Philip Larkin published four slim volumes of poetry in his short life. Three of these are mature masterpieces, each page—and very few of the poems are more than a page—a marvel of craft and invention. Kingsley Amis was said by his son to read two or three Larkin poems every evening. They reward such devotion. They are marvels of compression that open outwards like nothing so much as a Chekhov miniature. Larkin was a librarian, never a professional poet. He didn’t teach. He didn’t take fellowships or serve as a writer-in-residence. He didn’t join the global cultural tours that fill the late chapters of biographies of poets like Stephen Spender or Ted Hughes. He wasn’t fond of public readings or running up to London for book parties. But if in his life he had little to do with the literary world, since his death in 1985 it has had much to do with him. There have been two versions of his Collected Poems and a vast Complete Poems, which added 640 pages of unpublished work, notes, and variations to the ninety-odd pages of poetry that Larkin published in his lifetime. There have also been two volumes of juvenilia, three biographies, and three thick volumes of correspondence. The Library of Congress lists forty-five volumes under the heading “Larkin, Philip—Criticism and interpretation,” all of it heavy artillery in the Larkin
The issue of whether Larkin was naughty or nice has occupied critics and scholars on both sides of the Atlantic since the publication of the *Selected Letters*, edited by Anthony Thwaite, in 1992, and the official life, written by Andrew Motion, the following year. The violence of the viewpoints is extreme. And there is plenty of evidence for Larkin as misogynist or racist. There is also good evidence for him as kind colleague and doting lover. It is all utterly irrelevant. I almost typed *depressing*. The latter is the better word. Poetry is older than civilization, yet in the last fifty years, it has all but died out. Only a tiny number of poets have added anything to the public conversation during this period. Among them Larkin is pre-eminent. He has been dead for thirty years and to read his poems is to realize the power that poetry can wield over our memories and imaginations. Memorable poems are almost nonexistent today. But most of Larkin is memorable from the first moment. I vividly recall coming across these lines in “Self’s the Man”:

He married a woman to stop her getting away

Now she’s there all day,

And the money he gets for wasting his life on

work

She takes as her perk

To pay for the kiddies’ clobber and the drier

And the electric fire.

That use of “clobber” still smarts when I read it.

While all three bulk Larkins remain in print, Faber also has his three great collections—*The Less Deceived* (1955), *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964), and *High Windows* (1974)—available in gorgeous little paperbacks with French flaps. Buy them. Slip one into a jacket. Dip into it at odd moments. Your life will be improved. What will not improve your life is reading the thick volume *Philip Larkin: Letters Home*, over six hundred pages drawn from the four thousand letters and cards Larkin sent to his parents like clockwork between 1940 and 1977.1

Larkin was a serious correspondent. Writing letters was liberating, and he performed a wide variety of roles in them. He was just another lad with Kingsley Amis but a flirtatious shoulder for his much-put-upon wife, Hilly. It was gossip and pornography for Bob Conquest and reactionary politics for Colin Gunner. With Barbara Pym, he was the fellow beset writer. With the art historian Judy Egerton, the dear friend. His most protean correspondence was with Monica Jones, his long-term lover and spouse in all but name. He was a far more comfortable lover in words than in the flesh, but the letters to Jones still show him to be *trying* in both senses of the word. The Thwaite volume also demonstrates that Larkin’s famous grumbling, frustrated persona was absurdly
overplayed. Devoted girlfriends abounded. But the conservative opinions and the not-PC
doggerel—“Walt Whitman/ Was certainly no titman,” etc.—of the Selected Letters were too much
for the delicate flowers of the literary establishment. Thwaite’s book remains, of course, a
delightful volume after a quarter-century, full of verve and lacking any intrusive editorial
apparatus.

If there is a reasonable argument for publishing Letters Home, it is that Thwaite included none
of Larkin’s letters to his parents—a startling omission if you think of the volume as a brick in
some scholarly foundation, but very sensible if the aim is general reading interest. Thwaite’s
appealingly brief introduction noted,

There are over 700 letters in this book, written to more than fifty recipients, and the collection draws on
my reading of many thousands of letters, to those recipients and many others. They date from Larkin’s
late teens until close to his death at the age of sixty-three. Other letters exist on which I have not drawn
at all: chiefly those to his parents, and in particular to his mother, to whom, after she was widowed in
1948 and he moved to Belfast in 1950, he wrote regularly until her death in 1977, aged ninety-one. These
would have swelled the book to unmanageable proportions.

What Thwaite was sensitively suggesting, the new publication makes clear: Larkin’s letters home
are dull and add nothing to our understanding of his achievements.

Larkin started regularly writing to his parents when he went up to Oxford in 1940, but the letters
form no kind of intellectual biography or even diary. Let’s pause over two key moments in
Larkin’s development. In January 1948, he sent the manuscript of a second volume of poems, titled
In the Grip of Light, to Faber & Faber. Larkin was a precocious writer of both fiction and verse. And
he published easily at first: the small Fortune Press brought out a collection of his poetry, The
North Ship, in 1945, and a novel, Jill, in 1946. The next year Faber published his second novel,
The Girl in Winter, to critical acclaim. But in February 1948, the house turned In the Grip of Light
down. So, in short order, did The Bodley Head, Dent, Macmillan, Methuen, and John Lehmann. It
was a blow and would prove the turning point in his career. There is only one brief mention in his
letters home of what was surely months of hopes and hopes dashed. This may be explicable in that
his father went into the hospital in January for a gallbladder operation and died in March, but the
exclusion of weighty matters is also typical of the whole correspondence.

Larkin returned home after his father’s death and lived with his mother for two years. He wrote
little, a fact often attributed to the sting of losing a parent, but just as likely to have resulted from
the toxic mix of making house with his mother, starting a career he disliked (librarianship), and
the self-doubt fostered by the failure of In the Grip of Light. He escaped from domestic misery in
1950 to a job as a sub-librarian at Queen’s College, Belfast. He and Monica Jones had become
lovers, and he wrote frequently to her: letters full of his reading (the longing to share and show
off), his literary ambitions in the wake of the Faber defeat, and his preparations to have a
collection privately printed. He also began again with his weekly “letter home.” On Sunday,
November 5, still settling into Belfast, he wrote to his mother with truistic advice about paid
companions (“I realize the question of choosing a companion is extremely difficult and delicate!”),
buying a house ("I’m afraid there will always be some drawbacks in any house"), and her worry over the cost of storing furniture ("Ten shillings does not sound too bad—it’s a sort of compromise increase, I fancy"). “I have not much news this week,” he went on:

I was measured for the suit & it may be ready for Xmas, I don’t know. On Thursday night I had to go out on a ghastly drinking evening with the people I lied to previously. God! why can’t one be really rude? Yesterday Graham, Bradley & a man called Terry & I walked to Lisburn—some 7 or 8 miles I suppose—& Bradley & I stayed there for the evening. This was all right, but O! I do get bored so easily. A few hours of anyone is always enough for me. Then I long for a book & my own uninterrupted thoughts. Regarding my “new life,” it is superficially quite bearable, but at bottom all lives are impossible. I don’t mean I’m not quite happy, but it doesn’t do to analyse it all.

This is what you get, week after week, in Larkin’s letters to his mother, though mercifully free of the cloying language—he calls her a “dear old creature”—that descends almost to passages of baby talk in later years. Even the book’s editor, James Booth, admits the banality of the contents (he prefers the phrase “humdrum and domestic”). But he still criticizes his predecessor Thwaite for neglecting what “constitute[s] Larkin’s most intimate and committed correspondence, and takes us to the tragic core of the poet’s life.” Nonsense. There was nothing tragic about Larkin’s life, and his most intimate and committed correspondence was with Monica Jones.

Larkin mentioned the letter quoted above as having marred his day when he wrote to Jones in the evening:

I spent this morning writing home, a job that becomes extremely difficult sometimes. In fact I expect it lies at the bottom of the day’s unsatisfactoriness. My mother’s patient attempts to find someone to live with so that she need not bother either of us make me very uncomfortable. When I lived with her I was consumed with desire to get away—it seemed a prime necessity, like breathing—but now I am away it seems very shabby & callous of both of us that she shd have to be bothering her head about advertisements and pretending to like people when really the ordeal of setting up house with a complete stranger will be as miserable to her as to me.

He apologizes for the gloom, and the letter catches fire when he takes up what really matters:

Awake, my soul, and without the sun &c. I’ve finally assembled 20 poems—representing “all I wish to preserve” since 1945, and am typing them out. I know them all so well now that they are like old friends, hopeless old friends whom you know will never get a job. The difficulty will be knowing what to do with them—I haven’t more than 10 friends, & I doubt if I can give way more than another 30 to reviews & great men: I can see myself sending parcels of them to Blackwell’s instructing them to give one free to anybody who says “please” when speaking to the assistants. This all depends on my having enough money to foot the printing bill. The main concern will be keeping them out of Belfast.

The five years Larkin spent in Belfast were among the happiest of his life—the years when he found himself as a writer, turning away from fiction (he failed three times to write a third novel) towards poetry and breaking free of his early influences (Yeats in particular). Nothing of this is recorded in Letters Home. What you read instead is a banal record of a banal task: a young man pretending to be a dutiful son. A compelling record of these years of becoming is in Letters to
Monica (2010), also edited by Thwaite. Jones, addled by drink and depression and not aware of what was in her papers, was alive when Thwaite was preparing the Selected Letters. In the wake of her death in 2001, her side of the lengthy correspondence with Larkin came to light. Larkin publications have so often been reactions to earlier ones, and Letters to Monica was Thwaite’s attempt to show the tender side of Larkin after the beast of the Selected. “I don’t say I love you for doing nothing,” Larkin wrote to her in 1955, “but I love you for not doing any of the things available. Suppose you wrote poems I couldn’t praise! Suppose you read authors I suspect! Suppose you entertained well-assorted parties—[Philip Collins], the Hunters, Miss Moody, Barker! No, you are much better as you are, a simple dignified person, nobody’s sucker, an enigma.”

Yet the letters to Jones are not the performances of a dutiful lover. Larkin was by turns difficult and apologetic. He was rude and serious and honestly self-absorbed. He was, as far as I can tell, more or less himself (his abuse of Amis to Jones, for instance, rings far truer than the public friendship). “I’m sorry my thanks went down the wrong way: truly I meant no harm,” he wrote to Jones in October 1950, “I was only trying to say I didn’t take you for granted. Of course I can see dozens of ways in which thanking would sound nasty. But you must remember that there’s absolutely nothing of the confident male about me: it’d be better perhaps if there were.”

Larkin had Jones shred his journals after his death, and the letters to her form as close a record of his inner life as we will ever see. One of the major themes is his hatred of his family. This was a motif in the Motion biography, too. That book gets going with an autobiographical fragment Larkin wrote sometime early in the 1950s in one of his poetry notebooks:

> When I try to tune into my childhood, the dominant emotions I pick up are, overwhelmingly, fear and boredom. . . . My mother, as time went on, began increasingly to complain of her dreary life, her inability to run the house, and the approach of war. I suppose her age had something to do with it, but the monotonous whining monologue she treated my father to before breakfast, and all of us at mealtimes, resentful, self-pitying, full of funk and suspicion, must have remained in my mind as something I mustn’t under any circumstances risk encountering again. Once she sprang from the table announcing her intention to commit suicide. I never left the house without the sense of walking into a cooler, cleaner, saner and pleasanter atmosphere, and, if I had not made friends outside, life would have been scarcely tolerable.
My father’s state of mind at this time cannot have been cheerful. His wife had made home a place where he simply had to shut his mouth and bear it as best he could. His first child, my sister, he thought little better than a mental defective, who was showing regrettably few signs of marrying and clearing out. Second child, myself, lived in a private world, disregarding what awkward overtures he could make, and was handicapped by an embarrassing stammer. . . . I remember once saying to him that, after all, I supposed he had had a successful life. His humourless yap of laughter left no doubt as to what he thought on the subject. It would be somewhat absurd of me to regret his marriage, but I could never see why he needed a wife. He liked his own company best and gloried in his ability to look after himself, and his clumsiness in human relations must have made him an unsatisfactory husband, which in turn must have put a certain strain on him. Certainly the marriage left me with two convictions: that human beings should not live together, and that children should be taken from their parents at an early age.

Booth mentions this sketch in his introduction to *Letters Home* as having “perhaps unduly coloured” our view of Larkin’s home life. Hardly. He wrote often to Jones in the same vein, both specifically about his parents and sister and generally about family and commitment. A sampler from *Letters to Monica*:

I always find home depressing, not for its fault entirely, but entering it is to leave the harmless universe of make believe I inhabit & encounter the real world where children are reared & are a nuisance but will be alive after you are dead, & where people grow old & have to be looked after not because you like them but because they are breaking up, & where style in words & behavior counts for nothing at all. But what I dislike about my bunch is that they are physiologically and psychologically incapable of enjoying themselves.

And:

I don’t like home & never have. I am sent into furious rages about every 3 hours that make me want to smash things and shout obscenities. And it’s awfully boring, too.

The posturing and pretense of family relations—of which his letters home were obviously a chief form—were a constant distress for Larkin:

Often I experience moments of violent feeling of I suppose a rather mawkish pitying sort, but instead of grappling with them as a real writer wd I avoid them, averting my eyes, thinking if anything that they are too awful to be written about: I couldn’t bear to stir them up or peg them out for investigation. If I think of certain aspects of my mother’s life, for instance, or of my father when he was ill, a sort of roman candle of anguish goes off in me & from which I hurry away as soon as I can. They are moments mixed with guilt at my own selfishness, and with horror because I feel they are true. (“Suffering is exact”—“Tragedy is true guise.”) . . . If I had said: Mother, come & live with me in Belfast, or told my father the nature & hopelessness of his disease, this facing of facts would surely have lessened what I feel at present. I don’t know. Of course it is no use worrying about these things, nor is it seemly to do the wrong thing & then claim credit for worrying about it—but that’s me all over.
He returns to this feeling again and again: “Well, if you feel like that about it, why not do something to help her? Why don’t you? Why don’t you? Why don’t you? Part of sick life’s antidote my foot. Unsavoury humbug. Unsavoury humbug. Unsavoury humbug.”

Distaste for being nearer to his family was one reason he hesitated in 1954 to accept the librarianship of the University of Hull—a job he could scarce afford, professionally or financially, to refuse. He wrote to Jones about his hesitation:

Let me explain the family situation—last Christmas & Easter were hell at home: I don’t know what was wrong, possibly Mother was trying to bounce me into “doing something”—anyway, I told myself “You must never come back to England till she is dead and gone if you want a quiet life.” . . . Honestly I don’t know what I want—but I do know what I don’t want! I find the presence or company of my mother largely depressing. It fills me full of a sense of guilt & motheaten pity & wormeaten fear of responsibility and age and death.

He is surely performing a bit here, too, as Hull would also bring him much closer to Jones (she taught at the university in Leicester) and so force the question of marriage, which she was keen upon.

He took the job, avoided marrying, and, in 1955, his name was made with the publication of “Church Going” in The Spectator and shortly thereafter the collection The Less Deceived. It was one of those harmonious moments where a book of quality met the needs of a wider culture. Larkin was established as one of the chief voices of post-war England—the angry prophet of a chastened land that must look to the past as it has forfeited the future: “There is an evening coming in/ Across the fields, one never seen before,/ That lights no lamps.”

James Booth is a sensitive critic, and his knowledge of Larkin is profound. If you feel a need to read about the bard of Hull, you won’t do better than his Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love (2014). Yet I can’t help feeling Letters Home exists because a Larkin industry exists and perpetuates itself by fighting over his views of his mother or sister, his taste in pornography, and where he liked to holiday or shop. There is a delicious, if unconscious, note of this in the postscript to Booth’s biography when he discusses Maeve Brennan, another Larkin girlfriend. Booth helped her write The Philip Larkin I Knew (2002), and she served as vice-chairman of the Larkin Society: “At the time of her death in 2003, she was organizing a Society excursion to Scarborough to explore the site of her shopping trips with the poet in the 1960s. The excursion took place after her death.” Can you imagine the glee of Larkin relating this in a letter? He wrote to Judy Egerton in such a vein in 1982 remembering how Yeats suffered through hearing ten thousand Boy Scouts recite “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” in his honor: “ ‘They fuck you up’ will clearly be my Lake Isle of Innisfree. I fully expect to hear it recited by a thousand Girl Guides before I die.”

If I am glad in any way to have read Letters Home, it is because it has supplied a footnote for the ages, “A significant proportion of the socks recovered from 105 Newland Park [the poet’s house in Hull] by the Philip Larkin Society in 2004 following the death of Monica Jones have been carefully
darned, some with non-matching wool or in two colours. See Plate 5A.” Yes, there is a color photograph of Larkin’s socks in the book. “The mills of academe grind on. Almost simultaneously with *Letters Home* came a second heavily annotated volume of Sylvia Plath’s correspondence. These two poets have a torrid academic existence. It makes some sense in the American’s case: not only was her life tragically short and her work incomplete by any measure, but she is also one of feminism’s great martyrs. Larkin’s work is complete. His poetic gift died out almost a decade before his death—a reason he turned down the offer of the poet laureateship in 1984. His poetic notebooks make this clear. We see him whole in his published volumes and even in the round by reading the sixty-one extra poems Thwaite included in the two versions of the *Collected Poems*.

It is worth thinking about the arc of Larkin’s life for a moment. He was a successful (if unwilling) librarian and a very successful poet, but he took very little public role. Unlike T. S. Eliot, say, who represented high culture in the Anglophone world for three-plus decades, Larkin kept to himself and avoided the plunder and pratfalls of literary celebrity. Eliot’s anti-Semitism matters because he was presented as an exemplar of Western culture; his case is comparable to Thomas Jefferson’s not being able to live up to his glorious ideals. Larkin had no illusions about his place, arguably no illusions at all. He wrote to the best of his ability and arranged to take the world as he preferred it—at arm’s length. In a 1953 letter to his lover Patsy Strang, he hoped aloud, “I should like to write about 75–100 new poems, all rather better than anything I’ve ever done before, and dealing with such subjects as Life, Death, Time, Love, and Scenery in such a manner as would render further attention to them by other poets superfluous.” He achieved as he hoped.

But there is a tendency to mistake the poems as spoken in his own voice. The snippets of his work so widely recalled today are in a particular tone: “Why should I let the toad work/ Squat on my life?”; “Postmen like doctors go from house to house”; “They fuck you up, your mum and dad”; “Get stewed:/ Books are a load of crap”; “Never such innocence again”; “Nothing, like something, happens anywhere”; “Life is slow dying.” Dark, despairing, angry: anti-modern and anti-contentment. Yet you could just as easily pull a chrestomathy of Larkin that makes him out to be the Dalai Lama (“we should be careful// Of each other, we should be kind/ While there is still time”) and one that turns him into Erica Jong (“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”). He left us gorgeous work across a wide range. That he also left us a famous persona is not important. He made fun of it himself in a letter to Jones in 1972:

> I had a drive round yesterday, Pevsner in hand, Test on car radio, lovely weather. Didn’t go anywhere special—Bielby, Pocklington, Huggate, and so on. At least half the churches were locked. Pevsner says the best house in Pocklington is the Ritz Cinema—and when you look at it, it is! The ugliness is astounding. Wally’s Fish Fry jammed into 200 yr old cottage fronts. Then I looked at rather a pretty Victorian cemetery in Beverley. Quite a Larkin afternoon, in fact.

Alan Bennett noted a Larkin evening in his diary for March 20, 1993:
Late on Saturday afternoon I drive over to the Georgian Theatre at Richmond and do my piece. Half the audience in dinner-jackets, part of a group paying extra to dine afterwards with the Marquis of Zetland, thus raising more money for the Dales Museum. Nobody comes round and since I’ve cried off the dinner I come away feeling unthanked but also obscurely pleased, as it shows I’m just the entertainment, below stairs the proper place for the actor, and which I’m in favour of if only because the opposite can be so dire. So while half the audience are dining at Aske with the Zetlands, I am sitting in the Little Chef at Leeming Bar having baked beans on toast. Which is what I prefer, so it isn’t a grumble. But I catch myself here doing a Larkin (or being a man)—i.e. claiming I don’t want something, then chuntering about not getting it.

Larkin was a man like the rest of us. And he was a great poet like none of us.


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