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Philip Larkin's *Myxomatosis* and
the Problem of Empathy

Michael D. Shulman

Myxomatosis

Caught in the center of a soundless field
While hot inexplicable hours go by
What trap is this? Where were its teeth concealed?
You seem to ask.
I make a sharp reply,
Then clean my stick. I'm glad I can't explain
Just in what jaws you were to suppurate:
You may have thought things would come right again
If you could only keep quite still and wait.

Larkin, 1954

Philip Larkin's reputation as the "best-loved British poet" (Booth, 2014, p. 1) of the twentieth century has faced opposing forces of late. He is revered for giving a poetic voice to the gloom felt by many people with the collapse of ancient religious and social props but has also been the target of virulent rebuke for his misogyny, racism, and

his “unrelenting atheism and pessimism” (Vendler, 2014, p.20), especially as revealed in his posthumously published letters. “Myxomatosis” is an early poem, written in 1954 when Larkin was 31 years old. It displays the more amenable side of Larkin’s complex personality, and its sentiments conform to the elements of his biography that are easiest to embrace. It also touches on themes that are of great interest to anyone who believes that the practice of medicine might absorb lessons of value from the poetic sensibility.

In middle-age, Larkin wrote a never-published autobiographical fragment in which he recalled the “dominant emotions” of his childhood to be “overwhelmingly, fear and boredom” (Motion, 1993, p. 13). The atmosphere of the parental home he remembered as both “drab” and “intimidating.” One result of these fraught human connections seems to have been a deep regard for animals, with a special place reserved for the most hapless specimens. When Larkin began to publish novels and poems, ultimately achieving considerable distinction, his perplexity over relationships and his concern for animal suffering were preserved in equal measure. It is likely that this concern for neglected or damaged animals hid an element of perceived psychological kinship. Larkin never married or had children. Bald and bespectacled, some might have considered him plain (among them, the poetry critic Helen Vendler (2014), who writes of his “lack of good looks” (p. 20) as if it were a biographical detail as fixable as his birthplace. Unsurprisingly, then, when animals entered his poems, it was

on a note of commiseration. “The Mower,” for example, was written after a lethal encounter between Larkin’s lawn mower and a hedgehog he had been supporting with table scraps. “[Philip] came in from the garden howling,” Monica Jones, his long-time (and long-suffering) lover recalled (Motion, 1993, p. 475). In the poem “Ape Experiment Room,” Larkin characterized vivisection with a palpable shudder as “putting questions to flesh” (Larkin, 1988, p. 160).

Rabbits were an especially privileged species in Larkin’s universe. He admired Beatrix Potter, the author of the Peter Rabbit books, and referred to the devoted Monica as Bun (short for Bunny Rabbit), addressing scores of letters to her in what his biographer calls a “private language of rabbit-tenderness” (Motion, 1993, p. 459). Growing up in the English Midlands, Larkin would have been accustomed to sightings of feral rabbits, whose number circa 1950 has been put at 100 million (Sheail, 1971, p. n202). Despite their cuddly appeal to children, in rural England rabbits were widely regarded as pests. *Myxomatosis* was written in response to an effort to exterminate the rabbit population wholesale by exposing it to the myxoma virus, a pathogen previously unknown in Europe. The ensuing controversy is of interest for the light it throws on the constituencies then asserting themselves—farmers, furriers, sportsmen, lovers of animals and lovers of meat (meat in that post-war period was still rationed) all in contention. But for admirers of Larkin’s verse, the controversy is also of interest. It led, in *Myxomatosis*, to what is perhaps an inadvertent exercise in soul-baring

that can be better understood with a bit of historical and biological background.

In 1896, a Uruguayan research laboratory discovered that a mysterious febrile contagion had gripped a dozen or so rabbits previously imported from Europe, killing all of them within weeks (Kerr, 2012). The course of the illness was grimly predictable. Tumors of the skin and underlying connective tissue (called myxomas, after the Greek word for mucus), with an ugly predilection for the head and genitals, were its earliest manifestation. Within days, the flesh became swollen and empurpled. The skin bulged grotesquely, as if the rabbits were being misshapenly inflated with air. Fever, anorexia, and lethargy then followed, leaving the animals stupefied and inert. These symptoms were accompanied by a purulent ocular discharge and marked engorgement of the eyelids. The animals were then helpless. Opportunistic bacterial infections—typically pneumonia—mercifully took root as the end approached. When death did come—and it came in every instance—the animals were almost always blind.

Later experiments established several key facts. The source of the rabbits' illness was shown to be a pox virus (a *Leporipoxvirus* of the *Poxviridae* family) usually transmitted by blood-sucking insects such as fleas and mosquitos (Villafuerte et al., 2017). The myxoma virus, like the serial murderer in a generic thriller, was found to choose its victims fastidiously, striking down only one species of rabbit—*Oryctolagus cuniculus*—and an occasional hare. Squirrels, ferrets, and guinea pigs were unaf-

fected (Chaproniere & Andrewes, 1957). More intriguingly, myxomatosis could not be induced in human subjects. When study volunteers were injected with tissue from moribund rabbits, they emerged unscathed (Hobbs, 1928). Seeing one's volunteers in robust good health after being injected with a virulent pathogen naturally closes the book on one publishable line of research. It is the kind of result an ambitious investigator greets with mixed feelings.

The story then leaps forward to 1952, when Paul Delille, a retired physician living in France, weary of the despoliation of his carefully tended cultivars, injected a suspension of myxovirus into a rabbit and released it onto his estate. European rabbits, having had no prior exposure to the virus, lacked any resistance to it, and mortality was 100 percent (Fenner & Marshall, 1957). Less than a year later, on the other side of the English Channel, a few dead rabbits were discovered on a farm in Kent. The infection then spread exponentially, abetted by “rabbit destruction squads” composed of British farmers who viewed wild rabbits as a pestilential swarm of Biblical proportions. Opposing the farmers were “mercy squads” that roamed the countryside putting stricken rabbits out of their misery. The sight of dying rabbits—starving, disfigured, and blind—grew familiar to tender-hearted British citizens who, after a childhood spent in the company of Peter Rabbit, viewed with alarm the disappearance of his real-life cousins from a large swath of rural England (Bartrip, 2008).

Larkin's *Myxomatosis* memorializes the poet's encounter with one dying rabbit. Like a medical practitioner caring for a close family member, the poet vacillates between professional detachment and horrified identification with the object of his ministrations. The affectless title of the poem could serve as the chapter heading of a textbook. But prodded by the grisly image before him, the emotional current in the poet rises. He imagines—in fact shares—the experience of being caught in an invisible snare. The interminable hours, “hot” and “inexplicable,” refer to the animal's fever. But they could apply as well to the fury and consternation of the poet as his nature walk is transformed into a Dantean passage through a limbo of crippled innocents.

The word “suppurate,” with its Latinate and clinical associations, signals another poetic *volte-face*—a return to the anaesthetizing distance available to the poet at the start. In this moment of restored equanimity, the poet delivers his bloody *coup de grâce*: “I make a sharp reply, then clean my stick.” The language is spare—no mention of the unavoidable spattering—and by allowing the reader to conjure his own image, the effect is multiplied, disquietingly so.

The decisive mindset that brings the stick down upon the stricken rabbit does not last very long, however. The poem closes by restoring the pathos of a sickened creature in torment—the torment not of physical pain, but of anticipated extinction. It is the same anguish evoked so brilliantly in Larkin's “Aubade,” where it is also pro-

voked by the specter of death, “the anesthetic from which none come round” (Larkin, 2003, p. 190). Caught in extremis, Larkin’s rabbit is revealed to be a mid-twentieth century Christian of lapsed faith, aspiring to salvation, but knowing that merely to “keep quite still and wait” is hopeless. Things will “come right again” to be sure. And it will be in the form of a final, annihilating blow from above.

That Larkin should look upon a wild rabbit in its death throes as a fellow sufferer of existential dread illustrates the distinction, so often blurred, between empathy and sympathy, two responses that are not only divergent but can lead to opposite results. Sympathy is closely allied to compassion and kindness. It calls forth feelings of tenderness and the wish to protect its object from harm. Empathy is, in contrast, an involuntary, inward-turning process that recreates in the observer the suffering witnessed in others. Yale psychologist Paul Bloom defines empathy as a capacity “to experience the world as you think someone else does” (Bloom, 2017, p. 16). This closely follows the great primatologist Frans de Waal, who called empathy “the ability to be affected by the state of another ... creature” (De Waal, 2005, p. 184). Nothing in either definition leads one *a priori* to believe that empathy results in a charitable or moral impulse. Indeed, empathy with members of our own tribe may encourage murderous resentment for anyone outside it. But if empathy is ultimately an internal matter—if unlike sympathy, it is an unsought state of private distress—there is a possible outcome

that is even worse than violence against tribal enemies. Empathy might actually give rise to violence against the creature provoking it.

Once that possibility is raised, *Myxomatosis* can be seen in a new light, one that produces an off-putting sense that the dying rabbit of the poem is oddly dispensable. If it is true that the poem is offered as a protest against animal abuse, it is also true that it is offered without the faintest breath of tenderness. “I clean my stick” cannot strike the rabbit-lover as a terribly fitting epitaph. But then Larkin, while he was sometimes maudlin, was not a very tender-hearted man. A poet who fills his letters with expressions of contempt for women and inferior races, and yet recoils howling when his mower strikes a hedgehog, has perhaps confused love of animals with love that finds its true object closer to home.

It is precisely in that confusion—that intermingling of unworthy motives with charitable ones—that the problem with empathy lies, for unlike sympathy, empathy is inseparable from self-regard. *Myxomatosis* is a very good poem, and it is terribly moving in its way, but who does not perceive that it is first and last a poem about Larkin? The dying rabbit is a morbid figment, its corpse a simulacrum constructed from the poet’s dread of illness and death. This is because the essential nature of empathy is to turn our thoughts from the suffering of others to the torment it produces in ourselves. But if this is true of empathy, what hazard is created for the empathic medical professional who must absorb the horror of human affliction daily?

How much of the case for mercy killing, for example, disguises a wish to dispatch the patient and put an end to a misery that must otherwise be shared? And what is true in medicine is true elsewhere. If empathy turns the suffering of others into a source of personal anguish, how tempting to seek relief, as the poet does, by extinguishing the source. And perceiving clearly that temptation, how tragically but singularly human seem the all-too-familiar stories, both in art and in life, of men and women who kill the thing they love.

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Michael Shulman is a Canadian physician with a PhD in clinical psychology. He resides in Bucks County, PA, and is the father of three physician daughters.
Email: mdshulman89@gmail.com