

"They Fuck You Up," Philip Larkin's, *This Be The Verse*
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Here's another lively example of poets and psychoanalysts working the same dysfunctional family terrain.

This Be The Verse

*They fuck you up, your mum and dad.
They may not mean to, but they do.
They fill you with the faults they had
And add some extra, just for you.*

*But they were fucked up in their turn
By fools in old-style hats and coats,
Who half the time were sippy-stern
And half at one another's throats.*

*Man hands on misery to man.
It deepens like a coastal shelf.
Get out as early as you can,
And don't have any kids yourself.*

Since the great contemporary English poet Philip Larkin (1922-1985) published *This Be The Verse* in 1971, it has gone on, for obvious reasons, to be one of the most quoted of contemporary poems--recitable in full by many who probably couldn't name its author. Larkin, who in his lifetime gave the world a large body of memorable sardonic, seriously despairing and anti-sentimental poems joked that he expected this one would be intoned at his funeral by a chorus of a thousand Girl Guides.

Larkin was a prodigy when young, unmarried all his life, a lonely librarian in the small provincial city of Hull, a man who remarked famously that deprivation was for him what daffodils were for Wordsworth. "They fuck you up..." is Larkin at his clear, tough and anti-romantic best. There's a rude giggle, a recognition, and, it would seem, not much mystery in this poem. But then there's the title.

"This be the verse" is a quote from Robert Louis Stevenson's *Requiem*, some lines of which you no doubt will recognize:

*Under the wide and starry sky,
Dig the grave and let me lie.
Glad did I live and gladly die,
And I laid me down with a will.*

This be the verse you grave for me:

Here he lies where he longed to be;
Home is the sailor, home from sea,
And the hunter home from the hill.

So in *This Be The Verse* Larkin is presenting the world with his own anti-romantic epitaph. But note the source of the quote: Larkin's barely submerged emotional subtext is a sweet, sad longing, the *longing for home*. And what about the longing for home? Here's another Larkin poem, written some years before--and this one's not so funny:

Home Is So Sad

*Home is so sad. It stays as it was left,
Shaped to the comfort of the last to go
As if to win them back. Instead, bereft
Of anyone to please, it withers so,
Having no heart to put aside the theft*

*And turn again to what it started as,
A joyous shot at how things ought to be,
Long fallen wide. You can see how it was:
Look at the pictures and the cutlery.
The music in the piano stool. That vase.*

Most of us these days would like to think, perhaps romantically, that we can do better by our children than our parents did by us. No, says Larkin, it will not be so! But--no surprise to psychoanalysts--hidden in his anti-romanticism and just under the surface of his ironic joking about the impossibility of an improving family life, one finds a self-protective distancing. Distancing from what? In these two poems, it becomes clear, from profound sadness--from the mourning for the idealized home which was "a joyous shot at how things ought to be," a shot now "long fallen wide." Someone once said, "a cynic is a disappointed idealist." An anti-romantic, one would have to think, is a romantic in despair.

Notes:

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