

*Splinters of Ice in the Soul*

Philip Larkin, *Further Requirements: Interviews, Broadcasts, Statements and Book Reviews*. Ed. Anthony Thwaite. Faber & Faber, £25.00

Dennis O'Driscoll, *Troubled Thoughts, Majestic Dreams: Selected Prose Writings*. Gallery Books. €17.50

During his lifetime, Philip Larkin was regarded as having pulled off a unique double-whammy, writing poems that were equally admired by academics and the general reading public. W.H. Auden called him “a master of the English language”. Donald Davie described him as “the best-loved poet of his generation”. Anthony Thwaite referred to “the affection in which Larkin’s readers hold him, and the remarkable sense of privilege which they feel at knowing his work”. If anything, this extraordinary status was enhanced in the immediate aftermath of Larkin’s premature death from cancer in 1985, Peter Levi’s obituary describing him as “the funniest and most intelligent English writer of the day, and the greatest living poet in our language”. Of course, there had been occasional dissenters, such as Charles Tomlinson and Al Alvarez; but as both were minor poets it was possible to regard their niggardly, carping judgements as proof that weak talents console themselves by trying to detect flaws in strong ones. Certainly, nothing in their tepid responses prepared one for the avalanche of moral outrage and invective that broke over Larkin’s reputation in the 1990s.

The storm of hostility was keyed to a series of publications, most notably Anthony Thwaite’s *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin* (1992) and Andrew Motion’s biography *Philip Larkin: A Writer’s Life* (1993). The posthumous revelation that the man previously characterised as “decent” and “shy” harboured opinions that were philistine, sexist and racist provoked what Clive James has termed “a rush of dunces”, literary critics greeting each new dis-

closure with the glee of cannibals spicing a baby. The very name Larkin engendered a mini lexicon, every declension of which was pejorative. A new verb appeared, to “Larkinize”, meaning to demolish an artist’s reputation on the basis of his or her private opinions, as in Anthony Lane’s remark that “there is every danger that Eliot is now in the process of being Larkinized”. The term “Larkinesque”, which formerly meant wry, self-deprecating and undeluded, came to signify some obscure but vile perversion; one would not have been surprised to find it in Krafft-Ebing. As for “Larkinalia”, that presumably indicated the paraphernalia of the Larkinesque—lesbian pornography, perhaps, or spanking equipment.

Not the least alarming aspect of this critical débâcle is that some of the most vehement and vituperative comments came from distinguished university professors like Lisa Jardine, Terry Eagleton, Germaine Greer, Jonathan Bate and Tom Paulin. They ought to have been aware that if asked to choose between perfection of the life or of the work, the true artist opts for the latter. They ought also to have been mindful that the function of criticism is to facilitate appreciation of literature, not depreciation of its authors. Yet in using Larkin’s most offensive private remarks as an index of his public art, they might claim to be adopting a biographical reading strategy which he had endorsed in the essays and reviews he preserved in *Required Writing* (1983). Discussing Wilfred Owen, for example, he had thrown out the general principle that “a writer’s reputation is twofold: what we think of his work, and what we think of him. What’s more, we expect the two halves to relate: if they don’t, then one or other of our opinions alters until they do”.

*Further Requirements*, Anthony Thwaite’s gathering of the previously uncollected non-fiction prose, contains more comments in a similar vein—as when Larkin claims that “novels are about other people and poetry is about yourself”. However, Larkin lacked the predictability of small minds, and this volume elsewhere shows him struggling to develop a more sophisticated theoretical position and one more consonant with his verse practice, which was not essentially autobiographical. In an interview he said, apropos of “An Arundel Tomb”: “I was delighted when a friend asked me if I knew a poem ending ‘What will survive of us is love’. It suggests the poem was making its way in the world without me. I like them to do that.” In approving his interlocu-

tor's ignorance of the fact that he was the author of the poem in question, Larkin assents to non-biographical readings of his work. He went still further in a BBC broadcast for the Overseas Service when he said:

I suppose the kind of response I am seeking from the reader is, Yes, I know what you mean, life *is* like that; and for readers to say it not only now but in the future, and not only in England but anywhere in the world.

At the very least, this aspiration to address our common humanity regardless of sex, gender, race, creed, continent or historical epoch must severely qualify the earlier author-centred approach, limiting the autobiographical content of the poems to those areas of subjectivity shared by all.

Even more remarkable are those passages in which he comes close to the theory of impersonality T.S. Eliot had outlined in "Tradition and the Individual Talent", an essay Larkin sometimes affected to despise. Writing of the poem "Absences", which ends "Such attics cleared of me! Such absences!" Larkin declares:

I suppose I like "Absences" (a) because of its subject-matter—I am always thrilled by the thought of what places look like when I am not there; (b) because I fancy it sounds like a different, better poet rather than myself. The last line, for instance, sounds like a slightly unconvincing translation from a French symbolist. I wish I could write like this more often.

Ten years later, on a BBC Radio Three programme, he prefaced a reading of "The Explosion" with the words:

What I should like to do is to write different kinds of poems that might be by different people. Someone once said that the great thing is not to be different from other people but to be different from yourself. That's why I've chosen to read now a poem that isn't especially like me, or like what I fancy I'm supposed to be like.

These are wonderfully arresting formulations, profoundly at odds with biographical interpretations. We have the dizzying paradox

of Larkin trying to imagine himself present at scenes from which he relishes his absence. We have the celebrated xenophobe—“*Foreign* poetry? No!”—wishing to resemble a French symbolist in translation. We have the supposedly autobiographical poet trying to make each poem seem the product, not just of a separate narrator, but of a separate author. In their idiosyncratic way these statements share the Modernist ethos of Rimbaud’s famous seer’s letter of 1871 (“I is Another”); Fernando Pessoa’s multiple heteronyms; and the aforementioned 1919 essay by Eliot (“poetry... is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality”).

There are many other aspects of Larkin’s critical practice, as represented in *Further Requirements*, that work against the view that he was a naively autobiographical poet unaware of narratology. For instance, not one of the seven pieces devoted to John Betjeman’s verse draws upon the subject’s complicated sex life (about which Larkin must have known) or his private correspondence (of which Larkin must have been a recipient). Conversely, Larkin’s scintillating memoir of his Coventry childhood, “Not the Place’s Fault”, shows him to have much fonder memories of the place than the narrator of his great anti-roots poem “I Remember, I Remember”. The importance of such details is not only that they put impediments in the way of anti-Larkin critics who justify using the letters to denigrate the poems by claiming that he is the narrator of both; but also that they stand as a reproach to the pro-Larkin lobby which has itself been dominated by a well-meaning but conservative adherence to biographical interpretation. The stark truth is that the overwhelming majority of the poems tell one nothing about the gender, race or nationality of either their narrators or their addressees, but that both the poet’s champions and his detractors fill in the missing information by jumping to the conclusion that the protagonist is always and only a white, male, Englishman named Philip Larkin.

Two examples will suffice. Larkin critics are unanimous that, in the words of Warren Hope, the poem “Reference Back” deals with “Larkin’s loyal but strained relationship with his mother”. In fact, we are not told that the narrator is Philip and the addressee Eva Larkin; nor is it certain that a son is visiting his mother, since the relationship is not specified; we are not even told that the one is male and the other female. Sooner than explore these interpretative “lacunæ”, each deletion generating a limited plurality of

plausible meanings, our critics wad the gaps with biographical data. In the process, they ignore the possibility that these erasures and withholdings are a conscious methodology for achieving the universalisation Larkin (as quoted above) aspired to.

Similarly, in the first monograph on the poet, and in that sense the founding text for Larkin studies, David Timms writes of "Reasons For Attendance": "Larkin plays the academic university librarian, just old enough to feel out of touch with the students with whom he deals. Invited to a student dance, he approaches cautiously, and peering through a window, sees that this is not the place for him". Nowhere does the poem state that the narrator is male: we may exercise a heterosexist presumption and infer as much from the reference to "the wonderful feel of girls"; though the vulnerability of such a reading strategy has been highlighted by the recent publication of *Trouble at Willow Gables*, with its evidence of Larkin's fascination with lesbian perspectives. More particularly, the poem tells us nothing whatsoever about the narrator's profession, certainly not specifying that "he" is a librarian, nor that the dancers are students, nor that the latter issued the former with an invitation to the party, nor that the events are located on or near a university campus. These are all details that Timms has invented on the basis of what he knows of Larkin's life and they are being deployed, one assumes unconsciously, so as to render certain everything that the poem wishes to keep ambiguous.

We are now in a position to see that both sides of the debate have used the biographical approach to substitute a poet of certitude, even to the point of bigotry, for a Larkin who is actually the greatest poet of doubt and ambiguity since Thomas Hardy. So it is that over the past forty years the pro and anti camps have concurred in the view that Larkin's national identity is fixed, defining and monocultural. Among his champions, Seamus Heaney describes him as "a poet... of composed and tempered English nationalism"; while Tom Paulin, speaking for the opposition, more intemperately declares that "Larkin's snarl, his populism and his calculated philistinism all speak for Tebbit's England". There is also a striking convergence as to which poems shall be called upon to validate this universal belief in Larkin's Anglocentrism, the clear favourites being "Church Going", "Show Saturday", "To the Sea" and "The Explosion".

The perversity of this undertaking is apparent when one remembers that "Church Going" was written in Belfast and

according to Larkin “came from the first time I saw a ruined church in Northern Ireland”; “Show Saturday” was prompted by a visit to the Bellingham Show on the border between England and Scotland; “To the Sea” combines reminiscences of seaside holidays in both England and Wales; while “The Explosion” is set in an area that combines chapel-going with coal mining, the largest such area in the United Kingdom being South Wales. If Larkin really was trying to offer the unalloyed Englishness attributed to him by his explicators, one would have to declare him wilfully incompetent. At the very least, it might be conceded that Larkin’s nationalism is more British than English, more inclusive than exclusive.

The full absurdity of this position is revealed when one considers the poems Larkin wrote between 1950 and 1955 when he was living in Belfast. Some of these poems, including “Church Going”, appeared in English periodicals and anthologies at the time and were perceived as having been penned by an Irishman. G. S. Fraser included Larkin in the 1953 anthology *Springtime*, describing him as a “Northern Ireland regional poet”; adding that “Irish poets, like Mr Larkin, though writing in standard English, reflect another regional value, rootedness”. Not only were the very same poems that in recent decades have constituted proof that Larkin is rootedly English earlier deployed to prove that he was rootedly Irish, but sometimes it was the same commentators making the opposing claims. In 1955 the “Notes on Contributors” section of Alan Brownjohn’s magazine *Departure* stated categorically that Larkin “was born in Northern Ireland”. Writing a 1986 obituary article in the *Listener*, however, Brownjohn unblushingly commented that “Larkin’s poetry shows all the reticence and reserve of his quintessential Englishness”.

It might, of course, be countered that early commentators were simply misled by Larkin’s Irish surname and Belfast address. The fact remains that readers as sensitive as Fraser and Brownjohn, distinguished poets both, found nothing so incontrovertibly English in the poems as to queer the assumption that their author was Irish. The conclusion is inescapable that the poems are radically unhoused and that it is the critics who assign them a national identity—now this side of the Irish Sea, now that—in accord with what they know, or think they know, about the author. Far from being a gathering of barrel-scrapings and cast-offs, *Further Requirements* is an indispensable addition to the

Larkin *œuvre*; and not the least of its charms is that it offers one more opportunity for the poet's critics to address the full complexity of his attitude to narratology, erasure and ambiguity. Past experience suggests that they will forgo the opportunity.

At 360 pages, Dennis O'Driscoll's *Troubled Thoughts, Majestic Dreams* is almost identical in length with the Larkin but contains half as many entries (forty-seven items compared with ninety-six). It is far more cosmopolitan and polyglot in range: where Larkin will write repeatedly about favourite British authors like Hardy, the Powys brothers, Auden, Cyril Connolly and Betjeman; O'Driscoll encompasses poets from Ireland, the United Kingdom and the USA, together with translations of leading Polish, Czech, Hungarian, Estonian, Swedish and Yugoslavian contemporaries. O'Driscoll is also better at backing up his reviewing activities with longer meditations on, say, the nature of poetry, the relation of poetry to politics, the issue of national identity, the concept of translation.

In the process, O'Driscoll throws out aphorisms and maxims with spendthrift brilliance. Biographical reading strategies of the sort I have been at pains to dislodge, he demolishes in ten words: "Poems, like people, should not be judged by their begetters". If songs are words set to music, "poetry is music set to words". How much useless debate about *engagé* literature is circumvented by the authoritative declaration: "Poetry is a loyalty to language before it's a loyalty to anything else". And how about this as a statement of the reality principle, all the more forceful for being tentative: "I wonder if the rule in competitive walking which requires the athlete to keep one foot touching the ground at all times might have a role in poetry".

Where O'Driscoll compares unfavourably with Larkin is in the matter of qualitative judgement. Larkin was fond of quoting Cyril Connolly's dictum that the job of the writer is to create masterpieces and he measured the works he reviewed against that standard even when they were written by personal friends. *Further Requirements* is greatly enlivened by such devastating one-liners as: "Mr Peter Levi's first book *The Gravel Ponds*, shows him to be a deft and slightly precious writer with nothing particular to say"; or "Only a Mediterranean addict would find Mr Durrell a poet of first importance". He was quick to point out that while he preferred Betjeman's accessibility to Eliot's academicism, Eliot was the better poet. Nor does he hesitate to state, in the midst of a

glowing tribute to the pleasures of his pal Gavin Ewart's verses, that he does not think they will last. O'Driscoll's opening words promise something similar:

When, at a literary conference a few years ago, a Swiss poet asked me "What is your aesthetic as a critic?", I heard myself reply, "My aesthetic is the belief that there are good poets and bad poets and that one can tell the difference".

But it is thirty pages before the requisite note is struck: "I think it was Anne Sexton—a second-rate American poet—who said that to be second-rate in poetry was to be nowhere at all". Alas, the remaining 620 pages contain nothing quite that acerbic. On this evidence, the only equipment O'Driscoll presently lacks to achieve greatness as a poet-critic is that little splinter of ice in the soul Larkin assuredly possessed.