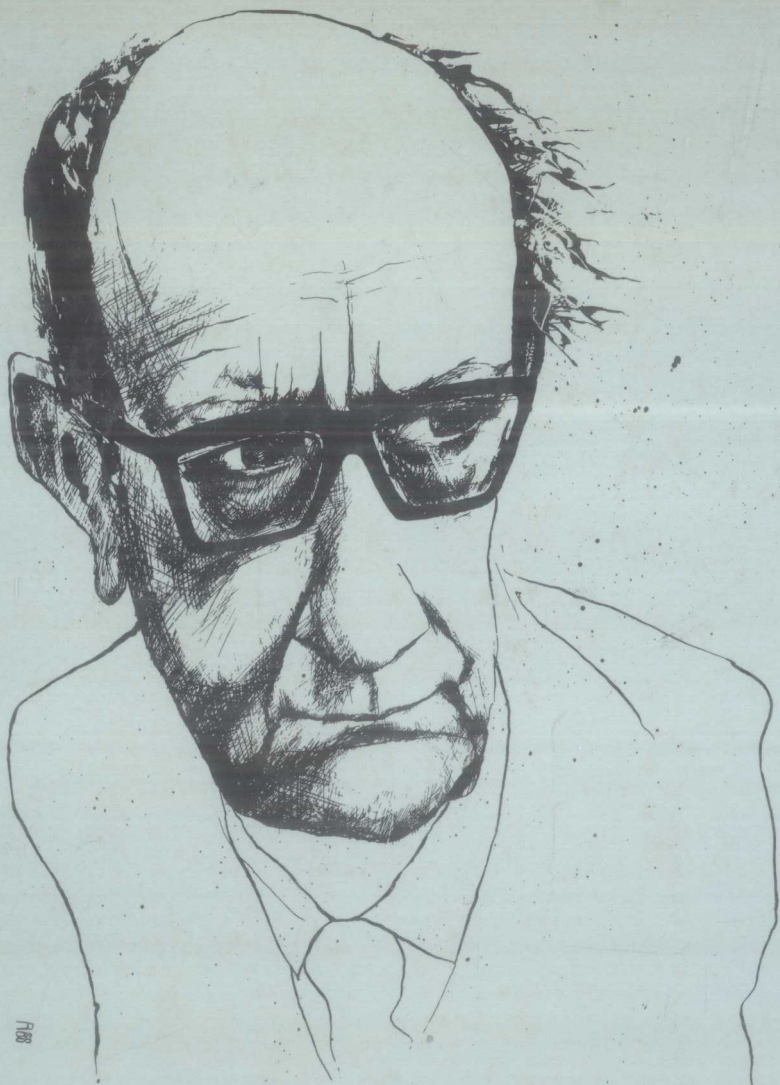


MACMILLAN STUDIES IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY LITERATURE



• TERRY WHALEN •

PHILIP LARKIN & ENGLISH POETRY

PHILIP LARKIN AND ENGLISH POETRY

Terry Whalen

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For Maryann and my parents

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In sometimes very different versions, parts of this study have appeared in a series of magazines and journals in the form of articles and review articles I have written on Larkin over the past ten years or so. In a sense, what the reader will experience between the covers of this book is the product of a lengthy process of transformation of these earlier comments into a larger statement of literary appreciation. The advice and encouragement I have received from the editors and assessors of those journals have been of great assistance to me in the discovery of a shape for the present study. I therefore wish to thank those editors not only for permission to reprint parts of the articles here, but also for their comments and suggestions along the way. They are the editors of the *Australian Book Review*, the *Critical Quarterly*, the *Critical Review*, *Modernist Studies*, *Sift* and *Thalia: Studies in Literary Humor*.

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Abbreviations

Page references to Larkin's main verse collections are given in the text, using the following abbreviations:

- HW* *High Windows* (London: Faber & Faber, 1974)
LD *The Less Deceived* (1955; repr. Hessle: Marvell Press, 1966)
NS *The North Ship* (1945; repr. with intro., London: Faber & Faber, 1966)
WW *The Whitsun Weddings* (London: Faber & Faber, 1964)

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	viii
<i>Abbreviations</i>	x
1 Introduction	1
2 Poetic Personality	10
3 Hunger of the Imagination	32
4 Solitary Wonder	56
5 Family and Nation	77
6 Poetry of Reality	95
7 Larkin's Proper Peers	115
<i>Notes</i>	140
<i>Bibliography</i>	149
<i>Index</i>	160

1 Introduction

In the time between his fiftieth birthday and his death in 1985, Philip Larkin's reputation has ascended to the point where even his detractors are now naming him a major poet. There are nine extensive critical and/or scholarly publications related to his achievement and they are all products of approximately the past ten years.¹ Larkin has earned a respectable critical acclaim for his novels, *Jill* (1946) and *A Girl in Winter* (1947), but it is as a poet of candour and brilliant craftsmanship that he has assured his high stature as a contemporary writer. Beyond critical recognition, the esteem in which he is held by other poets shows in the public praise accorded to him by them, and by such honours as his commission to edit *The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century Verse* (1973).² This latter trust, we recall, was last given to William Butler Yeats.

Larkin's scope as a reviewer and literary commentator has recently been made visible by *Required Writing* (1983),³ and by the publication of B. C. Bloomfield's *Philip Larkin: A Bibliography, 1933–1976* in 1979. Clive James, in *Larkin at Sixty* (1982), appreciates the poet's achievement as a critic – and, in one sense, as a poet – when he says of Larkin's criticism that it

appeals so directly to the ear that he puts himself in danger of being thought trivial, especially by the mock-academic. Like Amis's, Larkin's readability seems so effortless that it tends to be thought of as something separate from his intelligence. But readability *is* intelligence. The vividness of Larkin's critical style is not just a token of his seriousness but the embodiment of it.⁴

It is because I agree with this appraisal of Larkin's talent as a readable critic that I have made liberal use of his own criticism in this study. There is a helpful way in which Larkin's own remarks on literature and art irradiate his own practice, and many of his

commentaries dispel standard misunderstandings about the kind of poetry he writes.

Philip Larkin and English Poetry is primarily a practical criticism exploration of Larkin's poetry, and a reassessment of Larkin's aesthetic and his place in the traditions of English poetry. During a lecture given at Oxford on 12 March 1975, John Wain, after a close analysis of Larkin's 'How Distant', felt compelled to add, 'I apologise for the ponderous shredding out of this beautifully lucid poem; my excuse must be the monumental thick-headedness with which Larkin's poetry is often approached: there is no explanation, however otiose, that is not needed by somebody.'⁵ I quote Wain because I wish to borrow his implicit sanction in this context. There has been so much misunderstanding about Larkin's poems, and also about their cumulative effects, that a critical work which takes as its central strategy a close reading of the poetry would seem to be in order. Those who are aware of my critical essays on Larkin in the *Critical Quarterly*, the *Critical Review*, *Modernist Studies* and *Thalia* will see that I have revised and added to these essays in a way which deals with the individual poems in more detail. Each of those essays insisted that Larkin is a more complicated personality, a more explorative poet and also a more positive poet than much critical response to his work has been willing to recognise.

If we do not count Larkin's *XX Poems* (1951), which was published in a limited edition of 100 copies, he has four volumes of poetry in public view. They include *The North Ship* (1945), *The Less Deceived* (1955), *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) and *High Windows* (1974). It is standard practice to view Larkin as a poet who develops away from what Roger Bowen has referred to as the 'self-conscious lyricism'⁶ of *The North Ship* to a more mature, 'spare tone' in *The Less Deceived*, a tone which is then sustained in the volumes which follow. The growth of Larkin's sensibility, his development as a poet, is also seen as having to do with a movement away from the influence of Yeats and towards discipleship under Hardy. This shift is viewed by both Larkin's critics and the poet himself as the discarding of an early romantic impulse for the sake of a more tough-minded maturity. When *The North Ship* was reprinted in 1966, it contained an Introduction in which Larkin claimed his new freedom under Hardy's influence, and referred to the early influence of Yeats with a sense of embarrassment. Larkin noted that the 'predominance of Yeats in

this volume deserves some explanation', and told how Vernon Watkins visited 'the English Club' in Oxford in 1943 and 'swamped us with Yeats'. Larkin was impressed and enthusiastic, and

As a result I spent the next three years trying to write like Yeats, not because I liked his personality or understood his ideas but out of infatuation with his music (to use the word I think Vernon used). In fairness to myself it must be admitted that it is a particularly potent music, as pervasive as garlic, and has ruined many a better talent.

He included in the reprint an additional poem, one from *XX Poems* entitled 'Waiting for breakfast', which, he said, he had added as a 'coda' and which 'shows the Celtic fever abated and the patient sleeping soundly' (*NS*, pp. 9–10). And indeed the comment is accurate. The first stanza reads like a pastiche of early T. S. Eliot:

Waiting for breakfast, while she brushed her hair,
I looked down at the empty hotel yard
Once meant for coaches. Cobblestones were wet,
But sent no light back to the loaded sky,
Sunk as it was with mist down to the roofs.
Drainpipes and fire-escape climbed up
Past rooms still burning their electric light:
I thought: Featureless morning, featureless night.

(*NS*, p. 48)

In its sharp immediacy, made the more precise by its function as an objective correlative, the poem is radically different from the characteristic poem xxiv of *The North Ship*, where the 'Celtic fever' Larkin refers to is running high:

Love, we must part now; do not let it be
Calamitous and bitter. In the past
There has been too much moonlight and self-pity:
Let us have done with it: for now at last
Never has sun more boldly paced the sky,
Never were hearts more eager to be free,
To kick down worlds, lash forests; you and I

No longer hold them; we are husks, that see
The grain going forward to a different use.

There is regret. Always, there is regret.
But it is better that our lives unloose,
As two tall ships, wind-mastered, wet with light,
Break from an estuary with their courses set,
And waving part, and waving drop from sight.

(NS, p. 37)

The major difference between the two poems lies in the strength: witness the more visual-concrete realism of the later 'Waiting for breakfast'. Long after Larkin came to the example of Hardy's poetry he was to claim,

When I came to Hardy it was with the sense of relief that I didn't have to jack myself up to a concept of poetry that lay outside my own life – this is perhaps what I felt Yeats was trying to make me do. One could simply relapse back into one's own life and write from it.⁷

Larkin coincidentally gives us a broad distinction between the two poems just quoted. Poem xxiv appears to have been given birth out of a 'concept of poetry', a dated conviction that the 'poetic' requires the infinitely sad theme registered in the language of precious romantic refrain. It is a poem, therefore, which is held together by cliché form rather than felt experience. 'Waiting for breakfast', on the other hand, while perhaps lacking in thematic vigour on first glance, is crafted in such a way that the feeling expressed is more individual. A measure of the individuality of the feeling is there in the realistic quality of its setting and in the outward curiosity of the speaker. 'Waiting for breakfast' is, theoretically, a more mature and 'less deceived' poem.

Larkin is undeniably a 'less deceived' poet after *The North Ship*, but there is a tension that is written into his mature volumes, between his new energies as an ironic poet and his concern with beauty that is not eradicated by his new maturity. 'Waiting for Breakfast' exists as Larkin's reassessment of his earlier 'fever', but it also contains a sense of surprise at the passing beauty of the new day, and an ability to question his newly found 'spare tone' as

well. Its middle stanza includes a beauty and a note of pleasure which are commonly overlooked by readers who take the poet's 'less deceived' identity at face value:

I thought: Featureless morning, featureless night.

Misjudgement: for the stones slept, and the mist
Wandered absolvingly past all it touched,
Yet hung like a stayed breath; the lights burnt on,
Pin-points of undisturbed excitement; beyond the glass
The colourless vial of day painlessly spilled
My world back after a year, my lost lost world
Like a cropping deer strayed near my path again,
Bewaring the mind's last clutch. Turning, I kissed her,
Easily for sheer joy tipping the balance to love.

(*NS*, p. 48)

The operative word here, and in many of Larkin's poems, is 'misjudgement', for Larkin's 'less deceived' poetry is as likely to find that its speakers have misjudged the adequacy of their scepticism as that they must highly qualify their romantic urges. If only for a moment, there is a recovered joy in 'Waiting for breakfast', and it rises inevitably in the above lines as a sensitivity to beauty and an openness to empirical surprise.

The most unhelpful critical reaction to Larkin's move from an early romantic impulse to a 'less deceived' maturity has been a tendency amongst critics to overstate the pendulum's swing. More recent responses – and the analyses by J. R. Watson, Andrew Motion and Seamus Heaney particularly – have begun to take notice of Larkin's sensitivity to beauty; and the persistence of that openness in his volumes, I would suggest, represents an 'other' Larkin which makes him a more complicated and positive writer than has yet been appreciated in full measure.⁸

While Larkin has invoked Oscar Wilde on the matter of his development as a poet ('Oscar Wilde said that only mediocrities develop. I just don't know. I don't think I want to change; just to become better at what I am'⁹), his three major volumes show, in their design, a tendency to reach after the more positive vision, even if that reaching is also punctuated heavily with many sad, bleak, sceptical and 'less deceived' poems. Many would claim that

Larkin grows more pessimistic as he ages, and a chronological selection of poems can be made which would support that judgement. If we select such poems as 'Ambulances', 'The Building' and 'Aubade' as the makings of the case, each of these works presents us with eminently quotable lines, eminently bleak ones. On the other hand, if the selection includes instead 'Wedding Wind', 'To the Sea' and 'The Explosion', there is data for the judgement that the poet grows more optimistic as he proceeds. In short, how does one find grounds for any judgement at all? I think one should take notice of the overall design of the poet's volumes. Larkin's own identification of important triptychs in the volumes is very suggestive in this regard.

The design of *The Less Deceived*, for instance, is a relatively bleak one when judged by its central triptych of poems. The inclusion of such poems as 'Wedding Wind', 'Born Yesterday' and 'Church Going' gives the collection powerful moments of beauty. Nevertheless, the controlling triptych is a relatively disenchanted one. The volume opens with the sensation of human transience which is so central to 'Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album', and takes its title from a poem on rape and defeat, 'Deceptions'. And it closes with the calm but saddened lines of 'At Grass', a poem about old age. So, compelling as these importantly located poems are on their own ground, they certainly help to abet the notion that Larkin is a poet of failure and disenchantment. But the major error in criticism of Larkin's work has, I think, been the tendency of critics and reviewers to take this single volume as very strictly paradigmatic of the poet's entire achievement to date.

The Whitsun Weddings appears carefully designed as a slightly more buoyant volume than its two predecessors. It contains representatively dark poems such as 'Mr Bleaney', 'Ambulances' and 'Afternoons'. But its central triptych contains poems of beauty which would seem to locate the more 'neutral' poems to the back of volume's design. *The Whitsun Weddings* opens with 'Here', a poem which finishes on a mystical note of peace. The volume takes its title from a poem which celebrates the ordinary beauty of a ritual community event, and it closes with 'An Arundel Tomb', a piece in which the 'almost-instinct almost true' concern is that 'What will survive of us is love' (*WW*, p. 46). The triptych is dominantly a positive one, at least in terms of the poet's choice of the poems he wishes to highlight. And, in terms of Larkin's development of vision, the volume is pivotal in that it

demonstrates his desire to reach after the values of beauty as much as possible, while also maintaining, on the evidence of the darker poems, his unillusioned purchase on reality.

High Windows is similarly positive in design. It opens with the celebratory witness of 'To the Sea' and takes its title from a poem which moves from cynical detachment to lines which share with earlier poems such as 'Here' a mystical intensity. *High Windows* closes with 'The Explosion', a poem which manages to move from an ironic mining-disaster to a vision of transcendence which makes it one of the most compelling religious poems of our day. While there are also frankly bleak poems in the volume, such as 'The Building', 'This be the Verse' and 'Going, Going', the major triptych is one which highly qualifies the neighbouring gloom of the darker poems. There is an obvious struggle on the poet's part to transcend, without being glib, his own habit of attention to the bleaker aspects of human experience. And he has given evidence of this will toward further meaning in the design of his last two volumes. When commentators seize on Larkin's latest effort, 'Aubade', and name it representative of his work as a whole, they exaggerate the relative weight of its gloom. It is a bleak poem, and we can not doubt this. Yet it is in keeping with that major cluster of poems in Larkin's canon which are impatient with meaninglessness and hungry for that which can satisfy the existential imagination. In its Hamlet-of-the-suburbs melancholy and dark whimsy, it calls 'Nothing to be Said', 'Ignorance' and 'Days' to mind. Since no individual poem or cluster of poems can safely be said to house Larkin's complete view, 'Aubade' should, I think, be recognised for what it is: a continuation of the dialectic in Larkin's writing between the bleakness and the beauty which, together, comprise his total view. In short, on the external evidence of the matter, we can at least assert that Larkin is a more explorative and open poet than first thoughts might suggest.

And this is not to assert that we should judge the achievement of Larkin – or any other poet, for that matter – by the degree to which he writes in a positive light. While a strictly depressed or strictly atoned vision might, in some instances, give evidence of a narrowness of view and a simplicity of thought, the relative cheerfulness of the vision tells us, after all, very little about the quality of the writing or the trustworthiness of that vision. Larkin is a poet whose range of vision is wider than many have perceived; and to state this at the outset is merely to start with the