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Original Citation

Underwood, James (2016) 'A Kind of Homosexual Relation, Disguised': Larkin's Letters to Monica Jones. English, 65 (248). pp. 38-57. ISSN 0013-8215

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‘A KIND OF HOMOSEXUAL RELATION, DISGUISED’: LARKIN’S LETTERS TO MONICA JONES

James Underwood

Abstract

This essay reads Philip Larkin’s letters to his lifelong companion, Monica Jones, in order to present an alternative to the ‘easy misogynist’ and ‘crusty’ Tory caricatured and condemned by critics for more than two decades. Exploring Larkin’s textual construction of selfhood in these letters, the essay looks at the apolitical nature of the correspondence, its subtly-gendered experience of the everyday, and its surprisingly subversive view of sex and sexuality. Anti-essentialist in his approach to gender, Larkin projects a feminine, almost lesbian sensibility. However, by adopting a text-centred approach to the correspondence, this essay also highlights the way in which Larkin’s constructed persona obscures and conceals – against the grain of the critical response so far, which has privileged the letters as exceptional in their vulnerability and revealing intimacy.

Introduction

The first time Monica Jones clapped eyes on Philip Larkin – she was a lecturer in English at University College, Leicester, he had just taken up a post there as sub-librarian – she whispered to a colleague that ‘He looks like a snorer’.¹ It was, as Andrew Motion points out,

¹ Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer’s Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994) p. 165.

‘an inauspicious start to the most important relationship of his life’.² That was in 1947, and the pair soon became friends, and then lovers, striking up a correspondence that stretched into the early 1980s. Approximately 2,000 letters, cards, postcards, and telegraphs survive; in 2010, a 450 page selection was published by Faber and Faber, edited by Anthony Thwaite, one of Larkin’s literary executors.³ It is my contention that these letters have yet to be adequately digested by readers and scholars of Larkin’s work, and I want to use this essay to make the case for an alternative Larkin, present in this correspondence, but so far neglected.

A Note on the Sources

For this essay, I have explored the entire extant correspondence (copies of which Thwaite very thoughtfully deposited in the University of Hull archives), rather than Thwaite’s Faber selection. This was partly to guarantee the longer perspectives which come with poring through an entire archive, rather than an abbreviated edition. But distortion may take other forms too. Thwaite generally meets the needs of a *commercial* selection (taken from a huge correspondence); but those needs, I would suggest, tend to focus on the more consequential aspects of a writer’s correspondence: what did he write about his own works? And his literary contemporaries? Or about politics, and the momentous events of his lifetime? This approach generally fails to properly convey the experience of the everyday which pervades Larkin’s correspondence. The perspective afforded by archival research, then, was deeper as well as longer. As such, readers of *Letters to Monica* will recognise *some* of the material cited here, whilst some is being published and/or discussed for the first time.

² *Ibid.*, p. 165.

³ Philip Larkin, *Letters to Monica*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 2011 [first pub. 2010]). Thwaite’s introduction outlines the extent of the correspondence, and explains the practical reasons for its thinning out from 1972.

It should be said that other readers have been more critical of Thwaite's editing. Following the 1992 publication of Larkin's *Selected Letters*, Tom Paulin wrote to the *Times Literary Supplement* to attack Thwaite's many editorial omissions, scathingly re-naming the volume "The Selected Letters of Philip Larkin as Doctored by Anthony Thwaite"⁴. Most troubling for Paulin was the frequent practice of cutting short moments of 'race hatred'. Instead, Paulin argued, the letters should have been 'properly edited, with a full scholarly apparatus of footnotes and references and an introduction which sought to place, analyse and understand – socially and psychologically – Larkin's racism, misogyny and quasi-fascism'. Nonetheless, Thwaite replicated his strategy of omissions and light footnoting for *Letters to Monica*, insisting that he had, 'included something of everything, but in some cases I have chosen to give only a few examples of repeated themes and topics'.⁵ But it may be in the repetition that the Larkin of this correspondence appears with a greater clarity; his concerns, as I argue here, are not political, and often not even literary. Working with the full correspondence has provided important and manifold benefits.

A Note on the Methodology

As the historian Rebecca Earle points out, 'Personal letters [...] have often been read as windows into the soul of the author. The ancient trope that views the letter as merely a conversation in writing lent particular force to this idea, whereby the letter becomes as unmediated as a casual conversation'.⁶ But as Amanda Gilroy and W. M. Verhoeven have argued, this trope involves 'acts of erasure', ignoring both 'the dialogic construction of

⁴ Tom Paulin, letter, *Times Literary Supplement*, 6 November 1992, p. 15.

⁵ Thwaite (ed.), *Letters to Monica*, p. xiv.

⁶ Rebecca Earle, ed. and introd., *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-Writers, 1600-1945* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999) pp. 4-5.

identity', and the independent 'textuality' of letters.⁷ Nonetheless, this methodology – the letter as a repository of historical and biographical data – has become a scholarly convention, and the basis for many a work of historical or literary study. Larkin scholarship has been no different. When the *Selected Letters* appeared, seven years after Larkin's death, a number of critics saw the tome as finally unveiling that hitherto secretive Hermit of Hull – and promptly excoriated him.⁸ In his deprecatory missive to the *TLS*, Paulin described the volume as 'a distressing and in many ways revolting compilation which imperfectly reveals and conceals the sewer under the national monument Larkin became',⁹ whilst Lisa Jardine labelled Larkin as 'a casual, habitual racist, and an easy misogynist' – before boasting that 'Actually, we don't tend to teach Larkin much now in my Department of English'.¹⁰

When *Letters to Monica* was published in 2010, the response was not the same in tone, but the approach was. William Boyd found 'a compelling *authenticity* and almost *vulnerability*'; David Sexton called them '*the most intimate* letters of a major poet'; whilst John Carey was delighted with how they '*reveal* the life and personality *more intimately* than ever before' (all italicisations are my own). The chief problem with this letters-as-soul-portals philosophy is its naivety about the way in which epistolary identities are textually constructed. These critics seem to believe that the singular essence of 'Larkin-ness' can be inked from left to right across the page, and stuffed into a red post-box. Instead – like novels and poems – the identity of a letter's narrator is constructed and performed by textual means. This does not make the identity false, like a mask, but rather *constitutive* of a person (no matter how many

⁷ Amanda Gilroy and W. M. Verhoeven, 'Introduction', *Correspondences*, special issue of *Prose Studies*, 19.2 (August 1996): pp. 121-6.

⁸ Larkin, *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin, 1940-1985*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 1992).

⁹ Paulin, letter, p. 15.

¹⁰ Lisa Jardine, 'Saxon Violence', *Observer*, section 2, 8 December 1992, p. 4.

identities they construct); in this sense, we can still learn from the letters, but should avoid the naïve reading practice that sees a person's 'true' or 'real' essence directly splattered onto their notepaper.

In this essay, then, I apply a text-centred (rather than author-centred) approach to Larkin's lifelong correspondence with Monica Jones. An author-centred approach privileges the biographical value of a correspondence. The text-centred approach primarily rejects biographicalism, instead recognising the identity of a letter-writer as constituted by the act of writing itself. In doing so, more attention is paid to the *literary* qualities of a correspondence, including the ways in which citation and intertextuality – so subtle yet extensive in Larkin's correspondences – affect the identity projected and our interpretation of it. Thwaite's sparse footnoting has, unfortunately, allowed the high level of citationality in Larkin's letters to go under the radar. James T. Boulton, editor of D. H. Lawrence's letters, has described how 'an editor can easily falsify the Lawrence identity' if s/he is not sensitive to 'the network of literary references and allusions which supply the essential tone and character of the passage'.¹¹ He argues that alertness to this network allows Lawrence's 'underestimated' humour and learning to emerge. James Booth has remarked that Larkin's reading 'was as wide and deep as Eliot's'; perhaps, then, Larkin's letters need Boultonising.¹²

Peter Childs points out that 'while letters are often to biographers what novels and poems are to critics, they have idiosyncratic textual effects that also should be attended to'.¹³ Sensitivity to the textual idiosyncrasies of Larkin's letters is needed if hot-headed accusations, such as Paulin's of 'quasi-fascism', are to be avoided. Paulin himself has written

¹¹ James T. Boulton, 'Editing D. H. Lawrence's Letters: The Editor's Creative Role', *Prose Studies*, 19.2 (August 1996), pp. 211-20.

¹² James Booth, *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014) p. 33.

¹³ Peter Childs, "'One may as well begin with Helen's letters...': Corresponding but not Connecting in the Writings of E. M. Forster", *Prose Studies*, 19.2 (August 1996): pp. 200-10.

a superb essay on Elizabeth Bishop's letters, asking whether there exists 'a poetics of the familiar letter? Or do we simply enjoy a writer's published letters and then treat them as sources for literary works?'¹⁴ His belief – that letters are written with an 'in-the-moment' authenticity – is most enlightening when it comes to his subject (Bishop), but one size does not fit all. The relevance of his essay lies in its refusal to read a literary correspondence as either biographical plunder or as a series of early but inferior versions of soon-to-be-great poems, and instead to treat them as textual artefacts requiring a poetics of their own. All the stranger, then, that Paulin failed to adopt such a sophisticated approach when it came to Larkin's letters; particularly as, later in the essay, he briefly and vaguely mentions 'other, colder views of Bishop', concluding that moral judgement is, 'in my view, a most improper exercise where artists are concerned'.¹⁵ If the 'performative element' of the epistolary act 'scarcely needs emphasizing', as he says, why did this thought slip his mind as he penned his letter to the *TLS* in 1992?¹⁶ Despite this, Paulin's approach to Bishop's letters, which respects their textuality and individuality, is a useful one, and might be asset-stripped by Larkin scholars. The staunch rejection of biographicalism in Larkin's poetry has already begun: 'underneath the naturalness and orality attributed to Larkin's verse is a textuality that dare not speak its name', John Osborne has written.¹⁷ In his two studies of the poet, Osborne's text-centred methodology has allowed a drastically different Larkin to emerge, one he confidently

¹⁴ Tom Paulin, 'Writing to the Moment: Elizabeth Bishop', in *Writing to the Moment: Selected Critical Essays, 1980-1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996) p. 216.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

¹⁷ John Osborne, *Radical Larkin: Seven Types of Technical Mastery* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) p. 1.

labels as 'radical'.¹⁸ Larkin's *epistolary* textuality, which so far has not dared to speak its name, must now be dragged from the closet.

Rather than read these letters as the revealingly intimate love letters of a private man, then, I have attended to their textual qualities and idiosyncrasies; in doing so, I find a version of Larkin much more subversive and surprising than that identified by critics since the publication of the *Selected Letters* more than two decades ago, and since the more recent publication of *Letters to Monica*. In particular, the presence of a progressive gender and sexual politics is yet to be noted by scholars working in and on the margins of Larkin studies. The correspondence therefore provides an alternative Larkin to the one publicly flogged by critics like Paulin and Jardine.

Acting a Different Part

Larkin's discussions of his own work often adopted the direct but unsophisticated hermeneutics being critiqued in this essay: 'The Whitsun Weddings', a journey prompted by a rail trip from Hull to London, 'was just the transcription of a very happy afternoon. [...] [It] was just there to be written down'.¹⁹ Although we now know this to be untrue, the majority of critics have taken Larkin at his word.²⁰ When it comes to reading other authors, however – particularly their (auto-)biographies and letters – Larkin's subtle, complex, and incisive thinking has been much underestimated. Reviewing a biography of Wilfred Owen, he makes

¹⁸ See Osborne's *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence: A Case of Wrongful Conviction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), and *Radical Larkin: Seven Types of Technical Mastery*.

¹⁹ Larkin, 'Philip Larkin', in *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation with John Haffenden* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981) p. 124.

²⁰ See Archie Burnett's commentary on the poem, in his edition of *The Complete Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012) pp. 409-11: 'In fact, L did not travel at Whitsun, and did not go all the way to London'. Furthermore, the completion of the poem seems to have evaded Larkin for three years.

the following statement: 'A writer's reputation is twofold: what we think of his work, and what we think of him. What's more, we expect the two halves to relate: if they don't, then one or the other of our opinions alters until they do'.²¹ In this, he seems to have been an unfortunate but prescient prophet of his own posthumous downfall; once the letters and biography were out of the bag, everyone's favourite pudgy-faced grandfather of modern English verse became associated with a poetics of bitterness and misery, hatred of women, foreigners, and the working-class. Larkin's review of a volume of Evelyn Waugh's letters, however, is remarkably instructive. In it, he describes how 'A writer's letters stand midway between literature and biography'.²² This is very clear: a writer's letters are not purely biographical, but nor are they purely literary; they stand at the midway point between those activities. What does this mean, though? It means that by reading a writer's letters, we will, of course, discover more about his or her life than we previously knew: the small details (the food they ate, the struggles to control their weight), as well as the bigger picture (their personality, temperament, their values and philosophies). But because the letters also stand in some relation to the literary, their biographical value is tempered. They will involve some degree of artifice; the writer will be engaged in the control, the manipulation, the stylisation, of what is written. This is, after all, a writer's *raison d'être*. Voice and narrative become complex, not straightforward. There is an interplay between what is revealed and what is concealed, what is said and what is unsaid – let alone what is invented, or constituted, by the act of writing itself. All the more unfortunate, then, that Larkin scholars have been unable to match Larkin's own nuanced approach to letters and biography. As the list of plaudits quoted

²¹ Larkin, 'The Real Wilfred', *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces, 1955-1982* (London: Faber and Faber: 1983) p. 228.

²² Larkin, 'Chatterbox without Charity', *Further Requirements: Interviews, Broadcasts, Statements and Book Reviews, 1952-1985*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 2002) p. 302.

earlier shows, critics have tended to describe *Letters to Monica* in excited and superlative terms, including Thwaite himself, who tells us that these letters 'chronicle [Larkin's] life and attitudes more than anything else we have'.²³ Indeed, twice in his short introduction to *Letters to Monica* does Thwaite use the phrase 'pour out' to characterise Larkin's writings; such language represents the expressivist view of selfhood which believes that 'Larkin' has been directly transcribed onto his letter-paper.²⁴ In short, this elevates the correspondence to a special position in Larkin studies, as a collective document which is more open and more transparent about what it was like to be That Poet. As a result, the letters are mined for their intimacy, and biographical nuggets.

Significantly, though, Larkin's thinking in his various review essays is in tune with some fairly explicit nods to the idea of *constructed* selfhoods in this very correspondence. From early on, Larkin constructs an image of Jones to which his own projection of identity will respond – thereby enacting the etymological basis of correspondence as a *co-responding*. In October 1950 he writes: 'Truly I shall always remember the fireplace & the cricket-bin & all the battery of things on the mantelpiece, Fifi & blue Neddy & the flowered lamp. Your life there has come into extremely sharp focus for me now: heating milk, singing in the kitchen, drying stockings, etc.'²⁵ A week later, he ponders: 'I wonder what you're doing tonight: sitting on the floor in your dressing gown, reading the Oxford Book of Victorian Verse?' (7 October 1950). In a study of epistolarity, Janet Gurkin Altman describes how 'In the absence of the real addressee, one creates an image of a present addressee, with whom one can

²³ Thwaite (ed.), *Letters to Monica*, p. vii. Larkin's huge correspondence with his parents is currently being catalogued in the University of Hull archives. As it begins to feed into Larkin scholarship, yet another distinct and important 'Larkin' will be added to the mix.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. vii-xi.

²⁵ 1 October 1950, University of Hull Archives, Hull History Centre, U DX/341. All letters to Monica Jones are taken from this deposit; individual letters are henceforth dated as in-text references.

converse comfortably. Imagination substitutes what reality cannot supply'.²⁶ Here, Jones's projected identity is that of sweet and gentle femininity, a femininity which takes pleasure in the domestic and the natural (heating milk, drying stockings, amidst floral patterns, etc.). In his speculative description of her sitting on the floor in her gown, reading from the *Oxford Book of Victorian Verse*, she could almost be the subject of a sentimental poem from that anthology. As this essay will show, this portrait which Larkin paints will be extremely influential, dialogically, in terms of his own sense of selfhood projected within the correspondence.

Larkin makes repeated comments about *personae*; he tells Jones in one letter 'You are nicer than you seem to want to let anyone know: I suppose I mean I prefer you to your persona (in the Jungian sense) but fortunately there is more Monica than that' (22 February 1951). His analysis asserts that there is much more to Jones than that which she carefully presents to the world. When such an analysis is turned on himself, the results are much the same. Apologising for keeping Jones apart from his friends, he confesses it was because 'I acted a different part with them from my behaviour with you, and since I couldn't do both at once it was well not to try' – the theatrical language pointing to the very idea of a performed selfhood which I am describing (3 May 1955).

Larkin is well aware of his own persona, both public and private. In one letter he complains that 'the thought of anything beyond next week [...] fills me with dread, a dull foreboding', before adding in brackets 'How tired you must be of words like dread, foreboding, misery, wretched, unhappy, howl, wish, think, feel – in my handwriting!' (5 June 1955). He is, it seems, under no illusions about the particular 'Larkin' verbally constituted by these letters. In another, he describes a trip to 'rather a pretty Victorian cemetery in Beverley.

²⁶ Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982) p. 139.

Quite a Larkin afternoon, in fact' (13 August 1972). Again, this demonstrates a self-consciousness about the Larkin persona which exists in the public domain – the Larkin who is obsessed with death, who wanders through Victorian graveyards, as vividly presented by the BBC *Monitor* programme, *Down Cemetery Road*, which had aired eight years prior to this letter, and which Osborne points out 'had extraordinary penetration, carrying into the homes of a sizeable population of British citizens'.²⁷ In short, what we have already is a series of passages – straight from the horse's mouth – which more or less directly confirms the concept of identity as constructed, performed, and plural. This is a useful starting point.

Apolitical Larkin

So what selfhood(s) does Larkin construct here? Which particular discourse(s) does he employ in his 30-odd years of correspondence with Jones? Given the posthumous uproar about Larkin's politics – at best seen as a 'crusty Toryism',²⁸ at worst as 'quasi-fascist' – one almost feels obliged to discuss this matter. If one *were* to attempt to establish Larkin the man's politics (which this essay does not), then his letters to Jones would provide an important qualification to those charges. There are, it must be said, plenty of obscenities and offences. In one of his countless rants about noisy neighbours, Larkin tells Jones 'The swine above me is not one swine but two, & they are not dirty Irish micks but a filthy gum-chewing Yankee from Syracuse & some black bum from the West Indies' (7 October 1950). In 1961, he sends her a postcard of Hull's Dock Office and Queen's Gardens, doodled with two bodies hanging from a lamppost, which are annotated 'Castle' and 'BJ' (i.e. Labour MP Barbara Castle, and Hull's Welsh Vice-Chancellor, Brynmor Jones) (15 June 1961). Whatever the

²⁷ Osborne, *Radical Larkin*, p. 102.

²⁸ Ian Mowat, 'Preface', *The Labour Archive at The University of Hull*, Philip Larkin Memorial Series, ed. John Saville (Hull: Brynmor Jones Library, 1989) p. i.

ethics of products of Larkin's wicked imagination such as these, it must *also* be said that there are other political views expressed, which never seem to enter the radar of his denouncers. Telling Jones about the Queen's planned visit to Belfast in 1951, he says he should like to go, 'if only to see Belfast's 13,000 special constables wriggling in their illfitting uniforms – the hated "B specials", Orangemen to a man, a force in existence solely for the suppression of Catholic nationalism. However I'm no nationalist myself for the matter of that' (27 May 1951). This is a strange thing to see penned by (a) a card-carrying Little Englander, if you believe the account of Jardine, and (b) a card-carrying Orangeman, if you believe the account of Paulin.²⁹ Later that year (and it is worth noting that this was the year of the Festival of Britain, and part of a wider period of British decolonisation), Larkin is criticising Rudyard Kipling for his 'predilection for expressing public themes, common emotions in the sense of conventional ones; I am at odds with him in his role of "singer of the tribe", Laureate of the Empire' (12 November 1951). Again, to read the version of Larkin presented by Paulin, one would expect him to be Kipling's pasty post-imperial nephew.

Finally, there are numerous letters in which Larkin explains his total lack of interest in, and knowledge of, politics: 'the idea of my brooding & fretting over your political opinions is enough to make a Staffordshire cat laugh. You know I don't care at all for politics, intelligently' (5 August 1953). He even goes on to relate how he grew up reading and admiring 'either non-political or left-wing' writers, and 'couldn't find any right-wing writer worthy of respect', although he does then call the former 'awful fools or somewhat fakey, so I don't know if my prejudice for the left takes its origins there or not' – surely a sign that

²⁹ See Paulin, 'She Did Not Change: Philip Larkin', in *Minotaur: Poetry and the Nation State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992) p. 234: '[Larkin] has more in common with Spenser than might appear. Both are English Protestant royalists whose nationalism was intensified by their experience of Ireland'.

Larkin is no more a poster boy of the Right than he is the Left. 'But if you annoy me by speaking your mind in the other interest', he concludes, 'it's not because I feel sacred things are being mocked but because I can't reply, not (as usual) knowing enough'. It seems that Larkin was politically at odds with Jones, not on the question of where his politics lay, but on the question of *whether he really cared*.

'Four Rolls of Pink Toilet Paper': The Everyday

Of course, there are two kinds of politics: the politics that is 'done' in Westminster and the pages of the *New Statesman*, and the deeper, more fundamental politics of identity. To assert Larkin's total lack of interest in organised politics is not to classify him as a pure aesthete. This essay seeks to show that Larkin was both concerned with, and radical in his approach to, questions of identity politics. But, if we are thinking about the particular self constructed by Larkin in this correspondence, then attention must be paid to what is arguably the biggest subject of these letters: the ordinary, the demotic, the everyday. I have already remarked that, for sensible commercial reasons, the published selections of Larkin's letters tend to privilege the extra-ordinary aspects: comments on other public figures, discussions of poems in progress and their genesis, and so on. Of *Letters to Monica*, Thwaite actually writes 'What is particularly fascinating is the sharing with Jones of progress (or otherwise) on particular poems'.³⁰ Having, like Thwaite, pored through the entire extant correspondence, I have found much less evidence of this occurring than I had anticipated: only a handful of the surviving 2,000 items clearly enter into dialogue about his works-in-progress. A particularly interesting example of this follows the death of his father in 1948, when Larkin writes the following to Jones:

³⁰ Thwaite (ed.), *Letters to Monica*, p. x.

My holiday was rather as I expected – my poor father grew steadily worse & died on Good Friday. Since then mother & I have been rather hopelessly looking at the stock in the house – this morning I shifted 100lbs of jam – 1945, 1946, & 1947 years – and about 25 Kilmer jars of bottled fruit, seventeen dozen boxes of matches, a shoebox of chocolate – all this from one small cupboard. (4 April 1948)

Readers may recognise this as the genesis of the poem 'An April Sunday brings the snow'. Interestingly, Thwaite's 1988 edition of the *Collected Poems* gives that poem's composition date as 4 April 1948 – the same as the letter. Yet Larkin gives no indication that the experience is to be worked into art, let alone share a version of the poem. Instead, he simply and rather touchingly tells Jones 'I don't know what will happen to it all – I don't like sweet things, you remember'.

In fact, Larkin is *far* more likely to write about the prose than he is about the passion. From start to finish, these letters ooze with moaning, misery, and self-reproach, often regarding what to do with his ageing and ailing mother: 'I feel a bit sad today, really because my mother has returned home & I know she's alone [...] Well, if you feel like that about it, why not do something to help her? Why don't you? Why don't you? Why don't you?' (14 September 1952). But this is by no means the only source of unhappiness, Larkin possessing a litany of regular complaints: colds, bad food, bad beer, colleagues, Jones's 9 o'clocks ('it seems hard that you should have two') (12 February 1963). Sometimes no reason is needed: 'Feel dull & peevish today though the weather is fine' (15 March 1959). 'Send me as many wails as you like, if it helps, though I hate hearing of things hurting you', he writes on 12 July 1951. I concur entirely with Thwaite when he says 'They fed each other's misery'.³¹

³¹ Thwaite (ed.), *Letters to Monica*, p. viii.

LARKIN'S LETTERS TO MONICA JONES

More generally, the everyday pervades this correspondence, and, depending on the reader's disposition, is either a source of delight, or a cure for insomnia:

7.15pm. I have just darned 2 pairs of socks & am sitting at my window again. (7 October 1950)

In a fit of irresponsibility I have bought 2 yards of white flannel & intend making 2 long warm scarves of it, suitably dyed. (24 January 1951)

Tonight I seize half an hour after darning 7 prs of socks. (17 January 1952)

I have four rolls of pink toilet paper on my low table, more or less at my elbow, but their only significance is that I've been too lazy to put them away. Pink is a new departure for me [...]. (26 November 1959)

Time and time again, he even inserts shopping lists:

Then went out shopping with Graham. I bought:

1/2lb mousetrap cheese

1/4lb blue cheese

1 gollywog loaf

1 sandwich tin, to keep cheese in

2lbs of oranges ("balanced diet") (11 November 1950)

So incredibly detailed is the content, that the social historian David Kynaston often cites from Larkin's letters in his attempts to re-construct the texture of everyday life in post-war Britain.³² Indeed, the letters can be *painstakingly* detailed: 'I never sit in the armchair, because my feet slip on the lino' (7 November 1950). This eye for detail is something Larkin would deploy with immense skill in his literary writings.

The above examples demonstrate well how much of the Larkin persona of this correspondence was invested in a kind of 'old maid', or 'spinster', cultural type. One wonders how many men in this period were darning socks, buying flannel and pink toilet paper, let alone writing to their lovers about it. Larkin's own construction of Jones as a kind of Neo-Victorian 'old dear', discussed earlier, seems to have had a powerful influence on his imagination, and it is a similar persona which is reciprocated in the projection of his own identity. It is interesting to note that the denunciations of Larkin, post-*Selected Letters*, often rounded upon the poet's apparent masculinity (such as Jardine's 'easy misogynist' charge). That edition – nearly 800 pages in total – contained just thirteen extracts from Larkin's letters to Jones.³³ This did not prevent some sweeping generalisations about Larkin's character, his attitude to women, and (in the case of Jardine's Department of English) the marginalisation of Larkin in the curriculum. Since the publication of *Letters to Monica*, with approximately 450 pages of correspondence in print, no retractions or qualifications have been made, despite the overt femininity, in total sympathy with Jones's own, projected by Larkin in these letters – as well as the radical sexual politics, to which I shall now turn.

³² See, for example, Kynaston's *Modernity Britain: Opening the Box, 1957-1959* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

³³ This is not a criticism of Thwaite's edition; the vast majority were simply unavailable at the time.

'This Sounds Like Wolfenden': Gender, Sex, and Sexuality

Larkin's letters to Jones fit awkwardly into the tradition of love letters. This is not because Larkin was somehow incapable of expressing love – we have poems which display a beautiful adeptness – but because there are other things going on here. That is not to say the letters are totally devoid of conventional themes and language; there are various moments when Larkin tries out the discourse of a lover ('Sometimes there clings about your letters a faint redolence of perfume'), and some passages are tender and touching (such as when he praises 'the tiny creases your pink shoes make by squeezing your toes together') (14 October 1950; 22 April 1956). But rarely do his dispatches have the same 'sexiness' as those to, say, Patsy Strang, with whom Larkin had an affair in the 1950s. When Strang fell pregnant by Larkin, he informed her that he was feeling 'sorry & alarmed & guilty', but also found it all 'rather thrilling'.³⁴ That was in July 1952; in October of that year, Jones wrote to express her fear that she had fallen pregnant. Larkin's reply first discussed his lack of writing; then recent social engagements, library work, a joke about sociologists, a film he had seen; only then, finally, does he reach the issue of Jones's potential pregnancy:

Well, anyway, I'm glad you wrote – worries are always better shared, especially such formidable ones, but really I must say I think the chances are extremely slender & remote of there being anything in the air. To my certain knowledge I was never within a mile of endangering you, and it's only a disinclination to tempt fate & the fact that I don't know much about such things except generally that prevents me from saying flatly that it's out of the question – you do understand that I personally think it is. I'm not surprised you feel sick, with all the worry & gins & salts. Surely it's not unknown

³⁴ Quoted by George H. Gilpin, 'Patricia Avis and Philip Larkin', in *New Larkins for Old: Critical Essays*, ed. James Booth (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000) p. 70.

to miss a time? especially if you are worrying about missing a time? (23 October 1953)

The contrast in how Larkin responded to Strang and Jones is clear to see in this episode. In fairness to Larkin, it appears from reading between the lines that he and Jones had not engaged in the intercourse necessary to conceive. Nonetheless, Larkin's tone here modulates between sexually-uninformed male (a faux-naïf pose) and concerned mother, containing none of the sinful *frisson* of his letters to Strang. As Larkin himself put it in another missive to Jones, 'I don't often write a letter you can't leave lying about' (22 April 1956).

When he does, the sock-darning, pink-toilet-paper-persona cannot help but deflate his own efforts:

I wish you were here. I should be all over you. I had better disappear into bed. I've started leaving off my pajama top, which means I burn my chest when smoking my nightly cigarette. (18 October 1954)

You and your bottom – you never believe me when I say that while there certainly is a point of no return in that quarter, you haven't anything like reached it. I lay in bed one morning last week remembering one after-breakfast time when you were looking out of my kitchen window, and let me tuck your skirt up round your waist to be admired. You were wearing the black nylon panties with the small hole in! In consequence of this memory I was guilty of what I believe the Confirmation Books called 'impure thoughts', and, worse, late for work. (22 October 1954)

Any excitement Jones might feel from Larkin's new lifestyle choice – sleeping topless – is instantly dashed by the image of him dropping cigarette ash onto his chest; whilst his paean to her bottom collapses into a bathetic self-parody of the late-for-work onanist. In fact, his writing about sex hardly ever manages to get off the ground at all:

I was very glad to know what you feel about (this sounds like Wolfenden) love-making, or relieved, I sh^d really say, since often I'm quite uncertain whether you are feeling anything or not, and it seems so unfair if you aren't. It isn't that you seem uninterested (or disinterested), but that you rarely seem to like anything more than anything else. I think, if you analysed it stroke by stroke, my – or anyone's – way of making love is directed as much towards pleasing you as displeasing myself, and probably it grows a little by learning what you like – so if you don't give any definite signs in this direction, it makes it a little – a little what? Less straightforward? Less confident? (8 December 1956)

I feel a little irritated that this particular sort of sexual intercourse should be attracting attention in the weeklies, for while I can't claim any personal stake in it exactly, and while it seems much too difficult technically, all things being equal it would please me to share it with you, as fit expression of a feeling you're well aware of, and I regret finding myself in the van of intellectual progress along with the boys. I can't imagine there is much in it for you, though. I imagined it was the custom in Catholic-ridden countries where it was the only way girls could keep their fiancés happy & the priests at the same time. I never supposed that what they wanted was this piercing, rather awful sensuality. Ogh ogh. Hagh. (23 January 1962)

One could not put it better than Larkin himself – all this ‘sounds like Wolfenden’ (author of the 1957 Wolfenden report on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution) – that is, dry and scholarly rather than teasingly erotic (who really wants to analyse it ‘stroke by stroke’)? The latter quote in particular, presumably referencing the media interest in anal sex following the 1961 publication of an unexpurgated *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, is almost comically academic, describing the act as ‘difficult technically’ and analysing it within a socio-cultural context! Larkin’s language at the end (‘piercing, rather awful sensuality’) does echo Lawrence’s prose, but overall this does not sound like the product of a decade in which, culturally speaking, sexual intercourse began. What these letters do convey is a concern for *women’s* sexuality, which Larkin had already shown in the 1943 Brunette Coleman works, the novel *A Girl in Winter*, and to which he would later return in poems like ‘High Windows’, with its critique of male-centred sexuality implied by the lines ‘he’s fucking her and she’s / Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm’.³⁵ In short, the identity constructed by Larkin in this correspondence is utterly un-masculine. From his absorption in the domestic to his total lack of sexual prowess, he violates just about every code of conduct in the Blokes’ Handbook. Osborne has argued that ‘the period 1940-1960 witnessed the deepest entrenchment of patriarchal values since the Victorian era’; Larkin, however, was ‘thoroughly at odds with the mid-century libidinal economy’.³⁶ Beginning in the late 1940s, Larkin’s correspondence with Jones spans the rest of his life; the ‘deconstructive’ approach to gender which Osborne has comprehensively explored in the poetry has yet to be identified as an extensive aspect of these letters.

Fascinatingly, Larkin supplies his own analysis of this situation, in a 1957 letter which is yet to be properly digested by Larkin scholarship. Here, Larkin sums up his shared affinities

³⁵ Larkin, ‘High Windows’, *The Complete Poems*, p. 80.

³⁶ Osborne, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*, pp. 159-63.

with Jones: 'we are both shy, withdrawn, anti-social, anti-sex (you hate "woman-ish" behaviour & I hate "mannish" behaviour)' (11 January 1957). Under the biographical, letter-citing model employed by most critics, such an anti-essentialist statement ought to refute the view of Larkin as an 'easy' misogynist. A year later, Larkin wrote this:

I can quite honestly say I don't think nearly so much of qualities lacking in you as qualities lacking in me. It seems more to me that what we have is a kind of homosexual relation, disguised: it w^dn't surprise me at all if someone else said so, only there's no one in a position to do so, except you. Don't you think yourself there's something fishy about it? [...] I mean I like you and think you are unique & enjoy being with you, but not in the way commonly associated with girls – I mean, I seem entirely lacking in that desire to impose oneself that is such a feature of masculine behaviour: by marriage, by 'sexual intercourse'. Bothering people. Inflicting oneself on people. I'm devoid of all that, & it leaves a sort of central motiveless vacuum. (29 January 1958)

A homosexual relation, disguised? This reaffirms the picture of Larkin which I have been building from this correspondence, as more of a spinsterish old maid than a virile man, one whose feminine sensibilities put him in sympathy with the remarkably similar Jones – more of a woman-to-woman dialogue than a heterosexual encounter. Here, Larkin seems to verbally emasculate himself, confessing to a total lack of desire to inhabit the normative masculine role of (as he sees it) imposing and inflicting, by sex and/or marriage. His characterisation of this condition as one of 'lack' effectively renders him a eunuch – defined by what he does not possess. The alternative identity he constructs is that of a loving but radically *de-sexualised* partner, who might as well be another woman. In his recent biography

of Larkin, Booth picks out this letter for discussion, describing the remark as bizarre, and suggesting that, 'On another interpretation, these subtle wrangles show that they were perfectly matched. Both had sex in the head, and they were involved in an absorbing erotic *agon* which neither would have wished to end'.³⁷ But in this letter and countless others, Larkin is keenly aware that theirs is not a conventional heterosexual relationship, and that he is not a paragon of masculinity, no more of a shag-happy authority figure than she was. And it was by writing about pink toilet paper, bunnies, and sexual failure, that Larkin constituted this identity. In the catalogue of possible 'Larkins', the performance of a particular version of lesbian femininity is a highly significant one under-explored within Larkin studies.

There have been glimpses. The publication, in 2002, of Larkin's early fictions, including the work produced under the Brunette Coleman lesbian-heteronym, brought to light his interest in female identity and sexuality. In his introduction to the edition, Booth wrote that 'publication [...] here makes it possible for readers to decide for themselves how [the works] should be classified'.³⁸ Misleadingly, readers have focused on the texts' pornographic dimension, sometimes constructing a psycho-biographical profile of Philip the Pervert. But Terry Castle's excellent essay, 'The Lesbianism of Philip Larkin', has challenged the male-centric nature of such criticism. 'For a while', she writes, 'I've kept a list in my head of famous people whose sexual proclivities I myself find *inexpressible* – so odd and incoherent I can't begin to plumb their inner lives', going on to list Greta Garbo, Marlon Brando, Michael Jackson. 'And hard it is', she continues, 'to approach the work of Philip Larkin [...] without acknowledging *his* particular brand of sexual eccentricity', namely his interest in lesbianism.

³⁷ Booth, *Life, Art and Love*, pp. 231-32.

³⁸ Booth (ed. and introd.), *Trouble at Willow Gables and Other Fictions* by Philip Larkin (London: Faber and Faber, 2002) p. vii.

Larkin, Castle argues, 'presents a formidable challenge to the erotic taxonomist'.³⁹ And, more recently, Booth has returned to the Coleman *oeuvre*, suggesting that 'It is possible to read feminist motives into Brunette's response', and that her work could even be seen as 'écriture féminine'.⁴⁰ This suggestion ought to be made less tentatively; for the alternative Larkin which Booth and Castle detect tallies with the one which – I am proposing – can be found in these letters. The 'homosexual relation' of this correspondence is an important challenge to simplistic charges of bigotry and misogyny, and needs to be amplified within Larkin studies. Before I conclude, however, I want to muddy the waters of the Jones correspondence.

'This Almost-Russian Verbiage': Revealing and Concealing

Why do I want to do this? Because the extracts I have discussed so far act as revelations about Larkin's character and his views on sex, sexuality, gender, and identity. This endorses the aforementioned plaudits which adorn the covers of *Letters to Monica*, all of which celebrate the open and intimate pouring-out of 'Larkin-ness'. Such commentaries ignore one major aspect of this correspondence, which is the constant process of concealing, retracting, complicating – at which Larkin becomes a consummate professional. In one sense, the many anxieties about communicating within this correspondence are nothing but manifestations of a problem endemic to all correspondence, and indeed all communication. Linda S. Kauffman has described epistolarity as a 'destabilizing' category in modern fiction, but this is only true because actual letters destabilise and problematise notions of identity and meaning. It is no coincidence that when Derrida sought to do just that, he did so by recourse to the epistolary

³⁹ Terry Castle, 'The Lesbianism of Philip Larkin', in *The Movement Reconsidered: Essays on Larkin, Amis, Gunn, Davie and Their Contemporaries*, ed. Zachary Leader (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) pp. 79-80.

⁴⁰ Booth, *Life, Art and Love*, pp. 71-2.

event.⁴¹ In *The Post Card*, he challenges Lacan's statement that a letter always arrives at its destination. For Derrida, the possibility that a letter might not arrive at its destination – it may be lost in the post, or sent to the wrong address – is a possibility inherent to its structure:

Not that the letter never arrives at its destination, but it belongs to the structure of the letter to be capable, always, of not arriving. And without this threat [...] the circuit of the letter would not even have begun. But with this threat, the circuit can always not finish. Here dissemination threatens the law of the signifier [...]. [It] broaches, breaches the unity of the signifier [...].⁴²

Mention of 'the signifier' shows that Derrida's chief concern is not with the post that ends up languishing in a provincial dead letter office; rather, the constant potential for epistolary failure becomes his metaphor for all forms of communication, which are dispatched into the world only to be altered by *différance*. Whilst *The Post Card* is, primarily, a critique of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, its message can be fruitfully applied to the letters Larkin sent to Jones, in which he is frequently aware of – and sometimes actively ensures – the instability of the signifier (that is, the failure of his utterances to be immaculately comprehended by the recipient). Reviewing *Letters to Monica* in *The Spectator*, Philip Hensher described the pair as 'two of a kind', and 'soulmates'; and yet, from early on in their correspondence, Larkin wrote anxiously about the difficulties of them really ever knowing

⁴¹ Linda S. Kauffman, *Special Delivery: Epistolary Modes in Modern Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) p. 263.

⁴² Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, transl. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) p. 444.

each other.⁴³ Furthermore, he seems to have done a lot to prevent it. In July 1950 he warns Jones that she would like him less if she ‘had more opportunity of learning my general behaviour-patterns’ – which sounds like a prose version of ‘If, My Darling’ – fearing she has ‘*constructed* an over-favourable image of me’ (my emphasis) (23 July 1950). In case this might reveal too much, Larkin then compares himself to various literary figures (and twice *by negation*), including two from *The Death of the Heart*, Elizabeth Bowen’s novel about the anxiety of relationships: ‘Not le divine Marquis, not Captain Hugh, but a good deal more like Mybug or Portia’s Eddie – or even Portia’s father – than’s compatible with your idea of the Good Man’. The ostensible purpose of this exercise might be to rid Jones of any potential deception, but does it really make things any clearer? In recent years, a minority of Larkin scholars has pointed to his extensive citational practice in verse.⁴⁴ I have found the letters to be heavily citational too, but with Jones, citation is deployed not so much as something which points toward and teases out alternative meanings, but as something which obscures meaning.

Later in 1950, Larkin is questioning the quality of the poems he is considering publishing privately; reading Thwaite’s introduction to *Letters to Monica*, one might expect Larkin to share some of the poems, ask Jones for advice, re-draft, and so on; instead, he lampoons them as ‘Thrice holy is my Garden now Since it is sown by Thee kind of stuff: O Man! thy purblind eyes are sightless yet! type of tack. On seeing Lucinda with her hair in curlers (“Say, pretty Nymph”): Parting: a sonnet sequence (“we did not say goodbye: shunting, the trains”)? (1 November 1950). As a parody of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century verse, this is highly amusing; of Larkin’s own work, it reveals almost nothing.

⁴³ Philip Hensher, ‘Two of a kind’, review of *Letters to Monica*, *The Spectator*, 23 October 2010, at <<http://www.spectator.co.uk/books/6391178/two-of-a-kind/>> [accessed 19 February 2016].

⁴⁴ Osborne broke the ice with *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence*. Since then, Burnett’s authoritative *Complete Poems* has unearthed a further vast array of citations. More will follow.

LARKIN'S LETTERS TO MONICA JONES

In his 1940s letters to his painter-friend, James Ballard Sutton, Larkin mediated their artistic identities, and their attitudes to art and life, through the towering figure of D. H. Lawrence. In that correspondence, then, Lawrence becomes a useful point of reference. The author crops up on many occasions in Larkin's letters to Jones, but in this new context he acts as a blurred and coded warning: 'You don't know what ways I think my D.H.L. will have given you fresh light on my mind. Do you?' (7 November 1950). In the same letter, he goes on:

There are plenty of things I could say about myself, and the more serious & more sincere I sounded the less likely they are to be true. The only thing I will say is that I don't think much of myself, & that I have absolutely no idea of life at all, no idea at all. How it happens, & how people stand living, ordinarily, & how anyone dare pull out the plum that brings the whole edifice toppling down on him...But this is turning into a psychological document. Basta! as DHL used to say at the end of his letters: for ages I thought it meant 'beast', but it turns out it's Italian for 'enough'.

Whether or not Jones was grateful for the Italian lesson, it is unlikely that she moved any closer to knowledge of Larkin's personality, despite his dangling of Lawrence before her as a potential aide to achieving such knowledge. He does this again and again:

About DHL – a suitable symbol for any mild discord between us: one half of my assumption was simple: if you knew anything of my character, you wouldn't have to do with me. The other half: my idea of yr idea of the Good Man was based on yr expressions of moral disapprobation over several years – a sort of negative image. So

I suppose is yr idea of my idea of a Good etc. [...] I think the porter has had a good deal to do with all this. (15 November 1950)

You mustn't think of me as a perpetual introspector. What I am really trying to do is warn you, as I did in my first summer letter to you, however silly it sounded. I know I am capable of emotional deceit, dishonesty and even cruelty [...]. I remember being very struck by you once saying DHL was – what was it? Cruel, insensitive, was it? It had never occurred to me before?

Another saying of yours that struck me was the one concerning my baldness. I bought a bottle of Silvikrin today. (30 May 1951)

In the first quote, Larkin grammatically complicates Jones's construction of him as a Good Man ('my idea of yr idea of', 'yr idea of my idea of') via an unspecified connection to Lawrence, before deploying everyone's favourite avoidance strategy of blaming the drink. In the second, Larkin tries and fails to recall something Jones once said of Lawrence, before lapsing into another self-parody, this time on the theme of encroaching baldness (which also acts as shorthand for his lack of virility and masculinity, discussed earlier). In a long letter of 3 June 1955 (twenty-four sides of writing), Larkin launches a rhapsodic declaration of his love for Jones: 'Oh my dear, how can you believe I love you if I don't marry you? That's what I wonder constantly. And yet I do love you, really'; in his next letter, written two days later, he scribbles a qualifying and retracting comment in the top left-hand corner of the first sheet: 'Long, yes, but not so hysterical' (this act is a common strategy in Larkin's more vivid correspondences) (5 June 1955). In 1964, he tells Jones 'I wish I were more open with you: we are now, but I'm rather like Sir John at the beginning of The Crooked Hinge, not knowing whether he is an impostor or not' (29 April 1964). A reference to John Dickson Carr's 1938

murder mystery novel, one notes that such novels typically move towards knowledge and resolution, whereas Larkin's comments here do the opposite: is he an impostor or not? Why can't he be more open? And in another letter, he suggests that the world of small and furry critters which he and Jones created and sustained throughout their correspondence (through nicknames like 'bun', doodles of rabbits and hedgehogs, the recurring character of Dr G. F. Pussy) is simply an excuse to avoid dealing with reality: 'I grow stiff and silent, & never move off the ground of rabbithood, which is all very well but which prevents discussion of the real situation, don't you think?' (27 April 1955). As is usually the case with Larkin, he puts it best himself when he describes 'this almost-Russian verbiage, probably nothing but funk' – a succinct summary of vast quantities of his letters to Jones.

What these examples show is that, in many ways, this was a fraught relationship, complicated and damaged, of course, by his infidelities, his being tied to his mother's apron strings, and the to-and-fro of his many implied and quickly retracted marriage proposals. From the earliest stages of the correspondence until the end, Larkin seems terrified of giving too much away, of revealing his hand, and the result is decades of obfuscating letters, of smoke and mirrors, and muddied waters. The idea that we now have intimate access to the poet's mind and soul ignores the hundreds of pages – now in print – of going nowhere fast.⁴⁵

The portrait I have painted here adds to an ever-swelling list of 'Larkins', but does not present itself as somehow revealing 'the true Larkin'. One could select any of Larkin's major correspondences, and find a different selfhood constituted therein: the caring, almost-lesbian spinster of this one is distinct from the courtly lover who wrote to Maeve Brennan, the

⁴⁵ Although the two ended up living together in Larkin's Hull home from 1983 until his death in 1985 – in what Thwaite calls 'something close to marriage' – this arrangement was arguably one of necessity (Jones's poor health). Though clearly caring and loving, Larkin wrote numerous letters in which he sought to evade the dreaded questions of marriage and cohabitation.

aspiring aesthete who wrote to James Sutton, or the dutiful son who wrote twice a week to his mother. In the various memoirs associated with Larkin, the emphasis on personal pronouns implies a potentially infinite fragmentation of his persona: it is the Philip Larkin *I knew* (Maeve Brennan), or Philip Larkin *and me* (Jean Hartley), which are offered, rather than definitive accounts of the man.⁴⁶ This fits with the Derridean model of identity, wherein the 'I' and 'you' of a correspondence are always-already fragmented and contingent. Indeed, the catalogue of 'Larkins' is a voluminous one, and this essay seeks only to add one more, albeit a significant one. This will be disappointing to those who read editions such as *Letters to Monica* in order to get closer to 'the real Philip Larkin'. Paying attention to what Larkin himself called 'funk' is not a criticism of his letter-writing, but rather a criticism of naïve reading practices which glide over interpretive difficulties in search of 'truth' and 'authenticity'. Larkin's letters to Jones are, in the end, important, beautiful, and fascinating documents, and there is still every reason for scholars and interested readers to appreciate them – but with a sharper critical eye.

⁴⁶ See Maeve Brennan, *The Philip Larkin I Knew* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002); and Jean Hartley, *Philip Larkin, The Marvell Press and Me* (London: Sumach Press, 1993).