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Martin Amis
"Political Correctness: Robert Bly and Philip Larkin"
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Saul Bellow-- in Chicago. There are nightclubs all over the United States, they're all the same. Philip, with a few ...(inaudible) and theater people, but gradually there were kind of, just a few ...(inaudible) (laughter). A nifty place to have lunch, close to the loop, and be seen against the background of some nice ...(inaudible).

We chummed around Chicago ...(inaudible) and after that, I saw him in Israel, and I had gone down to ...(inaudible). We had many problems in common, as well as many pleasures. Naturally, we talked about writers we liked and writers we hated, and we agreed on so many points that we became fast friends.

But I thought tonight that I would allow Mr. Amis to introduce himself, and I chose a passage from an essay on Elvis Presley that he wrote some years ago:

"Onto the master bedroom: black suede walls, crimson carpets and curtains, eighty-one square feet of bed with mortuary headboard and speckled arm rests. To one side is an easel supporting a large photograph of Elvis' mother, Gladys; to the other is a sepia-toned portrait of Jesus Christ in his pink nightie [laughter]. On the bed lies Elvis himself, propped up in Goldman's gallant formulation, like a big fat woman recovering from some operation on her reproductive organ.

"Before going to work, Elvis rings his valet and junk-food guru, Hamburger James. After a midnight snack, a hundred dollars worth of Fudgicles, Elvis consumes a pound of Dixie Cotton bacon, four orders of mashed with gravy, plus lots of sauerkraut and crowder peas.

"He sleeps in diapers these days, thick towels pinned around his middle. He weighs over eighteen stone [excuse me, stone is fourteen pounds].

"This is a modern biography, so we now follow Elvis from the bedroom to the bathroom, not that Elvis can get there under his own steam [laughter]; a bodyguard has to carry him. The bulb-studded sanctimus, full of devotional literature, high-powered laxatives, and the King's special medication, i.e., his drugs. Elvis hates drugs addicts, he would like to see them herded into concentration camps. He once had an audience with Nixon offering himself as a figurehead in the battle against dope. He was stoned at the time [laughter]. In fact, he is a drug addict. His doctor must delve between his toes for an unpopped vein.

"In his six-door Batmobile, Elvis leads the motorcade to Memphis Airport. His

private plane, like his house, is a kitch nightmare of velvet and plastic. At dawn, the Lisa Marie, named after Elvis' daughter, lands in Las Vegas. Waiting limos ferry the party to the imperial suite of the Hilton International. Elvis is cranked down into sleep.

"'Mommy, I have to go to the bathroom,' he tells his girlfriend. 'Mommy will take you.' He sleeps, he is cranked awake, he eats with a handgun beside his plate. Bandaged and braced, i.e. corseted, Elvis dons an outfit embroidered with the crown head of King Tutancalan (?) and buckles his $10,000 gladiator's belt. He stumbles and mumbles through his act, climaxing with his American trilogy, "Dixie," "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," and "All my Trials." He comes off stage pouring with sweat and screaming for his medication. Soon he is back in his tomb, vowing that never again will be play 'this fucking Vegas.'"

I thought it best to let Mr. Amis speak for himself. [applause]

Martin Amis: Good evening. Thank you very much for asking me here, and thank you all for showing up to listen. At a recent rubber chicken dinner in Washington, D.C., Princess Diana, British she, regaled the audience with what she claimed was her favorite stanza of verse. It's a bit of harmonial Victoriana that I happen to know well, because my father wrote a parody of it -- it was one of his last squibs. Let's go back for the moment to the original which, brief as it is, and dear though it is, to Princess Diana's heart, she hadn't learned it and was reading it off some kind of placard held up to her by an aide.

It goes like this: "Life is mainly froth and bubble/ Two things stand in stone/Kindness in another's trouble/ Courage in your own."

Now here's my father's version [laughter], more appropriate perhaps to our ironic age -- By the way, the verb to winge means to grumble peevishly [laughter]:

"Life is mainly grief and labor/Two things see you through/Chortling when it hits your neighbor/Wingeing when it's you." [laughter]

We can imagine the first stanza being greeted with a kind of applause that sounds like the thunder of the herd, but for the second we imagine a more individual sound, laugher with its forgiveness, because laughter always forgives.

I'm going to talk about two examples: the interaction of poetry with the general culture. In one case, poetry goes out into society it was adopted by. And in the second, society comes to find the poet. In both cases, what we eventually run up against are the forces of humorlessness, and let me assure you that the humorless as a bunch don't just not know what's funny, they don't know what's serious. They have no common sense, either, and shouldn't be trusted with anything [laughter].

The first case is that of Robert Bly, who is in the audience tonight, and I hope he'll take what I say in good part. He's no stranger to controversy and I'm sure he will come back to me at question time.

In 1919, after prolonged study, the Harvard ethologist William Morton Wheeler

pronounced the male wasp "an ethological non-entity." Animal behaviorists had scrutinized the male wasp and found no behavior. We can well imagine the male wasps to such a verdict, his initial shock and hurt [laughter], his descent into a period of depressed introspection, his eventual decision to improve his act.

But nowadays, according to a recent *Scientific America* "interest in the long-neglected male" is flourishing, a tribute to the animal's broad array of activities. Male humans will surely feel for their brothers in the wasp kingdom; after a phase of relative obscurity, we too have rallied. In fact, we seem to have bounced back pretty well immediately with all kinds of fresh claims on everyone's attentions. Male wounds, male rights, male grandeur, male whimpers of neglect.

What is the deep background on the deep male? From 100,000 BC until, let's say, 1792, Mary Wollenstonecraft and her vindication of the rights of women, there was simply the man, whose main characteristics was that he got away with everything. From 1792 until about 1970, there was, in theory anyway, the "enlightened" man, who, while continuing to get away with everything, agreed to meet women to talk about talks which would lead to political concessions. Post-1970, the enlightened man became the new man, who isn't interested in getting away with anything, who believes, indeed, that the female is not merely equal to the male but is his plain superior.

Well, the new man is becoming an old man, perhaps prematurely, what with all the vacuum cleaning and washing up he's done. There he stands in the kitchen, a diaper in one hand, a pack of Tarot cards in the other [laughter], with his sympathetic pregnancies, his hot flashes and contact pre-menstrual tensions, and with a deep frown on his aging face. Suddenly the time is ripe and now the back door swings open and in he comes, preceded by a gust of testosterone and a few tumbleweeds of pubic hair: the old man, the deep male, "*Iron John*."

Iron John, a short work of psychological, literary and anthropological speculation by the poet Robert Bly, dominated the *New York Times* best-seller list for nearly a year and made, as we shall see, a significant impact on many aspects of American life. In England, it made no impression whatever [laughter]. For this, there are many reasons, but let us begin with the most trivial: *Iron John* runs into trouble, into outright catastrophe, it blows its foot off with the first word of its title. I don't know why I find this quite so funny. What's wrong with me? I don't know why I still scream with laughter every time I think about it. It's because the title itself so firmly establishes the cultural impossibility of England taking *Iron John* straight. Here's the difficulty: Iron is rhyming slang for male homosexual. Just as ginger, ginger beer means queer and oily, oily rag means fag -- so I'm afraid, iron, iron hoof means poof.

There's nothing I can do about this. At my local sports club in Parrington, where I do most of my male bonding, there is much talk about irons, as in "Elton John's an iron, isn't he?," or "That Tom Selleck, he's an iron." So I can easily conjure the fickle leers that would await me if one morning I walked into the club saying, "Well guys, there's a new book about men and masculinity that's going to straighten up all the problems we've been having with our male identity. It says we should spend much more time together and exult in our hairiness and sliminess and zaniness. It says we should leave the women at home and go

camping and take all our clothes off and roughhouse in the woods. It says we should hang out more with older men [laughter]. It's called *Iron John*."

Naturally, it's much too easy for a Brit to laugh at Robert Bly's vision, but why is it so easy? [laughter]. We are British over in Britain, we are skeptical, ironical, et cetera, and are not given, as Americans are, to seeking expert advice on basic matters. Especially such matters as our manhood. In England, maleness itself has become an embarrassment: male consciousness, male pride, male rage, we don't want to hear about.

This, of course, is the very diffidence and inhibition that Bly wants to goad us out of: his exemplar is the old tale of *Iron John*, which "could be ten or twenty-thousand years old," page five, or could be "pre-Christian by a thousand years or so," but which is, at any rate, old.

Let us quickly do *Iron John*, or its first and more interesting half. The kings hunters keep disappearing in the forest. One day, a man appears and offers to investigate. He goes out there, accompanied by his dog which gets tugged into a pond by a naked arm. The pond is bucketed out. At the bottom lies a wild man. The king has him locked up in a cage in the courtyard. One day, the king's eight-year-old son drops his best toy, a golden ball, into the cage of the wild man. A trade is arranged: The golden ball for the wild man's freedom. The boy agrees to open the cage, but he can't find the key. The wild man tells him that the key is to be found beneath his mother's pillow. The boy does as he is told, but is worried about punishment, so the wild man hoists him onto his shoulders, and off to the forest they go.

The story trundles on from here: the golden spring, the trial, the descent into the world, horses battles, ending with the usual stuff involving gory princess, kingdom, treasure. Bly takes the tale, in any event, as an allegory of male maturation.

Iron John, the wild man smothered in his ginger hair, is the deep male, the embodiment and the ...(inaudible) of variously, "Zeus-energy, divine-energy, hurricane-energy, masculine grandeur, and sun-like integrity, brandishing 'the Vagar sword' of sexuality, courage and resolve." And championing the moist, the swampish, the wild, the untame.

Iron John is hard to find and awkward to contain and dangerous to release, but his mentorship brings huge rewards, or his treasure. The story's single beauty, the location of the key to the cage, is also its crux: for the boy must put aside womanly things in his journey from soft male to hard. The rest of his development -- learning to shudder, tasting ashes, warriorhood -- comes over as a cross between adolescent fantasy and a middle-aged encounter group session, with many a crack-up and primal scream. The forest is an arcadia splattered with mud and blood.

What emerges? Feminist writers have done their job on *Iron John*. It hardly needs to be pointed out that Bly is phallo-centric to the ends of his hair, and rollickingly tendentious, even in his imagery: "The King and the Queen send energy down; they resemble the sun and the moon that pierce down through the earth's atmosphere; even on cloudy days, something of their radiant energy

comes through." Yes, but the moon has no energy and doesn't radiate. The Queen merely reflects the heavenly power of the King. Not that Bly is at all forgetful of women's interest. He wants to establish or reÅstablish a world where men are so great that women like being lorded over: "We know that for hundreds of thousands of years men have admired each other and been admired by women, in particular for their activity. Men and women alike once called on men to pierce the dangerous places, carry handfuls of courage to the waterfalls, dust the tails of the wild boars."

After a few hours of that kind of talk, the women will get their reward in the bedroom: "Sometime in a love affair, the lovers make love with the wild man and wild woman right in the room; and if we are those lovers, we may feel certain body cells turn gold that we thought were made entirely of lead." So there will be that [laughter]: wild sex. Bly knows about women's ascensionism but he thinks it "appropriate for women to describe it." We will confine ourselves here to men's ascensionism. The dialogue had better start soon, before the yodeling gets any louder.

Bly is a poet, he is a big cat, so to speak, and not some chipmunk from the how-to culture. But it is the how-to culture that has picked up on his book. And Bly's utopia is as remote in time as the story of *Iron John*, and can be recreated now only as a Rockwellian fantasy: the gruff dads with their tools and their guileless dungarees.

At the end of *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, Mellers tells Connie that everything would be all right if men sang and danced every evening, dressed in tight red trousers [laughter]. Bly, who likes his Lawrence, can think of nothing to do about the modern landscape except turn away from it. *Iron John* finally settles on the mind as a tangled mop of vivid and cumbrous nostalgies.

And yet, for a while *Iron John* transformed male consciousness in the United States. The wild men weekends and initiation, adventure holidays and whatnot, which were big business, may prove to be ephemeral. But what does one make of the unabashed references in the press to "men's liberation" and the men's movement and the fact that there are now at least half a dozen magazines devoted to nothing else? Changing men, journeymen, man.

Men, the male argument goes, are oppressed. Coming out second best on longevity, suicide rates, drug use, hopelessness and work hours. The political platform suddenly nailed together, included the federal encouragement of boys clubs and scout trails, male-only early grade classes taught by men, right down to such things as male-friendly tax breaks for home-based employment.

Now that men are just another minority, the way Ford or the way ...(inaudible) lies with eco-masculinity: and emphasis on husbandry which will "affirm the seed-bearing creativity capacity of the male."

It is relevant, I think, to ask what *Iron John* is like around the house [laughter]. Relevant because Bly's average reader is not a poet and a critic, but a weightlifter from Brooklyn. How tight a ship does our Captain Bly run? There he is on the back cover, assuming the stance of a man warming the backs of his legs over a log fire, with wispy white hair, specs, tapestry vest, crimson cravat.

He is, it seems to me, that familiar being with the strong personality. His kind of strength is innate and not acquired and is always looking for ways to expand: "Zeus-energy is male authority excepted for the sake of the community." Sounds like a marvelously elemental excuse for getting away with everything. Zeus-energy, hurricane-energy, here is something that sweeps all before it. Would you want to tell Zeus to take out the garbage? Would you want to ask a hurricane to wipe its feet on the mat?

Feminists have often claimed a moral equivalence for sexual and racial prejudice. There are certain affinities and one or two of these affinities are mildly and paradoxically encouraging. Sexism is like racism: we all feel such impulses. Our parents feel them more strongly than we feel them; our children, we trust, will feel them less strongly than we feel them. People don't change or improve much, but they do evolve. It is very slow.

Feminism, endlessly diverging towards the Bentimite or the ungrasped, the rarefied; the new man, emotional bisexuality; the old man, *Iron John*-ism. These are convulsions, some of them necessary, some of them not so necessary, along the way. Intensified by the contemporary search for role and guise and form.

Now, Philip Larkin. In 1985, the year of his death, Philip Larkin, a big, fat, bald librarian at the University of Hull, was unquestionably England's unofficial laureate: our best-loved poet since the war; better loved for our poet than John Betjetman, who was loved also for his charm, his famous beagle, his patrician Bohemianism and his televisual charisma, all of which Larkin notably lacked.

Ten years later, Larkin is now something like a pariah, or an untouchable. The word "Larkinesque" used to evoke the wistful, the provincial, the crepuscular, the unloved. Now it evokes the scabrous and the supremacist. The word "Larkinism" used to stand for a certain sort of staid, decent, wary Englishness. Now it refers to the articulate far right.

In the early eighties, the common mind imagined Larkin as a reclusive drudge, bespectacled, ...(inaudible) clipped, slumped in a shabby library, gaslight against the dusk. In the mid-nineties however, we see a fuddled Scrooge and bigot, his singlet clad form barely visible through a mephitis of alcohol, anality and spank magazines.

The reaction against Larkin has been unprecedentedly violent as well as unprecedentedly hypocritical, tendentious and smug. Its energy does not, could not derive from literature -- it derives from ideology, or from the vaguer promptings of a new ethos.

In a sense, none of this matters, because only the poems matter, but the spectacle holds the attention. This is critical revisionism in an eye-catching new outfit. The reaction, like most reactions, is just an overreaction, and to get an overreaction you need plenty of overreactors -- somebody has to do it.

There are those who believe that the trouble began with the *Collected Poems* in 1988. Its editor, Anthony Thwaite, who also edited Larkin's *Selected Letters*, decided not to segregate the published poems from the unpublished. So instead of the three volumes of fairly finished work, with all the other stuff tucked away

at the back, we get a looser and more promiscuous corpus, containing squibs and snippets, rambling failures later abandoned, lecherous doggerel, and confessional curiosities like the frightening late poem "Love Again": Love again/whanking at ten past three/Surely he's taken her home by now/The bedroom hot as a bakery/The drink gone dead/Without showing how to meet tomorrow and afterwards/And the usual pain/Like dysentery.

Larkin the man had started to look a little stranger. The *Collected Poems* didn't open him to attack, but it might have softened him up. The frontal assault began in the autumn of 1992, with the publication of the *Selected Letters*. The charge was led by Tom Paulin, who is well- known in the U.K. for his literary criticism, his poetry, his controversialism, and his small-screen losses of temper. Paulin articulated the case against. It centered on accusations of "race hatred, racism, misogyny and quasi-Fascist views." Paulin summarized: "For the present, this selection stands as a distressing and in many ways revolting compilation, which imperfectly reveals and conceals the sewer under the national monument Larkin became."

I remember thinking when I saw the fiery Paulin's opening shot, We're not really going to do this, are we? But the new ethos was already in place, and yes, we really were going to do this -- on Paulin's terms, too. His language set the tone for the final assault and mop-up, which came with the publication of Andrew Motions, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*. Revolting. Sewer. Such language is essentially unstable. It calls for a contest of the passions and hopes that the fight will get dirty. Thus, the reception of the life was marked by the quivering nostril and by frequent recourse to the pomaded hankie, the smelling salts and the sick bag [laughter].

Writing in the *London Times*, Peter Ackroyd attributed "a rancid and insidious Philistinism" to the foul-mouthed bigot. Similarly, Brian Appleyard saw or nosed a "repellent, smelly, inadequate masculinity in this provincial grotesque." A.N. Wilson, in a piece graciously entitled: "Larkin, the Old Friend I Never Liked," [laughter] said that "Larks" was really a rather nasty, prematurely aged man, and "really a kind of petty-Bourgeois Fascist." Really a nut case.

We get the idea of the breadth of the debate when we see that it extended to the normally tranquil pages of the Library Association Record, alongside humdrum headlines like "New Approach to DNHPL Review" and "Funding Blow to NVQ Lead Body." Here, an unnamed columnist called "the commoner" compared Larkin to David Irving, the Hitler fancier and look- alike. The commoner also said in conclusion, that Larkin's books should be banned.

Now, the more senior commentators in the mainstream press were, of course, not so impetuous. But offended senses rouse the will and the will looks around for something to do about it. They can't ban or burn Larkin's books. What they can embark on is the more genteel process of literary demotion. A third alternative would be to group Larkin with a multitude of other major writers who harbored undemocratic or pre-democratic opinions. But they're stirred up fore that, the offense is too rank and too immediate. So, "a sporadically excellent minor poet who's been raised to an undeserved momumentality." Appleyard. "Essentially a minor poet who, for purely local and temporary reasons, acquired a large reputation." Ackroyd. "He seems to be more and more minor; the poems

are good, yes, but not that good, for Chrissake." Wilson [laughter].

In late April, when the smoke was clearing up the appearance of the biography, Andrew Motion reviewed the controversy in his column in *The London Observer*, sadder and wiser, not shocked, just disappointed. Motion identified several regrettable tendencies in the anti-Larkin crusade: the lack of socio-historical context -- Larkin, alas, was pretty typical of his time and place; the failure to distinguish private from public utterance: "We need to remind ourselves that we are dealing with Dr. Larkin here, not Dr. Goebbels." "The evidence of people struggling in the straitjacket of political correctness and the naive 'conflation of life and art.'" "Such conflation," Motion went on, "rests on the assumption that art is merely a convulsive expression of personality. Sometimes, in its purest lyric moments, it may be. More generally, it is the suppression of personality and adaptation and enlargement." It's intensely disappointing to read literary commentators who write as if they don't understand that art exists at a crucial distance from its creator, which sounds, and is, very sensible. But what we can also hear is the whir of bicycle spokes, for the *Observer* piece is in fact a Tour de France of back-pedalling. Unstridently, often rather hesitantly and even sensitively, Motion's books commits all the sins that he later must be wryly shaking his head over.

It is not a position so much as an attitude. *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* is competently managed and chasteningly thorough. It is also an anthology of the contemporary tendencies towards the literal, the conformist and the amnesiac. Future historians of taste, wishing to study the Larkin fluctuation, will not have to look very much further.

The book, the life, is rich in the authentic poetry of dowdiness and deprivation, although Motion hears it faintly or not at all. Hardly anything in Larkin's letters is as swimmingly grim as the little clump of words and numerals in their top write hand corners: Flat 13, 13 Elmwood Avenue, Belfast. 200 Halgate, Coddingham, East Yorkshire. 192A Halgate, Coddingham, Yorkshire. 172 London Road, Leshishire . "I am established in an attic with a small window, a bed, an arm chair, a basket chair, a carpet, a reading lamp that doesn't work," -- he goes into caps whenever he's really angry -- "a small electric fire that DOESN'T WORK, and a few books." Bentworth, Kings Street, Wellington, Sarub. Even his holiday spots sound far from festive. For example, Dickscart Hotel, Sark. What the sap rising as Larkin contemplates his summer break:

"My holidays loom like fearful obstacle races, maladied Weymouth, with no sleeper probably, and no reserved seats. They reserve seats, it seems, only on days when there will be enough to go around. On July 25th and August the 1st, the two busiest days, they don't. I am traveling on both."

One significant address was 73 Coatinend, Warrick. This was the house that contained Larkin's parents, Sidney and Eva. Motion is quietly persuasive about the feel of the household, with its airlessness and constraint. Nor does he make too much of the sexy discoveries about Sidney Larkin's pro-German, even pro-Nazi bent. It seems that Sidney attended several Nuremburg rallies in the thirties. Bizarrely, he kept some sort of mechanical statute of Hitler on his mantlepiece, "which, at the touch of a button, leapt into a Nazi salute." Even a Nazi might have found that mannequin a little too kitch and insufficiently

serious. Old Sidney, a city treasurer, sounds like a miserably typical eccentric of the pre-war English provinces, a moot tyrant who set the emotional barometer, and set it low for everyone around him.

In an unpublished autobiographical fragment, Larkin wrote, "When I try to tune into my childhood, the dominant emotions I pick up are overwhelmingly fear and boredom. I never left the house without the sense of walking into cooler, cleaner, saner and pleasanter atmosphere."

Sidney died in 1948, when Larkin was in his mid-twenties, and Eva then began a widowhood that was to last almost as long as her marriage. During those twenty-nine years, Larkin wrote to her several times a week. Her letters to him are almost autistic in their flair for the trivial: "I do hope you achieve some warmth after loading all your apparel on the bed like that. Of course, you ought not to have changed those pants; remember that I though it very unwise at the time."

"Larkin's life," Motion writes, "was not 'much diversified by event.'" Which is one way of putting it. What he gives us, then, is chronic inactivity in an epic frame, 570 pages. Which is one way of doing it.

Larkin grew up, studied at Oxford, had a series of jobs as a librarian, grew fat, grew frail and died. War, travel, marriage, children, none of this ever happened to him. He wrote nine to five, then wrote, then drank. He coped with his mother, he corresponded with his friends, and he had perhaps half a dozen love affairs, and that was all.

The attics digs lodgings period lasted from 1943, when Larkin left home, to 1955, when he arrived at the Hull, where he would duly remain. In such "hide box habitats", Larkin's nature was being measured, and his sexuality was fermenting or congealing. Earlier, at Oxford he had briefly kept a dream journal. This is Motion: "Dreams in which he's in bed with men outnumber dreams in which he's trying to seduce a women, but the world in which these encounters occur is uniformly drab and disagreeable: Nazis, black dogs, excrement and underground rooms appear time and time again; and so do the figures of parents: aloof but omnipresent." Which sure looks like a mess.

Larkin had also devoted a ridiculous amount time and energy to the composition, under the pseudonym Brunette Coleman, of prose fictions about school girls: "As Pam finally pulled Marie's tunic down over her black stockinged legs, Miss Holden, pausing only to snatch a cane from the cupboard," etc.

Along the way, he was developing a set of sexual attitudes as an obvious and understandable defense his shyness, bad stammer, his unattractiveness: "My baldness seems to be keeping its end up well [laughter]" he wrote at the age of 26. And his fear of failure and unrequited expense. He was always psychopathically cheap. Thus, "Women repel me inconceivably. They are shits." Or "All women are stupid beings." To his childhood friend, J.B. Sutton, he confessed to feelings of anxiety and cowardliness. He worried that he had been "doctored in some way." But to his own peer group, he liked to sound defiant: "Don't you think it's absolutely shameful that men have to pay for women

without being allowed to shag the women afterwards as a matter of course? I do. Simply disgusting. It makes me angry. Everything about the relationship between men and women makes me angry. It's all a fucking balls-up, it might have been planned by the army or the Ministry of Food."[laughter].

On another occasion, he confided, "I don't like to take a girl out and spend circa five pounds, when I can toss off in five minutes free and have the rest of the evening to myself." [laughter].

Those five minutes, it seems, would normally be spent under the auspices of pornography. Once, loitering around a sex shop in London, Larkin was approached by the owner, who quietly asked, "Was it bondage, sir?" Actually, it was bondage: bondage, spanking intertwined schoolgirls. He was mightily gratified when he first got his hands on a copy of a magazine called *Swish*: "Jolly good stuff, *Swish*," wrote Larkin in his thank-you letter to the friend who had sent it to him.

This area of fantasy is referred to in the correspondence when Larkin complains about the kind of letter he isn't getting. Extracts from Larkin's "dream" mail: "Dear Mr. Larkin, I expect it's jolly cheeky for a schoolgirl to...." "Dear Dr. Larkin, My friend and I had an argument as to which of us has the biggest breasts, and we wondered if you would act as..." "Dear Dr. Larkin, My youngest, she's fourteen and quite absurdly stuck on your poems -- but then, she's advanced in all ways -- refused to wear a...."

Today, we all know how we feel or how we're supposed to feel about such attitudes, especially when we have shorn them of individuality and self-mockery. Motion duly reaches for the nearest words, misogyny, which at least in theory describes a real condition; and the still more problematic, sexism. He spots "a masturbatory impulse" behind several of Larkin's poems [laughter]. "Of Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album," Motion says, "The poem connects with the other pictures Larkin liked to gaze at: the photographs in pornographic magazines. The sex life they entail, solitary, exploitative, is a cruel version of the pleasure he takes in the album." Exploitative is the key word here. It suggests that while you are free to be as sexually miserable as you like, the moment you exchange hard cash for a copy of Playboy, you are in the pornography perpetuation business, and your misery becomes political.

The truth is that pornography is just a sad affair all around. It is there because men in their hundreds of millions want it to be there. Killing pornography is like killing the messenger. The extent to which Larkin was "dependent" on pornography should be a measure our pity, or even our sympathy. But Motion hears the beep of his political pager, and he stands to attention.

The two poems he specifically convicts of sexism were written in 1965, at which point sexism had no currency and no meaning.

This is a mild enough incident, but one wonders how the literary revisionists and cannon cleansers can bear to take the money. Imagine a school of sixteenth century art criticism that spent its time contently jeering at the past for not knowing about perspective.

Applied to the individual, sexism has always been a non-clarifier. Unlike the relationship between the races, racism describes a much simpler hostility. The relationship between the sexes is based on biological interdependency, which takes complex form. Still, the biological imperative was something Larkin never felt.

A virgin himself until the age of twenty-three, he was excited by virginity in women. His first love, Ruth Berman, was not much more than a girl when he took up with her. His other comparatively great romantic love, Mave Brennan, was principled and religious and took many years to wear down. Larkin's thing with Mave was accommodated within and balanced against a steadier relationship with his longtime companion, Monica Jones. The two women knew about each other. Larkin expended a lot of effort managing to hang onto both. Thus, the reader is almost as scandalized as Andrew Motion when, after so much temporizing, after so many survived ultimatums, Larkin starts an affair with a third women, Betty Macarow, his secretary.

Now, you might perhaps feel that having one girlfriend is happenstance, having two girlfriends is coincidence, but having three girlfriends is enemy action. After registering his astonishment of this latest turn, Motion quickly decides "it is all of a piece with Larkin's previous behavior." There is selfishness and duplicity, there is even the touch, he believes, of seneurism. One can almost hear Motion begging Larkin to seek professional help. Why can't be more sensible, caring, normal?

But of course, Larkin at fifty-two didn't have three women, he had four. He had Eva Larkin, who just went on and on living. "My mother," he wrote in 1977, "not content with being motionless, deaf and speechless, is now going blind." [laughter]. That's what you get for not dying, you see." [laughter]. It's been pointed out in a London paper that of the score or so major reviews of the biography, none was written by a woman. Were the literary editors feeling protective? This won't be a pretty sight, stand back, my dear. The job was left to the hardy menfolk, with their insecurities, their contemporary ...(inaudible).

It occurs to you that women may be less inclined to be baffled or repelled by Larkin's peculiar chaos, and less inclined to reach for the buzzwords as they are. Just as a Philistine does not on the whole devote his life to his art, so a misogynist does not devote his inner life to women. Larkin's men friends devolved into pen-pals. Such intimacies as he shared, he shared with women.

Before moving on to the charge of racial hatred, it will be necessary to answer to younger readers, those under about seventy, the following question: What is a correspondence? Younger readers know what a phone message is and what a fax is, they probably know what a letter is. But they don't know what a correspondence is. Words are not deeds. In published poems -- we think first of Eliot's "Jew", words edge closer to deeds. In Celine's anti-Semitic textbooks, words get as close to deeds as words can well get. Blood libels scrawled on front doors are deed.

In a correspondence, words are hardly even words. They are soundless cries and whispers, "gouts of bile," as Larkin characterized his political opinions, ways of

saying, "Gloomy old sod, aren't I?" Or more simply, Grrr.

Correspondences are self-dramatizations. Above all, a word in a letter is never your last word on any subject. There was no public side to Larkin's prejudices, and nothing that could be construed as a racist --the word suggest a system of thought, rather than an absence of thought, which would be closer to the reality, closer to the jolts and twitches of self response. Like moot cliches, Larkin's racial snarls were inherited prepositions shamefully unexamined, humiliatingly average. These were his "spots of commonness," in George Eliot's sense. He failed to shed them.

Politically correct is a better designation than (French). Both bespeak a strong commitment to the herd instinct, but P.C. suggests the necessary regimentation. Although it is French in its philosophical origins, P.C. begins with the very American and attractive and an honorable idea: that no one should feel ashamed of what he was born as, of what he is, of what he does. Of what he does, of what he says, yes. But not ashamed of what he is.

Viewed at its grandest, P.C. is an attempt to accelerate evolution. To speak truthfully, while that's still okay, everybody is a racist or has racial prejudices. This is because human beings tend to like the similar, the familiar, the familial. Again, I say, I am a racist. I am not as racist as my parents. My children will not be as racist as I am. Freedom from racial prejudice is what we hope for down the line. Impatient with this hope, this process, P.C. seeks to get things done right now. In a generation or at the snap of a finger, you can simply announce yourself to be purged of these atavisms.

But to achieve this, P.C. will need a busy executive wing and much invigilation. What P.C. will actually entrain is another time, and of course, consciousness, to add to the megatons of false consciousness already abroad, and then a backlash.

In Andrew Motion's book, we have the constant sense that Larkin is somehow falling short of the cloudless emotional health enjoyed by, for instance, Andrew Motion. [laughter]. Also the sense, as Motion invokes his like-minded contemporaries, that Larkin is being judged by a newer, cleaner, braver, saner world.

In the 1968 poem "Posterity," Larkin envisages: "Shit, Jake Bolokofski, my biographer." This is Jake: "I'm stuck with this old fart at least a year," says Jake, not bothering "to hide some slight impatience with his destiny. What's he like? Christ, I just told you. One of those old-type, natural, fouled-up guys."

Jake then, is hardly ideal for the job, but in the space of a few lines, he gets further than Motion gets. He is asking himself the right questions. What is the difference between being like him and being like me? What is the difference between then and living now? Motion maintains the tone of an overworked psychotherapist dealing with a hidebound depressive who, exasperatingly, keeps failing to respond to the latest modern treatments. There's nothing visceral in it. The mood of the book is one of impatience, mounting impatience.

It sometimes seems that the basis of the vexation is that Larkin was born in 1922, rather than more recently. Not only is he not well-adjusted, he doesn't

want to do anything about it. There are no serious shots at self-improvement or personal growth. Larkin left it too late to "change his ways." Even when he spots the difficulty, he "gives little sign of wanting to make analysis part of a process of change." He doesn't show a healthy enjoyment of positive experiences like sex and travel. Of Larkin's first love, Motion says, "The best he could do in the way of celebrating physical tenderness was to say, 'Her hands intend no harm.'" Of a late and rare trip abroad, Motion says, "The best he could manage was a grudging admission that he had 'survived.'"

With women generally, Larkin morbidly refuses to be caring and upfront. He is "deceitful, a self-dementing liar, and his affairs are characterized by indecision, lies and contradictions."

After a while, the book starts to feel like some kind of (French). Motion is extremely irritated by Larkin's extreme irritability. He's always complaining that Larkin is always complaining. One thinks of a remark in the letters, when Larkin is commiserating with and complaining to a woman friend about the inconveniences of Christmas: "Yours is the harder course, I see," writes Larkin. "On the other hand, mine is happening to me."

Motion is only writing a life, Larkin had to live it. Toward the end, even Larkin's fear of death, so central, so formative, so remorseless, has come to strike Motion as just another scaling of insalubrious egotism. After seeing the *Times'* obituary for Bruce Montgomery, a really close friend, Larkin said in a letter, "It makes it all sort of realer." Motion continues, "Larkin aired the same sorrowful but self-interested feeling in a letter to Robert Conquest: 'Funeral was today,' he reported. 'All very sad. It makes the world seem very temporary.'" Since when are intimations of mortality at a friend's gravesite self-interested? But perhaps all such thoughts, and perhaps mortality itself are now suspect. Don't dwell on death, it's anti-life.

Biography, besides be a lowly trade, may also be attritional. Perhaps Motion, who knew Larkin, who knew Howell and who is a poet, had his empathic power blunted rather than sharpened by the years of research and composition. He felt crowded out.

In his *Observer piece*, which contained more about faces than a battalion parade ground, Motion spoke of the relationship between art and life: "All good biographers insist on separation as well as connection." No. What they do is insist on connection. And Motion connects ad nauseam: "Obviously, the spur, the message for Ruth in these poems, put these fears into the mouth of the precise source." Feeding off his suppressed rage, the only begetters of many of his poems, and so on. Only begetters, however, are a romantic convention. Poems don't have only begetters. At one point, Motion says that the influence of one of Larkin's woman friends "extended beyond the poems in which she appears." Appears. Just as Marla Maples appears in the "Will Rogers Follies."

Biographers may claim separation, but what they helplessly insist on is connection. They have to. Well, what are they about. What the hell are they doing day after day, year after year, gossiping? Ringing changing in the zeitgeist? If the life doesn't somehow account for the art.

"You know, I was never a child," wrote Larkin at the age of fifty-seven. "I really feel somewhat at the last gasp. Carry me from the spot, time, with thy all-forgiving wave," he wrote at the age of twenty-seven. Arriving in Hull, aged thirty-two, he wrote to his mother, "Oh dear, the future now seems very bleak and difficult." It is in the word difficult that we hear the authentic quaver of the valetudinarian. "I'm so finished," he wrote to a woman friend when the end really was getting closer.

His last words were spoken to a woman, to the nurse who was holding his hand. Perhaps we all have the last words ready when we go into the last room. Perhaps the thing about last words is not how good they are, but whether we can get them out. What Larkin said faintly was, "I'm going to the inevitable." Inevitable in the sense that death could never be avoided as a fate and as a fixation. "I don't want to write anything at present," he said. "In fact, thinking it over, I want to die. I'm very impressed by this sort of unrealized death wish of mine," Larkin wrote at eighteen. [laughter].

They probably have a name for it now, something like early death awareness syndrome [laughter]. What we get at forty or forty-five, he had all along. He never did anything about it, because you didn't then. He seemed to nurture this adolescent lassitude, he made it his own patch of melancholy and tried to write the poetry that belonged there. Humanly, it turned him into an old woman, like his mother. "I bought a pair of shoes and they don't even try to keep the water out." [laughter].

Given his opportunities for variety and expansion, Larkin makes Mr. Woodhouse in *Emma* look like Evil-Kanevil. [laughter] But what redeems and monumentalizes this slow drizzle, what makes the letters a literary experience and the life just one thing after another, is the comedy of candor: "The U.S. edition of *High Windows* is out, with a photograph of me that cries out for the caption 'Faith healer or heartless fraud.'" "And then my sagging face, an egg sculpted in lard with goggles on. None of my clothes fit either. When I sit down, my tongue comes out." [laughter].

A life is one kind of biography and the letters are another kind of life, but the internal story, the true story is in the *Collected Poems*. The recent attempts by Motion and others to pass judgement on Larkin look awfully green and pale, compared with the self-examinations of the poetry. They think they judge him? No, he judges them. His indivisibility judges their hedging and trimming. His honesty judges their watchfulness. "If my darling were once to decide not to stop at my eyes, but to jump like Alice with floating skirt into my head, she would find herself looped with a creep of varying light, monkey-brown, fish-grey, a string of infected circles loitering like bullies about to coagulate. For something sufficiently toadlike squats in me, too. Its hunkers, the heavy is hard luck and cold as snow."

Larkin the man is separated from us historically by changes in the self. For his generation, you were what you were and that was that. It made you unswervable and adamantine. My father had this quality. I don't. None of us do. There are too many forces at work, there are too many fronts to cover.

Still, a price has to be paid for not caring what others think of you, and Larkin paid it. He couldn't change the cards he was dealt. What poor hands we hold, when we face each other honestly. His poems insist on this helplessness: "And I meet full face on dark mornings the bestial visor bent in by the blows of what happen to happen. Send no money. Most things are never meant. Going. Going. The unbeatable slow machine that brings you what you'll get, the life with the hole in it. Life is first boredom, then fear. Whether or not we use it, it goes, and leaves what something hidden from us chose. And age. And then the only end of age. ...(inaudible) sun."

My most enduring memory of Larkin is a composite one, formed from the many visits he paid to the series of flats and houses where I spent my first ten years in Swansea, South Wales. We were told that Larkin didn't really like children. I've since come to the conclusion that it was my brother and I who put him off. And we tended to stay out of his way. But I always felt a kind of -- although he never came out and gamboled with us in the garden, he did not tell us magical bedtime stories. But when I address my eager, timid, childish feelings in his presence, I find solidity as well as ...(inaudible), and tolerant humor held in reserve, as well as the given melancholy.

In Swansea, it was always raining, whatever the season. I remember Larkin coming in from the rain or preparing to go out in it, fussy, cumbrous, long-suffering. Rain as an element and an ambiance, provides a backdrop to the life and to this very English story: "On 13th of November, Larkin traveled through heavy rain to Wellington for his interview, clutching his green-bound copy of *The Public Library System of Great Britain*. Heavy rain, driving rain, torrential rain. Under the heading "Five Don'ts for Old Creatures," Larkin wrote to his mother, "Four: Don't waste time worrying about rain. This is a wettish country, lots of it falls. It always has done and always will." What was Hull? Hull was as dull as rain. Rain was what Larkin felt marriages turned into, rain was what love and desire eventually become.

"The Wits and Weddings," describes a rail journey to London in which the poet witnesses the aftermath of a wedding party, as at every stop the train fills up with fresh couples about to begin their honeymoons and the rest of their live. "London approaches. And it was nearly done, this frail traveling coincidence, and what it held stood ready to be loosed with all the power that being changed can give. We slowed again, and as the titan breaks took hold, there swelled a sense of falling, like an ...(inaudible) shower sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain. Everybody knows they fuck you up, your mom and dad." And the thrilled finality of that poem's closing stanza, this be the verse: "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."

But there was always a sense of romantic balance in Larkin, however reluctant, however thwarted. This be the verse of a sister poem called, "The Trees." After finishing it, Larkin wrote, "Bloody awful tripe," at the foot of the manuscript. But the last lines stand: "Yet still, the unresting castle's thresh in full-growth thickness every May. Last year is dead, they seem to say. Begin afresh, afresh, afresh."

In conclusion, I'll just say that when this piece appeared, Milan Kundera very kindly sent me a copy of his book of essays *Testaments Betrayed*. On page 240, I read the following: "Man proceeds in the fog. In the fog we are free, but it is the freedom of a person in fog. Yet when he looks back to judge people from the past, he sees no fog on their path. From his present, which was their far-away future, their path looks perfectly clear to him, good visibility all the way. Looking back, he sees the path, he sees the people proceeding, he sees their mistakes, but he doesn't see the fog."

I think that these are words to which we can all ascend, and is there any good reason why we cannot extend our multi-cultural generosity to include another dimension? That of time. The past, too, is another country. Its ghosts may look strange and frightening and slightly misshapen in body and mind, but all the more reason then, to welcome them to our shores.

Thank you very much. [applause]

Thank you. Are there any questions? Don't be shy. If you have a question, come to the microphone.

Robert Bly: Can I say a word?

Martin Amis:Certainly.

Robert Bly: I have a question. So, that was a superb piece on Larkin.

Martin Amis: Thank you.

Robert Bly: And you really came into what you know about him, quoted many wonderful things that he said. I thought there was greater poetry in him than you brought out, despite all the nastiness of his character, there was great poetry in there, don't you think so?

Martin Amis: Well, I think he used the letters as a way of clearing away the detritus in his mind. But for me, I accept the voice, and as I say, it is a literary experience, reading that book, and occasionally you're jolted and scandalized, but you accept self-mockery, and that seems to me the essence of his voice, is one of self-mockery.

Robert Bly: So I thought that was wonderful. As for our relationship, I think that when Robert Graves left England to take a serious study of mythology, he was thinking of people like Martin Amis when he said, "Goodbye to all that." There is some hatred of the metaphorical in you, and in, as you know, many English people now. There's something of a Mr. Gradgrind in *Hard Times*.

Martin Amis: I know.

Robert Bly: And he sees these English people who say, I want facts, just give me the facts. And he tried to point out that that leads to injustice and poverty and early death.

So, I think that's what Graves meant by this terrible "thinness" in the English

imagination. And this desire that anything grand will be mocked immediately. We have an adolescence in America; the adolescent male is often one who is in the football games and thinks it's terrifically grand. But they, in a way, can find a way onward.

But there's something adolescent often in the English, in which the wit is --

Martin Amis: Philistinism is the word you're --

Robert Bly: The which?

Martin Amis: Philistinism is the word you're searching for, I think.

Robert Bly: Yes, it's synonymous with the Britishist ...(inaudible). So, there's something in which wit is very adult and the feelings are infantile. The longing for nastiness is infantile, the longing to make fun of *Iron John* or anyone that comes along from a tradition in which there are kings or queens or grandiose -- there's something adolescent in that.

I just wanted to say what I felt, because I went to England and I noticed the roars of humor. The first time I got to England, I met a woman who reviewed *Iron John* for the *Literary Review*, and she said, "The funniest book I read all year, I laughed all the way through it."

But what I found was strange: that when we were English men, I was stunned to find out how much anger they had at their fathers, more deep than the American men. And I asked, "Why is this?" And they said, "Well, the kind of people that come to the things you do, which would be university-educated people and so on, tend to have been sent to public schools by their own fathers. And many of them consider that a real betrayal. They went through terrible things at the public schools."

So, I was stunned that the hatred of the father is so deep in England, that I don't see much possibility, as you do, of any kind of men's movement there. And the curious mocking that you were doing of men in the beginning, to me is an expression of that hatred of the father.

Martin Amis: Not in this case. [applause]

Robert Bly: But it could be catchy, you know. I think he's right, but I say, we have psychic plagues in this country, we have a lot of them. And that could be a little catchy.

Martin Amis: Well, I'm afraid, as I said, the English are inhibited and do not seek advice on these matters, and struggle, as Larkin did, struggle through them. They take the cards they're dealt.

Robert Bly: I thought that was marvelous, the way you described how he really fought with that. So I think this is really an evening with Larkin. I don't think it had anything to do with political correctness, nothing to do with me. To me, you reminded me of a colonialist who brings on myself as a black-faced comedian for ten minutes, before you start your speech. Because, like the colonialist,

knowing nothing of the black face, you know nothing of the things that we have done. What you've picked up is from the media. And the idea that we rolled around naked in the woods, are you crazy? I'm from Minnesota [laughter]. We wouldn't do that in a thousand years. What the media picked up, someone down in Texas who did that and then it followed on, and all of you picked that up, and didn't bother investigating what went on next.

So that was a disappointment, to me. So, how do you feel about that? That you study someone like Larkin so beautifully, but then you come here and you simply say --

Martin Amis: Well, I think they're parallel tales. I think what you express in your book is protected by learning and all the rest. One would expect from a cultivated man that once these ideas get loosed into society, then they are taken humorlessly and literally.

Robert Bly: By you.

Martin Amis: No, by the *Iron John* weekender.

Robert Bly: You know, there's something true in what he's saying here. The whole question is, when you bring in mythology from Europe and other places, how much of that should you make public, how much of that should you bring out? From the point of view of the esoteric, it's too serious. And he's saying there are many times you find hardly educated people take that thing and run with it literally, and it's damaging to the mythology and to themselves.

But that's always been the American way to try to do that. And the other way is to protect yourself so completely, or protect the mythology so completely that people starve, for not having any ...(inaudible).

And William Carlos Williams says, you know, "There's something in poetry, and people every day starve for the lack of what is there." So I think that's all I have to say, and I want to honor you for speaking so beautifully about Larkin. [applause]

Martin Amis: Thank you. Another question here?

Questioner: I have a question. My question is of a slightly different nature. It's not about Larkin and it's not about *Iron John*. I hope you won't object to me taking this opportunity to ask you about one of your own characters.

Martin Amis: Sure.

Questioner: My question is about John Self from the book *Money*. And I'm just curious how you did your research for that character, or if it was largely autobiographical. And if so, would you care out to go out for a few drinks after this event?

Martin Amis: Well, I did do -- I seldom do research for fiction, probably because I think - - you know, Tom Woolf said that all the great stories are out there and we should go and get them and writing should be ninety percent

research and ten percent inspiration. I always thought it should be exactly the other way around. But the story's no good unless you, as much as I enjoyed his book, the story has to be transformed by your own psyche, so that, instead of going out to research things, I just leave it too late to do that, and then make it all up.

In *Money*, I did do a bit of research though. With my wife's permission, I went to one of those parlors on Third Avenue, and a little snob of an escort girl questioned me about Lady Diana, as she then was, throughout our encounter. But that was the extent of it. Really, how it works is that you have to assume, when you create an character, even an extreme character, that he has some universality. And even though I feel I'm only one or two percent John Self, I then shed the other ninety-eight percent and become that character for the duration of the novel. And when I'm in my study I'm John Self, but when I come out of there, I'm me.

You don't, in fact, have to go very far down that road to see it all.

Questioner: I have a question about this need of people to hate, and if there's no one left to hate, they seem to focus on hating people who they think are full of hatred. So you have this --I think Samuel Butler divided people into hares and hounds, and it seems like the hounds are always in danger of having complete upper hand.

I was wondering if -- in the way this pursuit of people who have, there are people who are suspected of racism, sexism, various kinds of hatred. Isn't that the real powerful thing, the thing that one needs to be more watchful for?

I ask this, because I think in your presentation you tried to be somewhat even-handed. And then the question is, whether this even-handedness isn't -- but politically, what one always needs to be worried about are things that seem to be increasing in power. And it seems, to me at least, that the left in general is the thing to be on the lookout for. I mean, people don't resurrect people and revise them for sympathies, Communist sympathies or Stalinist sympathies. They resurrect people because of sympathies with Hitler, or Fascist sympathies.

And even when you get someone who seems in some way to be on the right, *Iron John*, masculinity, etc., he seems to get the effect by being somewhat left-wing. He's complaining - it's almost as if the male figure is, in some way -- to get attention, has to be portrayed as a victim, I mean, using the tactics and the way of the left to get attention.

Martin Amis: I speak of someone who's always been "just" to the left. And can't imagine being anything else. And the reason why we're easier on people who are Communist sympathizers than Fascist sympathizers is that the ideology is very attractive. And no one can deny that, and everyone should go through the stage of believe that. I think it's part of growing up, to feel --

Questioner:I would deny it, but --

Martin Amis: So you went straight into being right wing. Congratulations [laughter].

Questioner: I just seriously think that that's one of the signs of one side being so strong and powerful. I mean, just in the Middle Ages, it was inconceivable to people to imagine that someone who was an atheist could in any way be a human being. That was almost beyond the pale.

It seems to me it's just taken for granted today that a healthy human being is someone who sympathizes with the left. I mean, there's something sick or wrong with someone who's on the right.

And of course, you can always produce examples. There are people -- there's always -- I certainly don't find Mr. Larkin to have been an example of a healthy human being, but it seems to me that there are plenty of examples of people who sympathize with the left who one can say are very unhealthy, unattractive of humanity.

And it seems to me that the balance is definitely shifted one way, and that --

Martin Amis: Well yes, no doubt. People should be allowed their own evolution. I said to my father just before he died, when Larkin first was ...(inaudible), I said, "Hang on a minute, your letters are going to be edited and published, I bet they're just as bad as Larkin, if not worse. What are you going to do about it?," I said. He said, "I won't have to do anything about it, because I'm going to be dead, and you're going to have to cope with it." My father became just as right wing as Larkin, in his way, but he was, as a student at Oxford he was a card-carrying member of the Communist Party, and was until Hungary; and he went through his own evolution and that was his choice.

I think it's the whole impulse to judge and censor and euphemize, that is the enemy. The whole, the business of Eliot and anti-Semitism has come again in England. To make, I hope the last reference to Lady Diana, because her divorce lawyer has written a book called *Eliot and Anti-Semitism* -- and so all this stuff surfaced again. And of course, there's nothing new in: people have been discussing this for thirty years. But there are some people who will never get another chance to call Eliot a scoundrel, to feel equal to Eliot or superior to Eliot. And that is what these controversies, those are the energies behind these controversies. What fun, to feel superior to T.S. Eliot. And that's the impulse that I am suspicious of.

Any other questions? Sir?

Questioner: I wrote it out. Your discussion, first of Bly, then of Larkin, seem to me a matter of juxtaposition. The conclusions, you leave for us to draw. And I would like this question to encourage to draw them for us a little bit.

I wonder if this matter of juxtaposition, and then the silence, suggests something of your fear to actually draw those conclusions. You mock, first Mr. Bly's efforts to renovate masculinity, and you then you encourage us to pity rather to condemn the "mess", as you admit it was, of Larkin's masculinity. As a way of navigating between these two, you offer nothing but cultural evolution presented as something that seems as inevitable as biological evolution.

I wonder whether this is ethically and as explanatorily impoverished an answer, evolution, as it seems to me to be, or whether you mean something by evolution that I haven't understood.

Martin Amis: I mean, stumbling through the fog, is what I mean. I deliberately didn't draw any conclusions, because I think they're self-evident. I think -- I'm not going to tell you how to be man or how to live; I'm not going to listen to anyone who tells me how to do it, and I'm not going to condemn people for the directions they take.

Evolution is -- I see it working in England. I see the formation of a successful multi- cultural society. It really does seem to me not be happening there, with many fluctuations. But there's no reason why that shouldn't happen, there's no history of domestic slavery in Great Britain.

No. I believe in the absence of my desire to judge them. And that I leave to others. And find myself mocking all attempts I see at it. Last question.

Questioner: Yes. You said in the Larkin speech that you were less of a racist than your father, that your children would hopefully be less racist than you are. That, I think is very brave and optimistic, some might even say there's a bit of Pollyanna about it. What gives you confidence that the fog will grow less dense further down the path?

Martin Amis: I don't think it does grow less dense, but I think enlightenment is incremental, and I see it in my children. I was six-years-old when I met a black person. My father tutored me and said, "We're going to meet two men who have black skin." And on the bus in Swansea on the way there, I accepted this and thought this would be no trouble for me. And I was went into the room and burst into tears and pointed at the man and said, "You've got a black face."

This wouldn't happen with my children. They've known, they've mingled with black people all their lives. This certainly is not going to occur. And so it goes on in this incremental way. If I felt that this wasn't happen, I would perhaps be more proselytizing than I am.

But I think this is the only way it can be achieved. The trouble with proclaiming yourself to be cleansed of atavism is that it's not the case. It's an illusion. It's an illusion that can only be maintained by ideology and executive policing. It is forced consciousness. It's a lie to say, I have no racial feelings. Honesty and slow progress is a better policy, I think.

Thank you very much.
