

Philip Larkin: Critic

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Summary

批評家としてのフィリップ・ラーキン

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古来イギリスの詩人たちがそうであったように、フィリップ・ラーキンは（詩のみならず）批評も書く詩人である。他の詩人や小説家たちを批評するにあたって、ラーキンは今世紀のモダニストの作品の多くに違和感を感じ、イギリス独自の文学の伝統の卓越性と特質を例証している。

Until recently, the distinguishing trait of English literary criticism had been that its purposes and principles had been enunciated by people who were primarily concerned with creating literature. Thus it is that the long history of English literary criticism goes back to Sir Philip Sidney (1554–86), and it can boast of such illustrious names as Dryden, Pope, Johnson, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Arnold and Eliot among its practitioners. The primary aim in their criticism seems to have been to explain the nature and scope of critical endeavour in general, and also to create a taste for the (new) kinds of poetry or drama they were engaged in writing. The novel, being a comparatively recent form, came up with ‘novelist–critics’ only in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century, with George Eliot, Henry James, D H Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and E M Forster.

It might seem surprising when I claim, at the very outset, that Philip Larkin (1922–85) belongs to this tradition of English writers, and that his critical pronouncements have sharpened our appreciation of literary works in general, and of his own in particular. I say ‘surprising’ because Larkin has left no substantial work of criticism like *The Defence of Poetry* or *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*. He expressed his critical opinions in occasional essays and introductions but mainly in the reviews that he wrote mostly for popular (not literary) journals and in daily or weekly newspapers. In *Philip Larkin : A Bibliography 1933–76*, published in 1979, Larkin’s reviews and other critical writings already number around five hundred. Apparently, this mode and the media suited his personality as well as intention. He did not have the inclination or taste for theorizing about literature and literary forms. When his friend and editor at Faber, Charles Montieith suggested that he might run for the prestigious post of Professor of Poetry at Oxford, Larkin said :

I have really very little interest in poetry in the abstract; I have never lectured about it to any extent, and I know that I could never produce anything worthy of such a distinguished office and audience. The effort of trying to do so, moreover, would make my life hell for five years, and almost certainly stop me writing anything else, which would be (at least in my view) a disadvantage.

(*Selected Letters* 470)

As a matter of fact he did not seem to have welcomed the task of reviewing either. But he began to feel that as an increasingly successful writer it was a kind of obligation that he had to fulfil, that the blandishments of his editor–friends could not always be ignored. But in retrospect he was glad that he undertook such assignments because it kept his mind critically alert :

Although I rarely accepted a literary assignment without a sinking of the heart, nor finished it without an inordinate sense of relief, to undertake such commissions no doubt exercised part of my mind that would otherwise have remained dormant, and to this extent they probably did me no harm.

(*Required Writing* 12)

Though Larkin, later on, modestly dismissed the collection of his critical writings (*Required Reading*) as “a ragbag of fugitive scribblings” which would have prompted Leavis “to proclaim the intellectual, moral and emotional bankruptcy of the literary world” (SL 706), at the time of writing them he took them very seriously. His life-long companion Monica Jones remarked that Larkin took the reviewing work “very seriously . . . you know, sitting up night after night, working really hard” (Motion 308). He himself has said that he did not undertake the work “lightly,” that he wanted to be a good and responsible reviewer who could combine “the knowledge of the scholar with the judgement and cogency of the critic and the reliability of the journalist” (RW 12).

It is interesting that T S Eliot (in this century) preceded Larkin in discovering that reviewing could sharpen his critical sense. Pinion believes that Eliot’s “criticism was stimulated . . . by studious application in the continuing reviewing of books” (140). A similar claim can be made for Larkin, ie. that he was able to formulate his critical views, especially about contemporary poetry through his reviewing work. His career as a reviewer started soon after the publication of *The Less Deceived* (1955): “he began writing about modern poetry regularly in *The Guardian* in April 1956” (Motion 272), and he continued to do so until almost the end of his life.

He not only must have thought it natural that initially he should be asked to review and write about modern poetry, but found the work very congenial too. By then, his taste was largely formed. He had been interested in poetry since his schooldays, and when he went up to Oxford he had pursued this interest with greater confidence. Many of his early letters, especially to his friend from schooldays, J B Sutton, contain details about the kind of poetry he was trying to write, and his ideas about poetry and poets. Though he tended to be rather derivative in his early poetic exercises, he soon began to form some definite and in many ways original ideas about poetry which he was to develop, and in fact promote, in his later years. By the time he had finished his first term at Oxford, he was already set “against poetry as a craft-business” (SL 5) which can arguably be regarded as one of the central tenets of modernist poetry. This might be seen as the beginning of Larkin’s distaste for much of the experimentations in form and technique that was carried out by poets like Pound and Eliot, against which he campaigned both in his poetry and criticism.

But, ironically enough, Larkin, like a modernist elitist poet, did not seem, at that stage in his career, to care for the ‘common reader’: “. . . a poet never thinks of his reader. Why should he? The reader does not come into the poem at all” (SL 6). In this respect Larkin did change his mind. Once he became more confident of his poetic destiny, he started to feel that there must be a closer relationship between the reader and the poet, a relationship which, he felt, had been abandoned by the recent poets. Here was a further reason for his opposition to modernism. In 1957, he wrote an article entitled ‘The Pleasure Principle’ in which he complained that the modernist poetry of the early twentieth-century had lost touch with the common reader: “The reader, in fact, seems no longer present in the poet’s mind as he used to be, as someone who must understand and enjoy the finished product if it is to be a success at all; the assumption now is that no one will

read it, and wouldn't understand or enjoy it if they did" (RW 80–81). He deplored the poet's (and the critic's) tendency to make poetry more esoteric and inaccessible by making it more difficult and complex, and he went on to give a comparatively simple definition of poetry to counteract this trend :

... poetry is emotional in nature and theatrical in operation, a skilled recreation of emotion in other people, and ... conversely, a bad poem is one that never succeeds in doing this. All modes of critical derogation are no more than different ways of saying this, whatever literary, philosophical or moral terminology they employ, and it would not be necessary to point out anything so obvious if present poetry did not suggest that it had been forgotten. (RW 80)

He concluded by expressing his belief that "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 (RW 81–82). Larkin was essentially against experimentations in technique as professed and practised by the modernist artists, and he believed that was one main factor which caused a deep chasm between the artist and the general reader :

It seems to me undeniable that up to this century literature used language in the way we all use it, painting represented what anyone with normal vision sees, and music was an affair of nice noises rather than nasty ones. The innovation of 'modernism' in the arts consisted of doing the opposite. I don't know why, I'm not a historian. You have to distinguish between things that seemed odd when they were new but are now quite familiar, such as Ibsen and Wagner, and things that seemed crazy when they were new and seem crazy now, like *Finnegan's Wake* and Picasso. (RW 72)

It is clear that in making such assertions, Larkin must have been motivated by a desire to assert and, one might add promote, his considered ideas about what poetry should be. Right from the start of his poetic career, he wrote poems more in the 'traditional' mode which preserved and recreated in the reader the emotions that he believed to be important and meaningful. His first volume, *The North Ship* (1945) was largely ignored, and his second volume *XX Poems* did no better, except that D J Enright reviewed it in the Roman Catholic journal *Month*. The latter volume had contained several poems which were to reappear in the more celebrated *The Less Deceived*, so one can say that it was Enright who first recognized Larkin's poetic potential. He had sent a copy of his review to Larkin, and apparently encouraged him to try to publish his poems "commercially" (SL 176). Subsequently, when he edited an anthology of *New English Verse* (1955), he asked Larkin to contribute a few poems, together with a statement of his views on poetry. In his statement, Larkin said that in the "contemporary scene" there was "not enough poems written according to [his] ideas" which he elaborated thus :

I write poems to preserve things I have seen/thought/felt (if I may indicate a composite and complex experience) both for myself and

others. . . .

As a guiding principle I believe that every poem must be its own sole freshly created universe, and therefore have no belief in 'tradition' or a common myth-kitty or casual allusions in poems to other poems or poets, which last I find unpleasantly like the talk of literary understrappers, letting you see they know the right people.

(RW 79)

As Larkin's biographer Andrew Motion has pointed out, the reviewers saw this statement as "an expression of the anti-modernist feelings which lay at the heart of The Movement. Larkin may have been startled . . . but he had no reason to regret what he had written, or the way in which he had written it" (273).

Larkin believed that the modernist movement in English poetry was of foreign inspiration, and felt that its tenets and principles were not congenial for poets like him. He was particularly pleased therefore when Robert Conquest invited him to contribute to his anthology of poems by 'new' poets which he called *New lines*, the first volume of which appeared in 1956 :

Your letter about the possible Macmillan anthology [*New Lines*] was a very pleasant surprise, and I am grateful that you should think of me in such a connection. Of course I shall be happy to co-operate. Your remarks on the present scene sound the right sort of flag to sail under.

(SL 235)

The new kind of poetry that Conquest was introducing was to be based on the poet's own (British) experience because he believed (*pace* Pound, Eliot et al.) that foreign

. . . influences cannot just be meaningfully absorbed by an effort of will. It is equally true that the human condition from which the poetry of one country springs cannot be readily tapped by that of another. The British culture . . . is part of our experience, and for that no one else's experience, however desirable, can be a substitute.

(Thwaite 32)

With the passage of time Larkin, both as a poet and critic, became increasingly assertive of his British, in fact English, identity. He would have dismissed Eliot's Eurocentric remark that England was a "country destitute of living criticism' where few talk intelligently about Stendhal, Flaubert, or Henry James" (Pinion 143) as irrelevant and pretentious. When Larkin was asked to compile a new Oxford Book of twentieth century poetry, he told the editor that he believed that it was poets like Hardy, Hopkins and Kipling "who had clearly helped to form the twentieth-century poets' consciousness." He went on to add :

I am interested in Georgians, and how far they represent an 'English tradition' that was submerged by the double impact of the Great War and the Irish-American-continental properties of Yeats and Eliot.

(SL 380)

Thus it has come about that his *Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse*

(1973) presents a vast panorama of English poetry of the period in which the modernist poetry is put in the correct perspective. Twentieth-century is represented by 207 poets and it is Hardy, not Eliot, who emerges as the most dominant poet, with the greatest number of poems having been given to him in the anthology.

Larkin had always been a champion of Hardy's poetry. In a radio talk, which was subsequently published in 1968, he explained that the older poet had a profound influence on several generations of English poets, including himself :

I think most people who are well known today have loved Hardy's poems at one time or another. I think Auden has : I think Dylan Thomas did. Vernon Watkins told me that although Dylan Thomas thought Yeats was the greatest modern poet, Hardy was the one he loved. Betjeman clearly loves him ; the Poet Laureate, Cecil Day Lewis, clearly does ; and yet these all are very dissimilar poets. I rather think that they may have found what I found, that Hardy gave them the confidence to feel in their own way. 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 life — this is perhaps what I felt Yeats was trying to make me do. (RW 175)

If one looks at the history of Hardy's critical reception, one would find that he, like Lawrence, was known and esteemed as a novelist rather than a poet. This fact had bothered, disappointed and sometimes angered Hardy. Poetry was his *metier* but in the literary climate in which he grew up, he discovered that it was only by writing novels that he could find his niche in the literary world. When he had achieved literary recognition and financial security by writing novels he felt free to turn to poetry. It might have been difficult for his readers to see then but now it seems inevitable, in retrospect, that Hardy, who had spent the first fifty-eight years of his life in writing novels should have turned to writing poetry for the next thirty years of his life. He had always the highest regard for poetry as an art form, and decades of writing novels had convinced him that the novel-form was not suited to the expression of the new sensibility of his age which had greatly interested him. His second wife, Florence Hardy quoted a note-book entry made by Hardy as early as 1886 : "Novel-writing as an art cannot go backward. Having reached the analytic age, it must transcend it by going still further in the same direction. Why not by rendering as visible noble essences, spectres etc the abstract thoughts of the analytic school?" and goes on to remark that "this notion was approximately carried out, not in a novel, but through the much more appropriate medium of poetry, in the supernatural framework of *The Dynasts*, as also in smaller poems" (Hardy 177). Nevertheless, when his volumes of poetry began to appear, they were received by reviewers and critics either with murmurs of lukewarm praise or downright hostility or neglect. This made Hardy comment wryly that critics and readers tended to come to an unjustifiable "conclusion that an author who has published prose first and that largely, must necessarily express himself badly in verse" (Milgate 319-20). Unfortunately, the tendency to neglect Hardy's poetry in favour of his novels continued well into the middle

of this century. Larkin recalled how his own education had led him to see Hardy more as a novelist than a poet :

I had always known Hardy as a novelist when I was young but I hadn't read his poems particularly. I'd always rather assumed with Lytton Strachey that 'the gloom was not relieved even by a little elegance of diction'. (RW 175)

But, he went on to add, before long when he happened to find a selection of Hardy's poems, he was "immediately struck by their tunefulness and their feeling, and the sense that there was somebody writing about things I was beginning to feel myself" (RW 175). How Hardy shaped and influenced the younger poet and his poetic career is common knowledge. What needs to be emphasised here is that through his reviews and introductions, talks and interviews Larkin has succeeded in bringing about the recognition of Hardy as a major poet of this century — Eliot had written off "Hardy as the minor poet 'he always was'" (Pinion 272),— and this is a signal critical achievement. Donald Davie starts his book, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (1973), with the confident assertion that "in the British poetry of the last fifty years (as not in American) the most far-reaching influence, for good and ill, has not been Yeats, still less Eliot and Pound, not Lawrence, but *Hardy*" (3).

The other contemporary poet whose work Larkin greatly admired and advocated through his critical writings was John Betjeman. He first reviewed Betjeman in 1955 when he wrote approvingly of the latter's *A few late Chrysanthemums* for the Queen's University's journal (*Q*), and from then on went on writing on the poet throughout his life-time, claiming at one point : "I must have written about him [Betjeman] more than anyone else" (*SL* 480). His Introduction (RW 204–8) to the American edition of Betjeman's *Collected Poems* is a comprehensive critique of his poetry and poetic personality. It becomes immediately apparent that what Larkin finds most admirable in Betjeman's poetry are qualities which might be best described as Hardyesque. He says that the great merit of Betjeman's poems is that they continue to "surprise" us. Larkin had already discovered the same trait in Hardy's poems : "One can read him for years and years and still be surprised, and I think that's a marvellous thing to find in any poet" (RW 176). When Larkin used that word to praise Betjeman's poems, he went on to explain that good poems can seem to be "extraordinary" when one encounters them for the first time, but if such poems do not have the element of 'surprise' in them, they are likely to lose their effect once their extra ordinariness has worn off. On the other hand, the "surprise" element in Betjeman's poems, for example, helps to maintain "their power to inflict their tiny pristine shock long after they have become familiar." The other important characteristic in Betjeman's poetry that Larkin takes up for discussion and evaluation are his insularity and regressiveness. He is praised for basing his poetry on his own experience, culture and language. Larkin links Betjeman's poetry to his love of architecture, and points out that both poetry and architecture are related to man and the society in which he lives. He quotes Betjemnan's remark that "architecture means not a house, or single building or a church, or Sir Herbert Baker, or the glass at Chartres, but your surround-

ings ; not a town or a street, but our whole over-populated island,” and avers that “his fundamental interest is in human life, or human life in society, and that architecture is important in human life because a good society is one dwelling in well-proportioned surroundings.” Another quality of Betjeman’s that Larkin finds unique and admirable is his genuine love for human beings, despite their faults and shortcomings, and his humour and liveliness : “He offers us, indeed, something we cannot find in any other writer — a gaiety, a sense of the ridiculous, an affection for human beings and how and where they live, a vivid portrait of mid-twentieth-century English social life.” His poetic concerns and interests being such, Betjeman has no use for the themes, the methods and techniques of much of modernist verse :

The first thing to realize about Betjeman as a writer of verse is that he is a poet for whom the modern poetic revolution has simply not taken place. Insularity and regression rule here as there. For him, there has been no symbolism, no objective correlative, no T. S. Eliot or Ezra Pound, no reinvestment in myth or casting of language as gesture . . .

However, this attitude of Betjeman’s has not cast him “outside the course of poetic history.” On the contrary, Larkin sees him as being firmly placed in the tradition of English poetry which he saw Hardy continuing in the twentieth-century, and to which he himself gave a strong impetus in the post-war years.

Apparently, Larkin wanted the English tradition to continue and flourish in the contemporary novel too. But he found that the kinds of novels that were then (as indeed now) popular and in demand were spy/crime/science fiction or novels dealing with morbid themes of sickness and sadism and of “dope-taking nervous breakdowns” (SL 376). He himself was very much interested in writing novels :

I wanted to ‘be a novelist’ in a way I never wanted ‘to be a poet,’ yes. Novels seem to me to be richer, broader, deeper, more enjoyable than poems. When I was young, *Scrutiny* ran a series of articles under the general heading ‘The Novel as Dramatic Poem.’ That was a stimulating, an exciting conception. Something that was both a poem and novel. (RW 63)

But he realized that after his first two novels, he was simply not able to write any more in that genre ; the “ability to do so had just vanished” (RW 63). It is reasonable to suppose that had he been able to write, Larkin might have liked to produce novels like those of Barbara Pym. He encountered her novels by mere chance when, in the early sixties, his sister Kitty suggested that he might read them. He was very glad that he did. He discovered that she had the admirable gift for suggesting deeper meanings and larger issues through her accounts of ordinary middle-class characters, church-going spinsters and their often unrequited love for parsons . . . In an article, “The World Of Barbara Pym” (RW 240-44) that he wrote for the *Times Literary Supplement*, Larkin pointed out that through her novels, Pym provides “a separate world” and in her world the ordinary characters learn from their day-to-day experiences the lesson that if they are to live, they

have to turn to somebody else, "or, as the title page of her first novel has it, 'Something to love, oh, something to love!' About love on the grand scale ('a large white rabbit thrust into your arm and not knowing what to do with it') Miss Pym says very little." Her portrayals of love relationships in her various novels ultimately reveal in a moving manner "the loneliness of life, the sense of the *vulnerant omnes*." Thus, Pym is able to suggest deeper realities of the human predicament through ordinary stories of love involving ordinary, middle-class people.

When Larkin first discovered Pym, she had just published her novel *No Fond Return of Love* (1961). But then followed a long period of rejection. Apparently, publishers felt that in the changing fiction market there was no demand for her kind of novels. Larkin tried his best to coax publishers to change their minds about her but without much success. For instance, he had personally recommended her novel *An Unsuitable Attachment* to his own editor at Faber, Charles Montieth. But when even Montieth was not convinced, Larkin wrote to him an indignant letter in which he praised Pym's various qualities as a novelist and put her in the tradition of Austen and Trollop :

Personally, too, I feel it is a great shame if ordinary sane novels about ordinary sane people doing ordinary sane things can't find a publisher these days. This is in the tradition of Jane Austen & Trollop, and I refuse to believe that no one wants its successors today.

He claimed that he himself was one such reader, and went on to say how he wanted to read about the ordinary experiences in the lives of ordinary people, presented with "realistic firmness & even humour" :

I like to read about people who have done nothing spectacular, who aren't beautiful or lucky, who try to behave well in the limited field of activity they command, but who can see, in little autumnal moments of vision, that the so called 'big' experiences of life are going to miss them ; and I like to read about such things presented not with self pity or despair or romanticism but with realistic firmness & even humour, that is in fact what the critics wd call the moral tone of the book. It seems to me the kind of writing a responsible publisher ought to support (that's you, Charles!) and if an introduction by me saying so wd help to review your verdict on the book, then I'd gladly provide it for nothing. In fact, I'd be honoured. (SL 375-6)

As Andrew Motion has pointed out, in thus praising Pym's various qualities as an artist, Larkin is also indicating his own "excellences" : "infinite riches in a little room" (308). Perhaps it is equally true to say that in taking up the cudgels on behalf of Barbara Pym, Larkin was attempting to promote the kind of literature that he wanted a wider audience to know and read.

Larkin did not meet Pym for a long time. He wrote to her first in January 1961 but met her only in 1975. During this period they kept up a lively correspondence in which

each of them seemed to have displayed their common traits — little Englandism, self-depreciatory nature, even prejudices. And Larkin, on his part, continued to commend her work in public. Eventually, he succeeded in getting her new novel published. His efforts on her behalf began to bear fruit when, in 1976, the *Times Literary Supplement* asked Larkin, among others, to name the authors he considered to be under/over rated. Larkin put Pym's name in the category of the under-rated. David Cecil coincidentally did likewise and their combined recommendation sent publishers chasing Pym. Macmillan accepted her recently completed novel *Quartet in Autumn*, and Cape reprinted three of her earlier novels. Larkin wrote her a letter of hearty congratulations, telling her that both he and Monica were looking "forward to publication day as if it were our own", adding "in deep confidence," that as the chairman of the panel of judges for the Booker Prize for 1977, he would at least get her "read by the panel" (SL 557–8). Even though the book was not chosen for the prize, Barbara Pym soon became much more widely known and admired than previously had been the case. Now she has entered the academe too which means that she is discussed in schools and colleges, a fairly reliable sign of continued interest. Scholarly articles and books are regularly written on her : in 1992, Ann M. Wyatt–Brown published her *Barbara Pym : A Critical Biography*, and in the same year Mary H. Myers published 'Barbara Pym : A Supplement to a Further list of Secondary Sources.' So one can rightly claim that, thanks to Larkin's, championship of her, Barbara Pym is an established name in the world of contemporary British fiction.

Thus, Larkin's efforts towards and success in bringing squarely into the twentieth-century canon writers like Thomas Hardy, John Betjeman and Barbara Pym should be regarded as a major critical achievement. The byproduct of this critical exercise has been that it has led to a greater appreciation of his own poetry. In this respect he is very similar to T S Eliot :

Valuable as Eliot's criticism is in the mass, it is never more memorably illuminating than when it expresses a duality of significance, when its reading of an author throws light on the poetic vision of the writer . . .

(Pinion 276)

Though Larkin seems to have been critically at his best when he discussed those writers whose literary aims and attitudes were similar to his own, he also wrote originally and penetratingly about other writers too, mostly poets of this century. For instance, he recognized the war poet Wilfred Owen as a very good poet, but that did not prevent him from noticing Owen's limitations as an artist, which few critics have either the insight to see or the courage to express. Owen, like his fellow war poet Siegfried Sassoon, was "anxious that the war should be shown up, that the carnage, the waste, the exploitation should all be brought home to innocent non-combatants" (RW 160), but Larkin pointed out that when the Second World War came, it showed the ineffectiveness, if not the irrelevance, of such poetic warnings. These men were too personally involved in the war to see its calamities and tragedies with the dispassionate impersonality of a poet. When Larkin came to review Jon Stallworthy's biography *Wilfred Owen* (1974), he articulated this central weakness in Owen as poet in greater detail. He admits that Owen's

poems will remain “an eternally resonant monument” to the sufferings and tragedies of the fighting soldiers,

[y]et, in retrospect two casual sentences from a letter Robert Graves wrote to Owen seem increasingly significant : ‘For God’s sake cheer up and write more optimistically — The War’s not ended yet but a poet should have a spirit above Wars —’ It is as if Graves guessed intuitively that for Owen the war was not an impersonal calamity to be got rid of as soon as possible, but a private involvement, something that seemed a part of his isolation, his frustrated ambitions in poetry, his sexual hang-ups. (cf. see my discussion of Owen and other War poets in my book, *Spirit Above Wars* (1976)) (RW 239)

Larkin displayed a similar independent critical mind when he discussed (RW 278–81) the poetry of Sylvia Plath, who occupied then and perhaps still does, a high place in the pantheon of modern (American) poetry. He started by saying that her juvenilia or early poems did not seem to hold out promise of any impressive poetry later on : her verses were “intellectually conceited, vivid and resourceful in image and vocabulary” but it was obvious that “[f]orm was not her strong point : she rhymed and scanned when it suited her, which was less and less as she grew older. Nor was her ‘ear’ good : ‘Each teacher found my touch/Oddly wooden’ she says of her piano lessons, and one can see what they meant . . .” Her poems therefore are no more than those of “a prize pupil, crammed with invention, lacking emotional centre.” Later on, perhaps because of unhappy and sometimes traumatic experiences in her own life which led her even to make suicide attempts, the subject-matter of her poetry became “variously, neurosis, insanity, disease, death, horror, terror.” Larkin suspects that Plath unfortunately came to the conclusion that she could create poetry by exploiting such experiences and themes : “She also sounds ambitious, competitive, compulsive, the girl most likely to succeed, ready to exploit her own traumas if they would make poems.” Larkin therefore cannot avoid feeling that she “wilfully refracted” even neutral and sympathetic subjects and occasions into “something terrible or horrible.” Consequently, Larkin’s final judgement on her poetry is that since it is not born of commonly shared experiences, the reader cannot enjoy it as an elevating experience : he can only sympathize with her. About the ‘value’ of her poems, he remains sceptical :

How valuable they are depends on how highly we rank the expression of experience with which we can in no sense identify, and from which we can only turn with shock and sorrow.

We can better understand Larkin’s critical stance towards this kind of poetry if we recall that in his discussion of Emily Dickinson’s works he had praised her for exercising control when creating poetry out of her own personal experiences, which were mostly very painful. She had, he maintained, a “disturbed, if not arrested, development.” Something traumatic (perhaps unrequited love) had taken place in her middle years as a result of which “at times she thought she was going mad. Her eyes troubled her; increasingly she became a recluse, dressing all in white . . . Her epitaph might have been her own

words : 'Nothing has happened but loneliness'" (*RW* 192). The sorrow of unfulfilled love and death became the central themes of her poems, but since she was able to handle them with restraint, she produced some very remarkable poems :

[H]er successes, when one comes to think of them, are when she is at her least odd, her most controlled. This is worth remembering in an age when almost any poet who can produce any evidence of mental care is automatically ranked higher than one who has stayed sane : 'very mad, very holy,' as the natives say in one of Evelyn Waugh's novels, and we must take care not to copy their way of thinking. Poetry is an affair of sanity, of seeing things as they are. The less a writer's work approximates to this maxim, the less claim he has on the attention of his contemporaries and of posterity. (*RW* 196-7)

Incidentally, these comments throw a flood of light on the secrets of Larkin's own successes as a poet. After all, he had admitted that "[d]eprivation is for [him] what daffodils were to Wordsworth" (*RW* 47) ; but what is most impressive is that out of the themes of sadness, unhappiness, loneliness and the ever present fear of death, he created some of the most haunting poems of this century, without a trace of the morbidity or sensationalism, which are the hallmark of much of the "confessional" poetry of our times.

In the light of all this, one wishes that Larkin had written more criticism, especially about the writers he liked most — Lawrence, for instance. "To me", he said, "Lawrence was what Shakespeare was to Keats . . ." (*SL* 34) ; and he categorically asserted : "In my opinion he [Lawrence] is the greatest writer of this century, and in many things the greatest writer of all times" (*SL* 101). When later in life, he was invited to open an exhibition on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Lawrence's death, Larkin said : "No writer of this century aimed himself more at the world . . . no writer took it on more completely, its countries and continents, its peoples and philosophies, everything down to its smallest birds, beasts and flowers" (*Motion* 483). No wonder then that he felt that his critical faculties were paralysed in the presence of a genius like Lawrence. He never wrote a critical assessment of the writer. He said that once he had tried "to write a meagre essay about DHL & failed so miserably . . ." (*SL* 277). But we should be grateful that Larkin did feel called upon to express his critical opinions about other writers, and that he did so in such a way that our whole appraisal of twentieth-century English literature has been changed.

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