

TWO POETS FROM HULL

Philip Larkin's poems have an epigrammatic quality that is shared with Hull's other poet, Andrew Marvell.

*The grave's a fine and private place
But none I think do there embrace*

could have been written by Larkin.

*Sexual intercourse began
In nineteen sixty-three
(Which was rather late for me)—
Between the end of the Chatterley ban
And the Beatles' first LP*

could have been written by Marvell, if he had not been born too soon. Marvell was born in 1621, Larkin in 1922, by which time the cultural context had changed, but not the sentiment or in some ways the style.

Only a few of Marvell's poems are remembered now. *To his Coy Mistress*, from which the first quotation comes, is one, *The Garden* is another. That poem has its epigrams too.

*Society is all but rude
To this delicious solitude
Two Paradises 'twere in one
To live in Paradise alone*

Marvell's Garden is both literal and metaphorical, a man-made garden and the Garden of Eden. Seventeenth century free-thinking allows him to complain that God spoiled Adam's paradise by making Eve.

*Such was that happy Garden-state,
While Man there walk'd without a Mate*

'Beyond all this,' Larkin wrote in *Wants*, 'the wish to be alone'.

Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs.

Post-coital bliss, for Marvell, is best enjoyed alone, in the garden of the mind.

*When we have run our Passion's heat,
Love hither makes his best retreat.*

In Larkin's Hull of 1963, the familiar image would have been that of a man smoking a cigarette in bed, the woman beside him forgotten.

Larkin seems to have enjoyed love and passion less, and less often, than Marvell. Larkin's version of Marvell's *Garden* is *Spring* in which, among 'green-shadowed people' and children who 'finger the awakened grass', he describes himself

*Threading my pursed-up way across the park,
An indigestible sterility.*

The duality of body and soul, free-thinker or not, was unquestioned by Marvell. Larkin's England was different, at least after 1963. The world had changed in his lifetime, as he writes in *High Windows*, his last collection.

*No God any more, or sweating in the dark
About hell and that, or having to hide
What you think of the priest*

But the duality remains.

*Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:
The sun-comprehending glass,
And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.*

Both poets are realists, which means that each takes an unsentimental view of life and love. In *The Definition of Love*, Marvell begins uncompromisingly with his own definition.

*My love is of a birth as rare
As 'tis for object strange and high:
It was begotten by despair
Upon Impossibility.*

He proceeds to explore this statement in the manner of the poets whom we now call 'metaphysical', reaching an equally uncompromising conclusion.

*Therefore the Love which us doth bind,
But fate so enviously debarrs,
Is the Conjunction of the Mind,
And Opposition of the Stars.*

Larkin reaches the same conclusion, in *Next, please*, a poem of similar form and length. He begins, as Marvell does, by stating the facts.

*Always too eager for the future, we
Pick up bad habits of expectancy.
Something is always approaching; every day
'Till then' we say*

Larkin's method of exploration is not metaphysical but metaphorical. He sees the future as an 'armada of promises'.

*We think each one will heave to and unload
All good into our lives...
But we are wrong*

What we find instead, he concludes, is that

*Only one ship is seeking us, a black-
Sailed unfamiliar, towing at her back
A huge and birdless silence.*

To be epigrammatic, a writer must have not just wit, but a strong sense of sound and rhythm. That sense can be found almost anywhere in the work of both poets. Compare the closing lines of two of their best known poems, Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress* and Larkin's *Wedding-Wind*.

*Let us roll all our Strength, and all
Our sweetness, up into one Ball:
And tear our Pleasures with rough strife,
Thorough the Iron gates of Life.
Thus, though we cannot make our Sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run.
Can it be borne, this bodying-forth by wind
Of joy my actions run on, like a thread
Carrying beads? Shall I be let to sleep
Now this perpetual morning shares my bed?
Can even death dry up
These new delighted lakes, conclude*

Our kneeling as cattle by all-generous waters.

Two lines, one from Marvell's *The Garden*, the other from Larkin's *Church Going*, bear even closer comparison.

A green thought in a green shade

A serious house on serious earth

Two poets from Hull, separated by three hundred years, joined by a line.

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