

What Will Survive of Us?

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Booth, James. *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014. 532 pages. ISBN 978 1 4088 5166 1. Hb. £25.00.

There is every hope that people will always like big, massive books with a sharp focus on one extraordinary person. The front cover of James Booth's new biography of Philip Larkin shows a smartly dressed, heavily spectacled man from the fifties, ready to mount his bicycle. This picture (design by David Mann) is as familiar to poetry readers as to those who are more interested in Larkin's life than in his art. The title promises to offer something about his life as well as his texts. But should we be interested in a poet's life if we want to understand his poetry? However *faux-naïf* this question may sound, possible replies are diverse. Since this is a biography, that is, a life story, we can also turn the question upside down. Do we have to understand Larkin's poetry if we wish to understand his life and personality?

Booth's aim is not only to help the reader understand both but also to defend Larkin; he makes this clear in the "Introduction" and reinforces it in most of the later chapters. Some readers may ask: does Larkin need that? A number of issues raised at the beginning of the book suggest that he does; moreover, it seems that most texts written about Larkin (academic and non-academic) are either for or against the poet, very few of them are neutral. This is true both of Larkin's life and his poetry. After two biographies (Andrew Motion's in 1993 and Richard Bradford's in 2005) this is the third version of Larkin's story. As one would expect, it is significantly different from both (why else should we need it?) not only because it interprets life and art in its own way, but also because a biography is always the result of a selective process. A historian always chooses certain facts from the past, and the literary historian subordinates these to his reading of the life work. But one can also read this book as a novel featuring the major poet as its central character. Even some structural elements will be familiar from nineteenth-century grand narratives. In the last chapter, we find what we expect if we have been trained on reading Dickens: an accurate summary of other characters' life stories following Larkin's death.

The author's narrative is supported by facts: the book shows Booth's impressive knowledge not only of Larkin's literary but also of his non-literary texts, mainly his letters (published as well as unpublished). Those readers who are familiar with his edition of Larkin's Brunette Coleman novels and poems

(*Trouble at Willow Gables and other Fictions* [2002]) will not be disappointed: in the new biography, he also pays careful attention to them, suggesting that these prose pieces and poems form the real beginning of Larkin's career as a writer. He may not have been proud of them when he was already a celebrated poet, but this is where he started (and the "Sugar and Spice" poems are an enjoyable read in their own right).

As all literary biographies, Booth's book creates a context for the texts, and he proves to be particularly perceptive in revealing the controversies in the poet. As we learn, Larkin uses the same "myth-kitty" in *The North Ship* that he despises in his famous "Statement" (90-91), and Booth also agrees with those critics who read Larkin as a symbolist poet. French literature was far more important to him than he would ever have admitted. As Booth points out, it was the literary Other for him, a virtual "elsewhere" before he moved to Belfast and experienced a geographical and cultural difference. His two completed novels can be read in the context of French existentialism (104). One may wonder: is good Larkin criticism, by definition, a deconstruction of the poet's self-created mythology? Is the critic's major task to defend Larkin against Larkin, who pleaded ignorance of any kind of literature coming from abroad? I would not hesitate to answer in the affirmative, and Booth took this job upon himself. His arguments in revealing the contradictions between the poems and the declarations are convincing; this is one reason why I find the book very helpful.

Booth's method is the contextualization of the poems: he shows their places in the life story, and this is what most readers will expect of a comprehensive critical biography. The controversy, on the other hand, is that the context is created by the author of the monograph: what he is writing is merely one possible version of the biography. Meanwhile, there is a strong temptation to view the events of Larkin's life as manifest in nuances of grammar and style, and to see the hero of the narrative as a writer working on one large, coherent text all his life: Larkin's "sense of the integrity of his oeuvre is strong" (108), and his poems read each other.

The key phrase is "reading biographically": Booth intends to interpret Larkin's texts as parts of his life. One consequence is that other readings are of secondary importance, however, they do not disappear: he refers to Janice Rossen's feminist reading, Tom Paulin's Marxist reading, and many more. The question, then, seems almost inevitable: is biographical reading more authentic than other readings? Booth does not claim this, does not even suggest that his interpretation of the poems overwrites others. Language is very much in the focus of his attention, but he also relates it to the poet's

private life. When Larkin's style (language register) changes in his private letters, it also changes in his poetry (167). This holistic approach probably would not work with all poets, but it does with Larkin. As Booth notes in his second book on Larkin, *The Poet's Plight* (2005): "The *oeuvre* to which Larkin devoted his life does indeed possess the cogency of a single spontaneous sentence" (20), in which Larkin uses some key words, very consciously, only once (10).

Analyzing the nuclear elements of the poems, pointing out the relevance of lexicon, meter, and (most significantly) puns is important to Booth. What is even more relevant is distant reading and contextualization, including the thoroughgoing discussion of Larkin's reception. The construction (or self-construction) of a popular poet of the 1950s, also the making of the central Movement poet, is in the focus of his attention, particularly in the chapter "Various Poems."

It follows that the three cardinal points in this biography are Booth's version of Larkin's life story, the life work viewed as a cohesive whole, and the reception. Each factor raises its own special questions. First, is the life story written by a biographer to be treated as fiction, however factual it is? Second, which texts are we speaking about? Larkin the letter writer appears extremely important, yet it is questionable whether his letters can be considered as parts of his life work or not. Third, how are the three cardinal points related to each other: whether the life story (once its details are known to the reading public) is part of the life work or it is perhaps *vice versa*. Should we apply Larkin's theory of the "less deceived" position or his fascination with girls' fiction to interpreting his life? Does life imitate art?

The reception of an author's poetry is a never-ending process; Booth's monograph is not a closure of the Larkin debates, it is an act in the play. It will surely generate and has already provoked further debates. Sometimes he is passionate when he settles arguments against Motion (245) and, more importantly, when he argues against Lodge's famous notion of Larkin as a metonymic poet (236-37). This latter is not fully convincing since Booth himself keeps on using the term metonym in other parts of his book. What all readers should see is that metonymic poetry is not inferior to metaphorical literature.

One novelty of Booth's biography is its unusual emphasis on Larkin's readers. "He could not have said this to Monica Jones, not to Amis," we read in the chapter "Living for Others," and then: "He was returning to his aestheticist roots" (300). If he was an aesthete, it is fully justifiable to focus on the contrasts between Larkin's life and poetry—something that Booth

frequently does. The poet's aestheticism is a central category. It will probably generate debates, although Booth also points out its controversies.

What he writes about Larkin's famous anthology, *The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse* ("Every reader encounters a quite different Larkin *Oxford Book*" [357]), is also true of the poems: the meaning largely depends on the reader. Even the nuances, so carefully and perceptively discussed everywhere in the book, may have different significations to other people. Booth suggests, for example, that the word "Somehow" at the end of "The Explosion" is "loosely emotive" (360); in my reading, this word becomes meaningful. Larkin's poetics rests on preserving experience, which must be protected from oblivion in the poem somehow. He is aware of the controversies (once something non-verbal is recreated as something verbal, it cannot remain the same); nevertheless, to keep experience in poetry remains his basic ambition. The vision of the wives in "The Explosion," therefore, can be read as a metaphor of his own verse. He does not know why exactly he is doing that, neither how it can be carried out, but he is fully conscious of the imperative that experience must be preserved *somehow*.

Booth's book demonstrates, first of all, a reading of Larkin's life through the poetry while he also gives ample evidence that his texts read each other. Therefore, he offers more than mere biographical reading. In the chapter about Larkin's early mature poems, he mentions the possibility of reading the life work as a huge text in which the backbone is constituted by ten major elegies (140), and this will be a *leitmotif* in the monograph. Booth wrote a chapter on Larkin the elegist in *The Poet's Plight*, and now the interpretation of the oeuvre is largely predominated by this central idea: Larkin is basically an author of elegies, one of the most outstanding representatives of the genre in modern British literature.

This interpretation of Larkin's life makes the reader of this biography ask: was his life a life of melancholy? Booth relates life and art to each other in a vision suggesting that Larkin's life imitated (or at least followed) his texts rather than the other way round. In the discussion of the first novel, *Jill*, he remarks: "Just as John Kemp had determined to keep the innocent Jill from Warner and his world, so Larkin kept the innocent Maeve from Amis and his world" (269). This implies that Larkin put into practice what he first composed in literature: a social game in which our affection is at stake. That is how the three concepts in Booth's subtitle, *Life, Art and Love*, relate to each other.

Human life, however, is absurd since the end is the “inevitable” (to quote Larkin’s famous last word). The most authentic representation of this condition is the elegy, and Booth keeps on referring to the ten great poems written in this form. In the chapter about the poems from the first half of the 1970s (typically entitled “Winter Coming”), Booth uses the alternative (perhaps synonymous?) phrases “Keatsian odes or reflective elegies” (374). This remark (and numerous further references to this special form) may prove to be inspiring both in identifying Larkin’s central genre and in contextualizing his life work.

Reading Larkin as basically an elegist is well founded. Famously, Larkin said in an interview that everything he wrote was about death. Although we should be cautious with such declarations (Booth keeps on warning us that we must take them with a pinch of salt), the whole oeuvre gives evidence that Larkin did not exaggerate. If what he said is true, it follows that he always wrote in an elegiac tone, but it does not necessarily follow that the form was always an elegy. Booth’s dual phrase “odes or reflective elegies” suggests that another reading, namely, interpreting Larkin as an author of major odes, is also possible. Just like the elegy, the ode also has its roots in ancient Greek literature: whereas the former is about mourning and transience, the latter is about the real nature of the perceived object or phenomenon. An ode is always dramatic (its origin lies in the words of the Chorus in Greek drama), and it always implies a question about the relevant meaning of what is represented. Larkin’s major poems (like Keats’s great odes) are so rich because they follow in the wake of both traditions and the reader can observe them in both ways: as personal elegies (mostly self-elegies) about the pain caused by the consciousness of death, but also as great philosophical poems about the meaning of extinction. In Larkin, it is an ontological and epistemological end (death is where language ceases to exist). This is a conviction that reinforces his sense of personal loss, and this is why he is always (or almost always) movingly elegiac.

Towards the end of the book, Booth alludes to his own status as that of Jake Balokowsky. This is a reference to the hilariously funny, self-satirical, and very profound poem “Posterity,” in which the poet makes his fictitious biographer characterize him. It is inevitable that all Larkin scholars are in this position (for women scholars the name Balokowskaya has been concocted). If somebody is ready to associate himself with this imaginary American scholar, that means a thorough understanding of Larkin’s irony. After two previous monographs and a great number of

studies (not to speak of organizing conferences, editing volumes and a magazine) James Booth has, again, proved to be a very humble and hard-working Jake Balokowsky. His biography will surely become a basic source in Larkin studies as well as an enjoyable book for anyone interested in his poetry.

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— *JHEAS* —

Uncorrected proof