

English poets are
being forced to
explore not just the
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It is an inevitable fact that the consumers of literature – laymen and literary critics alike – tend to group together texts and authors into separate categories, and attach to each category a number of supposedly ‘common’ characteristics and idiosyncracies which all its members apparently share. Philip Larkin and Ted Hughes, and their poetry, are no exceptions. Larkin and Hughes are often linked together when discussing English poets, and do have a number of things in common: they were born within eight years of each other, they wrote and published their poetry at similar times, and both are identified with the north of England. Both men were writing at a time when the notion of a stable and established England was being undermined, largely due to the rapid social change initiated by the termination of the Second World War. Thus both poets were heirs to a unique poetic impulse which sought to reject the old order of modernism by employing creative and innovative forms of expression: the new consciousness of a new generation. Yet although Larkin and Hughes are frequently grouped together as ‘English post-war poets’, a term which suggest homogeneity, there is in reality more diversity in their approaches than is commonly assumed. Indeed, while Larkin is categorised as member of ‘The Movement’ – a group of poets whose focus was “an emphatically English provincialism”¹, Hughes resists overtly making England his subject matter, choosing instead to portray elemental forces in order to distance himself from the practices of ‘The Movement’.

The Whitsun Weddings portrays different aspects of England, which all come together to create a recognisable vision of contemporary society. The

colloquialisms and ‘ low’ diction employed in the collection is perfectly suited to Larkin’s focus on ‘ common’ life. Larkin’s England is a country that has been violated by the spread of industry, and is now languishing in a state of national decline, as depicted in ‘ Sunny Prestatyn’ – a poem in which an image of beauty, albeit artificial and material, is violently destroyed because it is “ too good for this life”. Yet paradoxically there is an awareness that this is the only country we possess, and is therefore precious. The Whitsun Weddings faithfully presents England as it exists, so that the reader, who is imaginatively engaged with Larkin’s poetry, is able to see with clarity England’s flaws and occasional virtues.

Larkin is fascinated by the relationship between the individual self and the landscape it inhabits. 2 Particular poems in The Whitsun Weddings, such as ‘ Here’, depict a geographical landscape, a rather flat portrait of England beyond which Larkin then moves by linking the physical panorama to the human condition. England is not merely a landscape, but a state of being, and a place that we inhabit physically and mentally. Yet the ultimate responsibility, that of deciding what is the matter with England, and to what extent its failings are responsible for the shortcomings of society and the individual, is left to the reader.

The success of Larkin’s poetry lies in his ability to recognise and capture common emotions and experience. In ‘ Mr Bleaney’, this sense of ordinariness, even banality, is heightened by the simplicity of language and the inclusion of unremarkable details: “ stub my fags / On the same saucer-souvenir”. The sparse description of the material surroundings shared by the

absent Mr Bleaney and the poet reinforces the poverty of their comparative lives: “ Flowered curtains, thin and frayed, / Fall to within five inches of the sill.” The comfortless nature of the environment is extended to the general nature of existence. It is only routine that can give comfort or meaning to a life that is otherwise devoid of meaning: “ he kept on plugging at the four aways-/ Likewise their yearly frame”. This sentiment is expanded in ‘ The Importance of Elsewhere’, where the security of routine becomes the sole purpose of life in England:

Living in England has no such excuse:

These are my customs and establishments...

Here no elsewhere underwrites my existence.

In ‘ Mr Bleaney’ the opening situation that is relevant only to the poet gives way to a vision that carries deep implications for all mankind. The awareness that: “ how we live measures our own nature” is endowed with poignancy by the universalisation of sentiment; the individual “ I” of earlier stanzas is replaced by the generalised pronoun “ we”. It is no longer simply the predicament of the imaginative construct of Mr Bleaney: it is our predicament too. Thus the poem is a social commentary, which focuses upon the impoverished existence of the ‘ common’ man.

The final two stanzas, with their complex syntax, deferred clauses and single tortured sentence, create the sensation of helplessness, which is conclusively affirmed by the final idiom “ I don’t know”. This is the general

conviction of ' Mr Bleaney': that the real meaning of life in England is permanently elusive. Rare moments of insight will only deliver frustration and resignation. Ultimately we are left with an eclipse of meaning, and a void that will be filled by routine.

An unattainable England of days gone by is recalled in ' MCMXIV', and a comparison is drawn between this idyllic past and modern society:

Never before or since,

As changed itself to past

Without a word

Larkin identifies the First World War as being responsible for a break in English consciousness by annihilating both the " innocence" of the time and the " grinning...moustached archaic faces". ' MCMXIV' celebrates the beauty and stability of this era, in contrast to the England of frustrated expectations and disappointed that is typically characterised in ' Essential Beauty'.

Contemporary England is presented as a place where deviation from social norms, although often desired and occasionally attempted, can never be wholly achieved because each individual destiny is at the mercy of unseen forces. ' Dockery and Son' dramatises the poet's realisation that his efforts to break free from societal expectations, to become like the " strong/ Unhindered moon" by relinquishing the conventional responsibilities of materialistic culture, have not delivered the freedom he yearns. Ultimately, the notion of choice is a fallacy: the poetic persona had the option to buy

into convention, or the choice to opt out of the capitalist existence and achieve nothing. Clearly his quest to find liberty by possessing: “ no son, no wife, / No house or land” has delivered nothing but the sudden: “ shock / Of finding out how much had gone of life”.

The poet’s acknowledgement of his own failure, and by implication the general failure of mankind, is made all the more poignant because it is a static resignation. The poet remains inert at the end of a station platform in Sheffield; he has nowhere to go, physically and imaginatively. Our last impression of Larkin is of a passive and powerless figure, who is able to discern that, whether or not he partakes in it, life goes on regardless: “ Life is first boredom, then fear, / Whether or not we use it, it goes.”

Railway imagery is a prominent component of ‘ The Whitsun Weddings’, a poem which comprehensively illustrates Larkin’s vision of England. The poem documents a train journey, which moves from images of landscape, through the observation of social rituals, and terminates with an intense moment of sophisticated insight, which entirely transcends contingency. ‘ The Whitsun Weddings’ mirrors the momentum of the train that carries the detached Larkin and the wedding parties that invade his carriage: as the train nears its destination, the pitch and intensity of the poem are heightened.

Larkin establishes himself as an individual observer, detached from the activity that surrounds him and endowed with acute abilities of perception. Thus details would be regarded by most as unworthy of note are related with an innovative originality: “ A hothouse flashed uniquely”. The industrial and

the pastoral are seen to exist side by side, the two ways of English life juxtaposed: “ Wide farms went by, short-shadowed cattle, and / Canals with floatings of industrial froth”, and even united: “ Its postal districts packed like squares of wheat”

The constant replaying of the same social ritual soon impinges on Larkin’s consciousness. The “ dozen marriages [that] got under way” possess an absurd quality: there is no distinction between any of the wedding parties that join the train. He sees “ it all again in different terms”, and the mass exodus to London by the newly married couples is played out almost like a pantomime, complete with stereotypical characters. Larkin comments on the farcical nature of the rites, often with some distaste:

Mothers loud and fat;

An uncle shouting smut; and then the perms,

The nylon gloves and jewellery-substitutes,

The lemons, mauves, and olive-ochres that

Marked off the girls unreally from the rest.

While each couple supposes themselves to be unique, Larkin and the reader are aware that they are merely part of a larger fabric of similar ceremonies.

As the train approaches its destination, the poem gains momentum as though possessed of some new energy, then suddenly slows down. The philosophical discourse slackens too, as Larkin can no longer sustain the

intensity of his superior knowledge that extends far beyond the superficiality of socially constructed rituals. He relinquishes the awareness that the journey was merely a “frail / Travelling coincidence”: the experience now inhabits the past, and Larkin releases his hold on it, leaving him free to pursue the fertile possibilities of the future. 3

Larkin has taken us on a journey through more than simply space and time: it has been a journey through experience and knowledge. It has revealed and observed the substance of Englishness: its landscape and the people who inhabit it. The gentle closing lines of the poem:

there swelled

A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower

Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain

is an optimistic release of the ‘true’ meaning of life that can never be fully sustained, or indeed realised, by most Englishers. In the poetry which makes up *The Whitsun Weddings*, Larkin presents the reader with a simple and uncomplicated depiction of the matter of England, through which it is easy to perceive what is the matter with England.

Ted Hughes has an altogether different attitude towards the matter of England, and indeed towards poetry itself. There are few overt references to the English nation in his *New Selected Poems 1957-1994*, primarily because Hughes does not deem the rational division of the earth into separate states to be of any real importance. To him landscapes, animalistic forces and the

scope of nature are not contingent upon the demarcation of a particular region – they are equally in existence the world over. However, certain landscapes in his verse can be identified geographically, and many of these are of England, or at least an England of the past. For example, *Remains of Elmet* is a series of poems which has as its backdrop the last Celtic kingdom; within this geography Hughes brings together history and the activity of contemporary life to create a mythic effect. England is depicted through the portrayal of the whole of western civilisation. The sentiments contained in Hughes' poetry apply to England because it has been shaped by the same processes as western culture, and both are now in the grip of a spiritual and natural paralysis.

Hughes harbours a powerful contempt for western civilisation because its values and attitudes have impeded the operation of man's natural energy. 4 He conceives of civilisation as a cage from which man must break free and rediscover basic instincts. Thus the role of contemporary society is negated, and the logical rationalism of modernity is denied, in favour of the evocation of primitive but unrecognised natural forces at work in man and his environment. Hughes sees that being “ disconnected from this inner [primeval] world, life becomes empty, meaningless, sterile.” 5, so he uses poetry as a means to discover this life by giving voice to the figure beneath the mask of civilisation.

Social history becomes translated into a natural history by Hughes' poetry: in ' *October Dawn*' for example, the social is related to the evolution of the landscape. 6 ' *October Dawn*' sets a precarious civilisation against the

puissant force of nature, a battle which civilisation inevitably loses. This poem emphasises that western culture is subject to the benevolence of the earth, and can be reclaimed at any point. So “ A glass half full of wine” is “ left out / To the dark heaven all night” like an offering to placate some primeval god. Yet the insubstantial wine glass, an emblem of civilisation, is “ doomed” as natural forces begin to conquer all things man-made: “ Ice/ Has got its spearhead into place.” The delicacy soon gives way to something more forceful, which is reflected by the elemental and energetic diction: “ a fist of cold / Squeezes the fire at the core of the world.” Such is the unbridled power of nature that it has eliminated the civilised man and all evidence of his existence, and reinstated the “ Mammoth and Sabre-tooth”, but has only just begun its domination. The potential of the landscape is immense: “ And now it is about to start.”

‘ Football at Slack’ appears in Remains of Elmet, a collection that focuses on a real world inhabited by real people as opposed to the mythopoeic world of Crow, for example. Here, the human and the elemental interact in an exhilarating celebration of vitality. But significantly the human activity of football, a game that occupies an increasingly central role in the culture of England, is contained within the bounds of the landscape: “ Between plunging valleys, on a bareback of hill.”

The football game is recounted in a gently mocking tone; the football players take on an absurd quality, and become almost clown-like figures: “ Men in bunting colours / Bounced”, and “ The rubbery men bounced after it”. There is something incongruous about the whole activity – men flailing around in

the landscape, chasing a ball while the enduring hillside looks on. As always, nature exercises control over the activities of man: “ The ball jumped up and out and hung on the wind / Over a gulf of treetops.” Nature exerts its powers on the men, as though in teasing; for although: “ the rain lowered a steel press” leaving the players practically submerged, they remain: “ washed and happy”. Man interacts with the landscape, and there is the connotation that the landscape watches the match and is entertained by it. Hughes identifies in this football game a vestige of man’s natural energy.

Yet although in this instance the natural and the social operate side by side in a complicit agreement, ‘ Football at Slack’ carries the suggestion that the hillside could at any time unleash its power on the comical figures: “ a golden holocaust / Lifted the cloud’s edge”. A bleak, physical landscape once again has supremacy over humankind, and primitive energies possess the advantage over the peculiarities of western civilisation.

An awareness of the carnal mentality shared by animals and humans alike is basic to Ted Hughes. 7 The impulse to get back to a new and more vital life principle is ever present in his poetry -he strips humanity down to a bare animal in order to attempt a reconciliation with a consciousness that has insisted on the alienation from the ‘ inner life’. ‘ The Long Tunnel Ceiling’ is a drama of consciousness, and illustrates the way in which the observation of animals, as representative of the true order of nature, provides the stimulus for the re-acquaintance with our true selves.

In 'The Long Tunnel Ceiling', the sight of a trout in a canal marks a departure from the mundaneness of modern life, and the verse that contains it. The fish takes on the persona of a natural god, a: "Master of the Pennine Pass", and in that capacity is exalted, indeed almost worshipped, by Hughes. The sighting of the: "Molten pig of many a bronze loach" triggers in the poet an imaginative flight into a mystical, natural landscape – a flight on which he is accompanied by the reader:

Brought down on a midnight cloudburst

In a shake-up of heaven and the hills

When the streams burst with zig-zags and explosions.

An encounter with a single, inert fish initiates a mental and spiritual departure from the heedless bustle of modern life, with its: "Lorries from Bradford [and] Rochdale" that pass insistently overhead. The animal is accepted as a desirable and precious aspect of the self; against this knowledge, the industrial society that surrounds the poet and the trout fails to possess any meaning. We are left with an awareness of a "wild god" that flowers like a symbol of hope and sustenance amid the relentless passage of modern life.

'Her Husband' is one of the few poems by Hughes to possess a socially oriented view. A precarious social hierarchy, with males assuming a higher status because they know: "The stubborn character of money", is portrayed. The existence of humans and their ultimately insignificant social structures

are sustained through the violation of the landscape. Thus civilisation is supported and underpinned by nature. Yet the poem suggests that the physical earth will revenge its desecration at the hands of ruthless humanity: “ Their jurors are to be assembled / From the little crumbs of soot.” The transience and superficiality of western culture is contrasted with the enduring and far superior presence of the landscape and its fossil fuels: “ Their brief / Goes straight up to heaven and nothing more is heard of it.” The farcical notion of the “ rights” of humanity is burnt away as effortlessly as the coal.

Hughes portrays basic natural forces with a language of energy and vigour, and in doing so creates a mythic dimension. The poetry of Ted Hughes is neither social commentary nor a straight-forward description of the geography of England. It condemns the whole of western culture, of which England is a part, for distancing itself and its people from the strong primitive urges that comprise the inner self. His aim is to: “ reconnect our own natural energies with those in the external, natural world” 8 through the medium of poetry.

Both Philip Larkin and Ted Hughes both —examine the matter of England, and expose its flaws. But their attitudes towards and treatment of this England differ radically. The term “ English poets” seeks to unite the two perspectives of two poets that remain essentially irreconcilable.

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