



## 'Coming'

### John Woolley

This piece was published in *About Larkin 11*, April 2001. John Woolley was awarded a PhD from Leeds University in 2000 for his thesis *History, Romance, Myth and Fiction in the Poetry of Philip Larkin*. Here he analyses one of Larkin's most delicately elusive poems.

In a suburban garden a thrush sings his evensong of oncoming spring; and the listener at once feels like a child arrived 'on a scene / Of adult reconciling' who, comprehending no more than the unusual laughter, starts to be happy. This is the story told in 'Coming' by that listener, Philip Larkin.

'And starts to be happy': but starting implies ending, and the laughter is unusual. If spring is coming, can winter be far behind? The poem unravels into a warning against the assumption of happiness. This self-unravelling, however, is part of another far more complex.

'And I, whose childhood / Is a forgotten boredom . . .' There is something wrong here. 'Forgotten' and 'boredom' don't quite fit each other. To forget may be to have no memory of; it may be not to think of. If Larkin's childhood truly has been lost to memory, how can he know he was so bored? It is the present tense of his claim that makes for awkwardness: *is* forgotten, yet *is* boring. The second kind of forgetting might allow a more likely interpretation: I never think about my childhood now because it was so empty then. Maybe, yet to say that your childhood was boredom through and through is to make a very large claim indeed. And once again: *is* forgotten, yet *is* boring. This boredom would seem to be as insistent a fact of present as of past experience, despite the denial insinuated by 'forgotten' - which, moreover, not only fails to convince but must be meant to fail, for it is after all with remembered boredom that the childish happiness of the rest of the poem is being contrasted. Perhaps the hyphen dividing the poem offers the puzzle-solving key:

It will be spring soon -  
And I, whose childhood  
Is a forgotten boredom,  
Feel like a child . . .

Suddenly 'I' is the poem's subject, not the birdsong. It could be a suddenness that mimes the shock of memory's irruption upon the calm of long forgetting, the precise moment when memory and forgetting come face to face; hence their contradictory conjoined presentness. And still there is something wrong here. Even if 'forgotten' and 'boredom' do fit together, there is no certain fit between the assertion of boredom and the intimate snapshot that follows of young happiness shooting, for it is very difficult - despite the equivocation offered by 'Feel *like* a child' - to believe that this sketch's intimacy is not that of direct and deeply felt experience recalled. Here is denial again; and more than denial, hypocrisy, the invention of a myth of loss so that the loss may be the more indulged. What is difficult also is to know whether this hypocrisy is a fault in the poem, unrecognised or unacknowledged, or whether it is being laid bare as self-deceit. Such irritant infinalities of choice suggest the presence here of Larkin in the role of ironist. Yet the poem's flow, and swift overflow, of powerful feelings is so limpid, so heartfelt and so intimate, as to suggest there cannot possibly be irony at work - a reflex that itself may be the work of irony.

The remembered incident is a fragment implying a world of experience which the mere assertion of endless past boredom cannot contain. It is a world the poem both is pregnant with and tries to hide. Its extent would seem to be that of a whole life. For if the poem is to be taken as a warning against happiness, then there must have been a time after the incident - perhaps very soon after - when the lesson that happiness deludes began to be driven home so hard that the pain of its learning must even now, in the poem's Proustian present of birdsong-roused recall, only be touched upon in the form of an evasive sentimentalising myth. Past truth, fresh-revealed, itself reveals the truth of the present: reveals past and present locked together across time, the present the creation and creature of the past.

The blankness of a developing single cell divides and differentiates within itself into compact intricacies of articulation. So here; much space in little room: from a fragment's misfit, a life unfolded: an act of enlarging definition.

Yes - were it not that the apparition of irony here, the mere possibility of its inhabiting the poem, is enough to suggest not only that the story of past boredom is a myth, but that the under-story of lasting pain it almost hides may be a myth too. At the farthest limit of the time looked back into there burns that small clear crocus-flame of virgin happiness. But irony is adult. It sophisticates. It is the salvage of experience. Irony is no virgin. Beneath story and under-story linking childhood-then to adulthood-now there could subsist another under-story still, of the growth towards power of this apparition that can sport with the past in this poem as though it were the creation and creature of the present.

From the merest shard of memory ambered within a poem itself shardlike in its brevity, a whole so much larger: an entire *Bildungsroman*. Which *Bildungsroman*, though? As irony is felt to be present or not present in the story being told, so the story shifts back and forth across the compass-points between telling of subjection to the past and some degree at least of freedom from it. The one certain story here is of related stories competing. Doubt-chequered, the shifting will not ever end. The metamorphosis of fragment into whole will remain forever incomplete, the generation always of greater fragments from a lesser: an act of enlarging indefiniton.