

SOME INFLUENCES ON PHILIP LARKIN'S 'CUT GRASS'

On 3 June 1971, Philip Larkin wrote to his partner Monica Jones that he was 'trying to write an ethereal little song ... about the time of year'.¹ The finished poem was published as 'Cut Grass' at the end of July, and collected in *High Windows* (1974).

In his edition of *The Complete Poems of Philip Larkin*, Archie Burnett offers extracts from the Book of Isaiah, Keats, Housman and Louise Bogan that may have influenced the language and rhythm in 'Cut Grass'.² Three further names might be added to these.

Larkin brings 'Cut Grass' to an end by looking upward:

And that high-buidled cloud
Moving at summer's pace.

The unusual participle 'buidled' occurs, Burnett informs us, in poems by Keats ('Like sculpture buidled-up upon the grave / Of their own power': 'The Fall of Hyperion', line I:383) and Louise Bogan ('hills that are buidled like great clouds': 'Summer Wish'). Another use by Keats in the same poem deserves mention:

I look'd around upon the carvèd sides
Of an old sanctuary with roof august,

¹ Philip Larkin, *Letters to Monica*, ed. A. Thwaite (London, 2010), 419.

² Philip Larkin, *The Complete Poems*, ed. A. Burnett (London, 2012), 473.

Builded so high, it seem'd that filmèd clouds

Might spread beneath, as o'er the stars of heaven. (lines I:61-64)

The proximity of 'builded' and 'clouds', and the upturned gaze, bring this passage near to Larkin's poem.

Another occurrence of 'builded' with 'cloud' is found in William Blake's 'Jerusalem' (from the 'Preface' to *Milton, a Poem*):

And did the Countenance Divine,
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here,
Among these dark Satanic Mills?

Where Larkin looks up at the clouds, Blake's face of God looks down at them.

Larkin's clouds are builded in the sky, whereas Blake's Jerusalem is builded here on the ground, yet each poem in its way contains a sacramental vision.

The musicality of his 'little song' mattered to Larkin. Before it was published, he wished that 'someone good would set it to music'.³ A few days after publication, he was again thinking of it in musical terms: 'About line 6 I hear a wonderful kind of Elgar river-music take over, for w^{ch} the words are just an excuse'.⁴

Given this mention of Elgar, it is possible that Hubert Parry's setting of Blake's poem stirred in Larkin's imagination when he was writing 'Cut Grass'. Like Elgar's name and music, Parry's *Jerusalem* is associated with nostalgic yearnings that are distinctly rural, indistinctly personal, and implicitly patriotic. Such yearnings are

³ Larkin, *Letters to Monica*, 422.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 423.

often part of the material of Larkin's poetry, and that he associated them with Elgar is sure, because he wrote about his intense pleasure in Elgar's symphonies. The First was 'almost my favourite piece of music',⁵ and the experience of listening to the Second 'on the wireless' moved him to burst out:

My eyes are swimming with tears! ... Elgar always ... fills me with a terribly strong loving yearning, for wch there seems no proper target or expression, & wch no one will ever understand – it is like some land where we are together for ever, beyond the reach of time and change ...⁶

It is likely that it was Parry's setting of Blake's words that entered Larkin's mind when he sought how to express what he wanted to express, in May and early June 1971.

There is also a particular personal memory. In a letter to Monica Jones on Sunday, 8 June 1969, Larkin wrote about a drive that he had taken the day before, visiting Blacktoft and Yokefleet and other hamlets along the rivers Humber and Ouse:

... wonderful it was. *Very* quiet: lanes all lined shoulder high with cowparsley; huge trees in their first full freshness ... O, it was beautiful! And always the rare *white* of early summer: may, hawthorn, chestnut candles, cowparsley, nettle-flowers so soon lost ... so exciting, so sunny & marvellous. ... It was a day among days: I'm sure it'll never be so fine again. ... I felt I'd found a new little country. I did wish you could have seen it.

[LM, 400]

⁵ *Ibid.*, 239.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 263.

Larkin wrote 'Cut Grass' exactly two years after this entrancing drive, and the poem too has 'lost', 'white', 'chestnut', and cow parsley in the form of 'Queen Anne's lace'. In reality, the 'young-leafed June' of 1971 was, he grumbled (in the published fragment of his letter to her), 'bloody cold'.⁷ Presumably, as Larkin shivered amid the signs of early summer, his imagination recalled the same season in a bygone year. The 'new little country' of the Humberhead Levels became an Elgarian Cockaigne, which his little song put beyond reach of time and change.

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⁷ Ibid., 419.