

Reseñas

ANDREW MCKEOWN AND CHARLES HOLDEFER, eds. 2006: *Philip Larkin and the Poetics of Resistance*. Paris: L'Harmattan. 238 pp.

Anyone interested in Larkin studies must welcome the appearance of the volume *Philip Larkin and the Poetics of Resistance*, edited by Andrew McKeown and Charles Holdefer and comprising twelve essays selected from papers originally presented at the University of Poitiers First International Conference of Larkin Studies, September 2004. The essays are unified around the theme of resistance, which is to say, their authors consider what Larkin is resisting in his writings and the means he uses of doing so. The book is divided into two parts, each of them including six essays. The first part, "Toward a Theory of Resistance," approaches Larkin's work from a more abstract, theoretical perspective, and the second part, "Resistance in Context," places the texts in historical and political contexts.

The first essay, Raphaël Ingelbien's "An Enormous *No!*: Larkin's Resistance to Translation," considers what Larkin really meant by "foreign poetry" in "*Foreign poetry? No!*" (Larkin 2002a: 25), his answer to the question "*I wonder if you read much foreign poetry?*" (Larkin 2002a: 25); an answer traditionally considered as an indication of Larkin's literary and political conservatism.

Ingelbien begins by wondering whether Larkin meant linguistically foreign poetry or culturally foreign poetry. In the first case, there are several examples that seem to confirm the vision of Larkin as a believer in linguistic determinism, but Ingelbien counters those examples by considering Larkin's own knowledge of French language and literature. If linguistic determinism seems too extreme an explanation, Larkin's resistance to foreign poetry could be seen as part of a more general scepticism about the translation of poetry. Ingelbien follows Georges Mounin's suggestion that there is always a hidden agenda behind those who reject the possibility of translating poetry. Then, using Even-Zohar's theory of a national literature as a polysystem of competing trends, schools and norms in which translation tends to confirm or support pre-existing trends, Ingelbien states that Larkin's objections are not so much a form of resistance to the foreign, but to those elements within post-war English poetry that used foreign models and translations in order to promote their own norms, antithetical to Larkin's. We are speaking of the legacy of Pound's modernism, which dominated the American scene at the

time. The same dynamics, then, may also explain Larkin's negative comments about culturally foreign poetry, which; "often means American for Larkin" (33).

Ingelbien's subtle essay leaves us with a very different explanation for Larkin's "No!" (Larkin 2002a: 25) from the usual accusation of xenophobic insularity.

In his essay "'Out of Reach': Philip Larkin's 'Here,'" Jacques Nassif, Larkin's French translator, analyses the question of Larkin's resistance to translation from a different perspective. Nassif sees resistance as the ways in which the signifier resists appropriation by the subject, and in his essay, by giving first a broad account of his experience as translator of Larkin's poems and then a more detailed account of his translation of the poem "Here," he comments on his treatment of these moments of resistance in the texts.

For Nassif the basic question for the translator of Larkin's poems is the resistance of the poems to being turned not into another language, French in this case, but into poems, that is, texts with sufficient literary entity to be considered as poems in their own right. In order to achieve this condition, the predominant factor behind his translation was, even before faithfulness of meaning, "the pleasure of having found a rhythm, a rhythm that produces the right rhyme" (42). Another priority was the fidelity to the experience described in the original poem, not to the words.

These principles and priorities are behind Nassif's comment on his translation of Larkin's "Here." The poem follows a movement beginning in a train which has branched off the main line and, after finding a river, arrives, by surprise in a city, Hull. The movement crosses the city and goes past its suburbs to the fields behind them, and then to a final nothingness. Nassif tried to reproduce the original movement and mixture of horror and light by using all the means at his command: prepositions, many verbs of movement, alliteration and rhyme, finally achieving his objective: to recreate the original atmosphere and produce a good translation which is also a good poem.

Jean-Charles Perquin begins the third essay of the volume, "'Why put it into words?' Philip Larkin's Perilous Poetics of Resistance," by stating that, due to the fact that resistance presupposes opposition, it gives us the key for Larkin's poetics, which is to say, the recurring model that the English author found poetically profitable.

According to Perquin, Larkin's poetry is filled with oppositions, refusals and resistances. The speaker in Larkin's poems stages his fears, anxieties and frustrations and then rejects them through irony and sarcasm, those negations necessarily being the best way to keep the speaker's fears at a distance. This structural matrix, identified in a number of poems, is what constitutes Larkin's poetics of resistance.

As a consequence of this poetics of oppositions and resistances, Larkin has often been considered a cynic. In this regard Perquin points out that it is dangerous to establish a connection between a poet's work and his personality, and for Larkin irony and sarcasm, however dark and desperate, function as ways of dealing with introspective pessimism and turning it into lyric poetry.

Following this idea that Larkin's texts are intensely self-conscious, Charles Holdefer offers, in "Camping with Larkin," the fourth essay, a reading of Larkin in the light of camp, a sensibility historically linked with homosexuality and related to the celebration of the outlandish or banal and the theatricality with which this affection is expressed.

As Holdefer brilliantly observes, camp is useful because it provides a way of bringing together several of the many contradictions in Larkin, from his early lesbian schoolgirl novels as the pseudonymous Brunette Coleman to his later persona as the gloomy Hermit of Hull. For the author, the use of masks and a sense of theatricality are a constant feature in Larkin, and his essay, which aims "to point out instances where Larkin, arguably, is camping" (69), brings about a circular vision of Larkin's work.

Brunette Coleman, naughty, bitchy, and full of double meanings, is a clear product of a camp sensibility. Holdefer finds a clear echo of Wilde, one of camp's "patron saints", in her sentence "I make no apology for presenting a collection of what may seem 'trivia' in these disturbed times. I feel that now more than ever a firm grasp on the essentials of life is needed" (Larkin 2002b: 243).

After his Brunette phase, Larkin's camp sensibility wanes for the next several decades, comprising works such as *The North Ship* (1945), *Jill* (1946), *A Girl in Winter* (1947) and *The Less Deceived* (1955), in which one can find many of the same ingredients (masks, ventriloquism...), but introspection and seriousness take the place of the theatricality and playfulness of camp.

The Whitsun Weddings (1964) shows the first sign of change with its mixture of the assertion of intense feeling and the sense of its absurdity, one of the typical features of camp, but it is in *High Windows* (1974), in poems such as "Posterity," "Annus Mirabilis," "The Card-Players," "Vers de Société," and "This Be The Verse," where Holdefer identifies the reappearance of camp, only with a different surface this time: that of the gloomy, lonely, very English, Hermit of Hull. In the end, just another mask to play with.

In his essay "Are Days Where We Live?," István Rácz outlines his vision of Larkin's poetics through the discussion of several poems included in *The Whitsun Weddings*, mainly "Days," "Afternoons," and "Nothing To Be Said," in which time becomes space, that is, units of time are transformed into places for domestic life.

This poetics is determined by the difference between the divisible time of life, which can, or rather must, be split up, because we cannot form a notion of life without forming a concept of days, and the continuous time of death. The conflict between time, both divisible and continuous, and humans, resisting the latter within the space of the former's days, afternoons, etc., constitutes, according to Rácz, the main focus of resistance in Larkin's writing.

"Toward a Theory of Resistance," the first part of the volume, closes with an essay, "Classical Prosody in Philip Larkin's Poetry," in which Martine Semblat identifies the formal aspect as the element that best defines Larkin's poetry.

According to Semblat, there is, for a conservative poet, a surprising scarcity of traditional poetic forms in Larkin's work. The young Larkin uses the sonnet in *The North Ship*, but it is very much a personal version of the form in which the structure of the stanza conceals the structure of the sonnet, and even this form nearly vanishes in the rest of his work, where what is left of traditional forms is extremely limited: the use of rhyme, the marked predominance of binary rhythms and the organization of the poem into regular stanzas. In all these cases, Larkin's formal virtuosity managed to conceal an underlying regularity beneath an apparent irregularity and casualness.

Larkin's main purpose was to achieve a personal mixture of tradition and innovation, and classical prosody persists in his poetry as a base which provides a solid frame to accommodate the innovations of the modernity of his time-- such as the use of mass culture elements, foul language and clichés-- and give them a familiar form. That is, traditional forms in Larkin's poetry offer the resistance necessary to ensure that these innovations could be incorporated without disturbing his vision of poetry as a genre.

"Resistance in Context," the second part of the volume, opens with the essay "Philip Larkin and the Poetics of Resistance to the Second World War," in which Helen Goethals encourages the possibility of reading Larkin's early poetry as war poetry, in the sense that it was written out of the experience of war, not requiring necessarily actual participation in battle.

The poems of *The North Ship* have been excluded from the canon of Second World War poetry due to a principle of selection which includes only poems "where the experience of the war is apparent and central" (Graham 1995: xx). But the unreality of Larkin's poems, which reflects the experience of being on the margins of war, was a central, in the sense of common, experience for many people, especially in the early stages of the war.

For Goethals, there are historical and literary reasons for reading the poems of *The North Ship* against the background of the Second World War. The historical reasons have to do with the need to re-write history so as to include every possible angle and have a truer picture of the impact and implications of the Second World War. As regards the literary reasons, Goethals identifies two kinds of poetics as responses to the war: the classical school of left-wing poets like Auden and MacNeice, who accepted war as the only realistic means of resistance to fascism, and the neo-Romantics like Dylan Thomas, who escaped to a world which included the personal and the universal, but not the historical. Goethals argues that Larkin's early poems can be read in the context of this neo-Romantic poetics of escape, identifying in the poems of *The North Ship* three strategies of resistance to the historical reality of war: isolationism, awareness of the absurd and a self-imposed silence.

Following Goethals' revisionist line of thought, although from a different perspective, Stephen Cooper, in his essay "Resisting Tradition: The Decentered Perspectives of Larkin, Auden and MacNeice," abridged from sections of his own book *Philip Larkin: Subversive Writer* (2004), puts forward and defends his

suggestive theory that Larkin's main resistance was against conservative visions of sexual and social politics.

Cooper takes into account unpublished materials and, considering young Larkin's often understated affinity with Auden and MacNeice, shows how Larkin's decentred and subversive attitude as regards sex, war and materialism is present throughout his work, from the cryptic *The North Ship*, through the Coleman prose and the unpublished verse drama *Night in the Plague* (1946), to the major poems of the 1960s and 1970s. This wide range of now available writing permits a more complete appraisal of Larkin's work, and provides evidence that Larkin deconstructed in his work the conservative ideas of his letters and public persona, thus countering the usual charges of racism, sexism, and class-consciousness, and allowing for a much needed and welcome reappraisal of Larkin which, in the case of Cooper, produces radical results.

In the ninth essay of the volume, "'Alien Territory': Resistance and the Poet's Social Function in the Work of Philip Larkin," David Ten Eyck takes the question of resistance to language itself.

Eyck's essay is structured around an analysis of "The Dance," the long, unfinished poem that occupied Larkin for almost a year between 1963 and 1964. Recognising the appropriateness of a biographical reading of the poem, for Eyck the fragmentation and indecision of the speaker in "The Dance" works for Larkin as a means not only of expressing a personal crisis but also of examining the inherent limitations of poetic discourse.

Larkin's poetics involves both formal and thematic limitations, and the resistance of a voice pressing against these limitations gives shape to many poems throughout Larkin's career. This procedure, frequently accompanying Larkin's exploration of the conflict between desire and personal reticence or stultifying social conventions, allows this theme to open into a reflection on the limitations of language.

"The Dance" turns Larkin's implicit connection between sexual uncertainty and language into a reflection on the process of poetic creation. The dance, as a metaphor for language, is an alien territory for the poet, forced by the very nature of his art to enter into dialogue with social forces that are often at odds with his artistic purpose and personal vision. Poetry, for Larkin, is an art balanced between the preservation of private experience and the relation of such experience to a reading audience which, by interpreting the verse in their own way, compromise the integrity of the experiences it preserves. Poetic discourse, as presented in "The Dance," is a question of measured resistance by a private voice forced to operate within an imperfect public medium.

According to Eyck, the creative process enacted in "The Dance," in which an isolated voice struggles to relate an experience within the alien territory of a language system or set of social expectations that is at odds with the speaker's project, characterises much of Larkin's finest writing.

In "Larkin's Impulse to Preserve," the tenth essay in the volume, Adrian Grafe studies the notion that for Larkin, time is inescapable except by art, and his poems,

filled with the equipment of memory —diaries and dates, photograph albums and records— are attempts at preservation, first of himself and then of everything else. Preservation implies both retrospection and prospection: the longer time goes on, the more Larkin feels the urgency to preserve and the more his fear of death intensifies. By analysing poems belonging to the whole of Larkin's career, Grafe identifies the linguistic means by which the poet accomplishes this kind of resistance to time: questioning language, understatement, and its opposite, extreme forthrightness or obscenity.

Similarly to Eyck, Andrew McKeown deviates in his essay "Resisting the Likes of 'Money'" from the traditional readings of this poem as an expression of Larkin's vision of money as an alienating force, a source of hope and, inevitably, disappointment for man. Like Eyck and "The Dance" too, McKeown sees "Money" as a meditation on language.

The structure of the poem is that of a dialogue between money and man. McKeown, pursuing this idea, establishes a parallelism between money and language, seeing the second as the main source of crisis for man, for rather than giving the subject possession of the world, language is "the supreme separator, splitting, dividing, disuniting that subject's sense of self and his place in the world" (182).

In the years after writing "Money" and *High Windows*, the book to which it belongs, Larkin often complained of having lost the ability to write poems. "Money" expresses this personal crisis, where the poet's increasing disaffection with regard to language, translated into the likeness of money, takes the form of an abandoned partner speaking reproachfully to his ex-lover. The speaker still feels desire, but, at the end of the poem, he resists this attraction by stepping out of the circle of language and desire and placing himself transcendently on a metaphoric hilltop.

The establishment of a relationship between language and desire (based on likenesses identified in the money model) and the stating of resistance to that relationship is a feature which defines Larkin's later poems such as "Love Again," "High Windows," and "The Winter Palace." The similarity of these three poems to "Money" suggests a pattern in all these texts where the personae of the poems answer the call of desire by bringing it to life in language and then attempt to transcend it by subverting language itself.

The volume finishes with "Resistance and Affinity: Philip Larkin and T. S. Eliot" by James Booth. Traditionally, Larkin and Eliot have occupied opposite extremes of the poetic spectrum: we have, on the one hand, Eliot, the Modernist poet and traditional Puritan and, on the other hand, Larkin, the Movement poet and modern secular. Booth brilliantly argues that beneath Larkin's resistance to Eliot lies a profound affinity in the areas of literary technique and spiritual transcendence. As regards the first, both Eliot and Larkin adopt ironic, self-mocking personae which undermine their otherwise provocatively aggressive egotism. And as regards the second, both, at their most intense moments, long for self-abnegation. Their similar negative epiphanies of dazzling light leave the reader

with an uncertain meaning and a feeling close to the mystical. At this point the two poets' ideological and political differences seem irrelevant.

Perhaps the most appropriate decision of the editors of this volume has been that of establishing a guiding concept, resistance in Philip Larkin's writing, which links the essays coherently and, at the same time provides a variety of different approaches. Many of the essays included in the volume are highly original and open new lines of thought, dealing with areas previously considered as unrelated to Larkin and allowing for a much needed reassessment of his work in the light of new critical perspectives.

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