

PHILIP LARKIN

The Poetry of Departure

Ambulance

Going Going

Show Saturday

TED HUGHES

The Jaguar

Bayonet Charge

Six Young Men

Thrushes

Unit-V

Philip Larkin and Ted Hughes

Both Philip Larkin and Ted Hughes are post-Modern (writers of a mood that succeeds High Modernist writing of the kind represented by Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot and James Joyce) in a sense in which W.H. Auden (1907-73) is not strictly a post-Modern writer.

People like Larkin and Hughes do not have much use for either internationalism or the mythic method. Theirs is not a Europeanized sensibility in the sense that term would apply to Eliot and Joyce. They learnt something from Imagism, Symbolism, Vorticism but the stylistic randomness and brokenness of a poem like *The Waste Land* will not do for them. They prefer tighter, more linear structures and their poems have a surfacial rationality. Auden (and from across the Atlantic Robert Lowell) affected them profoundly but they chalked out their own territory.

In the period between 1966-1985 Philip Larkin has been a major figure in English poetry despite his own attempts to underplay such eminence. He has dominated this period through style, phrasing and voice. He has made use of an elegiac tradition of Englishness. He underlines the importance of a native English tradition as opposed to modernist influence. His poetry is rational, dealing with the world of everyday reality in a pessimistic manner. There is in it, no touch of romantic excess nor is there the seeming willful obscurity of Modernism. He is a bored elegist. His best known poem 'The Whitsun Weddings' looks on England with a mixture of elegiac sleepiness and a quaint awakedness.

Ted Hughes is part of the 'New Poetry' group. This poetry, written in the shadow of nuclear weapons and Vietnam, gave voice to a sense of darkness and disintegration that characterises the post-Modern period.

Philip Larkin lived from 1922 to 1985 and Ted Hughes from 1930 to 1998. In the period they wrote their poems, T.S. Eliot's era was almost gone. W.H. Auden had come on the scene as the next major English language poet after Yeats and Eliot. In America the major talent was Robert Lowell. Auden and Lowell both affected these younger poets.

In drama and fiction, it was a period of absurdity, 'anger' and 'menace.' 'Anger' went largely with novelists like Kingsley Amis and dramatists like John Osborne. 'Menace' went with the plays of Harold Pinter. Absurdity got a powerful vehicle in plays like Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and the American writer Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

The post-Second World War mood dominated the scene. There was scepticism and there was fatigue. A kind of post-Modern sensibility was also at work, noted very perceptibly by critics like Ihab Hassan. Postmodernism as a distinct school of thought (largely originating in France) came later with the ideas of Lyotard and Baudrillard when the two talked in terms of 'incredulity towards meta-narratives' (Lyotard) and 'loss of the real' (Baudrillard). Two extremely representative works of the generation in question are Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954) and Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956). Amis's novel can be seen as a catalogue of the misadventures of Jim Dixon who is a lecturer at a small university. He pulls funny faces behind the backs of those who treat him unfairly. His disastrous paper to the faculty at the end of the term is a kind of climax to all the horseplay that goes on. He drinks a lot and is bent on mocking social conventions and class limitations.

In Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* the hero is Jimmy Porter. His tirades against the complacency of the English establishment hold the play together. This is where the label 'angry young man' came from. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* was an epoch-making play. Nothing happens except words. Languages and silences rule

supreme and a lot of horseplay goes on as well. Emptiness and meaninglessness are stressed throughout. One influence on works of this kind, was the existential thought of the French thinker Jean Paul Sartre. Harold Pinter's speciality is undefined menace. His play *The Birthday Party* has a nervous lodger Stanley who is visited by 'old friends.' They turn out to be from an organisation, which they say he has betrayed. A similar menace is at work in his play *The Homecoming*. The age is marked not only by scepticism and fatigue but also by a kind of hysteria kept in check. Rhetoric is minimised, verbal violence is kept in check, but keeps surfacing. Then there is the 'Beat' generation. A great American poem that sums up the overall predicament of intellectuals is Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* which begins:

*I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by
madness, starving hysterical naked
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn
looking for an angry fix,
angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly
connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of
night,*

There is also 'Confessional Poetry' in which one phase of Robert Lowell's poetry figures prominently. This phase is represented by *Life Studies*. A typical line from Lowell's well-known poem *Skunk Hour* is: 'I myself am hell.' Confessional poetry was written by Ted Hughes's wife *Sylvia Plath* as well.

Larkin, Hughes and Tradition

Larkin is seen as a poet of 'The Movement' and Hughes as a 'New Poetry' poet. 'The Movement' was a loose grouping of poets who made a name for themselves in the 1950s.

Robert Conquest's anthology *New Lines* (1956) included Larkin and Thom Gunn apart from Donald Davie. Hughes appeared in Alvarez's important 1962 anthology called *New Poetry*. In a sense, then, Hughes is a post-Movement poet. The poetry of the Movement was that of post-Second World War Anglo-Saxon rationalism. The Movement poets were repulsed by grand gestures and also resisted modernism.

Thomas Hardy the poet and John Betjeman were models Larkin followed while Auden remained an influence too. With the Movement primacy was given to provincialism over the Internationalism of High Modernism. English poetry scaled itself down. Larkin's provincialism was rooted in his life in Hull. His poem 'Poetry of Departures' effectively epitomises his departure from the romantic image of daring and heroism. In another sense he is a passive realist. He offers pathos as well as horror. He creates pastoral worlds but these are emptied of himself. He rejects history and he rejects self. The disparity between reality and desire is a preoccupation with him. We have no place in reality and our feelings have little meaning in it.

Larkin is a poet of isolated observation resigned to the failure of the inevitability of loneliness and death. He does, nevertheless, recognize the need for transcendence however frail its foundations may be.

Most poems of Hughes voice a poetic drama, often violent and distressing. He is possessed with the life of nature. Animals and plants are all cloaked in a kind of essentialism. D. H. Lawrence as poet and Gerald Manley Hopkins have influenced Hughes much. His poetry emphasises the pitiless and violent forces of nature. The animals of his poems pursue their lives with a single-minded strength and power. Also, what interests him about the animal world is the obviousness of the struggle for survival. The indifference of the natural world to man is stressed. In volumes like *Crow* (1970) his development has been towards self-conscious brutalism. The message of *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957) and *Lupercal* (1960) is one of impatience with human intellect and deviousness. A large part of the poetry is anti-human and it reflects the experience of human cruelty.

The main theme in Hughes's poetry is power and power thought of not morally but in a present that is violent

and self-destructive. The murderousness of nature is a theme too. Focussing on animals and nature, his poems derive their characteristic tension from the attempt to fuse into a unified response both horror and admiration. Hughes's writing began as a reaction to 'The Movement' poetry of the 1950s. That poetry was marked by restraint, understatement and a concern with everyday reality. Hughes's poetry on the other hand, embraces the violent life of nature, particularly as exemplified by animals and birds. He extends this to include human beings who are governed by instincts and drives. He, had a mistrust of the intellect.

Recent Commonwealth Poetry as an Overall Context for the Poetry of Larkin and Hughes

In the last fifty years or so, great poetry from the non-English-speaking world has come from Pablo Neruda, (Chile), Jorge Luis Borges (Argentina), Boris Pasternak (Soviet Union), George Seferis (Greece), Eugenio Montale (Italy), Octavio Paz (Mexico), Leopold Senghor (Senegal) and quite a few others.

From within the Commonwealth, two Nobel Prize winners from poetry have been Derek Walcott and Seamus Heaney. Three remarkable novelist-poets have been Michael Ondaatje and Margaret Atwood (both Canada) and Ben Okri (Nigeria). A remarkable Australian poet is Les Murray.

In Anglo-American poetry, Larkin has been a major voice after Auden and Lowell. He is wonderful with his modulation of voice and with tonal effects. He is also wonderful with registering and cataloguing life. He's been the voice of the Post-War decline of England. His technical skill is breathtaking. And yet, there is a little something lacking at the level of the kind of public dimension that Yeats's poetry had. Larkin's conscious 'Englishness' is limiting. Also, a kind of negativity is there about a number of things. He has a fatalistic frame of mind. His attitude to work and to general social contacts is far from reassuring.

All this is compensated partly by the richness of the texture of his poems and by the almost loving care with which detail is handled. There is a celebratory aspect of his cataloguing in which a preservation-oriented impulse is also at work. This element is there in 'The Whitsun Weddings' and in 'Show Saturday.'

Larkin remains the major poetic voice in British poetry after Auden. His virtuosity alone and his honesty are sure to take care of his stature. One of his special gifts has been to enclose heartbreak in a cool, chiseled and sometimes comic style. Quite a few of his poems end with a sudden, exalted and sometimes terrifying openness.

Ted Hughes is at a slightly lower rung. There is in him a wish to be out of the human altogether. He almost finds the human condition too much to bear. He moved away from the world of the Movement. This helped him evolve on his own but his thematic range is limited. Where Larkin scores over Hughes is that he is one of those humorists who make you laugh at things not because they are funny but because laughing with them makes it easier for us to bear them. Larkin stands his ground quite well when compared to Auden but Auden's canvas was more extensive. Both Auden and Larkin are masters of the elegiac tone but in Auden, the counterbalancing element of play is greater.

Directly or indirectly, all poets of the twentieth century who came after Eliot, Yeats and Auden were affected by their work. Quite a few of these very good younger poets were less ambitious and more private. Somehow, the kind of poetry that has had the maximum appeal is one in which private and public worlds affect each other both in the process of creating and in the finished product (the words on the page.) This is where Walcott and Heaney (and Auden and Lowell) score over poets like Hughes and Plath. The public side of Heaney's concern over the violence in Northern Ireland and of Yeats's and Neruda's poetry are there for us all to see. Even a younger poet like the Nigerian Ben Okri with his *An African Elegy* fares quite well on that count.

(A) Philip Larkin: The Poems

1. 'The Poetry of Departures'

In this poem Larkins offers a contrast between the decisive romantic gesture of impulsive 'getting away' with the more cautious decision to let things stay as they are. Here a different way of life is brought into discussion and is contemplated for a while before being eventually renounced as 'artificial' and a 'deliberate step backwards.'

There are three verse-paragraphs of 8 lines each and then one last verse-paragraph of 5 lines. In the first verse-paragraph, someone's chucking up everything and just clearing off is seen (in the view of quite a few) as audacious, purifying, elemental move. The man talking of the person by way of a fifth-hand epitaph is sure that his elemental move will find approval from the listener.

The second paragraph offers a list of possible reasons why such an approval is expected. We all hate 'home' and having to be there. The speaker says he detests his room and his specially-chosen junk. The good books and the good bed all point to a life in "in perfect order." This, however, is said ironically.

As the speaker moves from the end of the second verse-paragraph to the start of the third he says that it leaves him stirred and flushed to have it said: 'He walked out on the whole crowd'. He thinks that if one man did it then others can do it too (that includes himself). The sentence, which stirs him ('He walked out on the whole crowd'), is of the same order, as sentences like: 'Then he undid her dress' or 'Take that you bastard.' Such things, says the speaker, help him stay sober and industrious. At the end of the third verse-paragraph the speaker says: 'But I'd go today.'

At the start of the final verse-paragraph he gives details of what it would be like if he actually went but deflates the whole initiative. The different way of life which was brought into the discussion and is being contemplated is eventually renounced as 'artificial' and a 'deliberate step backwards.'

2. 'Ambulances'

'Ambulances' is about death, its inevitability and its domain being everywhere. There are five verse-paragraphs of 6 lines each. The first verse-paragraph focuses on the ubiquitous (being present everywhere) quality of ambulances. All streets are visited in time. These ambulances are closed like confessionals. They thread their way through cities with loud noons. They get lots of glances but do not give back any. They are light, glossy and grey. They come to rest at any kerb.

The second verse-paragraph talks of the physical goings-on in the wake of the ambulance's arrival. A wild white face is seen momentarily on top of red stretcher blankets. Then it is seen by children scattered on steps or the road itself or by women coming from the shops past smells of different dinners.

In the third verse-paragraph, the effect it has on the women and the children is touched upon. They whisper 'poor soul' as if at their own distress. They sense the solving emptiness that lies just below the surface of all we do. For a second they get this emptiness whole. It is so permanent and blank and true. Then the fastened doors of the ambulance recede.

The fourth verse-paragraph talks about the reason for the distress felt by the onlookers. The speaker says that carried away in the deadened air may be the sudden shut of loss round something which is nearly at an end. That something (an individual) had cohering in it across the years the unique random blend of families and fashions.

In the fifth and final verse-paragraph the speaker says that the blend just referred to starts loosening. The individual concerned lies unreachable inside a room. There he is far from the exchange of love. The traffic parts (opens up) to let them pass. This brings closer what is left to come and dulls to distance all that we are.

3. 'Going, Going'

The poem is largely six line verse-paragraphs. There are nine in all with one paragraph deviating from the length. The poem is about all that is not likely to last not the least of them being 'England' or the idea of England.

In the first verse-paragraph the speaker says that the sense of there always being fields and farms beyond the town would last, at least for his lifetime. There, village louts would be still able to climb trees because all trees would not have been cut.

The second verse-paragraph leads on from the last line of the first. The speaker says he knew that there would be false alarms in newspapers about old streets and split-level shopping. Some still remain (at least so far). When with the coming up of bleak high-rise structures, the old part of town retreats, one would still be able to escape in one's car.

The third verse-paragraph attributes a certain resilience to the earth and to the sea. However much we mess it about, the earth will always respond, an example of things being tougher than we are. Similarly, the tides of the sea will remain clean beyond the initial filth we keep throwing into the sea. And yet some doubt has started creeping into the mind of the speaker.

The doubt possibly is part of aging. This comes at the start of the fourth verse-paragraph. The constant howling for 'more' is the source of doubt: More houses, more caravan sites, more parking area, more pay.

The fifth verse-paragraph takes up ways of stirring greed. More profit is sought. That gives the speaker the feeling that things would not last.

The visualising of 'England gone' comes at the start of the next verse-paragraph but already he can see countries becoming 'slums of Europe.' The crooks and tarts will have a hand in it.

Now comes the verse-paragraph, which talks of 'England gone.' By this is meant the disappearance of shadows, the meadows, the carved choirs. Books will be there. A part of it will linger in galleries but that which is most likely to remain are concrete and tyres.

In the concluding verse-paragraph he sounds a better note. All this may still not happen. But greeds (plural) and garbage are scattered all over with such a thick layer that they cannot be cleared now. One way is to invent excuses to make them all appear as needs. Yet the disappearance would happen. That is what the speaker thinks. What seems 'going, going' (including England) would then be gone.

4. 'Show Saturday'

This poem is from the collection *High Windows*. It is a longish poem on the lines of 'The Whitsun Weddings' (possibly Larkin's best-known poem.) In both poems Larkin gives ample evidence of his extraordinary recording skills. Ordinary collective institutions like 'Show Saturday' are greatly valued by Larkin despite the distance he puts between the scene and himself.

The first verse-paragraph gives the setting. It is a grey day for 'The Show' but that doesn't deter people. The narrow lanes are full of cars. There is a dog-show, there are sheep, there is a 'chain-saw competition.' 'Jumping' is also on the cards. Judges are busy. Announcements are on. A man has pound-notes around his hat. A lit-up board announces: 'There's more than just animals.' Then there are headstalls, balloon-men and a beer marquee which half hides a stopgap canvas urinal. One tent sells tweeds, another sells jackets. There are bales on which fox sit like great straw dice. Each scene is linked by spaces and each item has its own crowd, faces are incurious and there is a blankness also about the proceedings.

The next verse-paragraph focuses on wrestling. This one is a shorter verse-paragraph (half the length of the first one.) The wrestling starts late. The setting is interesting. There is first a wide ring of people, then there are cars and then trees. Then there is the pale sky. Two men hug each other, rock over the grass, stiff-legged on a two man scrum. They are dressed in acrobats-tights and in embroidered trunks. One of the two falls. They shake hands. Then another bout starts. One of the wrestlers is haired but he wins. These bouts are not so much fights as long immobile strainings. They end in imbalance. One ends up on his back, unharmed. The other stands smoothing his hair. But there are other talents.

The next verse-paragraph focuses on a long high tent with lots of wooden tables. This tent is about growing and making. Crowds shuffle past the tables. A number of items are on display. Earth itself, blanks leeks like church candles, six pads of broad beans. These are dark and shining. There are leafed cabbages. There are dairy and kitchen items. Eggs are there, four white, four brown. There are scores. A recession of skills is on view. Then there is lambing, there are sticks and there are rugs.

The next verse-paragraph starts with a reference to needlework which is on view. There are knitted caps and baskets. All are well done and worth praise. Still they are less than the honeycombs. Then the speaker shifts from this scene. We are told that outside the jumping is over. Later, there will be trick-races. Meanwhile young men thunder their competing ponies round the ring (twice.) There will also be musical stalls, sliding off and riding bareback. The ponies are being dragged to and fro from a bewildering variety of requirements. They do not mind. In the background horse-boxes start moving like shifting scenery. Each crawls towards the stock-entrance. Each tilts and sways.

In the next verse-paragraph we are told that these are bound for far-off farms. The pound-note man also goes away. The car park is less crowded. Jumps are being loaded on a truck. Everything will now go back to a private address, gates and lamps in one-street villages with high stones. These are empty at dusk. These also may go back to side roads of small towns. Front doors commemorate sports finals and allotments go right down to the rail track. The ended hush of summer had brought them to this place for Show Saturday, the annual agricultural show. Now these will be back to autumn.

These people, the next verse-paragraph tells us, will all be back to their routines. They will include men with hunters, women who bring up dogs and are defined by wool. These will also include mug-faced children swanky in a saddle and middle-aged wives. These wife glare at jellies. Husbands are on leave from the garden and are as watchful as weasels. There are also car-tuning sons with curt hair. They will also go back to their

routines. The routine would amount to their local lives with names on vans and business calendars which are hung in kitchens. They will be back to the routine of loud occasions in the Corn Exchange and market days in bars. This is the routine of most farmers.

The concluding line of the last verse-paragraph is: 'Let it always be there.' This is the England of small towns and allotments where it is forever 1947. There is an ideal of familiar Englishmen that is underlined. As winter come the dismantled show itself dies back into the area of work. The speaker wants it to stay hidden there like strength. Below sale bills and swindling let the show stay hidden for a revival later. It is something people do without noticing how time's rolling smithy-smoke shadows much greater gestures. They share something that breaks ancestrally into regenerate union every year. 'Let it always be there' is the benediction with which the poem closes.

(B) Ted Hughes

1. 'The Jaguar'

This poem is from *The Hawk in the Rain*. There are five verse-paragraphs of 4 lines each. The first two verse-paragraphs focus on the indolence and fatigue of the other zoo animals. The apes yawn. The tiger and the lion lie very still. The boa-constrictor's coil is a fossil. In most cages, there is hardly any movement. They seem empty or they stink. Parrots either shriek or strut like cheap tarts to attract the stroller with the nut.

The remaining three verse-paragraphs focus on the jaguar who is a striking study in contrast. In the third verse-paragraph we are told that it is the jaguar's cage which best holds the zoo-visitor's attention. There the crowd stands and stares mesmerized like a child at a dream.

There they see a jaguar who is angry and who hurries through prison darkness after the drills of his eyes. He is on a short fierce fuse.

The fourth verse-paragraph tells us that these movements have no trace of boredom about them. In the rest of the verse-paragraph and the first line of the next verse-paragraph we are told that the jaguar's eyes are satisfied to be blind in fire. His ears are deaf by the bang of blood in his brain. Unseeing and unhearing the jaguar spins from the bar but a cage is as non-existent for him as is a visionary's cell to the visionary.

In the last three lines of the poem the poet focuses on the jaguar's stride and its majesty and unfettered quality. His stride is the stride of freedom. Under the long thrust of the jaguar's heel the worlds roll and as a result, the horizons come to the floor of his cage. This makes him a master in his own way.

2. 'Bayonet Charge'

This poem is also from *The Hawk in the Rain*. The first verse-paragraph has 8 lines, the second 7 and the third also has 8 lines. The instinct for survival is the core theme of the poem.

The first verse-paragraph gives the instinctive reaction of a soldier to firing from the enemy. Patriotism takes a back seat. The first instinct is to start running. It is raw fear. The khaki uniform is raw. The sweat is heavy. The soldier stumbles across a field full of lumps of earth. Rifle fire dazzles him. The fear of a bullet hitting him hurries him forward. His own rifle is as numb as a smashed arm.

In the second verse-paragraph the soldier pauses for a while. Bewilderment results from the run for life and the patriotic awareness sweats from his chest like molten iron.

His awareness in the second verse-paragraph is that he was running like a man who has jumped in the dark all the time wondering why he was running. He listens for the reason of his still running. He also wonders whether he is a pointing second in the cold clockwork of stars and the nations. This refers to the destinies of the people and nations and the element of cold clockwork that goes into all that. As all this happens his foot hangs like statuary in mid-stride.

In the last line of the third and final verse-paragraph and the opening of the third verse-paragraph we find a yellow hare being thrown up by the shot-slashed furrows of the field. It rolls like a flame and crawls in a threshing circle. Its mouth is wide open and silent and its eyes stand out. Startled, as the soldier plunges past with his bayonet towards the green hedge, king, honour, human dignity and things of that kind drop from him like luxuries. His terror is touching dynamite and the blue crackling air produces a yellow alarm and getting out of that space is what he wants more than anything else.

3. 'Six Young Men'

The six men were friends of Ted Hughes's father, and the actual photograph had been taken just before the war.

There are five verse-paragraphs of nine lines each. The first verse-paragraph focuses on the photograph of these six young men. The clinching line is the last line of the verse-paragraph:

'Six months after this picture they were all dead.'

The photograph holds them well. They were familiar to their friends. Four decades have passed. The photograph has faded but the faces or the hands of these people have not wrinkled. Their shoes shine though the cocked hats worn by them have gone out of fashion. One of the young men is smiling intimately. One is chewing a blade of grass. One lowers his eyes and is bashful. One's cocky pride makes him look ridiculous. At the start of the second verse-paragraph we are told that all the six had trimmed themselves for a Sunday outing. The spot, says the speaker, is familiar to him. The bilberried bank, the thick tree and the black wall are still there and have not changed. Where these six are sitting one can hear the water of seven streams fall to the roarer in the bottom. A murmuring of air goes through the leafy valley. Even that is audible at that point. Their expressions are those of men listening. The valley has still not changed its sound through the faces of these six have been under the ground for forty years now.

In the third verse-paragraph the speaker describes the way these people got killed. One was shot in an attack and called for help. The second one, his best friend, went out to bring him away. He was shot too. The third one was shot along with his rifle-sights. He was warned from potting at tin cans in no-man's land. The rest were also killed. Hope was no help.

In the fourth verse-paragraph the speaker invites readers to see a man in the photograph. His locket of a smile turns overnight into the hospital for his mangled (mutilated) last agony and hours. One can see bundled in it his dead bulk and weight which was mightier-than-a-man. This photograph is the one place which keeps him alive in his Sunday best. Here itself one can see cruel war's worst thinkable flash and rending. Forty years of rotting under the earth are there but the smile is there too.

The next verse-paragraph establishes a continuity between those in the photograph and those outside it. What gets retained is also considered here. The vitality of the young men in the photograph brings the permanent reality of death to the poet's mind.

4. 'Thrushes'

The poem is from *Lupercal*. 'Thrushes' are birds who prey on insects. There is a murderousness about their task. They do it with streamlined efficiency.

The verse-paragraphs vary in length except the first two which have 8 lines each.

The focus in the first verse-paragraph is also on 'some writhing thing' (an insect) which is mentioned at the end of line 5. The purposiveness of the thrushes is terrifying. They are like coiled steel and their eyes are dark and deadly. They attack with a start, a bound and a stab. They have no procrastinations about their task and the task doesn't bore them either. Then there is a ravenous second of consuming their prey.

In the second verse-paragraph the speaker compares their mental build to Mozart's brain. It is the efficiency of the kind which strikes in too streamlined a manner for any doubt to come in its way. No obstruction can deflect such efficiency which is comparable to that of the shark's mouth which hungers down the blood-smell even to a leak on its own side and in the process eats of itself. The question posed at the start of this verse-paragraph is as to what their bullet-like and automatic purpose is a function of. Is it their single-minded looking skulls or a trained body or genius? Or is it a nestful of brats?

In the third verse-paragraph the speaker says that man is not blessed with this kind of blessedness. His heroism is on horseback. He has a desk diary or a broad desk. He carves out a tiny ivory ornament for years. His act worships itself. In the last one and a half line of the third verse-paragraph and in the fourth verse-paragraph we are told that distractions in man's case are too many and too furious. Even if he bends so much as to be bent in prayer he can never achieve singlemindedness. The furious distracting devils orgy above the space where he prays.

Philip Larkin: Brief Technique-related Notes on the 8 Poems

1. Poetry of Departures

This poem is almost dialectical in its structure. The contrast built up by the speaker is between the decisive Romantic gesture of action or movement (the kind of thing Tom Gunn talks about in his famous poem 'On the Move') And the more cautious decision to let things stay as they are. The thing to note is that the different languages in the poem – the colloquial stand and the plain language – embody the differences in life-style that the poem focuses on.

Lines like 'Take that you bastard' add to the dramatic quality of the poem and to its insight into life-styles and human relationships. The artificiality of some impulsive actions bothers the speaker and he ends the poem on a dismissive note.

2. 'Ambulances'

This poem is in 6-line verse paragraphs. Rhyming is used to give the poem phonological regularity. The first two verse paragraphs offer vivid and realistic imagery as the ambulances are shown threading their way through city-streets. 'The traffic parts let go by' is another striking image (from the last verse paragraph) about the way the ambulances move through the city. The remaining three verse paragraphs offer us the speaker's musings on this movement and what the ambulances mean to people. 'Smells of different dinners' (in the second verse paragraph) and 'loud noons of cities,' in the first verse paragraph are good examples of figurality. The structure is tight but the tone is equanimous. Yeats's 'An Irish Airman Foresees His Death' comes to mind in the matter of tone .

The imagery and the rhythm together have the effect of capturing 'the still sad music of humanity' (Wordsworth's phrase).

3. 'Going, Going'

This poem also uses a rhyme scheme for phonological regularity. The tone is partly satirical. Irony is used to good effect. The gross materialism of people, their greed and their callousness about ecology are all touched upon. As compared to 'Ambulances' the consonantal sounds are jarring in effect. Alliteration is also quite effective. ('greeds and garbage' in the last verse paragraph is a good example.

Other examples are:

'Boiling will be bricked in'

'The carved choirs'

'A cast of crooks and tarts'

The language has a number of colloquialisms in it. Many of the verbs convey approval or disapproval only by being just the right ones to convey the intended emotion. At the same time, there is striking contemporaneity about language use that often achieves an ironic effect also.

4. 'Show Saturday'

The thrust of this poem is naturalistic recording. By naturalism at the simplest level is meant a kind of photographic realism with emphasis on accuracy in recording. We are flooded with detail. Here is God's plenty. In the process of cataloguing observation almost becomes epiphany. An ideal of familiar Englishness is offered.

In a sense there is more of quintessential Englishness here than in 'Whitsun Weddings.' This is almost Keatsian.

The cataloguing is like the one we find in Robert Lowell's book of sonnets called *Notebook*. In Lowell the tempo of cataloguing is a little faster because the form that contains it (the fourteen line norm) demands its being packed that way. The form here is more relaxed but about the cataloguing there is an alertness and a warmth which reinforces the longing for preservation at the end of the poem.

This poem needs to be read in conjunction with 'The Whitsun Weddings' which proceeds through its eight 10-line stanzas with none of the subdued gear-crashing of 'Church Going,' is the finest example of Larkin's temper, tone and technique. Its level descriptive sweep, its amused human observation, its intelligent sense of the inexplicable, all move with complete inevitability to the mysterious closing lines as the train with its load of newly-married couples slows as it reaches its destination.

Both 'The Whitsun Weddings' and 'Show Saturday' are remarkable examples of Larkin's assertion of Englishness. In this respect, he takes a stance against the internationalism of early twentieth century High Modernism. Sometimes, his poetry shows some traces of Eliot's *Four Quartets* in its imagery. But then, a large part of *Four Quartets* is also marked for Englishness. His is the poetry of the aftermath of Empire.

Ted Hughes: Brief Technique-related Notes on the 8 Poems

1. 'The Jaguar'

This is a poem with graphic imagery and striking figurality (similes and metaphors). The parrots shriek 'as if they were on fire.' They strut 'like cheap tarts' ('tarts' is one of the words used for a prostitute). Another striking figural expression is 'His stride is wilderness of freedom.' 'Bang or blood in the brain' is an example of alliteration. The jaguar's ferocity is actualised quite effectively and there is a tautness in the lines themselves which denotes power kept in check.

2. 'Bayonet Charge'

This poem is quite graphic. It uses a number of non-finite verbal phrases. Participial phrases are, there to capture things in motion. The soldier's movements are captured as if on a camera.

Figurality is used to good effect. A striking figural phrase is the closing line of the poem: His terror's touchy dynamite.

A kind of equivalence of this phrase with the preceding phrase is established. The preceding phrase is:

'That blue crackling air'

Alliteration is used quite effectively. Some examples are;

'cold clockwork,' 'shot-slashed'

The poem almost gives us a series of cinematic shots. The sense of menace brought about by continuous rifle-fire is built by quite well.

3. 'Six Young Men'

Here there are five 9-line verse paragraphs. The lines are more relaxed than in most of Hughes's poems. The first verse paragraph is packed with 'd' sounds. These go well with the climactic line of the verse paragraph.

'They were all dead'

The second verse paragraph uses rhyming 'know' rhymes with go, 'wall' rhymes with 'fall' and 'all'. 'Sound' rhymes with 'ground'. In the third verse paragraph rhyming is abandoned. 'All were killed' is the line that caps this verse paragraph.

Something of an elegiac tone is maintained in the fourth verse paragraph. The fifth verse paragraph continues the speaker's musings about that event in the past of which the photograph, in its own way, is a reminder.

4. 'Thrushes'

The first verse paragraph is mostly non-finite verbal constructions. The speaker tries to pack into this verse paragraph as much of information about thrushes as he can. That makes the paragraph quite intense.

The second verse paragraph gives the single-minded nature of the thrushes some thought. That musing is continued in the final verse paragraph. The context is made human this time.

The poem gives ample proof of Hughes's skill in portraying the animal world with the violence inherent in it.

Pessimism, Isolation and Alienation In Larkin's Poetry

Larkin's poetry is profoundly subversive of the institutional exhortations of church, work, family and school. The vision is unsentimental and realistic. He prefers to be in direct and ironic. He explores eternal themes of death and change. He tries to see things as honestly as possible. So there is a starkness of vision. He frequently brings in tawdry superficial aspects of modern city life.

In his best known poem 'Whitsun Weddings' he looks at couples trying to give their lives some happiness and order. But the conclusion that ultimately emerges is that happiness is something which only happens elsewhere, in the past rather than in the present, outside of our lives.

In 'Poetry of Departures' he has his own world with its detested limits but prefers it to action because that is likely to lead nowhere.

*We all hate home
And having to be there
I detest my room
Its specially-chosen junk.*

'Next Please' is another grim poem. It talks of life being a series of promises and hopes that are never fulfilled. 'Ambulances' also talks about the fact that every street is visited by disease and death. Ephemeral, temporality and nothingness dominate many of Larkin's poems. In *Going Going* what is going is England itself.

Larkin's preoccupation is with the melancholy, the misfortunate, the failing elements of life. There is, in his work, an agnostic stoicism. Through this, he confronts death, diminution and change with sardonic resignation. His humor is a black humor and can be quite unnerving at times.

Larkin's Poetic Craftsmanship

Larkin savagely and ironically portrays his compromises of life. This he does with such a mastery of the poetic line. He is also a master of indirection, irony, understatement and concision. The speaker of a Larkin poem is almost always someone standing outside the communal life of fellow human beings. There is a detachment and a separateness from his material.

It is with suppressed anger, pity, and humour that Larkin views the degraded circumstances in which people go through their lives. A distance between self and others is preserved. He values ordinary collective institutions like 'Show Saturday' but stands outside of all. He is an ironic recorder of the boring and the banal. The poems 'Dockery and Sun' and Mr. Bloomy show other aspects of his scepticism towards life.

Larkin mostly uses regular stanzas as form, artful syntax and striking diction with sometimes a colloquial touch. 'An Arundel Tomb' is a poem of exceptional technical achievement, emotional strength and verbal originality. In the poem 'The Trees' there is a combination of plenitude and transience that one finds in great poems like Keats's 'To Autumn.'

Also, Larkin is a master of naturalistic detail. 'Whitsun Weddings' and 'Show Saturday' give ample evidence of this. In 'Show Saturday' the sheer amount of detail contributes to the significance which is conferred upon the show in the closing parts of the poem. This is done in a very powerful way. There is affection for and approval of the activities described but no attempt is made to romanticize or render unfamiliar the everyday scene.

Metaphors are foregrounded by Larkin against a foreground which is predominantly metonymic. This, in turn, is foregrounded against the background of the poetic tradition which is essentially metaphoric. In the opening stanza of 'Whitsun Weddings' for example, the scenery is evoked by melancholic and synecdochic detail as are the wedding parties that the poet observes at the stations on the way to London, seeing off bridal couples to their honeymoon.

This is the usual tragic story of a Larkin poem. It would begin with a precisely observed description of a scene from life and would move to a conclusion which reflects on the significance of what has been described.

His poems are often structured to a thematic or dramatic climax which can come about through the release of an image or a change in voice from the lighthearted and the fatuous to deadly earnest. Quite a few Auden poems also work in roughly the same way but the seeming randomness is mostly greater in Auden's case.

Violence as a Theme in Ted Hughes's Poetry

Ted Hughes has a preoccupation with violence. A large part of his poetry is anti-human and it reflects his experience of human cruelty. Poems in *Crow* (1970) voice a poetic drama which is often violent and distressing. Hughes's father was a veteran of the First World War. He was one of seventeen survivors of a whole regiment which fought at Gallipoli. His father's life and losses are also part of Hughes's thematic repertoire.

Hughes's animal poems have been described as a modern bestiary. What occurs in *Crow* is a metaphysical, historical and individual nightmare cast in anthropological terms. Even elsewhere, 'The Hawk', 'The Thrush' and 'The Pike' are not only the physical but moral centers of their worlds.

Poems on animals in collections like *The Hawk In The Rain* and *Lupercal* evoke the wordless energies of nature – its violence, its pride and the accompanying death – in a language of harsh rhythm.

Hughes's was a poetry of man's dark side. Memories of a racial past came to be re-imagined through the freedom and violence of animals. In an early poem he talks of pike in terms of "A life subdued to its instrument." Impatience with human intellect and deviousness comes through all too often. The figure 'Crow' itself is the survivor, the black instinctive heart of the self for whom love is meaningless.

A substantial part of Hughes's poetry is anti-human. It reflects the experience of human cruelty underlying the work of contemporary East European poets like Vasko Popa (Yugoslavia) whom Hughes admired. To Popa especially he turned for 'the surrealism of the folklore'. Part of the influence comes from Dylan Thomas and Robert Lowell as well.

The creatures Hughes describes are often predators. The deaths he observes are unnervingly violent. Survival is the result (if at all) of a single mindedness is itself unnerving. The obviousness of the struggle for survival is almost always the backdrop. There is a considerable length to which Hughes sometimes seems to be going, to glorify the strength and determination of the survivor. So much so that sympathy with the plight of the defeated seems to be missing.

Hughes's abiding theme is the presence of amoral primitive forces at work beneath the surface of our predominantly urban, "civilized" culture. He has a tenacious grip over the poetry or packed, detailed, naturalistic observation. He locates violence everywhere as a universal, natural force. He sees his age as an age of irreversible decay in the ethical-metaphysical system of Western European culture whose episteme was the Enlightenment episteme.

Hughes's Overall Poetic Style

A strong influence on Ted Hughes's work is the poetry of G.M. Hopkins. His emphatic rhythms and strongly marked stresses are very similar to Hopkins's. The same can be said of violent verbs and run-on lines. The influence of W.B. Yeats, Dylan Thomas and Robert Lowell is also there. Where Hughes is at his best, is in the powerfully concentrated and disciplined evocation of creatures in a non-human environment.

In 'The Jaguar,' the pulsating driving rhythms of the poem reinforced by heavy alliteration and assonance help register an effect of barely suppressed rage.

In 'Six Young Men' Hughes offers a vigorous mourning which is very different from Larkin's kind of elegy exemplified by the poem 'MCMXIV.' Larkin mostly stations himself, as if in a train window. Hughes's most common vantage point is the eye, (the mind's eye). Hughes's landscape is interesting. Man speaks through nature.

There is an element of hysteria about diction in Hughes's later poetry. He has a dark essentialism cloaked in which everything takes on a similar aspect including animals and plants.

Hughes uses alliteration quite often. The line: 'By the bang of blood in the brain' from 'The Jaguar' is a good example. Half rhyme and imperfect rhyme are also used to good effect.

His imagery is quite graphic and can be startling sometimes. There is a freshness and directness about it. The life of nature is an obsession with him. He sees it as a 'life subdued to its instrument'.

A Short Biographical Note

Philip Larkin was born in 1922 and brought up in Coventry. He was educated at Oxford. Beginning in 1955, he spent his working life as the librarian of Hull University Library. He was a very private, almost reclusive person and remained unmarried. He

died in 1985.

Ted Hughes

Ted Hughes was born in 1930 at Mytholmroyd in the West Riding Yorkshire. He was educated at Mexborough Grammar School and Cambridge.

At Cambridge he started with the study of English literature, but two years later switched over to archaeology and anthropology. He and the American poetess Sylvia Plath met at Cambridge. The two got married in 1956. From 1957 to 1959 he and Plath lived in America. In 1960 the two came to England. The marriage didn't last very long. In 1963 Plath committed suicide. His second marriage was in 1970. In 1984 he became the Poet Laureate of England. He died in 1998.

A Short Bibliographical Note

Larkin's main works of poetry are:

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