



## **‘An Arundel Tomb’ – an interpretation**

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“... a rather romantic poem.... I don’t like it much ... technically it’s a bit muddy in the middle – the fourth and fifth stanzas seem trudging somehow, with awful rhymes like voyage/damage. Everything went wrong with that poem: I got the hands wrong – it’s right-hand gauntlet really – and anyway the hands were a nineteenth-century addition, not pre-Baroque at all. A friend of mine who visited the tomb in Chichester Cathedral told me that the guide said, ‘A poem was written about this tomb by Philip Spender.’ Muddle to the end.”<sup>1</sup>

These were Larkin’s comments in an interview with John Haffenden in 1981 about the poem ‘An Arundel Tomb’. But Larkin also said, in conversation with John Betjeman in the 1964 Monitor film, about the poem ‘Church Going’: “I didn’t think it very successful.” And there are countless comments scribbled in the workbooks in which Larkin deprecates many of the poems.

The fact that Larkin got the details of the sculpture wrong is really irrelevant to the appreciation and interpretation of ‘An Arundel Tomb’ the poem. We need to look at the poem as a piece of work that arose from Larkin’s recollection and interpretation of what he saw, and the inspiration this generated in the poet.

The details and history of the tomb have been well documented by Trevor Brighton in ‘An Arundel Tomb: The Monument’ in the Otter Memorial Paper No. 1, published by the Chichester Institute.<sup>2</sup> A great deal has also been written about the poem itself, including – in the same publication – an analysis of the poem by Paul Foster. Inevitably, many critical analyses of Larkin’s poetry deal with the poem, to a greater or lesser extent. Indeed, the final line of the poem is regularly quoted – often out of context – and is steadily challenging ‘They fuck you up, your mum and dad’ for the position of the most widely recognized line of Larkin’s poetry.

Following the horrific events of 11th September 2001, the movie critic Anthony Lane, in *The New Yorker* magazine, associated the blurred image of two people jumping hand in hand to certain death from one of the towers of the World Trade Centre – an image seen on millions of TVs and in countless newspapers across the world – to the earl and countess of Larkin’s poem, and concluded his article with the final line of ‘An Arundel Tomb’. Here are the last few lines of his piece titled ‘This is not a movie’:

“... Thousands died on September 11th, and they died for real; but thousands died together, and therefore something lived. The most important, if distressing, images to emerge from those hours are not of the raging towers, or of the vacuum where they once stood; it is the shots of people falling from the ledges, and, in particular, of two people jumping in tandem. It is impossible to tell, from the blur, what age or sex these two are, nor does that matter. What matters is the one thing we can see for sure: they are falling hand in hand. Think of Philip Larkin’s poem about the stone figures carved on an English tomb, and the ‘sharp tender shock’ of noticing that they are holding hands. The final line of the poem has become a celebrated condolence, and last Tuesday – in uncounted ways, in final phone calls, in the joined hands of that couple, in circumstances that Hollywood should no longer try to match – it was proved true all over again, and, in so doing, it calmly conquered the loathing and rage in which the crime was conceived. ‘What will survive of us is love.’ ”<sup>3</sup>

Once again the line is quoted out of context. As those familiar with Larkin’s poetry will point out, the line and a half before seem to qualify the final line:

and to prove  
Our almost-instinct almost true:  
What will survive of us is love. <sup>4</sup>

But *does* the preceding line and a half qualify the final line? Does Larkin mean, as the final line suggests, ‘What will survive of us is love.’; or does he mean that in mankind there is an almost-instinct to *believe* that ‘What will survive of us is love’, but this almost-instinct is only almost true, and therefore false. Thus insisting that love is what will *not* survive of us?

What follows is my own interpretation of ‘An Arundel Tomb’ in which I try to explain why I believe that Larkin’s poem really does mean – with one significant qualification – ‘What will survive of us is love.’

Studying Larkin at A level, as a mature student, I was taught that when the poet uses the verb *lie* – meaning to be prone or recumbent – in the poems ‘Talking in Bed’ and ‘An Arundel Tomb’, he is also suggesting dishonesty or untruth of some kind. At that time I thought this to be more than just a little ‘far fetched’: was I then to assume that every time *any* writer uses this word there is a suggestion of dishonesty; this seemed quite absurd.

I have since modified my view slightly on this; I now believe that we must at least *consider* that the writer, in this case Larkin, would have been aware of many, indeed most of the possible connotations of the words he used. Obviously we need to consider each situation on its own merits, bearing in mind not only the possible connotations but also the context in which words are being used. However, my interest here is with ‘An Arundel Tomb’, so I will concentrate on this particular poem.

Before I continue with my own interpretation of the poem, I think it would be interesting to hear what others have said about ‘An Arundel Tomb’, particularly in relation to those famous final lines:

“... the impulse in people to make gestures like the Earl’s and Countess’s, an impulse basic enough to be called an ‘almost-instinct’, has not altered. This is constant in people, however appearances may change. The ‘attitude’ of the Earl and Countess has persisted in the ‘altered people’” – David Timms<sup>5</sup>

“ If you were to stress both ‘survive’ and ‘us’, the line would not survive the plethora; and if you were to stress neither, the line would not survive the inanition. The line’s compactness is that two lines, identical in wording but not in intonation, occupy exactly the same space.” – Christopher Ricks<sup>6</sup>

“The two ‘almosts’ in these last lines both qualify the assertion (it is only an ‘almost-instinct’ and only ‘almost’ proven true), yet they also make it seem more likely a good thing because it is qualified, and thus not facile.” – Janice Rossen<sup>7</sup>

“He realizes that the effigies ‘lie in stone’ – that their faithfulness is a deception – and also admits that for them to be shown holding hands at all is nothing more than ‘A sculptor’s sweet commissioned grace’. But while the tomb may represent an ‘attitude’, a lie, it has become a kind of truth by virtue of having survived.” – Andrew Motion<sup>8</sup>

“The memorial, then, has persisted, preserving the continuity of time’s passage. What will survive of us is not love, but time itself as it progresses onwards from us into the future.” – Andrew Swarbrick<sup>9</sup>

So where did the change in my views leave me? Well, as far as the poem ‘An Arundel Tomb’ is concerned, it left me with this question: What are the possible areas to which the untruth of *lie* – in the lines ‘The earl and countess lie in stone’ and ‘They would not think to lie so long’ – could apply? To form any kind of opinion about this a greater understanding of the poem as a whole needs to be arrived at. But in being forced to ask the question about the verb *lie*, I also found myself asking another question in relation to the meaning of the poem’s most famous line, ‘What will survive of us is love’; a question about ‘Our almost-instinct’ which Larkin pronounces to be ‘almost true’. What, exactly, is the ‘almost-instinct’ to which Larkin is referring?

If we look at the poem stanza by stanza, we should be able to reveal a consistency of vocabulary, sense and meaning, which will make things clearer. I must point out that I will not be looking at poetical devices such as rhythm, metre, alliteration, enjambment, caesuras or rhyming schemes – though I will say that I think rhyming voyage’ with ‘damage’ was a stroke of genius and a perfect example of Larkin’s verbal dexterity and inventiveness; something which characterizes the best of today’s urban musical artists, almost half a century later. Nor will I be dwelling much on punctuation, the use or omission of which, in Larkin’s poetry, I feel could be the subject of a whole book in itself. What I will be looking at, as I have said, is vocabulary, sense and meaning, but also interpretation.

Having said I will not be dwelling too much on punctuation, naturally the first thing I comment on is the first line, with the comma dividing the line exactly in half (by word count), and introducing the two main themes of the poem: romantic love, through the physical relationship of the couple, as suggested by ‘Side by side’; and loss of identity, as

suggested by 'their faces blurred'. However, 'Side by side' has wider implications than the purely physical; it also highlights the supportive, emotional closeness of the earl and countess. The theme of loss of identity introduced in the first stanza and emphasized by 'blurred', 'vaguely', 'faint' and 'hint' dominates, in subtly different ways, throughout the poem, and it is this that will gradually reveal the ultimate 'meaning' of the poem.

In the second line we have the introduction, for the first time, of the verb *lie*: 'The earl and countess lie in stone'. If we are to accept the possibility of a double meaning with the use of the word *lie*, then what is *lie*, in the sense of untruth, referring to?

The earl and countess are 'vaguely shown', in their 'proper habits'; that is, their formal attire, but proper also in the sense of being appropriate for a particular occasion or event. From as early as the Stone Age the dead have been buried with a degree of preparation suitable for the journey it is believed they will experience after death. The effigies of the earl and countess signify their immortality in the eyes of the Church, and in the eyes of their peers, suggesting their resurrection. It is this 'stone fidelity', this symbol of the couple's faith in their own resurrection; and the representation of eternal life and fostering of a belief in immortality that the poet sees as a lie. The detail of the monument has become blurred with the passing of time – a misrepresentation or untruth, in the same way that the poet views the promise of immortality through some form of afterlife.

Accepting the possible connotations of the verb *lie*, we might justifiably argue that Larkin would also have been aware of the similarity between the word 'armour' and the French word 'amour', meaning romantic love. And thus, the combination of the words 'jointed', 'armour', 'stiffened' and 'pleat' in the same line emphasizes the nature of the physical relationship between the earl and countess, with 'stiffened' and 'pleat' being suggestive of male and female genitalia. The reference to 'the little dogs under their feet', though Larkin refers to this detail as faintly absurd, re-affirms the emotional nature of the relationship, through the association of pets, and particularly dogs, with loyalty, companionship and faithfulness. The playful presence of the little dogs also suggests the kind, affectionate disposition of the couple.

In the second stanza, the architectural style of the monument (pre-baroque) is plain, and the lack of detail acts as a disincentive for the poet's attention, so once again he focuses on the physical relationship between the earl and countess: 'his left-hand gauntlet' which is 'Clasped empty in the other' and 'His hand withdrawn, holding her hand.' The 'sharp tender shock' experienced when noticing the connected hands is once again suggestive of an emotional rather than a physical response – a recognition of the emotional bond between the two figures.

The first line of the third stanza repeats the verb *lie*, in 'They would not think to lie so long.' Notice (punctuation again!) the full stop; not a colon, or comma. Once again the *lie* the poet is referring to is the couple's faith in the promise of immortality. The religious beliefs of the earl and countess had convinced them that after death they would be together eternally, their souls everlasting. Indeed the Christian burial service commits the body to burial with the words 'in sure and certain hope of resurrection to eternal life'. But rather than enjoying a resurrection to eternal life, all that remains of them are their stone effigies, and these are slowly fading. Larkin famously referred to religion in 'Aubade' as 'That vast moth-eaten musical brocade / Created to pretend we never die'; and the pretence, the *lie*, of immortality and the prospect of eternal life, is being exposed once

more by the poet. The 'faithfulness in effigy', the 'detail friends would see' (and, being friends, would recognize as authentic), the 'sculptor's sweet commissioned grace', would not have been thought likely to survive longer than the souls of the earl and countess, which have now ceased to exist forever in 'The sure extinction that we travel to / And shall be lost in always'.<sup>10</sup>

Stanza four emphasizes the illusory nature of the afterlife. The only voyage the couple will experience is not a voyage of their souls through eternity, but one as stone effigies into the future; and this a 'supine' and 'stationary' voyage – notice the sounds of the second syllable of 'supine' and the first syllable of 'stationary' – 'pine' and 'stay'. Time continues to pass; the phrase 'soundless damage' indicates the slow erosion of the tomb and the effigies by the combined forces of time and nature, which are also turning 'the old tenantry away': even their way of life has disappeared. The 'succeeding eyes begin / To look not read' refers back to 'The Latin names around the base' in stanza three and again emphasizes the loss of identity through the discontinued use of the Latin language and its unfamiliarity to 'succeeding eyes' – succeeding meaning 'coming after', but also indicating advancement and progress and the continuity of time. But the effigies have remained – 'Rigidly they // Persisted', as stanza five explains, 'linked'. Their union, their relationship (both emotional and physical) survives – through the effigies' holding of hands.

Stanza five continues by listing images that show the passing of time, but some of these images also have intimations of immortality, and religious connotations, and I will deal with those a little later. Snow and light, however, are both symbols of purity and cleansing; but the 'bright / Litter of birdcalls' is suggestive of something appealing but ultimately worthless; waste, strewed as it is across the 'same / Boneriddled ground'. An indication of the extinction that comes with death and, again, the continuity of time. Religion is brought back in to sharp focus at the end of stanza five with 'The endless altered people'. While this initially can be seen as the continually changing nature of the people who come up the paths, and the different generations, the word 'altered' suggests the religious altar, and the way that religion itself alters individuals and their beliefs through its rituals: baptism, confirmation, communion, marriage, burial. How accepting a religious doctrine inevitably involves renouncing individual identity.

This focus on religion continues into stanza six with 'Washing at their identity'. Once again this can be read in two different ways: the 'endless altered people' in visiting the tomb could be considered to be washing at the identity of the earl and countess, but equally this could be interpreted as the 'endless altered people' washing at their own identity, diluting their own individuality with religion. The earl and countess are now without the support of their beliefs, 'helpless' – with all hope of a resurrection disproved – 'in the hollow of / An unarmorial age' – their status and identity increasingly irrelevant to the 'endless altered people'. All that remains of their 'scrap of history' is 'a trough / Of smoke in slow suspended skeins', a symbol of their expiration, their extinction. The word 'scrap', in one sense suggests the small part they played in history and their earthly insignificance, but also indicates waste and uselessness. The 'attitude' that remains is both their enduring pose in the carved effigies and their attitude – their love – for one another. The promise of immortality has proved to be empty.

The final stanza confirms beyond doubt exactly what the *lie* the poet spoke of in earlier stanzas is. 'Time has transfigured them into / Untruth.', is a reference to the

transfiguration of Christ (St. Matthew 17: 1-6). Christ's transfiguration is the first evidence in support of his predicted resurrection, which was earlier foretold (St. Matthew: 16: 21). The effigies of the earl and countess, as symbols of their own eternal life are a deceit: the immortality they had hoped for does not exist. The transfiguration of Christ is described in St. Matthew 17: 2 in the following way: 'And his face did shine as the sun: and his garments became white as snow', which Larkin echoes with his reference to 'Snow' and 'light' in stanza five. 'The stone fidelity / They hardly meant' – the holding hands as an expression of their love for one another, (and not the 'stone fidelity' they did mean – the expression of their Faith and their belief in the 'sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life'), 'has come to be / Their final blazon' – their final expression, and all that defines them. The symbolic representation of their love, as depicted in the connected hands of their effigies, has survived.

The final two and a half lines of 'An Arundel Tomb'

and to prove  
Our almost-instinct almost true:  
What will survive of us is love.

have, because of their apparent ambiguity, caused much speculation. Is it optimistic, or is it pessimistic? I have only found one interpretation which questions the nature of the 'almost-instinct'; the rest, and I have not read all available analyses of this poem, agree in accepting that the 'almost-instinct' is 'What will survive of us is love'. But clearly the 'almost-instinct' is our need to believe in immortality.

The word 'prove', in the sense of 'establish authenticity by argument' seems a little inappropriate for Larkin's intention here, but a more archaic definition of the word is 'to discover or learn something through experience', and it is this definition that suits Larkin's use of the word perfectly.

Paul Foster, in the Otter Memorial Paper No. 1, comments on the three instances where Larkin uses a colon in the poem:

"In each of the instances (at lines 15, 36, and 41) it occurs as a kind of trumpet call, announcing an exploration of what has gone before"<sup>11</sup>

While this is the most common function of a colon, I do not believe this to be the function of the third colon in 'An Arundel Tomb'. One of the possible functions of a colon is to introduce a phrase *in opposition* to what has gone before, and I believe it is this use that Larkin employs at the end of the penultimate line. 'Our almost-instinct', our belief in immortality, is proved almost true, that is to say, false. Our extinction guarantees we will not experience immortality. There will be no resurrection and no eternal life. 'What will survive of us is [not our souls, but our] love.'

The interpretations here relating to death, immortality and eternal life are consistent with views Larkin held throughout his life. Two years before his death, Larkin reviewed an anthology edited by D.J. Enright: *The Oxford Book of the Dead*. In this review he writes:

"Man's most remarkable talent is for ignoring death. For once the certainty of permanent extinction is realized, only a more immediate calamity can dislodge it from the mind, and then only temporarily...."

All the same, coming to terms with death has taken up a good deal of our time. Primarily in the form of religion: for if what distinguishes religion from ethics is the miraculous, the only miracle worth talking about is immortality.”<sup>12</sup>

It would be interesting to look in detail at the subtle variations of focus between ‘An Arundel Tomb’ – which in the view of Christopher Ricks ends *The Whitsun Weddings* “consummately”, ‘The Explosion’ – the final poem in *High Windows*, and ‘Aubade’ – Larkin’s “giant, terrifying, brilliant full stop”.<sup>13</sup> ‘An Arundel Tomb’ considers immortality from the perspective of an active participant looking to the historic past; ‘The Explosion’, from that of a passive observer reflecting on more contemporary events; and ‘Aubade’, through a kind of meditative monologue, contemplating the imminent future. All were completed in mid-winter around the turn of the year. Perhaps Larkin’s acute awareness of the turn of seasons and time passing was a significant factor in the composition of these poems, which question the purpose of our existence and our need for a belief in immortality.

I began by quoting Larkin from an interview with John Haffenden in 1981. Before I close I will again quote Larkin, from the same interview:

“I think what survives of us is love, whether in the simple biological sense or just in terms of responding to life, making it happier...”

In concluding ‘What will survive of us is love’, Larkin is certainly not suggesting that this is the end of the story. Survive though it may, love cannot, ultimately, endure eternally. To survive something merely means to continue to exist when that ‘something’ has ceased to exist. Ultimately, time – and death – will take all. In his biography, Andrew Motion tells us that Larkin added this comment to the end of the manuscript of ‘An Arundel Tomb’:

“Love isn’t stronger than death just because statues hold hands for 600 years.”<sup>14</sup>

Larkin’s views about the finality of death run right the way through his poetry. I can’t think of a single line in any Larkin poem that suggests he ever believed that ultimately love is stronger than death. But, as the final line of ‘An Arundel Tomb’ states, it *is* ‘What will survive of us’.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Larkin, Philip. ‘An Interview With John Haffenden’, in *Further Requirements* ed. Anthony Thwaite, (Faber & Faber, 2001), pp. 57-8.

<sup>2</sup> Foster, Paul. Brighton, Trevor. Garland, Patrick. *An Arundel Tomb*, Otter Memorial Paper Number 1, (Chichester Institute, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> Lane, Anthony. ‘This is Not a Movie - Same scenes, different story’ *New Yorker*, 24 September, 2001, p. 80.

<sup>4</sup> Larkin, Philip. *The Whitsun Weddings* (Faber & Faber, 1964), p. 46.

<sup>5</sup> Timms, David. *Philip Larkin* (Oliver and Boyd, 1973), p. 108.

- 6 Ricks, Christopher. 'Like Something Almost Being Said', in *Larkin at Sixty* ed. Anthony Thwaite, (Faber & Faber, 1982), p. 122.
- 7 Rossen, Janice. *Philip Larkin: His Life's Work* (University of Iowa Press, 1989), p. 32.
- 8 Motion, Andrew. 'Philip Larkin and Symbolism', in *New Casebooks: Philip Larkin* (Macmillan, 1997), p. 37.
- 9 Swarbrick, Andrew. *The Whitsun Weddings and The Less Deceived by Philip Larkin* (Macmillan, 1986), p. 71.
- 10 Larkin, Philip. 'Aubade', in *Collected Poems* ed. Anthony Thwaite, (Faber & Faber, 1988), p. 208.
- 11 Foster, Paul. *An Arundel Tomb*, Otter Memorial Paper Number 1, (Chichester Institute, 1987), p. 29.
- 12 Larkin, Philip. 'Point of No Return', in *Further Requirements* ed. Anthony Thwaite, (Faber & Faber, 2001), p. 331.
- 13 Motion, Andrew. From *Love and Death in Hull*, (Channel 4 TV, July 2003).
- 14 Motion, Andrew. *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* (Faber & Faber, 1993), p. 274