



# About Larkin

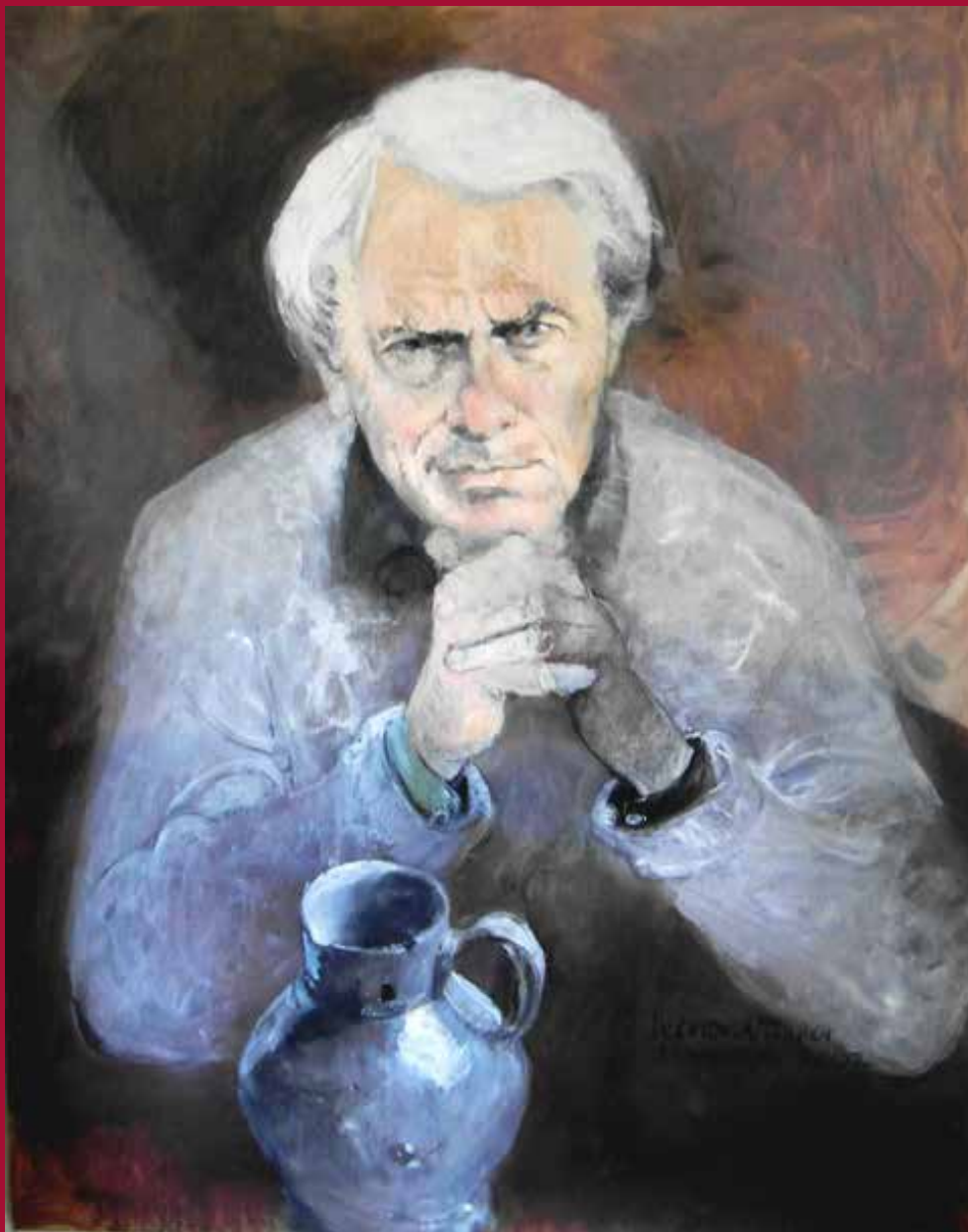
Journal of The Philip Larkin Society

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## Editorial

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It is with sadness that we record the death of Belinda Hakes, a stalwart of the Larkin Society Committee and Editor of *About Larkin* between 2004 and 2006. Our thoughts are with her husband Terry and her family. She will be missed.

In July this year our President, Anthony Thwaite, will celebrate his ninetieth birthday. This issue includes four hitherto unpublished letters which Larkin wrote to his friend between 1962 and 1982, annotated by Ann Thwaite. Other original material by Larkin in this issue includes a postcard to Maeve Brennan, written while the poet was on holiday in 1973, a letter to Mrs M.K. Sampson of 1984, in which he comments on the cycle-clips in 'Church Going', and a Memorandum of 1981 thanking James Booth for presenting his book *Writers and Politics in Nigeria* to the University Library. Geoffrey Weston contributes a piece on Maeve Brennan's gift to Larkin of Evelyn Waugh's *Unconditional Surrender* in gratitude for his help with her Library Association examinations in 1961. There is also a reminiscence of Monica Jones by Winn Sepanski, who was at Leicester University between 1958 and 1961.

We are delighted to publish here the first significant article on the reception of Larkin's poetry in the People's Republic of China. Wan Furong records how, since the end of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese interest in Larkin has closely followed Western concerns, from the social realism of 'The Movement', to symbolism, transcendence and, perhaps uneasily in Larkin's case, ecological criticism. We publish here also a substantial piece by Alain Sinner from Luxembourg, on Larkin's response to the French 'Decadents'. Delivered at the *New Larkins for Old* conference in 2002 this article remains a model of insightful criticism. We also feature a review of Clive James's final book, *Somewhere Becoming Rain*, by Kyra Piperides Jaques, a piece on Larkin and James's shared Jazz enthusiasms by John White, an appreciation of the recent Mechanicals Band event, 'The Righteous Jazz' (Coventry and Hull) by Philip Pullen, and a review of Nicholas Marsh's student guide to Larkin by Rachael Galletly

Our December event, 'We must talk about Philip', took the form of a review of new and impending developments: the Podcasts and Newsletter, plans for Coventry's 'City of Culture' year in 2021 and the anniversary celebrations in 2022. It took place on 1 December 2019 in the Royal Hotel. Alongside ageing stalwarts, Graham, Carole, Phil and James, our younger Committee members, Kyra, Lyn, Rachael and our Treasurer, Fiona Miller, were to the fore.

In July, Eddie Dawes, Chairman of the Society since its foundation, reaches 95, and has decided to step down from his post. He intends nevertheless to continue to take an active interest in the Society's events. At the AGM in June Trustees will be considered for re-election, and a new refreshed Committee will take us forward into the future.

In 2019 James Booth represented the Society on the panel of judges for the Philip Larkin Society and East Riding Poetry Prizes. The presentation on 25 January at the New Bridlington Library was a delightful event. Larkin always lamented the lack of practical encouragement for new and younger poets. The winning poems are published in this issue. In addition we include original poems by Carol Rumens, Christopher Reid, Kieron Winn, Alison Mace and Sharon Phillips.

Members of the Society will be pleased to know that past issues of *About Larkin* have been digitised prior to adding them to the University digital archive portal. Further news as soon as we have some. David Brown of The Beverley Old Bookshop, still has a number of past issues: [bevoldbooks@yahoo.com](mailto:bevoldbooks@yahoo.com). The University's axing of the post of University Archivist, founded by Larkin in 1959, came as a blow. However, Simon Wilson, the former Archivist, remains an active Society Trustee.

To celebrate the Society's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary the next issue of *About Larkin* will be a special commemorative volume, issued in time for the AGM on 6 June, edited by James Booth and Kyra Piperides Jaques and featuring a selection of pieces from the journal's first quarter century. James is taking this opportunity to step down as editor, and the sole editor from issue 50 onwards will be Kyra Piperides Jaques

**James Booth**  
**Kyra Piperides Jaques**

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*About Larkin* is produced twice yearly by The Philip Larkin Society.  
The articles in the Journal reflect the personal opinions of the contributors  
and not those of the Society as a whole.



# Notices

www.philiplarkin.com



**Dear Members,**

**April 2020**

It's 2020 and here is your first *AL* of the year to usher in Spring! I hope that you all had a good Christmas and had more than just 'bread and butter' to quote our favourite poet! And I sincerely hope that none of you have suffered in the floods of this winter.

I would like to warmly welcome new members and again sincerely thank our many loyal and supportive long standing ones. As you will have read elsewhere in this journal we have an exciting year ahead and I am hoping very much, that you all intend to renew your membership of the Society on July 1st this year and continue your good work in supporting our Charity.

Don't worry about remembering to renew, I will remind you nearer the time.

I hope that you all enjoy this April's *About Larkin* and are looking forward to our bumper commemorative edition timed to coincide with the AGM and lunch in June.

Until then, hope all goes well with you and yours and that we soon have some well deserved warmth and sun and a good summer to look forward to.

All best wishes,

*Carole Collinson: Membership Secretary*

## Forthcoming Events

Due to the impact of Coronavirus and government advice we have reluctantly cancelled our AGM, lunch and Distinguished Guest Speaker event planned for 6th June this year.

It is still uncertain whether we will be able to stage a December event. Please keep 2nd December free in your diary. As this is a Wednesday this year we may organise the activities either on the weekend before or after that date. We will let you know in plenty of time. We hope very much that every one of our members will stay well and strong in the current difficult circumstances. All our very best wishes to you and your families.

## PLS 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Issue of *About Larkin*

2020 sees the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Larkin Society. To celebrate, there will be a Bumper Issue of **About Larkin**, featuring highlights from the first quarter century of the Journal. The additional issue will be circulated to members in Summer 2020 as part of their 2019-20 membership subscription.

## Arboristics

Less limber than a lemur,  
which enjoys the unfair advantage  
of an infinitely elastic,  
imaginary harness  
as it grope-ropes through the jungle,  
tugging and twanging branches,  
the tree surgeon keeps to one tree  
at a time, a London plane –  
from a roadside single file  
of council-owned London planes,  
now due for a trim and tidy-up;  
hence, his swaying and belaying

twenty feet above stopped traffic:  
just a job; and yet his antics  
have drawn a circus audience,  
so daredevilishly he dangles,  
riproaring with his chainsaw;  
and we're both amused and anxious  
as we wait below to see  
the upshot of his lopping:  
whether some big branch or he  
will come spectacularly dropping,  
and our vehicles be free  
at last to stop their stopping.

*Christopher Reid*

# Letters from Philip Larkin to Anthony Thwaite

Introduced and annotated by Ann Thwaite

To celebrate the forthcoming 90th birthday of Anthony Thwaite, poet, friend of Philip Larkin and President of the Larkin Society, *About Larkin* is publishing four letters, previously unseen, from the many letters Philip wrote to Anthony over the quarter century of their friendship. Fifty of the others are in the *Selected Letters*, which he edited for Faber in 1992, following his work on the *Collected Poems*. I would particularly draw your attention to the letter Philip wrote on 14 April 1985, when he 'felt something of a pang to know you are out of England for so long...' We were about to leave for an academic year in Japan. I remember the dreaded day when Andrew Motion phoned Tokyo with the news of Philip's death.

When Philip asked Anthony to be his Literary Executor, Anthony said 'But I am only eight years younger than you are' and suggested Andrew Motion should share the unwanted task.

Over the 35 years since Philip's death, Anthony has seen the fluctuations in Philip's reputation, until the assured status he has today as the foremost poet of the second half of the 20th Century. Ann Thwaite

## THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

Librarian:  
P. A. LARKIN, M.A.  
PAL/36



THE LIBRARY  
Telephone: 14966  
(After 8 p.m. 14999)

21st February, 1962.

Anthony Thwaite, Esq.,  
THE LISTENER,  
Broadcasting House,  
LONDON, W.1.

Dear Anthony,

I was delighted to hear you have been made Literary Editor of THE LISTENER: long may you reign. As regards poems, I haven't anything ready at the moment, but will certainly bear you in mind when I have.

Yea, aren't those photographs peculiar. I thought it an index of the toughness of the new generation that I was the only one wearing spectacles. My secretary suggests contact lenses! I had previously decided that your caption would be "United's New Winger", and mine would be something along the lines of "Try Our Embalming Fluid".

I wish they had printed the rest of my photograph because it showed me rather elegantly dressed, sufficiently so at any-rate to rebut Al's charge in his intro to THE NEW POETRY. I expect you have seen this. Ah well, the Georgians lasted only five years: now we are in for a reign of Thom and Ted.

There was a paragraph about you in the Daily Telegraph this morning. I really don't think you need be self-conscious about your book. If George has 700 copies in the attic it is only because he grossly misjudged how big a first edition should be. I should be very surprised if HOME TRUTHS had not sold as much as most good first books of poems.

With all good wishes,

Yours ever,  
Philip

This letter, like so many, was typed by PL's secretary, Betty Mackereth.

The photographs were of a group of poets in the current *London Magazine*.

The descriptions of Philip and Anthony can equally well apply to the photo Philip took at UEA, reproduced on a Larkin Society postcard.

Thom and Ted: Thom Gunn and Ted Hughes.

Al was Al Alvarez. George was George Hartley. Anthony's first book *Home Truths* had been published by the Marvell Press in 1957 following Larkin's *The Less Deceived*.

33 PEARSON PARK  
HULL

24 May 1971

Dear Anthony,

I trembled at the fat envelope, but you are more than generous. If what you say in your first para is even half true, then I've done what I intended. Of course, it isn't an academic book: back to the common reader, bully for the bedside table, is my motto. But you know this.

It'll be amusing to see how much of what you say, and with what additives, sweetening or otherwise, it will filter through Davin. I won't answer in detail. All the editorial points will be cleared up - this is only a rough version (John Davidson is going in, for instance). As a general rule, what is in is there because I like it, and what isn't because I don't, but there may be some neutral ground where we can compromise. That poem of yours, for instance, both Monica and I are very fond of; I would be very sorry to lose it. People like Barker I would sooner leave out altogether; Fuller I think over-valued. I have no more compunction about omitting, say, Abse and Heaney than leaving out Abercrombie and Bottomley - the living are always over-valued. But I will study what you say carefully and without prejudice:

I would much sooner trust your judgment than anyone else's.

As th'exchequer of the Poore, I thought you might like to see the enclosed. Trick endings make bad poems, but there are some nice bits in: the first 2½ lines have been in my head for years.

With renewed thanks,

Yours ever,

Philip

Anthony had just received the MS. of Philip's *Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse*.

Davin was Dan Davin, the relevant editor at OUP.

That poem of yours was 'Sunday Afternoons', one of three Thwaite poems Philip had selected, along with 'Ali Ben Shufti' and 'Mr Cooper'. Anthony had suggested he would himself prefer another poem.

Barker is George Barker, Fuller, Roy Fuller. They were both finally included on Anthony's advice, but Philip could not sadly be persuaded to include Seamus Heaney and Dannie Abse.

For 'th' Exchequer of the Poore' see Shakespeare's *Richard II*, Act 2 Scene 3. As Anthony was the Literary Editor of the *New Statesman* he was able to pay for poems. Philip had sent 'Vers de Société'.

105 Newland Park  
Hull HU5 2DT

1 April 82

Dear Ann and Anthony,

I write from home, having done a bunk from VERA 24 hours early. (I could have stood the boredom or the discomfort separately; together was too much. Or perhaps I could have stood them both if my cold hadn't turned into a real streamer & now is a churchyard cough. Anyway, I lit out up the A247, 17 + 15 to cruise over the Humber bridge in lowlying cloud about an hour quicker than the A1 way. To bed for 2 hours, then hot bath (no baths in block E). Then drink & quiet evening.

Or perhaps it was madness

to expect that any conference could be other than St Quentin after your kind and generous hospitality. It really was delightful to see you again, & to renew acquaintance with Elsie, Lacy and Tillie, not to mention Malcolm & Elizabeth. A great pity Anthony and I didn't manage to buy some of Dr Windbread's Specific: it might have lived up to the conference. But I shall remember Furness for a long time: the soaring trees, the exultant rocks, the flowering grassland. I do thank you most sincerely.

Betty says Andrew Snell has been on the telephone in my absence and will ring again on Monday. Says he has 'just finished the India programme'. Geo. Hartley has accounted for sale of (104) LBS Oct. 1981/81. Barry Bloomfield knew all about the WDA - inscriptions at Gresham's, but was amused by Klugman/Maclean. Again thanks, Andrew, P.

Philip had suggested he visit us in Norfolk for a few days before a Library Association Conference at the University of East Anglia, not far from us. He had actually read to a small group when he visited Anthony, who was Henfield Fellow there, in 1972. Ten years later he was dreading the conference. I wrote eight pages about this visit in my diary. When I tried to persuade him there would be some people there he would enjoy seeing, 'Oh' he said, smiling wryly 'That is going a bit far.' So we were not surprised when he told us he had 'done a bunk'.

S. Quentin is the notorious maximum security State Prison for men in California.

Elsie, Lacy and Tillie are in the treacle well in Alice in Wonderland. Philip refers to three of the four Thwaite daughters, Emily, Lucy and Alice, who were at the Mill House at the time. Malcolm, the novelist, and Elizabeth Bradbury, close friends of ours, had come to dinner.

Anthony had driven Philip to north Norfolk, visiting a Joke Shop *en route* to Gresham's School, Holt. They had seen there the Honours Board with the names of W.H. Auden and the Communists James Klugman and Donald Maclean, all of whom had been pupils at the school.

Fornsett St Mary, not far from our Mill House, is remarkable for the Rectory home of Wordsworth's uncle, where Dorothy lived for many years and William visited when at Cambridge.

Andrew Snell: TV producer; Barry Bloomfield: Philip's bibliographer.

105 Newland Park  
Hull HU5 2DT

6 September 1982

Dear Anthony,

I enjoyed our thunder-shower meeting, like something out of a novel, but I wish I had re-read your letter beforehand, for then I could have asked what the 'sanguine guess' about the Let 60 sales were. And also rejected 'calculatedly scruffy' - my God, hasn't Paddy Khan or whatever his name is ever seen a scruffy person? YOU'RE WEARING A TIE. Also sympathised with your gloom, which by now I hope has dispersed a bit. What would you really like to do? To me you seem enviable, like that verse in Yeats with the refrain 'But louder still sang Plato's ghost, What then?' You know.

Thanks largely, well partly, to my loaf-haired secretary, REQUIRED WRITING is now almost assembled and ready to be sent to Charles M. I have taken the liberty of dedicating it to you, though when I look at the farrago of obviousness, cheap effect, cringing (cringeing?) arrogance and fake sensibility it constitutes I doubt whether this is a kindness. I have divided it up into Recollections, Books in General, Books in Particular, and All What Jazz, or something like that, arranged chronologically within the sections. CM wants it this month, for publication 'next autumn'. I suspect there will be some editing to do. I've no idea how long it is: xeroxed newsprint is hard to estimate.

Today's post brought an enquiry from OUP as to whether I should be prepared to revise/update the OXBO ('The OxBo Incident'). This throws me a bit. Certainly I want to keep my name on the title-page, but how do we adjust to Enright? Or the critics who

said I should have stopped at 1930? Or my well-known and total insensitivity (you know the word) to anything written since, well, 1950? Imagine me choosing from Craig Raine. Don't noise all this abroad, please. The enquiry has been made, that's all. But your advice would be welcome.

Also in the post was news of a Dutch volume of translations - including, to my delight, 'The Card-Players'. Jan van Hagepeem will feel at home at last. Can't remember the chap's name: Jan Sinkelstein, or some such name. We had a master at school called Meerendonk, and I've always wanted to use it. 'Pieter Meerendonk, my translator, has got my genders wrong?'

Also in the post was the new Betjeman, edited by some character called Bevis Hillier. Who he? To be honest, I've heard the name, but that's all. It seems when Betjeman cleared out of Clota Pair he sold several yards of metal-file contents to British Columbia - DID HE EVER CROSS THE BUGGER'S MIND? WHY IF YOU CAN CALL IT A MIND? EH? WHAT? I've madly agreed to 'do' it for The Oxb. Looks all right so far. What a good poet he is, how immediately one's heart warms to it, like an Armstrong solo.

Had a letter from Piers Plowright, saying that the reason he'd included no poems from TLD was that he'd never read it. What kind of people is going at all at all? He says he will. I thought you were dead right about the programme. I wish they'd asked you to do it. Also had a badly-recorded tape of Christopher Reid on Asclepiads, sounding as if someone was prodding him up the arse all the time he was talking. Perhaps they were. Still, generous enough. Gets the idea I'm gloomy, which is something. But this is where we came in.

Love to all,

*Philip*  
'Token' is my wanted piece.

*Larkin at Sixty*, edited by Anthony, had been published not long before.

Paddy Khan for Mick Imlah who in an article in the *New Review* had used the photo Philip took at UEA. Philip objected to the description of Anthony.

The Yeats poem: 'What then?'

The 'loaf-haired secretary' was Betty Mackereth. Philip had himself typed the letter. He quotes 'Toads Revisited'.

'Charles M' is Charles Monteith, Philip's editor at Faber.

OXBO: Philip's abbreviation for his Oxford anthology, from the western film *The Oxbow Incident* (1943).

D.J. Enright had edited another Oxford anthology in 1980. Philip had agreed to review Betjeman's *Uncollected Poems* for the *Observer*.

The University of British Columbia in Vancouver has a Betjeman archive.

Armstrong: Louis Armstrong, black jazz trumpeter.

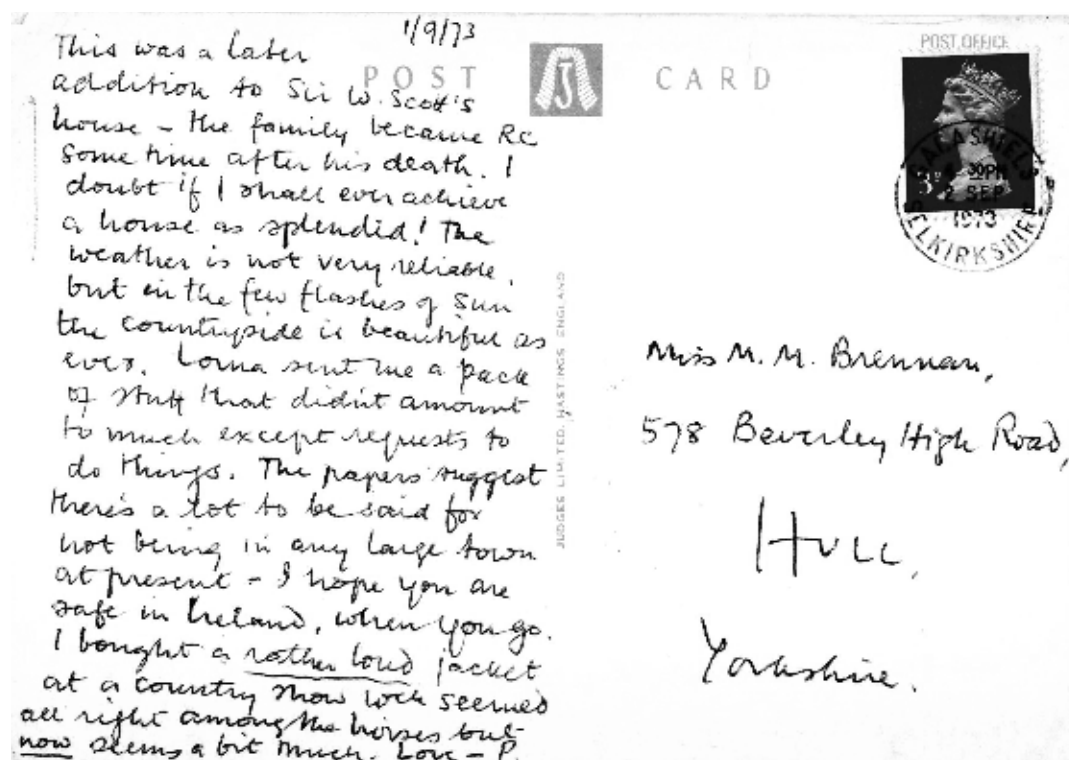
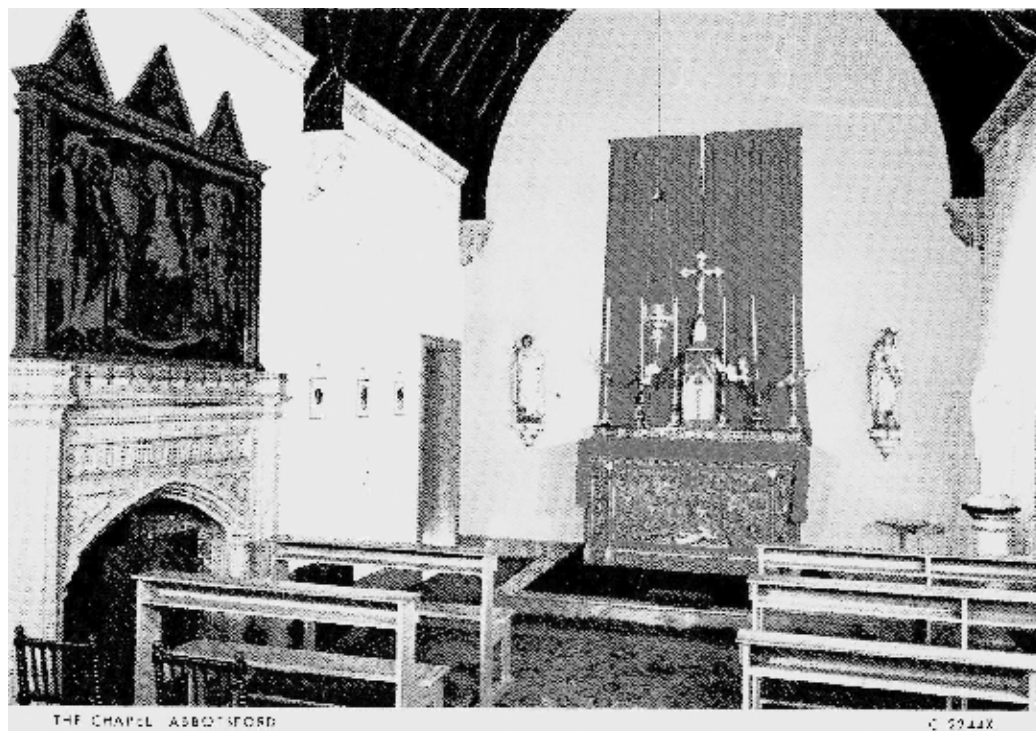
Piers Plowright: BBC radio producer; TLD: *The Less Deceived*.

The token was a 17th century Hull trade token we had given Philip for his birthday.



## Postcard from Philip Larkin to Maeve Brennan

On 1st September 1973 Philip Larkin was on holiday in Scotland with Monica Jones. He refers to Lorna Haysom, who worked in the Librarian's Office, primarily as secretary to the Deputy Librarian at this time, Brenda Moon. She was probably covering for Betty Mackereth, Larkin's secretary while Betty was on holiday.



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## *Letter from Philip Larkin to Mrs M.K. Sampson*

In January 1984 Mrs M.K. Sampson wrote to tell Larkin how much she had enjoyed *Required Writing* (1973). She also reminisced about H.M. Cashmore who had been the City Librarian of Birmingham in the poet's youth. In a P.S. addressed to 'Pop' in a letter of 7 September 1944 to his mother ('Mopcreature') Larkin referred to an interview with Cashmore in the *Birmingham Post* of 6 September which listed the relative popularity of 37 well-known authors according to lending statistics. (*Letters Home*, p. 100). In his reply of 8 September 1944 Sydney Larkin commented waspishly on Cashmore's formal style of referring to himself. (*Letters Home*, Appendix, pp. 567-8.)

The University of Hull

The Brynmor Jones Library

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*Librarian:* Professor P.A. Larkin, C.B.E., C.Lit., M.A., D.Lit., D.Litt., F.R.S.L., F.L.A., F.R.S.A.

27th January, 1984.

Mrs. M. K. Sampson,  
113 Upton Road,  
SLOUGH,  
Berkshire.

Dear Mrs. Sampson,

I am glad to hear that you have enjoyed Required Writing, and to have your memories of Mr. Cashmore. I met him only rarely, and I am afraid found him rather offensive, but as you say this may have been his shyness. I don't remember the speech impediment, which is odd as I myself stammered at that time.

Your comment about the reaction of classes to my cycle-clips is interesting; clearly the image of the starving poet has gone for good. Do you think they see the point of the line - that is, that since I am hatless, I take off my cycle-clips because I feel I ought to take off something when entering a church?

I hope you enjoy your return to librarianship, and thank you again for writing.

Yours sincerely,



Postcode: HU6 7RX

Telephone: 0482 46311

Telex: 52530 UNIIIUL G

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## *Memorandum from the Librarian to James Booth*

*From the Librarian*

Mr. J. Booth,  
Department of English.

18th May, 1981

### Writers & Politics in Nigeria

Thank you most sincerely for your kindness in presenting a copy of this book for the staff collection. Thank you too for noting the maddening misprints. Is this a consequence of printing in Malta?

The gift will be reported to the Library Committee at its next meeting, and I know the Committee would wish me to add their thanks to my own.



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### **White Bicycles**

In London, these days, a not uncommon sight,  
but something Mexican-macabre about it all the same:  
lashed to a post, or to railings, a bicycle painted entirely white –  
white handlebars and frame,  
white gears, brakes, wheels, spokes, pedals and chain –  
and decked with florists' bunches, satin-bowed and in cellophane.  
There may be cards and messages as well. Toys, too.  
Often a doll or a teddy.  
But it's the white that's so striking. What does it mean to you?  
Ghostliness? A skeleton? (A bicycle being skeletal already.)

Oh, get over it, it's the vernacular now; and what's not to like  
about "Out with the whited sepulchre! In with the whited bike!"?

*Christopher Reid*

# *From Maeve to Philip: Evelyn Waugh's Unconditional Surrender*

Geoffrey Weston

Following the official opening of the new Library building by H.M. the Queen Mother in June 1960, Larkin turned his attention to a very different matter. The female members of his staff were sadly lacking in professional qualifications, and he determined to take them in hand. Remembering his own struggles with the same examinations in the 1940s, he offered regular tuition during the lunch break to those interested. Although initially seven or eight took up the offer, by the end of the year only Maeve Brennan had stayed the course. The paper on Cataloguing and Classification was passed in December, and the final part of the Registration course for Associate of the Library Association was completed in the following autumn.<sup>1</sup>

As a token of appreciation for coaching her to success, Maeve presented Larkin with a copy of the recently-published novel by Evelyn Waugh, *Unconditional Surrender*, inscribing it 'To Philip, with grateful affection for the help and encouragement you gave me to conclude the A.L.A., from Maeve. November 1961.' Realising that the title was open to misinterpretation, Maeve jocularly warned him not to regard it as a green light to go ahead. With mock disappointment, Larkin replied that if a girl gave him a book with such a suggestive title, it could only have one meaning.<sup>2</sup>

Writing to Monica Jones on 23 November, in a letter as yet unpublished, Larkin noted that 'one scene in *Unconditional Surrender* takes place in our Victoria Overton's, a big long vivid scene between Virginia and Guy's Uncle Peregrine.'<sup>3</sup> Overton's was an upmarket fish restaurant opposite Victoria Station, obviously known to both Larkin and Monica. Despite it being wartime, Virginia and Peregrine could still dine on oysters and turbot, for a cost in excess of two pounds. Although long gone, the Overton's sign could still be seen as late as 2010 high up on the building then occupied by Prezzo's.

Larkin was profoundly affected by Evelyn Waugh's sudden death on Easter Sunday 1966. Writing to Maeve the following day from Stratford, where he was on holiday with his mother Eva, he said, 'This is almost the first real writer born in this century to have died of natural causes. He was 62. The *Times* said he died after coming back from church on Easter Sunday. I expect this is an ideal way to die for one of your persuasion – and not a bad way for anyone. But what a shock nonetheless. Now he will never finish his autobiography.

The *Times* gave him a long obituary, recalling that he had a notice on his gate saying 'No Admittance on Business'. It's very hard for me to imagine a world without Evelyn Waugh – he was one of the few really good living writers, & is a great loss.'<sup>4</sup>

After Larkin's death, Maeve, invited by Monica to choose a few of his books, selected this copy of *Unconditional Surrender*, along with the other two volumes in the *Sword of Honour* trilogy, *Men at Arms* and *Officers and Gentlemen*.<sup>5</sup> Following Maeve's death in 2003, volumes in her library with a Larkin connection were deposited in the Brynmor Jones Library. Inexplicably, in 2012 *Unconditional Surrender* was amongst those of Maeve's books which the BJL deemed not to be worthy of retention, and I was permitted to purchase it for the princely sum of 50p.

*We are grateful to the Society of Authors, as the Literary Representative of the Estate of Philip Larkin, for permission to publish the extracts from Larkin's letters.*

<sup>1</sup> Brennan, M.M. *The Philip Larkin I knew* (Manchester UP, 2002), p.37.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.43.

<sup>3</sup> ALS, 23 November 1961, BJL U DX/341/18.

<sup>4</sup> Brennan, M.M., *op.cit.*, p.186.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.44.

## Baggy

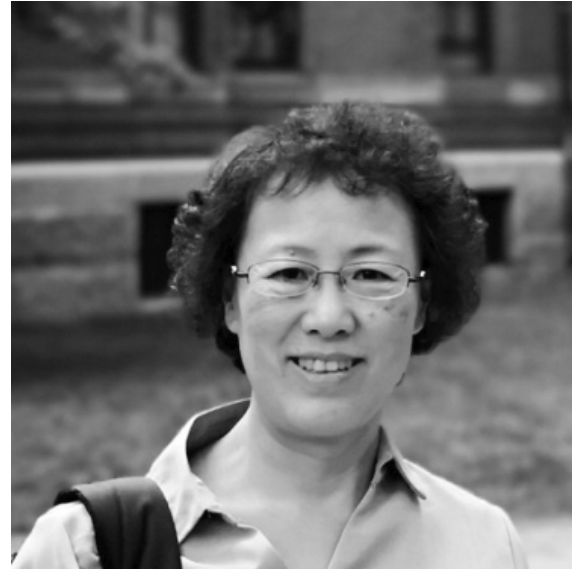
'Bags II! ' we 'd cry, claiming our certain right  
to the biggest biscuit, first read of a book,  
upstairs on the bus the coveted front seat.  
Easy entitlement! You got in quick –  
'Baggy! ' – that 's all it took. If another kid  
beat you to it, well, that was all right too,  
it was settled, agreed by all, you knew where you stood:

no silly messing about – 'You first ' – 'No, you. '  
Later, it wasn 't so easy – exams, a job,  
the boy you fancied – 'Baggy ' didn 't get those.  
You learnt to negotiate, compete with the mob  
for even a little of what, if you could, you 'd choose.  
In age, can you bag good health? Not to be lonely?  
No pain? A peaceful death among friends? If only.

Alison Mace

# *The Translation and Criticism of Philip Larkin's Poems in China*

Wan Furong and Zhang Yan



In the early half of the 20th century the introduction of modern English literary works to China was generally synchronic with their western publication. The May 4th Movement in 1919 generated a zest for western literature and culture.<sup>1</sup> W. B. Yeats was first introduced to China in the 1920s, and T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' was translated into Chinese in 1937. However, the situation of Philip Larkin was different. In the 1950s and 1960s, the time when Larkin earned his fame in the west, there was a general rejection of modern western literature in China. Following the foundation of the People's Republic in 1949, socialist China began a phase of learning from the Soviet Union in all fields.<sup>2</sup> It was not until the Reformation and Opening up Policy in the late 1970s that Chinese academics began to revive the interest in modern and contemporary western literature.<sup>3</sup> The translation of

and the studies on Philip Larkin began at that time.

The translations of Larkin's poems in the 1980s were limited to several of his most famous poems and the studies on Larkin consisted mostly of a general introduction, together with attention to other post-war British poets. Some scholars also gave an overall evaluation of his poetic themes and style. Yet the first in-depth monograph related to Larkin did not appear until 1998, entitled *The Poetics of Movement Poets*,<sup>4</sup> followed by some more-in-depth studies on Larkin. This article will trace the development of the translation of and researches into Philip Larkin in China in three phases: the translation of Larkin's works from the 1980s to the present; the study of Larkin before the Millennium; the study of Larkin after the Millennium. It examines the development of Larkin translations from single poems to three collections of his poetic works; and the study of Larkin from general introductions to the publication of four monographs and various articles, focusing on themes, language, Englishness etc. in Larkin's poems, and on studies of Larkin's poems from the ethical and ecological angle.

## **I. *The Translation of Philip Larkin's Poems***

In Britain, Larkin earned his fame after the publication of *The Less Deceived* in 1955, partly the result of its selection by the *Times* as one of the best

<sup>1</sup> Similar to the May 1968 protests in France, the May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement in China was initiated by university students to protest against the impotent Northern Government. It led to various struggles and helped spread the idea of liberty.

<sup>2</sup> The Cold War meant that socialist China regarded all those in capitalist society as corrupted.

<sup>3</sup> Proposed by Chairman Deng Xiaoping in the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in Dec. 1978, the policy emphasized the importance of reforms in state-owned enterprises and opening up to foreign investors. This led to a period of rapid economic growth in China.

<sup>4</sup> The book was based on a PHD thesis finished in 1990. Fu Hao. *The Movement Poets Poetics*. Nanjing: Yilin Press, 1998.

## About Larkin

books of the year,<sup>5</sup> partly because of promotion by critics such as G. S. Fraser,<sup>6</sup> John Wain<sup>7</sup> and William Van O'Connor.<sup>8</sup> The *Times Educational Supplement* gave the first thorough introduction to Larkin in July 13th, 1956.<sup>9</sup> After the publication of *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) and *High Windows* (1974), Larkin's reputation gradually reached its peak. He earned many awards.<sup>10</sup> David Timms published the first monograph on Larkin in 1973,<sup>11</sup> and the works of Lolette Kuby (1974),<sup>12</sup> Alan Brownjohn (1975),<sup>13</sup> and Donald Davie (1979) followed.<sup>14</sup>

The research and translation of Larkin's poems did not begin in China until the 1980s, lagging behind the western world by about twenty years. Two decades of ideological opposition to the capitalist camp had created in China an attitude which saw all literary works as class-oriented. Thus contemporary western literature was viewed as a manifestation of late capitalist decadence and disillusionment which should be rejected altogether. The economic reforms in the late 1970s led to transformations in thought, and a new desire to understand current western culture without predetermined ideology became evident. Larkin was introduced to China as a poet who offered a

"photographic" recording of post-war Britain. The early translations of Larkin's poems focused on those widely acclaimed pieces,<sup>15</sup> mostly composed in his middle phase, giving narrative detail concerning the post-war British social and religious situation. In this period among poems translated were "Toads" "Coming" "The Whitsun Weddings" (translated in 1980),<sup>16</sup> "Church Going" (in 1982),<sup>17</sup> "Afternoons" (in 1985),<sup>18</sup> "Fiction and the Reading Public" (1987),<sup>19</sup> "Going" (1989),<sup>20</sup> "Poetry of Departures" "Home", "Water", "Days", "A Study of Reading Habits" and "Going, Going" (1987).<sup>21</sup> They were all published in journals introducing and studying western literature, and in this period more translations were done than research papers. The translators were all university teachers. Some of the translations adopted an idiomatic translation style and used many slang expressions to make the translation fresh and natural to Chinese readers.

Meanwhile, some anthologies of modernist and post-modernist western poems published at the end of 1980s selected Larkin poems. Though viewed as realistic pieces, the modernist and post-modern artistic features in Larkin's poems were also noticed. Among these translators, Qiu Xiaolong rendered four of Larkin's poems, namely "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album", "Deceptions", "Days", and "Ambulances" into Chinese in *A Selection of European and American Modernist Poetry*.<sup>22</sup> In addition translations of "The Dance" and "At Grass" were included in *A Selection of European and American Postmodern Poetry*.<sup>23</sup>

Western cultural influence was further manifested in the 1990s in more anthologies of British poetry published in

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<sup>5</sup> "A Reader Looks Back Over The Year." *Times*, 22 Dec. 1955, p.9. The *Times* Digital Archive, <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/BR3QA1>. Accessed 26 July 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Fraser praises Larkin in various articles in this period, especially his way of building up the "situation". See Fraser, G. S.: "The Purity of Poetry." *The Times Literary Supplement*, 18 May 1956, p. 297. The *Times Literary Supplement* Historical Archive, <http://tinyurl.gale.com/tinyurl/CC37K6>. Accessed 11 Nov. 2019; Fraser, G. S., et al.

"EXPERIMENT IN VERSE." *The Times Literary Supplement*, 17 Aug. 1956, p. 492. The *Times Literary Supplement* Historical Archive, <http://tinyurl.gale.com/tinyurl/CC36Y9>. Accessed 11 Nov. 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Wain, John. "English Poetry: The Immediate Situation". *The Sewanee Review*. Vol. 65, No. 3. 1957, pp. 353-374.

<sup>8</sup> O' Connor, Van William. "The New University Wits". *The Kenyon Review*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Winter, 1958), pp. 38-50.

<sup>9</sup> Shakespeare, John. "Philip Larkin." the *Times Educational Supplement*, July 13, 1956:933.

<sup>10</sup> Larkin received the Ben Johnson Medal in 1974 and the FVS Foundation Shakespeare Prize in 1975.

<sup>11</sup> Timms, David, *Philip Larkin*, Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1973.

<sup>12</sup> Kuby, Lolette, *An Uncommon Poet for the Common Man: A Study of Philip Larkin's Poetry*. Netherlands: The Hague, 1974.

<sup>13</sup> Brownjohn, Alan. *Philip Larkin*. Essex: Longman Group, 1975.

<sup>14</sup> Davie, Donald. *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry*. Routledge & Kegan Paul. 1979.

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<sup>15</sup> Some selected by anthologies such as *The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse* and *The New Oxford Book of Light Verse*.

<sup>16</sup> Larkin, Philip, Gao Houkun. "Three Poems". *Foreign Literature*, 1980(01): 39-43.

<sup>17</sup> Liu Yutan. "A Survey of Contemporary British Literature." *Journal of Chongqing Normal University (Edition of Social Science)*, 1982(02): 70-80.

<sup>18</sup> Larkin, Philip, Zhou Jueliang. "Ten Poems." *Foreign Literature*, 1985(01): 23-28.

<sup>19</sup> Larkin, Philip, Huang Xinqu. "Fiction and the Reading Public." *Foreign Literature*, 1985(02): 93.

<sup>20</sup> Wang Xisu, Xu Qinggen. "British Post-war Poems." *Contemporary Foreign Literature*. 1989(01): 138-146.

<sup>21</sup> Larkin, Philip, Wang Zuoliang. "Philip Larkin: Eight Poems." *Foreign Literature*, 1987(01): 13-19.

<sup>22</sup> Dong Miao ed., Zheng Min etc. trans. *A Selection of European and American Modernist Poetry*. Beijing: China Youth Press, 1989.

<sup>23</sup> Hu Xing etc. trans. *A Selection of European and American Postmodern Poetry*. Guangzhou: Huacheng Press, 1991.

China.<sup>24</sup> Translators continued to translate typical poems of Movement poets and some representative post-war British poems into Chinese. Some favorite poems of Larkin, such as “Coming”, “Church Going” and “The Whitsun Weddings” were translated again and again. Yet at the same time, some early and less popular poems, such as “Pigeons”(1994),<sup>25</sup> “Triple Time” and “The Trees”(1997)<sup>26</sup> were also rendered into Chinese, revealing other aspects of Larkin.

After the Millennium, economic growth has led to a series of social and environmental problems in China similar to those in the west in the late 19th century. Polarization between the rich and the poor, the rural-urban disparity, and the east-west gap are all the problems the government has been tackling currently. While at the same time, cooperation and interaction with the wider world has manifested many characteristics typical of a post-modern consumerist society in China. Composed in an age of transition from industrial society to prevalent consumerism, Larkin’s poems are concerned with all these problems, while pondering on deeper doubts and anxieties of human beings. Under such circumstances, Larkin’s poems received more attention and resonated in China.

Three larger volumes of translated works are a direct response to Larkin’s continuing popularity in China. In 2003, based on the *Collected Poems* of 1988, the first translated *Selected Poems of Philip Larkin* was published.<sup>27</sup> Sang Ke, a poet himself, chose 150 poems from the 242 poems in the collection and rendered them into Chinese. In 2014 the full version of *Collected Poems* was translated by Shu Dandan, a woman poet and professor. Shu began to publish her translations of Larkin’s poems in 2005 and the book is the result of ten years’ work. In 2018, A Jiu, a Chinese Canadian engineer and poet, rendered *The Complete Poems of Philip Larkin* into Chinese only five years after the publication of the English version. Different from the earlier translators who are first and foremost

scholars and university teachers, the above three translators are all poets themselves, whose translations have influenced Chinese modern poetry in one way or another.

## II. *The Study of Philip Larkin before the Millennium*

The critical study of Larkin also began in the 1980s. Few specialized researches on Larkin appeared in this period. Most papers were the introductory studies of the poet and his poems, alongside the translations. The critical papers of Wang Zuoliang and Qiu Xiaolong should be noticed. Both of them analyzed the artistic features of Larkin’s poems in some depth, rather than simply viewing Larkin as a representative realistic poet of post-war Britain, the dominant trend in Chinese study of Larkin in that period. Wang mentioned Larkin’s imagination in the poems as well as his realistic writing and detected the “change of mood” in his poetry.<sup>28</sup> As well as his conformism, Qiu noticed Larkin’s rebellious attitude against poetic tradition, in his adoption of anti-climactic techniques and negative words.<sup>29</sup> Qiu’s criticism has echoed the western criticisms about Larkin’s symbolic features from the late 1970s.

In the 1980s, the journal articles about Larkin mainly examined him together with other Movement poets. These articles paid attention to Larkin’s realistic writing styles as well as his descriptions of people’s daily life, which reflect the religious decline and the life of British people in general in the 1950s and 1960s. A glimpse of the analysis of “Church Going” in China and an account of the different reasons for its popularity in China and in the west may be helpful to reveal the whole picture. Liu Yutang’s (1982) article was the first comparatively full study of Larkin.<sup>30</sup> In his introduction to post-war British literature, Larkin’s “Church Going” was analyzed stanza by stanza. The phrase “Hatless, I take off / My cycle-clips in awkward reverence” was viewed as a faithful representation of the plain life of common people, no longer comforted by religion. Similarly, Gao Dongshan (1985)<sup>31</sup> also examined this poem in detail and regarded it as “an important reflection of capitalist society”, “an agnostic’s meditation in church”. Both of them paid

<sup>24</sup> Wang Enzhong, Fan Xinmin. *Selected Poems of the Contemporary British and American schools*. He Fei: An Hui Literature and Art Publishing House, 1991. “Wants” “Church Going” and “Coming” were included. Fei Bai, Peng Shaojian edited, *World Collection of Poems* (2<sup>nd</sup> volume): Britain & Ireland. Guangzhou: Huacheng Press, 1994. “Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album” “Church Going”, “Home”, “Water” and “The Whitsun Weddings” were included.

<sup>25</sup> Wang Lin. “Philip Larkin: Four Poems.” *Translations*, 1994(01):188-189.

<sup>26</sup> Zhang Jian. “Four Contemporary British Poems.” *Translations*, 1997(02):152-153.

<sup>27</sup> Sang Ke. *A Selection of Philip Larkin’s Poems*. Shi Jiazhuang: Hebei Education Publishing House, 2003.

<sup>28</sup> Larkin, Philip, Wang Zuoliang. “Philip Larkin’s Eight Poems.” *Foreign Literature*, 1987(01): 13-19.

<sup>29</sup> Oiu did not give further analysis on these negative words. It is probable that he referred to those words beginning with “-un”. James Booth (2005) has pointed out that there are 157 such words in Larkin’s poems.

<sup>30</sup> Liu Yutan. “A Survey of Contemporary British Literature.” *Journal of Chongqing Normal University (Edition of Social Science)*, 1982(02): 70-80.

<sup>31</sup> Gao Dongshan. “An Essay on Contemporary British Realistic Poems.” *Research in Teaching*. 1985(02): 30-35.

attention to the decline of religion in people's spirit in post-war society. Wang Zuoliang (1987) regarded it as "honest" in describing people's daily life. In short, according to Chinese scholars, Larkin's depictions of common people's life and religious status in Britain were regarded as true reflections of post-war Britain while his irony and imagination were neglected. Larkin pointed out the popularity of this poem in the west may be because of its subject of religion, yet he emphasized that it is a secular poem.<sup>32</sup> He hinted that its skepticism may appeal to people around the world, though this was not the emphasis of criticism in this phase.

In the 1990s, Fu Hao's criticism gave a thorough examination to the Movement Poets and Philip Larkin in particular.<sup>33</sup> In his doctoral thesis entitled *The Poetics of the Movement Poets*, composed in 1990 and published in 1998, he discussed the Movement Poets' views on tradition, analyzed the themes and the poetic artistic features of their poems, including poetic form and language, as well as the readers of their poems. In Chapter Eight, entitled "Philip Larkin: the Unofficial Poet Laureate", Fu analyzed Larkin's poems fully and viewed them as the "unique and truthful representation of life experience" which manifest the general spirit of the post-war English intelligentsia.<sup>34</sup> Meanwhile, he insightfully pointed out that "besides recording the personal life and experience, Larkin sometimes transcends the realistic depiction of life and goes into the realm of imagination in writing".<sup>35</sup> Fu pointed out that Larkin's symbols are often found in his animal poems and poems about death. Also, Fu believed that Larkin's poetry showed some post-modern features in its language usage, especially in his use of four-letter words in poetry, which aimed to shock the people, and resisted social customs as well as creating a tone of self-mockery. Fu's research deepens Larkin study in China and sets the trend for later researches. Despite its lack of abundant first-hand materials, it is still an insightful study and effective guide to the research of Movement poets and Philip Larkin today.

### III. *The Study of Philip Larkin after the Millennium*

The research scope of Philip Larkin after 2000 has been broadened and shows some diversity. In CNKI, a database similar to JSTOR and Gale, with an insertion

of the Chinese character "Larkin's Poetry", 84 related articles can be found, mostly published after 2000. The number would probably be over 100 if those early articles which introduced Larkin together with other movement poets were locatable using these keywords.

Most importantly, Fu Hao's study on the themes and language of Larkin's poems is echoed and deepened in Lv Aijing's research. In her article entitled "Seeking after the Lost Past—On the Themes of Philip Larkin's Poetry" (2001), which offers an examination of Larkin's views on desire, time and death, she pointed out the poet's negative attitudes towards post-war society and his general pessimism.<sup>36</sup> Lv also focused on Larkin's colloquial diction and use of slang, seeing them as a manifestation of Larkin's nationalism and egoism.<sup>37</sup> In a 2009 article, she examined Larkin's animal poems, and saw a connection between Larkin's love for small animals and his theme of common life, regarding it as a "non-hero" attitude. Lv also discussed the origins of Larkin's poetics.<sup>38</sup> She believed that the decline of post-war society, with its roots in empirical philosophy and the salvation of British poetry from foreign influence, all led to "Non-heroism" in Larkin's works, manifested not only in his treatment of common people and small animals, but also in his adoption of common language, even four-letter words and his view that poet should be responsible to the common people. Lv's monograph entitled *Philip Larkin's View of "Non-hero"* was published in 2012. It was the first specialized monograph on Larkin in China.

Analysis of Larkin's Englishness should be noticed in this period. If Fu and Lv took Englishness for granted and examined it mainly in terms of "Larkin's continuation of traditional English culture",<sup>39</sup> Xiao Yunhua took the nature of Englishness as the entire focus in his research. Xiao believed that Englishness was a way for Larkin to construct himself in order to cater to the media and the reading public. In an article in 2008, Xiao examined Larkin's change of poetic style from Yeats to Hardy, which outwardly showed his seeking for a kind of Englishness, yet intricately revealed Larkin's personal anxieties concerning life,

<sup>32</sup> Larkin, Philip. *Further Requirements: Interviews, Broadcasts, Statements and Book Reviews*. London: Faber and Faber, 2002: 22.

<sup>33</sup> Fu Hao was granted doctorate by The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in 1990. He was among the first to achieve a doctorate on English and American Literature in China.

<sup>34</sup> Fu Hao. *The Poetics of the Movement Poets*. Nanjing: Yilin Press, 1998: 130-131.

<sup>35</sup> Fu Hao. *The Poetics of the Movement Poets*. Nanjing: Yilin Press, 1998: 138.

<sup>36</sup> Lv Aijing. "Seeking after the lost past —— On the themes of Philip Larkin's poetry." *Journal of Sichuan Foreign Language Collage*. 2001(01): 53-55.

<sup>37</sup> Lv Aijing. "The New Artistic Quality of Philip Larkin's Poetic Language." *Journal of Xiangtan Normal University(Social Science Edition)*. 2003(04): 94-96.

<sup>38</sup> *Philip Larkin's View of "Non-hero"* became the title of her doctor thesis.

<sup>39</sup> Lv Aijing. *Philip Larkin's View of 'Non-Hero'*. Shanghai: World Publishing Corporation, 2012: 79.



ideals and existence.<sup>40</sup> In an article published in 2010, Xiao examined Larkin's poem "Wires", which was viewed together with other frontier poems as a representative of Larkin's consciousness of cultural separation.<sup>41</sup> Larkin's personae in the poems such as "March Past" were regarded as revealing his English identity with techniques such as changes of personal pronoun, and the use of synecdoche and irony.<sup>42</sup> Xiao's researches centered on Larkin's manipulation of identity, construction of Englishness and his existential approach to life. His monograph was published in 2017.<sup>43</sup> Xiao's criticisms are insightful in perspectives and thorough in research. However the way he interprets all of Larkin's poems, even some purely animal poems in terms of cultural separation is not exempt from the charge of over-interpretation.

From the above, we can see that Larkin criticism in China focussed on his representation or construction of Englishness, which was seen in the context of his realism. Though much of the criticism of Larkin in the west was also the same in the 1950s and 1960s, a change took place with the publication of *High Windows* in 1974. Alan Brownjohn (1975) was one of the first critics who focused on Larkin's use of symbols;<sup>44</sup> Barbara Everett (1980) traced the influence of Baudelaire on Larkin in detail;<sup>45</sup> Seamus Heaney (1982) pointed out Larkin's transcendental moments through an analysis of his use of light;<sup>46</sup> Andrew Motion (1982) in his monograph centered his discussion on Larkin's symbolism.<sup>47</sup> They all contributed to the turning of Larkin criticism from the focus on its manifestation of realism to symbolism. At the same time, the prevalent view of Larkin as a pessimistic poet was also challenged. However, in China, though Larkin's use of symbol was mentioned

in some research papers, a thorough study of this aspect was not yet carried out.

It is in Zhang Yan's essay collection (2008) on modern British poetry that the symbolism in Larkin's poems was given a comparatively in-depth examination.<sup>48</sup> In her article entitled "The Symbolic Features in Philip Larkin's Poetry", Zhang pointed out that, though Larkin excelled at recording personal experience, this experience became "symbolic when recognized by most people". Besides, she took the much debated "Church Going" to discuss its imaginative elements. However, it is a pity that these articles did not arouse the same amount of attention as Everett's in the West, partly because they were not published independently in journals, partly because they didn't follow the dominant critical trend in Larkin criticism in China ten years ago. Another scholar Chen Xi also examined Larkin's connection with French symbolism in her article "The North Ship: A Flaneur's Meditation" (2009), which compared Larkin's depiction of city life to that of Baudelaire.<sup>49</sup>

The study of Larkin's poetry from an ethical perspective is also worth noticing. The development of modern technology in such fields as AI, cloning and genetic engineering made concepts of personal relationship more complicated in the late 20th century, and raised new ethical problems. The perspective of ethical criticism in literary study has aroused much attention in China recently. Larkin's poems, though they rarely touch upon technology directly, have been famed for his depiction of the individual's predicament, being alone or involved with others in complicated human relationships. Chen Xi's article (2011) on Larkin's "Deceptions" adopted an ethical perspective to examine various people's attitudes towards rape in different times and revealed the changes in people's moral sense.<sup>50</sup> Her doctorate thesis (2011) elaborated the "flaneur ethics" expressed in Larkin's poems, through which the characters' moral predicaments and poet's complicated attitudes towards life, people, sex and marriage were related to the historical context.<sup>51</sup> Chen Xi's research is a good start in China, and maybe a complement to the study of Larkin in the west.

<sup>40</sup>Xiao Yunhua. "Philip Larkin: Englishness turn and Personal Anxiety." *The World Literature Criticism*. 2008(02): 63-66.

<sup>41</sup> Xiao Yunhua. "Philip Larkin's Border Awareness: An Analysis of 'Wires'." *Foreign Literature Review*, 2010(01): 205-215.

<sup>42</sup> Xiao Yunhua. "A Dramatic Self: A Study of the Cultural Ideology of Larkin's Persona." *Foreign Literature Studies*. 2012, 34(06): 40-47.

<sup>43</sup> Xiao Yunhua. *A Study on the Cultural Strategies of Philip Larkin*. Guangzhou: South China University of Technology Press, 2017.

<sup>44</sup> Brownjohn, Alan. Philip Larkin. Essex: Longman Group, 1975.

<sup>45</sup> Brownjohn, Alan. Philip Larkin. Essex: Longman Group, 1975.

<sup>46</sup> Heaney, Seamus. "The Main of Light." In Regan, Stephen Edited. *Philip Larkin*. Basingstoke & London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1997: 23-31.

<sup>47</sup> Motion, Andrew. *Philip Larkin*. London and New York: Methuen, 1982.

<sup>48</sup> Zhang Yan. *Pluralism, Merge and Transcend: Studies on Modern and Contemporary British Poetry*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 2008: 206.

<sup>49</sup> Chen Xi. "The Northship: A Flaneur's meditation." *English and American Literary Studies*. 2009, (1): 104-116.

<sup>50</sup> Chen Xi. "Narrative Ethics in Philip Larkin's 'Deception'." *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, 2011, 32(01): 80-88.

<sup>51</sup> Chen Xi. "The Flaneur's Ethics: A Study of Philip Larkin's Poetry"[D]. Central China Normal University, 2011. The monograph based on this thesis was published latter in 2018.

Another trend in Larkin study in contemporary China is ecological criticism. Over the centuries, a largely agricultural China had tended to seek a harmonious relationship with nature. An understanding of nature can bring a good harvest; a worship of nature can bring peace and prosperity to the nation. Thus the love and praise of nature was a frequent topic in classical poetry. Industrialization and its utilization of nature cut the tie between human beings and nature, taking nature as the object conquered by human beings in the process of development. The booming of ecological studies in America since the 1990s quickly finds its ally in China, which has reminded Chinese scholars to rethink the endangered humanity-nature relationship. Though Larkin was at first famous for his depiction of city life, researchers in China began to pay attention to the nature images in Larkin's poems. Lv Aijing's "Seeking for the English Garden: Ecological Thinking in Philip Larkin's Poetry" (2010)<sup>52</sup> focused on the ecological ideas expressed in the poet's depiction of animals, nature and common people. Xiao Yunhua's article took Larkin's "Absences" as an example to reveal his existential attitude towards nature and its influence on his views of culture and society, which manifested in the prevalence of disillusionment in his poetry.<sup>53</sup> In a doctoral thesis, Cao Liqun (2016) compared the different ways of constructing nature in the poems of Philip Larkin, Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney.<sup>54</sup> She pointed out Larkin's fear of nature's changing course as well as his desire for regeneration in nature. Xiao Yunhua (2018) took "To the Sea" as an example to reveal Larkin's awareness of climate change in Britain in 1960s, which resulted in his general pessimism over humanity and existence.<sup>55</sup> For Larkin, the love for nature and small animals is a purpose in itself without purposiveness. Neither focussing exclusively on the romantic transcendence of nature, nor viewing it simply as in opposition to humanity, Larkin has tended to view nature as a friend of humanity and stressed its ordinariness as well as its beauty. Some of the criticisms listed above have managed to go outside the human focus and value Larkin's pure love for nature itself.

<sup>52</sup> Lv Aijing. "Seeking for the English Garden: Ecological Thinking in Philip Larkin's Poetry." *Journal of Sichuan International Studies University*, 2010, 26(04): 16-20.

<sup>53</sup> Xiao Yunhua. "Larkin's nature: the existentialism in 'Absences'." *Foreign Literature Review*, 2014(02): 215-224.

<sup>54</sup> Cao Liqun. "Construction Nature: The Poetry of Philip Larkin, Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney." [D]. Beijing Foreign Language University, 2016.

<sup>55</sup> Xiao Yunhua. "Poetry in the Anthropocene: A Case Study of Philip Larkin's 'To the Sea'." *Foreign Literature Studies*, 2018, 40(04): 69-82.

To summarize: criticism of Larkin in China has shown a great development in scope and depth and also much variety. In the light of recent research in the west it is now, first and foremost, necessary for us to use such new materials as *The Complete Poems* (2013),<sup>56</sup> the new biography *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love* (2014),<sup>57</sup> as well as *Letters Home 1936-1977* (2018)<sup>58</sup> to study Larkin's poems more thoroughly and perhaps see their relevance in China. Besides, researches on Larkin's poetics have just started and the study of Larkin's indebtedness is limited in China to Yeats and Hardy. It is to be hoped that future researches will deepen the study of Larkin's poetry by paying more attention to Larkin's poetics and the influences upon his poetry.

<sup>56</sup> Larkin, Philip. *The Complete Poems*, ed. Archie Burnett, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013.

<sup>57</sup> Booth, James. *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2014.

<sup>58</sup> Booth, James. *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2014.

### *A Reminiscence of Monica Jones in Leicester*

I was at Leicester University from 1958 to 1961. Monica had been there since 1946. Philip Larkin had by then moved from Belfast to Hull.

Monica was in the process of buying her house in Haydon Bridge and I think her heart was in Hull. In those days she was very attractive, not the gin-soaked harridan that Andrew Motion describes. She was quite petite, blonde and wore her hair piled up, Grecian style, but it was always escaping so the effect was Grecian/ Bohemian. She wore over-sized black-rimmed glasses which emphasised her rather elfin features and gave her an air of gravitas. She was nice enough but somewhat distant and I do not think her heart was in teaching undergraduates. In the Motion biography a letter to Larkin is mentioned in which she complains about the tedium of marking undergraduates' mediocre essays, and I always imagine she had one of my essays before her as she wrote. The timing would have been right.

I can remember only one of her lectures on some of Shakespeare's lesser-known works. I did not find it very inspiring but this was probably my fault as I had not read any of the plays she chose. The male students were all quite keen on her and no doubt found her much more inspiring.

*Margaret Sepanski*

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## *Couplings: Misreading Larkin's Sex*

*Douglas Porteous*

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*'a gobbledegookery of critics'* (Malcolm Lowry)

Quot homines tot sententiae: every litercritter has her own interpretation of Larkin's famous poem 'The Whitsun Weddings' ('TWW'). Some speak generally about rites of passage and tribal initiation. But Heaney, Ingelbien, Lucas and Paulin argue that the poem's about Englishness. Larkin stirs this pot by recalling Olivier's Henry V film, rampant with archery. Others see intimations of death, and still others tout regeneration. The last stanza mystifies most, particularly the metaphorical arrow-shower which, somewhere out of sight, becomes rain. Osborne tells us rain is regenerative and talks of the Fisher King myth. Motion suggests arrows of desire and shots from Cupid's bow. Rumens even sees homosexual despair. For Ingelbien the unknown 'somewhere' of the arrow-fall creates a sense of separation, and Bradford calls the closing lines 'a masterpiece of evasion.' Yet although nowhere is a Larkin trademark, the ordinary reader familiar with human anatomy and physiology needs little help to discover the whereness of this particular somewhere.

Although everyone sees the last stanza as erotic and even as a culmination or climax, few beside Booth are prepared to speak of 'an unmistakable sexual implication...a kind of detumescence.' Most tend to dismiss the fleshly physical and go for more subtle argument. Through their enormous critical output they have effectively desexualized a poem about weddings.

To recap the theme: At every stop of the train from Hull, newly-wedded couples climb aboard to begin a London honeymoon. Larkin's descriptions of England seen through the windows counterpoint what must be going on in the heads of these couples. They've just undergone the agonizing farce of their wedding and two more major changes await them: coping with London and coping with the wedding night. It's 1955 and most of these youngsters will not have visited London before. Nor will they have long histories of enjoyable sex, for they have no cars or urban haystacks, and sex in public places or the front room is always anxious and interruptible (I speak from experience). Some will be virgins.

It's a transformative day in their lives. They are pent up with sexual desire, and for the first time, perhaps, will soon be able to go at it like free bloody birds. They are happy, but on edge, and it shows. Some old bloke in the

corner is pretending to look out of the window. So what the last stanza is about is clear. Larkin himself speaks of the last lines as 'lift off.' My poetry is not about 'the organic voice of Olde England,' says Larkin, more 'the genital organ voice.' Unironically, Paulin talks of 'TWW's final lines as a 'Yeatsian big-bang.'

Here's my resexualised *Homo erectus* interpretation of the last stanza:

There we were aimed [our aim is to have sex]. And as we raced [we're desperate] across

Bright [lovers'] knots of rail

Past standing [what else?] Pullmans [pulling's been done], walls of blackened moss

Came close [these girls don't pubic shave] and it was nearly done [not yet!], this frail

Travelling coincidence; and what it held [hold on]

Stood ready to be loosed [we're coming now] with all the power [so strong]

That being changed can give [it's my first time]. We slowed again [take time]

And as the tightening brakes took hold [ah, God], there swelled [how could there not]

A sense of falling [Oh, Oh], like an arrow-shower [I've come]

Sent out of sight [me too, Oh, Phil], somewhere [right there] becoming rain.

Yet, except for Larkin the observer, the communion of event does not stop at King's Cross. The 'sense of falling' is key. As the train falls silent, and the poem falls from description into metaphor, so the fallen-in-love couples, as if in Alice or Wallace and Gromit, fall straight from their carriages into their hotel beds, all more or less at the same time. 'This frail travelling coincidence' then becomes robust as a couple of dozen bare bums engage in active simultaneous congress. You have to laugh: O sly Larkin.

And the attendant rain is also obvious, what poetic young Aldous Huxley called 'A million million spermatozoa.' For the arrow-shower is doubled: first, each husband's arrow-like penis penetrating each willing wife; and second, each arrow itself, on reaching the butt, releasing a further arrow-shower of sperm into the

vagina (there is no Pill; condoms are hard to come by). Whereupon all those little arrows, sent out of sight, begin their dark wet competitive journey.

A dark journey it is for Larkin, whose enjoyment of sex is often spoiled by imagining the result of just one of those arrowy spermatozoa reaching its target. And for the currently happy couplers, after *The Joy of Sex*, after their breakfast 'squares of wheat,' after the torrid honeymoon, fulfillment's desolate attic awaits like an unsprung trap.

Larkin is very sly. In *Further Requirements* he defies the reader to find in the poem any suggestion that the lives of these couples will be anything but happy. But we simply have to leave 'TWW' the poem and read on in *TWW* the volume. It's no coincidence that Arnold's unfulfilling marriage in 'Self's the Man' is the very next poem. Later we find 'Afternoons', where all that remains of 'Our Wedding' is the cushiony album next to the television. And between those two poems lie the usual suspects in Larkin's bachelor sexual repertoire: lying (to each other) in bed, the unknowable separateness of women, nasty kids, regret for wild oats not sown, the preferred porn of 'Sunny Prestatyn', and unfulfilled dreams of essential beauty.

*The Whitsun Weddings* ends with the highly suspect, unlasting love of the Arundel tombfolk. I end with the vision of poor old married Arnold, whose only chance of a screw is to put one in the wall.

#### CODA

But Larkin's fears are not without substance. On the return trip to Hull he endures 'a hellish journey back on a filthy train, next to a young couple with a slobbering chocolatey baby.' That's what soon happens to Whitsun Weddingfolk. Yet, 'Chocolatey Baby:' what a great title for an unoriginal New Orleans rag.

#### **In an Oxford Antiquities Shop**

Roman oil lamp with erotic scene

Such images left moderns mortified:  
A man and woman rear in ecstasy.  
This oil lamp was a talking point and guide.  
Now blurred by time, near where the flame once played,  
The figures keep a kind of privacy,  
And grow more universal as they fade,  
  
Showing the dreaming and imagining,  
The sameness and distinctiveness of lovers.  
Over a thousand pounds for this old thing!  
I pass thick colleges while hurrying home,  
And find you waiting deep within the covers  
Where soon we are rebuilding ancient Rome.

**Kieron Winn**

First published in *The Dark Horse*

### ***East Riding Poetry Competition 2019: Special Mention***

#### ***Doing the School Run with Freud***

'Check you've locked up,' he reminds me,  
because of course I'm likely to forget that.  
'Does turning the key in the lock bring to mind  
flesh grinding against flesh, maybe a penis,  
or something awkward from your childhood?  
A memory you've half-buried or hidden from?'

Not even out the house, and already  
Freud is bugging me. If he dares let  
my children's names cross his lips, I swear  
I'll deck him with my therapeutic handbag.

Freud wafts his cigar in the air, then strokes  
his beard pensively. 'Such pent-up aggression  
is interesting. Have you considered expressing  
this more often?' I think about expressing  
my hand across his shiny scalp or cheek.

Of course, I could tell my best friend  
that her prized walnut coffee cake  
tastes like burnt chicory and stale nuts,  
my husband to shove his dirty plates  
in his face, my kids to go live in a real pigsty,  
their teacher to homework herself  
into neater joined-up writing...or the great  
Sigmund Freud that sometimes love  
is the keeping quiet about the small things.

But he's tapping his stick now, impatiently.  
I start the car; he asks, 'What's the first thing  
you see when you look in the rear-view mirror?'  
'A psychoanalyst!' I reply as I jam my foot  
on the pedal and zoom backwards.

'Don't worry', Freud says, picking himself up  
from the tarmac and tacking back his shadow.  
'It's all there, waiting in the subconscious.'

***Sarah James***



*Belinda Hakes*

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# *From Tiny Beginnings*

*The Larkin Society Podcasts*

*Lyn Lockwood*

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The Philip Larkin Society always likes to think big. Maybe we have been inspired by the greatness of the Humber Estuary as it flows out into the North Sea as well as the genius of Larkin himself. I've been a trustee for six years now and I have always appreciated the energy and dedication that the members show in finding new ways to promote the understanding and interest in Philip Larkin, the twentieth century's greatest poet. The commitment to using our members' donations and subscriptions to support this aim responsibly and effectively does not interfere with a willingness to be creative and forward thinking. That said, my rather out of the blue suggestion that we have a podcast (during a routine committee meeting at the Bynmor Jones Library early in 2019) was met with some bemusement.

I had been considering this for a while as the huge growth in podcasts was becoming evident. I had been listening to podcasts for about three years at that point, such as *Vitriola*, *Criminal*, *S-Town*, *The Minimalists* and more. I'd been a guest on *The Afterword* music podcast. Real life stories, interviews, phone-ins, music and conversation; the format seemed endlessly varied and fresh. I really liked the independent nature of the podcast, not burdened by the need for a studio or other expensive outlay, no need to fit in with the scheduling of radio stations. This also meant you could be as *niche* as you liked and build your audience gradually and at your own pace. But they are reliant on digital engagement, and are generally accessed through smart phones on the move: something I certainly appreciated was not familiar to all. Despite this, the committee gave me the green light to look into it, and *Tiny In All That Air* slowly started to grow. The pilot was recorded with my husband Gavin (and is still available to hear on [Mixcloud.com](https://www.mixcloud.com)) and I played this to the committee at the very next meeting, gripping my chair with clammy hands, desperately hoping they would approve.

Having got over that hurdle (they did approve) I was lucky that Simon Galloway, BBC trained audio engineer, radio presenter, studio manager and all-round genius, agreed to be our producer. He recommended the equipment that we now use: a Zoom microphone for face-to-face interviews, and a Go Mic for online interviews, conducted via Cleanfeed (a bit like a recordable Skype). I registered an account with Anchor.fm which is a podcast distributor, designed the *Tiny* image using Canva.com, set up a Twitter account

for publicity and listener interaction and was ready to go. Wes Finch from *The Mechanicals Band* kindly allowed us to use his beautiful setting of *The Horns of the Morning* for our theme music and Simon recorded the introduction. He also very patiently listened to me trying to say, 'Hello, and welcome to *Tiny in All that Air*, the Philip Larkin Society podcast', several dozen times as we began recording. As an almost complete novice to this, I found it very hard to relax and speak naturally. I think I'm gradually improving.

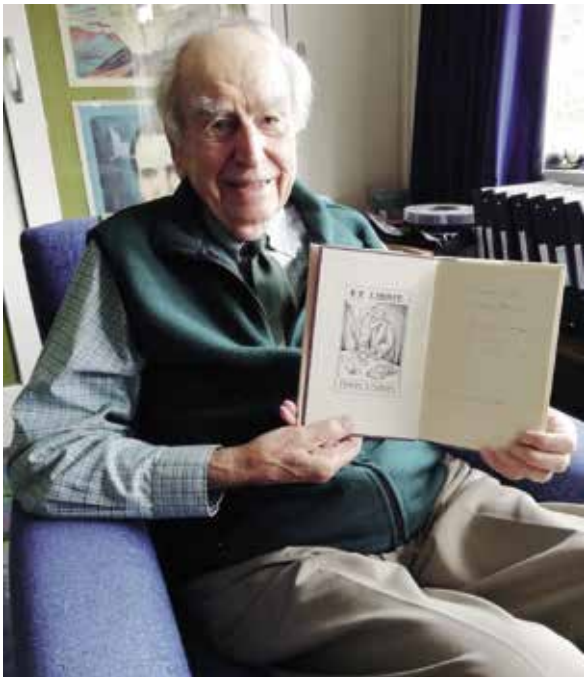


All we needed next were guests, and fortunately, that was much easier to organise. Dr Kyra Piperides Jaques, co-editor of *About Larkin*, was my first willing victim, and we tested out all the equipment and distribution to great success, much to my relief. As I played back this short 'taster' episode I was thrilled to think that this was actually taking shape. Next was the trip to Hull to record our first full episodes with Professor Eddie Dawes, our Chair and good friend of Larkin, and Professor James Booth, our Literary Adviser, *About Larkin* editor and Larkin biographer. I took Gavin with me as technical support and we had the most exciting day. James and Eddie were endlessly patient with me, and wonderfully interesting and erudite as always, although I did spend most of the day frantically worrying that I had somehow pressed the wrong button and messed all the recordings up (I hadn't).

The first podcast, my conversation with Eddie, formally launched on 2nd December 2019 to coincide with the

## About Larkin

date of Larkin's death, which is always marked by the Society, and the 25th year of the Philip Larkin Society.

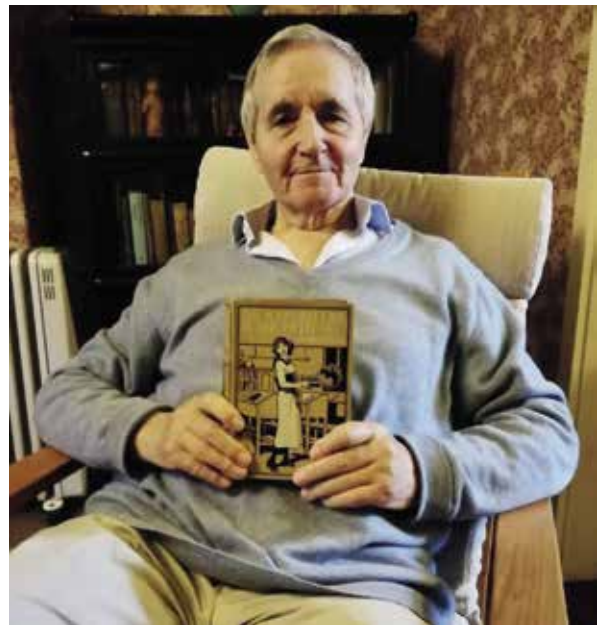


*Eddie Dawes*

We are now several episodes in, with more in production and planning. The statistics show that each podcast has already had hundreds of plays, and we have listeners across the UK and Europe, the US and even further afield. The comments from the Twitter community have been most encouraging, and we are already building a solid listener base. Some of these listeners are now interested in being guests themselves and sharing their own particular stories and passion for Larkin. So far I have interviewed poet Kieran Winn, Wes Finch, PLS trustee and Larkin researcher Philip Pullen, PLS merchandise officer and teacher Rachael Galletly, writer Chris Walsh and Anne O'Neill from the prestigious Listowel literary festival in County Kerry.

What I have loved about doing this is seeing the multiplicity of ways that Larkin can be explored. Every guest brings a unique perspective of their own: photography, jazz, Coventry, the library, Monica Jones, Larkin's letters and drawings, his librarianship, his family holidays, Larkin the teenager, teaching Larkin in school, Larkin's plaque in Westminster Abbey, cricket, Larkin's love of the Goons, Larkin's Oxford, his friendships with Barbara Pym and Kingsley Amis, his use of swear words, his drinking habits, his mum and dad, the changing landscape of Hull, Larkin the dinner guest, Pearson Park, Grayson Perry, and of course many of his poems as well as his novels... The list goes on, and we have only really just got started. I know my future guests will continue to uncover more and more. I can't think of any other writer who is so endlessly interesting! Future plans include dedicating episodes to

particular poems, as well as a Sidney Bechet special, podcast merchandise and many exciting future collaborations. I hope to bring some of our early guests back to update us on their Larkin related projects, and I hope Tiny In All That Air can play a role in Larkin100 in 2022. Thank you to all our members for being so supportive of this project, and, as I say at the end of each episode, if you would like to be a guest yourself, please get in touch!



*James Booth*

### **Eleven**

We sat in the dark and I picked  
at a scab on my knee. Dad said  
pay attention, this is historic.  
Two motorbikes revved outside;  
a stripe of moonlight crossed  
the carpet. I loved Steve White  
but he loved Denise.

The T.V. whistled and popped  
with static; a door slammed  
in the flat upstairs. Steve White  
had green eyes and black hair.  
Christ, I hope they're not going  
to start off again, Mum said.  
Zig-zags jittered on the screen.

You'll remember watching this  
when you're older, Dad said.  
I knew Denise was getting a bra.  
The T.V. crackled one small step  
for man; an astronaut bounded  
across grey rubble. Somewhere  
in our block a baby cried.

*Sharon Phillips*

## The Philip Larkin Society and East Riding Poetry Prizes 2019-20

'My Mind, My Thoughts': Bridlington Library, 10.30, 25 January 2020

James Booth

<https://festivalofwords.co.uk/poetry-comp/>



*Judges: Wendy Pratt (left); James Nash and James Booth (back row) with the attending prize-winners*

**Photos © Philip Pullen**

It has to be admitted that reading the 800 entries was something of a grind. Nevertheless there were enough real poems with a voice and idiom of their own, to make the final judgement very difficult. There are twenty or more poems, unmentioned at the prizegiving, which were definitely the real thing. By rights, the list of 'special mentions' should be very long. The range of approaches was impressive. Some of the entries told highly original stories; some were enigmatic and abstract. One or two were very funny. 'My mind' in one entry was that of a supercilious cat, looking contemptuously down from the fence, on a gormless dog whose meal s/he is intent on stealing. Then there was an over-the-top confrontation with a mysterious limpet, ending with the 'big reveal' when the poet finally prizes it from the rock, to be stared down by 'a glutinous grey gobbet, / gently throbbing, / a blotched blob botchjob'.

One poem, apparently about shopping, alternated the list of purchases, 'Bread, potatoes, onions', with an elegy on a lost partner, modulating into risky but breathtaking symbolism in the last lines: 'Sweet woodruff nests in my hair. / Fieldfares sleep in my ears. / Blankets of moss veil my eyes. / Foxgloves grow out of my fingers.' Elegy is the most universal of genres, and its key poignant trope, pathetic fallacy, in which inanimate nature expresses human emotion or the dead lover is addressed as if alive, is inexhaustible. In one entry the poet relates in the simplest terms how she returns to a loved, shared wood and reflects: 'you won't be coming any more.'

There were many more good poems than there were prizes. But a judgement had to be made and, in the event, the judges agreed upon the final list without bloodletting. In particular we all agreed that 'Fencing Project – 1975' is as good a poem as we got: a poised reminiscence, rich in psychological revelation. The cine-films, 'Camping – 1970', 'Birthday picnic – 1972', 'Fencing Project – 1975', recall a controlling, violent father, though the mocking face, flailing forearm and 'raw' eyes, remain realer to the poet than the censored narrative of the films. Now, the poet finds himself making a backyard bonfire of the super-8 film, which in a brilliant transferred epithet, is now 'liberated' from its spools to be fed into the comforting 'black smoke' penetrating the poet's lungs with 'unedited memory'.

Many congratulations to all the winners, the highly commended poets and those who gained a special mention. And many thanks also to all those who submitted poems. There is always next year!



*James Booth with Chris Sewart*

***Philip Larkin Society Prize  
Fencing Project - 1975***

Home movies record that fence.  
The sucking of sand, cement, water,  
A ripe mixture,  
shovelled around a cohort of cedar posts.  
Caught on brittle celluloid  
is a larchlap panel,  
pitched into place,  
galvanised nails punched home  
with a showy claw hammer.

Flapping from one sawn post  
is your lumberjack shirt, you next to it,  
grinning like Tenzing on Everest.  
A faded National Service tattoo winks at the sky  
from your greasy bicep.  
You fancied yourself with a cine camera.

Home movies don't record  
my failure to master the practical skills  
of fencing,  
of filming,  
of breathing.

There are no close-ups  
of your mocking face and flailing forearm, of red  
hand on awkward blue skin,  
of raw eyes.  
You fancied yourself with your fists.

I own the equipment now:  
camera, tripod, projector,  
gunmetal canisters labelled  
with your precise calligraphy:  
*Camping – 1970, Birthday Picnic – 1972,  
Fencing Project – 1975.*  
The ageing metal icy against my flagging skin.

Later, on a backyard bonfire,  
spools of liberated super-8 film  
spill and spew bitter smoke.  
I force my head over the comforting black,  
capture fumes on my tongue,  
let them coat my mouth  
and penetrate my lungs with unedited memory.

***Chris Sewart © 2019***

***East Riding First Prize  
Coasting***

As a child I flew  
from my window  
across the Holderness plain.  
I sretched my girl-skin  
like an egg.  
Bent arms downed  
fingers splayed  
to flight feathers  
the edge of my nightie  
fanned to tail. I bathed  
in the wilderness of wind.  
Coasting an easterly  
I flew above all fields.  
My sightline unbroken  
save for hamlets that cluster  
on closed lines and disused stations  
lone farms linked  
by ditches and drains  
the leylandii hiding the slurry pit  
that drowned a boy from school.  
Unsteeped churches  
understand this godless space  
between sod and sky  
is just for us birds to lose ourselves in.

\*

Once, the wind carried sails with skins  
and knives to Ravensor.  
Frismersk, Dimlington, Orwithfleet -  
all lost their bargain with the sea  
but their tongues live  
in every beck, brigg and carr,  
in every thorpe, thwaite and foss.  
There is beauty in time stitched slow.  
Taste it, sweet as raw milk,  
let it warm on your tongue.  
Smell sea's breath, skimmed  
and pooled in frets to cool summers.  
Hear the chatter of spuggies  
in hedgerows licked with may.  
See the wind lift fields of lapwings,  
folding and falling like loosed pages.  
Land here  
is not flat but subtle  
as rollers on a slight sea.

***Abigail Flint***



<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>East Riding Second Prize</i></b> <b><i>The Talking Crow of Knaresborough</i></b></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Highly Commended</i></b> <b><i>The Last Stitch</i></b></p>
<p>She's not like the rest. That white yoke of feathers for a start. That disappointed inflection to her voice – <i>y'alright love?</i> – where did she learn that? See,     she stands rustling her untidy wings for titbits, side-eyeing the ground. We flip a scrap.     <i>I'm alright</i> she intones, beak set like the sprung jaws of a man-trap. No lips, see, the voice hauled up from somewhere deep.     We chuck a crumb. <i>I'm alright</i> she insists again. She's habit-forming, so we conform.     Here, a morsel of a crisp. <i>Are you all right, love?</i>     Knowing what's expected, we tip the bag, scattering the broken flakes. <i>I'm alright</i>, she confirms, equipped with just this response, which she must bend to all eventualities.     See, she's standing on blank ground, there's nothing left. Hold out an empty hand – look, all gone – nothing left to say, but she's rooted to the place, still replying <i>I'm alright, I'm alright, I'm alright</i> to the question we're not asking anymore. Eventually, we go away.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b><i>Penny Boxall</i></b></p>	<p>I am sewing myself into a canvas sail again with a firm round stitch. I know how to tighten, how to gather and draw.</p> <p>I start at my feet (weighted): pierce, pull through, pierce, pull through. A steady progression for this cocoon this creeping, necessary numbness.</p> <p>Already I can't feel my feet, my thighs. Arms now pinioned I stitch over my ribs from the inside.</p> <p>The two rough halves draw closer to my face like blinkers. My lips kiss canvas.</p> <p>And now it is the last stitch: pierce pull straight through the nose, needling for a pulse.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b><i>Susan Szekely</i></b></p>

<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Highly Commended</i></b> <b><i>The Unfinished Book</i></b></p>	
<p>She's learnt how to halter-break the colt train him on a lunge rein get him used to saddle and bridle. By Thanksgiving – whatever that is – he'll be big, and strong enough for them to ride.</p> <p>When the red pony sickens she dozes on straw her father's snoring like the hinges of a swinging stable door. Morning comes and she hurries with Jody over the ridge.</p> <p>Thirty years later she'll reread the story see the shadows that were there all along, the speck of blood on a fried egg yolk massing rain clouds choked foreboding filling Jody's throat</p>	<p>but right now she's seven and the pony's dead on page forty-three. When the vulture lands and dips its beak she slams the book shut marches it, furious,</p> <p>up the road, past concrete bike stands in through the heavy library door slides it across the Formica desk, mortified, the smell of floor polish in her nose.</p> <p>She'll check the next few books she borrows for gymkhanas, shows, rosettes not understanding it's too late, that the weight gripping her bony shoulder is a patient bird of prey.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b><i>Deborah Harvey</i></b></p>

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## Belinda Hakes

28 October 1952 – 21 December 2019

An address delivered at Belinda's funeral. 11 am, 13 January 2020, Chanterlands Avenue Crematorium, Hull. Belinda's teaching colleague David Green and Patsy Stoneman of the Brontë Society also spoke.

James Booth

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My enduring memory of Belinda is of a strikingly elegant presence at Larkin Society committees and events. It was her composure which was so impressive.

Truly though our element is Time  
We are not suited to the long perspectives  
Open at each instant of our lives.  
They link us to our losses.

I first recall her at the Larkin Society Study Day at Wyke College which she organised on 15 March 2003. Her chairing of the sessions was inspiring. Photographs of the event show the students bent over in huddles, wholly engrossed in the poetry. Belinda was a most talented teacher, and her love of poetry was infectious.

At the time she joined the committee our journal *About Larkin* was going through a rough patch with a rapid succession of editors and co-editors: Martin Blyth, James Orwin, Jean Hartley, Maeve Brennan and myself. After this instability it was a huge relief when Belinda agreed to take over in April 2004 with issue 17 (which has one of our most striking covers: a 1950s Hull photograph of a 'ship up a street'. In all Belinda was editor for five issues. In 2005 the Society celebrated its tenth anniversary, and Belinda rose to the occasion with

the largest issue so far: 92 pages: a most impressive production, including a charming piece of doggerel which Larkin wrote in a Christmas card to Betty Mackereth in the late 1970s or 1980s. Belinda was one of the very few people who could say that she had published an original poem by Larkin.

Then there was the ambitious Larkin Society Schools Study Day in March 2008: a triumph of organisation and coordination, over which she presided with perfect aplomb. Attended by 170 students from five colleges in Hull, Newcastle, Sheffield, Rotherham and Grimsby, it filled the University's Assembly Hall with youthful energy. Set the task of creating a cover for a selected edition of Larkin's poetry, the students produced some most imaginative images. I remember particularly a kite flying surreally towards a firmly shut high window.

My most vivid recent image is of Belinda reading Larkin in dappled light on the edge of Pearson Park on one of the hottest days of 2018. Some of you will call to mind the evocative photograph in *About Larkin* 46.

On a more personal note I remember Belinda's faintly subversive presence at the yearly October Bridlington Poetry Festivals held in the sunny orangery of Sewerby Hall. We would exchange discreet glances at the most boring readings (and some of them were pretty inept). She had a totally inscrutable poker face. Later, as she gave me a lift to Bridlington railway station, we would let off steam. There were some good poems also, I hasten to add!

Good bye, Belinda, and thank you for everything. We will miss you,



# 'That chap Laforgue': Larkin and the Decadents

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This paper looks at the similarities between the themes and style of Philip Larkin's poetry and the work of the French 'decadent' school of the 1880s, especially the poems of Jules Laforgue (1860-1887), and suggests whether or not Larkin may have been directly or indirectly influenced by the Decadents.

In literary criticism the term 'decadence' is generously applied to a wide selection of writers ranging from Théophile Gautier through Symbolist poets like Baudelaire, Verlaine and Mallarmé to Irish and British writers such as Oscar Wilde, Ernest Dowson, Arthur Symons and Lionel Johnson. It is often used synonymously with 'fin-de-siècle', 'art for art's sake' and 'aestheticism',<sup>1</sup> but a much narrower definition of the concept might be more helpful in deciding which aspects of 'decadent' writing are relevant to Philip Larkin's poetry.

Towards the end of the 19th century a group of writers calling themselves 'Decadents', after a line by Verlaine,<sup>2</sup> began to meet informally in Paris. They had emerged in the night clubs and cabarets of the Latin Quarter and in Montmartre around the year 1880. A reaction to the rigorous rules and formal perfection of the Parnassians (Théodore de Banville, José-Maria de Heredia, Sully Prudhomme), the 'decadent' style was characterised by a certain relaxed bohemianism. It was neo-romantic in nature and its practitioners believed they lived in a dying, hence decadent civilisation. They formed short-lived groups with fancy names like the Hydropaths, the Hirsutes (i.e. the dishevelled or shaggy ones), the 'Chat Noir' or 'Black Cat', the Zutistes ('zut' being a mild expletive roughly similar to 'damn'). While refusing to embrace tradition, they did not have the energy to set up a new movement of their own either. Their style was characterised by humour paired with self-irony, sadness, melancholy, a strange mixture of cynicism and disenchanting idealism. They preferred vague moods, a vaporous and languorous style, and experimented with syntax, adding puns and folk rhymes and colloquialisms to their verses.<sup>3</sup>

The main representatives of the decadents were Laurent Tailhade, Georges Rodenbach, Éphraïm Mikhaël and above all Jules Laforgue, whose style combined melancholy and irony with an apparent unself-consciousness and casualness, which merely conceal the deep concern he felt about the world. His poetry mirrors an unstable reality: his lines are often dislocated, his

language mixes trivial and learned words, neologisms and commonplaces.

Like the other Decadents, Laforgue felt at odds with the age in which he lived. Alluding to a line from Alfred de Musset's long poem 'Rolla' (1833) ('Je suis venu trop tard dans un monde trop vieux'—*I have come too late into a world too old*), he longs in 'Trop tard' ('Too Late') for an age long gone, the time of the medieval cathedral builders, in which he could have enjoyed peaceful hours of study and contemplation in gardens and cloisters, or the quiet life of a monk illuminating manuscripts or singing the Angelus in the tranquillity of a monastery:

Ah! que n'ai-je vécu dans ces temps d'innocence,  
Lendemain de l'An mil où l'on croyait encor, [...]

*Ah! why did I not live in those times of innocence,  
After the year 1000 when people still had faith, [...]*

This idea of living in the wrong times, this nostalgia for an age when life seemed easier, more ordered and stable, when values seemed secure, is not alien to Larkin. The line 'Never such innocence again' from 'MCMXIV' seems to echo Laforgue's words and certainly the feelings Larkin expresses in that poem are close to those we find in 'Trop tard'. It is an abstract kind of nostalgia, of course: neither Larkin's pre-1914 England nor Laforgue's medieval France are historically adequate, nor are they meant to be. They present an interpretation of, a selection from reality; they pick what appeals to the poets and serves their purpose and leave out the less pleasant aspects of life in those periods. The longing is thus for an idealized perfection, for an imagined time in which the problems and insecurities of the present did not, or rather, would not exist, for an 'England of the mind', to quote Seamus Heaney's phrase.<sup>4</sup> It is a neo-romantic hankering after an alternative reality.

Larkin is aware of such mythologizing. In 'Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album' he debunks the cleaned-up version of the past that one finds in old photos ('Too much confectionery, too rich'). He realises it is 'a past that no one now can share', partly one might suspect because it never existed in the first place. It was made up, a dream, a sham, and the documentary quality of photography reveals it as such: nothing looks quite the way it was intended to. There is implicit regret in Larkin's poems about the fact that the past has disappeared and that it never really was as we now imagine it. In 'Going, Going' he foresees that those

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aspects of England he appreciates and loves will eventually succumb to the unstoppable march of 'progress', or should we say to greed and economic expansion: 'that will be England gone, / The shadows, the meadows, the lanes, / The guildhalls, the carved choirs.' England here is a romantic vision; it is a city-dweller's idea of rural and small-town life: there is no mention of the hard work, the poverty, the insalubrious sanitary conditions; the epidemics that were also part of living in the 'good old days'. In their poetry both Larkin and Laforgue dream of an idealised life; they identify with an imagined past. The reason for this nostalgia is an implicit dissatisfaction with the present they experienced, the longing for a quieter, simpler existence. But they both also know that such longing will always remain just that—it expresses deeply-felt yearnings ingrained in the species, but no realistic political or cultural alternative.

In 'Trop tard' Laforgue also mourns the loss of faith, a faith which provided security and certainty in a chaotic world. In 'Justice' (1880) he makes that point much more forcefully as he cries out against the general indifference and the sense of abandonment in a world without God:

Depuis qu'au vent du doute et des dogmes contraires  
S'est envolé l'essaim de mes douces chimères  
Me laissant seul sans but, sans espoir, sans appui,  
[...]  
J'erre, lassé de tout, le cœur mangé d'ennui.

*Since with the wind of doubt and contrary dogmas  
The swarm of my sweet chimeras has flown  
Leaving me alone and aimless, with no hope, no  
support,*

[...]

*I wander about, tired of everything, my heart devoured  
by boredom.*

And the poem ends:

Et cela seul nous reste, ô splendeurs étoilées.  
Le blasphème et l'injure aux heures affolées  
Et le mépris de tout aux heures de raison.  
Et j'étouffe un cri sourd de rage et d'impuissance  
Et je pleure devant la grande indifférence  
Le cœur crevé soudain d'un immense abandon.

*And this only remains, oh starry splendours.  
Blasphemy and insult in the confused hours  
And contempt of everything in the hours of reason.  
And I strangle a cry of rage and impotence  
And I cry because of this huge indifference  
My heart suddenly struck by immense abandonment.*

These are the words of a man who has lost his faith and finds it painful because he has found nothing with which to replace it. In a world without God the individual feels abandoned, lonely and lost with nothing to hold on to. We are reminded of Tennyson's 'In Memoriam', or of Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach'. Seventy-five years on,

Larkin's 'Church Going' is also in this tradition, although the feelings of the cyclist in his poem are much more ambivalent. He does not mourn the death of religion and yet he is drawn to a church and experiences an inexplicable fascination with it. His initial attitude is one of mockery and disrespect, as if he were ashamed of his interest: 'there's nothing going on', 'some brass and stuff / Up at the holy end'; he pretends mild curiosity for the architecture of the place but it quickly turns out that this attitude is due to a degree of embarrassment. Why does he feel 'awkward reverence'? What is it about a place of worship that attracts a non-believer? Eventually he realises that the church represents for him what is 'serious' about our existence, the things we cannot change: birth and death, love and pain. These are existential questions, metaphysical in the truest sense of the word, and religion used to provide answers to them. Those answers may no longer be satisfactory but there are no obvious alternatives. There has been no replacement for religion. The loss of faith is thus a loss of certainty, a loss of purpose; it leads to nagging questions about why we exist, about the meaning of life.

That was one of Laforgue's concerns, too. In 'Lassitude' he deplores that life has no metaphysical purpose any more and wonders what the point of our existence is:

À quoi bon l'existence?— À quoi bon le Progrès?  
S'il n'est plus que des lois, s'il faut que pour jamais,  
Sans raison, sans témoin, pêle-mêle tout meure?

*What is the point of our existence?—What is the point  
of Progress?*

*If there is nothing but laws, if for all eternity  
Without reason, without witness, everything dies  
indiscriminately?*

And much more bitterly and sarcastically, in 'Triste, Triste' ('Sad, Sad'):

Et notre sort! toujours la même comédie,  
Des vices, des chagrins, le spleen, la maladie,  
Puis nous allons fleurir les beaux pissenlits d'or.

*And our fate! always the same comedy,  
Vices, sorrows, blues, illness,  
And then we go feed the lovely golden dandelions.*

Faced with such momentous questions and their inability to find answers to them, both Laforgue and Larkin see life in terms of petty everyday problems which, however, represent wider, more fundamental issues. In 'Complainte d'une convalescence en mai' ('Complaint of a Convalescence in May') Laforgue writes:

mes grandes angoisses métaphysiques  
Sont passées à l'état de chagrins domestiques;  
my great metaphysical anguishes  
Have decayed to the state of household vexations.

That life can be boring and the poet irritated by the banal preoccupations of his contemporaries is shown in

'Complainte du sage de Paris' ('Lament of the Wise Man of Paris'), a poem bearing some similarities to 'Reasons for Attendance': 'Aimer, uniquement, ces jupes éphémères?'—'To love nothing but these ephemeral skirts?' he asks and condemns all sorts of trivial amusements. But, unlike Larkin in 'Reasons for Attendance', in this poem Laforgue finds no replacement, no 'Art, if you like' and concludes with the disillusioned words 'Va, que ta seule étude / Soit de vivre sans but, fou de mansuétude'—'Go, let your sole concern be to live without purpose, mad with mildness.' The same mood features prominently in the frighteningly depressing sonnet 'Spleen' ('Pas de livres parus. Passants bêtes. Personne. / Des fiacres, de la boue, et l'averse toujours... / [...] // Je mange, et bâille, et lis, rien ne me passionne...'—'No new books published. Dull passers-by. Nobody. / Carriages, mud, and always the pouring rain... / [...] // I eat, and yawn, and read, nothing excites me...'), or the 'Complainte d'un autre dimanche' ('Lament for Another Sunday'):

Ah! qu'est-ce que je fais, ici, dans cette chambre!  
Des vers. Et puis, après? ô sordide limace!  
Quoi! la vie est unique, et toi, sous ce scaphandre,  
Tu te racontes sans fin, et tu te ressasses!

Seras-tu donc toujours un qui garde la chambre?

Ah! what am I doing here, in this room!  
Verses. And then what next! O sordid slug!  
What! life is unique, and you, shut in your diving suit,  
Keep endlessly going over and over your own story  
and harking back to yourself!  
Will you be always a bedroom stay-at-home?

Such disenchantment recalls Larkin's frequently voiced comments about the tediousness of our existence. A poem like 'Mr Bleaney' comes to mind, or the line from 'Dockery and Son' ('Life is first boredom, then fear'), or the way life is presented as a 'slow dying' in 'Nothing to be Said'.

This leads on to another, major, common theme of Laforgue's and Larkin's: their obsession with dying and death. In the sonnet 'Stupeur' ('*Stupor*') a nightly walker suddenly realises:

'Chaque jour qui s'écoule est un pas vers la Mort!  
Chaque jour est un pas! C'est vrai, pourtant! Folie!  
Et nous allons sans voir, gaspillant notre vie,  
Nous rapprochant toujours cependant du grand trou!

Et nous 'tuons le temps!' et si dans cette foule  
J'avais alors hurlé: chaque jour qui s'écoule  
Est un pas vers la Mort! on m'eût pris pour un fou.

*'Each day going by is a step towards Death!'*

*Each day is a step! It's true, though! Madness!  
And we move on without seeing, wasting our lives,  
Getting closer always to the big hole!*

*And we 'kill time!' and if in that crowd  
I had cried: each day that goes by  
Is a step towards Death! they would have thought I  
was mad.*

Laforgue considered an alternative title for this poem, 'Frère il faut mourir' ('Brother we have to die'), and he added an epigraph supposedly from Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*: 'Les hommes vivent comme s'ils ne devaient jamais mourir. À les voir agir on dirait qu'ils n'en sont pas bien persuadés,' showing a kind of reverence to the mid-18th-century 'graveyard school'.

One is reminded of 'The Old Fools', 'Aubade', the final stanza of 'Next, Please', or 'the solving emptiness / That lies just under all we do' in 'Ambulances'. But the similarities are not just thematic, they extend to the imagery. In an early poem, 'Träumerei', Larkin creates an almost surrealist vision of a claustrophobic universe, of an existence that inevitably and inescapably leads to death, a world in which human beings are but passive, helpless passengers. Although the vision is a dream and the protagonist wakes up before it is completed, this poem does prefigure all Larkin's subsequent work on that subject. The inevitable 'sure extinction that we travel to' becomes even more horrific in a Godless world without the consolation of a life beyond death. It is 'Aubade' that deals with this problem most spectacularly and also addresses the failure of religion, '[t]hat vast moth-eaten musical brocade', to offer any sustainable consolation. Laforgue expresses a similar attitude in 'La chanson des morts' ('*The Song of the Dead*'):

On vit au cimetière  
Sans Dieu ni Lucifer!

*We live in a cemetery  
Without God or Lucifer!*

lines that reiterate the idea that in a world without God life becomes a pointless journey towards death, a long dying.

As a result of this, Laforgue is looking for the absolute, an essentially metaphysical search in an un-metaphysical world. Such a world must appear like hell and in the poem appropriately called 'Enfer' ('Hell') he voices all his anger about the human condition:

Quand je regarde au ciel, la rage solitaire  
De ne pouvoir toucher l'azur indifférent  
D'être à jamais perdu dans l'immense mystère  
De me dire impuissant et réduit à me taire,  
La rage de l'exil à la gorge me prend!

*When I look at the sky, the solitary rage  
Of being unable to touch the indifferent blue  
Of being lost for ever in the immense mystery  
Of telling myself I am helpless and reduced to silence,  
The rage of exile fills my throat!*

The image is very similar indeed to the ending of 'High

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Windows' or 'Here', a search for an indefinable and perpetually unreachable elsewhere, in Larkin's words 'the deep blue air, that shows / Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless', or, in 'Here', the 'unfenced existence: / Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach'. Both Laforgue and Larkin aspire to an answer to the fundamental existential question: our lives cannot just be an absurd procession from birth to death whose only purpose is the perpetuation of the species, and in which the individual is negligible. That would make the human condition too horrible to bear. There must be something else; but it remains beyond our grasp, beyond even our comprehension or imagination. Both poets use the image of the blue sky for this aspiration, the thing we can never touch, we can never reach, from which we are perpetual exiles. Laforgue goes on to feel a profound distress at the human condition. History is but an 'immense charnier des siècles engloutis' ('*immense boneyard of dead centuries*'), the future boring and monotonous leading only to our eventual disappearance 'sans laisser nulles traces' ('*without leaving any traces*'), humankind appears like ants and its destiny ephemeral. It is in art, and in music particularly, that he finds release, that he finds the only manifestation of the absolute, the only union with the universe that is available to the human being in the absence of God, and here he once again prefigures the Larkin of 'Reasons for Attendance':

En mille sons lointains mon être se disperse  
Et tout n'est plus qu'un rêve, et l'homme et l'univers.

*My being disperses in a thousand distant sounds  
And all is but a dream, both man and the universe.*

Another important poem in this context is 'Étonnement' ('Astonishment') in which the speaker awakes from the silence, the non-conscious, from eternal nothingness into an unlimited blue. In this vision he sees 'oases of misery or corpses of worlds' ('Oasis de misère ou cadavres de mondes') floating around. He wonders what this means and realises that the people around him remain unperturbed. They go on living their petty lives ('la foule de mes frères / Va, pleure, espère, et meurt! Mais ne s'étonne pas!'—'the crowd of my brothers / Walk, cry, hope, and die! But wonder at nothing!') The speaker searches for a reason, a big WHY presents itself to him, he looks for meaning, significance. Life must have a purpose. But what is it? There is no answer. Life has no meaning—it ends as it began—in silence, in darkness and oblivion. Frustrated by his inability to assuage that mental anguish, the speaker's only wish is to be happy, to live the only life he has as blissfully as possible without torturing his mind with philosophical and metaphysical problems, 'J'oublierai le cerveau que les siècles m'ont fait' ('*I will forget the brain that the centuries made for me*').

There are then quite a few thematic similarities between Larkin's poetry and that of Laforgue: a preoccupation with death, with the meaning of life, a hankering back to

a romanticised past. Moreover, there are formal characteristics that Larkin's poetry shares with Laforgue's: a marked sense of irony and a predilection for the mixing of registers. This is difficult to show in Laforgue's poetry without going back to the original French. Consider these four lines from 'Complainte des printemps' ('Complaint for the Springtimes') 'Permettez, ô sirène, / Voici que votre haleine / Embaume la verveine; / C'est l'printemps qui s'amène!'—'Allow me to say, O siren, / here is your breath / making the vervain fragrant; / springtime is on her way!' The English translation 'springtime is on her way!' does not do justice to the colloquial and slightly disrespectful nature of the French line 'c'est l'printemps qui s'amène', which clashes with the previous poetical references to the siren and the vervain. A better translation might be: '*spring shows up*' but even that does not compensate for the loss of the rhyme. There are numerous examples of such mixing of registers in Larkin's poetry: 'Books are a load of crap' ('A Study of Reading Habits'); 'They fuck you up, your mum and dad' ('This Be The Verse'); 'In a pig's arse, friend' ('Vers de Société'). If anything, Larkin uses a register that is not just colloquial but rude. It is in 'Sad Steps' that he comes closest to Laforgue as he opposes the language of love poetry with its direct allusions to Sidney's sonnet 31 from *Astrophel and Stella* to a crude line like 'Groping back to bed after a piss', the purpose being to subvert the false pathos of love poetry in general and of Sidney's poem in particular.

Another shared aspect is Larkin's and Laforgue's fondness for lists, the origin of which seems to me to be in the traditional litany. Here is one from 'L'hiver qui vient' ('The Onset of Winter'): 'Mais, lainages, caoutchoucs, pharmacie, rêve, / Rideaux écartés du haut des balcons des grèves / Devant l'océan de toitures des faubourgs, / Lampes, estampes, thé, petits-fours, / Serez-vous pas mes seules amours!...' ('But woollens, waterproofs, chemist's shop, dreams, curtains drawn back above riverside balconies before the ocean of suburban roofs, lamps, prints, tea, petits-fours, won't you be my only loves!') Another, maybe even better example, is the opening ten lines of the tenth poem of his 'Derniers Vers' ('Last Poems'). In Larkin we find such lists in his description of Hull and Holderness in 'Here', his view of pre-1914 England in 'MCMXIV' and the opening stanza of 'Church Going'.

Finally, I would like to have a closer look at 'L'hiver qui vient', quoted twice already in this paper, because it exemplifies the main characteristics of Laforgue's poetry. We can also be certain that Larkin was familiar with this particular piece as he called it 'the poem I've been trying to write all my life.'<sup>15</sup>

The dominant, in fact oppressive mood of the poem is melancholy, blues, spleen. Winter is a season of depression, of illness, of bad weather, cold and death. 'L'hiver qui vient' opens with yet another list, this one

serving ironically to deconstruct the positive aspects one might associate with winter: 'Blocus sentimental! Messageries du Levant!... / Oh! tombée de la pluie! Oh! tombée de la nuit, / Oh, le vent!... / La Toussaint, la Noël, et la Nouvelle Année, / Oh, dans les bruines, toutes mes cheminées!... / D'usines...' ('Sentimental blockade! Levantine packet-boats!... Oh, falling of the rain! Oh, falling of the night, Oh, the wind! All-Saints, Christmas and New Year, Oh, in the drizzle, all my hearthfires! All my factory chimneys!') The pun of the opening words ('blocus sentimental' recalling the 'blocus continental' of the English navy against Napoleon) sets the scene of a dreary, cold winter in which people's emotions are blocked, in which there is no warmth, no feeling, only loneliness and thoughts of death. All-Saints is not exactly a happy day in Catholic countries, as families congregate in cemeteries, often in rainy, foggy weather, to remember their dead. By association with this day, even usually happy occasions like Christmas or New Year become depressing feast days on which others have a good time while the speaker remains excluded, the more aware of his loneliness. The word 'cheminées' evoking cosy hearthfires is immediately undermined by the addition of 'D'usines'—it is not hearthfires he is thinking of but factory chimneys, representatives of a dreary urban cityscape.

The poem continues in this mood. Every comfort is gone ('On ne peut plus s'asseoir, tous les bancs sont mouillés'—'By now you can't sit down, all the benches are wet') and the general feeling is one of deception, of having been deprived of the pleasures of life—at least until the next spring. Everything deteriorates, everything dies. The poet's language becomes colloquial because there is no reason, no justification for poetical language: he sees 'un soleil fichu' ('a clapped-out sun', more properly 'a *godforsaken sun*'), a sun described as 'blanc comme un crachat d'estaminet' ('as white as a gobbet of pub-spit'). Laforgue shows a morbid interest in the decay surrounding him and in the speed with which green leaves have become dead leaves, with which 'rust gnaws at the telegraph wires'. Above all winter is a season without activity, a season of emptiness. It represents everything that is wrong about life and Laforgue is fascinated by it, just as Larkin never tires of complaining about the unpleasant aspects of life, as if such depressing thoughts had a peculiar thrill for him.

The question remains whether Larkin was indeed influenced by the French Decadent school in general, or Laforgue in particular, or whether the similarities are purely circumstantial. If we are to rely on Larkin's own statements about his relationship to non-English poetry, then the conclusion must be that he was not even remotely interested in French literature. In an interview with Ian Hamilton he answered the question whether he read much foreign poetry with an unambiguous 'Foreign poetry? No!'<sup>6</sup> In the same talk he stated quite clearly that

he did not enjoy (and had not been influenced by) modernist poetry.<sup>7</sup> In the introduction to his collection of jazz reviews, *All What Jazz*, he writes that 'the term 'modern', when applied to art [...] denotes a quality of irresponsibility peculiar to this century, known sometimes as modernism.'<sup>8</sup> Laforgue himself is implicitly and disapprovingly called a 'dead wordwriter' in a letter to Kingsley Amis.<sup>9</sup> And to Robert Conquest he wrote: 'if that chap Laforgue wants me to read his things, he'd better write them in English. Can't read his lingo, sorry. Don't expect he can read mine, if it comes to that.'<sup>10</sup> He was wrong there.

On the other hand, he once commented about the last line of 'Absences' that it 'sounds like a slightly unconvincing translation from a French symbolist. I wish I could write like this more often.'<sup>11</sup> Barbara Everett has very convincingly argued Larkin's indebtedness to French Symbolism,<sup>12</sup> as has Andrew Motion.<sup>13</sup> Blake Morrison quotes John Wain as saying that the cyclist in 'Church Going' 'is descended from late nineteenth-century French poetry,'<sup>14</sup> explicitly mentioning Laforgue as an example. Michael Hamburger, too, found echoes of Laforgue in Larkin's work.<sup>15</sup> In *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* Andrew Motion mentions that Larkin read an anthology called *Nine French Poets* in 1951.<sup>16</sup> The book in question is presumably Henry Edward Berthon's anthology *Nine French Poets, 1820-1880*, first published by Macmillan in 1930, a reprint of which had come out in 1949. However, Laforgue is not one of the poets featured in that edition. Then again, in a letter to Anthony Thwaite, Larkin once ironically described himself as 'the Laforgue of Pearson Park'.<sup>17</sup>

So was Larkin consciously trying to emulate Laforgue? Only Larkin himself could answer that question but I think it is fair to speculate that he was not. In so far as everything we read influences our subsequent thinking there *was* influence and some of Larkin's early lines sound very much like French symbolism: 'Death is a cloud alone in the sky with the sun' from 'And the wave sings because it is moving' is such a line but then it is quite unlike Larkin's later output. Larkin did not find anything new in Laforgue: what he found there was what interested him anyway—the fundamental concerns of every sentient being: a longing for some sort of Arcadian past, which grows from dissatisfaction with the present, a concern with the purpose of our existence, a deep anxiety about the end of that existence. These are the themes he also admired in Yeats, Hardy and Betjeman, poets who influenced him much more directly. Larkin was not a follower of Laforgue as Eliot was but they had similar preoccupations and though he was loath to admit it, 'that chap Laforgue' was a kindred spirit.

*Translations of Laforgue's poetry are my own (if italicised) or from Graham Dunstan Martin's Penguin edition.*

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Cf. entries in *NTC's Dictionary of Literary Terms* (ed. Kathleen Morner & Ralph Rausch), M.H. Abrams' *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, and *Bloomsbury Guides to English Literature: Victorian Literature* (ed. Jane Thomas).
- <sup>2</sup> Paul Verlaine's sonnet "Langueur" (1883) opens with the line "Je suis l'Empire à la fin de la décadence"—"I am the Empire at the end of its decadence".
- <sup>3</sup> Information gathered from P.-G. Castex, P. Surer, G. Becker, *Histoire de la littérature française*. Paris: Hachette.
- <sup>4</sup> Seamus Heaney, "Englands of the Mind", in: *Preoccupations*. London: Faber, 1980.
- <sup>5</sup> Cf. Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*: 202.
- <sup>6</sup> "A Conversation with Ian Hamilton" in *Further Requirements* (ed. Anthony Thwaite), 25.
- <sup>7</sup> "I have been most influenced by the poetry that I've enjoyed—and this poetry has not been Eliot or Pound or anybody who is normally regarded as 'modern'." *Ibid.*, 19.
- <sup>8</sup> *All What Jazz*, 23.
- <sup>9</sup> *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin* (ed. Anthony Thwaite): 133. Letter of 11 January 1947.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 274. Letter of 7 May 1957.
- <sup>11</sup> "The Poet's Choice." In *Further Requirements* (ed. Anthony Thwaite), 17.
- <sup>12</sup> Barbara Everett, "Philip Larkin: After Symbolism", in: *Poets in their time. Essays on English Poetry from Donne to Larkin*, 230-44.
- <sup>13</sup> Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin*. London: Methuen, 1982.
- <sup>14</sup> John Wain in a letter to *London Magazine* (March 1957, p.56) quoted in Blake Morrison, *The Movement. English Poetry and Fiction of the 1950s*. Oxford: OUP, 1980, 230.
- <sup>15</sup> Michael Hamburger, "Philip Larkin: A Retrospect", in *Testimonies: Selected Shorter Prose, 1950-1987*, Manchester: Carcanet, 1989, 312.
- <sup>16</sup> Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, 202.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 423. Letter of 13 June 1972.

## East Riding Poetry Competition 2019 Highly Commended

### How are you?

You ask me to lie, when you ask, 'How are you?'  
So I churn out the sing-song, 'Fine thank you.'  
As my shoulders slump into aching bones  
My hollow eyes scream a different tone.

We ping-pong pleasantries,  
Waltz well-worn mediocrity.  
You dribble about the drizzle,  
I prattle about the potholes.  
Neither listening,  
Learning nothing,  
Caring even less.

My mind's agony as I strive to be  
Inoffensive, interesting, kind and witty.  
But my brain buckles under the pressure  
'You've put on weight' is all that I measure.

Don't stare at her mole,  
Don't stare at her mole,  
Don't stare,  
Don't stare,  
Don't...  
I'm staring at her mole.  
Eyes lock.  
Time to go.

As we depart the pointless scene,  
'Let's catch up soon,' you smile at me.  
I want to ask, if you don't mind,  
Next time, do I have to lie?

Would my truth embarrass you?  
My wretched sorrow discomfort you?  
Does my honesty disgust or cause offence?  
My depression make you shrivel in defence?

Or perhaps my confession would provoke you  
To be open and honest about yourself too.  
I dare you to finally divulge something real  
You might discover that you start to heal.

So next time, friend, when you ask, 'How are you?'  
And you don't hear the reply you're expecting to,  
Will you scurry away and hope we never meet  
again?

That's if I'm still around by then.

**Shona Johnson**



# Analysing Larkin

Rachael Galletly

Nicholas Marsh: *Philip Larkin: The Poems*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.  
233pp. pbk £18.26. ISBN 978-1-4039-9269-7

This book is part of the 'Analysing Texts' series which I use in my English Literature A Level lessons. These books are ideal for this level of study, being accessible, but also packed with interesting, thought-provoking analysis. While aimed at students, I would recommend this text for anyone interested in Larkin.

The sections are easy-to-navigate, with engaging close readings of specific poems. The introduction has two short sections on historical background and an analysis of metre. These 'bite-sized' chunks are succinct and informative with some very handy examples to explain, for example, the trochee and dactyl: useful when discussing Larkin's technical brilliance. Marsh reminds us that metrical analysis is of no use if carried out for its own sake. It is useful only when it helps us to understand how a poem works 'on us' as we read. (p7)

The six chapters of Part 1 each focus on a different aspect of Larkin's work. In the first, 'Hearing Larkin's Voices', Marsh considers Larkin's search for 'his own voice', beginning with an analysis of 'Wedding-Wind', composed in September 1946. Anthony Thwaite's view that it is in this year that Larkin wrote 'the earliest poems which strike his characteristic note' is investigated. There follows an analysis of 'Poetry of Departures' and 'Next Please'. Marsh puts the question: 'What Triggered these Poems?' and explores Larkin's biography to answer it. This provided students with a 'hook' on which to hang the poems as well as a touch of gossip about Larkin's personal affairs. Early conclusions are then drawn on how Larkin writes; the characters he depicts and the themes already apparent. Finally, Marsh includes a 'suggested work' section which sets practical tasks to advance the student's experience of the poetry.

Subsequent chapters adopt the same format as Chapter 1. Each begins by analysing 3 or 4 poems in detail before moving on to a consideration of the context in which the poems were written. Sometimes this is historical – what was going on in the world at the time – sometimes the detail is more biographical. Marsh's approach reinforces the axiom I always stress to students: what we know of a writer's life is, in a radical sense, separate from the art. Marsh, for instance, stresses that 'The evidence of the letters is of doubtful use. Whatever kind of man Larkin may have been, his letters have the potential to be just as misleading as other evidence.' (p107)

The remaining five chapters in Part 1 cover several of Larkin's other themes such as the individual at odds with society, relationships, work, travel, religion and death. Whichever area of interest my students choose, there is a ready-made chapter, bursting with analysis and suggested starting points for their coursework.

Some of my students struggle a little with Larkin's use of irony and *personae*. My current students were uncertain, for example, as to what to make of the masculine voice in 'Self's the Man', as well as the poem's forced rhymes and clumsy constructions. Marsh's close-readings helped. He comments that: 'The four-line stanzas have an AABB rhyme scheme. The phrasing sticks rigidly to the lines as in a child's first attempt at verse, with no genuine enjambement. The result is that we sense the line awkwardly trying to reach the rhyme, which then lands like an elephant's foot.' (p37) My students much appreciated such humour. Marsh guides the most inexperienced readers through the 'intricate set of layers' (p41) in Larkin's poems and reminds them not to take anything at face value. Sometimes 'we must conclude that Larkin is having a laugh.' (p37)

Part 2, 'The Context and the Critics' contains more detailed biographical and historical detail than Part 1. Not being tied to any particular ideas in the poems, my students found this less useful than the earlier chapters. The final chapter features samples of various critical views. Different interpretations by James Booth and Tom Paulin are pitted against one another. This makes fascinating reading for both students and non-students alike.

Stylistically, I like the way Marsh includes the reader throughout. For example, 'We will highlight one further example of his poetic power, just to remind ourselves how extraordinary a talent he possessed...' (p27) Marsh succeeds in carrying the student reader along with him as he places Larkin's life and works under the microscope. His informal style appeals to younger readers while also transmitting Marsh's passion and enthusiasm. The more academic and dense essays we found on JStor, were for many too complex for A Level students. On the other hand some of the other student guides are simplistic and lacking in challenge. This book, however, strikes the right balance, and is ideal for students engaged at the research and essay-writing stages of A Level.

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## 'Oh play that thing!'

*Philip Pullen*

*The Righteous Jazz*: The Mechanicals Band: Hull Truck, 2 Nov; The Tin At The Coal Vaults, Coventry 14 Nov.

@mechanicalsband

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Larkin and jazz form a powerful combination, but never quite with the degree of verve and imaginative insight that the Mechanicals Band has achieved in their theatrical production, 'The Righteous Jazz', performed in Hull and Coventry towards the end of 2019.



*Photos © Philip Pullen*

This five-piece Coventry-based ensemble has a track record in setting literary words to music (check out their album of Shakespeare's songs and sonnets on Soundcloud), and their latest project, sponsored by the Philip Larkin Society, is an ambitious piece aimed at bringing together Larkin's literary work and biography. The result is well researched, technically accomplished and highly enjoyable. It contains an impressive range of nuanced detail to get any Larkin aficionado nodding knowingly and approvingly, from Larkin's red trousers to Monica Jones's reference to drinks at The Clarendon in Leicester. At the same time, an element of creative imagination sets out to fill the gaps in terms of what we don't know about the life but what we might speculate about, particularly, for example, how Monica experienced their relationship. To my mind, this is one of its strongest features.

As always with Larkin, it is the words that have it and here we get a clever blend of poetry and extracts from letters and interviews (not least his appearance on Desert Island Discs) brought powerfully to life against the musical background. On the small set the band sits feet away from Larkin's office cum flat and becomes part of an immersive musical and dramatic dialogue, as band members read extracts from letters, adopting the *personae* of the writers. Thus Wes Finch, aka Kingsley

Amis, gets a hard slap from Monica Jones after quoting Larkin's own dangerously candid advice to her about how she should speak less demonstratively in public.

The music reminds us how well Larkin's poetry lends itself to musical interpretation. Interestingly, the band has chosen to focus on some of the lesser known poems, not least the brilliant 'The horns of the morning' (Poem VII from *The North Ship* which now forms the soundtrack for the Philip Larkin Society podcast, *Tiny in All that Air*) and 'Long Lion Days'. These are turned into songs that stay in the head, with the intoxicating memorability which Larkin associated with jazz. The production includes some of Larkin's favourite tracks, such as a wonderful rendition of 'Spider Crawl', which has him tapping his feet and swaying unsteadily in time to its rhythm, as reportedly he did.

It is the relationship between Philip (Steve Brown) and Monica (Lisa Franklin) that forms the most thought-provoking element. While we know so much about Larkin's ambiguous attitude towards Monica: his hand-wringing deliberations on marriage and the duplicity of his relationship with Maeve Brennan, for the most part we can only guess at Monica's reactions. Her part in the literary conversation is, of course, embargoed in the Bodleian for years to come. But in this production we get to hear what she might have said, and thought. There is a chillingly sad scene during which Philip, with growing sexual arousal, reflects on his burgeoning relationship with Maeve, while Monica writes equally suggestively about their own relationship. Her response was also coloured, of course, by her despair at suddenly losing both her parents. Larkin found it difficult to cope



at this point, and the lack of connection and empathy is stark.

The musical soundtrack successfully captured the various rhythms of Larkin's life, from letter writing to jazz listening, and, above all, highlighted his angst. Parents, relationships, doubts, despair were all to the fore. It might possibly be criticised for leaving out some of the more positive features, such as Larkin's humour and compassion. Nevertheless, 'The Righteous Jazz' constitutes an impressive and skilful compression of, this complex life.

As with Larkin himself, the end came too soon. The general feeling around the audience at both venues was that they would have liked more. It is the band's intention to develop the production further, building on these initial performances. A CD of the songs will also be released later this year.

***East Riding Poetry Competition 2019  
Primary Category Winner***

**Goodbye**

As the sun sets on the horizon,  
My destiny in the stars written  
The world spinning around me,  
The ice on my heart thawed  
By your love. I try not to cry  
Memories of you trapped in my mind  
For the last time I say goodbye.

*Milly Hall*

***Primary Category Highly Commended***

**Gloopy Gloop**

Slimey slurping,  
Giant burping,  
Speedy, long,  
Stinky pong,  
See-through blue,  
Yelling "boo",

Twenty eyes,  
Munches pies,  
Spikey hair,  
Wears underwear,  
Crooked mouth,  
Lives down South,  
Tiny brain,  
What his name?

Dont you know?  
It's Gloopy Gloop,  
Champion Monster Hula Hooper

*Declan Prophet*

***East Riding Poetry Competition 2019  
Secondary Category Winner***

**Mother**

My mother painted my first bedroom  
and turned it into a jungle:  
the paint splayed out, twisting, opening  
the walls up like flower-bloom;  
a deep, monsoon gloom  
like looking into the centre of an emerald.

She pulled up trees from the floor  
and pulled light through their leaves.  
She planted ferns in the skirting boards.  
She made a hemisphere of daytime  
then sunset-cut the room in two  
and made another out of dark,  
and in those embryonic shadows  
she grew her animals –

a leopard with white-hot eyes  
slicked high on a tree branch,  
all covered in spots  
like kisses on a baby's forehead,  
a panther gearing its way  
through the grasses, feeling its way  
across the ground,  
the touch of a palm-reader,  
a hunt of musculature,  
a magnetism of teeth,  
and then a tiger in a clearing,  
a reflection in a pool of water,  
a fixed, horizon stare.  
In her palette she made everything.  
Mapped my first words,  
prepared a lock of hair,  
drew down vines like umbilical cords,  
unfurled stars read at birth –  
my constellations pinpointed.

She herded galaxies onto the ceiling above  
and let eternity gaze out of the black.

She crafted her creation more carefully than any God.

A mother's love enclosed in brushstrokes.  
An ecosystem threaded together like a necklace.

She pulled a treetop canopy together  
and made it into a cradle.

*Luca Goaten*

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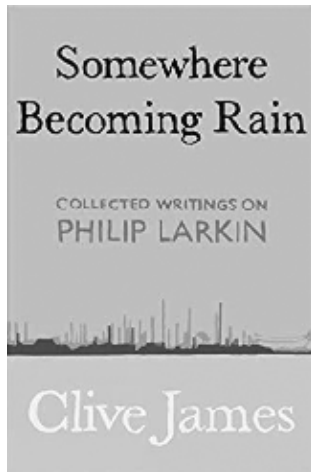
# 'The Unstinting Vitality of Language'

Kyra Piperides Jaques

Clive James, *Somewhere Becoming Rain: Collected Writings on Philip Larkin*.

Picador £12.99. ISBN 9781529028829

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When passed a copy of Clive James's *Somewhere Becoming Rain: Collected Writings on Philip Larkin* in late 2019, I was excited at the opportunity to spend time reading and appraising this attractively presented collection of Larkin-focussed pieces by such a distinguished writer and poet. When James's death was announced on 24<sup>th</sup> November 2019, however, this task became more formidable: there was no escaping the fact that this would be the final book published by the writer in his lifetime. My excitement was momentarily burdened by nervousness, reluctance even: how does one review a writer's work at such a poignant time; should the approach be softened by his death? Fortunately, what I found in *Somewhere Becoming Rain* was not difficult to praise.

The collection brings together forty-six years' worth of work. The earliest of the pieces collected here was published in 1973; the most recent in 2019. Described by James himself as 'episodic', these articles and reviews span not only Larkin's life and poetic career, but James's too: this collection is inherently personal, guided by James's daughter who suggested the compilation and then painted the Hull-inspired cover; this is very much James's lifetime journey through Larkin's texts.

The writer's affection and admiration for Larkin's work echoes throughout. He finds 'Larkin's complete works [...] a calming influence'; 'One wants, after all, to be as cool and clear as he was.' (xii) Cool and clear, James's writing can be. At other times his writing is urgent with passion and interspersed with beautiful poetic language of its own: 'In the three essential volumes, the balanced triad of Larkin's achievement, all the poems are poised

vibrantly in the force field of tension between his profound hopelessness and the assured command of their carrying out.' (3) *Somewhere Becoming Rain* may contain little in the way of new material, but each of James's reflections on Larkin's work (or that of his biographers and critics) is worth revisiting.

James's praise for the unstinting vitality of language' (47) in Larkin's poetry and prose, is unwavering. 'Fastidiousness is everywhere and flamboyance non-existent: the touch is unfaltering' (29). In contrast he is more wary in his approach to the biographies and collections of letters that came later. Here he is more critical, describing Thwaite's editing of the *Collected Poems* as 'tactfully carried out [but...] not beyond cavil' (2), before going on to express some exasperation over the 'inclusive' approach: 'Some of these poems, as we now see were indeed excellent, but if a man is so careful to arrange his works in a certain order it is probably wiser to assume that when he subtracts something he is adding to the arrangement' (7); 'Had Larkin lived longer, there would eventually have had to be one more slim volume, even if slimmer than slim. But that any of the earlier suppressed poems would have gone into it seems very unlikely. The better they are, the better must have been his reasons for holding them back' (8). These irks are gently delivered but resonate.

James's irritation with the extensive publication which followed the poet's death is not unfounded. Praise for the poet and his work elicits James's most beautiful language, but more powerful is his damning of Larkin's critics:

to suggest, for example, that Larkin's last great poem 'Aubade' broke a dry spell of three years is to ignore the possibility that a poem like 'Aubade' takes three years to write, even for a genius. Those who revere Larkin's achievement should be less keen to put him in range of mediocrities who would like to better themselves by lowering him to their level, matching his feet of clay with their ears of cloth (66).

We also revisit James's dismay in 1993, as 'ugly revelations threaten[ed] to make [Larkin] more famous still... By now everybody with something on him is bursting into print' (62). He cannot suppress his frustration with the 'rush of dunces' (75) who deride the poet – 'No writer, alive or dead, is any longer safe from the fumbling attentions of the semi-literate literatus' (68).

But perhaps the most valuable part of the collection is the original material: James's own poetic responses to Larkin, and copies of letters between the two. His poem, 'The North Window' (37-9) is a particular highlight, and it is fascinating to read Larkin's take on James's 'wildly flattering' praise also (50). Through his lifetime journey as a Larkin admirer we witness James basking in the glory of one of the nation's greatest poets, then leaping to the poet's defence as Larkin's renown is thrown into question. For James Larkin is simply pre-eminent among poets: 'it was his quotability that gave Larkin the biggest cultural impact on the British reading public since Auden – and over a greater social range. Lines by Larkin are the common property of everyone in Britain who reads seriously at all' (3).

James closes with the personal, with a nod to Larkin's 'decency and politeness' (94). What is clear throughout *Somewhere Becoming Rain* is that, for the forty-six years during which its 'episodic' content was written, its author was not only one of Larkin's greatest admirers, but also one of his greatest defenders.

***East Riding Poetry Competition 2019  
Special Mention***

**Reflections**

My youth's unbroken by bombs that flattened  
Malta, the gore of battlefields at the Somme,  
in wars fought by my father and his before him.  
They tuck you up your Mum and Dad, later proudly  
wave you off to University. At eighteen you learn  
to nurse a pounding hangover, the bluff of seminars.

A babyboomer, I'm on the well-lit second floor of  
Brynmor  
Jones library as wind hurls hail against the window.  
The outer world's in late afternoon December darkness.  
My struggle with an essay on Sovereignty and the  
UK's

accession to Europe, lapses into daydreams  
of the future of the future - what will I become?

It's then I catch a reflection in the window,  
feel a shift of time and consciousness.  
Through the glass, the face age has laid upon me  
looks back – my older self - still unsure whether I  
spent

my days taking life too seriously,  
or not seriously enough.

***Robert Rayner***

***East Riding Poetry Competition 2019  
Special Mention***

**being okay**

But if the weed tin's full I'll be ok  
enough. I can't be hurt when I'm in here.  
I'll mute the night and pixelate the day.

Long bloated years since I first found the way  
to bevel painful edges, disappear,  
cease caring. Weed tin full? I'll be ok

if I can gorge on smoke and sweets, and play  
the box sets back to back; if I can't hear  
through muted nights and pixelated days

a heart's abandoned screaming, hold at bay  
the rage and pain and terror (who'll come near  
this sickened self?): the tin's full, I'm ok;

well, kinda. And I could still throw away  
the wrappers, roaches—air the room—could clear  
it all, could purge the night and see the day,

perhaps. But so much time has bled away  
and self-disgust cohabits with the fear  
so, if the weed tin's full, I'll stay ok.  
I'll mute the night and pixelate the day.

***Lucy Crispin***

***East Riding Poetry Competition 2019  
Secondary Category Highly Commended***

**The Turtle's Long Voyage**

I hear the guillemot's cry,  
hear the whale's song  
deepening, slow and low.  
The ocean in calling me home.

I swim through strange seas,  
a million bottles holding  
the ocean's plea.  
Out of time, the blue world  
sinks into grey.

I swim and swim and swim,  
mourning my lost kin:  
leatherback  
featherback  
never back.

Gone.

***Django Bennett-Clarke***

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# *Clive James, Philip Larkin and all that Jazz*

*John White*

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*Photo © The Guardian*

Asked by a *Guardian* journalist in October 2019 what book he was 'currently reading', a terminally ill Clive James immodestly replied: 'Mostly at this stage I am rereading myself, and finding something marvellous on every page. I've just received advance copies of my new book about Philip Larkin called *Somewhere Becoming Rain*. Holding it up to be observed at various angles, I gloat audibly'.<sup>1</sup> Compiled at the urging of his elder daughter Claerwen, the book – subtitled, *Collected Writings On Philip Larkin* – considers Larkin's prose and poetry and couples his overriding passion for jazz with that 'unmistakable' poetic voice: 'It made misery beautiful'. James believed that in *All What Jazz*, Larkin's collected *Telegraph* reviews, he 'gives his most unguarded and exultant endorsement of the kind of art he likes, along with his funniest and most irascible excoriation of the kind he doesn't. Jazz is Larkin's first love and literature his first duty'.<sup>2</sup>

Yet reviewers have not paid sufficient attention to James's insistence on Larkin's passion for jazz, which (although to a lesser extent) he shared. And none have mentioned his own estimates of Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Miles Davis included in *Cultural Amnesia: Notes in the margin of my time*, published in 2008. This essay is intended to rectify that imbalance, and to illustrate the similarities between James and Larkin in their initial exposures to and subsequent experiences of what both regarded as a major art form of the twentieth century.

Born in 1939, James was introduced to 'traditional' jazz when he was at Sydney University in the 1950s. His heroes were pianist/composer Jelly Roll Morton, and the Louis Armstrong of the Hot Five and Hot Seven recordings. His early belief was that jazz was the creation and preserve of African-Americans. But before leaving the university he encountered the pre-war Benny Goodman small group recordings and became a disciple.

The crisp ensemble playing and the lilting sequences of short solos were just as dazzling as anything from Morton or Armstrong. Goodman was white. End of argument.<sup>3</sup>

He also listened to the astonishing 'white' cornet player Bix Beiderbecke featured with the (aptly-named) Paul Whiteman orchestra, but it wasn't until 'down and out' in London in the early 1960s that he first heard Beiderbecke's 1927 recording of 'I'm Coming Virginia' with Frankie Trumbauer and his orchestra. It was a Damascene experience.

An Australian homosexual ballet buff... persuaded me to sit down and listen to a piece of music he held to be the most beautiful thing in his life: better even than *Swan Lake*. For a while 'I'm Coming Virginia' – I used to make rude jokes about the title, but they conveyed my appreciation – became the most beautiful thing in my life too. The coherence of its long Bix solo still provides me with a measure of what popular art should be like: a generosity of effects on a simple frame. I wanted to write prose sentences that way, and lines of poetry.<sup>4</sup>

Reviewing the biography *Bix: Man and Legend* by Richard Sudhalter and Philip R. Evans (1974), Larkin wrote (more succinctly): 'His unique ringing sound, at once assertive and unworldly, became the voice of the WASP Twenties, the era of [Jay] Gatsby and Julian English [anti-hero of John O'Hara's novel *Appointment in Samarra*].'<sup>5</sup>

At Cambridge, James 'progressed' to an appreciation of some modern jazz – particularly the playing of pianist Thelonious Monk and alto saxophonist Charlie Parker. He also came to embrace 'classical' (as well as pop) music:

Listening on the same day to the [tenor saxophonist] Lester Young's quintet and a string quartet by Ravel, I could hear no incongruity: they seemed comparable events to me.

But not all jazz was that rewarding: 'I couldn't muster an affection for [tenor saxophonists] John Coltrane or Sonny Rollins – I don't think I was meant to – but the tradition that led up to them still had glories to reveal.<sup>6</sup>

In his essay on Duke Ellington, James makes the aside: 'I won't waste time trying to be funny about John Coltrane, because Philip Larkin has already done it, lavishing all his comic attention on the task of conveying his authentic rage.' He then adds parenthetically 'For those who have never read Larkin's *All What Jazz*, incidentally, the references to Coltrane are the ideal way into the burning centre of Larkin's critical vision.' In fact, unable or unwilling to resist the temptation, James proceeds to offer an acrid and decidedly Larkinesque description of a typical Coltrane solo.

There is not a phrase that asks to be remembered except as a lesion to the inner ear, and the only purpose of the repetitions is to prove that what might have been charitably dismissed as an accident was actually meant. Shapelessness and incoherence are treated as ideals. Above all and beyond all, there is no end to it. There is no reason except imminent death for the cacophonous parade to stop, a fact which steadily confirms the listener's impression that there was no reason for it to start.<sup>7</sup>

In a *Telegraph* review of 1965, Larkin had suggested that Coltrane 'sounds like nothing so much as the club bore who has been metamorphosed by a fellow member of magical powers into a pair of bagpipes.' James enjoyed the analogy, and praised Larkin's 'comic timing 'since "a less witty writer would have put 'metamorphosed into a pair of bagpipes by a fellow member of magical powers", and so halved the effect.'<sup>8</sup>

James also shared Larkin's dislike of Duke Ellington's latter-day extended suites and 'Sacred Music' public performances and recordings. They represented 'an etiolated culmination of his adventures in large-scale composition – the end point of a long development in an art-form for which his own best work had proved that 'development' was an inappropriate word.' James recalls attending a Sacred Music Concert in Great St Mary's at Cambridge as an undergraduate, and was impressed by the Duke's charm 'but there was too much sacred and not enough music.' On further reflection, James confessed that he found these large-scale compositions were 'smaller in every way than the three-minute miracles'. When they were released on vinyl LPs, 'it was all too evident that three minutes on shellac had been his ideal form from the start: he was a sonneteer, not an epic poet. The standard was set in the Cotton Club days, when cars still had running boards.'<sup>9</sup>

Larkin endorsed that verdict, and also used an automobile analogy to make the point: 'Early Ellington records are like vintage cars. They are not as he or anyone else would make them nowadays, but

historically they are important and aesthetically they are still delightful.'<sup>10</sup>

After Ellington's death on 24 May 1974, Larkin advised Robert Conquest:

Let us bury the great Duke. I've been playing some of his records: now he and Armstrong have gone jazz is finally finished. I never thought he was much of a piano player, and the suites and what-not of the last twenty years struck me as crap [but] his early records (like people's early poems) were superb. Amazing he kept on so long. Apparently he knocked off drink a long time ago, and recently only ate grapefruit, steak and salad. Life is a sad thing. Giving up drink!<sup>11</sup>

Larkin would also have endorsed James's appreciation and celebration of Louis Armstrong's cultural and political significance.

Jazz would not have been the same without him, and the whole artistic history of the United States in the twentieth century, quite apart from the country's political history leading up to the civil rights movement, would not have been the same without jazz. Armstrong was the object of prejudice right to the end. He had to be brave every night he went to work.<sup>12</sup>

Seventeen years older than James, Larkin remembered:

I was born the day after Louis received that telegram from King Oliver summoning him to Chicago, and like most of my contemporaries as soon as I was old enough to wind up a gramophone I was sold on his music. West End Blues, Dallas Blues, St Louis Blues, all of them took hold of my mind like poems, or better than poems, for you were taught those in school, and I had found this wonderful music for myself.

Echoing James, he continued:

In many ways...Louis had a hard life. He was born an American Negro in a New Orleans slum. He had no education but what he received in the Coloured Waifs Home. He was an artist, but his art wasn't recognised: He had to create its acceptance, giving two shows a night... blowing when his lip was shot, never taking a holiday. In the end he became an unofficial, and sometimes official Ambassador for his country.<sup>13</sup>

Lastly, much of Miles Davis's post 'Kind of Blue' recorded output appealed neither to James nor to Larkin. For James, much of it was often 'deliberately parsimonious and oblique,' with his muted trumpet sounding 'as if it had been shrunken within to the diameter of a drinking straw.'<sup>14</sup> In similar vein, Larkin deplored Davis's sound: 'He runs phrases to death with a calculated perversity, and spends whole blocks of bars trying to emasculate his tone to a still further degree of

## About Larkin

unpleasantness.' And in a blistering (but comedic) put-down:

I freely confess that there have been times recently when almost anything – the shape of a patch on the ceiling, a recipe for rhubarb jam read upside down in the paper – has seemed to me more interesting than the passionless creep of a Miles Davis trumpet solo.<sup>15</sup>

Reviewing the Davis album 'Seven Steps to Heaven' in 1963, Larkin deplored 'his lifeless muted tone, at once hollow and unresonant [which] creeps along only just in tempo, the ends of notes hanging down like Dali watches'.<sup>16</sup>

Larkin's account of his own introduction to jazz and the resulting friendships (in Coventry and then at Oxford) is graphically recounted in his mischievous introduction to *All What Jazz*, and need not be repeated here. But his admiration for and correspondence with Clive James is not so well-known. In 1974 Larkin wrote to Anthony Thwaite thanking him for an advance copy of James's review of *High Windows*.

I think it is amazing that such a tough egg as Clive James can find time for my old-maidish reservations, and I was much heartened by the unaffected and generous sympathy of his review. So long, too. Well, I shall have one good review at least.

In a letter to Judy Egerton in May 1982, commenting on a lunch party for the recently-published anthology *Larkin At Sixty*, he singled out James for his commendation of *All What Jazz* in the essay ['On His Wit']: 'I like Clive James, because he praises my one unsuccessful book. Don't underrate him! He's a formidable character.'<sup>17</sup>

Earlier in the month he had corresponded directly with James in a letter reproduced in *Somewhere Becoming Rain*, asking him to

...please accept my special thanks for the piece you wrote for Anthony's anthology. Not only was it good of you to take the trouble, but the article itself delighted me. I had a lot of fun writing those jazz columns, and it is heartening to have your appreciation, wildly flattering though it is. Such people as have read the book all pick out your contribution for special mention, as being not only extremely kind and friendly, and perceptive and witty, but as dealing with one book of mine that no one ever bothers about. Who was it who said that age is an increasing punishment for a crime we have not committed? For me, your article will be one of the few consolations.<sup>18</sup>

Both James and Larkin were inspired by the clarinet and soprano saxophone playing of Sydney Bechet. In a 1960 *Guardian* piece, 'A Real Musicianer', Larkin wrote:

'Bechet's tone was not to everyone's taste; he had some appalling clichés; but the force and sweep of his solos were unequalled in lyric dignity. There are not many perfect things in jazz, but Bechet playing the blues could be one of them.'<sup>19</sup> James repeatedly claimed that Larkin's poem 'For Sidney Bechet', with the line 'On me your voice falls as they say love should/Like an enormous yes', was not only the best jazz poem ever written, but could also be matched by his prose description of Bechet's performing 'Blue Horizon'.

...six choruses of slow blues in which Bechet climbs without interruption or hurry from lower to upper register, his clarinet tone at first thick and throbbing, then soaring like Melba in an extraordinary blend of lyricism and power that constituted the unique Bechet voice, commanding attention the instant it sounded.<sup>20</sup>

Ironically Larkin was less enamoured of the phrase 'like an enormous yes' and told Monica Jones: 'I can see that Bechet line is going to be my albatross....Why is it so bad? I thought when I wrote it that it just 'got' love & Bechet & everything. Perhaps that's what wrong with it.'<sup>21</sup>

In 2010, Trevor Tolley and I sent a copy of our Proper Box CD anthology *Larkin's Jazz* to James, and were gratified to receive a note from his secretary informing us that 'Mr James 'was listening to and enjoying the music 'even as he types'.

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<sup>1</sup> *Guardian* 5<sup>th</sup> October, 2019

<sup>2</sup> *Somewhere Becoming Rain* (Picador, 2019), 53-4. Hereafter cited as *SBR*.

<sup>3</sup> James, *Cultural Amnesia* (Picador 2008), 25. Hereafter cited as *CA*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 27-28.

<sup>5</sup> 'That Nice Boy' in Richard Palmer and John White, editors: *Larkin: Jazz Writings* (Continuum, 2005), 93. Hereafter cited as *LJW*. Larkin also called Bix 'the most original jazz talent ever produced'. *AWJ*, 51.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 29.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 191.

<sup>8</sup> *SBR*, 41.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 195

<sup>10</sup> *All What Jazz*, 100.

<sup>11</sup> Anthony Thwaite, editor: *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin 1940-1985* (Faber, 1992), 507.

<sup>12</sup> *CA*, 23.

<sup>13</sup> 'Lines Written On Louis Armstrong's Death,' *LJW*, 176.

<sup>14</sup> *CA*, 163-4.

<sup>15</sup> *CA*, 163-4.

<sup>16</sup> *AWJ*, 55, 150.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 96-7.

<sup>18</sup> *SBR*, 50.

<sup>19</sup> *LJW*, 28.

<sup>20</sup> *SBR*, 44.

<sup>21</sup> Anthony Thwaite, editor: *Philip Larkin: Letters to Monica* (Faber, 2010), 327.





*Our President Anthony Thwaite (centre) with Graham Chesters, Lady Virginia Bottomley, Alan Johnson and Carole Collinson at the unveiling of the 'Whitusun Weddings' plaque at King's Cross Station, 2014*

**Photographs © James Booth**

**Two Epi-grims**

Aging is death in slow mo –  
The last and the dreariest chore.  
You live in the village of No-Go  
Where no-one comes any more.

'Life is first boredom, then fear'  
But age is a double whammy:  
Both of the bastards appear  
At once. You're bored stiff and scared clammy.

\*

Don't pin a rose to my shroud.  
Don't stencil a cat on my coffin.  
Don't hire a hall or a crowd  
Of poet-types, smirkin' and coughin'!

If you can flog some old scribbles  
Of mine, you'll be able to buy  
A bottle of plonk, some cheap nibbles.  
Don't look so happy! 'Bye.

***Carol Rumens***



*Carol Rumens and Graham Chesters in The Deep 2005*



*Night comes on: Warehouses on the River Hull. 2005*

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## Notes on Contributors

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**Rachael Galletly** is an English teacher at King Edward VII School in Sheffield. She loves teaching Larkin and recently invited Philip Pullen to speak to her A Level students about the poet's life and work. Rachael first read Larkin's *The Whitsun Weddings* as an A Level student herself and Larkin remains her favourite poet. She has been a member of the Society since 2013, a Trustee since 2015 and currently serves as the Society's Merchandising Officer.

**Lyn Lockwood** is a Trustee and Education Officer for the PLS. She lives in Sheffield and by day works for a national charity. By night she writes text books for *York Notes* and co-authors the PLS Twitter account.

**Alison Mace** has written poetry since adolescence, much more seriously since retiring from teaching. She has written both poetry and prose for *About Larkin*, and has recently published her first collection, *Man at the Ice House*, The High Window Press, 2019.

**Sharon Phillips** was born and brought up in Bristol. After an English degree from Cambridge she spent most of her working life in post-16 education. From 2008 until her retirement in 2015 Sharon was Principal of King Edward VI College, Stourbridge. She is spending her retirement learning to write poetry again, having given it up over 40 years ago. Her poems have been published online and in print, most recently in *Poetry Birmingham* and the *Bridport Prize Anthology 2019*. Sharon now lives in Otley, West Yorkshire.

**Kyra Piperides Jaques** is a researcher of twentieth and twenty-first century poetry and has recently been awarded her doctorate at the University of York, for her thesis 'Yorkshire Poetry 1954-2019: Language, Identity, Crisis'. Her doctoral studies were funded by the White Rose College of the Arts and Humanities and the Arts and Humanities Research Council. Kyra's current work examines poetry written in the aftermath of the EU Referendum.

**Douglas Porteous** is an East Yorkshire settler in traditional Lekwungen indigenous territory on the west coast of North America.

**Philip Pullen** was born in Coventry and is familiar with most of the haunts of the young Philip Larkin. He now lives in Beverley. He spent his working life teaching in further and higher education and from 2001 until his retirement in 2011 was an HMI with Ofsted. Although his academic background is in the social sciences he has had a life-long passion for English literature. He is currently writing a biography of Eva Larkin.

**Christopher Reid** is at present working on an edition of Seamus Heaney's correspondence. A book of his own poems, *The Late Sun*, will be published by Faber and Faber in November 2020.

**Carol Rumens** has published a number of collections of poetry, including, most recently, *The Mixed Urn* (Sheep Meadow, NY, 2019), copies available from Syracuse University Press. Her chapbook *Bezdelki/ Small Things* (The Emma Press, Birmingham, 2018) won the Michael Marks Award in 2019 for best poetry pamphlet. She writes a regular poetry blog for *Guardian Books Online*, 'Poem of the Week', teaches creative writing at Bangor University, and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

**Margaret Sepanski**, née Leech (1940-2018), taught English in schools in Kent and New Zealand. She married a US Army officer and lived in the States, Europe and the Middle East before eventually returning to Kent. Her favourite Larkin poems were 'Cut Grass' and 'Show Saturday'.

**Chris Sewart** was brought up in Birstall, Leicestershire but relocated to Beverley in 2019. His career has been nomadic. He has been a

timber salesman, insurance broker, town centre manager, FE tutor and a traffic and travel broadcaster on BBC local radio. He now works as a freelance market researcher in UK town centres. He's been writing poetry, short stories and radio plays for over 20 years. After work got in the way for 10 years he completed a Creative Writing Degree with the Open University in 2016 and has since been shortlisted for the Sunderland University/Waterstones Short Story Prize twice, in 2018 & 2019. An MA in Creative Writing now beckons!

**Alain Sinner** read English at Hull from 1979 to 1982, after which he taught English language and literature at various institutions of secondary and higher education in Luxembourg for 37 years before retiring in 2019.

**Ann Thwaite** first met Philip Larkin in the sixties. She has been a member of the Larkin Society from the very beginning. She has published over thirty books; two of her biographies (of A.A. Milne and Edmund Gosse) won major prizes. A collection of seven short stories, *Running in the Corridors*, came out recently.

**Wan Furong** is a second-year PhD candidate at Beijing Normal University. Her postgraduate thesis is entitled *Personal Anxieties and Identity-seeking: Narrative Personae in Larkin's Poetry* (Nankai University, 2012). Her PHD thesis will study Larkin's poetry from the 'urban pastoral' perspective in contemporary Britain, examining his innovative use of this traditional poetic form. It will explore a more positive Larkin: a poet in pursuit of the ideal and of transcendence as well as a man whose life reflects the innate complexity of existence.

**Geoff Weston** worked closely with Philip Larkin in the Library for 16 years. Now retired from his post as Associate Director of Academic Services, he undertakes Larkin-related research and is heavily involved in school governance, particularly the process whereby primary schools convert to sponsored academy status.

**John White**, the Society's Jazz Consultant, is Emeritus Reader in American History at the University of Hull, where he taught from 1965 until 2002. With Trevor Tolley he produced the four-CD set *Larkin's Jazz* (2010). He is co-editor (with Richard Palmer) of *Larkin: Jazz Writings, 1940-1984* (2005), and contributed an essay "'Goodbye Witherspoon: a Jazz Friendship' to Dale Salwak's anthology *Larkin: The Man and his Work* (1989). He has written biographies of Billie Holiday and Artie Shaw, and won the Arthur Miller Prize for his essay 'Kansas City, Pendergast and All That Jazz.' (1992). A regular contributor to *Jazz Journal*, he lives in Seaford, E. Sussex.

**Kieron Winn's** first collection of poetry, *The Mortal Man*, was published in 2015: 'superb collection' (*Agenda*); 'the level of craft in these poems is a delight' (Clive James). Recent poems have appeared in *The Hudson Review*, *The London Magazine*, *New Statesman*, *The Spectator* and the *Times Literary Supplement*. In 2018-19 he was artist in residence at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford. In June 2020 he will be poet in residence at Rydal Mount, Wordsworth's final home, as part of the 250th birthday celebrations. [www.kieronwinn.com](http://www.kieronwinn.com)

**Zhang Yan** is a professor in the School of Foreign Languages and Literature of Beijing Normal University. She has been involved in research in English literature since the 1990s, her interests lying mainly in British Romantic poetry, 20th century British poetry and the poems of Shakespeare. Her academic monographs include *Pluralism, Fusion and Transcendence: The Study of Modern and Contemporary British Poetry* (2008) and *History, Reality, Imagination: Essays on English Literature* (2016). She has published nearly 50 academic papers in the literary journals in China and edited collections of poems and critical essays.


















# The Philip Larkin Society

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<p>Maeve Brennan: <i>The Philip Larkin I Knew</i> Larkin Society Memorial Series (Manchester University Press, 2002) £5.00</p> 	 <p>Larkin in 25 objects: Six double-size cards £5.00 photographed by Denis Low.</p>	
 <p>James Booth: <i>Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love</i> (Bloomsbury 2014) £10.00</p>	<p>Larkin Timeline £6.00</p> 	
<p>Jean Hartley: <i>Philip Larkin's Hull and East Yorkshire</i> 5.00 The second edition of this popular topographical and walking guide to the area</p> 	<p>T-Shirts / Night Shirts (for big Larkin fans) £10.00 in black or white</p> 	
 <p>Geoffrey Waters <i>The Larkin Trail</i> in sketches and watercolours £12.00. A companion to his friend Jean Hartley's guide.</p>	 <p>Larkin T-Shirts. Women's raspberry.. L only (14-16) £10.00</p>	
<p>John Harris: <i>The Beat of Happiness</i>. Six essays inspired by Philip Larkin's jazz writing. £10.</p> 	<p>T-Shirts Slate Grey          Men's Medium and large          Women's M, L XL £12.00</p> 	

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*Cover illustration: Portrait of Anthony Thwaite in oils by Len Taylor, 2002*