about his fool research)
But try to feel, because, however crudely,
It shows us what should be?
Too subtle, that; too decent, too. Oh hell,

Only the young can be alone freely.
The time is shorter now, for company,
And sitting by a lamp more often brings
Not peace, but other things.
Beyond the light stand failure and remorse
Whispering *Dear Warlock-Williams: Why, of course –*

The poem begins with a dinner invitation from a Mr Warlock-Williams and his wife. But it's a funny sounding invitation for he writes that he's invited other "craps" (idiots?) as well to waste their time and his! The person invited is the poet. And in fact, the invitation as he sets it out is his reading between the lines of these kind of invitations - spelling out the unconscious text as it were. Realising that such an evening would be a bore and aware of the beauty of the day's end there's no way he'll accept ("in a pig's arse, friend"). He thus starts to draft his apologies.

However, the amusing tone of the poem changes at the start of the second stanza with the stark line: "Funny how hard it is to be alone". It is strange ("Funny") presumably because we would not have expected it to be, given the exalted beauty of the world contemplated at the

day's end. A beauty which contrasts forcefully with the emptiness of the dinner party. Continuing the poet reflects that if he wanted to, he could easily fill many evenings drinking cheap sherry and having dinner with dimwits making vacuous conversation ("drivel"). But to do so would merely be a waste of time; or a way of committing time to nothingness by ignoring its passing. Far better to be alone, as solitude is something that 'repays' us with peace: as the light fades and trees sway, sitting next to a lamp by the fire, listening to the wind and watching the moon wane; fully present to the passing of time. But how hard it is, the poet notices, to do just this: to sit and think, to be alone and reflect and be present to the flow of time. But why, he asks, is it so hard? The answer we are given is that it has been drilled into our generation ("sternly instilled") that solitude is selfish and that being with other people is virtuous. And that this contemporary belief is in some way the result of atheism. Because once a belief in the divine has evaporated, prayer becomes nonsense, just talking to oneself; and that there is nothing left to find within apart from the ego. The poet questions this secular dogma rather cleverly by suggesting that behind our apparent altruism - seeing people and asking them how they are getting on (our feigned interest in someone's foolish research) is a symptom of the ego's desire ("the big wish") for recognition or 'being liked' ("have people nice to you"), and that reciprocal invitations are rituals just as empty as were former religious rituals or routines ("going to church"). Perhaps we do it, he wonders, in order to try to live up to some ideal of "goodness". But he immediately dismisses this as "too subtle". Human beings are not that decent, he concludes.

In the final stanza things change again, and it opens with another stark and serious statement that only the young know how to tolerate solitude ("Only the young can be alone freely"). For those who are older, solitude brings "not peace" but memories of "failure". In this sense being alone is no longer "free" from care, but full of "remorse" which, as it were, whispers in our ear. The reason the young can tolerate solitude is because they have no past (no "failure and remorse"), and death is not at hand. The last line returns to the invitation of the poem's opening but this time he starts a letter of acceptance. What has made him change his mind is the realisation that the day's end is an analogue of life's end; and all life ends in death. And the time we have to spend with others ("for company") is running out.

The themes in the poem of death and time are very typical concerns of Larkin. In an interview with the *Paris Review* (Vol. 84, Summer 1982) he said:

> I suppose everyone tries to ignore the passing of time: some people by doing a lot, being in California one year and Japan the next; or there's my way - making every day and every year exactly the same. Probably neither works.

And so is the way the poem shifts tempo from an amusing start to what is deadly serious. An example can of this can be seen in what is perhaps his most well-known poem: *This be the Verse*. It starts with the funny sounding truism: "They fuck you up your mum and dad/ They may not mean to, but they do" but after a few stanzas we are confronted with a profound and stark reality: "Man hands on misery to man". This line brings the reader to a halt; and at first its depth seems to lie in the fact that this is nothing less than a vernacular rendering of the doctrine of original sin. But in fact, it tells us not only that regardless of the circumstances of our birth and childhood we all inherit something fundamentally rotten but also that we, in our turn, pass it on to our offspring. And that the evil that permeates the generative act and paternity and maternity is inevitable and quite unconscious ("They may not mean to, but they do").