



Plant culture: thirteen seasonal pieces

June – cut grass

Nicholas H. Battey

Philip Larkin's poem 'Cut Grass' captures the transient beauty of a June day with a wistful perfection. A much earlier work, 'Absences' shows a more muscular, robust view of nature, active and dynamic because of the poet's absence. The absence of biology may also have made it easier for Larkin briefly to ignore life's futility, the exhausting accompaniment to scientific thinking.

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 that high-builed cloud
Moving at summer's pace.

Philip Larkin, 3 June 1971, 'Cut Grass' from *Collected Poems* by Philip Larkin. Copyright © 1988, 1999 by the Estate of Philip Larkin. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, LLC. and by Faber and Faber Ltd. Online publication by permission of The Society of Authors as the Literary Representatives of the Estate of Philip Larkin.

'Its trouble is that it's "music", i.e. pointless crap.'

Philip Larkin, on 'Cut Grass'

But he also knew it was stunning in its elegance. Its trouble really is that it's sentimental. The June world is described with the writer in full view. He is someone who sees the plants and gives them back to us with his associations: regret ('long, long the death'), and impermanence ('lost lanes of Queen Anne's lace'), featuring strongly (Fig. 1). He is enraptured by the still, hopeless prettiness of the summer's day. And so the final image, of the 'high-builed cloud', transcends to ... emptiness.

Much of Larkin's poetry tries for this transcendence, and ends nowhere. It is as though he is looking for God but knows he cannot have Him. It was one of the characteristics of the Movement poets with whom Larkin is associated to be 'cool, scientific and analytical'; the result, here at least, is a great sigh. 'Cut Grass' expresses, sublimely, what science allowed Larkin. It is a poem frustrated by a sense of restriction, by the idea of nature as blind mechanism. So it is more about Larkin's (unhappy) response to the natural world than the natural world itself.



Fig. 1. Queen Anne's Lace (*Anthriscus sylvestris*). Photograph, Paul Hackney, Ulster Museum (from *Flora of Northern Ireland* www.habitas.org.uk).

But elsewhere, on the rare occasion when he removes himself, Larkin paints a more vivid world, without sentimental hankerings, rational but without fear of science:

Absences

Rain patters on a sea that tilts and sighs.
Fast-running floors, collapsing into hollows,
Tower suddenly, spray-haired. Contrariwise,
A wave drops like a wall: another follows,
Wilting and scrambling, tirelessly at play
Where there are no ships and no shallows.

Above the sea, the yet more shoreless day,
Riddled by wind, trails lit-up galleries:
They shift to giant ribbing, sift away.

Such attics cleared of me! Such absences!

Philip Larkin, 28 November 1950, 'Absences' from *The Less Deceived* by Philip Larkin. Reprinted by permission of The Marvell Press England and Australia. Online publication by permission of The Society of Authors as the Literary Representatives of the Estate of Philip Larkin.

'Absences' is also noticeably absent of biology. This may have allowed Larkin to avoid the sense of futility he associated with a purely mechanistic science of life. Because biology deals with life (and death) it is (or should be) most challenged by the argument that science does not account for the reality of the world as *felt*. As the young walk away from cold, dispassionate science in droves, are the bombastic, irritated commentaries of Richard Dawkins the best we scientists can offer in reply?

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