Awkward Reverence: the Little World of Philip Larkin

by Philip Harvey

Philip Larkin (1922-1985) was a large round man with a round bald head and large oblong spectacles. He is about one of the most well-known English poets of the reign of Elizabeth II, and although not as accomplished as the most well-known poet under Elizabeth I, will be in the anthologies as long as English poetry survives. He was a member of a writing circle in the 1950s called the Movement. Its literary values, agenda even, is put well in a letter of the time: "For my part I feel we have got the method right – plain language, absence of posturings, sense of proportion, humour, abandonment of the dithyrambic ideal – and are waiting for the matter: a fuller and more sensitive response to life as it appears from day to day, and not only on Mediterranean holidays financed by the British Council."[1] This has sometimes been called kitchen sink literature. Philip Larkin's other job was as a librarian.

Larkin was in personal dispute throughout his life about his own career choice. He ends one poem with the blunt warning "Get stewed: / Books are a load of crap."[2] Not a view one would expect from an authoritative university librarian. Not a good opener for a reference class. When we read the preceding lines though, we see why such a person could get so cranky. Life starts well,

When getting my nose in a book
Cured most things short of school,
It was worth ruining my eyes
To know I could still keep cool,
And deal out the old right hook
To dirty dogs twice my size.

But the experiences of life fill him with a disillusion that literature cannot equal:

Don't read much now: the dude
Who lets the girl down before
The hero arrives, the chap
Who's yellow and keeps the store,
Seem far too familiar.

This is an elegant reiteration of the proverb, or even perhaps cliché, that life teaches you everything you need to know, who needs books: truth is stranger than fiction. This struggle, both with the worth of literature and with his own public employment, finds expression in many of Larkin's perfectly cadenced poems and can, like so much poetry, be sourced to hidden sufferings. One of the poems most popular with English readers begins,

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

Philip Harvey a poet and the poetry editor of Eureka Street.

Six days of the week it soils
  With its sickening poison –
Just for paying a few bills!
  That's out of proportion.

It's hard to believe that 'Toads'[3] was published when Larkin was 32, with most of his working life still before him. Somehow though he must have found solutions to "the toad", or found solace in work, as he proceeded to have a successful career as University Librarian of the Brynmor Jones Library at the University of Hull. In a letter later in his life, Larkin wrote that when he took over responsibility for running the Library in 1955 it was "a nice little Shetland pony," which under his guidance had turned into "a frightful Grand National winner."[4] A steadier, hopeful acclamation of the value of librarianship can be sensed behind the words of this short poem, 'New eyes each year'[5], written in the year before his death. It gains added depth when we know that he died in harness.

New eyes each year
Find old books here,
And new ones, too,
Old eyes renew;
So youth and age
Like ink and page
In this house join,
Minting new coin.

The Australian poet Peter Porter once described himself as an agnostic Anglican. There are a host of such people and they would make up a large percentage of what Bishop John Spong calls the Church Alumni Society. Philip Larkin's work displays several of the characteristics of an agnostic Anglican. Like Porter, for example, a favourite pastime was to spend his holidays visiting English country churches. Once he passed by a church on his bicycle, commemorated in that famous poem and school exercise, 'Church Going'.[6] It is worth observing that this is a personal visit and that the whole poem is missing what most of us would think of as essential to a church, the people who attend.

Once I am sure there's nothing going on
I step inside, letting the door thud shut.

The poet plays a dichotomous role, as one who questions the purpose of this church, only then to find reasons of his own that are much more than "tasteless Common Sense"[7] or sentiment. On the one hand he asks, was it worth stopping for, only to answer himself

Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,
And always end much at a loss like this,
Wondering what to look for ...

His feeling about being there moves from uncertainty and unease ("Hatless, I take off /
My cycle-clips in awkward reverence ...") slowly toward a reconciliation with his doubts ("But superstition, like belief, must die..."), before he comes to acknowledge that

...though I've no idea
What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth,
It pleases me to stand in silence here;

A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognised, and robed as destinies.

What makes him change? "Awkward reverence" holds the clue, for he learns that such reverence is possible and a reality, even though it has to be said in a mildly irreverent way – by removing cycle-clips thus, he mimics the act of bowing or genuflection to the altar familiar within the Catholic traditions of the church. What changes him, or converts him even? The presence and silence of the church itself and all of those who have used it, including the "many dead" who "lie around." Then too, his own need, his own potential for acceptance rather than denial,

Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious,
And gravitating with it to this ground,
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in ...

The poem says much about the ambivalent attitudes so many English people, not to mention people in general, have toward churches and church. Doubt, questioning, questing and some sign of hope are described as a process in the verses of 'Church Going'.

Another very direct handling of the subject of religion is the poem 'Water'[8]:

If I were called in
To construct a religion
I should make use of water.

Going to church
Would entail a fording
To dry, different clothes;

My liturgy would employ
Images of sousing,
A furious devout drench,

And I should raise in the east
A glass of water
Where any-angled light
Would congregate endlessly.

What would you do if you "were called in to construct a religion"? At first glance Larkin's assignment seems a puzzling, even eccentric game. But if we are prepared to take him seriously then first we must acknowledge that water is the source of all life as we know it. Belief, in fact certainty, in water is to be affirmed, especially in a country like Australia where it's presence has become a matter for restrictions and futures. How can we have meaning, or begin to make meaning, without water?

Judaism employs water everywhere in its scripture, most unforgettably in its creation myth at the start of Genesis. And the Christian religion inherits the understanding of water as maker and life-giver. Indeed, the sign of water is the definition of a Christian and even though verse three might even sound comic on first reading, it is a fair description of how baptism is often performed. 'Water' sets us thinking about religion. It also makes us wonder about the poet. After all, Larkin is setting up a rational discourse on the subject, while we know from 'Church Going' that he would be quite sceptical about holy wells, river gods, and other aqueous manifestations of the divine. When, in the final verse, he raises his glass to the east "where any-angled light would congregate endlessly," it instantly reminds us of Larkin's hard rationalist philosophy. It mocks religious symbolic action while simultaneously celebrating existence through such action. The poem remains unsettling, maybe because of the very impersonal nature of the religion espoused. Another Australian poet, Bruce Beaver, puts it well in his poetic attack[9] on Larkin and the Movement:

Nothing was ever intended to be extraordinary. The exceptional automatically is suspect. Anything that can't be measured weighed and completely self-satisfiedly categorised as useful in a wholly functional fashion is out. So are you.

For all the celebration of beauty and small pleasures that we find in his poetry, Philip Larkin himself seems to have been a difficult and even disagreeable individual. Private correspondence is where we find a person at their best and worst, unbuttoned if not actually unwashed; Larkin in this respect is full of the philistine opinions and anti-intellectual attitudes of a Little Englander. His letters, and his biographies to seem extent, disabuse us of any romantic image of the poet-librarian.

Each of the thin volumes published in Larkin's lifetime is packed with background knowledge, proving Samuel Johnson's saying, "A man will turn over half a library to make one book."[10] Larkin's output dwindles as he gets older. Some readers have explained this in terms of his work, that library commitments made it harder and harder to find time to write and read; we all know a librarian somewhere who no longer has time to read, they're so busy with books. Larkin's slowing up can be traced to problems in his own life, but there are also mundane explanations to consider, such as he had nothing more to say, or that he couldn't be bothered. As happens so often with artists who are highly popular in their own lifetime, the demand of the fans far exceeds the interests or abilities of their idols.

Larkin was largely a social poet, his themes the mistakes people make, and human fallibility generally. His worldview was formed by the experience of wartime England and the resulting hard-eyed realism of austerity England. Samuel Johnson also said that literature helps us better to enjoy life, or better to endure it, a position that Larkin probably shared to judge by his passion for it in the Letters. A rounded reader, Larkin identifies "the priest and the doctor" as prerequisite in his poem 'Days'.[11] Their presence in this poem can be interpreted as the reader wishes and some see them as grave forebodings or impractical interferences in the real business of life. A more generous interpretation would argue that their mention is quite essential for Larkin, that their presence here is necessary, unavoidable, meaningful, and even salvific:

What are days for?
Days are where we live.
They come, they wake us
Time and time over.
They are to be happy in:
Where can we live but in days?

Ah, solving that question
Brings the priest and the doctor
In their long coats
Running over the fields.

Sources

1. *Selected letters of Philip Larkin 1940-1985*, ed. by Anthony Thwaite, Letter to Robert Conquest, 28 May 1955, p. 242.
2. 'A study of reading habits', in *Collected poems* (CP), Philip Larkin, ed. with an introduction by Anthony Thwaite. Marvell Press & Faber and Faber, 1990, p. 131.
3. 'Toads', CP, p. 89.
4. Quoted by Anthony Thwaite in the Introduction to CP, p. xviii.
5. 'New eyes each year', CP, p. 212.
6. 'Church going', CP, p. 97.
7. Beaver, Bruce, 'On re-reading Amis, Wain & Larkin', in *The long game and other poems*, University of Queensland Press, 2005, p. 91.
8. 'Water', CP, p. 93.
9. Beaver, Bruce, op. cit., p. 92.
10. Johnson, Samuel, quoted in Boswell's *Life*, 1775.
11. 'Days', CP, p. 67.

OFFICERS OF ANZTLA FOR 2004/2005

President: Tony McCumstie
Mannix Library, Catholic Theological College,
P O Box 146, East Melbourne Vic. 3002
Phone: 61 3 9412 3350
Email: tmccumstie@ctcmelb.vic.edu.au

Vice President: Philip Harvey
Joint Theological Library, Ormond College,
Parkville, Vic 3052
Phone: 61 3 9347 8480
Email: pharvey@jtl.vic.edu.au

Secretary: Rhonda Barry
Mary Andrews College
28 Carillon Avenue
Newtown NSW 2042
Email: rhondabarry@netspace.net.au

Treasurer: Lynn Pryor
Churches of Christ Theological College
44-60 Jacksons Road, Mulgrave, Vic 3170
Phone: 61 3 9790 1000
Email: library@cctc.vic.edu.au

2005 Conference Representative: Kim Robinson
Moore Theological College Library,
1 King Street, Newtown, NSW 2042
Phone: 61 2 9577 9899
Email: kim.robinson@moore.edu.au

NZ Representative: Judith Bright
Kinder Library, St John's College,
Private Bag 28 907, Remuera,
Auckland New Zealand 1136
Phone: 64 9 521 2725
Email: Judith@stjohns.auckland.ac.nz