Some months after Philip Larkin, aged twenty-four, began an affair (his first) with a young woman named Ruth Bowman, he wrote to his Oxford friend Kingsley Amis:

I took Miss Ruth to see...Night Club Boom and I should say about 45 seconds of the Club Condon. This was worth the 1/8d. I paid for our admission but not the 5/2d. I paid for our railway fares or the 4/8d. for our scrambled eggs afterwards, or the 4/1d. for subsequent drink. Don't you think it's- ABSOLUTELY SHAMEFUL that men have to pay for women without BEING ALLOWED TO SHAG the women afterwards AS A MATTER OF COURSE? I do: simply DISGUSTING. It makes me ANGRY. Everything about the ree-layshun-ship between men and women makes me angry. It's all a fucking balls up. It might have been planned by the army, or the Ministry of Food.¹

Is the crude nastiness of this remark merely a pose designed to impress the worldlier, more sophisticated Kingsley Amis? Evidently not, for similar sentiments crop up again and again in the letters reproduced in Anthony Thwaite's edition of the Selected Letters and in Larkin's private diaries. “Re sexual intercourse:” he wrote in his diary in 1950 (M 119), “always disappointing and often repulsive, like asking someone else to blow your own nose for you.”
One of the surprising discoveries made by Andrew Motion in the course of researching his biography was that Larkin evidently had his nose blown for him a lot more frequently than his poems would have us think. Surprising, because Larkin has generally been viewed as the quintessential poet of “lowered sights and patiently diminished expectations,” as Donald Davie put it in his *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry.* In a commemorative volume produced shortly after Larkin's death, Steve Clark declared solemnly that “The sexual politics of Larkin's verse can be seen as one of principled and unillusioned abstention.” “Deprivation,” the poet himself told an interviewer in 1979, “is for me what daffodils were for Wordsworth.”

This image of Larkin as the poet of “principled” deprivation has become legendary. Modest, self-effacing, and levelheaded, so the story goes, Larkin devoted long and demanding days to his position as university librarian, holding posts in a series of dreary provincial cities: first Wellington, then Leicester, Belfast, and finally Hull. A lifelong, retiring bachelor, the poet kept house for himself in a series of digs that ranged from semisqualid furnished bed-sitting rooms to the cheerless and drably functional house in Newland Park where he ended his days. As for romance, Larkin, so the later poems would have it, “missed out” on the sexual revolution:

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Sexual intercourse began
In nineteen sixty-three
(Which was rather late for me) -
Between the end of the Chatterley ban
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And the Beatles' first LP.

Up till then there'd only been
A sort of bargaining, A wrangle for a ring,
A shame that started at sixteen
And spread to everything. (“Annus Mirabilis”)

It makes for a rueful, wry, and gently humorous tale, but we now know, thanks to Motion's biography, that the Larkin who wrote this poem had recently embarked on an affair with Maeve Brennan, one of his library assistants at Hull, “a sort of superior dogsbody,” as Larkin referred to her a few years earlier, “who did a bit of everything” and eventually took charge of the periodical division. This affair was very upsetting to his longtime steady girlfriend Monica Jones (a lecturer in English at Leicester), but Larkin couldn't bring himself to break it off. On the contrary, he eventually resolved the deadlock by taking up with a third woman, his secretary Betty Mackereth. Neither Maeve nor Monica knew about this relationship until after Philip's death, and both evidently felt deeply betrayed by it. But then, much earlier, while at Belfast (and already involved in what we would now call a “committed” relationship with Monica), he had had the most passionate of his affairs, a three-year liaison with Patsy Avis, then married to Colin Strang, Larkin's Belfast colleague. While vacationing with Monica in the Scottish Highlands and elsewhere, he wrote sexually charged love letters to Patsy (whom he addressed as his “honeybear” and “fabulous giraffe”) as well as arch, flirtatious letters to a young woman named Winifred Arnott, who was working at the Belfast library and whom
Larkin coveted and, one might say, courted for years although she, for one, refused to sleep with him. The affair with Patsy ended when the Strangs moved to Newcastle; later, when an increasingly alcoholic Patsy (her second marriage, to the poet Richard Murphy, did not last long) tried to reestablish intimacy with Larkin, he gently but firmly distanced himself from her pain.

Andrew Motion's own reaction to what seems to be a troubling discrepancy between the Larkin myth and the reality is that the very complexities and contradictions embodied in the poet's life make his lyric all the more interesting. In the Introduction to his long, painstakingly researched, beautifully written, and largely fair-minded biography, he declares, “After [Larkin's] death, it's clear that his writing transcends his time rather than merely encapsulating it: he is one of the great poets of the century.” And further, “it is part of his poems' strength to speak directly to most people who come across them. He makes each of us feel he is ‘our’ poet, in a way that Eliot, for instance, does not—and each of us creates a highly personal version of his character to accompany his work.”

Again and again one comes across this sentiment: Larkin, for better or worse, is our poet; “we recognize,” in Donald Davie's words, “in Larkin's poems the seasons of present-day England, but we recognize also the seasons of an English soul—the moods he expresses are our moods too” (DD 64). But with the publication of the letters and the Motion biography, a strong countercurrent has set in. Larkin's misogyny, wrote Lisa Jardine in The Guardian (8 December 1992), makes him a dubious contender for the rank of “representative” postwar poet. As for Larkin's politics (of which more in a moment), Tom Paulin was prompted to declare, “For the present, this selection [the Selected Letters] stands as a distressing and in many
ways revolting compilation which imperfectly reveals and conceals the sewer under
the national monument Larkin became,” a view more or less echoed by such well-
known critics as Terry Eagleton, Peter Ackroyd, and A. N. Wilson. These critics on
the Left have, in their turn, been castigated by those further to the Right like Martin
Amis, who in a Guardian piece called “A Poetic Injustice,” declared that “The
reaction against Larkin has been unprecedentedly violent, as well as
unprecedentedly hypocritical, tendentious and smug. Its energy does not—could
not—derive from literature: it derives from ideology, or from the vaguer promptings
of a new ethos.” “In a sense,” Amis adds, “none of this matters, because only the
poems matter.”

Ironically enough, the poet's biographer concurred with this sentiment. In an
Observer column written some months after his book's publication, Andrew Motion
chastised his critics for their “conflation” of art and life. “Art,” he reminded his
readers, is not so much the “convulsive expression of personality’ as it is the
“suppression of personality....[It] exists at a crucial distance from its creator.” T. S.
Eliot, whose “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (an essay Larkin once dismissed
as “piss”) Motion's statement about poetry neatly echoes, would have said, “yes,
and so why write a biography to begin with?” And why publish a man's personal
letters? If, after all, it's the poems, and only the poems, that count, what are we
doing with the two very fat volumes under review here?

But of course all of us know, as the terrible controversy over the award of
the Bollingen Prize to Ezra Pound in 1949 (and no one ever called his moods are our
moods too) made clear, Pound “our” poet said that “art” and “life” cannot be neatly
separated. Amis knows this as well as anyone: it's just that he doesn't think the
“life” is all that bad. “The word [racism],” he maintains, “suggests a system of thought, rather than an absence of thought, which would be closer to the reality—closer to the jolts and twitches of stock response. Like mood-clichés, Larkin’s racial snarls were inherited propositions, shamefully unexamined, humiliateingly average. These were his ‘spots of commonness,’ in George Eliot’s sense.” And there you have it again: Larkin is, after all, “humiliatingly average,” a “common” man speaking to men and thus, it turns out, quite endearing.

Indeed, what makes the Larkin controversy so odd is that just when every English major had supposedly learned the lesson that language, especially literary language, is always ideologically charged, that there is no such thing as “neutral” discourse and no hard-and-fast boundary between the writing of a poem and the writing of a letter, the New Critical doctrine of poetic autonomy has once again come into play. A poem, by this notion, is not the reflection of the ideas and beliefs of its author; on the contrary, it creates its own “exemplary” image of what that author is like. Hence all the fuss about “our” poet, the poet who “speaks for us,” and so on.

But now that we do, for better or worse, have the poet’s biography and letters, how do we relate the seemingly ill-fitting parts of the Larkin puzzle? There are two issues I want to consider here. First, I think it’s time to take another look at those “classic” Larkin poems—“Dockery and Son,” “The Whitsun Weddings,” and so on—to see if indeed they express “our” moods and, if not, whose moods they do express. Secondly, we must try to understand what the Larkin cult, still going strong in Britain, where his poems are memorized in the schools and assigned on examination papers, tells us about postwar, postmodern British.
“Fuck and bugger the war”

The Motion biography provides us with some fascinating clues. Sydney Larkin, Philip's father, was the City Treasurer for Coventry, a well-paid post that made it possible for the Larkins to live in a large, if unattractive, suburban house; keep a servant or two; and send their son to the elite King Henry VIII School. Larkin Sr., Motion reports, happened to be an enthusiastic Nazi sympathizer; "he even had a statue of Hitler on the mantelpiece (at home) which at the touch of a button leapt into a Nazi salute....As late as 1939, Sydney had Nazi regalia decorating his office in City Hall" (M 12). There is no indication that his son, largely apolitical as he tried to be when he went up to Oxford in the first year of the war, disapproved of his father's views. Indeed, the wartime letters make sobering reading. "Germany will win this war like a dose of salts," he writes to his school friend Jim Sutton in December 1940, "and if that gets me into gaol, a bloody good job too. Balls to the war. Balls to a good many things, events, people, and institutions" (L 7). On April 7, 1942 to Norman Iles, "I am more than ever certain that England cannot win this war: there's absolutely no spirit in the country. I feel everything is a mess" (L 33). And on July 6 of the same year, again to Jim Sutton, "If there is any new life in the world today, it is in Germany. True, it's a vicious and blood-brutal kind of affair—the new shoots are rather like bayonets. It won't suit me. By 'new' life I don't mean better life, but a change, a new direction. Germany has revolted back too far, into the other extremes. But I think they have many valuable new habits. Otherwise how could D. H. L. [Lawrence] be called Fascist?" (L 36).
This last remark tells us a lot about Larkin's state of mind during the war. Lawrence was the idol of his youth: not the Utopian Lawrence who wanted to create the ideal community Rananim in some distant exotic place, but the Lawrence of gritty and provincial Nottingham who believed that personal fulfillment is much more important than politics, who recognized that “the ultimate joy is to be alive in the flesh.” Larkin's Lawrence, furthermore, is the voice in the wilderness who despised the English bourgeoisie, mistrusted democracy as the rule of the weak, and loathed the idea of war between a petty, snobbish England and the more vital, bold Germany that had given him Frieda. “There's nothing in Wordsworth,” Larkin wrote Iles in 1942, “that D. H. L. hasn't done 20 times better” (L 51).

The fact is that the young Larkin, far from being the man speaking to ordinary men critics later took him to be, was a confirmed aesthete. He hated the war (any war or, for that matter, any political happening) primarily because it was a distraction from the art he wished to practice. Around the time of D-Day, he wrote to Norman Iles:

I feel that myself & my character are nothing except insofar as they contribute to the creation of literature—that is almost the only thing that interests me now. To increase one's value as a pure instrument is what I am trying to do. I conceive the creative process as depending on an intricate arrangement of little mirrors inside one, & by continual care & assiduity & practice these mirrors can
be cleaned & polished, so that in the end artistic perception is a whole-time & not a part-time thing...

You see, my trouble is that I simply can't understand anybody doing anything but write, paint, compose music (L 87–88).

Not Hardy, whom Larkin was later to claim as his model, but Pater stands behind this passage. And there's the rub. For Larkin was born, in the parlance of another idol of his youth—Yeats out of phase. It was one thing for Lawrence to detest war when the war in question was an imperialist struggle between rival powers, neither of which could be defined as the clear-cut “good” or “bad” side. But it was quite another to try to avoid the issues posed by the Second World War. Larkin seems never to have understood the differences between the two wars or cared what the Nazis did to whole populations they subjugated, much less what they did to the Jews of Europe. And he seems never to have understood that the “creation of literature” to which he longed to devote himself would have come to a quick halt if Hitler had actually invaded, as he fully planned to do, the British Isles.

It was not a blind spot that could be merely expunged when the war was over. “What [Larkin] most valued in Hardy,” Motion remarks, “was the importance attached to suffering.” But there is no indication that for Larkin “suffering” applied to anyone but himself. Again and again, as Motion details, he turned a cold shoulder to the suffering of others. When Monica Jones's mother died in 1959, for example, Larkin's first concern was not for her sorrow and pain, but that, as Motion
explains, “Without her mother, there was a danger that Monica might rely on him more than she had done in the past....She might even re-open the question of marriage.” Under these circumstances, his expressions of sympathy were, in Motion's words, “diluted by cold drops of self-interest” (L 295).

One might counter that such selfishness is by no means unique to Larkin, that the artist must guard his or her privacy more ruthlessly than do “normal” people. The difficulty arises, however, when the poet's chosen persona is, like Larkin's, a voice of such “decency” and “deprivation.” “To write a poem,” he insisted in one of his few statements of poetics, “[is] to construct a verbal device that would preserve an experience indefinitely by reproducing it in whoever read the poem” (RW 83). A curious echo of Eliot's doctrine of the “objective correlative” (which Larkin regularly declared bogus), but what is even more curious is that Larkin, who paid little attention to anyone else's experience, was so eager to have the hypothetical reader sympathize with his own.

On V-Day (May 8, 1945), in any case, Larkin “hardly bothered to raise his eyes from his manuscript book” (M 133). His contempt for the war effort that brought victory was soon transferred to other political and economic phenomena: Increasingly, Larkin's letters, especially to his great friend and fellow poet Robert Conquest, who furnished him with the porn magazines and porn-shop information that so intrigued him, express xenophobic, racist, and class prejudices. A few examples must suffice here.

On the critic G. D. Klingopoulos's dismissal, in his Pelican Guide volume From Dickens to Hardy, of William Barnes's metric (in a letter to Monica Jones, 1958):
I could kick that filthy Greek all the way from the British Museum back to Soho Square if he says Barnes is “clumsy”—the oaf!...Fat greasy garlic-slicer! Let him get back to his farced goat cooked in vine leaves and expense-account bills cooked in the stinking “office,” and take his filthy maulers off the class writers. (L 293–94)

On the victory of the Conservative Party and its possible effect on race relations in Britain (in a letter to Robert Conquest, 1970):

Cracking good news about the election, what? I can hardly believe we've got that little shit [Harold Wilson] and his team of arselicking crooks out of the way. Now Enoch [Powell] for Home Secretary, eh? [...] Remember my song, How To Win The Next Election? “Prison for Strikers, Bring back the cat, Kick out the niggers, How about that?” (L 432)


The latest campaign is for “the right to work,” i.e. the right to get £7 a week for doing bugger all. It's led me to begin a hymn:
I want to see them starving,
The so-called working class,
Their wages weekly halving,
Their women stewing grass,

When I drive out each morning
In one of my new suits
I want to find them fawning
To clean my car and boots. (L 541–42)


My simple cure for “unemployment” (no such thing really) is to abolish unemployment benefits. If you don't want chaps to do a thing then don't pay them to do it. In the nineteenth century men used to run behind your station growler, following you home to earn a few pence for unloading your luggage. I’d like to see Arthur Scargill [President of Yorkshire National Miners' Union] doing that. (L 646–47)

On recent strikes by black immigrant workers (in a letter to Colin Gunner, 1984):
And as for those black scum kicking up a din on the boundary—a squad of South African police would have sorted them out to my satisfaction. (L 719)

But it is not only “they” ("niggers," “greasy Greeks,” immigrants, unemployed miners) who incur Larkin's wrath; one of the surprises of the Selected Letters is the nastiness directed to fellow poets. “Yanks,” from Eliot and Pound on down, are especially reviled: Robert Lowell, who had praised The Less Deceived ("No post-war poetry has so caught the moment"), is dismissed as “Lord-Hairy's Arsehole” (a play on Lord Weary's Castle). Emily Dickinson is “Emily Prick-in-son,” a “tidy wordlocker”; W. D. Snodgrass, a “dopy kid-mad sod”; W. S. Merwin, “tripe”; Vikram Seth, the producer of a “load of crap...[It] comes of being an oriental.”

Larkin's fellow Movement poets don't fare much better. Thom Gunn is “old Feel-of-Stands” (a reference to the poem “A Feel of Hands”); “old [Donald] Davie droning out his tosh” becomes, in response to his critical review of Larkin's Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse, the subject of a song to the tune of “Daisy, Daisy,” which trashes “Davie, Davie” as one who panders to fashion and concludes with the lines “But let's be fair, / It's got you a chair, / And a billet in Frogland too” (L 499–500). And if Davie is a dishonest critic, Frank Kermode is a pedantic bore, a “jumped up book drunk ponce,” who, as one of those “salaried explainers of poetry,” finds allusions where there are none (L 307). As for foreign poets ("Who's Jorge Luis Borges?" Larkin asks Robert Phillips in the 1982 Paris Review interview), they simply don't exist, because there is no way “one can ever know a foreign language well enough to make reading poems in it worthwhile....If
that glass thing over there is a window, then it isn't a Fenster or a fenetre or whatever” (RW 69). “Fiancée,” the same complaint Larkin made to Kingsley Amis thirty-five years earlier (L 180), “why isn't there an English word?”

Larkin lovers defend these remarks, as well as the more scurrilous references I cite above, as largely “macho” bravado, the pose assumed by a painfully shy and stammering schoolboy, who never quite grew up. True, Larkin doesn't write the same way to most of his women correspondents, at least not to Patsy Avis, to whom he writes warmly and wittily, or to Judy Egerton, to whom he is unfailingly polite and thoughtful. But, with rare exceptions like his friendship with Egerton, the common thread that runs through the slurs, digs, racist and misogynist remarks, and proto-Fascist sentiments expressed in the letters and conservations is the absence of any and all generosity of spirit. No doubt this has to do with the strong dose of self-hatred regularly expressed by Larkin; in pop-psychological terms, he couldn't love others because he certainly didn't love himself. But from the reader's point of view, such explanations hardly make the Larkin persona of the letters and recorded conversations more likable.

Andrew Motion makes no bones about Larkin's views. “The Oxford undergraduate who had shown a really remarkable lack of interest in what was happening around him,” says Motion, “had grown into a man with no developed political opinions but strong reactionary prejudices.” But these prejudices, Motion believes, are transcended in the poetry: “the integrity of his poems depended on his ability to draw on the whole range of his selves, and speak in all their voices.” A Larkin poem, in other words, is a formal construct that enables poet and reader to hold contradictory views in suspension. As such, it is not to be confused with mere
“life,” even though it turns out to “express” what we all think and feel. “The moods he expresses are our moods too.” It is this hypothesis I now want to look at.

“Self’s The Man”

Suppose we take one of Larkin's best-loved and most frequently “taught” poems, “Dockery and Son,” from The Whitsun Weddings. Motion provides the background:

Begun on 14 February and completed after fifteen pages of drafts on 28 March [1963], it describes a visit Larkin had made to his old college at Oxford, St. John's, on the way back from the funeral of Agnes Cuming, his predecessor as librarian at Hull, almost exactly a year earlier....By permitting itself a great deal of novelistic detail (“Was [Dockery] that withdrawn / High-collared public-school-boy, sharing rooms / With Cartwright who has killed?”), and a structure loose enough to give the impression of thinking aloud (“If he was younger, did he get this son / At nineteen, twenty?”), the poem makes room for nearly all Larkin's tones and techniques. It is an anecdotal but lyrical, analytic, but expensive, realistic (“awful pie”) but metaphorical (“sand clouds”), reminiscent but locked in the present. (M 333)
What Motion especially admires about “Dockery and Son” is its complex irony. Visiting his old college, Larkin's speaker is forced to confront his youth and his decision not to marry and have children. To Dockery, having children evidently meant “increase,” whereas “To me it was dilution.” This is the obvious difference between himself and Dockery. But, as Motion points out, “Larkin's sense that his choices are made 'by something hidden from us' smothers the differences between his own and Dockery's life.” It compels him to admit that the fears they have in common are more striking than the hopes which separate them.” “Where,” asks the speaker, “do these / innate assumptions come from?”

Not from what
We think truest, or most want to do:
Those warp-tight shut, like doors. They're more a style
Our lives bring with them: habit for a while,
Suddenly they harden into all we've got

And how we got it; looked back on, they rear
Like sand-clouds, thick and close, embodying
For Dockery a son, for me nothing,
Nothing with all a son's harsh patronage.
Life is first boredom, then fear.
Whether or not we use it, it goes,
And leaves what something hidden from us chose,
And age, and then the only end of age.
“Bitterly funny and grievously melancholic,” Motion concludes, “‘Dockery and Son’ is a compressed autobiography....It grimly sketches the attitudes which dominated his adult life. Furthermore, its cunning deployment of epigrammatic wisdosm...ensure[s] that the poem rises from its authenticating details to spell out general truths” (M 334).

The reader will have noticed by now that Motion's critical assumptions are almost textbook examples of the New Criticism, as it was practiced, both in the US and Britain, during the fifties. A poem, his comments imply, is a "little drama"; it is based on “life,” but life heightened, distanced, and thus viewed ironically from more than one angle. Thus “differences” (between the poet and Dockery) turn out to be “similarities,” the great irony—evidently a “general truth”—being that either way, we lose: “Life is first boredom, then fear, / Whether or not we use it, it goes, / And leaves what something hidden from us chose, / And age, and then the only end of age.”

Repeatedly in discussions of “Dockery,” one finds this kind of reading. Barbara Everett, for example, alerts us to such nice ironies as the way the epithet “death-suited” in line three modulates into the memory of having been a “Black-gowned” undergraduate in line four with the further irony that the poet is symbolically “death-suited” in coming to recognize his own mortality, “the only end of age.” As for the ironic enjambment at the end of the first stanza,

I try the door of where I used to live:

Locked. The lawn spreads dazzlingly wide.
P. N. King comments solemnly that “The locked door and lack of recognition emphasize [Larkin’s] outsider status in a place where he once felt very much at ease.” And in case we miss this meaning, the next line brings it home to us: “A known bell chimes. I catch my train, ignored.”

The account of the train journey in stanzas three and four elicits further admiration. The poet, we recall, dozes off, “waking at the fumes / And furnace-glares of Sheffield, where I changed, / And ate an awful pie, and walked along / The platform to its end to see the ranged / Joining and parting lines reflect a strong / Unhindered moon.” “Even the station pie,” Everett explains, “has more identity than the speaker: it is ‘awful,’ it is itself,” whereas the poet who eats it is “passive, powerless, subordinate, merely open to experience” (GH 149). And King notes that the “ranged / Joining and parting lines” of the train tracks metaphorically point to the poem’s final epiphany: “Dockery’s paternity and the poet's bachelorhood are equal destinies: they are both results of neither choice nor desire but simply the fact of life happening, as it were, behind their backs before they had time to realize the situation they were in. It appears that choice is one of life’s major illusions.” Or in Everett's words, “The last lines of the poem crystallise this experience [the abrupt sense of failure in life] with an extraordinary blank austerity which at once realises and more largely and humanly generalises; ‘this is how it is.’ In the knowledge of what each has not got (a son, or an alternative to ‘harsh patronage’) Docker and the speaker meet, as they did not appear to have met in college” (GH 147).
“Dockery and Son,” as the critics present it, is, then, eminently teachable: a perfect classroom poem (and, incidentally, not one of Larkin's nastier poems, which use four-letter words like “This Be the Verse” or “High Windows”), providing food for discussion of the journey motif, the relation of past to present, the difference between reality and appearance, and so on. But the limitation of such New Critical explication is that the assumptions behind the nice ironies (the “black-gowned” become the “death-suited,” the “dazzlingly wide” lawns of memory give way to the “fumes / And furnace-glares of Sheffield”) are never called into question. Thus, the hard-earned insight to which a given poem supposedly moves—in this case, the recognition that “choice is one of life's major illusions” and that whatever the choice (“For Dockery a son, for me nothing”), the net result is that “Life is first boredom, then, fear, / Whether or not we use it, it goes”—must be appreciated by the poem's reader as a plausible conclusion to what has preceded it.

But what happens if we aren't disposed to accept the premise that having children is mere “increase?” Or that the poet's “nothing” and Dockery's “harsh patronage” finally add up to the same thing? To ask such questions is to notice that of course poor Dockery is never given a chance in this poem. That someone named Dockery (as in “Hickory, dickory, dock”) might just be a proud and loving father, that “Dockery and Son” (with its sarcastic echo of “Dombey and Son”) might have an interesting relationship—these possibilities are never entertained any more than it is conceivable to Larkin that Sheffield could signify anything other than “fumes” and “furnace-glares.”

The poem's carefully orchestrated details and clever ironies, in other words, will not stand up to real scrutiny. Dockery is just a prop, used to convey the poet's
own view of things, his sense that “Life is first boredom, then fear.” Far from expressing complex emotions, I would argue, “Dockery and Son” reduces emotion to stock response: The relation of father to son is “harsh patronage.” The Oxford of distorting memory (“the lawn spreads dazzlingly wide”) cheapens into the hideous industrialization of modern-day Sheffield (compare Lawrence’s more complex treatment of the topography), and anyway, whatever choices we make, the end result is death.

But the real death here—and perhaps this is why Larkin is so obsessed with “age, and then the only end of age”—is the curious failure of the imagination, which haunts Larkin's writing. Specificity, the image or phrase or syntactic construction that reveals—this is what we miss in a poem like “Dockery.” Oxford, with its “withdrawn / High-collared public-schoolboy[s],” its “Canal and clouds and colleges,” is—well—just a postcard Oxford; college life is having to report “unbreakasted, and still half-tight” to “the Dean” and give “‘Our version’ of ‘these incidents last night,’” and so on. But what Dean? What incidents? Does memory really operate on so generalized a level? Does one, for that matter, remember that, before falling asleep, one yawned, as in,

Well, it just shows
How much...How little...Yawning, I suppose
I fell asleep...

and why “suppose” anything about it except that one needs a rhyme? The “intended laconic flatness” of such passages is merely willed.
This same mood infects “The Whitsun Weddings,” where the poet looks with contempt at the bridal couples boarding the train at each station:

We passed them, grinning and pomaded girls
In parodies of fashion, heels and veils,
All posed irresolutely, watching us go,

As if out on the end of an event
    Waving goodbye
To something that survived it. Struck, I leant
More promptly out next time, more curiously,
And saw it all again in different terms;
The fathers with broad belts under their suits
And seamy foreheads; mothers loud and fat;
And uncle shouting smut; and then the perms,
The nylon gloves and jewelry-substitutes,
The lemons, mauves, and olive-ochres that

Marked off the girls unreally from the rest.

Again, notice the one-dimensionality, the flattening out of human emotion. “They” (the members of the wedding) disgust the speaker: “The fathers with broad belts under their suits / And seamy foreheads,” the “loud and fat” mothers, the “cheap” young girls with their perms, nylon gloves, and “jewelry-substitutes.” The
fathers, we read in the next stanza, “had never known / Success so huge and wholly farcical”; “The women shared / The secret like a happy funeral.” As in the case of “Dockery and Son,” the poet not only attributes his own emptiness to these others; he simplistically judges what their feelings must be. What could a daughter’s marriage represent to a father but “farce”? What can such a wedding represent to a mother but a “happy funeral”? Ordinary people, it seems, girls who can't afford real jewelry or leather gloves, who perm their hair and wear “parodies of fashion”—such people are not entitled to happiness, not capable of sorrow or deep feeling. What's worse, they are all alike. Indeed, “The Whitsun Weddings” is no more than a truncated version of the great wedding scenes produced by Larkin's masters, Hardy and Lawrence: the wedding, for example, of Anna Lenski and Will Brangwen in Lawrence's Rainbow, or the great opening scene of Hardy's Mayor of Casterbridge, in which Michael Henshard sells his wife Susan for a few quid.

The comparison brings me back to the issue of Larkin's politics and the question of their relationship to his poetry. On the face of it, “Dockery and Son” would seem to be far removed from the nasty extraliterary statements found in Larkin's letters and conversations. In the prose, we may well find such embarrassing statements as “I can hear fat Caribbean germs pattering after me in the Underground” or the complaint made, when Ruth Bowman's cousin came to town, that “it means I have to PAY for TWO women at the PUB and the FLICKS instead of ONE and I DON'T get my COCK into EITHER of them, EVER” (L 119). But surely, so the common wisdom has it, such sentiments are “transcended” in the poetry.
But are they? To invent characters named “Dockery and Son” and then to allow those characters no role but to represent the bourgeois choice of “increase,” is itself, I would argue, a form of prejudice very like the racism, sexism, or xenophobia Larkin practiced in his life. Not only is Dockery denied any conceivable humanity; the poet himself cannot concede the possibility of a life that might begin in something other than boredom and fear and might lead elsewhere than to oblivion and death.

This cartoon version of “life” is at the heart of Larkin's poetry. In “Self's the Man,” for example, he similarly begins by wondering whether “Arnold,” who has married and has “kiddies,” is less selfish than is the poet himself. The turn comes in stanza five:

But wait, not so fast:
Is there such a contrast?
He was out for his own ends
Not just pleasing his friends;

And if it was such a mistake
He still did it for his own sake,
Playing his own game.
So he and I are the same.

Only I'm a better hand
At knowing what I can stand
Without them sending a van—
Or suppose I can.

Here again the intended irony is that the poet's self-justification—his sneering at Arnold's marriage—is only a pose, that his real mood is one of fear, a fear that his own sanity is, after all, no securer than Arnold's. But in order to convey this irony, Larkin again depends on a series of clichés about the other man's choice: Arnold is presented as one who “when he finishes supper / Planning to have a read at the evening paper / It's Put a screw in this wall— / He has no time at all, / With the nippers to wheel round the houses / And the hall to paint in his old trousers / And that letter to her mother / Saying Won't you come for the summer.” Thus, Arnold is assigned Archie Bunker status, a stereotype for whom struggle, aspiration, and value are reduced to mere tic. Only the poet himself, so it seems, knows what it is to have conflicted feelings.

Now and England

Given these real limitations, why have so many English readers continued to view Larkin as “one of the great poets of the twentieth century”? Why are young students, as David Gervais reminds us in a new book called Literary Englands, more familiar with the end of “Church Going” than with Paradise Lost? John Bayley, for one, takes issue with Gervais's suggestion that Larkin's appeal has to do with his particular Englishness. “His greatness,” declares Bayley, “consists in the way it avoids not only that label but any other.”

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For the American reader—at least this American reader—such hyperbole is puzzling. Ninety-five years into the twentieth century, is Larkin really the beacon his admirers claim him to be? And if not, why the insistence that, as Davie put it some decades ago, “Like it or not, Larkin is the centrally representative figure” of postwar England? My own guess is that the Larkin cult has a great deal to do with the strange triangular relationship between Larkin, the contemporary English critic, and the figure of T. S. Eliot. Let me explain.

Larkin, as I noted above, was at heart an aesthete who believed that “every poem must be its own sole freshly created universe” (RW 79), an organic whole made by “construct[ing] a verbal device that would preserve an experience indefinitely by reproducing it in whoever read the poem” (RW 83). For him, as for Eliot, poetry is not the expression of emotion but the escape from emotion: Feeling must be there in the poem, detached from its creator who really can't talk about its qualities. That this is a latter-day version of Symbolist doctrine, as domesticated by Eliot early in the century, should be obvious to anyone, despite Larkin's own protests to the contrary. Larkin may have declared that he preferred Hardy to the “transcendental” Eliot because “[Hardy's] subjects are men, the life of men, time and the passing of time, love and the fading of love” (M 141), but as we have noted, Larkin's own subjects were decidedly not “men, the life of men” or even “love and the fading of love,” but rather his own tormented consciousness, his particular sense of isolation, boredom, and loss of opportunity. It was for these emotions that he tried to find the appropriate objective correlative.

Now, in postwar England, much more than in postwar America, where Pound, Stevens, and Williams soon began to take center stage, Eliot was and continues to
be the representative Modernist poet. And further, he appears, in accounts of
English poetry from F. R. Leavis's *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932) right up to
Motion's 1992 biography, where Eliot is considered as the logical point of
comparison, as, of all things, an English Modernist poet, an attribution that seems
increasingly eccentric to those of us on this side of the Atlantic, where Eliot's
profoundly American ethos is recognized as a matter of course. At the same time,
Larkin's own stated animosity toward the "culture-mongering activities of the
Americans Eliot and Pound," toward the "myth-kitty" and allusiveness of that "old
tin can," as he once called Eliot, reflects the larger animosities to Modernist-
Symbolist poetry that first became prominent in the fifties, thanks to Movement
poetics; these animosities have persisted to this day. In postwar, postimperialist
Britain, the internationalism of the teens and twenties has become deeply suspect,
and the "take-over" of English poetry by the Americans (Eliot and Pound) early in
the century has come to be seen as something to be resisted.

In this setting, Larkin became the inevitable candidate for the position of "our
poet." "Those slow canals," says Davie of "The Whitsun Weddings" ("Canals with
floatings of industrial froth"), "have wound through many a poem about England
since T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land*, but never under such a level light as this" (DD 64–
65). Thus, Larkin represents to certain English critics a chance to still have the Eliot
of "The Fire Sermon," whose typist and clerk surely anticipate the Dockerys and the
members of the wedding in Larkin's poetry and yet an Eliot without the master's
notorious difficulty, his foreign phrases and learned allusions. Larkin, in other
words, was lauded as an Eliot who had repudiated both America and Symbolist
France (with Greece and Rome thrown in for the bargain) and had "come home."
“On the literal level,” says Davie, “no one denies that what Larkin says is true; that the England in his poems is the England we have inhabited” (DD 64). Indeed, Larkin may well be the only postwar British poet who carried on the Symbolist tradition that marked the greatness of poetry written in England in the early decades of the century and yet seemed to apply it, half a century later, to the shrunken life lived in the red-brick university towns of the dismantled empire.

This unique position may well have prevented the poet's admirers from noticing that the voice we hear in Larkin's poems is closer to Prufrock's than to that of Prufrock's creator. “My relations with women,” Larkin wrote to his friend Jim Sutton in a moment of rare self-insight, “are governed by a shrinking sensitivity, a morbid sense of sin, a furtive lechery” (M 190). Touché, and this “furtive lechery” finds its outlet in passages like the opening stanza of “High Windows”:

When I see a couple of kids
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...

This “outrageous” opening quickly gives way to the recognition that “everyone young [is] going down the long slide / to happiness,” but of course, that slide also leads downward to darkness. The “love song” of J. Alfred Prufrock is also a death song, but whereas Prufrock at least has moments of vision, as when he
contemplates the “smoke that rises from the pipes / Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves leaning out of windows” or when he dreams of the mermaids “singing, each to each,” Larkin's “high windows” open only on the “deep blue air, that shows / Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.” In Eliot's vision, the “awful daring of a moment's surrender / Which an age of prudence can never retract” is carefully grounded (not by Prufrock but by Eliot himself) in the desiccated New England Puritan tradition where “eyes...fix you in a formulated phrase” and “Arms that are braceleted and white and bare / [But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!]” become threatening presences. But in “High Windows,” deprivation and despair are merely posited: There is no palpable context in which to place these gestures.

The very absence of context, of course, has made it possible for critics to point to countless ambiguities and ironies in Larkin's poems, as when Steve Clark, in a discussion of “An Arundel Tomb,” explains that “All that distinguishes [the stone sculptures of the unnamed medieval earl and his countess] is their gesture of clasped hands. In a complex and paradoxical development, it is this unconcerned anonymity, their reduction to a single ‘attitude,’ that allows them to be ‘transfigured’ into a ‘final blazon’” (GH 271). But what, beyond deprivation, is the poet's relation to this “perfect icon of desire”? An explication like Clark's cannot tell us because the poem's “ironic” premises are never called into question.

And questioned they must be. Reading Larkin in the mid-nineties, one wants to know what has happened that has made life so unremittingly bleak. Why, after all, are fear and boredom the only emotions of childhood? How is it that “Mum and Dad” “fuck you up,” that “women are shits,” that one's colleagues are “turds,” and
that one's typical “Dull non-day” is always followed by a “pissy evening”? Why, one wants to ask, doesn't someone just take out the trash?

If Larkin's poetry of “deprivation” does in fact express the quintessential postwar English experience, so much the worse for England. But fortunately (and paradoxically!), Andrew Motion's biography undercuts the very claim for representativeness it overtly makes for its subject. For in placing Larkin in a palpable world, Motion shows that the poet's ethos, far from being “representative” of something larger, may more accurately be seen as a rather special form of paranoia. Thom Gunn and Charles Tomlinson, Jeremy Prynne and Tom Raworth—these poets were not given to the constant name-calling, suspicion, and failure to envision change that we find in Larkin's work. Or again, the expression of bleakness becomes part of a larger complex as it does, for example, in the work of a writer with whom Larkin was acquainted and who once gave a reading from Larkin's work—namely, Harold Pinter. From The Birthday Party to No Man's Land and Old Times, and in a series of poems and radio pieces, Pinter takes those same dreary bed-sitting rooms, those nauseating bowls of cornflakes and custard, those scenes where old men are seen “Hoovering” the carpet (even as Larkin once reports to Monica that he got his tie caught in the vacuum cleaner), and invests these details with powerful resonance, providing us with chilling representations of the vagaries of love and friendship, deception, and remorse. Perhaps it has taken an outsider like Pinter (Jewish, London East End, nonuniversity) to take the measure of Britain's postwar accidie. “Home,” as Larkin put it in a poem of 1958, “is so sad. It stays as it was left....beneft / Of anyone to please, it withers so” (CP 119). And perhaps that was Larkin's problem.
1 Motion, 143. Subsequently cited in the text as M; the Selected Letters are subsequently cited as L. Larkin's Collected Poems, ed. Anthony Thwaite (New York: Farrar, Straus Giroux, 1989) is cited as CP.
4 "An Interview with the Observer” (1979), rpt. in Required Writing. Miscellaneous Pieces 1955–1982 (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), 47. This volume is subsequently cited as RW.
5 Martin Amis, “A Poetic Injustice,” The Guardian Weekly, 21 August 1993, 6. The Paulin statement and the responses by Eagleton, Ackroyd, and Wilson were made in the letters column of the Times Literary Supplement a few months earlier and are cited by Amis as is Motion’s response.
6 Barbara Everett, “Larkin and Dockery,” GH 149.