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Review Article

Reverence or Resistance? Reading Larkin's Poetry

Philip Larkin and English Poetry. By Terry Whalen. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1986. Pp. ix, 164. \$18.95.

Philip Larkin once remarked in an interview: "There is nothing like writing poems for realizing how low the level of critical understanding is; maybe the average reader can understand what I say, but the above-average often can't" (76). Like T. S. Eliot's preference for "an audience which could neither read nor write" (152), Larkin's championing of the "average reader" betrays a certain levity, though behind the ironic humour can be detected an anxiety over the interpretative licence a reader may exert in his or her zeal to understand a poem. The elevation of the illiterate and the average is in fact condescending since both poets do not seriously expect such an audience to read or appreciate their poems or to understand the "tribute" paid them through the reversal of the usual valuations assigned words like "illiterate" and "average." What is really at stake, then, in these provocative but surely self-defeating examples of irony is the struggle to control the interpretative labours of the reader by asserting the prior authority of the poet. Larkin seems to imply that the simplicity and humility of the average reader will guard against the complicating arrogance of the above-average and, thus, honour the amicable contract between author and audience that ensures the smooth and pleasurable transmission of meaning. But such a contract honours the reader's pleasure by rejecting the importance of critical labour, the task of questioning the poetic work. Jake Balokowsky, the aggressive and unscrupulous American academic featured in "Posterity," is the sort of above-average reader Larkin warns us against. But though one does not wish to excuse Balokowsky's careerism, one also wonders if the poem's excessive

ressentiment does not betray the poet's fear that his authority would be usurped by the imaginary academic who is also, significantly, described as the poet's biographer.

No threat to Larkin's authority is posed by Terry Whalen, a sympathetic above-average reader out to dispel interpretations that depict Larkin as a gloomy old sod interested only in the average and the everyday. In his introduction, Whalen states that his book aims "for the effect sought after by most appreciative works of literary criticism." Such appreciative criticism must convey the critic's "understanding of the poetry in a way which will encourage new readers to recognize the complexity of the poet's art, and at the same time return seasoned readers to the poetry with additional reasons for their praise and for consent to the poet's major status" (9). As an appreciation of Larkin's art Whalen's book is appropriately passionate and reverential, though it should also be noted that the complexity of that art is somewhat attenuated by the very appreciation that is lavished on it. I have no quarrel with Whalen's attempt to elevate Larkin to "major status" (a status already ensured in any case), but I am disturbed by his untroubled assumption that a poet's importance is measured solely by the reader's "praise" or "consent." Our recognition of "major status" need not involve "praise" or "consent" and may, in fact, more urgently, call for criticism, evaluation and even disagreement. A writer's importance may as often be measured by the reader's resistance as by his or her reverence. But not to resist the temptation is to allow one's appreciative insights to occlude more interesting complexities and questions.

Whalen's study belongs in the company of revisionist readings of Larkin produced by such critics as Barbara Everett, Andrew Motion and Seamus Heaney. These critics read Larkin's poems against the grain of the assumed public persona of the poet, a persona for whom deprivation is what daffodils were to Wordsworth. Like them, Whalen discerns behind this lugubrious persona a poet who is more positive and romantic in both sensibility and practice. Larkin's work, in this view, exhibits a "qualified romanticism" despite his "knowledge of innumerable reasons for despair" (8).

In promoting this version of Larkin as a romantic realist, Whalen first situates Larkin's critical realism in the tradition of Dr. Johnson's "Vanity of Human Wishes" and then compares his more romantic "poetry of passing wonder" (54) to the work of D. H. Lawrence and the Imagists. Whalen argues that Larkin's "less deceived" stance owes as much to Dr. Johnson's classical restraint and moralistic suspicion of the "hunger of the imagination" (33) as to the unsentimental realism of

the Movement writers. The comparison of Larkin to Dr. Johnson is apt, but Whalen adds little to existing analyses of the unillusioned strain in Larkin's verse. Whalen agrees with the view that Larkin portrays ordinary humanity as easily deceived, "victimized by the dream pictures of life, enslaved by the sentimental idealism which permeates the streetscapes and the mindscape of the contemporary world" (46). While it is true that Larkin generally regards ordinary people as passive, somnolent consumers duped by mass advertising (especially in poems like "Here," "The Large Cool Store" and "Essential Beauty"), it is also the case that in a few poems Larkin provides a less condescending and more complicated account of consumer behaviour. The voice in "A Study of Reading Habits," for example, is that of an ordinary man equally conscious of the attractive escapism of pulp fiction and dismissive of its seductive illusions. Similarly, in "Sunny Prestatyn," Larkin describes the disfigurement of a travel poster's promise of perfection by that ubiquitous critic "Titch Thomas." To his credit, Whalen, in his discussion of "Sunny Prestatyn," acknowledges "the 'less deceived' mentality of the rebellious graffiti." But, in almost the next sentence, the acknowledgement is qualified: "Nevertheless, if the graffiti oddly signify a critical capacity in the common man, Larkin more often sees ordinary humanity as the victim of the commercial dreams" (44-45). Larkin's contradictory stance towards the modern consumer, who is seen as both dupe and critic, should not be resolved by a breezy "nevertheless" or a dismissive "oddly" but should inform any exploration of the complex relation between mass cultural forms and their consumers. As a recent analysis of popular culture reminds us: "Social agency is employed in the activation of *all* meanings. Audiences or viewers, lookers or users are not simple-minded multitudes. As the media extends its sphere of influence, so also does it come under the critical surveillance *and* usage of its subjects" (McRobbie, 58). Titch Thomas may not be a Dr. Johnson or a Philip Larkin or a Terry Whalen, but there is nothing *odd* about his ability to criticize the commercial dreams aimed his way.

Whalen's discussion of Larkin's affinities with Lawrence is more stimulating though only half convincing. Within the "less deceived" persona, Whalen argues, is an "other" Larkin who shares with Lawrence a faith, bordering on the religious, in the possibility of realizing a "pure relationship with the living universe about us" (69). This Lawrentian Larkin reveals a sensitive concern for the beauty and mysterious otherness of the world in such poems as "Wedding Wind," "The Explosion," "Cut Grass," "The Trees," "Sad Steps" and "Solar." But

even as one agrees that a Lawrentian sense of awe is present in these poems, one also feels that there *is* a difference, that their structure of feeling, their tone is not quite the same as that found in Lawrence's work. Whalen's comparison of "Solar" to Lawrence's apotheosis of the sun provides a case in point. Whalen sees "Solar" as a hymn-like poem in praise of "the sun's essence as the natural symbol of perfection in the universe, the center of all creation" (72). Larkin's "valuing of the mysterious presence of the sun" (71) is compared to Lawrence's assertion that man's "greatest and final relation is with the sun, the sun of suns.... In the last great connections, he lifts his body speechless to the sun" (72). But Whalen's illuminating comparison ignores at the same time the considerable shadow of difference that falls between Lawrence's uninhibited Mithraic paganism and Larkin's rather cautious and knowing examination of the fictive elements at the heart of human symbols. Whalen reads "Solar" rather simplistically as a "unified thematic expression" of the sun's revitalizing power. All the images of the poem are said to "complement one another" and, Whalen adds, even "the phonetic level of the form, its layering of *o* sounds, mimes the circularity and perfection which the images suggest" (72). But what is ignored in this "solarcentric" reading is precisely the extravagant, centrifugal proliferation of images as the sun changes catachrestically from "lion face" to "stalkless flower," from pyrotechnic explosion to golden coin and, finally, to an unclosed hand. The self-conscious, excessive figures of "Solar" are more expressive of our human investment in "saving illusions" or fictions ("Our needs hourly/ Climb and return like angels./ Unclosing like a hand,/ You give for ever") than of the quasi-religious promise of the "greatest and final relation." In other words, the verbal wit and metaphoric abundance of "Solar" resemble more the disillusioned gaiety of Wallace Stevens than the earnest faith of D. H. Lawrence.

Whalen simplifies further when he claims that Larkin also shares Lawrence's interest in fostering genuine human community. Seeking to dispel the image of Larkin as "smug and aloof in his attitudes to life" (77), Whalen argues that some of Larkin's best poems are those that celebrate "ritual community events" (75). But in his determination to revalue Larkin by digging out his work those heroic Lawrentian virtues prized by modern critics like Leavis, Whalen loses his critical balance. As Larkin's "Deceptions" warns: "where/ Desire takes charge, readings will grow erratic." Untroubled by the gap between his praise of Larkin's "solitary wonder" (the title of chapter 4) and his promotion of those poems that celebrate "family and nation" (the title of chapter

5), Whalen remarks that the solitude embraced by Larkin and Lawrence is compatible with their solicitude for community life: "The sensitivity to mystery that is nourished by their solitude often moves outward to an appreciation of a social beauty that is the more perceptible when they attend to community life in its moments of spontaneous ceremony" (81). But such a statement is rather unhelpful in that its confidence evades precisely the problem of contradiction that needs to be addressed. For while it may be the case that Lawrence's work enables a productive debate between the individual and his or her community, Larkin's poetry seems to me to require the imposition of distance between the two.

Whalen argues that in the poems that celebrate community rituals, poems such as "The Whitsun Weddings," "To the Sea" and "Show Saturday," Larkin shows how cynicism and egoism are reduced as the poems' speakers "grow to realize that they are 'part of a whole,' that there is an otherness to which they belong" (81). But it can be argued against Whalen that the reduction of egoism in these poems confers greater authority on their speakers and that the identification of the self with others turns out merely to be the self's desire to represent others. Whalen claims that the speaker's initial indifference and detachment in "The Whitsun Weddings" is transformed, by the end of the poem, into sympathy and identification as he "finds a connection with common humanity and...celebrates it" (83). The "frail/ Travelling coincidence" the speaker celebrates is, however, surely the fortuitous assembly of different parties, quite unlike the sustained unities and interrelationships demanded by a genuine community such as that described in the "Wedding at the Marsh" chapter of Lawrence's *The Rainbow* which Whalen compares to Larkin's poem (84-85). What Whalen describes as the speaker's "spontaneous participation in the small beauty of the festivities" (82) can be seen instead as his somewhat fastidious observation of a community to which he does not belong. How else can we explain the curiosity which yields only a train of stereotypes: the fathers with "broad belts" and "seamy foreheads," "mothers loud and fat;/An uncle shouting smut; and then the perms,/The nylon gloves and jewellery-substitutes." What Whalen praises as "the felt life of the scenes" (83) seems to me to be merely a clichéd ethnography of petty bourgeois rituals. Moreover, the speaker's "connection with common humanity" only appears to increase his sense of conscious superiority as he compares *his knowledge* of the journey's significance to the wedded couples' dazed incomprehension:

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...

"None thought" but the "I" does as he transforms his journey, the landscape and his travelling companions into a significance known only to him. At the heart of the poem's "travelling coincidence" one finds an isolated superiority. As Stan Smith has so aptly remarked of the poem's speaker: "there is no one else like him on the train" (176).

"To the Sea," another poem that Whalen describes as portraying a moment of "living organic connection" (88), relies on an aesthetics of distance. "The attending observation," Whalen writes, "is one of communion" (89). But the poem's speaker is careful to maintain some distance between himself and the crowded beach. Distance is imposed by the mode of recollection as the speaker remembers childhood participation while insisting on his present estrangement: "Strange to it now, I watch the cloudless scene." But estrangement confers conscious articulate knowledge of the ritual importance of annual seaside holidays, a theoretical understanding denied the vacationers whose "knowledge" is mere unconscious habit ("through habit these do best"). In the midst of the "living organic connection" of the crowd, the speaker remains alone, a non-participant observer. There is no one else like him either on the beach.

The spectatorial aloofness of Larkin's speakers betrays a desire to escape the merely human. In "Wants," Larkin declares, "Beyond all this, the wish to be alone:/...Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs." "Here" expresses the wish to escape the "cut-price crowd, urban yet simple" for an "unfenced existence:/ Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach." "High Windows," Larkin's version of "Sailing to Byzantium," concludes with this profoundly anti-social desire:

Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:
 The sun-comprehending glass,
 And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
 Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.

At least Yeats bids farewell to "fish, flesh or fowl" for an ideal community of art and artists; Larkin rejects not only the human mess but also the dialogic, social nature of language for a transcendence that is ultimately inhuman, if not nihilistic, in its purity.

Larkin is described not only as a poet who celebrates the "beauty of festive community events" but also as one who is attentive to "beauty in the commonplace" (91). Whalen claims that the epiphanic vision expressed in poems like "High Windows" owes much to Larkin's "habit of beholding visual sensitivity" (98), a sensitivity likened to that of Imagist poetry. Imagist theorists like Hulme and Pound are quoted to show how their concern for "the empirical health of poetry" (99) is shared by Larkin. This "attentiveness to the details of the empirical world" (93) results in a "poetry of reality" (the title of chapter 6): "Larkin is a poet of reality in the sense that the real world is never far away in his work, and it is commonly at the centre of his thematic concerns" (95). Aside from the implicit tautology of such a statement (a poet of reality is one who writes about the real world), there is something touchingly innocent about a poetics that regards images as immediate and unproblematic transcriptions of reality. Whalen is of course not so naive as to ignore the subjective presence in the poetic epistemology of Larkin or the Imagists. As he admits: "[T]he world of fact is uninteresting or downright mute unless it is sifted and rearranged into meaning by the unifying intelligence of the poet.... The poet's colouring of the facts of the world by his poetic personality and his thematic compulsions takes all major poetry of immediacy past a mere suspension of objects" (104). Still, poetry is valued for its immediacy and good poems are said to be "directly experiential" and "grounded in actual observation" (104). We are presented with a curious epistemology that sees, on the one hand, a world of neutral, inert facts and, on the other, a poetic personality who unifies, enriches and transforms these facts into meaning. Such a view ignores the possibility that facts, far from being inert, are already part of a culturally coded system of signs and signifying practices. It also ignores recent psychoanalytic theories that question the unity of the self or, in Whalen's phrase, "the unifying intelligence" (104), by revealing its repressions and imaginary identifications.

I am especially troubled by Whalen's faith in the poetic self of personality because it is precisely such unquestioning innocence that allows him to rhapsodize about the veracity of poetic vision. In what follows, I would like to argue that the visual sensitivity and healthy empiricism Whalen celebrates in Larkin's poetry are in fact tainted by an obsessive scopophilia akin to voyeurism. The truth in Larkin's poems, Whalen claims, "is inseparable from an attending alertness of mind" (97). And one of the examples adduced to support this is the

first line of "High Windows": "When I see a couple of kids ..." But the poem continues:

And guess he's fucking her and she's
 Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm
 I know this is paradise
 Everyone old has dreamed of all their lives.

Far from being "a poet of sympathetic observation" (96), Larkin's look is decidedly prurient. The mind is perversely alert only to its own obsessions; it wouldn't otherwise immediately translate its vision of a couple of kids into a meditation on sexual promiscuity. In Larkin's poetry, looking is seldom an innocent act that leads to an epiphanic understanding of the world. Like his counterpart in "High Windows," the speaker in "The Whitsun Weddings," as we have seen, carefully maintains a safe and anonymous distance from the people he observes even as his look fixes and judges them. This is of course a description of voyeurism and it is often the case that Larkin's poems involve quite explicit acts of voyeurism. The first poem in *The Less Deceived* is called "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album" and it describes the male poet's excited perusal of the album as his "swivel eye hungers from pose to pose." In "Reasons for Attendance" the "wholeness of attending" Whalen finds in Larkin's poetry is given the lie by the speaker's casuistic attempt to justify his loneliness and alienation as he observes forlornly, through a window, the dancing couples, "sensing the smoke and sweat,/The wonderful feel of girls." The power of the look, its ability to fix and contain others from a discreet distance, informs another poem called "Latest Face":

Latest face, so effortless
 Your great arrival at my eyes,
 No one standing near could guess
 Your beauty had no home till then.

Even in "Dublinesque," praised by Whalen for achieving "the imagist requirement that the poem represent a moment of suggestive illumination" (107), the speaker remains a distanced observer whose impressions of "a troop of streetwalkers" mourning one of their own appear informed more by touristic *frisson* than by intimate local understanding. The eye, in Larkin's poetry, far from being an organ of sympathetic observation is more an instrument of scopophilia, of a voyeurism that looks and judges, objectifies and masters while withdrawing itself from view. Christian Metz's Lacanian inspired analysis of scopophilia can be applied instructively to Larkin's own passion for perceiv-

ing: "Psychophysiology makes a classic distinction between the 'senses at a distance' (sight and hearing) and the others all of which are exchanges between immediate neighbours and which it calls 'senses of contact.'... Freud notes that voyeurism, like sadism in this respect, always keeps apart the *object* (here the object looked at) and the *source* of the drive, i.e. the generative organ (the eye); the voyeur does not look at his eye.... [C]areful to maintain a gulf, an empty space between the object and the eye,...his look fastens the object at the right distance" (60-61).

The final chapter of Whalen's book is entitled "Larkin's Proper Peers" and it offers a Procrustean reading of Ted Hughes, Thom Gunn and R. S. Thomas that squeezes their work into the "poetry of reality" mould into which Larkin has already been inserted. This is by far the weakest and least convincing chapter in the book and appears more like a superfluous appendix than a necessary part of Whalen's argument. The "poetry of reality" rubric or category is stretched so widely that it can be made to accommodate almost all varieties of poetic work. As a consequence definitional rigour and theoretical clarity are lost. To be fair to Whalen, he does admit that Hughes, Gunn and Thomas "are radically different from Larkin on a whole series of counts, but they nevertheless share with him the rudimentary pleasure of participation in reality" (116). It strikes me, however, that the "whole series of counts" on which the three poets are different from Larkin overwhelm any "rudimentary pleasure" they may share with him. Moreover, this shared "pleasure of participation in reality" turns out to be nothing more than the disappointing observation that they all value the external world and its exact delineation. Who doesn't? At any rate, though both Larkin and Hughes may offer "exact" descriptions of nature, there is surely a world of difference between Larkin's lovely "Cut Grass" with its delicate, nostalgic recall of Georgian verse and Hughes's spiky "Thistles" with its knowing atavistic nod to Icelandic sagas.

There is much that is instructive and useful in Whalen's appreciative study of Larkin. If I have appeared unduly critical of his book it is because I fear the danger of simplification in revisionist and reverential readings, such as his, that tend to overemphasize the affirmative, epiphanic strain in Larkin's work. Resisting Larkin's rehabilitation in the name of his own diffident and complicated poetry, I have to declare my preference for the poet described by his equally fouled-up biographer a "one of those old-type natural fouled-up guys."

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