Passages like these give up the ghost, in a sense just shy of the literal: they tell us that this secondary tale is a story of our "layer of leaf," the middle realm of consciousness. From the preface, we know that Larkin seeks an account of humanity that avoids the foundational metaphysics of humanism. To that end he has written a phenomenological allegory of "emergent dependence," a post-metaphysical narrative of the rise of human consciousness on earth. The idea of the story, in other words, is the story of the idea.

Robert Frost once wrote that "the object of writing poetry is to make all poems sound as different as possible from each other, and the resources for that of vowels, consonants, punctuation, syntax, words, sentences, metre are not enough. We need the help of context—meaning—subject matter." Read in the course of the essay in which it appears (or for that matter in the light of Frost's own poetry) the statement says little that is shocking. But taken on its own, stripped from its context, the passage makes a truly radical claim. For to say that the sense must serve the sound is to effect a transvaluation of poetic values so thorough that from most interpretive perspectives it cannot but look like nihilism.

Peter Larkin is no nihilist, and his ambitions are evidently as philosophical as they are poetic. Still, it is hard to imagine his poetry motivating the kind and quality of exegesis the philosophy requires. Unless you come to the poem with a set of philosophical concerns substantially in line with Larkin's, "Leaves of Field" reads very much like a poem in which the sense is put in exclusive service of the sound.

But even if you share Larkin's philosophy, the sound this poem makes is its major charm. It is best read aloud and at speed. The sonic qualities of poetry are usually described by analogy with music, but musical categories don't capture the appeal of "Leaves of Field"—it is neither euphonious nor especially rhythmic. And yet it manages to seduce the tongue and coax the vocal cords into a dance most poems could only pant after. Judged on Frost's criterion, it succeeds impressively: it does indeed sound "as different as possible" from any other poem I have read.

Robert P. Baird

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Thomas A. Clark, *The Path to the Sea*. Todmorden: Arc, 2005. 82pp. £8.99

The Scottish poet Thomas A. Clark has been called a minimalist, a modernist, a romantic, an objectivist, a landscape poet, an anti-pastoralist, a Platonist, and an Aristotelian. While these labels are obviously contradictory, they are

useful insofar as they demonstrate how our most pressing, even contentious, concerns about poetry are brought into an engaged and engaging equipoise in Clark's craft. Engaged because Clark invites readers to assess each poem's activity of perception, setting into motion the balancing and counterbalancing of the pressures these labels represent; engaging because the poems' seeming simplicity sustains and attracts our attention.

Clark's latest collection, *The Path to the Sea*, illuminates just how much we can learn about perception by listening to the language we bring to it. Consider for instance these facing pages from "At Dusk & At Dawn." On the verso are six lines, each dropped at least three spaces down from the preceding line:

is it far when you think of it
is it grey when you think of it
is it cold when you think of it
is it clear when you think of it
is it small when you think of it
is it there when you think of it

There are many ways these seemingly simple lines arrest, challenge, please, and play with our expectations. Chief among them is the shifting of the adjective among lines that otherwise remain the same. Here, the structure of the poem's syntax emphasizes how language circumscribes, perhaps even invents, the observed world.

On the recto are six more lines:

the far-glimpsed island
the clear-seen island
the mist-veiled island
the wave-rocked island
the spray-washed island
the sun-bathed island

Lines on the left page line up with those on the right so one can read across the book's gutter:

is it grey when you think of it the clear-seen island

and a few lines later:

is it clear when you think of it the wave-rocked island

By pairing the poems, readers create a third, which adds to the texts' inquisitive, quizzical stance regarding the potentially duplicitous nature of all imaginative frameworks. As readers watch their perceptions, they consider

how Clark's phrases reflect not simply the scene, but the act of perceiving itself.

Clark's methods for bringing the poem, as a representational system, under our scrutiny are diverse. They include slight changes in otherwise repeated lines, repeated lines that offer different affective experiences due to their placement, and poems in which a couplet's impact is weighed against a single line's emphasis. In none of them are we asked to simply suspend our judgment and accept a range of sensual pleasures. Rather we have the opportunity to gauge the motion of thought and test its validity against our experience and against our experience of its presentation in the construction that is the poem.

In this respect, I am especially interested in the ways that Clark looks to the natural world for ways of understanding and better articulating his own subjectivity:

> in the half-light of dusk
> after the day has prepared
> hard surfaces for inspection
> before night has plunged
> things back into themselves
> there is a settlement in which
> the external and the internal are
> continuous with the evening air
> if you are alone at the edge
> of shadows you are not alone
> the hours of light shine in you
> with a compacted energy that
> also burns in tree and stone
> partly revealed and partly veiled
> ("At Dusk & At Dawn")

Clark's sensuously shifting syntax shows how he adapts to, and brings into confluence, the various orders of discovery, allowing each to arise from and transform what came before it. In this manner no preconceived position remains in static ascendancy; none controls the direction of what follows.

Such a dismantling of the restrictions that limit a full measure of experience suggests that Clark's poetics align with George Oppen's. Oppen had "faith that the nouns do refer to something; that it's there, that it's true, the whole implication of these nouns; that appearances represent reality, whether or not they misrepresent it." Like Oppen, Clark looks into the natural world for the irreducible elements of our existence, and finds there a ground to test the credulities and prejudices that limit our ability to see the thing before our eyes.

Yet there are significant differences. Oppen brings the natural world

into the poem, *into* the state of consciousness, where it becomes integral to the poem's dynamic being. In contrast, Clark brings the poem, the state of consciousness, *to* the natural world—at a particular place and in a particular instant or over a particular span of time, so that the poem becomes the shape of a consciousness apprehending an environment. The poem's formal variations and the flow of its thematic relations are, in some senses, a physical embodiment of that encounter with the natural world—part mimetic artifact, part map or reproduction. But Clark is careful to render the adaptive shifts of consciousness as much as he brings forth the elements of its world. Each poem, then, is unique in this work of attunement—less address or remembrance than experience, something the reader will confront as event.

As a whole, *The Path to the Sea* is vitally various with such attunement. Many of the single-page poems can be read alone, but they also function within a larger sequence. Though all the poems are short—from three to fourteen lines in length, and from two to eleven words per line—the potential experiences in each are manifold. Given the importance of each word's motility, it is not surprising that Clark uses no capitals, no periods, and only the occasional comma. His line breaks often turn the impact and implications of the sentences that pass through them, so that the balance of meaning changes as readers make their way down the page. There are many turnings in this text—both with respect to formal shifts and to turnings of focus within the content of the poems. So that when we arrive "in an access of brightness," it is not only the "brightness" that draws our focus, but also the "access" that opened it to view. Clark's attention to such shifts allows us to participate with him, to practice the endless corrections that look—perhaps, from the outside, or from a distance—like equilibrium. Reading his work, we learn to stay attentive to what the slightest material change on the page changes in us.

Rusty Morrison

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Geraldine Monk, *Escafeld Hangings*. Sheffield: West House, 2005. 128pp. $28

While it's often inadvisable to look to a poet's prose as guide to her poems, Geraldine Monk's "incomplete mapping" of her poetry on West House Book's website goes a long way toward illuminating her recent volume, *Escafeld Hangings*. On the site she describes her general approach as an "emotional geography of place"; in this book it takes the form of a meditation on Mary, Queen of Scots and her fourteen-year imprisonment in Sheffield (*Escafeld* in Anglo-Saxon), where Monk has lived since 1984. In its most successful