

Ambition: A Revue

by [Peter Dreyer](#) (January 2023)



Philip Larkin, Humphrey Ocean, 1984

It is equally undesirable to think oneself a poet and to think that one is not a poet. That is something that we never find out. –T. S. Eliot, Letters, 7: 333

Phil Larkin's 1973 Oxford anthology^[*] of the past century's British poetry, strictly for writers "born in these islands" or resident in them "an appreciable time"—a description not of me, it stands to reason, although I lived four years on Upper Montagu Street, just down the road from the Regent's Park and Madame Tussaud's—kicks off with the "dear pale face" of Blunt's Juliet, "On which those thirty years so lightly sat," who wore "a little *fichu* trimmed with lace."

«*Cherchez la femme, pardieu!*» says Dumas père, and girls to me seem as good guides as any, so from Juliet's trim kerchief we pass (all bets are off!) with more or less measured metric paces to Old Possum's "hyacinth girl," Sir John Betjeman's "Miss J. Hunter Dunn," and Roy Fuller's "girl in trousers wheeling a red baby"—absurd, louche and wan, for all those scents of bergamot.

"Man's love is of man's life a thing apart, Girls aren't like that," Kingsley Amis bleats, mistaken on both scores, while Roger McGough sighs: "Girls are simply the prettiest things." A second for that? "O happy girls, discreet in joviality!" Gerald Gould apostrophizes. "All these illegitimate babies ... / Oh girls, girls, / Silly little cheap things," Stevie Smith laments. Larkin's choices give me pause. He really ought to have included a suite

of those Americans—they were streets ahead!

It's not girls all the way, though, far from it:
"Well died, my old cat," Hal Summers says,
and Alun Lewis, who shot himself in Burma,
writes of rain; Ted Hughes of hawks and hogs.

The anthology wraps up with a sweetheart more,
a flowering blonde "girl in the bathroom singing,"
on whose naked boobs Brian Patten slams a door,
demanding "*only bona fide celestial music*"—the &%\$# douche!

†††

Though I'm not English and never wished to be,
I contemplate Larkin's assembled poets collegially—
especially, of course, my whilom compatriots:
Plomer, Campbell, and F. T. Prince (born Kimberley).
I got my taste for English poetry in the nineteen fifties
at the Hoërskool De Aar, guided by a kindly seer
called "Sir." His surname was de Villiers,
but he was "Sir" to us, because the texts he taught
were in English, not our medium of instruction;
we called all our other teachers *Meneer*.

Sir's English poets were chiefly nineteenth-century
—though Ezra Pound got in too, as I recall.
Keats, Shelley, Arnold, the Brownings, Tennyson,
he loved them all, and passed his passion on:
I for my part seized on their artistic *identity*:
an English *poet* was what I wished to be, poor foolish me,
when I grew up! Then fancying myself a man, presently,
I took off, without so much as thanking Sir, to my undying
shame.
It's too late now, of course, but poetry's a catch-as-catch-
can game,
and what's a point anyhow of saying what the dead won't hear?
None, I think, not even in the view of those *jeunes filles en*

fleurs.

[*] *The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse Chosen by Philip Larkin* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973) is the anthology, and the poems quoted from it are by Wilfred Scawen Blunt (1840–1922), from *The Love Sonnets of Proteus* (London: Kegan Paul, 1881); Hal Summers (1911–2005), “My Old Cat”; Roy Fuller (1912–91), “Metamorphoses”; Kingsley Amis (1922–95), “A Bookshop Idyll”; Roger McGough (1937–), “My cat and i”; Gerald Gould (1885–1936) from *Monogamy*; Stevie Smith (1902–71), “Valuable”; and Brian Patten (1946–), “Ode on Celestial Music.”

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Peter Richard Dreyer is a South African American writer. He is the author of *A Beast in View* (London: André Deutsch), *The Future of Treason* (New York: Ballantine), *A Gardener Touched with Genius: The Life of Luther Burbank* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan; rev. ed., Berkeley: University of California Press; new, expanded ed., Santa Rosa, CA: Luther Burbank Home & Gardens), *Martyrs and Fanatics: South Africa and Human Destiny* (New York: Simon & Schuster; London: Secker & Warburg), and most recently the novel *Isacq* (Charlottesville, VA: Hardware River Press, 2017).

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