

## Words at Once True and Kind : A Consideration of the Poetry of Philip Larkin

A Banerjee

Nothing shows why  
At this unique distance from isolation  
It becomes still more difficult to find  
Words at once true and kind,  
Or not untrue and not unkind.  
(“Talking in Bed”)

Philip Larkin the poet is in some ways a contradictory phenomenon. On the one hand it is difficult to refute the charge that he is “provincial,” “genteel,” and almost altogether without any trace of the “triumphant vision of life” that one associates with major poets like, say, Yeats and Lawrence. On the other hand it is hard to deny that of all the English poets writing today, Philip Larkin is the most distinguished. One evidence of such recognition came when he was asked to edit *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century Verse* (1973) which Yeats was called upon to compile in 1936. Cynics might try to explain this by suggesting that Larkin’s recognition and popularity indicate the falling standards of poetry and criticism in our times. But I would like to argue that nothing of the kind, in fact, has happened, that an inability to appreciate Larkin’s poetic merit springs from the failure of the modernist criticism which looks for things which the poet is at pains to exclude. Without subscribing to the “modern” critical orthodoxy which approves, if not asks for, complexity, allusiveness and ambiguity, and which seems to agree with Eliot’s view that “poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult,” Larkin is directly concerned with the human predicament, and speaks about it truthfully and compassionately. He creates poetry out of words that are “at once true and kind.”

It would seem ironical to make high claims for a poet who had unremarkable - if not unpromising - beginnings as a poet, whose total output to date is a meagre 118 poems or so and who has modestly aimed at writing poetry that would “keep the child from its television set and the old man from the pub.” It is clear that Larkin did not make his mark as a poet while he was an undergraduate at Oxford. Oxford had its undergraduate poets like Auden, Spender and Day Lewis in the thirties, and during the war years (when Larkin was an undergraduate there) it continued to be the place where young English poets like Douglas, Drummond Allison, Keyes and Heath-Stubbs were writing poems and debating about the contemporary critical/poetic climate in the pages of university magazines like *The Cherwell* and *Kingdom Come*. Philip Larkin does not seem to have been a part of this scene, and he was not one

of the poets Herbert Read selected when the latter came to Oxford from London in order to discuss the publication of *Eight Oxford Poets*. The editors of this anthology, Sidney Keyes and Michael Meyer, declared themselves and their fellow-poets as some kind of rebels who had "little sympathy with the Audenian school of poetry." Larkin was also, apparently, dissatisfied with much of the *avante-garde* poetry of his time but it is evident that during his Oxford years he had not found his voice. Subsequently, he has explained the reasons for his distaste for "the modernist revolution" in English poetry and has also expressed his poetic preferences. Asked to comment on possible influences on his own poetry, he said :

I have been most influenced by the poetry that I've most enjoyed - and this poetry has not been Eliot or Pound or anybody who is normally regarded as 'modern' - which is a sort of technique word, isn't it? The poetry I've enjoyed has been the kind of poetry you'd associate with me, Hardy pre-eminently, Wilfred Owen, Auden, Christina Rossetti, William Barnes ; on the whole people to whom technique seems to matter less than the content, people who accept the forms they have inherited but use them to express their own content.<sup>1</sup>

Larkin expressed his dislike for "the modernist revolution" more specifically when in an introduction to the American edition of John Betjeman's *Collected Poems*, he (approvingly) remarked :

For him [Betjeman] there has been no symbolism, no objective correlative, no T S Eliot or Ezra Pound, reinvestment in myth or casting of language as gesture, no *Seven Types* or *Some Versions*, no works of criticism with titles such as *Communication as Discipline* or *Implicit and Explicit Image Obliquity in Sir Lewis*.<sup>2</sup>

Larkin's basic complaint against the modernists, poets and critics alike, is that they have lost sight of the simple fact that poetry is an "emotional business" and that the poetry of complexity and allusiveness has driven the ordinary reader away from poetry. He is firmly of the opinion that poetry, if it is to be successful, must be able to appeal to and attract ordinary readers. In this connection it would be interesting to refer in detail to a review article called "The Pleasure Principle" which Larkin wrote in 1957.<sup>3</sup> He devoted half the space to a discussion of the reader's role in poetic creation. Speaking of the existing situation, he says that the "reader, in fact, seems no longer in the poets' mind as he used to be, as someone who must understand and enjoy the finished product if it is to be successful at all." He believes that the modern poetic audience "is a student audience pure and simple" and goes on to make his famous remark : "At bottom, poetry, like all art, is inextricably bound up with giving pleasure, and if a poet loses his pleasure-seeking audience he has lost

the only audience worth having, for which the dutiful mob that signs on every September is no substitute.” He explains that he uses the words pleasure and enjoyment in the commonest of senses in “which we leave a radio on or off.” All this might suggest that Larkin is merely over-simplifying the issue, that he sees the reader as a passive creature whom the poet must amuse and pamper. Indeed, one may say that Larkin is here invoking the ancient classical principle that art must give pleasure but is conveniently forgetting that its duty is also to instruct. But such an impression is soon dispelled in this very review-article when we find Larkin bringing in a set of critical criteria for judging the relative merits of the poetry volumes he is reviewing. Thus, Vernon Scannell’s poetry is praised because “it is forthright, understandable, well-observed, sardonic,” but “Mr Scannell’s weakness is the clichè, both intellectual and verbal.” John Press’s poetry comes to nothing because of the absence “of a dominating originality” and in Christopher Logue’s poetry there is “the general pointless mystification, the lack of humour, the themes encored from W B Yeats, the words King and Queen and Cain and Abel and Bethlehem and Calvary tolling like bell-buoys round the rocks of tedium.” Thus, Larkin is pleading for poetry which is original, well-observed and sardonic and is attacking needless mystification and tortured syntax in poetry. In fact, in that article as well as in his other writings and utterances, Larkin has been trying what Wordsworth had attempted to do at the end of the eighteenth-century: they both express their dissatisfaction with the state of poetry as they find it in their respective times. But like Wordsworth’s strictures on the neo-classical poetry, Larkin’s criticisms of the modernist poetry are not so valuable as critiques of that particular poetry as for the light they shed on his own poetry and poetic preferences.

Larkin’s preference is for Hardy’s kind of poetry, and he himself would agree with what he describes as Hardy’s “poetic credo”:

.... It was Leslie Stephens who gave Hardy his poetic credo in a sentence that is really all anyone needs to know about writing poetry:

The ultimate aim of poetry should be to touch our heart by showing his own, and not to exhibit his learning, or his fine taste, or his skill in mimicking the notes of his predecessors.<sup>4</sup>

And like Hardy’s, Larkin’s poetry is personal, and unlike the modernists he feels no need to invent new forms for expressing and recreating personal emotions and impressions of life. In one of his few remarks on the subject there is an implicit recognition that though some people are capable of taking risks in these matters, he cannot “dispense with the help that metre and rhyme give”:

I havn’t anything original to say about metre. I’ve never tried syllabics: I’m not fully sure I understand them. I think one

would have to be very sure of oneself to dispense with the help that metre and rhyme give and doubt really if I could operate without them.<sup>5</sup>

Nor does he feel the need to copy other poets' manners or modes. He started his poetic career under the influence of Yeats and Dylan Thomas but once he felt assured of his poetic powers, he realized, as Hardy had done before him, that his own personal emotions and impressions were adequate material for poetry, and that there was no need, therefore, for him to go outside himself for subject, or technique :

When I came to Hardy, it was with a sense of relief that I didn't have to try and 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.<sup>6</sup>

From all such utterances, Larkin emerges as a man who has a very modest conception of his poetic calling : for him the poet is not a sage, prophet or a teacher or someone with an extraordinary vision of life. He is an unpretentious, ordinary man, possessed with powers of observation, and he is skilled in the traditional art of versification. Lawrence, we might recall, made no special claims for himself : he wrote, towards the end of his life, to Lady Ottoline Morrell :

Do you think it's nonsense when Murry says that my world is not the ordinary man's world and that I'm a sort of animal with a sixth sense? Seems to me more likely he's a sort of animal with only four senses - the real sense of touch missing.<sup>7</sup>

It is true that Lawrence speaks of ordinary things in his poetry - man, birds, beasts, love, death - and that his poetry is deeply rooted in the earth. But what he perceives in life turns out to be the vision of a man who was, in the words of Aldous Huxley, "different and superior in kind" :

I think almost everyone who knew him well must have felt that Lawrence was this. A being, somehow of another order, more sensitive, more highly conscious, more capable of feeling than even the most gifted of common men.<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, Larkin, from all accounts, is an unspectacular personality. Dan Jacobson, who interviewed him, noted :

. . . . it wouldn't be difficult to carry away from an encounter with Larkin the impression which I suspect he wishes, in certain moods,

to give: that of the retiring, bachelor librarian, somewhat hard of hearing and occasionally hesitant of speech, bald, respectable and bespectacled . . . .

but Jacobson also discovered that there is another side to his personality which, one might suppose, produces the poetry:

Alongside him again, interpenetrated with him, is a man of reflective habits and complex emotions (most of them of a melancholy cast), with a tendency towards self-denigration so pronounced as to amount to almost self-hatred, and a profoundly pessimistic view of life in general and of his own in particular.<sup>9</sup>

Larkin's poetry is equally unspectacular (I mean no value judgement here) in the sense that it is the product of a man "of a melancholy cast" who surveys the world and is saddened by its transience and meaninglessness. But I think what he can, and does, claim to do is to show that he is "less deceived" than others about the sadness and suffering in life. This he does with great compassion and sensitivity though he is often bitter and satirical about those who persist in being "deceived." It would seem that this is a rather negative attitude to life but if it is so, Larkin is in the respectable company of Jonathan Swift who also believed that human happiness is basically a matter of delusion and self-deception. It may be recalled that in *A Tale of a Tub* Swift remarked:

. . . . if we take an Examination of what is generally understood by Happiness, as it has Respect, either to the Understanding or the Senses, we shall find all its properties and Adjuncts will herd under this short definition: That, *it is a perpetual Possession of being well Deceived.*

It is in this context that we can better appreciate Larkin's offer of consolation to the raped girl in the poem "Deceptions" and the description of the rapist's fulfilment as empty and desolate:

What can be said,  
Except that suffering is exact, but where  
Desire takes charge, readings will grow erratic?  
For you would hardly care  
That you were less deceived, out on that bed,  
Than he was, stumbling up the breathless stair  
To burst into fulfilment's desolate attic.

When the poet is unrelenting in recognizing, and saying, that the harsh truth is that

“suffering is exact” in life, there is no room for sentimentality, but for compassion there obviously is. An awareness of human suffering leads Larkin not like Housman to rail against “Whatever brute and blackguard made this world?” but to view human beings with kindness and compassion. What angers Larkin is man’s attempt to present a sunny picture of life which is false. “Sunny Prstatyn” is not so much an attack on the vandals who have defaced the holiday poster as on those who build up an imaginary picture of sunshine and beauty and ignore the presence of disease and death in life.

Larkin explores his themes through what might be called a “provincial” vision. But surely it is wrong to blame him for his provincialism as it is irrelevant to accuse Jane Austen of being narrow in her range. What is important is the depth of understanding achieved. Larkin’s view of life is, by necessity as well as choice, insular. He never seems to have felt the need, nor had the inclination, for extending and broadening his perception of life through historical or literary means. He is perfectly content to write about the life that he lives and sees around him. Just as his favourite Betjeman “was not, and has never been, a cosmopolitan” but a man who “at a time of global concepts . . . insists on the little, the forgotten, the obscure,”<sup>10</sup> Larkin has kept his poetry (and, one may add, himself) away from great or small political and historical events and international happenings. Nor does he see the predicament of modern man in terms of the monstrosities of recent history like Auschwitz and Dachau. Martin Dodsworth has argued that the pain in Larkin’s poetry is the pain of the age that has survived the terrible atrocities of the Second World War, and has quoted the following lines from Larkin’s poem “Nothing to be Said” —

Hours give evidence  
Of birth, advance  
On death equally slowly.  
And saying so to some  
Means nothing ; others it leaves  
Nothing to be said.

— suggesting that these “lines are written for the age that has survived the Auschwitz.”<sup>11</sup> It is difficult to prove or disprove such an assertion but I am rather inclined to believe that pain and suffering in Larkin are of a much more general nature than Dodsworth thinks. The contemporaneity of Larkin’s poetry consists not so much in the poet’s perception of modern man in terms of his contemporary historical/political movement or situation as in his placing man in our recognizably authentic world of cut-price stores, advertising bill-boards, and even scholars like Jake Balokowsky - and, of course, in the use of the rhythms of contemporary speech in his poetry.

The world that Larkin’s poetry presents is our suburban world of dull, drab reality :

Here domes and statues, spires and cranes cluster

Beside grain-scattered streets, barge-crowded water,  
 And residents from raw estates, brought down  
 The dead straight miles by stealing flat-faced trolleys,  
 Push through plate-glass swing doors to their desires -  
 Cheap suits, red kitchen-ware, shoes, iced lollies,  
 Electric mixers, toasters, washers, driers -  
 ("Here")

Such concentration on the drab reality of the modern, industrialized consumer society was preceded in Larkin by an initial excursion into the romantic world of dreams and dawns, birds, winds and lanterns of *The North Ship* (1945). But from *The Less Deceived* (1955) onwards the *locale* of his poetry is the modern world of "industrial froth," train journeys past "acres of dismantled cars." Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Larkin presents a picture of modern *England* because the topography of his poetry is unmistakably English. Such familiar and commonplace scenes are permeated by feelings of loneliness, sadness and a sense of purposelessness in life. Moreover, Larkin charges ordinary scenes and experiences with a controlled emotional power so that they suddenly acquire a certain depth and dignity. That is to say, Larkin handles commonplace incidents and experiences in such a manner that they illuminate some fundamental truths about human existence. This is precisely where his greatness lies. Larkin has little kinship with those "tragic" writers who can lift man above the level of ordinary humanity by transmuting his suffering into a celebration of some kind of "tragic beauty" or "tragic joy." Rather, he concentrates on the ordinariness and dreariness of human existence, and he knows that it is by exploring human suffering at that level that he can achieve, and communicate to his readers, a spiritually mature view of life. It might seem odd to use a phrase like "spiritually mature" in the context of Larkin and his poetry but it will not be so when we recall that, speaking of the "two-fold value [that] Hardy had placed on suffering," Larkin had remarked:

.... first he [Hardy] thought it was 'true' ('Tragedy is true guise, Comedy lies'); secondly, it could be demonstrated that Hardy associated sensitivity to suffering and awareness of the causes of pain with superior spiritual character ... the presence of pain in Hardy's novels is a positive, not a negative quality - not the mechanical working out of some predetermined allegiance to pessimism or any other concept but the continued imaginative celebration of what is both the truest and the most important element in life, most important in the sense of most necessary to spiritual development.<sup>12</sup>

It is true that in Larkin's poetry there is not so much "awareness of the causes of pain" (except that our being "deceived" about life's sufferings and disappointment

may cause greater pain) but he centres his attention on the pain in life (even when it is not caused by man's own follies and frailties) which is inherently there. It is the recognition of this fundamental "truth," Larkin believes, that brings about "the intensely maturing experience of modern man."<sup>13</sup>

A brief, four-line poem from *The North Ship* can be seen as striking the keynote of Larkin's early poetry :

This is the first thing  
I have understood :  
Time is the echo of an axe  
Within a wood.

("XXVI")

That being so, it is not surprising to find Larkin dwelling on themes of the transience of life, loss of love, man's gradual drift towards death. Characteristically, such themes emerge from Larkin's handling of commonplace incidents and experiences. For example, nothing very much is *said* in Larkin's poetry about death but complex emotional reactions that it evokes in a sensitive soul are embodied in his poetry. I shall come to those poems later on but here we may turn to those poems where aspects of living form the main subject. What he finds in life is the sadness, frustration and the meaninglessness of existence. He examines human yearning, love, sex, procreation, work, things through which men try to find significance in living but he discovers that they do not add up to much. His early love poems in *The North Ship* are romantic lyrics in which the lovers fail to find rest, and the feeling of desolation in the following lines is fairly representative of the period :

To wake, and hear a cock  
Out of the distance crying,  
To pull the curtains back  
And see the clouds flying -  
How strange it is  
For the heart to be loveless, and cold as these.

("Dawn")

But already in the last poem that Larkin added as a "coda" to a reissue of *The North Ship* in 1966, a new note is heard, and we immediately recognize it as characteristic of the poet of his later volumes. The opening stanza of the poem evokes a mood by an almost prosaic but meticulous description of a scene and an event :

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-escapes climbed up  
Past rooms still burning their electric light:  
I thought: Featureless morning, featureless night.

What strikes one here is Larkin's observation of the commonplace (drainpipes, fire-escapes) in the cheerless scene swept by mist and rain. This fuses with the speaker's own emotions so that he can see the night continuing into the morning in the sense that both are "featureless." Of course, there is an element of hope, as he says,

Turning, I kissed her  
Easily for sheer joy tipping the balance to love.

But this precarious balancing of joy (which here seems to be threatened by the demands of the Muse) foreshadows Larkin's awareness later on of the impermanence, if not the fraudulent nature, of most of life's happiness and joy. Even in a comparatively early poem, "Wedding-Wind" which is regarded by some critics as one of the few completely happy poems by Larkin, there is an implicit threat to the joy that it celebrates:

Can it be borne, this bodying forth by wind  
Of joy my actions turn on, like a thread  
Carrying beads? Shall I be let to sleep  
Now this perpetual morning shares my bed?  
Can even death dry up  
These new delighted lakes, conclude  
Our kneeling as cattle by all-generous waters?

The very mention of death here would seem to cancel out the affirmation that the speaker makes, or hopes for.

Larkin is dubious about the pleasure and happiness that are supposed to come from love and sex, but in a poem like "Reasons For Attendance" there is none of the lofty condemnation of the "trivialities" of love, nor indeed is there any self-congratulation on his wise refusal to participate in them. On the other hand, due recognition is given to each attitude:

The trumpets voice, loud and authoritative,  
Draws me a moment to the lighted glass  
To watch the dancers - all under twenty-five -  
Shifting intently, face to flushed face,  
Solemnly on the beat of happiness.

- Or so I fancy, sensing the smoke and sweat,

The wonderful feel of girls. Why be out here?  
But then, why be in there? Sex, yes, but what  
Is sex? Surely, to think the lion's share  
Of happiness is found by couples - sheer

Inaccuracy, as far as I am concerned.

He argues that he is too much of an "individual" to participate in such pleasures though he grants that the younger people's attitude has its own validity:

Therefore I stay outside  
Believing this; and they maul to and fro,  
Believing that; and both are satisfied,  
If no one has misjudged himself. Or lied.

However, the last two words explain the inadequacy of such neat resolutions. The acknowledgement of the fact that misjudgement or even lying might be involved brings the speaker into an awareness of the "truth" of the experience which has so far eluded him. In other words, both the attitudes to love and sex are finally seen for what they are, and their (partial) validity recognized. It is this ironic stance which cannot be readily categorised as "comic" or "tragic," "optimistic" or "pessimistic" that characteristically defines his attitude to, life. The method used in a poem like "Reasons For Attendance" shows how Larkin is able to suggest various implications of a given experience by inventing the fictional properties of a *persona*. In that article "The Pleasure Principle" which I referred to earlier, Larkin defined poetry as "emotional in nature and theatrical in operation, a skilled recreation of emotion in other people." In the context of his own poetry the word "theatrical" seems particularly appropriate because much of it is often dramatic in construction and effect. Larkin's poems are dramatic in more than one sense: they not only contain dramatic situations but they also dramatize opposite points of view equally convincingly so that the poet is able to present a comprehensive view of life. It is, therefore, wrong to condemn Larkin for his "self-regard" and for nursing "self-defeat." He almost always speaks in his poems through a *persona*, and even in his most autobiographical poems, he is not Philip Larkin the bachelor Hull librarian but a dramatic personality who tries to explore, analyze and understand the "truth" of human experience.

The variety alone of his love poems would seem to suggest that far from expressing his personal frustrations as a middle-aged bachelor, Larkin is in fact attempting to understand and explain the meaning of love in the lives of men and women in general. Speaking of his poem "Love Song in Age" Larkin remarked: "... [I] thought how terrible it must be for an old lady to hear one of these [Victorian drawing-room ballads] she had learnt as a girl and reflect how different life had turned out to be."<sup>14</sup> The poem not only speaks of "how different life had turned out to be"

but also of the lady's awareness that "the much-mentioned brilliance, love" was never capable of fulfilling the promises it had made: she has to lamely admit that it "had not done so then, and could not now." It is true that in Larkin love, indeed life, invariably brings disappointment and frustration but he believes that that is the reality of the human condition. But one must also remember that Larkin does recognize in his poetry the human hunger for transcendence which it is impossible to ignore even if it cannot be satisfied:

in everyone there sleeps  
A sense of life lived according to love.  
("Faith Healing")

Such a wish is most poignantly expressed in "An Arundel Tomb" in which the effigies on the tomb of an earl and his countess, lying side by side and holding hands, represent man's wish that love would survive - but it remains a poignant wish, "almost true" but not quite so:

Time has transfigured them into  
Untruth. The stone fidelity  
They hardly meant has come to be  
Their final blazon, and to prove  
Our almost-instinct almost true:  
What will survive of us is love.

Thus, Larkin examines, and eventually deflates, man's romantic longing for love to be blissful and eternal, and sees love as merely a part of dull, quotidian life. By plugging the escape-routes into self-defeating imaginary notions of things, Larkin is asking, as he thought Hardy was asking, "man to grow up."<sup>15</sup>

Predictably, marriage does nothing to alter the course of life which doggedly moves on in its dreary course. "Afternoons" presents young mothers who take their children to parks to play. The routine lives of these women are a wry comment on their earlier romantic ideas about love, courtship and marriage. The albums of their wedding-pictures are lying near their television sets at home, and in the parks they are in now, "the wind/ Is ruining their courting places." It is not love and marriage that give significance to their lives:

Their beauty has thickened.  
Something is pushing them  
To the side of their lives.

But what about the children that marriages bring? Surely, family life should be a source of some satisfaction, and pride? Larkin examines this question with great poetic feeling and skill in the poem "Dockery and Son." This poem, in some ways,

typifies what is characteristic of, and best in, Larkin. It is based on an incident which is by no means extraordinary or spectacular, but it becomes, for the poet and the reader, a thought-provoking experience. And he has been able to "preserve" that experience in the poem. It is a personal poem in which even the year of his birth has been accurately recorded: the *persona* in the poem closely resembles Larkin, the middle-aged bachelor, who had gone to College during the war-years ("Cartwright was killed") and who now lives in Yorkshire and has to change trains at Sheffield. But, of course, such details are not important as personal facts in the poem: everything has been transmuted into a dramatic fable so that a personal experience of the poet has become an independent poem, with its own separate existence. The very opening of the poem is dramatic, as the speaker re-visits his old College, "death-suited, visitant" (perhaps to attend a funeral or a memorial service?). In any case, themes of death and the day of reckoning are suggested at the very outset:

'Dockery was junior to you,  
Wasn't he?' said the Dean. 'His son's here now.'  
Death-suited, visitant, I nod. 'And do  
You keep in touch with —' Or remember how  
Black-gowned, unbreakfasted, and still half-tight  
We used to stand before that desk, to give  
'Our version' of 'these incidents last night'?

As the speaker learns that a junior contemporary of his has now a son at the College, he reminisces about those times when as an undergraduate he had to appear before the Dean and explain his conduct the previous night (of, perhaps, merry-making). The poet uses the "reckoning device" in the sense that the rest of the poem grows out of the "reckoning" that the speaker feels invited to make about his whole life. As he goes back on the train he reflects on Dockery's life - who has had a wife and a son - and is driven back to his own, and is struck by the way life turns out differently for different people:

To have no son, no wife,  
No house or land still seemed quite natural.  
Only a numbness registered the shock  
Of finding out how much had gone out of life,  
How widely from others.

But the central question that he poses, and answers, is whether the two kinds of life - that of a bachelor and that of a man with a wife and son - make any difference for the men concerned. The conclusion that the speaker arrives at is that whatever decision one may make about life, it turns out the same for everyone: if Dockery has had the satisfaction of having a son, the speaker himself has been saved from the "harsh patronage" that having a son involves. So the poem ends on a subdued note

in which there is a recognition that life is sad, that it ends in death, and that it is not men's deliberate choices that make any difference in their lives or make their lives meaningful:

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.

Thus in a poem like "Dockery and Son" Larkin starts with a simple, commonplace experience and goes on to project an all-encompassing vision of life that includes life, love and death. And in those poems which specifically deal with the theme of death, Larkin's attitude can only be described as commonplace in the sense that he does not take an imaginative leap that might reveal death as a challenge that the human spirit might face triumphantly. He would neither "rage against the dying of the light" nor would he cringe before it in abject terror and surrender. In other words, Larkin does not attach to death any of the "significance" that we have come to expect from a major poet. In fact, he disarmingly confesses to sharing the ordinary man's feeling that "when we start to die/Have no idea why." ("Ignorance"). Yet, he makes a profound comment on death when he remarks that though slow advance towards death means nothing to some, "others it leaves/Nothing to be said." I suggest that these simple words contain tremendous compassion and sadness as the poet surveys life among nomads, "small-statured cross-faced tribes" and "cobble-close families" and finds them all slowly moving towards death:

Hours giving evidence  
Or birth, advance  
On death equally slowly.  
And saying so to some  
Means nothing; others it leaves  
Nothing to be said.  
(“Nothing to be Said”)

Larkin is not unaware of the fact that men attempt to transcend death in various ways. Most people to whom life's slow advance to death "means nothing" go on cherishing the hope that by working hard and perhaps by waiting patiently, they will find "ships" arriving, laden with all that they have desired:

We think each one will heave to and unload  
All good into our lives, all we are owed  
For waiting so devoutly and so long.  
But we are wrong:  
"But we are wrong" because there are no ships as those *we* are seeking. On the

other hand, there is a ship that is seeking *us*, and this ship of death will inevitably find us :

Only one ship is seeking us, a black-  
Sailed unfamiliar, towing at her back  
A huge and birdless silence. In her wake  
No waters breed or break.

Unlike Lawrence's ship of death which will lead man into a renewal of life, and "fill his heart with peace," Larkin's ship makes no promises: its sailing is ominous, for "In her wake/No waters breed or break."

In Larkin's world, men do not build ships of death in the Lawrentian sense, they build hospitals in order "to transcend/The thought of dying." This is the theme of one of Larkin's later poems "The Building" in which the poet describes a tall, expensive and impressive hospital. But it is seen as a house of death where people come "to confess that something has gone wrong," and Larkin sees the patients there in terms of congregations :

The unseen congregations whose white rows  
Lie set apart above - women, men ;  
Old, young ;

But this modern church-substitute is as powerless as cathedrals in the past have been to "contravene" the "coming darkness." Flower offerings to the patients in hospitals are as "wasteful" and "weak" as wreathes on the graves in church-yards :

All know they are going to die.  
Not yet, perhaps not here, but in the end,  
And somewhere like this. That is what it means,  
This clean-sliced cliff ; a struggle to transcend  
The thought of dying, for unless its powers  
Outbid cathedrals nothing contravenes  
The coming dark, though crowds each evening try

With wasteful, weak, propitiatory flowers.

Thus, Larkin refuses to adopt the role of a visionary or a prophet. In his typical manner, he examines the common attitudes to death and finally accepts, what appears as almost inevitable in the world as Larkin sees it, the attitude of the toad towards life and death. He would not dodge, what Larkin describes in one of his poems, "the toad work," and he is prepared to be led by the toad to his final destination :

No, give me my in-tray,

My loaf-haired secretary,  
My shall-I-keep-the-call-in-Sir:  
What else can I answer,

When the lights come on at four  
At the end of another year?  
Give me your arm, old toad;  
Help me down Cemetery Road.

Colin Falck has complained that in Larkin "there are no epiphanies."<sup>16</sup> This is true and there is no denying that Larkin is not an artist like Yeats, Joyce or Lawrence who in their different ways proclaim triumphant tragic affirmations. Larkin is not a poet of visionary insights but of humdrum, common reality. His great achievement is not simply that he deals with this reality but his remarkable ability to transmute the anguish of commonplace suffering into a subject of poetic inspiration. A reading of his poetry brings the reader spiritual maturity in the sense that he is brought into direct confrontation with an authentic view of life which is at once familiar and revealing. The reader learns to be a little "less deceived" about the human predicament. It is remarkable that Larkin has been able to achieve all this without losing sight of the "common" reader and common human experience. Sir John Betjeman has said that "Larkin has certainly closed the gap between poetry and the public which the experiments and obscurity of the last fifty years have done so much to widen."<sup>17</sup> No wonder Larkin shows no inclination to go beyond his "parochial" range. He is content to see life through his apparently limited landscape and write poetry in words that are "true and kind:"

It's like looking down  
From long french windows at a provincial town,  
The slums, the canal, the churches ornate and mad  
In the evening sun. It is intensely sad.  
("Money")

#### NOTES

1. Ian Hamilton, "Four Conversations," *London Magazine*, (Nov. 1968), 71.
2. See *Poetry Dimension 2*, ed. Dannie Abse, (1974), pp. 19-20.
3. Philip Larkin, "The Pleasure Principle," *Listen*, (Summer-Autumn, 1957), 28-32.
4. Review of Robert Gitting's *Young Thomas Hardy*, *New Statesman*, (18 April, 1975), 514.
5. Ian Hamilton, *op. cit.*, 73.
6. *The Listener*, (25 July, 1968), 111.
7. *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. Aldons Huxley, (1932), pp. 784-5.
8. *Ibid.*, p. xxx.
9. Dan Jacobson, "Philip Larkin," *The New Review*, (June 1974), 26.
10. See *Poetry Dimension 2*, *op.cit.*, pp. 16 and 18.

11. Martin Dodsworth, "The Climate of Pain in Recent Poetry," *London Magazine*, (November 1964), 90.
12. Philip Larkin, "Wanted: Good Hardy Critic," *Critical Quarterly*, (Summer 1966), 178.
13. *Ibid.*, 177.
14. Quoted by Anthony Thwaite in *The Survival of Poetry*, ed. John Bayley, (1970), pp. 51-52.
15. "Wanted: Good Hardy Critic," *op.cit.*, 177.
16. Colin Falck, "Philip Larkin" in *The Modern Poet*, ed. Ian Hamilton, p. 110.
17. John Betjeman's review of *The Whitsun Weddings*, *The Listener*, (March, 19, 1964), 483.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### 1. Primary Sources

#### Poetry:

*The North Ship* (1945)  
*The Less Deceived* (1955)  
*The Whitsun Weddings* (1964)  
*High Windows* (1974)

#### Novels:

*Jill* (1946)  
*A Girl in Winter* (1974)

### 2. Secondary Sources

- Bayley, John. "Too Good For this World." *TLS*, 21 June 1974, 653-55.
- Bedient, Calvin, *Eight Contemporary Poets*. (N.Y. 1974).
- Bowen, Roger. "Poet in Transition: Philip Larkin's *XX Poems*." *Iowa Review*, 8, 1, 87-107.
- Brown, Merle. "Larkin and his Audience." *Iowa Review* 8, 1, 117-34.
- Brownjohn, Alan. *Philip Larkin* (London: 1975).
- Coulette, Henri. "The Thought of High Windows." *Southern Review* 12, 438-41.
- Cox, C.B. "Philip Larkin, Anti-Heroic Poet." *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 9, 1, 155-68.
- Dodsworth, Martin. "The Climate of Pain in Recent Poetry." *London Magazine*, 8 November 1964, 86-95.
- Ferguson, Peter. "*Philip Larkin's XX Poems: The Missing Link*." *Agenda* 14, 53-65.
- Hamilton, Ian. "Four Conversations." *London Magazine* 8 November 1964, 71-2.
- . ed. *The Modern Poet*. (London: 1968).
- Heaney, Seamus. "Now and in England." *Critical Inquiry* 3, 471-88.
- Jacobson, Dan. "Philip Larkin: Profile." *The New Review* 1, 3, 25-29.
- Naremore, James. "Philip Larkin's Lost World." *Contemporary Literature* 15, 331-34.
- Peschmann, Hermann. "Philip Larkin: Laureate of the Common Man." *English* 24, 49-58. *Phoenix* 11-12 (1973-74): Larkin Issue.
- Press, John. "The Poetry of Philip Larkin." *Southern Review* 13, 131-46.
- Reiberanz, John. "*The Whitsun Weddings*: Larkin's Reinterpretation of Time and Form in Keats" *Contemporary Literature* 17, 529-40.
- Scofield, Martin. "The Poetry of Philip Larkin." *Massachusetts Review* 17, 370-89.



- Thwaite, Anthony, "Philip Larkin" in *The Survival of Poetry*, ed. John Bayley, (1970).
- Timms, David. *Philip Larkin* (Edinburgh: 1973).
- Tomlinson, Charles. "The Middle-Brow Muse." *Essays in Criticism* April 1957, 208-17.
- Whitehead, A Kingsley. "Philip Larkin of England." *English Literary History* 38, 4, 616-30.
- Wain, John. "The Poetry of Philip Larkin of England." *Malahat Review* 39, 95-112.
- . "Engagement or Withdrawal? Some Notes on the Poetry of Philip Larkin." *Critical Quarterly* VI, 167-78.

November 30, 1979

Words at Once True and Kind:  
A Consideration of the Poetry of Philip Larkin

A Banerjee

Though Philip Larkin is recognized as one of the most significant poets writing in England today, he is often criticized for his narrow range, his unrelieved gloom and the absence in his work of the kind of transcendental vision that critics associate with major writers. I have attempted to argue in this paper that such criticisms of Larkin and his poetry betray the critics' failure to judge properly his poetic achievement, which is sharply different from what we have come to expect of a modernist poet. The fact is that Larkin feels little sympathy with the modernist revolution in the poetry of this century, and considers that a poet's duty is to speak in his poetry of the commonplace, ordinary experiences of life with which the reader might be able to identify with ease, and pleasure. In addition, he goes back to the older and more enduring tradition of English poetry in the sense that, unlike the modernist poet, he does not need the use of new forms and techniques. Thus he writes about the ordinary experiences of twentieth-century men and women in the traditional English verse-forms; but what distinguishes him as an artist is his ability to endow them with profound and lasting significance. That is to say, he honestly tries to explain the "truth" of the human predicament. He does so with a sense of sadness and disillusionment, but not without deep kindness and compassion.