

## PHILIP LARKIN

### 1922–1985

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Philip Larkin was born in Coventry; was educated at its King Henry VIII School and at St. John's College, Oxford; and was for many years librarian of the Hull University Library. He wrote the poems of his first book, *The North Ship* (1945), under W. B. Yeats's strong enchantment. Although this influence persisted in the English poet's formal skill and subdued visionary longings, Larkin began to read Thomas Hardy seriously after World War II, and Hardy's rugged language, local settings, and ironic tone helped counter Yeats's influence. "After that," Larkin said, "Yeats came to seem so artificial—all that crap about masks and Crazy Jane and all the rest. It all rang so completely unreal." Also rejecting the international modernism of Eliot and Pound because of its mythical allusions, polyglot discourse, and fragmentary syntax, Larkin reclaimed a more direct, personal, formally regular model of poetry, supposedly rooted in a native English tradition of Wordsworth, Hardy, A. E. Housman, Wilfred Owen, and W. H. Auden. Even so, his poetry is not so thoroughly antimodernist as are his declarations: witness his imagist precision and alienated personae, his blending of revulsion and attraction toward modernity.

Larkin was the dominant figure in what came to be known as "the Movement," a group of university poets that included Kingsley Amis, Donald Davie, and Thom Gunn, gathered together in Robert Conquest's landmark anthology of 1956, *New Lines*. Their work was seen as counteracting not only the extravagances of modernism but also the influence of Dylan Thomas's high-flown, apocalyptic rhetoric: like Larkin, these poets preferred a civil grammar and rational syntax over prophecy, suburban realities over mythmaking.

No other poet presents the welfare-state world of postimperial Britain so vividly, so unsparingly, and so tenderly. "Poetry is an affair of sanity, of seeing things as they are," Larkin said; "I don't want to transcend the commonplace, I love the commonplace life. Everyday things are lovely to me." Eschewing the grandiose, he writes poetry that, in its everyday diction and melancholy wryness, worldly subjects and regular meters, affirms rather than contravenes the restrictions of ordinary life. Love's failure, the erosion of religious and national abutments, the loneliness of age and death—Larkin does not avert his poetic gaze from these bleak realities. As indicated by the title of his 1955 collection *The Less Deceived*, disillusionment, drabness, and resignation color these poems. Yet Larkin's drearily mundane world often gives way to muted promise, his speakers' alienation to possible communion, his skepticism to encounters even with the sublime. At the end of "High Windows," the characteristically ironic and self-deprecating speaker glimpses both radiant presence and total absence in the sunlit glass: "And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows / Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless."

Like Hardy, Larkin wrote novels—*Jill* (1946) and *A Girl in Winter* (1947)—and his poems have a novelist's sense of place and skill in the handling of direct speech. He also edited a controversial anthology, *The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse* (1973), which attempted to construct a modern native tradition in England. But his most significant legacy was his poetry, although his output was limited to four volumes. Out of "the commonplace life" he fashioned uncommon poems—some of the most emotionally complex, rhythmically polished, and intricately rhymed poems of the second half of the twentieth century.

## Church Going

Once I am sure there's nothing going on  
 I step inside, letting the door thud shut.  
 Another church: matting, seats, and stone,  
 And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut  
 5 For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff  
 Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;  
 And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,  
 Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off  
 My cycle-clips in awkward reverence,  
 10 Move forward, run my hand around the font.  
 From where I stand, the roof looks almost new—  
 Cleaned, or restored? Someone would know: I don't.  
 Mounting the lectern, I peruse a few  
 Hectoring large-scale verses,<sup>1</sup> and pronounce  
 15 "Here endeth" much more loudly than I'd meant.  
 The echoes snigger briefly. Back at the door  
 I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence,<sup>2</sup>  
 Reflect the place was not worth stopping for.

Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,  
 20 And always end much at a loss like this,  
 Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,  
 When churches fall completely out of use  
 What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep  
 A few cathedrals chronically on show,  
 25 Their parchment, plate and pyx<sup>3</sup> in locked cases,  
 And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.  
 Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?

Or, after dark, will dubious women come  
 To make their children touch a particular stone;  
 30 Pick simples<sup>o</sup> for a cancer; or on some  
 Advised night see walking a dead one?  
 Power of some sort or other will go on  
 In games, in riddles, seemingly at random;  
 But superstition, like belief, must die,  
 35 And what remains when disbelief has gone?  
 Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky,

*medicinal herbs*

A shape less recognisable each week,  
 A purpose more obscure. I wonder who  
 Will be the last, the very last, to seek  
 40 This place for what it was; one of the crew  
 That tap and jot and know what rood-lofts<sup>4</sup> were?  
 Some ruin-bibber, randy for antique,  
 Or Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff

1. I.e., Bible verses printed in large type for reading aloud.

2. An Irish sixpence has no value in England.

3. Box in which Communion wafers are kept.

4. Galleries on top of carved screens separating the nave of a church from the choir.

- Of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh?<sup>5</sup>  
 45 Or will he be my representative,  
 Bored, uninformed, knowing the ghostly silt  
 Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground<sup>6</sup>  
 Through suburb scrub because it held unpilt  
 So long and equably what since is found  
 50 Only in separation—marriage, and birth,  
 And death, and thoughts of these—for which was built  
 This special shell? For, though I've no idea  
 What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth,  
 It pleases me to stand in silence here;  
 55 A serious house on serious earth it is,  
 In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,  
 Are recognised, and robed as destinies.  
 And that much never can be obsolete,  
 Since someone will forever be surprising  
 60 A hunger in himself to be more serious,  
 And gravitating with it to this ground,  
 Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,  
 If only that so many dead lie round.

1954

1955

MCMXIV<sup>1</sup>

- Those long uneven lines  
 Standing as patiently  
 As if they were stretched outside  
 The Oval or Villa Park,<sup>2</sup>  
 5 The crowns of hats, the sun  
 On moustached archaic faces  
 Grinning as if it were all  
 An August bank Holiday lark;  
 And the shut shops, the bleached,  
 10 Established names on the sunblinds,  
 The farthings and sovereigns,<sup>3</sup>  
 And dark-clothed children at play  
 Called after kings and queens,  
 The tin advertisements  
 15 For cocoa and twist,<sup>o</sup> and the pubs  
 Wide open all day;

*tobacco*

And the countryside not caring:  
 The place-names all hazed over

5. Gum resin used in the making of incense; one of three presents given by the three wise men to the infant Jesus. "Gown-and-bands": gown and decorative collar worn by clergy people.

6. Most churches were built in the shape of a cross.

1. 1914, in Roman numerals, as incised on stone memorials to the dead of World War I.

2. London cricket ground and Birmingham football ground.

3. At that time the least valuable and the most valuable British coins, respectively.