

Larkin's Eggs

BY EDWARD MENDELSON

Collected Poems
by Philip Larkin
edited with an introduction by Anthony Thwaite

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The worst disservice Philip Larkin's readers did to him was believing what he told them. A writer, like a government, speaks with two voices, an official one and an unofficial one. Only the second is truthful. In a government, the two voices are easily distinguished. The official spokesman stands behind a lectern and reads a prepared statement saying that everything is under control and progress is assured on all fronts. The unofficial spokesman cups his hand over a telephone in the back room and quietly tells a reporter that all hell has broken loose.

A writer's two voices are equally distinct, although readers have a natural tendency to conflate them. The official voice speaks smoothly and consistently

through interviews, lectures, and essays. The unofficial one argues with itself in novels, plays, and poems. The official voice either has all the answers or at least knows how to clarify and contain the question. The unofficial voice has nothing but questions.

In most writers the official voice is the voice of clarity and optimism, while the unofficial voice points to the dilemmas and darkneses that the official voice ignores. In Larkin, this pattern was reversed. His official voice spoke in essays and interviews about permanently lowered expectations, and adopted a comically aggressive tone of provincial disgust with everything in the contemporary world, including Larkin himself. His critics (with the honorable exceptions of Barbara Everett, Andrew Motion, and Sea-

mus Heaney), finding the same disgust and constraint in the poetry, tended to assume that Larkin's official voice was an adequate spokesman for the unofficial one.

By the time Larkin died in 1985, at the age of 63, he had created an official self-portrait of the artist as bitter, disillusioned, lonely, resentful of any energy and happiness enjoyed by others—even while he insisted that their energy was doomed and their happiness an illusion. But this partial portrait was no more truthful than any other official one. Larkin suffered all the bitterness of his official prose, but the alternative truth spoken quietly by his poems was a shy, persistent vision of freedom and exaltation.

Larkin seems to have been embarrassed by his own vision, and did his best to help readers ignore it. Most of the reviewers of his *Collected Poems* have been too busy quoting his famously caustic aphorisms to look for anything else, and it is hard to blame them. His deceptively unreflective style, the formal perfection of his rhymed and rhythmical stanzas, served as an effective camouflage for Larkin's vortices of feeling. More than any other British writer of his time, he seemed to transform the material bleakness of the austere 1940s and 1950s, and then the moral bleakness of the moneyed 1960s and 1970s, into an inescapable statement of the bleakness of almost everything.

In Larkin's official version of the human condition, life started badly and ended worse. From the moment you were born it was already too late to change for the better, because "They fuck you up, your mum and dad." And the poem that opened with this line closed with the advice that logically followed: "And don't have any kids yourself." If you try to think of art as a compensation for life's failures (as the unofficial Larkin in fact believed), the official Larkin offered the disillusion of long experience: "Get stewed: / Books are a load of crap." And if you dared to look toward something better, Larkin brought you down to earth in one poem after another that looked with unrelieved horror toward "the whole hideous inverted childhood" of old age—"and then the only end of age." The building most likely to appear in a Larkin poem is the hospital, imagined repeatedly as a cliff lowering over the hopes of anyone still living.

Larkin's laments over the decrepitude of age were so constant in the poems he published in his lifetime that it isn't surprising to find more of the same among the 80 poems first gathered in the posthumous *Collected Poems*. One almost predictable poem begins:

I feared these middle years,
The middle sixties,

When deftness disappears
 And each event is
 Freightened with a source-encrusting doubt,
 And turned to drought.

Or, more accurately, it would be unsurprising to find such a poem about old age if Larkin had actually written it. The poem he wrote instead—deliberately misquoted a couple of lines back—speaks of “these present years, / The middle twenties,” and was written when he was only 26. This suggests that when he wrote in the same way in later years he used age and death partly as disguising symbols of a different kind of loss. In fact, Larkin dwelled from the start on losses that were absolute and pervasive. And his sense of loss was less a satiric protest against the condition of the universe than an explicit sense that he was lost or divided from something—something that was desirable, calm, lovely, unalterable, and utterly inaccessible.

Even in the rare moments when Larkin modulated his bitterness to turn briefly sentimental over the possibility of happiness, the happiness he imagined lay somewhere over the horizon, outside the life he could perceive. The erotic energies of the couples on the train to London after the Whitsun weddings swell “Like an arrow-shower / Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.” In “Sad Steps” the “strength and pain / Of being young” is lost for Larkin but “is for others undiminished somewhere.” The direction marker always points somewhere else.

Larkin’s lost or distant treasure came into clearer focus as it grew more distant. In his early poems it took the vague form of an elusive and imaginary lover whose absence Larkin found more moving than the presence of any living woman could be. In his later poems, it transformed itself into a vivid intensity beyond understanding, a celestial emptiness more compelling than anything earthly and tangible. Whatever form it took, it was always exempt from time and death.

In an unsettling and exhilarating poem, written when he was 29 and first printed in this collection, Larkin begins the poem in a mood of gothic horror as

he waits for death to climb the stairs and open the door. But the poem ends with the arrival of death’s opposite:

Light cringed. The door swung inwards.
 Over the threshold
 Nothing like death stepped, nothing like
 death paused,
 Nothing like death has such hair, arms so
 raised.
 Why are your feet bare? Was not death to
 come?
 Why is he not here? What summer have
 you broken from?

The emotional force of this poem de-

that escape the bounds of earth. The mere juxtaposition of two kinds of cheap clothing shows

How separate and unearthly love is,
 Or women are, or what they do,
 Or in our young unreal wishes
 Seem to be: synthetic, new,
 And natureless in ecstasies.

In the world of matter and the flesh, the only possible objects of an unreal wish are synthetic, natureless, and inevitably disappointing. A few years later Larkin discovered that the real object of his wish was not an object at all, but a bright emptiness entirely beyond the changes of nature and the heaviness of matter.

Like any more explicit mystic, Larkin could name that emptiness only in terms of what it was not. A poem with the laconic title “Here” called it “unfenced existence . . . untalkative, out of reach”—silent and beyond the grasp of words. The title poem of Larkin’s last book of poems, *High Windows*, begins in his characteristic official mixture of sexual jealousy and compensatory disgust, but the poem ends far beyond it. Envying in four-letter detail the sexual freedom of the young, he guesses that, when he was young, he was envied in the same way for his freedom from religious dread. Then, as he senses through generations of envy the vanity of human wishes, words suddenly give way to vision:

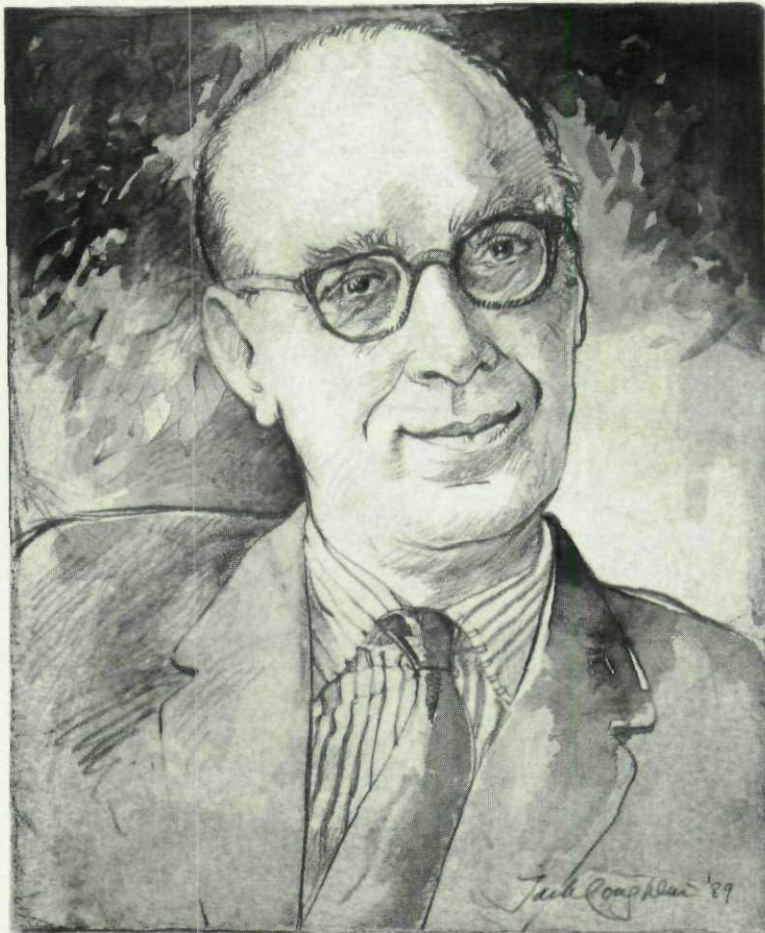
immediately
 Rather than words
 comes the thought of
 high windows:
 The sun-comprehending

glass,
 And beyond it, the deep blue air, that
 shows
 Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.

Larkin’s revelation following rage aligns him with earlier poets whose visionary sense was more explicit. Yeats among schoolchildren, “thinking of that fit of grief and rage” that turned a childish day to tragedy, suddenly saw a vision in human form:

Thereupon my heart is driven wild:
 She stands before me as a little child.

And George Herbert—a miniaturist, like Larkin, who looked out from narrow



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depends on its refusal to identify itself as either a wishful fantasy or a grateful recollection. Larkin pointedly titled it “Unfinished Poem”—he could never describe the satisfactions that might have followed its final stanza. When an alternative to death arrived in his later poems, it never arrived in so human a form.

In “The Large Cool Store,” ten years after “Unfinished Poem,” the contrast of daytime’s sensible clothes and night’s ruffled and fantastic lingerie propels Larkin, in a course of a few lines, from his initial fantasy of the separateness and un-earthliness of women to the recognition that it is not women but his unreal wishes

places to the infinite—felt the same visionary transformation as a personal appeal:

But as I rav'd and grew more fierce and
wilde
At every word
Me thoughts I heard one calling, *Child!*
And I reply'd *My Lord.*

Larkin's consoling vision could not share the personal drama of theirs, partly because Larkin wore the protective reticence that is the 20th century's vulgar tongue. (Wandering into a church, he is careful to remember that he is out of place; "Hatless, I take off / My cycle-clips in awkward reverence.") But it is not simply the fault of his century that his consolations never speak inviting words or wear a human face. Once or twice, the ideal and the human coincide, as in "Unfinished Poem," or in a late unpublished love poem four lines long that ends "there was one constant good: / she did not change." (The poem is a rare glimpse into Larkin's real private life that was apparently far less bleak than the life portrayed in his poems.) But in his darker moods he believed that

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

In his poems Larkin often responds to death's invitation by knocking back a stiff drink and wisecracking about the indifferent universe. But he also knew that he was isolated most of all by his own persistent refusal of a world that might have asked for his company had he been willing to listen. An early poem begins enviously, "I see a girl dragged by the wrists / Across a dazzling field of snow." Although in some later poems Larkin mocked his own youthful fantasies of "the women I clubbed with sex," in this poem his jealous wish, startlingly, is not to be the willful taker but the willingly taken—"to be / As she is," "As she laughs and struggles, and pretends to fight."

"Nothing so wild, nothing so glad as she / Rears up in me," he adds. Larkin thought himself uniquely disbarred from that wild glad surrender that others somehow managed to partake in. His last substantial poem, "Love Again" (as in many poems throughout his career, love for someone who is certainly in bed with someone else), interrupts its own envious complaint in the same way "High Windows" does, but this poem turns away from words toward a private emptiness, not an infinite one:

why put it into words?
Isolate rather this element
That spreads through other lives like a tree
And sways them on a sort of sense

And say why it never worked for me.
Something to do with violence
A long way back, and wrong rewards,
And arrogant eternity.

"Violence / A long way back." At the end of his life, Larkin's voice suddenly speaks as if from the analyst's couch to reveal private truths that his official plain-speaking voice never permitted itself to say.

Whatever that violence was, its heritage was the "wrong rewards" of an iso-

lation Larkin only pretended to accept. Watching young couples dancing, in "Reasons for Attendance," he first insists that his lonely satisfaction in art is richer than their joint satisfaction in sex, and then cancels that insistence in the final line:

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

The irony cuts both ways. Larkin can only half convince himself that, when compared with those who burst into fulfillment's desolate attic, he is the less deceived.

Balanced against his loneliness, the "unfenced existence: / Facing the sun" that Larkin saw through high windows was both nothing and everything. His moments of illumination could not keep his envies from recurring, but nothing else could silence those envies when they returned. And consistently, through all the ironies and bitterness of his poems, shines Larkin's pleasure in their own making. In his most adult and accomplished poems he often retains an adolescent's gawky air of self-discovery and self-forgetfulness. In longer poems he often rolls self-defining phrases over his tongue:

Yet stop I did: in fact I
often do,
And always end much at a
loss like this . . .
["Church Going"]

Strange to it now, I watch
the cloudless scene:
The same clear water
over smoothed pebbles . . .
["To the Sea"]

And he has an adolescent's delight in closing his poems with bright sententious hopes, sometimes carefully scuffed lest a more cynical part of himself snicker at them. The stone cou-

ple on "An Arundel Tomb"

prove
Our almost-instinct almost true:
What will survive of us is love.

And the Show Saturday out in farm country gives its visitors something that deserves the same kind of permanence,

something they share
That breaks ancestrally each year into
Regenerate union. Let it always be there.

Larkin is always too reticent for loud displays of technical bravura, but he reveals more quietly his sly pleasure in his own skill. His rhymes are often hidden among the unemphasized lowlands of his sentences, so that it is possible to read one of his fully rhymed poems without noticing that it is rhymed at all. His transitions from one phrase to the next often sound solidly reasonable, until you trace the logic in detail and discover that the poem made a daring associative leap while you were blinking. "It's unhappiness that provokes a poem," he told an interviewer, but his poems console the grief that provokes them. "Do you feel terribly pleased when you've written one?" the interviewer asked. He answered, "Yes, as if I've laid an egg."

Larkin published four classically slim volumes of verse. The body of his work is now almost doubled by the poems collected posthumously in Anthony Thwaite's edition. The newly revealed poems inspire nothing but gratitude. Even the earliest—written while Larkin trained himself to be a ventriloquist first of Auden's voice, then of Yeats's—have the technical fascination of poems that are purer distillations of their literary models than anything the models ever wrote. Among the later uncollected poems are some of Larkin's most personal poetry, side by side with some of the most accomplished public and occasional verse of recent decades.

And yet the whole plan of the book seems mistaken. Thwaite prints all of Larkin's completed poems in chronological order (although the earliest poems are gathered at the back). This arrangement obscures the craft with which Larkin arranged his poems when he gathered them into his books, and created sequences of poems that were as carefully organized as the individual poems themselves. Thwaite lists the contents of Larkin's books in an appendix, but a bare list has none of the literary and emotional force of a sequence whose significance unfolds itself as the reader turns over the pages.

Editors should be wary of the temptation to build large urban renewal projects that require dismantling the smaller structures left behind by an author. The

author knew his own work better than the editor ever will, and had his reasons for selecting and arranging his poems in the way he did. Ideally, the first collected edition published after a poet's death should be based on the last collected edition that the poet himself prepared. If, like Larkin, the poet never prepared such an edition, then the posthumous edition should reproduce the contents of the books the poet published during his lifetime. Any unpublished and uncollected poems belong in the back, divided from the published poems by a gap that respects the gap imposed by the poet who wrote them and rejected them. A chronological edition like Thwaite's has many virtues, but the poet should be given a few years to maintain his own arrangement first.

The concluding poem in Thwaite's collection is a commissioned throwaway about drinking at parties. Larkin chose a very different poem to conclude the last volume he published—a volume that he

knew, when he prepared it, would be his last. Near the beginning of that volume, *High Windows*, those windows opened onto the emptiness of Larkin's solitary vision. But in the final poem, "The Explosion," Larkin invoked a lost conjugal happiness recovered in one sunlit moment of vision at the very instant that sudden death brought happiness to an end. An explosion destroys a mine, and as the tremor dims the sky,

for a second

Wives saw men of the explosion

Larger than in life they managed—

Gold as on a coin, or walking

Somehow from the sun towards them,

One showing the eggs unbroken.

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