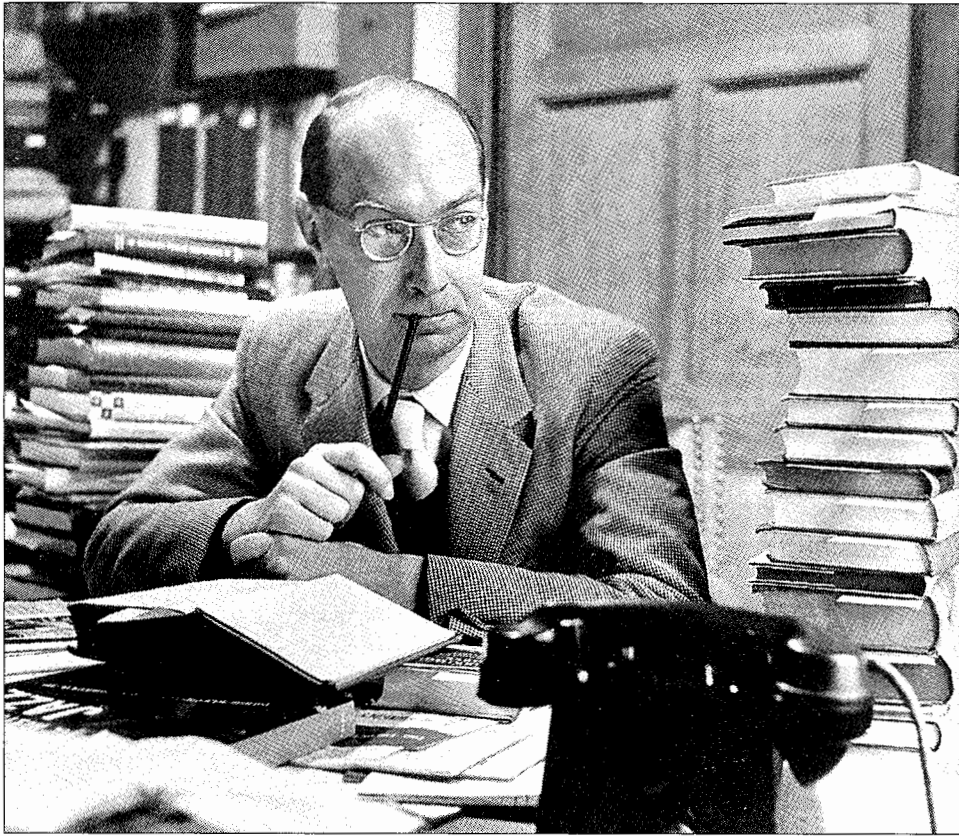

PHILIP LARKIN, 1922–1985



SOUR MAJESTY

BY EDWARD HIRSCH

Revealing the dark side of the best-loved English poet of his generation, the recently published biography and selected letters of Philip Larkin sent shock waves through the literary world. How might readers respond to the work of a man who gleefully raved against women, minorities, and almost everybody else, including himself? Edward Hirsch ponders the question.

Philip Larkin has increasingly come to seem the greatest English poet after W. H. Auden, though the word "great" is perhaps mildly inapplicable to a writer of such slender output and narrow range. Yet he was, as Auden himself said in a 50th-birthday tribute, "a master of the English language," a poet whose near-perfect phrasing, emotional honesty and directness, and clarity of artistic purpose permanently stamped his generation. Larkin essentially wrote from personal experience, his verbal antennae precisely attuned to unhappiness—"happiness writes white," he said, quoting the French novelist Montherlant. He understood poetry as "emotional in nature and theatrical in operation," and his carefully honed style combined a self-deprecating, razor-like wit with an unshakable sense of worldly disappointment, of desires unfulfilled and dreams thwarted. His famous remark to an interviewer that "deprivation is for me what daffodils were for Wordsworth" is both funny and acute since the misery of diminished and unfulfilled experience is his enduring subject. Indeed, it is difficult to think of him as young—this man who seemed to have been born middle-aged, regretting a past that never took place and terrified of oncoming death. The tone of sour majesty, of sardonic resignation infused with wordless romantic yearning, is something we might call Larkinesque.

During his lifetime Larkin became one of the best-loved English poets, a reclusive figure at the heart of the English sensibility. His formidable reputation basically rests on three thin, irreplaceable volumes whose combined contents come to 85 poems: *The Less Deceived* (1955), which made his mark and established his voice; *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964), which made him famous in England ("It turned his voice into one of the means by which his country recognized itself," his biographer Andrew Motion writes); and *High Windows* (1974), which converted him into something of an English national treasure and made him internationally known. These were gathered together and chronologically rearranged in An-

thony Thwaite's edition of the *Collected Poems* (1988), which also includes Larkin's early poems, written from his teens up to the publication of his first book, *The North Ship* (1945), as well as previously unpublished and uncollected lyrics. The arrangement dilutes Larkin's scrupulous effects and well-ordered individual collections, but it also gives a fuller sense of the writer at work, his clustering themes and chronological development. Larkin's bibliography also contains two early novels, *Jill* (1946) and *A Girl in Winter* (1947), written in his early twenties (his first overriding ambition was to be a novelist), and two nonfiction miscellanies, *All What Jazz: A Record Diary 1961–1971* (rev. ed. 1985) and *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955–1982* (1983). Larkin's reputation was further enhanced by the controversial success of his edition of *The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse* (1973), which succeeded Yeats's *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936). Larkin's edition gave canonical authority to his traditional poetic values and anti-Modernist tastes, his commitment to formal poetry written for a general readership. The voice of disillusion was also a conservator of English traditions.

After the death of his friend Sir John Betjeman in 1984, Larkin was generally expected to become the next poet laureate of England. The rumor persists that he was passed over because of the profanity in his work satirizing family values ("They fuck you up, your mum and dad"), but in truth he was offered the position by Mrs. Thatcher and turned it down. Larkin always refused to be in any way publicly involved with poetry. (He once said about poetry readings, "I don't want to go around pretending to be me.") He found appearing in public an ordeal, jealously guarded his privacy, and suffered what would turn out to be a near-terminal writer's block. ("Poetry has deserted me," he was already complaining in 1967.) He thought the laureateship had become "showbiz" and was not surprised when Ted Hughes,

whose work he disliked, accepted the position. But if Hughes, a romantic primitivist who glories in preindustrial Albion, became the official laureate, then Larkin remained until his death, as Donald Davie suggested, "the effective unofficial laureate of post-1945 England." Davie observed that "we recognize in Larkin's poems the seasons of present-day England, but we recognize also the seasons of an English soul."

Larkin drew a thick curtain between his private life and his public persona. He dismissed his childhood in the smallish Midlands city of Coventry as "a forgotten boredom" and encouraged the notion that nothing had ever happened to him. At Oxford during the war years ("Oxford terrified me," he admitted later) he wrote both poetry and prose and was associated with the generation of Kingsley Amis and John Wain. Afterward, he worked as a librarian in Wellington, Leicester, and Belfast before settling down at the University of Hull. For the last 30 years of his life he cultivated his disguise as an ordinary person—a working chap, a bachelor, a middle-brow. "Whatever a poet is supposed to look like, it's not me," he said typically. He was, by all accounts, unflinchingly courteous, bald and bespectacled and increasingly deaf, formal in a dark suit and tie ("death-suited"), stern but amiable, quiet and shy, but also droll and at times wickedly funny. He obviously took a great deal of pleasure in expressing himself as Philip Larkin, in his own playful articulate refusals and his unyielding posture of bleakness. He liked turning his dislike of things into a spectacle for his friends and delighted in comic exaggerations. "To say that he had a sense of humor," the novelist A. N. Wilson cautioned about Larkin's antic humor, "would be to imply that he sometimes said things which it was safe to take wholly seriously."

Not many detected the level of rage that

seethed inside him. Larkin never hid his negative opinions of others, but he parceled them out and displayed them with a witty tact. In *Required Writing*, for example, one encounters his offhanded sense of other people ("Everyone envies everyone else"), his commitment to bachelorhood ("I see life more as an affair of solitude diversified by company than as an affair of company diversified by solitude"), his distaste for children ("Until I grew up I thought I hated everybody, but when I grew up I realized it was just children I didn't like"), his ideas about being abroad ("I wouldn't mind seeing China if I could come back the same day"), and his conservative political views ("I adore Mrs. Thatcher"). He was right-wing and said, "I identify the Right with certain virtues and the Left with certain vices." He was also a monarchist and one of his last poems, dated March 2, 1978, is a quatrain written to commemorate the Queen's Jubilee. He called it "a lapidary lark":

In times when nothing stood
but worsened, or grew strange,
there was one constant good:
she did not change.

The poem is now inscribed on a memorial stone in Queen's Square garden.

Larkin believed that "the impulse to preserve lies at the bottom of any art," and many of his poems preserve the memory of a fading England. "Never such innocence,/Never before or since," he writes in his hymn to old England, "MCMXIV." In a sense, Larkin's mature tone settles down into a knowing acceptance of Englishness, of what it means to be English. The poem "The Importance of Elsewhere," which he wrote after living in Belfast for five years, begins, "Lonely in Ireland, since it was not home,/Strangeness made sense," and concludes,

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Living in England has no such excuse:
These are my customs and establishments
It would be much more serious to refuse.
Here no elsewhere underwrites my existence.

There is a Larkin of cricket and English seaside holidays, of country churchyards, native coastlines, and small market towns. But he catches the country at a point where it is endangered, hemmed in on all sides, on the verge of disappearing. The stately cadences of "Going, Going" are explicit:

And that will be England gone,
The shadows, the meadows, the lanes,
The guildhalls, the carved choirs.
There'll be books; it will linger on
In galleries; but all that remains
For us will be concrete and tyres.

Larkin's England is an Edwardian pastoral that has been desecrated by a relentless encroaching modernism ("greeds/And garbage are too thick-strewn/To be swept up now"). It is a provincial glory, besieged and vanishing.

Larkin's anxiety about the social and political developments of the 1960s was directly expressed in such satirical poems as "Naturally the Foundation Will Bear Your Expenses," "Take One Home for the Kiddies," and "Homage to a Government," which takes up the subject of Britain's withdrawal from a dominant military role on the world stage. "Homage" publicly articulates what Larkin told Barbara Pym privately—that he was "deeply humiliated at living in a country that spends more on education than on defence." Here is the last stanza:

Next year we shall be living in a country
That brought its soldiers home for
 lack of money.
The statues will be standing in the same
Tree-muffled squares, and look nearly
 the same.
Our children will not know it's a
 different country.
All we can hope to leave them now is money.

The sadness associated with Britain's loss of power is not just a personal neurosis; it reflects the pessimism of Larkin's class facing its reduced place in the world. Larkin is not usually such an overtly political poet; rather he presents himself as a lyricist of dwindled prospects, of leaves falling away from their trees and seasons fading, of people being pushed to the side of their own lives. But the politics associated with Larkin's personal sadness are encoded in his work since his autumnal feelings of disappointment continually point to a national feeling of cultural decline and decreased imperial power. Larkin was the unofficial laureate of a gray, postimperial, postwar England.

He cultivated a stellar, anti-intellectual pose as one of the lesser deceived. Larkin made no secret of his anti-cosmopolitanism, his anti-Americanism, his hatred of "the aberration of Modernism, that blighted all the arts." He took every opportunity to whack the Modernist giants (Pablo Picasso, Ezra Pound, Charlie Parker). He also made much of his literary conversion from Yeats to Hardy, which he defined as a rejection of grand rhetorical gestures and an acceptance of human limits. Hardy gave him confidence in his own authoritative pessimism. Thereafter Larkin always insisted on an empirical, antiheroic, antitranscendental poetic. He took a skeptical, commonsensical approach to poetry, ridiculed anything that smacked of "literature," and pretended to be a nonreader. One of his best-known poems, "A Study of Reading Habits," concludes, "Books are a load of crap." Or, as he told an inquisitive interviewer, "I read everything except philosophy, theology, economics, sociology, science, or anything to do with the wonders of nature, anything to do with technology—have I said politics?"

Of course this is absurd coming from a university librarian. The pose is belied both by the quality of Larkin's writing—you don't get to write the way Larkin did without being an acute reader—and by the sly, mostly buried range of references in his work, especially to

French Symbolism. In another format he admitted, "I've always been a compulsive reader," and acknowledged keeping 12 poetic exemplars within reach of his working chair: Thomas Hardy, William Wordsworth, Christina Rossetti, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Siegfried Sassoon, Edward Thomas, William Barnes, Winthrop Praed, John Betjeman, Walt Whitman (!), Robert Frost, and Wilfred Owen. Many of Larkin's opinions seemed part of an elaborate put-on, a vast private joke. Yet there was also a truth expressed in Larkin's stance against reading that may, after all, suggest an anxiety about the "unmanliness" of literary activity. As his work progressed, he increasingly fenced off more and more of the outside world, eventually excluding other people's thoughts and ideas entirely, dispensing with other people's passions by filing them away according to the Dewey decimal system.

This past year, however, a "national treasure" became, to judge by the ferocious debates in the English press, a national problem. The carefully erected barrier between Larkin's private life and his public persona was breached by the publication of two books by his literary executors: Anthony Thwaite's voluminous edition of the *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin*, which contains over 700 letters to more than 50 recipients, and Andrew Motion's judicious biographical account, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*. In England the *Letters* appeared first and the biography afterward; in the United States the process has been mercifully reversed. The biography is out this month, and the *Letters* will be published in December. Late in his life Larkin reviewed lives of Auden and Cecil Day-Lewis and declared he was "rather depressed by the remorseless scrutiny of one's private affairs that seems to be the fate of the newly dead. Really, one should burn everything." That "remorseless scrutiny" has now turned in his direction. Larkin was constitutionally unable to burn anything himself—he was as ambivalent about this as about almost everything else—but on his deathbed he instructed his long-time companion, Monica Jones, to destroy the

30-odd thick volumes of his diary, which she subsequently did. The rest of his papers survived, and the damage is profound.

The publication of Larkin's *Letters* created a controversy in England that has not yet subsided and will go on echoing for years. Almost all of the discussion has focused on the most repellent aspects of the correspondence: Larkin's racism, his xenophobia, his misogyny. It is as if he had exposed the sewer of the English soul. Certainly that is not what the editor of these *Letters* had intended. "What is remarkable," Anthony Thwaite writes in his tactful, somewhat hopeful introduction, "is how consistently Larkin emerges, whoever he is writing to. Books, poems, jazz, cricket, drink, the daily grind of 'the toad, work,' exasperation with colleagues and friends, gossip about them, depression at the state of the world and of himself, concern with whatever concerned the person to whom he was writing, occasional delights in the occasional delight he experienced—all are here, in the vividly speaking voice of someone who, even when he was joking, told the truth as he saw it." After this mild description, it is a shock to turn to the often foul-mouthed letters themselves. These letters, especially the ones to his male cronies Kingsley Amis, Robert Conquest, and Colin Gunner, were a time bomb that has now exploded. Many readers suspected Larkin's prejudices all along—his attitudes kept seeping into his poems, reviews, and interviews—but not many were aware of the virulence with which they were privately expressed. What began as a set of grim jokes and biases slowly hardened into a catalogue of intense hatreds. Larkin never pretended he enjoyed being Larkin—"Life is first boredom, then fear," he summarized in "Dockery and Son"—but the *Letters* indicate the depth of his self-absorption and self-disgust, his ever-deepening misery and despair, his rancid view of other people.

Many of the letters are uncontroversial. There is an exemplary, well-known correspondence with Barbara Pym—one of the few

writers he truly admired—and a friendly series of letters to his editors at Faber & Faber, in particular Charles Monteith. There are youthful, exuberant letters to his schoolmates in which he talks about his ambition to be a novelist, his early enthusiasm for Auden and Lawrence, his devotion to jazz. He writes chatty letters to female friends, carries on a savvy business correspondence relating to his poems, and writes warmly to other writers who are promoting his work. But Larkin's misanthropy is always lingering and gives a decided cast to the correspondence. "Bugger everything & everybody," he says. His scorn begins at home. Near the end of his life he calls himself "a pregnant salmon" and describes his "sagging face" as "an egg sculpted in lard, with goggles on." "I hated myself so much I was trying to disappear altogether," he jokes in italics at the bottom of one letter. "So now we face 1982," he confesses in another, "gargantuanly paunched, helplessly addicted to alcohol, 'tired of livin' and scared of dyin', world famous unable to write poet."

Larkin's self-disgust quickly spilled over to others, and not many escaped his bile. He especially mocked anyone connected to literature. "I have a huge contempt for all 'groups' that listen to and discuss poetry," he wrote. In his characterizations, Emily Dickinson becomes "Emily Prick-in-son," the poets David Jones "a farting prick" and W. D. Snodgrass "a dopy kid-mad sod." The critic H. E. Bates becomes "H. E. Bastard," and in a splenetic catalogue Larkin asks, "When will these sodding loudmouthed cuntin' shitstuffed pisswashed sons of poxed-up bitches learn that there is something greater than *literature*?" Nor are Larkin's friends exempt. Anthony Powell was taken aback to find himself described as a "creep" and a "horse-faced dwarf." About Kingsley Amis, to whom he is permanently linked, Larkin says, "The only reason I hope to predecease him is that I'd find it next to impossible to say anything nice about him at his memorial service."

The letters show that Larkin's poetics of preservation were countered by an equal need

to mock and denigrate. Hence the lifelong undergraduate prank that he shared with Amis of signing off with the word "bum" at the end of letters: "Man that is born of woman hath but a short time to bum," "The Tories may lose the election owing to Mrs. Thatcher's bum," and so forth. Larkin moves easily from irreverently joking about individuals to lacerating groups. He calls the Irish "driveling slack-jawed blackguards," and exclaims, "What dreary no-good cunts these foreigners are." His racism is especially repellent. He advises Amis to "keep up the cracks about niggers and wogs"; he speaks of "fat Caribbean germs pattering after me in the Underground." He announces, "And as for those black scum kicking up a din on the boundary—a squad of South African police would have sorted them out to my satisfaction." Here is a little ditty on "How to Win the Next Election" that he sent to Conquest, Gunner, and Monteith:

Prison for strikers,
Bring back the cat,
Kick out the niggers—
How about that?

Larkin's letters sometimes make a spectacle of being offensive, at least partially for the shock effect—"Ooh, Larkin," he feigns, "I'm sorry to find you holding these views"—but that makes his opinions no more funny or palatable.

Here is the "unwritten" Jubilee poem to Her Majesty that Larkin sent to Thwaite:

After Healey's trading figures,
After Wilson's squalid crew,
And the rising tide of niggers—
What a treat to look at you!

This is the "unofficial" quatrain buried under the "official" one, the political undertow, the racist joke that should be inscribed on the backside of the stone in Queen's Square garden. The shadow-side of Larkin's right-wing politics was a fury against everything Other: Jews, blacks, women, immigrants, academics, trade unions. He despised everything and

everybody, especially himself.

The letters are only the tip of the iceberg. "Please believe me," Larkin told an adolescent friend, "when I say that half my days are spent in black, surging, twitching, boiling HATE!!!" It is no longer possible to discount this aspect of Larkin's character, which was so inextricably tied to his creativity. His wretchedness was extreme. Apparently, the letters are mild in comparison to the diaries. The evidence suggests, as Andrew Motion says, that "even his most candid letters only hint at their intensity." The one person who glimpsed some of the diaries, his friend Patsy Strang, reported that they were sexual logbooks ("very masturbatory") and, in Motion's characterization, "a gigantic repository for bile, resentment, envy, and misanthropy." Larkin may have hated the Modernists, but he had more in common with them than he supposed. He now takes his place in a line of reactionary 20th-century writers—from Yeats, Pound, and Eliot to D. H. Lawrence and Wyndham Lewis—whose lives (and works) were fueled by repulsive right-wing hatreds. But what was for an earlier generation a rising tide of democracy and leveling modern values was for Larkin a flood that had already taken place. He has just about drowned. His defense, in "This Be The Verse," was a tone of sardonic chuckling, a grim, half-comic misery:

Man hands on misery to man.
It deepens like a coastal shelf.
Get out as early as you can,
And don't have any kids yourself.

Motion's biography is helpful in deciphering the clues to Larkin's character and in creating a context for his opinions. Larkin led an outwardly uneventful life—he was so self-divided and focused on writing that he mostly kept from doing anything—but a secretive, tumultuous inner life. He thrived off his own refusals and flourished on his own pessimisms. Motion locates Larkin's problems somewhere among his repressed homosexuality (never acknowledged), his latent anti-

Semitism (which scarcely figures into the correspondence), and the definitive influence of his parents, especially his beloved father, who was a prewar Nazi sympathizer. Far from forgetting his childhood in Coventry, Larkin remembered it all too well. He never recovered from his parents' cramped, loveless marriage, a "bloody hell" he vowed never to repeat. He seems to have combined something of his mother's excruciating timidity (as a child he was nearsighted and stammered badly) with his father's authoritarianism, thus trapping himself between opposing impulses. Larkin always attributed his negative feelings about travel ("filthy abroad" he calls it in the letters) to two trips he took to Germany with his father. Motion acutely speculates on the ambivalence and shame Larkin must have felt—"embarrassment at best, humiliation at worst"—about being in Germany in the late 1930s. By the late 1920s Larkin's father had already become, as one acquaintance said, "an active and impenitent admirer of Germany's postwar recovery, and of Hitler's role in achieving this." Larkin vehemently denied that his father was a fascist, acknowledging that Sydney Larkin was "the sort of person democracy didn't suit." Larkin sometimes mocked his father's opinions, but, as Motion notes, he "never actually disagreed with him—never sympathizing with the suffering of others, and sometimes even making a few mildly anti-Semitic and pro-German remarks of his own." Larkin's anti-Semitism surfaces in his late poem "Posterity," where his satirically named biographer, Jake Balokowksy, laments:

"I'm stuck with this old fart at least a year;
I wanted to teach school in Tel Aviv,
But Myra's folks"—he makes the money
sign—
"Insisted I got tenure."

Larkin's anti-Semitism is rarely this overt, but his attitude toward the Jew as the despised Other magnetized many of his other hatreds.

Larkin also picked up many of his father's

negative opinions about women. He had little or no contact with girls during his childhood and adolescence, and prejudice replaced knowledge. Women became for him remote and unimaginable. They sent him, as he confessed to his schoolmate James Sutton, "rigid with fright." Larkin's sexual anxiety and diffidence soon turned to sneering: "Women (university) repel me inconceivably," he told Sutton. "They are shits." "FUCK ALL WOMEN!" he writes elsewhere. "I am quite fed up with the whole business. . . . Sex is designed for people who like overcoming obstacles. I don't like overcoming obstacles." Those obstacles were mostly insurmountable and lifelong since Larkin's personality exquisitely balanced sexual attraction with sexual revulsion. Motion narrates the story—or nonstory—of Larkin's handful of stalled love affairs, especially with Monica Jones and Maeve Brennan ("Yes, life is pretty grey up in Hull," he wrote to Robert Conquest in 1966, "Maeve wants to marry me, Monica wants to chuck me."). His contradictory feelings left him at a permanent standstill.

Larkin thought of marriage as a "revolting institution," and his intense physical and emotional needs were countered by an equally intense fear of connection and commitment. He was convinced women used sex to snare men into marriage, which he thought of in the most conventional domestic terms. In the cartoonish situation of "Self's the Man," for example, poor, emasculated Arnold is run ragged because of his "selflessness":

He married a woman to stop her getting
 away
 Now she's there all day,

 And the money he gets for wasting his
 life on work
 She takes as her perk
 To pay for the kiddies' clobber and the drier
 And the electric fire,

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

Revolted by the idea of family responsibilities, Larkin also felt victimized by his own desires and often turned to pornography for consolation. The fact that his letters carry on a steady stream of casual, pornographic, and misogynistic remarks obfuscates but does not obliterate his sexual frustration and alienation, his sexual envy, bewilderment, and fear. It was largely because of his feelings about women that he came to define life as "an immobile, locked,/Three-handed struggle between/Your wants, the world's for you, and (worse)/The unbeatable slow machine/That brings what you'll get." ("The Life with a Hole in It"). Women became for him symptomatic of the life he would never lead, the incarnation of unfulfilled, unfulfillable desires.

Larkin's sexual conflicts were repeatedly played out in his work from the earliest poems in *The North Ship* to his final lyrics. In "Reasons for Attendance" he opposes "the wonderful feel of girls" to his own solitary calling to "that lifted, rough-tongued bell/(Art, if you like)." The problem was that he was still beset and bewildered by his own desires, terrorized by a solitude he had chosen but could not entirely tolerate ("Only the young can be alone freely," he concludes in "Vers de Société") and desperately needed to defend. He felt victimized for having chosen "a life/Reprehensibly perfect" ("Poetry of Departures"). Hence the bitter resentment of the first stanza of "The Life with a Hole in It":

When I throw back my head and howl
 People (women mostly) say
But you've always done what you want,
You always get your own way
 —A perfectly vile and foul
 Inversion of all that's been.
 What the old ratbags mean
 Is I've never done what I don't.

Larkin's work charts the forms of his deprivation in terms of women: the turmoil of losing the girl, of desiring the beautiful girl he cannot have and not desiring the unattractive, problematic one he might get, of being too

middle-aged for the sexual revolution. Larkin is known as a great poet of mortality, of aging and death, but, as his biographer suggests; "Reading his poems in chronological sequence, it is clear that his obsession with death is inextricable from his fascination with love and marriage." What Motion calls "fascination" is more accurately described as fascinated revulsion.

The specter of the white male poet turning reactionary in later life is hard to face and even harder to think about clearly. What are its implications? English poetry is not inevitably aligned with reactionary politics—one thinks of Byron and Shelley—and there is no reason that lyric sadness and disappointment cannot be linked to a democratic and progressive social action. It is rare but possible. In Larkin's case, however, as in many others, the poet's narcissistic wounds found outlet in a hierarchical politics of exclusion. It is not sufficient to say, as the *London Times* did, that "what matters about Larkin is the handful of melancholy and funny poems that captured the mood of his times." The problem is that Larkin's attitudes, now made explicit in the *Letters* and biography, are shot through his work. They are not "accidental" or merely unworthy of him. They shadow his poems like an unwelcome aura. They are stitched there like threads that we suspected were present all along and now can see. Naturally, this affects our unraveling of his work. Larkin's need to preserve was balanced by an equally intense desire to desecrate, and hatred was the flip side of his gloomy tenderness. "What will survive of us is love," he wrote in "An Arundel Tomb," but rage was the underbelly of his art.

Larkin's late personal lyrics show us the world from the point of view of someone who feels that love has been completely withdrawn from him. Hatred is one reaction to that withdrawal, an ugly solace and refuge in a place where privation reigns. He feels cheated and blames others for his

misery; he is imprisoned with his own inexcusable desires. Rather than express blame directly, the poems tend to celebrate and exacerbate the wound of lovelessness. Larkin's poems are not introspective. They do not lead him to "greater understanding." They are clenched, acerbic, unforgettable—the voice of bitterness itself. They are brokenhearted and utterly perfect and defensively armored. At times they are irresistibly funny and highly quotable, and many readers have found themselves reciting them from memory. Their lyric melancholy, splendid phrasing, and corrosive brilliance are like a magnet to poetry readers. But what is being magnetized? The poems move from the wry irony of "Annus Mirabilis"—

Sexual intercourse began
In nineteen sixty-three
(Which was rather late for me)—
Between the end of the *Chatterley* ban
And the Beatles' first LP.

to the grander resentment of "Sad Steps"—

... a reminder of the strength and pain
Of being young; that it can't come again,
But is for others undiminished somewhere.

to the putrefying envy and jealousy of "Love Again"—

Someone else feeling her breasts and cunt,
Someone else drowned in that
lash-wide stare,
And me supposed to be ignorant,
Or find it funny, or not to care,
Even . . . but why put it into words?

Here the voyeuristic fury turns to helplessness and then to frustrated silence. By the end of his life's work, Larkin's world had been hopelessly reduced; all that was left was the open sore of lovelessness and the prospect of "unresting death," endless oblivion.

Larkin made no secret of his final bafflement and dread. It was all he had left, his concluding weapon. He despised other people but

could not bear to be alone ("Vers de Soci  t  "); he was disgusted by "the whole hideous inverted childhood" of aging ("The Old Fools"); he felt his mind going blank from the blinding glare of death "not in remorse," he said, for "the good not done, the love not given," but at the thought of total emptiness, "the sure extinction that we travel to/And shall be lost in always" ("Aubade"). He went on complaining but knew that complaints wouldn't save him ("Death is no different whined at than withstood"); he raged against others but knew that rage devoured itself. He had found his last wrenched place in an unloved, unlovable universe. His viewpoint narrowed further and further until in the end all that remained of the heart's knowledge was a clear lens for viewing unacceptable death:

Where has it gone, the lifetime?
Search me. What's left is drear.
Unchilded and unwifed, I'm
Able to view that clear:
So final. And so near.
("The View")

The view into oblivion was so chillingly personal, painful, and direct that ultimately the poet wanted only to obliterate it. He longed for obliviousness itself, an end to the old wound, the agony of consciousness:

It will be worth it, if in the end I manage
To blank out whatever it is that is doing
the damage.

Then there will be nothing I know.
My mind will fold into itself, like fields,
like snow.
("The Winter Palace")

This poem is dated November 1, 1978, and it is no surprise to discover that from then on the mind folding back entirely into itself would not be able to sustain more than a handful of occasional lyrics. There was nothing left

for it in poetry. Resentment had run dry.

It is altogether remarkable then to turn back to a poem such as "High Windows" and find the same self-damaging rage transfigured, the same constellation of feelings remade. The unrelieved arc and movement of this poem with its crafty mix of dictions and characteristically ironized longings is Larkin at his artistic peak. It moves from a sardonic and profane bitterness about sex and religion to a final wordless perception of high windows:

When I see a couple of kids
And guess he's fucking her and she's
Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm,
I know this is paradise

Everyone old has dreamed of all their lives—
Bonds and gestures pushed to one side
Like an outdated combine harvester,
And everyone young going down the
long slide

To happiness, endlessly. I wonder if
Anyone looked at me, forty years back,
And thought, *That'll be the life;*
No God any more, or sweating in the dark

*About hell and that, or having to hide
What you think of the priest. He
And his lot will all go down the long slide
Like free bloody birds. And immediately*

Rather than words comes the thought of
high windows:
The sun-comprehending glass,
And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.

The visionary clairvoyance at the end of this poem points to an eternal realm, a Pascalian emptiness beyond the confines of language. It is rapturous and terrifying and free. "High Windows" reminds us that art exists beyond biography, that Larkin, too, was a vehicle for his feelings, that the sourness of his life could also be transformed into the spirit's majesty.

S

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