Simon Jarvis
reads
Promising Losses
(Palgrave Macmillan, 2012)
by Peter Larkin

FOR MORE THAN THIRTY YEARS the poet and independent scholar Peter Larkin has been publishing a series of subtle, meditative, learned and extremely difficult essays about Wordsworth and Coleridge. The present volume collects these essays. Some revision has taken place, it seems; but Larkin has resisted the temptation (or perhaps admitted the impossibility) of working them into a monograph with a single sustained argumentative arc. Despite this, though, the collection has a proper integrity of approach and topic. It is not merely a series of chance encounters with poems in valued authorships. Each essay represents a further development of an original project in philosophical poetics which is closely connected to Larkin's complex work as a poet. But being a poet, here, isn't, as it can sometimes be, an alibi for slender or missing scholarship. Each essay conscientiously and in detail engages with existing professional commentary on the primary texts to which it is dedicated.

What emerges from the collection isn't anything like an 'argument', but, rather, a cluster of preoccupations which are as often in a mutually antagonistic, as in a mutually supportive relation. The essays are almost painfully alert to the danger of reducing the poems with which they dwell. It is impossible to read these 'chapters' in a hurry; if one slows down, however, one begins to find oneself inducted anew into the very atmosphere of the Lucy poems or of 'Frost at Midnight', and, when Larkin's work is at its best, to hear these places as if for the first time. A patient account of 'Fears in Solitude' tunes into that poem's 'wavering animation' and enters the 'dell' which allows the poet to voice those fears. Larkin imagines himself into the dell in a way which nevertheless sticks closely to the letter of Coleridge's own verse: 'the poem takes us so close to the surfaces it evokes as to take us virtually beneath them, until we look across them as though from a rim or (parapet) at the same level.' Larkin's book is very evidently written by a practising poet-philosopher accustomed to setting himself inner tests and trials of a daunting severity and complexity, and who brings that sense of test and trial to his readings of these two poets. When Larkin writes that 'We need to ask to what extent is Coleridge driven to perform to himself a voiced community so he can hear his own speculative *élan* continuing (even as it is overtly chastised) beyond a moment of blockage or disillusion', this scruple by no means feels, as the scruples of contemporary Romanticists can sometimes feel, as though it were brought suspiciously to the poet by one who knows that he is in the right, but rather like the sympathetic glance of a man detecting in his poet the visible symptoms of his own immedicable affliction, the affliction of poetizing and philosophizing at once, and of not well knowing how this affliction is

satisfactorily to be survived.

Readers will be able to experience all this for themselves when they examine the volume. What this short notice will attempt is something else. One finishes the book with the disconcerting sense that one has greatly admired its exemplary patience of attention, but that, if anyone were to ask what exactly the book is about, one might be at a little of a loss for a reply. I should like here, if I can, to see whether I can get the distinctive motifs of Larkin's own thinking into a more resolved focus.

A central topic in Larkin's thinking, both as poet and as critic, is that of what he calls 'an ontology of scarcity'. Larkin does not really at any point define what he means by 'scarcity'. The whole interest of the term for him seems to be the way in which it brings together problems of ecology and of landscape with others attending phenomenology and metaphysics: it is 'a term not simply derived from economics (which it predates) but as a concept within ecology.' Perhaps for this reason, Larkin offers a number of different characterizations of the word's force for him, characterizations which do not always work easily together. It becomes clear that Larkin is capable of understanding as falling under this rubric of 'scarcity' questions which might seem at first to be rather forcibly recruited to it. The volume's introduction offers a chance for Larkin to understand his own thinking in retrospect, and here he links his idea of 'scarcity' to Stephen Prickett's notion of 'disconfirmation', the idea that failure might be essential to growth. From this point of view, 'Scarcity is one way of naming the difficulties of how to inherit oneself and one's poetic vocation and becomes distinctive in Wordsworth's development but is equally a current in Coleridge as he moves from a self-absorbing imagination toward the more distancing but acutely reflective tenor of prose writing'. But from another, 'Scarcity relates to a mode of finite being where what needs to be given for human life to be grounded in the natural world *has* been given, but not so as to constitute a sufficiency.' Larkin understands 'scarcity' not only ecologically, but also as a term 'sketching a phenomenology'. Larkin would never put the idea so crudely as this—indeed one sometimes in the course of this work longs to find *some* moment at least of Johnsonian or Empsonian bluntness—but part of the idea here seems to be that material loss can be spiritual gain or growth. 'Can there,' Larkin asks at the end of 'Relations of scarcity', his essay on "The Ruined Cottage", 'be a scarcity not solely the product of historic lack but in some sense revelatory, conserving a primordial relation to natural plenitude in its ethical nonidentification with it, a drawing back that then puts forward its "addendum" of rededication?' One difficulty with this interrogative formulation and others like it in the book is that the word 'scarcity' seems to be being asked to do two very different kinds of job. In what sense is scarcity in the sense of, say, a failed harvest, really like or even necessarily connected to what Larkin calls 'a scarcity of relation between the human and the natural'? This tension is at its most acute in Larkin's remarkable and remarkably difficult essay on the 'Lucy' poems, 'Scarcity by gift', in which we are asked to understand Lucy herself as in some sense 'scarce'. 'Scarcity figures rarity as

intensification in the imaging of Lucy herself', suggests Larkin, adding that the second quatrain of 'She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways' 'extols Lucy's scarceness as rarity'. In this instance, the terms do risk wrenching the poem to what they want it to be about. Should we really speak of a violet half hidden by a mossy stone as 'scarce'? Or of a lone star shining in the sky as 'rare'? The essay concludes that 'Lucy is distributed within (is less than) the rolling earth, but attributed to more than this scattering as such, until the vestige of her presence is concentrated in a symbolic scarcity open to a horizon not visible.' The strangest word in this mysterious sentence remains 'scarcity'. We are still at a loss, at the close of the essay, to know what it means to call Lucy 'scarce'. Perhaps it is imaginable that one might express one's bereftness after the death of a beloved person by saying that there is a shortage of her, but the strain in the expression might itself be a symptom of the damage undergone by the speaker.

At the centre of Larkin's more recent thinking is an engagement with a branch of the French phenomenological tradition which has (controversially) re-opened pathways between phenomenology and theology, a tradition represented by Jean-Luc Marion and Jean-Louis Chrétien. (In the introduction, Larkin also names Michel Henry; but this is, so far as I can see, the only occasion on which Henry is mentioned in the book, and in my view his thought is in fact radically incompatible with the particular kind of theologically-inflected phenomenological mode adopted here by Larkin.) This engagement is then supplemented with an interest in the British theologians associated with 'Radical Orthodoxy', especially John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock. Larkin must be aware that Milbank has addressed searching criticisms to Marion's work, for example, but he is, instead, more interested in whatever it is that these four thinkers might be said to share. But he is not 'applying' their work; he is, instead, in generous emulation, himself pursuing further original work in phenomenology by the surprising means of writing a series of essays about Wordsworth and Coleridge.

What then is Larkin's distinctive contribution? Again and again, as one tries to work out for oneself what Larkin's larger case might be, one is brought up against his way of writing as itself providing the texture of his thinking. Larkin's philosophical style clearly has precedents. The most powerful of these, even if not the one most often named by Larkin himself, is Martin Heidegger. Heidegger in many ways inaugurates a mode of philosophical writing which we might call *quasi*-transcendental. It is *quasi*-transcendental because it wishes to award to broadly aprioristic analysis words and topics which for a strict transcendental idealism of Kant's kind belong to the sphere of empirical research. The result, according to taste, is either a greatly enriched and deepened phenomenology, one capable of conducting a phenomenologically grounded investigation not merely of concepts but of moods, embodiedness, orientation in the world, and so on; or it is, as Heidegger's antagonist Adorno put it, a *Scheinkonkretion*, illusory concretion, in which a thinking which remains idealist recruits to itself the glamour of things, bodies, and feelings. Like much

of the most sophisticated and bewildering late twentieth-century thought, Larkin's thinking lives in the quasi-transcendental as its own enabling element or niche. When taking a distance from a certain idea of Catherine Pickstock's, Larkin remarks that it 'gives too unproblematic a sense of what time may enable or disable: a time that acknowledges scarcity as an equal constituent of its passage legitimately spatializes to the extent it allows itself to encounter a horizon (falling *across* its flow) before which it dedicates itself at a positive and charged limit.' Part of the appeal of this kind of writing is that fundamental concepts which might otherwise seem empty and abstract are made to be full of affective life. 'Time', here, 'acknowledges'; it (intransitively) 'spatializes'; it permits itself various things, before it sacrificially or ascetically 'dedicates' itself. But there is also a problem of idiom here, one which afflicts all quasi-transcendental thinking. The concepts which are supposed to be being grounded (time, for example, or space) cannot but be presupposed, because no words for them can be found free from already existing temporal or spatial commitments. Concepts are made to be actors in a moving drama; their abstraction is satisfyingly supplied with a richer or more exciting content; but it is, after all, just that abstraction which permitted them to be concepts, rather than myths, in the first place.

These, of course, are much larger questions than can be settled in a short notice of this kind. Larkin is a scarce and rare continuator of a tradition of fully philosophically ambitious encounter with two deeply philosophical poets, a tradition which, in the last couple of decades, has sometimes seemed on the point of expiring altogether. If it were to do so, something very important would be lost; there would be an important sense in which we should no longer be able to read Coleridge and Wordsworth. They would be history. Philosophic song as resonant as Wordsworth's and as Coleridge's refuses to lie still in its intellectual-historical coffin. Their verse is still today, and will perhaps always be, opening up philosophical roads not taken. And Peter Larkin's subtle, fascinating, perplexing book will, I anticipate, continue to fascinate and to perplex for many years to come.