

István Rácz

Philip Larkin's Poetics: Theory and Practice

The dissertation presents an impressive portrait of the poet's personality and a thoroughly systematic approach to what István Rácz defines as the poetics of Larkin's poetry. The dissertation is an excellent piece of scholarly work. For me, personally, it was a rare occasion to read a competent, thoroughly documented, well-informed and well-written paper like this. The way he discusses the problem of the poetics of Larkin's mature poetry is highly original and instructive. Consequently, I fully support the conferment of the degree of "Doctor of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences" on István Rácz.

Larkin's poetry is not widely known in Hungary, translations are few and hardly available, the almost solitary representative of his poetry in Hungarian translation is *Templomjárás (Church-going)* by András Fodor. The philological background is not responsible for the absence of Larkin's influence in Hungarian poetry and criticism, but, as a matter of fact, most Hungarian publications on Larkin are in English, and a number of them by the author of the dissertation. In Hungarian he published *A szép majdnem igaz. Philip Larkin költészete* (Debrecen, KLTE Kiadó, 1999) and an essay on Larkin in *A másik ország. Az angol költészet 1945 után* (Debrecen, KLTE Kiadó, 2006). (I mention in brackets that my early informative article on the Movement and the Mavericks published in *Jelenkor* 1960. Nr. 3, Vol. 3, pp. 44-54 with a tongue-in-cheek title, *Mozgolódók és bitang bikaborjak*, was not without flaws, e. g. as my verse quotations illustrate it, somehow I managed to create two Larkins instead of the then still existing one, perhaps due to a mysterious mix-up in my notes.)

The impressive portrait of Larkin, the poet, is however only a by-product of the dissertation which is focused on what István Rácz defines as the *poetics* of Larkin's poetry. Somewhat unusually the examination of the problem is not exclusively based on the close reading of the poems (with an emphasis on the mature work of the poet), the author of the dissertation makes reference to all eventual data, texts by Larkin's critics, biographers, his own statements, correspondence and confessions, his early poetry and the few novels he wrote at the beginning of his literary career. Texts by Larkin's literary models, Thomas Hardy, Wystan Hugh Auden, and in certain regards, Charles Dickens, are duly quoted to underline the author's assumptions.

István Rácz discusses studies on Larkin's poetry by practically all Larkin's critics and biographers with the recurrent comment that none of them dealt properly with what he defines as

the poetics of the poet's mature poetry. I followed this long series of apparently axiomatic self-justification with growing interest but not without misgivings. This long array of triumphant conclusions increased my censorious inclinations and obliged me to re-read those passages with special vigilance to trace how the author of the dissertation carried his point. Finally I found that his assertions were justified and his logic proved seamless. I have to confess that my misgivings rested, to some extent, on my homespun impression that Hungarian critics' interest lies rarely in the poetics of the works discussed, still less in their latent but theoretically presentable poetics. István Rácz demonstrates with valid testimony that apart from some partial achievements in this regard, none of Larkin's earlier critics succeeded to provide a comprehensive estimation of the theoretical background of the poet's mature poetical works.

Though in this presentation Larkin may appear as an immoderately conscious thinker, or as a would-be theorist of his own poetry, István Rácz concedes that in important aspects of the theoretical background, or the "latent poetics" of his verse, the poet's interpretations prove reliable only to the extent his actual poetic practice supports them. The most compelling passages of the dissertation substantiate its author's theory line by line, phrase by phrase, not to speak of essential structural details or basic logical and metaphoric structures, in a large number of individual poems. As I see it, all Larkin's considerable poems are subject to thorough critical treatment, with due attention to earlier critical interpretations, and never indulging in empty rhetoric.

As to the theoretical purpose of the dissertation, István Rácz puts to use Larkin's explicit statements about the intentions his poems imply, or, rather, his general view on the use of poetry. A common trait of Larkin's statements is that the function of a poem is the transference of experience from the poet to the reader. It is, of course, not easy to define the denotation of the word „experience”. István Rácz keeps in view the polarity of the Hungarian denotations of the English word (*tapasztalás/tapasztalat* v. *élmény*) (p. 64 ff.). He is conscious of the epistemological problems that rise with the use of the term „transference”, first and foremost the problem how an actual subjective experience is transferred to the verbal medium of the poem. Here is how he presents the problem:

„To find the space for it in a non-linguistic universe, he [Larkin] coins the surprising phrase: »the eternity of imagination«. If this is what all readers share with the poet, the term is probably a version of Jung's collective unconscious, even though Larkin rejects the idea of treating myths as the manifestations of what all human beings share.” (36)

The reference to Jung adds a peculiar slant to Larkin's theoretically innocent term. The „eternity of imagination” is an indefinable universe, the continuous realm of imagination, i. e. of mental facts and types of a contiguity whose specific terrains and their composite populations are actualised by truly artistic verbal, musical, pictorial etc. („artistic”) creations. Perhaps an adequate term to equal Larkin's phrase is „the eternity of perfect art”. When a theorist tries to identify the statutes of the contiguity and compass of such creations, her or his only option will be the testimony of individual works of art. Their „experience” (a kind of mental union with what they are and what they transfer) depends on the individual's receptivity, her or his sensual intelligence or intellectual sensibility or, simply, her or his intuition. This capacity involves the contribution of many more mental or intellectual faculties, also those based on scholarly studies and observations.

What I emphasize is that when Larkin refers to “the eternity of imagination”, he does not keep in mind any specific scholarly theory of imagination, and the term „eternity” implies the workings of „true poetry” or „true art” which has the power to “perpetuate” or “immortalize” the creations of poetic imagination. I take for granted that our scholarship is endowed with capacities to hypothesize a kind of virtual poetic eternity and find criteria which coincide with the factual details of the poetics of a poet's textual (verbal) achievement.

If „true art” coincides with beauty or some kind of „truth” to beauty, another problem arises, one which concerns Larkin's own interpretation of the twin terms of „truth” and „beauty”, and his interpretation of Keats' lines in *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. Prior to his present work István Rácz dealt with Larkin's views on the problem in two papers in English he read in Hull (2002) and at Temesvár (2007), and he discussed the problem in Hungarian in his book on Larkin: *A szép majdnem igaz. Philip Larkin költészete* (1999). I cannot but agree with his conclusion, the clarification of the obvious fact that in Keats's poem *artistic beauty* is the sole witness to the “eternity” of imagination.

When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
'Beauty is truth, truth beauty, -- that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.'

These last few words are a message the Grecian urn will transfer to forthcoming generations of mankind. What the fate of this message will be when there will be no mankind on the earth is of course an unanswered question. Will “eternity” last longer than human imagination? In the 1944 Everyman's Library edition of Keats's poems (which I own thanks to Graham Heathcote, one-time

colleague of mine in the Budapest Radio) there is a Note attached to the last line of the poem on p. 192: "In a letter to Bailey dated 22nd November 1817 Keats wrote: 'I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the Heart's affections, and the truth of Imagination. What the Imagination seizes as Beauty must be Truth--whether it existed before or not--for I have the same idea of all our passions as of Love; they are all, in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty.'"

Larkin is described by his critics (and also in his own statements) as one who broke with the poetics of the British modernist tradition. He is also referred to as a postmodernist poet. I think that our home-made concept of "postmodernism" is standardized along measures which are alien to the character of Larkin's poetry; first and foremost to the ultimately strict strophic formal qualities of his poetry, irrespective of its unorthodox strophic and rhyming patterns. His verse exhibits persistent mixtures or rather juxtapositions of unusual and stock poetic solutions, and though the symptoms of highly original extravagance put an other face on the matter, the dominant tone is that of apparently straightforward phrasing, simple attitudes, stories and lessons that imply unusual, profound and lasting philosophical insight. The translator's difficulties come from the fact that his language is characteristically different from what is usually accepted as literary language in Hungarian, and is unparalleled by our locally "postmodern" verbal conformities.

I take a simple instance of the lack of this kind of parallelism. I think we may agree that in the last few decades Hungarian poets have rarely dispensed with the use of Hungarian four-letter words. But can we imagine that it is simply the proper application of the inevitable four-letter words needed for an apt postmodern Hungarian rendering of such poems as *This Be The Verse, He Hears That His Beloved Has Become Engaged, Sunny Prestatyn*, or *Love Again*. Let me mention here that in Britain the situation of verbal usage is so different from that in Hungary, that the extremely shocking introductory lines of *This Be The Verse* have found their due place in the language of British jurisdiction. In April 2009 the poem was quoted by Lord Justice Wall, a British appeal court judge, referring to the emotional damage caused to a nine year old child by the divorce of the parents: "*These four lines seem to me to give a clear warning to parents who, post-separation, continue to fight the battles of the past, and show each other no respect.*" (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2009/apr/30/divorce-judge-philip-larkin>)

I am afraid that it is unthinkable that a verbatim translation of those lines is quotable in a Hungarian court.

Writing about the recent edition of *The Complete Poems* by Larkin Christopher Ricks wrote

in *The New York Book Review*: „I’ve read many fine essays about him but no book-length critical study.” (Christopher Ricks, Philip Larkin: The Desired Reading. (*The New York Book Review*, June 7, 2012.) (www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2012/jun/07/philip-la.) Well, here is a book-length critical study, written by István Rácz, with a comprehensive theoretical background. It provides the reader with a perfect answer to the problem raised by Ricks: the problem of the relation between what he defines as „the infrastructure” of Larkin's poems by which, as he points out, the „anecdote” reaches amazing poetical appeal—the poetic postulation of “insight” in István Rácz's terminology.

Unlike the author of the Dissertation, Ricks devotes attention to the language of the poems, even to typographic peculiarities. He praises Larkin’s skill in punctuation. In his opinion “Punctuation is great at **puncturing** heroics.”

And according to Rick's interpretation of Larkin so is **rhyming** as the following lines cited from “The Old Fools” attest:

*At death, you break up: the bits that were you
Start speeding away from each other for ever
With no one to see. It's only oblivion, true:
We had it before, but then it was going to end,
And was all the time merging with a unique endeavour
To bring to bloom the million-petalled flower
Of being here. Next time you can't pretend
There'll be anything else. —*

Here is what Ricks has to say about the rhymes of this passage:

“How effortlessly daunting is the merging of **for ever and end** in the immediate consummation that is **endeavour**, [**end+ever**] with the thought of death then kept alive (lest we forget) in *you can't pretend*.”

(Christopher Ricks, Philip Larkin: The Desired Reading. , June 7, 2012.) [The New York Book Review](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2012/jun/07/philip-larkin-desired-reading/) (<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2012/jun/07/philip-larkin-desired-reading/>)

I find it instructive how István Rácz's discovery of Larkin’s poetics succeeds without any immediate interest in the actual linguistic materialization of the poems. Perhaps this neglect is part and parcel of our local, seasonable „national” attitudes. It is in the air we breathe in that rhythm and

rhyme are alien from the tenor of postmodern poetry. A recent reference to this belief was made by Sándor Radnóti, deputy editor in chief of *Élet és Irodalom*: „...a remek rímek is visszaszorultak a light verse-be és a dalszövegbe, s ugyancsak föltűnést kerülve kell prózaian lejtteni annak a ma keletkező görög versmértékű sornak vagy strófának (...), amelyet magas költészetként elfogadunk.” (*Élet és Irodalom*, 2012. augusztus 24, p. 18.) In Britain a postmodern poet is celebrated for his „remarkable technique” of rhyme and rhythm, believed to be out of date in Hungary:

„...how Larkin’s poetry can be so affecting, I repeat that I have no clear answer except to say that his remarkable technique clearly has something to do with it. The concealed intricacy of his rhyme schemes and enjambments allows for a seemingly straightforward, conversational style; it sounds as if a man of unusual fluency is simply talking to you. For instance, the three stanzas of “Faith Healing” (“Slowly the women file to where he stands / Upright in rimless glasses, silver hair”) rhyme ABCABDABCD — often enough, that is, to knit the poem together, but at such spatial and temporal distance as to avoid any sing-song predictability and to afford pleasures both conscious (if you notice the pattern) and subliminal (if you don’t). And that’s an easy one. Sometimes the rhymes are consonantal (park/work, noises/nurses in “Toads Revisited”), sometimes they’re whole words (home/home, country/country, money/money in “Homage to a Government”), and sometimes I know they’re there but I can’t quite determine where (passim). Nor is this to speak of the variety of stanzaic and metrical variation, the enjambments, the half lines, and the metaphors ...” (Stephen Akey, *The Millions*, May 3, 2012) (<http://www.themillions.com/2012/05/the-poetry-of-mental-unhealth-philip-larkin.html>)

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Next I list a few flaws to be corrected in a forthcoming edition of the study:

Roman numerals are mixed up on pp. 123 and 130: „MCMXVI” instead of „MCMXIV” (1916 instead of 1914).

I find too many indirect quotations, and think that some of them are superfluous. Larkin’s words are quoted from a biography of the poet by Edward Motion (73). Auden’s words are cited from a biography of Auden (p. 62). Santanaya is quoted from a work by Goffman (p. 70).

On pp. 70-72 there is a minor tumult of quotations, aggravating the comprehension of an

otherwise important and interesting train of thought. What is more, there is a reference to Gordon Allport (p.70), with no page or work indicated; the name does not occur in the “Works Cited”. William Empson’s words appear as „qtd. in Bowman 173” (p. 71). A passage (or sentence) of a book by Balázs Nyilasy is epitomised in a single sentence with the information in brackets „(cf. Nyilasy 53)” (p. 71). There is a statement on p. 72 beginning „In their introduction to an anthology of poems, Andrew Motion and Blake Morrison point out...”, but though several publications by Morrison are recorded in „Works Cited” I found no reference to an introduction by Motion and Morrison. I wonder if a reference in brackets like the one on p. 73 „(which I referred to in a previous chapter)”, can be helpful to an ardent reader. Though I agree with much of what István Rácz has to tell us on Larkin’s poems, I cannot support his circumstantial interpretation of the line “Your mind lay open like a drawer of knives” in the poem “Deceptions” (84). It means simply what it is: “Your mind lay open like a drawer of knives”. Another matter is that in Note 2 on p. 83 the title of “the magazine of the Philip Larkin Society” appears (as *About Larkin* if I am correct) only two lines below in another sentence, and Mayhew’s book with the title cited on p. 83 (*London Labour and the London Poor*) cannot be found in “Works Cited” unless it is indentifiable there with another title by Mayhew (*London Underworld*) (202).

If István Rácz’s work has a chance to be published in Britain (which is much to be desired) certain references to Hungarian affairs should be spared, such as reference to Gárdonyi’s novel (189) and a witty turn of a phrase by Gyula Illyés (86).

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In the *Tézisek* István Rácz considered the *Collected Poems* of 1988 a „canonized” version. Since the date of the presentation of the dissertation (2011) Larkin’s poems were republished in *Complete Poems edited and with an introduction and commentary by Archie Burnett* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012. 729 pp.). *Complete Poems* has aroused heated discussion. It is three times as large as the 1988 edition and the extension includes unpublished fragments, rhyming trifles from Larkin’s correspondence and occasional writing, and annotations.

In the introduction of *Tézisek* István Rácz mentions that “the expansive literature on Larkin’s oeuvre does not contain an interpretation of the poet’s poetics as a unified system of principles” („A terjedelmes Larkin-szakirodalomban nincs azonban olyan mű, amelyik a költő poétikáját mint egységes elvrendszert értelmezné” -- *Tézisek*, 3). (Above I quoted Christopher Ricks’s observation about the lack of a book-length critical study on Larkin’s poetry.) István Rácz rightly claims that his study meets the demands of a book-length critical study on Larkin’s poetry and a systematic

theoretical work on its poetics. His theory is up-to-date and free from conservative methodology. It does not subordinate individual facts and distinct particles of a given poetic body to preconceived methods or principles of systematization. (We should not forget that even Aristotle created a purposely universal poetics which proved to be true to one type of the Greek tragedy only while it excluded from its scope the innate values of epic poetry.) The *Tézisek*, however well composed, seem to me an exceedingly modest appreciation of the actual achievement of the dissertation. The *Tézisek* as a genre cannot point to the fact that the task István Rácz undertook demanded intimate pernickety job, submersion in details, throwing light on hardly discernible components, and make extremely fine distinctions. The most impressive values of the dissertation lie in extremely fine distinctions which help, step by step, discover the hidden components of Larkin's unusual poetic achievement.

A crucial section of the dissertation is István Rácz's theory of poetic masks. This is not simply a differentiation between various types of masks. Ultimately, his theorem on a gradation of masks in the individual poems from perception to insight, with the result that the last section of the poem, with its often strange and even contradictory contribution to an *epiphany*, is enabled to throw a new and for the lay mind almost incomprehensible light on the poem as a whole. To illustrate this procedure I should quote much of the Chapter on „Character, Mask and Monologue” (starting from p. 67), and indeed the long series of interpretations of poems in Part 3, entitled “Writing about Time” (pp. 108-188).

Perhaps I have a mind unduly exposed to the attraction of extreme cases. At the moment I cannot resist claiming that while, with all the praises and reservations Larkin's greatness as a poet has been seized up within a certain gauge, with validation by the tremendous growth of his popularity, his hits, among them those which succeed due to their poetically justified use of strong language. The dissertation by István Rácz indicates that his poetry is distinct by an unmatched discovery, a unique type of poetic creation by a specific device of rhetorics, in a sphere in which it was not discernible earlier: an algorithm of poetic masks which appears as an organic and therefore “natural” infrastructure, coinciding with a parallel infrastructure of the gradual modification of themes, or rather the aspects or moments of a singular theme. Its scope ranges from the common or vulgar or superficial experience to the heights of poetic insight; poetic in the sense that the process includes verbal creation, an instance of *poiesis*, “making new” with Pound's term, the re-creation of an apparently unpoetic experience as a common human experience in the order of “the eternity of imagination”.

Here I mention that I feel the need of a further survey for the clarification of the relatedness

of Larkin's poetry with the stratagems of mainstream modernist poetics in English. It is more of Pound's side than Eliot's. Although one may find something Larkinesque in Prufrock, Bernstein, or the foot washing ceremonies of Mrs Porter and her daughter, but Pound's critical acumen was niggling (the idea came from László Kemenes Géfin when we met the other day), when he deleted two lines from the typist's scene. Listen please how the verse sounds truly Larkinesque with the deleted lines restored:

Bestows one final patronizing kiss,
And gropes his way, finding the stairs unlit;
And at the corner where the stable is,
Delays only to urinate, and spit.

Anyway, it seems to me a fine conclusion how in the final chapters of the Dissertaion the structural discovery of the poetic progression of the types of masks and the parallel gradation of themes (or the vulgar and poetical aspects of the theme, or the sequence of the „perceptive” and the „cognitive agent (74)”) give way to what is virtually a non-poetic experience, or at its height, an insight, a consistent agnostic humane vision of existence through pain, aging, death, time, space and timelessness.

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In conclusion I cannot but repeat my opening statement:

The dissertation is an excellent piece of scholarly work, a competent, thoroughly documented, well-informed and well-written paper. I fully support the discussion of the dissertation and declare that on my part I stand for the conferment of the degree of "Doctor of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences" on István Rác.

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October 10, 2012

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