

The Man Going Mad Inside Me

Donald Davie Reads Larkin

Two train journeys, two poems: Larkin's "The Whitsun Weddings" and Donald Davie's "In the Stopping Train". Each occupies a central place in its author's *œuvre*, and each is a meditation on travel that is also something larger: a meditation on the pact between poet, landscape, people and nation; Larkin's "frail/ Travelling coincidence" that is also a national fertility myth refreshed and renewed, Davie's journey of self-abasement in search of and in flight from "the man going mad inside me". Despite their superficial resemblance the poems form a tantalising study in contrast, a contrast that goes to the heart of the relationship between these two central figures in post-war British poetry.

Any comparative reading of Larkin and Davie must still begin with the Movement, despite its members' tepid *esprit de corps* even in its heyday. Groucho Marx refused to belong to a club that would have him as a member; Movement poets seem to form a club that nobody ever joined. As Davie wrote in a 1959 retrospect:

nothing now strikes me as so significant and so queer about "the Movement", as the way all of us who were supposed to be "in" it still spoke of it among ourselves inside invisible quotation-marks. We ridiculed and deprecated "the Movement" even as we kept it going.

If the Larkin-Davie connection is one of the most important in the network of friendships and alliances that made up the Movement, the two men's later quarrels expose the tensions behind those "invisible quotation-marks" from the start. A trawl through Larkin's *Selected Letters* shows a curve of guarded admiration for Davie quickly declining into exasperation. The two men met in 1954 when Davie invited Larkin, then at Belfast, to give a lecture

on modern poetry in Trinity College, Dublin ("to be given, by me, by word of mouth", a panic-stricken Larkin reported to Patsy Strang). In 1958 Larkin's relations with him remain "friendly", but by 1961 a record Davie made for George Hartley's Listen label is a "waste [of] good money" on Davie "droning out his tosh". In 1972 Davie devoted a much-cited chapter of his *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* to Larkin, identifying his choice of Hardy over Yeats as a symptom of anti-Modernist failure of nerve and the "poetry of lowered sights and patiently diminished expectations". Worse was to come the following year when Larkin's *Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse* was savaged by Davie in the *Listener* as a "perverse triumph of philistinism" and "a calamity", representing "an anthology of verse rather than poetry" in which gentlemen poetasters usurp the place of David Jones, Elizabeth Daryush and Richard Murphy and others. Further, he alleged that the book had been part-edited by Charles Monteith, the "familiar toad in All Souls". Larkin wrote not once but twice to deny this, while declining to engage with any of Davie's other charges or those of his supporters, who included Tom Scott, Michael Schmidt and William Cookson in a lively correspondence that ran for over two months.

Speaking to Anthony Thwaite on Radio 3 in April, Larkin smuggled a jibe at his adversary into the mock-humble confession that "for all we know" the poets of the '50s and '60s may not be Larkin and Hughes but "Davie and Brian Patten". The comparison can only have incensed Davie, who had singled out Patten's "Portrait of a Young Girl Raped at a Suburban Party" as the nadir of Larkin's anthology. Davie's Parthian shaft was the poem "Replying to Reviewers", published in the *Listener* on 19 July. In good harrumphing style, it attacks the co-opted dissent of angry young men turned establishment bores, the examples being Auden and a certain "such-and-such, provincial on the make/ who made it in the 1950s, now/ striking his right-wing attitudes like clockwork". Patten's poem exemplifies "a cut-price culture savaging its master" (echoing the "cut-price crowd" of Larkin's "Here"), though with the saving grace that Patten has not joined in the unseemly *Listener* mêlée: "Don't answer your reviewers./ Proud Brian Patten didn't, there's my boy". The irony of preaching "don't answer your reviewers" in a poem that does precisely that cannot have been lost on Davie, while the "provincial" smear is less than convincing coming from the Barnsley grammar school

boy, raising the wan hope that the satire is directed as much against Davie's pomposity as against Larkin and Patten. Larkin saved his poetic response for his letters, where Davie became the butt of doggerel ridicule: "Davie, Davie/ Give me a bad review". (When confronted by Larkin's private baiting of him in 1993, Davie wrote of Larkin's letters: "This is a hateful and disgraceful book... The damage it will do is incalculable".)

Larger issues than the poetic merits of Brian Patten are at stake in the *Oxford Book* exchanges. As we shall see, Larkin's "historical perspective" or lack of it bothered Davie, and as a traditional, anti-Modernist manifesto (if manifesto isn't too Modernist a word) the *Oxford Book* sets its face against the Eliotian sense of tradition as something difficult, to be earned by "great labour" rather than simply "inherited". (Writing to Robert Conquest in 1957, Larkin wonders "why does [Charles Tomlinson] assume I haven't read Tradition and the &c? I have, and think it piss.") Larkin's tradition requires no theoretical underpinnings: it is "human life as we know it", as he argued for it in *All What Jazz*, requiring no definition yet powerful enough to see off the Modernist revolution of "Parker, Pound or Picasso". Ironically then, it is Davie more than Larkin who is self-consciously arguing for "tradition" (in Eliot's sense) when he demands in *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* that we see the continuities not just between Larkin and Hardy but between Hardy, Prynne and Fisher, with commendations of Ed Dorn and Charles Olson thrown in along the way. Strange company for Larkin to be keeping, perhaps, but when Davie invokes "A shared humanity" at the climax of "In the Stopping Train" he has implicitly been arguing for a canon broad enough to accommodate such polarities, and to make their coexistence seem "traditional", even.

One of the effects of Davie and Larkin's public falling out has been to obscure such connections. Davie's admirers have treated Larkin with suspicion, anxious not to give succour to the anti-Modernist cause. Introducing the most recent edition of Davie's *Collected Poems* Neil Powell entertains the prospect of a "poet as approachable as Larkin" emerging from a winnowed-down version of the book, before sharply distinguishing the two men's post-Movement trajectory, while in his *Harvill Book of Twentieth-Century Poetry in English* Michael Schmidt awards Davie nine pages to Larkin's eight. To Larkin's admirers, by contrast, the problem is often remembering that Davie is there at all: compar-

ing him to his fellow Movementers James Booth finds only an “embarrassing gulf in literary complexity between Larkin and all the others.” In what follows I propose to examine the two men’s differences from and with each other, and how they transcend and complicate the usual Movement-inspired lines of demarcation.

A simplistic account of Davie’s parting of the ways with the Movement would point to his self-expatriation in Stanford and Tennessee and embrace of radical American poetics, not least in the form of Larkin’s great Satan, Ezra Pound; but for all his vehemence where Larkin was concerned, a side of Davie remains artistically loyal to his friend, even as another side of him tries to stamp his influence out. In the same way it is characteristic of Davie that when he starts to react against Movement Anglocentrism in the 1950s, in his anti-Kingsley Amis poem, “Via Portello”, he subtly undercuts his cosmopolitan pretensions at the same time. In Padua he finds a “conscious vista closed at either end”, a phrase presumably directed at Amis’s parochialism, though in fact the vista in question is Italian, not English. That it is in Padua counts for nothing: it is not remotely glamorous, but grim and impoverished. By seeing “abroad” in terms of postcard exoticism it is Amis who is in thrall to ideas of cosmopolitan chic, while Davie remains un-taken in—the less deceived, one might say. The poem could almost be subtitled “The Unimportance of Elsewhere”, if “unimportance” is understood as a compliment (nothing like something can happen anywhere, after all).

The dialectic of home and abroad also underwrites another Movement stereotype that gives Davie pause, the suspicion of poetry in translation. Larkin’s hostility to poetry in translation rumbles like an ostinato bass under his criticism, while Davie’s poetry and prose chorus their passionate advocacy of it, frequently under the Poundian flag. In “Hearing English Spoken”, another Davie version of “The Importance of Elsewhere”, he moves from the brokenness of his Russian to an awareness that “I speak/ Even in English brokenly”, the undermining of his linguistic at-homeness enjoyed and disapproved of at the same time. Larkin was less ambiguous on the subject. In his review of Davie’s version of Mickiewicz, *The Forests of Lithuania*, published by the Marvell Press in 1959, he wrote “I am always sorry when poets desert their private agonies to rehash others’ literature”. Though the book was “a pleasure to read”, he could not surmount a “con-

tinued bewilderment as to what it is about and why it was written".

The same opposition of home and abroad provides a handy point of entry into "In the Stopping Train". More than any other of his poems this can be read as Davie's attempt to work out his quarrel with Larkin, the Movement and the values he saw embodied in that central Movement text, "The Whitsun Weddings". For Neil Powell the two poems "could hardly be more different in tone and manner." "The Whitsun Weddings" dates from 1955, "In the Stopping Train" from twenty-two years later. The time gap is crucial: while Larkin traverses an England still recognisably innocent of the Beatles and *Lady Chatterley*, Davie is writing as a Stanford professor, holidaying not in Britain but France, where he travels from Tours to Paris and back. The two poets' views of the landscapes passing by are, again, a study in contrast. For all his identification with the city of Hull Larkin never names it in his poetry, and eschews Betjemanesque litanies of place names as he journeys south. England, the home place, is simply there, without needing to be named beyond the bare minimum of references to Lincolnshire and London. Though much more topographical than Larkin ever was, Davie's affinities lie not with Betjeman but Roy Fisher, a dedicatee of his travelogue *The Shires* in 1974 and an unsurprising omission from Larkin's *Oxford Book*. As against the symbolist underpinnings of "The Whitsun Weddings", triumphantly laid bare at its end, Davie (like Fisher) prefers the disjunctive mode of allegory, presenting his journey as a purgatorial pilgrim's progress. The stopping train of his title is a non-express. "Woe is us, we're in the slow and easy", a character says in Beckett's *Mercier and Camier* when he boards a similar vehicle, and for Davie too the stopping train triggers an unmistakable moral panic:

I have got into the slow train
again. I made the mistake
knowing what I was doing,
knowing who had to be punished.

I know who has to be punished:
the man going mad inside me;
whether I am fleeing
from him or towards him.

Not much landscape on show there, while the following stanza introduces the scene from the window with what is almost derision:

This journey will punish the bastard:
he'll have his flowering gardens
to stare at through the hot window;
words like "laurel" won't help.

Any pastoral expectations are in for a ruthless debunking. Five years previously Davie had displayed a similar astringency in his discussion of "The Whitsun Weddings", "Landscapes of Larkin". Davie praises the poem for its refusal to moralise on its dismantled cars and dirty canals, a refusal he links, against the grain of more sociological readings, to the poem's containing "no historical perspective, no measuring of present against past." In contrast to those who would cast Larkin as a misanthrope, Davie sees an excess of compassionate humanism preventing any outbreak in the poem of *Waste Land*-type nostalgia for pre-industrial culture. Larkin accepts the soiled England he sees as "the only one we have, violated and subutopianised and poisoned as it is". This acceptance, however, is conditional on the landscape remaining subordinate to its social applications, which are in turn re-presented as facts of nature, as in the final vision of London postal districts "packed like squares of wheat". As Davie comments: "Larkin makes himself numb to the non-human creation in order to stay compassionate towards the human." What for Edna Longley makes "The Whitsun Weddings" a supreme example of Larkin's art, the achieved balance of "the artist... necessary to society, the poem... equivalent to society", is for Davie exactly what he dislikes about the poem. Larkin achieves his adequation of poem to society only by settling for the "poetry of lowered sights and patently diminished expectations" to which Davie cannot be reconciled. "Heartening evidence" though it is of British poetry's meeting of an "historically unprecedented challenge", it is written "from a standpoint we cannot endorse."

The unaccustomed ferocity of diction, for Davie, of "bastard" in the third stanza of "In the Stopping Train" signals a rejection of any such "balance" or equanimity. The "man going mad inside me" is at odds with his surroundings in every way:

He abhors his fellows,
especially children; let there
not for pity's sake
be a crying child in the carriage.

Who exactly is he though? The note of anguished interiority is an unusual one in Davie's poetry. Unusual enough, I believe, to feed a bold suspicion: that the man is none other than Larkin, or the side of Davie that would accept the social contract and lowered sights of "The Whitsun Weddings" in the way he sees Larkin as doing. Davie's diction repeatedly gestures towards the Larkinesque: phrases like "enormous sadness", "bewildered fierceness" and "recklessness like breeding" could pass unnoticed in "The Whitsun Weddings", while the flowers he fails to recognise in section four recall the "weak, propitiatory flowers" of Larkin's recently-published "The Building". The dislike of children too is Larkinesque, recalling the "children/ with their shallow violent eyes" from the 1970 poem "How". It is Larkin rather than Davie who has been celebrated as the laureate of brand-name nostalgia, but the names of the cars abandoned by the train tracks—Vauxhall, Volvo, Simca—are a further rapprochement to the Larkin mode.

Remembering Davie's fault-finding with "The Whitsun Weddings" for its rejection of the non-human, the reader might expect more sympathy with the natural world from Davie. On the contrary, of the two poems it is "In the Stopping Train" which is by far the less attentive to what goes on outside its train window. His powers of observation, Davie felt, were never among his strengths: "You a poet, and you notice so little!" as his wife tells him in his memoir *These the Companions*. Puzzled by a jonquil, he asserts the sovereignty of imagination over trifling detail: "Has it a white and yellow/ flower, the jonquil? Has it/ a perfume? Oh his art could/ always pretend it had." This anti-empirical hubris represents the opposite pole to the Larkinesque vocabulary, setting up a poetic alternation between the two modes not unlike that of the stopping train itself, with its stop-start progression. This is reflected too in the abrupt transitions in Davie's poem from section to section, pre-empting the slow build-up and accumulation of detail that drives "The Whitsun Weddings".

Another occasion of argufying with Larkin in Davie's poem is the question of history and nationhood. Though "The Whitsun

Weddings" faced a "historically unprecedented challenge", it did so for Davie without the benefit of "historical perspective". It is unusual to find Larkin pulled up for lack of sensitivity to British history or tradition, but for all his Poundian excursions Davie was profoundly exercised by questions of England and Englishness throughout his career, though coming up with very different answers from Larkin's. In his sequence "England" he describes a patriotic friend for whom the country

must not be seen to be
dishonoured, he thinks, and so he
lowers the threshold of honour;
for your sake he will revise
the entire inheritance downwards.

This rephrases his "lowered sights" argument while hinting that conservative nostalgia is not just powerless to halt national decline but may even be complicit in it—not an insight that ever occurred to the Larkin of "Homage to a Government" or "Going, Going". This is not the thrust of Davie's objections in "Landscapes of Larkin", however, where Larkin with his compassionate humanism is located squarely in the political centre. Placing himself instinctively further to the right, Davie quotes Colin Falck, in a passage rich with irony in the wake of Larkin's posthumous demonisation: "In rejecting Larkin's particular brand of 'humanism' I may seem to be asking for the kind of 'right wing' violence to which D.H. Lawrence was sometimes led. I think I am".

Davie's recoil from the implications of this restores a measure of sympathy for Larkin, though he remains unhappy with the "diminished" world he offers. This shuttling back and forth between degrees of dissent is close to the style of "In the Stopping Train", preparing us for the discussion of national identity he introduces into section five of that poem. The nation in question is not England but Australia, as seen through the work of Judith Wright. Wright is "the voice/ of her unhappy nation". To Davie it is a country of "disequilibrium", with the trauma of decolonisation still ahead of it. As colonialism withers, Australia will no longer be able to displace its guilt onto far-away Britain: the freedom it can look forward to is at best that of a "still-to-be-guilty nation". Far from overcoming guilt and disillusionment, the

things he found missing from "The Whitsun Weddings", Davie's "historical perspective" painfully calls them down upon itself. This for me is the crux of the difference between Davie and Larkin. Although "The Whitsun Weddings" is by far the more impersonal poem, it is finally more gregarious and accepting. By the time we reach its Shakespearean arrow-shower—"A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower/ Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain"—Larkin has established a shared identity which leaves the poet free to keep his distance from his travelling companions but somehow at peace with them too. Finding no such shared identity, "In the Stopping Train" turns on itself instead. Sections five and six portray the poet as self-justified in the face of artistic duty but soured and paralysed, more not less deceived: "nobody knows just how/ truths turn into deceptions".

Davie now returns to exploring his own feelings towards his travelling companion: "I have travelled with him many times/ now. Already we nod,/ we are almost on speaking terms". He surprises him in what looks like remorse for his detachment, an "apologetic gesture/ at what we turned away from", but there is no last-ditch return to nature. The passenger continues to disregard the natural and human landscape, "coppice and chateau", "igniting and occluding" all he sees in the hope that "dulled words" will at least "keep still". The poem's pro- and anti-Larkin poles blur, allowing the passenger to combine the one's alienation from nature and history and the other's belief in pure imagination, in the search to put a stop to the disorienting "dance of words" ("this much I can command,/ exclude".) But it is too late.

The final section is most explicit of all in synthesising the speaker and the passenger, or as I have argued throughout, Davie and Larkin. It begins:

"A shared humanity..." He
pummels his temples. "Surely,
surely that means something."

He knew too few in love,
too few in love.

Read as a contemporary analysis of Larkin this would seem straightforward enough: the aloof poet realising his isolation from humanity and atoning for it in the inclusive social vision of "The

Whitsun Weddings". Except that "he" is no longer the speaker's fellow passenger but the speaker making his tentative peace with the humanism the other man already possesses; tentative, since the speaker can only bear to identify himself negatively as "not/our chap [i.e. the passenger], but another". The original journey behind "In the Stopping Train" was to meet the Irish poet John Montague, though the two men failed to rendezvous, we are told in a note. In his journey into Larkin's work these lines represent the point at which Davie comes closest to his friend's work, though here again the encounter miscarries at the last, just as a reconciliation with Larkin's aesthetic seems finally possible. The realisation of a "shared humanity" provides Davie with the courage to go and do not likewise but otherwise, free at last of the rancorous "man going mad inside me" yet chastened by the encounter. Throughout his work Davie struggled to produce a lover's credo to match the conclusion of Larkin's "An Arundel Tomb"; the ending of "In the Stopping Train" ("He knew too few in love") may be as close as he gets.

This may not be the only close encounter between the two poems, however. If "The Whitsun Weddings" anticipates Davie's poem, it is not without borrowings of its own. Larkin told Jean Hartley that the arrow-shower in its last lines derives from a scene in Olivier's *Henry V*, but there is another possibility: that Larkin has taken the image from a poet more usually associated with Davie, Austin Clarke. At the time of Davie and Larkin's first meeting in Dublin, Davie was enthusiastically proselytising for the Irish poet, one of whose best-known early poems, "The Lost Heifer", ends: "And her voice coming softly over the meadow/Was the mist becoming rain". Larkin would go on to include two of Clarke's poems (though not "The Lost Heifer") in his *Oxford Book*. It is tantalisingly unprovable but nonetheless compelling to imagine the talk on commons in Trinity College turning to Clarke, who would then go on to influence not only Larkin's greatest poem but Davie's reply to it.

Davie's relationship with Larkin involves attraction and repulsion, a journeying towards with no guarantee of encounter, or if they do encounter no guarantee of agreement: an on-off, stop-start affair for which the stopping train provides a fitting metaphor. But not the only metaphor: in a small postscript to their quarrel, the third-last poem of Davie's *Collected Poems*, "Two Intercepted Letters" is subtitled "i.m. Philip Larkin", and offers a

last word on the two men's friendship in the form of fictional letters by John Clare from Northampton General Asylum. In the first, Clare recalls Byron, whom he had "avoided, slighted" for his hostility to Landor, always a favourite poet of Davie's. By way of reparation Clare writes:

Injurious print
Outlasts all slate, although
What's said should be unsaid
Of Byron dead.

In the second, Clare describes his "traffic with/ Lord Byron and such spectres" which "grave-robbers" and "monsters" disturb with their attacks on the dead poet. There would be no need for the letters if Clare had not "slighted" Byron during his lifetime, though in any case his letters of remorse have not been delivered. But as a final gesture it would seem to revise downward by at least one the tally of the disregarded in the final line of "In the Stopping Train": "He knew too few in love".