

The Poetry of Philip Larkin

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## Martin Scofield

### The Poetry of Philip Larkin

PHILIP LARKIN has come to be considered by many people as the best British poet writing today. He is certainly one of the most widely read, and read, one has the strong impression, not just by professional literary people and students of English literature, but by that elusive but necessary figure who we are often gloomily told no longer exists, the general reader. He has published four books of poetry, *The North Ship* (1945), *The Less Deceived* (1955), *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964), and *High Windows* (1974), as well as two novels and a book of jazz criticism. He writes poems infrequently perhaps by some criterion of production (certainly in comparison with one of the poets he most admires, Hardy), but this tells us little about the general weight of his work and about the impression it has made. It is, indeed, a testimony to the fact that poems are still being read and remembered by ordinary readers, as well as poets being cultivated and books being turned out by the literary world, that poems of Larkin's like "Church Going" or "The Whitsun Weddings" or "Mr. Bleaney" or "An Arundel Tomb" appear (partly, of course, *via* anthologies) to be so widely known. This is difficult to assess, of course, and clearly is not just a matter of readership figures; but when the best professional reviewers and critics of contemporary literature seem to concur (and like Dr. Johnson, rejoice to do so) with the common reader or intelligent non-professional, it is encouraging evidence to the admirer of Larkin that his enjoyment is not just a private one.

It is less clear how widely Larkin is read and appreciated in America. He has been represented in anthologies which include British poetry<sup>1</sup> but his first two important volumes are now out of print. And American critical comment has on the whole been respectful but lukewarm. In the introduction to *Today's Poets*, for example, the editor Chad Walsh places Larkin as the central figure in the group of poets of the

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<sup>1</sup> For example: *New Poets of England and America*, ed. Donald Hall and Robert Pack (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1962). *Today's Poets*, ed. Chad Walsh (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972).

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1950's known as "The Movement" but says that his poetry demonstrates "the impressive though limited achievements possible with such a conception of poetry," the conception he describes involving a direction of poetry towards the intelligent common reader, a distrust of esoteric symbols, a strong sense of discipline and form. The reviews of Larkin's last two volumes in *The New York Review of Books* were written by non-Americans,<sup>2</sup> and the reviewer of the second, the Irish poet Richard Murphy, began his review with the implication that Larkin still needed having his case put to American readers, many of whom, he felt, "imagine he is a kind of old fashioned taxidermist who fluffs up the wings of dead ducks, like the iambic pentameter and the rhymed quatrain, for a public devoted almost to extinct birds." His intelligent review did much to dispel this notion, though I would take issue with his reading of one or two of the poems he discusses, and the title of the review, "The Art of Debunkery," stressed a familiar but not I think the most important side of his work.

The emphasis on form, and on the commonplace and "unambitious" subjects seem to be prevalent. The note struck by M. L. Rosenthal in his review of *The Less Deceived* (in the *Nation*, 16 May 1959)<sup>3</sup> is still often audible. Indeed he voiced an adverse criticism which may still have some currency in representing doubts about Larkin's work on both sides of the Atlantic. He saw the poems as representative of a restrictedness of imaginative and emotional life in the England of the fifties: the welfare state, he suggested, had solved most of England's material problems and reduced life to a comfortable gentility in which poets were left complaining about trivia, while in other parts of the world people were really suffering. Apart from the debatable view of the relation between poet and society which this implies—we do not disparage Keats, for instance, because he was not concerned in his poetry with the fate of oppressed European countries as Byron was—Rosenthal's view is a misreading both of Larkin's tone and subject. Larkin's poetry is in fact a radical criticism of himself and his time, an attempt to tackle, within the boundaries of sincerity, the large questions of love, death, morality, belief and social convention. But Rosenthal's view is

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<sup>2</sup> Christopher Ricks, "A True Poet," in *New York Review of Books*, 28 January 1965, pp. 10-11. Richard Murphy, "The Art of Debunkery," *NYRB*, 15 May 1975.

<sup>3</sup> Rosenthal also discusses Larkin in his *The New Poets: American and British Poetry since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

not negligible because it might *seem* to come close to the point: it sums up what I take to be the main form of resistance to Larkin, and it challenges his admirers to state the main case. He points to the frequently "low key" of Larkin's poetry, the doubting, prosaic and limited *personae*, the negative stance toward much of life. What has therefore to be shown in reply is the way in which this predominant tone, these self-confessedly limited voices, this negative stance, are raised to the condition of a finely wrought art which is never at rest within these limitations, and which continually seeks out firmer and more and more general certainties, a more clearly perceived truth about life.

Rosenthal's criticism also raises the central question of language, expressing the view that Larkin's style is too flat, his handling of language too timid. Reviewing Charles Tomlinson and John Betjeman in the same article, he raised this point to a general idea about the difference between the approach to language of American and English poets (or if "general idea" seems too elevated for the casual tone, at least he reveals an emotional bias): "They (English poets) do not, it is true, have our knack, improvised under pressure, of beating hell out of, or passion into, language by main force." Things may have changed since then, and from what I've read of recent American poetry I would guess that some American poets would demur at this characterization of themselves! But I would also guess that there is still a lingering truth to the idea. We do not have to turn to someone like Ginsberg with his incantatory style for an example of what this might refer to. Robert Lowell is often very active and manipulative in his handling of language, despite his often colloquial style: he often intensifies a poem with sharp rhythms or startling images. John Berryman often plays with moments of heightened style. Even quieter-toned poets like Richard Wilbur or James Dickey (or W. D. Snodgrass, whom Lowell has suggested might be compared with Larkin) often tend towards a kind of "symbolism" or purely figurative language which moves away from the discursive or descriptive. One of the immediately striking things about Larkin's poetry is its surface simplicity: the reader can generally find his feet quickly in a Larkin poem; he knows where he is, what kind of experience he is being drawn to engage with. Once he is then drawn into the poem, its deeper currents gradually become more apparent, and he realizes he is being offered something more than the obvious. But the poems are rarely figuratively or syntactically obscure.

The poem that M. L. Rosenthal liked best in *The Less Deceived* was "Dry Point," which is a much more "symbolist" poem than is

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usual with Larkin: it begins with an image, which is then amplified, and then modified by other images, with hardly any pinning down to situation, place or argument. The disparate images are held together by a unity of mood, making the poem suggestive perhaps, but also I think obscure. It is interesting that Rosenthal should have picked out this poem, because when Larkin himself came to choose a poem of his for the American anthology *Poet's Choice*,<sup>4</sup> he chose "Absences" from *The Whitsun Weddings*, a poem which is similarly "symbolist"; and it is possible he chose it with an American audience in mind. Both poems evoke a state of mind through images, with almost no discursive element; both employ resounding exclamations ("What ashen hills! What salted, shrunken lakes!" and "What attics cleared of me! What absences!"). Larkin himself admitted that the latter poem was not especially representative of his poetry: "I fancy it is like a different, rather better poet than myself." I think this pleasant modesty is slightly misleading: the poem tellingly expresses a feeling which is central to Larkin, the feeling of joy at being able to perceive a world existing quite independently of himself. But still the style is more figurative and less discursive than is usual with Larkin, and as he has said, the resonant exclamations sound like the not very good translation of some French symbolist poet.

Perhaps it is here that we can see a difference in tendency between Larkin's kind of poetry and the bulk of American poetry. The former is generally wary of making over-large claims to meaning, of employing suggestiveness and resonance which may go beyond what the poet feels he can really authenticate. The latter is often impatient with restriction, and in a certain sense more ambitious. One might compare James Dickey's poem "The Heaven of Animals"<sup>5</sup> with Larkin's "At Grass" which I discuss below. Dickey's poem attempts a highly imaginative metaphysical speculation about animal life and is written in a fine style of generalization, which reaches by the end a symbolic general statement about life as a whole:

At the cycle's center  
They tremble, they walk  
Under the tree,  
They fall, they are torn,  
They rise, they walk again.

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<sup>4</sup> *Poet's Choice*, ed. Paul Engel and Joseph Langland (New York: New Directions, 1962), pp. 202-03.

<sup>5</sup> *Today's Poets*, *op. cit.*, p. 283.

Larkin's poem is much more specific, and I think more successful. It reaches out tentatively towards the life of the horses, and the sense of the life it evokes is as important as the statements it makes about it; these in themselves make no large claims, but the poem makes us think more deeply about the implications of that life.

Larkin's poem is more tentative, but its final effect is calm and assured: the careful reaching out, as in many of Larkin's poems, is a way, in the end, of touching the subject, and us, more closely. It should not be seen as timidity. And here again one wants to put in a qualifying word about more recent Larkin criticism and its tendency to emphasize Larkin's limited scope. There is an intelligent and warmly appreciative piece in *ELH*, December 1971, by E. Kingsley Weatherhead, which perceptively describes Larkin's faithful hold on the ordinary, on "events which do not make a catch in the breath," and also his power of "exposing and satirizing spurious escapes from reality offered by the imagination." But in doing this the article does not, it seems to me, bring out enough of the way in which many of Larkin's poems discover genuine escapes for the imagination, and in surprising and indeed sometimes thrilling ways can awaken us to new feelings. And another possibly more widely known discussion leaves one with the same feeling. In *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry*<sup>6</sup> Donald Davie sees Larkin as "the central figure in British poetry over the last twenty years"; and he closes "An Afterword for American Readers": "And what he represents is British poetry at the point where it has least in common with American, a poetry which consciously repudiates the assumptions, and the liberties, which American poets take for granted; a poetry which is, in short, exceptionally challenging." But what he says about Larkin in the course of the book puts that challenge in rather a low key. He has some fine praise of "The Whitsun Weddings," and some apt characterization of Larkin's feeling for the landscape of contemporary England. But also he suggests that Larkin has "lowered his sights," and "sold poetry short" (as, in his opinion, did Hardy). He feels that Larkin's "humanism" also denies the impulses Larkin receives from his sense of the life of Nature, a view which I shall be implicitly questioning below. And in general his account leaves one with the feeling, whether or not it was intended, that Larkin's limitations have been stressed rather than his strengths. What the argument comes back to is the feeling that

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<sup>6</sup> Donald Davie, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972).

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there are certain domains of poetry, particularly the larger subjects, the attempt to revivify the sense of the noble, the mythic, and the supernatural, which Larkin does not touch on at all. Now it *may* be we feel the want of these things in contemporary poetry, but clearly they are easier things to lay talk *about* than to possess imaginatively. Larkin does deal, as I shall be trying to demonstrate below, with important subjects. But just as important is his highly critical and poetic sense of just what imaginative engagement really entails.

### II

LARKIN'S FIRST VOLUME OF POEMS, *The North Ship*, is not the one, despite its position in time, to send the reader to first. (The best way to begin with Larkin would probably be to get hold of *The Whitsun Weddings* and read it through, perhaps starting with the title poem: but in fact one can probably start anywhere in the poetry beginning with *The Less Deceived*; and one of the great pleasures of Larkin is to come by chance upon a very good poem standing out in an anthology or the current number of one of England's weekly magazines.) The poems in *The North Ship* are very accomplished and often rather beautiful, but they are romantic in what is often a derivatively early-Yeatsian way and do not in general get down to the substance of Larkin's life, and life in general, in the way of the later poems. There are premonitions of the later Larkin in the subject matter, the sense of sadness, of lost or missing opportunity: "cold" is a recurrent word. But it is expressed in tenuously beautiful late-romantic terms; moon and stars appear and reappear, "the trees and their gracious silence"; grief is like "a sunken coal," the heart "a frost-encircled root." There are Shelleyan as well as Yeatsian echoes in this volume, and the poems are often imbued with the Shelleyan feeling of a sensitive self surrounded by a harsh world. (One of the virtues of the later work is, one might say, its ability to see, as well as this, the features of a harsh self surrounded by a sensitive world.) Many of Larkin's recurring feelings are here (the disappointment, for example, in "Nursery Tale"), but they needed to be recast, recharted, brought down into common life so that they could be questioned, their realities and unrealities sorted out.

One of the ways in which Larkin sorts out these realities and unrealities is through a consideration of time, the past and memory; and I pick this out not merely because it is an easily identifiable "theme" in Larkin's poetry but more because it gives rise to particularly good poems.

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(One of the difficulties of trying to give a picture of Larkin is that one wants to give a sense of the variety of his preoccupations and at the same time a sense of his specific achievements: to range as widely as possible but to consider individual poems. Larkin's poems are so often carefully worked out wholes, where the progressions, the modulations of tone all count, that paraphrase and selection often give a very limited sense of the effect of a poem.) *The Less Deceived* has several examples. In "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album" the speaker begins with an almost voracious appetite for these images of the past—"My swivel eye hungers from pose to pose"—but after glancing at several pictures of the girl ("In pigtails, clutching a reluctant cat;/ Or furred yourself, a sweet girl graduate") he falls back on an admission:

But o, photography! as no art is,  
Faithful and disappointing! that records  
Dull days as dull, and hold-it smiles as frauds,  
And will not censor blemishes  
Like washing-lines and Hall's-Distemper boards,

But shows the cat as disinclined, and shades  
A chin as doubled when it is, what grace  
Your candour thus confers upon her face!  
How overwhelmingly persuades  
That this is a real girl in a real place,

In every sense empirically true!  
Or is it just *the past*? These flowers, that gate,  
These misty moors and motors, lacerate  
Simply by being over; you  
Contract my heart by looking out of date.

One has in these lines some of the essential features of Larkin's poetry: the faithfully observed details of ordinary life; the precise delineation of feeling; the questioning, exploratory attitude towards experience; the easy bringing together of the casually colloquial ("hold-it smiles") and a more formal even elegant diction ("what grace/ Your candour thus confers upon her face"). And what this characteristically achieves is a way of revealing deeper currents of feeling within the most ordinary experience. Larkin is always strongly drawn to fact, and these photographs attract because of their strong actuality. But then comes the question, and the realization that the actuality is not here now. So far the feelings revealed have been fairly conventional ones: but Larkin ends the poem by arguing through to an understanding of memory which



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is in its way a spiritual achievement. The pastness of the past can be a source of delight if we can contemplate it clearly and steadily and are not drawn to try and connect ourselves with it again. The loss of connection is a real loss, and what is left is something smaller, diminished. But in the lovely last lines of the poem Larkin defines the way in which this diminution is itself the condition of a kind of beauty:

Yes, true; but in the end, surely, we cry  
Not only at exclusion, but because  
It leaves us free to cry. We know *what was*  
Won't call on us to justify  
Our grief, however hard we yowl across

The gap from eye to page. So I am left  
To mourn (without a chance of consequence)  
You, balanced on a bike against a fence;  
To wonder if you'd spot the theft  
Of this one of you bathing; to condense,

In short, a past that no one now can share,  
No matter whose your future; calm and dry,  
It holds you like a heaven, and you lie  
Unvariably lovely there,  
Smaller and clearer as the years go by.

Larkin's concern with the past is a concern with distinguishing real from unreal aspirations, true possibilities from false or mistaken ones, as a means of becoming clearer about what is real and what is unreal in his experience in the present. Sometimes this takes the form of debunking conventionally romantic notions about youth or childhood. In "I Remember, I Remember" (the title taken from the first line of Hood's well-known poem), Larkin deals with his lack of any significant memory of his childhood; his sense, in fact, that nothing happened in it. There is the comic debunking of the conventional literary childhood, but there is also the feeling, that comes through in the possible allusions to the childhoods of Traherne and (as E. Kingsley Weatherhead has suggested) Lawrence, that other writers' childhoods have sometimes been fruitful, and there is something here from which he is excluded:

'Was that,' my friend smiled, 'where you "have your roots"?'  
No, only where my childhood was unspent,  
I wanted to retort, just where I started:

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By now I've got the whole place clearly charted.  
Our garden, first: where I did not invent  
Blinding theologies of flowers and fruits,  
And wasn't spoken to by an old hat.  
And here we have that spendid 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'.

But the poem in *The Less Deceived* which deals with the past, among other things, in the most profound way, is "At Grass": it is, I think, the finest poem in the volume. It is not just a portrait of the typically English world of racehorses, a nostalgic watercolour of the English scene, or as A. Alvarez suggested in his introduction to *The New Poetry*<sup>7</sup> "the Platonic, (or *New Yorker*) idea of the English scene." It is nostalgic, but the nostalgia is of that positive kind in which feelings for the past, and past feelings, are cultivated and brought into focus as a way of illuminating and giving solace to the present, rather than obfuscating it with anodyne illusions. Nor is the poem just about horses, though that is its ostensible subject: rather it expresses a whole sense of life, a sense of past vitality quietened by age to present dignity, but still breaking out in moments of "what must be joy." It is a poem about age, and the more imaginative in that it takes an experience outside that of the poet, indeed a non-human one. The quiet manner of the poem, the tact of the poet in refusing to claim any final knowledge of the life of the horses, the imaginative approach to sympathy qualified by the refusal to anthropomorphize, make what might seem just a delicate description into a poem about the poet's sense of life, and one that asks to be quoted in full:

The eye can hardly pick them out  
From the cold shade they shelter in,  
Till wind distresses tail and mane;  
Then one crops grass, and moves about  
—The other seeming to look on—  
And stands anonymous again.

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<sup>7</sup> A. Alvarez, "The New Poetry, or Beyond the Gentility Principle," Introduction to *The New Poetry* (London: Penguin Books, 1962), p. 30.

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Yet fifteen years ago, perhaps  
Two dozen distances sufficed  
To fable them: faint afternoons  
Of Cups and Stakes and Handicaps,  
Whereby their names were artficed  
To inlay faded, classic Junes—

Silks at the start: against the sky  
Numbers and parasols: outside  
Squadrons of empty cars, and heat,  
And littered grass: then the long cry  
Hanging unhushed till it subside  
To stop press columns on the street.

Do memories plague their ears like flies?  
They shake their heads. Dusk brims the shadows.  
Summer by summer all stole away,  
The starting-gates, the crowds and cries—  
All but the unmolesting meadows.  
Almanacked, their names live; they

Have slipped their names, and stand at ease,  
Or gallop for what must be joy,  
And not a field-glass sees them home,  
Or curious stop-watch prophecies:  
Only the groom, and the groom's boy,  
With bridles in the evening come.

The quiet manner might hide to a cursory glance, but in fact reveals, a delicate play of suggestion. Exhaustive analysis would be intrusive and is surely unnecessary: the poem simply needs to be read carefully. It should be enough to point to the poem's essential subject; I have said it is about age, but more specifically it is about the flamboyant public life of the horses' past and the quiet, freer life of their present. There is no idealization of their retirement, or of their heyday. There is a sense of the mystery of their life: what is it? the poet seems to ask; in what does, or did, it really consist? Which is the more fully "life," the public show which proclaims their life to "the world" and almanacks their names, or the present anonymous freedom, in which they have "slipped their names"? To come closer to the poem, one might simply ask the reader to consider the effect of certain words and lines and phrases: "The eye can hardly pick them out," and "cold" and "distresses" in the first stanza; "faint afternoons" and "artficed" in the second; "stole" and "unmolesting" in the fourth; "curious" in the

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fifth. The effect is complex and delicate, and the poem as a whole rises to the sense of life as a mystery, evoking a sense of reverence, and in the closing lines almost of ministration. A. Alvarez was surely reading the poem cursorily when he compared it unfavourably to Ted Hughes's poem "A Dream of Horses" finding in the latter a feeling of force and unknown life, and only gentility in Larkin's poem. In its sense of reverence for the unknown life of the horses it would not be absurd to compare it with Lawrence, and all the more so because of Larkin's marked differences from Lawrence, and the fact that the poem is entirely Larkinesque.

### III

A T GRASS is an achievement which goes beyond many of Larkin's poems in that the poet himself has almost completely disappeared, and the poem is almost completely absorbed in the life it is describing, while still maintaining for important reasons of fidelity the sense of an observer. In many more poems, on the other hand, the personality of the speaker, who may be Larkin or more often represents one aspect of him, is an integral part of the poetic effect. And here we encounter the limited, often gloomy figure who for many people seems to sum up Larkin: the bed-sitter occupant ("Mr Bleaney"), excluded from sex and love ("Reasons for Attendance"), clinging to his job for fear of the demands of greater freedom ("Toads"), anti-intellectual because books throw too strong a light on his own limitations ("A Study of Reading Habits"), drawn to making awkward visits to churches but unable to believe in them ("Church Going"). These figures need no apologies: they are an essential part of Larkin, whose poetic strength lies a great deal in the honesty with which he faces the drabness and sadness of life. But through a superficial reading of these poems Larkin can be reduced to a mere grumbler who reveals only, in Rosenthal's words, "the sullenness of a man who finds squalor in his own spirit and fears to liberate himself from it." In fact the poems generally avoid sullenness both through the capacity for a witty detachment, and a kind of involvement with the poetic *personae* which is never satisfied with their limitations, even when feeling them inevitable.

It is noticeable that there are more of these poems about limitation in *The Whitsun Weddings* than in the earlier *The Less Deceived*. In the later volume Larkin appears to be more conscious of his limitations, and also clearer-sighted about the way limitations involve limits, which can define strengths as well as weaknesses. There are greater doubts,

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but also more positive certainties in this volume, and this is the more striking in that the kind of subject-matter remains much the same. Larkin has disparaged the notion of “development” and has said that he does not want to develop in the usual sense (involving, I suppose he means, dramatic changes of mode or style) but simply to become better at what he does: and this is what happens in *The Whitsun Weddings*. Firstly the focus on the limitations is more intense and uncompromising: there is a darker and more fearful sense of dereliction lingering beneath the structures of our lives. But there is also a warmer sense of limited goods. “Toads” in *The Less Deceived* sees work as a brute squatting on the poet’s life; the poem ends with a recognition;

Ah, were I courageous enough to shout  
To shout *Stuff your pension!*  
But I know, all too well, that’s the stuff  
That dreams are made on:

For something sufficiently toad-like  
Squats in me, too;  
Its hunkers are heavy as hard luck,  
And cold as snow,

And will never allow me to blarney  
My way to getting  
The girl and the money  
All at one sitting.

I don’t say, one bodies the other  
One’s spiritual truth;  
But I do say it’s hard to lose either  
When you have both

Here the second toad is ambivalently presented as the guardian of sincerity, but with “hunkers heavy as hard luck”; and the last stanza is perhaps equivocal: despite the disclaimer, work does seem to be propping up “spiritual truth.” Perhaps the lingering sense of this claim was larger than Larkin felt able to make when he reconsidered it. “Toads Revisited” in *The Whitsun Weddings* sees work as a more limited good, guarding one from dereliction, from

Being one of the men  
You meet of an afternoon:  
Palsied old step-takers  
Hare-eyed clerks with the jitters,

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Wax-fleshed out-patients  
Still vague from accidents,  
And characters in long coats  
Deep in the litter-baskets—

All dodging the toad work  
By being stupid or weak.  
Think of being them!

And the poem ends on a note that is less pretentious than the end of the earlier poem, a note at once warmer and more sobering:

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.

The title *The Less Deceived* is taken from a poem about the seduction of a 19th century working-girl, an incident taken from Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*. But as a title for the whole volume it seems to strike a key-note of qualified but superior clear-sightedness: the poet is one who is less taken in than others. The progress marked by *The Whitsun Weddings* is towards a more sceptical view of the self (the poet is not quite certain how like Mr. Bleaney he may be), accompanied by a wider sense of sympathy for other lives, and it is the poems with this latter quality (already seen in "At Grass") that I think we may find some of Larkin's finest achievements.

### IV

THERE CAN, PROBABLY, BE LITTLE COMPASSION WITHOUT a clear perception of the self. The poet who is uncertain of his feelings about his own life will, to the same degree, be unable to enter sympathetically into the lives of others: and conversely, without the effort of widening sympathy the sense of self will become diminished. One might describe one main effort of Larkin's poetry as the attempt to extend his sense of life by contemplating the experience of others in a way which carries himself along with that imaginative extension and enables

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him, in some way, to share the experience. The quality that Larkin has said he most admires in poetry is honesty, and I think it is a quality we find to an exceptional degree in his poems. And one might further define his honesty by saying that it takes two directions: towards himself and what *he* feels, with all the possible sense of limitation that may entail; and towards what, as it were, he feels he might be able to feel or at least make imaginatively his own; that experience of life that others have, or have had, which may seem more significant in certain respects than his own. There is similarly a tension between the limits on what the poet can “make his own” and the values available to the intellect or the moral sense. Larkin himself has expressed this as a tension between feeling and belief:

Very little that catches the imagination, in short, gets its clearance from either the intelligence or the moral sense. And equally, properly truthful or dispassionate themes enlist only the wannest support from the imagination. The poet is perpetually in the common human condition of trying to feel a thing because he believes it or believe a thing because he feels it.<sup>8</sup>

Many of Larkin’s best poems involve this tension: and in them we feel that the poet’s sense of life is being extended in the experience being described, that feeling and belief are brought together, extended, deepened and confirmed.

One of Larkin’s best poems, “The Whitsun Weddings” is an example of how feeling and belief can be brought together, or more precisely, how the discovery of certain feelings can validate an acceptance of traditional ideas. Throughout his poetry Larkin is often drawn strongly towards traditional forms of life, but without the final conviction that they can apply to him in any usual way. “Church Going” is a typical example, in which the embarrassed agnostic church visitor, not quite sure why he is there, nevertheless reaches some statement of why it is that the place still draws him. The speaker is very much in evidence in the poem (indeed more than any other poem it has given readers their image of Larkin). And though this presence with all its shrugging reflections and dry disparaging speculations is part of the achievement, it makes difficult the final rise to dignified language at the end of the poem:

A serious house on serious earth it is  
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,  
Are recognised, and robed as destinies.

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<sup>8</sup> *The London Magazine*, February 1962. Quoted by Ricks, *op. cit.*

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If this is really true, what becomes of the speaker's lack of comprehension and sense of anachronism? "The Whitsun Weddings" seems to me a more successful poem, in that there is no such difficulty: the speaker's presence is significant but unobtrusive, and gradually disappears as the poem proceeds. With the speaker less prominently in view, the scene itself can be made more compellingly present for the reader and can reveal more persuasively the life that stirs surprisingly within ordinary lives and conventions (and makes us ask what we mean by the word "ordinary"). Larkin almost disappears from the poem, but importantly he does not quite: he remains in it enough to provide a sense of personal discovery which the reader shares. The poem begins with himself, and we never quite lose the authenticating sense of an observer, while being drawn out into a fresher and deeper sense of the life outside him, with its poignant mixture of beauty and banality:

That Whitsun, I was late getting away:  
Not till about  
One-twenty on the sunlit Saturday  
Did my three-quarters-empty train pull out,  
All windows down, all cushions hot, all sense  
Of being in a hurry gone. We ran  
Behind the backs of houses, crossed a street  
Of blinding windscreens, smelt the fish dock; thence  
The river's level drifting breadth began,  
Where sky and Lincolnshire and water meet.

The details that follow give a strong, deeply felt sense of the semi-urban, semi-rural English scene through which the train passes. (It was movingly apt that in a B.B.C. tribute to Larkin on his fiftieth birthday, Sir John Betjeman should give a fine reading of this poem.) At first the speaker does not notice the weddings ("sun destroys/ The interest of what's happening in the shade"). But then

We passed them, grinning and pomaded, girls  
In parodies of fashion, heels and veils,  
All posed irresolutely, watching us go,  
  
As if out on the end of an event  
Waving goodbye  
To something that survived it.

The first impressions are of the jovially banal details, the "fathers with broad belts under their suits," the "mothers loud and fat," but gradually



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the speaker is drawn more deeply into the seriousness of the scenes, and his observation of the serious feelings within the commonplaceness and vulgarity is quietly brilliant:

All down the line  
Fresh couples climbed aboard: the rest stood round;  
The last confetti and advice were thrown,  
And, as we moved, each face seemed to define  
Just what it saw departing: children frowned  
At something dull; fathers had never known  
  
Success so huge and wholly farcical;  
The women shared  
The secret like a happy funeral;  
While girls, gripping their handbags tighter, stared  
At a religious wounding.

The poem resists being divided up, but the extraordinarily telling close (Larkin's endings are frequently fine) exemplifies the way in which the experience of a specific occasion in Larkin can broaden into a rich sense of life as a whole, and the way in which the sense of the fertility of these arriving marriages becomes one which the poet imaginatively shares: the sense of falling, of life-giving rain, belongs to the poem itself as well as the marriages it is describing:

I thought of London spread out in the sun,  
Its postal districts packed like squares of wheat:  
  
There we were aimed. And as we raced across  
Bright knots of rail  
Past standing Pullmans, walls of blackened moss  
Came close, and it was nearly done, this frail  
Travelling coincidence; and what it held  
Stood ready to be loosened with all the power  
That being changed can give. We slowed again,  
And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled  
A sense of falling, like an arrow shower  
Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.

One might notice that in that last simile there is the kind of figurative, almost symbolist language which we find in isolation in "Absences," "unlike" and "better" than himself, as Larkin put it: but here it grows out of the specific, the prosaic, the actual. Larkin extends himself and

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his art in the progress of the poem. This feeling out into lives beyond his own, there too in "At Grass," is perhaps Larkin's finest quality as a poet: and it would not be the genuine extension it is without Larkin's accompanying honesty about himself.

### V

A LARGE PART OF LARKIN'S HONESTY can be seen in what might be loosely called his pessimism, and I would not want to close on a note which might seem to make him more comfortably "positive" than he is. I think that Christopher Ricks is being just a little fashionably bleak when, comparing Larkin's attitude to Hardy's aphorism "If way to the Better there be/It exacts a full look at the worst," he writes: "Certainly [Larkin] insists on a full look at the worst but not in the hope that there may be a way to a Better." Larkin's looks at the worst are quite uncompromising: he never dresses up a pessimistic poem with possible hints of a way out. But alongside a particularly dark poem we may find one which either insists on human strengths or sets down an unwilling sense of liberated feeling. Larkin's latest volume, *High Windows*, demonstrates this even more than the previous ones, and it would be appropriate to close this article with an attempt to indicate some of the most recent directions Larkin's poetry has taken.

There are darker and more bitter poems in *High Windows* than in any of the previous volumes. There is a kind of bitter defensive anger at human weakness and the horror of age and death which comes out most strongly in "The Old Fools":

What do they think has happened, the old fools,  
To make them like this? Do they somehow suppose  
It's more grown-up when your mouth hangs open and drools,  
And you keep on pissing yourself, and can't remember  
Who called this morning?

The disgust is not lack of compassion because it is a kind of self-disgust: the anger and the whole horror of the poem is directed finally at the self:

Can they never tell  
What is dragging them back, and how it will end? Not at night?  
  
Not when strangers come? Never, throughout  
The whole hideous inverted childhood? Well,  
We shall find out.

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One can call this pessimism, in that it chooses to face one of the worst possible versions of old age: after all, one might be able to imagine other versions. But one would have to be a very good poet to imagine them half as convincingly. The pessimism here is not of the kind that we feel springs from a *parti pris*, a prejudice towards the gloomy, and Larkin might prefer to call the quality of this poem that of realism. These are the aspects of reality that impress themselves on Larkin's mind, and they are made undeniably real to the reader. There are poems of a kind of social satire in this volume, too, which are harsher possibly than any of Larkin's previous poems: "Vers de Société" which caustically lays bare Larkin's sense of the destructive tedium and the pitiful consolations of "socializing," or "Symphony in White Major" which commends with blandly bitter irony the gin-drinking "good-sort" who comes perilously close, the poem hints, to being the poet himself. But again these are kinds of pessimism which seem to have their eye very much on the object (though in the latter poem one might still wonder how close this figure is to the poet). The pessimism is only less successful where it does seem to fall back a little into habit, as in "Going, Going," the poem about England's disappearing heritage which Larkin wrote for the Department of the Environment; or in "Homage to a Government" a poem about bringing British soldiers home "for lack of money," which does not persuade me, at any rate, that reduction of Britain's overseas powers and duties, though a loss, is symptomatic of a thoughtlessness in British society, as Larkin seems to be suggesting (though in reply Larkin would no doubt simply point to the line "Our children will not know it is a different country"). Both these poems have a flatter, duller tone, which convincingly renders a sad weariness: but there are better things in this volume than sad weariness.

The nature of these better things might be described by returning finally to the idea of two directions of Larkin's honesty: towards his sense of himself and towards his sense of the possibilities of other life. "This be The Word" makes fun in its title of the coarse, bar-room-gnomic bitterness, which is still genuine bitterness, of its opening

They fuck you up, your mum and dad,  
They never mean to but they do.  
They fill you with the faults they had  
And add some extra, just for you.

One hears Larkin saying this, but the title indicates that the tone would in some way qualify the element of bitter truth. This is Larkin's honesty

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towards his own irrepressible sourness. In "To the Sea" or "Show Saturday" there is the honesty towards his sense of other lives, here the stability and strength within ordinary social pastimes. But there is a third kind of honesty which is all the more telling for being, as it seems, unwilling. I do not think the two poems just mentioned are as good as "The Whitsun Weddings" though they are still moving poems. What one or two poems in *High Windows* do which Larkin has not, I think, quite done before, is to touch with precision on the life of Nature, and on a sense of life beyond the everyday which might, with due care not to assimilate the feeling to something else, be called religious. Reviewing Stevie Smith's *Selected Poems*,<sup>9</sup> Larkin drew attention to the serious religious note beneath her whimsicality: and I think it would not be impertinent to see a sense of a possible domain for this area of experience in Larkin. "Church Going" of course explores Larkin's highly qualified sense of this area, but in a discursive way, and if I'm right, with a slight straining to incorporate traditional dignity. "High Windows" on the other hand seems to escape suddenly and involuntarily from an oppressive sense of bafflement at human sexuality to what might almost be called a vision of pure spirit. The poem needs to be read in full, for the effect is complex. Analysis at this point would be too lengthy: let me simply suggest that this poem which might seem to express only disgust and a kind of nihilism, expresses rather bafflement and a kind of joy. It is a complex of feelings which we have had nowhere before in Larkin, and it suggests that his art is intensifying itself by forming new patterns of feeling. Larkin has said of Hardy that he "taught one to feel": it seems to me high praise, and that similar praise can be given to Larkin. For Larkin's poetry is finally a means for clarifying and sorting out feelings and letting the genuine ones come through. And it is a mark of both the discipline and generosity of feeling in Larkin's poetry that in his latest volume he can express, among other things, the scrupulous and unforced lyricism and the Shakespearian richness of language of "The Trees," a poem which has a simplicity and strength unlike anything he has done before:

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<sup>9</sup> "Frivolous and Vulnerable," in *New Statesman*, 28 September 1962, pp. 416, 418. I am indebted to David Timms's useful short critical study, *Philip Larkin* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1973) for its listing of this and other pieces by and about Larkin, as well as for its informed discussion of Larkin's work.

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The trees are coming into leaf  
Like something almost being said;  
The recent buds relax and spread,  
Their greenness is a kind of grief.

Is it that they are born again  
And we grow old? No, they die too.  
Their yearly trick of looking new  
Is written down in rings of grain.

Yet still the unresting castles thresh  
In full grown thickness every May;  
Last year is dead, they seem to say,  
Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.

It is one of the many poems of Larkin's where one feels that he returns poetry to its traditional role of speaking simply and profoundly to a wide audience.