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The Miserable Old Git as Hero: Philip Larkin's Racism and Sexism

Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems*, edited with an introduction by Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber & Faber, 1988).

Philip Larkin, *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin, 1940-1985*, edited by Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 1992).

Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1993).

92

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With the publication of the *Collected Poems*, the *Selected Letters*, and a biography by one of his literary executors, Philip Larkin's posthumous reputation has reached the decline that most writers experience shortly after their deaths. From this low point, many writers popular in their day never recover, while a few get resurrected and canonized by later generations. For Larkin, the decline was especially precipitous and sudden, when the reviews fastened upon his admiration for Mrs. Thatcher and upon some elitist and ill-tempered remarks in letters about women, blacks, and working-class youths who shouldn't be at university. Reviewers treated these revelations as surprising and something of a minor scandal—minor in that poetry is a minor subject these days and therefore incapable of causing a major fuss. The attacks were significant enough that Martin Amis, son of Larkin's Oxford school chum Kingsley Amis, attempted a defense in *The New Yorker*, but ended up defending the poetry and not the man and agreed that much of what the man said was inexcusable.

I never met Larkin, except in the poetry and letters. I find that I like not just the work, but what I can glean of the person as well. This is not

for me a matter of, Jerry-Falwell-like, loving the sinner but hating the sin. I find I love even the sin. How can this be, unless I too am an insensitive Neanderthal? My friend John Armstrong, a British schools inspector in the tradition of Matthew Arnold, but on a motorcycle, has always one response whenever I try to talk about Larkin: "miserable old git." And John is right. But somehow it seems to me a compliment, for it makes Larkin heroic in his attempts to overcome a temperament many of us struggle with, and less successfully than him. This heroism struck me the first time I read a Larkin poem, in a graduate-school class led by the late non-fiction writer Tom O'Donnell. In those pre-Xerox days I encountered Larkin via pages of mimeograph, with its characteristic fat blue letters and hand-drawn carots to correct typos. We were discussing "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album" when I got the distinct and uncomfortable impression that the poem was actually—and rather boldly—revealing Larkin's sexual self, which seemed to come alive in a series of highly developed voyeuristic fantasies. The poem treated the young-lady-in-question's photograph both tenderly and pornographically. I said none of this at the time, even though it was the Sixties (well, actually the Seventies, which is when the Sixties hit Kansas). Later I read "Dry Point," which seemed to me blatantly masturbatory. But how would I ever say this—I could not even write the word, let alone speak it. The only mention of that word in a literary context I had ever heard was Byron's insult to Keats, calling him a verbal masturbator, a comment that to my mind redounded more on Byron than Keats. I searched the criticism, but no one breathed a word about the subject, nor even addressed it euphemistically.

Here is that poem, for you to judge; it is part of a series titled "Two Portraits of Sex":

Endlessly, time-honoured irritant,
A bubble is restively forming at your tip,
Burst it as fast as we can—
It will grow again, until we begin dying.

Silently it inflates, till we're
enclosed
And forced to start the struggle
to get out:
Bestial, intent, real.
The wet spark comes, the bright
blown walls collapse,

But what sad scapes we cannot
turn from then:
What ashen hills! what salted,
shrunken lakes!
How leaden the ring looks,
Birmingham magic all discredited,

And how remote that bare and
sunscrubbed room,
Intensely far, that padlocked cube
of light
We neither define nor prove,
Where you, we dream, obtain no
right of entry.

The poem is about sexual desire in general, I suppose, seen from a male point of view as an irritant that is not escaped until death. In that general sense, it is much like Shakespeare's "lust" sonnet, "The expense of spirit in a waste of shame," which details the driven and addictive nature of male sexual compulsion. But it goes so much farther and graphically in the third stanza, into an after-picture of an ejaculation on the sheets. I could not believe that the balding, bespectacled, reticent poet-librarian Larkin appeared to be would be writing this way about *that*. I kept my mouth shut.

A dozen years later, on a sabbatical in England, I stayed with a former student in Hull for a week and read what unpub-

lished correspondence I could, including all of Larkin's letters to Jim Sutton, his earliest friend. There I found Larkin's delight in using shocking language, inventing combinations of obscenities for every part of speech. My response was not shock, however, but a childish delight at the freedom of it and an admiration for what seemed to me Larkin's willingness to be less than graceful, beautiful, cultured, eloquent, polite, or his best self. He was a foul-mouthed and ranting old git at sixteen.

Robert Bly once misquoted to me a poem of Tomas Tranströmer that he had previously translated from the Swedish. Or rather, he was making a new translation that had a little more vinegar in it: "Nice place you've got here. The slum must be on the inside." That's what I liked about Larkin. He didn't keep the slum on the inside. True taboos, ones that bring shame, were right there to be read. Sexual debauchery, but not the shame of it, had long ago made its way into poetry, but with the result that the poet was a superman of excess, or if not quite the Byronic or Beat hero, then penitent in a slyly self-congratulating way, such as St. Paul's egomania that he was the worst of sinners. But no one had ever written so baldly "Love again: wanking at ten past three." Drunkenness too has never been a stranger to poetry, but Larkin's drink was clearly taken out of fear and weakness, as that beautiful late poem "Aubade" admits. His mean-spirited thoughts, nasty feelings about women, about race, about anyone and everyone he came in contact with, even the gentle Barbara Pym, he allowed his letters and his poetry to air. In the poem "The Dance," for example, a colleague becomes "some shoptalking shit."

A letter to another poet begins with this rude limerick on Pym:

The chances are certainly slim
Of finding in Barbara Pym
(I speak with all deference)

The faintest of reference
To what in our youth we called quim.

These documents he knew would become public. He left two conflicting clauses in his will, one asking that his papers be destroyed, while another

gave sole discretion to his literary executors, who chose, as Larkin must have known they would, to publish.

In his public life Larkin was respectable, respected, and even kind-hearted, tolerating life's stupidities and intrusions when his growing fame would have allowed for more outright rudeness or more insulation. One can see this in the pained yet smiling photos he stood for with Americans whom he hardly knew when he was already dangerously ill. In this way he even made what might be seen as cowardice a subject for his art, by revealing the distance between his social persona and his private thoughts. He is, after all, the model for Jim Dixon in Kingsley Amis' comic masterpiece *Lucky Jim*. Jim, a bored junior academic who feels forced to flatter his boss, his girlfriend, and just about everyone he meets, is able to release his large store of pent-up frustrations with the fools of this world by making grimacing and mocking faces behind their backs. Larkin's words are Jim's faces. When *Lucky Jim* became a best-seller, Larkin did not hide his jealousy of Amis, nor his morose conviction that someone else always gets "the fame and the girl and the money" ("Toads").

Larkin's girl-troubles are enumerated in his executor Andrew Motion's biography. The unpublished poems that another executor, Anthony Thwaite, prints in the *Collected Poems* detail more of this for us. The sense of failure so prevalent in the poems (and perhaps the main stuff out of which the poetry is made) is not ultimately about money or girls or fame. It is about Larkin's feeling that he had failed as a human being. And this is how I read the racist and sexist remarks that Larkin showcases in the letters. He certainly believed in the duty one owed the social fabric, to be reasonably polite and socially responsible. He also believed, like Amis' hero Jim, that one needs to express what one feels, even if it makes its first appearance with an ugly and ignoble face. He showed that ugly face to himself first. The letters are full of inarticulate sounds—Wow, Wow, Wow—like an animal without speech ex-

pressing its pain. On his desk Larkin kept a picture of a gorilla at the London Zoo, mouth wide open baring its fangs and flinging out an unholy scream. The gorilla is Larkin. He imagines his future biographer complaining of being "stuck with this old fart at least a year" and then coming to the conclusion that this guy Larkin was "one of those old-type *natural* fouled-up guys." That is, it was in his nature, from the very beginning, to fail. Larkin's willingness to portray himself so unheroically is, paradoxically, a heroic action, and the poetry in that sense is heroic poetry. I admire it as well as love it, and honor him for not looking away from the slums inside himself. They were his muse. ~~SO~~