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PHILIP LARKIN: A PSYCHO-LITERARY SKETCH

Philip Larkin: A Psycho-Literary Sketch

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Abstract: *In the first part of his autobiography, entitled Words, Jean-Paul Sartre describes how as a child he discovered that words gave him a sense of power and a control of a world from which he felt divorced, and how he developed the habit of adopting personae to cope with reality. But this, he wrote, gave a pattern to his adult life and led to difficulty in coming to terms with his own personality and its emotional needs. Two concepts were important in Sartre's thought: one was alienation and the other angst. In his autobiography he gives these a personal reference. Alienation was concerned with his difficulty of dealing with reality, and angst with the anxiety and fear his emotions evoked. Words for Sartre were a means of dealing with these; they provided what the psychiatrists call a defensive mechanism.*

INTRODUCTION

This is remarkably similar to Philip Larkin's personality, for he, too, was dominated by words. As a child his short-sight led to an immersion in books as his chief recreation and in adult life he read widely and voraciously, especially in literature. One example of this can be seen in the extensive reading he undertook when he edited the Oxford Book of Twentieth Century Verse. But it was writing which took up much of his time and energies. When Philip Larkin was appointed as University Librarian at Hull I was the chairman of the library committee and saw him almost daily. At first I was impressed with the time he spent in his office, arriving early and leaving late. It was only later that I realised that his office was also his study where he spent hours on his private writing as well as the work of the library. Then he would return home and on a good many evenings start writing again. The published letters, which are only a selection, run to 700 printed pages and reveal Larkin as one of the last great letter-writers in England in quantity as well as quality.

Added to the hours he spent on his correspondence was the time he gave to his diaries (destroyed on his instructions after his death), to his essays and reviews, a selection of which were published in Required Writing, and his jazz reviews written from 1961-65 and published as All What Jazz.

As University Librarian he had to write reports to Senate, memoranda to and about staff, library estimates, all of them models of lucidity and precision, and when asked to become secretary of the University's Publications Committee he accepted with alacrity and the job gave him great pleasure. But of all his writings his poems, of course, were what he rightly valued most and he spent hours in composing and revising draft after draft and discarding those that did not satisfy his meticulous standards. He was pleased

with the fame his poetry brought him and with the realisation that his work would form part of the canon of English literature. Poetry was not only the most important part of his writing, but an important part of his life for which he was ready to sacrifice almost everything else. Poetry was a psychological necessity which allowed him to express his emotions and at the same time to control and give form to them. As with Sartre's writings it provided a means of relieving his fears and anxieties.

Larkin was ideally suited to his career as a librarian for this allowed him to give order to the printed word on a large scale. Significantly, in one of his published letters, addressed to Barbara Everett, he describes his 'work' as 'more than ever a refuge from reality' and in 'Toads Revisited' 'the toad work' is seen as a friend who assists this flight from reality:

Give me your arm, old toad; Help me down Cemetery Road.

As well as writing and work there were other 'refuges from reality'. One of these was drink, but it needed more and more to be effective and in the end it damaged his health. 'Aubade' opens with the line 'I work all day and get half-drunk at night', but he confesses that neither dispels his fear of death: the fate we 'know we can't escape, / Yet can't accept'. A greater liberation came to him not from drink but jazz. This allowed him to express his feelings without what Eliot called 'the intolerable wrestle with words'. In his poem for 'Sidney Bechet' he celebrates jazz as Like an enormous yes. My Crescent City Is where your speech alone is understood.

Another escape was humour. Larkin had a keen sense of humour and delighted in hearing or recounting an amusing anecdote. But his wit could be quite cutting in his comments on colleagues and

even on those who counted themselves his friends. I remember one occasion when I remarked of a new volume of verse by a distinguished poet (now dead), who was a close friend of Larkin's, that it was as good as his previous work and was met with the cruel rejoinder, 'You can't fall off the floor'. Perhaps Freud was too sweeping in his assertion in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* that all humour is a disguised way of ventilating repressed wishes and fears, but there was an element of this in Larkin's wit. He was less than generous in his remarks about his contemporaries and rivals. The only living poet I heard him praise without reservation was John Betjeman, but the published letters contradict even this. Betjeman is now with the also-rans; the only winners are those who are safely dead.

Humour was a means of coping with the insecurity which manifested itself in a variety of ways. One of these was his dislike and even fear of foreign travel. After a couple of family trips to Germany as a boy and a school trip to Belgium, he made only two overseas visits; one was to Paris in 1952 with Bruce Montgomery, the other to Hamburg in 1976 to receive the Shakespeare Prize. On this last visit he was accompanied by Monica Jones and looked after by the British Council and this relieved his anxiety. He sometimes said that he disliked 'Abroad', as he called it, because he did not speak any foreign languages, but this was transparently untrue of the USA where he would have received a warm and financially rewarding welcome. And money was always important to him.

Since his death several of his friends have referred to his meanness; notably Kingsley Amis who recounted how his son, Martin, looked forward to meeting Larkin and having a talk about literature. Instead he had to listen to a recital of all the bills Larkin was having to meet on moving from a flat to a house. Larkin always generously gave me inscribed copies of his most recent publications, but on one occasion he passed on to me the copy of Christopher Ricks's edition of Tennyson's *Collected Poems* he had just reviewed. He had had this bound in a new and serviceable library binding and this added to its value, but I was surprised when he asked me for the full published price of the book. He also drove a hard bargain with his publishers as we can see in the letter to Dan Davin of the OUP about the royalties earned on his *Oxford Book of Twentieth Century Verse*. He was generous in helping his friends when they were sick or bereaved, but money was altogether different.

Money gave him security and protection against any unforeseen catastrophe that might lie in wait. His concern was quite irrational for he had a good salary with an adequate pension provision and an increasing income from his books. His expenses were very few; he had no wife or children to maintain and no expensive tastes such as foreign travel. Sartre's habit of adopting different roles is evident in Larkin's correspondence where he constructed a series of personae to hide his real self. Everyone who writes a

letter adjusts his style and contents to meet the tastes and interests of the recipient, but with Larkin it went further than this. At one level it was simply a game he played with close friends like Kingsley Amis and Robert Conquest, in which he created for himself an Alf Garnett character with outrageous views on race and politics. He was certainly not a racist. My wife and I once had staying with us a young Indian woman who was a lecturer in English at Bombay University and a great admirer of Larkin's poetry. At very short notice, which would have given him an excuse for not accepting, we invited him to Sunday lunch. When he came he was extremely courteous to our visitor and after lunch gave her his undivided attention.

His other letters reveal a many-sided complex character who adopted a different persona for each recipient. He was almost secretive about his friends and correspondents, most of whom had little idea of who the others were. I once discussed with him the novels of Barbara Pym and irritated him by saying I thought Anita Brookner the better writer. But even then he never told me that he had been writing to Barbara Pym for some years.

'Secretive' is perhaps an unsatisfactory word to describe this; it was rather a desire to order his personal relations by bringing them within his own control. This desire to establish and protect his identity is seen in the importance he gave to solitude. Those journalists were wrong who described him at the time of his death as 'the Hermit of Hull', for he enjoyed a social life in Hull and occasionally in London.

Nevertheless, I felt, along with others, that there was a private area in his personality and that this was concerned with his poetry. He was always reluctant to discuss his poetry and never lectured on it in the University. This area was a Holy-of-Holies, which he alone entered. This may seem an extravagant way of putting it, but he himself always spoke of his poetry as a gift which came from outside and which he could not explain.

In his book *Solitude*, Anthony Storr emphasises the need for solitude for the creative process and this explains why Larkin valued it so highly. In 'Best Society', a remarkably frank poem published only after his death, he places his need for solitude as starting in childhood, which is where the foundations of our personalities are laid down: When I was a child, I thought, Casually, that solitude Never needed to be sought. Later in life he knew that this was no longer true: Then, after twenty, it became At once more difficult to get And more desired - With this came the realisation that the need for solitude was cutting him off from other people, from commitment and the acceptance of responsibilities.

Our virtues are all social; if, Deprived of solitude, you chafe, It's clear you're not the virtuous sort. But his obsessional need for solitude made him turn his

back on this and refuse to accept that 'to love you must have someone else'. Viciously, then, I lock my door.

The gas-fire breathes. The wind outside Ushers in evening rain. Once more Uncontradicting solitude Supports me on its giant palm; And like a sea-anemone Or simple snail, there cautiously Unfolds, emerges, what I am. Here with his door shut and in solitude he achieved the liberation words brought him. His self-centredness undoubtedly affected his most intimate relationships; it never allowed him to make a life-long commitment to another person and held him back from marriage; and the thought of having children filled him with horror. This fear of giving himself away explains his interest in pornography which indulged his sexual fantasies without involving a real woman. But things were to change in an unexpected way.

Three years before his death Larkin went on one of his usual holidays with Monica Jones. During this she suffered a severe attack of shingles which affected her eyesight and Larkin brought her back to Hull where she was hospitalised. On discharge she was still unfit and he took her back to his house where she then fell downstairs. After an attempt at living on her own, it became clear that she would have to remain with him on a long-term basis. The prospect of this filled Larkin with alarm. He said to me that his house was not big enough since each of them would need a separate sitting-room.

In the event the arrangement became a permanent one and proved very successful. His ability to write poetry was now fading but was replaced by a domestic contentment he had not experienced before. They were seen on Saturday mornings shopping together in Cottingham, a village-suburb of Hull, like an old married couple. He wrote to me in February 1984, nearly two years before his death, explaining that it was easier for them to shop in Cottingham because the shops were closer together and adding 'Our walking sticks hang side by side in the hall'. This brief account says nothing about the value of Larkin's poetry, only about its genesis. Although his reputation is beyond doubt, it is interesting to know something of why and how he wrote it. We all have our own anxieties and fears and different ways of dealing with them, but Larkin's exorcism of his demons, unlike ours, played a part in producing some of the best poetry of the second half of this century. We should not forget, however, that he himself and those he loved the most paid a high price for his achievement.