

Larkin's Poetics

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D. Rácz, István. *Philip Larkin's Poetics: Theory and Practice of an English Post-War Poet*. Leiden and Boston: Brill Rodopi. 2016. 235 pages. ISBN 978-90-04-31106-0. Hb. €76.00.

Larkin and “theory” make strange bedfellows: as is known, an openly confessed anti-intellectualism and a mistrust of theory defined Larkin's stance. When his former literary friend Douglas Dunn wrote, “Don't ‘-ize’ or ‘-ism’ me; don't ‘theory’ me,” in a poem about posterity, he gave voice to an opinion that Larkin, surely, would have shared. The book's title, *Philip Larkin's Poetics: Theory and Practice of an English Post-War Poet*, should deter no one, however, as it promises to give “practice” the same weight as “theory.”

In the introduction, István D. Rácz describes how Larkin's poems take their origins in common sense and experience but argues that Larkin's lack of theory does not mean a lack of “principles.” He aims to outline Larkin's poetics in a theoretical frame and turn these principles into practice, using a clear argument and laying out a logical structure for the book. In concise sentences, he paints a portrait of Larkin as a pessimist poet who often writes about unpleasant topics and is not very poetical in the conventional sense of the term. However, by subscribing to the idea that poetry comes from empirical experience and by having faith in common sense and in the accessibility of poems—principles first put forward by Wordsworth and cornerstones of mainstream English poetry ever since—Larkin has secured for himself a central place in the contemporary canon of English poetry.

The book has two main sections: the first one concerns Larkin's poetic principles, the second one his poems about time. In part one, Rácz throws light on Larkin's links with “the English line” (17). Though the Movement is commonly seen as reacting against Romanticism, Larkin, as well as the other Movement poets, continues some of the main concerns of the English Romantics, especially those of Wordsworth, inasmuch as he gives lucid verbal expression to ordinary experiences and locates himself in the English philosophical tradition of empiricism. Though Morrison, for instance, regards him as an anti-Modernist, the use of personae, which is one of his favorite techniques, and his habitual liking for the form of the dramatic monologue establish a notional link between him and paradigmatic High-Modernists such as Eliot. At the same time, he is an agnostic like Hardy, the most English of all English poets. As opposed to Keats, something cannot

be true *and* beautiful at the same time for Larkin, Rácz argues. Here Larkin rather follows Shelley's line and dissociates himself from Keats's Neoplatonism and High-Romantic idealism. Rácz, however, reads "An Arundel Tomb" in the context of Keats's "Grecian Urn," which seems a perceptive approach, and brings into play Kristeva's views on the disjunctive and non-disjunctive functions of figures of speech. For Rácz, Larkin appears to share Wittgenstein's notion that the gap between language and experience is unbridgeable and so we must stop speaking where words end, which is an odd concept for a poet. This limited ambition concerning the capacities of language results in paradoxical situations, such as in "The Old Fools": we will know the answer to the question of what old age is when we get old but will have forgotten the question in our senility. Communication seems impossible, in a Lockean sense, since for Larkin language seems to be a medium for communicating ideas rather than experiences, as opposed to, say, for Ted Hughes, who believed that words "displace" experience. Part two examines the continuity of time versus time divided into units and argues that Larkin's seeming awkwardness of phrasing when temporality is transformed into spatial relations marks a hopeless search for the meaning of living in time.

Within that frame, a very strong chapter scrutinizes Larkin's concept about nothingness and how nothingness should be or could be preserved in poetry. Perhaps a parallel drawn between Larkin's and Hamlet's negativity would have been relevant—especially given that, as Rácz argues, for Larkin "nothing is to be gained by *questioning* an emotion once it has been experienced" (42) and that Larkin's title *The Less Deceived* may be a nod to Ophelia's famous line about her being the more deceived by Hamlet. Rácz reads Larkin's poems, in which death and emptiness are combined with irony and parody, and often ending in black humor, in the context of Hardy, Wittgenstein, and Wordsworth. His suggestion, however, that "[a]bsence as a target of representation . . . is just as relevant as presence" (43) raises the question whether Larkin was an existentialist. He seems to me to be very much one, though he would have almost certainly denied it if such questions had been put to him. Indeed, Rácz does make a passing reference to Sartre later and Larkin's existentialism may be an issue worth considering at some future time.

The conflict between being a politically committed writer while playfully keeping a distance from public issues is the subject matter of the insightful chapter on Larkin and Auden, another genuinely English poet. While this chapter offers an elaborate discussion of links between empiricism

and the constructed verbal reality of poetry, some criteria applied here as well as elsewhere in the book seem quaint or alien in an English (and, in fact, in any other contemporary) context. Rácz concludes, for instance, that neither Auden nor Larkin were “systematic thinkers” or “lawgivers” (56)—should or could poets ever be either? Similarly, does poetry take its roots in “principles,” “conceptualized theory,” “ideology,” “axioms,” and “*Weltanschauung*,” as Rácz keeps stressing throughout his volume, or does it follow its own pretexts, as Seamus Heaney once said? His phrases like “autonomous individual” (103), “cognitive self” (111), and “perceptive agent” (123) sound odd in English prose. Yet, his consistency raises the question whether using the English language requires a non-English critic to assimilate an English mind-set and critical vocabulary, or it is quite acceptable to transfer un-English perspectives to an English-language discourse on an English poet.

Rácz gives a sensible typology of Larkin’s first-person poems and related terms such as dramatic monologue, mask, and persona, discussing many relevant problems in Larkin studies and indirectly raising an even greater number of fascinating questions. For example, Larkin’s well-known liking for jazz is brought up. However, is it possible to discover links between his practice of jazz criticism and the scarcity of his practical literary criticism? Is Larkin the jazz critic another mask, or is *he* the “real” Larkin? The concept of “Larkin playing the role of Larkin” reminds me of *fin de siècle* poetics, especially that of Wilde—there is, indeed, a quick reference to Wilde. Could further research in this unlikely direction return some startling results? Larkin’s obscenity in poems like “This Be the Verse” (one of Britain’s favorite poems) and his lesbian novellas written under a female pseudonym are mentioned in passing. Rácz remains silent on his notorious taste for pornography and rejects charges of obscenity rather than countering them or exploiting the creative correspondences between the ribaldry of Larkin and his near-contemporaries like Eliot. Surely, there are more latent and complex forces at play behind Larkin’s first-person poems than merely “finding,” “constructing,” and “wearing” a mask. For instance: to what extent is his mask of a lesbian woman writer something he found or constructed, and to what extent is it rooted in the dark places of psychology? Moreover, would the discussion of a heterosexual male writer writing female homosexual fiction fall in the domain of feminist criticism? Or that of gay criticism? It is hard to decide; what is certain is that Larkin problematizes binary perceptions of patriarchal and feminist discourses, which needs to be looked into more closely as well as reading more about Larkin’s comic side, among many other things.

Philip Larkin's Poetics by István D. Rác delivers what is promised in the book's subtitle: not only is it a synthesis of the theoretical approaches adopted in Larkin studies but it is a useful collection of sensitive close readings of poems central to the Larkin canon contextualized in twentieth-century English poetry and provides good practical criticism to be used in the classroom.

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— *HEAS* —

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