

Contemporary poetry

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PHILIP LARKIN

Philip Larkin was born in 1922 at Coventry, where he attended the King Henry VIII Grammar School before going to St. John's College, Oxford. He is Librarian at the University of Hull, Yorkshire, and has been jazz correspondent of *The Daily Telegraph* since 1961. In 1965 he was awarded the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry. He has published two volumes of verse: *The Less Deceived* (1955) and *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964).

He has expressed his personal approach to poetry as follows: 'As a guiding principle I believe that every poem must be its own sole freshly-created universe, and therefore have no belief in 'tradition' . . . I write poems to preserve things I have seen/ thought/felt . . . both for myself and for others, though I feel my prime responsibility is to the experience itself, which I am trying to keep from oblivion for its own sake. Why I should do this I have no idea, but I think the impulse to preserve lies at the bottom of all arts.'

In a radio interview he once spoke of the 'great tension' that exists between 'the normal, everyday language and word-order which one would normally employ in explaining one's ideas to a listener, and the perhaps heightened language and unnatural metre and rhyme-order which one must use to make it memorable'. He spoke too of the 'considerable struggle' involved in 'finding the middle way between these two opposing forces'—everyday speech and the form imposed by poetry.

Everyday situations presented in everyday speech which is never 'heightened' beyond the reach of the intelligent, sensitive everyday reader are characteristic of the poetry of Philip Larkin, who has been acclaimed as one of the finest poets of his generation.

The Whitsun Weddings

Philip Larkin has said that it took him over a year to produce the final form of this poem which he describes as the result of the kind of 'happening or situation that prompts you to think that if only you could get that down, in a kind of verbal photography, you would have a poem ready-made'. Despite the later polishing it required, this account of a train-journey from Hull to London, this sensitive record of a 'frail travelling coincidence'—a number of newly-married couples all starting off on their honeymoon by the same train—has retained all the spontaneity of a piece of genuine 'verbal photography'.

Disk. Side 1. Band 1

That Whitsun, I was late getting away:

Not till about

One-twenty on the sunlit Saturday
Did my three-quarters-empty train pull out,
All windows down, all cushions hot, all sense
Of being in a hurry gone. We ran
Behind the backs of houses, crossed a street
Of blinding windscreens, smelt the fish-dock; thence
The river's level drifting breadth began,
Where sky and Lincolnshire and water meet. 10

All afternoon, through the tall heat that slept

For miles inland,

A slow and stopping curve southwards we kept.
Wide farms went by, short-shadowed cattle, and
Canals with floatings of industrial froth; 15
A hothouse flashed, uniquely; hedges dipped
And rose; and now and then a smell of grass
Displaced the reek of buttoned carriage-cloth
Until the next town, new and nondescript,
Approached with acres of dismantled cars. 20

At first, I didn't notice what a noise

The weddings made

Each station that we stopped at: sun destroys
The interest of what's happening in the shade,
And down the long cool platforms whoops and skirts 25
I took for porters larking with the mails
And went on reading. Once we started, though,
We passed them, grinning and pomaded, girls
In parodies of fashion, heels and veils,
All posed irresolutely, watching us go, 30
As if out on the end of an event

Waving good-bye

To something that survived it. Struck, I leant
More promptly out next time, more curiously,
And saw it all again in different terms: 35

The fathers with broad belts under their suits
And seamy foreheads: mothers loud and fat;
An uncle shouting smut; and then the perms,
The nylon gloves and jewellery-substitutes,
The lemons, mauves, and olive-ochres that 40

Marked off the girls unreally from the rest.
Yes, from cafés
And banquet-halls up yards, and bunting-dressed
Coach-party annexes, the wedding-days
Were coming to an end. All down the line 45
Fresh couples climbed aboard; the rest stood round;
The last confetti and advice were thrown,
And, as we moved, each face seemed to define
Just what it saw departing: children frowned
At something dull; fathers had never known 50
Success so huge and wholly farcical;
The women shared
The secret like a happy funeral;
While girls, gripping their handbags tighter, stared
At a religious wounding. Free at last,
And loaded with the sum of all they saw,
We hurried towards London, shuffling gout of steam.
Now fields were building-plots, and poplars cast
Long shadows over major roads, and for
Some fifty minutes, that in time would seem 60
Just long enough to settle hats and say

I nearly died
A dozen marriages got under way.
They watched the landscape, sitting side by side
—An Odeon went past, a cooling tower,
And someone running up to bowl—and none
Thought of the others they would never meet
Or how their lives would all contain this hour.
I thought of London spread out in the sun,
Its postal districts packed like squares of wheat: 70

There we were aimed. And as we raced across
Bright knots of rail
Past standing Pullmans, walls of blackened moss
Came close, and it was nearly done, this frail
Travelling coincidence; and what it held 75
Stood ready to be loosed with all the power
That being changed can give. We slowed again,
And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled
A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower
Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain. 80

NOTES

Title 'Whitsun' and 'Whit' are the usual abbreviations of 'Whitsuntide' (Pentecost), a holiday week-end and a favourite time for weddings.

Line 8 Typical of the rapid impressions of sight and smell noted throughout the journey. Compare, particularly, lines 16–20, 65–66.

9–10 The river Humber separates Yorkshire, on the north, from Lincolnshire, with its flat fen country, on the south bank.

16 Get the full value of *uniquely*, a single point of bright reflected light in the passing landscape.

18 The unpleasant smell (*reek*) of the upholstery is contrasted with the pleasant smell of grass.

19 *nondescript*: without character or personality.

25 *whoops and skirls*: cries and screams of amusement; *skirl* is, strictly speaking, the sound of bagpipes.

26 *larking*: playing, amusing themselves.

29 *parodies of fashion*: There is social satire here, as in lines 36–45. These are not fashionable weddings, but working- or lower-middle-class affairs.

38 *smut*: indecent remarks; *perms*: permanent waves.

40 *The lemons, mauves and olive-ochres*: the current fashionable colours for bridesmaids and female wedding-guests.

43–44 *yards and bunting-dressed* | *Coach-party annexes*: wedding-breakfasts are often served in hotels or in annexes built at the end of (*up*) the yard behind them and used, on other occasions, to serve meals for parties of motor-coach tourists. They are often decorated with strings of multi-coloured flags: *bunting*.

57 *shuffling gout of steam*: the sound of 'shuffling' (throwing out in quick succession) is as important as the sense; it imitates the sound of the train; *gouts*: literally drops, puffs of steam.

62 *I nearly died*: a typically feminine exclamation recalling moments of excitement or emotion.

63 *under way*: started, set in motion.

65 *An Odeon*: one of a chain of cinemas, all called Odeon.

66 *someone running up to bowl*: a cricket-match is in progress; a player is about to launch the ball (*bowl*).

Dockery and Son

The poet returns to his Oxford college and talks with the Dean who tells him that Dockery, one of the men who had been a younger contemporary of his in college, already has a son old enough to be 'up' (taking a University course) at the same college. The poet reflects on the difference between his life and Dockery's. They must have been based, he thinks, on different concepts, leading, for both, to *age and then the only end of age* (death), though their different concepts of life have meant, he says, *For Dockery a son, for me nothing*.

Disk. Side 1. Band 2

'Dockery was junior to you,
Wasn't he?' said the Dean. 'His son's here now.'
Death-suited, visitant, I nod. 'And do
You keep in touch with —?' Or remember how
Black-gowned, unbreakfasted, and still half-tight
We used to stand before that desk, to give
'Our version' of 'these incidents last night'?
I try the door of where I used to live:

8

Locked. The lawn spreads dazzlingly wide.
A known bell chimes. I catch my train, ignored.
Canal and clouds and colleges subside
Slowly from view. But Dockery, good Lord,
Anyone up today must have been born
In '43, when I was twenty-one.
If he was younger, did he get this son
At nineteen, twenty? Was he that withdrawn

16

High-collared public-schoolboy, sharing rooms
With Cartwright who was killed? Well, it just shows
How much . . . How little . . . Yawning, I suppose
I fell asleep, waking at the fumes
And furnace-glares of Sheffield, where I changed,
And ate an awful pie, and walked along
The platform to its end to see the ranged
Joining and parting lines reflect a strong

24

Unhindered moon. To have no son, no wife,
No house or land still seemed quite natural.
Only a numbness registered the shock
Of finding out how much had gone of life,
How widely from the others. Dockery, now:
Only nineteen, he must have taken stock
Of what he wanted, and been capable
Of . . . No, that's not the difference: rather, how

32

Convinced he was he should be added to!
Why did he think adding meant increase?
To me it was dilution. Where do these
Innate assumptions come from? Not from what
We think truest, or most want to do:
Those warp tight-shut, like doors. They're more a style
Our lives bring with them: habit for a while,
Suddenly they harden into all we've got

40

And how we got it; looked back on, they rear
Like sand-clouds, thick and close, embodying
For Dockery a son, for me nothing,
Nothing with all a son's harsh patronage.
Life is first boredom, then fear.
Whether or not we use it, it goes,
And leaves what something hidden from us chose,
And age, and then the only end of age.

48

NOTES

Line

3 While everyday speech clearly dominates, it is here distinctly 'heightened' in the expression *Death-suited, visitant*. *Death-suited* not only indicates a dark, or even black suit, but suggests that the wearer has already assumed some ghostly quality, particularly when he describes himself as a *visitant*, using a 'poetic' word generally used in reference to a visitor from another world.

25-26 . . . a strong *Unhindered moon*: Another example of 'heightened' language. The moon was shining in a cloudless sky, unhindered. Contrast this with the distinctly un-'heightened' language of lines 22-23.