

The Paris Review

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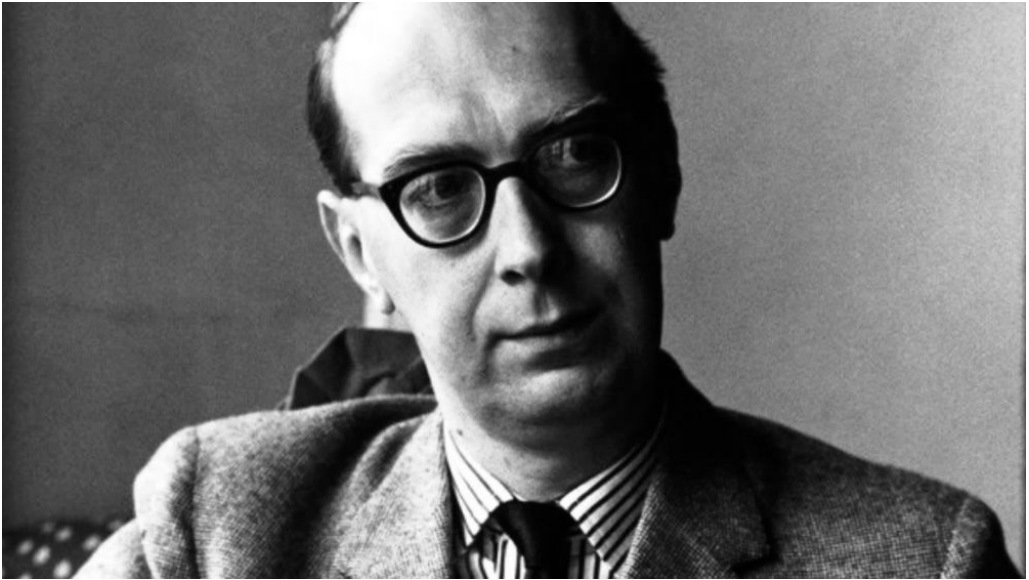
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Philip Larkin: The Art of Poetry, No. 30

Interviewed by Robert Phillips

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“Temperamentally and geographically remote,” the *Times Literary Supplement* wrote of Philip Larkin, “he has refused almost all invitations to judge, recite, review, lecture, pontificate, or to be interviewed.”

When the notion of securing a *Paris Review* interview with Larkin arose, the staff was not sanguine. Much to the staff’s delight, Larkin consented warily, stating that he wasn’t crazy about the idea, but that “*The Paris Review* series is, of course, known to me, and I can see I should be in good company.” In the case of this interview, Larkin did not let down his guard sufficiently to be interviewed in person. He stipulated that the interview be conducted entirely by mail: “You will get much better answers that way.” He took nearly five months to answer the initial set of questions sent to him at his home in Hull, England, stating, “It has taken rather a long time because, to my surprise, I found writing it suffocatingly boring.”

His letterhead, *P. A. Larkin, C.B.E., C.Lit., M.A., D.Lit., D.Litt., F.R.S.L., F.L.A.*, is indicative of the measure of worldly recognition his relatively small output has received. Indeed, he has been called the other English poet laureate

(“even more loved and needed than the official one, John Betjeman,” according to Calvin Bedient in *The New York Times Book Review*). But Larkin transcends his Englishness, and is widely read on the Continent and in the United States.

He has said his aim in writing a poem is “to construct a verbal device that would preserve an experience indefinitely by reproducing it in whoever read the poem.”

INTERVIEWER

Can you describe your life at Hull? Do you live in a flat or own a house?

PHILIP LARKIN

I came to Hull in 1955. After eighteen months (during which I wrote “Mr. Bleaney”), I took a University flat and lived there for nearly eighteen years. It was the top flat in a house that was reputedly the American Consulate during the war, and though it might not have suited everybody, it suited me. I wrote most of *The Whitsun Weddings* and all of *High Windows* there. Probably I should never have moved if the University hadn’t decided to sell the house, but as it was I had to get out and find somewhere else. It was a dreadful experience, as at that time houses were hard to find. In the end friends reported a small house near the University, and I bought that in 1974. I haven’t decided yet whether or not I like it.

INTERVIEWER

How many days a week do you work at the library, and for how many hours a day?

LARKIN

My job as University librarian is a full-time one, five days a week, forty-five weeks a year. When I came to Hull, I had eleven staff; now there are over a hundred of one sort and another. We built one new library in 1960 and another in 1970, so that my first fifteen years were busy. Of course, this was a period of university expansion in England, and Hull grew as much as if not more than the rest. Luckily the vice-chancellor during most of this time was keen on the library, which is why it is called after him. Looking back, I think that if the Brynmor Jones Library is a good library—and I think it is—the credit should go to him and to the library staff. And to the University as a whole, of course. But you wouldn’t be interested in all that.

INTERVIEWER

What is your daily routine?

LARKIN

My life is as simple as I can make it. Work all day, cook, eat, wash up, telephone, hack writing, drink, television in the evenings. I almost never go out. I suppose everyone tries to ignore the passing of time: some people by doing a lot, being in California one year and Japan the next; or there's my way—making every day and every year exactly the same. Probably neither works.

INTERVIEWER

You didn't mention a schedule for writing . . .

LARKIN

Yes, I was afraid you'd ask about writing. Anything I say about writing poems is bound to be retrospective, because in fact I've written very little since moving into this house, or since *High Windows*, or since 1974, whichever way you like to put it. But when I did write them, well, it was in the evenings, after work, after washing up (I'm sorry: you would call this "doing the dishes"). It was a routine like any other. And really it worked very well: I don't think you can write a poem for more than two hours. After that you're going round in circles, and it's much better to leave it for twenty-four hours, by which time your subconscious or whatever has solved the block and you're ready to go on.

The best writing conditions I ever had were in Belfast, when I was working at the University there. Another top-floor flat, by the way. I wrote between eight and ten in the evenings, then went to the University bar till eleven, then played cards or talked with friends till one or two. The first part of the evening had the second part to look forward to, and I could enjoy the second part with a clear conscience because I'd done my two hours. I can't seem to organize that now.

INTERVIEWER

Does, or did, writing come easily for you? Does a poem get completed slowly or rapidly?

LARKIN

I've no standards of comparison. I wrote short poems quite quickly. Longer ones would take weeks or even months. I used to find that I was never sure I was going to finish a poem until I had thought of the last line. Of course, the last line was sometimes the first one you thought of! But usually the last line would come when

I'd done about two-thirds of the poem, and then it was just a matter of closing the gap.

INTERVIEWER

Why do you write, and for whom?

LARKIN

You've been reading Auden: "To ask the hard question is simple." The short answer is that you write because you have to. If you rationalize it, it seems as if you've seen this sight, felt this feeling, had this vision, and have got to find a combination of words that will preserve it by setting it off in other people. The duty is to the original experience. It doesn't feel like self-expression, though it may look like it. As for *whom* you write for, well, you write for everybody. Or anybody who will listen.

INTERVIEWER

Do you share your manuscripts with anyone before publishing them? Are there any friends whose advice you would follow in revising a poem?

LARKIN

I shouldn't normally show what I'd written to anyone: what would be the point? You remember Tennyson reading an unpublished poem to Jowett; when he had finished, Jowett said, "I shouldn't publish that if I were you, Tennyson." Tennyson replied, "If it comes to that, Master, the sherry you gave us at lunch was downright filthy." That's about all that can happen.

But when we were young, Kingsley Amis and I used to exchange unpublished poems, largely because we never thought they could be published, I suppose. He encouraged me, I encouraged him. Encouragement is very necessary to a young writer. But it's hard to find anyone worth encouraging: there aren't many Kingsleys about.

INTERVIEWER

In his *Paris Review* interview, Kingsley Amis states you helped him with the manuscript of *Lucky Jim*. What was the nature of that working relationship? Is part of that novel based upon your own experiences on staff at Leicester University?

LARKIN

Well, it's all so long ago, it's hard to remember. My general conviction was that

Kingsley was quite the funniest writer I had ever met—in letters and so on—and I wanted everyone else to think so too. I know he says he got the idea of *Lucky Jim* from visiting me when I was working at University College Leicester. This has always seemed rather tenuous to me: after all, he was working at University College Swansea when he was writing it, and the theme—boy meets apparently nasty girl, but turns her into a nice girl by getting her away from nasty environment—is one I think has always meant a lot to Kingsley. He used it again in *I Want It Now*. When I read the first draft I said, Cut this, cut that, let's have more of the other. I remember I said, Let's have more "faces"—you know, his Edith Sitwell face, and so on. The wonderful thing was that Kingsley could "do" all those faces himself—"Sex Life in Ancient Rome" and so on. Someone once took photographs of them all. I wish I had a set.

INTERVIEWER

How did you come to be a librarian? Had you no interest in teaching? What was your father's profession?

LARKIN

Oh dear, this means a lot of autobiography. My father was a city treasurer, a finance officer. I never had the least desire to "be" anything when I was at school, and by the time I went to Oxford the war was on and there wasn't anything to "be" except a serviceman or a teacher or a civil servant. In 1943 when I graduated I knew I couldn't be the first, because I'd been graded unfit (I suppose through eyesight), nor the second because I stammered, and then the Civil Service turned me down twice, and I thought, Well, that lets me out, and I sat at home writing *Jill*. But of course in those days the government had powers to send you into the mines or onto the land or into industry, and they wrote quite politely to ask what in fact I was doing. I looked at the daily paper (the *Birmingham Post*: we were living at Warwick then) and saw that a small town in Shropshire was advertising for a librarian, applied for it, and got it, and told the government so, which seemed to satisfy them.

Of course, I wasn't a real librarian, more a sort of caretaker—it was a one-man library—and I can't pretend I enjoyed it much. The previous librarian had been there about forty years, and I was afraid I should be there all my life too. This made me start qualifying myself professionally, just in order to get away, which I did in 1946. By then I'd written *Jill*, and *The North Ship*, and *A Girl in Winter*. It was probably the "intensest" time of my life.

INTERVIEWER

Is Jorge Luis Borges the only other contemporary poet of note who is also a librarian, by the way? Are you aware of any others?

LARKIN

Who is Jorge Luis Borges? The writer-librarian *I* like is Archibald MacLeish. You know, he was made Librarian of Congress in 1939, and on his first day they brought him some papers to sign, and he wouldn't sign them until he understood what they were all about. When he did understand, he started making objections and countersuggestions. The upshot was that he reorganized the whole Library of Congress in five years simply by saying, I don't understand and I don't agree, and in wartime, too. Splendid man.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think of the academic world as a milieu for the working creative writer—teaching specifically?

LARKIN

The academic world has worked all right for me, but then, I'm not a teacher. I couldn't be. I should think that chewing over other people's work, writing I mean, must be terribly stultifying. Quite sickens you with the whole business of literature. But then, I haven't got that kind of mind, conceptual or ratiocinative or whatever it is. It would be death to me to have to think about literature as such, to say why one poem was "better" than another, and so on.

INTERVIEWER

We've heard that you don't give readings from your own work. In America, this has become a business for poets. Do you enjoy attending the readings of others?

LARKIN

I don't give readings, no, although I have recorded three of my collections, just to show how *I* should read them. Hearing a poem, as opposed to reading it on the page, means you miss so much—the shape, the punctuation, the italics, even knowing how far you are from the end. Reading it on the page means you can go your own pace, taking it in properly; hearing it means you're dragged along at the speaker's own rate, missing things, not taking it in, confusing "there" and "their" and things like that. And the speaker may interpose his own personality between you and the poem, for better or worse. For that matter, so may the audience. I don't like hearing things in public, even music. In fact, I think poetry readings

grew up on a false analogy with music: the text is the “score” that doesn’t “come to life” until it’s “performed.” It’s false because people can read words, whereas they can’t read music. When you write a poem, you put everything into it that’s needed: the reader should “hear” it just as clearly as if you were in the room saying it to him. And of course this fashion for poetry readings has led to a kind of poetry that you *can* understand first go: easy rhythms, easy emotions, easy syntax. I don’t think it stands up on the page.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think economic security an advantage to the writer?

LARKIN

The whole of British postwar society is based on the assumption that economic security is an advantage to everyone. Certainly *I* like to be economically secure. But aren’t you, really, asking about *work*? This whole question of how a writer actually gets his money—especially a poet—is one to which there are probably as many answers as there are writers, and the next man’s answer always seems better than your own.

On the one hand, you can’t live today by being a “man of letters” as easily as a hundred or seventy-five years ago, when there were so many magazines and newspapers all having to be filled. Writers’ incomes, as writers, have sunk almost below the subsistence line. On the other hand, you *can* live by “being a writer,” or “being a poet,” if you’re prepared to join the cultural entertainment industry, and take handouts from the Arts Council (not that there are as many of them as there used to be) and be a “poet in residence” and all that. I suppose I could have said—it’s a bit late now—I could have had an agent, and said, Look, I will do anything for six months of the year as long as I can be free to write for the other six months. Some people do this, and I suppose it works for them. But I was brought up to think you had to have a job, and write in your spare time, like Trollope. Then, when you started earning enough money by writing, you phase the job out. But in fact I was over fifty before I could have “lived by my writing”—and then only because I had edited a big anthology—and by that time you think, Well, I might as well get my pension, since I’ve gone so far.

INTERVIEWER

Any regrets?

LARKIN

Sometimes I think, Everything I’ve written has been done after a day’s work, in

the evening: what would it have been like if I'd written it in the morning, after a night's sleep? Was I wrong? Some time ago a writer said to me—and he was a full-time writer, and a good one—"I wish I had your life. Dealing with people, having colleagues. Being a writer is so lonely." Everyone envies everyone else.

All I can say is, having a job hasn't been a hard price to pay for economic security. Some people, I know, would sooner have the economic insecurity because they have to "feel free" before they can write. But it's worked for me. The only thing that does strike me as odd, looking back, is that what society has been willing to *pay* me for is being a librarian. You get medals and prizes and honorary-this-and-thats—and flattering interviews—but if you turned round and said, Right, if I'm so good, give me an index-linked permanent income equal to what I can get for being an undistinguished university administrator—well, reason would remount its throne pretty quickly.

INTERVIEWER

How did you come to write poems? Was time a factor in choosing poetry over the novel form?

LARKIN

What questions you ask. I wrote prose and poems equally from the age of, say, fifteen. I didn't choose poetry: poetry chose me.

INTERVIEWER

Nicely put. Your last novel, *A Girl in Winter*—which is a small masterpiece—was published twenty-five years ago. Do you think you will ever write another?

LARKIN

I don't know: I shouldn't think so. I tried very hard to write a third novel for about five years. The ability to do so had just vanished. I can't say any more than that . . .

INTERVIEWER

Jill was written when you were about twenty-one, and your second novel only a year or so later. Was it your intention, then, to be a novelist only?

LARKIN

I wanted to "be a novelist" in a way I never wanted to "be a poet," yes. Novels seem to me to be richer, broader, deeper, more enjoyable than poems. When I was young, *Scrutiny* ran a series of articles under the general heading of "The Novel as

Dramatic Poem.” That was a stimulating, an exciting conception. Something that was both a poem and novel. Of course, thinking about my own two stories means going back nearly forty years, and at this distance I can’t remember what their genesis was.

I seem to recall that *Jill* was based on the idea that running away from life, John’s fantasy about an imaginary sister, might lead you straight into it—meeting the real Jill, I mean. With disastrous results.

A Girl in Winter, which I always think of as *The Kingdom of Winter*, which was its first title, or *Winterreich*, as Bruce Montgomery used to call it—well, that was written when I was feeling pretty low, in this first library job I told you about. It’s what Eliot would call an objective correlative. When I look at it today, I do think it’s remarkably . . . I suppose the word is *knowing* . . . not really mature, or wise, just incredibly clever. By my standards, I mean. And considering I was only twenty-two. All the same, some people whose opinion I respect prefer *Jill*, as being more natural, more sincere, more directly emotional.

INTERVIEWER

In your preface to the reprint of *Jill*, you say it is “in essence an unambitious short story.” What is your definition of a novel?

LARKIN

I think a novel should follow the fortunes of more than one character.

INTERVIEWER

At least one critic has cited *Jill* as the forerunner of the new British postwar novel—the literature of the displaced working-class hero which spawned later works by Alan Sillitoe, John Wain, Keith Waterhouse, Amis, and others. Do you feel a part of any of this?

LARKIN

I don’t think so, no. Because *Jill* has none of the political overtones of that genre. John’s being working-class was a kind of equivalent of my stammer, a built-in handicap to put him one down.

I’m glad you mention Keith Waterhouse. I think *Billy Liar* and *Jubb* are remarkably original novels, the first very funny, the second harrowing. Much better than my two.

INTERVIEWER

You're extremely modest. Wouldn't you say that an open assumption of the British sense of class is important to your work—*Jill, A Girl in Winter*, a poem like "The Whitsun Weddings"?

LARKIN

Are you suggesting there's no sense of class in America? That's not the impression I get from the works of Mr. John O'Hara.

INTERVIEWER

O'Hara overstated. Did you prefigure a shape to your two novels, or did they evolve? You've stated your mentors in poetry, especially Hardy. But whom in fiction early on did you frequently read and admire?

LARKIN

Hard to say. Of course I had read a great many novels, and knew the mannerisms of most modern writers, but looking back I can't say I ever imitated anyone. Now don't think I mind imitation, in a young writer. It's just a way of learning the job. Really, my novels were more original than my poems, at the time. My favorite novelists were Lawrence, Isherwood, Maugham, Waugh—oh, and George Moore. I was on a great Moore kick at that time: probably he was at the bottom of my style, then.

INTERVIEWER

A Girl in Winter reminds me stylistically of Elizabeth Bowen's fiction, particularly *The Death of the Heart* and *The House in Paris*. Is Bowen a writer you've also admired?

LARKIN

No, I hadn't read Elizabeth Bowen. In fact, someone lent me *The Death of the Heart* when *A Girl in Winter* came out—two years after it was finished. I quite liked it, but it was never one of my personal favorites.

INTERVIEWER

Let's talk about the structure of *A Girl in Winter* for a moment: did you write it chronologically? That is, did you write "Part Two" first, then shuffle the pack for effect and counterpoint? Or did you actually conceive the novel as present-to-past-to-present?

LARKIN

The second way.

INTERVIEWER

Letters are an important and integral part of both novels, as plot and as texture. Are you a voluminous letter writer?

LARKIN

I suppose I used to write many more letters than I do now, but so did everyone. Nowadays I keep up with one or two people, in the sense of writing when there isn't anything special to say. I love *getting* letters, which means you have to answer them, and there isn't always time. I had a very amusing and undemanding correspondence with the novelist Barbara Pym, who died in 1980, that arose simply out of a fan letter. I wrote her and went on for over ten years before we actually met. I hope she liked getting my letters: I certainly liked hers. I talk about our correspondence in a foreword I provided for the U.K. edition of her posthumous novel, *An Unsuitable Attachment*.

INTERVIEWER

Can you describe your relationship with the contemporary literary community?

LARKIN

I'm somewhat withdrawn from what you call "the contemporary literary community," for two reasons: in the first place, I don't write for a living, and so don't have to keep in touch with literary editors and publishers and television people in order to earn money; and in the second, I don't live in London. Given that, my relations with it are quite amicable.

INTERVIEWER

Is Hull a place where you are likely to stay put? If so, have you as a person changed since the writing of the poem "Places, Loved Ones"—or is the speaker of that poem a persona?

LARKIN

Hull is a place where I *have* stayed. On my twenty-fifth anniversary, I held a little luncheon party for the members of my staff who'd been there as long as I had, or almost as long, and they made me a presentation with a card bearing the very lines you mean. *Touché*, as the French say.

INTERVIEWER

As a bachelor, have you sometimes felt an outsider? Or, like the speaker of your poems “Reasons for Attendance,” “Dockery & Son,” and “Self’s the Man,” have you enjoyed being single and remained so because you liked and preferred living that way?

LARKIN

Hard to say. Yes, I’ve remained single by choice, and shouldn’t have liked anything else, but of course most people do get married, and divorced too, and so I suppose I am an outsider in the sense you mean. Of course it worries me from time to time, but it would take too long to explain why. Samuel Butler said, Life is an affair of being spoilt in one way or another.

INTERVIEWER

Is the character John Kemp in any way based upon your own youth? Were you *that* shy?

LARKIN

I would say, yes, I was and am extremely shy. Anyone who has stammered will know what agony it is, especially at school. It means you never take the lead in anything or do anything but try to efface yourself. I often wonder if I was shy because I stammered, or vice versa.

INTERVIEWER

Was your childhood unhappy?

LARKIN

My childhood was all right, comfortable and stable and loving, but I wasn’t a happy child, or so they say. On the other hand, I’ve never been a recluse, contrary to reports: I’ve had friends, and enjoyed their company. In comparison with some people I know I’m extremely sociable.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel happiness is unlikely in this world?

LARKIN

Well, I think if you’re in good health, and have enough money, and nothing is bothering you in the foreseeable future, that’s as much as you can hope for. But “happiness,” in the sense of a continuous emotional orgasm, no. If only because

you know that you are going to die, and the people you love are going to die.

INTERVIEWER

After “Trouble at Willow Gables,” did you write any other short stories or tales?

LARKIN

No. I think a short story should be either a poem or a novel. Unless it’s just an anecdote.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever attempted a truly long poem? I’ve never seen one in print. If not, why?

LARKIN

I’ve written none. A long poem for me would be a novel. In that sense, *A Girl in Winter* is a poem.

INTERVIEWER

What about a play or a verse play?

LARKIN

I don’t like plays. They happen in public, which, as I said, I don’t like, and by now I have grown rather deaf, which means I can’t hear what’s going on. Then again, they are rather like poetry readings: they have to get an instant response, which tends to vulgarize. And of course the intrusion of *personality*—the actor, the producer—or do you call him the director—is distracting.

All the same, I admire *Murder in the Cathedral* as much as anything Eliot ever wrote. I read it from time to time for pleasure, which is the highest compliment I can pay.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever meet Eliot?

LARKIN

I didn’t know him. Once I was in the Faber offices—the old ones, “24, Russell Square,” that magic address!—talking to Charles Monteith, and he said, “Have you ever met Eliot?” I said no, and to my astonishment he stepped out and reappeared with Eliot, who must have been in the next room. We shook hands, and he explained that he was expecting someone to tea and couldn’t stay. There was a pause, and he said, “I’m glad to see you in this office.” The significance of that

was that I wasn't a Faber author—it must have been before 1964, when they published *The Whitsun Weddings*—and I took it as a great compliment. But it was a shattering few minutes: I hardly remember what I thought.

INTERVIEWER

What about Auden? Were you acquainted?

LARKIN

I didn't know him, either. I met Auden once at Stephen Spender's house, which was very kind of Spender, and in a sense he was more frightening than Eliot. I remember he said, Do you like living in Hull? and I said, I don't suppose I'm unhappier there than I should be anywhere else. To which he replied, Naughty, naughty. I thought that was very funny.

But this business of meeting famous writers is agonizing: I had a dreadful few minutes with Forster. My fault, not his. Dylan Thomas came to Oxford to speak to a club I belonged to, and we had a drink the following morning. *He* wasn't frightening. In fact, and I know it sounds absurd to say so, but I should say I had more in common with Dylan Thomas than with any other "famous writer," in this sort of context.

INTERVIEWER

You mention Auden, Thomas, Yeats, and Hardy as early influences in your introduction to the second edition of *The North Ship*. What in particular did you learn from your study of these four?

LARKIN

Oh, for Christ's sake, one doesn't *study* poets! You *read* them, and think, That's marvelous, how is it done, could I do it? and that's how you learn. At the end of it you can't say, That's Yeats, that's Auden, because they've gone, they're like scaffolding that's been taken down. Thomas was a dead end. What effects? Yeats and Auden, the management of lines, the formal distancing of emotion. Hardy, well . . . not to be afraid of the obvious. All those wonderful dicta about poetry: "the poet should touch our hearts by showing his own," "the poet takes note of nothing that he cannot feel," "the emotion of all the ages and the thought of his own"—Hardy knew what it was all about.

INTERVIEWER

When your first book, *The North Ship*, appeared, did you feel you were going to be an important poet?

LARKIN

No, certainly not. I've never felt that anyway. You must remember *The North Ship* was published by an obscure press—The Fortune Press—that didn't even send out review copies; it was next door to a vanity press. One had none of the rewards of authorship, neither money (no agreement) nor publicity. You felt you'd cooked your goose.

INTERVIEWER

How can a young poet know if his work is any good?

LARKIN

I think a young poet, or an old poet, for that matter, should try to produce something that pleases himself personally, not only when he's written it but a couple of weeks later. Then he should see if it pleases anyone else, by sending it to the kind of magazine he likes reading. But if it doesn't, he shouldn't be discouraged. I mean, in the seventeenth century every educated man could turn a verse and play the lute. Supposing no one played tennis because they wouldn't make Wimbledon? First and foremost, writing poems should be a pleasure. So should reading them, by God.

INTERVIEWER

How do you account for the great maturity and originality which developed between your first poetry collection and your second, *The Less Deceived*?

LARKIN

You know, I really don't know. After finishing my first books, say by 1945, I thought I had come to an end. I couldn't write another novel, I published nothing. My personal life was rather harassing. Then in 1950 I went to Belfast, and things reawoke somehow. I wrote some poems, and thought, These aren't bad, and had that little pamphlet *XX Poems* printed privately. I felt for the first time I was speaking for myself. Thoughts, feelings, language cohered and jumped. They have to do that. Of course they are always lying around in you, but they have to get together.

INTERVIEWER

You once wrote that "the impulse to preserve lies at the bottom of all art." In your case, what is it you are preserving in your poems?

LARKIN

Well, as I said, the experience. The beauty.

INTERVIEWER

Auden admired your forms. But you've stated that form holds little interest for you—content is everything. Could you comment on that?

LARKIN

I'm afraid that was a rather silly remark, especially now when form is so rare. I read poems, and I think, Yes, that's quite a nice idea, but why can't he make a *poem* of it? Make it memorable? It's no good just writing it down! At any level that matters, form and content are indivisible. What I meant by content is the experience the poem preserves, what it passes on. I must have been seeing too many poems that were simply agglomerations of words when I said that.

INTERVIEWER

In one early interview you stated that you were not interested in any period but the present, or in any poetry but that written in English. Did you mean that quite literally? Has your view changed?

LARKIN

It has not. I don't see how one can ever know a foreign language well enough to make reading poems in it worthwhile. Foreigners' ideas of good English poems are dreadfully crude: Byron and Poe and so on. The Russians liking Burns. But deep down I think foreign languages irrelevant. If that glass thing over there is a window, then it isn't a fenster or a *fenêtre* or whatever. *Hautes Fenêtres*, my God! A writer can have only one language, if language is going to mean anything to him.

INTERVIEWER

In D. J. Enright's *Poets of the Nineteen-Fifties*, published in 1955, you made several provocative statements about archetypes and myth which have become well known. Specifically: "As a guiding principle I believe that every poem must be its own sole freshly created universe, and therefore have no belief in 'tradition' or a common myth-kitty. . . . To me the whole of the ancient world, the whole of classical and biblical mythology means very little, and I think that using them today not only fills poems full of dead spots, but dodges the writer's duty to be original." Does this mean you really do not respond to, say, the monstrous manifestation of the Sphinx in Yeats's "The Second Coming"? Or were you

merely reacting against bookishness?

LARKIN

My objection to the use in new poems of properties or personae from older poems is not a moral one, but simply because they do not work, either because I have not read the poems in which they appear, or because I have read them and think of them as part of that poem and not a property to be dragged into a new poem as a substitute for securing the effect that is desired. I admit this argument could be pushed to absurd lengths, when a poet could not refer to anything that his readers might not have seen (such as snow, for instance), but in fact poets write for people with the same background and experiences as themselves, which might be taken as a compelling argument in support of provincialism.

INTERVIEWER

The use of archetypes can weaken rather than buttress a poem?

LARKIN

I am not going to fall on my face every time someone uses words such as Orpheus or Faust or Judas. Writers should work for the effects they want to produce, and not wheel out stale old Wardour Street lay figures.

INTERVIEWER

What do you mainly read?

LARKIN

I don't read much. Books I'm sent to review. Otherwise novels I've read before. Detective stories: Gladys Mitchell, Michael Innes, Dick Francis. I'm reading *Framley Parsonage* at the moment. Nothing difficult.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think of the current state of poetry in England today? Are things better or worse in American poetry?

LARKIN

I'm afraid I know very little about American poetry. As regards England, well, before the war, when I was growing up, we had Yeats, Eliot, Graves, Auden, Dylan Thomas, John Betjeman—could you pick a comparable team today?

INTERVIEWER

You haven't been to America, have you?

LARKIN

Oh no, I've never been to America, nor to anywhere else, for that matter. Does that sound very snubbing? It isn't meant to. I suppose I'm pretty unadventurous by nature, partly that isn't the way I earn my living—reading and lecturing and taking classes and so on. I should hate it.

And of course I'm so deaf now that I shouldn't dare. Someone would say, What about Ashbery, and I'd say, I'd prefer strawberry, that kind of thing. I suppose everyone has his own dream of America. A writer once said to me, If you ever go to America, go either to the East Coast or the West Coast: the rest is a desert full of bigots. That's what I think I'd like: where if you help a girl trim the Christmas tree you're regarded as engaged, and her brothers start oiling their shotguns if you don't call on the minister. A version of pastoral.

INTERVIEWER

How is your writing physically accomplished? At what stage does a poem go through the typewriter?

LARKIN

I write—or used to—in notebooks in pencil, trying to complete each stanza before going on to the next. Then when the poem is finished I type it out, and sometimes make small alterations.

INTERVIEWER

You use a lot of idioms and very common phrases—for irony, I'd guess, or to bear more meaning than usual, never for shock value. Do these phrases come late, to add texture or whatever, or are they integral from the beginning?

LARKIN

They occur naturally.

INTERVIEWER

How important is enjambment for you? In certain lines, you seem to isolate lives by the very line breaks . . .

LARKIN

No device is important in itself. Writing poetry is playing off the natural rhythms and word order of speech against the artificialities of rhyme and meter. One has a few private rules: Never split an adjective and its noun, for instance.

INTERVIEWER

How do you decide whether or not to rhyme?

LARKIN

Usually the idea of a poem comes with a line or two of it, and they determine the rest. Normally one does rhyme. Deciding *not* to is much harder.

INTERVIEWER

Can you drink and write? Have you tried any consciousness-expanding drugs?

LARKIN

No, though of course those of my generation are drinkers. Not druggers.

INTERVIEWER

Can you describe the genesis and working-out of a poem based upon an image that most people would simply pass by? (A clear road between neighbors, an ambulance in city traffic?)

LARKIN

If I could answer this sort of question, I'd be a professor rather than a librarian. And in any case, I shouldn't want to. It's a thing you don't want to think about. It happens, or happened, and if it's something to be grateful for, you're grateful.

I remember saying once, I can't understand these chaps who go round American universities explaining how they write poems: it's like going round explaining how you sleep with your wife. Whoever I was talking to said, They'd do that, too, if their agents could fix it.

INTERVIEWER

Do you throw away a lot of poems?

LARKIN

Some poems didn't get finished. Some didn't get published. I never throw anything away.

INTERVIEWER

You included only six of your own poems in *The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse* (as opposed, say, to twelve by John Betjeman). Do you consider these to be your half-dozen best, or are they merely "representative"? I was surprised not to find "Church Going," arguably your single most famous

poem.

LARKIN

My recollection is that I decided on six as a limit for my generation and anyone younger, to save hurt feelings. Mine were representative, as you say—one pretty one, one funny one, one long one, and so on. As editor, I couldn't give myself much space . . . could I?

INTERVIEWER

In your introduction to that anthology, you make a fine point of saying you didn't include any poems "requiring a glossary for their full understanding." Do you feel your own lucid work has helped close the gap between poetry and the public, a gap which experiment and obscurity have widened?

LARKIN

This was to explain why I hadn't included dialect poems. We have poets who write in pretty dense Lallans. Nothing to do with obscurity in the sense you mean.

INTERVIEWER

Okay, but your introduction to *All What Jazz* takes a stance against experiment, citing the trio of Picasso, Pound, and Parker. Why do you distrust the new?

LARKIN

It seems to me undeniable that up to this century literature used language in the way we all use it, painting represented what anyone with normal vision sees, and music was an affair of nice noises rather than nasty ones. The innovation of "modernism" in the arts consisted of doing the opposite. I don't know why, I'm not a historian. You have to distinguish between things that seemed odd when they were new but are now quite familiar, such as Ibsen and Wagner, and things that seemed crazy when they were new and seem crazy now, like *Finnegans Wake* and Picasso.

INTERVIEWER

What's that got to do with jazz?

LARKIN

Everything. Jazz showed this very clearly because it is such a telescoped art, only as old as the century, if that. Charlie Parker wrecked jazz by—or so they tell me—using the chromatic rather than the diatonic scale. The diatonic scale is what you use if you want to write a national anthem, or a love song, or a lullaby. The

chromatic scale is what you use to give the effect of drinking a quinine martini and having an enema simultaneously.

If I sound heated on this, it's because I love jazz, the jazz of Armstrong and Bechet and Ellington and Bessie Smith and Beiderbecke. To have it all destroyed by a paranoiac drug addict made me furious. Anyway, it's dead now, dead as Elizabethan madrigal singing. We can only treasure the records. And I do.

INTERVIEWER

Let's return to the Oxford anthology for a moment. Some of its critics said your selections not only favored traditional poetic forms, but minor poets as well. How do you respond to that?

LARKIN

Since it was *The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse*, I had of course to represent the principal poets of the century by their best or most typical works. I think I did this. The trouble is that if this is all you do, the result will be a worthy but boring book, since there are quite enough books doing this already, and I thought it would be diverting to put in less familiar poems that were good or typical in themselves, but by authors who didn't rank full representation. I saw them as unexpected flowers along an only-too-well-trodden path. I think they upset people in a way I hadn't intended, although it's surprising how they are now being quoted and anthologized themselves.

Most people make anthologies out of other anthologies; I spent five years reading everyone's complete works, ending with six months in the basement of the Bodleian Library handling all the twentieth-century poetry they had received. It was great fun. I don't say I made any major discoveries, but I hope I managed to suggest that there are good poems around that no one knows about. At any rate, I made a readable book. I made twentieth-century poetry sound nice. That's quite an achievement in itself.

INTERVIEWER

Not many have commented upon the humor in your poetry, like the wonderful pun on "the stuff that dreams are made on" in "Toads." Do you consciously use humor to achieve a particular effect, or to avoid an opposite emotion?

LARKIN

One uses humor to make people laugh. In my case, I don't know whether they in fact do. The trouble is, it makes them think you aren't being serious. That's the

risk you take.

INTERVIEWER

Your most recent collection, *High Windows*, contains at least three poems I'd call satirical—"Posterity," "Homage to a Government," and "This Be the Verse." Do you consider yourself a satirist?

LARKIN

No, I shouldn't call myself a satirist, or any other sort of *-ist*. The poems you mention were conceived in the same way as the rest. That is to say, as poems. To be a satirist, you have to think you know better than everyone else. I've never done that.

INTERVIEWER

An American poet-critic, Peter Davison, has characterized yours as a "diminutional talent"—meaning you make things clear by making them small—England reduced to "squares of wheat," and so forth. Is this a fair comment? Is it a technique you're aware of?

LARKIN

It's difficult to answer remarks like that. The line "Its postal districts packed like squares of wheat" refers to London, not England. It doesn't seem "diminutional" to me, rather the reverse, if anything. It's meant to make the postal districts seem rich and fruitful.

INTERVIEWER

Davison also sees your favorite subjects as failure and weakness.

LARKIN

I think a poet should be judged by what he does with his subjects, not by what his subjects are. Otherwise you're getting near the totalitarian attitude of wanting poems about steel production figures rather than "*Mais où sont les neiges d'antan?*" Poetry isn't a kind of paint spray you use to cover selected objects with. A good poem about failure is a success.

INTERVIEWER

Is it intentional that the form of "Toads" is alternating uneven trimeters and dimeters, with alternating off-rhymes, whereas "Toads Revisited" is in trimeters and off-rhymed couplets? What determines the form of a poem for you? Is it the first line, with its attendant rhythms?

LARKIN

Well, yes: I think I've admitted this already. At this distance I can't recall how far the second Toad poem was planned as a companion to the first. It's more likely that I found it turning out to be a poem about work, but different from the first, and so it seemed amusing to link them.

INTERVIEWER

How did you arrive upon the image of a toad for work or labor?

LARKIN

Sheer genius.

INTERVIEWER

As a writer, what are your particular quirks? Do you feel you have any conspicuous or secret flaw as a writer?

LARKIN

I really don't know. I suppose I've used the iambic pentameter a lot: some people find this oppressive and try to get away from it. My secret flaw is just not being very good, like everyone else. I've never been didactic, never tried to make poetry *do* things, never gone out to look for it. I waited for it to come to me, in whatever shape it chose.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel you belong to any particular tradition in English letters?

LARKIN

I seem to remember George Fraser saying that poetry was either "veeshion"—he was Scotch—or "moaral deescourse," and I was the second, and the first was better. A well-known publisher asked me how one punctuated poetry, and looked flabbergasted when I said, The same as prose. By which I mean that I write, or wrote, as everyone did till the mad lads started, using words and syntax in the normal way to describe recognizable experiences as memorably as possible. That doesn't seem to me a tradition. The other stuff, the mad stuff, is more an aberration.

INTERVIEWER

Have you any thoughts on the office of poet laureate? Does it serve a valid function?

LARKIN

Poetry and sovereignty are very primitive things. I like to think of their being united in this way, in England. On the other hand, it's not clear what the laureate is, or does. Deliberately so, in a way: it isn't a job, there are no duties, no salary, and yet it isn't quite an honor, either, or not just an honor. I'm sure the worst thing about it, especially today, is the publicity it brings, the pressure to be involved publicly with poetry, which must be pretty inimical to any real writing.

Of course, the days when Tennyson would publish a sonnet telling Gladstone what to do about foreign policy are over. It's funny that Kipling, who is what most people think of as a poet as national spokesman, never was laureate. He should have had it when Bridges was appointed, but it's typical that he didn't—the post isn't thought of in that way. It really is a genuine attempt to honor someone. But the publicity that anything to do with the Palace gets these days is so fierce, it must be really more of an ordeal than an honor.

INTERVIEWER

Your poetry volumes have appeared at the rate of one per decade. From what you say, though, is it unlikely we'll have another around 1984? Did you really only complete about three poems in any given year?

LARKIN

It's unlikely I shall write any more poems, but when I did, yes, I did write slowly. I was looking at "The Whitsun Weddings" [the poem] just the other day, and found that I began it sometime in the summer of 1957. After three pages, I dropped it for another poem that in fact was finished but never published. I picked it up again, in March 1958, and worked on it till October, when it was finished. But when I look at the diary I was keeping at the time, I see that the kind of incident it describes happened in July 1955! So in all, it took over three years. Of course, that's an exception. But I did write slowly, partly because you're finding out what to say as well as how to say it, and that takes time.

INTERVIEWER

For someone who dislikes being interviewed, you've responded generously.

LARKIN

I'm afraid I haven't said anything very interesting. You must realize I've never had "ideas" about poetry. To me it's always been a personal, almost physical release or solution to a complex pressure of needs—wanting to create, to justify, to

praise, to explain, to externalize, depending on the circumstances. And I've never been much interested in other people's poetry—one reason for writing, of course, is that no one's written what you want to read.

Probably my notion of poetry is very simple. Some time ago I agreed to help judge a poetry competition—you know, the kind where they get about 35,000 entries, and you look at the best few thousand. After a bit I said, Where are all the love poems? And nature poems? And they said, Oh, we threw all those away. I expect they were the ones I should have liked.

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