

Peter Larkin, *Leaves of Field*. Exeter: Shearsman, 2006. 116pp. \$15

Unless we were graced with a childhood in Kenya, Bali, or Italy, most of us have little sense of what it is like to live with an alien dialect of our own language. Peter Larkin's "Leaves of Field" gives English speakers a taste of that absent experience. The poem, the first and longest in the book of the same name, evokes an uncanny confusion: reading along you recognize the rhythms, you sense the structures of meaning, you track the patterns of stress and emphasis—and you understand none of it. "Only so suspensive a lamina vane cut to leaf can be trusted into the chain of stalk, living branch encrusts *after* an opening leafness has been in the way of." The sentence sounds like it means something, it *should* mean something, but even on a careful reading it's nearly impossible to figure out what that something is.

Larkin's language may seem an ideolect, but it's built from the same pieces as our own spoken and written Englishes. He uses several techniques to maintain the ambiguity. Like J.H. Prynne, he uses colons and italics to shaming effect, stinging his reader with embarrassment for having missed their intent:

The limbs not themselves dipping to earth share the hatches of leaf-field,  
are boughs *under* edge: its offering them a rimless refrain, how drooping  
from field at veil faltering precipitates branch and stalk.

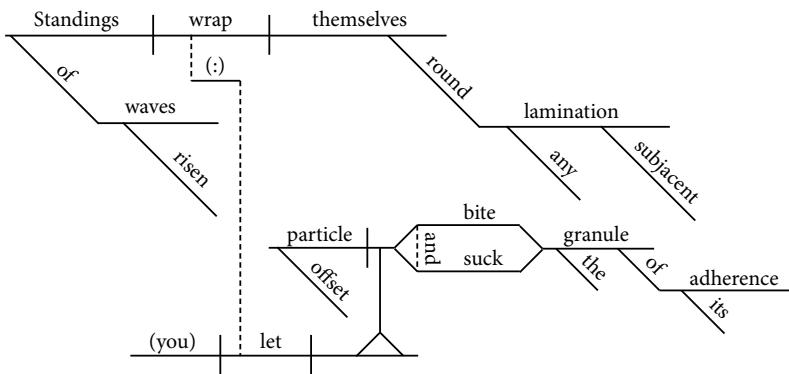
And like many poets with a fetish for etymologies, Larkin loves to pun. But one of his favorite methods of establishing the ambiguity is a rhetorical figure I'll call the antipun. A pun exploits homonymy to bring distinct connotations into ironic proximity, as when the military connotation of "surface-to-ground" brushes up against the suggestion of a burrowing root. By contrast, Larkin's antipuns make familiar words strange, as one connotation drives another (usually the more obvious) into hiding. The word "interstate," for example, remains literally incomprehensible until you abandon any thought of highways or commerce and parse it in halves: interstate as an in-between condition.

Part of what makes "Leaves of Field" so disconcerting is the difficulty one has in identifying the grammatical level at which Larkin twists his language awry. His lexicon draws heavily from biological (and especially botanical) registers, but with few exceptions it does not exceed the boundaries set down by the *OED*.

A reader of much contemporary poetry might expect Larkin to work the space between sentences, lining up one carefully shocking juxtaposition after another. (That once-fertile territory, where poets as different as John Ashbery and Ron Silliman reaped bounties, is today the exhausted plot of a period style.) But part of the spell of Larkin's poetry is in watching the

sentences insist on their sequence. Some specter of sense assures you that *c* must follow *b* and *b* must follow *a*, even while you have no clue what *c* and *b* and *a* stand for, nor even what the basis for such a sequence could be.

Unlike some of his peers, Larkin is not out to break the back of English syntax. His grossest syntactic violations include a mundane preponderance of fragments and the mannered omission of indefinite articles, the kind of soft parataxis with which we're all too familiar. Consider the following: "Standings of waves risen wrap themselves round any subjacent lamination: let offset particle bite and suck the granule of its adherence." Its syntax is perfectly English:



"Leaves of Field" is difficult, but it is not only difficult. Despite the poem's often frustrating resistance to careful consideration, its sense is not wholly evanescent. At its most basic level "Leaves of Field" is the story of how a field becomes forest: leaves generate soil; soil accomodates stem; stem becomes root, branch, and trunk. In Larkin's words: "Not until soil is shelterable can it be rootable; not until hung over in thin pellet not just another layer can the earth raise its pierced crust toward stanchions for hangars."

Suspended (or, as Larkin might say, *pro-pended*) from this primary narrative is "a ubiquitous secondary," an allegory that is signaled in all the expected places: epigraphs, preface, and flatly metaphorical lines like the following, which plays on the traditional identification of trees and people, leaves and paper: "If the limbs of the tree were to inscribe directly on the field of leaves it would go barren in mesh." There are also moments when the specter of sense risks exposure:

Between air of heaven, and earth in furniture, is layer of leaf, which distends  
*along* its fingers suspending hold: what holds it there (earth) not what it  
 gave way to (heaven) and not what it means.

Passages like these give up the ghost, in a sense just shy of the literal: they tell us that this secondary tale is a story of our “layer of leaf,” the middle realm of consciousness. From the preface, we know that Larkin seeks an account of humanity that avoids the foundational metaphysics of humanism. To that end he has written a phenomenological allegory of “emergent dependence,” a post-metaphysical narrative of the rise of human consciousness on earth. The idea of the story, in other words, is the story of the idea.

Robert Frost once wrote that “the object of writing poetry is to make all poems sound as different as possible from each other, and the resources for that of vowels, consonants, punctuation, syntax, words, sentences, metre are not enough. We need the help of context—meaning—subject matter.” Read in the course of the essay in which it appears (or for that matter in the light of Frost’s own poetry) the statement says little that is shocking. But taken on its own, stripped from its context, the passage makes a truly radical claim. For to say that the sense must serve the sound is to effect a transvaluation of poetic values so thorough that from most interpretive perspectives it cannot but look like nihilism.

Peter Larkin is no nihilist, and his ambitions are evidently as philosophical as they are poetic. Still, it is hard to imagine his poetry motivating the kind and quality of exegesis the philosophy requires. Unless you come to the poem with a set of philosophical concerns substantially in line with Larkin’s, “Leaves of Field” reads very much like a poem in which the sense is put in exclusive service of the sound.

But even if you share Larkin’s philosophy, the sound this poem makes is its major charm. It is best read aloud and at speed. The sonic qualities of poetry are usually described by analogy with music, but musical categories don’t capture the appeal of “Leaves of Field”—it is neither euphonious nor especially rhythmic. And yet it manages to seduce the tongue and coax the vocal cords into a dance most poems could only pant after. Judged on Frost’s criterion, it succeeds impressively: it does indeed sound “as different as possible” from any other poem I have read.

Robert P. Baird

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Thomas A. Clark, *The Path to the Sea*. Todmorden: Arc, 2005. 82pp. £8.99

The Scottish poet Thomas A. Clark has been called a minimalist, a modernist, a romantic, an objectivist, a landscape poet, an anti-pastoralist, a Platonist, and an Aristotelian. While these labels are obviously contradictory, they are