



On First Looking into Larkin's *The Less Deceived*

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I have called this paper, *On First Looking Into Larkin's The Less Deceived* in recollection of Keats's sonnet *On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer*. There is nothing very original about this: Lawrence Durrell did the same thing in his *On First Looking Into Loeb's Horace*. Yet it seemed to me an appropriate means of referring to the context in which I want to place Larkin's poetry - or my experience of it: the surprise and the (welcome) culture shock. At the age of seventy-five, I must be one of the few people here who had already formed their tastes in modern poetry and their expectations of it before encountering Larkin's poems. *Four Quartets* and *Deaths and Entrances* were new books when I started reading contemporary poetry. Anyone under sixty-five would have been only nineteen when *The Less Deceived* appeared; while nobody now under forty-five would have been likely to be interested in poetry when *High Windows* appeared in 1972. For them, when they encountered Larkin's poetry, it must have seemed just the way poetry was and ought to be. Indeed, attending these conferences, I feel at times like an old Bolshevik sitting in on seminars on the continuity of Russian politics. There seems too little recognition of the changes that Larkin brought to English poetry; and this was to a considerable degree the way he seemed later in life to want things to be seen. For Keats, reading Chapman's Homer in October 1816 with his friend Cowden Clarke showed him something new in poetry:

Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold...

Reading *The Less Deceived* did not perhaps offer a "pure serene", but it showed me new possibilities for poetry. As T S Eliot contended, truly new poetry not only makes us see the poetry of the past in a different light but also expands our sense of what poetry might be. The experience of this is not easy to communicate. It was not merely that someone was doing something new. It was analogous to the experience I had on first listening to a recording of the post-modern jazz pianist, Cecil Taylor. I was hearing something in an

idiom that I had always wanted to hear yet could not have imagined myself. I could not have imagined the style of the poems I encountered in *The Less Deceived*; yet they were just what I had been looking for in every respect. They very importantly echoed my sense of things - stylistically as well as in subject matter - in a way that previous poetry had not.

Some sense of one aspect of what was coming was there in the early novels of Kingsley Amis. In *That Uncertain Feeling*, which appeared in the same year as *The Less Deceived*, his hero speculates on seeing some of the recently affluent in a bar he visits:

You might even hear a couple of such people lamenting the fact that there wasn't the money about these days before ordering two double cordon bleu brandies and forty cigarettes. ¹

He then goes on to order a half of mild. I had the feeling that the author knew and was writing about life as I knew it - not life as it appeared in the sensitive, upper-middleclass settings of novels that dominated the British literary scene in the nineteen-forties - novels where nobody seemed to go to work or be permanently short of money. *Toads* spoke of my life-experience; but the poem by Larkin that seemed in so many ways to ring the bell for me was *Poetry of Departures*. I remember it from the British Council recording by Larkin, where the low-key, matter of fact slightly Midlands voice helped to direct one's response to it.

Sometimes you hear, fifth-hand,
As epitaph:
*He chucked up everything
And just cleared off.*
And always the voice will sound
Certain you approve
This audacious, purifying,
Elemental move.

And they are right, I think.
We all hate home
And having to be there:
I detest my room,
Its specially chosen junk,
The good books, the good bed,
And my life, in perfect order:
So to hear it said

*He walked out on the whole crowd
Leaves me flushed and stirred,
Like Then she undid her dress
Or Take that you bastard;
Surely I can, if he did?
And that helps me to stay
Sober and industrious.
But I'd go today,*

Yes, swagger the nut-strewn roads,

Crouch in the fo'c'sle
Stubbly with goodness, if
It weren't so artificial,
Such a deliberate step backwards
To create an object:
Books; china; a life
Reprehensibly perfect.

I suppose that the immediately striking thing about the poem was that the demotic phrase "He chucked up everything/ And just cleared off" was there quite unsensationally, unsatirically - a point of reference from the type of discourse the poem assumes we are all used to. This fits in with the slightly shabby clichés from the popular subcultures that are implied to be, as they are and were, part of our culture and that of the speaker and of the author. The language of everyday speech had of course been the recommended staple of Anglo-American modernist poetry - but not quite to this degree - not so aggressively down-played and down-market. The cited phrases do not stand out particularly as if in quotation marks, but fit naturally the weave of the poem. This effect is very artfully attained: the language is heavy with monosyllabic words. The movement of the poem has the flatness of the type of conversation it imitates.

The overall drift of the poem reinforced these low-toned effects. The speaker admits that he would be happy to escape from his drab situation, but has to resign himself to the fact that the only escape is to a world in which one finds oneself repeating the patterns one has left. This too was in keeping with the apprehension of so many educated people like Larkin at the time - of a world in which, in Cyril Connolly's celebrated phrase, "the artist is drifting into becoming a disreputable member of the lower middle classes waiting, in a borrowed mackintosh, for the pubs to open"².

Yet it is not the stated conclusion as such that made the poem so striking, but the role of the statement in the structure of the poem. A poem of the forties might have started with something like the opening situation of Larkin's poem; but it would have moved towards transcendence - to a resolving of the situation. Even if it rejected resolution, it would have been in terms of an irony that implied the possibility of transcendence. Larkin seemed to consciously disappoint such expectations - to refuse the normal poetic outcome. This refusal was in fact one of the most notable effects in *The Less Deceived*, encountered more obviously (and artificially) in *I Remember, I Remember* and in *If, My Darling*. It is there in those poems of ironic, terminal reversal, *Toads* and *Reasons for Attendance*. It was all tellingly new - though not in keeping with everyone's sense of what poetry should be at. An Oxford contemporary of Larkin, Alan Ross, who had formed his poetic style on that of the poets of the thirties, described the poetry of Larkin and the Movement as "timidly skilful...a modest poetry by modest men, with their eyes pretty much on their boots"³. There are other respects in which the *Poetry of Departures* deliberately disappoints expectations set up by much of the poetry of the forties and indeed the received sense of the "pleasure" that poetry should give. Sensitivity - particularly sensitivity of observation - was highly valued and cultivated in the poetry of the forties. W S Graham in 1950 spoke of trying "to break from the oversweet exhibition of sensitivity which is so much the mainstream of contemporary English poetry" - something that Larkin very much did. In conjunction with this valuation of sensitivity, there was an emphasis on the sharpness and (again) sensitivity of realisation of imagery. *Poetry of Departures* utilises a vocabulary and points of cultural reference whose

associations are the reverse of “sensitive”. Its visual imagery is extremely sparse, apart from the clichés from pulp fiction and the rejected fantasy of escape: room, bed, books come to us with no particularity; and the remainder of the speaker’s possessions are characterised by the dismissive carefully chosen junk. The idiom seems to have been consciously evolved in reaction to the poetry of the previous decade; yet it perfectly fits the sense of things that the poem conveys - that of being trapped in one’s life. This was a common enough feeling of the educated middle-class at the time - including myself; and is encountered in John Wain’s *Hurry On Down* (with its title taken from singer Nellie Lutcher), and Amis’s *Lucky Jim* and *That Uncertain Feeling*: a life of ease at Oxford with time for the arts and a first to top it off, followed by handing out books in a provincial library and living in digs with no sense of a way out. Far from being disappointed, I could only applaud the way in which the poem evoked a sense of life that was decidedly mine.

One could say that Larkin’s poetry went against much that was central to the received conception of what poetry should be when *The Less Deceived* first appeared. In the forties the inherited modernist dogma that poetry should work in images was still accepted, along with the sense that “statements” were inimical to poetry. Larkin and his associates turned away aggressively from the oblique poetry of Imagism and the great modernists to embrace a poetry of direct statement. This in itself seemed startling at the time. It paralleled the way in which Amis and Wain turned their backs on the novel of the stream-of-consciousness to return to the realist novel of the omniscient author.

Another arresting feature of *The Less Deceived* was the relation of its major poem, *Church Going*, to the philosophical and religious explorations of the poetry that had gone before it, most immediately in Eliot’s *Four Quartets*. In 1851 Matthew Arnold had written *Dover Beach* in which he celebratedly looked back to days when The Sea of Faith/ Was...at the full; and, at the beginning of his influential essay, *The Study of Poetry*, he had quoted his own prophetic words:

The future of poetry is immense, because in poetry, where it is worthy of its high destinies, our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay. There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve. Our religion has materialised itself in the fact, in the supposed fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything, the rest is a world of illusion, of divine illusion. Poetry attaches its emotion to the idea; the idea is the fact. The strongest part of religion is its unconscious poetry.⁴

We need not agree with Arnold’s argument here, other than to accept his recognition that the historical facts of religion were being brought into question in a way that undermined belief. What is undeniable is that the future for poetry was indeed to be immense in the context of the cultural predicament that he had outlined. Yeats said of the whole enterprise of poetry:

I am very religious, and deprived by Huxley and Tyndall...of the simple-minded religion of my childhood, I had made a new religion, almost an infallible church of poetic tradition, of a fardel of stories, and of personages. and of emotions, inseparable from their first expression...⁵

In those great and typical twentieth-century masterpieces, *Four Quartets* and *The Duino Elegies*, we encounter an attempt to find eternal meaning within transient experience. In the nineteen-forties, in poems such as Day Lewis's *O Dreams, O Destinations* and Dylan Thomas's *Fern Hill*, there had been a looking back to childhood in an attempt to discover some earnest of a redeeming innocence such as had been traditionally associated with religion. *Church Going* seemed to mark, with its untortured almost speculative question

What will happen when disbelief has gone?, a new stance - a quiet acceptance of an end to the quest for something to take the place of religion. *Church Going* in fact marks an important cultural turning point for English poetry. It is a major poem in which the quest for religious meaning that had been so dominant in English poetry of the first half of the century was quietly replaced by a recognition that all that was a thing of the past. Serious questions concerning meaning would remain; but the supernatural sources of meaning were unagonisingly looked back on as something we could no longer sensibly entertain.

Church Going appeared in the *Spectator*, the periodical that had recognised and indeed christened 'The Movement'. Yet, far from recognising this seminal masterpiece and rushing to print it, the *Spectator* in fact had the poem for over a year and lost the typescript before publishing it in November 1955, the month in which it also appeared in *The Less Deceived* in a slightly different version. Today we see *Church Going* as a poem to be placed without condescension beside *To His Coy Mistress* or *Sailing to Byzantium* for instance. That was not of course the case when *The Less Deceived* first appeared. The book was highly praised in the *Times Literary Supplement* as one that "should establish Mr Philip Larkin as a poet of quite exceptional importance"⁶; but Roy Fuller found it merely "as a whole readable and enjoyable"⁷ and David Wright in *Encounter* attacked it for "the palsy of playing safe"⁸. *The Less Deceived* had been preceded by Larkin's Fantasy Press pamphlet. Among the Fantasy Press volumes was *Poems* by Elizabeth Jennings, published in 1953. Jennings, also an Oxford poet, was four years younger than Larkin. Her second book, *A Way of Looking* was published by André Deutsch in November 1955 - the same month as that in which *The Less Deceived* (scheduled for October) in fact appeared. *A Way of Looking* was given the Somerset Maugham Award for 1956. Jennings was, and remained, a distinguished poet; and her work appeared that year, along with Larkin's, in *New Lines*. Yet the reception of her early poetry emphasises the fact that Larkin was merely viewed as one of the better young poets. For readers like myself Larkin's poetry only slowly emerged as the major British poetry of our day, just as the centrality of his concerns and manner was only slowly recognised.

Indeed, it is easy to forget that Larkin's poetry did not at first appear to have the great centrality that we acknowledge today. It shocked many people, seeming, as Larkin's contemporary said, to have its eyes on its boots. Like *Lucky Jim*, it affronted received pieties; while its diction was not what one expected in serious, unsatiric poetry. Even its music, so notable an accomplishment in all Larkin's poetry, seemed unfelicitous. A poet of the achievement and innovativeness of William Empson, in an interview with Christopher Ricks in 1963, said of the poets of the fifties: "these people think it's got to sound ugly or they aren't sincere"⁹. It would be hard to find anyone who would say that of Larkin's poetry today. No doubt Larkin intended at times to shock; just as John Wain did with his title *On Reading Love Poetry in the Dentist's Waiting Room*; yet so much of what seemed shocking in Larkin's poetry when it first appeared seems strongly evocative and appropriate. An example is *Reasons for Attendance*, with its phrases "And they maul to and fro" or "The wonderful feel of girls", catching poetically experiences that had not

been previously found suitable for unsatirical poetry. What was originally shocking in Larkin's poetry seems to have been the product of his moving poetry into new areas of experience and realising new possibilities of the art.

However, Larkin seemed later in life to want to ignore or deny the way in which he had quite consciously and in the face of accepted taste expanded the emotional and artistic scope of English poetry by writing a style of poetry that seemed to many people to fly in the face of what poetry should be. This later attitude seems to have been an aspect of an increasingly simplistic conservatism that Larkin came to display in all matters as he grew older - as did his friend Kingsley Amis - finding politics at last understandable with the emergence of Mrs Thatcher¹⁰ and lamenting the presence of the "young in the M1 cafe; [with] Their kids... screaming for more" (*Going, Going*). This change of attitude seems to me much more unfortunate than the politically incorrect stances detected in his letters. In the interview with the *Observer* in 1979, Larkin says that he no longer reads poetry and confines himself largely to the more relaxing type of novel¹¹. He seems to resent any suggestion; that the writing of poetry, as practiced by him, had anything to do with other literature. In judging for the Booker Prize, he contended:

I found myself asking four questions about every book: Could I read it? If I could, did I believe it? If I believed it, did I care about it? And if I cared about it, what was the quality of my caring, and would it last?¹²

This seems unobjectionable enough; but it is flagrantly commonsensical; and it seems to carry the suggestion that there is a lot of meretricious rubbish masquerading as serious literature that will be exposed by such questions. But will this really do? Hidden in it is the one question that might lead to the identification of quality in the writing - "the quality of my caring". We are hearing, it seems to me, from the editor of *The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse* - that "Great Parade of Single Poems" that seems to assert a sort of cultural independence for the poet and his poem, for its creation and its reception.

Kingsley Amis, in his *Memoirs*, says "I have no recollection of ever hearing Philip admit to having enjoyed, or again to be ready to tolerate, any author or book he studied, with the possible exception of Shakespeare."¹³ Such a position was certainly congenial to Amis later in life, and in keeping with his earlier iconoclasm and that of Larkin; but it seems to point to a relationship with the poetry of the past that was different from that of the generations that preceded them. Anne Ridler, in talking about the influences on her own poetry, could, in the same paragraph, speak of Sir Thomas Wyatt and Auden¹⁴. It seems to me that it was part of the important and innovative iconoclasm of Larkin and Amis that they did not explore the tradition in the formation of their idiom, but rather adopted a no-nonsense stance that seemed to ignore it. It is notable that, in their correspondence, there is hardly any reference to literature or writing. It might be argued that Larkin's essays show a well informed admiration for poets of the past; though the only pre-twentieth century British poets he writes importantly about are Marvell, from Hull, Williams Barnes and Christina Rossetti. There is nothing to be lamented about his modern admirations, for Betjeman or for Barbara Pym or for Stevie Smith; but there is something to be said against fronting such admirations. Pym and Smith are writers who one feels are out of the mainstream and their manners are admired for being uninfluenced by cultural fashion. These admirations went along for Larkin with an articulation of increasingly simplistic conceptions of the activities of writing or appreciating poetry and other forms

of literature, and indeed seemed to offer a justification for such attitudes. Larkin wanted to be seen as someone just doing his best to communicate to the sensible common reader emotions important to him. As he said in talking about the incident that led to *The Whitsun Weddings*: “It was just a transcription of a very happy afternoon. I didn’t change a thing, it was just there to be written down.”¹⁵ He encouraged the reception of his poetry as something that was consonant with such statements. He could always, in fact, write with considerable acumen about the activity of writing poetry when this did not conflict with this commonsense conception of the nexus between writer and reader or between writer and experience. The defensive anger he displayed in the face of what challenged his central simplistic stance seems to indicate that he sensed how vulnerable it was. As time went by he strained his position to the point of being unquestionably wrong when he ventures into a field where he is not well informed (as well as being not happy with modern tastes) and he refers to the diatonic as natural in contrast to the chromatic¹⁶ in his attempt to see the music of Charlie Parker as arcane. He speaks out against art that requires special knowledge to understand it; and one might say that this was true of Joyce and Pound as Larkin contends; but it is not true of the music of Charlie Parker, whose records are bought in the tens of thousands by uncultured fans. The trouble with Charlie Parker was not that you needed special knowledge: it was just the trouble that Larkin’s readers had when his mature poetry first appeared - one had to know how to take it. Similarly, Larkin could not imagine someone going into a room full of Picassos and gasping - not with mystified shock, but amazed delight.

The account of his own poetic development given by Larkin, in which, after being converted to Yeats by an encounter with Vernon Watkins, he found that reading Hardy led him to see that his own world could be the basis for poetry¹⁷, seems to ignore what had gone before for Larkin. His earliest model had been Auden; and reading Hardy took him back stylistically to what he had learned from Auden. Auden himself, under the example of Hardy, had come to see the importance of regular syntax as a structural device in poetry - in contrast with the use of syntactic distortion in much modernist poetry. Yet Auden had adopted the language of ordinary speech and the imagery of everyday life in his poetry - things that had been part of the program of Anglo-American modernism. In this he had consciously expanded the range of English poetry linguistically and in terms of subject matter. A further such expansion had been Larkin’s great achievement – an achievement that reached back via Auden to the modernist revolution. Larkin’s attacks on modernism seem to ignore or mask this - indeed to ignore the cultural basis of idiom formation.

The remarks by Alan Ross and William Empson that I quoted earlier would seem to indicate that they felt that Larkin himself affronted the expectations of the reader of the days in which *The Less Deceived* appeared. Which brings me back to my reason for my trip down memory lane. To the reader who came to Larkin after *High Windows* and after he was established as one of the leading poets of the last century with an important centrality - something that I believe myself to be true – the way in which Larkin changed English poetry - and had to change it to write the poetry that we so value - is easily lost sight of. Larkin later in life seemed to encourage a view of his writing as something that had not required any self-conscious and challenging cultural change. Yet writing of the first importance generally does. Larkin, as he aged, seems to me to have become simplistically defensive in what he had to say about the arts - as about several other things. It was part of the regrettable conservatism of his later years. In the atmosphere of admiration that surrounds his work today, it needs to be recognised as unfortunate and

distortive - distortive of the development of his own poetry and of its contribution to the development of English poetry as a whole.

Notes

- 1 Amis, K - *That Uncertain Feeling* (London: Gollancz, 1955)
- 2 Connolly, C - *Horizon* I, 4, 235
- 3 Ross, Alan - *A Conversation with Alan Ross* *The Review* 25,44.
- 4 Arnold, M - *The Study of Poetry: from Essays in criticism*, Second Series, reprinted in *The Essential Matthew Arnold* ed. L Trilling (New York: Viking, 1949) 209.
- 5 Yeats, W B - *The Autobiography of W B Yeats* (New York: Collier, 1965) 77.
- 6 (Anon) – *Poetic Moods* *Times Literary Supplement* December 16, 1955, 762.
- 7 Fuller, R. - [*Review of The Less Deceived*], *London Magazine* III (April 1956) 85.
- 8 Wright, D - *A Small Green Insect Shelters in the Bowels of My Typewriter*, *Encounter* October 1956, 75.
- 9 Empson, W - *Interview with Christopher Ricks* *The Review* 6 & 7, 32.
- 10 *An Interview with the Observer*, *Required Writing* (London: Faber, 1983) 52.
- 11 *An Interview with the Observer* 53.
- 12 *The Booker Prize 1977*, *Required Writing*; 94.
- 13 Amis, K - *Memoirs* (London: Penguin, 1992) 53.
- 14 Ridler, A - *A Question of Speech*, *Focus* 3.
- 15 *An Interview with John Haffenden*, *Further Requirements* (London: Faber, 2001) 57.
- 16 *Introduction*, *All What Jazz*, *Required Writing* 292.
- 17 *The Poetry of Hardy*, *Required Writing* 175.