

Philip Larkin (1922-1985)

and the Movement

Philip Larkin was born in Coventry, England in 1922. He earned his BA from St. John's College, Oxford, where he befriended novelist and poet Kingsley Amis and finished with First Class Honors in English. After graduating, Larkin undertook professional studies to become a librarian. He worked in libraries his entire life, first in Shropshire and Leicester, and then at Queen's College in Belfast, and finally as librarian at the University of Hull. In addition to collections of poetry, Larkin published two novels—*Jill* (1946) and *A Girl in Winter* (1947)—as well as criticism, essays, and reviews of jazz music. The latter were collected in two volumes: *All What Jazz: A Record Diary 1961-1968* (1970; 1985) and *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982* (1984). He was one of post-war England's most famous poets, and was commonly referred to as "England's *other* Poet Laureate" until his death in 1985. Indeed, when the position of laureate became vacant in 1984, many poets and critics favored Larkin's appointment, but Larkin preferred to avoid the limelight.

Larkin achieved acclaim on the strength of an extremely small body of work—just over one hundred pages of poetry in four slender volumes that appeared at almost decade-long intervals. These collections, especially *The Less Deceived* (1955), *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964), and *High Windows* (1974), present "a poetry from which even people who distrust poetry, most people, can take comfort and delight," according to Kennedy in the *New Criterion*. Larkin employed the traditional tools of poetry—rhyme, stanza, and meter—to explore the often uncomfortable or terrifying experiences thrust upon

common people in the modern age. As Brownjohn noted in *Philip Larkin*, the poet produced without fanfare “the most technically brilliant and resonantly beautiful, profoundly disturbing yet appealing and approachable, body of verse of any English poet in the last twenty-five years.”

Despite his wide popularity, Larkin “shied from publicity, rarely consented to interviews or readings, cultivated his image as right-wing curmudgeon and grew depressed at his fame,” according to J.D. McClatchy in the *New York Times Book Review*. *Phoenix* contributor Alun R. Jones suggests that, as librarian at the remote University of Hull, Larkin “avoided the literary, the metropolitan, the group label, and embraced the nonliterary, the provincial, and the purely personal.” From his base in Hull, Larkin composed poetry that both reflected the dreariness of postwar provincial England and voiced the spiritual despair of the modern age. McClatchy notes Larkin wrote “in clipped, lucid stanzas, about the failures and remorse of age, about stunted lives and spoiled desires.” Critics feel that this localization of focus and the colloquial language used to describe settings and emotions endear Larkin to his readers. *Agenda* reviewer George Dekker noted that no living poet “can equal Larkin on his own ground of the familiar English lyric, drastically and poignantly limited in its sense of any life beyond, before or after, life today in England.”

It can be said that The Movement poetry emerged out of the blending of psychological and sociological factors; it resulted from the psychological crisis in the aftermath of the Second World War. In his book entitled *The Movement*, Mohan Ramanan remarks that “the zeitgeist certainly helped to form the Movement, just as it helped to give the 20s it its high

modernist character, the 30s its urgency in terms of a political poetry presided over by an enfant terrible (161)

In a *Paris Review* interview, Larkin dismissed the notion that he studied the techniques of poets that he admired in order to perfect his craft. Most critics feel, however, that the poems of both Yeats and Hardy exerted an influence on Larkin as he sought his own voice. Hardy's work provided the main impetus to Larkin's mature poetry, according to critics. A biographer in *Contemporary Literary Criticism* claimed "Larkin credited his reading of Thomas Hardy's verse for inspiring him to write with greater austerity and to link experiences and emotions with detailed settings." King contends that a close reading of Hardy taught Larkin "that a modern poet could write about the life around him in the language of the society around him. He encouraged [Larkin] to use his poetry to examine the reality of his own life." In his work *Philip Larkin*, Martin also claims that Larkin learned from Hardy "that his own life, with its often casual discoveries, could become poems, and that he could legitimately share such experience with his readers. From this lesson [came Larkin's] belief that a poem is better based on something from 'unsorted' experience than on another poem or other art."

This viewpoint allied Larkin with the poets of The Movement, a loose association of British writers who "called, implicitly in their poetry and fiction and explicitly in critical essays, for some sort of commonsense return to more traditional techniques," according to Martin in *Philip Larkin*. Martin added that the rationale for this "antimodernist, antiexperimental stance is their stated concern with clarity: with writing distinguished by precision rather than obscurity. ... [The Movement urged] not an abandonment of emotion, but a mixture of rationality with feeling, of objective control with subjective abandon. Their notion of

what they felt the earlier generation of writers, particularly poets, lacked, centered around the ideas of honesty and realism about self and about the outside world.” King observed that Larkin “had sympathy with many of the attitudes to poetry represented by The Movement,” but this view of the poet’s task antedated the beginnings of that group’s influence. Nonetheless, in the opinion of *Washington Post Book World* contributor Chad Walsh, Larkin says “seemed to fulfill the credo of the Movement better than anyone else, and he was often singled out, as much for damnation as for praise, by those looking for the ultimate Movement poet.” Brownjohn concludes that in the company of The Movement, Larkin’s own “distinctive technical skills, the special subtlety in his adaptation of a very personal colloquial mode to the demands of tight forms, were not immediately seen to be outstanding; but his strengths as a craftsman have increasingly come to be regarded as one of the hallmarks of his talent.”

Those strengths of craftsmanship and technical skill in Larkin’s mature works received almost universal approval from literary critics. London *Sunday Times* correspondent Ian Hamilton wrote: “Supremely among recent poets, [Larkin] was able to accommodate a talking voice to the requirements of strict metres and tight rhymes, and he had a faultless ear for the possibilities of the iambic line.” David Timms expressed a similar view in his book entitled *Philip Larkin*. Technically, notes Timms, Larkin was “an extraordinarily various and accomplished poet, a poet who [used] the devices of metre and rhyme for specific effects... His language is never flat, unless he intends it to be so for a particular reason, and his diction is never stereotyped. He [was] always ready... to reach across accepted literary boundaries for a word that will precisely express what he intends.” As King explains, Larkin’s best poems “are rooted in

actual experiences and convey a sense of place and situation, people and events, which gives an authenticity to the thoughts that are then usually raised by the poet's observation of the scene... Joined with this strength of careful social observation is a control over tone changes and the expression of developing feelings even within a single poem... which is the product of great craftsmanship. To these virtues must be added the fact that in all the poems there is a lucidity of language which invites understanding even when the ideas expressed are paradoxical or complex." *New Leader* contributor Pearl K. Bell concludes that Larkin's poetry "fits with unresisting precision into traditional structures... filling them with the melancholy truth of things in the shrunken, vulgarized and parochial England of the 1970s."

If Larkin's style was traditional, the subject matter of his poetry was derived exclusively from modern life. Press contended that Larkin's artistic work "delineates with considerable force and delicacy the pattern of contemporary sensibility, tracing the way in which we respond to our environment, plotting the ebb and flow of the emotional flux within us, embodying in his poetry attitudes of heart and mind that seem peculiarly characteristic of our time: doubt, insecurity, boredom, aimlessness and malaise." A sense that life is a finite prelude to oblivion underlies many of Larkin's poems. King suggests that the work is "a poetry of disappointment, of the destruction of romantic illusions, of man's defeat by time and his own inadequacies," as well as a study of how dreams, hopes, and ideals "are relentlessly diminished by the realities of life." To Larkin, Brownjohn noted, life was never "a matter of blinding revelations, mystical insights, expectations glitteringly fulfilled. Life, for Larkin, and, implicitly, for all of us, is something lived mundanely, with a gradually accumulating certainty that its golden prizes are sheer illusion."

Love is one of the supreme deceptions of humankind in Larkin's worldview, as King observed: "Although man clutches at his instinctive belief that only love will comfort, console and sustain him, such a hope is doomed to be denied. A lover's promise is an empty promise and the power to cure suffering through love is a tragic illusion." Stanley Poss in *Western Humanities Review* maintained that Larkin's poems demonstrate "desperate clarity and restraint and besieged common sense. And what they mostly say is, be beginning to despair, despair, despair."

Larkin arrived at his conclusions candidly, concerned to expose evasions so that the reader might stand "naked but honest, 'less deceived' ... before the realities of life and death," to quote King. Larkin himself offered a rather wry description of his accomplishments—an assessment that, despite its levity, links him emotionally to his work. In 1979 he told the *Observer*: "I think writing about unhappiness is probably the source of my popularity, if I have any... Deprivation is for me what daffodils were for Wordsworth."