30 Μαρτίου 2017

Outrageous Death (Fr. John Garvey)

Ξένες γλώσσες / In English

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Philip Larkin's poem "Aubade" is one of my favorites. It is a formally perfect composition, and its vision of death is chilling. The poem is bitter, dark, and thoroughly unsentimental in its view of death. This is the first of its five stanzas:

> *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.

Larkin was not a believer (he considered religion a “moth-eaten” trick), nor was he the kind of blithe atheist who says there will be no “you” left to experience death or sorrow for not being. This precisely, he says,

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 anesthetic from which none come round.

Like any serious Christian (this comparison would surprise him), Larkin finds death outrageous. We long for life, and know that we will die. He writes, “Most things may never happen: this one will.” And he hates it.

Philip Larkin

“Aubade” may speak to me so strongly because of recent encounters with suffering and death and new life. As a couple of friends struggle to live with chronic, recurring cancer, another young woman gives birth. Two friends, about to marry relatively late in life, experience new depths of life as they are surprised and delighted by their love. Other people live with near constant pain, struggle with depression, work uphill against addictions.

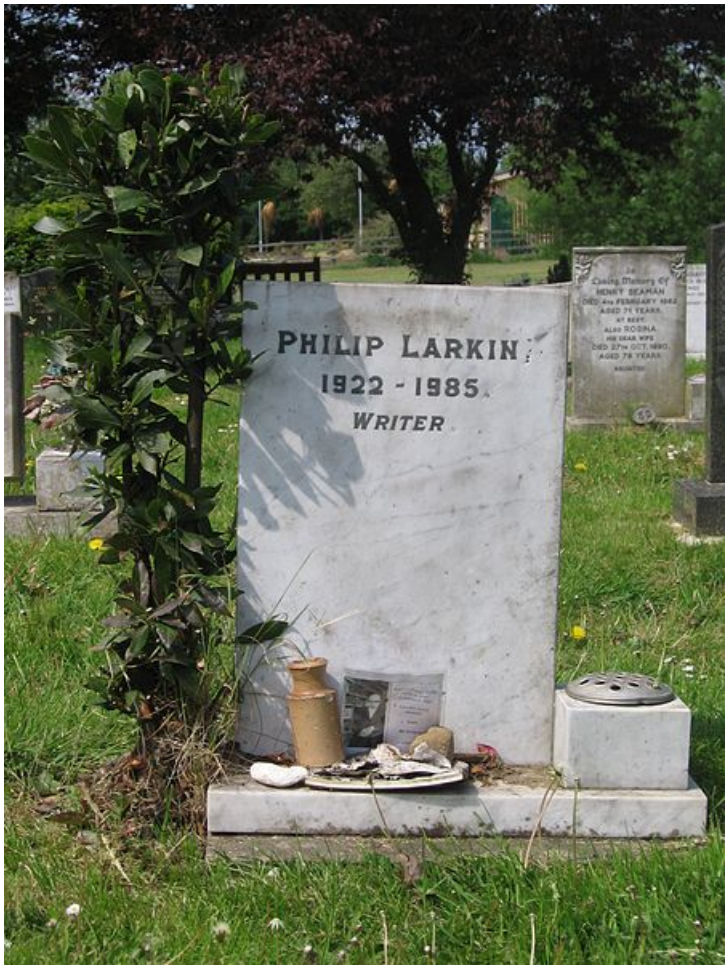
We want to hold on to life, but much of what many of us experience as life is a very mixed bag, and it is impossible to imagine wanting to hold on to this particular kind of life for all eternity. Life as we know it is a limited, partial, wanting thing.

Christianity inverted the belief of the ancient world that this life is our most vivid time, and that those who have died are shadows of their former selves. In Judaism a belief in resurrection began to take hold, a vindication of Israel's just and a condemnation of the unjust; and in Christianity the belief that Jesus was the firstborn of those who would be resurrected placed resurrection at the center of belief. Paul insisted that life in the resurrected state will be so much more real than what we now experience as life that we are incapable of imagining it.

The best parts of the life we live now are hints of what we are called to. What we know is far from the fullness of what we are meant to know; it touches that fullness and makes us yearn for more than what this mortal life offers us. What we really yearn for can't be killed, or know death's destruction.

Of course this seems too good to be true, and believers must try to understand the skepticism of unbelievers sympathetically, because it does seem strange to think of everything we experience as a metaphor for something deeper and greater, to think of the life we live now as not yet our truest life. This can look like wishful thinking, and belief in God like a child's belief in an imaginary friend.

But the alternative is to believe that evolution has set us up for a kind of cosmic swindle: we love life, see something good in it, want to hold on to that good and experience it in all of what its depths seem to promise us; and at the same time we know that this can never be, that our desire to live will come to nothing, that this will be taken from us, often after a period of great suffering.



Cemetery

Those reductionist atheists who speak of their awe at the beauty of a meaningless universe apparently aren't aware of the near-gnostic implications of their vision: what lies at the base of a universe without purpose is that all of our most beautiful hopes and desires, the things that most define our humanity, are in the end meaningless.

There is a way of learning to live with this, but it means a certain hardening of the heart, a final indifference to things we are meant to love. Christianity finds death outrageous, as Larkin did. "Death is no different whined at than withstood," he wrote, and he was right. The doctrine of resurrection does not say that we can learn to accept and live with death. It says that in Christ what we perceive instinctively as evil in suffering and death has been destroyed, and that we are right to rejoice.

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