

Philip Gardner

THE WINTRY DRUM:

THE POETRY OF PHILIP LARKIN

ON ITS APPEARANCE in 1955, Philip Larkin's *The Less Deceived* was praised most of all for its tone and style: its irony, its lack of sentimentality, and its strict formal control recommended it as an epitome of the reaction of the 1950s against earlier poetic excess. The fashion in the novel was for the anti-hero, the Chaplinesque "little man"; Larkin's poetic persona was that of the ordinary, rather unsuccessful, man equipped with a wry, out-of-the-ordinary awareness of his limitations. This persona was emphasized by the photograph of Larkin on the sleeve of his recording of his poems (issued by The Marvell Press in 1958): as if in illustration of "Church Going", the poet stands in a grass-grown cemetery, wearing an old mackintosh and cycle-clips and propping up a pushbike, and gazes glumly at stone angels and monumental masonry.

More recently, instead of praising Larkin's manner, critics have commented adversely on his matter, more particularly on his concern with humdrum "scenes from provincial life", his wariness of commitment to love or marriage, and his pessimistic awareness of the passage of time and the decay of human hopes. They wonder how much his melancholy is conditioned by a willed narrowness of experience: the key phrases are "Little Englandism of the Left"¹ and "lack of nobility".²

Both the praise and the blame do Larkin little, or at least incomplete, justice. The publication of *The Whitsun Weddings* in 1964 and the welcome reissue³ in 1966 of the first of his publications, *The North Ship* (1945), provide a frame for *The Less Deceived* and enable one to see Larkin's work in a wider perspective than that provided by the poetical fashions of the fifties. That an attempt to describe his subject-matter is not premature is attested by his statement, in an interview⁴ in 1964: "I don't think I want to change, just to become better at what I am".

Philip Larkin's favourite poet is Thomas Hardy, and some recent remarks of his on Hardy give the clue to what he himself is good at: "the dominant emotion in Hardy is sadness", and the "imaginative note he strikes most

plangently [is] the sometimes gentle, sometimes ironic, sometimes bitter but always passive apprehension of suffering".⁵ Larkin is sufficiently typical of the climate of the 1950s for the word "suffering" to need toning down to something like "disappointment", but otherwise the description holds good: the range of Larkin's attitudes includes irony but is by no means restricted to it.

The note of sadness is apparent even in his first volume, *The North Ship*. Stylistically these thirty-two poems differ from Larkin's mature work in two ways: they are dominated by the influence of Yeats, and they lack "local texture", the air of having proceeded out of a *particular* experience: only eight of them have titles. Larkin frankly describes them as "a mixture of Yeats and having nothing much to write about".⁶ It is not proposed to comment here on the influence of Yeats, except to say that it is not so much a matter of deliberate pastiche as of a kind of ventriloquism, with Larkin as the dummy (or, perhaps, the medium) through whom the dead poet speaks in accents uncannily his own. Yet, despite the Irish accent, many of the sentiments are—as seen with the hindsight afforded by his later poetry—obviously Larkin's: throughout Poem I—a youthful celebration of spring, love, and resurrection—a sinister note recurs:

Let the wheel spin out
Till all created things
With shout and answering shout
Cast off rememberings;
Let it all come about
Till centuries of springs
And all their buried men
Stand on the earth again.

A drum taps: a wintry drum.

The device of the refrain may be stolen from Yeats, but the "wintry drum" itself is Larkin's own property: the awareness of sadness at the back of things, of the passing of time and the inevitability of death.

The "wintry drum" also represents the dreariness of reality which obtrudes into romantic illusion. This contrast is one of Larkin's most insistent preoccupations, and it appears for the first time in Poem XX of *The North Ship* where, despite his Yeatsian disguise as "a sack of meal upon two sticks", we recognize the poet made familiar to us by his later work as "an indigestible sterility".⁷ His attitude is polarized between the "wild" and "glad" girl

whom he sees in the snowy fields, whose vitality he cannot match even with an equally-vital jealousy, and the "two old ragged men", clearing snow, who demonstrate the beauty of day-to-day survival, of "all actions done in patient hopelessness." Larkin sees himself as akin to these, rather than to the girl: "For me the task's to learn the many times / When I must stoop and throw a shovelful." And yet this vision of affinity is itself a gesture towards life, a grasping at a kind of belief and pattern which transcends the ordinariness of the image.

I must repeat until I live the fact
 That everything's remade
 By shovel and spade;
 That each dull day and each despairing act
 Build up the crags from which the spirit leaps.

At this stage of his poetry, Larkin is capable of seeing everyday reality as a foothold for the spirit; but obvious in the lines is a sense of the effort involved in this view — the "unicorn" of the spirit needs to be kept "against all argument". In Larkin's later work the arguments of reality are blunt instruments, the "despairing act" truly gets nowhere, and the spirit leaps from the crags not to fly but to fall flat on its face. Illusion is impossible, reality is a Yeatsian "desolation", and, whatever life one is allowed, the end is the same. Of all the poems in *The North Ship*, perhaps "Nursery Tale" predicts most gloomily the conclusions that Larkin is later to find inescapable:

So every journey that I make
 Leads me, as in the story he was led,
 To some new ambush, to some fresh mistake:
 So every journey I begin foretells
 A weariness of daybreak, spread
 With carrion kisses, carrion farewells.

Although an interval of nine years separated the publication of *The Less Deceived* from that of *The Whitsun Weddings*, to consider them in chronological order would be to try to tear apart the close fabric which, together, they compose. The same themes occur in both; a poem in one will continue, comment on, or dissent from a poem in the other; and the only essential difference is that the second volume is more pessimistic than the first. Their joint strength is twofold: their themes are universal — time, failure, love, death; and their

context, the detail of one man's experience in a "real place", gives them a sharp contemporary relevance.

It is this combination of universal and particular, rather than an ironic tone of voice, that would account for the strong impact that Larkin's poetry has made—a sufficient impact for the *Times Educational Supplement* to declare in 1956 that "with Larkin poetry is on its way back to the middlebrow public". To complain of "Little Englandism" in his work is to ignore the pleasure—as old as Aristotle's *Poetics*—which many readers will obtain from a poetry which is recognizably akin (albeit the likeness is an accusing one) to their own, frequently provincial, lives. The poet who sympathizes with the young mothers of "Afternoons", who changed trains at Sheffield and "ate an awful pie" ("Dockery and Son"), who lives in digs ("Mr. Bleaney"), who observes in "The Large Cool Store" (presumably the local Marks and Spencers) the idealistic overtones of "Lemon, sapphire, moss-green, rose / Bri-Nylon Baby-Dolls and Shorties", would seem a man not altogether different from themselves. And to object that Larkin's poetry lacks "nobility" is surely to forget the powerful stream of poetry in English, from the Anglo-Saxon elegies to the melancholy of Hardy and Housman, which derives its appeal, perversely perhaps but no less certainly, from the human capacity for facing sorrow and accepting its statement in art without any palliative except the "demonstration (by writing about it) that [the poet] is in command of a situation".⁸

The basic point is that Larkin is an *emotional* poet: the irony of his tone may sometimes be the self-protection of a man who guiltily feels himself to be on the edge of life, but more often it is there to control strong feeling. Where irony is absent, as in "Going", the strength of this feeling is frighteningly apparent, but the presence of irony in other poems should not distract our attention from the emotion which is also there. Larkin is no disinterested observer, but a poet who feels that "the man who creates" depends completely on "the man who suffers":⁹ as an intelligent man he notices the ironic, the absurd, the amusing, and the plain dull, but fundamentally he responds to pathos, futility and the fear of death.

Larkin's original intention was to call his 1955 volume simply *Various Poems*. Asked for something more striking, he transferred from the poem now called "Deceptions" its former title "The Less Deceived" and used it for the whole book. This title, though an improvement on its colourless predecessor, was perhaps a mistake, in that it suggested a clever, cool refusal to be "taken in": it chimed too easily with the fashion for intellectual suspicion and

wariness of the grand gesture — to be “less deceived” by everything was the “In” thing in poetry, even when the poet was an undergraduate who had not very much experience to be “less deceived” about.

None of this, of course, was Larkin’s fault. It is appropriate, therefore, to see the title in the context of the poem to which it originally belonged, since it does give a clue to Larkin’s way of looking. “Deceptions” (as it is more convenient to call it) concerns an incident from Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor*. A girl was kidnapped, drugged, and raped, and the poet broods on this with retrospective sympathy, sketching concisely the atmosphere of a nineteenth-century London which would have little pity to spare for her. Out of the situation he creates a parable of two kinds of deception: the girl’s “deception” (i.e. seduction) by the man, and the man’s deception by his own sexual desire. The latter, an illusion doomed “to burst into fulfilment’s desolate attic”, is implied to be the more serious (psychologically speaking) of the two; yet the poet realizes that the girl would hardly be consoled by such a conclusion. Two deductions can be made from this about Larkin’s attitude to life: the first is that his sympathies are likely to be as much for crudely actual sufferings as for loss of mental illusions; the second (assuming the girl as the poet’s surrogate) is that to be without illusions, or at least to be “less deceived”, is not much comfort, far less something to congratulate oneself on.

As an example of disenchantment accepted ruefully rather than brandished gleefully one may consider “I Remember, I Remember”, which purports to be a debunking of the “literary” childhood in which the future poet goes through the stages of Dylan Thomas pantheism, Betjeman hero-worship, Lawrentian sexual awakening, and eventual local recognition of his budding genius by “a distinguished cousin of the mayor.” This kind of childhood Larkin did not have, and his parodic humour implies at first that the lack of it was no loss:

And here we have that splendid family
I never ran to when I got depressed,
The boys all biceps and the girls all chest
Their comic Ford, their farm where I could be
“Really myself”.

Yet the ending hints that the satire is more bitter than it first appeared, and that, though the poet may not be sorry that his childhood was not like *this*, he

would have been glad had it been something more than what he calls elsewhere "a forgotten boredom":¹⁰

"You look as if you wished the place in Hell",
My friend said, "judging from your face". "Oh well,
I suppose it's not the place's fault", I said.

"Nothing, like something, happens anywhere".

The poem is, in fact, a disguised version of the regret which shows more candidly in Donald Davie's "The Garden Party".

Would a more interesting childhood have been any protection against the attrition of reality? Larkin's later poems suggest not. "A Study of Reading Habits" shows, with that sardonic colloquialism which is but the obverse of the poet's stoical acceptance elsewhere, that youth's bookworm illusions both of heroism and of dramatic villainy (shades of Biggles, Westerns, Jack the Ripper, and Count Dracula!) are soon shrunk by experience to the recognition of failure and mediocrity:

Don't read much now: the dude
Who lets the girl down before
The hero arrives, the chap
Who's yellow and keeps the store
Seem far too familiar. Get stewed:
Books are a load of crap.

Here the dangers of self-pity are avoided by rough language, exaggeration, and self-deflation. But other poems, by being more general, are able to strike plainly the note of regret: the dream-world of advertisement hoardings which "screen graves with custard, cover slums with praise" is, by mere juxtaposition with the "rained-on streets and squares" of real life, shown to be beyond our ever-grasping reach:

They rise

Serenely to proclaim pure crust, pure foam,
Pure coldness to our live imperfect eyes
That stare beyond this world, where nothing's made
As new or washed quite clean, seeking the home
All such inhabit.¹¹

The clearly elegiac tone of this precludes the sneer that those who desire the ad-man's world *ought* to be disappointed: the colourful posters of affluent living are a simple contemporary shorthand for the ideal which we strive towards and always miss.

The clash between reality and dream is more savagely pointed up in "Sunny Prestatyn". The "girl on the poster" in her white swimsuit, advertising the hypothetical joys of seaside holidays, may in herself be a corny sex-symbol (the background detail of a "hotel *with palms*" (my italics) is certainly a neat jab at the climatic rigours of British resorts); but the exaggerated crudity of her defacement by hooligans (emphasized by an equivalent crudity in Larkin's language) renders her sympathetic as yet another example of imagined beauty's inability to survive the attacks, not only of envious sordidness, but of a grimmer world in which fighting disease is a more appropriate occupation than dreaming of girls and sunshine:

She was too good for this life.
 Very soon, a great transverse tear
 Left only a hand and some blue.
 Now *Fight Cancer* is there.

More literally than most, this poem demonstrates how all our illusions are cut down to size.

The consolations of religious belief are no more available to Larkin than they were to Matthew Arnold; the "sea of faith" has ebbed, leaving only the "accoutred, frowsty barn" whose residual influence he tries to account for in "Church Going". His inability to believe seems to have nothing more to back it up than had Arnold's in "Dover Beach": the feeling, simply, that religion may have been possible once but is now outmoded. Larkin describes himself as "Bored, uninformed, knowing the ghostly silt / Dispersed", and one is inclined to question precisely *how* he comes by this arguable knowledge. The poem itself, not being a theological inquiry, gives no answer; agnosticism is the premiss, modified only by a subdued hope, as in Hardy's "The Oxen", that belief might be possible. The church which Larkin at first describes with a mixture of pity and ironic levity comes gradually to be recognized as a monument to that serious nexus of human concerns, "marriage, and birth, / And death, and thoughts of these". But the conclusion is ambiguous: wisdom is taught, not perhaps by the church as a symbol of faith, but by the churchyard

where "so many dead lie around", their graves reminding us of our own eventual fate.

In a world without order or religion, Matthew Arnold's remedy was "Ah love! let us be true / To one another." The poignancy (when it is not ruefulness) of Larkin's poems about love is not that of appeal, but of denial: "that much-mentioned brilliance, love" may forever promise "to solve, and satisfy, / And set unchangeably in order",¹³ but the promise is never fulfilled. We are left, as in "Next, Please", "holding wretched stalks / Of disappointment". The bitter pathos of this is nowhere more apparent than in "Faith Healing", where the ironic sketch of the American evangelist in his neat executive suit only underlines the deprivation of the "patients" who find in his business-like twenty-second morsels of "loving care" a substitute for the love they have missed. The poet's awareness of the grotesquerie of these particular women, "moustached in flowered frocks", whose "thick tongues blort", is swamped by his perception of a universal frustration:

In everyone there sleeps

A sense of life lived according to love.
To some it means the difference they could make
By loving others, but across most it sweeps
As all they might have done had they been loved.
That nothing cures.

The incurable *that* is not only the sadness over lost, or missed, love; it is also the persistent delusion, despite "all time has disproved", that to love or be loved would bring a happier and more successful life. The tension between these two feelings, in Larkin's first-person poems of love and marriage, takes the form of a bachelor's debate on the motion, "Am I, in not marrying, missing anything, or not?"

"Reasons for Attendance" suggests fairly strongly the poet's feeling that he is missing nothing: he may admit "the wonderful feel of girls", but for him the "rough-tongued bell" of Art is as loud as the "trumpet's voice" which calls him to join the dancing couples — louder, in fact, as is indicated by his denigratory phrase "maul to and fro" to describe their dancing. What is important is to decide what one's deepest needs are, and to fulfil them; then, both the artist — who values "individuality" — and the others — impelled by sex — will be satisfied, provided that "No one has misjudged himself. Or lied." It can hardly be inferred from the tone of *this* poem that Larkin felt he had done

either of these things. But a later poem, "Self's the Man", though it presents the most hair-raisingly sardonic comment on the view that "the lion's share/Of happiness is found by couples", implies also that the isolation of the artist may be less easy to bear than he had previously thought. Here is the bachelor's view of the suburban horrors of Arnold's marriage:

And when he finishes supper
 Planning to have a read at the evening paper
 It's *Put a screw in this wall* —
 He has no time at all,

With the nippers to wheel round the houses
 And the hall to paint in his old trousers
 And that letter to her mother
 Saying *Won't you come for the summer.*

Yet Larkin sees this comic-postcard hell as Arnold's refuge from loneliness; even though Arnold's romantic dreams rebounded on him, he was "out for his own ends", and Larkin's equivalent selfishness — the choice of bachelorhood — may rebound on him too:

I'm a better hand
 At knowing what I can stand
 Without them sending a van —
 Or I suppose I can.

It is no doubt reasonable to avoid marriage, if it is really so awful as Arnold's is made to appear. But that Arnold's own views might well be very different is indicated by the poem "No Road", which records a parting willed by the poet, for reasons he does not specify (although they are perhaps provided by the later "Wild Oats"). Larkin is seen poised between a nostalgia, which "still would be allowed", to take up the relationship which by mutual agreement was left off, and the feeling that it would ultimately be better to let it slip. The final implication is both that renunciation, though hard, is the sensible decision for him, and that there is perhaps something wrong with a man who will permit the loss which it entails:

"A little longer,
 And time will be the stronger,
 Drafting a world where no such road will run

From you to me;
 To watch that world come up like a cold sun,
 Rewarding others, is my liberty.
 Not to prevent it is my will's fulfilment,
 Willing it, my ailment."

The poet is unable to make the romantic gesture of commitment described in "Places, Loved Ones" as an abrogation of free choice: "You ask them to bear/ You off irrevocably". Yet the comparison of the choice in "No Road" to an "ailment" suggests that it is something forced on the poet from outside, and other poems make clear that it is not just this particular choice which is accompanied by the sense of possible error. The siren-call of events is always "Come and choose wrong".¹⁴ The choice of marriage and the choice of singleness are equally empty: neither offers any consolation in a life in which, inevitably, "time will be the stronger."

Choice, it would seem, is only one more of our illusions. Larkin's universe is a deterministic one in which, as in "Send No Money", we can only

watch the hail
 Of existence clobber life out
 To a shape no one sees.

Like the young mothers of "Afternoons" who feel that "something is pushing them/To the side of their own lives", we are, as time moves on, unable to recognize our own faces in the mirror except as a "Bestial visor, bent in/By the blows of what happened to happen." The search for pattern or "truth" in life is futile; everything we do is rendered meaningless by the cancellation of death.

Yet, though life is short, Larkin realizes the force of his own question: "Where can we live but days?"¹⁵ The supposition that "by acting differently" we could have kept our early hopes "blindingly undiminished"¹⁶ is refuted by our many failures, but Larkin cannot quite shake off "the dread / That how we live measures our own nature".¹⁷ Mr. Bleaney's lodgings, "Bed, upright chair, sixty-watt bulb, no hook / Behind the door, no room for books or bags", are no better than the grim bachelor equivalent of Arnold's marriage, and though Larkin's feeling in other poems is that the shape of our lives is something we cannot control, here he expresses the haunting suspicion that perhaps we do have a hand in making our fate. Certainly, to escape the life of Arnold only to settle into that of Mr. Bleaney is a bleak outcome; there is little consolation in feeling absolved of responsibility, even if we are.

Of all Larkin's poems, it is "Dockery and Son" which expresses most comprehensively his various tones of voice and the tension in his thinking between the attempt to evaluate different life-styles and awareness of the ultimate futility of all of them. "Dockery" and Larkin were up at Oxford together, but subsequently their lives diverged like railway-tracks, Dockery's leading to marriage, Larkin's to bachelorhood. The poet sees these destinations as being arrived at partly by way of innate ideas (to Dockery, marriage and children meant "increase", to Larkin, "dilution"), but mostly because at a certain point in life our habits "Suddenly harden into all we've got / And how we got it". Whether a thing be consciously sought or accidentally found, it becomes, when reached, inescapable. Larkin's muted envy of Dockery's fatherhood is held in equipoise with the recognition that their fates are, *sub specie mortis*, essentially the same: "a son" and "nothing" treat those to whom they belong with equally "harsh patronage"—both father and bachelor are pushed "to the side of their own lives":

Life is first boredom, then fear.
 Whether or not we use it, it goes,
 And leaves what something hidden from us chose,
 And age, and then the only end of age.

The Oxford which Larkin revisits in this poem is a symbol of the "home" from which we all began our differently-routed journeys towards the common terminus of death. When we attempt to return to it, it mocks us sadly with memories, preserved as in a museum, of our original "joyous shot at how things ought to be, / Long fallen wide".¹⁸

Charles Tomlinson has spoken disparagingly of Larkin's poetry as the embodiment of "his own inadequacy" and a "tenderly-nursed sense of defeat".¹⁹ If there is such a sense, it springs from clear-sighted observation of the amount of sadness and disappointment in life, and the determination not to burke its expression: far from being "tenderly-nursed", it is unflinchingly admitted. And what Tomlinson sees as Larkin's personal inadequacy can surely rather be said to be the statement, not only of his own, human limitations in a deterministic universe, but of the limitations of many. To find the expression of such limitations unpalatable is not to invalidate them; and even if Larkin's ideas are open to the counter-arguments of Christian belief, that is not to deny the poet his right to put down what he honestly sees.

Larkin's own claim, expressed with characteristic moderation, is that his experiences are *not* a special case but have a general relevance: "I do feel a slight restiveness about . . . being typed as someone who has carved out for himself a uniquely dreary life, growing older, having to work, and not getting things he wants and so on—is this so different from everyone else?"⁴ Those who answer "No", who recognize their own faces in this mirror, will admire Larkin for his scrutiny of their daily situation, and his expression of it in language that, in blending the contemporary with the dignified tradition of elegiac poetry, raises that situation to a higher power.

NOTES

1. Donald Davie, quoted by Kenneth Allcott in *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Verse* (1962), p. 335.
2. See J. M. Newton, *The Cambridge Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Winter, 1965-66), p. 98.
3. London: Faber and Faber, 1966.
4. Interview with Ian Hamilton, *The London Magazine*, Nov., 1964, pp. 77, 73.
5. Philip Larkin, "Wanted: Good Hardy Critic", *The Critical Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Summer, 1966), pp. 177-8.
6. *Times Educational Supplement*, July 13, 1956, p. 933.
7. "Spring": *The Less Deceived* (The Marvell Press, 1955), p. 34. See also (14) "Arrivals, Departures", p. 42.
8. Philip Larkin, *The London Magazine*, Feb., 1962, p. 32.
9. Larkin, *loc. cit.*
10. "Coming" (*The Less Deceived*, p. 15).
11. "Essential Beauty", *The Whitsun Weddings* (Faber and Faber, 1964), p. 42. See also (13, 15, 16, 17, 18) "Love Songs in Age", p. 27; "Days", p. 27; "Reference Back", p. 40; "Mr. Bleaney", p. 10; "Home is so Sad", p. 17.
19. Charles Tomlinson, *The Modern Age* (*Pelican Guide to English Literature*, No. 7, 1961), p. 471.