

Collected Poems

PHILIP LARKIN

Edited & With an Introduction by ANTHONY THWAITE
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For readers accustomed to the open-collared, unrhymed, and unmetered insistence on personal freedom in most North American poetry from *Howl* onward, the buttoned-down submission of Philip Larkin's poetry both to the apparent fetters of what he called life's "hollow stasis/Of havings-to" ("The Life With a Hole in It") and to the constraints of formal poetry—he wrote as if British verse had stopped with Thomas Hardy, Walter de la Mare, and Edward Thomas—may be somewhat jarring. To consider Larkin's oeuvre to be fundamentally conservative, however, would be to submit to the kind of "conceits/And self-protecting ignorance" ("The Building") his poems expose so mercilessly and memorably. Behind the ruefully caustic, aphoristic statements—"Life is first boredom, then fear" ("Dockery and Son") and "They fuck you up, your mum and dad./They may not mean to, but they do" ("This Be the Verse")—that brought his poems such renown on both sides of the Atlantic lie unexpected "sharp tender shock[s]" ("An Arundel Tomb") of passion that belie the poems' barbed and brittle surfaces. This new edition of Larkin's *Collected Poems* allows readers to reacquaint themselves with the four slim volumes published at roughly 10-year intervals during his lifetime, and specifically with Larkin's own sequencing of the poems within those books—the latter aspect so crucial to the sensibility of a poet as structure-obsessed as Larkin. Thwaite's previous 1988 edition of Larkin's *Collected Poems*, which presented all of Larkin's published and unpublished poems in strict order of composition, was a scholar's gold mine but a bewildering morass for the rest of us, and it is the latter group of readers for whom this present edition appears to have been mercifully and grudgingly prepared. Apparently unwilling to relinquish the editorial omnipotence of his previous edition, Thwaite has churlishly omitted all unpublished poems from this *Collected*, even though that necessitates leaving out such poems as

"An April Sunday," the unfinished "The Dance," and "Love Again"—poems which are among Larkin's most striking and memorable.

Apparently Thwaite wants us to have *both* of his editions of Larkin's *Collected* within arm's reach; I advise anyone who chafes at this requirement to simply copy the three poems Thwaite mentions from the 1988 *Collected* and stick them in the back of the 2003 *Collected* with the certainty of having the best of Larkin between two covers.

Once one suffers through a preponderance of hackneyed Edwardian imagery—"rain and stone places" ("IX") and "windy street[s]" ("VI")—rereading (or, in my own case, reading for the first time) Larkin's first book, *The North Ship* (1945), reveals just how early his primary obsessions took root. Although the bitter, middle-aged speaker of *High Windows* (1974) claims that "Only the young can be alone freely" ("Vers

de Société"), in the poems of his 20s Larkin "confront[ed]/The instantaneous grief of being alone" ("VI"); while in another early poem Larkin's speaker refuses freedom—"I would not lift the latch" on the grounds that liberation would inevitably "[s]till end in loss" ("XXI"); and *The North Ship* is delicately imbued with the underlying existential dread—"I am awakened each dawn/Increasingly to fear" ("XXXIII")—that the later poems so acerbically and soulfully articulate. The breathless, "fear[ful]" speaker of Larkin's early poems increasingly confronts, in *The Less Deceived* (1955) and *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964), fear's necessary partner, "boredom"—specifically the tediousness of life in postwar Great Britain. This boredom is characterized by the drudgery of workaday routine and personified memorably in two poems by "the toad *work*" who "squat[s] on my life." "Toads" contains a typically candid and self-lacerating statement that characterizes Larkin's mature poems:

*something sufficiently toad-like
Squats in me, too;
Its hunkers are heavy as hard luck,
And cold as snow*

It is the shift in preposition from *on* to *in* that gives the poem its pathos, for while the image of a toad "squat[ting]" *on* one evokes a profound disgust—as if the speaker were being physically debased and immobilized by the toad—the second image suggests an even more potent self-disgust: This time the compulsion to live out the "[s]ix days of the week [the toad] soils/with its sickening poison—/Just for paying a few bills!" exists both outside and inside the self. Many of Larkin's best poems evidence both sympathy and disgust for discarded people: bored housewives whose "beauty has thickened./Something is pushing them/To the side of their own lives" ("Afternoons"), "[m]oustached [women] in flowered frocks" taken in by a faith healer ("Faith Healing"), or "waxed-fleshed out-patients/Still vague from accidents" ("Toads Revisited"). The combination of smug condescension and deep empathy with which Larkin's speaker views these characters (or projections) is another aspect of the vacillation between rage at the "unbeatable slow machine/That brings what you'll get" ("The Life With a Hole in It") and self-loathing at one's own complicity with that "machine" that makes Larkin's best work so compelling.

Over and over Larkin's mature poems yearn for a freedom of "unfenced existence" ("Here") and "enormous air" ("To the Sea"), which, in the poems' world, is inevitably "untalkative, [and] out of reach" ("Here"). This thematic tension between outer freedom and inner constraint is enacted formally in the interplay of syntax and meter. Against the iambic pentameter line, Larkin practices an improvisatory variation akin to that of his beloved pre-bebop jazz musicians. Listen, for instance, to the opening of *The Whitsun Wedding's* "Essential Beauty":

*In frames as large as rooms that face all ways
And block the ends of streets with giant loaves,
Screen graves with custard, cover slums with praise
Of motor-oil and cuts of salmon, shine*

*Perpetually these sharply-pictured groves
Of how life should be.*

This evocation of a cityscape's billboards is about as far from straightforward descriptive language as poetry can get: the insouciance with which Larkin stretches out this one sentence across the pentameter line, piling up dependent clauses whose verbs strain against grammatical structure to make their own needful statement—advertising demeans the lives of those to whom it appeals by trapping them in delusion—only to pivot, unexpectedly, on the verb “shine,” which pulses between a comma and the end of a line to emphasize the billboards' paradoxical appeal. These lines' preponderance of enjambment and their relative dearth of punctuation demonstrate Larkin's brilliance at playing the limitlessness of syntax off the sharply delineated metrical line to create an emphatically erotic evocation of the interplay between limitation and release. Masterful as its opening is, “Essential Beauty” would remain on the level of social commentary did it not turn, in its last few lines, to the erotic and spiritual yearning that the billboards evoke:

*dying smokers sense
Walking towards them through some dappled park
As if on water that unfocused she
No match lit up, nor drag ever brought near,
Who now stands newly clear,
Smiling, and recognising, and going dark.*

Again we see Larkin exploiting syntax to stretch out the distance between the “dying smokers” and the idealized, mysterious “she,” both of the billboards and their fantasies. Advertising's effectiveness, the poem seems to claim, exploits a desire for “how life should be” that is innate to human consciousness, and which makes us all the more complicit in our own manipulation. This kind of sociopsychological insight has been commonplace enough since (at least) Theodor Adorno and Erich Fromm; what makes Larkin's deployment of the insight so forceful is his profound sensitivity to just how far he can juxtapose syntax with meter without destroying either.

In his last, greatest poems, Larkin came to see the social world as a giant sick ward, whose edifices rival those of cathedrals in scale and purpose: “How high they build hospitals!/Lighted cliffs, against dawns/Of days people will die on” (“How”). For this reader, all of Larkin's later work is a precursor to 1977's “Aubade,” written after *High Windows* and which, except for some occasional poems Larkin himself characterized as “doggerel” (“‘Dear CHARLES, My muse, asleep or dead’”), stands as his last finished poem. “Aubade” is a brutal summation of Larkin's technical achievement—the first stanza's diction swerves effortlessly between the demotic (“I work all day, and get half-drunk at night”) and Gerard Manley Hopkins-like (“Flashes afresh to hold and horrify”)—and his preoccupation with the way in which the social and psychological world functions as a bulwark of denial against “[u]nresting death”:

*The mind blanks at the glare. Not in remorse
—The good not done, the love not given, time*

*Torn off or unused—nor wretchedly because
An only life can take so long to climb
Clear of its wrong beginnings, and may never;
But at the total emptiness for ever,
The sure extinction that we travel to
And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,
Not to be anywhere,
And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.*

It's hard to decide which is more “terrible” in these lines: the catalog of the ways in which “[a]n only life” can be wasted or the way in which this catalog is grammatically subordinated to “total emptiness.” There is no sense in trying to explicate such a devastating poem at the end of a review, but after having tried to demonstrate Larkin's brilliance, in poems such as “Essential Beauty,” at evoking infinite possibility and “hidden freshness” (“Love Songs in Age”) by deploying a sentence across more lines than it seems will hold it, I'd like to point out how, in the conclusion of “Aubade,” he combines trochaic inversions, clipped sentences, and imagery that verges on the surrealistic to evoke a final shutting-down of possibility:

*Meanwhile telephones crouch, getting ready to ring
In locked-up offices, and all the uncaring
Intricate rented world begins to rouse.
The sky is white as clay, with no sun.
Work has to be done.
Postmen like doctors go from house to house.*

After six stanzas' worth of the kind of scathingly effective discursive statements that only Larkin could pull off—“Death is no different whined at than withstood”—these lines are content to let syntax and imagery do the poem's terrifying work. Yet as viciously hopeless as these lines are, the joy evident in the poem's fecund creativity evokes a kind of elation in the reader. The brutality of these poems' insight is counterbalanced by a tenderness on the levels of sensibility and technique. Larkin's unflinching gaze at the manifold workings of “grief,/Bitter and sharp with stalks” (“Deceptions”) in people's lives is transformed, by the means of art, into its own kind of astringent consolation.

REVIEWER: **Eric Gudas** (gudas@ucla.edu), whose work has appeared in *The American Poetry Review*, *Crazyhorse*, and *The Iowa Review*, is the author of *Beautiful Monster* (Swan Scythe Press), a chapbook of poems.