



NOWHEREMAN

J. Douglas Porteous

Published in *About Larkin 8, October 1999*, this is a modified version of a paper given at the 'New Larkins for Old' Conference in June 1997. Professor Porteous was born in York, and educated at Oxford, Hull, Harvard and M.I.T. He now lives at Charles Kingsley's 'other end of Nowhere', the seacoast of British Columbia, and is Professor of Geography at the University of Victoria.

Philip Larkin is one of Britain's pre-eminent twentieth-century poets. His posthumous *Collected Poems* sold over 35,000 hardback copies in a single year, an unheard-of achievement for poetry in this post-literate telemedia age. His undoubted popularity is based on well-crafted verse which 'tackles the big, central issues of ordinary life in the language of ordinary speech, and makes them numinous'. Larkin's voice became 'one of the means by which his country recognized itself' (Motion 1993, 343).

In the words of a letter to the editor of the *Guardian* newspaper (Healey 1989), Larkin:

reflects what many of us think and feel. What Larkin is concerned with, above all, is the truth; the truth about one's relationship with one's parents ('They fuck you up'), the truth about childhood and growing up ('I Remember, I Remember'), the truth about home ('Home is So Sad') and the truth about being old ('The Old Fools').

And, in geographical terms, the truth that 'home' and 'here' can so easily become anywhere, that a flight to elsewhere is hardly worth the trouble (because elsewhere is also anywhere, which is everywhere), and that the only hope, bleak as it is, is to reach beyond anywhere to nowhere. In Larkin's terms, then, everywhere is no-place.

Few geographers have considered his work. As I have contended elsewhere (Porteous 1985), this is in part because literary geographers are hung up on novels, especially pre-modern ones, as well as the essential notions of 'here' and 'there'. Geographers are firmly bound to place. Space is not homogeneous: something always happens somewhere; everything takes place. Larkin takes the opposite view; he is the poet of undifferentiated space.

Yet the only significant geographical reading of Larkin dwells on the poet's sense of place (Spooner 1992) in a fascinating analysis of the poem 'Here', which paints a picture of the seaport of Hull, East Yorkshire. While in no way denying that a telling evocation of Hull

does appear in 'Here', I want to place this sense-of-place piece in the context of Larkin's whole oeuvre. What I hope to demonstrate is that the poet's sense of place is merely a minor deviation from his deeper and broader sense of no-place. In terms of my model of intangible relationships with environment (Porteous 1993, 1996) Larkin's concerns with environmental ethics, spirituality and even aesthetics are quite minimal, and instead of attachment to place he more frequently expresses detachment.

The geographical themes most appropriate for discussing Larkin's no-placeness are anywhere (here), elsewhere (there), and nowhere (beyond).

Anywhere

Following Spooner (1992), it is clear that 'Here' provides a readily-identifiable capsule image (Porteous 1977) of Hull in the 1950s. The core of the poem encapsulates downtown Hull's particularities:

a terminate and fishy-smelling
Pastoral of ships up streets, the slave museum,
Tattoo-shops, consulates . . .

But these place-specific images are quickly followed by more general ones of 'grim headscarfed wives' (*Last of the Summer Wine?*) and eventually are overwhelmed by the 'raw estates' of the city's periphery, whence emerges 'a cut-price crowd, urban yet simple', whose goals are simply those of everyone, everywhere:

Cheap suits, red kitchen-ware, sharp shoes, iced lollies,
Electric mixers, toasters, washers, driers -

In other words, in the midst of its obvious placefulness, Hull is also everywhere and anywhere. Belying the poem's title, it may well be 'Here', but 'here' is very much like everywhere else.

Having a sense of place, of course, does not mean that the writer loves that place. Larkin's biographer, Motion (1993), seems to believe that Larkin had much affection for Hull, but Spooner (1992) is more cautious. In his private letters Larkin made many negative comments about Hull, in one memorable case calling the city 'the arsehole of the East Riding' (*Selected Letters*, 403) and its University students, of which I was one at the time, 'little subsidised socialist sods' (*SL*, 530). What Larkin did appreciate about Hull was its relative remoteness, as one of the least-visited cities in England, and its liminal location on a geographical edge, close to the sea. Its placeless ordinariness also strongly appealed to him.

This sense of Anywhereness emerged early in Larkin, who was born in the English Midlands (a region already a nowhere in comparison with the North and the South). The poem 'I Remember, I Remember' is a parody of effusive writings about childhood joys. His train rerouted, the poet finds himself trundling through Coventry, his birthplace. His attitude is the complete reversal of most positive childhood reminiscences; it is a list of all the things he didn't do, all the feelings he never felt. He concludes:

it's not the place's fault...
Nothing, like something, happens anywhere.

And despite his literary achievement, and his success in building a superb new library at the University of Hull, where he was librarian from 1955 until his death, Larkin continued to believe that nothing much would ever happen in his life. And if nothing was to happen, it might as well happen anywhere. But when nothing continues to happen, contemplation of it almost universally tends to dwell on the cruelties and sadnesses of lives unlived and badly ended.

Most of his Hull poems, in fact, are about sad lives lived anywhere. Mr Bleaney, living in 'a hired box',

lay on the fusty bed
Telling himself this was home.

Life for Larkin, Bleaney, and everyone else, is a sad tedium ('The Life with a Hole in it'):

Life is an immobile, locked,
Three-handed struggle between
Your wants, the world's for you, and (worse)
The unbeatable slow machine
That brings what you'll get.

What you'll get, of course, is sickness, pain, fear, and death. A whole series of poems, written in Hull but set anywhere, elaborates these frightening aspects of life. Ambulances

come to rest at any kerb:
All streets in time are visited.

Unpleasantly privileged for once, you are whisked by the ambulance to The Building, a 'lucent comb . . . Higher than the handsomest hotel', where:

All know that they are going to die.
Not yet, perhaps not here, but in the end,
And somewhere like this.

Penetrating the hospital, the visitor sees her own future, 'Heads in the Women's Ward', where:

On pillow after pillow lies
The wild white hair and staring eyes . . .
Smiles are for youth. For old age come
Death's terror and delirium.

When death comes, as it will come to us all, it will likely happen in just such a bleak placeless anywhere, a final anonymity of both place and person.

Anywhere is also everywhere. Another 'Hull' poem, 'Essential Beauty', describes urban billboards. I knew the very billboards, in Hull, that Larkin speaks of. But the billboards, which are both beautiful and sad to Larkin (Motion 1993, 321) are less evocative of Hull than of anywhere in the consumerist world:

In frames as large as rooms that face all ways
And block the ends of streets with giant loaves,

Screen graves with custard, cover slums with praise
Of motor-oil and cuts of salmon, shine
Perpetually these sharp-pictured groves
Of how life should be.

And, of course, isn't, until we purchase the commodity-dream, which instantly evanesces. This feeling of a consumerist world steadily homogenizing to placelessness is best summed up in 'Going, Going', where the 'spectacled grins' of capitalists collude with the unthinking crowds whose 'kids are screaming for more' to create a totally urbanised, ruinous and ugly no-place:

And that will be England gone,
The shadows, the meadows, the lanes,
 . . . all that remains
For us will be concrete and tyres.

I have recently analysed just such a process, whereby a small village upriver from Hull has been utterly planned to death (Porteous 1989).

Did Hull become a haven in this hell of anywhereness? Sort of. Before his arrival in the city Larkin had commented, in 'Places, Loved Ones':

No, I have never found
The place where I could say
This is my proper ground,
Here I shall stay.

He did stay in Hull until his death, and Motion says that the poem 'Here' shows that Hull provided the 'proper ground' so clearly missing before Larkin's arrival in the city. I don't believe this, as I shall shortly demonstrate. Besides, one's home *has* to be somewhere, yet 'Home is so Sad'.

Elsewhere

If Larkin has little choice but to live in a no-place, anywhere, does he ever consider moving, or even travelling temporarily, to a better elsewhere? Larkin was no traveller. though he took trips to other parts of Britain he hardly ever left the country for abroad. He became the fabled 'hermit of Hull' who felt that leaving home was almost always a mistake. Indeed, in the latter part of his life Jonathan Raban found him restricted to a very small, walkable triangle: his house, the local shops, and the university library (1986).

There is evidence that Larkin does envision elsewheres but, true to form, they are either unattainable or, attained, shown to be yet another anywhere. Several poems, for example, tell us that Larkin would just like to run off and live like a gypsy, or perhaps even like an animal in a soft warm burrow. He doesn't because of fear, inertia, and 'the toad work'. A second unattainable elsewhere is the past, which is often only the recent past of the previous generation. Again, several poems demonstrate that Larkin had an affection for neglected churches, empty hotels, obscure agricultural fairs, the haunts of almost redundant travelling salesmen, a whole run-down world of the nostalgic just-remembered. Or even the merely envisaged, for in 'MCMXIV' he tells us that, after World War I, 'Never such innocence again.'

Equally unattainable, it seems, is the sea-beach that suggests freedom. In 'Livings' Larkin exults with the lighthouse-keeper, below whom, 'seventy feet down / The sea explodes upwards . . .' and who cries, against the outside world, 'Keep it all off!'

But Larkin, as a provincial urban person, is more likely to take a holiday by the sea than to become a lighthouse-keeper. He could go for the sun, sand, sea and sex of 'Sunny Prestatyn', were it not for the fact that the advertising poster of the laughing nymphet

Kneeling up on the sand
In tautened white satin . . .

has been rudely subverted by graffiti artists:

She was slapped up one day in March.
A couple of weeks, and her face
Was snaggle-toothed and boss-eyed;
Huge tits and a fissured crotch
Were scored well in . . .

The poster, the sea, the girl, like the 'Essential Beauty' of billboards, are merely the stuff dreams are made on. And in 'Breadfruit', in which

Boys dream of native girls who bring breadfruit,
Whatever they are,
As bribes to teach them how to execute
Sixteen sexual positions on the sand . . .

Larkin parodies the whole Rousseau-esque exotic Polynesian ethos of the travel industry, showing how such dreams usually end up, in reality, and via evanescent sex, with

A mortgaged semi- with a silver birch;
Nippers; the widowed mum; having to scheme
With money; illness; age.

The game's not worth the candle. Elsewhere is illusion, for everywhere is anywhere and bland Coca-Cola and vicious Bennetton are there already. Although Larkin knows that in elsewhere, as in a stay in Ireland ('The Importance of Elsewhere'), his difference somehow makes him more real, this strange joy of exile, of being un-placed, can never be felt 'here', in the workaday world of home, where 'no elsewhere underwrites my existence'. Were he to move to elsewhere, it would simply become home, or anywhere. Better to stay put.

Nowhere

If home or 'here' is anywhere, and the reality of elsewhere is anywhere too, can there be dreams of nowhere? If something happens anywhere, then nothing happens nowhere. And nothing, and nowhere, appear to be Larkin's dream.

The structure and content of his so-called sense-of-place poem 'Here' demonstrates this need for no-place. Of the four stanzas, the first is chiefly occupied in getting to Hull on the train. Hull is indeed the core of the second and third stanzas, but before even the third

is finished Larkin is off again, out of and beyond Hull, into a rural area of:

Isolate villages, where removed lives
Loneliness clarifies. Here silence stands
Like heat . . .

Even this rural solitude, however, is not enough, for the poet swoops on down to the seacoast and beyond, out to sea, a nowhere of

unfenced existence
Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach.

Quiet and out of reach, nowhere is the place Larkin really wants to be. As he confirmed in late middle age: 'As for Hull, I like it because it's so far away from everywhere else. On the way to nowhere . . . and beyond . . . there's only the sea' (Larkin 1982).

Several other Larkin poems provide glimpses of this longed-for remoteness of the purely elemental. The 'padlocked cube of light' of 'Dry-point' becomes the 'big sky' of 'Livings I' and, beyond high windows,

the deep blue air, that shows
Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.

Yet nowhere has content. The content is basic: sun and water, ubiquitous elements that are everywhere, eternal and endless. Endlessness, in both time and space, is the most important characteristic of nowhere. In the few poems that manifest any spirituality at all, Larkin praises the sun ('Solar') as eternal giver of liquidity:

Suspended lion face
Spilling at the centre
of an unfurnished sky . . .
You pour unrecompensed . . .
Unclosing like a hand,
You give for ever.

And 'Water':

If I were called in
To construct a religion
I should make use of water . . .

And I should raise in the east
A glass of water
Where any-angled light
Would congregate endlessly.

The dream is warmth and wetness, endless and limitless. The unattainable womb?

Clearly, for Larkin, this sense of nowhere-ness is a yearning unlikely to be achieved; it is out of reach (Swarbrick 1995). Among humans, it might briefly be attained by those who run away from home and 'the toad work', or by ever-moving gypsies. It can't readily be achieved even by animals, not least those cattle behind electric fences. But perhaps a

possibility of consummation is given us in the image of the old horses, 'At Grass'.

Conclusion

News from nowhere has a long history, but became especially important in the second half of the twentieth century with the triumph of abstract art, atonal music, modernist architecture and absurdist theatre. Indeed it was the absurdist playwrights of the 1950s, most notably Genet, Pinter, Ionesco and Beckett, who most successfully portrayed the nature of no-place. In *Waiting for Godot* (1954), for example, 'nothing happens', and when Estragon finally cries 'let's go' the ultimate stage direction indicates: 'They do not move'. All this is set on a bare stage with a single dead tree. Indeed, there's nowhere to go because the characters have already achieved no-place, anywhereness. Similarly, in Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* (1960) the character Berenger tells us: 'I feel out of place in life'. And in Delaney's play *A Taste of Honey* the first lines are:

HELEN: Well! This is the place.
JO: And I don't like it.

Similarly, in Harold Pinter's *The Birthday party* (1959, 492) we find the following exchange:

LULU: We might as well stay here.
STANLEY: No. It's no good here.
LULU: Well, where else is there?
STANLEY: Nowhere.

The motif surfaces in many contemporary novels, from the 'sense of *anywhere*' in Bradbury's (1959) provincial English city to Margaret Drabble's *The Gates of Ivory* (1991) where a Thai talks of film: 'Look, is nothing. Is no person and no-thing and no place' (p.43) and an ex-Japanese of himself: 'I am all things and nothing. No nation, no place, all places. No thing.'

These Drabble characters appear to have achieved some semblance of nowhereness, although it does not rise to the epiphanic brightness of Larkin's vision. Yet it is in this context, I believe, that we must read the no-place poetry of Philip Larkin.

It would be easy to dismiss Larkin as a sour old fart who didn't have much of a life, but, from his sales alone, we infer that what he has to say resonates strongly with many. What he has to say, however, has little to do with the traditional geographer's sense of place: it is much more in tune with the opposite concept, Relph's idea of placelessness (1976). Larkin indeed has a sense of place, manifested most clearly in *Here* and a handful of other Hull poems. In the context of his *oeuvre*, however, this sense of place is marginal, for Larkin's chief achievement is a sense of no-place, of anywhereness.

'Solar'
SUN/WATER
(beyond)

NOWHERE

ANYWHERE

(here, home)

HULL

'Here'

ELSEWHERE

(there)

PAST/EXOTIC

'Breadfruit'

Everywhere

Figure 1. The structure of No-place.

No-place can readily be mapped as a triangle (Figure 1), where at the base both anywhere (here) and elsewhere (there) are equally everywhere. Larkin is stuck 'here', but knows full well that any attempt to escape to 'there is doomed, for disappointment inevitably awaits such a traveller. For both Anywhere and Elsewhere are Everywhere, grounded in sad reality. The only escape is to a no-place of the imagination, the limitlessness of nowhere, mere oblivion: the womb; death; or not-to-have-been-born. Or, more happily, less an escape to nowhere than an achievement of 'zero identity' (Whitaker 1986, 209), the 'great positive nothingness' (Esslin 1986, 121) conceived by Samuel Beckett.

References

- Beckett, S (1954),
Waiting for Godot, in H. Clarman (ed.) *Seven Plays of the Modern Theater* (New York: Grove Press), pp. 1-83
- Bradbury, M. (1959),
Eating People is Wrong (London: Secker and Warburg)
- Delaney, S (1958),
A Taste of Honey, in H. Clarman (ed.) *Seven Plays of the Modern Theater* (New York: Grove Press), pp. 153-224
- Drabble, M. (1991),
The Gates of Ivory (London: Penguin)
- Esslin, M. (1986),
'Samuel Beckett: Infinity, eternity', in E. Brater (ed.), *Beckett at 80* (New York: Oxford University Press)
- Healey, M. (1989),
'The right tone, the right time', *Guardian Weekly*, Letters, 22.i.1989
- Ionesco, E. (1960),
Rhinoceros, in H. Clarman (ed.) *Seven Plays of the Modern Theater* (New York: Grove Press), pp. 371-472
- Larkin, P. (1982),

- 'A voice for our time', in P. Larkin (ed.), *Required Writing* (London: Faber)
- Motion, A. (1993),
Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life (London: Faber)
- Pinter, H. (1959),
The Birthday Party, in H. Clarman (ed.) *Seven Plays of the Modern Theater* (New York: Grove Press), pp. 473-548
- Porteous, J. D. (1977),
Environment and Behaviour: planning and everyday urban life (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley)
- Porteous, J. D. (1985),
'Literature and humanistic geography', *Area* 17, 117-22
- Porteous, J. D. (1993),
'Resurrecting environmental religion', *National Geographical Journal of India*, 39, 179-87
- Porteous, J. D. (1996),
Environmental Aesthetics: ideas, politics and planning (London and New York: Routledge)
- Raban, J. (1986),
Coasting (London: Collins Harvill)