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Tree being in Peter Larkin's "Skies in Flight of Tree"

This essay reads Peter Larkin's twelve-part poem, "Skies in Flight of Tree" (2019), in the context of critical plant studies, to assert the affective energy of trees. With reference to Eduardo Kohn, Emanuele Coccia, and Michael Marder, the essay suggests that Larkin's poem sacralises this affective energy as a form of being connected to the inclusive, collective, and organisational cosmology of Catholicism. It posits that tree being rejects the logic of depletion and extraction, one that Larkin translates into a prayerful language that brings his readers into an intimate relationship with the material world. While he warns of the pressures of organic relations, Larkin ultimately reveals prayer as that which grants humans access (he calls it "breathable admittance") to the participatory and meditative thinking patterns of the other-than-human, tree and sky alike. In imagining and so practicing this thinking in "Skies in Flight of Tree," Larkin reads trees not simply as part of a diminishing economy of geological deposits, but as beings that exemplify relationships built on plenitude rather than scarcity.

Cet article étudie le poème en douze parties de Peter Larkin « Skies in Flight of Tree » (2019) à partir de l'approche des « Critical Plant Studies », pour analyser la puissance d'affect des arbres. Faisant appel aux travaux d'Eduardo Kohn, Emanuele Coccia et Michael Marder, l'auteur montre que Larkin sacralise cette puissance d'affect comme forme d'être inclusive, collective et organisationnelle liée à la cosmologie catholique. Il suggère que l'être-arbre rejette la logique contemporaine d'appauvrissement et d'exploitation, ce que Larkin traduit par une langue empruntant à la prière pour amener ses lecteurs à une relation intime avec le monde matériel. Tout en rappelant les menaces que font peser les relations organiques entre êtres, Larkin révèle que la prière est finalement ce par quoi l'homme trouve accès (le poète parle d'« accueil par le souffle ») aux formes de pensée participative et méditative du non-humain, qu'il soit arbre ou ciel. En imaginant et en pratiquant cette pensée dans « Skies in Flight of Tree », Larkin aborde les arbres non pas seulement comme éléments d'une économie en déclin fondée sur l'exploitation d'un héritage géologique, mais comme êtres incarnant des relations de plénitude plutôt que de manque.

Peter Larkin's twelve-part sequence, "Skies in Flight of Tree" (2019), chronicles the relationship between trees and skies through a poetic explication of tree being, which for him is attentive, affective, and unwaveringly relational. He discloses, if not advocates, tree being as the basis for a human imagining of how forests think in their pursuit of sustained interconnection, one that he describes with reference to the divine, prayerfulness, and the heavens. As John Milbank, one of the few theologians to write about Larkin, argues, human thinking of such interconnection is reliant on "ancient Jewish, Greek and Roman stimuli" to conceptualise a collective and harmonious social good that refuses "the primacy of the lone individual and an agreement merely to differ" (Milbank 2018, 36). While trees are distinct and specific, as Larkin's focus on particular trees and woodlands covering the English midlands attests, they also share in a wholly cooperative and integrated way of thinking and imagining their environments. In their participatory, shared, relational, and gathered connection with a world to which they do not only belong, but also create and sustain, trees "think" by registering the micro-details of their surroundings. The suggestion that trees and plants think will be familiar to readers of critical plant theorists like Emanuele Coccia, Eduardo Kohn, and Michael Marder. All three are interested in how humans might conceptualise and describe what happens when plant life thinks and so makes claim to being. This essay argues that Larkin's work helps us to nuance the field of critical plant studies with reference to the immaterial and sacred—or what Kohn calls the "spirit life" of Ecuador's ancient woodlands (Kohn 2017). I contend that

Larkin's work shows us that the material comprehension of different modes and phenomenologies of other-than-human thinking is deepened with reference to the sacred.

Larkin, a poet whose work spans the last thirty-five years, brings together a literary-political commitment to environmentalism and the ecological with a theological interest in phenomenology and liturgy through figures like Teilhard de Chardin, Jean-Luc Marion, and Jean-Louis Chrétien. As Simon Collings notes in an interview with the poet, Larkin's recent work has become increasingly open in its address of theology both in relation to language (with "words like 'sacral,' 'numinous,' 'prayer,'" Collings writes) and the nature of sacred or numinous experience. Larkin responds by stating that his theological preoccupations are presenced through trees, living beings that evoke a transcendence that reaches both up and across and so remains always in relation to the body of the ground in which it is rooted. His poem "Skies in Flight of Tree" (2019) evokes this sense of connection through its motif of skies moving through trees and woodlands lifting up into the firmament. As both a form of energy (breathable air, shelter, medicine, fuel, food) and affective being, the trees reject the logic that ensures their destruction by signalling a radically other mode of participation with the things around them. For Larkin, this inclusive, collective, and organisational cosmology courses through the natural but is only recognised by the human imagination when re-spoken through prayer and the poem. As Bruno Latour and Rowan Williams argue, this cosmology is Christian, a word that for them and in this essay signifies a non-dual and Catholic theology that complicates the monolithic alignment of Christianity with anthropocentrism promoted by Lynn White and more recently Amitav Ghosh. While some forms of Christian theology broadly encompass approaches to the environment in which the human is wire-cut from it as its shepherd or master, many do not, not least the mystical, apophatic, and contemplative non-dual Catholicism (Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Henri de Lubac, and Karl Rahner, for example) in which Larkin is interested.

The sacramental and prayerful theology of Larkin's tree thinking is woven into the poet's ecological politics and is not only compatible with what Coccia calls the immersive and communal existence of plant life, but also directly undermines the egoic and individualised human thinking that validates the ongoing exploitation of fossil fuels. I argue here for the significance of Christianity and the sacred in the Energy Humanities, which, like its close relation the Environmental Humanities, tends to lean away from its inclusion. As texts like Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer's flagship anthology, *Energy Humanities* (2017), attest, contemporary readings of energy are founded on an interest in methodologies that prioritise labour and power rather than devotion or faith. Larkin's work is pertinent here because it brings together all of these concerns in one poetic aesthetic that eludes the binary between the spiritual and political sustained by critics like Timothy Clark. He argues that "emotive/spiritual" poetry is little more than "a kind of personal therapy" that is "no longer" possible within an "'Anthropocene' context" (58–59). Anything other than a poetics that draws attention to the limits of the human in capturing the environment collapses into "pastoral fantasy" for Clark, who at the same time worries that a more academic poetic practice offers little "aesthetic" or "poetic pleasure" (68, 76). Larkin's work is defamiliarising to be sure, but its pleasure lies in the experience of reading a poet bend a textured language and form that enacts the verticality,

glide, and asymmetries of tree being. Swaying from sentences that reach across the page in blocks or fragments to thin, branch-like clusters of verse in which hollows of space let the light through, Larkin's poetry discloses the lost connections between human and other-than-human, whether floral, faunal, fungal, bacterial or spiritual, by granting the reader a way of imaginatively but obliquely thinking the specificity of what appears to the human as alien, opaque, and jarring. Rhythmic patterns and sounds mediate the organisation and forms of life inhabiting the densely entangled spaces of woodlands, forests, plantations, and thickets. Like Kohn, for whom the anthropologist must learn to hear beyond the phonemic familiarities of academic language into the specificities of indigeneity, Larkin suggests that the poet can give voice and form to the "speculative-contemplative" paradoxes associated with both "organic form" and "the ways of the spirit in our times" (Collings).

Larkin also draws on an often perplexing, mystifying, and compressed lexicon of scarcity to describe an overflowing world of plenitude and gift that founds an immeasurable and "non-scalable" way of being. As David Farrier notes, this poetics of scarcity contrasts with and so resists a "logic of resource extraction" (60–61). The abundance of the natural world is thus set against the artificial resource substitution that comes as a response to perennial scarcity. For Larkin, poetry registers and renews lost abundance because it admits the partial presence of a world laid bare by poetic expectation of the spiritual and the divine. His interwoven Catholic vocabulary of prayer and grace grants unconditional moments of ontological participation that answer the persistent threat of scarcity, damage, consumerism, and extraction. These are moments of "invocation" rather than "declaration," as Larkin states, and convey something unfamiliar, awkward, and vulnerable across his work (Collings). In his earlier "praying // firs \\ attenuate" (2014), for example, prayer builds up a "probative store" (I, 40) against the scarcity of resource, and later offers a way through excessively wooded treescapes: "Pray throughout, pray within, by virtue of a thickly paraded earth co-provokes just such quota-assemblies of trees" (III, 19–20). Prayer also appears as a "surplus" (although, the poet confirms, not an "excessive" one) in his poem "Expressing Trees by Default" (2018), wherein the tree becomes a "store of creation" (X, 1) marked by "ellipses and gift" (XII, 3–4) and "slender pauses of the spirit" (XV, 5) to conjure grace as an opening possibility. And yet his trees never point to the paradisaal alterity beyond the human Clark worries about. As Larkin writes in his *Seven Leaf Sermons* (2018), "Trees won't be miracle-filled" because they are "leaf-willed" (I, 1) and so comprehend their worlds in extraordinarily intricate terms.

It is in their capacity as shelters of religious meaning that trees feel intimately familiar and close in Larkin's poetry, then, driven by an inclusiveness that frees them from human efficiency and urban acceleration (Larkin 2012b, 94). Extended arboreally upwards but also rhizomatically across and down, they are immersed within a creation that comprises both the earthly and the heavenly, and relate to these multiple dimensions only in a continuum. While this continuum is constantly broken by an anthropocentric thinking that separates matter and spirit (if it recognises spirit at all), tree being founds and engages in participatory and meditative thinking patterns that Larkin translates into a language of the sacred. The rest of this essay will consider Larkin's poem, "Skies in Flight of Tree," through the interaction between ecology and religion. I begin with a discussion of recent writing on trees in the context of

critical plant studies, and work with Coccia, Kohn, and Marder to establish tree being and thinking as revelatory and transformative of a worldly entanglement from which humans are artificially disconnected. I argue that in “Skies in Flight of Tree” Larkin creates a poetic site in which his reader is given access to intimacy with the thinking of trees through a gnarled and yet flowing prayerfulness. This site is also the basis of an abundant relationship between the human and other-than-human that might enable the former to rethink the value of the energy trees produce through its relative vulnerability as well as measurable effects. As I suggest with reference to Larkin’s epigraph to “Skies in Flight of Tree”—Johannes Baptist Metz’s *Poverty of Spirit*—this material summons to such vulnerability and mystery finds form in a doxological poetics that uncovers and manifests what is otherwise concealed in tree being and thinking. At once affective and sacred, trees bring vicarious prayer to the human as a means to rethink and reorganise our relationships with them and the world they sustain.

Trees are equally beloved and exploited in the modern world. The environment they provide is as important as the pharmaceutical products derived from them, and countless books and articles in both popular media and academic journals extol the emotional and physical health benefits of human connection with trees. Peter Wohlleben’s *The Hidden Life of Trees: What they Feel, How they Communicate, Discoveries from a Secret World* (2017), Fiona Stafford’s *The Long, Long Life of Trees* (2017), Christina Harrison and Tony Kirkham’s *Remarkable Trees* (2019) and Bruce Albert, Francis Halle, and Stefano Mancuso’s *Trees* (2019), published to accompany the *Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain* exhibition on trees in Paris, are some of the more academic publications that join other folksy volumes on tree wisdom, medicine, and magic. The Japanese practice of *shinrin-yoku* (“forest bath”) is frequently cited as one that can reduce blood pressure, aid sleep, enhance the immune system, and help counter illness. Advocates of forest-bathing insist that mindful connection to the energy of trees serves as a preventative medicine, and argue for the preservation and rewilding of freely accessible forest-scapes. Such proven benefits, however, have not countered the excessive logging and burning of trees, and acts of deforestation, such as urbanisation, mining, drilling, farming, and the grazing of livestock. Responses to this tension have understandably been defined by anger and hostility to those who are perceived to be most at fault in the continued onslaught on trees and resulting wildfires, loss of clean water, and reduction of biodiversity in forests. The fury that drives these responses, however, is arguably founded on the same aggressive or strong thinking that underscores the violence it aims to oppose. The kind of thinking that might lead to a broad shift in consciousness with the potential to negate the logic of violence towards the other-than-human is a gentler one that many critical plant theorists and scientists suggest is embodied in trees themselves.

The field of critical plant studies has arisen in parallel with materialist developments in the life sciences that have turned our attention to other-than-human organisms. No longer perceived as static and discrete objects on which the world acts, trees and plants now appear as interconnected, porous, and dynamic agents free of subjectivity and ego (Coole and Frost 2010). From Matthew Hall’s *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany* (2011), a book that asks us to rethink plants not as a passive resource for our consumption but as beings for which

we should feel empathy, to Michael Marder's *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (2013), which argues for plant-consciousness as a model for human thinking, plant theory seeks to undermine a Western metaphysics that has neglected the being and beingness of the other-than-human. But this metaphysics has ignored the fact that this plant being is the foundation of all life forms and beingness. As Emanuele Coccia argues in *The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture* (2018), "the world is the product of plant life," a "circulation of living beings" that is the active and "constant genesis of our cosmos" (Coccia 8–10). Coccia's reading reverses the current prioritisation of environment over the living and reveals instead that plants make the world from themselves and are thus immersed within it. Through photosynthesis, plants produce the atmosphere that sustains all life, a "great atmospheric laboratory in which solar energy is transformed into living matter" (Coccia 37). Plants reveal the world as a fluid and dynamic space in which life is submerged, a mutuality in which "subject and environment, body and space" are indistinguishable and continually act on each other (Coccia 37). The recognition that living things exchange and reproduce the atmosphere and air they breathe in relation to each other leads Coccia to suggest that our experience and knowledge of the world is also a coming together of subject and object in which we are completely immersed. If, as Coccia argues, everything is in everything, then our ways of being, knowing and thinking are inseparable and synthetic. From the leaf whose openness to the elements generates life to the vascular roots that join the earth and the air, the sun and the sky, the plant is an inclusive "cosmic mediator" (Coccia 81) in which all things converge. In physical terms, this means that the sky is not simply "above" us in a discrete space separated from what lies "below," but rather an "everywhere: it is the space and the reality of mixture and movement, the definitive horizon starting from which everything has to draw itself" (Coccia 94).

Coccia's sky-shaped "everywhere" powered by plant life signals not only that the other-than-human and human are materially part of one event, but that to understand climate means to understand an atmosphere made by plants. As this plant making or *poiesis* is "seasonal, rhythmic, deciduous" (Coccia 28), it structures as well as produces a communal existence in which all things are sustained. That humans break and violate these rhythms is not unethical or immoral for plant life as Coccia sees it, but rather implausible and illogical. For the way plants think always in relation to the micro-details of their environments blocks any attempt to conceptualise existence outside of the atmosphere that conserves both them and those things to which they relate and on which they depend. As Marder argues, plant consciousness is, like human thought, based on cognition and sensation, but unlike human thought, is directed away from the plant's being and towards the other. This "non-conscious intentionality" comes from the plant's complete fusion with its milieu, a thinking before thinking in which the plant creatively and inventively engages with the world around it (Marder 153). Wholly adapted to and accommodating of the other without developing an identity that returns focus to itself, the plant subverts the "synthesis of *I think*" by its infinite ability to proliferate and disseminate itself (Marder 12). Inviting the participation of all things to life, the plant allows them to "surge into being, to be what they are" in a movement that both gives (through nourishment, food, light) even as it retreats (it does not expend itself in its giving). Marder calls this both a "giving

withdrawal” and an “inexhaustible generosity,” and argues that it “replicates the activity of *phusis*” in that it “makes” or creates others within a patient and relational ethics (Marder 28).

This ethics recalls Martin Buber’s I-Thou philosophy of existence as a mutual and holistic encounter free of judgement and assessment. But for Marder, the plant offers an even more radical encounter because it does not recognise “I” and is thus unable to objectify an environment it created and within which it is immersed and entangled. Kohn’s *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human* (2013), published the same year as Marder’s *Plant Thinking*, attempts to address this complexity by reviewing the linguistic framework in which the human assesses the other-than-human. In his fieldwork with the Amazonian Ávila Runa people, Kohn replaces a Saussurean semiotics dependent on the analytical relationship between a signifier and a signified with the broader “sign philosophy” of Charles Sanders Peirce. Peirce’s triadic study of signs states that a sign is something that relates to both its object and interpretant sign—signs only have meaning in relation to an object and its translation. In his reading of Peirce, Kohn proposes that all life forms are thinking and reflective translators able to make meaning. Animals, birds, fungi, as well as plants all represent the world through signs that “picture” what he calls “sylvan thinking”: bird call, the flutter of insect wings, the dances of bees, the movement of water on leaves are all signs that animate the forest and so articulate the kind of thinking that happens there (Kohn 2017). The Runa enter into this thinking by engaging with the “spirit masters” of the other-than-human selves that create these signs: all wild animals, for example, are protected by a spirit realm into which humans enter following death, but with which other-than-human entities communicate while living. For Kohn, human thinking is “made over” by a forest or sylvan thinking charged by spirits as well as other-than-humans, an argument designed to open human thinking beyond linguistic cognition and into “living thoughts, to selves and souls, to the forest’s many spirits” (Kohn 2013, 228). His sensitivity to the impact of the colonial world on the Runa people’s perspective on spirits, trees, plants and animals, as well as the colonial shape of his own encounter, founds his rereading of thought itself. For Kohn, the anthropologist must learn to hear differently and beyond the phonemic contexts with which the majority of academics are familiar.

To hear and offer witness to the thinking of trees is to engage with them beyond symbols and signs as expressive beings. But it also means to engage beyond the secular and take seriously a more intimate, relational, and immersive way of being that questions the basis of our understanding of experience. Without the non-secular embrace of the intangible and mystical, the spirit masters so important to the Runa become merely fetishized curiosities of the Western culture from which so many anthropologists speak. As Rowan Williams suggests in a conversation on the environment with Bruno Latour, the religious offers humans a language “which will hold onto the interconnectedness of the agencies among which we stand which will challenge every particular way in which we seek to isolate or quarantine ourselves as human agents from the world in which stand” (Latour and Williams 57). What Kohn refers to in the word “spirit,” Williams conjures in the word “sacred”: both, in the contexts within which they use them, refer to an idea of relationship as a “deeper more universal energy, agency” (Latour and Williams 53). Williams’s claim that the language of the sacred liberates

people from being controlled by others' perceptions of them mirrors Kohn's insistence that the forest allows for a proliferation of thoughts, a "dense" and "multispecies ecology of selves" (Kohn 2013, 227). Latour too notes that the cosmology of Christian religious institutions is by definition collective, organisational, gathering, modifying (Latour and Williams 55), a bringing together of human and other-than-human things that is thwarted by the same destructive logic that equally underpins the actions of deforesters and those who ignore Christianity's foundation in inclusive love and mystery. If the plant infinitely gives without asserting independence or ego, so those who engage the language of the sacred hand themselves over to a mystery that weakens the self and so might offer an entry point into plant being.

Larkin submits an example of what this language might look like in his knotted, tangled, and sometimes convoluted prayers. "Skies in Flight of Tree" opens with an epigraph from Johannes Baptist Metz's 1968 *Armut im Geiste (Poverty of Spirit)* to remind us that the material summons of mystery can only be heard "in prayer" wherein "we will cease to perceive this mystery as the distant horizon of our acutely developed human sensitivity and begin to hear about ourselves in its encompassing challenge" (Metz 50). Citing Metz, Larkin emphasises the importance of human submission not only to poverty and weakness but also to scarcity and the unavailability of meaning. This submission shapes the "I" through relation and possibility that for Metz is called God, for Kohn immersion, and for Larkin the affective being and energy of trees. From the start of the poem, he incarnates the relational and prayerful foundation of both sylvan thinking and Coccia's "everywhere" sky in the oblique sense of reversible interrelation across both trees and skies. This interrelation ultimately comprises the everywhere: Larkin's forests lift off into skies that simultaneously fly through the trees he describes: "the sky flies through it then dived to see how / wingless in leaf it was" (I, 21–22). This engagement with plant dynamism and adaptability is extended to the reader through what Larkin calls "breathable admittance" (X, 18) to the trees' release of oxygen. The act of using energy from sunlight is itself an instance of self-recognition and immersive thinking in which each tree becomes its own cosmos within a larger forest at once earthly and heavenly. In the first poem of the sequence, the skies are vast and vibrant—they "drum onto land" and "bounce off horizon"—but their range is only observable in the trees' reaching into them, and the skies in turn ascending into their trunks (X, 3, 10). This reference to ascension intimates the skies actively rising into the trees, their upended relationship to the ground challenging an earthbound perspective by breaking any expected dualism between firmament and terrain. The trees are rooted in a ground made of the heavens as well as the earth, the former an extra layer that the trees keep connected to the sky like an "*aileron*" (II, 2), the hinged surface on a plane's wing that keeps the aircraft from rolling. Larkin calls this layer a "secondary soil," a divine but immaterial "fabric" that "tents" the ground from which the trees push up vertically (II, 1–6). In a "mirage of terrestrial fluttering" the trees rise up, implanted in "quiet roots" that keep them from subsuming the sky: the forest "grows ravenous" in its pursuit of that into which it grows, but this voracity is halted both by its own body, leaves, branches, as well as roots and that which it meets in the skies, flotsam, clouds, dust, even carbon (III, 1, 7; IV, 1). The trees' skeletal, ribbed, and bony forms give their connection to both earth and the divine a physicality

and functionality. Traversing the material and the immaterial, the trees “rinse” the skies as well as re-seed them to nourish and sustain the ground: “A woodland will sow steep pasture (sky) along its after-root summits” (IV, 12, 21), Larkin writes.

In imagining a spheroid way of seeing wherein the skies and the trees both turn freely about each other as if dancing a continuously looping allemande, Larkin portrays the tree as that which grounds and frees the everywhere-ness of the skies. But his poetics remains deliberately tangled and involute, unwilling to free the reader into any easy conception of the beyond. Farrier calls Larkin’s language “coppiced” to convey an effect “in which interrupting or cutting back the pathway of linear sense making in the poetic phrase of line stimulates the growth of other possible kinds of sense, new shoots that branch off in other directions” (59). The fundamentally human activity of coppicing draws attention to Larkin’s formal innovations and, as Farrier writes, “the artificiality of efforts to represent nonhuman life-ways” (58–59). “Skies in Flight of Tree” goes further by intimating that it is precisely the other-than-human that gives expression to its companion in otherness—the divine. Larkin does not give us an experience of the divine as the mystical poet might because his focus is not on a solely human encounter with God. Rather it is the trees’ relationship with the skies that incarnates a reciprocal petition between the two in which momentary prayerfulness shines through “their plantation ribs” and “upbribed bones”:

a tree blooms
its sphincter
of air, alert
sky-tail

prayer of the heavens
for lading, on hold
not dropped
where dipped

in luminous
trench, outflown
by what it
retains (VI, 5–16)

Here the process of the trees’ creation of the everywhere space of the sky is portrayed as a bodily action, muscular and sphincteral, as their flowering is the means by which air, and so oxygen is received and guarded. They are like “sky-tails” in their alertness to the closeness of earthly and divine, ground and air, and hold buoyant the “prayer of the heavens” before it is ready to be revealed or shown by the luminosity in which it is submerged (VI, 8–9). Prayer is transformed from Metz’s “distant horizon” to a way of sensing that is gradually opened by Larkin to his reader. There is no “equivalence” between human language and the meanings trees and skies convey. Larkin asks us instead to step outside of the attempt to make congruent other-than-human and human experience, and suggests that prayer is the “zoneless” and “local” meeting place for all things (VII, 1; IV, 18–19). The trees and skies already know what Larkin attempts to communicate: they both “touch prayer” where it inflects, unfolds and “reinvents”

the idea of relationship, which throughout the poem becomes a borrowing of each other's terms, ideals, merits, as well as being (IX, 2; X, 3). For the skies fly not simply around the summit of the forest but also at its base. The woods produce an energy Larkin calls "jetwork," one that the trees "loan" to the skies so that the forest comes almost to "fly" the sky itself and gently "outcurl" it across the world. Larkin deliberately contrasts the reverent and peaceable "outcurl" to the more forceful and truculent "uphurl" here to convey the genial and affinitive nature of tree being and the energy it gives (X, 20; XI, 15, 23).

While Larkin's language of participation and affinity hints at a relationally paradisaic way of being and thinking, he also registers the darker problematic of the pressures of organic relations and shared sites. As Verena Conley notes, collapsing the multiple foci of human and other-than-human into an "all-encompassing simultaneity" leads to "pressure relations" that can be co-operative, but can also be competitive or predatory (35). As living entities feel each other out both positively and negatively, Larkin's response is a prayerfulness that refuses to allegorise paradisaic innocence, but rather mediates, intensifies, and recalls life to what it is not quite yet, but to that which it already echoes in itself. In doing so, his prayerful poetics reveal creation as scarcely emergent in the natural but also open to be realised and imagined more fully in a radically other mode of participation modelled by plant life. The closing image of "skyroads" forged by the trees to map the heavens for those yet to feel their presence discloses this potential beyond the conflicted and suffocating side of the organic. The heavens "cross themselves" on these skyroads in a motion that enacts the sign of the cross even as it conveys their entanglement with the material world (XII, 1). This grid-like passage through the skies culminates in redemption at the end of the poem, one marked by the phrase "redress at a co-extrusive blessing" (XII, 2). Like the intimate reciprocity conjured in and by the trees, this blessing is given form through an allusion to "extruded" volcanic rock that simultaneously gives back the blessing to the world it builds up within. The variously textured and crystallised mineral composition of this kind of rock is analogous to the compound world the poem creates, at once multiple and shared. Thus the final line—"Hacked to a wide strip of naked vertical sky set trees to reappear above it, / delve into flight"—becomes more than an environmental warning regarding the abuse of trees and the everywhere of the skies they uphold and sustain (XII, 21–22). Trees will grow back however slowly, but the possibility of continued human immersion in a sacral material world is more fragile in the context of endless and ruthless deforestation and so dematerialisation. The possibility of God is the possibility of immersion. As Larkin's trees "delve" the sky back into flight, they recall the "delve or hew" of Hopkins's "Binsey Poplars, felled 1879." Their delving stands in stark contrast to the human desire to excavate and mine, one that Hopkins, like Larkin, makes clear is an action founded on a faulty kind of knowing:

O if we but knew what we do
 When we delve or hew—
 Hack and rack the growing green! [...]
 To mend her we end her,
 When we hew or delve:
 After-comers cannot guess the beauty been. (Part? 9–11, 17–19)

If humans can no longer “guess the beauty been” the tree can, its prolonged memory attuned to the event of being and the kind of thinking out of which such being is unfolded, sheltered, and then learned by others. Larkin evokes this tree thinking through a prayerful language in which the trees and skies call to each other as much as to the reader. As such, tree thinking is a form of faith, one that Larkin defines elsewhere as the “spontaneous scarcity of the finite to itself, in that scarcity beckons a counter-absence always in a state of non-plenitude, what calls out the beforeness (horizon) of the prevention” (Larkin 2012, 64). In this statement, John Milbank finds a faith that gives “the triple senses of limiting, sheltering, and prevenience,” in which the plenitude of faith is hidden in a “thicket” of “dazzling” linguistic variation even as it is always already available to be anticipated or revealed (Milbank 2020, 3). This is a faith that the trees hold and practice as the ground of their thinking, one that refuses to appropriate the world it creates as the human has done but invites attention to its at once infinite and scarce detail and subtlety. The trees’ vertical upreaching into transcendence is transected by the skies’ horizontal immanence making what Milbank calls a Catholic metaphysic, participatory, relational, familiarising, and intimate.

Despite a continued reliance on fossil fuels, we are hopefully amidst a “meaningful energy transition” into the renewable and low carbon (Wood and Baker 613). But without a shift in the way humans think, one that is more compatible with the thinking of the other-than-human, moves towards decentralised and alternative energies are vulnerable to exploitation and arrogation. Larkin’s work suggests that the meditative, contemplative, and gentle thinking found in a participatory poetics is practiced and embodied by a carbonaceous majority (plants comprise 80% of earth’s biomass in contrast with human’s 0.3%). In “Skies in Flight of Tree” he asks for a reimagining of the oversized impact humans have on life, a violation not only of matter but of the sacred. As he stated in a 2007 interview with Edmund Hardy: “My texts have the grain (or lumpiness at times) of an argument, a speculation, a ‘try-on’ but it is all material set to be distended, an extravagance loyal to promise.” (Hardy) While Hardy discovers in Larkin’s clustered poetics moments that “jolt” between the assertoric and apodeictic, I hear in these jolts echoes of vibrations that move continuously and rapidly between transcendent and immanent, sacred and carbon, tree and sky, reading and thinking. From this oscillating movement comes a kinetic thinking that is always in relation to a world it unceasingly and actively creates rather than observes or measures. Affective and sacred, tree thinking registers the emotional dimensions of power and work and so holds the potential to reorganise relationships between the human and other-than-human within a logic of mutuality.

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