



PHILIP LARKIN AND ME, OR YOU: THE DEMOCRATIC APPEAL OF HIS POETRY

Jean Hartley

A version of the talk delivered at the University of Hull on 15 November 2000. With her husband, George Hartley, Jean founded The Marvell Press, which published Larkin's first mature poetry collection, The Less Deceived, in 1955.

Richard Hoggart, teacher and writer; Marie Evans, a teenage student from the Midlands; Sam Mendes, film and theatre director; Suzuyo Kamitani, a Japanese English teacher in Osaka; Colin Dexter, writer of detective novels; Pete Stevenson, a Canadian bomber pilot during the last World War; Ned Sherrin, polymath; Andrea Ashworth, an abused adolescent from a Manchester slum; Ian McEwan, novelist; Claire Tomalin, biographer; William Boyd, novelist; Dave Brandon, a slightly deranged plant-seed merchant from Norfolk; Helen Dunmore, novelist; Elaine Crossley, a young journalist from Bolton, and Barrie Rutter, actor/manager of Northern Broadsides. What do all these people have in common? Well, at some time over the last 45 years all of them fell in love with the poems of Philip Larkin. And in doing so they obliquely fulfilled a wish Philip once tentatively and wistfully expressed to me: 'I'd like to think, Jean, that people in pubs would talk about my poems'. I think I laughed at the time but, in fact, the essentially humane nature of Larkin's work has ensured that it is extremely popular and does have the sort of democratic appeal he'd hoped for. [1](#)

My own introduction to his work came in 1953 when I was 20 and helping to edit a poetry magazine called *Listen*. My former husband, George, and I wrote to Larkin asking for poems for the second issue, to be published in 1954, and he sent us 'Spring', 'Dry Point' and 'Toads'. I felt I'd been waiting all my life for them. I'd read lots of odes to Spring in my time but none that contained his piquant blend of lyricism and discontent. How often had I not felt that nature was doing its beautiful best but that my mood or circumstances simply didn't match it? All of us must, at some time have felt out of harmony with nature. The line 'And those she has least use for see her best' acknowledges the paradox that if one's life were on a par with all that Spring represents, Spring would not be noticeable except as an accompaniment to one's own blossoming. We see it so clearly because the contrast with our own state is so marked. The tension and drama of this contrast is underlined by the different registers of language which Larkin uses. We have the straightforward novelistic listing of detail he often employs to set a scene:

Green-shadowed people sit, or walk in rings,

Their children finger the awakened grass,
Calmly a cloud stands, calmly a bird sings.

After he has established this idyllic but commonplace vision of nature and humanity in harmony, he shocks us with the image of himself, 'an indigestible sterility'. It sounds awkward and convoluted after the smooth, then buoyant rhythms of the lines that preceded it. Then he pins our ears back by moving into poetic-passionate mode:

Spring, of all seasons most gratuitous,
Is fold of untaught flower, is race of water,
Is earth's most multiple, excited daughter.

That last line, a somewhat clumsy cluster of vowels and consonants, is difficult to read aloud but its loaded metaphor for spring thrills me even now, nearly fifty years after I first read it.

I couldn't make much of 'Dry Point', even though I liked the sound of it, and the arresting images:

But what sad scapes we cannot turn from then:
What ashen hills! what salted, shrunken lakes!
How leaden the ring looks,
Birmingham magic all discredited...

It gave me the feeling of baffled excitement I'd last experienced when reading T.S. Eliot. After I met Philip, I asked him about the poem, and once he'd explained that it was about how sex dominates our lives, all became clear.

The third poem, 'Toads', begins with two rhetorical questions:

Why should I let the toad work
Squat on my life?
Can't I use my wit as a pitchfork
And drive the brute off?

The subversiveness of this shook me deeply. No one I knew had ever, particularly not in verse, questioned the Protestant work ethic in such uncompromising terms. He pursues his argument against the pressure to earn a living that adulthood loads you with, nipping nimbly between different registers in a way no other poet I know of has managed since Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress'. He has fun in the third stanza by heading the list of people he considers to be workshy with 'lecturers', his colleagues, who, in his view, clearly have an easier time of it than librarians. But, after making an exhilarating set of justifications for chucking up work, he admits that;

Something sufficiently toad-like
Squats in me too.

And this, of course, will always battle with his desire to cut loose, be a free spirit rather than a wage-slave. His dream had been to live by his writing but early on he realised that if he'd tried it he'd soon have become a heap of whitened bones. While at Oxford Larkin had got to know Vernon Watkins, a bank clerk and a friend of Dylan Thomas. Larkin saw that Watkins' passion for poetry was contained within an orderly wage-earning life,

whereas Thomas lived a feckless, hand-to-mouth existence. The two poets were object lessons to Larkin, but didn't stop him fantasising about the life dedicated solely to art.

Those three poems were my introduction to Larkin's work and it was my luck that George, my inspired, obsessed, but essentially useless-in-practical-terms, spouse, should decide soon afterwards that he'd like to publish a whole book of poems. Whose? There was no contest there, so we immediately wrote to Philip in Belfast asking if he had enough poems for a book. We were an unknown quantity apart from *Listen*, but from the start that magazine had been a great critical and aesthetic success and Larkin was certainly impressed by it. Once, when *Listen* had not appeared for an even longer time than usual, he told us the magazine meant more in the intellectual life of the country than we imagined. And by then he had submitted to, and been turned down by so many publishers that he must have been excited to be actually asked for work by such an enthusiastic outfit. Because of my practical skills I became intimately involved with the publication and promotion of *The Less Deceived* and over the next thirty years I became Philip's friend as well as his publisher.

In the fifties when we first met, Philip must have seen me mainly as the girl with the ever-ready teapot and purveyor of posh snacks, since I scoured the delicatessen in preparation for his weekend visits. He in turn was generous with information of all kinds, gently correcting my many mispronunciations and passing on the names of useful and reliable professionals. We'd lived in Hull all our lives and taken neighbourhood potluck. He'd been here only a few months but his university contacts had put him in touch with people who serviced the middle classes, had the latest equipment and filled your teeth rather than pulled them out. I stayed with his dentist and optician until they retired or moved away and my daughter Alison has Philip's dentist to thank for her row of nice straight teeth – orthodontics were not practised by the dentists I had previously patronised.

We learned other things from him too, about books mainly, but when we weren't eating or talking about book business Philip kept us entertained. I thought of our riotous Saturday afternoons when I recently read some of the Kingsley Amis letters and realised how important it was over the years for Philip and Kingsley to keep alive the anarchic spirit of their student days. It kept them forever young. Their lifestyles diverged over the years. They may have continued to share much in the way of literary opinion, jazz, smut and a dislike of cant, but their attitude to and treatment of women could not have been more different. It is easy to see why Philip never invited Kingsley to Hull. It would have broken the early spell. So much had changed in both their lives, but in letters they were still able to act out the rôles they had adopted in 'The Seven', that Oxford undergraduate mob that Norman Iles describes so hilariously in his recent article in *The London Magazine*.

In one of Philip's early letters from home to Jim Sutton he speaks of needing to get into the company of people he can swear to. Philip found that with us he could not only share his literary interests but he could also swear to his heart's content. George, Philip and I hadn't even the excuse of strong drink to lower the tone on those afternoons at 253 Hull Road, Hessle. There was very little in Hartley family life to make us laugh during the drab, poverty-stricken days of the mid-fifties, so we responded delightedly to Philip's schoolboy humour. He loved the phrase 'under the auspices of', pronouncing it 'horse pisses'. Then, after we'd told him a 'knock, knock' joke, he told us one that featured Argo,

the high-class poetry recording company. 'Knock, knock.' 'Who's there?'. 'Argo.' 'Argo who?' 'Argo fuck yourself.' Although he was the least homophobic of men, possibly because there was a large element of love for men in his own make-up, he could not restrain himself when we told him we'd just accepted for *Listen* a poem by Thom Gunn entitled 'The Feel of Hands'. 'Does it go like this?' he asked mischievously: 'Oh who is this feeling my prick? Is it Tom, is it Harry, or Dick?' We enjoyed his defamations of people he regarded as rivals, humbugs or nuisances. He described a woman who had chased him from the south of England as having a bosom like a half-stuffed laundry-bag. This was followed by his famous description of Ted Hughes as looking like a present from Easter Island. We can see from his letter exchanges with Amis that they loved all kinds of wordplay, especially that gleaned from Irish writers such as James Joyce and Flann O'Brien, author of *At-Swim-Two-Birds*, one of the many books Philip recommended to me as a good read.

Talking to my daughter, Laurien, about the differences between Amis and Larkin, I mentioned that Amis seemed ashamed of his lower middle-class background and engaged in a fair bit of social climbing, whereas Larkin, who had good reason to be ashamed of his father's extreme right-wing political views, was staunchly loyal to his father and mother sending them 5,000 letters in the years after he left home. His poems are populated by ordinary people doing ordinary things and he would never have biked over to see us every week had he wanted to climb socially. 'He would never have come to Hull in the first place if he'd wanted to do that', said Laurien. 'In fact if you tried social climbing here you'd probably fall off the edge.'

He was sharp too at spotting snobbery or pretension and tactfully correcting it. George's mother was a fierce Scotswoman who had come to Hull with the fishing. She was permanently attired in headscarf, crossover pinny and boots, and no-one pushed her around, except her dearly-beloved son George, who was happy to accept her help, but expected her to disappear when any literary visitors called. This class of person she lumped together under the heading of 'them posh buggers'. Once when she was at our house Philip turned up unexpectedly. As I ushered him into the living-room Philip politely nodded to George's mother, as George pushed her into the scullery where she began clattering the dishes and put the kettle on. After we'd sat down Philip said to me: 'How often does your cleaner come?' I said 'Oh, she's not a cleaner; she's George's mother.' When George came in a few minutes later and asked Philip whether he'd like tea or coffee, Philip answered 'I'll have whatever your mother's having.'

Whenever you try to fit Larkin into a category he slips out of it. You find the despiser of charitable organisations sewing blanket-squares for Oxfam and making them a monthly donation. The arch-Tory proves to be the prime mover behind the University's acquisition of a large labour history archive. After most of his friends and contemporaries had acquired second homes and second wives, he still hated the thought of owning a house and all the things that went with it, including a wife. It was only when the University threatened to tip him out of his rented flat into the street that he was pushed into becoming a house-owner. And it was what some might call an outmoded sense of honour that persuaded him to invite a woman to share that house with him. For a man living in an increasingly acquisitive society, his was an unworldly and spiritual response in that he felt freed by not owning things. Art before Life was the creed he expressed to Norman Iles when he was at Oxford. At that time he was a left-wing book-thief and prankster, denigrator of culture and foul-mouthed hater of authority. Much of this changed when he

grew up and became a figure of authority himself, of course. But the subversiveness he was born with went into his letters, his diaries and his poems, particularly those poems with the tricky alternative or unresolved endings: 'If no one has misjudged himself. Or lied'; 'it's hard to lose either, / When you have both', or 'Words at once true and kind, / Or not untrue and not unkind'.

Being raised in pre-telephone days must have been a boon to the boy who stammered (and later to the man who went deaf in his forties). Of course there were telephones, but until the sixties they were only used in emergencies. Letter writing was the preferred mode of communication and in my youth the Post Office made three deliveries a day – morning, noon and one in the late afternoon. His passion for letter-writing must have come a close second to writing poetry for Larkin. It is therefore not surprising that at the end of his last great poem, 'Aubade', after the intimations of death and his thorough exploration of it, he describes his reprieve from death in the coming of the new day, and the final image is of the post being delivered, a wonderfully plain and beneficent image which sees letters as an indispensable lifeline: 'Work has to be done. / Postmen like doctors go from house to house.' How long, however, will it be in this increasingly on-line world before these lines seem archaic and the postman becomes as obsolete as the muffin-man?

It can be seen from the small selection of his letters that are in print that Larkin immediately fell into the register of the person to whom he was writing. Such niftiness in adapting to the predilections of his correspondents again makes it difficult for us to pigeonhole him. There was the passionate commitment to art and comradeship for Jim Sutton; poetry, travel, high culture and Shetland pullovers for Judy Egerton; gentle irony, health problems and helpful criticism of her work for Barbara Pym; a little jazz, literature and obscenity for Kingsley; a lot of determined political incorrectness for Bob Conquest, and much of the everyday, personal and domestic for his women, starting with the dearest old creature, his mother; then dearest Honeybear (Patsy Strang); delicious Winifred (Win Arnott); dearest Bun (Monica), and Maeve dear. The love letters reveal him to be confiding, evasive, tender and calculating in order to get his own way, which was to have them on his terms rather than theirs. He was constant in that his love relationships were few but long-enduring.

Of course he was much older than most boys when he first encountered women – apart from his mother and sister. As he says in 'Not the Place's Fault': 'I had grown up to regard sexual recreation as a socially remote thing, like baccarat or clog-dancing, and nothing happened to alter this view.' There *were* women at Oxford, but they were neither friendly nor forthcoming. It was not until he arrived at his first job in Wellington, Shropshire, that he met women on his own terms, and was not overshadowed by the competition of handsome, non-stammering smoothies such as Amis. Once he'd experienced 'the wonderful feel of girls', and made strong female attachments, they became more important to him than his male friends, who were mostly kept at a distance and corresponded with. Although proximity did not necessarily dispel his need to write letters. To Maeve, a woman he saw every day of his working life, he sent over 200 letters.

The need to please by performing in a way that made him accessible to a wide range of readers is a source of annoyance to purist academics who like to degrade him on this account, whereas the press enjoys degrading him in a different, though perhaps slightly connected way: 'Lashings of lesbian sex in Larkin's schoolgirl tales', or 'the genius in a

dirty mac'. He never rose to his own defence in life and he cannot in death. But if we are going to judge him, we should do so by the written work which he chose to publish, the library he built and the fidelity he aroused in his friends and lovers.

Amis said he knew where most of Philip's poems had come from, but there were some that baffled him. He went on to list a number, such as 'Wedding Wind' and 'The Explosion'. They showed the tender and transcendental side that Philip would not risk revealing to Amis. He could not have left himself vulnerable to a friend with whom he did not have that kind of contact. You need to look at the letters to Jim Sutton and some of his women friends to find that side. Conversely, people to whom he showed his playful, romantic side were often shocked by the anger and savagery expressed in poems such as 'Sunny Prestatyn' and 'The Old Fools'. They are all effusions of a rich, some might say divided, personality whose dramatic juxtapositions reveal a humanity that appeals across different countries, languages and social classes.

I was talking to a poet the other day about Larkin's popularity and we agreed that it is surprising how many of his poems stay in the heart and mind. With many other poets we loved, a mere handful of their poems are important to us, but not so with Larkin. I find myself mentally running through them and finding that not just the well-known ones speak to me but also slight ones such as 'How to Sleep'. Written in 1950 it describes all the different postures one adopts as the sleepless hours tick by. Finally the poet goes back to the foetal position before being able to drift off:

For sleeping, like death
Must be won without pride,
With a nod from nature,
With a lack of strain,
And a loss of stature.

Or there's 'Long Lion Days' written in 1982, long after his poetic stream had supposedly run dry. It is a sexy, nostalgic harking back to the time when he was a big Leo (his astrological sign) in many spheres: building libraries, writing poems, and making love. I find its energy and compactness absolutely stunning:

Whatever conceived
Now fully leaved,
Abounding, ablaze –
O long lion days.

Every year for the last five years, Suzuyo, a Japanese woman in her fifties, comes to England during her summer holiday to make an intensive study of Larkin's poems. This is not part of a career strategy, for her job is to teach practical English to training college girls. Suzuyo is a Larkin groupie – she's been to the conferences, she's done the walks and she has the T-shirt. I asked her what it was in Larkin's work that appealed to her, and she said: 'It's his apprehension of death, his view of life and his pessimism. Very Japanese.'

In her autobiographical book, *Once in a House on Fire*, Andrea Ashworth tells of her childhood in Manchester's underclass, abused by a succession of brutal stepfathers, with nowhere to go to get away from the beatings but inside her own head. She says this:

Whereas I *used* to hide the fact that I smoked cigarettes or swigged whisky or wagged

days off school, the things I *now* kept secret at home were words. Long, complicated ones I discovered in stories by Jane Austen and Thomas Hardy and the Brontë sisters, whose books I was given by Tamsyn or Mrs Arnold. Short, simple ones that would sparkle unexpectedly in the middle of poems. Long *Lion Days*, *Life with a Hole in It*. That vast moth-eaten musical brocade. *The Importance of Elsewhere*. I worshipped Philip Larkin, who got stuck into the dullest corners of life and picked up ordinary, everyday stuff to smack you with art. In the hollows of afternoons / Young mothers assemble ... / Behind them ... an estateful of washing, / And the albums, lettered / *Our Wedding*, lying near the television. It was as if he could step inside people's skins, to take photographs of them from the inside out:

 Their beauty has thickened.
 Something is pushing them
 To the side of their own lives.

I would pore over the poetry anthology from school, feeling words gathering and buzzing inside me, like the mob of bees inside the box in Sylvia Plath's poem: *Small*, taken one by one, but my god, taken together! When Dad was having a go at me, poking his finger against the bony bit of my chest and ranting, assuring me that I was good for nothing, I imagined letting them loose like swear words, only carrying a more beautiful sting. [2](#)

There is a young girl student in Warwickshire who first came across Larkin via some *Manic Street Preacher* song lyrics. Then she found the *Collected Poems*, joined the Larkin Society and spends her spare time printing her favourite Larkin passages on to T-shirts, which she wears, thus spreading the gospel according to St Philip, with great panache.

I've given these examples of partisanship because they're all women and because Larkin is the press's favourite exemplar of rampant misogyny. So what is the link between us and him? Coming from the most stolid of middle-class backgrounds, it was entirely against the odds of his upbringing and his peer group that his spirit should shine out in a sympathy that could encompass and move all classes and ages, when he put his feelings into verse. But he did so; witness his words in 'Faith Healing' on the value of love:

 In everyone there sleeps
 A sense of life lived according to love.
 To some it means the difference they could make
 By loving others, but across most it sweeps
 As all they might have done had they been loved.
 That nothing cures.

Then from his Sydney Bechet poem there's his succinct definition of love as 'like an enormous yes', and also the much-quoted last line of 'An Arundel Tomb': 'What will survive of us is love'. In 'Ambulances' we see a reverence for the life, the 'unique blend of families and fashions' of all individuals:

 Far
 From the exchange of love to lie
 Unreachable inside a room
 The traffic parts to let go by
 Brings closer what is left to come,

And dulls to distance all we are.

Then there is his sheer pleasure at being alive and, however obliquely, part of the vigour and thrust of the newly-married couples in that 'frail travelling coincidence' that has taken them all to London in 'The Whitsun Weddings'.

The value of family life and the ties of love are celebrated also in 'To the Sea', where he says that:

If the worst
Of flawless weather is our falling short,
It may be that through habit these do best,
Coming to water clumsily undressed
Yearly; teaching their children by a sort
Of clowning; helping the old, too, as they ought.

He ends his poem, 'The Mower', written after he'd accidentally killed the hedgehog he'd been feeding, and not long after his mother's death, with: 'we should be careful // Of each other, we should be kind / While there is still time.' Underlying these, and so many of the poems, there is a sense of decency, an assumption of agreed standards in our responses to people and our ways of treating them.

Wherever the poems start from, they most often end with the inescapability of death. Even his earliest poems do this. In 1946: 'What is under my hands / That I cannot feel? // What loads my hands down?'. 'Only one ship is seeking us, a black- / Sailed unfamiliar, towing at her back / A huge and birdless silence.' My favourite poem, 'Afternoons', is one of his many meditations on time and the passing of time. It was written when he was 37 and feeling, no doubt, as one does at nearly 40, keenly aware of the signs of personal depreciation and that the opportunities of youth will not come again. If you think of 'At Grass' from his *Less Deceived* collection you see a similar preoccupation with the pathos and inevitability of ageing, of time passing you by. But in both poems he has externalised these feelings by finding metaphors that he can develop to best express the sadness of the ageing process: old racehorses, young mothers. Both are far removed from his own life, and from those of many readers, but the poignancy of the metaphor can be felt by all, for we will all at some time experience the feeling of being pushed to the side of our own lives by the next generation. It announces its theme with its title and first line: 'Summer is fading'. So that if life can be seen as a day, these women are already in the afternoon. And if you think of life as a year then they are already at the end of the summer. And yet although this deeper resonance is there throughout the lyric, it also works as a straightforward description, an accumulation of graphic detail, economical and cinematic in its method, the same method Larkin uses to build similar settings for 'Ambulances', 'The Whitsun Weddings', 'Faith Healing' or 'Dockery and Son'. The details build a picture of young women whose most defining and individual moments are behind them.

In the hollows of afternoons
Young mothers assemble
At swing and sandpit
Setting free their children.

Behind them, at intervals,
Stand husbands in skilled trades,

An estateful of washing,
And the albums, lettered
Our Wedding, lying
Near the television...

I like the poem because, although the specifics of it are homely and commonplace enough, there is no trace of condescension, authorly distancing or irony as there might be in, say a John Betjeman or a Douglas Dunn. I feel there is a tenderness in Larkin's evocation of the loss of first youth that identifies us and him with these women as all partaking in this unnoticed, because gradual, but essentially tragic feature of the human condition. It is a welcome restatement of the theme that golden lads and girls all must, like chimney sweepers, come to dust. I first read this poem when I was twenty-six and very much in the situation of his young women. It spoke to me.

This treatment of our common fate has a charming simplicity, but Larkin was also a master of the grand and rhetorical when he wanted or needed to be, such as at the end of 'Church Going', when he speaks of the universal need for a spiritual dimension in life:

Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious,
And gravitating with it to this ground,
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,
If only that so many dead lie round.

In May 1949 he finished a poem, 'Modesties', the first line of which is 'Words as plain as hen birds' wings'. I like to think that in it he was laying down his rules for good writing. It should not be flashy or draw too much attention to itself; it should be ordinary and concern itself with eternal truths.

Riding the subway in New York a few years ago, I felt the thrill of recognition you feel when you bump unexpectedly into an old friend. For there in the carriage, sandwiched between advertisements for hypnotherapy and deodorant was 'Days'. First published in *Listen* in the 1950s, it was still making its way in the world in the 1990s. One of his quietest, most self-effacing poems, it states Larkin's constant preoccupation with the inevitable:

What are days for?
Days are where we live...
They are to be happy in:
Where can we live but days?

Many people I know chose to come to Hull as students simply on the strength of having seen poems by Larkin in anthologies or studied them as sixth-formers. They'd fallen in love with 'At Grass', or 'Church Going' or 'Toads' and, knowing he was the Librarian here, yearned for the proximity. (Admittedly the people I know tend to be romantics rather than hard-headed careerists.) Nevertheless, although thereafter all they may have seen of the man was a glimpse when he led the guided tour of the library given to all new literature postgraduates, sighted him in the distance as he made his way to work, spotted him lifting a glass in the bar, or collected his autograph on one of those sharp reminders about returning overdue books that he was so punctilious in sending out, it did not matter. The

fact that they breathed the same air was enough – a quality assurance that he and they had made the same choice to be here rather than elsewhere.

1. Recently I read in the paper that a clinical psychologist called Oliver James is bringing out a book about parental nurture. I don't need to tell you what its title is.

2. *Once in a House on Fire* (London: Picador, 1998).