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“Born Yesterday”: Philip Larkin and the Denial of Childhood

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ABSTRACT

Very little has been said about Philip Larkin’s attitude towards children, despite the fact that they play a significant role in his writing as symbols of the conventional family life he chose not to live. This article seeks to bridge this notable gap in the current body of scholarship devoted to Larkin’s work by considering some of the ways in which children and childhood are represented in his poetry, criticism and letters. It shows how Larkin’s tendency to denigrate children was reflected in his idiosyncratic relationship with the literary tradition and his antagonistic attitude towards Romanticism in particular, a trait he shared with other writers associated with “the Movement”, including friends like Kingsley Amis and Robert Conquest.

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(“... the trouble with old Phil is that he’s never really grown up ... ”¹)

I

In an interview with *The Observer* in 1979, Philip Larkin revealed that, as well as being short-sighted as a child, he had suffered from a stammer that had made him reluctant to speak in class once he started school.² This led his interviewer, Miriam Gross, to ask whether he had felt something of an outsider amongst other children. He responded by saying:

Well, I didn’t much like other children. Until I grew up I thought I hated everybody, but when I grew up I realized it was just children I didn’t like. Once you started meeting grown-ups life was much pleasanter. Children are very horrible, aren’t they? Selfish, noisy, cruel, vulgar little brutes. And if you’ve ever stammered, that’s enough to make you feel an outsider.³

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¹Thwaite, ed. *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin*, 596.

²In the article “Larkin’s Stammer”, Tim Tengrove-Jones links Larkin’s experience of having a speech impediment to the linguistic disorientation he experienced when, as a teenager, he visited Germany with his father. See *Essays in Criticism* 40, no. 4 (1990): 322–38.

³Larkin, *Required Writing*, 48.

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The ridicule that Larkin endured as a result of his stammer shaped his view of children as vindictive, and time did little to change his opinion. In “The Savage Seventh”, a 1959 review of Iona and Peter Opie’s *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, he reflected that, “It was that verse about becoming again as a little child that caused the first sharp waning of my Christian sympathies”.⁴ He proceeded to explain:

It was not the prospect of being deprived of money, keys, wallet, letters, books, long-playing records, drinks, the opposite sex, and other solaces of adulthood that upset me (I should have been about eleven), but having to put up indefinitely with the company of other children, their noise, their nastiness, their boasting, their back-answers, their cruelty, their silliness.⁵

Very little has been written about Larkin’s attitude towards children, despite the fact that they also play a significant role in his poetry as symbols of conventional family life. This article seeks to bridge this gap in the current body of scholarship devoted to his work by considering the ways in which children and childhood are represented in his poetry, criticism and letters. It shows how Larkin’s tendency to denigrate children was reflected in his idiosyncratic relationship with the literary tradition and his antagonistic attitude towards Romanticism in particular, a trait he shared with other writers associated with the Movement, including friends like Kingsley Amis and Robert Conquest. At the same time, the essay complicates the popular image of Larkin as a joyless misanthrope by showing how he retained a child-like dimension to his personality, manifest both in his enduring fondness for the tales of Beatrix Potter, and his ecstatic response to Frances Hodgson Burnett’s classic children’s novel *The Secret Garden* (1911).

Modern poets aligned with the Romantic inheritance that was bequeathed by Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge have tended to associate children with moments of revelation. In Yeats’s “A Prayer for my Daughter”, for instance, the presence of the poet’s sleeping child acts as a spur to his visionary imagination, while in Ted Hughes’s “Full Moon and Little Frieda” the poet writes out of a sense of awe and quiet reverence, inspired by his young daughter’s innocent interaction with the natural world. Larkin’s poetry, by contrast, tends to associate children with stale domesticity. As a bachelor, he seems to have resented being made to feel an outsider for not having married, and some of his most humorous poems take the form of a monologue in which the narrator seeks to justify his choice. The narrator of “The Life with a Hole in It”, for example, finds respite from the frustrations of his life in poking fun at a mocking caricature of the family man, “that spectacled schoolteaching sod / (Six kids, and the wife in pod, / And her parents coming to stay)”.⁶ In similar fashion, the narrator of “Self’s the Man” compares the freedoms of bachelorhood to the life of Arnold, a downtrodden father and husband “who has no time at all”.⁷ That poem also links the presence of children to tawdry consumerism, with colloquialisms like “kiddies”, “nippers”, and their “clobber”⁸ combining to evoke a lifestyle that is dominated by the need to provide for one’s family. And tellingly, in “Take One Home for the Kiddies” children are portrayed as callous in their treatment of the pets that they persuade their parents to buy:

⁴Ibid., 111.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Larkin, *Collected Poems*, 202.

⁷Ibid., 117.

⁸Ibid.

Living toys are something novel,
 But it soon wears off somehow.
 Fetch the shoebox, fetch the shovel—
*Mam, we're playing funerals now.*⁹

The disparaging nature of terms like “kiddies” reflects what Edna Longley once identified as Larkin’s need to retain his “distance from what he saw as ‘ordinary experience’”, a trait that is also evident in the frequency with which his poetic personae observe “ordinary” life from the outside, rather than actively participating in it.¹⁰ The narrator of the elegiac “Afternoons”, for instance, watches from afar as “Young mothers assemble / At swing and sandpit / Setting free their children”.¹¹ And famously, in “Dockery and Son” the narrator returns to the Oxford college he had once attended and is stunned to discover from the Dean that the son of one of his contemporaries is now studying there. Travelling back north by train, Larkin’s persona is moved to reflect on the passing of time and how different the trajectory of Dockery’s life has been to his own:

To have no son, no wife,
 No house or land still seemed quite natural.
 Only a numbness registered the shock
 Of finding out how much had gone of life,
 How widely from the others.¹²

The narrator’s initial response to this dichotomy is to attempt to rationalise it. But the nagging thought that his life could be perceived as “unnatural” continues to disturb him, leading the speaker to dismiss Dockery’s fatherhood as a projection of the ego and an excessive sense of self-worth: “how / Convinced he was he should be added to! / Why did he think adding meant increase? / To me it was dilution.”¹³ Here the defensive attitude of the narrator chimes with that of the persona Larkin adopts in an earlier poem written at the start of the 1950s, “Best Society”, where the state of solitude is regarded as more authentic than company:

[...] I lock my door.
 The gas fire breathes. The wind outside
 Ushers in evening rain, Once more
 Uncontradicting solitude
 Supports me on its giant palm;
 And like a sea-anemone
 Or simple snail, there cautiously
 Unfolds, emerges, what I am.¹⁴

⁹Ibid., 130.

¹⁰Longley, “Larkin, Decadence and the Lyric Poem”, *New Larkins for Old*, 29–50, 43. Longley argues that Larkin consciously cultivated a persona akin to that of the *fin-de-siècle* aesthete, an influential view of the poet that is anticipated by Barbara Everett in her important essay “Larkin’s Symbolism”. There, she makes the point that the Symbolist qualities of his poetry constitute a pertinent counterpoint to charges that his writing is inherently parochial, provincial, and even philistine. See Everett, “Larkin’s Symbolism”, 227–42.

¹¹Larkin, *Collected Poems*, 121.

¹²Ibid., 152.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid., 56–7.

From a remarkably early stage in life, Larkin had convinced himself that the cultivation of solitude was necessary if he were to succeed as a writer. Sharing his life with others to the extent of living with them was therefore inconceivable.

This fear of fatherhood can be traced back to Larkin's own childhood and a desire to avoid the fate of his parents, trapped within an unhappy marriage. He habitually told interviewers that his upbringing "was all right, comfortable and stable and loving".¹⁵ But some of his more candid remarks, such as his sense of having grown up within a household that was "dull, pot-bound, and slightly mad",¹⁶ mean that it is difficult not to view his claim that he had "completely forgotten"¹⁷ the events of his earliest years as a self-protecting fiction. Indeed, Adam Piette has argued persuasively that the bombing of Coventry by the Luftwaffe on 14 November 1940 provided Larkin with an opportunity to psychologically "annul" his childhood experience, "erasing the traces of his pre-war biography",¹⁸ including the pro-fascist sympathies of his father. In other words, the idea that childhood could be "wiped out" (and its psychological legacy denied) appealed to Larkin because it enabled him to bury painful memories, including the acrimony that had existed between his mother and father. Pertinent, in this respect, is the poem "Coming", which was written in February 1950 and published in *The Less Deceived* (1955). There, the narrator's casual dismissal of his childhood as "a forgotten boredom"¹⁹ serves as the prelude to an epiphany inspired by his awareness of the coming of spring, which he detects in the "fresh-peeled voice"²⁰ of a song-thrush, singing its heart out as evening approaches. For Larkin, it is an uncharacteristically Romantic conceit, and the effect of the bird's song upon the listener is such that it opens up a vision of another life, embodied in the figure of

[...] a child
Who comes on a scene
Of adult reconciling,
And can understand nothing
But the unusual laughter,
And starts to be happy.²¹

The implication is that the narrator grew up in a household within which laughter was rarely heard. Consequently, this symbolic scene of reconciliation, and the potential for happiness that it evokes, can be read as a vision of the kind of warm, emotionally sustaining childhood that Larkin felt he had been denied.²²

Biographers like James Booth have gone to great lengths to show that Larkin was a dutiful son.²³ But an autobiographical fragment that the poet wrote during the 1950s makes it abundantly clear that the discord between his parents, Eva and Sidney,

¹⁵*Required Writing*, 57–76, 66.

¹⁶Quoted by Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, 119.

¹⁷*Required Writing*, 47.

¹⁸Piette, "Childhood Wiped Out: Larkin, His Father, and the Bombing of Coventry", 230.

¹⁹Larkin, *Collected Poems*, 33.

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹*Ibid.*

²²Piette points out that, "in a manuscript version of 'Deceptions' analysed by Ridley Beeton, it is curious to find that one of the effects of the burying of the Mayhew girl in the long slum of years is noted by Larkin as "No different life called childhood". "Childhood Wiped Out", 239. Cf. Beeton, "The Early Philip Larkin", 35–65, 57.

²³Following his departure for university. Larkin wrote to his mother, Eva, twice a week for close on 35 years. See *Philip Larkin: Letters Home 1936–1977*.

“remained in my mind as something that I mustn’t *under any circumstances* risk encountering again.”²⁴ Over time, this conviction came to shape Larkin’s view of other writers, as well as underpinning his belief that marriage and children were incompatible with literary success. One of the reasons for his self-proclaimed switch of allegiance from Yeats to Hardy during his mid-twenties, for instance, which Larkin regarded as pivotal to the discovery of his mature poetic voice, was what Galia Benziman has defined as Hardy’s “undermining of a major Romantic convention: the idealization of the bliss of early life and the elevation of the experience of childlike innocence.”²⁵ Thus, while Larkin came to regard the childless Hardy as a kindred spirit, a review of William Cooke’s biography of Edward Thomas from 1970 finds him claiming that:

To some extent, the two sides of [Thomas’s] life were intertwined, like swimmers dragging each other down; marriage meant children, children meant more hack work, hack work meant more domesticity. “You see,” wrote his wife, “Edward is at home all day [...] He cannot have the quiet he needs.”²⁶

The possibility that Edward Thomas’s remarkable late poetic flowering may have been indebted to the enduring support of his wife and the presence of his children is never entertained. Instead, this literary miracle is attributed to the fact that Thomas “got a room outside his own house to work in [...] met Robert Frost [and] the war came.”²⁷

An equally important example of the way Larkin’s antipathy towards children could influence his criticism is a review of the collected poems of Emily Dickinson and Walter de la Mare that he published in *The Observer* in the same year as his piece on Edward Thomas, in which he launches a coruscating attack on the literary cult of the child. Larkin opens the review with the wry observation that, “[s]ome of my older readers may remember a passage in which its author asserts that, although he was a child himself once and childhood is all very well in its way, when he became a man he put away childish things”.²⁸ This allusion to the oft-quoted passage from *Corinthians* in which St Paul declares that, “When I became a man, I put away childish things”,²⁹ forms the prelude to a lengthy piece of polemic, in which Larkin argues that:

The status of this heartening sentiment today is difficult to assess. On the one hand, of course, the Freudian legacy assures us that our childhoods are with us for life: we are what they made us; we cannot lose their gains, or be compensated for their losses. On the other, children themselves have been devalued: we know them for the little beasts they are (a knowledge greatly amplified since 1945 by the forcible reintroduction of a servantless middle class to its offspring), and nobody would pretend there was anything angelic about them, so one of the major illusions of the Romantic movement has thereby quietly disappeared [...] An effect of this on literature has been to make it impossible for any writer of more than miniscule pretensions to adopt the matter of childhood, or the persona of the child, as his principal literary stock-in-trade. The enormous hobby-horse shadow has lifted from the scene. In consequence, even major writers of the pre-war period have suddenly taken a list to port, weighed down by their cargo of whimsy, while the matter-of-fact coasters round adult affairs forge distinctly ahead. The situation comes home with a

²⁴Quoted by Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer’s Life*, 120.

²⁵Benziman, “The Self-Resisting”, 18.

²⁶*Required Writing*, 189.

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸*Ibid.*, 191.

²⁹*Corinthians*, 13:11.

particularly heavy impact to a reviewer faced with 700 pages of Emily Dickinson and 900 of Walter de la Mare.³⁰

Larkin liked to be provocative in his reviews, and his penchant for irony means that one should be wary of taking his comments at face value. But the venom with which he attacks the Romantics for their veneration of childhood and accuses them of propagating “illusions” regarding the innocence of children is striking nonetheless, as is his claim that no contemporary writer of genuine stature would dream of writing about their childhood experience or adopting the perspective of a child. The latter claim is demonstrably false, since the preceding years had witnessed the publication of works like Seamus Heaney’s *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) and Ted Hughes’s *The Iron Man* (1967), and Larkin’s review ultimately comes across as self-serving in the way that it seeks to diminish the achievements of his contemporaries while implying that his own work is somehow more “adult” and thus worthy of critical approval. In this respect, it is telling that Larkin should conclude his polemic by observing that:

Anyone wishing to know the full story [of the way the child has been represented in modern literature] should consult Peter Coveney’s absorbing *The Image of Childhood*, which moves from Blake to J.D. Salinger with dispassionate penetration and humour.³¹

One cannot help noticing that the attributes Larkin ascribes to Coveney’s book are in fact hallmarks of his own writing. What he also fails to mention here, is that he had played a significant part in helping to bring *The Image of Childhood* into being, since the book was written while Coveney was working as a History lecturer at Hull University. The preface to the first edition, published in 1957, credits “the librarian of the University of Hull, Mr Philip Larkin, and his staff, for their great assistance and longsuffering in obtaining for me the works I needed”.³² While Coveney devotes the opening chapters of his book to discussion of the Romantics, his primary concern is the way the child is represented in nineteenth and early twentieth-century fiction, and the fact that Larkin had taken an interest in the project points to a paradox that also resides at the heart of his review—that he was both repelled by literature concerning childhood yet fascinated by it in equal measure.

II

Larkin’s discomfort with Romanticism’s elevated view of childhood experience is one of those aspects of his work that links him to those poets associated with “the Movement”, a group which includes his long-term correspondents Kingsley Amis and Robert Conquest. The latter was the editor of the *New Lines* anthology of 1956 which, along with D.J. Enright’s *Poets of the 1950s*, came to define Movement poetry, and in which Larkin’s work appeared alongside that of John Holloway, Elizabeth Jennings, Thom Gunn, Amis, Enright, Donald Davie and John Wain. Not all of the poets knew each other, and the extent to which they shared specific themes and stylistic traits is still a matter of debate.³³ But what many of the writers did have in common was a certain

³⁰Ibid.

³¹*Required Writing*, 191.

³²Coveney, *The Image of Childhood*, 12.

³³The most important consideration of the poetic claims of The Movement remains Blake Morrison’s *The Movement* (1980) Reprinted by Methuen, 1986. See also the essays collected in Leader’s *The Movement Reconsidered*.

scepticism towards Romantic ideals. Davie, for instance, would later recall that, “Romantic was for me and my friends the ugliest imputation that could be thrown at anyone or anything, a sentence of death from which there was no appeal”,³⁴ while Amis made his position clear in the allegory “Against Romanticism” and parodies like “Ode to the East-North-East-by-East Wind”. The latter is a spoof of Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind”, in which Amis satirises the Romantic tendency to deify the power of the elements:

Sometimes you pump up water from the ground;
Why, darling, that’s just fine of you!
And round Mount Everest—such fun!—you blow
Gigantic bits of rock about, for no
Reason—but every boy
Must have his little toy.³⁵

Here, as Michael O’Neill has noted, “exhibitionism, and irrational energy” are presented as “needing to be reined in by the adult Movement poet”.³⁶ Tellingly, “the wind, like the Romantic poets who exalt it, is a spoilt child”.³⁷

One of the principal reasons for the Movement poets’ hostility towards Romanticism was that they were looking to define themselves against the neo-Romantic “New Apocalypse” poetry of the 1940s, with which the work of the best-known British poet of the time, Dylan Thomas, has often been associated.³⁸ He had celebrated his South Walian childhood in visionary poems of startling beauty, like “Fern Hill” and “Poem in October”, and was an easy target for the Movement poets as a result of his high public profile, buoyed by the success of radio broadcasts like *A Child’s Christmas in Wales* (1952). Thomas had also become known for the excesses of his private life, which contributed to his early death at the age of just 39, in November 1953. Indeed, in his landmark study of the Movement poets, Blake Morrison suggests that “it was the legend—Thomas as drunk, fornicator, rebel etc—which most annoyed them.”³⁹ At the same time, Morrison also acknowledges that “there are a number of Movement texts which express serious reservations about Thomas’s poetry”, including Conquest’s introduction to the first *New Lines* anthology, where he argues that, during the 1940s:

[...] men capable of moving work were encouraged to regard their task simply as one of making an arrangement of images of sex and violence tapped straight from the unconscious, or to evoke without comment the naiveties and nostalgias of childhood.⁴⁰

What comes through strongly here, is Conquest’s sense that Thomas was a gifted writer who had been led astray by the degenerate culture of London Bohemia, and that his undoubted talent had been undermined by “those in the literary world who contributed to, and cashed in on his early death”.⁴¹ More specifically, Conquest’s reference to the “naiveties and nostalgias of childhood” implicates “Fern Hill”, a poem in which Thomas casts a wistful eye over his

³⁴Davie, “Eliot in One Poet’s Life”, 231.

³⁵Amis, *Collected Poems: 1944–1979*, 34.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷O’Neill, “Fond of What He’s Crapping On”: Movement Poetry and Romanticism’, *The Movement Reconsidered*, 280.

³⁸On Dylan Thomas’s relation to the New Apocalypse poets see John Goodby, “‘Very Profound and Very Box-Office’: The Later Poems and Under Milk Wood”, *Dylan Thomas*, ed. John Goodby and Christopher Wigginton, 192–220, 201.

³⁹Morrison, *The Movement*, 146.

⁴⁰Conquest, *New Lines*, xiv.

⁴¹Morrison, *The Movement*, 146.

own “Golden Age”, founded on memories of the summer holidays he spent as a child on his aunt and uncle’s farm amid the Carmarthenshire countryside:

Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs
About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green,
The night above the dingle starry,
Time let me hail and climb
Golden in the heydays of his eyes [...] ⁴²

These celebrated opening lines are echoed by Davie at the start of his gloomy autobiographical lyric “A Baptist Childhood”, where he writes: “When some were happy as the grass was green / I was as happy as a glass was dark”. ⁴³ In a similar way, Morrison suggests that Thomas’s poem was the text “uppermost in Larkin’s mind” ⁴⁴ when he wrote his satire of childhood nostalgia “I Remember, I Remember”, which finds him reflecting with caustic wit on his suburban childhood in Coventry:

From where those cycle-crates
Were standing, had we annually departed

For all those family hols? ... A whistle went:
Things moved. I sat back, staring at my boots.
“Was that,” my friend smiled, “where you ‘have your roots’?”
No, only where my childhood was unspent,
I wanted to retort, just where I started. ⁴⁵

Far from being nostalgic, Larkin’s narrator “recognizes childhood, or certain childhoods, to be uneventful and even boring.” ⁴⁶ However, aside from the principal theme, there is little textual evidence to support Morrison’s view that “Fern Hill” was a poem that Larkin was keen to satirise, and it should not be forgotten that he had once held Dylan Thomas’s work in high esteem. The poems Larkin wrote at Oxford show the extent to which he absorbed Thomas’s influence, including a fondness for generating surreal effects, and he would warmly recall how meeting Thomas while he was a student (following a talk the latter gave at the Oxford English Club in November 1941) heightened his desire to become a writer.

Ultimately, Larkin felt that Thomas’s example led him down a creative “dead end”, ⁴⁷ but his initial attraction to the Welsh poet’s work, along with his subsequent infatuation with Yeats, means that his condemnation of Romanticism should be viewed with suspicion. When asked by Miriam Gross about the kind of poetry he enjoyed, Larkin responded by claiming to “read almost no poetry”, ⁴⁸ before reflecting that:

Poetry can creep up on you unawares. Wordsworth was nearly the price of me once. I was driving down the M1 on a Saturday morning: they had this poetry slot on the radio, “Time for Verse”: it was a lovely summer morning, and someone suddenly started reading the Immortality ode, and I couldn’t see for tears [...] I don’t suppose I’d read that poem for

⁴²Thomas, *Collected Poems*, 134.

⁴³Davie, *Collected Poems*, 57.

⁴⁴Morrison, *The Movement*, 146.

⁴⁵Larkin, *Collected Poems*, 81.

⁴⁶Morrison, *The Movement*, 146.

⁴⁷Larkin, *Required Writing*, 67.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 53.

twenty years, and it's amazing how effective it was when one was totally unprepared for it.⁴⁹

As Michael O'Neill has noted, Larkin's sense of having been "unprepared" for the power of Wordsworth's poem is key here.⁵⁰ Unable to deflect its lyricism with irony or wit, he was caught off guard by the pathos of Wordsworth's elegy for the lost lustre of childhood, his sense that, "yet I know, where'er I go, / That there hath past away a glory from the earth."⁵¹ This instinctive response to the Immortality Ode endorses Edna Longley's provocative claim that Larkin "was a Romantic who covered his tracks, [...] an aesthete who pretended to be a hearty".⁵² His writing certainly shows an enduring fascination with the Keatsian ideals of truth and beauty, manifest in the narrator's reaction to the beauty of the thrush's song in "Coming" and poems like "Water", where Larkin's yearning for transcendence manifests itself in images of light and space.⁵³ This suppressed Romanticism can also be felt in the gentle lyric that Larkin wrote to commemorate the birth of Sally Amis during the winter of 1954. "Born Yesterday", which Sally's mother, Hillary, called "the most beautiful personal poem I've ever read",⁵⁴ adopts a paternal stance towards the new-born child, picturing her in tender terms as a "Tightly-folded bud".⁵⁵ In doing so, Larkin taps into a poetic tradition that includes Romantic auguries of innocence like Blake's "Infant Joy", Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight" and, especially, Yeats's "A Prayer for my Daughter". Yet whereas Yeats wishes that his daughter "May be granted beauty",⁵⁶ Larkin's narrator assumes a more circumspect attitude that is typical of the scepticism with which Movement poets tend to view Romantic ideals. Suspicious of poets who would wish children "the usual stuff / About being beautiful, / Or running off a spring of innocence and love",⁵⁷ Larkin seeks to bestow a more tempered blessing, wanting "Nothing uncustomary / To pull you off your balance".⁵⁸ Consequently, he hopes that Sally may turn out to be "ordinary", "average", and even "dull".⁵⁹ His use of such epithets is ambiguous, though, because in the final lines of the poem he recognises that the child has a potential that exceeds such prosaic terms, to the extent that she may aspire to an "enthralled / Catching of happiness".⁶⁰ It is a sentiment more in keeping with the Romantic tradition, and proves the accuracy of O'Neill's broader point that Romanticism "turns out to be 'A Presence which is not to be put by' in Movement poetry, for all its intermittent attempts to do precisely that."⁶¹

The tenderness of "Born Yesterday" suggests that Larkin's tendency to denigrate children (and the young generally) was something that developed with the passage of time. This is certainly the impression one gains from considering the poems included in *High Windows* (1974), which frequently cast doubt upon the desirability of children and the

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰O'Neill, *The Movement Reconsidered*, 274.

⁵¹Wordsworth, *Poetical Works*, 460.

⁵²Longley, "Poete Maudit Manque", *Philip Larkin: A Tribute*, 220.

⁵³On Larkin's fascination with light see McLoughlin, "Larkin's Light", 322–36.

⁵⁴Hilary Amis to Philip Larkin, 20 January, 1954, *Hull History Centre*, UDPL3/1/3.

⁵⁵Larkin, *Collected Poems*, 84.

⁵⁶Yeats, *Collected Poems*, 212.

⁵⁷Larkin, *Collected Poems*, 84.

⁵⁸Ibid. Tragically, Sally Amis did find something to pull her off-balance. She died in November 2000 at the age of 46, after a long battle with alcohol.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹O'Neill, *The Movement Reconsidered*, 274.

wisdom of having them. In “Going, Going”, for instance, Larkin’s nostalgic lament for an England which he feared was fading from view, he portrays the younger generation and their offspring as hopelessly spoilt brats who are gleefully participating in the destruction:

The crowd
Is young in the M1 cafe;
Their kids are screaming for more—
More houses, more parking allowed,
More caravan sites, more pay.⁶²

Similarly misanthropic sentiments inform the title poem, in which the narrator’s sardonic vision of “paradise”⁶³ takes the form of a relationship where sex does not incur the risk of pregnancy, and the point is driven home in brutal fashion in “This Be The Verse”, the speaker notoriously declaring:

Man hands on misery to man.
It deepens like a coastal shelf.
Get out as early as you can,
And don’t have any kids yourself.⁶⁴

Here, again, children stand as symbols of the family life he chose not to live. The poem was first published in the August 1971 edition of *New Humanist*, but Larkin had sent a draft to his friend and future literary executor, Anthony Thwaite, earlier that year, along with the bitterly ironic suggestion that it “might suit Ann’s next *Garden of Verses for the Kiddies*”,⁶⁵ a reference to the nursery rhyme form and the fact that Thwaite’s wife had been compiling anthologies of children’s verse.

III

Since the mid-1990s, following the publication of Andrew Motion’s biography and Anthony Thwaite’s *Selected Letters*, Larkin has become a writer as much known for the controversial nature of his correspondence as for the quality of his poetry. The views expressed in his letters tend to vary depending on the identity of his correspondent and, as Rebecca Devine has shown, the disparagement of children was something that he amplified in his letters to his long-term partner, Monica Jones.⁶⁶ This is evident from the correspondence they exchanged during the summer of 1947, in which Larkin expresses regret at having agreed to act as Godfather to his sister’s daughter, Rosemary, and describes his attendance at a service held to consecrate the role as “hypocritical”.⁶⁷ Subsequent letters portray his niece as a tiresome pest. His account of a family gathering that took place during the Christmas of 1962 is typical, in that it finds him complaining:

Rosemary was interrupting and correcting everyone, and (at the age of 16) insisting on her usual childish games. Honestly, I don’t think I did anything I wanted ALL DAY except go to the lavatory.⁶⁸

⁶²Larkin, *Collected Poems*, 189.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 165.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 180.

⁶⁵Anthony Thwaite Obituary, *The Times*, 22 April, 2021.

⁶⁶On the various personae that Larkin adopted in his letters see Devine, *Epistolary Larkin*.

⁶⁷Philip Larkin to Monica Jones, 22 August 1947 (photocopy of original), *Hull History Centre*, GB50 UDX 341/1.

⁶⁸Philip Larkin to Monica Jones, 26 December 1962, *Letters to Monica*, 314.

The irony here (of which Jones would have been well aware) is that, in private, Larkin delighted in “childish” behaviour. His letters to long-term friends like Amis and Conquest are full of scatological schoolboy humour, and he took great glee in caricaturing his most esteemed poetic rivals. Ted Hughes was “the Incredible Hulk” or “the Mexborough Marvell”, R.S. Thomas was referred to dismissively as “Arse Thomas”, and Seamus Heaney was given the moniker “the Gumbeen Man”, on account of poems like “The Grauballe Man”, inspired by pictures of iron-age bodies retrieved from the peat bogs of Northern Europe.⁶⁹ The playful sketches and doodles that Larkin would habitually draw in the margins of his letters to friends and family, many of them indebted to his enduring fondness for the tales of Beatrix Potter,⁷⁰ are manifestly child-like, and Larkin possessed enough self-awareness to know that, in certain respects, he remained juvenile. Hence his candour in a late letter to Kingsley Amis, written in March 1979, where he ventured to suggest that “the trouble with old Phil is that he’s never really grown up”.⁷¹

As Edna Longley has pointed out, letters resemble poems in the sense that they too “may involve masks, performance, artful self-veiling, unreliable narrators”.⁷² Accordingly, Larkin’s criticisms of his niece benefit from being read in the light of a revealing anecdote from Kingsley Amis’s memoirs, in which he recalls a rare occasion when he met Larkin in the company of Rosemary:

I remember with amusement how that earlier meeting had not been part of the plan, how Philip had always said he could not stand children and had not got on with his niece, then aged seven or eight, and how he had been moderately disconcerted by her obvious pleasure at seeing him again.⁷³

The anecdote suggests that Larkin’s relationship with Rosemary was a good deal warmer than his letters to Monica Jones would suggest, and moreover that, when writing to Jones, he played up to her dislike of children. Certainly, both of them seem to have regarded the prospect of becoming parents with something akin to horror, as can be seen from a letter Larkin wrote to Monica from Belfast during the autumn of 1952, in which he seeks to ease her fears that she might be pregnant:

I’m glad you wrote—worries are always better shared, especially such a formidable one; but really, I must say the chances are extremely slender & remote of there being anything in the air. [...] I’m not surprised you feel sick, with all the worry & gins & salts. [...] Now please don’t torment yourself any more: just go on ordinarily, & give up all these specifics & things. I’m sure it’s quite unnecessary. Keep me posted, of course, & talk about it in letters if you want. Patsy of course would be more authoritative, but I’m sure you don’t want her to know.⁷⁴

⁶⁹See Philip Larkin to Kingsley Amis, 11 January 1981, *Selected Letters*, 636. Also, Philip Larkin to Robert Conquest, 26 April 1956 (*Selected Letters*, 260) and 20 February 1962 (*Selected Letters*, 341).

⁷⁰A letter Larkin wrote to Monica Jones from Cottingham in October 1955 includes the news that, “I went to the bookshop and ordered *The Art of Beatrix Potter* on approval [...] It looks lovely – all her drawings.” (*Letters to Monica*, 184).

⁷¹Philip Larkin to Kingsley Amis, 3 March 1979, *Selected Letters*, 596. This juvenile dimension of Larkin’s character is also reflected in his early attraction to girls’ boarding school fiction, which led to the erotically charged stories that he wrote under the Brunette Coleman pseudonym following his departure from university, including *Trouble at Willow Gables* and *Michaelmas Term at St Bride’s*. See Larkin, *Trouble at Willow Gables and Other Fiction 1943–1953*.

⁷²Longley, *Under the Same Moon*, 231.

⁷³Amis, *Memoirs*, 63.

⁷⁴Philip Larkin to Monica Jones, 23 October 1952, *Letters to Monica*, 90.

While Larkin's frequent letters to Monica Jones served to keep her in touch, they were also a means of keeping her at arm's length, and it is noteworthy that he tempers this expression of sympathy by reminding her of the presence of Patsy Strang, with whom he had an affair during his time in Belfast. This pattern of artful resistance continued when Larkin returned to England and took up the post of Librarian at the University of Hull in March 1955, and there are moments when the absence of children haunts their correspondence. Writing to Jones in 1966, for instance, Larkin is struck by the realisation that:

Our lives are so different from other people's, or have been—I feel I am landed on my 45th year as if washed up on a rock [...] Of course my external surroundings have changed, but inside I've been the same, trying to hold everything off in order to "write". Anyone wd think I was Tolstoy, the value I put on it.⁷⁵

It is plain that there were times when Larkin felt that, in devoting his life to his writing, he had only succeeded in creating "a monstrous infantile shell of egotism, inside which I quietly asphyxiate".⁷⁶ Edna Longley has pointed out that the "self-analysis in his poems and letters is alert to psychoanalytical concepts such as blockage, denial, arrested development and primary narcissism".⁷⁷ Telling, in this respect, is the self-image Larkin projects in the early poem "On Being Twenty-six", written not long after his conversion from Yeats to Hardy, where the protagonist expresses his anger at having been denied the glimpse of "paradise" afforded to others in their youth:

I kiss, I clutch,

Like a daft mother, putrid
 Infancy,
That can and will forbid
All grist to me
Except devaluing dichotomies:
 Nothing and paradise.⁷⁸

Here the speaker sees himself as unable to escape the psychological legacy of a childhood that provided little in the way of emotional sustenance, but which did instil a searching idealism.

That Larkin did possess a keen awareness of the spiritual glory of childhood is evident from a letter he wrote to Monica Jones during the summer of 1953, an ebullient letter that is written in a markedly different tone to so much of his other correspondence, in which he relays his ecstatic response to reading Frances Hodgson Burnett's classic children's novel *The Secret Garden* (1911). The story had been recommended to him by Jones ("I remember you described it as exactly the sort of book we can share")⁷⁹ and Larkin was emphatic in finding the novel "astonishingly good",⁸⁰ remarking "I can't imagine how I've never come across it before".⁸¹ He then proceeded to elaborate upon why it had had such an impact:

⁷⁵Philip Larkin to Monica Jones, 1966, *Letters to Monica*, 368.

⁷⁶Longley, *Under the Same Moon*, 251.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 250–1.

⁷⁸Larkin, *Collected Poems*, 25.

⁷⁹Philip Larkin to Monica Jones, 24 June 1953, *Letters to Monica*, 98.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*

⁸¹*Ibid.*

If it has any message, it's surely that—well, I can't put it into a sentence, but it's that life is strong and joyful enough to push up & overturn the strongest and heaviest morbid fancies and fears: it calls on everyone to put aside distrusts and shrinking-back and live to the utmost while life is for the having. [...] I do want to get across that my chief impression was a deep one, *punched* by the expression of delight in natural life.⁸²

The letter shows a side of Larkin that was rarely expressed, and a hunger for life which is very much at odds with the popular image of him as a joyless misanthrope. His response to the book's "delight in natural life" is particularly striking given that, as we have seen, he could be casually dismissive of the "illusions" of Romanticism. A week or so after his discovery, Larkin wrote to Jones again to say that he had bought two copies of Burnett's novel and begun re-reading it. With an air of revelation, he told her:

... the book I keep being reminded of, in a distant oblique underwater way, is *Lady C*. I don't know if you know this book, but the theme is very much the same, rebirth, resurrection: Constance is "yellow", and a bit scraggy, like Mary, & feels she *must get out* in the spring, and does [...] There *is* something about this, and about the conclusion 200 pages on in Mellors' last letter [...]⁸³

Larkin's admiration for Lawrence as a novelist was longstanding. Owing to his father's keen interest in modern literature (their house "was full of books")⁸⁴ Larkin had arrived at St John's College, Oxford, in October 1940 having already read *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and his passion for Lawrence's writing is one of the most striking features of his undergraduate correspondence with his closest friend from school, the aspiring artist James Sutton. A letter from September 1941, for instance, tells Sutton that, "[t]here is something greater than *literature*",⁸⁵ and insists that Lawrence understood this better than anyone. Such comments serve as a reminder that, while Lawrence is usually thought of as a Modernist, he was also a Romantic in the sense that his writing is fundamentally concerned with what he conceived as the increasing alienation of men and women from the life-giving energies of the natural world. Indeed, Terry Whalen has argued that, from his teenage years onward, Larkin "shared Lawrence's lament for a fallen England, an England dehumanised by industrial pollution and commerce and by the idolatry of materialism."⁸⁶ As Larkin suggests in his letter to Jones, this theme is also central to *The Secret Garden* and the connection goes some way to explaining his fascination with the book.

More striking still, though, is the degree to which Larkin identified with one of the novel's principal characters. "I expect a point where it scored with you is its 'sensible-ness'", he told Monica, "I am not all that *sensible*—however much I applaud Mary, temperamentally I remain a Colin".⁸⁷ It is an extremely telling comment. Colin Craven is a petulant child who, having been born into a life of aristocratic privilege, develops into a hypochondriac following the untimely death of his mother, an event which leaves his father grief stricken and unable to communicate with his son. When Mary, the heroine of the story, discovers Colin hidden away within a bedroom in her uncle's country house, he has convinced himself that he is dying and come to accept

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³Philip Larkin to Monica Jones, 1 July 1953, *Letters to Monica*, 101.

⁸⁴*Required Writing*, 47.

⁸⁵Philip Larkin to James Sutton, 16 September 1941. The Philip Larkin Archive, *Hull History Centre*, GB50 UDP 174/2.

⁸⁶Terry Whalen, "Larkin and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*: Exploring an Influence", *New Larkins for Old*, 107–20, 109.

⁸⁷Larkin, *Letters to Monica*, 100.

the life of an invalid, despite the fact that there is nothing physically wrong with him. Resigned to his fate, and cut off from the natural world and its healing power, Colin is only saved from his self-pitying morbidity by the decisive intervention of Mary and the Pan-like character of Dickon Sowerby, who drag him outside and introduce him to the garden that was once beloved by his mother. In time, the beauty of the garden and the friendship of the other children leads to a transformation of his character and the restoration of his health:

So long as Colin shut himself up in his room and thought only of his fears and weakness and his detestation of people who looked at him and reflected hourly on humps and early death, he was a hysterical half-crazy little hypochondriac who knew nothing of sunshine and the spring and also did not know that he could get well and stand upon his feet if he tried to do it. When new beautiful thoughts began to push out the old hideous ones, life began to come back to him, his blood ran healthily through his veins and strength poured into him like a flood.⁸⁸

The fact that Larkin could identify with Colin so strongly shows why reading *The Secret Garden* moved him to such an extent, because he was confronted with a character in whom he could see elements of his boyhood self. One thinks, in particular, of the difficult relationship Larkin had with his own taciturn father, and the austere atmosphere of the bourgeois home within which he and his elder sister Catherine (or “Kitty”) grew up. In his biography, Andrew Motion reveals that visitors to Manor Road, Coventry, “remember[ed] a large-faced, long-haired child haunting its gloomy rooms in silence, or hanging around the adults with awkward reverence until told he could disappear to his bedroom.”⁸⁹ Given these parallels, it is plain why the story of Colin’s transformation would have resonated with Larkin. Reserving the highest praise for Burnett’s novel, he thanked Monica for alerting him to this “exquisite poem of childhood”.⁹⁰

Larkin also paid *The Secret Garden* a more covert compliment six months later when, in January 1954, he wrote “I Remember, I Remember”. As various critics have noted, the title of that poem alludes to Thomas Hood’s much-anthologised nineteenth-century lyric of the same name, which epitomises the sentimental Victorian nostalgia for childhood that Larkin seeks to satirise:

I remember, I remember,
The house where I was born,
The little window where the sun
Came peeping in at morn [...] ⁹¹

However, what has not previously been recognised is that, in the fourth stanza of Larkin’s poem, he alludes not only to Hood’s memories of the garden where he played as a child, but to Burnett’s novel as well, and the way in which Mary and Colin’s unhappy lives are transformed through their contact with the garden. In doing so, Larkin registers his bitter regret that something similar did not happen to him during the years when he was growing up in Coventry:

⁸⁸Burnett, *The Secret Garden*, 242.

⁸⁹Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer’s Life*, 13.

⁹⁰Larkin, *Letters to Monica*, 100.

⁹¹Hood, *Selected Poems*, 64.

By now I've got the whole place clearly charted.
 Our garden, first: where I did not invent
 Blinding theologies of flowers and fruits,
 And wasn't spoken to by an old hat.⁹²

The “old hat” may well be an allusion to the character of Ben Weatherstaff, the elderly gardener who touches his cap to Mary when he first meets her, and who plays a pivotal role in the novel by introducing her to the robin who shows her the location of the key via which she gains entrance to the garden. At the same time, Larkin's reference to “Blinding theologies” implicates the rehabilitated Colin's desire to “make great scientific discoveries”,⁹³ based on his new-found knowledge of the revitalising powers of the garden and the evangelical spirit it has inspired within him. “The Magic works best when you work yourself,” reflects Colin as he immerses himself in some weeding, “I am going to write a book about Magic.”⁹⁴ Much like those striking letters to Monica that were written during the summer of 1953, these echoes of *The Secret Garden* are significant because they suggest that, while Larkin's own childhood may have been short on magic, that did not stop him yearning for it: a tension which is indicative of the contradictory impulses that the theme of childhood was capable of provoking in him. As we have seen, Larkin's antipathy towards Romanticism's veneration of the child was real and symptomatic of deep-rooted insecurities that stemmed from his early life. But the widely held assumption that he regarded children and childhood with nothing but hostility needs to be revised.

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⁹²Larkin, *Collected Poems*, 81.

⁹³Burnett, *The Secret Garden*, 231.

⁹⁴*Ibid.*, 232.

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