

**Philip Larkin :
The Hunted Man Behind the Haunting Poems**

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要 約

不滅の詩の背後の追いつめられた男

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フィリップ・ラーキンの没後まもなく、彼の著作権者たちは、ラーキンが生存中断固として出版を拒んでいた詩作品を出版することに踏み切った。彼らは又、ラーキン自身が否認したであろうような、彼の私生活についての体裁の悪くセンセーショナルな詳細をも公表した。本稿は、そのような企画のもつ芸術上、及び／あるいは、倫理上の妥当性を検討し、ラーキンを弾劾した批評家たちの決断が誤ったものであったと結論する。

Philip Larkin the man was always an elusive personality. He was averse to the public gaze and was disinclined to talk about his private life. But, ironically, not long after his death in December 1985, two of his trusted friends, whom he had also appointed as his literary executors, displayed unseemly haste and eagerness to put into print his hitherto unpublished writings—not only his poems but also his letters—and details about his personal life. These are acts which Larkin would have strongly disapproved of for both literary and personal reasons. Larkin had often jokingly remarked that one reaps richer dividends by keeping one's personal life private. One positive result of this strategy is that his readers can concentrate on his writings, undistracted by the events of his private life. All that has now changed. There is every reason to suspect that, especially in the present climate of political correctness, the reading public may turn away from Larkin's poetry because it has been revealed that he was a racist and a misogynist, and that he had reactionary views on political matters. When Larkin's biography was published in the United States in 1993, William Pritchard warned :

[The] advance notice of 'Philip Larkin : A Writer's Life' in this country has directed attention to Larkin's bad attitudes, with the effect of alerting people who had no interest in reading his poems anyway to the scandal of the poet as unacceptable human being. (7)

More recently, James Wolcott has pointed out :

The posthumous publication of Philip Larkin has been pitted by the publication of his letters and Andrew Motion's biography, which document his racist jingles, reactionary jibes, miserliness, damp palm for soft porn, and unwillingness to commit to the women in his life, all adding up to an image of a mama's boy in a dirty old man's raincoat—not the picture of a lyric poet you want to carry in your pocket. (57)

It is therefore appropriate to investigate whether the addition of less successful poems to his *oeuvre*, and the revelation of unsavoury aspects of his life, have any artistic justification or moral validity. More importantly, such an enquiry will call into question the tendency in the modern world of literary scholarship to confuse a writer's life with his/her art, to the detriment of the latter.

In 1988, Anthony Thwaite published his edition of Larkin's *Collected Poems*, in which he included not only the poet's unpromising juvenilia (about fifty in number) but also about eighty poems which had either remained unpublished or had appeared in fugitive magazines, journals and pamphlets. There is every reason to believe that Larkin would not have been pleased with this. He had set for himself very high literary standards and if he felt that a certain poem of his did not measure up to them, he refused to publish it. When in 1962 (seven years after the publication of the highly praised *The Less Deceived*), Charles Monteith of Faber and Faber asked about the possibility of a new volume of poems by him, Larkin replied that though he had written a sufficient number of poems

to warrant a volume, he would not like to publish them because they were not "good enough for me" (Larkin, *Selected Letters* 576).

It is therefore incontrovertible that Anthony Thwaite has overridden Larkin's wishes on this matter in general. There is also a specific instance which shows that Thwaite has disregarded Larkin's express wish not to print a particular poem of his. The poem in question is 'Letter to a Friend about Girls.' During Larkin's lifetime, Thwaite had asked for his permission to print the poem in *Encounter* of which Thwaite was then a co-editor. Larkin's reply was polite but unambiguous :

Many thanks for the letter with Letter. I read the *latter* with great interest, not having seen it for some years. My reaction was that in the first place it wasn't at all funny : very sad and true ; in the second, that the 'joke' was either too obvious or too subtle to be seen ; thirdly that it could do with a bit of polishing up. But fourthly, I'm afraid, that it would hurt too many feelings for me to publish it. If it were a simply marvellous poem, perhaps I might be callous, but it is not sufficiently good to be worth causing pain.

(SL 576)

As soon as Larkin died, Thwaite went ahead and published the poem, unheeding of the poet's instructions or the feelings of those people he did not wish to hurt.

What reasons did Thwaite have for going against Larkin's wishes? In his Introduction to the poet's *Collected Poems*, he tries to justify his decision on the ground that as the poet's literary executor, he exercised his discretion to publish the poems in question because he believed that, even though there was no clear mandate to the effect, this was what Larkin really wanted. He offers two explanations for this supposition. First :

I kept in mind the fact that Larkin allowed his book [*The North Ship*], which he ruefully disowned, to be reissued over twenty years later..... (xxii)

As for this, it must be remembered that Larkin had a very poor opinion of the poems in that volume, and he had—reluctantly— agreed to a reissue of it purely for copyright reasons : "The poems', he told Monteith, 'are such complete rubbish, for the most part, that I am just as unwilling to have two editions in print as I am to have one, and the only positive reasons for a second edition would be if this was necessary in order to secure the copyright, and to correct a few misprints'" (Motion 358). Thwaite's second explanation is even more dubious :

He [Larkin] was, as I have indicated, scrupulous in dating and preserving his notebooks and typescripts, and kept a vigilant eye on the 'neglected responsibility' of the proper care and retention of modern literary material. I believe that such a man would not stand in the way of a collected edition such as this. (xxii)

This is very strange logic indeed. The fact that he had retained the manuscripts of the (to him, unsatisfactory) poems did not mean that he either wanted or expected them to be published after his death. Larkin is on record as having said that the manuscripts of

poems which he eventually decided were not worthy to be published were kept by him simply because "I never throw anything away" (Larkin, *Required Writing* 71). He never left any explanation as to why he did so. However, the opinion of the noted Czech writer Milan Kundera on a similar matter is highly relevant. In a book titled *Testaments Betrayed*, Kundera vehemently defends the writer's right to publish what he wants and to prevent the publication of what he does not want to, whatever may be his reasons. And he is severely critical of the writers' friends and literary executors who betray their trust and testament. For instance, Kundera is highly critical of Kafka's literary executor Max Brod who defied the writer's express instruction— "My last testament will be very simple : a request that you burn everything" —and went on to publish his works posthumously. Kundera considers the position that is often taken on the subject : "It's often said : if Kafka really wished to destroy what he had written, he would have destroyed it himself" (257). Kundera's answer to this is not only incontrovertible but also instructive because he gives his opinion as a writer, and that too a writer of great eminence. He explains that an artist keeps all his unpublished writings because he can always "get back to them. Not even a story he considers a failure is useless to a writer, as it can become material for another story. As long as he is not dying, a writer has no reason to destroy what he has written" (257–8). And since no writer considers himself "in serious danger of immortality" (257), he trusts that his literary executor will carry out his wishes after he dies. In this sense, like Kafka, Philip Larkin was betrayed by his literary executors.

Paradoxically, this habit of preserving everything probably worried Larkin when he thought of those of his writings (published or unpublished) which, even though he did not "throw-away", he did not wish others to see. When B C Bloomfield asked for his permission and co-operation in the preparation of his bibliography, Larkin expressed his delight and gratitude at the prospect of thus being honoured. However, he went on to ask whether he was "ethically" bound to give details about his publications which he might prefer not to reveal :

..... what are the ethics prevailing between bibliographer and bibliographee? If I know of a terrible poem tucked away in a magazine you have never heard of, am I bound in honour to reveal it? As you can guess, I should much prefer not to[editor's ellipses].

(SL 466–7)

And in another letter to the same Bloomfield, who presumably had asked him for details about his unpublished poems, Larkin curtly told him that he did not have "any unpublished new poems, and unpublished old ones are not very good, which is why they are unpublished" (SL 484).

We can see how right Larkin was in his judgement on this matter by examining, for illustrative purposes, his previously unpublished poem 'Love Again' which Thwaite has included in *Collected Poems*. This poem has attracted critical attention since Thwaite first published it. Motion has gone on to describe this poem and 'Aubade' as Larkin's "two unqualified successes of his last decade" (476). However, he does not pause to answer or

even consider the obvious question as to why it was that Larkin did not offer to publish this poem whereas he did send 'Aubade' to the *Times Literary Supplement* which published it on 23 December 1977 to universal critical acclaim. My own feeling is that Larkin thought, rightly, that 'Love Again' failed to be an achieved poem, that it had loose ends which he was not able to put together. It deals with the unsurprising Larkin themes of disappointment, sexual frustration and jealousy in love relationships. But unlike his other successful poems on similar themes, this one does not succeed in transmuting personal anguish into universal statements about love, failure and frustration. The speaker's own sense of deprivation and disappointment remains peculiarly personal to him, and what keeps the poem uncompleted is the failure of Larkin's poetic intelligence to unravel the secrets of the rival's successes and those of the speaker's own failure :

Isolate rather this element

That spreads through other lives like a tree
And sways them on in a sort of sense
And say why it never worked for me.
Something to do with violence
A long way back, and wrong rewards,
And arrogant eternity.

Even a sympathetic reviewer of the *Collected Poems*, Blake Morrison, cannot help finding the feelings expressed in this poem both "mystifying and even incoherent". He goes on to ask "What violence? which wrong rewards, whose arrogant eternity?" (1152). Though Morrison himself does venture to provide the answers to those questions by speculating that Larkin might have been harking back to the frustrations and experiences of his youth almost fifty years before, the fact remains that the poem itself does not offer any satisfactory clues. Larkin was obviously aware of this fact, and because of its unfinished nature he refused to publish it.

A large number of Larkin students, therefore, are likely to share John Whitehead's "unease" over the fact that in this new *Collected Poems*, "the 'finished' poems from Larkin's published volumes are buried under the clutter of inferior ones he never in his lifetime saw fit to collect or to print or even in some cases finish." "This," Whitehead rightly went on to add "would have earned the poet's strongest disapproval" (1227). The right place, therefore, for the poems which Larkin did not see fit either to publish or re-publish would have been the research archives or a separate volume titled as such, like Eliot's recently published *Poems of 1907-1917* (1996) which the poet had refused to print in his lifetime. They had no place in Larkin's final *Collected Poems*.

There is more to be said against Thwaite's enterprise, and it turns out to be highly relevant to my present concerns. One is disappointed with the minimal editorial skill and labour that went into the composition of the *Collected Poems* : it has only a perfunctory introduction, no useful annotations or details about the manuscript variants, dates of their composition, places of their first publication, their present location etc. Thwaite merely gives the dates of the first publication of the poems, and even on this

matter he is not entirely reliable. Take, for example, the case of the poem 'Letter to a Friend about Girls' to which I referred earlier in this article : *Collected Poems* gives the date of its original publication as December 1959, but in his annotation to Larkin's letter in which the poet mentions this poem, Thwaite says that the poem "was not published until CP [1988]" (SL 576). All this is regrettable because Larkin, like most poets, would have been pleased with a suitable collection of his poems. In 1977, he had told his publisher friend Charles Monteith that there was nothing he "should like more than a *Collected Poems* under your [Faber] imprint" (SL 568). Unfortunately, both his editor and publisher failed him in this respect : surely he would have been pleased if his *own poems* had been professionally and competently edited in the manner of *The Poems of Tennyson*, which had elicited the following high praise from him :

Its design is majestic : the poems are set in chronological order of composition, as far as this is ascertainable, with substantial head-notes regarding origin and first publication, and a fringe of foot-notes giving such textual variants and parallels as seem significant. In parts these are almost more interesting than the text.

(Larkin, *Required Writing* 182)

Thwaite's edition of *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin* (1992) is similarly disappointing : it is strewn with marks of shoddy scholarship and editorial incompetence. One is astonished that in these days when publishers pride themselves on maintaining high standards at least in technical matters, Faber should have allowed such books to come out under its imprint. Thwaite does not seem to have any recognizable editorial principles or policies. In the first place, he does not explain on what grounds he has selected (or expurgated) the letters that he has published. In his 'Introduction', he thanks no less than thirty-four people (several well-known literary personalities among them) for sending him Larkin's letters to them even though they were not 'finally used' (SL ix) by him. This very unusual acknowledgement is not only intriguing in itself but it also leaves the readers wondering how could it be that there was such a wide discrepancy between the opinions of the recipients of Larkin's letters and that of the editor about their importance and interest. Surely, the letters in question must have been of sufficient value and significance in the eyes of the recipients for them to pass them on to Thwaite ? But he does not pause to give his reasons for their exclusion. Further, Thwaite fails to give details about the precise location of the relevant MS/TS copies, and his annotations to the letters are either gratuitous or inadequate or simply non-existent. Here are some random samples. When Larkin complains that "our economic mess stems from homo Keynes," Thwaite's helpful annotation is : "The economist John Maynard Keynes" (SL 560). Elsewhere George Steiner and Walter Allen are tersely identified as "Critic" and "Critic, novelist" (SL 690) respectively. On the other hand, he fails to identify the "story" or explain what Larkin was referring to when in a letter to his other literary-executor Andrew Motion, he remarked "Did you see that story about G. Keynes and R Brooke's tie and handkerchief ? Shook me a bit. *You literary executors are a ghoulish lot*" (SL 690). Thwaite's cryptic annotation to these baffling lines is : "Geoffrey Keynes, executor to the

Rupert Brooke estate, was instrumental in appointing Motion to that position" (SL 690). Similarly, he is not able to explain what exactly it was in Anthony Powell's review of *Lucky Jim* that Larkin said that he did not "*like to see*" (SL 223): in his annotation to this, Thwaite simply asks the reader to "[s]ee Notes on Recipients" which give only brief details about Powell.

What drove Thwaite in his capacity as Larkin's literary executor to select himself as the editor of these books and to publish them so urgently, without much preparation and thought, is not clear. However, one cannot help suspecting that in the present 'literary-journalistic' climate when both publishers and writers reap huge profits by giving their readers a peep into the private lives of the famous writers and artists, Thwaite wanted to cash in on the popularity of Larkin. This is particularly deplorable because he panders to the demands of the contemporary reading public for the outrageous and salacious in the lives of famous people by printing those of Larkin's letters which expose the negative side of his character. In the Introduction, Thwaite claims that the letters make a "kaleidoscopic self-portrait" of a "memorable man, much loved by many people" (SL xv) but, unfortunately, the subject of this self-portrait reveals himself in these *selected* letters as an unwholesome personality who was, among other things, a racist and a misogynist. He emerges as a foul-mouthed person who routinely calumniated his successful peers, rivals and even friends in coarse language. He seems to have been disloyal in personal relationships too. All this is very different from the former image of Larkin "the memorable man, much loved by many people", a sad, middle-aged bachelor who led an ordinary, uneventful life but who was, at the same time, able to transmute his experiences into some of the most widely remembered and haunting poems of the post-war years. As Ian Hamilton has remarked, the term "Larkinesque" which until recently had "suggested qualities both lovable and glum" has now (after the publication of his letters) come to mean "four-letter words and hateful views" (3).

It is true that some of the letters in this collection give glimpses of the 'positive' side of the poet, his sense of humour, his modesty, and his devotion to poetry from the very beginning. But, unfortunately, it is the 'negative' side of his personality, which the majority of letters in this collection reveals, that comes out more forcefully and pervasively. So much so that on the whole the portrait that emerges of the poet is far from a flattering one, in fact as I have suggested it is a shocking one for most admirers of his poetry. And for this Thwaite must be held fully responsible. He seems to have exercised his right to select and expurgate Larkin's letters only to sensationalise the poet's life (and to protect his own editorial practices). In support of the latter suspicion one might refer to the fact that Thwaite has excised that (last) portion of the letter (SL 466-7) in which the poet most likely had explained to his biographer Bloomfield his reasons for not wanting a previously published (to him, unsatisfactory) poem to be brought back to the notice of the public. Perhaps Thwaite was trying to protect the editor of the *Collected Poems*? On the other hand, he did not excise the racist comments that Larkin had made in his letters: in this edition of *selected* letters, Thwaite has printed not one but several of those in which Larkin appears as a confirmed racist. For example,

he wrote a 'ditty' about blacks in England and praised and supported the British politician Enoch Powell who lost his shadow cabinet seat in the government for arousing racial hatred in the country. Larkin repeated exactly the same ditty and similar sentiments in favour of Powell in at least two letters to two different correspondents at different times, and Thwaite has printed them both (cf. SL 432, 493, 755). Similarly, not one but several letters in this collection show Larkin's mean-mindedness and his tendency to use foul language. Ian Hamilton is therefore right to blame Thwaite for presenting such a tarnished image of the poet to the public :

..... Anthony Thwaite's edition showed Larkin to be a fairly unpleasant piece of work and— yes—foul-mouthed, and there was not enough in the way of biographical context for his would-be defenders to get hold of. (3)

Far from offering any help to the 'defenders' and admirers of Larkin's poetry, Larkin's other literary executor, Andrew Motion, in fact reinforces this negative impression of Larkin the man in his *Philip Larkin : A Writer's Life* (1993). Motion builds up an unflattering portrait of the poet by giving ample evidence and eye-witness accounts of his less attractive qualities. This he does, more often than not, by quoting from those of Larkin's letters which are *not* to be found in Thwaite's edition—a practice which smacks of an odd business conspiracy between these two literary executors—and also by transcripts/recollections of conversations that Motion had had with Larkin himself, his friends and acquaintances. (And though these latter sources are scrupulously documented, I must add my reservations about this pseudo-scholarly mode which is followed by many contemporary biographers : I am referring to the useless citations that these biographers provide to their readers, eg. "PAL to author" [Motion 551]). Anyway, as Thwaite had promised, Motion in his book "fills in some gaps, draw[s] together pieces which [in Thwaite's own edition of the letters] can only be missing and fragmentary, and produce[s] a coherent narrative" (SL xv). Motion may claim to have provided a well-documented portrait of Larkin but it is manifestly a partial picture. Like Thwaite, he is inspired to concentrate mainly on the poet's negative traits. Indeed, the poet emerges as an even more unwholesome personality than the *Selected Letters* had made us believe. We now know more fully, for instance, that Larkin was a man of reactionary views in politics and even education, that his friendship and professed loyalties were untrustworthy, that his conduct as a lover of the various women in his life was more deplorable than previously thought, and that he had a penchant for pornography.

Of course, every human being has at least two sides to his or her character but it seems to me that these two literary executors are bent on concentrating on their subject's failings in order to cash in on the vulgar demand of the present-day reading public for the outrageous and sensational. All this is most unfortunate because Larkin had an agreeable side to his personality too, to which neither Thwaite nor Motion does justice. Jean Hartley, who, together with her then husband George, was instrumental in the publication of *The Less Deceived* which really launched Larkin's poetic career, presented a much more balanced portrait of the poet in her book, *Philip Larkin, The Marvell Press*

and Me (1989). Of course she was aware of his "bluff conservatism," his envy of his successful peers ("Philip's friendship with Kingsley Amis was strong and intimate but tinged with perhaps inevitable rivalry," his stinginess and even his tendency to swear and make "shockingly ribald parodies of great poets" (78). But she not only presented these traits as venial sins but went on to demonstrate convincingly how he was personally kind, and even generous with his money, to her when she needed help in her difficult days. Another important aspect of Larkin's character that Hartley reveals was his love for and devotion to his mother :

Philip always spoke very fondly of his mother whom I met only once. She looked, of course, very different from the early photograph of her, *which he carried in his wallet* [italics added] that showed her wearing a large Edwardian toque..... it was sad and worrying for him when, in 1972, she was taken, after having had a fall, to a nursing home to be looked after. (157)

Larkin also remained close to his sister throughout his life : they usually called "each other up on Sundays" (SL 645). But in Motion's book this side of his personality which cherished domestic affections and loyalties has remained largely buried, whereas prominence has been given to his impatience with and moans about his family obligations. Similarly, despite his liaisons with different women, it is clear even from the evidence that Thwaite and Motion have offered, that the woman he really loved was Monica Jones who remained his companion for about forty years. When, two years before Larkin's death, she developed painful shingles, he became very anxious about her health and insisted on her coming to live with him so that he could look after her. Thus, as Motion points out, "the relationship which both had so scrupulously avoided turning into a marriage at last became a marriage in all but name" (498). It may be recalled that Larkin had once approvingly quoted Housman's remark that "anyone who thinks he has loved more than one person has simply never loved at all" (Larkin, *Required Writing* 265). Perhaps there is a case for believing that Monica Jones was that "one person" in his life. More than twenty-five years before he died, when he thought of making his will, he told Monica, "I suppose you and mother and my sister are the only people I need consider" (SL 316), and when he did draw up his will he left the bulk of his estate to Monica. But instead of investigating this as perhaps the most important personal relationship in his life, Motion gives titillating tidbits about her anger and jealousy when Larkin flirted with other women. He goes on to give tedious details about Larkin's 'affairs' with such women, with all the treacheries and deceptions that they had involved, Moreover, we seldom get any meaningful account in this biography of the Larkin who was also a cheerful man, gregarious and friendly, who helped aspiring poets, and in whose will "Monica, The Society of Authors and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals remained the chief beneficiaries" (Motion 517).

Motion offers a critical justification for his concentration on the negative side of Larkin's personality. He is convinced that Larkin's life was dreary and basically loveless, and that this was directly related to the kind of poetry he produced. Indeed, this is the

basic assumption behind his biography : in his Introduction Motion claims, more flamboyantly than correctly, that “the beautiful flowers” [of Larkin’s poetry] grew on “long stalks out of pretty dismal ground” (xx), and he feels that his duty as a biographer is to describe and document this life in all its fullness. In a revealing remark that he made during an interview that he gave to *The Bookseller*, he said that the discovery of Larkin’s cache of pornography

was the most important day in the writing of this book, because it was then that I realized that I had the opportunity to talk about a general truth : that the beautiful flower of poetry grows, on a long stalk, out of some very mucky stuff. (45)

Motion’s pronouncement that “the general truth” is that beautiful art grows out of “very mucky stuff” is patently absurd, and in any case his attempts to relate Larkin’s supposedly low life to his poetry end in misrepresentation and failure. For instance, the search for sources/original inspiration for the poem ‘Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album’ takes Motion into a world of fantasy and voyeurism, which he arbitrarily attributes to Larkin himself. Encouraged by his discovery that in his 1953 letter to Winifred Arnott, Larkin had told her that the poem was inspired by her “photograph album” (SL 209), Andrew Motion interviewed her almost thirty-five years later on the subject. When she informed him that all the details were not factually correct—e. g. “there were in fact two albums, not one, there is not a picture of me wearing a trilby hat” —he concluded that Larkin was inspired to write the poem not by Winifred but by his fantasy about women in pornographic magazines and by his “masturbatory impulse”. Motion is of the opinion that “Larkin transform[ed] a masturbatory impulse and an addiction to solitude into poems of great beauty and sociable truthfulness” (233–4). How this implausible process transpires is never critically analysed or examined. Motion merely asserts the claim and just goes about his business of gathering evidence of Larkin’s taste for pornography and his ‘masturbatory impulse.’

In his damning review of Motion’s book, Kingsley Amis pointed out that the biographer had amassed facts connected with his subject’s life and work, but since he was singularly lacking in the qualities of “skill, dash, ability to select,” he fails to come out with any meaningful “interpretation” (25) of the subject’s life or his work. Motion’s unearthing and amassing of details about the origins of some of Larkin’s poems do not take us very far either in understanding individual poems. For instance, Motion informs us that though the poet had his first inklings of the poem ‘The Building’ in March 1959, he went back to it and completed it only on 9 February 1972 soon after his mother had to be removed to a hospital. However, Motion wants us to believe that the origins of the poem were more complex :

..... Larkin was candid and straightforward about its origins. ‘The Building,’ he told Brian Cox, ‘was “inspired” by a visit to the hospital about a crick in the neck which they couldn’t do anything about and which passed off eventually of its own accord. Funnily enough, as soon as I had written it [Larkin should more accurately

have said 'started it'] my mother had a fall and had to spend some time in the hospital in earnest, which led to many dreary visits.

(Motion 419-20)

But the question is, how does this information help our appreciation of the poem? Motion's own pedestrian commentary on the poem owes nothing to these biographical discoveries, unless his guess (it cannot be described as anything more than just that) that the 'building' in the poem is most probably a hospital is regarded as a brilliant suggestion. Similarly, his speculation that the poem 'Love Again' was prompted by his "jealousy of Maeve's independent life" (454) does nothing to remove or clarify the mysterious or mystifying elements in the poem which I have pointed out above.

The inevitable conclusion therefore must be that as a critical biography which it purports to be, *Philip Larkin : A Writer's Life* is a failure : the biographical contexts that it provides do not promote our appreciation of his writings nor do they give us an insight into the creative processes that led to their inception and birth. Perhaps such shortcomings are inbuilt in the very genre of critical biography. It is not surprising that W H Auden was distrustful of all such biographies. He had said that writers' lives were "always superfluous and usually in bad taste," and had gone on to explain what T S Eliot in another context had described as the separation between the man who suffers and the artist who creates :

A writer is a maker, not a man of action. To be sure, some, in a sense all of his works are transmutations of his personal experiences, but no knowledge of the raw ingredients will explain the peculiar flavour of the verbal dishes he invites the people to taste : his private life is, or should be, of no concern to anybody but himself, his family and friends.

Consequently, Auden dismissed literary biographers as "gossip-writers and voyeurs calling themselves scholars" (Carpenter xv). In a more recent book on the subject of critical biography, Janet Malcolm has argued that, in the present cultural climate, 'scholar-biographers' have exploited the lives of famous literary figures in order to write commercially lucrative books. She goes on to point out bluntly that it is sheer "voyeurism and busybodism that impel writers and readers of biography" in our times, and that "the apparatus of scholarship" that the biographer provides deludes them both into believing that "elevating literary experience" (9) is what is being purveyed and enjoyed. This fact is regrettable enough, and the 'scholarly' efforts of people like Motion are more deplorable because they alienate the reader from the writer's works. In D J Enright's words, "we don't really believe that a bastard like that could write perfectly shaped, plangent lyrics" (69).

Motion fails to do justice to Larkin's life as well as his works. Those who go to him with the mistaken view that one "reads the life in order to understand the work better" (Enright 69) will be sorely disappointed. His credentials as a scholar are not very impressive and he is not equipped to do justice to Larkin as a writer. His commentaries on Larkin's poems are either unexceptional or banal. His critical performance on

Larkin's prose writings is no better. With regard to Larkin's unpublished prose works, Motion is content to offer soporific summaries rather than new insight into the writer's artistic strategies, his strengths and weaknesses. No wonder Larkin has left on record his reservations about Motion's critical deficiencies. Remarking on his monograph on his own writings, Larkin complained that Motion's "comments" were "a bit scrappy and snappy" and that he took "Symbolism to mean a wide spread of things, from metaphorical to plain barmy" (SL 656). And Larkin's assessment of Motion's critical study of Edward Thomas, which he thought was "not v. good" (SL 631), was not very complimentary either: "My chief criticism is that the shape of the book is wrong: it tails off. Almost one feels the first should be the last, to provide a more solid summary of Thomas's achievement" (SL 599).

Incidentally, Larkin did not think highly of the younger man's poetry *either*, and this we also know, oddly, from the uncensored letters on the subject which Thwaite has printed in *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin*. For example, he thought that Motion was "not really tough enough—in his writings that is. Probably tough otherwise" (SL 624). Hence there is reason to suspect that Larkin might not have whole-heartedly recommended Motion's poetry volume to Faber for publication: "To be honest, Charles [Monteith, of Faber] never responded enthusiastically to the idea" (SL 639). One suspects this because as a member of the panel of judges for the Arvon Foundation Poetry Prize, Larkin went against the majority opinion which had gone in favour of Motion. He wrote to his long-time friend Judy Egerton:

By now you will know that, yes, the Arvon winner was your friend and mine, the Kneeless Motion [this refers, unkindly, to Motion's arthritic condition]. You, and everyone else will think: Larkin looking after his own, but it wasn't so. I couldn't make head or tail of his poem. Could you? My selection wasn't placed. I was a bit cross at famous Seamus's implication that we were all in agreement.

(SL 640)

Elsewhere, Larkin described Motion's posture at a poetry reading thus: "Andrew reads with one foot forward, as if about to throw a dart" (SL 723). "Andrew Motion looked like someone let out of Borstal for the occasion" (SL 677) was Larkin's description of his future biographer when the latter appeared in a television programme on Larkin himself.

Why then Larkin chose Motion as his literary executor is and will remain puzzling. Thwaite, who was nearer his age, was his first choice but, at the latter's suggestion, he brought in the younger Motion "to take care of the age angle" (SL 688). He knew that "the term 'literary executor' mean[t] nothing in law" (SL 738) but gave that position to these men in his will in the hope that they would look after his literary matters without envisaging that these men would choose themselves to be his editor and biographer. He only expected them to look after his "literary interests" and his "good name" (SL 738). It is doubtful that by publishing their respective books by and on Larkin, Thwaite and Motion have fulfilled his wishes.

There is every reason to suspect that both Thwaite and Motion have gone against

the spirit, if not the letter, of Larkin's will. Even Blake Morrison, who was thanked by Thwaite for his "co-operation and advice" with the editing of Larkin's *Collected Poems*, had to admit (in his otherwise laudatory review of the book) that the editor really had no mandate to publish what he described as "forbidden poems": "Not that evidence here is decisive enough to prevent a sense that we are reading forbidden material" (1152). John Whitehead, a lawyer, who has examined Larkin's will has pointed out that though "in some respects the will is indeed a muddle", he is certain that there "is no ambiguity" about the substance of the will in which Larkin directed that his "texts and manuscripts in any form" must be "destroyed unread" (1227) after his death. The "muddle" in the will perhaps can be explained by the fact that it was drawn up during the time of Larkin's last serious illness, not long before he died, while he was convalescing at Hull Nuffield Hospital. In a letter dictated to Thwaite on 12 July 1985, he said: "One side effect [of this illness] has been to speed up the making of my will, which I expect to sign next week. It is not really as you or Monica would I think wish it in every respect" But he went on to express his hope that when the time came, both Thwaite and Motion would "find it possible to act together with understanding and the knowledge of the kind of thing I should like done and vice-versa" (SL 743). From what we know of Larkin's standards and tastes in literary and public matters, it can hardly be denied that these, his literary executors and trusted friends, have not only failed but apparently deceived him.

It is most likely that these posthumous publications have increased Larkin's 'popularity' among the general public. But, it must be remembered that though he, like most people, welcomed money, he desired not 'popularity' so much as literary recognition. In fact, one can say that he wanted both poetic fame and financial benefits, but not one at the expense of the other. When the prestigious *Paris Review* sought to interview him, he laid down two conditions for his acceptance of the offer: one, that the questions should be sent to him by post (presumably to avoid having to answer questions about his personal life), and second that he should be paid for the job — "he got \$250—the only other interviewee to have done this after Nabakov" (Motion 491). The only occasion in his lifetime when biographical information about him was published in a book, *Larkin at Sixty* edited by Anthony Thwaite in 1982, which was a festschrift in his honour, Larkin was dismayed to find that contrary to his "impression that it was going to be literary criticism," he found his friends and acquaintances "recalling the number of times I puked down the stairs at Oxford, and reciting the worst of my limericks ['There was a young man of Bell Green']" (SL 640).

Larkin was not alone in believing that the reader should not be distracted from the reading and appreciation of a writer's works by any interest in his life. Kipling wrote

Seek not to question other than
the books I leave behind.

And in a letter (February 11, 1949), William Faulkner told Malcolm Cowley: "It is my ambition to be, as a private individual, abolished and voided from history, leaving it markless, no record save the printed books. It is my aim, and every effort bent, that the sum and history of my life, which in the same sense is my obit and epitaph too, shall

be them both : He made the books and died.” Proust also believed that any knowledge of the writer’s life was irrelevant to an appreciation of his writings : “a book is a product of a self *other* than the self we manifest in our habits, in our social life, in our vices the writer’s true life is manifested in his books *alone*” (quoted in Kundera 267).

It is therefore most unfortunate that Larkin’s literary executors have disregarded his direction on this matter. Literary heirs and executors who go against the wishes of their benefactors have become a common phenomenon in our times. It might be relevant to recall in this context the fact that Samuel Beckett (who also had refused to publish some of his writings which, however, he had carefully preserved) was outraged when Brecht’s and subsequently Joyce’s writings were published posthumously, and he castigated the literary heirs for disregarding the wishes and interests of their respective benefactors. Beckett’s biographer has recalled a conversation on the subject that the playwright had with his Polish editor Adam Tarn and his German friend Frederick Durrenmatt :

The conversation turned to Brecht, specifically to the posthumously published texts and then to Joyce, whose letters had just been published. “It’s these widows who are responsible,” Beckett raged. “When a writer dies, his widow should be burned on the funeral pyre. These ‘literary widows’ who claim that they allow posthumous publication for ‘scholarship’ are guilty of a serious crime, and they should be burned alive for it!” (630)

One might add ‘literary executors’ to this list of accomplices in the modern trade of literary biographies.

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