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Blake, Yeats, Larkin: Nihilism and the Indifferent Consolation of Post-Romanticism

It was during the Irish Civil War, sometime between 1922 and 1923, that W.B. Yeats, ensconced in Thoor Ballylee, the Norman tower that served both as a romantic, Samuel Palmer-esque symbol of the poet-scholar's separate, elevated fixedness above the mundane, hurly burly world of his fellow man, as well as an actual stone and mortar defence against intrusions from the outside world, composed a sardonically barbed renunciation in verse of both poetic transcendence and the possibility of any sort of tide-stemming defence against what he saw as a general devaluation of values. The poem in question is the caustically nihilistic fifth section of the apocalyptic sequence poem, *Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen*:

*Come let us mock at the great
That had such burdens on the mind
And toiled so hard and late
To leave some monument behind,
Nor thought of the levelling wind.*

*Come let us mock at the wise;
With all those calendars whereon
They fixed old aching eyes,
They never saw how seasons run,
And now but gape at the sun.*

*Come let us mock at the good
That fancied goodness might be gay,
And sick of solitude
Might proclaim a holiday:
Wind shrieked – and where are they?*

*Mock mockers after that
That would not lift a hand maybe
To help good, wise or great
To bar that foul storm out,
For we traffic in mockery.*

The profound sense of hopelessness is immediately evident. The first stanza invites us to consider the actions and passions of 'the great' from a position of resigned, mocking passivity. The difference between them and us modern nihilists, the implication runs, is that we are conscious of the inexorable power of what Yeats calls 'the levelling wind' and thus harbour no illusions about the efficacy of human striving or the longevity of human achievement. We are cast as, to use Philip Larkin's phrase, 'the less deceived', who have, as Yeats puts it, 'awakened from the common dream' to 'dissipation and despair'. As Yeats writes in the third section of *Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen*, again invoking a negatory wind:

O but we dreamed to mend

*Whatever mischief seemed
To afflict mankind, but now
That winds of winter blow
Learn that we were crack-pated when we dreamed.*

The wind, here, signals a moment of learning out of which emerges a new realisation, a new clarity about how things are, and with that clarity an accompanying sense of enlightened defeat and feelings of contempt for those who have not yet reached this understanding. As much as it signifies levelling destruction, then, the wind also marks the casting off and stripping bare of illusion. It is the wind that had once blown on Shakespeare's blasted heath, allowing Lear to see man shorn of the superficial trappings of wealth and status as a bare, forked animal.

The remaining stanzas intensify this sense of revelatory negation. In the second stanza it is the turn of 'the wise' to be mocked, in this case for their misunderstanding of temporality. They focused upon the calendar's artificial apportioning of time, remaining ignorant of the natural passage of the seasons. The implication seems to be that they treated time as infinite, instead of attending to the fast-emptying hourglass and addressing their own finitude. As a consequence they are now held stupidly enthralled to the sun's diurnal pulse. In the third stanza we are invited to mock 'the good', who favour a life of happiness, sociality and celebration. Once again, the purging wind gives them short shrift, perhaps suggesting that to live a life that is in some sense worthy requires an altogether more sober, indeed sombre, frame of mind. In the final stanza, in what amounts to nihilism turning vertiginously back upon itself, perfecting the poem's sense of complete and unrelieved darkness, we are called to 'mock mockers' and rail against their passive mocking of the good, wise and great.

A more terse, unflinchingly direct expression of negation in verse is difficult to imagine. Whether, in his blackest moments, Yeats endorsed this view, is not strictly relevant; what potentially is of consequence is that he seems to have articulated not simply the failure of the Romantic ideal of poetic transcendence, but also, devastatingly, the absence of the availability of any immanent consolation in the wake of this failure. This is significant because it positions the poem as recognising and confronting the possible extreme implications of two prevailing tendencies frequently identified as either generally characteristic of, or essentially constitutive of, modernity. Typically referred to as the decline or end of art and nihilism or the crisis of meaning, it would be a mistake to allow these almost caricatural sobriquets to obscure the complex genealogy and far-reaching import of the twin tendencies that they name, even if, perhaps inevitably, neither the genealogy nor the import can be fully explored here. What I propose to do in this paper is to examine how these complex sets of issues—on the one hand the Hegelian end of art, the failure of Romanticism, the crisis of representation and the exhaustion of non-representative art, and, on the other, a radical devaluing of values, an end of grand narratives, the decline of religion and other meta-narratives or frameworks of truth, the collapse of the enlightenment—are, in a sense, constellated by Yeats's poem and the poetic tradition of which it forms part. The guiding question is a simple one: what is it that Yeats's poem is casting aside, and what, if anything, is there left to endorse, both in terms of aesthetics and, indeed, life more generally?

Perhaps the most appropriate first step towards answering this is to be taken by returning to the poem that Yeats's poem, in an almost textbook case of Bloomian

misprision, seems to constitute a clinamen away from, namely William Blake's *Mock On, Mock On*:

*Mock on, Mock on, Voltaire, Rousseau:
Mock on, Mock on; 'tis all in vain!
You throw the sand against the wind,
And the wind blows it back again.*

*And every sand becomes a Gem
Reflected in the beams divine;
Blown back they blind the mocking Eye,
But still in Israel's paths they shine.*

*The Atoms of Democritus
And Newton's Particles of light
Are sands upon the Red sea shore,
Where Israel's tents do shine so bright.*

In this poem the mockers are identified, though 'Voltaire' and 'Rousseau' should also be understood as synecdochically standing in for the Enlightenment more generally and the broad move that it represents away from myth and religion, towards science and a more generally materialistic view of the world. The unholy trinity in Blake's frequent attacks on the Enlightenment are Bacon, Newton and Locke. In *Jerusalem* he imagines these three figures as a composite spectre that is carried by its 'two Wings, Voltaire, Rousseau' to 'teach Doubt and Experiment' to mankind. In Blake's view, this rationalistic and Deist or, even worse, atheist, way of approaching the world is more than simply mistaken, it is dangerously disenchanting, leading only to life's diminishment.

The central conceit of the poem is the contrast between a grain of sand and a gem. Famously, of course, Blake believed that when viewed aright—that is, with appropriately reverential innocence—one could see 'a World in a Grain of Sand' (*Auguries of Innocence*), and *Mock On, Mock On* seems to offer an extension of that idea. From a materialist perspective, the grain of sand is a grain of sand and nothing more. Sand, like dust, is a reminder of matter's lowest common denominator, that to which we shall return. For materialists, like the ancient Greek philosopher Democritus, this physical basis of all reality is the atom. Even the light in which the material world appears is, Newton argued, a stream of particles. For Blake, this emphasis on the physical and denial of the transcendental is self-defeating. Propagating an entirely immanent view of the world—akin, the suggestion seems to be, to throwing sand—is to make a mockery of existence. As if making just this point, the sand is blown back, further blinding the 'mocking Eye' to what Blake considers to be the reality of a deeper life. This deeper life only becomes apparent under the appropriate aspect shift granted by divine light, which radiantly transfigures base, everyday materiality. Each grain of sand becomes a shining 'Gem' and just as sand or dust signifies the entire material world, so too this gem-like sand serves accordingly to disclose the divinely transfigured context in which it appears. It is upon such sand, no less, that God's chosen people shelter the divine in the tabernacular tents, as the third stanza suggests.

What can this reading of Blake's poem reveal about Yeats's poem? The principal difference between the two is obvious. Far from the all-destructive nihilism of

Yeats's poem, Blake's poem defies the mockers, rousingly affirming a theological worldview. But what is particularly telling, though easily overlooked, is the role the wind plays, confounding the mockers and setting the scene for Blake's brief sketch of a divinely redeemed world. In other words, the wind, and by extension the whole natural order, is antagonistic towards the nihilistic disenchantment of reductive rationality and sympathetic towards all that might be thought to transcend that narrow view of the world, whether that be God, art, beauty or truth. Blake portrays the Enlightenment as broadly nihilistic in its refusal to recognise what he considered to be the genuine higher value of things, but the benevolent wind shows that this nihilism does not upset the natural order. By the time Yeats comes to write his poem, however, the wind is blowing in a different direction altogether: the wind is now 'all-levelling', a 'foul storm', and thus on the side of the mockers, rather than opposed to them. By extension, then, in Yeats's poem nihilism is no longer at odds with the natural order, it is the natural order and the mocking wind is proof of that. This clearly seems to constitute a victory for nihilism over anything that might aim or claim to rise above it. But what might that be exactly, besides Blake's divinely transmuted world, and does its rejection, signalled in Yeats's poem, amount to a rejection of Romanticism? What, that is to say, is the full significance of this wind change?

M.H. Abrams, in *The Correspondent Breeze*, drily observes how 'thoroughly ventilated' (1984, p.26) English romantic poetry is. What interests him in particular is the way in which, in Romantic poetry, 'the wind is not only a property of the landscape, but also a vehicle for radical changes in the poet's mind', and how it is 'correlated with a complex subjective process' (1984, p.26). This idea is vividly portrayed by Shelley in *A Defence of Poetry*:

Man is an instrument over which a series of external and internal impressions are driven, like the alternations of an ever-changing wind over an Aeolian lyre; which move it, by their motion, to ever-changing melody. But there is a principle within the human being, and perhaps within all sentient beings, which acts otherwise than in the lyre, and produces not melody alone, but harmony, by an internal adjustment of the sounds or motions thus excited to the impressions which excite them. It is as if the lyre could accommodate its chords to the motions of that which strikes them, in a determined proportion of sound ... (Shelley, 2003, p.675)

And as 'an invisible power known only by its effects' (Abrams, 1984, p.42), this *correspondent* breeze is also often presented, as in Blake's *Mock On, Mock On*, as a *Geist*-like force resistant to Enlightened, materialist views of the world. By poetically combining man's inner nature, his outer, natural environment and at least the suggestion of a non-material, supersensible realm, the romantic figure of wind is able to range over the typical post-Cartesian worries about dualism, taking in sand, gems and beams divine in its accommodating airs. Understood more broadly, this is the 'all-sustaining air' of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, which is able to transfigure the ordinary and reveal the transcendental truth of the material world. 'Asia' likens it to love which 'makes the reptile equal to the God'. 'lone', however, refers to the 'twin nurslings of the all-sustaining air' and 'their sweet, sad voices', like 'despair / Mingled with love and then dissolved in sound'. This comingling of despair and love, sustained by the air, is, I think, significant. Confronting scientific and philosophical tendencies to diminish the world, it seems entirely fitting that the transformative Romantic wind should be expressive of despair as well as love. As Michael O'Neill in *The All-Sustaining*

Air, remarks, ‘Shelleyan “air” is always ready to rhyme with “despair”’ (2007, p.16). What is important is that love ultimately prevails in the poetic moment and despair subsides. The wind, then, as Shelley tells us in his *Ode to the West Wind*, is both ‘Destroyer and preserver’. However it will not always be thus and we do not need to go as far forward as Yeats’s *Come Let us Mock at the Great* to understand this; it is already evident in Shelley’s *The Triumph of Life* which, famously left unfinished at the time of his premature death, seems to announce a certain end of Romanticism.

In *The Triumph of Life* the crushing, inexorable progress of the chariot is accompanied by what Shelley calls ‘the insulting wind’. The mocked good, wise and great of Yeats’s later poem are already present here as the ‘wise, / The great, the unforgotten’, who, too concerned with maintaining ‘thought’s empire over thought’ failed ‘to know themselves’, a failure with an obvious Greek provenance, but with a more relevant concern with regard to criticism being levelled at the Enlightenment on the basis of its inability to provide a secure ground of knowledge which, for Romantics of a broadly idealistic bent, would have to be located in the self or, at least, in a transcendental unity of the intellect and the sensible apprehension of the world. In Yeats’s poem we are invited to mock the ineffectuality of such worthies and then to mock ourselves, the mockers. In *The Triumph of Life*, these worthies, representatives of the Enlightenment, whom Shelley names as ‘Voltaire, / Frederick and Kant, Catherine and Leopold’, are themselves mockers, or as Shelley calls them, ‘spoilers’. But, foreshadowing Yeats’s imprecation to mock mockers, they are already ‘spoilers spoiled’ (a phrase Shelley, in turn, probably owes to Byron [Duffy, 1979, p.168, n.3]), defeated by life itself, whose cold and unforgiving light outshines the light of nature, which in turn outshines the light of the imagination. Harold Bloom suggests that the final position of *The Triumph of Life* is ‘total despair’. Love, in other words, which had once accompanied despair in the Shelleyan all sustaining air, is now absent, life having betrayed and overcome the inner impulses of the heart. This, then, is the end of Romantic consolation *as well as* a continuation of the Romantic rejection of Enlightenment rationalism. As Bloom puts it, ‘Life, our life, can be met only by quietism or by wilful self-destruction’ (1965, p.173).

What Bloom does not recognise is that far from being stark alternatives, it was, in a sense, precisely a combination of quietism and self-destruction that emerged as one of the dominant topoi of post-Romanticism. The idea that ‘wilful self-destruction’ is the appropriate response to the horror of life is, in modern thought, perhaps most strongly associated with Schopenhauer and Nietzsche’s respective appropriations of the so-called wisdom of Silenus. Nietzsche writes:

According to the old story, King Midas had long hunted wise Silenus, Dionysus’ companion, without catching him. When Silenus had finally fallen into his clutches, the king asked him what was the best and most desirable thing of all for mankind. The daemon stood silent, stiff and motionless, until at last, forced by the king, he gave a shrill laugh and spoke these words: ‘Miserable, ephemeral race, children of hazard and hardship, why do you force me to say what it would be much more fruitful for you not to hear? The best of all things is something entirely outside your grasp: not to be born, not to be, to be nothing. But the second-best thing for you—is to die soon. (1993, p.22)

Both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche took this to imply that the individual will is a sufficient condition of suffering. Because we are already in possession of it, the best thing for us would be its early extinction. As Béatrice Han-Pile points out, however, this

ought not to be through suicide, which would itself require an exercising of the will that would be a 'paradoxical assertion of a failed aspiration to live', but, instead, 'a passive relinquishing of the desire to exist, such as death by starvation' (2006, p.377). If quietism suggests the extinction of the will, then Silenus seems to be recommending a radical form of this, the experience of complete indifference to life. To be convinced of this would be, paradoxically, to will will-less self-destruction. Accepting this, Schopenhauer judged life to be undesirable and, accordingly, professed a deeply pessimistic philosophy of the will. For Nietzsche, though, the wisdom of Silenus does not require a renunciation of life. This, however, is the Romantic Nietzsche of *The Birth of Tragedy* who, like the Shelley of *Prometheus Unbound*, sees love as the supplement and complement of despair, and thus finds a source of consolation in the experience of tragedy. Nietzsche famously augurs the return of a tragic culture that 'turns a steady eye on the world as a whole, and seeks to grasp, with a sympathetic love, eternal suffering as its own'. This culture of 'bold ... dragon-slayers' must 'inevitably yearn for a new *art of metaphysical consolation*' (1993, p.88). The metaphysical consolation of art would provide an experience of the loss of self and a revelation of unindividuated, primal will. Within a few years Nietzsche would come bitterly to renounce this notion, rejecting Romanticism's intoxicating blend of love and despair, thus bringing himself in line with the position Shelley had marked out in *The Triumph of Life* and which is then taken to its bitter extreme in Yeats's *Come Let Us Mock at the Great*. In Nietzsche's case, however, there is a clear difference in that this does still not equate with a total rejection of life. Indeed, in rejecting metaphysical consolation, Nietzsche recommends instead '*this-worldly consolation*' (1993, p.11). This raises the question of how, if at all, this non-transcendental consolation might manifest itself in post-romantic poetry and thereby overcome the nihilistic hopelessness expressed by Yeats. In what remains of this paper, I would like to address this in relation to the poetry of Philip Larkin.

In our foregoing account the implicit suggestion is that the end of Romanticism is announced at the moment that the possibility of some sort of consolatory transfiguration or aestheticisation of the world is perceived to be no longer possible and in its wake is left a nihilistic feeling of diminishment, the Enlightenment's thoroughly Pyrrhic victory. I have suggested that this development can be traced in the poetic winds that blow through beams divine in Blake, to those marked by love and despair in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, to the wind-change marked by the 'insulting wind' of his *Triumph of Life*, to the 'levelling wind' of Yeats. In Larkin's poetry the wind drops and there is a sense that the extremes of both Romantic transfiguration and angry negation are being left behind for a new austerity that, although disbelieving, disenchanted and often mocking, is calmer and more detached, at times almost impassive. This much is anticipated by an early poem, *The North Ship: Legend*, which tells the story of three ships. One ship, carried by the wind, sails westward and enjoys a happy and prosperous voyage. The second ship sails east and 'the wind hunted it like a beast' and its voyage was an unhappy one. Both, however, returned in due course. But the third ship sailed north and 'no breath of wind came forth, / And the decks shone frostily'. It 'went wide and far / Into an unforgiving sea / Under a fire-spilling star, / And it was rigged for a long journey'. Quietly resilient and charting a course between two extremes, this third ship might well be taken to represent Larkin's poetic temperament. The figure of the wind does occasionally appear in his subsequent verse but, as in *Mr Bleaney*, *Sad Steps*, *Talking in Bed* and *Absences*, it tends to be a frigid,

cloud-tousling wind that plays an oblique and relatively minor role next to what Seamus Heaney, quoting Shakespeare, refers to as the 'main of light' (2002, p. 158) in Larkin's work, the still, luminescent air that intermittently features in his verse, marking peaks of aesthetic intensity. How might this new post-Romantic clime be understood? And how, in light of our discussion of Blake, Shelley and Yeats, might it be seen as renegotiating the Romantic legacy of nihilism and consolation?

One does not have to go far in Larkin's poetry to become aware of a certain contractedness, expressive of a dejected though quite matter-of-fact sense of life's hopelessness. There is a poignancy to this, a feeling that no matter how well things start, they will end badly—not, usually, in catastrophe, but in disappointment. When, in Larkin's poetry, the figure of the wind does appear in its former Romantic guise as an emblem of change, there is no sense of there being revolution in the air. On the contrary, in fact, rather than announcing something new, it tends to confirm an ongoing transformation—not so much an augur of change as an agent of atrophy. While in Blake's *Mock On, Mock On* the wind blows sand in the eyes of the mockers, sand that has been transmuted into gems by beams divine, in Larkin's poem *Skin*, time, which transforms the 'unfakable young surface' of skin into a thickened, loosened 'old bag', is likened to a 'continuous coarse / Sand-laden wind'. Similarly, in *Afternoons*, a poem that captures a sad, inevitable, though largely unremarkable, scene change of youth passing into middle age, couples stand around in the park in late summer, their children playing, as 'the wind / Is ruining their courting-places / That are still courting-places / (But the lovers are all in school)'. The poem concludes:

Their beauty has thickened.

Something is pushing them

To the side of their own lives.

As Larkin says in *Nothing To Be Said*, 'Life is slow dying', and the things we do, the ways in which we live, are 'Ways of slow dying'. For Larkin the truth of life is disappointment. There is no point railing against this fact, as might Nietzsche's bold dragon-slayers, yearning for metaphysical consolation. It is not the fault of some cruel or indifferent deity that can be blamed, nor is there a consoling 'common myth-kitty' (Larkin, 1983, p.79) to dip into as, according to Larkin, the modernists did. This is just the way things are. One's lot cannot even be considered unfair as there is the strong suggestion in a number of Larkin's poems (*Mr Bleaney*, *Toads*, *Home is so Sad*, *Sunny Prestatyn*, for instance) that we end up with the life that our skills, intellect, disposition and character warrant. We get the lives we deserve, in other words. '[H]ow we live measures our own nature', he writes in *Mr Bleaney*. Larkin confronts this reality both with doleful though detached inevitability, and gentle, ironic mockery, an attitude that seems to weigh life lightly, as though viewing it from beyond life. (It is in this light, I would argue, that the ironic detachment with which he views Romanticism in *Sad Steps*, and religion in *Church Going*, should be regarded.) Occasionally, as in *Toads* and *Poetry of Departures*, there are fantasies about living a different kind of life, but Larkin always succeeds in talking himself out of them. The prevailing mood, then, is one of fatalism, but a fatalism so passive that it might be viewed as utter indifference. Larkin identifies the windowless disappointment of life and accepts it. In the poem *Mr Bleaney*, having been shown the room that Mr Bleaney used to rent, a grim, spartan room that still carries memories of the routines of Bleaney's dull life, Larkin (and not to identify the poetic I with Larkin would, in this case, be taking the Barthesian death of

the author far too seriously) says 'I'll take it'. What he will take remains not entirely clear. The room, certainly; but there is also a sense that he is accepting much more than that, perhaps even the kind of life the Bleaney had lived. There is a temptation to see something vaguely Nietzschean in this affirmation of a nihilistic view of life, and it would be quite possible to offer an account of the coming to be of post-Romanticism as a move away from a Christian love of despair that characterised Romanticism, towards a kind of *amor fati*. But this, I think, would be to distort Larkin's poetic temperament. What I am suggesting is most striking about his poetry is not a sense of love or passion for anything in particular, though love and passion are certainly both there if one looks for them. Rather, what is remarkable is the way his devaluing of the world is directed, ultimately, towards an apparently impassive indifference that seems to affirm meaninglessness and yet simultaneously occupies it in a way that renders it, at least potentially, transformative. There is something both purifying and calming about this achievement of indifference in Larkin's verse, a sense of liberty felt as the claims of the world, and one's sense of care in regard to it, fall away.

This is particularly clear in the poem *Here*, which poetically recounts a rail journey from London to Hull. It is a journey that moves through urban civilisation towards an increasing sense of abstraction, insistently 'swerving to solitude'. Out beyond suburbia the railway line reaches,
Isolate villages where removed lives

*Loneliness clarifies. Here silence stands
Like heat. Here leaves unnoticed thicken,
Hidden weeds flower, reflected waters quicken,
Luminously-peopled air ascends;
And past the poppies bluish neutral distance
Ends the land suddenly beyond a beach
Of shapes and shingle. Here is unfenced existence:
Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach.*

Such moments are bereft of wind, whether romantically beneficent or derisively mocking. In its place is an empty, impassive stillness, a veritable death-in-life. However, this is not posited simply as an alternative to the contracted life of disappointment and disenchantment that Larkin's poetry records so sensitively. It is, rather, a consequence of a particular, I would say *indifferent*, response to it. In other words, this experience of 'unfenced existence' is only available through an acceptance of Bleaney's 'one hired box'. Indifference towards a life that is finite and a world that is no longer shot through with religious transcendence or the radically transfigurative power of the Romantic imagination affords a certain kind of calm, liberating elevation in Larkin's verse. This is notable in a number of his most significant poems and, indeed, it constitutes the aesthetic peaks in his verse that, as I have already mentioned, Heaney refers to as the 'main of light' of Larkin's poetic imagination. The most famous example of this is, undoubtedly, *High Windows*. Here, after painting a very coarse picture of modern life and the unedifying succession of generations, Larkin is suddenly left with the rather puzzling 'thought of high windows:'

*The sun-comprehending glass,
And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.*

Again, it is as though the purified detachment of the latter is a dialectical consequence of a meditation on the former. In *Cut Grass*, having contemplated ‘Long, long the death’ of mown grass, we are left with an image of ‘high-builed cloud / Moving at summer’s pace’. These experiences mark a willless loss of self, a quiescence of the ego dissolved in unindividuated space. In *Absences* he regards the sky’s ‘lit-up galleries’ and remarks: ‘Such attics cleared of me! Such absences’. In *Water*, Larkin reflects that if he were ‘called in / To construct a religion’ he would ‘make use of water’. He would ‘raise in the east’,

A glass of water

Where any-angled light

Would congregate endlessly.

But the world for Larkin is as disenchanted as it was at the end of Romanticism in Shelley’s *The Triumph of Life* and Yeats’s *Come Let Us Mock at the Great*. He makes no concession towards the idea of an otherworldly transcendence that would console by straightforwardly redeeming this-worldly existence. And yet clearly there does seem to be something consoling in the calming indifference of Larkin’s poetry. Might this be the sort of immanent consolation the post-romantic Nietzsche envisaged in his *Attempt at a Self-Criticism*, in which he rejects his earlier stance in *The Birth of Tragedy*? The achievement of a clear, unblinking and accepting vision of how things are—‘clear / as the bleb of the icicle’ Heaney might say—and, out of that, a sense of relief at having surveyed the worst with undeceived eyes? It is as though it is only through a negation of the world and of the self—the attainment of a point of complete indifference, that is—that any sense of value can be recovered. There is perhaps also a sense that deprived of the possibility of aesthetic transcendence of the world, the post-Romantic artist must simply step back from the world, cultivating an indifference that loosens its ties sufficiently for there to be any art at all.

All of this is quite possibly true. And it would mark a clear, I would suggest *post-Romantic*, development from the disconsolation of Yeats’s poem. In Larkin’s work, there is the possibility of a moderate, imperfect—indifferent, then, in every sense—consolation that is not at odds with meaninglessness. On the contrary, in fact: any consolation in Larkin’s poetry is only possible not by striving against or rejecting nihilism, but by frankly accepting it. The loss of transcendence, far from being an occasion for despair, would be an opportunity for calming, quietly transformative indifference. In this regard, Larkin’s poetry could be understood as instructive as to how to live in a post-metaphysical world, how to live in days unrelieved by some sort of redeeming, all-transfiguring beyond. In the poem *Days*, Larkin asks ‘Where can we live but days?’, and suggests that ‘solving that question / Brings the priest and the doctor / In their long coats / Running over the fields’. To the priest and the doctor might we add the post-Romantic poet who now offers to solve that question, not by means of an answer so much as a re-thinking of the question ‘What are days for?’

Quite possibly. But although this strikes us as new in the context of the legacy of Romanticism, it can actually be understood as reactivating long-established responses to human finitude that had perhaps been partly occluded by Romanticism and its influence. Taking this longer view, post-Romantic indifferent consolation can perhaps be understood as combining elements of Epicureanism and Stoicism with aspects of the experience of tragedy in literature. These philosophical and literary traditions have their own distinct histories and concerns, of course, but they can be

understood as converging on a common idea, and that is calm—perhaps even tinged with happiness or joy—when faced with the threat of annihilation. Epicurus referred to this state of detachment as *ataraxia* and the Stoics used the concept of *apatheia* to denote a similar state of indifference or equanimity that results from the purging of emotion. The experience of tragic art forms has also, of course, been understood as affording a similar sort of purging, leading to what Nietzsche referred to as ‘Greek cheerfulness’ (1993, 46). Yeats, likewise, reminds us that ‘Hamlet and Lear are gay’. Milton, in the Preface to *Samson Agonistes* likens this to the way ‘in Physic things of melancholic hue and quality are us'd against melancholy, sower against sower, salt to remove salt humours.’ Larkin’s poetry offers at least a suggestion as to how these various forms of achieved ‘indifference’ might perhaps be appropriated and adapted to serve a distinctly post-Romantic aesthetic, where nihilism becomes a sort of *pharmakon* and acts as its own consolation. This can of course lead to a sort of stupefied, resigned apoliticism. But there is also the tantalising possibility that the resulting state, in which the bonds of care and anxiety that usually tie subjectivity so closely to everyday, egotistical concerns, are loosened in indifference, might serve as a calm, clear, ethical space—an ideal space, as it were—in which the world can be radically recast. It is in the hope of the latter that I would like to imagine Larkin’s indifferent consolation taking up the legacy of *ataraxia* and *apatheia* in the spirit of Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*. Here, in what might almost be read as a highly elliptical parable of my account of Larkin’s indifferent consolation, the protagonist Teufelsdröckh gives his account of what he calls the ‘Centre of Indifference’. He only approaches this once the distracting ‘hot Harmattan wind’, significantly a *sand-bearing* West African trade wind, ‘had raged itself out’. He writes:

Its howl went silent within me; and the long-deafened soul could now hear. I paused in my wild wanderings; and sat me down to wait, and consider; for it was as if the hour of change drew nigh. I seemed to surrender, to renounce utterly, and say: Fly, then, false shadows of Hope; I will chase you no more, I will believe you no more. And ye too, haggard spectres of Fear, I care not for you; ye too are all shadows and a lie. Let me rest here: for I am way-weary and life-weary; I will rest here, were it but to die: to die or to live is alike to me; alike insignificant’. – And again: ‘Here, then, as I lay in that Centre of Indifference; cast, doubtless by benignant upper Influence, into a healing sleep, the heavy dreams rolled gradually away, and I awoke to a new Heaven and a new Earth. The first preliminary moral Act, Annihilation of Self (Selbst-tödtung), had been happily accomplished; and my mind’s eyes were now unsealed, and its hands ungyved. (Carlyle, 1999, pp.141-142)

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