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"Only the very greatest art", Iris Murdoch has written, "invigorates without consoling, and defeats all our attempts to use it as magic" (31). Philip Larkin's poetry at its best answers to this high charge. He can range from the bitter pessimism of 'Wires' to the mystic tinge of 'High Windows', covering all stops along the way, but what is especially valuable about his work is the way in which he welds these extremes together so that even the bleak pessimism of the former piece contains a frustrated energy – "always scenting purer water/Not here but elsewhere" (3-4) – that is closely related to the sense of the numinous that blazes from the closing lines of the latter (Collected Poems, 48,1.65). Larkin was what you might call a spiritual atheist. Refusing to be lulled by man-made systems, religious or secular, he managed to articulate, and validate, the eternal yearning that underlies such systems. He stared at the abyss until the abyss blinked, and it is precisely because of this unflinching stare at hell – "Life is first boredom, then fear" ("Dockery and Son," 52, l. 45) – that we believe him when he uncovers glimpses of heaven.

The title of the book that made his reputation says it plainly: The Less Deceived. Larkin will refused to be consoled for the sheer awfulness of so much of life, and nor will he seek to console others. In 'Deceptions' (32), a poem addressed to a rape victim, he says it explicitly: "I would not dare/Console you if I could" (ll.10-11). And not alone is the rape victim to be unconsolated in this poem, the rapist too will be disappointed when he "bursts into fulfilment's desolate attic" (l.17). With the lines "but where/Desire takes charge, readings will grow erratic?" (ll.12-13) Larkin sounds suspiciously as if he is making excuses for the rapist, but what these lines really reveal is his clear-eyed vision. He does not fume with righteous indignation, excusable though that might be in the circumstances, but

insists on probing for the truth of the matter. Perhaps the rapist is not totally a black-hearted villain, but has been led astray by uncontrollable urges? It is significant that Larkin phrases the thought as a question. Perhaps this reading of the matter is true, it indicates, but the speaker does not know and will not pretend to know, and neither will he pretend that even if it were true, it would be any consolation to the victim. "For you would hardly care/That you were less deceived" (ll.14-15). It is as if Larkin were setting up a sign in his poetic shop window: "No moonshine here."

Then there is the other side of the coin. "Coming" (interestingly, written only five days after "Deceptions") is a simple celebration of Spring (l. 33). Set on facing pages in Collected Poems they make a stark contrast, but the evil of 'Deceptions' does not negate the simple joy of 'Coming', and nor does the joy of 'Coming' wipe out the suffering in "Deceptions." It is not a consolation but a clear-eyed, strong-hearted, invigorating acceptance of all facets of reality, both good and bad. Larkin makes "Coming" even more convincing by referring to his own childhood as "a forgotten boredom" (l.13) while at the same time using the image of a child to convey the sense of natural happiness brought on by the arrival of Spring.

Another early poem about Spring, called simply "Spring" (39), shows an even closer fusion of bleak despair and beauty. Six lines of vivid description of the season blooming, "Calmly a cloud stands, calmly a bird sings" (l. 3), are followed by this: "and me/Threading my pursed-up way across the park/An indigestible sterility" (ll. 6-8). Then we have two short stanzas, the first, a wonderful Yeatsian vision of Spring: "is fold of untaught flower, is race of water,/Is earth's most multiple, excited daughter" (ll. 10-11); the second, another glance at the indigestible sterilities: "Their paths grown craven and circuitous/Their visions mountain-clear, their needs immodest" (ll.13-14). It is a vision of loveliness rendered especially poignant because "those she has least use for see her best" (ll. 12). And while "visions mountain-clear" is an image vibrant with the burgeoning hope of Spring, the phrase itself, in context, is more ambiguous. It speaks at once of memories of the hopes of youth, and of painful awareness of the fading of those

hopes. And the final phrase, "their needs immodest" destroys any illusions of experience bringing resigned wisdom: the hopes and possibilities vanish, the yearning remains. And yet the poem is not unremittingly bleak. This final line, with its blend of hopeful imagery and painful realism seems to knit the piece together in a way that neither denies the beauty and life-affirming qualities of the Spring (there will always be children to "finger the awakened grass" (l. 2), nor the reality of soured, life-battered individuals. It makes no claim that one will magically dissolve the other, yet it hints that the mere recognition on the soured individual's part of the beauty around him is somehow enough. It calls to mind that most invigorating and least consoling of phrases from Samuel Beckett, another great visionary-in-disguise: "I can't go on, I'll go on" (418).

This sense of meaning being all around us while being at the same time maddeningly inaccessible is by no means a predominant feature of Larkin's work, quantitatively speaking. So many of his poems stress relentlessly the bleaker side of life that it would be an easy matter to make a case for Larkin the thorough-going pessimist. On the complexities of love and human relationships he can be searingly, incisively honest. "No Road" (47), "Vers de societe" (181), "Since the Majority of Me" (50), "Talking in Bed" (129); all these are admirable for their refusal to embrace false consolations about either oneself or one's relations to others. But they tell only one side of the story, and it is surely no coincidence that the titles of his third and fourth volumes are taken from pieces that imbue this hard-eyed stare on the world with a mysterious sense of meaning that, for some inexplicable reason, carries a redemptive charge. These are "The Whitsun Weddings" and "High Windows" (114, 165).

These poems share another quality too, one which is vital to the power of the visionary glimpses they seek to reveal. This is the colloquial tone they both adopt. "The Whitsun Weddings" begins "That Whitsun, I was late getting away:" (l. 1). It is the tone of a man settling himself to tell a story. And the content matches the voice: a train journey through the midlands to London, the first two stanzas setting a lazy summer's day scene, building up through a handful of evocative phrases a sense of a sleepy, slightly run-down country at peace with itself: "All windows

down, all cushions hot, all sense/Of being in a hurry gone" (ll. 5-6), "through the tall heat that slept/For miles inland" (ll. 11-12), "short-shadowed cattle, and/Canals with floatings of industrial froth" (ll. 14-15), "acres of dismantled cars" (l. 20). (The "industrial froth" and "dismantled cars" are especially Larkinesque touches, nicely off-setting any leanings towards a phoney pastoralism as well as sharply etching the grubby, mundane background from which his hint of the sublime will eventually emerge.) In the third stanza the story proper, such as it is, begins with the narrator noticing the weddings. At once, the sharp eye of the realist comes into play: "girls/In parodies of fashion" (ll. 28-29), to be followed immediately by lines ringing of truth of a different order and giving a preliminary hint of the sense of wonder that will later suffuse the whole poem:

All posed irresolutely, watching us go,
As if out on the end of an event
Waving goodbye
To something that survived it. (ll. 30-33)

His interest roused, the narrator looks more closely next time, his eye for detail, both physical and psychological, as sharp as before: "mothers loud and fat" (l. 37), "perms" (l. 38), "jewellery-substitutes" (l. 39), "The lemons, mauves, and olive-ochres that/Marked off the girls unreally from the rest" (ll. 40-41). The train approaches London and in the penultimate stanza the tone begins, not to change, but to lift, like a camera slowly pulling back from a close-up at the end of a film to reveal a surrounding vastness: "and none/ Thought of the others they would never meet/ Or of how their lives would all contain this hour" (ll. 66-68). There is no jarring wrench from what has preceded this, no hint of a self-deceiving romanticism, but something, we sense, has begun to clarify.

With the last half of the final stanza it comes into perfect focus, just as the train eases to its journey's end in a London station. The middle lines, with their muted emotional charge and sense of yearning, pave the way: "and what it held/Stood ready to be loosed with all the power/That being changed can give" (ll. 75-77). Then, as the train slows, comes that enigmatic closing image, suffusing the whole

retrospectively with a poignant ephemerality that yet contains, paradoxically, a sense of eternal significance: "there swelled /A sense of falling, like an arrow shower/Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain" (ll. 78-80).

Larkin has declared his poetic aim to be "to construct a verbal device that would preserve an experience indefinitely by reproducing it in whoever read the poem" (Plimpton 152). By this criteria "The Whitsun Weddings" must be judged a resounding success.

If "The Whitsun Weddings" is a marriage of the mundane and the sublime, a blend of "success...huge and...farcical" (l. 60) with "a religious wounding" (l. 64), then "High Windows" seems to take the opposite view. We have the same colloquial tone: "When I see a couple of kids" (l. 1), and the earthy language convincing us that here is a man firmly planted in the real world: "And guess that he's fucking her and she's/Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm" (ll. 2-3). The pace is faster with a hint of breathlessness, which is in perfect harmony with the short, sudden thought and the sudden, astonishing finish. This finish shares something of the ineffable quality of the ending of "The Whitsun Weddings" – or, it might be more accurate to say, the ineffable quality that the ending to "Weddings" imparts to that whole poem. Therein lies one crucial difference between the two pieces: in "High Windows" the sense of awesome mystery at the end is set against the human failings/feelings that precede it. It seems to present a case of either/or, whereas "The Whitsun Weddings" spoke of both/and, the one a natural emanation from the other. This is not to say that "High Windows" is a lesser poem. It simply looks at a different aspect of experience, the sense of missing out on the good things in life and envying the young who seem to be "going down the long slide/To happiness, endlessly" (ll. 8-9), - hardly a feeling that could be bathed in any kind of spiritual glow. What saves the transcendent final stanza from conveying a sense of illusory consolation is that the envy of the first two stanzas is effectively answered by the third and fourth. The speaker recognises that just as he envies young people their sexual freedoms, so older people of his own youth probably envied him his freedom from the shackles of religion: "No God any more, or sweating in the dark/About hell and that" (ll. 12-

13). The implication is that the same cycle will endlessly repeat itself, the old forever envying the young for one reason or another. So the final stanza, when it comes, has the air of a man turning away from futility, instinctually craving for meaning, and not merely trying to console himself for a loss. The success or otherwise of this stanza depends perhaps on how one responds in general to hints of the numinous. One critic has deplored it as "outdated religious consolation" (Clark 99), and, perhaps through its detachment from any tangible human experience, it does leave itself open to the charge. But sudden vision is as valid a source of expression as any other and, personally, I find it more bracing and inspiring than consolatory. The final line, indeed, in its tension between the negativity of the words "nothing" and "nowhere" and the sense of awe lent it by that earlier luminous phrase "The sun-comprehending glass" (l. 18), imparts just a hint of terror, calling to mind the words of Rainer Maria Rilke: "For beauty is nothing but the beginning of a terror that we are only just beginning to understand..." (Needleman 188).

With "Sad Steps" (169), as if to forestall any charges of deceiving himself with consolation, Larkin builds the accusation into the poem itself. Speaking of "Church Going" (97), Ian Hamilton suggested that it "seems a debate between poet and persona" (74). This is even more true of "Sad Steps." The opening image, "Groping back to bed after a piss" (l. 1), is so solidly earth-bound as to verge on the sordid. But when this groping persona opens the curtains he is "startled by/The rapid clouds, the moon's cleanliness" (ll. 2-3). After two more lines in a similar vein, the persona wakes up, sniffing a romantic on the premises: "There's something laughable about this"(l. 6), but when he goes on to explain why it is laughable his words only serve to reinforce the sense of quiet wonder invoked by a sight of unearthly, cold beauty:

The way the moon dashes through clouds that blow
Loosely as cannon-smoke to stand apart
(Stone-coloured light sharpening the roofs below) (ll. 7-9)

The next line seems to fight with itself, poet and persona struggling for supremacy: "High and preposterous and separate" (l. 10). "High" and "separate" strengthen the poet's perception, "preposterous" is the agitated interjection of the persona. But sandwiched in the middle like this, the word has a curious effect. It takes on something of the aura of the words on either side of it and evokes a kind of sneering grandeur, as if flinging the speaker's contempt back in his face. Sensing this, the persona changes tack and adopts outright mockery: "Lozenge of love! Medallion of art!/O wolves of memory! Immensements!" (ll. 11-12). Then, feeling secure in his victory, he speaks plainly what he believes to be undeceived reality: "No,/One shivers slightly, looking up there" (ll. 12-13). But now something strange and wonderful happens. The next two lines give us a picture of the moon that seem to effect a reconciliation between poet and persona: "The hardness and the brightness and the plain/Far-reaching singleness of that wide stare" (ll. 14-15). The lines contain a hard mystic clarity that speaks directly to the poet's sense of mystery and beauty (indeed, they call to mind the closing lines of 'High Windows') without relinquishing in the slightest the persona's determination not to be deceived by romantic illusion. They stir up vague images of ancient pagan gods while being as close to unadorned descriptive realism as language can get. The final stanza goes on to seal this reconciliation. The sight is a reminder of the strength of being young, but also of its pain. "[T]hat it won't come again" (l. 17) is an acceptance of the brute reality of age and decay, while "but is for others undiminished somewhere" (18) is a momentary release from self-obsession and the prison of the ego, a spiritual meshing with the eternal realities of youth and strength and vigour that underlie the separate "muddy vestures of decay" (Andrews V.i.64) through which they manifest themselves. It is a perfect fusion of the twin elements that provide the spine to Larkin's best work: the unavoidable harsh truths of existence, the pain of age and death squarely faced up to, and, equally allowed for, the no less real but far more elusive spiritual truths than can never be more than glimpsed from the corner of the soul, as it were, but that once so glimpsed, hold the power to transform the dross of life into pure gold, if only for the briefest of moments.

Some critics are suspicious of these hints of transcendence. "There are no imaginative exits from history", Tom Paulin has written (Regan 19). Far from looking for exits, Larkin's work seeks imaginative enlargements of history (taking history here to mean experience, the limits of the ego, 'real life'). Take the late poem "Aubade" (208). As meditations on death go, it does not get much bleaker than this: "Most things may never happen: this one will" (l. 34). But then we notice that the last stanza opens "Slowly light strengthens" (l. 41), and ends with that familiar Larkin charge of mingled hope and despair: "Postmen like doctors go from house to house" (l. 50). Sickness and death may be inevitable but human communication, the glue of life, goes on. To return to Beckett, we might say that if "I can't go on" is the voice of history, "I'll go on" is the resolute answer of undeceived but deathless imagination. With courage and resilience, Philip Larkin embraced both.

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First Response

A vigorous and lively reappraisal and defence of Larkin's mixture of effects, and of his poetry as seeking 'imaginative enlargements of history' rather than selling it short.