‘MR GRIDLEY’S ROOM’: LARKIN AND DICKENS

We are not likely to think of Dickens as an important influence on the poetry of Philip Larkin. The title of ‘Dockery and Son’ may nod to *Dombey and Son* but Dickens’s sociable and expansive fiction seems far away from Larkin's compact lyrics of solitude and withdrawal.[[1]](#endnote-1) One is the product of a maximising, the other a minimising, literary art. Indeed, Larkin’s antipathy to Dickens is clear from early in his career: in a 1951 letter, when he was in his late twenties, he registered an irritable impatience with ‘the whole Dickens method’ which he described as

less ebullient, creative, vital, than hectic, nervy panic-stricken. If he was a person I should say “you don’t have to entertain me, you know. I’m quite happy sitting here”. The jerking of your attention, with queer names, queer characters, aggressive rhythms, piling on adjectives – seem to me to betray basic insecurity in his relation with the reader. How serenely Trollope, for instance, compares. I say in all seriousness that, say what you like about Dickens as an entertainer, he cannot be considered a real writer at all; not a real novelist. His is the garish, gaslit, melodramatic barn (writing that phrase makes me wonder if I’m right!) where the yokels gape: outside is the calm, measureless world, where the characters of Eliot, Trollope, Austen, Hardy (most of them) and Lawrence (some of them) have their being. However, I much enjoyed *G.E.* & may try another soon.[[2]](#endnote-2)

The contrast between Dickens and Trollope is an enduring one, and a later letter to Barbara Pym confirms the same judgement more succinctly: Trollope’s novels ‘are so *grown up*, to my mind, beside Dickens’s three-ring circuses’.[[3]](#endnote-3)

The dislike is not surprising; both temperamentally and politically the two authors were at opposite poles, and neither in his childhood nor as an undergraduate at Oxford is Larkin likely to have encountered any strong advocates of Dickens’s work. At home, Larkin recalls in ‘Not the Place’s Fault’, although ‘our house contained … the principal works of most main English writers’ together with a good collection of more modern authors such as Hardy, Wilde and Shaw, ‘there were exceptions, like Dickens’.[[4]](#endnote-4) His undergraduate lodgings may have been ‘filled with junk from India and China and volumes of Dickens etc.’ but, like the accompanying junk, Dickens was treated at Oxford at the mid-century with widespread scholarly disdain.[[5]](#endnote-5) There are only a few references to his novels in Larkin’s letters and reviews and those are mainly dismissive ones: *Little Dorrit* is ‘dreary tack’, *Dombey and Son* ‘a dreary-sad book… as if he was deeply depressed by things’.[[6]](#endnote-6) Dickens exemplifies creative egoism for Larkin, ‘one of those great men … in whom a horny sheath of egoism protects their energy, not allowing it to be dissipated or turned against itself’ but was never, it seems, a creative influence.[[7]](#endnote-7)

But, as their published letters show, Larkin’s friend and lover Monica Jones encouraged him to read Dickens in the early 1950s when he worked at the University libraries of Belfast and Hull. His responses to her suggestions are mixed and sometimes decidedly hostile, but there is one novel, *Bleak House*, which he read several times and responded to exceptionally warmly: ‘I do like it. There is more to thrill, & less to irritate or bore, me than in any other I’ve read.’[[8]](#endnote-8) A particular passage of dialogue stuck in his mind. He wrote to Jones; ’I’ve just reached those wonderful pair of lines I’d use for a book of ghost stories if I wrote one - ‘“As to dead men, Tony,” …Do you remember it? In the chapter called *The appointed hour,* or something like that.’[[9]](#endnote-9) The passage that he so admired occurs in chapter 32, almost at the exact centre of the novel:

‘It's far from a pleasant thing to be plotting about a dead man in the room where he died, especially when you happen to live in it.’

‘But we are plotting nothing against him, Tony.’

‘May be not, still I don't like it. Live here by yourself and see how *you* like it.’

‘As to dead men,’ Tony, proceeds Mr. Guppy, evading this proposal, ‘there have been dead men in most rooms.’

‘I know there have; but in most rooms you let them alone, and – and they let you alone,’ Tony answers.[[10]](#endnote-10)

The two characters who have this eerie exchange in an ‘unbearably dull, suicidal room’ are Mr Guppy, a lawyer’s clerk in pursuit of the novel’s heroine, Esther Summerson, and his friend Toby Jobling, alias Weevle.[[11]](#endnote-11) Weevle has moved into the vacated room of the recently expired law-writer, Nemo, whom we later learn is in fact Captain Hawdon, the lover of Lady Dedlock and father of Esther. As Guppy and Jobling talk, a strange smell permeates the air; it is the smoke and fumes from the spontaneous combustion of the landlord, Krook, who lived downstairs. Although such a fictional world seems far from the solitary unhappiness that is often the emotional centre of Larkin’s best work, Guppy’s and Jobling’s exchange seems to have played an important role in the genesis of one of his most admired poems, ‘Mr Bleaney’.

It is likely that Larkin’s idea of ‘a book of ghost-stories’ was simply a fancy, as by this time, he seems to have abandoned his ambitions as a writer of fiction. But the idea that the presence of the dead may linger on in rooms to disconcert their present-day inhabitants stays with him, purged of Dickens’s supernatural and gothic colouring. The ‘wonderful pair of lines’ is most likely to be a reference to Guppy’s ‘As to dead men, Tony … there have been dead men in most rooms’ but Jobling’s ‘Live here by yourself and see how *you* like it’ matters too. Guppy is trying to be reassuring at this point but his consolation has a built-in terror that Larkin is fully alive to. This is unsurprising, as it is preceded by a particularly evocative passage of Dickens’s prose

Both sit silent, listening to the metal voices, near and distant, resounding from towers of various heights, in tones more various than their situations. When these at length cease, all seems more mysterious and quiet than before. One disagreeable result of whispering is that it seems to evoke an atmosphere of silence, haunted by the ghosts of sound - strange cracks and tickings, the rustling of garments that have no substance in them, and the tread of dreadful feet that would leave no mark on the sea-sand or the winter snow. So sensitive the two friends happen to be, that the air is full of these phantoms; and the two look over their shoulders by one consent, to see that the door is shut.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Not long after he read those words, Larkin began his poem about exactly the situation described by Jobling, of a man living by himself in an ‘unbearably dull, suicidal’ rented room in which the previous inhabitant, another solitary man, seems to have died.

Larkin, of course, was not just drawing on Dickens. As Andrew Motion has shown, his own experience of renting a flat in Cottingham, near Hull, at exactly this period is a strong presence in the poem.[[13]](#endnote-13) Although he had drawn on Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor*, for his 1950 poem ‘Deceptions’, ‘Mr Bleaney’ has a more subtle relationship to its inspiration. For, like the poem, *Bleak House* is a story about the sadness and solitude of unmarried men, and the presence of death in their lives. In the midst of the complex, multiple actions of the book are two characters, both at the very margins of society and domestic life, both solitary bachelors in hired rooms. The first is the dead man, Captain Hawdon, known as Nemo, whose ghost Jobling fears; the other is the ‘man from Shropshire … who can by no means be made to understand that the Chancellor is legally ignorant of his existence after making it desolate for a quarter of a century’.[[14]](#endnote-14) We later learn that his name is Gridley, a name that Larkin remembers and puts to good use: in the earliest drafts of the poem, as Archie Burnett records in his comprehensive *Complete Poems,* Mr Bleaney is called ‘Mr Gridley’.[[15]](#endnote-15) ‘Bleaney’ retains the two syllables of Gridley’s name but also incorporates the ‘Bleak’ of the novel from which he comes. Its mingling of ‘bleak and ‘mean’ causes Dickens’s title word to hover over both Larkin’s title and poem, present and absent like Bleaney himself.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Admirers of Larkin have sometimes anticipated what his manuscripts and letters show: the word ‘bleak’ often appears in critical accounts of the poem, as when Laurence Lerner describes it as one of Larkin’s ‘bleakest and most powerful’ poems, and Janice Rossen sees the poem as having ‘the strange, lucid quality of a murder mystery or spy novel, where the investigator tries to reconstruct a dead or departed man’s life’.[[17]](#endnote-17) Guppy’s remarks in *Bleak House* made Larkin first think of a volume of ghost stories and his critics of a murder mystery, but what is so distinctive, indeed Larkinesque, about the poem that resulted is how firmly it resists such possibilities. Jobling is afraid of ghosts but there is nothing ghostly about Bleaney; the dread comes not from any kind of uncanny or ghostly return but from the very lack of such a possibility. Both Jobling and the narrator of ‘Mr Bleaney’ are afraid, but in very different ways. Jobling’s fear is of the anger or visitation of the dead; the fear in ‘Mr Bleaney’s room’ is not that the dead will return to haunt the living but that the banality of what they leave behind - ‘Bed, upright chair, sixty-watt bulb’ - maps out an equally futile and empty life to come.[[18]](#endnote-18) The poem is strikingly inexplicit about what has happened to Bleaney; we do not even know for certain that he is dead, although most readers infer that he is. Larkin’s is a world not hyperbolically charged with meaning, suspense and excitement like Dickens’s, but stripped of them, placed not near the centre both of London and one of the most complex of all Victorian plots but in a consciously marginal, empty, and unplotted room and story. Both, though, concern ‘dread’, in *Bleak House* of the ‘tread of dreadful feet that would leave no mark on the sea-sand or the winter snow’; in ‘Mr Bleaney’ of ‘the dread/ That how we live measures our own nature’, as Jobling and Larkin’s unnamed narrator learn to live in a room, like most rooms, in which dead men have been.[[19]](#endnote-19)

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1. Philip Larkin, The Complete Poems of Philip Larkin, ed. Archie Burnett (London, 2012) 427. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Philip Larkin, Letters to Monica, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London and Oxford, 2010), 53. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Philip Larkin, Selected Letters of Philip Larkin 1940-1985, (London, 1992), 440. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Philip Larkin, Further Requirements: Interviews, Broadcasts, Statements and Reviews 1952-1985, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London, 2002), 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Andrew Motion, Philip Larkin: A Writer’s Life, (London, 1994), 74. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Philip Larkin, Letters to Monica, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London and Oxford, 2010), 324 and 428. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Philip Larkin, Selected Letters of Philip Larkin 1940-1985, (London, 1992), 154. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Philip Larkin, Letters to Monica, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London and Oxford, 2010), 114. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Philip Larkin, Letters to Monica, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London and Oxford, 2010), 114. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Charles Dickens, Bleak House, ed. Norman Page (Harmondsworth, 1971) 507-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Charles Dickens, Bleak House, ed. Norman Page (Harmondsworth, 1971), 503. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Charles Dickens, Bleak House, ed. Norman Page (Harmondsworth, 1971), 507. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Andrew Motion, Philip Larkin: A Writer’s Life, (London, 1994), 247-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Charles Dickens, Bleak House, ed. Norman Page (Harmondsworth, 1971), 52. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Philip Larkin, The Complete Poems of Philip Larkin, ed. Archie Burnett (London, 2012), 394. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. David Timms, Philip Larkin (London, 1973), 97. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Laurence Lerner, Philip Larkin: Writers and their Work, (Plymouth, 2005), 21; Janice Rossen, Philip Larkin: His Life’s Work, (Brighton, 1989) 137. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Philip Larkin, The Complete Poems of Philip Larkin, ed. Archie Burnett (London, 2012), 50. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Philip Larkin, The Complete Poems of Philip Larkin, ed. Archie Burnett (London, 2012), 50. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)