

Beyond All This

by Robert B. Shaw

"... the wish to be alone."
— "Wants"



Collected Poems

by Philip Larkin

edited by Anthony Thwaite

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330 pp., \$22.50

Philip Larkin, who died in 1985 at the age of 63, has been commonly regarded as the finest English poet of his time. His reputation is founded not merely on the opinion of professional critics but on his remarkable popularity with readers, including many who rarely look at poetry. As I begin writing this review, I notice that Larkin's *Collected Poems* is a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, which is decidedly unusual for a book of verse. Anyone attempting to gauge Larkin's achievement must ponder the reasons for his nearly

unique popular appeal.

It might be easier to explain if he had engaged in the sort of self-promotion that many poets now accept as a natural adjunct to their calling. In fact, Larkin's poems, once written, had to make their way with very little help from him. He did not give readings, and only rarely agreed to be interviewed. He did not cultivate disciples by teaching at universities on short-term high-paid appointments. Although he did his share of book reviewing, he almost never wrote about contemporary poetry; while maintaining lifelong friendships with a few writers such as Kingsley Amis, Larkin distanced himself from the English literary establishment and its policies and perquisites.

The distance was geographical as well as emotional. Literary activity in Britain remains centered in London; Larkin, for most of his life, remained centered in the Humberside city of Hull, where he spent his days as head librarian at the university. He liked

Hull, he once said, "because it's so far away from everywhere else." In this isolation he produced the poems that made him famous; and he produced them very sparingly. In this, too, he showed himself indifferent to the obvious ways of advancing a literary career: frequent appearance in print is certainly one of these. After his first book, *The North Ship* (1945), which he virtually disowned as juvenilia, Larkin published only three slim volumes during his lifetime. Appearing about once a decade, together they contain 85 poems—a body of work remarkably small in proportion to the reputation it engendered. Clearly something, or several things, in this writing struck a powerful chord in those who read it. What could it—or they—have been?

Several explanations come to mind, all no doubt valid up to a point. One thing that strikes me immediately when reading Larkin's mature work is its profound descriptive fidelity. His youthful ambition was to be a novelist, and he published two novels in his

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20's. Although he was never able to complete a third, he managed to bring to his poetry the novelist's gift for creating a palpable, recognizable world through scrupulous rendering of the look and feel of things. Often his poems present themselves as *scenes*. Through his eyes we see, for instance, the center of Hull, where:

... residents from raw estates,
brought down
The dead straight miles by
stealing flat-faced trolleys,
Push through plate-glass swing
doors to their desires—
Cheap suits, red kitchen-ware,
sharp shoes, iced lollies,
Electric mixers, toasters,
washers, driers . . .

(“Here”)

Or we are shown the summer wedding parties, “grinning and pomaded,” waving newly married couples off at railroad stations:

The fathers with broad belts
under their suits
And seamy foreheads, mothers
loud and fat;
An uncle shouting smut; and
then the perms,
The nylon gloves and
jewelry-substitutes . . .

(“The Whitsun Weddings”)

Many of the settings are less animated, but just as memorable. There is the empty country church where the agnostic tourist, at a loss, makes a kind of inventory:

Another church: matting, seats,
and stone,
And little books; sprawlings
of flowers, cut
For Sunday, brownish now;
some brass and stuff
Up at the holy end; the small,
neat organ;
And a tense, musty, unignorable
silence,
Brewed God knows how long.

(“Church Going”)

And there is a near-deserted provincial hotel, in which the loneliness is grimmer:

Through open doors, the dining
room declares
A larger loneliness of
knives and glass

And silence laid like carpet.

A porter reads
An unsold evening paper.

Hours pass,
And all the salesmen have gone
back to Leeds,
Leaving full ashtrays in the
Conference Room.

(“Friday Night in the Royal
Station Hotel”)

For his English readers Larkin captured such scenes in all their bustling or sad familiarity; for American readers unfamiliar with the ambience the writing nevertheless has the documentary clarity of photography. Although his concerns in writing were not primarily social ones, Larkin's poetry offers a series of vignettes that coalesce in a compelling portrait of postwar England. The years of digging out from the Blitz, the shabbiness of economic austerity, the disillusionment attendant on the loss of empire and the bureaucratic sprawl of the welfare state—all these are implicit, giving depth to his descriptions. Surely one of his claims upon his public has been his ability to mirror so accurately the times and places they and he knew so well.

All that being said, Larkin's writing is most intense when it addresses his personal preoccupations. In a queer way it seems right to call him a confessional poet, although the term was not generally applied to him in his lifetime. Confessional poetry is in most people's minds linked with such poets as Lowell, Berryman, and Plath, who offer ostensibly unvarnished accounts of nervous breakdowns, alcoholism, adulteries, suicide attempts, and the like. Granted, Larkin has nothing so dramatic to reveal about himself. But if confessionalism means laying one's own flaws, disaffections, or malaise open to view, this is precisely what he did, in poem after poem, and he did so without indulging in the heroic postures favored by the poets mentioned above. The persona in his work is not a doomed genius but an ordinary man with troubles so ordinary that they have rarely before figured largely as poetic subjects. Solitude, partly willed, partly accidental, is one of his most problematic topics. Many pieces are framed as arguments with himself about his decision to remain single in a society that revolves around marriage.

Peering through a window at couples strenuously enjoying themselves at a dance, he is estranged in outlook as someone from another planet:

Why be out here?
But then, why be in there?
Sex, yes, but what
Is sex? Surely, to think the
lion's share
Of happiness is found by
couples—sheer

Inaccuracy, as far as I'm
concerned.

(“Reasons for Attendance”)

A stanza from the little poem “Wants” states the position with startling bluntness:

Beyond all this, the wish to be
alone:
However the sky grows dark
with invitation-cards
However we follow the printed
directions of sex
However the family is
photographed under the
flagstaff—
Beyond all this, the wish to be
alone.

Other poems disclose, or ironically celebrate, a temperament governed by emotional depletion or timidity—a psychological equivalent, really, of the pinched, exhausted atmosphere of the England in which he came of age. Larkin prides himself on avoiding the “bad habits of expectancy” he sees in so many people, even as he laments his unadventurous willingness to “let the toad *work* / Squat on my life,” or notes the relentless passage of time:

Life is first boredom, then fear.
Whether or not we use it,
it goes,
And leaves what something
hidden from us chose,
And age, and then the
only end of age.

(“Dockery and Son”)

This candor in confronting the occasionless unhappiness that in most people remains submerged and inarticulate is very likely another reason for Larkin's popularity. In a culture numbed by sensationalism the ordinariness of this melancholy arrests attention, and so does the poet's tone: not histrionically tragic, but plainspokenly stoical. His

bitterness at being odd man out is at times laced with humor, which has endeared him to readers as well:

Sexual intercourse began
In nineteen sixty-three
(Which was rather late
for me)—
Between the end of the
Chatterley ban
And the Beatles' first LP.
("Annus Mirabilis")

Finally, of course, Larkin's communicative success with his readers comes down to his self-effacing and yet dazzling skill with words. He is one of the most (some would say one of the few) quotable 20th-century poets. In his mature style one feels that all his wit, intelligence, and feeling are concentrated in lines of aphoristic energy. This is nowhere more true than in the harrowing late pieces that testify to his fears of aging, illness, and death:

... this is what we fear—no
sight, no sound,
No touch or taste or smell,
nothing to think with,
Nothing to love or link with,
The anaesthetic from which
none come round.
("Aubade")

Larkin's *Collected Poems* confirms our sense of his stature and offers some surprises as well. It virtually doubles the quantity of Larkin's published poetry, adding 83 poems to those he included in his four volumes. Some of these are juvenilia, and a few are unfinished. But many of them are from Larkin's mature period and are very good indeed. It was always evident that Larkin was an exacting craftsman; it is now apparent that he was a stringent editor, too hard on himself in withholding several of these lyrics from publication. "An April Sunday," an elegiac piece written after his father died, and several characteristic bits of self-portraiture such as "Mother, Summer, I," "The March Past," "The View," and "The Winter Palace" are especially welcome additions to the canon. Even when we can see why Larkin might have rejected certain pieces as too derivative, or as repetitions of things he had done before, they retain great interest for those

studying his development as an artist.

Anthony Thwaite's editorial labors have made that study easier. He has arranged the poems chronologically and attached dates of composition to them. This dating, and the appearance or reappearance of many early poems, makes it possible to analyze the fashioning of Larkin's distinctive voice more precisely than ever before. He himself rightly characterized the poems in *The North Ship* as being under the spell of Yeats, and he often credited his discovery of Hardy's poems with leading him to his own manner of speaking. Now, in this edition, we can see the grand, Yeatsian gestures giving way to a knotty, Hardy-esque plainness. But we can see the interplay of other influences as well. There is a lot of Auden echoing through the early work—not surprising for an English poet of Larkin's generation—but just a little later on we come upon the booming note of Dylan Thomas. This is surprising, since Larkin had suppressed all obvious signs of it after failing in the late 40's to find a publisher for a manu-

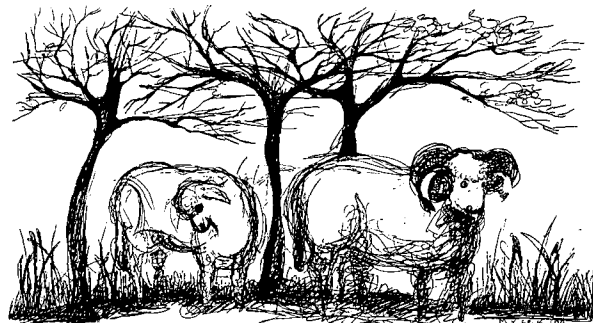
script collection with a fervid title Thomas would have loved: *In the Grip of Light*.

Before settling down beneath "the toad work," we can now see that Larkin went through some colorfully romantic phases that he was ultimately to reject as inauthentic. The wry, disenchanting voice he found for himself was no sudden discovery, and readers will value this collection for the dynamic portrait it offers of a poet's consciousness in formation, of the lonely, difficult emergence of a true self. The last stanza of one of the previously unpublished poems, "Best Society," provides a striking image of the process:

Viciously, then, I lock my door.
The gas-fire breathes. The wind
outside
Ushers in evening rain. Once
more
Uncontradicting solitude
Supports me on its giant palm;
And like a sea-anemone
Or simple snail, there cautiously
Unfolds, emerges, what I am.



LIBERAL ARTS



ON THE VIRTUES OF FARMING

Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people, whose breasts He has made His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which he keeps alive that sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth. Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example. It is the mark set on those, who, not looking up to heaven, to their own soil and industry, as does the husbandman, for their subsistence, depend for it on casualties and caprice of customers. Dependence begets subser-

vience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition. This, the natural progress and consequence of the arts, has sometimes perhaps been retarded by accidental circumstances; but, generally speaking, the proportion which the aggregate of the other classes of citizens bears in any State to that of its husbandmen, is the proportion of its unsound to its healthy parts, and is a good enough barometer whereby to measure its degree of corruption.

—from Notes on Virginia
by Thomas Jefferson

A Local Globalist

by J.O. Tate

*"But they who shared with me my life's adventure,
Who tossed their ducats like dandelions into the sunlight,
I know that somewhere they with songs are building,
Golden Towers more beautiful than my own."*

—"Golden Symphony"

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Fletcher is today remembered best as a pioneering Imagist poet, one present

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at the creation, one to be mentioned with T.E. Hulme, Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell, and H.D., but also one who went his own way, being the disciple of none. It's rather quaint to read in Amy Lowell's *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry* (1917) that "for the discerning eye, no living poet has more distinction of vision or of style. In [John Gould Fletcher], indeed, we see the beginning of that new order of which I have so often spoken. To the poet, he is a real teacher, indicating new directions, opening up untrodden ways of thought." The new directions and untrodden ways of the revolution of the Image led toward modernist masterpieces like *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, *The Waste Land*, *The Bridge*, *Pater-son*, A, and other such relics. But they also led toward "Amygism," undergraduate cloning, the disease of "cre-

ative writing," the democratization of art, a collapse of standards, and the ruin of poetry.

That's not to say that John Gould Fletcher is to blame for any of the worst of it, of course. He was very much an individual, a man of integrity, more of an old-fashioned gentleman, perhaps, than we'd expect a revolutionary to be. Fletcher lived through the transition from a *fin-de-siècle* aestheticism to its Modernist extension, and he was still writing after World War II. But he was not a great poet, or even—to my tastes—a poet of the first rank. The tenth poem from his *Irradiations: Sand and Spray* (1915) may be representative:

The trees, like great jade
elephants,
Chained, stamp and shake
'neath the gadflies of the
breeze;
The trees lunge and plunge,
unruly elephants:
The clouds are their crimson
howdah-canopies,
The sunlight glints like the
golden robe of a Shah.
Would I were tossed on the
wrinkled back of those trees.

Is that not a good poem? Yet it is also a decorative and shallow one; its exoticism has not worn well. Perhaps the best thing about it is its sound and *vers libre* swagger.

Lines from the fifth poem of the same series are as well known as any Fletcher wrote:

Whirlpools of purple and gold,
Winds from the mountains of
cinnabar,