

Note

THE GRIEF OF LEAVES: TWO POSSIBLE SOURCES FOR PHILIP LARKIN'S 'THE TREES'

Archie Burnett suggests a number of influences at work in Philip Larkin's poem 'The Trees'.¹ I briefly suggest two further possibilities.

In a letter of 24 May 1966, Larkin told Monica Jones that he was selecting poems by Edward Thomas for his *Oxford Book of Twentieth Century Verse*, noting, 'I still think he's good.'² Larkin did not choose Thomas's 'Aspens', but it may have been on his mind in April 1967 when he started composing 'The Trees'. Each poem considers how trees outlive us and associates them with the powers of speech. The aspens talk to one another and whisper, while in Larkin, 'The trees are coming into leaf/Like something almost being said.'³ Each poet also invests them with disconsolate human emotion. For Larkin (picking up the rhyme from 'leaf'), 'Their greenness is a kind of grief',

echoing Thomas's lines, 'Whatever wind blows, while they and I have leaves/We cannot other than an aspen be/That ceaselessly, unreasonably grieves.'⁴ Larkin's attention was perhaps also caught by 'New Hampshire', the first section of T. S. Eliot's 'Landscapes', which describes the passing from Spring to Summer in an orchard. As with Thomas and Larkin, Eliot sets the seasonal cycle against human ageing. The children, whose voices we hear at the beginning, are growing older: 'Twenty years and the spring is over.' This melancholy process, with the same association of leaves and grief, strongly anticipates Larkin, as Eliot continues, 'To-day grieves and to-morrow grieves,/Cover me over, light-in-leaves.'⁵

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/notesj/gjag064>

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¹ *The Complete Poems of Philip Larkin*, Archie Burnett (ed.) (London, 2014), 445–6.

² *Philip Larkin: Letters to Monica*, Anthony Thwaite (ed.) (London, 2010), 360.

³ *The Complete Poems*, 76–7

⁴ *Edward Thomas: The Collected Poems and War Diary, 1917*, R. George Thomas (ed.) (London, 2004), 84. The poem was first published in 1915.

⁵ *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*, Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue (ed.) (London, 2015), I, 144. 'New Hampshire' was first published in 1934. Burnett notes that Housman, in *More Poems* VIII A 3, also rhymes 'grief' with 'leaf'.