

Philip Larkin: Refusing the Call?

Poets usually refuse the call. How are they to accept it? How can a poet become a medicine man and fly to the source and come back and heal or pronounce oracles? Everything among us is against it. (Ted Hughes)

We can easily imagine Philip Larkin and Kingsley Amis jostling for first place in the queue of conscientious objectors waiting to refuse such a call. Or, more likely, denying that such a call had ever existed except in the overheated imagination of a Blake or a Ted Hughes. Larkin was not interested in inventing ‘blinding theologies of flowers and fruits’ (‘I Remember, I Remember’); not interested, surely, in the whole romantic legacy, except as providing easy targets for his deflating mockery. Yet he was prepared not only to contemplate but to respond positively to a not altogether dissimilar call:

If I were called in
To construct a religion
I should make use of water. [‘Water’]¹

Called by whom? Who enlists the constructors of religions? The poem goes on to propose raising a glass of water in the east to catch the light of the rising sun, and a ‘furious devout drench’. These are priestly if not shamanic rituals. And there are other sacramental poems of thanksgiving, for example, to the sun in ‘Solar’ for its hourly sustenance and blessings, and to the earth in ‘First Light’ for its ‘immeasurable surprise’.

Larkin was never likely to receive such a call. But he did receive a call to construct poems (‘I didn’t choose poetry: poetry chose me’²). The call came early, as it usually does, and from his muse, or as we should say, from his own nascent poetic imagination. And that call was accepted by Larkin, initially, in not very different terms from ‘Water’ (1954), since his early poems made much use of water and light, together with another traditional religious image, wind, as their principal symbols. In 1944 he wrote ‘art is as near to religion as one can get’.³

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The earliest poems in the *Collected Poems*, written when Larkin was sixteen, were competent Tennyson pastiche. In his last year at school, he anticipated Ted Hughes’ ‘To Paint a Water Lily’:

Summer shimmers over the fishpond.

¹ All quotations from Larkin’s verse are from *Philip Larkin: Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite, Faber and Faber, 1988.

² Philip Larkin, *Required Writing*, Faber and Faber 1983, p.62. Subsequent quotations from this book will be noted as RW.

³ *Philip Larkin: A Writer’s Life* by Andrew Motion, Faber and Faber 1993, p.131. Subsequent references are to WL.

We heed it but do not stop
At the may-flies' cloud of mist,
But penetrate to skeleton beyond.
[‘We see the spring breaking across rough stones’]

But it was not until Oxford that Larkin found his own voice. In ‘I see a girl dragged by the wrists’ he adopts the immediately recognizable tone of premature age and defeat as he envies the girl’s abandon in a ‘dazzling field of snow’. He pretends not to regret that ‘Nothing so wild, nothing so glad as she / Rears up in me’, and tries to reconcile himself to a future of repetitive work, hoping, like Hopkins, that ‘sheer plod’ might eventually produce its own leap of the spirit. But whereas Hopkins’ hope was based on his faith in the redemptive power of the crucifixion, Larkin’s can express itself only in the fantasy of the descent of a ‘snow-white unicorn’, to put its golden horn into his hand. The unicorn, in the myths, cannot be hunted or coerced, but will come of its own accord to the maiden who waits in still passivity. Larkin is clearly using it as Yeats used the winged horse of the Muses, as an image of poetic inspiration, which he seems to regard, in this poem, as an alternative to active engagement with the physical world. But his forlorn prayer to the unicorn carries none of the urgency of his earlier cry: ‘To be that girl!’

Larkin had all the necessary gifts, including a rich enough central theme — his failure to bring his life into contact with what Blake had called the Energies. ‘Rich’ may sound a strangely chosen word for such a theme. But it was, after all, Eliot’s theme¹, and when Eliot called *The Waste Land* ‘a wholly personal grouse against life’ he was ingenuously ignoring the poetry which had enabled him to transform so apparently meagre a theme into one of the richest poems in the language. Though he rarely mentions Eliot, Larkin must have been well aware of the affinity. In 1946 he wrote:

And now the guitar again,
Spreading me over the evening like a cloud,
Drifting, darkening: unable to bring rain. [‘Two Guitar Pieces’]

Coleridge, Hopkins, Eliot and Larkin are all engaging with the common theme of post-Enlightenment poetry, the theme of man’s sense of alienation from the natural world, and from the ‘natural man’ within himself. Coleridge wrote: ‘Sometimes when I earnestly look at a beautiful Object or Landscape, it seems as if I were on the *brink* of a Fruition still denied’. [*Notebooks III* 3767] When men cease to be able to receive this ‘wonted impulse’ from the physical world, they experience that particularly acute and modern form of dejection we call alienation. The template for all such poems is Coleridge’s ‘Dejection Ode’:

I may not hope from outward forms to win
The passion and the life, whose fountains are within.

¹ The thin and prematurely balding Prufrock comes close to Larkin at Oxford, getting only as far as the door of an attractive girl, with a bunch of flowers in his hands. Prufrock contemplates asserting himself by wearing white flannel trousers on the beach: Larkin actually dared to wear cerise trousers in the streets of Oxford. Prufrock’s name could easily have been Bleaney, and ‘Preludes’ gives us a glimpse of Mr Bleaney: ‘One thinks of all the hands / That are raising dingy shades / In a thousand furnished rooms’.

The fountain (of fresh water in a waste land), rain (as also in 'The Ancient Mariner') and wind, are Coleridge's consistent images for 'the passion and the life', and also for poetic inspiration, since Coleridge found that poetry cannot live without access to the energies of the natural world.¹

In his longing for wildness and fear of exposure Larkin comes close, perhaps more surprisingly, to the early Hughes. 'One man walking a deserted platform' anticipates Hughes' 'Wind':

While round the streets the wind runs wild,
Beating each shuttered house, that seems
Folded full of the dark silk of dreams,
A shell of sleep cradling a wife or child.

Wind is the chosen image of both poets for the creative/destructive energies of the world, which Hughes called the 'wandering elementals'. A state of grace, for Larkin, would be 'the unguessed-at heart riding / The winds as gulls do'. In Hughes' poem 'Gulls Aloft', the gulls effortlessly ride the big wind, and then 'repeat their graces'.

'Climbing the hill within the deafening wind' anticipates Hughes' 'The Horses'. Each poet climbs a wooded hill to find horses standing patiently, apparently submitting to the harsh elements. Larkin uses this as an image for the submission required of the poet to the demands of his muse, as Coleridge's Eolian Harp is played upon by the winds:

Let me become an instrument sharply stringed
For all things to strike music as they please.

At the end of the poem Larkin returns to the mundane world, and asks:

How to recall such music, when the street
Darkens? Among the rain and stone places
I find only an ancient sadness falling,
Only hurrying and troubled faces.

Hughes concludes his poem:

In din of the crowded streets, going among the years, the faces,
May I still meet my memory in so lonely a place
Between the streams and the red clouds, hearing curlews,
Hearing the horizons endure.

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The received opinion of Larkin's career is that he started out firmly in the romantic tradition, under the influence particularly of Yeats and Lawrence; that at Oxford he became acutely aware of the disparity between the role of romantic poet and his own

¹ See the chapters on Coleridge and Hopkins in *Literature and the Crime Against Nature* (Chaucer Books 2005).

person and personality, and was laughed out of taking poetry or anything else seriously by Kingsley Amis and other Oxford friends; that he then soon developed the characteristic Larkinesque voice and pose. This, however, grossly misrepresents the truth. At Oxford Larkin endeavoured to outdo Amis in childish behaviour and such indiscriminate debunking that the baby might easily have gone out with the bath-water. But though he began to write the kind of poems of which Amis approved, he did not cease to write very different verse, with traditional romantic themes and images, like a secret sin. His sense of how poetry is written remained resolutely romantic:

A poem is written because the poet gets a sudden vision — lasting one second or less — and he attempts to express the whole of which the vision is a part. Or he attempts to express the vision. Blake was lucky: 'I dare not pretend to be other than the secretary: the authors are in eternity'. And: 'I have written this poem from immediate dictation ... even against my will'. He was constantly in contact with the vision. Shelley in his *Defence of Poetry* points out that even the greatest poetry is only one-tenth or less as good as what the poet originally conceived, or felt. Lawrence had his 'daemon' which spoke through him. [WL 72]

Neither Amis nor Bruce Montgomery was able to shake Larkin's allegiance to Lawrence, nor to prevent his enthusiastic response to Yeats and Dylan Thomas in his last year at Oxford. The influence of Vernon Watkins, with whom Larkin became friends after Watkins had lectured on Yeats in Oxford in 1943, was greater than that of his undergraduate friends. That talk stimulated Larkin to 'go off afterwards and read Yeats for three years' [RW 43]. He described his 'infatuation with his particularly potent music' [RW 29]. (Ted Hughes recalled that, at the same age, 'Yeats spellbound me for about six years' [UU 202].) Watkins also strengthened Larkin's sense of poetry as a dedicated calling: 'He made it clear how one could, in fact, 'live by poetry'; it was a vocation, at once difficult as sainthood and easy as breathing' [RW 43-4].

The early influence of such writers as Lawrence had encouraged in Larkin a keen interest in the unconscious, particularly in relation to the writing of poetry. At Oxford, however, Larkin found that the mere mention of the unconscious, especially when Amis was around, could be guaranteed to produce a chorus of jeers. Nevertheless, Larkin wondered if a more solitary lifestyle might give him greater access to the contents of his unconscious. His perception that 'poetry and sex are very closely connected' [WL 80] echoed Wordsworth's claim for metaphor that 'this principle is the great spring of the activity of our minds and their chief feeder. From this principle the direction of the sexual appetite and all the passions connected with it, take their origin' [*Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*].

Towards the end of his first year Larkin attended and was extremely impressed by a series of lectures by John Layard, a Jungian psychologist who was to become Peter Redgrove's guru twenty years later. Larkin reported that the highlight of one 'damn fine talk' by Layard was his statement that 'what women must do — as they are in the unconscious, rubbing shoulders with all these archetypes and symbols that man so needs — is bring them up and give them to man' [WL 61]. That Amis jeered at Layard as a 'loonie' did not prevent Larkin, some five years later, writing 'Wedding-Wind', in which, by using a female narrator, he was able to gain access to a more fruitful range of

archetypes and symbols than in any other poem. In *The North Ship* wind had been the controlling image, symbolizing, as it always had, all the powers and energies of the non-human world, but also those forces normally locked in the unsuspected depths of our own being, or unsuspected by men. It figures progressively less in Larkin's later books, where there are more indoor poems, looking out through windows at an increasingly inaccessible outer world, avoiding exposure and risk.

By adopting the persona of a young woman on the first morning of her married life, Larkin can shed his usual reticence. The young woman has no fear of the wind, for all the damage it has caused overnight, for that damage symbolizes the exhilarating release from the remnants of her old single life, her sudden emergence from the dead past into a new life as a farmer's wife, a life replete with sex and farm work, both of which bring her into fertilizing contact with the creative energies inside and outside herself.

The rhythm of the opening lines embody her new-found strength and assurance:

The wind blew all my wedding-day,
And my wedding-night was the night of the high wind.

The same simplicity and directness characterizes the whole poem: 'and I was sad / That any man or beast that night should lack / The happiness I had'. The passion which sweeps through her carries away her former self, all her former thoughts and bearings, so that when her husband leaves her alone in the bedroom, she feels momentarily 'stupid', and does not recognize her own face in the twisted candlestick. But what she at first mistakes for stupidity she later finds to be a new defining reality of joy on which all her actions now turn. The wind 'bodies forth' this renovating joy as it thrashes her apron and yesterday's washed clothes on the line. Not only has the wind 'ravelled' yesterday's world, it has released pent-up waters, transforming them into 'new delighted lakes', 'all generous waters' by which she kneels 'as cattle', in humility. She feels fully awake and fully human for the first time: 'Shall I be let to sleep / Now this perpetual morning shares my bed?' The high wind embodies the power of change and new beginnings, in this case a once-in-a-lifetime experience, but the 'all-generous waters' it has released, with their biblical resonance, are felt to be permanent, or permanently renewable.

The richly deployed imagery of wind and water in this poem is not at all literary, but assumes, and triumphantly vindicates the assumption, that these primal images can still carry a great charge of controlled feeling when handled with sufficient delicacy and conviction. They enable Larkin to achieve a unique blend of innocence, frank sensuality, and religious awe. Though written in 1946, 'Wedding Wind' was included in Larkin's 1955 collection, *The Less Deceived*.

Larkin is widely thought to have shared the values articulated by Robert Conquest in his introduction to *New Lines* in 1956. That manifesto suggested that the poets represented there spoke with one voice. But Larkin, though he like to play up to his public persona as a grumpy prematurely old man, and wrote good poems in that persona, had many other voices, as had been evident in *The Less Deceived* the previous year. Of the nine Larkin poems actually chosen for *New Lines*, two, 'I Remember, I Remember', (with its debunking of Lawrence and Dylan Thomas and childhood and sex and nature) and 'Toads' (an example of what Charles Tomlinson called Larkin's 'tenderly nursed sense of defeat') were in the mocking or wryly cynical voice; three, 'Maiden Name',

'Born Yesterday' and 'Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album' were in an unaffectedly tender voice, with no trace of cynicism; and 'Church Going', though starting out in the debunking and self-deprecating voice, transmutes by the end into something very different and wholly out-of-place in *New Lines*.

What we first become aware of as we read this poem is a tone of voice already (it was written in 1954) recognizable as 'Larkinesque': ordinary, demotic, casual, perfectly fitting the speaker, this mild bore who has left his bicycle propped against a gravestone. He enters the church only when 'there's nothing going on'. The building is undistinguished, just 'another church' in another scrubby suburb. He neither knows nor cares about churches, their accoutrements, their rituals, the faith they serve. He is flippant, disrespectful.

There seems to be a complete refusal of the 'poetic' in language, rhythm or subject matter. Yet our attention is held; we are committed to going on reading, particularly if we are reading aloud, by a verse movement so deftly organized that it draws no attention to itself, but slowly, as the poem progresses, gathers first momentum, then dignity. The language begins, unostentatiously, to accumulate reserves of power. Notice, for example, how the stale, wry 'brewed' of the first stanza modulates into the fresh and startling 'blent' of the last.

Just as in the verse we have technical skill passing itself off as casualness, so the speaker's apparent philistinism, his refusal to be impressed by 'some brass and stuff / Up at the holy end', is betrayed by his inability to ignore the silence, his 'awkward reverence' in removing his cycle clips. His declaiming of 'Here endeth' is a gesture against whatever it is that demands reverence from a man to whom Christianity means nothing, against the silence which he would rather ignore or break. But the gesture rebounds, the silence wins, quickly stifling the sniggering echo of his voice. The silence seems impervious to time, change or intrusion.

The beginning of the third stanza signals a further change of tone. This man who had seemed a shallow clown is obliged to analyze the power which drew him here, and often draws him to such places. He takes on a representative function, a spokesman for all who, lacking piety or faith, nevertheless find some need obscurely satisfied by churches. As the enquiry deepens, the church itself seems to provide the speaker with new resources of language and hence of insight. It turns him into a poet. The throwaway, disconnected language of the opening now modulates into this masterly sentence:

Or will he be my representative,
Bored, uninformed, knowing the ghostly silt
Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground
Through suburb scrub because it held unspilt
So long and equably what since is found
Only in separation — marriage, and birth,
And death, and thoughts of these — for which was built
This special shell?

In speaking these lines aloud, the voice follows a perfect parabola. The rhythm lifts the voice to the word 'unspilt', accumulating emphasis, then holds the climax for four more words before allowing it to fall away. The liquid sound of the word 'equably', taken in

conjunction with the word 'unspilt', strongly suggests a brimming vessel with all its associations of benison and fruition. It is no surprise to find that 'Church-Going' was written only four months after 'Water'.

The man who had donated the Irish sixpence is now pleased to stand in silence. This undistinguished individual is now shown to be capable of 'surprising / A hunger in himself to be more serious', and that particular cross of ground of eliciting such a hunger in any chance passer-by. The timeless silence and presence of so many dead combine to displace the self which makes cracks, the self entirely caught up in the world of compulsions — the compulsion to go to work, to spend, to copulate, and then to age and die. The individual is obliged to see his own life against the continuity of the race. The most fundamental archetypes of all, birth, marriage and death (those first and last things which had preoccupied Yeats, Eliot and Thomas), are raised, not only by the church, but also by the poem, out of the world of clocks and cycle-clips, and 'robed as destinies'.

Several other poems, including some of Larkin's best, such as 'The Whitsun Weddings', follow this same structure. The tone of reductive comedy in which it confidently opens, is gradually exposed as inadequate as the poet, by drawing on the full resources of poetic language, is obliged to 'be more serious'.

Larkin's notorious comment made in 1955 that he had 'no belief in "tradition" or a common myth-kitty' might seem to conflict with my readings of 'Wedding Wind' and 'Church-Going', yet when asked to expand on this remark in his *Paris Review* interview in 1982, Larkin's comments were far removed from any wholesale dismissal of myths, archetypes and symbols. He was simply objecting to references to earlier literature which readers were unlikely to recognize, or which were intended to produce facile second-hand resonance. Later in the same interview he was obliged to defend the ending of 'The Whitsun Weddings' against the interviewer's complete misreading due precisely to his deafness to the resonance of the two archetypes, 'wheat' and 'rain', which deliver the whole point and power of the poem. Larkin patiently explained that 'the line "Its postal districts packed like squares of wheat" ... is meant to make the postal districts seem rich and fruitful.'

Archetypes do not need to be recognized as such by readers. The mere words have over the centuries accumulated overtones and associations, both from individual experience and tradition that, especially when they are raised to the light for special attention, as all words in a poem are, some of these resonances will chime for every poetry reader — a slightly different combination for each. The poet himself will not be aware of all of them, but his instinct will tell him that a certain word has the right charge, in this case the charge which communicates (at least to rather more attentive readers than the *Paris Review* interviewer) 'rich and fruitful'. It does not crucially matter, for example, whether Larkin and his readers know that Demeter was usually depicted holding two sheaves of wheat, or that the ultimate Elusinian mystery, celebrating the annual rebirth of Dionysos, was symbolized by the high priest holding up an ear of wheat, or that ears of wheat had a similar function in the rites of Osiris. The reasons why wheat was chosen for this symbolic purpose by the ancient Greeks or Egyptians are obvious to anyone. There are two things you can do with a grain of wheat, eat it (usually as bread, which is the staff of life) or bury it, in which case it dies and is (with the help of sun and rain) miraculously reborn as a new wheat plant. Baring and Cashford ask:

How did the initiates see the ear of wheat? When the hierophant harvests the ear of wheat and holds it up in the silence, he must have made it appear translucent with an essential truth of human life. Might they not have had a vision ... in which the individual life and the source of all life are reconciled as one and the same ... death and eternal life as a unity.

This symbolism is well known to us from the Christian tradition whose rituals also culminate in an offering of a wafer of corn. Jesus said:

Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.¹

In 'The Whitsun Weddings' the girls on the platform stare 'at a religious wounding'. This refers not only to the new brides' loss of virginity (which might still have been the case in 1958), but to the fact that they are in the process of being torn from their familiar lives, what Yeats called 'the casual comedy', to be changed utterly, and in some cases literally to conceive new life. The sexual symbolism of the poem is obvious once it is pointed out, as it was in a letter to me from Peter Hardwick:

The entire railway journey might be interpreted as a sexual symbol of penetration and impregnation - I mean the railway train charged with its life-breeding freight, gathering speed as it hastens to be clasped by those walls of moss and then loosing its load in a life-giving shower of arrows (the male zodiacal symbol). Might not all this relate to the gathering and discharge of semen?

The arrival in London will, like a shower of rain in a drought, magically transform its mundane postal districts, symbolically, into squares of wheat.

The poet cannot avoid archetypes. The common language is replete with them. Larkin knew this perfectly well. In poems such as 'Water' and 'the Whitsun Weddings' he is the poet as fully-fledged hierophant. When he raises in the east (to catch the first rays of the rising sun)

A glass of water
Where any-angled light
Would congregate endlessly

he is demonstrating nature's magic, that the simple mixing of water and sunlight can produce a rainbow, or, even more miraculously, new life.

Yet, despite its affirmations, 'The Whitsun Weddings' is a poem about failure. As in 'I see a girl dragged by the wrists' life is happening on the other side of a window. And Larkin is now so firmly ensconced behind that window that there is no longer any hint even of that desperate hope 'To be that girl!'. The three poems I have discussed all extol marriage; yet it seems that Larkin himself did not consider marriage to be an option. He knew that the London which awaited *him* would remain merely postal districts; and work

¹ *The Myth of the Goddess* by Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, Viking 1991, pp. 389-90.

without hope meant that life became a long walk 'down Cemetery Road' ['Toads Revisited'].

All too soon Larkin became aware that he might be nearing the end of that road, that the next ambulance might be coming for him. The window no longer gave him a view of life being lived by other people, of nature and love and change and growth and fruition. The deep blue air beyond it now shows 'Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless' ['High Windows'].

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Though Larkin accepted the call to write poems, and to be more serious while writing them than in the rest of his life, and to use the full resources of poetic language, including myth and symbol, he shrank from accepting the further call, to risk himself, to leap into the unknown, (what Hopkins called 'the fling of the heart', and Yeats 'going naked' and Eliot 'the awful daring of a moment's surrender'). Perhaps, if he had been a fisherman, he might have been able to

Join water, wade in underbeing
Let brain mist into moist earth
Ghost loosen away downstream [Ted Hughes, 'Go Fishing']

The nearest Larkin got to this was listening to jazz. Jazz was, for Larkin, what fishing was for Ted Hughes, a religious experience. Wading into water and hooking a salmon was for Hughes plugging himself in to the current of the river, which was the bloodstream of the Goddess. Of Sidney Bechet Larkin wrote: 'As soon as he starts playing you automatically stop thinking about anything else and listen. Power and glory' [WL 47]. Negro jazz, especially the blues, spoke to him out of a depth of authentic feeling (expressing the experience of the singer, the composer, and the race) which he seldom found anywhere else. This was redemptive, art transforming suffering into a dark joy.

But Larkin feared that the contents of his own inner darkness would be too trivial or disgusting to let out. Yet it had been the achievement of his great modernist predecessors, Yeats and Joyce and Eliot, to make all the futility and anarchy and putrescence of modern life and consciousness, in Eliot's words, 'possible for art'.

In the *Paris Review* interview Larkin claimed to have no regrets; yet his sense of failure is pervasive, and applies inseparably to his life and his art. Being more serious increasingly meant being more defeatist and fatalistic. As he rightly said in that interview, 'a good poem about failure is a success' [RW 74], and some of the finest poems in the language are about failure: Coleridge's 'Dejection', Keats' 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' ('The sedge is withered from the lake / And no birds sing'), Hopkins' terrible sonnets ('birds build, but not I build'), 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' ('I do not think that they will sing to me'). But lack and loss can only sustain a poet for a short time. Larkin said in this interview that he did not think he would write any more poems, and he did not. After 'Dejection' Coleridge wrote little poetry and nothing of much importance, though he lived another thirty-two years. After 'Aubade' Larkin could no longer 'breed one work that wakes' (Hopkins). There was only one direction, into a 'huge and birdless silence' ['Next, Please'].

That long last interview had a touching and revealing finale. Larkin did not end it with another mocking gibe at Ted Hughes. He was probably tired and his guard was down. He recalled judging the final stages of a poetry competition, and commenting on the absence of any poems about love or nature. 'Oh, we threw all those away', said the organizers. 'I expect', said Larkin, 'they were the ones I should have liked'.