

ON PHILIP LARKIN'S POETRY

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Abstract

Using his seemingly crass and apparently pessimistic "This Be the Verse" as a point of departure, this paper examines Philip Larkin's poetry with regard to the poet's own attitude towards the reader. His highly accessible poems, penned in common language, resulted in a reputation as both a 'poet of the people' and a 'philistine'. But for all its crudeness, Larkin's mode of writing always showed a keen awareness of the distancing aspects of modernism. In other words, he was not ignorant of the current political trends of his time, rather he was consciously writing against what he deemed elitist art. In conclusion, the paper returns to "This Be the Verse" and considers the moral import of Larkin's ironically acerbic "Get out early as you can, and don't have any kids yourself".

*"They fuck you up, your mum and dad.
They may not mean to, but they do."*

In terms of beginnings, Philip Larkin's "This Be The Verse" may offend some readers, but it will not bore. The more prudish among us might throw the verse down in disgust, while *Angst*-ridden teenagers might embrace the poem as a form of literary protest against mum and pop. This leaves that smaller segment of the population, professional and lay literary critics, to wonder if the poem is not protesting a bit too much in its very directness and crudeness against the previous generation. Before considering the shockingly pessimistic and crass nature of "This Be The Verse," in this paper I will offer a few examples of the flavour of Larkin's poetry and consider him as a poet far removed from any ivory tower. Furthermore, I will reflect on the possible motivating factors for Larkin's highly accessible mode of writing, primarily with regard to his aversion to modernism, such as that of T.S. Eliot, and his own views towards the poet's responsibility to the reader.

As cited above, the lines introducing "This Be The Verse" sound not only profane but also prosaic - hardly the sort of language we expect from poetry. Yet even the rhyming companions which complete the first verse are hardly virtuosic:

*"They fill you with the faults they had,
And add some extras, just for you." (Larkin, 190)*

It is because of lines such as these that Larkin's reputation as a poet is not that of a virtuoso. Since this reputation is well-documented, perhaps even exaggerated in academic considerations of his works, the following assessment is not untypical: "With Larkin and his English readers, the silliness which helped to make him popular was his genuine, uncultivated, sincere philistinism." (Hall, 10) Silliness? Uncultivated philistinism? These are not words we traditionally hear about first-rate poets. However, as we know from the circulation statistics of tabloid newspapers, these terms might be linked directly to Larkin's popularity. Silliness, being uncultivated, and even philistine, can add to one's popularity by increasing accessibility and thereby ensure a larger potential reading audience. But this, of course, is only half the story, for it ignores Larkin's quality as a poet. True, it might be easy to work with Larkin's poetry even in classes where English is a second language, but accessibility does not mean mediocrity. The quality of Larkin's poetry as a whole rests less on its lack of difficulty than on its formal excellence and earthy sincerity of content, a sincerity that arises from the personal tone Larkin employs. In other words, Larkin's oeuvre adheres to the traditional definition of poetry as the genre that expresses personal experiences and feelings in a most musical manner. Poetry is the stepsister of music that presents the emotions of the poet in conjunction with a particular experience or affinity.

Most of Larkin's poetry consists of portraying a concrete personal situation as a source of reflection. For example, the opening line of "Talking in Bed" portrays the intimacy of lying beside a loved one, but simultaneously corrupts that intimacy by expressing the realization that things are not as they should be: "Talking in bed ought to be easiest [...]" (Larkin, 129) It *ought* to be easiest, but for the voice of the poem, it is not. The concrete image of imperfect domesticity becomes an emblem of isolation. "Sad Steps," meanwhile, starts with a strange mingling of drunken solitude and an unromantic encounter with nature:

"Groping back to bed after a piss
I part thick curtains, and am startled by
The rapid clouds, the moon's cleanliness." (Larkin, 169)

The figurative isolation of "Talking in Bed" becomes literal, for both urinating and an encounter with the sublime are more personal than post-coital chats. Neither experience is likely to be shared with a loved one.

"This Be The Verse" goes well beyond the often painfully personal air of Larkin's other poems. Here the apparent malaise of a general condition, combined with profanity, makes this poem's opening sound more like graffiti than a rendering of a personal experience. The indicative surety of "They fuck you up [...]" even though "[t]hey may not mean to [...]" allows for no exceptions. Parents fail, and that is just the way it is. Even if we assume that this poem springs from a personal experience, say from a horrible childhood, this individual aspect is pushed into the background in favour of universalizing the experience, of stating it as an axiom. Even if we take the message symbolically, as a pessimistic expression of entropy marching across the generations, this is hardly sound argumentation. The blatant generalization about every previous generation rings chauvinistically anti-intellectual. Furthermore, if we combine this unphilosophical thinking with the crudeness of diction, and if we assume that crudeness

of diction is a measure of philistinism, then this poem does little to refute Larkin's reputation as an anti-intellectual, philistine poet. As we shall see, Larkin would probably not be bothered by this judgement, for unlike the modernists whom he disliked, Larkin was not one wear his intellect on his sleeve.

Larkin's distrust of modernism, such as that represented by T.S. Eliot, is hardly a secret. It shows forth his selection of poems for the *Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse*, in personal remarks, as well as in his own poetry. Take any given Larkin poem and compare it to one from Eliot, and the contrast will speak loudly. In terms of form, the simplicity of Larkin's folksy rhythms will contrast sharply with the complicated metres of a "Prufrock." In terms of content, Larkin's lines will often seem naively pedestrian, though not always untrue, against the erudite intellectuality of the modernist Eliot. In Larkin's view, modernism was an "aberration" that "blighted all the arts" and was partly responsible for stealing poetry from the "general reader." He decried both the transcendental tendencies in Eliot and, more vehemently, "the culture-mongering activities of the Americans Eliot and Pound." (Quoted in Motion, 354) Though Larkin's poems are permeated by a fearful obsession with death, he had little ink to spill on transcendental themes, and therefore an aversion to at least some of Eliot's poetic musings is understandable. A single comparison will illustrate the contrast between the two. Whereas Eliot writes confidently in "The Hollow Men" of "Those who have crossed / [...] to death's other Kingdom[.]" Larkin essentially pleads ignorance in matters of the afterlife:

"At death, you break up: the bits that were you
Start speeding away from each other for ever
With no one to see [...]" ("The Old Fools"; Larkin, 196)

Also, in an epistolary ad hominem attack, Larkin remarked to a friend that the scribbler of "The Hollow Men" was himself "an old tin can." (Motion, 173)

It seems that the difference between the two lay in their manner of reaching their audience, for Larkin revolted against and was revolted by Eliot's claim that a modern poet was likely to be "difficult." (Day, 30) Where Eliot's poetry breathes the rarefied air of academia, Larkin's remains refreshingly monosyllabic. Where Eliot quotes from a range of languages and literatures, Larkin quotes contemporary vulgarity as often as he quotes other (but only English!) poets. "This Be The Verse" offers a prime example of such quoting, as its title refers to "Requiem," a Robert Louis Stevenson poem, while the first line evokes the prosaic speech of everyday life. If this sounds like an extreme variation on William Wordsworth's call for a poetry using "a selection of language really used by men," such as outlined in the famous preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, it also entails writing about what really happens to men in their daily lives.

Larkin's role as a highlighter of the humdrum, quoter of the *quotidien* accompanies him throughout his career. "Vers de Soci t ," which originally appeared in the same volume as "This Be The Verse," begins with a mocking quote of a de-epithemized invitation:

"My wife and I have asked a crowd of craps
To come and waste their time and ours: [...]"
(Larkin's Italics; Larkin, 181)

If its tone is mocking, it is at least forthright in its disdain for others, for no one can accuse a misanthrope of insincerity. Though this is poetry, the voice of the poet is never far behind the lyrical voice of the poem - that is, one does not have the sense that this speaker is merely a postulated experimental voice. It is the voice of a real man who "deal[s] with farmers, things like dips and feed" ("Livings" 186), with the shortcomings of a real man: "I work all day, and get half-drunk at night." ("Aubade", 206); as well as the concerns of a real man:

"I have started to say
'A quarter of a century'
Or 'thirty years back'
About my own life." ("I have started to say" 185)

Such an approach to poetry accounts for Larkin's preference for the plainly pessimistic diction and the simpler rhythms of, as we shall see later, a Thomas Hardy as opposed to the modernists: "When I came to Hardy it was with the sense of relief that I didn't have to try and jack myself up to a concept of poetry that lay outside my life [...]. One could simply relapse back into one's own life and write from it." (Quoted from Booth, 66) And elsewhere on the same poet: "He's not a transcendental writer, he's not a Yeats, he's not an Eliot; his subjects are men, the life of men, time and the passing of time, love and the fading of love." (Quoted from Motion, 141) In Larkin's view Eliot, the author of "The Social Function of Poetry", had moved himself and his poetry away from themes and subjects that would appeal to the 'general reader.' Furthermore, the artist's retreat behind the work is carried out in an idiom that further distances the writer from the reader. Larkin is personal as can be, but not solipsistic, and his poetry is not hermetic. Even when chronicling personal misery, he never loses sight of the reader.

Larkin's viewpoint on the relationship between the writer and the reader is perhaps best represented in the poem "Fiction and the Reading Public." The poem begins with an imperative:

"Give me a thrill, says the reader,
Give me a kick;
I don't care how you succeed, or
What subject you pick." (Larkin, 34)

It would be easy to read this poem as a lament for the decline of artistic quality as a consequence of an uninterested public demanding that the writer speak down to its level. The tone is highly ironic, as an apparently apathetic reader nevertheless places demands - like a child throwing a tantrum for no apparent reason - for *something* even without knowing specifically what that something is. The diction of the poem makes it clear that the reader is not after eternal bliss, not after some lofty aesthetic perfection, but merely the fleeting pleasure implied by "thrill" and "kick." Merely? As the poem marches along towards its laconic conclusion, which contradicts any romantic cult of genius surrounding the artist, we see what themes propel the poem. On the one hand there is our desire for the poet to brighten our lives, on the other, the wish that he do so in an intellectually accessible manner. When Larkin, later in the poem, rhymes "make

me feel good” with “[I]et it be understood[,]” the suggestion is that the two are linked, as though the trickiness of intellectual themes impedes pleasure. In order to reach contemporary readers, it seems that the poet has to talk down to them.

In the final stanza of “Fiction and the Reading Public,” it becomes apparent that the question of whether or not it is a shame that poets have to speak down to their readers is essentially moot. The imperative of the opening lines is now a threat, as we learn the reason why the reader is in a position to utter commands:

“For I call the tune in this racket:
I pay your screw,
Write reviews and the bull on the jacket -
[...]
Just please me for two generations -
You’ll be ‘truly great.’”

In an admirably condensed manner, Larkin shows that worrying about the autonomy and position of the writer or the work of art is economically irrelevant. It is irrelevant for the simple reason that - and here the politically conservative Larkin becomes blatantly materialist - without readers prompted by critics to buy the works we can forget about poetry reaching any sizeable audience. In true Larkin fashion, this clearly stated point is further underlined by the kaleidoscope of puns whirling around “tune” and “racket.” By calling the shots, readers also literally determine the form of the poem, that is, its music, its “tune.” The most transparent meaning of “racket” in this context is obviously ‘business,’ but this meaning cannot be heard independently of others, including ‘fraudulent scheme,’ and ‘social whirl or excitement,’ each of which casts a dubious shadow on both the sublimity of art and the circumstances of its production. This whirling of meanings leaves the reader wondering whether the difference between a pleasant “tune” and yet another meaning of “racket,” in the sense of a ‘confused din,’ depends solely on the artist’s ability to be ‘in tune’ with his readers. The reader is not only a critic, but a bully.

It would be exaggerated to claim that the ideal interpretation of “Fiction and the Reading Public” is one which embraces the increased role of the reader in both the figurative and literal production of art - as though the poem were some sort of precursor to Reader Response criticism. Nevertheless, the roles of the writer and the reader are playfully reversed, for the latter even *writes* ‘reviews.’ But this elemental step is immediately undercut by a simultaneous realization on the part of this reader-become-writer that the words adorning a book’s jacket are “bull.” Readers realize that they wield power, but they also realize that the basis of this power is rather shaky. One wonders if the later Larkin would have added a syllable of profanity to this assessment, or if he would have left the echoes of the authoritative ‘Papal bull’ to resound ahead of bovine excrement. If Larkin showed restraint, this pun on “bull” leaves us with the implication that idiots pull the strings of power when it comes to the production of art. The suggested irony is that readers and literary critics, though papal in their power, are rather plain in matters of taste.

And so the poem is clearly ironical. But understanding ironical statements, as I will show again later with regard to “The Be The Verse,” need not be a mere matter of

turning a statement on its head. At its best, irony can be an oscillation between the literal and figurative, the stated and the implied. Its full understanding or appreciation requires an imaginative shifting of perspectives on the part of the reader. When, in tragedy, the hero announces to his loved one, just before his obviously imminent death, 'I will not see you for some time....,' our appreciation of the irony depends on both the privileged position of knowing more than the hero himself, and an attempt to identify with him. Thus, even as we observe him as a spectator, we also see the world through his eyes. In other words, irony means hearing or seeing two things at once.

The ironic strain running throughout Larkin's poetry is a musical one - the darkest cynicism is always formally mitigated by his sovereign command of rhythms; shining through this heart of darkness is an omnipresent lightness of verse which delights. In the case of "Fiction and the Reading Public," concentrating on the seemingly dark message means overlooking the fact that these words, placed in the mouth of the 'reader' who functions as the voice of the poem, are not only formally fine but also refreshingly true in their naiveté. If we (naturally excluding ourselves!) accept the tragedy that the general reader is a fop, we should not forget that Shakespeare's Polonius, one of the greatest fops in literature, was also capable of producing tidbits of wisdom. Foppery and useful bits of truth are not mutually exclusive. The analogy is not forced, for like Polonius' "Neither a borrower, nor a lender be," saying to the writer, "Just please me for two generations" is darn good advice. In light of Shakespeare's staying power, 'two generations' is akin to a nine days' wonder and therefore slightly humorous; but at the same time, Larkin's poem is a reminder that there is no need to pack books when we exit this world's stage. Dead men do not read books.

The advice doled out in "Fiction and the Reading Public" cannot be rejected altogether, even if it lacks erudition. On the contrary, for Larkin a lack of erudition, as well as a reticence towards the avant-garde so praised by modernism is a good thing:

"This is my essential criticism of modernism, whether perpetrated by [Charlie] Parker [the jazz musician who, in Larkin's opinion, gave in to the "constant pressure to be different and difficult" at the expense of pleasure], Pound or Picasso: it helps us neither to enjoy nor endure. It will divert us as long as we are prepared to be mystified or outraged, but maintains its hold only by being more mystifying and more outrageous: it has no lasting power." (Quoted in Motion, 398)

The sense here is that art's job is not to educate or edify, but merely to make life more bearable, to help us "endure." This evokes Nietzsche's oft-quoted aphorism that without music life would be a mistake, that music and by extension poetry help to soothe us. In addition, the conclusion we can draw from the above Larkin quote is that the ability to be "different and difficult" is not an intrinsic value; in other words, this quote redeems the simplicity of the "[l]et it be understood" that we see in "Fiction and the Reading Public." Larkin's work in general, and this poem in particular, calls for a philistine leap of faith by reminding us that there is no shame in asking of art, "That we may lie quiet in our beds / And not be 'depressed.'" In the words of Philip Booth, Larkin "is a highly 'visible' poet, who seems to have no inhibition about addressing

the reader in his own candid, natural tone.” (Booth, 6) If Eliot and the other modernists are cerebral twelve-tone composition, Larkin is the Jazz he loved so much.

“Fiction and the Reading Public” can be read as a counterpoint to T.S. Eliot’s canonical essay “The Social Function of Poetry,” in which he articulates the poet’s duties:

“[H]is first duty *qua* poet is to the language of his country. First, he has the duty to *preserve* that language: his use of it must not weaken, coarsen, or degrade it. Second, he has the duty to *develop* that language, to bring it up to date, to investigate its unexplored possibilities. So far as he expresses, in his poetry, what other people feel, he is also affecting that feeling by making it more conscious: in giving people words for their feelings, he is teaching them something about themselves.” (Quoted in Kernan, 160f)

Eliot’s optimistic conception of the poet contains an inherent confidence in the poet’s ability to shape language, to influence the general idiom. But what is the nature of this language to which Eliot refers? What does ‘weakening’, ‘coarsening’ or ‘degrading’ a language mean? If we accept the common currency of these words, this definition of the poet can only come at the expense of Larkin; accepting this definition at face value means denying Larkin the status of a poet as his language is often coarse, his lines more concerned with clarity of subject matter than with the lofty task of developing the language as a whole. It is unlikely that a poem like “This Be The Verse” will teach us anything new about ourselves. In short, Larkin takes his language and ideas from what is already there, as though Larkin were anticipating Terry Eagleton’s objection to formal definitions of poetry when he stated that “there is more metaphor in Manchester than there is in Marvell.” (Eagleton, 5)

Returning to the lines quoted at the outset of this paper, the profanity may sound more like Manchester or Manhattan than Marvell. Larkin’s use of the word puts a novel spin on the common expletive ‘they fuck you up.’ As one critic put it, the poem begins with a “fine pun,” for parents-to-be must get their corrupting hands on each other before they can turn to corrupting the fruits of their labour. (Day, 70) In other words, the profanity in the first line reminds us that the creation of the child necessarily precedes any psychological wounding of the same. Thus, in the biological sense, Larkin’s blatant generalization *is* a truthful rendering of a general condition, if not a truism. But focusing on the weakness of Larkin’s generalizations and the fanciness of his pun draws attention away from what strikes us first about the poem. In “This Be The Verse” we do not hear a particularly poetical voice in the first line, and even before unravelling the ‘fucking’ pun’s double strands, we are more likely to be shocked by the vulgarity of the language itself. Pun or not, it is unlikely that any reader will view this first line as any linguistic development, any investigation of ‘unexplored possibilities.’ Larkin, of course, was as aware of this as his detractors, and he commented more than once on his use of four-letter words, both in practical and pragmatic terms. The first because, “these words are part of the palette”, they simply exist and it is not the poet’s job to deny this existence, to bowdlerize the language; the second because, as every rebellious teenager knows, “[y]ou use them when you want to shock.” (Quoted from Swarbrick, 135)

Just as the specific pun asks us to engage in a sort of doublethink akin to appreciating irony, so did Larkin remain aware of the different functions of coarse language, as the following passage from a letter indicates: "I think it can take different forms, It can be meant to be shocking; it can be the only accurate word (the others being gentilisms, etc.); or it can be funny, in that silly traditional way such things are funny." (Quoted in Burt) However - and this is where the artist distances himself from others working in a four-letter vernacular - Larkin maintained in the same letter: "I don't think I've ever shocked for the sake of shocking." In other words, there is method to his meanness of diction. In yet another remark on the use of four-letter words, Larkin commented: "we live in an odd era, when shocking language can be used, yet still shocks - it won't last." (Quoted in Burt) It may be an easy way of garnering attention, but therein lies its problem, namely in the fact that shock-value is inclined to decline very quickly. To draw a parallel: the shocking quality of the avant-garde is that it is ahead of its time; when times catch up with it and entrench within the cultural canon, it is no longer shocking.

The same holds true for shock-value within an individual work - that is, it fades quickly. Works that begin with a bang, can easily end with a comparative whimper. Not so in "This Be The Verse." The shocking fatalism intimated in the generality of the first lines moves brashly, yet beautifully along towards its dour conclusion. Life is miserable, Larkin says, and it is not getting any better:

"Man hands on misery to man.
It deepens likes a coastal shelf."

The brashness comes out in more indicative surety about our common heritage, the beauty comes out in the perfection of the simile. The "faults" (yet another pun) alluded to in the first stanza grow into a coastal shelf that deepens towards inevitable catastrophe. In a world where parents' best intentions are swallowed whole by the weight of "They may not mean to, but they do," there seems only one solution:

"Get out early as you can,
And don't have any kids yourself."

The final lines of the poem are more vague but also more shocking than the first. Is it a thinly disguised call to suicide? A wish in the style of *The Who's* 'I hope I die before I get old...'? Or is it yet another literary lamentation in the tradition of Job or Oedipus?

Rather than repeating the story, let it suffice to say that while Job's salad years were relatively fruitful, he had a tough going of it later in life, and was driven to utter the following: "Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived." (Job ch. 3, v. 3) In plain English, he laments his birth, much like that other famous literary figure who laments his birth, namely, Oedipus Rex: "Not to be born is, past all prizing, best." These quotes are linked not only by intent, but also by the tragic context of their utterance. For both Job and Oedipus Rex are tragic characters in the classical sense of the word, that is, as victims of Fate. Job's position in the Bible is the essence of fatalism, for he is nothing more than the unfortunate object of a wager between God and Satan. His Greek counterpart is nothing more

than the unfortunate object of that cryptic public relations manager of the Gods, the oracle at Delphi. Such utterances are an extension of a wish for death as a means of ending one's suffering and pain. However in each case, the heroes' wish for death is as hyperbolic as their own tragic fates, and they are just as helpless, passive: suicide is a grim but active option, preventing our own birth is beyond our power.

As a parody of the more canonical examples just cited, Thomas Hardy, a writer very dear to Larkin, offers the following quatrain:

"I'm Smith of Stoke, aged sixty-odd,
I've lived without a dame
From youth-time on; and would to God
My dad had done the same." ("Epitaph on a Pessimist" Hardy, 764)

The poem possesses a bounce similar to that of Larkin's own "This Be The Verse" and the diction is slightly humorous, folksy, and anonymous. "Smith of Stoke" is about as unique as 'Novak of Novo Mesto,' and therefore evokes a generic character that detracts from the idea of individual tragedy. In addition, Hardy's vague reference to his source - "From the French and the Greek" - suggests a further generic aspect of Smith's situation, thus undermining a tragic situation by robbing it of uniqueness. If he is unhappy, he is surely not alone in his suffering. The value we allot unusual circumstances is undermined by the vulgarity and banality of Stoke's situation, for the source of this lamentation pales in the light of Oedipus and Job. The bluntness of "I've lived without a dame" implies that sexual frustration is to blame for this wish not to have been born which, Freudian interpretations aside, pales against the problems of Job and Oedipus.

Both Larkin and Hardy often play the time-honoured trick of mismatching form and content. Just as we rarely hear an ode to banality, or a sonnet composed to a goldfish, neither do we expect sheer pessimism to be presented with the levity of a nursery rhyme. (Swarbrick, 138) With the Hardy poem, the humour arising from such incongruity is clearly a means of dealing with the pain of loneliness. The wish never to have been born functions therefore as a sort of sexual gallows humour. In Larkin's "This Be The Verse" things are more complicated because an individual wish is spun into an imperative that tells us, if not to seek actively the grave then at least to avoid propagating the species. Can Larkin really mean this? As Anthony Swarbrick puts it: "The poem teases us by not quite telling us how seriously to take it. In that way, it gets away with being viciously cynical and uncompassionate." (Swarbrick, 138) Larkin's own comments on the poem do little to clear up the issue: "It's perfectly serious as well." (Quoted in Swarbrick, 138) Without the qualifying 'as well,' we could write the poem off as an ode to bitterness. On the other hand, by claiming so strongly that the poem is meant in earnest, Larkin shows a keen awareness that the reader is tempted to dismiss the poem's message as solely comic in its darkness. Larkin's comment on the poem does nothing to slacken the grotesque tension between the comical and the tragic, a tension that cannot be divided. If I accused Larkin of weak thinking at the outset of "This Be The Verse," the impossible imperative in the final stanza is an intellectual gem that shows how irony can allow us to spring the boundaries of logical thinking.

According to Anthony Swarbrick, a similar sort of tension exists in Larkin's works as a whole: "His whole career can be read as the often unresolved conflict between a romantic, aspiring Larkin and the empirical, ironic Larkin, between the aesthete and the philistine." (Swarbrick, 19) The strength of the imperative "Get out early as you can, and don't have any kids yourself" is essentially moral, though far from moralistic. Things are getting worse, we cannot do anything about that, says the ironical Larkin, so the best solution is to do something about it, says the aspiring Larkin. A wonderful contradiction in which he, for all his crudeness and apparent philistinism, both laments and pokes fun at our role in the modern world. In a similarly structured imperative, Larkin writes, elsewhere, "Get stewed: / Books are a load of crap." This was early in his career, yet he continued to write. And read.

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