



## 'LARKIN, PYM AND ROMANTIC SYMPATHY'

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A version of the talk given at the Society's AGM on 1st December 2001 poems.  
This piece was published in *About Larkin 14, October 2002*.

There is a moment we all remember in Keats's letters when he describes the once common experience – no longer so common nowadays, I am afraid, since sparrows have become virtually an endangered species – of seeing a sparrow on the ground outside his window. 'I take part in its existence and pick about the gravel.' The sense of identifying briefly with some sentient being in the *external* world is a common and a happy one and the early Romantics were not slow to discover and exploit its literary possibilities. The Romantic writers picked up the idea of sympathy, empathy or *feeling* from each other and from a predecessor, Sterne, whose cult of sentiment and the sentimental certainly had been highly deliberate, and yet had its moments of spontaneity too. Indeed this tricky combination is the hallmark of Romantic Sympathy, always – in the early days – in danger of becoming an affectation but usually saved by that sometimes embarrassing organ to which Wordsworth gives a bow in the *Immortality Ode*, 'the human heart by which we live'.

Byron of course is apt to show off his own human heart with a rhetorical flourish. 'I live not in myself, but I become/ Portion of that around me, and to me/ High mountains are a *feeling*'. Byron is claiming here – and claiming on altogether too false a scale – what Keats so happily takes for granted when he sees the sparrow, and imagines himself doing just what the small bird is doing. Byron also employs that lax Romantic shorthand which can be so irritating. 'High mountains' are for him simply 'a feeling' – there is no need to say more.

The gradual discrediting of what might be called orthodox and old-fashioned Romanticism was speeded up drastically in the 1920s after T. E. Hulme had referred to Romanticism and its feelings as no more than 'spilt religion', by which he meant, I take it, the afflatus and emotion of religious feeling without any foundation of dogma or belief. T. S. Eliot echoed and powerfully reinforced Hulme's anti-romantic sentiments, at least in his prose: about his poetry the aura of the Romantics unmistakably, if ambiguously, still hangs. In fact Eliot's early poetry shows the first signs of how Romanticism was transforming and, as it were, updating itself, changing its image and its nature in subtle and unexpected ways.

The most significant transformation is that Romanticism learnt how not to take itself seriously, how to be funny – not in the deliberate sense of making jokes, but as if to be funny, with the resources and the sensibility of a poet was the most obvious thing in the world. Humour becomes a part, and often the most important part, of what might be termed a new Romanticism.

At thirty-one, when some are rich,  
And others dead  
I, being neither, have a job instead...

What could be simpler and in its own way more heartfelt – just the kind of 'spontaneous overflow' that Wordsworth was sure that poetry was all about. (It is a pity, by the way, that the poem remained unfinished. Like so many of those early Romantic fragments it remains just that – an arresting fragment – and in Larkin's lifetime unpublished.) What the poem's opening does, nonetheless, is to establish an immediate sympathy and fellow-feeling between reader and poet.

And that kind of sympathy and fellow-feeling are exactly what we meet in a novel by Barbara Pym. Our bosoms at once return an echo, for instance, when we find ourselves with some of her characters by the seaside, all of whom have 'that quiet hopeless look of the British on holiday'.

Romanticism, in fact, has learnt to be funny at the same moment that it is full of feeling and discernment. Humour is doing here what Byron claimed 'high mountains' did for him. Byron can be witty, he can even be funny, and he can certainly be 'Romantic', and yet he could not have been all three things at the same time. But the 'feeling' that Byron claimed, and the sympathy that was natural to Keats as he watched the sparrow is by latter-day Romanticism seen as something that can be joined naturally together into the humorous and even comic. John Betjeman presents his Miss Joan Hunter Dunn in this light – 'furnished and burnished by Aldershot sun' – a wondrous object of old-fashioned Romantic longing, but also wonderfully funny at the same time. But Betjeman is not funny at the fabulous girl's expense. His heroine is simply and vigorously a part of the glamour seen or imagined in her life – the young men, the sports cars, the tennis-clubs of Camberley, the unconscious comedy of her lifestyle for which the poet feels both affection and nostalgia.

In a sense we have travelled a long way from the *Lyrical Ballads*, and from Wordsworth's earnest presentation of the poeticality of simple humble lives, to which our hearts are supposed to return an echo. But that is just the trouble. We can 'empathise', to use a term I don't much care for, with Miss Joan Hunter Dunn because we are not being pushed into doing so. Our feeling for her and with her is indeed spontaneous, in Wordsworth's sense.

At a memorable moment in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* the sad news arrives of the death of Tristram's brother Bobby. Family and servants alike are distressed by the news except for one dim-witted kitchen girl whom her colleagues cannot make understand what has happened. 'Don't you see – master Bobby is dead' they tell her again and again. At last she grasps the point, and exclaims triumphantly 'So am not I!' 'Good for the kitchen-maid' is our spontaneous reaction, and for once Sterne does not try to rub in any sentimental point. He makes no comment at all.

Unsympathetic readers laugh *at* Wordsworth's portraits: they did not laugh or feel *with* them. We may want to laugh if and as we feel, but we object, quite rightly, when we are told *how* to feel. Sterne's kitchen-maid and John Betjeman's Miss Joan Hunter Dunn have become naturalised in humour and in feeling – permanent residents in the mind and comfortably at home. Larkin's poems and Pym's novels have for me the same sympathy and humour; are, as it were bedfellows in all that they wrote. Larkin has left an account of travelling down the motorway, probably in that curious tobacco-coloured Rover sedan (sedan somehow seems the appropriate word for it) which I remember seeing him drive on various occasions. He had the wireless on (probably he would not have called it the radio) when he heard, quite unexpectedly, the words of a familiar poem. It was Wordsworth's *Immortality Ode*. At once his eyes began to blur with moisture, and he was compelled to halt on the motorway, against regulations, and wipe away the tears.

The story reminds me a bit of A. E. Housman's famous claim, made in his Cambridge lecture 'The Name and Nature of Poetry' that he could only tell *real* poetry – but then he could tell it at once – from its physical effect on him. If a line of poetry entered his head while he was shaving his beard bristled up and resisted the razor. There may be something a bit affected and irritating in the claim, as in the example, and yet Housman is of course quite right. The physiological effects of Romanticism are an authentic part of its sympathy with 'the human heart by which we live'.

But the human heart can be absurd too, and enjoy the art of the comic and the absurd. Pym is in total sympathy with all her characters, in a sense because they are all comic, and they appear – both to her and to us – most human and most endearing – at their most interesting too somehow – when they are also most fruitfully ridiculous. At the same time she never exaggerates, or makes her people deliberately grotesque as Dickens and even Jane Austen can do: on the contrary, she manages to give a sort of loveable and yet mysterious exoticism to their very ordinariness.

The communion of absurdity at mealtimes is a Pym speciality, the choicest examples occurring in the last of her novels, *A Few Green Leaves*. Notwithstanding their absurdity, even perhaps because of it, such conversations at the table continue to have something sacramental about them. Larkin can in this sense be sacramental too. When criticised in print for the determined pedestrianism of his subject matter, an exasperated Larkin asked whether his critics were always doing something heroic, like rescuing damsels in distress and slaying dragons.

A magic word, frequently encountered or implied in Pym and Larkin, whether in letters, poems or novels, is 'comfort'. I have a letter of Larkin in which he fervently praises the comfort of one's own bed, and remarks that the lack of it is what really deters him from going away, and from travel in any form. A prime comfort of Pym heroines, when a love affair goes wrong, is to seek out the nearest Lyons Corner House and immerse themselves in muffins, walnut cake and strong Indian tea. (How sad it is, incidentally, that Lyons Corner Houses, those great palaces of comfort so often mentioned in the fiction of the 30s and 40s, are no longer with us today.)

Larkin introduced this Romantic Comfort Principle, as it might be called, into the reading of poetry, and perhaps into its composition too. To put the matter baldly, the gloomier his poems are the more essentially comfortable. They cheer the reader up, as perhaps, too, the impulse to write them cheered the poet. If I am feeling really low I often read 'Aubade', or

'The Building', and they have an immediate and bracing tonic effect: However perverse the process might seem, they at once raise my spirits. Some critic once queried the postmen at the end of 'Aubade', the postmen who 'like doctors go from house to house'. Why should postmen be like doctors he asked? Oh yes, critic, they certainly are. Both, don't you see, bring comfort, the perhaps illusory comfort of news, friendship, healing, recovery even. Pym's *A Few Green Leaves* has a delightfully and unobtrusively funny section on country doctors and their patients. The prescriptions doled out at the surgery are comfort promises like the postman's letters.

This paradox of gloom as its own form of comfort is, in its way, a comic transformation of the old Romantic appetite for despair – Shelley's 'sweetest songs that tell of saddest thought'. Only in our own time, our own epoch of Romanticism, has comfortable gloom taken over from picturesque despair, and become domesticated in a homely need for humour and sympathy, the kind by which the human heart can live.

Such a transformation amounts to its own kind of joke. Larkin himself seems to have both loved and been amused by Romanticism in all its forms, present and past. He found them funny, but he also found them – well – Romantic. I was startled when he came in for a drink once – he was preparing the *Oxford Book of Twentieth Century Verse* – and said 'What do you think of Cargoes?' After a few seconds of bemusement the penny dropped: I realised that, fresh from the selection process, he must be thinking of John Masefield's poem.

He was. And he hated its last verse – 'all that crap about dirty British coasters' – which he said was meant to subvert Romance. 'The other verses are marvellous', he went on ecstatically. 'I often want to ask in the office if they could manage to bring me some sweet white wine from distant Ophir. I believe a quinquereme landed a consignment last week?' 'But', he went on. 'I'm afraid the secretaries would look at me *askance*' – he emphasised the comic word – like at the ending of that Walter de la Mare poem:

Still eyes look coldly upon me,  
Cold voices whisper and say  
'He is crazed with the spell of far Arabia,  
They have stolen his wits away.'

My wife and I were very fond at that time of the turn Frank Muir and Dennis Norden used to do on the radio. We had just heard one. Muir had produced an improvisation about Masefield trying to find a subject for a poem. His wife was going shopping and couldn't start the car. At last the engine caught, and she shouted up at her husband, who was leaning out of his window, 'All right – car goes'. 'Thank you' he shouted down, and sat down on the spot to write the poem. Larkin, who turned out to be a Muir fan too, enjoyed that story.

For Pym, Romance was a matter of love – in head and in heart – but, just as important, it was also a source of absurdity, as well as of comfort and humour. Neither she nor, of course, Larkin, ever married; and as she wrote to Henry Harvey, her old friend and 'romantic attachment', as she called him, for more than forty years – 'they say that marriage need not involve romance, but personally I would prefer romance even if it wore off, as I am told it does'. She enjoyed the excitements not of passion and sex but of falling romantically in love, 'which can be done', as she wrote, 'at any age, and without

any very grave consequences'. Love is no doubt an important matter, and yet the treatment of love in this late Romantic context has become different from what it was for early Romantics. Without losing what Coleridge called its 'sacred flame', it has become funny – always capable of and subject to humour. However romantic and however sympathetic they may be, Larkin and Pym are always funny; and some of their most attractive and effective humour lies in their powers of conscious self-parody. Romanticism, we might say, has learnt, in the cases of Larkin and Pym, not only to be amusing but to be amused by itself.