Conclusion: Two Philips

And finally, an anecdote. An acquaintance recently said this to me: ‘My problem with Larkin is that he’s a dirty old man. Exemplar of Englishness and all that, but just a dirty old man in the end. And I think he’s an example of the worst sort of Freudianism.’ Not sure what he meant, I asked him to explain himself. ‘Well, you know, ‘They fuck you up, your mum and dad,” he offered by way of explanation. I suggested that ‘This Be the Verse’ isn’t really typical of Larkin and listed ‘Dockery and Son’ or ‘Church Going’ as offering more nuanced views of procreation and a more thoughtful solemnity about life. ‘Oh, I only really know “They fuck you up,” he told me, ‘so maybe you’re right about his other poems. I don’t know.’ At the conclusion of this conversation, this man who admittedly knew almost nothing of Larkin offered a final observation of which I had often thought myself: ‘He’s just like Philip Roth in that way. People love him, but he’s a dirty old man too.’ And so, now, after having offered my own interpretations of Larkin’s poems, I would like to present a brief comparison of these two very different (but often similarly received) writers and to suggest that Larkin precedes – subtly, quietly, and with much self-conscious masquerading – the postmodern tradition of the great American novelist who so candidly confuses author and narrator; who so boldly upends audience expectations; and who so assuredly forces his audience to confront its assumptions and readerly conventions.

Certainly Philip Roth’s critical reception has, in important ways, mirrored Larkin’s, with the important exception that Roth’s reputation suffered early and has been, largely, redeemed while Larkin’s reputation, taking its greatest hit posthumously, continues to require concerted efforts at redemption. The characteristics that have often been emphasized in their writings, however, are remarkably similar. Roth, for instance,
is often seen as a quintessentially American artist. He is said to capture a particular kind of ‘Americanness’ through his evocation of American history and of suburban landscapes as well as certain fundamentally ‘American success stories.’ Catherine Morley argues that Roth’s *American Trilogy* ‘self-consciously addresses the role of the writer in the construction of a mythical national identity’ and calls the focus of the three novels ‘the dream of a self-reliant American identity.’ And although Roth’s early work in particular was often affixed with the ‘Jewish-American’ label, his more recent pieces have become, in the words of Max Falkowitz, ‘vital American reading,’ leaving aside the ethnic qualifier. Like Larkin, Roth writes discomfitingly about sex and gender and uses unexpectedly foul language. In addition to widespread discomfort with the novelist’s use of obscenity and vulgarity, many critics have accused Roth of, at best, insensitivity toward women and, at worst, encouraging active hatred of women.

Philip Larkin, too, has long been labeled a representative of national identity. Seamus Heaney points to him as the embodiment of a particular British voice, saying that Larkin is ‘urban modern man, the insular Englishman, responding to the tones of his own clan, ill at ease when out of his environment. He is a poet, indeed, of composed and tempered English nationalism.’ John Bayley argues that Larkin’s late poems are ‘the most refined and accurate expression possible of a rational as well as a universal area of awareness’ and that ‘they are very English in fact.’ Simon Petch calls Larkin ‘representatively English,’ and Donald Davie claims that Larkin represents ‘British poetry at the point where it has least in common with American.’ John Osborne cites no fewer than seven additional scholars who emphasize ‘Larkin’s position as a belated national poet’ and his ‘enduring Englishness.’ Larkin’s depiction of rural scenes, his frequent play with ideas of ‘here and elsewhere,’ and his self-presentation as wary of travel have prompted many readers to see him as possessing a representative Britishness.

Accusations of vulgarity, not merely in the sense of obscenity but also in the broader sense of ‘commonness’ with which Irving Howe uses it in relation to Roth, have followed Larkin too, particularly since the publication of his letters. Lisa Jardine asks how students can be advised seriously to study Larkin’s poetry when the student who consults a copy of the *Selected Letters* ‘confronts a steady stream of casual obscenity, throwaway derogatory remarks about women, and arrogant disdain for those of different skin colour or nationality,’ all of which are, according to Jardine, evident in the poems as well. Joseph Bristow writes, of the “chummy democratic appeal” of Larkin’s obscenity, that it ‘is informed